



Maude and Eddie
Chapter 6 of Rooting Out Evil
Part 3 of The Seven Brothers Saga



"Got a minute?" Nathan felt he should have been surprised to hear Buck's voice, but he wasn't. However, he was surprised JD wasn't with him. Buck had announced at breakfast that he was taking JD to Doc Anderson's to see Jack.

"No, not really. We are slammed this morning, Buck. I have seven more patients to see before I can break for lunch."

"One minute, two at the most." Not taking no for an answer, Buck grabbed his arm and pulled him into the exam room Mrs. Hall had just vacated. Figuring it would be quicker to listen to Buck than to explain to him that the reason they were slammed was that the front office staff had spent yesterday reworking his schedule so he could join his brothers in Vegas.

"I dropped JD off at Anderson's so he could get Jack settled. The whole ride there, he kept apologizing to Jack for leaving him after we just got him home. He was worried that Jack would think we were abandoning him. I tell you, it took a lot to convince the boy that he was projecting his issues with leaving Jack on the poor dog. Told him to tell the dog that he was going to have the time of his life and that Leigh would play with him and take him for walks."

Nathan sighed. He didn't have the time for one of Buck's tales, so he decided to nip it in the bud. "Boarding him at Anderson's place is a no-brainer. He is still healing, and we know he will get good care."

"JD knows," Buck left it at that, but Nathan hadn't seen JD as he frantically searched for, as JD put it, a T-shirt drenched in his sweat that Jack could curl up with, and know he was not forgotten. When Buck reminded him, they would only be gone for a few days, JD gave him a look that said he thought Buck had been born stupid, but he only said dogs did not have calendars. Deciding he couldn't

adequately argue that point, Buck kept silent as JD gathered chew bones and dog toys. After a quick call to Josiah, JD included one of the shoes in Josiah's closet in Jack's backpack. Josiah had directed him to a pair in the bottom of his closet that, judging by the numerous holes and the shoe's missing tongue, Jack was well acquainted with. Finally, JD declared himself ready to take Jack.

"So what do you want?" Nathan asked as he quickly glanced at his watch.

"The Caddie is being tracked, so we need a reason to go to Elko. We'll be going in the wrong direction if we pick up the judge at Evie's sister's place. We can't take the risk of having the judge meet us anywhere near Four Corners or Eagle Bend. Not if we are keeping his and Miss Evie's not hoarding the cruise ship a secret." The Judge hadn't explained why he and his wife had decided to remain on land, but when he called Nathan at the clinic a couple of mornings ago to catch up on what was going on with their plans to meet Maude, he volunteered that he and Miss Evie were at her sister's house. He had wanted to know what he could do to help.

Nathan nodded his agreement. When Chris had returned the judge's call, using a pay phone in Eagle Bend, Orrin said he wanted to be there, to see if Maude was the woman he remembered. They agreed to pick him up so he didn't have to drive to Vegas by himself, but hadn't thought through the logistics of picking him up in Elko without giving themselves away. "Have you got a plan, then?"

"Told you, Nate, my reading all those spy novels would come in handy one day."

Nathan looked at his watch; he really didn't have time for one of Buck's convoluted stories.

"You keep talking about getting a car, but you haven't done anything about it."

"When-"

"No. I am not blaming you. I know the hours you've been working. I just thought we could stop at a dealership or two in Elko and see what they have."

"I thought I would buy locally," Nathan protested, even as he considered Buck's idea; it was brilliant.

Hearing Nathan's protest, but witnessing the change in Nathan's eyes when he realized how perfect the 'misdirection' was, he added, "We are just looking, we don't have to buy anything yet. I might look around for something for JD to consider. I promised the kid I would help him find something that would be better than what he was driving in Boston."

Reaching for the exam room's door, Nathan turned, "When you go to Eagle Bend to call the judge, be sure to ask him what kind of snacks he wants for our road trip. We probably won't have time to stop for lunch."

"Got it. Refueling and bathroom breaks only."

Nathan walked out, almost bumping into Sandy, who was waiting to clean the room before the next patient. She didn't hear his apology; she only had eyes for Buck, blushing when he used her name when greeting her as he exited the room.

Not that he was looking. After all, he was happy to have Raine in his life, even if they were pretending to put the brakes on their relationship, but it might be nice to have a couple of women fawning over him instead of being forced to watch every woman in the world throw herself at Buck. Was that how it was for his father? By the time he had begun noticing the opposite sex, his father had quit dating. He supposed he could ask Orrin, but talking to the man he considered an uncle about his father's love life was downright creepy. Besides, he and Buck needed to keep Orrin from talking about anything important while they were in the car. He learned a lot about his father when listening to the tape. Maybe, in this meeting with Maude, he would learn more about the kind of man his father was.



"Feeling better?" Josiah asked as Vin climbed into the passenger seat.

"I feel incredible," Vin answered as he rolled his shoulders. The stiffness that had been building up over the last few days of sitting behind the wheel as they trekked across Texas. "I tell you, Josiah, there is nothing like a good massage to get rid of all the aches and pain caused by sitting for so long." He wasn't exaggerating. Traveling long distances was hard on his back under the best of circumstances, and the past few days could not be considered the best of circumstances, not even close. He had set out on this quest to fill in the holes. He wasn't even sure his memories of his mother were his memories or things he made up in his head; the things he imagined her to be. Spending time talking about his mother with the detectives who investigated her murder had led to conversations with the friends and co-workers who remembered Cady Tanner. He had even sat down and heard about her through the eyes of the lowlifes she had brought to justice. The words, the memories they all had shared, helped

paint the most complete picture he had ever had of his mother, but filling in the blanks combined with the confined spaces of the truck had left him barely able to get out of the motel room's lumpy bed that morning. Luckily, Josiah had been able to find a masseuse willing to see him that morning.

"Does your back always give you that kind of problem?" Josiah asked. Vin's struggle to get out of bed had seriously scared him. He had wanted to take his brother to the nearest hospital, but Vin had insisted that all he needed was a couple of beers and a massage, so he had used Vin's computer to locate help. Judging by the way Vin had walked to the car, he was feeling better. Reaching into the grocery bag behind Vin, he pulled out a beer and handed it to the man sitting in the passenger seat, and waited for Vin to answer.

Taking a long draw from the bottle, Vin twisted his upper body from left to right and back again before answering. "When I don't move enough, it does. Runnin' helps. So does goin' to the gym and workin' out." He finished his beer and easily twisted around to get a second beer. "Want one?" he asked, even though Josiah was sitting in the driver's seat.

Josiah pointedly looked at the steering wheel and raised his eyebrow to question whether Vin noticed they were in a truck and needed to hit the road if they planned to reach Vegas in time for the meeting. If he could tell himself he was the designated driver, he could ignore the calling of the beer. "I'm good. I'll drive; you can navigate."

"I 'preciate it. I'll finish this one. After we get supper tonight, I'll drive until we find a motel. With luck, we should get to Vega tomorrow night."

Unwilling to let go of Vin's back problem, Josiah asked, "Have you seen a doctor?"

"Yeah. A while back. There isn't much of a cure except for exercise. In case you haven't noticed, there aren't any gyms in Four Corners, so I have tried to get my runs in... the cold doesn't bother me, but the ice does." He grinned, "That last cold front came through and left ice on the road. I hit a patch and came close to landin' on my face. Decided that knockin' out a couple of teeth was not a good look for me, I make a point of doin' some calisthenics when it looks to be icy."

"Smart move," Josiah said with a grin.

They rode in silence for a half hour before Josiah said, "We need a home gym. With all that money we are inheriting, I think we can find a spot to build a gym."

Seeing the serious thought Josiah was giving to the idea, Vin ventured, "Do you like to work out?"

Working out was a way of life when I was in the military. I looked better and felt better than I ever had before; I never viewed it as a hardship, so after I left the military, I kept it up... Doesn't have to be anything fancy; a couple of treadmills and some weights should do the trick."

"Heck, Josiah, if we are goin' to do this, let's do it right. We need a basketball court, at least a half-court."

"A putting green would help my game. I saw something like that when I was doing pediatric counseling. The boy lived in a monster of a house, and hop, skip, and a jump on the other side of the garage was a gym. It had a full basketball court, a putting green, a room for weight lifting, a treadmill, a rowing machine, and that was just the start. The kid's father had made his money playing sports. Had big plans for his son to follow in his footsteps."

"Did he?"

Josiah carefully chose his words before he answered, "No. The boy and his mother were in an accident when he was twelve. That big, beautiful gym became a place for him to learn to walk with a prosthetic."

"You were there to help him get over losin' a leg?"

"No. His father was doing a good job with that. I was there to help him get over losing his mother... I could relate."

Once again, they rode in silence until Josiah said, "I really liked their gym. I never thought I would be in a position to have something like that, so I put it out of my mind."

"Sounds like somethin' worth plannin' for. It appears we will have the money. The only problem I see is gettin' Chris and Buck to agree to give up some pasture land for the gym."



Crossing his arms across the steering wheel, Mitch Harris leaned forward in his seat and watched from his patrol car as Chris Larabee drove two of his brothers out of town. With two of the brothers somewhere in Texas and two others checking out car dealerships in Elko, the whereabouts of all of Landon's boys were accounted for. For the moment, he did not have to worry about their safety, but he

had the feeling that when they returned from their family vacation, they would not be bringing back cute stories about their trip. Those men had not left for a fun-filled family getaway, but to strategize. None of them had shared with him their need to plan, but he could read people.

He also knew that somehow Judge Travis's so-called cruise was connected, as was Molly Kincaid's decision to pull her sons out of school and move with her husband to wherever. He had dropped in to say hello when he saw her taking personal items to her car. On the surface, her explanation of Martin being needed at his company's headquarters and her decision to join him rang true. Husbands and wives, as close as they appeared to be, would have a hard time dealing with a months-long separation. He had believed her explanation and wished her well. Then, a car on Main Street had backfired, and for the briefest of moments, real fear flashed on her face as her eyes darted to her sons sitting next to a couple of boxes, checking on their safety. It had been the briefest of moments, but the more he reflected on it, the more he realized that she was leaving town to protect her family.

It all fell into place. Evie Travis had not entered a contest and won a cruise. That was the judge moving her to safety. He wondered if the judge planned to return to Four Corners any time soon. Taking a long, hard look at the road to the north, he decided that the judge had taken Evie to her sister's home. If memory served him right, and it usually did, Evie Travis had once mentioned that her sister and brother-in-law lived on the outskirts of Elko. The judge being in Elko would explain why Buck and the doctor's sudden interest in looking at cars in Elko, when several closer dealerships, albeit smaller ones, were closer.

He hadn't realized the importance of the visit then, but Vin Tanner had come in a few weeks ago to see him. At the time, Vin claimed he was there to ask what progress had been made in the investigation into the attempted murder of his brother, Nathan. It had surprised him to see Tanner; he had expected Chris to be the one coming in, demanding answers. He had quickly realized that Chris had delegated Vin to this particular fact-finding mission, and seeing that he didn't have answers, he was glad the quiet-spoken brother was the one talking with him.

He hated having to do so, but Mitch admitted there wasn't any, and then shared the steps he and his deputies had taken in their attempts to discover the identities of the men behind the doctor's attack. Tanner had not reacted. Nodding his head as though he was absorbing the information, he had, almost casually, said Ezra had come close to dying in the same hospital in which their father had passed. He made no accusations and pointed no fingers. Instead, the two of them sat, locked in his office, discussing the similarities. He even called Ray Benson and asked him to repeat what Landon said when they talked about Holland's death. Tanner ended the meeting by saying that he found it difficult to believe in coincidences. He agreed with the young man, but refrained from adding the information about the dead rabbit.

He told himself that he had kept quiet about it because he didn't want the brothers jumping at shadows, but from what he had seen of them, he didn't think any of them were the type to jump. At the time, he figured Landon had been the victim of a horrible prank, but subsequent events had shown him the more likely explanation was that it was a warning Landon had not understood or had chosen not to heed. Mitch could honestly say that he, himself, hadn't known what it meant, but after Chris had been shot, he mentioned the dead rabbit to both Ezra and Chris. Neither brother had seemed surprised by the information, which caused him to believe they had found the notes Landon reportedly left hidden in his library.

It wasn't a humorous situation, far from it, but the lengths the brothers were taking to hide their true motives for running off to Vegas brought a smile to his face. Ezra let it slip at the barber shop that they were going to Vegas for the weekend. Buck had spoken to the Yosemite brothers about checking on things for them while they were in Vegas celebrating Ezra's clean bill of health. JD made arrangements for Jack's boarding at Doc Anderson's. Then Chris took Miss Nettie to Walmart and pushed her buggy around the store as she gathered the few things she might need that weekend. By nightfall, everyone in Four Corners knew the brothers were going to Vegas to kick back and relax.

Some folks remembered how Landon had, from time to time, taken off for Vegas. Those people shook their heads and muttered things such as 'the apple hasn't fallen far from the tree'. Others took it a step further and speculated as to which of the brothers would return to Four Corners with a wife. Most people said something along the lines of 'Good for them. Time for something good in their lives. Those were the people who recalled how recently Landon Larabee had been buried and recognized that Chris, Buck, and Nathan were still reeling from the loss of their father. Jimmy Ganton, from First Trust and Savings, had, on purpose or accidentally, mentioned that Mr. Standish was paying for their trip using stocks he had cashed out.

Everyone in town had an opinion about the brothers' Vegas excursion, but the sheriff doubted that anyone other than him saw it for the ruse it was. If he were a gambling man, and he wasn't, he'd bet every penny he had that they were leaving town so they could plan without the chance of anyone overhearing. He knew, without a doubt, that Landon's sons had learned something.

When they returned, he would watch them. He would help them if they needed his help, and with luck, he would keep any act of retribution they might enact within the confines of the law. His gut wasn't wrong. They were hunting.

Long ago, when he had worked undercover in L.A., Mitch Harris learned to depend on his gut, counting on it to tell him when something was off. Three times in his life, he had not listened to his gut and ignored the wrongness he felt.

The first was when he was working undercover in L.A. He had felt, deep in his gut, that something was off in the behavior of one of the men guarding the shipment of drugs. He had felt that he had worked too long trying to find the information he needed to put the men in jail. He told himself he was sure his cover was intact. He was right, his cover had not been blown; one of Carlos's men had gotten greedy. By the time the shooting was over, seven had been injured, and his partner lay dead. His marriage had not survived the guilt he felt, nor had his job. Coming to the small town of Four Corners might have looked like a step backward on his career path, but he never regretted the move. He only hoped he would one day sleep through a night without being awakened by a nightmare.

The second time he had ignored that feeling was when he saw the dead rabbit. He had discovered the scratches on the lock and had brought in people to dust for fingerprints. When they had not found any that they couldn't account for, he was at a loss as to what to do next. Part of him let the investigation grind to a halt because he believed the beast would have stopped anyone foolish enough to try to harm Landon. He told himself that since no fingerprints were discovered, the trail was dead. He was still unsure of what further steps he could have taken to uncover the identity of the man who had left the rabbit. He knew, though, in his heart, that by not finding the culprit, he had failed Landon.

The third time he had not listened to his gut was the day he informed the Marks family that Junior's body had been recovered, and he used the word suicide. Every member of the Marks' family quietly fell apart with his use of that word. They used it to define their grief. Not one of them had been acting. Their tears were real, of that he was certain. The pain and sorrow of their loss hung heavy in the air, strangling them all. Their efforts to remain composed nearly made him doubt his instincts; they were truly devastated by the news of Junior's apparent suicide. His gut kept nagging at him, saying there was more to the story. He had spent hours looking for a possible motive as to why anyone would kill the man, but his delving into the Marks' family finances had revealed nothing. The hours he spent interviewing neighbors, employers, and clients had also not uncovered a motive. He had nothing on paper to say that his gut was right. The coroner had declared it a suicide. His opinion that Junior's death was suspicious was nothing he could act on, especially when the only reasons he had to back his opinion were that his gut said there was more to the story and that Junior was related to Chris Larabee.

He had gone to the funeral as a matter of courtesy. He kept his eyes open, searching for any clue that he was correct in his suspicions of the family's involvement in Junior's death. As the mourners filed away, he put his hat back on his head and gave the grave site one last scan before he left. He almost missed it, but he witnessed a look between Jason and Garret that he could only describe as relief. The exchange had lasted only the briefest of moments, and no words were used, but there was relief in their eyes. Of course, they could have been relieved that the funeral was over. Or, given the rumors that Curis suffered from Alzheimer's, they could have been relieved that their Daddy had kept his wits throughout the solemn occasion. Or they could have been relieved that Joan had not interrupted the funeral with demands that Junior be buried closer to her home. But having seen the relief in those two sets of eyes, he couldn't ignore it. He promised the memory of the man he had barely known that he would keep digging. After all, his gut usually had it right.

The one time his gut had failed him was the fire that claimed the lives of Sarah and Adam Larabee. He had been out of town when it happened, so maybe he should not feel as though his gut had let him down. His ex-wife had been in an accident at the time of the fire. Seeing that he was still her emergency contact, he had been the one the hospital called. He had taken a leave of absence and spent ten weeks getting her back on her feet. The two of them had played house, in part to get her well and in part to see if there was anything left of their relationship they could salvage. When she recovered enough to go back to work, they realized that although they would always be friends, there wasn't enough left between them to salvage what they once had. He had returned to Four Corners.

When he resumed to his position of sheriff, he reviewed every incident from parking tickets to prepoof theft, then to the report about the fire. His gut had not warned him of anything that would make the fire a murder scene and not a tragedy. That had been his feelings then. Now, he had to consider the sheer number of deaths and near-death events associated with the Larabee name. he needed to reexamine the fire. The fire department's investigation had not uncovered anything that pointed to a deliberate act of murder. Maybe, if he had been there to see the faces of the men and boys who fought the blaze or if he had witnessed the bodies being brought out from the ruined house, his special powers would have been activated, and he could have begun a proper murder investigation. He would reopen that investigation.

