

BEEF TO FORT BOWIE
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Novelized by AJB

ACT ONE

The Arizona desert in the late afternoon was still unrelenting heat and little shade. Even a well prepared man would find the atmosphere difficult at best and deadly at its worst.

Murdoch Lancer sat his horse heavily, already tired and knowing it was only going to get worse. From where he stood on this small rise he had three views – a milling herd of restless cattle on one side, a chuck wagon laden with very sick cowhands, and the vast desert that surrounded them all.

Murdoch grimly lifted his hat, wiped his forehead with a dusty forearm, and resettled the hat firmly before turning toward the chuck wagon and signaling Jelly to start out with a wave of his big hand.

“You can’t send your men back. Not now!” the cavalry sergeant beside him protested.

“Those men are sick, Sergeant,” Murdoch said with tired patience. “They can’t move cattle.”

Sgt. Vandegrift glared at the departing wagon, then turned his glare to Murdoch. “Lancer, you contracted to deliver this beef to Fort Bowie. You can’t abandon the drive!”

“I don’t intend to,” the big rancher said softly.

“The Fort’s starving,” Vandegrift explained once again. “And it’s not just soldiers! Civilians, too. Women and kids who came there for protection during this Indian trouble.”

“I realize that, sergeant,” Murdoch replied, his patience wearing thin. “That’s why we agreed to take the risk of delivering this herd. But we’ve got fifty miles of Apache country to get through and sick men can’t punch cows!”

The two men stared angrily at each other for a moment before Vandegrift conceded with a short nod of his head. “Then what are we going to do?”

Murdoch squinted at the horizon. “There’s a mining town just south of here. I’ll take the men there for treatment. Maybe I can hire replacements there. Johnny’ll stick with the herd and help keep them together.”

The hostility in the military man’s demeanor melted away as he nodded again. He turned his attention to the milling cattle. “We gotta get them through, sir. It’s life and death to the Fort.”

Grimly, Murdoch agreed and a silent pact was formed.



Jelly hauled on the reins of the exhausted team of horses, turning them around a final corner and onto the main street of a small town called Quartzite. As he straightened from the turn, Murdoch loped next to the wagon and indicated with a nod that the grizzled drover and cook continue down the dusty street. As they passed the Quartzite Sheriff’s Office a mangy dog crawled from under the boardwalk and growled at the wagon, holding his ground in front of the office. Jelly snorted at the dog’s audacity and continued by.

Murdoch loped ahead and signaled him to pull up in front of a small house. Quickly, the large rancher dismounted, tied off his horse and stepped up to the front door where a doctor’s shingle hung. He knocked urgently on the door, the noise loud in the falling darkness.

After a moment the door opened and yellow light from interior candles spilled across the narrow boardwalk. Jelly pulled the tired wagon horses to a stop as Murdoch quickly touched the rim of his hat to acknowledge the middle age woman in the doorway. Without preamble, he began to explain his presence.

“Sorry for disturbing you, ma’am, but I need the doctor. There’s five sick men in the wagon.”

“Oh dear!” the woman gasped. “My husband’s out on call. Let me take a look . . .”

Picking up her skirt as she stepped from the porch, the woman approached the wagon with Murdoch right behind. He passed the grizzled driver, noting his slow descent from the seat and attributing it to fatigue. Murdoch continued to the back. Once there, Jelly caught up and reached over, flipping back the canvas tarp.

The woman let’s out a small gasp.

“Well aren’t you the sorriest bunch I ever did see,” Jelly said in a gently teasing voice. Murdoch knew he was trying to lighten the dire mood. Inside the wagon, Scott and four other cowhands lay head to foot on the wagon floor in obvious misery.

The woman bustled forward, critically eyeing them for a moment before placing a firm hand on Scott’s forehead. “Mercy, you’re as cold as ice,” she tisk’d.

Jelly nodded in silent agreement.

“We’re drivin’ a herd through outside of town and near as we can figure, they got hold of some bad water,” Murdoch explained, his eyes wandering worriedly over the prone men.

“Let’s not stand here talking! The sooner we get them in outta this night air, the . . .” Jelly’s comment was cut off as the little color he did have in his face drained instantly away and he wobbled dangerously. Murdoch snared his arm before the old man collapsed.

”You too?” Murdoch accused.

Jelly started to deny his condition, but the look on his boss’s face stopped him cold. Instead he clamped his mouth shut in a look of elegant chagrin.

“Why didn’t you say something?” Murdoch growled

“What? That I hadn’t the brains to boil that strange water before drinkin’ it? Them you could excuse for ignorance but with my knowledge of medical science . . .” Obviously humiliated, Jelly let his statement trail off.

The doctor’s wife stepped to his side and gently took Jelly’s arm freeing Murdoch to help Scott from the wagon. “Now hush and come along with me,” she said.

“But I ain’t that sick. Will you let go of me, woman? I never took to my bed in an emergency, and I don’t intend to start . . .” The doctor’s wife patted Jelly’s arm in understanding but didn’t let him go.

Scott, leaning heavily on his father’s arm, smiled wanly at the woman. “We’ll be okay.” He looked up to Murdoch. “You’ve got to round up some drovers and get back to Johnny and the herd.”

Reluctantly, Murdoch agreed and Scott gently brushed away the helping hand. Murdoch took a half step back and agreed solemnly. “All right. You take care.” As Scott ducked his head in reply, Murdoch reached out and touched his son’s shoulder with affection and concern. Scott offered a weak smile before starting to help the other drovers. Murdoch returned the smile, then reluctantly turned and walked away.

Feeling somewhat relieved that the sick men were now getting proper care, Murdoch squared his shoulders and rolled his head to try and loosen the tightness he felt along his back and neck. The cool of the evening felt good and he stopped a moment to fully gather himself and decide his next step.

Quartzite was a small town, obviously built and running based on the mining trade. People were scarce on the street but the somewhat cheery sound of a piano, clinking glass and voices emitted from one well-lit establishment proudly labeled "The Lucky Nugget Saloon." Murdoch sighed, knowing he had to get men fast, and took a step toward the saloon when he was stopped by a low growl behind him.

Slowly, Murdoch turned to see a scraggly dog standing at the edge of the boardwalk. Murdoch glanced at the building he was standing in front of and noticed the gold leaf wording "Sheriff" on the door. He turned his gaze back to the dog, who emitted a half hearted growl that ended in a small yip. Murdoch couldn't help but smile a little. The animal was too tentative to be truly vicious. "Hey, boy," the big man said gently. "Sure don't look like you been eating regular."

The dog's head cocked sideways, his tail sweeping a slow arc.

Murdoch patted his shirt pocket and felt a lump. Reaching inside, he pulled out a small piece of dried beef.

"How about some beef jerky?" he asked, part of his mind telling him to stop wasting time with a mongrel dog. Still, he found himself squatting down and offering the tidbit with an outstretched arm. The dog's attention was immediately focused. Every so cautiously, the animal dropped his head and slowly came forward, his body crouched and tense. His eyes, however, were locked on the piece of meat. The quivering, black nose paused within an inch of the food, his neck extended as far as it could go.

"Come on. It's good," Murdoch urged softly, being careful not to move.

Suddenly, the offering was snatched from Murdoch's fingertips and the dog was running away like a thief in the night. Chuckling, Murdoch straightened up and turned back to his original goal.

Just as Murdoch reached the other side of the street, a ruckus in the street made him glance back. A boxy prisoner wagon with a shotgun guard next to the driver turned the corner and pulled to a stop in front of the Sheriff's Office. Murdoch returned to his duty and pushed on the batwing doors.

Murdoch immediately noticed that this was a mining town saloon. The near dozen patrons wore the loose, baggy clothing and heeled boots of a typical miner, and no one wore a gun. The room fell silent as all eyes turned toward the large Scot. A matronly woman with a no nonsense style immediately made her way toward him. Her hair was grey streaked and swept up in a neat chignon. Her chin tilted up in a defiant angle as she boldly and firmly placed herself between Murdoch and the bar, hands on hips. Murdoch noticed that the bartender behind her casually pulled a shotgun into view.

"Bar's closed, cowman," the woman snapped.

"Didn't come for a drink," Murdoch replied, the hostile atmosphere thick and obvious.

"I don't cater to no other vices," the matron stated.

"Well, Ma'am, that's fine with me," Murdoch noted politely. "All I want is to hire five or six men to replace some cattle drovers that took sick."

The woman snorted. "You won't find no cowboys around here. Everybody's miners. Try down around Casitas."

"That's forty miles!" Murdoch protested, turning his appeal to the on looking miners. He did see one man with spurred, booted feet up on a corner table that didn't look like a miner and spoke to him instead. "Look, I got three hundred steers out by Gunnison's Mesa and no way of pushing them on to Fort Bowie without help. Now, who'll be the first to sign up?"

