A Better Day, Tomorrow (by DebbieB)

Summary: Caught in the middle of a family argument turned ugly and having to face his own irate father, Joe bears the blunt of both family’s wrath. He isn’t the only one who learns something from the experience.

Rated: PG Deals with domestic violence (6,250 words)

A Better Day, Tomorrow

The weary young man, leaving his horse standing at the hitching post, staggered toward the house. His day had been one of the worst he could ever remember and he wished at that moment he had never been born. So much had happened over the course of the last several hours that things had begun to run together and Joe could barely recall what had happened first that set the events into motion.

He had risen at sunrise to get an early start mending the fences in the north pasture. He vaguely recalled promising his father to be home early enough to be ready for the special guests that had been invited to supper. Pa had said something about the gentleman and his wife being old friends from back east that were passing through on their way to San Francisco and had wired him about wanting to stop by for a day or so to meet his sons. The promise, made in what Joe had laughingly called ‘the pre-dawn hours’ had long since been forgotten but had suddenly reappeared in a hauntingly strange manner.

Adam had joined his brother about mid-morning, bringing more
fencing and the supplies needed to complete the project. Then about noon, they had worked their way further down the fencerow only to find more downed fencing and to add to their bad luck had run out of nails. Adam had volunteered to ride the long way back to the ranch to fetch the necessary items. It had seemed, to Joe, that Adam had been gone much longer than necessary just to fetch some nails and he had just about decided to call it quits when everything suddenly went berserk. After that, it all became a blur. Now, here he was, home...much, much later than he’d promised his father...and with so much to give explanations for that his head had begun hurt, as if there was a dull buzzing sound inside.

He had just about reached the door when abruptly it was yanked opened and Joe found himself standing face to face with his father, looking into the dark, brooding, angry eyes of the man who towered over him. Had it been any other man but the man who had given him life, the younger man might have cowered in fear of the distorted expression on the weather-bronzed face of the man in front of him. Suddenly, his weariness engulfed him much as a cloak would cover a man’s entire body, and Joe unexpectedly felt weak in the knees. He needed to sit down in the worst way, but his father’s broad physique blocked the doorway and his chance to rest in a comfortable, quite place. Joe’s downtrodden expression was over looked as Ben glared down at his son. His father’s voice trembled somewhat when he spoke, so deeply embedded was his anger at his disobedient son.

“JUST WHERE IN BLAZES HAVE YOU BEEN!”

It was more a commanding statement than a demand for information and facts.
Joe’s troubled eyes moved upward to look into his father’s face. There was no missing the rage that lay just beneath the surface of his expression, yet the fury seemed excessive for the paltry misdemeanor of being late that he had committed, thought Joe in a flash.

“I can explain, Pa…”

“Ohhh, I’m sure you can…GET INSIDE!” growled Ben, moving aside to allow admittance.

Joe swallowed hard, stepping just inside the house and pausing at the credenza to remove his gunbelt. Ben shoved the door closed. It banged loudly and Joe chanced another peek at his father’s face. The incensed glare only deepened. Joe twisted his hat around nervously in his hands. He had the passing thought that his evening was not going to be much better than his day had been.

“I’m…sorry, Pa…” he stammered, looking much like the little boy he had been just a few short yeas ago.

“NOT NEARLY AS SORRY AS YOU’RE GOING TO BE!”

“I said I could explain…”
“I’m not in any mood for your excuses, young man!” Ben shouted.

Joe tossed his hat on the table behind the door and slowly moved into the room. He noticed Hoss sitting silently in the blue chair at the base of the staircase. His middle brother had a forlorn look on his rotund face, but Joe had only seconds to reflect on it before his father began shouting at him again.

“Do you know the trouble that you have caused me this afternoon, young man? Where in blazes have you been all day…Oh, don’t even try to make excuses!”