Then, he had to assume that Landon and Holland were murdered, no matter that Landon had supposedly died of a heart attack, and Holland's death had been declared a suicide. He also needed to look at the attack on Nathan as an attempted murder and not a failed robbery. The same went for Standish's experience of being given the wrong medicine in the hospital. Had that been an honest mistake, as those people anxious to sweep the incident under the rug claimed? Or, had it been an attempt to murder Standish? He and his deputies were working to determine whether unruly teens were responsible for the incident at the ranch, or if the courageous Jack had prevented someone from killing two of Landon's sons.

With every fiber of his being, he knew Landon's sons were targets. No doubt the brothers felt the same and were not in Vegas for fun and games. They were working on finding the evil targeting their family. For their sake, he prayed he would find it first.



Listening to his brothers' chatter only closely enough to interject the occasional comment to prove to 'the Listener' that he was still in the car, gave Chris time to reflect on the upcoming meeting in Las Vegas. Not the meeting with Maude. If she wasn't Ezra's biological mother, she had a lot of explaining to do, and if she was ... well, she had a lot of explaining to do. He wasn't sure what she had done; JD was remarkably closed-mouthed concerning his and Ezra's talk. But she had done something which caused JD's hands to clench into fists whenever her name was mentioned. The kid needed to learn not to let things get to him before he ended up with high blood pressure or something equally as bad. He could hear Buck's voice in his head: 'Now, Chris, there is no need for you to go and teach him how to throw temper tantrums.' He didn't scort at the thought, but it was a near thing. Buck, even the imaginary one speaking in his head, was right. There was only room enough for one tantrum-throwing son of a gun in this family, and years before JD was born, he had chosen to be it.

He didn't mean to complain about JD, and he shouldn't get into the habit of calling him a kid. No matter how young he looked, he kept proving himself to be a man. Not just a man, but one who wore courage like other people wore coats. Chris had not missed the way JD had kept watch while they talked at Doc Anderson's clinic. No one had asked him to do that, the ki- the young man had done that instinctively. According to Josiah, JD was the consummate performer, keeping his charade of being an empty-headed kid going throughout the computer store and even in the parking lot. He had kept up the act even though he spotted someone watching him. That took a lot of nerve.

From his first day on the ranch, JD had shown a willingness to tackle any job that needed to be done. No matter how dirty or how tired he was by the end of the day, he demonstrated every day that he took the work seriously. As far as Chris was concerned, JD's work ethic was enough to earn him the right to be called a man. Sure, he made mistakes; they all did, but JD learned and never made the same mistake twice. His ability to learn spoke volumes to his intelligence. His intelligence, his work ethic, and his courage were all admirable traits, and any one of them alone was enough to mark him as a son of Landon Larabee. The trait that Chris admired the most, though, was his compassion. He genuinely cared for people. It could be argued that Buck had that kind of compassion, and to an extent, Buck did, but Buck remembered people and knew how to talk with them. JD felt for them. JD was the only reason Ezra had stayed.

When he had been blown up at Ezra, JD had stepped in and convinced him he was a part of the family. He didn't know what words JD used, and he suspected he never would, but somehow the ki- the young man had kept Ezra from leaving.

He hoped JD's compassion would correctly interpret the emotions in the meeting he truly worried bout- the one with Tommy Botello. Three scenes kept repeating themselves in his head, fueling his concern.

The first occurred before Vin and Josiah headed out for Texas. The brothers met in the barn supposedly to check on and then admire the new foals and their mothers, but after Vin and Buck had swept the barn for bugs, the subject became serious.

It hadn't been cold in the barn. Built to last generations, the wind picking up outside did not reach them, and more importantly, the brutal wind didn't touch the new mothers or their babies. But it wasn't comfortable either. No matter how relaxed their father had looked sitting on a hay bale in the video he left them, sitting on hay was not the same as sitting on a couch or a recliner in the living room. However, they all agreed that meeting in Vin or JD's room became claustrophobic when they all crowded in. So the barn it was.

"I reckon it will start to be suspicious if we all stay in here for more than ten or fifteen minutes, so we make it quick." Realizing how easy it was to lose track of the time when making plans like these, Chris turned to Nathan and said. "You're in charge of watching the time."

Nodding, Nathan glanced at his watch. "I'll let us know when we have two minutes left."

"Ezra, can you talk to your Mother?"

"I will call her, but Mothuh gets invited places. More than likely, she will answer, but it will be when she is ready and not a moment before."

"And she won't come here?" Chris asked, even though he knew the answer.

"Too this backwater? No, the thought of a meeting with wealthy men will be the enticement she will most likely respond to."

"So, we need to book rooms for Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights." Chris, mentally, began checking the ranch's bank balance.

Knowing Chris had his eyes on a bull from Micky Stiles' herd, Buck interrupted Chris's calculations to remind them all that Tommy Botello had offered them rooms as well as the use of a conference room free of charge.

Chris was the only one who noticed Ezra's reaction when Botello's name was mentioned. Perhaps, because he knew of Ezra's history with Botello, he had caught the oh-so slight flinch when Buck brought up Botello. Before he could offer an alternative solution, Ezra was speaking.

"As generous as Mr. Botello's offer is, Ah do not believe that we should take him up on it." Holding up his hand to forestall both Buck and Vin's comments, he continued. Our listener may be checking the ranch's account to see how much money we spend on the trip. Ah suggest, Ah pay for it."

"How?" It wasn't Chris who asked, but Josiah.

"Ah have stocks that Ah will cash out." Seeing the looks of disbelief on his brothers' faces, he explained. "Ah know, Ah have expressed a certain reluctance to access the money my stocks represent, but Ah know mah mothuh. She will find this little scheme we are concocting more believable if she believes Ah have invested money with these very wealthy gentlemen. She can't touch mah accounts, but Ah live in reality and Ah am sure she has found a way to see how well they are doing."

"We can be honest, use our money, and tell her we are the wealthy men. I mean, we will be." JD spoke from his place near the open barn door.

Ezra sighed, chewed on his bottom lip for a moment as he sought the words he needed to use to explain Maude. Catching Nathan trying to look at his watch without appearing to do so, he jumped into the deep end of the pool and began talking. He hated talking about her, but they needed to understand. "Mothuh lives off the money othuhs have earned. She would nevuh do anything so crass as to steal, but Ah guarantee you, if she believes you have money, she will find a way to leave town with it. Chances aruh, she will have it spent before you even miss it. In many respects, Mothuh is a remarkable woman, but she is rathuh mercenary."

"It is settled then. Ezra, arrange for our rooms and get your mother to Vegas. Since you are paying for it, you can shop around for the best deal." Chris spoke up before Ezra felt the need to confess the reasons behind his reluctance to involve Botello. Exposing his mother's faults had been hard enough on Ezra without asking him to share more of his past; Ezra could do so when he was ready.

Ezra appreciated the out that Chris was giving him, saying he didn't have to stay at Botello's establishment. He studied the floor for a moment. He desperately wanted to go anywhere other than the site of his greatest humiliation, but P. stood for practical. Ezra Practical Standish needed to put aside his feelings for the sake of the con. "Mr. Botello's resort is one of, if not the finest, in Vegas. Knowing we are meeting there will impress Mothuh and increase the

likelihood she will come. She will be angry when she discovers that Ah interrupted her excursion in Paris to question her. She will think of the money she will not be leaving with, and no doubt, she will go to the casino to target some poor man with money.”

The meeting in the barn told Chris that Ezra planned to stay, at least until the end of the year. It also went a long way to explain the ease with which Ezra was able to forge his name on a check to take a significant amount of money. Ezra hadn't just forged his signature; he had spun a tale believable enough for Jimmy to fall for. After listening to Ezra's cautions about his mother, Chris was willing to bet money that Maude had taught her son those skills. A woman who would do that to her child was not the woman he remembered Maude to be. However, it did explain the empty safe...

The second scene or memory he wanted to examine was the night Maude disappeared with Ezra. Whenever he remembered the night when they came home to an empty house, he always focused on how inconsolable his father had been. After listening to Ezra talk about Maude, he wondered if he should have focused on the empty safe. What had been in the safe? He remembered his father telling the sheriff that some money had been in it. He never said how much; instead, he kept reiterating that she had taken his son. He wanted to ask his brothers what they knew about what their father kept in the safe, but to the best of his knowledge, his dad hadn't used the safe after that night.

Glancing at his brothers in the truck with him, he remembered to ask JD what features he wanted in a car. When JD began describing what he wanted, Chris returned to his thoughts about the night Maude left with Ezra.

It was a given that his dad had money in the safe. The question became how much? His dad, like many ranchers, liked to cut deals with a handshake and make payments with cash. He overheard Maude and his dad discussing the expansion of the herd. If he had only bought a few head, Chris doubted there would have been a discussion. But as he concentrated on recalling the days surrounding Maude's leaving. He remembered walking into the kitchen. His dad and Maude had been talking, with Ezra in her lap, playing with a yellow school bus. He had pulled a chair beside Maude and let Ezra crawl into his lap. Seeing that her son was in good hands, Maude had turned her attention to the papers in front of her. Maude studied the papers, and his father had said... he had said, 'Your Mother is calculating, son. She is adding and subtracting all in her head. I have to have paper and pencil, but I will bet that she will teach you how to do it in her head, if you ask.'

She looked up at him when his dad called her his mother. She smiled and whispered, 'Do you mind?' He mumbled something about thinking of her as his mom. She started crying, and his father handed her a napkin to dry her eyes. When she had wiped her eyes, she grabbed him and pulled him close, squishing Ezra between them. She kissed him on his forehead and whispered, 'Thank you. I promise you I will be the best mother I know how to be.'

Nathan had run into the kitchen to join them, and the papers on the table were forgotten until the babies went down for their naps. Later, he had strolled back into the kitchen and heard Maude say, "It will be tight, and we will have to postpone the kitchen renovations for a while, but I think you should do it. The price sounds high until you consider that the herd will almost double in size.

Doubling the herd. That was a significant amount of money. If she was as mercenary as Ezra claimed, had she viewed the money in the safe as her get-out-of-jail card? Was it her chance to leave the ranch? He had a hard time wrapping his head around that thought. He couldn't reconcile the woman who cried at the kitchen table with the woman who had taken the money. After tussling with his memories as he tried to make sense, Chris gave up and ruthlessly shoved them back into the corner of his mind where they belonged. He would wait to hear Maude's explanation.

He moved on to the third scene he wanted to examine. The scene of Ezra convincing his mother to leave France and come to Vegas to meet wealthy men began with watching Ezra as he explained to the reservation clerk (and to the 'Listeners') his decision to host a small family gathering at her resort. He told the woman the dates he needed and the rooms he wanted. When she\

While talking to the reservation clerk, Ezra had been smiling. His eyes twinkled. For someone who had refused to touch his 'portfolio' of investments when pursuing Timothy Moore and had squawked in protest when Vin requested that he help Miss Nettie, he was gleeful ...that was the most accurate word Chris could come up with. What had changed? He wanted to say that hearing the tape from their

father had changed Ezra's mood, but he didn't think that was it. Ezra had been quiet, worrisome quiet after listening to Landon talk.

It wasn't just Ezra who was quiet. They were all quiet as they processed the disturbing things their father had shared. There was no doubt in any of their minds that their father had been murdered, as had his detective. Chris had grown up with Nate and Buck and knew the minute their minds had moved from the possibility of murder category to the definitely murdered one. Buck's mind changed the moment Travis revealed the conference room in his office had been found to have a camera in it. Even after watching the video, Nate fought the idea of murder. He had trouble processing the fact that someone had wanted their father, their mothers, and Holland dead. You could see the question Why? as plain as day on his face, and he could not come up with a reasonable answer. Then on Sunday, he remembered the coffee.

Now, Nathan was ready to dig up both their father and Holland. He had spent Sunday evening in the library making a list of the various poisons which could account for their father's and Holland's deaths, and be difficult if not impossible to detect during an autopsy, and circled them in red. Then, he divided the list into three columns. In the first column, he wrote the 'exotics'; the poisons that only the truly knowledgeable murderer would know how to use and how to obtain. The drugs that were readily available at a pharmacy, Nathan listed in the second column. A person would need a prescription for the drugs, and anyone getting a prescription filled locally would be easy enough to track down. He reserved the final column for drugs, routinely used in a hospital or in a doctor's office. He wrote a long explanation about how drugs were supposed to be tracked in a hospital, but unless they were a narcotic, missing medications were too often attributed to the mishandling of paperwork. In his last paragraph, he wrote that he doubted they would find any trace of any drugs in their father's or Holland's bodies. He wrote the list because writing helped him feel as though he was doing something.

Chris hadn't grown up with Vin, but learning that the matching bullets proved that the same rifle used to kill his mother had also been used in the murder of the interior designer had been enough to convince him of the certainty that their father had also been murdered.

He wasn't sure exactly when Josiah had been convinced, but had caught him staring at a framed photograph of the man when they came home from the Travis's dinner. He had turned when Chris walked into the library, which allowed Chris to view Josiah's thoughts. His eyes burned with the fury and the promise of revenge.

On the ride home from the judge's home, JD had been still, looking out the window. Not talking as he mulled over what he had seen on the tape. When he exited the truck, he paused, turned around, and caught Chris's eyes and mouthed, 'We need to find the son of a bitch. He had slowly, angrily formed each word so Chris could clearly read his lips in the light coming from the porch lights.

So, when did Ezra decide their father had been murdered? It may have been when they first talked about it at Inez's, or when he realized he, too, may have been targeted in the hospital. It didn't matter. He didn't think Ezra's desire to see his father's murderer brought to justice was why Ezra had orchestrated the plan to get his mother to Vegas.

Ezra cashed out his investments and then used the money not only to purchase his mother's plane tickets, but to pay for their rooms in Vegas. Chris felt he knew Ezra's generosity was not due to a burning need to find Landon Larabee's murderer. His actions were due to his desire to uncover his mother's true identity. Was she the woman his father loved, or was she an actress, out to steal as much as she could from Landon Larabee? As far as Chris was concerned, both roads would lead to answers. It didn't matter why Ezra was participating in the hunt. What mattered was that he was not only participating, but he was enjoying it.

Whatever caused Ezra to smile, it was there, and he was glad to see it. Even being shot at had not diminished his enthusiasm. But that enthusiasm was almost lost with one phone call.

Josiah and Vin left for Texas. Then Nathan left for the clinic. Buck and JD ate dry toast for breakfast before leaving, taking Buck's truck to meet with the Yosemite brothers. The brothers knew almost as much about the Double L as they did about their own spread, but Buck wanted to make sure they knew which mares were still due to foal, and made sure they knew that Jack was out of commission and that they needed to watch for coyotes targeting calves. Privately, Chris figured that Buck was tired of being in the house where he had to watch everything he said or did, and wanted to go somewhere he could jaw about what was going on around town.

Ezra walked into the kitchen and took the calendar off the wall. Holding it in front of him, he made his first call of the day. The reservation clerk at Botello's resort was well-trained. She enthusiastically agreed that a family trip to the resort to celebrate Ezra's return to good health

was exactly what the doctor meant when he recommended a vacation in the lap of luxury. Somehow, she managed to maintain her flirtatious demeanor while flirting outrageously with Ezra. They had both been laughing when she turned her attention to the dates Ezra said he needed. Then she turned serious.

"I don't know Mr. Standish... You are not giving me much of a heads-up. I have four single rooms with king-sized beds on the seventeenth floor, and I can give you two rooms with two queen-sized beds on the ninth floor, but all my suites have been booked. And I am sorry, I do not have any available conference rooms for the next three weeks."

Chris was impressed with how much regret she poured into her voice and began signaling Ezra that they would take whatever she could arrange for them. Ezra shook his head no in reply to Chris's gestures and spoke into the phone, "No, sharing rooms will not work. We have tried that, and Ah learned mah brothuhs snore. We each need our own room. Moreover, while we primarily plan to see a show ot two and to win outrageous amounts in the casino, we need a conference room as we will be discussing family business. Additionally, mah mothuh will sulk if she does not have a suite that meets her standards. While mah mothuh is known for her good breeding and her charm, she can be a bitch when she feels slighted. Frankly, this family vacation does not need that kind of energy.

"I understand, Mr. Standish, but I don't have anything available," she again tried to explain.

"Ah understand what you are saying, but Ah will hold while you talk to Mr. Botello concerning our needs. Ah am sure he will make something available for Landon Larabee's sons." Holding a hand over the phone's mouthpiece, Ezra turned to grin at Chris. "Want to pour me a cup?"

Matching Ezra's grin, Chris did as he was asked and walked over to the table with two cups in his hands. "You're spending quite a bit of money."

With a nod to the phone in recognition of their Listeners, Ezra said, "Indeed, Ah am, but it is mine to spend."

"Still."

"You helped me with Timothy Moore. See this as mah way of saying thank you for such an elegant solution. Besides, it's not like Ah will inherit a sizeable chunk of change in a few months. Mr. Botello inferred he was a good friend of Landon Larabee. This is as good a time as any to see if he was."

"She might be speaking the truth. They may be full," Chris warned.

"Mr. Larabee, Ah take it you did not grow up in casinos."

"And you did?"

"Yes, suh, Ah did. They always keep rooms reserved for the unexpected and important guests." Ezra's attention returned to the woman's voice on the phone.

"Mr. Standish, I talked with Mr. Botello. He asked me to assure you that what you need will be available to you and all members of your party."

After hanging up with the reservation clerk and then calling an airline, Ezra started trying to reach his mother. It had taken numerous attempts, but she finally answered. Chris had been frustrated, almost growling when she did not pick up, but Ezra merely shook his head and said, "She won't answer until she is good and ready. The trick is to keep calling until her curiosity kicks in. We need her to be curious about these men I want her to meet."

Seeing the smile plastered on Ezra's face as he talked with his mother had been enlightening. At first, he thought that Ezra enjoyed speaking with his mother and thought maybe he truly missed her. That belief had lasted about forty-five seconds. Ezra, realizing that Chris was hovering, had winked. It was a conspiratorial wink that said, I have piqued her interest by calling. Now I will reel her in. Ezra was enjoying his conversation with his mother, but not because he enjoyed hearing from her, but because he was manipulating her into dropping everything and heading to Vegas. He was enjoying every moment on the phone.

