

Johnny or Joni

“My name is Joni! Damnit! I’m a girl!” Sam Longley, the owner of Cottonwood Livery said, “ Look Lassie, I don’t give a damn what your name is. I can’t use a girl! Your Dad was a good friend and I’d like to help you out. Look, I need a stable boy! But, your name has to be Johnny You’re big enough and dirty enough to be a boy! So how about it? Do you want the job or not?” She was Joni Watson, fifteen year old orphan daughter of the recently deceased Bank Robber John Watson , a member of the Black Henry Outlaw Gang. Some of Henry’s Gang had been killed in the failed attempt to rob the Santa Fe Cattleman’s Bank. Joni had no relatives in New Mexico Territory. She was now alone with no home and no money. All she had left from her Dad was his saddle and guns. His horse had taken half of the bullets thrown at him and died in camp, along with her Dad. Fifteen years old, no money, no home, and no one to go to. Her last three years had been tough following the outlaw trail of her Dad. She had to have some kind of work to earn her keep and a place to stay. She knew horses, guns and a hard trail life. She was far older in experience than a typical fifteen year old girl. Sam had been the only person that her Dad knew in Santa Fe. His dying words were “ Go see Sam, Livery Stable!”

Joni said, “ Why can’t I be a girl and work here?” Sam said , “ Look! I don’t wanta skirt around this Stable! With the kind of low life’s I get in here, a girl will only bring trouble. Johnny, you’re big, plain headed, and almost as flat chested as a Rattle snake. Few people would take you for a girl. I can use your help , but it’s awful rough language and you’ll have to put up with a lotta man stuff that you may not be used to!” Joni said, “ Mister Sam, I’ve been around men for three years on the outlaw trail. If I hadn’t seen it or heard it by now, I’d be deaf and blind! I’ve had to handle some bad situations with men already when they put their hands on me ,and I can handle a gun! I need the job and I’ll be a Boy if I have to! Where can I sleep?” Sam said, “ Drop the Mister stuff and chop most of your hair off. It’s dirty work here Lassie! You’ll earn your keep if you wanna work for me! The tack room back of that first stall is where you’ll sleep. Fix yourself a straw pile and keep it against the inside wall. You can roll up in there. Leave plenty of room for walkin so I can get harness and saddles out. Throw your stuff in there and come with me, we need to load a bunch of hay in the loft right away”

Four hours later and finally Joni could sit down with her canteen and some jerky for lunch. Sam said, “ Johnny , you did a good job. You’re mighty strong for your age. I’ve had boys in here that couldn’t work like you. I know you’re sweaty and all, but the horse trough is all I’ve got for washing up. The out house is out by the back gate.” Joni said, “ I’m used to bird washing Sam. Most places, I had to wash up in the creek. I’ll make out. You don’t have to worry about me.”Sam said, “

Well, I guess we better get up and at it! I've gotta get a Rig and horse ready for ol' Joshua Gordon the Banker. He's running over to Twin Forks this afternoon. I don't know if he's takin money or gittin it. Gimme a hand with this Cart."

Joni was thinkin, " Yeah now ! This is more like it! I'll get this Rig put together and maybe I can tend some of these other horses! That hay loadin was Ok, but I love workin with horses!" She quickly brushed Sam's Surrey horse and had the mare hitched up when Sam opened the big front door. He commented, " Johnny, looks like you know your stuff. Those tugs are tight and even. I couldn't a done a better job myself!" Joni said , "Sam , I love workin with horses. I kept my Dad's in good care every where we went." Sam said, " That's great, Johnny! I hope you know how to use a pitch fork! You've got four stalls and a stock pen to clean out!" That kinda workin with horses was not what she had in mind!!

Joshua Gordon was the typical fat Banty legged bald headed Banker. He was in a hurry and had nothing good to say about Sam's Surrey horse. He said, " Damnit Sam isn't that the same old nag you stuck me with last week? I'll be two days getting an afternoon's trip outta the way! Can't you hook me up with something that ain't voting age yet! I'd like to get back for dinner tonight! Not tomorrow's breakfast!" Sam replied, " Joshua! This ol'mare is only eight years old and if you knew how to drive a trotting horse properly, you could make a round trip in three hours easy! She's the best I have! Take her or walk!" Joshua

said, “ Sam , what’ll you charge to drive me there and back? I need to look over these tally books before I deal with ol’ Aven Smith at the Twin Forks Mercantile! Gotta hurry! Would you do it?’ Sam said, “ Sorry Josh, but I gotta stick around here. I’ve got six wild horses coming in, that I wanna buy!” Joshua said, “ What about your Boy over there? Can he drive?’

Sam yelled, “ Hey Johnny, Can your drive a trotter? Josh needs a driver for this afternoon!’ Joni replied, “ Yep Sam! I drove Dad all around St. Jo when I was back there!” Sam replied, “ Johnny , looks like you’ve got a job. Jump in that Rig and make a fast run to Twin Forks. Josh, a driver’ll cost you another dollar!” Before she climbed aboard, Sam called her to the tack room saying, “ Johnny ,you said you could use a gun. I noticed you had your Dad’s pistol. It might be a good idea to carry it along. We still have a few Indians out there you know!”

Joni took off at a brisk trot with The Banker still cussin about the outrageous cost for a Rig and driver. Joni noticed that Joshua swung his gun belt around so his pistol was handy. She wondered, “ Was he carrying money or was he gonna get some? Sam might be right about a few bad Indians, but there were a whole lot more Outlaws out there to worry about! Part of Black Henry’s bunch were still in the country. One of that bunch was still alive and had been a terrible threat to her a year ago!” Joshua said, “ Boy! Cain’t you get more speed outta that nag? Seems like he’s barely movin!” Joni said, “ She’s a good mare Sir, and clipping right along! She’s really smooth and she’ll put us there

in about an hour!’ Joshua was not convinced and pulled the coach whip outta the boot saying, “ I’m gonna touch her up a little Boy! I think we can move a lot faster!” Joni grabbed the whip from his hand saying, “ Mister Gordon. If you wanna drive, let me out right here! This mare is doin a great job without beatin on her!” Joshua angrily replied, “ Damnit Boy! I’m payin for this ride and I think that ol’nag is loafin along! Hell ! It’ll be midnight before we get back here at this rate!” Joni said, “ Sit back and get your Book work done! Let me drive the horse! You run her now and you’ll have to walk her back to Cottonwood! It’ll be midnight for sure!”

Gordon was not happy, and mumbled something about smart-alecky kids! An hour later he was looking up from his tally sheet and surprised to find that he was coming into Twin Forks. Joni pulled the Rig into the Mercantile Store and let Gordon out. She grabbed a bucket from the porch and got a small drink for the mare. Looking around town , she was shocked to see a bald face horse that she knew immediately! A cold and fearful feeling made her catch her breath! That had to be Buck Reynolds horse! Buck had been Black Henry’s right hand man until she and her Dad had joined the gang three years ago. That crawling feeling of fear crept over Joni! She could never forget that terrible night a year ago when Buck tried to rape her and it was only due to her Dad shooting him that he left her alone. Too bad the bullet wasn’t a little better aimed! Buck would be dead by now! As it was; it had only been a flesh wound. “Damn! If that was Buck’s horse ; he would be somewhere here in town!” Joni had learned to be wary of

men and had followed her Dad's advise. " Learn to use a gun and learn to use it well!" Joni strapped on her Dad's belt gun! Those hours of practice every day for six months, and instruction from her Dad had paid off! Very few folks other than the outlaws knew of her gun skill. She had never been forced to shoot at anyone! Would she be able to? Joni didn't know! She had imagined a thousand times shooting Buck Reynolds! He had beat her and forced her to the ground ripping off her clothes! Her scream had brought her Dad. His shooting had stopped Buck , but Joni could never forget the horror and fear of that night. Yes! She wanted to learn to use a gun! Her Dad had said," if you draw the gun ? Draw it fast! If you shoot? Shoot to kill! Otherwise leave the gun in the holster."

