

BLUE HORSE

Great big thanks to my two wonderful betas Shari and Karen. You've done a great job, girls.
Rascals AU where Ezra, Vin and JD are kids in the old west (open)
PG-13

By Freyan

Ezra looked at the small package in his hand. It was wrapped in brown paper and string and bore the name 'Chris' in bold letters on the front, written carefully in his own handwriting. On the bed was another small, brown-wrapped package bearing the name 'Buck'. They were the first presents he had ever made himself, and he was eager to see what kind of reaction they would garner. Ezra's own mother had always told him never to give anything away, unless he was sure to get something of monetary value in return. She had given him the clear impression that anything he made for her would just be a waste of time.

Obviously, this hadn't been his idea, but something suggested by the other two children in the household, Vin Tanner and JD Dunne. According to their logic a gift made by Ezra himself and given with no strings attached would make Chris like Ezra. Ezra hadn't been so sure in the beginning, but the younger children's enthusiasm had made him reconsider, made him think that they might be right. At least, he thought, it couldn't hurt.

He had arrived with his mother in the two-horse town of Four Corners almost four months ago, to run a con on whomever his mother picked out. In this case it had been the wealthy, if somewhat paranoid bank owner, Mr. Watson. However, for once the peacekeepers protecting the town had been smarter than his mother and she had been arrested, literally with her hands stuck in the cookie jar. She was still counting the money she had swindled from Watson, when the man in question realized the bonds he had bought from her were fake ones. Her bags were only half packed when Chris Larabee and Buck Wilmington, two of the town's regulators, had broken down the door to her hotel room and arrested her. Once the Honorable Judge Travis had arrived, numerous other cons and swindles had been added to the list of her crimes. Not without quite a few strong words not often heard from a woman supposedly of good breeding, his mother was sentenced to ten years in Yuma. But the case hadn't ended there. The town peacekeepers were still left with a nine-year-old, brown-haired, green-eyed, precocious troublemaker on two legs.

At that time Vin had been living with Larabee and Wilmington at their small ranch for almost a year and a half. Vin had come to town in the company of an old, rugged hunter and tracker. He had been living with him since his mother died when he was five, a full

year before. No one knew if the man was his father or not and no one had cared. Chris had hired the tracker to track down a mountain lion that had been roaming the hills outside town. Between their duty as peacekeepers and their work at the ranch, neither Chris nor Buck had the time to go chasing stray cats, and Josiah and Nathan had no experience in that area. And, as had been a sad fact since their arrival to the town some years before, none of the residents cared enough to lift a finger for something that could end up getting them killed. After all, that was why they had hired protectors.

But five days later, six-year-old Vin had returned astride a packhorse, teary-eyed, but stoic, to tell Chris how his mentor had been killed by a rockslide just as he had killed the cat. Vin himself had been farther away on the packhorse, watching and learning as he always did. But no amount of teaching could have prepared him for the shock, as he watched his friend get buried under a ton of rocks. Rocks brought down by the loud crack of the huntsman's rifle, made loose by many days of hard rain.

Chris had taken the shocked youngster in, while waiting for the judge to find some other place for him. He figured it was the least he could do. But somewhere in the weeks of waiting, something had happened between them, and Chris had decided to adopt the quiet, but tough boy.

JD had arrived with his mother from Boston a month later. She had settled down in town, working in the hotel as a maid and spending most of her time and money caring for her four-year-old son. Buck, being Buck, had flirted with the sweet but lonely woman since her arrival. He had fallen hard for the small, doe-eyed boy with the unquenchable thirst for life. When his mother had succumbed to illness three months later, the boy and the man couldn't bear parting and another regulator found himself the adopter of a small boy.

None of them had been especially keen on the idea of taking in a third when Judge Travis had brought forth the idea. The old man reasoned that the boy had a chance of finding the right path, now that he was away from his mother. Being placed in an orphanage would only encourage him to remember his mother's teachings and due to his advanced age and history, it would be hard to find someone else willing to take him in. Larabee had argued that he wasn't very willing to take him in either, that Ezra would be a bad influence on JD and Vin. The Judge had dismissed his arguments, stating that Buck and Chris's firm hands were exactly what the boy needed to break him of his bad habits. With a bit of carrot and a bit of stick, the promise of money and the threat of having their other boys removed, they reluctantly agreed to take him in.

When Ezra had arrived, it had been to a very tight-knit family, reluctant to include the newcomer, as Ezra had experienced so many times before. Buck, though, had quickly accepted him and by default so had JD, except for when Vin was nearby. The older boy was still the younger boy's best friend and he was careful not to do anything to upset that friendship. Having lost his mother at so young an age, while being thrust into a world unknown to the small city-bred boy, was hard enough for JD. Losing his new friend and brother would be even harder. With Vin's obvious animosity toward Ezra, JD quenched his naive good nature, only allowing himself to play with the new boy when Vin wasn't around. Although Ezra, being as old and worldly wise as he was, was quite exciting for the young boy, who still saw a hero in everyone. Buck had assured Ezra that it was just a matter of

time before Chris came around to seeing what a good friend Ezra was, and until then Buck would always be there for him.

Not that Ezra believed him. He was too familiar with this scenario, and too scarred to believe it would be any different from the other families/relatives he had been placed with. Chris was the real leader of this family. He was the one everyone obeyed without question, not Buck. Chris had made it perfectly clear what he thought of con-artists. At the time he had been speaking about Ezra's mother, but Ezra had often heard the phrase 'like mother, like son' directed at him from his superiors. Chris clearly didn't like him and would never accept him as part of his family, but Ezra could accept that. It would only be for a short time anyway. One day his mother would be there to pick him up. It was always the same. It was just a matter of time. No matter what other people said, his mother would come for him and he would be included in her plans for their next con. They would soon enough be off for the next town and other unsuspecting victims.

At first Vin's hostile attitude hadn't bothered him. It was clear the Texan was taking his cues from Chris, his new mentor. The two were so much alike that the shy boy trusted the older man in everything. If he thought Ezra was no good, Vin believed him. Almost two months went by with no one for Ezra to play with or talk to, except JD on occasion. He had tried to teach JD poker, until Chris confiscated his cards. There was Buck, when he wasn't in town or out working on the ranch, a task Ezra had no taste for. As it was, the Southerner finally succumbed to the loneliness and the strangeness of this place. He was no cowboy. At least his mother had always left him with people in a fair sized town, knowing he needed the hustle and bustle to keep his mind sharp. Something he couldn't find on a ranch. He had broken down crying in the hayloft, where Vin had found him around suppertime. Ezra had tried to hide why he was crying, embarrassed at the unbecoming display of weakness, but the perceptive Vin had seen straight through him. After that the other boy had gradually changed his attitude. Vin had started to include him in his activities, had showed him how to catch rabbits, fish, track deer and they had found common ground in playing pranks on Buck and JD. Ezra had refused to pull any on Chris, believing him to be a powder keg waiting to explode. Though Vin hadn't been too upset at that.

Gradually Ezra had started to come out of his shell, and as the weeks went by he became used to the life he was living. He found he relished his two younger friends and his ties with Buck and Josiah, the town's preacher and another regulator. Josiah loved to tell him about his travels around the world, much to Ezra's delight. Chris still only tolerated him, believing him to be generally a bad influence on the family. Chris became antsy whenever Ezra spent too much time with Vin and JD, seeing him as the instigator of every prank they pulled on Buck, even though Vin was more often the culprit.

Vin had noticed this tendency in Chris, and that was when he had come up with the idea that Ezra should make Chris a gift, so he would like him better. Both Vin and JD had given Chris gifts at his birthday and he had been real pleased with them, telling them both that he loved them. They were sure it would be the same for Ezra. Ezra had been all set to go to Mrs. Potter's mercantile to buy something with the money he had kept hidden from Chris and Buck, when JD had told him he should make the gift himself. The youngster's mother had always told him she would much rather have a drawing made by him, than the

most expensive painting by a world famous artist. Ezra hadn't quite understood that. He knew for a fact that his mother would much rather receive an expensive painting, than a worthless drawing made by him. The only time he had made her one, he had spent hours trying to make the painting of him and Maude perfect. She had looked at it for one moment, then thrown it in the wastebasket, telling him he shouldn't waste his time on trying to be creative. She told him to go practice his math instead or play with his cards, so he could stay sharp. He had been five at the time, and had sworn never to do that again, lest she should hurt him once more.