When Ezra hung up, Chris raised an eyebrow. Ezra's smile, if possible, grew larger as he explained, "Mothuh likes to believe she can manipulate anyone, me included. You cannot begin to imagine how satisfying our conversation was. She walked into my trap with so little urging."

"So, you are sure she is coming?" It had seemed too easy.

"The lure of money is a great motivator," Ezra didn't provide any more of an explanation; he sat looking smug, basking in the glory of outsmarting his mother.

The moment was shattered by the phone's shrill ring. Still smiling, Ezra picked it up and

said, "The Double L, may I help you?"

When the smile fled Ezra's face, Chris reacted. His hand hovered over the speaker button. He wanted to know who was on the other end of the line, but was unwilling to invade Ezra's privacy without permission.

Ezra straightened in his chair and a smile snuck back on his face, but Chris recognized it for what it was, a fake. Ezra placed a smile on his face in the hopes it would reach his voice and that none of the venom he felt leaked out. After a moment of listening, Ezra ended the call by saying, "Thank you. Ah appreciate your help."

"Your mother?" Chris asked.

"No, it was Mr. Botello, saying he was looking forward to meeting his friend's sons." He changed the subject when Botello's name was mentioned, or he plastered on his fake smile. He wouldn't change their reservations and insisted he felt no qualms about the possibility of running into the man.

Now, he was in the car, explaining the fine art of winning at blackjack to JD and to their Listener. To anyone unfamiliar with Ezra's history with his mother and with Botello, he might appear eager to see his mother and thrilled to stay at Las Vegas's most glamorous resort and casino. Chris knew better. Ezra was walking into the home of a man who had once declared him an enemy. On top of that, he would learn whether his mother was his biological mother or a kidnapper. Chris did not know which would be worse. He suspected Ezra did not know either.



Chris smiled, shook Botello's hand, and introduced JD and Ezra. JD's eyes were saucers as they darted from the ornate fixtures in the lobby to the doorway leading to the gaming tables. Ezra kept a smile on his face when he shook Botello's hand.

To most observers familiar with Botello's habit of greeting guests, nothing looked amiss. Still, Chris saw Ezra flinch when Botello threw his arm across Ezra's shoulders as he offered to show them around. Unsure of how he should handle Ezra's distress at being in such proximity to Botello, he decided that Ezra was an adult and more than likely would take offense if he played the hero riding to the rescue. He would pretend to be interested in the tour Botello was conducting, but he would be ready to step in if needed.

Chris listened to Botello as he showed them various dining options, shops, and the paths to the shows the resort was currently hosting. Reaching into his jacket pocket, Botello retrieved tickets to the Cirque de Soleil and passed them to JD. On the surface, Botello appeared to be the friendly manager welcoming important guests, but aside from handing the tickets to JD, Botello's tour was for Ezra's benefit. Sure, he included them all as he talked about the things to see and do in the casino and resort, but the timing of his stops concerned Chris when he realized that every stop was directly in front of a discreetly placed camera. Once or twice would be a coincidence. Five or six times was deliberate.

Chris was stopped from commenting when he saw Ezra's face. The fake smile plastered on Ezra's face when he had begun the tour had transformed into a genuine one. Forty minutes into the tour, they stopped on a balcony overlooking the multiple rows of brightly lit slot machines. Botello released his grip on Ezra's shoulders. He took a step away from the brothers and turned to face the trio of brothers before he began speaking.

"Ten years ago, Mr. Standish brought me a complex review of the state of the security here. Instead of listening to him...instead of taking the time to review the report he placed in front of me, I rudely dismissed him. I saw his youth and his name, and I made a snap judgment. Later, I found myself flipping through the report. I had not intended to do so. I planned to throw it away without reading it, but I dropped it, and the page that opened was the one on which you had made changes to the lighting in the parking garage. It was a little change. We only needed to move a handful of lights on three floors, but I immediately saw that in making those changes, the lighting in the structure would increase almost exponentially. The architect didn't see the problem with the lights. The builders hadn't seen it.

"I had trouble believing a kid could walk into a parking garage and see the difference moving a few lights would make. I told myself your catching that design flaw could have been a fluke, but when I read the report, I saw it wasn't. I called in my security team, and we spent the next month analyzing your recommendations. Then we began implementing them. Every new person we hire for security is required to read your report.

"Not hiring you on the spot was my greatest managerial mistake. I could give you all sorts of reasons for my behavior, but I was the one in charge, and I failed my guests, my employees, and the

shareholders when I did not hire you.”

He sighed and looked out onto the casino floor, and then turned to face the brothers. “This business of me offering to help. I hope you understand, Mr. Standish, that my offer was not due to my friendship with Landon Larabee, but because I want to make up, in part, for my actions ten years ago.” His eyes were fixed on Ezra, waiting for his judgment.

Ezra stepped forward with his hand outstretched and said, “Call me Ezra. Mr. Standish is too formal for friends.”

Chris sighed. He was relieved at how things worked out for Ezra and for their plan. It would have been a real bitch if they had been forced to relocate this close to Maude’s arrival. Part of him, though, was stunned at how quickly Ezra had forgiven Botello. It also bothered him that Ezra had asked Botello to call him by his first name. Especially, given that it had taken ages for Ezra to be comfortable using his brothers’ first names. He wasn’t sure what it meant, but knowing Ezra, it meant something. Later, when this mess they were in was cleaned up, he would ask. For now, he would file it under the mystery that was Ezra.



It hadn’t been an argument, but only because everyone was leaving the decision as to who was best suited to play chauffeur to Ezra, who was easily eliminated after he explained that his mother would, more than likely, be impressed if so-called investors sent someone to meet her at the airport. He knew the route and could easily navigate the traffic, but she would bombard him with questions regarding the investors she was to meet, and he was worried that any prolonged questioning would tip her off to the ruse.

Chris quickly eliminated himself. No one bothered to ask him for an explanation. The set of his jaw and crossed arms told his brothers not to press him on the matter.

Like Chris, the judge was quickly dismissed as a possible candidate. Orrin was a smart and well-respected lawyer, but if the rumor mill had it correct, he was a poor driver. Sure, he handled the traffic around Four Corners with ease, but the traffic of Las Vegas was an entirely different matter. Landon loved to share stories about Orrin getting lost and choosing to drive aimlessly in circles rather than stopping and asking for directions. He would never be able to pull off impersonating a chauffeur. Plus, she might recognize him.

Sitting around their supper table, the brothers had batted possibilities back and forth before Ezra spoke up. “Even if Mothuh believes that one of you is the chauffeur sent to pick her up, she will turn on her charm. If either Buck or Josiah plays the role of driver, she will have you wrapped around her little finger by the time you pull away from short-term parking. By the time you pull up in front of the casino, she will have the true story of why she was invited to this meeting of wealthy men.”

Chris didn’t bother to question Ezra. He said, “That leaves Nathan, Vin, and JD.”

Ezra’s eyes examined Vin’s, Nathan’s, and then JD’s face before choosing. “Mothuh will view Nathan and Vin as young, but she will do her level best to bewitch you into revealing your secrets. It is risky. Ah think JD will be the better choice. Mothuh will view him as being too young to know anything about an investment group. She may not even talk with him.”

“The Cadillac doesn’t have GPS, and I don’t know where anything is in Vegas. I will probably get lost.”

Relieved that the possibility of his being chosen as Maude’s driver had been taken off the table, Vin solved JD’s problem. “I will put an app on your phone that will act as your GPS.”

“If you comb your hair like you did on our trip to Ely, you can erase a few years from your age. If you do get lost, you can beg her not to get angry with you. Tell her that being a chauffeur is a new job.” Josiah advised.

“Tell you what, JD, when we finish here, I will show you how to get to the airport. We have time before it gets too late to take a couple of practice runs.”



“Yes, Evie, we got here last night... It was late and I didn’t want to wake you...I’m sorry...I understand you worry... Yes, my room is nice, very nice... Ezra cashing in those stocks of his to get us the rooms makes no financial sense, but it was a generous thing to do... You are right. He did it to thank his brothers for taking care of him... Yes, to celebrate their being a family... Yes, riding with Nathan and Buck is quite an experience. Nathan shared what I am sure he thought were amusing stories about working in the ER at his hospital in Birmingham...No, he did not bring up his grandparents... Buck?...

Buck told genuinely funny stories about the ranch... No, he did not mention Landon except for a story about Jack chewing up one of Landon's boots... No, you need to get Buck to tell you about it because I will butcher it... No, I haven't seen her yet. JD went to meet her at the airport... Yes, he had a little sign with her name on it... They decided to send JD because Ezra said that she would expect a driver... I agree Josiah would have been the logical choice, but Ezra said she would have Josiah wrapped around her little finger five minutes after they left the airport... Mr. Botello made a point to meet us in the lobby and to introduce himself... No, I don't think it was at all suspicious behavior. According to Vin, Botello makes a habit of greeting guests... We are being sneaky... As soon as I eat, I am going to disappear into a crowd to watch a show... You are right. I will find out the name of the show... I am meeting one of Botello's security people, and he will be taken to the private conference room Mr. Botello uses when he has staff meetings... I guess the others are taking similar precautions." Orrin crossed the room and pulled open the curtains, flooding the room with sunlight. "Say hello to your sister for me... I love you, too. I will be home soon."

He hung up and, after kicking off his shoes, lay back on the bed. He wasn't worried about wrinkling his clothes; he was in the khakis and the plaid shirt Evie had laid out for him, claiming they would be perfect for traveling in a car, as in so many things, she was correct. Paired with a clean shirt, they were also perfect for exploring the resort. He then called room service to ask for a ham and cheese sandwich. After eating, he would change into the black suit he had brought with him for the meeting. He chose the suit, thinking it would be appropriate if they learned that the Maude Standish, who raised Ezra, was not the same Maude Standish who gave birth to him. If she wasn't, then, more than likely, the Maude he had known was dead.

He rolled over and looked at the bedside clock. Landon's boys planned on getting lunch after Maude arrived and settled into her room. They had asked him to join them, but as much as he enjoyed the trip down, riding with Nathan and Buck, he had too much to think about to go to lunch with them and their other brothers. He wished Evie were with him; he wanted to compare her memories of Maude with his one more time. Landon remembered Maude as having brown eyes, but Ezra claimed her eyes were blue. He wanted to agree with Landon and say, yes, her eyes were brown, but was he being influenced by Landon's words from the grave? The uncertainty gnawed at him, adding to his already heavy heart. He and Evie spent the last several days talking about her. Evie remembered she had dimples; she said she remembered the dimples because she had been a 'a tad bit jealous' of them.

They both remembered her hair, long, thick, and a rich brown which, when in the sun, took on a red hue. He remembered her laugh when she chased Landon's boys, and their son Stephen, around the yard. Between the two of them, they recalled many times being with Maude and Landon, but while they agreed on her hair, neither of them could say if she had blue or brown eyes. He hoped his identification of her did not depend on this 'Maude' having the right color of eyes. The need for validation of his memories was becoming unbearable, threatening to consume him.



Ezra caught JD's eye and nodded as his brother jumped out of the car, ran around it, and opened the door for his... he didn't know how to think of Maude Standish. She had always claimed to be his mother, but now he was questioning the veracity of her ownership of that particular title. Certainly, it could be argued that she had done little to justify his calling her mother. Still, for now at least, he had a certain responsibility to her. He stepped through the electronic doors and strode briskly toward Maude. Taking one of her bags out of JD's hands, he glanced into the trunk and grimaced; as usual, she had overpacked. Gesturing to the porter waiting nearby, he wordlessly helped him load her luggage onto the cart. Handing the man a generous tip and the key card to the room he had secured for his mother, he said, "Thanks."

"Mothuh, you aruh all set," he turned to her and used the appellation he normally used when addressing her. "Ah took the liberty of ordering you grilled salmon; unfortunately, the shrimp and grits dish you would have preferred is not up to your standards. Room service should deliver it in forty-five minutes. That's enough time for you to get settled in and to freshen up. We aruh to attend a meeting in the conference room on the fifteenth floor. Mr. Lev Reuben will be at your door at ten minutes til two. He will escort you to the conference room. For now, go, eat, and rest a bit. Ah appreciate your coming. Ah know you must have had a tiring trip." He punctuated his words with a quick peck on her cheek. "Ah will see you shortly." He made a shooping motion with his hands, his eyes widening in surprise when she did as he directed. He knew, then, he had given something away.

Maude turned to look at her son, wondering what he planned to do. Nothing in his manner overtly worried her, but she could feel an undercurrent of anger emanating from him, making a lie of the smile

he had plastered on his face. Who did he think he was fooling? She was the one who taught him the importance of hiding his feelings behind a smile when in dangerous territory. What was he planning, and did it mean danger for her? She had never felt threatened by her son, but he barely concealed his anger. Most people would not see it, but she had raised him and recognized the fury in his eyes. What had she done to warrant his animosity? Surely, he wasn't angry about handing over his cash to Timothy Moore. That was months ago. Besides, the moment she walked into the room with Dear Besotted Timothy on her arms, she knew Ezra recognized the con she had played. She had trained him to disappear in situations like that. It was his fault that he had lost his winnings; he waited too long to leave.

"Of course, I will be ready, dear. You did say this would be a lucrative adventure. I will see you in a bit, then." She curved her lips up at the corners and made sure the smile was accompanied by the crinkling of the corners of her eyes and a slight tilt of her head. To any passersby who bothered to look, her face would appear warm and loving. She thought, 'Two could play this game of deceit' as she walked into the lobby, her heels clicking on the marble floors, and the porter trailing with her luggage.

"Everything OK?" Chris asked, dropping his hand on his brother's shoulder. He missed seeing the woman get out of the car, but he heard the exchange between Ezra and Maude. He wasn't sure if he recognized her or not. She was older, of course, and he wasn't sure how much of the changes he was noting were due to the thirty years since he had last seen her. Or if she was a different woman entirely. She was undeniably beautiful, but the woman he remembered would have looked out of place wearing the expensive, designer suit. She had the same build, but she moved more slowly, more deliberately than the woman he had called mother. That could be due to her age, though. Her hair was cut short and blonde, not long and deep brown. The shape of her face was the same as the Maude he remembered. But that was as far as he could go with his comparison. He hoped the judge had a better memory than he did.

Turning to face his brother, Ezra considered the question. Looking over his shoulder at the path his mother took, following the bellhop to the elevators, he answered, "She knows something is up."

"Will she bolt?" Chris asked. After all the trouble they had gone to arranging this meeting, she had best show up for it. She had questions to answer.

"No. She is curious, and if she has a weakness, it is her curiosity."

"JD will have the car turned over to the valet and be back here in a minute. Hungry?"

Ezra thought about the question. He wasn't really, but he hadn't eaten breakfast, and there was no telling how long it would take to get their questions answered. He couldn't have a growling stomach interrupting the proceedings. "Sounds like a plan."

Chris took his buzzing phone from his pocket and answered it. "Yeah...OK... Nathan grabbed us a table at that bistro down the street. Says to get JD. He'll call the others, and we should meet him there."



Orrin sat at the table, listening to Chris and Nathan in the hall. For Landon's sake, he had agreed to accompany his sons to this meeting with the woman Ezra believed to be his mother. Examining the room, he considered getting a cup of coffee from the buffet; he wanted something to do other than sit and think about the meeting. 'It's been thirty years since I saw her. I do not know if I remember Maude enough to be sure that it is her or if she is an impostor. There are consequences if I am wrong.'



Meeting his mother as she exited the elevator, Ezra took her by the arm and escorted her to the conference room Mr. Botella arranged for them to use. Chris and Nathan pushed themselves off the wall as they neared the room and followed them in. Orrin was already sitting at the table. Chris pulled a chair out beside him. Placing two empty chairs between Chris and himself, Nathan reserved seats for Buck and Ezra. Whatever this meeting uncovered, Ezra was sure to be affected, and Chris wanted him seated near him in case their younger brother reached across the table to strangle Maude.

Looking around the table, he worried that JD would be the one to leap across the table to attack Maude; the kid knew something that he hadn't shared with the rest of them. He caught Josiah's eyes, and with a slight nod of his head, he indicated that Josiah needed to keep an eye on the youngest. At least, he hoped Josiah had correctly read his warning. Chris and Buck both could read his looks, but Josiah was a new brother, and he wasn't sure; Josiah read everything he said when he nodded his head toward JD. He looked around for Vin and found him waiting by the door, pulling it closed when everyone

found a seat. With a chair reserved for Ezra beside Chris, the remaining chair was next to Ezra's mother. Nathan suspected Vin planned it that way.

"Let me introduce you to the gentlemen. Ezra went around the room, giving his mother each man's name. If Maude was surprised to find her chauffeur sitting across from her, she did not react. Nor did she react when he introduced Chris Larabee. Ezra found himself marveling at her control. She should know the Larabee name, even if she was not his biological mother.

"A few months ago, we were informed that we, except for Judge Travis, of course, are the sons of Landon Larabee. We find we need to talk with you." Ezra pulled out the chair, stood behind it, and gestured for Maude to sit. He stepped closer to the older man sitting at the table when she complied. Turning to watch Maude's reaction, he stepped nearer to the judge. "Judge Travis was a close friend of Landon Larabee and knew Maude Standish. He paced the hospital halls alongside Landon the night Ah was born. Seeing as how he and his wife were friends with both Landon and Maude, Ah would like to ask him a question. Judge Travis, can you tell me if this woman is mah mother?" Ezra spoke to the Judge, but his eyes were on Maude.

The man, her son, identified as Judge Travis, moved towards her, and Maude turned in her chair to observe him. He took a full minute to scrutinize her face, comparing the woman sitting at the table with the memories of the woman he had known thirty-plus years ago. Finally, he had his answer and turned to Ezra, rage competing with confusion on his face. "I did know Maude Standish, and this woman is not her," he announced to the room.



