

# The Route Home (by Monette)

Summary: Adam faces a long road home after suffering PTSD when a miner tortured him in the desert. He is afraid he killed Kane, because he cannot remember those last moments, until Joe supplies a 'trigger.'

Rating: G 8,780 words

*Author's Note: First published as "The Devil's Bargain" (on another site). The story has been given a new title and received a 2020 edit with new material, answering the question why did Adam decide to go fishing at Pyramid Lake without a pole?*

## THE ROUTE HOME

"What do you suppose happened to him, Pa?" Hoss asked at breakfast on the third morning after they brought Adam home, during which time he'd had only brief lucid moments and meager nourishment. "Who was that man?"

"Adam will tell us when he can. Whatever happened, I don't suppose there's anything we can do about it."

Joe stood, fighting the guilt that wanted to consume him. Guilt he knew better than to bear but was there all the same. "I'll go saddle the horses."

"Joseph, you haven't eaten."

But Joe was out the door.

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Adam at first didn't know where he was. His eyes opened to total darkness and shut quickly again. Had he died? Being alive would

shock him. He could feel movement. He was lying, as though in a bed, on the ground, in a grave, but the ground was moving, or he was ...

Kane! Kane was dragging him! He couldn't feel his arms, so Kane must have killed him and now was dragging him ... somewhere. He jerked his arms. The ground still moved beneath him. Where was he? Adam could have sworn they stayed together, looking for gold, surviving, surviving. "KANE?!"

Instantly the ground stopped moving. The sky, still clear blue, didn't hold still. He could see the blue waving in ripples.

Adam looked around but couldn't see anything familiar. Kane won, after all, Kane was alive and Adam had died. But did that make Kane a better man?

Somehow he lost track of the game. As his eyes closed again, he felt his mind drifting away – it was all over. They were dead. Someone was dead. Was it him? Kane? Both of them. Did either of them deserve to live out there?

"Adam..."

No! His family was looking for him! He was too far away. They'd never find him. He had no way of letting them know in this rocky country, no trail for them to follow. No, he couldn't call out because Kane would do this to them, too. That's why he was a better man but he didn't expect Kane to understand that. He tried to open his eyes, he wanted all this to be a bad dream, and when he woke up...

"Adam, you awake?" The voice was soft and gentle, reassuring.

"Pa?"

"You're home, son, it's over."

“Home?” But had he won? “Kane?”

“He’s dead, son.”

“Dead? I...”

“Don’t talk now. Rest. Just rest and build up your strength. You’re safe now.”

“I can remember being dragged through a desert. Dying of thirst.”

“That’s how we brought you home, son.” Ben sat next to him and rubbed his shoulder. “We buried Kane first.”

Home? But did he deserve to be alive? He thought hard but couldn’t remember what happened after he learned there was food and water, enough for one of them to get out alive. If he had killed Kane, then Kane had won, proving him no better than an animal.

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Ben watched his son drift away again. Was he ever going to get him back? He walked back down the stairs with the food he hoped his son was ready to eat. He’d had so little food since he left East Gate nearly a month ago.

Joe and Hoss were waiting. “No change?”

Ben handed Hoss the plate of food. “Not yet. He’ll get there, Hoss. Don’t worry. His mind is strong. Always has been.”

“Every man has a cracking point, Pa.” Joe stared up the stairs. “We never know what that is. Not for any man. Adam told me that himself, once.”

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Sunlight hit his eyelids and Adam winced.

The ground wasn't moving anymore and his throat was parched. He remembered the walk through the desert after his horse was taken from him. He had mourned the loss of his mount more than the danger, pushed aside the thought of what could happen if he didn't find a way out, hoping his horse would get free and come find him.

No, it was only a horse. If it got loose, it would find its way home but not in time for them to find him.

Five days, a week, before he died of thirst? Three days, he remembered three days passing. He had chewed on stones, cactus leaves, dug in the ground for muddy soil, all before he found ... salvation ... in the form of...

By that time, his eyes had been nearly burned into his skull and the miner's camp looked seemed like a mirage. The miner who saved his life, and then ...

He felt something cold and wet laid over his face and his whole body shook, startled. He reached up to take it off, but a firm strong hand grabbed his arm.

"Easy, son." Ben sat next to him, next to the son who looked seriously out of place in his own room. Dr. Martin had just left. Adam hadn't even noticed his presence, although he had been conscious the whole time.

The doctor prescribed bed rest and time. He had nothing else to offer.

"Where's Kane?" Adam tried to sit up and throw off his covers. "I have to talk to him."

Ben pushed him back down easily because Adam was still weak.

"I'm sorry, son. He's dead. We buried him before we brought you home."

"Dead?" Adam stared at the ceiling, trying to remove himself physically back through time, back to when Kane was still alive. "He can't be dead. How did he die?"

Ben frowned, trying but unable to hide his dismay. "I don't know, son. I was hoping you'd tell me. When you're ready."

"I have to know how he died, Pa. I can't remember."

"Do you want to remember? When it might be better not to."

"I have to. It's important because ... he wanted me to kill him. He begged me to. But I couldn't have. The person I think I am ... was ... couldn't have."

Ben closed the curtains to shut off the outside world. He thought the sun must be keeping Adam from fully opening his eyes. He looked back at his son in the darkened room and frowned. Adam's eyes were still only slits in a haggard, drawn face.

Ben sat next to him again. "If you can talk about it, I'm here to listen. Don't worry, you're safe now. The memories can only help you heal."

"Could I have some ... some water?" With a sudden cry of pain he threw his arms up around his head, the memory of past agony forcing him into spasms that Ben didn't want to believe were a part of him now.

Ben pressed down on Adam's shoulders, hoping to calm him. "You're safe now, Adam. Trust me, son. Whatever he did to you, it's over now."

Ben waited until he calmed again, and then helped him drink. He heard Hoss and Joe in the doorway behind them. "Go see if Hop Sing has anything Adam can eat."

Hoss left but Joe remained.

Ben turned back to Adam. "You need to eat, Adam. You can't survive this way." Adam's eyes were closed but his mouth tight, face pressed into a grimace. "Where are you now, son?"

"I was bringing money home. Joe and me. I should have given him the money. Instead I was foolish. Decide to go fishing. Joe ... wouldn't come. We split up." He started to laugh. "I was carrying money but we split up! Foolish, stupid ..." He turned away from Ben. "I'm tired. Please go."

Ben patted Adam's leg and stood. He walked out of the room but Joe was reluctant to follow, so Ben grabbed his arm and pulled him out.

"Pa, that doesn't look like Adam in there. What happened to him?"

"He wants to know who killed Kane."

"He doesn't think he did it? Maybe there was someone else out there, someone we didn't see."

"Or he did kill Kane, and he's afraid to face it."

"Well, if he did, it's because the man deserved it. We know that."

Ben sighed, staring at the still figure in bed through the partially opened door. "This is more than a simple case of self-defense, Joe. Adam will have to come to terms with it in his own way. Somehow."

Ben always felt his sons were strong enough to face anything. But Adam's own belief in himself was in danger now. Who might he be when this was over?

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"Pa, mebbe we oughta get Preacher Hartkins to come out and talk to Adam." Hoss had just come inside from chores because the banging from upstairs seemed to shake the entire house. Ben stood on the bottom of the stairs, looking up, uncertain what to do, and he stopped Hoss from running up there as well.

"I don't think a preacher can talk to him if we can't."

Hoss knew well what the last couple of days had been like for his pa. Adam rejected every conversation attempt, preferring instead whatever noise was going on inside his head. But at least he was eating again.

Then he stopped talking to himself and started making physical noises, not letting anyone into his room. They had taken to putting his food outside his door, often enough taking the tray back without the food only half eaten. How Adam kept up the energy to make all that noise none of them could figure.

Ben tried to reassure everyone that Adam's appetite would need to come back slowly. It had only been five days since they brought him home, but he had locked himself up for the last two and the smell was getting bad up there. Ben didn't know, when they finally got that door open, if he could stand to see what his son had become.

Ben climbed a step but stopped as another sudden loud bang shook the rafters.

"Pa, let me come up with you."

"No. You go join Joe out on the logging contract. Tell him ...

tell him I expect him to come home with you tonight.”

Hoss watched Ben climb slowly but his thoughts drifted to his younger brother, who had fled the house after the first loud bang from upstairs and hadn't been back since. Hoss wished Pa luck with Adam and went out to see if he'd have better luck with Joe.

What was on Joe's mind since they brought Adam home, he wasn't letting any of them know.

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Ben climbed the stairs. Each time felt like another mountain to climb. He stood outside Adam's door, getting more concerned over the lack of sound than by the banging. He rapped on the door softly. “Adam?”

When Adam didn't answer, Ben steeled himself, grabbed the doorknob and turned it. The door wouldn't open. “Adam!” Not a sound. “Son, you have to let me help. You have to talk about this. Please, Adam. Don't stay in the desert. Come home.”

He heard a noise, a sound, but he wasn't sure what – a soft sobbing, or sighing or scrapping of wood, ever so slight. But then Ben found he could open the door and eased himself into room.

Adam sat on the edge of the bed, unshaven, dressed in the clothes they thought they'd discarded, ripped and soiled. Except for a broken chair and a pile of bedclothes in one corner, the room seemed pretty intact. What had been making all those different sounds?

Ben walked to the window and opened it to air out the room. Adam just stared down at his hands.

Ben sat next to him and put a slightly shaking hand on his shoulder. "I'm going to town this afternoon and I'd like to bring Preacher Hartkins-."

"No."

"But Adam, you-."

"I killed him, Pa. I did it."

"You remember?"

"I'm sorry for the noise, the mess."

Ben never thought he'd ever see one of his sons so lifeless, so devoid of any emotion whatever.

"I thought if I could recreate what happened, feel it physically, I could remember. And I did. Most of it."

"Tell me about it, son."

Adam told his pa everything he could remember, up to the rifle being put between them and Kane starting to count, at the moment when Adam said he felt like something inside him "twisted."

He talked slowly, and at times the words had to be pulled out of him like a worm from a mud hole. Ben, fighting tears as he listened, at times found the words he thought Adam needed, and at other times it seemed that hours went by in the silence when both were too horrified to speak.

"And then ... the next thing I knew, I saw your face ... and just for an instant, I thought I had died, or was dying, and seeing you again wasn't real, because so little had been real, starting with the shooting of the mule." Adam stood and just as suddenly sat again. "I can't seem to shake this feeling of unreality, of still being trapped, wondering how it will all end."

Ben stood, unsure of his own composure. "You've just relived a very tragic experience, Adam. I think if you come downstairs, eat a little something, you'll start to realize it's all behind you now. You survived."

"How can I ever feel safe again if I don't trust myself anymore?"

"I'll bring some food up here, then." He grabbed the bucket and stumbled from the room, hoping Adam didn't notice his distress.

Just outside Adam's door Ben fell to his knees as wrenching but quiet sobs shook his body.

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It seemed like just another day, like any day before the fateful cattle drive that nearly ended Adam's life. Hop Sing rattled breakfast pans, Hoss's snoring was disturbed by Joe's loud rapping to wake him up, and Ben yelled at them both to light their lanterns and get ready for early dawn chores.

This morning, as every morning, Ben hesitated outside Adam's room. Adam's lantern was already lit, but Ben knew that didn't mean he was awake. He slept a lot ever since getting home and with the lantern lit, like developing a habit he just couldn't break, in a fear of darkness he couldn't name because one single memory was still lost there.

He had confessed to Ben, how many nights ago now, when he hoped talking would help him remember how he killed Kane, that he felt like an empty corpse without a soul. He couldn't remember Kane taking that last breath.

I don't trust myself anymore.

Ben knew that this feeling was reflected in the emptiness he could see in his son's eyes. They all tried to reassure him that

this Kane must have deserved it somehow, but Adam grew angry, nearly violent, so finally Hoss and Joe took to being busy on the ranch. The chores were waiting for him, they reminded Adam. He would find himself out there again if he would just throw himself into his work again.

Adam told them in one vulnerable moment that he was afraid that he would make the wrong move while working and find himself lost "out there." Instead, he promised he would keep himself busy in the house while they were out, as his appetite returned in the days that followed.

Hop Sing confirmed that he sat at the desk to do the books, but Ben found only broken pencils and smudges where figures should be.

Adam said he read but there were no books alongside the chairs. The layer of ash on his guitar was a little thicker every day. Ben feared he did little more than wander from one room to another, as listless during the day as he appeared at night when he ate a meager meal with them without saying a word or even looking up.

"Adam, I've been thinking about your windmill idea. What about you and me taking that overdue trip to Sacramento and check out some plans. We could even take in an opera or two."

"I'm not a child, Pa. You don't need to patronize me."

"I didn't think that's what I was doing."

"I'm perfectly fine taking care of things right here."

"You'll always be needed wherever you need to be." Ben headed out the door with a single look back to see Adam staring at his hands before closing the door. "Hoss, Joe!" They were saddling their horses for the day's chores.

“Joe, stay here with Adam. Hoss, you and me are going to find a couple men to do the herd check today and head for Virginia City.”

“This reminds you of Marquette, don’t it, Pa,” Hoss said as he waited for Ben to saddle up.

“Something can snap in the mind of any man, and we still don’t know the whole story. Adam feels he killed him but doesn’t remember how. I fear what could happen to him when he does remember. We have to find someone Adam can talk to. Someone who can reassure him somehow, whatever happened.”

Hoss nodded at the house. “Joe, too. He feels poorly about all this. Maybe the two of them can talk it out.”

“That’s why I told him to stay. Hoping he and Adam can talk it out together. Together they can see that everything happens for a reason.”

Hoss got into the saddle. “Yup. Sometimes that’s all a man needs to be reminded of.”

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“Paul, he just sits there! He can’t read, he can’t write, he doesn’t seem to concentrate, he can barely eat. How long can he live like this?” Ben and Hoss had been made to wait nearly an hour in the doctor’s office for Paul to return from a call, and Ben nearly burst with his frustration.

“I’m afraid I just don’t know, Ben. The trauma to his mind is such an uncertain thing.”

“He thinks he killed that man, but exactly how he just can’t recall,” Hoss said. “We think talking to someone who’s not one of us could help. Help him remember. He’s afraid to, maybe.”

"Mental therapy." Paul nodded. "Someone he knows and trusts."

"It's killing him, Paul, the idea that he killed the man who saved his life. But he had good reason!" Ben stood and paced. "The things that man did. If he were here right now he'd be dead three times over."

"Four," Hoss said.

Paul cleared his throat and stood, facing his library before turning back. "Right now Adam doesn't trust himself. He doesn't trust either his mental or his physical capability. He needs to remember everything, and he needs to forgive himself. To understand that the heat, and the lack of food and water, can do terrible things to a man."

"What if what he remembers is more painful than he could even imagine?" Ben and Hoss exchanged glances after Ben said this. They all agreed that what Kane had done to Adam justified whatever savagery Adam may have resorted to. But Adam wouldn't see it that way. He told them if he had been the person he once thought he was, he never would have crossed a moral line, no matter how temporarily insane Kane had driven him.

Paul nodded. "Not knowing is usually worse. But not always."

"I have faith in my brother." Hoss said. "When he remembers, he'll see he did just the right thing."

"I think you're right, Hoss. I suspect Adam will find some lines he just couldn't cross. But we have to get him there. That might take returning him to the scene."

"That sounds plum dangerous," Hoss muttered.

Ben stood. "We better get back, Hoss. I think we were hoping, Paul, that you'd have thought of some miracle cure."

"I'll see if I can get the reverend to ride out and talk with him. Give him some gentle memory nudges. We need to get him to remember, playing on the hunch that deep down he did only as he had to and no more. I think that's the key. And we'll have to hope we're right, that there was a line he couldn't cross."

"We'll accept the reverend's help, if you can guide him on how to talk to Adam."

Paul brushed at a speck on his coat jacket as he speculated. He walked over to his library and pulled out a book. After flipping through a few pages, he nodded as he read and turned to them. "He needs to have something brought to his senses from those moments that he's buried. Something he sees, or tastes, or hears can remind him of just one single second that he's lost. That something we call a 'trigger.' Once he remembers just one second of that missing past, the rest should start returning to him – like a bullet from a gun hitting a target. Find out as much as you can about his surroundings at the time, and you should find that trigger. Then when the reverend comes out, he'll be ready."

"I wonder if that's what the noises in his room were all about, Pa."

