



Warnings: I normally do not attach warnings to my stories. On the home page, I warn people that my stories could be considered dark. If you have read this far into the saga, you have probably noticed that bad things happen in my saga.

However, I decided to add this warning because of the events at Brown University. In this chapter, the potential for a school shooting is discussed. There is nothing graphic, and no one is injured. It was also written before the shooting, but what happened at Brown breaks my heart, and I have hesitated publishing Perceptions. If you are “triggered” by reading about such things, you may want to skip the chapter, but I do think it is important to the story.

As always, thanks for reading. I am very interested in what you think

Perceptions

Rooting Out Evil

Part 3 of the Seven Brothers Saga

I hate it when Angie gets emotional and starts demanding I answer her questions. Who does she think she is fooling? She pretends as though she is innocent, and I went around her back to enact my revenge on Landon, but she knew, or at least suspected, how angry and hurt I was when Landon chose to have a life that didn't include me.

And Byron! What right does she have to throw him in my face? She was the one who contacted me, saying that Byron thought she and I were having an affair and planned to leave her. He threatened to tell her boss, and then her parents, the reason

he was divorcing her was that, not one year into their marriage, she had proved to be unfaithful and that her partner was a woman. I tried to reason with her. I explained that Byron had no proof; he was trying to rattle her. But once he told her that he'd tell her boss and her family, she believed she wouldn't have a job and that her parents would disown her. She all but got on her hands and knees to beg me to save her from the indignity of people hearing Byron's accusations of her affair.

When she told me about the things Byron said, I stayed very reasonable and calm as we talked, but at some point that afternoon, I let Rage take over. I didn't let her see the Rage. I was no longer a child and had been well tutored by my parents on how to hide it from the world. They would tell me that all it would take was one more out-of-control outburst, and I would be locked away forever. Even as I heard their words, I let my Rage make my decisions for me and guide me in the steps I needed to take so that I could deal with Byron.

I made a plan to solve her problems, but I didn't tell her about what I had decided to do. She might have tried to prevent me from touching his shiny sports car, but I couldn't let her interfere. I would never admit to her that I tampered with his brakes, but in her heart of hearts, she would know what I had done for her and would be grateful. No doubt, she would feign devastation, and her parents would insist she move back home, to allow her sufficient time to grieve before finding a job and a new place to live. Besides, I was sure Byron had taken out a hefty life insurance policy on himself. It was a pity he hadn't died.

I am not sorry, Byron ended up in a body that no longer works. I need Angie in my life. I don't need her to hold my hand like I did when I first knocked on her door. I can go weeks, months, and years without seeing her. I don't need to have her at my side, listening to me cry about Landon's abandonment of me. I only need to know that she is available to listen to me.

She knew when I destroyed Byron, just as she does now, how much I depend on her to help me stay grounded. She knew me well enough to know when she shared her Byron story that I would take matters into my own hands. She never asked, but she had to have known what the outcome would be when she confided in me.

If Byron had the decency to die in the wreck, she would have forgotten about him years ago and moved on with her life. But knowing he is lying in a nursing home bed, unable to do the smallest of tasks for himself, haunts Angie. She wears her role in his disability like a weight around her neck, drowning her with guilt. Giving half her paycheck to the nursing home for his round-the-clock care is the scourge she uses to punish herself. I have tried to remind her on many occasions that Byron has a family, and they should help with his expenses. She doesn't see it that way. She thinks that by paying for his care, she is atoning for her part in his not-so-accidental accident. One day, I hope I can get her to realize that there is no such thing as atoning for sins.

I probably shouldn't have hung up on her the way I did. Angie has been the only one who understood my actions. It wasn't fair of me to knock on her door all those years ago, but I needed someone who would listen to me without judgment, someone who understood how devastated I was when I realized that I had no place in Landon's life. She commiserated with me when I told her how hard it was to watch Landon mourn over the burnt husk of a woman in the hospital bed, not even sensing my presence in the doorway. He was so busy playing a loving, devoted husband that he

failed to notice me. I almost said something that day, but I knew he would ask why I had run away. I didn't know how to answer him.

Through the years, I have tried to make Angie understand that she should divorce Byron and move on, but not only does she carry guilt for him being in the state he is in, but she also mourns the life she thinks they would have had together. She never understands that if Byron went through with his threat of divorcing her, then he would also expose me by sharing my existence with the world. I couldn't risk him telling people about me, at least not until I figured out what to do about Landon.

I would like to blame Landon for my Rage, but it has been with me for so long that I am not sure who or what gave birth to it. It doesn't really matter. I made him the focus of my Rage. I told myself that as long as he grieved for someone as much as I did for him, I could keep my rage contained. Knowing his loneliness matched mine was all I wanted. I once thought that if he died before me, I would be free of the Rage, but I am not free. I just don't know on whom to focus it.

No! I will not get stuck reexamining the past. I need to decide what to do to make Orrin talk to me. I promised him I would destroy him by removing a loved one from his life. Who do I choose to make my point? Not Evie. I once counted her as one of my best friends; I can't do anything to her, but even if I could kill her, I am sure he has put her somewhere safe. If I put my mind to it, I could find her. I won't look, though.

That leaves his daughter-in-law and grandson. I don't know enough about Mary Travis to know if he would be sufficiently devastated by her death to warrant the effort I would have to take to make that death happen. Mary Travis might not be the best choice to impress Orrin with how serious I am. Using his grandson to make my point is a possibility I need to consider, but I hate the thought of killing a child. On the other hand, I am already going to Hell. One of the first rules I put on my list when I let Rage take control of my life was that children were off limits. I need to find another to target.