Maude nodded, slowly processing the reason for her son's demand for her to meet with him in Las Vegas. "I suppose you want an explanation." She spoke without a trace of her normal Southern accent. Most people found her accent charming, but this was not a time to act charming, and she suspected these men would not be susceptible to it. There was an undercurrent of hostility in the room, and she could feel it directed towards her. From the youngest to the oldest, the faces of the men her son called his brothers were hard and unforgiving. She wanted to run and hide, but the time to run was over; this was her time to be fearless.



Swallowing hard, she met the Judge's eyes and began. "You knew Eddie Holt, Edwina Ann Holt. My sister." Maude glanced up at her son; he was the only person in the room who needed to understand, and he was not looking at her; she hoped he was listening. She closed her eyes and steepled her fingers, resting her chin on her thumbs, covering her lips with her fingers, as she considered where to begin. She realized she looked as though she might be praying, but she had given up prayer almost thirty years ago when she secured weights on her sister and dropped her into a swamp to become alligator food. Another time and another place, she would have used that perception of piety to sway their opinion of her. This was not the time or place to misdirect anyone. This was the time and place for honesty.

"I understand; you want me to be succinct, to tell this story in a few words. I can't do that. This is a multi-chapter book, a chronicle, if you will. It will be hard to hear. It will be equally hard to put into words, much harder. I need to tell the story without interruptions. If I stop to answer your questions, I am unsure if I can start again. Do you understand? I will answer any questions after I finish." She spoke for Ezra's ears but meant her instructions for all the men, with their carved in granite faces, sitting around the conference table.

"All of our lives took a path different than what we expected and planned for when I answered the phone on April 23, 1993. It was my sister, Eddie. She said, 'I am scared.' Eddie, saying those words, terrified me. More than any words I have ever heard before or since, those three words sent chills up and down my spine. You see, Eddie, my sister was only one year older than me, but for all her life, Eddie had looked out for me. She watched over me, making sure I had no reason to be scared of anything. Eddie never knew the meaning of fear. She was St. George, fearlessly slaying dragons for me. 'Do not worry,' she would say. 'Don't be scared, I am here. I will take care of you. I will make sure nothing will ever hurt you.' It didn't matter who or what I needed protecting from; she was ready. She would pick up her sword and shield and battle whatever dared frighten me. Eddie was absolutely fearless, utterly fearless.



Vin straightened in his chair beside Maude, tilting his head so he could better see her as she spoke. While listening to a person's words was necessary, words told only part of the story; their body language told more. Maude held her head high as though challenging them to doubt the truth behind her words, but from where he sat, he could detect the stress she felt. It showed in her hands, held in her lap with her fingers tightly intertwined, her nails perilously close to breaking skin. At this point in her story, she was speaking the truth. More importantly, she used the word 'fearless' in her description of her sister.

In using that word, she could have been talking about his mother. He ran the interviews he and Josiah had conducted all over Texas through his head. Trying to scrounge up more information on his mother than the police report contained and the detectives looking into her death remembered, he and Josiah had talked to his mother's former neighbors and clients alike. The common thread among the answers they received, once they finished telling him about his mother's beauty, involved words similar to fearless, such as courageous, gutsy, daring, and bold.

A man who sang her praises was a recently released from jail bank robber. His mother, apparently, had been hired by a bank to find the thief and the bank's money. She had tracked him down and turned him in, with a severely broken arm, to the authorities (who had been hunting him for six months), along with the money he stole. When he and Josiah had arranged an interview with the felon, Josiah told him not to expect much information about his mother, saying the man was bound to be bitter after spending much of his life in prison.

The recently released reprobate surprised them both by appearing to be saddened on hearing of Cady Tanner's long-ago death and by his willingness to talk about the woman who caused him to be incarcerated. He told them that she was not only 'purty as they come', but she was also 'smarter than the average bear' and 'spunky'. 'Few men would have been willing or able to follow my trail when I took that bank's money. I had a reputation for being dangerous, and most folk were leery of crossing me. Hell, if my reputation stopped her. If I had to be caught, I am proud to have been caught by Cady Tanner. See this,' he showed Vin and Josiah the scar on his upper arm. 'I pulled a blade out when she showed up at my door, and she kicked me twice. The first time she kicked me, my knife went flying. She shattered my arm with her second kick. The bone was sticking out, and the pain knocked me flat on my backside. She sure was something. With a mom like her, you probably had no choice but to grow up to be a man most anyone would be proud to have at their side. I know, I would have had a different life if I had someone like her directing my actions. I could have been an honorable man, not an ex-con who can't get a job better than a fry cook at a cheap diner.

Even though he had objected, at first, to Josiah's decision to accompany him as they ran around Texas, talking to people who had known his mother, Vin was now thankful. He could compare his thoughts on the woman his mother had been to Ezra's mom and see if Josiah agreed; his father had a type. Information like that should be factored into the profile of his father to help them unravel the mystery of the deaths of all those women he had loved.

For now, he would sit back and listen to Maude. See if he could pick up anything else. He snuck a look at his brothers sitting around the table listening to Maude. Ezra had not settled in his seat next to Chris; he hovered, moving between the door and Maude. Chris wore his I-am-in-charge look; his eyes darting from Maude's face to Ezra's face.

JD, surprisingly, sat still; the kid never sat still, but in this hour, he was unmoving, although he figured his other brothers could feel anger boiling up in the kid, ready to erupt, and like a volcano, an eruption could have devastating results. Nathan and Josiah were keeping an eye on him. Good. Buck was attentively listening, but his arm was ready to block Chris if Chris decided to forgo his I-am-in-charge mode and leap across the table to strangle the woman. He turned his attention back to the woman.



"I told her, Lucy and I were on our way, and hung up without asking any questions; I had a sick premonition of what she would tell me and cursed Landon Larabee under my breath. Lucy didn't know Eddie; she became my roommate after Eddie moved in with Landon, but she owed me a favor and owned a car.

"Before I tell you about the events of that day, I want to tell you about Eddies and explain why her words made me panic.

Maude sucked in a deep breath and slowly released it. "Eddie and I were born a year apart to Lynne and Leon Holt.

“Chapter One of this tale is all about Pa. Leon Holt was the younger son of a local farmer. His brother, Uncle James, was five years older, and Aunt Mattie was their little sister. Most of the boys in our whistlestop town did not finish high school. They either joined the military as soon as the army would take them, or they dropped out of school to help on the farm.

“Pa was an exception. He finished school, and then he joined the army. The way Eddie figured it, Uncle James was going to inherit Papa Holt’s farm, so Pa had to do something different with his life. He left as soon as he had a diploma in his hands, joined the army, and roamed the world. One of the things that made Pa unusual or different than the other boys who left was that he returned. After twenty years in the service, Pa retired from the Army and came home to find a plot of land, a wife, and the recognition he thought he deserved.

“You see, Pa was tall, taller than almost all of the men around. They had to look up at him when they talked with him, but he wanted them not to look up, not because he was tall, but because they believed he was special. After all, he had seen the world, and most of them hadn’t even seen the state capital. Coming back home, to our whistlestop town, gave him the feeling of importance he craved. Meeting Ma gave him the wife and the plot of land he desired.



“Pa first saw Ma when she was walking home after school one September afternoon. He was thirty-eight when he went to her father and asked for her hand in marriage. He had a vision of Lynne Higgins as the future mother to the sons he craved, sons who could work alongside him in the fields. He also saw Lynne as the means to get farmland. Papa Higgins had two daughters, and with practically no chance left of having a son, he had decided to divide his land between his girls. Aunt Doris had already married and was pregnant with her second son when Pa asked for her sister’s hand in marriage.

“Papa Higgins viewed Pa as an outstanding catch for his youngest daughter. He saw a tall, handsome man with broad shoulders. He and Mom-mom Higgins thought that since Pa had graduated from school and was talking about using the GI Bill to go to college, he would be going place and take Lynne with him; he would make a wonderful husband. So, they enthusiastically agreed to Leon marrying their fifteen-year-old daughter. They sweetened the deal with the promise of leaving him a hefty chunk of their farm when they passed.

“You are probably cringing at the thought of Pa marrying a child. In this day and age, it would be a scandal, but at that time, in Whistlestop, many old men married young girls. You see, in a town as small as Whistlestop, the mortality rate for women dying in childbirth was high. The bereaved widower would bury his wife and child; then he would start looking for his next wife. If he had small children at home, he needed a wife to care for them while he worked the land. If there were no children, he needed her to produce sons, so he would have workers to help him, and when he died, he would have sons to inherit. If you look at this through the town’s eyes, you will see it as practical.

“I don’t know what Ma thought of marrying Pa. She never said. I do know three things. One, Pa ruled the roost, and as far as I know, there was only one time that Ma challenged him on anything. I remember him coming into dinner and curling his lips in distaste at what she had cooked, and her jumping up to fix him something else entirely. I remember her getting up every morning to starch and iron a clean shirt for Pa to wear while tending to the critters. I remember her standing beside him, with her hand lightly placed on his arm, when they bumped into other women at the store to claim him, you see. She did everything in her power to keep Pa happy.

Maude ticked off the things she knew with her fingers, now unclasped, “Two, a row of graves for the daughters who did not live more than a couple of days after being born. There were a lot of dead babies, and even though they were dead and buried, they played a role in our lives.

Three, Pa had a disagreement with Ma’s father, and the promise of him inheriting land was rescinded. Pa cut ties with Papa Higgins and Mama Higgins; he was outwardly polite and respectful when we were out in public. We lived within spitting distance of them, but we didn’t see them except at church. After the service, Papa Higgins would shake Pa’s hand as they walked down the steps, and he’d say, ‘Mighty fine sermon, Leon.’ Then he would peck Ma on her cheek, and they’d leave.

“You may be wondering about Pa being a preacher. He wasn’t, but he knew the Bible backwards and forwards. What he read, he remembered. When the preacher, whom we shared with two other churches, didn’t make it in time for service, Pa would stand up and deliver his just-in-case sermon. If he had ever gotten around to using the GI Bill for schooling, he would have become a preacher, I think. He certainly had the voice for it, and he was a true believer. His belief kept him strong when life threw things at him.

"You see, Pa wanted sons, and Ma didn't produce any. She tried and failed. Time and time again, she failed. She had tried twelve times by the time she was thirty. By the time she was forty, Ma was old; being used as a broodmare makes a woman age before her time. All those pregnancies and only two daughters to show for it. Each time she became pregnant, Ma would be hopeful and start knitting a blue blanket in anticipation of the son she would deliver. When she birthed another daughter, she would see the disappointment in Pa's eyes, and she would apologize. A couple of days later, she would find her daughter cold and dead in the crib Pa had made in anticipation of his son. She would weep, give the new daughter a name, and then wrap her up in the blue blanket. Pa would break up the crib for kindling, and she and Pa would spend the evening planning the funeral.

"Pa never blamed God for his lack of sons or the abundance of burial plots next to the ones reserved for him and Ma. He said the Lord was testing him as he had Job, and like Job, he would praise the Lord's name, no matter what test his Lord put him through. Instead, he would say he had been blessed by his angel, Edwina. He called her that, all the time, and never me.

"Before I begin Chapter Two, may I have some water?" Maude waited as the son with the graying hair stood up and went to the buffet in the back of the room, loaded with chilled water and juice, as well as delicacies for the room's occupants to nibble on; she wasn't hungry and was thankful when the man did not prepare her a plate. She thanked him for the water, poured it into the glass he brought, took a sip, and began.



"Chapter Two. We lived in a no-name town in the foothills of the Appalachians. As much as Pa liked to talk otherwise, the hollow in which we lived was unsuitable for large-scale farming. We did have a large garden, which we shared with Aunt Doris, and in the summer, she and Ma would spend the morning shelling peas, making apple jelly, and freezing or canning whatever else had been picked. All the while, Pa took care of the animals and the weeds in the garden.

"Years ago, I looked up synonyms for town, trying to find one that accurately described the place in which Eddie and I grew up. The best I could find was whistlestop. The train ran across Main Street every day at 2:30. It would slow, and you could hear the whistle all the way to the school playground; the teacher would say it was time to go in and get ready

to go home. Whistlestop was so small, that the train would never stop, only slow a bit.

"We had on our farm a flock of twenty or so chickens, a boar, a sow, and, at any given time, a handful of cows. We were so poor that calling us poor would be aiming high. Our old, ramshackle house had a front porch, a living room, two bedrooms, and a back porch where the water pump was located. We had electricity, but we didn't have indoor plumbing, heat, or air. During winters, we had the coal-burning potbelly stove in the living room and the stove in the kitchen to keep us warm. It took Eddie and me both to fill and carry in the coal scuttle every morning. In the summer, we used handheld fans to keep cool, and Ma tried to keep her use of the stove to a minimum.

"Ma used her egg money to help with the bills and then took a job at the local grocery store. It was not much of a store, not by today's standards, not even when measured against other small-town stores. It served our town well, though, with its stack of bags of flour, sugar, and beans. Eddie would help her after school when Ma was in a 'delicate way', while I read the comics at the front of the store. Casper was my favorite.

"Saturdays were special. Ma had the afternoon off, and we would all walk over to Miss Durham's house. She would fix Ma's hair while Pa would cross the street to Mr. Jerry's barber shop, where he would spend fifteen minutes getting his hair trimmed and the next two hours pontificating; Eddie's word, not mine. I never used it; it would have earned me a smack for having a smart mouth, but Eddie could say it because she was Pa's angel. I think he pretended not to hear her. At times, Eddie would cross the street to listen to him, and she would say, 'You know, Maude, he made real sense today.' Other times, she would just shake her head.

“On Sundays, we’d get up early to bathe before church. Ma would heat water on the stove so Eddie and I could wash our hair. Ma would braid it, and we would put on the thrift-store dresses she had repurposed for us. Church was a couple of miles away, and we’d walk in the fall and spring, but Pa would get his car and drive us when it was too hot or too cold to walk. If it was a light rain, we shared umbrellas, but if it was storming, Pa would drive. There was no parking lot, so we had to get there early, or we would have had to park in the ditch and climb the hill. I liked climbing the hill because other kids would be there, and we’d play chase until the preacher or Pa would ring the bell to come in. We’d race in so we could get one of the pretty fans to keep us cool. After the service, we’d go to the graveyard so Ma could talk to her dead babies. She would cry and tell each one she was sorry. Winter was much the same, except we didn’t play in the cold, and Pa would hurry Ma when we paid our respects at the graves.

“Like I said, Ma had a baby every year or so, and I suppose all those babies died because she didn’t take vitamins or didn’t have the prenatal care like women are supposed to get. One night, though, Eddie and I were outside catching fireflies when she pulled me over to sit under our climbing tree. She asked me if I thought Pa drowned all those babies because they were girls and would have been one more ‘useless’ mouth to feed. I didn’t think he had, but there were clues we followed that said otherwise. Every grave was that of a girl child, and Pa hankered for sons. He regularly drowned the puppies our hound hid in the barn, and as soon as he found where Mama Cat hid her kittens, he would drown those, too. He told us we didn’t have the money to feed them and that ‘they were ‘useless mouths to feed.’ I like to think those babies died of natural causes, but once Eddie put the idea out there, it would not go away. Sometimes, I would wake up at night, worried he would come to drown me because I hadn’t done all my chores, but Eddie would say not to worry; she would keep me safe.



“She was like that. When I was too old to use the chamber pot at night, and Ma told me to go to the outhouse, Eddie would jump up and walk with me. She promised me that if I held my breath, I wouldn’t notice the smell, and if I fell in, she’d get me out.

“When Pa’s sister, Aunt Mattie, got kicked in the head by her milk cow, he took both the cow and Aunt Mattie in his brother. Uncle James claimed to have no room for her at his place. He made Pa angry when he said that, but Pa put a bed in the living room so she could be around us. The cow put her in the barn so we could have fresh milk. I heard Pa talking to Uncle James; Pa demanded that Uncle James give us the cow as payment for taking in Aunt Mattie, but I think he would have taken her in no matter what because the Bible directed him to do so and because the townsfolk respected him for taking care of his sister when his brother would not.

“It was supposed to be my chore to milk the cow, but after seeing how disfigured Aunt Mattie was and how she couldn’t talk right and spent much of the time lying on her bed, drooling on the pillow, I wouldn’t get near the cow. Eddie said for me to collect the eggs while she milked Brownie. It took me longer to ferret out where the hens had laid their eggs than it did for Eddie to milk Brownie, but, as I said, Brownie scared me. I didn’t want my head kicked in. If Pa knew we traded chores, he never said.

“We were supposed to help take care of Aunt Mattie, too, but I was scared of her. She would reach out to touch me with her long, bony fingers and ragged nails when I tried to feed her. I was frightened because she looked like the witch in the story of Hansel and Gretel, which Mrs. Brooks read to us. Even when it was my turn, Eddie would feed Aunt Mattie. At night, when Aunt Mattie had a bad dream and cried out, Eddie would get out of bed and go sing to her until she fell asleep. She would come back to bed and tell me because she knew what I was thinking: witches weren’t real. I’d say, then, why is there a book with one in it? Eddie would pull me close and whisper that if there were witches, Aunt Mattie wasn’t one. She was just an unfortunate soul we needed to care for. She always added, ‘If a real witch ever came for you, Maude, I would beat her on her head with her broomstick. I will always take care of you.’

Maude took a moment to look around the room. She couldn’t tell in those faces if they were listening to her and understanding what she was telling them or if they were only hearing the words. “I want you to see Eddie for who she was. She was ferocious, brave, and loving, all rolled up into one person.

“When Eddie was seven, and I was six, Pa sent us to school. We were in the same grade because Pa had neglected to send Eddie when she turned six. I believe he didn’t know how to keep her out for a second year. Anyway, school changed us. Eddie found the school library and, by the end of

second grade, had read everything in the place. The librarian would drive over to the middle school and bring books back to our school for Eddie. As for me, I liked the bathrooms. 'Imagine,' I would say as we walked home, 'running water, on the inside. I took to asking to go to the bathroom every half hour because I loved flushing the toilet and washing my hands in the sink. It was magical. I had done a quick poll of my classmates, and almost all of them had indoor plumbing, so I became a nag, asking about it every chance I got.