Coming from the Mercantile a half hour later is her passenger Joshua Gordon . " Of all things dumb!" Joni was thinking, " He's carrying a valise! Probably with money from the Store! No outlaw, even Buck Reynolds would be dumb enough, to overlook this!" Almost unconsciously , Joni placed her hand on her belt gun! Joshua climbed in and Joni sent the mare off toward Cottonwood at a good clip! " Thank God!" she was thinking, " No sign of Reynolds or any of Black Henry's Bunch! Maybe I can relax and enjoy the ride." Joshua said, " Boy! You haven't been working for Sam very long. Where'd you come from? Haven't seen you around town!" Joni replied, " No, just got in. My Dad passed away. He was a friend of Sam's from the War. They fought together in Tennessee. Sam gim'me a job." Joshua continued asking questions and Joni kept dodging direct answers. She directed the talk

away from herself and back to Sam's Business. The talk was light and Joshua spent most of the ride giving Joni the vast benefit of his advise for worldly success.

Joni had been a member of an outlaw band too long! Glancing at her back trail was almost automatic. There was a definite dust cloud above the road some distance behind them! Joni was worried! Black Henry's Bunch could be coming after them! There was no way they could outrun that bunch of bloodied horses to Cottonwood! Thankfully, the dust cloud turned south! Joni relaxed, but a feeling of unease stayed with her! " Maybe" She thought , " it's just my nerves! I've gotta get that fear of Buck Reynolds outta my mind!" She drove on, but the nervous fear stayed with her, something was wrong! She could feel it!

They had come to the low hills outside of Cottonwood and were climbing a two mile slope when warning signs started to play in her mind! The top of this rise was a perfect spot for a Hold Up! She had spent two years listening to plans for robbing stages and banks. Here at the top of this grade was a picture perfect set up. When she stopped to give the horse a rest , the outlaws would come running outta the brush with drawn guns! She and Joshua would be sitting ducks and wouldn't have a chance. She realized that in this Cart she was too close to Joshua to be safe in case of shooting and if she did survive a hold up . Reynolds would have his way with her! Joni was scared! What would her Dad do? He had said , " Joni, the best way to

protect yourself and win a fight is to attack the other feller first!" How would she do that? She had to be quick thinking!

She said, " Mister Gordon, I'm gonna stop right here in the shade for a little and let ol'mare rest a bit. It's a long pull up this grade." Joshua said , " Boy, that's dumb; why don't you stop at the top. We can get out there and rest our legs a bit. Surely , the mare can make it to the top! This grade ain't that bad!" Joni didn't want to alarm Joshua , but said, " My Daddy always said, the Rebs always waited at the top of the ridge for the tired out Yankees. It was the best place to hit'em! I guess I picked up some of his habits!" Joshua said," Damn! You're dreamin Boy! The Wars been over for years and there ain't no fightin goin on here! Let's git on up there. I need to visit a bush!" Joni got outta the Rig and pretended to check the tugs and mare's harness. It gave the mare a few more good blows. Finally she got back in and walked the horse up the remainder of the grade. She pulled the whip from it's boot and satisfied Joshua thinking she was gonna urge ol'mare to the top!

'Hopefully," She was thinking, " I'm imagining things and we'll have a clean trip on into Cottonwood." Wrong!!

As she topped the ridge , she saw riders coming from her right! "God !" She was thinking , " They musta cut around us to the South!" Whipping ol'mare hard with the whip, she heard the yell , " Hold up! Hold Up!" Three rider's broke out in front of her shooting at the Cart! She almost froze in fear. The leader was Buck Reynolds!! Ol'mare reared high in the air taking bullets meant for her and Gordon. Gordon had drawn his

pistol shooting, Joni dropped the reins and got her pistol out! When she did; the training of her Dad paid off! Everything was automatic! Her Dad had said that shooting was like feeding your face. If you did it enough, you'd never miss your mouth. He musta been right! She couldn't recall anything of the fight. It was all a blur of gunfire, smoke and movin horses. The fight was over in seconds! She quit shootin when her gun clicked on an empty and three outlaws lay dying on the ground! Ol'mare was dying! She'd never trot again! Gordon was yellin , "I've been shot! I've been shot!" Joni was quite familiar with gun shot wounds and busied her shaking hands tending Gordon's wound! Joshua had been hit in the leg and she ripped his pants leg open and used a strip to put a tight bandage over his wound. The bullet had caught the side of his left leg above the knee! He was in severe pain, but mainly mad at the outlaws. He wanted to put another bullet in one that had been shot in the stomach and was crying for help rolling on the ground.

Buck Reynolds was dead! Joni didn't know the other two. They must be some that had recently joined Black Henry. Joni couldn't recall much of the gun fight! It had all happened so fast and she was outta breath when it was over. She couldn't remember which of the riders she shot at; one or all three? She didn't know! It had all happened in a blur of gun fire , a screaming horse and smoke! She was still shaking with shock as she bandaged Joshua's leg. She felt like throwing up , but swallowed hard keeping her lunch down!

Sitting ,she took a few deep breaths. It was almost as bad as when her Dad was shot and she had to try binding him up. The bloody hands, the bleeding that wouldn't stop , the gasping for breath, the death rattle in his throat and finally the empty stillness of his body. He lay dead and she was alone! God! Would she ever be able to forget that terrible day! She shook her head and stood up thinking, “ I've got to stop it! I can't get sick! I've got to get back to Cottonwood! That man on the ground needs help!’ She got down and approached the injured outlaw. Then she remembered, “ My gun is empty! I've gotta reload! It didn't matter! The outlaw was seeing his last look at daylight! He was dying!

Joni had to think! Mister Gordon couldn't ride a horse! She had to have a horse for the Cart! Choosing the oldest of the outlaws horses, she harnessed him to the Cart. It took a good half hour getting the harness off the dead mare and on the other horse. She avoided looking at the dead outlaws and kept her attention on the horse. She hoped that he would pull the Cart Ok. He was a little afraid of the noise but had been a cowboy's horse and had pulled a lot of cattle. He tried to run away a couple of times, afraid of the noise behind. Joni set the brake and let him tire a little dragging the wheels! By the time she was in sight of Cottonwood, he had settled down and trotted along like he had been a cart horse all along. Joni drove straight to Sam's place and quickly told him of the holdup while he ran along beside the Cart on the way to the Doc's place. Gordon needed his leg tended and after dropping him off they headed for the Sheriff's office . Sheriff Jim Colbey grabbed a

wagon and he and Sam headed down the road to pick up the remains of the outlaws.

Sam told her in leaving, “Johnny, watch things while I’m gone . we shouldn’t be over an hour. The Sheriff’ll want your story when we get back!” Joni was glad to let Sam and the Sheriff take over. All of the fear and nervous tension of the last hour came down on her and she couldn’t stop crying! She wanted to crawl in bed and just forget today! An hour later , when they returned, Joni told Sam, “ I’m sorry Sam, but I don’t wanna talk to nobody right now. I wanna go lay down! I’m still too shook up to try and remember anything! I know I’m fifteen and should be more grown up, but I can’t help crying!” Sam said , “ Johnny , fifteen or fifty; anyone would be shook after what you just went through! Get a good night’s rest, we’ll talk in the morning.”