Joe had just opened his mouth to explain his tardiness but his father had cut him off, not giving him a chance to tell his why’s and what for’s…God he was so tired, so heartsick about what had transpired…he felt as if he wanted to lie down and die…

Pa was shouting at him again. His intensely heated words were beginning to run together, they didn’t make any sense to the one they were directed at. What did Pa just say…something about Adam…Oh yeah…Adam…he was put out a bit with his oldest brother too, for not coming back with the needed nails…hurt? Adam was hurt? Is that what Pa said…and the company…they went away without getting any supper? Adam’s leg was broken…he what? Hop Sing was upset, going to go back to China…all because of him…what had he done to the little servant man…Adam could have died? His fault…how could it have been his fault…
I was somewhere else…I…oh…my head…there had been so much blood…and screaming…his friend Matt…oh God…Matt…I can’t believe you’re gone…your father…the boy…Mrs. Cameron…dear God…why won’t Pa let me explain…why is he shouting…I need him to listen to me…I need him…please, Pa…I did something horrible today…and I want to tell you…please…I need you…Pa…Pa…help me…please…Pa!

“JOSEPH, YOU HAVEN’T HEARD ONE WORD I’VE SAID!”

Joe’s hazel eyes squinted, as if a sharp pain had surged through his head. His brow furrowed deeply. He covered his face with his hands…hands that shook uncontrollably. Everything in the room began to whirl in front of his eyes…it was getting darker…darker…his body was so weary…it shook violently…he felt as if he were falling…down, down, down…BANG…his head hit the hard wooden floor and everything that had flashed before him was no more.

“JOE!” shouted Ben, snapping from his frenzied world of anger, returning to the present and the boy who now lay in a crumbled heap at his feet.

“Hoss…help me, son,” Ben called to his middle son, who by now, had already sprung from his seat and was halfway across the room.

Tenderly, his rage no longer pronounced on his face, Ben lifted his son’s head from the hard floor and pulled the boy to his breast. With his own hands that shook slightly, he
gently patted the flushed cheeks, trying desperately to awaken his son.

“Joseph, wake up, son…come on boy, open your eyes,” he cooed. “Hoss, help me get him to the settee.”

Together, Ben and Hoss lifted Joe and carried him to the couch where they gently placed the unresponsive boy.

“Get some brandy,” Ben ordered.

Hoss complied and quickly poured a small glass, handing it to his father.

“Here ya go, Pa.”

“Thank you, Hoss,” Ben said, taking the glass while glancing into his middle son’s worried face. “He’s just fainted, son, I’m sure he’ll be alright…”

Ben turned his attention back to his youngest son, offering the boy a sip of the brandy.

“Come on, son…wake up and drink this for me.”
Lifting Joe’s head slightly and placing the rim of the glass to his lips, Ben offered the brandy.

“That’s it…take a sip.”

Joe began to move his head from side to side, trying to open his eyes, but it was useless, his body was too exhausted to oblige him. Softly, the boy moaned, a small tear appeared in the corner of his eye and Ben watched as the lone minuet bead of water rolled apathetically down the side of his son’s face. It was only then that the concerned father noticed for the first time, the bruise that marred the left side of the boy’s handsome face.

“Hoss, will you look at this, your brother has been in a fight…”

“That’s strange…wonder with whom?”

“Hop Sing bring water…to wash boy’s face…”

The loyal servant seemed to always know what was needed and when. His expert time had always left the family amazed. He placed the bowl of water on the table next to Ben and then stepped back. His own oval face and almond eyes, showed his concern for the youngest member of the family that he claimed as his own.
“Thank you, Hop Sing,” Ben said as he wrung the water from the soft cloth and laid it across Joe’s brow.

“I sorry, Boss…Hop Sing not mean to say nasty things about number three son…I not go back to China…I not care that supper ruined…or guests angry…I care only for sons…Mr. Adam who has broken leg and for Lit’le Joe who sick inside with grief and…”

Ben’s dark eyes shot upward, starring at the little man in confusion.

“Grief? I don’t understand, Hop Sing, what on earth are you talking about?”

Hop Sing pointed to the unconscious boy.