Finally, Eddie pulled me aside and told me to be quiet. She told me there was no money for indoor plumbing because Pa liked to play poker, and even if he had the money, he would not spend it fixing up Aunt Doris's house because she'd kick us out and rent it to some other poor sucker. I asked, but Eddie didn't know what he meant by 'poor sucker'. All she knew was that the house on the other side of the garden belonged to Aunt Doris, as did all the land and the house we lived in. After her husband, Uncle Ralph, fell off a ladder and broke his back, she moved the two of them and their sons, Cal and Archie, into town so she could better take care of him. Pa felt it was a slap in the face; she had not let us move into her house; it had indoor plumbing and a modern kitchen. He resented her for not giving it to him or Ma, saying he did all the work around the place, and she owed it to him.

"The fall, we were eight and nine, our lives changed once again. A carload of women who were traveling the backroads to see the changing leaves pulled into our driveway to ask Ma about her quilts hanging on the clothesline. Ma pulled an armload of her quilts out of her two cedar chests. They bought seven of them for thirty-five hundred dollars. Ma asked Aunt Doris if that would cover putting in indoor plumbing. I don't know if it did or if Aunt Doris chipped in a few dollars, but we had a kitchen sink with running water and a real bathroom. Of course, we had to step out onto the back porch to get to the bathroom, but it was so much better than an outhouse.

"Pa was furious that Ma had sold her quilts for so much money and didn't tell him. Ma got mad. It was the only time I heard her talking back to Pa, but she let him have it. I didn't need Eddie telling me what was going on; I could hear them, even after we climbed out the window to go sit under the climbing tree. I don't know how it ended because I fell asleep, but Eddie told me they were not getting a divorce when I woke up. We had heard about people who got into awful arguments and divorced.

"After that, Ma spent the evenings quilting, and Pa spent them teaching Eddie and me how to play poker. We played for matchsticks, and Eddie rarely lost. She told me she won because she looked into our eyes and could tell what we had in our hands.

"Then, there was the new school; we rode the bus for forty-five minutes to get to school and another forty-five minutes to get back home. High school meant making new friends and hanging out with old ones. It meant football, band, math, science, homecoming, and finals. It meant catching the trains. When we were in the seventh grade and Pa would not take us to the movies because the theater was too far away, Eddie got a hold of the train schedule and she had us chasing the train when it slowed and pulling ourselves into the nearest open car. We'd travel over the river to Big Town, and we'd hop off just before the train pulled into the station. We'd walk to the theatre and watch whatever was showing and return home the same way. She found it exhilarating, and while I was terrified, I couldn't help but follow her. Pa figured out what we were doing and how we were spending our hard-earned money picking produce, but he never said a word.

In eighth grade, she took on the school bully, named Dennis Newton. He was picking on little Tony Jones because he was the only Black kid in our class. One day, she threw her books to the ground and tackled Dennis. He went down, and she started pummeling on him in the middle of the gym, and he couldn't hit her back, she being a girl and all. The coach had to pull Eddie off of him, and when he stood up with his nose bleeding, she looked him in the eyes and said, 'Behave, or next time will be worse.' He believed her and never said or did anything to rile her again.

We loved school, but we adored Mrs. Roland. Mrs. Roland was our home-ec teacher, but most of us were already decent cooks, so she worked on eradicating our 'hillbilly accents'. It wasn't just our accents she wanted to change, but our lives. She talked about a world outside of Big Town and Whistlestop. She opened our eyes to possibilities.

"It probably sounds like we had a terrible childhood, but we didn't. I remember playing fetch with the dog and laughing when Pa joined us in chasing Wendy, our hound, around the pasture. Pa played chase with us, and Ma would sit in the front porch rocker and tell us stories about animals dressing in the latest fashions and talking and acting like people. Pa would sit on the steps, and after saying she should be telling us one of the stories found in the Bible, he would settle in to listen to Ma spin her tale; he even laughed at the appropriate times.

"I know we were loved. Ma would stay up late to sew our dresses, and other kids would ooh and ah when we wore them to school. Pa would show us the flowers in the garden he planted because a garden should produce beauty and not just vegetables. The only time he got mad at us was when we scared him. Like when he got upset with us when we chased the piglets around the farm while the sow would squeal in anger. He'd say, 'That sow is going to bust out of her pen and mow us down. Eddie and I would promise to leave the piglets alone, but Eddie made her promise with her fingers crossed. She told me she looked into the sow's eyes and knew she wouldn't hurt us. Besides, she'd say, I feed Sally and Bert apples and scraps from the supper table.

"I loved the farm. Eddie did, too. She loved the animals and the garden. She would talk about having a garden, but she said she would not plant turnips because turnip greens tasted nasty no matter how they were cooked. She'd say Pa was wise in planting so many flowers because their beauty would help us remember the way the Lord had breathed beauty into the world when he breathed life into the world. Pa made the rows between the vegetables and flowers wide so we could enjoy the garden's beauty without destroying the vegetables. I remember running, climbing trees, catching bugs, and putting them into jars until Ma made us let them go.

"If it hadn't been for Mrs. Roland and her opening our eyes to the world beyond, we would have been content to marry and produce sons for our husbands. But our eyes were opened, and we were changed. We knew if we stayed in Whistlestop, we would be married by graduation to someone Pa chose. So, during our sophomore year, we began planning our great escape. We made lists of careers we could have, and we found jobs around town to fund our great escape. We didn't breathe a word to Ma or Pa because Pa was already planning to marry us off to local farmers, and Ma would have told him of our plans, our dreams. We told Aunt Doris because the dream was too big not to share with someone. "Aunt Doris told us about her sons who had escaped Whistlestop and were living wonderful lives elsewhere. She helped us find jobs and drove us home so Pa wouldn't know what we were up to. She even taught us to drive; Pa didn't believe we needed to know anything about driving. Ma never learned to drive, and since he took her to work on rainy days, she never asked to learn. If she had somewhere to go, he took her, or she walked.

"Unfortunately, while we were busy planning new lives, I discovered boys. At the age of sixteen, I found myself pregnant. I went to Eddie, and together, we went to Aunt Doris. Again, if we had confided in Ma, she would have told Pa, and he would have made me and the boy get married, or he would have disowned me and kicked me out of the house. Aunt Doris arranged for me to get an abortion." Maude kept her voice steady, but she raised her eyes to meet her son's. "It wasn't done in a sterile clinic like it's done now, but in an old woman's house. Long story short, I spent the year helping Aunt Doris at her place while I recovered. Aunt Doris told my folks she had fallen and needed my help, and while Pa fumed, saying she had enough money to hire help, he didn't challenge her. After a month away from school, I went back and finished the year. At the end of the year, Aunt Doris miraculously recovered, and I went back to living with Ma, Pa, and Eddie. Years later, I went to a real doctor, and he confirmed what Aunt Doris had already said: I would never have children. I got over it, but Eddie didn't. She swore she would never sleep with a man unless she loved him, he loved her, and unless there was a ring on her finger.

"The following year, we were getting our hair styled at Mrs. Durham's beauty shop when a couple of the older ladies, sitting under dryers, started talking about us. They said we were more attractive than any actress they had seen on the big screen. The two of them compared Eddie to Audrey Hepburn and me to Marilyn Monroe. We laughed at them and said, No, we were not the kind of girls who belonged in the movies. But when we got home, we went to our room and talked about Hollywood. We agreed, we were both beautiful, and after a minute of giggling, we decided to try our luck in Hollywood.

We put together enough money to buy an old junker that the boys in the auto shop fixed up because Eddie asked them. When other kids were celebrating their graduation, we were packing our bags. We left a note for Ma and Pa, but we snuck out in the middle of the night. A boy who had a crush on Eddie, whose name was Jonah, I think, met us at the end of the drive and drove us to pick up our car; we had left it in the school parking lot. I like to think Ma understood us leaving, but we never talked about the night Eddie and I left. Leaving like we did also had the benefit of avoiding Pa's anger or, maybe, his relief knowing he would not have to find us husbands.

"We didn't make it to Hollywood. We took a detour and ended up in Vegas. Maude grew silent as she considered her next words. Across from her, she could feel Chris Larabee shift impatiently in his seat. Let him be impatient, be in a hurry;



this was her story, and she had waited close to thirty years to tell it. If she had to tell it, she would tell it right. "As I have already said, Eddie and I were beautiful. Even on the days we wore no makeup and had our hair pulled back in a knot, we attracted attention.

"Even now, at my age, men still want to be with me. I attract them, but I don't count on my looks. I charm men. I make them believe they are my entire world, and so they lay their world at my feet. I use their need for others to see me on their arms and their desire to be with me, to obtain their wealth and standing in society. When I part ways with a man, he leaves feeling he was fortunate to have been with me. With very few exceptions, the men I have been with consider themselves my friends. If I called them, they would come running, if not into my arms, at least to my aid.

"Eddie was different. Yes, she was beautiful. I have been told I was prettier, but I never believed it. Eddie had a way about her that caused people to seek her out. I have no doubt she would have been successful in Hollywood if we had gone. She would not have had to pray to be discovered while working at a diner. She would have walked into any studio and been signed on the spot. There would not be any casting couch negotiation for her; she would have walked out at the mere suggestion of such, but no sane director would have risked losing her by suggesting she needed to sweeten the deal by spending the night with him. Directors would have lined up to make her a star without fully comprehending she was already one. People would have flocked to see her on the big screen. Men would have dreamed of being with her, and women would have cut their hair to match hers, and would have endlessly searched through stores for clothes to match hers. It would have been in vain. Women wanted to be like her, but no one could. She was in a class of her own.

"I am not sure she knew how extraordinary she was." She smiled when she caught Judge Travis nodding his head, silently agreeing with her. "In reality, she scared most men away. She was too perfect, inside and out. Most men, while willing to dream of her, were too worried about how to approach her to even try.

"But Eddie was easy to love. She is one of the few people I would die for, but there were many people she would have died for. Of course, you, Ezra, were at the top of her list. Your father and your brothers were on that list. That was to be expected; you were her family. What set her apart were the chances she took to make sure others were safe.

"We had neighbors, whom we discovered after we moved into our apartment, who were in the drug-selling business. Eddie never thought much of people who used drugs, but she figured that as long as they were adults, their habit was their business. These two low-life pond-scum were a different matter. They were targeting children. The thought of anyone hurting a child got Eddie's Irish up. One night, she knocked ever so politely on the door of 3 B. I would have done my best to stop her if I had known what she planned, but I was several yards behind her when she knocked. St. George approached them ready for battle. She never raised her voice or showed them a weapon, but she convinced them they would be 'unmanned' if they ever sold anything to anyone under twenty. She told them she had been raised on a farm and knew how to do it. They believed her. At the time, I was frozen stiff, certain we were both going to get murdered, but later I realized they had seen an angel with the wrath of God in her eyes. Within a week, they had moved.

"One day, she started talking to a bunch of teens hanging out on our stoop. The next day, she had them knocking on our door, asking for homework help. When an angel tells you what to do to open up the doors of the world you thought were closed, you listen. Those kids proudly brought barely passing grades to show her they were improving, and she would challenge them to do better. And they did.

Maude wanted to feel confident that these sons of Larabee could feel the veracity of her words. If they didn't, there was a good chance she would be arrested for kidnapping and murder. She couldn't tell from any of their faces if they believed her. So, she continued, "When we arrived in Vegas, Eddie and I easily got jobs dealing cards at blackjack tables in competing casinos, but after a couple of months, we got jobs at the same place, different shifts. Like I said, we were beautiful, and men wanted to play at our table; more importantly, we knew the game.

"Sometimes, when I had the night off, I would go and watch her deal. In her head, she kept count of the cards and knew which players were going to go bust and which should stand. I could tell what she was thinking, but the players at the table never saw anything in her face or actions. At least, not until Landon Larabee began playing at her table." With that one name, she had their complete attention.



"I had wanted to go out that night, so Eddie took my shift. She sat at my table and wore my nametag. Later, when Kandy came to take over, and Eddie gathered her things to come home, Larabee appeared out of nowhere to ask if she wanted to get a cup of coffee.

"I got home at 2:00 that morning, and she was already home, but she was wide awake and waiting for me. We ended up talking till the sun rose, and then we went out for breakfast. We ate at Randall's, and I finally bopped her on her head with a menu to get her to shut up for one minute so she could order. There are times I wish Eddie had never met Landon Larabee. She would still be alive, and I would still have her in my life. Then, I remember our breakfast. If anyone in this world deserved happiness, it was her. I had never seen Eddie so joyful, so incredibly happy.

"To be honest, I was more than a little jealous. I don't know if she looked down the road and saw how her meeting with Landon Larabee impacted our plans for our future, but I did. There would be no Hollywood for the Holt sisters. She didn't know it that morning, but I did. She would go to the ranch he told her about, and she would stay. She would raise his sons and have more children than she could think of names for. Her babies wouldn't die as Ma's little girls had. Those yet-to-be-born children would thrive, as would the sons Larabee already had. She would put them in her heart, and she would keep them there. She would be fearless, both for the children and for Landon Larabee. She would never forget me, but she would move on. Eating our eggs, with her talking about Landon recognizing she counted cards, her excitement at meeting his three sons, and her apologies for not telling him her true name, I realized our paths were already going in two different directions, and I would have to learn to be strong on my own. I was going to have to learn to be fearless.

"It took a while, but she eventually moved to his ranch. She wrote me letters, and I could feel her happiness oozing out of the envelopes. She even sent me pictures of Landon and 'her boys'. One day, I received a letter informing me of her pregnancy. After that, her letters included updates on her unborn son, Ezra Phillip, reports on her other sons, the ranch, and Landon." Maude snorted and then smiled at a memory. "She wrote about Landon and her 'boys' as she talked about Landon at that breakfast. Nonstop...Pages and pages. "She only had two problems. Her first problem was caused by the only lie she ever made, the one in which she used my name rather than her own, and compounded that lie by inventing a new last name.



"The second problem involved her reluctance to introduce Landon to our parents. She loved them, I know she did, but she didn't want them in her new life. She could explain about us being poor, but she knew Pa would explode if he ever found out his 'Angel' had slept with a man before wedlock, and even if she married before her son was born, Pa would never see the baby as anything more than a bastard. Worse, he would make sure Ezra knew he was a bastard. He wouldn't think his actions were contemptible; he would see them as being compassionate. He would feel as though he was saving her soul and that of her son by pointing out how far she had fallen from God's grace. He would expect her to stay on her knees twenty-four-seven, repenting of her sin.

"She was strong and fearless and could handle anything Pa said about her, but she could not deal with the animosity he would show her son. She couldn't cope with the things Pa would have said about Landon already having two bastards with a third on the way. She would not risk Pa saying or doing things that would hurt Landon or his sons, any of his sons.

"She wanted to explain to Landon, but she told me Landon was the kind of man who tried to make friends with everyone. She was worried he would reach out to Pa and Pa would act like Pa." Spreading her fingers wide, Maude grimaced. "Eddie didn't think they would mesh. Every time Landon mentioned marriage, she stalled. Her best and most effective stall was that she didn't want to walk down the aisle pregnant. After you were born, Ezra, your mother bit the bullet and decided to plan her wedding. Even though she was worried about Pa, she focused on other aspects of the wedding. She was going to invite me over for the Fourth of July. She said that with me at her side, she could be strong. Imagine St. George saying that. She said it would be embarrassing to explain it to Landon, but I could help her come clean about the name mix-up, and years later, we would all laugh about it. She told me to practice my storytelling skills, and if I made Landon laugh about it, we could explain Pa and our whistlestop town. She even used my term for our town. She said she liked it because it was both descriptive and accurate." Maude felt a tear roll down her face, but she ignored it.



"All right, it is time for the next chapter." She accepted the tissues her son handed her. She wanted to burrow her face into his hands and beg him to understand. "Thank you," she whispered as she dabbed at her eyes. No matter how this day ended, no matter what those men believed, Ezra had

listened to her. She hoped he would continue to do so. She risked a prayer; maybe she had not been abandoned.

"As soon as I hung up the phone that morning, I became a whirlwind, throwing a few changes of clothing into an overnight bag, stuffing every letter Eddie wrote me into my tote, and then, I tossed Lucy's car keys towards her. 'You're driving,' I told her. The first stop was my bank. I emptied my account, and we hit the road. The only stops we made were to fill up the car and to grab snacks. Luck was with us, and we made record time without getting pulled over.

"As Lucy drove, I put Eddie's letters in order and reread them. The first letters began and ended with stories about Landon and his sons. They were filled with anecdotes about the boys helping her bake cookies for their dad and how little Nathan pushed a chair to the counter and climbed up so he could help stir.



She wrote about Landon taking them all on a picnic. She said Buck was with them that weekend. He and Chris flew kites while Nathan slept in her lap. She wrote about Landon taking Nathan from her so she could take a turn at kite flying. It was a new experience for her; we never did anything so frivolous growing up. She even had stories about a foal being born and how the mare knew exactly what to do.

She wrote about one of the cats dropping a gift of a live mouse in her lap and how, instead of screaming like Chris thought she would, she had picked it up off her lap and carried it out to the yard and let it go. She wrote that Chris thought she was very brave because he had heard that girls were afraid of mice. She wrote that she had sat down on the steps beside him and said, 'There is no reason for me to be scared of a mouse. Look how little it is.' Maude looked up at the man Ezra had identified as Chris Larabee. He met her eyes and nodded ever so slightly; he remembered.

"He did not know about the Winter of the Great Mouse Invasion, her letter continued. You see, one winter, it was exceptionally cold, and Mama Cat, try as she might, could not keep up with the mice invading our home looking for food, water, and warmth. Ma was scared of them, and I was too, so it was Eddie who emptied the traps in the morning. She cried for them.



"Anyway, those letters morphed into ones about her pregnancy and then about Ezra. The tone of her letters changed after she began planning for her wedding. I hadn't noticed. Her letters were long, and I got where I didn't read them to the end. They were predictable. Wedding stuff first, Ezra's accomplishments next. Then, she'd talk about Landon and the boys. By then, I was tired of reading about how happy she was, and I would fold her missive and put it back into the envelope, with a promise to myself that I would finish it later. I never did. At least, I didn't until that day while we were on the road. I like to think I would have acted differently and sooner if I had read them, but I am not sure. She was the brave one. Until she called that morning, I didn't know I had the capacity to be brave.