Daylight and Joni couldn’t remember at first where she was! God what a nightmare! Then it all came back! It really didn’t seem real; but she realized it was too real! She’d been in a deadly gunfight! Men had died! The banker had been wounded! Sam’s mare had been killed, How do you deal with that. What had her Dad said? “ Joni, I killed a lot during the War. It was terrible, but these folks were trying to kill me. I felt bad about taking their life, but the strongest survive. When you’re threatened by killer wolves or rattle snakes you kill to live! Get used to it! There are humans out there that need to be killed if you and yours are to live! Don’t look back and don’t let regret slow your trigger finger!

Someday killing other people won't be a part of living, but that day is far in the future!"

Joni took a deep breath and went out to talk to Sam. Sheriff Colbey was already there. She told her version of the attack and what she could remember doing after the shooting. The Sheriff was shocked! This young Boy had accounted for at least two of the outlaws. Gordon's gun was jammed by a bullet from the outlaws after he'd fired two rounds. Gordon figured his first shot hit the rearing horse! The bullet that hit his pistol was deflected causing the wound in his leg. That had to be the explanation. The only other answer couldn't be considered. Young Johnny had killed all three! There were five bullets accounted for in the three outlaws! This boy, Johnny; had emptied his gun during the fight! Sam and the Sheriff both looked at Joni with disbelief! Sam was thinking, " Sheriff you'd pass out if you knew Johnny was a girl!"

Sam said, " Well Jim , if you've got your answers, we've got work to do. Those outlaw horses; if there's no owners; I want'em or at least one to replace my mare." Sheriff said, " No Sam , I still don't have any answers that make sense, but keep the horses and carry a board bill in case there is an owner! And Thanks for helping me last night." Sam could see that Joni was still disturbed about the gun fight and said, " Come on Johnny, I wanna show you a few horses I just bought. They're all wild mustangs and we'll really have to hit it to make some money with this bunch. I probably should never have let that cowboy talk me

into buyin, but he's trying to support his Mom and younger sister. I thought we might could make coach horses outta some of them. They're in that high fenced pen out back." He noted right away that horses brightened her up!

Joni was shocked! There stood five really good lookin bay and brown mustangs. The number six though was a runty lookin line backed buckskin! Joni said, " Sam , they're all big good lookin horses except for that little buckskin and they're all stallions! Can you do anything with them?" Sam replied, " We'll cut'em all tomorrow! All that is, except that runty buckskin! I'll sell him for pig feed and get my money back. There's a number of hog farmers around that'll pay ten dollars for him." Joni said, "You mean they'll butcher him for hog feed? My God Sam, that seems a terrible thing to do!" Sam replied, " No Johnny, they'll just lead him into a hog lot, shoot him and the hogs do the rest" Joni was horrified! " My God!" She thought, " What a terrible thing to do to a wild horse. That cowboy shoulda just left him on the range!"

The following day was a real revelation for Joni. Sam was what passed for the local horse doctor and with her help , he separated the stallions one at a time , pulling them to the ground and castrated all of them, except the buckskin. He had seemed the tamest of the bunch and when she tried to approach him he waited until the last instant before jumping away from her. Joni felt sorry for the little guy and asked. " Sam, could I buy that little buckskin from you. I sure hate to see him killed. I haven't got any money, but you could take him outta

my wages.” Sam said, “ I’d hate to see you put money in a scrub like him, when all of these others will make better horses. Why not take that Bay with the white foot? He looks like a good’un.” Joni said , ‘ No Sam! There’s a lotta things about this buckskin, that I like.” Sam said, “ Well, it’s your money, but we gotta cut him too! I won’t have a stallion around. They’re nothing but trouble! Here get a rope on him and let’s get to it!”

The following three days were really rough. Dawn till dark every day cleaning pens , repairing harness and renting out horses. Joni was glad for the busy days. It helped fade the memory of the gunfight. She dropped in her bedroll every night sleeping sound and exhausted. Sam told her to slow down; all of the work didn’t have to be done in one day! Sam was buying their food as part of her wages and Joni did all the cookin. It was a good routine and Sam was more than pleased with everything. He and Joni both were looking forward to breaking the Mustangs. Sam had already had some offers for two teams. Another few days and they would be healed well enough for a little training.

Gordon came by and wanted to thank the boy, Johnny for fighting off the outlaws. Joni said “ Thanks Mister Gordon, I just kept shootin until my gun was empty. It all happened so fast, I did what my Dad taught me.” Gordon replied, “Well young man, I’ve gotta say you stand pretty tall in my book . I’ve never seen anyone act as cool as you did when the lead was flying. If you had not been there, I would be dead! No doubt about it!” “ Hey Sam!” he went on, “ How about next week?

Could Johnny drive me to Twin Forks again?" Sam said, " Yeah! If middle of the week is OK? We're awful busy near week ends. It'll cost you two dollars for a driver, and I'm gonna up that to Shotgun wages if you keep attracting Bandits!" Joshua said, " Two dollars is highway robbery Sam! Last time it was one dollar." Sam replied, " Yeah but it cost me a good Surrey horse and who's gonna pay for Johnny's bullets! No Josh, two dollars is dirt cheap!" "OK,Ok!" said Josh, " This leg of mine should be ready for travel by Wednesday! See you then!" Sam said "Johnny, looks like you have a regular job running ol'Josh to Twin Forks. Do you think that saddle horse will work out for Surrey work?"

Joni replied, " He's not the greatest Sam, but he'll do until I can get my little buckskin workin. He'll make a dandy Cart horse. He's got a flat croup, a full set of short cannons and muscling in all the right places. Yeah Sam, for ten dollars , I've got a good horse!" Sam said, " Damn, I've gotta watch you! I never saw that in that little horse. He just looked runty by all the others. Since you seem to know horses; what about the other five. How do they look to you?" Joni replied, " My Dad would have liked that bay with the white foot. He'll be a fast runner. Make a good outlaws's horse. The other four have low rounded croups and they'll pull much better than they'll ride. They're the ones we should break for coach work." Sam said, " Johnny, you have a great horseman's eye. I think I'll let you do the dickering when I get ready to buy a few more. If we can turn these pretty quick, I'll send word to that Mustanger Rob to bring me another bunch." Joni said, "

Sam if he's got a gather penned somewhere, why don't we go and pick out the ones we want?" Sam thought that was smart thinkin.

Wednesday arrived with Banker Gordon coming for his ride to Twin Forks. Joni was ready and this time she brought along her Henry repeater and wore her belt gun. She was hoping for a quiet and uneventful trip. Sam had offered to take the trip if she felt afraid. Joni said " No Sam!, I can't give up my job to a bunch of outlaws. If I quit now, I might as well get a job washing dishes someplace. I'm gonna drive and face whatever comes!" Sam just shook his head. He'd never ran into a young boy with the nerve of Johnny. He had to remind himself that Johnny was really a Joni!

The trip over went well but a little slower than with the ol'mare. In Joni's opinion, this cowboy horse was somewhat like his owner, mostly worthless! She had already started working with the little Dun colored Buckskin. She had named him Button and felt that within two weeks he would be pullin the Cart. She and Sam had already started the two teams and it looked like they would be sold in a couple of weeks. The white footed bay had been sold right away to a stranger in Cottonwood. Maybe he was lookin for a getaway horse.

