



## Memories- Regretted Actions

### *An Interlude in The Seven Brothers Saga*



Watching as Ezra slipped out of the living room, only to return, a few minutes later, wrapped in a blanket, Vin sat down on the hearth and began building a fire. The house wasn't cold, and even if there had been a chill in the air, he doubted the heat from his small fire would warm Ezra, but maybe seeing the flames burn in the hearth would make the room seem warmer.

Since coming home from the hospital, Ezra looked and acted as if he were cold and never appeared warm. He had seen Ezra check the thermostat when he thought no one was looking, and when he ventured out of the house, he returned with chattering teeth.

Nathan said it was a side effect of losing so much weight; Vin wasn't sure how much weight his brother had lost in the hospital, but it had to be a significant amount, as Ezra still appeared gaunt and tired easily. Of course, the way he ate, it would be summer before he gained the weight back, and then he'd probably start complaining about the heat. No, that was making it sound like Ezra was doing a lot of griping, and he wasn't. Once he realized he was the only one

feeling the cold, he quit complaining and started wearing heavy sweaters around the house and wrapping himself in a blanket when a sweater did not keep him warm enough.

Ezra hadn't let the cold winter sky keep him inside. Not that he'd caught him at it, but Vin had the sneaky suspicion that as soon as the house and no one was around to tell him to get back in bed, Ezra went to the barn. Wasn't his business, but if Ezra got himself kicked by one of the horses and ended up back in the hospital, Chris would have a cow.

Vin poked at the fire for a moment, making sure all the logs would catch, then he turned to watch his brothers find their way into the den and claim their usual spots. JD grabbed the computer chair and began a card game on Vin's computer while Josiah sank into one of the recliners and Buck into the other. Cocooned in his blanket, Ezra claimed one end of the long couch, Chris the other, and Nathan lay sprawled across the love seat. Sitting together, with Jack sleeping at Josiah's feet, things looked as they did every evening at the ranch. The fact that no one bothered to turn on the television and they sat with scowls on their faces in angry silence told another story.

Vin understood his brothers' anger and he knew if he had a mirror, he'd see it reflected on his face, but supper had been a bitch to get through with all the scowling and snarling. He didn't plan on spending the rest of the evening that way.

The kids, who had done their best to ruin Inez's Christmas when they spray-painted their message of hate across the doors and windows of her restaurant, had been caught doing the same to the walls of Tony Jimenez's garage. The seven of them should have been feeling relieved. Instead, they were angrier than ever. The kids were just that, kids. Worse, the kids who had been caught claimed to know nothing about the vandalism at the school or the spree of robberies at convenience stores and diners.

Ranging from Nathan's near murder to ugly words spray-painted on businesses, nothing linked them to the crimes, recently besieging Four Corners, except the message of hate. Tracking down the culprits would have been easier if only one group of people had been targeted. That wasn't the case. Houses and cars were spray-painted with Nazi symbols along with racial slurs. No one person or group appeared to claim responsibility for the attacks, and the media, ignoring Four Corners' long history of multi-ethnicity, was reporting these crimes as though Four Corners was a hotbed of racial injustice.

Law enforcement had been pinning its hopes on someone catching someone in the act. An off-duty deputy had done just that; he caught two boys spray painting racial slurs. Only, as the Sheriff said, the vandals were merely boys with too much time on their hands and too little parental supervision. He said they were mimicking what they saw reported in the news and held out little hope the boys would lead them to the men who had attacked Nathan.

The brothers were all in foul moods since the sheriff called with the news, and what had been a great day was ending on a sour note. Either knowing the law about releasing the names of juveniles or because he wasn't sure how the Larabee brothers were going to react, the Sheriff had not told them the names of the boys. Probably a good thing too. Chris was royally pissed and given his temper it was easy to imagine him storming over to the boys' homes and having a 'talk' with them and their parents.

Buck would probably help him; he was not only angry about Nathan's treatment at the hands of a lynching mob (Were two men enough for them to be called a mob?) but he had spent most of the holidays worried about Inez's safety; the ever-smiling Buck Wilmington had quit smiling the moment he saw the fear in Inez's face. He had practically camped on her doorstep, and he would likely still be there if Inez, demonstrating remarkable fortitude, had not overcome her apprehension and decisively declared that enough was enough. Showing Buck her shotgun, she had explained she was fine, and it'd be a pity if such a 'nice, sweet, man was the first person she ever shot'.

Vin understood Chris' and Buck's reactions to the news that the vandals were twelve-year-olds. They were angry with the kids and felt the boys needed something more than a stern talking to, but their real anger lay with their inability to find a lead to the men who had attacked Nathan. They were all beginning to feel as though they were butting their heads against a wall as they searched for the men who had almost succeeded in killing Nathan. It seemed the people of Four Corners were like the three monkeys, with hands over their eyes, mouth, and ears; no one had seen or heard anything, and if they knew something, they sure weren't telling any of the Larabee brothers. It was damn frustrating.

And tonight, their frustration had been taken out on each other at the supper table. Chris, after, handing out assignments for everyone for the morning, asked Buck if he thought he could convince Harris to tell him who the boys were, saying there was a chance they knew more than they were saying and even if they didn't know anything, they sure as Hell needed the errors of their ways explained to them.

Then Nathan said he didn't think Chris's yelling at the kids would teach them much, and Chris had said he wasn't thinking about talking; he was thinking about taking them out to the barn and giving them a tanning that would have them standing for a week or more. Then the conversation turned heated, with everybody shouting their two cents' worth at each other.

