



Jack: A Dog Story

An Interlude in Part 2 of the Seven Brothers Saga

“Did I ever tell you the story about how Jack came to be Dad's dog?” Buck asked his brothers, knowing he hadn't, and the story would be a new one for Nathan, too.

It wasn't much of a story, but watching how JD kept trying to get the dog's attention and seeing Josiah's large hand resting on Jack's back brought it to mind.

JD sat up straight, interest shown in his eyes, and Buck knew his brother was eager to hear anything about their dad. Josiah let the book he wasn't reading fall from his hands, and Buck was surprised to see the same interest in JD's eyes shining out of Josiah's. Even Nathan opened his eyes and sat up to listen. Buck felt as if he were a wealthy man doling out money to the needy. He knew their father as Josiah, and JD had not, and Nathan had all but cut himself off from his father for the last several years.

After all this was over, and they were all under the same roof, he would get out the photo albums, sit all of his brothers down, and introduce them to their dad. He sighed at the lost years; years that should have been spent, if not growing up in the same house, then, at the least, they should have known each other.

Clearing his throat, he began, “We always had dogs here at the ranch. Usually, we had a couple of dogs to help with the cattle; you can't have a ranch like this and not have cattle dogs. Sometimes, we had a couple of pups we'd be training, preparing them to take over when the

older ones got too old to work. When a dog got too old for serious work, Dad would not put it down. It would live out its life here on the ranch. The dogs we had were always well-behaved and well-trained. They worked all day long and thanked you at the end of the day for giving them a job.

"Now, you'd think with us having two and sometimes three or four dogs, Dad would be one of those dog people. You know the type. The ones who don't drive anywhere unless they have the dog sitting up in the passenger seat beside them. Those people always have their windows rolled down and their dog hanging his head out the window with his tongue flapping in the breeze. They are the people who put bows or bandanas on their dogs and give them fancy haircuts. They let their dogs rest under the kitchen table at suppertime so they can slip them tidbits. Or worse, they are the type of people who let their dog sleep with them," Buck grinned at Josiah, listening with a guilty look plastered all over his face.

He spared a moment to wonder if Josiah let the Great Pyrenees sleep in the bed or if he made the dog sleep on the floor. He needed to know; it would be essential for some teasing later.

"Dad wasn't like that. He wasn't a dog person," Buck continued. "The dogs on the ranch were working dogs. They were here to do a job. If, in the evenings, we wanted to play with them, it was all well and good, but they did not come into the house. They slept out in the barn. Dad didn't allow us to bring any critters inside the house. If one of the dogs got sick and someone needed to watch it through the night, or a bitch was about to whelp, then they were taken to the room in the barn with the cot. You've seen it?" he asked JD and Josiah, knowing they had, but not wanting to lose them.

"Now, that room has heat and running water, and Dad spent many a night out there watching over a sick animal, so no one can say he didn't take care of the dogs and cats around here. He just didn't want them in the house. Whenever we tried to bring an animal in, he'd launch into this story about when he was a little boy. One of their dogs got hurt badly, and his dad brought the dog in and kept it in on a pallet in the kitchen until it was better. The dog went back out, and then everyone started itching. Fleas were all over the place. This was a few years back, and they didn't have an easy way to get rid of fleas then. He said his mother was mortified she had fleas in her otherwise perfectly cleaned house. He'd end his story by saying the mere thought of having an animal in the house made him itch, and 'no, ' the dog, cat, or whatever, could not come in.

"Nate and me were happy with the way things were. Certainly, we didn't see any need to fight with Dad about bringing the dogs inside. Dad wasn't going to change his mind, that was for sure, and we got to play with the dogs when they weren't working. If they didn't come into the house, we could go outside. Reckon me'n Nate liked dogs as much as any kid, but we never saw Dad's rule as intolerable.

"Can't say the same about Chris. Ask Chris to list the three things he never had, but always wanted as a kid, and I guarantee he'll say, dog, dog, and dog." Buck saw Nathan's slow nod, and they shared a smile. "Didn't matter; we always had dogs running around the place. Mind you, Chris helped take care of those dogs. He helped train them. Certainly, he played with them, but he will still tell you he never got his dog. Chris wanted a dog he could bring in the house, one who would lie under the table at suppertime, to catch the food that Chris would have slipped to it. He wanted a dog that would sleep at the foot of his bed if not on his pillow.