"Thanks, Paul." Ben and Hoss walked out of the office. Neither of them headed for the saloon, breaking a normal habit of washing the trail dust before heading back. Neither of them expressed it, but listening to Paul, they had the sinking feeling what Joe might resort to.

"Pa, do you think maybe Joe got Adam to talk by now?"

"It's possible, Hoss. But right now we don't know which way he'll go when he starts remembering."

"Joe's been awful quiet ever since we found Adam. I don't think

I seen him smile once. Pa, Joe reassured us that he doesn't feel guilty over this, but what if he's hiding feelings, too? What if Joe tries to talk to him and Adam blames him? What if ...” But Hoss couldn't place the scenario in his mind.

“I thought of that. But having them go at it could be another form of therapy. Adam would never hold Joe accountable.”

Hoss took the reins of his horse. “Yeah. I reckon. What do you suppose this ... trigger could be?”

“You know, you might be right. Those noises Adam had been making a week or so ago. He said he'd been trying to recreate what happened. I suspect he was looking for that trigger.”

“Yeah. That might not work then, if Adam's gone and tried it.” Hoss mounted. “At least he's still smarter than he thinks. And we still gotta worry about Little Joe, too.”

Ben watched Hoss mount up before following slowly. He felt Joe had matured almost beyond his years, starting when he found Adam's horse at the way station in the desert and especially after the encounter in Salt Flat, when he bore the heavy belief alone that Adam was dead. The wire he had then sent them was the worst moment in Ben's life, but he only now started to understand what it must have done to Joe to send it. Ben had been proud of the idea that Joe was too mature to believe that what happened out there was in any way his fault. He certainly couldn't have foreseen the robbery.

“Come on, Hoss. We better hurry home and prepare for company.”

Ben knew for sure that the visions he'd gotten from Adam of what Kane had done to his son would never fully dissolve from his mind. He only shared parts of the story with Hoss and Joe, sparing them the worst of what Adam had shared. The agony that

Adam had endured in that man's suicidal hands would have been enough to kill even him, except for ... what? What had kept his son alive?

Ben needed to know the whole story, too. Not that he didn't trust his son, but how well do we know our own children? Could he have intentionally killed a man without asking himself if there was another way?

Ben never thought he would believe that sometimes killing was right. Even with the War of the Rebellion raging back east, this was still a hard concept for him to grasp. Sure, they've all faced their own mortality a time or two at the barrel of someone's gun, but they always looked for a way out of killing, wherever possible.

And this Kane madman, well, it would seem he just needed some help, too.

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Joe sat at the dining table, finishing his lunch but not tasting it. Adam sat motionless, staring at the fire. He had never doubted any decisions his oldest brother made. It was just that way since he could remember. Adam was always grown up. Why would he have questioned Adam's desire to take all that money fishing while Joe stayed in East Gate to watch a trial? He had no reason to question his older brother, unless Adam was giving him a hard time about his own decisions.

Now he knew that even Adam could make mistakes. But Joe should have known that all along, and in fact, they argued enough about things. No, Joe never thought Adam was always right. Just that when Adam won arguments he always turned out to be right. In this case, though, Joe never even thought to argue about his decision to take money fishing.

And anyway, he didn't have any fishing gear on him. So what's really eating him? Why did he decide to go riding off to Pyramid Lake? None of them ever thought to ask him that. Maybe that's the problem.

"Hey, Adam?" He waited until Adam looked at him. "Can I ask you a question? It might sound stupid but ..."

"Go ahead. I'm used to that."

Joe gave him a snide chuckle, and Adam returned a slight grin. "How come you said you wanted to go fishing? You didn't have nothing on you to fish with, did you?"

At first it seemed Adam wouldn't answer. Instead he rose and stoked the dead fire he'd been staring at. "Is that what I said? I was going fishing? Huh."

"Why did you want to ride up to that area alone?"

"Darned if I know, Joe."

"You don't remember?"

"Not precisely, no. I think ... I just wanted some alone time. Oh, no because I needed to get away from you, but ... we'd had a long hard drive, and I ..." He shook his head.

"I know how you get, Adam. It's okay. I was just thinking, maybe that's part of what you were feeling bad about, and we should talk about it. I never did apologize for letting you ride off alone with all that money."

"Huh. Like you could have stopped me." He sat again and starred at his hands.

"Want to chop some wood with me? Pa left a stack."

Adam just shook his head. Silence again.

Joe couldn't think of anything else to keep him from sitting there, looking like he was destroyed inside. No, maybe Adam could make mistakes, but he couldn't be destroyed. Not Adam.

"Well, then, I better get riding. I'll tell Hop Sing to get you anything you need. You haven't finished reading that book there."

Adam looked up at him with the blank expression that meant he was trying hard not to think, because the only other expression he had was of pain. "The words don't look right." Adam got up and poked the cold fire again, like he was looking for something in the ashes.

Joe stood with a grimace. This might take a little doing, but he was going to get Adam back, as only he knew how. "I didn't get the chance to tell you that Obediah Johnson got off with only five years. He didn't hang. You were wrong."

"There's a lot of that going around, isn't there."

"Anyway, I have to go back to East Gate." He saw Adam stiffen but he didn't respond. "Turns out there was a third man there involved the robbery. They killed the two who took your horse, but they need me to identify the third."

Adam reeled around at him in anger. "You can't do that. You can't go back there. Not alone."

"Why not?"

"It's dangerous country. You could get lost."

"Uh-uh. Anyway, this guy in jail, they might hang him on extenuating circumstances. Just because he was friends of the

two guys who heard us talking about the money.”

“They heard us?” Adam nodded. “I knew I recognized them.”

“So I’m the only one who could get him freed, I guess. I can’t let a man hang if he’s innocent.” Joe walked to the door and strapped on his gun belt. “Maybe Hop Sing could pack some food for both of us. If you’re up for a ride. Probably better, this time, if we stick together and watch each other’s backs.”

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“Pa has always taught us that we have the right to defend ourselves. Now in the case of Obediah, those two partners were robbing him blind and poisoning him with silver tailings. Because of that, the judge saw fit to let him live and just serve time.”

Adam sat relaxed and easy in the saddle, but his keen eyes took in his surroundings as though expecting trouble. “So even though he could have just turned those two over to the authorities and instead decided to kill them, for vengeance, he wasn’t totally at fault? Does that make sense to you, Joe?”

“Well, in a way it does, yeah.” Joe rode closer to Adam. “Look Adam, you were being tortured, brother.”

Adam turned to Joe, and Joe was dismayed by the lack of emotion in his brother’s eyes. He looked like he just didn’t care about anything anymore. “Joe, I killed the man who saved my life. I remember choking the life out of him. What does that make me, Joe?”

“I don’t think you killed him, Adam.”

“Why? What makes you think you know more than me?”

“Look, you said you can’t remember all of it. You had your hands

around his neck, sure, maybe. But all we know is that you pulled a dead man out of the canyon, a man you must have thought was still living. Why would you do that if you were so sure you killed him, huh?"

"Is that why you got me out here? You think you can prove something?"

"I sure do. You set great store by the law. What about pleading yourself innocent until proven guilty?"

Adam pulled his hat down tighter over his eyes. "I wish it was that simple."

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They rode on. Adam knew what Joe was up to, and he understood how bad Joe felt about it. Not that either of them was to blame, not really. Never talk about money in a strange saloon and that was where they both went wrong. Adam thought he'd kept his voice low enough, but maybe not. But his decision to ride off alone. That was something else. And Joe had to go and remind him. He'd forgotten and now had to figure out why he did something so stupid, both at the beginning and at the end of it.

"Adam? Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Hop Sing said you once said you wished you had died instead of your ma. You wouldn't say nothing like that, would you?" Adam kept staring straight ahead. "I mean, Adam, I know you wish she wouldn't have died. But Pa says losing you wouldn't have given him her back. I mean ..." He scratched his head. "Shoot, you know what I mean." He waited but Adam still didn't respond. "And if that happened, then Hoss wouldn't have been here, and I wouldn't have been here. And maybe even the Ponderosa wouldn't be here."

Adam gave Joe a half grin. "Sometimes you make a lot of sense."

"Adam, I know you're harder on yourself than anyone else ever could be. How about just being nice to yourself this once? Let's just enjoy the ride and maybe even put an end to that story."

"Joe, you remember the day when you were six, and Hoss got himself stuck in the mud nearly up to his neck?"

"Oh boy, yeah. That was a sight. And getting him out took a string of three horses."

"Did you ever hear how he got there in the first place?" Adam didn't wait for a response. "It was me. I dared him. I left for college shortly after that, and no one ever knew how bad I felt about that."

"I thought it was an accident."

"Do you remember when the shed started on fire, and we lost two colts?"

"Was that you?"

"I had a friend named Billy who gave me some smokes so I snuck out there and tried them."

"Wow, Adam, you did a lot of dumb stuff."

Adam winced. "We like to think we learn from our mistakes. Maybe I'm not who I think." He kicked his horse hard and rode off at a gallop.

"Hey, Adam, East Gate is that way!"

But Adam didn't stop. Joe rode hard after him.

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Somehow, he didn't know how, he lost Adam's trail. Lot of rocky country here, and Adam went a different way that Joe expected. He'd have to double back.

Joe followed the trail to Pyramid Lake, judging that to be the direction Adam was headed. When he reached a section of the path with loose granite soil he pulled up short. There were no fresh horse tracks here. He thought he had been following tracks, wherever tracks could possibly be seen, but now he realized he'd been following more a path of wishful thinking.

That Adam would actually do what Joe expected him to do – now that was wishful thinking. Especially now, since he didn't know who his brother was anymore.

Because of Hop Sing's warning, he realized he never should have gone against Pa's wishes, and now if anything happened... "Adam!? Hey, ADAM!" Feeling like he'd never get his brother back this time.

Joe whirled his horse around and headed back, knowing there were other trails to take along the way, other directions to head, including several that dead-ended. He'd find him – he had to. There was no going back until he did. No giving up, this time.

He heard a horse and rode in that direction. The horse was laid out, struggling to get up, and a man standing over it. That horse wasn't going to get back up. The girl next to the man fell to her knees weeping. He watched them. They looked hungry, desperate. He wasn't sure he should get involved, but he knew he couldn't just leave them there.

After all, Adam nearly lost his life out here, once. He couldn't let that happen to anyone else.

"Can I help?"

“Do you have a gun? Put it out of its misery? Guess my daughter and I pushed her too hard. But I gotta get my girl to a doctor.”

Joe pulled his gun and stood over the horse. A single gunshot took care of the horse, to be left for the vultures.

“Much obliged.”

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Adam heard the gunshot. At first he felt frozen in the saddle. He heard the shot ricochet around the rocks and knew the last echo was the right direction. He pinpointed it and focused on a landmark for the direction. Is that where Joe was? He left Joe behind him. How would he get over in that direction? Adam thought Joe was following him. But he knew this was all basically a circle. A straight line, a triangle, but still a circle.

He knew Joe was just trying to help him and now he could be in trouble. He couldn't do anything about his state of mind if he couldn't help Joe when he needs it.

He rode in the direction of the gunshot, but he knew he might not find Joe. Or Joe might not have been the one signaling him at all.

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Ben and Hoss rode home silently, quickly, but they barely beat sunset home. Both had been hard in thought about possible triggers to give Adam his trust back in himself, occasionally sharing a thought only to discard it. Neither of them expected what they saw when they rode up to the corral by the house.

“Pa, Adam's horse is gone. Joe's too.”

Ben jumped down and ran into the barn. He came back out,

scratching his neck. "Hoss, maybe this means..." Ben left his horse untied and ran into the house. "Hop Sing!"

Hoss came in behind him. "You think Joe took him out to where it happened?"

"Lord, I don't know. Hop Sing!"

"Dadburnit. What has Joe gone and done?"

"Now, let's not jump to conclusions. There's probably a logical-."

"Mr. Cartlight!" Hop Sing ran down the stairs. "Mr. Joe has taken Mr. Adam to East Gate."

"East Gate!" Ben had to digest everything quickly, worst fears realized. "Tell us what you know, Hop Sing."

They knew this idea was the last resort, for feelings that were desperate. He'd hoped they weren't there yet, but for some reason, Joe felt they were.

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Adam wasn't in that same desert terrain yet, still following the Truckee River for fear of thirst, but he remembered the parched feeling clear, the cool mountain breeze for the moment unstirring. A faith in one's self did not quench thirst. He recognized the heat, the thirst, that even on horseback he felt like he was on foot. As his horse picked its way carefully over rock in the direction of the gunshot landmark, he wondered if he could depend on Joe to help him become whole again, as Joe obviously needs to do. He hasn't yet tried to convince Joe that none of it was his fault. Was it?

Would he always have to depend on others for help, and would there be a higher price to pay each time? Was it true that our

lives only held meaning in relationship to someone else? Or something else?

He couldn't take the loss of control, when someone else had his future, his very identity, in their hands. And for that reason he continued to punish himself with what could be false memories.

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Joe put his hands up. "Sure, I got food. Go ahead, help yourself. Just let me have my horse."

"Let you have your horse?" The man laughed as he watched the girl digging through the saddlebags. "Now tell me what good your food would do us if we had to keep walking."

Joe felt for the gun at his side. The man was unarmed. "You just gonna leave me out here? That doesn't seem very neighborly."

The girl jumped into the saddle. "Come on, Pa. Maybe we can still make East Gate before night."

"We're not going to East Gate. We're headed north."

"Now just a minute." Joe pulled his gun. "You get off that horse."

"You gonna shoot us? Daddy, is he gonna shoot us?"

"No, because we're calling his bluff. See, he's not the type to shoot anyone who can't shoot back. Are you, mister?" He jumped in the saddle and rode off before Joe could figure out any other way to stop them.

Joe watched them ride off, not believing what was happening. It was like Adam all over, only him this time, and maybe he deserved it. Maybe the Lord in the Heavens wanted him to

understand what Adam went through. Only then would he be able to bring himself to ask Adam to forgive him.

He looked up at the sun. Nothing to do but try to head home and hopes he meets Adam along the way. At least he wasn't as far out as Adam was when he got lost. The Truckee River. Find and follow that home. Adam wouldn't stray far from water. Not this time.

\*\*

Adam still had his eye on the gunshot landmark but felt he was getting farther and farther from where he'd heard it. Was it Joe? Or someone else? Then he saw the horse carcass. He alighted and pulled his horse forward, but his horse reared back, skittish at the smell of death. "Whoa Boy." He could tell from a distance it wasn't Joe's horse.

He studied the tracks he saw leading from the area. Could be Joe's horse. There were also footprints walking in the other direction. Which way to go?

\*\*

Ben and Hoss rode hard to East Gate, taking what they thought was the most likely route Joe and Adam would go.

"At least they're together, Pa," Hoss said when they stopped to let the horses rest.

"I know Joe only meant well. But I don't think either of them were thinking clearly. Who knows what could happen to them out there? If Adam were to meet another stranger ..." He shook his head.

"Yeah. It could be the trigger he needs, or he could plum go loco."

\*\*

Adam heard the miner coming over the buttes before he saw him.

He had his gun out and ready. The old fellow was pulling a mule. Not Joe's horse but that doesn't mean he doesn't know where Joe was. He alighted and stood in the miner's path. "All right, hold it right there."

"Well, lookey there. Hey, you. Nice to see a face in all this desert. A man gets a mite lonely, you know."

"Yes, I know. You got water, food? Enough for days, maybe, huh? You headed to East Gate?"

"Who me? Heck no. Headed for Virginia City. Got a brother there. He invited me. Haha, I'm looking forward to getting my hands dirty." He held them up. "Oh, dirtier."

"Did you see anyone else out here?"

"Who me? No, why? Was I supposed to look for someone?"

"Just answer the question." Adam lifted the gun into the man's face. "You better tell me the truth. I don't play games."

"Hey, lookie, mister you want to ride with me? I got enough water if we go sparingly on it." He pushed Adam's gun aside. "You don't look like a killer to me. And I've seen plenty in my dad. Haha! And I'm still alive. You know why? I'm ornery, is why. So you come along with me, or don't. I don't rightly care."

Adam grabbed his arm and yanked him close. "I'm looking for my brother. I heard a gunshot. What can you tell me about either of them?"

"Either of them? I ain't seen no one and heard nothing. I think mebbe you're a might touched by the sun."

Adam grabbed the man around the neck and threw him to the ground. "I said I'm not playing games. Where's my brother?"