Vin personally sided with Chris and Buck; those boys needed their behavior changed, or they would be in real trouble in a few years. Even the Preacher (He couldn't call Josiah "Doc" because it would be just too confusing with Nathan being a doctor, too.) was mighty Old Testament (the Preacher's term) about it. Surprisingly, it was Nathan who took the other side. He firmly told Buck and Chris (and the rest of them, too) to leave the boys alone. He said they were just kids, and all children made mistakes. He went on to say, looking each one of them in the eyes, he was damned sure they had done something as kids they would just soon not have done and would die of shame if anyone found out. Supper was finished in silence. After the dishes were cleared, JD, who had been quiet while his brothers argued about the merits of spanking, opened his mouth. He waffled his way around the question but finally asked: What was the one thing they did as kids that they truly regretted having done?

The question stopped them all in their tracks, making them think, but it didn't clear any of the tension in the air. They might be sitting in the den as some show of unity against the world, but everyone was on edge. Without a doubt, unless something happened to break the tension, they'd once again start in on each other.



"JD," Vin almost laughed when JD jumped in his chair. "When ya asked if we have ever done things as kids we later regretted, ya brought up some memories."

"Like what?" JD swiveled around in his chair to ask.

"I got to admit, no one has ever accused me of being an angel. I probably played more pranks than I shoulda, but I can't think of one prank that keeps me up at night. I hung around with some really bad folks, and if Harry wasn't around to set me straight, I'd probably have done something by now, which would have me sitting in a jail somewhere rather than here with you all. I don't like to dwell on how different my life coulda been. I hate to admit it, but I've done some things I ain't really proud of. Most of 'em don't bother me none, but there is one thing I wish I hadn't done. I did it when I was about six. It wasn't anything big, in the grand scheme of things, but it bothers me anyway, and I'm sorry for doin' it."

"What did you do?" JD asked softly, afraid Vin would rethink sharing his confession and keep his mouth shut.

"After my mom was murdered, I spent a few weeks at this... I guess you'd call it an orphanage or something. I felt like it was more like a holding pen, somewhere the state could put kids until they figured out what to do with them. I was luckier than most when the Phillips took me. They were good people, and they treated me just like one of their own kids. They got paid for taking care of me, but they put the money into a bank account for me... a college fund. When Terry lost his job, they could have used the money, but they didn't touch it. When Terry told me they couldn't keep me, he thought they were doing the best thing for me. He said there were lots of families who would love to have a little boy like me; families who had the money to take care of me and give me the things a kid deserves. I think he was overly optimistic about how the child welfare system works."

Chris's head jerked up at that. He knew without a doubt Vin had not intended to reveal anything, but Vin's slightly wistful tone, even more than his words, told a story all in itself.

Vin shook off the melancholy those memories produced; he was not talking to depress everyone, but to cheer them up. "Anyway, the Phillips had three kids. The boys were a lot older than me, and I don't remember much about them, but they had this little girl, everyone called her Honey, but I don't know if it was her real name. Anyone mentions angels and I immediately think of her. She had long, golden hair reaching all the way to her waist in thick curls. Her mom would spend every morning combing her hair and putting these big bows in it forever. Wherever we went, people would stop and make a fuss over her. She was younger than me and followed me

everywhere, and I guess I was in awe of her, just like everyone else was. I never thought of her as being a nuisance or anything. If anything, it overwhelmed me. She thought I was great when it was very obvious that she was the special one.”

Chris saw the smile tugging at Vin’s lips, and he relaxed a fraction. Maybe this wasn’t a story to bring tears to his eyes or to further harden his heart against his father’s actions.

“One day, Terry took me and his boys to the barber shop to get a summer haircut. Now, I had been in a barber shop before and wasn’t particularly worried about getting a haircut, but as I watched the barber shave those boys bald, I panicked. All I could think was that my momma wouldn’t recognize me if I didn’t have any hair. I knew she was dead, and I knew she wasn’t coming back, but I guess part of me wanted to think maybe there had been some sort of mistake and she would come knocking on the door one day. She always told me I had beautiful hair, and I guess her words stuck in my mind.

“When it was my turn, I pitched a world-class fit. I remember Terry kneeling and talking to me. He said it would be hot all summer, and my hair would get sticky and sweaty. I didn’t care. He told me I’d be swimming every day, and my hair would get in my eyes. I didn’t care. He finally got tired of talking to me. He swung me up in the chair and told me in no uncertain terms I was getting a haircut, and I did. I cried and cried. That night, I refused to come out of my room to eat supper. I didn’t want anyone to see the way I looked. Honey, though, came into my room and tried to cheer me up by saying I didn’t look bad and how she wished she was a boy.”

“I can see where this is heading,” Buck interrupted with a laugh.

“Shut up, Buck.” JD could see where the story was heading, too, but he wanted to hear Vin tell it.

“Honey said she got tired of having her mother messin’ with her hair and thought if the boys got to have a summer cut, she should too. I offered to cut it for her. I’d like to say I only did it because she asked, but in the back of my head, I knew Terry and his wife would be really upset. So, I got a pair of scissors and cut her hair. Off came every long strand, and she giggled the whole time. ‘Bout the time I got finished, Honey was all but bald. She had little tufts of hair sticking out here and there, but her long golden mane lay on the floor around her. Terry came up with my supper just as I was finishing.

I remember the plate went flyin’, sendin’ food all over the floor, and how all these little green peas rolled across the floor and under the bed. Honey had been so proud of her haircut, but when she saw her dad’s face, she ran to the mirror and took a look at herself; she realized she didn’t look like Honey anymore. Her lower lip started quiverin’ and she turned around to look at me... she had tears in her eyes... even though she told her folks she wanted her hair cut and even though I didn’t get into any more trouble than she did, I felt like a ...worm... a real lowlife. I hope I wouldn’t have done it if she hadn’t said she wanted her hair cut, but I whacked away on her hair, knowin’ how unhappy her folks were going to be. I did it for revenge. I didn’t think about her getting’ hurt. She cried all summer when we had to go somewhere, and it was my fault.”

