



Message in a Bottle

Rooting Out Evil

Part 3 of the Seven Brothers Saga

Cletus Fowler placed the beer back in the fridge, saying, "This is not a normal night, Rabbit. This night calls for celebrating a job well done. I wonder if Miss Gaines has any appreciation for all that I do for her?"

Walking back into the living room with a glass and a bottle of scotch, pricier than Cletus Fowler, security guard at a small rural hospital, could afford, but was one with which Calvin Finch, hired killer, routinely celebrated the successful completion of an assignment. Sitting on the couch, he faced Rabbit so he could converse with the still terrified creature. Pouring himself a reasonable amount of the deep amber liquid, he settled back to watch the bunny try to decide if it was safe to drink the water it desperately needed.

He held out a leaf of lettuce, "The least you can do, Rabbit, is prove that you can be a good drinking companion. I know I promised you a week to change, but you're not even trying to mend your ways. If I didn't come running with a smile whenever my daddy called my name, off would come his belt, and he would tell me that he'd teach me to be appreciative of all the things he had given me. He never touched my sister, though. Even when she broke something or drew on the walls, I was the one who took the beating because I did not properly watch her. I didn't mind. I could handle being hit; she was little, and one of his blows would have broken her. I may have once loved her, but I am not sure. I do remember coming home from school and her lifting her arms for me to carry her. Daphne was her name...I think. It may have been Darla or Debbie. Like my name, I have changed hers so often that I am no longer certain what it was. It doesn't really matter, though. Her name, like Daddy's and Mom's names, is Dead. You should have seen it, Rabbit, it was a glorious fire. My first fire of any consequence... They screamed.

"But you don't want to hear about them, do you? You want to know how I clean up the mess that Miss Gaines made when she arranged to have the gun safe removed from Landon Larabee's home during the old man's funeral. The audacity! I would have applauded her except she left so many clues that could have led the brothers back to her and then to me. I enjoy her depravity and her willingness to

mow down anyone foolish enough to get in her way. But there comes a point at which I find I must rethink our relationship.

"The woman is patient, you know. I admire her ability to plan and wait for the pieces to fall into place. As a professional killer, I salute her lack of remorse in removing people, her many husbands included, to reach her goal. Her problem is that she doesn't realize that her goal is unattainable. I know people. In my line of work, a man has to be able to read people. Chris Larabee may knock his boots with her, but eventually, he will see the cracks in her story. Like a bloodhound, he will track her movements and discover the lengths she took to ensnare him. Unlike you, Rabbit, he will fight just as hard as that monster of a dog of his. I don't want to do it, I truly don't, but I will do what I must to keep her trail from leading back to me.

"But that is not the story I promised you." Cletis poured himself another drink. This would be his last for the evening. After all, drunks screwed up, and therefore, as long as he relished his role of killer, he refused to become drunk.

"Rabbit, I wish I had known what Miss Gaines planned. I could have advised her how to handle it better. I suppose her pretending to be the wife of the dead Larabee contained her need to throw herself at the living Larabee. Anyway, done is done. Miss Gaines, bold as brass, she is, arranged for some antique dealer out of Fresno to buy Larabee's gun safe. I don't know how she accomplished it, but she managed to get the rifles out of the safe before selling the thing. I can't fault her for that; it is a good thing that she has weapons that will not trace back to her.

"The problem is that she met the two men who were to transport the safe to Fresno. She didn't even try to disguise herself. I am not sure if she wants to be caught, has no idea about how to disguise herself, or was so proud of herself for taking the gun safe out of the Larabee home that consequences didn't matter. She didn't even wear a wig.

"It is a good thing that I am somewhat enamored of the woman, or I would have dissolved our partnership with a bullet between her eyes. I have to tell you, Rabbit, I considered killing her, but she, unlike you, continues to amuse me. I decided to remove the two men who saw her face from the equation. I am sure if you could speak, you would ask me how I managed to silence them when Fresno is a day's drive from Eagle Bend, and I didn't take any time off from my job this weekend.

"The solution is kindergarten simple, Rabbit. Perhaps you should go to Oz and ask the wizard for brains. Yes, you are right. Brains would make you realize how tenuous your claim to life is, and you would become even more depressed and hopeless. Enough of feeling bad about your predicament. It is time to hear how I got rid of the witnesses Miss Gaines left behind. As I just said, it was simple, incredibly simple. I called Albert Hawley pretending to have a hand-carved fireplace mantle for sale. I told him that it was original to the house, and if he wasn't interested, I knew a dealer in Kansas City. I told him I was renovating my home in Ely and thought the mantle was too good an example of craftsmanship to let it go to someone who would not appreciate it. The man ate up my lies, especially when I sent him the photos I took of the mantle from Chris Larabee's home before I burned it to the ground. From what I could tell, his great-great something or other was a master class carpenter. No, that is not quite the word I need. The man was a true artist. Pity the house had to burn; evidence of craftsmanship could be seen in every room. It looked as though every generation of Larabees who lived in the place had left their mark.

"Rabbit, that is how I captured Hawley's interest. The thing that clinched the deal was my saying that a friend from Four Corners, a woman, whose name was Mrs. Larabee, had mentioned his name and raved about the good service the team he had sent to pick up a gun safe from her home had provided. He assured me that the same two men would be available. I gave him the location of a house under renovation in Ely and met the men in the driveway. The minute they hopped out of their truck to shake my hand, they were dead. I can see that you are curious about how I disposed of their bodies. Don't you worry. They will eventually be discovered, but it will take years, maybe decades, before they are found. By then, the story of the disappearing movers will be a distant memory, like Jimmy Hoffa.

