

THE TEQUILA SERIES

I : TEQUILA DREAMS

It was the whistling that finally got to him. Johnny never whistled, mainly because he was so bad at it, and with each stroke of the dandy brush on Barranca's glossy coat the shrill, sour notes caused Scott to wince. The next unidentifiable note caused him to lurch and drop Charlemagne's hoof.

Scott decided to implement a distraction. "You seem awfully cheery this morning." His voice was artificially pleasant, but his musical brother didn't seem to notice.

"I am, ain't I?" Speaking, thankfully, put an end to the shrieking noise. Johnny tossed the brush to the opposite hand and began working on the palomino's mane. "I had a good night!"

"Really?" Scott said flatly as he bent down to retrieve his horse's hoof. He began to clean around the shoe with his pocket knife. "With the amount of tequila you drank last night, I'm surprised you're even upright this morning."

Johnny chuckled. "Takes more 'n that to lay me low, brother. Tequila is mother's milk to me." Curious, the dark haired brother glanced at his Boston-bred brethren. "You stopped after two shots, I noticed. You can't be feeling that this mornin', could ya?"

Scott felt the smile he knew was plastered all over his brother's face. "Glad to see you can count." A flick of his wrist finally loosened the small stone from beneath the shoe, and the lanky Lancer let the hoof drop. He stood straight and laid his arm over the tall bay's rump. "There's something funny about that stuff," he said thoughtfully and quickly, as he saw Johnny pucker his lips to begin the thing distantly related to whistling once again.

"Yeah?" Johnny turned to face his thoughtful brother. "Like what?"

Scott paused, cleaning his knife absently as he considered how to word his comment. "I, ah, I've noticed that, after I've had some of your mother's milk, I have very vivid dreams." He glanced up at Johnny, expecting a hearty laugh at his

LANCER FANFIC BY AJB

expense, but was surprised to see his brother nod and go back to brushing his horse.

"Yeah, that happens. I think it may be what it's made from." Johnny was silent for second. "I guess I'm used to it now, but when I started drinkin' the stuff, I had some wild dreams, too." He chuckled again.

"So, you don't anymore?" Scott slipped the knife away and grabbed the saddle pad from the stall door.

"Didn't say that." Johnny's voice was light. Scott glanced at him and noticed a sparkle in his brother's azure eyes. "In fact, I had a real good one last night. Guess that's why I'm in a good mood."

"You don't say. Tell me, what's a good dream to Johnny Lancer?"

They both went through the motions of saddling their mounts as Johnny spoke.

"Well, there was this girl. She was beautiful! Long blonde hair that she wore loose and moved back and forth as she walked; soft skin and delicate arms." Lost in the dream, Johnny paused, leaned against the palomino and tilted his head as he described his dream girl. "She wore this long, yellow dress that fit her very nicely across here," he made a motion across his chest.

Scott stopped what he was doing to watch his generally quiet brother. The dream must have been quite vivid.

"And she had . . . well, let's just say that she had an impressive chest." Johnny grinned, and then turned back to saddling Barranca. "She was walking toward me in this field, smiling with these perfect teeth, but what was truly amazing was her eyes."

"Her eyes?" Scott was now caught up in this vision.

"Yeah, they were brown, but not dark brown. They were like . . . well, the best I can describe them is burnt honey."

"Burnt honey." For a reason he couldn't comprehend, the woman Johnny described was changing shape in Scott's mind.

Johnny continued, oblivious to Scott's odd expression. "She was almost to me when he grabbed her dress and raised it just enough to see some leg. She had on these white stockings that matched her hair perfectly."

That did it for Scott, and he began to chuckle, which soon grew into uncontrollable laughter.

Johnny turned and scowled at him, confused. "What? What's so funny?"

Scott was bent over at the waist now, wiping his eyes and trying to catch his breath from laughing. It took him a few tries to get the words out. "You . . . you just described your horse!"

"What? No, it wasn't . . ." Johnny went over the picture in his mind, and then turned to look at his favorite mount. "But it was a girl!"

"No, you described Barranca as a girl! I knew you were close, but - " Another fit of laughing rendered the older brother unable to continue.

THE TEQUILA SERIES

Johnny began to sputter a rebuttal, but as he looked at Barranca, he grew still. "Well, I'll be damned," he managed to mumble just before starting to chuckle himself. "Her dress was that color!"

Scott finally got himself under control he and finished saddling with a final tug on the cinch, still laughing. "I'd say you weren't over the effects of tequila, brother. Remind me to keep you away from my horse the next time we go to town."

"Very funny, Scott," Johnny said lightly, the gleam in his eyes back again. "Guess we'd best hit the trail, huh? It's nearly an hour's ride to the far pasture ain't it?"

The brothers lead their horses from the barn and mounted just outside.

"I guess," Scott said with a final guffaw. "So?"

Johnny gathered up his reins. "Just enough time ta whistle a new tune I learned! It goes like this . . . "

Horrified, Scott kicked his bay into a lope in a vain attempt to keep out of ear distance with a gold and silver bullet on his heels. The pair of them shot from the yard and under the white Lancer arch.

Murdoch stepped from the house just in time to see his boys disappear over the horizon. Teresa joined him, wiping her hands on a towel.

"It's amazing how they get along, isn't it?" The Lancer patriarch said with a happy smile.

"Yes, it is," she agreed. "All brothers should be so lucky to get along so well."

II : TEQUILA DREAMS, TOO

The day turned out to be hot and the fencing wire unruly. By noon the brothers Lancer were both stripped of their shirts and glossy with sweat. Johnny had abandoned his whistling endeavors long ago, his mouth too dry to pucker. Scott's mild headache had turned into a screamer, but by the time the sun tipped over the apex of the sky, it had reduced to a dull but constant throb.

When the boys finally got untangled enough from the wire to collapse for lunch, their conversation had been reduced to guttural grunts. The lone oak nearest by was fortunately large enough to cast a shadow big enough for the both of them, and they leaned against the rough trunk, tugging off their work gloves in silence.

Johnny passed his canteen after taking a long drink. He tossed it without really looking and it landed with a solid plop on Scott's lap.

"Hey!" the blond snapped irritably. "Watch it!"

After a moment of heavy silence, Johnny chuckled lowly in response. He ducked his head and sought the bandanna in his back pocket as Scott threw him a glance full of daggers.

"What's so funny?" Scott snarled as he uncapped the canteen and took a sip. The temptation to pour it over his head was great, but he resisted because then he knew he'd have to go fill it again. Next he contemplated heaving the heavy container at his brother's head so they could have matching headaches.

"What you need is a little hair of the dog, brother. It sure would make ya easier to work with."

Scott bit back the desire to fire back an angry retort with the realization that he had been rather difficult to work with so far. His black mood dissipated when he made the mental decision to switch tracks with an explosive sigh. "Yeah," he admitted, rubbing his eyes. "Guess you're right. I have been rather prickly, haven't I?"

" 'Prickly' ain't the word for it, Boston . Try downright contrary. Murdoch's startin' to look darn agreeable."

Scott tilted his head aside and caught the indigo sparkle of humor in his brother's eyes. He couldn't help but grin back. "Okay, you got me. I apologize. But it's your fault, you know."

"MY fault?" Mock horror crossed the younger brother's handsome features as a hand splayed out over his grimy chest. "Care to fill me in on some details I'm obviously missin'?"

