



## Perplexing Puzzle Pieces

Rooting Out Evil  
Part 3 of the Seveb Brothers Saga

Scowling at the text he had just received, the sheriff stowed his phone in his pocket and greeted the three men walking towards him. Men, teenage boys, and more than a few women had been pouring in from all over the county, but not withstanding the presence of his deputies, he felt more relief at seeing these sons of Landone Larabee than any of the hunters, trackers, and the other miscellaneous people who had shown up willing to help. "Boys. Sure am glad you're here." Then, with a jerk of his head, he indicated that they should follow.

"As best as his sons can figure, Curtis has been gone since Friday. The weather has not been too bad, but tonight it's going to be cold. Not bitter, but we don't have a clue as to what kind of protection he has to handle the cold. Don't know what kind of shape he's in, assuming he is still alive, so it's best we find him sooner rather than later."

"You think he's dead, then?" Chris questioned.

"I hope not, but I have to consider the possibility."

"Reckon we need to get started lookin' then."

"In a minute. I got something I need to run by you first." The sheriff paused as he searched for the best way to phrase what he wanted to say without ruffling feathers. "I was the one who broke the news about Junior, and I don't want to have to give the family more news like that." He shifted his stance to face Chris directly. "I know they are your kin, but Junior's being found like he was bothered me then and still does. Garrett and Jason seemed real shook up, but I saw them exchange a look. I am not sure what it was they were telling each other, but if I had to say, it was guilt and now, with them waiting so long to call me about their father..."

"A lot is going on, and we need to talk with you about it all." Chris stopped talking and stared into the dark.

"Later then, after we find your uncle. For now, I need your help getting a proper search started. I was counting on the dogs to make this a quick, relatively easy search, but there was a wreck... Well, they won't be here for a while. Garrett and Jason rode out this morning looking for their father, but they

were on horseback, so I think a ground search is in order. Chris, Vin, I would be a hell of a lot more comfortable if the two of you would retrace the paths the brothers took. Buck, you were an immense help when that little girl wandered off in the Valley of Fire a couple of years ago.” When they nodded their acceptance of their assignments, he led them to the sign-in table and showed them the map he had divided into a search grid.

He rarely dreamed, but when he did, he paid attention. Years ago, he heard that dreams were a way a person could solve problems too complex for their waking mind to decipher. Glancing at his phone, he decided he had enough time to vocalize his dream before he forgot the details. “Hey, Dead Rabbit! Want to hear about my dream?” It was just a habit, he told himself as he settled into his spot on the couch to talk with the no longer in the room, recently deceased rabbit. Honestly, this was the last time he’d talk to the thing. He wouldn’t even be doing it now, but his dream was too deliciously perfect not to share, and Dead Sister had quit listening to him years ago.

“I doubt if you noticed even when you were alive and able to notice, but while I enjoy Miss Gaines’ company, I don’t trust her any further than I can throw her. She has a bad habit of listening to people’s private conversations.” He thought for a few seconds, then added, “That habit of hers, as despicable as it is, has provided me with the information I have needed to do my job. For example, the tracers she insisted we put on most of the Larabee vehicles has helped me keep tabs on the brothers’ whereabouts. And of course, the listening device in Chris Larabee’s home let me know exactly when to set the fire... That’s not the point, though.

“The point is that Miss Gaines likes to listen to and record conversations. The chances are high that she will try to record me. Back when I followed two of the brothers to Ely, I stumbled on a handheld bug sweeper. I have never used one before; I never had reason to, but they aren’t hard to figure out. As of last night, she has not bugged this apartment, but I do have a tracker on my car. That’s why I borrowed Charlie Tibbitt’s car to drive to Four Corners last night. You know the old man in 2C. He’s one step from being a doddering fool, but he still has it together enough to know that he can’t see when it gets dark. Even during the day, he’s dangerous behind the wheel; when he reaches 35mph, he thinks he’s going too fast. I swear, one day he’s going to cause a wreck. No matter, I borrowed his car, so Miss Gaines can’t track me, and I took care of the mess she left in Four Corners. When I got back here, I swept the place again in case she dropped by while I was gone. It’s clean, and I can freely share my most amazing and insightful dream with you.

“You, I am sure, remember how she wants me to kill Dr. Jackson when he exits the hospital one evening. She thinks that all the brothers will immediately rush to the hospital, leaving Mary Travis and her son vulnerable. She has visions of sneaking onto the ranch, knocking on the door, and, when Mrs. Travis opens up, shooting her. Her plan won’t work, not for her and certainly not for me.

“From what I know about mothers, Mrs. Travis will not answer the door. Even if she did, she would have tucked her son somewhere away, safe with a phone. He’ll call 911 before she enters the house. Even if Miss Gaines chooses to leave the boy alone, the kid will find a safe place to take pictures of the woman who murdered his mother. She will be caught, and once captured, she will make a plea deal by informing the authorities of my existence and how to track me down.

“You, Dead Rabbit, are aware of that, but in my dream, I convince her to let me take care of Mary Travis. I tell her that no one will suspect me, but that if they have any inkling she is involved in Mary Travis’s death, they will investigate her until they uncover every little secret she is hiding. They will find her room filled with her recordings taken from the Larabee ranch, and the tracking devices on their cars. Even if they can’t tie her to the death of the Travis woman, they might investigate a little further and link her to the deaths of her three husbands. I will explain to her that she will never be suspected of Dr. Jackson’s murder. More than likely, the law will assume the men who tried to hang the good doctor last November are to blame.

“I will assure her that with the Travis woman dead, she can comfort Chris Larabee without anyone around who might interfere. She will eat that up. She won’t be totally on board with the plan I have concocted. She really wants to see Mary Travis die, but she still has enough sense left to see the wisdom of my idea.

“Only, my real plan is not the one I share with her. I won’t go to the Double L to kill anyone. Instead, I will wait in the dark parking lot for her to shoot Dr. Jackson. Then, I will earn my pay as the security guard, by yelling ‘Drop It’ and when she turns, surprised to hear my voice, I will drop her. In my

dream, Dead Rabbit, her head explodes with the force of the bullet I send into it. I won't take a headshot; I might miss, but I will put her down.

