



A Letter to Hannah

An Interlude in The Seven Brothers Saga

Dear Hannah,

I know it's been a while since I wrote to you and even longer since I have visited. Please, forgive me. My absence has not been because I have forgotten you, far from it. You, my dear sister, are on my mind more than ever. You see, little sister, I have found out I have brothers, and these brothers need me. They want me to become part of their family. I can only pray I will not let them down as I did you. I hope this letter finds you well. Or, at least as well as can be expected.

The last time we spoke, I found you just sitting there, looking into space. I told you about Nancy. Do you remember me mentioning her? I am sure you do because I rambled on and on about her. I told you she was a psychologist like me and that I met her when I began working with her at the clinic. She's beautiful, both inside and out, and she has a way of listening that makes you want to confide in her. I always meant to ask her to come with me on one of my visits to see you; if there is any of you left inside, behind your blue eyes, she could find it and reach you. I don't know why I didn't bring her with me. I guess I didn't want her to see how I failed you. I wanted Nancy to see me as a perfect man. If I were as perfect as I wanted her to believe, I would have put your needs first, Hannah. Instead of asking her to help you, I showed her what kind of man I am, and I lost her. You would like her. She is a great woman.

More importantly, to you and so many like you, she is a conscientious psychologist who loves people. Unlike me, she still believes she can help them. I think I have lost that belief, and I

don't know when that happened. I have been trained to help people, I possess the skills needed to help them, and the Lord knows, I want to help those who need me, but I find myself too tired.

Hannah, I work with children. People say I am good with them. Many colleagues and even more clients say I am one of the best in my field. I should get a sense of satisfaction from that, but I don't, at least not anymore. When I first began working, I went home tired, but felt as though I had done something good. I would say to myself: 'Today, I helped Mr. Smith deal with his feelings of failure,' or 'Mrs. Jones and I are making good progress on her acrophobia.' I felt good about my work.

Then I began dealing with children. I didn't mean to specialize; it just happened that way. A friend of mine, a police officer, asked me to talk to a little girl who witnessed the murder of her mother and had quit talking. One case led to a few referrals, and suddenly I am the proud owner of a practice specializing in children. I had a great practice, was well respected, and was well off financially.

I woke up one Monday morning and realized I didn't know what had happened the past weekend. The smell of puke and whiskey hung in the air, and my head threatened to explode. I am ashamed to admit it, Hannah, but that wasn't the first time I had woken up like that. I had begun scheduling my clients, not seeing them until after twelve on Mondays, so I could recuperate from my weekend drunk. Two things were different on that morning, though. One, my knuckles were so bruised and swollen I couldn't make a fist, and two, there were three phone messages from a client needing to talk to me. I always talk to my kids when they call. I have made a point of being available for them. "Call me," I tell them. Day or night, call me and I will be there to listen. Only this time, I didn't return the call. I was out drinking and fighting, or just drinking; I don't know which, and it doesn't matter. What matters is that I let Coby down. She overdosed on some pills she found in her mother's purse. Her funeral was on a Wednesday. I didn't go; I was busy finding doctors for my other children. Doctors who didn't drink.

I sold my practice, spent six months in therapy, and then I began working at the free clinic where I met Nancy. Nancy had a rough time of it for a while. I am not telling any secrets when I say her ex-husband was not a nice man. What would have broken a lot of women made Nancy who she is today-- a kind, loving woman with an almost infinite amount of understanding. She doesn't just listen to her clients; she feels for them, and they love her for it. I worry about her getting hurt because she is so involved with her clients, but that is who she is, and I doubt she will ever change. And though I worry about her, I worry about me more. I am no longer the compassionate doctor I once was.

I don't worry about my clients as I once did. Instead, I hold them at arm's length, and I am so very careful not to let their pain become mine. I wonder where the compassionate, caring man who helped a silent little girl has gone. I want him back. I want to be that man again, but I worry, if he comes back, he won't be able to deal with his patients' problems, and he will drink himself into oblivion to forget what humans are capable of doing to their young.

My problem with alcohol is not little, and six months of therapy did not make it go away. One patient, with one tormented past, and I find myself a bottle of cheap whiskey. I scared her, and so Nancy and I have come to a parting of the ways. We broke up, little sister, and it was one of the most painful things I have ever done, letting her walk out of my life, like she did.

