Surfacing

by May Robinson (May7fic)

Summary

The aftermath of the collapse of the "Howling Man" mine and ensuing rescue of the kids takes an unexpected and devastating turn for the McFadden family. Everybody gets attention in this one with Daniel, Crane, Adam and Ford being the major players. Angst and h/c abound.

Notes

INTRODUCTION: This story follows immediately after the last scene in "A Ring for Hannah." Familiarity with the episode is obviously a plus but, between my episode summary down below and the exposition within the story, I don't believe it's absolutely necessary.
THANKS: Much gratitude to the awesome saberivojo and janissa11 for making career choices in the fields of medicine and health care, thus enabling me to keep that important part of the storyline as authentic as possible. As always, my thanks goes out to the equally awesome Katt, for the past, present and future betas and for taking precious time away from your own 7B47B WIPs to work on mine. As always, I tweak after every beta though so all mistakes are my own.
RATING: PG13, T (language/adult themes)
WORDCOUNT: Approx. 120,000 total, give or take
WARNINGS: A few curse words still not heard on network TV as well as some un-PC comments. There are references to other episodes and canon characters throughout and I'll do my best to address them within the relevant chapter notes.
DISCLAIMERS: See my profile page.
EPISODE SUMMARY: Anyone reading this story undoubtedly remembers "the mine...
cave-in episode" but, for the uninitiated, here's a brief overview:

Against the wishes of the property owner (and their dad's former partner), the youngest four McFadden brothers sneak into an inactive mine in search of enough gold to make up a wedding band for their sister-in-law, Hannah. Jenny Barrett, the owner's daughter (and Guthrie's classmate/fellow talent show contestant), follows them and shortly thereafter the mine caves in, banging up Daniel and separating him from his trapped siblings and Jenny. Over the next two days, a huge, desperate and seemingly futile rescue effort ensues during which Daniel suffers the wrath of Jenny's father, Adam's cold shoulder, and enough self-inflicted guilt to sink a ship. In the end Daniel saves the day though, first finding, then navigating the ventilation shaft that provides an escape route for the kids; earning forgiveness from Adam and the Barretts and thereby allowing everyone to live happily ever after…

Or so we think ;).
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes: Canon characters referenced here from this episode include Guthrie's classmate Jenny Barrett, her parents Tom and Carey, Sheriff's Deputy Ed Sykes, and news reporter Glenn Terry. Other canon characters mentioned briefly include Hannah's former boss at the restaurant where she once worked, Marie.

Surfacing (a Continuation of "A Ring for Hannah")
by May Robinson

Chapter 1

Euphoria.

It wasn't a word typically associated with young cattlemen but Crane McFadden felt it fit him perfectly at this moment.

His four youngest brothers had not only survived the collapse of The Howling Man mine, they had come out of it unscathed. Thank God.

Crane was a practical man. The harsh realities of life, plus an interest in the world beyond small-town northern California spawned from three years away at college, had made him so. Even still, he felt that the McFaddens had already had more than their share of tragedy. When their parents were taken from them before all but Adam had finished school, hell, before Guthrie had even started, that should have fulfilled a lifetime's quota of tragedy for them all. So, when he had found himself numbly standing with his two elder brothers outside that mine listening to Tom Barrett despairingly suggest that they might have run out of options... that they might have to give up hope on finding them alive; Crane just hadn't been able to believe it.

But the McFaddens were never quitters. And here they were now, Jenny Barrett in her parents' loving hold and Crane's three youngest siblings safe in the arms of Adam, Brian, Hannah and each other. Everyone whole and safe.

Including Daniel, their middle brother and his closest one, by age and by grace. Once so guilt-laden and shredded to pieces, he was miraculously now the hero of this story. Savior of Jenny and his little brothers.

Euphoria just about covered it.

Crane watched with pride as Tom offered his hand and heartfelt thanks to Daniel. Though Crane had only witnessed one of the earlier tirades their father's old friend and business partner had subjected the already guilt-ridden Daniel to, he knew how much they had taken their toll. If not for the kid's stubborn tenacity to make things right and save those kids, Barrett's words would've destroyed him.

And despite Crane's elation over the outcome of the rescue, he was bearing his share of guilt too. He'd been so distraught over the plight of their youngest, and so focused on digging them out; he'd failed to come to Daniel's defense. Hell, he'd barely offered up more than a few supportive platitudes during the whole ordeal. He knew the kid would understand his distraction, but Daniel had deserved better from him. At least big brother Brian had stepped up to the plate.
Crane planned to make it up to Daniel though. Make sure he knew how sorry he was for not being there for him and knew just how incredibly proud Crane was.

The kid was right in front of him, still wearing his fall arrest equipment and hooked up to the hoist as he stepped back from Tom's handshake. Crane reached out and placed his hands on Daniel's shoulders, intent on pulling Daniel into him, surprised when the kid's legs seemed to buckle a little at the contact.

"Whoa, hey, you okay?" Crane asked, grasping Daniel's upper arms then turning the kid around to face him. Daniel looked a little flushed and was definitely unsteady, swaying slightly under Crane's hold.

He answered clearly though, "Yeah, just need some air. Help get me out of this getup, would ya?"

Crane could understand that. They'd all been running on empty. Busting their backs for hours on end. Digging endlessly, seemingly futilely, in search of their missing youngest. Mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausted, Daniel had borne all that plus the heavier burden of guilt.

The crowds of well-wishers, rescue workers, news, and emergency crews were all still there, milling around with loud impromptu celebrations breaking out everywhere. People were packed together like sardines, it was no wonder Daniel needed some space.

"Yeah, sure," Crane said, removing Daniel's hard hat for him and lightly ruffling the kid's filthy hair. "Let's get you undone and head over to the ridge. The truck's there; it'll be a lot quieter."

Crane reached up overhead, liberating the lanyard and, with the tension released, Daniel swayed once again and, had Crane not been there to catch him, might've gone down. The poor kid was totally wiped out. Or maybe, Crane was starting to wonder - check that, worry - it was something more?

"You sure you're all right?"

The reply of, "I'm fine, Crane," was petulant enough to sound convincing, so Crane proceeded to order his brother to hold still as he helped him out of the harness. "Can we just do this?"

Despite his moodiness, Daniel leaned heavily against him during the process but he seemed steady enough now, even as he lifted one leg, then the other to step out of the contraption. Crane had been worrying about his family nonstop for hours; maybe it was time to let that go. "Okay, c'mon."

Slinging an arm around Daniel's shoulders, Crane steered his brother through the crowd and away from the lights and buzz of the masses still assembled around the ventilator shaft - the one Daniel had found - that had been his family's salvation. Though slightly torn about leaving behind Evan, Ford and Guthrie, knowing the paramedics still intended to check them over; he knew they were in good hands with Hannah and his older brothers. Besides, the younger brother leaning into him needed him more. Walking Daniel through that throng had made that perfectly clear. Well-meaning neighbors and strangers alike had reached out to him - to shake his hand, offer congratulations or pat him on the back but, with each encounter, Daniel seemed to curl further into Crane's hold.

Crane knew his brother was no stranger to the spotlight and, when it came to his music, reveled in it. But that wasn't the case now. If anything, Daniel was shrinking away from the adulation, seemingly getting smaller under Crane's arm. Crane knew all-too-well how, for Daniel and the rest of his family, the last two days had been an ordeal of life and death proportions. And, despite Daniel practically single-handedly making everything right in the end, Crane understood his
brother well enough to know that it was going to take the kid a while to process all that had happened. And forgive himself. He knew damn well Daniel wasn't feeling much the hero. Maybe that would come - someday.

When Crane felt Daniel shiver beneath his grip and realized they'd left his jacket behind, Crane decided it was time to be a little more proactive. Get Daniel to the sanctuary and warmth of their old truck. The rest of the family would catch up to them soon enough. Ever the boy-scout his brothers accused him of being, Crane pulled out his trusty Maglite from his jacket and flicked it on. "Let's cut across here."

Daniel didn't say a word but changed direction at Crane's prompting. The kid hadn't said much of anything for that matter, not since he'd first started making his way down that shaft in search of their siblings. Crane figured he could attribute that to fatigue. After all, Crane wasn't saying a whole lot of anything either despite his earlier intention to have a talk with his brother. That was okay. It could wait.

When the furthest reaches of the flashlight's beam hit the very welcome and familiar sight of the Circle-Bar-Seven emblem on the truck's door, Daniel slipped free of Crane's hold. "Hey, careful!" Crane called out, breaking into a jog to catch up to his brother. Daniel knew better than traipsing around in the dark like that, especially on this uneven, rocky ground.

Too late. Sure enough, he heard the grunt as Daniel's brightly printed shirt disappeared beneath the splash of light. Shit.

"Daniel!" he called, annoyance laced through his concern. Hadn't he had enough to worry about all day? "Are you trying to break your ne-" His words cut off by the sudden lack of earth beneath his feet. "Whoa!" he yelped, as he apparently found the same low spot that had just claimed his brother. Crane landed with a graceless "oomph," losing the flashlight from his grip as it bounced then rolled until settling upright in its own hollow.

After regaining some of the wind he'd had knocked out of him courtesy of his hard landing, Crane straightened up, fully intending to give his impetuous brother hell. For his impulsiveness and for not having the decency to say anything when his brother just landed on his ass trying to keep up to him.

The words died on his lips the instant he looked at Daniel.

Something was wrong. Daniel hadn't acknowledged Crane or the fall that practically landed his brother in his lap. And worse, thanks to the Maglite's upright landing, Daniel's face was in its spotlight and Crane did not like what he was seeing. At all. "Daniel?" he whispered, a shiver of fear coursing through him, stealing his voice. Daniel was still, too still. He looked like a ghost of himself.

Crane tried to convince himself that Daniel's too white complexion was an illusion created by the flashlight and the light of the moon. Or maybe it was the eerie glow of the flashing lights on the emergency vehicles behind them reflected in those vacant, too dark eyes. But despite his best efforts to deny his thoughts, Crane suddenly knew all too well what "it feels like someone was walking on his grave" meant. Only in this case it was Daniel's grave coming to mind and that utterly terrified him.

Trying to shake off the morbid, paranoid thoughts, Crane reached out, cupped his brother's face with a trembling hand and breathed out a shuddering sigh of relief when at last his little brother blinked and made eye contact.

"Crane?" Daniel finally spoke, sounding much too young and disturbingly confused.
"Yeah, buddy?" Crane answered softly, still deeply worried but no longer thinking the worst.

Until Daniel's next words stopped his heart.

"Where's Dad?"

Adam McFadden was an exhausted man. But so damn relieved and thankful he could've cried. He'd confessed to Hannah, while the boys were still trapped in that godforsaken mine, that he'd been beyond scared. And he had been. Not since he'd lost his parents and fought for permanent custody of his siblings had he felt so afraid and lost, so out of control. He never thought anything could rival that fear but the idea of losing his three youngest brothers, his boys, to this disaster had shaken him to his very core.

Thank God for Daniel.

If it hadn't been for that kid's determination to rescue Jenny and his brothers, they might still be digging futilely at the site of the collapse. And, Adam shuddered at the thought, with water seeping into its dark recesses, they might well have been digging for bodies and not the healthy, whole kids wrapped in their families' arms.

Literally. With one arm resting along Evan's shoulder, both Hannah and Ford were entwined under Adam's other arm. Fact was, Adam simply didn't want to let go. Not so soon after almost losing them.

They were all looking on as Guthrie, with Brian sitting beside him in the ambulance, was getting the once over from Gabe Coulter, one of nearby Sonora's paramedics. Gabe and his partner, Hank Lungren, had already checked over Evan and Ford and now were seeing to Guthrie and Jenny Barrett. Adam wasn't terribly worried. Not anymore. He knew the kids were fine and the medics were simply following standard protocols.

Then again, he did find himself breathing much easier when he made eye contact with Brian, whose grin and wink elicited an, "All right" from Evan and the beautiful sound of Hannah's equally relieved laughter.

The icing on the cake was Guthrie's bright face and excited thanks when Gabe handed him the ball cap he was wearing that made up part of his uniform. That boy's smile was impossible for Adam to resist and definitely helped ease the tension his body couldn't quite let go of entirely. It was as though he'd been stuck in high gear for so long, he had no idea how to shift back into park. Was it really only two days ago when the biggest event in their lives had been Guthrie's upcoming talent contest?

"Hey, shrimp," Adam said, reaching up and grasping hold of their youngest as Brian lowered him down from the back of the ambulance.

"Hey, Adam," he replied cheerfully, seemingly content to stay squished against his big brother's side. Or maybe that was the other way around.

Adam relished the feel of his youngest in his hold. Despite his ordeal, Guthrie was his vibrant, exuberant self and so seemingly unfazed, Adam was beginning to believe that these last two days would soon become just another tale to be told by the old-timers playing checkers over at Marie's place. One with a happy ending, thankfully.

That is, once he got the official word from Gabe.
"So, what's the verdict, Doc?" He asked as both Brian and the medic climbed out of the ambulance.

"I'd say he's just like the rest of 'em, Adam," he replied, offering a warm smile and a tweak to the nose of the boy squirming under Adam's arm. "No worse for wear and likely in need of nothing more than a good scrub in a tub."

"So, why do I get the feelin' there's a "but" comin', Gabe?" Brian asked, saying what Adam was afraid to, and looking less at ease than he had just moments earlier.

"Oh, I don't mean to worry you now," the medic replied, shrugging his shoulders and then continuing. " Normally I'd just tell you to run 'em on over to Doc Mayer's for a follow-up in a day or two, especially if any of them develop a cough. But, given the circumstances--"

"What circumstances?" This time it was Hannah giving voice to the words lodged in Adam's throat.

"Well, I figure we might as well have 'em all checked out at County since Hank and I were gonna run Daniel over there anyway."

"Pardon?"

It wasn't so much what he said but rather how he said it. Daniel had been affectionately calling Adam "Dad" for years. Hell, he'd even use it once in a while when he was pissed off with his oldest brother for pulling rank. But, in all those times Crane had heard Daniel call his guardian that, it had never sounded like it did right now. So young and so small. No, Crane knew deep down to his marrow that Daniel was asking for their long-dead father, and that scared the hell out of him. God, he'd obviously been hurt when the mine first caved in; had Daniel been deteriorating all this time? And, if so, how the hell could Crane have missed it?

The urge to get help for his brother warred with Crane's worry that he might suddenly bolt again and make matters worse. He needed to get Daniel settled. Crane shifted closer, both hands gently grasping Daniel's face; a face looking at him so imploringly, Crane was convinced that the kid in front of him was a Daniel from their past.

Desperately afraid to say the wrong thing, Crane didn't answer, just stroked his brother's cheek and tried to calm him. "It's okay, Daniel. You're okay."

Daniel tried to pull away, but Crane held fast, as afraid as he was certain that he was dealing with a head injury. Pulling Daniel into his chest, the resistance he feared gave way and instead he felt a sob against his coat. "Where's Daddy, Crane?" Daniel whimpered, his words and the memories they were evoking ripping at Crane's heart. "Are Mom and Dad mad at me?"

Crane hadn't thought his brother could sound more broken but the fearful plea revealed the guilt Daniel had been carrying over the mine collapse. And now that blame had buried itself into a past none of them wanted to relive. All he could do was rely on his instincts and do his best to comfort his little brother.

Keeping a steadying hand against Daniel's head, Crane drew him in closer, heartfelt words pouring from his lips. "God, no, Daniel. They're not mad. They're proud of you." Tears were clogging his throat but he carried on. "So proud." Pulling away slightly, Crane gripped both sides of Daniel's face again, forcing eye contact, "We all are. You hear me?"
But Daniel was gone again, looking through Crane or past him, not registering the terrified brother mere inches from his face. Somehow Crane knew he was losing him and he needed help now. He'd have to risk leaving Daniel, even if only for a few seconds.

Easing Daniel back against the slope behind him, Crane shrugged off his heavy coat, rolled it into a ball and placed it behind Daniel's head. For better or worse, Daniel was being compliant, if still hauntingly unaware. Hoping his touch would get through where his words hadn't, he pressed firmly against Daniel's shoulders, admonishing him to stay put. "I need you to stay here, okay, buddy?" At his brother's lack of response, Crane could feel his eyes fill. His next words were as much prayer as they were command. "I need you to stay with me."

Grabbing up the flashlight, Crane started calling out for help as he ran the few yards he was willing to distance himself from Daniel. "Hey, over here! Somebody!" he yelled, waving the beam high above his head, hoping to attract attention. "I need help over here! Help!" He shouted, repeating his plea a number of times until turning back. Unwilling to wait to see if he'd been heard, Crane stopped briefly to rest a hand on Daniel's shoulder. Softly imploring, "Stay with me, kiddo," before making his way to the truck, he swung open its door and pounded on the horn three distinct times. Without a shotgun handy, it was the best he could do. Turning the emergency flashers on for good measure, Crane laid on the horn three more times, hoping that his efforts would be enough.

Rushing back, he dropped to his knees next to the kid now curled up on his side, hands covering his head. "Oh, God, I'm sorry," he said, voice breaking, stroking Daniel's hair as he carefully peeled away Daniel's hands and pulled him into his lap. Daniel was still somewhere else, caught in between a nearly decade old hell and the one they'd just overcome. He was talking now, though nothing he was saying could give Crane a spark of hope. Daniel was rambling, the only distinguishable words doing their utmost to devastate them both. Calling for their parents and pleading "I'm sorry, I'm sorry" over and over, Crane tried frantically to break through, to overpower those destructive words with his own choking voice.

"It's okay, I gotcha," he declared, hugging his brother tight as he rocked Daniel to the rhythm of his own desperate mantra, repeating, "Stay with me, Daniel. Please," and closing his eyes. Praying help would come soon.

"What in the hell are you talking about, Gabe?"

Brian was right in Gabe Coulter's face, countless hours of tightly spun nerves about to let loose on one of the good guys. Adam knew he should do something about that. Problem was, not only was he finding himself hard-pressed to stop his brother, he was right there next to him crowding the paramedic and plying a death-grip on his arm. If something was going on with Daniel - and where was his middle brother, anyway? - he should damn well know about it.

"Adam!" Hannah stepped in between them; probably a good thing considering Hank had finished up with Jenny and was shouldering his way into the group. Adam needed answers but they were starting to draw a crowd. Common sense prevailed and he let go of Gabe.

"Tell me what's going on with Daniel," Adam demanded, his tone brooking no argument. "And just where the he-ck is he?" he asked, catching himself as he remembered there were children present.

One of them answered - Jenny, in fact. Pointing toward the ridge where Brian had moved the truck hours earlier, she eagerly informed the group, "I saw him walking that way with Crane." It might've been well past dark but, thanks to the light coming from the back of the ambulance, Adam could still see the blush on her face and the stars in her eyes. Oh, yeah. It looked like Daniel
had earned himself a new fan.

At Jenny's news, Gabe grabbed one of the kits from the back of his rig. "This way, Jenny?" He asked, starting out in that direction at her affirmative nod.

And finding himself once again with Adam McFadden's grip around his arm.

"Gabe, what's going on?"

The medic shrugged, exchanging a pained look with his partner and sighed. Scratching his jaw, he answered. "Adam, all due respect but Daniel's eighteen and if he didn't tell you, I've got to honor that."

"I'm gonna kill him," Adam spat, frustration and anger warring with concern as he marched ahead of Gabe and listened to the fading sound of Hannah giving Hank the third degree. He smirked at that, knowing that his wife, who'd spent time with Daniel in the ambulance, was someone that the six-foot-three 240 pound ex-linebacker did not want to tangle with.

Aiming for the truck, Guthrie's footsteps quickly followed but the youngest McFadden put the brakes on when Adam whirled around and pointed at him, flicking his finger beyond him, back toward the ambulance. "Get."

"But he saved us," Guthrie appealed, dejected as he turned back. Brian was quickly catching up with a powerful searchlight in hand, but stopped briefly to whisper something in Guthrie's ear. Taking a moment to remove Gabe's hat from Guthrie's head, tousle his hair and replace the cap before sending him on his way with a quick pat to his butt.

Adam kept walking.

"Hey, c'mon," Brian implored once he caught up, matching him now stride for stride as he walked beside him. "Take it easy. You know damn well Daniel never would've left while the kids were still down in that mine."

And that precisely was the problem.

Daniel's guilt, sense of responsibility and tenacity would have kept him fighting to save Jenny and his brothers long after anyone else would've given up. And the cost to himself would have never entered into consideration. That was just how his kid brother was wired. And yet after Adam had first refused Daniel's offer to help, the rescue crews had worked through the night before Daniel next approached him about joining them. That he was feeling up to it. "I'm feeling better now."

Goddamn it, Daniel had been hurt. Apparently bad enough to warrant an admittedly delayed ambulance ride and certainly bad enough for him to wait - overnight - until he felt strong enough to handle the task of digging out his missing siblings. And that was scaring the hell out of Adam. He answered his brother. "Don't you think I know that?"

Adam kept on walking.

Until he was running. Three distinct beeps of an old truck's horn as familiar to him as the back of his hand and he was off like a shot. Brian right beside him, lighting up the path ahead of them, both picking up speed when the second series of blasts, sounding somehow more urgent, followed.

Brian was shouting back at Gabe, and Adam trusted him to let the medic know their fears. Hell, Brian had been in Daniel's corner all day, something Adam ashamedly couldn't say for himself. Who better than Brian to handle this?
He heard a loud whistle and more yelling behind him, this time from Gabe - apparently telling his partner to start their rig, because the next thing he heard was the bleat of a siren as the ambulance was started up and driving across the field around the groups still gathered there. Thank God for that. If Daniel was as hurt as Adam now feared, help was just seconds away.

"Easy, easy," Brian cautioned as they approached uneven ground but Adam threw the warning to the wind, well aware that the terrain was dangerous but unable to slow down knowing that Daniel and Crane needed him.

Until the vision before them, illuminated by the searchlight's harsh beam, froze his feet. And his heart.

There they were. His brothers were huddled together on the ground, Daniel gathered in Crane's arms and Crane curled over him. Protectively, reverently, hopelessly rocking his little brother. The personification of grief.

"Oh, God, no," Brian had been stilled by the devastating sight too. But only long enough to utter his entreaty before quickly closing the distance and skidding to his knees, arms reaching out for his younger brothers before he'd come to a complete stop.

Riveted to the sight, Adam only started forward when Gabe brushed past him, catching up as the paramedic set his emergency kit down next to Adam's family. The ambulance had pulled up alongside them as well, Hank immediately jumping out of the driver's seat, then swinging open the back doors and grabbing a gurney.

Just as Adam dropped down next to his brothers, Brian spoke, his voice grave. "He's alive. But Jesus, this looks bad." He was addressing Gabe but met Adam's eyes and the fear reflected in them created a dread so strong, Adam hesitated looking at the condition of the youngest in their midst.

For only a heartbeat. This was Daniel after all. And he owed it to him to be there despite the fear churning in his gut. "Oh, Danny," he breathed, reaching around Crane's hunched shoulders to touch the boy's face. He wasn't sure what he'd expected when he first saw his brothers crumpled together in the moonlight. He certainly didn't expect to see Daniel awake, but not. His eyes open but unaware. Daniel… still here, but gone.

"Hold on, Adam." The medic's tone stopped him and Adam pulled back his hand, afraid he would cause further harm. "Let me get in there," Gabe continued, hands grasping Crane's shoulders to pull him aside.

Crane didn't react, seemingly as oblivious to his surroundings as Daniel appeared to be, though Adam knew Crane wasn't hurt - physically. Ignoring Gabe, Crane whispered, "Stay with me," into Daniel's hair and continued to rock his brother.

"Crane, come on now," Gabe insisted, raising his voice. "We don't have time for this." And this time Crane did respond.

"No," he choked out, his throat clogged with tears Adam knew were clawing their way out. "I can't," he managed, so shakily Adam now feared that Crane was going into shock. Exchanging an anxious glance with Brian, Adam's second in command canted his head in Crane's direction and raised an eyebrow, silently asking permission to do what Adam could not bring himself to do. Adam swallowed hard and nodded.

Hank was hovering behind them with a backboard at the ready, and as the men wordlessly signaled their plan, on three, Brian got up on his haunches and wrapped his arms around Crane
from behind. Before Crane could fight him, Brian began to talk, his head snug against Crane's as he spoke the words Adam trusted would get through to him: "Help's here, kid. It's okay now, let him go. Let 'em help Dan'l."

With a sob that tore through Adam's heart, Crane let go, releasing Daniel into the paramedics' care as he folded up into Brian's embrace. Adam reached out and cupped Crane's face, a small comfort he knew, but his brother looked all but destroyed. Grateful Brian was there to hold him up; Adam returned his focus to their injured little brother.

He wasn't sure just how to handle the well-practiced unison the two men were working in. He supposed he should take comfort in their obvious skill and expertise as they examined Daniel. But, as Hank rhymed off his brother's vitals and began questioning Crane about Daniel's condition, Adam couldn't help feeling every bit as scared, and mad as hell that he'd somehow missed this.

"Crane, how long since he last seemed aware?" Hank asked, repeating the question more harshly when he didn't get an immediate response. "Damn it, Crane!"

"Hey, go easy," Brian snapped, his protective hackles rising.

"No, it's all right," Crane answered, suddenly shrugging out of Brian's hold. He still sounded shaky but, to Adam, he seemed less dazed. Whether bolstered by Brian's strength or his own instinctive need to help, Crane was coming back to them. As Adam watched Crane's light eyes clear, he was thankful, not for the first time, for his brother's attention to detail.

"He was coherent and talking back at the shaft, when he got Jenny out," Crane told them. "Said he wanted out of there. Away from the crowds. But he seemed a little unsteady, dizzy maybe?" Crane's face fell as he watched the men strap Daniel onto the gurney, raising it up, before placing an oxygen mask over his face. Remorse filled his eyes. "I-I just thought he was beat," he faltered. "And overwhelmed, you know?"

"We know, kid," Adam said, as Brian wrapped his arm across Crane's back and the three brothers stood to follow the medics. Together they told him, "It's okay."

Crane smiled sadly then swallowed hard. "He took a tumble right here, and that's when he really started to fade out on me," Crane continued, trembling once again. "But… I think I was already starting to lose hi--Oh, God." He stopped himself, voice hitching now. "I… I think he was starting to deteriorate while we were heading over here."

"That helps us a lot, Crane," Gabe said sympathetically as he climbed into the back of the ambulance, though his tone didn't provide Adam with a whole lot of confidence. Brian stepped forward to help Hank ease the gurney in next to Gabe, pausing briefly to rest a hand on Daniel's chest before rejoining Crane and standing next to him. Crane, who once again looked so crushed, Adam stepped forward and pulled him into the hug he was long-overdue to give. Crane held on for dear life and Adam hated to let go but Hank was closing up the doors and Adam had every intention of riding along with them.

"Adam." He heard his name from two directions, suddenly aware that Deputy Ed Sykes was pulling up with the rest of their family in his squad car and Hannah and the boys were calling out to him from its open windows. His family piled out, concern etched on all their faces, but Hank was addressing him too. As the kids and Hannah converged on them, Adam turned to the medic.

"I've only got room for one," Hank said apologetically and Brian reached out, giving Adam a light push.

"It's got to be you, partner," Brian said, as he snagged a protesting Guthrie and drew him into his
side. The "you're next of kin" understood but silent between them. Their youngest was asking for Daniel, confusion and fear painted on his face. Evan and Ford looked equally shocked and bewildered but kept their questions to themselves, undoubtedly aware of the urgency of the situation. All they had to do was look at Crane to sense how bad things were. Adam hated the idea of tearing Crane away from Daniel now but Brian was right. Besides, Adam simply had to be there.

"Guthrie, come here, sweetheart." Hannah said, briefly squeezing Adam's hand before wrapping her arms around their youngest. Bless her perceptive heart, Adam thought. She was taking over Guthrie from Brian, who would soon be needed elsewhere.

"I'll provide an escort. Run the family in too," the deputy offered. "Where to? County?"

"No, Sonora," Hank answered soberly as he placed a firm hand on Adam's back and began to usher him toward the front of the ambulance. Climbing into the cab, Adam glanced back to see how his family had reacted to the news that Daniel was being taken to Sonora Regional Hospital instead of the closer County General. Adam figured all but their youngest would recall that Glenn Terry's last major local news story prior to the cave-in had covered the upgrades to Sonora Regional's Neurological department. As Adam shut the door he watched through the window as Hannah and the kids, every one of them a picture of misery, filed back into the car. Yeah, they knew it too.

As the ambulance began to pull away, Adam could see that Brian and Crane weren't among the deputy's passengers. He wasn't surprised that Brian intended to take their truck. Ed's car wouldn't hold them all and, knowing Brian, he'd likely beat everyone there anyway. As soon as he was finished dealing with Crane. Crane, who'd finally let go completely and was curled up on the ground with his brother's arms around him.

To be continued.
"SonMed Base, this is SonMed Transport 2 en route. We have an eighteen year old male with head trauma suffered approximately 36 hours ago due to impact with falling rock and debris. Patient initially refused treatment AMA despite affirmatives to LOC, blackouts, unequal pupils, and dizziness. Patient was alert and conscious until about fifteen minutes ago. Presently unresponsive. Initiating lactated Ringer's in transit…"

Adam listened intently, heartsick, as Hank spoke to Sonora Regional via the two-way. His eyes were riveted behind his seat though, on the kid brother strapped down with more and more wires and appliances being attached to him. Gabe was working methodically, inserting two IVs and placing heart monitor leads onto his chest.

Adam may never have gone to college to become the doctor he'd planned but it didn't take med school to figure out that "LOC" meant that Daniel had lost consciousness previously, undoubtedly when the mine first caved in. And who knows how often he'd blacked out afterward? Certainly Adam didn't. Damn it, why hadn't he asked anyone what condition his brother was found in before the rescue started? By the time Adam and the rest of the family had arrived at the mine site, Daniel had been upright, and apparently that was all Adam could see. Correction – all that he'd been willing to see. After all, his priorities were underground and not with the brother being decimated by guilt. And God knew what else.

Adam knew self-flagellation wasn't going to do him a lick of good and neither was the anger building up inside him toward the two men currently trying to help Daniel. "Initially refused treatment". To hell with Daniel being eighteen. Someone should have told him the boy was hurt.

Oh, yeah… Helplessness, frustration and bitterness were going to take their toll soon if he didn't do something about it. He decided to take a page out of Daniel's book and do whatever he could to help fix this. When Hank ended his transmission to the hospital with an ETA of ten to twelve minutes, Adam spoke up.

"Hank, you need any more information?" he asked. "Medical history maybe?"

The medic tapped on a clipboard fastened to the dash. "Got it all there from Daniel the first time we went over him," he replied. "Go ahead and look it over though in case he missed some history."

"Oh, so now it's all right for me to be in the loop." Apparently the bitterness was back.

A pained expression flashed across Hank's features before he answered solemnly. "Adam, you know the rules change when someone's incapacitated."

"Yeah, well sometimes the rules—"

Any further acrimony fell off his lips as Adam was silenced by an anguished scream coming from behind him. From Daniel.

"Evan!"

Adam tried to bolt out of his seat the instant he heard his brother cry out. Except Hank, one hand still maintaining control of the steering wheel, had immediately applied a linebacker's grip to Adam's wrist with the other.
"Adam, no!" he yelled, his tone softening as he implored, "Let Gabe do his job."

Except whatever Gabe was doing wasn't helping. At all. Despite being strapped down and held fast by Gabe's arms, Daniel was trying to move, writhe, maybe even get up, all the while repeatedly calling out for Evan, Ford and Guthrie from beneath the oxygen mask. When Guthrie's name came out as a muffled, agonized sob, Adam had endured all he could. "Let me help him," he practically begged. "I can get through to him. Let me try."

It was Gabe who gave in first, telling his partner, "I'd rather not sedate him if we can help it." He was still holding down a thrashing, frantic Daniel and Adam breathed a trembling sigh when Hank let go of his wrist. His first instinct was to dive in and try to keep his brother still but he was well aware of the fact that these men were in charge of both his and his brother's fates right now.

Easing into the spot Gabe was vacating, eyes glued on Daniel, he asked, "What do I do?"

"Just try to reach him, get him to see you," Gabe answered. "I'll hang onto him."

Gabe loosened his grip slightly as he gave Adam more room to maneuver; just the opening Daniel needed. Despite his restraints, he attempted to lunge, only to be met by resistance from both Adam and Gabe. He cried out again, then screamed, "Get off me, damn it! Oh, God, they're trapped! They're trapped..." Desperate words fading to a hopeless whimper as he failed in his escape, reverting once again to the breathless repetition of his younger brothers' names.

Absolutely petrified, words he prayed would break through the horror Daniel was reliving, poured from Adam's lips. "Daniel, it's okay. They're fine, just fine," he promised. "Settle down, kid," Adam pleaded, hesitantly reaching out to touch Daniel's face, briefly looking to Gabe for approval and getting it. Strapped to the backboard and wearing a cervical collar, Daniel's view was severely limited so Adam leaned over him, hovering close, careful of the equipment and wires as he lightly cupped both sides of his face.

"Daniel, look at me," he commanded, trying a different and stomach churning tack. "That's it, boy." Praise and immense relief softened Adam's voice when Daniel's erratic movements stilled and confused eyes attempted to focus on the face just above him. "Listen to me, they're okay. You got them out, Danny. They're fine."

"Fine," Daniel repeated from beneath the mask, tears spilling from his eyes. Adam smiled for what felt like the first time in years, brushing aside the sweaty fringe of hair framing his brother's face along with the moisture trailing into it. Thank God. No longer was he the catatonic imitation of himself that had utterly terrified Adam on the ridge, nor the crazed, near-violent kid from moments ago, Daniel was back.

"Yeah, thanks to you," Adam said, carding a hand through Daniel's thick hair, pride settling next to the relief in his heart. He risked a glanced at Gabe, hoping he wouldn't see a reprimand there. Adam knew his touch was comforting Daniel, and oh how he needed that connection with his little brother right now.

Gabe responded with a barely audible, "Keep it up" and Adam did, lulled despite the gravity of the situation into a sense of calm. One he hoped was projecting to Daniel.

Lightly resting his hand in Daniel's hair, he kept up a litany of reassurances. Though they remained fixed on Adam's face, Daniel's eyes thankfully reflected some awareness. Borne out when he began to latch onto some of Adam's words, barely whispering them in response like a muted echo.
"You got it," he breathed when Daniel repeated that everyone was okay. "Everyone's safe, kiddo."

"Sa—" Daniel's soft echo abruptly cut short and Adam could feel everything go to hell before he saw it happen. His brother's body stiffened beneath his hand, muscles visibly rigid and Adam watched in horror as Daniel's lashes began to flutter. Daniel's eyes vacant once more as they rolled up into his head just as tremors began to take hold of his body.

"Daniel!"

"He's seizing!" Adam vaguely heard Gabe's confirmation of his fears, before the medic swiftly grabbed up a syringe, shoved Adam aside, and plunged its needle into the nearest IV. "Call it in," Gabe shouted to Hank. "Administering 5 mg valium IV push!"

And Adam sat frozen where he'd clumsily landed on the floor of the ambulance, back against the wall. Watching numbly through the shaking hands covering his face, as his little brother had one horrific seizure after another.

"Here."

Crane barely acknowledged the steaming cup Brian held in front of him, or the blanket he draped across his shoulders. His mind was racing, replaying the last two days over and over in his head, trying to figure out how he could have possibly missed the signs that Daniel was so seriously hurt. He knew Daniel better than anyone. He should've caught this.

Despite the fact that Evan and Daniel were closer in age, Crane and Daniel were just – closer. As a child, Crane never really enjoyed being the tagalong. Younger than Adam and Brian by almost six and four years respectively, he was so very different from them both. Brian, especially, who was every bit the hellion then that he still was today. Crane had thrived on having Daniel as his tagalong though, his little brother becoming his willing shadow and playmate right from the start. They were just more alike than the brothers that book-ended them, with Evan and Brian both being the rough and tumble cowboys to Crane and Daniel's more introspective, what Hannah had christened "more soulful", natures. Not that Daniel didn't have a wild side; it was just that there weren't many kids his age who would choose to spend their spare time hanging out with their brother writing music after a hard day's ranching. But that's exactly what Crane and Daniel did. Well that and talking about girls, laughing at the same jokes and each being a rock when the other needed it.

And when you spend that much time together, so much of it in sync, you'd think you'd notice that your little brother had a concussion, or worse.

"Hey, c'mon, snap out of it," Brian scolded, shrugging off his jacket before sitting down next to him on the couch, then nudging Crane's shoulder with his own. "Drink." Scrubbing his hands over his face, Crane shook himself from his reverie, finally accepting the proffered cup. "Careful, it's hot," Brian warned needlessly and Crane couldn't help but smirk at his brother's fussing. He'd been doing a lot of that tonight. With good cause, Crane was more than a little ashamed to admit.

"Chicken soup?" He actually laughed when his senses finally clued in to what the styrofoam held. Damn, he could've really used another coffee.

"Yeah, well I figure we'll be living on java all night," Brian answered. "You need somethin' else in your gut."

Hellion. Yeah, right. If the ladies ever figured out just how much of a catch Brian was going to be
once he decided to settle down, Brian would never let his brothers hear the end of it.

"Thanks, Mom." Face falling, Crane felt like he was going to bawl. Again, damn it. He'd said it on reflex, with teasing affection, and now all he could think about was Daniel, trapped within his nightmarish hell, nine years old again and asking for the parents he'd never see again.

"Hey, stop it," Brian said, slinging his arm across Crane's shoulder and yanking him in close. "We talked about this, remember?" All Crane could do was nod. Despite Brian flooring it the whole way, they had talked about those heart-wrenching moments with Daniel before the cavalry arrived. "We know his head is messed up, all right? But that doesn't mean he's stuck there."

"Yeah, you're right," Crane replied, still afraid for Daniel and the wretched state of mind he'd been lost in. But more than willing to let his big brother's unshakable optimism give him hope that Daniel was going to fight.

"Besides, after everything we've seen Dan'l accomplish today, do you honestly believe that kid isn't going to win this fight too?" It was as though Brian was reading his mind.

Crane smiled at that, belief in Daniel's fortitude beginning to work its way into his heart. Worry was still holding court though. "They should be here by now, shouldn't they?"

As if on cue, and saving Brian from a response, two distinct sirens could be heard nearing the hospital. Despite leaving the ridge after the ambulance had sped off, having taken one of Brian's many back-road shortcuts, they had arrived first. By only five or ten minutes probably. To Crane it still felt like hours.

As the ambulance pulled up to the emergency department doors, the brothers stood in unison, the blanket falling off Crane's shoulders and pooling onto the waiting-room couch. Brian had hold of Crane's sleeve and Crane couldn't help but wonder which of them the gesture was meant to keep from moving. Lord knew Brian wanted to rush out those doors and see Daniel as much as Crane did. They both knew better than to get in the way of the medical personnel hovering just inside the ambulance bay though. When the sliders did open, and the hospital staff converged on the gurney as Adam and the medics rolled it through, Crane just barely caught sight of Daniel. His kid brother was covered with more equipment, wires and tubes, and his hair now looked drenched in sweat. Under the harsh hospital lighting, Daniel appeared drained of all color and most certainly unconscious. And all of that coalesced to strip away any of the burgeoning hope Brian had instilled in Crane.

Adam looked worse, if that was possible. Pale and strained and so much older than his 27 years, and Crane completely understood why. Watching Daniel suffer out on the ridge had aged Crane too.

Adam was helping guide the gurney, though Crane was pretty certain he caught a glimpse through the bodies surrounding Daniel of his oldest brother's hand grasping Daniel's. He prayed that Daniel knew his big brother was with him. That they all were.

"Oh, no."

He'd been so intent on trying to see his hurt brother, it took Brian's words and hesitant steps toward the group for Crane to realize that the clamor buzzing in his ears was actually a collection of individual voices. Specifically Hank and Gabe reporting Daniel's condition to the E/R staff. Oh, dear God. Did someone say "seizures"?

"Sir, you can't come through here." There was no hesitation in Brian's steps this time as an orderly blocked Adam from following the rest of the group disappearing through the swinging doors.
Brian was on the move and Crane, unable to dwell on what he prayed he hadn't just heard, followed instinctively on his heels. Adam looked so unbelievably tense, Crane was a little fearful that violence was about to ensue.

Apparently Brian had the same thought since it was he who swiftly grasped their brother's bicep in a strong grip and veered him away from the doors separating them from Daniel. Practically snarling, Adam tried to shake him off and this time Crane was certain his tightly wound brother was going to take a swing. With Brian not giving an inch, Crane stepped into range, placed his hands on Adam's shoulders and implored, "Adam, stop. We can't help him in there. You know that."

Adam relented, deflated really and, as Brian let go, Adam raised his arms up over his head, clasped his hands behind his neck and spun away from his brothers. The image of helpless misery. He walked away, but only for a few strides until he could regain the composure Crane knew he demanded of himself as head of the family.

"Adam?" Brian spoke, sounding scared for the first time since their family's ordeal had started. And Crane felt for him. As second oldest, Brian's only true rock was Adam. And Adam looked like he'd just been dragged through Hell.

His head lowered, still not meeting their eyes, Adam spoke – hoarsely. "He had a couple of seizures just before we got here." Finally looking at them, Crane almost wished he hadn't. His big brother looked utterly crushed, unshed tears in his eyes when he said, "I... I just don't know."

Crane wanted to comfort Adam, he truly did. But he was just so unnerved by the hopelessness shrouding his big brother and feeling so overwhelmed, he didn't have it in him.

Leave it to Brian to come through once again. Stepping forward, he held out his arms and Adam took over from there, hugging Brian and pulling Crane into him as well. They were all a mess but Crane drew strength from their embrace, their unity, and knew that his brothers would do the same.

They broke away from each other when the unmistakable sound of the automated doors sliding open announced the arrival of the rest of their family. Deputy Sykes, following behind them.

"Adam!" Guthrie's attempt at a whisper raised the heads of the other lost souls in the E/R's waiting area no doubt hoping for news about their loved ones too. Sympathetic looks were thrown in their general direction as Adam quickly grabbed up Guthrie into a hug. Hannah, Ford and Evan entered at a more reasonable pace though deep concern was etched on all their faces. As soon as the family united, the expected barrage of questions began.

"How's Daniel?"

"What's goin' on?"

"What happened?"

Adam answered, putting on an ill-fitting mask of calm Crane hoped the boys wouldn't see through. "It's too soon to know anything yet, guys. We have to wait."

When silence followed Adam's news, the deputy stepped forward and cleared his throat. Removing his hat, he fussed with its brim momentarily before announcing his departure. "Well, I'd best get on my way, folks."

"We're obliged to you for bringing them in, Ed," Adam said, having the wherewithal to shake the man's hand as Hannah encouraged the younger boys to give their thanks too.
"Well…" he trailed off awkwardly, never one for many words. Sykes ultimately just shrugged his shoulders and offered his best wishes to Daniel and the family before replacing his hat and walking away. Once at the sliders, he paused though, turning back to the group. "Say, Brian?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Do I want to know just how it is that you got here before I did?"

"No, sir."

"Didn't think so."

"All right guys, come on over here." Spying a corner of the waiting-room with vacant seats, Adam led his family over to it, knowing he could no longer put off telling their youngest just how serious the situation was. If only he actually knew what the hell was going on. Since Daniel had been separated from them, no one from the hospital had come out from behind those ominous swinging doors emblazoned with: "No Entry - SRH Personnel Excepted" to tell them a damn thing. For all he knew Daniel could be… No! He couldn't go there. Especially not when he had to face the kids right now.

"Adam, what's going on with our brother?" Evan asked, or rather demanded, while the family settled themselves on couches, the floor and against the wall. Despite how exhausted they all appeared, Adam couldn't help but think of story-time around their house back when the boys were all so much younger. Only the tale Adam had to tell tonight was far from a bedtime story. God, he prayed it would have a happy ending anyway.

He decided to stick to the basics and leave the most horrible details out. For now. Until he spoke with a doctor he didn't truly know what their ramifications were anyway. "Guys," he said solemnly, looking directly at each of them before continuing. "While the paramedics were checking you over after we…" He stopped himself. "After Daniel got you out of the mine, he collapsed."

"What?"

"No way. He was fine down there!"

"But how?"

The onslaught returned but before Adam could say anything, Crane spoke up. "Hey, slow down, all right?" He admonished, his voice getting sharper as he snapped, "We know he looked okay but apparently he wasn't."

As soon as Crane started speaking, Adam could hear the guilt and fear surfacing in his tone. Adam knew all too well how hard it was to think about what was happening with Daniel, let alone say it out loud. Brian must've sensed it too because he quickly stepped forward from where he’d been leaning against the wall and placed a supportive hand on Crane's shoulder and left it there. Hell, Adam was feeling the strain himself. But he wasn't going to let Crane do the talking here, it was his job.

"Boys…” Waiting until they returned their attention to him, he continued. "It looks like Daniel got hurt when the mine first collapsed. But he didn't tell us—"

"Why?" Guthrie interrupted.
"Because he was more worried about us." Ever insightful, Ford sounded heartsick.

Adam leaned forward to where their two youngest were sitting on the floor and, cupping his hand under Ford's chin, he admitted. "Yeah, that's what we think too, kiddo."

"Is he conscious? Talking?" Evan asked, worry raising the pitch of his voice.

Adam didn't know how to answer that. Thanks to those god-awful seizures, Gabe had been forced to sedate Daniel. He decided to go with, "They gave him something to knock him out but, yeah, before that he was awake and talking." From his periphery, Adam could see that Brian and Crane had both leaned in at that, exchanging glances in a silent conversation only privy to them.

"What did he say?" Guthrie asked, though Adam knew everyone wanted to know. Including Hannah, silently sitting next to Adam on the arm of the chair and who'd slipped her hand into his while he'd been talking.

Reaching out and settling a hand on Guthrie's head, Adam tried to tamp down the fear in his heart as he let his pride in Daniel out, and answered thickly, "He asked about you three. He wanted to make sure you were okay."

Crane seemed to relax just a little at that news, his relief evident to Adam as he settled back into the couch. Brian too, who affectionately bumped shoulders with Crane when he came around and sat down next to him. Adam could understand for the most part. After all, the last version of Daniel they both had seen was the unresponsive one. Still, there was something else going on.

Catching Brian's gaze, Adam raised an eyebrow but Brian shook him off.

Adam didn't think so. It was bad enough that no one from the hospital was talking to him. "Brian—" he persisted, his tone clearly pulling rank.

And then it didn't matter. Suddenly the doors were opening and Hank, Gabe and one of the nurses were walking through them. Finally, he prayed, some news about Daniel.

Crane leapt to his feet, ignoring how lightheaded he was feeling, as he and the rest of his family moved to meet the paramedics and nurse part way.

"Hank—" Adam started, before Crane or any of the others had the chance. But they were all silenced when the medic raised his hands, giving them the universal symbol for "quiet".

"Hold on, guys," Hank said. "I know you're all anxious to hear news but they're still running tests."

"Mr. Lungren's right, Adam," The nurse agreed, her familiarity with his brother jogging Crane's memory. "It hasn't been fifteen minutes, though I know it probably feels longer."

Fifteen minutes. It couldn't be. God, it felt like days since Daniel was rolled past him through those doors. Given the bewilderment on his siblings' faces, Crane was certain they all felt the same.

"What tests, Miz Raymond?" Brian asked and, instantly Crane recognized the older woman. Her son Ron had played sports with both Adam and Brian back in school. Crane took comfort in knowing that someone who knew his family was involved in Daniel's care. Hell, he'd take whatever comfort he could get.

"All the routine ones plus a few extra, Brian," she said. "And please, call me Diane. You're not
Ronny's playmates anymore," she added warmly. "As soon as the CT scan results come in, the doctor will be out to speak with you."

"And just how long will that take?" Evan's question had the distinct ring of annoyance to it. Crane had to admit he felt the same way even if he did smirk just a little when Ford elbowed his brother in the ribs.

"Shouldn't be too much longer now, sweetie," Diane answered, taking Evan's attitude in stride. "In the meantime, according to Mr. Lungren, I understand we have three celebrities amongst us who need some tending to as well."

To say she was met with opposition would have been an understatement. The three youngest McFaddens all protested and Crane couldn't blame them. They were all anxious for news about Daniel and, other than a few bumps and scrapes, they seemed perfectly fine. Then again, the same could have been said for Daniel just an hour ago. No; better safe than sorry.

Adam must've been thinking similarly and, with Brian and Hannah also on board, the boys were outnumbered.

"They'll need some adult supervision," Mrs. Raymond said, much to the irritation of the kids she was ushering with Gabe's help down the hall.

"I'll go," Hannah offered, and Crane felt guilty as hell for not stepping up himself. He just couldn't leave though. Couldn't when news about Daniel was so imminent. He knew Adam couldn't go. Their oldest might not technically be Daniel's guardian anymore but, as head of the family, he was next of kin and had to be here. And Brian had been going that extra mile, looking after Daniel and then Crane, since the rescue operation had first begun.

"No, I'll go," Brian said, proving Crane's point. "I'll have an easier time wrangling them than you will," he continued, the ring of humor in his tone ensuring that Hannah wouldn't take any offense. Brian was insistent though and Crane couldn't help but wonder if leaving Hannah behind to stay with Adam was his brother's ulterior motive. After all, she was his rock.

Damn.

Shame finally got the better of him so Crane grudgingly volunteered. "I should go. You've been on chaperone duty all night."

Brian was shaking his head before Crane could finish. "The only thing you're doing, partner, is planting your ass back on that couch." Looking to Hannah, he said, "Make sure he does, all right? And see if you can get him to eat. He's out on his feet."

So, apparently Crane was outnumbered too. But, since sticking close to Daniel was foremost on his mind, he really didn't mind all that much.

"You sure you won't finish it, hon?" Hannah asked Crane as she gathered up the barely touched sandwich in its wrapper from the table beside him. "It couldn't have been that bad," she teased half-heartedly before shooting a worried glance at Adam when Crane just shook his head.

Adam had watched with a whole lot of pride and a hint of amusement as Hannah tried to coax his brother into eating one of the sandwiches she'd picked up from the cafeteria downstairs. His wife had clearly taken heed of Brian's concerns and feeding Crane had become her latest mission. As stubborn as she was though, Crane's despondency was greater. And that had Adam worried.

Something had broken in Crane up on that ridge when he was alone with Daniel, and Adam
needed to get to the bottom of it. He couldn't recall his brother ever seeming so fragile, so vulnerable. Not since their folks had died. Of course he completely understood how much Daniel being hurt like this would devastate Crane. God, listening to Daniel frantically scream for his brothers during the ride to the hospital had been hell for Adam. Watching those seizures had been infinitely worse.

Still, there was something else going on with Crane, something that had shaken him to his core. And though Adam was loathe to say or do anything that would make Crane feel worse, he needed to know what had happened. So that he could help. He supposed he could wait until Brian got back and ask him. He was obviously in the loop. But that could involve the younger kids, something Adam wanted to avoid. They already had one brother to worry about.

"No, thanks anyway," Crane barely whispered, his answer almost an afterthought.

Tenderly running her hand through his hair, Hannah replied, "Okay, you let me know if you change your mind," then settled her hand briefly on his shoulder before returning to sit next to Adam.

Adam clasped her hand, giving it a squeeze as she settled against his shoulder. He whispered his thanks, lifting his arm so that she could nestle underneath it but instead Hannah straightened up, mouthing, "talk to him" and giving him a little push for emphasis.

Adam knew better than to ignore her. Especially when she was right.

"Okay," he said and Hannah leaned in, kissing him long and slow and gentle. Fortifying him. As though he was heading for battle and not simply moving two feet away just to have a conversation with a brother he could typically talk to so easily.

Getting up, and suddenly feeling aches in his arms and shoulders that no man under thirty ever should have, Adam crossed the space between them and sat down next to Crane. Crane's head was lowered in exhaustion or prayer, Adam didn't really know. Probably both, he decided.

Settling a hand at the base of Crane's skull, Adam could easily feel the tautness there. Crane had labored in that mine too but Adam knew this tension came from stress and worry more than anything else. Gently massaging the corded muscles, Adam lowered his head too, trying to make eye contact with his unusually distant brother. "Hey, talk to me. What's going on in that head of yours?"

"I'm okay," Crane answered unconvincingly. "Just worried, you know?"

Yeah, Adam did know. Just like he knew when this brother was being evasive. "No, it's more than that," he asserted. "What's with the ESP going on between you and Brian?" Another time he might've joked about that being more Crane and Daniel's trick. But that would hurt too much right now.

Crane did snort a little anyway, a hint of a smile curving his lips. Looking a little chagrinned, his eyes sought out Hannah whose gaze met his with encouragement and warmth. Turning back to Adam, he exhaled a shaky laugh, saying, "Nothing. I was just freaking out for a while."

"Join the club, kid," Adam said warmly, dropping his arm around Crane's neck and pulling him in until their temples touched.

Crane didn't resist and responded with another tremulous laugh. "Touché."

Heartened by the fact that Crane was loosening up, relaxing a bit, Adam forged onward. "So, talk."
Crane stilled for a moment, looking pensive. "Yeah," he said, mostly to himself. As though he was working his way up to the conversation. He pulled away, sitting up straighter as he dragged his hands over his face. When at last he looked at his oldest brother, Adam was ready. He hoped.

"You said Daniel was talking in the ambulance." Adam wasn't exactly sure where Crane was going with this but he nodded in response. He was even less certain when Crane almost meekly followed with, "Did he really ask for the boys?"

Adam swallowed hard. Daniel screaming hysterically for them was the whole truth but, no way was Adam about to share that, especially right now. Crane was looking so hesitant and vulnerable again, he couldn't. Instead he offered, "Yeah, Crane. He did."

"Like he was back at the mine?"

Adam exchanged a confused glance with Hannah before answering with the obvious. "Sure. Where else would he be?"

Crane dropped his head again and laughed. Only this laugh sounded guttural and awful and sickly. And with that, husband and wife shared expressions of concern. Ones that only deepened when Crane answered with, "Not where but… when?"

Adam felt his stomach flip, sensing where this was heading and dreading it. He'd been determined to get his brother to talk through and wasn't about to back off now. Besides, if what he was thinking was true, then he needed to help Crane work through it.

"I don't understand, honey…" Hannah didn't have the history. All of it anyway. So she softly asked Crane the question that couldn't get out past the tightness in Adam's throat. "What do you mean when?"

"Oh…" he breathed. Shaky again. "When he was with me, back on the ridge, he was really messed up." The memory clearly so difficult, Adam rested his palm on Crane's back as Hannah reached across the gap and placed her hand on his knee. "I think by the time we made it to the truck, he was someplace else. I don't know. Maybe it was all the guilt and the fear he'd been carrying around but… he was back there again." Light hazel eyes full of pain locked with Adam's as he said the dreaded, all-too-familiar words. "That night."

"Oh, kid," Adam sighed, curling his arm around his younger brother and pulling him in.

That was the thing about defining moments like the night their parents died. They were so monumental, so life-changing; they made a would-be cryptic reference like "that night" flash its meaning in neon. Even Hannah knew or at least sensed it. Her arms wrapping around Crane's shoulders as she slid in between him and the armrest proved that.

Adam could only pray that tonight would never, ever be referred to as "that night" in the future.

Crane straightened up; shifting to allow Hannah more room to sit next to him and Adam let it happen, even though he wanted nothing more than to hold him like he had the twelve-year-old Crane from... that night. No wonder he was looking so broken and vulnerable. If Daniel had been reliving the loss of their parents, poor Crane had been drawn into that awful memory too.

But, since Adam hadn't sensed Daniel's mind being anywhere other than in the very recent past, he hoped to convince Crane he was wrong. Repeating his thoughts aloud, Adam said reassuringly, "You know, I honestly didn't get any sense of that when I was with him. What makes you think he was there?"
Relief flashed briefly across his face but then Crane shook his head, his expression falling. "No, he was there. Asking for them and…” his voice trailing off and so obviously drawn into the heartbreaking memory. Only Adam wasn't sure which one.

Meeting Hannah's tear-filled eyes across Crane's downcast head, Adam smiled sadly as she entwined her fingers with Crane's. Adam reached for his other hand, encircling it more forcefully and squeezing it. Grounding him. "Hey, it's okay," he said. Though Adam knew it wasn't.

"They didn't come, of course," Crane continued, laughing bitterly once again as slight tremors coursed through him. "And when they didn't, he asked me if they were mad at him and then kept saying how sorry he was."

Oh, damn. Yeah, Crane was right.

Looking at Adam, Crane's eyes filled as he finally shared his worst fears. "God, Adam. I couldn't pull him out of it and that scares the hell out of me, you know? If he's stuck there – stuck then – how's he supposed to be strong enough to survive this too?"

"But he wasn't there, sweetheart. You heard Adam, Daniel was already coming back," Hannah said confidently as she tenderly held his face. And Adam fell in love with her all over again. Too numb himself from Crane's words and the memories they evoked, Hannah was stepping in when he couldn't.

Until he could. "Hannah's right, kid." Mustering all the confidence in his heart and every ounce of faith he had in Daniel's strength of will, he continued. "When he was in that ambulance he was back, I promise."

"Okay, sure," Crane sighed, but Adam didn't hear a lot of conviction there.

"Hey, look at me," Adam insisted and didn't carry on until their eyes met. "As for Daniel's strength? You know better than anyone how stubborn he is." That earned Adam a smile. A weak one, but he'd take what he could get. "Don't count him out. Not when he's got all of us fighting to hold on to him. Not Daniel, all right?"

"Daniel McFadden's family?"

There were two doctors standing before them now.

And Adam prayed he wasn't about to become a liar.

_To be continued._
This is the second time I've mentioned a Doc Mayer so far in the story. He was actually the doctor Hannah visited during "Winter Roses" and I'm making the assumption that he was the family's doctor and not her OB. Let's run with that, shall we?

"I'm Adam McFadden, Daniel's brother."

Crane marveled at how steady his brother's voice was. Hell, when those two grave looking doctors had come through the swinging doors saying Daniel's name, it took both Hannah and Adam on each arm to get Crane's legs to cooperate and stand. God, he couldn't remember ever feeling this scared.

The older of the two men spoke first, introducing himself as Anthony Romano, the E/R doctor and the one to first check over Daniel. And then he asked, not for the first time in the last near decade, if Daniel's parents were present. Like that wasn't a kick in the teeth after Crane had just bared his soul about Daniel's frame of mind. He must've made a sound, maybe he'd groaned or something, because the next thing he knew, Hannah had slipped her arm back through his.

"We lost our folks about ten years ago, Dr. Romano," Adam sighed, slipping into a spiel familiar to every McFadden brother that had ever found themselves in 'Emergency'. Which, come to think of it, included every one of them. "I'm head of the family; legal guardian of the minors." Still remarkably calm, Adam introduced Hannah and Crane before finally asking what they all needed to know. "How's Daniel?"

"He's a very sick boy, Mr. McFadden." The understatement of the year as far as Crane was concerned. Acknowledging the other doctor, Romano continued, rattling off, "Given his symptoms, initial history and assessment by the paramedics, we called in Dr. Lee, from Neurology for a consultation. Though I've been involved in his assessment and getting your brother stabilized, Dr. Lee will be taking over from here so I'm going to have him update you."

"Gentlemen, Mrs. McFadden." The other doctor began. "As my colleague indicated, we have a very sick young man on our hands and, with a head injury; time is of the essence in treating him."

Crane spoke up then, suddenly irritated. "Well, what exactly are you waiting for?"

Apparently unruffled by the outburst Crane immediately regretted, the doctor continued. "Your consent is in fact why I'm here."

"Consent for what?" Adam asked, no longer sounding calm.

"Mr. McFadden, CT scans have confirmed that your brother has a subdural hematoma... bleeding between layers of membrane surrounding his brain. This is causing pressure on the brain that we need to monitor and alleviate."
"And how would you go about doing that?" Hannah asked, sounding about as uneasy as Crane felt.

"By using an intraventricular catheter which will both monitor intracranial pressure and allow for drainage," the man replied coolly, sounding as though he was talking about the weather.

Crane, on the other hand, wasn't as composed. "You want to insert a catheter into my brother's brain?"

"Yes, and there are additional procedures we need to discuss, I'm afraid."

Oh, God. This was too much.

Turning his attention to Adam, the doctor carried on seemingly by rote. "It's my opinion that your brother would benefit strongly from medically inducing a deep unconsciousness and, with your permission, I'd like to initiate that immediately along with administering mechanical ventilation."

Adam, looking as tense as Crane could ever recall seeing him, finally spoke. "Look, Doc. Anything to help Daniel, all right. But give it to me in plain English, please."

"Of course," he responded, sounding a little more human. "In my experience, I've found that medically inducing a controlled coma will give the brain a break, allowing it to rest and to heal. By keeping it from doing much work, hence the addition of a ventilator, the pressure on the brain should ease as well, reducing the risk of any or further brain damage."

"Brain damage?" Crane asked; fear stealing his voice.

The doctor must've seen how appalled they all looked because his face softened further. "Look, let's not get ahead of ourselves, all right? I know the words are horrifying as is the idea of a coma." He had that right, Crane thought. "But neither has to be. I want you to think of the news stories you've heard about drowning victims in icy water conditions that have pulled through remarkably well. In essence we'd be creating similar circumstances."

Yeah, sure. A walk in the park. Crane felt sick.

"So what if the pressure doesn't decrease?" He asked, surprised he was capable of saying anything coherent.

"I'm an excellent neurosurgeon." Dr. Lee answered confidently, almost arrogantly. Crane decided he liked that trait in a neurosurgeon. He liked what the man had to say next even more. "But, again… let's worry about that bridge only if we have to cross it."

It was damn hard not to though. For Adam too, obviously, since he asked what was on the tip of Crane's tongue. "Doctor, is Daniel going to come out of this coma?"

"I believe so, yes." Again with the cockiness. Yep, Crane was fine with that.

"Is Daniel going to be Daniel when he does?" Hannah. Crane wasn't sure whether he wanted to bless or damn her insight.

"It's my hope that he will," Dr. Lee answered with a lot more compassion than confidence. And that scared the hell out of Crane.

"Can we see him?" God, even Crane knew he sounded about twelve right then. He knew what the answer would be but couldn't help blurring the question anyway.
"I'm afraid there's no time." Lee spoke almost apologetically, adding, "He's been heavily sedated due to the seizures anyway. He wouldn't know you were there."

But I would, Crane thought, forcing down the desperate sob that wanted to escape from his throat.

Adam returned from the nurses' station, hands still trembling after signing the consent forms he'd been given.

The signatures were just a formality, Dr. Lee having turned on his heel and pushed through those doors shouting orders the instant Adam had verbally okayed him drilling a hole into Daniel's brain, letting a machine breathe for him and putting him into a coma.

Oh, dear God. What had he done?

"Adam?" Crane called out to him and then was suddenly in front of him, in his face, gripping his arms and then holding him up as Adam felt the room grey out all around him.

Oh, crap.


Crane was right, so Adam allowed his brother and Hannah, who'd just as unexpectedly appeared at his side, to lead him over to the couches his family had commandeered earlier.

"Here." Crane handed him a cup of water, and though Adam wasn't sure he'd be able to keep it down, he accepted it. He knew his wife wouldn't let him get away with anything otherwise.

"Thanks," he said, taking a hesitant sip and then guzzling it down. He hadn't realized how parched he'd become. Apparently utter terror sucked the moisture out of a person.

"Let me get you a refill," Hannah offered, lightly brushing her fingers along his as she claimed the empty cup from him and headed over to the nearby counter. Adam watched her gracefully walk away. He knew she had to be as exhausted as the rest of them but there she was, still looking after him; that delicate touch even helping to ground him. He was so grateful he had her by his side.

"You okay?" Crane asked, interrupting his thoughts and jarring Adam back to reality.

"God, no," he confessed, feeling more than a little guilty that he was letting his younger brother see how wrung out he was. As head of the family, Adam needed to stay strong. Funny thing though, Crane seemed to be holding up better ever since he saw Adam falter. Adam supposed it gave his brother something to focus on other than his own fear for Daniel. That was reason enough to keep his mask off. For now.

"So, what did Romano have to say?" While Dr. Lee had headed back to get started on Daniel, Dr. Romano had walked with Adam to the nurses' station.

Hannah was making her way back, so Adam withheld his answer until she could join them.

"Thanks, girl," he said as she handed plastic cups to both brothers and squeezed in beside him again. Adam explained that, though inserting the catheter was a relatively quick and straightforward procedure, it still required an operating room and everything else that went with it. "They'll put him on the ventilator then too," he continued, deciding not to disclose to Hannah and Crane all the other invasive monitors and catheters Daniel's young body would be subjected to. There was actually a part of him very grateful that Daniel was unaware. "They figure it'll take
about an hour and then he'll get moved into a post anesthesia recovery room. We'll get to see him then."

"Finally." Crane breathed, sounding every bit as relieved as Adam.

"Once he gets moved into Intensive Care, we're going to be even more restricted," Adam informed them apologetically. He understood the need for the rule but, he couldn't help but be disappointed and already feel cheated. After all, Doc Mayer still made house-calls to their ranch and the family was used to rallying together when one of them was down. Isolation just wasn't something the McFaddens were familiar with. At all. Clasping Hannah's hand in his own, he added, "They're not going to let Guthrie see him up there. Kid's going to hate that."

"He can see him when they get him into 'Recovery' then," Crane replied, matter-of-fact. "Before they move him into ICU."

Adam tensed at that. As much as he knew it would upset Guthrie to be separated from Daniel for God knew how long, the idea of their youngest seeing one of his family hooked up to every contraption ever created through medical science turned his stomach. Guthrie was too young. No, it was better to wait. Guthrie might hate him for it but better that than the boy not being able to sleep at night.

"I don't think that's such a good idea, Crane."

"What?" Crane's response was so harsh; Adam could feel Hannah's surprise as it pulsed between their entwined fingers. "You're kidding me."

Adam was too tired for this. Crane had always backed his plays and he picked now, this moment and under these circumstances, to challenge his authority. "No. He's too young." Adam's and that's final was implied. He didn't need to say it.

Except maybe he did. Crane looked livid and, worse, even a little manic.

"Adam, no." The quiver was back in Crane's voice, but he was adamant. "He has to be able to see Daniel. I'll take him in there myself."

Adam sat up straighter. Taller. For the last two days his world had been spiraling out of control. Out of his control. It was time to take some of that back. "I've made my decision, Crane." He kept his voice down but seared his younger brother with an intimidating glare. "It's final."

"No, listen to me," Crane was still fighting him and Adam's hackles were on the rise and, if it hadn't been for Hannah's tight grip on his arm, the argument would have escalated.

Crane abruptly got up and walked away and Adam would've followed, suddenly hell-bent on confrontation, but Hannah wouldn't let him go. Turning on her, ready to snap, she simply returned his harsh look with a determined one of her own. "Adam, stop." And then her eyes filled and Adam was done for. "Look at him," she implored. "Do what he asks and listen to him, all right?"

"Okay," is all he could choke out. Until he had that brother wrapped up in the fiercest of hugs.
"We'll take him in together." Shifting his grip to Crane's neck, he held him still and bored into his eyes. "But no good-byes, you got it?"

"Yeah, okay," Crane replied, dropping his head. "I got it." And Adam took that opportunity to draw his beanpole of a brother's head down further and plant a kiss on top of it.

"Good."

"How is he?" Hannah asked, standing and wrapping her arms around Adam's waist once he returned to her side.

Pulling his wife in closer, Adam replied. "Oh, I don't know. Okay, I think." Though he wasn't entirely convinced. "He's been carrying around a lot more baggage than I realized," he sighed.

They watched as Crane walked away from the waiting area, his steps heavier than his lean, twenty-one year-old frame should ever make. "He's gonna go spell Brian, take over with the boys. Brian needs to know what's going on and Crane said he'd go stir crazy if he stayed here waiting until the procedure was over."

Hannah nodded in understanding. "It'll do him some good. Give him something constructive to do for a while."

They sat down together once again but Hannah didn't settle back. Instead she shifted to face Adam, their knees touching as she clasped both of his hands in hers and gazed intently at him with beautiful eyes he could so easily get lost in. "Honey, about this baggage… I've never asked but…" she started hesitantly, then with more conviction she continued. "I'd have to be blind and deaf not to know that tonight has stirred up a whole lot of memories for Crane and Brian and—" She looked pointedly at Adam, "And you."

Adam dropped his head. He wasn't about to deny it.

"And even Daniel. From what I've heard, it all started with him tonight, didn't it?"

Feeling the sting of tears in his eyes, all Adam could say was, "Yeah. We think so."

"Adam, I don't want to pry but I don't think I can help unless I know what happened that night."

"Oh, girl." He smiled then, lightly touching her face then smoothing his hand through her hair. "Of course you can. You are – just by being here." Drawing her closer, their foreheads touched briefly and when their eyes met once more he said, "But, you're right," adding, "Of course," a little sheepishly and Hannah gave him a sweet smile. "Honey, you're family. I've never meant to keep this from you. It's just, after this many years, the details didn't seem important anymore."

