



The Reading of the Will

Part 1 of The Seven Brothers Saga



Opening the blinds, Molly scanned the conference room with a critical eye. It was rarely used as the judge met most of his clients in his private chamber in the back, but with the number of attendees for this particular meeting, they needed the space this room offered. She stayed late last night so she could talk with Diego and Paulette about the importance of this meeting, and it was gratifying to see they had put in the extra effort to ensure the conference room as well as the other rooms in the office reflected the importance of the judge as well as the importance of the meeting. The freshly polished furniture shone, and the spines of the many law books lining the wall were not thrown in haphazardly (as the Judge tended to leave them when conducting research) but were lined up neatly. She nodded her head in satisfaction with the immaculate appearance of the room. From her desk in the reception area to the bathroom, the conference room, and the Judge's office, every surface in Judge Travis's establishment shone. The office even had a slight smell of apple pie in the air. She hadn't found anything she liked other than apple-cinnamon to make the smell inviting. She had woken up early, worried the scent would be overpowering. She wanted it to be pleasant and not overwhelming or feminine.

It was a pity that no cleaning could remove the sizable blue stain from the oriental rug. She once made the mistake of suggesting a new rug, but would never bring it up again; too many good memories were held in that stain.

Yes, she decided. Even though Four Corners was hardly a speck on the map, they were located on Main Street, and the office itself rivaled anything one of the big corporate law firms in any city could offer.

"Molly?" Orrin Travis called out as he entered through the back door.

"In here, boss," she replied. "Do you think they will all come?" she asked over her shoulder when she heard her boss.

Pretending to look around the room, she covertly studied the Judge. These last few weeks had worn him down, visibly aging him. He never struck her as old before all of this, but now he was. Losing Steven had taken its toll on both him and Evie. She understood that. The thought of losing a child left her with a hollow pit in her stomach. She could not even imagine the anguish he kept to himself so he could be strong for Evie. The sparkle had just started to return to his eyes when Landon Larrabee died. She caught him, more often than he knew, sitting at his desk with a book or paperwork in front of him, but his eyes staring off into space, remembering better times.

Orin glanced over at Molly. He knew exactly what she was thinking. He had to agree with her. This business with Landon consumed him. The work Landon asked him to do kept him occupied during the day and tired enough to sleep at night. He mourned Steven, and, only recently, when he had finally begun to laugh with his best friend, as he recounted the good times he and Steven shared, Landon died.

No one ever guaranteed life to be fair. He was sad and would always hurt every morning when he woke up and realized his son was forever resting under the ground. Stephen would never again answer his phone when his father called to inquire about his plans for the day. But working with Landon, concentrating on Landon's boys,

helped remind him that Stephen had blessed him by being a part of his life, and even with Stephen gone, he was still blessed by having his grandson around.

The mess Landon had created with his sons made him realize he needed to focus on his blessings. He had begun to believe Landon could fix things when the man died. He lost not only his best friend but also the life preserver keeping him afloat. Who was he going to talk to now?

He shook his head, clearing it, and saw Molly still staring at him, chewing on her bottom lip. He gave her a quick smile, and she relaxed.

"No. I don't think Standish will show. He hasn't bothered to call, and he was the only one of them Landon had been worried about showing up," he remembered to answer her question.

"Tell you what, boss, I'll bet you five dollars they all show."

"Only five? You don't sound too sure of yourself."

"Hey, boss, I need a raise. The kids took almost all my cash; the Book Fair ends today."

"I'm sure you did nothing to encourage them to buy books."

"What can I say? They must read and be smart because they sure aren't going to make a name for themselves in sports or dance."

Orrin chuckled at the mention of Molly's Evan and Nick. A particular image always came to his mind when their names came up in conversation. The twins, as toddlers, tried to navigate the steps to his house. They made it, but only the reward of looking at the books Molly held in her hands kept them moving. Now eight, the boys had inherited their mother's red hair and their father's myopic eyes. With their reed-thin bodies making them look as if a strong wind might snap them in half, they lacked even the basic sense of rhythm and grace most children possessed.

Molly, over Martin's strong protests, put the boys in ballet hoping they could be taught some coordination, but Evan's pulled groin muscle ended that experiment. Their foray into gymnastics only taught Molly the value of good medical insurance, as first Evan tripped and broke an arm, and then Nick mishandled a vault, making the boys a matched set. At that point, Martin put his foot down and took his boys out of that dangerous sissy stuff; nowadays, the twins could be found contentedly sitting on the sidelines, reading their books, as their basketball team dominated the league.



"Those are great kids you've got, Molly. You and Martin, be sure to remember that. And as far as that bet, you are on. I've got to go through the stuff in my office. Make sure I bring in the letters and the copies of Landon's rules, will you?"

Molly nodded her head and left the room. She needed to make sure no messages were waiting for her. Satisfied, no one called, wanting last-minute directions, she hurried to unlock the front door.

Walking into his office with its large antique desk that Evie rescued from a garage sale when he first opened his practice, Orrin began sorting through the files on each man, making sure the DNA tests done on each brother were included in his file. Landon had bordered on the paranoid, not about one of his sons turning out to belong to another man, but that someone, someday, would challenge one of his seven sons' paternity. Orrin engaged the services of three detective agencies, dispatching them nationwide with instructions to discreetly obtain DNA samples from each of Landon's sons.

Once, he had confirmation that they were indeed Landon's, Molly and another private investigator worked to create biographies for each man. Christopher Samuel Larabee, Bucklyn Reed Wilmington, and Nathan Daniel Jackson proved easy to track. They had lived with Landon and were open books. Landon wanted more information than the courses they took in college and their grades. He knew all of that. He wanted information on their mothers and other family members, as well as the people they dated and, in Chris's case, married. The other men were more of a challenge, and big holes remained in the biographies. It took four months of hard work, and though Landon had seen the files, completed to the best of their ability, he had not lived to see his dream of having all seven of his boys living under the same roof become a reality.

"You know," Molly stopped in the doorway and waited for him to look up from the stack of pictures of Landon's sons. "At first glance, none of these men look much like Landon and nothing like one another, but put their photos together, and you see Landon. The times I saw Chris with Landon, I thought they looked a lot like each other, but the resemblance is hard to see in these pictures. I wonder why?"

"Attitude. Chris isn't a womanizer like Landon was, and he certainly didn't inherit Landon's people skills, but he commands the attention of everyone in a room, just like his father did." The judge pawed through the pictures, pulling out several of Chris, before continuing, "Chris looks like his mother. He has Landon's build, thin and wiry, but he makes me think of his mother. He has Cassie's smile." Orrin leaned back in his chair, a smile on his face.

"Now, she was a woman worth knowing. With my right hand on the Bible, I swear to you that almost every boy in town would have sworn his love and devotion to her, except, she was known to have a temper. In school, most students and a few teachers were afraid of crossing her. She wouldn't throw things or hit people. Instead, she would put her hands on her hips and start talking. By the time she shut her mouth, the target of her tongue lashing would feel about an inch tall. Her family moved to Four Corners when she and her twin were seniors. They were new to ranching, and she was new to riding. Everyone in her class had known each other since first grade, if not before. Lifelong friendships had already been forged, and she should have been on the periphery of all the little cliques." Orrin paused and stared at a picture of Chris as a teen, seeing Cassie, not her son. He snorted at a memory from long ago but did not elaborate.

"Within a month of enrolling, Cassie ran the school. Evie explained it to me once. Cassie was a massive sun and pulled everyone towards her. She'd smile at you in the hall, compliment your outfit, or tell you 'good job' when you solved a difficult

math problem the teacher put on the board, and you would feel as though you had achieved world peace and discovered the cure for cancer at the same time. When you crossed her, she made you feel as though you were dying the death of a thousand cuts. Building people up or taking them down, both came easily to her. With her having red hair, people forgave her temper, saying What did you expect, look at her hair? She wasn't mean, but even Curtis tiptoed around her. She didn't have to stand in front of a mirror, practicing how to yell at the custodians."

"Saw that, did you?" Molly could feel her face burning. "And I didn't yell. I nicely explained to them that this meeting was important and how this place looked would reflect on us all."

"It looks good, Molly, and the smell in the air, Apple Pie, was a great choice. Makes a person think about home and the holidays."

Molly smiled at the compliment but remained focused on learning more. "Go on. Tell me about Cassie," she would never repeat anything she heard in this office to anyone, not even to Martin; that was one of the reasons Orrin paid her as well as he did, but she was curious. She had known Landon; you couldn't live in the area and not know him. She knew the three sons he raised. She had even dated Buck before she decided she preferred quiet Martin with the non-roving eyes.

But what she knew of the family was its recent history. The files she helped prepare on the brothers left many unanswered questions. If she wanted to spend the next year effectively dealing with these men, she needed a better understanding of them. Orrin could give her that understanding. He had been there with Landon through most of it.

"Cassie," he smiled at the memory. "From her pictures, you can tell Cassie was beautiful. Her beauty wasn't what you noticed or remembered. I always viewed her as a Celtic queen, riding into battle with her blood-red hair flying out behind her. Curtis Marks, her twin, was always at her side or one step behind her. If we lived in a fair world, people would have considered them equals, but she overshadowed him in everything they did. Their folks bought O'Malley's old place. They had this idea of running a small herd and gradually turning it into a large one. Luckily, they had money because Mr. Marks didn't know much about raising livestock and was too proud to ask his neighbors for advice or help.

"Cassie did well in school, but did not attend college like everyone thought she would. Instead, she stayed to help her folks with their ranch. Curtis did not do as well in high school, but his folks sent him to college. After completing his first semester, he returned home and worked with his father and Cassie. I think Curtis came home because he missed his twin." Orrin picked up Chris's file, making a show of examining its contents. He needed time to suss out why his brain thought that. Preparing the information on Chris brought up almost forgotten memories of the twins. Over the years, he had met several sets of twins. None of the twins he knew were joined at the hip to the degree Curtis and Cassie had been. He never visualized the two of them as having an incestuous relationship, but there was something there. The word penance popped into his head, but he had no idea why. He pulled out the pages documenting Cassie's short life. Between her immunization records and report cards, her childhood

was in front of him, Everything except her junior year at a large high school in Denver. They had Curtis's records; why not hers?

Molly noticed where the judge was reading, the only significant piece of missing information in Chris's files. "I talked with the enrollment clerk at her school in Denver. She said Cassie Marks was before her time, but after all these years, combined with the fact that a new school had been built twenty years ago, it was lucky that anything in anyone's cum folder was still around to be had. I managed to get a copy of both hers and Curtis's pictures in the yearbook. It is clipped together with her report cards."

Orrin looked up and smiled. "Frankly, I am amazed you were able to find as much as you did." For the moment, he would keep the question of the missing year to himself, and later, he would reflect on the word, penance. Perhaps when things calmed down at his house, he would ask her what she thought. Pity, he had not thought of asking Landon about her missing school year.

Shaking off his thoughts, Orrin picked up where he left off. "As beautiful as Cassie was, you would have thought she could have had anyone she wanted, but she frightened off potential suitors not with displays of her temper, but with the fact that she was better than most men, in what around here is considered manly arts of riding and roping. She, genuinely, was a better ranch hand than the men who considered courting her. Her ranching skills, combined with her shadow, Curtus, always hanging around, didn't make it easy for her to date.

"Her momma despaired of Cassie ever getting married, and seeing that her daughter graduated high school without a ring on her finger, acted as though she felt Cassie was doomed to be an old maid. She was shocked when Landon showed up on the ranch one day to ask her husband's permission to court Cassie. Even though Landon graduated from high school a couple of years before the Marks family moved to town, our families were acquainted, mostly because she and Evie were friends. Evie and I were engaged by then, and even though we didn't double date, Landon and Cassie were often thrown together because they were our friends. Landon dated many girls from Four Corners and Eagle Bend. Girls who were neither engaged nor married competed for his attention. He didn't ask her out until after he had talked to her father. I never asked, but I believe Landon was waiting to say anything to her until he had something to offer.

"I remember the day he told me he planned on marrying Cassie. We were in the booth next to the jukebox at Doug's Grill. That was way before your time, Molly. The Grill went the way of the jukebox; they are history, only memories. But back then, if you were young and single, Doug's Grill was the place to be on a weekend night.

"To set the stage...just after my first semester in law school, Evie and I came home for a visit. I dropped her off at her folks, said hi to mine, and met Landon at the Grill. After Landon decided college was not the path he wished to pursue, he returned to Four Corners to work on the ranch with Mr. Sam, and the only time I got to see him was between semesters. Coming home between semesters while in college was hard. When I was in law school, between the cost of tuition and my workload, it was almost impossible to find the money and the time to come home. Landon and I made a point of getting supper at the Grill to talk whenever I was in town.

“So, that night, when we entered the Grill, Landon led the way to a booth in the back next to the kitchen. Anyway, he used the marriage word, and my jaw dropped. The only words that made it out of my mouth were ‘Cassie?’ and ‘Why?’ He didn’t laugh to signal he was joking. He told me he wanted what I had with Evie.

“The big fights everyone expected because of her temper never happened. Rather, if they did happen, neither Evie nor I knew anything about them. When her parents died in a wreck, Landon grieved right along with her. When Curtis needed money, Landon took out a loan to make sure Curtis wouldn’t lose his place. Landon went to his daddy and asked to buy land from him. Mr. Sam would have given him the land; Landon would inherit it all one day, but Landon insisted he buy it. Said he wanted something of his own, something he had worked for and saved to buy.

“Landon and Mr. Sam, his father, worked the cattle during the day, and in the evenings, they’d work on building a house for Landon and Cassie to live in. Then Chris came along, and Landon was the proudest father in town. He’d take Chris into town and introduce him around; Landon knew everyone, and he made sure everyone knew Chris. Buck inherited that skill set from him. Chris surely didn’t. Six weeks after they moved into their new home, Cassie was in a wreck. She had been visiting her brother. The only good thing about that wreck was that Mr. Sam and Mrs. Judy were babysitting Chris that afternoon, and he was not in the truck when it caught on fire. Badly burned, Cassie lived for a month before succumbing to her injuries. Chris was only seven months old when she passed.

“I’ll tell you about the rest of them at another time,” Orrin promised after checking his watch. Molly took it as her cue to leave and check to see if anyone had pulled up and was waiting to come inside.

Orrin looked at the picture of Chris, the only one of Landon’s sons, to carry the Larrabee name. A fine man, though you couldn’t tell it the way he’d been carrying on. Maybe Landon’s will would do the trick. Certainly, he had seen more of the old Chris since his father’s death four weeks ago than he had in the last three years. No, that wasn’t the whole story. With his father gone, Chris was angry with himself for acting the way he had, blaming his father and Buck for his loss. Maybe it was the self-recrimination that kept Chris sober, but even though he was sober, he wasn’t the old Chris. He never laughed. The old Chris, especially after Adam’s birth, laughed. He hadn’t laughed or smiled for the past three years. All that Landon’s death accomplished was to get Chris to put the bottle away.

Orrin went out to the ranch a few days after the funeral to tell Chris, Buck, and Nathan their father had named all of his sons in his will. If the news bothered any of the three men, he couldn’t tell. They had, mostly, been curious about the possibility of meeting their newly found brothers. He told them they had not been able to notify these brothers in time for the funeral, and they had not questioned him about it. After all, they had to wait for the autopsy to be completed before they could bury Landon, but not to immediately notify the other heirs had been his decision. There would be talk around town when these other sons arrived. There was nothing he could do about it. However, it didn’t seem right to allow the talk to start at the man’s funeral.

Of course, the three brothers knew about Vin and Ezra and seemed interested in meeting these two 'new' brothers, but Orrin knew Josiah and John David would be a surprise. He shook his head in disbelief at Landon's audacity. Landon thought he would be able to heal the wounds of his children and make them one family. Maybe he could if he were still alive. There wasn't much that Landon was not capable of doing when he put his mind to it.

To reach out of the grave and do this was another matter entirely. Chris would be the key. The old Chris would make this work, but could the Chris who spent the last three years not caring about anything other than his anguish pull it off? Orrin suspected that if he could, then Chris would heal, and Landon could rest easy.

"Don't shred their files, but make sure to put them in the vault before any of them get here, will you, hon?" he called out to Molly.

"Sure thing, Boss," Molly answered. She went into his office and gathered up the pictures and the extensive research they had done on each of Landon's sons. She would do that and, hopefully, have time to freshen her make-up before they began arriving.

She was happily married and flirted with no man, except her Martin, but these were the Larrabee brothers, and she wanted her hair and lipstick to look perfect or, barring that, as close as she could make it. She took her toothbrush back with her. Long ago, Aunt June told her she had beautiful white teeth. 'Remember to smile, dear. Your teeth are so pretty. They will help distract men from your unfortunate hair.' No one had ever mentioned her beautiful teeth. One day, she would ask Martin if he found them attractive. In the meantime, she would make sure her teeth were clean, her lipstick fresh, and, with luck, her carefully styled hair remained styled.



Checking the name and address of the law firm on the envelope against the one neatly stenciled on the door, he slowed the car and began looking for a parking space. There was nothing near the office unless there was parking tucked out of sight, behind one of the buildings, but he did not have enough time to explore. He glanced at his watch. In a few minutes, he would be late, and what kind of omen was that anyway, late for the reading of the last will of the man who fathered him?

It was ludicrous; if a person bothered to stop and think, he would even be here planning to attend the reading of this particular man's will. The man had made it abundantly clear he did not want to be burdened with yet another child. What did he expect to happen? Did he think his brothers would welcome him with open arms? Not likely. The rich stayed rich by not throwing their money away and by not sharing it with the never-before-seen bastard who just happened to show up to find out if he had been left anything of consequence by the dearly departed.

Still, he argued with himself that Larabee's lawyer was the one who contacted him and not the other way around. Perhaps he had been remembered in some, preferably monetary way. Oh, how he would love to say something truly vile and walk away, leaving a pile of money on the table untouched. If he had grown up someone

else, he would do just that, but he was Ezra P. Stan, and P stood for prudent, dent and a Prudent Standish took the money to pay off people with fists the size of Ohio.

Seeing nothing, he circled the block. He needed something close to the building, or he would begin coughing before he got to the meeting. Damn Moore, anyway. The only good thing to be said about the encounter was that at least Moore and his men hadn't touched his face. He poked gingerly at his side as he turned the corner. Ribs healed; he just needed to figure out how to pay Moore before the goon decided he needed a more lasting lesson. Why couldn't the man have waited until after this meeting to show him he meant business?

Well, what was done was done, and now he needed to find out if he had been left any money. Not that he expected any money, at least nothing to amount to much. There would be just enough to entice him to sign on the dotted line of the agreement, saying that, as the bastard son, he would take this pittance, be grateful for it, and never bother the rightful heirs.

He would sign, but only after he got a good look at the men his father called sons. He had their names memorized and pulled them out from the little corner of his mind in which he kept them tucked away. Christopher and Nathan Larabee. What did they have that he was lacking? He wanted to know, and this would probably be his only chance to find out.

Alright, Ezra, once more around the block. If there isn't a parking space, then you know God didn't want you stopping to satisfy your curiosity. Damn it all, he had meant to arrive early, to sit in his car and watch as his 'brothers' walked in to get their share and then, he would have left, never leaving his car. Well, that had been his plan before Moore showed up; now he needed every dollar he could get his hands on.

His hand reached down to stroke the envelope with the letter safely tucked inside. Nice quality paper often meant money. Larabee's or the lawyer's, he didn't know. The letter, the summons, contained a personal note from a Mrs. Kincaid. She offered to get him a room, rent a car, or answer any questions he had, in short, do anything to make this 'sad and tragic day less stressful'. Sad and tragic, maybe it was for Larabee's other sons; it sure wasn't for him. He didn't even know the man. And answer questions? As though he would be so crass as to ask, 'What did dear ole dad leave me?' Still, the personal note had been a nice touch.

Maude would have already called the lawyer and sweet-talked him into giving her all the details of Larabee's will. If Larabee left him money, she would find out about it and begin scheming how to get control of it. She still insisted she knew what was best for him. Every move he made to gain financial independence, she schemed until she found a way to counter it. Sure, he had his moments of freedom. She would go her way and let him go his, but whenever he had money in his pocket, she would show up to remind him of all she had sacrificed for him. Try as he might to resist her words and tears, he, as her obedient son, would fork over his money to help her out of whatever jam she had gotten herself into.

Funny thing about Maude, with all her successful nights in the casinos, well-played cons, and numerous marriages to wealthy men, it would seem reasonable to

think she should be rolling in loot. Hardly. Money slipped through her fingers as fast as she closed her fist around it.

Long experienced in Maude's ability to sniff out money, he had been very discreet in letting people know where he was heading for the weekend. He told no one; not that there was anyone to tell, but if he had someone in whom to confide secrets, he would have kept this one to himself. If Maude smelled the scent of money, she'd show up, baying for her share of the loot.

If there were no money to be had, she would take the opportunity to inform his 'brothers' of how their father had been such a cheap bastard, of how he had gotten her pregnant and refused any financial support. Her tone would be a careful mix of righteous indignation and long-suffering piety. He'd heard that speech so many times, he could recite it all from memory. Hell, he could give it better than she could.

Growing up, anytime he wanted something beyond what was strictly necessary for his survival or to keep appearances up, she'd haul that speech out, dust it off, and give it. She loved delivering her rant, and no doubt, if provided the opportunity to recite it to Landon Larabee's rightful heirs, she would, hoping that they, full of remorse over their father's scandalous behavior, would hand over their inheritance to her eager, waiting paws. He would die of embarrassment if she showed up, and no doubt, she would step over his rapidly cooling body to deliver her speech.

Sometimes, he thought he hated his mother, but he had never voiced the sentiment or examined it too closely. She was all he had in the world, and had long since learned to live with her shortcomings. It was better than living alone.

He was here in this dusty little God-forsaken town for one reason. He needed to understand what was wrong with him. What was in his nature that pushed his father away and kept him away? He desperately needed to know why his father never cared enough about him to pick up the phone to call or even write a postcard. Was it the circumstances of his birth? Or was there something inherently wrong with him that his father, like his grandmother, could see, but because of the wrongness of his nature, he couldn't?

His mother once showed him a magazine article depicting a handsome man with hair so blonde it was almost white, deeply tanned skin, and intensely green eyes. The man in the photograph had been smiling while hugging two boys. The article named the green-eyed teenager as Chris and the boy with the dark skin and wide smile as Nathan. Chris and Nathan. His mother told him there was a third son, but she was unsure of his name. He committed the name of the ranch and the town in which it was located, to memory and carefully cut out the pictures and the article, hiding them away in the Bible Great Aunt Doris had given him for Christmas; she always gave him gifts to help him overcome his deficits and become a better person.

He must have been seven the year he decided to write. The kids at school had been joining teams their dads coached; when they asked if he was planning on playing, he said he didn't like baseball. He wanted to play and dreamed of playing, and in his dream, his dad, with the face from the magazine, neatly cut out and pasted onto a generic body, would run out to the field to congratulate him on a game well played.

The reality was far different. If he had played, he would have had to explain why his father never came to any of the games. Why did he never sign a report card? Why was the only picture he had of the man cut out of a magazine?

He hadn't played baseball; instead, he spent the summer practicing with the deck of cards his mother gave him for his birthday while waiting, each day, for the postman's arrival. After his Mother returned to the arms of her current beau, and he remained in the house with Great Aunt Doris, he waited until she started talking on the phone with her friends. Then he carefully retrieved the article and pictures. He spent a June day writing a long letter telling Landon Larabee about himself and how he lived with his Great-Aunt Doris and her husband.

He worried about his handwriting and was upset because he guessed how some words were spelled, but his first-grade teacher told the class to sound the words out, and he had. He even colored a picture of himself so his father would know how he looked. He tried to keep the tone light. Mother always said folks don't like to be around whiners, but at the end of the letter, he asked why he didn't want him.

He blinked rapidly, dusting off that rejection, even to this day, which caused his eyes to water and his stomach to churn. The kid who he had been, the one who thought he was so grown up, had walked to the post office and shook out the money he had won, from his classmates during recess, onto the oak counter, had asked if he had enough money to send his letter so his father would have to sign for it. He overheard Great Aunt Doris saying she sent tenants that she wanted to evict a letter like that. He had explained to the lady behind the counter that he wanted to do the same, so he could be sure his father had received it. He had. He still carried the green signature card in his wallet. For long months, he felt sure his father would write back. After all, he included his mother's current address and his aunt's, but as the months turned into years, he realized he would never hear from the man. The card with his father's signature had been carefully tucked into his wallet, but he had quit looking at it, and now he hardly saw the card when he pulled out money or showed his license, and he only touched it when it was time to replace his wallet.

Each time he bought a new wallet, he almost unfolded the card to look at the handwriting. Supposedly, you could tell a lot about a person from how they dotted their i's and crossed their t's. He never looked, though, but he never threw it away. He just tucked it into his new billfold and ignored its existence until the next time he changed his wallet.

Waiting to pull into traffic on Main Street, he told himself it was the last time around the block. He glanced at the clock. He did not have time to circle the block again. It was his sign from Heaven, time to go; he'd figure something out about Moore. He looked over his left shoulder, waiting for an opening in the traffic; whoever would have thought a town this little would have so much traffic? Who, the hell, had ever heard of Four Corners anyway?

Just as he was about to pull away, the car parked directly in front of the office flashed its brake lights. He stopped breathing and watched as the woman in the car looked over her shoulder, asking, with her smile, if she could pull out in front of him. Remembering to check the traffic before waving to say she could go, he let her out and



pulled into the perfect parking spot. There were even thirty minutes left on the meter; he wouldn't put any more money in, he doubted he would be here that long.

Painfully, he pulled himself from his car. If he planned to make a practice of letting people hit him, he had best obtain an easier car to get in and out of, something large and American. His mother would die. He could hear her, 'Ezra, dear, appearances are everything, and American cars just don't say money.'

Putting on his 'face,' the one which protected him and kept his enemies from seeing too much of his soul, he entered the building. A woman, not cute and perky like many receptionists, nor cold and efficient like many others, sat behind a large cherry desk. Real wood, he noted in amazement, not veneer popular in offices.

She smiled warmly, coming out from behind the desk to shake his hand.

"You must be Mr. Standish."

"Yes, ma'am, and you are?" Ezra worried about the ma'am. She didn't seem old enough for him to use it, but it seemed polite, and he wanted to leave a good impression with a woman he would never see again.

"Molly Kincaid, receptionist, law clerk, and chief bottle washer for Judge Orrin Travis."

"A judge?" Ezra raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"He's not a Judge anymore; he retired from public service a few years ago and now he manages the clients he likes." She smiled brightly at him, her brown eyes studying him, as he pulled off his sunglasses and carefully put them in a case in his suit pocket.

"I must say, you certainly remind me of your father, maybe, more than the others. Most folk would say it is your smile, but I think it is your eyes; his was green like yours."

"Indeed," he smiled wider, exposing his dimples. He hoped she would not hear the sudden thumping of his heart. He noted the platinum wedding band. "Ah must thank you, Mrs. Kincaid, for your kind note."

"You never called," she gently admonished.

"Ah had no questions."

"Not curious?"

"Not in the least," he lied.

Tapping her pen against her chin, she studied him, "You know, none of you look like each other. No one would ever take you for brothers, but this morning, after seeing you all walk through that door, it's amazing how much you all look like him."

"You knew him then."

"Of course. The Judge and Landon grew up together, and he's managed Landon's business for the last several years, and I, well, I've been working here for

about, uhm, thirteen of those years.” She seemed lost in thought for a moment with a sad little smile gracing her face, “I miss him. You couldn't find a better man than Landon, even if you spent the rest of your life looking. But excuse me, I know you want to go back. Everyone else is already in the conference room.”

Ezra glanced at the door she had looked towards, thinking that he shouldn't have come. He was setting himself up to be hurt. He swallowed hard. “Perhaps, you could direct me to your facilities before...” before I enter the lion's den.

“Oh, yes. Go down the hall, the last door on the left. I'll just let the judge know you're here.”

She watched as he headed down the hall. She knew everyone in the conference room chafed to get this business taken care of, and she was delaying the show. Too bad. She watched the car circling the block and waited patiently. He was nervous. She could tell from the moment he opened the doors and walked inside that he did not want to be there. Well, part of her job was to make clients welcome. Hearing the bathroom door shut, she slipped into the conference room.