"You may have caught on by now, Chris has something of a temper. He works hard to control it, but as a kid, he lost it pretty often, usually with Dad, and usually it was over his not having a dog.

"My earliest memory of Chris losing his temper was when I was about four. One of the ladies I stayed with when Mom was busy had this beautiful, long-haired, white cat. One day, the cat had kittens. Now, we lived above the bar, and we didn't have a backyard or anything, so getting a dog was out of the question, but I asked Mom for one of those kittens, and she got it for me. I called her Daisy cause she had such pretty yellow fur.

"Anyway, Dad and Chris came to my apartment to get me for the weekend. I don't remember you being there, Nathan, so you were probably taking a nap or something. Like you should be doing now," Buck wished Nathan would go on to bed, but the look Nathan gave him

told him his brother wasn't planning on moving any time soon. What was the saying... doctors being the worst patients? Whatever the saying was, it was true.

Sighing, just a little, over his stubborn brother, he picked up where he left off. "So, while Mom and Dad talked downstairs, I took Chris upstairs to show him my kitten. I might as well have shown him a stack of money piled to the ceiling. He could not have been more impressed, and it took a lot to impress Chris. I tried to show him some of my new toys, but he didn't want to have anything to do with them. He just sat there holding my kitten., He jumped up all of a sudden, saying, 'Buck, Nellie is too little to stay here all by herself. She might get scared at night, and what if she gets lonesome and thinks you're never coming back? We need to take her with us.' The next thing I knew, Chris was emptying my suitcase. 'You can wear my clothes,' he told me when he had me put my stuff back in my drawers.

I put my stuff away, and he started packing Nellie's food and water bowl, toys, and extra food. Dad hollers that it is time for us to go, and Chris hands me this awful, heavy suitcase to tote down the stairs while he carries this tiny kitten. 'She's just a baby, Buck, and you might drop her. I won't cause I know about taking care of babies. I have Nathan to take care of.' It sounded reasonable to me, so I dragged the suitcase down those steps all by myself, with him walking behind me, carrying Nellie, all wrapped up in his jacket.

"Now, Dad must have heard the suitcase thumping down those steps cause he's at the bottom waiting, and doesn't look real happy. Dad asked what was going on. Chris explained that Nellie was too young to be left alone. Dad didn't think much of Chris's idea of taking Nellie to the ranch, and he said 'no.' And Chris got mad. Didn't holler, didn't cry, and he didn't say anything ugly, but he just glared at Dad. Then, very quietly, he again explained why we needed to take Nellie. Guess he thought Dad hadn't heard him the first time.

"Dad wasn't buying it and told Chris to go put Nellie up. Chris walked back up the stairs, real-careful like, and put Nellie back in my room. When he came down, you could see he was livid. He told Dad he was mean, and he hated him. Why couldn't Dad understand that a baby needed taking care of?

"I remember I was crying because I was sure Chris was going to get a whipping, but Momma stepped in and just picked Chris up with him yelling and screaming like that. She told Dad to go help me repack my clothes because she was pretty sure they weren't in the suitcase anymore.

"When Dad and I came back down, they were in the kitchen. Chris was busy, telling Mom how to care for Nellie, and she was writing it on her notepad so she wouldn't forget. I know you are wondering how that fits in, but I just wanted to say that Chris really wanted a pet dog, and Dad had a very firm 'no animals in the house' rule, not even for a visit.

"Not getting to bring Nellie to the ranch didn't slow Chris's campaign to get a dog. Dad reached the point where he wouldn't take us to the feed store because someone always had a bunch of puppies for sale in a cage by the front door. Chris would have one picked out, named, and in the truck before Dad finished shopping. He'd come out, make Chris return the puppy, and then he and Dad would start arguing.

"I remember, more than once, Dad pulling off the road and giving Chris a whippin' for talking back. Dad didn't like spanking us, and he'd be upset for a long time after spanking any of us, but I must say Chris got more than his share of spankings. Most were over dogs."

"Chris is known for his stubbornness," Nathan croaked out. A long day of talking to patients had taken its toll.

