

THE
GREAT ROOM
BOOKSHELF



A LANCER FANZINE

SPRING 2005, VOL. I

THE
GREAT ROOM
BOOKSHELF

VOL. I



A COLLECTION OF LANCER FAN FICTION AND FACTS

MARCH 2005

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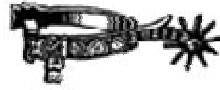
**YUCCA FLOWER PRESS
14671 TIERRA BONITA ROAD, POWAY, CA 92064
BURFIELD@COX.NET**

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THE GREAT ROOM BOOKSHELF, VOL. I



A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

I really have no idea what to write here other than I am truly thrilled to pull this magazine together for several reasons.

The first and foremost reason being the group of ladies I have met both on and offline in the Lancer Groups and at the Homecoming Convention 2004. A remarkably diverse, enthusiastic and creative bunch, they managed to surprise the heck out of me time after time with their humor and pool of knowledge. An education can be had every day ranging from 'How to Speak Australian' to 'Medical Miracles of the 1870's'. Admittedly, it was a bit of a relief to see other Lancer fans whose life was enhanced by this show rather than ruled by it. (I've too many people dressed as aliens and speaking Klingon in their homes. 'Nuff said.)

Another reason is my thirst for quality fan fiction and these pages are stuffed with that! Be prepared to be thoroughly entertained. The talent in this group is astounding and they deserve any and all feedback you care to give! Email addresses for that purpose are at the end of their contributions.

And lastly is the fact that I love cowboys. Lancer was a visual and emotional feast when it aired, and still is even as faded tape! I am only sorry the brothers' relationship wasn't pursued as much as I'd have liked, and according to the Alan Armer interview included here I wasn't alone in that thought. Fan fiction brought the opportunity to continue a storyline that was cut off much too early.

But we still got that visual feast and a lot of us still remember how it made us feel when it first aired. Worldwide, "new" fans resurface and make themselves known, the same visceral feelings rekindled. According to my records, this magazine will be sent to Australia, Belgium, France, Canada, England and all four corners of the United States. The Old West lives on - everywhere! Rather amazing for a series that's been off the air for over 30 years, wouldn't you say?

Still, it's not as amazing at the diversity of the people responsible for keeping it alive. If this magazine – which includes the telling tale of a pair of Australians' Con/USA experience – entices even one person to attend the 2005 Homecoming in Los Angeles, I will be one happy Lollie.

Happy reading!

AJ Burfield
Poway, California
March 12, 2005



RICHES REPAID



BY MAUREEN

“Wagon’s comin’ in, Scott,” Jelly called into the barn.

“It’s about time,” Scott grumbled to himself. By now he and Johnny should have been well on their way to finishing repairs to the bridge over Black Creek. But they had underestimated the amount of needed supplies the ranch had on hand. Johnny and the Lancer segundo, Cipriano, had ridden into Morro Coyo first thing that morning, and the pair had been expected back an hour ago. Scott kept himself busy around the hacienda, but he’d grown impatient waiting for the younger Lancer’s return. Almost noon, if they expected to make any progress at all today the brothers would now have to eat lunch on the ride out to the worksite. Scott hated having to eat on the move, especially in a rocking, rickety wagon.

A cleverly thought out witty comment about the punctuality of little brothers died on Scott’s lips as he exited the stable to find that only Cipriano had returned, Johnny and his ever-present horse, Barranca, nowhere in sight. As the man set the brake on the loaded wagon, Scott peered up at him anxiously and asked, “Where’s Johnny? Is anything wrong?”

Understanding exactly why Scott might be concerned, Cipriano was quick to set his mind at ease. “No, nothing is wrong. Juanito has stayed in town. I will help with the bridge today.”

Relieved that his ex-gunfighter brother hadn’t apparently run into any oft found trouble, Scott’s emotions doubled back on him and he felt himself growing aggravated that Johnny had so easily abandoned his duties – and him – for the day. Hoping he wouldn’t come off sounding like his ever-critical father, Scott nevertheless felt compelled to ask, “Please tell me he has a good reason, Cip?”

The older man’s slight smile told Scott that he’d failed miserably, the familial resemblance indeed recognized. But then Cip’s head bowed in serious consideration, his allegiance to the brother’s equal and leaving him torn between answering Scott, or keeping Johnny’s confidence. With a sigh he lifted his head and announced, “I am sorry, Señor Scott. It is not my place to say.”

Knowing it would be futile to push for more information, Scott resigned himself to the fact that he was on his own today. He could only hope that Johnny would offer him some kind of explanation on his return. “I understand, Cip. Let’s grab some lunch and get going.”



The pair made good progress on the bridge project, leaving the worksite feeling satisfied by a job well done, and fully expecting to make it back in time for supper. Reining up in front of the barn, Scott sent the segundo on his way and went searching for Jelly. He found him bedding down Barranca, another horse

standing nearby already wearing Johnny's saddle.

"Johnny's home, Jelly?" he asked the obvious.

"Not fer long," the old handyman answered gruffly as he kept at the task of caring for Barranca. "Said he was headin' back out soon as he fetched somethin' 'portant."

Scott felt his annoyance once again on the rise. "Know where he's going?"

"Didn't tell, an' I didn't ask," the old man answered. "Can't imagine where he'd be off to . . . gonna be dark in 'n hour."

With a frustrated sigh, Scott requested, "Wagon's just outside. Can you take care of it?"

"Don't see why not. Take care a' everthin' else 'round here. Unsaddle a horse . . . saddle another horse. Put up the wagon . . . take care of some other horses . . ."

"Thanks, Jelly." Scott left the handyman contentedly muttering to no one in particular, as he turned his own concern toward the house and the irksome task of finding his maddeningly elusive brother.

Scott pushed open the front door just in time to literally catch Johnny as he came flying down the staircase, absentmindedly counting money.

"Whoa there, boy. Watch what you're doing."



Johnny was blissfully oblivious to the fact that he'd almost knocked them both over. Smiling from ear to ear he asked, "You got any money, brother?"

Not bothering to wait for an answer, Johnny headed over to Murdoch's large desk, leaving Scott to trail behind, shaking his head in utter disbelief at his brother's impudence. Totally chagrined, he answered, "I might have about twenty dollars or so. Why?"

"Need to borrow it. Can I?" Johnny was still grinning excitedly – either unaware of his brother's rising exasperation, or unconcerned. "I'll pay you back . . . promise."

"I'm sure you will," Scott agreed evenly, then added, "Can I ask what it's for?"

The grin instantly left Johnny's face. "If you have to know for me to get it, then I don't want it." Scott didn't detect anger in the straightforward statement, more a sense of apprehension. The reaction left him puzzled.

Johnny couldn't really blame Scott for not wanting to just hand over the money without an explanation, but he sincerely hoped he wouldn't have to get into details. "I just need it, brother," he offered quietly, unable to tell Scott anything further, and wishing it would be enough.

Despite his lingering frustration, Scott only hesitated a second, his young brother's simple appeal too earnest to question further. "I'll get it."

Returning to the great room, Scott found Johnny counting out the petty cash kept in Murdoch's desk. Neither brother made it a habit to ever touch that money, knowing their father staunchly preferred that he alone track and distribute the funds the ranch had on hand at any time.

Johnny slapped the money down on the side of the desk like he was laying a hot bet. "I figure that for thirty-four dollars. Verify the count for me, would yah, Scott?" Johnny's

grin was once again firmly in place, and he left his brother to the appointed task as he picked up the ledger where Murdoch noted the men's wages.

Opening the book to the appropriate page, Johnny grabbed a pencil and began to write. "I got three weeks pay comin', and the rest I'll write down for three weeks in advance." Johnny looked up and graced Scott with an even bigger but decidedly more playful smile as he declared, "Won't even bill Murdoch for the two dollars he's short."

Noticing that Scott hadn't yet picked up the money laying on the edge of the desk, he prodded impatiently, "Come on, Scott. Count it."

Scott did as requested and announced, "Yes, it's thirty-four dollars." He handed the bills to Johnny, then pulled some more out of his pocket and handed those over as well. "I had twenty-six."

Johnny added his own bills, stood, and held up the whole stack of money. He waved it in Scott's face as he announced joyfully, "And what I got here is a man's fortune. See yah later, Scott." Johnny pulled his hat off his back and onto his head by the stampede string, and was instantly on the move. "Don't hold dinner for me," he threw back over his shoulder as he bounced out the door.

The whirlwind gone, Scott looked down onto the desk where Johnny had left the ledger sitting glaringly wide open. *'Lord help us when Murdoch sees that,'* he silently intoned, then left to clean up for dinner.



The whole ranch knew the exact moment when Murdoch spied the opened book.

"Johnny!" came the bellow from the great room, followed quickly by the order, "Johnny, get in here!"

Scott entered the room in time to see a swish of skirts as Teresa quickly exited – no doubt trying to avoid the wake of Murdoch's wrath, and to find and warn Johnny if she could. Everyone knew how hard Murdoch could be on his younger son, and the shouting matches that usually followed the father's castigations were notorious. Choosing to be anywhere near the pair during these times was to be carefully considered. Scott wasn't exactly sure Johnny wasn't deserving of reproach right now, but to let Murdoch continue shouting in vain would only make things worse for them all in the long run.

"He's not here," Scott informed Murdoch as he hovered in the doorway.

"Do you know what your brother did?" the father asked irately as he pointed at the open ledger on his desk.

"Yes," came the simple reply.

Obviously, that was not the answer Murdoch wanted to hear. "And you didn't stop him?"

"No."

"He had no right to take that money," Murdoch roared.

Scott hated being in the middle of another dispute between his father and brother. But the way Murdoch was fuming, he knew he had to do something to try to defuse the situation. "He's third owner of this ranch, Murdoch. I think he did have the right."

That was definitely the wrong thing to say. Murdoch slammed the ledger shut and declared menacingly, "Not without my

permission. Where is he, Scott?"

No longer willing to deal with his father in this ever-darkening mood, Scott declared, "I don't know. He said not to hold dinner for him. If you'll excuse me, I'm going to eat mine in the kitchen this evening." With that, Scott turned and left.

Murdoch was too angry to let it drop. He cornered Jelly and learned how Johnny had returned from town alone, but had saddled up again and headed right back out. Murdoch then hunted Cipriano down to hear what he knew, but just as he had denied Scott any real answers, the *segundo* refused to reply to any questions regarding Johnny's affairs.

"At least tell me if he's in any trouble, Cip."

It was a demand, but there was enough genuine concern mixed into Murdoch's tone for the man to want to reply. "No. There will be no trouble, *patrón*."

Murdoch wasn't appeased, but he was at least relieved that his younger, reckless son wasn't apparently in any danger. Yet. He stomped back into the house to await Johnny's return.



It was very late when Johnny came home. His mood as he rode under the Lancer arch could only be described as euphoric – until he spotted the light spilling out of the great room. At that hour the hacienda should have been darkened. Rather than being a warm, welcoming beacon, the brightness acted as a signal fire of warning that could only mean one thing: Murdoch had waited up for him. The younger Lancer son wasn't exactly surprised, but he was incredibly disappointed. *'Couldn't even wait 'til mornin' to wrangle,'* he thought sadly.

Knowing that, given the circumstances, he'd do it all again, Johnny prepared himself for the impending onslaught as he cared for his horse, then went inside to accept his fate.

Seeing Murdoch was expected, but finding his brother still up was disquieting. Scott was either seeking answers, just like their father – or this row was going to be worse than usual.

"You had no right to take that money," Murdoch immediately railed from behind his desk, jabbing at the condemning ledger.

'Worse than usual,' Johnny quickly determined. "I already worked for half of it," he began his defense quietly, trying very hard to hold his temper. "I'll work off the rest . . . and more," he offered.

"That's not the point!" Murdoch shouted back, despite the late hour and anyone else who might be foolishly attempting to sleep. The older man stepped out from behind his desk and took a few paces toward Johnny. Scott kept his place, but his guard was raised by the threatening move. "You should have waited for me to be here, and then asked," Murdoch scolded Johnny.

"I couldn't wait!" Johnny shouted back, his patience shattered in an instant, his face and body tensed and radiating with a frightening combination of anger, frustration, and abject despair. "I get tired of waitin' for you, old man," he continued acidly. "You ain't never been anywhere I needed you, when I needed you, so why should you start now!"

Scott had never heard his brother hurl an insult at Murdoch so vehemently, but Johnny didn't stick around for a reaction. He turned on his heels and left the hacienda, slamming the heavy front door behind him.

Murdoch had been prepared, as usual, to argue

for hours, but Johnny's response left him totally confused. "What the hell did he mean by that?" he turned and asked Scott.

Obviously Murdoch had missed the roiling mix of emotions that Johnny had laid bare during his outburst, or he'd have been more than concerned. Maybe it was because Scott had witnessed how joyful Johnny had been holding that stack of money that gave him perspective for how utterly devastated his brother had been made by their father's reproach. Murdoch had hit a nerve in Johnny that may have been buried deep, but had clearly been very tender.

"I don't know," Scott answered his father quietly as he walked toward the door. "But I need to find out."



Scott found his brother in the barn, saddling Barranca. "Don't leave, Johnny." The request was simple but earnest.

"Can't stay," was Johnny's honest response as he kept to his task.

"Not for him," Scott clarified, "for me."

That was probably the only thing Scott could have said that had a chance of stopping Johnny – and it worked. He let the saddle he was getting ready to heft onto Barranca fall back against his chest, and then lowered it until an edge sat on the ground, balanced against his leg. He wouldn't look at him, but in the light from the flickering lantern Scott could read Johnny's body language enough to tell that he was trying to make up his mind to stay or go. Scott pressed his brotherly advantage.

"Johnny, I know how important gathering that

money was to you. Can you please share with me why you needed it? I'd like to understand."

The saddle was instantly in motion. "You'll get your money back . . . same as Murdoch," Johnny spat.

Scott stepped forward quickly, yanked the heavy saddle from his brother's hands, and threw it against a stall wall. Barranca danced back, and several of the other stabled horses nickered nervously at the commotion. Scott ignored them all and stood toe to toe with his brother. "I don't care about the damn money, Johnny. I'd simply like to know why having it made you so happy?"

The brothers stared at each other for what seemed like forever. Johnny uncharacteristically broke first, and moved off to settle Barranca with a few soft pats to the animal's neck. The contact apparently worked both ways, for Johnny seemed to calm as well. "You won't tell Murdoch?" he asked quietly.

"No. I won't tell anyone," Scott answered, then went and sat on a hay bale to await his brother's decision.

It took him another minute of petting his horse before he spoke. "It went to repay a debt."

"Did you collect enough to cover it?" Scott asked seriously – but the response was not what he would have expected.

Johnny laughed. Heartily. He walked away from Barranca, shaking his head over the absurdity of his private little joke, while Scott waited patiently for Johnny to offer elucidation.

The laughter slowed, then stopped completely as Johnny once more sobered. "I could sell all of Lancer and it wouldn't have been enough,"

he stated firmly. "It was a debt of kindness, Scott."

"What did this person do for you?" Scott asked tentatively, not sure how far he could push his skittish brother.

Johnny lowered his head, and kept it there as he paused a moment, then answered with all sincerity, "He helped save my soul."

The admission left Scott speechless – not quite knowing what to make of it, but sensing how very deeply Johnny believed his declaration.

"When Cip an' me was in town, I saw a man who owns a big hacienda near a small town where my mama an' me lived for a bit." Johnny started to pace as he told his story. "I never knew him so much, but I did know his segundo . . . recognized him right off, 'though he didn't know it was me 'til I reminded 'im. They was supposed to leave today, but stuck 'round just so we could visit a piece.

"Señor Valez didn't have no job when I knew him, but he's got a good one now . . . and a good boss. Him an' his wife Rosita used to give me stuff when I was a kid. Nothin' much . . . hell nobody 'round there had much. But they'd at least spend time with me when . . ."

The pacing stopped. Johnny got that look he normally contained so well but which sometimes broke through his barriers and cascaded over his face like a waterfall. Most often it appeared when Johnny thought about his mother – and to Scott it reminded him of what anguish would look like if it had a face of its own . . .

The "look" was gone, as quickly as it had come, but the pacing was back. "They was just the nicest folks. I never will forget how good they always made me feel . . . like I was worth somethin' . . ." That look threatened

again, but Johnny shook it off.

"Anyway. We was talkin', and Señor Valez said he an' Rosita was savin' up to buy them a piece of property from his boss. Only needed 'bout ninety dollars more." Johnny's emotions flared, and he faced Scott as he repeated incredulously, "Only ninety dollars!" Johnny's hands were thrown wide, and he danced backward, as if it were to God he was asking, "Do you know how damn long it would take them to save that kind of money?! Even as segundo, it would be forever."

Johnny was back, leaning into Scott as he marveled, "But you shoulda seen 'im. He was so happy just holdin' on to the idea that he could own his own piece a' land for a change. I couldn't stand it. I knew if I walked away he'd never get that land, so I asked his patrón to get somethin' together to be signed, and I gathered up that money, and . . ." Scott had never seen Johnny so emotional. His young brother stood there, his body quaking, ready to burst . . . his eyes glistening with tears so very close to falling . . . and then he was turning away, heading back over to Barranca, working out his feelings through the calming comfort of that horse.

Quietly the end of the story was told. "Now they got somethin' they can call theirs . . . an' they deserve it. They earned it."

Scott didn't know what to say – so he said what he felt. "Thank you for sharing that story with me, Johnny. You need to tell it to Murdoch. Once he knows how the man helped you . . ."

"No, no, no!" Johnny took a couple of steps toward him, then crouched down and sat back on his haunches, his hands moving up to cover his head in frustration. He couldn't help but feel that Scott had totally misinterpreted why he'd told him about Señor Valez. He stood

and started pacing again. "The old man don't care 'bout my past, Scott! Neither do I . . . for the most part . . ."

"But he should know . . ." Scott tried to push his point.

"What? What should he know? How bad I had it sometimes?" Johnny's frustration was bursting out of him now. "Scott, it don't matter. What happened happened, and ain't none of it gonna change by me talkin' about it. You'd all just think you had to pity me or somethin'. I don't want or expect that.

"Yes. I had it hard as a kid," Johnny finally admitted as he paced, desperately seeking the words that would explain exactly why he needed to give his old friend that money. "And it got bad . . . real bad sometimes . . . But when you're livin' like that, you don't really think 'bout how hard it is." Johnny turned abruptly and pointed at Scott. "Bet you learned that yourself when you was in that war prison. You just handle it – just like everyone else 'round you is handlin' it. It's only later, if you dig your way out, that it makes a difference . . . when you actually know what you was missin', or what was denied you."

Johnny turned away, and with a tired sigh added, "That's when it becomes hard. Comin' back here to Lancer . . . seein', touchin', feelin' everything I could'a had . . . That's what's been hardest."

Once more he faced Scott, standing before him, begging for understanding. "Brother, you and I was both denied life here, but at least you was taken away and had someone who cared for you. I don't know why my mama took me away, 'cause she didn't take me to nothin'! She might have loved me, but she never cared for me. Kids don't really know when they're missin' things, but they sure can tell when they're missin' people.

"Scott, for a long time the only people who ever cared for me was strangers like Señor Valez. They at least gave me a little piece of their nothin' and a lot of themselves . . . and some days the only thing that *still* keeps me goin' is knowin' that there's people like that in the world. People who'd be there when a little kid needed 'em."

Johnny finally walked away, but his head was held high. "Murdoch wants his ol' thirty-four dollars back, he'll get it . . . and more. But he'll get it with no explanation, and no apology."

Scott now understood why Johnny was always giving things away to those in need – even when he was in need himself. '*Hardened gunfighter . . . no. Not Johnny Lancer.*' Scott shook his head in admiration over this new enlightening revelation, then stood and smiled as he went to stand beside his emotionally spent brother. "Johnny, I really do think I understand now. And I won't tell Murdoch a word of what you've told me tonight.

"I'd like you to consider that twenty-six dollar loan paid in full." Scott held up his hand to cut off Johnny's expected protest. "Consider it my contribution to those people in the world who help children . . . one who helped my brother. I only wish I'd gotten a chance to meet the man."

Johnny's head dipped in a combination of embarrassment, pride, and gratitude that he'd found such a brother as Scott. "You'd like him. If we ever get down that way, Rosita makes the best corn tortillas I've ever eaten . . . and don't you dare tell Teresa or Maria I said that." The brother's shared a comfortable smile, both content with how their relationship had deepened over the course of the evening – all because of kindnesses given and repaid.

"Let's get inside," Scott ordered. "I don't

know about you, but I'm exhausted."

"I'm done in for sure. But . . ." Johnny hesitated, looking out the barn door into the darkness.

"Don't worry about the 'old man.' I'll take care of him." They made short work of bedding down Barranca, then went to confront their father.

As the pair entered the front door, Johnny trailed his older brother, wondering what Scott could possibly say to appease Murdoch.

The Lancer patriarch had lost none of his anger, and started right in. "I want you to explain yourself, Johnny."

Scott no longer cared how upset Murdoch was, and with a slightly smug smile calmly informed him, "He doesn't have to."

Johnny looked at his brother like he had lost his mind, but Scott continued on unfalteringly. "I think he had a perfect right to the money, and you weren't here to consult. So as far as I'm concerned it is two owners against one. The only thing Johnny owes you is three weeks work . . . and I happen to know he's good for it. Now, if you'll excuse us, we're going to bed. Come on, Johnny."

