



The Hunt Begins

Hunting for a Lost Brother and Other Villains

Part 2 of the Seven Brothers Saga



Using the last of his Mello Yellow, Vin swallowed three extra-strength Tylenol and prayed the pain relief would kick in soon. There was no two ways about it; Buck was going to die, preferably taking days to do so. Vin climbed out of his truck feeling every aching muscle in his body and decided he needed to gut shoot Chris, too. Showing no consideration for his brothers, the bastard used all the hot water that morning. And Nathan deserved something; he stood there laughing with the bottle of ibuprofen in his hand, waiting for someone to take him up on his offer of pain relief. No one had; instead, they had all been too busy being real men who did not feel the effects of spending an entire day in the saddle. He escaped the ranch as soon as he could, and on entering Ely, he stopped and bought the Tylenol and the soda his body so desperately needed.t5

He walked to the motel lobby, smiling through each agonizing step. He felt as if his legs were the wishbone two children had been warring over. Let's mosey on over to Bailey's Creek, Buck suggested early yesterday morning. There wasn't anything he could do about finding Ezra until some searches were finished, though he had a list of people he wanted to talk to, no one was available, yet, and he agreed.



Checking on the cattle at Bailey's Creek had sounded like a good idea, a chance to show his brothers he did know what he was talking about when he said he knew his way around horses and cattle. No one mentioned how far away Bailey's Creek was. Neither Buck nor Chris remembered to mention they usually headed that way in a truck and not on horseback; they would most definitely pay, although, he thought with a snicker, a case could be made that Chris was paying already. Chris was the one who used up the hot water, and he was the one Buck kept laughing at all through breakfast, something about being out of the saddle for too many years.

The smell of rich coffee assaulted him when he pulled open the door and entered the lobby. He hadn't expected that, from Chris and Nathan's description of the area, he'd figured the hotel would be little more than a cesspool. Instead, the lobby, broken into three sections, was well lit, and the floor and counters looked clean enough to eat off.

The main section was not the check-in desk or the obligatory things-to-do-in-Nevada section, but the area devoted to the four round tables and chairs. An L-shaped cabinet separated this area from the rest of the lobby and acted as a mini-kitchen complete with a microwave, sink, and an under-the-counter refrigerator. The place was old and in a poor part of town, but it appeared to him that every effort was being made to keep the motel clean and in good repair.

"Howdy," Vin smiled at the two women sitting at a table opposite the check-in desk.

One of the women, the one with the coal black hair and the thickly lashed, dark brown eyes, stood up quickly, almost knocking her chair over in her haste. Brushing crumbs off her blue blazer, she hurried over to get behind the counter. "I am so sorry. We were ... May I help you?" She blushed as she searched for the words her brain had forgotten; not many hot, gorgeous men walked in and said 'Howdy'.

"Yes, ma'am. I am hoping ya can anyway," Vin leaned on the counter. "May I sit down, join you ladies, and ask you some questions?" He smiled his most sincere smile and crossed mental fingers.

"Name's Vin Tanner, I am a private investigator and have been asked to find a missing man. His trail leads here, and I was... wondering...if" his voice trailed off as the two women exchanged nervous looks with one another. "Perhaps, ya know the man. Dark hair, 'bout 5'8" or 5'9" has a southern accent, drives a black Porsche with South Carolina plates."

"What do you want with him?" the woman, no, girl was a better word, in a worn t-shirt and jeans, asked. She spoke softly and sat on the edge of her seat as though preparing to run.

"I don't want him, his father does," Vin answered, as he walked over to the table, mentally wincing with every step. "May I?" he asked the girl sitting there. He caught a glimpse of her beautiful face and hazel eyes before she bowed her head, letting her thick, mousy brown hair fall forward, hiding her face. She shrugged thin shoulders, and he took the slight movement as permission, pulled over a chair, and sat beside her.

