



Homecoming

Rooting Out Evil

Part 3 of the Seven Brothers Saga

"We need to go back. If Ma has come home and he isn't with her, we need to call the sheriff and ask for a search team to help us comb through these woods."

"And if she is not back?" Jason asked, knowing the answer and not liking it. It was shameful that they did not know where either of their parents was. Pa's mind could no longer be considered sharp. And Ma, well, she had been acting strangely ever since Junior's death. She couldn't be counted on to act reasonably either, especially if she was in one of her 'I've got to get away from things' moods.

"It's been years since she has taken off like this." Garrett knew where his brother's thoughts were taking him; he didn't need to put voice to them. "If she is not home, we should also call Sheriff Harris, explain the situation so he can put out one of those all-points bulletins like they do on TV."

"Explaining that Ma used to take off without telling us where she was going, be embarrassing, and now it appears she has taken another one, is going to be embarrassing."

"Yep, it will be. People are going to talk about us, wondering what kind of family routinely runs their ma off to parts unknown. I will be worse if Pa isn't with her, and we have to explain why we took so long to ask for a search party."

"I know. We have to do what we have to do."

"Jase, it might come out that we hid Junior's body. I am sure that is a crime. Are you ready to go to jail?"

"I've been tossing around the possibility in my head ever since we tossed Junior off the mountain." Jason pulled back on the reins, halting his gelding, and waited for Garrett to do the same. "Listen, you've got a wife and kids. I'll say it was me who did the deed."

"Thanks, but no thanks. We are in this together... I told Ash, if it looks like I am heading to jail, to divorce me, sell the Mountain's Edge, and move."

"What about Ma?"

"Ash loves her; she will make sure Ma is taken care of."

"And Pa?"

Garrett ignored the question. Instead of answering, he asked a question of his own. "Do you really think Pa killed Junior?"

"We went over this already. He was in the room with Junio's body. There was no one else there. Ipso facto, it had to be him."

"I know. The problem I have with it is that it doesn't feel right. He was up and moving before Ma."

"And?"

"You haven't noticed? Pa is sleeping later than he ever has. Ashley said something the other day about him not wanting to face the day. That he realizes he is not the man he once was."

He scanned the woods for signs of his father. He'd settle for a sign of his father's passage. He saw nothing: no broken twigs, no threads torn from the flannel shirt his father had been wearing the last time he saw him, and certainly, no footprints. He might not have been as good a woodsman as Chris Larabee, but the last few years spent escorting hunters had made him better than most. Had his father come this way? It was the most logical path to take once you left the row of cabins. The terrain was relatively easy, and the path was wide enough in most places for Jason and him to ride side by side. With new grass beginning to show and trees changing into their spring garments, it should have been an inviting walk.

"Do you think he headed to Cutter's Creek? I heard him telling your boy that he and his sister liked to go there."

"I don't know. That's a pretty hard walk."

"There is nothing wrong with his legs... If he came out the front porch, he would have more than likely walked this way, and we have searched almost every inch of the forest down to the road. If he walked out the back door, he may have headed to the creek."

"Yeah, we need to go check it out before we call for help." Garrett guided his horse onto a narrow trail, which would eventually lead them to the creek. They walked the horses, neither of them talking, as they scanned for signs of their father. They took turns calling for their father, listening for signs of a reply. The quiet surrounding them as their bellowing voices silenced the sounds usually heard.



"When ya get out, keep the door between ya and her," Vin instructed his brother as he snagged the rifle. It wouldn't be the easy fluid movement he needed to bring his rifle into play, but if the woman sitting in one of the rocking chairs on the front porch pointed any weapon at them, he would also be armed.

"I think she's OK," Josiah reassured his brother, but when he turned the truck's motor off, he kept the key in the ignition just in case they needed to get out of there fast. He did as Vin requested and kept the door between him and the woman as he climbed out of the truck. With a welcoming good humor in his voice and an accompanying smile that he hoped appeared genuine, he asked. "Something we can help you with?"

As the woman stood, he noted her hands remained in her pockets. Damn, he thought. He couldn't check her fingernails. He waited behind the door for her answer as he compared her features with those of the photographs Lev had handed them. Brown hair streaked with gray, tanned face with laugh lines and crow's feet. All of that could be changed with makeup and a wig. He needed to see her hands.

"Hello, my name is Amy Marks. I am Chris's aunt. I need to speak with him." Her voice, oddly stilted, sounded almost robotic and was at odds with the stress that shone in her eyes.

Josiah didn't take his eyes off her face. If she had planned on doing something, her eyes would betray her; he hoped Vin was reading her face and interpreting it as he was. He didn't believe her to be unhinged, but there was something in her voice and in her eyes that set off every warning bell in his body. At first, he had thought she had almost been panicked when they drove up. Perhaps she felt as though she had been caught trespassing. But if he had read the panic in her face correctly, it wasn't there now. It had not been replaced by desperation. He suspected that if he told her that Chris was delayed, the tears threatening to spill would flow down her cheeks, and the shame of losing control of her emotions in front of strangers would break her. He needed to get her to trust him.