"I need to practice my crying so I can be devastated by having to kill a crazed woman, but I will be believed. I will weep copious tears as I explain that she turned and pointed her rifle at me. They will attempt to comfort me by telling me I had no choice. In the end, people will call me a hero. My picture will be on the front page of every newspaper in the United States. I don't like that, but it may be time for me to retire from my true calling and quit taking jobs. The advantage of doing that is that I can focus on my more pleasurable pursuits.

"But back to my plan. While law enforcement descends on the hospital to work the bloody scene, I will ask if I can wait until the morning to come in to give my statement. They will ask me if I need someone to drive me home. I will have to make a show of composing myself, of steadying my nerves, before I tell them I live nearby. I won't go home, not immediately, anyway. I will destroy the tracker she placed on my car and go to the Gaines estate in Elko and remove any trace of me she might have gathered. I will leave just enough evidence to implicate her in the deaths of the detective, Holland, and that of Landon Larabee. The files I took from the detective's home, along with the one she took from Landon's library, should close those cases.

"I could be ready to put this plan in motion tonight if need be, but I really am not ready to end her life. It's funny, if you think about it, but I am oddly attached to Miss Gaines. Tell me, Dead Rabbit, when I do get around to killing her, will I talk to her as honestly as I talk to you?"

Cletus Fowler closed his eyes and leaned against the back of the couch. He wasn't going to sleep. He was trying to formulate a plan to calm Miss Gaines down. He began talking to himself. She will be pissed that the windows in Mary Travis's home were all broken last night, and of course, she will suspect me, but I will tell her I went to bed early. She will check the tracker on my car to verify my story. It will never occur to her how easy it was to use my neighbor's car. Heck, I even filled the tank for Charlie.

If I suggest that it sounds as though someone else in town has it out for Mrs. Travis, I might be able to convince her to wait. Yep, I think that is the best way to handle her. Once she finds out about the windows, she will call me demanding answers. I will pave the way for her to conclude that someone besides her is after Mrs. Travis. Curiosity will force her to wait to find out who and why.



Feeling the sun on her face, Mary rolled over and reached for her husband to wake him. Feeling nothing, her eyes flew open. Memories of Stephen threatened to overwhelm her, but reality hit her before they fell. She knew where she was and that her son was not asleep beside her. Bolting out of the bed, she called his name. When she did not hear Billy reply, she flung open the door and ran down the hall towards the kitchen.

When she entered, she saw a man scooting his chair away from the table, asking, "How do you like your eggs?"

"I am not hungry." She answered the man, Josiah; she thought his name was Josiah, but didn't use it. "Where is Billy?" She hoped she did not sound as panicked as she felt.

"Ezra is showing him the newborn foals we have in the barn. And yes, you may not know it, but you need to eat. We have a lot to do this morning, and it will be a while before we eat lunch.

"But Billy needs to be in school," she protested.

"Not today. He needs to be here."

There was something in his voice that drew her full attention. He wasn't playing games. He was dead serious. Relief flooded through her; the men, these brothers, were taking her situation seriously. She answered the question, "I am not picky with how I eat eggs."

"Scrambled it is. Coffee?"

"Black is fine."

Pouring a cup, he handed it to her and took the opportunity to refill his mug. Within minutes, he slid her eggs and toast in front of her and took his seat across from her. "First, let me tell you where everyone is. Chris's uncle has Alzheimer's. At some point, during the past few days, he wandered away from his home up in the mountains. Chris, Vin, and Buck are out with a search party looking for him. They will call when Curtis is found. Nathan has probably made it to the clinic by now, and there is no telling when we will see him tonight. JD has gone to retrieve Jack, our dog. Ezra, as I have said, is in the barn keeping Billy occupied so I can talk with you."

“About the man I saw?” Mary wrapped her fingers around the cup, willing the heat from the coffee to rid her body of the chill threatening it.

He glanced around the room, thinking of the hidden listening devices. They knew where they had been, but who knew if Waldo or their other Listener had used their absence to plant more. “Let me show you around the place. You will need to know where things are.”

Mary hurriedly finished her breakfast and followed Josiah to a truck. He opened the passenger door for her and walked to the driver’s side, and climbed in. “This is Vin’s truck. It’s probably the safest place to talk except out in the open. I don’t know about you, but the wind is a bit nippy this morning... There isn’t a good way to say this, but you and Billy are in danger.

“I do not have a clue as to who the man you saw is, or if the man who took your gun is that man. What I do know is that the threat may not be coming from your husband, Stephen’s past, but from a person we are calling Waldo. Waldo and another unknown person have placed listening devices throughout our house and many of our vehicles. Vin’s truck is clean, but be careful what you say in the house. We will go to your place later today to get a few more of your things. Be careful of what you say until one of us can check it for listening devices. Someone may have placed some in your home.

“Orrin found a camera in the conference room in his office. He and Evie have been gone for the last couple of weeks, so we have to assume other devices may have been placed around his office and his home. Vin, Buck, and Ezra know how to work the equipment to find the devices, but if they do find them, we probably will leave them in place so as not to tip off Waldo or the other Listener.”

Josiah paused and checked Mary’s face to see how she was handling the revelations. She had paled, but her face showed an unexpected level of determination to hear him through without falling apart. There was no doubt in his mind that while she was frightened, she wasn’t planning to run away and hide; she was planning to face head-on whatever threat headed her way. He wanted to praise her fearlessness, but he worried that same fearlessness might make her reckless. She needed to be a little scared, just as she needed to remember she had a young son to protect. His job, for the moment, was to instill a little fear into her. Just enough to make her cautious, but not enough to leave her quaking. She needed to understand the threats she faced, but also realize that he and his brothers, as well as Orrin and the sheriff, would work together to keep her and Billy safe. “Let me tell you about what we learned this weekend.”

Taking the pictures of Waldo from his coat pocket, he spread them across the dashboard in front of her. “Let me tell you about Waldo, the woman we believe is responsible for killing our mothers.” Josiah spent the next forty-five minutes telling her about their father’s suspicious death, the mix-up with Ezra’s medicine, the video they had received from their deceased father, and their trip to Vegas to meet Maude. He ended with the threats she had made against Orrin.