Johnny had been so totally awed by his brother's bold performance and his father's burgeoning expression of flabbergasted astonishment that he didn't move until Scott inconspicuously pushed him out of the doorway toward the stairs.

Turning to leave himself, Scott paused and

addressed Murdoch with an afterthought. "Oh, by the way . . . If you'll check your ledger more closely, you'll actually see that you owe Johnny two dollars. Goodnight, sir."

With a decided arrogance, Scott left Murdoch to stew in his own juices. But his carefully contrived reserve was nearly broken when he turned to see Johnny standing on the bottom stair, eyes wide and both hands clamped tightly over his mouth so his laughter would not be heard.

Scott had to bite his lip to keep his own chuckles at bay. Grabbing Johnny by the shoulder, Scott spun him around and, leaving his arm comfortably draped over his brother, the pair made their way up the stairs together.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maureen Preuss has been writing "fanfiction" since she was a kid – but didn't know anyone in the world shared her "hobby" until she discovered internet fanfiction a couple of years ago. One on-line site led to another, then to Karen Fedderly's wonderful "Lancer" website – and that's when Maureen's stories were daringly shared with anyone for the very first time. She finds the "Lancer" brothers intriguing and inspiring, and the "Lancer Ladies" creative, supportive, and incredibly encouraging. Maureen's always been a western fan, and "Lancer" was one of her faves. She's loved rediscovering the show through fanfiction – and making new friendships along the way.

Send any feedback for Maureen to mopeyone@hotmail.com



CALIFORNIA DREAMIN'



BY EM

She walked next to her husband of twenty five years with her arm safely nestled in the crook of his strong arm. It was a glorious fall day; the sun was bright and the air cool. The gentle breeze lifted a few escaping tendrils of her salt and pepper brunet hair, and she sighed with contentment.

As they walked along the uneven boardwalk in the town of Green River, her eyes were drawn to a golden horse being ridden slowly down the center of the street. The sun sparkled off its iridescent coat as the rider turned the horse to the hitching rail in front of the bank.

She watched as the young man gracefully dismounted in one fluid motion and almost carelessly threw the reins over the rail. He stroked the neck of the palomino once as he stepped up on the board walk and headed in their direction.

She'd seen this young man several times, and in the past had once feared him. Now he brought a smile to her lips as she watched him walk toward them with cocky strides, full of confidence reserved for the young.

As he got closer, they could hear the distinctive ring of his spurs as they hit the wooden walk. Her eyes were drawn to the low slung tight pants he often wore and as he approached, she was startled to see the fine pattern of stitching around each silver button that lined the outside of his legs.

She involuntarily gazed at the gun belt worn

so low over his slim hips. As he got nearer, she noticed the loose limbed way he walked and for the first time saw the small loop hooked over one of the buttons which held his gun in place.

She was drawn to the design finely etched in leather in the middle of his gun belt and the two buckles of his belt which held his trousers up. She imagined he needed the wide leather to support all his hardware below.

Everyone in the small community had been amazed at the colorful attire this young man was so well known for. Other young men might have taken quite a hazing over the choice of color and style, but not this one. His red shirt bore intricate embroidery complete with butterflies and flowers but on this young man, no one dared call him a sissy.

His confidence in himself was apparent as he walked the streets in clothes no other man dared to wear; his attire a challenge to anyone foolish enough to comment. Few did anymore and the unfortunate few who had weren't around to talk about it.

They were just a few feet apart when her hazel eyes were drawn to his deep penetrating blue eyes framed by dark, ridiculously long eye lashes. His high cheekbones and full lips brought a flush of color across her face and she was rewarded with one of his glorious smiles.

He reached his right hand up to tip his hat and she was mesmerized as the blue beads slid

down his sinuous arm. He was close enough to touch now as he ducked past the couple. As he stepped by, he spoke. "Ma'am."

Her husband was taken aback when she came to a complete stop and she turned to look at the departing back of the young man. *Ma'am?! When did I become a ma'am?* The thought stunned her.

She couldn't take her eyes off him until her husband's voice broke through, "Martha, are you all right?"

She licked her lips and tucked her hair back into place and patted her husband's arm. "I'm just fine Ernie.... just fine." They continued their stroll down the boardwalk on that fine fall day as Martha chose to ignore the fact that she was old enough to be Johnny Lancer's mother. She could dream couldn't she? She felt once again a young girl as she thought

about that walk, those blue eyes and long lashes, those slim hips and colorful clothes.

She smiled at her husband of twenty five years, and whispered, "Let's go home dear."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily McFadden (aka EM) lives in northern California in the foothills east of Sacramento. She has 8 Arabian horses and works in human resources. She discovered the Lancer group sites in 2003 and was amazed by all the ladies who still loved this old series. She never thought she would try writing fanfiction, but in July 2003, started her first story; An Uneasy Truce. She's found everyone very supportive and appreciates her new friends in Lancerland.

Send any feed back for EM to maaliem@yahoo.com



A SIMPLE GAME



BY DESERT SUN

For more than a mile, not one scuff of a hoof print marred the skim of dust on the sun-baked road that passed through Eagle Rock Canyon. The gentle slopes into and out of Eagle Creek itself were also devoid of tracks, as were both banks up and down the stream as far as horse or man could travel. Even the softer edges of the road, where a path could be made through the dense tangle of wild rose bushes and blackberry vines, were clean of marks left by either two-legged or four-legged animals.

Squatting with one knee on the ground and his elbow resting on the other, Scott Lancer felt his exasperation rise. He scowled at the hidden trail that he wasn't altogether sure was there, and sighed heavily as he stood. Then thumbing the front of his hat up off his sweating brow, he scrubbed the toe of one boot back and forth across the crusted dirt at his feet. "They had to come this way," he said, taking a step forward while tugging on the strips of leather in his right hand.

The flashy, sorrel horse on the other end of the reins willingly followed, his nose brushing against Scott's hip as the young man walked on down the road and explained that without sprouting wings, no horse could make it up or down that stream any farther than they had. The boulders were too big to go over and too close together to get between. No one could have climbed up the bank without being noticed, either. Where it wasn't too steep, the ground along the water's edge was soft, and tracks would be impossible to hide.

"That leaves the way we're going," concluded Scott with a sideways glance at his horse. He smiled his appreciation of the attentive forward angle of the gelding's ears and then focused once more on the task at hand.

A wall of rock lined the left-hand side of the road, which was now on the same course as Eagle Creek, while of blackberry vines form a thorny barrier on the right wicked enough to rip to shreds man or beast. The centers of the patches of briars rose to heights well above Scott's head, and the vines spilled down the slope that led to the stream bank. In places, the arched stems even touched the water.

Scott doubted that anyone would venture through the prickly hedge unless the stakes were considerably higher than the cost of a few rounds of beers, but he checked for tracks anyway. His brother wasn't just anyone, and Johnny really had no other option. Beyond the next bend, if he were still on the road, he would be exposed for nearly half a mile.

Even where the vines were thinnest, the leaves and spiny stems appeared intact. Scott mounted and urged his horse into a jog while continuing to glance at the ground, although he didn't expect to find any tracks. The road was rising out of the canyon, and the hillside on his right had turned into a rock bluff that fell a hundred feet or more to creek below. No one could leave the road now.

Once he rounded the bend and the road leveled off, Scott felt the reins bite into his

gloves as his horse stretched its neck forward, begging for more rein. "Easy Chico. I'll let you run once we see Johnny," he said, resisting the pull on his arms.

Nothing obstructed Scott's view of the road ahead. He frowned. It was empty. Somehow, without his knowing it, Johnny had left the road. The question now was whether to backtrack and look for the missing sign of his brother's escape or to go on to town and admit defeat.

Giving up without a fight went against everything Scott had learned as an officer in the Cavalry. He held to his current course and debated what to do next.

Up ahead, a rock lay in the middle of the road. It seemed out of place, but Scott wasn't sure why. Then remembering there was a cut somewhere ahead on the left and that, from his present position, he couldn't see if anyone was hiding there, he urged his horse on. Johnny just might be hoping to have fooled him into thinking he had missed something and, therefore, into going back for another look. *'Might as well look for tracks to the top of the ridge,'* he decided.

When Scott halted his horse at the break in the canyon wall, disappointment skewed his face as his hopes plummeted. His brother wasn't there, and the other man couldn't possibly be hiding. The entire crevice was visible except for the last three or four feet.

'He couldn't have,' was Scott's first thought, but then a rattle of tumbling stones drew his attention to the top of the bluff just as something pale flashed in the late afternoon sun.

Once again adjusting his hat, Scott contemplated the possibility of anyone getting a horse up the steep, narrow, rock-strewn

gouge. He supposed a strong animal like Barranca, his brother's palomino, might be able to make the climb provided that the unseen stretch at the top wasn't straight up and down.

Scott raked his teeth over his lower lip, drew in a deep breath, and then patted his horse's neck. "So Chico . . . shall we take a look?"

Chico Bonito, so named by Johnny Lancer for his pretty blazed face and dazzling white stockings, bobbed his head and danced in place. Scott held him with a tight rein and glanced at the road in both directions. One way meant certain defeat. The other could cost an extra hour or more of riding that ultimately ended with the same outcome. Even though the alternative was a long shot, it was the only option with any prospect of victory. Being a gambler at heart, Scott chose to take the risk and urged Chico up the rocky embankment.



Ducking a low branch here and there, Johnny Lancer guided his mount into the center of a cluster of scrub oak and reined to a halt. Barranca's lathered flanks quivered with each heaving breath, his proud head drooping.

"Good fella," Johnny crooned as he rubbed the horse's sweat drenched neck before swinging out of the saddle and peering through the maze of tree limbs. He continued to caress Barranca's neck while giving the horse a much needed rest. The gentle slope above him was empty, and he let out a soft sigh. "I think we fooled him," he said, his excitement rising with the anticipation of winning the game with his brother. Green River was less than a mile away, due south down the slope. A man on the road would have to travel closer to three. Johnny figured he'd have Barranca settled into

the livery stable by the time Scott made it to town. *'Unless he backtracks thinkin' I hid out somewhere along the way. In that case, he'll be an hour or more getting' there,'* he thought with a grin.

The smile, however, quickly died. Sunlight bounced off metal near the spot Johnny had topped the ridge a short while before.

Johnny frowned. Now what? If he headed straight for Green River, as he had planned, his brother was sure to see him. Staying put was out of the question, also. The spattering of trees offered little in the way of cover that would conceal him from his brother. Scott had too good an eye.

The only other option Johnny could see was to try angling along the slope toward a larger group of trees to the southwest and hope he was able to keep his current hiding place between him and Scott. There wasn't much time to formulate a plan, so he gently nudged the rowels of his spurs into Barranca's still heaving sides and said, "Come on, boy. Time to go."

Once out in the open, Johnny kept looking back toward the ridge. The farther he went without seeing the other rider, the higher his hopes rose. Just maybe his plan would work.

With each of the palomino's long strides, the grove of trees moved closer. At less than thirty yards to go, Johnny twisted in the saddle to check behind him one last time and muttered a curse. Scott had broken into the open and had stopped.

Barranca stumbled on the rough ground, terraced by cattle trails. His body lurched forward as his knees buckled and his nose dipped to touch the ground.

A quick grab of the saddle horn saved Johnny

from being thrown against the horse's neck. However his relief was short lived. As he righted himself, a bullet whistled overhead--the crack of rifle fire echoing in his ear.

Reining Barranca around to face the other rider, Johnny shouted, "Hey, don't yuh think that was a little close!"

Instantly, Johnny saw his mistake. Scott had not fired the agreed upon signal ending their game. The man with the raised rifle was astride a paint horse that only resembled Chico in the front end. Its hind quarters and rear legs were white, as were its long mane and tail.

With a cold shiver racing up his spine, Johnny dug his spurs into Barranca's ribs and yelled at the palomino while reining the animal hard to the left.

Barranca whirled. Then another bullet whizzed by as he surged ahead.

Johnny bailed out of the saddle. He wasn't about to wait for his attacker to take aim again. Barranca was too good a horse to risk being wounded in a gun battle.

The rifle barked two more times as Johnny rolled down the lumpy slope in hopes of reaching a line of trees he'd seen near the bottom, four or five hundred yards away. He thought he might have a chance until lead kicked up grit that stung his eyes. The shooter, whoever he was, was good. Too good.

Hot lead grazed Johnny's left shoulder and fear, bordering on panic, replaced the young man's sense of hope. He didn't dare stop his wild tumble to grab his pistol from the holster strapped around his hips. Before he could unfasten the short strap that held the gun in place and clear leather, the man with the rifle

would have a bead on him. His only chance for survival was to keep moving.

More shots sounded. One nicked the back of Johnny's right hand, and another bounced a pebble off his chin.

Johnny flung his legs in a wider arch in hopes of gaining speed. Time was running out, and he knew it. If he didn't reach cover soon, it would be too late.

Suddenly Johnny's legs stopped their downward roll. He yelped in pain as his upper body twisted before sliding in an arc like the pendulum of the grandfather clock in the Lancer living room.

Kicking to free his feet from the bush that had snared them, Johnny wished for a way out of what had started out a simple game of "Hide and Seek" with his brother. *'Scott, I sure could use your help,'* he cried in his mind.

The rifle again spoke, and a bullet blazed a path through Johnny's right thigh as his body came to an abrupt stop.

Johnny gasped and grabbed for his leg. Then a burst of pain exploded in his head and his world seemed to tilt and sway. He had the vague feeling that there was something desperately important he needed to do; but as all around him blurred, he gave up trying to think and submitted to the closing darkness.



The first shot came unexpectedly shortly after Scott had coaxed his horse to make the final lunge up the steep crevice to finally stand on level ground. The going had been rough, and Chico Benito had protested more than once against the rugged terrain, his shod hooves ringing off the rocks that rolled

beneath them. Only the persistent and firm tugs on the reins and Scott's soft pleading voice had kept the sorrel gelding from giving up the struggle to reach the top of the ridge.

Scott wasn't sure he had actually heard the sharp report of a gun. Sitting hunched over with his knees tucked under him, he was still gasping for breath from the treacherous climb that he couldn't quite believe he had just made. Each intake of air roared in his throat and the pounding of his heart sounded like someone was beating on a bass drum in his ears. Even Chico, standing close by with long legs trembling and nostrils flaring, had barely perked his ears at the sound.

Several more loud cracks drove any doubt from Scott's mind. His only questions now were who was doing the shooting and why.

In an instant, Scott forgot all about his former purpose for catching sight of his brother before the other man reached the willows along the Rio Verde, which was the Spanish name for the river that gave the town of Green River its name. Winning the game was no longer of prime importance. Johnny's safety was. All of the shots had come from a rifle.

Lunging to his feet, Scott ignored his still wheezing breath. He reached under his horse's neck, flipped the right rein over the animal's neck, and quickly mounted. "Come on, Chico," he said with a dig of his heels into sweat-streaked sides.

Chico grunted and moved forward at a trot. Scott guided him toward the far side of the swale. The gun shots had seemed to be coming from somewhere in that general direction.

Upon reaching the brow of the ridge, Scott slowed his mount to a walk and scanned the hillside below. Nothing moved.

Most of the slope was clearly visible except for a fan-shaped section that was hidden by a cluster of trees. Scott urged Chico back into a trot and guided the horse toward the lower side of the oak grove. An unnerving quiet had replaced the sound of gunfire, and he feared he might already be too late to help his brother, if help was needed.

With eyes constantly moving in search of the slightest movement, Scott skirted around the trees and broke into the open beyond where he immediately noticed the sun gleaming off the rump of a paint horse, which stood facing downhill several hundred yards down the slope. The rider had a rifle aimed at something on the ground ahead.

Reaching for his revolver, Scott pulled Chico to a halt. *'Johnny!'* he thought, feeling his heart lurch when he also sighted the rider-less palomino near the line of willows at the bottom of the hill.

Scott jerked his gun free of the holster and fired at the man with the rifle. There wasn't time to aim, and even if there had been, aiming wouldn't have done any good. He knew his pistol was no match for the distance.

The bullet, as expected, fell short of its mark. Still, its objective was accomplished. Scott's target was temporarily distracted into forgetting about whatever other prey he had been after. Instead, the man whirled the paint around to face Scott and fired off a quick shoot.

Feeling lead blaze a trail across his ribs as a bullet ripped through his shirt, Scott abandoned his saddle on the uphill side. He landed on his shoulders, arms flung out to the sides--knuckles of his right hand smashing into a rock and his fingers losing their grip on his revolver. Then somersaulting once, he lay still, belly down and head turned toward his

assailant.

Another bullet ploughed dirt into Scott's face. He didn't move. Without a gun, his only hope of living was for the man with the rifle to think that was no longer any need for further waste of lead.

Out of the corner of his eye, Scott watched the approach of the gunman until all that was visible of horse and rider were two pairs of white legs. He then held his breath when the soft thud of hooves ended, and the tip of a rifle came into view. Surely, at any moment, another bullet would be on its way into his body. However, there was only silence, and the probing of metal against his wounded side.

His flesh was on fire, or so it seemed, but Scott gritted his teeth against the pain and didn't move. Only when the prodding ended did he dare to take a quick breath. Any hopes that the other man was finished where short lived, however, when a pair of shiny, black boots moved into view.

Scott had no chance to prepare for the agony that exploded just below his ribs and in his belly when one glossy pointed toe streaked forward and lifted him off the ground. He landed on his back with an audible grunt--his lungs protesting the sudden expulsion of air and retaliating with a wheezing gasp.

"Thought you'd play possum and fool me into thinking you'd joined your brother, didn't you? Well, don't worry . . . you'll be with him soon enough."

Panting for breath, Scott stared up at the leering face that was decidedly familiar. Even though the name to go with it was illusive, there was no forgetting the high arch of those black brows over equally dark eyes that were set close to the bridge of a hawk-like nose, or the sneering upper lip that was covered by a

thick mustache that drooped to the man's chin at each corner of his mouth. His attacker was none other than the gambler that he and Johnny had played cards with two weeks ago in Spanish Wells.

"Why?" croaked Scott.

"Nobody treads on my toes and gets away with it. You and brother cost me a pretty penny with that little show of yours. I figure you owe me . . . and I always collect my debts."

Now looking down the business end of the rifle, Scott had no doubts about the man meaning every word. Apparently, the only reason the crooked gambler hadn't resorted to violence before was because the odds of two to one hadn't been favorable enough. Time and patience apparently had changed all that.

'Time and patience.' Scott lifted a brow, and the corners of his mouth curved slightly upward as a soft breath 'huffed' through his nose. If he could keep the man talking, there might be a chance of coming out of this alive. Val, Green River's less than orderly sheriff, was bound of have heard the shots and would, soon, show up to investigate.

"I take it you've been following us a while. Why wait 'til now to make your move?" Scott asked, suddenly remembering the man had introduced himself as Blaine. Whether it was a first or a last name had never been established.

Blaine scowled, chewing at his lower lip as though he were contemplating which he should do: answer the question or pull the trigger of the rifle in his hands. He apparently decided that, since he held all the aces, he could be generous. "I believe in making sure the odds are all in my favor," he said, visibly relaxing. "I did some asking around. Heard

you were a fair shot with a rifle and that that brother of yours was no slouch with a revolver. You two played right into my hand when you split up back there. Of course, I never counted on meeting up with either of you this quickly. I figured I'd have to wait for you where the road makes a sharp bend before crossing the river."

Scott took a deeper breath and willed his voice to remain steady. "What makes you think you would have gotten both of us? Johnny was far enough ahead that any shots would have given me plenty of warning."

The gambler laughed. "Doesn't look like it would have mattered, does it? You had warning enough this way."

Blaine's smug expression made Scott bristle, but he had to agree. The man was right. *'Like a green Lieutenant, I rode right into it. I should have taken cover in those trees and used my rifle.'*

It was too late to think about what he should have done, although Scott doubted the added delay would have prevented his brother taking another bullet. Not that any of that mattered now. Scott had the feeling it was too late to think about anything if he was reading the other man's eyes correctly. Blaine had the look of cat that had lost interest in toying with a mouse and was ready to finish the game.

"How do you expect to get away with this? Someone's bound to have heard the shooting," said Scott in one last effort to stall the inevitable.

"I took care of that, too. Besides, by the time you boys are found, I'll have climbed down the way you came up. No one will suspect a man walking on the road, especially if his horse was stolen early this morning." Blaine's pearly teeth shined in the sun.

Scott swallowed, his throat constricting as his heart pounded harder. The man had thought of everything, or so it seemed. What had started out a friendly match between brothers had turned into a much deadlier contest, of which neither would be the victor. *'Goodbye, Brother. It was good knowing you,'* he thought as he waited for the bullet that would send him into eternity.



Awaking to the sensation of lying on his back on a spinning merry-go-round and the sound of drums beating in his head, Johnny opened his eyes. Was that a revolver he heard? He rolled his head toward the sound and willed the earth to stop moving so he could find out what he was up against.

A blur of white came into view and a rifle barked. Then foggy spindles turned into the legs of a moving horse as Johnny looked farther up the hill. *'Not Scott, too,'* he silently groaned while closing his eyes for a moment to dispel the vision of his brother tumbling head over heels on the ground.

Indulging in anything akin to self-pity, however, would solve nothing. *'Things might not be as bad as they look. Maybe, I can do something to put an end to this nightmare,'* Johnny told himself, grabbing for his gun as he watched the man riding toward Scott.

The back of Johnny's right hand scrapped across the ground as he wrapped his stiff fingers around the handle of his revolver. Despite the bolt of fire blazing a trail from his knuckles to his elbow, he clinched his teeth and gave a hard jerk. His effort was wasted; the pistol refused to budge.

