

# After the War, Before the Peace

by Sharon Poppen

On their way back to Mexico, tragedy struck. They'd suffered a driving rain for a couple of days and were now in a particularly rocky area along the banks of the Brazos River. A gravelly beach next to a flood-gorged ravine and a small copse of cottonwood trees offered shelter too good to pass up.

Jim found a little cave among the rocks and was attempting to light a fire to make some coffee and hot food. Joe and Michael were tending to the horses and bringing their bedrolls in from the rain. Thunder and lightning added to their misery. Talking was impossible in the torrent. One of the horses had wandered off after being unloaded. Once they had secured the others and their gear, Michael set off to find the stray. She wouldn't go far in this weather.

Jim was taking his first sip of something warm in two days and Joe was about to remove his poncho when they heard the distinctive crack.

"That wasn't thunder!" Jim looked at Joe.

"Shit!"

Through the driving rain, they headed in the direction Michael had taken. They crept through the trees. A horse whinnied. In unison, the brothers veered in the direction of the sound. A bolt of lightning pierced the sky and gave the brothers a clear and horrible view down into the half-filled ravine.

Michael lay sprawled face down on its muddy wall. His legs, up to his thighs, were in the running water while the top of his body was motionless in the mud. There was an ominous dark stain just below his right shoulder.

Two men on horseback were leading the stray horse down the ravine toward the river. One was wearing Michael's poncho and hat. The other carried Michael's rifle. The brothers raced along the ravine until they were directly above them.

Jim yelled, "Stop!" and fired a warning shot into the water directly in front of them. The men turned and shot back toward the demanding voice.

"I said stop or you're dead."

It was now pitch dark, neither pair could see the other, but the men in the ditch fired wildly.

"Stop or we'll shoot to kill." Jim warned again.

"Fuck you!" A bolt of lightning pierced the sky as shots were exchanged.

"You ok?"

"Yeah, you?" came Joe's response.

Another bolt of lightning showed the two men laying face down, floating in the water.

"Shit. You go back to Mike while I check out these bastards."

"Not alone you're not." Joe was already scrambling down the ravine wall watching for movement from the floating bodies. He stood in the thigh deep water, grabbed one of the men's boots and pulled him up on the muddy wall of the ravine. He touched his neck. The man was dead.

Jim pulled the other man up next to his pal. This one was gurgling, trying to speak or cough. Abruptly, he jerked and was dead. The brothers turned and raced back to Michael.

He had not moved. They knelt on either side of him as Jim felt for a pulse. "Strong!" he yelled to Joe over the rain. "Let's get him back to the cave."

Carefully, they lifted him and worked their way back to the cave. Michael was unconscious.

but breathing. They checked for an exit wound, but couldn't find one. They laid him face down on his bedroll. The crimson stain on his shirt was spreading. Jim got the shirt off and examined the wound.

"That bullet's got to come out." Joe stated the obvious.

Jim nodded. "We'll need some hot water." They filled a pan and the water boiled quickly over the roaring fire. Jim laid his knife on the fire until it was red-hot, dunked it in the boiling water, then held it out in the rain to cool the metal. Joe got a couple of pair of socks out of his saddlebag and the brothers went to work.

It was a blessing that Michael was unconscious. The pain was excruciating and Michael's body violently convulsed. In too deep, the bullet would not come out. The probing caused more blood loss; they had to give up. Jim cauterized around the wound and placed the socks against it in an attempt to stem the flow. Michael remained unconscious. The brothers poured coffee and hunched down to watch for any movement, good or bad, from their brother.

Dawn arrived to find them still sitting vigil. Jim checked the wound again to find that it hadn't bled since the last check a couple of hours ago. A scab was beginning to form.

Joe gathered the bloody socks. "I'm going to wash these." He left the dry cave and went out into the wet gray dawn. He was gone for sometime. When he reentered the cave, he laid the socks out to dry. "No change?"

"No change."

"Christ!" He poured more coffee and hunkered down next to Jim. Each man lost in his misery, as Michael lay tenuously clinging to life. The frustration of not being able to do anything was unbearable. Joe broke the silence. "I checked on the bastards. Drug them up out of the gully and laid them side-by-side under a tree. Look like drifters. Carrying a lot of whiskey, no food, no clothes just a lot of whiskey. Probably why they were such bad shots last night. Too drunk to hit a moving target. I stripped what little gear they had off their horses and brought the horses back. Tied 'em up with ours. They're nags. No wonder they wanted ours." He had been rambling; all of a sudden his voice broke. "Dammit Jim, is Michael going to die?"

"I don't know." Jim looked at Joe, who was having trouble holding back tears and seemed about to fall apart. Jim didn't need that now; he was in danger of doing the same. "But I do know one of us needs to sleep, so one of us can keep watch. You first."

Joe looked desolate and waived off his brother's suggestion.

"Go. I'll wake you in two hours."

Reluctantly, Joe agreed, stretched out on his bedroll and closed his eyes. Sleep came quickly.

Jim watched Michael. Occasionally, he glanced at Joe fitfully sleeping. He was obviously having bad dreams, but at least he was sleeping. Jim wanted an escape from this bad dream. He thought about the responsibility conversation with his mother. It didn't work. He felt responsible for these two brothers. He should be keeping them safe. He'd failed.