But JD had been adamant, and Vin had agreed, that Chris would like a handmade gift much more than if Ezra were to buy him something. They had decided they would all make one gift for Chris and one for Buck, so that it wouldn't look too suspicious when Ezra presented his gift. JD and Vin had agreed on drawings, which were all they really knew how to make, but Ezra wanted to make something really special. He still hadn't forgotten the hurt from the last drawing he'd made. Since he had never undertaken a task like this before, he had no idea how to go about it. So he had gone to Josiah for advice. The preacher had been pleasantly surprised and had suggested that Ezra could make new hatbands for the two men. Ezra thought it would be a good idea for Buck's gift, but he felt Chris would just disregard his efforts as too common, too childlike. After all, he needed to impress the gunslinger, show him he was good for something other than being a conman. For some reason that just didn't seem to impress the older man. Josiah suggested Ezra go home and think of what Chris really liked, that it might give him an idea of what to make.

Ezra had spent the next week surreptitiously watching Larabee, and had finally found the perfect gift. Larabee's dead son, Adam, whom Ezra had been told never to mention, once made his father a small black, wooden horse. Ezra knew that, since Adam's name was written in red paint on the belly of the horse. It was signed just like all the famous artists did with their paintings or sculptures, Ezra had seen them in the galleries in New Orleans. Sometimes when Larabee looked sad or distracted he would bring the horse out from the box in his bedroom and just look at it for hours. It would bring a smile to his face as he ran his fingers over the smooth wood. Ezra wanted to make a piece of art just like that. He knew instinctively that Chris would appreciate it. When he had told Josiah about it, the old man had at first looked sad at the story, then amused as Ezra had told about why he believed Adam had made it. Josiah never explained why he thought that was funny. Instead he had told Ezra he thought it was a fine idea, and that Chris would love it too. The preacher had provided him with leather strips in different colors for Buck's hatband, paint, glue and a small carving knife for Chris' horse. Ezra explained to the older man that he couldn't spend money on the things himself, since it would go against the idea of a gift not bought. Josiah had just grinned, ruffled Ezra's hair and promised that he would get him the equipment for free.

Back at the ranch Ezra had "borrowed" Adam's horse to use as a template whenever Chris was in town. He then got to work on his gifts. Weaving the different leather strips together to make a finely woven hatband in different shades of brown was fairly easy, but he quickly realized he was no woodcarver. Having come this far he wasn't willing to give up though, and Vin and JD had been his constant supporters. They had finished their drawings in days, but Ezra was determined that his gift would be perfection itself, just like Adam's. It had taken several weeks and a dozen pieces of wood provided by Josiah, who had

promised it was just the right kind for carving. Although Ezra had his doubts, several misshapen tries, bloody and blistered fingers, he had a lot of tenacity and finally he had a horse he was satisfied with.

Adam's horse had been black like Larabee's own horse Pony, but Ezra wanted something more lively and colorful and had chosen a blue paint instead. When that was done, he carefully painted his name on the horse's hooves, one letter on each hoof.

Now it sat in his hands, carefully wrapped, waiting for Buck to come home. A bunch of men from the nearby ranches had shown up to warn them about a rabid dog in the neighborhood and Buck had volunteered to help them track it down. He had left just after breakfast, while Chris stayed and watched over the youngsters. The three children had decided to wait for Buck to return. It was almost evening before the boys had a chance to present their gifts. It had been snowing all day, and the newly fallen snow had kept them busy most of the day, building snowmen in the yard since they weren't allowed to go far because of the dog. When they had come back inside, Chris had seemed to be in a bad mood, and Vin and JD had both been worried. Dinner had been a subdued affair, and they had all gone to their rooms afterward, no one really in the mood to play.

Ezra's patience was beginning to wear down now. He had worked so hard on this, for so long. He wanted to present his gift now. He wanted Chris to tell him that he had done good, that he was proud of him. Just like Josiah and Vin and JD had promised him Chris would be. He wanted Chris' face to light up when he looked at Ezra's gift, just like it did when he looked at Adam's horse. For some reason the gunslinger's approval meant a lot to Ezra. Chris was a well respected, if not feared, person in town, and Ezra wanted to be considered his friend. He longed for that kind of respectability, something he had never received with his mother.

Usually, he wouldn't have come near Chris when he was in a mood like today, but he had faith in his horse. He was certain it would garner the same reaction as Adam's black one did, and that Chris would thank him for it and all the work he had done. Chris wasn't his mother. He wouldn't discard his precious gift like she had done. It had quickly been made clear to the boy that Chris, unlike Maude, could not be bought. He had no love for expensive and material things. This time it would be different.

With that thought in mind Ezra picked up his gift and went to get Vin and JD from their room. The two youngest boys shared a room, while Ezra had his own in what used to be a small store room, but now contained a bed, a dresser and a small closet. He found his friends playing marbles on the floor. Both looked up as he entered.

"Is Buck back?" JD asked eagerly. He wanted to present his gifts as much as Ezra did. It had been torture on him to wait until Ezra had finished his horse, and even worse to keep the whole thing a secret. Only Ezra's promise, that JD could have the horses he made that didn't turn out, had kept the younger boy's silence and prolonged his patience. He had practically been bouncing all day from the excitement and it was only the wonder of the newly fallen snow and Buck's absence that kept JD from springing the secret too soon. He wasn't as interested in giving his gift to Chris as he was to present his other one to Buck, his second father.

“No, not yet. But I will not wait any longer. I am going to give Chris his gift now, with or without Buck. He can get his when he comes back.”

“Don’t know if that’s wise, Ez,” Vin drawled from where he lay on his stomach on the floor, rolling a couple of marbles in his hand. “Chris didn’t seem to be in a very good mood before.”

“Exactly! And that is precisely why I need to give him my present now, my friend,” Ezra said excitedly.

“Not sure I follow you, Ezra,” Vin said confused. He still thought it would be a bad idea to disturb Chris right now. He loved the gunslinger, but sometimes he just knew he shouldn’t bother Chris, even though the older man had said he could always come to him. Today seemed like one of those times.

“Don’t you see, Vin? What is it that Chris usually does when he’s in a bad mood?” Before Vin could answer, Ezra continued. “He takes out Adam’s horse. But tonight I will present him with my horse and he will no longer be melancholy.”

Vin wasn’t sure he believed Ezra’s reasoning, just as he wasn’t quite sure what melancholy meant. But the older boy sounded sure in his beliefs and Vin wasn’t one to argue when he didn’t have an answer for something. So he just nodded.

“Okay, but I’m gonna wait with mine until Buck gets back. Want him in on it as well.”

“Me too,” JD agreed, even though he looked like he had been ready to get his present for Chris just before Vin spoke up. Now he looked a bit disappointed, but he was after all more interested in Buck.

“That will be fine,” Ezra agreed. “Perhaps you would like to be there, when I present my gift, though.” Ezra hoped they would say yes. He wanted someone there when he got the praise he deserved. He would have liked Buck there as well, but the other man already liked him, and right now it was more important for him for Vin to be there. Their friendship was still a bit tenuous because of Chris’ hostility, but hopefully that would change tonight.

“Sure, Ez. Lead on,” Vin said and got up from the floor. The small procession made their way to the kitchen where they found Larabee slumped in a chair at the kitchen table, staring deeply into a bottle of red-eye.

On some level Ezra knew he should probably have turned around and left the man alone after he realized he was drunk. But the excitement had gotten to him and he ignored his inner warning signals prompted by the man’s red rimmed eyes and whiskey-laden breath.

“Mr. Larabee? Sir?” Ezra waited until Chris had turned his drunken gaze on him, then showed him the present.

"I made something for you. It's a gift," Ezra said, trying to sound nonchalant, and waited for Chris to take it.

Chris looked at it for a moment, trying to get his eyes to focus on the brown blob in front of him and then reached out for it with shaking hands. It took a couple of tries to get the tightly tied string off, finally resorting to pulling his knife out and cutting through the bond. Ezra looked slightly perturbed at that, but Larabee ignored it. He unwrapped the present until he was finally holding the small blue horse in his hands.

Chris stared with unfocused eyes at the wooden horse in his hands. Adam's horse. The one he had carved himself to give to his son on his fifth birthday. It had become Adam's most precious belonging. He had treasured the horse, a miniature of his father's own, and he had carried it with him everywhere he went. It was the same horse that had been missing from the box Chris had kept it in ever since Adam and Sarah's deaths. He knew that it was missing, for he had looked for it today, needing the touch of the smooth wood and the faint smell of old paint and wax. He needed to bring up the good memories of his son, to dispel the sad ones that had taken him over today as the first snow of the year had started to fall, a time Adam had treasured. But the horse wasn't black anymore. It was blue. And it didn't say Adam on its belly anymore, either. As far as he could see, it didn't say anything at all. It wasn't Adam's horse anymore. Ezra had ruined it. He didn't know what Ezra had intended by this. He had long ago given up trying to figure the con boy out, tolerating him, but not liking him as he did Vin and JD. But this time the boy had gone too far.