Vin, having covertly pulled his rifle into the front seat as he climbed out of the truck, answered Chris's aunt, "Jest talked to him a little bit ago. He should be here in a few minutes. Is there anything we can help you with?"

"No, I will wait for him."

Josiah stepped away from the protection of the truck's door, thinking the woman did not seem crazed; she seemed distraught. "We are his brothers. I'm Josiah, Josiah Sanchez. He's Vin Tanner. There's no need for you to sit out here in the cold. Come inside, you can take your coat off, while I get a pot of coffee going." Josiah held his hand out, waiting for her to mimic his move and shake it. She didn't. Instead, she turned to look at the porch steps she had just descended before nodding and walking back up them to wait for him at the door.

Josiah didn't want to turn his back on her, but he needed to unlock the door. Trusting that Vin had his back and was ready to take action if she pulled a knife from her pocket, he opened the door and held it for her, inviting her inside.

My brothers keep telling me spring is right around the corner, but it still feels cold to me. I am from California, and I despise feeling cold. I like to think that coffee helps. How do you take it?" Josiah asked the question with a purpose in mind. Psychology 101: Starting with simple questions prepares clients to tackle harder ones later. He made a show of getting the coffee started in what he called the 'church pot'. When he had the coffee going, he turned and prompted, "I sort of lied when I asked you how you liked your coffee. My brothers and I all drink it black. We don't have any cream in the refrigerator. I don't even think we have milk." He waited a heartbeat, then added, "However, I can scrounge up some sugar if you like, only you will have to get it out of the camister. I don't know if we even have a sugar bowl." There it was, the tiniest of smiles; the first step had been taken.

"Black is fine."



Chris glanced at his phone when he heard it vibrate. Seeing the message from Vin that his aunt was at the ranch, he swore. When he saw that the worried look in JD's eyes was mirrored in Ezra's, he explained, "My Aunt Amy is at the ranch." He continued after a heartfelt sigh, "I don't remember the last time she came to the ranch... I don't have a clue as to why she is there." He wanted to add that it was impossible that she was Waldo, but he kept his mouth shut because it was not only possible, but it was very probable that if she wasn't Waldo, then Waldo could be listening to their conversation.

"Why do you think she is there? JD asked; he didn't comment on Chris's increased speed. They were only a few minutes behind Vin and Josiah, but he had seen Waldo's handiwork and figured that if Amy Marks was Waldo, she could do a lot of damage to his brothers in those few minutes.

Chris thought about JD's question. He knew he tended to ignore people's questions when he didn't have a good answer. Sarah would never let him get away with his silence; she said it was easier to solve problems when they were shared. Sarah, like in so many other things, was right. He would try it her way. "JD, I don't honestly know why she is there. She probably has a problem she wants me to solve."

"Does she normally come to you to ask for your help?" Ezra asked.

"No." Glancing in the rearview mirror, Chris saw that Ezra had his Sig in his hand. He wanted to ask where the hell Ezra had been keeping it, but he didn't; instead, he instructed JD, "When we get home, let Ezra get out first, stay behind him."

JD turned to look at Ezra and saw the gun he was holding, and correctly interpreted Chris's warning to mean: Don't get in Ezra's line of fire. He nodded his understanding and sank into his seat as he considered the situation.



Listening to Billy as he changed out of his church clothes and began rummaging around in his dresser for jeans and a sweater to wear to the park, Mary examined the gun in her hand. Realizing that a man was watching her place spooked her. She readily admitted to herself that she was scared when she had placed the gun in her purse before leaving for church. She didn't like having a gun, but last night, while lying in bed, concentrating on the sounds she heard from the streets, wondering if the noises of the night, which she usually ignored, were being made by the man who had been watching her home.

Kicking off her heels, she grabbed her running shoes from her shoe rack, thinking that she needed to be able to run if the man appeared again. She wouldn't wear her jeans. Every pair of jeans hanging in the closet had been purchased with the knowledge of how it showed off her figure and her long legs. They were bought with the idea of putting an appreciative grin on Stephen's face. She had never thought about whether she could run in them.

She opened a drawer and pulled out her green sweatpants and the oversized sweatshirt she had bought when she was running to remove the last few pounds she had gained with Billy. Her breath caught in her throat at the memory of getting up every morning, kissing Stephen as she handed their son to her husband, and darted out the door, ignoring Stephen's voice as he called out a warning to be careful. He alternated his warnings with his reassurances of how beautiful she was. Oh, how she missed him.

OK, she told herself, don't get weepy. She had promised Billy that she would take him to the park, and she couldn't afford to disappoint him now that things between them were getting back to normal. She quickly changed, but then stopped in her tracks as she caught sight of the gun she had laid on the bed. She couldn't leave it behind, and she couldn't take it with her. She needed to protect her son, but in her quest to protect him, she had to factor in Billy's reaction to seeing her with a gun. Even if seeing the gun didn't remind him of his father's death, Billy was clever; just seeing her holding a weapon would tell him they were in trouble. She couldn't risk his dreams returning.

She picked up the gun, looked around the room searching for a place to hide it that she could easily reach, and that Billy would not find. It was loaded, and children had no business being around a loaded weapon. She opened her nightstand and placed it inside. It wasn't an ideal hiding place, but she couldn't carry it to the park with her. Later, she would have to find a better spot to keep it.

