



Tuesday Morning

Rooting Out Evil
Part 3 Of the Seven Brothers Saga



His first impulse was to throw his phone across the room to stop the alarm's incessant chime. His second impulse was to remind himself of the cost of a new phone and to lower his arm. Sitting up on the cot in the jail cell, Mitch Harris looked around the station. Maddie, Mannie's twin, sat beside the station's phones, working on what appeared to be a Sudoku puzzle. Identifying the type of puzzle the woman had in front of her was the easiest way to tell which sister currently acted as dispatcher: Mannie preferred crosswords.

"Hey, Maddie. How fresh is the coffee?" he needed something to help him wake up.

"Wait a few. Elise is coming in for the meeting. Her coffee will be better than anything I brew."

"Anything going on that I need to know about?"

"Other than Miss Delaney's suicide, there haven't been any calls. If I didn't know what all was going on in Four Corners, I'd say this town was downright boring. However, Mr. Standish emailed this to you." She spun her chair around to hand Mitch a copy of the report Ezra had written. "It's his report concerning safety issues at the elementary school."

"Maddie, what have I said about reading my mail?" Mitch automatically chastised her as he read the report.

"You should be thanking me, Mitch. Mr. Standish's email instructed me to print it on 32-pound paper and use binders to give copies to Dr. Hobbs and Mayor Potter. He said folks tend to believe what is written on quality paper – his words, not mine, but he made sense. I scrounged around and found a couple of binders from when we worked the DEA task force in the supply closet, and Evan got some paper from his brother."

"He woke his brother up? I bet that didn't go well."

"Evan said Kyle stays up all night playing video games."

Mitch made a mental note to thank Evan, then sat at an empty desk and began thoroughly reading the report. Standish had included a list of exterior doors they found with a brick beside it so a teacher could prop it open when she took her class outside, thus negating the need for keys and ignoring the safety feature of keeping all exterior doors locked. In the section devoted to the number of classroom that did not have locks on their doors, he had included pictures and links to the three best locks for classroom doors and the cost. He turned the pages, making note of Standish's many suggestions. These included measures such as restricting access to the front offices and classrooms from the lobby unless doors were remotely unlocked, and introducing a phone app that would allow teachers and staff to quickly notify first responders if an incident occurred. He also included another app that would send messages and instructions to parents if there was any type of emergency at the school. The length Standish had taken to define the problem was evident on every page, as was both his professionalism and his concern for the children and staff.

He closed the folder; apparently, there were not enough binders for him to have his own. He looked over at Maddie and asked, "Did Amos get the bugs in Mrs. Travis's home to the lab in Ely?"

"Yes, sir. Pity, he left so soon. If he had waited, he could have taken what Mr. Standish found here, too."

"It's going to be hard to explain how that happened. I am the one who is paid the big bucks; the least I can do is explain it to the lab rats and the higher-ups."

"I've been thinking about that, sir."

"And?"

"Both bugs were hidden in electric outlets, right, and the camera was mounted in the air vent, right?"

"Yep."

"Then either one of us did it, and I don't believe that for a moment, or they were put there when we had that fire a few years ago. We moved the Four Corners operations to that room in Gloria Potter's shop. A lot of men worked here to repair the damage to the station. No one supervised them because we took anything we could salvage to the self-storage facility down on Harding Way."

Mitch smiled, "If it didn't break all sorts of sexual harassment rules, I would kiss you right now."

"Only if I let you. Frankly, Sheriff, you are in dire need of a shower and a whole heap of mouthwash."

Rather than take offence at Maddie's words, he laughed. He laughed harder when she added, "Now, that Mr. Standish is a different matter. I'd be willing to kiss him whenever and wherever he wanted."

"You are too old for him."

"Nonsense. What is he? About thirty? A ten-year difference doesn't mean I am too old. It means I am in the prime of my life and the things I could teach him..."

"Don't make me blush, and if I can recruit him, don't you or your sister scare him off."

"Thought you were planning on recruiting Tanner."

Mitch shook his head slightly, "Been thinking about that. No doubt, Tanner would make an outstanding deputy, but I am afraid Four Corners would be too tedious for him. Not now, of course, but once we catch this Waldo woman of theirs, he would be bored silly; he is a hunter and would see all the hoops we have to jump through as a cage."

With that, he headed to the locker rooms and showers. At shift change, he'd talk to every deputy who was not currently engaged in solving a crime like murder. By now, all of his deputies, he was sure, were aware of the damage done to Mrs. Travis's home and of her missing gun. He'd tell them about the vague threat to the Travis family. There would be a few who would gripe about out-of-control teens and want to blame it on the same kids who had vandalized places up and down Main Street during the Christmas holidays. He'd let them talk for a minute to get it out of their systems, then he'd show them the pictures of the listening devices discovered in her home. He'd tell them what they were looking at and ask who the teens were that they knew, capable of such sophisticated stalking tactics.

He'd end the meeting by showing them the devices Standish had found in the station's supposedly secure areas. It didn't matter if they were ending their shifts or just starting them; each would begin racking their brains for anyone who had been left alone in the station. Maddie had come up with a good theory, but someone else might come up with another avenue that would need to be investigated.

With luck, he would have time to drop by the diner for breakfast before he needed to meet with the principal of Four Corners Elementary. At 9:00, during Billy's teacher's planning time, he'd meet with her, Dr. Hobbs, the SRO, and Mary Travis to discuss the situation. That afternoon, he would meet with the teachers, support staff, lunchroom workers, the custodians, and the bus drivers, in short, anyone who had reason to be in or near the school. He'd share the list of recommendations Standish made, which were easy fixes, and save the other, more costly ones for the superintendent.