The miners passed a look among themselves but no one responded.

"I'm paying top wages," Murdoch added.

“They get top wages in the mines. And a thirty-dollar bonus,” the woman trumped. “You’re wasting your time, cowman.”

Reading that conclusion in the miner’s hostile faces, Murdoch turned back to the woman in frustration. “Ma’am, that’s the third time you said ‘cowman’ like it dirtied your mouth. Now, how come?”

“I got no fondness for saddle tramps, Mister! Like them two who come into town last Sunday – rode their horses right through my batwings and up to the bar, hollerin’ for whiskey and girls!”

Keeping his voice level, Murdoch tried again. “I’m sorry about that but not as sorry as the folks in Fort Bowie are going to be if they don’t get that beef.”

The woman’s stance softened a bit, as did her tone. “You still won’t find anybody here that knows about herdin’ cows.”

Hesitating a moment, Murdoch conceded with a sharp nod. Then his faced brightened a little. “Those two punchers – you know where they went?”

A smug look crossed the woman’s face as she turned back to the bar. “Straight to jail.”

As Murdoch turned to the door to follow through with his idea, he found his path blocked by the spurred cowboy from the corner table. “Name’s Tapadero. I might just be willin’ to help you punch that herd.”

Tapadero’s eyes were full of trouble, Murdoch thought. The man held Murdoch’s gaze with a challenging edge. “Course I got one rule,” he drawled. “I don’t take orders from a man unless he can whip me.” The statement was followed up with a roundhouse swing. Murdoch ducked, the blow whistling by his ear. Instinctively, his fist came up with his body into Tapadero’s gut. The miners began to whoop and holler, egging on their unexpected entertainment.

“Careful! My furniture!” The matronly woman cried out amongst the cheering. Tapadero crashed into the table closest to the bar, splintering it to bits. “Oh! My table!”

Gaining his feet quickly, Tapadero picked up a chair and swung.



Wyoming didn’t see any way out of this. In all his time as a gunfighter, this was the first and only time he’d given up all hope. The feel of cold steel on his wrists and ankles made sure that hope wouldn’t return. As the prison guard and driver checked the manacles for the last time, Wyoming dropped his head in defeat. *‘Two years,’* he thought miserably. *‘Two years for a bungled robbery. I shoulda known better.’*

“Come on, then.” The armed guard gave the prisoner a shove from behind. “Let’s move it.”

“Glad to have him outta here,” the sheriff mumbled as he opened the door. The sound of cheering and breaking bottles somewhere across the street caught his attention. “Sounds like I’ll need the space sooner than I thought.”

The sheriff stepped out and to the side, allowing the prison wagon driver to pass. The driver was followed by the shuffling prisoner and the guard, who paused on the boardwalk as the sounds of the saloon brawl grew louder.

A whine caused Wyoming to turn slightly and he was greeted with the sight of a scruffy dog bounding toward him. Grinning, he dropped to one knee before the guard could protest and found himself with a wiggling armful of fur licking his face.

“Oh, dog, dog. What’s gonna become of you now?”

Out of the corner of his eye, the prisoner saw the guard wind back to deliver a kick at the mongrel dog. Roaring in anger, Wyoming leaped at the guard as the dog adroitly jumps aside. "Nobody kicks my dog! Nobody!" Before he can connect with the guard, the sheriff and driver grab the snarling man and drag him to the back of the wagon where the guard opened the door. It took the three of them to shove Wyoming inside and slam the door.

Within seconds, the gunfighter's face appeared in the small, barred window. "Who's gonna look after my dog?" he asked the sheriff, the anger gone.

"You shoulda thought of that before you bought yourself two years on a rock pile!"

"But he could starve unless . . . unless somebody looks after him! You could find somebody, couldn't you? A kid, maybe? Please?"

The sheriff shook his head in disbelief as he turned his full attention to the sounds of destruction across the street. He started toward the commotion as the driver and guard moved to the front of the wagon.

"Then shoot him . . . please?" Wyoming begged. "Kill him quick and merciful?"

His plea went unanswered as the wagon started off with a lurch. Holding the bars tightly to keep his feet, the prisoner watched helplessly as his beloved friend stood in the dark street and grew smaller and smaller. Finally, the wagon turned the corner and the dog disappeared from his sight.



A chair crashed through the front window just as the sheriff reached the saloon doors. When he pushed them open his eyes fell immediately on a man sliding down the bar to the floor immediately below Mother James's keg of beer. Breathing heavily but still on his feet, a very large man reached over and opened the spigot. Beer drizzled down on the stunned fighter, shocking him into wakefulness. Sputtering, he shook his head but didn't try to rise.

"Anybody else?" the big man growled, turning to the cheering crowd.

"All right! Whose fault?" the sheriff yelled over the din.

After a slight pause, Mother James pointed at the dripping Tapadero. "The drifter," she said.

She sheriff sighed heavily and moved to Tapadero's side. Bending over, he grabbed his arm and unsuccessfully tried to drag the muscled man to his feet. Standing, he looks over to the crowd where a miner is handing the large cowboy his hat. "Charlie!" he ordered the miner. "You and Jake haul him over to the lockup."

"Now hold on, Sheriff," Murdoch protested. "I got first claim on him to work for me if I whipped him." He turned to the crowd. "Isn't that right?" General nods from the bunch agreed with him.

"What about my front window?" Mother James demanded.

"I'll pay you and take it outta his wages." Catching his breath, Murdoch flipped his hand toward the front door as he looked at Charlie and Jake, who now had Tapadero slung between them. "Put him in the wagon over at the Doc's place."

As soon as the trio left, Mother James announced, "Come on, boys! Belly up to the bar! Next drink's on Mother!"

Murdoch and the sheriff wended their way toward the front door through the minor stampede hitting the bar. As the pair reached the batwings, Murdoch laid a hand on the sheriff's shoulder. "Sheriff," he said, "I'd like to talk to you for a moment about a proposition that'll save your taxpayers money. . ."



The jailhouse was smaller than he expected. When Murdoch followed the sheriff into the office, he immediately found the two cowboys that shared one cell.

“All right, Mr. Lancer, I’ll let you put the deal to them,” the sheriff said.

The confined pair eyed Murdoch warily.

“You want out?” Murdoch bluntly asked.

One of the men snorted. “Would a cold beer go good in the scorchin’ desert sun?” Boone Frazier quipped.

“What’s the catch?” Frazier’s sidekick, Rob Roy Tilford, asked.

Frazier was the one that struck Murdoch as the leader of the pair so he directed his offer to him. “No catch. The Sheriff and I have it worked out so that I bail you out and you work off the money.”

“Honest work?” Frazier asked flatly.

“Droving,” Murdoch said. “Well?”

Rob Roy spoke up. “How long?”

“Long as it takes to get my herd to Fort Bowie. Then we’re square and you’re free to go.”

Frazier pursed his lips a moment, then nodded. “Sounds fair enough. But there’s one hitch – the Sheriff sold our horses for damages.”

“Our guns, too,” Rob Roy piped in.

Murdoch frowned slightly at that comment and answered evasively. “You’ll get what you need.”

“Then you got yourself a deal,” Frazier confirmed.

Nodding to the pair, Murdoch pointed at the cell door and the Sheriff reached for the hanging keys. Backing away, Murdoch placed himself in front of the Sheriff’s gun rack so they could watch the pair and get some sort of feel for them. “Let’s have your names.”

The one that seems only slightly older but much more confident was first to step forward. “Boone Frazier. One of the Texas Fraziers, Arizona branch.”

The other stood slightly behind Frazier. “Rob Roy Tilford,” he said.

Frazier tilted his head cockily and captured Murdoch’s eyes. “What’s to stop us from just taking off after we get to yer herd?” His eyes sparkled with something that put Murdoch’s senses on edge. He held the challenging gaze.

“That would make me very unhappy. But more important, it would make my son very unhappy.” He paused briefly. “You may have heard of him when he used to use the name Johnny Madrid.” Both men’s reactions made it very clear that they had, indeed, heard the name before. “Do your jobs and we all stay happy. Cross me, and you’re going to have some bad problems.” Murdoch let the statement sink in. “Now let’s go.”

Frazier and Rob Roy shuffled their way out the front door. Murdoch paused in the doorway to turn and touch the edge of his hat at the lawman. “Thanks, Sheriff.”

The Sheriff leaned back on his desk and held his hands up in surrender. “They’re your responsibility now . . . and welcome to it!”



