

The Wheels of Fate (by slaine89)

Summary: In an alternate universe where Ben is dead and the boys grow up separated, will fate brings the Cartwrights back together once more?

Rated: T (72,638 words)

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The Wheels of Fate

Memories. They're like an old injury that flares up just when you think you've gotten past it, usually right before a storm. He spun the cylinder of his gun and slipped the bullets in each slot with a metallic slither. He put the extra pullets into the loops on his belt and slung the leather contraption over the back of the hard wooden chair. He kept a hold of his gun though. The weight of it in his hand was reassuring, and he spun it around in a practiced maneuver that came without thinking. As he twirled the gun, his mind spun too, taking him out of his tiny hotel room in San Francisco. He aimed his gun and squeezed the trigger without cocking it, taking down an imaginary foe.

Always in the present, never the past. It was how he'd lived for the past fourteen years. For him there was no future, no past, just the here and now, and whatever man he had to kill next.

He slipped the gun back into the holster and stretched out on the flat bed. After spending nearly two weeks sleeping on the ground, he'd been looking forward to sleeping in a real bed, but this one made the ground seem comfortable. Still, he hadn't really expected much. Cheap hotel rooms rarely included comfort in their cost, but ironically the fleas came for free. He kicked the blanket on the floor and lay on his back on the bare mattress, staring up at the cracked ceiling. The person sleeping above would probably come crashing down on top of him in the middle of the night. He closed his eyes. Outside, he could hear the sound of the rain that had welcomed him to the city still coming down. Adam welcomed the sound as it distracted his mind from images of the first time he'd come to San Francisco.

It had been spring, no rain, just pure blue sky, clear and shiny as a lake. The only cloud around had been over him as he'd dismounted in front of a saloon that he was too young to go into. He'd gone anyway, needing the information and had gotten a black eye for his troubles. It had been the last time anyone had called him a kid though, at least the last time they had done it without learning just how wrong they were.

He reached over and pulled his gun out of the holster without opening his eyes. The grips were smooth and fit into the grooves of his hand as if they were the mold from which the gun had been cast. He rubbed his thumb along the butt and concentrated on the pressure on his thumb from pushing down. Here and now. His thumb traced the edge, and he slowly exhaled. Memories were like snakes, poised and waiting to strike. The only chance was to stay frozen in place and wait for them to decide you weren't a threat and move on. Just stay still and focus on the present until the past drifted back to the shadow it had emerged from.

~*~

It was still raining the next evening when he entered the

saloon. The man he'd been looking for was there, like he knew he'd be. Adam took off his hat, ran his hand through his hair, and put it back on again. Then he sat down beside Carl Reynolds.

Reynolds looked up from his drink and narrowed his eyes. "So the first of how many?"

"I don't count the men who are behind me, only the ones ahead of me." Adam answered. He motioned to the bartender, appearing relaxed, but every nerve was tense, waiting for Reynolds to make the first move.

"Well since you've been tailing me the longest, I guess the honor is yours." Reynolds lifted his glass in a toast to him, but Adam knew that a viper was waiting to strike behind his nonchalance. "How long was it?"

"Since Billings."

"Right, Billings. Nice little town."

"It was before you killed three people there." Adam said. He wondered how long Reynolds would draw the conversation out.

"So," Reynolds tipped his chair back so that the front two legs hovered in the air. "how do you want to do this?"

"Your poster says dead or alive. You pick."

Reynolds laughed. Quicker than sight, he reached for his gun, but Adam was faster. Reynolds's gun fell to the floor and he gripped his right shoulder.

"Not bad." he spat.

"No, not bad at all." Adam narrowed his eyes. Right handed holster, but he'd been holding his drink with his left hand. Something wasn't right.

Then he saw his left hand creeping toward the inside pocket of

his vest. Instinct pulled the trigger before his mind could process anything, and Reynolds slumped forward as another gun clattered to the floor. Adam holstered his own gun.

“You shouldn’t try a left-handed trick like that on me.” he said to the dead body.

A left handed man with a right handed holster. A left hand reaching for a hidden gun. The scene replayed in his head as he sat in the saloon nursing his drink. As he watched it again, the hand transformed from the calloused hand of an outlaw to the tiny hand of a three year old taking his own. He clenched his fist, able to feel the soft skin gripping around his finger. Another left hand.

“Horsey.” The little hand tugged on his finger like a bellboy ringing. Large hazel eyes topped with curly brown hair silently begged him, and Adam hoisted his little brother up onto his back and crawled on hands and knees on the floor.

Little Joe bounced on top of him, wanting him to go faster. Adam pretended to rear, catching his little brother just before he hit the floor and swinging him upside down. Little Joe screeched in delight.

“More!” he stamped when Adam put him down. Then the hand again – the left hand – tugging at his right one. The same hand that tugged at his that night. He hadn’t known what was wrong, only that his older brothers were upset, and as Adam looked down into his trusting eyes, they filled with tears. He couldn’t explain what had happened to him. Joe wouldn’t understand. Just like he couldn’t explain why he’d left.

“You’re a hard man to track down.” A familiar voice brought Adam out of his thoughts. The interruption was welcome, but the man who sat next to him was not.

"There's a reason for that." Adam slid his gun, which he'd automatically half drawn, back into the holster. He took one last swallow of his drink and stood up.

"Leaving so soon?" the man asked. "I was going to buy you a drink."

"I'll pass." Adam walked toward the door. The man stood and followed him. He was taller than Adam, with powerful hands that reminded him of a person from another life.

"I need you, Adam."

"Find someone else."

"There's no one else. Name your price."

Adam stopped and a low laugh came from his throat. It was one the man was familiar with – ironic and tinged with bitterness, no real mirth in it. He couldn't ever remember hearing Adam laugh wholeheartedly without that trace of poison.

"What could you possibly give me to convince me to work for you?"

"How about a piece of land east of Lake Tahoe?" the man asked slyly.

Adam's eyes narrowed. "What makes you think I want that?" his words were of a deadly tone that warned the man to tread lightly.

"They've just hit a bonanza out there in the Comstock Lode. Miners are already moving out there to strike it rich, but I got there first and staked a claim on what used to be your ranch." He smiled tauntingly at Adam. "You shouldn't leave land unattended like that and expect it to stay the same. Especially when the government wants land in the Sierra Nevada settled so they can tax miners on the gold. You may not care what happens to your father's land while it sits there

untouched, but what happens now? Miners are like gophers, Adam. They'll rip that land apart if I let them."

He knew it was true. He had left the Ponderosa unspoiled, like a bride left by her groom. He could see it in his mind's eyes despite his attempts to erase the memory: the tall trees like pillars stretching up to vaulted sky like the ceiling of a cathedral, the mountains framing the edges of the hills. And now it was threatened to be ravaged.

He could walk away. His entire life had gone up in flames; he might as well let the last reminder burn as well. He turned to leave.

"I'll give you until tomorrow night to think about it. I'm staying at the Hotel Americano, room thirty five."

"I won't change my mind, Bates." Adam said as he pushed through the swinging doors and stepped out into the twilight.

~*~

Adam leaned against the outside wall and watched the rain dribble off the roof into the street as he flipped a coin. Heads. He flipped it again. Tails. Then Heads. Since Bates had deprived him of his drink in the one saloon, he'd moved across town to another, but he had only stayed inside for a few minutes before moving out into the damp night air. Too many people, too many questions, particularly coming from the saloon girl who had recognized him from his heroics earlier in the evening. He hadn't minded at first when she'd sat down. She was pretty enough, and it was always nice talking to someone who didn't know anything about him. Then the questions had started.

He caught the coin and glanced at it. Tails. He wouldn't go.

"Just how many men have you killed?" she had slipped her limp white hand over his hardened arm.

Adam flipped the coin again. Why did people think killing was something so great? Did it really make a person powerful, to be able to take someone's life?

"More than I like to remember." He had answered, taking a sip of his drink. The quality wasn't as good as the other saloon.

"You've got some regrets then?" she'd asked.

Heads again. Adam glared at the coin. Best out of fifteen? He flipped it again and then tossed it into the street without looking at it.

"Just one." Either he'd had enough whiskey in him to bring it up, or he'd wanted to puzzle her into leaving him alone. Maybe both. "I regret eating supper on April fifth, eighteen forty-five."

Adam pulled out another coin. Heads. He put it back in his pocket.

She hadn't known what to say to that. So she'd shrugged and changed the subject.

"I guess no regrets isn't a good thing. That Reynolds didn't seem to have any, and you did the world a service by killing him."

Adam had stood. "I do not wish to kill or be killed, but I can foresee circumstances in which these things by me would be unavoidable."

"So why do you kill people then, if you don't like it?"

He hadn't expected her to recognize the quote, and she hadn't. Not many saloon girls read Thoreau. He'd tossed down a couple of coins to cover the drinks and flipped one on the way out. It had been heads, so he'd flipped again.

One last job. How bad could it be? Adam shook his head,

knowing the answer. He'd ridden away from Bates and his jobs six years ago, swearing to never have anything to do with the man again. It was an oath similar to his thoughts when leaving the Ponderosa for the last time.

The Ponderosa. Images, unbidden, came to his mind again. Adam pulled the coin back out and flipped it over his knuckles in an attempt to sweep them away.

Even if he did the job, he couldn't go back. It would be impossible. There were too many memories – the driverless carriage being pulled into the yard by a horse half wild with terror, the dead bodies found on the road, bullets having splintered the life that had once been housed there, the charred remains of a house that used to be a home... no, he couldn't go back.

"There are all sorts of different types of miracles in this life, Adam; you just have to look for them. Look around you right now, and you'll see one of them."

They had been looking down over the lake after putting up some fences. Adam had inhaled the scent of spring and promise, and the vivid greens and blues had danced before his eyes. A miracle, unspoiled land that would provide for you as long as you took care of it and defended it. That's what his father had believed and what he had pointed out to Adam that afternoon.

I can't, Pa. The coin bit into his palm as he gripped his hand around it, but he didn't notice. It was nothing compared to the empty gnawing in his chest. He couldn't go back. He just couldn't. But he couldn't pretend he didn't care either.

He flipped the coin again.

He stood outside the door, his arms unwilling to move. He

could still walk away. But as the thought of leaving entered his mind, his arm finally decided to obey, and his fist rapped against the wooden door.

"So you're in?" Bates cut right to the chase when he answered Adam's knock.

"I want the whole six hundred thousand acres." Adam said. He still didn't know why. He had fooled himself into believing that he would just sell it to another rancher who would protect it from the miners even though he knew he never could.

"Of course." Bates stepped back to let Adam enter and crossed the room to pour a glass of brandy.

"And I'm not killing anyone."

"You killed a man tonight."

"Yesterday. It's three in the morning right now." Adam corrected.

Bates shrugged to concede the point. "I knew you'd be around."

"Really." Adam crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. He felt too much like a fly creeping into spider's web to sit down.

"You forget, I taught you everything you know. Ever since I found you on the street outside that saloon, what, twelve years ago?"

"Fourteen." Adam wanted to snap the word, but he kept his tone even and inwardly chafed at Bates's self-flattering.

"Fourteen years." Bates lifted his glass in a wordless toast and took a sip. Adam shifted impatiently.

"The reason I'm here?"

"Have a seat." Bates lit a cigar and took his own advice. Adam

slid into a flowered chair. It wasn't worth proving a point at the expense of his legs.

"Several months ago, I was involved in a little business project in Jacksonville, Oregon that resulted in some favorable returns to the tune of fifty thousand dollars. I hired a local boy, to keep an eye on it for me as it was coming down on the stage."

"Why a local?" Adam knew that Bates had dozens of hired guns at his beck and call that he could have chosen from.

"After you left I got a little more careful with who I trusted. A lot of my men knew what was in that satchel, so I wanted to hire someone who didn't. The downside of that was that when the stage was robbed, he didn't think it was worth his life to protect it. Stupid kid."

"And I suppose if he had known, he would have gladly laid down his life for someone else's money." Adam said drily. Bates glared at him.

"Don't use that tone with me."

"You don't own me anymore, Bates." Adam reminded him. "As long as I do what you pay me for, I can talk to you anyway I want."

Bates paused as if trying to decide if it was worth the argument. Then he waved a hand and moved on. "The boy disappeared, and he owes me money. All I want is for him to either pay up or work it off. Simple right?"

Nothing was simple with Bates, but Adam didn't comment on this. Instead he waited, and Bates eventually continued.

"He's got a pretty powerful family, dangerous too. I don't want you getting yourself killed."

"You don't want to lose your chance at getting fifty thousand dollars back." Adam corrected.

"You just think I'm a cold hearted monster, don't you?" Bates shook his head. "I did care about you, Adam. No one would have put up with you through as much as I did if I didn't. So take my advice, and don't let the family know what you're up to. Make it nice and quiet."

Adam sat back in the chair, enjoying the softness of the fabric as he mulled the job in his mind, trying to unveil the intricacies.

"And you couldn't get anyone else to do this." he finally said.

Bates set his drink down and leaned forward to look Adam in the eyes. "Let's be realistic, Adam, you were my best man. I recognized the potential in you from the second I saw you fighting your way into a saloon to avenge your parents' deaths. But it was raw potential, it needed nurturing. I shaped you; I made you into a man who could survive doing what you've been doing for the past eight years."

"How do you know what I've been doing?"

"You came here, and now a wanted man is dead by your gun. Coincidence?"

"I didn't come here to kill him; I came here to bring him to justice. He picked the way he went." He was annoyed at his sudden need to justify himself. Yes, in his line of work he ended up bringing in his quarry more often dead than alive, but that didn't mean he liked it or that it was his goal to single handedly clear the entire west of outlaws by his gun.

"Like it or not, Adam, you owe a lot to me." Bates said.

Adam refused to give Bates the satisfaction of meeting his smug look with a glare. His face remained neutral, but inside he felt like a dog putting on a familiar chain. Well, he might have to endure it for a little while, but it wasn't going to

be a permanent addition. He reached for a pen and paper and began writing, ignoring Bates' curious looks. When he'd finished, he handed the makeshift contract to Bates.

"Is there anything you want to add?" His tone was cold.

Bates scanned the document. "If you find out that I lied to you about any aspect of the job, you receive compensation without further services?" he raised his eyebrows. "I didn't realize I'd taught you everything I know as well as everything you know."

"I've learned quite a bit on my own." Adam's voice was devoid of the friendly camaraderie that Bates had tried to inject into his. This was a business transaction, nothing more. If Bates wanted his dog back, he had another thing coming.

Bates began to write, and Adam resisted the urge to try to read the paper upside down. "I want this kept in the strictest confidence." Bates spoke as he scratched words onto the contract. "If you reveal to anyone information that might lead the Finch family to discover where their youngest son is before he finishes paying me off, this contract is null and void."

Adam put the paper in his pocket. "We'll get this notarized at the sheriff's office tomorrow, and I'll be on my way. In the meantime do you have a room for me?"

"Where did you sleep last night?" the first hint of hostility crept into Bates' tone. Adam grinned slightly in response to it. Nice to know he could still get a rise from the man.

"I wasn't working for you last night." he replied.

~*~

The details of the job replayed themselves in Adam's head, but instead of hearing the words, all he heard was the tone and the voice that had guided him for most of his young adulthood.

It was the same smooth but confident voice he'd first heard on the street outside the Bucking Bull saloon after having been thrown there by a couple of the bartender's hired muscles.

"You alright, kid?" The voice had been soothing, laced with the appropriate amount of concern. Adam had looked up into a worried face under a top hat. He'd shrugged off the hand on his arm, more from anger at the bartender than at the unexpected source of help.

"Fine." He'd stood.

"That's a nice shiner you've got there."

He'd automatically reached up to touch his eye and wished that he hadn't. His fingers had sparked a throbbing that traveled around his eyeball to the back of his skull.

"I'm fine." Adam looked back at the swinging doors that he'd come crashing through a moment ago. They'd stopped and stared when he'd walked through them, a fifteen year old trying to look tough, but they hadn't challenged him – until he'd started asking questions.

"Harry Singer?" The bartender had looked confused, but Adam saw through the act. *"No, I don't know anyone by that name."*

As he reflected from the street, Adam decided that grabbing the bartender by the collar hadn't been the smartest move he could have made. He'd felt a pair of hands like iron jerk him backwards and up against the bar.

"Either order a drink, or leave, and since you're too young to be drinking here, that only gives you one option." The man's breath had smelled like onions, and his stubbly beard had traces of dirt in it. Adam had pulled his arm away angrily. *What did he know about anything? He was old enough to bury his father and mother, wasn't he?*

The wind had carried the chill of bones in the air as it

rippled over the hills. Both Hoss and Little Joe were shivering in their jackets. Adam tightened the arm that was holding Joe and wrapped the other around Hoss, wishing he could say something to take away the chill that had settled into their hearts. As he gazed at the freshly mounded earth, his mind saw beneath it to the bodies housed in their wooden caskets. He wished he hadn't seen them, hadn't been the one to find the bodies on the road after they'd fallen dead out of the buggy because now he couldn't erase the image from his mind. His Pa's once strong arms had been limp, and his body had flopped heavily onto the wagon. There was nothing of the strength and life that had always supported Adam left. His mother's face had been scratched from falling onto the road, her skin covered with tiny cuts that would never heal. Adam closed his eyes against the images.

"Hoss," he'd knelt down in front of his brother after the funeral. "I've got to do something, and I've got to go away for a while."

"Like Ma and Pa?" Panic spread over Hoss's round, usually cheerful face, and he gripped his brother's arm.

"No. Not like..." For some reason the words wouldn't come out of Adam's throat. "Not like them. I'll be back; I promise. But I need you to take care of Little Joe while I'm gone."

For some reason Hoss hadn't asked why, and Adam had been grateful. His trusting eyes looking up at him, knowing his older brother would fix this somehow, made Adam meet the man's hostile gaze steadily.

"I'm looking for someone." he said. "Harry..."

"Harry Singer. He's not here, and if I was you, I'd avoid him. He'd crush a little bug like you without thinking twice."

"I need to find him."

"He's not here!" the bartender had had enough. "Jake, get him out of here."

Jake reached for Adam's arm, but Adam was quicker. He swung at Jake and managed to hit him in the nose. The next thing he was aware of was an explosion on his eyes that sent him flying backwards. Then he was flying through the air again, and this time he'd landed on the dimly lit San Francisco street with the saloon doors swinging apologetically behind him.

"So what were you doing in there anyway?" Bates had asked.

"Looking for someone." Adam barely registered the conversation; his mind was whirling with ways to get information. This had been the saloon his Pa had mentioned as being frequented by Singer; he knew it.

"Harry Singer."

The name caught Adam's attention like a gunshot. "Yes."

"Walk with me, son." Bates had reached to put an arm around Adam's shoulders, but Adam had stiffened.

"Don't call me son."

A deal with the devil. Adam reflected. And the devil had a honey coated tongue. He hadn't realized it until it had been too late then, but this time he was walking in with his eyes open. He'd do the job, get what he wanted from Bates, and never see him again.

Then what? Adam didn't know the answer. He would have his ranch back, the ranch that he and Pa had built out of nothing. And he wouldn't know a thing to do with it.

Deal with it afterward. He told himself. The job comes first. Back to the here and now. Adam brought to mind an image of the

young man he was going to find, Tom Finch. He'd be reckless, someone to do things on the spur of the moment. And he had a family to back him up if Adam didn't move fast. Something akin to jealousy rose in Adam's throat, but he pushed it away along with thoughts of the job. He reached into his saddlebags and pulled out *The Courtship of Miles Standish*. As he read, his lips moved along with the lines, and his mind settled into the rhythm of the poetry, leaving the real world far behind.

The first thing Adam did the next morning was get a buckboard and a couple of horses. The way he saw it, the easiest way to get a person from Jacksonville Oregon to San Francisco California without anyone knowing was to stuff them in a trunk and forget they were there. After loading a man-sized trunk onto the buckboard, Adam reined in his horses in front of the sheriff's office. Bates was waiting for him.

"Nice rig." he said.

"I'll be billing you for it." Adam answered as he jumped down.

Bates caught on to his lack of desire to talk and kept silent as they signed the contract. But he couldn't resist a little jab as Adam climbed back up into the driver's seat.

"So did you marry her?" He asked. When Adam didn't answer, Bates continued. "That pretty little thing that came between us?"

Adam stared at Bates for a minute, and an image came to mind of his fist landing squarely in Bates' face. Someday, not today, but someday, Bates was going to pay through the nose. For everything.

"I'm sure if you take my job into consideration you'll come to a conclusion about that." He finally said. He flicked the

reins to the horses and the buckboard lurched forward.

Bates didn't know it, but he'd struck a nerve. Or maybe he did know it.

Leah. The name was more powerful than a blast of hot air that stirred up a whirlwind of images and emotions. He could still see her now as clearly as the day she'd left. Her eyes had been so vacant then, a stark contrast to how they usually were, how they'd been for almost five months. Warm, deep, and trusting, with a spark of mischief. He could lose himself in those brown eyes and drink them in like a man dying of thirst.

"I could stay here like this forever." She had once said.

They had been lying on their backs near the river and looking up at the clouds that were migrating across a clear blue sky. Her head was on his chest, and when he breathed in, the soft scent of her hair intermingled with the scent of spring grass.

"I know what you mean." Adam answered in a dreamy tone. He cherished these moments that were few and far in between, moments when for a while, with his arms full of angel, he felt completely at peace. He hoped she wouldn't bring up the fact that soon his work here for Bates would be done, and he'd have to move on. The thought was a chip in the glassy peacefulness of the moment, and he pushed it aside.

"That cloud kind of looks like a bull." Leah said, pointing upward. "See the horns?"

Adam frowned and didn't answer, and she glanced up at him.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"What is it?"

"Nothing." The word was harsher than he meant it to be. "I

just don't like cows."

Leah was silent for several moments, and he knew that this time he'd been the one to shatter the moment.

"Why do you do this?" she finally asked.

"Do you want me to tell you why I don't like cows?"

"No, I want you to stop withdrawing into your head and slamming the door in my face. We've been together for months, and you've barely told me anything about yourself."

Adam took a deep breath. Where to begin untangling the massive knot of hurts and mistakes that was his past?

Leah seemed to sense his reluctance. "You don't have to..."

"You're right." he said. "Ask me anything."

She had paused to consider the man who her heart understood even if her head didn't. There was nothing she needed to know about him, but one thing that was always at the back of her mind troubling her.

"Why do you work for Sam Bates?" she finally asked.

It was a question that he'd asked himself constantly over the years. The question he had had a feeling she would ask, but it had still caught him off guard. He'd been glad he couldn't look into her eyes from the angle he was at; somehow he needed the privacy to think without her gaze boring into him.

"He helped me out." he had finally said. "After I lost my family."

For a moment the only sound that could be heard was the cheerful river rushing by, unaware of the somber conversation taking place on its banks. When Leah spoke, her words were soft and tentative.

"How old were you?"

"Fifteen." Between hay and grass. Old enough to kill the man who killed your Pa, not old enough to foresee or understand the consequences.

"How did it happen?"

"Pa had been gone for a week in San Francisco. When he came back, there was something on his mind, but he wouldn't tell me what."

He still remembered the conversation he'd overheard, still remembered the thoughtful worry in his Pa's voice as he spoke the name that had changed Adam's life. Harry Singer.

"He'd run into some trouble, and he was worried the man might try something stupid. He never told me what kind of trouble. Never got the chance. He and my ma were killed one day while coming back from town. Shot down like animals." Adam's voice had dwindled to a low murmur, and his eyes no longer saw the carefree clouds. Instead they traveled the road of memories. He didn't even notice that Leah had sat up and was staring at him worriedly.

"And then?" she prompted.

"I went after the man who'd done it. Bates helped me find him." Adam couldn't move his head sideways to meet her stare. He was trapped in a world of his own making and seeing it all over again. Singer had been three shots in when he'd found him, but he'd still been sober enough to knock Adam off his feet. Singer had gone back to his drink, but Adam hadn't stayed down. He'd cocked his gun, his Pa's gun, and had coolly informed Singer that they were going to the sheriff's. He hadn't been a killer then. Not yet. He'd still been an illusioned boy on a quest for justice.

"I killed him."

Singer had gone for his gun. He hadn't thought Adam had it in him. Adam stood and turned away from Leah, reliving the moment as if it was happening all over again. His finger on the trigger... just a twitch was all it took. One twitch and in a second thirty years of life was snuffed out just as easily as if it had been a candle. But that wasn't what had scared him and made him drop the gun onto the saloon floor.

His lips tried to form the words, but they wouldn't come out. He felt arms around him and knew he couldn't tell her what he'd felt that day. Or rather what he hadn't felt.

There was no regret. He couldn't feel regret as he stared at the dead man at his feet because somehow he couldn't see him as a man. All he could see were two fresh graves. Now there would be three, and only one of them was deserving.

He'd bent to pick up his gun, and Bates had stepped forward.

"Don't worry, Adam. You did what you had to do. He was going for his gun."

"I... I'm glad he did." As he realized the emotion he had to admit it to someone.

"Anyone would feel the same."

"My Pa wouldn't." But he wasn't sure. How could he be? It wasn't like he could ask him. He'd glanced back at the body, and regret finally flooded through him, but it was only regret that this had had to happen, and that his Pa wasn't there to explain what he was feeling to him.

"I'm sorry, Adam." Leah's voice pulled him out of his mind like a rope. He had leaned against her and breathed her in, letting the scent of her skin chase the memories away.

He dreamed of her that night. Her hands on his neck, her breath on his cheek. But when he reached out for her, his arms met with cold emptiness. Her image was gone; her voice lingered for a second longer.

"I don't blame you, Adam." she said.

He opened his eyes.

"I do." the words came out as barely a whisper. He blamed himself for everything: her brother's death, the death of his own brothers... everything. And it seemed to only way to ease his guilt over those he blamed himself for killing was by killing more.

Adam got up and stirred the ashes of his fire with a stick. The blackened charcoal tinged with red made him think of how it had been the day he'd returned from San Francisco. Fire was a funny thing. It could reduce a house that had taken months of labor to build into a pile of coal just as easily as if it were nothing more than firewood.

He had helped his Pa build that house. Of course he hadn't been able to do much, but he'd been a shadow every step of the way. And when it was done, he had stepped back and put his hands on his hips just as if he had built it single handedly.

"Have you ever seen a finer looking house, Adam?" Pa had asked, putting his hand on his young son's shoulder.

He hadn't, and he didn't think he ever would. But it wasn't the burning of the house that had left him feeling guiltily hollow. It was the burning of the lives inside. The lives that had depended on him to protect them now that Pa was gone. He had promised he'd be back, only he'd come back too late.

Too late to do anything. Too late to save the house or anyone inside.

"There wasn't anything you could have done, Adam."

How many different people had told him that in the space of the few short hours he was there? And each time they said it, the same question flickered back into his mind.

How do you know?

If only he had been there.

He watched a tiny flame lick its way around the edge of a piece of wood and wondered what it would be like to have that flame eating away at his flesh. He shivered and rubbed his arms at the thought.

It should have been me. I was the one who did the killing. Not Hoss. Not Joe. They were innocent.

Why was it always the innocent ones who died?

"Life's not fair, Adam."

Bates's voice was there again, in his head, smooth as butter.

"You just have to make the most of it."

"I guess." Adam had run his hands over the grips of his Pa's gun. It seemed like the only tangible link between them now. And what a poor one it was.

"You headed home now?"

"Yeah. I've got two brothers that need me. Thanks for your help." Adam held out his hand.

"You sure you don't want to reconsider my offer?"

He'd offered Adam a job. Adam still didn't know why. He didn't really care either. It wasn't that he wasn't grateful; it just didn't make a difference. His place was with his brothers. They would need him more than ever now. He shook his head.

"Thanks though."

"Well, if you change your mind, you let me know." Bates shook his hand.

"I will." Adam had turned to go when Bates reached out a hand to stop him.

"You sure you want to go back now? You're liable to fall off your horse what with how tired you look."

"I'll be alright."

Bates studied him for a moment. "I guess I can't convince you to get a good night's rest. How about supper though? What are a few hours? Especially if it'll keep you in the saddle. You've got a long trip ahead of you."

Adam hesitated, but he knew Bates was right. A few hours couldn't make that much of a difference.

"Not that much of a difference at all." He muttered. Instead of coming home to his home and brothers, he'd come home to ashes and two more losses.

"I thought I'd put out the fire in the stove, Adam. I'm so sorry." Mrs. Halloway, the neighbor who had been staying with Hoss and Joe had been practically hysterical. Adam had looked at her and didn't feel anything. No anger, no pity, no sorrow, nothing. Just numbness.

"It's not your fault." He had mumbled. Then he'd put on his hat and rode back the way he had come. The numbness didn't wear off until he was back in San Francisco, knocking on a familiar hotel door and hoping he hadn't checked out yet. When the door opened, Adam had nearly collapsed inside. He hadn't cried when he'd found the bodies of his mother and father on the road, or when he'd buried them, or even when he'd stood in front of his burnt down house, but now the tears had been building up, and he couldn't hold them back anymore.

Adam glared at the coals and wished it had been anyone else

that night that had helped him to the sofa as he'd given way to pain and exhaustion. Anyone except Bates. He stirred the coals again and watched a couple of solitary sparks leap upwards as if they were trying to become stars.

"You can only go forward in life. Some people never realize that and spend their whole lives trying to go the other way."

Adam stirred the coals again. Sometimes it's easier to try to go back than to go forwards, Pa.

~*~

When he finally pulled into Jacksonville, Adam reined in the wagon in front of the general store. He considered going inside and running up Bates's bill, but he didn't want a lot of excess supplies slowing him down. Instead he jumped lightly down and drifted down the street with one of Bates' early lessons echoing in his head.

"I always like to snoop around a bit every time I go to a new town. You can learn anything you need to know just by watching people."

Observation had been hammered into him by Bates over and over again, observation and knowledge. There was no such thing as useless information. It was one of Bates's sayings that Adam liked to quote back to him whenever Bates harangued him for reading so much. Bates would only snort.

"I meant practical information about the matter at hand, not some glorified scribbler's thoughts on the meaning of life." He had said once.

Ordinarily Adam would have shrugged it off, but as he stared at the white pages, he had been unable to get his Pa's voice out of his head. It was the voice that had read to him ever night before bed, even before he was able to understand what the words meant. He'd shut the book and then felt a hand on

his shoulder.

"It's a rough world, Adam. I don't want you getting killed because your nose is buried in a book, that's all." All sharpness was gone from his tone. Bates might have asked Adam what was on his mind, but he knew the answer, and Adam had made it a habit of avoiding talking about his family. So he'd let the matter fall into silence and changed the subject.

"Just make sure you're aware of your surroundings. All the time." He had said.

It was a habit now to glance back and forth casually under the brim of his black hat as he walked now, that and to strain his ears to listen behind him as his eyes flickered in front. Another habit brought him in front of the sheriff's office and forced him to stop and glance at the wanted posters. After studying the pictures, he continued to walk. Maybe once he owned the Ponderosa again he could leave that life behind.

The sound of cheering caught his attention, and he followed the noise down another street to where a large crowd was gathered. A temporary corral was set up, and inside it a young cowboy was trying to ride a dappled horse. The horse was having none of it though, and after a few scornful bucks, the boy landed in the dust. The crowd cheered again as the cowboy got to his feet.

"What's going on here?" Adam asked as several men moved to catch the horse.

"Brand Taggart always likes to bring in some of his young stock and let the local boys try their hands at 'em." One of the crowd members answered. "It saves him from having to hire anyone to break 'em, and it's good entertainment for the rest of us."

"And what do the boys get? I mean besides bumps and bruises?" Adam asked dryly.

"Bragging rights. To be young again, hey?" the man clapped Adam on the shoulder, and Adam stared at the man who couldn't be younger than forty. He didn't look that old, did he?

"Do we have any other takers?" A man, presumably Brand Taggart, called out to the crowd. "This old knucklehead has already had four riders; he can't have much more fight in him."

Adam was tempted, but he was beat by a voice from the front of the crowd.

"I'll show you how it's done."

Adam could only see the back of his head as he climbed over the fence, but he had to grin at the young man's cocky gait.

"This should be interesting." He hooked his thumbs in his gun belt and rocked back on his heels as he watched the boy climb up onto the rail and down onto the dapple. He settled into the saddle and nodded to Taggart.

As Taggart pulled the gate open, the dapple sprang forward with all four feet in the air. The young man moved with the horse as easily as if they were one creature. Adam frowned as he caught sight of his face; there was something vaguely familiar about him, but he couldn't place it. Then the horse spun, and the moment of familiarity was gone.

As the horse bucked and wheeled, the rider moved on top like a flame on a candle, always upright, never off balance no matter which way the candle was turned. It was almost like watching a dance, Adam decided. Finally the horse had enough. He threw in one last buck, more as a protest than in an attempt to get the rider off, and then stood still, breathing heavily. The rider leapt lightly to the ground as the crowd broke into applause. Adam joined them.

"Not bad." He admitted. Then he turned and went back to his

exploration of the town.

“Not bad riding, Joe. Not bad at all.” A hand slapped Joe on the shoulder.

“Yeah, where’d you learn to ride like that anyway?”

“I taught myself.” Joe grinned cockily up at Carl Finch, the one who had taught him everything he knew about horse breaking.

“Keep that up and you’ll be buying your own beer.” Carl gave him a push.

“Leave, the kid alone, Carl.” Carl’s younger brother Jesse said. “Besides, we don’t have time. Pa wants us back with that paint so we can finish fixing the back porch before supper.”

“Don’t know why I got stuck with that job.” Carl muttered. “It wasn’t even me that broke the railing.” He glared at Joe.

“Well it wasn’t me.” Joe said innocently. Then he ducked Carl’s fist.

“Come on, I just whipped that fire snorting beast. That deserves a drink.” He said.

“He’d already had four riders.”

“Four riders that didn’t amount to anything.” Now it was Jesse – one of the four riders – who took a swing at him. “Alright!” Joe raised his hands in defeat. “We’ll get the supplies and get back. Your Pa probably thinks you’ve been bushwhacked by now anyway.” Even as he said it, Joe knew it wasn’t likely. Gabriel Finch rarely paid much attention to his sons’ comings and goings as long as they kept any trouble they’d gotten into – like flying through a porch railing, for example – away from

his attention. It was an arrangement Joe, along with all three of the Finch boys, were more than comfortable with. But they also knew what would happen if they did manage to draw Mr. Finch's attention because of something unpleasant.

"Yeah, we've been gone all afternoon." Jesse led the way back to the wagon, and Joe jumped onto the back while Carl and his brother climbed up front. He settled himself against a sack of grain and braced himself for the lurching of the wagon.

"Hey boys! Hold up a minute!" Taggart waved a hand in the air.

"What does he want?" Jesse muttered.

"He'll probably offer our young bronc rider here a job. Again." Carl said. Joe rolled his eyes. He didn't doubt it.

"Mr. Taggart?" Joe stood in the wagon.

"That was some good riding today." Taggart paused to catch his breath. "When are you gonna put that riding to use and come work for me?"

Joe glanced at Carl in time to catch an 'I told you so' look.

"Sorry, Mr. Taggart. I already gave you my answer." He nearly fell forward onto the man as Jesse flicked the reins at the horses and they started moving. He recovered in time to wave. "See you in church."

"Since when do you go to church?" Jesse laughed.

"Since when is it smart to start a wagon moving when someone's standing on the end of it?" Joe snapped. But he was grateful. It wasn't that he didn't like Taggart; he just couldn't work for him. It didn't matter that the man was sober on Sunday; he was always drunk on Saturday, which made Joe shy away from him. He'd had enough of drunks to last him a lifetime.

Jesse pulled the wagon up in front of a spacious two story

house, and Joe jumped down and reached for the paint. The sound of a hammer could be heard from the other side of the house.

"How's it coming?" Joe asked as he rounded the corner. The young man nailing the railing together paused.

"Almost done. You got the paint?"

Joe raised the paint bucket.

"About time."

"Taggart had some of his colts in town." Joe leaned against a piece of intact railing.

"He would."

"You drew the short straw." Joe couldn't keep a gloat out of his voice. Tom wouldn't have been able to ride the dapple anyway. While he liked to pretend he was just as good of a rider, Joe knew he couldn't hold a candle to him.

Tom shot him a glare through his light blue eyes that always made Joe think of ice. "Next time you can stay here and fix the porch rail. You were the one who broke it."

"You were the one who pushed me." Joe reminded him.

"You hit me first."

"You swung at me first. Just because you missed doesn't mean you didn't start it."

"I missed on purpose." Tom stepped back after he finished pounding in the last nail. "I'm done my part. Now you can paint it."

"I have two brushes." Joe tossed him one and went to work with the other. For a while the only sounds were the distant sounds of horses from the barn and Tom's mother inside, singing as

she made supper.

"Did Taggart try to get you to work for him again?" Tom asked finally.

"Yes."

"And?"

"I told him no."

"I still don't know why. He pays well, and it's not like you owe us that much loyalty. All we did was give you a job."

Joe didn't answer. He could still feel the empty ache in his stomach that he'd felt the day he'd walked into town two years ago. It had been an ache from hunger and from hopelessness. No one wanted to hire a kid to do a man's job.

"There's always an opportunity at the mines." One rancher had told him.

"Thanks." Joe had said it with no intention of following up on the lead. He couldn't go back to mining work. He'd rather starve. And it had looked like there was a good chance of that when he'd walked into Jacksonville. He owed the Finches more than they realized and more than he'd ever let on.

"Guess I'll be heading over to the bunk house." Joe said when they'd finished painting.

"You're not eating here?" Tom asked.

"No." The memories had left him moody, and he didn't want to be around people tonight, especially not the Finches. There were times when he was with them that he felt like part of the family, and they had always tried to make him feel that way ever since Mrs. Finch had decided he was a growing boy that needed a little extra care, but he knew that tonight he'd just feel like an outsider trying to fit where he didn't belong and

it would only put him in a worse mood. He put the paint in the barn and then, instead of joining the rest of the hands for supper, he saddled up a horse and rode away from the Finch's.

~*~

Adam had missed his chance to get Tom Finch that day because he'd arrived in the town so late in the afternoon. Most people would attempt what he was planning on doing at night so that they would have a head start, but Adam didn't see it that way. If he took Finch in the late afternoon, he'd have several hours head start because no one would start looking for Finch until evening, and then they wouldn't be able to follow any trail he left after dark. That meant a day of waiting around in his hotel room though since he didn't want to draw attention to himself. He'd dozed a bit when he'd first gotten into his room, but then after eating the supper he'd had brought up, he went out and across to the saloon. He had to poke his head out long enough to learn where to find Finch.

The saloon drew him like a fish to bait. If there was one place to get information, it was there behind the swinging doors amidst the sounds of men's laughter and glasses clinking on the smooth wooden bar. Adam walked up to the doors but paused before pushing through. Something had caught the attention of his ears. He stepped back away from the noise streaming from inside and listened. A feminine voice was crying out. Adam spun and swiftly rounded the corner of the saloon into the alley.

"Stop it! Please!" a saloon girl was pressed up against the wall while a cowboy, clearly drunk, blocked her attempts to slide away. His one hand was locked onto her pale white arm.

Adam grabbed his shoulder and sent a fist into his face. The cowboy went down and then was up in an instant.

"What do you think you're doing?" he spat. "Mind your own business."

"You don't treat women like that." Adam said. He punched the man in the stomach.

"You... can't..." the cowboy gasped for breath as he tried to finish his sentence.

"Thank you." The girl smoothed down her silky dress with a slight rustling sound.

"It was my pleasure." Adam offered his arm, and she took it. The sound of a click triggered him into action, and he shoved the girl aside and drew his gun as he spun around. He ducked as he shot and the cowboy dropped his gun, clutching his arm.

"That wasn't very smart." Adam muttered.

"What's going on?" the gunshot had drawn several people, one of whom was wearing a tin badge. Adam grimaced and was glad he'd shot to wound. It had taken a slight flick to the side with his gun right before he'd shot, as habit had pointed the barrel at the man's heart.

"This man was just helping me." The saloon girl said to the sheriff.

The sheriff studied Adam and then nodded. "Alright, light a shuck."

Adam took the girl's arm again and walked past without a word. Sheriffs had always seemed a little hypocritical to him. They always looked at him with eyes rimmed with loathing whenever he'd turn in a body or a prisoner to get the money, as if he was some animal that enjoyed profiteering off another person. Except for the ones who had been hunters themselves in their younger days. Then it was a nod, and a silent acknowledgment of an ugly but necessary job that gave you nightmares instead of thanks.

