

# My Son (by Bakerj)

Summary: Caught in flash flood Little Joe loses his family and memory. After months of searching, Ben is forced to accept he is gone for good. Can Joe find his way back to his family, or will the man who rescued him but has his own reason for keeping him, succeed?

Rating T: some language and violence. Word Count: 21,465

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## My Son

Of course, if he'd listened to Hoss none of this would be happening now. If he'd only listened to sensible, big brother Hoss, Joe Cartwright, wouldn't be drowning.

He and Hoss were out rounding up strays after the ranch had been wracked by late winter and early spring storms, that had damaged fences. Joe had elected to ride over to Buckhorn Meadow. Situated on the eastern boundary of their ranch, the Ponderosa. Named after the majestic Ponderosa Pines which carpeted the hillsides. While Hoss had agreed to take the area further north.

"Mind now Lil'l Joe, stay away from the creek. We're likely

to have flash floods with them storms.”

Joe had flashed Hoss an insouciant smile, “Don’t worry big brother. I don’t wanna get my feet wet.” Giggling, he’d given a backward wave and ridden away.

He hadn’t lied, of course, he’d had every intention of keeping clear away from it. Being born and bred on the Ponderosa, he knew only too well the perils of flash floods. He’d seen how the melting winter snows and early spring storms could bring down sudden torrents of water, like lava spewing from a volcano. Swiftly turning a quiet creek or gully into a broiling, swirling, deadly deluge of water, mud, and debris.

Joe knew this, and Pa had raised no fools, but then he hadn’t bargained on the calf.

He spotted the cow first, standing on the bank of the creek, frantically lowing. As he tipped the rise he saw the cause of her unhappiness. Below, stuck in the mud at the edge of the water, was her calf; braying back frantically at his mother.

Joe grinned across at her as he detached his lariat from his saddle. “It’s all right momma, don’t worry I’ll get your baby for ya. C’mon Cooch,” he encouraged, as he manoeuvred the horse into position.

With an efficiency honed over long practice, he had the lasso over the calf’s head. Backing up Cochise, he began to haul the complaining animal out. Unfortunately, the calf in its keenness to re-join his mother, and much to Joe’s exasperation, managed to get the rope tangled in the brush. Snaring itself and the rope. He had no choice but to dismount and go down to untangle them.

Freeing the creature first, he watched with gratification as it clambered up the slope and was reunited with its mother.

With a satisfied smirk, Joe called out, “There you go momma,

baby, back safe and sound.”

Turning his attention to untangling and collecting his rope, he heard it. Spinning around, he saw the wall of water crashing round the bend.

The rope dropped from nerveless fingers. Terror slammed his heart against his chest. One word screamed through his mind. *MOVE!* Pumping adrenaline sent him frantically scrambling up the bank. Boots slipping in the mud, he clawed at the earth, in a desperate but vain effort to move faster.

Flinging himself flat up the slope, he tried to gain more purchase of the ground and pull himself clear.

The wall had other ideas. On him in seconds, it hit his legs like a train sweeping them from under him. Still clutching handfuls of grass, Joe gave a yell as he was yanked free. Sucked under and along, with the mass of foaming water, he fought for the surface. Turned by the torrent, he felt himself being bumped, dragged and torn along the bottom of the creek. Desperately struggling to stay afloat, it was a forlorn hope. So, here he was drowning. *Sorry, Hoss.*

With a suddenness that forced the breath out of him and sent a wave of pain down one side, Joe slammed into a tree branch. The branch had snagged with the bank. He clung to it sucking in air. This could be his only chance, and he had to use it. The force of the water was crushing him against the branch. Threatening in its terrifying power to snatch him and drag him under again.

It was then that Joe saw it, the over-hanging tree above!

A sob escaped as he spotted this slim glimmer of hope. If he could grab a limb, he might just be able to pull himself out of the torrent. A sick feeling rose in his stomach as he realized he couldn't reach it, hopelessness threatening to overwhelm him. Gritting his teeth, Joe pushed back the fear.

He was Joe Cartwright, and he wasn't a quitter! Looking around for something, anything to catch a branch with, he got the idea.

Pulling himself further up the log giving himself room to manoeuvre, he shrugged off his jacket. The raging water slashed over him as frozen fingers wrapped one sleeve tightly around his left wrist. Shaking the wet hair out of his eyes, he began to swing the jacket up to the tree above.

Over and over he swung it, only to see it fall. The whole time his body was being battered against the branch, he was clinging too. Every swing was exhausting, and he felt like he'd been there for hours. He knew it could only have been minutes and with this knowledge, fear began to constrict his chest, as with every failed attempt he felt his strength ebbing away.

Then the miracle happened. The jacket wrapped and caught. Joe gasped with relief. For a moment he hung there allowing his pounding heart and breathing to steady. Then began the tortuous haul toward the bank.

So intent on what he was doing he failed to see the upended tree root careening toward him. Its tendrils rising out of the water like some grotesque starfish. It struck him hard, slamming him into the branch, dislodging it and dragging him under. The sleeve of his jacket ripped away, leaving the rest flapping in the wind.

In a fight for his life, he battled against the entangling roots, frantically struggling for the surface. Pain seered in his chest as he finally emerged and gulped in the life-giving air. Never had air tasted so sweet.

Still caught in the massive roots, he grappled to push himself free. An explosion of light and pain abruptly tore through his head as a flying piece of rock debris struck him. Blackness rushed up engulfing him, and he knew no more.

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William Jennings pulled up his horses and clucked at the swollen stream. He'd spent the morning in Carson City buying supplies and was plodding back to his farm. He sucked his teeth at the signs that a flash flood had been through earlier. Although the water had receded some, he contemplated if his old horses could manage the crossing. With reluctance, he climbed down to take a closer look.

Satisfied that the water was low enough, he turned back to the wagon. It was then that he spotted the distressing sight.

A huge root of a tree had been flung up and was resting on the side of the bank. Tangled amongst its shoots, William could make out the form of what once had been a human being.

He approached with reluctance. Not being sure that he wanted to deal with a dead body, but not having the heart to just pass by the unfortunate soul.

The man's legs lay in the water whilst the torso was entwined in the roots. What was left of his clothes were shredded. His body one grisly mass of grazes and his hair a tangle of mud and matted blood.

Gingerly Will lifted the head and with sadness could see even through the mess that the man was barely more than a boy.

At that moment the corpse coughed.

Will gave a yelp and fell back, landing slap on the muddy bank. Pulling himself together he scrambled up and began to free the young man, dragging him over to his wagon. Laying him down he ran for his water canteen. Cradling the boy's head, he trickled some into his mouth. At the feel of the cold liquid, the lad shifted and turned. One word came trembling softy out of him, "P...Pa?"

William looked down at the young man, a strange look in his

eyes.

“It’s all right son, you’re safe now.”

The young man sighed in relief and slipped back into unconsciousness.

Laying him carefully back down Will cleared room in the back of his buckboard. After loading the boy on board and making him as comfortable as possible, he shook up his horses and headed them across the stream toward home.

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Hoss had finished his swing and was heading back with the strays he’d found to meet up with the rest of his family at the agreed rendezvous point.

His father, Ben Cartwright, and his older brother, Adam, had spent the morning checking the crews on the fence-mending and the herds in the lower pasture.

They’d agreed to meet up at the chuck wagon for lunch, before heading out for the afternoon. Swinging back around the Ponderosa, checking the furthest southern boundaries, then heading back to the ranch house.

The Ponderosa at over one thousand square miles was a minor kingdom that Ben and his sons had built for themselves.

There had been wives and mothers, of course. Three of them in fact, one for each son. Each one had been tragically lost. Ben had come through each of these tragedies a stronger man. They’d also made him a caring and sensitive one. He’d had to learn to be a mother as well as father to his boys, and this had moulded him into a unique man of strength, wisdom, kindness and above all love.

The most important thing in Ben Cartwright’s life was his sons, and his three sons felt the same way about him and their

brothers. Together they made one formidable, unbreakable unit, which had forged within the Nevada wilderness the jewel that was their Ponderosa.

Hoss, riding up to the chuck wagon saw his father and older brother already hunkered down by the fire tucking into their lunch.

“Hey, sure hope you’ve left some of that grub fer me. I’m plump wastin’ away with all that scrabbling around in the scrub fer those darn strays.”

Ben grinned, Hoss standing at six foot four and almost equally as broad needed substantial sustenance.

Sitting down opposite his father and brother, a plate of food in his hand, he began spooning it in as he looked around the camp. “Say, where’s Lil’l Joe?”

“Not back yet,” Adam informed him.

“Not back? But he took Buckhorn Meadow, so he should’ve beat me back easy.”

“Well, you know our little brother. Probably found himself a shady tree to take a nap under,” Adam smirked.

The oldest and most studious and serious of the Cartwright sons Adam sometimes felt that his baby brother had a far too cavalier attitude to his work.

Ben cast his eldest a slight look of reproach. Approaching twenty his youngest son was still young and full of high spirits, but he was also a hard worker. Ben though said nothing, and it was his middle son who came to his brother’s defence.

“Aww Adam, he ain’t that bad.” Adam gave a derisive snort.

By the time they’d finished their lunch, and there was still

no sign of Joe a scowl had begun to descend on Ben's face. Adam and Hoss exchanged knowing looks at the trouble their erstwhile brother could be in for.

Ben tossed the dregs of his coffee into the fire. "All right let's take a look at Buckhorn Meadow and see what that scamp's been up to."

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The meadow stretched out before them and whilst it looked sparse as it woke from its winter slumber, it would soon become a lush, abundant pasture. Perfect for summer cattle grazing. They rode across it, passing by the creek that meandered through it.

Hoss pointed, "Hey look, there's Cochise."

"What did I tell you, he's probably forgotten all about the job he should be doing," Adam griped.

"Now Son, let's see what he's been doing first," Ben soothed. Nevertheless, he meant to give the young man a good talking to if he'd been shirking off.

The three rode up to join the pinto peacefully cropping at the sparse grass a short way from the bank of the creek.

Ben looked around for his wayward son. "Little Joe, JOSEPH!"

Sauntering his horse to the top of the bank Adam looked down and saw the still swollen water and the debris tossed around the side of the banks.

"Looks like a flash flood's been through here." Immediately realizing the implications of his words he snapped back to his father. "I'm sure he didn't, Pa."

Ben's jaw set at the sight of the carnage. *If Joe had been caught in that?* He would not allow his mind to consider it.

Turning back downstream he said through gritted teeth, "Let's take a look."

Hoss picked up Cochise's lead rein, taking him in tow, as they followed on behind.

They'd ridden for about two miles when Adam spotted it.

"Hold on!" he cried as he urged his horse forward and across the creek to an overhanging tree the other side of the bank.

Reaching up and across his saddle, he pulled down what had caught his attention. His hazel eyes grim as he examined the remnants of his brother's favourite green jacket. Tucking it under his hand, he took it to show his father.

Ben clutched the jacket with shaky hands. He took in every tear and rip, and his fingers lingered over the faded red stains that could be only one thing, his youngest son's blood. He clutched it to him as if holding it close would bring him nearer to its owner. A lump stuck in his throat at the thought of what could have happened to Joe.

Adam, an analytical man, had been running through all the scenarios that could fit the situation. "Looks to me like Little Joe was using the jacket as a rope to climb out, then the sleeve ripped."

Hoss appreciated how his older brother's logical mind liked to work. Still, right now he wished he'd kept his thoughts to himself. He gave him a look that told him this. Catching it Adam flushed, looking guilty at his thoughtlessness.

"Don't mean nothin' Pa," Hoss mumbled.

Ben pulled himself out of his distraction and snapped out decisively, "Adam, I want you to return to camp. Tell Charlie that he's to take charge of the fencing crews. He knows what to do. Pick up supplies from the wagon for three days and catch us up. Hoss and I will continue to follow the creek and

keep searching.”

Nodding smartly Adam galloped off.

Ben cast his eyes up at the sky and scowled at the grey clouds forming.

“Looks like we’re in for more rain. We need to move before all the signs are lost,” he told Hoss unnecessarily, urgency adding sharpness to his words.

Hoss understood the reason for his snappiness, time was critical now. If Joe hadn’t drowned, hyperthermia from the freezing water could kill him. Turning their horses, they headed off.

The rain came an hour later, just as Adam re-joined them. Stopping only long enough to shrug on their rain slickers the three determined men continued their search, aware of how much more difficult the rain made their task. They would not stop until the light was gone and it was impossible to continue.

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William tugged his tired horses to a halt to make camp. It was a place he always used on his infrequent trips to Carson City. His farm was a good two days drive to Carson and back, so he only went when necessary. The camp was picked to give cover from the elements, provided by a rock overhang, and water from a nearby stream.