What if Michael died? How could he face Joe, Ma, Nora and the kids? All those trusting faces passed before his eyes. And Lita, oh God, how could he tell her? "God," he prayed, "don't make me have to tell Lita that her Michael is dead."

He walked to the cave entrance. It was midmorning and the rain had ceased, but the skies were so overcast it was like twilight. His thoughts returned to Lita. She would have long since been back from church. I hope she prayed hard. Jim closed his eyes and uttered a silent prayer. "Lita's Virgin, please listen to her. Please?"

He heard a moan and rushed to Michael's side. but he was still unconscious. Jim checked for

bleeding. None. The scab was more pronounced. Were these good signs? He made some fresh coffee and chewed some of Lita's homemade jerky. He let Joe sleep for three hours.

"No change." He updated Joe as he handed him a cup of coffee.

Joe sat up and took the coffee. "Now you get some sleep. No argument!"

Jim stretched out on his bedroll and sleep came quickly. No dreams. No nightmares. Just welcomed oblivion.

Joe watched Michael, drank coffee and occasionally stood just outside and smoked a cigar. He watched the day brighten and even caught a brief glimpse of some blue sky. He gave Jim four hours sleep. He heated some beans and jerky before waking his brother. The men ate in silence; each lost in thought or prayer.

Michael moaned; they rushed to his side. He was on his stomach with his face toward the fire. He opened his eyes for a moment before the lids closed in slow motion.

"Mike?" Jim called. "Mike, can you hear me?" Jim and Joe waited for a sound or some movement. Moments passed like hours.

Finally, a weak, "Yes." It was a whisper, but it was Michael and he moved slightly.

"Lay still. You've been shot."

"So hot." It was a moan.

Jim felt his forehead and found it burning. Joe grabbed the damp socks and pressed the cool material to Michael's head.

"Thirsty."

Joe held a canteen to Michael's lips, but he was too weak to drink. Pouring some into his hand, he spooned it down Michael's throat.

"So hot."

Jim wet the socks and wiped Michael's face and neck.

"Gonna die?" Michael's eyes were closed.

"No!" came Jim's immediate response. "It's not a fatal wound. You're going to make it." He hoped his doubts weren't transparent.

"Good." Michael tried to smile. It ended in a grimace. "Shoulder." Michael moaned. "Burns."

"I know." Jim patted Michael's good shoulder. "Just rest, try to sleep while you mend."

Michael was quiet for a long time. They thought he had fallen asleep. His low hoarse voice startled them. "Don't let me die here." He paused. "Water."

Joe spooned more water down his throat.

"Get me to Lita."

"You're going to be okay." Jim laid his hand on Michael's shoulder.

"Promise." He pleaded. "To Lita."

"I promise." Jim squeezed his shoulder. Michael's body relaxed with a deep exhale. Jim reached for his pulse. "He's only unconscious again," he told a relieved Joe.

While privately fighting worry and guilt, each man focused silently on the burning embers.

It was Joe again who finally spoke up. "We can't move him." He knew how Jim felt about keeping his word.

"But, I promised," came the expected response.

"It could kill him."

"I promised."

"Let's give it another day. Let the wound heal a little more."

“It’ll fester. The heat and searing pain he felt probably mean a fever and maybe internal problems.”

“He can’t ride,” again, Joe with the obvious. The brothers lapsed into silence over their unconscious brother. Suddenly, Joe looked up. “I’ve got an idea.”

Jim nodded for him to continue.

“The horses of those bastards, we could tie them together and make a sling for Michael.”

“What about just a travois?”

“Too bumpy and too slow, we’d make better time with the sling and Michael would probably be more comfortable.”

“He’d get crushed if the two horses came together.”

“We’ll make a frame with tree branches. It’ll work.” He rose. “I’ll get the materials together. You stay with Mike. I need to get out and do something. This is driving me crazy.”

He was gone for a couple of hours. When he came back, he grabbed his bedroll and asked Jim for help. Jim couldn’t decide if it was still raining, there was a heavy mist or it was just water being shed off the leaves of the sodden trees. No matter, the weather was as dreary as his mood. Joe showed him an oblong frame of stout branches roped firmly together to form a rectangle. Rope rings hung loosely from the sides. They secured the bedroll to the frame to form a portable bed, a sling.

“How are you going to get it secured to the horses and where did you get all this rope?”

“Those dead bastards had a lot of it for some reason, probably used for rustling stray cattle. Don’t know for sure how I’m going to secure the sling to the horses, but I will.”

In spite of the direness of the situation, Jim smiled. “You are quite a guy, Joe.”

Joe snarled. “Oh shut up and help. Grab the sling.”

They carried it to the horses. Joe had made loops around the shoulders and hips of each nag. They held the sling between the two horses and with the rope rings secured one side of the sling to the shoulder and hip loops of one horse, then did the same with the other side of the sling to the second horse. When it was done, they pulled and tugged to test their knots. The old and spiritless horses posted no resistance.

“Jim, go talk gentle to these nags. I’m going to test it.”

Jim held their halters and gently cooed. “Easy now. Easy girls.”

Joe pulled himself up sidesaddle and slid onto the sling into a prone position.

