



Tossing Out the Trash

Hunting for a Lost Brother and Other Villains

Part 2 of the Seven Brothers Saga



He didn't slam it as his fingers ached to do. Instead, Chris hung up the phone carefully, fearing any sudden movement would break his tenuous control over his rage, his feeling of betrayal, and his gut-deep sense of loss. He crossed the dirt floor and unhooked the mare from the crosstie; her leg was cleaned and wrapped, but he'd keep an eye on her. Quietly murmuring to calm the horse or himself, he didn't know which, he led the dainty bay into a stall. "Very good, Haley," he praised the mare as she walked into her stall. He reached up to scratch behind her ears, taking maybe a little more time with her than she needed. After a good scratching and a treat, he reluctantly pulled himself away from the stable and trudged up to the house and his problem.

He didn't go into the house; he wasn't ready for a confrontation yet and didn't need the beer in the fridge urging him to come, partake, and forget the day's troubles. Trying to control his temper before he went in, he paced the length of the porch, kicking rockers and other chairs out of his way, clearing a path with his anger.

"All right, Dad, you set this up. You, tell me what to do because I sure as hell don't know," Chris spoke angrily to the man who was not leaning against the post, drinking coffee, and talking about his plans for the morning. "It is unfair for you to burden me with all of this. So, answer me." He stopped pacing and rested his palms on the porch rail, looking out past the short expanse of the yard and into the trees edging closer to the house with each passing year. 'Dad,' he thought, 'I need to know what to do. I know you expected me to hold these men together, make us a family, but don't you understand I don't want the job? I don't want to be here. I don't want to be responsible for making this work.'

'I don't know how to deal with these new brothers. Josiah comes across as a calm, thoughtful man. Certainly, he is ready to give everyone a helping hand, but he has layers. I am not sure I will ever be able to unravel those layers or what I will find if I do. I like Vin, but I keep asking myself what kind of man becomes a bounty hunter. What has he seen and done? JD is a puppy, eager to please. I'll let Buck handle him; I don't want to rub off on him. But, tell me, Dad, how do I deal with Ezra? I don't know how, so you will have to help me. And while you are at it, tell me how to make things right with Buck. I don't have a clue.'

He pushed away from the rail and spun on his heel, heading not back to the barn, and he didn't head to the stream where he liked to walk when he needed to blow off steam, but inside to deal with the problem. He, after all, was his father's son, the one who once prided himself on being responsible. He would deal with this and not dump it into someone else's lap.

"EZRA!!! Come here, now," he roared as he glanced at the clock. Eleven. Josiah and Nathan were expected back by one o'clock, or later if Nathan's flight was delayed. He'd have the time to settle this one way or another.



"You know, I don't know what to do. If you were a kid, I would turn you over my knee. If you were a teenager, I'd ground you. YOU are an adult. So, what do I do? Hit you? Experts have done that already. Should I hit you a little harder than they did? Make you more afraid of me than anything else?" he glowered at the man seated at the table across from him, immobile as though he were carved of stone. With no flicker of emotion on his face and his eyes only revealing that they were green, showing no reaction to the anger in Chris's voice, Chris felt as though he was talking to a doll, a mannequin, someone dead on the inside.

"What were you thinking?" damn it, Ezra, he pleaded with his eyes, give me something to work with. I don't like this decision you are forcing on me. Help me here. Show something. Show remorse. Something. Anything. Don't force me to do this.

Ezra tilted his head to one side as though perplexed by how he should respond, "Ah had thought to have the money replaced by the end of the week. Ah did not think you would have noticed."

"You didn't think I would notice ten thousand moving out of and then back into the account?"

"You don't seem the type to check bank statements closely."

Chris blinked a couple of times and then raised his eyebrows, conceding the point. As long as the statement agreed with his checkbook within a few dollars, he didn't bother reconciling the statement. That had been his policy with his personal account, but now the responsibility for the ranch's books rested on his shoulders; he realized he would have to be a little more exact.

He got up to walk to the counter and began making coffee. He needed more time to think. Ezra needed the time to explain his actions.

"You want a cup?" he asked, deliberately keeping his voice low and calm. He didn't want this to seem like the Spanish Inquisition. If Ezra had a problem with gambling, they needed to get him help, not persecute him.

"No, thank you," Ezra replied quietly and calmly, matching the calm Chris projected, but did not feel.

Chris walked back to the table and set his coffee down. Maybe he should sit. He knew he had to be intimidating the hell out of his brother, towering over him, and pacing around the kitchen like a lion in a cage, and with Ezra less than a week out of the hospital, he must feel like a cornered mouse waiting for the lion to snatch him up and eat him whole. He might get more of a reaction if he tried to sit down and talk to him as a friend, but he was too angry to do that.

"You didn't think the bank manager would call me?" he asked.

"As you know, my story was plausible, and they did wait until after Ah left with the money to call you," he answered, thinking he should have taken the money and left town. He could have done what he needed and not bothered returning to the ranch.

"Why do you need the money?"

"Ah need it to get into a game," he replied without giving the full truth.

"You told me you were not addicted to gambling."

"Ah'm not."

"You've been here, in this house, six days, and you are already stealing from us to get into a game. I call that an addiction," he scored with his remark. Ezra jerked when he accused him of stealing. Realizing Ezra feigned his indifference, he continued, "You came into this house not to live with your brothers but to steal from them." Chris pushed the point, waiting for a reaction.