"Landon Standish is very worried about his son, Ezra. Ezra got into debt in a poker game. Bet money he didn't have and lost. His daddy got angry and told him if he was man enough to make those kinds of bets, he was man enough to figure out how to pay them. Landon Standish does not suffer fools, and wants his son to see where gambling led a person. He didn't expect the man Ezra owed money to would take it out of Ezra's hide. Ezra ended up in the hospital, and then he disappeared, AMA, against medical advice. One of his kidneys is damaged, and he needs to be on antibiotics and under a doctor's care. I need to find him soon."

Both women listened closely to his every word. The raven-haired woman pushed back her chair with a sigh, walked over, and got the coffee pot and another Styrofoam cup. She poured and put the coffee pot up before asking, "Monica?"

"Aunt Sophie will be so mad at me, Cindy."

"I don't think so." Cindy blotted the spill that Monica's nervous hands caused. "She told me not to say anything."

"He is hurt and needs more care than Sophie can give. Monica, I've heard him coughing. He's sick."

"Aunt Sophie can take care of him. It's just a little cough." "Monica!"

"She told me not to say anything," Monica explained. "She'll be mad."

Vin was dismayed, as the young woman he had seen when he first walked in shrank in her seat, and transformed into a frightened child. He knew, without being able to see, that her eyes were darting about looking for a way to escape the room. He barely breathed, worried any movement would cause her to rabbit.

"Monica, Sophie would never be mad at you; she loves you too much to be mad. But I do think we should help Mr. Standish find his son," she urged Monica to talk. Loyal to Sophie, Cindy kept her mouth shut when the cleaning woman spirited Ezra Standish away, but this was the second time someone came looking for him, and it sounded as though the next person coming after him might not worry about who else got hurt.

"Aunt Sophie says Christians need to help those who cannot help themselves," Monica whispered.

Vin ducked his head, trying to see her eyes. "His family wants to help him."

Monica shook her head no, and Cindy reached for her hands. "Monica, I could tell Mr. Tanner where he is, but if I tell Mr. Tanner, without your approval, I know you will call and warn your aunt. Sophie will hide him somewhere else. Think about his father; he must be worried sick."

Monica pushed her chair back in a sudden move, and was up and heading to a door marked ladies before Vin had a chance to react. Vin looked at Cindy, who was not so calmly sipping her coffee. "She's afraid. Is she scared of her aunt?" he asked, or has Ezra done something to scare her? He didn't seem the type, but you never knew.

"Monica's not always this scared. She went to see her Mom this morning," she tilted her head to the side, wondering how much she should say. Her dark eyes searched his intense blue ones. She saw only compassion and concern in them, and she finished answering, "Monica's dad likes to use his fists. They are his answer to everything. He hit her Mom one time too many, and there was some brain damage. The doctors say she has a flat personality. I never knew Carrie before it happened, but I've met her since. Flat is a good word to describe her. It tears Monica up seeing her. Takes her days to get over it."

"Is her dad in jail?"

"No. Carrie's still married to him. He still hits her. The good news is, he did let Sophie take Monica without a fuss. Signed papers and everything. The thing with Carrie scared him at the time; it didn't stop him, but it scared him some." "Is she safe?"

"Monica? From her dad, yeah, but you saw her," Cindy got up from the table, grabbed a paper plate and began piling it high with donuts and bagels, saying, "Help yourself. These are left over from the Continental Breakfast we serve."

"Ya sure?" he was hungry, having left the ranch before eating his fill at breakfast; Buck's snickering had gotten damn annoying.

"There's plenty, I have a hard time judging how much to get on Sunday. I got too much this morning." She took one and bit into it, watching him as she chewed. "What happened to you? You're moving like an old man?"

"It shows? And I thought I was doing a good job of hiding it." "I watch people for a living."

"Me, too," he smiled at her. "And, why am I moving like I am a hundred years old? Simple, I am out of shape."

"Oh, I don't know," she made a show of looking him over, and they both burst out laughing, purposely ignoring the girl as she crept across the room. "You look in pretty good shape to me."