\*\*

Without food and water Joe felt it would be a long walk home. He sensed the wind, thinking about whether he was headed to the Truckee after all, or just fooling himself.

Not a sign of anyone. What Adam had gone through he'd only begun to guess at. But now, rubbing at his sweat, he felt he was getting what he deserved. He figured he was on the road home, same as Adam must have figured. He looked around. Where had they found him? He couldn't be sure anymore, but maybe that's where Adam is right now, trying to relive what happened to him out here. Well, after all, that's what Joe figured he wanted to do. He just didn't figure on this. He figured the gal and her Pa were in Virginia City by now. Someone was sure to recognize his horse.

He needed to head where Adam was once. But that might be like committing suicide the hard way.

"Adam? Hey, Adam!?"

Just a shot in the dark. A shot. He pulled his gun and fired. Maybe he would respond to that.

\*\*

Adam heard the gunfire again and stepped away from the miner.

"Man, you're plum loco. I never did nothing to you." Still on the ground, he rubbed his head as he sat up. "Man, think I hit my head on this rocky ground. Gonna give me a headache, sure enough." He got to his feet. "You want to try that again, I'm ready for her. You just caught me off guard, that's all." He watched as the stranger stood frozen staring off into the desert. "Listen, if you're gonna try and steal my mule, well, I gotta tell, I'm just gonna have to go crazy on your ornery

hide.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me. I’ll ... look.” Adam went to his horse and pulled out his wallet. “For your trouble. Accept my apology.” He handed the man some bills.

“Well lordame, look at that. You’re plum loco but you make it up by being rich, too. I guess that’s all right.”

Adam placed a hand on his shoulder. “You may never know this, but I think you might have saved my life.”

\*\*

Something about this area looked familiar. Joe didn’t figure this section of the cliff was too high for him to scale. He started to run up but shortly lost his breath, his mouth clamping shut from the dry. He found a couple of small rocks and put them in his mouth to suck on.

The rocks were loose, the brush half dead and breaking under his grip, and before he knew it he was falling backward, slipping, the granite dust filling his eyes and mouth and this was it, he couldn’t hide it anymore. He couldn’t climb up as high as Adam once did. He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t save his brother the first time and now he was losing him again.

He crawled off into the smallest bit of shade he could find. He wasn’t going to get out of here. Not alone. He needed family. Adam wouldn’t have made it back either, not dragging a dead man. Not if they hadn’t found him. And him and Hoss, they had been ready to give up. Leave Adam’s body for the vultures. That’s what he deserved now.

Then he heard the gunshot. He jumped to his feet and stumbled forward to his hands and knees. “Adam?” He crawled toward the sound. There, the horse. “Adam!” He fell face forward into the

dirt again.

Adam helped him to his feet. "Joe, are you all right?"

"Adam, that you?"

Adam brushed Joe off and handed him the canteen. "You're all right. Here. You recognized this area, huh?"

Joe felt he could never stop drinking but finally Adam grabbed the canteen back. "I thought maybe I did. But I was headed for home. That meant I was going the wrong way."

"No, not the wrong way. But you don't realize how far home is from here. Joe, if you'd tried to walk, you wouldn't have made it. Any more than I would have if I hadn't stumbled on a miner."

"Adam, I'm sorry. I got you out here and that was wrong."

"No, Joe, don't you see what I'm trying to tell you? I know I didn't kill Kane. I couldn't cross that line. He was ready to die. That was the game. But he couldn't kill himself. He wanted me to do it."

"That's why you choked him."

"Yes. But I stopped myself, Joe.

"Then how did he die?"

"I was going to leave him alone out there, taking his mule. But he told me that made me no better than the men who left me. Joe, he fell. He fell against rocks. That's what killed him. Not me."

Joe fell into Adam's arms, biting back tears. "I'm sorry. Me and Hoss wanted to give up looking for you. But Pa refused. And then ... no, he gave up, too. It was just lucky we found you."

"Well, we learn from our mistakes. We knew to use our guns as signals. Let's head home. You can tell me what happened to your horse on the way."

Joe took a breath, and finally nodded.

"Come on, get on my horse. You need to rest a while."

\*\*

"Pa, wait." Hoss pulled his horse up and waited for Ben. "Doc Martin mentioned a trigger. Maybe Joe knew just what Adam needed. Maybe we have to trust him now, Pa. We have to trust them both."

"What are you suggesting, Hoss, that we just go home and let Adam and Joe come back on their own?"

"Would that be worse than the hell he's been going through since we brought him home?"

Ben sat back, looking up at the sunset that seemed just a little brighter than usual. "You go on home. Maybe they're back already. Go on. I'm going to look around awhile yet."

"No, I reckon I better stay with you." Hoss looked around. "This area still gives me the jeebies."

Ben stood again and considered the narrow trail the led up the side of the cliff. At the sound of an eagle cry they looked up into the approaching night. "Wait. Did you hear that?" There was another sound, faint at first. They listened. "Footsteps! Adam!? ADAM!"

They waited, not one of them breathing, all hoping Adam would answer. The footsteps got louder.

"I don't think it's Adam, Pa," Hoss's voice bit heavily with

disappointment.

"It has to be!" Ben ran part way up the hill and came to a stop.

From around the trees came a familiar sight. Adam, with his shoulders straight, had a smile on his face. Joe was on the horse that Adam led toward them.

Before Joe could even alight they were hugging and laughing and acting downright silly.

"Son, you're all right?" Ben said to Adam as the dust cleared.

"I didn't kill him, Pa."

"Ha! We never thought you did, older brother," Hoss said.

"What'd I tell you, see? What'd I tell you!?" Joe said after alighting and getting his hugs in return.

"You were right, Joe." Ben said, laughing. "What finally helped you remember, Adam?"

"I had a miner's neck in my hands. I let him go and that's when ... did you see him? He was headed this way."

The three exchanged glances. "No, no, we didn't see anyone, son."

Adam turned and looked into the setting sun. "That's strange."

"Well, I'm sure we just missed him. We only got to this area a few minutes ago ourselves."

"Say, anyone mind letting Joe ride with them? I'm getting a little tired of walking."

"You can ride with me, squirt," said Hoss. "Just don't make me ornery or I'm liable to tie you behind me like a puny elk."

"See you at home, boys." Ben spurred around and rode on ahead.

Adam watched Ben ride off. "I sure do worry him, don't I."

"Not any more than the rest of us. Well, Joe, anyhow." Hoss and Joe squeezed up the path to get alongside their brother. "Sure glad to see you, Adam. He was too. I think he was a mite peckish, and just doggone tired."

"Hoss, wait." Adam bit his lip and took a deep breath. "I just want you both to know that I understand why my ma died. So that I could have you two for brothers."

"Oh-ho," Joe said with a smirk. "You finally figured that out?"

Adam laughed. "No, I guess I knew it already. Let's just say I had to re-figure it out." He looked behind him at the trail that he felt sure was somehow going to disappear again. "You know, I think home is going to look rather good. Let's go." He rode on ahead.

"You think he really saw a miner, Hoss?"

"I don't know, Joe. Mebbe. But mebbe it's only important that his memory kicked in when he needed it to."

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Adam wondered himself, as he rode him, if that miner existed. But he knew it didn't matter. What he had needed was to talk it out somewhere out here, reasonably and logically. For now it was enough to understand that through that miner, Kane asked Adam to forgive him.

And he knew something else now, too. One simple fact he had overlooked in Kane's death. He had overlooked the fact that Kane had wanted to die, while Adam had wanted to live. One of them had nothing left to live for.

So, in meeting, they both got their wish.

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## The Search (by Monette)

Summary: Adam is accused of things he didn't do. When he finds a strange message left behind in Virginia City, he starts out on a quest to save his identity.

Rating PG. Word count 14,248

Author's Note: This is the 2020 edit, first time on Brand.

*Inspired by the episode The Search. I was disappointed that Pernell didn't get to play his double, as Landon and Blocker had, so I've taken some liberties with this storyline to show how I would have written it.*

### The Search

The stranger limped down the dirt road, his knee and ankle aching from the leap off the runaway stagecoach. Seems his luck was holding up, all right, and all bad. He'd gotten loose from that Union prison only the week before and could vividly recall the oath he made to himself – accept nothing less than good fortune from here on. Thought he had it, too, when he snagged the last ticket on the stage headed west.

Then came the thwarted stagecoach robbery attempt where the driver was shot and the horses bolted. He didn't even have a gun, and he wasn't about to risk death on his first day of

freedom after so many years of bloody hell. Bad luck being on that payroll stage, but he knew enough to make his own luck now, and jumped off. The stage robbers got whatever was on that stage but they didn't get him.

He had never much traveled this particular part of Nevada on foot before but had faith he'd stumble across a homestead sooner or later, and sure enough, he heard the whinny of corralled horses even before he rounded the bend and saw the old bachelor's setup. The horses weren't much to look at, either, fed on scrub and mostly swayback, but four feet beat two feet any day.

He walked up to the fence and leaned on it, relieved. He wiped a beige-shirted arm across his forehead and grimaced at the dirt on the once clean new shirt that he'd helped himself to before getting on this last stage.

"Well, Adam Cartwright, what in thunder happened to you?"

The stranger, ready to embrace good fortune in whatever form it traveled as long as it aided his freedom and survival, used his sleeve to move the dirt and sweat around on his face, as though hoping not to reveal the mistake in whatever countenance this fellow took him for.

"Met some trouble on the stage, lucky to get out with my hide intact. Guess I got a little banged up from my fall. Sure glad I stumbled onto your place."

"Stumbled? Well, I been here all along, you know that."

He swallowed hard and rubbed his mouth. "Sure could use some water, if you got some handy." After wetting his parched throat the stranger eyed up the horses with what he hoped was the air of an expert rather than a desperate Confederate wrangler. "Mind

if I buy that saddlebred over there?"

"That one? One of the oldest, slowest plugs I got. Was thinking of putting him out to pasture. Doggone, Adam, thought you were a better judge of horseflesh than that."

The stranger scratched his head. "Well, I believe I am but you see, I didn't figure you to want to be selling your best horse to someone who's already got one too many."

"Ha! Well, I'll tell ya, since a number of those horses I got coz of your family, I reckon I owe ya."

"Great!" He started forward, but the old timer stopped him.

"Not so fast. \$50.00."

"\$50.00! I thought you said you owed us."

"Don't mean you can have one of my best horses for nothing."

The stranger grinned at the old man's sudden bargaining prowess. "I reckon not." He felt his pants pockets. "I just don't have any cash on me right now." He affected a melancholy look fitting of a family this fellow held in such high esteem.

"Well, don't you worry none, coz I know where you live." He laughed a good bit about this one as they saddled up the horse.

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Hoss practically leaped down the last two steps in his anxiousness to get to the dining table before the flapjacks cooled. As he plunked himself down and forked one, he noticed his little brother's plate already dirtied and pushed aside.

Ben looked up from the letter he was writing to grin at his oversized middle son's exuberance for mealtime.

"Joe out already, Pa? Ain't like him."

"He's taking Becca on a picnic today. Told him chores had to be done first."

"Hah! That'll do it."

"Your other brother left even earlier without eating."

"Adam?"

"Who else?"

Hoss didn't match his Pa's grin. "He's got something on his mind, Pa. Don't reckon you know what it is?"

"No, but he'll work it out, whatever it is."

"Mebbe. Or mebbe one of these days keeping to himself will just get 'im into trouble."

"What's on your mind, Hoss?" Ben put his pen down.

"I ain't sure. Only I don't like the way he's been treating everyone and everything around him. Like we was all diseased or something, I don't know." Hoss didn't slow in his chewing to express his views and for once Ben was more absorbed in what Hoss was saying to criticize.

Ben sat back. "Now come to think of it, he does seem preoccupied. A couple days ago, I heard him mutter, as he bunkered his house, Don't know how much longer this can last. I thought at the time he was talking about the sunshine, but that wasn't it at all.

"Pa, you think Adam's sick?"

"Not sick, no. Not like that. You know, Hoss, I've always

trusted Adam to settle his own accounts.” Ben finished his coffee and wiped his mouth with a napkin before standing. “This time I don’t think it’ll hurt any to nose around a little.”

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“Joe! Over here!”

Little Joe had ridden into town and was headed for the boarding house where he was supposed to meet Becca when he heard her call out behind him in front of the hotel. He steered the buggy around as a cocky grin swept across his boyish face. This was a big day for him and he’d admit to feeling nervous, but he sure wasn’t about to show it. He’d been meeting Becca in town every week for a month and finally she decided he should meet her mother. She had met his Pa and brothers a few weeks ago but her ma had been feeling poorly.

Now today was the big day, and he wore his finest for this luncheon. He planned to be so charming that Becca would beam with pride and think of nothing but being with him.

He leaped off the buggy with finesse and a grin and tied the horse, sensing as he did that Becca was behind him, ready for him to turn into her arms ...

“Joe! You should have seen your brother!”

Joe tensed as he turned, his cocky grin faltering. “My ... brother?”

“Yes, Adam. Honestly, I wouldn’t have expected behavior like that from a Cartwright.”

“My brother ...” His voice squeaked so he took a breath. “Adam?”

“I know men in these parts take to whiskey any time of day but

to get drunk so fast! Like he hadn't seen a drink in 10 years! Or like a Paiute even."

"My brother Adam?"

"Joe, is that all you can say?" Becca flattened her blue bonnet down on her head to keep it from flapping off in the wind. Her hazel eyes snapped angrily but her brown hair drifted softly around her shoulders, as the wind played like an energetic boyfriend with her tresses.

He simply melted in her presence, no matter what her mood. He wanted to say, "Forget about Adam and think about me," but didn't dare. "Well, where is he now?"

"Oh, I don't know, that was yesterday."

"Yesterday? Adam said he had some fencing to check yesterday."

"Well, I don't know about that, but I know your brother when I see him."

"You sure? I mean, Adam doesn't--."

"Little Joe!"

"My brother doesn't drink. Not like that."

"Obviously. But I'm not mistaken. And that's not all, either."

Joe looked to the heavens for support. "What else?"

"Three women, Joe. He took three of those women up the stairs."

"Up the stairs?"

"That's right."

"My brother Adam?"

"Oh, Joe, I don't know how I can introduce you to Mother now. Not after the scene a Cartwright made. Joe, it's all over town!"

For what could be the first time in his life, Joe didn't know what to say.

"Goodbye, Little Joe. Take care of your brother. He needs help."

Joe felt his knees go weak as Becca walked away. This was love – the real thing – and there she went. He untied his horse's reins but, instead of mounting, sank down on the wooden walk as the good citizens strolled past him without comment. He could almost hear what they were thinking. Alas, poor mighty Cartwright, look at the hard times they've fallen into."

"Well, by golly, I've not fallen into anything!" Joe muttered as he stood. "Maybe Adam has, maybe that New England sullenness has finally made him crack. But not me, oh no, not Joe Cartwright, uh-uh." Joe drew himself up, stepped a left foot on the walk, hitched up his gunbelt and missed the step with his right foot, stumbling into a post.

"You okay, Joe? Too much to drink?" The older fellow, one of Pa's friends, Joe supposed, moved on, disgruntled.

"I haven't drank anything!" But the man didn't turn back. "Great. Now I annoyed someone Pa's probably doing business with. Will this day ever end?"

He eyed up the saloon across the street, thinking a good card game and a beer would help his troubles, when a horse and rider on the street caught his attention. Not a familiar horse, but something about the rider ... maybe because he had Adam on the mind, because the rider wasn't dressed like Adam, didn't sit the horse like Adam, but...

"Adam!"

The rider looked at Joe but without a twinkling of recognition.

“He’s lost his mind, maybe.” But anger over losing Becca took over and he stepped into the street, his voice loud and clear. “Brother, if we weren’t kin right now I’d take you down right there in the street!”

But as Joe approached him, the rider spurred the horse and rode off at a fast gallop down the road and out of town.

“Hey! Don’t let Roy catch you ripping through town like that!” Joe shook his head, vowing to tell Pa all about this. After a card game and a beer, of course. If he were home right now he’d sulk in his room for half a day to forget a gal. Here in town, he had to keep up appearances.

Odd that Adam forgot about that.

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The stranger rode hard out of town. He knew he wasn’t this Adam fellow, but with most people he could get away with it. Now this last fellow was a little too familiar to chance pulling off this switched identity. Time to stop living on the generous nature of Virginia City residents and move on. At least his rich double ought to be a little appeased by the apology he left at the Cartwright post box.