The problem with targeting Orrin's family is that Orrin is an only child, and he and Evie produced only one child. I don't have many people to choose from. I need to look at others close to him. Landon's sons come to mind, but I am not sure that I can use them to make a point. I don't want to touch the three sons Landon raised, and I doubt whether Orrin has had sufficient time to bond with Landon's other sons. So, who does that leave? What about his secretary? She is not in town at the moment... But I know how to find her.

The alarm on my phone reminds me it is time to get ready for bed. I have a routine I use. I first remove my wig and place it on its stand. After going through the ritual that I assume most women go through of washing and moisturizing my face, brushing through my closely cropped hair, and brushing my teeth. Doing those things lets me pretend I am normal, but I don't forgo the part of my ritual that reminds me of my differences.

First, I examine my teeth. I broke several of them in my wreck, but the crowns have served me well. One of my coworkers had to take a day off because she broke a crown and needed to have it replaced. I don't worry about breaking one of my crowns, but I have added checking my teeth for damage to my nightly routine. I step on the scale to check my weight. I am not worried about gaining or losing weight; weighing myself seems like something all women would regularly do, so I do it every night and every morning. Then I check for lines and wrinkles. I don't particularly care if my age

shows, but when wrinkles start appearing, I will need to adjust my 'faces', my disguises, to compensate. Finally, I examine the dent in my forehead.

It is not an exceptionally big dent, but it exists.

When I woke up in a hospital in Reno, the doctors said I had been in a wreck and suffered a TBI, a traumatic brain injury. According to the policeman who stopped by to interview me, I was driving too fast on a road in the middle of nowhere. Endless days in the hospital, enduring endless tests, told the so-called specialists that my brain injury left me with gaps in my memories, and the damage done to my frontal lobe had left me with what they called a flat personality. They didn't say anything about the rage I kept carefully buried. I've learned to fake the emotions I am missing, but I have yet to remember how to have them.

I have many holes in my memories. Some of the holes Angie has helped me fill. Others remain a mystery. Of the things I do remember, the most prominent is how Landon betrayed me. Over the years, Angie has tried to make me understand that Landon did not leave me, but I am not sure how much of what she has told me is reality or her perceptions of reality.

I remember Landon, of course.

I remember Landon telling me that he loved me before taking me to his bed. I remember holding a baby in my arms. I remember handing my baby to a woman with white hair and a kind smile, but I don't remember her handing my child back to me. I remember screams; when I wake up from a dream in which I hear the screams, I should be filled with panic, but I have lost the ability to panic.

I remember the day I gathered my courage and called Landon. A woman answered the phone. Her voice was as sweet as honey. She said hello, and I hung up. I called several more times. The one time that Landon answered, I heard her voice in the background. I hung up. I let my Rage command my actions and drove off into the night. I deliberately drove too fast and deliberately drove into the telephone pole.



Watching Standish dismantle the listening devices put Mitch Harris's brain into overdrive. This threat to Judge Travis's family was real; by extension, the threat to his community was real. The woman, Waldo, as they were calling her, had years to perfect her craft of getting in and out of people's homes without being noticed, was skilled at creating not just disguises but entire, believable personas, and, as far as he could tell, was certifiably crazy. No one in their right mind held a murderous vendetta for not just years, but decades. She could be almost any woman living in Four Corners, Eagle Bend, or the surrounding areas, and yet, she remained undetected. The probability of her striking out at the Travis family was high, and while they could hide away Mrs. Travis and her son for a few days, they couldn't do it forever. Billy was of school age. While a day or two of missing school was both understandable and justified, he could not be kept at the ranch indefinitely. At some point, he would return to school. They also had to consider that causing collateral damage didn't mean much to her, as evidenced by her murder of the interior decorator Landon had hired and the woman's twin daughters. She might decide to attack the kid on a bus or at school.

While waiting for the search parties to return, Buck said something about his brother, Ezra, designing the security for the casino at which they stayed. Buck had

correctly read his surprise; if Buck had said the same about Tanner, he would have immediately believed Buck. Tanner fit the bill, but he hadn't pegged Standish in the role of security expert. Buck, seeing the disbelief on his face, assured him that, according to his brother JD, Tommy Botello himself had taken his brothers, Chris, JD, and Ezra, on a tour of the resort, showing them the improvements he had authorized based on Standish's designs. He knew by reputation only that Botello did not suffer fools gladly. He would not have changed the angle on one camera if he hadn't been impressed with the quality of Standish's work. The night Chris and the Beast were shot had shown him a side of Standish he hadn't known to exist. Combined with Botello's praise, he needed to bury his perception of Ezra as somewhat of a dandy.

He had left his position in LA to escape the violence he could do little to stop. The death of his partner and the failure of his marriage had sent him on a downward spiral from which the only means of saving himself from a heart attack or a nervous breakdown was to leave LA. He had convinced himself that he needed a stress-free environment, that the occasional speeding ticket or a drunk and disorderly was all he wanted, but the thought of a murderer in their midst did not rattle him as he once thought it would. Instead, ever since Landon had shown him the dead rabbit, he felt more alive than he had in years.