“Remind me, boy, to never tell you to get a haircut,” Buck joked.

Vin stretched and grinned at Buck, “I get haircuts. I just like to do it in my own time.”

“Well, I hope you’ve learned how to treat a lady.” Buck replied laughing when Vin arched an eyebrow as though to say, ‘Well, of course I’ve learned.’

“What you did wasn’t so bad... I mean her hair grew back, and everything.” JD said quietly.

“You didn’t see her eyes, JD. She was younger than me and thought I was someone special, and I hurt her. I shoulda have known better.”

JD frowned, obviously thinking something over. After a moment’s hesitation during which he looked as though he wanted to say something, he turned back to the computer.

“Things you wished you regretted having done... well, I got one I sure wish I’d done differently,” Buck began. “Living where I did, I reckon I saw a lot more than most kids my age. My mom tried to shield me from most of it, but she couldn’t watch me and the bar at the same time, so I reckon I learned a lot more than she wanted me to. Anyone want a beer?” Buck interrupted himself and, without bothering to count hands, went into the kitchen and returned with seven beers. Ignoring Nathan’s scowl, he tossed each of his brothers a beer. Ezra had finished taking almost all of his medicine, and if there was a problem with him drinking one beer, then Nathan could just speak up.

"Is this going to be one of your tall tales, Buck?" Chris asked when Buck finished handing out the beer and got resituated in his recliner. He was suspicious when it came to Buck and stories.

"I wish. No, this is the gospel truth, but if you want another story, I can tell you about my time with the Smith twins," he tried to hide his grin as he took a sip of the icy beer.

"No... Reckon the truth would be a nice change of pace, seeing how it's coming from you." Chris said.

"Christopher, you wound me. You know all my stories are true."

"Yeah," Chris snorted. "Like I believe you when it comes to women. Remember the one about you and Judy Lynne; it never happened. It was physically impossible."

"Chris... Chris... What can I say other than – your education is sorely lacking," he laughed and ducked the pillow Chris threw his way.

"Are you two going to argue, or tell us the story?" Josiah asked.

"Well... seeing as how you asked so nicely..."

"Buck, tell the story, or I will go online and talk with someone with something to say." JD spun around to glare at his older brother.

"All right... all right. As I was saying, I was exposed to a lot... about... nature... way early in life. I never could quite figure out what Mom thought was OK for me to know and what would upset her. For example, she didn't want to be around people using bad language, and I never used any around her—don't know what she would have done, but it was just prudent not to use bad words and risk upsetting Mom needlessly. While bad language upset Mom, she kept the doors open to anyone who needed someone to talk to or a place to sleep, and she let in some real scummy people, the type of people good folk would cross the street to avoid bumping into."

"Your mother loved everyone." Chris smiled at Buck. It was true. Rosie Wilmington was one of those people who felt it was her job to take care of the world, and may the bastard who took her life, never find a moment's peace.

"That she did. She was cool. She never got mad or yelled at me... except once." Buck could feel the heat in his cheeks and considered not telling the story, but he had started and somehow not finishing it would make it sound worse than it had been, and it had been bad enough. One day, he would learn to think before he began talking.

"When I was eleven, I was tall and well, I guess you could say I was ... well developed, especially for my age."

"Too much information, Buck."

"It's pertinent, Chris." He waited until Chris shook his head in mock disgust and continued, "At eleven, I was starting to notice there was a mighty attractive opposite sex. Unfortunately, the ladies I noticed and felt interested in didn't want to have anything to do with an eleven-year-old, no matter how mature I was. That all changed one day when Mom had to go to some all-day meeting... I think it was taxes or something. Whenever she had to leave for any length of time, Mom would have Hal take over the bar, and his wife would come upstairs and sit with me."

"You and his wife?" Nathan sat upright, the disbelief clear in his voice and face. He knew the couple, and there was no way... no way at all.

"NO! Rita was like another mom. Oh Nathan! You have a dirty mind."

"Me? You're the one telling this story."

"You're the one interrupting."

"Fine, finish your story," Nathan huffed.

"So where was I...? Oh yeah. This time Rita couldn't make it, and the only person Mom could find was this fifteen-year-old girl... Let's call her Jane. Jane was the daughter of ... a neighbor, and in my entire life, she had not said more than three or four words to me. Kinda like Chris except Chris doesn't like to talk, and Jane didn't like to talk to me."

"A woman with taste," Nathan joked.

"No, it wasn't like that. I was four years younger than her, and so I was beneath her notice." He sipped at his beer, letting the suspense grow. "It was raining that day, and we were stuck inside. Jane watched TV all morning, and I watched Jane. I guess she noticed me noticing her because after lunch, she asked me if I wanted to see her breasts. I thought I had died and gone to heaven. And to make a really long and extremely interesting story short, Jane was thinking about doing it with her boyfriend and wanted to see what a boy looked like. It was a case of you show me yours and I'll show you mine."

"And that's what you regret doing?" JD asked.

"N-n-n-o-o, it's not. What I regret is we moved things on to my mom's bedroom; mine was a mess, and Mom wasn't due home for a long while."

"Your Mom caught you," Chris guessed.

"I prayed God would just take me right there and then so I wouldn't have to look at Mom's face. He didn't, and I dressed faster than the speed of light. All I could think was that Mom had seen me naked, and she hadn't seen me naked since I was old enough to take baths by myself. The next thing I know, Mom has us both sitting at the kitchen table and explaining the facts of life. She said she didn't want to know what all we had done, but it was obvious we were in over our heads. She must have talked for three hours.

"I don't think I heard a word she said. All I could think was she'd seen me naked, and not only had she seen me naked, but she had seen me naked in her bed. I was sure she must think I was some kind of pervert. To this day, when I'm going to ...you know, do it... I make sure the door is locked. Goodness, the look on her see her face when she walked in, I'll never forget."