"Until tonight."

"Yeah, apparently so."

Settling back into the couch, Adam pulled Hannah in under his arm as she curled up against his side. And then he began. "Mom and Dad were killed on the road between home and Murphys. It was around this time of year – we'll be comin' up on the anniversary in a few weeks. There was a flash freeze in the afternoon and an oncoming driver lost control of his truck and crossed into their lane." After almost a decade, the pain of the memory was still there and Adam was grateful for the woman in his arms lightly drawing soothing circles on his chest. Her fingers stilled though when he added, "Dad died at the scene. Mom, well, she hung on in the hospital until the next day."
"Oh, Adam, that must've been so hard," she barely murmured. "Where were you and the boys?"

Adam started slightly at the question, puzzle pieces from tonight suddenly clicking together. "We were apart. Brian and I were home babysitting the youngest three and Daniel and Crane were in town still at school. Mom and Dad were heading there to pick them up when they had the accident."

Adam felt sick. He could handle this memory – that wasn't it. Rather, it was how this memory had affected his younger brothers tonight. No wonder Crane was so distraught and no wonder Daniel's mind had gotten twisted up and lost in it. Sitting forward, Adam rested his elbows on his knees as he rubbed his suddenly throbbing temples. Hannah had risen with him and once again he drew strength and comfort from her touch. "Daniel didn't come home on the bus that afternoon with the others. He stayed after school because they had a full rehearsal for the talent contest the next day."

Hannah let out a tiny gasp and Adam didn't blame her. It was all coming together for her too. Guthrie had been living and breathing his talent contest for weeks now. It was on everyone's mind. "Mom and Dad were heading in together to watch. Crane was there too but he was too shy to perform. He'd just stayed behind because of—".

"Because of Daniel," Hannah finished for him. It was true. At twelve, Crane was even less of a tough guy than now. But there was no way he'd get on that bus and leave Daniel behind when the majority of the kids competing were considerably older and definitely bigger than Daniel. "Did they blame themselves for what happened, Adam?"

God, how Adam loved this woman. Gorgeous, smart, kind-hearted and so insightful.

Adam thought through his answer before responding. "If Crane did, I never got any real sense of it. I think he was too focused on Daniel to even consider that." Swallowing hard, Adam remembered. "Danny though… he was so damn heartbroken. At first he didn't understand. Thought Mom and Dad were mad at him somehow because I wouldn't – couldn't – let him see them. And then, after… he took on all the blame. Even though no one would've ever considered placing it on him."

Not like these last few days. When Tom's grief and fear and wrath placed the blame of the mine collapse solely on Daniel's shoulders. And Adam's silence might as well have amounted to the same.

And now Adam was mixing up his memories too. Daniel's guilt-ridden, terrified eyes of tonight and those same eyes from that night. On little more than a baby. "It was bad, Hannah. He was only nine years old and I was still scared that we were gonna lose him somehow."

Hannah looked about as heartsick as Adam felt and he knew that all the pieces had fallen into place for her too. Bless her heart though, she didn't miss a beat.

Grasping both of Adam's hands in hers she waited until their eyes met before she gifted him with more of her wisdom and faith. "But you didn't lose him then, Adam. And we're not going to lose him now."

"We're ready for you."

Crane wasn't. As much as he longed to see Daniel, he was petrified to see him in such a horrible state. He knew he'd have to hold it together though. For the younger boys. Especially Guthrie since he'd fought Adam for the boy's right to see his injured brother.
Crane had taken over from Brian, watching over their youngest as the E/R doctors checked them over. As expected, they'd all been given clean bills of health but, Crane had to admit, hearing it officially had taken some of the load off of his rattled nerves. Just spending time with them had helped. He knew that, just like the rest of them, they were scared and worried about Daniel. Knew that once they found out what treatment Daniel was receiving, they'd feel worse. Still, being with them had helped Crane stay out of his own overactive imagination and focus on them instead of his own fears and the guilt gnawing away at his soul.

One look at Brian once they'd rejoined the family in the waiting area and Crane had known Adam and Hannah had caught him up to speed. Brian had been the most stoic of them all through this ongoing ordeal but, he'd paled by then – still was now. And his jaw was still clenched so tight; Crane could see the muscles contracting beneath it.

So, when Dr. Lee and a young surgical resident had come out to talk to Adam after performing that catheter procedure on Daniel, Crane fought against every impulse in his body to insist on being part of the conversation. He owed that to Brian, and God knew they couldn't have had all of them stampede the doctors. Instead, Adam and Brian had received the update while the rest of the McFaddens watched in rapt silence. At least until the four men exchanged handshakes and Crane's older brothers returned with the news.

The news had been good – relatively speaking. Daniel was stable and the procedures had gone smoothly. No matter what though, he was still in a coma with a machine doing his breathing for him.

And now they would have to wait.

Again.

The next 72 hours were critical. To Daniel's survival, to determine if he'd need surgery, and to hopefully prevent brain damage… if there wasn't any already. And there was that clause again. The one Dr. Lee apparently liked to bring up immediately followed by, "let's not get ahead of ourselves".

Crane couldn't help going there anyway. Memories of Daniel's disorientation on the ridge haunted him. Worse still were the images carved in his mind of a regressed Daniel pleading for his parents.

Regressed. Huh. There went his overactive imagination again.

Adam told him that Daniel had been in the present before his seizures started. Still, until his kid brother opened his eyes, talked with and teased him like they did most every night, Crane wouldn't be able to let go the possibility that his song-writing partner, roommate, and best friend might not come out of this nightmare whole. And, if that were the case, Crane would never forgive himself for missing the signs that Daniel was so badly hurt.

Oh, Adam had relayed what the resident had said about subdural hematomas. That, because there often weren't any outward signs of a nasty injury and, since veins bleed slow with the pressure on the brain building gradually, the symptoms might not show up for a day, a week or more. All of that didn't matter. The inside of a mountain had caved in on his little brother and Crane hadn't spared five minutes at any point in time to check on how he was really doing.

Maybe if Crane had sensed something was wrong, his brother would've had a CT scan that first day. Before any swelling had the chance to risk permanent damage. And maybe then they wouldn't be hedging around the words "brain damage" at all.
"Crane?"

Startled out of his gloom, Adam was standing in front of him, Guthrie tucked close under his arm. Already looking nervous. Shit. Nice going there, big brother, he berated himself.

"Yeah, I'm good," Crane said, gathering his wits as he extricated himself from the couch. "Let's go." He tried to keep his own fear from revealing itself.

The Recovery room wasn't far and the rest of the family moved with them, following the nurse, Diane Raymond again, through a doorway down the hall. They'd take turns, very brief ones since Daniel's bed was ready, waiting for him in the ICU.

Through another door, they entered a room with two beds, curtains cordoning off one of them. Daniel. Adam had eased Guthrie directly in front of him, strong hands resting on small shoulders as he guided him forward. As Diane drew back the curtain, Guthrie hesitated. So did Crane. He could barely hear the nurse's, "It's all right, sweetie," through the roaring in his ears.

No, it wasn't all right. It wasn't all right at all.

But, as Adam coaxed Guthrie to move on, Crane stepped forward too. Beeps and hisses broke through the barricade deafening him and Crane's eyes were glued on Guthrie. He told himself it was because he needed to watch out for their baby brother, make sure he held up. In reality, it had every bit as much to do with the fact that he couldn't face Daniel. Not knowing that he was attached to the sources of all those mechanical sounds.

Guthrie took another step forward and Crane watched as his lips pursed in an odd mixture of concentration and fascination, his eyes traveling along the various tubes and wires connecting Daniel to the myriad of equipment surrounding the bed. His nose creased up slightly and he quickly averted them when his eyes found and wandered along the tube leading from underneath the light blanket covering Daniel to the bag collecting urine. Inching closer, he moved toward the head of the bed, Adam following, and Crane realized the time to truly face Daniel was now.

Oh, Daniel. He was barely recognizable. His face obscured by the ventilator's mask, and the wide bands securing it above and below his ears seemed to distort it somehow. Between that and his unnatural, ashen color, it was almost impossible for Crane to believe his vibrant younger brother was lying there. Daniel was never this still.

The catheter placed high on Daniel's forehead didn't look as horrible as he'd imagined and, for Guthrie's sake, Crane was glad of it. For all intents and purposes, with it meeting the dressing as it did, it almost created the illusion that it wasn't penetrating anything. That a burr hole – that's what they called it – hadn't been drilled through their brother's skull into his brain. The thought of it though… Crane could have just broken down right there and cried.

"Daniel's gonna be pissed."

"What?" Crane asked, his voice coming out only slightly hysterical, though the direction of Guthrie's gaze made it beyond clear that he was referring to Daniel's partially shaven head. Crane and Adam exchanged relieved glances across the bed and, Crane couldn't help himself, he actually smirked. Of all the things to upset Guthrie in here.

Diane caught on too. "It'll grow back soon, honey. I didn't let them take too much off," she winked, as Guthrie's eyes grew wide at the thought. "I know how much attention you young men pay to your looks."

Guthrie smiled approvingly at the nurse. "He'll appreciate that, ma'am."
"We all do," Adam agreed, ruffling their little brother's hair. Then, turning more somber, Adam told Guthrie, "We gotta get a move on, kiddo. Do you want to say anything to Daniel?"

Guthrie nodded abruptly, the severity of the situation seemingly catching up to him now. He started reaching for Daniel's hand then obviously thought twice about it before looking to Diane and asking, "Can I?"

She gave her okay and Guthrie lightly grasped Daniel's hand. Crane swallowed hard, emotions trying to breach the surface once again. He tamped them down, had to for Guthrie, but he couldn't prevent his eyes from filling once his baby brother began speaking.

"Hey, Daniel," he said softly. "I never really got the chance to say thank-you for finding us, so thanks, okay?"

Crane knew he was being ridiculous but he held his breath just for a second as Guthrie paused, praying that his brother in the medically induced coma would wake up miraculously at that very moment. And still felt foolishly disappointed when it didn't happen.

"I know you're real sick," Guthrie continued, his sweet words breaking through Crane's weakened defenses. "So you get some rest and then hurry up and get better, big brother." Unable to keep watching the tender moment unfold, Crane made the mistake of seeking out Adam's face. The tears in his big brother's eyes nearly became his undoing.

He held it together though. Until Guthrie finally spoke the words Crane didn't get the chance to tell his mom at the same tender age as she lay dying in a hospital bed. Guthrie's, "I love you" unraveled Crane and he quietly excused himself from the room, silently promising Daniel that he'd hurry up and get better, big brother. He'd stick like glue once he returned... his little brother's, "was that okay?" and Adam's heartfelt, "it was perfect" warming his soul at the same time his heart was shredded to pieces.

Ford knew he was up next and he felt just awful. Sick to his stomach and more scared than he'd been the whole time they were stuck deep down in that mine. Cave-ins, water leaks and rattle snakes couldn't compete with the prospect of seeing the big brother who'd risked everything to rescue him lying in a hospital bed... in a coma.

Or face the prospect of losing him.

It didn't matter to him that the coma was something the doctors did to Daniel on purpose. Ford might only be fifteen but he was old enough to know that they wouldn't resort to anything so extreme if Daniel wasn't critically ill. Life and death ill. He knew head injuries were nothing to fool around with. Even if they didn't kill a person, they could mess them up bad. Old Mr. Knudsen had to give up raising cattle after he'd had a run-in with a bull, he recalled. And though evenings at the McFaddens rarely included TV, Ford had seen his share of after school specials and news stories about people winding up paralyzed or worse, like vegetables, from brain injuries. To think of Daniel, who could out dance, out ride and even out jump almost anyone Ford knew, in such a state... it was unbearable.

Especially knowing that Daniel should've – could've – gotten help sooner if Ford and his brothers hadn't gotten trapped in the cave-in.

Oh, logically he knew the cave-in wasn't his fault. Nor could he have talked his three brothers out of what he'd known all along was a well-meaning but reckless adventure. He was awfully mad at himself for not even trying though. He'd gotten so caught up in it. Rarely did he feel so included with either Evan or Daniel and their escapades these days. Embarrassed as he was to admit it, he
felt closer in age to Guthrie most of the time. Those two were already grown-ups to Ford, knew what they wanted and were well on their way to achieving it. With Daniel's music and Evan's bronc riding, they were both going to be stars.

And then there was Ford… more comfortable skipping stones at the pond with Guthrie than he was asking a girl to a dance. Sometimes he was so envious, especially of Daniel, he couldn't stand it. It was because Ford loved to sing too. But, where Daniel shone on stage, Ford looked awkward and uncomfortable. Because he was awkward and uncomfortable. There were times when he resented Daniel for that and for other stuff too, like how cool he was around girls. And, because of all that, he'd been giving Daniel a pretty hard time of it lately.

Being in that mine with Daniel had reminded Ford of how much fun having an awesome older brother was.

But now everything might change.

"Crane?"

Brian sounded shocked, or worse, scared and Ford felt Evan stiffen and straighten up next to him. They were standing, leaning against the wall outside the doorway leading them to Daniel. Lost in his own thoughts, when he looked up, Ford's view of Crane was blocked by Brian.

Brian pulled Crane in close, speaking into his ear saying something Ford couldn't hear but when they backed apart, Crane was nodding his head. Clearing his throat, Crane looked at his family and the only thing keeping Ford from shrinking back was that he was literally against the wall. Crane looked rough and shaky and incredibly upset.

All he said though was, "Sorry, guys. Everything's okay." Then, looking a little lost for words, he shrugged, "I mean… no change anyway."

Brian slung an arm across his shoulders, telling him, "It's okay. We get it."

"Sure we do," Evan said sympathetically, relaxing next to Ford. Ford couldn't do the same. He was more frightened than ever to go in that room and see Daniel.

"You want some air?" Brian asked, his attention still on Crane.

Crane looked back toward the door, obviously debating the idea but, with more urging from Brian, he relented. "Yeah, I think so." So, with both brothers promising to be right back, he and Brian headed for the elevators.

"You two okay?" Hannah asked.

No, not at all, Ford thought, though he kept it to himself. Evan answered though, sounding a lot more confident than Ford felt. "Yeah, I think so." So, with both brothers promising to be right back, he and Brian headed for the elevators.

"You two okay?" Hannah asked.

"Especially when it's Daniel," Evan added and Ford had to admit it was true. Not that Crane didn't look out for all of his brothers, and Hannah too. It was just sometimes it seemed like Daniel was Crane's special project or something, the two were so close. That was another thing that bothered Ford sometimes… he felt a kinship toward Crane as the so-called brainy ones in their house. Yet, music bonded Daniel and Crane more.

God, what a lousy brother he'd been lately to have even been thinking those thoughts.
Before Ford could beat himself up further, Guthrie and Nurse Raymond stepped through the door. Guthrie, though a little red-eyed, looked a lot better than Crane had and that eased Ford's mind some. Their youngest did slip into Hannah's open arms though and Ford still found himself bracing for what he was going to see when he followed the lady through the door.

"Come on, kiddo," Adam said, meeting him at the entrance and Ford felt better for the supportive arm that was wrapped around his back.

Until he looked at the bed and what he could see of Daniel beneath the mask and tubes and hoses and, oh God, that thing sticking out of his head. No, into his head. Ford hadn't realized it but he'd stopped moving, only noticing because Adam shifted his grip to his neck and prodded him just a little to keep going. But Ford couldn't budge. He was frozen in place.

Ford must've made a sound, maybe that whimper he'd heard had come from him? Which might have explained why Adam was speaking so softly. Just like he did whenever he first approached newborn foals. "It's okay, go on," he said gently.

Ford wanted to argue, to say he couldn't, but pride and guilt took over and he stepped up next to Daniel anyway. As he lightly touched Daniel's hand, he felt a rush of tears flood his eyes. Blinded by them, he was ashamed to admit that he was grateful he couldn't truly see Daniel right now. And, with that realization another hit him... that he truly couldn't do this. "I'm sorry," he whispered and then the words spilled from his lips again, and then once more, "Oh, God, I'm so sorry."

"Hey, stop it. Don't say that," Adam soothed, his tone only making Ford feel worse. He was a coward and didn't deserve the absolution or the strong hands drawing him into a hug. "C'mere," Adam practically crooned and, worthy or not, Ford gave in anyway. Releasing the light hold he had on Daniel's hand, he turned his back on his sick brother and, with one more whispered apology, surrendered to his weakness. Staying within the refuge of Adam's arms, even as he was escorted away from Daniel and back out the door.

To be continued.
Adam heard voices and activity in the hall outside and reluctantly checked the clock on the bare wall above Daniel's head. It confirmed his fears. Seven o'clock. Shift change. The nurses would be kicking him out of the ICU any minute now. Away from Daniel.

He knew he should count his blessings. The Intensive Care Unit had rules about visitors, after all. But, aside from reaffirming that Guthrie was too young to be permitted beyond the waiting area, the staff had been awfully good about allowing Adam to stay with Daniel. The others too, as long as they limited their numbers to no more than two McFaddens at his bedside at a time.

Adam was on his own now, the others finally succumbing to exhaustion and sleeping in the waiting room. He hoped they were anyway.

Besides, it was easy to stay quiet and not disturb the other patients when you were numb. His energy was sapped and he'd run out of words hours ago… The platitudes he imparted to the younger boys he prayed would come true… The fears he confessed to Hannah and to Brian... The desperate hope he shared with Crane...

The love he whispered to Daniel.

Though that was infinite.

"Mr. McFadden?"

And there was his cue to leave. Just while the night shift briefed the day shift, without the patients' families hovering around. Adam got it. He just didn't like it.

"Yeah, hi," he said hoarsely, as introductions were made. "You're kicking me out, I suppose?"

"Just for a little while," Ellen Bryant, the nurse taking over Daniel's care, answered sympathetically.

Stiffly getting up from the chair he'd resided in all night, Adam nodded in understanding, afraid his voice would give away too much displeasure if he spoke out loud. Then he looked at their patient.
They'd have to wait another minute.

Slipping his hand around Daniel's, Adam bent low so he could speak into Daniel's ear. Willfully ignoring the tubes and wires obstructing the too pale face, Adam whispered his promise to return as soon as he was allowed back. "I love you, Danny-boy," he said then, his lips brushing what remained of his brother's soft bangs before he let go and stepped away from the bed.

Despite his immense fatigue, Adam left the room swiftly. He needed to re-group and to do that he needed a wall to hold him up. Turning the corner, he found the nearest one and braced himself against it. Eyes closed, he leaned his head back, finding the hard surface oddly comforting. He was too drained physically and emotionally to even acknowledge the quiet footsteps approaching him. One eye opened of its own accord though when the enticing scent of coffee wafted beneath his nose. Brian.

"Thanks," Adam said, accepting the proffered cup.
"You okay?"
"No."
"Yeah."

Not surprisingly, Brian wasn't up for a whole lot of conversation either. Mirroring Adam, he stood leaning against a pillar across from him, coffee in hand also. Noting the dark circles under his brother's eyes, Adam doubted that he'd slept much after Adam had banned him from the room. Or Crane had for that matter. At least the furniture had been more comfortable.

Looking past Brian at the uninhabited waiting area still strewn with pillows and blankets from the McFadden invasion of the last night, he had to ask, "Where is everybody?"

"They woke up when things got busy around here," Brian replied. "Headed downstairs for breakfast."
"Good."

Adam didn't want either Brian or Hannah to feel obliged to cook breakfast once they got home. Heck, the fact that the members of his household had actually slept in until seven was testament to how tired they all were. And this had been the second night in a row that none of them had slept in a bed. Despite the protests he'd endured when they'd all settled into this floor's waiting area last night, and the ones he anticipated this morning, he was sending his family home. He was responsible for all of them and looking after them definitely did not include having them camp out here at the hospital.

Whether it was the caffeine already hitting his system he couldn't be sure but, after a few minutes of companionable silence with his brother, Adam was starting to get his legs and wits back. "Anybody get to sleep?" he asked.

"Some," Brian replied noncommittally. Straightening up from his slouch, he added. "The young 'uns were wiped out. They slept like rocks."

"I bet," Adam said fondly. After all they'd been through in that mine and after, it was no wonder. "Hannah?"
Brian surprised Adam with a soft laugh. "Eventually," he responded, shaking his head with a warm smile. "Once she was done fussin’ over everybody she crashed with Guthrie on one of the couches."

In spite of the nightmare they’d all been thrust into, Adam couldn't help but smile too. He was so proud of Hannah. And Brian. The affection and admiration he heard in Brian's voice made his heart soar. Time was when Brian's resentment toward Adam's bride as an interloper in their family went deep. Not anymore though. Brian loved Hannah like a sister and the feeling was mutual.

Adam didn't bother asking Brian about himself or Crane. He could see how little sleep Brian had gotten and Crane, well; all Adam could hope for was that he at least got a bit of rest. Crane had too much going on in his head right now, Daniel's welfare and future at the forefront, but there was other stuff going on too. He knew the memories from that night were resurfacing. Hell, they had for Adam too. And the brothers had something else in common as well. The guilt they were both bearing. Adam knew he had to deal with it, convince Crane he wasn't responsible for missing the signs that Daniel had been in serious trouble. Problem was; the only arguments he could come up with to absolve Crane wouldn't pass muster with his sensitive, over-thinking brother.

And speaking of sensitive, over-thinking brothers… "Did you get a chance to talk to Ford?"

"Yeah, not that it did any good." Pausing to take a final sip of his coffee, Brian crushed the styrofoam in his hand before effortlessly tossing it into a distant waste basket. "He's beating himself up and not just for hightailing it out of that room. Not sure what for."

Adam didn't have any idea either and, as tired as he was, didn't bother dwelling on it. They'd figure it out. Pitching his own cup into the garbage, he asked, "You think he'll want to see Daniel today?"

Brian shook his head. "Nope, he's got Guthrie convinced they won't let anyone under sixteen in to see Dan'l." Adam started to protest, after all the hospital had stated fifteen was fine, but Brian held up his hand. "I know. So does Ford," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "He says it's a show of solidarity for Guthrie. I'm not gonna argue with him about it."

"I sure hope it's not something he'll end up regretting," Adam said grimly, thoughts of Crane churning the guilt and worry weighing heavily in his heart. Adam was solely responsible for Crane never saying a final 'I love you' to their mom. In this case, God forbid it came to that, the choice was Ford's.

Suddenly Brian was right in front of him, in Adam's face. "He won't." His brother's tone and piercing gaze as forceful as the grip he had on Adam's arm.

Adam was going to have to borrow some of that unwavering belief. Lightly patting Brian's neck with his free hand, he willingly conceded, "Yeah, you're right. He won't."

Seemingly satisfied, Brian relaxed his grip and his stance. Then, slinging an arm around Adam's neck, he ushered Adam around the pillar and through the open doorway into the ICU's waiting area.

They spent a few minutes working together quietly, folding up the blankets the family had been given and piling them high in their arms along with the borrowed pillows, intending to return them to the nurses' station. Instead, Brian's load fell carelessly to the floor.

"You aren't welcome here," Brian practically growled and, looking up, Adam nearly dumped his burden as well.
"Tom," Adam said coolly, setting the bedding in his arms on the nearest chair. Tom Barrett was standing before them, hat literally in hand. But, since Adam wasn't exactly sure how he felt about the man's presence, despite how contrite the man looked, he didn't chastise Brian for his insolence. Lord knew Tom hadn't offered Daniel one iota of civility when Jenny had been in peril.

"I understand how you feel," Barrett replied, not backing off in spite of the hostility facing him.

Adam sighed. To give the man his due, he was probably right. Brian clearly didn't care though and, given how rough Tom had been on Daniel, Adam couldn't blame him. Brian kept quiet though, apparently willing to let Adam take the lead for the moment. So Adam asked, "What are you doing here, Tom?"

"We were worried when you all took off looking for Daniel," the older man said sincerely. "Even more so when the sirens started up." Fidgeting with the hat in his grip, Tom looked apprehensively into Adam's eyes. "I drove by the house at sun-up and when I saw that no one was home, I started to get a little scared. Found out through the sheriff's office you all were here." Dread filled his eyes. "Is Daniel all right?"

Brian laughed bitterly and it sounded like it hurt. "No he's not, you son-of-a-bitch."

It was time to intervene. Adam knew deep down that Tom didn't deserve their wrath. But truthfully, Adam's motivation wasn't nearly that altruistic. Rather, Brian's voice was rising and Adam would be damned before he'd let Tom's presence result in any member of his family getting ejected from the hospital. "That's enough, Brian," he said firmly.

Brian looked disgusted. Pointing accusingly at Barrett, he objected, "It's nothing he doesn't deserve." Venom filled his voice when he added, "If he hadn't ridden that kid so hard, maybe he wouldn't be lying there in a coma."

"Dear, God!" Tom exclaimed, shock and horror rendered frozen on his face. "That can't be. He seemed perfectly fine."

"Well, he wasn't."

It was Crane. Sounding cold and dangerous and so unlike him Adam needed a double-take to make sure it really was the McFaddens' third son entering the room.

Crane passed through the stairway door and immediately located the sign directing him to the ICU. He'd been too impatient to wait for an elevator for his return trip to the third floor. He'd left Hannah and the boys at their table in the cafeteria, abandoning her to the argument that had been revisited countless times since Adam had announced he was sending everyone home. Crane's fuse was short and the last thing those kids needed was him yelling at them.

He was in agreement with his eldest brother. Evan, Ford and Guthrie needed to go home, get some rest and clean themselves up. In whichever order they preferred. Or Hannah dictated.

They were already going to miss school today. Better they get some real sleep in their own beds though and start back to school tomorrow, than have them hang around the hospital feeling helpless and spending all their time worrying.

And the ranch certainly couldn't run itself. The stock needed tending, especially since they'd been ignored yesterday.

Adam's arguments were sound. It was just... Crane couldn't fathom the idea of applying them to himself. The idea of walking out those doors and heading home without Daniel made him
physically ill.

He'd have to talk to Adam again.

Walking past the nurses' station, he went to the effort of greeting them. He knew they were being generous with the time the family was getting with Daniel. Still, once his back was to them and he neared the waiting area, the smile slid off his face. God, this was so damn hard. After everything his family had endured since Monday night, they didn't deserve this too. Especially Daniel. He should never have had to suffer at all, let alone this much, for one incredibly well-meaning mistake.

Daniel had such a good heart. Hell, every time Crane heard a Stormy Weathers single on the radio, his own heart would burst with pride. Daniel was responsible for that — for not only helping the singing legend dry out, but for rekindling his desire to write music. As far as Crane was concerned, the man's revitalized career and even his betterment as a human being were almost solely the result of Daniel's tenacity and big heart.

Crane wanted to scream at the unfairness of it all. How could it be that the same generosity and determination had put Daniel in the hospital this time? And with nothing to show for it but a kid tormented by guilt and the vile contempt of his dad's old friend, now lying unconscious with a catheter in his brain and a machine breathing for him.

"Dear God! That can't be. He seemed perfectly fine."

And there he was. Daniel's tormentor. How dare Tom show up here?

"Well, he wasn't." Crane spoke the icy words as he entered the waiting area. Adam looked concerned, giving him a warning glare, but Crane didn't care. It no longer mattered that Tom and Daniel had shaken hands after he'd rescued Jenny. Daniel had been going through hell the whole time Jenny and the boys were trapped in that cave-in and with the way Tom had torn into that kid, he might as well have been the devil himself.

"I— I don't know what to say," Tom stammered. Brian scoffed at that, shaking his head in disbelief. Crane knew exactly what he was thinking.

Seeing red, Crane stalked toward Tom, not stopping until he was in the man's face. Crane had never in his life used his height to intimidate someone but he had to admit, it felt damn good when Barrett backed up a step. "Funny, you didn't seem to have a problem speaking your mind when it came to Daniel yesterday."

"Crane, back off." Adam stepped in between them and Crane did ease up, but only because Adam sounded so worn out and he didn't want to add to his brother's burden.

He agreed wholeheartedly with Brian though when he said, "He needs to hear this, Adam."

And he needs to know what Daniel sacrificed, Crane wanted to add, but all he could do was nod.

"Fine, okay." Adam responded, resignation in his voice. Looking at Tom, Adam suddenly appeared as old as the man he was addressing. Crane knew that was the toll of speaking about Daniel's condition out loud. "Tom, when that mine collapsed, Daniel got hurt bad. " Barrett's eyes widened but he didn't say anything, wisely allowing Adam to continue uninterrupted. "From the minute it happened, his brain has been swelling but, instead of letting us know he was in trouble… instead of going to the hospital, he—"

"Hey…" As soon as Adam started struggling, Brian took hold of his arm. "He's gonna be all right."
With Adam in the best of hands, Crane stepped in to finish for him, fully intending to give Tom a piece of his mind before he was through. But he didn't. Couldn't. Tom looked utterly crushed, every bit his nearly sixty years and then some. And as broken as he had while his daughter's fate was still unknown. Crane saw something else there too. Something he recognized in the old man's eyes that he'd been seeing every time he looked in a mirror since arriving at this hospital...

Guilt.

Good.

It wasn't a very charitable thought and, as soon as he'd had it, Crane knew Daniel wouldn't be happy with him. So he kept it to himself, instead simply saying, "Go home, Tom. Just... just leave us alone, all right?"

Tom did what was asked, offering his and Carey's prayers before retreating and walking away. Crane turned back to his big brothers. Locked in an intense huddle, foreheads touching, Brian was undoubtedly trying to work his magic. Crane knew Brian was as scared as they all were but that wild unbreakable spirit of his, the one that often got him into trouble, was also what fuelled his belief in everything working out. Crane was grateful for it. He only hoped Brian had enough will and faith to go around. Their family needed it now more than ever.

"It's not fair."

Guthrie had been saying that a lot since last night. And Ford felt bad for him, he really did. Being the youngest was tough. Heck, being second youngest sucked sometimes too but at least now Adam would let him drive the tractor or even the truck, on their property anyway. Ford was even permitted beer... in the house only, of course. But, at just twelve, Guthrie had very few of the perks that came with growing up. Ones that sometimes his fifteen-year-old brother didn't even want.

Like being allowed in the ICU.

"I know, Guthrie," Ford said sympathetically, patting his little brother on the shoulder. "But the rules are the rules."

"The rules are crap."

Sometimes they were. But Ford understood the need for them. Not every twelve-year-old was as well-behaved as Guthrie and could be trusted not to disturb patients who needed the quiet. Like the desperately sick and hurt ones in the ICU. And not every twelve-year-old could handle seeing some of the scary stuff on this floor.

Even some fifteen-year-olds couldn't handle it.

Which was why Ford hadn't gone in to see Daniel after they'd all moved up to the third floor. He was incredibly relieved that neither Brian nor Hannah had called him on his lie. When he told an upset Guthrie he wasn't allowed in to see Daniel either, he wanted them to believe it was for Guthrie's sake. So their youngest wouldn't feel so singled out. But the truth was much more humiliating... Ford just couldn't stand the idea of looking at Daniel with that thing in his head. It made him queasy just thinking about it. And he couldn't stomach seeing Daniel hurt so badly that the doctors thought the best thing for him was to put him in a coma. The adult members of his family had avoided that word at all costs, but Ford was far from an idiot. He knew what was going on. And seeing it would only make it all that much more horrible.
God, he was so different from Crane. So much for thinking they had a lot in common. Crane couldn't stand to be away from that room for a single minute. He'd been miserable when Adam had finally kicked him out for good last night. Ford had already fallen asleep by then, but he'd woken up to Brian talking to Crane, trying to calm him down.

Just like Adam was attempting to do now.

By the time Ford, Evan, Guthrie and Hannah had left the cafeteria and caught up with Crane, he and Adam were having a fairly heated, if hushed, conversation in the waiting room.

Brian wasn't there and Ford supposed he'd slipped into Daniel's room when the nurses had given the all clear. Even though Brian had been siding with Adam since the night before, Ford knew their second oldest wasn't happy about leaving Daniel either.

Hannah was on board now, taking Brian's place in the discussion, which was going to doom Crane for sure. It was difficult for any of them to argue with her, harder still for Crane who rarely if ever said 'no' to their sister-in-law. Crane's defeated, "All right, you win," was pretty much a forgone conclusion. But nobody looked pleased about it, least of all him.

Just as Crane gave in, Brian returned from Daniel's bedside and, seeing the argument come to its inevitable conclusion, he apparently decided it was time for them to head home. He tossed Evan the keys to the truck, telling him to pull up in front of the hospital. Brian was acting pretty cool and casual, probably for their sakes as the youngest members of the family. But Ford knew different. Brian had that same look in his eyes that all of the family had whenever they left Daniel's room. Devastation.

And that's why Ford couldn't bring himself to go in there.

It didn't seem to matter to Crane. "Give me five," he said, not waiting for an answer as he immediately headed back toward Daniel's room. He'd be wearing that same look shortly. Then again it was pretty much Crane's permanent expression since last night.

"C'mon, Guthrie," Evan said, walking up behind their youngest and resting his hands on his shoulders. "How 'bout you helping me find the truck."

Guthrie looked longingly at the doorway Crane had just passed through and sighed heavily. "It's still not fair," he protested once again before allowing Evan to steer him out of the waiting area.

Looking around at the exhausted, brokenhearted members of his family, Ford agreed. "No, it's not," he said, mostly to himself.

None of it was.

Crane was out of the truck and heading for the barn before Evan had even shut off the ignition. He felt bad for not saying something to the kid. Evan had stepped up and insisted on driving since he'd gotten more sleep last night than Hannah, Crane or Brian. It was the responsible and smart thing to do and, under normal circumstances, Crane would've been first in line to give the boy praise. Nothing was normal these days.

All he wanted to do was turn out the horses, check on the rest of the stock and get back to the hospital as quickly as possible.

"Crane, hold up," Brian called, sounding more than a little exasperated. Crane didn't slow down. Brian knew where to find him. He came to a complete stop though when he entered the barn. Confusion warred with exhaustion as he stared at the empty horse stalls, his mind unable to
process where they could possibly be. Brian caught up to him then, looking equally dumbfounded.

"Brian! Hey, Brian!" Guthrie chased after them, with more energy than he had a right to, his boots thudding on the plank floor as he entered the barn.

"Whoa, slow down, short-stuff," Brian said, catching him up before he ran into them. "Where's the fire?"

"Hannah wanted me to give you this," the boy replied, thrusting a piece of paper into Brian's hand. "It was on the front door."

Raising an inquisitive eyebrow at Crane, he took the note and stepped out of the shadows, holding it up to the light penetrating the barn. "Well, I'll be," he said, chuckling softly and Crane had to wonder what could possibly amuse him at a time like this?

"What's it say?"

"It's from Ben Johnson," he replied. "Stock's taken care of." Which explained the absence of the horses. Come to think of it Crane might well have noticed them in the south pasture while they were driving past. He just hadn't made the connection. "Says here," Brian continued, sounding a bit choked up, "he and his boys'll keep an eye on the place if we need them."

Crane sat down on the nearest hay bale, relief filling his bones. This. This was why his parents had left the city so many years ago. This was why they wanted to raise their kids in the country. Neighbors like Ben and Noreen Johnson were a blessing. And as much as he could have used the distraction of the honest, hard work the ranch provided, his body was definitely not up to it this morning. "Thank God."

"Yeah," Brian sighed and moved to sit next to Crane.

Guthrie stood there a few beats longer, clearly disappointed that his news hadn't earned him a more animated response. "You guys coming in?" He asked.

"Yeah, in a minute, kiddo," Brian replied. "You go on ahead."

Shrugging his shoulders, Guthrie about faced. By the time he exited the barn, he was at a run.

"How does he do that?" Crane asked; his heart feeling a little lighter than it had in days.

Brian shook his head fondly. "He takes after Dan'l." And Crane felt that crushing weight upon his heart all over again. Daniel always had been a passionate, enthusiastic kid. Though he'd matured a lot by eighteen, especially compared to many of his friends, he still had those qualities. Crane prayed Daniel's passion for life would see him through this ordeal. Crane couldn't lose him. Couldn't even conceive of it.

He felt Brian's shoulder nudge his, followed by, "You need sleep."

Like Brian didn't. Crane didn't say that though. Instead, he said, "I need to get back to the hospital."

"Crane."

Bristling at Brian's tone, Crane felt his temper rising. "No, damn it," he swore. "I never should've let you guys talk me into coming home." His fuse extinguished quickly and all that remained was the desperate fear that was clinging to him like velcro. That Daniel was going to need him and he
wasn't going to be there. "I have to be there, don't you understand?"

This time Brian's nudge was followed by an arm hooked around Crane's neck. "What I understand, little brother..." Brian responded, his voice much more gentle than the grip Crane felt on his neck. "Is that Dr. Lee told Adam they'd be keeping Dan'l under for at least a couple of days." Crane tried to interrupt but Brian flexed his arm, making it perfectly clear that he had more to say. "And when that kid wakes up, he's going to expect to see you right there next to him, just like he has for the past eighteen years."

With those words, Crane felt his eyes fill.

"I'll be damned before I have to explain why your sorry ass is stuck in a room on another floor and not there with him." Brian gave him another squeeze, though this one was tender, and that became Crane's undoing. He laughed then, or maybe it was a sob. Either way, when Brian relaxed his hold, Crane didn't stop leaning into him. "Get some sleep now, partner. While you still can. Okay?"

"Yeah. Okay."

Crane had no intention of letting Daniel down. Not this time.

Adam heard the soft footsteps approaching, knew they'd belong to a nurse, but didn't expect to hear the voice that came with them.

"Got a minute, Adam?" It was Diane Raymond, Daniel's E/R nurse from the previous night. She'd dropped by the ICU to check on the family during her overnight shift and Adam certainly didn't expect to see her again this afternoon. She was in her street clothes though, her soft soled shoes tan not white.

Adam relinquished his hold on Daniel's hand, meeting her where the curtain dividing Daniel's makeshift room from the others was drawn back. "Sure, Diane. What can I do for you?"

She responded with a warm smile. "It's the opposite actually. Scott and I wanted to offer our place to you if you need to shower and change, or to just take a break." Handing him a key and her address written on a note, she said, "We're just a few blocks away."

Adam bowed his head, genuinely humbled by the woman's generosity. If there was one positive outcome to the tragedy and near tragedies that had befallen his family the past few days, it was the outpouring of support they'd received from their friends and neighbors. When he'd called home about an hour after Hannah and the boys had left the hospital, Hannah had told him about Ben and his sons looking after the stock. And that Marie was also sending her handyman out with basket-loads of food from the restaurant that would last even their brood for a number of days.

"Aw, you folks don't have to do that," he protested, though his gratitude was clear. "I haven't even had a chance to thank Scott and Ron for their help at the mine." Father and son had been there along with most of the county, working a different shift than Adam and his brothers, but Adam hadn't missed their presence. He'd just been too focused on rescuing the boys and Jenny to acknowledge them.

"Nonsense," she said, leading him back to Daniel's bedside. "We're small town folk, Adam. We stick together."

"That we do."

"Speaking of which, I'm surprised you managed to send the family home," she said, empathy
written all over her face.

"Yeah, well," Adam swallowed back the bitter tang of betrayal. His own. "They put up a fight."

"No doubt," she practically tsked. "Especially… Crane, is it?"

All Adam could do was nod. He still believed that sending Crane home was the right thing to do. The act had hurt them both deeply though.

"Such devotion," she added, almost to herself. "I would've expected it more from the boys closer to Daniel's age."

"Maybe so," Adam replied, wrapping his hand around Daniel's once more. "We're all close, Diane. It's just…" Adam paused, his thoughts going back to his childhood. He remembered the McFaddens' third born… so much quieter than Brian and him. And unable to keep up to unruly big brothers who fought hard and played hard and never slowed down.

It took Adam a moment to realize his thoughts had become spoken words. He let them flow. "By the time Daniel came along, Brian and I were already in school… leaving Crane behind again." Adam smiled at the memory, though it was a little bittersweet now. "Crane was awesome with him right from the start, gentler than the two of us ruffians could ever hope to be," he chuckled softly. "Anyway, our folks moved Danny in with Crane before Evan was born and, with Ford comin' so soon after, well, she had her hands full."

"I can imagine." Diane spoke kindly, almost reverently.

He was looking at Daniel now, reaching for him until he found the spot where his fingertips could lightly card through the soft hair not bound by the ventilator's straps. "So, Crane took charge of Daniel wherever he could. Didn't he, kiddo?" Adam stilled his hand, remembering once again that he wasn't alone. Straightening up, he cleared his throat, though his words still came out rough. "You see... with Crane, Daniel never had to keep up. Crane was just always there."

Adam saw the sparkle of tears in Diane's eyes and had to close his own, his emotions rising to the surface. Guilt and grief vying for top spot. He felt a warm, tender palm rest against his cheek. "And Crane will be there again when he's needed, Adam. You did the right thing."

Adam knew she was right. He just hoped like hell that Crane would forgive him.

Crane jerked awake, heart pounding against his ribcage as darkness gave way to light. Daniel's desperate cries lost to the nightmare Crane's wakefulness was driving away. Though the dream's specifics were already fading, the raw emotions were still front and center. Terror, helplessness. And worse... loss. He tried to shake the images from his mind but couldn't quite let go of Daniel, trapped in an endless, dark, dank tunnel. Its walls closing in and roof crumbling down. He felt sick.

Abruptly he sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and scrubbing his face with still shaking hands. He was drenched in sweat. So much for the shower he'd taken before finally giving in to sleep.

Dropping his hands he looked around the bedroom, surprised to see a window opposite him and not his brother's Bruce Springsteen poster. He'd fallen asleep in Daniel's bed. Right. After yet another meltdown in the long line of them he'd been having since witnessing his brother's rapid decline.

He needed to get back to the hospital.
"Shit," he said aloud, checking the alarm clock he shared with Daniel, appalled to find that it was almost three o'clock. He'd slept nearly five hours. And, thanks to the workout his nightmares had given him, he didn't feel particularly refreshed.

Still wearing the clothes he'd slept in, he padded down the hall toward the bathroom, carrying the duffel he'd packed before falling asleep. Eldest brother be damned, Crane would be staying at the hospital from now on. At least until Daniel was awake and talking to him, if not well enough to come home.

The shower accomplished what his sleep hadn't. By the time he made his way to the kitchen, he was feeling almost human again. The missing ingredient was coffee, though he knew it would only exacerbate the jitters he hadn't been able to shake since waking from that horrible dream.

As he rounded the bottom of the stairs, setting down his bag next to another Hannah likely packed for Adam, he could smell freshly brewed coffee. As grateful as he was for it, he really wished his sister-in-law wasn't standing there leaning against the counter with a cup of it in her own grasp. He didn't have time to talk, especially if the subject matter was him. He'd done what they'd insisted that morning. Now he was heading back to Sonora.

"Coffee's just made," she said by way of a greeting.

"Thanks," he replied, wanting to say more, though his thoughts weren't as generous as they should have been. Instead of thanking her for her strength and support, all Crane wanted to do was rant about Hannah letting him sleep so long. Though he knew full well it would be futile. Not to mention unfair. Despite her wonderfully maternal nature, Hannah sure hadn't signed on to be his mother. He kept his mouth shut.

Rummaging through the cupboard beside her head, he cursed under his breath, looking for but unsuccessfully finding any one of the thermoses typically stored there. He had every intention of taking his coffee to go.

Hannah stepped away, probably wisely, though when he heard her pour another coffee, he turned back to protest. "No, Hannah, I'm not—"

"Here you go," she cut in, a not-so-innocent smile on her lips as she handed him the thermos she'd just filled up. "I've packed up some of Marie's sandwiches too. They're in that basket behind you."

Apparently his immediate return to the hospital was no surprise to her.

Crane let his head fall. He was so wound up, ready to tear someone's head off, and here Hannah was looking after him. Like she did all of her husband's family. He knew she loved Daniel dearly but was setting her own worry aside for their sakes. Accepting the thermos, he gave her a warm, if somewhat embarrassed smile. "My brother is a lucky man, dear lady," he said, his words too unsteady. "We all are."

Her own smile fell a little and Crane could've kicked himself for letting his emotions show.

Hannah was a trooper though. He watched her blink away unshed tears and smile brightly for him even as she stepped in to give him a hug. "You remind him of that when you see him now, you hear?" Her own quaking voice belied the teasing words though and, when Crane hugged her back, she whispered, "It's going to be okay, honey. We'll get through this and everything's going to be okay."

"I know," he lied, stepping back from their embrace. Hannah laughed lightly, unsuccessfully covering the fact that she was wiping away tears as she reached for the basket of sandwiches for
him to take along. Accepting it from her, her hand squeezed his before she let go of its handle.

"Go on now," she said, lightly patting his back. He didn't need to be told twice. Swiftly turning away, he scooped up the duffels as he walked past them, slinging them both over one shoulder as he tried desperately not to think about her words. The ones that didn't tell him Daniel was going to be okay.

"I love you too, babe," Adam said, meaning every word. Hannah was holding down the fort even though he knew she wanted to be at his side at the hospital. He wished she was here too. But, she'd have her hands full at home, especially convincing the youngest three to start back to school in the morning. He had full faith she could handle it, handle them. Still, he offered, "Just call me if they give you anymore guff about tomorrow."

"Oh, Adam. You know I can handle it."

"That's my girl," he practically crooned, relishing the light laughter on the other end of the line.

Saying their good-byes, he hung up, a blush creeping up his neck to his ears as he caught the approving looks of the nurses working around the nurses' station. The ICU rooms didn't have phones so, thanks to their generosity, he was using theirs.

"Thank-you, ladies," he said, smiling genuinely for the first time in too many hours to count. Dr. Lee had been by to check on his patient. Though Daniel's fate was still uncertain, the doctor's update had given Adam his first hint of hope since watching his kid brother wracked by seizures the night before. Though he understood the neurologist having to impress upon him that it was still too early to celebrate, the man's cautious optimism, as he called it, was news Adam had to share.

Unfortunately his call had missed Crane. Knowing his younger brother's current state of mind, Adam would've much preferred him driving back to the hospital with a lighter heart than the one he'd been bearing. At least he'd finally gotten some sleep. Though, from what Hannah had told him, Crane was still strung so tight, she was worried he was going to snap. Adam knew pulling rank that morning hadn't helped and only added to his brother's misery. He prayed that Dr. Lee's news would ease the strain just a little.

He prayed harder for the recovery that would heal them all.

As he slipped through the curtains screening Daniel from outsiders, he once again achingly took in the scene. This was so wrong. Adam wasn't so naïve as to believe that bad things didn't happen to good people. It happened all the time. Still, watching a machine breathing for Daniel while he had catheters inserted everywhere from his brain to his, well, everywhere… was beyond wrong. It felt downright criminal.

Moving in closer, his hand wrapped around the kid's smaller one almost of its own accord. "It just isn't right," he said aloud, though he hadn't realized it until his words garnered an unexpected response.

"No, it isn't."

Crane.

"Hey." Adam's greeting ignored, Crane's eyes were focused solely on Daniel and, as he approached the bed, he absently set down two duffel bags plus the food basket Adam was expecting from Hannah. Adam stepped aside, releasing Daniel's hand and vacating the premium spot used to access their little brother through all the wires and tubing.
Crane took up Daniel's hand and, leaning in close, spoke softly into his brother's ear. "I'm back, Danny."

Adam swallowed hard, mesmerized as he watched Crane lightly stroking Daniel's hair. The tender moment so intimate, he felt like an intruder. He had a hard time reconciling that thought with the other one in his head… the one where Daniel called him "Dad" and looked to him for guidance and comfort. Reality was closer to what he'd told Diane though, that Crane had claimed Daniel as his nearly eighteen years before. Growing up had only brought them closer, their love not just of music but of creating it together, sealing their already solid bond.

Adam might be head of the family and Daniel's legal next of kin but, as he stood there witnessing Crane's unwavering devotion, he was beginning to realize that somewhere along the way he'd given up the right to banish Crane from Daniel's side. And realized he wouldn't get away with it a second time.

As moved as he was by the scene before him, he was equally aware of the grief eating away at Crane's soul. He knew his news would help alleviate some of it.

"Can we talk?"

"I'm not leaving."

"I'm not asking you to."

"You mean telling me, don't you?" Crane hadn't even looked at Adam yet, his gaze firmly fixed on the kid in bed.

Adam sighed. Yeah, there definitely wouldn't be a second time. "Look, about that," he started, fully aware that anything he said was going to be futile. Except maybe, "I'm sorry. I… I thought I was looking out for you. Doing what's best."

The apology, or its sincerity, broke through the wall of bitterness Crane had erected and Adam sighed again, this time in relief. Crane stilled his hand and then straightened up, unfolding his long, lanky frame before slumping down into the nearest chair. He ran his hands through his unruly hair and Adam took his seat in the one next to him, their shoulders nearly touching, waiting for Crane's response.

It came softly. "Yeah, well don't do it again."

Adam bowed his head, the affection in Crane's tone making his eyes sting. Shifting slightly to face him, Adam rested his hand against Crane's neck, chuckling lightly. "That kind 'a goes against my nature, kid."

A soft snort wobbled Crane's shoulders but, when piercing eyes lifted to meet Adam's, he resolutely said, "I mean it, Adam. You know I always have your back."

He did know. From Crane's unconditional welcome of Hannah into the family, to supporting Adam when Brian was stubbornly sitting in jail over a stupid game of mountain polo, to risking life and limb traipsing around the wilderness in a blizzard, Crane always had his back. The only person he was more loyal to was lying unconscious in that hospital bed. "Yeah, I do."

"Then don't ever do that to me again."

Lifting his hand to lightly pat Crane's cheek, he smiled apologetically and said, "I'll try not to, okay?"
"Fair enough." Crane answered, satisfied, their rift resolved in that moment. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

Adam tried to withhold his enthusiasm, heeding Dr. Lee's words of caution. Still, his lips began to form the hint of a grin as he started to pass on the surgeon's news to Crane. "Dr. Lee was by while you were on your way over here."

"And?"

"And… the pressure's coming down, Crane. The catheter's working."

"What?" It came out more a sob than question and Adam worried that perhaps he had just made a huge mistake. Crane looked as elated as he did shocked.

Grasping Crane's wrist, Adam quickly followed up with, "Hey, listen… it's too soon to know anything definitive." Crane nodded his head, accepting that caveat. "Lee says he's being cautiously optimistic though."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Crane smiled then, his eyes shimmering with unshed tears as he reached for Daniel's hand. "I'll take it."

*To be continued.*
Releasing Daniel's hand, Crane stood up from the chair that was by now leaving permanent imprints on his butt. Stretching out his back, he attempted to loosen up knots and kinks that were every bit as much due to the strain of worry as they were from slogging in that mine.

Adam hadn't yet returned from Diane's place. He'd headed there to shower and shave and may well have lingered outside for some fresh air. Three days cooped up in this place and the walls, or rather curtains, were starting to close in.

Crane shuddered and shook his head, banishing the sudden unwanted images from that horrible dream he'd had that last time he was home. He fervently hoped that Daniel's chemically induced sleep was free of such horrors.

Turning back to Daniel he couldn't help but whisper his thanks. The pressure in Daniel's brain, his ICP – and wasn't he becoming an expert on the medical lingo? – had been steadily reducing. They'd taken him for a CT scan first thing that morning and, so far, everything was going according to Dr. Lee's plan. The doctor had even ordered the staff to begin gradually reducing the amount of pentobarbital flowing through Daniel, the drug keeping him in the coma. And that had been followed by backing down the settings on the ventilator too.

That step had been a little nerve-wracking for Crane and Adam. Even though Daniel had shown no signs of breathing trouble before being put under, Dr. Lee had warned them the drug could cause respiratory depression which might keep him on the ventilator a while longer. But, they'd been more than lucky so far. Though the machine was still hooked up, it had been shut off for almost an hour now and Daniel had been holding his own.

Way to go, little brother.

Now they were just waiting for him to wake up, something Crane was certain was fairly imminent. Though his brother was still wired into more equipment than Crane cared to consider, the ventilator's hissing had stopped. He'd gotten used to the din of the hums and beeps and that constant hiss but, now that the latter was gone, he realized how unnaturally fast Daniel had been breathing while it was doing the work for him. Watching him breathe more slowly had unnerved Crane at first, until he'd realized just how well it matched his own. Just like at home, when Crane couldn't shut off the thoughts assaulting his mind, until he'd let his brother's soft breaths in the bed next to him lull him to sleep.

And though far from restless, Daniel wasn't nearly as still as he had been. In the last few minutes Crane's heart had skipped a beat every time Daniel's hand had twitched under his own, or he'd witnessed movement under eye-lids that had been closed too long. He'd been told not to try to wake his brother, that he'd undoubtedly fight the ventilator. He just wished Adam would get back so one of them could go talk to a nurse. He knew he could use the nurses' call button but, even as his gut was telling him Daniel was waking up, his head was telling him that he was over-reacting to just a bit of movement.

Except... there was another twitch. This time Daniel's foot. Decision made, he pressed the button and then settled back to wait, sliding the chair as close to the bedside as he could. He was afraid to
touch his brother now, afraid of rousing him while that tube was still down his throat. So instead he leaned in close. If Daniel awoke disoriented or afraid, Crane wanted him to see the face of someone who loved him.

Like he'd done already a number of times since walking back into Sonora Regional, Adam stared at his haggard face in a mirror. Satisfied this time that, despite the dark circles under his eyes, he looked more or less like himself. Diane had suggested that he head to her house to clean up and shave, tasks he hadn't given a thought to while his kid brother lay unconscious in the ICU. But he'd run into her that morning, at the end of her night shift and had told her the good news. That, if all went according to plan, Dr. Lee would be bringing Daniel out of his coma later that day. She'd been happy for him, though gently reminded that Daniel might still have a long road of recovery ahead.

He didn't need the reminder. It was the proverbial elephant in the room.

Courtesy of Dr. Lee, his staff, and the reading material provided by their department, Adam and Crane were well versed with any number of potential cognitive and physical problems Daniel might face as a result of the brain injury. And even those that might arise from the coma itself. It hadn't dawned on him at all though that Daniel might not recognize him if he woke to an Adam with four days' growth of beard. It was a sobering thought, scared the hell out of him in fact but, he was thankful to Diane just the same. He'd passed on her advice to Brian when he'd called home a short while ago. Brian had been looking awfully scruffy too and, with the whole family coming to the hospital after the kids got home from school, Adam wanted Brian to know.

Making his way down the corridor leading him back to Crane and Daniel, his heart lodged in his throat when he heard Dr. Lee being paged to the ICU. As far as he knew, Daniel was his only patient there at the moment.

He all but ran to the room.

Adam stopped short at the entranceway, his head telling him that everything was fine, his heart not entirely convinced. There were no alarms going off, nobody was frantically rushing around, and the voices from within were quiet and calm. Still, his heart was thundering in his chest and he realized, with a certain amount of mortification, he was as afraid of Daniel waking up as he had been that he wouldn't.

Because as long as his little brother was unconscious, Adam could believe he was still their Daniel.

And though he'd been told that the Daniel that came to might be miles from the person he would be in a day or week or even months from now, Adam was still scared. He needed Daniel to be okay. Their family needed Daniel to be okay.

Steeling himself to walk through it, Adam held open the curtain; only to have Dr. Lee brush past him.

That was all the incentive he needed. Adam followed him; the words, "I hear our patient's waking up," accelerating his pace.

Manel, the respiratory therapist Adam had met earlier that day was there, as was Ellen, Daniel's day-nurse. She softly rhymed off Daniel's vitals while Dr. Lee reviewed his chart. Adam tuned her out, his attention divided between his two brothers, the one in the bed he could barely see, courtesy of the medical staff and the all-too-familiar equipment surrounding him. The other, pale and scared, radiating tension as both hands wrapped white-knuckled around the railing of Daniel's
Knowing which one needed him first, he slid in next to Crane.

"Hey," he said softly, drawing his arm across Crane's back and settling his hand on his shoulder. "You ready to do this?"

"God, yes," Crane said hoarsely, anxiety etched on his face, though he did lean into Adam before unsteadily adding under his breath, "And, no."

Adam understood. He felt exactly the same.

Drawing his brother in closer, he whispered, "Me too, kid."

"Adam?" Dr. Lee summoned him over, formalities long gone. There were just too many Mr. McFaddens to go around, if for no other reason. Adam moved to the head of the bed, opposite Crane and next to the doctor as he'd been instructed. They'd gone over this procedure earlier in the day. His job was, as always, to be the father figure. To get through to Daniel if he bucked the ventilator and to make sure he felt protected and safe. Crane's job, which would've been funny if the circumstances weren't so tragic, was to be the mom. To help Daniel through the immediate aftermath of waking up, when his emotions were going to be as stripped raw as his throat.

They'd been told to expect an emotionally unstable Daniel when he woke up. Between the trauma of his injury and the uncertainty of his plight, their little brother was going to be at his most vulnerable. Add to that the aftereffects of being in a coma and of the massive, sustained dose of barbiturates used to keep him under, he was likely going to be a wreck.

"Daniel, wake up for me." Dr. Lee placed his palm flat against Daniel's sternum and, with those words; the future of the McFadden family began to unfold.

Adam watched, transfixed, as almost immediately Daniel's lashes began to flutter, his body stirring in increments until suddenly a horrible choking sound came from his throat. Daniel's eyes flew open, terror and pain shining through a film of tears. He began to thrash and, alarms and bells dormant just seconds earlier were now going off in earnest, undoubtedly adding to his panic.

Crane's voice broke through the cacophony, sounding equally petrified. "Help him; he's choking!"

The doctor and Ellen held Daniel down, all the while trying to talk to him but, wild-eyed and unseeing, he fought their restraint.

Screw waiting for Doctor Lee's next cue, Adam immediately shouldered his way in closer so that Daniel could see his face. If only he could get him to look at him, to register anything beyond fear.

Reaching around the ventilator's tubing and cupping both sides of his kid brother's face, Adam held firm, immediately calling out to him. "Daniel, it's Adam. Stop fighting us, you're okay." He nearly shouted it the second time and though he regretted the harshness and fear in his own voice, apparently the shock of the added volume was just what Daniel needed.

Daniel stilled, blinking deliberately before a flood of tears spilled down his cheeks. Pleading eyes focused on his big brother and Adam could have sobbed too, relieved at the recognition shining in their depths. "That's it, Danny-boy. You're doin' great, just breathe around it," he said softly, referring to the ventilator he knew was freaking the kid out. There was no need to shout anymore, his brother's attention was riveted on him and Daniel's breaths were calming.

"Good, good," Dr. Lee said and Daniel's eyes darted anxiously toward the man. "Daniel, I'm Dr. Lee," he said with a gentle calm Adam hadn't expected from the man. "I don't want you trying to
talk at all yet but can you blink once so we know you understand us?"

Adam held his breath but released it, his heart feeling so much lighter when Daniel complied. Daniel recognized him and was able to follow simple instructions. Those were two concerns they could put to rest. Thank God.

Dr. Lee looked satisfied too and, when he turned to the respiratory therapist and nodded his head, Adam knew they were going forward with removing the ventilator.

"That's it, kiddo," he said and Crane softly echoed the same words.

Clearly surprised by the sound of Crane's voice, Daniel looked his way and once again tears trailed down his face. But this time Adam saw relief shining in those dark hazel depths. He felt his own eyes well as Daniel immediately lifted his hand and clumsily reached for his brother. Crane was ready for him, huddling close and grasping Daniel's hand in both of his as he drew it into his chest.

"What?" Crane said, exhaling a quivering laugh as he followed with, "Who were you expecting? Heather Locklear?"

Though the tears were still there, Adam witnessed a beautiful thing. The corners of Daniel's eyes crinkled and too pale skin stretched across flushed cheekbones in an effort to smile. With Crane still clasping his hand, Daniel was relaxing in Adam's hold, the sign they'd been waiting for to get this show on the road.

"Daniel, I need you to listen to me, okay?" Though he hated to do it, Adam kept a hint of command in his tone. "Blink for me, kid." Removing the ventilator was going to be painful and, for Daniel's sake, they needed to get it done on the first attempt. He needed the boy's attention and breathed a relieved sigh when he got it as Daniel blinked once again. "Atta, boy."

With one hand rhythmically stroking his brother's hair, Adam began the lead up to Daniel getting extubated. "You've been awfully sick, kiddo, but you're doing much better now," he said reassuringly. The literature they'd been given reiterated what Dr. Lee had told them that morning, that it was highly unlikely Daniel would remember much if anything about getting hurt. So Adam had been told to keep his explanations short and simple, at least for now. His only mission was to keep Daniel calm. Pointedly shifting his gaze to the ventilator, he asked, "So, how 'bout we get rid of this thing, all right?"

Fear flashed anew in his eyes and Daniel's gaze sought out Crane.

There were times in Crane's life when he cherished the absolute trust and faith Daniel had in him. Most of the time in fact. Yet there were those rare occasions when he considered it a burden. One he'd willingly bear a thousand times over, yet a burden just the same. But that was only because of his own fear of letting his kid brother down. Of failing him.

He'd felt it the first time when their parents had died and Daniel had latched onto him for months afterward. Seeking comfort and, more than that, belief that his world might someday feel right again. His little brother's crushing grief and irrational guilt were issues no twelve year old should ever have tackled; Crane had been devastated too after all. But, in the end, Crane's devotion wouldn't allow anyone even dare try to take the job from him. He treasured being Daniel's champion and his sanctuary.

And as he looked into Daniel's frightened eyes; eyes that the doctors all had warned might not know him, he had to remind himself of that. That he'd signed on for this eighteen years ago. That
when Daniel had something painful to face, he trusted Crane to help him through it. And, more daunting, he believed in Crane's ability to make his world right again.

Removing the ventilator was going to hurt like hell. But it would probably be only the first of many challenges facing Daniel. And the easiest to conquer.

Crane would get him through them all. He had to.

Changing his grasp on Daniel's hand so that their fingers intertwined, he conjured up a smile and, with a confident voice that belied the dread creeping into his soul, he said, "Together; all right?"

Daniel responded with one deliberate blink.

There was that unadulterated trust again. Crane could've cried but instead he smiled again. For real this time. "With you every step of the way, kid."

"Daniel?" The soft British lilt succeeded in pulling Daniel's gaze away from Crane, and the pretty face held it there. Manel Samarakoon, with her dark hair and exotic features, was about as far from Heather Locklear as you could get but equally as attractive. And her accent could melt butter, at least Crane thought so. Daniel would be putty in her hands, a damn good thing considering the misery she was about to put him through. "I'm Manel, Daniel, your respiratory therapist. You're going to be seeing a lot of me over the next few days."

Daniel blinked in response, followed by another attempt at a smile and, when Adam winked at him, Crane was thrilled to see a hint of pink color the kid's cheeks.

Blushing a little herself, Manel introduced Ellen, who would be assisting, and then briefly explained the extubation procedure to Daniel, her words just a few beats ahead of their actions. Crane knew she wanted to do this quickly. The more time Daniel had to think about it, the harder it would be for him to relax through the process. Daniel flinched as Ellen removed the tape keeping the bands for the mask in place and, knowing things were about to get considerably worse, Crane tightened his hold on Daniel's hand.

"Just like at the dentist," Manel said almost cheerfully as she removed the mask that had been covering his nose and mouth for the last three days.

Yeah, right, Crane thought, wincing as Daniel's fingers dug into his own. No dentist in his experience had ever shoved a suction hose that far down his throat. The kid was starting to gag, tears leaking from the corners of his eyes.

Adam kept up a steady litany of encouragement, though Crane could see the strain of Daniel's suffering taking its toll. Adam looked nearly as pale as Daniel.

Continuing, Manel explained the next steps. "I'm going to get it all the way down now and suction you," and efficiently proceeded to do so, forcing the actual breathing tube deep into his windpipe and then manually drawing out whatever fluids were down there. Daniel damn near broke Crane's hand. Despite being shut, Daniel's eyes steadily streamed tears and his nose was running too. The kid's face contorted and turned bright red as he gagged and choked on the invading tube. He was lifting his head off the pillow trying to brace against the pain and Crane wanted nothing more than to make her stop. Stop torturing his kid brother.

And when she did, Daniel actually screamed, or tried to but all that he was capable of was a guttural, muffled groan. Crane died a little then, knowing the tube was still in there. Daniel was already hurting so bad.

"I know, Danny. I know," Adam soothed, laying his hand on Daniel's chest as Crane cradled their
clasped hands beneath his chin and prayed this would be over soon.

It wasn't. Using the suction hose, Ellen cleared out his mouth and throat yet again, prepping him for the hardest part of the procedure.

"We're almost finished," Manel reassured him, letting him know what was coming next. "This time when I go down, I'm going to pull the tube out and, when I say 'now', I'm going to need you to cough as hard as you can, okay?"

Daniel barely nodded, too caught up in his misery to open his eyes and acknowledge her. Both Crane and Adam caught it though, knew he was as desperate as they were to get this over with and was giving Manel the green light to continue.

Ellen moved in around Adam and, avoiding the ICP catheter, she held Daniel's head and chin with each hand in order to keep him steady. Knowing that this would be hell, Crane adjusted his hold on Daniel's hand and from his periphery saw that Adam now had hold of the other. Immediately Daniel's torment began again as Manel fed the tube back down his trachea and the poor kid started to gag once more, his toes curling and fingers tightening as Crane and Adam both tried to comfort him with words that felt utterly useless.

Abruptly Manel told him, "Now," and Daniel let out an agonizing, grating cough, sobbing openly once he finally expelled the tube from his mouth.

Daniel was spent, and Crane was too. Even Daniel's sobs sounded like they were hurting him. Crane wanted nothing more than to draw his brother up into a fierce hug but Manel wasn't done with him yet and Dr. Lee hadn't even started with his exam. Looking at his wrecked little brother in the bed; Crane honestly didn't know how much more Daniel could take. How much more Crane could take.

Ellen and Adam switched places again and, while Ellen suctioned out the crud that had come up with that tube, Adam settled a hand in Daniel's hair once more. Resting it there, Crane knew, to offer what little comfort he could.

"You did fantastic," Manel said with a bright grin. "That was one heck of a workout though, so I'm going to leave you alone now and come back to see you again tomorrow, okay?"

Resigned to his fate, Daniel scraped out, "'kay."

His first spoken word should've been cause for celebration but when it immediately precipitated a series of wracking coughs, it hardly felt like the victory it was.

The coughs sounded excruciating, like the worst case of bronchitis Crane had ever heard, but Manel encouraged Daniel to keep it up. "I know it hurts but the more you cough, the better it is for your lungs." Lightly squeezing his shoulder she added, "You'll be feeling better in a few days, I promise."

Daniel didn't respond, just let his head sink back into his pillow and closed his eyes. Crane squeezed his hand yet again. It was all he could do.

Manel turned to the doctor, confirmed that her next meeting with Daniel would be in the neurological ward the next day. Then, after deliberately telling everyone that Dr. Lee would take over from there, excused herself to see to her other patients. Exhausted, Daniel didn't acknowledge her departure, didn't even lift an eyelid.

"Daniel, it's Dr. Lee," the doctor introduced himself again as he stepped forward. "I know you're exhausted, son, but I just want to ask you a few questions and check you over before we let you
get back to sleep."

Daniel sighed heavily but slowly opened his eyes.

"We'll keep this short for today," Dr. Lee continued, "I know your throat hurts so whispering is fine."

He asked Daniel a series of simple questions, from his full name to his birth-date, to where he lived and the current year. Despite how painful it was for Daniel to rasp out his responses, with each correct one, Crane felt the weight pressing down upon his chest begin to ease.

Indicating Crane and Adam, the doctor then asked, "How about these two? Who are they?"

The emotional waves Daniel had been riding were returning and when he made eye contact with Crane, his eyes filled again. Crane's too. When Daniel softly said, "My brother Crane," and squeezed Crane's hand, Crane could've bawled right there, the swell of emotions so intense. He knew Daniel recognized him, had known it from the moment he'd first laid eyes on him after coming to. But still, to hear his brain-injured little brother say his name was just overwhelming.

A few tears managed to slip past his defenses when Daniel shifted his gaze to Adam and called him "Dad." This wasn't the confused Daniel from the other night. As instinctively as Crane had known how wrong the word sounded up on that ridge, he knew how right is was at this moment. And from the warm smile taking over Adam's face, he knew it too.

Dr. Lee on the other hand seemed concerned which Adam clearly noticed as well. Leaning closer, he cupped Daniel's cheek, gently saying, "Yeah, that's me, kiddo. The doc wants you to say my name though, okay?"

Daniel nodded, swallowed hard and coughed painfully once more but, eventually he said Adam's name. And Crane could tell that hearing Daniel say it had the same impact on his oldest brother as it had on Crane. It was pure bliss.

Satisfied, the doctor then asked, "Excellent. Now, do you recall my name?"

Daniel opened his mouth as if to answer, but immediately shut it as confusion swept over his face. He looked annoyed too, maybe even a little embarrassed, but when the doctor provided him with the first letter as a clue, a touch of dread started to show on the kid's face.

Dr. Lee was quick to reassure him though, explaining to Daniel that short-term memory loss and confusion were to be expected because of the medications he was on, not to mention everything he'd been through. That no-one had yet told him exactly what it was that he'd been through didn't seem to cross Daniel's mind. Crane was fine with that. The kid didn't need to know yet how seriously he was hurt.