"Ya wouldn't have said that if ya saw how long it took me to get out of bed this morning," he turned to include Monica in the conversation. She knew something about Ezra. His only hope of getting to share what she knew was to become her friend. "Yesterday morning, my brother Buck wanted us all to go riding. Ya see, my dad died recently and he left us this ranch..."

For the next hour, Vin talked to Monica. Cindy was there, but the story was for Monica. Vin told her about the big boned bay mare, Coc, and how she kept trying to walk him into trees and things. He talked about how his brothers and him were going to go an auction in a few days where he could pick

out how he would get to choose four or five horses of his own and while he had always wanted a black horse, he would settle for any color, if the horse was sound, even-tempered, and willing to work.

He talked about his little brother, JD, and how he scared Buck to death when he walked up to pet one of the calves. He told her about streams appearing out of nowhere, disappearing back into the ground after only running a few yards. He told her his brothers knew where every one of those streams was. He told her about his brother Josiah and the big dog, Jack, who followed Josiah everywhere he went. He told her about riding all day and how, when they got home, his brother,

Nathan, the brother who was a doctor, had supper waiting for them, but they were all so tired, they could barely eat, and disappointed Nathan when they did not listen to him tell them about his new office. He told her how they all collapsed into chairs to watch TV, and how Buck said maybe next time they might ought to take the pickup out to Bailey's Creek rather than make the horses work so hard, and how everyone threw things at Buck.

He told her he overslept for the first time, ever, and all the exercises he had been doing had not kept him in shape for riding. He told her about Chris using up all the hot water and how he spent his drive down, devising suitable tortures for a brother who wouldn't share the hot water. He told her about beginning his search for Ezra Standish on a Sunday morning so he wouldn't have to spend the day listening to Buck laugh at him.

When she started laughing, she lifted her head, and he could see her eyes. Crossing his fingers and hoping his timing was correct, he asked her about Ezra Standish. She stopped laughing, and the smile faded from her lips. Her eyes grew serious and thoughtful. Vin was acutely aware that his character and truthfulness were being measured, and if he did not pass her test, not even with Cindy's encouragement would she tell him anything.

Finally, she spoke. Listening, Vin wondered how he could have ever thought her a child; her voice was too burdened with sadness and too weary for her to be considered a child. "You seem like a really nice man, but nice is, sometimes, a mask people wear. I know you told me your story, so I would think of you as my friend. But you are not my friend. You want something from me, and friends don't want things from you, except to be friends. When you walk out of here and climb into your truck, you'll be gone, and this morning, no more than a memory. As soon as you get your answers, you will forget I exist."

Vin could feel his face flushing, and he wanted to deny her charges, but he couldn't. He had been trying to get information out of her, and she was right, when he left, chances were, he'd never see her again.

"In school, I knew lots of girls I called friends. We ate lunch together and in the halls, we talked about boys and complained about teachers after tests, but I never brought them home. I never told them about the yelling, the hitting, and the screaming. I've had a lot of boyfriends, too. They take me to the movies, after the movie, they take me to their apartment, and then they take me to their beds. If I don't want to go to their beds, they don't want to be my friend anymore. When I think about it, I have two people, maybe three, who are real friends. Cindy and my aunt are those two people. They are good people, my aunt especially.

"Aunt Sophie saw him. She saw his bruises. My aunt gets angry when someone is hit. She says she can't undo the past, but will do everything she can to keep it from happening again. That's not why she helped him, though. She doesn't care about him. She's angry, now. She is angry that my mom stays with my dad. She's angry that my dad hits Mom. She's angry that Dad didn't go to jail, but mostly she's angry because she didn't do something back when the hitting first started. By helping Ezra, giving him a place to hide until he's better, she can stop being angry for a while."

Monica paused; she never talked like that, especially to a man. She risked a look up at him and, seeing only concern in his impossibly blue eyes, she continued, "Aunt Sophie brought him home, said it was safer for him there than it would be staying here, at the motel. She was worried some of the lowlife around here would take his car, maybe rough him up, thinking he had money. She put him in her room and moved in with me."