Between those meetings, he'd talk with the mayor. He'd end the day meeting with the hastily called-together school board. They could grumble about the inconvenience of a last-minute meeting. He would remind them that their primary responsibility was ensuring the safety of the students. If they were not willing to do so, they would need to resign.

Four Corners had escaped the violence seen in other towns and cities. Even if they felt that the danger to the students from someone targeting the Larabee family was remote, he had to make them recognize that other dangers lurked waiting for an opportunity to pounce. Fixing the lack of functional locking doors in classrooms was a simple task. The lack of a plan for texting staff about dangerous situations frustrated him immensely, but he realised it was also an easy problem to solve; alerts should be sent not only to staff but also to first responders and parents. Some of the other fixes

Standish recommended would cost money, but if the school board balked, he would ask them to tell him the price of a child's life.

He'd make sure the media attended the meeting.

He quickly finished getting ready and headed to the briefing. With all hands on deck, it would be crowded, but it was important for everyone to be aware of the approaching trouble.



He immediately noticed and welcomed the quiet when he entered the house. While he enjoyed the occasional moments of solitude, he rarely craved them. After the hustle and bustle of getting Mary and Billy moved in, and this morning's barrage of questions Mary kept throwing at him, he needed a few minutes of silence before attempting to contact Hawley. He wanted to give the antiques dealer the benefit of the doubt, but the man had not bothered to pick up the phone or return any of his brothers' calls. What kind of business did Hawley run anyway? He didn't know, but he'd be damned if he let the man dodge answering his questions, even if it meant that he would have to drive there and bang on the door in person.

Dodging questions- he knew that was what Mary felt he was doing. The difference between his and Hawley's actions was that she wanted answers he did not possess. He, on the other hand, merely wanted a description from Hawley of the woman pretending to be Mrs. Larabee. He didn't think he was asking too much from the businessman. If Hawley did not have the description, the men who had driven a truck to the Double L did. After all, they had seen her when they picked up the gun safe. Surely, they could answer basic questions about her age, weight, and height.

Mary, in contrast, expected him to have answers to her endless questions and was genuinely disappointed that his answers were invariably the same.

"Who do you think broke my windows?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think it was the man I saw in the street?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think that man is the person who stole my gun?"

"I don't know?"

"Do you think this is because of something Stephen was working on?"

"Maybe, but I don't know."

"I don't know."

"Do you think the person who broke the windows is the same person who threatened Orrin?"

"I don't know."

And it had gone on and on.

At first, he had been sympathetic to her need for answers and attempted to answer them as honestly and as fully as he could, but when she followed him to the barn, peppering him with endless questions to which he had none, he had to stomp on his irritation. Somewhere along the line, her tone had shifted from that of a concerned mother seeking reassurances to that of a reporter at a press conference.

He could only hope that she kept quiet on the way to school. Given the circumstances, uprooting the boy had been a necessary evil, but scaring the kid was uncalled for. He hoped she was smart enough to realize it.

"Thought you would still be asleep," Chris told Ezra as his brother, without a trace of having been up all night, strolled into the den.

Ignoring the comment, Ezra went straight into the kitchen and began preparing a fresh pot of coffee. When he heard Chris follow him in, he said, "With eight people in this house, Ah hope Larabee Holding has invested in coffee futures so we can make some of the money back that we spend on coffee."

Grabbing two clean mugs from the dishwasher, Chris placed them in front of Ezra. "Josiah said you didn't get to bed until five this morning."

"I didn't mean to wake him up."

"He went to bed unreasonably early last night. I think he's fine. Did you get any sleep?"

"Sleep is highly overrated."

"So, you spent all night writing that report for Mitch?"

"Not all night..." Ezra slid a stapled copy of his report across the counter.

Without saying a word, Chris picked it up and began reading. He allowed Ezra to fill his cup, then walked to the table, pulled out a chair, by feel, not once taking his eyes off the papers in his hand. Part of his brain acknowledged Ezra's presence in the room as he hovered, waiting for Chris's reaction.

Finishing the report, Chris got up and refilled his cup. After draining the cup, Chris asked, "Is this what you did for Botello?"

"Pretty much."

"And you wrote this in one night, after seeing the school one time?"

"There is a certain protocol for securing a school. Securing points of egress and ingress, ensuring classrooms can be locked and barricaded, providing a means to keep unauthorized visitors from leaving the lobby and entering any areas where students are, and having a means of alerting staff, first responders, and parents to potential danger. After that, it's filling in the blanks with what to buy and where to place it for optimal effectiveness."

"I can follow all of that. What I don't understand is how you were able to draw a floor plan from memory. How did you know where to place security cameras and...and." He stopped talking and looked at his younger brother, shifting his balance from one foot to the other. Ezra was nervous. But, Why? Cursing himself for being a fool, he realized Ezra was worried about something. He just didn't understand what that something was.

"Ezra, I am not a security expert, but from what I can tell, you did a fantastic job."

"Thank you."

"But you are not telling me everything. Want to share?"

For a moment, Ezra vacillated between being relieved he was being given the opportunity to reveal a part of himself and keeping his secret to himself. Seeing nothing but the sincere desire to know what Ezra was holding back, Ezra cleared his throat and began, "Ah told Maude that Ah had an eidetic memory, but that is not

exactly true. Ah easily remember many things, but Ah do not remember everything. But Ah don't think like most people."

Chris bit his tongue to keep himself from saying anything sarcastic, which undoubtedly shut his brother up. Instead, he nodded, in what he hoped was an encouraging manner, for Ezra to continue.

"When Ah was in the third grade, mah teacher received a grant to test us with the idea that she would correlate her teaching methods with our learning styles. Ah remember thinking that the tests she gave were stupid, but she gave me the words Ah needed to explain how Ah see the world: spatial reasoning. We were living in New York in my late teens. Ah was able to spend my mornings in the New York Library researching that term. Have you heard of it?"