No, she didn't need a better hiding place for the gun; she needed a better plan to keep Billy safe.



"Don't have anythin' really to share, Chris. Josiah has tried talking with her, but while she is polite as hell, she ain't said much 'cept she needs to talk to you."

"Her fingernails?" He doubted his aunt was Waldo, but now had to consider the safety of his six brothers. He couldn't afford to be wrong and would treat her like any of the other suspects until he could prove her innocence.

"Cut real short, but she works on a ranch, not in an office. She might prefer to keep them short."

Chris patted Vin's shoulder as he walked by, "Want to help JD and Ezra unload?"

Amy Marks walked out to meet him, gave him a brief hug, and pulled him to her truck. "Let's get out of the wind. I need to talk to you about something."

"We can go inside, Aunt Amy," Chris offered, as he searched his brain for a place they could talk that would give them privacy from his brothers and from the Listeners.

"No. What I have to say is between you and me, not anyone else."

"We can go to the library." Not really. The only place he was reasonably sure it would be safe to talk was in either JD's or Vin's room, and taking his aunt into a bedroom was plain weird. He felt relieved when she gently shoved him towards her truck.

When they were both settled in the truck, Amy turned to face her nephew. "I've been practicing what to say, but I don't have it right, not yet. Anyway, I need to talk, and I need you to hear me out before making comments. Can you do that?"

"I will try, but don't you want to go inside? If you don't want to go to the house, we can go into the barn. I've been sitting in my truck all day. I need to be where I can stretch my legs," Chris objected, even as he opened the door and climbed into the passenger seat.

“The lever to push the seat back is on the side. You’ll be more comfortable.” She waited for him to move the seat back and then began. “Chris, I don’t like coming here. I have never felt at ease being on the Double L. This is Cassie’s home, her creation. I know there have been changes over the years, but I still feel her presence all around me. I feel as though I am intruding.” She tried to smile. “That makes it sound like Cassie and I butted heads. Most of the time, she was one of my best friends, but she had her moods, and they could be difficult to deal with... I don’t think she would approve of me being here, but with Curtis like he is, I can’t talk to you at my house, so here I am. Sitting in my truck at Cassie’s house is the only compromise I could think of that would be fair to my needs while still respecting Cassie. It probably doesn’t matter, and I am being weird and fanciful. If Cassie had a vote on whether she approved of what I am about to say, I am honestly not sure how she would vote, but she is dead and her vote doesn’t count, and I need to share some things with you.”

Chris nodded his head, but kept his mouth shut. It wasn’t only that he had promised to stay quiet, but because part of him wanted to protest her telling him whatever she was gearing up to tell him. This had been a difficult weekend. He wanted to hear good news about puppies and rainbows or whatever good news looked like. He was Landon Larabee’s son and would deal with anything his aunt told him like a man.

“After she died, your father struggled to talk about Cassie. I am sure you realize that. Curtis would say, especially when we heard rumors of Landon taking up with yet another woman, that Landon had forgotten his twin. Not for one minute have I ever believed that. I believe that. I think Landon remembered Cassie and grieved for her until the day he died. You could see his love for her in his actions and hear it in his voice. Everything he did, he did for her. When she was in the burn unit, he prayed for her to get better and to come home. He knew about the burnt-off fingers and the disfiguring burns to her face and body, but he would have ignored all of that. He just wanted her home. Every day, he prayed for a miracle, and every day when he went to the hospital to sit beside her and saw no miracle had happened, he argued with God.

When he dated other women, I think he hoped he would see Cassie looking back at him through their eyes. You do not need to share that with your brothers. I know they all want to believe their father was head-over-heels in love with their mother. When Landon and Cassie announced their engagement, there was a pool going on as to how long Landon would put up with Cassie’s temper and moods. After a few months of waiting for signs of an explosive row between the two of them and not seeing even the mildest of dust-ups, gossips decided that Landon had done the impossible and tamed the redheaded Cassandra Marks. That wasn’t the case. They had their fights; you can’t meld two strong-willed people into one person without a few squabbles. And when they did squabble, Landon would go wrestle with a cow or something along those lines, and Cassie would call Curtis. They did argue, but I don’t think Landon ever recovered from losing Cassie.

“Curtis worried about you not knowing your mother, not having memories of her. After her funeral, Curtis and I drove home in silence. He drove us home, using his left hand to steer and clutching my hand with his right. I will never forget the feeling of his hand in mine. Curtis was lost, and his hand, holding mine, was him, attempting to stay grounded in this world. People worried about your father, but as bad as I felt for him, I witnessed what the loss of Cassie did to Curtis. Every morning, I watched him struggle to get out of bed and face the day, knowing his sister had left him alone. It didn’t matter that I was at his side; I wasn’t Cassie. I wasn’t his twin. I hadn’t been at his side his entire life.