"Now, I want you to keep that in mind when I ask you to follow a few instructions, all right?" Dr. Lee continued. "You're just coming out of heavy sedation and you still have a lot of medication pumping through you," he reminded him. "I don't want you to be alarmed by any limitations you might display. All I'm looking for is a baseline, so we can see how things stand today."

Despite the doctor's efforts to set Daniel's mind at ease, his words did the opposite and Crane could see the apprehension and outright fear reflected in his eyes. "Hey, don't sweat this," he soothed, getting and holding Daniel's attention. "You heard the doc; this is just a starting point."

Though still tense, true to his nature, Daniel accepted the challenge. "Okay, let's do it," he whispered. Crane could see the pride that was swelling in his own heart shining in Adam's eyes.
After asking Daniel to squeeze Crane's hand, he told him to make a fist with both, all of which Daniel did with ease. Same with wiggling his toes. Crane was thrilled. Though, if he was being honest with himself, the fact that the doctor was even requesting such simple actions really hit home just how bad off Daniel could've been. So far though, aside from the short-term memory issue, Daniel was doing really well.

Until Dr. Lee got a little more specific. Daniel did fine when asked to lay his palm flat on the mattress but, when asked to lift up his index finger, he lifted all of them instead. The result was the same on his second attempt, as it was with his other hand. And though the doctor told him to stop trying and not to panic, Daniel wouldn't listen. He ignored Adam telling him to stop as well, his frustration and fear so palpable; the monitors around him were reflecting it as Daniel's heart rate began to speed up.

Crane couldn't stand to see Daniel so frantic and covered Daniel's hand with his own. "Daniel, quit it. That's enough."

"No!" He nearly shouted, eliciting another round of harsh coughing, the pain and duration of the fit depleting his strength but not the confusion and horror taking hold.

Despite Crane's best attempts to calm him, Daniel roughly dislodged his hand from beneath Crane's. Intuitively knowing what Daniel was about to do, Crane practically begged him to stop, knowing it would lead to more distress for his little brother. "Aw, Danny, don't."

It didn't help. Daniel was on a mission. To break is own heart. Awkwardly lifting both of his hands to within a few inches of his face he stared at them accusingly. Trying to will them to move in ways they just weren't capable of, his fingers jerked and spasmed or worked together as one. Try as he might, he could not get them to do what he wanted and Crane could see that it was killing him.

Adam tried to stop the disaster too, using a desperate, shaky version of his authoritative voice and ordering him to stop but it was to no avail. Dr. Lee tried to get through as well but Daniel was unreachable and inconsolable, a mixture of devastation and anger consuming him and resulting in a volatile outburst when Adam grabbed hold of his arms.

"No, Goddamn it. Let go!" He screamed, shoving Adam back and, with Dr. Lee in the background instructing Ellen to draw up a syringe of Valium, Crane watched with dread as Daniel's flailing arms accidentally caught hold of the lead attached to the ICP monitor and four pairs of hands simultaneously grabbed for it.

"Oh, Daniel," Crane moaned, reaching now for Daniel's face, wanting nothing more than to somehow remove the distress from it as the realization of having some sort of medical instrument attached to his head swept over him.

"What the hell's wrong with me?" He practically sobbed; no more fight left in him as imploring eyes searched both Adam's and Crane's faces for the truth.

Too choked up to utter any platitudes or words of encouragement, Crane didn't know how to respond. Though he knew Daniel's present condition might not be permanent, he also knew it could be and, to imagine Daniel without full use of his hands... it was unbearable.

Adam was clearly at a loss as well, reverting back to stroking Daniel's hair and telling him to settle down, that everything was going to be okay. Even though the devastation embodying Daniel told them all how useless those words were.

It was the doctor who answered him, reminding Daniel that he'd been very ill and today was just
the first day on his road to recovery. His words were kind and encouraging but Daniel, looking as
despondent as Crane had ever seen him, didn't seem to hear. And when Daniel just lay there,
subdued and unresisting as Ellen injected the drug into the IV line, Crane died a little more. The
fire within that drove his passion for life and music was gone from Daniel's eyes and Crane
realized that making his little brother's world right again, this time, might become the biggest fight
of his life.

"He'll sleep for some time now," Dr. Lee said, his features tight and maybe even a little
apologetic. Turning to Adam he said, "I'll be in my office for the next hour or so. Come see me
and we'll discuss what happened here." He then left the room, instructing Ellen to give them some
time alone before she was to return with an oxygen mask for Daniel.

As Ellen followed the doctor, Crane looked up from the unresponsive kid in bed to meet his big
brother's eyes. They both should've been celebrating the miracle that Daniel was awake and
aware, breathing on his own and in so much better shape than what could have been. Instead, they
were in agony, witnessing their kid brother's grief and despair and powerless to help him without
giving him false hope. And neither of them were that cruel.

Seeing his own helplessness reflected in Adam's eyes scared Crane in a way he'd never willingly
admit. He was a man now, very much a partner in the operation of the Circle-Bar-Seven but
Adam was still the big brother he looked up to and, without his strength, Crane felt his
foundations crumbling. He couldn't fall apart now though so he looked away, returned his
attention to the one who needed it most.

Daniel's eyes were at half-mast but his breathing was harsh enough for Crane to know he wasn't
yet asleep. Three days on a ventilator might've affected Daniel's airway but Crane still knew his
brother's breathing patterns. He was practically panting and that meant Daniel was incredibly
upset or hurt. In this case both.

Adam must've recognized the signs too and reached for Daniel again, this time placing his palm
down."

"Go." The word was spoken so softly, and so unexpected, if Daniel hadn't tried to buck off
Adam's hand, Crane wouldn't have been sure he'd heard anything at all.

"Pardon?" Adam answered, equally bewildered.

"Leave me alone." Daniel's voice was as broken as his expression and Crane started shaking his
head the instant he had an inkling of what Daniel was going to say. No way were they leaving
him alone in this state.

"That's not gonna happen, kiddo," Adam responded, his voice somehow as gentle as it was
unyielding.

"Damn it, please. Just go." Daniel was practically begging now and, as Crane watched his little
brother's eyes fill, he realized that Daniel was close to breaking down completely and desperately
didn't want an audience. Despite the Valium he'd been given, Daniel was seemingly more lucid.
As though the longer he was out of the coma, the more aware he was becoming. And that meant a
resumption of his unwillingness to show big brother Adam any weakness.

As much as they loved each other, this last year had borne countless arguments between them as
Daniel began to tread that tightrope between boy and man more frequently. His chosen career path
often the subject of their battles, Crane inevitably found himself in the middle. Between one
brother determined to someday leave them and make his mark in the music industry and, another
burying his head in the sand in the futile hope that the younger one would simply grow out of what he prayed was just a phase.

Crane knew that in reality Adam was just plain scared. That the industry would eat a good kid like Daniel alive. After all, all the talent in the world didn't save the likes of Jim Morrison or even someone like Karen Carpenter. Which was why Crane was scared too. But he knew that fighting Daniel every step of the way wasn't the answer. It would only succeed in driving Daniel away even sooner.

Or drive a wedge between them.

Like the one behind Daniel's nearly frantic need to get Adam out of the room before he fell apart.

"Please go away," Daniel barely whispered as he rolled to his side, effectively turning his back on Adam.

Crane couldn't bear to see Daniel this distraught and, even though the kid might not even remember any of this the next time he woke up, he loathed the idea of Daniel falling asleep feeling this helpless. His little brother needed a tiny victory, even if it was at the expense of their oldest.

Running his fingers through the remnants of Daniel's bangs, Crane shifted his gaze to Adam, met his anguished eyes. If Crane had any doubt that Daniel's rejection was hurting Adam, his crushed expression made it perfectly clear. Adam looked sick.

It didn't matter. Daniel came first and Adam would never argue that. Crane still sent his big brother an apologetic look as he mouthed the word, "Sorry."

Adam dropped his head, murmuring, "Yeah, me too," more to himself than anyone else. Swallowing hard he then circled behind the head of the bed to Crane's side so he could once again see Daniel's face. Sounding as defeated as he looked, he gave in. "All right, Danny. I'll go," his voice hitching slightly as Daniel's eyes finally shut completely. And then, because he was Adam and his obstinacy was only eclipsed by his love for his family, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to the top of Daniel's head, promising to be back after he'd had that talk with Dr. Lee.

Crane knew that Adam's kiss would be Daniel's undoing. But what he didn't expect from those amplified emotions was Daniel's gravelly, "You too," when he re-opened his streaming eyes.

His legs suddenly feeling like jelly, Crane sat back down as he exhaled a shaky, "What?" Daniel wanting him to leave as well was completely absurd. "Daniel, no."

"Just leave me alone," Daniel sighed, his misery as tangible as his exhaustion. "Please."

Crane wanted to tell him no again, he couldn't possibly leave. But his thoughts of letting Daniel fall asleep with a victory came back to haunt him. Daniel needed something to go his way right now. He sure as hell didn't need anyone fighting him, let alone the brother who rarely denied him anything. In his heart though, Crane just couldn't believe Daniel really wanted this.

He decided he could give Daniel both… what he asked for and what he really wanted.

Daniel was still on his side, legs drawn up and looking so small and young in that bed, Crane immediately had second thoughts about what he was about to do. The intraventricular monitor protruding from his little brother's head did nothing to ease his mind. Daniel had never before appeared more vulnerable. Fragile even, which was a word Crane never associated with Daniel.

Steeling himself, he squeezed Daniel's nearest hand and straightened up from the chair. Dark eyes watched him intently and Crane was convinced he was already seeing more fear than relief in their
"Okay, Danny. Okay," he said as he released Daniel's hand and turned away. Daniel let out a sob immediately and every instinct screamed at Crane to stay but he needed more from his brother. He needed permission.

Crane walked as far as the break in the curtains and slipped part-way through, his eyes never leaving the huddled form of his kid brother.

Watching Daniel, he felt his heart shatter into a million pieces. Now he understood why the kid had banished him. Daniel was trying again to do what Crane had prevented earlier. Though still on his side, Daniel drew his hands up to within a few inches of his face, his left hand curled in towards him, his right elevated slightly, as though holding the neck of a miniature guitar.

To hell with waiting for permission, Crane was on the move the instant he saw those hands jerk and twitch and fail to strum imaginary strings just like they failed to play chords along the imaginary frets. Never mind that Daniel would be incapable right now of writing his name, his biggest fear, the biggest question the kid couldn't ignore was whether or not he could play music. And as of this moment, the answer was as tragically certain to Crane as it was to Daniel.

It was no.

Daniel remained so focused on his rebellious fingers; Crane startled a gasp out of him as his hands closed down on both of Daniel's. "Damn it, Danny, stop. Don't do this to yourself." He was half begging and half ordering his brother to listen to him and when Daniel finally looked at him, Crane's permission to stay was granted in those desperate, anguished eyes.

Daniel might've thought about fighting him but, if he had, Crane only felt resistance for an instant. As his kid brother's face began to crumble, Crane let go of his hands, knowing that he'd need his in a second. Or less. Daniel sucked in a painful breath but didn't cough, instead crying out, "Oh, Crane, What am I—," the rest of his words muffled against Crane's chest as he leant down and slipped his arms under and around Daniel.

And as Daniel poured out his grief and his fears, Crane held tight and whispered words of hope into his little brother's hair – appeasements and promises and "everything's going to be all right's" and meant every single word. Playing music was as natural as breathing to Daniel and if he could do one, he could do the other.

Period.

It might take them some time but Crane would not let Daniel down. He'd make things right and they'd play music again. Together.

To be continued.
and over on video for the sake of accuracy and realism in my story. My heart goes out to him and his family and I hope and pray his recovery will be a full one.
"Hey, stop that," Adam said, gently chiding Daniel as the kid futilely tried to get his hair to cooperate. Shifting forward in his chair, he added, "You look perfectly fine. Quit fussing."

He looked damn near perfect, Adam thought. Though he realized he might be a little biased.

What a difference a week made. Or three days, for that matter.

It had been just over a week since Adam had almost lost his four youngest brothers. Though, at the time his fears had been concentrated on only three. He was starting to relinquish some of the guilt he'd been feeling about missing the signs that Daniel had been badly injured in the cave-in. He understood now that they'd taken a while to manifest. Still, Adam should have paid closer attention. He had missed some and, had the circumstances been different and Daniel had gotten banged up like that at home, Adam would've kept a vigilant eye on him. Or made sure someone else had.

He was more than grateful that Brian and then Crane had stuck close to Daniel during and after the rescue. Adam's nightmares were still telling a different story… one where Daniel's collapse happened after he wandered away from them, dejected, rejected and all alone. With Adam not even bothering to look for him until it was too late.

Okay, so maybe he was still feeling a lot of guilt.

But they hadn't been too late. And, after three days on a ventilator and in a medically induced coma, Daniel had woken up. Definitely worse for wear, but he'd come back to them as their Daniel.

Adam felt sick every time he thought about the torture the boy had gone through upon waking from the coma. The terror of waking up to the ventilator down his throat. The agony of its extubation. Thankfully, his kid brother seemed to have no recollection of that ordeal at all. Something Dr. Lee had told Adam to expect. Dr. Lee was also right about Daniel's fuzzy memory being a mixed blessing. Just as he'd forgotten about the extubation, he'd sometimes forget about his limitations too.

And then suffer through the realization that his fine motor skills were impaired and have to face the resulting fears and grief all over again.

As the effects of the barbiturates were continuing to wear off though, his short-term memory was improving. Something else Dr. Lee had told him to anticipate. Though the doctor always made it clear that every brain injury was unique and recovery couldn't be predicted accurately, he felt quite confident that Daniel would bounce back well. It had to do with the area of the brain that had sustained damage and the fact that they'd been able to manage his ICP so quickly. Those factors, plus Daniel's youth, over all superb health and, his determination to get better were all contributing to the doctor's optimistic prognosis.

Now that he was in the neurological ward, Manel was doing respiratory therapy with him to make sure he didn't come down with pneumonia or suffer any other repercussions from being on the ventilator. Daniel was already working with an occupational therapist too to help him regain those diminished motor skills.
The poor kid was perpetually exhausted but, in true Daniel fashion, he was pushing hard to recover and get out of the hospital. Adam knew his brother was already starting to go stir crazy stuck in bed but, he also knew Daniel wanted to get out of there to relieve the strain on their already strapped finances. A reality Adam wished the kid's healing brain hadn't remembered so soon.

Before he was able to track the days himself, Daniel would ask how long he’d been in there and how soon he'd be going home. Though he never said anything directly to Adam about it, he'd grill Crane. And Crane would tell him not to worry. That he had it covered. Daniel even remembered that Crane was meeting with the hospital's finance people now to find out more about what options they had. In truth, though some grants and assistance were available to them, Adam had no idea how they were going to pay for everything. They'd figure it out somehow though. No way were they going to compromise on Daniel's care and no way were they going to lose their home.

Besides, the issue would soon be water under the bridge anyway. As miraculous as it seemed, Dr. Lee was already starting to talk about sending Daniel home. They'd been working with three-day milestones… three days on the ventilator, another three on the ICP monitor and, with it having been removed this morning, they were targeting an additional three days and then discharging him. As elated as Adam felt about that news; it scared him too. Daniel was safe in the confines of the hospital. A working cattle ranch posed dangers that would keep Adam up at night if he let them.

Shaking off those worries, he turned back to Daniel and smiled. The kid was staring glumly at the mirror sitting atop the roller table across his lap. His biggest worry at the moment seemingly which direction his hair flopped in order to conceal the shaved area and the dressing covering his new scar.

With the pressure in Daniel's brain stabilized to where it should be, Dr. Lee had removed the catheter that morning. The whole family had wanted to be there for him but Adam had denied them. It was a school day for one. And doing so would've defeated their efforts to ensure Daniel that the device hadn't been disturbing to them. That it was just one of the many monitors he'd been hooked up to. Like that godforsaken urinary catheter that had been removed this morning too. Adam cringed just thinking about that one.

Brian was due in any time though and bringing along Ford. Contrary to what they'd told Daniel, their second youngest hadn't been able to handle seeing that catheter protruding from his brother's head. And he hadn't been coming around. Instead, throwing himself into schoolwork or ranch-work and spending a lot of time reading, up in his room. Fortunately, with Daniel sleeping so much, he didn't really seem to be keeping track of any of his siblings' comings and goings. Adam still wasn't sure that he agreed with Hannah and Brian about just letting Ford's absences go. But, he'd left them in charge at home and, that decision made, he knew he had to let up on the reins.

Daniel was priority number one right now. Even if all that meant was easing the kid's mind about his partially shaved head.

"It'll grow back, you know," he said reassuringly as Daniel shot daggers at the mirror. Leaning in, Adam lightly brushed the backs of his fingers against the peach fuzz high on Daniel's temple. " Heck, it's already starting."

"Yeah, I know." Daniel shrugged his shoulders but didn't cease in his awkward attempts to run a brush through his hair. It pained Adam to see his kid brother struggling with something that basic. "I just don't want to freak Ford out."

So much for Daniel not keeping track of his brother's whereabouts.
"Hey," Adam said, reaching this time to cup Daniel's cheek. "Don't say that."

Pushing aside Adam's hand, Daniel redirected his glare from the mirror to Adam. "Oh, come on, Adam. I looked like Frankenstein," he replied, disgust heavy in his tone. "No wonder he hasn't been around."

Daniel's volume was rising and Adam needed to calm him down before his temper really flared. The family had been warned that, while Daniel's brain was healing, his emotions were going to run the gamut from one extreme to the next. As quick as he was to tears, anger and even rage could come on just as swiftly. Crane and Adam had witnessed it already, usually during his occupational therapy sessions, when the kid's frustration would result in a pencil or fork getting thrown across the room. Frankly Adam was surprised Daniel hadn't tossed the hairbrush yet. Medications would help but, because of the enormity of Daniel's challenges, he was still bound to have some major ups and downs.

"That's not true, Daniel. It wasn't that bad." He knew it was a lie but the kid was feeling self-conscious enough.

Daniel's eye roll told Adam he didn't buy it. "Well, it's either that or he's pissed with me about something." Daniel's eyes grew big as he spoke the words. His anger suddenly extinguished and replaced by a look of horror that alarmed Adam so much, he got up from the chair and grasped the kid's shoulders.

"Hey, talk to me. What is it?"

Frantic eyes met Adam's concerned gaze. "Is that it? Is Ford mad? Did I… Did this—"

Adam didn't let Daniel finish, instead pulling his brother into a fierce hug. Daniel didn't remember a thing about the mine collapse and, after talking to Dr. Lee and the counselors in his department, they had decided not to tell him. Daniel would either remember by himself or he'd ask outright eventually. Until that time came or not until he was much healthier, they weren't volunteering any information. Aside from telling him he'd been in an accident and assuring him that no one else had been hurt. The very legitimate concern was that the memory would be a traumatic one and, until he was physically and emotionally stronger, no one wanted him to face it.

It might have been a defense mechanism but surprisingly, since becoming fully conscious, Daniel hadn't asked what had put him in the hospital. The ambiguous "accident" story seemed to satisfy any curiosity he had. Adam was fine with that and, given the current state of mind of the kid clinging to him as he assured him that Ford wasn't mad, Adam was hopeful that the memory didn't return for a long, long time.

"Aw, Danny, nobody's mad," he repeated, his reassurances brushing against the soft, wispy new hairs as Adam continued to hold his brother tight. "Least of all Ford," he promised, finally pulling back a little as Daniel nodded his head against his shoulder. "Okay?"

"You sure?" Daniel asked, uncertainty and hope exposed on his young face.

Hugging him again, Adam answered confidently. "Yeah, I'm sure." About to let go, Adam caught sight of Brian in his periphery. Without Ford, damn it. He saw Brian pick up his pace, worry for Daniel evident in his expression and his strides. Adam shook his head slightly, mouthing "he's okay". Brian's obvious relief didn't slow him down any.

Schooling his features so that he didn't show any disappointment over Ford's absence, Adam pulled back from Daniel, saying, "Hey, look who's here."
Daniel turned toward the entrance and his bright smile could've lit up the entire floor. "Brian!"

"Hey, partner," Brian beamed too, slinging his arm around Daniel's neck and cinching him into a tight squeeze. Though Brian had been coming by daily to see Daniel, he was so busy looking after the ranch, his visits were usually at night when the kid could barely keep his eyes open.

Shifting the kid into a near headlock, Brian proceeded to muss up the hair Daniel had spent too long trying to put in place. Still grinning, he cracked, "I see you finally got rid of your antenna."

Brian never did buy into the rest of the family's "don't draw attention to the ICP catheter" plan.

Daniel didn't seem to mind. In fact, he laughed. "Yeah. Too bad I won't be able to pick up 49ers games anymore."

The banter was so natural, so Daniel, Adam wasn't sure if he should laugh or cry. In that moment he could forget that his little brother was suffering from brain damage, couldn't write his name and hadn't yet walked to the bathroom. Adam decided he'd choose laughter, as did Brian. Though, when their eyes met, Adam had to quickly look away. Brian's laughs were genuine but so were the tears glistening in his eyes.

"Smart-ass," Brian said, hugging Daniel closer, under his chin. Using that closeness to cover the fact that he was crying, Adam knew. He'd been employing that tactic a lot lately too.

Pulling back from Brian, Daniel suddenly looked uneasy, even a little sad. "Isn't Ford coming?" he asked, and Adam could've kicked himself for telling Daniel to expect him. His memory was still shaky but not when it came to something important like this.

To Adam's surprise, Brian actually smirked. "Oh, he'll be right along," he said, throwing Adam an apologetic look when Adam breathed out a relieved sigh. Indicating the doorway, Brian continued, "We were introduced to Gregg out there. Ford's givin' the poor guy the third degree." Brian patted Daniel's shoulder, his expression one of exaggerated sympathy. "Once they started talkin' strategy, I high-tailed it here."

Adam couldn't help but chuckle. Gregg Godfrey was both an occupational and physical therapist and, if Adam knew Ford as well as he thought, his little brother was going to be making up for his recent absences by throwing himself into Daniel's rehab.

"You're in for it now, sport," Adam teased, envisioning the rehabilitation program Ford would lay out with Gregg's guidance. Like Crane, Ford was a planner and a thinker and absorbed new information like a sponge. Daniel would be in good hands. As long as he was willing to ease up on the chain of command and give his younger brother some control.

The warm smile Daniel was wearing told Adam he would. Daniel looked pleased and also very moved. He kept his emotions in check though, his face morphing into an unconvincing look of annoyance as he groused, "Don't I know it."

Another few minutes of banter passed between Daniel and Brian and, for the most part, Adam stayed out of it. Reveling in the sense of normalcy he was feeling, even as he knew life for Daniel and the rest of the family would remain far from normal for some time. If the norm they once knew would ever return at all.

Determined not to let Daniel see any evidence of his misgivings, Adam turned to go, intending to step out and give Brian and Daniel time to themselves. Instead he nearly ran into Ford on the other side of the entranceway, standing there with a handful of pamphlets, his face equal parts nervous and forlorn.
"Whoa," Ford yelped, nearly dropping the booklets he hung onto. Attempting to gather everything together, he finally looked up at Adam, swallowing harshly. Adam hadn't seen him in a few days and the poor kid probably thought he was mad at him. Truthfully, Adam could admit to a little disappointment. But, he'd never let it on. The entire family was still suffering the shock from Daniel's injury and, even though they were all incredibly grateful that Daniel was alive and recovering, grief was still very much a part of the equation for them. He had no right judging how anyone grieved, let alone his fifteen year-old sibling.

Besides, the kid looked guilty as hell but, armed with the information Gregg had obviously provided him, Adam knew the boy had every intention of making it up to Daniel.

Grasping Ford by the shoulders to help steady him, Adam let his pride shine in his eyes. "Someone's going to be thrilled to see you," he said, pulling him under his arm and guiding him back into the room.

Brian and Daniel were still talking but, when Daniel spotted Ford, he abruptly stopped. Apparently he remembered his earlier self-consciousness and immediately his fingers fumbled with his butchered bangs. Ford hesitated too but Adam ushered him forward. The unease between them would have to end... now.

Much to Adam's delight and surprise, it was the younger of the two that broke the ice first. "God, it's so good to see you."

Daniel smiled warmly. "It's great to see you too, little bro," he beamed as Ford approached him. Brian stepped back, allowing their younger brothers the room they needed for the big hug they were now sharing.

Standing next to Adam, Brian elbowed Adam lightly, satisfaction plain on his face. "That's better," he said and Adam couldn't have agreed more.

They left their two younger siblings to their visit, knowing Daniel's, "What have you got there?" would keep them busy for some time.

"Buy you a cup 'a Joe?" Adam offered as they walked stride for stride down the corridor.

"Only if it's from the cafeteria. That vending machine crap is eatin' a hole right through me."

They took their coffees to go. Despite Daniel's progress, neither of them wanted to stay away from him for too long. Especially Brian, Adam knew. By being second born, he'd drawn the short-straw in this case by having to be the one to stay behind and hold down the fort.

As they neared the nurses' station, Brian hissed, "Oh, shit," his pace quickening.

Adam winced and followed suit when he saw the cause of Brian's anxiety. Tom Barrett was standing at the counter, his wife Carey at his side.

Though he didn't feel the same animosity toward Tom as Brian did, and certainly none toward Carey, Adam was none too happy about their presence. He knew and appreciated that they were worried about Daniel and that Carey had been calling Hannah for updates. Still, with his little brother potentially facing months of rehab, being civil to the man who'd given a hurting Daniel so much grief was still something Adam had trouble stomaching.

They were talking to the nurses and, from the tail end of the conversation, Adam gathered that they'd been asking about visiting with Daniel.

"That's up to the family," Nan Schiedel, the head nurse, was saying. "You'll have to wait to speak
"Adam's right here," Brian announced as they approached, his tone clipped and remaining so when he greeted Barrett. It softened a little for, "Miz Barrett."

"Boys," Tom responded and Adam knew that Brian wouldn't appreciate that particular greeting at the moment. Frankly, neither did Adam.

Carey must've recognized it because immediately she stepped forward, grasping Brian's hand in both of hers and asking, "How is Daniel, Brian? We've both been so worried."

Never one to treat a woman with anything less than kindness, Brian's expression softened as he answered. "He's got a long road ahead of him but he's gettin' better, ma'am."

"Oh, is there any way we could see him? Please?"

Brian looked at Adam, uncertainty written all over his face. Adam felt the same.

Seeing it, Tom addressed his wife. "Carey, why don't we come back another day? When Daniel's feeling stronger, okay, honey?"

She looked so disappointed; Adam didn't have the heart to turn her away. The Barretts had been family friends for years, honorary aunt and uncle for as long as some of the boys had been alive. It might just do Daniel some good to see how everyone was pulling for him. Or to have a maternal presence around other than Hannah or someone wearing a nurse's uniform.

Gently grasping Carey's shoulders, Adam addressed her. "Sure, Carey. Just for a minute though, all right?" He relented, feeling better about his decision when she broke out into a warm, relieved smile. "Did Hannah tell you he doesn't remember anything about what happened?" She nodded her head and Adam felt confident she and Tom understood the gravity of the situation. "Seeing the boys hasn't triggered any memories and his doctor would just as soon keep it that way."

Hugging Carey to his waist, Tom promised for them both. "We won't say anything, Adam. He's suffered enough." His voice cracking, Tom's remorse was clear. "We just want to see for ourselves that he's pulled through this."

"Sure. Okay," Brian replied, perhaps finally moved by Tom's genuine sorrow. Leading them to Daniel's room, Adam slipped in behind Brian but remained in front of Tom and Carey.

Walking through the doorway, Adam couldn't have smiled wider at the image before him. Ford and Daniel were watching something on television, Ford sitting next to his big brother, one leg folded underneath him as the other dangled off the side of the bed. They were laughing at whatever was on, a sit-com if the canned laugh track Adam could hear was anything to go by.

"Hey, Dan'l; you up for more visitors?" Brian asked. His lop-sided grin telling Adam that he'd been heartened by the sight of their two younger brothers squashed shoulder to shoulder on the bed too.

Fumbling a little to turn off the TV, Daniel sat up, curious and Ford slid off the bed and stood beside him. When Carey stepped out from behind Adam and Brian, Daniel broke into a welcoming smile, greeting her with, "Hi, Miz Barrett." Looking past her, he saw Tom, and Adam was relieved to see that the kid's smile didn't falter.

Until Daniel spoke the man's name. Or tried to.

Staring at Tom, Daniel's breath hitched, like he'd been kicked by a calf at branding time, and
Adam's stomach plummeted. Dread overcoming him while his little brother struggled to stammer out, "T-t-tom."

"Dan'l?" Brian swiftly moved in next to Ford, confusion and fear blanketing his voice and Adam still found his feet firmly rooted to the floor.

It felt as though all the oxygen had been sucked from the room. Daniel's eyes were huge, riveted on Tom and then they were closed. Squeezed tight as he pressed the heels of his hands against them and groaning as he sunk his head back against the pillows propping him up. His breaths coming disturbingly fast, Daniel cried out then, clutching his head as he rolled to one side and drew his knees up, looking so helplessly small. He had a death grip on Ford's hand or maybe it was vice versa. But surprisingly Ford, the little brother who'd been afraid to face the physical evidence of Daniel's brain injury, was calm, calmer by far than Adam.

Adam fought the panic within him and, even as he witnessed Daniel's body abruptly stiffen and his eyes transform from horror to emptiness, he wanted to deny what was happening in front of him.

Again.

"He's having a seizure," Ford stated, his tone altogether too composed since he was giving voice to Adam's worst fears. Dr. Lee had warned him that post head trauma seizures were a possibility. Especially since Daniel had already had the one previously in the ambulance. Adam's feet had been firmly planted in denial though; convinced that after three days of full consciousness, they were out of the woods.

"Oh, dear Lord," Carey sobbed and Tom pulled her against his chest and wrapped his arms around her.

At Carey's cry, Adam spared a moment to meet Tom's eyes. The old man looked haggard, as broken as he'd been at the mine but he still had enough wherewithal to offer to get a nurse. Even though the screeching alarms attached to Daniel's monitors were undoubtedly signaling the medical staff to come anyway, Adam nodded grimly and watched Tom usher his wife from the room. This latest trauma was the McFaddens' to bear and theirs alone.

As the bed began to shake under the intensity of Daniel's shuddering body, Adam finally broke out of his daze, rushing forward only to be stopped by Ford's outstretched arm. "No, give him some air," the boy asserted as he promptly instructed Brian to lower the head of the bed. Numbly, Brian complied as Ford spoke calmly to Daniel, soothingly, though Adam didn't believe his convulsing brother could possibly hear him.

"You're gonna be fine, Daniel. You're all right. Let's get these around you, okay?" Ford said tenderly, surrounding Daniel's upper body with all but one of the pillows that had been dislodged from beneath him, and placing the last one under his juddering head. Adam irrationally wanted to stop Ford, shake him and yell. How dare he be so controlled and in charge when he was just a boy and it was Adam who should be looking after Daniel? But even as those rebellious thoughts came to him, he could see the logic in what Ford was doing, protecting Daniel's thrashing body from the bed's guardrails, and he found himself uselessly backing off instead.

And useless he was. Adam knew enough first-aid to realize that diving in and holding Daniel down was the wrong thing to do. Even though every big brother instinct was screaming at him to hold onto his suffering little brother and somehow make this nightmare end.

The seizure was terrifying. Still on his side, Daniel's knees were no longer tucked up, his legs straightening and stiffening instead as the full force of the seizure came on. Though his legs were
outstretched, his arms were curled in; flailing in front of him as his entire body twisted and quaked.

Along with joining in Ford's soothing mantra, Brian was doing his utmost to keep Daniel from hitting himself without actually restraining him. For Adam, watching Daniel's face was the most horrifying and heartbreaking… his eyes were as wild as they were unseeing, his lashes erratically blinking to the cadence of his head bouncing off the pillow. And his mouth was open, frozen in what should have been a scream. Instead, only pitiful grunts came from his throat but at such a rapid rate Adam feared Daniel might be hyperventilating too.

Adam couldn't take this anymore. Having no idea how long it had been since the alarms had begun their cacophony, Adam cursed Daniel's missing nurses and spun on his heel, intent on dragging them into the room if he had to.

Except they were already there. So focused on Daniel's torment, Adam hadn't realized that Nurse Schiedel was alongside Ford and another had made her way opposite them. Fear and frustration spilling over, he grasped Nan Schiedel's arm, just barely mindful of his strength, and harshly whispered, "For God's sake, do something!"

Adam could've cried at the sympathy in her eyes as the nurse placed her hand upon the one gripping her. Patting it she told him, "Dr. Lee's on his way, Adam. In the meantime all we can do is keep Daniel safe and ride out the seizure."

"Ride it out? No. Adam couldn't accept that. Daniel was convulsing so badly, Adam was afraid his bed was going to collapse. "But he needs help!" Ashamed of how desperate he sounded, Adam was grateful Ford and Brian were focused on Daniel and not on their oldest brother's weakness.

Nan shook her head. Indicating Ford, she explained, "There's nothing we can do that your young man here isn't doing perfectly." She sounded genuinely impressed and completely confident as she added, "He has everything under control. Look, Daniel's starting to relax. It's almost over."

She was right. Thank God. Daniel's limbs had gone from frighteningly rigid to limp and malleable and his eyes, though dazed and foggy, no longer appeared as wild. Sweat-soaked and panting heavily, the poor kid looked exhausted and, understandably, tears were rolling down his face onto the mattress. Brian was handling it though, as Ford, the essence of cool, calm and collected just seconds earlier squeezed Daniel's hand once, straightened and began to back away. His own body suddenly trembling as though the seizure had somehow become contagious.

With Daniel in good hands, Adam knew who he needed to tend to. Their remarkable young man. "Come here," he said, pulling Ford into his chest and wrapping his arms around him.

The boy came willingly and melted against Adam, his body shaking now from the silent sobs wracking him.

"It's okay, boy. It's okay," Adam soothed, resting his cheek atop Ford's blond head. "Let it out. It's all right."

With Ford crying into his shirt, Adam watched with pride as Brian took care of Daniel.

"Easy, Dan'l. Easy," he murmured, hunkered down on his haunches beside the bed, stroking Daniel's hair and gentling his little brother almost as he would a yearling. With the same kind of success too, if Daniel's easing breaths were any indication. "That's it. Settle down," he said, maintaining eye-contact and helping to keep Daniel centered as the nurses shifted him into the recovery position before checking his IV, leads and vitals.
"Wha—appened?" Daniel asked hoarsely and, though Adam knew the thought was irrational, he truly didn't want anyone to tell him. The poor kid had had enough to worry about.

"Daniel, you just had a little seizure, hon," Nan said compassionately. "I know it was frightening but you're doing just fine." Pulling the light blanket up over his shoulder, she smoothed it before adding, "Just rest now and Dr. Lee will be here shortly to see you, okay?"

"But—" Daniel tried to roll forward and raise himself up onto his elbows but his weakness and disorientation, along with Brian's gentle yet unyielding pressure kept him in place. Giving up the fight, he seemed to sink further into the bed. "I don't— a seizure?"

Daniel looked so confused and distraught; Adam desperately wanted to go to him. But that would mean relinquishing his hold on Ford who was still suffering in his own right. He'd have to leave the TLC to Brian, who was doing an admirable job with Daniel anyway.

"You heard the lady, partner; everything's fine." His hand hadn't stopped carding through Daniel's hair. "Hey, it's just your brain sputtering a little tryin' to kick-start itself, okay?"

"I—"

"It's okay, Dan'l," Brian insisted. "Just rest, kiddo. You're fine."

Daniel sighed heavily and closed his eyes, more tears escaping as he did so, but Adam knew his little brother didn't believe Brian's words any more than he did. Daniel was alive and going to stay that way and for that Adam thanked heaven each and every day. But he was far from fine. And it killed Adam to know that a hug like the one he was giving Ford would provide little comfort if any to the boy whose world had taken such a devastating turn.

At least he had been able to help Ford, who still held on tight but had quieted in his arms. Pulling back from him, Adam lifted Ford's chin. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Ford sighed; then focused his red-rimmed eyes on Brian and Daniel. He looked heartsick. Trying to erase that look from Ford's face, Adam said, "Hey, you were amazing. How'd you know all that?" Adam wasn't just trying to distract Ford. He genuinely wanted to know.

As was typical when he was the recipient of praise, Ford lowered his head and blushed. His answer should have come as no surprise though. "I've been studying. Picked up some books from school and the library, and Doctor Mayer let me borrow a few too."

And here the family had thought Ford had been immersing himself in school studies while he was avoiding the hospital. Adam should have known the teen would end up doing as much research on brain injuries as Crane.

With pride shining in his eyes, Adam placed his hands on Ford's shoulders. "I'm so proud of you, kiddo. Daniel's lucky to have you as his brother. We all are."

Ford dropped his head again and whispered his thanks, his ears turning as pink as his cheeks were. God, it was so good to see him smile, even if it was an embarrassed one. If only Daniel could be so easy to fix.

Or Crane.

Who had arrived just in time for the aftermath.

Having heard a sharp intake of breath coming from the room's entrance, Adam looked up only to
find Crane standing there. His arms spread, gripping each side of the door-frame and looking as livid as he did scared. Adam wasn't sure how he knew it, but it was clear that Crane had heard what was going on and had rushed to get there. His hold on the structure all that was keeping him from charging into the room. He'd probably run into the Barretts on his way back from meeting the finance people, Adam assumed. Which would explain the hostile look he threw at Adam when their eyes met.

Adam looked away. He'd planned on ushering Ford back to Daniel's side but, with Crane's return, their stricken brother would have all the attention he needed. Ford knew it too, as relief settled across his features when he caught sight of Crane.

Crane was positively vibrating and Adam watched as his younger brother inhaled deeply, letting his breath out slowly as he released his grip from the framework and headed directly for Daniel.

Brian looked over his shoulder, saw Crane coming and awkwardly moved aside. Slowly straightening knees that had been bent too long and rubbing his hands along his thighs to bring them back to life, Adam knew Brian would have stayed in that position for as long as Daniel needed him.

"Hey, partner." Despite the dire circumstances, Brian greeted Crane casually, a tactic Adam was sure Brian was using because he too could sense the turmoil in Crane's heart. It didn't work though. Ignoring Brian, Crane's focus was solely on Daniel.

Despite the nurses' quiet objections, practiced hands swiftly lowered the bedrail as Crane tucked one long limb underneath him and sat in the hollow created by the kid's bent elbow and knee. Facing Daniel, he began tenderly rubbing soothing circles along Daniel's back and shoulder. Their bedridden brother had been so quiet, Adam had mistakenly thought he'd succumbed to his exhaustion and fallen asleep. But, as Adam watched Crane clasp Daniel's nearest hand in his own and Daniel's fingers lace through it and squeeze tight, he realized Daniel was still very much aware.

"Hey, kiddo, I'm here," Crane practically crooned, leaning forward and shifting his gentle ministrations to Daniel's hair. "I gotcha."

Opening his eyes, Daniel tried to roll onto his back but Crane stilled him, instead leaning in even closer. "Stay put, buddy."

"I had a seizure," Daniel weakly proclaimed, his voice so soft Adam had to strain to hear him even though the monitors had returned to their less intrusive din. The confusion and devastation he could hear broke his heart. And Ford's too he knew as their second youngest, still a presence under Adam's arm, huddled closer while he bore witness to Daniel's despair.

"I know, kid, I heard. I'm sorry I wasn't here for you."

Adam swallowed hard at Crane's remorse and his words. The Barretts had to have told him. Even though it had been Adam's call to make, he hoped Crane would forgive him for letting them in to see Daniel and so obviously triggering the seizure. At this point Adam wasn't sure if he could forgive himself.

"Why is this happening to me?"

Daniel's eyes were full and, at that heartrending plea, Ford actually whimpered within Adam's hold.

"Easy, boy," Adam whispered, leading him back to Daniel's bedside.
Adam could see that the swell of emotions brought on by Daniel's unbearable question had rendered Crane speechless. When Daniel repeated it though, sounding impossibly broken, Crane found his voice.

Smiling sadly, Crane rested his palm against Daniel's tear-stained face and answered honestly. "Oh, Danny, I don't know. God knows you don't deserve this." Daniel's face crumpled then and for a flickering instant Adam wondered if Daniel believed him. If anyone could get through to him though, it was Crane. "You hear me, little brother? You don't deserve this."

"Oh, Crane," Daniel sobbed and, breaking from the recovery position, he launched himself across his brother's lap, arms wrapping around him as he buried his heartache against Crane's waist. And doing what came naturally, Crane just curled his body around Daniel, hugging him and resting his cheek atop his head. His own tears flowing freely as their little brother let out his grief.

To be continued.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Special thanks: I need to give a shout out to janissa11 for her help with the finance side of Daniel's hospital stay. Though I adjusted her figures to 1983 cost of living data, her help was invaluable in ensuring that I've kept things realistic. Lastly, saberivojo's ongoing medical fact-checking is so very greatly appreciated.

Story Note: If you blink you might miss it but, in this chapter you'll see my first reference to Daniel still being in high school. The series' episode 12, "Dreams", put him there as a senior and I've chosen to go along with that premise.

"Call if you need a hand," Crane offered as the bathroom door closed shut in his face. "I'll be right out here."

He smiled then, listening to Daniel muttering behind the door about being perfectly capable of dressing himself. It was great to hear some of that familiar spirit from his little brother. Ever since the seizure, Daniel had been awfully subdued. Crane knew it had terrified him. It had frightened them all.

And because of that, Crane couldn't shake his anger toward Adam for letting the Barretts see Daniel. The doctors couldn't say for sure, but there was no doubt in Crane's mind that their presence had triggered the seizure and whatever memories might have preceded it. Hell, even Adam agreed and had admitted so when Crane had confronted him about it. Crane knew his oldest brother felt incredibly guilty. It didn't matter. Crane only had so much sympathy to go around these days and every bit of it was reserved for Daniel. In the meantime, he would just continue to do his best to hide the rift between them from Daniel.

Up until then they'd all been in a state of relative harmony, taking comfort in the progress they'd been witnessing daily with Daniel's recovery. The seizure felt like a huge setback, even though it hadn't technically delayed his release from the hospital.

After the seizure, Daniel had fallen asleep in Crane's hold. With Brian and Adam's help, they'd been able to shift them both so that they could settle back against the raised head of the mattress. Once awake, Daniel hadn't seemed to care at all that he'd essentially been in Crane's arms during Dr. Lee's visit. Gone was his typical eighteen-year-old bravado. Crane wasn't sure how he felt about that.

The neurosurgeon hadn't batted an eye though and simply went on to explain what the oldest members of the family had already known but had intended to keep to themselves until Daniel was home. That post brain injury seizures were not uncommon. More importantly, they weren't indicative of a future plagued with more. While his brain was still healing though, he would remain at risk and would continue taking Dilantin, the anti-seizure medication he'd been getting all along. The doctor had also given Daniel the news that his driver's license would be suspended until he was seizure free for three months. Despite the fact that he was far from ready for the next county Gold Rush race, Crane had recognized the hurt and disappointment in Daniel's eyes. The kid had already been told that riding would be forbidden for just as long. And Crane had
wondered then how many more blows his little brother was going to have to take.

Though Crane had done his damnest to hide his own concern, Daniel had gotten so used to being poked, prodded and subjected to tests; he'd barely reacted to being told he needed yet another CT scan. Dr. Lee had explained that it was just a precaution and the results had fortunately confirmed what he'd expected. That there had been no ill effects from the seizure and Daniel would still be able to go home the upcoming Friday.

Today.

Thank God.

As thrilled as he was that Daniel was coming home, Crane had to admit he was worried too. The specter of another seizure was hanging over their family now. The ranch was a potentially hazardous place at the best of times and the idea of Daniel collapsing anywhere near the stock was terrifying. The barn, pens, corrals and pastures were all going to have to be off-limits for quite some time and Crane knew Daniel was going to hate that. Hannah was going to have her hands full once Daniel gained his strength back.

But that would be a while yet. After spending a week and a half in bed, Daniel was as weak as a newborn lamb. And even more wobbly. It had been obvious when Daniel had first awakened from the coma that the brain injury had affected the use of his hands, particularly his fingers. What had taken longer to pick up on were the balance issues, his dizziness, and that overall weakness. Between the injury messing with his equilibrium and energy levels, and his drugs making him sluggish, even walking from the hospital bed to the washroom had become a workout.

Speaking of… "Everything all right in there?" He asked, knocking lightly on the door.

"It's fine."

Daniel didn't sound fine at all. He sounded angry but with a hint of distress. It was the latter that made Crane risk setting off his little brother's chemically imbalanced and currently volatile temper.

"Incoming," he announced as he opened the door and entered the small room without waiting for an invitation.

Standing in front of the vanity and mirror, Daniel abruptly swung in Crane's direction, his irritated glare losing its impact as the sudden motion unbalanced him and he began to topple forward.

"Whoa," Daniel exclaimed, reaching for the counter-top and catching himself just as Crane lunged and caught him beneath his armpits.

"Easy, easy. I gotcha." Crane assured him as Daniel gripped his arm. Crane didn't let go, not until he was certain his brother had solid footing again.

"Thanks," Daniel said softly, all rancor gone. He only made brief eye contact, looking away quickly as his emotions ricocheted once more from one extreme to the next. And Crane knew he had to work on masking his own feelings at moments like this. That had always been a problem with being Daniel's self-appointed guardian... it was damn hard for Crane to look into his kid brother's eyes and not have his own reflect what he was seeing. He wanted to be Daniel's rock though. He'd done it before, he could do it now.

"Hey, no problem. That's what I'm here for." Shifting his grip to Daniel's sides, he held his little brother at arm's length, taking in the sight. For the first time in ten days, Daniel was clothed in something other than a hospital gown or the pajamas he'd graduated into. Standing there in jeans, sneakers and a sweatshirt, he looked almost perfect.
Except, as heartened as he was by the sight of Daniel even being upright, in all honesty Crane could see plenty of evidence of his brother's brush with death and his ongoing recovery. Hannah, bless her heart, had dropped off his homecoming clothes the previous day. She'd confided in Crane her hesitation about bringing one of his favorite over-shirts, knowing full well Daniel couldn't handle the buttons yet. Daniel nearly always wore layers, unless it was the heat of the summer. Ultimately she left the shirt behind. A good thing, since Crane knew full well Daniel's hostility and frustration of moments earlier had everything to do with dressing himself. Contrary to his objections, the poor kid did need help.

"Here, let me," Crane said casually as he moved the bandana hanging loosely around his brother's neck to its intended destination. "You almost had it," he said encouragingly as he doubled the knot Daniel had attempted and lightly tugged it against his forehead. When he'd first requested it, Crane had wanted to protest its use, concerned that Daniel was being self-conscious about his healing burr hole scar. But, he'd relented and asked Hannah to bring one along. Realizing that, at his age, Daniel was probably more embarrassed about his lack of hair and not the scar. Besides, whether he was emulating one of his songwriting idols or sporting one for practical purposes, this was Daniel they were talking about and it was pretty normal for him to wear a bandana that way. Crane was all for his little brother feeling as normal as possible.

"There," he said, careful not to be too rough as he pulled a few wayward strands out from under the fabric, allowing his remaining bangs to flop over it. Met with silence and downcast eyes, Crane decided it was best to get the kid's perceived humiliation over with as quickly as possible. "Okay, let's do up those laces," he added, squatting down to lace up Daniel's sneakers.

"I told you I wanted my boots," he replied petulantly.

"I know, but you need a better tread right now," Crane answered honestly. Never mind that most of Daniel's boots had a bit of a riding heel and Crane didn't trust the kid's balance to handle them yet. Finished with his footwear, Crane straightened up and dealt with his brother's fly and belt as efficiently and nonchalantly as possible. He'd have ignored the belt if he could have, sparing Daniel from his brother spending so much time helping him with his pants. But Daniel had lost so much weight the waistband of his jeans was slipping down onto his hips. The family had been told that weight gain was one of the side-effects of the Decadron he was on and would still be taking for a while. Crane couldn't help but think that wasn't exactly a bad thing given how slight Daniel appeared right now.

"Usually I get a kiss first," Daniel snarked, and despite the annoyance in his tone, Crane was gratified to hear some of his brother's sense of humor coming through.

"Yeah, well don't hold your breath. You're not my type," Crane smirked and Daniel actually smiled. Throwing an arm around the kid's shoulder, Crane added, "Don't sweat this. I've been dressing you since you were born. You can pay me back when I'm too old and decrepit to tie my own shoes. Deal?"

"Deal."

They made their way back to the hospital bed, Daniel not surprisingly wanting nothing to do with it and taking the chair beside it instead. Crane hopped up onto the mattress, settling in to wait for Adam's arrival and for someone to bring them a wheelchair. The fact that Daniel hadn't put up an argument about that news told Crane exactly just how little energy his sibling had.

They'd been sitting there all of about thirty seconds when, out of the blue, Daniel asked Crane the question he'd been praying wouldn't come his way. Though he knew it was inevitable, especially upon Daniel's discharge from the hospital.
"Crane, how are we gonna pay for this?"

"Daniel—"

"Don't blow me off, big brother, I need to know." Daniel's tone was adamant and pleading at the same time and Crane knew that his brother was absolutely right. Daniel did need to know, especially since technically the debt was his. Besides, he was going to be seeing the amount owing as soon as he signed his discharge papers. Still, just how in the hell did you tell an eighteen-year-old high-school student that he was suddenly in debt over sixty thousand dollars?

The family would hold the debt, of course, but that wouldn't ease his brother's mind at all. Crane knew Daniel better than anyone, which meant he could tell when guilt was gnawing at him. Almost from the minute Daniel had started getting his wits back after regaining consciousness, he'd been worried about the bill. Remembering the accident and finding out just how much was owed to the hospital would only add to his sense of culpability. God, how he wished Adam hadn't let Tom see Daniel. "I know you do, kid. But, it's like I've been telling you… I've got it covered, all right? We're gonna be okay."

Damn. The addition of 'we're gonna be okay' to his standard spiel had somehow just backfired on him. Whether it was the wrong choice of words or the wrong delivery, Crane couldn't be sure. But, instead of easing his little brother's worries, Crane had made matters worse. Daniel almost gasped, his eyes boring into Crane's as he asked, "Jesus, Crane. Just how much do we owe?"

"We may not have to pay it all." Crane knew he was stalling but he just couldn't help himself. The number was going to horrify Daniel so he kept on rambling. "There's Medicaid, plus grants and programs we might qual—"

"How much, Crane?"

Sighing in defeat and trepidation, Crane slid off of the bed, answering Daniel as he approached him. "A little over sixty-three thousand dollars," he stated calmly.

Daniel immediately went still and for a terrifying moment Crane worried that his words were triggering another seizure. "Danny?" He asked softly, reaching down and gingerly cupping his brother's face. "Hey. You okay?"

Daniel looked up then, eyes full of shock and fear as he finally uttered, "Oh my God, Crane. Oh my God." Breathlessly he asked, "What are we gonna do?"

Crane crouched down in front of him, this time grasping Daniel's hands in his. "Hey, listen to me. We probably won't have to pay it all and the rest we'll figure out. It'll be all right."

"You've got to be kidding me," Daniel said disbelievingly, anger rising. "How can you possibly say that when this family can't scrape together an extra fifty bucks when we need it?"

"Come on; it's not that bad," Crane responded a little resentfully, the strain of the past ten days making him take the kid's statement personally. After all, for the most part, the ranch's finances and budget were his responsibility.

"Not that bad?" Daniel scoffed, roughly wrenching out of Crane's hold and knocking Crane on his butt in the process.

His own temper was flaring but, as Daniel abruptly stood and spun away, Crane's anger evaporated. He found himself launching off the tiles instead in an effort to save Daniel from falling too as the sudden change in elevation had him pitching toward the floor. Calling out to him Crane
grabbed hold of Daniel's waist from behind, swinging him around and letting the bed break his fall.

"Get off me!" Daniel screamed as a well-placed elbow caught Crane in the ribs.

"Not until you settle down," Crane managed to say around his grunt.

Daniel was in a rage now, out of control but Crane knew his brother didn't have the strength to keep it up. He could chalk up this erratic behavior to the injury and knew full well the opposite end of the kid's emotional spectrum would claim him soon. All he had to do was hold on and make sure Daniel didn't hurt himself before the inevitable crash came.

Evan might have been the family's rodeo star but, just like when he wrestled a steer, Crane's considerable height and reach advantage gave him the upper hand and he used it to keep his squirming and bucking brother in place against the mattress. Never mind the fact that Daniel wasn't up to his full strength and was quickly using up what little reserve he had. When he wasn't turning the air blue with profanities that would make Brian blush, Daniel was panting and puffing hard. So Crane just kept hanging on, waiting for the kid to give in.

It might've worked too if Adam hadn't just walked into the room.

"What the hell is going on here?"

Their oldest didn't give either of them a chance to reply and instead barreled forward, pulling them apart before Crane could protest. Or warn Adam of the tempest in their midst.

So be it. As far as Crane was concerned, Adam was largely responsible for Daniel's current state of mind anyway.

As soon as Adam broke them apart, Crane backed off; lightly rubbing his lower ribs where he knew a bruise was already forming. Daniel, on the other hand, was hunched over the bed. His chest heaving as he gulped in precious oxygen. Crane felt awful that he'd lost control of the situation and accepted the disapproving look Adam threw his way.

Trying to make things right, Crane rested his palm on Daniel's back only to have it shrugged off. The kid was still clearly pissed with him. And the world.

"You're lucky security didn't come in here; I could hear you two from the hall." Adam's face revealed his confusion and concern as he gripped Daniel's arm but looked at Crane. "So, would one of you care to tell me what's going on?"

Daniel laughed bitterly then, slowly turning to face Adam though he still braced himself against the bed. "You want to know what's going on? I'll tell you… We're on our way to bankruptcy and losing the ranch and it's my fault!"

"Whoa, slow down a minute, mister," Adam said, clearly shocked by Daniel's words and ire. "Who said anything about losing the ranch?"

"Nobody had to, Adam. It's sixty-three thousand dollars, for God's sake. I've ruined us."

And here came the crash Crane was expecting.

Suddenly sounding incredibly broken, tears flooded Daniel's eyes again and Crane wanted desperately to go to him. But, sensing that he might be rebuffed again, he looked helplessly to Adam.
Adam looked as sick as Crane felt, obviously shaken by Daniel's abrupt shift in gears and even more so by his undeserved self-contempt.

Reaching across Daniel's back, Adam rested a hand on Daniel's shoulder. The kid tensed but Adam snaked his arm around him, gathering him in and turning him around so that he could face both of his big brothers. He lightly gripped the kid's upper arms, an act Crane appreciated, since their younger sibling looked about ready to drop.

Squeezing his arms none too lightly, Adam said, "I want you to listen to me, young man. We are not ruined, you hear me? And this is not your fault." His words were firm, brooking no argument.

"But it is," Daniel responded. Equally adamant and still unwilling to accept anything but blame. "None of this would've happened if I'd listened to Tom."

Crane winced and stepped in as he watched Adam drop his arms, visibly deflating; Crane's accusations from the other night no doubt coming back to haunt him. "How dare you let them in to see him?" Crane had railed. "Don't you realize how much damage you've done?"

As mad as he'd been and still was to some extent, seeing the pain reflected in Adam's eyes right now reminded him that Adam would sooner cut off his own arm than ever knowingly hurt Daniel. And now that damage was staring them in the face. Confirmation, finally, that Daniel did remember the mine collapse. And as badly as Crane felt for Adam, his heart broke for Daniel all over again. "Nobody blames you for this, kiddo," Crane said, wrapping an arm around Daniel's waist to give him whatever support he needed. Addressing Adam as much as Daniel, he added, "I think it would be a good idea if we talked about what happened, don't you?"

Daniel shook his head, apparently unwilling to let go of the guilt despite his heroics in the aftermath. "There's nothing to talk about. I messed up and nearly got my brothers killed."

The kid sounded so upset and Crane desperately wanted to fix that. Tugging him in tighter to his side, he tried to get through to him again. "Don't say that. It was an accident and you've suffered more than enough for it."

"But this whole family's gonna suffer for it," Daniel argued, still inconsolable.

"No. We're not," Adam said, his voice so stern he sounded angry, successfully snapping Daniel out of his desolation and gaining Crane's attention too. Reaching out, he cupped Daniel's face with both hands, not letting the boy look away as he spoke his next words. "What we're going to do is thank God each and every single day that all of you made it out of that mine alive. And then, over time, we're going to pay off that bill."

"But it's so much money," Daniel protested, sounding as young as he did miserable.

"Doesn't matter," Adam insisted, pulling Daniel in against his jacket and resting his chin atop his head. Crane let go, allowing "Dad" to give Daniel the reassurance he so desperately needed. Whatever remaining animosity he'd held toward Adam dissipated as their oldest said what was in all their hearts. "Sixty thousand or sixty million, you're worth every penny of it; you hear me?"

Nan arrived with a wheelchair shortly after Adam had successfully calmed Daniel down and Crane couldn't help but wonder if she'd been lurking outside the room all along, just waiting for tempers to settle and the coast to clear. If so, he was grateful she hadn't come in sooner. Adam's heartfelt words were exactly what the kid's sense of self-worth needed.

Though more content afterward, Daniel was awfully nervous when they made their way to the finance department to sign his release papers and the grant applications. Fortunately the staff were
great with him, from their patience and encouragement as he fumbled with the signatures; to
assuring him that Medicaid would cover some of the expenses and that they’d continue advocating
for him to receive some grants. Crane knew the truth though. That in the end, it was pretty much
going to be all or nothing. But, Daniel didn't need to worry about that right now. All everyone
wanted was for him to focus on his recovery. The rest they would deal with later.

All things considered, his discharge went smoothly but Daniel had been riding an emotional
rollercoaster and was exhausted by the time Crane wheeled him to just inside the exit doors of the
main lobby. Not surprisingly, while they were waiting for Adam to get the truck, in no time
Daniel's chin dropped to his chest as he began to doze off in the wheelchair.

Seeing the familiar old pickup pull in front of the curb, Crane bent low, next to Daniel's ear,
saying, "Rise and shine, buddy; your ride's here."

Startled, Daniel groused, "I wasn't asleep," his grumpiness a sure sign that Daniel had indeed been
sleeping. It felt so normal that, just for an instant, Crane could forget the harsh realities of Daniel's
plight and instead believe the kid was acting like he always did whenever he was over-tired.
Downright surly, thanks to staying up too late the night before, either working on his music or out
late listening to someone else play their own. Crane knew that was a fantasy but, just knowing that
Daniel was finally coming home gave him a glimpse of a hopeful future… that Daniel would
again someday complain about Crane waking him up too damn early to get started on their chores.
The thought made him smile and, as he pushed the chair through the exit and toward the truck,
their first real steps toward bringing Daniel home, his smile grew wider.

"What are you grinning for?" Adam asked as he rounded the front of the truck to meet them on
the passenger side.

Not wanting to embarrass Daniel, Crane shrugged his shoulders and lied. "Nothing in particular."

"Yeah, sure," Adam said knowingly, making Crane duck as he swiped at the top of his head.
Adam busted out into a big grin as well and Crane knew full well that his big brother was feeling
that same damn near giddy sense of relief and joy. Adam composed himself more quickly though,
turning his attention to a somewhat bemused looking Daniel and hunkering down next him.
"Come on," he said, sliding an arm behind the kid's back as he helped him out of the chair. "What
say we blow this joint and get you home?"

Basking in the warmth and affection he heard in Adam's voice, Crane handed over the wheelchair
to the attendant who'd followed them outside before he turned back to his brothers, intent on
climbing in next to Daniel. But as Daniel began to slide across the bench seat, he hesitated and
looked back at his brothers wearing an expression that lifted Crane's heart even higher. There was
mischief along with humor in the kid's sparkling eyes as he asked, "Now that you two have kissed
and made up, you sure you don't want to sit next to each other?"

So much for Crane thinking he'd successfully hidden their rift.

"Almost there." Adam didn't bother saying anything more as he took his eyes off the road a
moment to look at Crane. He knew Daniel was sound asleep tucked up against Crane's side, had
been pretty much since they'd passed Sonora's limits. The sight of Crane conked out too caught
him off guard though. It shouldn't have, knowing how Crane had been burning both ends of the
candle since Daniel had gotten hurt. Between reading up on traumatic brain injury and the
aftercare, dealing with the hospital's finance department and just being there for Daniel as much as
humanly possible, it was a wonder he was still coherent.

Adam knew full well the strain of it all had contributed largely to Crane being so mad at him over
Tom and Carey. Not that he hadn't every right to be. Adam had just believed that, with so much history together before the mine collapse, the Barretts' presence would no more trigger a memory, let alone a seizure, than seeing their three youngest brothers had. He'd figured wrong though and, as Crane had so intensely pointed out that night, Daniel had paid dearly for that mistake. Adam would never forgive himself for it.

Adam was awfully grateful that Crane had put aside his anger and let him take the lead in trying to calm Daniel down about the hospital debt. That Crane trusted him not to mess up again meant a lot. Thank God he'd been successful. Not just because it was damn hard seeing Daniel so distraught but also because Adam had missed having Crane to talk to the last few days. Doing right by Daniel had earned him the privilege of Crane's friendship and allegiance again.

As close as Brian and Adam were, they often found themselves at odds which was rarely the case with Adam and Crane. More often than not he could count on Crane to have his back as much as he could Hannah. The only person Crane ever showed more loyalty to was Daniel.

Glimpsing the two sleeping brothers huddled together beside him brought back fond memories. It had been a while since he'd seen them like that, probably not since Crane had gone off to college. It was a heartwarming sight.

Geez, he was getting soft.

Nearing the cutoff to their road, Adam reached across Daniel and lightly nudged Crane's knee. Crane didn't startle or jostle Daniel, seemingly aware of the boy in his charge even while asleep.

"What? Oh… yeah, I'm awake," Crane said a little groggily, rolling his neck and shoulders as the sleep cleared from his foggy mind. "Hey, we're here," he observed brightly as Adam turned onto the gravel road leading to their ranch.

"You wanna wake him before a crater does?" Adam suggested, knowing just how jarring their pot-holes could be.

"Hey, kiddo, up 'n at 'em," Crane said softly by way of an answer, and Adam couldn't help but smile fondly at Daniel's response.

"We home?"

"Yeah, we are." The quiet joy in Crane's reply gave voice to the emotions filling Adam's heart. Daniel was finally home.

Adam pulled the truck in front of the gate left open for them and, as he saw their family billow out the front door, he heard Crane laugh, clearly amused by the sight of Daniel's welcome committee as well. They were all standing on the front porch wearing grins, the younger ones bristling like racehorses at the gate. They were taking heed of Adam's orders not to rush Daniel, though Brian had his hands on Guthrie's shoulders, undoubtedly holding back the boy's charge.

Daniel seemed oblivious, clearly concentrating much harder than he should have been simply to climb out of the truck. Crane was there though and helped ease him to the ground, hanging on even after Daniel gained his bearings and appeared steady. No longer walking on the tile flooring of the hospital, the ground at home was uneven at best and Daniel needed the help, at least for a while. With that in mind and ignoring the bags they'd tossed in the back of the truck at the hospital, Adam stepped around the front of the truck and took his place on Daniel's other side.

Apparently that was the cue Guthrie was waiting for to bolt out of the gate. Or through it, in this case.
"Daniel!" He shouted, his delight as over-the-top as expected. Contrary to Adam's instructions of that morning, the boy did charge, though he pulled up in front of Daniel at the last second saving Adam from having to intervene.

Facing each other, Guthrie looked pensive as he gave Daniel a visual once-over.

"Hey, Guthrie," Daniel said quietly, perhaps a little thrown by their baby brother's sudden reserve.

Adam knew that if Daniel was a lot steadier on his feet, he'd have sunk down to his knees by now. His invitation to give the boy a big old bear hug like he had on so many other occasions. And maybe that was what Guthrie had expected from him. Daniel must've sensed it too. Releasing his hold of Crane, Daniel took one small step forward before spreading his arms in invitation. "It's okay."

Adam watched Guthrie bite his lip and felt his own eyes well when tears rolled down their youngest's face. Wrapping his arms around Daniel, Guthrie cried, "You're home," and proceeded to get an upright version of the bear hug he'd been expecting. As Adam moved in to support Daniel, so did Crane, exchanging misty glances as they did so. And then the rest of the family joined in too, Evan's whoopin' and Hannah's unabashed tears as she slid under Adam's arm, showing the range of how they all felt.

 Somehow, during their group hug, they managed to move Daniel along from the gateway to the base of the porch steps. They stopped there, untangling their arms and breaking apart until only Crane was supporting Daniel once again. Two realizations struck Adam then. The first being that Ford and Brian had in fact stayed back from the celebrations, though that was being remedied in part now as Ford descended the steps and walked into Daniel's waiting embrace.

Since Daniel's seizure, their relationship had changed… they were more like equals now than before and though Daniel didn't remember much about the actual episode, Adam was sure he remembered Ford's steady, comforting presence. Adam certainly did and he couldn't help but think Ford had grown up a little because of it, taking on even more responsibility at the ranch and determined to do the same with Daniel's recovery and rehab. It made Adam proud each time he thought about it.

The second realization was just how many damn steps there were leading up to their front door. He knew the staircase to their bedrooms was going to be an issue but he hadn't really considered the front steps. Daniel was looking at them too now with the trepidation Adam felt.

As wonderful as it was to see Daniel up and around, especially at home, the truth was he looked like someone who'd spent almost two weeks in the hospital. Exceptionally fit before he got hurt, the weight he'd lost was muscle, and his clothes were hanging on him. His tanned skin not only pale but even a little pasty. It was as though the minimal exertions of the day were catching up to him, and those nine steps might as well have been ninety. Though Adam's first instinct was to simply step in and carry him, he knew that would hurt Daniel's pride and probably worry Guthrie. He decided to move in anyway, catching Crane's equally concerned eye and silently agreeing between them that they'd get him to the door together.

He should've known that Brian already had it covered.

"Hey, what am I? Chopped liver?" Bounding down the steps and hoisting Daniel up into a fierce hug, he didn't set his little brother back down until he'd swung him up onto the porch.
dinner table.

Though the evening's meal had been the first time the entire family had eaten together since the night before the mine collapse, and Daniel's first back at home, it had been a subdued rather than celebratory affair. Daniel was getting much more adept but his relationship with cutlery was still strained at best. Watching him struggle to feed himself was difficult for everyone. Knowing he wouldn't yet have much of an appetite, Hannah had made up a milder than usual stew, chopping the ingredients down into tiny pieces so that when Daniel tired with his spoon, he could use the bread she'd baked to scoop it up and get it from the bowl to his mouth. Crane could've kissed his sister-in-law for her consideration, though he'd left that deed to his husband. Who was more than willing to oblige.

The couple hadn't really had much time together, let alone any privacy, since before Tom and Carey's anniversary party. So, after the evening's dishes had been taken care of, they had wandered outside onto the deck for some time alone despite the cooler temperatures.

They'd just come back into the house, content and happy in each other's arms, when Evan whispered Adam's name. He sounded a little concerned so Crane abandoned the accounts and headed over to the couch where Evan and Daniel had been seated.

It was just the five of them at the moment. Brian had gone out for a final check on the stock and the youngest two were upstairs doing homework in the room Ford and Evan shared.

By the time Crane made it over to join the others, he could see why Hannah was smiling so warmly. Daniel was asleep at Evan's side, or rather slumped down against him, Evan's arm wrapped around his older brother's shoulder.

Crane couldn't help cracking a smile too. Evan was their rough and tumble bronco buster and having his brother fall asleep on him didn't exactly fit the image of manhood the seventeen year-old was struggling to project these days. The kid looked a little self-conscious but it was the concern Crane could see in his eyes that Adam addressed.

"Everything all right?" Adam asked as he squatted low in front of them.

Despite his embarrassment, Evan rested the back of his hand against Daniel's forehead. "He's feeling a little warm... I think," uncertainty in his tone.

Adam reached out, copying Evan then checking the warmth of Daniel's cheek too. "He's okay, champ. I think he's just worn out."

Though he could see the worry and skepticism in Evan's face, even though it was barely 7:30, Crane was frankly surprised Daniel had held up as long as he had. Resisting the urge to check on Daniel himself, Crane backed up Adam's words. "He's done in, Evan. It'll be a while before he's up for late night runs into Murphys."

"Yeah, I guess," the boy replied, concern for his brother now overriding his earlier discomfort as he draped his arm protectively across Daniel.

"He'll be all right," Adam said reassuringly, reaching out and tousling Evan's hair before straightening back up again. "You two stay put and we'll pull out the bed for him."

"Like I have any choice," Evan answered, eliciting a snicker from Hannah.

Apparently they were all done in. Either that or Murphy's Law was holding court in their living room. Whatever the reason, despite their attempts to set up Brian's bed quietly, somehow a few pillows managed to dislodge sending them directly into the path of the nearest guitar. Fortunately
it didn't sustain any damage when it fell but the reverberating cacophony woke up Daniel.