"Your 'mother's milk'. I don't think it quite agrees with me."

Johnny snorted and wiped his face with a rumpled bandanna. "Don't feel picked on, brother. It don't agree with most folks."

THE TEQUILA SERIES

The brothers relaxed on the ancient oak trunk for a few minutes, relishing the quietness of the remote pasture. Scott's headache reduced its intensity with the banishment of his black mood, and he found his mind wandering.

"Johnny?" he asked with a curious edge. He got a sleepy grunt in reply. "What you said earlier about dreams . . ."

The low chuckle he got in response confirmed that his brother wasn't entirely asleep. "You ain't bringin' up that filly again, are ya?"

Scott burst out a short laugh. "No, no. That's not what I was going to . . ." he chuckled. "But now that you brought it up . . ."

"I ain't bringin' it up. What was your question?"

"It wasn't really a question . . ."

"Well, then what did you want to say?" Then Johnny's voice brightened. "What was your dream, anyway? Must a been somethin' good."

"Well," Scott hedged a moment, and he pursed his lips in thought. "It didn't involve women - I don't think."

"What do ya mean 'you don't think'?" Scott squirmed. Johnny had twisted around and was now sitting Indian style and facing him, his eyebrows raised in curiosity. "You tell me my woman was a horse, but you can't see any women in your dream?"

"It was just *weird*, Johnny. I don't know *what* to think of it."

"Go on, tell me."

"I don't know where to start."

"Well, the beginning would be a good place, don't cha think?"

"That's just it! There wasn't really a beginning! It just sort of - happened."

"Where?"

" 'Where' ?"

"Yeah, where'd it happen? Where were ya in your dream?"

Scott regarded his brother a long second. "You aren't going to let go of this, are you?"

Johnny's grin was lopsided and his eyes sparkled even more. "You can count on it. Now talk."

A snort escaped Scott's nose. "I was at a dance. I think."

"Music?"

"What?"

"Was there music?"

"Yeah . . . it was mariachi music."

Johnny's grin exploded into huge. "You don't say? Finally losin' that Bostonian edge, huh?"

"Oh, that's not the half of it. There was dancing, too."

"Lots a Mexican *senoritas* in colorful dresses?"

Scott hesitated, and his eyes dropped to his fidgeting fingers. "Well," he began.

"Oh, yeah. You said you didn't exactly recall girls. Then who?"

"Um, Murdoch and . . ."

Johnny reached over and punched Scott's shoulder. "And who?"

"Grandfather."

Johnny burst out laughing. "Murdoch and Harlan? Dancing?"

Scott's lips began to quiver as the humor of the sight rose in his mind.

"Together, yet. They were dancing together."

The younger brother hooted and slapped his thigh just before he doubled over in laughter. "Just who was *leadin'*?" Johnny choked as he wiped his eyes.

Scott's blond head began to nod a bit as his grin grew bigger. "Couldn't tell really. They weren't touching. But they were wearing kilts." He chuckling that began low in his throat started to grow.

"*KILTS?* Them Scottish dresses men wear?" Johnny could barely speak.

Scott was having difficulty at this point, too. "Not dresses, Johnny, skirts. You know, skirts . . ." He wagged his fingers down around his knees.

Johnny was incapacitated by laughter, and Scott was soon wiping his eyes and laughing loudly, too.

"I kin jus' see Harlan's skinny ol' bird legs hoppin' around!" Johnny finally managed to sputter.

"Murdoch's weren't much better," Scott added breathlessly. "He had these big, square knees . . . and his boots!" They both started howling again.

It took several minutes before they were able to breathe normally without chuckling. The brother's cheeks were streaked with dirty tracks from the tears they'd laughed into existence, and they both settled back against the oak tree once again.

"I don't think I want to touch tequila any more, brother," Scott finally admitted. "That's a sight I truly do not care to experience again. I'm sticking to Scotch."

"Can't say that I blame ya." Johnny rose to his feet and stretched, then absently examined the new nicks and cuts put upon his forearms by the fencing wire. "Well, come on, and let's get this job done." He offered a hand and helped Scott to his feet. "And may I say that I'm glad I wasn't in that nightmare."

"I didn't say that," Scott said with a light tone.

Johnny froze, and then turned slowly to face his brother. His eyes narrowed in suspicion. "I wasn't wearin' one of them skirt things . . .?"

"Nah, you were wearing normal clothes. Well, normal for *you*, that is."

The dark haired brother's face showed relief, and he cracked a grin. "That's good, I guess."

Scott's faced brightened as he pulled on his gloves. "But you *were* dancing with your horse." He slapped a surprised Johnny on the shoulder as he pushed by him. "And the horse was leading."

THE TEQUILA SERIES

III: TEQUILA REALITIES

"It's . . . it's like dancin'. No, no, it's better 'n dancin'," Johnny corrected himself as he poked his brother in the shoulder with a finger. On his way to leaning back in his chair he grabbed a sliver of lime. "It 's talkin' without words. But you can use words if ya wanna." He tossed back the last of the clear liquid in his shot glass and returned the empty vessel to the table. Scott automatically filled it again as Johnny chewed the citrus slice.

The older Lancer brother was rather amused with the animation his usually stoic brother was exhibiting. Scott put the bottle down and propped his chin on his palm, feeling pretty good himself. A mug of beer - one more in a line of many - kept the other hand occupied. He watched Johnny's face in apparent rapt attention at the younger brother's words, but it was the enthusiasm that caught Scott's interest.

Johnny's face had taken on a distant quality as he spoke. His words were tequila slurred, but his point clear. He tossed the lime remains on the substantial pile other skinned, green peels. "There's nothin' else like it in this world, Boston ." Johnny lifted his left hand like he was holding reins and pantomimed his words. "A tip of your wrist, a turn of the hip, even a dropped shoulder's enough to deliver th' message. An' it's answered without question."

Scott nodded, grinning. "Yeah, that is quite a horse you have, brother. You two are like the mythical centaur." He noted that his tongue felt unusually thick.

Johnny sat back and blinked, clearly puzzled. "A what?"

"Cen . . . taur," Scott said more slowly, carefully maneuvering his uncooperative tongue. "Part man, part horse. Greek mythology."

"Oh, yeah."

It was a rare night out for the Lancer boys, and even rarer that the younger of the two was in such a sharing mood. Perhaps it was the fact that they were the only two left in the bar except for the bartender and an older gentleman currently using a corner table as a bed. Johnny must have felt safe to let his guard down so far, and Scott took a little pride in the fact that his brother trusted him enough to watch his back in this situation. It also helped that they had hit on a favorite subject of the ex-gunfighter: horses. Scott's keeping a continual flow of beer and tequila also may have had a little to do with the loosening of Johnny's tongue, and he heartily pressed the tactic.

The dark haired brother glanced behind him, and then leaned forward in a conspiratorial way, crooking his finger to draw his big brother in. "I tell ya, Scott," he said in what he must have thought was a quiet voice. "That horse has saved my butt more times than I care to admit." He downed the next shot, plucked up the last citrus slice and leaned back so his chair balanced on the back two legs, sucking contentedly on the fruit.

"Really?" Scott said, raising his eyebrows. "How?"

LANCER FANFIC BY AJB

Johnny flicked the emaciated slice onto the pile, clunked the chair back down and poured himself another helping of what he called 'mother's milk'. He spilled a little, but didn't seem to notice. Then he raised the glass to his lips and paused. Confusion crossed his face, and he tried to focus his eyes on his brother. "What?"