If he had stayed in college, they would have had a chance to practice being on their own. He left college, you know, because he was worried about her. It took me a while to realize it, but whenever Cassie flew into one of her temper tantrums, it wasn’t her mother or her father who calmed her down and made her see how ridiculous she was acting; it was Curtis. I saw him as her shield. She would throw spears into the world, and he would swoop in to protect her. That was his role in life. When Landon came along and proved he was more than capable of taking care of Cassie, of calming her when she was ready to explode over something, of absorbing the spears she threw at him, not only not retaliating, but proving that he still loved her, when he did those things, Curtis began relinquishing his role of Cassie’s protector to Landon. She still called Curtis when she was angry with Landon, but most times, all he had to say was ‘You chose him, go talk to him,’ and she would.

When we married and my folks moved East to be nearer to my brother and his family, Curtis threw himself into making the Mountain Edge a home for the two of us. He wanted a place that I would be proud to show them, but he didn't include me in on the planning; he'd run each and every idea by Casie to see what she thought of it. I wanted to yell at him and tell him that I was his wife, that he should be sharing his ideas with me. Then, I would remember my mother's words: Honey, he is a twin, and it's always been the two of them. Give him time.' So, I did.

This has been a long-winded way of saying that Cassie and Curtis were close, the point being that Curtis feared Cassie would be forgotten and that you would grow up not knowing her. It was a fall. You had just had your first birthday. We had been invited to your grandparents' home for dinner and cake. Curtis sat on one side of your highchair, and your father sat on the other. Curtis kept trying to get you to try a bite of the cake, but you kept turning your head away from it. Curtis began a story about Cassie being a picky eater, and Lanson got up and walked out of the room. When he didn't come back, we got our things, said our goodbyes, and left. We had to pull off the road so Curtis could compose himself. He kept saying that Landon is erasing Cassie. When we pulled up to our house, we didn't go inside. We walked over to the split rail fence and watched the horses in the pasture. Curtis and I pledged on that day that you would know as much about your mother as we could give you, so that you could grow up with a sense of who Cassie was. Even though we talked about her and kept her memory alive, we made a mistake, not a big one; nonetheless, I have come to realize it was a mistake. We built her up, made her larger than life. The picture we painted for you was incomplete." She paused and deliberately turned away.

"We showed every picture we had of her, and either Curtis or I told you the story that explained each picture. Many pictures of her showed Cassie on horseback. Our classmates and the people around town were in awe of how well she and Curtis rode after only a few lessons because it was obvious neither of their parents knew anything about ranching. Gifted, they said. For years, that is exactly what I also thought. Neither Curtis nor Cassie mentioned that they had been around horses before moving here the summer before our senior year. That assumption wasn't quite the truth. When I confronted Curtis with pictures of the two of them being awarded medals at a show jumping event, he confessed that the two of them had been enrolled in a riding school since they were four years old. They didn't own horses until they moved here, but they did have riding lessons each week because their mother thought it was something rich people did. The lessons they had here, in Four Corners, were to get them comfortable riding with a western saddle. Curtis went on to tell me that the reason they were both so accurate when firing a rifle because they had participated in a skeet shooting club in Colorado, and that they were on teams at their school in Colorado. I don't know why she and Curtis felt the need to hide their past, but when I asked Curtis, he said that Cassie wanted everyone to be amazed by her prowess on a horse and with a rifle.

"I know it sounds as though I'm jumping around, and I am, but I need to tell it this way. I knew Junior was dead before they found his body. A mother knows these things. I knew he would not just take off and leave, especially since it was right before Thanksgiving. I started seeing the shadows in the house while people were still out searching for him. My sons think I am acting strange because Junior is dead, but the reality is that I am acting strange because of the shadows. They are everywhere in that house.

"The other day, I went down to our root cellar. Do you know how hard it was for me to go down there?" She didn't wait for Chris to answer, but hurried on as though she was afraid that if she waited for him to comment, she would not be able to complete her story, "For years, I have been too frightened of what I would see to go down there. I would send Curtis or one of the boys down when I needed something. I told them that I was scared of the mice and spiders that might be found there. I don't remember the last time I was in it, but earlier this week I felt compelled to go down those rickety stairs. I thought being there would give me the clues I needed to understand the shadows.

"As I walked down the stairs, I realized they were not the rickety stairs of my memory. The cellar wasn't the dark, dingy hole carved into the ground a hundred years ago that I remember. The single light fixture dangling from a beam stretched across the ceiling had been replaced with two rows of fluorescent lights. The floors, the walls... it was not the root cellar I remember... It was a room. It felt so much like someone's room that I half expected to see a bed in a corner.

"I thought that Curtis must have fixed it up real nice for me, so I wouldn't be scared to go down there, but I do not know when he did the work, and I don't understand why he didn't say anything to me. Thursday night, I asked him about it. He had been more engaged in the here and now than usual. He remembered George and Erin's names at dinner and had helped Garrett with a plumbing problem in one of the cabins. Normally, I don't ask questions when he is having a good day; when he can't remember how to answer a question, it throws him into a depression that can last for days, but my need to know what was happening in my house overtook my need to protect Curtis.

"So I asked. He told me that he fixed it up for Cassie. I said, Curtis, Cassie died years ago. He looked at me like I was stupid for stating the obvious and said that he knew she was dead, but that she liked to come around sometimes to talk, and that she needed a place to stay when she did.