"Ah I'm not a thief," Ezra spoke from a clenched jaw. "Ah am many things, but Ah am not a thief."

"You stole money," Chris retorted. 'Please, Ezra,' he begged with his eyes, 'admit you need help.' Nathan is sure to know people who can help. If he doesn't, Josiah does. Buck knows everyone. Between the three of them, we can find you help.'

"Ah borrowed it," Ezra saw the concern in Chris's eyes, but looked away, not accepting it. This was his problem, and he would deal with it by himself as he always did.

"You forged my signature, went to the bank, and after giving a little song and dance routine about how we needed the money for some livestock purchases, you walked out with ten thousand dollars," Chris banged his hand down hard on the table, causing his brother to flinch. Chris saw the slight move, and, on some level, he felt relief. His brother might be imitating a statue, but he was made of flesh and blood, not of stone; the recoil and the slight widening of his green eyes showed he knew what he had done was wrong, and feared Chris's actions.

Chris lowered his voice, locked eyes with his younger brother, and asked, "You wanted to get in a game? What the hell would you have done if you lost?"

"Ah don't lose."

"All gamblers lose," Chris replied.

"Not me."

"You are so fuckin' cocky." Chris glared at the man; his hold on his temper slipping.

"Ah am so fuckin' good," Ezra spats back; his temper flaring briefly.

Chris stomped down on his urge to throw something, preferably his brother, against the wall. In a deceptively calm voice, he asked, "For argument's sake, let's say you did lose. I understand you are the best there is, but let's say you lost. How did you expect to pay the money back into the account?"

"Ah would have been forced to sell mah car," Ezra answered, thinking that all his careful planning was ruined, and now he would have to do just that. He tried to keep his mind on the task at hand- dealing with Chris Larabee, but his mind reeled from the thought of selling his Porsche. He thought. The one that makes people sit up and take notice of me, the one that says I am more than a poor relation dropped off to stay for a while. I've managed to screw things up, and now I will have to sell it anyway! Oh Hell.

"Then why didn't you sell it in the first place?" Chris asked.

"Ah thought Ah could do it this other way and not have to sell it," he said, his voice as calm as Chris's. Inside, though, he was reeling. Like a scratched record, his thoughts were stuck on the real possibility of losing his car. He wanted to cry out— 'I don't want to sell my car. It's my car. It tells people who I am.' He kept quiet.

"Don't you have money in the bank?"

"You saw how much money Ah have."

"Seventy-five dollars is all you have?"

"Fifty-five. Ah bought gas."

"You have a car and fifty-five dollars. Let me understand this. You are saying that is all you have?" Chris asked incredulously. How could someone live that way?

"Ah have investments," Ezra bristled at Chris's tone.

"Then why didn't you use them?"

"They are long-term, and Ah can't touch them right now," he said, breaking eye contact. He wanted to say, 'I did it on purpose. Don't you understand? If my investments could be touched, Mother would find a way to take them. She would find a way to make me hand over my future. She would say she needed it, and I would end up handing it to her. She would promise to pay me back and conveniently forget about her debt. I need the money left alone. I need my investments for the time when I am unable to work.' He bit back the explanation.

There was no way Chris Larabee would ever understand the hold his mother had over him. It was much better to be thought of as a thief than to try to explain why he gave Maude Standish so much control over him. He doubted he could explain it even if he wanted to; he didn't understand it himself.

"Ezra, you are thirty and have no money in the bank. With the exceptions of your car, a few clothes, and investments, you can't touch; you own nothing. Do you see anything wrong with this picture?"

"You've known me, how many days? Six! How dare you be derisive of me? Ah stay at the best hotels. Ah eat at the finest restaurants. Ah, wear the latest styles, the most expensive clothes. Mah's car is worth more than anything out there in the driveway. It costs more than most people make in a year or two. Ah am worth something."

"Ezra, you are one massive bruise from your neck to your knees. You cannot walk from one side of this house to the other. You have trouble combing your hair and tying your shoes. Why? ...Wait, I can answer that ... it is all because of a card game. If someone got pissed with you, in the shape you are in, you could end up dead cause you sure couldn't protect yourself." Chris paused, searching for some reaction, some clue that what he said was making it through Ezra's thick skull. He saw nothing.

He tried again, "Ezra, you don't have enough money to buy a fancy meal or to sleep in a soft bed, and the clothes you are wearing are ones Buck went out and bought for you at Walmart. More importantly, you consciously decided to steal money from your family. This was not an impulsive act. You sat down and planned this. Then you went into the library and found the checkbook in a drawer... an unlocked drawer. It was unlocked because no one in this house has ever stolen a thing. Until now, that is.

"You took a check and then forged my signature. Let me ask, were you able to do it in one try, or did you have to practice a time or two? Don't answer. It doesn't matter. But answer this: Do you make it a practice to steal from people, from family? God knows, but I'd bet good money you've done this before. You were too smooth for this to have been a first-time theft."

"Ah needed the money to get enough to... Ah would have won enough to replace it. Ah borrowed the money. Ah was not stealing it; you would have been repaid one way or the other," he was trying to explain. Why wasn't Chris listening?

"You forged my name and took ten thousand dollars out of an account that did not belong to you. That is called theft. Any way you look at it, you stole," Chris flung his cup against the wall, shattering it and leaving a small dent in the wall. "If you were so sure you could repay the money, why didn't you come to me...to us? Why didn't you ask?"

"Ah couldn't be sure you would give it to me."

"A card game is that important to you?"