"I asked how," Scott repeated, trying not to laugh.

"How what?"

The blond head dropped to hide his chuckle. "How . . . did . . . Barranca . . . save . . . your . . . butt?" he enunciated slowly and clearly with a little more difficulty than he cared to admit to himself.

"Oh! Right. Well, lessee . . ." Johnny held up a hand with fingers spread wide, and somehow managed to connect one index finger with another as he began to count. "First, there's the time he jumped that fence runnin' from Pardee. If I had ta go around, ya know," he stopped and looked at Scott knowingly, then broke into a grin. "You taught him that! Thanks, big brother!" He reached over and slapped Scott's shoulder.

"You're welcome, little brother," Scott said, grinning back.

Johnny resumed his count, hitting the next finger with a little less accuracy. "'an two, he kept us from goin' rump over cabesa into a big, old hole once."

Scott frowned. "When was that?"

"Lessee." Johnny's forehead creased as he thought. "Coupla months ago. We were brush poppin' in the east pasture - you know, the foothills - an' I saw a couple of cows down in this narrow valley. We were on a hilltop, ya see, lookin' down on 'em . . ."

"We?"

"Yeah. Me 'n Barranca. Ain't that who we was talkin' about?" Johnny sounded a little miffed.

"Right. Sorry. Just thought I might have been there."

"Nah." Johnny flipped his wrist, dismissing that idea. "You were doin' somethin' else somewhere else with someone else. Don't recollect what it was . . ." He blinked to get his mind back on track. Scott had to bite his lip to keep quiet. "Anyway, I point Barranca's nose down the hill to go get 'em and we git about halfway down, hip deep in heavy brush, and he comes to a dead stop. Won't take another step." He sat back and laid his hand flat on his chest, then said slowly and sadly, "I'm 'mbarrassed to say I yelled at him pretty good, but he still wouldn't budge." Returning his hand to his shot glass, he continued. "Turns out the hillside had collapsed right there and there was a big ol' pit. The brush hid it, but ol' Barranca knew it was there."

"Good thing," Scott agreed, filling the shot glass once more.

"Then's the time he saved me from sliding over a cliff," Johnny said proudly.

"What cliff?" Scott asked dubiously.

THE TEQUILA SERIES

Johnny tilted his head to the south. "Ya know where those mudslides were? Where the hillside's all bare 'n rocky?"

Scott nodded. "Yeah. That slide area above the rocky gorge? You almost fell off that cliff? Johnny, that's a 100 foot fall onto rocks!"

"I know!" Johnny bobbed his head in agreement. "Told ya he saved my life!"

"What did he do?" Scott was now thoroughly interested.

"Well, we decided to cut across the slide area to save a couple of hours. . . "

"We' ?" Johnny stopped talking and turned his bleary eyes on his brother, frowning. "I thought I 'splained that already."

"Oh, right. I was somewhere else."

Johnny rolled his eyes. "Stay with me, will ya?" he said patiently.

"Sorry," Scott said contritely. "Go on."

Johnny cleared his throat. "Well, we were half way 'cross when I reached into my coat pocket and pulled out my bandanna. I forgot my watch was in there, too, and it fell out." Johnny turned and looked to the floor on his right side, pointing at the imaginary watch. "It hit the ground on the uphill side of us, then slid under Barranca's belly and came to a stop on the left side." As he spoke he slowly turned his head and moved his finger as if trailing the wayward watch. He stared at the floor on the left side for a few seconds then turned back to Scott with a very somber expression on his face. "That watch means a lot ta me, ya know."

"I know," Scott said impatiently. "What happened next?"

"Well, I had to get it!" Johnny explained, swaying slightly in his chair.

"I know!" Scott agreed impatiently. "What happened, Johnny?"

"I got off, an' as soon as my feet hit the ground, they both slipped out from under me," on the word 'slipped', Johnny brushed his hands together with a clapping noise. "Landed right on my backside and started to slide. There's nothing to hang on to, ya see, and I'm slidin' down the hill so I lay back and try so use my arms ta stop." Johnny waved his arms at his side like flapping wings.

Scott, however, was too entranced with the story to laugh. "Go on," he encouraged, pouring another shot.

"Then I stopped," Johnny said shortly. He leaned on the table, picked up the glass and took a thoughtful sip.

Scott stared at his brother for a moment, feeling a little cheated on the storyline. Did he miss something? "That's it? You just stopped? What's that got to do with your horse?"

Johnny rolled his eyes again and patiently explained, "Barranca stopped me! Why do ya think I said he saved my life? Sheesh!" The rest if the fiery liquid in the glass disappeared in the blink of an eye. Johnny poked at the pile of peels.

"How did Barranca stop you? You forgot that part!" Scott said a little more loudly than he intended.

"He stepped on my jacket!" Johnny answered hotly. Then a funny expression crossed his face and he smiled lopsidedly. "Guess I didn't say that part, did I?"

LANCER FANFIC BY AJB

"No," Scott said shortly. "You didn't!" He downed the rest of his beer and realized he had quite a buzz going himself. "What time is it anyway? We should be getting back."

Two chairs scraped the floor in unison as the brothers stood. Johnny hitched up his belt, then wobbled around to his brother and threw his arm around Scott's shoulders. "Yeah, guess we'd best not wake up the old man, huh?"

"Guess not."

They waved at the bartender and helped each other to the door. When they burst outside, the street was empty except for their waiting horses at the hitching rail. Both horses were standing with a hind leg cocked, relaxing, and both sets of ears swiveled in their direction at the noise. As the brothers stepped down to the street they had the undivided attention of two curious horses.

Barranca was the closer of the two. When Johnny was a few feet away, he suddenly stopped. Scott's arm slipped off, and the taller brother stumbled to a stop. "What?" he asked, noting Johnny's contrite expression.

"Barranca don't like it when I've been drinkin'," he explained in a drunken whisper.

"Oh." Scott looked from one to the other. "He'll take care of you, though, won't he? I mean, he always takes care of you. You just told me . . ."

"Yeah, I just gotta be nice, that's all." Johnny's voice rose to a somewhat normal tone. "Right, Barranca?" He stepped up to the strong, golden neck and patted it affectionately. "Let's get home, boy." He fumbled with untying the rein as Scott rounded the rail and did the same.

It took Scott two tries to hit the stirrup with his foot, but Johnny somehow managed to look a little more graceful as he swung up. Scott took a moment to settle in the saddle, but Barranca didn't allow Johnny that courtesy and began moving off before his rider was fully seated.

"Whoa, there!" Johnny yelped, scrambling to gather up the reins. The palomino ignored him and kept walking.

Scott clucked once and jogged to his brother's side, well aware that he had to concentrate if he wanted to stay aboard all the way home. One glance at his swaying brother told him that Johnny would have to concentrate even more. Scott laughed. "Who's in charge over there, anyway?"

"I told ya he don't like it when I've been drinkin'. Look at him!" Johnny wisely held on to the saddle horn with one hand as he motioned with the other, flapping the reins as he pointed at his mount's head.

Scott couldn't help but notice that the palomino did carry his head much higher than normal and that his ears were pinned back. "I believe you're right, Johnny. He does look mad."