"You are probably wondering about the truck. I left it where it was. Of course, I wiped it down to erase any fingerprints Miss Gaines may have left. So, now you are asking about the gun safe. You are wondering whether Miss Gaines left any fingerprints on it. I am sure she did, but I took care of that on Christmas Eve. You remember me being gone for a few days and how thirsty you were. I drove up to Fresno, found his shop, broke in, and cleaned the gun safe. Easy-peasy. He never knew I was there.



"What do you mean you don't know where your father is?" Without conscious thought, Amy's hands rose to her face, her fingertips pressing against her lips in an attempt to hold back her panic. When she felt in control, she asked with her voice very audible, "How long has he been gone?"

"Ma, we thought he was with you," Garrett tried to explain.

"How long?" she repeated.

"No one has seen him since Friday." Garrett looked at his wife and his brother, waiting for them to confirm what he said. When they both nodded, he added, "Ma, at first we thought that the two of you had gone to the store or something."

"I left a note saying that I would be gone until Sunday. Nowhere in my note did I say anything about taking your father with me." The shrillness in her voice startled her, and she pushed past her sons so she could make her way to her husband's office. She needed to see for herself that he wasn't sitting behind his desk, laughing at the elaborate joke they had played on her.

"There was no note, Ma. When you didn't come home Friday night, we figured that you had done a runner like you used to, but this time, you had taken Pa with you to wherever you go."

"I left the note taped to the fridge, up high where the babies couldn't reach. Every time I have ever left, I taped a note to the refrigerator so your Pa would know where I was if there was any sort of emergency."

Jason spoke up, "Ma, we didn't see a note. Not this time, not ever."

Tears welling up in her eyes, Amy blindly let her fingers find the chair behind Curtis' desk and collapsed into it. "Your father, surely, he knew?"

"As far as I can remember, he was just as bewildered as we were when you took off," Garrett told his mother, even as he looked at Jason to check if his brother remembered things the same way.

"I don't understand... We'll figure it out later. Your father... we have to find him. Call the sheriff."



When Chris went into the barn, Buck followed. He waited until they were several feet from the house before he asked, "Do you think it's the smart thing to do: letting Mary and Billy stay here?"

"Can't see that we have a choice... She is spooked, Buck, and something tells me she isn't a lady who is easy to frighten."

"Waldo was in Las Vegas with us."

"I'll grant you that, but think, Ezra said the listening devices are from two different time periods."

Buck nodded in understanding, but Chris continued, "The fellow who spooked her could be the one who killed Sarah and Adan." There, he had said what he had been thinking since Mary showed up out loud. He had expected the note of vengeance in his voice and the note of resolve saying he would find the bastard, but he did not expect to hear the relief in his voice. He stood rooted to the ground as he examined his feeling of relief. Finally, he opened his mouth to explain; if anyone was owed an explanation, it was his brother. "If the man she saw was the man who murdered my wife and son, then I am not responsible."

A smile almost made it to his face at the quizzical look Buck was giving him, and he continued, "I've met Mary Travis, what, two times? If he is after her to punish me for something I did to him, why has he picked her to frighten? It makes no sense unless he is absolutely bonkers."

"You've been thinking you did something to cause someone to take his revenge on you by setting the fire? Do you know how ridiculous you sound?"

Chris scowled, hoping he was hiding how sheepish he felt. "It's just since Dad said that the fire looked as though it was deliberately set, I've been racking my brain trying to think of who I pissed off enough to do such a thing."

"Besides Ella?"

Chris didn't take offense. After all, he had been thinking along those lines, too. "There was no reason for her to seek revenge on me. I didn't piss her off. We were kids when we broke up. It happened years ago. When she moved to Elko, she was married, and I also was married. If she moved here because she was interested in me, why has she waited so many years to get in touch with me? She's not. She just wanted to rekindle a friendship. End of story."

"You are probably right, but I keep coming back to how she conveniently remembered me, and how she knew who Dad and Nate were."

"You think I am being naïve?"

"Yep."

Chris took a couple of steps to the barn before stopping and saying, "You know, chances are the man she saw came from Stephen's past."

"Chances are," Buck agreed.

"We need to protect them."

"Of course."

Chris knew from years of being both Buck and Nathan's brother that they had talked. He hoped that they had the good sense to have their talk where their Listeners couldn't hear. Buck, Nathan, and Vin all saw something in Ella that he was missing. Was he letting his loneliness cloud his judgment? "It won't do any harm to ask Vin to do a deep dive into Ella's past."

"I think he has been waiting for your go-ahead."

"In case I don't get a chance to talk with him, let him know I need him to look into what Ella has been up to since our college days."

"Will do."

Chris caught the barn's side door when Buck swung it open. The bullet holes in the wall remained a stark reminder of the danger they were in. "In the morning, could you and Ezra sweep the barn?" he hoped that if a device had been planted while they were gone, his request would sound innocent.

"Well, I'm not sure if Ezra will be willing to get his hands dirty. You know how he is about doing menial labor, but I will tell him that it was your request. He'll get moving."



Mary gently closed the book she had been reading to her son and laid it beside the lamp on the nightstand. She could hardly keep her eyes open while they ate supper. She was sure it was delicious, and she hoped she had said something to that effect, but all she remembered was that she had been starving and that her relief at being in a place where she felt she and Billy were safe had sapped her of all her ability to carry on a conversation. She could dredge up enough energy to list at least five things she had eaten for supper, but only if someone put a gun against her temple and demanded that she start making the list. Her reserves of energy had left her when Chris Larabee had told her to make herself at home.

Poor Billy. He was as exhausted as she was and just as hungry. She was sure the brothers had taken note of the way the two of them were shoveling food into their mouths, but the men had been too tactful to say anything. They weren't starving, she had wanted to explain. They had only missed lunch. It was the fear driving her that depleted her resources, and her son was in tune with her feelings. In the not very distant past, she would have rejoiced that the two of them were in sync. She had come very close to giving up on Billy ever trusting her to take care of him like he had before his father's death. But now was not the time for her son to experience the same fear that was close to overwhelming her.