He switched his gaze from the horse to the child. Ezra was looking expectantly up at him, a pleased smile plastered on his face. "Do you like it?" he asked, his cheery southern drawl only fueling the flames of Chris' temper.

"Like it? You're asking me if I like it?" Chris whispered darkly, the stench of his breath forcing Ezra back a step. "Hell yes, I liked it. I loved it before you got your grubby little hands on it, you little bastard," Chris spat, his voice rising at the end. He looked down at the small blue horse for a moment, his face contorted in rage. Then he threw it forcefully against the wall, where it shattered, the frail neck and one of the legs breaking off and skittering across the floor.

"Get out, get out of here, you little shit, before I do something I'll regret," Chris yelled at the suddenly pale child. He lurched up from his chair and staggered towards Ezra. The shocked child finally found the will to move and dodged the drunken man easily. Terrified he ran for his room, ignoring the equally shocked Vin and JD, who were standing in the doorway watching. He heard a crash behind him as Chris fell to the floor, then a string of loud cursing and threats against his person. Ezra slammed the door behind him, and then frantically crawled under the bed just to come out with his carpetbag in his arms. He knew how to pack his clothes quickly, had done it often enough. Within minutes, he had all of his possessions neatly bundled in his bag. Blind from the tears that kept streaming from his eyes and almost deaf from the noise of his frantically beating heart and the blood rushing in his ears, he sat down on the bed for a moment to try and compose himself.

Terrified, he jumped when he heard the door creak open, only to relax slightly when he saw Vin and JD slip inside. Vin was white as a sheet and JD was crying silently. He seemed to realize making noise would only aggravate the situation. He also had a wet patch on his trousers, testifying to just how scared he had been.

“Whe...where are you going, Ezra,” JD hiccupped as he noticed Ezra’s packed bag. He was clinging to Vin’s arm, looking just as terrified as Ezra felt.

“I will be departing for town, JD. The stage coach will be able to transport me to Eagle Bend tomorrow,” Ezra answered, trying to hide the hitch in his voice. He tried to dry his eyes with his sleeve. His mother would have admonished him for that kind of behavior, saying that it didn’t befit a gentleman to show weakness and certainly not to make a mess of his clothes. Right now Ezra couldn’t care less.

“Then where will you go?” Vin asked, subdued like the rest of them. Larabee’s behavior had shocked the hell out of him and he didn’t know what to do. He didn’t want Ezra to leave, but he wasn’t sure how Larabee would react to him staying either. He certainly didn’t want to see Ezra get into more trouble for something that had ultimately been his and JD’s idea. Ezra had said it would be a bad idea from the start, but Vin hadn’t listened. Now his friend was paying the price, and Vin didn’t even know how it had all turned out so badly.

“I...I don’t know, Vin,” Ezra answered his question, pausing midway in pulling on his black, finely made leather boots. Vin had admired the expensive boots, until Chris had pointed out that they cost the same as three ordinary pairs of boots and that they were useless when it got cold, because they had no lining. Unfortunately Ezra didn’t own any other pair of boots. Chris had been angry that they had to waste money on new clothes for Ezra, since all he owned seemed to be too fancy for ranch work and play. Ezra hadn’t packed any of those clothes now, only his own. He didn’t want to go to prison like his mother, for taking something that wasn’t his.

“I think I have some family in Charleston,” Ezra continued, as he pulled the boot all the way up and found his red jacket. It had lining and would be fairly warm. “Perhaps they will agree to take me in again, although they seemed to be quite happy to see me leave the last time,” he said, swallowing the lump in his throat that was threatening to cut off his voice. He hadn’t really thought that far. He just knew he had to get away from here before Chris got his legs back under him and came after him. Once he was back in Four Corners he could figure out what to do next. He still had some money and he knew there was enough for a stage ticket, at least to the next town. Maude had taught him to always have enough funds for a quick escape, as one never knew when it became necessary.

“I don’t want you to leave,” JD cried and let go of Vin, only to wrap his arms around Ezra’s waist and bury his head in the older boy’s vest. If Ezra had cared about anything but getting out of there, he would have cringed at the sight of the runny nose buried in his fine garments. As it was he felt a slight comfort in the other boy’s misery and put his own arms around JD and hugged him back.

“I don’t want to leave either, JD,” Ezra whispered, knowing it to be true.

“Do you want me to go with you?” Vin offered sincerely. Ezra was both surprised and pleased at the offer, but he knew it wouldn’t be fair to accept it.

“Thank you, my friend, but you belong here. You need to stay and look after JD. Take care, Mister Tanner, and you too, Mister Dunne.” Vin stepped forward to be included in the hug, then both of the younger boys let go of their friend and stepped back. Ezra put on his mittens, scarf and hat and opened the window. An icy breeze hit the three boys, but Ezra wasn’t deterred from his mission. He carefully lowered the carpetbag out the window, and crawled after it. After another hug and whispered good byes Vin closed the window. The two smaller boys kept waving until Ezra disappeared in the gloom. They crawled onto Ezra’s bed, both feeling miserable. JD had finally noticed his wet trousers and another burst of tears covered his face. Vin quickly helped him out of them and together they crawled into the corner of Ezra’s bed. Sharing his blanket against the cold in the room and the cold in their hearts, they waited silently for Buck to come home and help them right their world again.

It was almost an hour later, before the man in question made it back. He was tired, cold, saddle sore and generally in a bad mood. They hadn’t managed to track down the rabid dog. Instead they had found two sheep it had killed and now it was too late to search for it, even though the full moon was lighting up the snow. That meant he had to go out to look for it tomorrow as well. Now all Buck wanted was to get a hot meal, to make sure his boys were all tucked in and sleeping peacefully, and then to get a good night’s sleep for himself.

He turned on a lantern and mechanically rubbed down his equally tired horse. Then he trudged his way through the ten inch thick snow to the front door. He wasn’t prepared for the sight of his best friend snoring at the kitchen table with a half full bottle of whisky in front of him. Nor was he prepared to find the pieces of a carved blue horse, kind of like the one Chris had once made for Adam, strewn around the floor.

Buck decided to ignore it, knowing he would have to have a serious discussion with Chris in the morning about not drinking when the kids were around. He wasn’t ready for a drunken confrontation with the man right now when it could wake up the children. He just hoped Chris hadn’t started before they had gone to bed.

He made his way on tiptoes to Ezra’s room, knowing both the Southerner and Vin were light sleepers. His composure fell when he opened the door and the beam of light from the lantern hit the sleeping forms of JD and Vin huddled together under Ezra’s blanket. Ezra was nowhere in the room, and Buck noticed his closet was open and nearly as empty as his dresser. Buck could feel his insides knot up. Something was wrong, terribly wrong. He hurried over to the youngster’s side and noticed the tear streaks on both their faces. He put a hand on JD’s shoulder and one on Vin’s knee and gently shook them awake. JD came to with a shriek and started wailing. Buck quickly gathered him in his arms, trying to assure the frightened child everything would be okay. As soon as JD had realized it was Buck, his wailing became louder. He buried his head in Buck’s shirtfront, shaking in all of his misery. As soon as Buck had gotten JD settled against him, he turned his attention toward Vin. The older child had at first shrunk back from Buck’s contact, trying to pull JD

with him. As soon as he had recognized Wilmington though, he let go of JD and crawled to Buck's side as well, needing the reassurance of the older man's hand on his back.

Buck let the children have a few moments to get themselves together; feeling dread seep into him like the cold snow had done all day. He gently released Vin and put a hand under his chin, forcing the quiet child to look him in the eye.

"What happened, Vin? Where's Ezra? Did Chris do something?"

Vin dried his eyes with his fist, then sucked in a large breath. He brokenly told Buck how they all had made gifts for him and Chris, and that Ezra couldn't wait until Buck came back before he gave his to Chris. Vin told how he had warned Ezra about Chris being in a bad mood, but that Ezra had wanted to go ahead anyway. He had to compose himself again, when he told about Chris' reaction to Ezra's horse. He couldn't hold the tears back any longer when he told how Ezra had left, probably for good.

Buck's temper had gone from cold steel to molten lava as Vin had told each heartbreaking detail of the day. He quietly hugged the two children to his chest again, trying to modulate his voice, before he said anything to them. He didn't want to frighten them any more than they already were.

"Vin," he said, once he found he had his emotions back under tight rein, "I want you to look after JD until I come back again. I don't want you to worry about Chris or Ezra anymore, okay? Everything will be alright. Take JD back to your room and stay there. Chris and I have to leave for a while and I want you to take care of JD until we come back. Can you do that?"