"No," Chris answered truthfully.

"The textbook definition is the ability to understand and manipulate the relationships between objects in space. Ah walked into the school and could visualize how easily an intruder could enter and what needed to be done to counter an intrusion. The intent of mah report is to show how structural changes can improve safety. Some are easy fixes, others are more involved and more costly. They also need to change the prevailing attitude that nothing bad will ever happen in Four Corners. Bad things happen everywhere. Not keeping the exterior doors propped open for the convenience of students needing to use the facilities. It is only slightly more difficult for the teacher to unlock the door herself or give the student the key. Speaking of keys, teachers are not required to turn in their keys if they change schools or quit. They have no idea how many keys are in existence.

"But back to mah having spatial reasoning. It is why mah handwriting is so precise and why Ah am a successful forger. It also explains why Ah win at cards. As the cards are dealt, Ah visualize all possible combinations of the hands other players have, and Ah can easily keep up with the cards yet to be dealt. Within a couple of hands, Ah have seen enough of the movements other players inadvertently display when they have a good, or a bad hand to recognize the tells of most of the competitors at mah table."

"You should be cleaning up then." Having that ability went a long way to explain Ezra's cockiness when it came to cards. Chris decided then and there, he was not going to wager against Ezra unless they were playing for toothpicks.

"If it became known how Ah see the world, Ah would not be welcome in some games."

"So you purposefully lose."

"Ah purposefully find something to distract me."

Chris thought about it for a moment and said, "It sounds a little like Vin's map-reading skills."

"Yes, it is, but for some reason, Ah struggle in making maps make sense."

"You can't be good at everything, but you know that."

"Yes, Ah realize that."

"Then what's bothering you?"

Ezra didn't ask how Chris knew something else was on his mind. "One thing Ah am reasonably good at is seeing patterns. Last night, as Ah was typing mah report, it occurred to me that Waldo would not attack the school to get to Billy Travis. Ah could

not find a way to make an attack by her on the school fit the pattern of her behavior. Ah don't think she will do anything to our young Billy Travis, but Ah do think she will attempt to kill someone close to Judge Travis."

"You think she is behind the broken windows?"

"Ah don't."

"Vin and I talked about it on the way back from Mrs. Travis's home. We agree with you. The question becomes, is whether Mrs. Travis and Billy are in danger, and if so, from whom?"

Ezra looked pointedly at the door, but he said, "Ah don't know."

Chris saw Ezra's eyes on the door and asked, "It's a nice day. Feel like helping me put the mamas and their foals outside to stretch their legs?"

"Ah, do, but let me get a coat first. Your nice day is not warm enough for me."

"Just wait. Before you know it, we will be in the middle of July, and you can complain about the heat."

"Ah have survived the likes of Savannah's summers, where it is hot and humid. Ah think Ah can handle summer here on the ranch."

"We don't have mint juleps here."

"You are thinking about Virginia. In Savannah, Chatham Artillery Punch is the drink of choice."

"Seriously. A punch?"

"It's quite potent."

"I'll take you at your word."

"You'll have to. While Ah am quite certain, Ah could obtain the necessary ingredients, the atmosphere here at the ranch is wrong for such a memorable drink," he said as he walked off to get his coat.

When Ezra left the kitchen to grab his coat, Chris picked up the piece of paper with the phone number for Hawley Antiques written across it in Josiah's scrawling script.



"I don't feel comfortable leaving Billy in school. I don't think any of them are taking this seriously."

Josiah didn't immediately respond to her. Knowing that starting the car would send Mary a signal that her concerns weren't valid, he didn't even put the key into the ignition. Twisting in his seat to include JD in the conversation, he asked Mary, "What do you want to do?"

"I don't know... I want to keep him at my side, but I don't know if being with me will keep him safe or make him more of a target."

"That's a good question."

"What should I do?"

"I can't tell you that. You have to do what you think is best." Billy was her son. If he told her the path she should take and she followed his advice... Well, he would not be able to bear the burden if something were to happen to the child. He had more than enough millstones hanging around his neck. One more and he'd run the risk of drowning. He glanced at JD, hoping to see in his brother's eyes the answer to Mary's question. All he saw was the same reluctance he felt.

Staring at the school's entrance, Mary fought the impulse to reenter the school and snatch her son out of his classroom and run. She controlled the impulse because she did not have a clue in which direction to run. "Can you help me and tell me what my options are?" She twisted the wedding ring she had yet to remove. "I am not normally so... lost, but Stephen is no longer around to discuss problems with me. I promise to make the decision myself... I just want to know my options."

"All right. Your first option is to leave Billy where he is."

"I don't know how safe he will be."

"I can't guarantee he'll be safe here, but that report the sheriff gave Dr. Hobbs, Ezra stayed up all night writing it. I read it this morning. In it, he outlines the steps they needed to take to make the school safer, not just for Billy, but for all students."

"The fact that Ezra wrote it doesn't fill me with confidence, even if the sheriff was waving the binder like he held the holy grail... Ezra may have found the listening devices in my home, but that doesn't make him an expert on school safety. What training has he had? I'm willing to bet that he hasn't stepped into one single school since he graduated."

"Miz Travis, you are wrong to dismiss Ezra's report," JD spoke from the back seat, his fingers curled into a fist in Jack's fur. Who was she to summarily reject Ezra's work? She hadn't had time to read the report. Knowing that much of the anger he heard in Mary's voice was there because of her circumstances, and not really directed towards Ezra, he tried to give her the benefit of the doubt and... failed. Not bothering to disguise his answering anger, he continued, "Have you heard of Tommy Botello?"

Mary nodded, yes.