As much as he hated to admit it, his deputies were woefully unprepared for what was coming. It wasn't that he had failed as a leader; it was just that there was little crime on which they could practice. He had sent them to conferences to learn the latest in investigative techniques, and he made sure they all qualified on the range, but other than the occasional theft and Dr. Jackson's near murder, there was no real crime of note in the area. He would need help and would have to look elsewhere to get what he wanted. Fortunately, a man who knew not only how to find surveillance devices but also how to make them useless was standing four feet away from him.

"Mr. Standish, if it is not too much trouble, can you check the station for me?"

"Now?"

"If it is not too much trouble."

Ezra looked at Chris for permission to abandon his job of helping Mary pack a few things. Receiving Chris's nod that said, Of course, he answered the sheriff, "It's no trouble at all, but Ah believe it highly unlikely that Ah will find anything. After all, it's the sheriff department."

"I don't expect to find anything, but if this woman is as crafty as it seems, we don't want her to have any way of listening to our investigation." He didn't expect Standish to find anything either, but he wanted another opportunity to watch how the man thought. He hadn't just powered up his anti-spyware device and let it do its work. He had entered each room of Mary's home and examined it with real thought before he turned the device on. Thorough, painstakingly thorough was how he would describe Ezra Standish. The question he wanted answered was whether Standish's thoroughness was an act or part of his nature.



The truck and car were loaded with the items Mary felt she needed to take to the ranch, and Chris congratulated himself in silence for keeping his mounting irritation under control. He had seen Buck, carrying out what Mary promised was the last load, eyeing him with concern.

Buck knew his brother very well and was prepared to intercept any explosion Chris decided to have. Frankly, he understood the feeling that Chris was uncharacteristically controlling. It appeared as though Mary Travis was planning to extend her couple of days at the ranch into something more or less permanent. He understood; they both did. But Chris was right, she should not expect them to take her and her son indefinitely. After all, they were still trying to get this business of being brothers sorted out, and after the past few days, they were all more than a little shell-shocked.

The broken windows, combined with Ezra finding listening devices, had spooked Mary, and rightly so. Someone had targeted her, but it was hard to say if Waldo, Stephen's murderer, or some unknown entity had been behind the planting of the devices, the theft of the gun, and the breaking of the windows. Judging by the look on Ezra's face as he put the devices into the evidence bags Mitch offered, they were the same type they had found at the ranch and in their vehicles. It appeared that whoever was after them had decided to go after Mary also. She and Billy being at the ranch was an inconvenience, but there was no help for it. Their problem had leaked out into her life; they were responsible for her and Billy until they found Waldo.

He grabbed up the set of keys Ezra had left on the table and pocketed them. "Chris, you and Vin take the truck. Mary and I will follow in the car."

Chris agreed by smiling. He knew that Buck would be taking the brunt of Mary's questions and would be answering them the best he could. No matter how many questions she asked or the number of theories she proposed, Buck would keep a mile on his face. "Sounds good. Should we pick up pizza?"

"We eat pizza all the time, Chris."

"That we do, but that doesn't answer my question. Should we pick it up?"

"Of course. I am pretty sure Josiah and JD haven't had time to think about supper, not with doing the chores and keeping Billy occupied. Nathan said something about wanting to talk to Nurse Angie today. No telling when he'll get home, and if the sheriff doesn't feed Ezra before running him out to the ranch, then he and Nate both know how to warm up leftover pizza for supper."



Dropping the third device into the evidence bag, the deputy held for him. "This is the last one." The stunned faces around the station made Ezra want to apologize for finding them.

"I guess the question should be: how did they get here. The lobby, I can understand. I don't like the thought of someone having the time to put one of those bugs in an electric outlet in the lobby, but I can stomach it better than thinking about someone having access to our secure areas. Damn!" Mitch Harris was mad, but he was mad at himself.

"Mr. Standish, do you have any idea how long the devices have been here?" Evan asked from his perch on top of a desk.

Ezra studied the device in the evidence bags before answering. "Ah will need to check to be sure, but I believe the two listening devices started selling in the 2018-19 time period. When they came on the market, it was a significant improvement over what was available. The distance at which it could pick up voices was 50% greater than its nearest competitor, and the sound clarity was greatly improved. But the real

improvement was that it runs on the electric current it had been installed next to, thus eliminating the need for batteries. In this case, they were installed in outlets. Ah am not familiar enough with the camera to say much about its capabilities. Having said that, Ah have no idea how long these have been here.”

Mitch had been up all night and wanted nothing more than to go to bed, but he was the sheriff, and he needed to take steps to keep his town safe. “Evan, you're just sitting there. Call Mayor Potter and tell him that he and I need to me tomorrow. Convey the urgency of the situation, but keep the presence of spyware in the station to yourself. I'll tell him when we meet. Then make an all-hands-on-deck call for shift change in the morning.”

Thinking of the numerous meetings ahead of him, Mitch took a second to consider quitting before catching Standish's eye and, with a jerk of his chin, asking the man to follow him to his office. “Have a seat,” he said, clearing a chair for Ezra. He went around his desk and sat quietly as he gathered his thoughts. “Do you think you found all the spyware?” he finally asked.

Ezra didn't take offense at hearing the question. Instead, he gave it serious thought before answering. “I would love to say yes, but given the rate of improvement in being made in technology, I can't say for sure. The best way to find out is to have a team experienced in locating these things come in and physically remove every outlet cover, search every light fixture, run anti-spyware programs on your computers and on your phones, and cross your fingers.”