"Reading those letters on the drive to Four Corners, one after the other, it became clear someone was stalking her. But even if I had read each letter in its entirety the day it arrived, I am not sure I would have seen the pattern. Later, when we had hit the road, she said she thought the stalking had begun only after she and Landon announced their engagement. I told her no. It had begun much earlier. She pulled over, and I got my tote out of the trunk. I went through the letters and pointed out all the unimportant things that had happened, the things that had, when considered standing alone, meant nothing. Her subconscious had added them up, and the phone call she received minutes before she called me had made clear the danger she and Ezra were in.

"The first thing I read, which set off alarms in me, was the night she heard something. It was in November, and your father and the ranch hands were out moving the cows somewhere. She was alone in the house with you three, Ezra, Chris, and Nathan. She woke up in bed, having heard something that didn't belong. She grabbed her robe and ran out to check on the babies, but they were both asleep. Instead of going back to bed, she sat on the stairs listening. Chris came up and sat beside her, saying he had heard something.



She said the two of you sat in the dark for a full thirty minutes, not talking, just listening. In that letter, she praised you, Chris, for being so brave. She said, You put your arm around her shoulder and whispered that you'd take care of her. She wrote, 'Can you believe it, a little boy being so grown-up?' She told Landon about the noise and how brave his son was. He told her that when the November winds kicked up, they made weird sounds, but he smiled with pride when Chris came home from school that afternoon.

"The second thing she wrote about and dismissed was that she had one of my blonde moments, an incident at the market. She had taken Ezra and Nathan to the market and bought diapers for Ezra and a large bag of M&N's for Nathan. She was using the candy to reward Nathan when he went potty. That paragraph was mainly about how smart Nathan was. He caught on right away that every time he went to the potty, he got an M&N, so he was going every few minutes. Her blonde moment came when she went to the post office to get stamps. She took both of you boys in with her because, as she said, you can't be too careful where children are concerned. She swore she had bought a large bag of M&N's, but when she got home, there was only the small bag they sell at the checkout line. She was embarrassed by it and didn't mention it to anyone.

"There was another occurrence; she had laid out clothes for Nathan when she bathed him. She didn't hear anything, certainly didn't see anything, but when she took him to his room to help him get dressed, though she assured me he could dress himself, the clothes were not there. A couple of days later, Landon found them between the cushions on the couch. She laughed it off when Landon found them, but wrote she had not gone into the living room that day.

Another time, she took Nathan and Ezra to the barn, and when they came back to the house, the coffee maker had been turned on, and a cup was poured. At first, she was willing to believe she had made herself coffee and forgotten about it, but when she took a sip, it had sugar in it; Landon only drank his coffee black. While she added cream to her coffee, she despised it, or tea, for that matter, with sugar in it.

"In the next letter, she wrote about hearing a ruckus in the barn and seeing several horses walking in the front yard. She grabbed Nathan and had him sit on the front porch while she used apples to entice the horses into the corral. When she entered the house, Ezra was asleep in the middle of the bed, not in his crib, where she had left him. She wrote that when she told Landon, he was perplexed. He said she would have heard a car if someone had come down the driveway, so he went up to the main road to look for signs of a car pulling off the side of the road, but he saw no evidence of it. The next weekend, he and a couple of hands put up a gate across the driveway.

"She would have packed up all the boys if one more thing happened, but it didn't. Landon found a mutt hanging out by the mailbox. It wasn't skin and bones, but it was clearly hungry. Landon fed it and put the dog in the barn with all the other critters, but in the morning, it was sleeping on the porch. He was going to put it back in the barn where it would be warmer, but Eddie told him she felt safer with the dog there. She wrote that she could tell he thought she was a city girl unused to the sounds and the sight of a ranch, but he humored her, built a doghouse, and put it on the porch. Bucklyn was there when the dog showed up, and he and Chris tossed a coin to see who had the honor of naming it. Buck won, and he named the dog Bruce. She never told him; she was ferocious and brave. Being ferocious and brave took on a new meaning when there were children to protect. She found solace in having Bruce sleeping on the porch, acting as a guard, ready to stop any danger from entering the house.

"A few times, the dog barked 'his fool head off' during the night, but it was always when Landon and the ranch hands were out chasing cows. She said Chris would come and stand at her side. The two of them would look out into the night, trying to see what had alerted the dog. Eventually, Bruce quit barking and growling, and they'd go back to bed. Then Bruce quit waking them up with his growls. Whatever he was alerting to had quit coming around.

"In February, she had a series of phone calls. The person on the other end would only breathe and not talk. She told Landon about them; he shook his head at the rudeness and said he'd look into getting a caller ID. The calls continued, even after they got caller ID. Eddie began writing the numbers down and calling the numbers back. The numbers were random. A phone booth in Eagle Bend, a car dealership in Ely, the waiting room of the hospital in Eagle Bend, a phone booth in Four Corners, and another number from the lobby of a hotel in Ely are the ones she named. She called each of those places, but no one confessed to calling the Larabee ranch either on purpose or by mistake.

"Landon looked at the numbers and told her he didn't see a connection. I told her the same thing when she showed her list to me. She took the list from me and said, 'You and Landon are both right, but I know without a doubt, it is the same person; I listened to the way he breathed.'

“One March morning, Eddie went outside to feed Bruce the breakfast leftovers, but Bruce was not on the porch. Landon spent the day on horseback calling for Bruce. He never found him.

“The morning of April twenty-third, she called me, saying she was scared. Lucy and I got to the ranch a few minutes before three. By the time I had climbed out of the car, she had my bag out of the trunk and was throwing it into her car’s trunk. I threw my tote with her letters in it beside my bag and turned for some sort of explanation, but she was telling Lucy to go home. Lucy could be a bit of a shatterbox, but on that day, she realized the seriousness of the situation and kept her mouth shut. She put her car into reverse and turned around in the driveway. Before she floored the car, she looked at me and said she would pray for us. I said thanks and told her that if I didn’t come back in a week, she was welcome to everything I left in the apartment. She didn’t reply; she took off. She was frightened.

Eddie rushed me inside, saying I had to hide before Landon and Chris got home. Landon was picking Chris up from school, swinging by to grab Nathan, and then they were heading to Eagle Bend to get Bucklyn. She said the ranch hands had the evening off, and Landon planned to take the boys out shopping for Ezra’s birthday party.

“She grabbed my arm before we reached the porch steps and said, ‘I have a notebook, and we will write to each other. The house is bugged.’ I remember wanting to reassure her. I wanted to say, Eddie, you are so wrong. But Eddie was not prone to nerves, and she was pale, almost shaking. She walked me to her closet, and I waited, hidden behind her gorgeous dresses, the ones she had bought when we shared an apartment in Vegas.

“I wanted to look at the dresses in the light, but I could see them in my mind. I was there when Eddie bought each one of them. Eddie saved for and purchased designer clothes when they went on sale. She bought an emerald-green silk gown, she said she would wear if she ever had a chance to go to the Oscars. The linen suit and rust-orange blouse she planned to use for interviews and the like. She also had a rose-colored dress because I told her she had to buy it.

“Those beautiful dresses, and I doubted she wore them anywhere. She never wore them except in the dressing room when she tried them on. They were dresses she bought for her Hollywood dreams. Maybe she wore one of those extraordinary dresses on a night out with Landon, but I doubt it. I am not sure what she saw when she looked at them. I saw the life she had chosen to leave behind in exchange for her life with the rancher, Landon, and all those sons.

Maude sighed, thinking of the dream her sister had chosen to let go of to live with the man she loved. “Hiding in the closet, I heard Landon and Chris laughing as they came in. Chris started yelling for Nathan to hurry. They all sounded excited; I smiled to myself, thinking how fortunate Eddie had been when she met Landon Larabee. Then, another thought occurred to me, and I couldn’t shake it. ‘What if Larabee was behind the things scaring my sister?’ When she pulled open the closet door, she handed me a pen and a notebook. I grabbed it and wrote down my question.

“I expected her to immediately deny the possibility, but she didn’t. She sat on the bed with her baby in her arms. She smiled at him and placed him on the floor to crawl. You were such a wiggle-worm, Ezra. She watched you as you dragged her shoes out of the closet and began lining them up to make your very own train. Finally, she answered. Looking up at me, she took the pen and the notebook and wrote, ‘Except for Buck’s mother, Rosie, they are dead. His wife, Cassie, died in April when Chris was a baby. Nathan’s mother died in April when Nathan was a baby. It’s April, and I believe they were murdered, especially after the phone call I got this morning. It was the breather I told you about, but he, or she, I couldn’t tell, told me to ‘run’. It wasn’t Landon. He had left no more than five minutes before the breather called. If you haven’t noticed, there are no phones around here from which to call. It couldn’t be Landon’s, but it was someone who knew he had left. I guess, little sister, I have read too many mysteries to let that coincidence pass. I spent an hour playing with the boys in the kitchen, the library, the den, and here. This is what I found.’ She picked up a glass of water, and in it was a device I didn’t recognize.

“She wrote, as she sang Old McDonald’s Had a Farm to Ezra, ‘I don’t know much about phones, but I am very sure this does not belong in the mouthpiece. I put it in water too. I hope the liquid destroys it. I am going to leave it here. Landon will find it. I will call him in the morning and let him know where I am. Ezra and I will come back here when he makes sure it is safe.’

“We spent an hour packing, then she fixed sandwiches for us. She wrote a long note to Landon while Ezra and I quietly stacked blocks; rather, I was quiet. Ezra, you laughed every time you successfully stacked a block. I had never been drawn to children, but for her sake, I sat on the floor and entertained you by making crazy faces, but never a sound. She wrote in the notebook that she hoped her stalker did not realize I was there.

"She wrote she was going to get some money out of the wall safe. Landon had stopped by the bank before picking up Chris to get cash for a big purchase he would be making. She watched him open the safe while Chris was getting Nathan to put on his shoes, and she memorized the numbers. I wrote I had money, but she wrote she didn't want to spend all of my savings. She was only going to take a thousand dollars. It was for his son, he would understand, and besides, she had already told him about her 'theft' in her note.

She was putting back the money and the stacks of papers that had been in the safe while I was putting Ezra's blocks into the basket when we heard the kitchen door open. We both froze, processing what we heard and what we hadn't heard—a car. With her finger over her lips, warning me to be quiet, Eddie stuffed the thousand dollars into her bra and swung the safe shut. She didn't shut it all the way because it had made a dreadful groan when she had opened it, and she didn't want to broadcast where we were. She grabbed Ezra from where he sat and whispered, 'Shush, baby, shush.'" Maude focused her attention on Ezra. "Miraculously, you did shush. I picked up her keys and purse from the table beside the note. Her suitcase was sitting in the den, but we didn't try to get it. She could wear my clothes for the couple of days we were going to be gone, and Ezra's clothes, blankets, and toys were already waiting in the car. I only had to snag Ezra's diaper bag. As we tiptoed toward the front door, we heard another door open, and the lights in the living room flicked on. If the intruder stepped into the den and walked past the end of the couch, he would be able to see into the foyer. He would have spotted us..." Maude shuddered and paused before continuing.



"We ran like we had when we were children, clearing the steps in a single bound and racing across the gravel to the car. Eddie reached it first and jumped into the backseat with Ezra. She yelled at me to drive, and I did as fast as I could without endangering her and Ezra; she was struggling to get Ezra in his car seat and had yet to get a seat belt on. We heard the sound of what I automatically identified as a firecracker, but Eddie screamed, 'Gun!' The bullet didn't hit us or the car, but we assumed a second bullet would be coming any minute. Your mother threw herself on top of you, Ezra.

"I remember looking through the rear-view mirror as we flew down that long drive. The lights in the house were being turned off, one by one. Eddie was in the back seat, cursing like a sailor, using words I did not know she knew existed, while she tried to get Ezra to sit. He was doing his level best to stand up in the car seat. It took her forever to get him buckled in. When she did, she began looking out the rear window, looking for anyone following us.

"We drove for thirty minutes, watching behind us and flinching every time we saw headlights coming toward us. We didn't say anything during that time. Even if our hearts weren't beating so fast and hard, Ezra's cries of displeasure prevented us from hearing anything other than him. Finally, he fell asleep, and I pulled over so I could get my tote and Eddie could take over the driving. I had no clue as to where we were; there was no light except that of the moon and stars scattered across the sky. I didn't know where we were, but Eddie did.

"Again, we fell silent as she thought. I could see her lips moving as she planned and discarded ideas for getting to a place of safety. At last, she began talking, sharing her plan. She knew of a motel where we could get a room. We'd get a good night's sleep and head to Reno after breakfast. We entered a small town with a grocery store. She ran in to buy replacements for the diapers, formula, and baby food we had left behind on the kitchen table. I sat in the car with Ezra. I knew no one had followed us, but the hair on the back of my neck was standing up. I am not one given to believing in second sight, but that night, sitting in the parking lot of a grocery store in a town whose name I didn't even know, I felt evil settle around the car.

"Eddie did too because after tossing the grocery bags in the back seat, she slid into the front seat and said, "Change of plans."

"I agreed. Once again, we were driving in silence. Finally, she started talking. 'I don't know how, but Mr. X knows where we are heading. I must have said something aloud while looking for the bugs. Something about where we could go to hole up. We need to find somewhere else to spend the night. While she drove, we talked. I shared my thoughts about the things that had been happening. We discussed her letters and the warning signs I had missed. For a while, we drove in silence, and then she began talking about Landon. She was aggravated that he had dismissed her fears, but she felt it wasn't due to his not caring, but that he saw the good in everyone and could not comprehend a person stalking another. You didn't hear about stalking in those days unless you were some sort of celebrity.

"We drove another hour or so until we reached a town. We were on the interstate and passed up two exits advertising motels. Finally, she pulled off the interstate and pulled into a brightly lit motel. Once

again, she was the one who ran in to get us a room while I sat in the car with Ezra. I kept a lookout and saw nothing, and I had no premonitions of danger. Neither did Eddie; she came out dangling a key card in her hand and a smile on her face.

"We unloaded the car and ordered pizza. She showed me how to fix Ezra's bottle, and I fed him while she picked up the pizza." Maude got up and looked around for an escape. She desperately did not want to continue. After standing behind her chair, staring at the door in the quiet of the room, she sighed and sat back down.

"Twenty minutes later, I heard her whispering my name at the door. Ezra had fallen asleep, and I had not turned on the TV, so I could hear her when she returned. But I heard her and opened the door. I swear, I thought we were safely hidden; she had too. We would not have stopped if we had known we were still followed." Maude closed her eyes and clenched her fists, letting the nails dig into her palms. She let the pain steady her. "I opened the door, expecting a pizza box shoved in my face.

"There was no pizza. As I opened the door, Eddie fell into the room, and only the reflexes I never knew I had allowed me to catch her and prevent her from hitting the floor. Even as she fell toward the floor, she did not reach out to catch herself. Instead, she kept her coat wrapped tight, absorbing the blood so it would not drip onto the carpet. She steadied herself with my help. She said, 'Bolt the door and get me to the bathroom.' I did as she asked. The bathroom was only feet away, but it might as well have been miles. She had no strength left; I practically carried her. I helped her in the tub and got her coat off. There was so much blood.

"I got up to call 911. She knew what I was doing and grabbed my arm. 'No time. He hit something vital, and I am bleeding too much. I will die in the next few minutes, so listen. He came from behind. He found us. I left my just-in-case sermon in my notebook.'" I remember giggling at her choice of words and her smiling at me, knowing the memories she had intentionally elicited with those words. "Protect my son. Be strong, be ferocious, and be brave for my son, for my Ezra.' Blood was pouring out of her, running down the drain. I tried holding it in, but it seeped around my fingers. She smiled at me and said, 'I love you. When he is older, tell Ezra Phillip, I love him.' She stopped talking. Her blood quit pouring out of her.



"Ezra was still lying on his blanket with his eyes closed. I could tell he was sleeping and not dead, but I risked waking him and picked him up because I had to hold him. He was the only part of my sister I had left, and I was having a hard time letting go of her. When I could put him down, I got her notebook and read her just-in-case instructions. At midnight, I got up and got to work. I went to the car and searched for whatever it was that had led him or her to us. After only five minutes, I found a small piece of equipment with a magnetic back, stuck under the rear fender. If I hadn't been looking for it, I wouldn't have noticed it. I didn't know what it was, but I knew it did not belong on the car. With no other explanation as to how the bastard found us, I figured it was a tracker. Thinking he might think Eddie was still alive and close by, waiting to see if he needed to finish the job, I put the device on the bumper of the car parked next to us.

"Then, I opened the trunk, and lo and behold, there was a small tool kit. In it was a note from Landon saying that if she had car trouble, the best advice he could give her was to contact him, but he put the tools in the car for whatever emergencies she might have. It was dated March 1992. I wonder if he had a premonition of some sort or if he put tools in all of his vehicles. I changed the license plate to one of a car across the parking lot. After I emptied the trunk of Ezra's and my things, I lined it with trash bags I found in the maids' supply closet.



"I got out the flashlight to look around for the pizza and any drops of blood. I found small blood drops on the sidewalk leading to our room's door and washed them away with water. I never found the pizza, and I've always wondered if he took it with him after he used his knife on Eddie. To this day, I cannot eat pizza, and once, I loved it. I cleaned the three spots on the carpet, took her blood-soaked clothes off her, and stuffed them into garbage bags, wrapped her in the two blankets I took off the bed. I got a dolly I had seen in the maid's closet and used it to carry her body to the car. I kept thinking, with all those lights everywhere, someone was bound to see me and investigate, but no doors opened and no other lights turned on; I am not sure how I

managed, but I put her body in the trunk and placed the garbage bags with her clothes beside it. As I took the dolly back to the supply closet, I kept telling myself it wasn't Eddie; Eddie was an Angel now, a real one. I used those words in an attempt to comfort myself, but I was sobbing.

