Only a Brother Can Know (by BettyHT)

SUMMARY: Adam is back, but he and Joe are at odds. Ben is surprised to find out why, but the big surprise is in what the brothers reveal in their conversation.

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**Only A Brother Can Know**

Sadly, to Ben Cartwright, it seemed nothing much had changed. He heard Adam and Joe arguing and sighed. Somehow he had hoped that his eldest returning home would be a good thing, but all that had happened so far had been that Joe’s anger was greater and Adam didn’t seem comfortable in his home. He feared he could lose both of them. Sitting at his desk, the ledgers open in front of him, he couldn’t bring himself to concentrate enough to work on them nor could he close that window that brought those angry voices inside. Jamie heard too and walked to his desk and talked softly so that the two men outside couldn’t hear.

“Pa, it’s going to be all right. Adam and me talked. He’s doing that on purpose.”

“On purpose? He’s purposefully stirring up enough anger in Joe to make him leave?”

“No, he said Joe had let everything get him down and numb. He’s trying to stir him up enough to fight back. He wants to see what he called his ‘old fighting spirit’ come out. He said if there was ever anyone who could make Joe want to fight, it was him.”
Leaning back in his chair, he regarded his youngest with some curiosity. “When did you and Adam start to talk so much?”

“You’ve been assigning us to work together, right? Well, it worked. We get along real well, or well enough. I ask questions a lot, and he likes to answer them. It’s a pretty darn good system.”

Jamie grinned then making Ben smile. At least he had two sons who could get along without fighting. The words outside though were getting more heated and he worried that Adam’s method might not work as he intended.

“Why did you ever come back?”

“It’s my home.”

“You sure never acted like it, and you weren’t here when we needed you. You didn’t come back when Hoss died. You weren’t here when I got married. You come slinking back to claim your inheritance when your whole world fell apart, I suppose.”

“My world didn’t fall apart.”

“Well mine did.”

“It didn’t.”

“You have no right to tell me about what I’ve lost. I lost everything.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“You’re a damn liar to stand there and talk that way. Shut up.”

“I won’t shut up because I know you haven’t lost everything. You’re too afraid to face life right now so you’re burying yourself in your sorrow.”
“I am not afraid.”

“You are.”

A fist connected with Adam’s chin at that point so fast he never saw it coming. Then there were more blows that he could barely fend off before they did irreparable harm. He didn’t strike back but did his best to defend himself until Joe had spent his fury and his shoulders were slumped and his head was down. By then, Ben and Jamie were on the porch too. Ben grabbed Joe.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“Pa, stay out of this. It’s between me and Joe.”

Ben wasn’t used to Adam using such a commanding tone with him. Then Adam did something that Ben would never have expected seven years earlier. He pried his father’s hands from Joe’s shoulders and had his father step back as he wrapped an arm around Joe. Adam was bleeding from his nose and lower lip but didn’t care.

“Pa, would you leave us alone, please.”

Shocked, Ben complied. The commanding tone of his son made arguing seem like a hopeless endeavor. Jamie smiled at him and took his arm.

“It’s going to be all right, Pa.” Looking back at Adam, Jamie wasn’t as sure but he prayed it would be.

Once Ben and Jamie were gone, Joe looked up at Adam and shook his head. “Why?”

“You had to get the anger out first. I love you, Joe.”

Unable to handle all the emotion and words he had never expected to hear, Joe began to cry. Heaving sobs wrenched his body for several minutes before he could stop. Once he got control again,
he looked at Adam who was staring into the distance as if a world away.

“How could you know?”

When Adam spoke, his voice was soft. “I took a job in England. I met a wonderful woman there. She was twelve years younger, but we liked the same things and talked so easily together. We fell in love, and I knew I couldn’t leave unless I married her and took her with me. We were coming home and a letter would have arrived as fast as we would. She miscarried while we were on the ship. She hemorrhaged. No one could stop it.” His voice broke as he spoke because the raw emotion was still evident. Taking a moment to get his emotions under control once more, Adam continued. “The day we consigned her body to the deep, I stood at the rail and wanted to join her. I thought I had lost everything when I saw that shrouded body slip beneath those dark waves and considered that I had nothing to live for any more. It took everything I had there for a moment not to jump that rail. Then I thought about how we had talked of the future and what we would do and the people we would see. I could still do most of those things. When I started counting my blessings, my whole life turned around. I came home instead.”

Very softly, Joe asked only one question. “What was her name?”

“Marlene. Her father was English and her mother was German. I was in England when you married Alice. I didn’t get your invitation until I arrived home and got the bad news from you in the same batch of mail that was waiting for me.”

“And Hoss? Why didn’t you come home?”

“That telegram was forwarded to me. I got it while I was in England. I couldn’t have come home in any reasonable time frame. That’s when I met Marlene. She was my rock during that time. I
might have fallen apart completely if not for her. One of the first things she said to me was that every man has to fight his own battle in his own way. It sounded so much like Hoss it was like he was there except he wasn’t. Dealing with his loss while I was alone would have been unbearable. Marlene was a godsend.”

“So you didn’t find out about Hoss’ death until long after it happened.” For the first time, Joe began to understand how difficult it had been for Adam to face the loss of Hoss when he lived so far from the rest of the family. Joe had his father, Jamie, Candy, and a few other hands to whom he was close and had known for a long time.

“Yes, it took quite a while for that mail to catch up to me. It’s why my letter probably arrived so much after the fact too.”

“I’m sorry I thought such bad things about you.”

“It’s all right. I counted on it.”

“We’re good now though, aren’t we?”

“We were always good, Joe. We had to remember how to show it.”