She had tried to act normal while reading his book, but she did not have the strength to change her voice for the different characters or make the sound effects the story needed. Fortunately, Billy had closed his eyes after only three pages. Deciding against getting up to change into her pajamas, Mary slid into bed beside her son. Taking the small hand reaching for her and clutching it tight enough for him to realize, even as he slept, she was there, she settled in beside her son. Before she could register that her head had hit the pillow, she was asleep. Tomorrow was a new day. She would deal with her stalker then.



"Ya did a good job tonight," Vin said when he and JD reached the second floor.

"Huh?" JD asked. As far as he was concerned, he had taken a few minutes to get clean bed linen on the empty bed and put clean towels in the private bathroom off the bedroom his father had once occupied. It wasn't anything anyone else couldn't have done.

Vin explained, "When we were eatin', ya kept the conversation goin'. Chris might have been the one who told her she and Billy could stay here, but in case you missed it, the only thin' he said was: Pass the potatoes, please. The rest of us weren't much better. Ya kept the boy laughin' with yer silly jokes."

JD thought about it, then said, "You are right. What happened to Buck? He can talk to anyone about anything, and he was pretty tight-lipped."

"Josiah is worried about Waldo doing something to a member of Orrin's family. That is probably what is running through Buck's head... Nate's, too."

"They will be safe here."

"Probably, but Waldo has warned us she is planning to strike at his family; we need to be ready for whatever she is going to do. In the morning, one of us needs to warn the sheriff."

"You should go. You've talked with him before. He'll listen."

"Want to come with me?"

"Yes, but you should take Chris or Buck. They have a better understanding of what happened than I do."

"Yer selling yerself short. 'Sides, Nate will be working, Chris and Buck's gotta talk to that fella that's got the gun safe. Josiah and I are a bit tired of each other's company. And Ezra, well, lookin' at him, he's feeling a bit raw. I'm not sure how much help he'd be."

"You are wrong. He's a lot stronger than you think."

Vin considered what JD had revealed. "He's told ya somethin' hasn't he?" Vin guessed.

"He'll be fine, come morning."

Vin nodded slowly. "If he is, then we will use him to help us solve this puzzle."

"I'll go, but we have got to pick up Jack first."

"No problem, we will take him with us," Vin quickly replied, hoping that JD had not picked up on his forgetting the dog was at Doc Anderson's place.



Orrin laid his fork on his plate and turned to his hostess. "I really enjoyed that, Allison, and I hate to ruin this good meal, but I need to tell you about what happened in Las Vegas. You are family, and may be targeted. I don't know." When he saw Allison blindly reach for Tony's hand, he said I am sorry." He then began sharing the message from Landon, his and Evie's leaving town, and what had happened at the resort. He ended with the threat that Waldo had leveled at him.

When he finished, he looked around the table. Allison gave him a weak smile, but her fingers remained entwined with those of her husband. Tony's face looked grim, but there was no sign of fear in it. He had begun his career working on oil rigs a month at a time before coming home for a few weeks to be with Allison and their three children. He had made good money, and by the time the kids were in their early teens, Tony had worked his way up into the higher level of management and had retired three years ago. After surviving the hardships that came from living on a rig, Orrin doubted that there was anything that could shake his brother-in-law. Tony might not come from the same stock that had settled the West, but he embodied the same strength of mind and body that the early settlers had possessed. He'd take Waldo's threat seriously, but he would not be intimidated by her history of murder or her more recent threats.

Allison was more like Evie than either of them cared to admit. She was scared, but just as she had when her husband had been on a rig, facing storms at sea, she put her trust in God to keep her husband safe while she concentrated on keeping the home fires burning and doing everything she knew to keep her children away from the news of the storm.

Evie was Evie. Enough said.

Orrin pushed his chair away from the table and said as he stood up, "I have some pictures I want to show you. He went in search of where Evie had stowed his luggage in the guest bedroom. He took his time getting the pictures and thumbing through them, making sure he had not only the four good snapshots of Waldo, but the fifteen ones of her in her disguises, taken at various times in the hotel and casino. He knew the pictures were all there, but he was hoping that something would click in his memories so he could call her by her given name and not Waldo. By the time he returned to the dining room, the table had been cleared.

Tossing the pictures onto the middle of the table, Orrin waited silently as Evie and her sister passed them back and forth, searching each picture for anything that might trigger a memory of one of Evie's childhood friends. Occasionally, Tony reached for a picture, held it in his hands, and studied it. When Evie and Allison finished their perusal, he took the best images of each disguised Waldo used and compared them.

"You said she chewed her fingernails off when she was in the suite, trashing it. Do you think she was making her hands part of her disguise? Or was her act of chewing her nails off something she could not control?" Tony asked as he examined the photo of Waldo pulling the fire alarm. "I ask because back when I worked on the rigs, there was a man who, when the sea got rough, chewed on his nails. He never acted scared, and he never shirked his duties, but he would bite his nails down to nothing. I kept an eye on him, and over time, I noticed that he had several other compulsive behaviors. I went to the apartment he kept in Houston one day; he had called and needed a ride. When he let me in, he had boxes stacked waist-high in his living room. I must have looked at him funny-like, because

without a word from me, he started explaining that he had been diagnosed with a mild case of obsessive-compulsive disorder. It was the first time I had heard of it, so I cleared a box off his couch, sat, and asked him to tell me about it.

"I guess I came off as nonjudgmental, and he spent the next hour telling me that when he got stressed, his disorder kicked in. He'd get focused on something and could not let it go. He would bite his nails, organize and reorganize his books, and buy things he didn't need. When he got back on shore, he spent half of his leave returning things he had ordered online during a storm. He asked me if I was going to fire him; I told him his problem had never affected his work, and I wasn't going to get bent out of shape about his behaviors unless they did."