"Hey, it's all right," Crane heard Evan insist and, as he rounded the furniture to help with a clearly disoriented Daniel, Crane was grateful the boy had the sense to keep Daniel from bolting upright. "Stay put, Daniel. You're okay."

Crane bent low, placing his hands on either side of Daniel's face and forcing eye contact. Daniel had hold of Evan's arm, his eyes still looking a little wild but clearing when they focused on Crane. "That's it, you're okay," Crane soothed, relaxing as Daniel's expression did the same.

"Crane? Where?"

"You're home, kiddo. See?" Knowing Evan still had hold of Daniel and vice versa, Crane moved aside slightly so that Daniel could see the familiar surroundings of their living-room. He'd been looking at variations of the same sterile walls for almost two weeks; it was no wonder the kid was confused.

"Home?"

"Yeah, you betcha," Adam replied from beside Hannah, the two of them having followed Crane. Daniel relaxed further in Evan's hold until clarity sunk in and he began to straighten up once more, slowly this time and with Crane and Evan's help. Apparently realizing he'd been using his younger brother as a pillow, Daniel offered a needless apology. "Sorry, man," he said but Evan shook his head.

"Hey, don't mention it," he replied and then waiting a beat, added. "To anyone."

The ensuing laughter felt good and watching Daniel grin and elbow his younger brother felt even better. There was still the matter of getting Brian's bed set up for Daniel to contend with however. And Crane knew, now that Daniel was lucid, it was going to present more of a challenge.

Apparently reading Crane's mind, Adam said, "Why don't we call it a night and get you to bed?"

Daniel didn't hesitate in agreeing, proving to them all just how exhausted he was. "Yeah, okay. I've been looking forward to finally sleeping in my own bed."

Crane caught Adam's slight wince and as they exchanged glances, Crane didn't bother sending his oldest brother his "I told you so" look. They'd had this discussion days ago. Before the seizure, when their disagreements had still been civil. Adam was worried about the staircase and didn't want Daniel isolated for as many hours as he needed sleep. But Crane felt, with a family their size they could work around it and give the kid his bedroom. Ultimately Crane had deferred to Adam but had warned him that Daniel wouldn't take the news well.

"Well, actually..." Adam started, gesturing toward Brian and Guthrie's bed.

"What? No way," Daniel protested, coming fully awake and fully aware as he saw the partially made pull-out bed. "I want to sleep in my room."

"Daniel, I know. I get it," Adam tried to placate. "But c'mon, sport. You're not up to those stairs yet. You know that."

"So what," Evan interjected, defiance shining in his eyes and evident in the set of his jaw. "It's not like he doesn't have plenty of help." It wasn't every day that Evan stood up to Adam and rarely was Daniel his cause. Apparently Daniel's vulnerability had brought out the protectiveness in another of his siblings.
Unfortunately that protectiveness didn't always put the brothers on the same side.

Adam shot Evan a look that very clearly told him to keep out of it, so the kid huffed and crossed his arms as he settled back on the couch next to Daniel.

"Daniel, honey," This time Hannah tried to reason with him. "Adam's not telling you you'll never sleep up there again. It's just until you're stronger."

Daniel sighed and Crane braced for the rollercoaster to begin. He was expecting his brother's temper to flare, especially with Evan in the room. He knew tears were a possibility too but he figured they'd be less likely in the presence of one of his younger siblings. He certainly didn't expect Daniel's next question.

"Adam, what time is it?"

"What?" It clearly threw Adam as well.

"What time is it?"

Adam checked the clock on the mantel and answered with, "It's almost a quarter to eight, why?"

Daniel looked at Crane and Crane realized that his little brother was asking for his support, even though he wasn't entirely sure what Daniel was up to. He had a pretty good idea though. Besides, they'd always trusted each other and with Daniel keeping his cool, Crane had faith that the kid was working with a level head. Hoping he wasn't making a mistake, Crane nodded at Daniel.

"How am I supposed to get back my strength with what might as well be a herd of buffalo trying to tiptoe around me down here? It's not gonna work. Especially if I'm gonna crash this early."

Crane dropped his head to hide his smirk. Evan tried to contain his laughter but they all still heard his resulting snort anyway.

"Adam, please. I'm not gonna take a header, I promise," Daniel implored. "I won't try the stairs without help, okay?"

Clearly of mixed emotions, Adam clenched his jaw before looking to Hannah and then Crane for… Crane wasn't exactly sure what Adam was looking for either. Guidance? Their blessing? Adam already knew how Crane felt. Maybe it was just strength.

"Okay, sure. We'll give it a try," their eldest gave in; not sounding entirely convinced he was making the right decision.

But Daniel's delighted response put a smile on Adam's face. Crane's too.

"Thanks, Dad."

To be continued.
Chapter 8

Crane sat down on the edge of Daniel's bed and placed his hand on the kid's shoulder, nudging him lightly in an effort to rouse him awake. He smiled then, watching as his sleeping brother hitched up his shoulder, failing in his attempt to dislodge Crane's persistent hold. So much had changed in almost two weeks but a few things hadn't. Like the quiet joy Crane always felt as he pestered his so-not-a-morning-person baby brother into wakefulness. He'd never get tired of it. Shifting closer to Daniel's hip, Crane reached across the kid's ribcage and braced his arm against the mattress on Daniel's far side, effectively trapping him should he try to sit up too quickly.

"Daniel, come on," he urged. "Time to get up."

"Five more minutes," Daniel practically groaned, his eyes remaining sealed shut. The response was so achingly familiar Crane had to blink away the prickle of tears that came on unexpectedly. He was able to hold any further waterworks in check though.

"No way; Hannah's got breakfast started."

Daniel sighed heavily, dark hazel eyes finally revealing themselves as surprise gave way to annoyance when he yawned and bumped Crane's restricting arm as he tried to stretch his own. "Tell me you didn't stay like that all night?" The kid asked as he raised himself up onto his elbows.

It took a moment for Crane to catch up. "What? No, no," he denied, realizing that he actually had been sitting pretty much in the same position when the kid had fallen asleep. Daniel had been so upset; the triumph of convincing Adam to let him sleep in his own room morphing into humiliation and defeat when ultimately Crane and Evan had ended up basically carrying him up the last half of the steps. They'd tried their best not to make a big deal of it but the effort had cost Daniel, both physically and emotionally and Crane had decided to sit with him until he'd settled into a deep sleep. And then he crawled into his own bed and passed out. "Slept in my own, thank-you very much," Crane added as he indicated the rumpled bed over his shoulder.

"Good," Daniel replied, seemingly satisfied.

Crane had actually woken late but he wasn't feeling guilty about it. On Daniel's first full day home, the ranch's normal routine would be thrown out the window and the family would be starting their workday later than usual. Together. That Crane shared a room with Daniel gave him the luxury of sleeping in until he couldn't anymore, simply because no one wanted to disturb Daniel. It also meant everyone else had gone downstairs and there were no lineups for the washroom. No audience either, so Crane was able to help Daniel with his clothes and shoes without the kid feeling too self-conscious about it.

They'd made a deal the day before in the hospital… about Daniel paying him back for his help
when they were old and gray. But, after Daniel's struggle with the stairs, Crane had reminded him that it hadn't been so long ago when little brother had helped big brother up the stairs and into bed. It was the day Crane had driven Molly to the Stockton Airport to see her off as she began her trek east to continue her education. That had been the last time he'd seen the girl who'd stolen his heart. Letting her go had been devastating. Daniel had insisted on taking him into town that night and Crane had gotten plastered. Despite being underage, his brother was pretty much on a first-name basis with every bartender and owner in the county and as long as the kid didn't imbibe, he was welcome. And Crane had downed more than enough alcohol for them both. He didn't remember much from that night but he knew Daniel had gotten him up those stairs and had poured him into bed. It's what brothers did for each other.

As painful as Molly's farewell had been for Crane, he was glad he could use the memory to help Daniel cope with the limitations he had now.

Like getting back down those stairs.

This time with Ford's help.

"Keep your eyes on me," Ford coached from one step beneath him. "Remember what Gregg said. Try not to think about what you're doing and don't watch your feet."

"I know, all right," Daniel snapped, sounding as tense as his white-knuckled grip on the bannister implied. Crane had hold of him so there was no fear of him falling. Daniel just had to trust his body to know what to do without thinking about the mechanics, just like Ford was telling him.

At the rebuke, Ford's face fell which immediately elicited an apology from Daniel.

"Don't worry about it," Ford said in response. "Just trust us, okay?"

Steeling himself, Daniel said, "Okay, let's do this," and Crane made sure Ford caught the approving look he sent his way.

Sparing a glance to his left, Crane saw Adam standing near the couches watching their progress and looking as anxious as Daniel. But he stayed back; reluctantly Crane was sure. His presence undoubtedly keeping the rest of the family from joining him and gawking as their middle brother slowly made his way down to the living-room.

They made it and though it felt worthy of celebration, Crane knew that wasn't what Daniel wanted or needed. A simple, "Good job," would suffice which is exactly what Ford offered.

Daniel snagged Ford's wrist briefly, saying, "Thanks, bro," and Crane couldn't help smiling as he saw the blush coloring the younger boy's face. Adam hauling him in for a headlock did nothing to lessen the hue either.

Daniel was smiling at his brothers' antics but Crane knew he was pleased with himself too.

Getting down those stairs was a small victory but one he needed after last night.

The long sleep in his own bed seemed to have done Daniel some good and Crane was able to usher him to the table with just one hand resting lightly against his back. It was really the first sign he'd seen of Daniel starting to regain his strength.

They sat in their usual spots; the rest of the family already seated or taking their places. Though Brian typically served up breakfast, this morning Hannah was on duty. Crane looked around the table at the faces of his siblings and saw in them the same relief and hopefulness he was feeling. It would've been unimaginable a few weeks ago to consider a walk down the stairs and across the room a triumph. But life had changed for all of them, not just Daniel, and reveling in the little
things had become their new norm.

Hannah had cooked up scrambled eggs and as she rounded the table with the frying pan in her hold, dishing it out onto everyone's plates, Crane noted with approval that she slid Daniel's portion onto some toast, making it easier for him to eat once again. It wasn't that they were coddling him… Daniel was going to master cutlery soon enough but, with seven pairs of eyes watching him, the kid didn't need to feel like a spectacle. They'd practice when most of the family was out and more intensely when Gregg, Daniel's therapist, came by to continue his rehab. He'd be by three times a week, starting the coming Monday, one day more than originally arranged by the hospital. Gregg felt Daniel could handle the extra load and the kid was more than eager to get his coordination back. Best of all, the additional time wasn't costing them anything. Gregg was a city boy intent on showing his girlfriend he could ride and the Circle-Bar-Seven just so happened to have a house full of experts willing to teach him.

With his stomach growling loudly enough for Adam to hear and send him a smirk from the far end of the table, Crane ploughed into his breakfast. While Daniel had been in the hospital, Crane hadn't had much of an appetite but it was back now with a vengeance. It felt so good to be home with Daniel on the road to recovery.

The feeling didn't last long.

"You feelin' all right there, partner?" Brian, sitting directly opposite, quietly asked Daniel. His concerned tone as much as the question turning Crane's attention toward Daniel.

"Daniel?" Adam had hold of Daniel's wrist and it was no wonder. The kid looked green.

"Sweetheart?" As Hannah rose worriedly from her chair, Daniel suddenly did as well, shaking off a surprised Adam and choking out a muted, "Sorry," as he bolted unsteadily from the room and headed for the back-door.

Slipping past Hannah, Crane followed. Adam's anxiety-filled, "Everybody stay put, Crane's got it," still audible as Crane closed the screen door behind him and caught up to Daniel.

"Oh, Danny, what next?" Crane thought, or maybe he said it out loud. His little brother was hanging over the railing, retching, his back heaving as the kid deposited what little breakfast he'd had onto the flower beds bordering the foundation of the porch.

Crane moved in next to him and loosely wrapped an arm around Daniel's back, mindful of the precarious way his little brother was leaning out over the top rail. By the time he had finished, Crane knew he was spent. Daniel straightened up, more or less, allowing Crane to curl him around under his arm as the two of them slumped to the floor of the deck. It was cold out but the fresh air would feel good on the kid's flushed face.

"Shit, Crane. What am I supposed to say to Hannah?" Daniel asked after a few minutes.

"Not a thing." It was Adam who answered. Approaching from the doorway and crouching down in front of them with a glass of water in one hand and a damp washcloth in the other. Patting the cloth against the kid's face, he assured him. "She understands. We all do."

With their help, Daniel got up to his feet, accepting the water. After swishing and spitting it out over the railing a few times, he was ready to say more. "Well, I don't. The eggs tasted fine. It was just—" Daniel paused then, hesitating before shuddering. "I couldn't take the smell."

Adam hooked an arm around Daniel's neck, pulling him in as he consoled the kid who was clearly feeling guilty about his admission. "Don't worry about it, kiddo. We were warned things like this
might feel off for a while, remember?"

"Yeah, I guess," Daniel replied not very convincingly. Crane exchanged a concerned glance with Adam over the kid's lack of conviction. If Adam was thinking along the same lines as Crane, the worry had another source as well. They lived on a ranch, for God's sake. How was Daniel ever going to regain the weight and strength he had lost if his sense of smell was so messed up?

"What the hell?" Heading toward the paddock, Adam suddenly reined his gelding left. Heels digging into its flank as he wordlessly demanded it accelerate toward the fencing separating him from Daniel.

Goddamn it, he'd told the boys the barn was off-limits to Daniel, told Daniel the same and yet where was he now? Leaning against the rails of the corral just outside the barn. Watching as Ford, with an animated Guthrie at his side, led a saddled bay horse toward him. Gibson… Daniel's gelding.

After that morning's disastrous breakfast, Daniel had gone back to bed, leaning on Brian that time to get him upstairs. Adam still didn't like the fact that the kid was isolated up there but, true to his word, Crane had worked on the books in their room until Hannah had called them down for lunch. With leftover stew from the previous evening on the menu, thankfully Daniel had managed to keep everything down.

Despite the family's resistance to being apart from Daniel, with it being Saturday, Adam needed to take advantage of the extra manpower his still-in-school brothers provided. Evan, especially. Reluctantly, after their midday meal, he'd sent Brian and Evan out to scout the fence-lines. Though their neighbors had pitched in commendably and helped keep their stock fed and watered, after almost two weeks of neglect, Adam needed to know the condition of that fencing, especially the trouble-spots they already knew needed addressing. He could've used Crane's help as well but, for the immediate future, brother number three was going to stay where he was needed most. Especially while Daniel's emotions were still so unpredictable.

Adam had left the barn and yard duties to their two youngest, though he also knew Ford had intended to get started on some preliminary rehab work with Daniel, in anticipation of Gregg Godfrey's first session at the ranch the coming Monday.

Call him crazy but nowhere in Adam's definition of barn-work or preliminary rehab did letting Daniel get near his horse come into play. And Ford damn well knew that.

By the time Adam had ridden through and closed up the gates leading to the barn, Daniel and his horse were in the midst of their reunion and Adam's guts were tied up in knots. Though he was well aware of the sheer strength and brawn possessed by their equine partners, it was never more evident or unsettling than now. As he watched Gibson grind his powerful head against the kid's shoulder in what Adam knew was a display of affection, he couldn't help but worry just the same.

"Watcha doin', fellas?" He asked unnecessarily, his voice soft but tight as he approached with his mount at a cautious walk.

Though Guthrie seemed oblivious to Adam's consternation, Ford wore the look of the proverbial kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "I was just——"

"We're getting reacquainted," Daniel interrupted, "Aren't we, Gibs?" Laughter rang in his voice as he reached around Gibson's neck, interlocking his hands as he allowed the Quarter Horse to shove him and even lift him slightly off the ground.
"Okay, Daniel. That's enough." That was over a half ton of muscle pushing Daniel around and Adam couldn't stand it anymore. Shifting forward in his saddle, Adam was about to get down when, no doubt sensing his rider's increased agitation; his horse began to sidestep, toss his head and blow.

And, as was typical with horses and their stable-mates, so then did Gibson.

"Whoa!" Startled, Daniel abruptly let go as the horse lightly tossed him backwards, the still unsteady kid flailing a little before catching himself against the fence rails. Too hard for Adam's liking.

"Easy. Easy, boy." Ford soothed, calming the animal down as Guthrie scrambled past them to check on Daniel.

"Adam!" Crane called to him gruffly, approaching with a ground eating stride from the direction of the house. It was only then that Adam realized both Crane and Hannah, who was standing at the top of the porch steps – arms crossed and shaking her head – must have been watching it all. And, given the looks of displeasure on both their faces, had been party to it.

By the time Adam dismounted and turned his attention back to the younger boys, Gibson had settled and calmly stood as Daniel leaned into him, his head resting against his horse's muscular shoulder this time. The absence of laughter deafening. Damn it.

Crane brushed past Adam, but the annoyed look he wore went straight to Adam's hackles and they rose almost of their own accord, tamping down any of the remorse he was feeling.

"Have you all gone insane?" He asked, watching as Crane tended to both Daniel and Gibson. "Did you not see what almost happened here?"

"Your horse started it," Guthrie accused. "It's not Gibby's fault." His expression about as sour as any twelve year-old could muster.

The boy had a point but Adam wasn't about to concede it. "That'll be enough from you, young man. Why don't you go on inside with Hannah?" It wasn't a request. Tossing a stern look Ford's way, Adam added. "You too."

As Guthrie stomped off toward the house, Ford balked. His new found maturity and protectiveness of Daniel showing through. "I was going to take Gibson out for a ride. That's why he was out here in the first place."

Which made sense. Ford had made it his mission to keep Daniel's horse well exercised while his brother was out of commission. "Okay, go. Just be careful; he's twitchy."

Adam was grateful Brian wasn't there at that moment. Even still, the words he knew his brother wouldn't hesitate to say to him sprung to mind. 'Yeah. And whose fault is that?'

Daniel gave his horse one last affectionate pat before admonishing him to behave for Ford. Then, absently closing and latching the gate behind the departing horse and rider he walked dejectedly next to Crane as they moved to stand with Adam.

Though Adam knew Crane was pissed with him, yet again, it was obvious by the smile he was trying to subdue that he too had caught the ease with which Daniel had latched the gate. Gregg was right... Daniel was capable of fine motor control on an unconscious level. The mechanics were there. It was just the disconnect between thought and action that he was struggling with. If only Daniel would realize that and stop trying so damn hard.
"I'm not insane, Adam," Daniel said, completely unaware of the silent victory his older brothers were sharing in. His statement threw Adam entirely until he recalled his frustrated words from moments earlier. "I'm not an idiot either." His voice cracked when he said it and Crane immediately hooked an arm around his neck, gently asserting that Adam was well aware of that fact.

This was too important for Adam to let Crane do the talking for him. "I know that, kiddo," Adam affirmed. "Of course I do."

"Then, why'd you freak out? You think I'm so brain-damaged that I'm gonna ride no matter what Dr. Lee says?"

"Hey, " Crane implored, as disturbed by Daniel's distress as Adam. Light hazel eyes sought Adam's, clearly pleading with him to say the right words. And fix this.

Deciding it really might be the best policy, Adam answered honestly. "I don't know what I was thinking, kid. All I saw was a thousand pounds of horse-flesh pushing my little brother around. The one just home from the hospital." He let his guilt come through as he said, "I guess maybe I'm the one who went a little crazy." Whatever Adam was saying seemed to be doing the trick. The hurt and frustration in Daniel's eyes rapidly being replaced by understanding and affection.

"If you're looking for someone to disagree with you, don't look at me," Crane laughed and, at that, Daniel dropped his head and smirked.

On a roll, Adam decided to play the sympathy card too, though he was being absolutely sincere. "Jesus, Daniel, you haven't been home twenty-four hours yet... you think you could give me a break and hold off on pushing the boundaries at least another day?"

At that Daniel did laugh, tossing out, "Okay, Dad. Anything to make it easier on you."

"Good." Adam clasped Daniel's neck and tugged him in against his shoulder. "But don't call me 'Dad'."

"He's getting tired," Hannah observed worriedly as she set down her tea, pulled out a chair and sat next to Crane at the dining table.

She was referring to Daniel who was working with his therapist, for only the second time since coming home from the hospital. Crane sighed; removing his glasses and setting them down next to the ledgers he'd been trying and failing to balance. Lightly tossing his pencil onto the tabletop, he added, "Yeah. And awfully frustrated."

"He just doesn't see what we see. How much better he's doing," Hannah replied thoughtfully as she rested her elbows on the table and folded her hands under her chin.

It was true. After five days at home Daniel's balance was improving and he was suffering fewer periods of dizziness. He was feeding himself for the most part and, thankfully, the smell of eggs seemed to be the only food to trigger the awful nausea he'd endured his first morning back. Fortunately, since eggs were such a staple in the McFadden home, whipping them up into pancakes seemed to circumvent the kid's hypersensitive nose and it looked like Daniel might even start to put on weight. The fresh air he was getting from his limited excursions outside, like the one he'd had with Gregg and Crane earlier that morning, was helping him look more like their Daniel too.

"I know, he's way too hard on himself," Crane agreed, lamenting his brother's refusal to recognize
his successes and dwell on his perceived failures.

Despite the obvious daily improvements, Daniel was still struggling and had a very long way to go. He'd mastered zippers but buttons and laces still gave him grief. His handwriting was improving too, though his printing and numbering were still lacking. Under Gregg's direction, Ford had been working with Daniel on his concentration and memory skills. They'd played checkers a couple of times after a few failed attempts at playing cards. Daniel had to work too hard just to hang onto them fanned out in his grip, or to pick them up off the table without sliding them to the edge. So expecting him to remember exactly what cards were in his hand was too much to ask. They'd've started him on jigsaw puzzles too but his difficulties with picking up the pieces left their choices limited to some pretty basic children's ones and Crane had vetoed those. He knew they'd be an insult to the kid's intelligence.

They'd work their way up to cards and puzzles eventually but, for now, a flustered and frustrated Daniel was simply too volatile to deal with and, when he worked himself into that state, progress wasn't in the picture.

After nearly two hours of working with Gregg, the kid was approaching that threshold now.

Usually Crane deferred to the man's expertise. But, as the therapist made his way over to the piano, Crane couldn't help but believe that the end of one of their grueling sessions was just about the worst time to approach the subject of music with Daniel.

It was no secret to his family that Daniel's ability to play music again was his greatest concern. The possible inability his greatest fear. And Crane had made sure Gregg was well aware of music's importance to Daniel. That, in the kid's mind at least, it's what pretty much defined him. And, up until the injury, his future.

Except for that dark period after their parents' deaths, when Daniel had been so emotionally wrecked, Crane's little brother had lived and breathed music. Ever since their mom had bequeathed him his first guitar; one her grandfather had given her in her youth. Daniel was all of about seven then, though he'd started strumming and playing by ear even before then. He was a natural. And because of that Crane was confident Daniel would be able to play again and even write music again too. But right now he knew Daniel was scared and avoiding it like the plague. The family had all but given up on their nightly jam sessions after Daniel had spooked on them his second night home. As soon as Evan had pulled out a banjo and Brian his harmonica, Daniel had claimed exhaustion and started heading up the stairs before anyone could catch up to him. Crane didn't doubt the fatigue had been real but, it was the kid's nearly frantic haste to get away that had him concerned.

It worried him that Daniel wasn't even willing to try. He was pushing himself to overcome every other obstacle but wouldn't even look at his guitar.

Failure scared him that much.

Though more Crane's instrument of choice than Daniel's, the kid had been avoiding their piano too. Which likely explained the look of sick horror on his face as Gregg pulled out the bench in front of it and sat down. It was taking everything in Crane's power to ignore his protective instincts, stay back and not intervene.

"Come on, Daniel," Gregg said, patting the vacant spot next to him on the bench. "Show me what you can do on this thing."

Crane watched as Daniel hesitated, knowing the kid's pride was warring with his fear. "Uh, I haven't tried it yet. N-not since c-coming home," Daniel responded, his nervousness apparent
"That's okay," Gregg said, "I don't even know how to play one but I just want to see what your fingers can do with the keys. This could be a great exercise for you," He reasoned.

After another moment's hesitation, Daniel softly agreed. "Yeah, okay," he said as he sat down next to Gregg. Looking at the sheet music on the music rack, Daniel flipped it to the first page before placing his fingers atop the keys. Crane searched his memory, trying to remember what piece was sitting there. Hoping it was something simple that he'd been teaching Guthrie rather than one of the more complex, classical pieces he indulged in.

Sadly, it didn't matter. Having quietly removed himself from the table, Crane had worked his way closer to watch, pleased to see Daniel's hands resting in the position he'd taught him. But hand position was where Crane's delight ended and Daniel's misery began.

Crane's heart fell as he witnessed Daniel's jaw clench and his posture grow tense. The kid was staring, then glaring, at the sheet music and then at his hands. The latter not moving at all even as his gaze moved up and back down again until Daniel suddenly slammed his outspread fingers down onto the keys. The resulting sound was far from melodic; its clamor reflecting perfectly the turmoil Crane knew was residing in Daniel's heart. From what Crane had just seen, he was convinced Daniel could still read music but, the message was short-circuiting somewhere and the notes weren't translating to his fingers at all.

"Screw this; I can't do it," Daniel declared, confirming Crane's fears as he abruptly leapt up from the bench. He would've stormed away had Gregg not grabbed him by the arm.

"Hey, hey, hey! Daniel, stop!" Crane insisted, worried that Gregg's move might trigger more than just a verbal assault from Daniel. The kid's heavy breathing and clenched fist told Crane he was damn close to slugging the man.

"Gregg, let him go. Now," Hannah demanded, having made her way over to them as well. Her concern for Daniel bringing her dangerously close to getting within swinging range.

At Hannah's command, Gregg did let go and Crane slipped in between them, not yet convinced his enraged brother wouldn't sucker punch the guy. Focusing on mollifying his brother, he lightly gripped his arms, placating him. "Daniel, you've gotta cool down. It's gonna be okay."

Daniel shrugged out of Crane's hold but his body-language no longer screamed rage. Instead it radiated despair. "No. No it's not. My hands are fucked, Crane. They're useless."

Crane sent Hannah an apologetic look. That kind of profanity wasn't permitted in their home, especially around Hannah but, not surprisingly she waved it off. The kid was nearing the end of his tether and even without the excuse of his brain chemistry messing with his behavior, Crane figured he deserved a pass.

Grasping Daniel by the back of his neck, Crane drew him in. Daniel didn't resist and Crane let his distraught little brother lean into him as he gathered together his next words. "You've got it wrong, Danny. You've come so far in just a few weeks. Don't give up on yourself."

"Crane's right, Daniel," Gregg agreed. "You're really doing remarkably well."

Daniel scoffed, lifting his head from Crane's shoulder to face the man. "Look, are we done here? I'm feeling kinda wrung out."

Gregg sighed, slumping his shoulders a little and Crane knew he didn't want to leave Daniel in such a negative frame of mind. Crane didn't want that either, though the way the kid was still
leaning against him, he knew Daniel wasn't faking his exhaustion.

Straightening his stance, Gregg replied. "Okay, I'll leave if you want me to but answer me this first... can you play without reading music?"

"I don't know," the kid replied honestly, his voice hitching.

Gregg shook his head and smiled slightly, saying, "No, I mean before the injury. Could you play by ear?"

Shooting a confused glance Crane's way, he answered, "Sure. Why?"

Guessing where Gregg was going with this and desperate for Daniel to come away from this session with a victory, Crane jumped on board. Rubbing his hands together in anticipation, Crane ushered Daniel back over to the piano, sitting him down and then squeezing in next to him. "Okay, so let's try this."

Crane played eight simple bars, using only one hand.

Heaving a reluctant sigh, Daniel acquiesced and began to play what he'd heard. His attempt wasn't perfect but it wasn't bad at all.

"And again."

It took a few more tries before Daniel nailed it but, once successful, Crane added more notes to the piece. Each time Daniel was able to master it.

The kid was smiling now; they all were. The relief in the room palpable and Crane wondered if they should finish off literally on that last positive note. Gregg had other plans though and asked Daniel if he wanted to try playing something on his own.

Nervous, Daniel stared once again at the keys before making his attempt and Crane couldn't deny that the result was pretty awful. He knew the kid was thinking too hard, not allowing his ingrained talent to come through.

His fuse already short, Daniel banged the keys again in frustration. But this time instead of manhandling his charge, Gregg immediately began to question him, asking, "How's the vertigo these days?"

"What? Why? What does that have to do with anything?"

Thankfully showing no signs of his patience wearing thin, the therapist answered. "Just humor me. Are you able to close your eyes without getting dizzy?"

Daniel hesitated before answering. Then, sending Crane a look which begged him to keep the answer from Adam, he said. "Not standing up, no."

"But it's better sitting down?"

"Not really sure." Seemingly knowing what was being asked of him, Daniel turned back to the keyboard and Crane moved off of the bench, giving him room.

Positioning his fingers once more, Daniel closed his eyes and began to play and though it wasn't his most melodic effort, Crane recognized the song immediately. It was one of the first they'd ever written together. "Yes!" he said, elated. "See, I knew you could do it."
Beaming at a positively glowing Hannah, Crane patted Gregg's back and whispered his thanks as Hannah rested proud hands on Daniel's shoulders, bending down to kiss him affectionately on the cheek.

Daniel looked up at them all, relief evident but the fear was still there. "Yeah, well that sucked pretty bad."

"No it didn't, sweetheart." Hannah said, her tone almost scolding.

"It's gonna come back, Daniel," Crane promised. Meaning it.

"Maybe." Daniel didn't sound all that convinced and his reaction to his success was falling far short of what Crane had envisioned. Turning to Gregg, Daniel asked him, "Am I gonna be able to work with sheet music someday?"

Crane winced, knowing what Daniel was really asking… if he was not only going to be able to play what was already in black and white but also, more importantly, was he going to be able to create music and put it down on paper. And Crane knew the therapist wasn't in a position to make the promises Crane was determined to keep.

"I hope so, Daniel."

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Daniel answered, still sounding pretty damn disheartened. "If you'll all excuse me then, I'm gonna call it a day."

"Daniel—" This was not at all how Crane wanted this session to end.

"Just leave me be for a bit, okay, Crane?"

Despite Daniel's request, Crane moved to follow him. Hannah snagged his arm though, sympathy in her eyes. Knowing she was right, he relented.

As the three adults watched Daniel slowly make his way up the stairs, Gregg called to him. "Daniel? You still want me to go ahead with Monday?"

Daniel paused briefly then carried on, answering flatly, "Yeah. Sure. Whatever," as he made his way up to the landing.

Crane wasn't happy at all with his brother's halfhearted response. Monday would be too monumental for anything but a positive attitude. Noting the deep frown worn by Gregg, Crane was pretty certain he felt the same way. Hannah on the other hand simply looked confused.

"What's this about Monday?"

Adam slumped against the back of the couch, trying to take in everything Gregg had just told him. Everything he'd suggested. Leaning forward again, he templed his hands against his chin, trying to keep his anxiety from revealing itself in his voice. "Let me get this straight… You're telling me— No. You're actually recommending that Daniel starts back to school on Monday?" He couldn't help himself; despite his efforts to stay calm he knew his volume had just risen.

Gregg confidently met Adam's eyes. "I understand that the concept's a little nerve-wracking for you—"

"You think?"
Gregg continued, all business. "All due respect, Adam but, both statistically and in my experience, getting brain injured kids back to school in even a limited capacity as soon as possible is the best thing for them."

"How limited?" Hannah asked worriedly. Adam knew his wife's maternal instincts were kicking into high gear. "It's still morning and he's already back in bed. And after everything that happened today… he's just so exhausted."

There was a little heartache mixed with the worry in Hannah's tone and that had Adam even more concerned. Before Gregg could respond, he spoke up. "Why? What happened?" He turned to Crane this time, sitting next to Daniel's therapist and staying unusually quiet. And looking incredibly tense. Though far from the most vocal McFadden in the house, when it came to Daniel's welfare, Adam could usually count on him to be right in the thick of things.

"Oh, he just had a tough time with everything," Crane answered, seemingly as troubled by the morning's events as Hannah.

Gregg spoke up then. "Guys… he made loads of progress today. Honestly. Especially with his music."

At that, Adam's eyebrows rose. "Music?"

Crane went on to explain what had happened. Though Adam was glad to hear that Daniel was still able to pick up a tune by ear, his heart was breaking too. Knowing how hard it must have been for his little brother to truly face that doing what he loved best was going to be such a huge struggle. Like damn near everything else these days.

"And even after today, you still think he's capable of getting back to school?"

Gregg nodded his head assuredly. "Definitely. Just mornings to start and we'd have to review and probably shuffle some of his classes. Pick and choose so we don't overtax him."

Adam had a million questions and twice as many concerns but he decided to hear the therapist out first. "I've already started working with the school to put together an Individual Education Plan," Gregg continued. "And, though he'd be attending regular classes, we can work with Special Ed. to make sure he doesn't fall too far behind. We'd meet with his teachers first – I've tentatively booked a meeting for one o'clock tomorrow – so they know exactly what they're dealing with and then we can take it from there."

It sounded so simple. So why did Adam feel like he'd be throwing Daniel to the wolves? He looked at Crane. He knew his roommate best and, since Gregg had already broached the subject with him earlier, had been given more time to mull it over. "Do you think he can handle it?"

Crane met Adam's gaze intently but then suddenly those hazel eyes filled and he lowered his head. "Honestly..." he answered shakily, running a trembling hand through his hair. "It's me. I don't think I can handle it."

"Yeah," Hannah laughed nervously before adding, "I mean, he'd be so far away." The and we won't be there to protect him implicit but flashing in neon anyway.

Adam swallowed hard. His wife and brother obviously shared his fears. Christ, the kid still couldn't tie his shoes and Gregg wanted to send him off on a bus to 'raging hormone high'. He felt sick. Still, he had faith that Daniel's therapist wasn't making the recommendation without good reason. Sighing heavily, Adam looked up at Gregg and asked, "You think you can hang around
for a while? There's someone I need to talk to."

Just moments later, having reached the top of the stairs, Adam paused briefly to look back down them. Something he'd found himself doing a lot of lately. Their height, the steep angle and their sheer number loomed like a threat to his vulnerable brother's safety. The same brother who, before brain damage had stolen his coordination and athleticism, would have just as soon slide down the bannister as use the actual steps. Gone were those days though. For now, Adam chided himself.

Slowly making his way down the hall, he quietly opened the door to the room Daniel and Crane shared, stopping at the sight of the boy curled up under his quilt, sound asleep. Daniel was lying on his right side so, even as Adam softly approached the bed, he wasn't able to see the lingering evidence of his little brother's brain surgery – neither the scar nor the still growing-in hair ensconced in the pillow his head rested upon.

Adam'd be lying to himself if he said Daniel looked completely normal though. Even in his sleep, he could see the shadows of exhaustion beneath those dark lashes.

The mattress dipped with Adam's weight but Daniel didn't budge, didn't utter a sound until Adam tenderly stroked his soft hair.

"Go 'way, Crane. I'm all right," he murmured, the words muffled against his pillow.

Adam couldn't help but smile. "It's me."

"'dam?" Slowly waking, his lashes fluttering to reveal slivers of dark hazel, Daniel rolled onto his back, dislodging Adam's hand. His words were still thick with sleep when he asked, "Lunch ready?"

Adam shook his head, "Not for a while yet, sport." Daniel kept his gaze fixed on him, understandably looking for more of an explanation. "I just came up here to see you."

"Ever'thing okay?"

Adam didn't like the hint of worry in Daniel's tone. Liked it even less that he was the cause of it. Lightly patting the kid's cheek, he shrugged, asking, "You tell me. I hear you had quite a morning."

Daniel raised himself up onto his elbows then, offering his thanks as Adam angled his pillow against the headboard and helped him sit more upright against it. It was his turn to shrug. "It was okay, I guess," he said noncommittally. Then, smiling a little sheepishly, he added, "Can almost read my writing now."

"Good," Adam replied, wanting to acknowledge the accomplishment but knowing high praise would only make Daniel more self-conscious. "Anything else?"

Daniel shrugged again then sunk back further into his pillow. Crossing his arms, he answered, giving Adam only fleeting eye contact. "Gregg says I'm doing good."

"Yeah, he does." Adam smiled, this time allowing his enthusiasm to show.

It was pretty clear that Daniel wasn't going to bring up what had happened with the piano and that didn't really surprise Adam. After all, Daniel's music had become as often as not a contentious issue between them ever since Daniel had started his senior year. Truthfully, Adam was more than impressed with his kid brother's talent but, like with Evan and the rodeo, he'd been a hell of a lot happier when he'd thought their interests were hobbies and not their chosen vocations.
He honestly didn't know which scared him worse... the possibility of Evan getting seriously hurt on the rodeo circuit or the idea of Daniel getting sucked into the culture of drugs and booze that seemed to go hand and hand with the music business. Hell, Adam remembered being in high-school when Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin died. And then Jim Morrison the following summer. Hell, having Stormy Weathers stay with the family hadn't exactly eased Adam's mind either. Thanks to Daniel's help the legendary singer may well have triumphed over his inner demons but, life on the road had contributed to their existence, of that Adam was sure. Daniel becoming yet another victim terrified the hell out of him.

What happened downstairs with the piano wasn't why Adam was up here though. Adam had other, more pressing concerns.

"And he thinks you're ready to start school."

"Uh huh."

There wasn't a lot of conviction in Daniel's response. Even less enthusiasm, and he was looking away from Adam again. Reaching out, Adam guided his brother's attention back to him. "What do you think?"

Daniel sighed heavily. "Gregg thinks it would be good for me."

"That's not what I asked."

"Is it my decision to make?"

The question threw Adam and he sat back a little when it was posed. At eighteen, it probably was Daniel's decision... legally. It didn't matter. When it came to his own well-being and self-preservation, Daniel's decision making track record had failed dismally as of late. Someone had to look out for him and, as head of the family, that was Adam's job. Still, he had come up here to hear the kid out. "Well, no. Not entirely."

"Adam—"

"Now, hang on," Adam interrupted, hoping to prevent a tirade. "I just want you to know that no-one here is in a rush to send you back to school until you're really up to it," he said sincerely, keeping his concerns about Daniel being out from under their watchful eyes to himself. "No-one's going to think any less of you if you stay home a few more weeks. Least of all me, all right?"

Daniel uncrossed his arms and looked away again, his attention fixed upon a loose thread he fumbled awkwardly between his thumb and forefinger. "If I don't start back soon," he started, so softly he was almost whispering. "There's no way I'm gonna finish this year, even with summer school." He finally looked at Adam then and it took everything Adam had not to look away from the raw emotion he saw in his little brother's eyes. "Adam, I know it's a long-shot but... I really wanna graduate with my friends."

Adam swallowed hard. There it was. God, how much things had changed in just a few weeks. Though Daniel had friends in school, good friends he'd grown up with, in most cases they'd drifted apart once Daniel had started playing seriously with his band. His band-mates were all older, out of school and, for the most part Daniel hung out with them or Crane. For him to suddenly care about graduating with his class, it actually seemed out of character. Only, with a future as uncertain as Daniel's was, maybe this goal seemed more attainable right now than a career in music?

Selfishly, Adam was all for that. Besides, it was damn hard to say no to the heartbreak shining in
"Okay," Adam said, surprising even himself just a little. "We'll give it a try and see how it goes."

"Thanks," Daniel replied tiredly and Adam, though he'd never admit it to anyone, was a little disappointed that Daniel hadn't added "Dad" to his thank-you. That told Adam the boy probably wasn't truly all that enthusiastic about going back to school yet. Either that or he was just too tired to tease his oldest brother. Probably both.

It was because of the latter, Adam decided to risk Daniel's ire or embarrassment and help settle him back down to sleep. "Don't thank me yet," he said softly, adding, "Okay, come on," as he patted the mattress with one hand and slipped his other behind Daniel to lay the pillow flat again. Daniel complied without protest, sliding back down under the covers. "And there's no shame if you decide it's too much once you start back, all right?"

"Okay," Daniel said, rolling over onto his side again, seemingly oblivious to the fact that Adam was tucking him in.

Adam fought the urge to place a kiss in Daniel's hair and instead smoothed the wayward strands flat. "Get some more sleep. One of us'll come get you when it's time to eat."

Daniel didn't respond and, as Adam got up he instantly regretted that he hadn't said the words that had been residing in his heart during their talk. He decided to say them anyway. "I'm proud of you, kiddo."

As he slipped through the doorway, he thought he heard Daniel say something, barely hearing what sounded like, "Shouldn't be."

Turning back to him, this time Adam definitely heard the kid breathe, "Not after what I did."

"Danny?"

Only soft, steady breaths answered him. And though Adam didn't really buy that the kid was truly sleeping, he let it go. He hated knowing that Daniel was still carrying the blame for the mine collapse but he also knew he needed help dealing with it. He'd have to bring this up with Crane, maybe even Brian too. Whether Daniel was willing or not, one of these days they were going to have to talk about it.

To be continued.
Coop Johnson, Evan's rodeo instructor, is referenced briefly here, as is Daniel and Evan's football coach. I've named him Coach Snyder in honor of Drew Snyder, who played "Coach" in the episode, Dreams. Sophie Barton, the single mom befriended by Hannah in Neighbors gets a shout out too, as does Marie again, Hannah's former boss.

"You warm enough?" Crane asked as he looked over at his brother sitting forlornly on a stack of hay-bales, his arms and ankles crossed. Though it was early afternoon, the day was overcast and the chill in the air had penetrated the barn. "You look cold."

"I wouldn't be if you'd let me do something."

"Daniel—" Crane sighed. Mind you, the kid was right. All Crane was doing was sweeping out straw bedding from the empty horse stalls, something Daniel was perfectly capable of doing at this stage of his recovery.

It had been five days since Gregg Godfrey had first proposed the idea of Daniel starting back to school. An idea which had shocked Crane at first. Just the thought of a still vulnerable Daniel away from home with only Evan and Ford to look out for him from a distance had utterly terrified Crane, despite the therapist's insistence that Daniel was steadily improving. Largely due to Adam and Daniel's talk that day though, the family had agreed and allowed Gregg to set the wheels in motion. Crane had to admit that the man knew what he was talking about. Since then, Daniel's improvement had been virtually exponential and, though he still had a long way to go, Crane was feeling more confident about him starting classes.

The kid could tie his laces now and his ever-present bandana. Cutlery was no longer a problem and, as long as he didn't have to restrict himself to the single lines in his note-books, his handwriting had become more legible. His dexterity on the piano had improved too though he still had problems with smaller things like fastening buttons or picking up playing cards or pocket change off of flat surfaces. Best of all, though he still tired quickly, he was steadier on his feet and hadn't had a dizzy spell in days.

Of course, red tape and bureaucracy being what they were, Gregg's target date of the following Monday – today – hadn't panned out. Daniel was going to start Wednesday instead, two days from now. Crane actually preferred the idea of Daniel easing back into classes with only a three-day week.

And if he was going to be starting school, he might as well help clean out some stalls. "Fine," Crane said, exiting the one he was working in. Grabbing a shovel from its hook on the wall, he handed it to Daniel with a smirk. "Here."

Daniel wrinkled his nose. "Dung duty? You really shouldn't have, partner," he griped.

"Hey, at least some of it's warm."
"I wasn't planning on rolling in it, big brother," Daniel muttered as he swung open the nearest stall door and set about shoveling the manure and dumping it into an awaiting wheel-barrow.

Crane's answering grin lasted for a long while after that comeback.

They worked in companionable silence; Crane checking periodically to make sure the kid wasn't wearing down. Daniel tended to attack any chore with gusto and it was hard for him to accept how quickly he tired these days. He seemed to understand the multiple reasons for it – his loss of weight and muscle, the still healing injury to his brain, and the medications that brought on lethargy – but none of that prevented him from pushing himself.

Ultimately it was the sound of hoof-beats, approaching at a rapid pace, that put an end to both Daniel's and Crane's chores. Since Adam and Hannah were in town and the rest of the boys were in school, it would have to be Brian coming in that fast.

Setting aside their tools, they stepped out of the barn in time to see Brian, already inside the nearest paddock, removing his gelding's saddle and bridle and hefting them onto the top rail. Swinging its gate shut, he started heading for the supply shed, clearly on a mission, until Daniel's voice stopped him.

"Hey, Brian. Where's the fire?"

Crane and Daniel caught up to him then and Crane couldn't help but note the once-over his older brother was giving their younger one. In spite of his obvious urgency, Brian looked pleased and Crane was sure that seeing Daniel… steady; eyes bright and alert, was the cause. The kid had no idea he was their walking miracle.

"Hey, Dan'l," he said. "You warm enough?"

Daniel sighed, crossed his arms and then rolled his eyes at Crane. "You two rehearse this routine before I got up today?"

Crane laughed, even harder when he saw the confused look Brian wore. "Nah," Crane answered. "There wasn't enough time."

"Speaking of no time," Brian spoke up; his earlier haste returning. "I've got a small disaster to avert."

"What's going on?" Daniel asked before Crane had the chance.

Brian pulled a pair of work gloves from his back pocket and slapped them against his thigh before putting them on. "Oh, you know that old elm next to the fence at the south pasture... The one that got struck by lightning about a month ago?" Crane knew the tree. Bringing down the scorched branches that had partially split from its trunk had been on their to-do list for the week following the Barretts' anniversary party. Until the mine collapse and Daniel's injury drastically changed their priorities.

"They came down?" Crane asked, cringing, already knowing the answer.

"Oh, yeah."

"How bad?" Daniel asked, equally concerned.

"Upended one fence-post and both lines are down either side of it," Brian said grimly.
"Shit." This was all they needed, Crane thought. The herd was in that pasture and, curious beasts that cattle were; they'd check out those fallen branches and discover the twenty foot break in the fence in no time.

"Well, hell, boys," Daniel said, heading for the shed. "Looks like we've got a fence to fix."

"Daniel, no," Crane hadn't intended to sound so sharp but, cleaning stalls was one thing. No way was his brother up to fence repairs, or potentially cutting down half-dead trees.

"Now hold on there, partner," Brian said, catching up to him and snagging Daniel's sleeve. Daniel looked down at the hand holding him back and gave Brian an irritated look that screamed "back off". Brian didn't let go but he did relax his stance. "I can handle this. You two have work to do here."

"Mucking stalls? You're kidding me," Daniel replied, incredulous. "Brian, it's at least a two-man job and you know it."

Brian released Daniel's sleeve and looked helplessly at Crane. The kid was right but neither one of them intended to leave Daniel behind or take him with them to shiver his ass off while they did the repairs. Crane really didn't know what to say either without sounding blatantly overprotective. He suddenly found his boots utterly fascinating.

Daniel huffed in annoyance, drawing Crane's eyes back up to him. "Come on, guys." Turning to Brian, he said. "Look, if I can't go, fine. At least take Crane, okay?"

Crane stepped forward, lightly placing a hand at the juncture of Daniel's neck and shoulder. "I'm not about to leave you alone, buddy. As soon as Adam and Hannah get home, I'll follow Brian."

Looking over at their older brother, Brian nodded; satisfied with the suggestion.

Apparently Daniel wasn't. Daniel reached up and grasped Crane's wrist, dislodging it from his shoulder but not letting go. "And I'm not about to be responsible for Brian getting hurt," he said, his frustration mixed with misplaced guilt. It was the latter that shone through when he added, "And I'm not going to be the reason this family gets further in debt."

"Dan'l—"

"We can't afford to lose any of that herd, Brian."

They were wasting precious time arguing and Crane was about to cave. He hated the seven different kinds of guilt Daniel was wearing around his neck and knew if they lost a single steer, Daniel would add its loss to his burden. Besides, Adam and Hannah were just in town. They might even make it back before Brian and Crane did.

Sighing heavily, he cocked his head and looked at Brian. Brian looked pensive and though he didn't tend to coddle Daniel the way Crane or even Adam did, Crane knew the fear of Daniel having another seizure was foremost on his mind. Even though Dr. Lee had told them Daniel didn't need constant supervision, leaving the kid on his own went against every big brother instinct they both had.

It had been just shy of two weeks since that last seizure though.

When Brian's shoulders slumped, Crane knew his older brother had come to the same conclusion and decided to give in as well.

"Okay, partner," Brian said, clearly not happy about his decision, despite Daniel's obvious relief.
"But you're waitin' in the house until we get back."

The repairs had taken longer than Crane had wanted them to. They'd had to take a chain saw to some of the bigger branches before they could even deal with the fencing. By the time that section was standing again, over two hours had passed.

Concern over what their middle brother had been doing to kill time had occupied his thoughts, so Crane hadn't been very talkative by the time they'd loaded the Jeep back up and performed a cursory headcount of the herd. Brian hadn't really spoken either. Crane was surprised then when his older brother piped up from the passenger seat and asked, "So, what do you think of this idea of Marie's?"

"Not sure," Crane answered thoughtfully as he swerved to avoid a particularly deep swale in their path. "I guess that'll depend on her proposal."

Adam and Hannah had gone into Murphys to meet with Marie and some of the other business owners from the town. They wanted to discuss organizing some kind of fundraiser to help offset Daniel's medical bills. "It's Marie so you know her heart's in the right place but..." Crane kept the rest of his thoughts to himself. It was something their community did. Rallying around their neighbors when misfortune struck. Just like when Crane and his brothers rebuilt Sophie Barton's barn after a fire had leveled it. Or participating in the fundraiser to help out Matt Knudsen after a bull had nearly killed him. Or digging out four trapped kids after a mine collapse. Still, the McFaddens had always prided themselves on being able to take care of their own. A fundraiser for them just went against the grain and Crane was sure that Adam had to be struggling with the concept.

Rolling to a stop in front of the gate, Crane kept the engine running as he finally admitted aloud what was truly bothering him. "I just don't know how Daniel's gonna take this. His self-esteem is bad enough right now without having to consider himself a charity case."

Brian gripped the Jeep's roll-bars and lithely swung himself out over the passenger door before turning back to face Crane. "I know what you mean. It sticks in my craw too." He shook his head then and rested fisted hands on his hips. "Like it or not, little brother. With sixty-three thousand dollars at stake, we are a charity case."

Crane didn't have an answer to that so, waving his hand in the direction of the house instead, he said, "Go check on him. I'll park this by the shed and catch up in a sec."

Crane didn't bother to take the time to unload the tools and leftover fence wire from the back of the Jeep. With no sign of the truck, he was too anxious to get back to Daniel, to see how he fared on his own. Besides, the boys would be home from school soon so he'd get them to unload it.

Making his way back to the house, his attention was drawn to a recognizable flash of red – Brian's down-filled vest – in his periphery. What the hell was he still doing outside?

Upon closer look, apparently Brian was peeking inside the house through one of the side windows.

His worry about Daniel easing – Brian wouldn't still be out there if he couldn't see Daniel – Crane quietly made his way over to his snooping sibling. "Just what are you doing?" He asked, smugly satisfied when he made his brother jump.

Brian stepped back from the window, his eyes sparkling as he said, "Take a look for yourself."
"No way. I am not going to spy on Daniel," Crane replied, suitably affronted on Daniel's behalf.

"Suit yourself, boy-scout. But he just might stop what he's doin' when we walk in there."

His curiosity piqued, Crane breathed out a put-upon sigh. Shoudering his way between Brian and the window, he grumbled, "You've always been a bad influence on me, you know that don't you?"

Brian laughed and lightly punched Crane's arm. "It's a badge I wear proudly, little brother."

Snorting at Brian's gall, Crane looked through the slight break in the curtains on the opposite side of the glass, cupping a hand against the window to cut the glare from the late afternoon sun. He nearly choked on the breath he sucked in when he caught sight of Daniel. His brother was striking an achingly familiar pose, seated on the back of the couch nearest their kitchen, his back resting against the wooden support post at its corner. His acoustic guitar in his hold.

"My God," he breathed, as thrilled as he was horrified that Daniel was finally trying to play. He was pretty confident that strumming wouldn't be a problem but, the chords, well; Crane honestly didn't think the kid was up to that test yet. Especially if Daniel thought too much about what he was doing.

"Yeah," Brian said from behind him as he rested a hand on Crane's shoulder.

Crane watched as Daniel wrapped his fingers loosely around the six-string's neck, its body resting on his thigh. He was obviously concentrating on his left hand and immediately Crane felt his stomach sink. This was not going to go well.

"What's wrong?" Brian asked, no doubt feeling the growing tension in Crane's shoulders.

"Everything," Crane replied bleakly, sickened as he watched his little brother fight to get his individual fingers to work along the frets. Despite the distance between them, Daniel's mannerisms were as familiar to Crane as his own. He didn't need to see perfectly to know that Daniel was breathing hard, his eyes closing as he leaned his head back against the wooden upright. The guitar slid slowly off his thigh, dangling loosely in Daniel's grip and Crane felt helplessly paralyzed by the image of abject misery unveiling before him. But the instant he saw Daniel pound his head back against the post, Crane was on the move.

Clearly alarmed, Brian followed on his heels. When they reached the front door though, Crane paused long enough to look over his shoulder and say, "No. Give me fifteen, all right?"

He didn't wait to see if Brian would comply but, as he quietly opened the door, he heard his brother's reluctant, "I'll unload the Jeep," followed by the heavy thud of boots as he slowly made his way down the steps and away from the porch.

By the time Crane made it through the door, Daniel was no longer taking out his frustrations on the back of his head, instead about to focus his wrath on his guitar. Though incredibly relieved his brother's still fragile brain was no longer in jeopardy, Crane knew he wouldn't be able to say the same about Daniel's heart if he let the kid smash that guitar. As Daniel raised the instrument in the air, Crane yelled, "Daniel, no!"

Startled by Crane's shout, the distraction allowed Crane time to cross the room quickly and scoop up his own guitar. Before Daniel had a chance to throw down his treasured six-string, Crane presented his to him with the reverence of the sacrificial offering it was meant to be.

With his guitar still raised in the air, Daniel stared numbly at the one Crane was holding, his eyes filling when Crane offered it again. "Here. You'll never forgive yourself if you wreck Mom's."
With those words, the levee broke and Crane quickly set his guitar aside, moving in closer and reaching for the one in Daniel's now unsteady hold. With a racking sob, Daniel released it and Crane carefully set it down alongside its counterpart before wrapping his arms around his little brother's shaking shoulders and drawing him in.

Despite all the hurdles he'd faced since coming home, Daniel hadn't broken down like this, hadn't grieved like this, since he'd had his seizure in the hospital. Gently easing Daniel from the back of the couch to the front, Crane settled down with him and let him cry. Rocking him in his arms the way their mom used to; his own tears flowing as he desperately wished she was there too, to comfort her devastated baby boy.

"You know you don't have to babysit me," Daniel said without a lot of conviction as he and Ford walked through their school's front doors and down toward the curb. "I'm perfectly capable of waiting for Hannah on my own. Go have lunch with your friends."

"I will," Ford replied, meaning it. "Later. I like hanging out with you." He meant that too.

Besides, Daniel's friends had been pretty much steering clear of him since last week. His first day back they'd all ambushed him with stupid questions and had either treated him like he was spun glass or contagious. By the Friday, Daniel had lost his cool – he'd been doing that a lot lately – and they'd backed off and left him pretty much alone ever since, an entire week. Between those friends and the idiots Ford heard whispering things in the hallways ranging from "he's faking it" to "retard" or "short bus" behind his brother's back, Ford wanted to stick close. Evan was aware too and staying vigilant but, after Daniel insisted that Evan didn't miss another lunchtime scrimmage with the football team, Daniel was stuck with Ford.

"That makes one of you," Daniel replied softly and Ford knew then that he'd made the right decision. He hoped Daniel's friends would warm up to him again. Since Daniel was avoiding music and consequently blowing off the guys in his band, he needed the companionship of his school friends more than ever.

"They'll come around," Ford said optimistically.

Silence was Daniel's only reply.

It was unseasonably warm so they were outside, seated on one of the benches near the curb waiting for Hannah. Daniel had been taking the bus with Evan and Ford in the mornings but, since Dr. Lee had only approved half days, he needed a lift home every day.

They'd been sitting in companionable silence, Daniel self-consciously fussing with the bandana he'd wrapped around his forehead when he wasn't fiddling with the cassette tape he'd been given by Mrs. Chavez in History. She was being really great to him, recording her classes while she was teaching them and sending Daniel home with copies of her own notes to help offset the concentration and memory issues he was still having. Ford wished all of Daniel's teachers were being that cool. Fact was, even half days wore him out. Ford knew that once home, when he wasn't working with Gregg, Daniel was in bed and would stay there until the buses dropped his brothers off at the end of their lane. He knew Daniel didn't want them to know how hard he was struggling. Especially Guthrie. Ford had figured it out anyway though. He hated that Daniel was so worn out all of the time.

"Aw, crap," Ford said, catching the arrival of some other students in his periphery. Apparently the warm weather was bringing out all the wildlife. Even some of those aforementioned idiots. Including Steve Fletcher and his entourage; loudmouth underachievers who didn't like Daniel. Daniel didn't have any use for them either.
Ford always figured Steve and his minions were jealous. Despite Steve's good looks, the variety of vehicles he came to school with, and his parents' presumably significant bank account balance, Daniel was the more popular of the two. Between Daniel's looks, football and especially his music, the girls at school all thought he was a hunk. Heck, there wasn't a girl in Ford's grade who didn't blush and darn near squeal any time Daniel looked their way. Heaven forbid he smile at them.

It could be downright humiliating for the hunk's shy younger brother.

Except it wasn't really. Ford was so ashamed of the rough time he'd been giving Daniel prior to the mine collapse. He'd let his own insecurities and jealousies color his opinion of his brother and had often taken it out on Daniel in the form of rebellion. Truth was, Daniel was just plain likeable and, even though he lapped up the adulation, he wasn't conceited about it. He always seemed genuinely flattered by the attention. Not like Steve who oozed superiority, especially around lowly sophomores like Ford.

"Hey, McFadden. You waiting for your mommy to pick you up again?"

"Jackasses," Ford said under his breath as snorts and hoots and cackles and high fives were exchanged amongst Steve's followers. Aside from an appreciative smirk sent in Ford's direction, Daniel kept his mouth shut though.

"What's wrong?" Fletcher kept goading, obviously trying to get a rise out of Daniel. "Cat got your tongue or too brain-damaged for a comeback?"

Ford caught his brother's flinch but it didn't slow him down. "You hear that buzzin', Ford?" Daniel responded casually. "There aren't any mosquitoes this time 'a year. Must be some other annoying pest in need of gettin' squashed."

Ford unsuccessfully stifled his laugh, heartened by the fact that his subdued brother still had a way with words, even if he'd shown no inclination to write songs since coming home. Going by the snickers Ford could hear, even a few of Steve's friends were amused by Daniel's reply.

Steve, on the other hand, was not. Face reddening, he stepped forward and spat at Daniels boots. "There's nothing wrong with you, asshole," he sneered. "This is some scam you're pulling. Only comin' part-time and getting the teachers to do your homework for you." With that absurd accusation, he swiped the cassette tape out of Daniel's hands.

Ford was on his feet instantly, an overwhelming feeling of protectiveness stealing his good sense. "Give that back, you jerk," he demanded, heart pounding in his ears. After all, Steve Fletcher was a senior.

Daniel stood too, but didn't say anything. Ford was sure he could feel radiation from the challenging glare Daniel was sending Steve's way though.

Nervously, Ford surveyed the faces of Steve's friends, all staying back thankfully, seemingly well aware that their leader had crossed a line. Some even looked downright uncomfortable. Not Steve though, he was on a roll. "Whoa, fellas," he laughed. "Maybe I had it wrong… don't matter that he nearly got him killed, McFadden's still got his baby brother standin' up for him. He must be a retard!"

Ford felt his blood boil and abruptly found himself in Steve's face. "You take that back, you scum sucking moron." And then, just as suddenly, he felt a bone on bone crunch as the moron in question connected his knuckles with Ford's face.
"Ford!" He heard Daniel shout as he experienced the odd sensation of his knees buckling before the ground came up to meet his butt.

And then terror filled his heart as his field of vision was consumed by the image of Daniel rolling on the unforgiving ground with Steve. Dirt and gravel flying and worse, so much worse... fists were flying too.

Though school yard brawls weren't on the list of activities Dr. Lee had told the family Daniel was restricted from for at least three months, Ford knew without a shadow of a doubt that they'd rank as high or higher than horseback riding and even football. And with that horrifying thought in mind, resolve overcame his brewing panic and he dove into the fray.

Trying to get in between the flailing arms and legs, he desperately cried out, "Stop it, please! This could kill him, stop!"

Then unexpectedly, miraculously, Crane was there too – yelling and cursing and, between them and some of the crowd that had gathered, they pulled Steve and Daniel apart. While Crane dragged off Steve, he ordered Ford to keep Daniel down and, since Ford couldn't breathe anyway, he was more than okay with that. He stayed there on the ground next to a panting Daniel, hands shaking but tightly gripping his brother's arm, his attention torn between the brother in his hold and the one currently shoving Steve Fletcher around. At least until Crane returned seconds later and hauled them both to their feet.

Hunched over with the rag Crane had unceremoniously handed him pressed up against his blood-clogged nose, Ford thought he saw out of the corner of his eye some of Steve's friends roughly manhandling their buddy, half dragging and half shoving him away from Daniel. Ford honestly didn't care. His focus was now on his two brothers... first on Crane, livid and scared and chewing out their innocent brother. And then on Daniel, blankly accepting Crane's ire until his body abruptly grew rigid, then just as suddenly crumpled forward into Crane's arms, shuddering and jerking uncontrollably in the throes of another seizure.

Crane drove past the familiar landmarks of BHU, his old high-school's grounds, turning left onto Main heading toward the school's front entrance. Sometimes it felt like decades since he'd attended school here, other times it felt like yesterday. Mrs. Asher, his principal, was still here, as were a majority of his teachers.

He always felt sorry for his younger siblings when each of them started their freshman years. Some of the teachers held preconceived notions as to what to expect out of the McFadden boys, despite their widely ranging personalities. Of course having followed behind the likes of Adam and Brian, Crane had learned that first-hand. He still remembered his first day in Biology when Mr. Gillespie had taken attendance and then abruptly asked Crane if he was related to Brian. With Crane's answer being affirmative, the next thing out of Gillespie's mouth had been an order; one commanding Crane to sit right in front of the man's desk so that he could keep an eye on him. Crane had been pretty pissed with Brian over that.

It hadn't taken long though for Crane to convince Mr. Gillespie he wasn't the hell-raiser Brian had been. In fact, in short course, the teacher had become one of Crane's staunchest advocates, one whose support undoubtedly contributed to the scholarship Crane had received from Davis. He was grateful for the relationships he'd cultivated while a student here. Especially now. They were serving the family well in their dealings with the faculty over Daniel's needs.

Hannah had been picking up Daniel since he'd started back to school but today Crane had offered to do it instead. He knew, now that it was definitely going forward, that Hannah and Adam intended to broach the subject of the fundraiser to Daniel at some point this weekend. And, though
their oldest brother wasn't going to be happy with him, Crane had made the decision to jump the gun and tell Daniel himself. If Daniel was going to rail; which was exactly what Crane expected; let him rail at Crane. With Adam it could get ugly, especially if Adam pulled rank.

Besides, it was the end of a long, tiring week for all of them and, on such a gorgeous day, Crane felt like rolling the windows down in the truck and going for a drive. If he happened to stop to have a talk with Daniel on the way home, so be it.

He hadn't really had any time alone with him since Daniel had broken down a couple of days before starting back to school. And though the kid had been able to compose himself by the time Crane had led him back to their room for some sleep, they hadn't talked about that failed attempt to play guitar. Then or since. Not that Crane had much opportunity. Even though they shared a room, by the time Crane headed to bed at night, Daniel was typically out like a light.

Crane was proud and more than a little relieved that Daniel had been coping so well with school. Though he did sense that things were much tougher for him than he was letting on. Well, that and Evan and Ford were reporting back to their elders that Daniel was pretty much keeping to himself these days. And with his hair-trigger temper, Crane was pretty certain that hadn't been entirely of Daniel's choosing.

He hated the idea that Daniel, the McFaddens' social butterfly, might be waiting for his ride with no-one but his younger brothers for company. Which, according to Hannah, had been the case all week.

Mindful of the noon hour and that students would be coming and going across his path, Crane drove slowly along the roadway leading him to the pickup and drop-off zone in front of the main doors.

He heard the commotion before he could see its cause. And he didn't like what he was hearing at all. His boot found the accelerator.

There were voices shouting and cursing, girls were screaming and, somehow in the midst of all that chaos, he could even make out the sound of running feet pounding along the concrete walks and along the paths from the sports-fields behind the school.

Anxiously approaching the area where he was expecting to see Daniel, Crane's mouth suddenly went dry. A crowd was beginning to form in a haphazard circle and it looked like pandemonium. No, it looked like a school-yard fight.

And Crane couldn't see Daniel or his other brothers anywhere.

Which meant, knowing two of those brothers, they had to be in the middle of it.

Crane was thrown pretty hard against the seatback when the old truck jumped the curb but he didn't waste any time thinking about it. And then all conscious thought fled his brain when he heard Ford frantically cry out, "Stop it, please! This could kill him, stop!"

He didn't remember getting out of the truck or pushing through the crowd. But he was certain the memory of a brain-injured Daniel, bloodied and dishevelled, rolling on the ground, arms swinging and legs kicking as he exchanged solid punches with some unknown kid would haunt his dreams. Assuming he'd be able to shake the image from his waking mind long enough to ever fall asleep again.

"Get the hell off of him!" he yelled, grabbing Daniel's assailant even as he knew full well Daniel was trying to give as good as he was getting. Ford was right there with him, others too and, as
Crane worked an arm around the throat and waist of the kid slugging it out with Daniel and pulled him off, Crane managed to grunt out, "Keep him down." He didn't look back to see if Ford was complying, prayed that Daniel would stay put. Prayed harder that Daniel's still vulnerable brain hadn't suffered any further damage.

"We've got him," a disembodied voice said and Crane realized the others who'd helped break the boys apart still had hold of the teen in his grasp. Crane risked letting him go, oddly gratified when he realized they were students, not teachers who'd come to his aid. Daniel's aid. Though desperate to check on his brother, Crane allowed himself a moment to get in the teen's face. Taller than Daniel, Crane still had a couple of inches on him and though he was vaguely aware of the fact that he was about to commit assault on what may well be a minor, he didn't care. Daniel could've been seriously hurt. Could be seriously hurt.

Roughly grabbing him by the collar with both hands, he gave the kid a couple of firm shakes then drew him up and in until his dark eyes met Crane's. "Do you have any fucking idea what you've done? How badly he could've been hurt?"

"I—" Crane didn't bother to hear him out. Feeling uncharacteristically empowered by the abject fear he'd put in the kid's eyes, he released him, shoving him hard before turning and heading straight for Daniel.

His younger brothers were still on the ground, Ford holding on firmly to Daniel's arm and when he got a good look at Daniel's bruised face and then Ford's, Crane's vision went red. Blood red, like the stuff already crusting beneath Ford's nose. Adrenaline pumping, his nerves still on edge from the terror of seeing Daniel in that fight and the exertion of breaking it apart all got the best of him and Crane was far from gentle when he grabbed both boys and pulled them up.

"Here." Thrusting a rag from his back pocket into Ford's hand, Crane left him to his own devices. Then turning to his other battered brother, he grasped a handful of Daniel's shirt and hauled him in close.

"Are you trying to kill yourself?" He snapped, furious, though somewhere in the back of his mind he knew Daniel, of all people, wasn't deserving of the pent up rage he was releasing. "What were you thinking?" The demand came out of his mouth anyway. When Daniel didn't answer, just stared past Crane into the street, Crane shook him, ignoring the alarm bells going off in his head. Until Daniel stiffened and then fell forward into his arms and then Crane couldn't ignore them anymore.

"Daniel!" he cried as he heard Ford do the same. Awkwardly lowering Daniel's racking body back down onto the unforgiving ground, Crane could hear screaming and chaos behind him. But soon everything faded to a dull roar outside of the bubble he found himself in as he helplessly knelt next to his stricken brother and cupped his hand beneath Daniel's head.

"Keep it up. Whatever you do, don't let him hit his head," Ford cautioned, kneeling right beside him, family penetrating the bubble. He followed with, "Be right back" and leapt to his feet. Seconds later, he returned with the blanket usually stuffed in the small space behind their truck's bench seat. Folding it to use as a pillow, Ford slipped it under Daniel's head but Crane kept his hand there anyway, hoping Daniel would somehow know he was there protecting him in the only way Crane knew how.

"It's okay, Danny, you're okay," Crane soothed, trying to keep his own panic from his voice as Daniel grunted in time with the seizure's erratic thrusts. "It'll be over soon," he promised, believing that to be true at least.

"Crane, do we need an ambulance?" It was Mrs. Asher, the principal, her face the picture of
Crane hesitated. Everything in his heart told him his suffering brother needed one but the reading material, not to mention Gregg and Dr. Lee's counselling, told him otherwise.