Dawn finally broke along with the chuck wagon wheel. Murdoch, tightlipped and obviously anxious, was not happy with the delay and stood with his arms crossed over his chest.

"I never said I could drive not chuck wagon," Tapadero said. He glanced at the lightening horizon, white puffs of distant smoke against the dark blue sky. It made him nervous to be unarmed. "Besides, how you expect me to watch the trail with that Apache smoke sign hangin' out there?"

"You better get used to it," Murdoch growled. "There's gonna be a lot more where we're headed."

"I don't see how we're headed anywhere," the cowboy said lazily. "With no wheels we might just as well split out right now and go our ways. . ."

Murdoch threw a disgusted glance at him and moved to his horse. "I'm getting you back to that herd if we all wind up crawling." He stuck his foot in the stirrup and pulled himself up. Gathering up the reins, he informed Tapadero of his decision. "I'm going to ride ahead to our camp. You stay put."

"Hey!" Rob Roy, who had been relaxing on a rock with Frazier, was on his feet in an instant. "You ain't gonna leave us here without guns or nothin'?"

Not bothering to give an answer, Murdoch reined around and galloped away.



Tapadero watched him, hands on hips, until the large man was out of sight. Then he turned around and smiled. "Well, what're you waitin' for?" The other two gathered around. "Let's take the horses and get back to town!"

Frazier raised a brow. "Sorry, friend, but you see, me and Rob Roy got our reasons for not wanting to go anywhere but South to Mexico."

Suspiciously, Tapadero looks over the pair before him. "Yeah?" he said slowly. "I been looking back over my shoulder lately, too. There's this bounty hunter been after me with a Kansas warrant."

"Is that a fact?" Frazier asked, moving slowly to the side of the wagon.

"You could come along to Durango with us," Rob Roy suggested. "Except there ain't but the two horses."

The motion was so quick that Rob Roy didn't have a chance to react. Tapadero had cuffed him painfully, spun him around and had him in a choke hold before he even knew something had happened. He gasped, and felt warm breath on his ear as the older man spoke lowly in his ear. "Guess who rides one of 'em?"

Frazier broke into a big smile and raised his hands in surrender for his partner. "Easy! Easy! How far you think we'd get without guns? Why, we'd find ourselves hangin' head first over an Apache fire! Now don't it make more sense to play along with Johnny a while? At least 'till his back's turned?" He leaned back, hands on the wagon, one hand slipping below the seat.

Tapadero held his position, but eased his grip. "It's still risky."

"Now, why don't you quit choking poor Rob Roy and try to look at the sunny side?" Frazier said with an amused grin. With subdued bravado, Frazier revealed a branding iron pulled from under the wagon seat and slaps in against his other palm, the threat clear.

Tapadero eyed the iron a second then slowly repositioned his hands onto Rob Roy's shoulders. He gave the wary cowboy an affectionate shake. "Well now," he said, grinning. "I guess I'm in favor of anythin' you say . . . Partners."

Realizing an odd sort of alliance had been reached, Rob Roy stumbled aside rubbing his bruised throat in relief.



Johnny closely watched his father's face as Murdoch gave him his orders, instinctively picking up on his urgency. Fiddling with the two pairs of reins in his hands, Johnny wondered for a moment what his father had gotten them into.

"You'll find them in an arroyo maybe five miles due south of here. Don't waste any time with the wagon – we'll have to go on without it."

"Okay," Johnny replied, mounting Barranca. He looped the extra reins around the saddle horn, pulling the second horse into line. "Anything else?"

Murdoch was obviously tired, but managed a slight grin as he tilted his face toward his son. "One thing," he said. "You won't have to introduce yourself. I've already done that."

Grinning back, Johnny reined around and jogged away.

Riding south for almost an hour, Johnny pulled up abruptly at the sound of gunfire. Unable to exactly locate the source for a moment, he quickly secured the reins of the trailing horse and jerked his rifle from its scabbard. Kneeing Barranca to the safety of a nearby cluster of rocks, he got as close as he dared to where he thought the noise came from and dismounted.

"I'll be right back, amigo," he said softly to the palomino as he tied both horses to a sturdy stand of brush and slipped from sight.



Wyoming was worried. It was getting dark, his head throbbed, and he had no idea what was out there. The prison van had careened sideways in the midst of a vicious firefight, and now it was too quiet out there. Carefully, he scooted to the door and dared to peek out the barred window only to duck immediately as a bullet winged off the wood near his head. Shifting position slightly, he peeked out again and dropped to the floor. Indians!

As he was trying to figure out a plan, a rifle barrel was thrust in the window, its owner seeking a target. Without thinking, Wyoming grabbed it with both hands, the chains binding him and making it awkward to keep any semblance of balance. An Apache's face appeared in the window for a moment, then the sound of a distant rifle shot made the Indian grunt and drop away, dragging the rifle from Wyoming's grip.

The prisoner pulled himself up to the window in time to see his attacker collapse and the remaining braves beating a hasty retreat. In the failing light, Wyoming saw a familiar figure coming his way with a raised rifle. Anger began to burn in his gut.

"Johnny Madrid," he snarled quietly.

Wondering what to do about it, Johnny's voice disrupted his thoughts.

"Hey? Anyone alive in there?"

Wyoming ducked out of sight into a corner and spoke in a plaintive voice. "Help me, Mister! Please help me!" He readied himself for a fight, gripping the chain that linked his hands tightly. A gunshot, followed by the metallic ping of the lock being shattered, made him jump. After a few quiet moments, the door slowly opened. Johnny entered the wagon cautiously. Wyoming sprang from the darkened corner and snared Johnny's neck with the chain. Pulling Johnny in tight with a jerk, both Wyoming and his victim rolled on the floor in a deadly struggle for dominance.

ACT TWO

Johnny fought vainly for any kind of grip. Wyoming, whose grip had been loosened in the fall, worked to re establish his grip when he heard a barking outside. Before he knew it, a familiar, shaggy form leaped into the wagon and onto Wyoming's back. Surprised, he jerked aside and gave Johnny the opening he needed to break free.

After knocking his attacker aside, Johnny rolled to his feet, his gun appearing in hand in a fluid movement. Fear crossed Wyoming's heart and he grabbed the wriggling dog into a protective hug. "No, Johnny! Don't!" he yelled.

Johnny's finger hesitated on the trigger at the sound of his name. Panting heavily, he squinted into the dark at his target. If he was surprised, he didn't show it; the gunfighter's expression didn't change.

"You know me, Wyoming," Johnny said evenly. "When was I ever a dog shooter?"

"You were other things," Wyoming said somewhat petulantly, obviously angry.

"Not what you think," Johnny replied.

Wyoming glowered at his past acquaintance, dark accusation lurking in his eyes. Suddenly, he gave a noncommittal shrug.

"We can settle that later," Johnny said. "Come on, let's get outta here." Waving his gun toward the open wagon door enlisted a menacing growl from the dog.

"Hush, dog," Wyoming crooned. "Johnny, the keys . . ."

The prisoner held up he manacled hands. He and Johnny held each other's gaze as Johnny considered the request. Wyoming saw a motion just outside the open door behind Johnny and realized that there was an Apache working his way into the open door, knife poised to strike at Johnny's back. Momentary indecision makes him hesitate, but then he yelled, "Johnny!"

Instantly, Johnny rolled aside as the Apache's knife arced past his shoulder. A single shot knocked the Indian sprawling. As the puff of gun smoke dissipated, Johnny studied Wyoming with a calculating expression. Finally, he approached. Wyoming extended his hands expectantly.

"Don't bother thanking' me, Johnny. Getting' these off will square things fine."

Sparing an annoyed glance, Johnny shook his head. "I'm not that grateful. And why'd you wait so long?"

Wyoming shrugged innocently. "I was waitin' to see if Johnny Madrid was as quick as he useta be." He wiggled his hands to remind Johnny about the shackles. "Come on, Johnny, it ain't the first time I saved your bacon. Or don't you remember how we rode as partners durin' the border troubles?"

"I remember Tascosa three years ago – how you swore you'd kill me for what happened."

Dark anger crossed Wyoming's face for a second before he controlled his expression. "That's how I felt then. But no more. It's done and forgot."

Unconvinced but obviously turning the words over I his mind, Johnny took a moment to retrieve a canteen from outside and tossed it to the chained man. Before taking a drink himself, however, he uncorked the container and poured some of the liquid into his cupped palm for the dog who lapped it up thirstily.

"'Forgot', huh?" Johnny said, watching the dog drink. "Then how come I can still feel that chain of yours diggin' into my throat?"

"Well," Wyoming drawled slowly but thinking fast. "How was I to know it was you? I figgered it coulda been an Apache comin' to finish me!"