"Then you know Mr. Botello runs the most successful resort and casino on the strip." He didn't wait for her response. "What you might not know is that my brother designed the security Mr. Botello uses." He felt satisfaction when he saw her shocked look, but he wasn't finished. "Perhaps, you should ask him to give you a copy of the report he spent the night writing for Sheriff Harris, then read it, before you decide he is not an expert."

Mary could feel her face burning. The young man was right; she had assumed Ezra had essentially been blowing hot air when he assessed the situation at the elementary school. She had been so sure of herself that she had ignored Sheriff Harris's belief in the document he handed Dr. Hobbs that morning. She had been so confident in her ability to sift through the facts surrounding Stephen's murder to discover the man or men responsible for his death, but she had not even been able to correctly interpret the high regard in which the sheriff held Ezra Standish when he informed them of the changes his expert recommended to make the school safer for all students. She had come close to saying that she didn't care about all students; she cared about her son.

She knew she should apologize, but she didn't. She'd wait and read the report first. Straightening in her seat, she asked Josiah, "What is my second option?"

"Move. Go somewhere in which no one knows who you are, and cut ties with the life you have in Four Corners."

She actually thought about it for a moment before shaking her head no. She and Billy wouldn't be just cutting ties with Orrin and Evie; it meant she would have to abandon her quest to find her husband's murderer. As much as she loved her son, and

how desperately she needed to keep him safe, she knew herself well enough to know that she rated finding Stephen's murderer as a high priority. Maybe if she found the man who took Stephen from her, she could let go of the love of her life and move on. She realized she had been silent too long, and Josiah was still waiting for an answer.

"Billy has already lost his father; I won't separate him from his grandparents."

"I suppose then that you will reject my third option: send Billy to a boarding school."

"Never."

"The only other option I have for you then is for you to homeschool."

Listening to Charity Hobbs, and Billy's teacher, Catherine Honea, talk about how she was probably overreacting to some kids' prank gone too far, she had considered the possibility of yanking him out of school and reaching him herself. "I don't know. I think he would be safer with me, but I doubt if it would work." Not with the amount of time she spent preparing for her social media accounts, and definitely not with the amount of time she needed to spend searching through Stephen's files; there would be no time left to teach.

"What do you see as the problem?" Josiah asked. Home schooling seemed like the best solution, especially after witnessing the Great Divide between Dr. Hobbs and Mary Travis. Although he wasn't referencing how the water in the U.S. flowed into the Pacific Ocean or ended up in the Atlantic Ocean, depending on the geography of the land, but to the way the two women viewed the potential threat to Billy's life. Mary all but demanded an armed guard at Billy's side at all times, while Charity emphasized the lack of funding for the changes Ezra proposed.

He almost snickered to himself. Charity Hobbs made two critical mistakes in the meeting with Mary Travis. When he and Mary had entered her office, Charity Hobbs had come out from behind her desk, taking Mary's extended hand in her two, in a warm, welcoming grasp. He wasn't sure if the principal had deliberately slighted Mary or if she had recognized his name from one of the journal articles he had written for *Educational Psychology*; he had seen at least a year's worth of the publication in the bookshelf behind her desk. Whatever the reason, the minute she began referring to the other parties involved in the meeting by their titles rather than their first name, Josiah noticed the frown on Mitch's face and the slight tightening on Mary's when Billy's teacher and the SRO were introduced as Mrs. Honea and Deputy Nelson even as she introduced Mary Travis as Mary, Billy Travis's mother. Meant as a slight or not, Dr. Hobbs had started the meeting off on the wrong foot.

She had ended the meeting just as badly by countering Mary's request that at least the classrooms be given working locks on their doors by saying that replacing the latches on all the doors would be too expensive for the school's budget to handle. Mary had not taken the comment well. In the end, she had said she would fund the locks herself if the school board did not ensure the classroom doors were lockable.

After several calming breaths, Mary made a decision, sort of. "Chris said that this Waldo woman said that Orrin had until Sunday to give her the name of the person responsible for killing Landon, right?"

"Yes, that's what she said."

"Do you think she is serious?"

"I do."

“And do you believe she will try to do something to my son?”

“I don’t know. Her actions are very deliberate and well planned, but they are those of someone with serious mental health issues... In the past, she has avoided hurting children. I don’t know if that is a conscious decision or not. The last person she killed was a woman with two-year-old twins in her car. The twins died along with their mother. I don’t know if she planned for the little girls to die or if her planning was sloppy.”

“And you don’t have any clues as to who she is?”

“We are working on that. We have a list of suspects, but we may not even have the right suspect on that list.”

Mary wanted nothing more than to curl into a ball and pull the covers over her head until the danger was gone, but there was no time for her to do that, not if she planned to protect her son, Stephen’s son. “All right... I think the best course of action is to let Billy stay at this school for the time being, at least until Friday. I can contribute the money for the locks on the classroom doors. I don’t have enough to fund the renovations to the lobby that Sheriff Harris said Ezra suggested. Even if I did, I am very sure that at the pace most bureaucracies work, there is not enough time to hire an architect and contractor to make the changes. I don’t know if there is enough time to buy the locks and get them here, but get them installed by Friday.”

“Ezra may know of a company that will expedite shipping, but you should plan for getting the locks on the doors, taking at least two weeks.”

Mary held in the curse words she wanted to use; her mother had said that ladies don’t curse. “I don’t understand why they don’t have safety measures already in place.”

From the backseat, JD spoke up. “Lack of money for schools is a real issue. The company I worked for when I lived in Boston did the accounts for a couple of school systems in Massachusetts. Many school systems get their funding from property taxes. To get more money, more people have to move into an area, or you have to raise property taxes.”

“They should think of the children and raise property taxes.” Mary interrupted JD to say.