Smiling at the men sitting impatiently waiting for the judge to begin, she walked up to her boss and whispered in his ear. She held her hand out, waiting for the five dollars the judge happily lost—the one they had all but given up on, had arrived. She hurried back to the front desk; Standish looked as though he was ready to bolt, and she had promised Landon, in her heart, that she'd make sure that all his boys were sitting in that room, around that table, listening to the reading of his will.



Ezra splashed water onto his face and dug into his pocket for Tums. He ate two, willing his stomach to settle, then, to be on the safe side, he ate a couple of extra tablets. He debated the sense of going ahead and throwing up before going in to meet them. His stomach voted for that choice, but he wasn't sure how well his ribs could handle it, and he felt very certain any vomiting would set off another coughing spell. Though he hadn't bothered to see a doctor, they asked all sorts of embarrassing things, but he was certain that at least two of his ribs were broken.

Damn mother, for bringing Moore to the game. What the hell was she thinking? She knew his reputation. She had to have known there would be problems. She never thought things through. She never thought about the consequences. She always left him to deal with the repercussions of her actions.

He looked in the mirror as he straightened his tie, checking, without conscious thought, that his gold chain with its protective charm still hung around his neck. Not too bad, he decided, a little on the pale side, but he doubted if anyone would notice. It was time to see what Larabee had wanted with him. Probably, the old man had decided that he had better right wrongs if he was going to get into heaven. His voice from the past would say, 'My dear son, I am so sorry for not being in your life when you were a child, but now, on my deathbed, I want to rectify that error and make amends. Here is some money, go somewhere, buy a drink with it, toast my memory, and remember to have a great life.'

So, the question became, if Larabee was doling out cash to grease St. Peter's palm, how would this last act of his translate into American dollars? He squared his chin as he gazed into the mirror. Now remember, Ezra, whatever happens in there, it means nothing. He had his chance. You are here to satisfy your curiosity about your brothers, and if a few dollars get tossed your way, you take them.



Nathan heard the door open and listened as Orrin greeted the man they had been waiting for, but he didn't bother to look up from the floor. A blue stain adorned the rug, and he had spent the last several minutes trying to figure out what it was and why Orrin hadn't replaced it. Orrin had money; he could get it cleaned or replaced, but the stain remained, and its existence made Orrin appear cheap.

He wished Orrin would get this show started. He listened as the latecomer was introduced to everyone, and he even managed a handshake when it was his turn, but all he heard was the grandfather clock in the hall as it chimed the hour. The appointment was for ten, and it didn't matter to Orrin that he and the others had arrived early. The judge insisted they wait until the last brother showed or until the hour. All right, he is here, and the hour is at hand, so please, Orrin, let's get this over with. It's tearing me up to be sitting here with these strangers calling themselves brothers and my daddy lying dead, in a hole in the ground.

I need to go somewhere I don't have to be strong for Chris and Buck, somewhere I can take the smile off my face and throw things that break, somewhere I can grieve. These last weeks have been a blur. Buck called in the middle of a busy morning, words tumbling all over one another. 'Dad has had a heart attack. Come home, now!'

He remembered hanging up the phone and calling the hospital in Eagle Bend. He talked with the cardiologist, who assured him that while the tests were not all back, it appeared that this was more an anxiety attack rather than a heart attack. They would keep him overnight for observation, but would probably release him in the morning. He should have asked, What reason did Dad have to be anxious? His father was as cool as the proverbial cucumber. Even when he had a problem, he never let it stress him; he faced it head-on and took care of it.

Nathan debated about not going; he had patients to see, and it sounded as though nothing was seriously wrong, but this was his daddy, and he, the son who never did anything impulsive, began making a series of phone calls, starting with the airlines.

The last thing he clearly remembered was that after the plane landed on the small airstrip in Eagle Bend, he had taken a cab to the hospital. He smiled the whole ride over; he would ask his dad to forgive him, and then he and Buck would sit down and talk sense into Chris. Everything would be good again. He walked into the hospital with the stench of disinfectants heavy in the air and the lights burning too brightly after the taxi ride in the dark, but he saw Buck and grinned until Buck turned to him with his eyes, red and puffy, and leaking tears.

It was like being on a roller coaster. He was in a car that ever so slowly made its way up to impossible heights, and just as it reached the top, he could feel happy that his life was back on track. The car sped rapidly to the highest point on the tracks and then plummeted. He started falling faster and faster to the ground. Even though he knew he'd survive the landing, he was screaming, begging for someone to take him off that horrible ride. Seeing Buck's eyes was like that, and he knew his brother was on the rollercoaster, too, screaming along with him.

The staff packed away all the equipment, and the doctor came out and said all the right things, just like they were taught. All that was left for him to do was to go in and say goodbye before they wheeled his daddy down to the morgue. He kept thinking, this must be a joke, or a bad dream, something, because his father wouldn't die, not with things between them like they were.



Orrin Travis took his time studying the faces of the men sitting around him, trying to determine the strength of their character. Of course, he knew Chris, Buck, and Nathan. He'd been there, pacing in the hall alongside Landon when Chris had been born, had bullied his way through child services to get Bucklyn turned over to Landon's care when his momma died, and had fought Clara's family tooth and nail when they wanted to take Nathan.

They were good boys, all three of them. Landon had done well with them, although it had all but fallen apart three years ago when Chris lost Sarah and Adam to the fire that had torn through his house and barns.

Chris left, and Nathan left, but for different reasons. Only Buck remained to help keep the place running. Landon had been a fine man, a shrewd businessman, and a good friend, but when he screwed things up, he did it in a mighty big way. For example, that business with Nathan should never have happened. He loved the boy more than life itself. He had been proud of Nathan and his every accomplishment. He made sure the whole town knew of every shining star the boy brought home.

Landon had been scared. When Nathan was young, Clara's parents tried to take him. That's why he had never formally adopted the boy; he had been terrified that a judge would look at the color of the baby's skin and give his son to Clara's parents. Landon did everything he could to keep them out of court. The things Orrin knew about and pretended he didn't were delaying tactics, threats, and bribery. He suspected there were other things Landon had done that he would rather not even think about.

In the end, it had blown up in his face. Nathan went to medical school in Alabama. There he met his mother's family. It hadn't been a TV type of reunion, full of weeping women sweeping the long-lost Nathan into their family circle. That, Landon could have combated. It was more insidious, and the evil seed they planted caused feelings of insecurity. Of not knowing his place in the world, feelings Nathan had never known. They asked, 'If your father loves you, why didn't he give you his last name?' By the time Nathan decided to ask his father their question, it had become his own. Landon's explanation of his grandparents' ruthlessness while trying to take him away conflicted with the sweet, loving family he had met and grown to love. This was

especially true when Clara's mother decided to set the record straight and told him the tactics his father used to keep them away from his son, their grandson.

Nathan came home right before he graduated to talk to his dad. A shouting match ensued. All he could say on the matter, with any authority, was that while it took a lot to get Landon riled, Nathan's questioning of his love cut him to the bone, and Landon had reacted poorly. When the shouting ended, Nathan stormed off the ranch and took a job at University Hospital, ignoring his promise to return to Four Corners and set up a clinic. Orrin was convinced that once the two stubborn men cooled off, they would find their way back to each other.

He laughed when Landon told him about the fight. It had felt good to discover that Landon was having problems dealing with his sons; it made him more human. Orrin gave them two months to work things out, and it would have, except for the fire.

Orrin's eyes turned to Chris and Buck. You couldn't say one name without saying the other, as different from each other as night and day. Most people understood Landon needed solace in a woman's arms after Cassie's death. They felt finding comfort was perfectly understandable, but finding comfort in the arms of Rosie Wilmington was not acceptable, and frankly, it disrespected Cassie's memory. Yes, Chris did need a mother, but as Mrs. Elizabeth and Mr. Sam frequently explained to Landon, if he needed a wife and a mother for his son, he should be looking for one at their church. A little churchgoing would not hurt Chris any, they would tack on at the end.

Landon stopped leaving Chris with his parents when he saw Rosie on Saturday nights. He either got a babysitter or dropped Chris off with him and Evie. Folks claimed Rosie enticed the lonely man to her bed, but that was not the truth. Orrin had been there for enough of it to know better. Rosie listened, listened without judgment as Landon poured out his pain. One thing led to another, and Bucklyn Reed Wilmington was born. Rosie laughed at Landon when he offered to marry her; she also refused to let Landon adopt Buck. Those refusals killed their romance, the refusals along with the arrival of Clara, Nathan's mother.

Fiercely independent, Rosie turned down any monetary aid Landon tried to give her. The clothes he bought for Buck were returned to the store, and his money would be waiting on the counter on his next visit. She would give him her speech about how the two of them were fine, and while he could visit Buck whenever he came to Eagle Bend, he was to remember that Buck was her boy. It took Clara's intervention to convince Rosie to allow the three-year-old boy to spend the occasional weekend with them.

Clara turned Landon's life upside down. She made Buck a true member of the Larabee family; he even had a role in their upcoming nuptials. She didn't stop there. She convinced Landon to reconcile with his parents, and convinced she was the best woman to be Landon's wife. There was a courtship, plans for a wedding, and problems with her family. She took it in stride. She had a handle on everything when she discovered she was pregnant.

Landon wanted to move the wedding up, and she said she needed more time to convince her parents to attend. Then something happened. She never said what, but she packed her bags and went to live in Ely to think about the future. Nathan was born in Ely, but she and Nathan came home when Nathan was four months old. She and Landon resumed their wedding plans, deciding to keep it simple. When Nathan was six months old, three days before she and Landon were to be married in a simple church ceremony, some blasted hunter, probably, a tourist wanting a trophy for his wall, shot into her car, hitting her in the chest. She bled out before the ambulance made it to the scene.

Then, there was Landon with three of the cutest, most doted-on boys you could ever hope to see, Stephen, only being slightly cuter. When Landon had Buck for the weekend, he became 'Super Father,' letting his ranch hands deal with the ranch as he spent time with his sons,

Chris was ecstatic on the weekends when Buck visited the ranch. He had a brother with whom he could play. As tall as Chris, and then passing him, Buck looked older than he was, and he had a raw edge that came from living over a bar and dealing with some of the folks coming through the bar on a nightly basis. It was hard for people to remember he was the younger of the two boys. He could tell stories that made your hair stand on end, of drug dealing, of pimps beating on whores, and once of finding a dead woman in the dumpster.

After hearing those stories, Chris would go to Landon and beg him to take Buck to the ranch, where he would be safe, but Rosie wouldn't budge, and Landon's name was not on Buck's birth certificate.

For years, Orrin teased Landon about his boys. At times, they seemed joined at the hip, even little Nathan tagged along with his brothers and joined in their more hair-raising adventures. During Chris's senior year, he was the quarterback while Buck played the wide receiver. Together, they led their team to victory at All-State. On Saturday nights, the boys could be seen cruising around the town. Chris drove, and Buck would talk girls into joining them.

Rosie had not been big on book learning, so when Buck needed help catching up in school, Chris tutored him until he made straight As like his brothers. They went to the same university, and both excelled, graduating at the top of their classes. They began going to horse shows together, and when Chris was twenty-eight, he and Buck made an appointment with their father and Orrin, outlining a proposal to breed quarter horses.

Landon had been surprised; he had always figured the boys would come and work with him. Orrin had seen it coming. It was obvious to anyone who cared to look. Chris felt that he needed to get out from under Landon's shadow, and of course, where Chris went, there went Buck.

Well, except to the altar. Chris ended up marrying the sweetest, most gentle woman in the whole state of Nevada. The daughter of a rancher, Sarah had been on a visit home from a woman's college back east when she met Chris at a rodeo. Her

father objected not only to Chris but also to her marrying before she completed college. His objections fell on deaf ears, and with Buck's help, Sarah and Chris eloped.

Orrin's eyes fell on Chris. The man seemed sober. Orrin suspected he had been ever since he had returned to the ranch. He was sober, but the fire, the rage, still smoldered in his eyes. Only the careful calming influences of his brothers kept the man still and in his seat. This meeting may be due to his father's death, but the anger in those eyes went back to the night three years ago when Chris's ranch burned.

It had been a long, dry summer, not drought conditions, but a summer drier than usual. A summer that had everyone searching the sky for signs of rain. Chris and Buck took a trip to Mexico to look at a stallion they were considering for their breeding program. Sarah had originally planned for her and Adam to accompany them, but morning sickness had hit her hard, so she and Adam stayed behind. Landon promised his son he would check on them every day and used Chris' instruction to 'watch out for them' as an excuse to play with his grandson. Chris and Buck were supposed to return Thursday night, but Buck wanted to spend one more night with a woman he met. After calling Sarah, Chris agreed, saying he would be home the next day.

Landon had planned to go into town to pick up a pizza, but called Sarah to cancel when he began throwing up after lunch. Drained from his stomach bug, he went to bed early. That night, the incessant barking of his dog, Jack, woke him. Thinking of dry pastures, the acrid smell filling the air sent Landon into auction. Calling out for his ranch hands to wake up, he instructed Jerry to call the fire department and nearby ranchers. They needed to get the fire under control before it spread. Thinking they might be able to contain the fire with a trench, he loaded his truck's bed with every shovel in the barn, jumped in, and followed the smell of smoke to its source. Two of his ranch hands grabbed his arms so firmly they left bruises on his arms as he tried to rush into the smoldering ruins of Chris's home.



Chris and Buck returned from their trip pulling an empty horse trailer. Buck later recalled the sense of dread filling them as they traveled. Neither Sarah nor their father had answered when Chris called to see how Sarah was feeling. Their feeling of foreboding increased long before they reached Chris's home. The smell of fire tainted the air as they drove through town. The looks they exchanged reassured each other; both men were thinking that if the fire had been on either their father's ranch or Chris's spread, the smell would not have reached Four Corners. It was not them; it would be a neighbor who would feel the devastation fire leaves in its wake. Both men scoured the sides of the road, searching for the source of the smoke cloud billowing in the sky, wondering if the fire was out or if their help would be needed.

They ignored the bouncing, as first the truck and then the empty trailer crossed the cattle grid, and Buck sped up the gravel road towards Chris's house. Met with the grisly smell of burned horseflesh hanging heavy in the air, clawing at their throats, Buck slowed the truck to spare a glance at the smoldering remnants of the barn. Then he floored his truck past the vehicles lining both sides of the drive, past the grim-looking, soot-covered men and teens hovering uselessly, waiting for someone to tell

them what to do. Buck passed the small grove of trees Sarah had nurtured, hoping one day they would produce enough fruit for her to make jelly.

The firetruck and ambulance parked in what had once been the front yard of Chris's home gave them a flash of hope that someone had survived the flames that consumed the house. At another time, the smell and the sight of the burned husk of a barn would have been enough to bring grown men to tears. On that morning, it gave the folks who had shown up to help put the fire out something on which to focus so they did not have to see the blackened bones of the house, smell charred human flesh, or witness the shredding of a man's life as he realized what happened. The house was little more than ashes; Sarah's and little Adam's bodies were tucked into black bags waiting for the ambulance to take them to the morgue. People wearing white rubber gloves swarmed through the ashes searching for clues, sifting through the debris of Chris's life.

Jumping out of the truck before Buck had brought it to a complete stop, Chris spotted the black body bags. Dropping to his knees, he began screaming; he wouldn't quit. He said horrible things to his father and worse things to Buck. After the funeral, he started drinking. For three years, Chris drank, taking small jobs to pay for his bar tab when his bank account was emptied, and his father cut off the money.

At first, Buck tried to keep tabs on Chris. He felt compelled to keep him from ending each day in a drunken stupor. After almost two years of Buck spending his weekdays helping Landon on the ranch and spending his weekends sobering Chris up, Buck came home with his lip split and one of his eyes swollen shut; he didn't say anything to Landon, but he didn't go back out after his brother again.

Orrin finished his reminiscing, knowing these men were waiting for answers. "I've never been one to beat around the bush, and my wife has, frequently, told me I need to learn tact. Figure she might be right," he glanced around the room. The eyes, meeting his, ranged from openly curious to closely guarded.

"You are all here, as sons of Landon Jefferson Larabee, to hear his will. Rest assured, I will read it, in its entirety, to you, but it is a long, dry document. I will first tell you what he wanted done and why." His eyes circled the room again; he had lost them already. The men were busy examining the other occupants of the room. Some, for the first time, registering an enormous family had suddenly been thrust upon them. He gave them a moment to stare at each other and digest the news.

"Excuse me, Mr. Travis."

"Yes, Ezra, isn't it?" He knew exactly with whom he was speaking, but didn't want these men to realize or even suspect he had researched their lives and possessed extensive dossiers on each of them.

"Yes, suh, Ezra Standish," Ezra wanted to look around the room, but the laughter building up in him would escape if he connected with any other faces saying they also saw the humor of the situation. "Am ah to understand that we aruh all sons of Mr. Larabee."

"Yes."

"And except for Mr. Christopher Larabee," Ezra nodded his head once in Chris's general direction, "We aruh all, how shall Ah say it, born on the wrong side of the blanket."

Travis nodded, halfway angry at the amusement dancing in the young man's eyes and halfway grateful for it.

Ezra couldn't help it; he started laughing. Wiping at the tears threatening to roll down his cheeks, he struggled to compose himself and answer the incredulous looks tossed his way. "Ah know, Ah know. This is supposed to be a most solemn occasion, and ah am being extremely rude, mah mothuh would roll in her grave, but it just struck me that," he waved his hand around the room to include them all, "our Mr. Larabee collected bastards like other men collect stamps."

Ezra heard the growl and hastily apologized, "Ah am sorry if ah offended you, Mr. Wilmington." The tall man sitting on the other side of Chris Larabee must be the other son Landon raised. Chris, Buck, Nathan. He filed the names away for later, when he'd have the time to figure out what his father found in them, which made him keep them, the element he lacked.

"Are you ready to continue?" Orrin asked the chuckling man.

"Oh, mah yes, please proceed."

Travis settled in his chair and steepled his fingers. "Your father knew of each of you and prepared a personal letter for each of you. Suffice it to say he recognizes each of you as one of his sons. Landon knew this might be hard for all of you to accept. He was not proud of his actions regarding his children, and in your letters, he explains those actions or, in some cases, inactions. He did not do this in the will because it would become public domain. These letters are private communications between you and him. Each of you may decide on how much, if any, of your letter you wish to share with your brothers or with other people.

"Having said that, I must also say, he has stipulated in his will, if any son, and I stress this, any son attempts to prove another son is not the true son of Landon Larabee, he will forfeit his entire claim to his share of the estate. Landon was very sure that you seven men are his sons. While he knew in his heart that each of you was his son, and while he did not believe any of you would question the claim of his calling you sons, he did worry that a non-family member might. He didn't want there to be any questions. Therefore, he had DNA collected from all seven of you, tested to verify his decision to call you sons. Before you ask how, we had very good detectives collect samples from cups that had been thrown away and the like. I have the results in my safe. Are there any questions?" Orrin studied each face, not one of them revealed the confusion he must be feeling; in that, they were all Landon's sons.

"It is my personal belief Landon wanted every one of you, and if certain circumstances had been different, he would have happily raised every one of you," Travis smiled at Josiah Sanchez whose salt and pepper head almost rivaled his own, "Although, I am not sure how good a father he would have been at sixteen." Josiah broke into a large grin that threatened to split his face in half.

"Almost a year ago, Landon came to talk to me. He was extremely worried about his deteriorating relationship with his son Nathan, and Chris's increasingly inappropriate behavior." Orrin looked over at Chris as he spoke, catching the flash of guilt crossing Chris's face. Good. Maybe there was hope for the man after all. Maybe Chris was beginning to see how destructive his actions were.

Not wanting to embarrass Chris further, Orrin continued, "Landon worried that Buck would get hurt in his roles of playing peacemaker and guardian angel as well as practically running the ranch by himself and doing the work of three men. He did a lot of thinking and decided he messed things up with all of you, and he was desperate to set it right." He stopped to take a sip of water, surprised to find, even as seasoned as he was, having spent a lifetime dealing with all sorts of people, some of them less than savory, having those seven sets of eyes so much like their father's, focused on him, unnerved him.

He cleared his throat and continued, "Landon was an extraordinarily successful rancher. Unfortunately, being successful does not always translate into being wealthy. Up until about fifteen years ago, Landon had little cash. He had enough to take care of his boys. Enough to send them to school. Enough to help Buck and Chris get their horse ranch started. Enough to fund Nathan's schooling, but everything else, he plowed back into the ranch.

"On my advice, he began diversifying. He gambled in a big way in the stock market. He provided financial support to various small enterprises within the community. He bought and sold real estate across the state. Everything Landon did, he did well. He has left a sizeable estate. But as with all good things, there is a catch."

"That catch being?" Chris's quiet voice almost echoed in the room. The judge told them about the brothers, but he had not discussed the terms of his will. He merely stated Landon wanted all his sons to hear those terms together.

"Landon desperately wanted to get you all together. He planned to bring all of you to the ranch after we found you. He wanted to sit down and get to know each of you. Writing his will was a contingency plan. He never expected to die and thoroughly expected to mold you all into one big family. Frankly, I didn't think it could be done, but he was adamant, saying that you were all Larabees, and blood would tell in the end.

"Chris," he used Chris's name, but spoke to them all. "He has left each of you one million dollars, provided," he paused; he knew it was a little too dramatic, but he wanted them all to hear and understand this provision. "Provided you live together in the ranch house as brothers and run the ranch together. Landon made it clear how he wanted things done. I will give you his conditions in a moment.

"Assuming you meet his requirements, to live at the ranch and help run it, one million dollars will be deposited in your bank account. A million dollars for each of you staying for the entire year. If you leave before completing the year, your million dollars will be given to the charity of your choice. In addition, if one of you leaves, your brothers will, each, forfeit one hundred thousand of their million dollars, to be given to a charity. At the end of the year, you may take your million and leave if you desire. If you choose to leave, you will always be welcome back at the ranch, but you will not be

entitled to share in the rest of the family holdings unless your brothers unanimously vote to allow you back into the business.”

“Orrin, I worked right alongside Dad for the past three years and there isn't seven million to be had unless you start selling off land and stock,” Buck objected thinking of when the second year of the drought hit the ranchers, he and Dad stayed up many a night trying to make ends meet, without having to dig into the reserve in the bank. If there was so much money to be had, why didn't they spend it?

“You're right, and you're wrong, Buck. When your father began diversifying, he worried about losing the land. He could have dealt with losing money, but he wanted the land to be always safe from any fluctuations in fortune his investments might bring.

“The Double L Ranch and Larabee Holdings are two separate entities. None of you may touch any part of Larabee Holdings until this year has passed, and you have committed to working with your brothers in the running of the Holdings. Stocks, bonds, and all investments are frozen for one year. Beginning in the morning, nothing will be bought or sold.”

“Is that prudent?” Ezra asked. He made himself mad by speaking again, but the thought of money, with no one to watch over it, subject to the vagaries of the economy, made him nauseous, and he was nauseous enough as it was without having to worry about that money.

“No, but it is the way your father set it up. He was confident, the lot of you could quickly reverse any reversal of fortune,” Orrin answered. He had wondered which of them would be the one to bring up the flaw in Landon's plan. He thought it might be John David, fresh out of Business School, but he wasn't surprised the gambler had brought it up. He reached into his stack of papers to pull out copies of the conditions for getting the million dollars and began handing them out.

“Read this. It is not the letter he wrote to you. These are his conditions you must follow if you plan on inheriting. These are copies of the original, which is part of his will and will become part of the public record.” Once each man had a copy of the rules, he began watching them as they read.

How to Earn a Million Dollars in Seven Easy Steps

1. You will live on the ranch for one entire year, that year beginning the day following the reading of my will at ten in the morning. Some of you will have to contact employers and such. So, leeway will be given at Orrin Travis's discretion on how long this will entail.

2. Each of you will have a room at the ranch. The room is furnished. If you need more, it comes out of your allowance. Yes, Bucklyn, there was a reason for the remodeling I've had done, sorry I couldn't share those reasons with you.

3. Each of you will receive an allowance of \$1500.00 per month for personal use, payable out of the ranch coffers. You will receive this money on the first day of each month.

4. The estate has two pickups, and both trucks are in good condition. It also has a four-door sedan. The ranch funds repairs, insurance, and upkeep for these vehicles as it does for the tractors and other equipment. However, your cars are your own and are to be taken care of by you, not by the ranch, even if you use them for ranch business. Deal with it.

5. You will not hire housekeepers, cooks, or groundskeepers. Calvin Yosemite, and his two brothers will help with the ranch, but only work part-time. Their involvement does not excuse any of you of your responsibility to do your share in the running of things. Remember, the Yosemite brothers have their place to look after. If circumstances dictate the need to hire additional people, you may collectively decide to do so, provided the ranch accounts are in such a state as to allow you to pay for said hiring.

6. You are not chained to the ranch, provided your work is done. I encourage you to dine out, meet your neighbors, date, and so on.

7. The ranch is to show a profit at the end of one year.

There is one exception to these rules, and that is Nathan. I know, son, you have been resistant to starting a practice in this town. I know that decision is most probably due to our argument. Please read the letter I wrote you, as I hope it will explain my actions to your satisfaction, and you will consider opening a practice here. Your presence is needed in Four Corners. Doctor Griggs is nearing retirement age and cannot manage things alone. If you choose to work with him, I will relieve you of the day-to-day ranch work provided you are at the clinic or the hospital. I do not relieve you of the burden of living with your brothers, and I am smiling here as I remember how much you loved living on the ranch. I do not believe your brothers will prove to be too great a burden. I do not relieve you of your responsibility to take part in making decisions concerning the ranch.

To all my sons, I am sorry for my mistakes. I can only hope that by giving you to each other, I can help rectify those mistakes. Even if, at the end of this year, you find you cannot live with each other and want no part in the operations of the Ranch or of Larabee Holdings, I hope you leave with some measure of love for your brothers and me. If you do leave, take your money, live as well as you can, and never hesitate to ask your brothers for help, that is what families are for.

With all my love,
Your Father,
Landon Jefferson Larabee

Orrin leaned against the window, watching as the men read. Nathan brushed tears off his face and sat motionless, lost in thought. He felt reassured by Nathan's reaction. He knew the man would read the instructions and think, not only of his words but also of the love he and his father had for one another.

Josiah fingered his ornate cross as he read. He carefully folded the note and put it in his breast pocket when he finished reading. He bowed his head and either prayed or fell asleep. After a moment of watching him, Orrin decided the man was praying; he looked as though he would be the type to snore when he slept.

Orrin could read every emotion as it raced across Buck's face. Yes, Dad. So, these men are why you added all those rooms to the house. Yes, of course, I will stay

for the year. I will help the others, and we will become a family. This will be good for Chris; this plan will give Chris something to focus on other than Sarah and Adam. Yes, I will make sure Nathan comes home. I will take care of things until Chris can. Love you, too, Dad.

It was harder to figure out what Vin Tanner was thinking. His long, curling, brown hair fell into his face as he read, but Orrin could tell he was mouthing the words, and the length of time he took to complete the letter, he was having trouble deciphering it all. He didn't think the man was slow. Yes, he had made only average grades in school, but he and Landon had talked about Vin's school transcript, and the two of them figured his lackluster grades were more a result of moving in and out of foster homes rather than any lack of intelligence. Besides, his brilliant blue eyes were too observant for him not to be intelligent.

Ezra had been smiling as he read the instructions, but paled as he read the last paragraph. Now, he sat stiff and erect in his blue leather chair. He looked as though he might be ill, but Orrin wasn't sure. He didn't look long at his face; it was devoid of emotion; he could easily pass for a department store mannequin. It was painful to witness.

Orrin glanced over at John David Dunne. He missed seeing him read, so he decided to watch him as he tried to get better looks at his brothers without them catching him. Buck had caught his attention and winked, and you could see the tension melt away from the young man. He'd stay; he was desperate for a family after having just lost his mother. He could heal at the ranch.

Orrin didn't bother to look at Chris' face as he read. That face, etched in anger and pain, revealed little. His actions would reveal more. He could be the glue binding them together, or... he could take his brothers with him on his little path of self-destruction.