"Yes."

"Good. Don't worry, boys, I'll bring Ezra back." He gave them one final hug, then released them and made his way out of the room. He would bring Ezra back, that was a given. The question was, would the boy be dead or alive? It was freezing outside, Ezra was on foot and to make matters worse, there was still a rabid dog on the loose.

The sight of Chris still snoring drunkenly at the kitchen table brought the rage out in him. He had often, too often, seen Chris this way and ignored it. But now they had the responsibility of three small boys and Buck would no longer tolerate it.

"Get up, you rotten bastard," he yelled and kicked Larabee's chair so hard that the drunken man fell from it and landed belly down on the floor. Chris tried to grab for the gun that wasn't there, before he realized it was his oldest friend yelling at him.

"What...what the hell is going on, Buck?" he muttered angrily, staggering to his feet. He wasn't in the mood for this shit.

"I should be the one to ask you that, Larabee. I thought I told you never to drink when you were alone with the boys."

“Ain’t your business, Wilmington.”

“The hell it is. Especially when you hurt them.”

“Ain’t hurt nobody,” Chris said, his temper rising as he tried to get the floor to stop spinning.

“No? Then tell me something, Larabee. Tell me why I found Vin and JD terrified in Ezra’s bed? Tell me why Ezra is on the run in the middle of the night in the freezing cold with a rabid dog on the loose, and the notion in his head that he has to make it to Four Corners tonight or he’ll end up hurt?” Buck raged. He had no consideration for Chris’ feelings and told the truth bluntly, knowing nothing else would penetrate the alcohol fogged brain. Chris looked at him like he was insane, then all color left his face.

“Aw shit, I never meant that. I was angry...”

“Save you apologies, Larabee. I ain’t in the mood to hear them. If you’re lucky, real lucky, Ezra will. Now get your drunken ass out there and saddle some horses, while I get some blankets and another lantern.”

The fear and the icy wind that ripped into him as he opened the door made Chris sober up faster than any of Nathan’s terrible concoctions ever had before. The evening’s events were coming back in flashes and the most pronounced were the picture of an ashen faced boy and the sound of loud yelling, threats, and things being smashed. He just hoped to hell Ezra hadn’t gotten himself killed. He wouldn’t be able to live with himself if that happened. He couldn’t bear to be the cause of another small boy’s death, another boy he ultimately had the responsibility for. He had been so mad at Ezra, still was, for ruining his treasured horse, but he never wanted this. Never wanted Ezra to run terrified from the house, in the dark and the freezing cold, thinking it would be safer than staying within Chris’ reach. His drunken temper had gotten the best of him and he had lashed out, saying things that a grown person would have just ignored or else hit him for, but instead he had terrified a child.

Buck made it back to the stable just as Chris finished saddling the horses. They quickly secured the extra blankets behind the saddles, mounted up and led the beasts on the road toward Four Corners. Buck had come back from the other side and wouldn’t have seen the child earlier and neither of them dared to think that Ezra wouldn’t be following the road.

Chris took the left side and Buck the right, searching for any sign of the missing child, or even Ezra himself. They were both grateful for the moonlight, but they knew it had only just stopped snowing and any footprints Ezra had left would have been erased. Afraid to miss the child should he be buried in the snow, they kept their horses to a slow canter, all the while calling out for him in the silvery darkness.

Ezra was cold, wet, miserable in every sense of the word, and completely exhausted. His tears had frozen on his cheeks and for the last ten minutes he had been forced to cradle his carpetbag in his arms. His fingers had been too numb to hold on to it, even though he

still wore his mittens. His boots were soaked from the snow, and his feet hurt. The snow was making it difficult to move very fast and he was quickly becoming drained of his last remaining strength. The adrenalin that had kept him running to begin with had left him a long time ago.

He no longer feared Larabee. Instead he feared the darkness around him, the unfamiliar sounds of the prairie, and the cold numbing his body. Like JD he was a city boy and though Vin had tried to teach him about the outdoors, he wasn't ready to handle this. The moon gave him light to see by, but it also made him jump at every shadow, until he was too numb and exhausted to jump anymore. His mind had gone blank a while back, fear and exhaustion had taken over. He no longer had any idea where he was, since he couldn't see the road for all the snow and he didn't recognize any of the landmarks around him.

For the fourth time that night he tripped over a rock hidden under the snow. He fell hard on top of his bag, the fall forcing the air from his lungs. Already numb, he didn't feel the snow seep through his clothes. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew he had to get up, he had to get going again. He tried to stand up, but only made it to his knees, arms still clutching the bag. His body was just too tired and too cold to obey him. He didn't even have the strength to cry.

A growl made him look up, only to stare into the eyes of the mad dog Buck had been chasing all day. It was foaming at the mouth and its fangs were gleaming in the moonlight. Ezra could do nothing but stare at the creature. He didn't utter a sound, didn't move a muscle, but inside every part of him was screaming in terror. The cold and the terror kept his body immobilized. All he could do was wait for death as the beast lunged for him.

He didn't hear the shots that echoed through the night and his eyes had closed as the dog's body slid to a halt just in front of him. He didn't hear the familiar voice that called his name or feel the warmth of the blankets placed around his shoulders. He vaguely registered it when he was lifted onto a horse and placed in front of a warm body, whose arms reached around him and held him tightly. He felt it when more blankets were wrapped around his feet and head, until he was completely covered, and when the horse was kicked into a gallop, the arms tightening around him. But it wasn't until he was unwrapped again in the warmth of the kitchen, that he finally opened his eyes to look at Buck and let his soothing words comfort Ezra's terrified mind.

Chris and Buck had seen it at the same time. Ezra, lost and alone, on his knees in the snow, his carpetbag cradled tightly to his chest, staring into the eyes of a killer. They had reacted at the same time as well. Chris, a split-second faster than Buck, even in his half drunken state, had hit the leaping dog first. Larabee knew he would never forget the sight of the small boy sitting in the snow in the light of the moonlight, eyes closed, waiting to be killed. It was something he never wanted to see again.

After he had fired his shot, he had stayed on his horse, not sure what to do. Afraid that if he went to Ezra, the scared child would perceive him as another threat. Instead he had let Buck handle the situation. Buck had jumped from his horse, pulled the blankets from his

saddle and gone to Ezra. The child never reacted to what was happening around him. He just kept sitting with his eyes closed.

"It's okay, Ezra. You're gonna be fine," Buck soothed, as he wrapped his blankets around the cold body. What he could see of Ezra's skin had a bluish tinge to it, and it was clear the boy was in shock. He knew he had a hell of a lot of work in front of him and he cursed Larabee once again. He carefully picked up Ezra, carpetbag and all, and carried him to the horses. Chris climbed down and took the boy as Buck got back in the saddle. Larabee was shocked to see how blue Ezra looked.

"Gonna have to wrap him real tight, before we bring him back, Buck," he said. Together they placed the last two blankets around Ezra's feet and head, so that he was covered completely. He couldn't afford to lose any more body heat.

"Take care of the dog, and the horses when you get back," Buck ordered as he turned his horse and kicked it. Chris would rather have gone with him, wanting to be with the hurt boy, but he knew what he wanted wasn't important. It was the furthest thing from Buck's mind right now, and he accepted that.

Although Pony wasn't too happy about it, he hastily secured the dead beast on the back of his horse and turned back. He left the carcass in the woodshed, knowing he would have to burn it in the morning to prevent other animals from catching the dreaded disease. He thanked the gods that Ezra hadn't been bitten. They had gotten to him just in time, but it had been so close. His whole body shuddered as he thought of what could have happened if they had been just a minute later. He took his time with the horses, especially Buck's, which had been forced to gallop back. He was aware that sweat and the freezing cold didn't mix well. Ezra was proof of that.

After Buck had placed Ezra on a chair he quickly put a kettle of water on the stove. He watched as JD and Vin appeared in the doorway, looking with wide eyes at Ezra's cold, motionless form. He figured he might as well get them to help, instead of sending them back to their room where they would only fret over Ezra. "JD, go get some towels and Ezra's blanket from his bed. Vin, go put some more wood on the fire. We need to warm this place up." The two boys obeyed without a word.

Ezra had started to shake and Buck let out a relieved sigh. At least Ezra's body hadn't given up the fight yet. In its own way it was trying to generate some heat, but he was still critical. Buck picked up Chris' bottle of whisky and poured a large shot.