"Drink's on the house." The girl pulled him out of his thoughts as she sat him down inside the saloon.

"I thought I was supposed to buy you the drink."

"You can buy the next one." She set down a bottle of whiskey in front of them, and Adam poured two shots.

"So who was that fellow?"

"Just one of the Finch boys."

"Finch?" Adam pretended nonchalance.

"The oldest one."

"How many are there?"

"Three. Carl, Jesse, and Tom."

So Tom's the youngest. Adam noted.

"The boys can get a little wild sometimes. They think they're something with their Pa owning nearly all the lumber rights within three days ride." She shrugged. "Carl in particular likes to act like he's paying girls a favor by letting them talk to him."

"Do they live in town?" Adam asked.

"About ten miles north in more like a castle than a house. Why?"

"I'm in the lumber business and I thought I'd drop in." Adam said. He downed his shot and dropped a coin on the table. Now that he had his information, there was no point in sticking around.

"I told you, it's on the house."

"It's alright." Adam put his hat on and stepped outside.

It was twilight, not too much longer and it would be completely dark, which meant most people would be inside, and his chance of catching a glimpse of Tom Finch was gone. But

that didn't mean he couldn't go have a look around. He went over to the livery stable and hitched up the horses to the wagon himself instead of saddling his riding horse. He didn't want to miss an opportunity just because he didn't have the wagon with him. He left the wagon hidden in the trees by the road and crept up to the house.

There were a few lights on, and Adam slid along the outside wall to one of the lighted windows. The dark covered him like a cloak, and his ears were straining to catch the sound of anyone approaching. His hand settled onto his gun, and his fingers casually looped around the handle in a relaxed but watchful position. He listened outside the window, but no sounds came out. Adam carefully raised his eyes and peered in. He was looking at an empty hallway. He moved on to the next window. Before he even stopped, he could hear voices coming from inside, like the murmurings of a creek. He pressed his face closer and listened. He could just make out a deep voice, but he couldn't catch any words. He hesitated, trying to decide if he should risk a look. Then he slowly brought his head up and just as slowly brought it back down. No sudden movements here.

There had been three men sitting by the fireplace, all with the same fair hair that Carl Finch had, only one had some streaks of grey through it. The other two looked younger than Carl. A father and his two sons. Adam closed his eyes, suddenly overwhelmed by treacherous jealousy that stabbed him like a knife and made him catch his breath. It hadn't been so long ago that he could have been in that scene with his father telling him about the plans for the next day and with his little brother playing with a pup that had followed him home. His mother would be in the rocking chair he and Pa had made for her last Christmas, and she would be holding a little one who couldn't keep his eyes open, but he was trying anyway because he didn't want to have to go to bed quite yet. He inhaled and could almost smell the smoke from the fireplace

then, like smoke, he let the image disappear. He took one last peek inside and studied the face of the youngest son then he crept away from the house and vanished into the night.

~*~

“Who was that, Vicki?” Joe slid into a seat beside his favorite saloon girl in time to see her watch another man leave. Joe couldn’t see his face, but something in the way he carried himself made Joe curious. He walked as if he had some veiled strength that only needed the right trigger to break loose.

“Some man who bought me a drink.” She indicated the mostly full bottle.

“And he walked away from someone like you after the first shot?” Joe grinned and scooted closer.

“He was asking about the Finch’s; I guess he had business there. Weren’t you in town earlier, Joe? What’d you come back for?”

“Maybe I came back to see you.”

“Hmm.” She poured a shot, and Joe gladly swallowed it, welcoming the distracting tingling that began in his chest and worked its way through his body until it settled in his toes and fingers. Vicki put the bottle down, and Joe winced at the wooden clink.

Bottles slamming against wood. Then bottles shattered against bottles in a high pitched ringing that twisted his stomach. Broken glass littered the floor. If there was one thing he liked better than emptying a bottle of whiskey it was smashing it once the liquor was gone, usually by throwing it against the wall while raging at Joe. Joe had learned how to duck before he’d learned his letters and numbers. He’d also learned to read the levels of drunkenness and to know when to ignore,

when to hide, and when to talk back. It was something she'd never learned, even though she was married to him. Instead she'd scream while he would swear and holler back and break more bottles. She would swear too, only in Spanish instead of English.

"Two dollars? Two dollars to get us through the rest of the month? Culo!" she spit. "How am I supposed to feed myself and the boy?"

Another bottle splintered to pieces. "You're both worthless anyway."

"You're the worthless one! Vete al inferno!"

She shrieked as the back of his hand lazily collided with her face. It had a drunken weight behind it, and it sent her backwards into a chair.

Joe didn't look up. Sometimes if he didn't move they didn't realize he was there. He held his breath and imagined that he was a piece of dust on the floor.

"Joe? Joe?" Vicki sounded concerned, and Joe took a deep breath and one more shot.

"Guess I'll have to leave you too, Vicki." He said.

"Are you alright?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Joe forced a laugh. And why shouldn't he be? They were only ghosts, after all, his father couldn't hurt him now, and his mother couldn't swear or scream anymore; she was dead. There was no reason why he shouldn't be perfectly fine, the memories nothing more than dust in the wind that tickled your nose, made you sneeze, and then was gone, blown away by a much stronger force.

Though if that was the case, why was he getting back on his horse and riding away instead of staying in the bar with

Vicki? Joe slowed his horse to a walk, in no hurry at all to get back to the Finch's. The hands would have turned in by now, and he would have no choice but to do the same and then lie staring at the ceiling and counting his breaths in the darkness as black silence loomed amidst the stillness. On most nights it didn't bother him, and even when it did, he was usually able to ignore it, but it had been a day for unwanted memories, and he knew he couldn't face the darkness of the bunkhouse tonight.

"What's the matter, kid? Afraid of the dark?" One of the hands had yelled when he'd bolted from the bunk house his first night there and they'd turned out the lights.

"No." Joe had snapped. The hands all picked on each other, and he wasn't interested in his phobia becoming the butt of someone's joke.

The other hand had eyed him for a minute, but thankfully he just grunted and went back inside. Joe didn't follow him. The winking stars and the crisp night air had helped to clear his head, but he hadn't been able to bring his wobbly knees to propel himself back into the darkness of the bunkhouse, darkness that had nearly suffocated him a few moments ago.

I guess I forgot what it's like to sleep inside. He thought. It had been either barns or the side of the road for so long, ever since he'd walked away from his so called home. He hadn't looked back, but apparently he hadn't been able to leave it completely behind either.

Joe sat propped up against a hay bale in the barn after untacking his horse. Better to just stay out here than to go into the bunkhouse and be attacked by blind darkness that echoed memories.

"Two hours." The man at the forge said.

Adam narrowed his eyes. "It's just a shoe."

"And apparently it's the day for thrown shoes. You're fifth in a long line." The blacksmith crossed his arms over his chest in a gesture that Adam recognized as unmoving. He rubbed his forehead.

"Fine. I'll be back in two hours. And it had better be done."

"It'll be done when it gets done." The blacksmith said.

Adam chose not to answer and walked away. If he was going to wait around, it was going to be where it was cool. As he crossed the street, a loud thump made him glance over to where a large man was loading supplies from the mercantile. He paused as something about the man caught in his mind. Something about the shoulders, or the way he carried himself reminded him of someone. Adam debated waiting to see if he could catch a glimpse of his face but then he shrugged it off. It was just a mountain man; he'd seen hundreds of those in his life. Just one more to add to his list. He entered the saloon and exhaled at the change in temperature that was a result of a simple move out of the glaring sun.

After getting a beer he sat down at a table near the window so he could keep an eye on the wagon and stretched out his legs onto the adjacent chair. He shifted his holster as it snagged on the chair, and for once his fingers noticed the worn down smoothness of the leather. Adam glanced down at it and noted the lightening of the leather, a testimony to its age. He should replace it, but he couldn't bring himself to do so any more than he could replace the gun inside of it. It was a gun he had never tired of practicing on or watching his Pa send bullet after bullet into glass jars with.

"When do I get my own gun?" He had asked while watching his father clean it one night.

"Me too!" the seven year olds voice was eager as Hoss tugged

at his Pa's leg.

"Why do you want a gun, Hoss?" Ben asked, his voice warm with a fatherly smile.

"I want to be like you, Pa."

Ben had looked at Adam and exchanged a grin. Then his face melted into thoughtfulness. "Adam, maybe you should tell Hoss what I told you about guns."

Adam had straightened, feeling the weight of the task settle on his shoulders. "Guns aren't meant to define a person; they're meant as a defense. Being able to kill someone with a simple tool isn't something to be proud of, being able to look someone in the eye and refuse to succumb to violence is." Adam was sure his little brother didn't understand half of those words, but it was part of a much longer speech he'd been the recipient of multiple times. He was sure that by the time Hoss was old enough to learn how to shoot he too would have heard it enough to be able to recite it.

Adam's hand followed the contour of the grip as the other lifted his drink to his lips. The beer was as smooth as the glass as it went down his throat, but it tasted more like horse sweat than a drink. He set the beer down and remembered another speech about guns, not three years after the first.

"Having a gun is pointless if you're not faster than the other man." Bates had demonstrated his own proficiency to Adam earlier. Adam had watched quizzically, slightly amused by the image of a man in a business suit shooting like a gunslinger.

"No one wants to kill anyone, just like no one wants to die. But sometimes things happen, and you have to be ready for it. Survival, my boy, that's the key."

"So another human's life isn't as important as my life?" It had been back when Adam still challenged Bates on certain

things.

“Is it to you?” Bates had demanded. “If someone came in here with a gun and said he was going to kill one of us, and you could choose which one, wouldn’t you save yourself?”

“I...” Adam would have liked to say no, but he honestly didn’t know the answer.

“Of course you would. Why else did you pull the trigger on Singer? Man will always reach for their own survival first and worry about others second. It’s why you have to be careful when you have a man trapped in a corner.”

The subject had shifted, but part of Adam’s mind had remained stuck in the previous topic, and if he was honest with himself, it still was. The conflicting images swirled in his mind even as he swirled the beer around in its glass. A familiar ache rose inside him like when a beggar who had forgotten his hunger catches the scent of bread. It was a longing for the familiar voice that had once shaped his attitudes and beliefs to echo in his ear once more and for the familiar hands, strong and capable, to grip his shoulder in a reassuring gesture. He wished he could have an hour with his Pa, just one more hour where he could inhale his scent once more and ask him if there was any way to move on. Maybe he could even receive some sort of justification.

But he couldn’t ask him, not in this life, and probably not even in the next. If his Pa was looking down on him from heaven, Adam doubted he’d ever get the chance to tell him what he thought of his son’s choices because he was certain the pearl gates were closed against him and locked tight. He took a drink, not sure if he was trying to wash away memories of the life he used to have or thoughts of the one he had now.

“Hey there, Hal. Got a drink for me?”

Adam glanced up as the man he’d seen from outside entered the

saloon. Once again, he was struck by a niggling memory of someone, though for the life of him, he couldn't figure out who it was. But now that he could see the man's face, he caught another glimpse of a memory, something in the roundness of it, maybe in the nose. Adam frowned. It was like an itch in the middle of his back that he couldn't quite reach or like trying to remember a dream. The harder you tried, the quicker it disappeared.

"Sure thing. Haven't seen you in a while." Hal slid the man a beer, and the man took a long swig and smacked his lips appreciatively. Adam wondered if the bartender had given him a different type of beer than the one he was drinking.

"Just stopped in for some supplies before heading back up north." The man took another drink, and Adam tried another sip of his own beer. He grimaced. Maybe the bartender had accidentally given him dishwater.

"Well, better be on my way; I just came in for something to cool me off."

"It sure is a hot one. We'll see you around, Hoss."

Adam nearly fell out of his chair. Hoss? It was a common word around mountain men, but that man... suddenly he realized who the man reminded him of. Everything about him screamed Cartwright. Adam stood and in a few strides had crossed the saloon and pushed through the swinging doors.

"Excuse me." He frowned, trying to think of what he was going to say if he was wrong. The man turned and Adam found himself drowned inside a pair of deep blue eyes. They were eyes that had stared up at him unblinking during the first hour of their life, eyes that had filled with tears when Adam had lost his temper, and eyes that had lit up when he'd apologized and offered to take him fishing. They were eyes that he would recognize anywhere. He wasn't wrong.

Adam stuck out his hand. "Adam Cartwright."

Hoss stared at him for what seemed like years. Then he blinked.

"Adam?"

Adam nodded. For a moment the two men studied each other with eyes agape, then Adam felt Hoss grab his arm and pull him towards him. He exhaled, amazed at how solid this man was, who a few moments ago had been only a shadow and a memory.

"I can't believe I have to look up at you." He said as he straightened.

Hoss unconsciously drew himself up. "Where have you been, Adam? I thought you were dead."

Adam blinked at the simple statement and for a second he couldn't get his mind past it. "What? Why?"

"The men you met up with in San Francisco said you'd been killed by the man who killed Pa."

"What men?" Even as he spoke, Adam knew the answer. Questions that he didn't know had existed but that had been hovering in the back of his mind came forward and received answers as quickly as they appeared.

"Bates." He hissed. The name carried the poison of a serpent. In the time it had took for Adam to eat dinner, he must have sent some of his men back to the ranch. "They burnt the house."

As Hoss studied Adam, his mind struggled to reconcile the hazy memory of his tall older brother to the man in front of him who was smaller than he was.

"Who's Bates?" he asked.

Adam didn't answer. He'd killed dozens of men over the course

of his life, but he'd never wanted to kill someone as much as Bates right now. He closed his eyes against the volcano of wrath that was erupting inside him. The emotions were too powerful to water down by putting them to words, so he didn't speak. Instead he saw in his mind Bates dying, over and over, bullets ripping into him, shot from Adam's own gun, a thousand times in a split second.

Hoss put a hand on his brother's arm. "Adam?"

Adam took a deep breath, and the volcano simmered down to a steady boil. "If I had known then..."

"Known what?"

Adam shook his head. He would deal with Bates later. First he had to get back what the man had stolen from him.

"Where's Joe?" he asked.

A cloud shifted over Hoss's face. "He died in the fire."

Adam closed his eyes as the hope that had risen for a brief moment collapsed again. Then he opened them again. He still had things to be grateful for, and the biggest one was standing right in front of him.

"I'll take care of Bates later. Do you want to get a drink? Maybe you can convince the bartender to give us the good beer."

Hoss's face burst into a familiar grin that had always made Adam think of the sun breaking free of clouds. He clapped his brother on the shoulder in a way that painfully reminded Adam of Pa and then led the way back into the saloon. They got their drinks and sat down in silence. Both were unable to take their eyes off each other as they mentally compared the past to the present. Adam took a drink and couldn't help but notice that the beer hadn't improved in the two minutes that he'd been outside. He put his mug down and leaned back in his seat.

Where to start? For some reason he didn't want to cloud the moment with the darkness of the past. It was enough to sit next to his brother, drinking poor quality beer in a hot saloon.

"What happened in San Francisco?" Hoss asked. There was an unspoken question behind the words that made Adam wince. Why didn't you come back?

"I found the man that murdered Pa and Ma. Then I came back, but I was too late." Adam surmised what was arguably the most life-changing few days in his existence in two sentences. Then he resisted the urge to take another drink as he cast about in his mind for some way to change the topic. "I'm sorry." He finally said. "I thought you had been inside with Joe."

"Anyone would assume that."

"What happened?" He didn't want to know, but he had to. It was like the first time he'd seen a dead man when he was seven. You don't want to look, but something inside you can't turn away.

"I was woken up by a man who said he met you in San Francisco. The house was on fire, and he pulled me out. I told him to go back for Joe, but he said it was too late." Hoss's eyes were dark and vacant as if he was seeing it in his head as he explained. Adam knew the look and put a hand on his arm, gently drawing him back to the present. "He said you said to take me to San Francisco."

Adam bit back the question of why Hoss had believed him. He'd been nine, a trusting child who should have been protected by his older brother. Adam took a deep breath. At the time Hoss had been kidnapped and Joe had died he had been eating steak in a hotel in San Francisco. "So how'd you end up here?" he asked in an attempt to clear his mind of the heavy guilt that had settled onto it.

"This is just a stop I make every few months. I actually live farther north in the mountains. I've lived there ever since I was found by a mountain man after we were attacked by Indians on the way to San Francisco."

Adam wondered what would have happened if they hadn't been attacked. If Bates' man had wanted to kill Hoss, he could have just as easily done it before burning the house.

"You don't remember anything about the man?"

"He was tall, but then again, everyone seems tall when you're a little fella." Hoss closed his eyes and tried to see clearly the murky image that was reflected on his mind. Then he shook his head. "Sorry, Adam."

Adam shrugged. "I don't know why I wanted to know. It doesn't make a difference."

Silence settled in, a long comfortable one in which Hoss drank his beer and Adam ignored his. Then Hoss spoke.

"What brings you here?"

Adam hesitated and then uncharacteristically decided to throw caution to the wind.

"Kidnapping, actually."

"Somebody kidnapped a friend of yours?"

"Nope." Adam shook his head, amused at Hoss's puzzled expression. He glanced around but the bartender was distracted by a newspaper and no one else was inside the bar. "I've got a kid in the trunk in that wagon over there. I'm taking him to San Francisco."

Hoss stared at Adam as if he'd grown a second head. Adam couldn't blame him. After all, kidnapping didn't exactly fit the image his little brother probably remembered of him.

"Why?" Hoss finally asked.

"Somebody's got your big brother by the nose, Hoss. The kid needs to pay money that he owes to a... an acquaintance of mine. I'm just making sure he pays. In return I get the Ponderosa."

"The Ponderosa?"

Adam could see that he was only making Hoss more confused rather than explaining anything. He nodded. "You got it." He raised his glass in a bitter toast and took a gulp. To Bates. He thought. May he rot in hell for making me look like a hard hearted criminal to my little brother.

"How did this friend of yours get the Ponderosa?"

"Acquaintance." Adam corrected, holding up a finger. "Clever lawyering and money will get a man a lot, especially when the government is eager to get rid of land that's not being worked."

Hoss shook his head. "Well if he's got you by the nose, maybe it's time someone did something to his nose." His fists automatically clenched, and the gesture somehow made Adam feel warm, like he'd just fallen into a hot spring after a cold rain. He grinned at Hoss, a movement that his mouth was a little rusty with, relieved that for once he actually had an ally.

"Maybe we both will, but later. If I learned one thing, it's that going up against Bates requires tact. You have to play by his rules sometimes."

"But the boy..." Hoss gestured toward the wagon.

"Like I said, he does legally owe Bates the money, and his family can pay up without blinking an eye. I wouldn't do this if I thought he would come to any harm."

Hoss eyed him for a minute. "San Francisco then? It's a bit of

a ride.”

“Yep.” Adam’s heart rose as he thought he caught on to what Hoss was hinting at. His brother’s next words confirmed it.

“Care for a little company?”

Another grin. Could it be possible that this was going to be a habit? Adam clapped his brother on the shoulder and took another drink, not even noticing the bland taste. He felt as if a weight on his shoulders had been blown away by sudden breeze.

“I’d like that a lot, Hoss.”

The wind from the motion of his horse whipped against Joe’s face like rain as he resisted the urge to spur the animal on faster. He knew that he potentially had a long way to go, but he couldn’t ignore the sense of urgency that was nipping at his heels. Still it was nine miles to Gasburg, and then three more miles to Wagner Creek, too far to go the whole way at a dead gallop if he didn’t want to have to rest before going on to Ashland. Joe let his horse slip down into a ground covering lope.

He didn’t believe Mr. Finch’s thought that Tom was off gallivanting with a girl. Why would he tie his own horse on the side of the road? But he couldn’t for the life of him imagine what sort of trouble he’d gotten himself into. All he knew was that he was going to get him out of it. He owed Tom that much.

Tom had earned his loyalty from the first day they’d met him. Not his trust – that was something he still hadn’t given away, even to Tom, but a certain amount of allegiance was owed to him after Joe had nearly gotten himself killed in a fistfight

that had turned nasty when his opponent had pulled out a knife. A faint grin flickered on the corners of Joe's mouth as he remembered the perplexed look on the young man's face when Tom had knocked him from behind. He'd had just enough time to realize what had happened before he hit the dirt, out cold.

"What do you think you're doing?" Joe had snapped.

"Saving your hide. You can thank me later." Tom brushed imaginary dust from his sleeves and nonchalantly stepped over the unconscious man's body.

"How about I thank you now?" Joe said. He balled his fist and sent it flying into Tom's arrogant smirk. Only his punch never landed. Instead Tom ducked and Joe felt a sharp pain as a fist slammed into his stomach, but he managed to refrain from doubling over.

"You're gonna have to do better than that." He said. He'd been hit harder. Much harder.

"How's this?" Another fist, but this time it was Joe who ducked and hit back. Hard. He followed up with another punch that once again missed its mark, but he managed to duck the retaliating strike. For a moment the two circled like strange cats, then Joe lunged at his opponent.

The next thing he knew was a flurry of fists and kicks as they rolled back and forth in the street. Joe's head snapped sideways from a blow, and for a moment all he saw was black spots. He blinked and struck out wildly until his vision returned. Tom's face was in front of his, and Joe snapped out a punch.

"Get out of the way!" someone hollered. Joe and Tom looked up in time to see a stage rolling toward them. They separated and leaped sideways as the stage rattled past. Joe rubbed his face, wincing as he encountered swollen spots. He glanced over at his opponent, and they both sat for a moment, panting and

covered with dust. Tom held out his hand.

"Tom Finch."

"Joe Greyer."

"New in town?"

"What makes you say that?"

"You just picked two consecutive fights with two of the best fighters in Jacksonville."

"I didn't provoke the first, but who's the second?" Joe asked. Rather than being insulted, Tom had laughed.

"Come on, let me buy you a beer."

Joe eyed him incredulously and wondered just who this kid was who walked into the saloon like he owned it and who, when he slapped down his hand on the shingly polished counter, was awarded two drinks like he was actually old enough to consume them. Tom lifted the mug to his lips and drank deeply, and Joe followed suit, though in a more hesitant fashion. The richly sweet smell of the alcohol filled his nostrils and turned his gut, but he managed to get it swallow it with a grimace and keep it from coming back up out of his offended stomach. He put down the mug and hoped Tom wouldn't notice if he didn't drink anymore. He didn't think he could handle another sip.

It was the smell that got him. You'd think he'd be used to it; the shack had always reeked of it, but every time he walked inside, it had greeted him with a sinister embrace, reminding him of its powerful grip on the place and the people inside it. His back and shoulders had ached from a day of hauling rocks at the mine, and the dirt had that clung to his sweaty body felt like a second skin that had grown too tight. A wheezy snoring covered the squeaky protest of the hinges as he shut the door and then walked to the back room without stopping to hunt around the dingy kitchen for any food that

might have managed to hide in sparse cupboards. His Pa was asleep, which meant he had time to get in his own room and lay low. He'd been sleeping more and more after his Ma had died. Joe wouldn't have pegged the man on being sentimental, but he figured he missed the extra income and the occasional home cooked meal. With any luck he would sleep through the night and leave Joe alone.

"So where are you from?" Tom asked.

Joe didn't answer right away as dozens of images flitted through his mind like summer moths. A dried up mine, a shabby cabin on the edge of Durham, and a hundred other towns that had turned him away. They all seemed to mingle into one, like paint colors mixing into a brown haze. He gripped the edge of the bar and wondered if the room was swaying back and forth or if he was. And what was that buzzing noise?

"Are you alright?" Tom asked.

Joe closed his eyes, but the swinging sensation only turned to spinning. He couldn't feel the bar beneath his hands anymore or the floor beneath his feet. The buzzing grew louder until it filled up his ears like cotton. Then he couldn't hear anything at all.

Even now, sitting in his saddle while riding down the road, Joe could still remember how soft the bed he'd woken up in was. He'd thought for a minute he was in a cloud, which must have meant he'd died. Only he couldn't be in heaven because while his body felt like it was made of sand that could easily be blown away, his head felt like an anvil complete with a hammer pounding down on it. He'd grimaced and wished he could go back to sleep.

"You should know better than to drink on an empty stomach."

Joe opened his eyes at the familiar voice. There was Tom, and by his side was a woman with lips painted bright red to match

her satin dress. Joe blinked.

"Where am I?"

"Upstairs in the saloon." Tom answered. "I didn't want to take you to a doctor just in case you were a wanted man or something. Are you?" he leaned forward, and the commanding air that had enveloped him was gone, replaced by boyish eagerness. Joe shook his head.

"Sorry to disappoint you."

To this day, Joe still couldn't figure out how he'd ended up in front of Gabriel Finch feeling like a new toy that Tom had brought home to his father, asking if he could keep it. His head had still been fuzzy, and he'd nearly hit the floor again before Mr. Finch had grunted at his son, which, according to Tom, meant he had a job. Joe figured it didn't matter how it happened, the important thing was that he'd been given a chance, and it was a chance he'd known better than to waste. Now it looked like it was payback time. Joe tied his horse outside the familiar Gasburg saloon. Despite his pressing errand, he couldn't help but wink at Dolly, the pretty blonde he'd talked to last time he'd been here. She gave him a twinkling grin and raised an eyebrow questioningly, but Joe shook his head. He was here on business.

"Doug." Joe leaned against the bar.

The bartender studied him. "You're that young man that works for the Finches." He finally said.

Joe nodded. "I'm looking for someone."

"One of the boys?"

"No. A man in black. Dark hair. Carries himself like a gunfighter almost."

"Nobody like that's been in here."

Joe sighed. "Thanks." He turned to leave.

"Going so soon?" Dolly slid up beside him.

"Sorry, Doll. Maybe next time."

"I'll hold you to it." She kissed her fingertips and pressed them into Joe's cheek. He flashed her a quick grin which faded into a frown as he mounted his horse and squeezed his heels into the animal's sides.

~*~

The wagon wheeled on in silence, jolting occasionally from a dip in the road, but otherwise running smoothly on the dirt track that wove in and out of the pine trees. Hoss glanced at the man driving who was his brother, once again caught between past and present. Resolute, capable hands, held the reins in a relaxed grip, hands that he remembered sliding his own into when he'd needed a little extra reassurance. His eyes gazed ahead distractedly, as if he was staring down the road of his thoughts rather than the dirt one of Oregon. As Hoss studied the look, he remembered it, the one he had just been learning meant to leave his big brother alone when the shooting had happened. Forgotten memories of being snapped at or answered absentmindedly kept him from talking now. He didn't mind though. They had talked for hours, and now they were resting in an amiable silence that Hoss didn't want to break.

"So have you been down to this part of the country before?" Adam had asked him after they'd driven a distance from Ashland.

"Not really. I do know there's a couple of line shacks farther down the road. We can stop at one for the night."

Adam had fallen into thoughtful silence before nodding. "There shouldn't be anyone following us."

"Just how did you get involved with this 'acquaintance' of

yours anyway?" Hoss asked.

Adam had let out a bitter laugh. "It's a long story."

"Well, the way I figure it, we've got a long ride ahead of us."

Adam had been silent for so long that Hoss didn't think he was going to talk at all. Then he'd begun his story, in the slow, deep voice that made Hoss think of midnight talks when he'd had a bad dream and crawled into his brother's bed. Only this time his voice had carried a tone of sorrow rather than reassurance.

"It's not your fault you know." Hoss had said at the end.

Adam hadn't answered, which let Hoss know that he didn't agree and wasn't going to change his mind.

"Like as not you'd have fallen off your horse from exhaustion if you hadn't gotten some food in you. Anyhow, how were you supposed to know he was a lying weasel?"

"I suppose." Adam hadn't sounded very convincing, but it was a start. As they drove, Hoss reflected on his story once more. It made him wince that he'd been so willing to fall into Bates' plan, nine years old or not. He should have known better.

He remembered pulling away from the strange man's rough grip and digging in his heels. "Where are we going?" he had demanded.

"Adam told me to take you to San Francisco before he died. There's a man there that will take care of you."

The night had been cold, and Hoss shivered in his nightshirt. His boots felt alien and uncomfortable on his feet since he didn't have any socks on, and he didn't want to go anywhere. If Adam said so, he would have to, but Adam had also said for

Hoss take care of his little brother. He crossed his arms and tried to look intimidating. "What about Joe?"

The man took a deep breath and swept his arm back at the house. Through the windows, Hoss could see the red glow of the fire that had nearly eaten him alive. His voice was still raw from the smoke he'd inhaled.

"In there. It's too late, kid."

"Too late for what?"

"He's dead, ok?" the man had snapped and then grabbed Hoss's arm again. "Now let's go."

Suddenly the wind was gone, and the pinching from his boots disappeared as well. Hoss felt numb as he let himself be dragged along to a waiting horse. Joe was dead. Adam was dead. Ma and Pa were dead. He tried to remember what Adam had explained to him about death.

"It means they've gone away, Hoss, and that they can't come back. Like that pup we had last year, remember?" Adam's voice had been shaky as he knelt down in front of his little brother.

"Why did they go?" Hoss didn't know why, but he'd felt small and scared all of a sudden. "Was it because I didn't fill the wood box like Pa asked?"

"No." Adam's fingers had gripped Hoss's arm. "God just wanted them to be with him in heaven."

"But I want them to be here." Hoss's blue eyes had searched Adam's brown ones as if his brother had the key to bringing back his parents.

"I know, buddy. I know."

Now Hoss was faced with more people leaving him. Maybe that's

where this stranger was taking him – to the place where everybody had gone. Maybe he was dead too and when they got to San Francisco, his family would be there. Maybe that was where heaven was. Hoss gripped the saddle horn.

“How will Joe get there?” he asked.

“What?”

“Joe. How will he get there?”

“Your brother won’t be there, kid. I told you, he’s dead.”

Hoss frowned. Maybe Joe would come later. He would have to ask Adam when he saw him again. If they couldn’t come back, maybe they could send this man again to get Joe. He wanted to ask the man if he was dead as well, but he felt irritation rolling off of him in waves and decided it would be better to wait and talk to his brother when they were in heaven together.

Hoss exhaled as he remembered the calm assurance he’d had that he would see his brother in San Francisco. Somewhere along the line that assurance had died out, and with the understanding of what death really was came the resignation that he was alone in the world. Until now. For once he was grateful for the perpetual aloneness of his life because he’d been able to drop everything to accompany his newfound brother on this crazy quest. Hoss glanced back at the trunk nestled behind the wagon seat.

“Are we gonna let him out when we stop for the night?” he asked, changing his focus from the past to the matter at hand.

Adam shrugged. “I guess it couldn’t hurt.”

Ashton was larger than Jacksonville, but it lacked the certain

hominess that had almost made Joe feel part of the town even though he still regarded himself as a stranger. He glanced over at the mercantile and unconsciously rubbed his shoulder as he remembered being thrown out of that store the first time he'd passed through Ashton.

"I'm not here to steal anything." Joe had snapped. "Is it a crime to look around?"

"Do you have money?" the burly storekeeper had growled.

"So it's a crime not to have money then." Weeks of walking and sleeping on the ground with almost nothing to eat had left Joe beyond irritable. He'd gone inside to get out of the rain while he planned his next move only to be thrown back out in the freezing October downpour while the storekeeper crossed his arms and glared at him from beneath the shelter of the porch.

"We don't like strangers in this town."

"I kind of think that you just don't like people in general." Joe had expected the fist and had easily stepped aside, but he hadn't hit back. It was pointless; he knew when he was beaten. Instead he'd left the town and had kept moving.

Going farther north with winter coming and no prospects hadn't really the logical thing to do, but he'd done it anyway, if for no other reason than because he could. It made about as much sense as what he was doing now did. After all, the likelihood of the man in black having something to do with Tom's disappearance was about as slim as Joe actually being able to find him. But he still went into the saloon, as much for something to cool him off as for information. The sun was closing in on the horizon, but it still wasn't low enough to cool things down. Joe took his hat off and ran his hand through his matted hair as the bartender poured him a drink.

"Has a tall man all dressed in black come through here?" Joe

asked after taking a long drink.

"Why do you want to know?" the bartender asked.

Joe took that as a yes and resisted the urge to lean forward. He didn't want to look too eager.

"I don't have any money." He said. "I just need to find him."

The bartender eyed him for a minute as he wiped down glass mugs with a soft, white rag.

"He met up with another man, a mountaineer that comes ever few months, and they left in his wagon." He finally said.

Joe frowned. He wasn't so sure about going up against two men without help. "Where's the telegraph office?" he asked.

"Next street over, by the bank."

"Thanks."

"Hey, tell the two youngest Finches that they own me from the last time they were in town and decided it'd be fun to tear the place up."

Joe gave a noncommittal wave as he walked out of the saloon, mildly amused by Tom and Jesse's apparent antics at the same time as he was irritated by them. Despite the fact that they were both older, he often caught himself wondering when they were going to grow up.

After sending a telegram back to the Finches, Joe paused to decide if he should continue on or not. It would be dark soon, but he didn't want to lose the trail. He could see reasonably well in the dark – a tribute to working in the dim light of a mine – and he felt a sudden urge to catch up to this man now that he knew he was on his trail. Joe mounted and rode forward into the twilight. He didn't know what this man wanted with Tom – if he'd been mad at Carl, he would have just taken it

out on him rather than his kid brother – but he wasn't about to leave his friend in the hands of some crazed gunslinger and his mountain man companion. Joe's hands gripped tightly on the reins, and he glared at the road ahead even as it disappeared under the hooves of his mount. He was going to find this man in black and make sure he knew just who he was messing with.

~*~

The first thing Adam had seen when he opened the trunk was a pair of feral eyes glaring up at him. They were blue, but not like Hoss's, whose eyes were like deep water. These eyes were shallow, like a frozen and glassy lake.

"Come on." Adam had hauled him up. He knew there was no way Finch would be able to walk after having spent a day tied up and cramped in the trunk, so he'd half carried, half dragged him into the line shack. He'd driven the wagon to where it would be out of sight of the road and when he'd returned, Hoss had Finch untied and eating. Adam started to say something about the security of the prisoner and then stopped. But Hoss must have caught the look on his face.

"He's gotta eat something, Adam."

Adam tossed his hat onto the rough table. "Is there any left for me?" he asked.

Finch had glared at him as he ate, and Adam had waited to see who could remain silent longer: Finch, smoldering and irate, or himself, cool and indifferent. Finally Finch broke the silence.

"Just wait until my Pa and brothers get their hands on you."

"If they ever do, and that's a big if." Adam had responded. "Though I'm not sure what you're so mad about. Next time just pay your debts if you don't want things to get complicated."

"Next time you should tell Bates to do his dirty work

himself!"

Adam stood. "The man would never get his hands dirty, and it's a moot point because there won't be a next time for me." He let the shutting of the shack door punctuate his statement.

Now he was standing in the crisp night air that had taken a sharp turn for the chilly side of things, wishing for the hundredth time that he'd never gotten mixed up in all of this. He should have just walked away instead of having to babysit a whiny kid. Of course, if he had then he wouldn't have met up with Hoss. Maybe there was a God after all.

Besides, as much as he liked to pretend to himself, he knew he couldn't walk away from the Ponderosa. He had poured just as much of his heart into it as his Pa had, and he had worked to build it up from the ground as well. It was his home, the only one he would ever have, and he needed it back, now more than ever. There was a yearning in his chest for it now that it was in his grasp that he couldn't ignore, even if he wanted to.

"You alright, Adam?" Hoss's voice came from behind him, but Adam didn't turn around.

"Yeah."

"You sure you want to do this now? There'd be no shame in turning back, you know."

Adam inhaled all the way to his toes and then let it out slowly. "No." he said. "I have to get that ranch back." He didn't think Hoss would understand; after all, he'd been young when things had gone south. He probably couldn't remember the fire in his Pa's eyes when he spoke of the ranch and the dreams he had for the place.

"Well, as far as you go, I'll be right there beside you." Hoss clapped Adam on the back, and Adam finally turned around.

"Thanks." His voice was thick with emotion. He didn't know how

to tell Hoss how much it meant to him, but he thought maybe his brother knew. He seemed to have a knack for reading Adam's mind.

"You want to come back to the shack now?" Hoss asked.

"In a minute." Adam listened to the sound of his brother making his way back to the shack as he stared up at the countless stars plastered on the sky. Maybe one of them was his Pa, looking down now. Adam took another long, deep breath.

"I'm doing it for you, you know." He said in a soft tone that carried over through the trees and up toward the heavens. "I just wish... I wish you could see me and could know that at least two of your sons are back together."

He was about to turn and go back to the line shack when a soft rustling caught his ear. As a man who had spent his life appearing where he wasn't expected, he instantly recognized the sound of someone sneaking. Adam tentatively stepped forward toward the sound of the noise. It was coming from the direction of the wagon. As he moved forward among the shadows, he could just make out the shape of a slight figure behind the wagon. Adam debated calling out, but he didn't want anyone to see him or to know there was something amiss. It was only one; he could be taken care of easily. Adam drew his gun. A simple knock over the head and then he and Hoss would be on their way. So much for a good night's rest.

But as he noiselessly stepped forward, he must have set off some inner trigger in the other man. He turned and for a moment they were both frozen. Then the other man lunged. Adam felt himself knocked backwards, but he let the motion roll him over and back onto his feet. Instantly his fists were up and ready. The other man swung first, and Adam easily ducked. Light from the full moon cast a shadow over the man's face, and the back of Adam's mind noticed how young he was even as the front of his mind drove his hands to hit back. The other

man ducked, but too late, and Adam's fist collided with his face. The young man staggered backwards but was back in an instant and in a fighting stance, one fist slightly in front of the other so one could strike and one could block. Adam shifted, slightly off balance that the other man was using his left hand to strike.

He's left handed. He realized. His mind couldn't finish the thought that had begun to form as the other man attacked, and Adam caught one of his blows in the eye. He swung back. Whatever it was, it could wait. His punch landed solidly in the man's stomach, and Adam followed it up with two consecutive hits. The man slumped forward slightly, and Adam gave him one more punch that sent him toppling backwards. Light from a lantern suddenly filled the clearing as the young man hit the ground.

"Adam? You alright?" Hoss stepped forward, but Adam didn't look over. He knew the man would be up, and he was right. The man stood, and as he stepped into the light, his green eyes sparked anger, and Adam could have sworn that he'd come face to face with Marie, his Pa's third wife, and his mother for a short time. The young man raised his fists, and Adam was once again struck by his fighting stance. But this time the thought clicked.

"Wait." He stepped backwards, and the young man followed, wiping blood off his lower lip as he came.

"What?" he spat.

"You..." His mind was playing tricks on him. He'd found Hoss, so now he thought he was seeing someone else. But it was impossible. Just because he'd found one brother who he thought had been dead didn't mean the other one was alive. Adam shook his head in an attempt to clear it. Why did he feel so sure?

"Hoss..." he tried to speak again as he continued to back up.

"What is it? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I may have."

The other man seemed impatient at the lack of action – even though he'd been losing the fight. "I'm here for Tom Finch." He said.

"What's your name?" Adam asked. He couldn't be right. The word impossible rose to his mind again, but it couldn't beat down the niggling doubt that was more solid than any practicality.

"Joe Greyer."

"Joe. Joe Cartwright?"

"Greyer." But even as Joe corrected him, the other name clicked in his mind like a door latch that opened to a forgotten memory.

A woman was screaming. He knew her; she called herself his mother even though she wasn't. And the man who had told him he would be his Pa when the other man had dropped Joe off was towering over her, belt in hand. He could feel the dust tickle his nose and cobwebs stick to him as he tried to cower in the corner. Dirt stuck to his hands as he crouched.

"He'll learn his name if I have to beat it into him!" the man's voice rose like a wolf's growl, making them both tremble.

"He's just a boy!" she had begged, but the man was already stooping over Joe and pulling him out of his hiding place. Joe struggled as he was dragged forward, but he was a stick caught in a flood.

"Cliff told me to make sure he forgets, and I aim to do that!" he hollered one last retort at his now sobbing wife and then turned back to Joe. "What did you say your name was, boy?"

Cartwright. The name had risen to his mind like smoke, but he'd glanced at the belt. In the space of the few long months that he'd been here, he'd felt it more often than he'd liked.

*"Greyer." his lips had trembled their way through the word.
"Joe Greyer."*

His so called Pa eyed him suspiciously before shoving him to the side and turning back to his wife.

"See? He can learn."

Joe had felt a hand on his shoulder, and he'd looked up into her light brown eyes. The door slammed shut, and with her husband gone, he felt it safe to speak.