"Before we make any decisions regarding this, Orrin, I think you need to tell us why you had the police and the FBI talking with us these past two weeks," Chris challenged Orrin.

"That's fair," Orrin said as he pulled his chair out and sat back down. "Several months ago, Landon asked me to find his missing sons so he could bring you home. He had a health scare. Went in for a routine physical, and Dr. Griggs did a biopsy on a 'suspicious spot on the back of his hand. Emmett scared him by using the 'C' word, and he decided he didn't have time to waste. He came in asking me to hire investigators to find his sons. He had a list with their birth dates, mothers' names, and any other information he thought might be helpful. I asked him how he planned to get grown men to come to Four Corners. He didn't have a good answer. He just said when I found you, he would talk to you and bring you home, and I quote his words, 'where you belong.'

Orrin picked up the envelopes neatly stacked in front of him and absently began shuffling them from one stack into another. He had already had this conversation more times than he cared to, first at the hospital with Chris and Buck and then later with Mitch Harris, Ray Benson, and some man from the FBI whose name he could not

recall. He didn't want to relive the events of that Friday morning. In a way, it was harder than learning of his son's death; he supposed it was because he was there with Landon. He didn't want to talk about it, but he would; he owed it to the men sitting around the table who were new to the family.

"Everything changed, not on the day your father died, but the Friday before Landon's death. A private investigator named Frank Holland committed suicide. Landon called me that afternoon to tell me his PI was dead. I must say that I was confused because I had hired three firms to find you all, and I had not heard of any of them dying. I asked Landon what he was talking about, but his answer was as vague as all get out.

"I had no clue that he had hired anyone else until the afternoon after Holland's wife, Carmon, discovered Frank Holland's body. Landon called me from the parking lot of a police station in Ely to tell me about the death, saying he wanted the man's wife and his secretary taken care of. He said it was his fault that Holland was dead, and he felt obligated to ensure Holland's widow and secretary were financially secure. He wanted me to get the paperwork done. Said he would be in in a few days to sign it. He hung up the phone before I could ask why he had hired another PI.

"He was preoccupied the whole week. I called him repeatedly, but he either would not answer or would say he was busy and hung up when he did answer. After a couple of days of not talking with him, I took matters into my own hands and made some calls. While I have not been on the bench for the past few years, I am still in contact with people in law enforcement. From what I learned from asking around, Holland was considered a very capable investigator with contacts from all over Nevada, California, and other states. I contacted the police in Ely and tried to talk with the lead detective investigating Holland's death, a man named Ray Benson. I said I tried because he shut me down, saying 'no comment' and hanging up on me." Orrin snorted and then explained, "I was hung up on more times in that week than I have ever been in my career as a lawyer, a judge, and a semi-retired attorney combined."

"I ended up calling Mitch Harris." Looking at the lack of reaction from the men new to Four Corners, he elaborated, "Four Corners does not have its police force; we rely on the county's sheriff department to provide law enforcement for the area. Their office and the county jail are a couple of blocks down the street. Sheriff Harris is the man in charge. More importantly, he keeps his ear to the ground and knows about anything that may impact the people of Four Corners.

"Mitch picked up the phone on the first ring, saying he had been expecting my call. In a concise, matter-of-the-fact manner, Mitch gave me the details your father had not. Holland was found by his wife in his tub with his gun on the floor beside him and his brains sprayed on the wall behind him. There was no note, but his place was tidied up, and a suit, according to his wife, his best one, hung up on the doorknob of the bedroom's closet. The police in Ely think it was suicide, but your father showed up and made a stink about it being a murder.

"Your father claimed Holland had scheduled a meeting for the first thing that morning because there had been a new development in the case Holland was looking into for him. Your father said something to Benson at their meeting that Benson

recalled after hearing your father had died of a heart attack. Landon told him that if he ended up dead, any time soon, to remember he did not believe in killing himself. That's when the FBI was called in.

"I am getting ahead of myself. Let me go back to the morning Landon came in. Molly and I had just finished looking at the appointment schedule for the day, and she went to unlock the doors while I began turning on the lights. He must have been standing at the door, waiting for the sound of the door unlocking, because he didn't give Molly time to back away from the door when he shoved it open. He came barreling in and came extremely close to knocking Molly to the ground.

"Orrin, I need to talk with you,' Landon declared as he made his way to my office. I had never seen Landon deliberately rude; he never said a word to Molly... there was no excuse me or I am sorry, nothing, and his unusual behavior kept my mouth shut as I followed him to my office.

"Normally, I shut the door when meeting a client, but I didn't that morning. I felt I needed Molly to witness whatever he planned to say.

"He sat in the chair and crossed his legs, shifting his position several times before I walked around my desk to my chair. The calmest, most laidback man I have ever known was ... the best I can describe it was jittery. 'Are you ok?' I asked even though it was clear that he wasn't.

"Orrin, I have a lot to do. I may not have the time to finish. I need you to listen.'

"OK,' I answered, deciding to let him talk.

"I engaged Holland to investigate an unusual incident at my home months ago. We ended up falling into a rabbit hole.' He reached for the legal pad on my desk and grabbed a pen, but he put the pen down when he saw how badly his hand shook.

"Did you create trusts for Holland's wife and secretary?' he asked.

"I opened the file drawer in my desk and pulled the documents out. He took the papers, but instead of leaning back in his chair to peruse them, which he normally did, he reached for the pen and signed both documents. He signed them, but his hand...arm was shaking so much, the signature was almost unreadable, and you know how neat and precise his penmanship was. Molly had been standing in the doorway, and when she saw he planned to sign them, she got her notary seal and notarized them on the spot.

"Getting that done seemed to relieve him, then he said, 'Orrin, they will need help closing up his business. If you and Molly can help, I would certainly appreciate it. Kathy will need to find a new job. Can you help her?'

"I nodded I would, but then I asked, 'What is going on?'

"He looked up at me and answered, 'I have had too many people I love die, and now Chris has too. Holland and I were putting the pieces of the puzzle together. He had something to tell me, but he is dead. The files he had are gone.'

"I was going to ask more questions, but Molly walked in and knelt by Landon. 'Let me take your pulse, Landon,' she said, grabbing his wrist before he could say anything. She looked up at me and mouthed, 'It's too fast. Call an ambulance,'

"The sirens could be heard, but I was listening to him say, 'I wanted to know who and why?'

"I wanted to ask him about his copies of the files he and Holland made. He kept copies of everything... I didn't get a chance to ask; the EMTs had entered and were fitting an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth. Brian, one of the EMTs, said, as he was slamming shut the back of the ambulance, that Landon might be having a heart attack.

"Thirty-eight minutes. It took thirty-eight minutes to get him to the hospital," Orrin spoke, almost to himself. Those thirty-eight minutes had been an eternity.

"Buck made it to the hospital before Molly and I did. He was on the phone, tracking Nathan and Chris down, when the ambulance pulled up.

"After a while, the doctors came out and told us it wasn't a heart attack. More of a panic attack, they said, but they decided to keep him overnight for observation. They gave him something to help him sleep." Orrin's voice faltered, and he took a couple of deep breaths. "Chris showed up by then, and we were sitting in the lobby waiting for Nathan to get there; he'd said he'd catch a cab as soon as the plane landed. We were talking when people started running to his room. He died, had another heart attack, and died.

"They held the body until the results of the autopsy were in. The autopsy showed he had a massive heart attack. That morning, the doctors said his heart was fine. Orrin quit speaking; he turned away and looked out the room's lone window, waiting until he could control the trembling in his voice.

"In short, something happened. Dad decided to hire a private investigator. The investigator commits suicide after making an appointment to see Dad. Then, a week later, Dad gets admitted to the hospital and dies," Chris ticked off his points in a quiet voice that carried throughout the room.

"This is true. We have no reason to believe you, any of you, are in danger, but we also can't be sure of your safety." Orrin waited for someone to say something, but they all sat still, digesting the information. He wanted to guide them back to the matters at hand. "Do you, any of you, have any questions regarding the terms of your father's will?"

"So, all we have to do is live and work at the ranch for a year to get all that money?" John David did not want to think about any more deaths; he was still reeling from his mother's death last June. He could think of Landon Larabee and his will, without hurting. Landon Larabee was just a name; the name of a man who left him a million dollars.

A million dollars! He had never dreamed of having that kind of money. He and his mother had scraped by on her job cleaning houses. It covered the bills but left no room for luxuries, and she had insisted that his money from afternoon and summer

jobs go into the bank for when he went to college. With a million dollars, he could have bought a house for her, a new car, and beautiful clothes. She wouldn't have had to work so hard, and her hands would be soft and manicured, not rough with broken nails. She would have had time to go to college herself.

He sighed. He had those dreams for years; now, he wouldn't be buying her any of those things; he'd be buying her a tombstone. He looked up from the stain on the floor, which had captured his attention as he listened to the Judge talk about his father's death. Glancing around the room, he asked, "Who's doing this? Staying for the year, I mean?"

"I'm in. A million dollars is a lot of money for doing' ranch work," Vin answered. He wanted to know more about his mother and how she died. It sounded like the best place to start looking would be at the ranch. The money sounded nice, too, but with this other stuff about family, he'd wait and see how things sorted out. He'd been introduced into too many homes, each saying they were his new family, to get excited about this new promise of kinship.

"Might be interesting having a family," Josiah's voice boomed. This sounded like the opportunity he had been waiting for. It was an opportunity to take his time to decide how he should spend the rest of his life.

Orrin glanced at Josiah, noting that he was tall, but not extraordinarily tall or big, yet he carried an aura of physical and mental strength. He seemed like a man who had seen many different things in life. He would be an interesting man to get to know. Maybe after Josiah settled in at the ranch, he'd invite him to lunch. He thought he'd like to get to know Landon's sons.

"The ranch was my home," Chris glanced over at Buck and then at Nathan. He owed it to his father to get this brother-stuff settled and to find out how and why his father had died. Then he'd leave, with a million dollars, and he could drink until he vanquished his pain.

"I'm staying," Buck answered. He loved the land, but more importantly, he loved Nathan and Chris, and for his father's sake, he'd give these others a chance. And, if someone had killed Chris and Nathan's mothers just as their father had been killed, he couldn't assume his brothers were safe. No matter his inheritance, he'd stay and watch over them.

"Orrin, I'm going to need help getting out of my contract," Nathan said. He loved Birmingham, loved his work at University Hospital, and he loved his mother's family. This was home, though. Until he had returned, he had not known how much being home meant to him.

Even if he did not have his brothers at his side, even if he did not live on the ranch, and most importantly, even without the lure of money, he would stay. The people in Four Corners needed a doctor; Doctor Griggs was getting too old to manage things alone, and the nearest hospital was in Eagle Bend, a good forty-five minutes away.

"I'll schedule you for an appointment at 9:00 tomorrow morning," Orrin said as he scribbled himself a note and then looked up at the last one. Ezra, are you in?"

"A year... chained to a ranch. No, Ah think not."

"A million is a tremendous amount of money. Where else make that kind of money in a year?" Chris spoke, irritated that the man was not doing as their father requested.

"Ah have other prospects, and while they may not provide the same expectation of me ending the year with a million dollars in mah pocket, they are lucrative, and Ah will not be living on a ranch." Ezra checked his mask, making sure none of his thoughts were leaking out through his eyes, and looked around the room, trying to find a way to fit in. Maybe, if the offer had been made only to the other forgotten sons, and to Buck, with his easy, infectious smile, then, maybe, he could do it. He couldn't stay at a ranch with Chris and Nathan living there; he would spend each day looking at them and then looking at his reflection in the bathroom mirror, searching for what they had, but he lacked. Every time searched their faces and compared them with his own, a little piece of him would break off and disappear. By the end of the year, he would have money, but his self would have dissipated into nothing.

"Before you decide to forfeit the million dollars, let me give you the personal letters your father wrote," Orrin said, breaking the tension between Ezra and Chris. He reached into his stack and pulled out white envelopes thick with pages of love stuffed into them.

"I don't know what is in these letters. His instructions were for me to give them to you and for you to read them at your earliest convenience. There are no copies of these letters, and they will not appear in any form in the will; there is not even a mention of them in Landon's will. Landon realized his will would be open to public perusal, and these letters are intensely personal. He did not want you to read each other's letters, nor did he want you to ask each other about the contents of the letters.

"If at some time one or more of you decide to discuss your letters, you may, but there is to be no pressure on anyone to do so."

Orrin gathered up the envelopes made thick with the words Landon wanted to share. These letters had been his suggestion. He had never expected to pass them out. He had only suggested Landon write them as a prudent move, as protection against unforeseen tragedy. He thumbed through the envelopes, finding the one marked Ezra. He held out the letter, meeting the eyes of the one brother, ready to leave. "This is yours," he said.

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Ezra took the letter because he could not think of a gracious way to refuse, but he felt as though he had just placed a rattler in his pocket and was waiting for it to strike. I wrote to him once, and he is just now getting around to writing back to me. No, and Hell no. I will not read this missive.

"Ah think it is best if Ah leave." Ezra stood up, his ribs protesting the movement. As he straightened, the room blackened, and all he could see were tiny points of light. He knew they were talking, protesting his leaving. He could hear Chris speaking angrily, but could not make out the words. He waited, and his vision cleared, and his hearing returned.

"Are you ok?" Nathan asked, knowing the answer was no.

"Of course, Dr. Jackson, Ah merely stood up too fast." He pasted his smile on, making sure it reached his eyes and held out a hand, "It's been a privilege to meet you, Dr. Jackson."

Absently, Nathan shook Ezra's hand, noting the sweaty palm and the thin bead of sweat across the man's upper lip, "I don't think you should be leaving right now."

"Nonsense, Dr. Jackson Ah must be on mah way,"

Ezra turned to shake hands with Vin Tanner, only to find Chris standing there. "Mr. Larabee, mah condolences on your loss." He smiled as brightly as he could, but the man didn't return it.

"We are going to get something to eat over at Inez's. Even if you don't want to spend a year with us, you can find the time for lunch," Chris ordered. He knew he sounded angry with the man, and he was: Standish was not even considering their father's request.

"When you put it like that, how can ah refuse? If you could give me directions..."

"It's three blocks, we'll walk. Are you up to it?"

"Of course," oh, damn it all, he thought furious with himself. No. He wasn't up to it. He had broken ribs and was seriously wondering if he would be able to walk to his car. "Ah need to use the facilities first, if you don't mind."

"Molly will show you the way," Chris replied. He didn't like the way the man looked. He'd ask Nathan about his brother's health. A sick man could not make good

decisions. He could not decide whether to throw away money or the opportunity to get to know his brothers. He could wait and make his decision when he was better.

"Thank you. Ah'm sure I can manage."

Chris watched him walk gingerly out to the hall before turning to Nathan. "Well?"

"He ain't gonna make it to Inez's," Nathan replied, and then realized ain't had crept back into his vocabulary. He could only hope the stir Ezra was causing would keep his brother from catching his slip-up.

"Five says he does," Tanner said as he opened his wallet. The smile tugging at his lips grew when his brothers (and would he ever get used to saying that?) began reaching into their wallets to pull out money.

"You go by Vincent or Vin?" Josiah asked after he made his bet.

"My friends call me Vin." Vin leaned against the wall and brushed his hair out of his eyes. He had started his day with his hair pulled back, off his face, and secured with a rubber band. Sitting in his truck and using the vanity mirror to try to work in a loose strand, he broke the rubber band right before the meeting at Judge Travis's office. His hair had been irritating him, as of late, and he was considering cutting it. He just hadn't found the time yet. "You?"

"What's in a name? Joe, Josiah, Mr. Sanchez, or Dr. Sanchez, I answer to any of those names. On the other hand, a man once called me Little Joe, and I didn't like it much."

"I'll remember not to call you Little Joe."

"Play it safe, call me Josiah," the man winked at his younger brother, and they both broke into grins.

Chris checked his watch and announced, "I told Inez we'd be there 'bout noon. She's holding her back room for us. We'd better head on over. Judge, would it be all right if we came back...say about two o'clock to finish?"

The judge nodded, feeling inordinately pleased with the way things had gone. Chris was doing his work for him; he'd hate to be in Standish's shoes right now because Chris was preparing to pressure the man into agreeing to follow the dictates of the will.

Smiling, he left the room. He'd have Molly call his two o'clock and ask him to come in later. He made his request and then exchanged grins with Molly as Buck's voice carried in from the street to fill the small lobby.



"Boys, you are in for a treat. Not only does Inez serve up the best steaks and ribs in the state, but she is the purdiest little spitfire and--"

"And she's one of the handful of ladies around these parts not at all interested in Buck," Chris said as he joined them.

"Chris, I tell you, she's playing hard to get."

"Well, Buck, tell me, how long is she planning on playing this game?"

"She loves me, Chris. Anyone with eyes can see that. Hey, kid, you ready to put some meat on those bones?" he threw his arm over John David's shoulder. "Say, what kind of name is John David?"

"What's wrong with it?"

"Don't get upset, kid. It's a fine name," Buck reassured as he pushed the boy out the door. "Kind of long, though. Don't you think?"

"My momma called me John David," he scowled at Buck, daring him to say one more thing about his name.

"It might have worked in a city like Boston. But kid, if you ain't noticed, you ain't in Boston. Do you see any pretty skyscrapers? Not around here, you don't. Tomorrow, I need you and yell 'Hey, John David, shut the gate before the cows get out!' and by the time I've said your name, half those girls are packed and are on their way to California."

"You want to call me John, that's fine."

Buck scrunched up his face thinking about it, "No, kid, I can name about half a dozen Johns right off the top of my head and there ain't no call to go and make you one of that herd. Chris, help me out here."

"JD," Chris obliged without hesitation or humor. If Buck was going to saddle the kid with a nickname, it had best be one that the kid could grow old with, because it would stick.

"Chris...I better go and--" Nathan looked worriedly at the empty stretch of sidewalk in front of the Judge's office. He started to go back in, but Chris's hand grabbed his upper arm, stopping him.

"Vin went to get him. If he needs you, he'll get you."

Nathan, surprised, looked around at the cluster of strangers; he had not seen the man slip away from the group, nor had he seen any sign Chris had noticed, and he had been keeping an eye on Chris. "But--"

"Nathan, let's get moving so we can eat. We need to get back here by two and get this finished."

Nathan glanced back inside Travis's office. The judge and Molly sat at Molly's desk quietly talking. There was no sign of Standish or Tanner. Reluctantly, he began following Chris toward Inez's restaurant. Standish looked ill, and Nathan was loath to leave without checking on him. On the other hand, the judge introduced him as a doctor. Both Tanner and Standish were grown men, and surely, if he was truly needed, they'd get him. He lengthened his stride and easily caught up with the others.



"Ya all right in here?"

Ezra didn't startle, but it was more a matter of not doing so because his side couldn't take it, rather than being aware Vin Tanner had entered the room. What happened to respecting a closed bathroom door, or at least knocking? He would suggest getting a lock for the door when he wrote Mrs. Kincaid a note thanking her for her hospitality.

"Ah'm sorry, ah must be holding up things."

"Nervous stomach?" Vin offered a plausible reason for the man having bolted out of the conference room.

"Ah am fine," he lied; he had nerves of steel. It was just that every breath he took made him relive the impact of each blow. He reminded himself to avoid deep breaths, at least until he was away from the strangers. Wondering whether the man heard him hacking, he consoled himself, thinking that at least he hadn't cried out as his ribs protested the movement his coughing caused.

"Yeah," Vin said, his expression saying that he didn't believe the pale man, not for one minute. "If you're finished making the acquaintance of the toilet, let's get goin' before Nathan gets it into his head to join us."

"It would be rather cramped in here," Ezra said. He turned on the water in the sink and, using cupped hands, rinsed his mouth. Straightening, he saw that Vin's eyes were watching his every move. He frowned and asked, "What?"

"I've got five bucks on ya."

"You bet on me? What sort of bet?" his eyes narrowed with suspicion as he followed Vin Tanner out the door, letting the man hold it open for him.

"We're bettin' on whether ya can make it to this restaurant of theirs."

"There is a wager on whether ah can walk three blocks?" Exactly how bad did he look if they were betting on him? He had to do better. Remember, he told himself, be witty. That usually was enough to distract people and keep them from prying into his business.

"Nathan doesn't think you can do it. And him being a Doc, he thinks he knows."

"He doesn't know me."

"Exactly."

Ezra ignored the fact that he had walked right into that one. "Ah am more than capable of walking to this establishment," Ezra said, unsure if he was more irritated that the man was smirking or because he had to walk three blocks to prove he was indeed fine. Life would be much easier if he just got in his car and drove off. Damn his curiosity, anyhow. One day, it would get him killed.

"Yeah, that's what I said. Josiah, Buck, and the kid think you'll get about halfway there. Chris and me think you'll make it. Ya ain't gonna make me lose my money, are you?"

"Ah get half of the winnings."

"Nope. Ya didn't place a bet."

"Ah didn't realize that you all were the sort to make wagers of this type."

"A lot about us ya ain't realized."

"Haven't."

"Haven't what?"

"Realized."

"You've completely lost me."

"Don't use ain't. It sounds uncultured."

"I ain't cultured."

"Perhaps not, but you are too intelligent to use such words."

"Habit."

"Break it."

"Make me."

Ezra shook his head, "You'll have to do this on your own. Ah will not be staying."

"Even if we want ya to stay?"

"You don't know me."

"I know ya are proud, stubborn, and courageous."

"This is the first conversation we have ever had, and you have learned this how?"

"Ya are too proud to read your letter; I picked it up out of the trash." Vin handed the letter, now torn in half, back to Ezra, who sighed his displeasure at the letter's return but put both halves in his suit's inner breast pocket.

Vin continued when Ezra began walking again. They were moving slowly, but he noticed so were the others walking in front of them. "Ya are too stubborn to lose the bet."

"It's three blocks, not a marathon," Ezra interrupted.

"And ya are courageous enough to try this for a year," Vin continued as though Ezra had not opened his mouth.

"Mr. Tanner, you are hard of hearing. Ah have definitely said that after this lunch, Ah would be leaving."

"Best start calling me Vin."

For a moment, there was quiet between them as Ezra battled the pain caused by the jolt of stepping off the curb. Walking across the alley with their destination in sight, he wondered how he was going to manage the step up, but a sudden hand under his elbow helped him maneuver the step. As suddenly as it appeared, the hand withdrew, and Ezra was allowed to walk up to the others under his own power.



John David rolled his new nickname over his tongue again and again. Never in his life had anyone ever called him anything but John David, except for college professors who called him Mr. Dunne when they checked for attendance and his boss, who persisted in calling him John. It was nice having a nickname, he decided as he sat between Buck and Josiah, the two men dwarfing him. He glanced around the table, his eyes settling on Chris. He wondered how the man did it--made the room his home. He made it appear that even though they sat at a large round table, he was at the head of that table. He did not contribute much to the conversation, but with the occasional nod of his head and his even more rare comment, he controlled it.

JD puzzled over it as he dug into the plate of ribs the waitress slid in front of him. Josiah was the oldest and had a doctor in front of his name. You would have thought he would have taken charge, but he seemed content to let Chris direct things, like choosing where and when they would eat and what topics they would talk about. Chris looked to be about six feet with a lanky build. Except that he was dressed entirely in black; black long-sleeved shirt, sleeves neatly rolled up to his elbow, only slightly faded black jeans slightly scuffed black boots, and a black leather jacket that hung on the coat rack beside JD's own heavy brown wool winter coat which had been new when he started college.

He looked around at the others, suddenly feeling horridly overdressed. He had worn his best suit and a white dress shirt and tie. Although Nathan wore a sweater and dress slacks, and Josiah wore a blazer and khakis, they were not nearly as formally dressed as he and he knew, without a doubt, none of them had agonized over what to wear. Aside from Ezra, who was dressed in a grey suit and dark green shirt, JD was the only other person wearing a suit.

Clothes! What did he need to wear at the ranch? Jeans, he supposed, and boots and some sort of jacket, and... and his bank account was low after buying plane tickets. And he'd have to have money to go back to Boston and pack up his apartment, and he'd have to quit and that would be fun going into his little box of an office, cubicle really, and typing up an 'I Quit' letter after clearing out his desk and deleting his mail. He'd say his goodbyes to a couple of the men working next to him and to Susan at the front desk; he'd never gotten the nerve to ask her out, but that was okay cause he figured that she'd be married and have five children before he'd find the courage to ask her out.

He was starting over. And he couldn't believe it. He had a new job working on a ranch, and the thought didn't scare him. When his mother died three days after he graduated, he had taken the first job he was offered, and he had been scared to death. Every day, walking into that building, he felt scared. At first, he feared he couldn't do the work and woke from nightmares in which he had been fired because his boss discovered how inept he was. One morning, it hit him, he could do the work, but most of the time, it bored him. His nights became infested by dreams in which he'd grow old and die in that job without ever really living.

It wasn't just the new job; he had a new name, and it didn't sound snobbish like John David. Bless Mom; she hadn't realized what a burden she had given him, saddling him with two names. Buck was right, they were much of a mouthful when said

together. JD was the name of a man who could get things done. Dunne. He almost giggled. He glanced around to confirm he hadn't snickered, but they were all too busy eating to notice.

They weren't even talking to each other, just eating. The conversation stopped when the food arrived. He wondered if all the meals with his new family would be like this.

He had a FAMILY. He'd always known he had brothers; Mom had told him about them, but they were unreal, storybook characters. He knew their names: Chris, Buck, and Nathan. He knew about Ezra and how his mom had disappeared with him when he was just a baby, and how Vin's mother was a private eye looking for Ezra.

His mother, Jenna, made sure he understood Landon Larabee had wanted him and did love him, but stayed away for her sake. He hadn't understood why she refused to marry his father, especially when she said Landon Larabee was a good man. He hadn't understood when she refused to take any money from his father. There had been so many times when they could have used it. Once, he came home to find her crying. She admitted she felt extremely tired and was experiencing spasms in her back. He asked her why they couldn't accept his father's offer, made long ago, to help. She had shaken her head and said that she'd explain later. She never had, not to his satisfaction anyway.

He tried to calm down and eat like his brothers were, but it was all too much. When his mom died, he figured he'd be alone forever. He didn't have many friends and had only dated a few times because it seemed to him that it was wrong and wasteful to spend money on himself just to have a few hours of fun when there was so much they needed. He spent his time divided between his school, his after-school jobs, and in the evening talking about his day with his Mom before hitting the books - he needed to get a scholarship, she kept telling him. Then he graduated and he got a job, and his mother was dead, and he had no clue as to how to go about making friends or getting a girl. Now, though, he had brothers, and they were going to be a family, and he could feel the loneliness that had been weighing down his heart, leaving him. They would think he was crazy if he burst into song, but that is exactly what he wanted to do.



Vin thanked the waitress as she cleared away his plate. She and another girl made quick work of clearing empty plates and beer mugs off the table and putting coffee cups and a couple of big, heavy pots in front of them. The girls flirted with all of them as they worked, even with the kid, to JD's obvious amazement, but as soon as they cleared the table, they disappeared. He poured coffee for himself, then poured a cup for Ezra, the man sat stiffly in his chair, and looked as though picking up the heavy pot would mean it would end up spilled. Certainly, judging by the way he ate, picking up his fork had been too much. He touched little of his lunch, mostly toying with the food rather than eating any of it. Wordlessly, but with a pointed stare at the ill man, Vin passed the pot to Chris.

Couldn't say, he blamed Ezra much. While the platter of ribs Inez had brought over to them was tender, spicy, and delicious, he couldn't see Ezra digging into those

ribs and risking getting sauce on his fancy clothes, and if he did have an upset stomach, he did not need to be eating the spicy ribs. Vin crossed his fingers, hoping whatever Ezra had wasn't catching. Then, he dived into the question at hand, "Ya think our Pa was murdered?"



Nathan didn't bother to look up at the men sitting with him. Talking about his father was difficult. With his eyes on the spoon his fingers played with and concentrating more on keeping his voice steady and calm than on the words he used, he explained, "I took a look at the monitor strips, the one taken in the ambulance, the one taken in the ER and the one taken that afternoon. They were right, it wasn't serious. His heart looked strong on the strips. He should not have had a massive heart attack. If I had looked at those strips in the ER and if I did not know that Dad never panicked about anything, I would have sent him home without admitting him. Dad was in good health. He was fine. Nothing was wrong with him. Except Dad died.