“Lit’le Joe…he hurtig inside…something happen to make boy verly sad…see how his body quiver? He sad…verly, verly sad…”

Hop Sing padded silently back to his kitchen, leaving Hoss and his father to wonder at the meaning behind the strange words.

“I can’t get him to wake up, Hoss. Let’s get him in bed and have someone ride into town and fetch Doc Martin.”
“What happened to him?”

“Adam, I’ve already told you, he collapsed downstairs. Pa’s with Doc and Little Joe now,” Hoss explained.

Hoss had been sent from his younger brother’s room as soon as the doctor had arrived. His father had been asked to leave as well, but Ben had refused to vacate the room, insisting that he stay by the boy’s side until he was certain that his son was alright. It frightened him that Joe had not yet awakened; Ben feared that more might be wrong with the lad than just merely fainting. Hop Sing’s words lingered in the back of his mind encasing him with an unease that troubled him. The bruises on Joe’s face and the fact that his unresponsive body trembled even in his world of oblivion added to his mounting unrest of the events that had caused one son to be injured and another to collapse.

Hoss had gone, not without an argument, but agreed to check on his older brother only after both his father and the doctor promised to call him once Doc finished with his exam.

“How’s the leg?”

“Hurts like hell,” Adam complained. “What was the boy’s excuse...why wasn’t he there when I got back with the nails? What reason did he give for taking off...he left the team, the wagon...the supplies...everything...”
Hoss signed deeply. It had been a long day, nothing had gone right...for any of them it seemed...and everyone was on edge, snapping and snarling at the others. Everyone that is, except for Little Joe...he just collapsed...but for what reason?

“I done told ya, Adam...he ain’t said why...”

“Nothing...he just stood there and didn’t say anything? I find THAT hard to believe...”

“Well, it’s true...to be honest with ya, Adam...Pa didn’t give Joe much of a chance to say anything...whew...he sure was mad at the boy...”

“He should have been. Hoss, do you realize...Joe walked off the job...he left two good horses standing in the hot sun...he wasn’t where he was suppose to be...he was off doing...God knows what...and then, when I get there and find the mess he’d made...I’m left to straighten out the fence, it snaps, spooks the team, they break free and bolt, I’m knocked up in the air...half way to heaven, and land with my leg twisted under me...broken. I have no way to get help...I’m stuck, in pain...and madder than a hornet...why? Because of our little brother who was off somewhere wasting his time...probably...Oh...what’s the use!”

“Aw...dadburnit, Adam...why do you and Pa gotta always be so hard on the kid?” grumbled Hoss in his little brother’s defense.

“Because...the ‘kid’ as you refer to him, is always insisting
that he isn’t a ‘kid’ but a man…well, if he’s a man…then he needs to act like it and stop goofing off, wasting time and getting others hurt because of his foolishness!”

Hoss puckered up his lips. He didn’t like the insinuations that his older brother was making about the youngest of the three.

“He’s only seventeen, Adam…that’s still a kid…leastways to me it is.”

“Maybe to you seventeen is still a kid, but when I was that age, I was…”

Hoss held his hand up in the air, shaking his head from side to side, indicting that he didn’t want to hear any more.

“I’ve already heard your story, Adam…how when you were that age, you were doin’ a man’s day of work, you shouldered your responsibilities, you were going to college, studying, trying to make something of yourself…well…look at you now…laying there in the bed with a broke leg. You went away, you studied…for what? You came back here, you mend the same fences as me and Joe, ya break the same horses as us, ya round up the same steers…you muck the same filthy barn as we do…so what makes you any better’n us?” growled Hoss with a deep frown.

Adam grew quite. He studied his brother’s face; he saw the hurt, and the pain he felt for his family and knew that he had
injured his middle brother’s tender feelings.

“I’m not any better than you…and I didn’t mean to imply that I was…”

“That’s right, Adam,” Hoss said, pointing his finger at his brother. “Ya might have more education than me or Joe, but ya ain’t one iota better’n us. Little Joe might very well have a darn good excuse for what he done today, and we’ll all know, once he’s awake and can talk…”

Hoss shook his finger under Adam’s nose; his anger was quickly mounting.