Joni dropped Gordon off at the Mercantile and Gordon had to brag about their fight with the outlaws. Everyone in town had heard some kind of a story. Here was their chance to get the inside story. Gordon loved the attention and overloaded everyone on the extraordinary fight that he and Johnny had put up killing three outlaws! Joni was glad

when they left town. She hated answering all the questions and tried to convince them that Gordon had been the hero of that fight! She wanted to forget the details; not keep hashing over killing someone. On the way back to Cottonwood, she tried to get away from the gunfight talk and direct Gordon to talk about horses. She said, "Mister Gordon, do you know this Cowboy Rob that Sam gets his wild horses from?" Gordon said, "Sure do! That family owes me a good bit of money! Too bad about Jim Bender, Rob's Father. He was killed in that gunfight at the Santa Fe Bank. Folks say that a stray bullet killed him. He wasn't involved at all. Just happened to be in range of the shooting."

Joni was shocked and dismayed thinking, "My Dad was killed also, but Rob's Father was innocent of everything. My Dad was part of the outlaw bunch! How would that family feel if they knew that I was the daughter of one of that gang of killers? They'd probably hate me! Right now, there was nothing she could do. The past was something you couldn't go back to and she'd spent many days over the last few years trying to convince her Dad to quit Black Henry. He had kept saying "This next job will be my last!" This time he had been unfortunately right! Now she had no Dad!

Holding back tears of self pity, she listened to what Gordon was saying. "Jim Bender had borrowed against his Ranch and lost almost his whole calf crop last year when we had that Blue North'er come through in February! He wasn't alone and everyone in the county is

hurtin for money this year. Jim's son Rob is not eighteen yet, but doin a great job catching and selling Mustangs to keep the Ranch goin. He's caught up payments ,but just gittin by. I'm sure hoping he gets better and can keep it up! I've had to foreclose on two small ranchers already, this year." Joni said, " Is there something wrong? I think Sam wants to get more of Rob's Mustangs. It looks like he may have a sale for teams and some of those from the last bunch are working out well."Gordom replied, " Last I heard , he caught a bullet in the arm from a horse thief and it's held him up from working more stock. I'm hoping he can get back to work pretty quick. He needs to meet a stock loan payment in four months in addition to his regular loan. In a normal year that woulda been easy with a descent calf crop, but he has only a dozen or so calves, and they'll never cover his loan. I hate to do it, but I haven't got any choice but to foreclose, if these payments aren't met!"

Joni was thinkin, " Wish I could do something to help the family out, but I'm pretty bad off too! I can hardly help myself! Maybe we could go get another bunch of Mustangs from Rob. That should help a little anyway!" She said, " Sam sold a few of Rob's Mustangs. Maybe he's got more for sale!" Gordon said , " I heard that he has a pen full. Maybe there are some he could sell. Too bad he's hurt! I know the Army is looking for horses right now. There's a remount Station up the road about seventy five miles. They're always looking for good saddle horses!" Joni was thinkin more on the order of pullin horses. They were much easier and faster to train than riding stock. Her Dad had

trained horses for years and that was how he became acquainted with Black Henry. The outlaw would pay more than anyone for a good fast horse and her Dad had been attracted to the easy money. That easy money and the excitement were the death of her Dad! Joni had a very good memory of riding broncs for her Dad! She was thinkin, "Rough and tough! Yeah she was all of that! She had hit the ground fifty times at least! A rough rider she was, but a girl? No!"

Finally getting back into Cottowood, Gordon said, " Johnny this ol'nag Sam rented me is slower than molasses. I sure hope he's got something better for next week!" Joni said, " Mister Gordon, if you want me to drive, I'll take the Surrey and use two of those new horses we have. It could be a little exciting , but we'll sure make a quick trip!" Gordon said, " Sounds good to me! I'd love a quicker trip!"

Jomi was talkin to Sam later saying, " Yeah, Gordon wants a faster trip. I'll give him a real ride next week! I'll take a pair of those broncs to Twin Forks. It'll be a good workout for them!" Sam laughed and said, " Go to it Johnny! It'll shut him up ! By the way, we're goin out tomorrow to the Bender place. Rob has a bunch of horses he has to get rid of. We can make some good buys! Wear your hoss tradin eyes!"

"Rob Bender, Mrs. Bender,, this is my helper Johnny Watson!" Introductions that Sam made as he and Joni drove into the Bender Place. After handshakes around , Joni was thinking, " Rob's sure a neat Boy!" Surprising herself ! " Damn, I'm thinking like a girl! Forget it! We're here to buy horses!" The corrals were full of Mustangs! "Boy

there's some good lookin big ones in the nearest pen!" Joni immediately went to that pen. Rob said, " No they're not for sale!' I've got a contract with the Army for that bunch! Calvary mounts, all of them; but I can't get'em broke until my arm's healed up some . They take quite a bit of ridin! The Army wants them rough broke before they'll buy'em! This damn arm is almost useless! Took a bullet from a horse thief trying to steal that bunch!"

Sam was amazed that Rob was handling so many horses! There had to be thirty five or more in the corrals. Rob explained that his Mom and sister Anna helped with the water and feeding, but he was getting low on hay. He said, " Sam, what type and how many do you want ? Right now I need the feed money. Look 'em over and take your pick. I'm sure we can settle on a price!"Joni followed Sam to the back corrals. She asked Sam, "How many teams do you want ? Rob has already pulled the best lookin saddle mounts?" Sam replied, " Hell, I don't know Johnny! I've got room for eight or ten horses. Can we work that many?" Joni said , " Sam , we were held up a good week before we could work those castrated geldings. If we get a bunch of mares, we could start'em tomorrow!" Sam said , " Good thinkin and a lotta folks want mares for the foals next year. Especially farmers! Let's see what looks good and you pick'em out!"

Joni went right to work! She said, " Rob, you and Sam hold the gates and I'll haze 'em in!" Rob said , " Sam , you gonna let the kid select your horses? He don't look old enough to know Jack about horses!"

Joni said, “ Feller, I’ve ridden since I could walk! I don’t see anything here that really grabs my eye for horseflesh and I think I already own the best horse you caught in that last gather of yours!” Rob responded saying, ‘Wow Sam! I didn’t know you had an expert workin for you! What does he think is the best horse, I had in those that I sold you?’ Rob really laughed when Sam told him that Johnny was buyin the little Buckskin! He quit laughin though when Joni cut out two light weight greys and a matched pair bays. All ten horses she had selected were under five years old and everyone had quiet doe like eyes. They , without a doubt were the cream of the twenty or so in the pen!

Rob said, “ Johnny, I take back what I just said! You do know your horses! Can you top a bronc?” Joni said, “ I’ve topped a few. Whatta you got?” Rob said, “ There’s twelve in that front pen, I have to get ridden by the end of the month, or lose my contract to the Army! I’d pay five dollars each to get’em rode! I’ve got half a dozen more , but they’re stallions and need cutting!” Jomi looked at Sam saying, “ Whatta you think Sam? Could I get a day or two off to rough out his broncs!” Sam laughed sayin, “ I could let you off Tuesday and Thursday, but Wednesday you gotta run to Twin Forks!” Joni said , “Rob , I’ll see you at day brake on Tuesday!” Rob asked , “ How many do I halter for Wednesday? How many do you wanna try?” Joni looked around and said, “If that swimming hole in the river over there is waist deep, halter all of them, I’ll ride the whole bunch Tuesday!’ Sam was shocked! Rob thought Johnny was crazy! He said, “What the hell are you sayin? You’re gomma top the whole bunch! You’re crazy!” Joni

said , “ Just have ‘em ready Rob! See you Tuesday! Sam , lets halter up your bunch and git’em home!”