"I talked to a colleague in Birmingham and faxed him the strips. He agreed. There were no signs, no real signs; he was about to have a massive heart attack. He was a healthy man."

"Why did they take the heart monitor off him? I mean, it seems to me that if they are thinking a man might have a heart attack, they'd keep watching him," JD asked.

"This is a small hospital compared to what you would see in a bigger city, and in addition to the usual number of patients, the ER was slammed that evening. Their resources were stretched thin. They needed the heart monitor elsewhere, and since Dad was doing fine, they took the one he was using."

"Aren't there drugs that can cause a heart attack?" Josiah's voice rumbled across the table.

"Yes. And before you ask, they found no trace of them when they did the autopsy." Nathan glanced at Buck and Chris. He wished one of them would pick up the narrative. They seemed to think that since he was a doctor, he could handle talking about it easier than they could. It hurt him to talk about his father's death just like it did them, but Chris was busy being silent, and Buck was looking at something only he could see.

"Would they necessarily show up?" Josiah persisted. He would need his books to check for sure, but he was sure that there was more than one South American plant that mimicked heart attacks.

"Most would," Nathan sighed. They had gone all through this with the police and then with the FBI agents who had come by to talk with them at the sheriff's request.

"Did you find out anything about his investigator, the man who killed himself?" Vin asked.

"No sign of foul play and no suicide note, but the cops say that isn't as uncommon as you think. He had done several things that suicides frequently do. His bills were paid and were waiting on the table, ready to go in the mailbox. His keys

were lying on the kitchen table, labeled, so there was no question of which key opened what. The house was cleaned from top to bottom. He had a suit, his ex-wife says it was his best suit and saved for special occasions, and a white shirt still hanging in the dry cleaner's garment bag on the doorknob. His shoes were on the floor by the bed, and his belt, socks, and tie were lying on the dresser. The investigators say they think he was laying out what he wanted to wear for his funeral.

"How did he die?" Vin asked, his brow wrinkled in thought.

"As the judge said, all signs pointed to a suicide. He was found in his bathtub. It looks like he reached down, picked up his gun, and shot himself." Chris answered before either of his brothers.

"Why shoot himself? Ah always thought suicides slashed their wrist when they killed themselves in the tub." Ezra spoke quietly so as not to succumb to the cough threatening to ruin his guise that all was well with him.

Josiah's voice rumbled across the table as he answered, "Maybe it was handy. Maybe he used an electric razor. Maybe he didn't want to be able to change his mind. We do not have enough information to make a conclusion."

Nodding his head in agreement as Josiah named possible reasons for the use of a gun, Chris took over the narrative, surprising Nathan. "The police called it a suicide, and the coroner agreed. There were no signs of a struggle or a break-in. Nothing to indicate anyone else had been in his home. The doors and windows were locked. If his ex-wife hadn't shown up that evening to talk about increasing his child support, he wouldn't have been discovered until he began to smell."

"Is his ex-wife in the clear?" Vin asked.

"No one has even seriously considered Carmen a suspect. Besides being a wreck, she also has an alibi. She left their son with a babysitter at six thirty. She was seen arriving at his duplex at 7:00, and folks heard her screaming a couple of minutes later. The duplex had been theirs, and she still had a set of keys." Buck explained as he toyed with the empty coffee cup.

"Not to state the obvious, but why are you not saying anything about anyone hearing the gunshot?" JD asked the others.

"No one did, JD," Chris answered, trying out the new nickname the kid had been given.

"That doesn't make sense. Surely, if her screams were heard, a gunshot would have been heard." JD argued.

"You would think," Chris concurred. "The FBI said his death was between two and four. School hours. Kids were still at school or on the way home. All the adults were at work or were waiting in a car line to pick up their kids. No one was nearby to hear a gunshot."

Vin leaned his chair on the back two legs before he remembered he was in a restaurant in the town in which he would be living for the next year, and if he fell backward, knowing how small-town gossip worked, it would be remembered and

talked about for a long time. Not wanting to be a source of ridicule, he settled his chair back onto four legs and looked at his brothers. No one was saying it, but chances were that they were thinking it. "Sounds like the police didn't do a good job investigating."

"Sheriff Harris is the sheriff in Four Corners, and while he is not directly involved in the investigation in Eli, he says Ray Benson has the manners of a porcupine, but he does know what he is doing. When Dad's obituary came out in the paper, he contacted Mitch. He told him Dad had said something about how he was going to be the next one to die. He and Mitch got the FBI on what would normally be considered a natural death." Buck's face was uncharacteristically somber. All his life, he had looked for good in every situation, but this mess, apart from meeting family, had no good to look at. "The sheriff is a good man. He and Benson requested that the FBI double-check the work that Benson's men did on Holland, but they couldn't add anything. There is no trace of anyone in the place other than him and his ex. They...we all, brainstormed for any way it could be murder, but we couldn't find anything to explain it as anything other than suicide."

"Other than the fact that Dad said they scheduled a meeting with him to go over something he had learned," Nathan interrupted. "They did not find anything in the place or in his office to say a meeting was planned. There was nothing about a meeting on Holland's calendar, and Dad kept stuff like that in his head. The two men involved in the meeting are dead, and we can't ask them anything."

"Where was Holland's underwear? You talked about him laying out his clothes, but you didn't say anything about underwear."

"I don't know," Chris answered, his mind considering the reason for the question.

"Seems to me, it is important if he didn't lay out any. Might be something we need to know."

"Might be at that," Chris looked at his brother with respect. That had been a damn fine observation. He had missed it, hell, the sheriff and FBI had missed that, and they were trained professionals. How did Vin know to ask it?

"I don't understand," JD admitted.

"Well, kid. The way I see it, ya could look at this suicide two ways," Vin answered after getting a nod from Chris. "First way, this is suicide. Classic signs of suicide and no sign of foul play. The second way, Mr. Holland found information for an important client. He gets his best suit out and hangs it up on the door, along with a good shirt. He lays his socks and shoes where he can reach them easily, the same with his tie and belt. He wants to look respectable for this meeting and might get more business swung his way if he comes across as competent and professional. He strips and gets in the tub. He's soaking in the tub when someone comes in and kills him."

"Another thing we need to consider is the timing." Josiah waited until he had all their eyes on him. "Who gets ready for an important meeting, the day before the meeting? Especially in the early afternoon. A man doesn't arrange a meeting, and then

kill himself, just like he doesn't take a bath in the middle of the day, instead of showering the day of the meeting."

Buck looked up as a thought struck him. "A man who thinks he is about to get lucky would bathe and shave in the middle of the day. His ex-wife was coming over. Maybe that was the meeting he was preparing for. Maybe he had plans to wine and dine her, get her back. He is getting ready; it doesn't matter if the suit is for the date or the meeting. Either way, his not laying out his underwear doesn't mean anything. It was his home; he would be comfortable walking around in nothing but a towel."

"So, it appears, he probably did not lay out his clothes to make it easier on his family when planning his funeral." Chris glanced at his brothers, Nathan and Buck, wondering if they were also thinking about how hard it had been to find the right clothes to bury their father in. "It seems, to me, in the light of having two meetings to get ready for, Fred Holland did not kill himself. It was murder," Chris stated, with little room for rebuttal.

"No-o-o. I don't buy that. No one is going to sit there and just let someone kill him. He would have fought; there would have been signs of a struggle." John David protested. He hated going against Chris Larabee, but if they were going to do the right thing in this inquiry, he had to voice his concerns and thoughts.

"Maybe he was unconscious when he was killed," Nathan said automatically as he reread the coroner's report in his head.

"Still no. Someone comes up and knocks him unconscious, the autopsy will find it out," JD insisted.

Ezra shook his head, amused at the innocence of youth, "You are assuming competency on the part of the Medical Examiner. Dr. Jackson, do you know the ME's skills?" He told himself he didn't care how Landon Larabee died or whether his detective committed suicide. He was merely interested in getting the facts straight. Nothing could be figured out if the facts were not all in.

"Hold on, Nathan. Before ya answer, let's look at this scenario. Holland is murdered, and the killer begins looking for his notes, or his evidence, whatever. He does a thorough search, cleaning as he goes. This accomplishes two things. He finds what he's looking for and the house gets cleaned, getting rid of the evidence he's been there and helping him set it up to look like a suicide."

"The underwear?" Chris asked, a slight smile on his lips; he liked the way this man thought.

"If it was in the bathroom, Holland was planning on living. If there wasn't any, then it was removed from the scene, or he never got it out of the drawer, and he was planning on walking around the house in a towel. If there was underwear in the bathroom, he was murdered," Vin pushed his hair off his face and continued, "If his underwear is not in the bathroom, but with his other clothes, we can consider it a suicide. No man lays out everything for his funeral, a man who makes it easy for whoever has to come in and clean up after he is found, a man who has labeled all his keys for his family and paid the bills; no man who did those things would forget to put out nice clean briefs."

"Might ah inquire if any notes on the case he was taking care of for Mr. Larabee were found?" He didn't care about the way they looked at him; he was not ready and doubted if he ever would be ready to call the man father. Landon Larabee was just so damned predictable. Sure, he handled the doling out of money in a unique manner, and he must be given points for that, but he ruined it all by tacking that saccharine spiel onto the letter. Now, Ezra knew the price of getting into heaven: one million dollars per child. How the hell did money of any amount erase the debt of never being there? Someone better explain it to his satisfaction if they expected him to call Landon Larabee 'father.'

"No. No notes were found in Holland's office or home about his investigation for Dad. Chris chose not to challenge the man's decision to ignore Landon Larabee as his father. It irritated him, but he could understand it. Respect was earned, and just because he loved and respected his father, he was not blind; there was no evidence Landon had done anything to earn his other sons' allegiance and love.

"And, Ah suppose, neither you nor your brothuhs, have uncovered any notes...your fathuh may have made regarding the investigation of his dead ...loves." He stumbled on the word. What did a gentleman call the mothers of all these sons? Paramour would get him hit, and he did not want that. Wife was not an appropriate word for most of the women. 'Girlfriends' lacked the deep emotional commitment Mr. Larabee felt for the women; his mother was the understandable exception proving the rule. Loves was the politest and most accurate word he could find.

"We've been looking, Ezra, but we haven't found them," Buck answered when he noticed Chris's clenched jaw. Diplomacy was not Chris's strongest point, and he could tell his brother had decided every one of their brothers would follow their father's wishes. In his mind, Chris already had the others unpacked and working the cattle. If any of them chose not to follow Dad's idea then Chris would hit the ceiling; Chris was pretty torn up about the way he had treated Dad, and anybody could tell by the way he was glaring, like it or not, he was going to make sure each and every one of them followed Dad's wishes to the letter.

Oh, he'd be fair, and tell everyone the danger they were in, but then he'd hog-tie them and keep them that way for the entire year, if he needed to, just to make up for the way he had blamed Dad for his wife's and son's deaths. Buck wondered if Chris was ever going to stop blaming him for making them stay the one extra night in Mexico. More importantly, he wondered if he'd ever stop blaming himself. A pretty face, a night of passion, could never be worth what Chris lost; hell, what he lost, too.

"So, you think they were stolen, too?" Josiah asked, pulling Buck back into the present.

Buck looked at Nathan, and then they both looked at Chris. Their eyes met and held each other's; finally, Chris broke the gaze and answered. "Anything catching Dad's interest, he kept a file on." The humor in his voice softened his face somewhat, making him look more approachable.

"Lots of things caught his interest," Buck interrupted, shaking his head, enjoying the first honest bit of mirth he felt since Orrin called, saying to meet him at the hospital. "Files and files and files and only Dad knew how he filed things."

"And he tucked things away," Nathan added, thinking of all the books in the library. The ranch house, although large, especially since the remodeling, was not truly exceptional until you walked into the library. There was no organization to the library; it was divided into the books Dad had already read and the books he wanted to read, and although Dad could always walk right to any given book, the library was a source of chaos for everyone else. It would take forever and a day to find the file if he had stuck it in one of his books, as he was prone to doing.

"One moruh thing," Ezra promised himself that he would ask this one last question, and then he would keep his mouth shut. "Where is his computer? He may have kept his notes on it."

His burst of laughter caused coffee to explode from Buck's mouth. Looking at Nathan and Chris as he dabbed at his mouth, he explained. "Dad was a Luddite. He wouldn't touch a computer with a ten-foot pole."

JD had jumped in to voice his incredulity before Ezra could get over his shock. "There were no computers in the house. I don't believe it. Everyone has a computer."

"We had them," Buck reassured JD. "In fact, there is an ancient one still in the library, with a modem sitting right beside it. Dad did not know what to do with it when it gave up the ghost. Dad would not use them, though. He said he could get more information from his books than he could get from any computer."

"Ah did not know the man, but Ah assure you he had one."

"And what are you basing that opinion on?" Chris challenged. The man steadfastly had refused to acknowledge Landon Larabee as his father, yet he was claiming to know something about the man that the sons who had grown up with him did not.

"A man, as successful as Judge Travis says Mr. Larabee was, needs a computer to keep up with his investments." Ezra was somehow relieved when both Vin and John Daniel nodded their heads in agreement. He continued. The documents Mr. Holland had are missing. Is it a stretch to believe a computer is also missing?"

Chris nodded thoughtfully before saying, "Good point, but I don't see Dad keeping notes on a computer. They would be in the library, stuck in whatever book he was currently reading."

"He may have done both. If someone broke in to look for the notes, the thief may have taken the computer for insurance." Josiah added. "When I have important information on a patient, I put a handwritten note in his file and another in his chart on my computer. Having information in two different places accomplishes two things. First, it ensures information does not get lost or deleted. Second, it helps to verify your memory of what was said. If both accounts match and then match what you remember, you will be a formidable witness if you ever need to be."

"True," Nathan agreed, after giving Josiah a studied glance. Those words spoke of at least one experience in court. "I hated thinking of Dad being killed because of his 'investigation.' I hate the thought of our mothers being murdered. I have no problem believing that once, having started his investigation, Dad would have found a way to safeguard what he discovered. He would not rely on Holland having the only copies of whatever they had unearthed."

They all reached for their coffee at the same time, though only JD noticed. The cups were drained and put back in their saucers when Chris nodded slightly as though he had made up his mind about something. "Buck, go sweet-talk Inez into giving you some paper and pens. I'm sure she has something lying about."

"And real mugs, these cups are too dainty. Feel like I'm going to crush this one every time I take a sip," Josiah added, his big hand wrapped around the cup, all but hiding it from view.

"Inez got out her best because she knew I was coming," Buck smirked as he left the room.

"Sounds a bit smitten," Vin smirked at Buck's retreating.

"Wants to put another notch in his bedpost," Chris answered Vin's observation.

"Now, I don't know about that. He waxes poetic about her beauty and her virtues. He might really care for her," Nathan objected.



"Pardon me, if one of you gentlemen could direct me to the facilities," Ezra pushed away from the table and stood up. He had held off the coughing as long as he could and needed to get somewhere more private to hack up a lung or two.

"Ezra, why don't you let--?"

Ezra abruptly cut off Nathan, "Ah must admit Ah am not feeling mah best, but Ah'm sure it is nothing for you to worry ovuh." He turned away, determined to leave the room while he could still manage a dignified exit. With a little luck, he could escape the restaurant and make his way back to his car before any of them noticed. He needed to get away now; he could feel them trying to draw him in and his damn curiosity was making their job easy.

He had to leave, but leaving was easier said than done, he realized as he struggled to put one step in front of the other while keeping his face smiling and devoid of pain. Every breath he was taking was sending blinding tendrils of pain across his chest, making him both nauseous and struggling to smother a cough. A hand clamped down on his shoulder. "Ah must insist you release me," he licked his lips, tasting bile and what may be blood in his mouth.

Nathan let his hand fall to his side. He didn't like how pale the southern man had become or the slight tremors he could feel under his hand. Still, he couldn't force his brother to accept help. Wait, yes, he could; he was a doctor.

"Ezra, stop," Nathan grabbed him by the upper arm, jerking the man back, thinking to stop him. He expected another demand for release, or given the greenish

tinge to the man's face, he wouldn't have been surprised for him to throw up all over the place. He didn't expect the violent hacking nor the blood around Ezra's lips. Only years of working in the ER prepared him to catch Ezra as all color drained from Ezra's already pale face and he eased the man onto the floor.

"Nathan?" Chris, in that one word, asked what he could do to help. He didn't know if any of the other men noticed when Ezra turned, to ask Nathan to release his arm, coughing instead, his mouth was filled with blood.

"Call 911. Vin, I need a couple of chair cushions." With fingers, experienced from numerous nights working in the Emergency Room, he checked his brother's airway and pulse before he began loosening his tie and undoing his shirt buttons. He peeled open the shirt, and hissed, "Oh shit."

"Where do ya want these?" Vin, holding two cushions, dropped beside Nathan. His face blanched at the bruising he saw.

"Under his feet." Long, nimble fingers loosened Ezra's belt. "I want to see if your belly's soft or if you are bleeding inside," he told his brother as he gently palpitated the bruised abdomen.

"Stop," Ezra's eyes fluttered open, and his hand reached to push Nathan's hand away.

"Shh. I'm stopping. No, don't try to get up. Chris has called for an ambulance. It will be here in a few minutes."

"Ah don't want to go to a hospital," Ezra tried to push up onto his elbows. "Ahm fine."

"No, you are not fine." Nathan splayed his fingers across Ezra's chest, gently preventing him from moving. "You try sitting up, you're probably going to pass out again."

"Ah just need to get to mah feet," he protested. He had driven from the hotel in Eli that morning without too much difficulty. He was fine. He just needed a day or two to recuperate.

"No. I want you to lie still and give me your history. Are you taking any medications?"

"If ah tell you aruh you going to let me up?"

"No. Have you taken anything for the pain?"

"You're the doctor, figure out things on your own," he retorted, pushing against the hand restraining him.

"Ezra! I need to know," asked Nathan, concern coloring his voice; the heart beating under his fingertips was too fast. He could feel broken ribs. Broken ribs, and coughing up blood usually meant a bruised lung. Painful, but not fatal, if it was treated in a timely manner, and pneumonia did not set in.

"Let me up," Ezra tried sitting again, scowling when the large hand easily held him down.

Chris came back in time to hear Ezra argue. He growled out Ezra's name, but Nathan's headshake kept him from interfering. He could see that Nathan had the situation under control and did not need him. This was Nathan's realm of expertise, and unless his brother said he needed help, he would stay out of the way. Besides, he had never really seen Nathan on the job. He knew his brother was smart; Nathan could line several walls with the awards he won in medical school. Watching him in action validated the awards; he was exceptionally good, both academically as well as with patients. It was not just a big brother saying that. The easy, confident way Nathan took over easily demonstrated, he was a man who knew his job.

Funny, how Nathan, from as far back as he could remember, loved doctoring. The rest of them could doctor a horse or cow if they had to, and when Buck had been thrown and broke his arm when they were kids, he had managed things all right. But neither he nor Buck were drawn to medicine like Nathan. It wasn't just that Nathan genuinely loved working on hurt folks; it was that he was curious about things. Medical school had given Nathan a chance to try and satisfy his curiosity. During vacations, their father and Nathan would closet themselves in the library, only to come out for meals, discussing the things Nathan was doing and learning. The discussions had not stopped at the library door but had been continued over supper at the kitchen table. While Chris was not particularly squeamish, some of Nathan's medical school tales about dissecting cadavers were gruesome and the worm stories should have remained in the library, but that was his dad and Nathan for you.

Growing up, he had often wished Nathan would get his head out of the books and help around the ranch. Now, watching Nathan work, he couldn't imagine the man doing anything else.

"There is supposed to be some give and take in negotiations, suh." Ezra panted as Nathan's hands ran up one side of his ribcage and down the other.

"We are not negotiating, Ezra. We are waiting for the ambulance," Nathan replied while debating whether he should go ahead and cut the shirt and suit jacket off or wait until the paramedics arrived. He knew they were broken when he felt them, but he didn't know if there were other injuries hiding under the suit. He would be more comfortable if he could get a better look at the rest of the man. The first thing he had learned in the ER was clothes hid injuries.

The ambulances were garaged just up the street. He knew paramedics would be arriving momentarily and so he decided to wait before he began cutting off his clothes. Besides, without a blanket, the floor was too cool to serve as an exam table. More importantly, he didn't think the man under his care would appreciate being exposed for all the world to see and would fight him on the matter. The condition of his ribs alone, never mind his other injuries, made fighting a bad decision.

"Ah don't think you understand. As Ah tried to explain..." Ezra struggled to catch a breath; the pain in his chest was making it difficult to breathe. He collapsed back to the floor; if he could take one deep breath, he'd be all right, and he could explain to them, convince them to let him up. He was Ezra P. Standish, and P. was for Persuasive.

He could talk anyone into anything. He just needed to catch his breath. Why was it so hard to breathe? One good breath, please, he needed to explain to someone why he couldn't go to the hospital. He looked around for someone who would listen as he explained. He couldn't see anyone other than Dr. Jackson and Dr. Sanchez, and clearly, they weren't listening to him. He could hear the siren, and he moved, struggling to pull his shirt closed.

"You must ..." he tried, but he couldn't get the rest of the words out. He couldn't catch his breath. Was the man leaning on him?

"Ezra, calm down." Nathan let Ezra pull his shirt back up and sat back on his heels, his hand hovering over Ezra's shoulder, prepared to stop the man if he should try to get up. Ezra's breathing was too fast, and his heart rate was making Nathan nervous. He watched with relief as the medics came in with their equipment. Now, he told himself, if Ezra started going bad, he had equipment with which to work.



Chris stood along the wall and fidgeted as the two medics broke through the barrier of spectators and dropped to the floor to talk to Nathan. Never good at standing on the sidelines, he fought the urge to take over the situation, put the stubborn bastard on a stretcher, and to load him onto the ambulance. He kept telling himself Nathan was more than capable of managing the situation and would view anything he did to get them moving as unnecessary meddling.

He knew his faith in his brother was well-placed when the southerner lashed out at one of the medics, kicking the man in the hand and knocking the blunt-nosed scissors out of his hand. Holding up his hands, signaling the medics to back off for a moment, Nathan leaned forward and whispered something in Ezra's ear. Whatever he said worked because, with incredulous eyes, the Southerner became still and allowed the medics to lift him and put him on the gurney.

While one of the medics strapped Ezra onto the stretcher and the other man nursed his wounded hand, Nathan stood up and walked over to Chris. "I think I'd better ride with him, keep him in line," Nathan said with a self-satisfied grin.

"What did you say to him?" Chris had been impressed by Ezra's sudden willingness to cooperate.

Nathan's grin grew, "It's a professional secret." He looked over his shoulders, watching as the two medics headed towards their ambulance with Ezra. "I've got to go."

Chris shared a look with Buck as they followed Nathan and watched the ambulance leave. "Remind me not to ever get hurt. I don't believe Nathan is nice at times."

"Pot talking about the kettle," Buck mumbled, not quite speaking under his breath.

Chris glanced over at him, but rather than comment on that truth, he asked, "Did you settle the bill with Inez?"

"All taken care of," Buck answered, handing Chris his jacket. Chris slipped it on and began heading to the car parked three blocks away. He didn't bother looking behind him. He knew his brothers were following him, matching his hurried steps with their own.



Chris looked up when he heard the door leading to the ER open and watched as a petite blonde nurse padded down the hall. Her sweater obscured her name badge, and for the life of him, he couldn't remember her name, although her face looked so damn familiar.

"Hey, Missy. You got news for us?"

Thank God for Buck, Chris thought as he watched his brother wrap the diminutive nurse in a hug. He could never figure out how Buck remembered everyone. As a teen, he'd tease Buck about knowing all the girls in town, but the truth was, once Buck met anyone, he never forgot their name. Years ago, Chris quit trying to be Buck. He'd never be any good with names. Nowadays, he settled for pretending that he knew who he was talking to if he liked the person, or glaring until introductions were remade if he didn't.

"Hey Buck, Chris," she gave Buck a peck on the cheek and held his hand as she looked around at the others, "One of you boys needs to go settle Nate down. He's got his tail feathers in a ruffle because they are having him stand in a corner and observe."

"They're not letting him help?" Chris frowned. That made no sense; his brother was a damn fine doctor.

"It's not a big deal, but he doesn't have privileges here. If he does something, then the hospital can get into big trouble. It's a formality, but he can't touch a patient until he goes before the hospital board."

"Buck," Chris nodded towards the double doors leading into the ER, asking his brother, the one who knew everyone and remembered their names, to take care of the Nathan situation.

"Already on it," Buck dropped Missy's hand, and the rest of them watched as his long legs ate up the distance, and he disappeared behind the doors.

"What can you tell us, Missy?" Chris asked, pleased to have a name to call the woman; he had found that people were more cooperative if he used their names rather than growling.

"Nathan said to tell you that Ezra is stable, and they will probably be moving him to a room depending on what Dr. Craig says about his kidney," Missy replied, hoping she had not said too much with those few words. Dr. Craig liked to be the one to talk to family; in fact, he had chewed her out after she told the parents of a little boy about his lacerated kidney.

"And?" Chris asked for the rest of what she had to say.

Missy crossed her fingers hoping she would not be written up for a HIPPA violation, and in an almost explosive release of breath, she began, "Dr. Craig is a nephrologist, and they want him to examine Mr. Standish," she also hoped Chris, or someone would explain who this Ezra Standish was; he looked familiar for some reason, but she couldn't put her finger on why?

"If he thinks it's not alright?" A long-haired man standing on Chris's right spoke up for the first time.

"Then, Dr. Craig will come out and talk to you," she had grown up knowing the Larabee brothers. She thought highly of them, and their father had been a nice man. Generous to a fault. Childhood memories prompted her to talk to Chris, but she was not planning to second-guess Dr. Craig again and risk getting chewed out. He wasn't from around these parts and tended to follow rules other doctors ignored when talking to kinfolk. Craig chewing her out or reporting her was not the issue. She was fine shooting the breeze with the Larabee brothers, but she had already said too much because she and the Larabees went way back. She needed to remember to keep her mouth shut. She had been warned only last week about sharing personal information. There was no way she would discuss some unknown man with strangers. Again, a huge HIPAA violation. She had her career to think of.

"Missy," Chris needed more information, but he felt Vin's hand on his arm. Vin was right; she was doing them a favor, so there was no need to try to intimidate her into giving what-if answers. "Thanks."



Nathan walked toward the group of men, his brothers, standing in the waiting room. He passed them, dropped the bag in a chair, and, reaching over, snagged the Coke out of Chris's hand before sinking into a chair. He drained the Coke, crushed the can, and tossed it over their heads into the waste can next to the TV before speaking, "You can all sit down," he ordered. "I'm tired. I'm sitting. You can sit, too. The lot of you standing around looking like a pack of wolves waiting to devour any poor soul with information scares the staff."

Chris made a show of looking at his watch. He was tired of the waiting and wanted to know what was happening, but he did as Nathan requested and sat across from him; he noticed the other men also complied, pulling chairs closer to be within earshot. "Nathan, we wolves have been waiting four hours."

"I know it seems like a long time, but everyone has been moving quickly. Getting X-rays and a CT scan takes time, as labs do. Be nice to people. Put on your friendly face. All of you. They're getting a room ready for Ezra as we speak. He's not happy about being here, but he's medicated now, and so he's not giving anyone too much grief."

"Was it safe to leave him?" Vin asked, not sure of whether he was more worried someone would harm Ezra or that Ezra would harm someone; He had seen the way the paramedic nursed his hand after Ezra kicked him.

"Buck is with him," Nathan swiped a hand across his face, trying to wipe away the smile, attempting to look the cool professional. He gave up and explained, "Buck tried talking with Ezra, but the meds hit him hard, and he can't keep his eyes open, so Buck has a captive audience. The poor man has to listen to Buck's Top Ten."

"Top ten what?" JD asked in all innocence.

"Buck likes women and he likes to talk about his," Nathan searched for a less crude word than the one that popped into his head and settled for, "adventures with the ladies in detail."

"Isn't that rather tacky?" Josiah asked with a hint of a smile, wondering what he was getting into with this family.

"Buck changes the names and some of the details, but yeah, it is tacky," Nathan answered.