As though there was any choice about it. I wish I could say we were going to get past our differences, my drunkenness, but the chances of that happening are low to non-existent. In all truth, I must say our breakup is entirely my fault. Nancy did not need to be with another man who scared her. She deserves better than that. Fortunately, she realizes it.

Unfortunately, I have left the clinic, too. It was too awkward for all of us, staff and clients alike, for me to continue to work there. Our poor colleagues did not know if they should console us, counsel us, or just pick sides and help us fight. Anyway, I left the practice and sold my part of it. Judge Travis handled everything for me. I didn't expect to get much, and I would have probably just signed anything they handed me to sign, but he insisted that he look over everything before I signed on the dotted line. I got more out of it than I thought I would or deserved. The money, along with the allowance I am getting for staying on the ranch, will pay for your care, Hannah. So don't you go and start worrying about anything.

I miss my practice, and I miss Nancy, but my leaving was the best move I could make. It hurt that Nancy didn't even bother to say goodbye when I went in to sign the papers. Did I scare

her that badly, or is she having as much trouble as I am in letting go? I wish I could talk to her, just one more time to say goodbye.

I've moved to a little town in upstate Nevada. Beautiful land. God's country. Most of the land is used for cattle, although there are many different kinds of mines around here: gold, silver, and lithium, to name a few.. I think it's mainly silver mines, although I don't know that for a fact. If you are interested, I will find out. Oh, Hannah, if only you would respond to anything, I would not only find out what kind of mines they are, but I would bring the mine to you, or you to it. I would take you anywhere, show you anything, or give you anything if you smile once again.

So much has happened, I am not sure where to start. My father, or should I say our father, died. I know you have never met him, and I am sad to say I only met him once. He left me a portion of his estate and six brothers. Imagine it. I will bring them to visit you as soon as I can. As soon as I know they will understand about you, and as soon as I know why Mama never told anyone who your father was. I have spent a lifetime thinking she had conceived you while having an affair with a married man. I remember watching the men she worked with, wondering who your father was. She never said, and I never saw her with a man, but the moment I walked into the judge's office and saw my brothers, I knew who your father was. I want them to meet you; they deserve to know you as much as they deserve to know me, but until I understand the situation better and until I know them better, you are my secret. I hope they can forgive me for keeping you hidden away. I am sure they will love you as much as I do.

I hope you had a wonderful Christmas. Did the clothes fit? The sisters assured me that I had the right sizes and that you needed some new jeans and shirts. I had help picking them out, and I am sure you are grateful for the help. There is no telling what you would have ended up with if I were left to make the choices all on my own. Do you like the green blouse? The saleslady wanted me to get another one, but I thought the shade would bring out the green of your eyes.

I joined a fruit-of-the-month club; you'll be getting a fresh basket of fruit each month. I know you love fruit, especially apples. You'll have a wide variety of apples to try this year. Let me know, I wish you could which apples you like best, and I will get more of them. Don't be afraid to try some of the more exotic fruits. Some of them are very good, and of course, you'll never know what you will like if you don't try a bite.

Did you like the paints? I sent acrylics because they'll be easier to clean up than oils would be. I love what you have done in the medium. I would love to have some of your pictures to hang in my room.

I had a very quiet Christmas. I am staying on the ranch with the brothers I just mentioned. We didn't exchange gifts, but we did get a family portrait made. By the time we got Ezra home from the hospital, Christmas had snuck up on us. No one felt much like shopping, although Buck and JD went out and bought a few Santa Claus gifts to put under the tree, and Nathan found a little something for everyone in his office, although I think the only person he was interested in giving a gift to was Raine.

I did overhear Ezra asking Vin to mail a card for him. I had thought he was sending something to his mother, and after all the trouble she caused, it made me see red. I confronted him about it, and he said he and his mother never indulged in religious sentimentality, and the card was a short note expressing his thanks to two lovely ladies for their generous spirits. But aside from that, no one felt like exchanging gifts. Part of it was because we were strangers pretending to be brothers, part of it was the pain in Chris's eyes anytime Christmas was mentioned, and part of it was because it seemed wrong to celebrate when the man who gathered us was so recently buried.