Johnny cursed his forgetfulness and then fumbled to unbutton the strip of leather on the

upper edge of his holster. He felt it give, his hopes rising as he slid his gun from its prison.

Again the rifle spoke, and a glance up the hill told Johnny that the gunman was already out of range.

Johnny's hopes plummeted, and he bit his lip. His efforts to liberate his pistol had taken too long. Now, he would have to get closer to be of any help to his brother, if Scott was still alive. That meant crawling up the hill, and hoping he wasn't caught in the process. First, though, there was one other problem to solve. He had to free his trapped foot that had his leg twisted in an uncomfortable position.

Wiggling out of the clutches of the bush proved a failure. Johnny couldn't even move his foot. He considered sitting up to use his hands, but this idea was instantly rejected. He would be too visible a target. That left him with one choice: rolling to his side and dragging his upper body around to where he could reach his foot.

With his left hand, Johnny grasped a clump of grass near his knees and pulled. Pain gnawed at the wound in his thigh and his left ankle objected to the added twist as his body slid over the rough ground. His stomach lurched, and he thought for a moment that he was going to be sick. Too much, however, was riding on his stopping the man with the rifle for him to give up. He ignored his discomfort and reached for another clump of grass farther up the hill.

Progress seemed slow and took precious time that Johnny wasn't sure he had. He could see the pinto's rider dismounting. If Scott was pretending to be dead, the act might soon become reality.

This last thought fueled Johnny into one more desperate pull that ended with his body slanted

uphill. He then easily wiggled his trapped foot out of its snare.

A wave of relief washed over Johnny, and he let out a long breath while lying still a moment. He would have liked to have rested longer, but knew he didn't dare. Too much distance separated him and his brother.

Half crawling and half dragging himself with the sheer power of his arms, Johnny continued on his course. Each upward thrust taxed his resolve to go on. His right leg hurt ferociously when he bent his knee or bumped the wound, his ankles complained against the strain of pushing with his toes, his temples throbbed against the invisible squeeze of a vice, and his throat was battling to hold his stomach in place. Quitting, however, was not a choice. He had to save his brother, if it wasn't too late already.

Beads of sweat dripped into eyes that were having enough difficulty seeing. Johnny swiped the moisture away with the cuff of his shirtsleeve, and kept going. A little closer, that's all he needed. Then maybe he could get off a decent shot.

Voices drifted down the hill: one deep and gruff and the other softer with Scott's familiar Boston accent. Even though Johnny couldn't distinguish any of the words spoken, he felt his hopes rise once more. At least his brother was still alive.

Suddenly, the talking stopped. Even though the man with the rifle hadn't moved, Johnny sensed that something had changed and that Scott's time had run out. Anything that was to be done had to be done immediately,

Johnny lifted his revolver, took quick aim, and squeezed the trigger. Although, the distance was farther than he liked, he had no choice. Even if he missed, he had a slim chance of

buying his brother some extra time.

Ears ringing from the loud bark of the gun and heart racing, Johnny stared up the hill at his brother's assailant. Apparently the bullet had missed. The man was still standing.

A rush of adrenalin left Johnny feeling weak as he willed his shaking hand to be still and again lined his sights on his quarry's body. The previous attack had momentarily diverted the man's attention. With a little luck, this shot would take him out before he recovered enough to shoot Scott and turn the rifle down the hill.

As Johnny fired, the earth came alive at his target's feet. The man toppled forward—arms jerking upward. His black hat sailed through the air, landed on edge, and wobbled a short ways to finally flopping over onto its crown while Johnny watched in awe.

Suddenly realizing that his brother was grappling for the gunman's rifle, Johnny tore his eyes away from the hat. He staggered to his feet, hobbled a step, and fell. Pain blurred his vision, making it difficult to see the two men rolling around on the ground as one, but he kept going. Scott might need help.

Hopping on one foot and dragging his injured leg behind him while holding his upper body off the ground with outreached arms, Johnny scrambled upward. His breath came in loud huffs, and his heart thundered in his ears. The back of his sore hand scrapped against a small bush. Johnny winced but ignored the pain — eyes fixed on the struggle farther up the hill.

At last Johnny drew near enough to clearly see the two fighting men. They rolled, Scott ending up on top with both hands wrapped around the rifle. As the body beneath him bucked, he twisted the gun one way and then the other.

"Hang onto him," called Johnny, immediately wishing he had kept quiet when Scott turned his head and then fell sideways, grunting as his shoulder thumped the ground and the tip of the rifle barrel barely missed his head.

Scott quickly recovered, pushing the barrel of the gun away from him while jerking the stock with his other hand. The gunman yelped but hung on.

Johnny rose on shaky legs and watched for a chance to aim at his brother's attacker. There wasn't one. Scott, having rolled on top of the other man, was in the way.

Held by four unrelenting hands, the weapon wavered. First the barrel pointed at one man's head and then the other. Johnny held his breath. There was nothing he could do.

Suddenly Scott fell forward onto the other man's chest. The weapon disappeared from sight, and the two men tumbled down the slope. When they were less than thirty feet from Johnny, an explosion rocked their bodies and they lay still.

"Scott!" Johnny lunged up the hill, gasped, and fell on his face – his leg feeling as though it were on fire. He bit his lower lip against the searing pain and clinched his eyes shut as the earth beneath him spiraled out of control. As he lay fighting the darkness that threatened to claim him, it seemed an eternity passed.



The smell of gun powder assaulted Scott's nose at the same instant that he became aware of the heavy weight on his chest and the hot, sticky substance running down the side of his neck. He opened his eyes, then immediately wished he hadn't. Blaine's grotesque face, or rather what had been a face, was inches from

his own.

With a mighty shove, Scott sent the lifeless body rolling down the hillside. He shuddered. Sight of the ragged flesh, red with blood, brought to mind scenes of battle that he would just as soon forget.

Another face crowded into Scott's thoughts. 'Johnny!' He surged to his feet, and looked down the slope. His brother's body was no longer where it had been.

Something moved just below Blaine's resting place thirty yards or so down the hill. Scott grabbed the rifle and took aim.

A head of dark hair slowly surfaced, a face then appeared, and finally a faded-red shirt collar. Scott bolted down the slope. "Johnny! Are you all right?" he asked, stumbling and nearly diving head-first into his brother.

"Yeah. How about you?"

Scott wobbled then caught his balance. "I'm fine," he said, leaning over Blaine's body for a better view of Johnny. The other man hadn't sounded near as fine as he claimed to be.

Johnny waved a hand at Scott's left side. "That don't look fine to me."

"This?" Scott touched the blood-soaked cloth and winced at the soreness of the ribs beneath. "It's nothing . . . just a scratch," he said, quickly covering up his discomfort while moving down to his brother's side.

"I can see that," Johnny replied, his tone saying he wasn't fooled.

"I have eyes, too, Brother." Scott pointed at the steady stream of blood, seeping through a hole in the thigh of Johnny's pants and sliding

down the dark leather.

"I've had worse."

"I'm sure you have, but you better let me have a look at that, all the same," said Scott as he removed a blue scarf from around his neck. He dropped to his knees beside his brother and proceeded to wrap the piece of fabric tightly around the other man's leg.

Johnny nodded toward the lifeless form less than a foot up the hill from him. "Any idea who he is?"

"He's the gambler we played cards with in Spanish Wells a couple of weeks ago?"

"Blaine? He say why . . .?" Johnny grunted as Scott pulled the neck scarf tight.

Scott shrugged while knotting the ends of the neck scarf. "Guess he didn't like us spoiling his game."

"Sore loser, huh?"

"You could say that." Scott leaned back and let out a soft sigh. "Think you can make it down to your horse if I help you?"

"I can make it."

"Sure you can," said Scott with arched brows and a light chuckle. He had heard those words before, right before Johnny had passed out a year ago from being shot in the battle against a gang of land pirates led by Day Pardee.

"What about him?" Johnny tipped his head toward Blaine.

"Your friend Val can take care of him. We have more important things to attend to . . . like getting you to a doctor," replied Scott, grasping Johnny by the wrist, pulling him to

his feet, and then wrapping an arm around his waist.

Progress down the hill was slow. Johnny was leaning heavily against Scott, making it difficult for the older man to keep his balance.

"Guess I owe you a few beers?" said Johnny when the brothers were half-way to the bottom.

"Yes, I believe you do," replied Scott with a grunt.

Johnny was silent for several steps. "So . . . how'd you figure out where I went?" he then asked.

Scott groaned again. His sore side was beginning to ache with a vengeance, and his brother's hand pressing against the wound wasn't helping matters.

"Well?"

"Well." Scott hesitated and smiled. "Guess you can thank Blaine for that. I caught sight of his horse and thought it was Barranca."

"Chico give yuh much trouble?"

"Not much. How about Barranca?"

"Nope," replied Johnny, before sucking in a sharp breath.

His brother's obvious pain brought a scowl to Scott's face. "You need to stop a minute?"

"Huh, uh."

"You sure?"

"Would yuh stop talkin' an' get me to my horse."

Scott laughed at Johnny's commanding tone and then immediately regretted it--needles of pain piercing his own side. He decided it would be wise to do as he was told.

When the brothers neared the bottom of the slope, a group of riders broke through a gap in the willows along the river. One waved a hand toward Barranca and Chico, who were grazing a ways up river, and another pointed up the hill at Johnny and Scott.

"Looks like we're about to have company," said Scott.

"Yeah. What say we sit down an' let 'em bring our horses to us?"

"Sounds good to me."

Scott eased Johnny to the ground and then settled down beside him to watch the men below. For once, he had to admit that Val Crawford was a welcome sight.

The sheriff arrived a moment later. He didn't look any more like a lawman than he ever did, with his untidy hair peeking beneath the brim of his battered hat and his clothes wrinkled as though he had slept in them. Still, he took charge of the situation, and soon the Lancer brothers were mounted and on their way to Green River. Two men from a neighboring ranch, who had been in town to pick up supplies, were sent up the hill to collect Blaine's body while another man was ordered to find Sam Jenkins. Fortunately, this was the week that the only doctor in the area spent in Green River.

An hour later, Scott paused beside his brother's bed in the Green River hotel. Even though their father had been notified of their injuries and had sent word that he would be there as soon as he could with a wagon to take them home, Sam had insisted Johnny not be

moved before morning. It would be late by the time Murdoch arrived anyway, so Scott had booked rooms for them all.

"I think you're gunna have to wait for them beers, Brother," said a groggy voice.

Gazing down on his brother, Scott had to agree. Johnny's usually tanned face was pale, and his eyes, which earlier had been etched with pain, were nearly closed from the laudanum the doctor had given him.

"I'll give you all the time you need . . . on one condition," said Scott with a hint of mischief in his voice.

"Yeah . . . an' what's that?" Johnny asked with a yawn.

"We don't play any more children's games." Scott held out a hand and looked pleadingly at his brother. "Deal?"

"Deal," replied Johnny, grasping the hand. Then his mouth quirked into a crooked grin as his fingers lost their grip. "Your games do get a bit dangerous for my blood."

"Mine, too, Brother. Mine, too," Scott whispered, watching Johnny's eyes flutter and close. Although his own injury was superficial in comparison to his brother's, his nerves were on edge from how closely their simple game had come to turning into a tragedy. He knew it would be a long time before his fond memories of playing "hide-and-seek" with childhood friends no longer brought to mind a much more horrifying scene.

Scott turned down the lamp on the table by the door, removed his pants and shirt, and dropped them in a pile at the foot of the other bed before crawling between the sheets. He fully expected to lie there awake, but the strain

of the last few hours had taken its toll. Soon he too was sleeping soundly.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

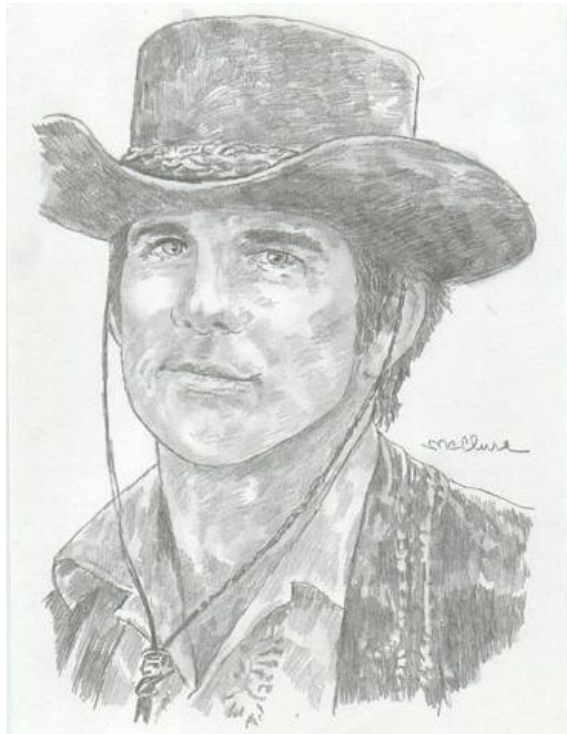
Cathy Friend says her favorite stories have always been Westerns. She grew up with a litany of TV westerns, but Lancer was her favorite with Laramie a close second.

Cathy has been fortunate enough to get to live a fantasy many of the girls who grew up in that era cherished: in 1981 she became a

rancher's wife and has since lived the life she dreamed about as a child. In the fall of 2001 Cathy fulfilled another dream when she discovered fan fiction and began writing her first Lancer story. Since then, she has written several Lancer stories and made friends via the Internet with Lancers fans around the world. It is of note that Cathy credits her talent for writing to God, and makes it her first concern to please Him.

Cathy chose the pen name Desert Sun because it best describes her. She lives on a ranch in the desert country of central Oregon and loves the sunshine.

Any feedback for Cathy can be sent to desertsun4me@ashwoodstock.com



JOHNNY MADRID LANCER BY JEANNIE MCCLURE

UNEXPECTED DISCOVERIES



BY FAY

Chapter One At Lancer

Johnny Madrid Lancer pulled his horse to a stop at the crest of the hill. The gelding gratefully took advantage of the break to rest and so stood still as his master surveyed the scene below.

Johnny pushed his hat back off his head, leaving it to dangle down his back on the storm straps. His left hand held the reins loosely as he leaned on the pommel with his right. From his side-on vantage point, he noted the magnificent hacienda surrounded by lush, green grass. A well-tended garden was visible behind a courtyard, with cool vines growing over the pergola. To the right from his viewpoint and on the rear corner of the structure, he spied a large room with a particularly enormous picture window. In the middle of the building was a tall square tower providing uninterrupted views on all sides. Just under this was a balcony, also affording extended views of anyone approaching the home from the rear.

Further away from the home, he saw a sturdy post and rail fence. It was only past this that the vivid green of the lawn gave way to the dull buff of the more parched pasture. As his eye travelled further to the left, the pasture gave way to verdant trees lining the riverbank. Beyond the estancia rolling hills, reflecting all colours of nature's glory, gently merged and blended, one into the other. Greens, yellows, browns, greys and even blue tinges were

evident. Rich pastoral land, some parts completely wild and rugged. Other parts were obviously tamed to some degree with strong fences, tracks and bridges creating some order and providing useful infrastructure for this thriving ranch. Cattle could be seen grazing peacefully. Their intermittent lowing floated over to him in the breeze.

His birthright. Below him, spread out as far as the eye could see, was his birthright.

His gut clenched and he thought he might pass out from the sight. His chest constricted and his mouth set in a straight line as his teeth ground together and his jaw jutted out.

He drank it all in. He was mesmerized. Such beauty. Such natural grandeur. Such wealth.

The bastard! He would get the bastard and make him pay!

Only when his heart stopped pounding and regained a more steady, less forceful beat, did he seem to breathe normally again. He sucked in several deep lungfuls of air and expelled it slowly.

His mind made up, he pulled forward on the storm strap and reached back for his hat. Planting it firmly on his head, then slanting it slightly forward to shade his eyes, he uncorked his canteen and took a long swig as though to give him strength. Wiping his mouth on his shirtsleeve, he re-corked the vessel, hung it from the pommel and kneed his horse gently, but purposefully, forward.

He trotted through the imposing Lancer arch. The grandiose nature of it brought a sneer to his lips.

Oh, yeah, he thought. Just to make sure that, if you didn't know it already, you are on Lancer property – and don't you forget it! You're somewhere special now. Somewhere high and mighty.

He snorted sourly, but continued his pace steadily, passing outbuildings, a bunkhouse, corrals and a large barn. Seeing a ranch hand over near the corral, he headed there. He stopped in front of the man, removed his hat and nodded in greeting.

The hand was Mexican, portly, in his forties, and sporting a large moustache.

Johnny wondered whether this was the sort of workplace where Mexicans were employed as cheap labour, but where Spanish was forbidden. Never being a shrinking violet, he decided on at least opening his speech in Spanish.

“Hola. Buenos dias.”

The Mexican worker replied in kind, looking Johnny steadily in the eye.

“I was in Morro Coyo. They told me that you are hiring on. Any spare jobs left?”

“Si. We have several places left. My name is Cipriano. I am the Segundo.”

This surprised Johnny. He didn't expect a non-Gringo to be given a position of responsibility. Leastways, here of all places.

“The name's Alvarez. Johnny Alvarez.”

Cipriano studied the deep blues eyes.

“That's a Spanish name.”

“That's right. I'm half Mexican.”

“And just what can you do that could be useful for us?”

“Oh, I can ride, I'm used to hard labour, can fix fences and I can rope me some of them cows. I've done some branding and trail riding. Guess you could say that I could do just about anything you wanted me to do.”

“All right. We can do with some extra hands. You may put your gear in the bunkhouse to the rear of the barn.”

Johnny nodded before adding, “Gracias.” As an afterthought, he looked at Cipriano full in the eye, then spoke what was on his mind. “So, tell me. If you are the Segundo, why aren't you out with the men? Why are you here around the house?”

“I pulled some muscles in my back several days ago and have been on light duties around the hacienda for a day or so before branding starts the day after tomorrow. Plus, things are a little unsettled with many instances of land piracy in the valley. I am keeping an eye out while I am working here. These are uncertain times.”

Johnny nodded again, “You sure got that right. Well, I'll just get myself settled in.”

Johnny was about to lead Barranca away to the bunkhouse when he heard a loud voice hailing Cipriano from the hacienda porch.

The person belonging to the voice was a mountain of a man. As he approached, his size was perceptively more remarkable. He walked with both a cane and a limp. The man's face was craggy and lined through years of exposure to the Californian sun. It reminded

Johnny of the rock-strewn hillsides he had just ridden through: all angles, crests and crevasses. The eyes were blue and whatever hair colour he had was basically lost to grey.

He reached the two men, eyes firmly held on Johnny. Cipriano introduced Johnny to the patr n of Lancer, explaining to his boss that Johnny had just been hired. Johnny felt his hand shaken in a firm grip, but was unaware that he had even extended it. So here he was. In front of the man who had cast his son out at such a tender age. The man who continued to live in this wealth while his son and mother eked out an existence not fit for an animal. When he considered what his mother had done to feed and clothe them, his stomach lurched. This was the bastard responsible for it all.

This was the man he planned to kill.

Johnny could not talk. He could not even summon up Madrid, so intense was the wave of emotion washing over him.

Drawing in a fortifying breath of air, he took command of his emotions and began to focus on what the man was saying to his Segundo.

"I don't want you overdoing it. We've got all that branding to do and we're still short handed. The doc will be back to see you tomorrow."

Turning to Johnny, he addressed him personally and to the point. "We are busy and we are shorthanded. You'll work hard for a fair day's wage, but I won't tolerate troublemakers. I can see how you wear your gun. I don't want you using it and causing any trouble here. I don't want you starting anything."

Johnny focused on him, his eyes fixed on a blue not as deep as his own.

"Oh, I won't start anything...but I sure won't

back off from finishing problems if they concern me."

Johnny perceived a flicker in Murdoch Lancer's eyes as the older man considered this odd statement...or was it a challenge?

"Don't play games with me, son. You just keep away from that gun. You're on the payroll for ranching duties, nothing else. I've got no time for distractions."

'Son'. He had called him 'son'. For an instant, Johnny thought that he had been recognized, but then he realized it was just a general term for a younger man. It meant nothing personal to the great Murdoch Lancer. He was nothing personal to this man. He was nothing special at all. Just an insignificant ranch hand to be given orders. It didn't stop his chest from constricting as though weighted down, however, with the full burden of the Lancer arch.

"I don't like distractions, either, so I'll just head over to the bunkhouse and get ready for my ranching duties, all right?"

A piercing look from Murdoch indicated that the big man did not miss the distinct sneer that accented the end of the new hand's statement. Cipriano intervened just then, providing Johnny with the chance for a curt nod before he made his exit.

"Damn!" he chastised himself for his lack of control. He mentally kicked himself for allowing his feelings to surface and to colour his words.

Then he kicked himself further for having any feelings at all.



The first day on the payroll saw Johnny

helping round up stock for branding. He was up at dawn and worked solidly until late afternoon, when the cattle had been confined to the required paddocks. He kept his ears open and encouraged talk, but gave little of himself. For some reason, the hands were a loyal bunch. They followed orders from Frank, the black foreman, without quibbling and worked well as a team.

It was a tired Johnny who headed back to the ranch with the men in the late afternoon. He saw to his faithful steed's needs, giving him a long brushing, then set about checking his tack for the week's work to come.