"So, if you had to do it over again, you wouldn't have done it?" Vin smirked.

"Not in my mom's room, I wouldn't. It was a long time before I could look at her without my face feeling as though it had caught fire. You know, though, it was the last time I had a babysitter."

JD didn't laugh with the rest of his brothers. He worried at a finger, chewing on a hangnail. When the laughter died down, he began talking, his eyes never seeking out those of any of his brothers.

"I stole a hundred dollars." There he had said it. Would they understand his remorse, or would they be disgusted and ask him to leave? Ezra had stolen, but he had given it back, and Ezra had wanted to use the money to save his mother. He wanted the money to buy some games.

"Why?" Buck's gentle voice sounded loud in the room.

JD shrugged his shoulders in a quick, jerky move. "I don't know... Mom had bought me a used Nintendo for Christmas. It was so cool. I only had a couple of games, but I played them all the time. Then one day, this kid at school says he wants to sell his old Nintendo games. He had fifteen games and was going to sell them all for one hundred dollars. I didn't check out the games to see if they were still good, and I certainly didn't know if a hundred dollars was a good price or not. All I knew was I wanted those games. Usually, I had some rainy-day money tucked away, but I had never had a hundred dollars at one time, and even if I had that kind of money, this was after Christmas, and I was broke. Every morning, I would ask Mom for her spare change, and then I'd race to school to make sure Ryan hadn't sold the games.

"This went on for a week. At the end of the week, I only had two dollars and thirty-five cents. Friday afternoon, Ryan told me I'd have to get the money by Monday or he'd find someone else to buy his games. I could have asked him to sell me one game – Mom would have given me enough for one game, but it never occurred to me. All I could think about was the fun I'd have with those games."

Buck was torn. He wanted to say it was okay and JD didn't need to tell them anymore, but this was JD's story, and if he needed to share, then Buck needed to let him.

"We didn't go to church every Sunday. We didn't go on most Sundays. Mom was usually too tired to go, and I didn't like going without her. Around Christmas, though, Mom liked to go to church. She said she liked to go then because the preacher wasn't busy talking about sin. She said she liked to hear the story about the baby Jesus and the message of how he is the hope for mankind; she also liked the songs. She had a beautiful voice." He felt the sting of tears in his eyes. Would the loss of his mother ever stop hurting? He blinked back the tears, hoping no one noticed. He didn't want the others to think he was a baby. "She would be so ashamed of me if she knew what I did," he whispered. He cleared his throat and, in a shaky voice, began again. "That Sunday, I didn't want to go to church; I was too busy being miserable about not having the money for the games. Momma insisted, and I sat beside her, pouting. She knew something was up and tried to get me to tell her what was wrong, but I just kept telling her I was fine.

"Finally, she gave up, and by the time the service started, she was pretty much ignoring me and was following the service instead. When they started passing the collection plate, I had an idea. I argued with myself. I told myself I would go to hell if I stole from Jesus. In the end, when the plate was passed to me, I realized no one was looking and I took some money. Momma never realized what I had done. Monday, I went to school, and I told Ryan I had the money to buy

the games. I went by his house after school and bought them... I told Momma Ryan gave them to me because he couldn't use them anymore... All the trouble to get the games, and within a month, I had them, and the Nintendo packed up. I couldn't play it without thinking about how the money should have gone to help the poor. Momma asked about it a couple of times, and I lied and told her I played with it while she was still at work, but when she was home, I wanted to spend time with her instead... She told me I was a real special kid and she thanked God every day for me."

Josiah heard the genuine shame in JD's voice and understood, as the boy did not know that this time of exchanging stories had been elevated to a new level. Vin and Buck both shared something they regretted, but while their admissions had brought a deep blush of shame to their faces, their stories had not caused their voices to shake as they spoke, nor had it brought tears to their eyes. Vin had chosen his story to entertain his brothers, as had Buck. JD had dug deep into his soul and had shared an extremely personal experience. Originally, Josiah had thought he would follow Vin's and Buck's stories with something equally cute, but if he ignored JD's painful confession, the others would also.

Josiah looked around at his brothers. The amused chuckles heard after Vin's story and Buck's tall tale were not echoing in the air. The room was silent as each brother digested JD's story, understanding his shame, and wanting to say something to reassure, but not knowing what to say without trivializing his act.

Nathan studied the shine on his shoes as though he were wondering whether they were buffed to the highest possible shine. Josiah knew that Nathan was not seeing the shoes. Instead, he was reliving each time he mentioned how their father could not abide a thief, wondering how JD must have felt hearing each comment and feeling it was directed at him. Buck, who had been sitting on the recliner with his long legs stretched out and a beer bottle gripped loosely in his hand when JD began speaking, now sat with his feet planted on the floor in front of him, his arms resting on his knees, his eyes resting on JD. Obviously, he wanted to reach out and pull JD into a hug, but something kept him still. Was it because he was embarrassed to show his emotions? No, this was Buck... he was probably having problems understanding how Jenna Dunne had refused to have any contact with Landon even when things had been desperate. Had she been scared of him, or had she been irrationally stubborn in wanting to keep JD's and her life separate from Landon Larabee? They might never learn Jenna's reasons, but Buck was greatly bothered that she stayed in poverty rather than ask her son's father for help.

Someone was going to have to say something, Josiah thought, as his eyes searched the room. The silence was dragging on too long, and JD was bound to see it as condemnation—he hadn't even looked up to check how his brothers took his story. Maybe it was better that way; if he did look up, he would see the scowl darkening Chris's face and think it was meant for him. It wasn't Josiah who was sure of it. Josiah closed his eyes and sighed. It was going to be up to him to speak.

"I hit my grandfather."