"So, what happened to Ezra?" Chris moved the conversation back to the problem. He didn't know the man and wasn't prepared emotionally to acknowledge him as a brother, but Ezra was his father's son, which meant, as a Larabee, he had become his responsibility.

"I asked him about the bruising in the ambulance. He said he had a collision. After we got his shirt off, which, by the way, he informed me when we tried to cut it off cost \$800.00, I saw..."

"Damn," Vin interrupted in shock. The shirt cost more than all of what he had on, including his boots and jacket. Heck, it was worth more than his entire wardrobe. "I guess he doesn't shop at Wal-Mart," he quipped.

"Yeah, I thought I was overspending when I spent a couple of hundred on a shirt last spring," Nathan agreed. He ignored the incredulous look Chris shot at him. The shirt had been a necessary expense; he had been invited to a fundraiser, and he had been determined to dress as well as his counterparts. Besides, he worked hard for his money, and Chris could wipe that look off his face; the Birmingham social scene was quite different than the one here.

"Pretty steep... what does he do for a living?" Josiah asked.

"Besides getting beat up?" Nathan replied.

"I thought you said he was in a wreck," Chris spoke sharply. This latest information sent alarm bells ringing all through him.

"He said he was in a collision. On further questioning and with me pointing out a few inconsistencies with his story, which became obvious when we got his shirt off, he admitted he collided with fists," Nathan continued. He stole a glance at his watch. "Give them a few more minutes to get him settled, and then you can go in and ask him the who, what, and why. He graciously informed me when a person says it's a long story, they are trying to be well-mannered enough not to say, 'Mind your own damned business'."

"Wears fancy clothes; gets beat up and won't talk about it. Does he deal drugs?" Chris asked, not sure why that profession popped into his mind. Maybe it was

because he had a problem seeing that brother with his practiced, but fake smile and too expensive clothes, doing anything remotely legal. More than likely, he thought that way because of his decade-old memories of the man's mother. It didn't matter why he had thought it, just as it didn't matter about Dad's wishes. Brother or no brother, he was not staying at the ranch if he was involved with drugs.

"Don't know if he deals them, but he doesn't use them. His blood work-up didn't show any trace of drugs, and he got upset when Dr. Abernathy gave him painkillers." Nathan cringed at the memory of the stricken look on the man's face. He looked betrayed when the needle slid into the IV. Didn't he understand that they were trying to help him? "He says he can't think if he has pain medication on board."

"So, how is he?" JD asked. He didn't think Ezra sold drugs and wasn't interested in discussing that possibility; after all, Ezra was his brother, and surely someone related to him wouldn't be mixed up in anything criminal.

"He is covered in bruises. Not the kind you get from bumping into a table or tripping over something left on the floor. These bruises are the kind you get in a car wreck or when someone intends to inflict a lot of damage."

"He was in a fight then," Chris interrupted, thinking this brother sounded like trouble.

"Wait. Let me finish," Nathan ordered. He could read where Chris's thoughts were taking him. "His chest was struck several times. Those blows broke two ribs and cracked three more. He has bruises, handprints really, on two places on each arm, his biceps, and his forearms."

"Two people were holding him," stated Josiah. He knew, but he waited for Nathan's nod to confirm his suspicions. "Add another man to strike the blows. Speaks of excessive rage."

Nathan flexed his right hand, holding it out for his brothers to see. "I wrapped my hand around Ezra's bicep, covering the bruises, if I had to guess, both men, holding him, were at least my size, or rather, they had hands as large as mine."

Nathan looked at the men sitting in a semicircle around him. Judging by how they threw ideas around at lunch, he felt they had seen the same sorts of things he had, working in the ER. Different perspectives, but the same things. He hoped he was right about them, but he really didn't know. However, he knew Chris and he knew Chris would not be able to prevent himself from going into protective, big brother mode once he heard the rest of what he had to say. "He's got two broken ribs on his left side, three with cracks in them on the right. Both lungs are bruised. He has an injury-related traumatic pneumothorax. This means one of his broken ribs nicked his lung. Sounds awful and it is, but it could be worse, much worse. He has a minor lung wound that will heal without surgery. If he rests, does his breathing exercises, and takes his medicine, he will be fine."

"And his kidneys?" Chris asked impatiently when Nathan quit talking. Not that he wanted there to be more injuries, but Missy said something about an injury to Ezra's kidneys, and while he didn't know much about medicine, he knew kidney

damage ranked up with a punctured lung, and both were worse than broken ribs and bruises.

Nathan raised his eyebrow. It had been a mistake to let Missy talk to his brothers. "He was kicked, in the back, and he is pissing blood. Dr. Craig came in to take a look. He said we would monitor him overnight, but he doesn't think he will need surgery. Just plenty of water and rest."

"And?"

Nathan saw Chris' frustration and hurriedly continued, "X-rays didn't show any breaks in his hip or leg, but sometimes breaks don't show up on X-ray for a few days. He starts having problems walking, and he'll need another set of X-rays. The bruising on the kidney shows up on ultrasound, and he has blood in his urine. Dr. Craig came over and took a look. He says he wants to keep him overnight and will reevaluate him in the morning. Kidneys heal pretty well, if the damage isn't too extensive, and no one wants to open him up unless he starts looking worse. If he looks better in the morning, then he'll be placed on antibiotics and sent home."

"Do you think we could go see him now?" Josiah asked.

"Yeah, but first, we have one more problem," Nathan opened the plastic bag and, after rustling through the clothes, produced Ezra's black wallet, tossing it to Chris.

Chris caught it one-handed and flipped it open to reveal the South Carolina driver's license. "I'll bite, Nathan. What am I supposed to be seeing?"

"It's empty. No money, although I did find seventy-five dollars tucked up in his shoes. No money, no credit cards, no pictures, and definitely no medical insurance card. He didn't have a phone on him, either. Everyone has a phone."

"Robbery?"

"The money is not there, but you won't get him to say. He explained, in detail, that since he doesn't believe in using hospitals, he doesn't waste his money on medical insurance. Furthermore, 'and I am quoting here, 'since we brought him to the hospital, despite his protests, when it is obvious to even the village idiot that all he has is a few bruises and since we are now holding him in said hospital against his will, we can pay the bill'." Nathan shook his head and chuckled. "The ladies in admitting are standing on their heads and having cows, all at the same time, because he doesn't have insurance. They hate it when the hospital eats the cost."

"Thought you said that he said pain meds kept him from thinking."

"Thinking maybe, talking no," Nathan smiled, "you could almost hear the morphine kicking in. It's a good thing I've spent the last few years in Alabama, or I wouldn't have a clue as to what he's been saying. Had to act as an interpreter a few times."

Chris listened with one ear as he examined the wallet. All he could determine, from the look of the wallet, was that even if it had money, it would fold, nice and flat; judging by the way he was dressed, Ezra worried at the thought of a thick wallet

wrinkling his suit. Black, expensive, empty wallet. He pulled a folded green card out of the wallet.

"What's this?" Chris asked Nathan.

"I didn't look," Nathan answered and nodded his agreement with Chris as he slid the card back into the wallet without opening it. When he looked in the wallet, he, too, left the card untouched; it seemed old and almost sacred. He didn't know the man well enough to examine something obviously personal, and if the torn-in-half half letter he discovered in the coat earlier was any sign, he was unlikely to ever know him.

"All right, I'll talk to admitting and have the bill sent to the ranch. You boys go over to Ezra's room. Get with Buck and make a shopping list. He said something about the cupboard being bare. Nathan, make a list of what Ezra will need when we take him home tomorrow; we can get it when we do our shopping."

"Chris, he doesn't want to come home with us."

"He's busted up. He needs a place to stay."

"Yes, he needs a place to stay, but I don't think he wants to stay at the ranch. We should call someone for him, his mother, or a girlfriend."

"Nathan, I said, he's coming home with us. Besides, didn't he say something about his mother being dead?"

"In the ambulance, he mumbled something about needing to talk to her. We should see if the Judge knows anything about how to reach her. Speaking of the judge, did anyone call him and let him know about this?" Nathan asked the group surrounding him; he didn't think he needed to expand on what 'this' was.

"Josiah called on the way here. Ezra can call his mom from the ranch if he wants to."

"Christopher," Nathan began in his most patient I-am-talking-to-an-imbecile voice. "If you take someone to a place they do not want to be, it is considered kidnapping."

Chris dropped his hand on his too-tall brother's shoulder and looked him square in the eye as best he could, considering he lacked the four inches he needed, "When he leaves the hospital, he's coming home with us."

"Chris."

"At least until his ribs are healed," Chris tried to compromise.

"Chris, he doesn't want to come. Haven't you heard anything he said today?"

"I heard what he said, I have just been listening to what he hasn't said. He wants to do this. It just won't be easy getting him to admit he does." Satisfied he had made his point, Chris turned towards the door with the placard 'Admitting.'

"He's a royal pain," Nathan muttered to Chris's back, disgusted with Chris and the situation. Didn't he realize, hadn't Dad realized, you couldn't snap your fingers and make everyone one big happy family?

Chris heard Nathan and retorted over his shoulder, "I'm a bigger pain than he is."

"I was talking about you."

Nathan chuckled when Chris raised his arm, saluting Nathan and Nathan's opinion with his extended finger.



Vin had to walk quickly to keep up with Nathan as he turned down corridors leading into other corridors. Vin Tanner, he chided himself, it's not that big of a hospital, and if you lose Nathan, I'm sure you could find your way to Ezra Standish's room just fine. It wasn't that he was worried about getting lost; it was that he was worried about getting lost, opening a door, and seeing something he didn't want to see.

And why, while he was thinking about it, was Nathan moving at about one hundred miles per hour? Weren't you supposed to walk through hospitals? Not that Nathan was running, part of the problem was the man's impossibly long legs ate up the ground, and because he was moving as though... as though someone's life depended on it. Vin decided he'd watch Nathan outside the hospital and see if he moved like that all the time.

Vin whispered out of the side of his mouth to his younger brother as they hurried along, "Think we should suggest that it might be a good idea to install some traffic lights around here?"

"The way he's moving, I think Nathan would just ignore them."

"Yeah, he looks like a man on a mission." Vin watched Nathan and Josiah turn the corner. Josiah easily kept pace with Nathan, and though they were talking, with Nathan pointing as he talked, neither man slowed.

"I ain't running in a hospital," Vin said to JD as it became plain, they were losing ground on their brothers. He wasn't particularly worried about someone stopping him and verbally chastising him for running, but somehow running down the long halls, dodging nurses and patients with their IV poles, seemed wrong.

The two, by mutual agreement, slowed down. It wasn't as though Ezra was going anywhere, anytime soon. Besides, they were forced to slow down to a crawl as the corridor suddenly turned into a nurses' desk complete with nurses, doctors, patients, and a whole slew of other people milling about, and the people didn't get out of their way as they had for Josiah and Nathan. They kept their brothers in sight but gave up any hope of catching up to them when a door opened and three women in scrub suits wheeled a gurney out of the room.

The woman on the gurney, pain contorting her sweat-streaked features, reached for them as she wheeled by. Vin and JD backed up against the wall as the nurses aimed the gurney down the hall, running alongside it at breakneck speed.

"Nathan's led us through the maternity ward." Vin's explanation was unnecessary. JD gave his brother a look that said I'm not stupid but didn't make the comment aloud.

"Do you think that she'll be all right? They all look worried."

"I don't know, JD," Vin suddenly smiled, but it wasn't a pleasant smile; it was more of a lopsided grin, full of mischief. "There are windows in those doors, you can go check," he challenged.

JD rolled his eyes, "Yeah, right." He started walking in the general direction Nathan and Josiah had taken.

"Wonder why they put those little windows in the doors, anyhow?" Vin asked JD's back. "Don't seem privacy is too important around here." He followed JD around the corner. Josiah and Nathan were waiting for them by a Coke machine, drinks in hand.

"Thought we'd lost you," Josiah teased.

"Nah, we just had to stop and give some expert advice to some woman fixin' to have a baby," Vin quipped.

"Come on," Nathan said. "We are almost there. I want to make sure Ezra got settled into the room without any problems and see how he's reacting to the meds."

They turned one more corner and almost ran into Buck leaning against a doorway, chatting with a silver-haired nurse with a beautiful smile. Vin stopped in mid-step. Did Buck know everyone? He certainly was on friendly terms with every woman they met today. This one, though, was old enough to be his mother.

"Miss Angie, how are you?" Nathan enveloped the buxom woman in a brief hug.

"Never better," she beamed up at Nathan. "Buck tells me our Mr. Standish is one of your long-lost brothers."

"Sure is. Hope he doesn't give you too much trouble."

"Don't worry about it; many people don't want to be here. Are you going to introduce me?"

"Yes, Ma'am. This here is JD Dunne, that one is Vin Tanner, and this is Josiah Sanchez."

If the woman saw anything unusual about meeting all these grown brothers with different last names, she didn't show it. Instead, she shook each man's hand, smiling up warmly at each man as she welcomed him to Eagle Bend.

"Where's Chris?" she asked, worry evident in her voice.

"He's trying to take care of the paperwork."

She wanted to ask how he was holding up and if he was still drinking, but she didn't; you didn't ask the Larabee boys, things like that. They would look you in the eye and smile, then tell you everything was just fine. "I hope he doesn't get the ladies all in a tizzy, pouring on the Larabee charm."

"Well, Miss Angie, maybe I should have gone down there if they need to be charmed," Buck volunteered with a smile, thinking Miss Angie ought to know better. She should know the only person Chris had ever poured on the Larabee charm was

dead. His good mood at seeing the woman evaporated. As frustrated as he was by Chris's behavior, he understood the depth of Chris's loss; he wished other people could.

'Bucklyn, you go down there, and the ladies would never let you go," she reached up and patted his cheek. "You are just too cute for your own good."

Nathan cleared his throat, a little embarrassed about his brother's reputation, and turned to his newfound brothers, "Ms. Angie Delaney, better known as Miss Angie, worked with my mother when my mom worked here, and then she went and joined Dr. Murdoch's staff. He was our pediatrician. She always made going to the doctor a little less scary."

"Tell the truth, Nathan. You were never scared at the doctor's office. We all knew right then you were heading for medical school. Took after his mama," she patted his arm. "She was the loveliest woman, a good nurse, and a sweet soul. If only she could see you now. She would be so proud of you, Nathan."



Buck leaned against the doorway, smiling at Miss Angie as she petted Nathan on the arm, but his eyes were not on the reunion, but on the memories of his father, seeing Miss Angie brought back. Going to the pediatrician or the dentist had been secret trips his dad insisted they make. His mom had nothing against going to the doctor when a body was sick, but when it was healthy, she figured it was a waste of money. As far as he knew, she never realized that he was vaccinated against all the childhood diseases, and had his teeth cleaned every six months.

He tilted his head to the side and smiled, pretending he was listening to Miss Angie go on about Clara Jackson. Sometimes, he wished people remembered his momma the way they did Cassie and Clara. Folks loved talking about the beautiful, laughing Cassie and the sweet, caring Clara, but they never said much about his mother, not to him anyway. They never talked about how beautiful she was... and she was. They never talked about how good she was... and she was. They certainly never thought she was a good mother, and she was the best.

He knew how she came across other folk; they thought his mom was neglectful. They lived over her bar, she didn't take him to the doctor, and she let him skip school more than he should. On the other hand, she always had time for him. Not just a pat on the back or a quick hug, but real-time. They walked on mountain trails, and she would name each plant and tree they saw. If they came across a creek, they would take off their socks and shoes and roll up their jeans to walk in the water. She burned almost every batch of cookies she baked, but she always let him help mix and lick the spoon. The house was a mess most of the time, but that was because she opened her doors to runaways who needed a place to stay. She shopped at secondhand stores, but that was because she was always buying groceries for folks having a hard time with things. They never took vacations, but every holiday, she served food at a homeless shelter in Ely.



He'd tell her he loved talking to her because she listened so well. She'd joke and say a good bartender needs to know how to listen. But she was more than a good bartender. She was the kindest, bravest person he knew, and she took not only good care of him, but excellent care and not just of him.

Anyone who needed a champion, she was there. Like when Dee Dee's pimp beat her black and blue, his Momma paid her doctor's bill and then told Eddie if he ever thought about hitting one of his girls again that she'd shoot his balls off--he'd been listening from the stairs and if his momma had known that he was up there she wouldn't have used that language. Or the time little Callie Davis found out she was pregnant, she went with her and held her hand when she told her folks. Or when Donnie Walters came into the bar saying he wanted to get clean, she found a clinic and bullied the doctors into moving Donnie to the head of their waiting list.

Buck slipped back into the room to check on his brother; Ezra appeared to be sleeping, so he pulled up the blanket and tucked it in, covering the bruised flesh. You look as though you could use a friend, he thought. My mother always worried about folks. I bet she would have worried about you like she did Chris and Nathan. They never knew it, but she worried they didn't have a mother, and when she worried about my brothers, I would realize how lucky I was.

Buck stepped back into the hall; Nathan read Ezra's chart as Angie chatted amiably with his brothers. She turned to him and, reaching up, patted him on the cheek, "You take care of these brothers of yours, Buck."

"I'll do my best," he wanted to pat the top of her head in retaliation, but restrained himself.

"I know. Listen, I must go back to the desk and check on things. If you need anything, just buzz me," she graced each man with her smile and walked down the hall, disappearing when she turned the corner.



"Nathan, is it just me, or does this hospital have a lot of corners?" Vin asked as he watched the nurse disappear.

"Seems that way," Nathan chuckled. "History has it that there was a decision back in the 1920s to put a hospital in the area. Both Four Corners and Eagle Bend sent delegates to the legislature. See, the state had grant money set aside for building a hospital, and the two towns knew that having a hospital meant their town would have a better shot of flourishing. The delegates from Four Corners took sick, and the delegates from Eagle Bend took the grant money. Rumors flew that the Four Corners contingency was poisoned. Nothing was ever proven. Anyway, the hospital was built and built some more, and then about ten years ago it was built some more. It is not big; they just continued building it without thinking about where they were going.

"The thing is, there is no logic to it all. A person could get turned around in here real fast. I've done it more than once, and I've been hanging out here pestering doctors for years. Not that either town saw a boom, but with the new hospital, Eagle Bend came closer to prospering than Four Corners." Nathan explained. If these men

were going to live in the area, they needed to know a bit about the rivalry between the two towns. That competition not only survived through the years but was going strong, and not just when the towns cheered on their respective high school football team in the annual match-up. It went deep and was hard to explain, but extremely easy to see. The strength of the delegation each town sent to lobby at the Capitol too often determined which roads were resurfaced or which school had a leaky roof repaired. His Dad mentioned, in the letters he wrote Nathan to remind him of what he was missing, living so far away, how close the towns had come to war when Walmart decided to build one of their superstores in the area.

“As soon as I got my driver’s license, I started hanging out here after school,” Nathan smiled at the memory of himself, a tall, gangly boy looking more like he belonged on the basketball court than in a hospital ward. Dr. Griggs was the one to answer his questions, show him around the place, and introduce him to other doctors. Not all the doctors had been interested in answering his questions. Some had been too busy to worry about a kid. A very few had made openly racist remarks that wounded his soul, but which he had never mentioned to his Dad or brothers. Some, though, took time with him, encouraging his questions and giving him things to read. Later, those men wrote recommendations for him, helping him to get into medical school.

“Is he sleeping?” Josiah interrupted Nathan’s musing by asking Buck about Ezra.

During their conversation, Buck had blocked the doorway, sticking his head in every little bit to check on Ezra. “He’s acting like a two-year-old fighting sleep; he can’t keep his eyes open, and he can’t keep them shut.”

“When have you ever been around a two-year-old?” Nathan teased as he thrust the bag of clothes at Josiah and started to push past Buck. He saw the flash of pain in his brother’s eyes and answered his own question. Adam. Squeezing Buck’s shoulder in mute apology, he paused, searching Buck’s eyes for the forgiveness he knew would be there. Sometimes, he said things without thinking. Buck nodded ever so slightly and moved out of the doorway, letting Nathan go in.

“Is Ezra worried about those men coming after him again?” JD asked, eyes large and round.

“So, I asked him about it, and he said something about how it was over and done with. He’d been taught his lesson,” Buck answered. He tried talking with Ezra in his more lucid moments, but the morphine had a stranglehold on Ezra, and their conversations were short, with Ezra offering little information about himself or how he had come to be in this state.

“Lesson in what?” Josiah grumbled. The last time he looked, hitting someone rarely taught them anything.

“Hey, that’s all I got from him other than ‘where’s mah clothes,’” Buck glanced down at the bag Josiah held. “You take those in there, and he’ll be gone. The only reason he’s still in that bed is he can’t figure out how to get back to his car without being arrested for indecent exposure.”

"He'll stay. He needs the rest, and Chris is taking care of the hospital bill, so he has no reason to leave." Nathan said as he reappeared at the door. He grabbed the clothes from Josiah and carried them into the room.

"He doesn't leave much room for argument, does he?" Josiah asked no one in particular.

Agreeing with Josiah, Buck laughed.



JD knew he'd made some sort of mistake by offering to help with the shopping when Buck smiled at him, the grin reaching all over his face. Then Chris confirmed his fears by asking in a soft, almost gentle voice, "You sure?"

He could have backed down, but he just couldn't figure out why he should stay in that car. "Yeah, of course," he said as he climbed out behind Josiah and went to stand on the curb, looking around for Buck.

"He's over there," Nathan said, reading JD's mind and pointing to their brother, who, only seconds before, had been at their side but was currently helping an elderly woman push a grocery-laden cart to her car. JD frowned as his eyes followed Nathan's pointing finger. "How did..."

"I think he has some sort of radar for ladies in distress," Nathan answered as they waited for Buck to unload the frail-looking woman's groceries.



Chris watched Buck load the woman's groceries with a slight smirk. When he heard the passenger door slam shut, he didn't wait until Josiah had his seat belt buckled before he started the engine. He rolled down the window of the gray Cadillac and told JD and Nathan, "Don't take all day." He didn't fail to notice the puzzled frown JD still wore on his face. Good. Buck will make the kid forget the events of the day.

"Nice car." Josiah eased the seat back to accommodate his legs a little better. On the way to the hospital, he rode in the back alongside Buck and JD while Chris took them on one of the most hair-raising rides he'd ever been fortunate enough to survive. Coming out of the hospital, he had quietly slipped into the back with JD while Nathan, Buck, and Chris argued about who got to sit in the more spacious front.

Chris ended up driving while Buck mumbled about how all the short people should be sitting in the back and how people of decent height needed the legroom of the front. Nathan just told Buck to shut up; he had pulled the seat up as far as it could go. It appeared to be part of a long-standing argument.

Josiah suspected Chris rarely, if ever, let the others drive. He closed his eyes when the bickering continued, partly because he was trying to tune them out and partly because he wanted to send a heartfelt prayer up to God asking him to make Chris not speed and to remember to slow down on the hairpin curves. God heard his prayers, and even when Nathan hissed something to Chris that couldn't be heard over Buck's complaints and Chris's anger became something that could be felt throughout the car, Chris did take it easy on the gas pedal.

"Dad bought it not quite a year ago. At the time, he told Buck he was tired of driving a pick-up everywhere and wanted something more comfortable. Buck found me to discuss the situation. At the time, I was ... not on the ranch and did not know about the remodeling Dad was doing. I only heard about the car when Buck started in about Dad buying it. Around here, most people drive trucks. He was worried that Dad was sick and just not telling him. I guess he got the car at the same time he started thinking of you four. Same time, he hired an interior decorator and remodeled the house."

"Does it bother you that he started thinking about us?"

Chris kept his eyes on the road, thinking about the question. "Do you want an honest answer?"

"If you can give me one."

"I don't know. The money doesn't matter. I think if Dad said, 'Here is some money' and everyone took their share and left, it would be easier."

"Easier on you. What about Nathan and Buck? Would it be easier on them?"

"You ask hard questions."

"Easy questions I can figure out on my own."

Nathan's home is here. This will of Dad's gives him an excuse to come home."

"What about Buck?"

"Buck needs to play brother," Chris said, thinking 'and with luck, he will latch onto one of the others and let me go, and I can leave knowing he won't be alone.'

"He seems pretty sincere to me."

"He is," Chris looked over at Josiah, quickly turning his eyes back on the road, not bothering to finish his explanation aloud. 'Josiah, Buck wants to save the world, save me. I can't get him to understand that I don't want to be saved.' That was too personal, and brother or not, he had only met this man a few hours ago.

"What are you going to do about Ezra?"

"I don't know. Nathan has a point; I can't just kidnap him. I don't even know if I want him on the ranch. If he's doing something illegal, he could destroy us all."

"Let him go then. Accept that he doesn't want to be with us and let him go."

"No. That's not an option."

After a brief pause, Josiah changed the subject. "I met him once, you know."

"Who? Standish?"

Josiah shook his head, "No, not him. Our father."

"And?"

"He and you are cut from the same cloth, I think."

"How so?"

"The best that I remember, you look a little like him, but the real resemblance is the way you act."

Chris didn't know how to respond, so he asked, "How did you meet him?"

"I'd been pestering Mama about my father for weeks. Contrary to what people said, I knew that Mom knew him, and she knew where he lived and how to get hold of him. I wouldn't let her have a minute's peace. My grandfather was away; otherwise, I would not have said anything, but I had a hunger, a longing to understand why the other kids had fathers and I didn't.

"One morning, she woke me up early and told me to come on. We got in the truck and drove for hours until we came to a truck stop. I didn't want to go in. Even though I don't look like a Mexican, Mama did, and we spoke Spanish. I'd seen what happened when people entered places where they weren't wanted. I was big for my age and didn't look Mexican, but I knew I couldn't take on grown men if they came after Mama.

"You won't believe it, looking at me, but she was beautiful. Not movie star, beautiful but beautiful just the same. We sat down at a booth. A man, tall, blond, and golden from the sun, sat down across from us. He had this aura about him, confidence in himself. He was a man who owned any room he walked into.

"He took Mama's hand, and I knew, I just knew who he was. Mama said, 'Josiah, hijo, este es su padre. Talk and I will be back to get you.' We talked for a while, an hour or two. I don't remember, but it was enough for me to get a feel for the man, to understand who he was. I was eight, and I stood taller because I knew my father to be a man I could be proud of. It didn't matter what anyone said about me not having a father. I knew the truth. Then Mama was back, and he was hugging me, telling me goodbye."

When it became clear that Josiah was not volunteering any more information, Chris did what he usually did not do and asked a question. "Do you resent him for not being there for you?"

"No." Josiah turned to look out the window, thinking, 'What can I say, Chris, Father was white, and my mother was a Mexican woman fighting her people. How could she explain to her supporters that she had a child by a white man ten years her junior? Knowing his daughter had not been raped as she claimed and instead had seduced a sixteen-year-old child, would have killed my grandfather or pushed him further into the fires of religious fervor. I know, Mama, seduce is too strong a word. Just as I know that you fell in love with that sixteen-year-old man-child. I could see love in your eyes when you looked back at him as we left. I heard it in your voice when you whispered, 'Vaya con Dios, my love. Go home to your wife and child.' So, Chris, you see it would never have worked.'



JD wondered if his embarrassment could get any more complete. It seemed like a good idea when he said he would help Buck do the grocery shopping. Certainly, it seemed better than sitting in that car listening to Chris be quiet.

Growing up, he felt sorry for kids who lived with yelling. He once thought it would be very bad to be yelled at. Now he knew being quieted at was worse. It started with something \Nathan said to Chris; he hadn't heard what, but he felt Chris's anger instantly, and from where he sat, squished between Buck and Josiah, he could see the white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel.

Oh, he had been young and foolish then; he remembered thinking about how glad he was that Chris wasn't the yelling type. Five minutes of quiet had him sweating; fifteen minutes had him willing to confess to sins he hadn't committed to get the quiet to stop.

Buck talked over the quiet, but it was still there, and you could tell that Buck didn't like it any more than he did. It had gone on and on until they pulled up into the shopping center parking lot. He volunteered to help Buck shop while Nathan looked for medicine and stuff, to get out of the car while Chris and Josiah went to check them out of their hotel rooms.

'It had been a good idea,' he told himself over and over. At the time, he had not been able to conceive of anything worse than sitting in a car with Chris being Quiet. Now he could. Now he understood the smirk on Chris's face.