"I went in and cleaned the smeared makeup off my face. I changed my clothes and put them in another garbage bag. Then, I started wiping down the bathroom. After I finished cleaning the bathroom, I woke Ezra, changed him, gave him a bottle, and put him in his car seat. We headed for New Orleans. I don't remember much of that drive. I kept telling myself I was brave, and I was strong, and I would protect her baby.

"I did as she instructed me, and I dumped my sister in a swamp for the gators to feast on. I watched her sink, and then I got in the car, and I kept driving until I got to Aunt Doris's place. I used her washing machine to wash the blood out of Eddie's clothes and threw them away on garbage day. Her coat was too big to fit in Aunt Doris's washing machine, so I waited until two o'clock in the morning to drive to a laundromat in another town, which would be both open and empty at that time of night. I had to go to three places before I could get in to wash the blood away from Eddie's coat.

"When I got back to Aunt Doris's house, she had a box of hair dye ready for me. I dyed my hair, Dark Mahogany if I remember correctly, and the next morning, I used Aunt Doris's car to drive to the DMV in another town as a brunette. I used Eddie's Nevada license to get a North Carolina one. I even corrected the mistake on the license, saying I had worn contacts the day the picture was taken. The man taking my picture had been flirting with me and only gently chided me for doing that, saying it could have led to a lot of confusion. When he asked for my birth certificate, I told him I had gotten married and had not changed my name back to Holt. Eddie had kept up with those sorts of things, and I had found mine, paper-clipped into her notebook. It took half an hour to transform from Maude Holt to Maude Standish. A few years later, I renewed my license, and I returned to being blonde.

"I will be the first to admit I was a horrible mother. I never wanted to be one, and with my botched abortion, I thought Fate had stepped in and had agreed with me. When you entered my life, I tried to become more like Eddie, but I could not. Every time I looked at you, Ezra, I saw your mother. It physically hurt me to hold you. You have her hair, her smile, her dimples. When I watched you run and play, I saw her. I saw, in you, her excitement in discovering the world. Her enthusiasm.

"I expected you to realize I wasn't your mother, but I told myself you would forget her, and one day, you would call me Mother. It happened, eventually, but when you call me that, it brings back my memories of Eddie. I am both pleased and saddened when you call me Mother.

Becoming Eddie's Maude drained me. I spent days in bed crying. Aunt Doris protected us when I couldn't even get out of bed. She sat on the floor and played with you when the mere sight of you made me throw up. I dishonored Eddie's memory because I could not be strong, ferocious, and brave, but she and Uncle Ralph, in his wheelchair, were the ones who took care of you.

"The thousand Eddie had taken from the safe dwindled to almost nothing. Who would have thought taking care of a baby would be so expensive? I looked at the money I had pulled from my bank and handed it, one evening, to Aunt Doris. She closed my fingers over the cash and said it wouldn't last long. She said taking care of Uncle Ralph was expensive, and as much as she loved Ezra and me, her husband came first. She looked into my eyes and told me I had to earn more. I had told her about Eddie and me finding jobs at a casino, so I knew she wasn't asking me to walk the streets but was sending me to Atlantic City. I used some of my cash to buy a casino-appropriate dress, which was sure to make me stand out, and then I risked driving Eddie's car to Atlantic City. I returned home with a wad of cash. It became a pattern.

Eventually, Aunt Doris told my parents I had returned home with a son. She claimed my husband, James Standish, had died in a car wreck. Ma believed and came by three or four times to see you. Pa did not believe the story of my having a husband. He had no problem believing I had a son. I never took you to see them; the graves of those dead babies haunted me, and I couldn't risk Pa drowning another useless mouth to feed. I don't think he would have. I don't think he was responsible for all those dead babies, but I heard Eddie's voice in my head, the one from that night she posed her question to me. I couldn't risk it. Later, when you were older, I could have introduced you to Pa, but it was never the right time. I could have done it, I suppose, but I feared, as you got older, Ma would see Eddie when she saw you playing under the climbing tree, and she would know.

"I made up a story of Eddie meeting a businessman in Vegas. I told them they had wed in a Las Vegas chapel. It was a rushed wedding because he needed to fly back to London immediately. I wrote letters and postcards from all over Europe telling them about her new life. I had Eddie's letters to help me practice forging those letters, but in reality, I learned to write like Eddie when we were children. She hated my handwriting and said it looked like a chicken scratch. She made me trace her printed words over and over until our handwriting was virtually identical. She did the same when we were in third grade, learning cursive.

"I had a friend who was an airline pilot. He'd take the postcards and letters to various cities in Europe and mail them to Ma and Pa. Three months later, Pa received a letter from the American Embassy in Rome saying both Eddie and her husband died in a wreck on a country road. They grieved, and Pa put the letter in a frame and hung it on the wall in the living room. He'd look at it when he talked about her.

"Anyway, I was satisfied that Ezra and I had successfully disappeared. Mr. X would not find us in Whistlestop. I didn't think Larabee or Mr. X would find us, but then I'd go to Atlantic City, and people began asking if I was the Maude Standish, the detective Cady Tanner." Maude paused and studied the man sitting next to her. "Are you related?" she asked.

"Yes, Ma'am," Vin replied. "She was my mother."

Maude once again closed her eyes and rested her chin on her steepled fingers. She slowly breathed in and then, equally as slowly, released it. She repeated those actions two more times before she felt steady enough to open her eyes. "You said 'was'. I take it your mother has passed?" She watched as Vin nodded, then asked, "Mr. X?"

"Signs are pointing in that direction."

"Good Lord," Maude whispered. "Are all of your mothers dead?" she asked, not wanting to hear the answers.

JD spoke up, "My mom took me to Boston to hide. She left Four Corners and our dad before I was born. She said it wasn't safe at the ranch."

"She's alive then?" Maude regretted the question as soon as she asked it; the boy's face struggled and failed to hide his pain.

Shaking his head, JD answered. "Mom died of cancer last June."

"I am so sorry," Maude said automatically, her mind processing the word June. "Why didn't he take her seriously and investigate... found the bastard. Certainly, with her note and the bug, he could have prevented Cady Tanner's death." Maude ran out of steam and sat back in her chair, crossing her arms and glaring defiantly at Chris.

"Maude..." Chris stomped hard on his anger and softened his tone. "There was no note and no bug. I went in with Dad, and we went from room to room. All of Maude's," he corrected himself, "Eddie's clothes were gone. Her closet was emptied. In the library, the safe was wide open. The cash, the stocks, and a couple of land deeds were also gone. It appeared that your sister stole the safe's contents and left with Ezra. Dad did not care about the things in the safe. He only wanted Ezra and your sister back." "If he had known Eddie as well as she thought he did, he would have known. He would have sensed the wrongness of an empty safe. If it had been me, sure, I would have emptied the safe, but Eddie had honor. She believed in him. Why couldn't he believe in her?"

"Mother?" Ezra dropped his hand on her shoulder and gently tightened his fingers. In that one gesture, he told her he loved her, and he understood her actions. She reached up to grab his hand with hers and held on. Her son had thrown her the lifeline of his acceptance, and her tears threatened to spill, but she remembered Eddie's request of her to be fearless. She let go of her son's hand and gave it a gentle pat, signaling she was, if not all right, at least holding on.



"I met your mother once, you know," she told the Tanner at her side.

Vin shook his head and settled in for her story about his mom.

"Ezra was not quite two and living with Aunt Doris and Uncle Ralph while I made money at the poker tables in Atlantic City. I was very careful not to win enough to be noticed by management, but I made enough to be a challenge to most men. I laughed, and I smiled, and I charmed the men whom I played against. On Friday and Saturday nights, I gambled, and on Sunday, I slept. I drove back to Whistlestop on Monday. One Saturday night, one of the men at the table asked me if I had talked to the detective. I felt my stomach flip, but I did not throw up. I even kept a smile on my face when I asked what detective. This man, I don't remember his name, but I do remember thinking, 'You are already pudgy; put the sandwich down.' I didn't say it out loud, of course, but I loudly thought it at him to drown my sense of panic. 'I wonder what she wants?' I asked no one in particular, but Pudgy took it as a request to go track her down. The next thing I knew, she was standing next to me, comparing me to photos in her hand.

"It's difficult to describe her. She had dark hair. It was almost black. Her eyes were blue. I asked her if she wanted to get something to eat. Poor thing, there she was, obviously pregnant and doing her job, so far from home. We went to a restaurant that was nearby and sat and talked for a couple of hours. At first, she was all business, saying she was looking for the woman in the photos who had taken her

son and left the grieving father alone. She didn't mention the money. She only talked about the father missing the woman he loved and his infant son. She asked me if I had seen the woman in the photos. I studied the photos; they were photos of Eddie I hadn't seen, and I wanted to snatch them away from her and run out the door. I returned the photos to her and told her I had no idea who the woman was. She asked me if someone could have stolen my identity. I was so thankful I had cut my hair very short because I think if she had seen my hair hanging down to my waist and had worn no make-up, she would have seen the resemblance between Eddie and me.

"She was suspicious, but I gave the performance of a lifetime, and she let it go. I asked how far along she was, and she patted her stomach and smiled. She had been a little more than average-looking, but when she smiled, she became beautiful. I told her about how I came to Atlantic City every once in a while, to hone the poker-playing skills my daddy had taught me and my two brothers one summer when we were visiting Mother's stuffy parents in the Hamptons. I told her about fishing off the boat pier with Miles and Mark and how I was the only one of us to catch anything, but Miles had to take the fish off the hook for me, and wasn't Daddy foolish for saddling my brother with that name?

"We laughed, and I asked what she was planning to name her child. Victoria, if it was a girl, and that she had not settled on a boy's name. She said the baby's father kept saying 'no' to every name she brought up, saying either there were too many people running around with that name or the name was boring. She had worked up to letter V and hoped he could agree on one of the three. She had circled in the Baby's Name Book, which she carried with her as she searched for the missing Maude Standish. She told me she had narrowed the V names to Vincent or Victor. She said she reckoned that, as hard as it was to agree on a first name, the child might not have a middle name.

"I asked her about what the child's father thought about her having such a dangerous profession, and she said, 'Landon hired me to find his son, Ezra, and Maude. He knew the kind of person I was when this child was conceived. I asked her if she and Landon fellow were planning a wedding. She said she had considered it for two seconds, but while she would always have a place in her heart for Landon's if they married, he would try to corral her and keep her safe, and they would argue nonstop about her job and the cases she took on. She shook her head at the thought, and her hair went flying about her head, and I thought, 'She resembles a Friesian Horse.' You know, the big black horses with the incredibly long manes. That was her beauty. She was strong and beautiful, and she would use her powerful hooves to strike down anyone who tried to hurt her foal. At that moment, she was stunning. Maude turned to Vin, saying, 'I had thought to throw her off Ezra and my trail, but now I have to wonder if I had told her the truth about Eddie, would Landon have protected her, and would your mother still be alive?'"

Vin had asked himself the same question. "I don't rightly know, ma'am, what anyone would have done. I do know ya were doin', what ya were doin' to protect Ezra. We can't be lookin' to change the past. We just need to find our Listener, Mr. X." he glanced at Ezra and saw the silent thank you on Ezra's lips.



Clearing his throat to get everyone's attention, Orrin waited until he was sure he had their attention. "I have been listening to what you had to say," he hesitated over the name, but plowed through, "Maude. Your story sounds fabricated." He held his hand up to forestall her protest. "Let me finish, please. You have been talking, and I have been listening, but I have also been remembering.

"Jenna Dunne, JD's mother, pulled me aside at a barbecue she and Landon were hosting for a few friends and their children. I remember this for two reasons. The first was that Evie was scandalized that Landon had gotten that 'little girl' pregnant and told Landon off that night. Not in front of everyone. She is too polite to rake someone over the coals in front of a crowd, but I saw her pull him into the house when I took over turning the burgers on the grill. We hadn't planned it that way, but she took advantage of me being busy. I probably could have said or done something to prevent Evie from tearing into Landon's, but I didn't try; Evie was right, it was wrong, and he needed to hear what she had to say.

"While Jenna was legal, she was only two or three years older than Chris. Landon had hired her to take care of the boys during the summer, you know, keep the house tidy, make sure they had lunch, and make sure they did their chores. She was fresh out of high school and eager to earn money for college. I don't know what he was thinking; she was little more than a child. The second reason was because of what she told me. As I tell you this, keep in mind, no one had seen the letter Mau... Eddie left, and although Buck had recently lost his mother, it was at the hands of someone wanting to rob the bar, and we did not know about Cady Tanner being killed in Texas.

“Jenna waited until everyone was eating to pull me into the library. She inspected the library, making sure it was empty before closing the door, and then pulled out a chair and sat down. It was like watching a balloon deflate; all the energy, the vitality that, I know, is part of what attracted Landon to her, left her. Tears threatened to spill, and though her eyes stayed bright and shiny, her tears never fell. I told her Landon wanted to marry her. She nodded her head and said she knew. She said Landon had proposed to her; she loved him, and that she had said yes. She then looked at me, straight in the eyes, and in a whispery voice declared, ‘It’s not safe for me here. Not for me nor my baby.’

“ I had already had a few beers when she pulled me into the library, but when she said that, I sobered up immediately. Who? Why? What? I asked her all the usual questions, but the only things she could point to with certainty were the phone calls. He just breathes, she said. She, like Eddie, started keeping a log of where the calls originated, but she could not find a common source. I told her they were wrong numbers. She listened to me, then shook her head no. ‘They are not misdial numbers. I hear it in his breathing; the calls are threats. He always calls when Landon and the boys are not in the house. Besides,’ she said, ‘Wrong numbers don’t account for the crockpot being unplugged after the roast was browned and half done, or the washing machine being stopped in mid-cycle. Both times were when I had taken the boys to get ice cream. Sometimes, I feel as though someone had been in my bedroom, moving things around. There is nothing I could point to and say, Look, see, a pillow on the floor, a magazine with a page torn out, my toothbrush on the counter, not in the toothbrush holder. Little things. But I know someone was in the house when I wasn’t. Landon won’t believe me.’ I told her I would talk to him and we would look into it. Jenna took off the next day. She left a note for Landon, telling him not to look for her; being with him wasn’t safe for her or her unborn child. It is not much to go on, but it sounds like what Eddie experienced.”



Buck looked up from the spot on the table, which he had been examining while Orrin talked. “My Mom had a kind heart. Reckon you all know my mom owned a bar. Because of her work, Mom had a certain reputation for being a loose woman. No, Nate, don’t shake your head no. Mom did have a reputation among certain people in our community. I am sure her affair with Dad and my subsequent birth solidified the opinion of those people. She had another reputation you might not know. She was always there to help the folks who needed a hand to get back on their feet. The men who desperately believed there was a chance to get Rosie Wilmington to take them into her bed, the churchgoers looking for a sinner to rehabilitate, and the teachers looking for a reason to call child protective services all felt Mom had few morals and that her morals would rub off on me. None of them, including Dad, I think, wanted to hear the stories about her helping folks.

“Yes, Mom had an open-door policy when it came to people who needed help. Many times, I would wake up to find a man sleeping off a drunk on the couch because Mom would not give him his key to drive home. One time, I went out to see Mom sitting with a crying man; the man had just buried his wife and needed her to listen to him talk about missing the love of his life. Other times, there would be a kid who was thinking about leaving home, and Mom would sit while he waited for them to come to pick him up; she would not let him go until she was sure everything would work out between them. I saw junkies flying on whatever drug they took and crying when they came back down to Earth. I saw prostitutes after a John beat them.

“Once, I woke up to an entire family camping out in our living room. I fixed bowls of cereal for the kids; their eyes were frightened, you know, waking up in a strange place and all. I ended up throwing out their cereal because it turned to mush while they debated eating it. The kids ate the second bowl I poured, but only after I told them a silly story about Nancy loving to eat the milk at the bottom of almost empty cereal bowls; I told them she wanted a bowl of Cheerios of her own, but was afraid we would think she wasn’t a cat. When I called her name, she came running and jumped up in Mom’s spot and waited for them to finish. Mom looked up from where she was talking to their parents and smiled at me. “That family stayed the entire weekend. On Monday morning, Mom went with them and got them right with the bank. Later, after they went back to their home, I told Mom how fortunate we were to have Nancy because she kept those little ones entertained and made them feel safe and loved. She hugged me and told me we were indeed fortunate.

“That family, well, I don’t think they had the money to repay Mom, but when summer came, we had the best-tasting vegetables waiting for us in a grocery bag when Mom opened up the door Monday mornings. The mister came by once to apologize for not being able to repay her kindness, but Mom just smiled at him and told him the fresh vegetables were the best she had ever tasted, especially the

tomatoes. After he talked with her, he left the bar, walking taller. She never beat anyone when they were down. Her motto, if she had one, was that building people up made the world better.

"I saw a lot, but what I didn't see was a string of men coming out of her bedroom. I used to get so mad when I saw her shunned by the so-called polite society, but Mom would shake her head and tell me that if people treated each other as they should, the bar would not have enough business to stay open. "Mom, letting all types stay with us drove Dad crazy." Buck pushed his chair back so he could better see Chris and Nathan's faces as he talked. "I am pretty sure you two do not know it, but the times Dad sent us to get donuts at the bakery down the street were the times he wanted us out of the way so he and my mom could fight."

"If we were not there, how do you know they were fighting?" Nathan reluctantly asked. They had heard enough about Eddie and Jenna; he didn't want to hear anything about Rosie.

"When I was eleven, Mom bought me a whole slew of Hardy Boys books at the thrift store. After reading a couple, I decided I wanted to be a detective like them. I saved my birthday money and bought myself a tape recorder. On three separate occasions, I taped their fights. Nothing was ever thrown, no one was ever hit, and curse words were never used, but they were brutal."

"Do you still have the tapes?" Chris asked when Buck grew silent, apparently lost in a memory. "Of course not. We left one afternoon in a hurry, and I didn't have time to retrieve the recorder before we left for the ranch. Mom found it, and when I got home from the ranch, she and I had a long talk. She let me listen to the last recording, and their fight ended on a good note, with them laughing. Then she tore up the tapes, and she told me how disappointed she was because I was listening to private conversations. While it was not strictly a sin, it wasn't right. My intentions to be the world's best detective went right out the window. I put the tape recorder in my closet and never touched it again.