JD's head shot up. Josiah was always so calm and well ... nice. He looked around to see if the others looked as startled as he knew he did. He couldn't see Ezra's face as he was all bundled up in his blanket, but Chris was nodding slightly as though he suspected Josiah would confess to having done something violent, and the others didn't look too surprised either.

Josiah cleared his throat and began speaking. His eyes did not meet any of those of his brothers; instead, they were locked on the past. "Eduardo Ramon Sanchez was not an easy man to live with. He had been born into one of the wealthiest families in California, a family that traced its roots back to the Conquistadors. In the spring of 1949, his family sent him to Europe; the plan was that he would return to attend Harvard in the fall. Imagine their surprise when he returned from Europe with a seventeen-year-old, pregnant, German wife from a no-name family. What could they do? She, obviously, got pregnant to trap him into a most disagreeable marriage. They were Catholics, and the shame of a divorce in their family would be too great a burden to bear, and even though they were sure to have considered an annulment, there was a baby to consider. As much as it galled them to have to accept a no-name peasant girl into their family, it would have been far worse to cast out her and the baby she bore. And in the year my mother was born, this very old, very proud, very wealthy family made a foolish business move that caused their wealth to disappear. They were left with nothing except their name and their pride."



Josiah took a long sip of his beer. The rational part of his brain told him he shouldn't be drinking, but he had automatically reached for one of the beers Buck passed around. Seeing his bottle was almost empty, he sternly reminded himself that he would have to slow down or switch to something else. He looked up from his bottle and saw JD watching him, and the boy reminded him why he had begun his story. He continued, "Maybe if my Great-grandfather had not had a heart attack and died, he would have found some way to salvage their money, and perhaps if my grandmother hadn't died of childbed fever, she would have been able to keep Grandfather from turning bitter, but those things happened. You have to understand that my grandfather's family may have lived in California, but they thought of themselves as Spanish... Spanish aristocracy. My grandfather went not only from being the privileged son of a wealthy family to a pauper, but he was thrown into a society where those who spoke with an accent were looked down upon."

"Must have been hard on him," Nathan spoke almost to himself, his mind on the times Josiah had laid a hand on his shoulder in mute understanding of what he was dealing with. He assumed his brother was offering support, but it sounded as though Josiah had problems of his own to overcome.

"It was. Without an education, he was reduced to taking manual labor jobs to support his mother and his daughter, something he was unused to doing. Other men may have turned away from God, but the harder life hit him, the more religious Grandfather became. He saw himself as Job with God testing him with each new obstacle. He welcomed each test. When my mother found herself pregnant with me, she told him she had been raped. He wasn't angry; he saw her rape as another test God was giving him. He never questioned her; he could never have imagined his beautiful Anna had been anything less than chaste. Grandfather wanted her to become a nun, but when she began her fight for the rights of the migrant workers, he reluctantly decided there was more than one way to do God's bidding. Of course, when I came along, her being a nun was out of the picture. Mama certainly didn't date, and if she was interested in men, she didn't show it; so, when she announced she was pregnant again, it came as a great shock to both me and my grandfather. If she had said she had once again been raped Grandfather would have believed her, but she didn't. If she had said she was going to marry her lover, Grandfather would have accepted it, but she made it plain from the start she had not only not been raped but she had no plans to marry. She wouldn't even name the father of her child."

"Why not?" Vin asked.

"She said the baby's father had another life... They fought night and day...my grandfather and my mother. He wanted her to feel shame, but she didn't. She told me that she loved the baby growing inside of her, and it was my responsibility to love her and to help take care of her... Mama was sure she was going to have a daughter, and I never questioned her about it. As the months passed by, my mother grew radiant, and my grandfather grew irrational. At least, that is how I saw it then. Now, it's easier to see his side. He must have stayed up nights, wondering how his beautiful Anna managed to get pregnant not once, but twice. She never dated, and was never seen with men unless it was at work and other people were around."

Chris wanted to ask if Landon Larabee was the baby's father, but something in Josiah's face kept him from asking the question, just as it kept him from asking where the baby was now. Josiah said his mother had drowned; had the baby died with her? He would find out, but now was not the time to ask those questions.

"One day, Grandfather slapped my mother. She had blood dripping down her face, and I saw red. I threw myself at him, screaming for him to leave her alone. I was in a rage, and my fists were flying. I hadn't reached my full height yet, and he was still taller and bigger than me, but I was fueled by anger at the way he had been treating my mother.

"I remember my mother calling my name, begging me to stop, and when I did, I saw blood dripping down my grandfather's face. I backed away from him, surprised by my attack on him, but not at all sorry. I told him he was never to touch my mother again."

"That's not too bad... I mean you hit him; I would have, too." JD said when it became plain that Josiah had told all he planned to share.

"You asked, what was the one thing we did we regretted the most. I hit my grandfather. I should not have done that, and if I hadn't, then other things would have turned out differently. That day, I not only learned I am very capable of violence, but I also broke the bond I had with my grandfather." He sank back into his seat, finished off his beer, and fought off his desire to get up and find something to drink that was stronger than beer. Maybe, if he had not hit his grandfather,



he could have stayed and taken care of Hannah. His decision to hit rather than talk put him on a path he couldn't get off. As soon as he finished high school, he left home, and the army had taken him to distant lands. By the time he returned, it was too late, and Hannah's life was ruined.

One wrong decision should not matter so much, but sometimes they did.

Nathan looked over at JD and saw that the kid did not understand. "JD, sometimes the things we regret the most are not the things which are our great sins, but just things we did. That little girl of Vin's, her hair will grow back, and if she remembers him cutting it off, it will probably be with a smile, a funny family story, but Vin remembers the look on her face when she saw herself in the mirror. And while Buck probably doesn't regret getting in bed with his babysitter, he regrets that his mom saw a side, no pun intended, of him, she wasn't ready to see. We all do things we regret."