"You think that Waldo has OCD?" Orrin asked.

"I am not a doctor, so I am not qualified to diagnose her. Especially not with the one example."

"But it is not just one example, is it?" Evie pointed out. "From what I know, and I freely admit that I get most of this from things being shared on Instagram and TikTok. No matter. What I have heard is that people with OCD get fixated on things. They can't shake it off. Waldo is fixated on Landon. Agreed?"

"Definitely," Orrin replied. "I'll make a point to talk to Josiah tomorrow. I'll stop by the Double L when I head back to Four Corners."

"We."

"Evie, I know you don't like me telling you what to do, but you need to stay here. You'll be safer here than anywhere in Four Corners."

"I can't stay here forever."

"Yes, you can, Evie, and it won't be forever. We can work on making a quilt like we have always said we would." Allison said, reaching across the table to take one of Evie's hands in her own, causing Evie to look at her.

"We were going to do that when we got old. I don't know about you, but I am not old yet." Evie asserted, pulling her hand from her sister's grip.

"Evie, you are forgetting that neither of us knows the first thing about sewing. We will be old before we get around to actually making a quilt," Allison reminded her sister.

Evie smiled at her sister's comment, but kept her eyes on Orrin as she replied, "Mom failed us in that respect, didn't she?"

"Mom couldn't sew on a button if her life depended on it. She was counting on our Home Ec teacher teaching us." She stood up and held out her hand for her sister. "C'mon. Let's take a look at Naomi's old room and see what we need to do to transform it into our sewing room."

Evie stared hard at Orrin. Her look said she would stay, but that if he let anything happen to himself, there would be hell to pay. "Mary and Billy?" she asked when she knew he understood her look.

"I'll figure something out," Orrin promised.

When the women were out of earshot, Orrin turned to Tony and asked, "You don't mind, do you?"

"To tell you the truth, Orrin with both boys out in the Atlantic on oil rigs, and Naomi in Alaska, this house is too big. It is so empty it all but echoes."

"Have you thought about getting something smaller?" Orrin asked even though he knew the answer.

"Nope. When we bought the place, I promised Allison and the kids that this would be our forever home. The boys stay with us when they can, and if Naomi ever marries that fella of hers, we will need room for the grandchildren to stay when they visit."

"You think they are going to get married then?"

"Eventually." He looked around the dining room. It was meant to hold eight, but even though the table had been set for four tonight, it was usually empty, and the two of them ate at the smaller table in the breakfast room. "Why don't you send your daughter-in-law and grandson to stay here until you find Waldo. And, if you don't mind me asking, why Waldo?"

Orrin shrugged, "Apparently, it's a children's book. Something about finding a man in a crowd."

"Never heard of it."



"Believe you me, Miss Gaines is becoming a real irritant." Cletus realized that anyone witnessing him talking to an empty cage was bound to think he had lost his marbles, but it was a habit, and the

curtains remained closed. He continued, "I suppose you know as well as any, what happens when I become irritated." He dropped into the chair beside the cage. "If you must blame anyone for your sudden and painful death, you should blame her. Buying you and your brother was her idea. Let's scare him, she said. Hang up a dead rabbit, and Landon Larabee will be terrified when he sees it. I tried to point out to her that Larabee was not the kind of man who would run at the sight of a dead rabbit, that a more appropriate tactic would be to dismember one of his sons, but she worried about how Chris would take learning his brother had been killed. Now, she is in one of her moods cause Mary Travis and her son have moved in at the ranch with the brothers. She blames me for letting Mary Travis see me watching her place. That wasn't my idea; it was hers. If anyone is at fault for scaring the Travis woman and forcing her to seek refuge with the brothers, it is her. Do you want to know what she did? She waited around until Travis and her son went out, then she snuck in to see if there were any signs that Chris Larabee had been in her place.

"Miss Gaines should have left when she didn't find anything. Did she? No. She stole the gun that Mary Travis hid in a drawer. It should have been obvious to her that the first thing anyone scared does, especially a woman with a child, is check to see if the weapon they plan to use to protect themselves with is still where they left it. It is one thing for Travis to have seen me watching her house. I was nothing more than a shadowy man, standing across the street. I knew when she called the sheriff department and left before they made it the few blocks to her home. My presence could be explained by saying she had an overactive imagination. It is an entirely different situation, and one that the police will take seriously, for a gun to go missing. Guns kill people, and a missing gun smacks of a plan for someone to die.

"There were other ways to protect me if she was indeed worried about me, as she claimed. A better course of action would have been to remove the bullets. I doubt if Mary Travis is experienced enough to notice their absence. Miss Gaines is getting reckless and could have been seen.

"I have enough sense to realize that she is not worried about me. In her eyes, I am little more than the hired help. Taking the gun was not a precaution. Miss Gaines was merely marking her territory. Too bad Mary Travis did not know how to recognize that a bitch, especially one in heat, leaves her scent to mark her territory. No doubt, the smell of jasmine and rose hung in the air, but Mary Travis was too busy getting out of the house to recognize the scent of Chanel No. 5 that, he was sure, Miss Gaines had doused herself with before entering the Travis dwelling.