Before Crane could respond, Ford did. "No. Not yet, Mrs. Asher." And Crane looked over to see Ford checking his watch, timing the seizure; witnessing firsthand just how calm and capable this kid was in times of crisis. No wonder Brian and Adam were so proud.

"Ford! Daniel!" That was Evan, far from calm and, by the sound of the thunderous pounding of feet running toward them; he had the entire football team with him. "Get out of my way! Back off!" he shouted and Crane looked up to see a mass of bodies, suddenly realizing that his safe bubble was in fact the epicenter of a spectacle and Daniel's torment was the main event.

About to tell Mrs. Asher to clear everybody away, Crane's plea was sidelined as Evan broke through the crowd, skidding to his knees next to Ford. "What happened?" He demanded; eyes wide with fear as he reached out to touch Daniel but then quickly drew his hand back as Daniel's body convulsed yet again.

"They're slowing down," Ford breathed, relief evident in his tone. But Evan looked incredulous and horrified. Crane understood why. Despite being there for the aftermath of the second one, he too had never before witnessed Daniel seizures. And if he wasn't seeing for himself that they were indeed starting to slow down and lessen in intensity, nothing about Daniel's head and body jolting off the ground right now could ever be considered positive.

He reached across to Evan with his free hand, cupping his younger brother's cheek. Evan had never looked so devastated, not even when Diablo broke his cannon bone and the initial prognosis had looked hopeless. "He's coming out of it, champ," Crane assured him and, as if to prove it, Daniel's guttural grunts began to shift to soft moans and whimpers instead.

Hoping Evan would take comfort from the news, instead Crane watched as Evan's eyes hardened and he brusquely leapt to his feet. "Where is he? Where's Fletcher?" he snarled, and this time Evan didn't have to push his way through the crowd, its members wisely clearing a path for him. A path leading him directly to the kid whose name, undoubtedly thanks to high-school's supersonic rumor mill, Evan already knew.

"Evan," he called. "Evan!" Repeating it with more urgency, hoping his brother would turn back. He didn't.

Loathe to leave Daniel just as he was coming back to them, Crane knew he couldn't ask Ford to tackle Evan. Hell, Crane had gone off on this Fletcher kid and that was before he'd witnessed Daniel's collapse. No, Crane had to get to Evan before he earned himself a juvenile record.

"Look after him," he said, squeezing Ford's shoulder before getting to his feet. Meeting the principal's sympathetic gaze he admonished her, "Get these kids back." Daniel didn't need to come to knowing he'd been on display at his most vulnerable.

"Of course," she said, clearly flustered and likely a little mortified that she hadn't taken care of it already. Her efforts were ultimately futile and Crane realized the crowd was dispersing anyway. Or rather they were following him, determined to get their money's worth and watch the next performance in this McFadden family tragedy play out.

By the time he caught up to his younger brother, Coach Snyder and one of the few teachers Crane didn't recognize had a hold of him by either arm and were dragging him off of his intended quarry. Sparing the clearly horrified looking Fletcher only a moment's glance, Crane realized with a
certain warped satisfaction that, given the fresh blood seeping through the older youth's fingers as he wiped them across his lips, Evan had been too quick and had gotten in at least one punch before being subdued.

"That's enough, McFadden. Evan, stand down!" The coach was yelling at him but Crane could hear the pleading in his tone too. Evan was wild, twisting away from them and bucking in their hold like one of Coop Johnson's broncos. He was out of control and spewing threats and, when Crane caught Principal Asher's grave face as she followed him over, he realized, despite the extenuating circumstances leading up to Evan's state, the boy was dangerously close to getting suspended. Or worse… arrested. And no one wanted that.

Moving in to stand in front of the target of Evan's wrath, blocking his view, Crane grabbed hold of his brother's shoulders. "Damn it, Evan, calm down!"

"Let me at 'im, Crane," Evan practically growled, lunging again but, between Crane and the two other men, he wasn't going anywhere.

"Not gonna happen, bud," Crane replied, as sympathetic as he was unyielding.

Evan must've sensed that too because abruptly he gave up the fight, Crane seeing it drain out of Evan's eyes first, replaced by the same grief familiar to Crane every time he looked at his own reflection.

Shifting his grip from Evan's shoulders to his neck, he softly said, "He's not worth it, anyway."

"Yeah, but Daniel is."

"Yeah, he is," Crane answered, relief and affection bubbling out of his throat in the form of a shaky laugh. Slinging an arm around Evan's neck and giving it a squeeze, he nodded to the others to release his brother and began steering him back to Ford and Daniel. "Let's see how he's doing."

Approaching their brothers, they encountered another wall of bodies yet again and Crane was about to lose whatever remaining cool he had left. Until he realized the kids forming this wall were facing away from Daniel.

It looked like the entire football team and they'd formed a protective circle around his brothers, arms crossed and defiant. Standing tall and preventing prying eyes from witnessing any more of Daniel's plight.

"Thanks, guys," Evan said, sounding as choked up as Crane felt.

Slipping through the human barrier, they kneeled next to their siblings. No longer suffering from the uncontrollable seizures, Daniel was still down and Ford must have shifted him into the recovery position, his head now pillowed on the light jacket Ford had been wearing earlier. He'd covered Daniel with the blanket, a good thing too since the boy was shivering. Though the day's sun was still warm, Crane could feel the colder temperature of the ground seeping through his own jeans.

"He's just coming around," Ford said softly, his palm resting on Daniel's nearest shoulder, his other hand holding Daniel's.

Daniel was awake but unmoving, eyes open though dazed and he appeared utterly spent. Tucking the blanket more snugly around him, Crane bent closer, running a hand through his sweat-soaked hair. "Danny, it's Crane. Can you hear me, kiddo?"

"Crane?"
Though the confusion broke his heart, Crane smiled to hide it. "Yeah, it's me."

"What hap—" he began as he attempted to roll onto his back. Crane helped, quickly adjusting the blanket around him to ensure he kept covered. Daniel looked into the faces of each of his brothers and Crane knew, despite the encouraging smiles they were wearing, Daniel could see beyond them straight through to their worry. Awareness dawned then and he suddenly asked, dread scratching past his strained throat, "Did I…?"

Exchanging sorrowful looks with Evan and Ford, Crane answered gently, "I'm afraid so, buddy."

Daniel closed his eyes.

Even with them closed, Daniel's anguish was palpable. Crane knew that his dismay would only worsen as more clarity returned and the reality of having this seizure in front of his peers came crashing down. He needed to get him out of there.

Slipping an arm behind Daniel's back, Crane waited until Daniel opened his eyes before asking, "You think you can try to sit up? I want you up off the ground."

"Yeah, okay," he said hoarsely, a little of his familiar resolve coming back as he levered himself up onto his elbows.

Crane moved in behind and, with their brothers' help, they eased Daniel up into a sitting position. The effort seemed to exhaust him. Curled into Crane, his head leaning heavily against his shoulder, he already needed a break.

"Okay, that's enough. We'll get you up on your feet in a minute." Crane felt Daniel nod against him and fought the urge to just pick him up right then and carry him over to the truck. But he knew that wasn't what Daniel would want if he'd been fully aware. If only for the sake of Daniel's pride, Crane was walking his brother to their truck.

As Evan replaced the dislodged blanket around Daniel, Crane lightly grasped his arm, pulling him closer. "Go to the office and call home; Adam should be there by now. Tell him to meet us at Sonora Regional." At that, Evan's eyes widened but Crane was quick to reassure him. "Dr. Lee'll want to do another CT-scan. Just as a precaution," he added, shifting his grip to Evan's hand and squeezing it.

"Okay, sure," Evan replied, no doubt relieved to be doing something constructive.

Rising to his feet, it was Ford who stopped him this time, "And Evan," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "He needs a change of clothes."

Realization must've struck both Evan and Daniel with those words. As Daniel pressed his head deeper into Crane's shoulder, his soft oath tore through Crane's heart. Blinking away the sudden rush of tears, Crane met Evan's sorrowful eyes. Canting his head in the direction of the school, Crane worked to keep his voice steady even though "Go," was all he had to say.

To be continued.
Adam walked through the automated doors of the Sonora Regional Hospital, his fervent hope that he'd never again have to see the inside of its walls dashed all too soon. Though calmer than he'd been thirty days ago when Daniel had been rushed through those doors on a gurney, his heart was still in his throat and his stomach in knots. Another seizure. God.

It wasn't fair. His little brother did not deserve this.

He didn't have any details; Evan's phone-call home had been too hurried. At least he had told Adam that he thought Daniel was okay. Trying to offer reassurance as much as he'd needed it himself, Adam was sure. The only other comment had been his request, or rather insistence upon the need to bring a change of clothes for Daniel. Reflexively gripping the bag in his hold, Adam swallowed thickly. He prayed his kid brother hadn't suffered that humiliation in front of his friends. As it was, he knew having the seizure at school would impact Daniel's already rocky self-esteem.

With thoughts of his stricken brother consuming him, Adam didn't realize until she was standing in front of him that Diane Raymond had come out from behind the nurses' station to meet him. Looping her arm through his, she steered him past the counter, heading toward the curtained-off beds of the E/R. Surprised to see her working the day shift, he had to admit her familiar presence and easy smile were helping to tamp down his worry.

"He's fine, Adam," she said. "They all are."

All?

Check that. The worry was back.

As they approached the opening of one set of curtains, Diane placed her hand atop Adam's, a signal for him to stop. Softly she cautioned, "Daniel was asleep last time I checked." Nodding in acknowledgment, Adam waited as the nurse pulled back the curtain a little and whispered, "Boys… Adam's here," then parted it further so that he could pass through. "I'll leave you alone and check if the test results are back."

Adam offered his thanks, hoping she was referring to another routine CT-scan and not something he wasn't anticipating, and then turned his attention to the sleeping Daniel.

Catching Adam's eye, Crane moved to get up from his seat next to the head of the bed. "We'll be right outside," he said, quietly addressing Evan and Ford.

He knew that Crane wanted to update him without disturbing Daniel, but Adam needed to check on his little brother first. Even if it meant just watching him sleep for a minute or two. He waved Crane off. "No. Give me a minute."

"Sure," Crane nodded, understanding shining in his eyes. He stood up anyway, relinquishing his place nearest Daniel.

Setting the change of clothes down at the foot of the bed, Adam switched places with Crane. Opting to stand next to Daniel's huddled form, Adam barely acknowledged Crane's, "He's okay," as he lightly squeezed Adam's arm before stepping away.
Despite Diane's and Crane's assurances and the lack of any medical evidence to the contrary, it still killed Adam to see Daniel back here. As daunting as having Daniel come home had been, his presence there was a testament to Daniel's resilience and to how far the boy had come. This place? Adam swallowed reflexively. It was a reminder of how hurt and fragile his little brother still was.

Reaching out, Adam tenderly ran his palm along Daniel's hair. It had gotten quite long, long enough to obscure part of his face. On this side anyway. Hannah had offered to trim it but, apparently the kid was holding off until the shaved part reached a certain length. Adam didn't object. Though, right now it made Daniel look that much younger and even more vulnerable.

As did the bruises and scrapes exposed when Adam lightly smoothed it back from his face.

"What the?" He hissed, successfully keeping his voice down as he pulled back his hand.

"It's my fault."

Ford sounded so utterly miserable; Adam was actually able to tear his gaze away from Daniel's latest injuries. Only to come face to face with a little brother whose still forming bruises promised to become even more spectacular. Shocked, he barely gritted out, "I think we better step outside now."

Crane dropped his head, heaved a deep sigh and told the boys to stay with Daniel. Adam was of a different mind though and admonished Ford to follow. The teen looked like he was heading for a firing squad. Adam wanted to take pity on him but couldn't, his mind reeling trying to come up with any reason why two of his younger brothers looked like they'd been in a brawl. Especially when one of them happened to be brain injured and the other was the most gentle of them all.

Unwilling to be further than earshot away from Daniel, he stopped Crane and Ford just a few feet beyond the curtains. "What the hell happened?" Adam abandoned any attempts to remain calm and simply focused on keeping his volume down.

"There was a fight," Ford answered, softly mumbling the obvious.

"No shit." Adam's tone was cutting but despite Ford's wince, he couldn't stop himself. Eyes flashing at the fifteen year-old, he let himself wind up. "Would you care to tell me exactly what part of 'Daniel's supposed to avoid any strenuous activity' you didn't understand?"

"Adam—"

He knew Crane was being protective but Adam didn't care and promptly told him so. "I don't want to hear it, Crane. You know how serious this is," he exclaimed.

"Of course I do," Crane replied calmly, stepping in front of Ford as he locked eyes with Adam. "Just hear him out." He relaxed his stance and then used that head-cocked imploring look of his that begged Adam to be reasonable. "Please."

Adam sighed.

"All right, let's hear it," Adam relented, turning to Ford. The boy's eyes were downcast, as was his whole demeanor. It was clear that Ford was feeling guilty over what had happened, though, when Adam took the time to think about it, he had a hard time imagining that their second-youngest was anything more than innocent in this mess. Reaching out, he lightly lifted Ford's chin, drawing his blue eyes to meet Adam's hazel and gently promising, "It's okay, Ford. I won't be mad."

He'd lied. By the time Ford had finished recounting his tale, Adam's jaw hurt from clenching it so hard. He was furious, though he retained enough composure to know that Ford truly wasn't to
blame. And blaming the kid lying once again in a hospital bed would've been downright cruel. Not to mention unfair. Still, the visions he couldn't shake from his mind of Daniel rolling on the school's concrete walk exchanging heated punches with another student were making him ill. Though his steps only took him across a few floor tiles each way, he started to pace. It was the only outlet he had.

Until Evan had the misfortune of popping his head out through the curtains. "Hey, guys, he's aw —"

Adam whirled; stalking up to a smiling then startled Evan and immediately yanking him through the opening. "Just where in the hell were you, young man, while your brothers were getting beaten up?"

"I—"

"Adam, don't."

Ford and Crane were protesting from both sides, though only Crane had the guts to grab Adam's forearm and hang on.

"Back off, Crane," Adam spat out.

"Not until you do," Crane said firmly, insinuating himself into the space between Adam and a crestfallen Evan. "He doesn't deserve this."

Adam took a long look at the teen and saw the guilt that mirrored Ford's radiating from his eyes. Even worse though, he saw true fear. Adam groaned. Once again he'd let worry spark his temper. He never ever wanted his little brothers afraid of him. Wilting under that realization and Crane's obvious disappointment, Adam sighed, patted Evan lightly on the cheek and agreed. "No. No, he doesn't."

"Yeah, especially since Evan being at practice was my idea."

"Daniel!" Ford's grin practically split his face in two as Daniel padded out through the curtains, looking more than a little irritated.

He looked pretty rumpled too and it was obvious now that, before Adam had interrupted, or rather, accosted him, Evan had been trying to tell them Daniel was waking up. The kid must've hurried to get into the clothes Adam had brought. No doubt rushing because he'd heard the ruckus on the other side of the curtain. Sock-footed, he'd only pulled on jeans and a shirt, the latter left unbuttoned and un-tucked for the time being.

Disheveled and still too thin, seeing him upright and mobile was a sight for sore eyes for Adam and, though the swollen lip and bruises and scrapes on Daniel's face still made his blood boil, Adam's relief was almost overpowering. He found himself standing in front of Daniel before he realized it, hands gripping the kid's shoulders probably a little too hard as he shook him lightly. "You really are trying to give me a heart attack, aren't you?"

He'd meant it as a lame joke. Maybe with a hint of chastisement too. But, being so close to his broken little brother brought out all the fear and the love and, instead, Adam had choked on his words. And watched helplessly as Daniel's face crumpled with the weight of them.

"I messed up," he began, his "I'm sorry" muffled as Adam pulled him into his chest.

"Shhh, don't say that," Adam hushed him, holding on tighter. Unwilling to hear the kid pile more guilt onto his already over-burdened shoulders. If only it could be that easy to vanquish the
"Sure. Yeah, that'll work," Daniel said into the receiver. He was on the phone with Gregg, and Crane was pleased to hear the touches of determination and enthusiasm in his voice. Big brother wasn't eavesdropping. Really. It was just damn hard not to stick close so soon after your little brother collapsed in your arms.

Daniel had been so subdued since getting back from the hospital. Crane knew that exhaustion from not only the physical strain of the seizures, but also the fight, could be blamed for that. But, he also knew his brother well enough to recognize when the kid was feeling incredibly down.

Guilt was eating Daniel up inside. For causing the family more worry and for adding to their medical bills. He'd said as much while they'd driven home, asking Crane how much his latest trip to the E/R was going to cost them. Crane had tried to ease Daniel's concerns but Daniel had shut him down. He hadn't wanted to be mollified. Any more than he'd wanted sympathy or coddling once he'd arrived home.

Though he'd tolerated the hugs he'd received from Hannah and Guthrie, he'd had no sense of humor at all for Brian tousling his hair. And Adam's insistence that he get more rest had been met with resistance at best. Insolence at worst.

Crane had hoped Gregg's phone call would offer the kid some perspective. Daniel's relaxed, "Thanks, man. See you then," seemed to indicate it had.

As Daniel hung up the phone, Crane glanced around the room, noting that everyone in the family was doing their utmost to look preoccupied. Apparently he hadn't been the only sibling hoping that Gregg's call would do Daniel some good.

Because of the trip to the hospital, Daniel had missed their Friday afternoon session. Hannah had called the therapist to cancel and to let him know what had happened. That Gregg had called back to check up on Daniel and offer him some support was another of the many reasons Crane liked the guy. He truly cared about his patients. About Daniel.

Though there were chores to be done outside and in the barn, the whole family was inside. Rallying around Daniel whether or not he wanted the attention. Brian and Hannah were just starting to make dinner and the younger boys were hunkered down around a side-table playing cards. Had this been a little over a month ago, this family time would've guaranteed a few guitars being strummed by now with Daniel as the ringleader. Times had changed though. The unspoken rule in the house was that music had become off limits to all of them; because if anyone made a move toward the piano or a guitar, Daniel would find an excuse to flee. And none of them wanted to be responsible for driving him away from the family.

Even though Adam was mindlessly flipping through the sports pages of the newspaper, Crane had long since put aside the business section he'd been pretending to read, his attention on Daniel's phone call with Gregg now blatantly obvious.

"So, what did he have to say?" Crane asked when Daniel met his gaze.

The kid shrugged before making his way to the couch, shucking the abandoned newspaper section from the spot next to Crane and slumping down in its place. "I dunno. Pretty much the same as Dr. Lee, I guess." He shrugged once again adding a little self-consciously, "He told me not to freak."

"Good." That had been, more or less, what Dr. Lee had said back at the hospital. That, despite
having another seizure, it didn't mean he'd ever have one again. The doctor had to restart the clock on Daniel's three month driver's license suspension but, aside from that and upping his dose of Dilantin; it was business as usual for Daniel.

Yeah, right.

Crane bumped shoulders with Daniel, whose attention was now firmly planted on his hands resting in his lap. God, he looked miserable. "He say anything else?"

Daniel blinked, and then straightened a bit before finally addressing no one in particular. "Um, yeah. He said he could come by and work with me tomorrow if I wanted him to… since we missed today. I told him okay."

Adam set aside his paper and leaned forward, resting his elbows against his knees. "You sure you're up to it?" he asked, concern evident in his tone. Crane fully understood the worry but was grateful Adam wasn't pulling rank and saying no outright. "It wouldn't hurt to miss a session, kiddo. Maybe give yourself a break?"

Despite Adam's gentle tone, or maybe because of it, Daniel's reaction was far from the same. "Wouldn't hurt? Of course it'd hurt," he snapped. "I'm at least a month behind in school, Adam," he continued, his words coated in condescension and his own frustration.

Knowing full well how volatile Adam's and Daniel's arguments could get, Crane tried to run interference, lightly squeezing Daniel's arm. "Hey, take it easy."

Jerking away, Daniel practically snarled, "No, you take it easy," and abruptly stood up.

Recognizing that Daniel's pent up emotions were verging toward a melt-down, Crane raised his hands in surrender, trying to lighten the moment at the same time giving his kid brother space. He shot Adam a warning look too, hoping their eldest wouldn't say or do anything to escalate the tension coming off of Daniel in waves. Adam met his gaze and though the line of his jaw was clenched tight, thankfully he remained seated and kept his mouth shut.

Daniel backed away, his breaths coming hard and increasing rapidly as he blindly bumped the back of his legs against the furniture. The kid was in close quarters and Crane knew he was feeling trapped. It didn't help that every member of the family had stopped what they'd been pretending to do and all attention was focused on him. Embarrassment was warring with the myriad of other emotions Crane could see flashing in Daniel's eyes and, after the day he'd had, the last thing Daniel needed was to feel like a spectacle in his own home. Crane desperately wanted to rescue him but the kid was about as volatile as a powder keg right now. For once Crane was at a loss, uncertain how to settle his brother down.

Which made Hannah's sudden, "Hey, which of you fellas is going to get me some more apple sauce for the pork chops?" all the more welcome.

She'd broken the heavy silence and, in doing so, much of the tension too as their three youngest scrambled to get up, a chorus of, "I'll get it," pin-balling between them as they practically tripped over themselves to get to the pantry.

And if Hannah's distraction had started the ball rolling, Brian's, "Huh. They never liked my apple-sauce that much," succeeded in ratcheting tensions down so much further, even Daniel dropped his head and smirked.

The storm had blown over. Such was the way of living with Daniel's emotions these days.

Crane breathed a sigh of relief, sent an appreciative wink Hannah's way, and then moved to go to
Daniel who remained standing in the same spot. His head was still lowered too and Crane worried
that the boy's calm would be short-lived, over-thinking about what had just happened, no doubt.
And, once again, feeling embarrassed and guilty. Adam reached him first though and Crane
watched approvingly as Adam grasped the bowed neck and drew Daniel's head into his shoulder
as he said, "I'll take Gregg out riding after your session, okay?"

Daniel nodded against Adam's shoulder, his whispered, "That'd be great, thanks," audible to
Crane since he was standing right behind Daniel by then. Resting his hands on Daniel's shoulders,
he exchanged nods with Adam, the "I have him" unspoken, before Adam let him go and headed
toward the kitchen.

As they watched their eldest walk away, Crane could feel the still-churning emotions Daniel was
trying to keep at bay. Squeezing the taut muscles beneath his grip, he soothed, "It's okay. Let it
go," wishing it could be that easy as he ushered Daniel toward the kitchen and the rest of the
family.

They'd made it far enough for Brian to pat Daniel lightly in the ribs when the distinct sound of a
vehicle pulling up in their laneway prompted Hannah's, "Are we expecting anyone?"

"Not that I know of," Adam replied, setting down the coffee he'd just poured himself and making
his way over to the front door.

Guthrie, having returned with the other boys from the pantry, had beaten Adam there and was
already looking out the window when he promptly announced, "It's a lady."

"It's Colleen Asher," Adam confirmed, opening the door to meet the principal as she made her
way up the front steps.

"Uh oh, now you're in for it," Brian teased, swiping a positively ashen-looking Ford with a dish-
towel and tossing it on the counter before heading toward the door as well.

"Cut it out, Brian," Daniel chastised before Crane had a chance to. Having worn the family's
teacher's pet mantle for years until abdicating it to Ford, Crane knew exactly how awful the
teenager would be feeling. The boy had never before been in trouble in school and yet here he
was now, after a fight, with his high school principal showing up on their doorstep. Though Crane
was confident Ford was going to come out of this encounter unscathed, the kid was clearly of a
different and petrified mind.

"Come 'ere," Daniel said, stepping out of Crane's hold and hooking an arm around Ford's neck as
he pulled him into his side. "It'll be okay."

Ford practically melted against him and Crane's heart filled with pride watching Daniel look after
his little brother despite the trauma he'd suffered today.

Evan, on the other hand, looked unfazed and Crane worried that the boy's attitude might work
against him if indeed Mrs. Asher had come to mete out any punishment. Following Daniel's lead,
Crane called Evan over to him, asking him to at least try and look a little contrite as Adam
welcomed the woman into the house.

In the end, how apologetic Evan or any of them appeared didn't matter. Mrs. Asher only had eyes
for Daniel. Zeroing in on him as soon as she made it through the door, her hands seemed to act of
their own accord as she grasped Daniel's in hers and stood back appraising him. "Oh, Daniel. It's
so good to see you up and around," she declared before ultimately pulling him into a hug. "Are
you all right, dear?"
Startled and clearly embarrassed, Daniel politely reciprocated, pulling back as soon as was civil and offered, "I'm okay, Mrs. A. Honest."

Still not finished with her affectionate overtures, she reached up and gently brushed Daniel's cheek saying, "No thanks to—well, no matter," she continued absently, cutting off her own words before stepping back from Daniel, squeezing his hand once more and then addressing Adam. "I just feel terrible that this happened at my school... under my supervision," she stressed.

Her words were so heartfelt Crane knew that Adam wasn't going to hold her any ill will. Hell, Crane had been there and, aside from possibly gaining better and sooner control of the onlookers, he knew damn well she didn't deserve any condemnation. Teenage boys fought in school. It was a fact of life and a rite of passage and the fact that this particular fight happened to result in Daniel succumbing to another bout of seizures was far from Mrs. Asher's fault.

Before Adam could respond to her, Daniel did instead. "It's not the school's fault, Mrs. A. And it sure isn't yours," he said sincerely. "Hel-heck, another few steps and we'd've been off school property anyway."

Mrs. Asher dropped her head, her shoulders slumping. In relief or defeat, Crane wasn't sure. Hannah stepped in then and lightly patted her arm and when the principal's eyes met Adam's again, he smiled kindly before canting his head in Daniel's direction and saying, "What he said."

She smiled warmly then, perhaps a little taken aback by the family's relative calm in the wake of the day's events.

Gathering herself, she straightened and addressed the family more formally. "Well... though I certainly thank you for your understanding, I'd be remiss in my duties if I didn't advise you that the Board and I are addressing this issue and taking immediate action to ensure that this never happens again."

That sounded pretty ominous and Crane wasn't at all surprised when Guthrie piped up with, "What are you gonna do?"

"Guthrie!" Adam scolded, before stepping forward and steering their overly inquisitive youngest into Hannah's care.

Mrs. Asher smiled good-naturedly, her experience with teenagers undoubtedly making her immune to the boy's lack of social graces. She answered Guthrie's question anyway, though her words were directed at Adam. "I met with Steven Fletcher and his father in my office before coming over here; advising them both that Steven has been suspended pending the results of an expulsion hearing with the Board next week."

Evan's, "All right," came out as a whisper but Crane smacked the back of the kid's head anyway. Adam was too busy shooting Evan a disapproving glare for Crane to gauge his reaction but Brian looked pretty satisfied with the news. Though clearly relieved that he wasn't in any trouble, Ford still wore a pained expression and Crane would've taken pity on him if not for the worrisome looks of shock and ire on Daniel's face that drew his attention instead.

"What? No!" Sure enough, before Crane could grab hold of him, Daniel moved to stand directly in front of his principal, protesting loudly, "That's not fair!"

"Daniel, that's enough," Adam reprimanded, clearly shocked by Daniel's outburst. "Show Mrs. Asher some respect."

Everyone, not the least Mrs. Asher, seemed shocked by Daniel's objection but truthfully, Crane
had to admit that Daniel's thoughts mirrored his own. Sure, Crane was pissed off with this Fletcher kid—absolutely. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that the fight had triggered Daniel's seizure. Still, Crane had been there and knew full well that Daniel had given his all, albeit his underweight all, in that fight. Frankly, fear for Daniel's wellbeing hadn't been the only emotion driving his anger when Crane had pulled the boys apart. He'd been awfully mad at Daniel.

Perhaps not as much as Evan and Brian, but Daniel had inherited a touch of the McFadden trait that had skipped over Crane… their enjoyment of fighting. And even though defense of Ford had been the catalyst, Crane couldn't help shake the feeling that Daniel had welcomed if not embraced the moment. With that in mind, the idea of kicking Steve Fletcher out of school seemed excessive.

Not to mention it would be something else to add to the burden of guilt Daniel was carrying.

Determined to share his thoughts, Crane waited for Daniel to apologize first. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Asher," he said, sounding as tired as he was sorry. Until he followed up with, "But all due respect, ma'am, it takes two to tango so why aren't I getting slapped with a suspension too?"

Crane didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"Daniel!"

Adam looked so appalled Crane decided he'd better say something.

Stepping up next to Daniel, Crane wrapped his arm around his shoulders. Despite or perhaps because of his rebelliousness, the kid looked shaky and, as wrung out as he was, Crane wanted to lend his support. When he felt Daniel lean into him, he addressed the principal, purposely playing the sympathy card first. "I don't think my exhausted brother is trying to tell you how to do your job, Mrs. Asher." Squeezing Daniel's shoulder, Crane added, "He's just trying to understand why the school isn't using a level playing field here."

That earned Crane a disapproving glare from Adam but Daniel's approving nod made it worthwhile.

Turning to Daniel, Mrs. Asher spoke frankly, confusion plain on her face. "Daniel, I don't understand. I thought you wanted to be back in school. Are you asking for a suspension too?"

"I just don't want to be treated anymore different than I already am, ma'am," he answered honestly. Crane swallowed hard, caught Adam's wince too. Yeah, they should've seen that coming.

Her face softened, as did her voice. Grasping Daniel's hand once again, she replied. "Then let me assure you... having taken into account both your history and that of young Mr. Fletcher with my office, along with the statements from those who witnessed today's events, I'm treating this as fairly as possible."

So, apparently this Steve Fletcher had a history with the principal's office. Crane had to wonder about that. Given what Mrs. A. had to say, the kid already had some strikes against him which was not something that could be said of Daniel. Aside from his music being a distraction at times, Daniel never got into the kind of trouble that resulted in a trip to the principal's office.

Her response satisfied Crane. Looking at Daniel, Crane met Daniel's still troubled gaze. "You okay with that?"

Daniel looked down and away.

Mrs. Asher sighed and let go of Daniel's hand. Turning to Adam, she used her formal voice again,
"Adam, I'll be expecting Daniel back in school Tuesday, following his one day suspension for fighting."

Adam looked torn. Somewhere between annoyance and relief, Crane couldn't be sure. He numbly shook Mrs. Asher's hand and offered up an awkward thank-you for her understanding. Then, stepping into the role of patriarch, he addressed Daniel, who hadn't reacted at all to the principal's decision. "Daniel, have you anything to say to Mrs. Asher?"

Crane gave Daniel's neck a prodding squeeze before Daniel responded with a subdued, "Thank-you, ma'am".

"Yes, well…" Her words trickled off. What could she say? Exchanging a concerned glance with Crane, she turned away but not before calling out to Evan.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered and Crane was glad to hear actual contrition in his voice.

"That goes for you too, young man."

"Yes, ma'am."

If Evan was angry with Daniel, he didn't show it. In truth, he didn't really have the chance to anyway. As soon as Mrs. Asher left, Daniel excused himself to his room. The sound of the bedroom door slamming shut resonating along the hallway and down the stairs giving his family a pretty damn good idea about how he felt about the situation.

To be continued.
Chapter 11

"No luck?" Hannah asked as Adam slowly made his way back down the stairs from Daniel's room. Her love and concern for his brothers always warmed his heart and, as she slipped her arms around his waist and hugged him to her, he reminded himself never to take it for granted.

Shaking his head in response, Adam caught a glimpse of both Evan and Ford's hopeful faces falling before the teens silently returned to the kitchen chores they were doing with Guthrie. Feeling the weight of their disappointment, Adam held Hannah even closer, their lips meeting briefly for a tender kiss before he reluctantly pulled back from their embrace. "No," he sighed. "He's asleep." Crane, having gotten up from the couch as Adam rounded the bottom of the stairs, raised his eyebrows at that so Adam added, "For real this time."

From the moment Colleen Asher had left after dropping her bombshell about the likely expulsion of Steve Fletcher, Daniel had sequestered himself in his room, feigning sleep with Adam the first time he'd gone up there to check on him. Adam had known his little brother was faking it but, after the hellish day the boy had had, Adam wasn't about to call him on it. Besides, at the time he'd figured Crane would have been able to coax Daniel back downstairs to join them for dinner. But Crane had struck out too, though he'd managed to get the kid to talk to him at least.

True to their bond, Crane only relayed a bit of their conversation, enough to let Adam know Daniel was still upset about Steve's punishment… not so much the suspension but the threat of expulsion. Adam didn't quite get that – according to both Evan and Ford, there was no love lost between Steve and Daniel – but Crane seemed to understand and, for now, that was good enough for Adam.

Worrying at her lip, Hannah lamented, "I'd feel better if he'd eat something."

Adam felt the same way and he knew Crane did too. The doctors had warned them that Daniel might gain weight with the Decadron he was on but they were still waiting for that to happen. The kid hadn't had any fat to lose before the mine collapse, yet he'd still managed to drop almost twenty pounds since then. That he no longer had a voracious appetite had a hell of a lot to do with it, Adam was sure. Though, up until tonight, Daniel hadn't outright refused a meal. Still, Adam hated seeing his wife looking as concerned as he was. Reaching out, he brushed an errant curl from her face as he responded with, "It won't hurt him to miss a meal, honey."

"Sure, but it won't help him any either," Crane answered instead, seemingly plucking his thoughts from Adam's mind as he wearily slumped back down onto the couch.

"Yeah," Hannah sighed, placing a comforting hand on Crane's shoulder before sliding past and settling next to him.

"Yeah," Adam repeated, sitting opposite them. He couldn't think of anything else to say.

When Hannah leaned forward and delicately placed her hand on Adam's knee, he looked up and met her troubled gaze. Sensing something else was worrying his bride, he squeezed her hand, inviting her to speak her mind.

She did, but not before exchanging a glance with Crane who was clearly in the loop. "Honey? About the fundraiser…" She spoke softly, in part Adam knew so that the younger boys wouldn't hear her. Only Hannah and the three eldest McFadden sons were aware of the town's plans for the
event. He'd planned on telling their youngest about it only after he'd broken the news to Daniel. Tonight.

Adam groaned, couldn't help himself, and releasing his hold on Hannah he ran his hand shakily through his hair. It was a wonder he had any left, he thought wearily. The fight, the seizure, Colleen's announcement… there was no way Adam was going to add this news to everything Daniel had endured today. Hell, he knew his prideful brother wouldn't take to the idea on a good day, let alone after a godawful day like this one.

"I think you should hold off telling him about it; don't you?"

She'd read his mind. Then again, maybe Adam had been reading hers.

"Adam, he's not up to it. Especially not after today." Crane's tone was hushed but Adam knew he was going to have a fight on his hands if he disagreed. Fortunately, he didn't.

"Yeah, well, he's out like a light so I don't see it being a problem for the moment." Adam responded. Given the twin looks of intensity beaming at him from the couch, he realized Hannah and Crane needed more from him. "No, you're right. Don't worry about it," he placated them. "If he wakes up, I'll hold off."

Adam was glad to see the relief on their faces, wished his next words wouldn't erase it. "But the whole town's gonna know come Monday," he reminded them. After all, between word of mouth and a newspaper article about the fundraiser expected in Monday's edition, they were still going to have to break the news to Daniel over the weekend. Even with Daniel and Evan suspended Monday, that wouldn't really buy them any extra time. Ford and Guthrie would be sure to hear about it at school.

Sighing, Adam watched as Hannah's and Crane's faces fell. They knew it too.

Adam wasn't sure how long the three of them stayed that way, lost in their respective troubled thoughts. The only noise coming from the clanging of dishes and cutlery as their three youngest finished up drying and putting them away. Brian was doing a final check of the barn, the evening having gotten away from all of them with Colleen's unexpected appearance and its aftermath. It was already after eight, not terribly late for a Friday night but, the day's events had drained them all. Even Guthrie, whose animated commentary was notably missing while helping his brothers with their chores.

The house was so quiet; Adam literally jumped at the combined sounds of yet another vehicle pulling up in front of the house plus the thud of boots on their porch.

When the door abruptly swung open revealing a bewildered looking Brian, Adam was already heading over there. It was Brian who spoke first though, asking, "Know anyone who drives a Land Rover?"

Adam was about to answer in the negative but was silenced by a sudden outburst from Evan.

"Oh, shit. No way!"

Adam would've scolded him for swearing in the house but was waylaid again as the teenager made a beeline to the nearest window and, looking outside, added an angry sounding, "You have got to be kidding me!"

It was Hannah who finally spoke, or rather asked, "Evan, what's going on? Who is it?"

Ford answered for his still fuming brother. "Steve Fletcher sometimes drives his dad's Range
Rover to school." The kid sounded downright appalled.

At that revelation, the house descended into pandemonium. Thrusting an arm out to grab hold of Brian, whose oath supplanted Evan's at the top of the list of words not to be used in Hannah's or Guthrie's presence. Hauling his incensed brother into the house, Adam closed the door on the two figures he could see just climbing out of their vehicle.

"All right, that's enough," he ordered. "Everybody quiet down." He didn't want to shout; knowing that raising his voice would only succeed in ratcheting up the tension even higher. Not to mention that Daniel was still sleeping upstairs. He hoped. Unfortunately volume was presently the only way he could get his family's attention. Turning to Brian, still in his grip, he demanded, "And just where did you think you were going, mister?"

"Where do you think?" Brian said defiantly, his eyes gleaming the way only Brian's could when he was in a scrapping mood. Evan was right beside him now too, practically bouncing on his toes, clearly ready to back up Brian.

"Oh, and what's the plan, tough guy? Beating up an eighteen year-old kid on our front porch? Are you trying to get yourself arrested?"

That took a little of the wind out of Brian's sails and once he settled down, Adam released his hold on him.

It was clear from Brian's hands-on-hips stance that he still wasn't happy though. "So, what are we going to do here? Welcome them with open arms?" The derision was oozing from his every pore.

"No, of course not," Crane answered, stepping into Brian's personal space. "But we are going to hear them out."

It wasn't the first time Adam had witnessed Crane and Brian at odds. It wouldn't be the last time either, of that he was sure. Their personalities so different, sometimes the only thing they seemed to have in common was the fervent love they shared for their family.

And more often than not, when sides were taken, Adam and Crane were on the same one. Not surprisingly, they were allies this time too. "Crane's right, Brian," Adam said and Brian snorted, shaking his head bitterly.

"Whatever you say," he scoffed, throwing up his arms in either defeat or disgust, probably both, before practically stomping over to the couch and heavily sitting down.

"You go with him," Crane admonished Evan and, if the teen hoped Adam was going to overrule their third-born, he was going to be sorely disappointed. Crane was right. They didn't need either of the family's resident powder kegs standing right there at the front door if it was indeed Steve Fletcher making his way up their porch steps.

Come to think of it, there were altogether too many McFaddens crowding the front door as it was. Throwing Crane an apologetic look, hoping his most level-headed brother understood his motives, Adam spoke. "Why don't all of you go sit down and leave Hannah and me to deal with this?" It wasn't really a question.

He'd briefly considered sending the youngest three upstairs but, since both Evan and Ford were in the thick of this – whatever this was – he felt they should stay. And sending Guthrie upstairs on his own ran the risk of waking Daniel, something Adam wanted to avoid. At least until he knew the true intentions of their unwelcome guests.

"C'mon, guys," Crane said as he steered their two youngest over to the couches. Crane didn't join
them though, giving Adam and Hannah space but remaining standing. Like a sentry in front of their seated brothers.

Wrapping his arm around Hannah’s waist, Adam waited until their visitors knocked on the door before opening it.

Two men stood opposite them, or rather one likely in his late forties and another, no older than Daniel. They were both nearly as tall as Adam though and he realized fleetingly how easy it was for him to consider the young man opposite him exactly that – a man – and yet still think of Daniel as a boy. Before he dwelled on the disparity of that thought, another immediately overrode it. That, despite how lanky he was, Steve Fletcher easily outweighed Daniel these days by thirty or forty pounds. And since that realization was raising Adam's protective hackles, he was more than glad he’d made Brian step away from the door.

Granted, he was having a hard time sizing up this nemesis of Daniel's. Despite the kid's height, Adam couldn't tell the color of Steve's eyes, downcast as they were. He was worrying his lip too, clearly not happy about being here. Good, Adam thought. Let him squirm.

Fletcher senior was another matter though. Adam's mother would've described him as "strapping" and not exactly what Adam would've envisioned had he previously spared any thought to the man's appearance. The immaculate suit and overcoat didn't come as a surprise – Adam had heard from the boys that Steve came from money. He'd heard "businessman" though and wrongly anticipated more paunch than the man possessed. Fletcher was in shape and his posture so rigid, Adam had to wonder if he had a military background. A closer look at his face told Adam the truth though. With his dark eyes strained and jaw clenched tight, the man's entire being was ripcord taut. Tension was the source of the man's carriage though and Adam frankly wasn't sure whether he should feel empathy or contempt for this man who was Steve Fletcher's father.

"Adam McFadden?" He finally said, the uncertainty in his tone something Adam had gotten used to over the years. Had heard a lot of during Daniel's hospitalization especially. Even when people knew of their family history and that the oldest McFadden brother was the head of their family, Adam being under thirty still tended to throw them. It was something Adam understood, though was having a harder time with these days at least every time he looked in the mirror. Didn't he look as old as he felt? About fifty at least? When Adam didn't answer, Fletcher continued, thrusting out his hand and accompanying it with, "I'm Edgar Fletcher and this is—"

"I know who you are," Adam replied curtly, knowing he was being rude but still pointedly disregarding the older man's proffered hand. It was Steve who visibly flinched and Adam felt Hannah's disapproval as she bristled in his hold. As the father awkwardly dropped his hand, Adam sighed, softening his tone a little for his wife's benefit as he added, "What is it we can do for you?"

He ignored the harsh whispers and grumbles he could hear from the peanut gallery behind him, leaving Crane to handle them if a revolt suddenly broke out. Steve, on the other hand, wasn't able to overlook them and Adam watched as the kid's eyes darted past him to Crane and beyond, widening in fear before lowering again to survey his sneakers. Not surprisingly, it was his father who spoke up again. "My son has something he'd like to say to your family, to your brother Daniel especially." The latter he emphasized with a firm squeeze to the back of his son's neck. The action brought the kid's head up but it was Adam's reply that finally got him speaking. Addressing Steve directly and not giving in to the odd hint of compassion the nervous kid was stirring in him, Adam said, "What you've got to say, you can say to us. Daniel's not—"

"Oh, God. Is he still in the hospital?"
Steve looked utterly horrified and so sick at the thought; Adam's own gut lurched just a little. Enough to give in to that touch of sympathy and enough to begin to comprehend why Crane and Daniel were so bothered by Steve's possible expulsion. This may have been a school-yard fight with dire consequences but those were a result of Daniel's existing injury and not because two rival seniors got into a scuffle at school. Hell, truth be told, between Brian and Adam they'd had more than their fair share of fights in high-school, sometimes even with each other.

Still, from what he'd heard from Ford and Evan, Steve was a smart-mouthed jackass and, one who was very clearly a hell of a lot bigger than Daniel. He was certainly old enough to have had the common sense if not decency to avoid getting into a fight with a classmate still recovering from a serious head-injury.

A hurt and angry classmate who presently had a hair-trigger temper, Adam reminded himself. Shit, no wonder Crane, Daniel's self-appointed guardian, didn't have it in for this Fletcher kid. Adam really didn't know what to think about this whole mess.

He knew one thing though. With Hannah's nudge against his waist, it was clear his kind-hearted wife wanted him to spare this kid the misery of thinking he'd hospitalized Daniel. She was right. Of course. Meeting Edgar's apprehensive gaze first, Adam then shifted his eyes to Steve. He couldn't deny that his size still bothered him but the look on his face screamed "scared kid" so he relented. "No. No, he's here. Just resting up in his room."

The relief radiating from both Fletchers was palpable but the moment didn't last. Adam heard the thump of boots on hardwood, wasn't entirely surprised that it was Evan vaulting the back of the couch and heading their way. "No thanks to you, you son-of-a-bitch," he growled, sounding so much like a pissed off Brian, Adam had to do a double-take.

Crane's long reach easily grabbed hold of their irate little brother so Adam returned his attention to the Fletchers. It should've been comical the way Edgar had a protective hold on his son. After all, Steve outsized Evan by a mile too. But Adam felt a surge of kinship toward the man who stepped in to protect his boy. Especially since Adam knew full well that an enraged Evan truly was a threat to Steve.

In the end, it was neither the protective father nor Crane's reasoning or grappling skills that extinguished Evan's ire and saved Steve from harm. It was Daniel.

"Back off, Evan."

Evan instantly stilled. Hell, you could've heard a pin drop in the place. Which was probably why Edgar Fletcher's gasp drew Adam's eyes briefly away from Daniel, standing at the top of the stairs, and back to their unwelcome guests. The father looked almost as pale as Steve had a moment ago. And then he looked angry, his protective hold on his son morphing into a bruising grip on the kid's shoulder. Adam couldn't blame him. He'd have been awfully pissed too if any of the boys had gotten into a fight with someone who looked as utterly defenseless as the teenager slowly making his way down the stairs.

Whether it had been Evan's boots hitting the floor or Daniel on his own accord, Adam's middle brother clearly had just woken up. Though Adam recognized the Springsteen t-shirt as one of Daniel's own, from the way it hung so loosely on him, it might as well have been Crane's. His jeans were baggy too and slid low off his hips, not quite concealing that Daniel was still barefoot. And to literally cap off the vision of vulnerability, scrapes and bruising – courtesy of Edgar's son – stood out in stark contrast against Daniel's pale face and beneath his unruly, lop-sided hair.

Adam was grateful Daniel didn't notice that all eyes were glued on him at that moment, concentrating as he was on making his way down the stairs. Though Daniel had mastered them a
while ago, when he was extremely tired or just awake, they posed more of a challenge. In this case the boy was both. Not surprisingly, Hannah slipped out of Adam's hold and met Crane at the base of the stairs.

"No, I'm okay," Daniel said softly, rebuffing them as they climbed up part way.

"I know," Crane replied, sliding an arm behind Daniel's back anyway. He stayed there, at Daniel's back, as they approached Steve. Steve, whose gaze had found the floor again until his father cleared his throat and squeezed his arm, drawing the kid's eyes upward.

Daniel stood before him and though Adam's temper spiked once again at the size discrepancy between the two teens, he let it go, watching with a certain pride as the younger Fletcher seemed to shrink in Daniel's presence. Despite Crane being right there, Adam was sure he had little to do with Steve's bearing. That was all Daniel, standing straight and tall, dark eyes piercing Steve.

Daniel stood there intently, crossing his arms in a stance Adam recognized in himself whenever he demanded an explanation from one of his siblings for doing something utterly bone-headed. The kid's eyes were flashing anger though. He was more than simply irritated. "You got something to say?" He finally spoke, his already gravelly voice even rougher from sleep, but that didn't detract at all from his command of the moment.

"I—" Fletcher started, faltering until his father admonished him to continue. "I came to apologize," he continued, obviously still struggling for the right words to say. "I never thought—" he shrugged, and though Adam heard Brian's derisive snort, nobody else in the room called Steve on the irony in that statement before he finally blurted out, "I was just messing with you, you know? But, I swear, I never meant to put you in the hospital!"

Though the sincerity was evident, Daniel shook his head, the smirk transforming his face seemingly misplaced until he answered acerbically with, "You give yourself too much credit, you know that?" Steve looked as confused as Adam felt. "You didn't put me in the hospital. I did."

"Now wait a minute," Adam objected, unwilling to let Daniel shoulder any more blame.

"No, let me say this," Daniel insisted. "Just because he picked a fight with me doesn't mean he caused that seizure."

Adam wanted to argue but the fact that Crane was doing nothing more than wrapping an arm around Daniel's shoulder in a show of support had Adam keeping his thoughts to himself. Besides, Daniel wasn't done yet.

Shrugging out of Crane's hold and stepping further into Steve's space, Daniel continued. "I caused it. I was pissed… Not just at you and I wanted—"

"Hey," Crane said softly, interrupting before a less steady sounding Daniel could finish what Adam realized with dismay was his own confession. He was starting to grasp even further why his injured little brother was so upset about Steve's likely expulsion. And the realization made Adam heartsick. He knew, despite their failed efforts to get him to talk to them, Daniel was still blaming himself for the cave-in and for the hospital bills and God knew what else. And he knew the guilt was eating the kid up. Adam just hadn't realized how much anger Daniel was carrying too. At his plight and at himself. Crane obviously knew though, which explained why he hadn't been holding the same degree of animosity toward Steve as everyone else had. Because Crane knew as Adam did now that Daniel was angry enough to, if not start that fight with Steve, at least revel in it.

Shit.
Neither Adam's realization nor Crane's soft admonishment were noticed by Daniel though. He remained intently focused on the younger Fletcher.

"I don't…I don't understand," Steve said, clearly oblivious to Daniel's near admission of complicity. Adam briefly glimpsed at Mr. Fletcher but couldn't gauge anything from the man's expression beyond the compassion and concern already etched there as he looked at the smaller of the two boys. His attention drew back to his son though when Steve addressed Daniel bewilderedly, "Aren't you pissed with me?"

Daniel's countenance changed again, from distraught to riled. "Of course I'm pissed. You sucker punched my little brother."

Despite the gravity of the day's events, Adam had to fight the smile quirking his lips. There were times when he felt like a dismal failure as a parent to his six siblings. Then there were times when he witnessed their protectiveness and loyalty, something he'd tried so hard to instill in all of them, and felt like he'd done all right. Seeing that shining through Daniel right now lightened his heavy heart. Just a little.

Steve's eyes widened at Daniel's pronouncement but, to give him credit, he picked up the ball and ran with it. Looking beyond Daniel to the McFaddens gathered near the couches, Adam watched as his eyes fell upon their second youngest. "Ford, right?"

Adam couldn't deny the irritation bubbling under his skin, knowing that this Fletcher kid wasn't even sure of the name of the boy whose nose he'd bloodied, but he let it slide. Their typically shy sibling was meeting the older teen's gaze confidently. Ford wasn't showing any of the anxiety he wore in Mrs. Asher's presence and that made Adam proud.

"Uh huh," the boy responded indifferently, moving toward them, but not before receiving a supportive pat on the back from Brian.

Ford stepped amongst them, positioning himself next to Daniel, and Adam felt another swell of pride. His mind's eye envisioning him stepping in protectively between Daniel and Steve earlier that day. Daniel slipped an arm behind his kid brother's back, their unity even more evident in that act. "You got something to say to me?" He said, repeating Daniel's words from moments earlier.

The regret seemed authentic when Steve responded, looking the smaller Ford in the eyes. "Uh, yeah. Yeah I do," he said. "I'm sorry I hit you." Indicating his father he then added, "I was taught better than that and had no business punching out a sophomore."

"No, you didn't," Daniel said sharply.

Not surprisingly, their soft-hearted second youngest was more forgiving, offering up an olive branch as he answered with a shrug. "Well, I did call you a moron."

Adam had to fight another smile. He lost the battle when Steve responded with, "I think that was scum sucking moron, actually."

This time even Daniel smiled, letting out one of his ridiculous little giggles in the process. Adam couldn't remember the last time he'd heard that laugh. It had been far too long, that was for damn sure.

The tension had come down with Ford's little ice-breaker, even Steve and his dad appeared more relaxed. Though, with that ease in the atmosphere, Adam couldn't help but notice how worn out Daniel was; looking rougher even than he had coming down those stairs. He was leaning back against Crane now and though Crane's expression still showed the remnants of levity from Ford
and Steve's exchange, Adam recognized the concern there too.

"All right, are we done here?" The question came out of Adam's mouth almost of its own volition.

"Yeah, we're done," Daniel replied. Adam shot a glare at Brian and Evan, ensuring that neither of them voiced any objections. They looked satisfied, if not happy. Good. Adam might be the head of this family but he was willing to let Daniel call the shots on this truce or whatever this was going on between him and Steve Fletcher. Within reason.

"Good," he said, punctuating the moment. Then, to Ford, he suggested, "Why don't you two head on upstairs?"

The insightful boy clearly knew what Adam was asking of him, lightly grasping Daniel's elbow accompanied by a, "Come on, let's go."

Daniel's compliance proved Adam's theory that the kid was done in, so he couldn't help but wince when Steve stopped the pair's progression by calling out, "Say, Ford?"

"Yes?" Ford replied a little warily.

"You got guts, kid."

Ford's only response was an intense shade of pink overtaking his face.

The two brothers proceeded side by side up the stairs, Crane following right behind them. Whether it was their painfully slow progress prompting him, his dad, or the guilt still weighing him down, Steve called out again. This time blurting out Daniel's name.

"Yeah?" Daniel answered wearily from the landing above them.

Suddenly looking uncertain, the kid replied, "I owe you, man. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Adam's opinion of this young man was changing. Hell, maybe the gravity of this incident had just catapulted the cocky teen into maturity? Something good had to come out of this crap day, after all. Unfortunately the positive feelings didn't last, quashed as soon as Adam heard Daniel's despondent reply.

"There's nothing anybody can do, Steve."

Adam felt as crushed as each of the two brothers flanking Daniel looked.

Adam swallowed roughly as his three siblings moved out of sight. Meeting Edgar's sympathetic gaze, he smiled sadly. Steve looked miserable. Hell, everyone did.

The solemn moment didn't last though when suddenly Daniel's voice floated down from the landing. "Hey, Fletcher?" He called, peering down at them, both hands resting on the railing. "You really wanna help?"

"Yeah, sure. Anything." The kid sounded like he really meant it.

An odd grin formed across Daniel's features, one that was mirrored by Crane who had come to stand next to him. Adam couldn't help but wonder what those two had concocted in the minute or two they'd been out of his sight. Check that, those three. The other blond brother was now bookending Daniel too.

"We're still down a man; can you ride?"
"Now, hold on—" Brian objected, finally breaching the invisible barrier near the couches and coming forward to join the group.

"Easy," Adam said, blocking Brian's path with an outstretched arm. Brian relented, though he stayed put. Adam didn't begrudge his brother the reaction. He was second in command, especially when it came to the operations of the Circle-Bar-Seven. And he was as worried about Daniel's welfare as the rest of them. Hell, Adam had been a hair's breadth from saying a hell of a lot more about a cockamamie idea like that. But something in Daniel's expression stopped him. Or maybe it was the kid's voice. He actually sounded enthusiastic about something. Looked it too.

Adam looked up at Crane then, couldn't avoid doing so what with the intense gaze his brother was searing into him. When Adam met that gaze, Crane nodded, cocked his head at Daniel and mouthed what Adam was sure was, "It'll be okay."

Though there seemed to be some sort of armistice between the two teens at the moment, Adam still wasn't sure. The idea of Steve being on the ranch, in close proximity to Daniel – or more significantly Daniel's erratic temper – had him worried. Young men were predictably unpredictable and the last thing they needed was another potential threat to Daniel's safety. Or another potential setback to his recovery.

They needed to talk about this. Correction… the adults needed to talk about this.

"Sure, I can ride." Oblivious, Steve answered with even more enthusiasm than Daniel. "I could help out. It's not like I've got school next week anyway." The latter sentence carried damn near as much self-recrimination as practically everything Daniel said these days. He looked imploringly at his father then and Adam tamped down a twinge of envy. At least Steve remembered that the decision wasn't his. "Can I, Dad?"

Adam could read the conflict in Edgar's eyes. Was relieved he shared it. The older man took a step back then and puffed out a heavy breath before running a hand through his short, greying hair. Adam could've sworn it hadn't had that much silver in it when they'd first arrived; had a sudden desire to find a mirror and check what state his own was in.

Another deep sigh brought Adam's attention back to the more important issue at hand. "It's not my decision, Steven," Edgar answered soberly. "But if Mr. McFadden is agreeable, so am I." Steve's answering grin didn't last, falling when his father added one condition. "I want you to stay away from Daniel though."

So much for the adults having a discussion about this. But at least he and Edgar were on the same page. Though Adam could see a mixture of hurt and indignation in the younger Fletcher's eyes, the boy wisely kept his thoughts to himself. Clearly the kid was well aware of the rocky ground he was teetering on. Adam was actually a little surprised that Daniel had kept his mouth shut. Seeking him out atop the landing, the eldest McFadden realized he had Crane to thank for that. The two were huddled together, Crane hunched over to meet Daniel's height. There was obviously an intense conversation going on up there that included Ford too, standing close and nodding his head in agreement over something being said.

Despite the reservations he still had, especially knowing he wouldn't always be around to ensure the boys didn't butt heads – and he was including Evan and Brian in that scenario too – Adam was about to cave. He knew Daniel felt like a burden and desperately wanted to contribute in some way during his recovery. It didn't matter to their middle brother that the entire family considered every moment of his recovery a blessing and most definitely not a burden; the prideful kid just couldn't accept it. So, if taking on Steve would alleviate some of Daniel's misplaced guilt, Adam was willing to give it a shot.
It probably went without saying but Adam needed to say the words anyway. Needed Daniel to hear them. His powwow with Crane and Ford evidently over, Adam met the kid's expectant gaze before telling him, "We do this, that goes both ways, you hear?"

The resultant eye-roll and sigh could be seen and heard all the way down the stairs. Adam was pretty sure it earned Daniel an elbow from Crane. Or maybe even a foot stomp. Whatever happened up there, the kid finally responded verbally with only a slightly condescending, "Yes, Dad."

That settled, Edgar and Adam mutually agreed to ironing out the specifics over the phone the next day. Daniel clearly needed more rest and everyone else was damn near as wiped out. Adam sure was. He hoped like hell they wouldn't have any more unexpected guests show up on their doorstep tonight.

With an apology for monopolizing the family's evening, Edgar began steering his son toward the door. "All right, let's go. We've taken up enough of this family's time."

"Yes, sir," Steve said, almost reluctantly. He turned back though, meeting Adam's gaze with an odd mixture of remorse and relief in his eyes. "Mr. McFadden?"

God, did that make Adam feel old. Or even older, despite it coming from a kid Steve's age. Given the circumstances though, for once he refrained from telling Steve to call him Adam. The kid hadn't yet earned that right. So, "Yeah, Steve," was all he said, trying not to sound too impatient. The kid put out his hand then, and Adam found himself clasping it as Steve thanked him for the opportunity to make it up to the family. Looking up toward Daniel, he continued. "I know you're not blaming me for putting you in the hospital but—". He sighed then, ultimately shrugged. "I meant what I said. Anything I can do to help out, I will, man."

Steve sounded earnest, enough to make Adam wonder about what made this kid tick. He sure wasn't acting like the jerk Evan and Ford both had vehemently described. And certainly not like the reprobate that had tormented a brain-injured classmate. He figured once Brian put him to work though; they'd get more than a glimpse of whoever the real Steve Fletcher was, so he decided not to worry about it.

Besides, with Edgar's next words, Adam suddenly had a hell of a lot more to worry about.

"Oh, and speaking of helping out," the older man said, reaching inside his suit jacket and pulling out a check book, "Steve and I would very much like to contribute to Daniel's fundraiser."

"What fundraiser?"

The question came from Daniel. And he sounded horrified.

Shit.

*To be continued.*
There are a number of canon references in this chapter, though all are quite minor:
The conflict between Brian and Daniel over Tally Dean in "Daniel's Song" is
touched on very briefly. Mentions of other 7B characters are in this chapter too,
including: Marie and the Barretts; Dave Schiller (Crane's lawyer in "The Man in the
White Hat"), Walt (the mechanic from "Winter Roses") and Silas (one of Adam's
older supporters in "The Election").

"Adam, no, damn it! They can't do this!" Daniel shouted, though the moisture filling his eyes told
Crane frustration and distress would soon overtake the fury that was sustaining his kid brother's
second wind. Crane knew it wouldn't last much longer though. Couldn't last much longer. They'd
been arguing about the fundraiser for a solid ten minutes now and Daniel looked about ready to
drop.

God, what an awful, miserable day. And night.

Crane had witnessed the color drain from Edgar Fletcher's face when the unfortunate man had
realized what he'd done. That he'd inadvertently broken the news to Daniel about the fundraiser.
Though Crane's focus had almost immediately trained on his younger brother, he'd spared a
moment's sympathy toward the older man. And toward his son.

Hannah had ushered them out of the house quickly, sputtering out a weak, "Don't worry;
everything will be fine." Her voice straining with the tension they all were feeling. They'd needed
to get the Fletchers the hell out of there though. So the family could deal with this next crisis.

Daniel's, "What fundraiser?" and its ensuing silence had held so many different emotions in it.
Confusion, realization, hurt, mortification, anger; Crane could've cried. Emotions that were still so
palpable, the kid was literally shaking.

"Daniel, they can and they are."

Of course responses like that one from Adam were just about exactly what Daniel needed to refuel
him.

Sure enough, Daniel straightened to his full height and shot Adam a heated glare. "It's my debt
and I'll say how it gets paid," he snapped.

"Oh, yeah…" Adam said with enough derision that Crane moved in closer. "So, tell me your plan
then. How's it going to get paid?"

"With the grants we applied for," Daniel responded a little desperately and looking to Crane for
backup.

And Crane winced. He hadn't had the heart to tell anyone but Adam yet that they'd be lucky to see
five grand from those applications. And who knew when they'd even receive that? It could be
months, maybe even a year or more. Daniel must've read it in Crane's expression too because his face fell immediately when their eyes met.

Damn. He hated letting Daniel down like that.

To give the boy credit, he regrouped quickly, schooling his features and turning to face Adam once again. "I'll get a job; pay it off myself."

This time it was Crane who threw a glare Adam's way. Half pleading, half warning; Crane prayed that their eldest wouldn't pounce on the absurdity of that statement. Never mind that Daniel was still in school and probably would be through the summer. Or that a half day of classes and two hours of rehab still required rest and outright sleep in between. Hell, he couldn't even drive thanks to his three month license suspension. At least three months, a voice of doom whispered in Crane's mind. Forget that the kid could no longer do what he was best at – be it turning a wrench or performing on stage…

Crane stopped himself right there. He wasn't going to give in to those negative thoughts. Daniel was getting better. Much better.

But, he sure as hell wasn't up to any kind of workday. And Adam knew it every bit as much as Crane did.

"Believe it or not, I know how you feel," Adam sighed, switching gears and thankfully ignoring Daniel's "job comment" entirely.

Crane knew Adam was telling the truth. Still, the impatience and frustration in their eldest brother's voice and in his demeanor weren't terribly convincing and were making Crane's hackles rise. There was just no way that Daniel, as wound up as he was, was going to see anything in Adam but condescension, let alone believe the empathy he was claiming.

"How could you possibly know how I feel?"

"Daniel, c'mon. Settle down," Crane softly implored, reaching out to grasp his irate sibling's shoulders. It wasn't just that he hated to see Daniel so upset. After today, the fear of another seizure was something Crane just couldn't shake.

"No, you settle down!" Daniel shouted irrationally, surprising Crane as his hands not only came up to block Crane's advance but actually shoved him backward. Hard. More than a little shocked, Crane backed up. In part because of the force of Daniel's shove, but also to give the kid some space. Daniel was looking alarmingly wild.

Brian apparently thought otherwise though and moved toward their incensed brother instead. "Dan'l, that's enough," he commanded, ignoring Adam's order to back off and stepping in too close for Crane's comfort. There was plenty of anger in his tone, though Crane knew fear for Daniel was fueling it. Grabbing Daniel tightly around one wrist, Brian practically growled, "Give it a rest," and shook Daniel in his hold for added emphasis.

Daniel stilled then, dark eyes traveling from the strong unyielding grip up to his big brother's equally intense gaze. The silence was deafening and Crane knew full well it wasn't a sign that Daniel was relenting. The kid was pissed, maybe even more so than the last time he'd taken a swing at Brian. Back when good intentions went awry and Brian had stuck his nose in where it didn't belong… right smack dab in the middle of Daniel's first serious, albeit destined to fail, relationship.

"Let. Go. Of. Me." The demand was made softly but Crane had never before heard his good-
natured little brother sound so dangerous, so lethal. Unwilling to risk anyone else's safety, Crane decided he was going to have to step in, put himself in the line of fire. Just in case Daniel did let loose.

Except Hannah stepped in instead, placing her smaller, delicate hand over top of Brian's, the contrasting image looking like some warped parody of a Musketeers' salute. "Brian, let him go," she said firmly, insinuating herself between the brothers' stare-down.

"Hannah, get out of there," Adam hissed and there was true fear in his tone. Fear clearly for his wife's safety and palpable enough for Brian to abruptly release Daniel and spin away with a mortified and self-directed curse.

Free from Brian's hold, Daniel staggered back a few steps before steadying himself. He looked a little dazed, enough to make Crane worry, so he reached out for him once more, risking the kid's wrath. Daniel brushed Crane off but not with the vehemence of before. It was as though he hadn't even noticed Crane's presence as he hesitantly approached their sister-in-law, held now in Adam's protective arms.

"Hannah?" The kid said softly, his voice catching and shaky and Crane knew Daniel was verging on tears. Knew Daniel was absolutely crushed thinking that either Adam or Hannah believed he might hurt her. "Oh, God, Hannah, I—" he faltered as he halted in front of the couple. Crane caught up to him then, ready to intervene if Adam said the wrong thing. But, at Daniel's choked out, "Adam, I would never—" all Crane could see was love and concern in Adam's eyes.

"I know that, Danny-boy," Adam interrupted him gently, reaching out and cupping Daniel's face. "And so does she," he added as Hannah straightened from within her husband's embrace.

Not surprisingly, Hannah spoke up for herself, her pretty face full of tenderness as she held out her hand for Daniel to grasp. "Of course I do, sweetheart," she said kindly, sounding and acting so much like a mom, like their mom, Crane could've wept.

And Daniel did weep, Hannah's, "It's okay, baby," very nearly being Crane's undoing when Daniel entwined his hand with hers and allowed both Hannah and Adam to pull him in for a hug.

The fireworks were over, thank God, and Crane exchanged a relieved glance with Adam overtop of Daniel's and Hannah's heads. The reprieve was short-lived though as Daniel composed himself, pulling away and imploring Adam yet again not to hold the fundraiser.

"You don't understand. I'm already the freak that humiliated himself in front of the whole school; please don't make me a charity case too!"

After hearing Daniel's heartbreaking plea, Adam was at a complete loss. He knew his still-recovering little brother was full of guilt and self-loathing but he hadn't realized until now just how deeply ingrained the latter was. He had no idea how to help him and that realization rendered Adam speechless.

Crane stepped in then, not at all surprisingly, pulling the boy under his arm and coaxing him into heading up to bed. They all knew Daniel was exhausted after such an emotionally gruelling day.

"Come on, we can talk this out tomorrow," Crane gently suggested.

Daniel directed his reply to Adam instead, looking at him with tired eyes full of hurt. "There's nothing to talk about, is there?" he said, and Adam swallowed hard. He'd heard those words from his middle brother before. Full of petulance and in the heat of anger but, this time, Adam knew
defeat was their catalyst. What was worse was that the kid was right. The fundraiser was a done deal and wasn't up for debate.

Afraid of hurting Daniel further with the cold, hard truth, Adam could only grimace and look away, his eyes ultimately finding the floor as Crane steered his roommate away from Adam and Hannah and toward the stairs.

But resolve to work this out between them prompted Adam to follow. His wife's none-too-gentle nudge, not to mention her whispered, "Don't let this day end like this for him," might have had a lot to do with it too.

Empowered by Hannah's faith in him and her indomitable will, Adam moved to catch up to his brothers. He didn't have to go far. Brian, clearly still upset with himself over his standoff with Daniel, had corralled the kid into a bear-hug that was promising to crack a few ribs.

"Everything's gonna work out, Dan'l. You'll see," Brian promised him, with a force of will that rivaled Hannah's and a contrasting, gentle mussing of the kid's hair.

Daniel didn't respond and Adam caught the worried looks exchanged between Crane and Brian.

"Okay, sport, let's get you upstairs," Adam said, easing Daniel out from Brian's hold. That Daniel still said nothing, didn't offer any resistance when Crane took his other arm as they guided him up the stairs, was testament to how defeated he truly was.

Once Daniel was in his room and sitting on the edge of his bed, Adam stepped back and leaned against the wall across from them, allowing Crane the space to get his brother settled.

Somewhere along the line, Daniel had outgrown both bedtime kisses and getting tucked in by Adam. Hell, all of them, including Guthrie were well past that. Things were different between Crane and Daniel though, especially since those first harrowing days after the kid woke up from the coma. Admittedly, a goodnight kiss would likely earn Crane a black-eye, but Daniel was accepting of what Crane was offering him right now – help changing his clothes and a solid, steady presence sitting there on the mattress beside him. They’d made some kind of deal Crane had said when Adam had queried him about it. Whatever pact the pair had between them, Adam was grateful for it, especially at times like these.

Watching Daniel so passively accept Crane's ministrations was giving Adam second thoughts about instigating anything resembling a conversation with him right now though. Daniel looked ready to pass out any second. Still, Hannah was right. The boy deserved better than to fall asleep feeling this low.

Besides, if Adam got his way, there'd be less conversation and a whole lot more of Daniel just plain listening. Adam would just have to tread lightly for once; gentle his approach. He could do that.