"I had thought that the day I learned that Junior was dead was the worst day of my life. Standing there, listening to Curtis explain that he had fixed up the cellar for a ghost, is when it really hit me that losing his twin was the worst day of Curtis's life and that he never recovered. I grieved when she died. Everyone who knew Cassie grieved, but we moved on. Thursday night, I realized that my husband could not move on. That night, it came to me that Curtis made the root cellar habitable so he could talk to his sister without anyone noticing he was talking to a dead woman. He even showed me a hidden passage in his office that led to the cellar. It was nothing more than a ladder hidden behind a bookcase, but he said that he used it when she visited so they could talk privately.

"Curtis has been tormented by a ghost for all these years, and I hadn't even realized it. Friday morning, I got up and packed an overnight bag, and left. I've done it before, you know. Leave without telling anyone."

For several minutes, she was quiet as she mentally reviewed the things she had said and the things left that she needed to say. "I haven't felt the need to get away for years, but there have been several times I had to get out of the house and go somewhere quiet. This sounds silly when I say it out loud, but I left to become unafraid. What was I afraid of, you might be asking. I gave my family the excuse of being tired of cleaning up after them. I told them I needed time to pamper myself. But that wasn't the reason I left. I was scared.

"What scared me were the little things that happened. Phone calls where no one talked. A bed I had made I had made earlier, in the day, I found in shambles an hour later. A stove I had turned on to preheat was turned off when I went to the laundry room. One of the cabins that I had cleaned so it would be ready for our next guests, I later discovered that the clean towels I put in the bathroom had been used. I could give you a hundred examples. I used to keep a notebook, but it disappeared.

"Anyway, on Friday, I drove to a little motel on the outskirts of Elko. I spent that night having nightmares of Cassie lying in a bed in the burn unit... When I woke up, I realized it was my fault that she was there." She glanced towards Chris with tears streaming down her face. He didn't need to ask her what she meant. She needed to confess her sin and seek his forgiveness.

"I was planning a shower for one of my friends. I got up early that Saturday morning and cleaned the house. I was expecting a few friends to come over to help me cook, so I thought the day would be fun and exciting. It was the first time I had ever acted as the hostess for an event, but I thought I was prepared. After all, when Curtis and I began talking about getting married, Curtis's mother, Maeve, filled a recipe box with handwritten recipes she used when she had entertained when they lived in Colorado. Before she died, she and I spent many evenings cooking, and she showed me how to make several appetizers that she said guests would absolutely love. Friday morning, I went through the recipes and made a shopping list. That afternoon, I went to the Albertson's and bought everything I needed. My house was clean and ready for the decorations, and the ingredients I needed waited for me to begin cooking. I thought I was prepared. I even bought a few snacks for the girls who were coming over to help me.

"When we got up Saturday morning, Curtis told me how proud of me he was. He said that I reminded him of his mother and that she would be equally as proud to see me following in her footsteps and hosting a shower for a friend. I remember that with his words in my ears, I almost skipped down the hall, but when I got to the kitchen, the recipe box was gone. Cassie had been over while I was out shopping; Curtis admitted that she had been ranting about Landon not loving her anymore. She said that she did not want him to be the beneficiary of the life insurance policy their parents had taken out on them when they were first born. All he wanted to talk about was Chris. Curtis calmed her down and assured her that it was obvious that Landon worshipped the ground on which she walked and that it was equally as obvious that the reason he loved Chris so much was because her son was part of her. He said that as soon as she quit crying, she left.

"All I could think of was that she had taken the recipes, and I needed them back. I called her up and we got into a shouting match. She told me that her mother was the one who created those recipes and that I had no right to use them. I told her to get her fat ass into her car and give them back, or I would make her rue the day she had crossed me. She hung up. I didn't expect to see her.

"I knew I made a mistake when I said she had a fat ass. She didn't have one, and the few extra pounds she had gained while carrying you were rapidly disappearing. I shouldn't have said it, but every day she would call crying about how Landon only loved Chris and had forgotten her. I was so tired of her complaining. She showed up a little bit later, screaming insults aimed at me, and threw the recipe box at me. I caught it and opened it. It was empty.

"Curtis showed up out of nowhere and managed to get her into his office. I picked up the knife I had been using and walked outside. I was beyond angry and intended to carve 'bitch' into both sides of her car, using big capital letters. I had never done anything like that before, but I wanted everyone she passed on the road to know how she was acting. She wasn't in her car, though. She was in Landon's, and there was no way I was going to damage his truck.

"I remember leaning against the side of his truck with the knife in my hand. I was so angry, and I needed to do something. I stabbed both of the gas cannisters."

"So they were leaking onto the truck's bed?" Chris had to ask. His mother should have smelled the gasoline.

"No, I stabbed them near where the spout connects. I wanted to damage them enough for Landon to notice and ask her about the holes. I thought she would blame me, and I was going to tell him when he called that he needed to get her help before she did something worse than trying to ruin my party, to which she had been invited... I knew she drove fast, but she was a very good driver. I didn't expect her to wreck, but she did, and the car caught fire. They said that she had gotten tangled in the seat belt and couldn't get out in time to escape the flames. If Angie hadn't stopped... Is there any way you can forgive me?"