He chose a bench under a shady tree near the barn to work from, which allowed him to keep an unobtrusive eye on the hacienda as he toiled. Not long after he started, he noticed the young woman he had seen the other day. She carried a huge washing basket to the line and began removing clothes and linen. She appeared to be in her late teens. Slim and brunette, she walked with a lively bounce. She didn't look like Mexican help, so he wondered where she fitted into the picture. He studied her surreptitiously as she completed her task and then tried to lift the enormous load.

Johnny was not one to miss opportunities. Setting his gear on the ground, he crossed the yard to her. "Here, let me get that for you," he suggested as he simultaneously reached for the basket.

She looked up, surprised at this intrusion and hesitant to let him help.

"That's an awfully big basket for such a little lady to carry."

He smiled his easy smile. The genuine warmth in his eyes convinced her.

"Thank you, Mr...?"

"Alvirez. Johnny Alvirez."

"I haven't seen you here before. Are you new?"

"Yeah, I arrived yesterday and started today. Been moving cattle all day ready for branding tomorrow."

Her shy smile encouraged more conversation.

"How long have you been working here?" Johnny ventured.

"Oh, I'm not paid help. I was born here. Mr Lancer is my guardian," she replied, realizing his misconception. "My father was foreman here until six months ago."

Here she faltered and he could see that she was fighting emotions buried deep. After battling them for a few seconds, she managed to restore her calm manner and continue. "He was killed by land pirates when they were repeatedly attacking Lancer and the local farms. My father and Mr Lancer went to check on some stolen horses and they just shot him. Mr Lancer was shot in the back at the same time."

Emotions threatened to overcome her again. Johnny put the basket down and reached a tentative arm to place on her shoulder. "I'm so sorry. What about your ma?"

"She left my when I was little. She..." Teresa looked away, gulped, clamped her lips together, then turned back to Johnny with squared shoulders. "She ran off with a man. He had a travelling show, organizing entertainment for saloons."

Teresa looked him in the eye and lifted her chin, daring him to say something negative about her mother. To her surprise, she saw nothing but understanding.

"That must have been rough," was all he offered.

"Yes, it was. I only have vague memories of her. I suppose it would have been worse had she taken me with her and dragged me from saloon to saloon. At least here I had a stable home with my father, or at least I did until last fall."

"Where do you live now?"

"Here in the hacienda. Murdoch has taken me on as his ward. He's been like an uncle and second father to me all my life. I owe him so much."

"Yeah, he must be a real kind and generous man."

Teresa stared at him, his sharp tone surprising her.

"Yes," she replied calmly. "He is both of those things. I am lucky to have him. I would have nothing at all if it weren't for him."

Outwardly, Johnny nodded in understanding. Inwardly, he seethed that this girl could be assured of a home, a decent meal, a clean bed and security while he had been thrown out in the cold and left with nothing. She had been the daughter of the manor in every way while he had been deprived of it all. However, the events were not of her making.

"I'm glad, real glad you have Mr. Lancer. Ain't nothing worse than being alone, having nowhere to call home and having no one to care," he assured her.

There was a pause as Teresa thoughtfully regarded him, seeming to peer into his very soul.

"What about you, Mr. Alvarez? Where is

home?" asked Teresa, holding his eyes with hers for a moment.

Realizing he was giving too much of himself away, Johnny glibly evaded her question. "Here, at the moment."

He grinned and indicated the basket. "Where do you want this?"

"In the kitchen will be fine. There's a big bench there where I can fold everything."

"What about Mrs Lancer, doesn't she help out with the chores?"

"There is no Mrs Lancer. There was, but that's a long story."

I bet, thought Johnny bitterly.

"Come through here. On that bench will be fine. Thank you, Mr Alvarez."

"You're welcome, Miss. And it's Johnny."

"Teresa, then. It's Teresa."

"Fine, Teresa." Johnny tipped his hat after placing the wash basket on the bench. He cast a quick glance around the Lancer kitchen and then headed for the back door. As he did so, the cook came bustling in, a bowl of eggs clutched to her chest. They collided, the egg bowl bouncing off her ample bosom before beginning its descent to the floor. With lightning reflexes, Johnny made a grab for it, retrieving it successfully before it reached the hard surface. Voluble Spanish accompanied his act and he replied in kind, calming the overexcited cook with his words. He thrust the bowl at her to show her that all were still whole and not a one of them cracked.

Her face split into a beaming smile and he grinned back. Placing the bowl carefully on

the table, she placed both her hands over his cheeks and then smothered him in a hug.

“Oh, you are all skin and bone. Here, come and sit. I will give something to eat. I have some tamales and beans. You are the new hand that Cipriano told me about. He said that you have come from the border towns. I’m sure you must miss some good Mexican food. You must be hungry, no?”

“Well, Ma’am, I am, but I’d better wait until suppertime in the bunkhouse. I’m sure that Mr Lancer won’t take kindly to you feeding the hands in the main house.”

“Maria. My name is Maria. And, you talk nonsense. This might be Mr Lancer’s home, but this is my kitchen and he knows it! Besides, his bark is worse than his bite.”

This self-assuredness and dictatorial attitude from the hired help startled Johnny, who let himself be seated at the table. Tamales and beans followed shortly, which he devoured with enthusiasm. As he ate, he watched Teresa fold the clothes while Maria began preparations for the evening meal.

“That was delicious, Maria. Muchos gracias.”

“You would like some more?”

“No, I’m fine. It’s a long time since I’ve eaten like that.”

“Any time you get hungry, you come and see me. All right?”

“All right. And thanks again.” Johnny turned to leave, then hesitated before placing his hands on her shoulders and giving her a quick peck on the cheek.

Maria blushed, then swatted him with a towel she held clasped in her hand.

“Go on with you, but don’t forget to come back!” she added, laughing happily at him as she bade him goodbye.



The backbreaking work of branding began in earnest on the second day. Johnny was biding his time, learning as much as he could about the man he was going to kill.

He kept himself to himself, but his ears were always open to hear anything to his advantage. Surprisingly, he found the food wholesome, the bunkhouse clean and comfortable and respect evident for his new boss. What rocked him, however, is that there appeared to be no distinction between gringo, Mexican or black workers. All were treated the same, the jobs were divided fairly and the same expectations were placed on everyone.

The boss came out to supervise, but was unable to assist due to his injuries. As Johnny devoured his surprisingly good lunch of beef stew and beans brought along by Teresa and the bunkhouse cook, Murdoch Lancer walked over to sit on the log next to him.

Johnny stiffened, but continued eating, nerves screaming out to be on the alert.

Murdoch began his meal and after several minutes asked how Johnny was getting on.

“Fine,” was his brief answer.

“Well, I just want you to know that I’ve been watching you.”

Johnny tensed and stopped chewing.

“I’m pleased with the way you are shaping up. I don’t have time for those who don’t pull their weight, and you are certainly doing your

fair share.”

Feeling something was required, Johnny surprised himself by muttering, "Thank you".

He surprised himself even more so for feeling pleased that his work had been noticed.

Ill at ease, he stood up to go check on Barranca while Murdoch spoke to Cipriano and Frank. Approaching the chuck wagon to put his plate away, he paused and watched the scene before him intently. His adrenaline began pumping furiously. He had no choice but to take action.



Murdoch was engrossed in conversation with Cipriano and Frank. He listened to them earnestly and occasionally interrupted with questions. He trusted these two men who had stayed while others had deserted him when he was facing the land pirates. They had kept the ranch running after his wounding and Paul's tragic death.

Concentrating as he was, he did not at first see what was happening.

His sharply indrawn breath diverted the attention of the two men next to him, who stopped their conversation as their eyes followed the path of his.

The new ranch hand had his gun out of his holster and was levelling it with eerie steadfastness.

There was a catlike grace about him as he moved so stealthily and silently to one side. His boots made no noise as his whole body and mind concentrated on its target. As Johnny moved closer, Murdoch was struck by the determination on his face. A determination

to kill. It appeared as if the whole fabric of his being was in a capsule of its own, shutting out everything, every action and every noise which could divert him from this ultimate game of life and death.

Murdoch was frozen, unable to move, the gun barrel mesmerizing him with its rigid stillness.

The blasting of the revolver shattered the peaceful afternoon. Three rapid shots, then no more.

Johnny's aim had been sure, the blood spatter marking a deathly trail.



Johnny sprang into action, pulling the girl away from the boulder she had been leaning against. She was white with shock and trembling violently. Blood sprayed over the bodice of her dress and face.

At her feet was the corpse of an enormous rattlesnake, its head blown clean off. Johnny swiftly checked for any relatives or playmates of the creature, but was relieved to see that it had been acting alone.

He reached for his bandana and gently wiped smudges of blood from her face, speaking to her soothingly as he did so in a mixture of English and Spanish. Murdoch claimed her then, clasping her in a great bear hug with his burly arms wrapped right around her tiny body, as she sobbed in fright.

Johnny reached down to pick up the dead reptile, then threw it out of sight in the bushes. Throwing the girl a sympathetic look, he continued on his way to Barranca.

Murdoch and Teresa caught up with him a few minutes later. Teresa reached out and stopped

him with a trembling touch to his sleeve.

“Thank you, Johnny. I was so terrified. I thought I was going to be bitten. I don’t know how you did it, but thank you!”

Uncomfortable with her sincere words and Murdoch’s scrutiny, he muttered a quick “It was nothing” before dropping his head and scuffing the dirt with the toe of his boot.

“It was more than ‘nothing’, boy. That shooting was remarkable. Teresa is all I have. Thank you.”

Johnny glanced up, Murdoch’s words going through his mind. *‘Teresa is all I have’. And whose fault is that, Old Man?* Johnny’s thoughts screamed at him.

Johnny bit back the words that wanted to come, Madrid taking over to cast a steely stare at Murdoch.

“Well, if she is all you have then it’s just as well I came by, isn’t it?”

With a nod at the two of them and a dip of his hat, he agilely mounted Barranca and headed off to start his afternoon duties, leaving a puzzled Murdoch Lancer staring after him.

Chapter Two

The branding was completed before the week was out. By the end of that time, the hands took on slightly less arduous chores. They needed to recoup some energy and were permitted to do minor jobs to give them some time to recover from the physically demanding work of branding.

Johnny spent some time in the barn and tack room getting to know the trusted hands, particularly Cipriano and Frank. He was staggered at the warmth of expression when

they spoke about Murdoch and at respect they held for him. They seemed to think he was a fair boss who expected the best from a person, but he could also be kind and generous in certain circumstances. Both felt that Murdoch had given them a chance of a good life and above all treated both themselves and their families with respect in return. Johnny nearly choked on his coffee as they were telling him this over breakfast at the end of his first week at the ranch.

Their viewpoint did not mesh with what he knew of the man. For some reason this man was nicer to people who were not related. The great benefactor wouldn’t even keep to his marriage vows and look after his wife, let alone care for his child. Maybe he wasn’t a racist when it came to having workers or acquaintances of non-gringo blood around him, but having sired a mestizo must have been too much for the old geezer. A bit of an embarrassment. A disgusting aberration. A mistake. Something to be eradicated.

Johnny let his mind drift as they continued to talk across the breakfast table. All those years of being not wanted and not loved haunted him. His Mama loved him in her way, but only when it was convenient for her, only when she had no man to please her. He had been in the way then, too. If Murdoch Lancer hadn’t thrown them out, his mother wouldn’t have lowered herself to try to find love from all the low life scum who had been attracted to her.

Murdoch Lancer was going to pay. For his Mama, he would seek revenge.



Johnny entered the kitchen, arms laden with wood he had chopped for the ovens. He stacked them neatly in the wood-box, filling it

to its brim. As he straightened up, Murdoch entered the kitchen from the Great Room.

“Good morning, Alvarez,” he greeted the new hand.

“Morning,” muttered Johnny as he abruptly turned to go.

“Wait. Would you mind chopping up some kindling and stacking some more logs for the fire in the Great Room, just through here, when you have finished?” requested Murdoch, indicating the doorway to the Great Room for Johnny’s benefit.

I sure do mind, you old coot, thought Johnny, but instead Madrid put a lid on his emotions and nodded in the affirmative. “Sure. I’m done in here now, anyway.”

“Thank you,” commented Murdoch.

Johnny walked out, his thoughts and feelings in a turmoil.

Bet he wouldn’t be so polite if he knew who he was talking to, he considered. *His mistake wouldn’t get to see those fine manners.*

Johnny worked out some anger with the axe that he swung with a brooding ferocity, which startled Maria as she entered the garden.

“Good morning, Johnny. Anyone would think that you, that axe and that log have had a disagreement.”

“No, Maria. Just like to do a job fast and thoroughly.”

Maria approached him.

“You are upset.”

“No,” he denied. “I’m just getting the job

done.”

“Why so much anger?”

“I ain’t angry and I ain’t upset. I just want to get the job done. It’s just pride in my trade. Now let me get on with it!” he dismissed her curtly.

He began chopping again with all his might, but almost immediately stopped. He turned towards Maria who had stood her ground.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude. I guess I got too much energy this morning,” he lied.

Maria was not fooled. “Well if you are using up all this energy, you will need more food to keep you going. When you are finished, you come into the kitchen, si? I will have something for you.”

Johnny looked into the kind and understanding eyes of this woman who had taken him into her heart. “Gracias.”

He smiled at her and satisfied, she smiled back before heading back to her duties.

Johnny loaded his arms once again with logs. Entering the kitchen, he smiled at Maria and made his way to the Great Room.

Once through the doorway, he stopped abruptly. He had never seen such splendour, or a room of such generous proportions. One whole wall was lined with a bookcase filled with books of all kinds, mostly expensive leather bound volumes embossed in gold writing. In front of the bookshelf stood an enormous dining table, with heavy padded high-backed chairs in a Spanish style. Upholstered in an aqua velvet jacquard fabric, they exuded affluence. The fireplace came up to Johnny’s shoulder in height and above it was a large Lancer ‘L’, at least two feet in dimension. He grimaced in recognition.

Having spent the past few days branding the cattle, he felt as though the Lancer brand had been seared into his own mind.

In front of the fireplace, placed for comfort and also covered in jacquard material, were two mustard brown sofas situated at right angles to each other. To the left of the hearth stood a deeply padded shiny leather armchair. Two more armchairs upholstered in expensive pale blue textiles added further luxury to the room. He noted a model of a ship, taking pride of place on a side table. The French windows, with heavy burgundy drapes to either side, provided access to the exterior across the porch. Everything screamed wealth and comfort, success and security.

Johnny placed the logs down next to the fireplace, then continued his perusal of the room. Some embroidery had been left in a basket, no doubt Teresa's. Fresh flowers were in several vases, giving the air a fresh and perfumed scent. But dominating the room was a massive desk in front of a gigantic picture window. Johnny had never seen such a large window in his life. It drew him like a magnet. He stood there looking at the view of the rolling hills of Lancer, seemingly extending forever, dotted with the cattle that were the lifeblood of the ranch.

He gazed around the room once more, hoping for some memory to return, something to trigger his babyhood here. But he remembered nothing. This room was nothing to him. And he was nothing to it.

He looked at the desk with its neat piles of ledgers, accounts and bills. A frame facing away from him took his attention. He reached for it and turned it around.

The world stopped. He felt gut-punched as he expelled air from his lungs in a soft groan.

His Mama was smiling up at him. His Mama, whom he thought he would never see again. A younger Mama than he remembered, with laughter lines around her eyes. A man was standing next to her, his right arm protectively around her shoulders. A gigantic man who dwarfed his mother. And in his left arm was a little boy, about a year old. A dark haired little boy with light coloured eyes. The little boy was cuddling in to the huge man, his head in the crook of his father's neck with his chubby little fist clutching the string tie worn to complement the man's suit. A shy smile lit up the little child's face.

It couldn't be. Surely not. It defied belief. Bile rose in Johnny's mouth and his breaths came in ragged gasps. He closed his eyes tightly and grasped the picture to his chest as tears welled up. For several moments, his mind was in a whirl. He felt dizzy. He was ragingly angry. Why had he been robbed of his birthright. Why had he been condemned to the life he had led?

After his breathing settled down, he came to his senses and quickly peered around to make sure he was unobserved. He wiped his eyes on his sleeve, stared at the likeness of this happy family group for a further minute, then gently placed the frame back where it was.

It was then he noticed two more frames on the other side of the desk. One held a daguerreotype of an attractive blonde haired woman. She sat with graceful, erect posture and smiled sweetly at him. In the other was a little boy, about five years old in Johnny's estimation. He seemed a little serious and very innocent. He had beautiful smooth skin and blonde hair like the woman, but his hair was cut in a different style with a fringe across his forehead. He sat stiffly and was oddly dressed in a miniature suit with a velvet bow-tie around his neck.

"Just what do you think you are doing?" a sharp voice cut through his reverie. "Why are you in here at Murdoch's desk?"

Johnny turned to face Teresa.

"Hello," he greeted her. "I just chopped some wood for the fire and brought it in."

"The fire place is on the other side of the room."

Johnny smiled at her.

"Don't worry, I know what a fireplace looks like and I haven't filled the desk drawers with wood."

He paused to see the effect of his sense of humour, then added something close to the truth.

"I'm sorry. I've never seen a room like this. I came over to this side of the room to look out the window. It sure is an incredible view. It sorta takes your breath away."

Teresa eyed him warily, but his sincerity won her over.

"Yes, that's one view that Murdoch never gets tired of. But nevertheless, you could get that view outside."

"True, but I ain't never seen such a large window that can let you see so much of the outside from the inside!" retorted Johnny honestly.

Teresa looked at him for an instant, then laughed. "I suppose you're right, but why do you have that frame in your hand?"

Johnny looked at her, then at the frame he had forgotten he was holding.

"I saw these on the desk. I suppose I was curious as to who the women and children are."

"It's really none of your business, is it?"

This remark had the effect of poleaxing him. *None of his business.* His father had made sure of that. Not any more. His business had been firmly separated from his father's, through no fault of his own. A gulf as wide as the all the desert and badlands in Mexico and California combined separated them.

"No, but those ladies sure are pretty...and so different in looks."

Teresa stopped and seemed to consider whether she should say anything. She cocked her head slightly, her eyes making it clear she was pondering a response.

"This lady is Maria, Murdoch's wife, with their son, John. That lady is Catherine, Murdoch's first wife. She died in childbirth."

"So if his first wife died in childbirth, what happened to Maria?"

Teresa did not at first answer, but then shrugged and seemed to come to a decision. "She ran off with another man, a gambler, taking her son with her."

Liar! Liar! Johnny's mind screamed silently at her. But instead he gibed, "Doesn't have much luck with his women, does he?"

Before she could respond, and for fear that he would put her offside and not discover any more answers, he pursued another line of questioning. "What makes you think she ran off with another man?" he asked.

"My father told me. Everyone knew. It was as though everyone in the whole neighbourhood

knew, except for Murdoch. He came home one day and found them gone. John was not quite two years old. He was devastated.”

“Devastated? That kid looks like he’s a half-breed. Maybe it was a relief for the old man,” Johnny suggested.

“How *dare* you suggest such a thing! Afterwards, Murdoch left the ranch for six months. He scoured the countryside, here and in Mexico looking for them! When he came back, my father said that he looked like a skeleton and had aged ten years. He thought the world of his son and wife. Everyone knew that he would take his son on his horse and give him rides on his shoulders whenever he could get away from work. He doted on the little baby and his wife. He was heartbroken.”

Johnny stared at the girl, trying to make sense of what she had said. It jarred totally with what he had been told by his mother. And she would not lie to him.

“He still pays the Pinkertons to trace little John. For nineteen years he has done this, but without result. Whenever there is any profit, he makes a payment to the Pinkerton Agency hoping that they will find them.”

Johnny was flummoxed by this. It simply could not be true. It was impossible that his father cared. Maybe he had another reason for continuing the hunt? Maybe his Mama had something belonging to Murdoch? Maybe he wanted to make sure they never came back to claim their heritage? Johnny’s mind searched wildly for possible reasons to explain these actions of his father.

“Why would he want them back if she left him for another man? Why would he want such a woman who had been soiled by another man?”

Teresa looked at him as though he was a

cretin.

“Because he loves her,” she stated simply, “And he adored the ground his son walked on. Because she is the mother of his son and he wants her back. He wants his family back. He wants his life back. He never knew she was unhappy and guilt eats at him for not noticing. He wants to put it all right again.”

Johnny’s mind raced, unable to take all of this in. Desperate to give himself some thinking time, he asked about the third picture. “Who’s the blond kid?”

“Catherine and Murdoch’s son.”

Johnny stared at her. “I thought you said that she died in childbirth?”

“Yes, she did, but the son survived. His name is Scott and he lives in Boston with her father, Harlan Garrett, a wealthy businessman.”

“Why doesn’t he live here?”

“Because Murdoch sent her away when she was near her time. It was too dangerous at Lancer. Land pirates were active then, too. Harlan Garrett took the baby away immediately after Catherine died, and before Murdoch could reach them.”

“Well, why spend all that money on Pinkertons to track down the half-breed when he has a perfectly good son living in Boston? And why didn’t he bring the other boy here?”

“He tried to bring him here when Scott was five and John was two. He left the ranch to go to Boston, leaving my father in charge here. Harlan let him see Scott, but only introduced him as a business associate. He told Murdoch that if he tried to get Scott, he would stymie every move, he would drag Scott through the courts and would bankrupt Murdoch. Scott’s

grandfather is rich enough and powerful enough to do it.