“Well?”

“I think it’ll work. Walk the horses down to the river and up the banks.” The short walk verified that the sling was usable. They hobbled the horses and reentered the cave.

Over more beans and jerky, they made plans. They’d travel from dawn to early morning, then rest through the heat of the day. They’d start again late afternoon and travel until it got too dark. It would be slow and take a lot of luck. But, it was moving forward. It was a way for Jim to keep his promise.

They discussed trying to get Michael to a doctor, but they were a rarity in these south Texas towns. Precious time would be lost by searching. They agreed a straight line to Ciudad Acuna was Michael’s best chance. They knew Senora Rodriguez practiced a form of medicine and just being with Lita would be healing for Michael.

Each man slept for four hours and at dawn they packed up. Lastly, they carried Michael out to the sling and carefully slid him onto it. He never woke up and they were relieved to see that they had not induced any bleeding.

They had tethers attached to the loops encircling the nags to give them control over the animals. Jim rode along pulling one nag to the left, while Joe pulled the other to the right. They worked at keeping the animals apart so the sling could nestle between them.

They spooned water down Michael's throat frequently and kept the sun off his face by laying his hat over his head. They found an agave plant and rubbed the leaves on the wound. His body was still hot to the touch. The wound was a deep purple and puss filled. They feared an infection was retarding the scabbing process. Michael moaned occasionally, but never woke enough to speak.

The heat got to them just before noon. They found a copse of trees near a gurgling creek running fast and clean from the recent storm. The horses were hobbled and each brother took a two-hour nap. They spooned more water down Michael's throat and worked the agave leaves again. They were on their way again by four in the afternoon. They were about to stop due to darkness when the sky began to lighten. A full moon crested the horizon providing ample light for a couple more hours.

They traveled for three days before the rains returned in the way of a gully-washer, monsoon with thunder and lightning. They had hoped to make Mexico by midday, but the storm slowed their progress to a crawl.

"We should find a spot and make camp," Jim yelled over the rain.

"We're so close. Not more than two hours."

"Four in all this."

"Still, we only need to follow the river and there's less chance we'll run into anyone in weather like this. I think we should go on. Besides, I don't see any shelter around."

Jim agreed. They were going to be miserable riding or waiting, might as well be closing the gap. The rain pelted them unmercifully. At one time, Joe felt hail. The heavy rain shrouded the lights of Ciudad Acuna and the brothers would have passed right by, but a flash of lightning silhouetted the church bell.

Jim turned and yelled. "We made it! Thank God!"

"Amen!"

It was near midnight when they reined up in front of the little adobe. The bad weather muted their sounds. No one had seen or heard the little band arrive. The brothers dismounted. Jim checked Michael and found him still unconscious, but breathing.

"Get Lita!" Jim yelled to Joe over the storm.

Joe pushed the creaky door open. "Lita, its Joe."

The orange glow in the fireplace gave the room an unearthly hue. Joe flinched when he saw an image appear in the bedroom doorway like an apparition.

"Jose?"

"Yes."

Lita screamed. "Oh Madre mia. No! No! No!" She crumbled to the floor.

Joe rushed to her. He was wet and dirty, but he pulled the limp, sobbing woman into his arms. "No. Come! He's only hurt."

She sprang from his arms and out into the storm. A bolt of lightning illuminated a drenched Jim holding the reins of two horses and a man prone on a sling between the horses. She ran to Michael and removed his hat, then ran her fingers over his face. The cold rain lashed at them, but Michael's head was burning with fever.

“Hurry. Inside.” She urged.

Jim started to untie the sling. She helped him. When it was free, she raced to the other end and helped Joe. The men carried the sling into the adobe and set it down in front of the fire.

“Lantern, light the lantern,” ordered Lita in her native language. “Stoke up the fire.” By the time the fire brought sufficient light into the room, she had untied the ropes securing Michael to the sling and was assessing the wound. “Is this the only one?” She looked up at the brothers.

“Yes.” They chorused.

She probed his head, torso and legs. Nasty green puss oozed from the wound. She pried open his eyes, but his eyeballs were not visible. When she tousled his hair and rubbed his forehead, he moved. Everyone leaned forward.

“Lita?”

“Yes, me amor.”

“I’m home?”

“Si. You home.”

They waited for more, but Michael was out again.

“Miguel?” She cooed softly, cuddling his head to her chest. “Miguel?” Eventually, Lita turned to Joe. “Jose, get Senora Rodriguez. Tell her it’s an emergency.” She spoke to Jim. “Help me get him undressed and into bed.”

Once Michael’s clothes had been removed, Lita handed Jim some wet cloths. “Swab his head, face and neck.” She ran into the bedroom. Jim watched as she tore a colorful spread from the bed and tossed the pillows into a corner. She unfolded a large white sheet over the entire bed. She returned to Michael’s side and urged Jim. “Pick up his chest. I’ll lift his legs so we can put him in the bed.”

They placed Michael face down so that his wounded right shoulder was lined up with the edge of the bed. Lita turned his head sideways. She looked at the love of her life nude, pale and motionless. The room began to reel. She took a deep breath and began to move. She had no time to worry or grieve; Michael needed her.