"As you have so eloquently stated, Ah find mahself short of liquid assets. Ah have investments, but they are tied up, and Ah need money now. There is a game this weekend in which Ah would be welcome. Not a big one, but one in which Ah could win what Ah need."

"Why the hell do you need money? You have a roof over your head, food on the table, and an allowance. At the end of the year, you have a million dollars. Ezra, I know a year can seem like a long time, but six days. SIX DAYS. Tell me what was so damn important you needed to steal from the rest of us after only six days. TELL ME."

Ezra lowered his eyes, unable to face the anger he saw in Chris's face. His eyes focused on the remnants of the coffee cup on the floor; he knew Chris had thrown the cup rather than hit him. He wanted to say something, but all the words he found made him sound pathetic. What could he say? He sure as hell couldn't say: Tell you what, Mr. Larabee? Do you want me to tell you that I finally put enough cash together to play a high-stakes game? Do you want me to tell you about Mother waltzing into the room wearing a slinky black dress, the likes of which had all the men in the room salivating? She had a fur draped on one arm and Mr. Timothy Moore entwined in the other.

Do you want me to tell you how I took one look at her, and I knew she spent the last few weeks draped all over him, playing the role of a vapid, moon-struck woman who only has eyes for her new knight? Do you want me to tell you Moore was a pitiful player? He may have done well in penny-ante poker played with equally bad players, but the rest of us at the table were not bad. We were good. You want me to tell you how Moore couldn't walk away from the table and how we all took his money until he had none left on the table, and he was searching his pockets for more to throw at us. You want me to tell you about the rumors following Moore around and how my blood ran cold when I saw the con my mother played, the risk she took with him, and his temper.

Do you want me to describe how his face darkened when Mother called me son? Do you want me to tell you how Mother left the table, the big winner of the evening, and disappeared before the rest of us finished shaking hands? Or perhaps you would rather hear how Moore whispered in my ear when his hired thugs held me between them, saying he knew Mother and I had cheated? The fool never realized the con had happened long before he walked into the room.

Do you want me to explain how I cringe, Mr. Larabee, when you and the rest of your brothers sit around talking about this Landon Larabee and the good women he fell in love with? Did you not wonder why I did not contribute to those conversations? Do you want me to tell you my mother left me to deal with Moore, and when I called her to inform her that Moore wanted the rest of the money he lost, she laughed? She thought I was overstating my injuries. She said Dear Timothy, was not the monster I was making him out to be.

Do you want me to tell you how it hurt when she dismissed my injuries as nothing, saying I was exaggerating? Do you want to hear how she said that if I were foolish enough to hand over my hard-earned money when dear Timothy made a little noise, it was my problem and not to expect her to give up her winnings to placate a poor loser?

"Ah needed the money," he couldn't say those other things. He would deal with Moore alone. He worked better alone, anyway. Going alone meant there would be fewer complications.

"You needed money. So, you stole money that did not belong to you. You are a thief. It's a good thing Dad didn't live to meet you because the one thing in life he couldn't stand was a man who stole from others. To know that you were his son would have made him sick." Chris didn't bother to hide his anger or disgust. "You know, it's a good thing that Dad didn't live to meet you.

To know a son of his was a thief, and that the people, from whom he stole, were his brothers, would have killed Dad. You would have been a murderer as well as a thief. You don't belong here, not in the home Dad built. Thieves belong in prison."

He wanted to protest, but Chris's words were true, and he had nothing with which to counter them. He straightened his back and, hiding the quiver in his voice, said, "Am Ah to assume a sheriff is on his way to arrest me?"

"That's what they usually do with thieves."

"Yes, suh, it is," he fought to keep his voice steady, but he was far from it. He was going to prison. He tried to calm his loudly beating heart, to keep the panic out of his eyes, but all he could think was that he was going to jail. Oh God, he prayed, what am I going to do? I've been in jail for minor things, but not for anything like this. This is serious. If he has me put in jail, how am I going to stop Moore from hurting Mother? She never thinks about the repercussions of her cons and will return to the country, and the bastard will find her. Should I beg? Would he listen? No. Look at his face. It's made of granite. No chance of understanding there. He has already decided. Jail! Please, God, don't let me be sick in front of him. Don't let him see how scared I am. Please.

Chris studied the face of the man biology dictated was his brother, looking for any sign, anything he could use to pull the man out of the pit he had dug for himself. He saw nothing in Ezra's face; the man was made of stone. Clutching the chair in front of him, reminding himself he had the welfare of five other men to consider, he reluctantly spoke. "Relax. I'm not going to call the sheriff. Dad had a good name in this town, and I will not have the likes of you tarnish it. I want you gone. Since you felt good enough to drive to the bank and back, you must feel good enough to go somewhere else. There is a nice Bed and Breakfast in town. It might not meet your standards, but until you are better, the ranch will pick up the bill. I will call ahead and let them know to expect you. But I want you off this ranch today."

Chris could feel his face harden and his fingers dig into the back of the chair. He hated this; his brother had a problem, and there should be a way to get him the help he needed, but he couldn't put his other brothers or the ranch in danger.

Ezra nodded, accepting his banishment, "Of course. Ah will pack and be gone within the hour. Ah do appreciate your offer, but Ah can find mah own accommodations. Ah am indebted enough to you and your brothuhs." He carefully stood up, keeping his hands at his sides and not holding his damaged ribs. He would not show any pain or discomfort. "If Ah might inquire, what will you tell the others?" He couldn't look at the man he had wanted to call brother; he didn't want to see the contempt he knew would be on Chris's face.