“When you raise property taxes, you run the risk of people moving, and-” he hurriedly continued, seeing that Mary was prepared to interrupt him again. “even if they don’t move, you are faced with how to use the money. Everyone wants technology in the schools, but that is expensive. Everyone wants smaller class sizes in the schools, but hiring more teachers is also expensive. And if you have the money for more teachers, you may not have the space to put them in. What do you do then?”

Mary wanted to argue, but JD made some good points. She changed the subject, “I’ll spend this week researching homeschooling. I have no idea how to teach a first grader, but I am sure I can figure it out.”



“No, thanks,” Raine smiled as she pointed to the stack of charts she had waiting for her review. “I am going to spend the next,” she glanced at the clock on her desk, “fifty minutes working on these before I have to head out.”

Carol shook her head in mock disapproval. Raine had spent the last few days burying herself in her work. She was obviously pining for Dr. Jackson, and while neither of the two had said anything about why they had chosen to part ways, they took great

pains to avoid each other. "There is no point to working yourself to death. Those charts will still be waiting for you after lunch."

"I know, but I really don't want to work late," Raine answered with the smile still plastered on her face, but she held up the file she was working on and hoped Carol would take the hint and leave.

"Do you want me to bring you back anything?"

"Thanks, but I'm fine."

"All right then, I'll leave you to it. Do you want your door open or shut?" Carol asked even though she was walking away. She spared a glare for Dr. Jackson's closed door, wishing she had enough courage to go in and tell him off for hurting Raine. It didn't matter who had chosen to break off their romance; she was certain the fault lay with Dr. Jackson.

Raine listened for the sounds that would mean Carol had left, then stood up and walked to the patient door to check whether it was locked, and then to the back door to do the same. Along the way, she made sure no one else had stayed behind. Satisfied that only she and Nathan remained in the clinic, she went to his office and opened the door without knocking.

"Nathan," she wanted to ask if he was ok, but one look into his eyes told her that he wasn't. She walked around his desk and wrapped him in her arms. "Tell me."

Nathan stood up and pulled her close to him. He held her close, allowing the feel of her to comfort him as no words could. Breathing in the lavender scent of her hair, he let it steady him, and then he began talking. "Angie Delaney killed herself last night... We talked, I left, and then she killed herself. I must have said something..."

"Tell me," Raine repeated as she stroked his back.

Nathan spent the next twenty minutes recounting his conversation with Angie. When he finished, he asked Raine, "What did I miss?"

"Honestly, Nathan, I don't know. Your questions sounded reasonable, but..." her voice trailed off.

"But what?"

"But she wasn't acting right. She wasn't acting like the woman I know. She knew something, didn't she?"

Nathan sank into his chair, pulling Raine down with him. "I think she knew so much more than she was willing to tell me."

"Do you think she was complicit?"

"I don't want to believe that, but, yes, part of me does." He pulled her tight before pushing her off his lap. "You had best get your things together and head out."

"I know." She grabbed his hand and guided it to her lips. "I don't believe you did anything wrong. I am worried about you, Nate. Last night, I had a dream. It was so real... When you go to the hospital, don't park in the doctor's parking lot. It's not safe."

"Your dream said it wasn't safe," Nathan tried teasing, but the seriousness in her eyes told him she needed him to listen to her. "I will find another place to park."

"Thank you. Remember, I love you, Nathan Jackson. You need to take steps to keep yourself safe."

"I am, but you need to do the same."

"I have. I broke up with you." She tried smiling, but the tears in her eyes, threatening to ruin her carefully applied makeup, made a lie of the smile. She walked out

the door, pulling it shut behind her, and hurried to gather her things and get on the road before her colleagues returned.

Listening to her steps as she walked out of the clinic, locking the door behind her, Nathan vowed that when they had all of this mess cleaned up, he would not only propose, but he would hire a pilot to write in the sky for all the world to see, Nathan Loves Raine.



"Damn," it was the only thing he could think to say when he counted the third body. That made it four. Cows had miscarriages just as human women sometimes did. "It happens, but not often. Not to our herds." Buck explained to his brother.

"What do we do?"

Buck leaned against the steering wheel and studied the pasture for signs of anything being there that shouldn't be. Seeing nothing obvious, he turned to Vin, saying, "The first order of business is to get these girls moving. When we get them settled, we need to figure out which of them has slipped their calves. Later, we can get a blood sample from the mama's so we can check their health."

"And in between moving them and getting the blood?"

"We come back and pick up the dead babies, let Doc Anderson do a necropsy on them."

Turning the unfamiliar word over in his mind, he decided that Buck was using a fancy word for an autopsy. Filing the word away for future reference, Vin asked the obvious question, "Has this happened before?"

"Yep. Three years ago, we lost seven calves. We found Ponderosa Pine needles mixed in with what we had put in the hay feeder the day before."

"I take it the pine needles are what caused them to miscarry their calves."

"Yep, and if you take a good look around, we don't have any Ponderosa Pines in any of our pastures. I can imagine those little helicopters, you know, the winged seeds, getting blown on our land by a strong wind, but the needles? The only place we found any of those things was a few at the bottom of the feeders. We didn't find any scattered on the ground."

"Which they would have been if a wind had brought them. Did ya see any tire tracks?"

"We looked for signs that someone had been around, the feeders, but we didn't find anything."

"So, ya don't have any clues to who was behind it?"

"Oh, we knew. Just couldn't prove it."

"Ya going to share?"

"Stewart James. He and His Dad have feuded over a stream that runs from their land into his. He's brought in the law twice, claiming that we damned up the creek so his cattle couldn't get to water. Dad walked both the sheriff and James the entire length of the creek to prove we had not done anything to divert the water. The sheriff was convinced and reminded James that this was Nevada and that even he knew that streams disappeared into the ground on little more than a whim. The next week, we found the first dead calf... Well, daylight's burning, so we had better get this show on the road. Hop in the back and toss some of the grain on the ground. A few handfuls, and

they will get the idea that the truck is filled with treats. I'll drive slow, so they can keep up."