Murdoch didn't want to do that to Scott. And he had John to think of. He knew that Scott was safe and well cared for, but he knew that John was probably at risk. If he spent all his money trying to get custody of Scott, he would have to forsake John, who probably needed him and the security he represented more. He knew Scott was sheltered and looked after, but not knowing about John's welfare has eaten at him for nearly twenty years. It is so tragic that he has neither son and that the two brothers don't have each other."

The two brothers.

Johnny's ears rang. The world tilted. His brain roared.

As she had discussed Murdoch's two families, he had not taken this on board until the very end.

He had a brother.

The two children in the pictures were brothers. Albeit half-brothers, but still brothers. The blond boy shared half his blood. A continent separated them. A marriage separated them. Fortune and extreme poverty separated them. A life's experiences separated them. Hell, even hair colour and complexion separated them.

But he had a brother. A brother who shared his blood. A brother who shared his father.

Johnny looked at Teresa. He commented inanely, "Yeah, that is sad. A pity they don't know about each other. Murdoch doesn't write to this Scott?"

"Murdoch has written many times, but there is never a reply. He always sends something for

his birthday and Christmas, but Murdoch gets nothing back. After he went to get Scott, Harlan sent Murdoch that photo. That's all he has. I often wonder if Scott has ever received any of Murdoch's letters."

"So you think that Scott has been kept deliberately in the dark?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Sounds like one heck of a mess."

"Yes, it is, and it's so hard on Murdoch to keep pushing himself trying to locate John. There's been disappointment after disappointment."

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry. I guess life wasn't meant to be easy."

"True, but why does it have to be so cruel for some people?"

Why indeed?

The front door slamming interrupted them. Johnny jumped back from the desk and turned towards the loud footsteps approaching, waiting for a challenge from Murdoch regarding his intrusion into this sanctuary.

"Hello, Teresa" greeted Murdoch as he placed a kiss on her cheek.

"Hello, Murdoch. Dinner is almost ready. You've got time to wash up."

"Thank you, honey."

Johnny was half way out the room making what he thought was an unobtrusive exit when Murdoch stopped him.

"Alvarez. Have you chopped all that wood?"

Johnny turned, heart racing.

"Yes, sir. It's all stacked up and ready."

"Good. Come over here, son."

There he was again, using that term. Rubbing it in.

"You know, what you did the other day meant everything to me. Thank you. Teresa is very precious."

"I did what anyone would do."

"No, you didn't. You achieved what none of us could do. You managed to kill the snake without startling it into biting Teresa. Where did you learn to shoot like that?"

Johnny's protective shutters descended. He kept his eyes bland as he gave a deliberately uninformative answer. "Here and there."

"Where exactly is 'here and there'?"

"In Mexico. Along the border towns."

"What did you do in Mexico and along the border towns?"

"This and that."

Murdoch surprised him with a wry grin. "All right, I get the message. I won't ask any more questions. I don't want to scare you off. By all accounts you are a good worker. But I do want to give you this."

Murdoch reached into the breast pocket of his coat and withdrew a billfold. From it he took out an envelope, which he extended to Johnny.

Johnny looked at it, but didn't reach to take it.

"What's that?"

"Take it and find out."

Johnny searched his father's face for an answer, but not finding one, held out his hand and took it. Inside were banknotes. Many of them.

Johnny looked up in shocked surprise.

"There's \$500 in there. I told you that Teresa is all I have. I want you to take that and use it wisely for something special."

"I can't take your money. I don't want it."

"Yes, you can. In saving Teresa, you gave me a reason to keep living. I have nothing without her. My life is empty without her here. Please. I won't take it back."

For what seemed a lifetime, Johnny stared at his father, at the sincerity on his father's face. Finally, he nodded and placed it in the inside pocket of his jacket.

"All right."

He started to walk away, then stopped and swivelled on his heels.

"Thanks," he offered.

"You're more than welcome."

Johnny went to leave again, but turned a second time.

"If you've only got Teresa, what are you going to do when she up and marries?"

It was a cruel question, but he had to know.

"I'll keep doing what I've been doing for the past twenty years. I'll keep looking for my family."

The utter hopelessness and desolation in Murdoch's face ripped through Johnny's soul.

"What if you find them and you don't like what you find, what sort of people they've become?"

"*When* I find them I will bless the day. I just want them to know that they are loved and always have been. What right would I have to condemn them when I know nothing of the obstacles life may have thrown in their way?"

Johnny nodded his understanding and left.

Chapter Three

Boston

Johnny tensed and peered intently, waiting for his quarry. He drew up the collar of his coat against the cool Boston breeze and watched with interest.

He had left California several weeks ago, blessing the newly completed transcontinental railway. The seemingly interminable journey was at least much faster than travelling by steamship around the continent.

Ironically, Murdoch's money had made this mission possible. He had given his notice and was assured he could come back any time. More irony! He purchased his ticket for Boston and upon arrival found accommodation and immediately used his skills to track down his prey. Harlan Garrett, the prominent citizen, was easy to find, but it was Scott he needed to make contact with. The social pages in the newspapers provided pictures of the man who had become an obsession.

Johnny stiffened as a man opened the front door of the elegant three-story home in affluent St Louisburg Square, close to Boston Common and near Beacon Street in Beacon

Hill. He was taller than Johnny by two to three inches, but not nearly as tall as Murdoch. Slim in build, he was clad in riding clothes consisting of tight plaid pants and a neatly buttoned tan coat with a green cravat loosely tied at his neck to ward off the morning chill. His hair was as blond as in the old daguerreotype on Murdoch's desk. The fringe was virtually the same as well.

He had shadowed his sibling for the past four days, trying to work out his routine and hoping to find a way to get to speak to him. Not that he knew what he would have to say, or indeed if he would say anything anyway. He just didn't know. This indecisiveness was not part of Johnny's character and left him unsettled.

Scott Lancer seemed to be man of habit. He rose early by Boston standards, but not as early as Johnny was used to on the ranch. He went for a ride in the woods and over the fields on the outskirts of the city, before returning to his abode, changing and heading to the office of Garrett Enterprises. The building seemed to swallow him up for the entire day, disgorging him only in the late afternoon or early evening. His evenings were spent at various clubs, theatres or residences about town. There seemed no set pattern to his nocturnal activities.

Johnny watched Scott leave. He bit his lip in concentration and decided on a plan.

Making his way to the commercial centre of the city, he had himself measured for a city style suit and a dress dinner suit. He decided that his current clothes would do for riding. Making arrangements to pick up the clothes later that day, he immersed himself in discovering as much about Harlan Garrett and his business interests as he could, as well as about his brother. He used businesses, the library, neighbours and the local newspaper,

relying heavily on his charm and some fabricated stories to get what he wanted.

One fact surprised him immensely. A newspaper article referred to Scott as an ex-Lieutenant in the Union Army. The accompanying photograph showed him at an annual ball to raise money for those injured during the war and for their families. It was once again a serious photograph as Scott stared grimly at the camera.

In the afternoon, Johnny paid a visit to the livery where Scott's mount was stabled. He introduced himself as a Californian rancher and checked over the stock, making much of Scott's mount. When told that the mount could not be hired out, Johnny chose another stallion. A fine animal with rippling muscles and energy quivering below the surface.

Paying in advance, he finalized his requirements for the next day and left. Last preparations made, Johnny picked up his clothes and returned to his hotel room for dinner and an early night.



The next morning saw Johnny out early riding his mount in the crisp air. He kept an eagle eye out for his brother by hovering just out of sight on a hillcrest. Finally, the time arrived. Scott was proceeding towards him at a steady pace. Johnny knew that once he topped the rise, he would head below and ride flat out in the valley, both Scott and his steed soaring over obstacles such as fences in their path.

Johnny headed for the valley below, sure that Scott would soon arrive. Sure enough, his sibling soon joined him on the valley floor. Johnny quickened his pace as Scott drew near and glanced over his shoulder at his older

brother.

Scott narrowed the gap and just as Scott drew alongside, Johnny looked over at him and stared full in the eye. He grinned, jerked his head forward and spurred his horse on. Momentarily, Scott was left behind, but a few short moments later he had taken up the challenge and was flying along at breakneck speed. The men kept pace over several miles, their mounts lithely jumping over logs and fences barring their passage. Each rider was glued to the saddle, moving as though an extension of the animal between their thighs.

Finally, both men recognized the need for their horses to take things easier. They gradually slowed the animals whose flanks and withers were flecked with the foam of exertion. Both man and beast were breathing heavily, the soothing walk gradually restoring them to normal respiration.

It was then that Scott spoke, his cultured, deep voice causing Johnny's heart to thud at these first words.

"It's a long time since I have had the pleasure of a ride like that."

Johnny angled his head at him, grinning, "Is that what you call it? I thought it was a race!"

Scott laughed. "All right. I'll amend that. It's a long time since I've had the pleasure of a *race* like that."

Johnny's infectious grin dazzled his brother, who beamed back in pleasure.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Lancer. Scott Lancer," elaborated Scott as he stilled his stallion and leaned over, offering his hand.

Johnny was mesmerized by the hand hovering

in front of him. He finally extended his own right hand and clasped his brother firmly in a prolonged shake. It seemed like Johnny could not let go and only loosened his hand when he felt Scott begin to withdraw his arm.

"I'm Johnny." After a moment's hesitation, he added "Alvirez. Johnny Alvirez."

Johnny's world contracted to just the two of them. He was riding next to his brother. His breath left him for an instant and he felt giddy.

Finally, he asked, "Where did you learn to ride like that? I didn't think that many city slickers could possibly ride like that and still maintain their seat in the saddle."

Scott looked over and smiled, a little sadly. "In the cavalry. I served under Sherman in the war."

"What were you doing in the war? A gentleman like you wouldn't have needed to sign up."

"No, I didn't *need* to, but I felt a *need* to. I had led a privileged life. I opposed the slavery issue. No man should be a possession and every man should be able to make decisions for his own future without others making them for him. Every man should be able to dream and to have his dreams realized with a little hard work and no one putting obstacles in his way."

Scott abruptly stopped, embarrassed that he should spill his thoughts to this stranger. Before he could divert attention from his statement, his new riding partner made an astute comment.

"The world would be a better place if more men thought and acted like you."

The second piece of praise unsettled Scott,

who sought a safer topic of conversation.

"I see you ride with a western saddle. Where did you learn to ride?"

"In Mexico and California."

"You have a different accent from mine. Is that where you are from?"

"Yeah, I spent all my life there."

"What finds you here? You are a long way from home."

Home. Little did this man know that he had no home.

"I have business interests in California. I'm a rancher."

Scott's interest quickened. "Where is your ranch located?"

"In the southern San Joaquin Valley. I spent most of my life further south, but I now have interests there."

It was only a white lie or a little twist to the truth, after all.

Scott was silent, grey even in pallor. He continued to walk his horse next to Johnny. Finally, his erect posture squared further.

"Do you know a man named Murdoch Lancer? He has a ranch in those parts."

"Yes, I know him. I met him recently, in fact."

Scott brought his horse to an abrupt stop. Johnny's horse continued past, before he, too, reined in. Johnny twisted around in the saddle to watch his brother. Scott's face was immobile and white with shock. His eyes locked with his unknown brother.

"Are you all right?" asked Johnny softly.

Scott seemed to visibly shake himself. "Yes, I'm fine," he asserted.

"You don't look fine. You look like you've seen a ghost."

Scott glared at him, his mouth set in a tight line. Too late, Johnny realized that he might have pushed too far. Scott spurred his horse forward and flew along at a terrifying speed. Johnny took off after him, genuinely concerned that he would come to grief.

Scott was some rider and managed to outpace Johnny for quite a distance, with Johnny doggedly in pursuit not far behind. Finally, Johnny drew level and kept his brother company on his wild dash. Scott's horse began to slacken at last and Scott gently reined him in, Johnny mirroring his brother's actions.

They had come a beautiful lake, surrounded by lush green trees. Scott dismounted and fell to his knees. Johnny stayed in the saddle for a while, then when he felt that his brother had composed himself somewhat, he too dismounted. He gently pried the reins from Scott's hand and led the two horses over to one of the trees where he could tether them both. Once they had cooled down, he would let them drink from the inviting waters of the lake. As Johnny dealt with the horses, Scott stood and made his way shakily to a log. He leant both hands on his knees and gulped great lungfuls of air.

Johnny approached his companion, proffering him a canteen. Scott quirked an eyebrow.

"A canteen?"

"Back where I come from, you don't go anywhere on horseback without at least one or

two canteens. It's only water. If I had my own horse and saddlebags, I'd be able to offer you something stronger."

Scott smiled at him. "Thanks, anyway. Water will be fine."

Scott took a welcome drink, then offered it back to Johnny, who also drank, both to quench his thirst and to give Scott time.

"Do you want to talk?"

"I don't know you."

Ain't that the sad and sorry truth, thought Johnny morosely. Instead, he advised, "Sometimes it's easier to talk to someone you don't know. It sort of provides a distance, a buffer."

There was a silence as Johnny stared at the rolling hills, so different from the landscape of Lancer. When Scott did at last speak, his voice gripped Johnny's attention.

"Murdoch Lancer is my father. My mother died when I was born and my grandfather, my mother's father, raised me."

"You've never met him?"

"No, he never came to reclaim me."

Johnny bit his tongue and mulled over his response.

"How do you know? And maybe circumstances prevented him, anyway."

"I think I'd have known if I met my own father!" spat Scott with venom.

"When you were older, yes, but when you were younger, you may have been unaware of what was going on."

Scott looked at Johnny with a steely stare. Johnny thought once again that he had blown it. Scott was the first to look away.

“Sometimes things aren’t what they seem, Scott. Sometimes they are not as simple as they seem to be when you are a child. Things aren’t always black and white.”

Silence enveloped the two. A companionable silence, Johnny suddenly realized.

“What about your family?” Scott enquired.

“I’m not married.”

“Neither am I . . . I was thinking about where you grew up.”

“My mother left my father when I was about two. I never knew my father, either.”

They looked at each other, a common bond shared.

“But you had your mother?”

“Yes, but only until I was ten.” Fearing that this sounded selfish given Scott’s loss, he added.

“I was lucky to have my Mama for ten years at least.”

“Was she a good mother?”

Johnny balked at this private question, then gave his weighed response.

“In her own way, she did her best.” But did she? He really needed to examine his thoughts and feelings about his mother and her actions since his return to Lancer, but it was simply too hard, too raw and too uncomfortable for him.

Scott nodded. “So what happened when you were ten?”

“She died,” was Johnny’s cryptic response.

“But what happened to you?”

“I got me some work. Enough to get by. I spent a few months in an orphanage.”

Scott looked at him horrified. “Do you mean to say that you looked after yourself? You had no adult to fall back on? Why didn’t you stay in the orphanage?”

“An orphanage is like the army. I’m sure you can relate to that,” added Johnny with his unique humour. “All rules and regulations. All the life stifled out of you so you do what they say, when they say, how they say. I just preferred to be in charge of my own destiny without having to answer to someone else. I never was much good at taking orders,” he finished with a dazzling smile.

Scott reciprocated. This man’s smile was captivating and disarming. Scott could not remember when he had last felt so at ease with someone.

Scott felt guilty. For a short while he had actually felt jealous that this man had known a mother’s embrace and affection, but then he compared his pampered lifestyle to this man’s solitary existence and he felt deep pangs of shame that he had grown up with so much, and his new friend with so little. Scott was not naïve. The war had changed that. He knew that the man must have suffered unspeakable hardships.

Johnny sat next to him on the log. They stayed silent for a minute, then Scott took a deep breath. “What can you tell me about my father?”

What could Johnny say? Johnny himself did

not know what to make of the man.

“Boy, is he big!” was the first thing that he could think of. “Bigger than you by about five inches. Just massive. I believe that he’s Scottish, but no trace of his accent remains. He just has your average American accent.”

“What sort of man is he?”

“I don’t really know, but his workers think the world of him. He expects them to work hard, but he is a fair and respected boss. His ranch is one hundred thousand acres, just outside of Morro Coyo, not all that far from Stockton and Sacramento. It’s a big enterprise and he’s a leading figure in the Cattlemen’s Association.”

“Does he have a wife now? Does he have any other children on the ranch.”

“No,” Johnny truthfully replied.

They sat together for a further few minutes, after which Scott asked Johnny how long he intended to be in Boston.

“I’m not sure. I suppose it depends on how things pan out.”

“Would you care to meet me for lunch at my club today?”

“I don’t know if I’d be acceptable there.”

“Why?”

“Some of those sorts of establishments don’t take kindly to clients of mixed blood.”

Scott simply stared at him in dismay.

“I had hoped that those sorts of attitudes had changed since the war.”

“Nope. Leastways, not where I’m from.”

“You’ll have no problem, I assure you.”

Scott gave him the address, then the two of them made their way back to the stables at a leisurely pace after allowing the horses to refresh themselves at the lake.

For the next week, Scott and Johnny met every day. While Johnny needed to deceive his brother over some issues, he nevertheless used honesty where possible.

From Scott’s perspective, he had never felt this easy relationship to another human being. He had come close during the war, but never had he felt so much enjoyment of someone’s company.

Towards the end of the first week, Scott asked Johnny to dine at home with his grandfather and some business associates.

“I really don’t know if I would fit in.”

“Yes, you will. Besides, one is a Spaniard. He comes here once a year from Europe on business. You speak Spanish. I’m sure he’ll be pleased to have someone else speak his language.”



Johnny spent the afternoon in a nervous fidget, but the opportunity of seeing Harlan in the flesh was too tempting. He arrived punctually, dressed in his formal suit and was shown into a sitting room by the butler. Scott leapt up to greet him and to introduce him around.

Johnny felt comfortable with the Spaniard, Alberto Martinez, and listened closely to the business chatter weaving around him. The

other Bostonians were stuffed shirts, but his survival had long rested on his ability to blend into his surroundings and to absorb useful information. Dinner was delayed slightly as they waited for another guest, Chad Longworth, to arrive, but in the end it was decided to begin without him. Longworth, it was explained, was businessman from southern California who traveled once a year to Boston to keep up to date on the latest goods available for shipment to his growing network of stores in the south of the state and even over the border into Mexico.

They were well past the first course at the dining table, and Johnny was just starting to feel confident in his handling of conversation when it came his way, when the delayed guest finally arrived. He entered the room gushing apologies and excusing his tardiness owing to a double booking of a carriage.

He was introduced around, but as he turned to face Johnny, he came to an abrupt halt. He froze. The blood drained from his face and his body noticeably began to tremble.

The other guests looked on in consternation, his puzzling behaviour disconcerting them

“You,” he gurgled. “What are you doing here?”

Johnny looked at him in the eye, memory flooding back and curdling the contents of his recently digested meal.

“Been a long time,” drawled Johnny.

“You know each other?” queried Scott.

“Madrid’s a killer, a gun for hire. What in tarnation is he doing here at your dining table, Harlan?”

Harlan went a ghostly white and swayed.

Comprehension had sunk in.

“Johnny Madrid? Maria’s boy. No!” he whispered in dismay, grasping the back of a dining chair for support.

Scott looked at the men. Taking in the fear in his grandfather’s face and the uneasy tension in Longworth, he then looked at Johnny’s deceptively placid features.

“Johnny?” has asked tentatively. “What are they talking about?”

“Harlan’s right, Scott. I used to go by the name of Johnny Madrid. I was a gun-hawk. I met Longworth along the border towns. He was refusing to sell goods to the people at a reasonable price or refusing to provide them after a reasonable deposit had been made prior to ordering. He held the monopoly. He made sure he sewed up the contract from the flour mills, he stopped sugar getting through, essential tools were with-held, supplies were kept locked away, goods were sold twice over as he realized he could jack up the price through lack of opposition.”

“You stole from me. You killed my men.”

“I took what they had already paid for! What was rightfully theirs! Supplies that you tried to sell twice, the second time around to the highest bidder. The only men that got killed were those who fired first on women and children trying to load their rightfully purchased goods into wagons. You and your men are scum, Longworth. Of course, you were scarce when the action started. Easy to send men to fight for you, isn’t it, when you can hide away from reality, hiding behind your money?”

Scott was frozen as he tried to comprehend what was happening. He felt cheated, but of what, he wasn’t sure. He stared at the tableau

before him.

Then he remembered what Harlan had said.
“How did you know Johnny’s name, grandfather? How did you know him? Who is Maria?”

For the first time in his life, Harlan Garrett was silent. He was incapable of moving. His world was going to crumble around him unless he thought fast.

Johnny also noticed the chink in the old man’s armour. Harlan knew who he was and his relationship to Scott, of that Johnny was certain. Perhaps now was the time to risk it and come clean.

“Are you going to tell him, Garrett?”

Harlan looked at him blankly. “What do you mean?”

“You obviously know who I am. Tell Scott who Maria is.”

“Grandfather?”

Harlan looked lost and bewildered, before attempting to bluff his way out of it. “You don’t need this riffraff. You can be assured that everyone in this room will keep this quiet. Your business future and matrimonial happiness will depend on it. I will not have you dragged into the gutter.”

Harlan’s beseeching look was lost on Scott. “Tell me what is going on, Grandfather. Now!” ground out a seething Scott.

“This murderer is the son of Murdoch Lancer’s whore. This is John Lancer.”

Johnny swore loudly and launched himself at Garrett, but his brother got there first. He grappled with Johnny, managing to throw him

off his grandfather after a short scuffle. Panting with exertion and frustration, Scott demanded answers.

“Stop! I want to know precisely what you mean, Grandfather.”

Harlan straightened his clothes, considered what he should say, then ploughed on.

“Several years after your mother’s passing, your father remarried. This time to a Mexican harlot he only just made respectable in time before her bastard son could be born.”