"I'll tell them you decided you were not suited for ranch life and headed off to the city. This other business will stay between you and me," Chris spoke quietly, but the anger caused by the decision this brother had forced on him was clear in his voice.

He wanted to sit down and start the conversation over. He wanted to ask his brother why. Why did you do this, Ezra? Why did you screw things up? Why won't you talk to me? I know you want to be here. Maybe if I were the only one involved, I could forgive you, but I cannot risk you messing things up for everyone else.

"Thank you." He held his hand out, but dropped it when he realized Chris would not shake. "Good-bye then, Mr. Larabee. Ah wish you and your brothuhs the best." "Ezra, take care of yourself," Chris said to his brother's back.

"Ah always do," touched by the concern he thought he heard in Chris's voice, Ezra almost turned around but didn't.

"No, you don't," Chris whispered to his brother's back. When Ezra was gone from sight, Chris picked up the shattered remnants of his cup. A broom made quick work of the small pieces, and a sponge wiped the wall clean. The only thing left in the room, bearing witness to his rage and frustration, was the small dent in the sheetrock. With luck, no one would notice.

He picked up the stack of money and slowly thumbed through it. Jimmy had sounded exasperated when he called to ask that, in the future, if the Larabee boys wanted that large amount of money in cash, he sure would appreciate getting a heads-up so he could have it ready and not wipe out the cash he had on hand. He had taken the necessary steps to see that this particular problem wouldn't arise again. He looked at the money in his hands; he would put it back in the bank in the morning and, with luck, the others would never discover the dishonest nature of their brother.



Nathan yawned into his hand and then apologized, "I don't know why I am so tired. I got plenty of sleep."

"Might be jet lag, or it might have something to do with leaving one life and starting up somewhere new," Josiah replied, careful to keep his eyes on the road. He always considered himself a good driver, but these curves challenged him and his van.

"Maybe," Nathan swallowed another yawn, "But I didn't have much to do. I went into the hospital to tender my resignation, and the Administrator was sitting behind his desk with a stack of papers ready for me to sign. Seems the judge got hold of him and said something about how I was coming back home to tend to the populace of a community in dire need of a physician.

"Bert wasn't upset or anything. Just told me he was sorry to see me go. I would be missed, but Alabama's loss was Nevada's gain. I was out of there by noon, and Molly arranged for a company to pack me up on Tuesday morning. All I had to do was say goodbye to Gran and Gramps."

"How did they take the news?" He heard an odd note in Nathan's voice when he mentioned his grandparents, and wanted to allow Nathan to talk if he needed it.

Nathan rubbed his hands across his eyes in an unconscious effort to rid himself of the image of his sweet, loving grandmother saying the vile things that flew out of her mouth. After a brief moment, he said, "They were a little upset. I guess they thought I would stay and settle down in Alabama." All right, little, was putting it mildly, but as much as he liked the man sitting beside him, he didn't know him well enough to dump all his problems in his lap. They were his grandparents; he would find a way to make them understand.

"Do they have other family?" Josiah knew he was being shut out; that was all right. He was nothing if not patient.

"Yes. They are elderly; I wouldn't have left them if it meant leaving them alone, but there are," he counted briefly in his head, "Four other children and thirteen grandchildren in Birmingham, along with several handfuls of kinfolk I never sorted out. They won't be alone. Everyone is tight-knit, too. It's just... I hurt them when I told them I was moving back here."

"Some folks worry when their loved ones get out of sight."

"I know, but," Nathan glanced at his new brother, trying to figure out how much he could tell him. He couldn't just come out and say they were angry, not because I left, but because I went back to my white family, my rich, white family. I only told them my father died, and my brothers needed me. I didn't tell them about the money, and yet they still accused me of leaving them for my rich white family. I could understand them being upset at my leaving and worrying they'd never see me again, but the anger, I don't understand the anger."

Nathan looked out the window as he tried, for the millionth time since he read his father's long rambling apology, to understand what had happened and why it happened. He understood why his father had been reluctant to face his grandparents in court. Even today, there is a chance a judge would look at the color of a child's skin, believing it to be the most important factor in deciding where the child belongs.

He just couldn't reconcile the loving grandparents he knew with the vindictive parents his father wrote about in his letter. At least, he hadn't been able to until Monday night. When he went over to talk to them and explain his decision about moving back to Nevada, he had been shown a

side to his grandmother and grandfather he hadn't known existed. Neither one of them understood. And the things his grandmother said, the names she called him. He had a better understanding of why his father acted as he did.

If only he could understand his grandparents. Surely, they didn't mean the things they said. They had been so kind and loving. Had it all been an act? Had their talk of love only been a way to hurt his father? Had he been used as a weapon in a war that should have been declared finished decades ago?

Nathan looked again at Josiah; he realized he had stopped the conversation. He expected Josiah to say something to fill the silence, but his older brother seemed comfortable waiting for him to get his thoughts together. "I guess I just expected a different reaction than the one I got. I wanted a little more understanding from them."

"Sometimes when someone is disappointed, it is easier to push the loved one away, to be angry with them, rather than it is to take the steps towards understanding."

Nathan looked out the window, watching the landscape, so different from the lush green of Alabama. He could have been happy there, and part of him already did and always would regret coming back rather than finding a little community in rural Alabama in need of a doctor. They needed help, too. But this was home, and regardless of whatever regrets or second thoughts he might be plagued with, he knew he had made the right decision.