"If I really cared anything about Miss Gaines, I would drive to Four Corners and launch a few rocks at the Travis building. Broken windows would provide further evidence that Mary Travis had been targeted for some reason, but the smell no doubt permeating the residence would seep through the broken glass and dissipate into the cold night air. He knew that if he didn't do something, when Mary Travis returned home in the morning, she would smell the perfume and might recognize it. Logic dictated that Mary Travis would not return alone. Chris Larabee may not be as enthralled with Mary Travis as Miss Gaines feared, but Larabee was not the type of man to let a damsel in distress face possible danger alone. In the morning, Fowler was sure Larabee would bring Mary Travis home first thing in the morning, to allow her to get a few more things so she and her son would be more comfortable at the ranch, or so Larabee could make sure it was safe for them to resume living in their own home. It didn't matter why he brought her home. What mattered was that the moment he entered, he would smell the perfume in the air. If he had any sort of nose on him, he would identify it as being what Miss Gaines wore. If he couldn't, the brother he was sure to bring with him might.

"I have two choices, Dead Rabbit. I can stay here and pack, or I can take care of the situation.

He stood up, went into the kitchen, and retrieved a beer from the fridge, purposefully not looking at the carcass on his counter; he would have to get rid of it and clean the kitchen, but that would have to wait until after he had determined what to do about Ella Gaines and her latest plan.

Returning to his seat, he picked up where he had left off. "Miss Gaines is a strong-willed woman who knows what she wants. I like that about her, but she is consumed with her need to entice Chris Larabee back into her arms. I have to admit, at first, I was overwhelmed by finding someone as willing to kill as I am. I had thought I was walking this Earth alone. For a man who has been in the shadows for as long as I have, discovering Miss Gaines was the emotional equivalent of a man who has been lost in the Sahara and is dying of thirst, but then stumbling upon an oasis." He thought about what he had stated before shaking his head in agreement with his words. "Yes, exactly. She was a refreshing glass of cold water. I never expected to find someone like her."

He leaned towards the empty cage and, lowering his voice to talk to his no longer living coconspirator, he confessed, "I do realize she is new to moving undetected in the shadows. I take full

responsibility for that. I should have trained her better, but she is not like me. I take pleasure in ending life. She doesn't. She is like a child in a toy store, pointing to what she wants and pitching a fit when Santa brings her a Barbie playhouse, but forgets the pink Corvette.

"After talking with her today, I fear that unless I can get Miss Gaines to control herself, I may have to cut ties with her. I don't want to eliminate her, but I will.

"Her most recent plan involves me shooting Dr. Jackson as a distraction, which will draw all the brothers and the law to the hospital while she gets rid of Mary Travis and her son. If we do this, I am sure she will be caught. When she is caught, she will talk. I am not sure if I even have enough time to erase evidence of my existence from this apartment, much less the hospital.

"One of the reasons I have lasted in this business for as long as I have is that I make sure I leave no photographs, no DNA, and no fingerprints behind. I also make a practice of not leaving in such a way as to cause questions to be asked. If I am living in an apartment, I like to give thirty days' notice. If I own a car, I sell it. If I have a job, I give HR a reason for leaving. Even though I want to blame Miss Gaines for my predicament. It is my fault. I have always made it a practice not to stay in any one location for any length of time, and I have violated that rule. I have allowed my fascination with Miss Gaines to trap me. I am fucked. I am going to have to chew my leg off to get out of this trap unless I can think of something.

"So you understand, Rabbit, I was going to give you the full week to become my friend again, but if Miss Gaines goes berserk and does something stupid enough to get caught, I will need to rabbit, pun intended. I can remove my fingerprints from this place, but I am not sure I can remove all traces of them from the hospital. I am all over the place, and I can't exactly go around with a rag cleaning everything I may have touched. Now that I think about it, there is a picture taken of me at the New Year's Eve party I was loath to attend, but circumstances did not give me a choice.

"To be honest, I am not even sure how I can properly get rid of your cage so that its existence and by extension your existence doesn't lead back to me. I know that the elder Larabee called the sheriff about the rabbit I left hanging in the tree. I also know that if Miss Gaines finds herself cornered, she will throw me to the wolves. If the sheriff shows up and sees the cage, he will make the connection.

"Looking back, I should not have put your cage in the living room. I don't invite people over, but this is an apartment complex. I don't know who saw it when I brought in groceries, or worse, who entered my apartment unbeknownst to me. You know, spraying for bugs and the like.

"Rabbit, you ending up in my stew pot is not my fault. I told Miss Gaines that one rabbit would do the trick, but she insisted that I get two. I couldn't even give you to some kid wanting a pet because they would remember I had once owned you."

He walked to the kitchen. Dropping the stew into the sink, he turned on the garbage disposal, saying that many people ate rabbits and many people raised them for consumption. Not many people bought them as pets and hung one in a tree, and boiled the other one. He then raked the carcass into the garbage, thinking it was a good thing that the garbage trucks would show up in the morning.

The crate, well, he would drive it to an apartment complex in Elko, and leave it propped up against the garbage bin with a note saying: Free to a good home. He'd make sure to remove fingerprints, and no one could connect him to it.

Walking back into the living room with a garbage bag, paper towels, and a spray bottle of bleach, he knelt beside the cage and began dismantling it. As he worked, he complained about the number of bodies Miss Gaines was willing to accumulate. "A good killer doesn't kill in his home, and like it or not, Four Corners and Eagle Bend are now my home. I can relocate, of course, but I am not ready to leave. I have promised myself the pleasures of hunting both the young one and the pretty one. I made the deaths of the woman and her whelp look accidental, and of course, the hospital could be blamed for the old man's dying if anyone questioned his heart attack. The only concern I have is the death of the detective. It might appear to be a suicide, but the old man asked too many questions, and I worry that a thorough investigation might uncover my presence.

"So far, I am in the clear, but more deaths related to Landon Larabee will raise the suspicions of his sons. I can't have that, not if I plan to hunt.



The phone began ringing the moment Chris entered the kitchen. It was almost as if the universe, knowing his aversion to talking on the phone, had planned for not one of his brothers to be in sight so he could pawn the job of answering it off on them. He waited, hoping that one of them would appear, but on the third ring his sense of courtesy overruled his reluctance, and he answered. "Hello?" he tried on his friendly voice and crossed his fingers that he didn't sound as put out as he felt.