"Told ya." Johnny's face had taken on a serious expression as he dropped his hand clutching the reins, obviously making an effort to mentally overcome the effects of his mother's milk. The effort lasted less than a minute before he cracked

THE TEQUILA SERIES

a grin and turned to his brother, nearly tipping out of the saddle with the motion. Barranca danced sideways to keep balance. "Hang on, horse. Don't run into ol' Charlie! Hey, Scott!"

"What?" Scott didn't take his bouncing eyes off the road in front of him for fear of toppling over.

"D'ya think Teresa left us some biscuits? I really think I need some food in my stomach."

"Don't know, but I think we'd both better drink a bucket of water each before we go to bed."

"Water! We forgot!" Johnny let go of the saddle horn and clamped his palm on his forehead, nearly toppling himself over. Barranca adjusted his balance once again "We didn't let our buddies here get a drink before we left." He slapped the golden neck. "No wonder they're mad at us. Come on; let's water 'em at the river." He nudged his horse into a jog off the main road. Scott glanced over and saw that the palomino's head was still up high and his ears still pinned. He also wondered how his brother managed to stay in the saddle with such an alarming sway; or were his own eyeballs just bouncing that much?

"I don't think they're thirsty, Johnny," Scott reasoned, following at a stomach-churning trot. He fell in next to his brother. "I don't think Charlie's mad, but Barranca doesn't look happy at all."

"Yeah, he is kinda peeved, but prob'ly cos he's thirsty. Right, boy?" Barranca's ears remained tightly tucked back.

They trotted a weaving path to the river, the moon nearly full up above them and shining off the water. Every ripple and rock in the road and river were clearly visible. The brothers pulled up next to a tree.

"Hey," Johnny laughed giddily. "This is the spot where ya decked me!"

Scott looked blearily around. "Yeah, it sure is." He shook a finger at the wavering figure next to him. "And you really deserved it." He began to laugh, mostly at how silly his brother looked at the moment teetering on a clearly annoyed horse. "And you're really drunk, brother."

"Me? I ain't that drunk. Been drunker. And I got you to look after me now!" Johnny's teeth made his smile very visible in the darkness. "Part o' the big brother rule book, ya know."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Let's water these animals and get on the road before I throw the rule book at you." Scott turned his bay to the water and dropped the reins. Charlemagne obligingly dipped his muzzled, causing silver rings to edge out into the current. Scott sighed, grateful for the pause to let his stomach settle. It took a few seconds to realize that Johnny hadn't joined him. He turned around carefully, well aware that his sense of balance was compromised. "What are you waiting for?"

"Nothin', nothin'. Come on, boy."

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Scott sat completely relaxed as his horse drank and watched the glowing, moon-touched palomino approach the water. Barranca's head had finally dropped, but even with Scott's blurry, jumping vision, he could see the horse's ears were still flat against his crest. When he reached the water's edge, the gold nose dipped momentarily in the river's edge without coming to a complete halt. Then, with head low, he waded right into the water.

He saw Johnny grab for the saddle horn, momentarily surprised as his mount plowed onward. "Hey," he heard his brother protest. Barranca paid no mind and continued on, his nose just skimming the top of the water as he moved to a deeper part of the river. Johnny relaxed and gave his horse his head. Scott couldn't see Johnny's face clearly, but could tell by the way he held on to the saddle that he wasn't expecting this little venture. Finally, in a quiet part of the current, the palomino stopped.

Charlie raised his muzzle from the water at that moment and watched the pair with both ears focused on his gold and silver friend. Scott saw Johnny relax and let go of the horn and figured the picky palomino finally found a part of the river that suited him. Big brother opened his mouth to say some rude comment about the fussy horse when suddenly, Barranca's front legs buckled.

"Hey!" Johnny yelped again, this time much louder as his mount's back legs buckled and the horse lay down in the shallow river with a noisy splash.

Scott's mouth hung open in shock for about a second before he started to laugh with hysterical gusto. Using both hands to hold the saddle horn and barely keeping his seat, Scott watched as his brother scrambled in the cold water to separate himself from the saddle, and Scott laughed even harder when Barranca carefully got back to his feet once free of his human entanglement. The palomino shook briefly, turned around, and exited the river with a definite purpose of action. Once on the shore, went to the tree and turned to face his sputtering owner, with attentive, forward pricked ears. Johnny dragged himself, swearing, from the water.

Spanish wasn't one of Scott Lancer's best languages, and he was sorry that he wouldn't remember any of the colorful, new words he was hearing at this moment. Right now, it was all he could do to stay aboard his mount and catch his breath from laughing so hard. He knew he would pay for this; he also knew that he had an excellent story to tell if the right time ever came. Right now, though, he had to keep his seat and keep himself out of the story. And get his brother home - it was obvious that the strong minded palomino had abdicated that job.

Just when Scott was able to get his breath back and control his laughter, it started all over again when Johnny tried to catch Barranca. Never completely abandoning his master, the horse managed to stay just out of his reach. If Johnny had been sober, it wouldn't have been an issue. Scott had to admire the horse; he had his own standards and was standing by them, but wasn't ditching his brother,

THE TEQUILA SERIES

either. Eventually, the horse stood, with interested ears and nonchalantly swishing tail, just out of Johnny's stumbling grasp.

"Oh, ta Hell with ya!" his younger brother finally sputtered as he turned his back on the horse and headed to Scott. "Comon, Scott, I need a ride."

Finally able to catch his breath, Scott wiped his eyes and asked, "Why should my horse suffer because your horse is so spoiled?"

"'cause it's in that big brother book! Come on, Scott, I want to get home! I'm freezin'!"

Pity made Scott give in. It took a few tries, and Charlemagne had to circle a few times, but Johnny finally got up behind his brother with a disgusted snort.

"Let's go home. And not a word to anyone, you hear me?"

Scott nudged Charlie and they started down the road to Lancer. Barranca fell in behind. "Well, I could say that Barranca would eventually stop because he'd be stepping on his reins, but I see that you thoughtfully knotted them so they wouldn't fall."

"Yeah. Figgered I was too drunk to hold 'em proper. Damn varmint's takin' advantage."

"That damn varmint is smarter than the two of us put together right now."

"Yeah, that too."

They rode on in silence for several minutes, Scott hanging on to the saddle horn with Johnny, shivering, hanging on to the cantle. Scott finally had to speak. "You don't really expect me to keep this to myself, do you?" he asked bluntly. "I mean, come on, Johnny . . ." he began to laugh again.

"Oh, shut up, will ya?" Johnny said, then after a time he began to chortle himself. "I don't think anyone will believe ya, anyway, Boston ! And you know I'll deny it all!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know." He glanced back at the trailing palomino. "He doesn't look peeved anymore."

Johnny spared his betrayer a glance. "No, he ain't. Looks kinda smug, if ya ask me."

"Smug'? When have you ever used the word 'smug'?" Scott teased.

"Seems I've used it a lot since I met you, brother," Johnny replied instantly, and they both cracked up again.

"Look, we're almost home." Scott pointed out the white arch just within sight, glowing in the light of the moon.

Johnny was leaning heavily into his brother's back at this point, trying to absorb a bit of warmth. His voice was muffled. "Pull up, Scott. Maybe Barranca will let me keep my dignity and allow me to ride in. Damn horse." Scott pulled his leggy bay to a stop and the palomino followed suit. Gold ears tuned in the younger Lancer as he awkwardly slid from the tall bay. Barranca continued to watch calmly as Johnny slowly walked toward him.