"I talked to Emmett Griggs before I flew back to Birmingham. He has the only family medicine clinic in Four Corners. He said he had been waiting for me to come to my senses and asked what color I wanted my office painted. I told him as long as it wasn't pink, I would be happy." Nathan chuckled and then explained. "Five years ago, he and his partner Gene Tribble built a new clinic. They hired an interior decorator, one who specialized in doctors' and dentists' offices. She came highly recommended, and so they told her they trusted her to make it comfortable for the patients. I never saw it, but I heard from Nora Griggs that the clinic was beautiful, like something out of a magazine."

Gene and Emmett were horrified. They thanked the decorator and paid her. However, as soon as she was out the door, they started repainting the clinic. They wouldn't let anyone help. They said they would be laughed out of town if anyone saw it."

"You said Griggs had a partner, so you'll be the third doctor in the practice."

"No, Gene Tribble killed himself a couple of years ago. Buck wrote and told me about it. His wife had asked him to move out and said she wanted a divorce. He got an apartment and didn't tell anyone anything. Then one day, he got a letter from her lawyer. That evening, he returned to his apartment and blew his brains everywhere."

Josiah took his eyes off the road long enough to look at his brother. It always bothered him when anyone mentioned suicide. Early in his career, he had a client come in talking about the suicide of a co-worker; he had not wanted to listen to his patient talk about another man's suicide. He wanted to work on his patient's problems, and they discussed the man's feelings about losing a job promotion. He finished the session thinking they had made real progress, and then, two days later, the man had killed himself. Now, whenever someone mentioned a suicide, his blood ran cold, and he listened.

He took another, longer, appraising look at his brother. This was a stressful time for Nathan. He had lost the father he so obviously loved. Then, he met his four new brothers and was forced to live with them. Not to mention that he was uprooting his life. These were all stressful events. "Did Tribble leave children?" he asked to keep his brother talking to him.

"They're grown. Leslie is Chris's age. She's married, has two or three kids, and lives in Reno. James is my age. Last I heard, he moved to Montana and has never come back for even a short visit. They weren't close to their father."

"Still, it must have hurt losing him as they did."

"They're grown. It wasn't like he was leaving small children." Nathan repeated.

"Grown children hurt and grieve just like the young ones."

Nathan looked away from the scenery and at the man beside him. "If that's a roundabout way of asking how I am dealing with things, I am alright," he replied, knowing it for the lie it was even before the words passed his lips. If he were honest, he would have added: No, that's a lie. I miss my father, and I want to talk to him. I am not alright, but I am Landon Larabee's son. I've come home, and I will heal. "You're letting me do all the talking. Is that some shrink trick?"

"I am a psychologist, not a psychiatrist. And yes, it is."

"So, tell me; what do you think of this family?" Nathan pointed and said,

"Turn up here and
I'll show you a shortcut."

"Left?" Josiah eyed the dirt road with suspicion.

"Correct," Nathan laughed at the look Josiah was giving the road. "Don't worry. In a little bit, the road will reconnect to the main road, and you will have saved yourself about ten minutes." Josiah nodded, reassured that his van wouldn't have to take the abuse of the road for long.

"So, what do I think about my brothers, let me see...hmm," he repeated Nathan's question, buying himself time to formulate an answer.

"You are stalling. Give me your first impressions."

"You know, Brother Nathan, I do not like to discuss my first impressions about anything; too often, I am wrong about things. Take, for example, the first time I went sailing, I was utterly miserable, the second time I was just sick, about the tenth time I discovered I enjoyed it."

"If you were sick the first time you went sailing, why did you keep going?"

"Lanie Aldridge."

"So, you made yourself seasick, all for the love of a woman."

"Not just a woman. She was Lanie Aldridge. And not only did I endure the hardships of the sea, but those of the ballet and symphony as well," he smirked more than a little smug and asked, "So what have you done for the love of a woman?"

Nathan laughed. "The line in the letter Dad wrote about getting out and dating was directed at me. I have done nothing but eat, drink, and live medicine since I graduated from high school. Oh, I have had dates, and I was serious about a girl in college, but we broke things off when I got accepted into medical school."

"Why?"

"She said I was too driven."

"Are you?"

"I am a Black man working in what is still essentially a white man's world. I like to think I got into medical school on my own merits, but there are a lot of folks out there who, when they see a black doctor, think he or she got through medical school because of the quota system. They think, maybe, he isn't as qualified as a white doctor. I never want there to be any questions about whether I am qualified."

"Graduated at the top of your class, did you?"

"Close enough."

"So, will you find a wife with the same dogged determination?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll be lucky, and the perfect woman will fall out of the sky and land at my feet." He pointed to another dirt road. "See that road? It will take you to Mrs. Wells' place, aka Miss Nettie."

"The blueberry preserves?" Josiah sighed as the road he was on merged into a paved one. He took a guess and turned left.

"The blueberry preserves, pickles of all sorts, and, if we are lucky, casseroles. Miss Nettie has a nice place. After her husband and son were killed in a wreck, Dad always made a point of stopping in and checking on her, fixing the things she couldn't manage by herself. She ... when he died... she brought us food... I wonder if Chris or Buck has been out to check in on her...one of us should," his voice trailed off as a speeding, gray sports car passed them.