When Vin was ensconced next to the several buckets of grain they had loaded into the truck's bed, Buck leaned out the window and hollered, "Come on, ladies, time to get moving. When the first cows noticed the feed on the ground and began jostling for the best position to eat, Buck eased the truck forward. Within minutes, he was leading the drove to the pasture closest to the ranch.

With luck, they'd get those dead babies to Doc Anderson before the coyotes arrived. He crossed his fingers that the Doc could find an answer before he had to tell Chris the bad news. As much as he wanted to blame Stewart James, it didn't make sense. These girls were nowhere near the disputed creek.



They moved the mares and the youngsters out to the pasture, showing a few blades of green grass which the mares were eagerly nibbling on while the foals frolicked under their mothers' watchful eyes. Deciding that watching the foals kick up their heels was definitely a cure for the pains of hearing questions he couldn't answer, Chris took the opportunity to evaluate the latest additions to the Double L. Seeing Ezra also had his eyes on the antics of the foals, he asked, "What do you think?"

Knowing exactly what Chris was asking, he took a moment to study the scene in front of him before answering. "The little bay, Polly's son, he's quick on his feet. He has run straight towards the fence at least three times. Each time, Ah expect him to plow right into it, but at the very last minute, he turns. He'll make a good cattle horse if he doesn't get too big."

Chris grinned at Ezra's answer. "Go on."

"The little buckskin is a pretty one, but she is not exploring and playing like the others."

"She might not feel well. We need to keep an eye on her." Chris remembered what Buck told him about using words when talking to Ezra. "Good calls. Every day, when we let them out or even if we keep them in because of the weather, we need to evaluate them. Care to learn what I look for in a cattle horse?"

Ezra thought about the question. Never in his life had he ever considered living on a ranch, and yet, here he was. Did he want to stay? Or did he plan on leaving as soon as he got his million? Correction. Got his million and found the murderers. "Ah don't know if Ah have it within me to stay. Ah never stayed for any length of time at any one spot. Having said that, Ah need to learn as much as Ah can so Ah can properly evaluate whether to stay or move on. So, yes, Ah am willing to learn."

"Good," Chris headed to the barn. "I need to call Hawley. Want to talk about what's on your mind before or after I make the call?" He was very pleased with the manner in which he had phrased the question. Vin would be proud that he was not pushing Ezra into a corner by demanding he immediately provide an answer, but, instead, had signaled he was interested in what was on his brother's mind and was willing to wait for his answer. He knew better than to try pushing a feral cat.

"Go ahead and make the call. Josaih tried multiple times yesterday and could not get anyone to answer. Perhaps you will have better luck."

Chris reached for the phone and hesitated. The listening device they had found in the phone was an older one, probably placed there by Waldo. Would what he had to

say to Hawley cause a reaction from Waldo? The listener, their Mr. X, more than likely was who sold the gun safe... He grabbed the phone and quickly dialed the number.

"Hawley's Antiques," A child answered the phone.

"Uh, yes, this is Chris Larabee. May I speak to Mr. Albert Hawley?" Chris asked. He put the phone on speaker so Ezra could hear that he was speaking to a child. He had prepared to confront Hawley with the fact that he had received stolen goods, but he couldn't threaten a kid. He held the phone away from his ear when the child screamed for his "Uncle Eric!"

Within seconds, a breathless voice answered, "Eric Hawley speaking."

"I was expecting to talk with Albert Hawley. Is he there?"

"I am his son. Is this, by any chance, about the gun safe?"

"It is." Chris glanced at Ezra, who shrugged his shoulders. He didn't know what was going on, but like Chris, he could tell something was wrong. On the other end of the line, the sound of a door closing was followed by the noise of a chair being moved across the floor.

"I'm sorry about that. My nephew loves to answer the phone... Can I ask who I am talking with?"

"Larabee, Chris Larabee."

"And you're calling about the gun safe we picked up from," It sounded to the brothers as though papers were being shuffled.

"The Double L in... Four Corners, Nevada, and, yes, I am." Chris told him, rather than waiting for the man to finish his search through, from the sounds coming across the phone lines, the papers he held in his hand.

There was a long moment of silence during which Chris couldn't decide if he was more angry at what seemed like a stalling tactic or more bewildered. No one conducted business this way.

When Hawley decided to begin talking, the first words out of his mouth sent a chill down Chris's spine.

"I am sorry," Eric Hawley said, "but this sounds so weird, so please bear with me. You called on Saturday, right?" He didn't bother to give Chris time to answer the question, but hurried on. "Dad came in on Sunday to pull the records for the pick-up from the Double L, and one that was scheduled for this past Friday in Ely, Nevada. Our crew was picking up a hand-carved fireplace mantle. The seller said he was renovating his house into a modern-looking one, and the mantle wouldn't fit the minimalist look he wanted. He emailed photos of it, and Dad had to have it. Normally, my dad doesn't get involved in furniture and such, but the workmanship was so exquisite. Dad couldn't resist. The man, I believe Dad said his name was Charlie Frost, said that a friend of his, a Mrs. Larabee from Four Corners, told him to insist that Lorenzo and Ignacio be the men to pick up the mantle. Mr. Frost told Dad that Mrs. Larabee spoke highly of the men, saying they were the most professional movers she had ever used, and that she knew they would make sure the mantle would survive the trip without any damage.

"They were to meet Mr. Frost on Friday at five. No one has heard from them since. The owner of the property being renovated, a Don Sanderson, not a Charlie Frost, found our empty moving van on his property Sunday afternoon and tracked Dad down through the logo on the truck. Dad and my sister Ester flew to Ely this morning to meet with the police."