He’d covered the wagon when the rain had started, to protect the boy and his supplies, He didn’t uncover it until he’d got a fire started, settled his horses, and got some coffee and food going. He also warmed up a big can of water.

The young man groaned in protest as he was hauled up.

“C’mon Son, we’ve got to clean you up an’ take care of ya.”

Lifting his head the young man opened his eyes for the first time, although they were glazed and unfocused. A word, barely a breath, slipped out, "Pa?"

"C'mon Son, let's get you over here an' I'll make you more comfortable. Can you help me an' walk?" Will asked pulling the boy to the edge of the wagon.

"Yeah Pa, I'll try."

With one of the young man's arms around his shoulders, Will half carried, half walked the lad over to the bed he'd made for him.

As he staggered, Will saw how the boy groaned and clutched an arm to his chest. He figured there was most likely some damage to his ribs.

Having got the lad to the blankets he'd laid out, Will quickly stripped him of his torn and filthy clothes. He'd also lost one of his boots, so the other was tossed onto the pile as well. He then proceeded to wash the lad down with the water he prepared, checking him over as he did.

As suspected the lad had bruised, possible broken, ribs. He also found a nasty, oozing wound on the side of his head behind his left ear. Other than that he was a mass of gashes and bruises. Overall though, Will decided, he'd been pretty lucky.

Cleaning him as best he could with the water he'd warmed. Will bandaged the head wound and then his chest.

Finally covering him with a blanket Will sat back. That was all he could do for now. When he got him home tomorrow, he'd clean him up properly and use the good salve he had for cuts and bruises.

The boy shifted and moaned. Will could see in the firelight the sheen of sweat on the boy's skin. *Has a fever fer sure.*

Fetching a cup of water, he hoisted the lad up against his chest. "Here's some water boy, ya need to drink."

"Pa?" came the confused response.

"C'mon son, drink this down now," Will was pleased that the lad immediately took the water and drained the cup.

When he finished, he laid the boy back down. There was kindness in the calloused hands that caressed the boy's face, "You rest now Son."

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Ben, Adam, and Hoss eventually camped when it got too dark to see.

It was a quiet, depressed camp. Each man caught up in their own thoughts of their missing family member. Each wondering if he was all right. Whether he was lying out there somewhere in the rain freezing, injured...or worse.

No one wanted to voice their fears. Each wrapping themselves in their own silence not wishing to risk letting their concern seep out. Settling down, they spent a sleepless night filled with worry.

The day dawned flat and grey. The rain had stopped, but there was no hint of the burgeoning spring in the sky.

The three sombre men ate their breakfast in silence and packed up quickly eager to continue their search.

By mid-morning, they had passed beyond the boundary of the Ponderosa. Hoss pulled his horse up abruptly as he spotted something. Dismounting he squelched over in the mud to look. A large upturned tree root lay embedded in the side of the bank, and Hoss dug around the side of it.

"What is it, Hoss?" Ben fretted.

Hoss hauled his prize out of the mud and held it up. But it wasn't a prize, more like a doomsday bell. As he turned it in his hand, his heart felt like a lead weight. Reluctantly he took it to his pa.

Ben cradled the soft tan boot in his hands. You could barely make out the colour it was so covered in mud, but Ben would know it anywhere. Hadn't he told Joseph often enough to get them off the table?

"It's Little Joe's," he confirmed, the words constricting his throat.

"So? All that tells us is that he was in the creek!" Adam's ferocity bit the air. "We already know that. He may have lost it climbing out."

Hoss was startled at Adam's sudden anger, but he didn't argue with it. The last thing they needed right now was to give in to their fears.

"Adam's right Pa don't tell us nothin' we didn't already know."

Grateful for their reassurance Ben managed to drag up a smile. "C'mon let's keep looking."

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Sighing deeply Will lowered himself into his rocking chair. It had been a long day. He looked over to the corner of the cabin to the cot where the boy was finally asleep. Turning back to gaze into the fire he smiled. He had been given a miracle, God was giving him a second chance.

His mind wandered back over the previous night and day. The lad had regained consciousness several times on the ride home and each time had told him the same thing, and Will had begun to hope.

Once he got back to the farm, he'd hauled the tin bath out, figuring it would be the easiest way to get the lad properly clean.

Having achieved this, not without difficulty, after all, Will bandaged the head wound and strapped up the boy's torso again. Lastly, he scrupulously applied his dependable salve to the mass of welts and bruises. The lad still had a fever, but it wasn't bad enough to cause him any worry.

Finally finishing his ministrations he'd laid the young man back down on his cot to find the green, glittering eyes open and watching him.

"Pa?" came that word again. Will stroked the boy's head fondly.

"It's all right son. You can rest now."

The eyes searched the man's face. The lean, long face stubbled with four days growth. The brown eyes lined with worry and brown hair flat and lank. It was an aged face, careworn and sad. William Jennings at forty-six looked older than his years, life marking and ageing him ahead of his time.

"I'm sorry Pa," the slightly breathless voice from the bed apologized.

"Sorry, what fer?" Will asked surprised.

"For not remembering you."

Will smiled and ran a hand through the boy's clean, soft curls.

"I told yer son, it don't matter none. Yer had an accident, a nasty fall an' got a bang on the head. It sometimes happens that people don't remember things after a bang on the head. Don't you worry now ya hear me?" he ordered, as he changed the subject. "D'ya think you can eat somethin'?"

Receiving a nod in reply Will eagerly got up and went to the stove where he had a stew cooking.

Trusting eyes followed Will as their owner pondered his position. No, he wasn't worried. He should be, he felt, waking up in a strange place. Not remembering his father or anything, even his name. You'd think he'd be frightened, but he wasn't, because he was with his pa. Somehow, he knew deep down in his soul that he was safe. He couldn't remember it, but *he felt it*. The strength, the safety that came from this man. He knew with unshakable certainty that his pa had always been there for him and always would be. As long as he was, he didn't have to be afraid or worried.

The young man frowned as he felt the need to know one thing. "Pa?"

Will came immediately back to his side. "Yes, Son?"

"What's my name?"

Will chortled at his oversight, "I should've told ya. It's Peter, Pete as we called yer."

Pete rolled the name around his head. Sadly it didn't strike any familiar chord.

Setting his disappointment aside he wondered about what his Pa had said. "We?"

"Yer Ma and me."

"Ma?" Excitement crept into his voice, "She here?"

Will shook his head. Sadness enveloped him, "She's been gone nigh on four-year now son. Fever took her."

Pete dropped his eyes, "I don't remember." Yet in his heart, he was aware of the loss. He could feel it acutely even though he had no picture in his head of the woman who caused these

feelings.

"You sure take after her."

"I do?" Through misty eyes he added, the words wistful, "I wish I could remember her. I think she loved me very much."

Will gave Pete's hand a squeeze, "She did son, now c'mon let's get some food inta ya."

*Yes, God has given me a second chance.* Will looked again at the sleeping figure in the bed. *My son is back, and this time things will be good.*

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Pete's recovery was rapid. The slight fever had gone after two days. By the end of the week, although he still had some dizziness and headaches, he was insisting he was well enough to get out of bed and help around the cabin.

His ribs, which they decided were only bruised and not broken, were still very sore. However, Will could see Pete chaffed at the idea of sitting still and doing nothing. As a result, he let him have his way and allowed him to do very light work. He couldn't help chuckling as he watched Pete milking the cow or feeding and collecting eggs from the chickens.

Pete also offered to make the dinner, but after one bite and much laughter, they agreed that would remain Will's job.

"Sorry Pa," Pete giggled, "guess I'm not much of a hand with cookin'. You know you could've told me. I won't mind you tellin' me if I ain't good at somethin'."

Will grinned, "Well I guess I could, but where's the fun in that?" Pete's high-pitched giggle broke out again. Finding it impossible to resist Will joined in. He couldn't remember an evening when he'd last laughed like this, and all because his boy was home.

Over the coming days, Pete familiarised himself with the farm. He was a little disappointed that he couldn't remember any part of it, but he noticed how comfortably his hands turned to the work. Although having to take things slow because of his injuries, he knew what he was doing, especially with the horses. He definitely knew his way around horses.

When he first harnessed the team, he'd been struck with a strong sense of familiarity as if he'd done the same thing many times before. He'd tried to pursue the memory pressing his mind. All he got was searing pain and a headache, so he'd let it go. He told himself there was no need to push things, after all, he was home and safe. Consoling himself with the thought that his memory would return when it was ready, up until then he wasn't going to force it.

Sitting on the fence one morning he took a good look at the farm. It was around two hundred acres, respectable in size and enough to provide a good living.

However, his experienced eyes took in fences that needed fixing, the barn in urgent need of repair and the fields that stood fallow; needing ploughing ready for the spring planting.

He could also see that only thirty acres were ready for cultivating. He knew that another forty could be easily put to plough. Apart from giving them more feed for animals, so their stock could be increased, it would also mean a bigger cash crop.

As he watched his pa toiling away chopping wood, he found himself wondering what sort of son he was. *How could I allow the farm to become so neglected?* His pa had obviously been doing the best he could alone, but what had he been doing?

Once considered, he couldn't shake the thought and asked his father outright about it that night.

Will shifted his food awkwardly around his plate for a moment

before answering. "Well, you've been away. We needed some extra money to cover the taxes an' you took a job to get it." As he continued Pete was distressed to hear the shame in his father's voice, "I know the place isn't in great shape. I done my best to keep up with the chores..."

Pete quickly laid his hand over his pa's to silence him. "Pa, I'm not blamin' you. I know how hard you work and how difficult running this place alone must be. I was just wonderin' why I wasn't helping you."

Will covered Pete's hand with his other, anxious to reassure him. "Son, you was helpin'. I jest feel I let you down."

Pete shook his head, his voice adamant, "No Pa, never. You can never let me down. I might not remember, but I know it." Pete took a determined breath and vowed, "I'm back now, an' I gonna do my bit. Working together we can really get the farm back on its feet."

Will was overwhelmed and delighted. "Sure son, you an' me together, we can do anything!"

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Standing at the edge of the field Pete reached down to pick up a handful of warm earth, letting it crumble and fall through his fingers. It was good soil and would grow good crops. Taking off the large floppy hat that Will had given him he wiped his brow. Closing his eyes, he lifted his face to the sun letting it warm his skin and took a deep breath.

It had been a month since Pete's accident, and although there was no sign of his memory returning, he wasn't worried. His ribs, though still sore, were good enough for him to start the heavy work and he was looking forward to getting on with it. He was happy at the chance to be properly active again. Most of all he was happy to be working with his pa.

During his inactive weeks, he'd had some ideas for the farm which they'd talked through, and he'd been delighted that Pa had agreed. The trust he showed in him made his chest swell with happiness. He was determined not to let him down and do better by him in the future. Despite what Pa had told him had a sneaking suspicion he hadn't been as helpful in the past as he could have been.

Will, watching Pete from the house smiled to himself. It was so good to have his son back, and for the first time in a long time, he was looking forward to the future.

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The three tired horses came to a halt in the yard in front of the big ranch house. The animals, however, were in no way as tired in body, as well as in spirit, as the three men who rode them.

Dismounting, they handed their mounts over to waiting hands and turned to walk exhausted toward the house. The door was flung open and out of it came a small Chinaman, sporting a pigtail and the garb of his people. He hurried towards the spent travellers, his words rushing out in a heavy Chinese accent.

"Where Lil'l Joe? You no find him? You still no news of number three son?"

Ben laid a hand heavy with weariness briefly on the Chinaman's shoulder as he walked slowly by. "No, Hop Sing, no news."

The small man's face fell. He looked at the other two men.

Adam shook his head fatigue etched into his voice, "No news, no trace of Little Joe."

He could see how worn out the family were and the despair haunting their eyes. He turned and ran back into the house. If he couldn't help with finding his beloved Little Joe, he could

help the rest of them by seeing they had warm coffee and good food.

The family had spent the last month searching every inch of Buckhorn Creek and its surrounding countryside until there was nowhere left to look. Ben sent telegraphs to every town in a hundred-mile radius offering a reward for any news of Joe. Now, at a standstill, they could do nothing more but return home and hope for word.

Besides that, Ben reluctantly accepted, they had a ranch to run. He had good hands, but they couldn't leave it without their guidance of the reins for too long. Though it ripped at his very soul to stop searching, he had to accept that having covered every area they now had to rely on getting information through other means.

Life must go on after all. They were in the middle of the spring roundup and branding season, which would require every hand. Ben recoiled at the thought that every hand would be there, but one.