"That's not really my name."

"Ssh." she put a hand over his lips. It was rough and calloused, not like another hand he'd known. Another hand from somewhere before the falling down house and the man who wore his belt in his hand more often than on his waist.

It was the hand that stuck in Joe's mind. Soft and gentle, it had caressed his round face and had toyed with his curls. The hand of a woman, but a woman with no face.

"How do you know me?"

Adam glanced at Hoss, but his brother was dumbstruck. No help there. Still the expression on his face was comforting; it meant that Adam wasn't crazy and that Hoss was seeing the same thing he was.

"We're your brothers." He said.

Normally Joe had a comment for everything, but this time no words came to his mind. He didn't have any brothers. Did he? He ran his mind over the forgotten memory like it was a key to some box that contained a past he couldn't remember.

"Who are you?" It wasn't the question he wanted to ask, but it was the closest thing he could get to it as an ocean of thoughts tossed his mind back and forth like a ship in a storm.

"I'm Adam, this is Hoss." Adam's brow wrinkled as he noticed how strange it was to introduce himself to his own brother. But the more he reflected on it, the more he realized that it was a brother he'd never truly known.

It hadn't been the answer Joe was looking for either. Then the larger man stepped forward.

"Joe, what all do you remember? Of the Ponderosa."

Joe struggled to place the name. It was like something he'd once smelled but couldn't remember the scent though he could taste it on the tip of his tongue. He shook his head in helplessness, and both men in front of him seemed to slump disappointedly. Joe looked from one to the other, trying to place their faces in his mind, but there was no trigger, no tingling of a memory. He thought about drawing his gun while they were distracted; he could get Tom and get out of here. Then the larger man, Hoss, spoke again.

"You were only three when it happened. I thought you died in the fire."

Another word that flashed an image: fire. Joe heard a distant crackle as if coming from miles away down a deep tunnel.

Hoss continued, "I reckon the same thing happened to you that happened to me; one of Bates' men took you out of the house before it burnt to the ground."

"What house?" Joe didn't know why he was listening to this, but he couldn't pull himself away.

Adam held up a hand. They might as well start at the beginning.

"Your name is Joe Cartwright." He said. "As I said, we're your brothers. We had a ranch in Nevada, the Ponderosa. Our Pa and Ma were murdered when you were three, and I went to find the man who did it. While I was gone, I met a man named Samuel Bates, who wanted to hire me, but when I told him I couldn't work for him because I had to take care of my brothers, he sent men back to kidnap you both and make it look like you were dead." As he told the tale, Adam realized just how ludicrous and fantastic it sounded. He wondered if he would believe it if he was in Joe's position.

"So you're telling me that I grew up in a family that wasn't my real one, and you two are my long lost brothers?"

Adam cringed at his incredulous tone.

"That's what we're telling you." Hoss said. "And it's the truth."

"I didn't come here to find a family I didn't know I had, I came for my friend. Where is he?"

Adam cringed again. It was a subject he'd been hoping to put off for at least a little while longer. He paused for several moments as his mind struggled to come up with an explanation that Joe would understand. Hoss remained silent, ready to back his older brother up, but not wanting to do any damage by trying to explain the situation himself.

"Your friend lost some money that belonged to Sam Bates. He just wants it back."

"So why did he send a cheap gunslinger?"

Adam gritted his teeth and refused to let the intentional insult cut into him. "He sent me to get Finch and bring him to him."

"So he can take his money out of his hide?"

"He won't hurt him." Adam said. Bates would have tried harder to squirm out of the contract if that had been what he'd had in mind. "Once he pays up he can go home." And so can I. Adam wondered if he should mention that part of the contract and decided it couldn't make things any worse. "Bates managed to get his hands on the Ponderosa somehow, and if I do this, I'll get it back." Adam hesitated. "It's your home too."

"My home is with the Finches." Joe snapped.

"Then you're in a tight spot." Adam said. He didn't know what else to do. The resolve to get back his ranch had taken root inside him, and he couldn't just pull it up and toss it out so easily. The whole situation was surreal, and part of his brain just couldn't accept that it was his little brother in front of him, in front of him and trying to stop him. His irritation at the situation must have come through in his tone because Joe's hand dropped to his side next to his gun. Adam stiffened. It shouldn't be this way. But he'd nearly died too many times for habit to ignore the silent challenge, and it forced his hand to follow suit. As he met his brother's eyes, a line of tension stretched between them. He wondered what this young man would be like if he'd grown up under the gentle pine boughs of the Ponderosa.

"Hold on." Hoss stepped between them, and the tension snapped like a cut rope. "There's no reason we have to be on opposite sides."

Joe could think of a few, but he relaxed his shoulders slightly and let Hoss continue.

"Now look here, Adam just wants to get the ranch that our Pa built with his bare hands back. You may not remember it, but that still don't mean it ain't there just the same. He says that this Bates fella ain't gonna hurt your friend, and I believe him, but if you don't then you're welcome to come along with us to make sure nothing happens to him. And then

maybe afterwards you can come with us to the Ponderosa and see if being there don't jog your memory."

Joe regarded him for a moment in silence as he weighed his options. Adam held his breath, silently thanking whatever higher powers there were that Hoss had stepped forward when he did. The realization that he'd nearly had to shoot his baby brother was dawning on him, and it made his stomach turn.

Have I gotten into the habit of mistrusting so much that I would shoot down my own brother? It didn't matter that he didn't even know him, the thought still made Adam want to throw up.

"I want to see him." Joe said.

"Alright." Hoss led the way back to the line shack. As they walked, Adam fought against the instincts screaming at him that this was probably the stupidest thing he could do. Before Hoss could open the door, he gave in to them.

"Your gun, Joe." He said.

Joe's hand automatically covered the handle, and Adam refused to let the uncomfortable tightness in his gut show on his face. They stared at each other for several moments, and then Joe slid the gun out of its holster and handed it, not to Adam, but to Hoss. Then he went inside.

Tom was tied to a chair with his head bent down toward his chest, and his disheveled hair obscured his face. At first Joe thought he was sleeping, but then he lifted his head.

"Joe! What took you so long? Did you get rid of those two men?" his grin shifted into confusion as Joe stood in the center of the shack unmoving. "Aren't you gonna untie me?"

Joe took a deep breath, like a drowning man receiving air. As he let it out, he struggled to separate his two trains of thought.

"Why did they take you?"

"You're not going to untie me first?"

"Just tell me." Part of him was stalling for time and the other part was hoping Tom would tell him something completely different, something that would rationalize a daring escape despite the fact that they'd taken his gun.

Tom shrugged as best he could with his hands tied behind his back. "Alright. They want me to pay some man I got a job with a few months ago. You remember; I was paid to ride that stage to San Francisco?"

"Yeah." Joe said with a sinking heart.

"It was to guard some money, fifty thousand dollars. But the money was stolen, and apparently, Bates, the man who hired me, wanted me to cough up the money myself. I told him I'd get the money and then hightailed it back home. So he sent these characters after me."

"Why didn't you just pay? Your Pa..."

"My Pa's tired of dishing out money for my mistakes. Sure he'd pay, and then I'd never hear the end of it."

Joe sighed and ran a hand through his hair, absentmindedly realizing that he'd left his hat where it had fallen outside.

"Will you untie me now? I can't imagine you killed those two men, so we probably don't have that much time."

His lips wouldn't form the words any more than his arms would move to cut the ropes. He was stuck, dangling between two points and unable to tip the scale either way. His mind turned over rapidly, rocking him back and forth between two courses of action. For a moment he felt as though he would be here forever, and life would go on by without him as he remained in an endless debate with himself. Then he shook his head. He

couldn't decide right now; he needed time, space. For the moment, he would leave things the way they were.

"Adam said Bates didn't want to hurt you; he just wants his money." He said.

Tom's eyes narrowed. "Adam? How do you know these men?"

Joe shifted. "It's complicated. But I know them. Or they know me." Complicated was an understatement. Joe rubbed his arm, giving in to the need to do something with his hands.

"So you're on their side?" Tom snapped.

"No. But... I have some things to sort out." He resisted the urge to beg Tom to understand; he knew he wouldn't. He didn't understand himself. "I'll be back." He said.

Adam and Hoss were outside. Joe grabbed the reins of his horse and turned to Adam before he mounted.

"Can I have my gun back?"

"Sorry." Adam couldn't trust him with it just yet. He wasn't sure whether he was doing the right thing or not, but he knew that the suspicion was mutual. If the situation was reversed, he was sure Joe would do the same thing.

"Don't worry about it. Brother." The last word came out as a snarl and Joe mounted his horse and rode away.

"In retrospect, that probably wasn't the best thing to do." Adam murmured. The echo of hoof beats was like a thudding on his chest.

"You had no choice, Adam."

Adam frowned at his brother; a man who he was beginning to see like an onion, with multiple layers beneath the outer surface. And this trip seemed to be a knife; just as Adam got used to one layer, it pulled it back to reveal another. "I thought you

trusted him.”

“No. But I can’t bring myself to mistrust him either. I reckon neither of us knows him well enough to be sure. And he sure don’t know us all that well either.”

“He has more reason to be loyal to that man in there than he does to us.” Adam realized.

For a moment they both were silent as the truth of his simple statement settled onto their shoulders like a large weight. Then Hoss put a hand on Adam’s back.

“He’ll come around. You remember how curious he used to be?”

Adam nodded and couldn’t help a faint smile that tickled the corners of his mouth. Telling Joe not to get into something was the quickest and easiest way to make sure he did just that. At least it used to be. Adam wished he knew just how much his little brother had changed.

“Yes sir, he’ll be back.” Hoss said as he stared through the woods Joe had disappeared into as if he could find and answer somewhere in the darkness.

Joe let his horse guide itself through the trees as he urged it on faster. He was running from his mind; he didn’t want to think. He just wanted to gallop so fast that his horse became a blur and they left time behind. But his thoughts kept catching up.

All he’d wanted was to get Tom and go back to Jacksonville. But could he do that? No. Just because of some fire or whatever they had said that had happened years ago. Joe suddenly reined in his horse and leaped to the ground. He couldn’t outrun his thoughts, so he might as well face them.

As Joe marched back and forth in a circle his horse, grateful that he wasn't being forced at a breakneck gallop through the woods, dropped his head to graze. Joe glared at the animal as if it was the root of his problems.

"Go ahead and eat! It's not like your future is impacted at all by this." He snapped. Then he spun and sent his fist into the nearest tree. The bark clawed at his knuckles, but he didn't pay any attention to the pain except to notice that it distracted his mind from the knives stabbing into his stomach and the whirlwind in his head. He punched again and then again. Bark spotted with his blood flew off the tree, but he kept hitting it until his arms felt like wrung out rags. He hissed at the currents of pain that ran through his wrists and up his arm as he unclenched his fists. Then, like vultures that had been temporarily scared off a carcass, his thoughts returned.

This should have been simple. Why wasn't it simple? Even if they were his brothers, it wasn't like he owed them anything.

Involuntarily his mind leaped backwards to a scene that had happened right after Tom and Jesse had been thrown out of the saloon, dragging half a dozen men intent on getting their blood with them. Joe had arrived at the same time the sheriff had, and it was a good thing for the Finch brothers. If the sheriff hadn't broken up the fight, one or both of them would have been visiting the doctor – or quite possibly the mortician. Joe, never one to refuse a fight but always one to scold for it, had given Tom and earful.

"Why did you get into that fight anyway? There was no way you could have won." He had demanded.

Tom had shrugged off the multiple bruises on his face. "Yeah, but my big brother was fighting, so I had to help him out."

At the time, Joe had just assumed that Tom was itching for a fight the way he sometimes did, but now the memory had gained

another level of depth to it.

For his entire life all he'd wanted was another family. A brother, sister, aunt, cousin, anything. And now he had one, and it was at the worst time imaginable.

Joe sank to the ground as his anger wafted away and left him feeling limp and hollow. Truth be told, he'd lied when he'd said his home was with the Finches. If he'd been forced to be honest, he would have to admit that he didn't have a home. Because no matter how close he seemed to be with the Finches, there was always an undercurrent pulling him away. He didn't belong there. He knew it, Carl knew it; surely Mr. Finch knew it, probably Jesse too. Tom was the only one completely oblivious. And he had to be the one dragged into this.

Joe rubbed his swollen lip. Whoever this Adam Cartwright was, he had a good arm.

Cartwright. Joe Cartwright. Joseph Cartwright. The name felt like an old leather shoe that was too small and stiff to fit over his foot but that still had an air of familiarity to it for all that. And like an old shoe, the more you tried it on, the more it stretched and fit a little better. He wracked his mind for memories like a man who'd lost a diamond in a cornfield, but all he came up with were empty husks. There was nothing there.

Maybe he needed a trigger, like his name had been. He'd heard it and then had remembered something he'd forgotten had ever happened. But in order to keep triggering his mind, he would need to stay with Adam and Hoss. Which meant betraying Tom to an extent. The web continued to tangle itself. And he'd sent the telegram which told the Finches where they were. Another knot. Joe groaned and let his head fall into his hands in defeat. Once again he realized that it was a decision he couldn't make. Not now. For the moment he would just have to see how things played out.

~*~

Hoss wasn't as confident in his surmising of Joe as he'd let Adam think. He was good at reading people, and he could see wrath bubbling like hot water in Joe's every move. Joe was on the warpath; there was no doubt about that. His demeanor now stood in stark contrast to the sunny little boy that used to give him colorful rocks from the shore of the lake. Hoss closed his eyes and remembered the way Joe's eyes had widened with his mouth as he shouted his name.

"Hoss! Hoss!"

Adam was chasing him around the table and the three year old ran to his other brother for protection. Hoss stepped between him and Adam, winked at his older brother, and grabbed Little Joe around the waist and held the three year old as he shrieked and Adam charged. Then Joe shrieked again as Adam began to tickle him.

Hoss couldn't remember anything else about that day, but he could see the scene in his head as if it had happened yesterday. Or maybe even more recently. Memories were a funny thing; you could remember a single moment, a game played between three brothers, for years and yet forget what you had for lunch the day before.

"Memories are dangerous." Jim had once said to him. "They trick you into thinking things were so much better back then. They weren't you know. You just only remember the good things."

"Or the bad." The bad had been what had kept Hoss from sleeping that night – memories of fire and Indian chants and then running for his life.

"But even the bad doesn't seem so bad because now you have hindsight and can rationalize how it worked out anyway. You'd rather go back and face the problems you had then than try to

get through the ones you have now."

That was true, Hoss reflected. But maybe if he could get through these problems, things might just get better. It was worth a shot anyway.

The sound of a horse made him look up, and Joe rode up to the shack. Hoss resisted the urge to stand and greet him; he didn't want to scare him off. But he couldn't keep the grin off of his face as he exhaled in relief. Then he caught sight of dried blood on the back of Joe's knuckles.

"Joe! What happened to your hands?" Instantly he was on his feet.

"Nothing." Joe undid the girth and pulled the saddle off, but he couldn't hold on to it long enough to lower it, and it landed on the ground with a heavy thump.

"Let me look at them."

Joe jerked his hand away as Hoss reached for it. "It's fine!" He snapped. He tied his horse and hesitated before going into the line shack.

"Something wrong?" Hoss asked.

There were several things wrong. First of all he was caught between a rock and a hard place, also known as his friend and his brother, and he didn't want to be around either of them right now. Secondly the shack reminded him far too much of another that he'd left behind, and walking inside it was sure to bring back memories that would keep him up. But he didn't want to mention any of that to the large man staring concertedly at him, so he shrugged in an attempt at indifference and sauntered inside.

Tom was asleep, snoring in his chair, but Adam was up. He glanced at Joe, and Joe ignored him. He didn't want to talk about the predicament anymore than he wanted to think about

it. He tossed his bedroll down in a corner and stretched out on it. Even through the fabric, he could feel the unforgiving boards reminding him that he was on a floor instead of a bed.

He heard Hoss come in and shut the door behind him then there was a scraping sound. Joe peeked through his eyelids in time to see him wedge a chair against the door before he too lay down. Across the room, he could see the still form of Adam in the darkness. It was motionless, but Joe didn't think he was asleep. He was probably lying in the darkness waiting for Joe to do something stupid. Joe rolled over and crossed his arms. The stupid thing was sticking around, but he'd decided to do it, so there was no point in belly aching.

He closed his eyes so he couldn't see the darkness of the shack. It was all too familiar: the rough blanket, the tiny room, the hardness of the floor, the harsh snoring covering the sounds of the night. But he refused to let himself toss sideways in an attempt to fend off the memories of the place he'd walked away from. He ground his teeth and clenched his fists then he winced as his knuckles began throbbing again. He really should clean them out. But if he got up he would have Adam's eye on him the entire time, and he'd just as soon avoid being watched like a chicken by a hawk. Instead Joe carefully relaxed his fingers and eventually the throbbing subsided. Every time he felt himself starting to slide into oblivion, he clenched his fists and let the pain rip through him, jolting him awake. He wasn't going to fall asleep and have a nightmare wake him up. That would lead to too many questions. In between clenching his fists he listened to sound of Hoss' snoring, which had joined Tom's. Adam's breathing was deep and regular, but Joe was still certain he was at least partially awake. He felt irritation rise within him. Why couldn't Adam go to sleep so he could slip outside? If he could just walk around in the free air, he might be able to clear his mind and get a couple hours of rest.

His arm had fallen asleep. Tiny needles pricked at him from

his elbow to his wrist, and his fingers felt fat and swollen. Still he didn't move. It was getting to be a silent contest of wills, one that Adam didn't even know he was a part of. But if he could lie unmoving in the darkness pretending to be asleep, so could Joe. He bit his lip and wiggled his fingers as the darkness pressed close and threatened to smother him. He felt like a quail hiding in the bushes as the hunter got closer and closer. The only difference was that if he was a quail, he would burst forward at the last moment and possibly manage to escape. Right now the only thing he could do was ignore the darkness, knowing it was himself that had added the sinisterness to it but unable to erase it.

He clenched his hands again and then felt a tiny trickle run down the back of his left hand. He must have torn it open by his constant flexing. The blood tentatively dribbled down toward his wrist and then began to slide off the edge of his arm. Joe rolled his wrist so that the drop of blood was absorbed in his shirt and then pressed his knuckles against the blanket to stop the bleeding.

After what seemed like years, the shack began to lighten. At first it was barely noticeable, and then the black began to fade to a dingy grey, and Joe could make out the shape of the table and the chair where Tom was tied. The weight that had been pressing against his chest slowly stretched and lifted itself off of him.

There was the sound of rustling cloth, and then Adam rose. Joe remained where he was and watched him walk across the floor and open the door. A line of fresh sunlight cut across the floor like an arrow as Adam stepped outside and left the door open a crack behind him. Tom raised his head and caught sight of Joe with his eyes on the crack Adam had disappeared through.

"Joe." He hissed. "Quick, untie me."

Joe turned his head. All of his reasoning from the night before had vanished like morning fog burned away by sunlight, and he thought for a moment about untying Tom and riding away from this tangled mess. He rose from his bedroll, but before he could walk across to Tom, Hoss rolled over and grunted slightly. Then he opened his eyes.

“Morning, huh? You boys hungry?”

Joe and Tom’s eyes met, and Joe couldn’t decide if he felt relieved or disappointed. He shrugged off the unfamiliar queasy feeling.

“Sure.”

The slowly spreading light cast by the sun enabled Adam to see well enough to hitch up the team and then tack up his own horse. He pulled Joe’s gun out of his belt and fingered it for a moment as he wondered if he should give it back. But then he felt the sickening in his stomach that had sprung up last night when he’d thought the gun would be pulled on him and that he would have to shoot back, and he put it in his saddle bags. Joe was just too skittish; Adam couldn’t give it back to him and risk a gunfight. Because he knew Joe would lose.

Adam leaned against his horse, allowing himself a moment of weakness as the weight of his responsibility threatened to crush him. He didn’t know what he was supposed to do. For so long his life had been clear cut: pick a man, find him, bring him in, move on to the next one. Now here he was in this knotted mess, needing some way to get through to the little brother that he barely knew and at the same time trying to get back the land that was in his blood.

“I can’t do this, Pa.” he murmured. He wished once again that

his father could hear him. Even if he didn't answer, just to know that he was listening would somehow make it easier.

His horse, tired of supporting Adam's weight, shifted over, and Adam straightened. He pushed his shoulders back and fitted an unwavering look on his face like a shield.

He kept up the appearance of being in control through their makeshift breakfast during which he realized that they were going to have to stop for supplies. He had only brought enough food for himself and Tom and hadn't counted on having twice the number of people.

"We've got enough to make it to Yreka, right?" he asked Hoss. His brother had somehow unobtrusively taken over the cooking for the trip.

"Plenty." Hoss answered. He pulled himself up into the driver's seat of the wagon.

"I can drive, Hoss." Adam said.

"The way I see it, with as little sleep as you go last night, you'll be nodding off in about an hour. I'll drive."

Adam crossed his arms, a small smile playing at the edges of his cheeks. "How do you know how much sleep I got?"

"Just a hunch." Hoss gathered up the reins.

Adam glanced in the back of the wagon where Joe and Tom were getting comfortable. There would be plenty of farms in the Horn Brook area once they got over the border, and he didn't know just how widespread the Finch's influence was. Better to be safe than sorry.

"In the trunk, Tom." He said as he easily swung up into the wagon.

"No way." Tom crossed his arms in a daring gesture. Adam

inwardly groaned. Now that his 'buddy' was here, it looked like Tom was going to be unmanageable.

"I'm not risking you being recognized."

"I don't care if I'm recognized." Tom snapped.

"No, I didn't think you would. But I do."

"He's not riding in there." Joe suddenly swung to the side of his friend, and Adam felt the sudden urge to wring both of their necks. He wanted to rub away the tension between his eyes, but he knew better than to show any sign of weakness. Instead he hooked his hands inside his belt and affected a careless look.

"You don't have a choice, Tom." He ignored Joe for the moment. "Or rather you do. Conscious or unconscious, you can get into that trunk."

Joe stepped between them, forcing Adam's eyes to meet his. "Just try to hit him. See what happens." He hissed.

"If last night was a demonstration of your fighting skills then I already know what will happen." Adam replied.

Joe drew himself up, but Hoss' voice cut through the thick air between them.

"Adam, just let him ride in the back, and if we see anyone he can duck down."

Joe raised his eyebrows, and Adam figured it was the best he was going to get. "Fine." He said. He settled against the side of the wagon. So much for a nap. He probably wouldn't have been able to sleep anyway, but now all hopeful illusions were shattered. Joe sat across from him and next to Tom, glowering despite the fact that he'd won.

Adam forced himself not to keep his hand by his gun. He didn't

think Joe would try anything, and it would probably only agitate him further, but it was hard to ignore fourteen years worth of instincts. He tipped his head back against the seat and let his eyes shut slightly as the movement jostled him from side to side, his body slowly relaxing even as his mind was still alert and attentive.

Joe studied Adam's face beneath the brim of his hat. It was a hard face, like the stone slab of a headstone, and revealing nothing about what lay beneath it. But now with his eyes half closed, a sort of softness crept into it, and Joe struggled to place the face in his memory. Maybe he was trying too hard because all he came up with was blankness.

"Hey, Joe, you want to come and sit up front here to balance out the seat a little? It's tipping something fierce."

Joe looked up at Hoss. Another face he couldn't remember. He stood and climbed over the seat to sit next to the larger man.

"Much better." Hoss said. "'Course, you're not much of a counterweight with how small you are. What did those Finches feed you anyway? You ain't much bigger 'n two licks. Still, I reckon you know how to use your weight with the way you took Adam on last night. I would've expected a much shorter fight than what you gave him."

Joe remained silent and let Hoss ramble while his own thoughts took him far from the road. He came back to attention when Hoss pulled the wagon to a stop.

"What it is?" Adam asked.

"Time to water the horses. Give me a hand, Joe."

Joe jumped down, grateful for the chance to stretch his legs after several hours of sitting. He reached down to unhook the traces from the wagon and found that his hand wouldn't grasp the chain. His knuckles had swollen so much that he could

barely close his hand at all. He gritted his teeth and struggled to slide it free.

"I'll get that, Joe. You get the riding horses."

Joe almost said that he was fine and could do it, but he knew he couldn't. He went to the back of the wagon, untied his and Adam's horses, and led them down to the stream by the road while Hoss brought the team down. After they'd drunk, he started to lead them back up, but Hoss put a hand on his shoulder.

"Let me look at those knuckles of yours." It wasn't a suggestion.

Joe dropped the reins and let Hoss lead him back to the riverbank. Hoss pulled a bandana out of his pocket, wet it, and began to carefully wipe away the dried blood and dirt. Joe tried not to wince from the pressure of the bandana on his tender skin.

"So what'd you do? Beat up a porcupine?"

"A tree." Joe mumbled.

"Hmm." There was no condemnation in his grunt, but Joe felt irritation rise anyway, and he almost pulled his hand away. But despite the pain, the cool water on his inflamed hands felt good, as well as the warm contact of Hoss holding his wrist in a gentle way that Joe wouldn't have thought possible for such large, rough hands.

"I'll wrap these when we stop for lunch." Hoss said. "For now try to keep 'em clean."

"Shouldn't be too hard considering I'll be sitting in a wagon. I can't really get dirty there."

Hoss let out a snorting laugh.

"What?" Joe asked.

"I just remembered something is all." Hoss' eyes sparkled like the stream they were standing beside. "One of Pa's rancher friends was getting married, and we were all dressed up for the ceremony. It took Ma and Pa hours to get us cleaned up and ready. I don't remember why, but for some reason Pa left you and I out in the wagon for a minute. Not much longer than a minute anyway. I guess he figured we couldn't get into any trouble in that space of time. But when he came back out, we were both off the wagon making mud pies and dirty from head to toe." He laughed again, and Joe felt his face break into a slight grin, like the sun peering through the clouds.

"Did you get in trouble?"

"Oh, he probably tanned me a good one. Guess I deserved it." Hoss shook his head at the memory.

Joe's smile faded slightly and he went back to get the now grazing horses.

"Joe?" Hoss asked worriedly.

"Nothing. Better get back up there before Adam hollers at us for wasting time." Joe walked up the hill to the road. The moment of connection was gone, broken by the emptiness in his gut. He wished he could remember something, anything. He tied the horses and climbed back into the wagon next to Hoss. Somehow he didn't think Hoss had wanted him to balance out the seat when he'd asked him to sit up here. He glanced at his brother as he took the reins and slapped them down on the horses' backs.

"Hey... thanks. For telling that story to me." He said.

Hoss' face broke into that grin once more, the one that Joe was unable to resist smiling back at.

"No problem, little brother."

The drove on in silence, and as the wagon rocked and rattled, Hoss watched Joe's eyes slowly start to drift shut and his chin fall closer and closer to his chest until it simply rested there, jittering back and forth slightly with the motion. A slight snore came from beneath his hat. Hoss was glad; he figured his little brother hadn't gotten much sleep either, though he wasn't sure why. He had sensed last night that there was something more than the current situation that had been bothering him. But it was no good prying, or trying to squeeze blood from rock, as Jim would say.

"You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." Another saying, one that Jim would characteristically add on the end, "But you can run him around until he's thirsty enough."

True, they couldn't make Joe want to be with them, but maybe just being here was enough to make him thirsty enough to stick around.

I sure could use your help right now, Jim. Hoss thought. From the moment they'd met, Jim had been a man he relied heavily on.

"Pa?" He'd heard a voice that had pulled him out of his unconscious state, not as deep as his Pa's, but still caring enough for him to make the comparison.

"Easy now." A gentle hand stopped him from sitting up. "You've got quite a bump there."

"Where am I?" As Hoss realized that the voice didn't belong to his Pa, the fear that had been pursuing him since he'd heard the chanting and the hoof beats returned.

"You're safe. Now why don't you tell me your name and what you're doing out in these parts? Where's your family?"

"Dead." The word was branded into Hoss mind. He looked up

suddenly as hope leaped up inside him. "Am I in heaven?"

"No, boy. You're very much alive."

Hoss looked down. If he was alive and everyone else was dead, that meant he couldn't be with them. Two hot tears landed on the brown blanket that covered him.

"How did you get out here?" a hand supported his back, and Hoss looked up into a pair of grey eyes peering out over a grey mustache and beard. Everything about him seemed grey, but not like the gloomy grey of winter, more like the strong grey of a storm cloud.

"I thought I was going to be with them. We were riding down the road, and then..." The stillness of the cabin was drowned out by the ringing war cries of the Indians who had swooped down upon them. He'd felt himself falling as the man had spun his horse, and for a moment he'd been stunned on the impact; then he'd gotten up and run as if the Indians were demons on his tail. For some reason they hadn't chased him; but he could still hear the screams of the man as they dragged him from his horse. Hoss hadn't looked back; he'd kept running, gasping for breath, his boots flapping on his bare feet. He must have tripped... he couldn't remember anything else.

"It's alright, lad. You don't have to talk about it." The man rubbed Hoss' back as he gave in to several days' worth of stress in tears.

"What's your name anyway?" the man asked when Hoss' sobs had subsided.

"Hoss." Hoss mumbled gently.

"Hoss, eh? A name for a mountain man."

Hoss rubbed at his eyes. "What do I do now?" he waited for an answer. This man was an adult; he would know what to do. The man stroked his grey beard thoughtfully.

"I'm headed up to the wilderness; it's no place for a child."

"I'm a big child." Hoss protested. He didn't want to leave this sudden source of comfort as soon as he'd found him. And it wasn't like he had anything to return home to.

"True, but it's hard work and hard country. Still..." He had taken Hoss in silently for a moment while Hoss held his breath. "I reckon I can make a mountain man out of you. You've got the name anyway."

Somehow life had seemed simpler in the mountains, and when Jim had died, he hadn't left. But while being alone made life easier, Hoss figured he would rather be here in this mess, caught between two brothers who were more ornery than a pair of mules, than back on the mountain.

Adam stood up behind him, his knees bent to absorb the motion of the wagon.

"Something wrong?" Hoss asked.

"Just stretching."

Hoss figured that meant he was trying not to fall asleep. The motion of a wagon was good at lulling people into a doze before they realized it. "We can stop for lunch if you want; let the horses rest."

"It's a little early. I can wait another couple of hours."

Hoss shook his head and wondered if Adam had always been this combination of stubborn and practical.

"You want to drive?" he asked.

"Only if you think we can manage to switch places without disturbing him." He glanced at Joe, whose hat had tumbled off his bowed head to the floorboards of the wagon. A small, soft smile spread over Adam's face.

"I used to watch him sleep you know." He said quietly. "I'd slip into his room and watch his chest rise and fall as he breathed. It always seemed like a miracle to me, that this tiny little person was really alive. His fist was no bigger than this." Adam made a circle with his thumb and forefinger. "He'd latch onto my finger and stare up at me like I was a giant, and I'd stare down at him wondering how a person could be so small. I remember when you were born, I asked Pa if I'd been that small, and he told me I was smaller. I couldn't get it into my mind, just like I couldn't get it into my mind that you would actually grow up and get bigger until you became a person like me." He shook his head, clearing his mind of the memories like a dog shakes after coming out of a lake.

"Are we stopping soon?" Tom called from the back. "I'm hungry, and these ropes are too tight."

Adam refrained from saying the dozens of nasty comments that leaped into his head and simply sat back down.

"Soon." He said.

~*~

When they stopped for the night, Joe wasn't allowed to get firewood because Hoss didn't want him getting his freshly bandaged hands dirty, so he brooded around the clearing they'd stopped at while Hoss built the fire and Adam brought him wood. Tom remained tied in the wagon, and Joe drifted over to him.

"How you doing?" he asked

"As if you care. Getting all cozy with your new family, Joe?"

Joe bristled. "And if I am? You yourself said I didn't owe you anything."

"I said you didn't owe us your employment for the rest of your life, not that you didn't owe our friendship a little help in

trouble.”

Joe exhaled. Just when he'd felt like he'd been able to rise above everything, there was the knot, pulling him back down with a thump.

“You're right. But I'm doing all I can.”

“Riding as shotgun guard with the people who kidnapped me is really helping right now.”

“Look, I sent a telegram to your father telling you where you were.”

“When?”

“Ashton.”

“Is he on his way?”

“How should I know?” Joe snapped.

“And when he comes, who are you going to side with, Joe? You know my Pa; he'll take what he wants with his fists or his gun. I don't think your 'brother' over there will let me go that easily.”

His stomach churned as he realized Tom was right. They were headed straight for a fight; sooner or later he was going to have to pick a side.

“Don't you think you owe me more than those people who abandoned you? You didn't even know them until last night. Do you really think they would have told you that sob story unless you had shown up on my side? They just needed you against me; otherwise they wouldn't have bothered with you. It's not like they really care.”

Joe glanced across the clearing at Hoss and Adam. Part of him wanted to disagree and part of him knew that he was right; people used each other; even the Finches did it from time to

time. You could always be certain that a man had his own interests first in his mind, and he'd only worry about yours if his were in order. It was a lesson that had been beaten into him, first by his Pa, who he was not at all sad to realize actually wasn't his Pa, and then by angry miners who needed a place to vent. Joe could still feel their fists lashing down on his body, not because they were mad at him, but because they were mad in general and he was smaller than they were. He went over to the horses and began rubbing them down, hoping that the activity would clear his head. He scowled when Adam stepped beside him.

"What did he say to you?" Adam asked.

"None of your business." Joe snapped.

Adam sighed. So he was still the enemy. At least Hoss was having progress. He went over and dropped the firewood on the ground.

"Should be enough." Hoss said.

"You got that going fast." Adam watched the flames leap up to lick the fresh wood.

"Years of practice, big brother. You know, I guess it makes sense that I'd be a mountain man, what with my name and all." Hoss had been hoping the comment would lighten Adam's dark mood, but it seemed to only make him withdraw farther inside his thoughts.

"Maybe." Adam said. "Hoss is a mountain man, Adam committed the first crime and was banished from his home as a result," He raised his eyes to where Joe was rubbing down the horses, "and Joseph was scorned by his brothers and forced into a life of exile."

Hoss cleared his throat. "Well, I guess the similarity ends with me."

Instantly the pensive, brooding look was gone, and Adam returned to the present instead of the distant dreamland he'd been in. "I guess you're right."

"Hey!" Tom shouted. "You know I'm getting tired of constantly being tied up. How about a little stretch?"

"Sorry." Adam really wasn't, and another thought about names came to mind as Tom glanced across at Joe and raised his eyebrows as if saying 'see?'. Joe looked down and away.

"And Thomas created doubt." He murmured. Then he turned back to Hoss. "Joe and I will ride into Yreka to get supplies once we get close enough; you and Tom wait until we get back and then we'll go around it."

Hoss' brow wrinkled in concern. "Are you sure?"

"I can't leave him here; he's too unpredictable, and it would be two against one."

"Maybe I should go."

Adam shook his head. "I'll be alright. Who knows, maybe if we're alone away from Tom he'll actually talk to me." Wishful thinking maybe, but you never knew. He went to untie Tom so the boy could eat, making sure that his gun was loose in its holster before he cut the ropes.

Joe studied both of his brothers in the flickering light of their fire that night. They were only a few miles outside of Yreka, but they'd arrived too late to go into town and get supplies, so they'd made camp. Joe had stiffened when Adam had informed him that they would be the ones to go into town the next morning.

"Why?" he had asked.

"Does there have to be a reason?"

"I get the feeling that with you everything has a reason."

Adam shrugged. "You and I are the two with horses, so we'll be the ones who ride in."

Joe didn't think that was the reason, but he didn't say it. Let Adam have his sneaky plans and hidden meanings.

Now he watched shadows from the fire dance lightly across Adam's face and wished again that he could remember this man. Part of him writhed under his careful planning and firm control, but another part admired him for it. This was a man who would never back down. Joe just wished they could be on the same side.

He stood and stretched; his legs were still cramped from the long wagon ride. As he walked, he found himself drifting over to where Hoss was rubbing down the horses.

"Just checking up on them before we turn in." Hoss said as Joe drew near. "Want to make sure they don't need nothin'."

"And I suppose they would tell you if they did." Joe said with a small grin.

"They would. They can talk, Joe; most people just don't take the time to listen." He rubbed Adam's gelding on the shoulder. "Sometimes I think they have more sense than us humans."

"I might have to agree with that." Joe muttered.

Hoss caught the bitterness in his tone and debated whether or not he should pursue it.

"You know, Adam's caught in as much of a pickle as you are."

"How's that?"

"He's caught between you and that Finch boy just like you're caught between him and Adam."

"He could choose to end everything and let Tom go." Joe insisted.

"Could he?"

The way he asked the question stopped Joe from blurting out a yes. Hoss finished rubbing down Adam's horse and began to walk back to the fire.

"You don't know him, Hoss." Joe called softly. "Neither of us do."

"You're right." Hoss answered. "We don't."

Joe glanced at the horses. "What would you do?" he muttered. The horse raised its head, and Joe turned to see Adam. His face instantly hardened by habit.

Adam stopped and stood where he was, hands hooked over his gun belt. "Look, I'm sorry about this morning, Joe." He finally said.

Joe's eyes narrowed. Was he apologizing because he meant it or because he needed to keep Joe on his good side?

"Look, I know he's your friend, but he's also my responsibility."

"You chose it."

Adam ran a hand through his hair, sensing that he wasn't making any progress. There was no reasoning with someone who was dead set to disagree with you.

"I just wanted to say sorry." He said.

Joe shrugged. "Doesn't matter." He turned back to the horses, but Adam didn't leave. Joe tried to ignore the man staring at

the back of his head, but finally he couldn't.

"Anything else?" he asked without turning around.

"Sorry." Adam said. "I was just... I spent a lot of time wondering what you and Hoss would look like when you grew up. Back before I knew you were alive. It's just nice to see you in front of me instead of in my head."

Joe remained facing the horses, but he heard the grass rustle under Adam's feet as his brother walked away. He waited several moments before he allowed his shoulders to slump down from the rigidity they'd set themselves into.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked Adam's horse. He wished that the animal could talk and could tell him if Adam was being honest or just playing him like a fiddle.

People always look out for their own interests. It was the way they were. Joe rubbed the horse's forelock between his fingers and considered all the tales this horse could tell him, stories of Adam's gun shooting again and again, of people dying. He couldn't trust Adam. He couldn't trust anybody. That was the way it had been all his life, and it was the way it would always be.

~*~

The next morning Adam and Joe mounted their horses without saying a word. For a moment Adam considered changing his mind and letting Hoss go with Joe, but he squeezed his heels into his horse, and Joe followed. Hoss stared at them as they rode away with more than a little concern burrowing into his stomach. Those two chaffed against each other something fierce, and he didn't know if them being alone together was a good idea.

They rode into town in silence, and when they got there, Joe dismounted and tied his horse next to Adam's along the

hitching post. Then he promptly turned and walked down the street away from the mercantile. He wasn't in town to buy food; he was in town to buy a weapon.

"Where are you going?" Adam asked.

Joe continued walking and didn't look back. "To get a gun." He said. Let Adam try to stop him; he was tired of feeling like a pointless underling.

Adam caught up to him in three strides – quite impressive since Joe was walking at a clip. He didn't slow down though and then pulled away when Adam put a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

"Joe..."

"I don't need you telling me what to do." Joe snapped. "I've gotten along quite well my entire life without you, and I don't see the need to change anything now."

Adam was taken aback for a moment, but he quickly recovered. "Well that's too bad because it's going to change."

"Why? Because you need to be in control? Or because you need me out of the way so you can get what you want?"

Adam's eyes narrowed. So that's what Tom had been whispering in Joe's ear. "You can't believe everything someone tells you. Especially someone who's trying to use you himself."

"As far as I'm concerned, you're the only one who's using anyone. But I'm through with you trying to control everything." People were starting to stare, but he didn't take any notice; he kept walking as fast as he could, wishing he could leave Adam in the dust.

"I'm in charge of this; you said yourself you were just along for the ride."

“And aren’t you glad of that.” Joe stopped walking and spun around. “After this whole thing is over, I’ll disappear and we can go back to our lives: me as a horse breaker and you as a hired murderer.”

Adam clenched his fists but somehow managed to keep from lashing out. Still, Joe had to have known he’d scored a point.

“How many people have you killed, Adam?” he persisted. “Just because they’re wanted men doesn’t mean they’re not still people.”

“You’re walking a line, Joe. Just decide which side you want to be on.” He said.

“I don’t even want to be a part of this.”