"That's Ezra! What, the hell, does he think he's doing? Just like Buck, he's driving too fast." Nathan turned in his seat to watch the car disappear around a curve. "He shouldn't be driving," he spoke, more to himself than to Josiah, but Josiah heard him and offered up a prayer. He had a sense of forboding concerning the driver of the too-fast, too-expensive car.



Ezra pulled his suitcases out of the closet. He'd been meaning to take them up to the attic and get them out of the way, but he hadn't felt like doing it himself, and everything had been so hectic, he hadn't asked anyone to do it for him. He planned on taking care of the chore when his ribs felt better. It must have been a psychological thing, his not getting rid of the suitcases; he must have known he would not be staying.

He swung one of the bags up on the bed, grunting in pain. He looked over at the two prescription bottles on the nightstand, one full of pain pills and the other of antibiotics. He had not taken any painkillers since leaving the hospital; he hadn't needed any. Well, he needed them, but the pain he was in was not worth the trouble the painkillers would bring, and he left them alone. He would have liked to leave them on his nightstand, but he was Ezra P. Standish. P stood for practical, and a Practical Standish did not leave pain pills when planning on driving across Nevada at breakneck speeds with broken ribs. He tapped one pill out of the bottle and looked at it before swallowing it dry. He hurt; it was difficult to tell where the pain originated, but he hurt all over. He didn't like the possibility of falling under their spell again, but it hurt to move, even to breathe, and he didn't think he could do what he needed to get done unless he found some relief.

He pocketed the bottle for later use and reached for the antibiotics, knocking them off the stand. He watched with dismay as the bottle rolled under the bed. There was absolutely no way he would be able to get on all fours and retrieve it. How necessary were the antibiotics anyway? It had been a week since he had been beaten, and any infection should be gone. It didn't matter. The bottle could stay where it had rolled. It would have to stay there because there was no possible way he could get down on his hands and knees and crawl under the bed to retrieve them, and there was no way, in hell, he would ask Chris Larabee for help.

Standing in the doorway, he examined the room. He had emptied the room of his things and retrieved his toiletries from the bathroom. The garbage in the basket by his desk was tied up neatly in the white plastic bag, ready to be removed. He had checked all the drawers and the closet; they were empty. He had stripped the bed and placed his dirty linen in the hamper in the bathroom. The curtains were open, letting light into the room. The pillows were plumped and stacked on top of one another; the two hand-sewn patchwork quilts were neatly folded and lying on top of the mattress. The bedspread, he was never quite sure how to leave the bedspread, but he had folded it back, exposing the bare mattress. Chris Larabee could decide if he wanted the linen, once cleaned, in the linen closet or used to remake the bed.

He stripped off the comfortable sweatsuit Buck bought for him before he left with John David. It was in the hamper, and the other two newly bought sweatsuits were folded, lying on top of the dresser, beside the house slippers. They would be too short for Chris Larabee, but maybe John David could wear them.

Satisfied, he was leaving the room as well as he could be expected to in the time he had. He ran a finger along his neck, making sure his gold chain was secure and would not fall off to be left behind in this place to which he'd never return. He eyed his suitcases and laptop standing out in the hall. He wasn't sure how he would manage, but he must do this in one trip; he didn't think

he could reenter the house once he began putting things in his car. He tucked the laptop under his arm along with his portfolio and wheeled his luggage to the front door. He picked up the suitcases and carried them down the steps. His ribs protested the abuse and forced him to bite down on the inside of his cheek, but at least he didn't have to hunt down his keys and bring his car around. Mr. Larabee had pulled the Porsche up to the end of the walkway. Ezra thought Mr. Larabee was either a bit worried about him having to walk all over creation carrying his luggage or he was in a hurry to see him leave. He concluded that the latter scenario was more probable, but during the quiet of the night, when reflecting on the day's events, he would entertain the notion that Chris Larabee had shown some concern.

He stowed his luggage and got in the driver's seat. Tossing his wallet into the glove compartment, he placed his portfolio on the seat beside him. Putting his heavy winter coat in the back, he covered the exposed suitcases and laptop. Fighting the urge to take one last look around, he climbed in, started the motor, and floored the car. He never looked back. Long ago, he decided it was best not to look back at what you were leaving behind, but to look forward to the possibilities. It was a good policy; he would adhere to it.

He passed Josiah's van and waved jauntily without ever seeing the driver, and if he drove a little faster after passing the van, who was there to tell him to slow down? Besides, his car was made for speed, and he was thrilled seeing just how well she maneuvered the mountain and its curves. It was easier to concentrate on his driving than on other things.



Vin stepped out of the shower and, after quickly drying off and combing through his hair, he used the towel to wipe the steam off the mirror. He scrunched his face one way and then another, trying to decide if he needed to shave. He didn't like wasting time on shaving, and considered growing a beard, but his memories of the mustache he had been so proud of when he was fourteen and the maintenance necessary to keep the thing looking decent kept him shaving, but he did not do it daily. Besides, given the line of work he was in, sometimes, looking scruffy came in handy, and helped him blend in with the lowlife he so often chased. Today, though, he wasn't chasing anyone, so he lathered up and began removing his whiskers in quick, efficient strokes, while his thoughts were on the things he needed to accomplish. He wanted to be on the road no later than noon tomorrow. Most things could be taken care of over the phone, but he did need to pack up, clean the place, and tell some people goodbye.