“And don’t ya go blamin’ Joe for that there broke leg…it ain’t his fault…it’s your own fault…ya should have been more careful about what YA was doing stead of fumin’ about what that boy in there might have been doin’!”

Hoss turned to go, but stopped at the door, looking back at his brother.

“Joe’s been hurt, Adam…and I think his hurt is much worse than that there broke leg. He’s hurtin’ inside…Hop Sing saw it…he knows…and he ain’t never been wrong about such things. Why, I just bet when Little Joe tells us what happened, we’ll all be sorry for fussin’ at’em and blamin’ him for all that’s gone wrong this day! We’ll all be ashamed of ourselves…”specially you!”
Hoss walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him as he went.

“HOSS…WAIT A MINUTE!” Adam shouted, but the door remained closed, Hoss had refused to return. “I’m sorry, big guy,” he muttered softly as he pressed his head into the pillow.

“Well, Ben,” the doctor whispered as he straightened up after examining his young patient.

Paul Martin began rolling down his shirtsleeves.

“Well…what, Doc?” Ben said as he sat down on the edge of the bed and studied the tired, worn expression on the face of his unconscious son.

“Well,” Paul began again. “It’s no wonder the poor boy collapsed…”

Ben looked with concern up at his friend, confused.

“Okay, so he collapsed…I want to know why…what’s wrong with him, for God’s sake!”
“You don’t know?”

The doctor seemed to be the one who was confused now. Ben stood to his feet, facing the physician. A hint of anger flashed in his dark eyes.

“No…I do not know…I do not know a thing about anything that has happened today other than it has been one hell of a day…everything has gone wrong…my oldest son breaks his leg, my youngest boy collapses…my middle son is racing from room to room like a fox caught in the henhouse with no way out, my cook has threatened to quit and my out of town guests have left in a huff…hungry mind you because this…this…boy refused to follow orders…”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, Benjamin…you can’t really blame Little Joe for everything…my God, man…the poor lad was forced to kill a man today…”

Ben’s next words hung in his throat. He was stunned into complete silence, not sure if he had heard correctly. He cleared his throat, glanced first at the doctor and then his son and back again at the man standing next to him.

“What did you just say?” stammered Ben in a trembling voice.

“He didn’t tell you?” Paul Martin asked, noting the startled
expression on the worried father’s face.

“No…he didn’t tell me…”

Ben swallowed hard and sat back down on the bed. Suddenly it all came rushing at him, his anger, his sharp words, his unconcern for anything but the boy’s tardiness…the frightened, disheartened look that had been on his son’s face, the tear filled eyes…the way the slender shoulders had slumped, the unexplained bruises…

Ben looked up at the doctor, suddenly very much ashamed of himself.

“I guess I didn’t give the boy much time to explain himself,” he muttered, glancing again at Joe.

“Pa…”

Joe had opened his eyes and was watching the exchange between the physician and his father.

“Joseph,” breathed Ben in relief. He smiled, transforming his anxious expression into one of serene peacefulness. “Welcome back, son.”
Instantly, the hazel eyes filled with tears. The chin began to quiver as Joe fought to contain himself. Ben heard the boy sniff and watched as Joe swiped his hand across his face to wipe the dampness from his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Pa…for being late…for making you mad…I’m sorry I wasn’t there for Adam…”

Joe’s words came out in a rush, he sobbed softly.

“I didn’t mean for everything to happen as it did…”

He looked at his father with large tears rolling from his eyes and down his face, breaking his father’s heart.

“Adam…is he alright…oh, Pa…it was awful…”

The events of the day had finally taken their toll on the young man. They rushed down, engulfing him with their highly emotional desecrating powers. Joe could no longer control the urge to cry.