"Here, Ezra, I want you to drink this," he said and held the shot glass to the boy's bluish lips. Ezra swallowed the fiery liquid without a twitch. Thanks to Maude, this wasn't the first time he had been given whisky. "Alright, Ez. Buck's gonna get you warm in no time. Don't you worry none. Let's get you out of those wet clothes first." Buck kept up a running commentary as he gently pried the bag from the numb arms, then proceeded to strip the boy until he was completely naked. He noticed Ezra was wearing his favorite shirt and vest and although he had the urge to just rip the troublesome buttons off, he knew he couldn't. Ezra had been hurt enough for one day and this would just be another blow to the shocked

boy that he didn't need. Instead he was forced to take his time and gently undo each of the delicate buttons.

When he was done, Ezra was shaking so much and his teeth chattering so hard against each other that Buck was afraid he was gonna chip a tooth. He quickly swathed him in the blankets again, then pulled his bandanna from his neck and rolled it tightly. He hated what he was about to do, but knew he had to.

"Ezra, I'm gonna put this in your mouth, so you won't hurt your teeth, okay?" Ezra didn't answer, not that Buck had expected him to, and he carefully inserted the cloth between the boy's teeth. Afraid that it would fall out again he tied the ends behind Ezra's head, just like a gag. The sight made Buck cringe. "Just till you stop shaking so much, okay?" Ezra bowed his head, and Buck gathered him into his arms, rubbing the shaking body, trying to infuse some warmth in it. Chris entered, bringing in a cold wind and Buck instinctively turned Ezra to shield him.

"What do you want me to do, Buck," Chris asked as he surveyed the kitchen. JD and Vin were standing in the doorway, JD holding a bunch of towels and a blanket and Vin with soot on his fingers. JD looked at him with fear in his eyes and Vin with disdain. Chris felt his heart break, but knew mending it would have to wait. Right now, Ezra was more important.

"Get a chair over here by the fire and get those towels JD brought. We need to warm up his hands and feet." Chris quickly complied and Buck sank down in the chair in front of the fire and settled Ezra in his lap. He took one of the towels Chris gave him and started rubbing the cold hands. Chris wrapped Ezra's own blanket around the boy, then got down on his knees and started rubbing Ezra's feet gently. As soon as Ezra stopped shaking Buck removed the gag from Ezra's mouth. When Chris was satisfied Ezra's feet were starting to warm up again, he got up from his position on the floor and went to Ezra's carpetbag, where he searched for a couple of minutes before he came up with two pairs of dry socks. He gently put them on Ezra's feet, then went and removed the whistling kettle from the stove. He made a cup of strong coffee and laced it liberally whisky. Ezra never looked up when he came back, and he gave the cup to Buck, knowing Ezra didn't need anymore agitation. Now wasn't the time to try and earn the boy's forgiveness. There would be plenty of time for that in the days to come.

"Thanks, Chris. Could you put the boys to bed? I'm gonna stay here with Ezra for a while," Buck said and started to feed Ezra the coffee. The boy was starting to warm up again and he no longer looked critical. The blue tinge had left him completely and the warmth of the roaring fire and the extra blankets would soon dispel the rest of the cold.

Chris nodded and went to kneel in front of the two youngest. JD was hugging the last towel tightly to his chest, almost on the verge of crying again. Chris carefully reached out and gathered him into his arms. "It's okay, JD. Everything's gonna be okay, I promise. I'm sorry for what happened today. I got angry at Ezra, but I never meant for him to run away. I never meant to hurt him, do you understand?" All the while talking to JD, he was looking at Vin, seeing the boy stare back at him defiantly. At least he wasn't afraid of him as he had feared.

“But...but he just wanted you to like him better. The gift was supposed to make you like him better and not make him leave,” JD said, still upset at what had happened and not understanding where it had gone wrong.

“I know, JD, I know: I shouldn’t have gotten so mad at him. But Ezra destroyed something precious to me and I just reacted without thinking. I was drunk and I did something I shouldn’t have done, when I yelled at him. I’m sorry about that and I’m gonna talk to Ezra about it tomorrow. I never meant for this to happen,” he repeated, hoping JD would calm down.

“He didn’t paint Adam’s horse,” Vin said quietly from where he was standing. He was starting to realize what had happened.

“What do you mean, Vin?” Chris asked and looked at the child in front of him. He didn’t believe any of the others had done it, but thought maybe Vin was trying to take the blame. He wouldn’t let him do that, but he wanted them to know Ezra wouldn’t be punished anymore either.

“Wasn’t Adam’s horse. Ezra made that one himself,” Vin said and pointed at the blue horse still lying discarded on the kitchen floor.

“You don’t need to cover for him, Vin. I know it’s Adam’s horse, it’s missing from its box, but it’s okay. What’s done is done, and I won’t punish Ezra again. I don’t even blame him anymore. He didn’t know how much I cared about it, and I certainly don’t care more about it than I do about the three of you.”

“It ain’t Adam’s horse!” Vin repeated heatedly. He was starting to get mad at Larabee now. Why couldn’t he understand Ezra hadn’t done anything wrong. “Come on,” he said and grabbed Chris’ shirtsleeve. Chris picked up JD and followed Vin into Ezra’s room, where Vin disappeared under the bed for a moment. Chris deposited JD, who had seemed to have calmed down, on the bed and knelt on the floor. Vin emerged, clutching a box in his hands, which he gave to Chris. Then he crawled onto the bed to sit next to JD, where they both could peer into the container Chris now held in his hands.

Chris looked at the collection in the box. It contained several pieces of wood, a small carving knife he didn’t know how Ezra had acquired, and six carved wooden pieces, some only bearing a slight resemblance to a horse. Others looked more like they should have, but were missing a leg or two and one even lacked a head, where the knife had slipped. One bore a dark splotch of dried blood and Chris suddenly remembered a couple of days about two weeks ago, when Ezra had been wearing a small bandage on his finger. Cut it while peeling potatoes, he had said, and Chris hadn’t cared enough to verify it with Buck.

And there in the corner of the box, wrapped carefully in one of Ezra’s fine silken handkerchiefs, sat Adam’s horse, looking the way it always had, with its black coat and leather mane and tail.

“Ezra promised we could have the others,” JD said quietly from his perch on the bed. He was holding Vin’s hand now, calmed by the other boy’s presence and Chris’ quiet behavior. “Ezra said they weren’t no good because he carved them wrong, but I don’t mind.”

Chris couldn’t tell if the last remark was directed towards him because JD thought Chris hadn’t liked Ezra’s carving because it had been imperfect, or if it was just JD’s honest opinion. He realized that it probably was just that. The five-year-old wasn’t really smart enough for subtle innuendos yet. It didn’t matter. The older man knew he had a lot to make up for, not only to Ezra, but JD and Vin as well. A lot of trust had been lost this evening.

“He was always very careful with it,” Vin said and pointed at Adam’s horse. “Said we weren’t allowed to touch it, only look at it, and he always put it back when he was finished. He only used it as a temple.” Chris didn’t care to correct Vin. He just nodded slowly, the words not really penetrating his guilt ridden and foggy mind anymore. He picked up the horse and put it in his pocket, not caring whether it be scratched or even broken should he sit on it. Somehow it wasn’t really important anymore.

“Come on, let’s get you two to bed.” Chris put the box back down on the floor and got up. He watched as the children jumped down and went to their room. He followed more slowly, a lot of things on his mind.

When he entered their room, he saw JD hastily push a flat paper wrapped package under his pillow, while Vin was holding an identical package in his hands. He could see the name ‘Chris’ written in crooked, childlike letters on the front of it just underneath the string, just like it had been on Ezra’s.

Apparently all three children had wanted to give him and Buck something today and he had ruined the big day completely. JD had looked almost afraid as he had hidden his gift. Afraid, maybe, that Chris would yell at him too, for having the audacity to give him a gift. Chris cringed at the thought, but knew that was how Ezra was feeling right now. He was beginning to realize the extent of the damage he had done tonight. He had attacked Ezra for doing something all of them had thought had been a good thing, in fact was a good thing. While confirming Ezra’s belief that people couldn’t be trusted, he had turned everything Vin and JD knew about life and people upside down. Now neither of them knew where they stood anymore.

“That for me?” Chris asked and nodded towards the package. He looked at Vin, awaiting his reaction to his question. Of all the children Vin was the hardest to figure out which way he would jump in a given situation. Most of the time he knew because they were so alike in mind and spirit, but sometimes Vin would surprise him by doing something completely unexpected.