Sam just shook his head as they led his five teams to the Livery corral! This Johnny girl was full of surprises and he was wondering as Rob was , how she intended to top a dozen Broncs in one day! One or two would loosen up your insides, but a dozen! You’d be spittin blood! He would make special plans to go with her Tuesday , just to see the show! That weekend was a revelation .Joni tied up a hind foot and harnessed the Greys making them follow a wagon through town and finally dragging a large log. Sam could readily see that this team would be saleable in a week easy! They had settled down quickly and put their weight into pulling. This Joni Boy! was a wonder when it came to horses! Joni had learned well from a Dad that had perfected the easy way out from almost everything, including hard work! Joni was thinking, “ It was too bad he didn’t stick with horse training! He would still be alive!”

Tuesday came almost too soon! Joni was at Rob’s near daylight! All of the horses were haltered as he promised. Joni led the first bronc to his hitch rail and side lined the near hind foot, This made saddling easy and safe. Joni had Rob saddle his horse and short pony the bronc while she mounted. This held the broncs head close to Rob’s saddle horn, Joni climbed aboard and Rob headed for the breaking corral leading her bronc. Joni said, “ No Rob, lead me into your swimming hole!” Rob looked at her like she was crazy. Out in the middle of the

stream , Joni had Rob release her bronc! The bronc plunged ahead ducking its head to buck and burying it's head under water! Once was all it took. The bronc held it's head up and couldn't buck! Joni pulled it around forcing it up and down river. Within ten minutes the bronc was responding without resistance! Rob could hardly believe what he was seeing; there was no fight left in the bronc! Some gave more fight than others, but by one o'clock all twelve horses had been ridden! Sam had arrived for number three and he was as impressed as Rob! Neither had ever seen the Indian method of breaking horses to ride!

Rob said, “ Johnny, I've never seen that done before. Where did you learn that method?” Joni said “ My Dad had a very bad leg. He copied an Indian boy and broke many horses this way. He couldn't afford to get bucked off! I don't like hittin the ground myself. I'm not as tough as you!” Rob said, “ Johnny , you're a lot tougher than me , but how many rides do you think you'll have to make before I can sell this bunch?” Joni said, “ Won't take many. I'll come back Thursday and we'll take'em in again!” Rob asked Sam, “ How old is Johnny, Sam? He sure seems to know a lot about horses for a kid” Sam replied “ Johnny's fifteen Rob, but has had a rough and tumble trail life with a lotta horse experience. While I'm here with Johnny, do you want me to castrate that bunch of studs in that back pen? You can owe me! It's two dollars a head!”

That evening , Sam noticed that Joni was awful quiet and asked if she was Ok; or did she get hurt today? Joni replied, “ No Sam , but I'd like

to be a girl!" Sam was startled saying, "Damn! You wanna be a girl? Oh God! It's that Rob! You're gittin sweet on that Rob boy, ain't you? Damn , Johnny ! He thinks you're a boy! Everybody thinks you're a boy!" Joni said, " Well Sam , I'm a girl and I wanna be a girl! I can't go on being a boy when I'm a girl!" Sam ,said, " Damnit! " I shoulda known this would happen! I tried to give you a break and a job. I can't keep you as a girl. I told you that! If you work for me , you're a boy!' Joni said, "OK Sam, but I'm gonna find another job, where I can be a girl! As soon as I can find that job ,I'll move on!" Sam said, " Look, I don't mean to be hard on you Joni, you've done a great job. Your horse is paid for and you've made me a good bunch of money while workin here, but these town folks are gonna make a fuss about us living together and us not related. They'll all be thinkin the very worse! Let's let it ride for a couple of days and see what we can work out." Joni said, "Ok, but how about if you're my Uncle? Wouldn't that work?" Sam said, " Yeah! We could let it go that way for a bit. Maybe we could let it slip that you're a girl. I never told anyone you were a boy anyway! So from now on, I call you Joni!"

Wednesday morning, Joni harnessed two of the Mustangs to the Surrey. She was thinking , " Yeah , these broncs are itchin to go! Ol'Gordon's in for a ride today! I'll race 'em to the foothills so they're tired and ready to walk goin down hill!' Gordon gave the mustangs a disappointed look as he stepped into the Surrey sayin, " Sam's livestock gets worse every time I go to Twin Forks. These are the worse I've seen! Johnny, do you reckon we'll make it there and back

with these sorry lookin scrubs?” Joni said, “ Mister Gordon , you’re in for a real ride today, so hang on!’ Joni turned the bronks loose, but only a little.! They left town at a good run! Gordon was thrown back in his seat! There’d be no checking his log book today! He had to hold on! At two miles out the Bronks were slowing down and Joni touched them back up into a ground eating lope! She wanted them tired for the down hill run into Twin Forks! Gordon experienced the fastest trip he’d ever had! Joni was thinkin, “ Maybe now he’ll quit complaining!” Wrong! The ride was too rough! He would have to stay in town longer so he could study his ledger!

An hour later, the Mustangs were watered and rested when Gordon came from the Mercantile.” Damn!” She was thinkin, “ He ain’t learned nothing. Here he comes carrying a valise again! Why don’t he wave a red flag for the outlaws!” Joni checked her guns! Hopefully, no one was watching! Wrong again! A dust cloud followed her outta town! Joni was scared, this time she had to try something else! Shooting and she could be killed! She had been lucky before. The outlaws would be waiting on top of that two mile grade. She was sure of it! Gordon was an idiot! They could both be killed! Joni walked the mustangs outta town. She was gonna need all the speed she could get when they hit the top. Gordon was fuming angry when she stopped a hundred yards from the top . This time she totally ignored his complaints about wasted time and his difficult schedule. She let the mustangs get a full rest back to normal breathing.

Walking to within twenty five yards of the crest, Joni shocked Gordon as she laid on the whip! The half broke Mustangs responded with a full runaway. They almost ran down two outlaws with guns converging on the trail yelling “Hold Up!” Gordon started shooting as they passed! Joni had all she could do to keep the mustangs on the trail! She never touched her gun! The mustangs hightailed it across the mountain pulling the light weight Surrey! The outlaw horses were blown out ,having been run hard to gain the Ridge before the Surrey arrived! Joni had her hands full and shortly outdistanced the riders! Gordon was complaining that she had not helped fight off the outlaws! Joni said, “ Mister Gordon , there was no need for me to do any shootin. You had them shot outta the way and all I had to do was race the horses! I think you mighta hit one of the Outlaws!” Gordon was pleased with Joni’s answer! He could take full credit for busting the Hold Up!

Joni eased the Mustangs down into a ground eating trot. She was thinkin, “ Well at least ,I acted like a girl this trip! No shooting or killing for me! These Broncs did a great job! Sam can get a good price for’em!” Gordon headed straight for the Sheriff’s office as they came into Cottonwood! Joni was glad that there had been no killing, but told Sam, “ I don’t wanna drive Gordon to Twin Forks again. He insists on carrying that black valise and every outlaw in the country thinks it’s full of money! Sam, I may not be so lucky next time. He can hire somebody else. I don’t like being shot at!” Sam said, “ Gordon can hire a guard to drive him there. I agree with you. We rent horses and if he asks again . The answer is no!”

Joni was lookin forward to working with Rob again and had been working everyday with her little Buckskin. She hitched him to Sam's Cart and drove to The Bender place just to show off a little. Rob was quite surprised to see how well he handled and what a great looking horse he looked in harness! His Mom , Gladys Bender said, " Rob I told you that little horse would make a great horse for your sister Ann. " Rob said , " Yeah Mom, I know you did , but I needed the money and he was too small for remount." Joni said , " Mrs Bender, Jump in . I'll give you a ride!" Gladys stepped up into the Cart saying, " I could use a quick trip to the Mercantile, if you can spare the time!" Joni was happy to show off her Button! He was a very smooth and fast trotter. She accompanied Gladys through the store and helped her load groceries in the Cart! Gladys asked , " I don't mean to be nosey , but how did you come by the name Johnny. I've never known a girl to be called Johnny before!" Joni was shocked spinning her head around saying, " How did you know I was a girl ? Did Sam tell you?" Gladys laughed saying, " I'll Swanee!. These men! I knew you were a girl, the first time I saw you! I told Rob. He thought you were a boy too! You're tall and wear boys clothes, but you walk and move like a girl. Your features are soft and refined .Now, what's your real name cause you sure ain't no Johnny!" Joni then told Gladys her story of why she had to be a boy to work for Sam. She only withheld her Dad's part in the robbery that killed Mister Bender. Joni was deeply grateful to tell someone and become a girl again!