“I was afraid you would say something like that...” I don't know when the devices were planted in my station... or how, but it happened under my watch. That makes me look incompetent, and it makes my team look incompetent or worse, complicit. Four Corners doesn't see much in the way of crime, but we have assisted other counties in taking down very bad people. There have been times when this station has been used as a place where CIs,” he paused, checking to see if Standish recognized the shorthand for confidential informants. When Ezra nodded his understanding, Mitch continued, “and more than a few undercover agents have come by to brief us on the status of various investigations. Spyware in my station risks losing and corrupting months, if not years, of work to take down criminal enterprises. More importantly, it puts those CIs and undercover agents and their families at risk.” He stopped and looked Ezra straight in the eyes. “You were busy scanning Mrs. Travis's home, so I am not sure you heard, but she asked me to meet with her at the school. Billy's teacher has planning time at 9:15, so she called the principal and asked for a meeting at that time. I've said, more times than I can count, that the people of Four Corners believe they live in a world where nothing bad will happen here. They honestly believe that they are protected because Four Corners is small and isolated, and that the community is composed of neighbors helping neighbors.

“I originally came from LA. I was fortunate in that I never had to deal with a mass casualty event at a school, but I did see violence... When I first took on the job of being sheriff, I went around to the schools, talked with the SRO assigned to each school, the School Resource Officer, and then I met with the staff to talk about safety. I followed up by meeting with the school boards to give them suggestions as to how to improve school safety. Everyone listened politely, thanked me for coming, but they

didn't consider any of the changes I recommended. They believe they are immune. They are not ready for your Waldo. I need your help to make them ready."

"Ah will help, but Ah am not sure what Ah can do."

"Buck said that you handed Mr. Botello a report that impressed him enough to sink a lot of money into making the changes you suggested. I don't personally know the man, but I do know Tommy Botello's reputation. If he made one change to his resort and casino based on what you wrote in your report, he did so because you impressed the hell out of him. Can you write a similar report for me?"

Ezra did not immediately answer. His mind was too busy processing the fact that Buck had bragged to the sheriff about him. How had he known about the report? He felt sure that Chris had not shared that embarrassing time from his past...JD had been on Botello's tour. He must have said something to Buck. He wanted to keep that report part of his past, but Botello had talked and talked, and JD had been paying attention. He couldn't be mad at JD; it wasn't as though his report was a state secret, but...he needed to remember that JD saw and heard things even when he was apparently busy taking in the sights and sounds of the casino... Was Buck really impressed? What had JD said to make Buck feel the need to brag on him?

"Ah have never even ridden by any of the schools." Ezra protested when he found his voice.

"I'll take you there in, say, thirty minutes. That is, if you are not too busy."

"Ah am free, but it will take me a while to write a report."

"I am meeting with the mayor in the morning. Can you have something ready by then?"

"Before Ah answer, Ah will need to see the school."

"That's fair. Sodas are available in the break room. Go get one while I call the principal and the SRO. They should walk around the school with us."

Ezra didn't bother pointing out that school was over for the day, and they might have plans for the evening. He needed to borrow a charger for his phone; he would be taking pictures.



"I thought you would have been the one doing the sweep in Mrs. Travis's home."

"It's like this, Chris. Ezra thought to bring the toy. It'd be ungentlemanly for me to take it away from him before he's had a chance to play."

"And?"

"And Ezra can talk the talk. I wanted to see if he could walk the walk. From what I saw, he knows what he was doin'. Besides, I wanted to take a look around outside."

"And?"

"The perp got lucky with yer Uncle Curtis being missin' like he was. When we drove into town, it felt empty. Folks had time to get home, but they must have headed straight to bed. The man who did this could have danced nekkid in the middle of the street and not been seen; Four Corners must have been pert near empty last night with so many folks out lookin' for Curtis."

"When Harris let us into the place, the first thing I noticed was the lack of rocks on the floor, mixed in with the broken glasses. When we drove up and saw the broken windows, I thought someone had thrown rocks or used a slingshot on them. When the sheriff let us in, I didn't get much of a chance to look in all the rooms before Mrs. Travis

and her broom started cleaning up the place, but I did get a look at the bedrooms. Only broken glass was on the floor.”

“So the question is, how did the windows get broken?”

“Exactly. That’s why I went back out to look around.”

“And?” Chris sincerely hoped that Vin planned to share his information in a timely manner. He was tired and getting cranky; he didn’t want to snap at his brother.

“Sounds on the street don’t exactly echo, but they do carry. I think someone would have heard the sound of breaking glass, even with so many folks gone. I know the sound of a pellet gun or a rifle being fired would have been heard. People around here are gun-savvy, and the firing of one to break the windows would have been heard, if not by someone in the sheriff’s office, by a concerned citizen who would have reported it and maybe even investigated it themselves. Mitch called his office to check if anyone had reported gunfire and was told it had been a quiet night.”

“Sounds like you’ve ruled out a firearm being used.” Chris pulled to a stop at the sign, taking the opportunity to think like a criminal. “Let me run a few things by you. If I wanted to break the windows, my first thought would be to use rocks. The problem I see with that is that the second-floor windows were broken. I played baseball in high school. I was damned good, but even at my best, I doubt I could have hit every window in the dark.”