Johnny stopped less than an arm's length from the horse's nose, and put his right hand dramatically over his heart. He swayed just a little bit as he spoke. "I apologize for embarrassin' you, amigo. I truly mean it when I say it won't happen again. Comprende?"

His brother spoke so seriously and obviously from his heart that Scott found he could not laugh. He could clearly see the absurdity of the moment and the hilarity of the whole action, but the sincerity in his brother's tone sobered him. Amazed, he watched as Johnny first stroked the horse's nose, then face, then moved to his side and swung up without a hitch. Barranca's ears were relaxed, and his head at relaxed position. It was as if the last three quarters of an hour never happened.

Side by side they trotted under the arch that marked home in silence. The brothers headed directly to the barn where they took care of the horses, still without a word to each other, making sure the animals had extra feed and clean bedding.

When they reached the kitchen door, Scott pulled Johnny to a stop. "Okay," he said, swaying drunkenly. "Did what I see happen actually happen?"

Johnny glared at him and pushed the door open. "I'm freezin' my cojones off. You figger out why." He pushed himself into the kitchen and went directly to the stove where the ashes of the day still held some warmth.

Scott dug up some biscuits from the dark pantry, left for them by Teresa. Several biscuits and many glasses of water later, both brothers felt stable enough to try the stairs. Leaning heavily on each other, they made it to the top where Johnny stopped and stared stupidly at his boots.

"Should take off my spurs," he mumbled.

"Too late," a deep voice rumbled from the darkness of the hall. Murdoch Lancer's massive frame emerged from the darkness and stopped in front of the entwined brothers. He eyed them curiously, eyes sparkling. "I could hear you in the kitchen and the spurs had nothing to do with it."

"Oh," Johnny said, squinting blurrily at the tall form. "Sorry."

"Yes, we're sorry, sir," Scott slurred, trying to stand tall. All he managed to do was cause the two of them to lurch sideways and scramble for footing.

"You do realize it's two in the morning?" the big man inquired. The humor in his tone was lost on the brothers.

"Really?" Johnny said brightly. "Guess my watch keeps pretty good time after all! Time to call it a night, wouldn't ya say?" He detached himself from his brother and wobbly pushed his way around his father.

"Johnny, are you wet?" Murdoch asked curiously.

Murdoch's younger son paused, pulled himself up straight, and looked directly into his father's eyes. "Yes," he said shortly. "Yes, I am." With that, he moved on to his room and shut the door behind him.

Murdoch turned to his older son. "Why is he all wet?"

THE TEQUILA SERIES

Scott swayed a moment as he thought, then shrugged. "I'm not sure. I'll think about it and tell you in the morning." He then walked around the other side of his father and entered his room. A quiet click noted when his door was closed.

Murdoch turned and regarded the closed doors with an amused smirk. Something told him he would never find out what happened, and for some reason, that comforted him. Maybe ignorance was bliss, after all. With a resigned shake of his head, the Lancer patriarch returned to his room in the now peacefully quiet hacienda, thankful for such interruptions of the night.

IV : TEQUILA SUNRISE

"I can't believe I let you do that to me," Scott moaned, dragging his hand shakily through his hair. Even though he'd shaved and had on clean clothes, he still looked like something the cat dragged in.

Always sympathetic in a little brother sort of way, Johnny slapped his distressed sibling on the back, pointedly ignoring the way it made Scott stumble down the hall. "I didn't make ya do anything! You were the one makin' the rules."

"Rules my foot. They were guidelines. We didn't have to follow them so closely. And you didn't have to keep forcing that foul poison down my throat!" At the top of the stairs, it took Scott two tries to find purchase on the railing. He hesitated, eyeing the steps like they would rise up and bite him.

"Aw Scott, don't be such a poor loser. It don't look good on ya." Johnny smiled perkily and slipped past the lean blond, headed for the kitchen. "Mmm, don't that sausage smell good?"

Turning a pale shade of green, Scott's foot never hit the first step as he quickly whirled and dashed back to his room. Johnny chuckled and fairly hopped to the bottom floor, then swept into the kitchen like a barely controlled dust devil.

"Buenos dias, Juanito! My, you are certainly happy this morning!" Maria tilted her cheek to gladly accept the proffered kiss from her favorite Lancer as her hands continued to fly above the stove. Johnny snatched a tortilla from the skillet as she chastised him affectionately.

Johnny poured himself a cup of coffee and plopped into his chair as he attacked the warm tortilla.

"Can't you wait for the rest of us?" Teresa asked, appearing from the pantry with a bowl of spices. "Where's Scott?"

"Oh, he had to do something in his room," Johnny chuckled. "I don't suggest holding breakfast for him."

The young woman scowled as she handed off the spices to Maria, then she turned to her surrogate brother. "You are bad, you know that? What did you do to your poor brother?"

"Me?" Johnny protested, one hand flat on his chest. "I didn't do anything!"

"Oh, Johnny, you know Scott can't drink tequila. It's your job to take care of him!"

Putting on a properly insulted expression, Johnny accepted his plate, loaded to the edges, from Maria. "Scott's perfectly capable of taking care of himself. He don't need me bein' his mother hen." He dug into the food with relish.

"Couldn't wait for the rest of the family?" Murdoch Lancer's voice, even when spoken quietly, filled the kitchen.

Johnny paused, considering the statement, then dug back into his plate. "Figured I needed a head start. Lots to do, as usual."

THE TEQUILA SERIES

Murdoch nodded and sat, his plate appearing on the table instantaneously. "Where's your brother?"

Teresa snorted as she poured her guardian's cup of coffee, causing Murdoch's brow to rise. Johnny swallowed his mouthful before replying.

"Oh, he'll be down. He's movin' a bit slow this mornin'."

Murdoch cut off a bit of egg. "I guess I'm not surprised. I am surprised to see you here, however." He forked the egg into his mouth.

Johnny paused a second time, looking puzzled. "Why?" he finally asked.

It was Murdoch's turn to pause, his fork hovering over the remains of the egg. "You don't remember last night?"

Puzzlement turned to wariness on Johnny's face. "Last night?" he repeated as he toyed with his food.

"Yes, last night," Teresa said as she rolled her eyes. Replacing the coffee pot on the stove, she put together a small plate of food for herself and returned to the table.

Johnny's face had taken on a worried look, and his zesty attack on his plate had slowed considerably. "Oh. That. I can handle it," he finally said.

Murdoch and Teresa exchanged an amused look. It was clear to both of them that Johnny had no idea what they were talking about. Teresa picked up her fork and spoke brightly.

"Oh, I'm sure you can." She dropped her voice and glanced back at Maria before leaning forward toward Johnny, whispering in a conspirator-like way, "I'm sure no one's told Maria."

Johnny froze a pair of seconds then continued to eat, this time at a much slower pace. His fingers were suddenly clumsy with the silverware.

Glancing surreptitiously at both Murdoch and Teresa, no clues could be found. Both of them continued to eat, unflustered. Just as he decided he could eat no more and started to rise to his feet, Murdoch stopped him with a raised hand.

"And I'd advise keeping away from Cipriano today, son. Just until it blows over." The patriarch calmly returned to his food.