Chris asked, more as a stall tactic than any real belief, the two men had just walked away. "These men are reliable? The truck didn't have a flat tire or anything, did it?"

"Dad asked almost the same question, and the truck was fine, just empty. And before you ask, the two men were not involved in anything shady. They were honest men. More to the point. Ignacio is married to my sister. The little boy who answered the phone is their son. Ignacio would never do anything that would shame Ester or little Hugo. Dear God, this is really bad, isn't it?"

It was bad, but Chris didn't bother answering the question. He couldn't think of any words that would ease the pain he felt sure the family would be going through over the next few days...months, even years. "Do you know the name of the man investigating the ... disappearances?" He wouldn't use the word murder even though he knew neither man would be found alive, just as he knew that the woman pretending to be Mrs. Larabee had made a mistake in letting the two men from Fresno see her face. The man, Charlie Frost, was cleaning up her mistake.

"I don't know who is in charge. When Dad calls, I'll get it and call you back. Will that help?"

Hearing the sorrow in the man's voice, threw Chris back to the day he had spotted the two body bags outside the shell of what once was his home. "We can find out from this end. Your job is to take care of Hugo and your sister. They will need you."

"I will... What do I say to them?"

"Don't say a word, not yet. Just be there." Chris advised. Before he could hang up, Ezra grabbed the phone from his hand. "Mr. Hawley, mah name is Ezra. Ah am Chris's brother, and while Ah hate to ask anything of you, at this time. Is it possible for you to forward me a copy of the contract that the supposed Mrs. Larabee signed when she sold the gun safe?"

"Of course. I have it here in front of me. What else do you need?"

"Do you have Mr. Frost's email address?"

Papers rustled, then "I do. I can also forward the pictures of the mantle, if that would help?"

"It definitely would," Ezra assured the man. Then he rattled off his email and listened as Eric repeated it back to him. "Thank you, suh. We will make sure the police in Ely have this information. Hopefully, they will not disturb your family any moruh than they absolutely must."

"Promise me that you will catch the bastards."

"That is our plan. We will inform you when they are behind bars."

"If there is any justice in this world, there won't be a need for them to go to jail. They will do something to get themselves killed."

"We can hope." Ezra hung the phone up.



"If you don't mind, I need to stop at the post office and sign for something that was sent to the ranch," Josiah told Mary. She had been silent since leaving the school, but the anger boiling off her filled the car. Even Jack had quit his job of watching the world as they passed and was lying with his massive head in JD's lap. He could tell by Jack breathing, in other words, he wasn't snoring, that Jack was not asleep, but remained alert.

"No, I don't mind," Mary responded, but her eyes were focused on her home down the street.

"It only took a minute to get the certified letter Joan Marks sent. He didn't know the woman, hadn't met her or even seen a picture of her, but he had witnessed the effect her news had on Chris. Chris wore a genuine smile when he talked with her about her new baby. Buck had once said that Chris was a different man before the fire; watching him on the phone, he had seen that man. As he opened the door, he gave a silent prayer that the Chris on the phone would come to stay. Sliding into the seat, he asked, "Are ham and cheese sandwiches all right for lunch, or does anyone want me to stop somewhere?"

"Josiah, not in my wildest dreams did I ever think I would say this, but please, can we eat anything other than pizza?"

"Mary?"

"A sandwich is fine. I need to work on getting those pictures of Waldo out to my followers. I can do that while I eat."

"Then back to the ranch it is."



Mary desperately wanted to skip lunch, head to her room, open her laptop, and scan the pictures Josiah had given her of Waldo. The quicker she got them out to her followers, the quicker she could track down the woman's identity. Once Waldo was found and dealt with, she could return to her files her husband had left behind. For now, though, she needed to prove to the brothers that having her and Billy in their midst was not a burden.

She'd help with lunch, chat pleasantly with the brothers over ham sandwiches, call someone to repair the windows in her home, meet Billy's bus, help fix supper, then, after Billy went to sleep, she'd find somewhere, out of the way, in which to make a reel. She couldn't make it in the bedroom because not only would she disturb Billy, but she had been warned that there were listening devices in that room. The library would have provided a perfect backdrop, but listening devices were also in the library. She could go to the barn, but she didn't want to deal with the cats that would try to crawl into her lap while she talked; they had followed her around all morning while she was trying to talk with Chris. They acted as though she carried catnip or some other delectable treat in her pockets. And the horses, they didn't exactly scare her, but their size unnerved her. One of them had shown her its teeth, but she had jumped out of its reach before it could bite her. Laughing at her reaction, Buck had explained that it was trying to smell her, but she didn't believe him. To her, those teeth looked dangerous. Besides, too many of her fans would focus on the 'cute' animals and not her message if she crafted her reel in the barn.

Her only alternative was to make the reel in her car. If she made it when it was dark outside, and only used the overhead light to illuminate her face. The lighting in the car would add circles under her eyes and hollow out her cheeks, but she wouldn't wear any makeup to counter the effect of the poor lighting. She would use it to her advantage. She would appear as though she was hanging on by the thinnest of threads, enduring an unknown threat to her and her son's safety. She'd make a point to discuss her fears for her son's life. She'd say that she and her young son, -stressing the

word young- were living at an undisclosed location until the threat to their lives was nullified. Her followers would jump at the chance to help save her and her son.

She would show them the pictures she had of Waldo, making sure they understood that all of the pictures were of the same woman, the same dangerous woman. With the pictures, her reel would go viral in hours. She would need a new email account to which leads could be sent. She felt certain that someone had seen this Waldo woman in one of her disguises and that someone would reach out to tell her where Waldo was seen and the name she used.

Billy would soon be safe, and the two of them could return to their home. He would never see the broken windows or the glass on the floor. She'd move back to her home and get her life back.