Chris took her hand and held it in between his. His thumb rubbed circles on the back of her hand as he looked into his heart, checking to see if forgiveness was there. He couldn't simply say he forgave her. If he chose to forgive her, he not only needed to sound sincere, but he had to mean it. She would know if he faked his forgiveness. Finally, he answered her. "Thank you for telling me what you did. I admire your honesty with me. My answer may have been different if I thought that you intentionally caused my mother to die, but I think I understand what happened. You were angry, and it sounded as though you had good reason to be, but I don't believe you caused her to wreck. Punching holes into the gas cannisters was a childish revenge, but you were young and were trying to get a point across. I believe the fire was not intentional.

"Aunt Amy, I had a good childhood, and you and Uncle Curtis were part of why it was good. The stories you told about my mother may not have been the complete picture, but they were what I needed at the time." Chris pulled his aunt into his arms, holding her as she sobbed. When she pushed away, he let her go.

"Thank you." She reached for the keys in the cup holder, but Chris's next words froze her in place.

"Do you think there is any way that a mistake was made and that my mother is alive?"

"I told you what I dreamed on Friday night. I guess I should tell you what I remember on Saturday night."

"I'd appreciate it." Later, Chris would congratulate himself on his patience. He had a strong need to shake answers out of people, and yet, he had handled his aunt with the kid gloves she needed.

"I was sitting on the edge of my bed in the motel room, smoking a cigarette. Don't look at me like that. I don't smoke often, but I do sometimes. The dreams I had managed to haunt me all day long. I was only remembering bits and pieces of them, but they still bothered me. I was working very hard to put all the pieces together. My efforts were in vain, and I know I was forgetting more than I was remembering, so I asked myself: What is the most important question that you have, Amy? It came to me so quickly that it surprised me. I wanted to know why I was so scared of the cellar.

It is silly to be scared of a room. The house is really old, and though we have done our best to keep it well-maintained, and we have modernized the bathrooms and the kitchen, it still creaks and moans in the middle of the night. I am not scared when I hear those sounds, so why was I scared of the cellar? A year or so ago, my church had a speaker come in and talk about how to calm yourself so you could hear God when he spoke. I didn't really want to speak with God at the moment, but I did want to remember why I was so scared. I decided then the technique to calm yourself would probably work in my situation, so I tried it. It worked. I remember walking down stairs to get a jar and jam for breakfast. Cassie stood there in a corner. Her skin, the skin on her face, was peeling off and hanging down in strips, but I recognized her eyes. I closed my eyes, and when I opened them, she was gone. I don't believe in ghosts, but I am sure I saw her ghosts." She shuddered at the memory.

Chris asked, "When did this happen?"

"I really do not remember...It was before Curtis redid the cellar."

"But you don't remember when that was?"

"I am sorry..."

"It's OK."

"Startling herself, Am gave a more precise answer. "I was pregnant, I hated going up and down the stairs because I was barefoot, because my feet were swollen. And before you ask, my feet swelled during the last few weeks of each pregnancy."

"You have been a big help. You'd better head home before it gets late." Chris pecked her on the cheek and reached for the door handle. Before getting out, he turned and asked, "Can I come over one day this week and talk to you about the members of the rifle club?"

"Of course, but why?"

"Something came up this weekend that my brothers and I are trying to sort out. I think you might be able to help us make sense of it all."

"I will help any way I can, honey. Do you want me to come inside while I am here?"

Chris considered her offer, but the thought of the listening devices throughout the house put her in danger if she said something that Waldo didn't like. "No, Aunt Amy, you need to go home. I am sure Uncle Curtis and the boys are worried about you." He hopped out of the truck, but before he closed the door, he said, "I love you, Aunt Amy."

She smiled her thanks and swiped at the tears that threatened to become a torrent.



Mary pulled in next to the Cadillac that Dr. Jackson and another man were getting out of, put her car in park, and, after telling her son to stay put, climbed out, calling to the blonde man coming out of a barn. "Mr. Larabee? I need help. I know that my being here is an inconvenience, but with Evie and Orrin being out of town, I don't know where to turn." She glanced at Billy sitting in the back seat of her car. His expressive eyes were wide with worry. Without a word, she entered his room with an overnight bag and started packing his clothes and pajamas. Sensing trouble, he quickly added his two favorite dinosaurs, a T. rex and a stegosaurus, along with his library books. Nodding her approval of his choices, she had handed him the stuffed bear Santa had brought him when they were still a family of three, and with which he had slept every night since. "Get your backpack, too." She had whispered, and matching her silence, he had done as she instructed and had followed her to the car.

Once in the car, Billy found his voice and asked, "Is this like Daddy?"

"I don't know, son," she had honestly answered. She had turned to try to smile at him, saying, "I just want us to go somewhere safe." Most people would not see fear in his face, but she was his mother and noticed that he had pulled his bear, Bubba, a little closer. Her son was brave, the bravest of the brave.

Mary turned her attention to the three men approaching her and walked towards them. "I don't want Billy to hear."

"What's wrong?" Chris asked when they were several feet away from the car.