Packing wouldn't be hard. He had already begun thinking about moving ever since the word on the street said Eli Joe had put a bounty on his head. He wasn't very worried about a punk coming for him; Eli Joe didn't have enough clout to offer the money necessary to attract the big guns. He did have enough money, though, to attract more than a few bozos, but those clowns got innocent bystanders hurt. Worried about Mrs. Fisher's safety, he'd told his landlady he would be moving out of the garage apartment by the end of the month. She already had a University kid chomping at the bit, waiting to get into the place.

He finished shaving, dressed, and sat on the bed to make a quick phone call. He had one person he needed to say goodbye to in person. After planning to meet for lunch, he began sorting through his things, hoping, all the while, that he was making the right decision.

Vin took his tray and, after grabbing a handful of napkins and two handfuls of ketchup packets, he walked over to the booth Harry had chosen and sat down across from him. Vin was the first to break the silence, "I've got a lot of stuff I won't be taking with me. You know, anybody might need some things."



"I know a couple on the reservation who are just starting out; they could use just about anything you can give them." Harry brushed his black hair out of his eyes. He tried not to think about the many silver strands running through his hair or the fact that he was blessed with three grandchildren and one great-grandchild, which meant he was getting old, but it was easier to think about getting old than it was to think about letting this almost-son go. It

would be hard to say goodbye, but he would; it was time for Vin Tanner to move on. This business with Eli Joe was the handwriting on the wall. This business with Landon Larabee gave Vin a direction to move towards, so he wouldn't feel like he was running.

"I told Chris Larabee about me bringing Eli Joe in and how he has offered a reward to anyone who took me out," Vin said, seeing the look of concern Harry was giving him. "And?"

"And he told me it sounded like I needed someone to watch my back," Vin answered, thinking how easily the reply had rolled off Chris's tongue. The amazing thing was that Chris meant it. Saturday had been an intense day, and that night, after everyone said goodnight, he found he was too wired to sleep. He had slipped outside, planning to enjoy the stars, and there, wearing black clothes and almost invisible in the shadows, sat Chris. Wordlessly, his brother handed him a beer, and they sat together listening to the sounds of the night. Once, Jack, the white dog that had spent the day shadowing Josiah, showed up and sat with them, but their lack of conversation must have bored the dog because he left them and disappeared into the night. "Patrol," Chris said as they watched the dog leave them. "Watch him, he'll be sleeping in Josiah's room by this time next week, I don't care how much Josiah says he won't." He sneaked, agreeing with Chris.

They sat in the dark, silently enduring the cold to enjoy the peace of the night and each other's company for an hour or more. When Chris handed him a third beer, he told him about Eli Joe.

"Good thing you're here. You need someone to watch your back." Those simple words, honestly spoken, warmed him and made him smile as he repeated them back to Harry.

"Does he know how dangerous Eli Joe is?" Harry asked. It was easy to promise to be there, but too often, when the going got tough, people left. Vin didn't need anyone else abandoning him when things got tough.

Vin carefully stretched his legs out, making sure he did not accidentally kick the older man sitting across from him, and said, "I told him everything. He knows. Besides, I reckon Eli Joe can't reach all the way to Nevada."

Those words sent a chill up Harry's spine. It was never wise to tempt fate. "You watch your back just the same, Eli Joe is angry at the world, has been for some time, and you have provided him with a target."

"I know. I knew then, he would see me coming after him as a betrayal, but Harry, I saw what he did to the little girl; she isn't more than twelve and ...and she's... she's bad off. I couldn't just look the other way."

"I know."

Vin's expression softened. Of course, Harry understood. Harry hadn't liked the career he had chosen. Harry worried, but he understood and had never tried to talk him into doing something less dangerous. "You know, I could have ended up just like Eli Joe. We ran in the same gangs, we hung together in school, and more often than not, we stayed in the same homes. Maybe if someone had taken an interest in making sure Eli Joe grew up right, like you did with me, then he wouldn't be in prison now."

"I became your Big Brother when you were what, twelve? Did I ever tell you I had been given two names to choose from? I talked with Eli Joe, and I saw a person I did not like. He was polite and friendly, but I saw no joy in him. I saw nothing in him I could reach. His name was given to another Big Brother, and I was relieved I did not have to deal with the polite, soulless boy."

Harry took a bite from his hamburger and chewed it slowly before swallowing. "You were this angry boy with an attitude, but inside I saw a good man waiting to be released. I have never been disappointed in my decision."

"I owe you so much."

"You owe me nothing, son. Finish up, and I will come help you pack."



Ezra turned the radio off. He needed to make some decisions and revise his plans. He still had Moore with whom to deal, and he didn't have enough cash to make the kind of money he needed to pay the man off. That was another thing to consider. Moore didn't seem as though he would be happy with just getting his money back. The man wanted a few screams of pain, and the ones he had already provided probably were not a sufficient salve for the man's wounded ego.

Maybe Mr. Larabee did him a favor. Now that he was forced to rethink things, he saw all the problems with Plan A. For one thing, the experience at the bank proved the word was out. Landon Larabee had scads of sons. Once a secret was told, it was only a matter of time before everyone knew it. With Mother safely on her way to the Mediterranean, Moore would start hunting for him, and, in a little town, he would be easy to find, as would his brothers. Not that he cared for them; he didn't believe in emotional attachments, but he didn't want harm to come to them because of him.

All told, it was best for everyone if he was on his way. He didn't have to worry about his father's sons getting caught up in his problems. He didn't have to worry about his mother for at least a couple of weeks. With luck, he wouldn't see her until after Christmas. He only needed to stay out of Moore's clutches to work out the details of Plan B.