"You, Doctor, somehow I doubt that," Ezra spoke up for the first time that evening from his spot on the couch.

Nathan bristled at the use of his title rather than his name and at the tone of Ezra's voice. He came close to snapping at Ezra. His use of his title rather than his name was not the same as Vin calling him Doc. He felt sure Ezra did it to irritate him, and one day he would have to call him on it, but not right then. Making JD understand was more important than telling Ezra to use his name. He turned back to JD as he answered. "I've done things which still bother me. I think, at least it's true for me, it's the little things that bother us more than the big things."

"So, what is your regret?" JD asked. He understood what Nathan was saying, but no matter what he said, the simple truth was that while the others said they had done things they regretted, their actions were understandable, and his were criminal. Vin had been just a kid and had done as the little girl asked. Buck had experimented, and experimentation was natural. Josiah defended his mother, and his actions were admirable. He, on the other hand, stole from a church. How could his theft be defended?

"I cheated on a test," Nathan admitted.

"That's not so bad." JD felt like throwing up. He had admitted to a felony, and his brothers were admitting to regretting the little things they had done. What did they think of him?

"It is to me." Nathan could feel his face burning with shame, but continued, "I was in the tenth grade when I decided I wanted to be a doctor. When I made that decision, there was no going back and changing my mind. I was going to be a doctor, or I was going to be nothing. I focused on my goal. Everything I did was with an eye to how my action would look to the admissions committee, with whom I hoped I would be talking."

"Sounds like you were driven," Josiah interjected.

"I was, I guess I still am, but I don't want it to sound as though I didn't have fun or anything," he grinned sheepishly when both Buck and Chris snorted. "I was determined to do everything I could to make myself the best candidate for medical school. At the beginning of my senior year, I realized Alex Compton and I were both in the running for class valedictorian. Our GPAs were so close that any test could change which of us was in the lead.

"One day, during basketball season, I came home late from a game, and I went straight to bed without doing any of my homework. The next day, my history teacher asked for the homework to be sent up for a grade. Only three or four people had done it, and to say she hit the ceiling is an understatement. She lectured us for fifteen minutes about how, even though basketball games were fun, and everyone enjoyed going, especially since we were in the playoffs, our schoolwork came first.

She told us we needed to learn that doing our schoolwork was more important than having fun. She said for us to take out a piece of paper, clear our desks, and get ready to take a test. I panicked because I hadn't read the chapter, and knew I wouldn't do well on it. I raised my hand and asked if this was going to count as a test grade or as a quiz. She turned to me and said, 'I said test, and I meant test.'

"You had old lady Carmichael, didn't you?" Buck asked and then, not bothering to wait for Nathan's reply, said, "She was such a battle-ax."

"Maybe," he answered, wanting to agree, but his sense of honesty forced him to admit that he learned a lot in her class. He sighed, "A bad quiz grade I could have made up, but a bad test grade would ruin my average, and I knew Alex didn't have Mrs. Carmichael for history, and he wouldn't have to take a surprise test. All I could think was he'd be valedictorian, and there went my chance at medical school."

"She wrote the questions on the board, and with each question, my panic grew. I didn't know any of the answers. I was not just going to fail the test; I was going to make a zero. I looked around the room, and very few of us were writing, so I knew most everyone was in the same boat as I was, but knowing I wasn't alone didn't make me feel any better. I guess the panic was easy to read on my face because Lois Hollister moved her paper so I could read her answers. I read her answers, paraphrased them, and made them my own. I passed up my paper along with the rest...

"I thought I would feel better, but I didn't. I kept wondering what Dad would say. I didn't have to wonder; I knew. I could feel my heart racing as Mrs. Carmichael flipped through the papers. I wish I could say I was making plans to go up to her desk, tell her what I had done, and take my medicine like a man, but I wasn't. I sat in my seat and prayed she wouldn't find out what I did. And you know... after she looked through the papers, she tossed them all in the garbage without grading them or anything. She told us she wanted us to understand that you never knew what was going to happen in life. Life, real life and not school, constantly throws surprises at us and the best thing we can do is to be prepared for anything and everything..." Nathan chewed on his lower lip, remembering the long-ago lecture.

"Then it didn't matter you cheated," JD said.

"Of course it mattered. Just because she didn't count the grade doesn't change the fact that I cheated."

JD sighed; Nathan didn't get it. Cheating on a test that hadn't even been graded was nothing compared to stealing from God.

Ezra's eyes darted from JD to Nathan and back again. Anyone watching him who knew what to look for would see the sheer disbelief in Ezra's green eyes. He didn't disbelieve Nathan's story, far from it. The shame, hovering over Nathan as he talked, was plain for all to see. He deeply felt remorse and regret for his actions those many years ago, and undoubtedly, he woke from dreams in which his deceit had been exposed for the world to see. It might not seem like a great sin in the greater scheme of things, but its commission gnawed at Nathan's conscience. He believed Nathan's sincerity in saying this act was his greatest regret; Nathan was a good man, and it was hard to believe he had ever done anything bad. What he couldn't believe was that Nathan thought his confession would help JD. JD had revealed what he truly regretted, but his regret was ... criminal. As sincere as Nathan was, he still left JD alone with a confession of a deed (at least to young John David) worse than anyone else's.

If anyone bothered to remind JD, which, surprisingly, no one had, his theft had been more recent and of a far larger amount. His theft had been made as an adult and not a child. He could point out facts, but he suspected JD would brush it away, saying something about him using the money to help his mom, and they really couldn't compare the two thefts.

He sighed when he saw JD's shining eyes. After his confession, John David felt honestly ashamed. If someone didn't say something, the young man would leave the room feeling he had dishonored the Larabee name. That would not be right. Of all of them, JD was the most innocent and pure. He could not be allowed to leave the room with his misconception.