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“I said get away from that stream.” Adam had his gun out but not yet threatening.

The two men, with pans out for gold, slowly stood, one tossing his pan down, the other more defiant. “I think we got a right to get ourselves a drink.”

"You're not drinking, you're panning."

"So what's your problem?"

"You're on Ponderosa land. If you had bothered staking a claim, you would have found out."

"Look, this is open water. Runs right through to the lake, we checked. You can't own a stream."

Adam climbed slowly off his horse, gun aiming easy. "And you're not standing in the water there, are you. You know what happens to land that's dug up for gold? You know what could happen to that lake? You're going to have to leave, now. And if I ever catch you here again, I will have you arrested."

"Come on, George, there's nothing in that stream but dirt, anyhow."

"Yeah," George agreed. "Nothing around here but dirt." With a deliberate glare at Adam still pointing the gun he mounted up behind his partner and rode off.

Adam walked up to the stream, sank down on his haunches and splashed water on his face. It had been a long week and he was tired. But he didn't feel like going home yet. He still hadn't figured it out. The worst thing about not figuring it out was not knowing what he was trying to figure out. He stood, with a slight grimace, hand pressing against his hip. Sometimes he wished he was still in that wheelchair. Then he wouldn't have so many decisions to make.

He checked his saddlebag. He's been long out of grub, but it wasn't hunger eating at him. He hated not knowing what was itching at the back of his skull and didn't like the thought of going home this way. He'd long thought he could handle anything that came along with just a little extra thought and precaution.

Now he wasn't so sure, because he'd been doing nothing but thinking and going around in circles. It was enough to make a grown man weep. He wasn't in the weeping mood.

He was in the traveling mood. He'd go home, all right, but he wouldn't stay.

Small movement in the bushes caught his eye. Could be the game he'd need to make the journey home. Adam moved slowly and pulled his rifle. Whatever it was, it wasn't in a hurry to come out. He took aim but shooting into the bushes could be wasted ammunition. He waited, braced another minute to shoot, jaw clenching.

He finally sighed and lowered the rifle. Probably nothing. He turned to scan the horizon in the direction home. He could make the trek without any food. He slipped the rifle back into the scabbard on the saddle, not noticing as a snake slithered from the bush and wrapped itself around the horse's rear foot.

The horse suddenly screamed and reared, knocking Adam backward. Before he could grab the reins the horse bolted off, headed home without him. Disgruntled, Adam pulled his gun and shot the snake as it half-slipped into its hole. "Seems I'm was going to need some nourishment after all."

Adam picked up the snake and started walking. Maybe he'd find the horse waiting for him somewhere along the walk home. But he wasn't in any rush to get anywhere. Just follow the stream and he'd be home soon enough. Maybe in a better frame of mind, too, found in the brush along the way.

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Joe joined Ben and Hoss at the supper table, still fuming from his spoiled date with Becca. "Where's Adam?"

"Haven't seen him for a few days. He was going up north to fix fencing and replant some trees that were crowding out." Ben paid no note of Joe's temper. He and Hoss exchanged glances.

Hoss noticed Joe's troubled look first. "Yeah, that burnt out patch behind the old corral. Pa, you were going to go looking for Adam today, weren't you?"

"Yes, but I got sidetracked. We got some cows down, don't know what's ailing them. I've isolated them, only hope they don't have to be shot and buried. Waste of good beef. I'm getting McAndrews up here to look at them tomorrow." He reached for the coffee but noticed the anger in Joe's face. "Something wrong, son?"

"He ain't where you think, Pa. He must've decided to just go ahead and take that vacation he griped about last week."

"Oh, it ain't like Adam to lie about something like that." Hoss reached for the water pitcher but Joe was too quick and got it first.

"Yeah, well, I saw him today. In Virginia City. Acted real guilty, too." Joe laughed, suddenly enjoying the idea of his brother drunk and playing with loose women. "Maybe had a reason to, too." He winked at Hoss, who didn't get it.

Ben frowned. "Joe, stop teasing, and out with it."

Joe told the whole story, embellishing just enough to get Adam in trouble for making him lose his girl. "Pa, I have never known Adam to take girls up the stairs."

Hoss threw his napkin down and stood. "I'm going to go look for him."

Ben put up a hand. "No, you're not, son."

“But Pa, he could be—.”

“I’ve been giving this a lot of thought, and I’ll do the looking. He’ll resent any intrusion. You’re all men, all three of you, and deserve your own lives. But ever since he lost Laura, he’s seemed out of sorts, like he’s waiting for something that he knows will never come. Sometimes...” Ben sighed and picked up his coffee cup. “Sometimes I think the Ponderosa isn’t big enough for him anymore. I’m going to find him and ask him to run an errand for me over in St. Louis. Get him away from here for a while, a month or two.”

“A month or two?” Joe’s face sagged at the thought of losing the extra hand on the ranch. That wasn’t the punishment he had in mind.

“It’s either that or lose him for good.”

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Ben paced in Roy’s office in Virginia City, waiting until Roy got the drunk who’d been shooting up the nearby saloon settled down. He’d laid it all out for Roy, all that he’d heard, knowing full well that Joe’s been known to turn a tale by the tail a time or two.

“Ben, wouldja simmer down now. I ain’t got the funds to be putting new floorboard down.” Roy closed the door to the jail and stood facing him, keys clasped in his hands. “Now what’s this you want to know about Adam?”

“Sorry, Roy, but when Joe told me he had been drunk—.”

“Oh, that he was. I told him to get a room for the night when I saw him. And then saw him do just that.” Roy had a twinkling grin on his friendly and wrinkled face.

Ben dropped into a chair, fist in mouth. "Roy, can you sit a minute?"

Roy frowned briefly. He wasn't often asked to sit in his own office. "Sure, Ben, sure." He sat. "Did I look near to falling?"

Ben sat on the desk. "No, it's just..." He lowered his voice. "What do you know, Roy?"

"Know?"

"About Adam?"

"Oh. You heard some rumors, huh? That what's got under your hide?"

"Rumors? What kind of rumors? It's not like Adam to get drunk. Has he said anything to you?"

"Ben, I've always envied you your sons. You know that. But there comes a time when you gotta leave well enough alone."

"Roy, something's bothering him. Is there something wrong with me wanting to-."

"And you figure he needs your help?"

"It's been nearly 10 days since I've seen him, Roy!"

"Well, then, I can put your mind at rest. He appeared just fine to me. Different, true. But not sick or ... anything like that."

Both of them spent a minute remembering Adam's old friend Ross. "Not like that, Roy?"

"Not at all."

"But if he's getting drunk and causing trouble-."

Roy stood, putting up a hand. "Now, Ben, nothing I could arrest him for!"

Ben jumped up and leaned over Roy's desk. "Roy, he's a Cartwright!" Ben slapped his hat against his thigh and turned to the door.

"And that about makes him a saint, don't it." Roy watched with a grin as Ben tensed, finding no argument in response. "Ben, I never could tell you how to be a pa to your boys. You always done good by them. Is there a time when your doing is done?"

Roy crossed his arms, not expecting a reply and not getting one as Ben grunted and walked out.

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"Well, Tom Burns, I'm surprised to see you back. I thought once they let you out of that Union prison you'd be headed north, not back here."

The stranger who had begun to think of himself as Adam stiffened at the sound of the familiar voice calling out to him so soon after he arrived back in Placerville. Finally he turned. "I came back for Valerie. My wife. Don't think I've forgotten everything."

"You think she wants you?" Jason climbed into his wagon, which sat close to where Burns had stopped his horse on hearing his name. Jason had nearly missed his step because he had taken too many libations with lunch, more than usual but at least his nagging mind had settled.

Then he had to go and see Burns ride in – someone he never expected to see again. "Surprised some Union soldier didn't do you in."

“Guess the war didn’t last long enough for that.” Tom walked to the saloon, before turning back with a question burning in his throat. “She waited for me, didn’t she?”

“Guess you’ll have to ask her and find out.” Jason gave a loud ‘hyah’ and rode off.

Tom figured Jason knew something about the money that turned up missing, but now was not the time to ask. Besides, he might get all he needed to know from Valerie. What happened to our bank account, my love? He went off to fight the war for her father and brothers, but if she did nothing here but spend his money, he’d have the right to wring her pretty neck, and get away with it.

The saloon seemed crowded to an ex-confederate soldier, but Tom Burns using an alias had made himself very comfortable in a crowd back in Virginia City. People will know him here, but at least he didn’t feel as distressed by crowds as he might have, being from the losing army and all. No one could smell that loss on his breath, anyway, not with enough whiskey in him. Before he rode over to her house he needed to loose his trail nerves.

Jason might know something, all right, but his reaction could have been honest and nothing to do with anything.

Maybe Valerie thought her beloved husband as guilty as everyone else did, even though she said she’d wait for him. But did she wait? He didn’t really think so. And running off to the army two years back didn’t mean he was innocent, either.

Tom was on his second whiskey when he saw a fetching saloon girl staring at him. He rubbed a hand across his mouth and turned to her, leaning up against the bar. He was no fool – he knew he could catch a girl’s attention with no more than a glance, and he often glanced. He wondered if his compadre, ‘Adam,’ had the

same kind of luck with the same kind of dark and intense looks.

"You're new in town," she said. "Mind buying me a drink so we can get acquainted?"

"No, I don't mind. But I'm an old-timer here, so you're the one who's new."

"Ah, giving me the double talk, now. I'm Anne. What's your name?"

Tom hesitated. Everyone knew him here, wasn't any good playing a Cartwright anymore. Besides, Anne seemed like one dame he could be himself with. "Name's Tom Burns. Just got out of an army prison."

"Aaaah, were you innocent?"

"Of killing? No. None of us were."

"Is that why you were in an army prison?"

Tom winked at her. "A smart one, aren't you. I was framed. And I'm going to prove it."

"Oh, now there's a new one. Framed for being a bloody killing soldier?"

"Buy me a drink if you want my story."

Anne led him to a table to sit, pushing aside the empty glasses. "You've got nice eyes, Tom Burns. If you're looking for someone to listen, I just might have the time."

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Ben rode slowly into the yard, his body aching more than usual. He knew it was because his mind was stinging from the talking to

he got from Roy. Of course he treated his boys like men. He knew they were grown and could handle themselves. That didn't mean he stopped being their father, just like that. He could still show his concern, no matter how old they got. And not finding Adam anywhere didn't help his temper much, so now his muscles felt stiff all over. Never did the body any good to have too much on the mind while riding.

He heard the noise long before he saw the source of it – Little Joe was actually sawing wood without a reminder. But then, maybe Hoss dragged him out because Hoss was there too, sitting on the log to steady it. Ben was tired, nearly too tired to think about it, but managed to offer them a thanks as he walked inside, and once inside, saw his maverick son Adam packing a bedroll. The idea that he was packing didn't register at first – only his delight at seeing Adam again after all the worry. Not even the haggard look in Adam's eyes registered at first.

“Adam! Well, the prodigal son has–.”

“I'm leaving again, Pa.”

“Leaving?” Then he saw it, the bedroll, the gear packed, and on Adam's face the frown, the eyes that didn't see what he might be leaving behind. “Where to this time? You've already been gone so long. I thought we could talk–.”

“Just a short trip, Pa, a few weeks, that's all. To St. Louis.”

Ben breathed a sigh, hoping it didn't sound like relief, and leaned against the settee. “That's not a bad idea, son, I was thinking of having a few papers delivered to a friend of mine there.”

“Then send Joe or Hoss. This trip is just for me.”

Ben was taken aback, but before his temper could rise Joe came

in the house.

“Adam? Old Abe Jenkins is out front, says he’s got to see you right away.”

“Abe?” Adam looked puzzled but shrugged. “I haven’t seen him in ages.” He left his pa still reeling from his son’s rejection to duty and went outside with his bedroll and gear.

Ben wanted to follow but Joe stopped him, asking what he’d found out in town. Not much, Ben had to admit. “Roy said he saw Adam drunk and made him take a room at the hotel. That’s about all.”

Hoss came and told them what happened about the horse and the man who pretended to be Adam. “Adam lied to Abe, Pa. Told him he’d been here for a week or more. Why would he lie? He ain’t been here.”

Joe was more interested in the story about the potential double. “Isn’t Abe way north of the Truckee? So then that couldn’t have been Adam in town, right? Wait til I tell Becca!”

“Where’s Adam now, Hoss?”

“He’s left again.” Hoss’s face drooped, giving him a sad dog expression. “Pa, I done teased him about getting hitched. I was kidding, and then I realized what I said and waited for him to get mad, but instead he acted like he didn’t care.”

“Maybe we should go after him, Pa.” Joe said, standing. “This guy who’s using Adam’s name could be dangerous, especially if Adam should suddenly find himself confronted with his double.”

“Well, I have to admit, Joe, I was relieved at first, too, to hear Adam hadn’t lost his mind in town, but something is still eating at him that he doesn’t feel like sharing with us. You said he’s going to look for this so-called double, Hoss?”

“Yup.”

“Then maybe this is the kind of diversion he needs. He told me he needed to go to St. Louis for awhile, but I got the feeling he just needed some time to himself. He’ll likely find it this way.”

“Pa, if that man is dangerous—.”

“Adam can handle himself.” Ben frowned, feeling more like Roy talking than himself. He always trusted Adam to handle things his own way, but this had a different feel, the kind of gut feel that always made his neck itch. “Now go on, back to work.”

When the door shut behind them, Ben slouched onto the settee. He wasn’t so sure, anymore. The hardest thing a father had to do was let go. Why had he picked up all this land, only to have his sons dissatisfied with their life here? Because it was sinking into his gut that Adam wanted a life of his own, away from them. Ben knew he’d do anything to keep from losing his son – especially to the east coast. Having that ‘double’ show up when he did was almost like a stroke of luck.

Ben opened the front door and watched Joe and Hoss arguing whether the ax needed honing. Allowing a small smile to slip over his face, he realized that in a way, Roy was smarter than he was. Of course Adam needed space, and that’s why the Ponderosa was so big. Adam had lost a very close chance at having his own family and it still bothered him. Adam needed his own world, and he needed his father to understand that. Ben thought he might just have a way to give Adam what he needed and keep him close by, at the same time.

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“Well, Valerie, how are you?” Tom leaned against the doorway in

his wife's bedroom, watching her as she stirred. Just as lovely as ever, even with another man next to her.

"Tom! What are you doing out of jail?"

"You mean alive, don't you? Any idea who got my release and then tried to kill me? Only you knew I went to Mississippi, my love, until the dust settled. Got me that Confederate uniform and a huge story about needing to save Lee's army. Come on, think hard. I'll bet you know."

"If you're so sure it was me, why come back here?" She pushed at the man who gaped at Tom without moving. He finally went scrambling, watching his back as he gathered his clothes.

But Tom made no move toward him. "You'd like it if I killed your lover, wouldn't you? Then you'd have something on me for sure."

"Oh, Tom. I can't get over seeing you standing there. Come on, sit down." She wrapped her bedding gown tight against her loose bosom. "You can't blame me for him. I thought you were dead."

He smiled and with some forethought sat next to her. "Well, you know, Valerie, you should always expect to see me again. Because a man only gets fooled once."

"I didn't set you up, Tom. You know I didn't. Not two years ago, and not two months ago."

"No, I don't know it. Why don't you try and convince me?" He grabbed her roughly and kissed her. "I want the truth."

"The truth is..." She ran her fingers through his hair. "I still love you. Seeing you again, like this, I know it." And, kissing him roughly in return, she pushed him back on the bed.

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Adam rode into Placerville, following the lead he picked up back in Virginia City. This double of his was smooth, talkative and fond of spending Cartwright money. All along the trail he knew he was on the right track because of the way people looked at him, or seemed to know him. Following a man who closely resembled him gave him that much advantage. Why had they never crossed paths before? Placerville wasn't so far from Virginia City.

Adam nodded at the Placerville liveryman as he rode up and alighted. "Got one to loan out? Mine needs some keeping for a day or two."

"For you? Payment up front."

"Hmmm." Adam dug in his pocket and deliberately pulled out a fistful of notes, brandishing his wealth in a way he felt sure Burns would, judging by the note he'd left behind. "Name your price."

"Well, I declare, Burns." The liveryman scratched his head as he looked it over. "I woulda swore the likes of you would never come up with something like that again. Maybe once, like you done earlier. Appearing broke when you got to town and then ..." He shrugged. "What you do is not my business. You'll find a fair mount over yonder."