“You’re right. Even if you could hit the windows, you’d have to deal with all those lights they’ve got all up and down the street. Those lampposts are real purty, and they do a great job of lighting the sidewalks and the roads. You’d run the risk of bein’ seen.”

Chris saw the conclusion Vin was leading him to make. “So he broke in, opened the windows, leaned out, and hit them with a hammer or something to make it appear that he had shot out the windows. All the glass would land on the inside of her home.

“If he wrapped his hammer in a towel, it’d be like him havin’ a silencer on his hammer; there would be little to no noise.”

Chris turned on his blinkers and pulled into a space reserved for carryout. “Run in and get the pizza. I need to think on this for a few minutes. When Vin hopped out, he began reviewing the afternoon. When they first pulled up beside Ezra, Mitch called the station and instructed a patrol car to go up and down the streets of the town, looking for additional damage. Chris could tell that when Mitch received the news that Mrs. Travis’s home was the only one touched, his stance changed; he had briefly touched his gun in its holster before pushing ahead of the rest of them to ensure there was no one waiting for her return. Seeing the broken glass, Mary clutched Chris’s arm and dragged him into each room. He missed a lot of what was happening because of that, but he had not missed Mitch Harris’s anger when he called the CSI unit in Ely and was informed they were stretched thin with three different murder scenes. The earliest they could get there would be sometime Tuesday afternoon.

Unfortunately, Mitch had his phone on speaker; Mary heard the news, but instead of complaining, she began cleaning up the glass. When Chris attempted to reason with her, she had turned on him, hissing that it was just like when Stephen was killed. No one had conducted a serious investigation then, just as they were not doing now. It had taken a great deal of convincing, but finally she agreed to leave the shattered glass on the floor of her bedroom for the CSI team to do their ‘magic’. She

had used the word magic, but it sounded more like a curse word coming out of her mouth.

Chris spent the time waiting for Vin to return, trying to figure out why someone had gone to all that trouble to break windows in each room. If the man was trying to intimidate Mary Travis, he hadn't succeeded. She was spitting nails.

Lost in thought, he came close to jumping when Vin, balancing three pizzas, a large order of wings, and a large order of breadsticks, used his elbow to bang on Chris's window. Chris rolled down the window and took the food. When Vin was seated and had the stack of food safely balanced in his lap, Chris asked the question that had been plaguing him, "Why?"

Vin knew exactly what his brother was asking, but he didn't have an answer, so he shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

"I don't either. What I do know is that if he was trying to scare her, he didn't. She is pissed."

"We keep saying he and him, but could it be Waldo?"

It was Chris's turn to shrug. "Could be, but I don't think so."

"Why?"

"It doesn't feel the same." Knowing his explanation wasn't adequate, he tried again. "There was destruction in both Maude's suite and Mrs. Travis's townhouse, but what happened in Maude's suite showed an out-of-control rage. The destruction in Mrs. Travis's home was deliberate and methodical. I don't think the same person did both."

Vin stayed silent for a few minutes as he tried to make various theories fit the circumstances. "I see what yer sayin' and I can't say yer wrong. Let's move on to why break the windows? Yer right, it took someone who acted deliberately and methodically to break one pane in each window in each room. If it wasn't done to scare her, I am then left with the question, why? The only thing I can think of is that he wanted to remove something from the air."

"There is a gas stove in the kitchen. He might have planned to let the gas build up in her house so he could watch it explode when she turned the stove on to cook. The natural gas used in stoves has an odor added to it. He may have realized that she would smell it and call the fire department. He broke the windows to hide the fact that the gas had been turned on."

Vin nodded his head in agreement, "Yer makin' sense. He may have wanted her dead, but for some reason, he changed his mind. Should we run this by her?"

"We should, but not tonight. I plan to eat and go to bed," but he knew he would not sleep until everyone was home and accounted for.

"Yer gettin' old, Larabee."

"How late are you planning to stay up?"

"I reckon I can stay awake until 7:30, maybe 8:00."

"That's what I thought."



They didn't leave in thirty minutes; it was closer to forty-five, but Ezra used the time to let his phone charge. As they headed out of the station, the dispatcher handed them sandwiches and sodas, saying, "You're not going to have time to eat, take this." Between bites, Mitch gave a brief history lesson on Four Corners.

"His name is not Harry, it's Stanly, but in his own way, Mayor Potter is a magician. He's only been in office for two years, but he has managed to obtain more funding for roads than his three predecessors combined. He made a promise to make Four Corners a decent place to live. He has been delivering on that promise since his first day in office. He not only improved the roads, but he also convinced two phone companies to put towers in the middle of nowhere. As a result, fewer dropped calls. Unfortunately, he, like so many Four Corners residents, believes the area to be crime-free. School safety has not been at the top of his to-do list. I'll be talking with him in the morning. His son Dwane attends Four Corners Elementary, and his daughter, Grace, is at the middle school. He'll listen to me. Your report will help him convince the school board to do as he says."

With that said, he pulled into the school's parking lot and frowned. Neither the principal nor the SRO's cars were there, and no lights were visible inside the school. Rather than give in to the slow burn of anger he felt. He had personally called Charity Hobbs and his deputy, Mike Nelson, to explain that he had a serious concern that he needed to discuss with them immediately.

Seeing no signs of approaching cars, he turned to Ezra. "You'll like Mike Nelson. Everyone does. The kids probably love him, but even though he is one of my deputies, he has no business being in law enforcement. He was made SRO by my predecessor, and the union says I can't fire him without cause."