Personally, he would be happy to be out of the house. It was horribly quiet without Little Joe's laughter echoing through it and his energy, that had seemed to fill every room, now absent.

So Ben worked and continued to hope. Riding into Virginia City once a week to collect the mail and check with the telegraph office. Each week the reply was the same – no news and Ben would climb back on Buck and bleakly ride home.

The weeks passed into another month, then two, and then three. Ben's friends looked on in growing dismay.

Dr Paul Martin watched Ben come into Virginia City every week. He watched Adam or Hoss come in for supplies and head straight home.

He couldn't remember the last time he saw them go into the saloon and no Cartwright had attended a social function since Little Joe had gone missing. Paul shook his head as he observed his friend ride out empty-handed again. He knew it was time to have a talk with him.

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Ben sat at his desk trying to work on his accounts, something he was finding increasingly difficult. The house just seemed too damned quiet to concentrate. He was also always slightly on edge expecting the door to fling open and Little Joe to come crashing in, his spontaneous laughter on his lips. Therefore, the sound of a buggy drawing up was a welcome distraction, and he gratefully set aside his books to see who it was.

Paul Martin took his friend's hand and scanned his face. He could see the new lines etched into it, the shadows under the eyes and the new gauntness in his cheeks from where he'd lost weight.

Always the good host Ben ushered Paul inside. "Welcome Paul come in and have some coffee. What brings you out here? You haven't news of Joe?" he asked, sudden hope lighting his eyes.

Paul shook his head. "No, Ben it's not Little Joe," and watched the light die.

Hop Sing appearing around the corner from the kitchen disappeared again as Ben's request for coffee. Paul settled himself into the blue chair opposite his friend.

"It's you, Ben, actually. I've come to talk about you."

"Oh?" Ben bristled, he felt interference coming his way.

"I'm worried about you. You, Adam and Hoss, the three of you can't go on like this," he told his friend quietly.

Ben voice was hostile, as he snapped, "Like what?"

Paul sighed, he'd known this wasn't going to be easy. He continued quieter still, "Ben, it's been four months since Little Joe went missing. When are you going to accept that he's not coming back?"

Ben's hands clenched on his knees, "We don't know that. I've got telegraphs out..."

"And how many replies have you had?" Paul interrupted. He sat forward speaking earnestly, "Look at yourself Ben. Look at Adam and Hoss. If you don't face it for yourself, do it for them. They can't move on until they grieve, none of you can."

Ben flung himself out of his chair unwilling to hear his friends' words. "I can't Paul, I can't give up on him!" his voice grated, hoarse with emotion.

Hop Sing, who'd been standing at the back of the room, moved forward to lay down the tray of coffee on the low planked table. His dark eyes flitted from Dr Martin to his employer, who stood with his back to him facing the fireplace.

"Thank you, Hop Sing," Ben muttered over his shoulder.

Instead of going back to the kitchen Hop Sing took a breath and spoke up, "Mr Cartwright you need to listen to good Doctor friend. Family sick and need to heal."

Shocked, ferocious eyes were turned on his cook.

Braving the eyes he pressed on, "Hop Sing love Lil'l Joe like he were son, but he gone now, and I need to say goodbye. All need say goodbye." Turning Hop Sing dashed back to the kitchen before the emotions he was holding back overwhelmed him.

Shaken, Ben sat down again.

"It's not a betrayal to accept the truth Ben," Paul comforted

him.

Getting up Paul walked around the low table and laid a hand on his old friend's shoulder giving it a squeeze. Then he left, leaving his friend to his thoughts, coffee sitting untouched.

Ben sat alone, a desolate look on his face. He'd suffered so much loss already. Three beautiful, wonderful wives and now, now he had to surrender his youngest child? Bowing his head, despair washed over him. Burying a child was the hardest thing a man could do, and he didn't even have a body to bury. It was too much to ask of him.

"Little Joe, my Little Joe," he whispered. Covering his face with his hands, he wept.

Adam and Hoss rode into the yard, slowly dismounting before heading for the barn with their horses. The conversation as they took care of their animals was sparse, as had become the norm since Joe's disappearance.

"Maybe Pa's had some news today," Hoss suggested with an effort.

Adam grunted, he couldn't bring himself to agree. He didn't want to lie and lead his younger brother on into thinking that he believed that. At the same time, he couldn't let Hoss see that he didn't believe there would ever be any news.

Ever since they ended their search, Adam's rational mind had been battling with his emotional side non-stop and lately had been winning every argument.

He'd been forced to accept that Little Joe was gone. It hurt him in a way he found hard to accept. Even more so when he had to hide his conclusion from his father and brother. He felt he had no right to crush their hope.

Hoss brushing down his horse sunk again into his own morose thoughts. He knew Pa would never give up on Little Joe, but

his heart was breaking under the pressure of supporting him. As each week passed, he found it harder and harder to keep alive his own flickering flame of hope.

Ben watched from the house as his two sons trudged toward it. Hoss's great body slumped and drained with desolation. Adam's a rigid rod of anguish. At that moment he knew Paul was right, it was time. Time to accept his loving, charming, infuriating, quicksilver ray of joy was gone from their lives.

He looked down at his desk and picked up the portrait of Little Joe's mother. "Marie, my love, look after our boy," he begged.

Hearing the door open he replaced the picture, pushed back his shoulders and stepped out to greet them. "Sons we need to talk."

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Excited as he was to be starting on the heavy work Pete was discovering that although his ribs were improved after a month, ploughing certainly did them no favours.

After seeing him wince for the umpteenth time, Will finally spoke up, "Y'know ya never did like to plough lad and them ribs are still sore. Best let me do it."

Pete scowled, planted his hands firmly on his hips and stubbornly shook his head.

"No Pa, we both need to do this, there's too much for one man, and I'm fine!"

Will stared at his son in surprise, who turned with a resolute stride back to the plough. He'd never seen him so determined and was aware of a burst of pride.

"Sure thing," Will enthused, as he picked up the pail of seed to follow behind.

With each man taking a turn at the plough the two were soon able to finish the cultivation.

Wheat, corn, and potatoes planted, Pete turned his attention to the rest of the farm. Mending broken fences, repairing the barn and rounding up the livestock.

In this way, three months easily slipped past and Will standing at the stove grimaced at his bare cupboard.

"Gonna hav'ta take a trip ta get supplies."

"Fine Pa, now'll be a good time to go. Everything here's in good shape. With the stock out on the pasture and the fences repaired we can both go to Carson City." Pete was more than eager to encourage such plans, thinking how good a break would be.

Will hesitated, "Actually I figured on goin' to Dayton."

"Dayton?"

"Yeah, it's a might closer an' they'll have all we want."

Will sighed in relief when Pete readily agreed. He'd been concerned at the idea of going to Carson City. Since he'd found Pete not far from there, he didn't want to take the chance on someone recognizing him. After all, Pete was his son now.

'Sides,' he told himself, 'I only went to Carson coz them boys at the Lazy Y had taken ta givin' me such a hard time.' It had been over a year since he'd last been to Dayton so, he reassured himself, they'd probably forgotten all about him.

Excited at the idea of visiting a town Pete tipped back his chair, plopped his feet on the table and laced his fingers behind his head.

"Yessir, I'm gonna get me the tallest glass of beer," he

grinned.

Will spooning the food onto the platters spotted Pete's position. "Son, feet off the table."

"Yes sir," Pete squeaked sitting up immediately. Abruptly the room changed. He was looking at someone else. A broader, taller man with grey hair. Pete knew this man, but he couldn't see his face. *Why can't I see his face?* His fingers reached out to him, a feeling of recognition teetering on the edge of his mind.

White-hot pain shot through his head and he slapped his palms to his forehead to hold the agony back. Groaning he doubled over.

"What is it Pete, you sick?" Will was by his side, concerned at his son's changed demeanour.

"Head...pain...hurts."

Gentle hands were immediately on his forehead and rubbing his back. Will coaxed him to his cot to lie down before fetching a cold cloth for his brow.

Lying with his eyes closed against the spinning room, he could feel the pain already easing. Gingerly opening his eyes, he turned to see his pa, concern shadowing his face, looking down at him. The outline of the other man drifted away like smoke.

"I'm fine Pa, just a headache."

"Good, but you rest awhile. I'll leave yer plate ta warm. You eat later when ya feel up to it."

Pete nodded, smiling gratefully up at the man who always took care of him.

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The trip to Dayton driving their wagon was slow due to their

aged horses and therefore required an overnight stop, but they arrived in Dayton early morning.

Taking advantage of their early arrival, they decided to find a restaurant and get some breakfast before going to the mercantile for their supplies. Pete was hopeful that while the owner gathered up their order, he could cajole Pa into letting them get that beer before returning.

Will, still cagey of running into the troublemakers from the Lazy Y, wasn't keen but he wasn't proof against Pete's persuasions. Being fixed with what he could only call *the biggest pair of puppy dog eyes I'd ever seen*, he gave in and Pete, to his delight, got his beer.

Returning to the mercantile, they'd almost finished loading the wagon when some Lazy Y hands arrived. Will was packing in the bags of sugar, Pete still inside the store collecting the last item, when he heard a jeering voice behind him.

"Well, well boys if it ain't the dirt farmer. Thought we told ya to stay out of Dayton...dirt farmer?" The last two words were spat out as an insult.

Turning, he found himself facing three cowboys. The speaker standing in front of his two cronies, thumbs hooked into the front of his gun belt, exuded arrogance.

"I...I don't want no trouble boys, I'm jest leaving," Will placated, holding his hands up in a mute sign of surrender.

The cowboy leaned forward his lip sneering, "Jest leaving, jest leaving? Hear that boys the dirt farmer thinks he's jest leaving."

The other two men sniggered and smirked at each other.

Will's eyes flicked nervously to each of the men, unsure what to do.

"What d'ya say, boys? We can't let the dirt farmer leave without giving him a drink can we?"

"No, Lee that right's we can't," the others agreed as they fanned out each side of the ringleader.

Will raised a hand higher, warding them off. "I don't want no trouble," he told them again. Although he had no hope of being listened to.

Lee grinned, "Course you don't," he scoffed. "Now let's get ya that drink."

The men lunged, the two cohorts grabbing Will's arms while Lee grabbed Will's shirt front. Together the three men dragged him over to a nearby horse trough.

Clutching the back of Will's head Lee went to force it down into the trough. He froze as a voice rang out.

"Take your hands off him!"

Startled, the four men looked up to find Pete standing at the door to the mercantile. From under his broad hat, his eyes could be seen blazing with a deep fury. There was no mistaking the menace as he demanded, "I said take your hands off him."

Lee glanced at his two friends for support before answering, "Look mister this ain't got nothin' to do with you."

Pete stepped forward and calmly laid down the bag of flour he was carrying.

"That's my pa mister, so it's everything to do with me. Now, why don't cha try picking on a younger man...or don't you have the guts for that?"

Lee flung Will aside with a snort and advanced on Pete.

Pete readied himself. Apart from feeling furious at their treatment of his pa, he was curiously conscious that he didn't

feel frightened or panicked by the advancing men. Somehow, he knew what to do and that he could handle himself and them. The words *Keep those elbows in* and *Watch you keep your guard up now*, flashed through his mind. Taking the time to assume a comfortable but prepared stance he waited for the cowboy's onslaught.

Dodging the blow thrown at him Pete quickly dealt the man punishing one, two punches to his midsection. Like lightning, he followed this up with an uppercut to the jaw. Lee went down.

Momentarily astounded his two friends quickly recovered to launch themselves at the interloper. Snatching up the bag of flour Pete threw it at one, knocking him back long enough to give him time to deal with the other. Sidestepping his grab, he brought both his fists down onto the man's back sending him sprawling. Turning, head down, he barrelled into the other.

The two ended up of the floor, but Pete quickly rose to his knees and dealt the cowboy a shattering punch, laying him out. Jumping up he side-stepped the other man again and, helping his rush with his boot squarely planted on his backside, sent him crashing into the horse trough.

The three dazed cowboys stared up at him.

"Don't you ever lay hands on my Pa again!" he smouldered.

Scooping up the bag of flour he dropped it into the wagon and gathered up an equally stunned Will.

"You all right Pa? Did they hurt you?"

"No...no" Will stammered. Seeing the crowd that had gathered, he quickly retreated to the wagon. "Let's go home son."

Bill Turner had been visiting his daughter and new grandson for the past few months, having left his two sons in charge of their ranch. He was in Dayton waiting for the stage back to

Virginia City when the fight attracted his attention.