Johnny carefully gathered his plate and handed it off to Maria with a big, but somewhat tentative, smile. The small woman gave the young man a puzzled look as she took the plate. Johnny backed slowly away, escaping to the hall. "Tell Scott there's no hurry! I can handle his work today!" The youngest Lancer's voice faded as he moved down the hall, the sound of him putting on his gun belt clear in the back ground.

"All right," Murdoch called, his eyes sparkling at his ward. "That's probably a good idea. It'll keep you away from Jelly, too."

There was a long moment of silence before the front door opened and closed. Murdoch chuckled, and Teresa started to giggle.

"He has no idea that nothing really happened, does he?" she laughed.

LANCER FANFIC BY AJB

"No, he doesn't. And that's the beauty of too much tequila," Murdoch said sagely. "You can never be sure what you're going to do, or what you did. That's why I stick to Scotch."

"Do you think we'll see him for lunch?"

"I'd be surprised if he was home before dark."

"Maybe that wasn't a very nice joke," Teresa said, wiping her eyes.

"Well, we'll ask Scott what he thinks when he comes down, which may not be until tomorrow since he was at the receiving end of Johnny's joke yesterday."

Teresa's giggles started all over again. "When are they going to learn?"

Murdoch shook his head. "I'm beginning to wonder myself," he said as he returned to his breakfast.

V : BEANS & THE BOSTON GENTLEMAN (AKA : Tequila Beans)

The acute senses of Johnny Madrid came in very handy to Johnny Lancer. During his years of living on wits alone he had developed a sixth sense that allowed him to pull together a successful plan in an astoundingly short amount of time when certain events aligned in just the right way.

This was such a time.

Johnny had been reading the signs for a few weeks now and knew that something needed to be done. When it would be done became a question of timing and patience, along with alert eyes and ears. Today was the day – the day to execute an uncomfortable task that needed to be dealt with without witnesses.

The hacienda was empty – an unusual happenstance in itself – and Johnny readied himself to complete his task with the renowned speed for which he was known. He knew he had at least a pair of hours in which to accomplish the deed, which meant he didn't have to rush. He knew the perils of a hurried job in this type of delicate situation. Having adequate time, as well as privacy, was the only way to get it done right.

As soon as the wagon containing Murdoch's tall figure disappeared over the horizon, Johnny set to work. He knew that many men faced this same situation and, again, wondered briefly how they handled it; it wasn't something that lent itself to verbal discussion. He'd decided long ago that each technique was probably a reflection of the man himself. With that thought, he went directly to the kitchen pantry and pulled the container of molasses from an upper shelf.



Scott jogged Charley under the Lancer arch, a tired slump to his shoulders. Right now all he wanted was a drink and a bath – and not necessarily in that order. When he pulled up in front of the hacienda the first thing that struck him was the silence; usually Teresa or Jelly was on hand with a greeting and kind word. Today, it was quiet enough to hear the lizards skittering on the courtyard wall.

The second thing that struck him was the smoky and mouthwatering smell of baking. *'That must be why Teresa's not out here,'* he mused. Scott could think of worse things to come home to. He hadn't eaten since his pre-dawn breakfast of coffee and leftover rolls in Cross Creek much too long ago. His stomach growled, reminiscing.

He was home early, having been unexpectedly shut out of the Army contract bids by an unscrupulous rancher from Nevada. Scott figured the Army would soon learn the folly of accepting the lowest bid. Meanwhile, he would relish the rare quiet time at home with his acquired sister. His first two desires could be easily usurped by fresh cookies.

Following his nose to the kitchen, Scott Lancer was more than astounded to find his rough and tumble brother the only occupant of the room. Scott came to an abrupt standstill in the doorway, speechless, as he surveyed the normally pristine kitchen.

Loose oats were scattered about the work surface and floor. Molasses dribbled down the side of the labeled canister. Flour dusted the counters and every visible surface of cooking area in an imitation of snowfall. Johnny, still unaware of his presence, moved from Scott's line of sight.

The weariness he'd felt evaporated as Scott entered the kitchen and witnessed Johnny, his hair spotted white with flour, shoving a tray of – something – into the hot coals of the oven. His brother spat a line of Mexican curses and jerked his hand back as the heat bit his knuckles. Scott was astonished that he was able to get this far into the room without his little brother noticing.

"Johnny?" Scott queried out loud, puzzled. Johnny spun around awkwardly, burnt hand clutched to his chest and eyes wide in total surprise. His normally coordinated brother lurched sideways to catch his balance.

The third thing Scott noticed was the half-empty tequila bottle on the table.

"Johnny?" he repeated as the humor of the whole situation began to sink in. As he slowly surveyed the room again, his grin grew with each soundless flap of Johnny's jaws. A short laugh escaped him before his hand rose to cover his mouth, giving him time to fully absorb the scene before him.

"Sco . . . what the hell are you doing here?" Johnny finally managed to spit out. One hand shot up to shove a dangling clump of hair away from his face. It left a swatch of flour across his forehead.

Scott bit his lip behind his hand to stop the laughter that threatened to erupt. He knew he had to keep calm to fully milk this situation of blackmailable information.

"Um . . ." he started.

"Y're not supposed to be . . . you're in Nevada !"

Scott took a breath and straightened, forcing himself to wipe emotion from his face before crossing his arms over his chest. Finally feeling in control, he turned his gaze on Johnny. "Obviously not." He cocked his head aside. "Am I . . . interrupting something?"

Nothing was more difficult than keeping a straight face as Scott watched his normally unflappable brother's jaws wordlessly open and close like a landed fish. Johnny first glanced to the stove, then to the white-flocked workspace, and then back to his big brother's face without a successfully spoken word.

Finally, Johnny's eyes narrowed and his mouth clamped shut. He pulled himself together, albeit rather spasmodically, and reached for the tequila bottle. Snatching it from the counter he pulled the cork and swished around the remaining liquid with a critical eye.

THE TEQUILA SERIES

“Are there hors d’oeuvres with that?” Scott asked brightly, tilting his head toward the stove, now belching smoke unlike he’d ever seen with Teresa’s cooking.

Johnny frowned, the bottle still held aloft. “My horse?” he sputtered, his cheeks flushing pink under the flour as his eyebrows rose. “Uh . . . well . . . you know . . .”

Scott immediately honed in on the flash of panic he saw in Johnny’s eyes and the completely uncharacteristic stutter of speech. Still not sure what was going on, he decided to simply press the obvious and see what he found out. “What are you cooking, brother?” he tipped his head to the oven. “Or should I say, burning?”

Johnny gaped at him a second then swung his head around to the stove. “It ain’t burnin’. Well, those aren’t, anyway. A couple slid off the tray before . . .” Johnny’s mouth snapped shut and he faced his brother again, the tequila bottle now in his grip at his side. “They’re . . . uh . . . you know. Cookies?”

“Molasses cookies?” Scott guessed, trying to keep Johnny unbalanced.

“Uh, yeah.”

“For you?”

“Not for me, for Barranca!” Johnny snapped. He looked suspiciously at Scott. “You said horse . . . somethin’. Ain’t that what cha meant?”

Scott had to admire his brother’s ability to read people even when under the influence of his beloved mother’s milk; Johnny would soon figure out that his brother was fishing for information if Scott didn’t put him at ease. “Sure, that’s what I meant. May I?” Scott held his hand out for the bottle as if all this wasn’t the least bit odd.