"But you want to fire him?"

"I sure do. He hasn't done anything I can use to fire him, but he belongs in sales where a nice guy can make money."

"Ah don't understand the problem."

"That's it, he doesn't either. Take tonight, for example. If any of my superiors called me, or for that matter, if any of my deputies called me to say there was a situation we needed to handle immediately, I would not be on time; I would be early. He's not deliberately being insubordinate. He does things on his own timetable. But that's not the real issue I have with him. I've actually given it a lot of thought over the years. I need a reason for wanting him gone. The best I can come up with is that he doesn't have the edge."

"What is the edge?" Ezra obliged him by asking.

"It is that instinct that tells you something is wrong. It's what keeps you and others alive in dangerous situations. It's what tells you who you can trust and who you need to arrest. If your Waldo comes into the school to pick up her grandson, Billy, he will not only let her in, he will walk her to Billy's room and be surprised when she pulls an automatic out of her purse to shoot him and every kid in that school."

"And you can't reassign him."

"The best I can do is hope we can make him understand the seriousness of the situation and pray he follows our advice."

Ezra craned his neck, looking for signs of cars coming up the drive. Seeing none, he asked, "How powerful a flashlight do you have?"

"Will an alley light do?"

Ezra's answering grin filled his face. "Ah've never had the need to use a spotlight, but it sounds like it's just what Ah want. Can we get it set up so we can examine the entry and egress points?"

Ten minutes later, the two men were sitting in the lobby when the first car arrived. A classroom's window had been left unlocked, and Ezra had easily climbed into the room. Mitch Harris shook his head and promised himself that he would forgo the bag of M&Ms in his car and immediately begin his diet.

"Sheriff Harris, how did you get into my school?" a short woman with her brown hair pulled back in a braid demanded as she fumbled for keys.

"You are late," Harris said without bothering to explain how they had gained entry.

"I have too much to do to jump every time there is a so-called crisis." She glared at the sheriff and then shifted to look at Ezra, furiously typing into his phone. "I am Dr. Charity Hobbs, and you are?"

Ezra continued to type, but he grinned when out of the corner of his eye he saw the sheriff extend his index finger. Ezra corrected the sheriff subtly by tapping his phone twice. Dr. Hobbs, as she preferred to be called, had kept them waiting. Mitch had warned him about her sense of self-importance and had been challenged to keep up with the number of times she reminded them of her importance and her advanced degree. He was up to taking her down a notch or two. He finished his sentence before looking up to meet her furious eyes. "Ezra Standish, degenerate gambler and security expert at your service."

She spun around, her sneakers silent on the linoleum floors of the lobby. Following her, Ezra picked up the new legal pad and a pen from her desk before she made it behind her too large and too ornate for the room, mahogany desk.

"I will need that in the morning," she snapped.

"I need it now."

"You can't-"

"Charity, I am infringing on Mr. Standish's time by asking for his help in this matter. He wanted to stop and pick up a notebook and pen, but I told him we would be late. We were on time. You were late. Figuring that you would be late, I built in fifteen minutes into our schedule. You exceeded it by another fifteen minutes. You live five minutes from here."

"I had plans for this evening."

"You get paid what, a100k a year. There are times in life when you have to earn your paycheck. This is one of those times."

"Doctor Hobbs, I am called Dr. Hobbs when I am acting as school principal."

"Then, might Ah suggest you act like one and listen."

"Who the hell do you think you are?"

Mitch had been expecting the question and began answering before Ezra had a chance. "Mr. Standish is a security expert. His recommendations have been used by one of, if not the most important, casinos in Vegas. I am sure Mr. Tommy Botello has your number on speed dial." Mitch had been watching her face when he mentioned Botello's name. She recognized it. Living in Nevada, how could she not?

Ezra calmly turned to a new page before replying. "Ah doubt Mr. Botello has mah number on speed dial," he said, but seeing the look of triumph in her eyes, he added. "But he does have mah number in his contact list. His security chief, Lev Reubens, has mah number on speed dial." He didn't give her time to process, but plunged ahead. "The life of Billy Travis has been threatened by a deranged individual who has proven capable of murder. She has already proven herself willing to kill innocents. If you do not listen,

take what we have to say seriously, and immediately implement school-wide changes, you run the very real risk of him being killed on this campus.”

“I take the lives of all my students seriously, not just the life of Judge Travis’s grandson. The school is perfectly safe.”

“No. You are lying to yourself, to me, or you are choosing to be ignorant regarding school safety. Which is it?” Normally, Ezra would have kept a smile on his face, and his words would have been thought, but not voiced, but Billy was a dear boy who had followed him around that morning, asking intelligent questions concerning the horses.

“How dare you?”

“I dare because I have seen what this woman is willing to do.”

Mitch decided he’d better intervene before words were said that couldn’t be taken back. “Mr. Standish, I just heard the lobby doors open. Can you go and explain to Mike who you are and why we are here?” When Ezra left the room, closing the door behind him, Mitch said in a sottovoice, “Charity, I know you care about each kid in this school, but you are letting your pride get in your way. You need to listen to what we have to say if for no other reason than to protect your career. Mary Travis is bringing Billy to school tomorrow. I guarantee you she will ask you how you plan to keep him and the other students safe. Billy is Orrin Travis’s grandson, but Mary Travis is a social media star. If she doesn’t believe you are taking this seriously, she will make sure the several hundred thousand people who follow her know your name. Your name will be Mudd. You will not get tenure as a principal and any other system in the county that you might want to work for... well, they won’t have you.”