No one was leaping into the growing silence, and in reality, if they were taking turns sharing, then only he and Chris were left. He doubted Chris would open his mouth and contribute to the conversation. Even if Chris spoke up, his confession would probably be like Nathan's confession of being less than perfect. It would be left up to him to say something to ease John David's mind and reassure him he was not alone in doing truly regrettable things. The Lord knew he had plenty of regrets, which would put JD's minor sin into perspective.

"When Ah was twelve, Ah got involved with drugs." He didn't stop when he heard John David's sudden exclamation, but resolutely continued, "Ah suppose Ah could say Ah did so because Ah wanted to fit in or say Ah did, as a mattuh of youthful experimentation, but the truth was Ah liked the way they made me feel. My cousin had a lot of friends, and one day, her boyfriend offered me some stuff. Ah took what he offered. Ah felt like Ah was part of the gang and to be one of them... to have friends...to be accepted... that was something."

"Do you still use drugs?" Chris asked.

"No," Ezra answered. He had taken pain medication in the hospital, but he knew Chris knew about those things and was not referring to that. Instead, he asked if he still had a problem. "Ah don't use drugs, but they call me. Their call is not so persistent now, but Ah know it would be easy to go back to them."

"What keeps you from using them?" Josiah asked.

Ezra shrugged. "Ah loved the way certain drugs make me feel. Ah loved the way Ah was welcomed into a group... didn't mattuh the group was a group of losers... Ah belonged. But Ah don't like the way drugs took mah will away. Ah liked how they made me feel, but Ah didn't like what they made me. Am Ah making sense?"

"I think so," JD answered.

"How did you get off of them?" Buck asked. Ezra's time in the hospital notwithstanding, he always seemed in complete control of himself. It was hard to imagine him taking anything, but maybe he had learned control as a way to fight his need for drugs.

Ezra scrubbed at his face, not wanting to answer the questions, but he had begun this and needed to finish it. "Ah spent every bit of money Ah could win off mah cousin and her friends on buying whatever Ah could afford, and when Ah didn't have the cash Ah did other things. One day Ah found mahself in a situation beyond mah control... Ah decided Ah never wanted to be in similar circumstances. Ah quit."

"Just like that," Nathan asked. It wasn't that he didn't believe Ezra had taken drugs; the man looked too uncomfortable during his confession to have been making it up, and it did explain his aversion to taking pain medicine, but it had been his experience that people did not quit just like that.

"No, Doctor, not just like that, but Ah did quit, and Ah no longer indulge in that particular vice.

"What happened to make you quit?" JD asked.

"That, John David, is a story for another time." His voice was light and teasing, and a smile was on his face, but he wouldn't meet anyone's eyes. Pulling his blanket around him a little tighter, even though the fire Vin started was burning high and the room was quite warm, he pushed himself into the couch as the cushions allowed.

Chris hadn't been planning on saying anything. If he had realized when he settled down on the couch that everyone was going to start bearing their souls, he would have found some excuse to go check on the horses. Now, though, he was stuck. There was a challenge in the air which had not been there when Vin began speaking, and even if he could find a suitable answer to take him off the hook and get him out of the room without losing too much face, he wasn't sure if he would leave.

"I have many regrets," he began, then stopped when he saw the look of horror in Buck's eyes. He knew Buck thought he would talk about staying that one extra night in Mexico. If there existed a way that would allow him to turn back time, he would in an instant, but there wasn't. He would have to learn to live without them. "But your question was which one thing we did when we were kids that we regret?" he asked JD.

"Yeah," JD watched Chris with open worry in his eyes. He had not missed the look in Buck's eyes; Buck had been afraid of what Chris was going to say. He wasn't stupid and had figured out enough to know Chris had once blamed Buck for his family's destruction, but he thought Chris was over it and had forgiven Buck for whatever had happened.

"I guess sixteen is still a kid then," Chris spoke more to himself than to his brothers. "You can't tell a sixteen-year-old he is still a kid, though. At least you couldn't tell me. I thought I knew everything."

"Oh hell, Chris, you were born thinking you knew everything," Nathan said. He noticed how pale Buck had become when he thought Chris was going to bring up Sarah and Adam. Chris was trying to let go; why couldn't Buck?

Chris nodded his head in agreement, "Suppose I was, but I was a real smart ass when I was a teen. My attitude must have driven Dad crazy; he and I butted heads on many occasions." He watched the fire dance, not willing to look at his brothers; instead, he searched for the words to explain. "I don't know if it's the same for girls, but for guys, sixteen changes things. I had my driver's license, and I thought having it made me a man. It doesn't; it just means dating is a lot easier.

"With a license, I had freedom. I didn't have to listen to Dad's precautions as he drove me to my date's house, and I didn't have to worry about him sitting in the car waiting for me when I escorted her back to her house when the date was over, and it was time to go home. And at sixteen, I not only had my license, but I also had a car and all that having a car means."

"It was our car," Buck smiled, thinking of the old convertible he and Dad had fixed up for Chris's birthday. He and Chris had spent many weekends driving around, impressing the girls. It had been a real babe magnet.

Chris continued without acknowledging Buck's comment. "I started dating Melanie Miller about two weeks after I got my license. She was my first real girlfriend. I drove her home after school so she wouldn't have to ride the bus. We held hands in the hall, ate lunch together, and wrote sappy notes to each other. When I wasn't with her, I hurried with my chores so I could call her. We broke up right after the Valentine's Dance. She was upset for a few days, and I was upset for a few more days, but we went on to find other people to date and remained friends. It wasn't like that for Austin Wiggins. Remember him?"

"A little. He was mainly your friend," Buck answered.