It would be a little more work, and definitely, it would be riskier, but the rewards would be greater. He still needed some working capital. He could use some of the money under his seat, but he doubted that it would be enough. He'd have to sell the car. Damn. He knew a man in Reno who would give him top dollar, and maybe, with some luck, he could buy it back after this mess was over.

No. That was stupid. He would have to let the car go. He was glad his mother was not around to witness his distress caused by the thought of selling his car; she would think he had formed an emotional attachment to it. It was just a vehicle, an inanimate object. He would buy another, a better, flashier one-- something red. And after the car, he'd buy himself a big house with gleaming marble floors and many windows. Then, if he ever ran into Mr. Chris Larabee, he could show ... NO! He was not going to start thinking like that. Damn, Chris Larabee. He was NOT a well-dressed, homeless bum. He was a gambler; he didn't need a home.

He banged his palm on the steering wheel, allowing himself a little show of temper before shutting it away. He was driving too fast to get angry. Mother's rule number 3 or 4, he couldn't remember which, never get angry because angry people make stupid mistakes.

He'd made enough stupid mistakes during the past week to last a lifetime. He needed to quit making them and start learning from them. It was time to make a new list of rules. Rule One: Run whenever Mother comes into the room because if I stay to chat, I will get hurt. Rule Two: Never gamble with hot-tempered men who do not understand the game, or how to lose gracefully. Rule Three: Don't go home with strange men claiming to be your brothers because you might want to stay. Rule Four: Don't work a con in small towns where people actually call each other. Rule Five: When you have money in your hand, don't stay around waiting for someone to take it away from you.

Staying had been his big mistake. He should have taken the money, resolved his problem with Moore, returned the money, and come up with an explanation that would have satisfied Mr. Larabee and the others. Maybe they would have listened and understood; it wasn't likely, but it was a possibility. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. He hadn't done that; instead, he had counted on no one noticing the missing money.

So, what to do now? Think, Ezra, think. First of all, you do have money. You have sixty-five dollars in your wallet, and twelve hundred taped under the seat. Second, you have an impressive portfolio of investments. None of the investments should be touched, but anyone who could honestly claim even the most rudimentary understanding of the stock market would be awed by how well you have taken your winnings and funded your retirement. Maude's Rule number something or other, impressive things, impressed. So what else did he have that was impressive?

At one time, he had owned the latest iPhone and would have used it to impress, but Moore had seen it fall from his hand after the cretin had delivered the first blow to his gut. The phone had hit the pavement with barely a sound, and if any air had remained in his body to hold, he would have said something to distract the man. He did not even have enough breath to offer a prayer that Moore had not seen the phone, but he had no such luck. Moore spotted it as it fell, then changed his mind about striking him in the face. Instead, Moore had spent several minutes stomping the latest in technology into several useless, broken pieces. On Monday morning, as soon as he was alone, he used the ranch's phone to cancel his account.

He needed to think about what else he could use to impress potential marks enough that they would be willing to help him. He drove an impressive-looking car, complete with ownership papers. He wore designer clothes that he had purposely chosen to impress Landon Larabee's sons. He had an impressive-looking ring that he sometimes wore in card games.

In reality, it was little more than a piece of junk, but when it caught the light, it flashed. He wore it to capture his competitors' attention, keeping them from looking into his eyes when he played. His mother, on more than one occasion, had shared that the best players could read their opponents' eyes and determine the value of the cards in their hands. He didn't know if she was correct, but he often wore the ring as a distraction.

He had things that he could use to impress. The question then became how to best use them?

Another question popped into his head- should he use them? Moore was searching for Ezra Standish, a flashy dresser with an even flashier car. Should Ezra Standish continue to exist? He had the knowledge and the resources to become someone else.

He was about thirty miles outside Ely, thirty miles before he had to decide whether to continue down to Las Vegas or take the interstate and go to Reno. There were advantages both ways. It would be easier to get money in Vegas than in Reno. In a city full of dreams-come-true and out-of-luck stories, people were more willing to suspend their disbelief and thus tended to believe the well-played con. As long as he steered clear of pulling something in one of the casinos, Las Vegas was an easy town, ripe for him to pick clean. On the other hand, he knew some people in Reno. People who could help him achieve the anonymity he needed to deal with Moore. And it was a lot closer to Sacramento, Moore's home territory.

Not bothering to signal and making the person he cut off angry, he took the exit leading into Ely. He passed the first motel he saw, the second, and the third. He looked for something cheap and one where he wouldn't be asked questions.

Finally, he found one. Ignoring the protest of his ribs, he contorted in the car seat, searching for the envelope under the seat. Sighing as much from relief at finding it still there as from the pain of pushing himself upright, he opened it and shook out the contents.

After inspecting the Platinum Visa that he kept hidden along with his emergency money, he decided it would pass a cursory inspection. He would pay for the room in cash and stay safe. The desk clerk could look at his important-looking card and even make a copy of it, but under no circumstances could he allow her to run it. He would weave a tale of an ex-lover stalking him. He would say he didn't want to leave a trail she could use to find him. He would make his story believable enough to ensure the desk clerk understood he would pay for the room with cash. With his designer clothes and flashy car, she would believe his story and respect his need for anonymity. She might not even make a copy of the VISA. As long as no one ran the numbers on the card through any system, it would not be exposed as a forgery. He could rest, eat, and make plans for tackling the Moore problem. Get a room, get something to eat, and make a plan--the business of the day.