Mary quickly shared her story about a man watching her place the previous night. "I slept with a gun. I even carried it to church, but I had promised Billy we would go to the park when we got out of church, and you can't push a swing when you have a gun in your hand, so I left it in my nightstand. We were at the park for an hour or so. We walked home... There were a lot of people on the street. The church crowd leaving Inez's place... I told Billy to go wash his face and hands, and brush his hair while I changed into something a little more appropriate for eating at Inez's... I don't know why, but there was something... The best way I can describe it is that my room felt as though someone had been in it. I checked the nightstand and my gun is missing... Stephen gave it to me right before he was killed... I have never even shot it.

Fighting the tears, she continued. "Can Billy and I stay here...just until Orrin and Evie get back?"

"Of course," Buck answered.

Mary kept talking as though she had not heard. "I think the person who killed my husband is after his notes... I have been going through his files, but I haven't found anything that should have gotten him killed...He was so worried, you know... I locked the house... I know I did... I don't have anyone else."

Pursing his lips, Chris scanned the gravel driveway and the pastures on either side of the drive before he turned his attention to Mary. "Buck's right. You can stay here, but before we unpack you, we had best let you in on the reason we went to Vegas. You may not want to put yourself in the middle of our mess. In fact, your problem may be part of our mess."

Keeping his voice low, almost emotionless, Chris began with the death of Landon Larabee and his PI. He included the video that their father sent them, the listening devices they had found in the house and in their vehicles, what Maude had told them about the death of her sister, and the subsequent destruction of her belongings and room. He recounted how Ezra nearly died because of a medication error, pointing out that this mistake happened at the same hospital where their father had passed away. He pointed out that the bugs they had found were of two types: one a newer, more powerful device, and the other, years older. Then he surprised both Nathan and Buck by telling Mary that his wife and son had, more than likely, also been murdered. He finished with the threat made against someone Orrin loved.

Mary had paled as she listened. Her eyes were darting from brother to brother, checking in their faces for the truth in what he told her. "So you are telling me I should leave Four Corners?"

"No, Miz Travis."

"She interrupted him, "If we know each other well enough to talk about murder, we know each other well enough for you to call me Mary." She hoped she sounded braver than she felt. She tried on a smile, but it fell away before anyone noticed.

"Mary, I don't know what to tell you to do. I do know Waldo, as we are calling her, is a master of disguise. Think Mission Impossible. We also know she killed our brother, Vin's mother, in Texas. She is probably responsible for Josiah's mother in California, and she may have caused the death of our youngest brother, JD's neighbor, in Boston. We do know she killed Dad's interior decorator and her twin daughters in Veas. I can't guarantee your safety if you move. "

"So, you are telling me that there is no place for me to take Billy."

"Yes, that is what I am saying." Chris saw the despair in her eyes, so he hurriedly continued, "The only thing I can guarantee is that there are seven of us, and we will do our best to keep you and your son safe." He wanted to offer her a chair in which to sit and give her time to think, but the Adirondack chair Ezra had sat in while he and Vin had searched their trucks for trackers and listening devices had been moved by one of the Yosemite brothers to the interior of the barn. Manners dictated that he should go get it, but he felt as though his presence was helping her to hold it together. Without taking his eyes off of Mary, he jabbed Buck with his elbow. Luckily, Buck, having spent a lifetime being his brother, knew what he wanted and hurried into the barn to retrieve the chair. Two minutes later, Mary was seated, and she began weighing her options.

After looking towards her car and seeing her son's anxious face, she made her decision. "Stephen knew he had stirred up some kind of hornet's nest with his investigation. He usually told me what he was working on, but whenever I asked him about it, he said it was big and that he needed to keep me out of the loop to keep me safe... To keep me and Billy safe. He didn't keep himself safe. I just... I just keep thinking that if he had told me what he had discovered, I could have helped." She snorted or sobbed, she wasn't sure which, but she gratefully took the clean handkerchief that Buck offered, even as she wondered who in this day and age carried not only cleaned but ironed handkerchiefs ready for a damsel in distress.

"I believe Stephen overlooked the idea that there's safety in numbers, so if it's not too much trouble, Billy and I will remain here—at least until Evie and Orrin return."

"Then it's settled. Get your son and let's go inside. Buck!"

"Already on it, Chris." And he was. Sprinting ahead of the trio walking towards Mary's car, he grabbed JD's arm, saying. "We've got company. I need your help getting Dad's room ready."



"I can't believe the Bitch's audacity." Ella kicked the ottoman she had propped her feet up on while listening to the conversation at the Double L. Poor Chris had managed to stay out of Mary Travis's clutches while vacationing in Las Vegas. Good for him. But the poor, innocent man had fallen into Mary's trap the minute he invited her into his home. Sure, she would sleep in the old man's room. At least, she would at first. However, she had known women like Mary Travis her entire life, who schemed and schemed to get innocent men like Chris into their beds. Mary Travis might be the judge's daughter-in-law, but she was no better than so many other women that she, Ella, had been forced to deal with.

"I can't count on Fowler to take care of her. He might resort to fire, and there's no way I can let him burn down that beautiful ranch house. I am not sure how I can take care of her while she is at the ranch. I need to do something to draw her out into the open."