Ben, stricken with emotion, pulled his son into his arms and held him while Joe cried out his misery. He still had no clue as to what had happened to his son to put him in such a distraught condition. Tenderly, Ben ran his hand up and down the boy’s back, cooing softly to him.
“Shh...it’s alright now, son...whatever happened is over...everything is going to be fine...I promise,” he assured the young man.

Ben waited until Joe had calmed down and then gently leaned him back against the stack of soft pillows. He was unaware that the doctor had left and his middle son had replaced the physician’s presence with his own. Hoss stood at the foot of the bed, silent, filled with apprehension for his younger brother.

“Why don’t you tell me about it, Joe?” Ben questioned as he brushed back lose strands of wayward curls.

Joe wiped his eyes. He looked deeply into his father’s dark eyes, not sure how to proceed.

“I tried to tell you...but...you didn’t give me...a chance,” he whispered.

Ben hung his head in shame. His lips were drawn tightly. The truth often hurt he had taught his sons, now he was experiencing that hurt, for Joe had spoken the truth...he hadn’t given the boy much of a chance to say anything. He felt the overwhelming dishonor he had exhibited and he was forced to swallow his regret.
“I know, son...and I’m sorry for that.”

Ben glanced up.

“I’m ashamed of myself. I was only thinking of myself...my guests, the ruined supper...Adam. I was angry...very angry.”

Joe made a sniffling sound as he watched the remorse wash over his father’s face.

“I know,” he said softly. “I could tell.”

Ben was silent for a moment and then smiled.

“I guess I didn’t hide it very well, did I?”

“No sir...but Pa, I understand why you were mad...”

“Joe...I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions, I was wrong for not giving you time to explain...I was wrong for not listening to you...and I’m sorry, very sorry. But, I’m listening now...why don’t you tell me about today?”

Joe swallowed hard. It wouldn’t be easy, reliving the horror of the afternoon...he glanced at Hoss who had moved to the
opposite side of the bed. The gentle giant smiled at his brother, giving Joe enough courage to tell his story.

“Well… I was up in the north pasture, mending fences and waiting for Adam to get back with more nails. It seemed like he was taking forever and to be honest, I was getting a bit upset with him.”

“He was delayed, he had to ride into town for those nails, son. We were out of the ones you needed.”

“I didn’t know… I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry, son…it wasn’t your fault, nor was it his,” Ben smiled. “Please, continue.”

“Like I said, I was sitting there, waiting for Adam, when little Timmy Cameron rode up on his father’s old mare. He was crying something fierce, his words were so garbled, it was hard to understand what he was trying to tell me… but he kept muttering something about his father beating up his brother…”

“Matt?”

“Yeah, Matt…”
Joe felt his throat begin to tighten as he recalled what he had seen once arriving at the Cameron home. This time, the haunted expression did not go unnoticed by his father. Ben laid his hand on Joe’s arm and gently squeezed.

“What happened after Timmy showed up, son?”

Joe swallowed.

“He was frightened half out of his mind, he kept screaming at me to help him…so I went with him over to his place. We rode double on that old mare…took forever it seemed, she’s so old and slow. But when we got there, I could hear screaming…horrible, ear-piercing screaming inside the house. I told Timmy to wait outside for me…”

Joe paused, took a deep breath and glanced at his father and brother. The doctor had helped Adam into the room and his oldest brother now sat in a chair with his leg, encased in a heavy plaster cast, propped on a stool.

“I didn’t bother to knock, I just walked right in…” he swallowed again, shaking his head slowly from side to side. He lowered his head, squeezing shut his eyes in an attempt to wipe the memory from his mind. Ben heard the boy groan softly.

“Joe,” his father murmured. “This can wait, son, until you’re more rested, if you’d rather.”
“No,” Joe muttered, looking into the dark eyes and finding inner strength in the warmth he found reflecting back at him.

“I have to tell you…I have to...get it out.

I rushed in...not knowing what to expect...and certainly not what I found.”

“What did you find, son?”