The picture was Buck's idea. I am not sure what put it in his head, but JD liked the idea, and even Chris said something about the picture over the mantle needing to be replaced with something that had everyone in it. I look at the picture sometimes, searching for something to tell me we are a family, and I am not sure I see it. I see the easy way Chris stands in the middle, flanked by Vin and Buck, and I know no matter how this grand experiment turns out, Chris will always have the two of them. I see how Buck's arm is casually slung across JD's shoulders, pulling him toward the rest of them. I see how Chris's hand rests on Nathan's shoulder as though reassuring both of them that he is indeed there and is safe. I see how Nathan and I looked, more at each other than at the camera, trying desperately not to laugh at the inane joke JD had told, right before the photographer snapped the picture. I also see how Ezra stood apart from the rest

of us, his eyes not looking at any of us, but fixed on something he saw out on the horizon. I wish one of us had thought to pull him in with a look or a touch, but we didn't, and I fear that if we can't connect with him and soon, he will be gone again.

I see these things, and I have to wonder whether we are a family, yet. I don't know, but I hope I am seeing the beginning of one. *I am sending you a copy of it so you will have a current picture of me, and so you will recognize these men when we come to visit. They are your brothers, just as I am.* Maybe one of them can reach you, as I have been unable to do.

Inez hosted a New Year's party at her restaurant. It goes without saying, Buck will be at her side. I think JD and his date, Casey, will be there also. They didn't plan it that way, I don't think. There aren't too many places you can take a date to in Four Corners to impress her. Nathan is on call tonight, but he took Raine out last night. I assume he took her to Inez's Place, but I haven't seen him and don't know. Vin drove to bring in the New Year with a woman he met a few weeks ago, Cindy. She needed to stay at home to be with her grandmother, but promised to cook a meal that Vin would enjoy if he brought the champagne. Vin asked for Buck's help in choosing something nice.

I don't know many people yet, so I am celebrating here, at the ranch with Chris and Ezra. The truth is: I am not attending any celebrations because I am making a concerted effort to stay on the wagon. Chris brought out the sparkling grape juice at midnight. I see that he is making the same effort. Toasting the new year with sparkling apple juice isn't the same as toasting it with champagne, but at least I won't wake up with a headache. Ezra didn't even get the juice; the poor boy could not keep his eyes open. He fell asleep on the couch at nine.

Chris and I both like mysteries, and judging by the way Chris kept chuckling while reading, I will borrow his book as soon as he is finished. We spent an hour exchanging looks over the tops of our books, daring each other to wake Ezra up and get him into a real bed where he could sleep more comfortably. Neither of us wanted to wake the man; he was sleeping soundly, for a change, but neither of us wanted to be the one to explain to Nathan why we let Ezra spend the night on the couch, when he had a perfectly good bed down the hall. Just when I was about to wake Ezra, Chris reached over and shook him. The look on Ezra's face when Chris ordered him to go to bed was priceless. His green eyes darted from Chris's face to the clock and back to Chris. He opened his mouth to protest being sent to bed like a child. If it had been me who was ordering him to bed, no doubt the protest would have escalated into an argument with him telling me that he was an adult and perfectly capable of making decisions as to when to go to bed, and me countering him with something about how his battered body needed rest. Chris didn't bother arguing; he just pulled Ezra to his feet, pointed him in the direction of his room, and with a softly muttered "Happy New Year," Ezra obeyed.

You would have thought that Chris would have been happy about Ezra not arguing with him, but he wasn't. It bothered him. "I don't want him scared of me," Chris said to Ezra as he left the den..

I wasn't sure if he spoke to me or himself. I answered anyway, "He's not scared of you." Chris looked at me as though I had just said the world was flat, so I tried to explain, "He's unsure of himself. He's lost his independence and is stuck with people he doesn't know. He's worried he'll do something wrong again and we'll make him leave."

"I wonder where he got that idea?" The self-recrimination in Chris's voice was painful to hear.

"You can't change what has happened," I said, only too familiar with self-recrimination. *I hope that wherever you are, Hannah, you know that I would turn back time, Hannah, if I could. I am so sorry for not being there when you needed me. I get down on my knees every night, Hannah, and pray that I don't make the mistakes with these brothers that I made with you.*

"You know he can't ride, don't you?" I remarked to change the subject, and it worked. Chris blinked owlishly at me, trying to make sense of the fact that he had a brother who didn't know how to ride.