When he saw who was at the centre of it, he broke out into a grin. He might have known. Anywhere there was a brawl, Little Joe Cartwright would be involved. Hadn't he heard he'd got himself into some trouble just before he'd left Virginia City? He chortled at the thought of teasing Ben over this new piece of high jinks when he saw him next.

Seeing the fight was over, he made his way through the crowd and across the street to say hello to Joe. When he called his name, Joe didn't seem to hear him. Only the older man next to him looked around before whipping up his team.

Bill stopped, slightly puzzled as he watched the wagon roll away. Shrugging, he headed back to the stagecoach office. The stage was over an hour late so should be in soon. He grinned again. He'd really enjoy telling Ben about this one.

Pete eyed his pa with anxiety as he reached over to ease up the team, "Whoa Pa, I don't think Betsy and Bertha can take the pace. Are you sure you're all right?"

Will drew a breath, "Yeah son, sorry jest a bit shaken I guess." He turned his head to look at the young man next to him. "Thanks for what you did back there."

Pete furled up his eyebrows, and a smile that reached up to his cheekbones broke out. "What, defending my pa, what self-respecting son wouldn't have done that?" he joked.

To his surprise, he could see his pa's eyes beginning to well up and was moved.

"I love ya son."

Wrapping his arm around Will's shoulders, Pete told him tenderly, "I love you too Pa."

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Ben, Adam, and Hoss dismounted and headed toward the stone masons. Their steps although purposeful were unhurried as if none were in haste to reach their destination.

The talk Ben had with them the day before hadn't been an easy one but they'd all agreed to buy a headstone and hold a memorial service. Although they had a long way to go, he felt a kind of peace had settled over them as they'd finally accepted their loss and could begin their grieving.

As they reached the stone mason's yard though they all hesitated, each seemingly unwilling to be the first to cross the threshold. Standing between Adam and Hoss, Ben placed a hand on each of their shoulders as if to give them strength and reassurance. Taking a breath, they moved forward as one.

A shout of Ben's name arrested their motion. He turned to see Bill Turner trotting up to him, a wide grin on his face.

Ben knew that Bill had been away and figured he didn't know about Little Joe yet. He was actually relieved not to have to deal with another sympathetic neighbour.

"Bill, good to see you. How's that pretty Sally doing?" He took the man's hand in a firm grip.

"She's just fine Ben, as pretty as ever."

"And your grandson?"

"Oh, he's just great." Bill puffed up his chest slightly with pride. "Got the look of his grandpa about him."

Ben smiled, pleased at his friends' delight. It was good to hear about new life. Life goes on after all.

"He's walking already y'know, dashing all over the place, regular little bundle of quicksilver." The word sent a spasm of pain through his heart, and although he continued to smile Ben inwardly wept at the thought of the other quicksilver

child he'd never see again.

"Yeah, he's gonna be a handful that one," Bill chuckled. "Which reminds me, Ben, I just saw Little Joe in a nice little fight. Took on three galoots at once. Boy, he polished those fellas off." At the shocked faces in front of him, he faltered, "What's the matter, Ben?"

Ben clutched Bill on either arm, "You saw Little Joe? When? Where?"

"Yesterday in Dayton," he told him, surprised by Ben's frantic tone.

"Are you sure Bill, are you sure it was Little Joe?" Ben beseeched him.

"Ben, I've known Little Joe since he was knee-high! I think I'd know him if I saw him."

Adam jumped in, "Was he alone? Was he all right?"

"Yeah, I told you he laid these three fellas out easy."

"There's no doubt it was Little Joe?" Ben asked again excited.

"Yes, Ben." Getting rattled at their behaviour, Bill demanded, "What's goin' on?"

Ben slapped his friend on the back, grinning broadly. "Nothin' Bill, in fact, you've just made this the best day ever."

"Huh?" Bill gaped. Baffled, he watched the three men run off down the street. "If that don't beat all."

"I don't believe it Pa, Lil'l Joe's alive," beamed Hoss.

Adam glared at his father. "If he's been in Dayton this whole time, why hasn't he contacted us?"

"I don't know Adam. All that matters right now is he's alive,"

Ben avowed, hoisting himself into his saddle. "Let's ride!"

The three men hurtled out of Virginia City back to the Ponderosa for supplies. Then on to Dayton. Where Ben hoped to find his cherished lost boy.

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"Dadburnit Pa! Somebody in this dadburned town must've seen Lil'l Joe?" Hoss pushed his hat back and scratched his head in frustration.

So far, their search and questions had elicited little response or information. They sat now in the saloon discussing their frustration over a beer.

On arriving in Dayton, their first call had been to the sheriff. He'd come very close to receiving the sharp edge of Ben's temper as he'd showed no interest in their problem. After some rummaging through the pile of papers on his desk, he found the telegrams and posters that Ben had been sending out. Ben could see he'd paid them scant interest.

Seeing their pa's hold on his temper diminishing, Adam and Hoss hustled him out of the sheriff's office before he exploded and landed them all in jail.

Muttering some very uncomplimentary remarks on the man's fitness to do his job, which made Adam and Hoss grin at each other, they headed for the hotel. Then the stable, doctor's office and mercantile, each time coming up blank, and now they were finally in the saloon.

Ben made a growl in his throat, "We're not leaving 'till we find him or get some information."

The saloon, beginning to fill with the evening crowd was getting busy. Ben decided to see what his reward would shake loose. He pulled out one of the posters he'd had printed and sent across the territory. The same ones the Dayton sheriff

had ignored. Going over to the bartender he asked if he would tack it up. Then he called for the attention of the patrons.

“Gentleman, my name’s Ben Cartwright, and I’m looking for my son Joseph. We’ve had word he was seen in Dayton a few days ago. I’m offering a reward of five thousand dollars to anyone who can provide information that leads to him. The details are on the poster.”

A general mummer of curiosity went around the place, and several men got up to take a look.

Satisfied Ben sat back down. “Hopefully, that will raise some interest.”

Abel Jennings watched the three men with resentment, as he nursed the single glass of beer he could afford.

He was a bitter man. All his life he’d never managed to get his big break, his big bonanza. Whenever he’d been close fate or luck would turn against him and prevent him realizing his fortune.

His last venture, silver mining in the Comstock, had died a death in Virginia City. Thanks to the lousy card sharp at the game he’d sat in on to raise his grubstake.

Down to his last few dollars, he was forced to visit his brother. He hadn’t seen him for two years and only ever visited when he needed money. Of course, it never occurred to Able Jennings to get a job, only fools worked after all. Besides, he could always squeeze a few dollars out of brother Will.

As Able headed out the saloon, back to the stable where he was bunking for the night, he stopped to read the poster. He drank in the information and, most of all, the reward printed on it.

From his time in Virginia City, he’d heard all about the Cartwrights, owners of the biggest spread in the state. He

just hadn't realized how rich they were until now. Casting an envious look at Ben as he shuffled out, he muttered angrily, "I could sure use that kind of money."

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Pete sat astride the fence, a grass stalk hanging out of one side of his mouth, feeling pleased. He was looking over the livestock. Moving the cows to another pasture where he'd thought the grazing was better had paid off. The cows and calves were in great condition. Maybe next year they could have enough stock to send to market? Pa had told him they'd never managed to do that before and he was excited at the prospect that they could achieve that now.

He also had an eye on a young bull he'd spotted in their neighbour's herd. Pete had ridden over and spoken to the man about the animal, once he found out he'd only moved in six months ago. He was embarrassed at this piece of foolishness. But knowing the farmer didn't know him made it easier, as he hadn't felt uncomfortable not recognizing him.

He was hopeful, he reckoned with the money they'd make from the extra cash crop they could afford to buy it. The animal was a good one and would improve their stock.

Pete hadn't told Will yet, he wanted it to be a surprise. He could only imagine the look on his face when he did. Like a kid at Christmas, his green eyes sparkled with delight at the thought of it.

Removing the grass from his mouth, he grinned. Yeah, he felt everything was going well. He turned his head as he heard Pa clanging the old bell to let him know supper was ready. Jumping down from the fence he swung mounted Bertha and set her into a reluctant trot back to the cabin.

As he tucked into his stew Will asked how the cattle were doing but before he got the chance to answer the cabin door

crashed open.

"Howdy brother, looks like I'm jest in time fer a meal," hollered the man who walked in without knocking.

"Abel," gaped Will.

Pete frowned and took in the stranger standing in the doorway. In features, there was a strong resemblance between him and his pa. Although his eyes were hard and lacked any warmth and where Will was lean and rangy, this man was heavier and stocky. He didn't take to him.

Abel looked at his brother sitting with his mouth hanging open, and then at the unfamiliar kid next to him. He was about to ask who he was when Will jumped up.

"Abel! It's good to see ya."

Abel stared in disbelief at his brother. That was the first warm welcome he'd got in over ten years.

Slapping a hand on his brother's back Will enlightened, "Pete, this here's your Uncle Abel, my older brother."

Abel's eyes narrowed and darted between Will and the lad. Something was going on for the kid sitting at the table certainly wasn't his twenty-eight-year-old nephew, Pete. Taking a close look at the stranger, his eyes widened as he recognized the features he'd seen described on a certain poster.

"Erm...Abel, why don't you and me step outside fer a moment, I need to talk with ya. Pete go on with yer supper, we'll be back."

The two men moved outside. Pete sighed, he knew his pa was gonna explain about his memory loss. He didn't want to do it in front of him, in case it upset him. Smiling his eyes softened as he thought of the consideration that showed.

"What in tarnation is goin' on?" Abel bellowed.

Will had dragged him to the barn far enough away to be out of earshot.

"I don't know what yer doin' Will, but I know one thing, that kid in there ain't your Pete! As I recall the last time I saw that pig-nosed boy of yours, he was nigh on six foot an as lanky as you. He also had hair like straw, not chestnut curls!"

"Shush Abel, please, I can explain. I found the boy half drowned. I saved him, brought him back to life. He can't remember nothin' from before an' he's mine now."

Abel, slack-jawed, ogled his brother unable to believe his ears.

"Do you know who you've got there? That's Joseph Cartwright, one of the Ponderosa Cartwrights! His pa owns one of the biggest spreads in Nevada. He's plastered posters all over Dayton offering a five-thousand dollars reward for the boy!" Abel leered at his brother exclaiming with glee, "That's two an' a half thousand each."

Will's eyes widened in fright. "No, Abel, no! You ain't takin' Pete away from me!"

Abel waved a dismissive hand. "Whatcha talking about? He ain't Pete an' that money..." Abel broke off. Will had grabbed a pitchfork and was pointing it with decided menace at him.

"I ain't losin' him, Abel, you got no right ta take him."

Taken aback Abel considered his brother. He realized he had a problem. He'd never seen his younger brother like this. Mild-mannered Will had always knuckled under to him before, and he wasn't about to let him grow a backbone now. The money was in his system. He could almost taste it, and he wasn't going to give up on it easy.

The rights and wrongs of Will keeping the boy from his true family didn't occur or bother Abel but losing out on that money did. He had to think.

He put up his hands in surrender. Smiling he soothed, "All right brother, you win. I won't say a word."

"You promise me now Abel coz I ain't joshing here. That's my boy an' no one's taking him."

"Yeah brother. C'mon let's go get some supper. I'm starved."

After sizing up his brother for a minute, Will seemed to accept his word. Putting the pitchfork to one side, he returned to the cabin. Abel followed as meek as a church mouse. He needed time to form a plan.

While Will and Pete headed off to work the next morning, Abel wandered around trying to formulate his scheme to get Pete, or rather Joseph, away from Will.

As he roamed, he took in how good the farm was looking. The last time he visited he remembered how run down the place was, what with Will struggling to keep it up on his own. Pete was no help being feckless in nature. He'd preferred to spend his time in Dayton or Carson City drinking and gambling rather than farming.

Able shrugged, not that he could blame the kid for that. He also hated farming which was why he'd let Abel keep the farm after their pa had passed away. Not that he hadn't milked it for money over the years.

But now he thought, whistling in appreciation, the place looked mighty fine. No broken fences, fields full of crops and stock looking fat and healthy. 'He might be a rich kid, but that Cartwright can work,' Abel sneered to himself.

Meandering about he found himself at the small family cemetery. In it lay the graves of their parents together with

their little sister, who'd died when she'd been only three. Next to them was Will's wife, Sarah. He stopped and frowned. Alongside the four markers, he could clearly see a fifth mound next to Sarah's grave.

Walking over Abel scratched his head. It was definitely a mound and fairly recently put there, but there was no marker. Curious, he began to cast about and hidden under some brush he found it. Pulling it out he looked at the wooden marker for a moment. A cruel smile stretched his thin lips. He had what he needed. This would ensure Will would do whatever he wanted.

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"No! I told ya nobody is takin' Pete away!"