Jim watched Lita prepare a basin of warm water and begin to wash Michael. She was gentle, but thorough. As she washed, she caressed and rubbed as if to restore feeling. It was too intimate for Jim. He wondered if she even remembered he was in the room?

He drew her attention, “What can I do?”

She had forgotten he was there. For the first time, she noticed the pain and worry etched on his face. “You have already done so much. You brought him home. Thank you.”

Jim grimaced. “Please, I need to do something. Let me help.” He pleaded.

She had never seen him so out of control. Her heart went out to this distraught brother. “Go stoke up the fire. Get more water hot. Get some agave leaves. Take the sling outside.”

He remained frozen, looking at Michael.

She rose and touched his arm. “I will tend to Miguel. You should rest; you must be tired. You did good, Jaime. You got him here. You rest now and pray.” She could see the tears threatening in his dark brown eyes. She took his hand, then kissed his cheek. “You rest. It’s in God’s hands now.” She returned to bathing Michael.

Jim touched his cheek, then turned and did Lita’s bidding.

A drenched Senora Rodriguez burst into the cabin as Jim was adding logs to the fire. He nodded toward the bedroom and she rushed to Lita’s side. Joe came in a few seconds later. He looked at the empty sling with dread in his eyes.

“We got him into bed.”

“Still out of it?”

“Yes.”

Jim began to pick up the sling and ropes. Joe helped, commenting that they needed to get the horses to shelter. They took the sling outside and took it, along with their horses, to their own adobe. Their guns, bedrolls, saddlebags and the sling were thrown down on the earthen floor.

“I’ll stable the horses and be right back.” Joe offered. “Go to Lita.”

Jim nodded and returned to the lighted adobe across the way. He shook as much rainwater off as he could before entering the cabin. He stoked the fire again before going to stand in the bedroom doorway. The women weren’t talking much. Michael lay with his back exposed and a bed linen laid across his buttocks and legs. His skin had an unnatural red caste to it. Eventually, Lita turned and motioned for Jim to join them.

“We must get the bullet out.” She told him.

“We tried. He bled too much.”

Lita looked at Mrs. Rodriguez.

“We will surely lose him if the bullet stays in there. The wound will continue to fester because of the lead.”

“What about the loss of blood? It was bad when we tried before.”

“It is a worry, but he is young. Perhaps his body will quickly replenish it. Leaving the bullet in will surely kill him.” The woman minced no words.

The words *kill him* gave an added twist to the emotional dagger of guilt already in Jim’s heart. Through his pain, he heard Lita.

“We must do it.”

Senora Rodriguez told them what she needed. They prepared an agave salve mixed with tea and herbs. Jim soaked some sharp knives in boiling water and found a bottle of whiskey. Lita gathered cloth, needle and thread. Michael remained comatose and was still burning up.

Joe returned to find everyone busy with the preparations. “What’s happening?”

Lita took his hand. “We’re going to remove the bullet. He will die if we don’t.”

Joe nodded

Senora Rodriguez explained that even though Michael was unconscious his body could react to the invasion of the knife. It was good that he was unconscious. They needed to tie his hands and feet to the bedposts. While this was being done, the women knelt before a small icon of the Virgin and prayed. Then, they went to work on Michael’s shoulder while Jim and Joe stood at the foot of the bed.

The senora poured whiskey over the wound causing Michael’s body to jerk. With the knife, she opened the ugly greenish-black scab and gently scrapped away the crust and oozing puss. Lita wiped away the mess and swabbed at the fresh blood while the other woman cut deeper into his flesh. She poured more whiskey into the gaping bloody hole. Michael’s body shook violently despite the tethers to the bedposts. She told Jim to hold his shoulders down and for Joe to control his legs. Jim pressed his full weight onto Michael’s left shoulder while Joe lay across Michael’s legs. Senora Rodriguez cut the wound wider and inserted her index finger into the hole. She probed deeper and deeper. Michael’s body continued to convulse. At one point, an anguished moan escaped his lips. His eyes opened and he raised his head. It lasted only a moment before his body shut down again and his head fell back to the bed, but he was still breathing.

“Oh please, find it. Madre guide her.” Lita whispered.

“I have it.” Her finger was embedded up to her second knuckle. She inserted her thumb into the wound and slowly eased her fingers out. She had the ugly piece of lead held tightly between her fingers. She dropped it into Joe’s hand. He made a fist and tightly clutched the bullet covered with his brother’s blood. She poured more whiskey into the wound creating another round of convulsions, then pulled the skin together and basted a couple of stitches. Lita continued to swab the blood. Michael’s body was calming; the convulsions slowed to an occasional spasm. Finally, his body was motionless.

Jim and Joe released their grips when the Senora told them to untie Michael’s limbs. When this was done, Joe covered him with the bed linen to just above his buttocks. The flow of blood seemed to be easing. Senora Rodriguez smeared agave salve liberally over the wound. Lita continued to dab at the blood with one hand, while the other sponged his head and shoulders with a cool, damp rag. The desolate older brothers stood helpless.