Vin had always seemed to dislike the older, Southern boy, not always understanding his fancy language and probably feeling a bit intimidated by the older boy’s schooling. He had picked up on Chris’ obvious dislike for Ezra, although the reasons were different, his mostly fuelled by the boy’s overconfidence and criminal past as well as the fact the Judge had almost forced him on them. Vin had been even harder pressed to like Ezra, as the

man he looked up to the most, had made it perfectly clear Ezra wasn't worth wasting time on. Chris sighed, feeling very, very old all of a sudden.

"It was," Vin answered his question, still looking Larabee straight in the eye, "but I don't want you to have it anymore. I want Ezra to have it." He never took his eyes off Chris', but the gunslinger could almost feel the tension radiating off the small body in front of him. It was the first time Vin had ever stood up to him like this. But for some reason Chris felt a small weight lift from his shoulders, knowing that when push came to shove, Vin would do the right thing and stand by his brother. Even if it meant going against the man he loved the most. With all that had happened tonight, the bond between the three stepbrothers had been strengthened.

"That's good, Vin. I think Ezra would like that very much." Vin held his gaze a little longer, then dropped it and put his package on the floor, next to Buck's. Chris knew instinctively that his apology had been accepted. They still had a long way to go to get back to the easy relationship they had once enjoyed, but Vin had given Chris his permission to try.

Chris helped Vin into his nightgown and tucked him in, then turned to help JD. The five-year-old was still sitting on his bed, staring wide-eyed at Chris and Vin. When he realized Chris was looking at him, he gulped and looked down at his hands clasped in front of him. Chris waited a moment, knowing JD was trying to gather his courage to say something. The events of the evening had been very hard on the youngster, but Chris also knew he would be the first to bounce back.

"I...I want Ezra to have mine, too," JD whispered and pulled his slightly crumbled package out from under his pillow and held it out. Chris took it and placed it on the floor next to Vin's, before he straightened up and ran a hand through the boy's hair mussing it up, bringing forth a small smile.

"Why don't you give it to Ezra tomorrow as well, JD. I know he will be very happy to learn he's got such great brothers." That earned him another happy smile, and JD willingly let Chris undress him and help him into his nightgown.

"Ezra won't have to leave, will he," JD spoke up, as Chris tucked him into his blankets. "It was all our fault. We made him do it. Ezra didn't want to. He said his mother told him not to do nice things for other people unless they paid him, and Ezra didn't think you would pay him. But we told him you would like him better and wouldn't send him away if he did nice things like making presents and Ezra said that it might make his stay nicer until his mother came and got him again. Will his mother come and get him?" JD finally stopped for a breath, followed by a huge yawn.

"No, JD, Ezra's mom won't come and get him, and he won't have to leave either. I was drunk today, and I said a lot of things I shouldn't have said, a lot of things I didn't mean. You're absolutely right, he did something very nice and I shouldn't have yelled at him. I owe him a big apology, like I owe the two of you an apology."

"But you didn't yell at us," JD stated.

“No, I didn’t, but I did behave very badly. I shouldn’t drink like that when Buck isn’t around and there is no excuse for it. It got Ezra into trouble, although he didn’t deserve it, and Buck is very mad at me right now, which I do deserve. But now you two better get some sleep. I’ll take your chores tomorrow, so you won’t have to get up early, and then you can spend the rest of the day with Ezra, okay?” Satisfied when he received two nods in answer, he kissed each of them and left the room. He went back to the kitchen where he found Buck still holding a sleeping Ezra in front of the fire.

“How is he doing?” he whispered, although he was fairly sure Ezra wouldn’t hear it even if he raised his voice. The child was exhausted.

“Got chased from his home, almost died, how do you think he’s doing?” Buck said accusingly, rocking the boy slowly from side to side on his knees. He wasn’t ready to forgive Chris just yet.

“I know, Buck, I know. I never should have reacted that way. I was drunk and hurting. The snow made me think of Adam and I couldn’t find his horse. So I started to drink. When Ezra showed me his horse, I mistook it for Adam’s and everything went to hell.” Chris ran a hand through his already unruly hair, then buried his face in his hands with a tired sigh.

“I know you still miss Adam, Chris. Ain’t nothing wrong with that. I miss him, too. But now we got three other boys in our lives. Ain’t none of them had an easy life, not even Ezra, for all his airs and graces, and all of them deserve it more than anything. If I ever catch you drinking again when the boys are around, or hurting them like you did today, I won’t hesitate to take them all away and raise them myself. And I will shoot you, if you try to stop me, you got that, pard?” Buck said with steel in his voice.

“I got it.” Chris didn’t have to look up to know Buck was deadly serious. He loved the boys as much as Chris did, and he had been the first to accept Ezra. He would protect him just as fiercely as the other two. For many years he had endured Chris’ drunken and irrational behavior without complaint, but things had changed the day they had taken over the responsibility of one, then two and now three small boys. He wouldn’t tolerate anyone hurting his family, not even Chris.

They sat in silence for another ten minutes, looking at the sleeping boy and enjoying the last warmth from the dying fire. Chris noticed Buck’s gentle rocking had turned into shifting the boy from knee to knee, as he tried to keep his legs from falling asleep.

“You need a hand there?” Chris asked and held his arms out towards Ezra. Buck contemplated the situation for a moment. He was unwilling to give Ezra up, but he found he couldn’t move without doing so or waking the boy up. Grudgingly he gave Ezra over to his friend, only to take him back as soon as he was upright.

“Gonna let him sleep in my bed tonight, so I’ll be there when the nightmares start,” Buck said and stepped around Chris, not offering him a goodnight. Chris hadn’t expected one. He knew he would be in the doghouse for a while to come.

Quietly he started to tidy up the kitchen. He shook his head as he recalled what JD had said earlier. That Ezra was just waiting for his mother to come and collect him again. He wondered if Ezra, in the four months he had been there, had ever thought of it as home, or of the others as his family. Probably not, Chris admitted in defeat. He wouldn't have had any trouble picking up the antagonism toward him coming from Chris, and the boy knew who was the boss of this household. That was until Buck put his foot down, anyway.

Ezra was a smart boy, much smarter than a boy his age should be, that was one of the things that had ticked Chris off in the beginning. That, along with his criminal past, his cocky attitude, and his extended vocabulary, led to the fear that he would turn JD and Vin into miniature Ezras. The boy had seemed completely self-serving and Chris had feared it would rub off on the younger boys. Tonight he realized he had no reason to be worried. No reason at all. Ezra wasn't rubbing off on them, except in a good way. Like the fact that Vin now knew how to spell Chris with an H and not 'Cris' like he had before. Instead JD and Vin were rubbing off on Ezra, teaching him it was okay to be good, to do good things. That was, until Chris blew it all.

He picked up the pieces of the horse Ezra had made for him and studied them. It was obvious now that it had been made by a child. The square legs, the too thin neck and the funny looking head were all testament to that. But a lot of love had been put into it as well. In contrast to the horse Chris had made, this one had real horsehair for a mane and tail, glued on to thin leather strips that were in turn glued on to the horse's neck and rump. It had been carefully painted all over, the hooves black, making them stand out from the blue paint that covered the rest of the body. For the first time Chris noticed the small letters underneath the hooves, spelling out Ezra's name. He wondered why Ezra had written his own name instead of Chris' whom the horse was supposed to belong to, then realized it was another remnant of his mother's upbringing. He was imitating artists from the galleries he had excitedly told Buck about over dinners, while Chris had only listened with half an ear.

The whole thing, from beginning to end, would have taken Ezra weeks to finish. It had cost him blood, sweat and tears. Blood, from when he had cut his fingers, and Chris guessed it had happened more than once judging from the severed legs on some of the other horses. Sweat from the toil of carving it, and tears from the reception it had received.

Ezra had finally gone against his mother's training and tried to do something nice, without expecting money for it, and it had nearly gotten him killed.

Closing his eyes, Chris sat down on a chair, knowing he had a hell of a lot to make up for with the boy. Ezra was part of his family now, and for the first time, that fact didn't bother him anymore. Buck was right, Adam was an important part of Chris' life. He would always be so, but Adam was dead and Ezra was not. The way he acted towards the living was more important than the way he acted towards the dead, because it could ultimately kill the living.

That was where Ezra found him the next morning, fast asleep at the table with his head resting on his arms and the cursed horse that had started it all cradled in his hands. Ezra had the sudden urge to flee again, just grab his carpetbag, which was still resting on the

floor and leave. Run back to Four Corners as fast as he could and take the noon stage far away from here. But he had already proven that he wasn't strong enough for that, at least not in ten inches of snow. And he had no wish to repeat last night's performance. Not to mention the brush with death at the teeth of a mad dog. He had woken up several times through the night, sweating and crying, seeing the huge monster lunge for him, only to find himself next to Buck. The older man would gather him into his arms until he fell asleep again, all the while rubbing his back soothingly and whispering in his ear that he was safe.