"He ain't Pete an' you know it," Abel's fumed.

Will turned and looked out the barn door to check Pete was still nowhere in sight.

"Tell me brother, just who is it buried in that unmarked grave?"

Will snapped back around looking horrified. His colour drained, fear now replacing the anger in his eyes.

Abel watched with satisfaction. *Now I've got him!*

"Just think what you could do with that money," Abel coaxed. He'd rather have Will on his side working with him than fighting him.

"I don't care about the money. I just can't lose him, Abel...I can't."

Will regarded his brother with contempt. He had a very poor opinion of a man who couldn't care about two and a half thousand dollars. Still Able was kin, and as for the kid...*well what the heck.*

"Maybe ya won't hav'ta. The kid can't remember nothin' right? So we tell him it's a scam. That he looks like the Cartwright boy and we need him to go with them, so we can get the reward. Then he can run away back ta you." Able sniggered at the idea of Ben Cartwright paying out for his son and then losing him again.

Will sounded unhappy, "But he may remember them or, or, figure out it must be him?"

Abel wasn't listening as another idea was already starting to take form in his greed driven mind.

"Even better," he carried on as if Will hadn't spoken. "Them Cartwrights are real rich. They must keep more money in their house. With the kid on the inside, he can get us in so we can take it. Just think brother we can have the reward money and more. Set us up for life!" Abel almost whooped in delight. Finally, his Bonanza was within touch.

Will miserable, shook his head. "No, we can't do it, I'll lose him."

Abel seized his brother by his shirt front, threatening, "We do this, or I get the sheriff out to look at that grave. You'll lose the boy fer sure then, and I'll still get my reward."

Knowing his brother was more than capable of carrying out his threat Will caved in, "What'll we tell him?"

"Leave that to me."

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"I won't do it!"

The two brothers gaped at Pete, one in surprise the other with annoyance. If Abel thought persuading the boy would be easy he was learning his mistake. The Cartwright brat was proving to

be very stubborn.

"I'm not gonna pretend to be some poor man's missing son just so you can get a reward," Pete rejected hotly.

"It's five thousand dollars son. Jest think what we could do with the money," Will coaxed again.

"Pa, we don't need the money! The farms doing really well, and it's a crazy idea. How can I pretend to be Joseph Cartwright?"

"I told ya, coz ya look like him!" Abel barked.

"How can I possibly look like him?" Pete asked, incredulous at the notion. He was pacing the room when he abruptly halted. Whirling 'round he faced his father and uncle, an odd expression in his eyes. "Wait, when did you say he went missing?"

Will's throat dried at the question. The nightmare he predicted was about to happen.

"About a month ago. He went missing in the desert," Abel promptly lied. "Everyone reckons he's dead but ole man Cartwright won't give up on him."

"A month?" Pete repeated. The wisp of a thought that had become to form was dismissed. He brought his focus back to the current contention. "It doesn't matter, I still say I can't pretend to be him."

His exasperation boiling over Abel threw up his arms insisting, "Yes ya can, I know about the Cartwrights. I can tell you all ya need to know."

Anger ignited in Pete again, "I don't care. I won't do it! I sorry Pa, but I can't!"

Will warily regarded the enraged young man standing stiff before him. All jutting chin and clenched fists. He didn't

know what to make of this person. Since he'd come home, he and Pete hadn't had a cross word. This highly charged individual was something new.

What they were asking of him was despicable, he was right there. But, if he couldn't get him to agree, the result would be losing him. He couldn't bear that possibility.

Will wasn't a natural born liar like his brother. Neither was he a bitter man, but he was a lonely one. Ever since his wife passed on four years ago, his son's infrequent visits were the only person he saw on the farm. Maybe three or four times a year, whenever he needed a break from him drinking and gambling in Carson City. Pete would come home for a few days or weeks then, having squeezed a few dollars out of his father, leave again. Will dreamed that one day his son would give up his life of carousing and return to take over the farm. That he'd get back the laughing child, who'd once run so eagerly to help his pa. He'd cherished this right up until eight months ago when the 'accident' happened. After that, he'd been all alone. Then he'd been given his second chance, and his dream had finally come true. Now, that dream was threatened.

A weight crushed his chest making it hard for him to breath at the thought that Pete could be taken away from him. Determination washed over him, he wasn't going to let that happen. At that moment an idea occurred to him that was breath-taking in its simplicity.

Working up his courage he told his brother, "Abel, give Pete an' me a minute."

Abel held Will's gaze, glaring at him before he reluctantly got up and went out.

"Sit down son,"

Still furious Pete refused to sit. Instead, he resumed his

pacing, hands on hips.

"Pete..." Will tried again. Heated words cut him off.

"C'mon Pa! This is all wrong, and you know it. We don't need to steal to survive. Maybe that's what he does, but it sure as hell ain't what we do!"

Pete halted his pacing staring into the fire, waiting for the rebuke. He didn't know why he expected it, he just did. The voice reproofing him for his tone and language.

When it didn't come, he turned around. There was no fatherly indignation in Will's eyes instead what Pete saw dissolved his anger into concern.

Alarmed he went and sat down asking, "What is it Pa?"

"I'm sorry son," the bleakness in Will's voice chilled him, "I promised yer Uncle. I owe him a debt. A debt I have to repay."

Pete jerked up. Walking back to the fire he stuffed his hands into the back of his oversized trousers. His stiff back betraying his unease as he stared into the fire.

*So that's it, a debt.* For a moment he wondered what it could be. Glancing over his shoulder, the look of desolation on his father's face checked the question. He dropped his eyes, unable to bear the sight. He didn't want to know.

He felt backed into a corner. How could he argue with that? Debts had to be paid.

Going back to the table he sat down again, defeated. His final stab of resistance came out in a whisper, "I just don't know that I can do it Pa, somethin' so wrong."

Will's hands covered Pete's, his thin bony fingers squeezing them. Adding their own silent entreaty to his verbal one. He pleaded, "Fer me, son, can ya try fer me?"

Dropping his head, unwilling to let his pa see how this was tearing at him he replied, "All right Pa, for you."

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Ben paced the hotel room in frustration his face grim. Adam sat in a chair by the window looking out at the town waking up to the early morning. He was doing his best to ignore his pacing parent. Hoss sat on the bed looking wretched.

"Four days and nothing! No news and no one seems to have seen Little Joe," Ben grumbled to no one in particular. "How can this be?" he flung out his hands in vexation.

Hoss linked his hands tight between his knees. Swallowing hard he spoke aloud the fear that had begun to haunt him. "Do ya suppose Mister Turner was mistaken Pa?"

Ben abruptly stopped his pacing. "No! I won't believe that. He was sure it was your brother."

Hoss dropped his head, ashamed of his words.

Regretting his harsh tone Ben went to him and placed a hand on his shoulder, "I'm sorry Son. I shouldn't have snapped at you."

Sitting down on the bed next to him silence fell as all three men seemed lost in reverie. The knock brought them immediately back to the present. Ben, throwing a hopeful look at his sons went to open the door. He was conscious of a feeling of disappointment at the man standing there. He wasn't very prepossessing and had the look of a drifter about him.

"Mister Cartwright, Mister Ben Cartwright?" the man asked. At Ben's affirmation, he continued, "I here coz I have information about yer son, Joseph."

Ben's chest tightened. Was this the miracle he'd been praying for? Adam and Hoss were standing behind him now, alert and

eager.

"Have you seen my son?" Ben's heart seemed to stop as he waited for the answer. He didn't know if he could cope with more disappointment.

"Yes, sir, I have."

The collective relief was incredible. Ben heaved a breath that went down to his toes. Hoss clapped his Pa and older brother on the back crying, "Hot diggity." While Adam muttered under his breath, "Thank God."

Questions were then bombarded in unison. "Where is he?" "Is he all right?" "Where's he been?" The stranger threw up his hands in surrender.

"Whoa there, folks. If I can come in? I can explain."

"Oh yes, of course. Forgive me." Ben ushered the man into the room. "Please, sit down."

Settling himself into a chair by the window Ben took the one opposite. Adam and Hoss ranged either side of him.

"My name's Bill Smith an' yer son was found by my brother. He pulled him from the river an' he's been taking care of him on his farm," Abel explained.

"We're grateful of course for your brother's actions Mister Smith, but it's been four months. Why didn't he contact us?" Ben asked perplexed.

Abel twisted his hat in his hands and managed to look sorrowful. "Ya got to understand, my brother's farm is some ways from any town and your boy was injured and real sick." Abel smiled inwardly as he saw the concern wash over the three faces before him. *What a bunch of suckers.*

"My brother couldn't leave him an' he didn't know who he was.

It was only when I visited him and remembered the description in yer poster that I recognized him.”

“Why couldn’t Joe tell him?” Ben asked, beginning to worry how bad Joe was hurt.

“You see the lad were all mixed up. He’d hit his head yer see. My brother says he didn’t say nothin’ fer a long time as he was sort of dazed.”

Abel watched the men closely and saw they were buying his story. “I know my brother could’ve done more Mister Cartwright, but he’s kinda a simple man. I’m ashamed to say he didn’t think about it.”

Ben was quick to reassure, “Your brother saved my son’s life. We’re eternally grateful to him, nothing else matters.”

The disquiet raised by what had been said about Joe’s health had Ben probe, “How is my son, Mr Smith? You said he was dazed?”

“That’s right, but he’s much better now.” Feeling he was on thin ice with these questions Able was quick to change the subject. There was only one topic that interested him anyway. Assuming the demeanour of a humble man he asked, “There were talk of a reward?”

“Of course, the reward is yours with my thanks. When can we go to your brother’s farm?” Ben asked, fretful to see Little Joe as soon as possible.

“No need Mister Cartwright my brother is bringing him here ta Dayton. He’ll be arriving later this morning. His horses being a mite slow, I came ahead.”

Ben jumped up relieved and delighted, “Hear that boys, we’ll soon have Little Joe back!” The three men shook hands and slapped backs in united joy.

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Pete sat in the wagon looking and feeling dismal.

He'd spent the past two days being schooled by his uncle on the Cartwrights. He had to listen to him droning on about the Ponderosa and how rich the Cartwrights were. An unsettled feeling in his gut growing as the greedy light in the man's eyes lit whenever he talked about their wealth.

Every part of his being revolted at what they were planning to do. When his uncle had sprung his new idea of robbing the Cartwrights he'd been so enraged he'd come close to a physical confrontation with him. This had only been prevented by Will stepping in between them and leading him away. Will had then begged and entreated his son to go along with his brother's plan.

Pete tried hard to talk his Pa 'round, but it didn't work and seeing how upset he was making him he finally gave in. Privately he determined whatever happened he wouldn't go along with his uncle's plan for the robbery. He felt sick to his stomach at the idea and had no intention of letting his Pa get into deeper trouble because of his brother.

As they approached Dayton Will finally spoke to Pete, "I'm sorry son." Most of the last part of the journey since Abel had left them had been conducted in silence as Pete wrestled with what he had to do. "I know I've disappointed ya, but if we can get through this, we can say goodbye to Abel. Then get on with our lives in peace."

Only too aware of the regret in his father's eyes and voice, Pete tried for a lighter tone, "Sure Pa, together we can do anything, right?"

He was rewarded with a smile and a cheerful, "That's right son, we can."

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The tension in the hotel room was almost unbearable. All three men were pacing now, not easy in the space they had. The reward money burned a hole in Ben's pocket. He wanted nothing more than to hand it over and see his youngest son again.

Bill Smith had gone out to meet his brother and Ben had wanted to go with him. The man though had insisted he stayed, repeating his brother was a simple, retiring man and wouldn't take kindly to people and fuss. Ben had reluctantly bowed to his wishes.

Abel had no intention of letting Will anywhere near the Cartwrights and their reunion. The way he'd been acting lately, he had no idea what his brother would do, and he didn't trust him as far as he could spit.

Pete was reluctant to leave his pa in the street but accepted it as he realized it was safer for him not to be seen.

Hugging him tight for a moment he whispered, so his uncle couldn't hear, "I love you Pa." He felt Will hug him tighter in response. Breaking apart, he walked away but turned as he reached the back door of the hotel. "See you soon Pa."

Will stood looking desolate and broken as he watched him walk through the doorway. Abel revolted by his brother's weakness knew he'd made the right decision to leave him here.

Finally, Ben heard the knock he'd been waiting for. Almost running to the door, he snatched it open. Standing before him was Bill Smith, next to him was a slim youth wearing oversized clothes, typically worn by a farmer. The sleeves and legs had been turned up to help them fit. On his head, he wore a large, floppy hat which he now removed, and Ben found himself gazing at the son he'd given up for lost.