“It’s in God’s hands now.” Senora Rodriguez looked at Jim, at Joe, then back to Lita. “Leave the wound open. Rub fresh agave salve on the incision every couple of hours. Be sure to swab off the old first. We must wait to see if an infection forms before we completely sew it up. His color looks better already.” She touched his forehead. “I believe his temperature is coming down.” She hugged Lita. “Pray. Pray hard.” She looked at Jim and Joe. “You too,” she advised as she left the room.

Jim followed her to the front door. “Thank you.”

She nodded. “I pray it is not his time to go.” She patted his hand and went out into the rain.

Joe came out and poured a cup of coffee. “For Lita. She won’t leave his side.” Soon he was back and he brought the bottle of whiskey. He poured two cups of coffee and laced them with the liquor. “I can’t get warm.” He handed a cup to Jim.

“Me neither.”

“I’ve never been so scared.”

“Me neither.” sighed Jim.

“I feel so helpless.”

“Me too. Thank God for the women.”

“Thank God!” The brothers nursed their drinks. “Seems like we Farrell men are blessed as far as our women go.” Jim could only nod. “I gave the bullet to Lita.”

Again, a nod from Jim. The whiskey and hot brew proved to be a much-needed relaxant. After a bit, Joe folded his arms on the table and laid his head on them.

“Go home. Get some rest. I’ll get you if an . . .”,

“No.” Interrupted Joe. “I just need to rest.” Before long Jim heard his brother lightly snoring.

Jim went to the bedroom doorway. Lita had gotten into bed and lay curled against Michael. Her lips were pressed against his back and one of her arms thrown across his waist. She may have been sleeping. He brought the rocking chair into the bedroom and sat down. Lita did not acknowledge his presence. He watched his brother silently fighting for his life. He looked at the girl beside him. Michael was her world. If Michael didn’t make it, Jim wasn’t sure Lita would survive the loss. At last, the tears fell and he wept silently for a very long time. He didn’t realize he had dozed off until he felt a gentle shake of his shoulder.

“Drink this.” It was Lita with a cup of coffee. The room was dark except for a lone candle on the night table. “I must go to church. Watch over him. I won’t be long.”

Jim took the coffee. It was ghostly quiet. He could not even hear Michael’s breathing. “Has it

stopped raining?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll watch over him. You go now.”

After she left, Jim got up and stretched. He looked down at Michael. No change. He felt his forehead. It did seem cooler. Lita must have cleaned the wound because there was no sign of blood or puss and the agave salve looked clean and fresh.

“That looks a lot better this morning.” Joe had come to stand next to Jim.

“It does and his fever has dropped.”

“The rain stopped. I’m going over to our place and clean up. Yell if you need me.” Joe left and Jim returned to the rocker to continue his vigil.

When Lita returned, Jim went home to clean up. Lita got in bed and cuddled into Michael’s body. She wanted to will her warmth and love into his flesh, his soul. She napped with her arm thrown across his waist.

She woke to the smell of bacon. Her view of the kitchen was blocked by a large piece of bed linen hung in the bedroom doorway. She smiled, grateful for the privacy. She caressed Michael intimately and cooed lovingly into his ear, but elicited no response. She sighed as she rose to rinse her face and freshen her mouth. Forgetting that she had already changed into a clean shift for church, she reached for a clean one only to find her bloodied sleeping gown hanging on the peg. She shivered as she brought the garment to her lips. She kissed one of the bloodstains. The tears flowed. She dabbed at them with the gown. Quickly she composed herself. This did no good for her or Michael.

When she entered the main room, Jim smiled and pointed to a stack of bacon and some biscuits.

“I’m not hungry. I can’t eat.”

“If you get sick, we’re all in trouble. Please? Eat to keep up your strength.” He held out a chair as they continued to speak Mexican.

She smiled weakly and sat. He poured coffee. While she sipped at it, he stayed busy by the fire.

“Jaime.”

He turned to face her.

“Please, come sit.”

He stopped his busywork and came to sit across from her. He shoved the bacon and biscuits toward her.

She took a small portion, no more than a bite, of each item. She ate, then took a little more. She smiled up at him. “I guess I was hungry. It was good, thank you.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“I’m afraid.”

He reached out and took her hands. “Me too.”

“I love him so much.”

“I’m glad you do.”

“How did it happen?”

It was the question he had been dreading for the past five days. He released her hands and began to speak softly. He relayed how it happened, when it had happened and about their trek with Michael in the sling.

“Bastards!”

He felt shame at the venom in her voice. "I know. I should have watched over him better."

She looked up. "No, you're his brother, not his keeper. Those men were the bastards. Miguel is a man, not a boy to be taken care of. He knows the risks. We've talked about it. I'm glad he has you and Jose with him, but he is responsible for himself. I will never, nor will he, ever feel you were responsible for this. You shouldn't feel that way either." She reached across the table and squeezed his hands.

Her absolution washed over his mind and body and he closed his eyes, "Thank you."

She walked to his side and laid her hand on his shoulder. "You're a good man, Jaime Farrell, a good man." She kissed his forehead, then began to clear the table. "Thank you for the breakfast."

He opened his eyes. "I'll do that. You go to my brother. Take care of him. Somehow, I know he feels your presence."

She didn't argue, but turned toward the bedroom. She stopped at the door as she pushed the bed linen aside. "Thank you for this too."

"You're welcome."