Hearing Nathan's voice, Buck thought 'There goes the pot calling the kettle black' but kept his mouth shut. If he pointed out that Nathan possessed his share of stubbornness, Nathan would give him one of his wide-eyed-innocent looks and ignore him.

"There is no way I can overstate how much Chris wanted a dog. Dad may have gotten over his fear of fleas and given in eventually, but he was from the school that said parents needed to be firm in their decisions. I sometimes think he was afraid that if he changed his mind about the dog, Chris would challenge him whenever he said 'no'.

"Dad quit carrying us to the feed store, but he did carry us to the bookstore in Eagle's Bend. Once a month, we'd go there and load up on the new arrivals. Dad would get news

magazines and books on whatever currently claimed his attention, and Nathan would get something with pictures of people cut up into little pieces.”

“I got science books.”

“Yeah, so you say, but I was there, little brother. I saw what you were buying.”

“Get on with the story,” Nathan croaked. Just once, he wished Buck would tell a story without all of his hardly based-in-truth, side-stories.

“So, Nathan had his blood and guts books, and I grabbed up whatever comic books I could find and...”

“And your science fiction, Heinlein, Tolkien, Herbert,” Buck had this irritating habit of trying to make himself look like an uneducated oaf, and Nathan was tired of it.

“This is when we were kids, and who's telling this story? You are supposed to be resting your voice anyway,” he mock-frowned at Nathan before taking up his tale once again. “It would be a fun trip. After we got our books, we would stop to get ice cream. Then, a new mall opened up in Ely. It had two floors, an escalator, and a huge bookstore. So off we went to see it for ourselves. I was about six, so Nate was about four, and Chris must have been eight or nine. Nate and I loved the escalator, and we'd go up and we'd go down and we'd go back up. We were having such a good time going up and down that Dad kept letting us talk him into one more time.

Chris went a couple of times and then realized riding up and down the escalator over and over made him look more like a country hick than the cool kid he wanted to be. If any of his friends saw him riding up and down the escalators like me and Nathan, they would think he had never ridden one before. So he sat on a bench and waited for Dad to tire me and Nathan out. After the umpteenth ride, when we rode back to the top, Chris wasn't on the bench waiting for us.

“To this day, I remember the panic on Dad's face. He swung Nate up in his arms, grabbed me by my hand, and we ran from store to store. The police were called. Nate and me were put on a bench, and a policeman stayed near us while Dad and another policeman ran around the mall asking everyone if they had seen a little tow-haired boy in jeans and a red shirt.”

“You don't remember what he wore.” Buck always claimed he remembered this or that, but Nathan was convinced he remembered stories because of their father's fondness for repeating them. Buck, certainly, did not recall the color of Chris's shirt.

“Shut up, Nathan. Now, as I was saying. Chris had turned the entire mall on its head and had almost given Dad a heart attack. Sometimes, Chris does things without thinking them through. Even I knew better than to just take off like that. Nate and I were sitting on the bench with the policeman hovering over us for what seemed like forever. I was scared people would think we had done something bad, and he was going to take us to jail.

“Just when I was starting to get really nervous about jail, Dad came and got us. Chris had discovered the pet store and decided he needed to look at their puppies. I don't think Chris could sit down for a week, but that didn't stop him from heading to the pet store every chance he got. Dad threatened to buy a leash to use on Chris if he didn't behave, but the call of the dogs was too much for our Chris. Every time we went to the mall, looking for books, he would end up at the pet store.

“That boy wanted a puppy so bad. He would read an ad in the paper about free puppies, show it to Dad, or tell Dad how someone at school had puppies they were giving away, and Dad would point out that we had plenty of dogs and we even had cats. And, of course, we had horses. Chris would say he wanted his own dog, and then he'd start crying when Dad refused to consider it.”

“Chris didn't cry,” Nathan objected.

“He was crying on the inside, where it counted,” Buck insisted.

Nathan nodded. Buck was right about that. “Each time, Chris found himself a puppy, he and Dad would have the same argument. Chris would get angry at Dad, and he would storm off rather than say something that would get his mouth washed out. He would give Dad the silent treatment for days,” Nathan explained to Josiah and JD. His voice sounded so raspy that they strained to make out his words.

“Stubborn cuss,” Buck added.

“Both of them,” Nathan agreed.