“Too late.”

“Stop acting like this is all part of your big plan! You think you can control me?” Joe raged. “You can’t; you have no right. Any more than you have the right to drag someone away from their home just so you can get some land.”

“Even if the person has a legal obligation?” Adam demanded. His eyes glittered like ice as Joe’s sparked and crackled.

“As if you care about that. It’s just your justification for doing whatever you want to get whatever you want. You don’t care who gets hurt. You probably never cared about anyone in your life.”

The fist came out of nowhere and knocked Joe backwards into the dirt. He moved to jump up, but Adam’s voice held him down.

“I’ve cared more deeply about someone than you could ever possibly hope to understand after having lived among shallow people like your ‘friends’ the Finches.” His tone was low and dangerous, like a wolf whose growl was overshadowed by its bristling hair and glowering yellow eyes. Joe couldn’t move as

Adam turned and walked away. Then, as if a spell was broken, he was able to get to his feet.

“Tom Finch is more of a brother to me than you could ever be!” He yelled. Adam stopped, but this time it was Joe’s turn to walk away. He listened for Adam’s following footsteps, but there were none.

He walked around without even seeing where he was going and somehow ended up at the saloon. He pushed through the swinging doors, and for a moment he stood in the doorway. The saloon was empty except for a few poker players, and he let the silence bathe his mind of his anger; then he went to the bar and got a beer. He made his way to the corner and took a seat. Normally Joe preferred to be in the center of the room, right in the middle of things, but for some reason he was drawn to the fringes. For once he didn’t want to lose himself in a crowd; he wanted to observe and let the wheels of his mind, which were clashing against each other, simmer down until they could slowly begin to turn again.

Three beers later, the clashing had subsided to a gentle hum, and Joe felt both better and worse. Better because he could barely feel the tips of his fingers, which was a novel experience in itself, and worse because he was no longer just mad at Adam, he was mad at himself now too. Mad for losing his temper, mad for actually believing that he had a shot at having a family, and mad for not walking away from all of them, including Tom, when he’d had the chance. Well, he was walking away now, and with a vengeance. Joe slammed his empty beer mug down on the table and called for another one. The bartender gave it to him along with a sympathetic glance at the young man getting drunk so early in the day, which Joe missed completely. He lifted the amber liquid to his lips and discovered another reason to be mad. He’d always promised himself he would never sink down to his father’s level, and now here he was, drinking away his problems because once the numbness got past your fingertips and made its way to the rest

of your body, you were sure not to hurt as much anymore.

At least now he could understand his Pa a little better anyway. Sometimes oblivion was the best gift you could give yourself. He took another swallow and had a vision of himself riding back to the line shack and staying there like his Pa had stayed at his shack, not really living, just existing and counting the minutes until the next drink, alternating between angry, painful sobriety and blissful drunkenness. He would get a wife who would work, bring home booze, and holler at him for being a lazy bum and a kid that wasn't his own to beat up on. Life would be grand.

Joe picked up his mug and eyed it with suspicion. Just what was in there that was making his mind go this crazy?

"Joe?"

There was a familiar voice hovering over him, but Joe couldn't place the person or where the voice was coming from. He looked up vaguely and saw two people who looked exactly alike standing behind him. Joe frowned. Twins?

"Joe, what are you doing here?"

Funny, they seemed to move in tandem too. But at least Joe recognized one of them.

"Didn't know you had a twin, Jesse." His lips sluggishly responded to his mind, and his hand jerked slightly as he waved toward the empty seat. "Want a beer?"

"I think you've had enough, Joe. What happened? Where's Tom?"

"With that stuck up... no good... arro... arroga..." Joe couldn't remember what he'd been trying to say. What had Jesse asked him? Suddenly there were no longer two Jesses, instead there were four.

"How you do that?" he mumbled.

“Do what?”

Joe waved a hand, but when he looked at it, it seemed like he was seeing someone else's hand. Having something to focus on suddenly helped Joe to realize what Jesse wanted.

“With th'other two. Come on.” Joe stood and then the room tipped over and threw him down with as much disdain as an old woman shooing a cat off her porch. Joe barely noticed hitting the floor or the fist that gripped the back of his jacket and hauled him out the door. Then the light hit his eyes like shattered glass an instant before his head was shoved into lukewarm water. He came up spluttering, and suddenly only one Jesse stood before him. Joe jerked away and then gripped the hitching post as he nearly fell right back into the water trough.

“Will you tell me what's going on now?” Jesse snapped. Too loud. Joe didn't know whether to shield his eyes from the blinding light or his ears from Jesse's near shouts. He settled for covering his whole face with his hand and slumping to the ground.

“He's with the other two who took him.” Joe answered. Somehow talking encouraged the hammers, which were trying to find nails in his head, to an even greater persistence. “What are you doing here?”

“We got your telegram, so Pa sent me ahead while he waited for Carl. They should be here soon, within the morning I'd say. Joe, why didn't you do anything?”

“It's... complicated.” Joe wanted to crawl into a hole and die. He mentally snorted. Complicated. The situation really had grown to proportions beyond that word. His scowl made him wince as pain traveled through his face and into his skull, and he cradled his head in his hands apologetically.

“Come on, Joe. Where is he?” Jesse pressed.

"He's not gonna let Tom go without a fight."

"Who's not?"

"Adam. My brother." Joe didn't raise his head from his hands. He felt like if he so much as shifted he would be sick.

"Your brother?"

"Pretty much."

Joe could almost hear Jesse thinking. He'd always been the thinker, the quiet one who spoke up after everyone had gotten into a mess and then came up with a flawless plan to get them out.

"Where is he? Your brother, I mean?"

"Why?" Joe was suddenly wary. Sure, he wouldn't mind knocking the living daylights out of Adam, but that didn't mean he wanted someone else to.

"I just want to keep him around until Pa gets here. Maybe we can talk to him, see what he wants."

"Fifty thousand dollars. It's for that man Tom got a job with."

"Right. Pa can pay him and we'll be on our way with Tom. Just point him out to me."

For a moment Joe considered not telling Jesse. Didn't it break some sort of brother code? But when he raised his head he nearly lost the contents of his stomach, and he remembered why he'd been drinking in the first place. He could still feel the power of Adam's fist as it had collided with his jaw. He didn't know why it bothered him so much; he'd been hit before. But something about it ripped into his chest in an unfamiliar way. Joe lifted a hand to point.

"That's his horse across the street. He was getting supplies,

should be out soon.”

Jesse clapped Joe on the back. “Thanks. Come on, we can wait over there; there’s some chairs.”

Joe shook his head and then wished he didn’t. “You want to talk to Adam, you go ahead. I’m going find somewhere to sleep.” He was done with Adam, and the Finches, and the Cartwrights, at least for a few hours until his head stopped threatening to squeeze itself into a tiny ball.

“You go on then. I’d better stay out here and keep watch.”

Joe nodded and stood. “No need to help; I got it.”

He staggered over to the hotel and glared at the bell at the empty desk. He would not ring it. But he wanted to lie down, and there was no one around. Joe raised his hand and braced himself. The sharply pitched ding made him wince, and a man came over.

“Can I help you?” His voice boomed in Joe’s head.

“A room.” Joe whispered.

When he finally collapsed on the soft bed, and his head was able to enjoy the bliss of the feather pillows, he thought once more about his conversation with Jesse. Maybe he should go and keep an eye on him. Jesse wasn’t prone to violence, but Mr. Finch and Carl were coming.

Joe mentally shrugged since he couldn’t physically. Adam could take care of himself, and if Carl gave him a black eye it would serve him right.

~*~

“Is that everything?” the shopkeeper asked.

“That’s everything.” Adam went outside and started putting the food into his saddle bags. Then he stopped. Joe’s horse was

still here. Adam had been certain he would have gone back to camp or just left altogether. He finished packing away the supplies, but instead of mounting, he took off at a walk through the town. If Joe was here, he was going to find him. Arguing was one thing, but lashing out with a fist... that was unforgiveable, no matter what Joe had said. For all his swagger and maturity, Joe was still just a kid struggling to figure out where he fit, and Adam figured he hadn't scored many points toward his side of things. Hopefully he could make it up to him.

"Hey, mister."

Adam turned at the voice and then froze as he instantly recognized the young man on the saloon porch.

"You're a Finch." He said.

"Darn straight. Jesse Finch."

"What do you want?"

"To talk." The young man stepped forward. "Let's go up to my hotel room where it's private."

"No thanks." Adam turned to go, but the young man stepped in front of him.

"Let me rephrase." His voice was low and even. "My Pa's got your little brother upstairs, and if you don't follow me, he'll blow a hole through his head."

Adam felt like he'd fallen into an icy lake. For a moment he was frozen, body numbed over as his mind raced to understand what he'd just heard. Then he exhaled in defeat. "Lead the way."

He followed Jesse into the hotel and upstairs. Jesse unlocked the door and stepped back so Adam could go in first.

Adam surveyed the room. "Where's Joe?"

"I lied." Jesse said. Then he brought down his gun on the back of Adam's head.

Joe groaned as he woke up. The room was dark, and for a minute he thought it was night, but then he remembered that he'd closed the curtains before passing out.

What time is it? He wondered. He felt like he'd been caught behind a stagecoach and dragged, but he managed to stagger to his feet and push back the curtain. At least the light was no longer threatening to murder him.

The sun was about halfway through its downward journey to the horizon, so it was at least three. Joe reached for his hat and wondered if Mr. Finch and Carl were here and if they were still talking with Adam or if he'd gone back. Maybe they'd turned Tom over and left him behind. Joe didn't know if he would be happy or mad if they did.

He found his horse right where he'd left it. The animal glanced at him as if asking why he'd been standing there all day. Joe tightened the girth and swung up, but the motion almost made him fall right back down. He gripped the saddle horn.

"Just a nice easy walk back to camp." He muttered.

"Joe!" Hoss ran up to him when he arrived. "It took you long enough; I was getting worried. Where's Adam?"

Joe blinked. "How should I know? He didn't come back?"

"Why would he? He was with you."

Joe shook his head, eyes closed. Clearly they were not on the

same page.

"What's wrong, Joe? You look terrible."

"Help me down." The ground seemed miles away, but Hoss' arms were mercifully solid as he helped Joe to dismount.

"So Adam didn't come back?" he asked again.

"He hadn't been back since he left with you."

"He must still be with Jesse." But why so long? If Carl and Mr. Finch were due this morning, surely they would be done talking by now. Joe felt a cold hand squeeze his stomach.

"Jesse?" Tom called. "Jesse's here?"

"Who's Jesse?" Hoss asked.

"His brother. He wanted to talk to Adam when his Pa got here. But they should be done by now." Maybe they were delayed. But for some reason he couldn't convince himself of that.

"I don't like this. Not one bit." Hoss muttered. "Joe, where are they?"

"It's fine, Hoss. They said they'd talk and pay Adam and then Tom could go."

"Then why is it taking so long?"

"How should I know?" A narrow edge of irritation crept into Joe's voice. "Maybe they're drinking tea or discussing politics or something. It's none of my business."

"It's your family, Joe."

Joe whirled to face Hoss. "Family?" he spat the word. "You want to know what my experience with 'family' is? Not a day of my life went by where I didn't get some kind of a bruise from either my drunken father or my beat down mother. And when she

died, he sent me to work at the mines when I was twelve, Hoss. Twelve! All because he didn't want to lose the income for his booze. He wouldn't even let the foreman pay me; he made sure he got it all." Joe took a deep breath as he suddenly realized that he'd left himself wide open and vulnerable. "Just don't... don't talk to me about family."

Hoss was silent for a moment, and then his voice was soft when he spoke, like he was trying to calm spooked a horse. "Not your father, Joe. Just the man you thought was your father. You ain't his son any more than you're a fish. You're a Cartwright."

Joe slumped against a tree and let his head fall into his hands. "What does that even mean?" he mumbled through his palms. Then he felt a hand on his shoulder, firm and supporting. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the warmth of that hand.

"It means you're a fighter, Joe. It means you stick by what's yours. And it means that yours'll stick by you."

"I don't have anyone, Hoss. I'm alone."

"You ain't alone right now, are you?"

Joe took a deep breath and blinked eyelashes that were slightly damp. "No. I guess not." He looked up. "So in other words a Cartwright would go and check on Adam?" An ironic smile crept over his face at the ridiculousness of the situation.

"We'll both go."

Joe shook his head. "Better just me."

"Dadburnit, Joe! I'm gettin' tired of sitting around here while you two run around and get yourselves in trouble."

Joe smiled slightly at his brother's sudden display. "If I

show up with you, it'll put them on the defensive. Right now they think I'm on their side."

"They probably shot your brother." Tom said. "I would have." His eyes glittered at Joe like a snake's.

Joe swallowed. "They'd better not, at least not before I get the chance to go rounds with him. I still have a score to settle." He mounted. "I'll be back."

~*~

There was a large, throbbing knot on the back of his head. Adam went to reach up to rub it, but he couldn't move his arms. They were tied behind his back. He opened his eyes and found himself in a chair, arms and legs securely bound.

Stupid.

He refrained from struggling against the ropes and remained still, listening to the voices around him.

"Just how hard did you hit him anyway?" one of them said. "He's been out for a while now."

"Guess I don't know my own strength." Adam recognized Jesse's voice.

"He'll be awake soon enough." another voice joined the conversation, this one deeper and older.

"What makes you think he'll talk?" the first voice asked.

"He'll talk." the lack of emotion in the voice sent a shiver up Adam's spine.

"Pa..." the voice trailed off hesitantly.

"What?"

"It's not your fault."

"Isn't it?" the two words spoke volumes in the otherwise silent room. Adam opened his eyes and for an instant he saw the bleakness on the man's face before it hardened.

"Welcome back." A voice said. Adam refused to allow himself the pleasure of glaring at the young man that had tricked him.

"That's not a very good way to start a relationship." He said. His voice was even and light, as if he was discussing the weather in a saloon. It was something he always enjoyed, being able to affect casualness when most men would be shaking and blubbering.

"Who says I want to have any kind of relationship with you?"

"Easy."

Adam studied the man who stepped forward. He would have recognized him as Gideon Finch even if he hadn't seen him in his house. He had the blonde hair of his sons, even though it was fading to white as well as the ice blue eyes, and he carried himself with an air of authority that made him think of his own Pa for a minute. But then he dismissed the idea. His Pa had walked with a strength that had instantly demanded respect, while Finch seemed ready regard the dirt beneath him as his own property for stomping on.

"Now look son..."

"I don't think I'm your son, sir." Adam interrupted.

Finch eyed him like a tree he might like to cut down. "Alright then, Adam, is it? Here's the thing, I want my son back, and since you seem to be responsible for taking him away, it only stands to reason that you ought to be the one who tells me where he is. So here's what's going to happen. You're going to tell me where my son is, and then we're going to get him and ride away, and you are not going to come after us."

"Don't ever try to make a living as a fortune teller, Mr.

Finch. You're terrible at it."

A blow glanced across his face and made his head snap sideways.

"Come to think of it, you're not that great of a fighter either. Is that all you have?"

Another blow, but this one had some feeling behind it. Adam wished his hands were untied so he could reach up to feel the swelling under his eye.

"Where is he?"

"Fifty thousand dollars would get me to talk a lot more than your fists." Adam focused on breathing deeply to battle the tightness in his stomach. He wondered how desperate they were, and then he wondered how determined he was to keep his mouth shut.

I guess we'll find out. He decided. He wasn't letting go of the Ponderosa just because someone wanted to redecorate his face.

"Tell me where he is, or you might not live to regret it." Mr. Finch hissed.

Adam grinned up at him, a grin that defied the twisting in his stomach and the scowling of the Finches like a cat grins down at a dog. Only this time, Adam reflected, the tree was on fire. Still, he wasn't about to let them know they'd gotten to him. "Shall we continue then?"

~*~

Somehow a sense of urgency had taken hold of Joe as he rode back toward Yreka. He urged his horse on, no longer worried about keeling over. Something else had latched onto him and gave him the resolve to stay in the saddle.

I don't want to see someone else die. He realized. Even if he didn't particularly like Adam, he knew enough to know that watching someone die, even someone who you think you hate, left you feeling empty, like last summer's apples rotting on the ground. That was how it had been when his Ma had died, or at least the woman who called herself that.

She had been getting sicker and sicker, but He hadn't cared. He'd just told her to stop whining and go to work so he could buy more liquor. They were almost out. Joe had noticed her looking more transparent each day, like a shred of paper getting thinner and thinner or a shadow shrinking back from the sun. It hadn't taken much of a push – He hadn't been sober enough to push her very hard anyway – to send her flying backwards. She'd caught the edge of the rough table with the back of her head, and when Joe had lifted her up, his hand had come away sticky with blood. And even though he'd never cared much about her, his tears had still dribbled off of his cheeks and fallen onto her cold ones. She had cursed at him, slapped him, scratched him, and spit on him, but Joe could remember her slipping him food when he'd been sent to his room without supper, not because of anything he'd done, but because the food needed to be stretched out a little more. Or the times when he'd gotten a sedative from the doctor and she would slip it into his food so they could have a night in peace. They hadn't been friends, but they'd been allies against Him.

“Lo quise. Lo quise.” She kept muttering over and over again until her voice had slipped away into silence. He'd closed her eyes and held her there a moment longer.

“You shouldn't have loved him.” He told her empty body. Love meant relying on someone else, and you couldn't rely on anyone but yourself.

He had buried her alone and had been astounded at the storminess of his emotions. Death brings emotions to the surface you never knew you had. As much as he wanted to have

something besides hatred for Adam, he didn't want to discover it while looking at his corpse.

Adam's neck was sore from the constant twisting, and his wrists had been rubbed raw from being jerked against the ropes. You wouldn't think he'd notice that compared to the throbbing in his head and face. Also it was driving him mad that he couldn't reach up and wipe away the trickle of blood that was tickling his face as it slid down from below his eye.

The things you notice. But he still managed to keep a taunting smirk on his face even though inwardly his mind was screaming at him to just give up. To shut the voice up, he put himself far away from the fists and the snapped questions of Finch, and the roped cutting into his wrists and let his mind drift to the Ponderosa. He wasn't letting go of her that easily.

"He's not going to tell."

Adam heard the voice as if from far away.

"Shut up, Jesse."

"You should have just asked Joe instead of playing all this cat and mouse game." The older brother said.

"I didn't want to have any trouble from this one."

"And you avoided it so nicely."

"Enough, both you boys." Finch paused and wiped the blood off the back of his hand. He lifted Adam's head and Adam saw him through swollen eyes. "You ready to talk now?"

"About what? Child rearing?" Adam's lips were swollen and heavy. Another fist crashed into him, but he barely felt it. His entire face was numb and throbbing at the same time.

"Pa! Look!" Jesse called from the window. "Joe just came into the hotel."

"Did he now?"

Adam didn't like the sudden smirk on Finch's face. He nodded at his oldest son, and Carl slipped behind the door. Finch clapped a hand over Adam's mouth, and a moment later there was a knock at the door.

"Jesse?" Joe called.

Adam struggled against Finch's hand. *Get out of here, Joe!*

Jesse glanced at his father, hesitation written plainly on his face. Gabriel gave his son a stern look.

"Come on in." Jesse said.

The door opened.

"Jesse, is..." Joe froze as he saw Adam, and then Carl jumped out from behind the door and grabbed him, pressing his gun against Joe's neck. Mr. Finch released his hold on Adam and strode across the room to shut the door. When he turned, his face carried the smirk of a man who holds all the cards. He rubbed his palms together.

"Adam, you now have a choice."

Adam knew what he was going to say before he said it. He closed his eyes and pictured the Ponderosa stretching out before him like he was an eagle flying over it, a green rippling carpet beneath him. Then he opened them and stared into the green eyes of his brother.

"He's about two miles north along the road." He said. Joe looked up incredulously, and Adam wondered if he'd thought he would let him die.

"Tie him up, Carl." Finch said.

Carl dragged Joe over to a chair and pulled out more rope. Joe glared at them.

“Good and tight, Carl.” He said. “Not like that knot you tied that horse with that one time. Remember? You’d just bought him for three hundred dollars. And who caught him?”

“Shut up, Joe.” Carl jerked the rope, and Adam could see the turmoil on his face even if Joe couldn’t. He didn’t like this any more than the sick looking Jesse by the door. But their father’s word was law.

“You should’ve stuck with me, Joe.” Jesse said as they left. Then the door shut behind them.

“Well...” Joe began.

“Shh.” Adam’s head was cocked and his eyes were closed. Joe frowned but didn’t try to speak again. Finally Adam heard what he’d been waiting for: hoof beats riding away.

“They weren’t very smart.” He said. “You should never leave two people tied in the same room.”

“What are we...” Joe was cut off by Adam tipping his chair sideways on to the floor. He lay still tied to the chair, and twisted his head around to face Joe.

“Are you going to join me or just sit there staring?” he asked.

Joe mentally shrugged and jerked sideways. As he hit the floor, the chair smashed against the arm wrapped around it, and he let out a muffled yelp.

“Watch your arm when the chair hits it.” Adam said.

“Thanks.” Joe hissed.

Joe couldn’t see Adam since he was behind him, but it sounded like he was trying to wriggle across the floor toward him. Joe

shifted his head so that his face wasn't being pressed down into the carpet.

"This hotel doesn't clean their floors very well." He said. "It's usually easier to clean carpet this cheap."

"Too bad their chairs aren't as cheap as their carpet." Adam grunted as he struggled to navigate across the floor. Almost there.

"How did they get you tied up and everything like that anyway?" Joe couldn't imagine Jesse overpowering his older brother.

"He tricked me. Said you were up here."

Joe scowled. "Sneaky, no good Finch." He muttered.

"Sneaky, no good son of a Finch." Adam corrected. Joe's lips twitched.

"I didn't know you had a sense of humor."

"Well I guess I didn't display it very well when I was knocking the sense out of you." Tiny rocks bit into Adam's arm as he moved. Joe was right; they didn't clean the carpet.

"You weren't. I was just letting you get in a couple of good punches before I knocked you out."

"Right." Adam finally managed to line himself up with Joe so that they were back to back. "Ok, see if you can find the knot; my hands are too numb to do any untying right now."

Joe's fingers felt around blindly behind him until he managed to brush against Adam's arm. He followed it down to his wrists and the rope around them. The knot was tight, made even more so by the constant jerking against it done by Adam. His fingers couldn't get a hold of it.

"I can't get it." He said.

“Just play with it.” Adam said. “Find a loop and work at it until it’s loosened.”

Joe dug his fingernails into the rope and wiggled it back and forth. His index fingernail broke, and he started using his middle finger. Finally the loop was loose enough for him to pull with his fingers. His relief was short-lived as he realized that the knot wasn’t any looser.

“I wish I could just see the thing.” He muttered as he went to work on another loop. This time it was his thumb nail that broke, and he shifted to using his right hand. He freed the loop and then another one, and at last the whole knot slid apart as easily as if it had been cut. Adam winced as he rubbed his wrists and flexed his fingers then he untied his legs and then Joe’s hands. Joe massaged his arm where the chair had been digging into it as Adam freed his legs.

“Are you ok?” Adam asked.

Joe stared at him incredulously. Adam was the one with blood running out of his lip and nose; why was he asking him if he was ok?

“Fine.” He said. “You?”

“Sure. Come on; I don’t think they’ll be any nicer to Hoss.”

~*~

Hoss couldn’t make himself sit still. He stood and surveyed his work for the tenth time: Tom was in the trunk and the wagon was moved farther off the road to a spot that offered a clear view of anyone coming from either direction, and the fire put out. But he still couldn’t help worrying, like an itch in the middle of his back. Tom glaring at him from behind those beady eyes of his didn’t help either.

He heard the sound of hoof beats and stood, putting a hand on his gun. It was three horses riding in, not one. At the most,

there should only be two. Something had gone wrong, and that didn't bode well for Joe and Adam.

Three riders came into view, all of them with their guns drawn. Hoss debated whether or not to draw his. He'd always said that the quickest way to make a bad situation worse was to toss a gun in the mix, but since these three already had their guns out, he decided things had already become worse. Still, he didn't want to give them an excuse to shoot him, and there wasn't much he could do against three guns anyway. He let his arms hang at his sides.

"Evenin'." He said to the riders.

"Evening." The tall man who was clearly the leader reined his horse to a stop. "Nice night."

Hoss didn't answer. They both knew what was going on; he wasn't in the mood to play games. He was too busy taking into account the two grim-faced young men on either side of the man who was clearly Gabriel Finch.

"You have my son somewhere here." Finch said.

"I don't even know you, mister."

Finch dismounted and the others followed suit, guns still drawn. They reminded Hoss of rattlesnakes, all coiled up and ready to spring. Finch walked forward.

"I don't recall asking you if you wanted to join my camp, sir." Hoss said.

"I don't recall caring." He looked dramatically at the two others on either side, clearly his sons, and then back at Hoss. "We've got three guns, you've got one. Think you can stop us?"

"No, probably not. But I aim to try."

Finch shrugged. "Carl, find Tom."

The older of the two boys nodded, and Hoss took a step in his direction, but the sound of a gun being cocked made him freeze.

"Don't make me shoot you." Finch said.

Carl walked around to the wagon and jumped inside. It only took him a moment to figure out his little brother was in the trunk. Hoss considered his options. Carl was stooped over, trying to untie Tom's knots, and he would be distracted for a couple of minutes; now there were only two. Hoss tensed. Then they all heard it – the sound of galloping hooves coming down the road. As Finch glanced behind him, Hoss grabbed him by his gun arm and pushed him to the ground, grabbing his gun. He rolled under the wagon and somehow managed to avoid the bullets the other Finches fired at him. Hoss gripped the gun and sent a few back, making all four of them leap for cover.

"That had better be Joe and Adam." He muttered.

~*~

"Gunshots." Adam spurred his horse forward, and Joe followed. They thundered down the road, and Adam felt his heart leap into his throat as the wagon and the Finches came into view. Where was Hoss? A gunshot from under the wagon answered his question as a bullet whizzed past his ear. Adam leaped from his horse and pressed himself behind a large boulder.

"Your gun's in my saddlebags, Joe; get it." Adam drew his own weapon.

"I can't shoot them."

"They're shooting at you; I want you to be able to defend yourself."

Joe hesitated, but then he grabbed his gun and crouched next

to Adam behind the boulder.

"Mr. Finch!" Adam called. "There's no reason for all this shooting! Bates has a legal claim on fifty thousand dollars; once I get that, I'll be gone."

"I'm not giving you a cent more than this next bullet costs!" Finch hollered back.

"You're not weaseling your way out of this contract like you probably always manage to do."

The answer was a bullet that skipped off the boulders surface. Joe and Adam ducked.

"You probably shouldn't make him irritated." Joe murmured.

"Really." Adam tried to peer around the rock. "Can you see Hoss?"

"He's under the wagon." Joe realized that from their vantage points they could easily overpower the Finches. Surely Adam would have noticed, so why was he just sitting there?

"Those Finches are a trigger happy bunch." Adam seemed to read his mind. "I'd rather not have to kill any of them or get any of us killed."

"So I suppose you'd rather sit here until they run out of bullets?"

"It's bound to happen eventually." But Adam wasn't banking on it. He peered out from behind the rock. "Let's talk, Finch!"

"You already had your chance to talk."

"Five minutes. Everybody puts down their guns, and comes out. If we can't resolve anything, we go back to trying to blow each other's heads off."

There was a long silence in which Joe counted the seconds with

his heartbeats. Then Mr. Finch called out.

“Five minutes; you come out first.”

“We’ll toss our guns out and then you toss yours. Then we’ll come out.” Adam threw his gun to the side where the Finches could see it but couldn’t reach it.

“You don’t trust them?” Joe asked incredulously. He’d already been burnt once that day, and it was enough for him.

“Nope. But we don’t have a choice.”

Joe sighed and sent his gun in the direction of Adam’s. They heard the muffled thump of the Finches’ guns hitting the ground, and then they stepped forward.

“You alright, Hoss?” Adam asked his brother who emerged from under the wagon.

“Sure thing. Even managed to hold down the fort.”

Adam surveyed the men in front of him. It was just the three of them; Tom must still be tied in the wagon. He glances from one to the other and noted their hard faces. They weren’t backing down from this fight.

“I’m taking my son out of here.” Gabriel Finch said.

Adam raised a hand, and Joe was stunned at the air of authority his older brother had, even when facing Mr. Finch.

“You have two options, Mr. Finch. Three if you happen to have fifty thousand dollars on you, which I doubt, so we’ll skip that option. The second option is one you probably won’t like, and I can see why. I’ll take Tom to San Francisco and let him settle his own affairs one way or another with Sam Bates. Like I said, you probably won’t like that option. The third option is that we all go back to Yreka and to your lovely hotel room with the dirty carpet and we wait until you hand me a bank

draft for fifty thousand dollars. Then we go our separate ways. It's up to you."

"I don't owe anybody anything."

Adam sighed. How could you rationalize with a man who wouldn't see reason?

"Now here are your choices." Finch stepped forward. "You can go back to wherever you came from, or I can blow a hole in your head."

Adam had been intent on Finch, but then he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye from the wagon. Tom. As the youngest Finch leaped through the air for Hoss' gun, Adam dove the opposite way, toward the Finch's guns. His hand curled around a handle and he twisted in time to see the barrel of another pointing at him. He fired and rolled sideways. Dirt exploded next to him.

Instantly a frenzy erupted as the Finches scrambled for their guns. Adam ducked behind the wagon, and Hoss scooted in next to him. Adam sent a couple of shots at the Finch boys to give Joe time to get behind a large rock. His bullets sent the Finches scurrying behind a fallen log where they returned the favor.

"That didn't go as well as I'd hoped." Adam muttered. Now they really would have to wait until they ran out of bullets. For every two of their shots, Adam sent one. He wanted to have ammunition for when the Finches ran out.

A sound rose over the gunshots and made them all pause as they tried to place it. Then Adam caught sight of Gabriel Finch as he knelt on the ground and clung to the limp body of his youngest son. From his lips came a sob and Adam holstered his gun as a lump formed in his throat. It was the mournful wail of Jacob over Joseph because he had lost something that no one, not even eleven other sons, could replace. Carl and Jesse

went to their father and each placed a hand on his shoulder in silence.

“I should kill you.” Gabriel’s words were choked out. “But that won’t change anything, will it?”

“Pa.” Jesse began, but Gabriel cut him off.

“He didn’t know what he was getting into. I should have stopped him.”

Adam didn’t speak. He could point out that Tom had drawn on him, but he didn’t. Because as Finch had said, it wouldn’t change anything. The fact that his son was killed in self defense would be no little consolation to his crying father.

It takes eighteen years to raise a son and half a second to kill him. Adam looked away and his glance fell on Joe, pale and silent, gun still in hand. Adam’s heart wrenched, and he was thankful Hoss had stepped forward to stand with his little brother. He didn’t think Joe would want any consolation from him.

Finch rose with his son in his arms and draped him over his horse. Carl looked up at Adam, and his eyes glittered with hatred, but he followed his father. As the Finches mounted in silence, Joe stepped forward; his were eyes large and dark in his pale face, and they were fastened on the limp form of his friend. Jesse turned and saw Joe staring at the lifeless body.

“Joe, you know Pa didn’t mean...”

“I know.” Joe said. And he did. More clearly than ever he’d seen the line that was drawn when a family was attacked. You were on one side or the other, and you could be certain that the family would all be together. Somehow he couldn’t hate the Finches for that.

“You can come with us, Joe. Pa wouldn’t mind.”

Joe turned and looked back at Adam and Hoss. They had both frozen, unable to beg him to stay and unwilling to move until they knew what he would do. Hoss's eyes held the plea that he couldn't say, and Adam's remained as deep and unrevealing as ever.

"I... I don't know." He said.

Jesse nodded and clapped his shoulder. "Catch up with us if you change your mind."

He felt the eyes of Hoss and Adam on him as the Finches rode away with Tom's limp arms swinging back and forth slightly from the motion of the horse. He looked away, feeling sick.

"Joe?" Hoss asked hesitantly. Joe shook his head. He wasn't alright; he was going to throw up, and he couldn't do it here in front of the man who had just killed his best friend. He went over to his horse and mounted.

"Joe, wait." Adam said.

"I just need..." he didn't know what he needed. So instead of finishing the sentence, he turned his horse and rode away.

He couldn't get the image of Tom out of his head, and the word lifeless took on a whole new meaning as he closed his eyes and saw it again. Pale skin, eyelashes resting lightly above his cheeks, almost as if he were sleeping, but they didn't blink or twitch. Instead they were still as a dead butterfly. And the hands that had so often gripped Joe's in an arm wrestling contest were as limp and weak as an old sack.

Joe dismounted and slumped to the ground, his back against a tree. No one deserved to die. No one deserved to have their whole existence wiped out like that, especially not Tom. Not

the young man who had yelled that he would beat Joe at a horse race and then tackled him when he lost. He'd never stood still, not for an instant, always vibrant and moving. Maybe that was why they'd gotten along so well. And they had. In Tom, Joe had found his first and only friend. And while part of his brain didn't fully grasp that he was gone, the other part was reeling and screaming. Joe pulled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them as if the closeness of his own body could make the ache in his chest disappear. He let his forehead fall to his knees. Gone. The word kept playing over and over in his head, but he still couldn't fully comprehend it. He closed his eyes against the burning tears and tried to keep them back then he gave in. At first the sobs that wracked his shoulders were silent ones, but then a single cry escaped from his lips and suddenly he was sobbing out loud, his voice joining the lone coyote.

Eventually his sobs wore down into a deep silence that weighted so heavily on his shoulders he didn't think he could move. So he kept his head where it was and his eyes focused on the line where his knees met while his stomach and head ached in tandem. His eyes burned, but he couldn't reach up to rub them. He felt as if nothing was real anymore; everything was just his imagination, and if he blinked it would disappear, swallowed by darkness. The coyote howled again, and this time the loneliness of its cry brought more tears for Joe's eyes.

I know how you feel. He thought. I don't have anyone either.

He shouldn't have to do this alone.

Carl's words echoed in his head. He could go back with the Finches, the first real family he'd known and probably the only people who shared his sense of loss right now. And somehow he knew if he went back, things would be different; there would be no more feeling of being on the outside looking in. If he went back, he would be one of them.

One of the people who would kill or betray a friend at the word of their leader. He realized. And he couldn't do that. He thought of Adam and Hoss, men who were just as convicted, but they were men who were true. Adam would never betray trust or use one man against another like pieces in a chess set.

Joe could still feel the tooth-like barrel of Carl's gun pressing against his neck. He'd thought he was as good as dead – Adam would never give up his Ponderosa; that much was obvious by looking at the bruises on his face from the Finches. But he'd barely hesitated before blurting out where Tom was. And then there was the simple statement he'd made when he'd told Joe to get his gun.

“I want you to be able to defend yourself.” Not ‘you need to’ or ‘you should’. I want. Joe swallowed hard and thought of Hoss patching him up like he was a wayward stray that needed tending to. That was where he should belong. That was where he should feel like he belonged.

So why didn't he?

Maybe he was too messed up. After all, he wasn't anything more than a kid who'd grown up under the belt of a drunken father and then ran away to get involved with another messed up set of people. What did he know about families?

Joe closed his eyes again and struggled to visualize the ranch that Hoss had described to him during the wagon ride. He could build a picture in his head of tall trees and a small log house with a fireplace, but there was no connection. It could just as easily have been anyone else's house he was imagining, filled with faceless people whose names meant nothing to him. Joe opened his eyes and lifted his head. He was on the edge of a clearing that sloped steeply downwards with the sky hovering over it like a cape, dark and sprinkled with stars. The emptiness made him feel like the only person in the world, and once again he ached for someone to be with. He thought of

getting up and riding back to Adam and Hoss, but he couldn't convince his legs to move. His mind saw Adam, on his knees, pulling the trigger effortlessly. No, there wouldn't be any sympathy there. Adam had only ever been able to see Tom as an irresponsible idiot, which in all fairness, he was from time to time, but he was also more. Hoss might understand, but Joe thought it was more likely that he'd side with Adam. After all, they'd been together longer, and they had memories of each other. Joe glared at the empty space in front of him. He would cut off his own hand if it could get him one memory. Just one. And it didn't even have to be a big one. Just of something.

And what would Adam do once he realized that Joe had been the one to point him out to Jesse? It wasn't a matter of if; he'd probably already figured it out by now, and chances were he wasn't too thrilled. Joe flushed scarlet. He had been stupid and had nearly cost Adam his life. No, that wasn't a thing his older brother was likely to forget.

Some things just aren't meant to be. Joe hated it when people said things like that. He'd always accredited fate as laziness; you didn't try hard enough, so you blame your failure on some overruling power instead of yourself. But maybe there was some merit in it after all. Maybe he wasn't meant to be part of a family. He could strike out on his own again. This time he was older and had experience; he wouldn't have a problem finding a job.

Joe felt a sinking feeling in his chest, and he clenched his fists. This would be so much easier if he were a girl. Girls were allowed to hug and cry when they needed to; they were allowed to change their minds and go backwards, but men had to be tough. They had to keep a stiff upper lip even when it felt like the world was shattering beneath them, and they had to stand alone when what they needed more than anything else was an arm to lean against or an embrace to rest in. Girls were allowed to be wrong. But Joe had chosen his side when he'd

told Jesse who Adam was, and now he was just going to have to make the best of it. If he couldn't go back, he could at least go forward.

Joe crossed his arms over his knees. He would like to see the Ponderosa, just once. Maybe someday he would. For now he rested his chin on his arms and watched the sun begin to lighten the sky and rise, making the cold stars melt away like ice.

~*~

Sparks from the fire hovered like bees above the bright orange flames that mesmerized Adam's eyes. He and Hoss sat on opposite sides of the fire in silence, both of them hypnotized by the continual leaping of the flames. But Adam's eyes managed to break free from the spell occasionally to wander over to the spot where Tom Finch had fallen. He wished they could leave so he didn't have to keep looking at that spot. And even when he looked at the flames, he could still see it happening, the dive for the gun, the shot, the roll. He hadn't even known he'd hit him; instinct had pulled the trigger and had kept him rolling and shooting. Then he heard that cry again, a wail that he thought he would hear for years. It was eerily similar to the wail that had echoed in his chest when he had come back to find his home burnt and brothers gone. Adam shifted and pulled a leather flask out of his pocket, took a drink, and then held it out to Hoss. Hoss scooted over and took it, sniffing before he drank.

"It's whiskey." Adam said.

"Where'd you get it?"

"I figured we'd want to celebrate a little after dropping Tom off while on our way to the Ponderosa." He should have known better than to get too far ahead of himself. Now his plans had leaked like water out a barrel, left to dry into dust. He took another drink and glanced over his shoulder again.

"You keep lookin' at that spot back there." Hoss said.

"Maybe."

"Somethin' on your mind?"

Adam shook his head. How could he explain what was on his mind? He'd killed dozens of people before, but this was the first time he could honestly say he wished it had been him instead. His family was already broken, and no one would miss him except Hoss and possibly Joe. But now he'd gone and taken from Gabriel Finch what Harry Singer had once taken from him.

"Adam?"

Adam took a deep breath to compose his thoughts. "I've killed people before. And I've always felt this twinge, this sadness, but it was all abstract. But this... this time I didn't just end a human life from the point of view of a humanitarian. This time it's real. I took a son from a father, Hoss. And I can feel the weight of that on my chest, threatening to suffocate me." He took another drink and then gave the bitter laugh that was so familiar to his lips. "It's nice to know I'm not a heartless monster, I guess."

"I get the feeling that you feel things on a whole deeper level than the rest of us."

"I get that feeling about you."

The crackling fire filled the silence that followed. From somewhere in the darkness a coyote called. Adam's eyes were buried deeply in the flames when Hoss spoke again.

"What do we do now?"

It took a moment for the question to sink in then Adam looked up. "We?"

"I threw in with you; I ain't going nowhere."

Adam closed his eyes briefly. "In what sense do you mean now? Now as in right this moment or now as in now that we botched things up?"

"The botched up one."

"Bates will still want his money."

"Where are we supposed to get fifty thousand dollars?" Hoss asked.

"I have a few ideas. At the moment we wait for Joe though."

Hoss nodded and left unspoken his thought that if Joe didn't come back he was going after him. It would probably be pointless; the boy did have the Cartwright stubbornness after all, but he wasn't about to let him go that easily. He couldn't shake the feeling in the back of his mind that he'd gotten as he watched Joe ride off: that that would be the last time he saw his little brother.