She sat in the rocker across from Michael. She rocked, and waited, and watched, and prayed.

The next day, Michael's wound seemed no worse and the bleeding had stopped. Senora Rodriguez decided it was time to complete the stitches and seal the gash. With Lita's assistance, she cleaned the wound, dabbed it with whiskey and began. The brothers stood ready to help, but it went smoothly. As the senora was taking the last of the tiny stitches, Michael moaned and his shoulder flinched.

Lita spoke softly into his ear. "Miguel?" There was no response. "Miguel? Is Lita. You hear?" Her hand combed through his hair as she caressed his cheek. He uttered another soft moan and ran his tongue over his lips. Lita spooned some water on them. "Miguel? Thirsty? Miguel, you hear?" Her eyes filled with tears, as she looked up at the senora. "It's a good sign, no?"

Senora Rodriguez shook her head. "I hope so."

The brothers let out the breaths they had been holding. Jim's heart was pounding. His mind kept repeating maybe, just maybe. For the first time in a week he felt hopeful, not wishful.

Two more days passed with no change. He didn't get worse, but he didn't regain consciousness. Lita wept when she was alone. She kept her spirits up for the brothers; she knew they were also fighting off the devils of despair.

It was just before dawn on the sixth day that his hand slipped between her thighs. It softly caressed her skin. She was in a half awake, half-asleep state and thought she was dreaming. For a few moments, she forgot the present and responded by shifting her leg giving him greater access to her private area. The pressure of his caress increased. Her eyes flew open. She wasn't dreaming. She felt movement in the arm she was curled up to and knew Miguel was doing it on his own.

"Miguel?" The movement of the hand stopped and slid from her body. She sat up and gently touched his shoulder. He turned to face her with open eyes. "Miguel?"

He smiled. "They got me home." His voice a hoarse, scratchy whisper.

"Oh, my love. Yes, yes." She covered his face with kisses.

He tried to reach for her, but winced.

"No, no. Lie still. Wound not healed.

He did as told. "Thirsty, I'm thirsty."

She spooned water into his mouth.

“You’re beautiful.”

“You beautiful.” She fed the compliment back and smiled.

His brow furrowed. “My brothers?”

“Home sleeping. Is middle of night. No one sleep much. Worry for you.”

“I have to pee.”

Lita slid the chamber pot from under the bed and helped him to sit up. He eased his legs over and lowered his feet to the floor. She gave him the pot. When he was done, she lowered the lid and tucked it back under the bed. She handed him a glass of water; he drained it.

“Hungry?”

“A little.”

“Can you sit there for a minute?”

“I think so.”

She raced to the kitchen, grabbed a cold biscuit and hurriedly smeared it with grape preserve. She was back in less than a minute. He was drinking more water. He nibbled at the biscuit and drank more water.

“I need the pot again, sorry.”

She produced the pot. When she had put it away again, he reached for her.

He pulled her to him and nestled his head between her breasts. She held his head to her and played with his hair. The tears began to stream. He tasted them as they fell on her breasts. He pulled her face to him, kissed her full on the mouth and then began to kiss and lick at the salty tears.

“I’m sorry honey. I’m so sorry for hurting you.”

“Shush. Is happy tears.” She straightened up and brought his head and mouth back to her breasts. He cupped them with his left hand and kissed them through the cloth of her shift.

“You always make me dizzy.” He began to fall to his side. She braced him.

“Too much, too soon.” She scolded softly. “Lay back.” She helped him back onto his stomach.

“I feel so weak.”

“Lost much blood. You shot week ago.”

He patted the bed and she slid in next to him. He caressed her face. “I love you,” he murmured into her hair.

“I love you.” Her voice was a whisper.

“Jim kept his promise.”

“Promise?”

“I asked him to bring me to you. I didn’t want to die in that rain.” His body was still weak, but his memory had returned.

“They bring you here. Bad rain. Senora Rodriguez take bullet out. You better each day.”

His eyes closed. “I’m so tired.”

“You weak. Lose much blood. Sleep my love. Sleep, get well. I tell brothers.”

He eased his arm across her body. “No, stay with me. You’re my strength. I need you.” He moved his hand to gently knead her breast. “I love you.” He mumbled as his hand slowed. His light breathing let her know that he was only sleeping not back into the coma.

Eventually she slipped from the bed. She removed her shift to run a wet cloth slowly over her skin, remembering the feel of his hands exploring all her secret places. Tears of joy fell in anticipation of the passionate delights they would soon be sharing. Her body responded to her

cleansing motions and began to tremble. She leaned against the wall as spasm after spasm washed over her. When her mind cleared, she looked over at Michael. Their love was truly magical. That just thoughts of him could bring her to such heights was, was . . . What, indeed, was it? It was everything she could do to keep from caressing him, to bring him the rapture he had just given her. But, he was still weak and needed time to rebuild his strength. Right now sleep was better for him. Reluctantly, she dressed and started some coffee before going to tell his brothers the good news.

She knocked at the wooden door. "Jaime, it's Lita." Just as she was about to rap again, the door opened. "He was awake."

Jim stepped outside and closed the door after him. In the predawn light she could see that he was shirtless, his pants were on but only partially buttoned and he was shoeless.