Easing off the wall, Adam moved to stand behind Crane who was absently smoothing the blanket over Daniel all the while whispering words of comfort and encouragement. Adam lightly rested his hand upon Crane's shoulder, successfully shifting his attention away from their already nodding off younger brother. Adam didn't say anything, just canted his head toward the door in a silent request for Crane to give them some privacy.

Adam could sense Crane's hesitation, felt his intense scrutiny and vainly tried to prevent himself from getting annoyed. This was just Crane at his most protective after all. Adam must've measured up, his good intentions coming through, because Crane visibly relaxed and moved to get up.
"G'night, kiddo," Crane said softly, squeezing the kid's arm, before crossing over to his own bed, sitting down, and proceeding to pull off his own boots.

Adam sighed. Crane wasn't going anywhere.

Resigned to that fate, Adam settled into the spot Crane had just vacated and gently laid his palm on Daniel's chest. "Hey… I know you're running on empty but, do you think maybe you could just hear me out some more?"

Heavy lidded eyes blinked up at him. "I don't wanna fight anymore, Adam." Daniel sounded so desolate and so young, Adam felt his stomach flip. And wondered when confrontation had become the expected norm between them.

"I don't like it any more than you do, you know?" Adam said tenderly. Honestly.

"I know."

"Good. Well, that's a relief." Adam smiled fondly and ruffled his brother's soft hair. "You up to this?"

Daniel didn't answer right away, his eyes darting beyond Adam's shoulder to the other bed and the brother who always had his back. Adam was confident that he could count on Crane in this moment too though. He only wished he could spare Crane from being blindsided. Crane might know how this story ended but he definitely didn't know everything and everything is what Daniel needed to hear.

When Daniel said, "Yeah, okay. Hang on," Adam sent Crane a silent thank-you.

And a silent apology.

Daniel rose up onto his elbows, shifting from prone to a more upright position allowing him to lean back against the headboard. He still looked beat but in his quiet, "Thanks," after Adam helped him situate his pillow, Adam heard a bit less resignation, if not a lot of conviction.

He'd take what he could get.

Now that he had his little brother's full attention, Adam found himself at a loss for words. He was going to tell Daniel something he'd vowed never to share with the younger ones. Hell, these were locked away memories that he'd never wanted to dredge up. But, for Daniel's sake, Adam had to bring them to light.

"Daniel," he started, his tone serious but gentle. "You've got every right to tell me I don't know how you feel, that I don't understand what you're going through. And you're right about that," Adam conceded. "But, even if I can't pretend to understand, I can tell you I know how it feels to be eighteen and to have the rug pulled out from under you so hard that you believe the life you'd planned, the one you'd hoped for is over."

"Adam—"

Damn. After nearly a decade, Adam had thought he'd have been able to keep his voice from betraying the strain he'd been under back then. Daniel was a sensitive kid and most certainly wasn't oblivious to the hardships that his elder brothers had endured. Even so, never in a million years did Adam ever want to hear Daniel speak his name like that; not with that much sympathy.

"It's okay; let me say this, all right?"
At Daniel's nod, Adam continued. "I know you're scared, kiddo. And the reason I know is because I was too," he admitted, knowing it would curb any denials from Daniel. "All of a sudden I had six kids to raise and a ranch to run and, at times I didn't know how I was going to get us through the day, let alone the next month."

As hard as this admission was, Adam knew the hardest parts were still to come. Reaching out, he lifted Daniel's chin, making sure he had eye contact before he carried on. "I was drowning and pulling you all under with me… too stubborn, too afraid I'd be letting down Mom and Dad to ask for help or even accept it when it was offered."

"Oh, Adam…They never would've expected you to do it all by yourself." Daniel latched onto Adam's wrist. Squeezing it, he added, "And you gotta know they'd be proud of you."

Adam wondered if the lump in his throat could get any larger. Those words meant a lot to him, especially coming from the brother he fought with most. It wasn't that Adam didn't believe in them. With the benefit of hindsight, he was pretty confident his folks would've felt he'd done all right by them. And the boys.

But, in those first weeks and months… Adam shook his head. He'd had some mighty bleak thoughts. Still feeling their weight almost a decade later, the self-recrimination came out in his voice when he confessed, "Not if they'd known I almost gave up. That I felt so useless and desperate I actually considered letting CFS win… and find you new homes."

"What?" That came from Crane, the shocked tone exactly what Adam had expected from him when he'd started this tale. Though Crane had known at a too young age about the ranch's financial struggles, Adam and Brian had kept the specter of the Department of Social Services breathing down their necks away from him.

Briefly turning his attention away from a bewildered looking Daniel, Adam focused on Crane sitting on the edge of his bed, anger and betrayal in his face, hurt filling his eyes.

Swallowing down the bile suddenly churning in his gut, Adam held Crane's wounded gaze long enough to whisper a strained, "I know… I'm sorry," before turning back to meet Daniel's huge eyes. "I started to think what CFS was telling me was right, that there were better homes out there than the disaster I had to offer you boys."

"CFS? I don't—" Daniel looked to Crane, no doubt for answers, but Adam knew the kid's closest brother would have none. Crane was sitting there blankly, shaking his head, long tented fingers covering his face.

Without a response from Crane, Daniel's piercing gaze found Adam's guilty one. "I don't understand."

It was no wonder, Adam thought bitterly as he began his feeble attempt at an explanation… How, at eighteen and as legal next of kin, he'd automatically gained custody of his brothers. Until Children and Family Services had come sniffing around and found him severely lacking. And they'd damn near convinced him of it too. After all, the house had been in a constant state of ruin and Adam had fallen behind on bill payments. On everything. Brian had missed too many classes and, where the little ones were concerned, any missed school had been considered too much missed school by the case workers. In no time they were talking about stepping in on behalf of the State and Adam had never been more scared in his life.

At least not until he'd had to say yes to putting his little brother into a coma.

"God, Adam… how did you fight them?"
Daniel sounded horrified, which was exactly why Adam had sworn never to tell any of the boys this story. He could only pray that what he revealed next would help Daniel instead of hurt him; that it would resonate with him and help the kid accept the inevitability of the fundraiser.

"With help," Adam answered succinctly before resuming his tale.

What Adam hadn't known back then was that, with the case-workers staying in Murphys, the town had gotten wind of what was going on. In no time he'd been summoned to Tom and Carey's place for a meeting. Marie, Walt, Ben and Noreen, Silas and Emma, hell half the county had shown up there and they'd presented Adam with a solution. A life-line. Along with enough precooked meals to fill their freezer, their friends and neighbors had given him a schedule and a list of names...who would babysit Guthrie during the day, who'd watch the kids after school, who'd help with house-keeping and who'd help with the next roundup.

"They even found someone to represent me in court – pro bono," Adam said with a hint of the wonder he felt back then.

"Dave Schiller's dad?" Crane asked; interrupting Adam's story and pulling him back into the present.

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

Crane smiled warmly, shaking his head. "Back when Dave first met with me in jail… he'd said something about it being a family tradition." Crane chuckled softly. "I never understood what he meant by that."

Having Dave's father, Dieter Schiller, in his corner had definitely been a blessing, Adam remembered fondly. He had figured that out eventually. Once he'd finally removed his head from his ass.

Daniel sunk back deeply into his pillow, a heavy sigh accompanying the move. Despite his rapt attention on Adam, he was definitely struggling to stay awake. That didn't prevent him from commenting though. "That was pretty awesome," he marveled, clearly moved by the generosity of their family's friends and neighbors.

Good. That was exactly the reaction Adam was hoping for.

The kid was going to be less impressed with what Adam had to say next though.

"Yeah, it was," Adam agreed. "Except instead of being grateful, I was pissed." Raising his hand to forestall Daniel's protest, Adam continued. "I know, I know. But I was stubborn and full of pride and had this stupid notion in my head that accepting help would make me less of a man."

Adam watched as Daniel's contented face registered his words and abruptly transformed into a scowl. The light-bulb was coming on and, like his mule-headed oldest brother before him; Daniel wasn't particularly enjoying the life lesson. But at least he was taking it in.

"Daniel, I almost let pride get in the way of this family staying together and, if Brian hadn't reminded me that the reason Mom and Dad moved up here in the first place was to raise us in a place with good people who cared and actually looked out for one another... well... I don't even want to think about the alternative."

Daniel stayed silent for a moment, his lips pursed in obvious thought. They parted with a question. "So that's why you agreed to this fundraiser?"

Bingo.
Adam reached for Daniel, cupping the kid's jawline and resting his palm there. He waited until their eyes met before answering, "It took me a while to figure it out but, yeah… I realized that sometimes bein' a man means just knowing when to say yes to help. And then actually saying it."

Daniel shut his eyes and swallowed hard, and Adam felt an almost imperceptible nod against his hand.

And there endeth the lesson.

The weight grew heavier in Adam's hold and he realized the poor kid was barely hanging on to the last tendrils of his consciousness. "All right, time to call it a night." Adam took to his feet at his pronouncement but bent low to support Daniel's neck, adjusting the pillow beneath him. "Lay down," he gently commanded and, without argument, Daniel complied. But, when Adam began to pull away, Daniel latched onto him again, a question unmistakable in his eyes.

"Am I gonna have to be there?"

Adam paused and then, tucking a leg underneath him, his butt found the kid's bed once again. The apprehension he could hear told him Daniel already knew the answer but Adam wasn't going to force him. "I won't make you go but, I'm betting that if you think about it you'll agree that you should."

"Yeah," Daniel sighed.

"Yeah."

Daniel closed his eyes, a lone tear trailing into his hair as he sighed deeply. Adam gently brushed it away and stayed where he was. His gut was telling him that Daniel wasn't finished with him yet.

He wasn't surprised then when dark lashes fluttered open once again and sought out his face.

"Adam?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm glad you said yes."

Knowing full well the boy wasn't referring to the fundraiser, Adam blinked against a rush of hot tears. "Me too, Danny," he managed to slip past the lump in his throat. "More than you'll ever know."

Within seconds, Daniel's eyes closed once again, his breaths evening out into the steady rhythm of sleep this time. Adam tucked the blanket under the kid's chin before allowing his fingertips to travel and lightly brush against the soft fringe of hair growing where it once had been shaved off. Remembering a time when a kiss from big brother could chase away all of Daniel's hurts, Adam manfully resisted the urge to kiss him there.

Until he couldn't. To hell with it, he'd risk the black eye.

"You just took your life in your own hands; you realize that, don't you?" The comment startled Adam but he managed to pull away from Daniel without disturbing him. Though it was a smart-ass thing to say, the sparkle of tears reflected in Crane's eyes told Adam how Crane really felt. How moved he was.
So caught up in those last few minutes with Daniel, the eldest McFadden had actually forgotten that Crane had been there too. Had heard everything. And with so much responsibility having been dumped on his shoulders back then, Crane had to be feeling hurt and let down. Now that he knew the awful truth of Adam's deception and near betrayal.

"Hey," Adam said carefully. "You okay?"

Ignoring the question, Crane responded with, "That was quite the bedtime story." And Adam could find no condemnation, only gratitude in his brother's warm smile.

The relief Adam felt was immense. "Yeah, well, he needed to hear it."

"He did," Crane agreed. "Thanks."

Another response with a dual meaning. Adam didn't really know how to react to being praised for not making the worst decision of his life though, so he turned his attention back to Daniel, sleeping soundly now. He couldn't help but smile.

"He's out; was fighting going under all along…You think he's even gonna remember any of this?"

Crane's laugh, cut short as it was, sounded conspicuously like a sob. "Are you kidding me?" He said incredulously. "His big brother just bared his soul to him..." and all Adam could see was approval in Crane's smile, and hear in his tone. "What do you think?"

God, Adam hoped so. He wasn't up to anymore fights with this kid. Prayed this would be the last one for a long time; about the fundraiser or anything else.

Like Daniel's career choice.

Shit; where did that come from, Adam thought guiltily. He wasn't proud of the relief he harbored deep inside about Daniel's aborted music career. Still, it was there. Shaking off his unsavory thoughts, Adam decided he'd had more than enough of this horrible day. He was exhausted too – emotionally and physically. It was definitely time to crawl into bed and curl up with his beautiful wife.

Shrugging off Crane's question, he instead told him to follow Daniel's lead and get some sleep.

Tomorrow simply had to be a better day.

_to be continued._
"Wind's pickin' up."

That must have been at least the third or fourth time Ford had heard Daniel comment on the weather in the last fifteen minutes. Ford wasn't the only one to have noticed Daniel's fixation either given the conspiratorial wink he just saw Crane throw Hannah's way while their middle brother peered out the front window.

Again.

The focus of Daniel's concern was clearly Steve Fletcher, whose dad had yet to pick him up after work like he'd been doing daily for the last two weeks. Ford wasn't sure of the arrangement between Adam and Steve's father but so far the BHU High senior hadn't stepped foot in the McFadden house since he'd started working at the ranch.

Adam had ordered Ford and his brothers to keep it civil between them and Steve and they were carrying out those orders. For the most part. Ford had noticed Steve limping one day last week and though, to the kid's credit he'd said he'd let himself get stepped on by a horse, Ford had his doubts. He'd put money on Evan being behind it. He'd considered Brian as the likely culprit but only briefly. Adam had made the issue of their age difference crystal clear after all. Besides, since Brian was in charge of telling Steve what to do, he could take out any animosity he held by giving him the most unsavory tasks to do. Like making Steve clean out their chicken coop, muck stalls and shovel every type of manure the Circle-Bar-Seven had to offer. Heck, the only crap Ford had cleaned off his boots since Steve had started working there was from the cow patty he'd accidentally stepped in the other day. A guy could get used to that, he thought smugly.

The house was off limits to Steve though. Because Daniel was off limits to Steve. It was still where Daniel was spending his afternoons once he got home from school. If not doing rehab with Gregg, just resting. Something Ford knew was because of how hard his brother was pushing himself and not just the meds he was still taking. Oddly though, Ford didn't sense any hostility between the two seniors anymore whenever their paths crossed. And when Steve asked how Daniel was doing, which was pretty frequently come to think of it, his concern always seemed genuine. As was the guilt and worry clouding his features when one of them answered honestly, usually with how tired Daniel was.

That Daniel right now was fretting about Steve sitting huddled on their porch swing was a sign of his change in attitude too. At least that's what Ford thought.

He could sort of understand why, where tonight was concerned anyway. To go along with the wind that was presently whipping through the trees and reminding them that spring hadn't quite settled in yet, the temperature had dipped pretty quickly. The jacket Steve was wearing had been fine for working during the day. But, with the sun going down, the weather changing, and Steve not doing anything but sitting there, he was probably freezing his butt off right now. Ford figured that the least one of their family could do was offer the guy some warmer gloves and a hat.

"I'm goin' out."

Apparently great minds thought alike. And, given the defiance in Daniel's tone, he wasn't looking for permission. Putting on his red down-filled jacket, Daniel grabbed two pairs of gloves along with a couple of hats and slipped out the front door.
"You," Crane said, addressing Ford. "Go chaperone." Hannah laughed, well kind of snorted actually, and Ford couldn't help but wonder about this silent exchange between his sister-in-law and Crane too. It was pretty obvious that those two didn't think Steve was a threat to Daniel anymore. Adam hadn't changed the rules though as far as Ford knew so he kind of understood why Crane wanted someone out there to supervise.

Still, he wasn't entirely enthused about going back outside in that worsening weather. He'd finished his chores after all. "Why me?"

"Because I said so," Crane said matter-of-factly. "Besides, Evan and I intimidate Steve," he added before swatting a gloating Evan in the arm; the one he was presently flexing in a comical impersonation of either a circus strongman or the Incredible Hulk.

Problem was Ford couldn't exactly argue with Crane. Despite the apology Evan had told Ford he'd received from Steve the first day he'd started working there, Ford knew Evan was still pissed with him. Daniel's seizure had scared the crap out of him and, like Adam, Evan's instinctual reaction to fear was anger. Ford vividly remembered the murder in Evan's eyes when he'd gone after Steve while Daniel was still in the throes of his seizure. It was going to take more than a couple of weeks of hard work and an apology for Evan to get over that.

And though Crane was a gentle soul, Steve didn't know that. He was older and bigger than Steve, and his protective streak, especially when it came to Daniel right now, was about a mile wide. Even Ford had been a little shocked when he'd witnessed Crane lose his cool and manhandle Steve that day. Then again, maybe he shouldn't have been. Crane was a McFadden after all. Ford smiled at that, though he knew he shouldn't. Knew it was wrong to hope that maybe someday he'd actually be able to intimidate someone anywhere other than with his report card and test scores.

He had no hope of getting out of going outside though. Brian and Adam weren't back from their supply run into town and Hannah was making dinner. He couldn't very well expect Guthrie to go out there and baby-sit. Resigned, Ford sighed. "Fine, but if I get my nose bloodied again, it'll be on your heads."

By the time Ford put on his warmer gear and trudged out the door, Steve was already putting on the gloves Ford assumed Daniel had handed him.

"Don't mention it," Daniel shrugged, presumably in response to a thank-you. Steve was standing now, opposite Daniel who was leaning casually against the porch railing. At Ford's arrival, Daniel looked at him inquisitively before frowning. "Our chaperone," he smirked, hiking a shoulder in Ford's direction.

"Hey, it wasn't my idea."

"Surprised they picked you," Steve tossed out and then, seemingly mortified by what he'd just said; he cursed faintly, dropping his gaze to the porch's plank flooring. "Sorry, man."

It was meant to be a joke, Ford was sure. After all, the irony of choosing him to supervise this encounter, when the last time the three of them had been together had ended so disastrously, wasn't exactly lost on him. But Steve cracking a joke about it? Well, that was just wrong.

That suicidal protective instinct he'd felt at school was kicking in again and Ford felt the urge to tell off Steve once again. Except Daniel seemed to think what he'd said was hilarious, grinning in a way Ford hadn't seen in far too long. He ended up giving Daniel a dirty look instead.

"What?" Daniel asked innocently. "He's got a point."
It must’ve been the approval or more likely the outright amusement in Daniel's tone that brought Steve's head up. Ford watched sourly as their gazes met and held, feeling neither amused nor appreciative when the two supposed rivals started to crack up into a fit of completely inappropriate laughter.

"Better me than Evan or Crane," Ford snapped, feeling smugly satisfied when Steve's laughter abruptly stopped and the taller teen appeared to shrink before his eyes.

This time Daniel threw Ford a dirty look.

"Okay, I gotta admit Evan's got a hell of a temper when he gets going, but Crane? Come on… he's just a pussy-cat," he said reassuringly, so typically Daniel as he tried to smooth things over.

With the kid who'd called him a retard and put him in the hospital, Ford thought bitterly.

"Crane?" Steve scoffed. Raising a hand a couple of inches over his head, he added, "Bearded guy, about yea tall, with steely eyes…” he shuddered exaggeratedly. "Riiiiight, there's nothing scary about him at all."

Daniel laughed incredulously and Ford realized that his brother probably had no recollection of Crane going after Steve at school. Daniel had been on the ground after all, with Ford doing everything in his utmost to keep him there. Besides, since it had happened right before he'd begun to show any outward signs of the seizure, his brain had likely already been starting to misfire. Whatever the case, Daniel hadn't witnessed Crane shake Steve like a ragdoll; hadn't witnessed that protectiveness at its fiercest. Ford wished he'd had. Then maybe he'd believe he was deserving of it.

Ford found himself exchanging a glance with Steve, shrugging when the kid looked at him questioningly, maybe even a little worriedly. Ford wasn't about to explain Daniel's memory issues to Steve though, nor was he going to tell Daniel what had happened between Crane and Steve right in front of the guy.

With Ford and Steve remaining somber, Daniel's laughter trickled off and what remained amongst the three of them was a pretty uncomfortable silence. Surprisingly, it was Steve who broke it.

"You know, I get it," he said seemingly randomly before continuing, "I mean… if anyone tried anything with my brother, especially if he was already hurt, I'd…” He trailed off then, perhaps caught up in his own thoughts or simply thrown off by the shocked expression Daniel wore. The same one Ford was mirroring.

"You have a brother?" Daniel asked; voicing the question before Ford had the chance.

"Yeah," Steve answered with a grin. "A younger one – Billy. He's thirteen now," Steve added, sounding a little amazed at that fact. He carried on though, leaning back to rest against the house. Even under the porch lights, Ford could tell his eyes were shining with affection the same way Ford's big brothers' eyes lit up whenever they spoke about their younger siblings. "He's about Guthrie's size, though his feet aren't nearly as big," Steve added somewhat sheepishly.

The comment seemed to come from out of left field until Ford realized Steve had absently hiked a knee and was rubbing his hand against his shin. It dawned on Ford then just who had been responsible for Steve's limp last week. He wasn't sure what had motivated Steve not to rat out Guthrie; whether it had been his own embarrassment or to save him from punishment?

With the realization, Ford must've gasped or reacted in some overt way because Steve caught Ford's eye and shook his head. Daniel missed their silent exchange and that worked just fine for
Ford. Last thing Daniel needed to hear was that their baby brother had acted out, apparently violently, on his behalf.

Deciding to change the subject, not to mention genuinely curious, Ford asked, "Doesn't he go to Michelson?" Grant it, a new little kid starting school back when Ford had been starting eighth grade might've easily gone unnoticed. Except, "Guthrie never mentioned any new kids when you moved here?"

Steve sighed then and Ford couldn't help but wonder what he'd said to wipe that warm smile off of Steve's face.

He soon found out, Steve being surprisingly open about his parents' divorce when he was eleven and Billy only six.

The wind had died down some, allowing for easier conversation as Steve told Ford and Daniel that they'd grown up in Alameda but, after the divorce, moved with their mom to Fresno.

Ford couldn't help but think of himself at Billy's age, losing both his parents. He didn't have strong memories of his mom and dad but he did remember the huge sense of loss. Though Steve and Billy's folks were both still alive, the separation from their dad must've been hard. But at least, like the McFaddens, the Fletcher brothers had each other.

Until they'd been separated too.

"She kicked you out?" Daniel asked disbelievingly, after Steve explained that soon after his mom had remarried, he'd had to move in with his dad. It had been the summer before junior year and Steve and his dad had ended up relocating to Murphys. "That's harsh, man."

Surprisingly, Steve was quick to defend his mom. "No, no. I'd gotten really out of hand. Trouble at school, with the cops… drugs," he barely whispered, crossing his arms and practically hugging himself. "You know, same old, same old," he said, laughing humorlessly, and Ford could hear the regret in his voice.

Steve and his friends were pretty well known as the stoners in school so Ford had to admit he didn't expect to hear the level of remorse that was coming from the guy. If he was being honest with himself though, Ford never would've guessed Steve had any depth at all.

"That still must've hurt though… pissed you off too?" Daniel asked softly, absent of any judgment and with the compassion and all that depth of emotion Ford was used to hearing from his brother.

*The same compassion that allowed him to forgive an old drunk for stealing both his savings and even one of his songs –*

"Yeah," Steve admitted finally. "I was pretty angry for a while."

– or maybe forgive a troubled schoolmate for taking out his anger on the popular classmate whose family of brothers couldn't be separated, not even by the deaths of their parents.

Ford had learned at a young age that one of the advantages of being the quiet one in the family was his ability to disappear, to be forgotten, while actually still present. To go unnoticed while his older brothers discussed everything from the price of cattle feed to when Brian last got laid. To listen to Daniel write music without becoming a distraction and to even learn more about his brother's brain damage, his treatment and recovery, than Adam ever would have knowingly shared.

Or to bear witness to two seemingly polar opposites bond over everything from kid brothers, to
fixing up cars, and to the unappealing but inevitable reality of them both having to attend summer school before either of them could graduate this year.

"I wish it would've helped," Daniel said in response to Steve's gratitude toward Daniel for trying to prevent him from being expelled. Apparently Daniel, no doubt with Crane's help, had written a letter to the School Board on Steve's behalf before his expulsion hearing.

Something that he'd managed to keep from Ford and the rest of the family, as far as Ford knew. He sure had mixed emotions about that. He was awfully surprised that Daniel had gone to that effort last week. After all, Ford was certain Daniel hadn't known any of Steve's history or this more sympathetic side of him until now.

"Nah, man, it actually did," Steve insisted. "At least they're letting me back for the summer."

"Yeah, but you'll miss Homecoming and—"

Steve's snort cut Daniel short. "Jesus, McFadden, do you honestly picture me at Homecoming? That's your scene, man, not mine," he said flippantly.

Daniel didn't seem to mind Steve's tone at all. It didn't derail his thoughts either. "Yeah, but what about your friends?"

"What friends?" Steve scoffed. "Not even those lame-asses I was hanging with want anything to do with the guy who hospitalized the school—"

Though this time Steve cut himself off, it was Daniel who filled in the blank: "Retard."

Appalled that Daniel was referring to himself in that way, Ford decided it was high time to surface again. "Daniel! Don't say that!" he admonished him, crossing over into Daniel's space as he did so.

Surprisingly, Steve followed and Ford found himself standing shoulder to shoulder with him. "For your information," Steve said, his tone soft but still with a little bite. "I was going to say the school's "Golden Boy"."

This time it was Daniel who snorted derisively. "More like the school freak."

"Daniel, that's not true," Ford scolded him once again, though without as much force. He knew Daniel was referring to more than the spectacle of his seizure but Ford was at a loss as to how to help him. To help him see that he was an inspiration and nowhere near a freak to a lot of people. Including his fifteen year-old brother.

"Yeah, well, join the club," Steve said, ignoring Ford's comment and moving to lean back against the railing beside Daniel. For some reason, the absence of objections or denials from Steve actually made Daniel smile. Just a little.

They stood side by side like that for a few minutes, the silence more companionable than before, though this time it was Daniel who broke it. Bumping elbows with Steve, he changed the subject. "So, when are we gonna meet Billy? You should bring him up here," he suggested, genuine enthusiasm in his voice. "Does he ride? I—uh—I mean—one of the guys could teach him."

"Yeah, he rides," Steve replied, his nose crinkling with disdain when he added, "Though my mom's got him learning English." Despite the fact that darkness had fallen, he turned around and looked out over the yard and beyond. Returning his attention to Daniel he continued, "He'd love it up here, thanks."
"No problem, man," Daniel said, smiling, his teeth shining bright in the porch-light. And Ford couldn't help but smile too.

Any further conversation was interrupted by the sound of tires rumbling over gravel and the brilliance of headlights bobbing in the darkness along their drive.

"Looks like you're gonna meet him sooner than you thought," Steve said cheerfully, lightly clapping Daniel on the arm.

As it turned out, Edgar Fletcher was late because he'd picked up Billy to bring him home for the weekend. And Steve had known all along that his father would be running this late, due to that considerable side-trip.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Daniel chastised him. "Crane could've driven you home to meet them there." Steve raised his eyebrows at that and Daniel blew out an exasperated breath. "Oh, for God's sake, he really doesn't bite, you know. Besides, it would've saved you a couple hours of freezing your ass off out here."

"I didn't want to put anyone out," Steve replied and Ford honestly believed him. "Anyway, this wasn't so bad," he added softly, and Ford could've sworn Steve's ears were now blazing red under the incandescent lights.

Any response from Ford or Daniel was lost as Mr. Fletcher pulled up in front of their gate. And as the passenger door swung open, it was accompanied by a gleeful shout that would've rivaled any one of Guthrie's.

"Stevie!" The youthful voice called out.

And, as Steve bounded down the steps to hoist his little brother up into a big hug, Daniel and Ford exchanged amused glances. Breaking into stupid grins and outright laughter when Ford finally uttered, "Stevie?"

"Up here, Hannah?" Steve asked; a large newly dried platter in his hold as he indicated the uppermost shelf of the cupboard he'd just opened.

"That's the one," She said with an approving smile and Crane leaned back in his chair, sharing a smirk with Brian sitting across the table from him. Crane couldn't quite decide if Steve was an Eddie Haskel impersonator or a Richie Cunningham in the making but, either way, Hannah was benefiting from the kid's show of good manners. Besides, it saved Crane from having to dry and put away the dishes, so more power to him.

Crane had to admit that, notwithstanding his first encounter with Steve Fletcher, he was surprisingly leaning toward the Richie Cunningham analogy. He had his reasons. Both Daniel and Ford had offered some recent insights and though Steve still seemed to avoid Crane like the plague, Crane was nothing if not observant. Of course it didn't take Sherlock Holmes' legendary powers of observation to see that Steve was looking out for Daniel these days. That bought him a hell of a lot of good will in Crane's book.

Case in point the fact that Steve had summarily dismissed Daniel's offer to help wash and dry the dishes tonight with a casual, "Sit down before you fall down, McFadden; I've got it."

That Daniel didn't seem to take offense delighted Crane. For the most part, when the family drew attention to Daniel's perpetual fatigue, he'd accuse them of hovering or coddling him. Even Crane sometimes, despite their pact. It was usually when Daniel was frustrated with how his therapy had
gone through so Crane never took it personally.

Business had taken Ed Fletcher to Sacramento today so, knowing he wouldn't be expected back until fairly late, he'd left Steve the Range Rover and had taken a rental. Daniel had made that fact known early on in the week, along with his opinion of Adam's "no Steve in the house" rule. Crane had to agree that it had become pretty redundant, if not Daniel's word for it – asinine. Especially considering how much time Daniel and Steve were spending together outside of the house. There was no question that they were becoming friends; hanging out together typically from the time Steve finished up with his chores until his dad would come by to pick him up. Unless Daniel was crashed on the couch, like he was right now.

And so, eventually, Adam had relented. So now, not only was Steve welcome in the house, once Hannah realized Steve would be fending for himself tonight, she'd insisted he stay for dinner.

Steve had initially declined, claiming he was used to his dad's irregular work schedule and eating on his own. Of course he hadn't realized those words had fated him to Hannah's maternal proclivities. Not that that was a bad thing. She'd even baked two pies today.

Crane knew that Steve's welcome was being met with varying degrees of approval. Adam was keeping pretty tight-lipped about it, seemingly okay with the burgeoning friendship but ever watchful of it as well. And demanding the same of the other McFaddens of course, insisting that they step in at any sign of trouble between the two teenagers.

Despite the hostility he maintained over the incident at school, Brian was warming up to the kid. Grudgingly admitting that Steve was a hard and willing worker, especially for a kid born of privilege. Or, as he put it… with a silver spoon up his ass. Hannah too, though protective of her adopted brood, she couldn't seem to fight those maternal instincts. Even though Steve's mom was very much alive, once Adam's bride had found out that Steve's folks were divorced and Ed had custody, she'd started mothering him too. Crane was certain Daniel's acceptance of Steve had been the catalyst though. If the two boys hadn't been getting along so well, no way would she have tried to stuff him with all that food tonight.

Much like Hannah, Guthrie was following Daniel's lead. And Ford was too. Thanks in large part Crane knew from that night he'd sent Ford out to supervise Daniel and Steve's first real encounter since the Fletchers had arrived on their doorstep. Though Crane had only an inkling of what had happened that night, bread had definitely been broken between the three boys.

Evan was another story. He hadn't forgiven Steve at all and though he was keeping his opinions from Daniel and the impressionable Guthrie, the rest of the family knew exactly how he felt. Their fiery cowboy just didn't understand the growing friendship between Steve and Daniel. And he definitely didn't approve.

Along with perhaps Ford, Crane understood more than any of them that this friendship wasn't as unlikely as it seemed. From the moment Daniel had started back to school, he'd felt like an outsider. And Crane's good-hearted kid brother was still feeling some of the burden of responsibility for Steve being seen as an outcast now too. Crane didn't agree, but he could see Daniel's point of view. Especially after Daniel had confided some of Steve's background with him. Crane didn't need the introductory Psych course he'd taken at Davis to recognize that two kids who were hurt and angry due to forces beyond their control could find a bond like this.

Crane's initial concern had been that their anger might be taken out against each other, which was no doubt what had happened that fateful day at school. It didn't seem very likely now though. The two seemed good for each other and Crane was confident that Steve wasn't holding any animosity toward Daniel for having to work at the ranch or for his suspension from school. In fact, Daniel had even passed on Steve's thanks about the letter to the Board that they'd worked on together.
More importantly, Daniel had shared Steve's apparent admission that the incident between them had actually helped Steve with his relationship with his father. Edgar coming home every night to pick up Steve, where in the past he'd often stay overnight in Sacramento or San Francisco, was forcing them to spend more time together. And talk. And they were working through their issues.

It wasn't only Steve profiting from their new friendship either. Daniel was benefiting from the lack of expectations that Steve offered him. With no history between them save from the fight they'd already worked past, Steve clearly expected nothing of Daniel except for the kid he was currently hanging around with.

It wasn't as though the family were making any actual demands of Daniel, except of course to not push himself too hard. Still, Crane knew that Daniel was pressuring himself to get back to one hundred percent. If not with his music, which had its own set of issues and guilt, certainly with his chores and responsibilities to the ranch. Crane could see the guilt in Daniel's eyes every time the kid watched them ride off on horseback, or climb onto the tractor or, hell, even take the truck into town. The guilt was totally unwarranted and entirely self-inflicted, but very real for Daniel just the same.

"Okay, that's everything," Steve announced and Guthrie, who'd been helping him, let out an uncharacteristic – even for him – whoop.

"Yaaay," the boy exclaimed, excitedly dashing through the living area, waking Daniel in the process, and thudding up the stairs. "That means it's time for a jam!"

Grim-faced, Adam got up from his easy chair and called after him. "Guthrie, no!"

Seemingly oblivious to both Adam and the shocked silence that had suddenly shrouded the house, Guthrie continued his way up the stairs.

Shit, Crane thought, numbly taking to his feet. Guthrie was looking for their guitars. The ones that, like the small chunk of gold the boys had salvaged from the mine collapse, had been purposely hidden from Daniel's view in the weeks following his return from the hospital.

It dawned on Crane then that this dinner with Steve was the first they'd had with visitors since the cave-in. And that all those in the past had always included the McFadden brand of entertainment afterward.

Crap.

Exchanging a pained looked with Brian, Crane saw the expression of sick horror on Hannah's face and the twin looks of anger worn by Evan and Ford before he finally took in the sight of Daniel. His brother was standing now too and Crane caught the haunted eyes and ghostly pale face before the kid's gaze dropped to the floor.

"Daniel?" Steve asked; clearly bewildered. He'd made his way from the kitchen out to the dining table. The kid's eyes sought out Brian, undoubtedly for answers. But all Brian did was shake his head.

Daniel didn't respond either, just kept his head down and shook it slightly too.

Even though there were three brothers nearer to Daniel, it was Brian who moved in first. Making his way over, he placed a comforting hand on Daniel's shoulder. "Hey, you know he doesn't mean anything by it," he said soothingly.

"I know," Daniel replied quietly, visibly wincing as the youngest McFadden's boots could be
heard clomping on the floor above them. He took a deep fortifying breath and gave Hannah a half-hearted smile before locking devastated eyes with Crane. "I'm gonna go 'n check on Gibson," he said tremulously. Then, indicating the stairs, he looked beseechingly at Crane. Crane knew what his heartbroken little brother was asking of him... to break it to Guthrie that there'd be no family jam session tonight.

"Oh, honey, please don't leave," Hannah implored, her eyes filling.

"Daniel, stay." Adam spoke softly, tenderness in his tone as he approached their brother.

Though his heart ached that Daniel felt compelled to run, Crane wasn't going to try to stop him. After all, hadn't he just been thinking about how much pressure Daniel was feeling around here? "No, let him go," Crane softly disagreed. With eyes locked on Daniel's he gently told him, "It's okay; go on." His I'll take care of it left unsaid but understood.

"Comin', Steve?" Daniel asked; sounding a little more composed. Not waiting for a response, Daniel pulled away from Brian and grabbed his jacket from the closet, tossing Steve's over the banister before slipping out the front door.

"Is he all right?" Steve asked worriedly, and Crane was surprised to see that the kid was definitely addressing him.

"He's okay," Crane said, though his words didn't erase the concern from Steve's face. "Just keep him company, all right?"

Steve nodded – message received – and hurriedly followed Daniel out the door, snagging up his jacket as he all but ran past the stairs.

Just as Steve closed the door behind him, Guthrie made his grand reappearance at the top of the stairs, bounding back down them excitedly with two guitars in tow.

"Hey, where'd they go?" He asked, annoyance in his tone and a scowl overtaking his face.

"Adam—" Hannah warned, but she was too late. Though Crane knew Adam would never intentionally hurt their youngest, he cringed just thinking about the encounter the oblivious boy was about to have with the pissed off head of their family.

Crane moved in closer but Adam made it to their youngest first. Reaching for Guthrie as he rounded the bottom of the stairs, Adam grabbed him none too gently, high on each of his guitar laden arms.

"Guthrie, what on earth were you thinking? You know better than that?" Adam wasn't yelling but, between the condemnation and distress in his tone, there would be no question in Guthrie's mind that Adam was upset with him.

Swallowing hard, Guthrie looked around and surveyed the family, undoubtedly seeking out an ally. He came up empty. Evan and Ford were outright glaring at him and the others were mirroring the expression of deep disappointment Crane knew was plastered on his own face.

His lower lip beginning to quiver, Guthrie still managed to answer Adam with more than a hint of defiance. "But we always play music when company stays for dinner."

The boy's response certainly did nothing to save him. It just confirmed what Crane had suspected already. That Guthrie knew exactly why he was in trouble. And had likely known what he was doing – the line he was crossing – when he'd gone racing up those stairs. It wasn't normal for their baby brother to go looking for trouble like this though. Hell, like most of the McFadden brothers,
it tended to find him. So, to challenge Adam like he was doing right now? No, Crane thought. That wasn't Guthrie. There was definitely something deeper going on here.

With everyone still so focused on and justifiably worried about Daniel, giving any consideration to how the rest of their clan might be faring had become pretty much an afterthought. Including even the baby of the family. Hence, Evan's unsympathetic response. "But not since Daniel got hurt, Guthrie!"

"Yeah, but this is the first time we've had company since then." The quiet observation came from Brian, whose demeanor had softened, Crane supposed, once that realization had struck him too. Sure, Gregg had often joined them for lunch or a mid-afternoon snack, and a few of the neighbors had dropped by from time to time for coffee or a piece of Hannah's pie. But the McFaddens hadn't had anyone over for dinner since Jenny Barrett during her parents' short-lived second honeymoon. With Steve being the first, apparently Guthrie had hoped to make the most of it.

Adam sighed heavily, doubtless letting Brian's observation sink in. Releasing his hold on Guthrie, his hands remained in front of him in an obvious request for Guthrie to hand over the guitars. The boy reluctantly did so and Adam set them down carefully, leaning them against the back of the chair he'd vacated.

Crane watched as Adam looked to Hannah then, undoubtedly seeking the strength she always provided him. Or maybe he was just hoping to absorb some of the patience she seemed to have in abundance.

He was going to need it too since Guthrie had apparently chosen this night of all nights to pull out his pre-teen petulant card. "I don't see what the big deal is anyway." He was outright sulking now. Fortunately for the twelve year-old, his oldest brother didn't lose it on him like he could have. Apparently Hannah's patience surplus had spilled over into her husband. "C'mon now, Guthrie," he chided. "I know what you were trying to do here but having company isn't going to fix things. It's not going to make Daniel play."

"Guthrie, don't say that! That's just mean." The outburst came from Ford this time and Crane watched as Guthrie actually startled just a bit. Clearly not expecting a reprimand coming from his closest ally, their little brother's façade of self-righteous attitude began to show its first signs of crumbling. The poor little guy's eyes were full.

"Okay, cut it out." Crane stepped forward, deciding it was time to intervene before their youngest found himself verbally tarred and feathered. "How about we let Adam handle this, huh?"

"Thank-you," Adam replied, unable to hide the sarcastic undertone. Turning back to Guthrie, Adam planted his hands on the boy's small shoulders. "Guthrie, you're not being fair," he chastised. "Daniel is still Daniel. But he's also still healing." Squeezing his shoulders lightly, he added. "You know that… He can't play music right now."

Though Guthrie's eyes were threatening to spill over, rather than any hint of understanding, frustration and anger erupted from his lips. "He's not the same Daniel. He's not!" He actually shouted, pulling back from Adam, his small hands clenched in tight fists.

"Guthrie, that's enough." Crane instantly regretted his raised voice and Guthrie's wounded reaction. Hell, now even he was going after the little shit. He just couldn't help himself. Nobody was going to get away with disparaging Daniel and the enormous amount of effort he was putting into his recovery. Nobody. Not even their obviously hurting little brother. Guthrie was definitely
hurting though so Crane softened his tone. "C'mon, buddy. How can you honestly say that?"

Despite the tears now spilling down his cheeks, Guthrie's temper still flared. "Because!" He spat through a hiccupping sob. "I liked the old Daniel better."

"So did I, squirt."

Oh, hell… That came from Daniel.

Standing in the doorway between the kitchen and the table, Steve right behind him, they must've come back in through the mud room. How long he'd been standing there was anyone's guess. Going by the despondent look on Steve's face, it had been much too long.

It was Hannah who broke through the miserable pall that had followed Daniel's entrance. "Oh, sweetie. Are you all right?" She asked; deep concern etched on her pretty face.

It was no wonder she was worried, Daniel looked crushed. And so drained of color, Crane was afraid he was going to pass out right there in front of them. "Danny?" He said softly, joining Hannah as she made her way to his side. Crane lightly grasped the kid's elbow. "Kiddo?"

Daniel dropped his head briefly before meeting Crane's eyes with a completely unwarranted flash of guilt. He shrugged then, raising a hand slightly and jiggling what it held from side to side. The telltale sound of pills rattling around in plastic told Crane why Daniel had come back inside. He'd forgotten his evening meds. "Sorry," the kid whispered.

The room was so quiet; Crane could've heard the proverbial pin drop. It was no surprise then that Adam responded to Daniel's barely audible apology, his words echoing what Crane was thinking.

"Daniel, you don't have anything to apologize for," he said adamantly though his tone remained tender. Turning his attention to the boy quietly weeping in his hold, Adam continued more harshly, "But you, young man—".

And that was all it took to for Guthrie to fall apart.

"Adam, don't." Daniel came to Guthrie's defense, breaking free of the hold Hannah and Crane had on him. "Leave him alone," he said angrily. Crossing the room hastily, Daniel swooped in and pulled an unresisting Guthrie away from Adam and into a fierce hug.

Adam wisely didn't interfere.

"I'm sorry, Daniel. I didn't mean it," Guthrie choked out as Daniel, tears flowing freely now too, curled himself over and around his little brother and kissed the top of his head.

"I know that, baby brother. I know." Daniel tried to comfort him but Guthrie was inconsolable, consumed by sobs Crane was sure had been building for two months. Ever since the boy had witnessed Daniel being taken away in an ambulance.

As Guthrie cried in Daniel's hold, Crane slipped his arm around Hannah's waist and guided her over to her weeping boys. Adam held out his hand to her as she slipped out of Crane's grasp and the two of them wrapped the huddled together pair in their own loving embrace.

Crane held back despite how emotionally drained he was. He felt incredibly old and ridiculously tired but, when Brian swooped in along with Evan and Ford too, he knew he wouldn't be able to resist the inevitability of a McFadden family hug even if he wanted to. He moved to join in, only to be halted by the sound of a lightly clearing throat.
Shit, he'd forgotten about Steve. The teenager looked awfully broken up, his eyes bright with unshed tears. Crane felt awful and even a little embarrassed about Daniel's new friend having to witness such an incredibly private and emotional moment. He certainly didn't expect the younger Fletcher to be the one to offer up an apology.

"I'm sorry I caused this," he said, his voice rough.

"You didn't," Crane responded honestly. "I think it's been brewing for a long time now. You just happened to be the spark," he added sympathetically.

Steve didn't look convinced. "Yeah, well I think this spark better go."

"Yeah, you probably should," Crane said not at all unkindly. "You okay to drive?"

Steve nodded, smiling tightly. "I'm okay."

Crane smiled too. Resisting the urge to agree aloud, he lightly clapped the kid on the back. Escorting him toward the front door, Crane led him past the family as they began to separate into smaller clusters, juggling Daniel and Guthrie between them, still offering comfort to them both.

When Steve stopped just beyond them, Crane paused too, assuming the teen was looking through the tangle of arms, perhaps trying to get Daniel's attention. But instead Steve appeared to focus on the guitars still leaning abandoned against the chair Adam had vacated. Oddly, as intense as that gaze was, it vanished in an instant and Steve turned to Crane and quietly said, "Thank Hannah again for me; would you?"

Promising he would, Crane told Steve to drive carefully.

Canting his head back toward the family, Steve shook his head. "Just worry about them."

Suddenly feeling a genuine affection for this newest friend of Daniel's, Crane reached out and lightly patted his arm. "It's what I do."

"Yeah, so I've heard."

Crane laughed at that. Or maybe it came out more like a sob. Apparently his reputation had preceded him.

All the more reason to let Brian drag him into a hug with Guthrie and Daniel he prayed would be a catharsis not just for those two… but for the rest of the family too.

To be continued.
Chapter 14

There are a number of canon characters referenced in this chapter, including Daniel's country music idol from "Catch a Falling Star", Stormy Weathers (played by the late, great Levon Helm), and Charlie Lewis, the man who succeeds Buck Tanner as sheriff when Adam pulls out of "The Election" race. Speaking of "The Election", Jocko, the oversized thug who helped beat up Daniel and kidnap Crane, is also referred to here. In the episode he doesn't have a last name, so I've given him the same one as the actor who played him: Durock.

"Daniel?" Adam spoke softly, afraid he was going to spook the kid who already looked like he was ready to run. Daniel was standing, one arm wrapped around the back of the chair he'd been seated in while he and most of the adult contingent of the McFadden family had been having lunch. Brian was out working the north range with Steve and the younger kids were still in school. With Crane having picked up Daniel in town, there'd been only the four of them home when the phone had rung.

Adam had answered it, genuinely pleased when he'd heard the familiar Arkansas drawl coming from the other end of the line. He hadn't heard it in a while. It had been Hannah who'd tracked down Stormy in the aftermath of the mine collapse… to let him know what had happened to Daniel. And then again, a few weeks ago, to ask if he'd be willing to perform at the fundraiser. Not surprisingly, the country music star had jumped at being there, even to the point of insisting he'd have his manager reschedule a conflicting concert date. It warmed Adam's heart to know that Daniel meant so much to the man. And Stormy's affection and worry for the boy had shone through their telephone conversation, though with Daniel right there, eyes huge and full of hurt and fear, Adam couldn't say too much.

"D'you think he's up to talkin' to me this time?" Stormy'd asked, hope and concern easily reaching across the miles. Stormy'd had every right to his uncertainty. He'd called a number of times since Hannah had first broken the news to him and Daniel had declined talking to him each time, claiming he was too tired. Maybe next time. They all knew that Daniel just couldn't face a conversation with the singer – couldn't face hearing about the man's current tour or next album or interview. All topics that had come up between them during phone calls prior to The Howling Man disaster.

Worst of all, Adam was sure, was Daniel's fear that Stormy would ask him about his own music.

Things hadn't changed since Guthrie's ill-fated attempt to get Daniel playing guitar again. And though Adam knew that Daniel forgave their baby brother heart and soul for the hurtful things said in the heat of the boy's outburst, there was no doubt the words had cut deeply... reminding the eighteen year-old of his limitations and of dreams dashed too soon. It was no wonder that the kid just couldn't face Stormy; not even over a telephone line.

But he was going to have to deal with Stormy soon enough. The fundraiser was coming up fast and Stormy Weathers was the headliner. Better that they broke the ice now, Adam thought,
despite the anxiety he could see rolling in Daniel's eyes.

"Yeah, he's right here; hang on," Adam had answered Stormy, and immediately Daniel's eyes had flown to Adam, sparking anger and betrayal along with that all-too-familiar fear.

When Adam spoke his name, Daniel immediately looked to Hannah and Crane. Undoubtedly for rescue but instead all he got from Hannah was a gentle kiss on the top of his head and a comforting rub of the shoulder.

"He's coming all this way just for you," Crane said casually, though concern and sympathy were written all over his face. "The least you can do is say hi, don't you think?"

Outnumbered, Daniel released his white-knuckled grip on the chair and stepped forward to take the phone from Adam.

Curling the receiver into his chest to muffle the sound, Adam lightly grasped the back of Daniel's neck and pulled him in as well. "He understands," Adam assured him, believing that wholeheartedly. "He just wants to hear for himself that you're doing better."

Daniel nodded against Adam's shirt, before visibly steeling himself and accepting the handset. "Hey, Stormy," he spoke into it as he turned his back to the table, his voice barely above a whisper.

"No, I'm doin' a lot better… really." Daniel continued quietly, answering questions with 'goods' and 'fines' all the while Adam and Hannah and Crane, seated once again around the table, exchanged worried glances. Sure, they were outright eavesdropping but none of them were willing to leave. Daniel needed their support more than he needed the privacy.

It was Crane who stood up when Daniel's voice got shakier, a strained "No, Stormy, I can't," sounding like he'd reached his breaking point. He pulled himself together though and added, "You can do it," and then more assertively, "You sing it better 'n me, anyway."

Damn. They had to be talking about Long Gone Highway. The song Stormy had once borrowed from Daniel.

Perhaps looking for a lifeline, Daniel turned around to face the family again and Adam immediately saw the tears clinging to his lashes, threatening to spill. Adam stayed seated though, sending Hannah a supportive albeit tight smile as she fought gamely to control the tears mimicking Daniel's. Crane had moved in already, sliding in behind Daniel, the phone cord trapped in between them. Daniel didn't protest the hands resting on his shoulders but Adam honestly wasn't sure if Crane's support would bolster the kid or give him permission to let go. So he held his breath, praying for the former.

Daniel held up, or held on, his voice rough when he finally ended the call with, "I won't, I promise," followed by a slightly more enthusiastic, "See you soon, Storm." Without another word, he handed the phone off to Crane who returned it to its cradle blindly, his attention never wavering from Daniel.

"Hey, you okay?" Crane finally asked, though it was plain as day that Daniel was hurting.

Daniel shrugged his shoulders without breaking Crane's hold, gazed sorrowfully at Hannah and Adam before looking up to answer Crane. "He made me promise not to quit trying." He smiled a little self-consciously then, "told me… us musicians have to stick together… 'n that he believed in me."

Daniel's gaze fell to the floor then, likely a few shed tears along with it, even as Crane pulled him
Memories of Daniel standing up to him, fighting him over kicking Stormy to the curb came rushing back to Adam. We all need someone to believe in us... We turn our backs on him, the man's lost. It sure looked like Daniel's faith in that particular man had rubbed off and Stormy was trying to return the favor in kind. It made Adam proud. At the same time it made his heart ache.

"We all do, sweetheart," Hannah said sweetly, getting up from her chair to run a gentle caress across his cheek.

Daniel looked at Adam then. For confirmation or strength, Adam wasn't sure. He couldn't bring himself to say the words though. Tried to convince himself that it was just because he didn't want to pressure Daniel. The boy was already pushing too hard each and every day. Plus it was too soon after poor Guthrie's meltdown. So, instead Adam played his "Dad" card, and told him to go upstairs and get some rest. "I'll take Gregg out riding when he gets here." Before they did therapy instead of after, like usual.

Very obviously drained, and without any protest, Daniel acquiesced. "Yeah, okay," he said tiredly, absently tugging Crane along with him by his sleeve like he used to when they were little.

And Adam watched as his two brothers slowly made their way up the stairs, all the while traitorous thoughts assaulted his mind; a mantra repeating, he's not ready for the stage... and I don't want him to ever be.

"How much feed are we picking up?" Crane asked Daniel as he steered the old truck along the familiar road to Murphys. The question so normal, he had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from grinning.

Daniel was in the passenger seat; his window rolled all the way down, as was Crane's. Steve and Evan were in the bed behind them and it was a gorgeous day for a drive into town to pick up supplies. Though it was a Wednesday, with the rest of them being off thanks to a high school teachers' development day, Guthrie was the only McFadden in school. At that thought Crane finally did grin; the image of their youngest reluctantly trudging out alone to the school bus vividly coming back to him.

Pulling a list from his shirt pocket, Daniel answered, "A dozen bags," before looking at Crane. "What's so funny?" he asked, his lips automatically quirking too when their eyes met.

"Just thinking about poor, woebegone Guthrie this morning."

Daniel grinned too and Crane's heart felt lighter for it.

"It's not fair! Why do I always have to be the youngest?" Daniel suddenly wailed. He was doing an impeccable impression of the sulking Guthrie, pout included. And Crane found himself laughing so hard, the truck drifted onto the shoulder, tires kicking up gravel until he corrected his steering.

Jerking the truck back onto the pavement, he wasn't surprised to hear Evan's shout from the back. "Hey, watch it!"

"Sorry!" Crane called back to him, waving at the scowling visage of his brother reflected in the rearview. All the while still chuckling.

Ducking his shoulders he dared to glimpse at Daniel again, breaking into wholly inappropriate laughter once more as the kid shrugged and said, "Oops". 
It had been too long since he'd laughed like that with Daniel.

Their laughter died down as they continued along the road, a comfortable silence settling between them. At least until he caught his brother checking the mirror as well.

"Any progress back there?" Crane asked. He knew what held Daniel's interest. They'd put Steve and Evan in the back for a reason. In truth, with Daniel still recovering, there was no way he was going to be permitted to bounce around in the truck bed for weeks or even months to come. Crane wasn't about to tell Daniel that though. The kid hated that he was still being treated like spun glass. It was a hard habit for any of the McFaddens to break though, even if he was doing much better.

The warmer weather had contributed to Daniel finally getting back some much needed color. And the fresh air and sunshine of springtime were increasing his energy levels. A slight weight gain was helping him look and feel better too but he was still on all of his medications, reminding them all that Daniel hadn't fully healed. Yet.

Dr. Lee had tried weaning Daniel off his meds but, without them, his mood swings were still volatile and his balance was shot. Forgetfulness and headaches, especially when he was tired, were lingering issues too. But, the biggest single reminder that Daniel was still in recovery was the fact that Gregg was still coming by to help with his rehab and occupational therapy. For the most part, Daniel's fine motor skills appeared back to normal but, if he visually focused on whatever he was trying to do, like keeping his handwriting between the lines or reading music while he played piano, he'd still struggle. It was why Crane was certain Daniel still hadn't picked up the guitar again, even after Guthrie's "episode". Daniel would do anything within his power and beyond for Guthrie. Hell, that fateful night he'd rescued Jenny and the boys from the mine was proof of that. So, for Daniel to have not yet picked up a guitar? Well, that meant there was still quite a bit of healing left to be done.

As far as Daniel knew though, Steve and Evan were in the back for one reason only. To get them to kiss and makeup. Figuratively. And it was partially true. After listening to Daniel go on about Evan giving Steve the cold shoulder whenever he came around, Crane had decided he'd try to do something about it. Even if he understood where Evan was coming from.

Despite having just checked the rearview, Daniel twisted in the seat to look behind him before answering Crane.

"Nope, no progress. Steve's looking straight out the back and Evan's just sitting there like he's got a rod stuck up his ass," Daniel said bitingly.

"Hey, be nice," Crane chastised him, even if Daniel's comment did make him smirk just a little. "He's got his reasons."

Daniel's only response was an eye roll.

Crane was torn. He didn't want to bring up that day at school. Not only did the memory embarrass Daniel but it added more guilt to the load the kid was already stockpiling. But he was being unfair to Evan and had started to get a little too vocal about it lately. With that in mind, Crane decided he might just have to broach the subject. He'd try another tack first though.

"He also has a right to his own opinion."

"Yeah, well, his opinion's wrong," Daniel said sullenly.

So much for the other tack, Crane sighed. "Daniel, you need to understand something..." he started. "Watching you go through that seizure scared the hell out of Evan." Crane too, but that
was beside the point. "It's not something that's easy to forget."

"I'm sorry," Daniel said softly, that guilt Crane was afraid of engulfing those two simple words.

Crane dropped his hand to the kid's leg and gave it a squeeze. Left it there. "That was not your fault," he said, adamant. "Just realize that Evan felt helpless, powerless to do anything about it. And you know as well as I do that Evan doesn't do helpless."

Daniel snorted at that. "Who in this family does?"

"Touché."

Daniel actually laughed lightly and Crane would've breathed a sigh of relief but for the shift in tension he could feel in the taut muscles beneath his hand. Daniel had more to say.

"Crane, Steve didn't cause that seizure."

"No, he didn't," he agreed. Taking his eyes off the road long enough to look pointedly at Daniel, Crane added, "But he also had no business going after a kid everyone knew was seriously hurt."

Daniel shifted in the seat, effectively dislodging Crane's hand as he turned to face him. "You blaming him now too?"

Crane didn't answer and didn't look at Daniel. He just kept on driving. His brother knew full well that Crane didn't hold Steve responsible for the seizure. The kid's temper was flaring though, so there was no point in feeding its flame. Sure enough, after a few seconds, Crane heard Daniel sigh resignedly.

"Steve's my friend," he said softly. It was almost a plea.

"And Evan's your brother," Crane answered brusquely, not giving in to the emotion he could feel coming from Daniel in waves. The kid needed to hear this. "He loves you, all right. And he's gonna come around. Eventually. Just give him more time."

Evidently Daniel didn't have an answer for that. Settling back further into his seat, he crossed his arms and huffed out a harsh breath. And just sat there, watching the scenery go by. Allowing Crane's words to sink in, Crane hoped.

Apparently uncomfortable with the silence that had descended in the truck's cab, Daniel abruptly reached over and switched on the radio.

And Crane held his breath.

And eventually he held back his tears.

The radio was tuned to 92.7 out of Sonora which meant any one of the "of age" McFaddens, with the exception of Evan, had been last to drive the truck. The songs were a mixture of old and new pop ballads or light rock. Many of which would've been covered by Daniel, on stage or simply playing around on his guitar.

In the past.

It shouldn't have been a surprise then when the kid started softly singing along to *Into the Mystic* but hearing it stopped Crane's heart anyway. Though he'd walked in on Daniel recently a few times humming softly while he was brushing down Gibson or puttering around doing whatever light chores he'd been permitted to do, Crane hadn't heard his brother truly sing in months. And
despite how soft his vocals were right now, Daniel still sounded terrific.

Big brother didn't sing along with him like he would've so easily in the past. Afraid to draw attention to what the kid was doing so effortlessly. But, when *Take it Easy* came on and Daniel's volume increased enough to nearly drown out Glenn Frey, Daniel's eyes met Crane's and Crane read in them an open invitation to join him.

He did. Blinking back tears and choking out his first line and wishing Murphys was another three hundred miles down the road and not just a few more miles away.

His heart soared as they sang together, Crane sending silent thanks to the station's programmer for a play-list that contained so many favorite and familiar songs. Somewhere after the second chorus of *Running on Empty* though, Crane realized Daniel wasn't harmonizing with him anymore. Wasn't singing at all.

Damn.

Steeling himself, Crane looked at his little brother. The kid's head was down and his Adam's apple was bobbing and there was no doubt that Daniel was fighting back tears. And somehow Crane just knew that Jackson Browne singing, "*People need some reason to believe,*" had been the catalyst. Whether he was right or wrong didn't matter. What mattered was that this song, one that Daniel had sung so many times before, was causing him pain now.

Crane reached for the radio but Daniel placed his hand atop Crane's.

"You don't have to," he said softly.

Of course he had to, Daniel was hurting. Shutting off the music, Crane lowered his hand to rest on the seat between them, making sure Daniel's hand came with it. Interlocking their fingers, he held on, squeezing back when Daniel clasped even tighter.

They stayed that way, his thumb lightly brushing across Daniel's until they drove into Murphys and Daniel pulled away. The banner announcing Daniel's fundraiser, just ten days away now, seemingly floating in the light breeze as the truck crossed over its undulating shadow along Main Street.

For such a gorgeous morning, the sidewalks were nearly barren. Too soon for the lunch crowd, and after everyone else had already come in to work, Crane supposed.

"Let me off here," Daniel said suddenly, handing Crane his supply list and sounding a lot more composed than he probably was. Signaling, Crane pulled off to the side just beyond the pharmacy he knew was Daniel's intended destination. The kid had a ton of refills to pick-up.

Daniel practically bolted out the door and before Crane could tell Evan to go with him, Steve launched himself out of the back of the truck. He didn't blame the kid. Evan was probably still staring daggers at him.

It wasn't that Daniel needed a baby-sitter. But this was only the second time he'd come into town, aside from school or checkups with Doc Mayer, since coming home from the hospital. The previous time had been just last week and, according to Brian, it had been pretty overwhelming. Between the do-gooders and well-wishers, the kid had gotten way more attention than he'd expected. Certainly more than he'd wanted. He'd come home exhausted and in a pretty foul mood. It hadn't helped that everyone and their mother had brought up the fundraiser. Daniel may have come to accept its inevitability and was even humbled by his friends' and neighbors' outpouring of altruism, but that didn't mean he was happy about it.
Though Crane would've felt more comfortable if Evan had gone with Daniel, Steve would do. Besides, Crane had already worked on Daniel about giving Evan a break. Now it was Evan's turn.

"Meet us when you're done," Crane called after Daniel, who simply waved behind his back in acknowledgment and carried on along the sidewalk, Steve at his shoulder. Evan pounded on the side of the truck – a little too hard – signaling his current mood no doubt as much as he was letting Crane know he was ready for Crane to pull out. Crane did so, merging back into what little flow of traffic there was in Murphys on a weekday morning. Turning down Scott Street, he was pleased when he found a parking space right in front of the old building’s front door. Those feed bags were going to be heavy.

"I hear what you're saying, Crane," Evan said more than a little irritably. "But you just don't get it… Steve's been a jerk since the day he started school. Everyone knows that."

After picking up the odds and ends Brian had put on the list, Crane had decided that, while they loaded the feed they'd purchased into the back of the truck, he'd broach the controversial subject of Steve Fletcher. Unfortunately, he wasn't getting very far with his stubborn little brother.

For the record, he wasn't at all surprised either.

"I know that, Evan," Crane acknowledged, trying not to lose his patience. "You've told me; Ford's told me and, hell, even Daniel's told me that." Hoisting the bag off of his shoulder and into the truck bed, he wiped his gloved hands on his jeans before planting them on his hips. Frustrated, he sucked in a calming breath, deciding he'd have to try this from a different angle. "Isn't it enough that Daniel seems happier these days?"

Evan abruptly stopped what he was doing, the fifty pound bag landing with a thud at his feet instead of in the bed of the truck. He looked up at Crane then, eyes solemn, his youthful face etched with a gravity no kid his age should ever project. Especially not Evan. "I don't trust him, Crane," he said earnestly. "He's been trouble ever since he moved here and that trouble put Daniel in the hospital."

Crane wasn't about to argue the point. Evan was too upset. Still, Crane had inherited his share of the McFadden stubbornness gene too. "Evan, I know that seizure scared you." He hoped the understanding in his tone would buffer his words.

It didn't. Eyes flashing, Evan's head snapped up to meet Crane's gaze. It wasn't seventeen year-old bravado or the expected denial that came out in his response though. "Like it didn't freak you out?"

Crane smiled. Little brother was growing up. "Yeah, it did, kiddo. Of course," he admitted easily. Reaching out, Crane rested his palm against the juncture of the kid's neck and shoulder. "And I can guarantee it terrified Steve." Maybe enough to change him, Crane wanted to add but didn't.

If Evan was maturing enough to admit what scared him, he'd eventually come around to seeing the changes Daniel was seeing in Steve. Like Crane had told Daniel, he just needed more time.

But for Daniel's sake, Evan did need to cut back on the not-so-mature dirty looks he was constantly shooting Steve. "Okay, okay…I'll back off," Evan grudgingly promised after Crane told him exactly that.

"Atta boy," Crane said approvingly, as he heaved the last of the bags into the bed. Removing his gloves, he smacked Evan good naturedly with one of them while he added, "I know Hannah will appreciate it. It'll make meals with Steve a lot less intense."
"Speaking of," Evan replied. "Shouldn't they have caught up to us by now?"

Crane checked his watch, anxiety building in his chest when he realized nearly a half hour had passed since they'd separated from Daniel. Kelly's Drugs was never that busy. Besides, Hannah had called in advance, giving ample notice for them to at least get started on pulling together Daniel's bi-weekly supply of pills.

"Yeah, they should have," Crane answered; his mouth suddenly dry. He tried to keep his uneasiness from showing but he needn't have bothered.

Evan looked just as concerned as he closed up the tailgate, giving it that extra shove it always needed. His only response being a resolute, "Let's go," as he stepped up onto the walk.

The determined teenager was moving just short of a run; so much so that even Crane struggled to catch up with him. He eventually did though, walking even with Evan until the kid froze momentarily in his tracks. "Oh, crap."

They'd just reached the corner at Main and Scott when Crane looked up ahead to see what had prompted Evan's curse. And what had made him take off in a dead run.

"Shit."

Heart pounding, and not just from the exertion of his pursuit, Crane snagged Evan's jacket before he moved to cross the street.

Evan whirled on Crane. "What are you doing? Let go! Don't you know who that is?"

Crane knew exactly who it was that they'd seen disappearing into the alleyway next to the drug store. And the knowledge gave him chills. Even from a distance, there was no doubt it was Johnny Durock, defensive end for the Sonora Wildcats and son of Jocko Durock. The same Jocko who'd put a beating on Daniel when Adam had made his run for Sheriff. And who was currently spending time in Folsom State for his part in Buck Tanner and Ben Tobey's multitude of illegal enterprises.

Though Daniel hadn't been asked to testify; that detail apparently hadn't made an ounce of difference to Jocko's son. The nearly six and a half foot tall teen had taken out his animosity toward Daniel once already on the football field. His offside clothesline had literally knocked Daniel out of the game. The foul had been good for a game forfeiture plus a three game suspension. Unfortunately for Daniel though, that had only succeeded in fuelling Johnny's hatred toward BHU's running back.

"I know," Crane replied just as testily. "But if we go charging in there, we might provoke him," he tried to reason despite his own reservations about not diving in full throttle. "And Daniel's going to pay for it."

"How do we know he hasn't already?"

Crane didn't know. Hell, he couldn't even be sure Daniel was in that alley. But his gut told him that Daniel and Steve never catching up to them and Johnny's appearance outside Kelly's was more than mere coincidence. And that worried the hell out of him. "We don't," he snapped. Still gripping Evan's jacket, he started to walk, pulling his brother along with him. "Come on. But go easy."

Damn it, his gut was right.

Still across the street, they were now directly opposite the entrance to the alleyway. From what
Crane could tell, Johnny stood in front of Steve and Daniel, with two kids Crane didn't recognize flanking him. And he sure as hell didn't like those odds. He liked it even less that Daniel was only half standing, half sitting upon what appeared to be a big bin next to the building. From what he could make out, his brother was looking a little disheveled, like maybe someone had manhandled him. Or roughed him up. And Crane's heart thudded even more forcefully against his chest at the mere thought.

Now that they were closer, Crane could see that Steve was actually standing in front and a little to the side of Daniel. His arm blocking him, preventing him from getting up. That eased Crane's mind just a little. At least it looked like Daniel could get up.

But he prayed Daniel wouldn't.

When he thought he heard Steve say, "McFadden, keep your ass where it is," Crane knew it was time to cross over. Signaling Evan to work his way around the back of a delivery truck parked in front of the store, he quietly reminded him to approach with stealth. Crane would use the front of the truck for cover. If they needed to jump in to protect Daniel, Crane didn't want Johnny or his pals to see them coming until the last possible second. The other two weren't as big but Crane had no idea how loyal they were toward their ringleader. Or if their intentions were as malicious as he was certain Durock's were.

"Yeah, stay put, Danny-boy," Johnny sneered. Crane was so close now he could hear everything. "Who's your babysitter? Another one of your mother's bastards?"

Oh, crap.

Crane took a deep breath, ready to reveal himself when he saw Daniel lunge at Johnny. Steve was able to block him again though, this time placing himself directly in front of Daniel. And right in Johnny's path.

"I'm the guy you have to go through to get to him," Steve said evenly and Johnny laughed. Only it sounded a little nervous. Thanks to his size, he probably wasn't at all used to anyone standing up to him. Crane noted too with a hint of satisfaction that his cohorts were starting to look awfully uneasy. Good. Evan was in position now too. They were ready.

"Get out of my way, Fletcher."

Crane winced. That was Daniel. He'd known full well the kid would protest being kept out of the fray. Had just hoped he wouldn't. His brother was never one to let someone else fight his battles though.

Steve stood his ground. "You're on the disabled list, so shut up about it," he ground out, adding, "Doctor's orders, remember?" If the situation wasn't so damn volatile, Crane would've applauded. Steve definitely had balls taking on both Johnny and Daniel.

Daniel flinched, the words clearly stinging, and Crane was both surprised and immensely relieved to see Daniel resignedly give in. He was near enough now to see why though. Daniel was every bit as scared as he was pissed off. Crane could see it in his eyes; so dark and wide and wary. And he could see it in the muscle twitching beneath the kid's clenched jaw. Most worrisome were the tremors in the hands Daniel was running up and down his thighs. The nervous action wasn't unusual for Daniel but those tremors definitely were.