Regardless of who could see him, Ben reached forward and

gathered his son into his arm. Tears formed in his eyes. He buried his face into Joe's soft curls.

"Joseph, thank God," he murmured sending up his prayer for the marvel he held in his arms.

Pete, acutely uncomfortable at the man's fervent embrace, forced himself to respond, "Hi, Pa."

Adam and Hoss hung back letting their pa have his moment. Finally breaking loose Ben pulled Pete into the room and his brothers got their chance to welcome him back.

Adam shook his hand and slapped him warmly on the back. Under cover of Hoss giving his little brother a huge bear hug, he exchanged a meaningful look with his father at Little Joe's lack of response.

"Sure did miss ya, Short Shanks," Hoss told him, unashamedly wiping the tears from his eyes.

"Yeah... erm... me too Hoss."

Abel gritted his teeth and glowered at Pete. The stupid kid wasn't doing what he'd been told.

Taking Ben to one side he hastily covered, "Like I done told ya, Mister Cartwright, the boy weren't talking fer a long time." After checking Pete was occupied he added with mock concern, "He ain't never wanted ta talk about what happened."

"Yes, I see, thank you, Mister Smith. We owe both you and your brother more than you know." Ben reached into his jacket. "With that in mind, I can at least give you the reward."

It was all that Abel could do to stop from snatching the money from Ben. "Five thousand dollars as promised." Ben placed the money in the man's hands. He gave a small smile as he saw them tremble. He knew it was more cash money than most farmers ever saw in a lifetime.

Thanking Ben, Abel quickly backed out of the room and left. Eager to count and gloat over the cash some more.

Shutting the door behind him, Ben turned back to drink in the sight of his youngest.

He was relieved to see that Little Joe looked fit and healthy. His skin was its usual golden tan and his hair longer than ever curling below his shirt collar. The disquiet caused by Mr Smith's word receded, and Ben breathed easier. However, as he blissfully took in his boy, he became aware that everything else about Joe was not right. The stiff, edgy young man standing there chewing his bottom lip was a far cry from his confident Joe. Disquiet filled him again, what had his son been through to leave him so changed?

Thoroughly terrified and wretched at the deceit he was being asked to practise on these poor folks, Pete stood awkwardly in the middle of the room. He was looking at his real father and brothers and didn't know it.

Adam and Hoss glanced at each other unsure what to make of their ill at ease brother.

In a heartening tone, Ben suggested, "I think we should all get some breakfast before we head home. How about it, Little Joe, you hungry?"

Pete stared back at the big, friendly man before him. He'd had no idea how difficult this was going to be when he'd given in and agreed to take on the role of Joe Cartwright. His gaze travelled to each man. All looking hopefully and expectantly at him for some response they'd recognize. He just wanted to bolt and run.

Pulling in a steadying breath, he managed to paste a weak smile on his face. Summoning up a reply he answered feebly, "Sure Pa sounds good."

Neither of the three men commented that it didn't seem to look good, but they gathered up their hats and left anyway.

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The ride home to the Ponderosa began to take on nightmarish proportions to Pete. Realizing all too quickly that his uncle's tutelage which had basically consisted of the names of the Cartwrights, their ranch and saying over again in different ways how wealthy they were, was woefully inadequate for the task.

He did his best to appear relaxed and respond accordingly as the family filled him in on what was happening at the ranch but, by the time they stopped for the night, he was able to wipe a sheen of sweat from his brow. A testament to the concentration he was having to employ.

Under cover of preparing the camp, Ben took the opportunity to have a quiet word with Adam and Hoss.

"It looks like what we were told is true. Little Joe is in some state of shock still. He's sure not acting like himself."

"Yeah Pa, when he looks at us it's like he don't even know who we are," Hoss agreed. The worry he was feeling clearly showing in his face.

Ben grunted, nodding in accord. "I'll have Paul take a look at him when we get back. Until then best not push him too much or ask him about what happened."

Pete, though, had made his mind up to hightail it out of there during the night. The hideous thought of another day like he'd just endured urging him on.

Waiting until the camp was quiet, except for the snores of Hoss and the crackle of the fire, he cautiously sat up and pulled aside his bedroll. Immediately a soft voice came out of the dark.

"You all right Little Joe?"

Jumping he almost cursed, so sure they were all asleep, "Err...yeah, Adam, fine, jest found a lump."

Settling back down he realized with dismay that the three men were watching him closer than he thought. He felt more wretched still as he recognized that this was from concern. Making him appreciate how much they cared and loved the son and brother he was impersonating.

*It's gonna kill them when they find out the truth.* With a grim smile, he admitted to himself that he wouldn't blame them if they killed him when they did.

In an attempt to cocoon himself against these thoughts he pulled his bedroll tight around him. Closing his eyes, he tried to sleep.

They reached the Ponderosa the next day, and Pete was suitably awestruck.

Stopping at a bluff, he surveyed the land stretched out below him and drew a breath. It really was the kingdom his uncle had told him.

Bringing his horse up beside him Ben smiled, "Good to be home, Son?"

He drew another breath, "Yes Sir," genuine reverence vibrating in his voice.

Finally, they rode into the yard in front of the ranch house. Pete took in the building and was impressed. It dwarfed his and Pa's little cabin, yet somehow it still looked comfortable and homely. He was aware of a twinge of jealousy and was promptly ashamed of himself.

The door to the house flew open and out of it came a whirlwind in the form of a small Chinaman. Rushing straight at Pete he

yelled, "Lil'l Joe! You home! Hop Sing so happy to see number three son back." A stream of the man's native tongue followed as he threw his arms around the youth.

Ben, Adam, and Hoss laughed as they'd never seen their cook so excited. He began to drag an overwhelmed Pete into the house, talking about all the food he'd prepared for his return.

Still laughing Ben attempted to stop the flow, "Whoa, Hop Sing, it's been a long ride home, and I'm sure Joe would like a bath and change of clothes before lunch."

Having no idea of the layout of the house, Pete began to panic. He was saved by Hoss who, slapping him on the back, told him cheerfully, "C'mon lil'l brother I'll help ya fill that bath, an' you can have a nice soak."

Once the two had disappeared inside Ben turned to Adam, "Send one of the hands for Paul, I'd like him to look Joe over as soon as he can."

"Lil'l Joe sick?" asked Hop Sing concerned.

"No, he's just not himself that's all. I'm probably just being foolish and over cautious."

Hop Sing wagged a finger at Ben admonishing him, "Mister Cartwright you be foolish an' cautious as you want. Now we have boy back, we thought lost forever, we need keep him." He then turned tail and ran back inside the house before Ben could answer.

Ben smiled at the affection shown by his cook and friend, who had helped raise his youngest son. Turning he entered his home, mentally giving thanks that it was complete again.

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Pete wandered around the bedroom curious and interested. He'd finished his bath in the washroom, and Hop Sing had brought

him a change of clothes. Knowing they belonged to the real Joe Cartwright, he'd been reluctant to wear them. In the end, he hadn't much choice since the efficient Chinaman has whisked his own clothes away without him noticing. So dressed now in dove grey pants and shirt he was wondering what kind of person his lookalike was.

The room was comfortable and spacious. On the dresser was a small pile of dime novels. Pete picked one up and smiled, he liked to read those too. Stopping, he wondered at the perversity of his memory that let him recall that and yet not remember his own name?

He continued his inspection picking up and putting down items until he came to the small frame by the bed containing the portrait of a woman. Instinctively running his hands gently over it his fingers abruptly froze. He put it down as if it'd burned him. Backing away he felt like the room was closing in on him. He needed to get out and snapping open the door he made his way downstairs, but the strange, unsettled feeling didn't leave.

They'd just finished lunch when a buggy drew up outside heralding the arrival of the doctor. Worried that the man might discover his deception Pete did his best to avoid any examination, and for the first time let his temper creep out. To his surprise, this drew nothing more than laughter from the doctor, who was only too used to his patients dislike of being 'prodded and poked' as he put it.

"Come now Little Joe, bow to the inevitable because if you think I'm going to be put off, you don't know me as well as I thought you did," he told his reluctant patient jovially.

Pete had no choice but to give in. He sat nervously throughout the examination, hideously aware of how his heart hammered in his chest. Sure that at any minute the doctor would unmask him.

When he finished, Paul gave the young man a reassuring smile. "Well, that wasn't so bad, was it? I'm not even going to give you one of my 'evil concoctions' as you call them," he chuckled. Receiving no response to this mild quip, he snapped his bag shut and prepared to leave the room. "I'll just go have a word with Ben, but you're fine. We're all very happy to have you back Little Joe."

On those kind words, he went downstairs. He left a miserable Pete sitting on the bed, hating himself more every minute for his deceit.

Paul sipped the coffee Ben had waiting for him, enjoying the aroma. Hop Sing certainly had a way with coffee. Seeing Ben's barely concealed impatience, Paul smiled and gave his verdict.

"He's fine Ben. There are signs of a nasty crack on the head he took, but that's healed up nicely. He's very fit and healthy, but." All attention, Ben clasped his hands together and sat forward in his chair. "You're right, he isn't quite himself, is he?"

"No," Ben murmured, "he's distant and withdrawn, almost like a stranger."

Paul nodded, Little Joe had never been one to enjoy his ministrations. His usual response was to moan and groan his way through them, declaring the whole time he was 'fine'. He'd never examined a silent, rigid Joseph Cartwright who's racing heart betrayed a nervousness Paul couldn't understand.

"You say the man who found him told you he was in some kind of state of shock, not speaking for a long time?"

"Yes, that's why he didn't know who Joe was."

"Ah ha, and he hasn't talked about what happened to him?"

"No," Ben glanced across at Adam and Hoss for affirmation, "not to them or us."

"I see, well my advice is not to press. Give him time, the mind is a complicated thing. His may just be taking its own sweet time to come to terms with what's happened. When he's ready, I'm sure he'll talk. Just let him know you're there to listen when he is."

Ben sighed, he knew Paul to be right, but he'd come so close to losing his boy that not to have him back entirely was hard to bear.

Footsteps on the stairs made the four men turn. Pete, looking embarrassed stood awkwardly on the half landing.

"Erm, I thought I'd get some air," he explained, feeling the need to justify his presence. Finding it increasingly hard to meet their gaze he dropped his eyes.

"All right son, that's a good idea. Why don't you head over to the barn and see Cochise? He's really missed you," Ben suggested. Trying hard not to react to his son's obvious unease.

Panic clutched Pete again, and he only managed a strangled reply before rushing out of the house.

*Who is Cochise?* As he entered the barn realization dawned and he grinned at his stupidity. "A horse," he snorted, mocking himself.

In response to his master voice, Cochise nickered and tossed his head. Drawn to the beautiful paint, Pete patted the silky neck.

"Well, hello there. You, I guess are Cochise, ain't you a beauty?" Cochise lowered his head and pushed his nose into his master's chest. "Hey," Pete laughed, "friendly fella ain't ya?"

He stood stroking the horse, the motion soothing and settling him allowing his mind to relax for the first time since he

arrived. After a few minutes, he turned without thinking and lifted a lid of a nearby barrel and scooped out some oats.

“Here you go you’ll like these Cooch.” He frowned. “Now why did I call you that?”

He backed off from the horse, the skin down his back tingling as an uneasy feeling ran through him.

Putting his hand up he rubbed the back of his neck. Cutting a look back at the horse he laughed again at his foolishness, “Why shouldn’t I call you that? Seems like a good nickname to me.”

*Don’t let this place rattle you.* He scolded himself.

He ran his eyes enviously over the beautiful animal. His heart beating a little faster at the thought of riding him. “Sure like to take you out.”

Hearing a noise behind him, he turned to see Hoss walking into the barn, hands in pockets.

“Did ya say hello to Cochise?” he asked in his friendly way.

“Yeah, “ Pete replied and had to bite his tongue as he almost added what a great horse he was. *Dammit, I have to be careful!*

“You could take him for a ride.”

Pete’s eyes gleamed at the idea. This could give him the chance he needed. He could leave and send the horse back later.

This hope was immediately dashed as Hoss added, “I’ll come with ya.”

Before anything could go any further Ben, who’d come out of the house looking for Joe, interrupted, “Sorry boys, but Paul says Little Joe needs to rest, so no riding today.”

Relieved he wouldn't have to hold up his end of a conversation with Hoss Pete made no complaint. Hoss was not prepared to give in so easily.

"The doc said Lil'l Joe's all right Pa, an' I'll keep an' eye on him."

Before Ben could reconsider Pete blurting out, "Never mind Hoss, another time maybe," and scurried outside.