Adam didn't much care for the sound of this man's disdain for Burns. "I'll be back day after tomorrow. Take care you don't loan this one out," he said sternly as he handed his horse's reins over.

"Yeah, sure."

Adam resisted the urge to grab the man's collar and demand a little respect. He couldn't understand his own temper lately,

why on a moment's notice he felt ready to boil over. Just because others are now treating him like this other fellow was no excuse for this anger. He felt like a simmering kettle even before he'd heard of this Burns fellow.

With the new horse reined and saddled he rode over to the first saloon he saw. As he tied the horse up he looked around at the town he usually only rode through on the way to Sacramento – a town of total lawlessness, giving it the name of Hangtown before the marshal arrived and cleaned out the rafters.

Adam turned to walk into the Lucky Eye and found himself the object of a comely saloon girl's attention.

"Tom, where you been? I've missed you."

"Ah, really?" Adam hesitated but she strolled up to him and made herself immediately familiar in a way that was not unpleasant. "Has it been awhile since—" But he didn't get to finish as she tilted her head back, demanding and receiving a long warm kiss, enjoying the way she moved into him, as though she knew every part of him. And before he let her go, he realized she did. Or thought she did. This Tom Burns chooses well.

"It's been at least a day." She pulled him over to a table and sat. "Oh, I hope you haven't changed your mind. I know you're still married, but we have something together, don't we? You said it's over with her, anyway. And I don't blame you. She's been a piece of work without you around." She ordered them each a whiskey. "And the way you shared your soul and your troubles with me, too."

Adam toasted her with the shot, and with whiskey still on his lips leaned over and kissed her, enjoying what he perceived was Tom's character. "You'll have to forgive me," he said softly before pulling away from her. "I haven't been myself lately. Why

don't we get reacquainted?" Carefully, watching what he said and letting her lead, he found her to be open, honest, and not in the least suspicious, and got her name quietly when the bartender called her back to work.

For now, at least, it suited him to pretend to be Tom in return.

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"What are you looking at, Tom?"

"Oh, just someone I thought I knew, Val." Tom stood on the porch of the house and saw Anne take that fellow into the saloon who could just be his look-alike, coming after him. He hadn't thought the character whose identity he adopted in Virginia City had this kind of guts.

He swallowed his broad grin at the thought of a sudden scheme before turning to his wife, who had come out behind him. He grabbed her hand and pulled her back inside. "Valerie, I gotta leave town for a few days. But I want you to cover for me and tell people that I'm around, taking care of business, you got that?"

"Tom, honey, you're not going to double-deal on me, are you? I thought we had an understanding, now that you're home again."

Tom grabbed her hair and forced her backward against the wall. "Can I trust you? For once in my life?"

"You know it. You saw how I handled Jason. He paid back everything he owed you."

"That he did." He kissed her cheek lightly and left.

Tom planned his next 12 hours carefully, keeping out of way of the stranger who would undoubtedly call himself Cartwright once

he found out enough about Tom Burns. This Adam was an unexpected glitch in his plans but could perhaps be used with great purpose. When he was ready.

Tom stopped in at the sheriff's office and hinted that he might be looking for revenge for being set up. He found two of Valerie's old friends and picked a fight with one, leaving him needing a doctor. He rented a room at the boarding house to give himself privacy away from Valerie.

And then he went to find Anne.

"Tom, you're back," she said when he grabbed her from behind. "Ohh, and with cologne on. That's nice." She turned around and he planted one on her lips. She wiped at her lips and took a step back, puzzled. "I thought you were going to settle for the night."

"I couldn't stay away. Order us a whiskey."

"I swear, you are the odd one. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were two different people, having fun with me."

"Now what are the odds of that? Come back with me to my room?"

She pushed him away. "I don't like to be teased. I told you that."

"That's why I'm back." Apparently Cartwright didn't know what a jewel she was. As soon as he was through with Valerie he was going to take Anne away from here where they could start fresh, together. "I don't want you getting any mixed messages. So let me lay it on the line clear. I love you." He looked around. "Let's go where we can have some privacy."

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Ben couldn't get over the look of the table with Adam's empty chair. It'd been empty on enough occasions but the feel of this emptiness came from somewhere else. Hoss and Joe ate quietly as well, knowing Ben would share when he was ready. The clinking of silverware began to grate on Ben's nerves until finally he put down his fork and sat back.

"Boys, I've been thinking."

"We could tell, Pa," Hoss said as he reached for his water glass.

"I'm sure you could. With Adam gone, and the temper he left in, it occurred to me just today that maybe I've been unfair to you boys."

"Unfair, Pa? How?" It didn't surprise Ben that Joe asked this. As the youngest Joe would never feel as old as his two older brothers. Adam had nearly 14 years on him, which, when Ben took the time to think about it, was considerable.

"The Ponderosa has gotten too big for one man to operate effectively. I think the time has come to divide it up."

"You're going to sell some land, Pa?"

"Well, in a manner of speaking, yes. But I have only three specific buyers in mind."

Both sons stared at him. Ben stood and waved them over to his desk. "The way I look at it, the ranch land can be divided up into four quadrants. Now I've been paying attention over the years to which sections of the ranch each of you would prefer. Joe, I figure to give you the southern section, Hoss you will take this here, and Adam will get the northern most share. I'll retain this area that the house sits on."

“That’s not much for you, Pa.”

“Maybe not, but at the same time, I’m getting older, too.” He waited a second for them to object but for once they didn’t. “I know this is coming out of the blue, but I have been thinking about it for awhile. There’s no need for all of us to live together like we’re all connected to the same cornstalk. There’s a lot of land here, and you boys should each manage a portion of it. Your own ideas, your own families.”

“This have something to do with Adam, Pa?” Joe voiced it but Hoss nodded, wanting the same answer.

“Yeah, I guess it does. Your brother is 35 now. Joe, you’re 22. For you, the timing is right. For Adam, I’m afraid it may be past time. I just don’t want to see this same discouragement appear in your lives, too.”

Hoss and Joe exchanged a glance, and each stood on one side of Ben studying the map as he began to draw in the boundaries. Neither would voice it, but all of a sudden the Ponderosa began to look very small.

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Adam didn’t know what his next move should be. He felt trapped and restless, like a cougar who’d chased prey into a canyon only to lose the way out. Everyone here now called him by the name of Burns, and Anne felt awfully good in his arms, but she called him Tom, too. It was his own doing. He should have been straight, from the start.

He sensed Tom was close by, maybe watching him, letting Adam pretend to be him the way he pretended to be Adam, but for what reason? Every minute of the day Adam expected to be tripped up by someone, but so far taking on a new identity seemed easy

enough, except that every now and then Adam met someone who thought they'd seen Tom only five minutes ago wearing something else. He was getting used to working his way around that, though, with only a mention of having stopped at the barber and/or clothier. People did not consider the idea of two men in town so approximate in appearance, so any reasonable explanation was accepted.

Adam knew what the next step had to be. Confront Burns himself. And in public. Once they were seen together the resemblance would likely fade into imagination. But so far he's been unable to trap this Burns anywhere. Like Burns knew his every move. As long as Burns was busy watching him, he wasn't out ruining the Cartwright name.

Adam walked past the saloon where Anne worked instead of stopping in. He didn't want to keep leading her on, so it was best to avoid her altogether.

"Tom!?"

He thought just to keep going, but the sound of her voice reeled him in like an invisible fishing line. He couldn't help himself around her, and pretty soon, he thought he might become Tom Burns just to make her happy.

Anne ran out of the saloon and slipped her arm around his waist. "I thought you were laying low for awhile, Tom." She lifted herself up as Adam bent down, for a moment the two hearts beating as one.

When she finally let him go he looked into her eyes. "Anne, if I'm not mistaken, you're trying to raise our acquaintance to the next level."

Before she could respond two men pulled him away, one delivering

a solid blow to his jaw, sending him reeling to the ground. He shook off the stinging surprise and started to get to his feet when a right boot clipped him under the chin, sending him backward. He could feel the blood trickling out his mouth but braced for another blow and when the foot veered to stomp on his head, he grabbed the foot and flipped the man to the ground. He jumped up with an immediate fist to the other man's gut and threw him down into the first man, relishing the sound of cracking skulls when at least one of them got knocked against something.

"All right, hold on."

Adam, still tensed, whirled around, ready to lash out again as his anger of the past few weeks relished. The sheriff stood with his gun out at him.

"Well, Tom Burns. I declare. You know when you seek vengeance, it does tend to seek back."

Anne ran forward. "Sheriff, it wasn't his fault. These men jumped him."

"Yeah, and I have the feeling it's because of the beating he gave Ed the other day. Come on, Burns. I'm taking you to jail." He looked back at Anne before shoving Adam forward. "You need to learn how to pick men better, Anne."

Adam resisted the idea of being thrown in jail but figured he could end up dead now as Burns just as easily as anytime. Time to end the charade. He could feel Anne's eyes on him. She was now an integral part of his only way out of this mess.

What was it he once told Mark Twain, when the conniving journalist printed wild stories in the Territorial Enterprise? "If you always tell the truth you don't have to remember

anything.”

He stood in the jail cell and leaned on the bars, contemplating what to say to this sheriff, knowing he should have seen this coming. What was that Burns up to?

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Roy ran out of the sheriff’s office when he saw Ben riding through town. “Ben, have you heard the news about Adam?”

Ben pulled up short. “I haven’t heard a word since he rode off almost a month ago, Roy.” He jumped down and tied his horse. “Where is he? Does he need help?”

“No, I don’t reckon so. That son of yours seems to have things well in hand. Got himself in a speck of trouble and got himself right back out again.”

“How’s that?” Ben leaned against the hitching post, seeing no need for privacy since the news was good.

“Got himself arrested on a case of mistaken identity. Relief for you to hear the fellow here last week wasn’t Adam, eh?”

“What’s the story, Roy?” Ben was too tired for long, drawn-out explanations.

“Over to Placerville, Adam got thrown in jail, being mistaken for this Tom Burns fellow. To prove it was really him, I said to have him give the birth place of Hop Sing. If it was Adam, he’s freed by now, probably halfway home. The Placerville sheriff is a fine man.”

“Placerville.” Before Roy could object, Ben put up a hand. “Adam made it plain before he left that he could handle things.”

“Where are Hoss and Joe, you in town alone?”

"I left them at the land office." Ben looked off toward the road leading back home, trying to remember the argument he'd had with his two younger sons on the way in.

"Picking up more land?"

"No, sectioning what I ... what we have, putting up boundaries."

"Whatever for?"

Ben thought maybe he said too much already. But Roy was an old friend, and he needed to voice this idea out loud to see if it sounded as bad as he thought it did. "I decided to divide the Ponderosa up into quadrants so each of the boys can have their own land to manage."

"An interesting idea, Ben. You don't reckon that to cause any trouble, do you?"

"Well, I've given it enough thought. They need to be in charge of their lives, not cower to me all the time. It's no secret that I picked up all this land with them in mind. There may be some complications when they realize what these boundaries mean, but they're mature men and will find a way to work through ... oh, confound it, Roy!" Ben took off his hat and nearly punched a hole right through it. "All Hoss and Joe have been doing is arguing. There isn't any one section of land they like enough to be confined to it."

"Confined?"

"Confound it! Confined! They have too many memories all across the Ponderosa and are afraid to give any of it up!"

"Well, then, what are the boundaries for?"

"Why, to keep my family together, of course." Ben turned to

leave. "Or so I thought."

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By the time Ben left Roy's office, he had a splitting headache. He tried hard not to think, so running into Joe on the walk caught him by surprise. "Joe! Where's Hoss?"

"Do I care? I've always found him difficult to lose, anyhow."

"Enough of that now. I'm not in the mood for your jokes."

"You know what he said!?" Joe gestured wildly back at the saloon. "He said when he has his house built I have to send a messenger ahead when I want to come visit! Hah! Like I'd ever do that anyway!"

Ben looked back at the saloon. "Doesn't sound like Hoss. What did you say to set him off?"

"What did I say? Oh, sure. Blame the youngest. The troublemaker. The one who's still wet behind the ears!"

"Now, come on, Joseph, you've hardly a clean record when it comes to giving your brothers a hard time."

"You know whose fault this is? It's Adam's fault, that's whose. He gets a double and we get cut off from each other. I don't see why we have to all change our lifestyles for him. Seems to me he can damn well change for us. Or he can find somewhere else to live."

Ben nearly blew his top, but part of what Joe said made sense. "Come on, let's get Hoss and go home. Seems we better give this idea some further consideration."

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Anne stood outside the sheriff's office, not too close because she didn't want Adam to think she was waiting for him. She was pretty well mad at him for leading her to think he was Tom. Worse than finding that out was wondering where the real Tom was, or which one of the two men she liked better.

She backed up toward the saloon when Adam came out of the sheriff's office and shook the sheriff's hand. Good buddies now, just because he affected a name change. Just like that.

Okay, so she didn't know Tom well enough to tell the difference right off. But how many attractive men with dark brooding eyes and that slow sensual smile could there be in the world? In a different time, a different place, she could fall madly for Adam.

Adam approached her and though she turned away, she stood her ground. "Anne. Let me apologize."

"For what, Mr. Cartwright?"

"I'm sorry I led you on. But I needed to see what I could learn about this man who stole my identity. I needed to know what kind of threat he posed to me. A man who would take another's identity once would do it again."

"And that's all that matters to you, isn't it?"

"I don't understand."

"Your own precious life is all you're concerned about. What about Tom?"

"I'm not sure why Tom should mean any more to me than I mean to him. I just want to get this in the open. Now tell me where I can find him."

"You don't know Tom Burns at all." Anne wheeled about on her heels and left him standing in the street.

Inside the saloon she let her shaking legs lead her to a table. She put her head down briefly on her arms but didn't cry as she expected to. She saw something in Adam's eyes, something she didn't expect to ever see in a man's eyes, not since Emil died so long ago. Hunger. Desperation. A man looking for complicated answers in a simple world.

If she read him right, he'd still be in town come tomorrow. And by then, if she read him right, he'd be ready to help. Because Tom was hiding, and she felt she knew why.

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From what Adam could tell, Burns was keeping to the outskirts of town so that they would never been seen at the same time by any one person. If they were to have a showdown, it would be on Tom's terms outside of town. No sense delaying it. Adam packed some grub for an overnigher out in the hills. At least his own horse was rested up and ready for some new adventure. He liked the advantage of a familiar mount, knowing the response of heel to belly right off.

Whatever Burns's intentions were, it was time to find out. What was this revenge the sheriff mentioned? He only knew it had to do with getting thrown in prison after he enlisted in the Confederate army. If he thought he was going to get himself a permanent Cartwright identity, he was going to find a fight on his hands.

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Tom sat up in the rocks, watching Cartwright build his campfire. He saw the tense attitude, the quick move to his gun at the

slightest sound, and waited for him to let down his guard. He knew Adam was waiting for him, which made it even more important that he get the advantage early and keep it.

Tom took his time conjuring a plan. Not usually a patient man, he prided himself this once on taking his time. Because as much as this Adam fellow wanted to know Tom's intent, Tom wanted information about the man whose life he was about to take and keep.

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Adam dumped his leftover coffee on the fire and kicked apart the remaining embers.

When he heard the rocks tumbling, he smiled briefly to himself. He knew pretending to let his guard down would smoke the fellow out.

Adam pulled his gun out of the holster on the ground and stood. He knew he ought to let the man come to him, but he was feeling a little impatient to get this over with. A little guilty, perhaps, over the game he played with Anne, and maybe even more over what he left back at the ranch.

With eyes darting in every direction he crept along the rock, attempting to sense the direction Burns might be hidden. Was he planning an attack or just a dramatic entrance?

But before Adam could conjure an answer to this question, cold steel connected with his skull and he was down and out.

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Tom had a campfire going by the time Adam came to and found his hands bound behind him. "Howdy, stranger."

Adam grunted in return and struggled to sit up. "Can't understand it at all." He said and spat the dirt out of his mouth. His head throbbed but he'd been hit harder.

"Can't understand what?"

"How anyone could mistake you for me." Adam wasn't sure what he expected when he first met his 'double' face to face. This Burns had a much wilder, more uncontrolled look to him. Sure, he was dark, with a firm jaw that clenched easily and eyes that seemed to look right through a person. But the nose was wrong, and he was thinner.

Tom laughed heartily. "Looks are more than just attitude, friend. People see what they want to see." He offered Adam a drink from his canteen and Adam accepted.