Still not quite yet clear as to what was going on Scott decided to back off and let Johnny get back to his business, hoping to figure this all out by observation alone. Even drunk, Johnny still had remarkable intuition and if Scott wasn’t careful, he’d never find out the reason for this . . . event.

Scott took the bottle and downed a swig directly from it in an effort to throw off Johnny’s suspicions. The tequila burned a trail from his tongue to his stomach. His eyes instantly watered. The following cough and gasp for breath was unavoidable.

Johnny smiled crookedly and laughed. “Thought you weren’t gonna touch that stuff again!” He playfully punched Scott’s shoulder. “Guess this is what it takes, huh?”

Johnny turned back to the oven leaving Scott gasping for breath and puzzling over the last comment. ‘*Just go with it,*’ he told himself as he wiped his eyes. “Sure is,” he croaked. Then he remembered something. “Doesn’t Barranca take exception to your drinking? Didn’t a dunking in the river instill that in your memory?”

Johnny sidled over, leaned in as if addressing a fellow conspirator, and whispered, "That's the reason for the cookies." With a wink, he was back at work.

Amazed, Scott watched as Johnny pulled the oven open and looked inside with a critical eye. "They're done," he announced. Grabbing a towel, Johnny pulled the tray from the oven and plunked it down on the counter, causing about a dozen round, brown and lumpy objects to bounce once in unison. Johnny plucked a kerchief from his back pocket, unfolded it, and spread it out next to the tray. Engrossed in the production, Scott took another hit from the bottle.

"Don't those need to cool?" Scott asked in a hoarse voice, his throat not quite recovered from the tequila.

"Nah, they'll be cool soon 'nough." Johnny plucked the molasses and oat clumps from the tray and, one by one, carefully piled them in the middle of the kerchief. He finished by tying it all up in a bundle. He picked up the package and tucked it into the crook of his arm. "Okay, that should do it. How about 'nother shot, there, brother?"

Scott wordlessly handed over the bottle. His previous joy at finding an opportunity to acquire potentially embarrassing information to use against his normally secretive brother was quickly turning to confusion. What the hell was this all about? Johnny gulped down a mouthful of the vile liquor and handed the bottle back to Scott.

"So, is Charley due, too? Should we kill two birds with a rock?" Johnny turned to the stove, picked up a previously unnoticed pail, and moved to the kitchen door. He shoved it open to the bright outdoors and shrank back momentarily from the glare. He blinked rapidly as his eyes adjusted to the light.

"Stone," Scott corrected without thought. "You mean stone."

"Stone?" Johnny rubbed his eyes with his one free hand and cocked his head toward Scott. "Thought it was called a bean. They're beans 'round here. Don't be callin' 'em stones, brother, no one will know what cha mean. Not that anyone talks about 'em anyway." Johnny strode out the door, the liquid sloshed from the bucket as Johnny walked away.

Feeling the wooziness of the alcohol on his empty stomach, Scott frowned at his brother's receding back. The initial joy of being one up on his brother had gone; now he was just plain perplexed. Frustrated, he took another hit from the bottle and knit his brow. "What the HELL is he talking about?" he mumbled to himself. Determined to make sense of all this, Scott downed another fortifying swallow, tucked the bottle under his arm and marched after his brother.

Johnny headed directly for the barn. Even as the lightheaded tequila effect already hampered his own gait Scott was still able to marvel at Johnny's straight and true path while under the influence. His secretive brother was running on pure instinct, he realized, which meant that whatever he was planning to do now had been done many times in the past.

And whatever it was, it was taking place in the barn.

THE TEQUILA SERIES

Scott fixed his eyes on the barn door where Johnny had disappeared and followed at a steady, but not entirely even, pace. By the time he stepped inside, Johnny had already disappeared inside Barranca's stall. The bucket from the porch was on the ground by one of the tie rings. Scott tripped on his way to see what was in it. He was disappointed to see it was simply water - warm, steaming water.

"Hey, get some cold water, will ya? Don't wanna burn Barranca's parts, ya know?"

"Sure," Scott agreed, trying to follow the logic of all this. Looking around, he spied a bucket hanging on the wall and weaved his way to it.

Johnny momentarily appeared in the doorway of Barranca's stall, fumbling with the halter, rope and the bulging bandanna. The palomino's nose was an additional obstacle hampering his progress as he was apparently drawn to the molasses treats. "Damn it, Barranca, hold on a minute, will ya?" He shoved the horse back a step and tilted his head in Scott's direction. "Where's Charley? Ain't he joinin' us?"

Scott blinked. "Sure," he replied. "Okay. I'll get 'im. In a second."

Johnny finally maneuvered the halter onto the recalcitrant Barranca with the treat-laden bandanna balanced precariously on his arm. Johnny shuffled from the stall and tied off the lead rope on the tie ring.

"Water?" Johnny asked, nodding at the bucket. "I'll hold that for ya." He indicated the tequila as Barranca nipped at the bandanna. Johnny tried to whack the horse's nose as he reached for the bottle, but the palomino deftly dodged the strike and tried again for the bundle. "Stop it, will ya?" Johnny ordered, clutching the bundle tightly under his arm, fending off the horse and snagging the bottle from Scott at the same time.

Scott was distractedly awed by the stunning display of dexterity and balance.

Barranca pinned his ears and shook his head in frustration.

Johnny took a swig of the bottle and handed it back to Scott. Scott copied the move, the burn of the swallow less than before, and handed the vessel back.

"I'll get th' water," Scott uttered with a thick tongue, wishing he'd stopped to eat in Morro Coyo prior to coming home.

"'n Charley. Bet he'd like these, too." Johnny had stepped aside and put the bundle on a hay bale to untie the kerchief knot.

Scott found that his feet didn't go exactly where he wanted with each step, but he eventually found his way to the water trough and filled the bucket. The time outside gave him a few minutes to regroup and realize that he still didn't really know what his brother was up to. Or why Barranca was involved. And now, apparently, Charlemagne and himself.

Lugging the bucket, Scott started back to the barn with the nagging thought that he was forgetting something and was reminded of it was almost immediately upon entering the barn.

“Didja lose Charley?”

“Oh. That’s it,” Scott said, snapping his fingers while setting the bucket down none too gently. Water sloshed over the side. Johnny offered the tequila bottle. Scott downed a slug and left again to get his horse. It took a moment to untie the reins and get turned toward the barn again. When he again entered the barn he realized he didn’t know what was next expected of him.

Only when he saw the bottle of cod liver oil in Johnny’s hand did a sense of unease start to tickle his thoughts. Trading Charley’s bridle for a halter was a hit-and-miss affair, accomplished simply because the horse was tired. Tying up Charley to a second tie ring, he watched Johnny carefully mix the cold and hot water. Then, Johnny collected the tequila bottle from the hay bale that held the cookies and cod liver oil bottle and took another hit. Then he traded the liquor bottle for the oil bottle.

Johnny poured the oil on his hand, coating his fingers, and then snatched one of the molasses cookies from bale. He fed it to the palomino and then approached the horse’s flank. Then Johnny paused and Scott lifted his blurry stare to see Johnny glaring at him.

“Do y’eh mind?” Johnny’s voice cut into Scott’s thoughts.

“Huh?” Scott replied, tearing his eyes away from Johnny’s oiled hand. Johnny crouched at Barranca’s flank, the bucket of warm water by his feet and a disapproving scowl on his face. “Mind?”