Picking up the pictures, Mary began examining them. “My priority is to make sure Billy is safe. I want you and your brothers to promise me that his safety will also be your priority.” When she saw Josiah nod in agreement, she continued, “It embarrasses me to admit this, but I made a lot of money promoting various beauty products on social media. I wanted to be taken seriously as a journalist, but I developed a rather large following by sharing makeup tips. One thing I learned is that what I am going to call Certain Looks don’t happen overnight. It takes practice. Judging by how different she looks in each photo, I am willing to bet two things. The first thing to know is that I am sure she is not using drugstore products. She is putting serious money into her makeup. The second thing is, I want you to look at how unlined her face is in this photo of her in the blue suit and in the one of her in the hall on Sunday morning. If she is a contemporary of Evie and Orrin, she should be showing signs of aging, such as crow’s feet and lines around her lips. It is easy to use makeup to add lines and wrinkles, but it is hard to use makeup to erase them. She has probably done one of three things: undergone cosmetic procedures on her face and neck, used a red-light device to reduce wrinkles, or followed a premium and costly skincare regimen.

She frowned at the pictures for several minutes before she turned to Josiah and smiled, “I really hate the idea of being hunted. So let’s turn the tables on her. We should consider hunting her. What say you?”

“Sounds like you have a plan.”

“I do. As I said, I have a large following. I believe that we should ask my followers to help us hunt your Waldo.”

“Those are disguises. How will that help us find out who she is?”

“She has used those faces before. I am certain of it. I want to put out that some woman has threatened the life of my son and I think it is one of these women. I will make a clip looking scared and

worried for my son. People will begin hunting for her. With luck, we will have a few legitimate leads to follow within twenty-four hours."

"Josiah nodded slowly. It was a better plan than anything he had come up with. "Before you do it, let's run it by the others and see if they see any holes in it." He lifted his head and smiled. He heard his van before seeing it. JD was coming up the drive with Jack. It would be good to have the beast in the house. "In the meantime, let me introduce you and Billy to Jack, the best guard dog ever."



Vin squatted in the dirt to examine the footprint someone had left. "I only see one set of prints here. Whoever it belongs to looks to be wearing hiking boots."

"Don't think it's someone the sheriff sent out then. He made a point in saying he was sending teams of two or three. How old do you think the trail is?"

Vin stood and pointed to the broken twig from the maple tree. "See how the sap is still oozing. I'd say we were fifteen minutes or so behind him."

"Then why the hell isn't he answering?"

"Can't answer that, Chris. I can say he's following a deer trail. Probably heading to the creek."

"How the hell do you know about the creek?"

"I'm listening to nature, Chris. Ya might want to give it a try sometime."

"Let's say I am as ignorant as a newborn of the woods. Care to enlighten me?"

"Harry told me once that to find water, look for a thirsty tree. Trees like this, here maple, are very thirsty. Plus, we are walking downhill. Plus," Vin stopped dead in his tracks and grinned at his brother, "if ya quit yer jabbering, you can hear running water."

"You are a wise ass, you know."

"Keepin' you on your toes, Larabee."

Without saying a word about their need to hurry, the two men quickened their pace, only stopping occasionally so Vin could confirm they were heading in the right direction. Within minutes, they cleared the last bit of tangled honeysuckle vines.

Curtis, standing at the edge of the creek filled with runoff from the winter's heavy snowfall, turned to look at them as they approached him. "Chris, what are you doing here?"

"Looking for you, Uncle Curtis. Are you all right?"

"Don't you have eyes in your head? Of course, I am all right."

"What are you doing out here, Uncle Curtis?"

"Here? I wanted to take a walk, and my feet led me here."

"We've been out looking for you. We've been worried about you." Chris wished his uncle would take a few steps away from the fast-moving creek. He wasn't worried about his uncle drowning. There was no way he'd let that happen, but the water was bound to be as cold as ice, and neither of them needed to get wet this far away from warm blankets.

Curtis looked around, examining the forest and the creek running through it. "You know, I really didn't want to move here. My pa said this place would be good for Cassie. Out here, away from people, she could heal. Pa saying that made me come this close to being mad at him as I ever got. Everything centered around what Cassie needed or wanted. I understood, of course. But I really didn't like it here that first summer. Then, Cassie discovered this creek right before school started. She loved sitting here by the water. She spent hours sitting here watching the water. She would say that if you looked at the water as it flowed by, you could see the fairies dancing in it, and if you're quiet, you could hear them sing. I never saw them dance, never heard them sing, but I am sure Cassie could. She possessed magic.

"After she died, I often came here to see if her spirit would show up and tell me about the other side. You know we're twins, Cassie and I. People told me when she died to give it time. Life would get better, and I would adjust to not having her in it. I don't think I ever have.

"That first year after we buried Cassie, I lived with the expectation that Amy would leave me. She loved Landon, you see. I was her second choice. With Cassie gone, she had a shot at him. I don't think he ever looked once at her. It broke her heart. She could understand him loving Cassie more than her. She could understand him taking up with the woman who owned the bar. She had real problems with Landon asking that nurse to marry him. She said that, I think her name was Jackson, yeah, Jackson like your brother, she said she wasn't what Landon needed. She said that he needed someone from these parts. I never let on to her that I knew she was talking about herself. I never told her that I spent

so much time working together because I hated hearing her and her friends ranting on the phone about Landon choosing an outsider to marry. She actually used that word, outsider. I have often wondered what she meant because, technically speaking, both Cassie and I were outsiders. I thought it might be code for black, but when Landon took up with Maude, she and her friends used it again.

"Anyway, to answer your question as to what I am doing here, this is the time of year Cassie liked the best. I circled the day on my calendar so I wouldn't forget to come and sit with her in case she dropped by. I try to talk with Cassie whenever I can. Especially now, in case no one has told you, I have Alzheimer's. Little pieces of my memories are slipping away. One day, I will lose my memories of Cassie just as I have of the day Junior dropped by. It was the last day I saw him alive. Do you remember that day?"