"Chris?" the voice on the other side of the phone line asked.

"Yes," he answered, hoping the woman would immediately identify herself so he wouldn't have to guess.

"It's Joan, Joan Marks. I hope I am not calling too late."

Of course, it was dark, they had a long day, and they would need to get up before daybreak. Anyone calling after 8:30 should expect to be hung up on, but this was Joan. He had meant to call her to check on her and hadn't. There was no excuse for it. "Joan, this is a perfect time to talk."

"You sound like Junior did when he lied, so you can't deny I am calling at a bad time. I just needed to talk to you for a minute. I hope that is OK."

"Joan, I've been meaning to call, it is just that... No, I don't have a good excuse for not checking on you. Can we start this conversation over?" He didn't wait for her permission and restarted their conversation. "Joan, it is so good to hear from you. How are you doing?" he hoped she could hear the honest sincerity in his voice and would forgive him for not calling.

"You are a good man, Chris Larabee."

"Thank you for saying that, but that is not why you called, is it?"

"I do mean it, but you are right, that is not why I called."

Chris waited with a patience he normally did not have. Even though he could not see her, and even though she was silent, he knew she was fighting tears. He understood. He had felt that way every day for years.

Finally, she began, "I think I told you that I would have a friend and her children stay with me."

"Yes." He didn't hear her tears, but he knew they flowed down her cheeks.

"Well, she and her husband reconciled after Christmas. It seems that not having Christmas with his wife and kids made him realize what they meant to him. They are seeing a marriage counselor; I think they will make it."

"I am happy for them, but you are alone-"

"No, I am not alone. That is one of the reasons I am calling. You know how Junior and I were trying to adopt. I got a call from the agency last week. There is a little girl who needs a home. She is a year old and deaf." She rushed through her answer. There was so much to say, but she didn't have the words to express her happiness.

"I am happy for you, but tell me, Joan, why are you crying?"

"You can tell? Junior could always tell... I am crying because Junior is not here to share in my happiness. He wanted a baby, too, you know."

"He would have been an excellent father."

"He really would have. I'm cheating, you know."

"I don't understand,"

"I called you in part so I could pretend that you were Junior and I was telling him about his daughter. You sound so much like him."

"You know he is in heaven, for you and your daughter."

"I know that. Most days, I can feel him in the room with me. I know he is happy. I just wanted to pretend for a moment or two that you were him."

"Pretend if you want, but please tell me about your daughter. What is her name?"

"Her birth mother gave her the name of Roselyn Amber. I don't want to take that away from her, but I think I am going to call her Rosie."

"That is a lovely name. One of the most beautiful and most loving of women that I have ever known was named Rosie. She was my brother Buck's mother."

"Oh. Do you think that he will mind? I mean, he might be saving the name for his daughter."

"I am going to tell you now, I know my brother, and he will be tickled pink to know that your daughter and his mother share a name. He will expect to be invited to all of Rosie's birthday parties."

She began openly sobbing, "I have a request of you and him, then. Rosie is a good candidate for a cochlear implant. She is having surgery in June. Do you think that you and Buck can come hold my hand while she is in surgery? I don't mean to sound weak, but she is so little and...and I am so scared."

"You will have a whole contingent of me and my brothers waiting with you. Now tell me about her."

"If you have the time, I will talk your ear off. First, though, I need to tell you what I found."

"I'm listening. Buck just walked in. May I put you on speaker phone?"

"Go right ahead. Maybe the two of you can make sense of this; I can't. I think that this is why Junior went to see his father."

"What is it, hon?" Buck asked.

"I was cleaning Junior's office to make a playroom for Rosie, and it fell out from where it had been wedged between the wall and his printer."

The brothers could hear a baby crying from another room. Chris said, "Go get her, and I will catch Buck up."

By the time she returned, Buck was grinning ear to ear as though he had won a prize, and when he heard her pick up the phone, he said, "Don't you go worrying. If it wouldn't be overstepping, give us the name of the doctors you will be using, and Nate will check out their credentials. We need to make sure this little girl has the best of the best."

"You are going to make me start crying again, Buck. You don't mind her having your mother's name?"

"Mind?" Buck's voice grew as solemn as the wide grin on his face would allow. "Mind? I am honored that your daughter and my mother share a name. It's a beautiful name, and I am sure my mom is looking down from heaven, agreeing with me. So tell me about this little doll of yours."

"I will, I definitely will, but first let me tell you about this document. I overnighted a copy of it to the ranch. It's certified, and someone will have to sign for it. I called to warn you it was coming; it didn't seem right to just have you open it."

"We appreciate it, Joan. We've been hit with a few surprises as of late. What can you tell us about it?" Chris asked.

"I can take a picture of it and send it to your cell."

"No." Chris and Buck said together. The brothers realize how close they had come to shouting into the phone. "No, you don't have to do that, Joan. Our phones have been acting a little wonky, so we'll wait for the mail. You can send us baby pictures; between the two of us, we should get a few to come through, and we'll share the pictures with the whole family."

"Not the Marks, though, right?"

"If you don't want us to, we won't."

"I don't. I know that sounds ugly, but they will never see Rosie as Junior's daughter, and they will be angry that I am moving on with my life."

"I am sorry they have made you feel that way."

"It is OK. I just don't want to have anything to do with them. I am sure they know my feelings. I have my memories of Junior, and contrary to what they want to believe, those memories are good ones. I don't want to hear any of them suggest that Junior is not my Rosie's father. I will make sure she knows how much he wanted her. Besides, I can't forgive them for what they did to Junior."

Buck and Chris exchanged looks of surprise, but it was Chris who asked, "What do you mean?"