Every brotherly instinct Crane had was screaming at him to show himself. To let his brother know he was there and that he wasn't going to let anything happen to him. He knew, under normal circumstances, Daniel wouldn't back down from Johnny. But now that the memories of his last
fight and the resulting seizures were firmly ingrained in both of their minds, nothing about this
situation was normal. But despite all that, Crane couldn't risk Daniel inadvertently tipping off
Johnny or his pals. With Steve sandwiched between them, both boys were in harm's way. He just
had to wait for the right moment.

"Yeah, doctor's orders," Durock parroted; completely oblivious, thankfully. Then, visibly sizing
up Steve, he challenged him. "Do you honestly think we can't take you to get to him?"

"Nope," Steve answered dismissively. "But I can guarantee you're not going to get through them." Steve actually smirked when he made eye contact with Crane. And with Steve providing that
distraction, the moment had arrived.

"Hey, fellas," Crane said coolly, rounding the front of the truck and insinuating himself next to
Steve. But before he planted his feet and squared his stance to face Johnny, he made sure to catch
Daniel's eye. He saw the relief and gratitude there and wanted nothing more than to go to him.
Instead Crane only offered what he hoped was a confident nod. It was all he could do until this
standoff was diffused.

Johnny actually drew back just a little at Crane's arrival and Crane had to admit he enjoyed the
moment. It got even better when Evan joined them, his abrupt and stony-faced entrance startling
the kid to Johnny's right so badly, he promptly announced, "Fuck this. I'm out of here," and took
off down the street.

His fellow sidekick looked like he desperately wanted to leave too and it was probably only fear
of Johnny that was keeping him in place. Crane knew it would only be a matter of time before he
bolted too.

Good, Crane thought. Much better odds.

Johnny clearly wasn't happy about them, the range of emotions spilling over his face running the
gamut from confusion to anger to the current uneasiness practically flashing in neon. He was just
like his father, who'd cut a deal for a lighter sentence and rolled over on Tanner and Tobey.
Johnny was a bully. And one who'd no doubt piss himself the minute things didn't go his way.

And things were definitely not going his way.

Crane saw Charlie Lewis rolling up in his cruiser even before the Sheriff switched on his siren and
gave it a quick blast. Johnny jumped like he'd been scalded, a look of dread overtaking his face as
Charlie pulled over in front of the alley.

Apparently the arrival of the law was just the right incentive for the other kid to finally high-tail it.
Chasing after his friend like there was a prize awaiting them at the end of the street, and poor,
pitiful Johnny was left standing there on his own.

Climbing out of the car, Charlie rested his forearms casually atop its roof and watched the kid take
off. "Morning, Crane. Everything all right?" He asked around a smirk.

Before Crane had a chance to respond, the bell on the pharmacy's door chimed indicating that
someone was opening it. Sure enough, George Kelly himself stepped around the corner,
brandishing, of all things, a baseball bat. Crane almost wanted to laugh. The old man might've
been too timid to show himself until Charlie's arrival, but Crane was still thankful for his presence.
It was probably George who'd called the Sheriff's station in the first place.

"Go on now, George," Charlie told the man. "You wanna help out; you just keep everyone inside
for now like I told ya, all right?"
Grumbling his disappointment, the old man didn't put up any further argument and made his way back around the corner and back into his store.

"I don't know yet, Sheriff," Crane answered honestly when the lawman asked after them again. Only now was he finally able to turn his back on Johnny and check on Daniel.

Daniel hadn't really moved, which was setting off massive alarm bells in Crane's head. The kid should've been enjoying this victory, not just sitting there hunched over, staring at the ground.

Please, God. Not another seizure, Crane silently pleaded.

"Danny?" Crane whispered, cupping his brother's face with both hands. "Talk to me; are you okay?" Daniel's only response was a full body-length shudder and Crane felt a little like he was dying inside, believing another seizure was imminent.

Instead, Daniel raised his head, welling eyes meeting Crane's as his trembling hands lifted and grasped Crane's wrists. The kid was shaking like a leaf but he was still very much aware.

"I'm sorry," he whispered as a single tear escaped to trail down his face. Daniel brushed it away angrily.

Crane didn't get a chance to respond. To tell Daniel he had nothing to apologize for. "Boys?" Charlie wanted his attention again.

Torn, Crane straightened up but kept hold of Daniel, tucking the kid against his side. His brother was still shaky and all Crane wanted to do was check him over and get him home. Facing the Sherriff, Crane noted with some satisfaction that a very miserable looking Johnny Durock was now sitting in the back seat of the cruiser.

And Charlie was looking at Daniel; all vestiges of amusement gone from his round face. Hiking his thumb in the direction of the back seat, he addressed Crane, "Do you want me to take him in or just run him and his boys out of town?"

Crane didn't care. Didn't want to deal with this. He just wanted to see to Daniel. Especially when Steve blurted out, "They slammed him pretty hard into that wall," he said bitterly, indicating the brick wall beside them. "Isn't that assault?"

"What?" Evan practically growled, immediately crouching down and checking over Daniel.

"I'm sorry." Steve's tone held a mixture of guilt and ire. "They must've seen us go in because they grabbed him as soon we came out and walked past here."

Crane didn't blame Steve at all but he didn't have time or energy to console him. Nor did he answer Charlie. His brother's healing brain was of his utmost concern. Running his hands over his head and through his hair, he asked Daniel, "Did you hit your head?"

Daniel pushed Crane's hands away, shoving off Evan too; adamant that he hadn't.

"Daniel, you have to be sure." Crane told him, his tone as serious as the possible ramifications if Daniel wasn't. He had to be certain. Otherwise there was a trip to Sonora Regional in their immediate future.

Daniel sighed, "I tucked my chin. It's okay."

Believing him, Crane finally allowed himself to relax, his body slumping down of its own accord next to Daniel on the wooden bin. "Okay," he breathed and looped his arm around Daniel's neck,
tugging him under his chin. "Okay."

"Crane?" It was Charlie again.

Crane knew the man was still waiting for an answer. He turned to Daniel, locked eyes with him. He'd let him decide. "It's your call, kiddo."

Daniel ran a still quivering hand through his hair before shifting his gaze to Steve and Evan, both hovering close by. With their matching looks of anger, neither of them were hiding the choice they'd make. But when Crane felt Daniel's heavy exhalation beneath his arm, he knew those two weren't going to be happy.

"Just get him the hell out of here, okay, Sheriff?" Daniel told him, and Crane immediately shot Evan a warning look. Objections were not an option. For a moment it looked like Evan was still going to protest but, ultimately he just blew out a deep breath and stared at his boots.

"Will do, son," Charlie said kindly and without any hint of judgment. Tipping his hat, he turned back to his vehicle calling out, "You boys take care now," before climbing into it and closing the door.

Evan stepped out onto the sidewalk and watched Charlie pull away, Steve at his side. Both of them still looked pissed off so Crane decided he'd better give them a distraction. Pulling his keys out of his jacket, he jangled them. "Why don't you two go get the truck?"

Crane tossed the keys at Evan, not giving him the chance to decline. Reflexively catching them, Evan nudged the taller boy beside him. "Come on, Fletcher. I know when I'm being dismissed."

Their at times obtuse little brother was finally learning some insight.

It was his other little brother who drew his attention again when Crane felt another worrisome shudder against his side. "You cold?" Crane asked, not bothering to wait for an answer as he shrugged off his jacket and draped it over Daniel's shoulders. Daniel's head was down again, his hands clamped between his thighs. "Are you sure you're okay?"

This time Daniel answered with an abrupt shake of the head. The alarming, albeit silent, admission immediately had Crane on his feet and in front of his brother. Reaching for him again, Crane gently drew the kid's head up to face him. Daniel's eyes were wet; telling Crane that what was hurting him wasn't physical. He allowed himself a moment of relief even as his heart broke for him once again.

Crane had a pretty good idea what was eating him up. Shifting his hands to Daniel's shoulders, he gave them a light squeeze. "You know there's no shame in choosing a tactical retreat every once in a while," he told him gently.

Daniel softly snorted. "Yeah, right. I might as well've tucked my tail and run," he replied bitterly. And for that, Crane was eternally grateful, though he didn't let his embarrassed little brother know that. This time he squeezed a bit harder. "Hey, from what I saw, you hardly rolled over," he said resolutely. "Besides, you had a hell of a lot more to worry about than a black eye, didn't you?"

Daniel bit his lip, nodding briefly as a few more tears fell. He met Crane's gaze with wide eyes, full once again of fear as he confessed, "Crane, when I hit that wall, all I could think about was me having another seizure... and flopping around in this alley." His voice hitched then and Crane moved in next to him again, sliding his arm in back of Daniel and tugging him in close. "I'd be useless," he continued. "No help to me 'n no help to Steve."
Crane did not like the self-flagellation he was hearing and spoke a bit more harshly than he'd intended. "Hey, enough of that," he scolded. "First of all, Steve can handle himself—".

"Yeah, but he shouldn't have to. Not because of me."

Crane actually laughed at that, earning him a glare from Daniel. It was the least Steve could have done, Crane thought. But he wasn't about to share that either, or the irony of Steve defending him against someone who'd acted the same way toward Daniel as Steve had less than two months ago. Daniel definitely wouldn't appreciate it. Instead he said, "Daniel, something tells me Steve Fletcher doesn't do a whole lot of anything he doesn't want to do, am I right?"

This time Daniel huffed out a soft snort. "Yeah. You could say that."

"Okay, then." Lightly slapping Daniel's thigh, Crane added, "And you know what?"

"What?"

Crane was so gratified to see a sparkle in his brother's eyes that for once he couldn't attribute to tears.

"You didn't have a seizure."

He let Daniel think about that fact for a second. Sure, he hadn't gotten into a full-fledged fight. But he'd been thrown into a wall, shaken up and had the crap scared out of him. So much so that both his blood and adrenaline surely would've been pumping wildly. No one would ever know for sure if this incident would have triggered a seizure before now but, as much as it pained him to think about it, Crane was pretty convinced it would have. That it didn't now, well, Crane considered it a victory.

"I didn't, did I?" Daniel said with a mixture of delight and wonder in his tone. And there was that bright grin Crane missed so much. It was impossible for Crane to resist.

Both their smiles grew brighter when Crane looked across the street and saw Steve and Evan still making their way toward the truck. Pointing out the pair to the kid under his arm, he revelled in the light elbow Daniel planted in his side. Evan and Steve were walking side-by-side, clearly having an animated conversation. One that showed no hint of hostility whatsoever.

_To be continued._
Chapter 15

There are a few canon character appearances/references in this chapter, including the Barretts and Dave Schiller, the young lawyer who represented Crane in "The Man in the White Hat".

Adam was speechless. There he was – standing utterly stupefied in Tom Barrett's office – staring blankly at the older man sitting across from him behind his desk. Tom's eyes were sparkling, his earnest face breaking into a warm smile in spite of – or maybe because of – Adam's reaction.

Or lack thereof.

And still Adam said nothing, even as the proverbial gift horse smiled wider at him.

Less than an hour earlier, just as the family had been finishing up their dinner, Tom had called. Crane had answered; likely assuming as Adam had that it was Daniel already calling to get picked up from Steve's.

Somewhere along the line, despite the events of his first ill-fated dinner with them, Steve had become quite a regular at meal times around their place. And Daniel had been spending some time at the Fletchers' too. Though with Edgar flying out of town yesterday, this was the first occasion that Daniel had gone over there with only Steve for company. Adam had to admit he was having a hard time letting go of the apron strings but, after hearing about Steve putting himself in harm's way to protect Daniel from Jocko Durock's boy, he'd been hard-pressed to come up with a decent argument for forbidding Daniel to go.

He had to admit, once Tom had called, asking Adam to meet him at his office in Murphys and to bring Daniel along, Adam had been glad Daniel had already left with Steve. Though Carey's few visits had caused no ill-effects, Adam still had trepidations about Daniel seeing Tom. He knew they were irrational, and Adam understood that seeing the man again wasn't likely to ever trigger another seizure but, that didn't change Adam's instinctive desire to protect Daniel from him anyway. It hadn't helped either that Tom had been so evasive on the line, only saying that he needed to see them both in person.

And now ironically, instead of being a threat in any way, here Tom was offering Daniel and their family a lifeline. And yet the idea of accepting it nearly made Adam gag.

He'd been surprised to see Dave Schiller, the lawyer who'd represented Crane during the co-op fiasco, in Tom's office when he'd arrived. Dave had grinned nearly as wide as Tom when they'd shaken hands. Frankly it had made Adam a little nervous.

"Fellas, what's this about?" Adam had asked uncertainly.

Never one to beat around the bush, Tom had responded brusquely. "Adam, I've sold The Howling Man to foreign investors, speculators really, and we just closed the sale before I called you."
Which explained Dave's presence.

If the news that someone had actually been interested in purchasing an unworkable mine had surprised Adam, Tom's next words had nearly bowled him over.

"Dave here has the payment currently in trust with his firm." Smiling broadly now, Tom added, "And seventy-five thousand of it is going to be yours," he said matter-of-factly. "Should the check be made payable to you or the Circle-Bar-Seven?"

And that finally explained Adam's presence.

And his current catatonic state.

"Tom… I can't," he finally stammered, feeling the incredibly suffocating weight of turning down the man's too generous offer. "Hell, you can't," he exclaimed, knowing damn well that even though Carey and Tom were fairly well off, they certainly didn't have this kind of money to throw around.

"Nonsense, Adam," Tom replied, apparently oblivious to Adam's inner turmoil. "When I bought out your father's share of the mine, I never felt comfortable with the price. It always felt like I short-changed him even though he was insistent on it being fair. This is my chance to rectify that."

Despite the importance of what was going on here, Adam's interest was piqued by Tom's words. Fact was, any time the man shared even a hint of his history with Adam McFadden Sr., his namesake was hard-pressed not to lap it up. It must have shown on his face too since Tom seemed more than willing to elaborate.

"You see, the mine was a bust, good people had gotten hurt after a wall collapse, and we simply had to shut it down. Which came right on the heels of Jeanie and Mac announcing that she was expecting again." Tom smiled at the memory, as did Adam. He hadn't heard his father's nickname in a long time. "Let's see… Daniel was still in diapers so that meant number five was on the way. And, with us closing down the mine, that also meant the ranch was going to be your family's sole source of income." Seemingly lost in the troubling remembrance, the older man's tight expression reflected his discomfort until he visibly shook it off. "Anyway, times were tough for ranchers back then too and Carey and I wanted to help where we could. So I offered to buy out his shares."

Though the Barretts' generosity didn't surprise him, Adam had no recollection of it. Then again, he'd been only about ten years old at the time.

"Stubborn mule wouldn't take a penny more than the going rate for land," Tom continued, affection in his voice despite his harsh words. "Between the structures and equipment, I offered him more but, as far as Mac was concerned, the only stitch of value on the property was the land. So we finally settled on a price per acre." Adam could see the hint of bitterness there, truly believed it was still a sore point with Tom. His thoughts were confirmed when Tom added, "I just never felt like I did right by your folks."

"Tom, you didn't have to buy him out at all."

Tom laughed at that, sharing a knowing glance with Dave as he muttered, "Apple didn't fall far; did it, David?"

"They all come by it honestly, Tom," the young lawyer replied, no doubt recalling Crane's unwillingness to implicate his friends and neighbors in court.

At Tom's amused chuckle, Adam shot them both a weak glare before turning his thoughts back to
the matter at hand. "I appreciate how you feel, Tom. And I appreciate this offer, I really do. But what about Carey and Jenny?"

Tom's eyes lit up at the mention of his family. "My girls want this, Adam. Hell, Jenny's thrilled as can be at the thought of helping out Daniel." His expression softened further as he continued, "She's awfully smitten with her rescuer. Frankly, I think she's got her mind set on marrying that boy in about ten years' time."

At that Adam couldn't help but laugh.

"Adam," Tom said, turning serious once again. "Let me do this for your family. For Daniel."

Adam winced. He'd do just about anything to relieve his little brother of even some of the burden he was carrying these days.

Seemingly reading Adam's thoughts, Tom continued, "That boy has enough responsibility to shoulder, no thanks I'm sure to me," regret very apparent in his tone. "No one should have to head into adulthood with that kind of debt, and…" He cut off Adam's protest. "Don't tell me he won't bear it alone. I know that. But the rest of you don't need to bear it either. Not when I can help."

"Besides," he added, very much on a roll, "This sale never would have happened if it hadn't been for that cave-in."

Adam stiffened. Was Tom actually suggesting something even remotely positive came out of Daniel nearly dying? "What exactly are you saying?"

The man must have realized just how utterly wrong his statement had sounded. Immediately he got up from his chair, rounded the desk to face Adam again and, with contrition written all over his rugged features, rested both hands on Adam's shoulders.

Adam still tensed, only relaxing when Tom spoke again, his voice rough with emotion. "Adam, you have to believe that if I could go back in time and prevent what happened to those kids, I would." Breaking off his hold, the older man continued. "But I can't and it did happen. And the fact of the matter is that the story made international news. And these men were willing to pay good money on the chance that mining technology will be able to handle The Howling Man's stability issues in the future."

Adam heard what Tom was saying, he really did. He just didn't like it. Like his father before him, he loathed the idea of profiting from that godforsaken mine. Any more than he liked the idea of accepting a handout.

"I'm only giving you what would be the balance of your father's fair share had we still been partners. Nothing more," Tom insisted. "Please accept it."

Just like his father had. For the good of his family.

*Sometimes bein' a man means just knowing when to say yes to help. And then actually saying it.*

Adam swallowed hard. "I don't know what to say."

Except he did.

"Say, thank-you, Adam," Dave encouraged softly, understanding in his eyes.

Adam did. And, after signing the documents that gave Dave the authority to pay off Daniel's hospital bill and deposit the remainder into their bank account, Adam shook hands with both men
and headed out to the truck. On what may well have been the wobbliest legs on the planet.

In the time he'd spent in Tom's office, Adam's feelings had ricocheted from confusion to disbelief and to pride and even anger. But now, as he climbed into the truck, he allowed them to settle on relief and gratitude. Daniel's medical bills would be paid off the next morning. He couldn't believe it.

Hands shaking, he wheeled out onto Main Street and started out for home. He couldn't wait to tell the family. To tell Daniel.

Damn.

He'd forgotten the kid was at Steve's.

Well, after everything Daniel had been through, there was no way he was going to be the last to hear this news. Adam would just have to head over to the Fletcher place and tell him there. In person.

Decision made, Adam checked his blind-spot and made a quick U-turn. Heading south along number 4 he allowed himself a genuine smile. Daniel was more than due some good news like this.

Crane turned south off of 49 onto Whittle Road, watching for the landmarks that had grown familiar from the times he'd picked up Daniel here recently. The Fletchers' home was well off the road, its driveway nearly hidden by the trees and more than once Crane had driven past it before coming to recognize its entrance.

He should've called, given Daniel warning that he was coming early to get him instead of waiting for Daniel's call. But Adam hadn't been gone ten minutes and Crane's imagination had spun into overdrive. Wondering what in hell Tom Barrett wanted and why he'd asked to see not only Adam but Daniel too. He couldn't imagine it being bad news but, with Daniel still feeling so much guilt over the cave-in, Crane feared even the mere mention of Tom would be enough to send his little brother into a self-flagellating depression.

It had Crane worried, so antsy that Brian had told him to either give it a rest or go on already and pick up Daniel. Crane had chosen the latter. Whatever the reason behind Tom's call, Crane figured Daniel should hear it from Adam sooner rather than later. And that meant breaking up whatever Steve and Daniel were doing.

What Crane fervently hoped they were doing. Something he admitted he really needed to see for himself.

A grin began to quirk Crane's lips as Steve's words from the other day came back to him. "He's doing it. He's playing," Steve had confided excitedly, an incredibly pleased smile overtaking his features. "It's working!"

It had been shortly after Guthrie's meltdown when Steve had approached Crane, wondering if giving Daniel his guitar would provide some incentive for him to play. Though well intended, and it explained the seemingly random interest Steve had shown in their guitars the night of Guthrie's outburst, the offer had been awfully naïve. After all, if their mom's guitar and a nearly hysterical baby brother weren't enough to inspire Daniel to try again, Steve giving him a different guitar to play surely wouldn't.

Crane had tactfully shot down the idea; feeling nearly as disappointed as Steve had looked when
he'd turned away, shoulders slumped, and quietly resumed his chores.

But Crane had kept on mulling it over. Determined that there was something, some way he could use Steve and his guitar as incentive for Daniel to play again. And then he came up with an idea he was pretty confident would work. Was working, according to Steve.

The Jeep's tires crunched atop the gravel as Crane pulled in front of the expansive house. According to Daniel the place wasn't that much bigger than their own home but, this one, with its huge windows and sprawling ranch design, sure looked a lot more impressive.

Deciding to park in front of the open garage doors, Crane recognized Ed's Range Rover parked beside another vehicle hidden beneath a fitted tarp. Unless Edgar owned another vintage muscle car that Daniel hadn't mentioned, Crane could safely assume the tarp was covering the Barracuda Daniel was itching to drive once he got his license back.

Crane had told Daniel not to mention the car to Adam. Big brother would freak if he thought a rusty Daniel was going to get behind its wheel, or rather, its powerful hemi engine the minute his license was reinstated. The truth was, as much as Crane had faith in his little brother, the idea made him a little nervous too.

Making his way to the front door, Crane rang the bell, waiting a couple of beats before knocking on it as well. No answer. After achieving the same results a few minutes later, he self-consciously tried the door, a little surprised when it opened up for him. Before entering, Crane made sure he scraped off the soles of his boots on the welcome mat, hopeful there wasn't any ranch detritus, especially manure, still stuck to them.

The place was every bit as impressive on the inside but he had to admit he was surprised by all its white. He figured more than just the gleaming floors and exposed beams would match the wooden exterior. Instead, with the white walls and, in particular the massive floor to ceiling window facing him on the opposite wall, the home was very bright. With all the wood and leather furniture though, it definitely looked like a man's home. A wealthy man's home.

There was no sign of life in it though so Crane decided, a little hesitantly: in for a penny; in for a pound. Crossing over to the French doors adjacent to the enormous window, he passed through them, stepping onto the patio he could see on the other side.

Given the time of year, the in-ground pool didn't exactly look inviting yet, but the ring of laughter he could hear coming from the cabana opposite it sure sounded warm and welcoming.

Certain now of his path; Crane headed around the pool toward the laughter, his heart lifting and his pace quickening when the even more enticing sound of a guitar being strummed carried over to him.

What followed it, wafting along the light breeze, stopped him in his tracks. It was something he hadn't smelled in close proximity since Davis. No, check that… not since he'd made the seven hour drive with Daniel to the US Festival last Labor Day weekend.

He'd known that short of locking up Daniel in their room, the kid was going to make that trek on his own. With or without Adam's permission. By offering to take him, Crane had successfully cost Adam his argument. So the head of their family had grudgingly relented. Crane was willing to admit it had gotten a little scary down there at times but the buzz he'd had courtesy of the marijuana haze enveloping them for three days had only added to his vigilance when it came to his little brother. For Daniel though? That concert had been everything he'd hoped for. Everything he'd dreamed. And that had made the hundred and ten degree weather, not to mention the more dangerous and seedier side of the concert, all worthwhile for Crane.
It was undeniably pot that he was smelling now but this time there weren't two hundred thousand other bodies to blame it on. When the potential consequences of Daniel mixing weed with the myriad of medications he was presently on – particularly those intended to help stabilize his brain chemistry – hit Crane, he felt his heart skip a beat. And then he immediately cursed himself for jumping to conclusions. With no secrets between them, he knew that Daniel didn't smoke weed or anything else for that matter. The kid took the preservation of his lungs and vocal chords seriously and, despite the current interruption in his career path, Crane highly doubted his brother would choose now to start inhaling smoke of any kind. Especially knowing he'd be playing Russian Roulette with his still-healing brain.

As for Steve? Could Crane honestly say he was surprised that an eighteen year-old, let alone one with Steve's reputation, was lighting up while his dad was out of town?

Hardly.

When the unpleasant and damn near screeching sound of misplayed chords followed by Daniel's ridiculous laugh reached Crane's ears, he decided he didn't really care. And when he heard his brother's chuckle-laced, "Here, let me see," in response to Steve's assertions that the guitar was out of tune, it took everything Crane had to not run over there to take in the scene.

His idea was working. Daniel was really teaching Steve how to play guitar.

Crane had counted on Daniel's generous nature to make him agreeable to Steve's request to learn the guitar. Without Steve having any of the expectations Daniel believed the family had about his abilities, he could feel more at ease in front of his friend. More willing to mess up. And though Crane's heart twisted a little at the thought of Daniel being more comfortable with a friend he barely knew instead of his big brother and writing partner, he buried the hurt. He understood that Steve didn't have the history or any pre-conceived notions to bring out Daniel's insecurities. And right now that's what Daniel needed. Once he regained his footing, Crane was confident Daniel would play music for and with his family again. And he'd get back on stage too… where he belonged.

Aware that the boys were outside too and not in the cabana like he'd first assumed, Crane made his way out back of it. Taking in the sight of Steve and Daniel under the patio lights as he rounded the little building, he could see that they were sitting opposite each other on matching lounge chairs, an unfamiliar guitar in Daniel's hold. A very familiar and cherished one lying across the foot of his chair.

My God, Crane thought. He briefly wondered why neither Hannah nor Adam had mentioned it had gone missing from its hiding place in their bedroom. Until he realized, not without a touch of mortification, that they probably had other things on their mind whenever they were in their room.

Brian was right… with Molly back east; Crane really was becoming a monk.

Daniel was strumming the guitar, putting it through its paces and Crane closed his eyes, taking in the deep, rich tones and holding back a prickle of tears.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," Daniel said, a smile wrapped around his words. "It's definitely not out of tune."

"It sounds just about perfect to me," Crane agreed, though the same couldn't be said for the raspy noise coming out of his own throat, choked up like he was. He'd decided it was time to reveal himself, though he regretted it almost instantly when he witnessed the apprehension wash over Daniel's face as he approached them.
It was short-lived though as Steve nearly contorted himself and tipped the lounge chair, cursing colorfully as he tried to reach under it, one hand roaming blindly, presumably in an attempt to locate the joint he'd reflexively dropped there. Of course Daniel would find that hysterical. Crane just stood there, crossing his arms and looming over the both of them, biting the inside of his cheek in a desperate attempt to look stern and not laugh out loud.

"Hey, man, it's cool. He's cool," Daniel assured his friend. Looking uneasily at Crane, he added, "You're cool, right?"

Crane could see the hint of desperation in Daniel's eyes, knew it stemmed from the insecurity he'd developed ever since he'd gotten hurt. Those big eyes were pleading with him not to blow this for him; not to jeopardize his friendship with Steve. His little brother really had no idea that Steve needed their friendship just as much.

Though he had no intention of being either hypocritical or a prick about it and, despite his faith in Daniel, he needed to hear the words. Relaxing his stance slightly, he uncrossed one arm, bringing it up to his chin. "Well… I guess that depends."

"On what?" Daniel asked warily, his eyes darting to Steve who'd abandoned his search and now sat looking at Crane with an expression full of dread.

Crane just raised an eyebrow, looking knowingly at Daniel.

And Daniel rolled his eyes and sighed. He did have another response though, one dripping in sarcasm.

"Not to worry, big bro. I called up Dr. Lee's office just today and asked if mixing recreational drugs with the cocktail I'm already on was a problem." Daniel said it so straight-faced that Steve actually raised his eyebrows. Without missing a beat, Daniel continued, a little more condescendingly, "They told me to go right ahead."

He was wearing a smirk now, showing Crane that he was more exasperated than mad.

Crane dropped his head anyway, scuffed the toe of his boot against the concrete slab beneath it. Yeah, he pretty much deserved that. "Okay," he said guiltily, shooting his little brother an apologetic look.

Justifiably confused by their exchange, Steve piped up then, anxiety straining his voice. "Does this mean you're not going to tell my dad?"

And Crane decided to give the kid a break. He was eighteen, wasn't driving anywhere anytime soon, clearly wasn't forcing it on Daniel and they were on his home turf.

Besides, Crane wasn't Adam.

Nor was he a saint.

Chuckling, Crane shook his head and stepped forward, lightly kicking aside Steve's foot. Bending to his knees, he needed his full length to reach the intended prize. It was no wonder the kid couldn't find it, the joint had rolled well back of him.

The five second rule notwithstanding, Crane decided it was high time to stop torturing Steve. Straightening up he lifted the joint to his lips, taking a drag of the still burning cigarette. And exhaling immediately with a harsh cough.

And Daniel, apparently taking delight in his brother's misfortune, managed to sputter out,
"Lightweight," before losing himself entirely in another fit of laughter.

Crane shot him a searing look; unable to muster up the wherewithal to call his baby brother on the fact that, while little brother knew Crane hadn't had any weed since Davis, big brother knew Daniel never touched the stuff at all. Instead, once his eyes and throat stopped stinging, Crane managed to choke out a sardonic, "Smooth," before finally gasping out a relatively coherent, "Where have you been storing this crap? Your gym bag?"

Unlike Daniel, whose amusement was so great he almost let Steve's guitar clatter onto the patio, Steve at least had the decency to look repentant.

"Yeah, sorry, man. It is pretty rank," he shrugged, accepting the joint back from Crane and setting it aside in the ashtray on the small table next to him. "I've had it since before..." His words trailing off as his eyes darted toward Daniel before seeking the ground, effectively putting an end to Daniel's laughter.

An awkward silence followed, one Crane was sure had them all thinking back to that god-awful moment in front of the school. It was Daniel who ended it, not all that surprisingly, prodding Crane with the headstock of the guitar he'd been playing. "Hey, check it out," he said, his enthusiasm genuine.

And rightly so. Impressed, Crane couldn't help but whistle appreciatively when he accepted the Gibson from his brother. With its dreadnought design and distinctive hummingbird pattern on the pick-guard, Steve telling him previously that it was a really nice guitar had been an understatement. The Gibson Hummingbird was one of the finest acoustics Crane knew of.

Trading Daniel for their mom's still sitting across the base of the lounge chair, Crane took its spot next to his brother and settled the Hummingbird into position. Strumming a few chords, he sat back, exchanging an approving look with Daniel. All he could say was, "Wow." It really had a beautiful sound.

"Not too shabby for a consolation prize," Steve joked, though his attempt fell uncomfortably flat. Between what Daniel had told him about Steve's history, and Steve's comments to Crane about the guitar, Crane could put together the puzzle pieces. Those being that this guitar had been a birthday gift from his parents just before they'd announced their impending separation. It was no wonder the seven-year-old instrument still looked brand new.

It sounded amazing though and Crane decided to run with that. Instead of saying something wholly inadequate to break through the solemn moment, he'd let Steve's guitar do the talking. The fact that Daniel was beside him; his own guitar sitting so damn naturally in his hold had a lot to do with that decision.

To hell with Tom Barrett's phone call. This was more important.

He could've picked an easier song, randomly playing a few chords to get comfortable with the feel of Steve's guitar before suddenly finding himself committed to the eight measure chord pattern of Hotel California's intro. It didn't matter, Daniel was keeping up.

Daniel was playing guitar.

And by the time they got to the end and its dueling guitars section, Daniel was playing more than just rhythm. Okay, so maybe he wasn't quite Joe Walsh. But Crane was falling short of Don Felder too. They were both rusty. Daniel had one hell of an excuse and Crane had a pretty decent one too. After all, he was fighting the swell of emotions from the utter joy he was feeling with every note. It was a good thing the song wasn't even longer. Another minute and he was pretty
certain his heart would've burst.

They’d sung it too, though Daniel had seemed content to stick with fairly tentative backup and harmonies. When Steve applauded raucously and Crane watched Daniel’s head lower in uncharacteristic shy embarrassment, he figured he knew why. Steve hadn't grown up around here, hadn't grown up watching Daniel on stage like the rest of the kids. This was uniquely new territory for them both. Something else that Daniel feared might affect their friendship, Crane suspected.

It didn't make Steve uncomfortable at all though, in fact his applause was followed immediately by sincere praise. "That was totally awesome!" he said excitedly. "How come I've never heard about the both of you on stage before?"

This time Crane dropped his head, feeling his ears begin to tingle as Daniel answered on his behalf. "'Cause big brother here is a candy-ass," he chided. "Put him on the debate team and he'll kick butt on stage," he elaborated, much to Crane's chagrin. "Ask him to carry a tune in front of an audience though and he's toast."

"But you're really good together," Steve argued, and Crane felt the sudden, irrational desire to shave, his face was burning so hot.

"Tell me something I don't know," Daniel replied, apparently warming up to the accolades. "Believe me, I've tried. He won't do it." And didn't Daniel look awfully put-upon in that moment.

Try me again, little brother, Crane wanted to say despite his present humiliation. He'd do anything to see Daniel on stage again. Including dare to conquer his stage fright. Instead, he dead-panned, "He's also right here and will kick your ass if you don't lay off."

And Daniel snorted, knowing full well the threat was idle.

"Play something else," Steve insisted, though he promptly got up and headed into the cabana.

Crane lifted a questioning eyebrow but Daniel only shrugged in response. Crane figured the cabana probably had a bathroom but, when Steve emerged seconds later with a six-pack in hand, the mystery was solved. He set an opened bottle next to Crane's boot and popped open another for himself, obviously well aware that alcohol was off-limits to Daniel these days. Daniel didn't seem to mind so Crane decided he was more than happy to oblige in his young host's hospitality.

Crane wanted to pinch himself. He hadn't felt this relaxed, this good, in ages.

The only thing that would make this better would be if… yeah… there we go. Daniel started playing again. Apparently Crane had started something and the Eagles were on the set-list, more specifically side one of their fifth album. Crane set down his beer, listened to Daniel play the familiar intro for *New Kid in Town* and joined him, closing his eyes in bliss. Now this; this was harmony.

He should've known it wouldn't last.

"Hey, fellas. Mind tellin' me what's goin' on?"

So lost in the music, Adam's arrival had come as a complete surprise. So much so, that all three of them literally jumped in their seats. Suddenly remembering the initial purpose of his own trip and that Adam must've come here directly from Tom's, Crane really wished he knew what Adam's frame of mind had been like before he first got here. He didn't though. All he knew was that Adam sounded really annoyed. And the sight of the six-pack and bottles rolling around at their feet courtesy of him startling the hell out them would do nothing to improve big brother's mood.
It didn't matter that the McFadden house rules permitted the kids to have their first taste of beer at fourteen, Daniel wasn't at home and he definitely wasn't permitted alcohol right now. Crane swallowed hard. The straight line of Adam's lips, his clenched jaw, the thunderous expression brewing beneath his Stetson and the quiet ring of danger in his simple question were all telling him that Adam did not approve. At all.

He had to know that Daniel wasn't drinking, that Crane wouldn't just sit by and let that happen, right?

Wrong. This was shoot first and ask questions later Adam McFadden, after all.

Crane carefully set down Steve's guitar and stood up, using Daniel's shoulder for leverage and leaving it there. To make sure he stayed put and to let the kid know his big brother had this covered.

All it earned Crane though was a raised eyebrow and a look of utter disdain from Adam. Oh for Christ's sake, Crane thought. I'm not drunk. He didn't say that though. Instead he said just about the stupidest thing he could think of. Well, aside from telling Adam to go to hell. "This isn't what you think."

"Oh, really?" Adam scoffed, his attention on Crane. At least there was that. Crossing his arms in what Crane knew was a serious version of his own previous attempt at making Steve and Daniel squirm, Adam easily slipped into the role of condescending authority figure. "And what exactly do you think I'm—"

Shit. Adam was standing next to Steve now, or rather right behind the table beside him. Just above the ashtray with the marijuana joint in it. The forgotten marijuana. Or, even better, the ignored and abandoned marijuana. Not that Adam would see anything even remotely virtuous in that fact.

"Is that grass?" Adam practically choked on the question.

He didn't wait for an answer. Adam was off and running and there would be no interrupting him.

As Adam rants went, it ranked with some of his best. Never mind that they were breaking the law, he brought his accusations closer to home… from Guthrie being bullied at school by those pint-sized pushers, to Ford and Evan getting shot at by growers, and PJ damn near getting killed, the three of them might as well have been responsible for the onset of the apocalypse. And Crane let him go, his leg pressing up against Daniel's knee demanding he do the same. It didn't matter that Daniel never used pot or that, until tonight, Crane hadn't touched any since Davis. Hell, even while there, Crane had rarely partied with it and never once spent precious money on it.

But once Adam started getting more personal, Crane knew he had to speak up. Before big brother said something in the heat of anger he'd most certainly regret later. Unfortunately, when he turned his ire on Steve, Crane knew he was going to have trouble keeping Daniel's temper contained as well.

"Tell me, Steve," Adam said bitingly, "Does your father condone his son doing drugs?"

"Uh—" Steve looked helpless, understandably at a loss for words and more than a little intimidated. Something Crane wasn't about to tolerate.

"Back off, Adam."

Shit. That was supposed to be Crane's line but Daniel beat him to the punch. The kid was on his feet now, ignoring the grip Crane had on his bicep and standing tall and defiant even as Adam
stalked over to him.

As their eldest breached what anyone would consider the accepted realms of personal space, Daniel had no choice but to back up. The legs of the lounge chair scraping across the concrete as it moved with him.

"Adam—" Crane warned.

Adam eased up slightly but Crane couldn't relax. Adam had only backed off enough so that he could jab his forefinger into Daniel's chest. "You got something to say, mister?"

"Yeah," Daniel snapped. "You always have to think the worst, don't you? You just have to blow everything out of proportion." Daniel was pissed too; no doubt about it.

"Are you trying to tell me that illegal drugs and underage drinking are no big deal, is that it?"

And then they were both off, Daniel yelling about hypocritical and overbearing dictators in need of joining the twentieth century and Adam countering with the always helpful "as long as I'm the head of this family, you play by my rules" argument.

Crane had to put an end to this. But, before he could, he needed to get Steve, who already was looking a little shell-shocked, out of the line of fire. Shooting the kid an apologetic look, he strongly suggested that Steve go inside until this blew over. Promising it actually would blow over.

To the kid's credit, he was reluctant to leave, no doubt feeling like he was abandoning Daniel. It was only when Crane told him that he'd serve Daniel better if Crane's attention wasn't split between them that Steve acquiesced. First walking then jogging toward the sanctuary of his house.

Unfortunately, with his focus elsewhere, his brothers' argument had degraded into what, short of them trading blows, Crane had feared most.

"Wh—at?" Daniel said tremulously; suddenly pale from insensitive and cruel words that might as well have been thrown with a fist.

"Daniel, he didn't mean it," Crane said, almost desperate, his arms wrapping around his little brother as they both sank down onto the lounge chair. Crane looked up at Adam then, standing over them wearing an expression Crane couldn't quite decipher… part horror, part shock maybe too. Crane didn't care. He couldn't believe Adam had dared go there. With a voice as unsteady as Daniel's, but stemming as much from rage as hurt, he demanded, "Adam… tell him you didn't mean it."

"I—" Adam started, faltering then shaking his head. He opened his mouth again. But still no words came.

"Tell. Him. Damn it."

Crane didn't remember deliberately getting up from beside Daniel and facing their oldest brother. He knew he'd never forget the stunned expression on Adam's face though as he grabbed hold of the front of Adam's jacket and shoved him. Once again demanding Adam take back his damming words. Daniel had been hurt enough.

He supposed he should've realized that Adam's arms were down at his sides, that he wasn't defending himself. It didn't really matter. All Crane saw in that moment was red. But it wasn't enough that his vision was red. He wouldn't be satisfied until his knuckles and Adam's face were red too.
To be continued.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

There are a few canon character appearances/references in this chapter, including Marie and the Barretts and also "Hoops" and Mike, Adam's friends who returned to Murphys for their tenth anniversary high-school reunion in the episode, "Winner". Adam's ex-girlfriend and federal agent PJ is mentioned briefly too.

Adam pulled up into the Fletcher driveway, parking next to the familiar Jeep, and took in a calming breath. He should've been in great spirits but instead he was irritated and he knew it was his own damn fault.

Still, why no one in this neighborhood deemed it worthy to put names on their mailboxes was beyond him. He sighed again.

It wasn't until he'd turned onto the road that he'd realized he didn't know Ed's address. And since Crane had picked up Daniel the previous times he'd been here, this was the first time Adam had been down Whittle Road in a good ten years. After all, its residents tended toward different lifestyles than Adam McFadden.

Damn near every house was built well off of the road, some behind gated laneways, so he'd had no hope of spotting the Land Rover. Plus, since the majority of the mailboxes were marked with numbers, not names, he'd ultimately had to pull over to the side of the road and ask an older man walking his dog along the gravel shoulder where the Fletchers lived.

Despite the onset of dusk, he'd still had to endure the man's obvious suspicion as he'd scrutinized both Adam and the old International with the intensity of a food inspector. To say it had put a bad taste in Adam's mouth was an understatement. That he knew the guy had felt the same disdain about his neighborhood's interloper didn't exactly improve Adam's mood at all.

It hadn't helped either that, once he'd been grudgingly given directions, Adam had still managed to miss the driveway and had to back-track in order to find it.

Adam knew he had no business being irritated with such good news to share with Daniel, and apparently Crane too. He couldn't help it though; he was feeling downright grumpy at the moment.

Okay, so he had to admit he'd started chewing on the concept of accepting Tom's offer while driving over here and it was starting to bite him back. He definitely understood how, despite his acceptance of the fundraiser, it still set Daniel's teeth on edge. At least he could set the kid's mind at ease about that.

Of course, with the fundraiser only three days away, Tom's news brought about its own set of issues to contend with. Such as, now that they didn't need the money, just how were they going to stop it?

Deciding the issue was one that could be dealt with either later tonight or tomorrow – he'd get
Hannah to call Marie – he finally climbed out of the truck.

The double garage was wide open and the lights from within it came on automatically, surprising Adam as he walked past it toward the front door. With the lights on, his eyes caught site of an intriguingly shaped tarp next to Ed's car. Curious, Adam approached, hoping that he wasn't about to set off some fancy alarm system when he dared lift up the front of the cover to take a peek at the vehicle underneath.

From the look of its grill, it was a 1970 'Cuda and Adam couldn't help but be impressed. Especially if it had a hemi under its hood which, given whose garage Adam was standing in, was more than likely the case. His expression soured though when Adam wondered aloud why Daniel hadn't mentioned the car to him. Their mutual appreciation for muscle cars was one of the few things they still had in common. He hoped like hell Daniel hadn't been driving it and that was why he was keeping its existence from Adam.

He was sure he'd made Edgar aware of all of Daniel's restrictions, including the license suspension. Mind you, even when he got his license back, Adam didn't want Daniel near the high powered machine. Not until big brother was sure he could handle it anyway. He'd have to make that crystal clear to Ed the next time he saw him.

Carefully replacing the tarp, Adam finally made his way to the front door. Knocking a few times and ringing the door chime yielded no results so Adam decided he'd head out back and see if Crane and the boys were outside. After all, a place like this probably had plenty of outdoor lighting.

The locked gate hindered him though and since he couldn't see what was on its other side, he chose to let common sense prevail and didn't try to scale it. Besides, he hated to admit, he wasn't as young as he used to be. He'd try the garage side of the house.

Making his way across the front, Adam changed his mind, figuring it was worthwhile to try the front door once more in case they'd come inside. Still no answer. Feeling frustration crawl up his spine he decided, to hell with it, and gripped the door handle. Turning it, the door opened and he walked through it without any hesitation. Though he wasn't particularly concerned about Daniel at this moment, as far as he was concerned, the past three months of worry for his kid brother had earned him the right to be so bold.

The vaulted ceilings, lustrous wood floors, granite counters and immense windows did give him pause though. I bet Edgar wouldn't lose sleep over a sixty-three thousand dollar hospital bill, he thought bitterly. And then, cursing lightly, he chastised himself for the petty thought. It clung to him anyway and, as he passed through the glass doors facing him and stepped onto the patio, he was still trying to shake off the feelings of inadequacy that he'd thought he'd put to rest when Hoops had left town and Mike had been arrested during their ten-year reunion.

The melodic sounds of expertly played guitars and his brothers' harmonies were helping to shed those thoughts though, and Adam was drawn to them like a moth to a flame. He didn't know Daniel was playing again. How could he not know this? And why in the hell hadn't Crane told him?

As he approached the boys from behind Steve, Adam couldn't help but consider what else Daniel and Crane might be keeping from him. The opened six-pack sitting between them certainly gave him cause.

Realizing his fuse was still short, Adam told himself not to jump to any conclusions. There was no way Crane would let Daniel mix beer with all his medications. And, for his part, Crane was legal
now. Still, Adam couldn't help but wonder why Crane was already here when, in theory, they hadn't been expecting Daniel's call for a few hours. Had he and Daniel planned this jam session all along? And, if so, why in the hell was it a secret?

Adam clearly had questions that needed answering. And there was no time like the present.

"Hey, fellas. Mind tellin' me what's goin' on?"

Under different circumstances, he might've considered their shocked reactions funny. But for some reason, watching them all jump out of their skins as two beer bottles skittered across the cement patio did nothing to amuse him. All three looked like they'd been caught with their hands in the cookie jar, even Crane. And that didn't sit well with Adam at all. Something was going on here.

It didn't help that Crane apparently needed to brace himself on Daniel's shoulder in order to stand. Just how many beers had he had? He was driving, for Christ's sake. Adam didn't want to believe it but the evidence was standing there right in front of him. And when Crane answered lamely with, "This isn't what you think," Adam was fairly impressed with himself for not losing it entirely right there in front of Steve.

After all, it was clearly exactly what Adam thought. Instead of being the responsible adult in the absence of Adam or Edgar, Crane had taken it upon himself to not only allow Daniel to party with Steve but to actually join in with them.

"Oh, really?" Feeling his hackles rise, Adam moved forward, his focus on Crane. Blocked by Steve's deckchair and the drink table beside it though, Adam was forced to stop. His posture rigid, he crossed his arms and sent Crane a livid glare. "And what exactly do you think I'm—"

He recognized the smell before he even bothered to look down at the table at his knees. Wafting up from the ashtray upon it was the smoke from a cigarette. A marijuana cigarette.

"Is that grass?" Appalled, Adam asked anyway; nearly choking on the words.

He didn't wait for an answer. He was sure he was sounding like a raving lunatic, bringing up everything from those little goons pushing pot at Guthrie's school to PJ's plane being shot down, but he didn't care. There was nothing even remotely reasonable that Crane could say in his defense so Adam wasn't about to give him the chance. Though getting read the riot act might be unfamiliar territory for Crane, Adam was well versed in the art of castigating younger brothers. Admittedly, even though Adam had his suspicions that Crane had experimented a little in college, their third born was about the last brother Adam ever expected to lecture over the stupidity of drug use.

In truth that was always Adam's greatest fear with Daniel and his damned music. That lifestyle offered both temptation and accessibility and once the kid inevitably left home Adam wouldn't be there to protect him from either. And that frankly scared the hell out of him. That it was happening here, literally under his nose… well, that was something Adam simply couldn't abide. Even if it meant putting an end to Daniel's new friendship.

With that in mind, Adam shifted the focus of his wrath to the kid seated closest to him. "Tell me, Steve," he said acerbically, "Does your father condone his son doing drugs?"

The kid was practically cowering but Adam didn't care. He realized he should've heeded Evan and Brian's initial protests; regretting now that he had ever let Steve into their lives. Into Daniel's life.
"Uh—" Steve stammered and Adam ramped up his icy glare.

"Back off, Adam."

Not a chance, Danny-boy. Adam may well have been tiptoeing around Daniel's volatile emotions ever since he'd gotten hurt but the kid wasn't going to be able to play his recovery card here. Not this time. He was eighteen and damn well knew better.

Stepping over the foot of Steve's chair Adam stalked over to Daniel as the kid took to his feet, not breaking stride until Daniel and the chair he was up against were forced to back up.

"Adam—"

Despite Crane's warning and the kid's involuntary retreat, Daniel's eyes were still flashing defiance at him and that made it easy for Adam to ignore both.

Pulling back enough to jab a finger into the kid's chest, Adam growled, "You got something to say, mister?"

Apparently Daniel did have a lot to say, but then so did Adam. Most of which was a rehash of familiar arguments from the past. In Adam's case, much of what his middle brother had to share was territory already covered by Brian. It was nothing new. With that being so, Adam held no qualms about recycling some of his old material as well. It didn't matter if the rules changed when they were under his roof versus someone else's. And frankly, hypocritical or not...as head of the family, Adam had the right to change the rules whenever he damn well pleased.

He knew the argument was escalating but the more Daniel downplayed the marijuana the more Adam's old, insidious fears began to come to the forefront. Though he truly doubted that Daniel was using right now, he couldn't help but worry that his defense was a sign that the boy had already started down that road. If not using himself, hanging out with those who did. That this was nothing new. And something he was willing to resume as readily as playing guitar.

Damn it, with Daniel's injury, Adam had thought he'd been given a reprieve. That he wouldn't have to worry anymore about the kid being led down that famously perilous path of sex, drugs and rock and roll.

So much for that theory.

"You know... the only good thing about you getting hurt was that it put an end to your goddamn music career!"

Oh, God. Had Adam actually said that out loud? He couldn't have...could he?

Wh—at?"

"Daniel, he didn't mean it." Crane shot Adam a frantic look. One filled with such hurt and anger, Adam couldn't face either of his brothers as they now huddled together on the deckchair. Watching Crane wrap his arm around Daniel, Adam felt sick. He was horrified that he'd let his innermost thoughts spew out of his hot-tempered mouth. Daniel looked stunned, wasn't responding to Crane at all which Adam knew would worry Crane as much as it did Adam.

Sure enough, Crane looked up at Adam, eyes drilling him with intense emotion as he shakily demanded, "Adam... tell him you didn't mean it."

"I—" Adam started; couldn't get any words out past the block of his own betrayal clogging his throat.
He had meant it. Every selfish word.

"Tell. Him. Damn it." There was a kind of desperation in Crane's eyes, one that belied the edge in his voice. Adam watched Crane hug Daniel before getting up again. Knowing his overprotectiveness had caused so much harm, Adam finally tried to offer a pitiful apology, but he feared nothing he could say would fix this. It didn't matter; any intended words were cut off by Crane roughly grabbing his jacket. Adam had never seen Crane so incensed, his eyes seemingly as dark as his thoughts.

Adam knew he'd hurt and had even betrayed Crane nearly as much as Daniel with those damning words. After all, those two were a team and Daniel's musical triumphs were Crane's too. But as much as his own pain might be behind the outburst, Adam knew that it was Daniel's champion and protector confronting him now. Crane had been with Daniel every step of the way during his recovery. No one was more intimate with Daniel's suffering. And yet Adam had let those traitorous words slip out of his mouth. How dare he see anything good in almost losing their little brother?

Which was why Adam wasn't putting up any resistance. How could he even try to defend the indefensible? There was no excuse for what he'd said. So he said nothing at all, even while Crane shook him just before releasing him with such an abrupt shove, Adam staggered back a few steps.

Adam had to admit, though he knew he deserved it, he didn't really expect the left cross that followed.

He almost went down. Maybe as much from shock as from force. The punch had certainly been hard enough to rock him but it was the metallic taste of blood in Adam's mouth that confirmed to him that Crane, the peacekeeper, had just split his lip. And, based on the fire in his eyes, he wasn't done with Adam yet.

And somehow that was absurdly okay.

"God, Crane, no!" Though Adam had no intention of fighting back, Daniel didn't know that and apparently had decided to take it upon himself to step in. Adam never saw Daniel get up, just the blur of bodies as the kid swooped in between them, wrapping his arms around Crane and forcing him back. If it was someone else in Crane's state of fury, Adam might've worried for the kid's safety. With Crane though, he had no such qualms. "Are you crazy? He'll break you in half!"

No I wouldn't, Adam thought. Especially not with the way Crane was clinging to Daniel now. It was as though the instant Daniel had touched him, he'd broken through the rage and all that remained was the grief Crane had been carrying around since Daniel had collapsed out on the ridge. Thinking back to their talk that first night in the hospital, Adam swallowed hard, realizing that a decade older grief might well have had something to do with that punch too.

Adam tentatively approached his two kid brothers, the younger one now comforting the older; though it was Crane who had Daniel in the fiercest of hugs.

"Hey, buddy, come on," Daniel was saying, his words muffled against Crane's chest. "It's okay; it's okay." And Adam died a little inside as he watched Crane's shoulders shake; knowing that he was falling apart, the way he'd had with Brian that night when Daniel was loaded into the ambulance. It was heartbreaking to witness and Adam desperately wanted to rush in, hold them both, but this wasn't about what he wanted. Hell, he wasn't even sure he'd be welcomed.

Until Daniel looked over his shoulder, his expressive face full of confusion and even a little fear. Eyes pleading with Adam to help.
There was no hesitation this time. He stepped in, lightly cupping Daniel's cheek before resting his palm against the base of the boy's neck. Willing to risk another hit but convinced Crane no longer had one in him, Adam reached around and across his brother's broad shoulders and held onto his quaking form. He felt as much as heard the hitch in breath and as Crane leaned into him, Adam shifted his hold to his brother's head, pulling him in against his neck.

"I'm sorry, Crane. I'm sorry," he whispered into the blond hair though he knew Crane wouldn't be satisfied until those same words were directed at Daniel. Daniel, whose arm was squished between older brothers now. "Hey, c'mon; let go. I think we're breaking the kid's arm," Adam said softly to Crane, his tone much gentler than his words.

Despite Daniel's light chuckle, Crane let go like he'd been burned, muttering an apology and successfully breaking apart the hold they had on each other. It gave Adam his first look at Crane's face and he wasn't at all surprised to see the tracks of tears, the red eyes and nose. He looked wrecked. Clearly felt that way still as he dragged his hands roughly across his face.

"Oh shit, your hand!" Daniel exclaimed, obviously as alarmed by Crane's bloodied, already swollen knuckles as Adam.

For his part, Crane looked a little dazed, peering at his hand as though he didn't know how it had gotten that way. Maybe he didn't. Adam could tell exactly when the pain started to kick in though. The color suddenly draining from Crane's features was his first clue.

"Daniel, find some ice." Adam took command, guiding Crane back down onto the nearest deckchair as the youngest disappeared into the cabana. "You better not have broken it," Adam softly chastised, keeping Crane's hand elevated as he crouched in front of him, looking it over. The fire was gone from Crane and he even seemed a little contrite when he looked worriedly at Adam, asking, "How's the mouth?" He was too contrite as far as Adam was concerned.

"It's fine. Don't worry about it."

"Adam—"

"Don't you dare apologize," Adam interrupted his still trembling brother. "I got exactly what I deserved," he insisted, meeting Crane's gaze until he found himself in a staring contest. One stubborn brother against another. Until it was broken by Daniel.

"If you two are gonna start up again, let me know now so I can get more ice."

The kid had returned; a dishtowel filled with ice in one hand, the other hitched over his shoulder indicating the cabana. Though his words were flippant, he looked awfully worried. Something else Adam could feel bad about.

Apparently Crane felt the same way; about Adam's guiltiness that is. "Yeah, you did," he said, ignoring Daniel's wisecrack and referring once again to the punch. His tone held an odd mixture of affection and condemnation and Adam wasn't certain whether to smile or apologize again. He decided on the latter.

"Except for the part about the brother with a busted hand," Adam replied ruefully, taking the bundle of ice from Daniel.

"I don't think it's broken." Crane straightened his fingers then made a fist, grimacing but proving his point. Adam placed the makeshift ice-pack on it anyway, tying the ends together to keep it relatively secure.
"With that granite chin, it's hard to believe," Daniel tossed out as he settled down next to his roommate and added his support to the unhurt hand keeping Crane's injured one elevated.

And I call Crane the peacekeeper in the family, Adam thought.

Daniel was trying so hard to keep things light between them. Despite the fact that Adam knew full well how much his words must've hurt. It was time to rectify that.

"You implying I have a hard head?" Adam already knew the answer though he raised an eyebrow at Crane's snort. The color was coming back to Crane's face; the ice apparently doing its job. Good. Next up was soothing his heart. Which, in this case, meant somehow making it up to Daniel for those awful, spiteful words.

He was hunkered down in front of both of them now; knees already protesting but Adam ignored the discomfort. He wanted to talk to them literally on level ground.

Despite the jokes Daniel was throwing around and his focus on Crane's hand, Adam knew the youngest in their midst was also using Crane's injury as an excuse to avoid making eye contact. Reaching across the small gap between them, Adam placed his palm on Daniel's knee, successfully drawing the kid's eyes toward him. Adam hated the wariness he saw there. Damned if it wasn't mirrored in Crane's eyes too.

"Daniel, I'm so sorry." His words heartfelt, Adam started with the much needed and deserved apology. He wanted to grant Crane his wish and take his words back, tell Daniel he hadn't meant them; but he wasn't going to lie. To either of them. The best he could offer was, "I never meant for you to hear that."

When the kid dropped his gaze, murmuring, "I know," Adam let go of Daniel's knee, lightly grasping his chin instead. He hated how small and young Daniel sounded in that moment. Vulnerable. It reminded him of why he'd uttered those horrible thoughts in the first place.

Gently tilting his brother's chin so that their eyes met again, Adam continued. At the least he owed the boy an explanation. "I never meant to hurt you, kiddo. You know I say the dumbest things when I'm scared."

At Crane's soft, "You can say that again," Adam dropped his hand and looked away from Daniel. That contrasting blend of warmth and bitterness in Crane's expression and tone was back and Adam knew the incongruity came from Crane's desperate need for him to fix this. And an equally desperate fear that Adam would screw it all up.

Adam knew it because he felt the same fear. An all too familiar one where their middle brother was concerned.

Daniel, on the other hand, was oblivious. As evidenced by the light elbow to Crane's ribs as he admonished his closest ally to cut it out. When he returned his attention to Adam and asked so much with one simple, "Scared?" Adam realized he had a confession to make.

"Danny, you terrify me. Don't you know that?" That wasn't exactly how Adam thought he'd start this. Blurting it out like that, especially when it resulted in the shocked look the kid wore.

"I—what?" Daniel stammered; his bewilderment crystal clear.

Crane slung his arm around Daniel's neck, grounding him Adam knew. And then he gave Adam a supportive nod… with a hint of warning in it too.

Adam nodded back. He'd tread lightly. But it wasn't going to be easy.
"You always have. Ever since…” he sighed. No, this wasn't going to be easy at all.

Especially with his knees screaming at him. He moved to sit next to Daniel; the kid sandwiched between big brothers now, and squeezed Daniel's hand. He had to blink away a sudden swell of tears when Daniel briefly threaded his fingers through Adam's. The memories of the boy's trust in him during a time when he'd had absolutely no clue what he was doing hit hard. "I messed up so bad with you back then. You'd shut down and… I didn't know how to bring you back. Didn't know how to help you."

Daniel breathed a deep sigh, his gaze falling on their adjacent hands. Adam squeezed them together once again. His little brother started speaking then, his voice much too small for Adam's liking; and much too flat, rekindling that hauntingly familiar fear. "Adam… the only thing that would've helped is if I'd never stayed after school that day."

And there it was. Proof of Adam's failure. Their parents had died almost a decade ago and the boy still blamed himself. Had never stopped. That nine-year-old devastated shell of a child was exactly where Adam feared he'd been all along. Lurking just below the surface inside this sensitive, soulful kid. The one who wanted nothing more than to leave home and bare his heart and that soul to the same wolves and vultures who'd done nothing to prevent the train-wrecks that happened to the talented, vulnerable kids who'd come before him.

No, Adam wasn't terrified at all.

"Hey, stop that," It was Crane who responded first, chastising Daniel with words that should've come from their oldest brother. If Adam hadn't felt like he'd just been gutted by a bull, he might've been able to say something. Instead, he released Daniel's hand and let Crane continue. His words were usually the balm Daniel needed anyway.

Crane drew Daniel closer to him, his gentle admonishment continuing as he told him, "What have we talked about? You know I was there too."

"Yeah, I know," Daniel said, his voice muted against Crane's shoulder. "They were coming to get both of us," he continued, sounding a little resigned.

"And—?"

Daniel pulled back then, his eyes locked on Crane's expectant gaze. "And Mom really wanted us to be there," he finished, almost as if by rote. No, Adam realized, it was by rote.

"You bet," Crane said softly. His affection so apparent in his tone and in his soft expression, no one would have to witness Crane pulling him in again and planting a kiss in Daniel's hair to know how much he loved this kid.

And Adam felt that familiar prickle of tears again. Plus a hint of shame. He wondered just how many times over the years this conversation had taken place between them. Knowing how stubborn Daniel could be, countless times.

Adam had to wonder too how it was that a twelve year-old Crane had been given the insight to share in Daniel's blame rather than try the impossible task of absolving it. By sharing in the burden, he had helped draw Daniel out of his shell. Helped him feel less alone. Adam was sure of it.

Something their oldest brother had been incapable of doing. He let his pride shine through as he met Crane's misty eyes overtop of Daniel's head.
"She did, you know," Adam said fondly, referring to their mom as he squeezed Daniel's knee. "She'd just about burst with pride every time you got up on stage."

Daniel straightened then, wiping his own eyes and displaying the eagerness every one of the McFadden boys always had at just the slightest grain of information about their parents. Instead of asking about her though, Daniel surprised Adam with a different question entirely.

"Then why do you give me such a hard time over it?"

Adam swallowed hard. Knew what he was going to say wasn't going to do him any favors or earn him much sympathy.

"Because she never knew the wrecked little kid that I did." Adam tried to temper his tone, keep it gentle. It didn't come as any surprise when Daniel's eyes flashed anyway.

"But, Adam, I'm not that little kid anymore."

"No, you're not," he admitted. But you're broken and you almost died on my watch. Adam kept those last thoughts to himself. Was grateful for the empathy he could see reflected in Crane's eyes.

"Danny, I don't expect you to understand this but… in some weird, warped way, you're my first born..."

Daniel scoffed at that but didn't say anything else. Adam could only assume it was the dead serious tone he was using plus the grip Crane had on the kid's shoulder keeping his objections at bay.

"But instead of some bright-eyed bouncing baby, you were this grieving, shattered little kid and so damn vulnerable. And I guess… a part of me has never stopped thinking of you any other way."

Adam was looking at Daniel but through such a haze of uncertainty, he was incapable of reading the kid's expression. With his next admission, he had to look away, meet Crane's understanding gaze instead. "God, kid… the thought of you off on your own in L.A. or New York… that just scares the hell out of me."

Adam winced as he said his peace, bracing himself for Daniel's onslaught. Hell, even before the kid's emotions had been messed up by his brain injury, he'd have flown off the handle over this.

"So you're telling me all that grief you give me over the band is because you're scared?" Daniel sounded more incredulous than mad and Adam felt immense relief over that. Though he knew damn well the kid wasn't done with him yet.

"Yeah, I am," Adam admitted a little apprehensively.

"Scared of me getting into the drug scene?" This time Daniel did sound offended. A little amused too though.

Adam answered carefully. "Well, yeah… Why else would I give you a hard time?"

Daniel looked at Crane and something unspoken passed between them. Their silent exchange made Adam wonder if "Why Adam is an ass about my music?" was a common point of discussion between them. Aw, hell, who was he kidding? Of course it was.

When Crane gave the kid a nudge, Daniel finally answered, his voice barely a whisper; his eyes downcast. "I dunno. 'Cause maybe you think I suck?" he shrugged. Crane shook his head at that, a hint of a smirk on his lips. But Adam didn't find it funny at all. Ridiculous and appalling, yes, but definitely not funny. Especially when Daniel added under his breath, "Or maybe 'cause you
just want me to stay and work the ranch the rest of my life?"

It actually hurt to think that Daniel could be so damn wrong about his motives. To believe that Adam's intentions, however paranoid, weren't driven by love and concern. He had to begrudgingly admit though that, when the message was always broadcast in the heat of anger, he could see how those softer emotions could get lost in translation.

Still, he had to ask... "So, you have no problem thinking of me as someone with a horrible ear for talent or, better yet, as a tyrannical dictator, but not a scared shitless surrogate dad?"

At least Daniel had the decency to look a little abashed. "Well, when you put it that way, no; I guess not." The kid closed his eyes then, sucking in a deep breath that he blew out harshly. Steeling himself, Adam was sure, and he found himself doing the same. "Adam, you don't have to worry. I'm not doing drugs," he insisted. "And I have no intention of ever using, okay?"

"Danny, I wanna believe that, I do, but..."

Daniel rolled his eyes this time, clearly flustered. "But what? Besides, you of all people know that if I wanted weed, I sure as hell don't have to go to L.A. to get it."

If Daniel thought reminding him that their home turf was a mecca for pot growers was going to help his argument, the kid was sorely mistaken. He must have seen it in Adam's reaction too since his next move was pulling out his ace card... Crane.

"Tell 'im, Crane," he implored. "Tell him he doesn't have to worry about me smoking pot."  

"He doesn't," Crane said matter-of-factly. It wasn't the first time Crane had told Adam this to be honest. Regardless, it wasn't just pot that had Adam so damn concerned. Weed hadn't killed the singing stars Adam had listened to in high-school. "But pot's not the only threat out there," Crane added, voicing Adam's thoughts and backing him up much to his relief.

Not Daniel's though.

"Oh, Christ... not you too!"

Crane winced at the accusation and betrayal he heard in Daniel's tone, reached for him belatedly as the kid abruptly pulled away. Getting up from beside Crane, Daniel walked away but didn't go far. His back was to both of his brothers, ramrod straight though his head was lowered. Crane knew he was breathing hard, trying to regain control. A feat for him even before the hematoma had created havoc with his brain chemistry.

The last thing Crane ever wanted to do was kick anyone when they were down. Least of all Daniel. Instinct was screaming at him to just go to his little brother and wrap him in a hug but his head was telling him otherwise. That despite Adam's initial freak-out, this might well have become the most opportune time ever for his two hard-headed brothers to have this long-needed talk. Adam had already flipped his lid and the resulting guilt would make him more malleable, more willing to listen. Hell, maybe that punch had helped too. Maybe Crane should've decked his oldest brother a year ago when these battles had first started in earnest.

Exchanging concerned glances with Adam, Crane ultimately did get up, abandoning the makeshift ice-pack, when big brother pantomimed an "after you" wave. Crane wanted to ask "why me?" but he already knew the answer. He always had better luck calming Daniel down. Besides, Daniel was probably angrier right now with his roommate than he was with Adam. After all, the kid was used to Adam's overprotectiveness coming out so abrasively. What he wasn't used to was Crane
not backing him up when it came to his music.

What Daniel couldn't see right now was that Crane still very much had his back.

"Danny, come on," he said as he approached him from behind. He felt the flinch as he rested his hands on the kid's tense shoulders. Didn't let it deter him. "Hey, you know I'm on your side."

Daniel scoffed harshly at that, the accompanying action very nearly dislodging Crane's grip. "You've got a funny way of showing it." The tone rang with petulance but Crane didn't let that put him off either.

Crane shifted his grip so that he could turn the kid around. Squeezing his neck brought the kid's eyes up to meet his. "Just because I want you to live your dream, doesn't mean I'm not as scared for you as he is."

Daniel looked to Adam then and though Crane couldn't see what expression Daniel was met with, the kid's resigned sigh told him that only Adam's love and concern must've been showing. Daniel relaxed his stance too, lifted a hand to pat the one Crane still had resting against his neck. "Why is it so hard for you guys to believe me? Hell, you're the ones who raised me; don't you think I know right from wrong?"

"Aw, Daniel," he said, stepping forward and tucking his kid brother under his arm. "It's not that… It's just—"

"Bigger men have tried and failed, sport," Adam finished for Crane, moving in too and ruffling Daniel's hair.

Daniel closed his eyes and shook his head and Crane could feel both the tension and animosity draining from his brother's bones. The kid lifted his head, a small smile curving his lips when he offered, "Yeah, well they probably didn't have parents who already knew the score. Or three big brothers who'd kick their asses if they even considered going down that road."

From what Crane knew of Hendrix, Morrison and Joplin, the kid actually had a decent argument. He couldn't help but huff out a laugh, chuckling, "He has a point," before giving the kid's neck another affectionate squeeze.

"That he does," Adam said seriously, though Crane could see by the sparkle in his eyes that Daniel had successfully broken through that stubborn hide. Adam pointed an accusatory finger at him anyway, his own smile softening the impact when he added, "And don't you forget it."

"I won't; I promise," Daniel replied softly, fixing an equally serious gaze first on Adam, then Crane. His expression sobered even more when he added, "I guess I haven't given you much reason to have faith in me lately."

"Hey, don't say that," Crane chastised. He hated that Daniel was still beating himself up so badly.

"I don't wanna hear that either," Adam said brusquely. "Daniel, we all mess up sometimes. Lord knows I have." Apparently Adam had heard enough of Daniel's self-reproach too.

Daniel actually looked a little affronted. "Oh, come on. When was the last time either of you nearly got your brothers killed?"

"Daniel, it was just a mistake; one you've paid for in spades." Crane had hold of Daniel's shoulders again, resisted shaking him. Wanting so desperately to get through to him that no one blamed him anymore for that damned cave-in.
"Yeah, well. Tell that to the Barretts," Daniel said disgustedly. "I damn near killed Jenny too."