Hoss pursed his lips and scuffed at the floor with his boot, "Aww Pa that was the first time he'd seemed excited since he got back."

Ben gave his son's big shoulder a pat, "I know, but I've just got the feeling we need to keep Joe close for now." Hoss nodded, accepting his fatherly intuition without a second thought. Besides he hadn't missed the reluctance in his younger brother's eyes when he'd suggested he rode with him.

Returning to the house, Pete sat down on the settee in front of the fireplace. Plucking an apple from the bowl on the low planked table in front of him he began twisting it 'round in his hands.

Adam, seated in his favourite blue armchair, allowed his eyes to slide off the page of the book he was reading to contemplate his youngest brother nervously playing with the apple.

Coming in behind him, Ben hooked his eldest's gaze and gave a clear message that he wanted to be alone with Joe.

"Think I go see if Hoss needs any help," Adam casually said getting up and strolling out.

Pete eyed Ben with suspicion as he settled himself in his big leather chair next to the settee. He didn't like where this could be heading. If he was concerned about a chat with Hoss, the idea of a personal talk with Ben Cartwright terrified the

heck out of him. He decided to duck out.

“Think I’ll go to my room an’ rest.”

“Hold on Little Joe, I want to talk to you,” Ben insisted placing a hand on his knee to stop him getting up further. Feeling caught he reluctantly sat back down. “Son, I know you’ve been through a lot, and I’m not going to press you to talk about it. I just want you to know when you’re ready, I’m here to listen.”

Ben paused to let his words sink in. As his head was down Ben found it hard to read his son’s reaction. Sitting forward he put a hand on his shoulder giving it a reassuring squeeze.

“We’re all here for you when you’re ready.” Ben paused. Feeling the need to say more he added, “I thought we’d lost you, Joe. I’m just so grateful to have you back.” He stopped unable to continue. The emotion in his voice saying much more than the words.

Pete’s jaw tightened as he felt sick to his stomach, disgusted with himself. Tentatively he raised his eyes to Ben’s face and dropped them immediately at the raw emotion he saw there. He couldn’t bear it.

“Thanks...Pa,” he managed to force out. Getting up it was all he could do not to run up the stairs away from the kindness flowing off this man.

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Sitting on the edge of the bed Pete dropped his head into his hands. All he wanted to do was run. If he could have gotten away right then he may well have tried; whatever the risk.

The whole situation here was ghastly. The Cartwrights were so kind and obviously cared for each other in the same way that he and his pa did. Their happiness at having their Little Joe back was gut-wrenching to him to watch. Especially since they

didn't, they just had him, a fake, a fraud, a liar!

Pete pushed the heel of his hands into his eyes squeezing them shut. His uncle had instructed him to find out where Mister Cartwright kept his money and was going to give him until tomorrow night to find out. Then he and his pa would come and get it.

This, he decided, wasn't going to happen. He'd leave during the night and find Pa and his uncle at their camp. Whatever his uncle said they wouldn't come back.

The realisation had struck that he couldn't just leave the Cartwrights high and dry. He knew what his loss would mean to his pa and how devastated he would be in this situation. He was bound and determined he wouldn't do that to this family.

He'd leave them a letter telling them the truth. He knew it would be painful, but less painful than forever wondering where their Joe had gone and what happened to him. Better for them to know he'd just been a stinking imposter.

Stretching out on the bed he laced his fingers behind his head. Having settled in his mind what to do, he was able to finally relax and soon dozed off.

He was surrounded by people he knew...only he couldn't make out their faces. As they crowded in on him, he began back away. But he couldn't seem to put any distance between him and them. Alarm filled him as the faceless people pushed closer and closer, demanding recognition. *Why won't they leave him alone?* Moving in they started to crush him. He was finding it hard to breathe. They surrounded him now, screaming his name. He didn't know them, he didn't!

Starting awake, his breath came in quick raggedy gasps. He buried his face in his hands running them down it as he wiped away the sheen of sweat. It was that same dream again. Ever since his accident, this dream had haunted him. Although it

had never been this vivid before. It took a long moment for him to throw off the vision of those faceless people.

A knock at the door caused him to jump violently.

Quelling his thumping heart, he managed to say in a shaky voice, "Yeah, who is it?"

The door opened, and the little Chinaman came trotting in carrying a large jug which he set down on the washstand.

"Bring Little Joe warm water to wash with. Supper ready soon, need to wash." Hop Sing ran sharp eyes over Joe's shirt seeing it dark with sweat. "Change shirt," he tutted.

"All right Hop Sing, thanks."

Stopping on his way back out Hop Sing turned to Pete and softly in Chinese told him, "Wǒ hěn gāoxìng nǐ huílái" (I'm glad you're back)

Pete flushed and replied, "Xièxiè." (Thanks)

Hop Sing gave him a beaming smile and left, not noticing the shocked expression that settled on the young man's face. Still sitting on the bed he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, becoming aware it was shaking. *How did I do that?* Fear prickled in his chest.

Pete gave his head a shake. *Don't be an idiot, think!*

When they'd sat around the supper table in the evening, Pete had asked Pa to tell him about himself. Stories from when he was a child and later. He remembered being told how he'd like to spend time in Dayton and often hung around Chinatown. Pa had told him it was because he found the people interesting. Pete suspected he was gambling.

*So that's where I would've picked up the Chinese.*

This made perfect sense and he chided himself for spooking so

easily. However, he was still relieved to think that he would be leaving this place behind after tonight. It would be good to get back home.

Finishing his wash he dutifully did as instructed and changed his shirt. Going to the dresser, he yanked open a drawer and took out the fresh shirt he needed. Tossing it on the bed, he went to close the draw. His hand froze. Looking up, frightened eyes met frightened eyes in the mirror. "How did you know which drawer?" he asked the other face in a disturbed whisper.

The haunting thought that clawed at the back of his mind scratched a little louder. He ruthlessly damped it down.

Doing his shirt up with fingers that weren't quite steady, he scolded himself. *I'm letting this place get to me.* He sucked in calming breaths. *Once I get out of here and home everything will be all right again. I just have to get this evening over with.*

He made it through supper with difficulty. Everyone was being very kind and sensitive to his feelings. Which only made him want to shout the truth.

Ben, running his eyes over his son chortled, "Y'know the first thing we're gonna have to do is get you into Virginia City for a haircut. I don't think I've ever seen your hair that long before."

Pete nodded over his apple pie, and Hoss launched into an amusing anecdote about Joe and cutting his hair. He realized this was meant to put him at ease but only served to tighten the anxious feeling in his chest.

Settling around the fireplace, he wondered how long before he could decently escape to his room. Half-heartedly he agreed to a game of checkers with Hoss. At least it would be a distraction.

Absorbed in the game the knock at the door intruded on his concentration. Automatically jumping up he called, "I'll get it." The others didn't move, so used to Little Joe doing just that.

As he went to the door, he fleetingly wondered why he'd volunteered so readily. Any chance to consider this further was forgotten by the shock of seeing his uncle and father standing there. Both carried their rifles.

"Wha...?"

"Is it jest them?" Abel snarled, shouldering passed him.

Knowing that Hop Sing had gone into Virginia City to visit friends, he answered, "Yes...but." Before turning a bewildered gaze on his pa.

Seeing the question in them, Will muttered, "Abel thought it best not to leave ya too long."

Ben, recognizing one of the visitors as the man who'd restored Little Joe to them, began to rise in welcome. As he did, he saw the rifle in his hand. "What it this?" he demanded and was astonished when Little Joe replied.

"I'm sorry, Mister Cartwright."

All the Cartwrights rose with varying degrees of confusion on their faces.

"Where's the money?" Abel asked Pete, who stood staring speechless back at the man. "Well?" he asked again, irritated by his lack of response.

"I don't know. You haven't given me time to find out."

Turning a shoulder on Pete Abel pointed his rifle at Ben and snarled, "Cartwright, where's your money?"

"In the desk."

Abel waved his rifle in that direction indicating that he wanted them all to move over there. The three men moved cautiously. The whole time Ben had his eyes fixed on Joe who, to his amazement, seemed to be helping these thieves.

"Little Joe what's going on?"

Pete couldn't bear the pretence any longer. Eyes begging for understanding met Ben's. He blurted out, "I'm so sorry Mister Cartwright. I'm sorry, but I'm not your son. I'm not Little Joe. It was a lie, a trick to get the reward money."

"Don't be ridiculous of course you are," Ben returned harshly. If this was some kind of a joke these three had cooked up, he certainly wasn't enjoying it.

"No Sir, I'm not."

"Look at ya Lil'l Joe, who else could ya be?" Hoss demanded stunned.

Pete eyebrows furled up in his despair, "I'm not, I just look like him, but I ain't!" He tore his head away from the three men staring at him, shame breaking his gaze. "I really am sorry."

Turning his back, hands on hips, he raised his eyes to the ceiling as if that would hold back the guilty tears pricking at them. Sorry wasn't enough, not nearly enough.

Abel, impatient at the delay stabbed his gun at Ben's chest. "Never mind all that, jest git that money now!"

Casting him a look of contempt Ben took out the key and began to unlock the drawer of his desk where he kept his money box.

Adam, who had been watching Pete intently the whole time, asked perplexed, "Little Joe, you're not making any sense."

"I told you," Pete pleaded. "I'm not Little Joe. I just look

like him”

“Course ya are,” Hoss argued again. “You know who we are an’...”

“No,” Pete broke in distraught. “I don’t! My Uncle told me all that stuff.”

“Shut up!” Abel shouted, “We ain’t got time fer this. Hurry up with that money.”

Ben having opened the box removed the money pouch and dropped it on the desk in front of his son. “Here you are Little Joe, it’s as much your money as mine. You only had to ask for it.”

Abel’s eyes gleamed. “How much is there?” he asked, the greed evident in his voice.

Not taking his eyes of Pete he replied contemptuously, “About three thousand.”

“Not much,” Abel growled stepping toward the desk to pick up the wallet.

Before he could touch it, Pete was there. Putting himself between the desk and Abel. He had to have one last try to undo part of the wrong.

Looking at Will, he implored, “Pa, please let’s not do this. We don’t need the money, not with the farm doin’ well...”

Abel lashed out clipping Pete on the chin with his rifle butt knocking him sideways to his knees. “Shut up!” he screeched. Nothing and nobody was getting in the way of his fortune this time!

Incensed at this treatment of his son Ben stepped forward to help. Before he could, Will ran to Pete. Helping him up, he pulled him away from Ben and Abel.

“There’s no need fer that,” he told his brother sharply.

"I'm all right Pa." Wiping the blood from his lip, Pete scowled at his Uncle.

Ben stared in disbelief. *This can't be, this is my son. Must be my son. I can't lose him again, not again.*

The spectre of loss loomed up before him once more opening that empty chasm in his chest. Then he looked at his son's face. Joe was looking at Abel; his eyes now blazing deep emerald with an inner fire, nostrils flaring, chin jutting and lips tight together.

*No, I'm not wrong, that's my Little Joe, I know that face. Goodness knows he'd seen it often enough on his hot-tempered, stubborn youngest through the years. He glanced at Abel and Will and inwardly rejoiced. And they don't! They don't know they've got a powder keg standing there.*

Pete's fist clenched as he watched Will stuff the wallet into his shirt. "We're not takin' that money," he commanded, cold fury in his quiet words.

Will turned in surprise at Pete's tone.

Abel smirked, "You givin' me orders boy?"

"That's right." The threat dropped like a rock between them. Pete turned to his father asking for his support, "Tell him he can have the reward Pa. We don't need it. Remember, together we can do anything."

The sight of his son standing tall and strong, fighting for what was right made the pride rise in Will's chest like a wave. A smile started to bloom in response. Then his world began collapsing around him.

"He's not yer Pa, you dumb kid!" Abel roared. "I knew the real Pete an' he weren't nothin' like you!"

"No Abel, ya promised!" Will begged, horrified at what his

brother was doing.

Ignoring him Abel continued, mockery in face and voice, "Don't you get it yet? You ain't Pete Jennings, you really are Joe Cartwright."

Abel pointed at Ben and jeered "He's yer real Pa!" A hideous cackle broke from him as he watched Pete's face turn from fury to confusion.

"Pa?"

Instinctively Ben moved forward again, responding to that word and the torment in it. But it wasn't to him his son had spoken, and his heart ached for the anguish he now saw in his face.

Cackling again Abel continued his onslaught, "You still don't believe me, boy? He fished ya out of a river an' you'd forgotten who you were. You'd lost yer memory. So he kept ya and called you his Pete!" Sneering he turned to Will, "Tell him! Tell him what happened to the real Pete. Tell him who's in that unmarked grave beside yer wife's!"