"I know that my husband went to see his father. When he left, he was in a good mood. He said he would be back before Thanksgiving. Then he is found dead, supposedly having jumped off the side of a mountain that everyone knows he would not climb. Someone in that house murdered him, and the rest of them covered it up. You said that you would let me know when you found something out. I looked into your eyes, and I saw honorable men. The only reason you haven't found out what happened to Junior is that they have circled their wagons to protect whoever killed my husband."

The brothers listened as the baby stirred in Joan's arms, and Joan soothed her back to sleep. When Joan spoke again, the pain in her voice was evident. "I can't talk right now. I am getting upset. My being upset is keeping Rosie from sleeping. I will put her in bed with me tonight. She is not yet used to the house, but she knows me and knows I will keep her safe. If you want, you can call me tomorrow. I'll pick up no matter whose phone you use."

When they no longer heard anything other than the dial tone coming from the kitchen phone, Buck turned to Chris and said in no more than the quietest of whispers, "She knows something, doesn't she?"

In an equally quiet voice, Chris answered, "Knows or suspects." Then he said in a normal voice, "I am surprised we didn't wake Mary."

"When we were putting sheets on the bed for her and Billy, JD asked her if she had her cell with her. When she said she did, he unplugged the landline in there and took it out."

"Smart thinking."



"Did your mom land safely?" Josiah asked when Ezra came out of the bathroom.

"I'm sorry, have I been keeping you?" Ezra asked, ignoring Josiah's question. It would take more time and energy than he had to explain his complicated relationship with Maude. He wasn't even sure he could.

"Just wanted to brush my teeth," Josiah answered, picking up on Ezra's desire to steer the conversation away from his mother.

"I'm sorry. I thought you had already gone to bed...I couldn't sleep and hoped a hot shower would rid me of some of the tension caused by this weekend's events."

"Did it help?" Josiah asked, genuinely curious. As much as Vin extolled the virtues of his pickup, comfort wasn't one of them. If they were going to take any more cross-country trips, they would have to find another vehicle to do it in. "I have a few aches and pains of my own to work out."

"Give the water heater a few minutes to recover. I used more than my fair share of the hot water."

"No worries. I don't think many of us were planning on showering until after morning chores." That line of conversation had reached an end; there were only so many things you could say about the benefits of taking hot showers without sounding weird. He glanced at his doorway. "I'll be glad to get Jack home. I never thought I would say this, but not hearing him snore is keeping me awake."

"He is a good dog and has certainly proved himself to be a valuable member of this family."

"That he has," Well, that was all he had to share on the subject of Jack. He doubted Ezra, as fastidiously clean as he tended to be, would understand the comfort of the weight of Jack as he slept on the foot of the bed, brought. He smiled a good goodnight and went to brush his teeth.



I really hate eating fast food. I am not sure if it's because of the food's taste or because I am sitting under bright lights in the middle of a swarm of people I don't know, but here I am. Looking around, I search for familiar faces. I don't see any, and not recognizing any both saddens me and comforts me. The number of people in Four Corners has increased, not exponentially, but to the point that I know so few.

I hadn't planned to stop, but hearing my stomach growl was becoming tiresome. I had at least four more hours on the road, and not only would I be driving along empty roads with few places to grab supper, but this was Sunday, and many businesses would be closing soon. Plus, a woman eating alone tends to be noticed and remembered.

I could always spend the night in my hidey-hole. I would be safe and warm there, but I would have to leave ridiculously early if I planned to arrive at work on time. I didn't particularly like my job, but it gave me the access I needed to have multiple incomes, and my boss appreciated my willingness to work long hours, work by myself, and fill in wherever I was needed. He never questioned me the rare times I asked for time off; he just gave it to me. When folks along my route complained about missing items, he backed me 100%. He knew the chances of him finding someone to replace me were slim. Even though I had been a valuable employee for the last ten years, I needed to be at work on time in the morning.

My friend would be hurt when she learned that I drove through Four Corners without stopping in to say hello. She'd also be relieved that I kept driving instead of knocking on her door. She never knew how to act around me. At first, she had been concerned and protective. She seemed to understand what I had been through, the pain Landon had caused me, and while she still kept me updated on the Four Corners gossip, over the years, she had begun to act increasingly suspicious of me. Pretending to be shocked at Landon's misfortunes was difficult, and it has become increasingly difficult to remember the proper terms of sympathy to use. I couldn't blame my not dropping in to see my old and dear friend on those things, though. My decision to skip seeing her was fueled by my anger at her for not telling me about Landon's death. She should have called me.

I have to ask myself if she plans to betray me.

Or worse, she knows who killed Landon and is keeping the name from me.

I may need to rethink my plans. I need to think about it, but until I know, she deserves my rage, I need to consider the best way to punish Orrin if he chooses to keep the name of Landon's murderer from me. I can not bring myself to hurt Evie. Long ago, she fell under Orrin's spell and has not had the strength to free herself. He has a son... no, the boy is dead. The boy's wife is a possibility, but does he truly love her? I don't know, and I am not sure how to find out. I don't want to add to my list of sins by harming his grandson. I will set aside my vow of never hurting a child if I have no other option.

Who does that leave? Orrin was an only child, and his parents passed years ago. I could target Evie's family. I am sure that he is close to them, but hurting any of Evie's kin would hurt Evie more than it would Orrin, and he may not divulge what I need if he feels them threatened.

Who then?

His receptionist, maybe. My friend once said that Orrin treats her more like a cherished daughter than an employee. What is her name? I am sure I was told, but I saw no need to remember it. I can't exactly call Orrin and ask for her name...or could I? I will have to use stealth in how I find the information I need. I don't want to leave trace evidence of my presence in my search, but there are ways to find what I need to know. Tonight, I need to drive. Tomorrow, I will plan.