"No, Uncle Curtis, I don't," the lost look in his uncle's eyes physically hurt Chris. He understood his uncle's desire to speak with his sister; he still found himself talking to Sarah, but the sudden shift from Cassie to talking about Junior confused him. Was this Alzheimer's taking over, or something else?

Curtis stopped talking so he could look at his nephew. Finally, he shook his head in an attempt to clear it. "You weren't at the house that day, were you?"

"No, sir, I wasn't.

"I didn't kill Junior."

"I didn't think you had."

"My sons think I did. They don't say it to my face, but I see it in their eyes. Why on earth would I kill Junior? He was my son, my firstborn. I know I was hard on him; I thought I was supposed to be, but I would never kill him."

"I know." Chris automatically reassured his uncle, but his eyes were on Vin, who had stepped away to contact the sheriff; he hoped the call went through. It was hit-or-miss with the phones up here in the mountains. He refocused his attention on his uncle. He needed to get his uncle to answer a few questions before he slipped back into the fog he was too often trapped in.

"Uncle Curtis, I know you didn't kill Junior. You are not that kind of man. So, why do Jason and Garrett think you are responsible?" They probably blamed their father for arguing with Junior and pushing him further into the depression Joan said he didn't have. He didn't expect the answer he received.

"I don't know if I am remembering this right, so you can't take my word for it, but I have a vague memory of Junior being on the floor in my office and his brothers yelling at me." He looked at the creek and walked away. "I don't suppose that Cassie is coming this year. Sometimes she does, and sometimes she doesn't. You probably scared her off. I wish you hadn't. I would like to see her again before she disappears forever."

Chris looked over at Vin, who had pocketed his phone. He had noticed Vin taking it out, but had focused on what his uncle was saying. He hoped Vin's phone had been able to connect with Buck's. It was difficult making connections from the ranch, but up here in the mountains, it could be close to impossible. He was saved from asking by the sound of a whistle.

"Garrett says he knows where we are and is bringing a four-wheeler," Vin announced as he came closer to Chris and Curtis. He held his hand out to shake hands with Curtis. "Names Vin Tanner."

"Any relation to Cady Tanner?"

"Yes, sir, I'm her son."

"I remember her; we only bumped into each other a couple of times. She wasn't from around here, was she?"

"No, sir. She was from Texas."

"She quit coming around here. Did she get tired of Nevada?"

"She died a few years ago."

"Sorry to hear that. Seems a whole lot of folks die around here."

"We've got a few minutes to wait before Garrett gets here, so do you mind me asking a couple of questions?"

"If you don't mind me not remembering the answers," Curtis tried a smile that looked more sad than the humorous one he was aiming for.

"Well, my first question is, by any chance, do you have a map of Mountain's Edge I could look at? Maps can tell you so much."

Curtis beamed, "I have several hanging in my office. You are welcome to come in when we get back and take a look. If your phone takes pictures, you can take pictures. One of the maps was made back in the late 1880s."

As Vin engaged Curtis with talks of maps, Chris circled the area looking for signs of hoofprints. Later, when they were headed home, he'd ask Vin about the maps and share what he had not seen.



Josiah hung up the phone and said a prayer of thanks that Curtis Marks had been found. He didn't know the man and wasn't sure he wanted to, but no one should be left wandering around for days in the woods. He didn't know if there were any wolves in the area, but he was sure many dangers lurked behind the trees.

"Ah am guessing they found the gentleman." Ezra spoke from where he was cooking hamburgers. "Should I add a few more hamburgers?"

"No, seems like the Marks' women spent the morning cooking for the folks searching for Curtis. Chris asked that you take Mary to her house so she can pick up a few things for her and Billy." Josiah made a point to look at the equipment Ezra had just finished using to check the barn for bugs.

Ezra nodded in understanding. If someone had broken in to steal her revolver, the possibility that a listening device had been left behind was high. He doubted anyone would come in search of Billy at the ranch, and if someone did, Jack was there, but he'd leave his weapon with Josiah just in case. "No worries, I'll make sure she gets there safe and sound. Have you got the number of that antiques dealer Chris was talking about? He mentioned that he needed to call him because he had a few things he wanted to get rid of. I can give him a call while I wait for Mrs. Travis to gather what she wants to bring back."

"It's there," Josiah pointed to the empty coffee mug with a piece of paper sticking out from under it. "Good luck. I've been trying every fifteen minutes since 9:00. It goes straight to voicemail."

"Sounds like he doesn't want Chris's business." Ezra nonchalantly said as he picked up the piece of paper and tucked it into his wallet, but inside, he hoped that was all it was.



Chris, Buck, and Vin rode in silence. They were tired, but the silence wasn't due to fatigue. They were keenly aware that someone could be listening to anything they said.

"I think Ezra, JD, and Josiah have everything under control with the livestock. Seems that a number of our heifers calved while we were gone." Buck said to ease the weight of the silence. It was damn near impossible to keep quiet when they had so many things to share.

"Good to hear. We should probably give the Yosemite brothers a bonus. They have been lifesavers for us these past few months." Chris added his two cents' worth to the conversation, but what he really wanted to know was what Vin found so dang interesting about the maps he had photographed. "It will take us a few more minutes, but why don't we go on into town and see if Mary and Ezra need any help?" There, he had just given a plausible reason for them to go to Four Corners. He wanted to catch the sheriff up on what they had learned this weekend."

Vin looked up from his phone, "Reckon that'd be the gentlemanly thing to do."

Having run out of conversation to share with Waldo and their other listener, the three men grew silent again.



"You're missing it," Mary turned to point to the building they were passing.

"Intentionally so." Pulling into a parking spot near the Sheriff Station, Ezra looked up one side of the street and then the other before turning to explain, "The best I can tell is that every window in your dwelling has had at least one pane broken. No one likely has noticed since so many people have been out searching for Mr. Marks. I would feel more comfortable if other establishments also had signs of vandalism, but it appears that your home was targeted. I think we should wait where we are until a few deputies show up. Or until my brothers show."

Mary didn't argue. She turned to look. Ezra was correct, but that wasn't the whole story. The places where the windows were broken were not just cracked. Actual holes were in the glass panes. "How?"

"The vandal has a very good arm or a slingshot. I don't know which. As there is no obvious source of rocks lying about of sufficient size to inflict that kind of damage, I suspect he brought his own."