Ezra had silently decided to stay next to Buck for the rest of the day until he was taken back to town and put on the stage. But a thirst beyond parched had forced him from his hibernation to go in search of water. Last night he thought he would never feel warm again, but the combined body heat from him and Buck and two blankets on top had done a lot to dehydrate him through the night.

Now, as he watched Larabee awaken on his chair, he wished he had never left the bed. He wanted to run back to Buck, to his protector, but his legs just wouldn't obey him as Chris raised a sleepy head to look at him. He quickly turned his gaze towards the floor, wondering if Larabee would start yelling at him again. He felt, more than saw, Chris get up from his chair and crouch in front of him.

"You okay, Ezra?" Chris asked quietly and placed a hand on the boy's forehead.

Ezra nodded, enduring the touch but wondering what was going on. If he didn't know better, it almost seemed like Larabee was concerned...for him.

"Don't think you've got a fever, you're just a bit warm. But you probably shouldn't be out of bed yet. You thirsty, Ez?"

Again, Ezra just nodded. The less he could do to aggravate the gunslinger the better.

Chris got up from his crouching position and went to get a glass from the cupboard. He filled it with cold water from the inside pump and carried it back to Ezra, who gingerly took it and quickly gulped down half the contents. He drank the rest more slowly, then turned to place it on the sink. Chris plucked it from his hands, refilled it and brought it back to Ezra.

"Ezra, you and me need to have a little talk. I got something important to tell you. Why don't we go into your room, so Vin and JD won't disturb us when they wake up?"

Ezra nodded silently and turned towards his room. He knew what was coming. He had had that talk plenty of times before. *'I'm sorry, Ezra, especially after we promised your mother - what a lady by the way - but for some reason you just don't seem to fit in our family. We can't provide for you any longer, but don't worry, we have already found somewhere else for you until your mother will be able to pick you up again. You'll leave on the stage later this afternoon.'* It was always the same speech, with slight variations. The reasons for it would also be slightly different. He would have tried to teach the children how to play poker, like he had done here with JD. Or he would have conned the children out of their allowance, which he had also tried, but Vin had seen through him immediately and JD wasn't paid anything. Or else his mother would have conned the family, which happened

quite often. In any case, he just didn't fit into the family for some reason. He guessed that last one was the one he would hear today, unless Larabee was still mad at him for trying to teach JD poker. He briefly wondered if he would be sent to some other 'relatives' or if he would be put in an orphanage again, then decided it didn't really matter. His mother would find him again. She always did. He crawled onto the bed and sat with his hands clasped in his lap, his legs dangling down the side and his gaze on them, waiting for the speech.

Chris had brought in a chair from the kitchen and sat down opposite him, placing a hand on Ezra's knee. Ezra flinched. He always felt uncomfortable when someone touched him during a confrontation, since it gave him less space to maneuver in, should he need to get away quickly. Chris seemed to recognize that and quickly removed his hand. Instead he placed his elbows on his legs and clasped his hands in front of him, peering into Ezra's downcast face.

"Ezra, I need to give you an apology and try to explain what happened last night." Ezra opened his mouth to agree, then closed it again when the words registered. He chanced a quick peek at Larabee's face, but the man looked sincere, even contrite. Ezra looked down again, continuing his exploration of his fingers, not knowing what else to do. No one had ever bothered to apologize like this to him before.

"I know Buck's told you about my son Adam, and that some days when I think of him and his mother I get in a bad mood. When that happens you and JD and Vin should stay away from me." Ezra nodded. He had known that, and Vin had even warned him yesterday, but he had ignored it when he probably shouldn't have.

"The horse you used as a template, this one" Chris said and fished Adam's black horse out from his pocket and showed it to Ezra. Ezra felt his cheeks burn at the sight of it. He had meant to put it back before Chris noticed it was gone, but he had been so excited about finally finishing his own horse, that he had forgotten.

"This horse is one of the few things I have left from Adam. I made it for him when he was four, and he loved it. Used to carry it around with him everywhere he went. I sometimes take it out to remember the good times we shared. When you gave me your horse, I thought it was Adam's horse you had taken and painted over. I didn't think you had the skill to make such a fine horse. More importantly, I was drunk and didn't think clearly. I got mad over something I should have been really happy about, and I'm sorry. Making that horse for me was a real nice thing to do and I appreciate it. I hope you can forgive me for being an idiot."

Ezra nodded dumbfounded. Sure he could do that, if it would make Larabee feel better. He couldn't see the harm in it since he would be leaving in a couple of hours anyway, and he wasn't really a revenge kind of guy. Mother always said revenge only led to rash decisions, and spending time on plotting revenge would be time spent away from plotting something much more lucrative.

"I'm real glad about that. You're a good kid, Ez, and you didn't deserve the treatment you got yesterday. I want you to promise me one thing," Chris waited until Ezra looked up before he continued. "If I ever act like a complete jerk again, and I can't promise you that it

won't happen again, but if it does, I want you to go get Buck and tell him what happened. If he ain't around I want you to go wait for him before you do something yourself. I promise you that Buck will kick my ass and he'll make sure you get ringside tickets, son." This brought a tiny smile to Ezra's face, not just the promise, but the fact that Larabee had called him son. It had been a long time since anyone had called him that with any kind of affection. Chris was smiling as well, holding out his hand. Ezra tentatively brought out his own and Chris engulfed it in his large hand and they shook on it. "Deal?"

"Deal."

"Why don't you get some rest? You're up awfully early and I know you're not a morning person."

"Does this mean my departure will be postponed?"

The smile fell from Chris' face and he turned towards Ezra.

"There'll be no departure, Ezra, I promise you. I know you've been with a lot of families before, but this is different. Maude ain't coming back. She's in prison, where she's gonna be for a long time. And when she gets out you'll be old enough to decide where you wanna be yourself. Okay?"

"I won't have to leave? Even if you tell me to?" Ezra wanted to be certain. He knew Buck had told him the same thing before, but he still needed to hear the words from Chris. He also knew Buck was only half of this family, and while Vin had finally accepted him, Chris was still the one who made the major decisions. Until yesterday, that was. Ezra still remembered Chris taking orders from Buck without a word of complaint, getting down on his knees to dry Ezra's feet and making coffee for them without having anything himself. He knew Buck was really mad at Chris, madder than he had ever seen him before. Chris never said anything, he simply obeyed Buck's orders.

"No, Ezra, even if I tell you to, you don't have to leave. You just go get Buck, or even Josiah or Nathan, and they will fix things. You got that, pard?"

"Yes."

"Good, now go to sleep. The two tornadoes will be up in a while and since you all have the day off, while I'll be doing your chores, I know they'll want your company."

Ezra groaned, not knowing what was worse, having Vin ignore him completely, or suddenly being included in all of the younger boys' activities. Those activities could range from fishing to mud wrestling, to learning to fly from the rafters of the barn. No, Ezra knew. He would take mud wrestling and rabbit tracking any day, over being an outcast. With thoughts of the day to come filling his mind, he let Larabee tuck him in and then fell asleep.

Epilogue

Chris stood on the porch, his elbows resting on the rail and his breath forming a white plume in front of his face. It was a week after the almost fatal incident with Ezra, and he now stood watching as the three children tried to put a third ball of snow on the snowman they were making. Well, Vin worked. JD was already decorating the two other balls with twigs and rocks and whatever else he could find under the snow and Ezra was supervising while making comments on what Vin could do to get the giant snowball up there.

It had been a hell of a week. When Ezra had woken up after their talk, Vin and JD had immediately found him in the kitchen and presented their gifts to him. He had been a bit apprehensive at first about accepting them, knowing they had originally been for Chris, who had been in the kitchen with them. But the gunslinger and Buck had encouraged him to take them and he had finally acquiesced. He had opened JD's first, since the younger boy had practically shoved his present in Ezra's face, wanting him to open it. Ezra had stared long and hard at the colorful doodle JD had made, complimenting him on the excellent choice of colors and the exquisite shapes, before JD had proudly told him it was a drawing of Chris' horse Pony. They had all looked at the swirling mass of blue, green and red colors wondering exactly where Chris' black horse was supposed to be, but no-one had disputed the five-year-old's claim. Instead Ezra had thanked him profusely and promised to put the picture up on his wall.