She tugged at the chain around her neck; she wasn't used to the weight of the gold lying heavy against her skin. "Last night, Aunt Sophie and a bunch of her friends went to the dollar movie. He went to bed early, and I took a shower. Then I went to him. He told me I was beautiful, but it wouldn't be right if we did anything. He said he was a bastard, both literally and figuratively, but he had not fallen so low

that he would take an innocent to bed. I told him I wasn't innocent, but he wouldn't listen. He said yes, I was. I looked up those words, literally and figuratively, this morning. I know what he was saying, but I think he was wrong. He's not a bastard. I think he is a gentleman; he's the most gentle man I know." "Is he still there?" Vin asked when she grew silent.

"That's not the question I wanted you to ask," she bit her bottom lip and looked at him, her eyes filled with reproach.

"I'm sorry I don't--"

She ignored his question. "That story you told me about his father wanting him is a lie."

Vin thought over her words and how she had just said Ezra told her he was a bastard. "Part of it was," he reluctantly admitted. He was good at finding people, but he wasn't good at weaving a story that would hold up under questioning. If his story hadn't sounded like some bad novel, he would have stuck with the truth from the get-go. "His father...our father died a few weeks ago. Ezra is a bastard. Me too. Ezra said, the first time I met him, that our father collected bastards like other people collect stamps." Vin paused; he wasn't sure how much of the truth she was buying.

"Ezra did get beaten up. A man named Moore did it because Moore dropped a lot of money at a poker game. He's decided to make Ezra and his ma pay. I don't know what Ezra has planned, but he ain't in any shape to go up against anybody. He's going to get hurt if I can't find him..." he stared out across the lobby, his head tilted to the side, no longer listening for signs she was buying into his story but rather listening to his heart. "I don't know him, don't know if I want to know him, but I'll be damned if I let someone take my chance to get to know him away from me. Do you understand?"

She nodded slowly, "I understand you want him. I want to believe you are telling the truth, but you've already lied once to me, and I don't know if this time, you are telling the truth or not." She fingered the chain about her neck, willing her new talisman to give her the backbone people always said she lacked. "You need to talk to my aunt. She'll help you if she thinks you are telling the truth."

Vin leaned back in his chair, his eyes not releasing her, and considered his options. He could try to get this Aunt Sophie to talk to him, or he could press her a little harder, and wait for Monica to crumple and tell him everything she knew. Maybe if he were a different man, he would make her talk, but he had seen how hard it was for her to straighten her shoulders and look him in the eyes. He couldn't make himself break her. "Where is your aunt?" he asked gently.

Monica's hands tore her cup into a mountain of Styrofoam, and she wouldn't look up to meet his eyes. It was as though the few minutes of defiance had taken her and left a rag doll in her place. For several long minutes, her fingers tore the shredded remnants of her cup into even smaller pieces. Vin waited, motionless and quiet, for her answer.

Finally, she answered without looking at him, "Give me your number. I'll tell my aunt you want to see Ezra."

Vin pulled a business card from his wallet, scratched through his old number, and carefully wrote the ranch's number. He checked the number three times before handing the card to her. He hated writing things down for people; too often, he wrote them wrong. "I'll be on my cell phone. That's the number there. If you can't reach me, call me at the ranch," he pointed to the number he wrote. "If you see Ezra, tell him to call me. No, ask him to, please, call me. Tell him I want to get to know him."



Nathan leaned on the steering wheel, checking the parking lot one last time before driving off; Chris's truck was there, but he didn't see Vin's battered pick-up. He hoped they had gone somewhere together; Vin would watch Chris and keep him from drinking too much, and after a meal, solving Junior's problems, Chris would want to drink; he knew if he were in Chris's place, he would.

He guessed Chris decided he needed to deal with Junior Marks alone. Or maybe Chris hadn't included Vin or anyone else in this little meeting with Junior because he just wanted to get away from them all for a few minutes. He had. That was why he was driving through the mostly deserted Four Corners on a beautiful Sunday afternoon; he needed a place he could think, away from his brothers, and he figured the best place to think was his office. Besides, he wanted to look the office over without Emmett hovering.