Johnny studied him for a moment. "What were they takin' you in for?"

"I kinda hate to tell you," Wyoming said, taking his turn with the canteen.

"Kill somebody?"

Wyoming shook his head. "Johnny, it's shameful for a man like me to admit. But I was short of money, and not wantin' to hurt nobody, one night I broke into the Assay Office. Gettin' caught serves me right! But you know I ain't a common burglar, don't you Johnny? I got more style than that."

Johnny nodded, admitting Wyoming was right. "What did you get?"

"Only seventy dollars."

"I meant how long in prison."

"Two years. Two years on the rock pile down at Yuma."

Johnny ducked his head. "They went hard on you."

"You know what that hellhole's like, Johnny. They don't stop at breakin' a man's back. They break his spirit, too."

Johnny took a thoughtful pull on the canteen, his eyes taking in Wyoming and the dog. With his free hand, he pulled a piece of jerky from his shirt pocket, squatted down, and with a few coaxing noises, offered it to the mangy animal.

Wyoming straightened up and frowned. "My dog don't take nothin' from strangers, only me."

The dog, however, had other plans and quickly accepted the snack. He even allowed Johnny to scratch his ears as he chewed happily on the treat.

"Who said we were strangers?" Johnny said lightly.

"Come here, dog!" Wyoming ordered.

The dog ignored him, enjoying the attention from Johnny, who smiled at his friendliness. "He musta been travelin' on pure heart, followin' that wagon all the way out here."

"Got more heart than any human I ever know. Exceptin' one." Bitterness edged the words. Wyoming glared at Johnny. "And we both know who that was."

Johnny's eyes narrowed and he started to reply, but instead, clamped his mouth shut and stood. After a moment, he left the wagon and surveyed the destruction around him. Wyoming clambered awkwardly from the wagon on Johnny's heels.

Outside, the landscape was littered with the bodies of the driver and his partner, as well as several Indians.

"C'mon, Johnny. Lemme go. What're you gonna do with me anyway?"

As Wyoming spoke, Johnny had been thoughtfully spinning the wheel of the upshot wagon. "Right now I can tell you this. You're gonna give me a hand righting this wagon."



The best trail leads due east through Pocos Canyons, then we follow the dry river southeast about fifteen miles to Hualapai Gap. That's where a patrol's waitin' to escort us on to the Fort."

Vandegrift's stick-drawn map in the dirt was easy enough to read, but it still didn't set well with the Lancers. Murdoch pointed at one section of the map.

"Those canyons sound like they could be good ambush country. I won't move the herd into there until somebody scouts it."

Johnny straightened. "Better let me, Sarge," he said softly.

Vandegrift's eyes automatically shifted over Johnny's shoulder where he could see the herd moving slowly forward. His gaze found Frazier, Rob Roy and Tapadero working the edges

of the herd and actually doing an adequate job. Still, he did not trust those men for a second. He shifted he look back to Johnny, his mind set. "It's my job. Yours is keepin' those three curly wolfs from runnin' out on us now that they got guns and horses."

"He's right, Johnny," Murdoch murmured as the military man mounted up.

Fishing a small mirror from his pocket, Vandegrift flashed it in the sun. "I'll flash if things're clear. I'll check the men before I leave." With that, he spurred off leaving Johnny and his father to observe the men moving the herd.

"They the best you could find?" Johnny asked.

"That was it."

The pair mounted up and continued to watch the herd.

"I ain't gonna be shuttin' my eyes at night till this herd's delivered and we're rid of them," the younger Lancer commented.

"We'll keep them apart as much as possible. Just for precaution." Johnny nodded at Murdoch's plan, then their attention was drawn aside by the sound of a dog whining.

"What about the convict?" Murdoch inquired. "Where do you know him from?"

Johnny's voice was neutral. "Good friends. But no more. He thinks he's got reason for hatin' me. I don't know, Murdoch, I don't trust him enough to unlock those chains but I can't help feelin' sorry for him. Wyoming, well, he's always first in line when they hand out raw deals." After a thoughtful moment, Johnny reined Barranca around and loped toward the herd.

Murdoch, however, jogged to the prison wagon and stopped. From inside he heard the occupant talking with the mangy dog.

"It's just the two of us against the world," he heard Wyoming tell his fuzzy friend.



The night held a full moon. From his position Vandegrift, who was standing guard, could easily see the milling herd below. Frazier's eyes darted quickly around as he approached the cavalryman, making sure they were alone. His footsteps on the hard ground caused the military man to turn and acknowledge his arrival.

Frazier stood silently next to him for a few moments and wondered how to proceed, then spoke. "The Lancers sure are determined not to lose this herd . . . I guess that's 'cause you're payin' them sky-high prices for takin' on a job this dangerous?"

"Regular market," Vandegrift said shortly, his gaze sweeping the herd.

"Only twenty dollars a head? Why, that won't amount to more'n four thousand all told."

"Closer to five."

Frazier rubbed his chin. "Well, Johnny and his Pa must have friends at the fort to be willin' to take this kinda risk?"

"They've never been there. That's why I'm along as a guide."

Nodding, Frazier tried to keep the grin from his face. "Almost like the Bible, ain't it? Strangers helpin' strangers without thought of reward . . ." Satisfied, he said his good night and departed the way he came.



Johnny loped up to the campfire, nodding at Vandegrift as he passed. He reined in near the campfire, where he saw Murdoch standing a short distance away watching something by the

fire. Johnny refocused his attention and saw Wyoming squatting by the campfire, eating. About every third bite was shared with the scruffy dog giving him his full attention.

As he dismounted, Murdoch moved closer to him. "Everything quiet out there?" his father asked.

"Yup," Johnny nodded. "Is Wyoming behaving himself?"

"Hasn't said three words. I get the feeling he's . . . well, holding all his emotions inside. Hate, resentment, outrage. Everything but his love for that dog."

Johnny chuckled quietly. "I'll tell you about him. Come on while I put up my horse."

Murdoch fell into step next to his son.



As soon as the pair dissolved into the darkness, Frazier stepped into the campfire light and began to pour himself a cup of coffee. He glanced at Wyoming, put down the pot, and took a step toward the man and dog.

He was greeted with a menacing growl.

"You keep hold a him, friend, or he's one dead dog."

"Ain't no friend of yours," Wyoming said lowly, one hand on the dog's back.

"Well, we was locked up together, wasn't we? Scratchin' the same fleas in that rotten jail?" Frazier took another step and was stopped by another threatening growl.

"Hush down!" Wyoming soothed.

"Mean one, ain't he?"

Wyoming tilted his head toward Frazier. "Just smart. Dogs know things – like who their friends is, and who can be trusted."

"Don't go by his opinion, friend – not if you want them chains off?"

Fondling the dog's ears, Wyoming eyed Frazier appraisingly. Then he spoke carefully. "That's one thing I want . . ."

"What else?" Frazier inquired.

"Johnny Madrid lyin' dead, with the buzzards pickin' his bones!"

Frazier broke into a toothy smile. "See? We're friends after all. I got a plan workin', and I'll fill you in later tonight." With that he took a swig of coffee, then dumped the rest onto the campfire and put the cup down. Frazier disappeared into the night after giving Wyoming a conspiratorial wink.

The dog growled as the cowboy left his sight. Wyoming tried to calm him, but instead, the mangy mutt wiggled free and ran in the direction of the remuda. Watching the dog dart off, Wyoming turned his angry gaze to the manacles encircling his wrists and gave them a disgusted tug.



"And you don't believe Wyoming's changed his mind about wanting to kill you?" Murdoch posed the question as Johnny groomed horse, the vigor of the effort making it clear that the subject was starting to tread on touchy territory.

"I'd like to think so," Johnny breathed, leaning into the job. His thought ended with a shrug.

“So, what did you do that he should want revenge?” Murdoch sensed he was pushing the subject, and with Johnny’s weariness, that could result in an explosion.

“Nothin’,” Johnny snapped. “Well, not what he thinks, anyway.”

“And what’s that?” Murdoch pushed carefully.

With that, Johnny turned in exasperation. “Look, Murdoch . . .”

Murdoch threw up his hands in surrender and physically took a step back, not really surprised. “I’m sorry, son. I didn’t mean to pry . . . I’ll stand guard while you get a few hours sleep.” He turned to go, but was surprised when he was stopped by a gentle hand on his shoulder. As he turned to his son, a motion in the bushes caught his attention.

Wyoming’s scruffy dog bounded from the shadows to Johnny’s feet, wagging his tail so furiously his hindquarters joined in the action. Johnny dropped his hand from Murdoch’s shoulder with a grin and then dropped to one knee and began scratching behind the effervescent dog’s ears. After a few moments, the previous irritation ebbed. Murdoch heard Johnny sign.