Swaying under this battering of words Will whimpered and seemed to shrink in on himself. Seeing his distress, Pete started to go to him. Before he'd taken more than a step, he was snagged under the armpit by Abel and pulled tight into the man. The fingers digging deep into his flesh, the grip like a vice.

Abel levelled his rifle at the Cartwrights.

Ben, Adam, and Hoss stood like statues. Still reeling from what they'd just heard, they now faced the business end of a rifle.

"I reckon you Cartwrights are good fer a lot more than this three thousand, an' now that we've settled this one is really yours." He gave Pete a vicious shake to emphasise who he was

talking about. "Yer gonna hav'ta pay a lot more ta get him back. Coz I'm taking him with me."

Listening to his brother Will pulled himself together. He'd done wrong he knew, but now it was time to set things right.

He brought his rifle to bear and for only the second time in his life opposed his older brother, "No, Abel I ain't gonna let you do that. We ain't hurtin' the lad no more. Let him go, or I'll kill ya."

For a moment Will and Abel's eyes locked. Abel couldn't believe what he was hearing. His own brother was betraying him. Uncontrollable rage washed over him. Of all people to stop him getting his rightful fortune it sure as Hell wasn't going to be dumb baby brother Will.

The explosion ripped through the air. Shocked, everyone stood motionless for a fraction of a second, then things began to happen at once.

Pete, seeing Will flung back from the impact of the bullet, cried out. Breaking loose of Abel, he bolted toward Will, with Ben following.

Hoss and Adam moved in unison straight at Abel. Seeing this wall of muscle heading his way he swung his rifle round. Before he could bring it to bear Hoss steamed into him, laying him out with a bone-crunching punch.

Dropping on his knees next to Will, Pete tried to staunch the blood that poured too freely from his chest with hands that trembled violently.

"No, Pa, no!" Pete begged him. Becoming aware of the presence next to him he turned stricken eyes up at Ben, "Help him, please, help him."

Ben looked down at the injured man. Help him? He had more reason to hate the man than help him. He'd taken his son from

him and would have kept him for his own selfish reasons. For an instant, Ben felt a surge of anger toward Joe for even asking this of him. Then he saw the frightened, desperate child begging for his mercy and the only thing that mattered was taking that fear away.

Grabbing napkins from the table, he knelt next to Will pressing them onto the wound. Seeing it up close he didn't think it would do much good.

"Thank you," came the grateful acknowledgement of his actions. Ben nodded his heart heavy at being thanked like a stranger. His gut constricted as he saw the love in his son's eyes as he looked down at the dying man. *He's taken your love too.*

He glanced up as Adam and Hoss joined them. With a shake of the head, he indicated there was nothing to be done.

"Pete...son."

"No Pa, don't talk," Pete urged him running a gentle hand down his face. Oblivious to the smear of blood this left behind "Just lie still we'll get a doctor."

"No Son...no, no time." Struggling for breath Will swallowed and coughed. Blood spurting from his mouth.

Hoss and Adam exchanged looks, it wouldn't be long now.

"I hav'ta tell ya, son. Abel weren't lyin'. I, I killed my Pete. Didn't meant ta, he weren't...no...good. Tried to...rob me of the last money I had. We, we fought an' he...fell on his own knife."

"Oh Pa, don't," Pete begged, his voice breaking as tears began to fall. Stroking Will's hair, he kept his other hand firmly pressed over the wound. Although the cloth he was using was now drenched in blood.

Will gasped from the pain and for breath as his lungs filled

with body fluid. "When I found ya. Pulled ya...from that river. Then I saw...you didn't remember...who you were. I thought ... I thought you were a gift from God. That I'd been given... given, a second chance to do it right," he confessed each breath harder than the last.

Pete shook his head, trying to deny the flow of words. Will kept on, wanting to finish before his life force ebbed completely away.

"An' you were...the best son a man could have." Seeing Will trying to lift his hand Pete caught it and held tight. "Havin' you as my son...these past months...made me...the happiest I ever was. Don't cha...forget that boy."

Dropping his head to his pa's shoulder, Pete wept into it. With supreme effort, Will raised a hand to Pete's head and stroked his hair.

Will's voice was weak now as he managed to rasp, "I love ya son."

"I love you too Pa," came the sobbed reply as Will drew his last breath.

The hand stilled and slipped away. As he felt it fall Pete stiffened and raised his head. Disbelieving eyes beheld open, glazed ones.

Pete shuddered, "Pa? No, Pa, No!" Sobs racked from him as he shook Will. "No, Pa, don't die! Pa! Pa!" his voice rose as his quivering hands roamed Will's face and body. Plucking at his clothes, desperate for a reaction.

Adam knelt down taking him by the shoulders whilst Ben reached across putting a gentle hand over his shaking ones. Stilling them, his words soft, he told him, "Joseph, he's gone son."

Pete shook his head. How could he die? He was his pa, the rock in his life, the only thing he knew. Without him, he was lost

and afraid.

"No, no, he's gonna be all right," he insisted beginning to shake Will again.

Adam tried to pull him away, unable to bear his anguish any longer, "C'mon Joe, stop now, he's gone."

Pete flung himself furiously back screeching, "Leave me alone!"

"Lil'l Joe!" Hoss cried, his voice breaking at seeing his younger brother's torment. "We're just tryin' to help ya. We're you're family."

Quaking he stood looking at them out of vast, terrified eyes.

Ben, desperate for him to remember, urged, "Joseph, what he told you was true. I'm your father, son."

"No, no it can't be," Pete argued, the words hollow and lost.

His world was spiraling out of control. Everything he'd held on to in the past months was shattering around him. How could his pa have lied to him? How could what they were telling him be true?

He scrubbed his face with bloodied hands, giving himself a ghastly appearance. His head was pounding now, and he was finding it difficult to focus. The room around him seemed to be tilting, and everything was slipping into a strange hue of colour.

"It can't be...can it? I don't remember."

They rushed forward as Joe's legs buckled.

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Ben sat at Joe's bedside looking down at his unconscious son. Sunlight filtered in through the curtains letting him know the

dawn had arrived. Joe hadn't regained consciousness all night, and Ben was worried.

Adam appeared carrying a cup of coffee, "Breakfast is on the table Pa, you should eat something."

Ben accepted the coffee gratefully but ignored the suggestion about breakfast, "What if we've damaged him mentally, trying to force him to accept who he is?"

Adam sighed and sat down opposite his father, "I know what Dr Hickman told us when Hoss lost his memory, but remember what Paul told us afterwards? Some doctors now think that telling amnesiac patients about who they are is the best treatment."

Ben grunted and nodded, but his uneasy expression didn't change.

With a shudder, Adam remembered how close they'd come to losing Hoss. He'd lost his memory after being attacked on the road and been taken in by an elderly couple. They found him but, like Joe, he didn't remember them. Dr Hickman had advised them that telling Hoss who he really was could damage him mentally. Following his instruction, they'd held back. It had almost broken them to stand by and watch Hoss about to leave with the elderly couple. Thankfully his memory had returned, just in time.

Adam recalled Pa's fury when Paul had told him other medical opinions on the treatment of amnesia differed. Yet, here he was now doubting all that he had been told.

"Why don't you get some breakfast? I'll watch him," he suggested again.

Ben nodded but as he was rising the young man in the bed stirred. "He's waking," he said eagerly. "C'mon son time to wake up."

He stirred in the bed which was warm and comfortable. He was

still tired, bone tired. In fact, he'd never felt so exhausted, and he didn't want to wake up. The voice though was insistent. He tried mumbling petulantly, "Go away, tired." When that didn't work, he finally gave in. It seemed less effort to do that than ignore the voice.

His eyes flickered open, and he spoke the one word, "Pa?"

"Yes son, I'm here, how are you feeling?" Ben stroked back the hair that had strayed into Little Joe's eyes and prayed he wouldn't rebuff him.

The eyelids fluttered some more as the head turned toward the man sitting next to him. Coming out of their deep sleep the eyes took a moment to focus and take in the broad shoulders, greying hair and brown eyes full of love. Reaching toward him he asked, "Pa, you here?"

Ben's hand enveloped Joe's. He smiled down at his son, "Yes, I'm here."

Adam stood up and leaning forward demanded eagerly "Pa, does he...?"

Little Joe's sleepy green eyes rested adoringly on his Pa's familiar face. The sudden realisation of what this meant made them flare wide. Sitting bolt upright he cried out, "Pa, I remember!"

All that had happened came crashing in. The events of the last few days overwhelming him. A cold hand closed around his heart as he realized how close he'd come to leaving his family behind. Worse still, he recalled the shattered look on his father's face as he'd stood in their home betraying him and denying his family. It decimated him.

Reaching for his father he begged for forgiveness, "Oh God Pa. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!"

Ben hugged Joe to him. Over his head, he mouthed the word

'brandy' to Adam, who disappeared immediately to fetch it. "Joe, you don't have to be sorry." Pushing him off his chest, he smiled into his son's eyes and told him, "Welcome home son."

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The two men stood quietly in front of the grave. The big man with silver hair took a surreptitious sideways look at the slim youth beside him.

Little Joe had insisted that they return Will Jennings to his farm and bury him next to his wife and son. Whose marker Joe had reinstated.

Ben had been reluctant at first to have the burial back at the farm but seeing how much it had meant to Joe, he let him have his way. Although it made Ben ache to watch his son expending thought, care, and love on a man he felt had no right to them.

He and Joe had had a long talk once he was up and about. He'd told Ben that even though he hadn't been able to remember anything, what had kept him anchored and feeling safe, was the knowledge of the love he felt for his father. This had made Ben feel better.

The burial was a small affair, with just the Cartwrights and the Parson. Through enquiry, a cousin had been located and wired about the death and the inheritance of the ranch. It seemed he was a young man with a hopeful family. Currently working as a clerk in Genoa he was more than willing to leave this behind and take on the farm. Joe was pleased to know the farm would go to a young family and soon be filled with children. He was also glad to know that Will and his hard work wouldn't be wasted.

When the short service ended Adam, Hoss and the Parson left them alone. Giving them private time at the grave.

Joe twisted his hat in his hands and cleared his throat, "It's strange Pa, even though my memories back I still can't help having feelings for him."

Although his head was bowed, and he couldn't see his face, Ben knew Joe's eyes were on the grave's marker. "It's difficult to suddenly stop loving someone," he replied carefully. In truth he did still harbour some resentment to Will but being a wise father he kept this to himself.

Joe chewed his bottom lip. Was it really that simple? That having loved someone you couldn't just stop, even though everything about that love was a lie? Nothing about the feelings he had for Will Jennings were real. The man had lied to him and tried to keep him from his family. Yet despite all that he couldn't forget that Will had cared for him and died for him.

Then there was the guilt over Pa. Although Pa didn't say so, he knew it bothered him that he was doing all this. Yet he couldn't help it, and this disloyalty chewed at his gut. He needed his pa to know how sorry he was.

"But they weren't his by right Pa, they were yours." Ben saw the quiver in the chin as Joe fought to control his emotions. "I'm so sorry Pa. Sorry I betrayed you an' sorry I couldn't save him..." his voice cracked.

Aghast Ben wrapped an arm around his son's slim shoulders. "Is that what you think? Don't ever think you betrayed me, son, because you didn't," he reassured, hugging him close.

Ben considered the grave. They had to make their peace with this.

"As for Will, you did save him."

Puzzled eyes found his, "What d'ya mean?"

With immense kindness, Ben explained, "You heard him, that

time with you was the best he'd had. You made him happy. He died loving his son and knowing he was loved back. No man can ask for more than that."

Ben was rewarded with the peaceful look that settled on his youngest son's handsome face. "Thanks, Pa."

"C'mon let's go collect your brothers and head home."

They found Adam and Hoss chatting to the hand they'd hired. He was to look after the place until the new owner arrived. Joe joined them, giving the man some last-minute instructions.

As they rode out, Hoss asked, "Hey Lil'l Joe you really do all that plantin'?"

"Yes, big brother I did."

Ben, who'd been impressed at the condition of the farm added, "You did really well here son, I'm proud of you."

Joe blushed, and his horse pranced on a little ahead. Adam and Hoss joined him, but Ben was content to hang back a moment watching his three sons. They still had Abel's trial to face, but they'd get through it together. Together, he knew, they could do anything.

Ahead of him, Joe made a remark and laughed, his high infectious giggle drifting back to him. He drank it in like nectar. Adam then said something. Hoss's loud guffaw joined Joe's laugh only to have Adam's rich baritone added.

Ben frowned and urged Buck into a canter to catch up. Those three were having altogether too much fun without him!

\*\*\*\*\*End\*\*\*\*\*