The sat and watched as the fire dwindled down from a flame to smoldering coals, charred black on the top, molten red on its underbelly. Neither of them spoke. The vividness of the fire faded as the sun began to lighten the sky. Adam stood and tossed his cold coffee onto the coals.

"Let's go find him." Hoss said.

"You think we can?" Adam could barely believe he was saying this, but it had been stewing at the back of his mind all night, and he knew it was what had to be done. He glanced up at the lightening sky and wished there were still stars. If I let him go now, will you give him back to me someday? But just like there were no stars, there was no answer, and Adam looked back at Hoss.

"He didn't come back, so he either went with the Finches or struck out on his own. If he went with the Finches that means he picked them, and that's where he needs to be right now. Tom

was his friend; he's hurting right now. I'm not going to drag him away from someone who can help him."

"And if he went off on his own?" Hoss asked.

Adam raised his hands. "He's been alone before." He didn't think he sounded very convincing, but Hoss exhaled slowly.

"I don't want to leave him." He said.

"He's been alone all his life." Adam said. "Maybe he needs to be alone to find what he's looking for." It was the hardest thing he'd ever had to admit. When Joe had ridden off last night, Adam had felt like a piece of himself was riding away with him. He just hoped that whatever Joe was looking for led him back to his brothers.

~*~

They hadn't spent much time in Yreka, just long enough to stop at the bath house and eat. Adam's whole body had ached and the dirt that covered him had felt like a shirt that had shrunk too small, but even more than that, he needed to let his body relax and wash away the tension that had been building ever since San Francisco. He had closed his eyes and envisioned all of his worry evaporating like steam from the tub. Some of it was a little sticky, but he had managed to push it to the back of his mind and focus on the gentle sound of water lapping against the side of the tub and the smell of soap. His mind was in blissful darkness, and his body seemed weightless, as if he were floating even though the tub was barely three feet deep. How long had it been since he'd slept? Not since Jacksonville, that was for sure. Adam had slipped into a deeper level of darkness and then was jerked out of it by his shoulder being shaken.

"What?" he had mumbled. His eyes sluggishly obeyed his command to open.

"I thought you might like to sleep in a bed instead of drowning in a tub." Hoss handed him a towel, and Adam stood. The air raised goose bumps on his wet skin, chilly after the warm water.

"You know, I barely recognize you without all that dirt on ya." Hoss said. "You don't look half as ugly as you normally do."

Adam half heartedly threw the towel at Hoss, which he caught easily. But he couldn't help a faint grin. "Must run in the family." He said.

Hoss opened his mouth to retort, but then he changed his mind and sniffed. "Smell that? Somebody's cooking bacon."

"I can't smell anything."

"Trust me on this one."

"I'm going to have to because I think I need sleep more than food."

Hoss sniffed again. "Eggs too. And flapjacks."

"How can you smell that?"

"I think the better question is how can you not?"

So they had stopped for breakfast, and now they were riding south again, Adam on his horse, and Hoss on his newly purchased mount. Hoss had been confused when Adam had told him to sell the wagon and the team and get a new horse.

"Why don't I just use one of the driving horses?" he had asked.

"Trust me, there is logic to it. You just don't want to know what it is." Adam thought of how Bates would fume over how much of his money he was spending, and it actually made him smile. At least he could extract a little justice.

"I never should have said yes to Bates." He muttered as they rode.

"Well, some good things have come of it." Hoss said.

"And several bad."

Hoss pursed his lips and studied his brother. That Adam sure was a worrier. Even if he didn't want to admit to it, Hoss could tell was stewing about Joe. But like he'd said, there was nothing they could do. If Adam was an example of a Cartwright, then Joe was one too, through and through, and that meant he wouldn't be coming around until he was good and ready. Hoss decided to change the subject.

"So where are we headed anyway?"

"Sacramento."

"What's in Sacramento?" Hoss finally asked after his brother didn't seem too inclined to explain any further.

"Fifty thousand dollars." Adam smiled slightly as Hoss shifted impatiently in the saddle. Joe probably would have hit him by now for teasing him this way. The thought made his smile fade. "Every year a very rich man named Wilbur Hawkings holds a horse race in Sacramento."

"And the winner gets..."

"Fifty thousand dollars to the owner of the horse."

Hoss shook his head. "That's an awful lot of money to dish out. Why does he do it?"

"Purely because he thinks this is uncivilized country that needs some amount of culture brought to it. Or at least that's what he says. He doesn't mention that he fronts half the purse while local businesses and some from San Francisco front the other half and it's almost always his horse that wins or that

he makes easily two to three times that amount in wagers.”

“How do you know that?”

“A friend told me.” Adam’s voice softened.

“A friend?” Hoss prompted. Clearly there was more to the story than Adam was telling.

“Abraham Rosner. You’ll meet him soon enough.”

“I will?”

“He owns the horse I’m going to be riding.”

“But the owner of the horse gets the money.”

“That’s right.”

Hoss stared at Adam. “You may really think you’re explaining things, but it’s about as clear as mud.”

“You’ll understand when we get there.” Adam said.

Hoss snorted. “It doesn’t matter if I understand it or not, just so long as this plan of yours works.”

Adam smiled at his brother. Just when he got used to having someone along, Hoss would go and say something that reminded him just how grateful he was that his brother was there instead of him being alone. But even as part of him was thankful that he had one brother with him, the other part sent up a silent prayer to his Pa or whatever God might be watching to keep an eye on the other one.

Hoss and Adam would head south, so Joe went southeast through the mountains. He had some vague ideas about going off to sea and leaving everything behind him, but he knew that would

never happen. He liked to have land under his feet, and he liked the trees and mountains that firmly hemmed him in. Besides, he was a horse breaker. He'd go down to southern California and find a job at a ranch.

Then what?

Then what indeed. He didn't have the answer.

"Have you ever thought that people are trapped?" Tom had once said to him. Joe frowned and remembered the conversation. They'd been fishing, and Joe had pulled in the first one, but it had been small enough to let go. He'd come back and catch it someday when it was bigger.

"What do you mean?" He had asked Tom. He wiped his fish slimy hands on his pants and settled back down into the long grass that tickled his elbows as he picked up his fishing line.

"Maybe we're like that fish, swimming around in the world, and the only reason we're alive is because someone wants us to get big enough to be eaten."

Joe had stared at Tom for a full minute before shaking his head. "I think you've been in the sun for too long."

Maybe Tom had been right though; maybe there was a large giant in the sky just toying with him, waving happiness in front of his face like bait and then jerking him out of whatever semblance of a life that he had.

Well if you're up there jerking my line, how about a favor while you're at it? Just let me remember. I don't care how small it is. Just something to help me understand who I am. Joe didn't think his thoughts counted as a prayer, but he wasn't sure exactly what category they fell under.

His horse suddenly snorted, and jerked sideways, nearly unseating Joe. He kicked himself for not paying attention and leaned forward to stroke the animal's shoulder, wondering what

had caused him to spook. His answer came a moment later as a branch came crashing down through the trees above him. The horse leaped forward, and Joe sat up, tightening his reins, but then the horse's foot caught on a branch beneath its foot, causing it to strike his leg. The horse kicked and ignored Joe's hands, plunging into a gallop.

"Easy, Scout!" Joe struggled to slow the charging horse as trees whipped by, several nearly smashing his knees. He ducked low to avoid being swept off the saddle by low branches, and tried to pull Scout into a circle, but there wasn't any room. A short branch struck him on the shoulder and caught on his jacket, dragging him halfway off the saddle. Joe jerked free, and then felt himself falling as his horse swerved out from under him. He felt an exploding sensation in his side as his body crashed against a tree, but he didn't remember hitting the ground.

~*~

Once again, Adam found himself gazing into the orange, glowing campfire. Hoss had told him in no uncertain terms to go to sleep so he wouldn't fall off his horse the next day, which had made Adam laugh slightly.

"So now you're the boss?"

"You may be the oldest, but that don't make you the smartest. The way I see, you ain't had a good night's rest since we left Ashville."

Adam couldn't argue with that, but that didn't mean he could sleep either. So he lay on his side, listening to Hoss snore and watching the fire eat what was left of the wood before it would starve into coals.

You sure have gotten yourself in a mess this time. He told himself. No doubt Abraham would heartily agree when Adam showed up at his doorstep, but he knew the man would help him.

He was the type of man who would give his mortal enemy his last dollar if it came down to it. Adam had often thought that Pa would have liked him if they had met, and that more than anything made him respect Abraham.

He had been sleeping in the stables because he couldn't afford a hotel when he had met Abraham. Then he'd sensed somebody watching him in the darkness and had rolled over.

"Can I help you?" Adam had asked.

The man had let out a dry chuckle that was somehow warm at the same time. "You're the one sleeping on the floor. I would think I could help you instead."

"I'm alright."

"You're one of the riders."

"And?"

"How does your boss expect you to race if you don't get a good night's sleep?"

Adam shrugged and sat up. Clearly he wouldn't be going to sleep for a while. He brushed some hay out of his hair. "I guess he figures I'll be fine since I was sleeping on the streets when he found me." He said it out of a need to shock the old man out of his pity. He hadn't gotten to the point of using people's guilt to his advantage.

"Well, that would make sense. Who is your boss?"

"Paul Samson."

"You won't win."

Adam bristled. "Why not?"

"Paul's a fine breeder, but he's not a very good trainer."

*"I think I can make up for that." But now Adam was intrigued.
"Who are you?"*

"Just an old man with an extra room in his house if you want it."

"No, thanks; I'm alright here."

"I suppose it is an honor to sleep in a barn." The old man looked around. "After all, it is where Christ was born. But this barn is a lot nicer than the stables of first century Bethlehem. You could probably get a lot closer to the real thing if you slept in a mine."

Adam studied the man, a half smile playing on his lips. It was the kind of talk that had made his Pa want to pull his hair out and holler to get to the point, but it unlocked something in Adam's mind.

"Well no one really kicked me out of an inn, and I don't plan on being crucified, so I think the metaphor ends there." He said.

"No one ever really plans their manner of death, though since the Roman method of execution has long since passed out of tradition, you're probably right. Still, it may not end there. You've left your home, so did Christ, though probably for a more noble cause than yours."

"What makes you think I haven't always slept on stable floors?"

"An educated guess."

"And who would you be then? A Wise Man?" Adam smiled again.

"Not a Magi, but certainly wiser than you because if I had been offered a bed to sleep in instead of a floor I wouldn't have refused. However, I'll give you a chance to correct your mistake and put the question to you again. Would you like to

sleep in my extra bedroom?"

This time an all out grin broke over Adam's face, the first since Leah had left. He stood. "Lead the way."

They had talked almost all night, and while Adam didn't tell him anything about his past, he wondered how much Abraham had guessed. Not the details, but he wondered if the man had been able to see past the false wholeness to the raw, gaping wounds that life had left in him.

Now some wounds were healing and some were being ripped open again, and as Adam stared into the fire, he couldn't help but wonder if that was the way things were always going to be. Get a little, give a little, but never actually gain anything in life. Always trying to get somewhere, but for every step you take, you get knocked back two more. Adam shifted onto his back and stared up at patches of star-sprinkled sky through dark clouds whose edges glowed faintly from the moonlight.

Just take care of him. Was all he could think to pray. If Pa really was up there, hopefully he had his eye on Little Joe. And hopefully he'd march him back to where Adam could keep an eye on him soon.

~*~

He was spinning. Why wouldn't the spinning stop? Joe clenched his eyes shut in an attempt to make his head still. He could feel blankets beneath him, but his eyes wouldn't open. He felt as if weights were on top of his arms and legs, and for a moment he struggled against panic. Then, as he slowly relaxed, his body became weightless, drifting between the darkness and the waking world. A soft touch on his forehead brought him closer to the latter, and a familiar smell filled his nose. Pine smoke. Suddenly Joe felt as though he were somewhere else, curled up near a fire somewhere far away. He let the scent carry him back, and it seemed as if he were on a rug, listening to the fire crackle and something else – a voice. It

was deep and rhythmic, and then another voice joined it, as soft as sunlight. He knew those voices somehow; they were a sound from far away that he had forgotten. As he listened to them, he smelled other things, the scent of brandy in a glass nearby mixing with the scent of the night, streaming in through a slightly open window, and he heard the circular creak of a rocking chair and the gentle click of knitting needles. He felt the bumpy woven rug beneath him and the heat from the fire on his back while the sweet warmth from the night caressed his front. Where was he? But the more he tried to see the scene with his eyes rather than his other senses, the more it faded, and so he stopped trying and listened to the voices. They wrapped around him, making him feel safe, and he drifted back to sleep.

The next time he woke up, things were clearer, and his eyes managed to open slightly to let in the image of sun streaming through yellow curtains in a tiny bedroom. He blinked as the bright light made his head spin slightly.

“Waking up, are you?” a gentle voice called him out of the sleep he’d been slipping back into. He opened his eyes again, and the light didn’t hurt quite as much this time.

“Where am I?” his voice sounded like sandpaper on tree bark, and the woman next to the bed helped him sit up so he could drink.

“You’re at the Ryder farm. And you’re lucky that I found you; you were pretty banged up.”

“Darned horse.” Joe remembered now, and he reached up to rub his head. His whole side reminded him about the tree as well. “Did I break anything?”

“Just your pride, I would imagine. How did you fall?”

“He spooked at a tree branch falling. I should have been paying better attention.” He settled back into the pillows and

took in his surroundings. The room was small but tidy, if sparsely furnished, but somehow it matched the petite blonde woman in a faded dress and apron sitting on a straight backed chair beside the bed.

"Sorry I took your room." He said. "How long was I out?"

"I found you yesterday evening. It's almost supper now."

"Thank you."

"Do you have a name?"

"Joe..." he paused.

"Just Joe?" she asked with a slight smile.

"Cartwright." The name was simultaneously rough and smooth coming out of his mouth.

"I'm Helen Ryder. And that..." she glanced over to where two small faces framed with fine blonde hair were peering in through the door, "... is Sarah and Mike."

Joe smiled at them, but the faces disappeared.

"I'm almost done cooking supper." Helen spoke again. "Would you like me to bring you in a tray?"

"I can get up." Joe moved to rise and then collapsed back against the pillows as a searing pain shot through his side and the room spun. His hand automatically moved to cover his ribs.

"They're not broken, but they're probably sore." Helen said gently, but her eyes twinkled with slight amusement.

"Just a little." Joe spoke through gritted teeth. "Maybe a tray would be better."

She left and he felt dizziness overtake him. Joe sank farther

into the pillows and closed his eyes.

~*~

When he woke up again, the room was dark, and his empty stomach reminded him that he'd missed dinner. Joe experimented with moving again and felt a slightly duller pain in his ribs. He put a hand over them and shifted his legs over the side of the bed, pausing for a minute before he attempted standing. His arm shook as he rested his weight on the bedside table while the room spun in crazy circles around him. For a minute he contemplated giving up and going back to sleep, but he knew his stomach wouldn't let him. After a few more moments, the room quieted down, and he was able to step forward, arm braced against the rough log wall, in the direction of the kitchen.

There was a plate covered on the stove, and after moving it to the small square table, Joe collapsed in a chair. He could feel sweat gathering in his hairline, and he felt like he'd just run ten miles uphill. He'd just picked up his fork when a door opened, and Helen came out carrying a lamp.

"I didn't mean to wake you up." Joe said.

She put a finger to her lips and shut the door behind her. "They're sleeping." She set the lamp on the table and sat down. "I thought you needed rest more than food earlier."

"I probably did." Joe dug into the slightly cold chicken and beans. The juice from the beans was congealing, and the chicken was a little dried out, but he was too hungry to notice.

Helen did though. "Tomorrow I'll fix you a better breakfast."

"It's no trouble." Joe said. "This is the best I've eaten in a while since I was on the trail." As he ate, he studied her out of the corner of his eye. Her blonde hair was mussed and still vibrant, and her eyes were a bright blue, but they carried a

heaviness in them that wasn't from lack of sleep. She looked young and old at the same time. Joe knew the look; he guessed that he wore it himself.

"Are you alone here?" he asked.

"There are two boys that live over the hill that help me run the farm, but they're home with their mother for the weekend." She cleared her throat and looked away. "My husband was killed two years ago in a hunting accident."

"It must be hard for you."

"I'm used to farm work. More than anything I'm worried about them." She gestured toward the bedroom door with her chin. "I'm afraid that they won't remember him."

"I lost my father when I was young." Joe didn't know why he said it. It wasn't like he wanted to talk about it.

"Do you remember him?"

"I was raised by another family; I didn't even know who I was until several days ago. I didn't have what they have: someone to keep the memories alive."

"Where were you going when you fell?"

"Somewhere. I figured if I rode long enough I'd get there eventually."

She seemed to know better than to pursue it. Instead she took his empty plate and set them in the wash basin and then helped him back to his bed. His aching body gratefully sank into the mattress, and Joe stared up at the ceiling, counting the throbs in his side. He wondered why he'd brought up his past to her, a complete stranger. Maybe he'd been overwhelmed by the need to tell his story to somebody, as if that could help him make sense of it.

Sarah and Mike were lucky, he decided. They still had a mother who cared for them. Joe recalled the image of the faceless woman and the feel of her hand caressing him that he'd remembered the night he'd met Adam and Hoss. Who was she? Joe scrunched his eyes shut and tried to see her in his head, but he couldn't conjure up an image for her any more than he could for his Pa.

Joe groaned and rolled over, forgetting about his side then he yelped as he remembered it.

If my Pa could see me now. He thought. If his Pa was anything like Adam he would probably be rolling his eyes over his youngest son's antics.

Maybe this was pointless. Maybe he should just forget about the past and move on. After all, he was free now; he didn't owe anyone anything. It would be the easiest thing in the world to simply walk away from it all like he had once.

Joe rolled over again, this time onto the opposite side. He closed his eyes and pictured Hoss's face in his mind as he had cleaned out Joe's torn up hands that day by the river. He imagined his brother's voice, not deep but rich and thoughtful. Then he tried to go backwards and hear his voice again, only earlier in his life, but his mind came up empty. Frustrated, Joe started again, this time with Adam's deeper voice. He remembered everything Adam had said to him, listening for the tone and tried to hear it from a different time, a time when life had been about simple things like mud pies with his older brother. And then he thought he heard a snatch. Joe held his breath, but the more he focused, the farther away it got. He relaxed his mind and concentrated on the voice again, and once more he heard an echo. He couldn't think of any words, but he knew that he remembered the voice.

It could be just wishful thinking. There really wasn't any way to be certain either, unless he could figure out some way to

turn back time. For a moment Joe fantasized about what his life would be if that happened. He would grow up on a ranch in Nevada, with trees so tall they seemed to be holding up the sky, according to Hoss. Joe smiled slightly as he pictured it, ignoring thought of faceless parents and voiceless brothers. Instead he let his mind create in his head his own Ponderosa, vast and sweeping, full of trees and hills with a lake on one side that was as pure blue as a cloudless sky.

Hoss had been fifteen when Jim had died. It hadn't been dramatic or noisy; he'd just slipped away quiet and easy like, much the way he'd lived his life. It had been fitting, but it had also taken Hoss a long time to realize that he wasn't just gone up into the mountains and would be back in a few days with a bundle of furs to sell. And that was the first time that he had realized the full extent of the cabin's emptiness and how isolated their little world was. Always before the solitude had been a comfort, a place to retreat to from the world that was so harsh and unpredictable, a place where a man could hear God whisper if he paused and listened. But after Jim died, all he could hear was the lonely whistle of the wind through hollow woods and the echo of silence off the rocks.

Still he hadn't been able to leave it for good, even when he started guiding settlers and hunting stray lobos for farmers; he'd always come back to his little piece of desolate heaven. And now Hoss almost wished he was back on it now, that he'd never left. What good had he been on this trip? He hadn't been able to stop Tom from being shot or Joe from leaving.

Hoss glanced away from the reflection of their hotel room in the window that he'd been staring at and looked at Adam, immersed in a book. Or so it seemed. Hoss noticed that his eyes weren't moving back and forth, and he had yet to turn a

page. Either he was stuck on a word he didn't know – which Hoss doubted – or he was chewing something over. Something inside him snapped, and he stood.

“You know what we need to do?”

Adam lifted his head from his book. “What?” His voice was almost bleak, and Hoss knew it was time to stop stewing about things they couldn't change.

“We need to get out of this old hotel room. Come on.”

“To where?”

“Just come on.” Hoss led him out of the hotel. The saloon was down a street and to the left, and he pushed through the swinging doors and nodded in satisfaction. The place was crowded with cowboys, farmers, miners, and girls. A hazy smoke from cigarettes drifted lazily to the ceiling where it mingled with the rich scent of alcohol and laughter to create thick, swirling air.

“Two beers.” Hoss said to the scurrying bartender. He lifted his mug in tandem with Adam.

“Well?”

Adam shrugged. What did they have to toast to?

“To the philosophy that all men are created equal and the society that ignores it.” He finally said.

“You seem to be in a good mood.”

Adam shrugged and downed his beer. It was good, but he barely noticed. He felt about as civil as a bear with a sore head.

“Want to play poker?” Hoss asked, trying to pull his brother out of his black mood.

“I'm not all that good at poker.” Adam answered.

"Now that I can't believe. Adam, you could bluff the devil himself."

"Maybe, but do you have any money? Because I sure don't."

Hoss frowned. "Where'd you get the money for the horse?"

Adam reached in his pocket and pulled out the voucher Bates had written for him. It let him draw money out of Bates' bank accounts, and it was good in practically any bank in California since Bates had an account in virtually every bank. Something devilish broke free in Adam, and a deep, dark grin spread slowly over his face.

"Come on." He said to Hoss. He went over to the table where a game was starting up.

"You boys want to play?" One of the cowboys asked.

"I don't have cash, but I've got this." Adam showed him the voucher. "If I end up owing, I'll get money out of the bank first thing in the morning."

"Sam Bates, huh?" The cowboy glanced at the signature. "He owns half the town. You work for him?"

"In a way."

"Have a seat. I'll take an I-owe-you for any losings. I'm Jake Harding."

"Adam Cartwright. This is my brother, Hoss." Adam pulled up a chair, and Hoss followed suit, slightly puzzled at the sudden change in Adam's demeanor. But since it was for the better he decided not to dwell on it.

The other players introduced themselves as Wes Green and Charlie Lowell. Jake dealt, and Adam studied his hand for a moment. It was decent, and he decided to play to win for now.

Three hands later he was winning and Hoss dealt him three

kings. Adam felt his face nearly stretch into a smirk again, but he forced himself to remain looking neutral. Then he tossed two of his kings.

"Give me two cards." He said to Hoss.

"Looks like your luck's running out." Charlie said when Adam lost.

"Looks like." Adam dealt five cards to each player and then picked up his hand. This one didn't need much help to be a loser, but he tossed a ten just to be sure.

"I might come out on top after all." Jake said when he won. "You gonna keep going?" he asked Adam and Hoss.

"I'm out." Hoss said.

"I'll stick around." Adam bet the remaining of his winnings from the previous hand, and Hoss looked at him with a nervous expression that almost made Adam laugh as he threw out two of his three of a kind.

"Adam, don't you want to head back to the room?" Hoss said two hands later when Adam owed two hundred dollars. It was late, but Adam knew that wasn't why he was asking. The stakes were getting higher. Charlie was out, and Adam bet another three hundred of Bates' money.

"I'm just getting started." He said. He drew a three that actually gave him a straight, and he beat Wes in that hand, but then lost the next two. Hoss shifted behind him, and Adam nearly laughed out loud. Poor Hoss was in for a lot of concern tonight.

Three hours later the bartender told them to wrap it up, and Adam drew a full house. He grinned to himself and tossed two aces and a ten.

"Not your lucky night." Wes said.

"Or yours." Jake gathered up his winnings. "That's six thousand you owe me, Carwright."

"That much, huh?" Adam wrote out a note and signed it. "I'll go down to the bank and get your winnings in the morning."

"Mr. Bates sure is gonna be ticked that you lost so much of his money." Jake said with a grin.

"Oh, I'm counting on it." Adam replied.

"Bates is gonna be spitting mad." Hoss muttered when they were back in the hotel room. "How are you gonna explain losing all that money in a poker game?"

"I'll think of something." Adam pulled off his boots and flopped on the bed. He could very easily imagine the look on Bates' face, and it made him grin. That night he slept more soundly than he had in months.

~*~

He heard soft voices coming from the foot of his bed when he woke up. He lifted his head to see the faces of the two children studying him from the safe distance of behind the footboard. When he looked at them, they seemed to shrink down a little. Joe smiled to himself and raised his hands. As the children watched intently, their blue eyes wide and unblinking, Joe covered his right thumb with two left fingers, tucking his left thumb underneath. He slid his left hand back and forth, making it look as if he was stretching his right thumb out and then pushing it back.

The trick worked like a charm, and Sarah and Mike crawled onto the bed. After investigating his hands for a moment, Mike looked up into Joe's face, his blonde hair falling back from his forehead.

"Are you a bank robber?"

His blue eyes were wide and ready to take everything in, and Joe's throat clenched as he thought of a similar question that he'd been asked by another boy with blue eyes. He shoved the memory aside and forced a smile. "No."

"A cowboy?"

"In a way. I break horses."

"How do you put them back together?" Sarah asked.

Joe's smile slowly gained legitimacy. "Not like that. I train them so that people can ride them."

"Then why did you fall off your horse?"

He had to laugh, and the sound brought Helen in from the kitchen.

"I thought I told you two not to wake Mr. Cartwright up." She put her hands on her hips, a wooden spoon protruding from one of them.

"Just Joe." Joe said.

"We're sorry, Mr. Joe." Sarah said.

Joe smiled down at her. "I was already awake."

"Breakfast is ready; would you like a tray?"

"I'll come out." Joe stood carefully, but the room barely shifted. His side was still tender, and he could feel a lump on the back of his head, but at least he could walk. Sarah and Michael 'helped' him out to the table, and for a moment he stood beside his chair, paralyzed.

There was a fire in the stove, and from it rose the scent of pine wood burning – the same scent that had come to him during his... dream? Memory? Vision? Whatever it had been the night he'd been unconscious, Joe remembered it now.

"Are you alright, Mr. Cartwright?" Helen asked.

"Joe." Joe said distractedly, pulling himself to the present. "I'm fine. Sorry." He sat, his mind still staggering.

It had been so real, so clear. It couldn't have been a dream. Joe remembered the joke of a prayer he'd sent up for a memory, no matter how small. Had it actually been answered?

"Joe?" Helen paused as she set a plate of flapjacks in front of him.

"Thanks. Sorry." He sure was saying that a lot this morning.

"Someone's coming!" Mike leaped out of his chair and raced out the door with Sarah close on his heels. Helen followed, shaking her head at her children's antics, and Joe stuffed a couple bites in his mouth before doing the same, limping slightly from the pain in his side.

"Mr. Parsons!" Sarah and Mike ran to greet the man who rode up on the back of a mule, leading a horse that Joe instantly recognized. He leaned against the porch railing with a grin and shook his head. Maybe there was a God.

"Glen, what brings you out this way?"

"I heard you had a visitor who lost a horse, and this one showed up at my doorstep last night." The man glanced at Joe. "Would he be yours?"

"He would." Joe stepped forward and ran his hands over Scout's body and legs, but the horse seemed uninjured.

"Well thank you for bringing him over. Are you staying for breakfast?" Helen asked.

"I'd better get back."

"Thank you again." Joe straightened and took the reins.

"No problem. Next time keep a better hold of him, eh?" Glen grinned and turned his mule.

"Mr. Cartwright." Joe felt a tug on his pants and looked down into Mike's eyes. "Does this mean you'll be leaving?"

He grinned down at the boy. "Not until I eat breakfast anyway." He said.

They went back inside, and he winced as he sat down. He wouldn't be going anywhere for at least a couple more days. Part of him was annoyed, but the other part was glad. After all, it wasn't like he had a destination in mind. It was like he was tumbling and he could land anywhere really. It was the same feeling that had accompanied him the morning he'd left Durham.

There hadn't been anything different about that morning. Fog had curled around his legs like wispy cats, waiting to be burned away by the sun as he walked down the road. He'd walked down it hundreds of times on his way to the mine, but this time he had kept walking instead of turning off to go down the dirt track. He wasn't going that way today or any other day either. He was done.

In retrospect, Joe realized that it was probably one of the stupidest things he'd ever done, second only to waiting so long to finally leave. He'd left without food, money, or any specific plan, carrying nothing but the clothes on his back and a grimly set jaw on his face. Three days later both his clothes and his jaw were limp and soggy as he huddled under the edge of a roof in a rain storm.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. He had thought. He had been supposed to have enough money for a stage to San Francisco. And he almost had. Then the money had been found, purely by accident when his Pa had drunkenly mistaken Joe's room for his and had knocked over the box containing the money. And while Joe was too big for him to be able to beat him anymore, he'd

still borne the brunt of a screaming tirade laced with scathing insults and enough curses to turn the air blue. Joe had crossed his arms and stared at him with a sullen face until eventually the old man forgot what he was screaming about and passed out on his rocking chair. Then Joe had gone into his room and destroyed pretty much everything, the chair, the bed, the window, even the walls had holes punched in them. That money had been the result of almost a year of saving. But since there was no way he was waiting another year to have enough money to leave, he might as well leave now.

While watching water drip onto his soaking boots, Joe had wished he had waited a little bit longer, just enough to have some money for emergencies for example, when it poured down rain and he wanted a hotel room. He had wrapped his arms around his middle and shivered through the night then he'd left the town the next morning, always heading north. For what he didn't know, but he'd kept moving.

"Joe?" Helen asked softly. Joe blinked. He was back in the kitchen, and the smell of wood smoke was still in the air. It warmed him somehow, as if reassuring him that that cold, wet night, as well as everything else in his past was gone.

"Are you alright?" Helen studied him with concern.

"I'm fine. Sorry, I was just... thinking."

~*~

There was a clanking noise, iron against rock, like chains being swung in a never ending mantra against the stone walls that surrounded him. Joe could hear screaming from farther down the tunnel. A man was trapped. But he couldn't save him because the chains were on him now. Joe struggled against their weight as the clanking grew louder, and the walls began to shake. As dirt rained down on top of him, Joe panicked and pulled at the chains. They wouldn't come free; instead they seemed to grow. He screamed at them and pulled, only when he

pulled the wall collapsed and fell toward him. Joe threw up his arms to protect his head and as he opened his mouth to scream again, dust flew into it and choked him. He tried to cough, but he couldn't breathe. Air. He needed air. Joe clawed at the rocks on top of him. They were trying to crush him. His chest was collapsing. He tried to cry out again, but the words choked in his throat.

A thrash jerked him awake, and Joe sat up. He inhaled down to his toes and collapsed back against the pillows as he exhaled. He'd forgotten how real those dreams could be. As Joe wiped the sweat off his face with the back of his hand, he contemplated going back to sleep, but he knew it was pointless. He stood and silently padded out of his room and out to the porch, wrapping his arms around his middle against the chilly night air. Above him the stars merrily reassured him that he was in the open country, but his mind was still stuck in his dreams.

"Mr. Joe?" A sleepy voice behind him made him turn to see Sarah in her nightshirt, standing just outside the door. She reached up and rubbed her eyes, as if she wasn't sure he was really there.

"What are you doing out of bed?" Joe spoke softly so as not to wake anyone else.

"I was gonna ask you that." She scooted down to sit next to him. "You shouldn't be up; you're sick."

"I was hurt, but I'm not anymore." He said.

"Did you have a bad dream?"

Joe stared at the six year old. "What makes you say that?"

"I used to not be able to sleep because I had a bad dream. I would go sleep with Mama." Sarah said.

Joe smiled faintly. "I don't think your mother would

appreciate that very much. What did you have nightmares about?"

"After my Pa died, I dreamed that I couldn't find him, or that I was being chased by bad men, and he wasn't there. And Mama told me that he was in heaven making sure God kept a special eye on me."

Joe smiled down at her as she tucked her little body under his arm. "I'm sure he is. Maybe my Pa's with him too."

"Do you think they're friends in heaven?" big blue eyes stared up at him.

"I'm sure they are."

"That's good." The voice was slurred and drowsy, and she tucked her head against his shoulder. He wrapped his arm around her little body to keep her warm, grateful for the company. He wished he had a parent he could curl up in the bed of and have them tell him everything would be alright. Unfortunately the only parent he'd ever known was the cause of the nightmares.

There really was no walking away. He could try; he could even go back to Adam and Hoss and leave the past where it was, but somehow he knew it would catch up with him until he stopped running and turned around.

I have to go back. He realized. Part of him instantly rebelled. He'd spent so long trying to put space between himself and the little shack on the edge of Durham, and he was just going to forget about that and go back? What did he have there? Nothing except broken memories like bottles. Chances were, the man wouldn't even be sober enough to tell him anything, and even if he was he would probably refuse. He'd stopped whipping Joe around the time he'd turned twelve, but Joe still had a tendency to skirt around him like a dog with its tail between his legs. He never had respected him any more

than one respects the business end of a gun, but he sure knew about fear. It was fear that wrapped its icy hand around Joe's chest now and began to squeeze. Joe tried to shake the feeling off. He was a grown man now, not the angry kid that had run away. Somehow Joe knew that was a lie though; the anger was still there, barely hidden by a painted on maturity. He wondered if he dared to go back and see the man who had raised him. He might not be able to control himself.

Well he'd better, Joe decided. Because even though the one part of him was still fighting the idea, the other part was quickly coming around to the fact that it was the only way he was going to be able to separate his different lives. He needed to know what had brought him to Cal Greyer's house and why. And there was only one person he knew who could answer that.

Beside him, Sarah's chest rose and fell rhythmically as she slept. Joe carefully scooped her up and carried her back to her bedroom. He laid down in bed with his arms behind his head and listened to the different sides of his head argue back and forth in a pointless battle. Because as much as he didn't want to, he knew that come morning, he would be going back to the place he'd called home for almost fourteen years.

Abraham Rosner owned several hundred acres of pastureland outside of Sacramento that stretched over the foothills like a carpet, and right in the midst of it, sat his tidy little house, refusing to be overpowered by the imposing barn next to it. Adam tossed his horse's reins over the hitching post and walked up the three porch steps to the red door, wondering again, as he had the first time he had been there, why Abraham had bothered to paint it such a vibrant color.

"Yes?" A short man with wiry white hair answered the knock,

and then his face was masked by the grin that split across it. "Well if it isn't the young man I found sleeping in the barn several years ago. So you're a prodigal this time?"

"Hardly since you didn't give me my inheritance when I left and I haven't been eating with any pigs." Adam replied.

"Always poking holes in my metaphors. And who's this Goliath you brought with you?" he glanced back at Hoss.

"My brother, Hoss."

"Hoss? So you're a mountain man then?"

"Yes, sir." Hoss stepped forward and realized that the top of Abraham's spiky white hair barely reached past his chest.

"No need to call me sir; it makes me think I'm back at Yale. Abraham will do. Come in, please." He led them into an open sitting room where a fireplace was central, surrounded by several covered chairs. He gestured toward them, and Adam and Hoss sat down.

"So you're back in time for the race, Adam." Abraham settled himself into a seat. "Are you riding?"

"I hope to."

"In other words," Abraham leaned forward and spoke to Hoss, "he wants to ride one of my horses."

"We're in a bit of trouble, Abraham." Adam hated what he was about to ask, but he didn't see any way around it. "We need fifty thousand dollars."

"You need money? Maybe you're more of a prodigal than you thought. What did you do this time?"

Adam told him the story, filling in parts of his past that he hadn't told him before. Hoss noticed that he didn't go into great detail about anything; he just gave the bare facts and

let Abraham draw his own conclusions about emotions or motives. When he finished, Abraham leaned back.

“That’s quite the quandary you’re in. But I wouldn’t worry too much about the little one; he sounds like he can take care of himself. What you need to focus on right now is your money – though if I were you I’d just knock that Bates over the head and be done with.” He stood and suddenly looked like a little boy about to show off a toy that he’d made. “Follow me.”

He led them out a back door toward the barn and pointed to a small paddock. Adam inhaled sharply as he caught sight of the horse inside.

“Something, isn’t he?” Abraham beamed with pride as if he had been the one to sculpt the horse himself.

“He sure is.” Hoss stepped forward and took the animal in. He had two white socks on his long, reaching legs and a coronet on the third while the fourth had no markings but was the chestnut that covered his entire body, too light to be like fire, but too dark to be like gold. His crest was high up on his long, muscular neck, and as he trotted over, Adam could see the muscles ripping in his shoulders and flanks. The horse put his chiseled head over the fence, and Adam noticed the curious intelligence in his dark eyes.

“He’s my entry in the race. But I don’t have a rider yet.”

Adam whirled to look at Abraham. “You want me to ride him?”

“Think you can?” Abraham chuckled. “He’s a lot of horse. But no other horse can match him, not around here anyway. You win the race, and you can keep the prize money.”

Adam and Hoss blinked. While it had been what Adam was hoping for, he could barely believe it.

“But it’s your horse.” Hoss said.

“Exactly. I keep the horse, you keep the money. Who do you think is getting a better deal over the long run?”

“Abraham...”

“Don’t argue with me, Adam. You ought to know by now that it’s pointless.”

Adam shrugged. He had a point.

“This horse here, Minotaur, he’s ready to win, but he needs a good rider. I didn’t pick one because there’s no one around here that can ride him the way he needs to be ridden. I want him to win, Adam. That’s all. What would I do with the money? I’ve got everything I need, right here.” He patted Minotaur’s red neck. “I’d end up giving it away anyway, and you need it more.”

Adam exhaled. “I... thank you.” He swallowed past the lump in his throat, and suddenly the Ponderosa, which had been so far away, suddenly seemed in his grasp again.

Abraham waved him off. “So, are you ready to ride him?”

~*~

Even hours after the ride, Adam could still close his eyes and feel the sheer speed of Minotaur. If he’d been breathing, the wind would have taken his breath away, but he hadn’t been, at least not in the normal sense. His breaths had come and gone with each stride, his body moving with the horse as he thrust himself forward, collected, and then thrust again. The power behind each plunge had staggered his mind, but his body had simply shifted in the saddle and let the energy flow through him, back to the horse. For the first time he could remember, he’d been whole with no thoughts, just the push and pull of Minotaur rocking his body.

Now however, he was back on the ground, and his thoughts returned like rats to their nest. The wholeness had vanished,

and once again he was incomplete, as if a third of him was gone. What remained hated himself. He shouldn't have let Joe go. He shouldn't have made it seem as if the Ponderosa was more important than his own brother. He'd thought that given time he would be able to get through to him, but the notion of their time being cut short hadn't occurred to him. As he looked up at the night sky, he could almost see his father's face looking down, disappointed.

"Sorry, I failed you." He said to the stars.

"Talking to yourself are you?" Abraham joined him on the porch.

"Trying to commune with spirits." Adam muttered.

"You clearly need to do more research about séances."

"It doesn't matter. They're not really there." He said it so that Abraham could deny it, but instead the short old man remained silent.

"I shouldn't have left him." he finally said. After a moment he looked at Abraham. "Since when are you so quiet? I thought you always had something to say."

"I was just thinking; I do a good bit of that too. But why are you regretting your decision?"

"It's just... he's so young. Older than I was when I was alone, but still... he's got this raw side to him. I guess I was afraid of scaring him away, but now I think I should have gone after him."

"And if you had gone after him and things had gone wrong you'd be kicking yourself just as hard."

"What if I'd gone after him and things had gone right?"

"How should I know? I haven't even met him." Abraham leaned

against the rail and coughed. Instantly Adam's attention was on his friend.

"Are you alright?"

Abraham waved a hand. "They say this cough will kill me eventually. For now I am."

"When's eventually?" Adam asked warily.

"Eventually. Not in the near future, I'd say."

Adam conceded, slightly appeased and slipped back into his gloomy thoughts.

"Do you really think that no one is up there?" Abraham said.

"I used to hope; I don't know if I believe it. Do you?"

"Son, after all I've put up with in this life, I wouldn't mind at all if death was nothing but a long, never-ending nap."

"That didn't answer my question."

"It wasn't supposed to. Why don't you ask someone whose opinion you don't already know?"

Adam paused as he reflected on this. It wasn't just a rhetorical question or a way for Abraham to avoid answering him.

"Maybe I don't want to know the answer." Adam finally admitted. He never would have thought that there was something he didn't want to know. As long as he could remember, he'd always been hungry to know things, math, science, literature, languages, anything he could get his hands on. But this was something that scared him more than he wanted to let anyone know, including himself.