Standing on the porch steps, Mitch Harris scanned the area in front of the house as he created a plan of action for the upcoming search. He had briefly toyed with the idea of handing the search for Curtis Marks to one of his deputies, but had immediately discarded the idea before it had fully formed in his mind. He was the man in charge, and he liked it that way, but as far as he was concerned, the Marks family was hiding something about Junior's death. He didn't want to believe they had killed Junior, but his gut was telling him there was more to the story than they were telling. He hated to think that one of them had killed Junior, but unless someone burst out of the woods claiming responsibility, he did. And now the father was missing. Patients with Alzheimer's often disappeared, but Curtis and his wife taking off for the weekend, the brothers waiting as long as they had before reporting their father missing...Once again, there was more to the story than he was being told.

Taking his notepad from his pocket, he began making a list. At the top of the list was checking with the hotel Amy Marks claimed to have stayed at. He needed to know if she had made a reservation, when she arrived, and when she had checked out. More importantly, he wanted to know if anyone had shown up with her or if anyone had joined her. Next, he wanted to know who benefited from Curtis Marks' being dead: Amy, probably. The Mountain's Edge was a family-run venture, and they were all working together to make it a success, but in his experience, looks were often deceiving.

For now, they needed to act as though Curtis was alive and needed rescuing. Mannie was already calling folks to help with the search. He didn't want to send men into the forest at night. They could get hurt, and they could miss something. Horace Milton and his sons were experienced hunters and had worked search parties. Confident they would miss very little, he would send them into the woods as soon as they arrived. In the meantime, he needed one of the brothers to provide him with a map of the woods so he could begin gridding out the search area.

He pulled his phone from his pocket and texted Manny to make sure to send the box of whistles located in the closet in his office his way, and to make sure that several cases of water were heading his way.

He had already told Amy and her sons to thoroughly search the house. When they said they had already done that, he asked them if they had opened the doors to rooms and peeked inside, or if they had looked in closets and under the beds. When they told him they hadn't, he told them how to search the house from top to bottom while he organized a search team.

He didn't expect them to find anything, but once, in LA, he had been involved in a search for a missing child. While the search and rescue dogs were tackling the nearby heavily wooded park, he had focused on the house. He had found the child's body in a water cooler in the garage. The investigation determined that the neighborhood children had been playing hide and seek, and the little boy had found what he thought was a perfect hiding spot. He hid in a cooler in the garage. His dad, when getting the lawn mower out of the garage, placed a heavy box on the cooler and did not hear the boy's cries as he mowed the lawn. The boy suffocated.

He didn't think that Curtis Marks was in the house, and could not imagine him crawling under a bed or hiding in a closet, but he wanted to rule out the house. He and his deputies would then start looking through the cabins, barns, and other buildings. The dogs would arrive in the morning. He hated waiting on the dogs, but bloodhounds could track anything, and Howie Phelps was the best handler he had ever worked with.

Hearing movement behind him, he turned. Amy Marks came to join him on the porch. "I checked the closets. It looks like Curtis took a coat with him. Not his heavy one, but he has a coat."

"That's something."

"I know you must be wondering what kind of wife I am to let this happen."

The proper response would be to say: No ma'am, I am trying to think about what I need for a thorough search. He didn't say that. Instead, he asked, "What kind of wife are you?"

"I am the kind of wife who loves her husband." When she saw he was willing to accept her answer, she continued, "I didn't at first, I thought I loved Landon Larabee. He was a few years older than me, and I fell for him. I confessed to Cassie that I thought I loved Landon, and she set her sights on him. Before you know it, they were married. With their marriage, I lost not only my best friend, but the man I had been pining for. I felt so alone. And Curtis lost his twin. Cassie was married and as good as gone, then his parents were killed in an accident, and he was all alone. We knew we didn't love each other when we married, but we decided to make do with each other. Curtis brought a Mason jar when he proposed. He wrote a note, saying that he knew I was his second choice, but he would do his absolute best to love me like I deserved to be loved. I wrote a similar note, and we buried the jar in what is now the flower garden. Every year, on our anniversary, we talk about whether we should dig up the jar and revisit what we wrote. On our third anniversary, I realized that I loved him. I realized he was my other half. We had our ups and downs, but I loved him. I still do."

"The jar is still there?"

"We never dug it up."

"And you have been happy?"

"Yes, we've been happy except when Cassie comes to visit."

Mitch could not help it; his eyebrows shot up. "I might have the history wrong, but I thought Cassie was dead.

"She is, but she haunts Curtis and sometimes me."

"You've seen this ghost then?" So what kind of family was this?

"It was years ago, and only the one time. It scared me so badly that for years I wouldn't go into the root cellar. Isn't that silly?"

"No. I had an aunt who regularly saw the ghost of her little brother." And Aunt Mabel was a real loon.

"What did she do about it?"

"I don't think she thought she could or should do anything about it."

"I think that is how Curtis thinks, too."

Mitch had more questions, but the headlights of a truck appeared. The first of the search and rescue team had arrived. His curiosity would have to wait. He had work to do.



Ready to turn the kitchen lights off, Chris froze in place when the phone rang. Deciding he had done enough talking for the day, he let Buck answer. He didn't leave the room, though. Buck looked serious, and a serious Buck usually meant something serious had happened. He watched as Buck listened to the voice on the other end of the line and then said, "We are on our way."

"What's happened?"

"They can't find your Uncle Curtis. They believe he is lost in the woods near Mountains Edge."

Chris nodded, then said, "Tell Nate what's happened, then wake Josiah and Ezra, let them know this may be a ploy to get Mary and Billy, but don't wake her up. I'll let JD know, and then I'll get Vin. He hunts people for a living; let's hope he can find them when they are lost in the woods."