Johnny straightened with a hint of a sway, his face flushed. “Scott, this is embarrassin’ enough. Just do your job an’ I’ll do mine an’ we’ll pretend this never happened. Comprende?”

Scott was rooted in place, slow realization dawning.

Beans.

It came to him then – the chore of those that owned stallions and geldings. The chore that Scott had managed to avoid all his life, first by his station in Boston society and then later by his Officer status in the cavalry. Someone else had always been relegated to do it for him.

He felt his face grow hot.

Sheath cleaning was a chore women were not allowed to acknowledge and men dreaded. Beans - the collected dirt, dust and bodily fluids within a male horse’s most private part. The balled mass was called a “bean”. If allowed to grow too large, the bean would interfere with urination and cause infection. Difficulty in peeing was the first sign a sheath cleaning was needed and, apparently, Barranca’s time had come.

As had, apparently, Charley’s.

Flustered, Scott quickly turned his back to Johnny and Barranca and lurched sideways, grabbing Charley’s black mane to keep his feet. He kept his balance but his head continued to spin. Johnny’s voice peppered the air.

THE TEQUILA SERIES

“Come on, B’ranca,” Johnny fussed. “Give it up, now, will ya? I don’t wanna be here all afternoon yankin’ on your . . .”

Scott slapped his hands over his ears. There was no way he wanted to hear that part of the process; it was bad enough just now realizing he, himself, didn’t know the first thing about this . . . event. And he needed to. The idea of Johnny teaching him was, well, unthinkable. He’d have to watch and learn so Johnny would never know about his ignorance.

Slowly, he turned. Two Johnnys and two Barrancas and two . . . Barranca parts . . . rocked back and forth in front of him. Scott cleared his throat. Both Johnnys looked at him over their shoulders with angry expressions. Or was it embarrassment? Scott shook his head.

“What?” the Johnnys demanded.

“I . . . er . . . never done . . . did . . .” The word loss was more than likely due to the tequila, Scott reasoned. Instead he just waggled his finger in the Johnnys’ direction.

After a moment, the Johnnys broke into laughter. “You ain’t never done this, have ya, Boston?”

The Johnnys’ dazzling display of double negatives sent Scott’s reasoning ability reeling. He could only nod and hope it was the correct response. Then he realized he’d forgotten the question.

After that, things seemed to happen in a series of separate vignettes.

In Act I, the three of them emptied the tequila bottle.

In Act II Scott saw the Johnnys plunk buckets next to Charley’s flank and he felt a reassuring and heavy hand on his shoulder. Something was said – directions, he thought – but they were a bit slurred and disjointed. There was confusion as to which bucket to use. The oil on his hand felt surprisingly nice.

Act III was the act he wished to forget. There was a horse . . . part, possibly two, some arguing and those damn cookies . . . the Johnnys’ continual and droning voices, pointing fingers, some shouting and ducking . . . a loud bang . . .

Act IV involved a very ticked off bay that looked very much like his Charlemagne, but he didn’t think his horse’s teeth were that yellow and that big and that numerous.

The final Act took place in Teresa’s rose garden. That’s where Scott remembered thinking that the dirt there was so soft and cool and that the air smelled really sweet.



Murdoch topped the ridge and looked lovingly down at the heart of his home. He never tired of the view, especially on a Sunday. It was usually so peaceful with the men off for the day. He smiled.

LANCER FANFIC BY AJB

"It's good to be home," Teresa commented, pulling her shawl across her shoulders. "It looks pretty quiet down there."

"Yes, it does."

As the wagon passed through the arch, something niggled at Murdoch's sense of peace.

"Isn't that Barranca?" Teresa said, perplexed. "Going into my VEGETABLE GARDEN?"

Murdoch urged the team into a faster trot with a snap of the reins. The vegetable garden was on the far side of the main house, across from the barn. As he pulled up in front of the hacienda, Teresa leaped from the wagon and stormed to the garden gate.

"BARRANCA!" she yelled, charging out of Murdoch's sight.

Murdoch jumped down and intended to follow but a motion on the near side of the hacienda caught his eye.

There was Scott's horse, saddled, strolling from the back of the house right into Teresa's rose garden. He was about to call to Teresa, but decided against it when the horse grabbed a mouthful of his ward's favorite red blossoms. Beginning to worry about his sons, Murdoch approached the garden to collect the horse and look for clues before alarming Teresa.

When he entered the courtyard and got his first clear view of the garden, the sight of his son lying in the groomed garden dirt alarmed him. He charged forward and knelt next to him.

"Scott?" he called softly, brushing the wheat toned hair back from Scott's forehead.

His well-schooled Boston society son replied with a jagged snore and a hiccup.

Taken aback, Murdoch quickly noticed there wasn't any blood but there was a distinctive odor of . . .

A mumbled curse drew his attention to the second body. Johnny was sitting upright, slumped against the garden wall. Charlemagne had apparently nibble flowers too close to his gunslinger son's face. With his eyes closed, Johnny attempted to swat the beast away but missed by a mile. The horse continued on with his snacking. He'd moved on to the pink flowers.

Shocked and somewhat amused, Murdoch got an inkling as to what had transpired when he saw the nearly full tequila bottle in Johnny's lap, loosely held with one lax hand. There wasn't much gone from that bottle . . . and what was that white stuff in his hair?

Turning back to Scott, Murdoch looked more closely at his surroundings. There was an empty tequila bottle under the bench behind Scott's body. His suspicion was confirmed.

THE TEQUILA SERIES

A scream from inside the house startled him. He rose and took a pair of steps backward to where he could see the front door. Teresa stormed out as mad as he'd ever seen her.

“WHAT HAPPENED TO MY KITCHEN?”

Another piece of the puzzle clicked in place as Murdoch took a guess as to what the white stuff was in his younger son's hair. He surmised he knew exactly what . . . or who . . . happened to her kitchen. The “why” was still out there to be answered, but that dissertation simply had to wait for the two sources to sober up.

Murdoch decided to handle one thing at a time and quickly moved to Teresa's side, turning her back to the house.

“I'm sure this can all be explained, honey. Why don't you start in the kitchen and I'll take care of things out here.”

“Where's Johnny?” she demanded, resisting his direction. “What ‘things’ need taking care of?” Her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

Murdoch had to think fast. He waved toward the palomino now tied to the hitch rail. “You know, Barranca, the vegetables, unloading the wagon . . .” He gently pushed her again. “I'll let Johnny know you want to speak with him, too.”

The hard line of Teresa's mouth twitched slightly. “All right. It probably wasn't Johnny anyway. The only thing in the kitchen he knows how to work is the coffee pot, and that's only to pour it.”

Murdoch patted her shoulder and chuckled. “I'm sure you're right. I'll handle things out here.”

Teresa entered the house, somewhat appeased. Murdoch knew it wouldn't last. As soon as the door shut he sighed and returned to the rose garden where he collected Charley from his banquet. A cheery yellow bud disappeared in the horse's grinding jaws. On their way out of the garden, Murdoch stopped next to the now snoring Johnny and gently removed the tequila bottle.

“I think you're done with that,” he said softly. Then he leaned down and whispered. “And by the way, Teresa wants to speak with you.”

THE END

“Beans” was inspired by a most entertaining web article, the 2006 Boston Con, and Rita Hazlett. Here's the web link that started it all:

<http://www.equusite.com/articles/health/healthSheathCleaning.shtml>