"Knowledge is painful. But I don't think anyone can know what happens after you die. Even the most religious only have a

hazy idea. Some people believe a person returns to become someone else, reincarnation, others believe in a type of paradise. Most religions agree that death isn't the end and that the soul carries on after the body passes away. Now is this a human tendency to relieve our natural fear of death or are they on to something?" he shrugged. "You can ask any Christian, and they'll tell you that your soul goes either to heaven or hell. Ask them what happens then, and they'll sputter until their face turns red, but they can't answer. Maybe people who are dead can see us and talk to us. I know several people who would stake their lives on the existence of ghosts and others who would do the same for the opposite."

"That doesn't really help." Adam said. But in a way it did; at least he knew he wasn't alone in his confusion. "Sometimes I think I let my parents down by not being able to believe. I... I pray to my Pa instead of God."

Abraham put a hand on Adam's shoulder. "I'm sure he passes the prayer along. And if he was half the man you are I know he wouldn't condemn you."

"Half the man I am?" Adam snorted. "You barely know me, and if you did, you'd take that back."

"You barely know me, and if you did you'd take that back." Abraham retorted.

Adam didn't answer. If Abraham wanted to believe he was a good person that was his affair. Adam preferred not to see himself as anything, not good, not bad, just a person trying to survive in a world that sometimes made it seem like it wasn't worth the effort. Quite the bleak view of life when you thought about it. He considered bringing it up, but he wasn't in the mood for a long philosophical debate at the moment. Abraham seemed to sense this and remained silent. For some reason Adam was glad he didn't leave. Maybe it reminded him of looking up at the stars with his Pa as they had traveled west.

"Where's the bear, Pa?" he would ask. And Pa would point out the different constellations to Adam and tell him stories of being on the sea and using the stars as a compass to steer by.

"How can the stars be a compass?" Adam had asked once.

"You see that star right there at the end of the little dipper?" Pa had pointed up to the star spattered sky. "That's the north star. Follow that and you can get wherever you want to go."

"What if it's cloudy?" Adam had asked.

Pa had laughed and wrapped his arm around Adam, who burrowed into the warmth of his father's embrace. "Then I guess it's a good thing our ship had a real compass."

Yes Pa, what if it is cloudy? Adam thought. So cloudy that I don't even know which direction is up. So cloudy that I don't even know where I want to go much less how to get there. What then?

~*~

Helen hadn't thought that his leaving was a good idea, and she'd said so. His ribs were still bruised, and riding all day would only be painful.

"I've already waited three days." Joe had said when she'd protested. "My side barely hurts anymore."

"Barely?" Helen had raised her eyebrows and put her hands on her hips. Joe hadn't been able to help but smile.

"Those two won't be getting away with anything with you around." He had gestured toward the house that Mike and Sarah were inside of having already said their goodbyes.

"I'm a mother; it's my job to worry."

"I'll be fine. I need to go."

"You're not imposing."

"No." Joe sighed. "It's not that. I wouldn't get much rest anyway right now. I need to get this taken care of."

She nodded had though she couldn't have possibly understood. He was grateful that she had stopped trying to fight him, and when he had mounted she had simply put a hand on his knee.

"I hope you find what you're looking for." She had said.

Joe adjusted his hat so that shade from the brim fell low over his face. "Me too."

Now he was wondering just what he was looking for. He had ridden for four days straight. Somehow he was afraid that if he stopped he wouldn't be able to start again, so he'd kept going, stopping only to let his horse rest. The food that Helen had packed for him ran out after the first two days, but he barely noticed his empty stomach. It, along with his aching ribs and dry, tired eyes were in the very back of his mind while memories like wet clay clung to the front.

Familiar land marks became more and more frequent – the creek he'd stopped and drunk from on his way north, an apple tree that had given him a meal, a jagged old oak tree with initials carved into it. With each one he passed, he felt as if there was an invisible rope trying to pull him back. Probably his common sense. Joe gritted his teeth and continued to ride. His stubbornness had always been stronger than his common sense.

He skirted around Durham not wanting to be tempted to stop. The place had grown from a dirty mining town into a quaint little town, and the road that ran past it was wider and the grass was carefully cut back, but as he went on, it became more ragged, and the road narrowed until he was on a small dirt track that wound its way past a tiny shack until it disappeared into nothingness. Joe reined in his horse in front of the shack. It was the same place he'd left, sagging roof

and grey boards like an old man's legs, but somehow the familiarity made it seem different, smaller perhaps. Joe sat on his horse and tried to convince himself to get down, but his legs felt like they'd been nailed to the stirrups. He stared at the house for what seemed like years when his horse let out a cough, which pulled Joe out of his thoughts. He sighed and got down. There was no hitching post, but Scout was trained to ground tie, so he left him there and went to the door.

It hung crookedly on its hinges and wasn't latched. It never had been. She had used to tie it off with a leather thong, but that had long since withered away before he left, and Joe had taken to pushing a chair in front of it during bad weather. He reached and pushed it open now, the rusty hinges giving away before his knuckles.

"Who's there?"

The voice made him stop halfway in the door, and the light coming in from behind him made it impossible to see through the stubborn dimness of the shack. Joe took off his hat and stepped forward, letting the door swing shut behind him. Suddenly he was aware of his own neat clothes sharply contrasting with the dusty shack and the tattered shirt and worn out boots of the scraggly man sitting in the wooden rocking chair. He was skinnier – most people gained weight when they drank, but Cal Greyer lost it – and Joe couldn't tell if his sparse red hair had grayed more or not through the layer of dirt in it. Cal scowled at Joe.

"I thought you were dead."

"Well I'm not." Joe's fingers ran along the brim of his hat nervously. He was sober, which meant he would actually be able to answer Joe's questions, but he would be mean as a snake about it.

"What'd you come back for then?"

For some reason Joe couldn't answer. The force that had been pulling him away now refused to let him do what he wanted most: ask his questions and then leave as quickly as possible. Gone was the tension and anger that had clawed at him, and now all he could do was to stare in pity at the man he had hated his entire life and wonder why he had. This man wasn't even worth the effort to hate because as Joe looked in his eyes, he saw that he already hated himself.

"Did you bring anything to drink?" Cal demanded.

"No."

"Then why'd you come? To show off your fancy new clothes to a man dressed in rags and wave your success in front of the face of your broken down Pa?"

"You're not my Pa." Joe snapped.

Cal narrowed his eyes as if deciding whether or not he wanted to argue that point. Joe didn't give him the option.

"I found out who I am. My name is Cartwright. And I want to know how I got here and why you made me think I was your son." Joe's words were clipped, and he tried to make his voice sound like Adam's – authoritative and commanding.

"I don't owe you anything." Cal leaned back and closed his eyes.

"No?" Joe took two steps and tipped the rocking chair forward so he was looking directly in Cal's eyes. He nearly gagged at the smell of the man's breath. "I think you owe me a whole lot, both for my sake and for the sake of the woman who loved you for over ten years with nothing to show for it. If I wanted to, I could take it out of your hide right now. I'd rather have answers, but if you're not going to give them to me then I guess I'll just take what I can and leave."

He had no intention of taking anything out of his hide, but he

had Cal convinced. The old man nodded, and Joe straightened, glad to be away from his grisly face.

“Tell me what happened.” Joe said.

“We never had children, but Elena wanted them.” He began, snarling like a coon in a trap. “Her brother knew this, and one night he showed up on our doorstep with a three year old.” He nodded meaningfully at Joe, and suddenly Joe was entranced as if he’d been surrounded by a ragged old tent his entire life, and suddenly it was falling away, leaving him to finally see what was outside.

“You both smelled like smoke, and you were asleep, but you had swollen eyes and a red face, like you’d cried and hollered until you’d fallen asleep from exhaustion. Juan looked exhausted as well.”

As he spoke, Joe could almost feel the heat of the flames on his face and taste the smoke raggedly in his throat. He heard a child screaming as if from far away. Was it him? Crying out for his Pa or his Mama and then for his brothers. But the man’s hands had roughly hauled him onto a horse, and all of his screaming and struggling hadn’t helped.

Cal continued, “He dumped you in Elena’s arms and told us we could keep you under one condition: we had to make you forget your real name and think you were our son. He said if you ever found out, he’d kill us. You were supposed to die, but he said he wasn’t a child murderer, and neither was his partner. I didn’t want to keep you. Told Elena I was going to throw you in a sack in the river, but she got around me.”

Joe knew what her methods of getting around him had been. No doubt she’d made sure he was in a drunken stupor for several days until Joe’s existence in the shack had become a habit. He silently thanked the woman for her protection, wishing he’d known before she had died.

“So who told you?” Cal said.

“My brothers.” Joe answered. He felt numb. It was as if so many emotions were assaulting him that he had shut down completely.

“And I suppose you’re going now to ride off with them and leave your old man to rot.”

“If I thought anything I did would make a difference, I would stay.” Joe said. But he knew it wouldn’t. Cal would never be more than this, not because he couldn’t but because he didn’t want to. Joe put his hat on and pulled open the door. He glanced back, wishing he could do something, but it would be futile. By the end of the day, Cal would forget it anyway, lost in drunken forgetfulness. For an instant Joe considered the merits of joining him and temporarily dulling the pain in his side and in his chest from the loss of Tom and both his families, but then he mounted. It wasn’t worth it, he decided. Sooner or later you have to wake up face things because they never truly go away.

He nudged Scout with his heels and as the horse walked down the lane back toward Durham, Joe suddenly felt lighter, as if he’d left part of himself back in that shack. And it was a part he figured he could do without.

Minotaur strained against Adam, wanting to run all out, but Adam held him back. He wanted to build the horse up more, so he kept him collected at a ground covering gallop that was less than the horse’s full potential. Even so, the trees and grass blurred together into one as they ran, and spit from Minotaur’s mouth flew back to pelt him on his shirt and cheeks. After they were done running and Adam was walking him out Minotaur still pulled at the bit and pranced sideways.

Adam chuckled slightly at his antics. Apparently in the horse's mind if Adam was still on his back there was a chance of running, so he slipped his feet out of the stirrups and slid to the ground to walk him out on foot, otherwise the horse would never cool down.

"Fall off?" Hoss asked good naturedly as Adam approached the barn leading Minotaur.

"If I had, he'd be clear in Texas by now." Adam said.

"You two sure were flying."

"And he wasn't even trying." Adam took off the saddle and grabbed a rag to rub the big chestnut down. Abraham entered the barn as Hoss joined Adam.

"You ran him faster today than yesterday." He said.

"I could barely hold him back."

Abraham nodded but for some reason Adam's statement seemed to trouble him. He surveyed the horse, running his hands over it for a moment. "If this was an ordinary race, he'd win easily."

"It ain't an ordinary race?" Hoss asked.

"The race is stacked every year; Mr. Hawkings always makes sure that the horse he back wins. He makes a killing off the gamblers in this town, not to mention the big timers that come from San Francisco."

"Maybe he'll back Minotaur. He's sure to win."

Abraham shook his head. "He'll back someone who's not afraid to play a little dirty." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Think you could hold him back enough so that he doesn't look like competition, Adam?"

Adam glanced at the horse as he thought. "Not without making it look like I was holding him back."

"He's that much of a spitfire?" Abraham smiled fondly at his horse.

"He reminds me of my little brother." Adam muttered. Hoss chuckled, and Adam gave him a rueful grin.

"Well, we'll have to think of something else to keep him safe until the race."

"Safe?" Hoss asked.

"Several years ago I had a horse that looked like he could be a contender. He colicked right before the race. Not badly, just enough to be unable to run."

"Maybe I should start sleeping in the barn." Hoss put a protective hand on Minotaur's shoulder.

"I don't think that's strictly necessary, but if you want."

Adam remembered when Abraham had warned him about the race being fixed the first time he had ridden. He'd told him to be careful, but Adam's horse hadn't been fast enough to be in any danger. Now however, things were different. Minotaur had a good chance of winning and therefore a good chance of being a target.

"Maybe I should stop running him out in the field." He said. "Anyone could come by and see."

Abraham glanced at Adam as if he'd said something profound. "Maybe. Hoss, saddle me a horse will you? I've got something to take care of."

"Yes, sir."

"You're not going to tell me?" Adam asked.

"Not yet; I want to be sure first. But you've given me an idea."

"You're welcome." Adam said, a little disgruntled.

Abraham laughed. "I'll tell you when I get back. In the meantime why don't you boys go to town or something? You've been cooped up on this ranch for a while now. You might as well have some fun."

"And what do you propose we do for fun?" Adam asked.

"How should I know? Go to the saloon, meet a girl, break a few windows."

"It's a little early for that." Adam said.

"Fine!" Abraham threw up his hands. "Be a stick in the mud. I'll be back." He took the horse that Hoss brought out and rode off.

"What was that all about?" Hoss asked.

"Do you want to go into town?"

"Do you?"

"If you had seen Abraham's library, you wouldn't be asking me that question."

"Mind if I go?"

Adam shook his head. "Have fun. Try to stay out of trouble, will you?"

Hoss just laughed and went to saddle up his own horse. "You're the one that's always getting into trouble, big brother."

That was true, Adam reflected. Maybe it was just as well he wasn't going.

~*~

His side was screaming at him for rest, so Joe stopped in Durham. He felt around in his pocket and pulled out a few

coins. Not enough for lunch if he wanted to feed Scout too, but probably enough for coffee. Getting something in his stomach was better than nothing, he figured, so he headed over to the first restaurant he saw. A young woman who wore a checkered red apron over her pregnant belly walked over when Joe sat down.

“What can I get you?” she asked. “They’re cooking up a bunch of hotcakes right now with buttermilk.”

“Just coffee, thanks.”

“Alright.”

As she walked away, Joe wondered how far along she was. She looked like she was ready to give birth right that morning.

His numbness was starting to melt away long enough for Joe to think rationally. There was no way he was making it much farther south with what he had – which was pretty much nothing. He took a sip of coffee and tried to think of another plan.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the young woman carrying a heavy tray of food. Instantly he was on his feet.

“Let me get that for you.” He said, taking it from her as she protested.

“It’s not all that heavy.” She said.

He raised his eyebrows at her. “Where’s it go?”

“This way.” She sheepishly led the way to a table with a family of five.

“You didn’t have to do that.” She said. “But thank you.”

“Just let me know if you need me again. You shouldn’t me carrying heavy things.”

"Oh trust me, nothing can stop this little one." She put a hand on her stomach. "Need more coffee?"

"Please." Joe noticed a newspaper sitting on one of the table. "Mind if I read that?" he asked.

"Not at all."

Joe settled back down at his table and opened the paper. Maybe there would be a job posting. Not that he wanted to stick around Durham, but the paper came from San Francisco, so there was a good chance he could find something farther away. He had meant to flip through to the classifieds, but a name caught his eye. Cartwright. Joe stopped and stared at the article. It was about a horse race in Sacramento, and it listed the names of all the horses and riders. Joe rubbed his eyes and looked again. Minotaur, owned by Abraham Rosner, ridden by Adam Cartwright. And the purse was fifty thousand dollars.

That sly dog. Joe thought. Instantly he was on his feet.

"Leaving so soon?" the waitress asked.

"Yeah. There's somewhere I need to be." Joe called over his shoulder. He leaped onto Scout with a swing mount and urged the horse into a canter. He could almost hear Scout moan along with his own sore body, but he ignored it. There would be time enough to rest once he'd caught up with Adam and Hoss.

~*~

Adam had spent most of the afternoon with his nose buried in Abraham's books, barely noticing the time pass. He remembered that Pa, a literary man himself, had always been astounded at Adam's continual thirst for anything he could get his hands on to read. The habit had started on his trip west when it had been just him and Pa, who had taught him his letters as they jostled along with everything they owned in the back of their wagon, and ever since then Adam had always had a fascination

for the written word. Even when life had been good, reading had always been an escape for him, a chance to get out of his own world and enter into someone else's, to see through another person's eyes for a little while. And when he came back to his world from the other one, he always felt calmer and able to think more clearly.

"Hey, Adam!" Hoss' voice drifted in through the open window, but Adam ignored it, deep in an ancient copy of Beowulf.

"Adam!"

Adam snapped the book shut and stood, irritated. There was a difference between coming out of another world of your own accord and being yanked out.

"What?" he yelled out the window. He couldn't see the barn from the side of the house he was on, and he wondered what was so important that Hoss had to interrupt him, especially considering the way Adam had snapped at Hoss after he had disturbed him when Hoss had first gotten back from town.

"Get out here!"

Clearly he wasn't going to be able to read anymore until he found out what Hoss wanted. He regretfully put the book down and went outside. Then he stopped dead in his tracks. Abraham turned with Hoss grinning beside him.

"Well?" Hoss asked.

Adam shook his head. Abraham was holding a bright red horse with long legs and an equally long neck. He looked a lot like Minotaur except that he didn't have the powerful muscle to fill out his gangliness. But the similarity was eerie.

"Where did he come from?" Adam stepped forward and put a hand on the horse to make sure it was real.

"His name is Red. He's a cousin of Minotaur's that I sold to a

friend out near Placerville. I went over and asked if I could borrow him until the race.”

“But how will we make people think he’s our racer?” Adam asked.

“Hand me those pullers.” Abraham started to bend over to pick up the horse’s foot and then handed the tool to Hoss as he started coughing. “You’d better do it. Pull one of his shoes; it doesn’t matter which.”

“Alright.” Hoss looked at Adam, who shrugged. Whatever Abraham had in mind, they’d find out soon enough. Hoss bent over and within a few minutes Red was missing a shoe.

“Good.” Abraham said. “You boys saddle up; you can come with me into town.”

“What for?” Hoss asked.

“The horse just lost a shoe! We’ll have to get another put on, won’t we?”

Adam laughed at Hoss’ helpless look as understanding finally dawned on him.

“The missing shoe is just an excuse to take him into town and show him off a little.” He said.

Abraham nodded. “Now you’re getting it. We’ll go in and talk about how fast he is, and then tomorrow morning they’ll be bound to be a few people out to watch you ride our racehorse.”

“Only it’ll be Red instead of Minotaur.” Hoss finished.

“Exactly.”

Adam crossed his arms and shook his head. “I told you he’d think of something.”

Once in Sacramento, Joe realized how little of a plan he had. Not for finding Hoss and Adam; that would be a simple matter of asking around. No, what he really hadn't planned out was what he was going to do once he found them. Maybe they figured he was a lost cause and didn't want him around. Maybe Adam was mad about Joe telling Jesse who he was.

"Maybe this was a bad idea." he muttered. But he wasn't much of one to turn back even if what he was doing wasn't very smart, so he straightened his shoulders and guided his horse through Sacramento. As he turned off one street onto another, he noticed a small crowd that had gathered over at the blacksmith's. Curious, Joe rode over. There was a wiry, older man holding a tall chestnut at the front of the crowd. Not the most impressive horse Joe had ever seen, but not too bad looking.

"I'm telling you, this horse really has it. He may be a winner." the old man was saying. "He's got a bit of his grandfather's spirit in him."

"You're always going on about that old horse, but you've never bred a winner yet." someone called out.

"This year things will be different. Right, Adam?" the man gestured to someone behind him, and Joe nearly fell off his horse. Hoss and Adam stood behind the old man next to the horse. Joe didn't know how he'd missed them.

"You think you can run this horse fast enough to win?" someone asked.

"That's the plan." Adam answered.

Joe grinned and crossed his arms over his saddle horn. "He doesn't look like much to me." he called.

Adam and Hoss looked up, and Joe nearly laughed at the

astonished looks on their faces. Hoss was the first to recover.

“Joe!” he stepped forward, and Joe dismounted, grunting slightly as his feet hit the ground.

“Careful.” he said when Hoss reached for him.

“What’d you do?”

“Uh... fell against a tree.” Joe said sheepishly.

Hoss frowned. “If I were you, little brother, I’d avoid trees. Seems like they’re always the ones winning.”

“True.” Joe turned to Adam, and suddenly now that he was face to face with his brother, he remembered why he’d left in the first place. He heard the shot again and saw Tom’s pale face, the life drained out of it like blood from a pig.

“Adam.” he said awkwardly.

Adam nodded. “Welcome back.”

Abraham cleared his throat, effectively breaking the awkward tension. “So I take it this is the prodigal then?” he said.

“More like Oliver Twist.” Adam replied.

Joe glanced at him, wondering if that was a compliment or an insult.

“So Abraham, are you wanting to make a wager on the race?” someone called out, clearly uninterested in the young man that had disrupted the spectacle.

“I’m not gambler, Johnny. You should know that. And now if you’ll excuse me, some of us have more to do than stand in the street gawking all day. Are you coming to supper, lad?” he asked Joe.

"Sure." Joe said gratefully to the man who had seemed to grasp the essence of the situation within a glance. He mounted his horse and fell in line with Hoss, Adam, and Abraham, the latter of whom tied the chestnut's lead line to the horn of his saddle before mounting. They rode away as the crowd grudgingly dispersed.

"How'd you find us, Joe?" Hoss asked.

"You're in the paper. Or Adam is. Not that hard." Joe answered he glanced at Adam, unsure of how to act.

Adam wasn't sure himself. He'd sensed the hesitation of his younger brother, and it had immediately put him on guard. Now he was having a hard time lessening his defenses. Thankfully Abraham once again picked up the slack.

"So you're here for the race then? Wonderful. We can use all the help we can get."

"You're gonna need more than just me to help if you think that thing can win." Joe nodded to the chestnut who was complacently tagging along beside Abraham's roan.

Hoss grinned. "That's not our racer. He's just the decoy. Tomorrow Adam's gonna ride him out in the field so that any prying eyes can see that he's not all that fast and then he'll run the real racer down in the bottom of Abraham's pasture where no one will see."

Joe raised his eyebrows. "And the reason for all this cloak and dagger stuff is...?"

"To keep Minotaur, the real horse safe from anyone who might want to gain an advantage unethically." Abraham answered.

Joe shook his head. "Nothing can ever be simple." he muttered.

When they got back to the ranch, Hoss took Joe to see the real racehorse. Joe's eyes widened as he saw the big horse.

“Adam’s going to ride this thing?” he asked, instantly jealous.

“Yep. And let me tell you, he’s faster’n greased lightning.”

“Looks like it.” Joe slipped over the fence and into the horse’s corral to examine him. Every muscle on the horse was perfect, like it had been chiseled out on purpose.

“Say, Joe...” Hoss stopped, not sure which question he wanted to ask first: why Joe had left or why he’d come back. “I guess this has been pretty hard for you.” he finally said.

Joe turned his face away from Hoss, pretending to be looking at Minotaur’s legs. In reality he didn’t want Hoss to see any sadness on his face. He hadn’t counted on coming back being this hard.

“I’m alright, Hoss.” he said when he could trust his voice. He didn’t want Hoss to know he was still torn up about Tom. Hoss might tell Adam and Adam wouldn’t think he couldn’t trust Joe. More than anything Joe wanted to belong here by the side of his two brothers. If that meant ignoring his feelings, then that was the way it would be. It wasn’t like he hadn’t done it before.

“If you ever want to talk about anything, you know I’m here.” Hoss said.

“I know.” Joe took a deep breath and turned, digging up a smile from somewhere to plant on his face. “Is there anything to eat around here?”

Hoss hid his concern behind a forced smile. If Joe wanted to play tough then that was the way it would have to be. For now at least.

“Come on.” He said.

~*~

"He's something, isn't he?" Abraham said to Joe as they watched Adam work Minotaur. The sun had barely cleared the horizon, and a hazy dampness that smelled of green and hay clung to the morning. The grass Joe scuffed at left watery traces on his boots. He wished he was Adam right now, riding a piece of wind with the earth and all of its problems being pounded beneath hooves like thunder.

"You know, you and Adam are a lot alike."

"Really." Joe didn't believe it. They were about as different as a turkey and a fish.

"You both clam up when you're unsure."

Joe didn't know how to respond to that, so he decided not to. Then he wondered if that was considered 'clamming up' and thought that maybe he should say something to prove the old man wrong, but Abraham beat him to it.

"Do you know the origin of the name Cartwright?" he asked.

"No."

"It comes from the days when a person's surname came from their trade. So a Cartwright would be..."

"A cart builder?"

"There may be a brain up there after all."

Joe decided to take the insult as a compliment and regarded the old man with mild amusement. He seemed so out of place leaning up against the fence watching his horse run in his white shirt and shiny shoes. And yet somehow he fit more than the most rugged cowboy.

"Now a cartwright is a man who makes his living creating wooden boxes of opportunity." Abraham went on in a thoughtful tone. "He fits the wheels on and makes sure the seat is solid

and the floorboards won't rot away, and then he sells his cart to a man who can use it for hauling grain, or moving everything he owns across the country to try to carve a life out of the wilderness, or for taking his sweetheart to a dance. A cartwright never knows what those wheels he puts on will see or where they'll roll. He just slides them on and makes another cart."

"So you're saying that I have no idea how my actions will impact other people."

Abraham stared at him like he was insane. "Not at all. I taught history, not theology, boy; that was a lesson in origins."

"Oh." Joe snapped his mouth shut. Then curiosity made him open it again. "So why did you stop teaching and start breeding horses then?"

"A man shouldn't be tied to one lifestyle; if he wants to change halfway through his life, he has the right. Nobody owes society predictability or consistency. That's not why I quit though." He pulled out a handkerchief and coughed into it before continuing. "There were too many spoiled young brats who thought that they owned the world just because they had money. They thought their father's hard work to create a fortune was enough that they could ride through life as if they were drifting down a stream. I got fed up with trying to teach history to people who only cared about themselves. So I quit, came west, and bought my first horse. That one..." he pointed. "Is his grandbaby, and the first one I've had that reflects him like a polished mirror. 'Hast thou given the horse strength? Hast thou clothed his neck with thunder? Canst thou make him afraid as a grasshopper? The glory of his nostrils is terrible. He paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in his strength: he goeth on to meet the armed men. He mocketh at fear, and is not affrighted; neither turneth he back from the sword. The quiver rattleth against him, the glittering

spear and the shield. He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage: neither believeth he that it is the sound of the trumpet. He saith among the trumpets, Ha, ha; and he smelleth the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting.' I don't suppose you know who said that."

Joe stared at him blankly.

"God said it. Job thirty-nine verses nineteen to twenty-five. Read the Bible, son. It'll show you just how stupid people are. 'And God took a handful of Southerly Wind, blew His breath upon it, and created the horse.'" He glanced at Joe but thankfully didn't ask him who had said that. "It's an old Bedouin legend. Every time I see that horse it makes me think of it. See that horse, he's knows who his grandpa is. And he's ready to make him proud. He knows that with his lines there's not a reason in the world that he can't win this race with room to spare."

"Do you think knowing your roots is that important?" Joe suddenly wanted to hear this grizzled old man's opinion.

"Do you?"

"I didn't. I used to think it was only about who you were, not who came behind you. But that was when I thought my father was a drunken bum."

"And what caused him to be a 'drunken bum'?"

"What do you mean?"

"Was his father in turn a drunken bum, in which case your argument about who came behind you not being important is void, or did he start out a bright star that ultimately fell from the sky and became an empty crater for the world to pity?"

Joe blinked. He wasn't sure how to answer that, or even if he'd understood the question, but Abraham seemed to take pity

on his clueless facial expression.

“No one exists alone in the world, Joseph. As we live we change and are changed by others, like rocks rubbing against each other. A person needs to know where he came from to fully understand himself.”

“Well, then I guess I have no idea who I am.” Joe let his chin fall to his hand that rested on the top of the fence.

“You know who you were; now you have another dimension to add.”

“And no idea how to add it.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure something out.”

“Thanks.” Joe muttered. For a moment he watched Minotaur prance restlessly as Adam tried to rein him in. The horse wanted to run, but Adam still wouldn’t let him go full out. Not yet. Joe watched his brother ride, his legs and hands gently containing the feisty beast beneath him, his body strong and balanced on top. Joe couldn’t help wishing again that he was the one up there even as he admired Adam’s skill.

“How did you meet Adam anyway?” he asked.

“He was a rider for the race several years ago.”

“Was that before he became a gunman?”

“Why did you use the word ‘became’?”

“What?”

“In Spanish they use the phrase ‘llegar a ser’ to express becoming something. Literally translated it means to arrive at being, but the verb ‘ser’ is a permanent and inward form of being as opposed to ‘estar’ the other Spanish word for being that is more temporary and less intrinsic.”

Joe blinked again and wondered if Abraham enjoyed confusing him.

“In other words, do you really think your brother became a man who lives by his gun or just someone who had a job that required gun use?”

Joe didn't know the answer. “Are you sure you didn't teach theology?” he finally said.

Abraham laughed. “Just like people, no subject ever truly stands alone. There's mathematics in poetry and philosophy in science. How do you think Archimedes or Galileo arrived at their discoveries? By dreaming and philosophizing about what was beyond the knowledge of their time. Man is only ever limited by his own mind, nothing else.”

Joe wondered if he was specifically talking about the current situation or just rambling again, but before he got the chance to ask, Adam pulled Minotaur up in front of them and dismounted.

“He's raring to go.” Adam said.

“He'll get his chance. Are you ready to go ride our decoy?”

“Never a moment's rest.” Adam muttered. He looped Minotaur's reins over the saddle horn of the horse he'd ridden out to the pasture and mounted. Joe and Abraham followed suit. The easiness that had developed between Abraham and Joe instantly withered, and Joe sighed to himself, wondering if he would ever be able to talk to Adam the way he talked to Hoss.

“How are your ribs, Joe?” Abraham asked.

“Fine.” Joe said. They barely hurt unless he put pressure on them. “Why?”

“I've got a load of feed that needs to be picked up in town. Could you and Hoss go while we take care of the busy bodies

that want to see our horse?"

"Sure." Joe couldn't help but smile. Maybe if it was just he and Hoss things would be less tense.

~*~

After riding Minotaur, Red seemed almost like an old mule. It wasn't the horse's fault, but Adam still felt as if he had to push him to a gait faster than a crawl.

"Well one thing's for sure: if anyone's watching they won't be impressed." he said to the horse as they took their third lap around the large field. As he passed Abraham he noticed that he now had two spectators. No doubt they had invented some errand as an excuse to come and see just how fast this gangly red horse was while the real racer was resting in the barn after his morning run. By the time he finished there were several more people, who quickly dispersed when they saw that the show was over.

"Well?" Adam asked.

"I'd say that before noon everyone will be saying that my race horse doesn't stand a chance and it's just Abraham being crazy again."

"Again?" Adam asked, a smile playing on his lips.

"Again. They used to call me crazy all the time when I first started here with just a horse and a dream. When I succeeded they quickly fell out of the habit."

"You don't think it's crazy, do you? To chase a dream?" Adam asked, thinking of his Pa and the dream that had led him across an entire country.

"When a man starts out with just a dream and the clothes on his back, he's called crazy until he succeeds; then he's called an inspiration." Abraham answered. "Why do you ask?"

"I'm just thinking about my Pa." Adam remembered so many nights when his Pa would put him to sleep with stories about the ranch they were going to build.

"It'll be the largest ranch for miles with enough room for our cattle to stretch their legs. And you too, Adam. We'll go where people aren't even settling yet to make sure the land we get is pure and untouched. It'll be wild, but we'll tame it and out of it we'll build a kingdom that will last long after you and I are gone."

Adam frowned and dismounted. Long after? He thought. More like three days. He led Red into the barn, and the horse tossed his head slightly against Adam pulling at the bit before he followed. Abraham watched him untack in silence.

"What's on your mind, son?" he finally said.

"Nothing." Adam answered.

"Impossible. There's always some form of thinking happening."

Adam sighed and closed his eyes briefly. There was a point when speaking intellectually got old, and they were rapidly approaching it.

"If you don't want to talk about it..."

"I just..." Adam cut him off and then didn't know what to say.

"Look at it, Adam. When God made the world, he touched this spot and made it into an imitation of heaven."

Adam tried to glare at his father's voice in his head, but he only managed to irritate Red by rubbing him too hard. The horse flinched and stepped sideways.

"Take a minute, Adam." Abraham said.

Adam sat and as he exhaled, it seemed like all the fight to keep his emotions in went out of him with his breath. "I

failed him." His voice was barely audible as he spoke through his hands. "He tried to build something out of nothing, and I let it go to waste. And then I nearly lost Joe."

"But you didn't."

Adam snorted. "That still has yet to be determined." He closed his eyes and leaned back against a beam, letting the solidness of the wood soak into his scalp. "I miss him." He said. "It's been fourteen years, and I miss him as much as I did the day it happened."

Abraham laid a hand on Adam's shoulder. "And you'll miss him until the day you die." He said gently.

"That's comforting."

"It wasn't meant to be."

Adam opened his eyes in order to narrow them Abraham.

"Life isn't always the way you want it. You know that better than most. And the truth isn't always comforting. If I told you things would get better, would you believe me?"

"No. But it'd be nice."

"I lost a woman I'd loved for twelve years, and I still feel her absence like a knife. But you're not alone, Adam. Not anymore, even though you do have a propensity for isolating yourself."

Adam couldn't argue with that. He remained where he was for a few more minutes, allowing himself to stop pretending to be strong before he stood again. Red looked at him warily when he picked up the piece of sacking, but Adam's hands were gentle as he rubbed away the saddle mark.

"I'm assuming that if I ask you if you'll be alright you'll answer yes regardless of the truth?" Abraham said.

Adam smiled. "Your assumption is correct."

"Then in that case I have some business over at Jed Harding's ranch. Don't wait for me at supper; his wife makes the best cherry pie you've ever eaten." He hesitated. "Hoss ought to be back in a few of hours."

"I'll be fine, Abraham." Adam's smile grew as he pretended to glare at his friend. "As you said, I'm used to being alone; I think I can handle a few hours of having no one around. It might be nice to not have someone constantly spitting out clever thoughts that he thinks makes him sound wise and knowledgeable."

"There's a difference between thinking and knowing, lad. I know that I sound wise and knowledgeable, and it's because I am. And I might add that if you were a little more knowledgeable, you would give that poor horse you're going to be racing a little more hay."

Adam shook his head and turned Red out in his corral. "If you say so."

"Another thing you can do is to dig around in the tack room and find the racing saddle."

"Racing saddle?"

"It's probably the smallest saddle you'll ever see. Dust it off and try it on Minotaur to make sure it fits. I don't want it sliding in the race. You can run him in it tomorrow."

"Anything else?" Adam asked.

Abraham narrowed his eyes. "Don't get snide with me, boy."

Adam laughed at Abraham's school master stance and went back into the barn while Abraham mounted and rode away.

Hoss had thought that if Joe came back everything would be alright. Even if they didn't get the Ponderosa, they would be together again, a family. But there was still tension, though it wasn't as blatant as before. And the subtle tension seemed to be aimed at everyone, Adam, himself, even Abraham. Hoss couldn't figure it. But then, there were a lot of things he couldn't figure about people. Maybe that was why he got along so well with animals; they were a lot less complicated and a whole lot more straightforward. Animals didn't try to hide or fake things, they just let whatever was on their mind show in their body. Too bad Joe wasn't doing the same; it might make it easier for Hoss to make conversation as they drove Abraham's wagon into Sacramento to pick up some supplies. But Joe was silent, and Hoss wasn't sure if he wanted to talk or not, so he decided on the safer option and remained quiet all the way from the ranch until he pulled the wagon up in front of the mercantile, weaving in and out of people in the congested streets.

"Where did all these people come from?" he muttered.

"They're probably here for the race." Joe spoke for the first time.

"That's not until the day after tomorrow." Hoss said. He jumped down. "What do you say..." Hoss began and then stopped, whipping his head around. He'd caught sight of a man with ash blonde hair like the Finches. Hoss craned his neck to see if he'd been imagining things.

"Hoss?"

"Did you see that?"

"See what?" Joe glanced around in an attempt to catch sight of whatever it was that his brother had seen.

Hoss started to say he'd thought he'd seen someone who looked like a Finch and then stopped. He was probably wrong, and he didn't want to make things worse by bringing it up. He would just have to be on the lookout.

"Nothing. Let's go inside." He said.

Joe meandered around the store while Hoss filled the list, glancing at the various cloths, spices, and tools. Then his eye caught sight of the rifle.

It was carefully engraved and inlaid with silver swirls, and it was almost an exact copy of the one that Tom had received for his birthday one year. The first time he had used it, he had saved Joe's life.

They had been hunting a mountain lion for three days without catching sight of it. Tom had wanted to quit and go look for a more easily found prey, and Joe had been certain they would find him. So they'd stayed one more day. Joe had scurried up a steep hill to look around for the animal below, unaware that the cat looked down on him from above. He'd heard Tom's yell and then a gunshot, and he'd turned just in time to see the large yellow cat fall out of the air, letting out a final yowl. If he'd blinked, he would have missed it, and if Tom had blinked, Joe wouldn't have survived. But Tom had only grinned shakily up at him, the delayed panic on his face matching Joe's.

"Guess we found the lion."

Joe frowned as he stared at the rifle, mad at himself for remembering. It was in the past now, gone. There was no point in reliving it. He moved away from the gun and focused his attention on various knives, but they blurred in front of his eyes.

When Hoss had finished going over the list, he crumpled it back into his pocket and grabbed the box. "Abraham wanted us

to get a load of feed too." He said to the storekeeper.

"It's out back."

"Come on, Joe." Hoss glanced around when there was no answer.
"Joe?"

"Right." Joe turned and followed Hoss outside. As they loaded the heavy feed sacks, Hoss tried to keep from asking the question that he was quickly learning Joe hated, but eventually he gave in.

"Are you alright, Joe?" he asked.

"Fine." Joe heaved the last sack onto the wagon with a muted thump and swung his arms to relieve the muscles. Amazingly, his ribs were silent. "Do we need anything else?"

"No, that's it."

"I think I'm gonna stick around here for a while." Joe couldn't go back right now, not with so many memories clogging up his head. He needed to let it clear a little first.

"How will you get back to the ranch?"

"You can bring my horse when you come into town to see that redhead at the saloon you were telling me about." Joe managed a wobbly smile that almost passed for a grin.

"Alright. But don't you go sweet talking her behind my back." Hoss waved a finger at him.

"I won't."

Hoss climbed up onto the wagon and flicked the reins at the horses. The heavy wagon slowly rolled forward into motion. Hoss leaned back against the seat, remembering how many times he's sat on the other side of it while his Pa or Adam drove a wagon full of supplies back to the Ponderosa. He had begged so many times to drive the wagon. Adam usually let him, Pa

usually didn't.

"Just sit back and enjoy the ride, son; soon enough you'll be wishing you weren't old enough to drive." He would say.

"I'll never." Hoss had insisted once. "I want to be big enough to do everything you and Adam do."

Pa had laughed and ruffled his hair. "That'll come sooner than you think."

Those days sure had come, though in a way that Pa would never have been able to imagine. Hoss sighed and thought of Joe. Maybe the kid was lucky not being able to remember anything. Sometimes it seemed like memories only made things worse.

~*~

Sacramento boasted a wide variety of shops, stores, and attractions without the cramped city feel on San Francisco, but Joe passed shop after shop without stopping. He didn't feel like looking at more things that would potentially make him feel gloomier than he was feeling right now, so instead he drifted aimlessly like a stray dog. As he walked he noticed that the people around him seemed to move in pairs or small groups. A woman leaned on the arm of her husband, three young men jostled against each other jokingly, and a group of women chatted as they walked side by side down the street. He was the only one alone. Maybe he should have ridden back with Hoss after all.

A shout cut off his thoughts, and Joe peered into an alleyway to see what was happening. His jaw clenched as he saw three boys taking turns throwing punches at another boy, smaller and wearing clothes with patches attempting to hide their tatters. The sight brought him back to days when he'd been the smaller boy, beaten up because his Pa was a drunk and his Ma did whatever she had to do to put food on the table and get his booze. As much as Joe wanted to intervene, he knew that the

boys would take their irritation at being stopped out on their victim later. So he waited until they'd gotten their final kicks in and then went over and held out a hand.

"You ok, kid?" he asked.

"Sure." The boy's teeth were gritted as he ignored Joe's hand and buckled down any stray emotions that might make him seem vulnerable. Joe knew the look too well.

"You know what you do with guys like that?" he scooted down next to the boy. The boy studied him, clearly wondering if he was an enemy. Joe met his careful eyes and continued, "You let them hit you. And then you let them hit you again. And again. As hard as they want. And you don't flinch. You let them knock you down as many times as they want and then you get back up because they're only making themselves weaker as they make you stronger. But you don't hate them. You just take what they give you until the day you prove them wrong."