For now, this moment in her life, she would put a smile on her face, thank Josiah and JD for going to school with her, and then she would offer to help prepare lunch.



Orrin arrived in Four Corners late Monday afternoon and had seen some of the damage then, but not recognizing any of the vehicles as belonging to Mary or one of Landon's sons, had kept driving until he reached his home. Looking around, trying to ascertain whether anyone in their neighborhood was out and about, he pulled the car into the garage and shut the garage door. Once inside, he quickly made his way through the darkened house to the library.

Mentally, thanking Evie for her foresight in putting blackout curtains in the library and in their bedroom. Unless someone witnessed him pulling into the garage, he would be able to keep his presence in his home a secret. He planned to find the school yearbooks Evie had kept since high school, moving them into each home they lived in, but never bothered to look through them. He remembered teasing her about it, but she had just smiled her big smile, the one that wrinkled her nose and said, 'Just wait, Orrin, one day they will come in handy.'

If he had thought about the yearbooks before leaving Evie with Allison and Tony, she would have been able to tell him exactly where they were. He discarded the idea of calling her to ask, because he would end up telling her about the damage done to Mary's home. She knew Mary and Billy had moved into a spare room at the Double L, but she was certain that the brothers would keep them safe.

In a little while, he would use the burner phone he had picked up in Elko to text Tony to tell them he had arrived safely. In the meantime, he'd find those blasted yearbooks. Under other circumstances, Evie would have pitched a fit, but he didn't think she would mind if he had to cut the girls' pictures out of the book so he could scan them and email them to Botello's wonder kid. It would be very nice indeed if one of those faces matched Waldo's face.



Parking his rental car in the lot behind his office, Orrin got out and, locking the car, he opened the back door to his office. Making sure the door was locked behind him, headed to his office without turning on a single light, letting the sunlight peeping around the closed blinds in every window guide him without tripping. When he reached his inner office, he shut and locked the door. He dropped the yearbooks he had stopped by his house to collect on his desk.

Promising not to dwell on it, he gave himself two minutes to reflect on the damage done to Mary's home. It looked worse in the light of day than it had yesterday in the dim light the street lights provided. All right, he said, enough about the windows. The first order of business was to figure out how to use Molly's printer to scan. She kept the instruction manuals for everything in the ... storage room, he supposed. If not there, it would probably be in one of the file cabinets.

He could do this and would do this without calling Molly. She would laugh at his helplessness when faced with technology. More importantly, he did not want to compromise her safety in any way.

Before he began looking, though, he needed to find the make and model of the printer Molly used.



Staring at the wheel marks in the dirt, Buck swore. "Somebody, or, based on these tracks, several somebodies, spooked those girls. Had them frightened enough that they were running in circles." Buck stood from where he had been kneeling beside the tracks of what appeared to be four or five motorcycles. He banged his hat against his leg only because the only person around to knock some sense into was Vin, but Vin was not guilty of the dastardly deed. "Who the hell does this...this?" Words rarely failed him, but in that moment, he didn't have the vocabulary to adequately describe the varmints who had chased his heifers from one end of the pasture to the other. Chased them until they lost the calves they carried." He glanced at his phone- no bars.

"Do you have any bars?" he asked his brother.

"I've got one," Vin answered after digging his phone out of his pocket and checking.

"Put in a call to 911."

"Is this an emergency?" Vin tried to reason with Buck. He had never seen the man so worked up about anything.

"It's not an emergency, it's murder."

Vin didn't argue; he had helped carry those lifeless bodies into Doc Anderson's.

Buck said over his shoulder, "Ask for Evan, he'll view it as murder, too. Tell him, I will follow the tracks to the main road and meet him where these... bottom-feeding scum came in."

"Want me to call Chris?"

"No!" he stopped dead in his tracks and turned to face Vin. "Not until we have some answers. He's going to blow a gasket as it is."



Chris studied the contract that 'Mrs. Larabee' had signed, but other than her signature, there were no clues to her identity on it. "How is this going to help us prove that it was Ella who sold the gun safe?"

"By itself, it won't prove or disprove her culpability in the theft, but she handwrote each of us an invitation to her gathering. Ah didn't save mine, but if one of us did, Ah will compare handwriting samples."

"You can compare them even though the names are different?" Chris asked Ezra.

"It won't make a difference. However, mah comparison won't hold up in a court of law. Ah have no standing as a handwriting specialist. If Ah can prove that she signed both the contract and the invitation to mah satisfaction, we may be able to convince the police to look into her involvement in the theft."

"I'll talk to everyone after lunch. If no one saved it, then I'll come up with a pretext to get her to write a note of some sort." He reached for the rest of the papers Ezra had printed. "What are these?"

"Pictures Charlie Frost sent to Hawley."

Chris's face paled as he examined each picture, one after the other. Without explaining to Ezra, he reached for the phone and dialed a number he had committed to memory after being shot: the police station. "Elise, is Mitch in? Do you have any idea how long he will be with the mayor? No, don't interrupt him. If you would, though, leave him a message to contact me ASAP. Thanks." He turned to Ezra, "Those pictures are of the mantle that was in my home. Ella is working with the man who murdered my family."

"If it was Ella," Ezra reminded Chris, Ella's involvement was still speculation; nothing had been proven.

Chris scrubbed at his forehead. He didn't have a headache. He was attempting to harness his rage. He needed to stay calm and plan.

"If nothing else, we know the man who claimed to be Charlie Frost was involved." Staring at nothing in particular, he continued, "Ella and me, we were an item for a few months when we were little more than kids. I don't see her reasoning. It has been almost two decades since we dated. Is she punishing me for breaking up with her?"

"She may be, or she may want you back in her life."

"But it has been so many years... No one hangs on to hate or love for that many years."

"Based on our experiences with Waldo, some people do."

"You are right. Some people do."