“Murdoch. The trouble between me and Wyoming, it was a woman. A woman called Delores.”

“Delores,” Murdoch echoed. “It means ‘sorrows.’”

Johnny laughed shortly. “Yeah. She was a real grief, alright . . .”

“Hey Dog!” Wyoming’s voice called from the direction of the campfire, catching both Johnny and Murdoch’s attention. The convict broke from the brush and came to an abrupt stop at the sight of Johnny scratching his pet. “You feedin’ my dog again?” he asked sharply.

“I guess that’s what he wants,” Johnny said calmly, reaching into his shirt pocket.

“Don’t!” Wyoming snapped.

Johnny froze for a moment, and then slowly withdrew his fingers. “Sure, amigo. It’s plain enough he’s a one-man dog.”

“Yeah,” Wyoming said sternly. “Yeah, you remember that.”

Johnny stood and waved the dog off. “That’s all, fella. Go on! If you’re hungry, go see Wyoming.”

Reluctantly, the dog turned as if to go, but instead stopped, looking back at Johnny with a sideways cock of his head, ears flat. Johnny gave him a shove.

“Come here, dog!” Wyoming ordered.

The animal hesitated, looking from Johnny to Wyoming, then suddenly his ears perked up and his body tensed. Instantly, he began to bark at an outcropping of rock in the shadows. Within a few seconds, his hackles spiked sharply and the barking became almost frantic. The three men first looked questioningly at each other, then turned their attention to the rocks.

Suddenly, an arrow sang through the air and cracked into a boulder behind Johnny. He drew and snapped off a pair of shots. Wyoming dove behind some rocks as the dog barked wildly. Murdoch pulled leather, but before he could take a shot, a hard shove followed by intense pain made him fall back. Dazed, he looked down to see an arrow dug deeply in his shoulder.

The rest of the attack seemed a blur. The horses pitched and snorted in fear, and Johnny’s gun rang out over and over.

“Johnny . . .” he called, the sound barely a whisper against the roar in his ears. Through the agony he heard his son and Wyoming trying to calm the horses.

“Don’t let them get away!” Johnny yelled, his voice seeming so far away.

“Whoa, whoa there, settle down!” Wyoming’s voice seemed just as distant. “You hush that barkin’, Dog!”

Fearing he wouldn’t hear them ever again, Murdoch spent his last energy, “JOHNNY!”

Was he heard? Would they find him? The anxiety mingled with the pain until he saw his son's horrified face hovering over him. Then everything faded away.

ACT THREE

“Shoulder bone’s the Clavicle . . . arm bone’s the HUM-erus. Or is that said Hu-MER-us?” Jelly rolled the word over in his mind as his studious gaze swept from the book in one hand to the hand of the skeleton in the other. Wrinkling his nose to adjust the glasses perched on its tip, Jelly refocused his attention to his self-taught lesson. “Then the Ulna and the Radius . . . Ulna’s the one Charlie Sawyer broke so awful back in the summer of fifty-seven.”

Engrossed, he didn’t hear the doctor’s wife enter the room. “Mr. Hoskins?”

“Wrist bone’s the Carpus . . .”

The woman cleared her throat and started again. “Mr. Hoskins, the Constable wants to talk to Scott, but that poor young man needs his sleep, and I thought . . .”

Jelly swiveled his head toward the woman. “You thought right! Anythin’ he’d say to Scott he can say to me.”

What apparently was the Constable entered the room behind the woman and came to an abrupt stop at the sight of a grizzled old man holding hands with a skeleton. Jelly regarded him with impatience, unaware of the spectacle he presented.

“Come in, Sheriff . . . I was just brushin’ up a bit on my medical knowledge,” he said, ignoring the odd look directed at him.

“Not ‘Sheriff’ – Constable.”

“You sit down and I’ll fetch some coffee and pie on a plate,” the Doctor’s wife offered, bustling from the room.

The Constable stepped aside to let her pass as he pulled some folded papers from his pocket. Jelly finally released the bony hand as the law enforcement officer got down to business, speaking as he unfolded the papers. “You know them three saddle tramps the other Lancer bailed out of my jail yesterday evenin’?”

“I seen ‘em when Murdoch stopped to say good-bye. Had a mighty scruffy look about ‘em, if you want my opinion.” Jelly pumped up his words by bouncing on his toes, thumbs hooked in his waistband.

“I found these in the mail that come in today’s delivery.” With a slight pause, the Constable handed over three wanted posters.

Jelly’s eyes widened as he scanned the posters. “Wanted for . . . Oh, my gracious!”

The officer shook his head slowly. “Meanest kind of killin’ . . . of a hostage they took durin’ a bank robbery down in Tucson! ‘Course, I realize there’s no way in the world you could carry a warnin’ to the Lancers. But I figured you’d want to know anyway.”

A baleful look crossed Jelly’s face but was quickly replaced by one of optimism. “Johnny’s a smart lad. He’ll get onto them quick enough . . . and nobody pulls the wool over Murdoch Lancer’s eyes!”

The Constable eyed the older man for a moment, then shook his head as he refolded the papers. “I sure hope you’re right, Mr. Hoskins.”

Quiet flames pulsed in the darkness, its warmth dissipating into the desert's cool air. Golden light threw itself over Johnny as he grimly tightened the bandages around his father's shoulder.

"I don't think the arrow . . . hit anything vital, do you?" Murdoch rasped, trying not to cringe from Johnny's touch.

"Bleedin' shoulda stopped by now," Johnny said quietly. Murdoch tried to read his boy's face, but it was a stern mask.

"Then you have to cauterize it," Murdoch growled between teeth clenched in pain.

Johnny's gaze flicked from his father's eyes back to the dressed wound. "Maybe not . . . not yet," he said quietly.

"Johnny . . ."

The mask cracked with Johnny's plea. "After all the pain getting' that arrow out . . . Murdoch, I don't wanta hurt you more!"

Murdoch grasped Johnny's forearm in a firm grip, his point clear. "The iron's hot," he said lowly, holding his son's anguished eyes. "Don't wait, son."

A few moments later, Johnny tore his gaze from that of his father's and reached for the iron already glowing red as the embers. Even through a haze of pain, Murdoch could see the ever so slight tremble in his son's hand. Wishing to shield his son from any more sense of hurt, Murdoch set his jaw against what he knew would be a painful ordeal.

Johnny wrapped his hand in a thick cloth and lifted the crimson iron from the coals. He held it aloft, the glow burning brightly in the dark and paused, unable to meet his father's eyes. "Grit your teeth," he said quietly.

Murdoch nodded shortly and Johnny lifted the bandages from the bloody wound. After a moment's hesitation, Johnny applied the iron which sizzled as it touched Murdoch's flesh. He clenched his jaw against the pain, more to spare his son than to appease his own feelings. Still, he could see the agony in Johnny's eyes at having to be the bringer of such pain.

Above the sound of his sizzling flesh, Murdoch heard a heart-breaking whine off to one side. Frantic for any reason to tear his eyes from those of his tortured son, Murdoch found the source of the noise. Wyoming, barely visible in the shadows, was tightly gripping his wriggling, whining dog. The manacles on the man's wrists flashed in the golden light, the chain between them clattering darkly. Murdoch crazily wondered for a moment why the dog was so upset before he slipped into agonizing darkness.



"That's how I got it schemed out," Frazier explained to the two men huddled close in the night. "We kill the Lancers and the soldier boy, and deliver the herd. I say I'm Johnny Lancer, collect the money, and we head for Mexico 'fore anybody's the wiser."

Tapadero shook his head slowly. "I don't know. I don't usually go along with that kinda killin'. Still, it'd get back at Johnny for that whippin' – and the old man's good as dead anyways."

Encouraged, Frazier continued. "And soldier boys expect to get killed. See? It's all in how you look at a thing."

"Yeah," Tapadero agreed hesitantly. "But the Injuns . . ."

"Ain't five thousand dollars' worth runnin' a little risk?" Rob Roy asked.

"Why, sure it is! Takin' a chance kinda puts the salt on the meat!" Frazier knew his idea was sold.

Tapadero frowned in thought for a second, then took on a look of acceptance. "When do we make our move?"

"Tomorrow," Frazier said. "We'll let Johnny and the Sarge help with those cattle 'till we're nearer the fort."

"What about Wyoming?" Rob Roy asked. "We still gonna cut him in?"

Frazier clapped Rob Roy on the shoulder. "We don't need him. That arrow tipped the odds in our favor – now, come on! Let's look after them cattle of ours!"

Rob Roy rubbed his hands together greedily as they all chuckled. It was a good plan.