"What now?"

"Now?" Burns paused. "Now I find out a little something about you."

"Why?"

"So people can see me close up and still call me Adam, such as that young one who called you brother back in the city. See, I've been studying your actions, your movements. Now I just need to know something more about your life."

Adam swallowed hard. He got the sudden sinking feeling they'd find this fellow an improvement. "It won't work." That came out with more conviction than he felt.

"I could always feign amnesia if you don't tell me anything. And kill any of them that gets suspicious. So if you want to save your family, you'll cooperate."

"Why not just keep your own life? You can't live a lie forever."

"Won't have to. Once they're convinced enough for me to get free access to that bank account of yours, I'll be out of their lives for good."

"What about Anne?"

"Anne? Who's Anne?"

"The girl who loves you."

"What kind of fat you frying? My wife's name is Valerie."

Adam shook his head. "There's a lovely lady back in town who believes you are worth caring over. I made the mistake of thinking her a good judge of character."

"You talking about that saloon girl?"

"That's right."

"Anne. Hmmmph. Likes me, you say?"

"Can't say as I see why."

"You don't know anything about me! What I've been through!" Tom grabbed the coffeepot off the fire and yelped at being burnt. "Damn it! I don't like being upset. Gotta keep control of emotions. They do you in every time."

"Guess we are alike in some ways." Once that image hit him, of what happens to him when he loses his temper, he felt eerily odd but also cautiously hopeful. Maybe there was a way out of this mess – and he didn't mean with Tom. Somehow he didn't think Tom was a killer. "So what's the story with your wife?"

"What makes you think there's a story?"

“Obviously something made you turn to Anne.”

“All right, I’ll tell you. My wife conspired with my business partner to steal funds and pin it on me. I went off to join the Confederate Army because Jason told me that way I could come back free and clear to all this dough, but then I get arrested there. Obviously had me pegged as the pigeon right off. Valerie won’t admit it, acts like she’s glad to have me back. But I’m going to find a way to prove it. You just happened along at a good time. With your identity the proving will be easier.” He laughed. “Or at least easier for me to get away once I’ve had my vengeance.”

“Does Anne know?”

“You sure are nosy about Anne. You got a thing for her yourself?”

“Curious, that’s all.”

“Look, the lady means nothing to me. She just happened to be there when I needed someone to talk to. I was feeling vulnerable, and I’m over it now.”

“You convinced her she meant something to you.”

“Well, she doesn’t!” Tom stood and kicked the coffeepot, sending the hot liquid against the rocks. He turned on Adam. “You were playing Burns to her. It’s all your fault.”

Adam winced, imagining a poorly doused fire sparking a dry bush close by. Weird how the mind made unexpected connections. That’s what his discomfort of the past few months had been, he suddenly realized. Unexpected connections. Like living with Pa meant being half a man. He thought he had to find out who he was somewhere out there, beyond the Ponderosa. But that isn’t where he is, at all.

“Valerie taught me a lesson, friend. Women are users, unless you use them first. But what do you know? You ever been married?”

Adam hesitated. “No.” He realized he was in control after all. “Never even came close.”

“Shame. Good looking fellow like you.” Tom laughed and put his gun back in his holster. “Well, friend, I expect I knew all along I wouldn’t get away with this. Besides, how could I kill someone who looks so much like me?” Tom crouched behind Adam and untied his wrists. “And I think you’re noble enough to give me the same consideration.”

Tom threw the rope aside and turned his back to Adam, until he heard the click of Adam’s gun.

“Turn around and sit down.”

Tom put up his hands. “I thought we had us a draw, you get your life, I get mine.”

“That’s not what you want at all, is it? I ride out of here, you follow and shoot me in the back?”

Tom drew his gun and Adam pulled the trigger. Tom threw himself to the ground with a yell, and was slow to sit back up, holding his arm and wincing as he did. Blood seeped through his fingers.

“Had to do it, huh?”

“Guess so, when a man draws on me.”

A small smile drifted across Adam’s face. “At least now I can tell us apart.” Adam took Tom’s gun. “I think we came to an understanding just a minute ago. You go back to your life and I’ll go back to mine. Because if I ever catch you using my name and bank account again I will kill you. Leaving an apologetic

note takes no effort at all." He went to the horses and untied them both. "You can walk back. That'll give me enough time to get far from here."

"Fair enough." Tom accepted the bandanna Adam held out and pressed it against his arm. "Thanks for only winging me."

"One other thing." Adam waited but Tom didn't turn back. "When you see Anne again, tell her the truth."

"That I don't love her? You know what? Somehow, after you're gone, I think I could."

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Adam waited in his hotel room for Anne. He sent the message down but wasn't sure how she'd respond. He told her he had news about Tom, but figured she might have already given up on him. If she came, it would be for him, and not Burns, and he hoped that, too. He could take her from here, back home with him. That alone could ease the ache he's felt since Laura left. Maybe Anne was the only one who could. Having her choose him over Tom would also help.

He heard her slender knock and leaped to the door. She stood on the other side, hesitant.

Adam leaned on the doorframe expectantly. "Yes?"

"Adam! I got your message. I need your help. I don't know where else to turn."

"What's wrong?"

"Tom's disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Adam grinned. "No, he's fine. I left him out there without a horse. He'll be back."

“Oh, Adam, why?”

“Well, he wanted to kill me, for one.” This wasn’t going the way he hoped. “Listen, I have to get back to Nevada. I was hoping to ask you to come with me.” He wrapped his arms around her and gave her a longing kiss, one that she responded to with as much passion as he’d hoped.

When they broke away to take a breath, she took one. ‘Oh, Tom ...’ And then broke away from him. “Oh, Adam. I’m sorry.”

“No, no, you answered my question for me. Come on. We’ll go out there and help him get home. Could have bled to death by now.”

“What?”

“Never mind. Just let me pack up for the trip home.”

“Adam, he might be in trouble. I think his wife and business partner might try to kill him. You have to forgive him if he was trying to use you to get away. He wouldn’t kill you. I’m sure of that.”

“I wish I were.”

“Look, help me find Tom. Help us clear his name. If you don’t, there’s always that chance you’ll get mistaken for him. Tom’s a decent man, I know he is. And I know you are. But I need to see things to the end with Tom first.” She placed a hand on his shoulder and moved closed, lowering her voice. “You understand that, don’t you?”

As Adam kept packing, Anne turned to the door. “Thank you anyway. I can work this out myself.”

“Wait.” Adam sat on the bed and waved her over. “What you said before made sense. If he’s innocent, he has the right to prove it. I’ve come this far, I may as well finish it. I’m going to

take you to find him and the three of us will figure something out.”

Anne sat next to him and wrapped her arms around him. “Thank you so much.”

She kissed him and though he wanted that more than he needed to admit, he pushed her away and stood. “By the time this is over you’re going to understand the difference between me and Tom Burns.”

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Ben couldn’t find the words to quell the anger that Hoss and Joe brought to the dinner table. They simply refused to look at each other. He had never given much thought to the idea that eventually he’d want to parcel the land out, and now they equated it with no longer being a family.

Joe finished eating before anyone else and stood.

“Joe, you didn’t ask to be excused.”

Joe didn’t sit again. “I think I’m old enough to excuse myself.”

“Not before I discuss with the two of you the chores for tomorrow.”

“Yeah, hah!” Hoss said with a smirk. “But once we got our own places, we can make our own schedules, our own chores and our own mistakes.”

“Maybe you will,” Joe said with a smirk. “My ranch will run like a downhill river.”

Ben put his hands up. “All right. Here’s the plan. I have fifty acres up to the northeast that I was thinking of giving Adam but I don’t know if it’s any good for cattle grazing or timbering. I

also wonder if there's any mining possibilities in the area. I want the two of you to scout the area and bring me back a detailed report."

"Oh, great. You want us to spend a week on busy work for a brother who doesn't even bother letting us know if he's still alive?"

"As a matter of fact, I got a telegram from him just yesterday." Ben hated lying but he didn't know that he had any choice. At least they did know that he was released from jail in Placerville last week. "He's had some luck locating the ... stranger and is preparing for a showdown. He'll either get the money back that was taken from us, or have the fellow thrown in jail. He'll see us shortly."

"I'd love to see that showdown. Adam against himself." Hoss stabbed another chicken leg. "Come to think of it, Pa, seems like the universe might be telling him something. Maybe he'll come back all in one piece."

"Doesn't mean we have to scout land for him," Joe muttered.

"Yeah, well, at least we can argue over his land for a change and not our own."

Joe threw down his napkin and stormed outside.

"Still didn't get excused, Pa."

Ben shrugged. He could only hope this all worked out in the end. Either he instilled in them the pride in family strength even more than love of land, or he failed. Time will tell.

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They had to travel long into the night, with no sign of Burns

where Adam had left him, and Anne taking them on a route that headed in a different direction from Placerville. Adam offered to find a place to bed down but Anne insisted she wasn't tired. Adam thought the route Anne chose to follow was an odd one – a cabin Tom told her about where he and Valerie had lived when they were first mining, trying to make some money. The banking operation that Tom had been accused of stealing from was a natural extension of this successful mining venture. Could Tom have lied to him about using Anne? Anne was a sharp woman and she didn't feel used. But it could be that she and Tom were made of the same cloth, could be they were using each other and unable to be hurt by it.

Adam never thought he could be hurt by attitudes of someone else. We are responsible only for our own reactions, Adam knew, a lesson he learned early enough. He would be used only if he allowed it.

Halfway to the cabin – a benchmark Anne used and remarked on because the rock had such a distinct shape – Adam felt they were being followed. He tensed in the saddle, sat up straighter, but not so visibly as to be noticeable even by Anne, especially not at this time of night.

“And then, Adam, my father told my mother that he'd never come west to pan, that since it was her dream she ought to just do it, and he handed her all the mining gear he'd bought back in St. Louis and ran off. We never saw him again.”

Adam grunted sympathetically, wondering who might be on their trail. If Valerie had partners who felt threatened, they could be preparing to attack. At the same time, Anne could be trying to lead them off Tom's trail by using him as a decoy, so they'd think she was with Tom. With clenched jaw he suddenly pulled on the reins, making his horse cry out as it reared back.

“Adam, what’s wrong!?”

But Adam jumped down off his horse, his gun drawn.

“Adam, don’t! You’ll ruin everything!”

“Ruin it how? By saving my own hide?” He ducked into the brush. He knew he’d heard other horses and had a keen sense of their direction. He pushed into a clearing and found the unmistakable hoof marks, fresh and jumbled, under the bright clear sky night, leading up into the hills. They were staying well hidden by the night and the brush, obviously intent on protecting their own necks.

He replaced his gun and turned to go back to Anne, suddenly unsure he’d still find her waiting.

He wondered why Tom couldn’t just expect him to help out. Seems now his only purpose was as decoy. Adam realized with a stab of pain that since Laura left him he’d begun to question everyone’s motives but his own. If he was needed to be a decoy so that Tom could prove his innocence, so be it. Humans have often been used for less noble reasons and survived.

He pushed through the brush back onto the trail to find Anne waiting for him. She breathed a sigh of relief. “Did you find anyone?”

“No. Did you think I would?”

“What did you hear?”

“We’re being followed, Anne. And what’s worse is that you know it.”

“No. I only thought we might be.”

“I understand that Tom took to dressing like me back in Virginia

City. Was he already conjuring this scheme, expecting me to get on his trail?"

"No, Adam, you're wrong. That's not what this is about."

"Isn't it? Isn't there an ambush waiting for me down river? If I'm mistaken as Tom and killed, doesn't that leave him free to get on with his life? As me?"

"I told you, we want to clear his name. Punish those who are guilty. There is only one way to accomplish that. Please just believe me and follow my lead."

Adam took her hand and guided her off her horse and into his arms. "Convince me." Even embraced in a passionate kiss he thought about needing to trust again. "All right. Take the lead. I'll believe that Tom's plan doesn't include either of us getting killed."

"I believe in happy endings, too, Adam." Anne mounted again. "Come on, daylight's gonna beat us to the cabin."

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Hoss and Joe rode several breasts apart for most of the day. Hoss pretended he was inspecting different territory than Joe, while Joe didn't pretend to be anything but miserable. How was he supposed to get over being mad at Adam when they didn't get to have it out face to face? And now, because of Adam, the whole family was falling apart. Now, because they were considered 'old enough,' they had to divvy up the acres of the Ponderosa as though nothing more than cattle hides. But he didn't expect being old enough had a whole lot to do with anything, or Adam would have gotten his own quarter of land years ago.

And even while he was building his house for Laura, they had still considered the land as belonging to all of them. Adam

never said anything about putting fencing up to delineate boundaries the way Pa talked now. Since when weren't they a family anymore? Right now he wanted to see Adam more than anything so he could get over being angry.

Hoss got down off his horse to study the ground. Was this good grazing for cattle? As far as Joe could tell, it was good enough. But there was Hoss, peering into the tall grasses like he was naming them. Sure, he was always able to tell grasses apart better than anyone else. But did that naturally make him an expert?

Joe rode deliberately away from Hoss over to the pines standing near the creek. From what he could see of the woods beyond, only a few stood tall enough for timbering. The rest wouldn't be good enough yet until Adam had grandchildren. He chuckled to himself. If ever.

Joe hadn't thought he'd ever find a time when he couldn't talk to Hoss about something. This was that time. He had been hoping that he and Hoss could share the favorite southwestern end of the lake even though that section was in Hoss's quadrant. When he made the simple suggestion that they not put up fencing between their lands Hoss seemed quite agreeable. But then Joe asked if Hoss planned to sell any of his land to strangers because Joe didn't care for the idea of other people putting up fencing.

And before he knew it, they were coming to blows. Okay, he understood that when they each took a bride they might likely give some of their land out to relatives, and they couldn't exactly deny anyone the right to fencing. But Hoss got so darned ornery about it.

And now here they both were, angry over something that hadn't even happened yet.

Hoss was still studying the ground. Joe was tempted to ride back to him when he heard the unmistakable sound of wagon wheels – looked like a family of squatters and they were headed Hoss's way. One man pulled a rifle.

But Hoss didn't notice, he didn't even look up, so intent was he on studying the grasses.

"Hoss! Hey, Hoss!" Joe yelled, just as the man fired.

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The cabin wasn't in bad shape for its years of neglect. There was even, in consideration of privacy, a water closet built out the back door. Adam realized, as Anne jumped down and ran for it, how little they'd been apart the past day and a half. He felt closer to her than he ever intended to, and for good reason. She told him, with some emotion, how she came to earn a living as saloon girl. He always thought it a choice that women made freely but she convinced him otherwise. He wanted even more to help her escape that life and not let her get hurt by the likes of Tom Burns.

"Is that the mine Tom got rich on? Not in a very likely location," he told her when Anne joined him inside the cabin.

"That mine was his primary investment and paid off hugely. When he went off the army he was told the mine had played out. But then his partner had him arrested there for running off with money for the Confederates. He's been wanting to clear his name ever since."

"You mean revenge."

"Well, that, too. He just wants what's his."

"Is that the real story? Because I hear it different every time

it's told."

"As close as I can figure." She lit a candle and rubbed her arms. "Oh, I know I sound foolish for believing in him. I just can't help it. Ever since I saw him, looking so sad and vulnerable when he walked in the saloon."

Adam scratched his neck. "Yeah, we do have that affect." This made them both laugh.

"Let's take that candle and go check out the inside of this mine. You game?"

"I'm not sure I could sleep anyway."

Inside the mine, Adam first tested the timbers, finding them stiff and hardy, without any sogginess, and the walls of the mine were soft and cool to the touch, but without a trace of mineable ore. "Definitely a going concern at one time. Here, feel this." He took Anne's hand and ran it across the rough gored surface. "Notice how you can feel, even with your eyes closed, where silver had been removed, where granite had been penetrated."

He pulled her to him and kissed her hard. "Oh Anne, forget Tom and come away with me." He kissed her again before she could protest. He could feel her body melting into his, her form molding against him as though as anxious to be one with him. He pulled her deeper into the mine shaft, where no light penetrated, where their hands could explore that which remained untouched but screaming with desire. "I can show you love like you've never known." Anne's hands unfastened his shirt as her lips slid from his cheek to his neck. "Tell me you love me, Anne."

"Oh, I do. I do love you, Adam." And together, as one, they sank

to the floor of the mine.

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Adam winced into the light as he led Anne back out, both disheveled but otherwise intact, to find three men on horseback waiting for them.