"You talked with him?" He finished buttoning his pants. He spoke in her language.

"Yes. He woke, talked to me, asked for water, ate a biscuit and even used the chamber pot."

Jim pulled her into his arms. "Thank you, Lita, thank you."

Her face was buried in his torso and despite the tickling of his chest hair, she let him cling to her. He rocked back and forth. His relief was so profound that she thought he might faint. Eventually, Jim pulled back and placed his hands on her shoulders.

"He's his old self, he remembers things?"

She smiled. "Yes, he is definitely Miguel. He remembers being shot and he remembers asking you to get him back to me."

"When I heard your knock, I feared the worst."

"I'm sorry. I should have . . ."

He interrupted. "No, you did nothing to be sorry for. I've just been so worried. He wouldn't have survived without you. I know that for certain. Thank you, Lita. Thank you from the bottom of my heart." He kissed her forehead. Any residual strain on the relationship of these former adversaries dissolved. Jim noticed the gray sky turning a faint yellow. "You go on to church. I'll get dressed, tell Joe and go sit with Michael. I'll only be a minute, go on now."

"Hurry, I don't want him to wake up alone." She turned toward the church.

"Lita?"

"Yes?" She turned back.

"I love you, little sister. This family owes you so very much.

"I love you too, big brother. Your strength and love helped us all."

"Do me a favor."

She nodded. "Anything."

"While you're at church, tell Him I said thank you."

"I pray to the Virgin. I will tell her you said to thank her Son." She turned and hurried away.

Within minutes, Jim entered Michael and Lita's adobe. The smell of coffee beckoned him, but he went straight to the bedroom door. He pulled back the makeshift cloth door and was pleasantly surprised to see a smiling Michael looking back at him.

"Well, I was hoping for Lita, but you'll do."

Jim feigned laughter. He took a deep breath, it was hard for him to speak; his heart was in his throat. "Depends on what you want me to do."

Michael laughed which brought on a little cough. "Get me some of that coffee. The aroma's

been making me crazy. Then, help me sit up.”

“You got it!” Jim promised and hurried out.

He was back in no time at all with the sweetened hot liquid. He set the cup on the night table and gently pulled Michael to a sitting position, neither brother spoke. When Michael was settled, Jim sat on Michael’s left side and carefully put his arm around his brother’s shoulder to hug him.

Michael reached over and took Jim’s hand. “You came through for me. Again! Thank you.”

Jim could only squeeze Michael’s hand. Michael sensed Jim’s need for closeness and allowed the moment to continue for a while. Eventually, the lure of the coffee became too much.

“Coffee’s getting cold.”

Jim gave a final squeeze to Michael’s shoulder and put the hot cup into his brother’s hand.

Joe poked his head through the doorway sheet. “God damn! Am I ever glad to see you sitting up and awake.” He was grinning ear to ear as he gently gave his kid brother a bear hug, being careful of the shoulder wound as well as the hot coffee. “You really had us worried. There were times we didn’t think you’d make it.”

“Thanks. Both of you. I needed to be here.”

Jim finally found his voice. “I know.”

The three said a million things to each other with their eyes. It was all that was necessary.

“You need to know, it was Joe who came up with the idea that helped us get you here. Do you remember the trip on the sling between the horses?”

“The only memories I have are the bite into my shoulder and the feel of the cold water and muck as I fell into the mud. I sort of remember a dark smoky place, some unbelievable pain in my shoulder, and looking into Jim’s face and waiting for a promise to get me to Lita. I have a vague memory of being soaking wet, lying in front of the fire and Lita’s face looking frightened and lined with tears.”

His brothers were surprised at how much he remembered.

“Then, this morning I woke to the feel of her body and her beautiful face. How long was I out of it?”

“About ten days.”

“Been rough on you, huh?”

“We worried a bit.” Jim understated their emotional drain.

“I want to hear about everything, but right now I’m starving.”

“What do you want?” Lita had been standing on the other side of the makeshift door, letting the brothers begin the emotional healing.

Michael’s face lit up when he saw her.

“The works. Anything and everything. I’m starving.” He waived the cup to her. “More, please?”

She brought him a refill and left the brothers alone again as she started to fix a big breakfast. Tears of joy and release continued to fall as she prepared everything the way he liked it.

The rest of the day, Michael continued to wake and sleep with the waking periods getting longer. The older brothers filled Michael in on the shooting, the decisions made in the cave and the long trek to Ciudad Acuna.

Lita joined in relating the bullet removal process and their vigil of the past five days. Senora Rodriguez dropped by and was delighted by Michael’s recovery and responded to his expression of thanks by assuring him it was a joint effort by all of them and surely a gift from God.

Lita made supper, which they ate, in the bedroom with Michael sitting up in bed. The older

brothers left early knowing they would be getting a good night's sleep unencumbered by nightmares of the shooting and the potential loss of Michael.

Lita offered to bathe Michael. He sat passively on the edge of the bed as she slid the cool rag over his body. As usual, her ministrations generated a reaction in his groin.

"Now see what you've done." he smiled.

"Must not. Wound not healed." She protested, but as usual it excited her to see the enlarged proof of his feelings for her. She rinsed the cloth in a basin of cool water and continued.