Scott stood stock still. Shock rolled over him. He stared at his grandfather until Harlan cringed at the rage and hatred hurling silently towards him.

Slowly, Scott turned to Johnny who held his gaze unwaveringly.

“You’re my brother? My little brother?”

“Yes,” replied Johnny simply.

Scott remained immobile except for a slight nodding of his head. “And you’ve known from the start, Grandfather?”

“Yes, Murdoch wanted you to join him and his Mexican wife, but I put a stop to that nonsense, of course. That country killed your mother. I wasn’t going to let it happen to you. I wasn’t going to let that dirty foreigner, who didn’t even speak proper English, try to replace Catherine in your heart.”

“My father tried to get me back?”

“Yes, but I couldn’t allow it, of course. I made sure that his attempts came to nothing. I was not going to have your life ruined by them and that heathen, godforsaken country. Nor was I going to have that half-breed killer

contaminating you. You can see how it was for the best.”

Scott looked searchingly at Johnny. “When did John Lancer become Johnny Madrid?”

“When I was eleven.”

Scott nodded at that. It made sense. After his mother’s death. His grandfather received the next question from him. “And how long have you known that John Lancer was Johnny Madrid?”

Harlan appeared puzzled. “Since he was eleven and changed his name.”

“So you kept tabs on him all this time?”

“Yes, I needed to protect you, Scotty.”

Scott glared long and hard at his grandfather.

“So you knew he was alone from the age of ten?”

Harlan realized his mistake. He opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. Finally he attempted, “It was like this, Scotty...”

That was as far as Harlan got. He did not see the fist which flew towards his mouth, the resultant blow bloodying his nose and lips. The force landed him on his back with a grunt. He squealed in fright as he saw the blood and searched frantically for a handkerchief to staunch the flow of the red sticky substance ruining his clothes.

“Have you taken leave of your senses, boy?”

“No, now that I have been apprised of a few facts, I’ve just come to my senses. THAT was for Johnny. Don’t you EVER call his mother those names again! Don’t you EVER again

refer to my *brother* as a bastard or a half-breed or a killer!”

Scott turned to Johnny. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Scott took Johnny’s arm, led him outside, hailed a cab and had them driven in meditative silence to his club. Paying a substantial sum to be permitted to use a private conference room there, he turned to Johnny.

“Is whiskey OK?”

“Yeah, but I’d prefer a tequila if this fine establishment carries any in stock,” grinned Johnny wickedly in response.

“I’ll see what I can do, brother,” smiled Scott warmly in reply.

Scott ceased movement as he began to choke on the last word. Taking some deep breaths, he shook off the emotion, organized their needs to include some food since their meal had been disrupted and led his brother away, with the firm assertion that they were not to be interrupted.

Closing the door behind him, he leaned heavily against it, before making his way to some deep armchairs beside a table. He poured them both a large drink, then sat staring at it. Finally he raised his eyes to Johnny, who had been patiently waiting and biding his time. He lifted his glass to chink against Johnny’s and offered a simple toast.

“To the Lancer brothers.”

“To the Lancer brothers,” repeated Johnny solemnly.

They drank deeply, then immediately topped up their glasses.

"Care to tell me about it, Johnny? This time I'd like the truth."

Johnny was not sure where to start.

"Much of what I told you is the truth, Scott. My mother married my father...our father," he corrected himself hastily, "Just over two years after you were born. I was born at Lancer, but was taken away from there when I was just two."

Here Johnny paused. Making a decision, he decided that he owed his brother the complete truth.

"She told me that Murdoch kicked us out, that he didn't want a half-breed for a son."

At this, Scott looked at him in shock.

"That's what I grew up believing. She had ...various men ... and did what it took to feed us. Guess she wouldn't hold her own in polite Boston society," contemplated Johnny wryly

It was getting harder for Johnny who tossed own the rest of his drink and reached for a refill. "One man she was with often used to beat her and me both. One day, he went too far. I tried to protect her, but I wasn't big enough or strong enough."

Johnny's voiced hitched at this point. Scott held out a hand and tentatively touched his sleeve. Johnny looked at the hand on his arm, then nodded his appreciation at his older brother.

"He killed her and then went for me. He'd left his gun in its holster hanging on the back of a chair while he ...dealt with my mother. I got to it first and shot him. He was the first man I killed. And I'd do it again, Scott."

Johnny waited for the reaction, but his

brother's eyes only held approval and understanding.

"I lit out. I had to fend for myself. Being a half-breed makes you the whipping boy for both races. I had to learn to defend myself or die. So began the legend of Johnny Madrid."

Scott did not press for further details, but felt that he was being given an edited version of events. He was surprised that Johnny had divulged as much as he did. There was no doubt that, given time, he would learn more about his brother and his dreadful experiences. And time was what he had in mind to spend with this brother of his – with this most unexpected and welcome discovery in his life.

"About two months ago I reached a point where I couldn't continue the life of a gunhawk any more. It's sordid, soul-destroying. I just couldn't keep going, but I knew as soon as I tried to give it up I would have every wannabe gunfighter gunning for me and I'd be dead within weeks. Seeing I realized that my time on this earth was limited, I decided I'd take the one person who had caused all my misery with me."

Johnny hesitated, but than added, "By the way, just so that you know, in all my career he would have been the only one I would have killed in out and out cold blood."

Johnny ventured to look at Scott again. Still not getting a negative reaction, he decided he could safely continue his recount of events. Scott interrupted first.

"What changed your mind?" Scott then hastily amended this, some panic evident in his tone. "Presumably you *did* change your mind?"

"When I got to Lancer, I found out that things were not quite what I was led to believe."

"How so?"

“Our father was not the cold-hearted devil I was led to believe. He was well respected by the workers. He didn’t seem racist. And then there was Teresa.”

“Teresa?”

“Our father’s ward. He took her on when her own father was killed by land pirates. I saw some photographs on his desk one day. One was of you. I didn’t know you existed until then. She told me how he tried to get you back, but Harlan prevented it and threatened to drag you through the courts. He would have won and he would have bankrupted Murdoch into the bargain.”

Johnny bowed his head, speaking very softly as he continued. “She also told me that my mother and I weren’t kicked out. She had run off with another man and that Murdoch has spent all this time looking for us. She didn’t know who I was, so there was no reason to lie.”

The last was barely a whisper.

The movement of a lone tear slowly sliding down Johnny’s cheek broke through Scott’s reserve. He reached forward and grasped his brother in his arms for the first time.

Chapter Four

Return to Lancer

The two Lancer brothers reined in their horses on the same crest Johnny had stopped at several months ago. Both remained silent until Johnny offered the observation that everything below was Lancer, as far as the eye could see.

Scott had never seen any property so huge. Yes, his grandfather’s holdings were extensive, but they were never anything you could physically see, except for maybe an

isolated office building.

It took the brothers’ breath away.

After staying up all night talking and drinking at Scott’s club, they had returned to his grandfather’s home, where Scott had proceeded to pack his belongings. Some he took with him in several valises, the rest he had packed into trunks for shipment or arranged for them to be held indefinitely in storage. Scott had said an icy goodbye to his grandfather, but was genuinely moved when taking his leave from the faithful servants who had been all the family he had.

He had procured an adjoining room to Johnny’s at the hotel, where they had spent one last night in Boston before heading out west on the railroad.

The time on board the train had given the two men more time to adjust to each other and to learn more about each other. Both were quite staggered that they felt so much at ease in each other’s company. That there was a growing, indefinable bond was unmistakable. Scott reveled in being the older brother. He just wished that he had been there to protect his brother when he needed it most as he grew up alone.

Scott learned more about Johnny’s past. Johnny opened up gradually, but Scott often wondered if he would ever learn the true extent of his younger sibling’s suffering as a child and adolescent.

Johnny was astonished that even though he allowed Scott an ever-increasing glimpse into his past, Scott did not judge him. Rather than being mortified and disgusted, Scott seemed to become more protective of him. Scott had told him about his time in the army, the abhorrence he felt for the senseless killing and of his appalling time in Libby Prison. The two came

to understand that they had more in common than they at first thought.

This time together did much to mend the broken bridges of their childhood. Scott found Johnny's vibrant humour and effervescent sense of fun to be a lifeline after his ruptured relations with his grandfather. His buoyant attitude and ebullience were contagious. Scott, who had been raised in a stifled and serious environment, felt liberated.

After several minutes studying the scene below, the brothers simultaneously made the move forward. Walking their horses through the Lancer arch, both looked around and drank in every detail. They stopped outside the hacienda and dismounted to tether their mounts to the hitching rail. At that moment, Teresa came out onto the porch.

"Hello, Johnny. You're back!" she exclaimed in pleased tones. "Murdoch and Cipriano were only saying this morning that they could use your help at the moment."

"Why is that?"

"Oh, we've had some further trouble from land pirates while you've been gone."

"Well, perhaps if we could go inside, we could discuss it with Mr. Lancer."

Teresa led them in, surprised that Johnny did not introduce his well-dressed friend.

"Murdoch! You have visitors!"

Murdoch rose from his desk as Teresa left for the kitchen to get refreshments.

"You're back, Alvarez!"

"Yes and no."

"Yes and no?"

"Yes, I'm back. No, I'm not really Alvarez."

Murdoch stopped with a frown creasing his forehead. "Would you care to explain?"

"Alvarez was the name of one of my step fathers. I've been going by the name of Johnny Madrid for the past ten years."

Murdoch stiffened in shock, not daring to believe what he was hearing. Pinkerton reports had recently indicated his son's alias. He dared not hold out hope. "And what name did you go by before then, son?"

Johnny looked at him, locking eyes with his father's. He was sure that undue emphasis had been put on that last word.

"Johnny Lancer."

Murdoch felt weak at the knees. His limbs turned to jelly, his breathing became rapid until finally he stumbled the last few paces to Johnny and grasped him in a tight embrace. It was so tight that Johnny could scarcely breathe.

When finally he was released, his father held him at arm's length, moist eyes drinking in every detail.

"You look so like Maria. I caught glimpses of it before, but couldn't put my finger on what it was that made you seem so familiar to me. Now, it seems so obvious and such an uncanny resemblance."

Johnny swallowed a lump in his throat, preventing him from speaking. He cleared his throat noisily. "I brought someone with me."

Murdoch looked at Scott properly for the first time. At first merely curiously, waiting for

Johnny to elaborate, then with an intensity which pinned Scott like an insect stuck on a display board. Murdoch approached the stranger.

He knew. It had to be. The same serious face and the same blond hair in a grown man's body.

"Scott," he breathed, before enveloping him in a hug, which seemed to crush the air from Scott's lungs.

After some time Murdoch stepped back, holding him by the forearms. A ghost of a smile played at the corners of his mouth.

"You, son, have your mother's eyes."

Scott flinched a little at the memory of a woman he never even met, at the thought that the woman who had given him life had left a legacy to remind others of her.

Murdoch's smile was broad and infectious. "Welcome home, boys. I never thought I would live to see the day. This calls for a celebratory drink. You *do* drink, don't you?"

"When I know the man I'm drinking with, yeah," grinned back Johnny in return.

Murdoch passed the glasses around, offering a toast to his sons and to a future together at Lancer.

"To this most unexpected and delightful surprise, one I've waited a lifetime for," proposed Murdoch.

They raised their glasses and Murdoch shared his first drink with his boys. He turned to the picture window.

"Through that window is Lancer. I've got a grey hair for every good blade of grass you

see out there. I used to love this ground more than anything God ever created. But it doesn't mean much without my sons by my side to run it and share in it."

He appraised both his lads. Both so different. Johnny in his gaudy Mexican garb and with his slouched stance. His hair so dark it was almost black. Dark features set against astoundingly piercing and lively blue eyes. Scott with his erect posture, what looked unerringly like straight-backed military bearing. His blond hair and fair features contrasting with his brother's. His proper Boston traveling clothes giving him what could be called a slight dandified air if one didn't detect the barely discernible fibre of steel within.

"A third of it is yours. Everything you see out there. A three way split. A three way partnership. Equal shares to each of us. One hundred thousand acres. Twenty thousand head of beef. If you want it, that is. I'll have the papers drawn up tomorrow. All you have to do is sign."

"Well, far be it for me to spoil a family reunion," assented Scott with a relaxed smile.

"Am I right in guessing you played a part in this family reunion, Johnny?" enquired Murdoch.

"Let's just say that I put that \$500 to good use. I'll tell you about that later, but first of all I'd like to know about the troubles Teresa mentioned."

"We've been attacked by land pirates since you left. My fences have been cut, beef stolen, workers frightened off, burned out. The only law we've got here is pack law. Big Dog gets the meat."

"Does Big Dog have a name?"

“Pardee.”

“Day. Day Pardee.”

“Do you know him?”

“Yes, I know him. He’s a gunfighter and he’s pretty good. Yeah, I’d say you have some kind of trouble. Or should that be we have some trouble? I guess we came back at the right time, Scott. I don’t like to see my property under threat.”

“Our property!” corrected Scott with mock severity, before breaking into a beaming smile which infected the others, bringing with it a sense of solidarity and a determination to stand together in the future in a way that they had been deprived of in the past.



FOOTNOTES

Daguerreotypes were an early form of photography developed by Frenchman Louis Daguerre. They came into being in 1839, their use peaked in 1847 and dwindled by the late 1850’s. They are renowned for their clarity, even compared to today’s standards. The plates were non-magnetic and were composed of silver on copper. They had a mirror effect when turned. Daguerreotypists were proud of their craft and often stamped the name of the manufacturer and the date on the corner of the photograph.

The *transcontinental railway* was completed in the USA on May 10, 1869. A railway traversing the continent had long been proposed, but there was some dispute about the route. With the advent of the Civil War, the south withdrew from negotiations and so the northern route was chosen. A path between Sacramento and Omaha was the required link in order to complete the track, which was

begun in 1862. The Union Pacific and the Central Pacific companies, while originally surveying past each other, were forced by the government to let common sense prevail and meet at Promontory, Utah, on the northern rim of Salt Lake on the above date. I have set the story around 1870.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

“*Unexpected Discoveries*” is Fay Mitchell’s first Lancer effort. Known online as “faymitch”, she lives in sunny Perth, Western Australia, less than a mile from the Indian Ocean and the superb white sand beaches her state has to offer. She lives with her husband and four teenaged sons, plus energetic Rex, their three-year-old Jack Russell terrier.

Fay is the Head of Department of Languages at a large senior high school in Perth. French is her specialist subject, which she originally learnt at high school before continuing on her studies at university. After receiving her degree, the French government awarded her a scholarship to study post-graduate at university in France. She spent most of her time at Besançon University, but she also attended Grenoble University in the Alps. For someone who lives in the most isolated capital city in the world, being in such close proximity to so many other breath-taking countries was like a dream come true.

A former state and national women’s Lever Action Rifle champion, her own interests have taken a back seat over the past twenty years with the demands of raising a young family, where entire weekends passed being a spectator and supporter at Tee-ball, cricket, basketball, soccer and Australian Rules Football.

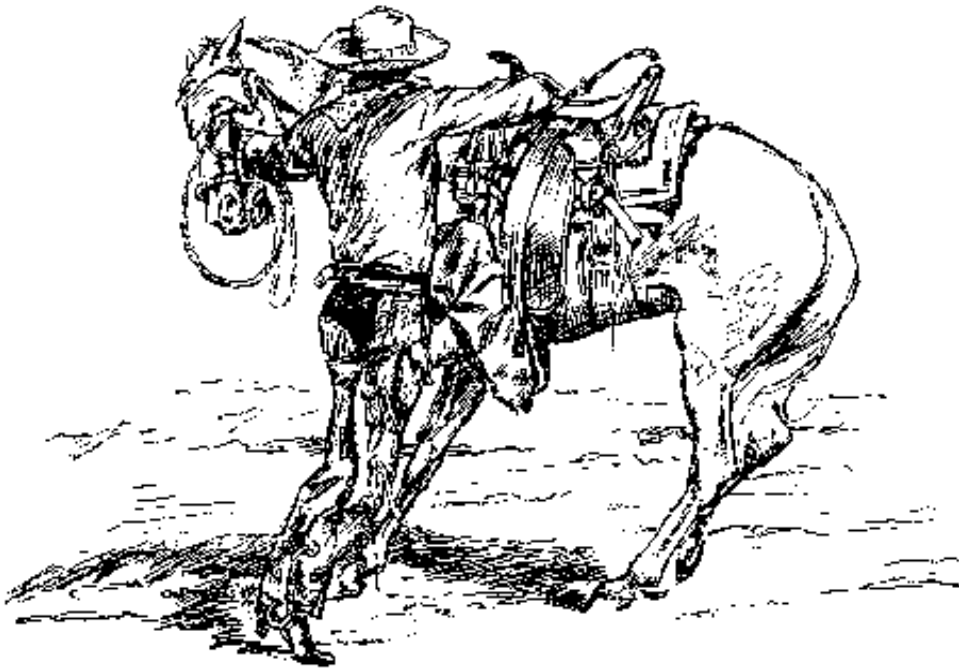
Eighteen months ago a change was heralded when, stuck at home without kids all at school with a broken down car and waiting for a tow,

she got on the Internet to play for the first time in her life and discovered the Lancer sites. A whole new world opened up! Fay had first seen Lancer as a teenager in the early 1970's and had always kept fond memories of the show. Of course, it was only seen in Australia in black and white, as colour television didn't come to these far shores until 1975. Thanks originally to James Stacy, whose site was the first she discovered, and then to other girls on the Lancer sites (such as Brenda, Ros, Marcia and Julia), Fay's life has changed. To the immense joy of her four sons, the family moved forward technologically. Two new VCR's were purchased in order to view and record Lancer episodes. This required a new TV to be bought as well, which went down a treat with the boys as it came with a DVD player. The Internet was changed from dial-up to ADSL broadband and a router installed, so

that the boys as well as Fay could access the Internet without vicious squabbling! All this in turn led to Fay's trip to the United States in July and August for the best month of her life as she attended the Lancer Convention, met James Stacy, saw all her Internet friends, stayed at Brenda's stunningly beautiful farm in Virginia and explored this most varied country with her travelling companion Ros ("An Olfactory Offense").

Fay has found more time for herself lately, going to the gym three times a week in an effort to maintain some form of fitness. Bedtime novels have given way to reading fan fic, which is a perfect stress release after a gruelling day at work. More importantly, Fay has met some wonderful people from the sites and cherishes the friendships she has formed.

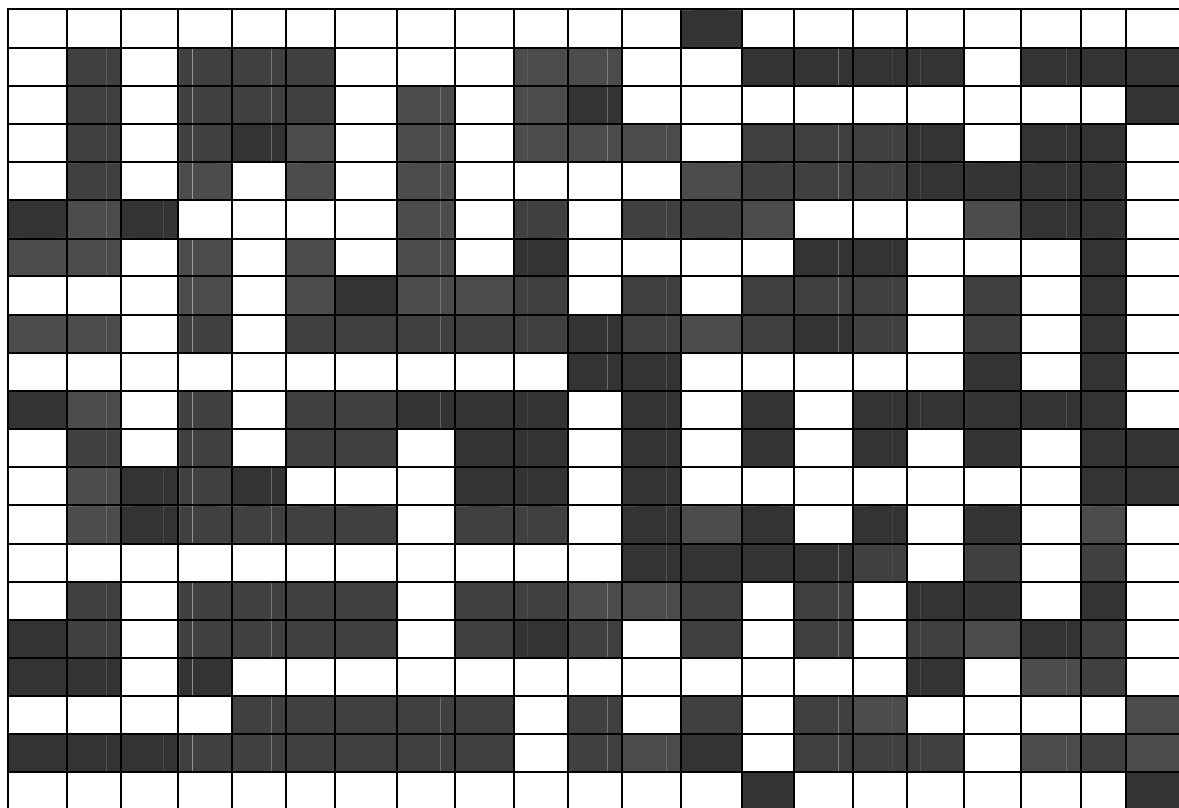
Send any feedback for Fay to faymitch@hotmail.com



LANCER FILL-IN PUZZLE



BY JANET



Johnny Madrid	Rifle	Harlan Garrett	Jelly	Maria
Sheep	Glory	Sow	Gabe	Steer
Green River	Chad	Sons	Maunder	Morro Coyo
Eight	Poe	Rich	Camp Juniper	Elam
Barranca	Horse	Lion	Ward	Ewe
Murdoch	Stallion	Dam	Cipriano	Humbug
Teresa	Spur	Zee	Mexican	Lamb
Scott	Andy	Ax	Land	Wes
Watch	Julie	Do	Gus	
Spanish Wells	Dewdrop	Axe	Span	

Solution on Page 202

INTRODUCTIONS



BY KAREN "KC" CAMPBELL

Sequel to "Long Way Home" and "Time After Time"

"Put your hand underneath..."