Buck was a maniac when he shopped. They started with the beer and then they moseyed, Buck's word, not his, on over to the soft drinks, then back to the beer, and then over to the dairy aisle for two gallons of milk, butter, and three cartons of 'be-careful-of-the-eggs-they-break JD', as though he were an idiot. Then another trip back to the beer for another six-pack, chips, and more chips, and then back to the dairy aisle for the dip. On every aisle and in between aisles, it was either a 'Hey sweet thing, how are you doing, or, if not that, it was a hug and a kiss for every woman Buck met. While he hadn't hugged any of the few men in the store, he stopped to shake their hands and ask them how things were going. Then, he listened to them as they told him how things were going for them.

Then, on the canned goods aisle, JD discovered Buck liked to throw cans. He did not gently toss them so JD could put them in the cart, but lobbed them like a football. JD felt certain Buck was going to kill someone with one of those throws and knew, somehow, he would be the one people blamed. People liked Buck too much to find fault with his behavior.

JD looked at the overflowing cart and considered banging his head against the handle. Surely it couldn't hurt any less than the headache he acquired in the produce aisle. Buck was talking with, surprise here, another woman, so JD took the opportunity to rearrange things and catch his breath. Twice already, he had suggested getting a second cart, and both times, Buck had replied that there was plenty of room. Did the man not have eyes?

Tuning Buck and his lady friend out, JD began to think. What a day. I woke up to find I have six brothers, and in a year, I will be a millionaire. That is good. One brother is in the hospital, which is not so good. That brother is probably a criminal, unbelievably bad. One brother is scary, and the friendly one is too friendly with, oh... let's estimate -- everyone in the store...and he is crazy on top of being too friendly.

Criminal brother, scary brother, crazy brother. Not exactly the way he wanted to start his new life. He hoped he could deal with it all.

He wasn't sure if he could ever go shopping with Buck again. Let's see, what could be more fun than shopping with Buck? Jumping off a high cliff with no bungee cord would be more fun. Being held hostage by a crazed psychopath with an automatic rifle and a nervous finger would be more fun. Being on a 747 flying over the Arctic Ocean with the pilot and co-pilot unconscious would be more fun. Swimming in the Amazon with a school of piranhas in a feeding frenzy would be more fun. Stopping a train with-

"Come on, kid. Quit dawdling."

"Me. Me!" Oh No! Did his voice squeak?

"Well, you're the one just standing there. We better hurry cause Chris is just pissed enough to make us walk."

"Hurry? I can't believe you are saying that. I haven't been the one talking to everyone, and I do mean everyone, we see." JD protested.

"Here, put this cereal somewhere," Buck tossed a box over his shoulder.

"Where, Buck? Where?" JD stopped and looked at the cart. There was no feasible way it could hold anything more.

"On top there."

"No. We need a new cart," he put his foot down.

"Nonsense. We can't get another cart."

"Why not?"

"Two carts are more than a few things. I told Chris we'd only be a few minutes because we only needed a few things. Besides, with Nathan's cart, it wouldn't be two carts, it would be three. Can't take out that many things to Chris. Didn't you notice the mood he is in?"

"You don't think he will notice we have more than a few things?"

"Not if they are all in one cart," Buck explained as though he made perfect sense.

"Buck, that is just plain crazy," he knew he was close to yelling, but he couldn't stop himself.

"Look, if we have one cart and are late, we can say we were stuck in a long line, and he can't be angry. More than one cart means we went shopping, and he's going to be ticked off. Do you want to sit with an angry Chris Larabee for the next forty-five minutes?"

JD stopped, thought, and then yelled, "Buck, you are so full of crap!"

Startled by the loudness of his voice, he hung his head, afraid to look up and see people staring at him. His face burned as he realized he had just used not-so-nice language in public. It wasn't bad language, but for Pete's sake, he yelled it in a grocery

store with women and children all around. He was new in town, and they didn't know he knew better. One of those manager types was going to descend upon them and ask them to leave. He'd never been asked to leave a store before, and now... oh my goodness, did he just scream?

"Did I startle you?" Nathan asked as his hand dropped away from JD's shoulder.

Surely, it was a little yelp and not a scream. Girls scream, not guys. I am never going to be able to come to town again. And if I do, I will not go anywhere with Buck. "No. I'm fine."

Nathan examined the cart with a critical eye, "Getting a little top-heavy there, Buck."

"Now, see Nathan, that just goes to show you why you had trouble with geometry."

Nathan decided not to touch that line with a ten-foot pole. No telling where Buck would take it. "Buck, we need bread. You get it, while JD and I get the vegetables you passed up. Some of us might enjoy something green to eat. No. Come back here. You loaded that cart; you take care of it."

For two aisles, neither man talked as Nathan pulled things off the shelf and handed them to JD or placed them in his nearly empty cart himself. Finally, JD asked, "Is he always like this?"

"Who, Buck? Buck clowns around, but don't ever think he's a fool. Cause he isn't. He's sharp as a tack," Nathan eased back on the intensity he knew was in his voice. "Just don't go shopping with him. That man knows everyone, and folks will come clear across the store to say hello to him."

"He said Chris would be mad about us taking so much time."

"Chris, nah, Chris knows exactly how long it takes Buck to shop."

"Too long," he said with an exhausted sigh.

"No. Long enough for Chris to get over being angry with me."

JD looked across the store at the long-legged man heading towards them, smiling at some people, and speaking to others. He needed to think some more about these brothers.



Chris pulled into the Sleepy Hollow, wincing at the name as he did every time he saw it. Someone had tried to be cute when they named Four Corners' only motel. He wondered if they had ever read the story.

"It looks like fate stepped in and dictated our moves when we made our reservations."

"More likely that this is the only motel in town." Chris smiled. He got out of the car and, taking a couple of white keycards from his wallet, handed them to Josiah, saying. "You get your things, then head to Vin or JD's room. I'll run in and get everyone

checked out, see if Ezra has a room here, and catch up with you.” He frowned at the money Josiah dug out of his pocket and tried to hand it to him, “How 'bout we charge this to the ranch's accounts?”

It didn't take long to get their things out of the rooms, and no, Ezra was not registered there. He must have stayed at one of the bed and breakfasts, which were usually empty this time of year but stayed busy during tourist season. For a moment, Chris considered knocking on a few doors, then he shrugged, dismissing the thought. If Ezra wanted his things, he had better wake up enough to tell them where they were. He slammed the trunk shut and got behind the wheel. As soon as Josiah was in the car, he backed up and headed down Main Street looking for the various vehicles for which his brothers had handed him keys.

Chris pulled up alongside the van Josiah had pointed out, claiming it as his. He let the man climb out so he could open the rear of his van. Only a few cars were left on the street, and he examined the remaining vehicles, first finding Vin's truck and then ... and was that a Porsche?

A Porsche Carrera in Four Corners!!!! If he were a betting man, he'd bet every nickel he had, the car belonged to Standish. He put his car in reverse and pulled in behind Josiah's car. Shouting 'just a minute', he jogged across the street and pulled out the set of keys he had not bothered to look at. Bingo. He opened the car and looked in. The folded-down back seat held a suitcase and a laptop computer. He slid onto the silver-grey leather driver's seat and studied the controls for a moment until he found the trunk release; he popped it.

“Do you know how much these things cost?” he asked Josiah, who joined him to examine the car.

“How much?”

“I don't know. Buck will. Buck is going to be beside himself when he sees this. There is no way Buck will let Ezra leave. He'll wrap his arms around it and not let go,” he smirked at the thought as he walked around the car and kicked the tires, so to speak. Buck would kill him if he saw him kicking anything on this car.

“I take it our brother Buck likes cars,” Josiah filed another bit of trivia about his brothers away.

“He and Dad. Get him to show you his Mustang. A '67 red convertible. A real beauty. He and Dad fixed it up. Has her named, and everything,” Chris stepped away from the car, looking it over. It was a beautiful piece of machinery, and if Buck got behind the wheel, they wouldn't see Buck until he'd made a quick run to Canada or something. 'Just wanted to check her out, Chris. Listen to her purr.' Beautiful cars were just as intoxicating to Buck as a beautiful woman, just as intoxicating and just as irresistible.

“Think he has insurance?” Josiah interrupted Chris's thoughts.

“Check his glove compartment, if he doesn't, it's staying put.”

Josiah slid into the driver's seat and leaned across to open the glove compartment.

"Interesting," Josiah said, passing a handgun to Chris.

Chris cursed softly under his breath as he took it. He doubted Ezra planned on heading to the firing range after the meeting with the judge.

He wondered what his brother was involved with, which made him feel he needed to carry a handgun, and more importantly, since he had a gun, why hadn't he used it to protect himself? Josiah held up a clear plastic envelope that he pulled from the glove compartment. Opening it, he found the car registration, insurance information, and a permit issued by the State of Nevada allowing him to carry a concealed gun. He passed the envelope to Chris, "At least it's all legal."

"Is there a holster in there?" Chris asked. Did Ezra carry the gun hidden under his clothes, or did he keep it only in the glove compartment?

Josiah shook his head no without bothering to recheck, grunting as he pulled himself out of the car, "Must have hurt getting out of here. Wonder why he didn't say anything?"

"I wonder what he does to own something like this." Chris couldn't say if he was talking about the car or the gun.



Vin flipped through the magazine; it was a woman's magazine, one that the nurse Angie Delaney dropped off along with a cheeseburger and Coke. He could have done without the magazine and eaten another cheeseburger, but didn't complain; she had been real thoughtful in bringing him those things.

When Chris called, he would tell him it was unnecessary to come all the way back to the hospital just to feed him. He grinned at the thought of his brothers and the ruckus they had made getting it all sorted out; he was fairly certain, one of the reasons he had been fed was so Chris would not come back.

It hadn't started as an argument; it had begun as a simple discussion as to which of them would stay with Ezra. Then, it progressed to planning how to get everyone, their things, and their cars to the ranch. The only thing they all agreed on was that, in the light of the suspicious death of their father at this hospital, someone needed to stay with Ezra. All of them, except Ezra, and his opinion hadn't counted as he was too zonked to be coherent. Through hooded eyes, Ezra vehemently protested his stay in the hospital and the need for a jailer.

While everyone tried to reason with Ezra, if it could be called reasoning, the kid had stepped out into the hall and pretended he didn't know any of them, which he truly didn't.

Ezra, while struggling to sit up, set off a coughing spell. A nurse burst into the room, ordering them to all leave. They were upsetting her patient. Obediently, and more than a little sheepishly, they filed out. When Vin turned to look back into the room, the man was swishing a mouthful of water around in his mouth and then spat blood into the basin. The nurse told Ezra to go back to sleep and let her handle things. He said something, but between the pain medication and his accent, Vin was not sure

what, but the nurse smiled, looked at the readings on the monitor, and came out to stare at the six men. When she was sure she had their eyes on her, she lifted her index finger to her lips and said, "Shhhh."

Acting on Nathan's strong suggestion that they argue elsewhere, they stepped outside, leaving a thoroughly embarrassed JD to sit with Ezra. Nathan wanted to stay the night, but Buck informed him that he didn't believe Ezra was happy with Nathan now, and it might be better if he stayed away until the man calmed down. Buck then informed Nathan he needed to improve on his bedside manner.

Buck had, obviously, been teasing, but Nathan just as obviously felt stung by the remark, his hurt showing in his large brown eyes. Maybe, Buck could have patched things up, preventing the extremely vocal argument that followed, but Chris had said something about needing to get Ezra's keys so they could get his car moved out to the ranch.

Nathan quickly forgot his hurt and anger over Buck's comment and turned to Chris, explaining, yet again, that Chris could not just take Ezra out to the ranch against his will. Chris argued that yes, he could. The conversation degenerated at that point, and they still might be outside arguing, but Chris, tired of listening to it all, told everyone to shut up, and everyone did just that.

It got sorted out: Buck would get food, Nathan would get the medical supplies, Josiah and Chris would get everyone checked out of the motel, and he would stay with Ezra. Before heading out to the ranch, someone would call and find out if he needed anything. The decision on what to do with Ezra would keep, until after Dr. Craig made his morning rounds.

When they walked back into the hospital, Vin felt eyes on him and his brothers; they needed to make a point to keep their arguments away from prying ears. He stole a look at Chris, who surprised him by looking back; his face said it all. No more yelling in hospitals.

Every one of them apologized for making him stay, as though he were making a huge sacrifice by staying. He didn't see it that way. He'd much rather be here than cooped up in a car with the rest of them. 'No offense, brothers, but a few of you are too big for cars; you take all the room and breathe all the air and complain when a fellow tries to get himself some fresh air.'

He was fine where he was. Besides, it wasn't as though he knew the area well enough to go chauffeuring people around, yet. He pulled his jacket off the room's other chair and pulled out a couple of maps he had stuffed into his pocket that morning. With so many folks using GPS to tell them how to get places, he had been surprised to find them. One map was of the state and the other of the county; he had picked that one up at the little red house serving as Four Corners' Chamber of Commerce. It had been easy to find, sitting scrunched between Gloria's Gifts and Harding's Automotive. Surprisingly, he discovered it was open on a Sunday afternoon when he drove down Main Street looking for Judge Travis's office. He talked to the lady behind the counter and paid five dollars for the map and another fifteen dollars for the beautifully photographed postcards of historic Four Corners and two king-sized bags of M&M's.

He tucked the postcards away in his glove compartment; he wanted a reminder of where his father had lived and scarfed down both bags of candy before finding the motel just outside of town.

After checking in, he went to a crowded diner across the street that claimed to have the best food in town. It wasn't the best. Inez's ribs were some of the best ribs he'd ever eaten, and he was from Texas, but the prices weren't bad, and he wasn't too fussy about what he ate, and last night he hadn't known about Inez's. As long as it didn't moo, oink, or squawk when he pierced it with a fork, he reckoned it was edible.

He remembered seeing both Josiah and JD at the diner and wondered if they had noticed him. Josiah may have, but he doubted whether JD saw much of anything other than that book he had his nose stuck in. He thought he had seen a horse on the cover, so it was probably a western. Hope the kid wasn't filling his head with foolish notions of what the West was like. Those books, too often, had it wrong.

He'd also noticed a group of men in a corner who made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. They weren't wearing signs announcing, 'we are bad men, beware', but bad men didn't bother to wear signs; they let their actions speak for themselves.

He buried himself in the menu and then, while waiting for his fried chicken, he pulled out his map and, while pretending to study it, kept his ears open. He hadn't learned much other than that the men had no use for some man named Johnson. They hadn't done anything other than talk big, but he got the feeling, these men were not the types to merely talk.

Leaning back in his chair, he glanced at Ezra and then the monitor. Ezra's eyes were closed, and the machine wasn't beeping, so he decided all was well. He considered his options regarding those men from the restaurant. Nothing he could do about them, but if he were planning to stay in town, it might be a good idea to ferret out who they were and what they planned. Men like them did not peacefully co-exist, and he'd bet his last penny they were up to no good. Maybe he should talk to the sheriff, find out what he knew, and he probably should mention it to his brothers. He'd definitely talk to Chris.

He glanced again at the bed; it had taken a while after the last nurse had come in and checked on Ezra, but the man had finally fallen back asleep, although he was twitching too much for it to be a restful slumber. He shrugged; it had been Ezra's choice not to take the medicine, and he'd have to live with the consequences. He hoped he saw Nathan's face when he learned Ezra had refused his painkiller. Nathan had been right unhappy with Ezra's attitude about being in the hospital, something about not knowing what was good for him.

He had never been in a hospital. Most times he had ever had to go to the doctor were to get his vaccinations, and those weren't anything to whine about. He guessed he'd been lucky: He had made it through childhood without any broken bones and only minor injuries. The one time he'd had to have stitches, the doctor had done it in his office, and watching in a mirror as the doctor stitched his thoroughly numbed forehead had been neat. He went to school the next day and showed his friends the stitched cut

alongside his hairline. He told them, on the way home from school, he had almost been scalped by an Indian. The mundane reality of him tripping over an exposed tree root did not make an exciting story. Anyway, he didn't understand the fuss Ezra was making; he'd ask him about it when he woke up.

He turned his attention back to the map of Four Corners and soon lost himself in the names of roads. He loved maps. They told riveting stories of water cascading from high atop mountains, running along valleys and then moving off to the sea. Maps told of long-ago volcanoes that formed mountains and glaciers that carved the mountains and then stopped their southerly travels to form lakes. Maps spoke volumes about man's exploration of his world.

About a year back, he'd been in a junk store, waiting on a man to come out of the apartment across the street. Trying to look like a customer and not like a bounty hunter waiting on his prey, he walked around the dark, dank store, seemingly shopping, but, in reality, keeping watch through the propped open entrance, on the door across the street. Then he caught sight of a map that captured his attention and would not let it go; he became so engrossed in the thick, old parchment with its scrawled hand-drawn map covering it that he almost missed seeing his quarry leave the building. Torn between the need to chase down his man and the desire to own the map, he came close to letting his man go. Two days later, he returned to the store with his fingers crossed, hoping to find the map still there.

Luck was with him; no one else had found the old map hanging in a cheap new frame as fascinating as he had. The old man had taken the map, in its little black frame, off the wall, and before accepting the fifty dollars in Vin's hand made sure he understood though the map was old, it offered no frame of reference needed for locating a mine which probably, was just some worthless hole in the ground. He hadn't cared. He didn't expect to find the mine; he wasn't stupid. He had bought the thing because of the story it told.

Maps told stories, and throughout the evening, he learned the story of Four Corners and the surrounding area. He'd been interrupted once by a phone call from Chris, but other than the call and the noises in the hall when the nurses changed shifts, things were quiet. He'd told Chris he was fine; Ezra was sleeping, and yes, he did eat supper. He may have been a little short with his brother, but Chris didn't seem to notice, so he hung up the room's phone and returned to the map. This time tomorrow, he could go pretty much anywhere in the county and not get lost.

He hoped he would get the chance to stop at a hunting supply store before heading out to the ranch so he could pick up a topography map of the area. He made a note to check the library and see what they had. Amazing what wonders those buildings held, and how pleased librarians were when they were asked to help locate something. No telling what he could find in a library.

"Want some water?" he asked the two green eyes slowly blinking open.

"What aruh you doing heruh?" Ezra asked when his brain finally got into gear, and he had to match a name to the face.

"Sitting with ya."

“Why?”

“Ya were being a pain in the ass, so someone had to stay and make sure ya didn't make any of the nurses cry.”

“Ah have nevuh made anyone cry.”

“Never in your entire life?”

“Maybe once or twice, but certainly not often enough to justify you making that assumption about me.”

“Ya want some water?” Vin repeated. Nathan had said something about him needing to drink water to help his kidneys heal. He didn't know anything about medicine, but he reckoned he could get him to drink the water he offered.

“What time is it?” He wondered how he managed to hurt more than when he came in. He considered calling the nurses' desk for something to relieve the pain, but decided on second thought, after the noise he'd made in rejecting the second dose of morphine, they'd probably laugh at him. Besides, he needed to think. He was in a mess and needed to figure out a way out.

“It's a little after eleven. Here, drink a sip of water.” He pushed the straw toward Ezra; Vin held the cup.

“Isn't it past visiting hours?” Ezra asked after taking several sips.

“After doing such a thorough job of making a horse's ass out of yerself, the nurses asked that one of us stay.”

“And you were elected. Ah am sorry. Ah have intruded on your plans to reunite with your long-lost family. Mah apologies.”

“Yer family too.”

Ezra frowned at those words. His family, too, not likely. Thinking feigning sleep might rid him of the man, Ezra moved his arm, so the crook of his elbow covered his face, but the move proved incredibly uncomfortable. Perhaps, he thought, it was best to lie still until after the man left, and then he could get out of bed and work the soreness out of his body.

The dangling tube caught his eye, and he followed its path to the back of his hand. Damn, just like a hospital to put things in you that you didn't want. They told him in the ER that there was blood in his urine. They wanted to insert a catheter to monitor his kidney function. The nurse claimed to need to know how much urine he was peeing and the amount of blood in it. Ask, he told her. He tuned her out when she began telling him how inaccurate his observations would be. She kept stressing he was bleeding, but she was not giving him any new information. He had been bleeding ever since Mr. Timothy Moore landed an extremely vicious kick to his back; it was his way of saying goodbye. It didn't matter; he would heal and deal with Moore. There was no other option.

Dr. Jackson surprised him, interrupting the nurse's spiel to offer a compromise solution that would satisfy all parties. He said, “Ezra, we won't insert a catheter if you

will pee in a specimen basin in the toilet, but you will let us put in an IV line so you can get fluids.” Ezra had readily agreed, thinking that an IV could be easily pulled out of his arm. He then could leave when none of the banshees dressed in scrubs were looking. He hadn’t counted on the morphine they added to the IV, knocking him out, or on finding Mr. Tanner sitting in the room with him.

“You may leave now.”

“Reckon I don't have a place I need to be.”

“Aren't you going out to the ranch?”

“In the morning, when ya go.”

“Mr. Tanner, Ah think Ah have made mahself clear. You have bettuh things to do and Ah do not need you heruh. Doesn't it bothuh you that ah do not wish you heruh?”

“Not in the slightest.”

Ezra searched the blue eyes staring calmly at him. He broke the gaze, sighed, and settled in his bed before asking, “You are not leaving, no matter what Ah say or do, aruh you?”

“Nope.”

“Turn your back for a moment, then.”

“Why?” Vin asked even as he turned around.

“Plausible deniability.”

Vin heard movement and a soft hiss of pain, but he did as he was asked and stayed facing the window. “Ya, OK?” he asked.

“Just a moment.”

“Ya want me to get a nurse?”

“Not ... necessary.”

“Ya sure?”

“You can turn around if you so desire.”

Vin turned, and the smirk left his face at the sight of blood dripping between the fingers of Ezra's hand, clamped over his hand. “Don't ya think ya need a nurse?” he asked. Apparently, Ezra didn't know how to take out an IV.

“If you get a nurse, they will only want to put it back in, and Ah don't care to have to repeat mahself.”

“Wouldn't think you would. Do you feel better?” He so wanted to see Nathan's face in the morning.

“Definitely.”

Vin didn't call the pale man lying on the bed, holding his bleeding hand, a liar, but he thought it at him real hard.

Ezra ignored the look Vin Tanner gave him and sneaked a peek at his hand. He found it amazing that such a little wound could leak so profusely, but it seemed to have slowed. Deciding to make use of his sitter, he asked, "Would you mind getting a cloth so that Ah might wash?"

"I'll get it, but I will call the nurse if it doesn't quit bleeding in a minute."

"Nonsense, their first question will be, why did you just stand there and watch him do that?"

"What happened to deniability?"

"If you tattle, Ah will have no choice but to make you mah accomplice."

Vin shrugged; he would probably do the same. There was something about nurses in their scrubs and their no-nonsense attitudes which made them intimidated patients and their visitors. Vin walked over to the counter and searched through the paraphernalia for a couple of alcohol swabs. Tearing open the package, he dabbed at the bloody fingers and said, "Ya know, they will check on ya."

"With any luck, it will be in the early hours of the morning, and it will be fait accompli, and they will have the sense to allow me to rest," Ezra replied, taking the second swab from Vin Tanner's hand. He wrinkled his nose at the smell of the alcohol, wishing the man had gotten a wash rag.

Vin raised his eyebrows at the unfamiliar words, but since he deciphered Ezra's meaning, he did not ask questions and filed the words away until a time he could examine them more closely. While Ezra dabbed at the blood on his arm, obviously careful of the bruising, Vin glanced over at the now ruined IV. Ezra had tied a knot in the IV tubing.

"Ah do not understand how our society can place such obvious sadists on such high pedestals."

"Are ya hurting?"

Ezra chose to ignore such an asinine question and concentrated on finding a way to position himself that offered some relief for his backside without giving his ribs too many reasons to complain. After a couple of minutes, he decided perhaps the best move was to just not move.

"So, ya ready to talk?"

"On what subject do you wish to converse?" Ezra frowned as Vin propped his feet up on the bed and leaned dangerously far back in the straight-back institutional chair.

"Let's start with oh... let me ... see ... How about why ya acted like a ninny about going to the hospital?"

"It is obvious, you do not keep abreast of current events," he sighed dramatically and paid for his theatrics as a bolt of pain ran across his chest. When the elephant decided to get off him so he could breathe, he began again without acknowledging Vin's look of concern. "Do you realize the sheer number of virulent

infectious diseases that run rampant in these institutions of medical quackery?" he cocked an eyebrow at Vin, barely turning his head to get a better look at the man.

"Do ya realize the number of people that get helped here?"

"That is the spiel that the medical profession wants you to believe. The reality is that this is a giant petri dish for bacteria waiting to take over the world after having turned our bodies into sludge."

"Yer getting helped here."

"Nonsense. Ah am getting treated here. They have done nothing to make me better, it can be argued that they have made me worse."

"How's that?"

"Since being here, Ah have been poked and prodded enough to have a new set of bruises to match the ones Ah already had. Those leaches have stuck holes in me to get my blood out and have stuck more holes in me to put other stuff in," he glanced up at the IV poles.

Vin looked at Ezra for a moment. He spoke in such a sincere forthright manner that Vin almost believed Ezra believed it to be true and briefly wondered if his new brother was more than a little off. Then he saw the tiniest glints in his brother's eyes and knew better. He laughed, "Ya ain't gonna tell me a thing are ya."

"Mr. Tanner, I thought we discussed your appalling choice of words."

Vin leaned back in his chair, not realizing how far out of Ezra's line of sight he was moving. "I reckon I might not have yer schooling, but at least people can understand me."

Ezra winced as Vin's barb struck him hard. What schooling? He rolled in the bed to glare at Vin. "You have understood my every word," he growled through the pain the unwise move caused.

"Do ya want me to go get a nurse?"

"For God's sake, no," Ezra hissed. He eased back down on the bed. He knew his eyes were watering from the movement. It embarrassed him not to be able to deal with his pain better. "Ah take it you have never had broken ribs before?"

"I've been shot at."

"Ever hit?"

"No, I have better sense than to get shot."

"So do Ah."

"But not enough sense to stop from pissing off people capable of beating the shit out of you."

"It happens."

"It's happened before?"

"Ah didn't say that."

"No, you didn't." Vin studied the man on the bed, letting the silence thicken around them.

"So, what do you do that causes people to shoot at you?" Ezra asked; he couldn't stand silence and usually filled it with the meaningless chatter he perfected over the years. He was just too sore to do it now and would have to get Tanner to do the talking.

"Take bad guys to jail."

"You're a cop?" he couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice.

"Nope. I go after the folks who skip out on their bail."

"I see ... and the danger appeals to you?"

"The chase does... figuring out where a person will go ...who would they turn to...finding them," Vin stopped talking, he didn't know this person from Adam. The silence between them grew again.

Ezra rolled his eyes, trying to see Tanner; he did not repeat his mistake of sudden movement. "Aruh you asleep?" "

"No, but you should be."

"Nonsense, the night is my element."

"Are you a vampire?"

"No, but once, in N'awlins, I saw some."

"Lots of kids are into that."

"These kids weruh older than you."

"Being a kid is a state of innocence."

"Like John David."

"JD. Remember?"

"Is that what he wants to be called?"

"Yep. I think he does." Vin leaned forward and came back into Ezra's range of vision.

"So, ya gonna tell me what the lesson was about?"

"Lesson?" Ezra frowned, then remembered what he had told Buck. "Oh, yes, that lesson. Simply put, be careful with whom you play poker."

"Ya owe him money," Vin stated, satisfied that he had this one mystery solved.

"Nevuh," Ezra glared at Vin and his false assumption. "He was a poor player who did not know when to leave the table."

"So, how much did you take him for?"

"His share of the pots Ah won ...around 55,000 dollars."

Vin arched an eyebrow but did not whistle, "Weren't no nickel and dime pots, then. So, what do ya do to make the kind of money that lets ya play those games?"

"Ah am a gambluh. Ah gamble," he waited for a remark denigrating his profession and was surprised when it did not come.

"So, he's pissed that ya took his money and what, follows ya down here and gets his money back."

"Ah left, he followed, and seeing as he had assistants the size of Kong Ah handed ovuh mah winnings. Mr. Tanner, as lovely as this conversation has been, Ah must ask you to leave the room."

"Why?"

The dunce, did he need it spelled out for him? "Ah have to make a call of nature."