The boy held Joe's intense gaze for a second more and then slowly nodded. Then he took Joe's offered hand and stood. Joe reached in his pocket and pulled out the money his hand closed over.

"Here." He said.

"No thanks."

He should have expected that, but he took the boy's hand and closed it over the money.

"It's a loan; you can pay me back someday." He said.

"How?"

"I'm sure you'll think of something..."

"Luke."

"Luke. I'm Joe Cartwright." The name slipped off his tongue

like honey.

Luke nodded and gripped the money. He managed a half smile. "Thanks."

"Take care." Joe clapped him on the shoulder and watched him dash away, headed in the direction of the mercantile.

He turned to leave, but a flash of light blonde through a window caught his eye. Joe blinked and looked again. There was someone sitting inside a restaurant, but Joe could only see the back of his head. He put his hand on his gun and walked over to the door. A bell rang as he pushed it open, and the man he'd seen from the window looked up. Their eyes locked.

"Jesse." For a moment Joe thought he was seeing things then in an instant his face hardened and his defenses went up, defenses that he'd never thought he would need around Jesse. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I'm not here to cause trouble, Joe." Jesse said.

There was a tone in Jesse's voice that Joe had heard before in many people but never Jesse. He sounded tired, almost lost. But that wasn't right. Jesse was always as smug as a cat no matter what trouble Tom or Carl got him into. Joe pushed thoughts of Tom out of his head. He was on the Cartwright side now.

But he couldn't bring himself to leave. Something in Jesse's eyes matched the pain in Joe's chest, and he reached past the invisible barrier between them to put a hand on Jesse's shoulder even as he tried to steel his own heart against the emotions that were tumbling out of it like an overflowing barrel in the rain. As an expression of hopelessness settled over Jesse's features – another unfamiliar attribute – Joe resisted the urge to sit next to his friend. He recognized the sorrow in his eyes, sorrow that Joe had been hiding under false cheerfulness for too long. It would be such a relief

just to not have to pretend for a few minutes. He glanced around and then sat.

“How are... things?” he asked awkwardly.

Jesse looked at Joe gratefully and then looked away, staring blindly into the air. “Pa’s pretty beat up.” He said, not meeting Joe’s eyes. “He blames himself for not keeping a better eye on Tom. He was just a kid.” Jesse cleared his throat in a gesture Joe knew well. Make it look like you have a cough instead of a lump in your throat. “And then Carl took off about a week ago. I followed him to San Francisco where I lost him.”

“I haven’t seen him.” Joe said, thankful that he hadn’t.

Jesse sighed audibly. “I don’t know if that’s good news or bad. At least he’s not here causing trouble. I...” he looked away and even clearing his throat didn’t seem to help. Joe waited, feeling his own throat choke up. The very nearness of Jesse made Tom seem that much farther away.

“...I don’t want to lose another brother.” Jesse finally said.

Joe closed his eyes against blinding tears. He shouldn’t be feeling this way; the Finches were the enemy. Too bad they’d once been friends.

“I saw Adam’s name in the paper and thought he would be heading here. I was worried...” he trailed off and Joe silently finished the sentence for him.

Worried that he’d be coming after Adam. Joe felt as if someone had punched him in the stomach.

“Did Carl say that’s what he was doing?” he asked.

“He just disappeared. I was following his trail the whole time, but I was at least a day behind him.”

“So if he was coming here...” Joe looked around as if Carl was behind him waiting to strike. He stood.

“I need your horse.” The need to see his older brother, to know that he was alright, had suddenly seized Joe. He couldn’t wait for Hoss to get back.

Jesse looked at him and nodded. They had both seen Carl’s anger enough to know that it was something to be avoided. “She’s out front; I’ll get one from the livery stable and follow. Joe...” Jesse caught his arm as he started to leave. “Don’t hurt him.”

Joe pulled his arm away. “Unless he hurts my brother.”

Adam managed to find the saddle, and discovered that Abraham was right; the thing couldn’t have weighed more than fifteen pounds, and it looked tiny on Minotaur’s back. He tightened the girth and stepped back to survey his work. Minotaur glanced at him, clearly wondering why Adam wasn’t giving him more hay, and Adam just shook his head at the horse.

“Well all I can say is that it won’t be my fault if you don’t win now.” He ran his hand between the saddle and horse to make sure it wasn’t pinching or too loose and then moved to loosen the girth when a noise from outside made him stop. He thought it might be Red shifting in his paddock, but some inner sense told him it was something else. Out of habit Adam reached for his gun, but his fingers closed over air. He had left it inside the house while he was riding.

Minotaur’s ears suddenly perked, which confirmed Adam’s suspicion that there was someone outside. Something uneasy stirred in Adam’s gut. He hadn’t heard a horse coming up the lane, which meant that whoever was outside had come on foot,

but the ranch wasn't a place you just walked to; it was a good distance from anything or anyone. Adam put a hand on the horse's shoulder and slipped into the stall with him.

"Easy." he murmured, crouching down in front of the horse. He didn't really trust Minotaur not to trample him, but it was his best option as the shadow of someone in the doorway snaked its way across the barn floor. The floor creaked grudgingly under the intruder's boots, and Adam peered out from the stall. His heart sank when he recognized the man. Carl Finch.

It only took Adam a minute to survey his options because as far as he could see, he only had one. He crept forward to the front of the stall once Carl walked past it, remembering when he'd run into him in Jacksonville. It hadn't been much of a fight, and Adam hoped that indicated his fighting ability rather than how many drinks he had had.

He tensed and inwardly counted down from three. Then he lunged forward.

Carl toppled to the ground underneath him, but he twisted and rolled more quickly than Adam would have thought. Adam hung on, unable to let go to hit him. Carl's leg thrashed back and forth and then the toe of his boot caught Adam in the knee. Adam's grip slipped for a moment, and Carl jerked free. Instantly they both rolled to their feet and circle, hands up and fisted. Carl was shorter than Adam, but he was also stockier, and his eyes glittered with hatred like broken glass. Adam knew better than to make the first move and waited for Carl. He didn't have to wait long.

Carl's punches were powerful, but he cocked his arm back in a way that let Adam avoid most of them. As he was struck by Adam again and again, Adam saw the fury rising in his face like raging water. He needed to finish this fight fast. Adam sent a hard punch that pushed Carl back off his feet and into the wall, knocking down a shelf. For a moment he lay unmoving.

Then he jumped up, gripping a hoof knife. Adam glanced around for something he could use as a weapon. Too late. He ducked as Carl hurled himself forward and thrust the weapon toward him, his arm automatically reaching up to shield his head. He felt a rip in his skin and then nothing, as if his hand wasn't there at all. Warm blood began to pour down his arm. Adam glanced down at it distractedly and barely had time to react as Carl shoved his weight against him. Rough hand gripped his neck, and he clawed at the helplessly with his good hand. His legs flailed in panic as he couldn't breathe, and all he could see past the black specs that were closing in on him were the hate rimmed eyes of Carl Finch.

Then they were gone, and sweet oxygen filled his lungs. He gasped it in and then rolled over to see Joe on top of Carl. He gripped his arm, shocked by the amount of blood that coated his clothes and the floor.

"Joe." His voice was shaky, and he cleared his throat. "Joe!" he snapped again, louder this time. Joe didn't answer; his fists were slamming down again and again into Carl's face and body in a merciless frenzy. Adam didn't want to take his hand off his arm to scoot closer.

"Joe!" he yelled.

This time Joe looked over, and then he froze. Suddenly he felt faint. Adam was holding onto his arm near his wrist, and blood streamed over his fingers onto the hay below making it look as if he had dipped his hand into dark paint.

"Are you..."

"Go for a doctor, Joe."

"What if Carl comes to?"

"We'll have to risk it." Adam's voice was almost completely even, but a slight tremble at the end made Joe dizzy with

fear. He turned, but instead of grabbing Jesse's horse, he slid a bridle over Minotaur's head and leaped onto the horse. He was nearly left behind as the horse plunged forward, and in an instant they were out of the barn and down the lane.

He hadn't even stopped to think when he'd seen Carl on top of Adam; he'd simply reacted, hurling himself against Carl and punching as if he was the devil himself. His hands gripped the reins shakily; they were raw and bloody. Carl's blood. Joe didn't care if he'd killed him. He hoped he had. The sheer hatred made him almost as dizzy as his fear for Adam. There had been so much blood. He hadn't realized that a person had that much blood in their body. And it hadn't been the same color as the blood on Joe's hands; it was darker and thicker, like it had been flowing straight out of his heart.

He urged Minotaur faster and the horse gratefully obliged, straining to stretch his front legs faster and thrusting harder with his hind legs. What if he hadn't killed Carl and he woke up while Adam was alone? Hoss was on his way back from town, but he might not get there in time. Joe pushed the thought out of his head and pushed Minotaur harder.

Please, God. He couldn't think of anything else to say to anyone who might be listening. So he just repeated it over and over in rhythm with the horse's pounding hooves. Please, God, please.

~*~

Adam concentrated on breathing slowly and deeply. He would lose less blood if he was calm, and he didn't know how much more he could afford to lose. The cut was deep, but he wasn't sure how deep, and he didn't want to move his hand away to find out. He glanced at Carl, but thankfully he remained unmoving. Adam didn't know what he would do if Carl woke up. If he moved his hand he would probably bleed to death.

The seconds trickled by like a withered stream, drop by drop,

and Adam noticed a throbbing in his arm that was a lot like his heartbeat. He forced himself to stay calm. Carl remained still, and he wondered how much time had passed. He should have wrapped something around his arm so he could have taken Joe's gun.

He leaned his head against the same post he'd leaned against earlier while he was talking to Abraham as he suddenly felt lightheaded. Another moment of panic. Adam inhaled and then slowly let it out. Hoss had to be on his way back from town; he would be here. A faint grin spread over Adam's face. Hoss was right; he was always the one getting into trouble.

"Adam!" The familiar voice made Adam close his eyes in relief, and Hoss entered the barn. Instantly he was kneeling at his brother's side.

"What happened?" his gaze fastened on Adam's blood covered wrist and arm.

"Hoof knife."

"Is it still bleeding?"

"I don't know."

"Come on; let's get you to the house." Hoss started to help Adam up, and Adam struggled not to jerk violently away.

"No!" he snapped, a little more harshly than he meant to. "I don't want to move and risk losing more blood."

Hoss sank back to the floor. "What do you want me to do then?"

"Check him." Adam indicated Carl with a nod.

Hoss went over to Carl. "Jesse's behind me, according to Joe."

"Jesse?" Adam tensed.

"Joe said he doesn't want to cause trouble."

"I remember another time he didn't want to cause trouble." Adam muttered. He glanced at his wrist and wondered if he should risk taking his hand off the wound to wrap it, but decided it wasn't worth it. The doctor would be here soon. Suddenly Adam groaned.

"What?" Hoss was instantly attentive.

"Joe took Minotaur to get the doctor."

"So? He's fast; he'll get back here in no time."

"And once he gets into town riding him everyone will know just how much potential Abraham's racer has, also in no time."

Hoss frowned at Adam. "You're thinking about that now?"

"It's better than thinking about how much my arm hurts and how much of my blood is on my clothes." Adam pointed out. He closed his eyes and tried not to think about anything. He felt like he was spinning and falling at the same time as blackness swirled around him like three large vultures.

"Adam?" Hoss' voice came from far away.

"Hmm?"

"Stay with me, brother." Hoss was beside him again.

"Hoss?" Now his own voice seemed far away.

"What is it?"

"Hold my hand down." He couldn't keep his hand gripped on the wound anymore.

Hoss' large hand covered Adam's, applying a pressure that Adam could barely feel, his arm was so numb. He closed his eyes again.

"Adam, open your eyes."

I can't, Hoss. He wanted to say, but instead he made the effort and met his brother's eyes through slits in his own.

"The doctor will be here soon, and he'll patch you up. You've just got to hang on until he gets here." Hoss said. "Got it?"

"Got it." The words were mumbled, but Hoss gave him a nod of encouragement.

Adam counted the pulses in Hoss' hand and then the beats of his own heart along with his breaths. Hoss held Adam's wrist and hand with his other hand two, creating a warmth that Adam barely felt. A noise outside made Hoss reach for his gun, and Jesse entered. Instantly his hands went up when he saw Hoss.

"I came for Carl." He said.

"Throw your gun over here."

Jesse did and then crouched down by his brother. Something in his face made Hoss soften a little.

"He's not dead." He said. "Just got walloped."

Jesse exhaled. "I tried to stop him." His face remained on Carl. "He doesn't listen to anyone."

"Sounds like someone else I know." Hoss glanced at Adam, but his smile died as he noticed the grayish tinge to Adam's skin. He gripped his brother's hand harder.

Finally his ears caught the sound of a buggy being driven up at break neck speed. The barn door opened and Joe and the doctor entered.

"How is he?" Joe dropped on his knees next to Adam. Hoss didn't know how to answer, but thankfully the doctor beat him to it.

"Pretty bad. Go get me some water and clean rags so I can clean up some of this blood."

Joe took off at a sprint, and the doctor carefully peeled back Adam's hand to take a look.

"Bad?" Adam muttered.

"I'm going to have to stitch this." The doctor said, more to himself than to Hoss or Adam.

"Will he be alright?" Hoss asked.

"The bleeding seems to have almost stopped, but he's lost a lot of blood. If it gets infected he may be too weak to fight it."

Hoss shook his head. "Adam ain't too weak for nothing." He said it more to convince himself than the doctor, but he saw a weak grin on Adam's face.

Joe came back with a large pot of water and white linen. Concern was etched on his face as he joined the small group around Adam.

"Give me some space and him some breathing room." The doctor said.

Hoss pulled Joe back. "I'll stay here with Adam; you and Jesse take Carl inside and stay with him."

"Why?"

"If he comes to, I don't want him near Adam. And maybe you can talk some sense into him."

"No one can do that." Joe muttered, but he knew Hoss was right. He cast a regretful look at his older brother, wishing Adam would say something or at least open his eyes before he left. Then he and Jesse lifted Carl up and carried him to the house. Jesse was as silent as his unconscious brother as they lifted him onto the bed. Joe stepped back awkwardly. He wanted to go back to the barn and be with Adam, but something besides

Hoss' words kept him standing next to Jesse.

"Sorry." he finally said.

"For what?"

"For... that." he gestured at Carl's swollen face.

"You did that then?"

"Yeah."

"I never saw him take a beating to the head that he didn't deserve." Jesse swallowed hard. "If Adam dies..."

"He won't."

"If he does then Carl will hang."

"He won't because Adam won't die." Joe said fiercely. Jesse nodded.

"Alright."

They waited in silence until Joe heard a horse approach. He went outside and saw Abraham tying his horse.

"Whose buggy..." Abraham stopped when he saw Joe's face. "What happened?"

"Carl Finch attacked Adam; he's in the barn with the doctor now."

Abraham turned and walked briskly toward the barn, and Joe followed, no longer caring about Carl or Jesse. He needed to see his brother.

The doctor didn't look up when they entered as he concentrated on sliding the needle in and out of Adam's skin leaving a row of stitches like a ridge line along Adam's wrist.

"How is he, Hoss?" Abraham asked.

Adam's head moved slightly. "Thought you wouldn't be back until later." he said through gritted teeth. Joe exhaled the breath he hadn't even realized he'd been holding at the sound of Adam's faint voice.

"Mrs. Harding was gone to Placerville to visit her sister." he shook his head. "I leave you alone for one afternoon, and you manage to get into this much trouble? If your father was alive, I'm sure you boys would be the death of him."

Adam grimaced, though Joe wasn't sure if it was because of the needle or Abraham's statement. The doctor paused in his work and looked up at Abraham.

"If you don't mind, I'm in the middle of some very delicate business here."

"Alright, Doctor Thorne, I can take a hint. Come on, Joe; we can see about making supper for when the good doctor is finished."

"But..." Joe didn't want to leave.

"Go ahead, Joe." Adam said.

Joe frowned and followed Abraham back to the house. Instead of going to the kitchen though, he went back to the room where Carl and Jesse were.

When he approached the door he heard voices. Carl was awake. Joe paused outside and listened.

"I'm not leaving."

"Yes, we are. We're going home." Jesse's voice was more irritated than Joe had ever heard.

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to see you dead like Tom. You're damn lucky that you didn't kill Adam because if you had I'd be

going back to tell Pa that he lost another son. And do you know what he'd hear? He'd hear that he failed another son. He'd hear that another one of his boys is dead because he wasn't paying attention. Do you want to do that to him?"

Joe listened to the silence and knew what was happening. Carl couldn't reason with Jesse; any time he'd ever tried he'd always given up and thumped him over the head or ignored him, and that's what he was doing now. He needed to get rid of Carl, partially to protect Adam and partially because the image of Carl swinging from the end of a rope with his face swollen and neck rubbed raw made his stomach churn. He didn't want Carl to hang any more than Jesse did. Joe stepped forward, letting his hands relax out of being clenched fists. Just because he didn't want him to hang didn't mean he wouldn't enjoy having another go at him. Joe gave Carl a hard look that Carl's face was too tender to return.

"You think killing my brother would bring yours back?" he snapped.

"He killed..."

"It could have just as easily gone the other way!" Joe felt his anger return and he clenched his fists, wanting to take a shovel to Carl's head. "But I wouldn't be going after Tom's blood if he'd killed Adam in self defense."

"How do you know?" Carl demanded. "Have you ever lost someone close to you?"

"I lost Tom." Joe hissed.

"Tom wasn't your brother!" Carl's shout filled the entire room.

"Wasn't he?" Joe nearly took another swing at Carl, but Jesse stood up.

"Enough." he said. The one word was a knife that sliced

through the channel of anger between them. "How is Adam?"

Joe took a deep breath. "The doctor doesn't think he'll live out the night." He glowered at Carl. "I know why you did it, but that doesn't mean you won't hang if he dies. I want you to leave. Now."

"Why? What if he dies?" Carl's flashing eyes said that he was still hoping it would happen even if it meant he would hang. As much as Joe wanted to say that he'd find Carl and kill him, he knew that would defeat his point.

"Didn't you hear me, Carl?" He snapped. He let his fear for Adam translate into rage as he towered over Carl. "He's practically dead now. I want this over and you gone. Jesse doesn't need to lose another brother, and I don't want to lose another person who used to be my friend. Just leave!" He turned away pretending to be overcome with emotion. The shaking was real and he tried to steady himself as he held his breath, listening for what Carl would say.

"And what would your brothers say about you letting me go?" Carl finally sneered.

"This is my decision." Joe snapped. "You can take the offer or leave it. If you don't want to go I can get the sheriff. Lately you and Jesse have done enough to get both of you locked away." He knew Jesse would have taken the offer in a heartbeat, but Carl didn't have the rationality, or even the plain common sense, that his brother had. Joe just wanted them gone, and if he could convince Carl that Adam would be dead before he reached Oregon, especially while he was still feeling lousy from being beaten up, he might just stay away. Adam and Hoss probably wouldn't see it that way, but they didn't know Carl Finch as well as Joe did.

He could tell that Jesse wanted to tell Carl not to be an idiot and to leave, but they both knew Carl had a tendency for doing the opposite of what people told him to do. So they both

held their breath as Carl considered Joe's offer in silence.

"My horse is tied down the road a mile." he said at last. "Go get him, and Jesse and I will leave." He leveled his eyes at Joe. "But if he does survive and I ever see him again, I'll put a bullet hole through his brain."

"Then you'd better hope he dies. Because you do that and I'll make sure you hang." Joe held his gaze for a moment as their eyes both flickered darkly. Then Joe left the room. As he entered the kitchen he nearly collapsed into a chair.

"Joe?" Abraham was at his side instantly.

"If someone is hurt, and you tell a lie that they're going to die, will it really happen?" Joe asked.

"I don't think I follow you."

"Nothing. Just keep Adam away from Carl and if anyone asks, he's going to die. I'm going get Carl's horse so they can leave."

Abraham eyed him for a minute and then nodded. Joe stood and went to get Carl's horse.

It was well after dark by the time Doctor Thorne drove away from the ranch after having stayed for the supper that Adam slept through. Joe had pretended to sneak Carl and Jesse out of the house after getting Carl's horse, and Jesse had turned to him before mounting.

"I'm sorry." He said.

Joe hesitated and then had decided that Jesse didn't need the burden of thinking his brother was a murdered. "I just wanted to get rid of Carl. He should be alright."

Relief swept over Jesse's features, and he had mounted. Joe watched the Finches ride away until they were obscured by a bend in the road and then returned to the house. Later when Doctor Thorne had gone to leave, Joe went out with him and untied Minotaur from the back of the doctor's buggy.

"Sorry for leaving you out here all evening." he said as he led the horse inside and took the saddle off. Minotaur shook and then snorted in an exhale, and Joe knew how he felt. It had been a draining day. He rubbed Minotaur down and put him out in his corral, but instead of going inside, he climbed up on the fence and settled on the top rail with his elbows on his knees and head in his hands. Minotaur sniffed around before finding the hay that had been tossed out earlier which he began to eat. Joe watched him, wishing contentment was that easy for him to find.

He was glad Carl was gone, but he couldn't blame him. Part of him had wanted to beat the daylights out of Adam for that bullet too. He didn't understand it. When he'd seen Adam hurt, with all that blood pouring out of his arm, all he'd wanted to do was rip Carl to pieces. But now that the moment was gone, he found himself remembering Tom's death and thinking that maybe Carl had a point. Not that he wanted Adam dead, but he could see what had driven Carl to this.

"Want to trade places?" he asked Minotaur. "I can run the race and you can try to figure out who I'm supposed to be loyal to."

The horse didn't even look up from his hay, and Joe's shoulders slumped slightly. All the extra energy that had come from his panic to fuel him earlier had slowly leaked out, leaving him feeling like a wrung out rag. He didn't have the strength to try to understand the contradicting thoughts that flickered through his head like dizzy bats.

~*~

For a moment he was disorientated when he woke, but then he realized he was in his bed in Abraham's house. Adam sat up and glanced at his arm, which still hurt beneath the neat bandage. But it wasn't the inflamed burning of infection; it was the aching throb of his body healing. He took that as a good sign and stood up, grasping the edge of the bed as the room spun for a moment before settling. He used his good arm to guide him out of his room and out to the porch where Abraham was and then followed Abraham's gaze to Minotaur's corral where Joe was sitting on the fence. Every once in a while the wind would blow snatches of his conversation with the animal over to them, but Adam couldn't make out any words.

"Feeling better?" Abraham asked.

"I'm alive." Adam shrugged. "I guess that's good news."

"You should go talk to your brother." Abraham said.

Adam hesitated. "He's used to sorting out things alone."

"And has that ever gotten him anywhere?"

"I don't know."

"Why don't you ask him then?" Abraham had yet to take his eyes off Joe, but now he turned to face Adam. "He needs someone understanding to help him now, and you're going to have to do."

"What am I supposed to say?" Adam asked helplessly. He could barely understand his own emotions; how was he supposed to help Joe sort through his?

"I'm sure you'll think of something." It wasn't a suggestion.

"Thanks." Adam muttered. He ran a hand through his hair and managed to make it over to the corral fence without collapsing. He leaned against it, and Joe glanced up to acknowledge him then looked back at the horse, but Adam didn't

speak. Instead he studied Joe. He had known all along what was bothering him, or had guessed it anyway, but with Joe being so touchy, he hadn't wanted to risk bringing up a sensitive subject. But now all of his defensiveness and bluster was gone, and Adam realized again that he was just a kid. Something that was iced over inside of him slowly melted.

"I know how you feel, Joe. I lost a good friend once too."

Joe didn't look up or even answer, but Adam was encouraged by the fact that he didn't tell him to shut up and continued.

"She was..." he closed his eyes and inhaled as her image rose in his mind once more, and he searched for the right word to describe her, but only one presented itself. "...beautiful. The most beautiful woman on earth. She had a way of looking at me out of the corner of her eyes with this little smile. I could never describe it to her, but it made me feel... at home. And she wasn't just the woman I loved; she was the first true friend I'd had since leaving home. Sometimes I think I valued that even more than our love."

Joe looked up in astonishment. Were those tears he heard behind his older brother's voice? The brother who he had accused of being emotionless?

"What happened?" he asked.

"I was working for Sam Bates when I met her, and Bates thought that she would eventually pull me away from him and convince me to quit. He was right, but before she got the chance, he sent one of his hired guns to shake things up between us. I thought he was just coming to help keep an eye on the contract I was overseeing, but things ended in Leah's brother getting shot. That's when I realized I'd been played. I quit with Bates and went off on my own."

"And Leah?" Joe asked softly.

“She had family in Salt Lake City on her mother’s side. I never heard from her again.” Adam struggled not to see her in his head, her yellow skirt rustling as she climbed into the stage, a soft wave of her hand, and tears darkening her eyes before she turned and shut the door against him.

“I can see why you hit me.” Joe finally said.

The silence stretched between them, but the animosity had drained out of it like water through a leaky barrel. Joe hesitated and then asked the question that had been at the back of his mind since Yreka.

“Why did you tell them where Tom was? You would have lost the ranch.”

Adam held his brother’s searching eyes. “You’re more important than land, Joe. I lost you once; I don’t plan on doing it again.”

Joe looked down, unable to reply to the sudden openness of emotion in Adam’s tone. When he spoke, his own voice was choked.

“I wish I could remember... what it was like. Before.”

“So do I.”

“I know Tom wasn’t the greatest person, but he was still... he gave me a place when no one else would. I didn’t have anyone else.” Joe felt the lump inside his throat swell until it pushed the tears he’d been holding back out of his eyes. He impatiently swiped at them.

“You don’t have to pretend not to care.” Adam said. “He was your friend after all. That’s going to hurt no matter where your loyalties lie.”

Joe looked at Adam bleakly, as if unsure whether or not to believe him. Adam mentally scrambled to think of something he

could say to reassure Joe, but nothing came to him.

“Sorry.” he finally said. “Guess I’m not as good at Pa was when it comes to talks.”

“What would Pa say?”

“To you or to me?”

“Me.”

Adam closed his eyes and recalled his father’s voice and deep eyes that seemed to have unending depths of understanding. Pa had always known the right thing to say no matter what the situation.

“Probably that it’s perfectly natural to feel what you’re feeling.”

“What am I feeling?” Joe interrupted.

Adam opened his mouth and then shut it. “Why don’t you tell me?”

Now Joe was at a loss for words. He had so many emotions spinning around inside him that it seemed impossible to pin any of them down.

“Lost.” he finally said. His voice sounded small, and he struggled to find the right words without sounding like a six year old. Finally he gave up. “I want... I want to belong here with you and Hoss, but every time I think of what happened... I miss him, Adam.” Joe looked away, wishing he had never opened himself up. He tried to breathe deeply to calm himself, but the air caught in his lungs like sandpaper. Then he felt a hand on the back of his shoulder, warm and strong like Hoss’ had been. It was enough to make the tears he had been trying to hold back spill out under his eyelids.

“He was the closest thing to family I had.” He choked on the

words, and the hand tightened. As his tears fell like silent rain, the hand continued to hold onto his shoulder, acting like an anchor in a gale. Eventually the storm began to subside, and Joe found he could breathe again. He inhaled shakily.

“Hey, Adam?”

“Yeah?”

“What would Pa say to you?”

Adam smiled. He could easily imagine Ben Cartwright’s reaction to his stupidity; he’d been hearing it in his head for quite some time now.

“Stop trying to make everything perfect and pay more attention to what’s happening in front of you.” he said. “Pa always said I spent too much time being two steps ahead of everyone else.” he shrugged. “I guess that can be a problem when the important things are happening two steps behind me.”

Joe took a deep breath and studied his brother as if seeing him for the first time. He wondered if Adam looked like Pa and imagined that he’d gotten a lot of his grit from him.

“How’s your arm?” he asked.

“I’ll live.”

Joe frowned at the joke. “I... I was worried.” He shrugged awkwardly. “I didn’t want to lose you either.”

Adam let the statement hang in the air, but he tightened his grip on Joe’s shoulder.

“I’ll be fine.” He said. “I’m just not sure how we’re going to pull off this race now.”

“That’s easy. I’ll ride.”

Adam glanced at him, a smile on his lips. "You think you can ride this beast?"

"I can ride him better than you." Joe replied.

"I doubt it, but I guess we don't have a choice." The grin hovering on Adam's face let Joe know he was teasing. "We'll talk to Abraham in the morning."

"I think Abraham was right." Joe said softly.

"What's that?"

"We're a lot more alike than I thought."

"Maybe. How about helping me back to the house?"

"You? The great Adam Cartwright needs my help?" Joe's eyes widened in mock disbelief.

"Watch it kid, I could still pummel you with my other hand."

"You'd fall over if you tried to hit me." Joe shouldered Adam's arm and helped him across the yard to the now empty porch and back to his room.

"Just give me a couple of weeks and I'll show you how to fight." Adam said.

"Sure." Joe went to shut the door behind him on his way out and then stopped. He hesitated in the doorway, and Adam glanced up at him.

"I'm glad you're alright." He finally said.

Adam smiled at him, a smile that seemed familiar to Joe, as if he'd seen I before a long time ago, looking down at him when he was younger.

"Thanks, Joe." He said.

The house was empty and the sun had saturated it by the time Adam woke up. He went out to the porch and sat with his eyes closed grateful that his lightheadedness had passed. He let the sun soak into him like bread soaking up melted butter and wondered briefly where everyone was.

"Adam?" Hoss called.

"Out here." Adam didn't open his eyes.

"How are you feeling?" Hoss' voice came from right beside him.

"Better. Where are the others?"

"Joe and Abraham went to put Joe's name on the entry list instead of yours. I think they were also going to spread around that Minotaur's worn out from running so hard yesterday and probably won't run as well tomorrow."

Adam didn't think it would make a difference; they'd already attracted attention to themselves. Now they were just going to have to ride it out and hope they could handle it. Or rather, hope Joe could handle it. He would be alone out there once the race started. The thought made Adam's heart skip slightly.

"Who's that?" he asked without opening his eyes as he heard hoof beats coming up the lane.

"A kind of heavy fellow. Sure is dressed nice."

Adam felt his heart stop, and he opened his eyes.

It can't be. His stopped heart sank down to the boards beneath his feet.

"It's been a while, hasn't it, Adam?" Sam Bates called as he dismounted from his horse. Adam narrowed his eyes and felt Hoss stiffen in response to his defensive demeanor. For a moment he considered the merits of letting Hoss knock him

around, but he knew that it would only land his brother in jail. He forced his hands to relax out of their rigid grip on the arms of his chair.

"What brings you here, Bates?" he asked.

"I like to keep track of my men."

"I repeat, what brings you here? I don't know of any of your men in the area."

Bates chuckled and walked up the porch steps. He glanced at Hoss. "Who's this?"

"My brother." Adam's watched Bates' reaction, but he only started briefly and then smoothed down his expression into neutrality.

"Imagine that." He said. "So I hear you had a little misfortune with Tom Finch."

Adam didn't reply and thankfully Hoss followed his lead, though Adam could sense him bristling like a porcupine. Inwardly he was itching to know how Bates had found out, but he didn't want to give Bates the satisfaction of him asking. Besides, he already had a guess.

Bates got tired of waiting for Adam to say something and continued. "I assume that you don't want your ranch back since you haven't given me the fifty thousand dollars?"

"You assumed wrong." Hoss growled.

"I'll give you the money." Adam added before Hoss got even more defensive.

"After you win it in the horse race?" Bates glanced at Adam's bandaged arm, and Adam settled back into his chair. He could play smug too; he'd learned it from the man in front of him.

"Apparently Carl didn't tell you everything." He said.

“Carl?”

“Finch’s brother. He talked to you didn’t he? That’s how you knew where to find me.”

“I didn’t expect to find you alive either, after seeing how upset he was.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

“You’ve always been good at taking care of yourself, almost as good at it as you are at walking out. Which is what I wanted to make sure didn’t happen this time.”

Hoss stepped forward, having had enough of this man swaggering over his brother. “You’ll get your money, Mr. Bates. And if you want to be around to spend it I suggest you leave.”

Adam raised his eyebrows at Bates and watched the man shift as if wondering whether or not to call Hoss’ bluff. Finally he turned and went back to his horse.

“Fifty thousand dollars, Adam.” He said after mounting. “The day after tomorrow or you’ll be hearing from my lawyers.”

Hoss turned to Adam as Bates rode away. “Why didn’t you just knock him over the head in the first place instead of getting into this mess?” he asked.

“I’ve been asking myself the same question for a while now.” Adam grumbled. He inwardly cursed Carl for alerting Bates to their situation. That was all he needed, Bates leaning over his shoulder waiting for him to fail.

But they wouldn’t fail, he told himself. Joe was a better rider than he was, and there was no chance of Minotaur losing. After the race he would give Bates his money and along with it the fist he’d owed him for a while now.

Hoof beats made Adam glance down the lane. He thought maybe

Bates had come up with something really nasty to say, but the hoof beats he heard belonged to Abraham and Joe.

“You two sure look gloomy.” Abraham called.

“We just had a visit from an old friend.” Hoss answered.

Adam snorted at the word, and Abraham cocked his head. “Oh?” he asked.

“Sam Bates.” Adam said. He noted Joe’s instant clenching of his fists and wondered where this sudden hatred had come from. “He found out about our... predicament through Carl and came out to remind me that he still wants his money. He’s giving us until after the race.”

“Bastard.” Joe muttered.

Adam glanced at Joe. “I always thought so, but when did you realize it?”

Instead of answering Joe turned and remounted his horse. “I’ll be back.”

“Joe...”

“I’m not going to do something stupid like kill him – though that might have simplified the situation. I just need to know something. I’ll be back.”

“Hoss...” Adam didn’t need to finish his statement; Hoss was already halfway off the porch following his brother.

“Hey, Joe! Wait up!” Hoss swung up on Abraham’s saddled horse and urged him into a lope after Joe. Joe held his horse back so Hoss could catch up.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” Joe said. “I just need more answers.” Questions fizzled and popped in his head as he rode, but thankfully Hoss

was silent. He wouldn't have admitted it, but Joe was grateful for the company.

He could hear the fire again, crackling in rhythm with his horse's hoof beats and the screams. Joe closed his eyes and inhaled, breathing smoke in with the dust from the road.

"Pa! Pa!"

"Shut up, kid! I'm doing you a favor!"

He couldn't see a face, but he could hear the voice, as harsh as the hands that gripped him.

"Where's Pa? Mama!"

One of the hands let go of his body and clamped over his mouth. He kicked against the man holding him. Hot tears blurred his vision. He was on a horse. He kicked again and then bit the hand over his mouth. A curse and then a slap. He could feel his cheek stinging. Where was his Pa? Where were they going?

"Joe?"

Joe blinked. They were in Sacramento in front of the best hotel. Hoss was looking at him worriedly.

"Joe?" he asked again.

He needed to know why. Joe dismounted and then paused as Hoss moved to follow him.

"Do you mind staying down here?" he asked Hoss.

"Are you sure that's such a good thing?"

"Please, Hoss?"

Hoss studied his younger brother for a moment and then nodded. *"Alright. But don't do anything stupid. I'm guessing a punch*

would land you in jail, and you have a race tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry. I just want to ask him something.” Joe went inside the hotel and to the desk. “I’m looking for Sam Bates.” He said to the clerk.

The clerk eyed Joe. “Is he expecting you?”

“Yes.”

He hesitated for a moment longer and then pulled out the registry book. “Two-twelve. Second floor on, your right.”

“Thanks.” Joe followed the plush red carpet up the stairs and down the hall. His heartbeat quickened as he walked, and he forced his fist to remain loose and unclenched as he knocked.

A man opened the door. “Yes?”

“Are you Sam Bates?”

“Yes.”

Joe inhaled as the sudden need to send his fist into the man’s gut nearly overpowered him. “I need to speak with you.”

Bates studied Joe for a moment, his eyes sweeping up and down the length of him. “I’m afraid I’m busy right now, and I don’t usually cater to strangers who demand to have a word with me in a hostile manner.”

Joe stepped forward. “We have a mutual friend, Mr. Bates. Adam Cartwright.”

Bates’ face revealed nothing about what was going on in his head, and Joe wondered if Adam had learned his facial control from this man. “And you have something to say to me that pertains to Mr. Cartwright?”

“Yes.”

“Leave your gun outside.”

“If I had been planning on killing you, I already would have.” Joe said. He slid his gun out of its holster and tossed it on the ground. Then he stepped into the room and Bates shut the door behind him. For a moment Joe was silent, studying the man who had altered the course of his life by a slight wave of his soft, cushioned hand, which was now resting comfortably on the expensive fabric that covered the arm of his chair. Joe glanced about the room, noting the thick drapes, polished wood, and a bottle of fine wine that stood in a sharp contrast to the broken emptiness of the rough wooden shack he’d grown up in.

“So how do you know Adam?” Bates asked.

“He’s my brother.” Joe spat. Once again, Bates’ face was emotionless. He calmed himself and continued, refusing to rise to this smug cat’s game. “I didn’t know he was my brother until a little while ago. Before then I was raised by another man. When I asked him about it, he said that I was entrusted to him by a man who was supposed to kill me. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?” Joe glared at Bates who was still as still as a lake in the summer. But Joe caught a faint twitch in his left cheek like a tiny ripple.

“Are you insinuating that I had something to do with that tragic story?” he asked, and suddenly Joe was reminded of a snake, cold and deadly, waiting for its chance to strike. But he wasn’t backing down.

“I already know you do. I just want to know why.”

“I’m afraid this interview is at an end.”

“Not yet.” Joe resisted grabbing the man by the collar. “Was it for the ranch? Then why are you offering it to Adam now?”

“You Cartwrights all seem to think a lot of your precious

ranch, so much so that you don't realize you have a more valuable asset."

"What?"

"Yourselves." Bates sat back in his chair. "You remind me a lot of Adam at this age, all fire and snap. But you don't have that granite in you that he had. And that's what I liked in him. He was one who would stick through with something no matter what it cost him. It's what made him kill the man who shot your parents and what kept him working for me all those years, and it's what's keeping him going now, when everything is falling apart."

"Nothing's falling apart." Joe hissed.

"No? I suppose you're the one who's going to race. Well, you might come in third or fourth, but you won't win. As I said, you don't have the tenacity."

"I'll win." Joe said.

"Will you? From what I hear Mr. Hawkings only lets his horses win. I've already had a conversation with him and told him that it may benefit him even more if Abraham Rosner's horse loses."

"Why?"

"Adam was a good man. He ought to be; I made him into what he is, and I'd hate to lose him again. If he fails to pay then I'll have to arrange a work agreement in which he can compensate me through labor."

Joe felt a shudder ripple through him as he realized that Bates had raised the stakes. But there was something Bates didn't know. Joe drew himself up.

"You didn't make Adam into anything. He's a Cartwright, which means he's more than a low-down, yellow-bellied, dung-licking

snake like you could ever understand. And he would never work for you again because you're not worth the dirt on his boots. He was alone the first time you got your claws into him, but he's got a family now, and I happen to be one of them. He would die before he'd work for you, but I would kill you first. Keep that in mind." Joe turned to leave and then stopped halfway through the door. "And I've got more granite in me than you do. At least I fight my own battles." He slammed the door.

"Well?" Hoss asked when Joe came out.

"Let's go." Joe mounted and shook his head. "I hate that man." He muttered.

Hoss rode in silence as he debated whether or not to say anything. Finally he gave in.

"What did you ask him, Joe?"

For a moment Hoss didn't think he was going to answer, but then Joe exhaled as if the weight of a hundred years was on his back.

"Before I came here I went back home. Well, not home, but where I grew up. I had to know what happened."

Hoss leaned forward in his saddle. "What?"

"We were both supposed to be killed. That's what Bates had told his men to do. But I guess they couldn't bring themselves to murder two kids." He shrugged. "I must've been this good looking even then." Instead of laughing at his own joke, he continued, "The one brought me to his sister, and she and her husband raised me as their own. All so Bates could use Adam for his dirty work. And now he's at it again."

"Again?"

"He's up to something. He said that if Adam doesn't pay up,

he'll use a work contract."

"Adam would never."

"He might. He wants that ranch, Hoss. And he wouldn't have a choice; it's Bates' money."

"Reckon we'll have to be extra careful then." Hoss said. "What are you going to tell Adam?"

"Nothing." Joe decided. "He's already worried enough; if he thinks Bates is going to try something he may say that the race isn't worth it."