"It was planned then?"



“Most definitely.” Ezra agreed. When he saw a deputy’s car pull onto Main Street, he said, “Stay seated.” He exited Josiah’s van and waved down the deputy.

Minutes later, the deputy was on the radio calling the sheriff.

After taking the keys from Mary, Mitch Harris and his deputy, Amos Beasley, entered her office, searched it, and then climbed the stairs with guns drawn. Mitch Harris didn’t see any signs that anyone had entered, but Mrs. Travis had reported her gun stolen on Sunday. If the thief was the same person who had shattered the windows during the night, he might still be around. If he was still around, he might be armed. Mitch was experienced enough to know that thinking a perp had already vacated a locale, too often got law enforcement shot. He wouldn’t call it clear until every nook and cranny had been searched. He had seen not fear, but rage in Mrs. Travis’s eyes. The minute he said it was safe, it had better be because there would be no stopping her from coming inside. He did not plan on ending his career because a civilian was murdered in front of his eyes.

Thirty minutes later, he gave the all clear. He was surprised Mrs. Travis was not the first through the doors, but Mr. Standish. Standish held a sweeper in his hands and walked past him without saying a word, as he began searching the office for evidence of spyware being installed.

It took Ezra a good hour to complete his search, but when he had, he pointed to the router in the office, to an outlet in the kitchen, and to an outlet almost covered up by the bed frame in Mary’s room. When he finished pointing them out, he looked to Chris for instructions on what to do. Anticipating Chris’s words, Mitch held his fingers over his lip. When he saw that Chris Larabee was willing to follow his lead, he told his deputy, “Good work, Amos. Bringing a sweeper when you saw the damage was smart thinking. I’m sure Mrs. Travis wants those things removed immediately.”

With that said, Ezra began using his phone, photographed the three devices. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and popped the back of each device open. Using a dime, pried out the battery powering each device. “Do you have any evidence bags on you?” He asked no one in particular.



“I suppose this is as safe a place to compare notes as we have,” Mitch said when Amos had left with the deactivated listening devices. “Want to tell me what’s going on?”

“A hell of a lot, Mitch. We were planning to come by and talk to you this morning, but because of my uncle, we got delayed.”

“Let’s start there. While they are fresh, I would like to hear what you observed.”

“He didn’t look like he’d been lost in the woods since sometime on Friday,” Buck spoke up. “I don’t know about you, but when I am out for any length of time in weather like this, hunting for a stray or something, my cheeks are rubbed raw by the wind; his wasn’t.”

“He didn’t have any whiskers. He should have had some scruff if he had been out of the house since Friday.” Vin added. “And his clothes weren’t mussed. I didn’t see a flashlight, and even though the moon was out, the undergrowth in those woods is wicked in places. I would have thought that he would have taken a tumble or two.”

“His boots are what I noticed first. He had hiking boots on. I’m not sure when the last time I saw him in anything other than western boots.”

“He wore black dress shoes for Junior’s funeral, but you are right, Chris, the only time I ever saw him in hiking boots was when Junior fell back when we were scouts. Remember?”

“Yep. I also noticed one more thing. Vin, when you and my uncle were talking about the maps. I walked around looking for signs that horses had been around. I didn’t see any.”

“I’m not sure if that means much. I took pictures of the maps on his wall. There are several ways to the creek we were at from the house. There are also several ways from the house to the road. It might not mean much, but on the way to the Mountain’s Edge, I didn’t notice them. When we left, I knew where to look. I spotted two of the roads, dirt paths really, but I didn’t see the third. That in and of itself doesn’t mean much. Things grow fast in the forest, and it could be history by now. It was just somethin’ I noticed.”

“Do you know when the aerial map was made?” Mitch asked.

Vin opened his phone’s photo library and brought up two pictures of the aerial map and blew one of the images up, and showed it to the sheriff. “The frame covers a good bit of the information about the map located at the bottom. I can’t tell who the photographer was or when it was taken. But if you look right here, I think that is a part of a number one, then there is a space with a line coming down, but I am not sure about the rest.”



"May I see?" Ezra asked. He intently studied the photograph and then said, "I am fairly sure that is the Lucida Calligraphy font. If it is, it says 1 of 3. Sounds like he had three copies made."

"Have you ever worked in law enforcement?" Mitch asked.

"I considered it once, but it was pointed out to me that if I were going to work in law enforcement, I needed to be law-abiding. I can't see how I could live with those kinds of restraints placed on me."

Mitch returned the smile Ezra gave him. Then he turned serious. "What I noticed was the lack of concern. I've been on a few missing person searches. One thing they had in common was the sheer panic in the faces of the members of the family. It's not a crime to delay reporting a loved one gone missing. They may have felt they could find him on their own, but that's not been my experience." He looked at the men around him and then at Mary Travis leaning against the door frame with a broom in her hand. They all looked as tired as he felt. He wished he could send them on their way, but they had news he needed to hear. "Want to tell me what's going on?"



Nathan hesitated before knocking on the door to Angie Delaney's apartment. He had stopped her in the hall when he had made rounds for Emmett at the hospital and asked if she had a few minutes to spare. She had smiled at first, but when he said he had a few questions about the Rifle Club she belonged to in high school, her smile faded, and she said she had too much to do to talk. He had suggested that he meet her when she took her lunch break, saying he would treat her to any place she wanted to go. There had been no trace of her good nature when she turned him down. He had persisted and suggested that she meet him for dinner. She sighed and told him to be at her apartment at five sharp. He had never been to her place before, and it bothered him that she had given an emphatic no to his suggestion of meeting anywhere for lunch or supper. Her hesitation to talk with him at the hospital in the doctors' lounge or over lunch or dinner disturbed him and made him wonder what she was hiding. He wanted to walk away from the door and leave the questioning to the amiable Buck, whom everyone loved, or to the more direct and explosive Chris, but he was his father's son and would face whatever Nurse Angie had to say.

Really, Nathan, he scolded himself, she is only an inch or two over five feet. He had more than a foot of height on her. What physical harm could she do to him? And he could recover from whatever emotional harm she inflicted on him. Man up, Nathan, he sternly told himself as he knocked.