“Blood...everywhere...Mr. Cameron was...like a mad man...he had a club in his hands, beating Matt. Matt’s head was split opened...blood ran like a river down the front of his face. It covered his eyes...he couldn’t see. He was...trying to protect himself...begging...yelling, pleading with his father to stop hitting him. But Mr. Cameron didn’t even hear him...he was so...enraged,” Joe explained.

He paused again and took a deep breath.

“Mrs. Cameron was covered in blood. I thought she was hurt too...but I later found out that it was Matt’s blood. She was wild with fright, trying to pull her husband off Matt. He had fallen down and his father kept hitting him again and again. The shouts stopped...that’s when I pushed the woman aside and grabbed Mr. Cameron’s arm.
Everything stopped for a moment, like time had stood still. Mr. Cameron glared at me with fire in his eyes...I glanced down at Matt and could tell...he...was...dead...Pa. His own father...had...murdered him...”

“Joe...” Ben muttered softly.

He could see the tears slowly building in the hazel eyes. The chin began to quiver again as his son tried to finish the horror story.

“He took a swing at me...but I managed to duck. But the next one caught me in the side...that’s when the woman charged her husband, shoving me out of the way. Mr. Cameron back slapped his wife and shoved her. She went down on top of Matt...that’s when Mr. Cameron came at me again. I don’t know how I did it, but I was able to get out of his way...I kept begging him to put the club down, but he kept swinging it at me...I couldn’t reason with him.

I pulled my pistol and pointed it at him...hoping he would listen...but he was like a wild man, Pa...he wasn’t even aware of what he’d done or who any of us were...

I told him to put down his weapon...the club...but he only laughed at me. Mrs. Cameron managed to get up and from somewhere she found a knife and then before any of us could react, she lunged at him. He grabbed her arm and wrenched the knife out
of her hand, but he cut her arm...she screamed something awful...then to add to the chaos...the little boy opened the door and ran inside, screaming like a Ban chi Indian...

Mr. Cameron still had the knife in his hand and didn’t seem to know who the boy was...when he saw the kid...he raised his arm, I knew he was fixing to throw the knife at the boy...I yelled, ‘NO’, that’s when he turned on me and just as he threw the knife, I fired at him.”

Joe paused, lowering his head. He wiped his sleeve across his eyes and slowly raised his head, searching for understanding in the eyes of his father.

“I...killed him...Pa.”

Ben leaned forward, placed his hands gently on the trembling shoulders and pulled his son to him. For several long moments, he held the boy as such.

Adam and Hoss swapped looks, each feeling the remorse and the pain that their younger sibling surely must have been experiencing. Adam glanced at his younger brother. Somehow, their eyes met...and Adam lowered his head. He too, was ashamed of himself and could not look the boy in the eye.

“Joseph,” Ben said softly.
Joe leaned back...relieved to have the burden and the guilt lifted and shared with his family.

“You only did what you had to do…”

“I know that, Pa…but...why would...I mean...how could a father be so angry at his son...so much so, that he could lose control enough to...kill his own son?”

Ben gasped softly. Thoughts of the afternoon suddenly became vivid in his mind as he recalled his own anger...his own thoughts of what he’d do to his own son for disobeying him...for embarrassing him in front of friends...for not being where he should have been...for not being their for his brother when Adam had been injured...for being late...dear God, thought Ben, had he become so angry that he could have...no...no...he’d never allow his emotions to go so far beyond his personal control that he could do to one of his boys...what Walter Cameron had done to his son.

Tenderly, Ben ran his hand down the boy’s dampened cheek.

“I don’t know, son...I honestly don’t know.”

It was days later and Joe was resting on the settee when the knock on the door woke him. Ben jumped to his feet.
“I’ll get it, you two sit still.”

Joe glanced over at Adam who has seated in the blue chair, his leg propped on the wide table in front of him. Adam grinned.

“Like I’m going to rush to the door,” he whispered.

Joe giggled softly.

“Mrs. Cameron…this is a surprise…please, come in,” Ben said.

Joe glanced over the top of the settee. Seeing the woman and her young son, he sat up instantly and slowly rose to his feet in respect of the lady.