“Well, Adam, trying to steal my girl, eh?” Tom stepped down from the saddle, his arm bandaged. The other two men sat mounted and grinning.

“Didn’t expect to see you here, Tom. Rather expected to see the men who wanted you killed. I take it that wouldn’t be these two.”

“Ah, Adam, still thinking me guilty. Anne, I thought you were going to wait for me. Decided this one is a pretty good imitation?”

“Adam convinced me that you’re good at lying. Seems he’s right.”

“Neither of you know what I’m up against! But I guess we all need to know who our true friends are.”

Anne started forward. “Tom ...”

Adam pulled her back again. “Given up on trying to prove your innocence?”

“Come on, you can do better than that. Guess why I’m really here.”

“To save my life?”

“Oh, hardly, friend. Since Valerie and her friends are after us, I thought I would drop your corpse here and let her think that she’s won.”

"No!" But Anne turned between the two men, stuck helplessly in the middle.

"Let her go. She's not part of this."

"Oh, but she is. She's a loose end I cannot afford. The only one who knows both of us."

"And then?"

"Then she reveals where she's hid all the money and I take it back, without her seeing me, of course."

"I really don't think you understand what you're up against." Adam saw movement out beyond the trees, and felt he need stall only a little longer. "I see the one flaw in your plan."

"And what's that?"

"All right this is the sheriff, everybody drop 'em!"

Adam pushed her aside as the other three started shooting.

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"Hoss! HOSS!" Joe bent over his brother on the ground. Why would those people shoot at him like that?

Joe pulled off his bandanna and pressed it against the wound, even though his instinct was to run after that wagon now kicking off hard in the distance. He had tried to fire back but oddly enough didn't have any bullets in his gun. And he couldn't go after them and leave his brother to bleed to death. "Why would anyone do that? They looked like simple homesteaders. Come on, Hoss, speak to me."

The bullet looked like it hit his heart. "Please, Hoss, don't die. Come on, you know I can't save you. I can't take a bullet

out. Please don't die." Fellow was an awful good shot, too, hitting Hoss from so far off. "I'll never forgive myself if I never hear your voice again."

Hoss's shoulders started to shake, as though he was having a fit, but Joe was distracted by a little speck of white coming out in the blood. "Oh no, it looks really serious, it looks like ..." He sniffed and then licked his finger. "Tomato?"

Hoss let out a big guffaw. "Yup!" was all he could manage because he was laughing so hard.

Joe jumped away. "Why, you big ox! You did that on purpose? Just to scare me?"

Hoss sat up and wiped his eyes as he tried to stop laughing. "Hey, hey, Joe. We were forgetting something, that's all. Pa was giving us this land to go off on our own, but that didn't mean we were being expected to stand alone. This land, that ain't us. We are the land. I think we were forgetting it, that's all."

Joe sat down next to Hoss. "I wasn't forgetting that, Hoss. But doggonit, it seems like Adam always gets his own way, and we can't say anything about it."

"You think so? He's off chasing someone who tried to steal his life. You want him to put up with something like that? Was it his fault you lost Becca?"

Startled, Joe couldn't hide his embarrassed grin. He was so mad over losing Becca and thinking he'd never get hitched that he'd plum forgot it wasn't Adam's fault at all. "I guess I do tend to act a little too quick against him sometimes. Because ... doggonit."

"He's older and smarter?" They laughed at this. Hoss stood and shook out the flattened tomato inside his shirt. At first Joe

thought he was going to pick it up to eat, but it seemed even Hoss had limits. "Come on, let's go home."

"No, wait, Hoss. I got a better idea."

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Adam pushed Anne to the ground and flung himself the other way as he pulled his gun and fired up at Tom. Tom backed up toward his horse and fired one back, and the two on the horses pulled their guns as well but Adam shot one off the saddle as Tom's bullet zinged his ear.

Adam shot at Tom again and turned his gun on the other friend who flung himself out of his saddle and scrambled into the cabin. He tried to fire at Tom again but had no bullets left. Didn't need them. The sheriff and two deputies took Tom down.

"Anne, are you all right?" Adam rolled in the dirt away from his dying double and stood.

But Anne was gone.

Adam holstered his gun as the sheriff came over. "Thank for the tip, Adam."

"Glad you were able to stay on our trail."

"If you're looking for your lady friend, she's right over there."

Though Adam knew he should just get on his horse and ride on out, he couldn't let her go so easily.

"Adam." She was standing outside the cabin. "I was frightened back there."

"I don't blame you."

"You had the sheriff following us?"

"Thought we could use the protection."

"So you never really trusted me."

"No. I guess not."

"Adam? That's it, then? Will you at least let me apologize?"

"For what? For loving a man who just happened to look like me? For agreeing to bring me to him so he could kill me in the mine?"

"If ... If only I had met you first."

"Somehow I don't believe it would have made any difference." He mounted up. "But I'll never forget you, Anne. If I had been Tom, I think we could have been happy."

He rode off without looking back. That way he could imagine that she shed a tear or two over seeing the right one, the one who survived, get away.

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Hoss saw Adam riding toward them but allowed Joe to make the discovery in order to see his honest reaction. Joe had been quiet after telling Hoss he wanted to meet Adam so they could all ride home together, so Hoss didn't really know what was behind this seeming change of heart.

"Hoss! I see Adam! Come on!"

Hoss grinned behind Joe as he followed.

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Ben ran out of the house at the first sound of horse hooves and

stopped short when he saw all three sons riding in with big grins on their faces. For a brief moment he flashed back in years to long before any of them had thoughts of leaving home. "Well, look what the wind has blown in. Must have been a real storm brewing to find all three of you at once."

Joe jumped off his horse and ran to Ben. "Pa, wait till you hear the story about Tom Burns. Boy, Adam sure had his hands full with that one."

"Oh, I don't know. I don't think it was much worse than when Hoss had amnesia. Remember that, we almost lost him for good," Adam said with a grin.

"Hah! Or how about the time Joe almost took to living with ghosts. Now there was a story."

"Oh, you want a story, huh. How about the big bull story? I've never heard such tall tales coming out of the mouths of two younger brothers before." Adam couldn't hide a quirky grin, but they didn't know what it meant – that if he ever did decide to leave the ranch, it will be because he knows what he wants, and not because he doesn't.

"Why don't we reminisce over some brandy? Adam, I'd love to hear about Tom Burns. And then there are some aspects on the size of our ranch that...I need to talk over with you." Ben let his boys walk in ahead of him so they wouldn't hear his sigh of relief. The day might come yet when they would divide up the land. But that day was not today.

The End

Author's Note: Download a copy of "Cartwright Saga," an 8-story anthology, at [www.grimm2etc.com](http://www.grimm2etc.com)

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## Dead of Winter (by Monette)

Summary: A rare story of how the Cartwrights survived one particularly bad winter.

Rated: MA (5,510 words)

### Dead of Winter

January, 1857

**Ben Cartwright attempted to stand.** But dizziness forced him back onto the settee. He had stumbled all the way down the stairs and now doubted he could make it back up. The habit of expecting breakfast to be waiting fuels a man who's starving to death, even when the thought of it had long past died of hopelessness. And he wasn't even as bad off as his boys, as they'd gotten in the habit of sneaking some of their portions onto his plate until he stopped them—so long ago. When they still had food. How many days now without? He couldn't remember.

Finally Ben got to his feet. With a hard beating heart and the hope of the slowly dying, he stumbled to the door and looked outside. On the Ponderosa, his expansive ranch high up in the Sierra Nevada Mountains near Lake Tahoe, snow sat heavy and deep, glistening like the many sword blades of the Mexican cavalry and just as deadly. No sign of the January thaw—just deep and gut wrenching cold. The Cartwrights were isolated,

alone, out of supplies and he had to admit it—he and his three sons were dying. January thaw was due weeks ago but no sign of it. Ben shut the door again and fell against it before righting himself.

“Hop Sing!” But no, Hop Sing ran out of here three days ago, wielding a heavy butcher knife and a rifle, swearing to return with meat or die trying. “I no see Cartlight men turnee to bones,” he had yelled. Ben wondered, with a mind unable to focus, if the Chinaman had been properly dressed for the Tahoe weather, or if he even had enough meat left on his bones to withstand the frigid air. “Meat on his bones.” Everything became food to a man starving, he realized.

How would the Chinaman find game when they had all tried for weeks and failed? The game was down in the valley for the winter, they all knew that, along with the winter stock, and so hope in all of them died, the spirit losing its will even before the body. Hop Sing had gone mad and now lay out in the snow, frozen to death.

And there wasn't a damn thing Ben could do about it.

Ben sat again—more like collapsed—into the settee and put his head back. No way to feel comfortable anymore. Everything hurt. No food at all for five days. That all? Felt like five months. And before that, starvation rations for nearly a month. They had eaten all their animals except for the remaining three saddle horses. Plenty of hay for them but they'll starve too with no one to feed them. No sense leaving them alive. He had to butcher another horse today. They all agreed. No more time to wait. He kept hoping Hop Sing would return first, because as long as he was out there, there was a glimmer of something in his veins Ben recognized as hope.

An odd feeling, hope. Not something Ben could remember living

his life for, because there was always something to do, somewhere to go, and hope was just for someone who didn't have the brains, brawn or back for hard work. Now since all he had was hope, he found it kept returning, and that alone meant he was still alive.

They hoped for the thaw every day so that a horse, still living, could carry one of them to Eagle Station, down in the valley. But if they ate all the horses, then what? None of them were in any condition to walk it. But the snow had piled so high on the mountain that the thaw would have to last two weeks for even a sleigh team to break through. And would have started last week.

Still, he hoped. They'd already been through so much together, breaking horses, breeding stock, and picking up land by making long excursions in every direction. Ben found a smile on his face at the memory of explaining to Joe, years back, how they increased their herd size. Sometimes they didn't wait for the natural mating. Ben told Joe about breeding techniques by hand and then showed him—and how big Joe's eyes got at realizing what they were doing.

Now Ben had to kill Buck. Family. The last gift from Sutter, and Ben had to break Buck himself. A rifle would be easiest, but then the sons would hear it and perhaps refuse to eat. They all felt the pain of starvation but really didn't feel much hunger anymore. So they might refuse and Ben couldn't bear that. [1] A knife plunged into Buck's heart? What if he missed? He never had to kill a horse quietly before, and a frightened horse could kill him easily. Ben Cartwright never figured to die easy.

How did they get in such a desperate situation? Early snows cut off the pass, isolated them.[2] But they'd had early snows before and were always prepared.

This time everything went horribly wrong..

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The front door opened and slammed. "PA! They found gold at Spooner Creek!"

Ben had been waiting for his youngest son, who had already missed supper by an hour. "That's not what I expect to hear, Joseph. What about selling those head of stock? The winter snows are coming and we need supplies-."

"Pa, you don't understand. They found gold on our land and now-."

"We have just one concern right now, young man, and that is to get this ranch ready for the long winter ahead. You know what we do to trespassers-and they know it, too."

"Yessir." Joe hung up his hat and walked to the table to see if Hoss had left him any food. "Where's Hoss and Adam?"

"You never mind them." Ben strode to the table, his heavy arms crossed over his chest. He often worried that he gave his 15-year-old too much responsibility for his age, but Joe kept demanding to be allowed to do as much as his brothers. So Ben made the tasks he gave Joe sound very important, and increased the importance as he earned it. This time he might have given him a little too much. "Tell me what I need to know, Joe."

"I was on my way, Pa, honest. I had the five steer all going with me real nice. But then these three guys, they come to me and ask if I knew you. And I says, well, depends. So then they tell me about the gold and I rode with them and then we followed the creek apiece and doggonit, Pa, we should go out and get it before they do!"

“And what happened to the five steer? You know it’s all the cattle we can spare—.”

“Well, I left them grazing, for just a little while, Pa. They’re pretty well protected, I think.” He swallowed some milk and gave Ben a white-mustached grin.

“I need a straight answer, Joe.” Ben crossed to the table where dishes had been cleared except his brandy glass and the food Joe was eating. “How old are you, young man?”

Joe looked down at his finger tracing the hole in the tablecloth. “Old enough.”

“Old enough to admit you don’t know where the stock is, right? A simple job, locate them, deliver them, and bring the money home, that’s all.” Ben sat at the table and picked up his brandy glass, but the golden liquid couldn’t quell this feeling in his gut.

“Oh, I know where they are, Pa. Charlie and Stu are watching ‘em. Just for tonight, because it was getting so late. I’ll go back and finish the delivery tomorrow. Well, I had to, Pa, I had to tell you about the gold. I thought you’d be...” he shoved a piece of bread in his mouth, suddenly less animated. “Excited.”

“Charlie and Stu?”

Joe stared up at his pa a moment before his eyes dropped and he threw the bread down on his plate. “You don’t know who they are, do you.” He slowly lifted his eyes to meet Pa’s.

“No, I don’t know who they are.”

Joe leaped to his feet and grabbed a handful of slice pork. “Let’s go find ‘em, Pa. You know what we do to trespassers.”

"It's too late, Joe, you want to wander around out there with torches? Cattle get skittish around torches."

Hoss ran in the front door and slammed it behind him. Joe sat back down, hoping to hide and eat at the same time.

"Pa! Pa!"

"In here, Hoss."

Hoss ran to the dining table. "Our cattle's been stolen, Pa! The cattle Joe was..." He saw Joe slouched at the table. "Oh hi, Joe."

"How do you know that, son?"

Hoss's face was red from the wind and his exertion. As Ben's biggest son, he preferred to take things slower, and told his brothers he could get more done that way. "These two fellers, I tried to stop 'em because I saw the steer with our brands on 'em, but one of them drew down on me so quick there was nothing I could do!"

"That must have been Charlie and Stu." Ben turned and glared at Joe.

Joe slunk down in his seat.

"Huh?" Hoss looked from one to the other with no answer forthcoming.

"What's all the ruckus?" Adam walked down stairs fastening his pants, his red shirt unbuttoned. "Can't a man get any sleep around here?"

Ben put a hand on Adam's shoulder. His eldest had been ailing lately and was trying to catch up on his sleep. "Sorry, Adam, but Hoss and Joe—."

“Adam, there’s a—.”

Ben put a hand up at Hoss. “Our cattle’s been—.”

“I didn’t—!”

Adam put a hand on Joe’s shoulder as Joe tried to stand in protest. “I think I got it. Little Joe, while you were in charge of the herd, our cattle got stolen, right?” Adam broke the tense silence that followed by clearing his throat. “Heard there was a bad group coming through, men looking for gold, looking to take whatever they could. Sorry, Joe, I should have warned you.”

Ben shook his head. “Don’t blame yourself, Adam, you haven’t been well enough to think clear lately. I heard rumors, too, but figured we didn’t have enough up here for them to bother with.”

“Well, what are we going to do, Pa? You know what the Paiutes told us about a bad winter coming. Think Sal over at Eagle Station will float us for those supplies?”

Ben looked at his hands clenching the table, and unclenched them. “Not sure, Adam. Ever since that ruckus with his sheep...” He shook his head. “We’ll be fine. But we’ll have to try to find those men and our cattle. I suggest that since we can’t do anything now we all get a good night’s sleep. We’ll get up early tomorrow and get on their trail.”

Adam finished buttoning his shirt. “I could take a lantern, look around.” He walked to the door and looked outside. “No moon out. Makes it more difficult. Wait a minute.” He walked outside, barefoot, and after a minute came back in. “Snowing.”

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Ben heard a rustling upstairs. Someone else had enough energy to get out of bed this morning. He felt a vague rush of surprise—they'd all been gradually losing stamina over the past two months, and now, after five days with no food at all...He couldn't imagine any of them having the desire to exert energy, but after a moment Joe walked down the stairs, not steady, but walking.

"Any sign of Hop Sing?"

"None."

"Pa, I gotta go out, there's gotta be some cattle wandering."

"Cattle's not enough, Joe. We're not just out of meat, we're out of everything. Fruit, bread, onions."

"I know, Pa, we'll get scurvy, but at least we won't starve to death."

"Sit down, son, before you fall. You won't last two minutes out there."

"I'm okay, Pa. But you should see Hoss. His skin is just hanging on him."

"And Adam?"

"Oh, he ain't been the same since we found his horse froze in the snow."

"I know. He's probably hungrier than the rest of us because he couldn't eat much of it." [3]

Joe collapsed onto the settee next to Ben. "You know what we should do, Pa?" When Ben didn't answer Joe leaned over him. "We should let more people move in around us. Then we'd have some neighbors to borrow from."