Her pride or her career? Mitch watched the emotions as they flitted across Charity’s face. He made a point of looking into the backgrounds of people moving into the area, especially those who would be working with children. Charity’s resume was impressive, but it left out how hard she had worked to get out of the poverty in which she had been born. She had a right to feel proud of her accomplishments, but too often she carried her need for recognition too far. She had stepped on toes and hurt feelings in the short two years she had worked in Four Corners. She would either be promoted to a position in Central Office or she not be rehired at the end of the year. Both options were a shame as far as he was concerned. She loved the students and knew each of their names, and had the drive needed to make the school excel, if she could rein in her pride and get her staff to work with her, and not against her. How she handled this situation would either make her or break her.

Hearing footsteps coming down the hall, Charity looked up and said. “I suppose I should listen to what Mr. Standish has to say.” The anger and the belligerence were gone from her voice. She called out, “Mike, Mr. Standish, turn around. We have a school to look at.



With a slice of warmed-up pizza in one hand and a pen in his other, Ezra scribbled notes on the legal pad in front of him. For the most part, he was ignoring the conversation swirling around him, but he put his pen aside and wiped his hands clean when Billy came up to thank him for showing him the horses that morning. He watched Mary walk with Billy as they headed for the bedroom. When he heard the bedroom door shut, he risked a smile. Mary Travis was probably a nice lady under normal

circumstances, but these were not normal, and her endless questions were grating on all their nerves.

The sheriff had dropped him off a little before eight, so he had dodged the task of having to listen to her questions. Logically, he knew all she wanted was to know that she and her son would be safe. Asking questions was her attempt to gain control of her life. He knew that, and he knew his brothers did too, but they were all tired, even Buck struggled to keep a smile on his face. Hopefully, she would fall asleep and not come out to pester them with more inquiries about the identity of the woman who had threatened Orrin.

Wait, had Nathan been talking about stopping in to see Nurse Angie? “Your Nurse Angie, she isn’t Angie Delaney, is she?”

Nathan returned to the plate the slice of pizza he had been nibbling on as he described Angie’s bizarre behavior. “Yes.” He answered warily. Ezra’s tone said there was more to the inquiry than a desire to clarify what he had missed while writing about the school. “Why?”

There wasn’t an easy way to put it, “Mitch got a call on the radio when he was bringing me home. That’s why he didn’t come in... The call was about an apparent suicide.” He licked his lips; his mouth had gone dry, but seeing the realization in Nathan’s face of what he was about to say, he hurried on. “The dispatcher said that a Miss Angie Delaney had killed herself. Her neighbors heard a gunshot, and when they couldn’t get her to answer the door, they called the sheriff’s office, asking that a deputy conduct a welfare check on her.”

Nathan tried to force his mouth to form words; he knew he looked as though he were mimicking a fish, but he could not make a sound. He knew that she had more information related to Waldo. He had left, thinking he would try talking to her at another time. He had accused her of murder; had he pushed her too hard? “When?” he managed to ask. He didn’t know why it mattered, if she had killed herself immediately after he left or an hour later, but somehow it did.

“Ah am not suruh. Anything Ah say would be a guess.”

“Then I’ll guess. I left her apartment at about a quarter to six. You heard about it at what... 7:45?” When Ezra nodded, Nathan continued, “People heard the shot and went to check on her... say five to ten minutes of banging on her door and then calling the sheriff station. Another fifteen or twenty minutes for the deputies to arrive and break her door in. Then they called it in, which is what you heard... A rough guess would be that she killed herself somewhere between seven and seven fifteen. I guess it doesn’t matter. Something I said caused her to kill herself.”

“You don’t know that,” Josiah said as he pulled out a chair and sat next to Nathan.

“Do you have a better explanation?” Nathan asked. As far as he could tell, he had said or done something to trigger her suicide.

“Not yet. I don’t have enough facts yet to make an educated guess, but I want to remind you that you don’t either. Before you start blaming yourself, we need to know more.”

Nathan picked up his plate and carried it to the sink.

“I’ll take care of that, Nathan,” JD volunteered.

Nathan stayed frozen in place for a moment before he nodded and said thanks. "I told Emmett that I'd make rounds in the morning so I'm going to bed." He wasn't ready for bed and knew it would be a while before he would find sleep, but he didn't want to be around anyone at the moment. He wouldn't wallow in self-pity, but he would examine each moment he had spent talking with Angie. He needed to know if he had missed seeing the sign that he had pushed her to the point of despair. Without another word, he walked out of the room.

Chris stood up and stretched. "I'm heading to bed, too. Ezra, when is your homework due?"

"It's going to take several hours to complete. Ah will email it to Mitch when Ah finish. Ah hope he knows to print it on quality paper and to use a report cover. Ah had better text him."

"Before you do, are you going to be up all night?"

"He needs it first thing, so Ah need to finish by four so he will have the time to print it before he has his all-call meeting."

"Do you need help?" Chris wasn't volunteering himself. He hated working on the computer, but JD was adept at spreadsheets and s. He could probably type really fast, too.

"Thank you, but it would be faster if Ah did it mahself."

"You'd better sleep in then, say until nine thirty."