“I’m sorry to barge in on you like this,” she apologized. “But, Timmy and I were leaving in the morning…”

“Leaving?” Ben questioned.

“Yes, I’ve decided to go back east…my folks are there…and since…well…since it’s just Timmy and I now…I thought it best for the boy. You know…get him away from all the talk…the gossips.”
“Yes...I agree...it would probably be for the best,” Ben concluded. “Please, won’t you sit down?”

“Why, yes...thank you.”

Mrs. Cameron took a seat at one end of the settee. Joe sat down on the opposite side.

“Good afternoon, Little Joe.”

“Ma’am,” Joe said in greeting.

He was confused, frightened some by the woman’s presence. He tried not to stare at the bruises that marred her lovely face or the blackened eye where her husband had hit her...or the bandaged arm that hung useless in the sling that draped around her neck.

“I wanted to come over, Joe...to speak with you...to...thank you for what you did...”

“Thank me?” puzzled Joe. “But...I...”

“You only reacted, Little Joe...you were trying to protect us...me...
and Timmy...you placed yourself in danger...for us. I can’t thank you enough for coming to our rescue...”

“But I...killed your...husband,” Joe said softly. “I’m sorry...”

“You had no choice...he forced you to do it...he’d already killed my son, Matt, he wouldn’t have hesitated to kill you...or Timmy, or me...he was crazy, Joe...plumb crazy. It wasn’t the first time he’d hit us...or beat one of our boys, especially Matt. I think Walt resented Matt...him being only his stepson and not really his flesh and blood. I think my husband resented me too...for being Matt’s mother. No, Little Joe...you didn’t cause my husband’s death...he caused it himself. If you hadn’t come along when you did...we might very well have died that day.”

“But...why didn’t you tell someone...about him beating you, I mean?” Joe asked.

“Yes...why didn’t you go to the sheriff...tell him what was happening?” Ben added.

“It wouldn’t do any good, Mr. Cartwright. You, yourself know that it’s not against the law for a man to hit his wife. They call it...keeping her under control,” Mrs. Cameron stated with a smirk.

“Well, it’s a law that needs to be changed. It’s wrong...for any man to beat a woman, or a child...look at the devastating affects it has on a family...and not just the family,” Ben said,
pointing to his own young son, “but to outsiders as well. Someday…with God’s help, laws will be made to prevent such things from happening…help has to come from somewhere…but it takes people, like Little Joe here, who are willing to help, who aren’t afraid to stand up for what’s right and what’s wrong!” declared Ben in a loud voice.

“Men must learn to control themselves first, before they can control their wives and children. Without inner control…a man becomes…a…a…”

“Monster…Mr. Cartwright. That’s what Walter had become. He was so filled with self-loathing, disappointment of his own life, his own failures, that he took it out on the very ones he was suppose to love…and who loved him. You see, my husband wasn’t always like he was that day…no…once he was as kind and caring as…you are, Mr. Cartwright…but over the course of years and too much bad luck, he changed…nothing mattered to him anymore…he stopped caring and became a totally different man, a man I no longer knew…or loved. He killed more than just my son…he killed my love for him…now I have to live with the hate I feel toward him.”

Mrs. Cameron stood to her feet. Her expression was grim as she turned to go.

“Joseph, again I thank you for helping us. I will always remember you with kindness…and you, Mr. Cartwright…for having the self control over your own emotions to raise your boys to be good, decent men.”
Ben stood silently at the door. He glanced around the room at his ‘boys’, all young men now. In his heart, he thanked God for giving him power over himself, wisdom to know how to control his own troubling thoughts and feelings when they suddenly appeared. He thanked God that he had not been reduced to the same level as Walter Cameron that day...that day when he had been so angry as to consider wringing the neck of his youngest son...and for what? His shame deepened and he vowed never to allow his temper to interfere with the welfare of one of his sons.

“Thank you, Mrs. Cameron, for stopping by. I hope you and Timmy have a safe journey.”

“Thank you, Mr. Cartwright, Joseph...good day, Adam, I hope you get better real soon.”