"Yep," Buck shifted in his seat, hoping he wasn't making it obvious he was trying to check the time. "I know I am making it sound like Dad didn't like animals. He didn't mind them... He just didn't want them in the house, jumping all over him, slobbering over him, or getting fleas in stuff. I don't think he really and truly understood how much Chris wanted a dog he could think of as his.

"So, the years go by, and at some point, Chris quits asking for a dog. Reckon, he figured Dad would never change his mind, and he was wasting his breath trying to make him. Chris goes off to college, comes back, meets Sarah, and they get married. I thought he would have a pet dog by the time Sarah got the curtains hung, but he didn't get one; he didn't even mention getting one. So, Adam is born, and there is still no puppy. Nothing happens until Adam is about four, and Chris isn't the one to buy the puppy.

"One day, I am at the barn checking on this new mare, and Sarah walks up beside me and says in a quiet, whispery voice that she found Chris's magazines. She said that she might have done something stupid. She went on to say that 'Done was done,' and asked if I would help her. Now, my first thought is, of course, I'll help, but my second thought was, What magazines? And my third thought was that if Chris had a stash of magazines hidden away, he should have shared and hidden them better. I followed Sarah in, and there are all these magazines scattered around the table, and they ain't the kind of magazines to be getting upset about.

"I turn to Sarah and say, 'Sarah, hon, what's the problem?' I couldn't see what she was upset about. So, what if he looked at dog magazines?' 'Well,' she answered, with a sheepish look on her face, 'I ordered Chris a puppy and I used the money he put aside for putting up new fencing.' I didn't choke when she said how much she spent, but it was a near thing. It wasn't much for a working dog. Those dogs are worth their weight in gold, but it was a lot of money for a dog whose sole purpose was to be Chris's dog. I mean, it wasn't what a good, working dog would cost, she saw by the look on my face that I thought she had gone plumb crazy and so she starts flipping through the magazines, showing me all these little notes, Chris had made and all I could think was about all the times Chris disappeared from the bookstore only to turn up at the pet store. I agreed to distract Chris the next morning, so she and Adam could pick up their golden retriever pup from the airport.

"You could have knocked him down with a feather, he was that surprised." Buck smiled to himself, thinking of the stunned expression on Chris's face when Sarah scooped the puppy off the front seat and handed it to him when he opened the car door for her. "He looked happier when he held Adam for the first time, but the puppy was a close second."

JD startled as the story apparently ended. "I thought you said you would tell us about Jack?" he complained.

"Of course I am, but to understand how remarkable Jack's being here is, you need to understand how much Chris wanted a dog and how much Dad did not. Anyone want a beer?" Buck stood up, stretched, and covertly checked the time before heading to the kitchen for a beer. When he returned, he sat in his chair and took a long draw from the bottle before he returned to the story.

"Now, Chris tried to tell everyone the puppy was for Adam, but we all knew that was a lie. That dog slept in Chris and Sarah's room, ate in their kitchen, and rode in the front seat beside Chris when Sarah wasn't around to ride shotgun. He had one of those long fancy names that dogs with papers get, but Chris called him Shadow. And that he was... Chris's shadow. A beautiful dog... he was exactly what Chris wanted."

Buck grew quiet, lost in the memory of the beautiful dog's death. He realized his voice had trailed off; his audience had been left hanging. "Anyway, Chris and me were off looking at a couple of brood mares. We didn't take Shadow, and I guess it was a good thing we didn't. You see, when Chris wasn't around, Shadow followed Adam. That day, Sarah took Adam up to this creek so she could take some pictures. One day, take a look around the house. Most of the pictures on these walls are hers. She had a gift with a camera. She could make the most ordinary scene look magical and wondrous. Never could figure out how she did it." He shook his head, thinking about the time he followed her around with his phone's camera and took the same shots she did. Hers had been stunning; his had been more or less in focus.

"So, Sarah was taking pictures at this creek, on a hot summer day. Adam and Shadow were running around chasing each other, laughing well, Adam was laughing, reckon Shadow was barking, but that was just his way of laughing."

"Buck!"

"Gosh, JD, you are really impatient," Buck laughed and dodged the pillow his brother threw at him. "Now, don't hurt the storyteller or you might not get the rest of the story."