"Thanks for coming over," Angie said with a forced smile. She didn't want him here, but she did back out of the doorway and gestured for Nathan to enter. "It's not much, but it suits me."

Nathan could feel his face burn, and he hoped that with his dark skin, Miss Angie did not notice his embarrassment at being caught judging her small apartment, with its worn couch and stained, scarred end tables. He had a rough idea of what she earned, and while he did not expect her to live in the Taj Mahal, she should be able to afford better furniture and a less shabby apartment. Even her television was small and old. Not knowing how he could question the condition in which she was living, Nathan shoved his curiosity to the back of his mind, smiled, and, as he followed her to the couch, said, "I appreciate you seeing me."

"This morning, at the hospital, you said that you had questions about the Rifle Club. I assume this has something to do with your mother's death. Tell me what you know."

Angie Delaney's voice held none of the spark of good humor that he associated with her. Her smile had vanished, and her arms were wrapped around herself as if she were attempting to protect herself from the questions he might ask. If he had to describe her to someone, he would have said she was short and on the beginning-to-worry-about-diabetes side of plump. He would never have described her as old or small, but here in her apartment, he watched her both age and shrink as she folded in on herself. He wanted to say: Never mind, and leave, but the memory of the damage done to Maude Standish's suite kept him from leaving. If Nurse Angie had information that could help them find Waldo, he needed it.

"Let me tell you about my weekend," Nathan said, spreading across the coffee table the four pictures of Waldo he carried in his jacket's pocket. "This woman stalked and terrorized my family this past weekend. She has threatened to harm a member of Orrin Travis's family if he doesn't provide her with the name of the person responsible for my father's death by Sunday."

"He had a heart attack," Angie said quickly.

"That is the official cause of his death, and he might have had one, but this woman doesn't believe it. And to be totally honest, I tend to agree with her."

Angie straightened and began to study the pictures. Are you saying these are the same woman? They don't look alike. These women are not even the same age."

"Professionals who know what they are doing say they are indeed the same woman. I'm looking for details about the members of your high school rifle team: Amy, Connie, Trish, and Babs. We have reason to believe one of them is this woman."

"You didn't mention Evie or Cassie."

"Evie has an alibi, and Cassie is dead. And we have asked Evie the same questions I am asking you. I am hoping you can tell me more than she did."

"Evie was and probably still is head over heels in love with Orrin. The time she spent with us, she was thinking of him. So, yes, I see her not having much to tell you about us, just as I am sure Orrin gave Evie an alibi. As for Cassie's alibi... I guess having a grave with her name on a tombstone gives her a damn good one." She pushed herself up and walked to the kitchen. Nathan could hear her opening and shutting cabinets. He debated going into the kitchen to help her get whatever it was that she was rummaging around looking for. Before he could decide whether to help her, she returned with two tumblers and a bottle of vodka, but Nathan declined the drink she poured. "Thanks, but I am driving."

"I know, but one drink won't hurt you. I am telling you this, if I am going to dredge up memories from my past, I need a stiff drink to fortify me, and I never drink alone."

Keenly aware of the challenge in her eyes, Nathan accepted the drink, knowing that if he didn't, she would demand that he leave. He'd nurse the drink for as long as he could, and if he didn't feel safe driving, he had brothers he could call to come and get him. "Thanks."

"I know why you have eliminated me as a suspect. There is no way I could fit into the suit the blonde woman wears in this picture. I also understand why you eliminated Cassie, but can you explain why you eliminated Evie? So what if Orrin is her alibi? I hope that you understand he would do and say anything he needed to protect her."

"I know, but I also know where Miss Evie was this past weekend."

"Where?"

Maybe if Angie had not seemed so interested in Evie's location, Nathan would have told her, but her interest in Evie's whereabouts was in stark contrast to the lack of emotion on her face when they began talking. "I have promised not to say."

"So, you are a man of integrity."

"I try to be." Angie was angry, but he didn't know where the anger was coming from. Reminding himself that he needed any information that she could provide, Nathan didn't react to her change of mood. Instead, he asked her, "What can you tell me about the other members of the rifle team?"

"I am not sure what there is to tell. We were a bunch of girls who were good with a rifle and were friends."

"Are you in touch with any of them?"

"We don't hang out or anything even though we are both single, but Trish and I bump into each other sometimes, usually at the hospital. She works for child protective services, you know. Occasionally, she has to bring in a child for treatment, and when I have to refer a kid to CPS, I call Trish."

"Why Trish?"

Angie stared at Nathan, obviously trying to decide what she should share. Then she sighed, "It's not like it's a big secret or anything, and if Trish were here, she would probably tell you this herself... Her folks argued a lot. When they argued, her dad would more often than I think anyone knew hit her mom. Sometimes, he'd hit Trish. He was killed in a hunting accident when Trish was a high school freshman. There was a big stink for a few weeks while it got investigated. Some people said her mother did it, some said Trish killed him, and others said Trish had a boyfriend do it. Nothing was ever proved one way or the other. Eventually, people quit speculating and began noticing that both Trish and her mom seemed happier without Gil around. That was his name, Gilbert Ferguson. I remember my dad saying that the world was a lot safer without Gilbert Ferguson in it."

"Anyway, I am sure Trish went into social work so she could make sure kids don't have to go through what she did." Once again, Angie pushed herself off the couch and went into the kitchen. This time, she came back with a bag of Oreo cookies. "I know you are probably wondering how I can eat Oreos while drinking vodka. The answer is that they are both comfort foods. There are times when I need comforting. Sometimes, working in a hospital makes you feel good because you helped someone. Other times, it's damn depressing. Want one?" She held the bag out for Nathan. Thinking

that, as disgusting as it sounded, a cookie or two would help negate the effects of alcohol, made Nathan take one.

When Angie settled into the couch with a cookie in one hand and her almost empty tumbler within reach on an end table, Nathan asked, "What do you think? Did Trish kill her father?"

"I do. I don't blame her, though. Trish never said, and I never thought to ask. Back then, it was something that I couldn't conceive of a father doing, but the older I've gotten, the more I have seen... It's why I got out of pediatrics. Anyway, hitting her mom or banging her, I now think that Trish decided to end the torment."