"Next year, Joe." Ben sat up suddenly, making his head throb.  
"Did you hear that?"

"No. Did it sound like a cow?"

"I'm not sure." Ben forced himself to his feet. "Maybe Hop Sing?"

Joe and Ben went to the door and looked out, but a blinding wind blew snow into the room and they shut the door again.

Ben leaned against Joe. "I've got to shoot a horse. We gotta force ourselves to eat Buck."

Joe nodded, tears glistening in his eyes. "I know, Pa. I'll go tell Adam and Hoss. Don't worry, Pa, we'll eat it. We all feel bad about not getting those supplies..."

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Hop Sing swung his heavy knife in the air as he yelled at Adam for coming back empty-handed. "You not bring supplies!? You see list? You take list? You forget??? Your pa break open big box and give you coins plenty for food."

"Now Hop Sing, just settle down." Adam carefully took the knife from the Chinaman's hand and turned back to the dining table. "Pa needed us to track down the cattle thieves. I've got the list. I'm going."

"Today not enough. Today and yesterday not enough. Today, yesterday and tomorrow maybe enough. How you goin do that?"

"I'll bring twice as much home today." Adam started for the door but Hop Sing followed.

"Already snow. You not find what you need at Eagle post, you go Truckee post. Then to Mormon Station. Get stranded. Die in

snow.”[4]

“I’m not going to die in the snow. It’s gotta come down in buckets for the horses and wagons to get bogged, and there’s only a couple inches out there. No problem. Probably going to rain later this week, too.”

Hoss burst into the house, hitting Adam with the door. “Adam, we got problems!”

Adam grabbed the door and his jaw and glared at Hoss. “Keep coming in the house that way you’ll have worse ones. What’s wrong with you?”

“Them cattle thieves, they done it again.”

‘Oh, no, they went after the winter herd?’

“Yup, got five of ‘em, including the one we just bred!”

Hop Sing grabbed Adam’s arm. “You lookee for cattle thieves instead of winter stock for kitchen, and not get either one?”

“Listen, Hop Sing, I know you’re busy, but would you mind going for the goods today?” Generally the Cartwrights preferred not asking this because they knew what tends to happen to Hop Sing when he goes to any of the posts alone. Just about everyone in the area despised these newcomer Chinamen and took every chance to let them know.

Hop Sing stared hard from one to the other and back again, his ponytail bobbing angrily.

Hoss shrugged and placed a hand on Hop Sing’s shoulder.

“Listen, Hop Sing, you know I would just plume waste away without my nourishment. Tell you what, Adam and me will take the wagon and look for cattle thieves and go to Eagle Station,

all right?"

"Yeah," Adam nodded. "We'll see if we can hire us some more protection for what's left of the winter herd in the valley, too."

"Find us a cattle guard, Adam?"

"Something like that."

They dashed out into the light snow before Hop Sing could brandish the knife again.

"You think we can get everything done, Hoss?"

"Guess we gotta, Adam. Tell you what, you take the wagon and follow me along, and when we've done lost the trail of them thieves, you'll head down to Eagle Station for the supplies and the guard, and I'll head back to reassure Hop Sing, so he don't go and do nothing foolish."

"Oh, no, you don't. You made the promise, so I'll go back and reassure him that you're getting the goods." Adam gave Hoss a smug smile. "Besides, I'm still recuperating."

"Well, dadburnit, if you ain't just the most cantankerous brother. I thought it was Joe but now I ain't so sure, uh-uh."

They hitched the team to the wagon, and Adam finished putting boxes in the back while Hoss saddled Adam's horse, something he taken to doing while Adam was recovering from the gripe. Adam figured it only right because Hoss gave it to him. "Hey, Adam, do you think that Kudwa is right about a bad winter this year?"

"Well, he's not a medicine man of the Paiutes for nothing, Hoss. I mean, he's been dead on in pretty much all his predictions."

“Ah. How’s he do it, you reckon?”

Adam jumped into his horse’s saddle as Hoss clambered up into the wagon. “You know, you could move more quickly if you lost ten pounds.” He laughed at Hoss’s scrunched up attempt at an angry face. “Kudwa tried explaining to me but I’m not that up on my Paiute. His tribe puts great faith in him, though.”

“Yeah, well, I wish you hadn’t told Hop Sing. Made him downright jumpy.” Hoss flicked the wagon reins and they headed out. “Come to think of it, I ain’t much happy about it myself.”

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As sunset settled around the ranch house Hop Sing paced impatiently. Ben never saw him so worried about a load of supplies before. Ben and Joe kept exchanging looks but not words while eating. They knew they couldn’t possibly get as riled as Hop Sing was.

Finally Ben grunted. “Hop Sing, why don’t you sit and have a bite? No sense it all going to waste.”

Grumbling maniacally and tossing food onto a plate, and sometimes missing—though Joe dared not giggle—Hop Sing sat at Adam’s plate and dug in. He ate meticulously but furiously, with this break of routine causing only half of his discomfiture. “They plomise supplies today. They late. They gettee stranded. We starve. Best to eat now.”

Ben cleared his throat. “I’ve never known Adam or Hoss to let you down, Hop Sing, but it’s true we’ve had a bad time of it so late in the year. I hope—.”

They heard the clattering of wheels outside and all ran out, Hop Sing in the lead.

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Ben forced his youngest to go back up to bed to save his strength for the inevitable horse soup. He fought the memories of how they got into this fix but memories kept returning until finally he took total blame. That had been their last chance to get the supplies before the snows arrived. He didn't blame his sons for the failure—he couldn't. It was more like the stars had been against them this year, the stars he'd been thanking every year since he took Adam west so many years before. If he hadn't been so distracted with the books, dwelling on the possibility of selling some of the land to come out after this year's thefts, he would have gone for the supplies himself. All his fault. *Next year, Dear Lord, we'll lodge for two months in the valley, just let us live. Next year we'll build us a winter lodge in the valley to keep an eye on our stock ourselves. Please don't take my sons.*

Adam and Hoss had managed to catch the cattle thieves, running into them almost by accident, but then, in an odd turnabout, the cattle thieves caught them. They had their mind on supplies and not capture, anyway, Adam explained, and before they knew it they were tied in their wagon and their horses stolen. Fortunately this had happened only a couple miles from home so when finally they were able to free themselves, they pulled the wagon themselves all the way back, able to follow the wagon tracks already made in the snow. They were both exhausted and starved and made short work of whatever food was left. They nearly left the wagon behind several times, but knew that if they were going to get supplies they couldn't chance the thieves returning and taking the only wagon big enough for the purpose.

And now where was Hop Sing? Out killing himself to give them some kind of hope.

The boys had promised an immediate trip to town the following morning, but the household awoke to find the house buried by five feet of snow. Silent killer, that's what snow was. Only then did Ben learn why Hop Sing had been so frantic for supplies. He knew the snow was coming, and he knew their supply was only enough for a couple months, at most.

That couple months was gone.

And now, what cattle thieves and gold robbers and other cutthroats couldn't do to him and his boys, snow could. Like the Donners eight years before, they were trapped, and only family members left to eat—their horses. Adam's horse had found its way back home, only to die and give them another few days of food. Could he do what the Donners did and eat a son who'd died? No, he would die himself, instead.

Ben thought he heard that noise again and struggled to his feet, knowing every exertion brought him closer to death. He jerked open the front door as though hoping to see sudden spring. "Hop Sing!" His voice had lost its boom but carried a short distance anyway in the cold thin air. "You out there?"

The horses had enough hay but he could hear them stomping against their corrals, wanting exercise. Ben picked up the rifle he'd stood beside the door. Buck had to be first. His horse. He looked up into the sun, seemingly a universe away but it still brought a sparkle to the snow-capped trees. In years passed he'd always enjoyed how quiet the world of Lake Tahoe became in the winter, how clean and brilliant everything felt, even the air as he breathed it in. Now his breathing had become shallow, and the white world surrounding the brilliant lake was nothing short of hideous. Could he kill Buck and eat him? Could he do that to save his sons? Maybe he could let Buck loose, let him break a leg first trying to run through the snow.

But Buck wouldn't run. He trusted Ben too much.

"Hop Sing?" Someone was out there, beyond the bunkhouse. Or in the bunkhouse. Ben forced himself through the snow path to the bunkhouse and opened the door, at first unable to get it open because something had fallen, blocking the door. He could see a hand, and then a head..."Hop Sing!"

Finally the door opened enough for him to step in. Not Hop Sing but a man he'd never seen before lay there, his mouth opening and shutting as he saw the big man leaning over him. "Help...please..." but then his eyes froze as he breathed his last.

Not knowing how to deal with a dead man in the frozen winter, Ben backed away toward the house. A man...dead...as soon his sons would be...

Inside the house Ben fell into the settee and his eyes closed. He could not say later if it had been a dream or a memory, but he felt immersed in the rescue of the Donners, stranded in the Sierras on their way to California in 1846, not long after he first moved to Nevada from California. These poor folks on a wagon train had taken a new, supposedly shorter route but got a late start. Stranded in the snow, their supplies ran out. By the time Ben and a number of others arrived to rescue them in early 1847, they found the survivors surrounded by human skeletons, bones stripped clean.

As the story evolved, at first they ate only those who died naturally, and then, when that wasn't enough, some began to kill...they began to kill each other for food.[5]

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"Pa. Pa, you okay?"

Ben opened his eyes to see Adam staring down at him, his once

handsome son now skeletal and listless. "What's...wrong..." One of his sons, had one of them died?

"You were screaming, Pa, about having to eat Hop Sing."

"Oh. Sorry, just a bad dream."

"Must have been remembering the Donners, eh? I'll never forget you telling me about it. We'll be okay, Pa." Adam swayed and then grabbed the wall for support.

"How, Adam?" His eldest, skin pale and dry, had only barely recovered from illness before they had to go on starvation rations. How was he surviving?

"Pa, where's Hop Sing? Did he come back? Is he dead?"

"No, I haven't seen him, but there's a ... a strange man in the bunkhouse, dead. Cold as an icebox out there. Probably...keep there till spring."

Adam bit his lip to keep it from trembling. "Dead?" He dragged himself upright. "I might know him." He grabbed the coat Ben had worn moments ago.

It seemed to take his boy forever to return. As Ben felt his heart fill his chest with the hard-beating pain of worry and without any energy to rescue him, Adam came back inside.

"Pa, that's one of the cattle thieves. One of the ones that got us in this fix. Pa, Hoss is bad off. He's gotta have food."

"We all do, son." Ben struggled to his feet. "I'll...shoot Buck."

"No! Pa, if the Donners can do it, we can."

"What?" Ben found he wasn't as shocked as he should have been.

“Adam, you can’t be serious.”

“It’ll buy us some time until Hop Sing gets back. Pa, we don’t have to tell Hoss what he’s eating, he’ll never know. We’ll use a lot of spice.”

“No, Adam. I couldn’t.” Ben tried to picture himself carving some meat off that man out there. “I just couldn’t.”

“But you can eat our horses? I’d rather eat the guy that did this to us.” Adam shook his head. He grabbed the settee to stand and face the stairs, his entire body slouched. “I can’t even take those stairs. I’m going into the guest room and Pa...I won’t be back out.”

Ben watched Adam disappear. Can’t be serious. Adam wasn’t beyond saying something startling to get Ben to move. He concentrated—hard to think with his head hurting. He had talked to one of the Donners—the name escaped him—and asked how he could live with himself. At first the man, who seemed double Ben’s age, only shook his head. But after thinking about it, he said, “I never killed anyone in my life, and never will. But not eating the meat the Lord provides, in whatever form, is also like committing murder, by letting others starve. Yeah. I live with it. Because I am able to.”

Ben had to admit it that a dead man was easier to butcher than a live horse. He used the walls for support and got into the kitchen for Hop Sing’s biggest butcher’s knife and a clean bucket. He put on the warm coat and hat and stepped outside. Why couldn’t a cow have found its way into the yard before dying?

He forced cows into his head, until all he could see was cows, even as he stepped into the bunkhouse. Ben knelt and forced all thought away except of cows as he unbuttoned the man’s coat.

Arms, legs, neck, chest, where to begin? Ben kept undressing the cow until he found the source of the best fat. He grabbed the frozen flesh in his hand, pictured his sons whole and healthy again, and after a look through the open door at the whiteness of the outside world, began to hack at the meat.

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Ben ate several scoops of the stew to make sure it was edible. He nearly gagged on the taste in his mouth, but then his body accepted the nourishment and he found himself feeling stronger. He tried to bring some to Adam but found the guest room empty, and then heard the brief sound of laughter coming from upstairs.

Ben, bowl and three forks in hand, stepped into Hoss's room to see Joe and Adam each holding one of Hoss's hands as they talked. Hoss sat up in bed but he was pale, skin lying in folds about his face and neck, eyes black and listless. He looked up at the smell of food, and opened his mouth as though to talk but nothing came out. Ben put the stew on his lap.

"Dig in, boys. Hop Sing found and cooked...some sort of animal."

By the expression on the faces of first Adam and then Joe, Ben knew Adam must have told Joe about the dead man.

"Yeah," Joe said to Hoss, a little louder than he needed to. "Some animal kind of wandered into the yard and died."

"Yeah, like one of our cows," Adam said, perking up a bit with a kind of vague and unrealistic hope.

"Or a chicken," Joe added.

"Hell, I'd even eat that cattle thief right now," Hoss managed to whisper as he ate slowly at first, and then with more vigor as he realized this really was food and not an illusion.

Adam and Joe covered their eyes and swallowed hard before looking back at Hoss. "I'd even eat you if you died right now, you skinny thing," Adam said.

"Yeah, we got a new name for you, Hoss, we're gonna call you Little Hoss!" And Joe laughed a moment and then, dizzy, laid back against the bed post.

Ben pointed to the two extra forks. "Adam, Joe, you need to eat, too."

They hesitated. "Well, what about you, Pa?" Adam asked.

"I've had my share already. You'll find you can only eat a little, at first." Ben swallowed hard at the sudden thick wetness in his throat. "Hard to get your appetite back."

Joe picked up a fork, and after a moment, Adam took hold of his. Adam watched as Joe scooped up a forkful and put it to his lips. "Smells okay, Adam."

"Tastes great, Joe, what you worried about?" Hoss looked from Joe to his Pa, and then down at the food again. "Hey, what is this stuff?"

As if on cue Hop Sing burst into the room with another helping of stew. "This I findee wandering. You like elk, Hoss? You Joe? Adam, elk is always favlite. Hop Sing know ways to make it last. Then find way down mountain to valley for supplies."

Ben laughed when he saw the expression on Adam and Joe's faces. "What did you boys think we were eating—Hop Sing?" Ben grabbed the extra bowl that Hop Sing brought and as Hoss ate with a savoring appreciation of every mouthful, the four gathered around the bed and joined him. Slowly, small mouthfuls at a time, all savoring and the room filled with the merry tunes of mmmmmmm.

"Hop Sing," Hoss said, for once not getting scolded for talking with his mouth full, "you are just plain plum magical."

Hop Sing nodded and laughed.

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When they seemed satisfied, Hop Sing took the bowl and silverware back downstairs. Listening to their happy conversation above him, Hop Sing snuck back outside to make sure the other dead cattle thief and his sleigh were well hid.

[1] See Oliver Knight, *Following the Indian Wars: the story of the Newspaper correspondents among the Indian Campaigners* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), 267. John F. Finerty, *War Path and Bivouac* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1961, originally published 1890), 184; from Lt. Lawson on the Starvation March under General Crook in 1876, "When it comes to eating a horse, I'd as soon think of eating my brother!"

[2] By the middle of December, snow around Tahoe is on average 15 feet deep. Average annual snowfall is 18 feet. Information from the "Lake Tahoe – Facts and Figures" given out at the 2005 Convention. The January average temperature is 36 – but for this particular winter, I have it at just under freezing until mid-January, or right around the time they start to starve.

[3] Gerhard Luhn wrote his wife on September 10, 1876, proud at how long he could hold out on Crook's starvation march without eating a horse. "The Big Horn and Yellowstone Expedition of 1876", *Annals of Wyoming*, 44.

[4] Carson City was founded as a community in 1858, seven years after the establishment of the Eagle Station Trading Post in 1851. <http://www.carson-city.nv.us/aboutcarson/history/1.htm> .

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[5] See more on the history of the Donner Party at <http://www.donnerpartydiary.com/>.

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