“Thank you ma’am...I’ll be fine.”

Ben walked out into the yard with the woman and her son. Joe turned from the door and slowly made his way back to the settee. Adam watched his brother as Joe sat down.

“Something bothering you?” he asked Joe.

“Naw...I just feel sorry for them, that’s all.”
“Well, so do I…”

Joe took a deep breath and glanced over at his brother, but said nothing. Adam read the troubled thoughts that showed in his brother’s expression.

“No Joe…Pa could never get that mad.”

Joe’s eyes widened slightly.

“How’d you know what I was thinking?” he asked with a slight grin.

“Because, next to Pa, I know you better than anyone else…better than you know yourself…”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes really! I know you’re feeling a bit guilty about what happened too…I know you’re wondering if you could have handled things differently…and…I know you did the only thing you could have done.”

“I didn’t have to go…with Timmy, I mean…I didn’t have to stick my nose into someone else’s business…or…”
“Stop it Joseph,” Ben said as he closed the door. “Stop second guessing yourself. It was bound to happen sometime...you just happened to be the one who was forced into killing the man. But someday...things will be different...you saw first hand what physical abuse can do to a family. Laws can be changed...people can be taught to react differently to certain situations...Joe...you can be a part of that change.”

“How...how?”

“By letting others...men...know that it’s not right to beat their wives, or mothers or sisters...that it’s wrong to beat child...to kill a child in a moment of rage. It’s wrong son...”

“I know, Pa...and...I’m...thankful that you aren’t like Mr. Cameron...”

“Never, son...never...” muttered Ben. “I learned a long time ago what it takes to control my anger...but I must say...I almost forgot that the other day...”

“You were pretty mad at me, weren’t you?” grinned Joe.

“So was I, kid,” laughed Adam.

Ben placed his hand on Joe’s shoulder and smiled. All the love
he’d ever had for this young man, glistened in his eyes, resounded in his tone when he spoke, filtered through from his heart to his fingers that lingered.

“Yes, I was mad…but never so mad that I could have done something so horrible. You…and your brothers, are my whole life, Joseph…without you…I would be nothing. I am, who I am, because of all three of you…you boys have made me, the father that I am…because you are a part of me…and I am a part of each one of you. I not only love you, but I respect you…I cherish each of you, you are all a gift from God, therefore I could never physically or intentionally hurt you.

Walter Cameron let the woes of his life take over control of his inner feelings…he lost respect for himself, he lost sight of the gifts that God had given to him. When he reached the point that he believed his own life was not worth living, he lost respect for everything else, his sons included…he destroyed the most precious gifts of all…his family. I will not allow that to happen to me…God willing.”

Ben smiled at each of his sons, including Hoss who had just returned from town.

“Come on, I think Hop Sing has supper on the table. I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry…”

“Me too,” laughed Joe as he helped Adam to the table.
“Thanks, kid,” the older brother grinned.

“Anytime, big brother.”

Ben sat down, waiting for each of his boys to take their proper place. When they were settled he began serving the meal.

“I sure hope we have a better day, tomorrow,” muttered Little Joe.

“I hope all our tomorrows are better…” smiled Adam.

“They will be…couldn’t get much worse…”

“Joseph! Don’t tempt fate!” snapped Ben, laughing.

“Yeah, with your luck, we’re all liable to end up with broken legs!” roared Hoss with a wide a grin.

“Hey…that wasn’t my fault…”

“It never is…” Adam said with a fake smirk. “It never is…that’s why they call you…”
“I know, I know...the ‘trouble magnet!’”

“You got it, kid...”

THE END

February 2005

If you suffer from physical or emotional abuse...or know someone who does...there is help for you. Please take the first step in ending the violence, call the hotline and report it, you might save your own life, or that of a loved one!

Here’s the number, it’s toll free: domestic violence hotline 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

And remember, there’s a better day, tomorrow!

Thanks to my good friend, Peggy Fox, for the story idea and for supplying the number!