But what? I am sure I could make a bomb for her car, but what if Chris was in the car with her? I can't let him be hurt. Chris, being the gentleman that he is, won't let her out of his sight as long as he thinks she is in danger. She needed a way to make sure the two of them were not together when she sprung her trap.

Using the boy to bait the trap was one possibility. If she could figure out how to get him to leave school with her, she could leave him out in the middle of nowhere, call the Travis bitch, instruct her to come alone if she wanted to see her son alive, and then shoot her dead when she showed up. The problem was getting the boy. She couldn't exactly go into the school and ask for the boy. No matter how plausible her excuse for picking up the boy, there was a chance that someone would want to verify that he had permission to leave school. She had one chance at nabbing the boy; if she blew it, Chris and those blasted brothers would circle the wagons around Travis and her kid. That would defeat the whole reason for getting that woman out of Chris's house.

Maybe something could happen to one of Chris's brothers. If one of them were injured or missing, Chris would lose all interest in that woman. She could visualize it. The horse of one of his brothers would return to the barn with an empty saddle. Everyone in the county would show up to help search for the missing brother, and while they were out looking, she could dispose of Mary Travis. There was a problem with the plan; what was it? Of course, they had taken to going places in pairs. It would be harder to do it that way, but with Mr. Fowler's help, it could be done.

The next question needing to be answered was: Which brothers? The youngest, of course. His perpetual state of innocence meant that it was unlikely that he would see the trap until it had been sprung. On paper, Tanner would be a good choice, but something about him unnerved her. He did need to be eliminated, though. He was too perceptive and had unapologetically demonstrated that he didn't like her. It was worse than him not liking her. She could read in his eyes that he would do whatever he could to keep her and Chris apart. Not that he could. Years ago, the Fates had determined that she and Chris belonged with each other. There wasn't anything Tanner could do to stop them from becoming one, but he would throw roadblocks up trying to prevent or delay that from happening. Even if she didn't use him as bait, she would have to kill him. He was dangerous. She should have already taken care of him, but the two times she had him in her sights while he was rounding up strays by himself, he had sensed her presence and had looked straight at her. He didn't see her, of course; she had the sun at her back, and she knew he could not make out who made the hair on the back of his neck stand up, but the fact that he felt her presence alarmed her. She couldn't even blame it on the sun being reflected on her rifle barrel because she was aware of the possibility of that happening and had checked to make sure the sun was behind a cloud before she raised the rifle. His knowing she was there meant that a trickster of some sort was feverishly working against her reuniting with Chris.

Part of her berated herself for not taking the shot; she hadn't because she knew that if she fired and missed, he would have driven his horse up that slope before she got away. If Tanner had caught her, Chris would have believed whatever explanation she gave him because they were destined to spend their lives in each other's arms, and he could not do anything other than believe her. His other brothers were not bound by the same rules of fate as Chris was, and they would cause trouble. She would hate having to remove them from his life. A man like Chris needed brothers.

As much as she wanted Tanner gone, she needed to steer clear of him.

That was OK. Chris had other brothers she could use as bait. At one point in time, she would have chosen to use the sickly one as bait, but she had watched a documentary on honey badgers a few days ago and realized how much alike the honey badger Ezra Standish was. They were both small and pretty to look at, but the honey badger regularly stole food from lions, and when he picked fights with a pack of wild dogs and the dogs were the ones who slinked away to lick their wounds. Listening to him in the truck, she heard something in his voice that had her linking him with the honey badger. If she picked a fight with him, he would not go down easily, and she ran the real risk of being hurt.

She had just crossed two brothers off her list. That left the older brother, Josiah. There was no way she would use him as bait. Her reluctance to use him as bait was not because of his graying hair. Her reluctance was fueled by the carefully controlled rage she had seen in his eyes the day she had invited Chris and his brothers over for a barbecue. She had forgotten herself and snapped at the girl she was training to be her maid. It was a little thing; the napkins were not folded to her specifications. She should have waited until after the guests were gone to correct the girl, but she had wanted everything to be perfect for Chris, and the napkins being folded in a rectangular shape rather than the fan shape she had instructed the chit, made the table look messy. She had heard Josiah walking towards them and had not slapped the girl as she so richly deserved. When she saw his eyes, she was glad she had restrained herself. She made a joke about how good help was hard to find, and hurried off without staying to see if he laughed. She would leave him alone, and with luck, he would return to wherever he came from once she and Chris were man and wife.

And then there were two. The problem with those two choices was that she genuinely liked both men. She had genuinely liked her dead husband, but he stood in her way and would never understand her removing the Sarah and Adam obstacles to her and Chris's future happiness. When he contracted pneumonia and was hospitalized, she had perfectly played her role of devoted and loving wife while helping him reach the pearly gates. She had proven she knew how to make tough decisions.

She sat on the couch and drew up her knees, and wrapped her arms around her legs. Resting her chin on her knees and staring at nothing in particular, she debated which man would draw Chris and his brothers away from the ranch so that she could end Mary Travis's hold on Chris.

When she noticed the red and gold streaks in the sky, she had not only made her choice but had formulated a plan. She smiled to herself. If she remembered correctly, and she was sure she did, Tuesday was Fowler's day off. The Fates had chased the Trickster away and were actively helping her.

Oh, Chris, we will be together soon.