"I am telling you this because the phone calls started right after that last argument I recorded. I have been sitting, listening to you two talk about Eddie and Jenna here, and I am wondering if I was the only one recording." Buck could feel all of his brothers shift in their seats, except for Ezra, who still stood with his hand resting on Maude's shoulder; with that revelation, they all realized his mother, too, had been murdered by the same lowlife who had killed Eddie and had run off Jenna.

After a moment of letting it sink in, Chris turned to his brother, "What was on those tapes?" Wishing he had given some thought to the secrets he would be revealing when he first opened his mouth, Buck began, "If you knew what to look for, you could tell when Dad was truly and royally pissed. For the most part, Dad was real respectful when he talked with Mom. You could see the love he felt for her in the way he talked and in the way he would share a story or two about what he was doing at the ranch. They'd spend a few minutes talking while I took you two upstairs to get my things, and you, Chris, would take a few minutes to play with Nancy. On those days, we'd come down, and Mom and Dad would be relaxed, smiling, and laughing.

"When he came in angry, Dad wouldn't ruffle my hair like he usually did, and while he would smile, it was more of a grimace, if you looked closely. He'd sound friendly on the surface, but if you looked beneath the smile, there would be a look as though he had bitten into something bad-tasting. Mom would tense up; she'd pick up a rag to wipe down a table she had already cleaned or step behind the bar to check to see if anything needed restocking, although she restocked the bar the first thing every morning. On those visits, he would pull out his wallet and walk down to the bakery and get a dozen donuts, but he would forget to tell us to look both ways when we crossed the street and remind us to thank Mrs. Crutcher when she gave us our donuts; He wanted us to get moving so he could yell without our hearing.

"He hit the ceiling because she was exposing me to the scum of the earth. He'd demand that she quit letting strangers into the apartment, that her need to take care of a beat-up streetwalker or a down-and-out bum did not mean she should expose me to people who chose to ruin their lives. He didn't want them ruining mine. She would retaliate with, 'The moment Bucklyn was born without the benefit of our being married, you chose to put him in the category of being a bastard. Every time you come in here spitting nails because I let someone sleep on my couch, you put me in the category of being a whore.

"You could hear them breathing deeply, trying to calm themselves down. He'd say, 'I offered to marry you, remember?' She'd answer, 'You did, but we both know you were scared to death; I would say yes

"Dad would get quiet and almost whisper, 'One day you are going to take someone in, and the two of you will end up dead. He'd continue with stuff about how I was his son, and Mom would counter with, 'he has my name, not yours. Dad would deflate and say, 'He has your name, but I've asked you several times over the years to take mine.' I could hear Mom walking up to him and saying, 'Landon

Larabee, you know we would never work. I like it here, and you would never give up your ranch to be with me. He is my son, and the moment you come to me with proof that he isn't growing up to be a fine man, then we will revisit this.' I never saw them do it, of course, but I heard them kiss. She would say she did love him, and he would say the same to her, but he'd add, 'Rochelle, you are my rock. I need you to be careful.'

"You know, until I heard Dad call her Rochelle, I did not know that was her given name." Buck debated with himself about telling them about the third tape. He looked at Chris and then at Nathan; the third tape would hurt them. Their eyes were steady when they met his, realizing he did not want to talk. They both nodded, signaling for him to continue; they could handle him telling them about the long-ago recording.

"Dad started in as usual, but for whatever reason, Mom was spitting fire, too. When he said some folk had told him she had a man sleepover, she wanted names. Dad said something about not wanting to get them involved, and she said the minute they went to you with innuendo and outright lies, and you believed them, they made themselves involved. Dad caved. He started with the name of the man she had been accused of sleeping with, Patrick Jones.

"Mom must have stared him down because nothing was recorded for a bit. Then Dad listed the people, the women who had come out to the ranch that morning with their concerns: my teacher, Miss Connie White, your aunt, Mrs. Amy Marks, the nurse who thinks so highly of you, Nathan, Miss Angie Delaney, and a social worker whose name I could not decipher."

Buck's eyes flickered from brother to brother. Both brothers were trying to be calm and stoic, but neither was succeeding. He didn't bother looking at the others in the room. These were the brothers who were feeling like they had been gut-punched. Nathan recovered first, but it was Chris who told him to continue.

"It took a lot to get Mom mad, but I could hear her fury in the way she hissed, 'These damned busybodies.' Mom never cursed, but she said a few more choice words about them. I think that it was the shock of hearing Mom curse, more than anything, which caused Dad to apologize. Mom told him to keep his mouth shut and ears open. She went on to explain that Patrick Jones was little more than a kid, and that kid was drunk because he had buried his father that afternoon, and she did not feel he could be trusted behind the wheel.

"Dad went on to say, 'Rosie, you are beautiful, and you are single. When you let someone stay over, people will find out, and they will talk.' Mom then said, 'I guess the solution is for us to get married.' Dad told her to pick a date. I could tell they were over the argument and teasing each other, but I wondered if there was indeed someone listening in, if that person knew they were playing. Mom got her calendar out and started naming possible dates. Dad counted with others. Mom said she would have to have enough time to get a dress made, and Dad said they would have to get someone to watch the boys so they could go on a proper honeymoon.

"They carried on their pretend plans for a while. Mom called Dad once, asking if it would scandalize people if she wore white because she looked good in white. Another time, when you all came in, Dad started talking about how honeymoons to France should be planned so they could see vineyards harvesting the grapes. It was fun to watch them play pretend and laugh with each other, but that is also when the phone call started. They usually came when she was the only one working in the bar, like on a Wednesday night or when she was closing. She always answered because she felt that, since she had a business, she had a responsibility to do so. After all, people call when they leave a phone or a purse, and she would have to find it and put it up until they could come in and retrieve it. When they came on the weekends, and Mom would be sleeping in, I would answer them. Yes, Chris," he answered the question Chris asked with his raised eyebrow. "We had caller ID, and while I did not keep a log of who called, Mom never mentioned knowing any of the numbers.

"The calls were getting on my nerves, but Mom sat me down and told me the story of why the apartment has a separate phone line from the bar. It seems that when Mom first opened her place, there was just one line. After I was born, she started getting calls night and day. She said that between me waking her three times a night, the call waking her up, and the phone ringing nonstop when she tried to nap, she was exhausted. She said she didn't mind legitimate calls, but the people who called and didn't talk made her ready to reach through the phone lines and rip their throats out. She finally broke down and got an unlisted phone number for the apartment. When I was a year or so old, the weird calls stopped.

"We ate breakfast at one of the tables in the bar. The morning Mom was murdered. It was a teacher's workday, so I didn't have school. Mom planned to clean, and she wanted me otherwise

occupied, so she would turn her music up and scrub the place until the whole;e bar gleamed. While I warmed our Danishes in the microwave, she lined up her cleaning supplies. Normally, I helped her, but she had seen a mouse scurrying across the floor when she closed the night before. She kept a clean place, and either because of Nellie or because there were no crumbs for mice to feast on, mice had never shown up before. She was determined to discover whatever brought that mouse in. She had just sat down and taken a bite out of the Danish when the phone rang. She rolled her eyes and got up to answer it. She answered it and said, 'Can you speak up? Can you say that again?' She came back to the table laughing because she made the cretin hang up. I asked her if the man had actually talked. You see, she thought it was someone trying to get up the courage to ask her out. She was laughing so hard she had trouble chewing. I asked her what the caller said, and I think, I only think, mind you, she said the word 'Run.' She shrugged and said she figured the calls would stop now that he had spoken. I remember telling her it was weird; she agreed with a laugh.

"It is the last memory I have of her. She had no makeup on, and her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She was wearing jean shorts, a faded red T-shirt, and blue flip-flops. I remember thinking that I hoped she would change before Dad got there to pick me up. She was laughing, and she spat out crumbs onto the floor. I told her she was feeding the mice. That made her laugh harder. That is how I remember her; she was so beautiful.

"I picked up my skateboard and left to meet Danny in the park. When I came back home for lunch, there were police cars with their blue lights flashing. I sat in a police cruiser until Dad showed up. While I sat in the car, I listened to the police talk to each other. They thought someone wanted cash. They assumed it was a junkie who killed her. It didn't make sense to me; Mom would have helped. I didn't have any other explanation; I did talk to an officer about our morning and the call. They said they would look into it; I don't know if they did or not. I haven't given it real thought. They were sure the shooter was a junkie, and I took their word for it. Dad started saying the same thing. I came to take it as fact that a junkie killed my mom. I need to rethink things."



Maude leaned back in her chair and told her son, "Go sit down. We need to talk." Her look was the one she used when she wanted him to leave the room so the grownups could speak in private, but she nodded her head towards the seat beside Chris. Apparently, he had graduated to the grown-up table. She waited until Ezra had made his way to his seat before continuing. "It sounds like the same person responsible for the terrorizing and death of my sister had a hand in the stalking of, if not the deaths of some, if not all, of your mothers." Even though her statement seemed as though she was stating the obvious, Maude looked around the room to make sure the brothers agreed with her. "I think we all have made a mistake in assuming a man. It feels like a woman to me."

Vin shook his head. "We don't know that. My mother and Nathan's mom were killed by a long-range shot fired from a rifle. That sounds like a hunter, and most hunters are men."

"I agree, and Eddie was stabbed to death. She was not just stabbed; her stomach was torn apart. I have always assumed a man killed her. I thought to do that much damage; it had to be a man. I told myself only a man would have the strength to rip her open like he did. But someone filled with rage could have done it. It is how the murders were committed over such a long time. It seems as though the man or woman either had a very real hatred for Mr. Larabee or did not want him to marry."

"Agreed," Chris answered when she paused to see if the brothers were following her logic. "Go on."

"I am not saying it is definitely a woman, but I do think we need to consider the possibility. I have been thinking about this for years. A man or a woman could be responsible for the phone calls and the games Eddie endured. And, what the madman...mad person did to Eddie took strength, so I have presumed it was a man who killed her. I am rethinking that. Someone with enough rage could do it. Sitting here listening to you men talk about your mothers, the thought that comes to me is to hold on to that much rage and not show it in their day-to-day life, calls for a lot of control."

"Let's start by layin' out what we know. The first person killed was Nathan's mom in what," he asked, calculating before anyone could answer. "1990. So we are looking at someone in their mid-fifties or older."

"I can't agree with your assumption that the killings started in 1990, Vin. You are taking Cassie Larabee's death off the table." Josiah spoke up.

"Her death does not match the iters. It appears to have been an accident." Vin argued.

"Appearances are deceiving." Ezra, having retaken his seat, interjected. "Someone could have caused the accident and discovered that causing an accident is a lot of work. Using a rifle is easier."

"That brings up the second point: Who has that level of skills?" asked JD.

Buck answered, "Around Four Corners? That is a long list. Add to the list, the people in Eagle Bend and the surrounding areas... A great deal of money is made during hunting season, and a lot of folks hire out as guides who take tourists out to hunt. Add in the ex-military who have settled in these parts and the gun enthusiasts who spend the weekends at Riley Gun Range honing their skills, that list becomes unmanageable."

"Not necessarily, Buck. We can use the parameters of age, like Vin said. Remove from the list anyone not around in 1990."

"Remove the ill and the infirm," Nathan added. "That is still a long list."

"The only way to whittle down a list is to make it. Ezra, you have the best handwriting of us all. Take notes. It looks like Mr. Botello left us some notepads over on that table, JD. Want to get one?" He waited until JD had done as requested and handed Ezra a notepad and a pen before going back to his seat. "Before we get started writing down names, I have to ask: Did everyone leave their phones in their room?"

"I have mine." Maude reached into her handbag and pulled it out.

"It should be safe, Ma'am." Buck smiled at her. "You don't need to be here. You won't know the people we will be bringing up."

"You are wrong, Mr. Wilmington. I need to be here for Eddie." No one contradicted her, and she prepared to listen, listening for any names Eddie may have mentioned.

Even though he was pleased his brothers and the judge had remembered the possibility of someone listening to them through their phones, Chris kicked himself for not asking the question sooner. He knew Nathan and Buck would remember, but he had not known if his other brothers or the judge would. "I hate saying this, and I don't think this to be true, but Dad's name needs to be at the top of the list. He could have made those shots, but I like to think I heard honest puzzlement in his voice when he showed us his poster."

Buck hated that Chris put their father's name on the list, but he did not object. If they were going to discover Mr. X's identity, they needed to put emotion aside and work with logic. "I agree. I don't see Dad having done the shootings, especially the twins, but he had access to the house, and chances are he had the technical know-how to install the older devices. I don't think we should rule him out just because he was our dad."

Nathan signaled his agreement with Chris and Buck by asking, "Has anyone looked at his rifles?"

Buck and Chris exchanged shakes of their heads. Then Buck answered. "He kept three in the gun safe in the library."

"There is no gun safe in the library."

"I know that Vin. I am trying to remember the last time I saw it." He searched his memories before saying, "I have been busy and haven't been in the library in ages. I don't recall seeing it when we searched for his files, but with the furniture being rearranged, I didn't notice its absence. He may have moved it to another place in the house or barns."

"No. I don't think so. A gun safe is kind of hard to miss. It is not in his room...It isn't in any of the barns. I don't know where it would be unless he has some hidden room that we haven't discovered it has been removed."

"So, Chris, you think someone removed it, maybe while we were at his funeral."

"Maybe. I don't see why, though."

Maude had told herself she would be quiet and listen to these men figure out who had killed her sister, but Eddie's voice rang out in her head. Games, the voice said, so she repeated it. "It's a game. To me, it feels like one of the senseless games Mr. X played."

Josiah nodded his agreement with Maude's words, then said, "It is very probable Mr. X is still playing games, but we can't rule out Landon from having moved it himself."

"Two things, Josiah. The first thing to ask is, why was it moved? The second is, how was it moved? That thing was heavy. I don't see anyone being able to move it himself."

"Nate, ya haven't done enough movin'. I don't see Mr. X as having an accomplice, so the chances are that whoever moved it had the right equipment. A dolly. Get it on the dolly and carry it right out. With sliders, he could have rearranged the furniture in no time."

"That sounds good, Vin, but even if he got it out of the house, how did he get it in the bed of a truck?"

"Ah would have used a U-Haul. The larger trucks have ramps."

"Still, the porch steps are a problem," Nathan argued.

"A ramp is easy enough to build. I don't see him using a pickup. There would have been too much risk in someone seeing it. I think you are right, Ezra. A U-Haul was used. Vin, can you check out moving companies in the area and see who rented what around the time of Dad's funeral?"

"I can use the new computer when we get back to the ranch, or if ya let me use yer laptop, Ezra, I can pull up a seat in the corner over there and get to work on it now."

When Nathan hung his head, cringing at the flagrant violation of laws Vin was about to commit, but kept his mouth shut, Vin grinned. His brother was learning that doing the right thing trumped doing the lawful thing. His grin widened when Ezra wordlessly handed him the keycard to his room. Taking it, he left the conference room.

"Ok, we have done all we can for the moment with Dad's name. I want to put another name." Chris didn't wait and blurted out, "My Uncle Curtis. In his office, he has a picture of him and my mother wearing medals they had won in a shooting competition they were in when they were sophomores at their school in Colorado. Uncle Curtis said he had competed against grown men and had come in second place, and my mother had won the women's division. He claimed that if he ever bothered to enter any contests around here, he would have won hands down. He said the only person who was better than him was his sister."

"Do you think he would have killed our mothers?"

Chris shrugged, "I don't know. I know he loved my mother. She was his twin. They were close, and he still grieves for her, but I don't see him picking up a rifle and killing someone. Uncle Curtis's weapon of choice was words. I don't see having the balls to kill someone. I definitely don't see him as having the patience to plan a successful murder. And more to the point, he had trouble with the TV remote; I doubt he could have walked into the house and planted the bugs."

"If Curtis goes on that list, you'd better put Amy... And Angie Delaney. There were not many sports for girls in high school in those days. I attended several competitions to watch Evie. Evie tried, but she did not see well enough to hit the long-range targets. It didn't matter who they were competing against; First prize always went to Cassie. Depending on the day, Angie took second place and Amy third place, or vice versa."



"Wait, you are talking about Miss Angie, the nurse?" Nathan felt stunned. He had a hard time reconciling the nurse he knew with the teenage sharpshooter Orrin described. But the day after Chris was shot, she had wanted to know whether anyone had been injured. She had used all the right words to say all the right things, but she had been hiding something. Orrin laughed at Nathan's shocked face. "It is hard to believe, isn't it?"

Chris stretched in his seat and looked around the table. The afternoon's many revelations had sapped them of the energy they needed to think properly. They all needed a break. "Mr. Botello arranged for snacks to be brought in if we need them. Why don't we eat? We can stretch our legs and clear our minds." As his brothers, Maude and Orrin, pushed their seats away from the conference table, he thought to himself That is my family. It wasn't just his brothers who were his family, but Maude and Orrin, and even though she wasn't here, Evie... The Maude of his memories, the Maude who he called mother, was replaced by the woman Ezra called mother. No matter Ezra's warnings that she would try to take their money, she was family and needed protecting.

Seeing her make her way to the door, he intercepted her. "Are you coming back?"

"Are you going to find the monster who murdered my sister?"

"We are hunting."

"Being here hurts. I want to be here, and I want to help, but I am not Eddie. Being brave and ferocious is hard for me, but I will stay as long as I am able."

"That is fair. Don't leave without telling us you are going."

"My sister named you the responsible one, so I will ask you to take care of my son. I have not been the mother he needed, but I think he turned out pretty good despite me. Don't you think?"

"I do."

She patted him on the arm as she walked away. She would be back for one last meeting with the brothers, and then she would pack her bags and disappear for a while. She needed to go home to visit her aunt in the nursing home. Then she would drive to Whistlestop to tell Eddie's story to the graves of her Ma and Pa. She would then pay her respects to all of her dead baby sisters. Maybe, after that, she could think of Eddie without the emptiness consuming her.