"I got it."

"Johnny, there's a way to do that..."

"Yeah, I got it." He spared Darcy only a quick glance and then concentrated again on the awkward bundle squirming in his hands. One palm cradled a very small head and the other slid down to the roundish, well-swaddled and also impossibly tiny other end, and he lifted, as gently and as evenly as he could manage.

"She's beautiful. Isn't she, Johnny? There's nothing wrong with her, is there?" Darcy's voice was fading and Johnny glanced up again, only half finding her through the damp edges of his gaze. Her hair was glossy with sweat and it lay flat against the wrinkled pillow, her braid long lost in the hours that had stretched out behind them—the lamp-lit labors of the night before, and then the dawn, and now this moment, an hour of bright midday sun and August heat.

"No...there's nothing wrong," he said, surprised at the strength of his own voice. It must have surprised the bundle, too, because she twitched and settled again. Quieter, with his face tilted toward Darcy this time, he

answered once more, "There's nothin' wrong."

"She's beautiful." Darcy's words barely made it the short distance from her bed to the cradle, weighted as they were with exhaustion.

There was a proper way about this, he knew it, just like Darcy had said. The arm—you tuck their head inside your elbow and hold them on the flat of your arm—he'd done it before, long ago maybe, but he'd done it. He just couldn't figure out how, now with this fragile thing filling his two hands, so he didn't and he sat instead, lowering himself very carefully into the rocker, the one Murdoch had pulled from the attic months before, and setting his hands and her against his legs. The bundle squirmed again and scrunched her face.

"Darcy," Johnny said very quietly. He leaned forward and stilled the rocker when it creaked at the movement, watching for any sign that the sound had broken through the bundle's dreams. It hadn't, and she lay still. "I'm not so sure 'bout that name..."

Noises moved through the house, odd clatters and voices, muffled by the thick walls and the heavy door, and a sparrow chirped outside the window, just as if this was any ordinary day. Johnny had missed the rhythm of Darcy's breathing at first, but that sound crept in with the others, the sweet repeated sigh that lapped against his thoughts. He didn't even look up, sure that Darcy was asleep and knowing that

he was alone. No—they were alone, this pink-faced stranger and him.

“Hey,” he whispered and her eyelids trembled.

“You wanta open those eyes and take a look at your daddy?”

She didn’t, and Johnny took her in instead. Her little hand was balled up into a fist, and it pressed a splotch into one fat cheek. He’d seen newborns before, foals mainly, and calves. They were gangly and struggling, but you could stand them on their feet and they’d be all right, but this one—she looked like one of those porcelain dolls he’d seen in Baldemero’s window, and she wasn’t any bigger than his holster. And she wasn’t perfect, not the way he’d always been told. Babies were supposed to look like someone, but this one didn’t—this one was almost bald and what little hair she did have was whisper fine and wild and pale. And she had more than just that one splotch, there were several of them, faint purplish shadows against her pink skin. Angel kisses, Teresa had called them, making them sound prettier than they were, making her sound beautiful. And she was.

“Hey,” Johnny whispered again, and she answered this time, shifting slightly against his palms and stretching as much as the swaddling blanket would allow and making a sound, nothing he’d heard before, not that he remembered anyway. It was like mourning doves calling, only nicer than that. He could feel a smile tugging against his lips and he blinked hard, wishing he had a hand free to wipe away that one tear that kept nagging at him. “Open those eyes, chica, and let me see what they look like.”

She paid no attention.

“Johnny?”

Scott’s voice made him jerk, but Johnny held

tight to his bundle. Turning, he saw that the door was slightly opened and his brother’s head was half through it.

“I knocked,” Scott said. “Didn’t you hear me?”

“Sure,” Johnny said softly, wondering why he hadn’t. “Darcy’s asleep, so you might want to keep your voice down...You got cleaned up.”

“Just a clean shirt.” Scott walked quietly through the room and moved to the window, leaning back against the table there. Johnny had to squint against the sunlight framing his brother and he looked down again, glad of the chance of it anyway. There was still that one tear.

“You want me to keep an eye on her while you go wash up?” Scott asked.

“No...we’re fine.”

“Have you eaten anything?”

“I’ll eat.”

“Maria has a stew on. And some fresh bread.”

“Did Sam get off all right?” Carefully, Johnny lowered the thicker part of his bundle to his lap and slid his one hand free. “Or did Teresa talk him into staying for dinner?”

“She tried.”

“I bet she did.” Johnny chanced another squint at his brother. “Sam’s gettin’ too old to be up all night like that.”

“So’s Murdoch.” Scott tipped forward, balancing with a hand on the back of the rocker and hovering above them, looking straight down at the silent infant. “Is that a rash on her face?”

"You think it's a rash?" Johnny stroked a finger over one of the marks and she turned a little, searching for his touch. "Sam says it's just how they come out sometimes. Maybe she wasn't done cookin' yet."

"Darcy might argue that point."

"You ever seen a woman get that big?" Johnny lowered his voice, even though he was already just about whispering and even though Darcy was falling into a very endearing, very quiet snore. "If she didn't have this baby right quick I was thinking of puttin' her in the circus. Figured she could be one of those side shows...maybe some sort of amazing elephant woman."

Scott grinned. "You didn't tell her that, did you?"

"What do you think?" Johnny couldn't help but grin back, and he shot a guilty look at his sleeping wife. "You're not gonna tell her either."

"I'm not?"

"Nope."

"You sure?"

"I'll tell her that you said it."

"You wouldn't."

"I might."

His face softening to a gentle smile, Scott reached down and tugged the blanket tighter around the baby. "Elizabeth," he said.

"Yeah." Johnny's gaze settled on his child, following the chubby line of her cheeks and finding her fat bottom lip. Elizabeth. He rolled the name through his mind, testing it.

"Think she looks like one?"

"I've never seen a baby that looked more like an Elizabeth." Scott's hand dropped from the rocker to land lightly on Johnny's shoulder. "But I have to tell you, I've spent most of my life trying to stay away from these creatures. I think I like this one, though."

"She ain't yours, huh?"

The grin flickered again across Scott's face. "That could have something to do with it."

"Murdoch's going to be working on you to make one of these."

"Teresa already is. She has a friend with a friend."

"The one from Green River?"

Scott nodded and stood straight again, smoothing his hair back with one hand. "She swears that the lady has an excellent sense of humor."

"Bet she's big as a cow."

Shaking his head, Scott grimaced. "I'm not taking that bet."

"I know how to distract Teresa."

"Elizabeth?"

Johnny nodded, feeling the rocker start to sway with the motion. He held it still.

"You'd sacrifice Elizabeth to save me from Teresa's matchmaking?"

"If you don't tell Darcy about that circus thing."

"Deal, brother."

Scott leaned back, perching again against the table, clenching its edge in both hands, and simply staring down at Elizabeth. Maybe he should have said something, Johnny figured a long moment later, but he didn't and neither did Scott, and it was fine. It was good. He could hear those sounds again, Darcy and the bird and his own breath, coming slower as his lids grew heavier and they slid, narrowing his world and leaving her, the only thing small enough to fit within his sleepy gaze. He could have slept and knew he'd have to soon, but there were things he might miss and so he didn't.

"Johnny?"

"What?" he asked, blinking the world back into focus.

"I asked Darcy about the name, the full name."

"Yeah?" Johnny lifted his knuckle to his eyebrow and rubbed.

"So what did you decide?"

"She tell you what we were thinkin' about?"

"Do you mind?"

"No..." Johnny shifted in the rocker, moving his spine away from a suddenly uncomfortable slat. "No...I don't mind..." He gestured and left his hand hanging in mid-air. "Look, Scott, we haven't decided on anything and I don't know..." Dropping his hand to Elizabeth and caressing his finger against her little fist, he sighed and his tone softened. "It's her name...maybe I'll just let her tell me what she wants. What do you say, nina, you need more than one name tagging onto ya? Do ya?"

Her eyes stayed firmly shut.

There was a reassuring firmness to Scott's words. "He'll approve," he said.

"You don't know that."

"If it's what you want, then he'll approve."

"Like I said, we haven't decided anything." Wriggling again, Elizabeth opened her eyes a thin sliver and her fist unclenched to grasp Johnny's little finger. "Will ya look at that?" Johnny said, his gaze finding his brother for only an instant before dropping back to that slender glimpse of her eyes. "She's got a grip on her."

"Just wait until she's more than an hour old."

"You figure we can teach her arm wrestlin'?"

Struggling to keep down a yawn, Scott took a second to answer. "It doesn't sound like something you teach an Elizabeth," he finally got out, just as the door creaked wide open.

It was Murdoch, a cup in each of his fists and his eyes cast downward at the steam rising from them. Johnny watched him walk carefully across the bedroom.

"That looks hot," Johnny quietly called out.

"Just brewed." Murdoch's deeper voice rumbled through the room, even though he'd kept it as low as Johnny thought was possible. His father stopped next to the rocker and looked down at Elizabeth. "Has she been awake?"

"Not so's you could notice. Are one of those for me?" Johnny eyed the cornflower mug in his father's hand, the one Teresa had taken to bringing him most every morning he'd been laid up with Pardee's bullet. It had a chip in the rim now, but he'd never had to ask Maria not to throw it out and it was always there,

hanging on its peg every morning, no matter who else had been up for breakfast already.

Murdoch thrust the cup toward him. "I thought you could use it," he said, and Johnny gingerly tugged his finger from the small fist and reached for his cup.

"Thank you." Leaning over the curved arm of the rocker and cautiously avoiding any hot spills that might land on his daughter, Johnny blew the steam away. "I need about ten hours' sleep, but this will do." He slurped a small mouthful and savored the satisfying warmth as it went down.

"Is there any more of that?" Scott asked.

"Half a pot," was Murdoch's distracted answer. Johnny could feel him hovering over him, and he watched his father's big boots move closer to the rocker, more into the line of sight between the cup in Johnny's hand and the floor below. While there was still room, Johnny set the cup on the braided-rag rug. There was motion off to his other side.

"Here," his brother said, and as Johnny straightened up against the hard rocker slats, he saw Scott swing the ladder-backed chair through the air and land it just behind their father. "Sit," Scott said.

Murdoch did, and he scooted the chair that much closer to the rocker. "How's Darcy doing?" he asked.

"Fine." Johnny watched Darcy for a moment, wondering how she was sleeping through all of their noise. She was, though, soundly, and for just one twinge he missed her. "She did good, didn't she?"

"Yes, she did," Murdoch said.

"I wasn't so sure there when this one started

comin'." He caught himself, remembering Teresa's thin smile as she gathered the linens, deftly folding the red stains inward and hiding them away, hiding them from him, and he wished that he could take his words back and conceal them like those blood-soiled sheets. There'd been another birthing, his brother's lifetime ago, and that knowing rushed over him. Johnny leaned over and grabbed up his cup again, staring down into it before taking another sip.

"Do you think we're disturbing her?"

All Johnny could find in his father's voice was concern and he relaxed a little, even more so when Scott's answer was tinged with humor. "Apparently Darcy could sleep through a moderately quiet tornado," Scott said.

"Well, we'll see about that." Murdoch chuckled softly. "I imagine when my granddaughter starts testing her lungs then nobody's going to get any sleep, least of all her mother." He leaned closer. "What do you say, Elizabeth? Are you ready to run things around here for awhile?"

"Don't give her any ideas." Johnny put the cup down and gave his father a lazy, lopsided smile, then turned to watch Scott move behind him.

Scott kept walking toward the door. "That coffee smells good," he said. "You two let me know if the baby does anything besides lie there, I'm going to go get a cup of that. Or I'm going to fall into my bed...I haven't decided which." He pulled the door almost shut behind him as he disappeared into the hall, a muffled yawn fading along with his footsteps.

"Well, he lasted longer than I thought he would." Johnny shifted again in the rocker, settling deeper into it and resting his head

back against its slats. He closed his eyes for a second. "You oughta get some sleep too, Murdoch."

"I slept."

"When?"

"Last night."

"For what? Five minutes?"

"It was ten and don't talk back to your father. It sets a bad example for my granddaughter."

Johnny lolled his head to the side, eyeing Murdoch, and he wondered how he got to feeling so drunk. It was a good drunk, though, the kind that turned your body into useless mush. But warm mush. "You gonna use that against me now?"

"Every chance I get. Now let me hold that baby."

"Sure you remember how?"

"Just give her to me."

"All right."

He didn't though, not really—not with his arms as weary as they were and his body just sunk into that rocker, a part of it now, the whole of him only a satisfied heaviness. Mush. Murdoch took her instead, leaning again and reaching for her, her tiny bundle dwarfed in his big palms, and then he somehow managed what Johnny himself hadn't been able to fathom before and he folded her into his arms.

Johnny used his suddenly freed hand to rub at his eyes. "Scott thinks she has a rash," he said.

"You mean this?"

Following the trace of his father's finger across one of her pale splotches, Johnny nodded. "Should we be doing anything about those? Maybe an ointment or somethin'?"

"No, they're fine."

"But look at 'em."

"Give her a little time, and you won't even know they were there."

"That's what Sam said."

"Sam knows what he's talking about."

Summoning up most of what little energy he had left, Johnny bent and grabbed hold of his cup again, taking it in both hands and downing a big slug. "Guess I got a lot to learn about this."

"It gets easier."

Johnny raised a brow at that. "Yeah?" he said, and he took another slow sip and watched a smile drag across his father's lips.

"There's degrees to that word, in case you didn't notice. I didn't say easy, just easier." Murdoch's gaze dropped to the face framed in the folds of the tiny blanket and after a long moment he added, "You and Darcy...and this one...you're all going to do fine. Aren't you, Elizabeth?" He kept smiling and his eyes wrinkled with it. "Elizabeth," he said again, importantly this time.

"That was Darcy's idea." Johnny watched his father's face for just that one second more and then found his coffee, staring down into its steaming darkness.

"Her mother's name."

"Yeah." Johnny ran his finger against the rim of the cup. "She never really knew her mother, what with her dyin' so young, and we figured it'd be good to call her that." The smooth curve of the porcelain gave way, and he worried at that spot, the rough blemish cracked into his cup. "Darcy likes Lizzie, but me...well, I'm still getting used to it all."

"Darcy asked me what I thought about the middle name."

It was stupid. Johnny knew it was stupid and childish and he felt just about as big as that baby lying in his father's arms, but he didn't want to do this right now. Maybe he didn't want to do it all. It was Darcy's idea, after all, one they'd argued over night after moonlit night, right there in that bed when they should've been sleeping or maybe doing other things. Definitely doing other things. Johnny looked up from his coffee and found Darcy's face, half buried in her pillow. "She told you, did she?"

"She said that you were thinking about it."

"Thinkin'...yeah."

"You haven't made up your mind?"

The damn moonlight. That's all he could figure, thinking back on it now. He watched Darcy sleep, her few freckles dark in the midday brightness, and he remembered the moonlight. Like water, silvery water, washing over her shoulders and the curve of her neck and her hips and pouring down into the hollowed spaces. A man could drown in that kind of light. "I said we were thinkin'."

He didn't want to talk about it, and Murdoch let it lie. Those sounds crept into the silence again. There must have been some cattle in the near pasture because one was lowing. A mama calling for her calf most likely, Johnny

told himself, and he sipped at his coffee and listened to her complain, until the waiting got too much. He set his cup on floor, straightened back against the slats of the rocker, and tipped his hand into the air.

"Look, Murdoch..."

"You had one of these."

"What?" He'd almost missed his father's nod, but Murdoch did it again, caressing the gap between the baby's pale brows and nodding down toward his finger.

"One of these marks. You had one of these when you were born." Elizabeth was swaddled too tightly to move much, but she jerked at Murdoch's touch, her little fist flailing out, and he laid his hand across her instead, settling her and nearly concealing the whole of her bundle. "Hush, there sweetheart," he said, as gently as Johnny had ever heard him, something like those mourning doves but deeper and weary. "Your mother," he went on a moment later, "she cried when she saw you for the first time. You were so small, even smaller than this little girl. It wasn't time yet, but she'd had you and we were both scared to death. The woman we had tending to Maria....Mercedes, I think her name was...that's right, Mercedes...she got you washed and wrapped you up in a blue blanket. Did you see a blue blanket in the trunk?"

"No...maybe." Johnny watched as Murdoch's eyes sought out the tiny trunk under Darcy's bed and then gazed down again, finding Elizabeth. "There were some blankets," Johnny said.

"I'll look later." Murdoch smoothed one of Elizabeth's wispy hairs into place. "It was night...you were born at night...and Mercedes handed you to me and I counted all your toes,

and then Maria saw that mark on your face. And she started crying. She said it was the curse of some spirit...one of her ghost stories; I didn't pay any attention to it, but it had her upset for weeks. She wouldn't let you out of her sight. Sometimes I'd wake up in the middle of the night and she'd be over by your cradle, just sitting there and watching over you. And crying."

"Women cry a lot," Johnny said, hesitantly, not knowing what else to say.

"Yes, they do." At first that seemed to satisfy his father, and Murdoch was quiet, they all were quiet, but then Murdoch sighed. "It disappeared. One morning I looked at you and that mark was gone, I'm not even sure when it happened. I didn't know when a lot of things happened."

Johnny had to strain to hear those last words, as near as he sat to his father.

"She loved you, Johnny," Murdoch said. "I never had any doubts about that. And she'd love this little one." He grunted then and Johnny watched him struggle to his feet, keeping Elizabeth balanced evenly in his arms and stretching to his full height. Johnny's rocker was built for a nursery and it sat low, making his father tower over him, as big as he'd ever remembered him. "It's a good name, son." Murdoch bent, bringing his armful of blanket and baby lower and settling her into Johnny's arms. "Teresa gave me strict orders not to wake Darcy, and I better not push my luck any longer. Women know best about these things."

He should have said something. Johnny thought of that a few seconds later, after Murdoch had set his hand on Johnny's shoulder for a brief moment and then moved away. He could hear his footsteps, heavy ones, he could always tell his father's

footsteps by their thick thud, but they were gone before he'd remembered to speak. And there were things he needed to say, but Elizabeth was squirming again. The dark crescent of her lashes disappeared into her scrunched up cheeks and the fresh smoothness of her brow furrowed.

Slipping her deeper into the cradle of his arms, Johnny held her tight against his chest. "Whoa, chica. It's just your daddy...I got you now." She stilled, listening. "What'll you say? You want to open those eyes for me?"

She didn't look like anybody. There weren't any freckles across those smooth cheeks, only those three tiny splotches, and her nose was just a tiny roundish nub, delicate and perfect. Johnny swept his finger across the mark on her brow, gently, as quietly caressing as his words. "Where'd you get this kiss, little girl?" Her eyelids flickered.

"Come on, Elizabeth, you're all right. Your mama gave you two angels to watch over you and you got me. I know how you feel, you know, sometimes this world don't seem like nothin' worth seeing, but you're safe. I got ya, and you're safe."

Her little arms stretched against the blanket.

"Elizabeth Maria Lancer, you open those eyes."

And she did. They were bright, so bright that they glistened, and his next breath wouldn't come. "Hey," he said when he found his voice again. Her eyes were impossibly blue, a deep blue, like the ocean just those minutes past the dawn, and they studied him somberly. He studied her back. "So what do you think, Lizzie...that the last time you ever going to listen to your old man?"

Her watchful eyes didn't waver.

“Don’t tell her I said so, but your mama was right.” His words scratched past the thickness in his throat. “You’re beautiful.”

She made that sound and he couldn’t see her anymore, not the way he wanted to. There was a damp haze getting in his way and he had to blink hard.

“Don’t tell anyone ‘bout this neither, all right, Lizzie?”