"How are ya going to manage that?"

"Carefully," he ignored the incredulous look Vin gave him. "The bathroom is ovuh there. Ah plan on using it. Ah cannot do so with you in the room."

"Ya can't do it at all. Ya got broken ribs. I'll get a nurse."

"Ah am not using a bedpan," he glared at Vin. "You forget Ah was doing fine this morning. If Dr. Jackson had not pulled me off mah feet"

"It would have been something else then, and he did not pull ya off yer feet. Ya fainted."

"Ah did no such thing!" He placed his hand over his broken bones (Why the hell hadn't they wrapped them???) and sat up. "If you please, suh Ah must attend these mattuhs and Ah wish for you to vacate the room." There was no way he was going to parade around in the skimpy garment he currently wore in front of a stranger -- it didn't have a back.

Vin rubbed at his lower lip and considered his options and Ezra's strength. "If I go and stretch my legs for a bit, do I have yer word that ya will get back in bed when ya finish?"

"You do."

"Ten minutes?"

"Bettuh make it fifteen."

"Okay, I'll get a drink. Want something?"

"Ah appreciate the offer, but Ah do not care for a thing." Ezra answered, thinking, 'Mr. Tanner, how did you ever make a living at hunting down bad guys? You are far too trusting. This is a lesson that you will be the better for, having learned while still young enough for it to sink in. Never believe anyone.'

Ezra used the bathroom and washed his hands and his face. Now, he needed to find his clothes. A quick search revealed his wallet and watch in the nightstand's drawer, and he found his clothes stuffed into a plastic bag in a small closet with his

shoes next to them. He wasted a minute shaking out his clothes and sighed his relief when the chain fell onto the bed. He slipped the chain over his head to safeguard it against theft or misplacement, and, exhausted, he leaned against the wall. Damn it, this was taking too much time, and he felt as though his brain was encased in quicksand. Think, Ezra, think.

All right, they had his car key but not his car. They could open the door but not turn over the motor unless they knew the password. That neat little gadget cost him a bundle, but if it kept them from moving his car, then it was worth it. If he could get to his car, he could get his spare key and get the Hell out of Dodge before they came and took him away to the cow farm.

The problem was getting his clothes on without alerting any of the nurses; they would want to know where he was going, and he didn't feel like arguing. Then, he needed transportation. He'd go find an empty room to change in before Mr. Tanner returned, one less person to explain things to. He'd be out of the place before anyone noticed. He pulled his watch on and checked the time. He better move a little faster than he was if he wanted out. He slipped his shoes on, not bothering to tie them; he would do that later, carrying them seemed like too much work. Then he picked up the bag with his clothes in it-- why couldn't they have hung them up? They were hopelessly wrinkled.

Still, he was fortunate to have them. Overly enthusiastic staff members wanted to cut the clothes off him. Luckily, he had been able to prevent it. Okay, quit pampering yourself. You need to hurry. Step one: get his clothes on. Step two, find a ride. If it came to it, he could visit the parking lot, but he'd rather hitch a ride. It would be bad form to borrow a vehicle when you've used your real name; misunderstandings about cars could lead to jail time. He pushed away from the wall, walked to the door, listened for movement, and opened it to see Vin standing there.

"I ain't too stupid, little brother." With gentle hands, he turned Ezra around. "Drop them clothes and hop back into bed before I call a nurse to check on ya."

"First, if you insist on calling me brothuh, remembuh, Ah am the elder and therefore it is you who aruh the little brothuh."

"I wasn't talking about age, I was talking about size, and ya are the little brother. If I were talking about age, I would have said older brother." He helped Ezra onto the bed and then glared at him, "You lied to me."

"Ah was merely going to stretch mah limbs."

"You lied. I trusted ya and ya lied."

"You didn't trust me too much."

"Why did ya lie?"

"Ah wanted out of heruh."

"I thought we went through this."

"Go to hell." He was through talking to the man. He was tired, and he was hurting. He would deal with his demons by himself.

“Why do ya want to leave so badly? Didn't ya hear him when Chris said he was having the hospital send yer bill to the ranch? There ain't any need for ya to sneak out of here in the middle of the night.”

“Ahm tired and need to sleep.” He closed his eyes. He knew he was coming across like a baby, but was unable to explain his actions. The thought of hospitals and their sick, dying, and dead people terrified him. He got lost in a hospital and had trouble remembering what was then and what is now. He tried to hide from the ghosts of his past, but he couldn't. When he closed his eyes, he saw sheet-shrouded gurneys with tiny, blue-tinged hands dangling off them and red splotches dotting the white linen sheets and red fingernail polish on those tiny hands, and he could hear the people.

All around him, he could hear disembodied voices, some crying, some screaming in pain so deep and raw that everyone knew their souls had been ripped apart. The voices, all of them, were saying it was his fault. He was the one who had kicked the ball. People began screaming at him, telling him how bad he was, and saying why couldn't he have been the one who died? He could remember Uncle Roger running in from his construction site, heading toward him, and the grieving father picking him up and throwing him across the room. He could remember hitting the wall and the sound of his arm snapping. And he remembered that she hadn't moved through any of it; she just lay under the sheet, and it was his fault his little cousin Bethany would not play with anyone again.

Eyes opened or closed, he saw, remembered, the awful afternoon. He watched behind his eyelids as white walls oozed blood and the normal noises of the hospital merged with those of his memory. He could still hear the crying in the waiting room and the voices of the doctors and the nurses working on his arm. He remembered how they were talking about how he was Maude Standish's bastard. He probably didn't even know his father. How bad seed comes from bad seed. He remembered when they pulled his arm back into place, they told him to quit crying. He remembered the sounds of sirens filling the air, and someone patted his knee and told him to wait. Then everyone took off running.

He waited, he did, but no one came back, so he got up and walked out to the empty waiting room. His aunt was gone, his uncle was gone, and his great-aunt was gone. He didn't know where his Mother was. He didn't know what to do, so he left too.

He left that place with the little, dead cousin, but he couldn't ever escape the voices telling him he was bad. He didn't need them to tell him that. He knew that good boys have moms who took care of them, and they have fathers. They got tucked in at night, and they got kisses for doing good in kindergarten. Good boys had a room to call their own, even if they had to share it. Good boys remembered not to kick the ball into the street. They remembered that cars can crunch and bump over little cousins.

He knew he was bad, had known it every day of his life. He just didn't like to be reminded of it. And hospitals made him aware all over again, he was not good, he was bad. He just wanted to leave this place so he wouldn't have to listen to the voices.

Vin watched his brother close his eyes and turn his head toward the wall in dismissal. He knew he had just lost whatever ground he had made with their talk. He

probably should have helped him escape, he decided as he watched Ezra pretend to sleep.



Chris leaned against the porch rail, sipping at his cup of black coffee. His mind was not on the rosy sky of dawn, and though he did spot the mule deer family watching him from the edge of the pinions, his mind did not register them. He was lost in a jumble of thoughts and memories.

It hurt to be back here, so many memories called to him. The one that stood out now was of him and his dad debating the necessity of putting a pool in the backyard. It had seemed so necessary when he was ten. He had made every argument he could think of. His dad remained dead set against it, saying a pool would ruin the view. He had been so angry that his father wouldn't listen. Years later, on a visit home from college, he stood on the back porch and realized his dad had been right.

Like his father, Sarah loved this place. When they were dating, not long before they married and moved into Gramps' old house and made it their own, Sarah would come here and sit all day with her camera, waiting for the perfect shot. Later, after Adam's birth, there had been fewer perfect shots, but many less perfect, ones and infinitely more precious ones of a baby taking his first steps to his father, of a toddler chasing a puppy, of Uncle Buck carrying a three-year-old on his shoulder and Uncle Nate showing him how a stethoscope worked.

Sometimes, he and Sarah would drive up here for dinner or something, and when they would leave to return to their home, Adam asleep in his car seat, she would start talking about the place. She loved it, maybe more than he did. She would hasten to reassure him that she loved her home, but the log and stone home, built when Chris was a baby and expanded over the years, with its meandering halls placed so that a tree wouldn't have to be destroyed, or a boulder dug up was far more interesting and more photogenic.



She took photos of other things too, one of him when he had poured a pail of water over his head in a desperate attempt to cool off, another of him rocking a colicky baby so she could get some rest, or the picture of their son showing her how big the fish, the one that got away, was. She could capture in black and white the heart of a moment.

His dad had several of her landscapes hanging on the walls, many of Adam, sleeping, crawling, and running hung in halls, and the few pictures of their wedding were tucked away in an album in the library. He didn't have any pictures of her laughing as she presented her burned Christmas dinner, or leaning against the corral watching the yearling foals kicking up their heels, or when she had held her son for the first time--that one had been almost totally out focus, his hands had been shaking so bad but, she framed it and put it on their nightstand. Those pictures were gone, destroyed in the same fire that had destroyed his family, the one that had decimated his life.

He missed her; her laugh, her walk, the way she'd tilt her head listening to him, the way she looked stepping out of the shower, water hanging on her impossibly long eyelashes. He missed the times she would take his hand and lead him into the bedroom, and her laugh when he would mock protest, saying it was the middle of the day, what would the neighbors say? She would laugh at that and ask, 'What neighbors?', before tackling him, and they would fall on the bed.

That day would be forever etched in his mind. They had seen the smoke from a distance, and he had turned to Buck, saying they needed to check it out. Coming up over the ridge, they had been assaulted by the stench, and that moment was when time started slowing for him.

By the time they came upon the smoldering ruins, he was seeing things in a series of snapshots. His brain had been unable to process so much terrible information it began taking a series of photos to remember that day. He had one shot of the doors to the coroner's station wagon being opened, another of the look on his father's face, another of tears leaving paths in a fireman's soot-covered face and still one more of the two dark plastic bags that he knew, without anyone saying a word, held his Sarah and Adam.

He became vicious, turning on everyone, snapping and snarling. He said abusive, ugly things to his brother and then to his father, trying to comfort him. In the back of his mind, he knew Sarah, in heaven, would be shaking her head in disapproval at his angry, hateful words. He tried to hold back the words, to contain his rage and despair for her sake. He couldn't do it.

He was filled with the same black smoke rising off the remnants of his home. Like the smoke, he was empty, dark, and empty. He could not see any light. He did not feel joy or hope. He hated everyone and everything. He hated the morning when he woke to discover that Sarah, lying in his arms, was nothing more than a dream. He hated the night when it was time to tuck a laughing Adam into bed, only to remember he no longer had that happy task to look forward to doing. He hated beautiful days because she was not there to photograph them, and he hated dreary days because those would have been the ones that Sarah would have brightened with her smile. He hated bicycles, baseball gloves, and yapping puppies. He hated minivans with car seats in the back.

Most of all, he hated himself for living. He spent every night of that first awful year in a bottle. Drinking until his money ran out or until Buck showed up to take him home. He said things, wanting to deliberately hurt both Buck and his Dad, thinking that if they understood his pain, they would quit trying to bring him back to the man he once was. If Nathan had been around, he would have hurt him also. The second year, he spent drinking and fighting. He knew he had hit Buck on more than one occasion, and yet Buck always came back until one night, he didn't.

He couldn't remember what he said or did, but he remembered Buck's face bleeding and bruised. His right eye was swelling shut, and his left eye was blank and devoid of emotions. Chris told himself, now, Buck would understand what emptiness feels like. He had hit Buck before, but Buck always came back looking for him, refusing to let him drown in his misery. That night, he saw that battered face and knew

Buck wouldn't be coming back. Buck gave him what he said he wanted: the gift of being alone. In his rare moments of reflection, he wondered if being alone was what he truly wanted. In those moments, he could hear Sarah telling him to go home to his family so he could begin to heal.

The thing was, Buck probably thought his coming back to the ranch when their dad died meant he was back for good. It didn't, and he did not have the words to explain it to Buck. There was too much emptiness inside him that couldn't be filled, and far too many memories taunting him here. Too many ghosts.

He poured out his coffee; it had turned cold waiting for him to drink it. The sun had begun its journey across the sky. He turned to go in, thinking he'd put his coffee cup in the sink, and run down to the corral and check on the horses before breakfast. They needed to get into a routine of getting up and moving, but he doubted if today was a good day to begin it. He'd better let his brothers get settled a bit first.

"You want another cup?" Buck asked as Chris came in, letting the door slam behind him.

"Didn't know you were up." Of course, he thought, Buck would be up and moving.

"Thought I'd get a start on the day," Buck shrugged and poured himself his second cup of coffee.

"Why didn't you come out and talk?"

"You didn't look as if you would appreciate the company." Buck pulled out one of the chairs and sat down. His hands traced patterns in the grain of the massive pine table. "Dad did this himself, didn't want my help except when he needed it moved. It weighs a ton. Made the chairs too. He had his decorator help him decide on the color of the chairs so they would look right; patina bronze is what she called the color. I told him that it looked green to me. I couldn't figure out why he was doing all this. All those new bedrooms, two new baths, remodeling the kitchen, and building this table to seat eight. It was just the two of us, and even when there...even when all of us...we'd usually eat out on the porch." He got up to rinse his cup before putting both his and Chris's cups in the dishwasher. "I'm going out to check on the horses."

"I was heading there myself."

"Then why don't you go on? I want to look under the hood of the Ford. We're going to need to take salt out the next day or two, and last time I took it out, it wasn't shifting gears smoothly."

"Is this going to be an all-day job?" Chris tried to tease, but it must have sounded as though he was getting on Buck's case, judging by the look on his face.

"No. I just want to look. If it is something major, I'll use the Chevy and work on the Ford later."

He should have said something then. He should have said what he always said when they were kids doing their chores, 'It will go quicker if we work together.' And it had, although, more often than not, he and Buck had done Nathan's chores too-- that

boy could not keep his nose out of a book. The thing was that even with all the laughing and clowning, the chores were quickly completed, and did not seem so much like chores. He should have said, 'Come help me, Buck.' He didn't. "I'll see you when you get finished, then."



JD stretched his arms over his head, rolled over, and bolted upright when his eyes landed on the clock. Nine!! He planned to be up hours ago. He wanted to see everything: the house, inside and out, the horses and cows, and the winding mile-long driveway leading up to the house. More importantly, he wanted to start the day off by helping.

He may not have spent his whole life in the saddle, but he wasn't a total idiot when it came to horses. He spent enough summers cleaning out stables for rich people who didn't want to get their hands dirty and exercising their expensive horses they forgot except on bright, sun-shining weekends. What he didn't know already, he would learn. Those older, bigger brothers would never have reason to regret him coming to stay. He could be an asset to the ranch. He just needed to prove it.

Throwing on the only pair of jeans he brought with him and a thick red sweater he layered over a t-shirt, and grabbing his hiking boots and a pair of socks, he ran out of the room, hit the stairs two at a time. He slowed down when he hit the ground floor, momentarily confused. Buck had given them the three-minute tour when they finally got to the ranch after the sun had long since set. Nathan disappeared to call someone about scheduling a meeting in the morning while Buck walked them around the house. It had been a brief tour, mainly letting everyone pick a room and showing them the bathrooms. He had grabbed a room on the top floor of the old wing, as Buck had called it, and tossed his luggage on the floor, traded his dress shoes for a pair of hiking boots, and headed back down the stairs.

They planned to eat in town. Nathan worried a little about the milk spoiling, but Buck pointed out that, as cold as it was, there was little chance of spoilage and even the beer might be chilled by the time they reached the ranch.

That had been the plan discussed as Buck loaded the trunk. According to Nathan and verified by Chris, Buck had a superior awareness of the geometry needed for the proper loading of a trunk; hearing that, he, along with everyone else, had been content to watch the man work. JD had to admit that by the time Buck had everything stowed, nothing could slip or be crushed.

Chris leaned against the car door and smirked the whole time, merely shaking his head when Buck asked what was up. Slamming the trunk closed, Buck hopped into the back seat, thanking Nathan for pulling the seat up and giving his legs some room. When they turned onto Main Street, it was dark. All the shops and offices looked empty. JD easily spotted his rental three doors down from the judge's office. Buck suggested they could drive it back to the ranch, but before he could reply, Buck began shouting 'Oh my God' at the top of his lungs.

He did not even wait for Chris to turn the motor off before he was out of the car and across the street. With reverent fingers and worshipping eyes, he examined the black car parked almost directly in front of the judge's office.

"Chris, do you see this?"

"Yes, Buck, I see it."

"This is a Porsche. A Porsche Carrera. This is Ezra's car, isn't it? I knew there was a reason I liked the boy. Do you know how fast this baby can go?"

"Can't go anywhere, Buck."

Buck halted and glanced over the car hood at Chris. "What did you do to it?" his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"I didn't do anything to it. Ezra has an anti-theft device on it."

Buck was around the car and in the driver's seat before Chris could finish his explanation. "This is good," he crouched down on the pavement next to the driver's seat. A moment later, he looked up and said, "I'm better."

Close to thirty minutes later, Buck could be heard singing a raunchy song as he talked to his 'sweet baby'. He was on one side of the street, and they were on the other; they had been banished to sit in Josiah's van when the older man had passed out cigars. Only Chris had accepted, but Buck, worried Chris or Josiah might inadvertently damage the car, sent them away. Nathan and JD took turns jogging across the street to check on his progress.

A sheriff's car pulled up and a balding, pot-belly Sheriff walked around to the driver's side of the car and talked to Buck; JD felt grey hair sprouting all along his head when Buck answered the sheriff's question of 'What you up to Buck?' with 'Removing this sweet baby's anti-theft device.' He hadn't been arrested on the spot, and the sheriff merely walked across the street to talk to Chris. Whatever Chris said must have done the trick because the sheriff walked to the van, shook his hand, introduced himself as Mitch Harris, and welcomed them to town before returning to his car and driving off.

Chris finished his smoke and went back over to Buck. "Buck, the rest of us are getting hungry. You plan on being long?"

"Chris, good buddy, you know some things in life can't be hurried. Why don't you take the boys and get some pizza? I'll catch up."

"Catch up, Buck, not beat us there. You hear me," Chris warned.

"Yeah. Yeah, I hear you," Buck answered distractedly.

Chris called ahead so the pizza would be waiting, but Buck still managed to beat them to the ranch and was wiping off the car's hood with a soft cloth when they pulled up beside him.

"Won't get the ladies like my Betty Landon, but she is a beauty," he all but bounced on the balls of his feet, happiness in his every move.

"Buck, give me those keys," Nathan snapped as he climbed out of Vin's truck. "It isn't enough that I have one brother in the hospital. Here you are racing up these curves at night. Are you stupid? Chris, did you drop him on his head when he was a baby?"

"Leave me out of it. I'm going to warm up the pizzas," he knew Nathan had a point, but he wasn't going to change Buck.

"Now, Nate, I just wanted to see how she ran. I tell you, she practically flew. Hugged those curves like nothing you've ever seen," if he thought he was making Nathan feel better, he was mistaken.

Nathan threw the keys to Josiah. "Put these somewhere. Preferably, out of Buck's sight. I'm going to call Emmett Griggs," he growled as he stormed into the house. The rest of them had unpacked the cars, and by the time they finished the tour of the house, given by a surprisingly subdued Buck, Chris hollered for them to come and eat. They ate in silence as they had at lunch. Except, at lunch, the silence had been caused by hungry men eating delicious food. This silence owed its existence to the tension between Buck and Nathan.

Buck explained he had left almost as soon as they did, and he hadn't driven particularly fast, but Nathan was having none of it and ate in stony silence. If it hadn't been for the smile Josiah gave him, the one that said Don't worry, JD wasn't sure if he could have made it through the meal.

As soon as he finished and rinsed his plate off, he excused himself, saying he was tired and heading to bed. At least, they had all said good night to him as he had trudged out of the kitchen.



Exhausted from the day's news and events, JD watched the clock as the minutes turned into hours. His thoughts, and the unfamiliar silence after a lifetime in the city, worked together to keep him awake. His mind raced with all the discoveries of the day. He ran his brothers' names over his tongue, testing them out. He could put faces with names, and his Mom was right, Chris was like King Arthur, royal and commanding. And if Chris was King Arthur, was Buck the loyal Sir Kay running the castle for his brother, or was he the fool entertaining the King? Josiah had to be the wise and mysterious Merlin offering sage advice. So, which brother was Lancelot, and of course, where did he fit in this Camelot?

Visions of Chris, on a horse as black as night, waiting, with his knights spread out beside him, for some enemy hidden in the fog, were his last thoughts as Morpheus dragged him into his realm; that and the promise that he'd begin the day early.

Coming down the stairs, he felt humiliated that he had slept so late. He was angry with himself. After only one day, he had broken his promise to show these guys he belonged, no matter that he'd made it only to himself. He wanted them to like him and not think of him as a burden they had gotten stuck with.

He slowed down even further, dragging his bare feet along the wood floors, suddenly reluctant to face his brothers. Yesterday, everyone had been running on

adrenaline. No one slowed down to talk. What if Chris and Buck didn't want any help running the ranch and resented his presence?

Running a nervous hand through his hair, he braved the kitchen. Chris sat at the table, talking on the phone. Intent on his conversation, he did not look up as JD entered the room. JD, relieved he didn't have to face Chris, turned to Josiah, standing with his back to the island, cooking a mountain of bacon.

"Sorry, I overslept," JD apologized.

The big man awarded JD with a noncommittal grunt; his attention riveted on the sizzling bacon. "The trick to keep it from burning is careful observation," he said as he speared a slice and laid it on a paper towel to drain.

"Where is everyone?" JD asked.

"Buck's still down by the equipment shed, working on a truck. Nathan's on the other end of the phone." Josiah snagged another piece of bacon and flipped it just before it started burning. "How do you want your eggs?"

JD eyed the large bowl of whisked eggs and answered, "Scrambled is fine."

"Good, because that is the only kind I make," Josiah grinned. "Why don't you start opening some of these cabinets and see if you can find plates and get the table set? Forks and knives are in that drawer by the dishwasher."

JD found the plates and began setting the table. His mother would have put placemats down, but he figured that, even if he knew where placemats were, they'd probably look ridiculous on this table. Chris moved an elbow out of his way, mouthed 'morning' at him, and pointed at a cabinet. JD opened it and found the salt and pepper shakers as well as the sugar bowl.

"Bless you, Josiah, this smells wonderful," Buck's voice boomed in the quiet room as he entered the kitchen. "Let me wash up and I'll help." He disappeared behind a door, but his voice could be heard over running water, "JD, get some of Miss Nettie's preserves out of the pantry."

Chris, who had hung up the phone and was busy pouring coffee, pointed towards the door next to the refrigerator, "Third shelf on the left, I think."

JD opened the door, "Buck."

"Yeah."

"Come here, please."

Buck, puzzled by the tone of JD's voice, went to stand beside him in the pantry. "Can't find the preserves?" he asked.

"I found those just fine," JD glanced around the large room, not some little cabinet. Shelves lined two walls and a walk-in freezer the third. Enough food was in the pantry to stock a small grocery store.

"Then what?" Buck asked, puzzled.

"Last night, you said we didn't have any food. I pushed a cart with food stacked taller than me around the store because you said we didn't have food. Look! There is enough food to feed an army in there," he yelled at his brother.

"JD, that's not food, that's supplies."

JD stood, glaring at Buck before huge hands grabbed his shoulders and propelled him to the table. "Time to eat," Josiah said.

This morning, they did not eat in silence and between bites of biscuits piled high with preserves, Buck explained the necessity of keeping the pantry well stocked during the winter months. "Living out here is not like living in town. We are pretty far out of town. When winter comes, we can't just run to the store to get food we may have forgotten. We can't depend on Nathan being able to bring us what we need on his way home from the clinic. Knowing Nate, we might not see him for days if he gets busy. We don't get much snow, not this far down in the valley, but there are times when it's best not to drive, and during those times, you'd best have plenty of food on hand."

JD nodded in understanding. Buck made sense. More importantly, he wasn't talking down to him. His eyes showed only serious consideration, and JD could feel a chill of apprehension; this was so very different than living in the city. What if he couldn't handle it?

Buck turned to include the other men in his conversation. "We need to check our inventory and stock up. No telling when we'll get some weather."

"You want to do that this morning?" Chris asked.

"No. I'm taking JD out riding first, to see how he does. You want to come, Josiah?"

"No, I want to walk around first, then I'll get started on looking at our supplies. I have an idea of what we will need. When you get back from riding, you can look over my list and add anything I missed."

"Good. That ok with you, kid?" Buck looked at him, suddenly concerned, he'd made the plans, and maybe JD didn't want to come. He hurried to explain, "We need to look for Jack. That's Dad's dog. He used to follow Dad everywhere." his voice broke, and he got up, his mug in his hand, and walked over to the coffee pot to pour another cup.

"That was Nathan on the phone," Chris said to give Buck time to compose himself. "He left early to take Vin some breakfast and check on Ezra before heading to his meeting with Judge Travis. And then he'll head back to Eagle Bend and meet with the hospital administrator to find out what he needs to do to get hospital privileges."

"How are our brothers?" Josiah asked.

"Nathan said they both are tired-looking. The nurses were in a tizzy. Seems, Ezra pulled out his IV," he explained. "Vin wouldn't let them wake him to put it back unless his doctor said it was absolutely necessary. The nephrologist was in, and he told Nathan that Ezra's bleeding had tapered off. He's getting discharged this morning, provided he stays on antibiotics. He'll be reevaluated after two weeks of bed rest."

"What are you going to do about him?" Buck asked as he sat back down. If his eyes were a little watery, no one mentioned it.

"According to Vin, he's a gambler. The reason he was beat up was because he won more than some bastard thought he should have."

"Must be pretty good to drive around in a car like that," Josiah observed.

"Nothing illegal about gambling," Buck added.

"Nope," Chris replied.

"And?" asked Buck.

"Nathan thinks I should leave him alone."

"And?" Sometimes, talking to Chris was worse than pulling teeth.

"Buck, you take JD out and find that dog. The fool dog has been mourning Dad long enough. It is time he comes home. Josiah, get to work on the pantry and make a list of what's in there. Check the freezer too. I'm going to go fetch our brothers. Nathan will be gone all day, meeting with Judge Travis, then Emmett, and then the guy at the hospital. By the time he gets home, Ezra will be settled in."

JD let a little smile creep across his lips. Having these men as brothers might be fun.



Not even bothering to circle the hospital parking lot, he parked at the pharmacy across the street from the hospital's main entrance. The hospital had grown wide and not up. Now the building sprawled all over its tract of land, leaving little room for parking. There had been talk about buying one of the neighboring buildings and tearing it down to build a parking garage, but so far, the price the hospital board was offering the doctors and dentists for their buildings had not enticed anyone to sell. Consequently, if you did not arrive significantly before the start of visiting hours, you'd best forget finding a space near the hospital and plan on walking.

Chris stepped out of the sedan and stretched, oddly reluctant to go in there and to his brother. He had never felt hesitant to do a job that needed to be done. He had always been confident of his abilities, but now he was bereft of that confidence and felt awkward going in to speak as a brother to a man he did not even know. Girding himself, as though preparing for battle, he walked into the building.

He nodded politely and tipped his hat (Buck would be proud of the effort) at the nurses clustered around their station. He did not recognize any of the women congregated behind a wall of monitors tracking patients' blood pressure and heart rates. At least one nurse recognized him. As he passed the nurses' station, she pushed away from her computer and hurriedly came around the counter, intent on stopping him.

"Mr. Larabee."

He knew he should have been friendlier, but he had decided to talk with Ezra, and she was impeding his progress. "Yes," he managed not to snarl at her.

"Mr. Tanner is in the nurses' lounge and wanted to talk with you first thing."

He concentrated on softening his face into something a little more agreeable. Buck had often told him that when he scowled, he frightened people. "Where?"

"First door on the right," She said, watching him walk away. He wore a blasted coat so she couldn't see much other than the ends of the coat flapping behind him, but she could appreciate the fluid grace with which he walked. She giggled as she sat back down. She and her co-workers exchanged guilty looks and burst out laughing. They were professionals and should not be getting this much pleasure from watching a man walk.



Vin glanced up from his assortment of vending foods and the orange juice a cute nurse had given him.

"Finally made it. About to send out a search team."

"That's what you're having for breakfast?"

"Nah, breakfast was hours ago. This is a mid-morning snack. Hobbits have the right idea about breakfast," he offered Chris an open bag of chips, which he declined.