Faint light on the horizon promised another hot dawn after a long, sleepless night for Johnny. He'd stayed by Murdoch's side the entire time, checking and rechecking the bandages and his father's breathing. It wasn't even daylight yet and both Lancers were already sweating.

Johnny barely acknowledged Vandegrift's arrival as he carefully wiped down Murdoch's face. There had been a little animation there earlier. Johnny knew he was finally waking up and wanted to be there when he did.

Eventually, Murdoch's lids cracked open. He groaned weakly.

"Hey," Johnny said softly, dampening the cloth with canteen water. "Think you can travel by morning?"

Murdoch blinked a few times as his mind began to work. He nodded once. "Can't delay the drive," he croaked.

"Forget the drive. I'm getting' you back to that doctor that's takin' care of Scott."

"We're closer to the fort," Murdoch said weakly. "They must have a surgeon there."

"There's Apaches in between," Johnny pointed out before Vandegrift interrupted.

"Maybe only a few, Johnny. It's my guess what we've seen so far's the work of a small band."

Johnny shot him a look before turning back to his father. "That don't mean others won't be joinin' them tomorrow."

"If we push, we can get through these canyons first . . . and meet that escort patrol waitin' for us at Hualapai Gap," the soldier reasoned.

"You push!" Johnny snapped. "The herd's yours. Do anythin' you want with it, but I'm takin' Murdoch to a doctor."

"But I need you," Vandegrift said. "I can't handle those three jailbirds."

Frustrated, Johnny replied a little more angrily than he meant. "Look, this is my father!"

A gruff voice made the two men turn to Murdoch. "It's my decision, Johnny. I say we stick with this herd."

Johnny let out an explosive breath and shook his head, combing his fingers through his hair. He was tired, dog tired, and a little voice inside screamed that it was a bad idea. Blaming his indecisiveness on his fatigue, Johnny mentally managed to silence the tiny voice using the logic that the fort was closer. He stood, decision made, and began to issue orders.

"All right, Sarge. Go relieve that Rob Roy kid and tell Frazier we'll start the cattle movin' an hour before sunup."

Vandegrift nodded sharply. "Mr. Lancer . . . Luck to you."

Johnny watched the soldier mount up. Then a noise beside him caught his attention, and he turned to see the ragamuffin dog sitting by him, watching him with bright eyes as his tail

swept the ground. With a small smile, Johnny looked up at Wyoming standing a short distance away, also watching him.

“What am I gonna do with you?” Johnny said, half the man and half to the dog.

Wyoming answered by holding up his manacled wrists. “Somebody’s gotta drive the wagon,” he reasoned.

“Yeah, me,” Johnny snapped.

“You can’t do that and boss this trail drive, too.”

“He’s right, Johnny,” Murdoch said softly.

Johnny regarded his father for a moment, then slowly fished a set of keys from his pocket. He studied them a moment before moving closer to the convict. “Why should I trust you?” he asked warily.

“Cause helpin’ you out’s to my advantage, too.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, I figure you’ll return the favor later – by givin’ me a horse and rifle and a head start? After all, stealin’ seventy dollars ain’t that big a crime.” Johnny didn’t reply immediately, which seemed to encourage Wyoming. “Please, Johnny? My dog’s feet are hurtin’ him from runnin’ all yesterday. If I drive the wagon, he can ride with me.”

Johnny sighed tiredly. “Yeah . . . yeah, you got a deal.”

As he unlocked the cuffs, he couldn’t help but notice the enigmatic expression on Wyoming’s face.



Wyoming rubbed his wrists as he walked back to the nearly dead fire. A single, lumpy blanket nearby told him he found what he was looking for and with a backward glance to make sure he was out of Johnny’s sight, he dropped to one knee next to the pile. Roughly shaking the slumbering Rob Roy out of his sleep, Wyoming quickly clamped his hand over the boy’s mouth to keep him from yelling out. He leaned in closer as the boy’s wide eyes told him the kid was awake.

“What’s the plan?” Wyoming said. He loosened his hand from Rob Roy’s mouth.

“What plan?” the kid said a bit too quickly.

“Frazier said you had something’ cookin’ and he’d tell me tonight but it’s almost mornin’ and he ain’t said a word.”

“N. . . not me, neither,” he stuttered. “If he’s got a plan, he ain’t told me!”

“Don’t lie!” Wyoming snarled, his nose nearly touching the kids. Then he leaned back and cuffed him hard. The dog, watching from the side, barked loudly at the action and Wyoming was distracted for a second. Rob Roy took the slight advantage and broke away. Wyoming’s arm swept the air in a vain attempt to snag the kid’s shirt, but Rob Roy ducked the grab and stumbled off toward the remuda.

Wyoming watched the kid run away and knew the group was up to something.



Full daylight broke hotly as Johnny made a final check of his father’s traveling bed. Murdoch was as comfortable as humanly possible for the circumstances he knew, but still, he was uneasy. They’d knocked out the bars of the prison wagon, which now acted as the chuck

wagon. Finally, Johnny checked the last item – Murdoch's revolver. He made sure it was loaded and clean enough to function properly.

“I still ain't sure of Wyoming,” Johnny said quietly. He snapped the cylinder shut. “Any false moves, shoot him.”

Murdoch nodded weakly as Johnny tucked the gun under the blankets within his father's reach. He studied Murdoch for a few seconds, then sighed. “Well,” as he turned to leave the wagon.

“Johnny.”

Johnny paused and looked back. “Yeah?”

Murdoch looked like he had something to say, but instead said, “Nothing.”

“It ain't gonna be easy on you,” Johnny said softly.

“Or you either,” Murdoch replied. “You haven't had any sleep for two nights.”

Johnny turned back to his father. “I'll get by,” he said.

“Me, too.”

Murdoch raised his hand and Johnny grasped it firmly in a loving shake. It was the best he could do for now, his eyes saying just that. Murdoch returned the look with complete understanding. That one grip confirmed the trust and confidence they had in each other – a bond of father and son.

When Johnny left the wagon, he knew how rough the trip would be for his father, but he had to push that thought aside for now. Wyoming joined him as soon as he was outside.

“Ready to move out?” Johnny asked tiredly.

“Remember how I used to say you had eyes in the backa your head?” Wyoming said lowly. “Use 'em today, Johnny.”

Johnny pulled up sharp and quickly turned. The tiredness was suddenly gone – his eyes were cold and dangerous. “You threatenin' me?” he said tightly.

Wyoming shook his head. “Warnin' you. About them three. They're up to somethin' . . .”

Johnny cool a bit. “What?” he asked.

“I ain't sure. All I know's they was gonna deal me in, then changed their minds. I'm only tellin' you 'cause it don't look good for me neither.”

“Yeah,” Johnny agreed. “That . . . or maybe you're pointin' at them to keep me from watchin' you?” He continued to walk, hearing Wyoming following.

Reaching the horses, Johnny snatched Barranca's reins and quickly swung into the saddle. Wyoming caught the bridle and spoke sharply as he looked up at Johnny. “I spent three days in the same jail with them – long enough to know they ain't chuckleheaded rannies! Or maybe I just dreamed them whisperin' about how they robbed a bank down in Tuscon?”

Johnny considered for a moment. “If that's true, why didn't they clear out tonight while they had the chance?”

“Must be after somethin'.”

“Only one thing we got worth the stealin',” Johnny said, pointing toward the cattle. “That herd!”

He tried to rein Barranca away, but Wyoming did not yield his grip.

“Who's your amigo, Johnny?” Wyoming asked desperately.

Johnny met his old friend's gaze for a moment. “You,” he finally replied, a small smile smoothing some of the tired lines from his face.

Wyoming released the bridle, and Johnny kned the palomino into a lope. Thoughts tumbled wildly in his mind, a picture eventually coming to the fore. He knew what the others were going to do, he was sure of it. The only way to stop them was with reinforcements.

Looking to the front of the now milling herd, Johnny pointed Barranca's nose in the same direction and moved off to find Vandegrift.

Sounds of the cattle being urged forward was quickly drowned out by the thunder of many hooves. The early morning's hot light was soon hazy with dust as the men drove the herd toward the foothills that would funnel them in the direction of the fort.

Finally, Johnny found the cavalryman at the mouth of the canyon and told him what he suspected.

"Steal the herd?" Vandegrift said with surprise. "But how could they get away with that?"

"Wouldn't be too hard," Johnny reasoned as he patted Barranca's already sweaty neck. "Kill the rest of us, pass themselves off as Lancers, and collect the money before anybody caught on."

"But you can't be sure that's what they're thinkin' of?"

Johnny snorted. "I'd take bets," he said.

"Well, how do we stop them?"