He reached down and pulled the rag from her hand as she girded it around his penis. With the cloth gone, her hand continued the caressing motion she'd been making with the cloth. The feel and the sight of his manhood brought a rush of fluid between her own legs. Her breasts tightened and began to ache. He slid his hand under her shift and began to probe.

"Please?" He raised her shift.

"Will hurt the wound," she protested.

"This hurts more." He pleaded and continued to raise her shift.

She had never been able to refuse him. "Turn. Sit back." She helped him to swing his legs into the bed and propped some pillows behind his back. He was now sitting in the middle of the bed in a semi prone position. She removed her shift and stood nude before his adoring and excited eyes.

He watched as she crawled on the bed, knelt astride him and kissed his lips. His hands went to her breasts and she moaned in ecstasy as he kneaded them. She kissed his nose, forehead and hair while he kissed and sucked at her chin, neck and breasts. His hands slipped to her buttocks to squeeze and pull her against his member.

She was moaning and his hands burned at the contact with her skin. He tried to lift her, but the pain in his shoulder became too intense. He felt her lift herself. His hands still cupped her buttocks as she raised herself above him. They kissed, then pulled back to watch as she guided him into her.

The instant she fully engulfed him, he felt his groin begin to thrust. He moaned, dug his fingers into her soft bottom and kissed her neck and shoulders. She pulled his head into her body. They felt their juices mix creating a feeling akin to swimming inside each other. Neither knew or cared how long the wave after wave of surges lasted.

As their passions spent and euphoria settled in, a languid bliss settled over them. He relaxed his grip and eased back into the pillows. He watched her face relax, her breasts soften and the rosy flush of her skin receded to its natural soft beige hue. When he slipped out, her body always tensed as if to hold him inside and he was pleased to see it happen again this time. She opened her eyes and smiled. She lifted her right leg off of him, laid her head on his outstretched arm and curled into his side. Neither spoke, nor did they clean themselves. The moist, sexual aroma of their coupling was too wonderful to wash away. They fell asleep with the same thought.

"I'm home."

"He's home."

Despite some soreness in his shoulder, within a month Michael was using his arm normally. Target practice proved he could still shoot and surprisingly, his muscle control was so restored that he retained his excellent marksmanship. The others recovered in their own way too.

Joe bounced back the quickest. His optimistic nature put the shooting and ambulatory trek

behind him. It was Joe who set up the target practice sessions for Michael to exercise his muscles and he was the one to get Michael back on a horse. To Joe, it felt good to be doing something.

Jim alternated between moods of quiet introspection and relaxed, familial countenance. He tried to get Michael thinking about quitting the family business. Michael shut him down.

“I knew the risks, Lita knew there were risks. I know there’ll be more in the future; she knows it too. When we quit, we’ll all quit.”

Jim countered. “The family business is growing. There are other things that need to be done in addition to the night raids. There’s family to be cared for and property both here and in Boonesboro.”

“Fine. Joe and I will do the night raids and you take care of family and property.”

“Mike, now . . . “

“Look.” Michael interrupted. “You and I both know the women in both places do a fine job of taking care of things. You need to get over feeling like you were responsible for the shooting. You’re my brother, not my keeper. We’re equals, remember.”

He reached out and touched Jim’s arm.

“You’re a hell of a brother. You’ve always been there for me. I’m always going to be there for you. Let the shooting go. You aren’t changing my mind. I’m a stubborn Irishman too.”

“I just want you to have a long and happy life. In the cave, I saw Lita’s face and Ma’s face and thought, how was I going to tell them.”

“I know. I understand, but it would be the same for Joe and me if anything were to happen to you. Except, we’d have to tell Patrick and Sarah too. We all know the risks.” He paused, “The women know the risks.” Jim gently touched Michael’s shoulder. “We’ve made good plans and know what needs to be done. We’ve done good so far. Let this melodrama end and get on with business. Then we can all quit. Alright?”

Jim nodded in response. Michael’s words were indeed wise, but Jim knew he’d always feel responsible for the family. However, he made a real effort to let normalcy return to their relationship. He buried his worries deep in his heart and tried to smile more often.

Lita’s love and support for Michael grew stronger. Each time he left, she knew it could be forever for many reasons. There was always the possibility of death, but there were other concerns. Concerns like he was Americano and she was Mexican. He was god-fearing, but not religious. She was totally devoted to the Virgin, God, church, saints and priests. She knew she would never leave him of her own volition, but he hadn’t asked her to marry him. That he loved her, she never doubted, but what about their future together? The brothers talked of a future out of the family business in a place called Wyoming. What would that mean? If she thought about these things, she could become possessive and drive him away. She took each day and night with him as a gift. It was always possible that tomorrow with Michael might never come.

She used this reasoning to bring them back to their pre-shooting routine. Breakfast and supper with the brothers in light-hearted conversation over good food. Days and nights seeing to Michael’s every whim while making it look like he had no whims, that her deference to him was a normal course of events and nothing special. She wanted him to have pleasurable memories luring him back to her arms and bed. God had spared his life and she refused to dwell on what might have been. She put the horror of those frightful days after the shooting into the same spot in her heart that Jim had put his feelings. They were a lot alike, she and Jim. She smiled.