Joni wondered how Rob had taken the news that she was a girl? She didn't want to ask! Rob seemed to be the same. There was no sign that her being a girl made any difference. Once again she worked all of his broncs through the swimming hole and all seemed to accept riding without problems. When the morning's work was finished, Rob said; "Joni I want to apologize for thinking you were a smart aleck kid and a boy at that! You're really a great horse worker and I really appreciate you taking on my breaking job. If I can get these broncs to the Remount Station in Wagon Mound, I can meet Ol'Gordon's payment due on the calf crop loan." Joni said, " Rob, how about those studs we cut? They should be ready next week for work. Couldn't you top those off and sell them too?" Rob said, " Joni, normally I could ,but this arm is still useless. One of the small bones was broken. Hurts like hell if I use it at all! They'll just have to wait another month or so. I should turn'em out with the Wild bunch up in the Tonto Hills. That would save me a big feed bill. I guess I could catch'em all again next spring!" Joni said " No Rob, they'll break real easy now right after cutting. They'll bust a lot easier than this bunch I just rode! Can you wait one more week before delivery to the Remount Station? I'll come over and if you'll short snub'em , I'll ride all of 'em through the swimming hole!" Rob couldn't believe what he was hearing! If he could sell that many remounts, he'd be outta debt for the year! He said, " Joni, I don't know what to say! I can't expect you to do that! What about your job at the livery; what will Sam say?" Joni said, " He knows I'm lookin for a new job, but I need a place to stay. The tack room at the stable is where I

sleep and keep my belongings. I'm gonna have to move out though, because Sam really ain't my Uncle like we're tellin folks and most of them think I'm a boy!" Rob said, " I don't see that as a problem, but Mom might! Let's ask her!"

Glady's was horrified, and after hearing the full story said," Joni , I've never heard of such a thing! You, a young girl. living in that filthy Stable. That Sam outta be shot! You can come here and stay with us until you find a place! You can bunk in Ann's room! If you wanna keep workin for Sam, that's fine, but it's surely not the place for a young girl!" Joni was thankful for the invitation and replied, " Mrs Bender, I'd love to accept your invitation, but there's something you should know. I'm Joni Watson. My Dad was an outlaw in Black Henry's Gang. He was killed in the Bank Robbery that caused the death of your husband. I'm not sure I'd be welcome in your home!"

Glady's replied. "Hon, you can't be blamed in anyway for what your Father did. You couldn't know this, but my Jim was killed before the robbery by that Bank Guard Sam Tippins. Jim was angry and beating on the door before the Bank opened.. He wanted to talk to Ol, Gordon about his loan. Tippins shot him through the door. Yeah, my Jim died hours before the robbery. Tippins was killed later that afternoon during the Black Henry robbery attempt. That was a good thing, otherwise I'd be in Jail for killing that cowardly Tippins myself. Of course ol'Gordon tried to hide the real truth of the whole affair. My Jim always said he was worse than the Outlaws for stealing a man blind! No, Hon! I'd love

to have you stay with us until you can get a place of your own. Rob thinks you're about the best horse trainer he's ever seen , even if you are a girl! You've already made him a bunch of money and I'm sure we can work out something." Joni replied, " Mrs Bender, I don't know what to say! I'd love to come here! I'll talk to Sam! I know he'll be relieved to have me move out, but I'm a girl and I want to dress like one! Everyone in town thinks I'm a boy." Gladys said, " Joni, don't you worry about it. The town will soon enough know you're a girl and a pretty one at that!"

Gladys went on with, " The summer Dance is coming up and Rob is the best dancer in town. He's always the hit of the party and he can introduce you to everyone." Joni said, " I've never been to a dance! Do you think that's a good idea?" Gladys replied. " My Ann can teach you to dance in ten minutes. Rob always does a lot of his dancing with Ann and she is almost as good as he is!" Joni replied. " Mrs. Bender, it all sounds wonderful. I'm gonna talk to Sam right away."

The following day, Joni moved in and shared Anna's bedroom. She kept her job with Sam because he needed help with training his group of wild mustangs. Her days really became filled working the Livery and topping Rob's remounts. There was no time for sitting around . The coming dance was something Joni was afraid of and how she would look in Rob's eyes. Every evening , she asked Anna to help her learn the dance steps . She had her pay from Sam and went with Gladys's

shopping for a dress. Gladys and Anna had her trying everything and insisting on dressing her. Gladys was right. Joni was a very pretty girl.

Summer Dance Day finally arrived. If Rob was impressed and proud of Joni for her horse training; he was far more impressed with the pretty girl, she turned into for taking to the dance. He was a little amused by her attitude compared to other girls he had escorted to picnics and dances. Joni had hitched up Button to their Surrey and when all were ready she said, “ Rob would you, your Mom and Anna come out and I’ll help you step up into the seats?” Rob laughed and said, “ Joni, that’s supposed to be the man’s job. I should do that, but you’re right ; I can’t use this arm . You’re too pretty to be the man of the house, but yes I’ll use your help. This time!” Joni turned red as Gladys and Anna laughed at her. They knew she was getting sweet on Rob.

The picnic before the dance was a wonderful experience for Joni and she was pleased to do everything she could to help out. Rob loved the attention he was getting from her and enjoyed it. Once again though, at the Dance, he had to laugh at her when she says, “Rob, would you like something to drink ?”He says , “Hey, Joni I’m the man here. I’m supposed to ask what you want to drink!” Joni said , “ OK , I’ll have lemonade, but what can I get for you?’ Rob says, “ No, No! You sit here. I’m having punch, but I’ll get the drinks!” Joni says , “ Rob, I’m a big girl , remember! I can get our drinks! I’ll be right back!” Rob just shook his head laughing. Joni was already half way to the Punch Bowl.

Later , after Joni had watched Rob dance with almost every girl there , she finally managed to say, “ Rob , I don’t know much about it or if I’m speaking outta turn, but could I try a dance? Other boys have asked ,but I told them that I didn’t know how.” Rob laughed and said, “Sorry, I forgot! Once again though, I’m supposed to ask the question. Everyone here is asking about you and It’s way past your turn! I’ve sorta been keeping you for last. We’ve got the whole evening ahead to dance and they’re starting to play slow music. You’ll pick it up a lot easier. Most of the girls here, I’ve known for years and they’re good friends. I have to give them all a dance, but the rest of the evening, we can enjoy together. ” Joni said, “ No, I just wanted to give it a try! I’ve never danced before. Don’t give up your dancing for me. You are a very good dancer and I really enjoy watching you.” Rob said , “ No , Joni you’re prettier than any girl here. Get on your feet, we’re gonna enjoy , but be careful of my arm.” Joni enjoyed the next full hour of dancing with Rob. She had never enjoyed anything so much in her life.