Johnny tilted his head in the direction of the fort. "How you feel? Up to ridin' and bringin' back that patrol that's waitin' at Hualapai Gap?"

Vandegrift nodded sharply. "And in the meantime?"

"I'll keep the lid on things here. Now, get goin'."

The sergeant lifted his reins. "Just pray I don't run into them Apache reinforcements." Then he touched his spurs to his horse's sides and leaped away. Johnny watched until he was out of sight, then turned his attention to the herd.

He didn't see Rob Roy soon follow the soldier.

ACT FOUR

Johnny squinted into the sun, not at all pleased with what he saw in the distance. Satisfied with the speed and direction of the herd, he reined around and rode harder than he wanted to back to the wagon. Wyoming pulled the team to a stop on Johnny's arrival.

"Seen that?" Johnny pointed to the visible smoke signals rising above the canyon walls. Wyoming glanced up and nodded, his expression unreadable. "You can read smoke talk. What're those Apache sayin'?"

"A warnin' to lie low. There's a soldier patrol around . . ."

"Good," Johnny breathed, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. "I sent the Sarge to fetch them. That should make Frazier's bunch think twice before they try anythin'!"

Wyoming squinted at Johnny with a sideways tilt of his head. "If they do make trouble, I can't help much without a gun."

"I don't plan needin' help," Johnny said firmly.

"Your Pa might."

Their eyes met for a moment, and then Johnny reined around to look in the prison van window. For a brief second, Murdoch's face reflected his incredible pain. "You all right?" Johnny asked.

The expression immediately softened as Murdoch nodded.

"Want a drink of water?"

Murdoch shook his head. "Keep the drive moving . . ."

Not at all surprised, Johnny nodded and returned to Wyoming's side. The scruffy dog's body wiggled in time with his tail at his arrival. Smiling slightly at the animal, Johnny reached

down and pulled his rifle from the saddle scabbard, turning it over to Wyoming with a stern look.

“Be good to use this,” Wyoming said, accepting the weapon.

Johnny’s eyes narrowed.

“That is, good to fight beside you again . . . just to prove I don’t bear no grudge.”

After a moment, Johnny nodded slowly, then indicated the wagon with a tilt of his head.

“He’s hurtin’ bad . . . don’t take any extra bumps, huh?” he said softly.

Wyoming agreed. Reluctantly, Johnny turned back to the herd.



Emerging from a heavy cloud of dust and the crowd of cows, Frazier weaved through the brush and found Tapadero away from the milling herd.

“Rob Roy got the soldier,” Frazier announced as he pulled up next to his friend.

“When do we go after Johnny?”

“Pretty quick,” Frazier said, indicating a spot further down the trail with a flick of his wrist. “There’s a narrow place about a mile ahead. Good spot for an ambush.”

Tapadero grinned. “Fish in a barrel, huh?”

“Yeah. Your job’s to stay behind Johnny and the wagon. Cut ‘em off in they try turnin’ back.” Frazier grinned. They couldn’t lose.

Orders given, Tapadero rode toward the back of the herd.



Tapadero was surprised to find Johnny so quickly. Expecting him to be riding drag in the heavy dust nearest the wagon, he instead found him above the herd on a small rise standing still and searching the canyon behind them. The ex-gunslinger was thick with dust, the area around his lower face cleaner from the bandanna he’d had pulled off just a few moments before. Johnny gave Tapadero a dismissive glance before going back to studying where they’d come from with a puzzled expression.

“The wagon up ahead?” Johnny asked worriedly.

“It’s supposed to be back here.” Tapadero frowned at this turn of events. He was supposed to have both Johnny and the wagon under his guard.

“Well, look for yourself,” Johnny snapped. “It ain’t! It’s gone.”

“Maybe broke down or somethin’?” The drifter suggested, wondering what he was supposed to do now.

“Yeah. Maybe . . . I’ll find out.” He gave a sharp look to Tapadero. “You keep that beef movin’!” With that, he wheeled the dusty palomino around and headed back down the canyon.

Tapadero was now confused. What should he do? Pulling his rifle clear, he drew a bead on Johnny’s retreating back but hesitated. This wasn’t the plan, and Frazier could be pretty difficult when the plan wasn’t followed. Soon, his choice was made as Johnny disappeared from his sight. With a sigh, Tapadero replaced the weapon, sighed heavily, then loped after the retreating cattle.

It took longer than he expected to work his way along the milling mass, and by the time he did, they were at the ambush point. Tapadero moved to the edge of the herd, searching the

hills above until the last of the cattle were past him. He moved forward slowly, then finally spotted Frazier in the rocks. He waved his arm and shouted.

“Johnny ain’t comin’! He’s gone huntin’ after that wagon!”

Frazier spat a vague expletive and stood, signaling Rob Roy to show himself. The two of them disappeared from Tapadero’s sight, then reappeared mounted up on their horses. They stopped next to him.

“But the cattle!” Rob Roy said.

“First things first!” Frazier ordered. “Come on!”

The trio turned back and galloped into the canyon.



Murdoch was sure he’d never felt this kind of pain before. It was both sharp and aching at the same time, and incredibly merciless. He also knew he had a fever due to the swimming, disjointed way his thoughts tumbled about. When the wagon stopped moving he was both joyous and annoyed – he welcomed the break in his torture but the nagging of responsibility couldn’t be put aside.

His jumbled line of thought was interrupted when the door of the wagon swung open. Squinting against the brightness outside, Murdoch made out the outline of Wyoming as he made his way inside to Murdoch’s side. The man knelt down and offered him a canteen. Murdoch gratefully accepted it, the tepid water feeling incredibly cool in his throat.

With one arm wrapped tightly and the other holding the canteen, Murdoch was unable to stop Wyoming when his hand dipped under the blankets and he came up with Murdoch’s gun.

“Go on. Drink your fill . . .” Wyoming said.

Murdoch glanced down at the gun, then regarded Wyoming with contempt. “Why?” he managed to croak.

“No point makin’ you suffer. I mean, I don’t hold with blood-feudin’ – blamin’ a father for his son’s guilt.” With that, he pushed the canteen back toward Murdoch’s dry lips.

Murdoch pushed back, releasing the canteen. “What . . . What did Johnny do?” His voice sounded weak to his ears.

“Somethin’ so low I can’t never forgive him. He’s gotta die.”

“I can’t . . . I *won’t* believe that.” Murdoch held the man’s gaze as he furiously tried to think of a way out of this.

“You wouldn’t. You love him like he loves you. That’s how come I’m usin’ you for bait.”

Seeing both his low chance of escaping and the desperation of Wyoming’s soul, Murdoch sighed.

“Revenge,” he stated simply. “It’s a futile thing. It’ll leave you empty.”

“I am already,” Wyoming said quietly. “Have been since . . .” His voice trailed off and he reached inside the top of his right boot and pulled out a small locket. “That lawman back in Quartzite, he let me keep this. . .”

Extending the item to Murdoch he saw that inside the small frame, there was a photograph of a plain and unremarkable dark-haired girl.

“Ain’t she beautiful?” Wyoming’s voice was nearly a whisper.

“Dolores?” Murdoch guessed.

Wyoming nodded. "She died 'cause of Johnny, but she'll rest easier – after I put Johnny in his grave."

Fear clutched Murdoch's heart; he has never felt so helpless in his life.



Tracking the wagon wasn't that difficult. The rocky terrain made some sections a little less clear but picking up the trail on the other side was easy enough. Johnny pulled off his hat and wiped the sweat from his eyes before squinting into the hot sun. Replacing the hat with a resolute tug, he pushed on knowing that what he sought was not what he was looking for. He knew he'd find his father, but also knew this was leading to a trap set by an old friend. His heart was heavy with dread.

Twisting through a stand of rocks, he found himself at the edge of an open area. The wagon was stopped at the far edge and in its shadow, Murdoch lay, unmoving, on the ground. Johnny jumped from Barranca, his first instinct to run to his father's side. Instead, he forced himself to take cover behind a boulder before rushing in. Still, his concern overrode all and he stepped into the open.

A rifle shot passed close by his face, the wind of it sharp. It struck a rock behind him and he felt the sting of shrapnel on the back of his neck. Johnny dove behind a boulder. Wyoming called out.

"You wanta help him, Johnny . . . throw out your gunbelt!"

Johnny obeyed without further thought, the belt landing in the dust with a thud. Johnny could see that Murdoch was barely conscious and unable to help. He was a pawn, clear and plain, and there was only one thing to do. With his empty hands held out from his sides, Johnny stepped into the clear. He saw Wyoming to Murdoch's right among the scattered rocks, his hand holding the dog back from racing to greet his newest pal.