"He told you this?"

I shook my head 'no'. Ezra wasn't confiding in me. "Saw him a couple of days ago when I had to come back cause Tangie lost a shoe. He was in the corral. Had a bridle on one of the geldings and was trying to pull himself up."

"Damn. He's supposed to be taking it easy."

"More importantly, it was obvious to anyone with eyes that he had never been around a horse before." It was equally as obvious that Chris couldn't get past the fact that our just-out-of-the-hospital brother had been trying to teach himself to ride rather than stay in bed like he had been told to do. I wish you could have seen it, Hannah. Chris Larabee just stood there, unsure if he should throttle Ezra for his stupidity or if he should commend him for learning to ride. The little war played across his face for a full minute, then just before I stepped in to point it out, he realized what he had missed. Ezra was trying to learn to ride. In this day and age, the only place he needed to ride was on a ranch. Stupid as it was, Ezra, with his still-healing ribs and still suffering the aftereffects of his bout with pneumonia, it was the first sign that he wasn't planning on taking off the first chance he got. It was the first real sign he would try to fit in.

Chris got quiet after that, mulling over the idea Ezra might be considering staying. After pouring our glasses of sparkling juice and waiting for the countdown on TV to be over, he studied the picture over the mantle; using our father's name was enough for us to be squeezed in for a shooting and for a rush job to be completed in time for the Christmas morning unveiling. I don't know, Hannah, if he saw, in the picture, the same things I saw. But when we finished toasting the New Year he said, "I'll work with him. He wants to learn to ride. I'll help. Needs some boots and some better outdoor gear..." his voice trailed off, but I could see he was thinking of ways to teach Ezra how to ride without making too big a deal about it.

Hannah, I must be getting old. I spent a quiet New Year's Eve and didn't regret it for a moment, especially since I have to get up early to take care of the animals. Animals don't understand if you forget to feed them. Holidays and sleeping late don't mix with ranching. It is a good thing that Chris and I stayed home. We will have to be the ones to wake up, take care of the horses, and check on the cattle, because the rest of our brothers will be of no help.

If you want to hear about a fun, exciting evening, you'll have to talk to one of my brothers. Does it hurt you for me to call them my brothers? I hope not. I certainly don't want you to feel as though I am replacing you. I am not. I never would. You are my little sister, and you will always have a special place in my heart. If I thought I was hurting you, I wouldn't call them my brothers, but I honestly don't think you understand anything I do or say.

If you can say Buck is smitten with Inez, then you'd have to say Nathan is head or heels in love with Raine. He hasn't known her long enough to get serious about her, in my opinion, that is, but her name manages to come up in all his conversations, and he has gotten to the point that he spends a lot of his free time with her or on the phone talking to her. They had a romantic dinner for two at her place. I wonder where her father was. Did they include him, or did he leave? I'll have to remember to ask Nathan later.

I had a date, too. It was a blind date arranged by Buck and the girl's aunt. I hope he had a good time, but he hasn't said much. The poor boy came up with about every excuse in the book for not taking the girl out. They all boiled down to: I am terrified, I am going to do or say something stupid, or she won't like me.' Those thoughts were not helped when Miss Nettie dropped by to inform him of what would and would not be tolerated, and made sure he knew the consequences that would be waiting if the line was crossed. The kid had spent an hour throwing up in the toilet before heading out to pick up his date. Buck was rather pushy setting up the date, but he was right, I needed to get out and start meeting people his age.

I guess that about covers everything. I plan on coming for a visit soon.

Remember, I love you.

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Josiah read over his letter. He'd mail it in the morning. The nuns would read it to his sister, not that Hannah would notice. She wouldn't take note of the letter, nor would she take note of the new clothes, the new paints, or the once-a-month delivery of fresh fruit. She wouldn't be aware of his absence, and when he visited, she wouldn't know that either. She was off in her own little world, where she had been for the last twenty years. Maybe she'd come back one day, but he had quit praying for that. Nowadays, he just prayed she was happy.