Nathan sat in silence as he thought about the type of man who would abuse a child, especially his own. He had seen cases while working in Birmingham, but he didn't get into the trenches as a nurse or a social worker often had to.

"Based on what my father and now my brothers have uncovered about our mothers' deaths, it seems likely that someone from the rifle club is responsible for murdering them. Do you think that someone could be Trish?"

"Let's talk about your father, too. Are you ready to hear some hard truths about your father, Nathan?"

"I don't want to hear bad things about him, but I am an adult, and I can handle hearing what I must."

Taking an Oreo out of the bag, Angie ripped it in half, exposing the cream interior. "I promise, I didn't get the Oreos out to do this; they just happen to be my favorite. You are like this cookie, dark chocolate on the outside and white on the inside. You may have heard the comparison before... I don't know... Clara may not have had an ounce of white blood in her, but she fit in with our white hospital staff when she came. I had been working for a doctor in Eagle Bend. I won't say who, but his wife didn't like having me in the office. You probably can't tell now, but back then I was very cute. He fired me, and I got a job at the hospital. Clara and me started working there at the same time, and we became not just colleagues, but friends.

"Your mom was strikingly beautiful, and she was smart as they come. If she had chosen to go to medical school, I have no doubt she would have been a top-notch doctor. There were times when she disagreed with the treatment plan a doctor made, and she would confront the attending and show him her plan. It took me a while to figure out why none of them got mad at her for showing them up. It was because she didn't use words like I feel or I believe. No, when Clara went to do battle with a doctor, she went in armed with facts that she had memorized from the journals doctors left lying around in the break room. She never contradicted a doctor in front of others, and she never contradicted him without having her facts straight. Needless to say, both the doctors and staff respected her, and people listened to what she had to say.

"Patients loved her. She saw them as real people, not just as the person in the bed in room 221. She always made time to chat with a patient or hold the hand of a scared family member as she explained what was happening to their loved one. I don't know how she found the time to do all that she did.

"One day, years after she passed, I had a patient come in, an old reprobate who never has a good thing to say about anyone. I actually cringed when I saw that he was on my floor with a kidney stone. When I went into his room, he asked where Nurse Jackson was, saying she had been there for his mother when she fell and broke her hip. I told him she had died in an accident. He got really quiet. When he looked up at me, he said, "That is a real pity. Nurse Jackson was a mighty fine woman."

"I think that summed up all that there was to say about Clara." She emptied her glass, but did not refill it. "If Clara had stuck to being the best nurse the hospital had ever seen, no one would have had a bad word to say about her, but she went and fell for Landon. That angered a lot of folks. Me included."

Nathan made sure his face didn't show his surprise or his anger. He had spent his entire life thinking that Nurse Angie was his mother's friend. When he had his voice under control, he asked, "Why?"

Angie nodded to herself. She had known her admission would be seen as a betrayal. She needed to explain. "It wasn't because she was a black woman and he was a white man. It was because... I think it was because she wasn't one of us.

"In case you haven't noticed, Four Corners is a small town. It was even smaller when you were growing up, and if you can imagine, it was smaller still when I was in high school. I don't know how much you know about girls, so I will tell you. We girls, at least the members of the rifle team, liked to

plan our future. We wanted the dream we were told we should have: a husband, a house with a white picket fence, and 2.5 children. We spent many hours giggling over who we should marry. We gossiped about each boy in our class and found fault with all of them. We could not look at them and see the men they would, one day, become, so we looked for older boys. Well, I said we did that, but Evie didn't. She knew early on that she wanted Orrin, and now that I have said that, I have to add that Orrin fit the bill; he was older, and as far as I know, she has never regretted her choice.

"The rest of us, Babs, Trish, Connie, Amy, and I, all fixated on Landon. We took to going to the Grille in hopes that he would drop by. When there was a game of any kind, and we thought he might be in the stands, watching, we were also in the stands, only we watched for signs of him. We were confident that he would choose one of us, so we agreed that when he picked, the rest of us would go elsewhere to build a life that did not include Landon.

"The summer before our senior year, Babs moved away. The rumor mill ran wild, saying that she left because she was pregnant. I remember I was furious because I was positive that she had purposefully let Landon get her pregnant. For my entire senior year, part of me waited for news that she and Landon had wed. We didn't talk about it, but I am sure we all thought that Babs was going to have Landon's baby."

When her hand hovered between the bottle and the cookies, Nathan took the opportunity to ask, "Do you know what happened to her?"

"A few years ago, Connie called me to let me know that she had run into Babs working as a saleswoman in one of the malls in Ely. And no, I don't know which mall or which store, and according to Connie, Babs was not too forthcoming with what she had been doing since leaving Four Corners.

Nathan asked the next logical question, "Would she have been capable of killing my mother?"

Swallowing her cookie, Angie laughed. "I guess I haven't been telling this right if you have to ask. Honey, we were all capable. When Landon and Cassie married, we all stepped aside, but none of us left town. We stayed, ready for him to notice one of us, if something ever happened to Cassie. Even Amy would have ditched Curtis in a heartbeat if Landon curled his finger at her... We waited with bated breath after Chris was born for them to divorce. They were not the perfect couple that I am sure you have heard about. As soon as she got her son home, Cassie had a meltdown to beat all meltdowns. It wasn't her usual explosion. It lasted forever. If it hadn't been for the wreck, it might still be going on.

"She called us crying, saying Landon was looking at other women. She claimed that he was disgusted by how much weight she had gained. That he never helped her with Chris, while at the same time, he was too focused on Chris. She had her good days when she was back to herself, but then something would set her off.

"At the time, I was finishing nursing school. I had finished my coursework and was planning for my life after graduation day. I was engaged to be married, and to save money, I moved back home with my parents while my fiancée finished his last residency rotation. Anyway, I ran into Landon at the Grille. He had his baby with him, and I asked about Cassie. I was young and thought I knew everything. I had previously diagnosed her to my friends as suffering from postpartum depression. When Landon brought up Cassie, I told him the same. I told him that a lot of women suffer from being overwhelmed with a new baby and the hormones in their bodies readjusting to life after pregnancy. I told him to give her time."