Sam had come in for the Dance and watched Joni as she turned into a very pretty young girl. He was thinking, “No one , even I; would believe that Joni had survived outlaw living and a killing gunfight. I’m happy for her. She’s a wonderful young lady. She and Rob make a good looking couple.” Gladys thought so too. She also noticed that her son couldn’t take his eyes off Joni. She was thinking, “ Rob is a man and I’ve gotta quit thinking of him as my little boy. Joni is just what he needs! Maybe I’ll be in for a wedding one of these days.

Suddenly, the music stopped and a loud voice called out, “Rob! Rob Bender! Mrs Bender! Your Ranch has been hit! Raiders!” It was Sheriff Colbey. He had just received word from an outlying Rancher, Bill Porter. The Raiders had raced by his place with a string of horses. Mrs. Bender couldn’t believe this bad news. Fearing the worse, They quickly scrambled into the surrey and raced home. It was bad. Twenty of Rob’s Remounts were gone! Rob couldn’t believe it. There was no way to meet the Ranch payments now. There were only half a dozen remounts left . Luckily, his work horses were out in the big pasture.

Sheriff Colbey and Sam had ridden out with them and after checking the Corrals He asked , “How bad is it Rob?” Rob was totally dismayed and shaking his head said, “ We’re wiped out Jim. We’ll have to let the Ranch go. I can’t use this damn arm and there aren’t enough descent Mustangs left in the big corral to even make working them worthwhile. I’ll turn the whole bunch loose in the morning and the girls can haze’em up the Tonto’s. I’m short on feed anyway. Jim , I can still handle a gun. I’m going after my horses. I’ll be leaving as soon as I can throw my stuff together.” Colbey said, “ Look Rob ; don’t be hasty. Going out there alone . You’ll get yourself shot. Let me get a posse together and we’ll track’em down.” Rob replied, “ No time Sheriff. They’ll be in the next county come daylight and you don’t have authority south of here.” Sam spoke up saying, “ Look Rob, Colbey’s right. You’ll get shot goin it alone.”

Colbey said, “ Rob , I didn’t tell you, but that was Black Henry’s bunch that stole your horses. He was identified by Porter. They’re killers every one . Think about your Mom and Sis. You’re the man of the family now and they need you more than anything since your Dad was killed.” Rob replied, “ I’ve gotta try . My Dad would already be riding. I’m going. It don’t look like I’ve done too good a job anyway.” Rob headed for the barn to get his gear. Sheriff Colbey went to Mrs Bender hoping to get her to stop Rob. Joni had stood with Gladys and Anne during the whole exchange. Gladys said, “ No Sheriff, I’ll not try to stop him this time. I did when that horse thief shot him. Rob’s a great tracker and wanted to shoot a thief. This probably wouldn’t have happened if I had let him run down that thief.” Sheriff Colbey realized that he was wasting his time and headed back into town, saying, “ Hey Sam see if you can talk some sense into that boy, I’ve gotta see if I can get a posse together,” Joni abruptly said, “ Gladys I’m going with Rob.” Gladys was horrified exclaiming“ Oh No! Joni, you can’t go . Lordy girl, what are you thinking ! You, a young girl going out chasing horse thieves. Where’s your mind girl? You just can’t do that! Your reputation . what will people think? You can’t just run around like that with Rob! Joni replied, “ I don’t really care what people think. I can and have used a gun. Rob can’t use his arm and desperately needs help. I’m going with him.” Sam spoke up saying, “Mrs Bender, I’ll go with Rob if you’ll check my stall horses for me . They need to be hand fed and watered.” Gladys spun around saying, “ Oh God! Thank you Sam. Annie and I can be down there first thing in the morning.”

The argument between Rob and Joni was loud, but Joni prevailed when she said, “ Rob, I told you before that I rode with the Black Henry Gang for two years. I know exactly where they’ll take your horses to rebrand before selling them. We can cut across country and be in Caldwell’s Blind Canyon by noon tomorrow. That’s where they’ll head for. They have a regular Ranch setup there. I even have an idea how we might get your horses back.” Rob, Sam, and Gladys finally realized that Joni was determined to go and helped put trail gear and food together.

At midnight they had been on the trail for two hours and stopped for a breather at the top of a ridge. Rob said, “ Joni, I can’t tell you how I feel about you coming with me and wanting to help me get my horses. I don’t know what to expect, but there will be shooting and I want you to promise me that you’ll stay back out of danger. Sam and I will go in if anyone has to. I never heard of Caldwell’s Blind Canyon. I’ve been in that Redondo country and never heard mention of it.” He was looking at Sam’s negative headshake when Joni replied, “ It’s a well hidden Outlaw hideout, but the one thing that keeps it well hidden will help us get your horses. The trail in is very narrow and allows only one rider at a time. They’ll all ride in first leaving a couple of wranglers to bring in the horse string. If we can get in position before they arrive , I’ll take a high place above the trail with my rifle. You stop the wranglers and take your horses and I’ll hold off anyone coming back up the trail.” Rob said , “ Joni, it’s a good plan if the layout is like you say. You’ve been here before? How many times?” Joni replied, “ My Dad was a horse

trainer when he wasn't part of Henry's Hold up Gang. We were here five or six times over the past couple of years. It's a very good hide out." Rob said , " Joni, this is no game and there's gonna be shooting. I'd rather you weren't anywhere around. Whatta you think Sam?" Sam looked at Rob and said, " I know you don't know much about Joni , but believe me Rob, she has already been in more gunplay than either of us. Let's do this her way . She'll do just as she says. We'll have our hands full with the Wranglers."

At daybreak they rode into the little town of Redondo. Joni said, " Rob, I'm dead tired and hungry. Let's get something to eat. It's only about an hours ride to the Canyon and it'll be this afternoon before the horses arrive." Sam says , " Sounds good to me Rob. If a man's gotta get shot ,it might as well be on a full belly." Dismounting and walking to the Boarding House kitchen, a loud voice interrupted saying, " Hold it you three! Turn around easy, I'm Marshal Red Conners and I've got a gun on you. I wanna ask a question." All three stopped and slowly turned around making sure they kept hands clear of their side arms. Sam being the oldest asked, " What's your problem Marshal? We're gonna get something to eat." Conners said, " Thought you might be part of Black Henry's bunch. Girl ain't you Watson's daughter? Where's your Dad?" Joni replied , " Dad's dead. Killed in that Santa Fe Cattleman's Bank robbery. I'm working horses for Sam here, owner of the Cottonwood Livery. We're gonna pick up a horse string just west of town." Sam chimed in saying "That's right Marshal. We'll be bringing 'em right back through town. Probably sometime this afternoon."

Conners replied , “ Sorry about your Dad girl, but Bank robbing ain’t the safest job. Sam bring them horses thru here slow. These town folks don’t like a lotta dust and these streets are bone dry right now.”

Conners left them standing and Rob asked , “ Joni why didn’t you tell him what we were really doing here. We coulda used the Law’s help.” Sam replied , “ Rob, Joni knows Red and when she answered the way she did , I just followed her lead.” Joni said, “ Red and Black Henry may be paired and we don’t wanna show our hand.” Rob laughed saying , “ Damn , excuse me! But gal I love you, you’re springing something new on me every day. I sure don’t ever wanna play poker with you. Sounds like you can read the back of the cards.”Joni said, “ Rob, I’ve played poker with some of the worst outlaws in the territory and taken some of their money. You better remember a young fuzzy headed girl don’t know nothing until you see her raking in the pot!” Rob just shook his head saying , “ Girl, you’re a wonder. I’ve never met anyone like you.”