Crane was at a loss. Carey had been over to the house more than a few times since Daniel had come home. And she'd treated him with all of the affection if not more than she had prior to the cave-in. Admittedly Tom hadn't been by, but that was pretty much by mutual accord; that first seizure in the hospital never far from anyone's mind. His absences had absolutely nothing to do with Tom still blaming Daniel for anything.

Crane looked to Adam then, hoping their oldest brother could put an end to this destructive train of thought once and for all. After all, he'd just come from seeing Tom.

Forget ego. Or stubborn pride. And while he was at it, Adam could shove away any of his stupid insecurities about what kind of a provider he was for his family. The moment he saw that too familiar guilt in Daniel's eyes, heard the self-contempt in his voice, Adam couldn't have been any happier with his decision to accept Tom's offer.

Because now he could do this…

Moving in next to Crane, he offered up a wink, giving Crane what he needed to willingly let go of Daniel. Gently cupping Daniel's cheek, Adam spoke assuredly. "Daniel, Tom doesn't blame you anymore. You can believe that."

Though Adam felt Crane relax at his shoulder, Daniel still looked unconvinced. "But—"

"But nothing," Adam interrupted; his lips quirking into a soft smile. "If he did, then why on earth would he have just signed a check over to us to cover your hospital bills?"

"What?" It was Crane who asked; shock undoubtedly contributing to the waver in his voice.

Daniel, on the other hand didn't say a word, though his shock was just as evident. Eyes wide, his mouth frozen in what might have been intended as a question; still he remained silent.

"Danny?" Crane's voice was hushed now, concern softening it as he returned his grasp to Daniel. The kid suddenly looked pale, literally staggered by the news.

By unspoken agreement Adam and Crane moved him back over to the lounge chair, helped him sit down. Crane eased down next to him, their shoulders touching, and lightly gripped Daniel's nearest forearm. The kid looked numb but conversely, he looked like he might just bolt any second.

When Adam repeated his name, those big eyes finally made contact. Looking questioningly at Adam, he finally stammered out, "I—I don't understand."

"It's true, kiddo." Adam was more than willing to explain. He started with Tom's phone call and recounted the meeting in as much detail as he could provide.

Glancing at Crane, he could see the McFaddens' third born was every bit as interested in the story as he was relieved that their financial burden had been lifted. The moisture pooling in those light eyes was all for Daniel's sake though, Adam was sure. Shimmering with gratitude that their family would no longer have the financial debt that troubled Daniel so deeply.

If only Adam could convince Daniel that all of his burdens were gone. He couldn't see even a hint of relief in Daniel's face, just bewilderment and even some strangely out of place anger. Adam knew that could well stem from the hard-headed streak of pride they'd all inherited but he honestly didn't think that was the case here. There was something else going on in his little brother's brain.
and Adam had the sinking feeling it had everything to do with Daniel's unwillingness to forgive himself.

Addressing that concern, he said kindly, though assuredly. "Nobody's blaming you anymore but you, you know? Let it go, kid. Just let it go."

Daniel ran a trembling hand through his hair and shook his head before raising tear-filled eyes to meet Adam's. "How can I?" He said miserably, "You're wrong, Adam. You have to be," he practically demanded; his voice so tight it was almost shrill. "Tom can't possibly forgive me after what I did. Why would he?"

"Because it was an accident." Crane sounded equally adamant, his grip on the kid's arm nearly as fierce as his resolve. "And Tom's forgiven you for your part in it."

Daniel looked away from Crane, apparently still unwilling to hear even an ounce of absolution. Adam wasn't going to let Daniel get away with it though. They'd put off this talk too many times before and though that had always been Daniel's call, it was clear to Adam now that giving in had been a mistake. Daniel had suffered too long already with his self-inflicted guilt.

"Crane's right," he said; his tone gentle. "Don't you think it's about time you stopped beating yourself up about the cave-in and started feeling pride in rescuing the kids instead?"

Clearly frustrated, Daniel's voice cracked as he insisted, "But, I didn't save them. You did. Tom did. You guys dug them out."

Oh, no.

Adam felt gut-punched. He couldn't breathe.

This couldn't be. But looking at Crane he realized it was. Crane actually groaned, looking crushed and like he was about to hurl. They'd both missed this. Nearly three months since Daniel had woken up from his coma and they'd both somehow missed the monumentally important fact that their kid brother had no recollection of saving Jenny and his brothers.

"Oh, God," Crane said, though it came out more like a sob. Adam watched as Crane abruptly let go of Daniel, rocking forward to cover his face with his hands. This had to be killing him. Like it was killing Adam.

Clearly alarmed, Daniel latched onto Crane's arm this time. "Crane? What—?" Confusion and fear warred for supremacy as his eyes sought out Adam. "What's going on? What's wrong?"

Knowing that Crane would torture himself over this as much as he had missing Daniel's decline in the first place, Adam sat down beside him, sandwiching Crane in the middle. With a hand resting on Crane's bowed neck, Adam riveted his gaze on Daniel. "Daniel, this is really important. It's about the rescue and you need to hear it."

Like all the other times the subject had come up, Daniel was already baulking, even pulling away from his distressed brother. "Why? What difference does it make? We all know I messed up." He sounded so young and upset and Adam remembered just why he'd backed off all of those other times.

He couldn't this time. Wouldn't.

But when Crane's pleading gaze rose to meet Daniel's and he whispered, "Danny, please. You need to hear him out," Adam didn't have to push.
Daniel sighed heavily, relenting.

Not wasting any time in case his stubborn brother changed his mind, Adam forged ahead with the truth. "God, how I wish I'd known how bad your memory still was." He reached across Crane to lightly grasp Daniel's chin, intent on holding the kid's attention, making sure he couldn't look away. "You're the reason Jenny and the boys made it out alive, sport. We had to stop digging but you found another way to get them out."

Adam could feel Daniel's resistance, the tremble in his chin, and was grateful when Crane looped his arm around the kid's shoulders.

"But— I— I don't..." Adam let go as his little brother struggled to remember. It was obvious there'd been no light bulb moment with the news. That was okay, though. The tears clinging to those dark lashes told Adam that Daniel was working his way up to believing him.

Daniel sought out Crane then, whose glistening eyes looked like they might overflow too. Crane somehow managed a shaky smile before reeling Daniel in under his chin. Adam watched, his heart swelling with renewed pride when Crane settled him in against his shoulder, declaring, "You saved them, Danny. It was all you."

Their little brother finally let go, wrapped in Crane's arms and returning his embrace just as fiercely. Adam knew the boy was shedding long overdue tears of relief as the albatross he'd been carrying was finally freed. Adam hoped there might be tears of joy shed too but realized those might not come until the questions he was certain Daniel would have for them were answered.

For now though, big brother knew what he could do, or rather say, to help them along. "We're all so proud of you, Danny." He swore it like an oath and then, enveloping them both in his hold, Adam hung on tight. Trying and failing to be the one stoic brother that didn't let any tears fall too.

Daniel was looking more than a little dazed and Crane couldn't help but worry. His little brother had just suffered quite a shock and, even though the news was good, it had still blind-sided him.

Crane was doing his utmost not to berate himself. He needed to focus on Daniel and not the anger and guilt that had settled deep in his gut over not realizing that Daniel didn't remember the rescue. He could usually read Daniel like a book but had failed miserably at reading the kid's subtext this time. He could still vividly remember Daniel's outburst in the hospital just before he'd been discharged. "None of this would've happened if I'd listened to Tom," was imprinted in Crane's memory as though he'd heard it yesterday. Just as, "There's nothing to talk about. I messed up and nearly got my brothers killed," still reverberated through his mind.

If only he'd realized that Daniel's memories were so much more limited than they had seemed.

The truth was the kid still had amnesia when it came to much of the cave-in. That had become more than evident as the three of them sat huddled together with Crane and Adam relating the events of the rescue to Daniel. Daniel sitting there rapt, with only fragmented memories of what had happened before Tom and Carey's arrival and almost none at all afterward. Daniel's recall was so spotty he didn't remember getting hurt, or helping to dig Jenny and the boys out. Or anything at all about finding their dad's map and the ventilator shaft.

What he did remember was that utterly terrifying moment of realization when the ceiling began caving in, separating him from his little brothers; the rescue teams covered in rock dust and; at least one of the times Tom had railed at him.

The poor kid. No wonder his guilt had been so overwhelming.
He'd run out of questions for them to answer and that had allowed Crane's mind to wander. Which was never a good thing. Crane shook off his own guilt once more, redirecting his attention outward where it should be.

"Hey… you okay?" He asked Daniel, reaching up and brushing an errant bang out of his eyes. "You're looking a little shell-shocked."

Daniel shrugged. "It's a lot to take in," he admitted, looking a little sheepish.

"I think we can call that an understatement, kid," Adam responded, his words wrapped in obvious affection.

Daniel's head lowered briefly but, when he raised it, responding with, "Yeah, I guess it is," his eyes looked lighter somehow and a hint of a smile played on his lips. And Crane dared to believe that tonight's revelation had lifted a huge burden from Daniel's shoulders.

Tonight had been full of surprises. From Daniel playing guitar, to learning that the hospital debt was going to be paid off, the night had been pretty amazing. Adam and Daniel might have even come to a bit of an understanding about the kid's music… which was damn near miraculous in its own right. And now, to top it all off, Daniel's guilt had begun to lift.

So maybe Crane could afford to let go some of his own too.

Deciding that sounded like a hell of a plan, Crane bumped the kid's knee with his own. "Well, I don't know about you guys, but I think it's time we head home, huh?"

"Oh, shit… Steve!" Clearly having forgotten his host until now, Daniel darted his gaze around the patio and beyond.

"It's okay," Crane placated. Indicating the house, he continued. "He took to higher ground while you two were squaring off."

Adam had the decency to look abashed though Daniel still looked worried.

Apparently noting that too, Adam stood and offered Daniel a hand up. "Come on. Let's go track him down."

Gripping Adam's hand, Daniel moved to get up, using Crane's shoulder for leverage he clearly didn't need. The playful shove that rocked Crane backward and nearly off the lounge chair was as much a sign that his little brother was truly bouncing back as them playing music together had been.

Righting himself, Crane took a few seconds to catch up to his brothers. His, "You little twerp," as he smacked Daniel in the belly absent of any venom thanks to the grin he couldn't wipe off his face if he'd tried.

By the time they made it to the French doors at the back of the house, their levity had subsided. Crane offered to do the talking but Daniel was resolute. It was his job. First knocking a few times against one of the glass panels, Daniel jiggled the door handle.

Adam's sardonic, "Well, that's a good sign," as the door opened succeeded in relaxing the kid at least a little bit. Crane smirked too.

"Hey, Fletcher?" Daniel called out and the teen emerged from behind the island in the kitchen.

"You okay?"
"Everything all right?"

Crane exchanged an amused glance with Adam. These unlikely friends had definitely become just that.

"Yeah, it's all good," Daniel answered, sounding like he really meant it as he stepped forward and met Steve half way.

Steve raised an eyebrow and then gave both Adam and Crane long, scrutinizing looks. When Crane realized the kid was checking out Adam's fat lip and his own corresponding scraped and swollen knuckles, he felt the throb in his hand reignite with vigor. As he shook out his hand, from his periphery, he could see Adam rub his lip self-consciously too.

As the instigator of the punch, Crane felt compelled to explain himself but Daniel spoke up before he could do so.

"Told you he was a pussy-cat," Daniel dead-panned and Steve snorted outright.

Eyeing up Crane again, the kid answered, "Oh, yeah. I can see that."

Despite the sneaking suspicion that he was the topic of a conversation that apparently had some history between the two teens, Crane was more than willing to become the brunt of this joke. Steve had relaxed palpably and that was having the same effect on Daniel. Good. Crane would let Daniel take the lead on this as long as he was up to it.

Exchanging glances with Adam, Crane could see that big brother had decided to do the same.

Daniel's response was earnest. "Hey, man. I'm really sorry we did this here. It's just… We needed to clear some air and I guess…"

"Tonight was the night." Steve supplied correctly when Daniel fumbled for his words. "So, everything's okay now?" He asked again.

Daniel turned back to Crane and Adam before answering "Yeah, I think it really is." There was that warm smile. The one that Crane could never resist. It was working on Adam and Steve too.

Adam apparently took that as his cue to move forward and Crane followed his lead. Standing behind Daniel, Adam rested his hands on the kid's shoulders.

"Good outcome or not, I'm not too happy about us airing our dirty laundry in your backyard," he said seriously.

"It's okay," Steve responded; pretty graciously as far as Crane was concerned. "My family's been known to have had a few public battles too."

Crane didn't really know how to respond to that, so he was grateful when Adam spoke up again. "Yeah, well, keep hanging around this family of hotheads and you're bound to see a few more."

Steve's eyes surprisingly lit up then, hope shining in them when he asked, "Does that mean I'm still welcome?"

"What? Of course you're…" Daniel's words cut off suddenly, his own eyes growing big and Crane could only assume he'd just remembered what had set off Adam's tirade in the first place…

The joint.
Frankly, Crane had forgotten about it too. They'd covered so much other territory – serious, monumental territory – since then. He looked at Adam then, whose jaw was grinding at its pensive best.

"Adam?" Daniel's plea was almost heartbreaking to hear.

It worked on Adam too, who sighed heavily as he rested his hands on his hips. "You're still welcome," he said sternly, his face softening when Daniel broke into another grin. Schooling his features once more, he added, "But under no circumstances do you ever expose Evan, Ford and Guthrie to pot; is that understood?"

The condition actually surprised Crane. Knowing his eldest brother’s stance on the subject, he expected an outright ban. Maybe Adam was being realistic enough to recognize that he couldn't police Daniel's friends. Or, Crane preferred to believe, Adam was actually taking Daniel for his word. That just because he was going to be exposed to temptation, it didn't mean he was going to succumb. Crane sure hoped it was the latter.

"Yes, sir," Steve answered gravely.

"Good," Adam replied crisply. "And don't call me 'sir'. It makes me sound old."

Adam immediately muffled Daniel's contribution to the discussion, though Crane could still easily make out his, "You are old."

Despite the wrestling match going on between Daniel and Adam as the younger tried to break free of Adam's hold, Steve still looked concerned.

"You all right?" Crane asked, putting an end to his brothers' horseplay.

Addressing Adam instead, Steve spoke softly. "Are you gonna tell my dad?"

Daniel immediately shot Adam a plaintive look and then an imploring one at Crane when apparently he didn't like what he could see brewing in Adam's eyes. Crane was pretty confident he knew what Adam was going to say. Though he knew it wouldn't satisfy Daniel, and despite Crane's own involvement in the night's "festivities," he was going to back their elder up on this.

Adam actually took a moment before he responded, no doubt collecting his thoughts. "Steve, did you know that before I said yes to Daniel coming out here the first time, I had a talk with your dad?"

The kid said nothing, just shook his head, his attention fixed on Adam.

Adam's eyes slid to Daniel though, an apology shining in them. "You see, even though Daniel's been getting better every day, he's still recovering. His brain is still healing; he's still on medications and…" Adam swallowed hard… "he's still very much at risk."

"Adam—" Daniel tried to cut in but Crane snagged his sleeve.

Pulling him back against his chest, Crane lightly wrapped his arms around Daniel, resting them on the kid’s shoulders. He knew Daniel didn't want to be portrayed as the brain damaged victim in front of Steve but both boys needed to hear this.

Adam threw Crane an appreciative look before carrying on. "So, I called your dad and gave him the lowdown... Made it absolutely clear that Daniel's life was in his hands." Though he'd been speaking gravely, Crane could hear the warmth in Adam's tone when he added, "And he promised me he'd watch out for him."
Steve's only response was his bowed head. And Daniel, still in Crane's grasp, mirrored Steve.

Adam reached out and lifted Steve's chin. "So, can you see why, when Ed's away, I need to do the same? What kind of man would that make me if I didn't?"

Crane was pretty damn proud of Adam in that moment. His eldest brother could be eloquent when he didn't let his temper best him. Unfortunately, the man had expressed his point of view so well that Crane was feeling pretty rotten about having been so casual about the pot.

Maybe tonight he should have been more parent than friend?

But then he thought about playing the Eagles with Daniel tonight, sharing in Daniel's joy, and decided it wasn't that simple. Maybe they'd both been right.

Adam sure didn't seem to be struggling with his decision, something Crane was envious of at the moment. Oblivious to Crane's own doubts, Adam didn't wait for Steve to respond to his question. They all knew it was rhetorical anyway. "So, what that means is that you are going to tell him what happened; not me," Adam said pointedly. "And you're gonna get him to tell me, so I know you have. Right?"

Steve actually looked a little relieved, even though he wasn't getting off the hook at all. "Yes, s—Adam," he replied, the catch eliciting an approving smile from Adam. "I will."

"Good, man," Adam said, in surprisingly good humor, as he clapped Steve on the arm. From there Adam declared it was time to head home and Crane couldn't agree more. Daniel was looking wrung out and had piled on some more guilt thanks to Adam sentencing Steve to his confession. Fortunately Steve was being good about it and was insisting to Daniel that everything was cool between them.

Crane wasn't too happy about this insecurity that had become almost a side-effect of Daniel's injury and, when he was as exhausted as he was now, reared itself more frequently. He could only hope that it would fade just as the scar from the ICP catheter was diminishing over time.

Steve walked them out front, joining them as they stood next to the truck, and Crane dug into his pocket, pulling out the keys to the adjacent Jeep. Guilt tugged at him. He was confident that he was okay to drive; he'd had only the one beer after all and had choked out more of the joint than he'd inhaled. But, Adam's damn "what kind of man would I be" speech was eating away at him.

Resigned, Crane tossed the keys to Steve. "We're gonna hitch a ride with Adam," he said, steering Daniel over to the truck's passenger side. "Drive it in tomorrow and one of us'll get you home after work, okay?"

"Yeah, sure," Steve agreed, thankfully not asking any questions.

They said their goodbyes then and climbed into the pickup, Daniel squashed in the middle as was his lot these days. Crane expected the kid to comment, to say something about their driving arrangement. He was pretty damn surprised then when it was Adam who turned to him before backing out of the driveway. It was too dark to see it but Crane could hear his brother's smirk when he said drily, "With age comes great responsibility, doesn't it?"

Crane closed his eyes; felt his ears burn. Adam knew. Of course he knew.

Because good parents always knew.

And Crane was pretty damn sure he was never going to touch pot again.
He wasn't going to answer Adam either.

Adam didn't seem to be looking for one and didn't appear to be mad, so Crane decided not to wind himself up about what Adam did or didn't know and instead focus on tonight's triumphs. On Daniel's triumphs.

With those positive thoughts filling his head and the combination of the darkness and the rhythm of the tires meeting the road as they headed home, Crane could feel the tension he'd been carrying for so very long begin to melt away. And with Daniel's warm weight sinking heavily against his side, it was no wonder he let it lull him to sleep.

It was a peaceful sleep too. At least until Daniel woke up with a start, practically shouting:

"Shit! What are we going to do about the fundraiser?"

_To be continued._
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

To saberivojo and janissal1 for expertise that helped keep this story firmly based in reality, as I post the final chapter of this epic, I offer my heartfelt thanks. And to Katt for once again going that extra mile, staying up late, calming me down and, most importantly, offering wonderful insights into these characters and pushing me to make each chapter better, I owe you my first-born.

There are quite a few canon character appearances and/or references in this chapter, including: Marie; Silas; the Barretts; Buck Tanner; as well as newsman Glenn Terry and, lastly, Stormy Weathers

I have placed some more notes at the end of the story too since I didn't want to put any readers to sleep before the first paragraph ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Quite the turnout, isn't it?" Hannah said with a bright smile and Ford wondered not for the first time how she knew exactly what he was thinking. From his vantage-point just off to the side of the stage, it looked like the entire county was filling in all of the rows in front of the Frogtown Pavilion. He was seeing as many unfamiliar faces as those he'd known all his life. It warmed his heart. Because he knew most of these people were here to support his family.

Even if not in an official capacity anymore.

"Yeah, it's really awesome," he replied, knowing his grin was almost as big as hers.

The family had all been dumbfounded when Adam, Crane and Daniel had arrived home together the night of Adam's meeting with Mr. Barrett. Daniel looking exhausted and yet somehow… better. Adam had soon explained why; his announcement about the sale of the mine paying off the family's hospital debt prompting a noisy if short-lived celebration.

Short-lived for a few reasons, the first being Guthrie's uninhibited, "Did you guys fight?" in observation of the colorful bruise forming under Adam's puffy bottom lip and Crane's raw-looking knuckles. Their youngest hadn't exactly been the only one to notice. After all, Adam's fat lip had been kind of hard to miss. It just hadn't seemed like the right time to point out that the head of their family had apparently been punched by the only brother that even came close to having Ford's milder temperament. When Guthrie then directed a reproachful, "Wow, you must've really pissed him off," at Adam that had made Daniel and Crane snicker like school-girls and their eldest blush before grinning wide enough to split open his lip again, nobody had bothered again to ask what had happened.

It didn't really seem to matter anymore.

The second reason had been Adam's quiet revelation that Daniel had no recollection of the rescue. Ford had to admit that the news had shocked the heck out of him. After all, he'd spent a lot of time helping Daniel with his rehab and he'd never caught on. Never had a clue.
He still felt kind of bad about that.

And though Daniel had seemed oddly embarrassed about his faulty memory and hadn't wanted any fuss, well Ford just hadn't been able to oblige him. Neither could an emotional Evan, who'd approached Daniel and softly scolded him with, "Shut up, you jerk," before hauling him into the kind of rib crushing hug that would've rivaled one of Brian's. Especially once Ford and then Guthrie had piled on too.

The final reason for the aborted celebration had been Hannah's new mission to figure out what to do about the fundraiser. Her first call had been to Marie, and Ford had quickly lost count of how many other phone calls she'd made afterward. Come to think of it, his sister-in-law had still been on the phone when he'd wandered off to bed for the night.

It had been the next morning, at breakfast, when Hannah had proclaimed that the fundraiser was going forward. Only now, Sonora Regional's Neurological and Emergency departments were going to be the beneficiaries instead.

Nobody had to ask why those departments had been selected.

Even though their family no longer needed the money, none of the vendors or performers had backed out of participating in the fundraiser. And that pretty much blew Ford away. Sure, the cause was still an extremely important one but Ford couldn't help but think that everyone was still coming as a show of support for the McFadden family, Daniel especially. And that made his heart just about soar.

He had a feeling Daniel felt the same way too. Ford's brother was keeping a pretty low profile at the moment. The well-wishers he'd run into ever since the family had arrived at the fairgrounds still overwhelmed him and Ford had watched with approval as Crane had eventually shepherded Daniel in behind the stage. As far as he knew, the two of them were still hiding out back there catching up with Stormy.

Confident that Daniel was safe with Crane, his thoughts turned to all his brothers; scattered as they were around the fairgrounds at the moment.

The family had stuck together when they'd first arrived, immediately heading over to the silent auction table. By mutual agreement, they'd decided to donate the gold they'd collected from The Howling Man mine to the auction.

Now that they were no longer the beneficiaries of the fundraiser, they all wanted to give too.

Donating was a pretty hard thing to do though when you didn't have enough time to make anything and never had a whole lot of extra money lying around. And despite Mr. Barrett's generosity, nothing had really changed for them in that department. Something Ford knew because he'd overheard Hannah and his older brothers talking about their finances. Thanks to Tom, Daniel's hospital bills had been paid off, as had a few of their lesser debts. What was left over Daniel was adamant should go into savings toward education for the two youngest siblings. Ford had wanted to protest – that money belonged to Daniel as far as he was concerned. But, he'd kept his mouth shut. He hadn't been invited into the discussion; shouldn't have even been eavesdropping in the first place. Besides, the grownups had all agreed so Ford would've been outnumbered anyway.

None of that solved the issue of what to donate to the fundraiser though. But, after mulling it over with Evan, the two of them had suggested donating the gold. After everything Daniel had suffered; how much he had lost of himself and was still struggling to regain… they couldn't imagine that Hannah really wanted to wear a reminder of the place that had nearly destroyed their
family. Even a melted down reminder.

Ford knew Guthrie had been a little disappointed, though to his credit he hadn't objected. And Daniel had stayed pretty quiet about the subject too. That didn't really surprise Ford. Even after learning about his part in the rescue, Daniel wasn't terribly inclined to talk about the subject. Hannah agreeing to the plan wasn't really a surprise either.

So, they'd donated the gold, which Tom had officially declared was worth over four hundred dollars. And then they'd pretty much split up. Going their separate ways; checking out the vendors, playing some of the fundraising games, and spending a lot of time talking with neighbors and friends.

The last time Ford had seen Brian, he and Gregg had been standing in line for cotton-candy. Both of them with pretty ladies on their arms. In Gregg's case it was his horse-crazy girlfriend, Laura. In Brian's, it was Manel; Daniel's respiratory therapist snug against his side. Geez, was she ever pretty. So much so that Ford had a hard time looking her in the eye, even though she'd always been sweet as one of Hannah's pies to him. Heck, who was he kidding? Especially because she'd always been so sweet to him.

Evan was somewhere with Steve, he supposed. Probably talking up some girls. Though, with the show scheduled to start in about twenty minutes, Ford expected them to take up position in the front row fairly soon.

Speaking of Steve, Ford could just now see his dad making his way over to where Hannah and he were standing. With Guthrie and Billy in tow.

Mr. Fletcher had a warm smile on his face as he approached, though he looked a little harried too. "Hannah, I don't know how you do it," he said, shaking his head. "I thought Billy was a bottomless pit."

From the mustard and ketchup stains on both boys' faces and shirts, Ford could safely assume that Edgar had just treated his youngest son and Guthrie to some hot dogs or burgers. Maybe both.

"He's had six role models to take after," Hannah replied with a hint of laughter, and then promptly attacked both boys' faces like they were three year-olds, using the kerchief that had been in Ford's back pocket until just a moment earlier. Tsk-tsking at the squirming kids before her, she ultimately abandoned her efforts announcing that a trip over to the truck, where she'd stashed wash-cloths and a water bottle, was required. "When you see Adam, tell him we'll be back in just a sec."

"Okay, I will," Ford assured her.

"I better lend a hand," Mr. Fletcher offered genially and then promptly caught up to Hannah and her charges as they headed toward the truck. Ford wanted to tell him that Hannah was perfectly capable of handling the two boys on her own but then thought better of it. Deciding that his sister-in-law deserved a break any time she could get one.

Besides, Crane and Daniel and Evan and Steve were converging on Ford and he was looking forward to spending even just a few minutes in their company without any other adults around. Or little brothers tagging along.

As they met up with each other at the front corner of the stage, Daniel was greeted with a chorus of "Hi, Daniel's" and best wishes from the people starting to take their seats for the show. And though Daniel was gracious about it, Ford could tell his brother was feeling both humbled and pretty darn uncomfortable.
"Here, switch with Evan," Crane said softly, guiding Daniel into position against the stage where Evan had been casually leaning. Following Crane's lead, Ford and the others shuffled around so that Daniel was safely ensconced behind a barrier made up of their bodies in front of him and the stage at his back. The human shield worked, allowing Daniel to relax and the five of them to shoot the breeze. Talking about Stormy's upcoming show, girls, the muscle car that Edgar and his sons had arrived in, girls, the warm weather... which somehow brought about another mention of girls, and so on.

It was kind of ironic that it ended up being a girl that brought an end to their lively discussion. A much younger girl.

"Ford; hey, Ford!" Jenny Barrett called to him excitedly as she and two of her giddy little friends came bounding up to their group. "Do you know where—"

"—Guthrie is?" Ford supplied hurriedly. She looked different somehow but since the last thing Ford wanted was to be seen checking out the appearance of a twelve year-old girl while he was hanging out with his older siblings, he wasn't about to dwell on it. Certain she wanted nothing more than to torment his little brother like always, he was more than happy to oblige her and send her on her way. Indicating the parking lot, Ford told her, "He's with Billy and Hannah over—"

"No, silly," Jenny cut in this time, in that superior tone she typically used with Guthrie. Looking at Ford like he was a bug, she placed her hands on her hips. "Why Daniel, of course." And Ford felt quite confident there was a silent "you idiot" intended for him in there somewhere.

The barrier fell apart in that instant as Evan snorted soft drink out of his nose and Steve broke ranks laughing at both Evan and the look of disdain the pint-sized brunette had just thrown at him. Correction—had thrown at them both. And with Crane's attention momentarily diverted to their sputtering brother; that gave an undeterred Jenny a direct path to the apparent object of her quest.

Poor Daniel, already overwhelmed by all the attention he'd been getting, looked like a deer caught in the headlights.

"Uh, hi, Jenny," Daniel said uncertainly.

Ford was pretty sure this was the first time Daniel and Jenny had seen each other since he'd rescued her. Though they all knew the Barretts had forgiven Daniel for his part in the cave-in, Daniel's obvious unease was telling Ford that his brother wasn't entirely convinced.

He needn't have worried.

"Oh, Daniel," she said; her voice sounding overly dramatic and strangely rehearsed. Kind of like Carol Burnett when she played Scarlett O'Hara on TV, only without the hilarious wardrobe. As she reached out both hands and batted her long eye-lashes – and, yes, Ford was absolutely certain now that Jenny was wearing mascara – Daniel numbly grasped them.

But not before elbowing a snickering Steve in the ribs.

The situation was hopeless. Crane was about the kindest, most respectful person Ford knew and even he was desperately trying to contain his laughter to only the tears welling in his eyes and the smirk he hid behind his hand. Steve was a lost cause, though Ford had to give him credit for staying upright. And Evan, well he was still trying to breathe air instead of soda.

"Ignore these idiots, Jenny." After shooting the guys an exasperated look, Daniel returned his attention to the girl, his voice softening as he asked, "What can I do for you?"

Well, if Jenny Barrett and her twittering teenybopper friends weren't already crazy over Daniel,
his version of gallantry had just sent them head over heels into puppy love.

And apparently Jenny's precocious confidence had found its limits. With her small hands held in Daniel's grasp, and his "dreamy" eyes – this according to the female half of the tenth grade and most definitely not Ford – steadily focused on her, Jenny Barrett was finally at a loss for words.

"Daniel, I—I—"

"Go on, sweetheart," Daniel said patiently, apparently oblivious to the effect the endearment would have on her. Ford just rolled his eyes, not finding this display nearly as amusing as his older counterparts did. After all, he was an old hat at this. He'd been witnessing various versions of it at school over the last two years.

Inhaling deeply, Jenny finally blurted out in one long breath, "I wanted to thank you for saving me. You saved me, Daniel. You're my hero!"

She disappeared, with an outright squeal, just as abruptly as she'd arrived. Slipping away from Daniel's hold and tearing off at a run with her friends at either side. And Ford couldn't help but wonder how anyone could run that fast and still maintain a giggle like that, all at the same time.

"Can somebody please tell me what just happened?" Daniel asked, clearly mortified though a smile was definitely playing at his lips. "Was Jenny actually wearing lip gloss?"

"That girl's plum in love," old Silas Warden supplied helpfully as he made his way over to the second row to take his seat. "Boy, don't you recognize when a girl's moonin' for you?"

Ford didn't think he had ever before seen Daniel blush like that.

Not surprisingly it was Crane who came to Daniel's rescue, wrapping a supportive arm around his back but not before offering his input too. "I'll tell you what just happened," he said, his tone mockingly grave. "That girl's just set her sights on your virtue."

"Jesus, Crane; she's twelve!"

"Who's twelve?"

The arrival of their oldest brother from above prevented Crane from taking any further advantage of Daniel's outrage. Looking up at Adam towering over all of them from atop the stage, Crane wisely addressed him instead. "Uh, we were just trying to decide who was older – Guthrie or Billy."

Crane was always pretty quick on his feet; a trait Ford admired.

"Uh huh," Adam replied disbelievingly. "Sure you were."

There were a lot of things Ford admired about Adam too. Including his uncanny ability to catch his siblings in a lie.

Seemingly shrugging it off though, Adam reached a hand down to Daniel. "You ready to do this?"

"As I'll ever be," Daniel replied nervously as he gripped Adam's wrist and let Crane and Evan boost him up. The stage stood about shoulder height to Ford and it was one that Daniel had easily hopped up onto under his own power in the past. Seeing the combined efforts of his brothers to get Daniel up there was one of those small but stark reminders that Daniel still hadn't fully recovered.
That was okay though, Ford reminded himself. His brother was getting better and better every day.

"Hey," Crane called up to him softly, catching Daniel's attention before he took completely to his feet. "You've got this." He added with a supportive smile before giving Daniel's pant-leg an affectionate tug.

"Piece of cake," Daniel replied as he grinned cockily at Crane, bending down even lower with Hannah's well-timed reappearance and her insistence on giving him a good luck kiss. He finally stood and, with Adam resting a hand on his shoulder, Daniel scanned the faces of the friends and family gathering just in front of the stage. Ford hoped he was gaining strength from them all.

Ford felt Brian squeeze his neck as he sidled up behind him. Looking back over his shoulder he met Manel's sparkling eyes instead and this time Ford held her gaze. Saying, "Hi," he gave her a warm smile, one she returned with interest.

If there was one thing he'd learned from Daniel over the past three months, it was that there were much bigger fears to face and challenges to overcome than keeping eye contact with a pretty girl. Ford just needed to remind himself of that every once in a while.

As everyone took their seats and Adam escorted Daniel upstage to just inside the curtains; KNWW's Glenn Terry, the master of ceremonies for the event, made his way to the microphone at center-stage. Announcing the beginning of the show, he introduced Marie to the crowd as the official chairperson of the fundraiser.

Marie was great, like always. Warm and funny and just loaded with personality. For the few people that might not have been aware, she briefly explained the circumstances surrounding the change in beneficiaries, just touching on the fact that a last-minute anonymous donor had taken care of the funds for the original cause. Even though for most of the audience that probably wasn't really news anymore; it still earned a cheer from the crowd.

Though not entirely surprised, Ford was pretty impressed that the Barretts wanted to keep the donation anonymous. Tom was a businessman though and on the Town Council, so Ford knew that word of his donation would've earned him even more goodwill in the community. He had to respect the man for not taking advantage of that.

Ford was pretty confident that the biggest round of applause was still to come, once Marie introduced the fundraiser's Honorary Chairman. And, because of it, Ford felt butterflies in his belly like he hadn't since he'd sung *Take Me Home, Country Roads* on stage with Daniel's band.

"Ladies, gentlemen, friends and neighbors," Marie began with a broad grin. "I give you our Honorary Chair and Murphys' own...Daniel McFadden!"

Sure enough, as Daniel approached Marie with Adam at his back, the fairgrounds let out a collective roar. Along with boisterous clapping, there was hooting and hollering and Ford could barely hear himself think. His brothers of course were contributing to the cacophony and Ford damn near bumped into Manel when Evan's exuberant cheering knocked him sideways. Manel didn't seem to care though, caught up as she was in the excitement, her index finger and thumb pressed firmly between her lips as she whistled liked it was a contest.

Even though Daniel's eyes were pretty much hidden by the shadow of the cowboy hat he was wearing, he looked about as jittery as Ford had ever seen him. Rubbing his hands up and down his thighs as though maybe his palms were sweaty, Ford could've kicked himself for every jealous thought he'd ever had over Daniel's ease on stage. True to his nature though, with what appeared to be a gentle nudge from Adam and a motherly hug from Marie before she exited backstage,
Daniel finally spoke into the mike.

"Hey, how is everybody doing?" He asked softly. And a little shakily. The audience didn't seem to notice and answered back with more enthusiastic applause, whoops and hollers. Daniel smiled but it was pretty clear that his nerves hadn't settled down as he admitted, "Wow, who'd've thought after all this time I'd ever feel nervous up here, huh?" He laughed nervously then and Ford caught movement from the corner of his eye.

It was Crane, his face pinched with concern, standing and stepping toward the stage. Ford wasn't exactly sure what his brother's protective instincts had in store but whatever his intentions, someone from the audience saved Crane from having to execute them.

"We love you, Daniel!" A decidedly feminine voice shouted from somewhere in the middle rows and, amid the whistles and applause that followed, Ford watched Daniel break into a grin just before he dropped his head and took a step away from the microphone.

Adam was grinning too and Ford sensed rather than watched Crane resume his seat a few places over from him. Ford couldn't take his eyes off Daniel.

In all his years of watching Daniel perform, Ford had never tried to copy him. It wouldn't have been right for one and, besides, their personalities were completely different. But that didn't mean he didn't study him. The eye contact he made with his audience, near and far; how he held onto the mike stand or the microphone itself when he wasn't strumming his guitar. And how Daniel leaned into it a little sideways when he was. Even his confident walk as he worked both sides of larger stages like this one.

So, when Daniel remained standing there with his head down, but then reached for and wrapped his left hand around the mike stand, well, Ford just had a good feeling.

And when Daniel took one step forward and raised his head, tipping his hat back so that everyone, even in the back row, could see his sparkling eyes and beaming smile, Ford knew his big brother had found his footing again. Mastering the stage and his audience when, with that slightly sideways lean, he schooled his features and spoke huskily into the mike.

"And don't I just love you too, darlin'."

More applause and laughter erupted, along with some cheers and "All right's", including those courtesy of Evan and Steve. And Ford couldn't help but grin as he watched Adam throw his head back and laugh with obvious delight.

Ford was close enough to make out Adam saying, "They're all yours, sport. Knock 'em dead," as he slapped Daniel in the belly and offered up a salute and a bow to his kid brother before making his way over to stand next to Glenn.

Adam's comical gestures kept everyone's spirits high but Daniel eventually raised both hands to silence the crowd, which worked so effectively everyone immediately started to laugh all over again. Eventually order resumed though and Daniel deftly removed the mike from the stand and began to speak more seriously.

"Let me start off by thanking everyone for coming out for such a wonderful cause. I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank Doctors Lee and Romano and their staff at the Sonora Regional Hospital for the incredible work they do."

Though Ford couldn't see Dr. Lee from his vantage point when Daniel prompted him to stand up for a well-deserved ovation, Ford had already known the neurosurgeon would be in the audience.
He'd seen the man earlier on the grounds, along with a number of Daniel's nurses and their families, including Diane Raymond and her husband Scott. He supposed Dr. Romano was working the E/R since Daniel hadn't pointed him out. That was a shame but Ford certainly understood. As did Daniel.

Gabe Coulter and Hank Lundgren were there too, only they were on duty; the paramedics having volunteered themselves to work the first aid station. It was heartening to know that these wonderful people who'd all had a hand in Daniel's recovery were getting a chance to see him looking and doing so much better.

Daniel continued with his high praise for the hospital, the crowd sobering along with him when he said, "I know I wouldn't be standing here today if it wasn't for them, so please give them another round of applause."

Daniel returned his mike to the stand so that he could lead the crowd in its show of appreciation before he silenced them again, this time with just one raised hand.

"I'd also like to take this moment to publicly thank all of you, our friends and neighbors, for the support you've shown my family." Before anyone could respond, Daniel continued his command of the audience, his voice remarkably steady even though Ford was pretty sure the extra shine in his eyes was due to tears. "It's not the first time you all have rallied around us and, even though, in the end we didn't need the help you offered this time, please know that we love you all and we thank-you with all our of our hearts."

Damn if Ford wasn't tearing up now too. But then, looking at Manel and Brian to his left and Evan and Crane to his right, he realized he wasn't at all alone in getting caught up in the emotion of the moment. He looked back up at Daniel, who really seemed okay. Just in time to catch him taking off his hat to salute the crowd.

Daniel was pretty much having his way with the audience at this point, their applause and cheering continuous, and Ford couldn't have been any more proud. He was lapping it up and he sure hoped Daniel was too. Looking all around him at his family members, Ford couldn't help but grin widely as he met each of their beaming faces.

Except Evan was now looking expectantly at him, with really big eyes. As was Crane beside him. And, as he replayed in his head the last words Daniel had just said into the microphone, he suddenly realized why…

"Now, without further ado and as soon as my little brother Ford gets his hide up here, we'll be able to get this show on the road… with the Bret Harte Union High School concert band and their rendition of Don't Stop Believing."

"Oh, crap!"

Suddenly Ford experienced a minor case of déjà vu as he felt Crane and Brian grab him by the arms and hoist him awkwardly onto the stage. It wasn't that he was afraid to get up there this time. He'd just forgotten that the concert band was performing first. That he was performing first.

The crowd seemed to appreciate the McFadden brothers' impromptu comedy routine but that did nothing to prevent Ford's face from turning bright red. He could feel his ears burning, they were so darn hot.

But, despite the fact that he really, really hated being the center of attention like this, not to mention putting himself in Mrs. Prescott, his music teacher's bad books, the band was going to have to wait just a minute longer.
Daniel was still standing at the microphone. Wearing that big, bright, goofy grin he always wore when one of his younger brothers did something utterly stupid. It felt so good to see Daniel with that smile. And while he was on stage, no less.

Yup, his band-mates could wait just a little longer. Long enough for Ford to stop and give his big brother a hug.

Swilling around a mouthful of tap water, Crane unceremoniously spat it into the sink and drained it before taking a hesitant look in the mirror. Yup, it was official. He looked like shit. He wished he could blame it on the artificial lighting in the tour bus' bathroom, but he knew the bloodshot eyes and grey pallor were all natural. All him.

At least he couldn't possibly have anything left in his stomach. If he didn't know better, he'd have sworn he'd thrown up cake from Guthrie's last birthday.

God, he hated this. Give him facts and figures and put him behind a podium and he could master any stage. Give him a cause, like pitting Adam in an election against Buck Tanner, and he could publicly speak his mind. But put music to it, or ask him to carry a tune in front of an audience, and he was toast.

He remembered Michelle, a girl he'd dated for a few months while at Davis, had taken great pains to try and figure out his stage-fright after he'd softly serenaded her one night with his guitar. She had wanted to show him off to her friends and, though flattered, it was something that Crane had baulked at. Thirty odd hours of Psych 101 had made her an expert though, and she'd wanted to get to the bottom of it. She'd decided it had something to do with "that night"… that his folks dying the night of the talent contest's dress rehearsal had scarred him for life. He hadn't had the heart to tell her he'd been every bit as afflicted before the accident.

He'd just always been painfully shy about singing in public. Even in church, though with his family by his side, it was something he'd been able to endure. Besides, with a little brother who'd willingly, hell eagerly, take the spotlight instead, it had never been a big deal.

Until now.

Crane was so damn proud of Daniel. Of how hard he was fighting to come back. To get well again. And to feel productive again. Back in that hospital room, Crane had vowed to be there for his kid brother every step of the way. That he'd fight for and with Daniel. And it was paying off. Crane couldn't even count the number of times he'd been approached today by people telling him how great Daniel looked. That, seeing him now, they never would've been able to guess the trauma he'd been through. Or that he had almost died.

And Crane would thank them and marvel with them and send them on their way with a smile.

But he could still tell. Crane could see it in the clothes that still hung loosely and in the newer notches Daniel was still using in his belts. And in the slightly puckered scar that peeked out through Daniel's hair; shining in the glow of moonlight seeping through their window whenever Crane, who'd previously always been first to head upstairs, would sit on the edge of his bed and watch Daniel sleep.

But mostly he could see it in Daniel's eyes. In the ever-present uncertainty and apprehension that had once been so foreign in that sparkling dark hazel gaze. Gone was Daniel's perpetual cockiness; the confidence that, thanks to his big heart, rarely ever crossed over the line into arrogance.
And worst of all, Crane saw fear. Of the tangible; like another seizure, sure. But more than that. Fear of failure… of letting the family and himself down by never again being the Daniel they expected. That he expected.

Daniel faced those fears every day and, because of his stubbornness and drive, Crane knew he was already exceeding Dr. Lee's expectations. And Gregg's too.

Eighteen year-olds were awfully impatient though.

So, Crane desperately wanted to do something for Daniel to show him how proud he was of how far he'd come already. And to let Daniel know that he would conquer those fears.

And he'd known the moment Stormy had agreed to the fundraiser how he was going to do it.

Daniel's greatest fear at that time, the one that had almost paralyzed him, had been of not being able to play music. And Crane had wanted to show him that he believed in him. In his talent and ability. He couldn't think of a better way of doing that than by overcoming his own fears about music and performing in the fundraiser too.

Thankfully he’d had a willing ally in Stormy.

Admittedly, things had changed since that ball had been set in motion. Daniel was playing guitar again and singing, just a little. And for a fleeting instant, Crane had considered backing out of the concert.

But Crane knew that would have been the coward's way out. And what kind of big brother would he be if he'd shown Daniel the coward's way?

So, here he was. Puking his guts up in Stormy's tour bus instead of joining up with his family to watch what promised to be one hell of a good show. He knew Daniel would be wondering about his whereabouts by now. After all, aside from heading back to the auction table while Daniel had been resting up here in the bus, Crane had pretty much been glued to the kid's hip all day.

Crane had been fine. Really. It wasn't until intermission that cold hard reality had set in. And Crane had realized he really was going to be performing on stage… with professional musicians… and in front of most of the county.

He didn't have butterflies. There were freaking pterodactyls flying around in his stomach. Or at least there had been. They were gone now. Extinct, he thought giddily, maybe even a little hysterically, before patting his face and neck with a damp towel. He wasn't going to be sick anymore. He wasn't. After all, he had a song to sing for his little brother.

Checking his reflection once again, his eyes were drawn to his shirt pocket and the slight bump he could see through the fabric. Sliding out the tiny packet he'd placed there earlier, he carefully removed the largest of its contents and examined the little hunk of gold he held between his fingers and thumb. Felt its roughness against his skin and closed his eyes against the overwhelming urge to flush the damn thing down the toilet.

They had never asked Daniel outright what he wanted to do with the gold. After all, despite Daniel finally learning of his heroics in rescuing the kids, the topic of the mine collapse was still a sensitive one. The kid still took the blame for them getting trapped in the first place. So, of course Daniel had kept his mouth shut while his brothers, his victims, suggested donating it.

Even if he wanted to keep it.
It wasn't until they'd handed the gold over at the auction table that Crane had noticed the apprehension in Daniel's eyes. The turmoil. He'd seen enough of that in those eyes to last a lifetime.

So, while Daniel had been crashed out in this bus, Crane had made his way back to the table. He was still a little surprised by his own boldness. First, that he'd actually asked Steve's dad to spot him five hundred dollars until he could get to the bank on Monday. And then, even more so, that he'd accepted Edgar's offer instead. To buy the gold for Daniel in lieu of the donation he'd originally intended to give them the night they'd met. After the fight between Steve and Daniel.

If Crane had already held mixed feelings about dipping into the money allotted for Ford and Guthrie's education, he'd felt even more uncomfortable considering accepting five hundred dollars from Edgar, donation or not. But Edgar had insisted, adamant that it was the least he could do. Along with sincerity, Crane had recognized a flash of guilt in the older man's eyes when he'd said those heartfelt words. Guilt Crane suspected had a lot to do with being an absentee father and the resulting actions of his wounded son.

So Crane had ultimately acquiesced and the two of them had headed over to the auction table, Edgar with his checkbook in hand, to collect the packet of gold.

Still, five hundred dollars was a hell of a lot of money for a tiny chunk of rock.

Cradling the nugget in his palm now, Crane felt his stomach lurch one more time.

It had almost cost them so much more.

He had no clue what Daniel would want to do with it now that Crane had retrieved it. Hell, he had no idea when he was even going to let Daniel know what he'd done. All he knew was that it had been too soon to make a decision about the gold. Daniel was still healing. They all were.

In the meantime he'd place it back in his pocket where it rested above his heart. Maybe the damn thing would give him strength or good luck. He could use every bit of it he could get.

Adam took Hannah's hand as they climbed the steps in behind the stage. They were on the hunt for his wayward middle brother. Though Daniel's star had shone brightly when he'd given his speech to open up the show, and it had looked like he'd even thrived on the applause, the kid had crawled back into his shell afterward. Seeking shelter away from the one-on-one attention and accolades his friends and neighbors wanted to bestow upon him.

Adam understood. Even though Daniel was a walking blessing and miracle as far as his oldest brother was concerned, he knew the boy was feeling far from one hundred percent. Adam knew how awkward it felt to receive praise when you didn't feel you deserved it. Remembered feeling like a fraud each time he'd gotten a pat on the back when all he'd been doing was holding on for dear life back when their folks had died. He just wished Daniel could see how far he'd come instead of how far he still had to go.

"There he is," Hannah said with a hint of relief as she pointed out the lone figure sitting atop a picnic table behind some of Stormy's stage lighting. Adam slipped his arm around her waist and they made their way over to Daniel.

Despite the hive of activity going on all around him as the roadies were readying the stage for Stormy's performance, Daniel had found a relatively quiet haven in this corner. It was intermission now, after a long day of local acts, and the headliner's road crew was using the time to get him set up to close out the show.
"Hey," Daniel said by way of greeting them, smiling softly as Hannah slipped out of Adam's hold and brushed the kid's cheek with a kiss. She lithely hopped up onto the table and sat beside him, sliding her hand into his. Daniel hung on.

Trying not to let the warmth filling his chest show by grinning like he wanted to, Adam gave his little brother the once over before asking, "You holding up?"

"Yeah, I'm good," Daniel answered and Adam believed him.

Hannah apparently needed more proof. "Are you sure, sweetheart? You must be tired."

Daniel shrugged and gave his sister-in-law's hand a squeeze. "No, I'm fine, Hannah. Honest," he insisted. "I crashed out in one of the bunks on the bus a couple of acts after Ford was done."

Adam would have to thank Stormy later for looking out for his brother. He knew damn well Daniel wouldn't have asked to rest up in the tour bus. The suggestion either had come from Crane or Stormy himself. Either way, Adam appreciated it.

"You mean you missed out on Charlie Campbell and his talking frog?" Adam teased, referring to the local "legend" and his ventriloquism act.

"Shoot, that moth-eaten frog's older than I am," Daniel chuckled and Hannah smiled fondly at him. Lightly tousling the kid's bangs, she released his hand and straightened up before announcing that it was time for round-up.

Adam looked around him and decided she was right. The stage was nearly set up and the McFaddens, most of them anyway, were expected once again in the front row.

Helping her down from the table, Adam didn't let her go, pulling her in close instead for a long, lingering kiss.

"Aw, come on, you two," Daniel protested. "Get a room."

Adam reveled in the smile and the laughter he felt tickling his lips. "Did you say something, kid?" He asked as he pulled away from his gorgeous wife. This time Daniel and Hannah both snorted.

Hannah waved delicately at them both, a seductive sparkle in her eyes, before she turned and gracefully walked away. And Adam watched, transfixed by her long, willowy legs and her—

"What was that for?" Adam coughed reflexively and rubbed the ribs that had caught the brunt of Daniel's back-handed smack.

"This is a "G" rated production, or haven't you heard?" his smart-ass little brother replied.

Adam felt his face flush; covered it by grabbing Daniel in a headlock and impressively mussing up his hair.

After successfully getting the kid to cry "uncle", Adam settled in beside him, taking the spot Hannah had vacated. They sat quietly for a while but Adam could sense his brother's growing agitation as the last of the band's instruments and equipment were set out on the stage and Daniel kept looking all around him.

Adam was pretty sure he knew why Daniel was getting so antsy but decided to ask anyway. "Hey, what's got you in a twist?"

"Have you seen Crane?" The boy asked, just as Adam expected.
He's probably barfing his guts up somewhere on the back forty, was what Adam wanted to say. Instead, he offered, "He'll be here soon, sport. He's not gonna miss Stormy's show."

"Yeah, you're right," Daniel replied, placated for now.

When Adam watched Phil, Stormy's tour manager track down Glenn Terry for a brief conversation, he knew the final act was about to begin. Slapping Daniel on his thigh, he pointed toward the nearest wing. "Looks like they're about ready to start. You want to watch from there?"

Daniel looked a little surprised, Adam's hunch confirmed when he asked a little hopefully, "You're gonna stay?"

Adam smiled. The kid was clearly missing his shadow but apparently "Dad" would do in a pinch. "Sure. Come on."

With a light grip on the back of Daniel's neck, Adam ushered his brother over to the side of the stage. They'd have a great view of the show, and the stage provided Daniel with refuge from the onslaught of Murphys' well-intentioned supporters. Adam guided them around though stopped when he heard their names being called in a distinct and familiar drawl. Stormy caught up to them quickly, a well-worn Gibson guitar already strapped across his chest.

Though they'd spent plenty of time together and just plain ran into each other on and off during the course of the day, the man still greeted Daniel and Adam with a warm, toothy grin. "Now, you sure I can't talk you into playing with us, Daniel?" He asked for what clearly wasn't the first time.

Adam winced, knowing Stormy's intentions were good but not happy about Daniel being cornered like this.

"Naw, thanks, Stormy," Daniel said softly. "You know I appreciate the offer though." There was a lot of emotion bubbling out in that reply and Adam returned his palm to the base of the kid's neck.

"How 'bout I save Long Gone Highway for the finale?" Stormy persisted. "See if you can talk him into it by then?" Stormy was looking expectantly at Adam now but Adam shook his head.

"He's his own man, Wendell." Adam replied firmly, though he let his pride in Daniel show through. "He'll know when he's ready."

"That he is," Stormy said fondly, pride shining in his eyes too. "Well then, how about just a good luck hug from my redeemer?"

"Aw, Storm, I ain't all that," Daniel protested as Stormy drew him into a big hug.

And all Adam could do was smile.

Stormy pulled away first but kept hold of Daniel's shoulders. "Son," he said softly, though the intensity of his gaze was piercing. "Those kids ain't the only ones you saved."

He released Daniel then and hurried downstage to the central microphone where Glenn was already standing. Adam's attention remained on Daniel instead, who hadn't said a word or even really blinked since the singer spoke those heartfelt and utterly perfect words. The kid's eyes were full though. It was no wonder Stormy Weathers was considered a legendary wordsmith.

Adam stepped closer, looping his arm in front of Daniel's shoulders and tugging him back against his chest. Adam closed his eyes when he felt the weight of Daniel's head settle into the crook of his neck; sent up a prayer of thanks when the kid reached up and latched onto his arm.
They only stood together like that for a few minutes; Glenn's introduction of Stormy and his band bringing about a rousing reaction from the audience in front of the pavilion and from those lucky few back stage. Including Stormy's number one fan.

Stormy Weathers was on fire; playing his guitar and mandolin, and even taking a seat behind the drum-kit while he and the band played a few covers of other well-known songs. He was definitely a far cry from the washed up singer Daniel had first brought home like a wayward puppy. While Adam knew sober living and a fresh start had a lot to do with the man's vitality out there on the stage, he couldn't help but think Stormy's extra enthusiasm had a hell of a lot to do with Daniel. That the singer was just as grateful that the boy was alive as they were and was celebrating that fact in the best way he knew how.

And though Adam could see that Daniel was lost in the harmonies as he sang along with Stormy, the kid did send him a mischievous, shit-eating grin when he caught his big brother singing along to *Made a Bet with Myself*. All Adam could do was shrug a little sheepishly and then give the kid a wink.

As the show went on though, Adam found himself watching Daniel more than the goings on at the front of the stage. And listening to him.

His kid brother truly was lost in the music. His eyes were closed and he was damn near belting out the songs. And sounding as good as he ever had. It wasn't just Adam who thought so either. More than a few of Stormy's roadies were nodding at Adam and looking on with approval. They were smiling too, watching the kid's hands... when they weren't subtly dancing in front of him like a maestro conducting an orchestra, Daniel's fingers were clearly playing an absent guitar.

And a lump was forming in Adam's throat about the size of a Charolais bull.

Daniel belonged out there. He belonged on that stage.

Leave it to ole Adam to finally come to that conclusion at a time when Daniel was doubting his place there.

That was okay though, he reminded himself. What had he told Stormy? Daniel would know when he was ready.

Though Adam was privy to the fact that Stormy had an encore planned, the country star finished his official set with his classic, *Even a Fool Would Let Go*. The crowd went wild and, as the singer slipped in behind the curtains to towel himself off and rehydrate a little, a chant of, "We want Stormy; we want Stormy," immediately started up.

The high spirits were contagious and Adam found himself following Daniel over to where the kid was congratulating his idol. "You just slayed 'em, Stormy," he gushed before offering up his accolades to the rest of the band. "Guys, you were awesome."

"Yeah, I'd call this, one for the win column," Stormy said in his typically understated way. "'Course, the one thing that would cap it off would be…"

"Stormy—"

Adam almost stepped in then. He could hear the heartache in Daniel's plea this time but Stormy obviously did as well and switched gears immediately. Lightly patting Daniel's shoulder, he said apologetically, "I understand, son. Maybe next time." Slipping off the towel he had draped around his neck, he tossed it playfully to Daniel before rallying his players together. "All right, fellas. Let's give these people what they want."
As Stormy and his band gathered just in back of the curtains, Adam and Daniel returned to their prime vantage-point. And though Daniel’s attention remained on the band, Adam's turned to the lone form standing opposite them on the other side of the stage.

Crane.

It was too dark back there to distinguish his brother's current condition, though the fact that he was hunched over bracing his hands against his knees strongly suggested it was anything but great. Adam winced. He wanted to go to him, considered abandoning Daniel's side to do so but it was too late. With Glenn's sudden announcement, the curtains parted once again and the lighting crew illuminated the stage.

It was clear that a few minutes away from the audience hadn't diminished their appreciation for Stormy and, as he spoke into the microphone, thanking everyone for their welcome and for supporting the event, every eye and ear in the place was on him.

"Folks, we have a special treat for you tonight," he continued. "A young man who I'm sure you all know is going to come out here and sing for you."

"Oh. no," Daniel breathed, the panic in his voice pulling Adam's attention away from Crane. "No, no, no. I'm not—"

"It's okay," Adam soothed and squeezed his shoulder, understanding how easily Daniel could draw the wrong conclusion. "Easy, kid. It's not you." Then, indicating the tall, lean silhouette across from them, he said, "Look."

Daniel squinted against the stage lighting, clearly trying to make out who it was. There was no doubt when recognition hit, slammed him really, as Daniel's eyes grew huge. "What? No," he practically squeaked. Concern for Crane laced through his words as he stated emphatically, "He can't. He'll freak."

Touched as he was by Daniel's protectiveness of Crane, Adam wasn't about to put a stop to what Crane had already set in motion back when Stormy had first agreed to the concert. Yes, when it came to live music, Crane had terrible stage-fright. But, this was all Crane's idea. Nobody had twisted his arm.

When Stormy announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, please give a warm welcome to your friend and mine… Crane McFadden!" Adam had to quickly grab hold of Daniel's bicep. The kid looked ready to charge.

He looked damn near ready to take a swing too when he turned anxious eyes on Adam. "Daniel, take it easy," he implored. "This was Crane's idea," he explained, loosening his hold as the kid began to relax in his grip. "He wants this," Adam continued as they watched Crane take his seat in front of a piano to Stormy’s left. Daniel looked at him skeptically until a rush of tears filled his eyes with Adam's, "He wants to do this… for you."

Damned if the kid's reaction didn't suck Adam under and he had to look away, return his attention to Crane. Otherwise he'd be bawling right there in front of Daniel.

"Uh, hi," Crane said shakily as he promptly bumped the mike in front of him.

The resulting screech of feedback brought Adam's hands to his ears but not before he heard Daniel's despondent, "Oh, shit."

The next minute or two were equally painful to witness. As Crane apologized and began his jittery
address to the crowd, Adam was beginning to regret having prevented Daniel from sprinting across the stage and dragging Crane off in front of God and everyone. It wouldn't have been any more embarrassing for their family's gentle, unassuming third-born.

When Crane inhaled deeply, finally announcing the song he was about to sing and immediately played the wrong note, Adam shamefully looked away; even closed his eyes. This was supposed to be a triumphant moment for his brother and their family. Adam knew how much Crane had wanted to sing this song for Daniel. To conquer his own fears for him.

What a disaster it was turning out to be instead.

Except…

"Hold up, Stormy," he heard Daniel call out and Adam opened his eyes. Well, one first and then the other. Just in time to see Stormy handing over his guitar and the microphone stand he'd apparently been moving over nearer to the piano. From what Adam could figure, it looked like Stormy had decided to take pity on Crane and move closer to give him a helping hand.

But as Daniel shrugged on the guitar and adjusted the mike stand to suit him, it was pretty clear that little brother had come up with an even better idea. With the spotlight fittingly on him, Daniel threw his now beaming and clearly relieved roommate a look of mock irritation and then spoke into the mike. "Since when do you sing this without me?"

Apparently Daniel had decided he was ready.

After leaving the sanctuary of the tour bus, Crane managed to make his way to the back of the stage without running into anybody, thankfully. Had he run into Hannah looking as sick as he'd appeared in the mirror, he might have had a fight on his hands going through with his plans. Fortunately everybody was already watching what was sounding like an amazing show.

After climbing the stairs he found Phil Dobson, Stormy's tour manager, who would brief him on last minute changes if there were any. Upon giving Crane the once over, the man offered him a sympathetic look and asked one of the crew to go find some Gatorade.

"I look that rough?" Crane asked and Phil raised an incredulous eyebrow.

"You must love that brother of yours an awful lot." He said by way of an answer; his bluntness throwing Crane just a little.

The answer was yes, of course. It just wasn't something men talked about on a regular basis, especially with guys they'd just met. Hell, not even amongst the McFadden men, who Crane was willing to admit tended to be more demonstrative with their affection than most of the guys he'd gone to college with. He knew it stemmed from his parents and he could still remember hugs and kisses from both of them. But, he also knew it came from after, from a time when two terrified kids had been forced to step in and raise five more terrified kids. When love and affection were all they had to hold onto. Well, that, and each other.

Michelle would've had a field day with that.

"Thanks," Crane said, accepting the sports drink from one of the roadies as he handed one over to Phil as well. Eyeing it a little reluctantly, Crane ultimately opened the cap and took a small sip. Took another when his stomach didn't show any signs of immediate rebellion.

"Yeah, I do," he finally answered, this time feeling emotion clog up his throat instead of the much less savory alternative he'd been getting used to.
He'd have to hold on tight to that feeling now. Because Stormy's official set, with the exception of *Even a Fool Would Let Go*, was over.

"Well, he's got one of the best seats in the place," Phil said somewhat distractedly, indicating the opposite side of the stage.

As Phil moved off to get ready to meet up with Stormy, Crane squinted across the stage, trying to make out the figure of his little brother. It was too dark but, since there were only two standing across from him, he could safely assume they were Adam and Daniel. Adam had promised to stick close to the boy when Crane disappeared.

Crane only had a moment to contemplate how supportive Adam and Hannah had been about his decision to perform tonight. Because in that instant, the show was over and, after some wildly enthusiastic applause, a "We want Stormy" chant erupted from the crowd.

Oh, God. They weren't getting Stormy yet. They were getting Crane.

He didn't just have pterodactyls roiling around in his stomach now. Everything from the entire Jurassic fossil record was churning in his gut.

Leaning forward, Crane braced his hands against his knees and breathed. Very carefully. He could do this. This was nothing like having to learn how to write and feed yourself all over again, for God's sake. It was nothing like having to suffer coughing up a ventilator tube, or trying to lie there wide awake while a catheter was slowly being removed from your brain.

All Crane had to do was perform a beautiful but simple tune that he could damn near play in his sleep. And sing a song he and Daniel had sung a thousand times.

He and Daniel.

Only this time Crane would be singing it *for* Daniel.

"Folks, we have a special treat for you tonight." Stormy started his introduction and Crane very nearly jumped out of his skin. He hadn't realized the band had gone back on stage. Maybe that was a good thing.

Though when Stormy welcomed him to the stage, Crane suddenly felt very aware of his surroundings. He felt one of the crew give him a firm shove and Crane practically tripped over the hem of the curtain as he found his way through it. Trying his damnedest not to raise a hand and cover his eyes when the spotlight blinded him.

He'd had every intention of detouring slightly and shaking Stormy's hand, or maybe casually patting him on the back. His ever weakening knees had an entirely different idea though and instead he found himself taking the shortest possible route to the piano bench.

Sinking down onto the seat, he looked out into the audience and was grateful that he couldn't really see them. He knew there was a mass of bodies down there, could hear them clapping and even cheering for him. He decided to concentrate on the fact that Hannah and the boys were close. On his side – literally. Relaxing a little, he leaned toward the microphone and realized that it was going to be too far back for him to work with.

Reaching to adjust it, Crane nervously said, "Uh, hi," and cursed under his breath, he hoped, as he promptly bumped it. The feedback damn near blew out one of his ear drums.

Speaking into the mike, he apologized and then nervously began to address the faceless crowd.
"Uh, I just wanted to thank, ah, to say thank-you to Stormy. I mean…” God he hoped he wasn't bombing as badly as he thought. After all, talking in front of a crowd was supposed to be his strong suit. He hadn't even attempted to sing yet.

Eventually his meandering mouth wound its way over to the whole point of the exercise.

"Anyway, this is a song by Bill Withers. I couldn't have said it any – uh…” Crane stumbled once again over his words and gave up. He'd let the song do his talking for him. Lightly clearing his throat, he finally introduced the song. "It's called Lean on Me."

When Crane's right index finger landed on both F and G, he froze. This could not be happening. After all, he'd taught Guthrie how to play the song in one sitting. "I'm so sorry, Danny," he whispered as he closed his eyes.

They snapped open the second he heard his kid brother's anxious voice.

"Hold up, Stormy," Daniel called out and Crane looked across from him to see that Stormy, bless his heart, was in the process of moving his mike stand closer to the piano. But clearly Daniel had something else in mind.

Crane watched through a veil of tears as Stormy handed over his Gibson to Daniel with a warm smile and a clap to his shoulder and, after slipping the guitar strap over his head, Daniel adjusted the microphone stand to suit him.

Apparently Daniel had another rescue up his sleeve.

And when someone from the lighting crew shone the spotlight on Daniel and the audience burst into applause, Crane figured the smile on his own face could outshine it.

This was going to be fun.

Casually sitting back now, planning to enjoy his brother's show from the best seat in the house, Crane eagerly waited for Daniel's next move. When the kid winked and threw him a look of feigned annoyance, Crane couldn't help but laugh.

"Since when do you sing this without me?" He asked; tongue firmly planted in cheek.

"Apparently never," Crane easily answered, eliciting a collective laugh from the audience. Raising an eyebrow, he looked at the beaming kid and asked, "On three, little brother?"

"How 'bout seven, big brother?"

Crane felt another swell of tears but his joy kept them in check. And, on the count of seven, Crane's fingers effortlessly found the right notes, Daniel accompanying on guitar once they both started humming the melodic introduction.

They sang the first verse together but then began alternating like they'd done many times before. Until Crane pulled back so that Daniel could sing solo. He wanted, no needed, to be a spectator for just a little while. After all, he'd been praying for this every bit as much as Daniel had. Maybe more.

And it was amazing. Daniel was amazing. Crane's little brother took command of that stage and didn't hold anything back. His voice only wavering once… when Guthrie suddenly appeared on stage, practically slamming into him with a hug before the rest of their family followed, joining in for the song's powerful coda.
With Stormy, the band, and the audience singing along too, it sounded like a choir. Crane might've even said it was heaven. Except it wasn't.

Because Daniel was very much alive.

It might not be heaven but, as he slipped away from his seat and moved to stand next to Daniel and share his microphone, he realized the feeling was close. And though the feeling wasn't one typically associated with a young rancher like him, Crane knew exactly what it was.

Euphoria.

-The End-

Chapter End Notes

Somewhere along the way, I'd come to the conclusion that this fanfic, based on a TV show that was a musical family drama, needed a musical number. I wasn't sure how I was going to manage but, I think it turned out okay. So, because this story does end McFaddenesquely but doesn't have benefit of a soundtrack, I thought I'd provide the song lyrics too for those who don't know them or who might just enjoy a reminder. So here they are:

Lean On Me
By Bill Withers

Sometimes in our lives
We all have pain, we all have sorrow
But if we are wise
We know that there's always tomorrow

Lean on me when you're not strong
And I'll be your friend, I'll help you carry on
For it won't be long
'Til I'm gonna need somebody to lean on

Please, swallow your pride
If I have things you need to borrow
For no one can fill those of your needs
That you won't let show

You just call on me, brother, when you need a hand
We all need somebody to lean on
I just might have a problem that you'll understand
We all need somebody to lean on

Lean on me when you're not strong
And I'll be your friend, I'll help you carry on
For it won't be long
'Til I'm gonna need somebody to lean on
You just call on me, brother, when you need a hand
We all need somebody to lean on
I just might have a problem that you'll understand
We all need somebody to lean on

If there is a load
You have to bear that you can't carry
I'm right up the road, I'll share your load
If you just call me

Call me (If you need a friend)
Call me (Call me uh-huh)
Call me (When you need a friend)
Call me (If you ever need a friend)
Call me (Call me)
Call me (Call me)
Call me (Call me)
Call me (Call me)
Call me (If you need a friend)
Call me (Call me)
Call me (Call me)
Call me (Call me)
Call me (Call me)
Call me

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