"Yeah. He was. He had a car six months before I did, and he'd get a bunch of us on Friday night. We'd say we were going bowling or something, but in the end, we'd go wherever the girls were. If talking to girls made me tongue-tied, and it did, they made Austin catatonic. But he got over his case of nerves to ask Toni Wallace out on a date. Toni was pretty, smart, and funny, and he adored her. You couldn't talk with him for more than two minutes without him mentioning her name. All the girls in school were jealous of the attention he showered on Toni. He made the rest of us guys look cheap. He always had a little thoughtful gift for her... a poem, a box of candy, or a stuffed animal. At Christmas, I bought Melanie this stuffed bear, and I thought I had done good buying her something both cute and affordable. Austin bought Toni a very expensive pair of earrings. I know; I was there when he bought them, and I asked him where he got that kind of money. He said he had some money saved. I cautioned him about getting into his college money, and he laughed – he said Toni was worth it.

One day, Toni called me crying... she said Austin was scaring her. She said he was pushing her into stuff she wasn't ready for; she was only fourteen, and she said she wasn't ready for what he wanted. She wasn't clear about what he wanted, but I had an idea. I talked with him. I told him a real man didn't ever force a girl into doing something she didn't want to do. I told him best friend or not I would beat the crap out of him if he didn't back off. I thought he understood, but I guess he didn't. Toni broke up with him in January. Melanie said Toni said she hadn't broken up with him because he was pressuring her into sex. She said he was calling her night and day, getting angry if she didn't tell him where she was going to be at all times, and generally following her everywhere. Nowadays, you'd called it stalking, back then, I didn't know what to call it.

"We tried to fix him up with other girls and he went on a couple of dates, but then he started writing Toni long letters in which he'd tell her how much he loved her in one paragraph and call her a slut in the next. It wasn't just the letters; he just got weird. He talked about Toni all the time. He'd follow her from class to class. If he didn't see her, he'd pester everyone with questions about where she was and what she was doing.

"Toni started skipping school and quit going to any after-school functions. One night, she called me because she was home alone, and he was sitting out in his car in her driveway. I drove to her place to talk with him and convinced him to go see a movie with me. I rode with him to the theater, but we didn't go in. Austin started crying. He said he missed her.

"She was his life. If she didn't love him, he didn't want to live. He said he didn't want just to have sex; he wanted to marry her. I pointed out she was still just a kid, and she wasn't old enough to get married. He said he'd wait for her to grow up. He said he just needed to be part of her life. We must have talked for four or five hours straight, and finally, he agreed he would quit dwelling on her and start dating other girls. He drove me back to get my car, and when he slowed down in front of her house, I thought all my talking to him had gone in one ear and out the other, but then he waved at me and drove away. I went home thinking I had done a really good job of helping a friend. He killed himself that night."

"What do you think ya could have done differently?" Vin asked. "Sounds to me ya did everything ya could."

"I didn't tell an adult. When he started acting weird, I should have talked with his mom, a teacher, or Dad. Someone. I didn't tell anyone. Me and Austin's other friends thought we could take care of him. We knew he was acting strangely, but we thought we could pull him out of his depression all by ourselves. If I had told someone, things might have been different."

"Didn't his parents notice his behavior?" Josiah asked.

"It was just his mom; his dad had run off with his secretary a few years earlier. Mrs. Wallace talked to Mrs. Wiggins about what was going on, but I guess Mrs. Wiggins didn't want to believe Austin needed help."

"If Mrs. Wiggins didn't believe Toni's mother, then why do you think you could have gotten her to realize he needed help?"

"I don't know. I'll never know. I regret that I thought I could handle things all by myself. I regret not telling Dad how bad things were for Austin. I regret he was my best friend, and I failed him."

No one spoke for several minutes. The only sounds heard in the room were the crackling of the fire as it burned itself out and Jack's loud snores from where he lay sleeping at Josiah's feet.

Vin poked at the fire for a moment and then turned around to face his brothers, saying, "Well, I reckon I have two things to say. One, JD son, next time you want to have one of these emotional male bonding sessions, pick a happier subject. Something like-

"The best sex you ever had."

"Buck, I wasn't planning on giving out details like that, but if ya need advice in the how to have sex department, I reckon I could give you a few tips."

"Don't think I need any help, but if you think you might know something I don't, I am always willing to listen."

"Maybe we can each make a list of tips and-"

"Write a book."

"It'd be a best seller."

"Two, Mr. Tanner," Ezra broke into the bantering between Buck and Vin.

"Two what?"

Ezra sighed. He was tired and would have been in bed ages ago, but they were having this 'talk', and he didn't want to be the first one to leave. "Ah believe you said you had two things to say."

Vin thought about it and grinned, "I was planning on saying good night, but I reckon me and Bucklyn here have a little discussing to do."

Chris stood up and stretched. "No," he said, fixing a hard stare on each of his brothers. He knew these two brothers, and it was best to nip this in the bud right then and there or they'd be up talking all night. Their talk would start based on reality, and then as each brother tried to outdo the other, their talk would move on into tall tales and would end up at some very late hour in the realm of wishful thinking. "Everyone, go to bed now." Chris grinned when all of his brothers started saying their goodnights and moving on to bed, thinking maybe he was getting the knack of being the head of the family.

"Are you going to bed?" Josiah spoke from the hallway.

"In a minute. I want to wait and make sure the fire is out."

"Want some company?"

"Nah, go on to bed. This will be out in a minute." Chris watched as Josiah turned away, and then he called out softly, "Thanks."

"For what?" Josiah asked, curious.

Chris shrugged; he didn't know. Maybe he wanted to thank Josiah for sharing his story, and maybe he just wanted to thank Josiah for being his brother. It didn't matter, so he said, "See you in the morning."

"Sleep well."

"I will," and he knew he would.