Later , they were approaching the canyon and Joni said , “Hold up.”Rob asked, “Joni ,There ain’t a trail outta here. Are you sure this is the right canyon? Joni replied, “See that big boulder between the two pinnacles? Go around it to the right and cross to the left and go almost all the way around before you try to head right again .it’s a blind trail. It looks completely blocked from up here, but believe me a horse can almost run through there. I’ve done it a number of times. She rode over close to Rob and said, “Rob, don’t get yourself hurt

down there. I'm gonna be over here by that cut bank and I can stop anyone trying to come out. Sam, see that he don't get hurt, will ya?" Sam said, " Take it easy Joni. We're gonna hide out down that draw west until the horses are here and the Gang has entered that blind trail. It seems like a good plan if everything goes as you say." Rob blurted, " Joni, wait now. Please don't get out where you might get hit. I'd just as soon lose the horses as see you get hurt." Joni pointing quickly said, " Can't wait! Here they come! Dust cloud. They'll be here in a few minutes, we better get in position, Good luck!"

Quickly Sam and Rob hustled to the draw where they'd be outta sight. Rob was shaking his head and trying to look back for Joni. Sam said, " Son don't worry about her, she's been in two shootouts and has more guts than any girl I've ever met. Take your keeper off your pistol, cause we ain't gonna have no time to lose. Can you see the entrance to that trail?" Rob replied nervously, "Yeah Sam, but something's wrong , the whole group is headed down toward town. They're leaving two riders with the horses. Damn, this blows the whole thing. We can't go in there shootin. The other four'll come back right on top of us. They're beginning to string my horses together. I guess they're gonna lead the whole string through the blind trail. Sam , Damnit , that cuts it. We'll have to let'em go or take on the whole bunch." Sam moved his horse up where he could see the riders and suddenly exclaimed, " I'll be Damned! What the hell is Joni doing?" Rob looked where Sam pointed. Joni came casually riding down to the two riders and just as casually rode to within ten feet of the horse thieves. Suddenly she

leveled her rifle at the two thieves. Both shot their hands in the air and Sam said, “ Rob , let’s go! Smart damn girl!” Rushing up on the two thieves with drawn guns, he said, “Rob take their guns! I’ll kill the first that moves.”

Joni sat her horse and after the two were disarmed, she said, “ Mort, you and Jason get off your horses. No we’re not gonna turn you over to the Marshall for hanging. You stole these horses, but we’re gonna be nice. We’re gonna let you walk to your hideout. No. we’re not gonna let you ride in, we’re gonna steal your horses like you stole ours. Start walkin!” Mort turned around saying, “ You Damn Jezabel, Henry will kill you for this!” Rob spoke up saying , “ Mister , one more word and you’re gonna get that rope you asked for. Those are my horses and I’m not against a hanging right here! You’re lucky she’s here to save your worthless hide.” Jason said, “ Shut up Mort, let’s go!”

Rob said , “Joni that was crazy! They coulda shot you on the spot.” Joni said, “ When I saw what was happening, I knew we were done for. I just thought if they recognized me, I could get close enough to throw a gun on’em. They have both seen me shoot and when I threatened to put a bullet through their elbow if they didn’t raise their hands. They believed me and then you and Sam took over. I knew we didn’t want any shooting and taking their horses means that Black Henry won’t know we’ve been here till late tonight when he gets back from town. Rob we can be within a few miles of Wagon Mound and that Remount Station by daybreak.” Rob came over and gave Joni a big hug saying, “

Girl you are so special. I could just kiss you” To Joni’s disappointment , he didn’t!

The horses were tired and gave very little trouble as they hazed them in a group at a dogtrot towards the Station at Wagon Mound. At daybreak they were still a good ten miles out and Joni anxiously kept an eye on their back trail. She was relieved and in answer to Rob’s question she replied, “ Just checking for a dust cloud following us. I guess Henry decided trying to catch us was not worth it. We should be seeing the buildings of Wagon Mound any minute .”

Two hours later , Rob was collecting a bank draft from Captain Harrison and the Captain was saying, “ Bender, these are the best group you’ve brought us. Every one of the twenty five carrying your brand are well gentled and easy riders. I’ve got twelve or fifteen half broke’s that my men can’t do anything with. Got’em from Red Conners over in Redondo. Paid the going rate but these are all bronco’s. Gonna have to get rid of’em.” Joni spoke up saying, “ Captain , what’ll you pay to have’em ridden down and gentled?” The Captain spun around saying, “ You know Miss, I expected to hear that question from Bender, but since you asked. I’ll pay fifteen a head and board for two weeks.” Rob came over and took Joni’s arm laughing and sayin, “You’re right Captain, but Joni here is my right arm at the moment, and I think we’ll take the job. We should have them ready in two weeks.”

Later as they took the twelve horse string and headed back to Cottonwood and the bender Ranch Sam said, “ Rob, it looks like that

Red Conners is selling Black Henry's stolen horses. I'll just bet every brand on all of these has been altered." Rob replied, " Sam , you're right and I think Captain Harrison is gonna be a little hesitant to give Conners a descent price in the future. Right now he's making money for me and Joni. She'll have these rough boys lamb gentle in two weeks." Sam said, " Yeah Rob, She's quite a young lady. I've never met anyone like her. I'll take her for a niece anytime and be proud to have her call me Uncle."

Later as they corralled the Army horses and related their story to Rob's Mom, Sheriff Colbey had come over to hear the whole thing from Rob. Sam had given him a short account. He was amazed at Joni's part and said, " Little lady , you seem to always be around when there's gunplay. Maybe I should call on you when we need a Deputy. Rob whattta you gonna do with this pretty girl? Get her all shot up chasing horse thieves?" Rob kinda turned red as he said, " Sheriff, you heard the story, but you had to be there watching Joni as she took down two horse thieves single handed and did it without firing a shot. Yes, she's very special to me and no I won't be chasing any more horse thieves with her. Tomorrow we're breaking horses and believe me she's a whole lot better at that than I am." Colbey said, " Rob, maybe you should consider making her a permanent member of the family." Rob quickly swung his head around relieved that Joni was in the kitchen with his Mom. He said , " Sheriff, Joni is a very independent girl, always on her own ,and calling all of her own shots. I couldn't ask for a better partner, but some things are better left up to her. Right now ,

I'm enjoying working with her and we're having a great time . When the time is right, I may have a question for her." Colbey slapped Rob on the back saying," Couldn't happen to a better pair in the whole Territory! Damn sure invite me ."

Three long weeks of hard riding and the Army horses were returned to Captain Harrison. Rob and Gladys were overjoyed with paying off the Banker. The ranch was no longer in jeopardy of foreclosure. Rob said, " Joni this has all been possible because of you. I owe you more than I can ever repay. You're the best help I ever had and with my arm coming around, we can do a lot more together." Joni replied , " Rob, I love your Mom and I love working with you. These last few weeks have been the very best time of my life. I wish it could go on forever. Would you go riding with me in the moonlight again?" Rob replied, " There you go again. Joni, I'm supposed to ask you for a moonlight ride. Remember, it's a man thing." Joni replied , " OK, it can be your man thing, but will you go ? I loved it the other evening and the moon is still almost full. It's beautiful out there!" Rob took her hand , laughed and said, "I'd love to."

Later , after a two hour ride around the Ranch , the two were returning riding side by side holding hands as they talked about little things when Joni couldn't stand it any longer. She blurted out, "Rob , I don't know a lot about it , but I've fallen in love with you . I know you didn't think a girl can ride broncs or rope cows, but I've already proved I can do all that. Do you suppose we might get married someday?" Rob spun

around saying. “Hey! Wait a minute! You’re speaking out of turn again! I’m the one that’s supposed to ask that question!” she says , “Sorry! I forgot!, OK! It’s your turn! You ask the question!” Rob laughed, giving her a big hug, and said. “ You know Joni. I think I’m just gonna do that!”

The End