"Then there was the wreck, and we all witnessed how lonely Landon was and figured he would choose one of us to replace Cassie."

"Even you? I thought you were getting married."

"Byron and I fought one night. He grabbed some clothes and stormed out. I knew he would cool off and we would talk it out. Four days later, he was in his own wreck. He didn't die. His car didn't catch fire, but he was lost to me. He was left with an SCI and is a paraplegic. Most of my salary goes to his care in a nursing home. I would take care of him myself, but he doesn't want me around. The rest of that story is: I told everyone I got divorced and moved back in with my parents."

"I am sorry."

"No. I don't want your sympathy. I am telling you this for a reason. You wanted to know why I was angry with your mother getting involved with Landon. It wasn't as much as your mother taking up with Landon as it was Landon taking up with your mother. It was as though he had forgotten about Cassie. He was here every day while she lay unmoving in the burn unit, but he forgot her the day after he buried her... One time, one time only, he called me saying that Cassie was haunting him, that he was sensing her presence in the house. It was about ten months after the funeral, and he had already taken up with Rosie Wilmington. The whole town was gossiping about it. I told him what he was

sensing was his guilt for taking up with a woman like Rosie. I told him that if he was that lonely and desperate for someone to replace Cassie that he needed to pick a better class of woman. I told him that it was shameful for him to carry on with her. It was as though he had forgotten about Cassie. He hung up on me, and we didn't talk again until after your mother died. I had started working for Dr. Nelson, and he brought you boys in for a check-up. Landon was polite, but he wasn't friendly, and that was the way it stayed between us.

Angie sighed and took a large gulp from her tumbler. "The whole point of what I have said is to tell you that while your mother was a lovely woman, she was an outsider. A lot of folks thought Landon got involved with her too soon after Cassie's wreck, and others were baffled by his choosing an outsider. People thought he should have waited longer before getting involved with your mother. He should have honored Cassie longer."

"What about Rosie, Buck's mom?"

"People understood that a man has needs, but Rosie Wilmington worked in a bar; she wasn't wife material, not for a man like Landon. Now go. I've got to go in early and need some sleep."

Nathan had so many more questions, but he sensed that for now, Angie Delaney had said as much as she was willing to say. Still processing what she had said, Nathan went on autopilot to say the pleasantries that polite society expected him to use: Thank you for talking with me, Thank you for the vodka and Oreos. Thank you for sharing Trish Ferguson's history. He did not thank her for the disrespect to Buck's mother. When he told his brothers about what he learned, he'd leave out that bit, but he suspected Buck was fully aware of Angie's attitude.



Angie listened to the sounds of Nathan walking down the hall towards the elevator. Then she turned off the living room lights and watched him drive off into the night. Once she was sure he had left, she reached for her phone and punched in the numbers she'd memorised long ago and had intentionally never saved to her contacts. The woman she called waited through four rings before finally picking up the phone.

"I don't know what you did this past weekend, but one of Landon's sons came to visit me this evening. He had questions, and he had pictures of you in some of your various disguises... Yes, they are quite clever disguises... You are not taking this as seriously as you should... I am telling you, they are hunting you. One of them you could evade, but they are not hunting alone like Landon was. They are hunting as a pack. You need to think of them as a wolf pack. You need to leave Nevada... I don't care where you go. I don't want you to tell me... Please, do as I am asking and leave.

"Why am I telling you this... I don't know... You are my friend, and I don't want to see you in an institution again, which broke my heart... Why do I help you? You ask me that every time we talk, and every time, I answer you saying that I failed you the first time you came back... What should I have done then? I don't know. No. I do know. I should have called Landon. Together, he and I could have found a way to help you... Sometimes, when I think back, I ask myself what would be different about my life if I had slammed the door in your face when you knocked on it all those many years ago... Maybe, Byron and I would still be together. Maybe I would have my house and a white picket fence surrounding the house. But even if Byron and I didn't make it as a couple, at least he wouldn't be lying in a bed in a nursing home waiting for someone to come wipe his bottom because he is tired of smelling his soiled sheets. Maybe when he looked at me, I wouldn't see his hate... Do I blame you?... That is the first time you have ever asked me that question. Before I answer you, tell me: Did you tamper with his brakes?... What do you mean, you don't remember... It was a long time ago, but you know, I wake up and remember that the man I loved will never run again. He will never dance with me again. Hell, Byron can't feed himself. He can't even wipe his own butt.

"Yes, I am crying... I spent the first year of my marriage deceiving my husband because you asked me to keep your existence a secret from everyone... Why did I do that? I love you, that's why. The thought of you being locked up in an institution has kept and still keeps my mouth shut...

"Let me ask my next question: Did you kill Clara? Did you murder the women in Lincoln's life?"

Her question was answered with the silence of a disconnected call.

She slid off the couch, landing on the floor with a thud. Tears rolled down her face, soaking her scrub top. She tried to tell herself that she hadn't known and she hadn't, but she had suspected. She had suspected who was behind her husband's wreck and who was responsible for Clara's death. Each month, when she sent a check to the nursing home for Byron's care, and every time she sent one to the insurance company to cover the life insurance she had taken out on herself, to cover the cost of

caring for Byron, she wondered. Who was responsible for her husband's accident? she would ask herself, but she never allowed herself to answer. If she had, she would have had to admit her own culpability.

Laughter fought with her sobs. It had started because of her pride. She had thought she could keep her friend safe. Instead, she had allowed a monster to run free. The likely reason the killings had stopped was that someone else had seen the monster and had institutionalized her. Pity they had released her.

She, Angela Denise Delaney, was the one who should have stopped the monster, Waldo, they called her. She should have, but she didn't have the strength of character to handle the fallout. She spent the next hour tidying up the place as best as she could before getting her insurance documents out of the filebox in her closet. She set it on the coffee table, crossing her fingers that half a million would be enough to take care of Byron. She sat on the couch and looked around, making sure that everything was as neat as she could make it. She picked up the gun she had bought for protection when a series of burglaries had plagued her apartment complex a few years ago. Staring at it in her hand, she reminded herself that she was going to Hell anyway.