Vin's picture had a more pronounced effect. It was a picture of the whole family, with Buck and Chris on the outside. Vin was standing next to Chris, JD was next to Buck, and in the middle stood Ezra, holding Vin and JD's hands. They all knew the picture had been drawn long before Ezra ran off, and it finally proved to the older boy that he was a part of their family. Ezra had to turn around for a moment to gather his composure and wipe away a few tears, before he turned back around and thanked Vin. The Texan was happy for the response, knowing Ezra had read the message in the picture. They had spent the rest of the day indoors, since Ezra still hadn't quite shaken the feeling of being cold.

It wasn't until after supper the next day, that the youngest boys had finally managed to convince Ezra that it would be safe to give Buck his gifts, and so they had all brought their packages to the table. Ezra had decided to wait until last, no doubt wanting to judge Buck's reactions to the other boy's gifts first. Chris didn't blame him. He was sad that he had shaken the boy's confidence that much, but he hoped Ezra would get it back soon enough. He didn't like the scared little Ezra much, he would rather have the cocky, irritating one back again, even though he would never admit it out loud.

JD, as always, had volunteered to go first. This time he had concentrated on the reds and yellows, making the whole picture a flaming sea. Buck had held up the picture with a proud smile on his face, congratulating JD on his fine work. That was until JD told him indignantly he was holding it upside down. The little artist proudly explained it was a picture of him and Buck together on Buck's horse. Four heads bent over the picture studying it intently. They quickly gave up trying to figure it out. Instead Buck picked up JD and threw him over his shoulder, before he proceeded to swing him around himself drawing peels of laughter from the boy.

Vin's was a painting of Buck and Inez, the feisty barmaid at the saloon in town where the regulators normally hung out. Buck had been trying to court her for months on end, but she steadfastly refused any of his offers or suggestions. That didn't mean Buck had the sense to give up, though. It just meant he got more creative. The picture showed a scene Vin had witnessed almost three months ago, when Inez had thrown a full pitcher of beer after Buck, to 'cool him off'. Buck had affectionately growled at Vin for bringing that episode up again, then tickled him until the boy was so out of breath he had to call 'uncle'.

No one had missed how Ezra had moved behind the others and closer to the door, when Buck had gotten to his present. Once Buck was holding the unwrapped gift in his hands, Ezra had uncertainly explained that it was supposed to be a hatband, and that Josiah had showed him how to make it. Buck hadn't said anything, just squatted down and opened his arms wide. Ezra had looked uncertain for a moment, then moved into the hug, as Buck had thanked him for the beautiful gift. When he let go of Ezra he had quickly taken off the old hatband and replaced it with Ezra's, and Chris had reassured him it looked mighty fine there.

The next day, Chris had approached Ezra with the pieces of his own gift in his hand. He had told Ezra that he would be real happy if they could work on it together and restore it to its former glory. Ezra had been most inclined to just throw it out, but Chris had insisted that even if Ezra didn't want to have anymore to do with it, Chris would still keep it, just the way it was. Finally Ezra had relented and gone to get his glue and paint. Together they had glued back the broken legs and head, and with some of Chris' sandpaper they had evened out some of the rough spots and then painted it over again. Much to Ezra's surprise and delight, Chris had opted to place it on the fireplace next to Adam's horse, where they could keep each other company and always remind Chris of the great boys he had. Encouraged by the good work they had done on Chris' damaged horse, JD had brought out his own broken horses and told them to fix them. With a smile they had agreed and Chris and Ezra had spent the evening gluing, sandpapering, painting and swapping stories and advice about carving. Chris had found that Ezra was always eager to learn more, and he had found the time in the shack had gone by faster than in a long time. He also knew that it wasn't just horses that had been mended that day. His relationship with Ezra had also taken a big step in the right direction. When they had finally finished, Chris had offered to put the six horses with Ezra's and Adam's on the shelf to make a small herd. JD had looked at him like he was insane, then fled into his room with his arms full of his toys, where crazy adults couldn't take them away from him, much to Ezra and Chris' amusement.

It had been three days after the incident before Chris finally made it back to town again. Buck had already been back to take patrol and buy supplies, and Chris should have known his friend would have told their other friends about what had happened. He wasn't quite ready for the response he got, though. Gloria Potter had refused to say a word to him, not even a 'good afternoon' as she always did, when he had been in to buy some candy for the boys and a book for Ezra. He had picked out a dime store novel for Ezra, figuring that the boy would read anything and he really didn't know what else was in Ezra's taste. When he had put it on the counter Mrs. Potter had taken it away before he could protest. She picked out a copy of Charles Dickens' 'David Copperfield' and put it with his purchases instead. She had glared at him, daring him to make a comment, but Chris had wisely kept

his mouth shut and bought the book, not wanting to get into any more trouble. Judging from Ezra's delighted smile later on, he had done the right thing.

Chris had hardly made it outside before he was almost trampled by Mary Travis. Unlike Mrs. Potter, the town reporter didn't mind making her opinion of Chris' behavior known loud enough for everyone else to hear. She berated him as he tried to make his patrol in town. Chris had fled into the saloon only to find himself at the end of a shotgun. Inez Recillos had taken a shine to the fancy dressed boy who had made himself at home in her saloon when he had first arrived with his mother. Even though boys his age normally didn't have any business in a saloon, Inez had quickly recognized Ezra's familiarity with such places and decided just to keep an eye on him. He had quickly proven to be quite an adept poker player and when he had offered Inez ten percent of his winnings for being allowed to stay in the saloon, the fiery Mexican woman had been sold. Now, whenever Ezra came into town, he would pop over to meet Inez in the saloon, maybe play a game or two with whoever was fool enough to take his challenge, and help Inez with cleaning the glasses or getting liquor from the basement. Ezra being in the saloon was another of those small things that use to annoy Chris. He didn't want the boys around when he was drinking in the saloon, afraid something like what had happened with Ezra would happen there. But now he accepted that Ezra was actually safer there, no matter how drunk Chris was, than he was alone at home. Inez had proven that when she had escorted him out the door and told him not to set foot in her saloon again until Ezra was with him, so she could hear from him personally if Chris had made a proper apology. Throwing Chris out of the saloon meant more to Inez than it seemed. Her saloon had always been the peacekeepers' favorite place and the folks in town knew it as well. It meant that all of the local rebel rousers avoided the place and it was the most peaceful and prosperous saloon in town. Inez risked losing a lot of customers if Chris suddenly decided to take his drinking somewhere else, since he knew the other peacekeepers would follow him. They watched each other's backs, no matter where. But Chris wasn't interested in finding another place. He had spent less than an hour in Digger Dan's before the noise and general bad atmosphere in the place had driven him away. He was resolute in his determination to bring Ezra back with him as soon as possible, so Inez would let him out of the doghouse. His troubles still hadn't been over, though, since it hadn't taken long before he had met Nathan and Josiah, who had given him a piece of their minds as well. Josiah had looked ready to knock him out and it had taken quite a lot of groveling to get the big man to settle down. Who knew that Ezra had made so many friends in town? Not even Ezra himself, Chris guessed.

Buck still hadn't forgiven him, but they were working on their friendship. Chris had been forced to give a lot of promises to the other man, especially regarding Ezra and drinking, but Chris was confident they could work it out. They had been partners for too long to throw it away, even over something as serious as this had been. Chris knew that Buck realized that he had learned a hard lesson this time.

Chris was brought out of his musings by a loud yell from Ezra. He looked up to see Vin being knocked down by the giant snowball as it slipped from his fingers just as he had pushed it to the top. It broke into several pieces, covering the downed boy. Ezra quickly ran to his side, brushing away snow and Chris stepped off the porch to go see if Vin had been hurt. His breath hitched in his throat as he heard Ezra curse, then relaxed again as

he saw Vin's arm snake around Ezra's back and dump a handful of snow down the other boy's collar. In no time the two boys were wrestling in the snow, trying to wash each other in it, while JD completely ignored them. He seemed to have figured out that Vin would never manage to get the last snowball on top of the snowman, for he had already made eyes and a mouth on the second ball and was working on pressing one of the horses' carrot's in place as a nose.

Yep, life was good, Chris decided and stepped back inside to make some warm coffee. Ezra would be back inside in no time, now that he was wet and would need something warm. He would probably want to spend the rest of the afternoon in front of the fireplace, reading his new book and listening to Chris cook dinner. JD would be inside in a short time as well, knowing that Ezra would be reading and wanting to be read to. Vin would be a bit longer, but after he had checked the horses and made sure there wasn't anything else out there that needed his attention, he would join his brothers as well, listening to Ezra and even taking over later on when JD was in bed, so he could practice his own reading skills.

The End
July 2003

Freyan_fey@hotmail.com

http://www.geocities.com/freyan_fey

The Magnificent Seven are owned by MGM, Trilogy Entertainment Group, and Mirisch Corporation. No copyright infringement is intended. No profit is being made.