"You wanted to talk?"

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't push him."

Chris dropped the bag of clothes he brought for Ezra into a chair, thinking he should have brought something for Vin, too. Oh well, Vin could shower and change when they got to the ranch. He glanced at Vin's snack and almost gagged at the odd assortment of food Vin snacked on. He didn't gag, he didn't even comment on the mixture of sweets, sour, and salts. Instead, he removed his coat and draped it on another chair, propping his hat on top of the duster beside him. Comfortable, he reached past the chips and grabbed the pickle. They had those in vending machines? "You got something to tell me?" It was a statement, not a question.

Tanner finished swallowing his chips and took a swig of orange juice. Scooting his chair away from the table, he leaned back and propped his legs up on the table. "Had me an apartment once, me and two of my buddies. Ground floor, near the garbage bins.

"There was this orange tabby who had kittens hidden away somewhere nearby. I left food out for her to keep her out of the bins. I kinda worried she'd get trapped in it, and the truck would come and pick her up with the garbage. I hoped to catch her and her babies, go get 'em spayed or neutered, find 'em a home. Never could get near her, she was that wild. This here is from the one time I did manage to catch her," he pointed to a pair of diagonal lines running up the inside of his right forearm. "I thought I was going to need stitches."

He finished the juice and tossed the empty carton into the waste can. "One night, I heard a noise, and there she was with five of the scrawniest little kittens ya ever saw eating the food I'd left out on the patio. They started coming with her after that, and when my roommates were out, I'd turn off the lights and wait for her and her kittens to stop by.

"After a couple of weeks, she came one night with only two of her kittens. A few days later, it was just those two boys stopping by. One night, it was raining somethin' fierce, and I cracked the patio door open and waited. When they came in, I made a mistake. I frightened them. I forgot they'd never been held, never been around people. I just saw those two wet kittens and I made to grab them. One took off out the door: I kept putting food out, but he never came back. The other ran down the hall into my bedroom.

"It took me weeks to get it to come out from under the bed when I was in the room, and even longer before he'd let me pick him up to pet. Ended up a really good cat, a good mouser. He used to bring me presents. He liked riding in cars. Gave him to a girlfriend when I moved. Saw her about a year later, he came right up to me and jumped into my lap." Vin looked up at Chris, his eyes deadly serious, "Ya scare him, trying to get him to do things yer way, and he'll run out the door. Don't lunge for him."

"Thanks for the pickle," Chris grabbed his things and the paper bag and walked out of the room and on down the hall.

Vin returned to his assortment of snacks.



Josiah finished cleaning up the kitchen. He grabbed a Coke from the fridge, his hand only hovering for a moment over a beer can. He did not need a beer, he sternly told himself as he closed the refrigerator door. Popping the top off the Coke, he grabbed his coat from where he had thrown it earlier and walked out to the back porch.

Funny, how alcohol affected him. It wasn't that he drank every night, or when he did, that he always drank to excess. It was just that when he drank too much, he was mean and violent; he didn't think of himself as a mean or violent man, and he had to ask himself, did the alcohol change him, or did it strip the veneer away and expose the real Josiah? Thankfully, he never hurt anyone, not seriously, anyway, but he scared people. He scared Nancy so much that she moved out; she had her children come with her to move her things out, and it hurt. As though he would ever hurt her.

She blamed herself, telling him she was sorry, she loved him, and she wanted what was best for him, but she couldn't give him what he needed to stay sober. Her children had glared at him as she gave her tearful speech, thankful, no doubt, that their mother and he never wed.

They lived together for six months and had known each other for three years before moving in together. Out of all that time, he had gotten drunk only a handful of times ... listen to you, he told himself sternly. When you scare someone, when you drink and cannot remember what you said or did in the morning, when the woman you love leaves you, then you have to face the facts. You drink too much.

Nancy left, and he took a leave of absence from the clinic. He couldn't decide if his partners were happy, he was taking some time off, or if they were disgruntled; they had to pick up the slack. Either way, he couldn't blame them; he was leaving them shorthanded. The clinic needed every councilor carrying a full load if they planned to make any headway in healing the ills of the masses. Still, Nancy worked there too, and even though she hadn't told anyone why she had moved out, the tension between the two of them must have been hard for everyone else to deal with.

Leaving the clinic was the best thing he could do under the circumstances. He pretended that when he left, he would be returning soon, but he doubted if he could or should go back. Perhaps it would be better to sell his part of the clinic and start over elsewhere, but did he want to start over?

He was a little old to be completely starting over. This Will of his father's came as a godsend. He would have a year to decide what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. At the end of the year, his options would be wide open. He could stay and work the ranch with his brothers, he could open a small practice somewhere, or he could take his million dollars and retire.

The question was: what did he want to do? He'd figure it out. First, though, he had to figure out what these brothers of his meant to him and his future. Whether this grand experiment worked and forged them into a family depended on Chris, he thought. It was obvious both Nathan and Buck would follow wherever he led. He wondered if Chris also had a drinking problem. Nothing in his behavior last night indicated alcohol might be a problem. Nothing in his behavior, but a man would have to be blind to miss the looks between Nathan and Buck when Chris reached for his second beer, and the relief in both of their faces when he switched to a soda. If Chris did drink too much, would he be able to hold them all together, or would he drive them away?

He closed his eyes and prayed. He wasn't sure what to pray for except for the strength to make it through the day. After a moment, he opened his eyes and looked around, and seeing the glorious day the Lord had made, he gave thanks.

"Utterly unbelievable," he said to himself, as he followed a well-worn path to a stream. He had lived in many different places and had seen many wondrous sights, but for the life of him, he couldn't think of any to equal the beauty and wonder of the land he was walking. The stream ran rapidly along, splashing the white smooth stones lining the bed. He walked a little further along the stream, startling birds who angrily rebuked him for his invasion of their paradise. He apologized profusely to them but continued to follow the sparkling stream.

He didn't think he'd gone that far, but when he turned to look in the general direction of the house, he was startled to realize the sparsely wooded land all but hid the house from his view. He decided to leave the birds to their business and head back to the house; he wanted to walk down to the stable and see the horses before he got started checking on their food situation. It had been many years, but once he had ridden and loved it. He hoped it was one of those things that you didn't forget, like bike riding. Though to think about it he wasn't sure if he could ride a bike now if his life depended upon it.

Maybe he had better pray to remember how to ride, for the Lord loved for His children to ask for His help.

The horses had been turned out to pasture, so he gave the stable only a cursory examination, noting the neatness of the tack room, the clean bedding, and the absence of flies. He walked back out into the sun and up to the fence. The horses watched him with more curiosity than wariness, and though they occasionally lifted their heads to return his stare, his slow, deliberate movements reassured them, and they continued grazing. He watched them move about the pasture in long, easy strides, and a long-forgotten voice began pointing out the faults and merits of each of them.

Caught up in the sight of the horses, he was not aware of his new companion until a large head pushed under his hand. The largest dog he had ever seen sat beside him, tail thumping gently on the ground. 'Hey boy,' he spoke softly so as not to break the mood, and the thumping quickened. He rubbed the massive white head, and the dog leaned into his hand,



"I guess you must be Jack." The dog insisted his ears needed special attention by way of answer. Josiah knelt beside the dog and was offered a paw. He didn't know much about the different dog breeds, but once dated a lady who bred and showed Great Danes. He had accompanied her to several shows. He thought Jack must be a Great Pyrenees; he'd have to ask someone.

His fingers ran through the dog's coat and were met with matted hair and caught twigs. "You look like you could do with a good brushing," he said, standing up and gesturing for the dog to follow him to the barn. "Did I ever tell you I was once considered a fairly decent barber?"



Chris didn't bother to knock; he just pushed the door open. If he managed to surprise Ezra, it didn't show in his face. "Thought they wanted you in bed."

"They did, and then they insisted Ah wake up so Ah could tell them how Ah slept last night, and they did all sorts of invasive procedures which Ah endured with stoic strength, and as soon as they finished making me bleed, they told me to get some sleep. No sooner than Ah had shut mah eyes, intent on following their instruction, another one, of those Amazons in scrub suits, came in with the premise, Ah provided her with ... urine. To move the story past a few unpleasant details, Ah must conclude: it is preferable to stand and meet whoever walks through the door on mah feet rathuh than wait on mah back." He motioned Chris to the chair, "Please be seated. Do not feel you need to stand on mah account."

Chris tossed his coat and hat on the bed and placed the paper bag on the table before sitting down. "Word is they're planning to release you shortly."

"Yes, Ah believe Ah have done mah time."

"Got any thoughts about where you're heading?"

"Ah suppose Ah'll return to Las Vegas," he said, thinking he needed to find a game and win some money if he planned to keep Moore off his back.

Chris considered his brother, wondering how to convince him to come and live at the ranch. The man, standing behind the chair in a short hospital gown and an equally short robe, managing to look as though he was posing for the latest in hospital wear, did not look as though he were fit to travel. Faint shadows under his eyes and the tightness with which he grasped the chair betrayed his attempt to look relaxed and normal. He was stubborn: stubbornly looking normal when he had to be in pain, stubbornly refusing to acknowledge Landon Larabee as his father or the rest of them as brothers, stubbornly resisting coming to the ranch. What was he supposed to do?

"Vegas is a long drive," Chris commented as he crossed his arms in front of him and scowled. He looked at his brother and thought, 'Especially for someone with broken ribs and a punctured lung. "You won't make it, no matter what you tell yourself."

"Ah can in mah car," Ezra answered, the skepticism in Chris's voice and the matching look on his face. Ezra let go of the chair, breaking eye contact with Chris. He went to bed and sat down on the edge. "What's this?" he asked, prodding at the brown sack as though he expected something to jump out.

"Clothes."

"Mah clothes?" he glanced at the bag, frowning at the thought of them wadding up another of his suits to make it fit into the bag.

"It is my clothes." Chris opened the bag and pulled out blue running pants and a coordinating jacket. A large white t-shirt completed the outfit. "We couldn't get the locks on your luggage opened, so I brought this."

"Ah'll make sure it gets returned to you," said Ezra. he kept his frustration hidden, wondering why couldn't they have just hung up his suit from yesterday and brought him a clean shirt? Even wrinkled, it was preferable to what Chris Larabee had brought, and he wouldn't be bothered with the need to return it. And they had his luggage? Surely, they left it with the car.

Chris almost left then. Nathan spent the morning on the phone lecturing him about the legal and moral repercussions if he forced Ezra to the ranch, and then Vin had warned him against cornering the man. How the hell was he supposed to reach a man who had already made up his mind not to listen? He wanted to throw up his hands in frustration and leave, but he was hit by a dark premonition. If he let their brother walk away, they would never see him again. They would never hear from him unless it was to read about him in the paper: the article would either be about him winning big in Vegas or his body being found in an alley. For God's Sake, the man carried insurance on his car, but not on himself. How could anyone think that he would take care of himself?

If he let his brother leave the hospital alone, there would be no letters exchanged. There would be no phone calls in the evening. There would be no occasional vacations to the ranch. If he were allowed to leave, he would be gone forever.

Vin was right, though; if he lunged at Ezra, he would be out the door. To catch a feral cat, he needed a trap in which to hold him until he could be tamed. He turned Vin's words over in his head, wondering how he could use them. They were Vin's words, but it was Sarah's voice he heard, 'Be yourself, be the man I married. Be the man who smiles, who laughs, and who cares about people.'

"Ezra, come out to the ranch. At least until you are on your feet."

"No. Thank you for asking, but Ah have obligations elsewhere."

"You don't have a job. Are you married? Do you have children? If you do, we can make room for them."

"No."

"Are you an addict?"

"Ah am not foolish enough to take drugs," he replied, puzzled. He couldn't believe Chris Larabee asked that. What about him made Chris ask that?

"Not drugs. Are you addicted to gambling?"

"Ah am a gambler. It is how Ah make mah living," he answered. It was the truth. He was not addicted to gambling; he made a living by gambling and, though he tried not to do so with any sort of frequency, by helping his mother out with her occasional cons. He glared at Chris, "Ah am not addicted to it."

"How do you know you are not addicted? Have you ever tried to leave?"

"Why would Ah leave such a lucrative business?"

"Oh, I don't know ... to get away from people using you as a punching bag for starters."

"A misunderstanding, nothing more."

"Bull."

"Pardon me?"

"You heard me. You are going to end up dead if you keep dealing with people who can do this."

"We all end up dead," he tried to glare back at the man, but he was tired. He needed to get out. He pulled the clothes to him and shook out the pants. Why wouldn't the man leave? He needed him gone, so he could figure out how to get the pants on without passing out from the effort.

"Sit down, Ezra, and listen to me. Hear me out," he took the pants out of Ezra's hands, tossed them on the bed, and sank into the chair, waiting for the right words to come to mind. He couldn't find them. Why couldn't he have Buck's gift for making people feel at ease? Finally, he just started talking, "I told Josiah, last night, it would be easier if Dad had given us the money and had not included this one-year family reunion into the mix."

"Yes, we would be gone, and you would have the ranch and..." he was horrified at the bitterness he heard in his voice.

"Is that what you think?" Chris spat out. "That I want you gone so I can have the ranch?"

"It is your home."

"No, it ... was ... my home," Chris bolted out of the chair and paced around the room, burning off steam so he could sit and talk rationally. He was angry, but not angry enough to miss Ezra's almost imperceptible recoil, made when he jumped out of the chair. "One day ... maybe... I will know you well enough to show you my home."

He sat back down and glared at the stranger across from him. "I am here because Dad ... LOOK AT ME EZRA ... Dad ... OUR father asked us to do this. I am staying the year because of him; I owe Dad that. One year and then I am gone."

"That is what you are doing. Fine. You owe him, fine. Ah do not owe him anything," Ezra spoke between clenched teeth, his voice husky with anger.

"No. I guess, you don't owe him," Chris reluctantly admitted. He knew his father. Knew him to be a loving and caring father, but the man sitting on the edge of the bed, all hunched over and holding his side in obvious pain, did not know that man. "I know he wanted you home, searched for you."

"Shut the hell up!" his voice was low and dangerous. He slid off the bed, ignoring the bolt of pain the action caused, and walked over to the window. "The truth is, if he wanted me, he could have found me."

"He tried," Chris followed his brother to the window.

"Ah wrote him. All Ah wanted was for him to write me back, and he couldn't be bothuhed."

"I'm sorry," Chris said, not knowing what to do or say to ease the hurt and rage in Ezra's voice.

"Why?"

"You needed him. I am sorry he wasn't there."

"Don't be. Ah'm a much stronger man than Ah would have been if Ah had him to lean on."

"Then why are you so afraid?"

"Of what?" he was not afraid. He learned to handle his fears long ago. He turned to face one of his biggest fears. His face, hard and remote. He was determined to show nothing, though inside, behind his barriers, he was throwing and breaking everything in sight.

"Of me, of Josiah and JD and Buck and Nathan and Vin. You are shaking in your boots at the thought of us."

"You are mistaken. Ah merely am not interested in you."

"If you were not interested, you would not have come yesterday."

"Idle curiosity, nothing moruh."

"You are lying. I see it in your eyes. You wanted to meet us, and now that you have, you are going to run off with your tail tucked between your legs," he reached over and wiped at the lone tear that had escaped his brother's control and was rushing down his cheek. "You are running off, and when you can't run any further, you will remember this meeting and you will hate us for not keeping you, just like you hate Dad for not keeping you."

"Why is what Ah think, so important to you? Why do you care if Ah'm there working at the ranch with you or in a casino winning a fortune?"

Chris locked eyes with green ones like his own. He whispered, "You owe me."

"Ah do not see how you can make that claim," Ezra wanted to step back out of Chris Larabee's personal space, but he had nowhere to go. He could hear his heart thumping loudly in his chest and wondered whether Chris could hear it, too.

"I remember you. Do you know that?" asked Chris, thinking of what Vin had said in the nurses' breakroom: Offer a feral cat a tidbit and maybe he'll follow you through the patio door.

"No," Ezra whispered.

"I do. Do you want to hear about it?" asked Chris. He came close to whispering, 'Please take the bait,' but he waited silently for Ezra's response.

"Yes," the word snuck out of his mouth as a whisper. He didn't want to hear anything; there were too many years of silence, but for the life of him, he could not keep from speaking that word.

"Come, sit down on the bed. I'll sit over here and tell you why you owe me," he hardly blinked, fearing that if he lost eye contact, he would lose the 'feral cat.' He waited for his brother to settle on the edge of the bed. He knew all that movement had to have set Ezra's ribs on fire, and sitting on the bed hurt his bruised rear, but his brother's face did not register any of that pain; he doubted if it even existed at that moment for Ezra. His older, deeper pain overshadowed all else.

Reaching behind him, he dragged the table to him and sat on it, so he was at about the same height as Ezra, and their knees were only a fraction of an inch apart. He didn't want to crowd his brother, but was sure that if he didn't keep some measure of contact, he would lose the hold his promise of an explanation had created.

"I have memories of Dad, of him rocking Nathan and crying. Mama, Nathan's mom, had died, and the house seemed emptier and quieter than it ever had. He'd rock Nathan to sleep and put him in his bed. He would sleep on one side of Nathan, and I would sleep on the other, and when Buck stayed over, he'd put Buck in bed, too. I would wake up in the middle of the night, and he'd be at the window, standing and staring out into the darkness.

"Sometimes, he would hold me so tight it would hurt, but I knew it was because he was sad. One day, Judge Travis and Miss Evie came and took Nathan and me to spend a few days at their home in Ely. They said Dad was going to get away for the weekend.

"Ten days later, Dad came back and holding his hand was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. At first, she didn't move in with us. She would spend the weekend and then drive back to Vegas.

"I liked having her around. She would read to us, or if she was in the kitchen, she would tell the most fantastic stories. Every Saturday morning, she sat on the floor to watch cartoons with us. Her favorite was Transformers, and she would pretend the Matchbox car she held could transform, and we pretended our cars could do the same. She sang when she cooked... Old Mac Donald and Bingo..." Those were Adam's favorites. Chris remembered singing them, but did not share his memory. "She'd sneak up on me and hug me for no reason. She did the same to Buck and Nathan. Our house had been dark, and she brought in the sunshine. She was wonderful. I never knew my Momma, and I don't have any bad words to say about Nathan's mom, but she didn't play hide-and-seek or tag. I know she loved Nathan and me, and when Buck came to the ranch, I could tell she loved him too. Your mother was quiet and loud at the same time. One moment she would be sitting on the porch reading, and the next minute she would be the princess in a castle. Buck and I would rescue her from the dragon.

"I remember when I told her she was getting fat. She didn't get angry, she just laughed. The weekend I told her she was getting fat was the weekend she moved in. I live on a ranch; I figured out early on that she was pregnant. I remember thinking how great it would be to have a little brother or sister. Someone I could be responsible for. A brother I could teach to ride and show how to catch fish, and the other things a big brother needs to teach his little brother. I know, I had Buck and Nathan, but by the time I realized I needed to be responsible for them, they were too grown up and too independent. I know it sounds weird, but even though they were my little brothers, I didn't feel responsible for them. Miss Rosie was responsible for Buck and Dad for Nate.

"One day, Dad told me I didn't have to go to school. He had me and Nathan put on our church clothes. He said he was going to take us to meet our new brother. You were so little...premature. We would come every night to look at you through a glass window. I remember picking Nathan up to see you and, when Buck came along, a nurse brought out a stool for him to stand on. Finally, you were brought home, and I watched from the doorway as your mom put you in the crib. The crib was made of oak, and the sheets and the bed skirt had little bears wearing blue jackets on them.

"The next morning, she had us, me, Buck, and Nate sit on the sofa so she could show us how to hold you. We each had a turn, and then Dad came in and sat in the rocker with you. He told Maude to take a nap while he took care of Ezra. He said he had three big boys who could help.

"I remember she would lay a blanket on the floor and lie you on your stomach. I would lie down and talk to you as you pulled your head up and looked around. Maude said I was a big help by encouraging you to build strong neck muscles.

"That spring, Maude brought you to my games. She would be up in the stands with you, sitting in her lap. I would watch her lift your hands so you could cheer with

the crowd whenever someone hit the ball. You would laugh. You were a happy baby; everyone said so.

“One night, we battled some kids who were from out of town. I know that because they arrived on a bus. We won. There was a lot of whooping and hollering, but when we stopped cheering for ourselves, we lined up to shake the other team’s hands and congratulate them on a game well played. I remember the line taking forever. Afterward, I ran up the stairs to get my brothers. Buck held onto Nathan’s hand and led the way down the steps. Your Mom let me carry you. A woman turned to Maude and told her how irresponsible she was to let me carry a baby down the stadium’s steps. Your Mom all but spat at that woman. She said, ‘I may be irresponsible, but Chris is the most responsible boy I know. He will take care of Ezra; he will take care of all of his brothers.’

“We four went out to the field where my team was standing around with their parents. I introduced you to everyone. I told them that one day the four Larabee brothers would go down in history as the best ball players Four Corners had ever seen.

“Two or three weeks later, Dad took me, Nathan, and Buck out for supper. Your Mom said to go without her and without you because you were cranky and needed a good night’s sleep. It was OK because we were planning your birthday party. I had to keep sending Nathan outside because he didn’t understand it was a surprise and kept telling you about the clown. Looking back, I know you were too young to understand, but at the time, I was furious with Nathan because he wouldn’t shut up about the clown.

“We went to Eagle Bend, to the mall to get your presents, and then to the grocery store to order your cake. It was a dinosaur one. At the mall, Dad kept looking at clothes, but I made sure we got you a ball so you could learn to throw. We were gone for a while, and it was dark when we pulled in.

Chris had been talking fast, spewing out his memories as fast as he could. Now, he slowed down, reluctant to share the next part. “Your Mom’s little red car, which she hardly ever drove, was not in the driveway. The porch lights were not on, and she always left them on if we were going to be out after dark.

“I could see Dad’s face as he unbuckled Nathan from his car seat; he was scared, and that scared me even more. He handed Nathan to me and told me to stay there. I gave Nathan to Buck and followed Dad in. The house was dark and quiet. He hurried to his bedroom, calling her name; she never answered. He opened the closet and her clothes, the jeans she wore around the house, her dresses for church, and the truly beautiful dresses she never wore because there was no place for them in Four Corners; they were all gone.

Dad ran through the house to the library and turned on the lights. At first, I couldn’t see, but I heard Dad ask, “Why?” I looked where he was looking, the door to the safe was open, and the safe was empty.

“I left him, turned on the lights in the kitchen, and called Buck and Nathan in. I told them to get a drink of water, get their PJs on, and go to bed. They didn’t argue;

they understood something bad had happened. I stayed in the doorway of the library, afraid to leave. The sheriffs came. Dad told them he had money in the safe, but money could be replaced; his son couldn't be."

Chris's memories of Maude were so different from his own. If he had thought his body would allow him, and if Chris's eyes had released him, he would have jumped up to deny the truth of Chris's words. He wanted to deny the existence of Chris's Maude. Chris's Maude was the mother all kids wanted to claim as their own, but she was not the woman he called Mother.

He was glad he had waited to speak because the ending to the tale explained it all. Maude had played an elaborate con that had been years in the making. There had to have been a great deal of money involved. There was no way his mother would have allowed herself to get pregnant and ruin her figure unless there was a significant amount of money to be had. The only surprise he found in her actions was that she had taken him with her. It was so unlike her to willingly burden herself with a child when she could have easily left him in his crib.

Beyond his mother's treachery, he was stunned by how much Chris remembered from that time, thirty years ago. "Ah don't understand how you managed to remembuh all of that."

"My brother was taken from me," Chris responded as though that explained it all. When it became obvious Ezra needed more explanation, Chris continued, "That night, I didn't sleep. I wrote down everything I could think of about you and your mother. Every time a report on your whereabouts didn't pan out, I would pull out my notebook, record new information, and renew my pledge to find you."

"Dad, he looked for you, he did. That's how Tanner came into our lives. Vin's mom was the private detective Dad hired to look for you. She found the car right away. She told Dad that even though the car had been discovered abandoned in Virginia, Maude and Ezra Standish had disappeared. That went on for a few years. Cady would find a mention in a magazine or a newspaper, and off she would go with several pictures of your mother. With her hair up, with her hair down, all dressed up, in jeans, working in the garden, riding a horse. She found several women named Maude Standish, but they were too young or too old. No one recognized the woman in the pictures."

"Then Miss Rosie was killed during a break-in at her bar, and Dad had to fight to get custody of Buck. Things were a mess for several months. Then Cady got killed going after a bail jumper. Vin got put in a nice foster home."

"Dad went out to talk to Vin's foster parents. He came back and said Vin was better off where he was. He said it with such conviction...I always believed Dad when he talked like that. Dad was different for a while, dark and broody. It was like he had the life sucked out of him for a while. I tried to understand it, and all I can say is that he didn't have the spark he once had. I thought he had given up on finding you and getting Vin back to us. I even thought he had given up on dating. He did hire Jenna Dunne to help with the house, but he never went out. I now understand why. I don't know what he was thinking; she was way too young for him."

"He gave up on you and Vin. I told myself that since Dad felt Vin was better off where he was, I would wait until he was older to get reacquainted with him. But I promised myself I would not give up on finding you."

Chris wanted to sigh. He wanted to look anywhere other than at his brother as he admitted his failure, but he was still afraid that if he looked away, the breaking of eye contact would release Ezra; it would permit Ezra not to listen. Instead of looking away, he paused, making sure the eyes, green like his own, were focused on him.

"I let you down. When I realized Dad was not looking for you, I should have stepped up and done something. The only excuse I have is that I let my life get in the way of looking for you. I went off to college and got involved with people and things. I didn't forget you, I just kept telling myself I would find you after... whatever I was doing at the time. I am sorry."

"Ah don't see how this means Ah owe you," Ezra insisted. He understood about life getting in the way. He understood his mother's action had been reprehensible. He did not understand how all this translated into his owing Chris. He hated owing anyone anything and would do whatever he needed to do to wipe his slate clean.

"You owe me the chance to get to know you. You owe me the chance to see what kind of man you grew up to be."

"Ah believe that you will be disappointed by what you find."

"I believe a man that I could be disappointed in would not worry about me being disappointed." Cris easily countered.

Ezra hunted for the lie in Chris's face and eyes; he looked for 'the tells' that would expose the deceit. In the back of his head, his mother's voice, warning him of a scam, reminding him not to forget he had to stand up on his own two feet, that he could not trust the good intentions of others. Maude had run a con on Landon Larabee. This was their chance to retaliate. There was a con, it had to be: life had taught him that much, but he couldn't find it.

"Ah will make you mad," he tried again.

"Hell, everyone makes me mad. Brothers get mad at each other; they get over it."

"Ah'm not a morning person."

"I make people nervous."

"I like to play poker."

"So do I."

"You won't win if you play with me."

"You're cocky."

"Ah'm honest."

"We'll see."

"Don't cry when I win your million off of you."

"Didn't want it anyway."

Ezra leaned back on shaky arms, "If you tell anyone in this institution this, Ah will have to deny it and plot some suitable revenge, but Ah really don't believe Ah am up to driving to Vegas today," he had a debt. He had to erase it.

"I don't think Buck's ready to let the Porsche out of his sight. If you leave now, you would have to take him with you."

"Ah suppose Ah must stay and let him get ovuh his infatuation."

"Let's get you dressed, so we can get out of here," Chris could feel the tension and fear he had been holding in, drain away. He almost felt lightheaded.

"Ah have been dressing mahself for years. Why don't you wait out in the hall?"

"You ever dressed yourself with broken ribs?"

"As recently as yesterday."

"You are a stubborn cuss."

"Yes, so Ah'm told."

Chris stepped out the door and glanced at his brother, leaning against the wall. Seeing him there, propping up the wall, he knew Tanner was the reason that no one had interrupted his talk with Ezra. "He's getting dressed."

"Might take a while."

"Yep, that it might. Reckon, it's good we don't have anything pressing to do."



Slowly, Ezra eased onto the bed, frowning. How was he supposed to wear \$1600 Italian black dress shoes with a blue running suit? He would simply die of embarrassment. Would it be dreadfully insulting if he wore his wrinkled suit instead of Chris Larrabee's offering? He looked at the assortment of clothes and decided the better question was not what to wear, but how to get dressed.