"That's doable." He stood up and gathered his things. I will be in the library." He started to walk away, then, looking at Josiah, said, "If I might suggest, Josiah, you should probably accompany Mrs. Travis and Billy to school tomorrow. I believe Dr. Hobbs has already sent Mrs. Travis and Billy's teacher a text, asking that they meet with her and the sheriff tomorrow at 9:00."

"Why me? Sounds like the Sheriff has it covered."

"You will be the referee, Dr. Sanchez. Dr. Hobbs has...issues, and Mrs. Travis currently has a short fuse. You will be there to make sure everyone plays nicely."

Josiah's smile was more of a grimace, but he accepted his assignment without complaint.

"Buck, can you and Vin go bring those second-year heifers to the High Water Creek. The Yosemite brothers left a note in the herd book that they believed the blue roan heifer slipped her calf on Saturday. If they are up at High Water, we can keep a closer eye on them."

"No problem, Chris. And, no Vin, we won't be using horses; we'll take a truck out there with the last of the carrots. They will follow us if we keep them supplied with carrots."

"Wait a minute. That's all it takes. Why are we getting dogs? Why do we spend so much time in the saddle? Why?"

Buck held his hand up to signal JD to stop. "Whoa, there, JD. The herd Chris wants Vin and me to take to High Water Creek has several bottle babies in it. Those ladies are used to following us to get treats." Glancing at the clock, he stood and announced, "I'm heading to bed." With that, the brothers began filing out of the kitchen to go to bed.

Midstride, Chris remembered to ask Josiah whether he had been able to reach Hawley.

Shaking his head no, Josiah said that both he and JD had tried calling the man. Their calls were answered by a recorded message, but the messages they had left had not been returned.

"He knew we would call. So why is he avoiding our calls?"

"I have absolutely no idea, Chris."

The silence coming from the antiques dealer didn't irritate him as much as it perplexed him. "No matter, while you are making sure that Mrs. Travis and the principal get along, I will try calling. He had best answer the phone. We have a lot of calves due this week. I don't have the time to drive to Fresno, and I will take it out of his hide if I'm forced to fly, but one way or another, I will find out who it was pretending to be Mrs. Larabee." He almost left it at that, but then a thought crossed his mind. "Tomorrow, when you take Mrs. Travis and Billy to school, take JD and Jack.

"If I were a betting man, I would bet every cent I have that Mrs. Travis will not let Billy take one step inside that school until they show her the steps that they are taking to keep Billy safe. According to Ezra, you will need to be in the meeting, but we can't have Billy sitting in the car by himself."

"I have no problems taking JD, but Jack will get hair on everyone."

"Neither you nor JD carries a gun. If someone tries to hurt Billy or Mrs. Travis, Jack will protect them. A little hair is a small price to pay."

"You know, Jack going after the shooter as he did, surprised me. He is such a gentle giant. It's hard to think of him as willing to take on a gunman."

"And he may never again, but if he is perceived as a threat..." his voice trailed off. "People's perceptions of the world and its inhabitants play a massive role in how they behave. If a thug sees Jack's size, he will be less likely to threaten JD or Billy."

"Have you studied psychology?"

"No, I based that spiel on something Dad once said."

"Are you planning on sharing?"

Chris thought about it, then said, "If you ever repeat this, I will deny it and find a way to take my revenge on you."

"I'll carry your secret to my grave."

Chris shuddered at Josiah's reassurance. "Don't put it like that."

"How about: I won't tell a soul."

"That works... For some reason, I kept getting cast in the role of team leader. It didn't matter if it was sports or academics, I was put in charge. It didn't bother me when it came to sports. We were all on the same team, and we were all working for the same goal: win the game, win the tournament, win the state.

"In the sixth grade, my teachers decided we needed to develop our social skills by having us work in groups, and for some reason, I was consistently made the leader of my group. I really didn't think about it until this kid said that it wasn't fair that I was once again given the role of group leader. He called me a teacher's pet, saying they gave me the easy job of making everyone else do the work. What he said bothered me. That night, I asked Dad why my teachers always made me the leader when we had to work in groups.

"Dad didn't give me a flippant answer; he never did that. Instead, he got real quiet as he thought about my question. He answered me by saying: It's a matter of perception. The teachers see you as a leader, because no matter who they group you

with, your group does quality work and ends up with an A. I've watched the way you think. If you have given a member of your group a job and he struggles with it, you don't take over and do it for him; you show him what he needs to do, and when he does it right, you thank him for his hard work. Your teacher sees that not only do you know how to do the work, but with your help, so does your teammate.

"I told him that what everyone does. And he said that is what a leader does. He said that kids perceive you as a leader because you show them what needs to be done, and then you let them shine. They perceive you as someone to follow, not just because you know where you are going, but because you will make sure they get there with you.

"He then told me that when I perceived myself as a leader, I would automatically set the goals for the team, but I would also explain those goals in such a way that the members of the team I was on would understand what we needed to accomplish and their role in getting us all across the finish line. He told me each person in this world had talents, as a leader, it was my job to see those talents in such a way that they, too, perceived them." Chris shook off the memory of his father. "Sorry, I didn't mean to get so long-winded. I must be more tired than I thought. I usually don't indulge in nostalgia."

"Sounds like Landon Larabee was a man worth knowing," Josiah replied, wondering, not for the first time, how his life would have been if he had grown up with his father giving him advice.

"I think he was." He left without saying anything else. He didn't feel Josiah's thoughtful eyes on his back as he climbed the stairs to his room.