Johnny took a step toward Murdoch and the dog whined in eagerness, his little tail swaying furiously although he obeyed Wyoming and stood still. Johnny took another step toward his father and another crack from the rifle sent dirt flying on his boots as it hit the ground in front of him.

"That's far enough!" Wyoming yelled. Johnny noted that his voice had a slight tremble.

"Look, Amigo . . ."

"Don't! Don't call me friend!" Wyoming cut in.

"Does it hafta be right now?" Johnny was working hard to keep his voice even. "Wait 'till I get Murdoch to the fort, and we'll settle this any way you like."

Gambling, he took another step. The next shot was much closer to his feet.

"The next one's through your head."

That did it – too tired to keep under control, Johnny yelled angrily. "This don't hafta happen! If you'll just put up that rifle and listen to the truth . . ."

"Delores told me!" The quaver in Wyoming's words spoke of the same anger and weariness. "Why? Why her? You always had your pick of woman. Why did you hafta go after the one that meant anythin' to me?"

Seeing his old friend's anguish gave Johnny something to work with: The truth. As he spoke, one hand slowly moved toward his shirtfront pocket for the treat he knew was there. "You got it backwards . . . It was Dolores come after me."

"You're a liar!" Wyoming shouted, the rifle wavering dangerously.

In Wyoming's moment of distraction, Johnny pulled out a piece of jerky from his pocket and the dog leaped happily forward. Johnny dropped to one knee and wrapped one arm around the dog as the animal eagerly accepted the treat from his other hand. He hated using the dog as a shield, but it was the only way out he could see.

"Leave go my dog!" Wyoming shouted as he again aligned the rifle.

"Not 'till you listen!" The uneventful pause was what Johnny had hoped for. "You . . . you got a blind spot, Wyoming. You can't see faults in things you love. This dog's the finest dog ever lived, and Dolores . . . Well, you thought she was perfect. Only she wasn't."

"Don't lie!"

Wyoming shook his head in denial, but the fact that he hadn't shot yet told Johnny more.

"She was mean and selfish! She got it into her head she loved me and kept goin' at me behind your back. I couldn't put a stop to it without hurtin' you, so finally I just left for Mexico."

"You took her with you!"

Johnny blinked in surprise. "I what?" he said, confused.

The rifle sagged as Wyoming vented. "Don't deny it! You see, I went after you . . . I found Dolores six months later. Down in Sonora – behind a cantina. Sick. Alone. She told me what you done and made me promise I'd pay you back. I wouldn't at first. I didn't wanta believe it. But she swore it was true . . . with her last breath. Right before she closed her eyes and died!"

Johnny shook his head slowly in sorrow and helplessness. "She musta tried to follow me . . . But I never saw her after I left you both in Tascosa."

The sharp sound of a bullet being levered into a chamber got his full attention. Wyoming glared at Johnny, his resolve apparently rebuilt.

"Leave go my dog, Johnny," he demanded lowly. When Johnny didn't respond, he found his old friend's forehead in the sights.

Johnny read his body language and knew he'd lost. Reluctantly, he let go of the dog and stood. "Amigo . . . Believe me!" he tried.

The words made Wyoming hesitate. Johnny saw indecision in his eyes. Caught in the moment, they both jumped when the dog began to bark furiously at something behind Johnny. Before Johnny could move, Wyoming lifted the rifle higher and squeezed off a shot.

Johnny spun and dropped. Behind him, Rob Roy flew backward from the shot as Frazier and Tapadero lifted their own weapons. Johnny crawled toward his father, still in the open.

The dog stood fast, barking rabidly as Wyoming took cover and continued to shoot. Ignoring it all, Johnny made it to Murdoch's side and dragged him to cover behind the wagon. That done, Johnny peered around the corner.

"Johnny!"

Wyoming's shout alerted Johnny, and he tossed Murdoch's revolver to him. Johnny snatched the gun from the air as a bullet near his head sent splinters flying.

The gunfire was fast and furious, the frenzied dog's barking adding to the ruckus. A scream from the rocks verified a hit, and Tapadero stood shakily, clenching one arm with the other.

"I'm hit!" he shouted, terrified. "Don't shoot! Please, Johnny, I ain't parta this!" To confirm his plea, Tapadero dropped his rifle.

Johnny and Wyoming hesitate, glancing quickly at each other to gage what to do next. Before they can fully react to the surrender, another shot rings out from Frazier's weapon and it met with a heart wrenching yelp.

The dog was instantly silent.

Wyoming froze in horror, his eyes on his unusually still friend. Johnny, gun aimed, bolted from his cover realizing, too late, that Frazier was gone. The sound of frantic horses told him where his nemesis has gone.

Running through the brush and following the noise, Johnny found Frazier trying to calm his horse enough to mount. Finally, he managed to do so, but before he could fully gather his reins, Johnny yanked to the ground. Hitting hard, Frazier was momentarily stunned. Johnny stuck his gun in the man's face, and Frazier wisely lay still.

Johnny roughly grabbed him by his collar and practically dragged him back to the wagon where he found Wyoming cradling the still dog in his arms.

"Dog? Oh, Dog . . ."

When the man buried his face in the animal's fur, Johnny dropped his eyes and turned his attention to securing the prisoners, giving his old friend privacy to grieve.



Exhausted beyond belief, Johnny dug down deep and managed to find a resource to keep him going for just a little while longer. Now that Murdoch was back in the wagon and they were ready to go, he felt his worry lessen just a bit. He reached down and adjusted the blanket under his father and found himself the recipient of a pained expression. Murdoch was finally awake, his eyes open.

"You rest easy, now," he said to his father. "There's a doctor at the fort, and we'll have you there by nightfall."

"What about the herd?" Murdoch asked weakly.

Johnny chuckled. "The soldiers're havin' a round-up. They think it's a game."

Murdoch smiled haggardly.

"Yeah . . . smile again." Johnny laughed. He picked up the manacles and ring of keys from the floor of the wagon and turned serious. "See you later. Right after I tend to this."

"Johnny," Murdoch breathed softly. "Compassion . . ."

Johnny hesitated and dropped his eyes for a moment before climbing from the wagon without replying. Two soldiers were waiting for him outside.

"Move out anytime," he said. "Just leave my horse and one other."

They nod in unison, and Johnny walked away, a man with a mission. Johnny found Wyoming placing a final rock on the dog's grave and walked around to meet him face on. The manacles dangled significantly from his hand. Johnny stood before the kneeling man, his expression hard. Wyoming kept his focus on the pile of rocks and didn't move.

"Murdoch wants me to forgive you," Johnny said flatly.

Neither man moved for several long seconds. Then in an explosion of motion, Johnny swung the chains and the raked them across Wyoming's back.

"Look at me!" Johnny yelled.

Wyoming looked up thorough his lashes, defeated. "What do you want. I don't care . . ."

"I figure Yuma Prison's got first claim on you right now," Johnny growled.

"Don't matter," Wyoming whispered. "Nothin' matters . . ."

Johnny flung the manacles to the ground at his feet.

"Yes, it does!" he snapped. Reaching down, he yanked the bigger man to his feet and shoved him backward until he could slam him back against a boulder, where he got in Wyoming's face. "You gotta live through the next two years! You gotta stand up under hard work . . ." he cuffed the man's chin to accent the words. ". . . And hot sun . . ." another whack, ". . ."

and rotten food,” another backhand, “. . . and beatin’s!” The final cuff ended with Johnny pushing himself off the man. “And more beatin’s! Amigo, you gotta take the worst treatment they can hand out . . . and you can’t do that if you don’t care enough to hang onto your soul – ‘cause that’s the only thing you’ll have to call your own!”

Miserably, Wyoming lifted his chin. “Why, Johnny? What for?”

Johnny raised a finger and shook it in Wyoming’s face as he spoke. “For a day two years from now – when the gates swing open and you’re a free man! Know the first thing you’ll see? Me . . . I’ll be there outside the walls and I’ll have forgotten all this.”

With those final words, Johnny swept his hand to indicate all the events that had taken place in this small clearing. Wyoming was looking at him intently, his eyes lightened by hope.

“You believe me? Or do I hafta pound on you some more?”

Wyoming shook his head in wonder and gratitude. He pushed himself off the boulder and squared his shoulders, standing straight and tall for the first time in a long while. After nodding shortly to his old friend, he looked past Johnny to the rocky grave. “And I thought . . .” he swallowed hard, and then spoke clearly. “I thought I’d buried my only friend.”

He looked back at Johnny, who gave him a reassuring clap on the shoulder. Johnny stood back to allow Wyoming to step forward, and the two of them walked side by side from the clearing to the waiting horses.

The manacles were left behind, forgotten, in the dust.

THE END