"Now, they are playing, and Sarah is taking pictures. Suddenly, the laughter and barking turn to screams and growls. Sarah spins around, not knowing what to expect, in that one instant, thinking Shadow had turned on Adam, but that wasn't what happened. No. Not at all. See, Shadow had this big, ole rattler by the neck and was slinging it around in circles, trying to break its neck. Sarah grabs Adam and carries him back to the truck. After making sure Adam was OK, she got the shovel Chris left in the back of the pickup from when we had been fixing some fencing, and she headed back to Shadow and the snake. Sarah might have looked like a porcelain doll, but when it came to protecting Adam, she was tough as nails. She told Shadow to drop it, and if that snake had any life in it, after the shaking Shadow had given it, well... Sarah killed it. Chopped it into little bits.



"While I wasn't there, and neither Adam nor Sarah ever said anything, I'm willing to bet she had a few choice words to say to the snake."

"That, I have no problem seeing," Nathan turned to Josiah and JD. "Sarah was this angel of a woman, but calling her protective would be putting it mildly."

"What does this have to do with Jack?" JD answered Buck's frown with one of his own. Yes, he knew he was being impatient, but Buck promised a story about their father and Jack. Buck had been talking forever, and Jack's name had not once been mentioned.

"I'm getting there, boy. Give me a minute." Buck's eyes danced with mirth as he watched JD react to the 'boy'. Obviously, his younger brother didn't like to be reminded he was the youngest, and equally as obvious, JD was willing to keep his mouth shut about it, rather than risk not hearing the rest of the story.

"As I was saying, between Shadow's shaking and Sarah's shovel, that snake met its end that day. It would be the end of the story except Shadow limped back to the truck. To make this long tale a little shorter... Sarah got back to the house, called Dad to help her get Shadow to the vet's, and that's where Dad met Jack.

"Before you ask, Shadow was ok. He landed wrong during one of his wild snake-tossing jumps and favored the paw for a few days, but neither he nor Adam was hurt. Reckon, Shadow was a hero. Certainly, Sarah couldn't say enough good things about the dog, and Shadow ate really good for a long time. Chris finally put his foot down and said Sarah was turning Shadow into one fat dog. Things returned to normal for them after that, but not for Dad.

"You see, the vet has this kennel he uses to keep dogs that have been boarded. It runs alongside the building, and anyone stopping at the office gets to be barked at by all of these dogs when they take their pet in. Dad used to complain something awful about taking his dogs past the pack of 'obnoxious mutts'.

"On that day, though, when he carried Shadow in, only one dog was in the kennel. It was a huge dog, with its hair so matted with dirt and twigs, it was almost impossible to see the true color of the dog's coat. One of his eyes was infected, and a swarm of gnats circled the dog's face. The dog was seriously malnourished and looked like he could barely stand up. I know cause on his third visit to the clinic, Dad took me with him to see the dog.

"I don't know what it was about this dog that caught Dad's attention, but he had. Maybe it was because the dog would hold up his paw, waiting for Dad to reach into the fence to shake it. You have to understand, Dad always warned us about being careful around dogs we didn't know, and here he was, reaching in, invading that huge dog's territory, to shake his filthy, parasite-infested paw.

"The vet said animal control picked the dog up as it walked alongside the road. He said they were worried he would fight them, but he seemed relieved someone stopped for him. They

could have taken him to the pound, and if they had, I don't know what would have happened. A dog of Jack's size and being in the shape he was in, not too many people would have been willing to adopt him.

"Well, they didn't take him to the pound; they took him to Doc Anderson's place, and the Doc started him on all this medicine and special food.

"I don't know why, it wasn't as though Dad hadn't ever come across a stray, but Dad fell in love with the dog. He asked Doc about it when Doc finished treating Shadow. Doc told him he reckoned someone had bought a nice quality puppy without understanding how big the dog would get. Then, rather than trying to find a home for it, they brought it out to the country and dumped it. It happens a lot, you know, people dump their unwanted pets out here, so they don't have to feel guilty about taking them to the pound. Reckon, they figure one of us ranchers will take it in and give it a home. Most die, and more than a few go feral...some people are real bastards and should not be allowed to own pets."

"Yeah," JD muttered under his breath, scooting closer to the Great Pyrenees, he began stroking the massive head.