"Do you think he would?"

"How should I know?" Joe suddenly felt tired. Too many guesses, too much unpredictability. How could he know what Adam would or wouldn't do?

"You're getting yourself in pretty hot water." Hoss said. Maybe Joe could handle himself, and maybe he couldn't, but Hoss would make sure he didn't need to handle himself alone.

~*~

Adam didn't say much when Joe got back, probably grateful that his little brother hadn't gotten himself into trouble and content to leave it at that. He did, however, have a lot to say when Hoss casually mentioned later on that evening that he'd be sleeping in the barn that night.

"You don't need to do that, Hoss. I'll stay out there." He said.

"You're injured." Joe protested. "I'll sleep in the barn."

"You need your rest." Hoss replied. "You weren't exactly in tip top shape when you got here, and now that you're racing, you need sleep even more."

"I'll be fine. You're the one that needs to be awake in order to spot any trouble at the race."

"Both of you need sleep; I'll go out there."

"No!" Hoss and Joe both snapped at the same time.

Abraham, watching the argument from his leather armchair, cleared his throat. "Well I'm not sleeping out in the barn. And since it's getting late may I suggest that you take your argument outside so that one of us can sleep?" he glanced pointedly at the back door.

They looked at each other and shared a simultaneous shrug before going out to the barn.

"Looks like we're all sleeping out here." Adam said. "We'll take watches."

"Only if I get the first watch." Hoss said.

"Fine." Adam was too tired to argue. He settled himself against the hay and closed his eyes.

Joe did the same, but for some reason the tiredness he's been feeling had vanished, and he couldn't keep his eyes shut for more than a few seconds before opening them and following the outline of the beams of the roof with his eyes like a finger running along their edges. Beside him Adam's breathing deepened, and he figured his older brother was asleep. Hoss shifted in his position of being propped up against a hay bale and crossed his arms over his chest. Joe wondered what he was thinking about.

"Hoss?" he asked. His soft voice sounded loud in the stillness.

"Yeah?"

"What was Pa like?"

Hoss exhaled as he tried to think of something concrete he could tell Joe. He had clung to the memories like a handful of leaves that had slowly withered and crumbled, leaving behind only traces and half remembered images that were more feelings than anything else. They were emotions that he could feel, not images he could put into words.

“He had a stubborn streak a mile wide.” Adam’s voice came out of the darkness. “He never gave up; when he committed to something, you knew it would be done. And there wasn’t anything he was more committed to than his family and his ranch. He would be out before dawn and come back after dusk spending the whole day clearing, planting grass seed, and putting up fences, dead on his feet, but the next day he would get up and do it again.”

“I remember.” Hoss said. “He had a deep voice.”

Adam nodded. “Reassuring. Like listening to the waves of the lake at night. He used to sing to me when we were on the trail west. When I got older he stopped, but I still liked to listen to him sing to Hoss at night.”

As he said it, Hoss heard a voice inside his head, singing as he drifted off to sleep.

“I remember.” He said.

“Did he...” Joe stopped. Somehow it seemed like a silly question, but he still wanted to know. Thankfully Adam finished it for him.

“Did he sing to you? He and Ma both. You were her baby, Joe. She sang to you every night.”

Joe closed his eyes, but he couldn’t hear anything except the occasional chirp of crickets and the shifting of the wind through the trees.

“I don’t remember it.” He said quietly.

From the darkness came a voice, soft at first, but then it grew stronger as Adam sang.

*"Tell me the tales that to me were so dear,
Long, long ago, long, long ago,
Sing me the songs I delighted to hear,
Long, long ago, long ago,
Now you are come all my grief is removed,
Let me forget that so long you have roved.
Let me believe that you love as you loved,
Long, long ago, long ago."*

Joe closed his eyes and let the voice carry him backwards. A soft hand was stroking his curls off his forehead. It seemed as if a deeper voice joined in with Adam's.

*"Do you remember the paths where we met?
Long, long ago, long, long ago.
Ah, yes, you told me you'd never forget,
Long, long ago, long ago.
Then to all others, my smile you preferred,
Love, when you spoke, gave a charm to each word.
Still my heart treasures the phrases I heard,
Long, long ago, long ago."*

He was in a bed with a large quilt covering him. The wool felt thick under his fingertips and it rested heavily on his body like an embrace. Pine scented smoke floated over to him, mingling with the scent of tobacco from the man who sat on the bed, making the mattress dip slightly by his shoulder. Soft yellow light from a lamp cast a shadow over the bed and his feet, which stuck out from the quilt. He liked to leave his feet out of the blankets and to curl up sideways with his knees drawn up.

*"Tho' by your kindness my fond hopes were raised,
Long, long ago, long, long ago.
You by more eloquent lips have been praised,*

*Long, long ago, long, long ago,
But, by long absence your truth has been tried,
Still to your accents I listen with pride,
Blessed as I was when I sat by your side.
Long, long ago, long ago."*

The song ended, and Joe opened his eyes. He glanced over at Hoss, who was looking at him. Adam's eyes were vacant, looking back down through the years at happier times. He turned his face toward them, and his eyes returned, focusing back on the present and the older versions of the little brothers he had known. He offered a faint smile.

"Thanks, Adam." Joe said.

~*~

Hoof beats. They were like rocks falling in an avalanche, rolling faster and faster until there was nothing but madness and everything was crushed beneath. Joe crouched low over Minotaur's neck, urging him forward. The riders behind were on his heels, but they couldn't catch up. On his horse, Joe was the wind, just like in Abraham's Bible verses. Minotaur leaped forward, snorting at the slower horses behind him.

Then Minotaur jerked. He stumbled, and Joe was hurled forward. He felt himself spinning, falling, twisting in the air. Minotaur squealed as he was trampled by the horses behind him, and the ground rushed up to meet Joe as he tumbled, head first toward it.

The light shifted. He was back on a horse, but he was sitting in the saddle in front of someone. A strong arm gripped him, and a familiar scent surrounded him, like pine and soil. He was three again, and he leaned back against a firm chest, breathing in the scent of strength and security. It was his first time on a horse, and he kicked his heels impatiently, wanting to go faster.

"Easy there, Joe. You want to sit still."

He knew the voice. He'd always known it. It was deep; just like Adam had said, and warm like a rock in the sun. He craned his neck to look up into a pair of dark eyes, deeper than a black sky. Ben Cartwright smiled down at his three year old son and nudged his horse into a trot. Joe squealed and clutched at the saddle horn, the leather smooth under his fingers. He heard his Pa's laugh at his reaction, but the arm tightened around his stomach to keep him from slipping off.

"What if I fall?" he wanted to know.

"You get back up, Little Joe."

Joe opened his eyes. Sunlight was draped through the air and over the wooden walls like ribbons, setting golden fire to the sweetly scented hay. He glanced over at sleeping Hoss and the awake Adam and remembered the morning in the line shack. The first morning. So much had changed since then. Adam glanced at him, somehow sensing that he was awake.

"Race day." He said.

Joe nodded and sat up. Bits of hay stuck in his hair and he brushed them out impatiently and then rubbed his neck, stiff from sleeping on the floor. "Has it been quiet?"

"As a church. Which means that if anything is going to happen it'll probably be during the race." He paused. "You don't have to do this."

Joe stood up, sending a flurry of hay to the floor like snow. "Yes, I do." He said.

If Sacramento had been crowded earlier it was swarming now. Minotaur pranced restlessly back and forth at the end of his lead as they threaded their way through the crowds.

"That horse looks like he feels the same way I do." Hoss said. Minotaur's head was up and his nostrils flared as wide as his eyes as he took in the crowds and strange smells.

"He's probably never seen so many pretty girls before. Maybe he and I should try talking to them."

"After the race, you mean?" Adam interjected.

"Naturally." Joe glanced at a shapely blonde and sighed inwardly as they continued riding. She might be around after the race. And he might still be in one piece. He swallowed against the fear that tasted bitter in his throat. Whatever Bates was planning, he had no choice but to ride into it, so there was no point in worrying. Too bad he couldn't make his fluttering stomach agree.

They put their horses at the livery stable and Hoss started fussing over Minotaur's legs. Adam and Abraham watched in silence while Joe fidgeted with a piece of twine.

"There's a lot of people out there." He said.

"There always are." Abraham's eyes remained on Hoss, and Joe sighed when he didn't offer any further comments.

"At least there will be a lot of witnesses if anyone tries anything." he tried again. When there was no answer, he tossed his twine to the floor. "I'll be back." He said.

This time Adam looked up. "Be careful. And don't go far."

Joe waved him off irritably. He felt like if he stood still for another minute his head would fly off. Outside the rippling of the crowd helped to soothe his tense muscles. He glanced to his side and saw another young man who looked like he was going to throw up. Joe nodded at him. It was good to know he wasn't the only nervous rider, though he was probably the one with the most at stake.

“Pst!”

Joe frowned and glanced around. He caught sight of a young man and searched his mind briefly for the name.

“Luke?” he finally said.

The boy jerked his head and disappeared around the back of the stable and down a narrow alleyway. Joe mentally shrugged and followed.

“What is it?” he asked.

“You’re the one riding Abraham Rosner’s horse, aren’t you?” Luke asked. His voice was low in a conspiratorial whisper.

“Yeah, why?”

“Someone doesn’t want you to win.”

“Who?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. I was cleaning the livery stable ‘cuz I work there and I heard a couple of men talking about it. But I don’t know who they were. They mentioned Mr. Hawkings though. Said there was something planned for during the race.”

Joe snorted. “Can’t even win honestly.” He shook his head. They had known it was coming, but it still took him by surprise. The part of him that had been hoping that all this worry was for nothing threw in with the rest of his frenzied nerves. “Thanks for the warning.”

Luke grinned. “You said to pay you back.”

“This leaves me in your debt.”

The grin got wider. “You can pay me later.”

Joe laughed. “Hold me to it.”

"I will. But I'd better get lost. Don't want anyone knowing I told you; seems trouble likes you."

"I'm not arguing with that." He leaned against the wall as Luke scooted away. For some reason he felt a lot calmer now that he knew something was coming. At least he could stop jumping every other second. He went back inside. Hoss was still running his hands down Minotaur's legs and Adam and Abraham were still looking on. For a moment Joe considered keeping Luke's news to himself. After all, there wasn't much they could do during the race except watch. But he cleared his throat.

"We've got trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" Adam asked. Hoss straightened and they all faced Joe.

"Hawkings, or Bates, or both have something planned for during the race. One of the stable boys told me."

Adam frowned and Hoss' eyes flickered from him back to Joe.

"Maybe you shouldn't ride." He said. "If it's..."

"I'm riding."

"It's too dangerous."

"I'm riding." Joe said. His tone left no room for arguing, but Hoss did anyway.

"It's not worth your life, Joe."

"So you both are allowed to risk your life for the Ponderosa, but I'm not?" Joe demanded. Hoss opened his mouth and then shut it. Joe had him there. He looked to Adam for support.

"You think you can stop him?" Adam asked wryly. He met Joe's slight grin with his own faint smile that belied how sick his stomach was feeling. "But be careful."

"I've been taking care of myself without you for a while now. I think I'll manage." Joe answered.

"Time to line up!" someone yelled into the stable. Joe took a deep breath and gripped Minotaur's reins. Hoss walked next to him in a slow cadence behind the line of horses on their way to the empty street. It was lined with a blur of faces and colors that Joe barely noticed. He mounted in silence and Hoss checked his tack and then held onto the reins under Minotaur's chin. The horse squealed and aimed a kick at the bay beside him.

"Easy." Hoss said sternly. He looked up at Joe who had barely flinched. "Are you alright?"

"I don't know." He felt sick suddenly. "Hoss, if something happens, don't let Adam blame himself. I want this just as much as he does."

Hoss nodded, but he couldn't help adding, "Nothing's going to happen. Just stay clear of the pack; it's not hard for a rider to stick a knife into someone without anyone seeing it."

"Right."

Hoss didn't want to leave him looking so panicked, but he was the only one left in the street on foot. He gave Joe a pat on the knee; it wasn't much, but it was all he could think to do. Then he left his little brother and the horse.

Joe inhaled and let the breath out slowly, feeling it shake in his chest. Minotaur seemed to sense his nervousness and pranced slightly, forcing Joe to focus on his horse instead of any potential danger.

Just focus on him. He told himself. You can outrun any problems. He hoped he was right.

~*~

For some reason Joe looked extremely small on top of Abraham's large horse, almost as small as the time they'd given him a ride on Hoss' pony when he was three. Adam couldn't tear his eyes off his little brother as horses and riders alike shifted impatiently, waiting for the gunshot that would shoot them forward into a stampede. One that held a lot of potential danger for his little brother sitting palely on top of his antsy mount. If only Adam knew where the attack would come from. But he didn't; Joe was alone against an unknown enemy. And Adam had put him there.

"Are you wishing you were riding?" Abraham asked, breaking Adam's train of thought.

"He's alone out there." Adam said through his clenched jaw. Hoss put a hand on his shoulder.

"He'll be fine. He's as stubborn as a donkey."

"If anyone's going to be hurt, it should be me." Adam said.

"You already got hurt." Abraham pointed out. Adam snapped his mouth shut and refocused on the line of horses. The gun went off.

~*~

Joe barely needed to tell Minotaur to go with the gunshot; the horse leaped forward with a push from his hind legs that would have knocked Joe out of the saddle if he hadn't been ready. As Minotaur landed, Joe urged him forward again into an even longer stride. Then he checked him before the horse could fully stretch his legs.

Not time to be in front yet. His thoughts came in short bursts like the sound of hooves hitting the ground beneath him. He'd seen enough races to know that the horse that started first rarely finished that way.

Hold him back. The voice in his head sounded like Carl, the

same tone that had coached him through his first race. Then Adam joined in.

Watch out. You don't know who's against you.

He was surrounded by a sea of bobbing horse heads and rocking bodies of varying shades of brown and red. Any one of them could have been hired by Bates. As they rounded a bend in the road, Joe swung Minotaur to the outside. The horse fought against Joe's restraints, and Joe resisted the urge to pull back.

Don't fight him; he's stronger than you, and you'll just wear him down. Keep him between your hands and legs. He felt the horse pull on his hands all the way through his shoulders, back, and stomach, but he didn't budge. They were running in the center of the pack, not exactly where Joe wanted to be, but he knew if he brought Minotaur to the outside he wouldn't be able to hold him back. As it was he was nearly running over the horse in front of them as Minotaur tried to wriggle through the herd like a fish.

He glanced at the remaining riders, but they all seemed intent on their own horses rather than paying any attention to him. Minotaur felt his attention wander and tried to run out from under him, but Joe held him down.

Not yet. He held Minotaur together in a rhythm that got faster and more compact, like water raging at a dam, waiting for the moment it would break free.

Then he felt an explosion of red in his side. The world tilted and burst into flashes of black as he fumbled for Minotaur's mane. His hands had slipped, and Minotaur lurched forward from underneath him. He felt his body leave the saddle; he was flying through the air. Then the ground slammed into him, knocking all the air out of his lungs. Joe ducked his head and put his arms over it to shield him from the horses behind him. The hoof beats were so loud it was like they were in his ears.

Something exploded in his right shoulder. Another shot of pain behind his thigh. So much dust. For a moment he thought of a cave in. Then silence. He raised his head and nearly screamed from the flame of heat that ignited his side. His head crashed back into the ground, and his left hand reached up to cover his side as the flame spread over his whole body. His hand came away sticky with blood that had seeped through his torn shirt. The rider beside him must have had a knife. Joe struggled to picture his face, but everything was hazy. He tried to sit up again, but his side sent rivets of pain through him that overshadowed the numbness in his right leg from the horse that had kicked him. He didn't reach down to see how bad it was. Instead he let his head hit the dirt for a third time and focused on breathing through clenched teeth and the red fog in his lungs.

"Get up."

Joe opened his eyes that had been squeezed shut. Who had said that? But he didn't see anyone, just his horse. Joe stared at Minotaur in shock. Why hadn't he run off? He struggled to his feet and fell to his hands and knees as his right leg gave out beneath him. A yelp burst through his lips from the weight on his shoulder.

"Come on." His voice rasped, and he held out a hand to the horse. He couldn't get up without a support, not if he still wanted to keep a grip on his side. Minotaur lowered his head and sniffed at Joe.

"Please." Joe nearly cried in relief when the horse took a step in his direction. From his position on the ground, Joe checked Minotaur's forelegs. They were a little scratched up, but he couldn't feel any heat or swelling.

"Guess you're the lucky one." He gasped as he looked up at the saddle. The horse seemed five miles high.

"We can't catch them anyway." He said. But his used his left

hand to pull himself to his feet.

You get back up. He remembered the voice in his dream. "Come on." He led Minotaur limp by limp to the edge of the road where there was a rock.

He struggled to the top, leaning on Minotaur instead of using his now throbbing right leg. He could barely see anything through the black specks in front of his eyes, and once he was on top he swayed dizzily and nearly fell back down. He gripped the saddle, and Minotaur glanced back as if to ask if he was going to get on. Joe started to and then realized that he couldn't swing his right leg over the saddle without using his painful right arm.

You don't have time for this. Joe gritted his teeth and flung himself up. For a moment he thought he was falling again, but his left hand gripped the mane, and his feet found the stirrups. He lay with his face in Minotaur's mane, panting and trying not to throw up. Minotaur started moving, and Joe straightened. There was a buzzing in his head, like it was stuffed with hundreds of bees. He covered his side with his limp right hand and held onto the reins as well as the saddle horn with the other. It and his left foot in the stirrups was the only thing keeping him in the saddle. For a moment he considered letting himself fall again, crash into the earth and then slip into blissful nothingness. It wasn't like he could catch the other riders anyway. But Adam wouldn't do that, and neither would Hoss or his Pa, according to Adam. Cartwrights didn't give up.

"Let's show them who they're messing with." he muttered through clenched teeth, and he drove both of his heels into Minotaur's sides, ignoring the burst of pain through his right leg. If they were going to catch the others, he would have to ride this horse, not just sit there managing to hold on.

Minotaur flew. The landscape blurred together with the black

specks in front of his eyes. He didn't need to see; he just needed to feel his horse beneath him. His shoulders rolled with every stride, and each movement left him gasping for air, but he clung to the horse like a tick to a hound crashing through brambles after a deer. Then he couldn't feel anything either except the scream from his muscles every with each of Minotaur's leaps. Joe closed his eyes and let the horse go.

A gunshot made his eyes snap open again. Were they shooting at him? The shots sounded far away, up ahead more. His eyes watered, but all he could see was dust. As Minotaur raced forward, he could make out the shapes of horses farther ahead. They weren't running a race though, they were scattered. Was he seeing things? Then the horses realigned; whatever had scattered them was gone. Joe gripped the reins in his good hand as well as the sleeve of his jacket to keep his useless arm from flapping. The motion made him see red every time it jarred against itself as the arm rolled free of its socket. He couldn't see anything through the red tears that either came from the wind or the pain.

"Go on." His voice scraped through his jaw, clenched in pain. He spurred Minotaur forward.

~*~

The seconds ticked sluggishly by like a river of mud. All around him people were talking, but Adam felt like he was behind a wall of silence. Hoss' hand was still on his shoulder. Neither of them noticed anymore. The voices around him slowly fell into silence, and Abraham pulled out his handkerchief to cough.

"The race usually doesn't take this long." Someone muttered.

Adam felt his stomach sink to his knees. Something had gone wrong. A paper propelled by the wind skidded across the empty

street. Then a voice called out, "I see them!"

The crowd broke into noise once more. "Who?" someone yelled.

"John Baker's horse followed by Wilson's!"

Adam craned his neck, but he couldn't see past the tall the people in front of him. Any other time he would have laughed at Abraham standing on tiptoes as he tried to see.

"Is Joe there?" he asked.

"No." Hoss said.

Adam felt like he'd been punched in the stomach.

"Wait." Hoss' voice suddenly changed. "There's a horse coming around that left bend."

Adam pushed forward to see. It was Joe, but he was hunched over the horse in a way that made Adam's throat clench. Joe's right hand was clenched uselessly at his side, and his clothes were torn and dusty. Something had gone wrong.

"He won't make it." Hoss said.

"He might." Abraham stepped in front of Adam.

Adam held his breath as he watched the horse reach with his front legs, Joe urging him faster with his hands and body.

"Come on." Adam mentally urged the horse faster and felt his legs tense as if he was driving Minotaur himself. Slowly the distance between Joe and the other horses began to close. Too slowly. Adam's heart sank as he realized Joe wouldn't make it.

"He has more." Abraham said. "Joe just has to drive him to it."

As if he'd heard Abraham, Joe seemed to bend closer to Minotaur and something broke free. They were no longer horse

and rider; they were an avalanche or a windstorm that swept past the trailing horses. As the two lead horses thundered toward the finish line, suddenly there were three leaders. Joe's eyes were closed, but his body still urged Minotaur forward, asking for more from his lather covered horse. And Minotaur gave it; as they swept past the finish line, he thrust himself forward, just barely in front of the other two. Hoss whooped and threw his hat in the air; Adam thought he was going to collapse. He hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath.

"What did I tell you?" Abraham slapped Adam on the back.

Adam grinned and glanced down the street toward Joe. Then he froze. The horses were still running as their riders slowly brought them down from their gallop, but Joe was slumped over in the saddle like he'd been shot. While Adam pushed past the crowds to get to his brother, he watched in what seemed like slow motion as Joe slipped forward out of the saddle and landed unmoving on the ground.

~*~

People were cheering. He could barely hear them over the buzzing noise in his head. His head fell forward; he was too exhausted to hold it up after that last burst that had driven Minotaur over the finish line. He felt so heavy, as if he was made of wood. His fingers loosened and then the reins slipped out of his hand. He couldn't even see them to pick them back up. Minotaur kept running, but Joe couldn't feel the motion anymore. He was falling, slowly, like the air was trying to push him back up. He wanted to tell it to let him go; but his mouth wouldn't form the words. Then there was darkness.

Hoss wanted to tell Adam to sit down. His brother kept pacing

back and forth, his glance shooting from the window to see if Abraham was coming back from collecting their winnings to the door that the doctor was behind with Joe. But he knew it wouldn't do any good. Truth be told, he didn't know how he was managing to stay so calm; usually he was the first one to be up in arms when things happened.

"How long is this supposed to take?" Adam muttered. The few minutes that they'd been there seemed like hours.

Hoss wasn't sure if Adam was talking about Abraham or Joe. Hopefully the doctor would be done soon. Somehow Hoss felt that the longer he was in there, the worse off Joe was.

Adam had been the first to reach him, but he hadn't been able to lift him with only one arm, so Hoss had carried him out of the street and the path of the other horses. Joe's head had lolled to the side when Hoss had picked him up, but other than that he didn't move, and Hoss had nearly dropped him when he had felt how light he was, more like the three year old he'd once held under his Ma's watchful eye than the seventeen year old he'd come to know.

"Shouldn't be too much longer now." he finally said. It was a safe answer for either situation.

Adam barely heard him. Abraham needed to get back so he could take the money to Bates and then pound him into a bloody mass, and the doctor needed to finish up so Adam could know whether or not he needed to kill Bates.

"You should sit down." Hoss said.

"I can't." If he sat he'd be up again two seconds later. Hoss nodded knowingly and let the matter drop.

Adam paused at the window and let his forehead rest against the cool glass. He'd been so close to fixing everything, and now he may have been cheated again. He closed his eyes and

breathed a prayer that showed up as condensation on the window.

“Hey, Hoss?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you believe in God?” Adam didn’t lift his head.

“Sure I do.” Hoss glanced at Adam curiously. “Do you?”

“Why?” Adam ignored Hoss’ question.

“Doesn’t seem like there’s any other answer for the fact that our family was torn apart, but we still found each other. Then we were almost split apart again, and we’re still here together.” Hoss came over and put a hand on Adam’s shoulder, knowing what his brother was thinking. “I don’t think God brought us back together just to let Joe die before he has a chance to get to know his family.”

Adam wished he could have such faith, but at least he could take comfort in Hoss’. The cloud of vapor evaporated from the window, leaving the glass clear once again. Adam spun as the door behind him opened.

“How is he?” He asked.

“He’s lost a lot of blood, and he’s pretty banged up. He may have internal bleeding.” Doctor Thorne said. “If he does...” he trailed off and cleared his throat. “I need to examine him more thoroughly, but if you want to see him first ...” the doctor was cut off by Adam and Hoss rushing past him, and Adam forced his mind not to finish the sentence.

“...one last time.” He pushed the thought from his head.

Joe’s face was as pale as the sheet that covered him, but Adam was relieved to see the fabric moving gently up and down. He let himself sink into a chair by the bed with Hoss standing

beside him, his heart thudding like hooves on his chest.

Please, Pa, God, anything but this.

“Adam.”

Adam started at the sound of Joe’s voice that was smaller than a whisper. His little brother’s eyelids fluttered open and underneath his eyes searched back and forth. Adam bent over so Joe could see him.

“What is it?”

“Did you see that last spurt? Some horse.”

“Some horse and some race.” Hoss said. He tried to make his voice sound light, as if he wasn’t worried that inside Joe’s body his blood might be seeping out like poison.

“We won.” Joe closed his eyes. “Didn’t we, Adam?”

“You did.” Adam’s throat closed over his voice. He kept his face calm, but inwardly he felt like railing against fate and her toying with him and against any god that might be listening. Maybe Hoss was right and they wouldn’t have come this far to be torn apart now, but in his experience, life only ever knocked you down and then kicked you while you were there.

“Don’t worry.” Joe didn’t open his eyes, and his voice was so low that they had to lean close to hear.

The rising and falling of the sheets began to slow, and Adam leaned forward. “Joe?” he asked worriedly. He didn’t like the dreamy tone of his brother’s voice or the vacant look that had been in his eyes just before he’d closed them.

“I gave him something for the pain.” Doctor Thorne stood in the doorway. “He’ll nod of any minute now and then sleep for a good while.” He cleared his throat. “Right now I need to

examine him further. It might be better if....”

“We ain’t leaving him.” Hoss said.

Doctor Thorne nodded. Adam looked past him and nearly froze. Jesse Finch was standing in the doorway.

“I’ll be back.” he stood and then felt a weak hand brush against his.

“Adam...” Joe hesitated, and Adam gave him a nod and gripped his hand. The gesture spoke more words than he possibly could have.

“You did good, kid.” He said. This time he couldn’t keep his voice from shaking a little. “Better than I would have done.”

Adam shut the door behind him and crossed his arms as he leaned against it. His relaxed stance belied his inner defensiveness as he eyed Jesse coldly. “What are you doing here?” he asked. His hand strayed to his side and rested against his gun. Jesse raised his arms.

“Evening out the odds a little.” His hand brushed his gun. “Abraham sent me to get you.”

“Why?” There were several questions wrapped into the one word. “Where is he?”

“I left him at the courthouse. There’s a bit of a stir going on. Apparently some people think the race was fixed.”

“I don’t know why they would think that.” Adam muttered. The memory of the last time he’d followed this man somewhere flashed through his mind.

Jesse shook his head, and something like amusement flitted over his face. “Probably because someone fired some shots at the riders during the race and stirred them up a little. It slowed down the race considerably.”

Adam eyed Jesse. "Who would do that?"

Jesse shrugged, and Adam rephrased.

"Why would you do that?"

"I owe Joe for letting Carl go."

Adam tensed. "Where is Carl?"

"On his way to Oregon."

"Alone?"

"Doubt me if you want, but Abraham is still waiting." Jesse gestured toward the open door, and Adam hesitated. Then he shrugged and followed Jesse out onto the street. He trusted Abraham – if Abraham really had sent Jesse.

"Why did you come back?"

"Bates is a snake from what Tom told me. And believe it or not, I care about Joe."

Adam had a hard time believing it, but he didn't say so. Instead he followed Jesse in silence, wondering when exactly they had become allies.

"So you saw what happened? In the race?" he finally asked.

"Not really. I came around the bend and Joe was dragging himself up onto his horse. He was way behind, so I went ahead and slowed the herd down a little. I figured if they could cheat, so could I. Only now everyone's in a little bit of an uproar about it." Jesse opened the door to the courthouse, and Adam stepped in. He paused for a moment as the sounds of loud voices rolled over him like waves of heat. Jesse hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said there was an uproar.

"There's Abraham." Jesse pointed, and he and Adam nudged their way through the crowd to the short, white haired man.

"How's Joe?" Abraham asked.

Adam shook his head. He didn't want to say it. "I don't know."

Abraham seemed to know better than to offer a weak 'he'll be alright'. Instead he nodded toward a silver-haired man in the front. "There's Hawkings. He's probably trying to figure out how to make good on his wagers."

"Bates isn't here." Adam glanced around. He should have known that he wouldn't be. He would let Hawkings clean up his mess rather than risk getting caught with a smoking gun.

"Hawkings is your lever." Abraham agreed. "The question is, do you want your winnings or do you want to get him arrested? Because you won't get both."

"And there's no way to get dirt on Bates. He'll weasel his way out of anything." Adam weighed his options for a moment and then stepped forward. He slipped between several arguing people until he was right behind Hawkings.

"Not the way you planned things, is it?" he said in a low tone that only Hawkings could hear.

"What do you mean by that?" Hawkings barely turned his head, but he glanced at Adam out of the corner of his dark eyes.

"The horse that was supposed to lose won. You lost your wagers and whatever money Bates was going to pay you."

"I don't think I know what you're talking about." Hawkings snapped. "And I'm in the middle of something here, so if you don't mind..."

"You don't know what I'm talking about." Adam snorted. "And I suppose you've never heard of Sam Bates before either. Only I've got several witnesses who know better." Adam reflected that he'd just stretched the word several to include a stable boy that he didn't even know the name of, his unconscious

brother, and Jesse Finch.

“And who might that be?”

“No one I’ll tell you the names of. People involved in this seem to be getting injured at a rapid rate.”

“You’re lying.”

“Maybe. Want to risk it?” Adam leaned closer. “Go ahead and try my bluff. We’ve both played our hands, Hawkings, and I came out on top. Want me to yank up your sleeve and show everyone that you’ve been hiding an ace?”

“You can’t prove anything.”

“I don’t need to. A man like you is only as good as your reputation. How much mud can it be dragged through before it starts to tarnish?” Adam could almost hear Hawkings thinking as his breathing shallowed, and he cleared his throat.

“Alright.” He said. “What do you want?”

“Just cut your losses and announce the winner of the race.” Adam said. He took several steps back, and Hawkings raised his hands.

“Attention. Attention!” Hawkings shouted several times before a few people up front looked up at him. The voices dwindled down, and when all was silent, Hawkings cleared his throat again. “I realize that this race has been a little different. Some people are saying that it was fixed. However, as the sole sponsor of this race, I think you’ll all agree that it is my right to decide the winner. Since no one was killed or injured in the mysterious shooting, I don’t see any need for a legal investigation.” He glanced at the sheriff at the edge of the crowd, and then back at the people in front of him. “I therefore declare Minotaur, owned by Abraham Rosner and ridden by Joe Cartwright to be the winner. And if anyone has a problem with that, they can take it up with me in private.” He

quickly added the last part as the voices surged again. Abraham moved forward to get the money and Adam allowed the people to push him back until he was beside Jesse again.

"Not bad." Jesse said.

"Sometimes I think justice is as crooked as a dog's hind leg." Adam muttered. He also felt like he was trying to stop an avalanche by throwing snowballs.

"You can only do what you can do. These people have their games, and they're good at them. The only way to win is to play by their rules. If you come out ahead, it's better to take what you've got than lose it all trying to beat them." Jesse met Adam's questioning look and then glanced away. "My father happens to be one of those people."

"I gathered."

"Well." Abraham stepped beside them, and the rest of the people slowly began to disperse. "Hawkings gave me a look fit to kill, but here it is." He placed a money sack into Adam's hand. "I assume you have some business to take care of with that." he said.

The sack was a light tan, the same color as the dust of the road that Adam had lifted Joe's head off of. Adam's fist closed around the cloth. "I do."

Bates was in the hotel dining room and his carefully manicured hands held a newspaper that his eyes skimmed across. Adam paused in the doorway and stared at the man for several moments. He had seen him like this so many times; Bates always pretended to read when he was thinking. Adam could tell his eyes were moving by habit while his mind was miles away. Or maybe not miles. He was pretty sure Bates knew he was here,

but he didn't move. His face remained frozen in a scowl that would have made most people take a step back. But Bates only looked up and smiled as he folded the newspaper.

"Aren't you going to sit down?" he asked.

Adam glanced around. He recognized two of the men sitting nearby, and there was a third that he didn't know, but he had the bodyguard look. He stayed where he was, leaning against the doorframe.

"Why don't you get rid of your men first." He said.

"So you can kill me?" Bates snorted.

"If I wanted to kill you three oversized nursemaids wouldn't stop me. You know I can draw faster than them anyway."

"You'd be dead a second after me. You really want to throw it all away now that you've won this round?"

Adam briefly wondered what Bates meant by 'this round' but he brushed the thought aside.

"No." he said. "I'm not going to throw it all away. Which is why you'll be perfectly safe alone with me." He glanced at the men. Bates exhaled and then motioned to the men to leave.

"I suppose congratulations are an order." He said when they were gone. Adam knew he had to be writhing with fury inside, but it was impossible to tell from looking at him. "How's the boy?"

"Not dead yet." Adam walked across the room and sat. He glanced up at Bates with a half curled lip from across the table, and Bates stared back with his eyes narrowed. Both looks were cold, one mocking, the other calculating.

"Do you have what you owe me?" Bates finally asked.

Adam tossed the sack on the table. As Bates pulled out the

deed and signed it, Adam contemplated what to say. He'd made up a whole speech on his way over, but now it had vanished, and he could only think about how easy it would be to kill Bates right now. A small bullet, a simple twitch of his trigger finger, just like the one that had started this whole thing. Or if he wanted to make it last, he could knock the life out of him slowly, punch by painful punch. His fists clenched at the thought, and a sharp throb shot through his right arm. It was like dry pine on a fire.

"You know you owe me a lot more than this." Bates said, handing the deed to Adam. The paper felt light, as if it didn't contain a lifetime's worth of dreams. Adam pocketed it.

"I know." He stepped forward. His right arm was still tightly bandaged, but his left one worked just fine. His first punch knocked Bates out of his chair and onto the floor. The dull thump was the same that the dirt had made on his father's coffin. It was about time justice was done. For everything. He closed his eyes and used his right hand as well, not even noticing the angry pain that radiated through his wrist and forearm.

Bates looked up but didn't move to rise. He wiped the blood off his face with the back of his hand.

"Feel better now? Avenged?" he hissed. "Like life is fair again?"

"If life was fair we'd both be dead. I guess we should both be grateful for second chances." Adam snapped. Bates' chuckle made him clench his fists again, but he forced them back open.

"I guess you're right. So now you're going to go off to your little ranch and live life like an upright citizen. Good luck. I know who you are. I ought to, I made you into it."

Adam sent a boot into Bates' side and the man gasped. Then he leaned forward and hissed in Bates' ear.

“You’ve only ever seen yourself in me, which is why you only see a monster. You have no idea who I am. I’m letting you off easy this time, mostly because I’d rather rebuild starting with a clean slate than with another killing. But if you ever try to hurt my family again, I still won’t kill you – I’ll make you wish I had. And if my little brother dies, you won’t be able to run far enough to get away from me.”

Bates looked at him through one eye and nodded. There was no smooth reply, no careful phrasing. Adam straightened and gave Bates one last glance. His gun was still at his side, but Adam wasn’t even tempted to use it. For all his money and power, he realized that the sniveling man below him wasn’t even worth the bullet. Adam turned and walked away.

~*~

It was raining again, a steady downpour that ran in streams off Adam’s hat and down his neck, but it was warm, not cold like the icy rain that had hung in the air fourteen years ago, and it smelled of damp soil and pine. It carried the scent of familiarity that brought Adam back to another time. He led the way on a path he could have traveled in his sleep, past the crumbling ruin of all that remained of the house and through trees on an overgrown road that led to the edge of the lake. The brothers were silent as they rode – somehow it seemed unreal, as if a spoken word would make it vanish like the fog that clung to them. For Adam it was like they he was riding through another time. He could easily close his eyes and imagine that the horse beside him was his Pa’s instead of Hoss’ and that they were riding out to check fences or clear more pastureland. The trees seem to glance down at him and note how much he had changed even as he realized how little they had. It was all the same as he had left it, and his throat constricted painfully as flashes of memories mingled with the rainy present. His Pa seemed closer than he’d ever been at the same time he seemed farther than ever, and the part of him that had been buried when he hadn’t come back was

resurfacing in his chest. He could almost hear Ben Cartwright's voice.

"We'll add about twenty head within the next few months and let them up into that new pastureland. There's more than enough room for them to roam up there. Come spring we'll add even more."

Adam closed his eyes and inhaled. How many times had he listened to his Pa talk as they rode this way countless times? But now he remembered the last time he'd come this way with his two brothers, the last time he'd seen his father's face. He could still see it in his mind's eye, so life-like despite the paleness. For some reason Adam had expected it to be more dead looking, like it was carved out of stone, but his eyes had gently rested shut, as if he was sleeping, and the lips had been parted slightly, like he was ready to speak. Adam opened his eyes and the image vanished. He reined in his horse and Hoss and Joe followed suit. In front of them the lake looked greyer than the clouds above it, and raindrops tattered the waves that rocked back and forth on their way to the shore as if pointing at the two graves nearby. Joe grunted slightly as his feet hit the ground, but Adam had learned quickly not to ask if he was alright. He could still feel the relief that had washed over him like rain when he'd returned to the doctor's and had found Joe awake and with a good chance of surviving. Words that sprung to his mind had clogged in his throat, and he'd only been able to grip his brother's hand and bow his head in gratefulness to whatever higher power had spared him.

"Cartwrights don't die that easily." Joe had said to him, making Hoss laugh.

"Ain't that the truth." He had said.

Jesse had left shortly after. He had shaken Adam's hand, and then turned to Joe. But Joe cut off whatever he had been going

to say.

"Maybe I'll see you around the ranch sometime."

"Probably not for a while. Wounds don't heal that quickly, Joe. You've got your family to stick to, and I've got mine. Besides, Carl thinks Adam's dead, and it's probably better if things stay that way."

Joe had nodded understandingly, and the two had embraced before Jesse had mounted and rode off. Now the three brothers descended toward the lake side and the two gravestones that stood there. Both were cracked, and Adam brushed aside some of the moss that had grown over them. The silence was broken only by the sound of water – the raindrops on their saturated clothes and the lapping of the waves of the lake. Adam let the last handful of the springy moss fall to the muddy ground and moved to stand by his brothers. Water drops pelted down onto his bared head and ran over his eyes to drip off his nose. He blinked the rain and something else away.

"I wish I could remember more." Joe's voice was low and his face was hidden by a forelock of hair over his forehead, curly in the dampness. His eyes traced the names again and again. There were still no faces, but if he closed his eyes he could imagine that he heard their voices, especially the deep one that had told him to get up during the race.

"It'll come." Hoss said. It was slowly coming back to him, and it would come back to Joe. Not necessarily the memories, but the feeling, and the knowledge of who he was. "You can bet anything that Pa's up there now saying that it took us long enough to get here."

Joe looked up, and his eyes were shiny with unshed tears. Adam felt moisture on his own cheeks, but he made no motion to wipe it away. An arm that had once held a three year old now wrapped around his little brother's shoulders and tightened, and a hand that had once gripped his as a nine year old now

rested on his shoulder, as solid and heavy as a paperweight. He remembered that day and the emotions that had snapped and snarled at him, fear, hatred, doubt. All of it was being slowly washed away with the rain that streamed down his body and into Lake Tahoe. Maybe his Pa had been looking down then, but Adam was sure he was looking down now. And while the memory of that day was still there, it seemed hazy and far away like mountaintops in the distance, still a part of him but nothing more than a memory.

~The End

Next in The Wheels of Fate Series:

[A Spoke in the Wheel: Joe's Story](#)

Chapter End Notes:

Thanks to all my readers from BW that helped me to write this; I'm serious guys, I couldn't have done it if it hadn't been for your constant support, comments, and constructive criticisms. It's kind of bittersweet putting this story up here at BB since I was really looking forward to publishing it on BW, but I'm grateful to still have the community on a wonderful new site that I can share it with. All the best,
slaine89

Master of Paraphernalia for PCC, Wonderfully Long Updater,
Holder of the Key to the Fantasy Realm.