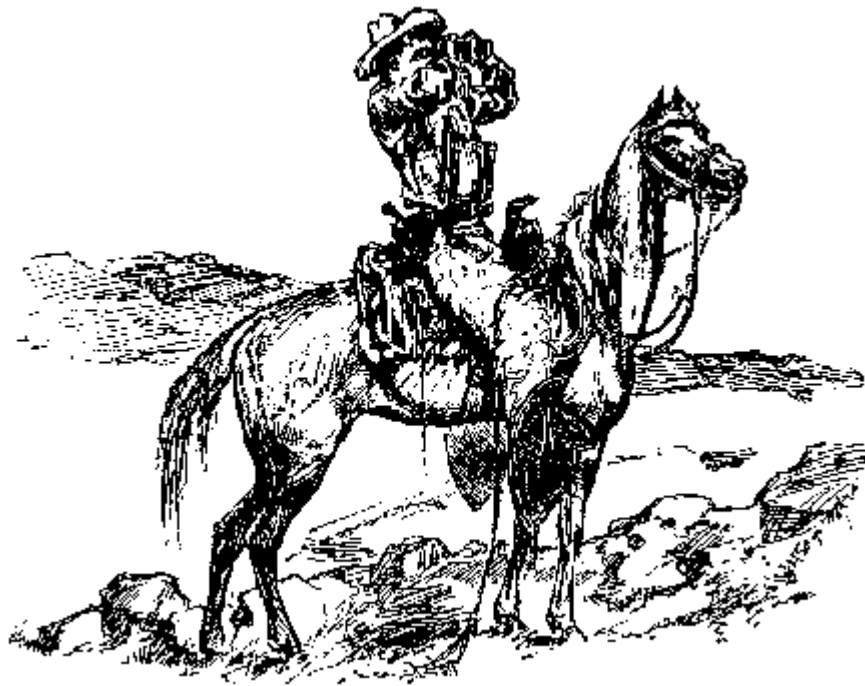
And finally, alone with only Lizzie to see, he reached up and wiped that one tear away.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

While paying the bills with her 25 year radio sales career, Karen Campbell has never given up on her first dream—she wants to be a cowgirl. With nothing but miles stretched out around her, a good horse under her, and a dark-haired cowboy at her side. Heaven with a sagebrush scent. And until her dream comes true, she lives an ordinary life in the Ozarks and writes.

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HARPER'S NEW MONTHLY MAGAZINE

April 5, 1919

WORDS FROM WYATT

Part 5 of 5 of a series
of interviews with the legendary
Marshal Wyatt Earp

By Joseph Cunningham

The following is the fifth and final story to be published as a result of the interviews courteously granted by the distinguished marshal and legendary gunfighter, Wyatt Earp, to this awed reporter. Most of you know me as an avid historian and enthusiast of gunmen and gun lore. Indeed, the early years of my career were spent capturing the stories and legends of many vaunted "slingers of sixes." It has been my distinct honor and privilege to spend these days with Marshal Earp, a man I consider one of the greatest gunmen of all time, and I thank him from the bottom of my heart...

My dear readers, to paraphrase the immortal words of Mr. Dickens, "It is the best of times; it is the worst of times..." It is the worst of times because we have come to the end of the series of delightful, sagacious, and insightful interviews shared by the gracious and garrulous Mr. Earp. It is the best of times because at last Marshal Earp will reveal, once and for all, whom he believes to be the greatest gunfighter of all time.

The reign of the gunfighter is that period covering the westward sweep of settlement, roughly within the span of years between 1865 and 1899. His is the story of our frontier and this story continues to excite our passions and command our deepest attention. My esteemed colleague, Joseph G. Rosa, expresses our national infatuation with gunfighters in eloquent terms I cannot hope to equal. Thus, I am indebted to him for allowing me to improve this article with his observations:

"The western gunfighter was the New World's counterpart of the knights in armor and the Robin Hoods of the Old. His sword was a Colt .45, and his armor the ability to outdraw and outshoot any rival. For generations he has represented to the nation's youth the heroic image of the lone crusader who fights evil in order that good may prevail – a paragon of virtue, beyond reproach. It is this concept of the gunfighter that is generally uppermost in our minds – surely in our imaginations. ... To his many admirers the idealized gunfighter herol seems to embody many things Americans believe in – freedom, democracy, and one's right to defend his home and family. Moreover the Wild West legend is an expression of the New World's need for recognition by the Old. ... The dust from the last cattle drive has long since settled; the mountain trails and sun-baked streets the gunfighter traveled are no more. But his ghost still rides, and the marks he made on the land are cut deep into the American heritage."

Mr. Rosa's compelling words notwithstanding, there are those among the readers of this magazine who will ask, "What does it matter?" Of course, to most of the men mentioned herein, it doesn't matter at all for they no longer walk this earth. But to me, many readers, and certainly other chroniclers of the events of our country's glorious past, it matters because we wish to give credit and honor where such is due. We accept the responsibility of preserving the memory and deeds of these extraordinary men for future generations.

It also matters because within us exists a spirit that yearns to leap upon a fiery *caballo* and gallop away - whether across the rolling prairies, the rugged *malpais* dotted with greasewood and buffalo grass, the harsh yellow sands of the desert, the rolling hills, the majestic mountains... Ah, no matter what the venue in the vast land of our imagination,

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there is that within us that longs to ride with a trusty pistol strapped to our hip, ready to display our lightning-fast proficiency beneath the wreathing gray smoke of the Colt .45. It matters because we possess an undying interest in brave men and their adventures. Ask any schoolboy and you'll hear with alacrity that he would rather read tales of a storied gunman like Wild Bill than all the books written about George Washington or Honest Abe.

As in the previous articles, I've chosen to present Mr. Earp's story to you as a combination of narrative and quotations from the marshal himself. Let me preface this piece by explaining that before our final interview, I asked the marshal to define a set of standards by which we could judge those shootists worthy of being distinguished as the cream of the crop. I then requested that he apply these criteria to develop a list of ten names – the top ten gunmen of all time, if you will.

Mr. Earp spent untold hours in careful deliberation before selecting the names you will see. His choice was rendered all the more difficult by the vast array of formidable contenders. Yet he persevered and composed an inventory of the gunmen who exemplify the characteristics adopted as the archetypical "Test of the Best."

I realize that any list such as this will draw great criticism from those whose own favorite shooters failed to make Marshal Earp's final cut. It is, of course, highly subjective, but I remind you that the judge in this case lived the life, heard the gunfire, and smelled the gunsmoke. He is imminently qualified to render this verdict. Whether you agree or disagree, I believe you shall be intrigued by his choices and fascinated by the story he weaves as he finally names the man who stands alone as the greatest of them all. So without further adieu, I place you in the capable hands of this living legend that he

may explain what elevates a would-be shooter into the rarified realm of fabled gunfighter.

"What makes a man a great gunman? That's a question men have debated for going on sixty years now. I've spent many hours discussing this with my good friend and fellow shootist, Bat Masterson. We've developed a set of four qualities we believe to be requisite in order to achieve sustained success as a gunfighter. Many men exhibited one, two, or three of these qualities, but the gunmen on my list were gifted with an ample measure of all four. Without a synthesis of them all, a man would not have survived for very long in such a perilous business.

"Before I continue, please accept an apology from this old man. I lived during these storied times and because I enjoyed them so, I often speak of them in the present tense. If you discover confusion in verb tenses amidst my verbal wanderings, please excuse the shortcoming. Now, back to the qualities that all top shooters shared.

"The first, and most obvious, is, of course, speed. A top gunman simply must display the ability to get his weapon into play quickly. Speed calls for lightning reflexes and precise muscular control. The men on my list could pull a gun from a holster so quickly that the ordinary bystander might miss the movement. Many young men lusting after a reputation as a gunhawk believed speed to be the Holy Grail. Most of them never earned the reputation they sought as they died under the guns of men who were a hair slower, but possessed a wealth of the other qualities on this list. For you see, speed is eminently desirable, but speed alone is simply not enough.

"Even more important than speed is accuracy. The marksmanship to kill or disable an adversary with the first shot is an often overlooked requirement for a successful

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gunman. Many of the men on my list killed opponents who drew first, but missed and never got the chance at a second shot. If I had to choose between speed and accuracy, I would choose to be more accurate. Speed is fine, but accuracy is final.

"Let me inject a note of caution at this point. I am speaking of speed and accuracy in a fight among men. Many would-be gunmen happily blast cans and bottles to perdition, fancying themselves at the O.K. Corral. There are no words to describe the vast gulf between shooting at a target and shooting at a man who is willing and able to shoot back. Take it from me, if you faced off against any man on this list, his brain would be constantly calculating exactly how he meant to take you down – quite unlike any can, bottle, or paper target. There is something about a target's ability to return fire that inevitably alters the equation. That brings me to the third attribute.

"The top guns all possessed what I refer to as consistent courage. By courage, I mean the willingness to step out and fight to the death, not hesitating to stake your life on the outcome. This implies what some have referred to as 'nerves of steel.' The best shootists remained cool under fire. They could stand covered by an adversary's gun, life trembling on the other man's trigger-finger, without experiencing the slightest panic. They could face a cocked pistol and the accompanying virtual certainty of death and never lose their smile – all the while deciding exactly how to turn the tables and kill the opponent.

"When I refer to courage, I include all of these qualities in the concept. I add the word consistent because all men have the capacity to exhibit great courage under certain circumstances. But the best gunmen were always unflinching. Their courage was not a situational characteristic or one time phenomenon. The best gunmen were capable of performing accurately and with breathtaking

speed under any condition, at any time, day in and day out. At any given moment, they could stand calmly and shoot while being shot at.

"Finally, a top gunman exhibited the will to use his talents. To state it more baldly, he was willing to kill. These days, many of your readers might view this attribute as a lack of character, even a fatal flaw. Yet this quality was invaluable in building our great nation. While they may share this characteristic with some unsavory or even evil villains, the men who brought justice and law and civilization to the American West possessed this trait in spades. Indeed, this country would not be where it is today, without the exploits of men able and willing to stand up for their beliefs and do the right thing, no matter the cost – men who were capable of defending themselves and others with guns, if necessary. So no gunman earned a spot on my list without the readiness to shoot fast and accurately at the first hostile move another man made. Make no mistake, these men were willing to take another man's life when they believed circumstances warranted. They were killers. This trademark, above all, is what kept the gunfighter alive."

These then are the benchmarks and measures Marshal Earp weighed in order to develop his list of the greatest gunmen of all time. Messrs. Earp and Masterson adamantly defend the validity of their criteria as a means of selecting and comparing great gunmen. At long last, here is the honor roll of men, in alphabetical order, the marshal believes to be the cream of the crop of mankillers. These names represent untold hours of debate, argument, discussion, and often heated disagreements between both men. Marshal Earp believes that the ten finest gunmen of all time are (in alphabetical order):

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The Ten Greatest Gunmen of All Time

Matt Dillon
Wyatt Earp
John Wesley Hardin
James Butler Hickok
John Henry "Doc" Holliday
William Barclay "Bat" Masterson
Diego Moncada
Paladin
Joe Reveles
Ben Thompson

Those of you who have followed my career, realize that I was startled, and even a bit dismayed, at one name in particular that is not on the above list. I must tell you that I exhibited admirable restraint and did not question these choices – and was happily rewarded, as you shall discover by reading on. I will also share the secret that Mr. Earp has agreed to collaborate with me on a book about this group of men. In that tome, we shall justify each of the above choices with eyewitness accounts of their exploits, facts and figures from newspaper articles and books, and folklore.

It is important to understand that Mr. Earp contends that the majority of these men are so evenly matched that on any given day, any one of them might beat any of the others. After hearing this, I asked the marshal if there were any men in particular that he would not wish to meet in a face to face gunfight. Of course, he immediately recognized my admittedly transparent ploy to rearrange his alphabetical roster into a list ordered by merit. With a rather enigmatic smile, he chose not to acknowledge my ulterior motive, but rather answered my direct question.

"Yes, I would not wish to find myself in opposition to Hardin, Hickok, or Moncada."

Eyes fixed firmly on my goal of a numbered list, I then asked if he considered these men to be a shade better than the others.

"Absolutely. Please understand that by better I mean more likely to still be standing at the close of a fracas, and thus, more deadly. With no disrespect to any of the names, these three men combined the characteristics of a great gunman into an even more rare alchemy of finesse. Call it wizardry, call it black magic, but by whatever name, some elusive spark within propelled these men to the head of the class of great gunfighters. All three were consistently fast and accurate, and they weren't afraid to use their guns. There isn't so much as a cat's whisker of difference between them, either. Any one of them could take the other on any given day."

I asked the marshal if he considered himself in that same rarified league with these three.

"Yes. I suppose I may be biased, but I believe I've proven myself worthy to stand alongside Hardin, Hickok, and Moncada."

I then inhaled a deep breath and asked Mr. Earp if he could beat them.

"As I said before, on any given day, any one of us could win. In all likelihood, we'd end up killing each other."

My framework established, I quickly arrived at the question I was dying to ask. Yes, it is the same question you, my readers, have clamored for. I asked Wyatt Earp if the title of fastest gun of all time is a toss up between Earp, Hardin, Hickok, and Moncada.

"It may surprise you, but the answer is 'no'. You see, you asked me to compile a list of the ten men I consider to be the cream of the crop of shootists. You then asked if some men on that list are better than others. The answer is 'yes' and I've categorized the list into a general grouping of better and best. I know your readers really want to see it arranged numerically from number one to number ten, but these men are so evenly matched that I won't even attempt such an impossible endeavor."

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I hurriedly explained that I understood the difficulty and asked if he felt able to at least assign a name to the number one slot.

"If you held a gun to my head," the two of us shared a hearty chuckle, "I would have to say that the name next to the number one on my list is Wes Hardin."

I immediately began writing that name in my notes, but halted as the marshal laughed loudly and shook his head.

"Ah, Joseph, the question you really want answered is not who can claim the title of number one on that list. The real question is, 'Who do I believe to be the greatest gunfighter of all time, the best of the best? Am I right?'"

I made haste to assure him that I and my readers were dying to know the answer to exactly that question.

"The only man who can lay legitimate claim to that title isn't on the list I gave you. The men we've discussed were top caliber shooters. Absolutely top drawer. On any given day, the top four could beat any of the others. They're in a class by themselves. But there is a man at the very top of the pyramid. He stands there alone. I didn't mention him in the same breath with the others on the list because on any given day, he would have defeated any one of us. Consistently. His name doesn't belong on the list with the rest of us because he was, quite simply, better than we were."

As you can imagine, my ears pricked and I salivated like one of Pavlov's dogs. I listened, totally enthralled, as Wyatt wove a spellbinding story to explain his choice. His voice grew hushed with admiration as he expounded upon a theory prevalent throughout Europe in the 15th-19th centuries. The great warriors, the master swordsmen, particularly of Italy and France, believed that in each

century, a swordsman is born who cannot be defeated in battle — a man marked with greatness to stand alone in unquestioned superiority. A man without peer.

I have verified the veracity of this claim with several eminent historians and scholars in this country. Such a legend does indeed exist. Many insist it is not legend, but verifiable fact. In any event, it is a fascinating concept and Wyatt Earp is an avid believer. He extrapolates this thesis freely from swordsmen to gunmen. Thus, he defends his ability to unerringly choose a man worthy to stand at the pinnacle on the pyramid of great shootists.

In closing, I'll let Marshal Earp tell you in his own words just who he believes has earned the right to stand above and apart from the master gunfighters already mentioned.

"I was blessed to live the prime of my life during the heyday of the master gunfighter. I had the great good fortune to meet and observe in action every name on the list. I stress that my judgment, while my own opinion, is grounded in first hand experience, uncolored by romanticized retellings. Alas, of all the men mentioned here, only Bat Masterson and I are still alive. I must tell you that Bat concurs with my choice of the greatest gunfighter and he, too, had the benefit of first person interaction with them all.

"My top gun was a young man gifted with inhuman reflexes combined with almost preternatural eyesight and hearing. He moved with a speed beyond the capacity of most men to see. His accuracy was the stuff of legend. The more desperate the fight, the cooler he became. A gun came alive in his hands, the weapon became a part of him, grafted onto his very soul. His speed, grace, and confidence elevated gunplay to a magnificent work of art.

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"He demonstrated his virtuosity at an astonishingly tender age, beginning when he was eleven and forced to defend himself against his mother's murderer. Before night fell on his fourteenth birthday, he could claim five kills. The other four were experienced, vicious killers who butchered his friend. He stood against them, one boy against four hard men. They died in the face of his incredible, flashing draw. He pulled the trigger four times while only one of them got off a shot. Thus he became a legend while still a boy. His

storied exploits were common knowledge throughout the west. Many wonder if it is possible to separate the man from the myth.

"Call him the top gun, call him the best of the best, call him the fastest gun of all time. The title doesn't matter for the name is the same. You can tell your readers from Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson that the legends don't lie, that the man and the myth are one. The greatest gunfighter of us all was Johnny Madrid."



NOTES ON TIMELINE

This story remains true to the same errors in weaponry and historical events/characters so often seen in the original Lancer episodes—although the series was set in the early 1870s, the weaponry used and many other references were more appropriate for the mid-1880s. We acknowledge the historical inaccuracies of the compressed timeframe implied by the interaction of such characters as John Wesley Hardin, Wyatt Earp, and Bat Masterson, etc... and claim creative license.

NOTES ON STORY

Our apologies to Wyatt Earp (died 1929) and Bat Masterson (died 1921) for putting words in their mouths. Wyatt's actual choice would be Doc Holliday while Bat favored Ben Thompson... Fencing Masters we spoke with acknowledge folklore concerning the "undefeatable swordsman." This story is ours, with a heartfelt tip of the hat to Eugene Cunningham and Joseph G. Rosa.

NOTES ON CHARACTERS

Joseph Cunningham is a character created as part of our Young Gun: Hell Bent for Nowhere series of stories dealing with Johnny Madrid as a young

gunfighter. Joseph is the newspaperman responsible for bringing Johnny's abilities to widespread notice. His name is a derivative of Eugene Cunningham and Joseph Rosa, the two men whose writings and musing on gunfighters of the American West we most admire. The tone and style of the piece is based on their actual writings. Wyatt's criteria in this "story" represent a compilation of the works of Cunningham, Rosa, and Bat Masterson's 1907 Human Life articles. We used quotes from Joseph G. Rosa as noted in the story, we simply moved the man forward in history by 45+ years!

The men on the list who actually lived are Wyatt Earp, Wes Hardin, Bill Hickok, Doc Holliday, Bat Masterson, and Ben Thompson. Matt Dillon and Paladin are fictional characters drawn from the television series Gunsmoke and Have Gun Will Travel. Joe Reveles is a character created by Buttercup in her outstanding fan fiction, A Ghost from the Past. Reveles is a kind of mentor to young Johnny as he learns his trade. Buttercup generously allows us to use Reveles in our stories where he plays the same mentor role. Diego Moncada is a character created by nct in her story A Certain Kind of Fool. Diego taught Johnny the basics of the fast draw and pistol marksmanship. nct is the Nancy half of Karen and Nancy and the events and characters from A Certain Kind of Fool play a key role in our joint stories. Johnny Madrid needs no introduction!

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Karen is a life long fan of the western and Lancer is her all time favorite. She was pleased to find the various Lancer groups and even more delighted when she discovered the vast array of fanfic there.

She finds the concept or “bones” of the Lancer series to be a fascinating scenario and considers it a wonderful gift to any writer, with its endless avenues begging to be explored and its wonderfully intriguing, complex, and enigmatic characters to play with and develop. Karen especially loves delving into their lives and “interfering” with their growing relationships!

When Karen isn’t riding the ranges of LancerLand, she is a wife, mother, and RGN (Johnny doesn’t know whether to be thankful for or fearful of her medical knowledge!). She lives in the wilds of Wales in the UK.

Nancy is a diehard western fanatic, having read “thousands” of western novels and counting the 1960s and 1970s western television series as her friends. Lancer is her favorite of the lot and that dark-haired, blue-eyed, soft-drawlin’, fast drawin’ cowboy astride his flashy palomino horse embodies her image of the tragic western hero. She is especially interested in gunfighters, firearms, the folklore of the southwest, and the vaquero method of horse-training, enjoying an extensive library of research materials on these subjects.

Nancy was thrilled to discover LancerLand and its outstanding fan fiction. Contributions from the

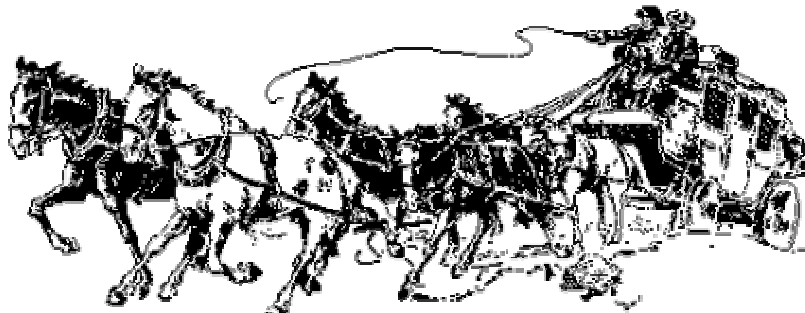
talented writers Buttercup, P.J. McClure, Lisa, Sprite, Diana, Cat, and Vicki encouraged her to try her hand at Lancer fanfic and she was hooked! Her favorite stories examine the motivations of the Lancer men, explore and mold the relationships between the various characters, and investigate possible answers to the many questions the screen writers obligingly left open to Lancer fans’ interpretation.

When not slapping leather or gentling horses in LancerLand, Nancy partners with her Aunt in breeding and showing Quarter Horses. She owns a palomino filly that constantly reminds her of Johnny and Barranca. She lives in a historical ranching area in west Texas where she is a marketing consultant and an Escrow officer.

Karen and Nancy met soon after Karen joined the groups and the two were gratified to discover that they were true kindred spirits. Their visions of the world of Lancer and its fascinating characters are startlingly parallel and they enjoy the same episodes and dialog exchanges, also sharing similar tastes in fan fiction.

The two jumped straight into a writing partnership and both refer to their joint endeavors as an amazing and highly rewarding experience, not to mention just plain fun. A favorite pastime for both is to create a physically and/or emotionally painful situation, toss in a certain dark-haired gunfighter, holler “Let ‘er buck,” and stand back to see what happens next...Hot Dang!

Send any feedback for Karen to kowens40uk@yahoo.co.uk and for Nancy to ntubb46@direcway.com



Please continue to Part 2!