"Dad placed an ad in the paper and crossed his fingers that no one would claim Jack. Of course, he didn't say that. He claimed a well-mannered dog like Jack probably had a home somewhere and had merely gotten lost. It was his duty to make sure the dog was returned to his rightful owners. That was a lie. Dad knew as well as I did that no one around here had a dog like Jack. He just didn't want to admit the dog was going home with him.

"It took weeks before Dad decided to bring him home. It snuck up on him, I think. It wasn't enough to call Doc Anderson; he started dropping by to second-guess the doctor. The doc's really laid back, and he knew Dad for years, so if he took offense at Dad's suggestions, he sure didn't show it. Did he need to be on a special diet? Were the antibiotics for the eyes doing their job? Had he checked the dog for heartworm, ringworm, and all the other worms? Did he need vitamins? Did he need something for the cuts on the pads of his feet? Dad paid to have Jack sedated so he could have all his hair shaved off without being traumatized-- he was that badly matted, and Dad stayed until the dog woke up and shook his hand.

"I reckon it was obvious the dog was coming home. Well, to the rest of us, it was obvious. Chris was having a field day. He'd call and get the latest on how the dog was doing from Dad. Then, he'd spend the day thinking up questions to upset Dad. Was the dog bored sitting in the run all by himself, all day? Dad took to visiting the dog twice a day. Were his teeth in good shape? Dad watched while Doc Anderson showed him how to brush Jack's teeth, and Dad bought him those special bones dogs eat to keep their teeth clean. Was the concrete ground too hard on the dog, with him being nothing but skin and bone? Dad went and bought the largest cedar-filled bed he could find for a dog.

"Things might have gone on that way forever, with Dad just visiting Jack and never bringing him home, but Adam stepped in and made Dad bring the dog home. He said Jack, Adam picked out the name, told Dad that Jack got lonely at night, and had bad dreams when he had to stay by himself. Dad brought him home that evening, paid a whopper of a bill without blinking an eye," Buck chuckled. "I thought he'd balk when he saw the bill, but he didn't. Little did I know he was so blasted rich." Buck's voice trailed off.

"Did he let Jack in the house?" JD asked from his spot on the floor.

"Yep, he sure did, kid." Buck smiled at the memory. "Jack followed Dad everywhere. He wasn't much of a cattle dog, but he loved it when Dad went to check on the cattle. When Dad drove into town, Jack sat on the front seat with his head hanging out the window. At night, Dad would say, 'Let's call it a night,' and Jack would run out, do his business, check the yard and the barns, and then he'd woof to come in. Dad would let him in, and he slept on his pallet beside Dad's bed. In the morning, Dad would slip him a piece of sausage for being such a good dog."

Jack's enthusiastic tail thumping, caused no doubt by the attention that both Josiah and JD were heaping on him, reverberated throughout the room as Buck's story came to an end. Buck watched as Josiah's hand stroked Jack's head. Poor JD, as much time as he had spent over the last few days trying to get the dog to notice him. You would think it would sink in that Jack was Josiah's dog. Jack was one of those one-man dogs. The giant, white dog turned over his heart to Landon Larabee the moment their father reached into the fence to pet him (And hadn't Dad

always said not to do that? What had he been thinking? A dog as big and as powerful as Jack could have easily taken his hand off.) An occasional thump of the tail was all anyone, but their dad, got out of Jack. For their father, though, Jack would do anything. One of the saddest sights to be seen was when Landon went somewhere without the dog; poor Jack would sit on the driveway gravel and wait until his much-adored owner returned. Coming home from the funeral and seeing the big dog still patiently waiting tore them all up. How do you explain death to a dog about death?

Jack must have understood, though, because that was when he took off. Good thing Josiah showed up, because there was no telling what would have happened to the dog if he hadn't. And wasn't it just a little bit strange that after days of being who knows where, Jack appeared out of nowhere\ and transferred his love and devotion to Landon's oldest son?

"What happened to Shadow?" Josiah asked.

"He died in the fire that took Sarah and Adam," Buck answered after a long pause. He didn't want to get into discussing the fire. He hoped his brothers would pick up on his reluctance to do so without him having to be rude about it.

The room fell silent, everyone wondering what to say to ease the tension that crept back into the room with the mention of the fire. Finally, JD looked up and with a big grin, asked, "So what about the cats? What are their stories?"

Buck was laughing when the phone started ringing.