Pulling into the staff parking lot, he smiled when he saw the parking place with the Reserved for Dr. Jackson sign. His Dad must have been pretty sure he would come home. He and Emmett probably

sat around and discussed their strategy for luring him back. Later, when it didn't hurt so much to think about his father, he would ask Emmett about the plan they had formulated. It must have been good because Emmett had everything prepared for his arrival.

He opened the door with the newly made office key and quickly ran his fingers over the keypad, resetting the alarm. Emmett apologized for the necessity of the alarm. Nathan assured him he was used to such things, but Emmett had only shaken his head and replied it was a sad day indeed when things had become so bad folks had to live in prisons of their own making –couldn't even open the door to get a breath of fresh air anymore. He hoped Emmett exaggerated the problem.

He nudged a box with his toe; UPS had made a late delivery on Friday, and no one had bothered unpacking it. He opened the box and looked in, mostly pamphlets. He wasn't sure where they went, but he didn't like leaving boxes blocking the hall; it bothered him all day long yesterday when he and Emmett had been forced to climb over the box as they toured the clinic. Hanging his coat on one of the brass hooks in the hall, he decided the box could sit in the storeroom as easily as in the hall.

Opening the door to the supply closet, he grimaced. The supply closet had nice, neat shelves complete with labels. Unfortunately, it looked as if a whirlwind had attacked the closet, leaving chaos and ruin in its wake. "Your office manager isn't doing her job, Emmett," he shook his head at Emmett's soft heart. He cleared a shelf and began putting things up where they belonged. After a good forty-five minutes, he fell into a rhythm that allowed him to automatically sort through the mess, freeing his brain to think about the past several days.

A month ago, he knew exactly where his life was heading- nowhere. Looking at him, people would think he had it all together. He agreed with the consensus; his life was heading in the direction he wanted. At least he did when he didn't think too hard. He had gone to college, made it into medical school, and matched at one of the better teaching schools for his residency. He may have been on the outs with his father, but he had discovered his grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. He should have been happy there; he told himself he was happy. But... but he had not committed to a long-term contract with the University, and had not actively looked for a place to set up a practice. And now that he had left, he realized that while he had many acquaintances, no one he knew would miss him other than his grandparents.

He wasn't married, engaged, or even regularly dating anyone. He was working day to day with no long-term goals set out for himself. He thought he had been accomplishing so much, but the reality was that he was drifting through life. Yesterday, when he followed Emmett into the clinic, he had grinned like an idiot while Emmett showed him his office, with a brass nameplate on the door, his name. Emmett seemed pleased that he was surprised, and he was, but he was not surprised at seeing his name on the door or the white lab coats hanging in his private bathroom. The surprise he felt was how right this all seemed.

Practicing medicine with Emmett seemed to be the right decision. Being home and living at the ranch was also the right decision, but this business of having all these new brothers confused him. He knew he had been raised in a rather unconventional home. He had known that from the first day in third grade when Mrs. Stout assigned seats, putting the white kids on one side of the room, the black kids on the other, and him in the middle. Before then, he hadn't been concerned by having a white father, but he was that year. By the end of the year, he had decided it didn't matter; if Mrs. Stout had a problem with his white blood, then it was her problem, not his.

It was true, he grew up in an unconventional family, but 'unconventional family' became an inadequate term when faced with all these new brothers. His father had been sixteen when Josiah was born. And Jenna Dunne? He remembered her. What had possessed his father to get involved with her? She was closer to Chris's age than to their father's. Judging by the sheer number of children his father claimed, it was apparent his father had not practiced any form of self-restraint, but why had his father never practiced birth control?

Buck was the same way, a different woman every night. Had their father's death and the appearance of all these brothers been a wake-up call for Buck? He hoped so. If Buck didn't stop following their father's footsteps, he was going to find himself a lonely old man with no wife and a bunch of bastards calling him daddy.

Strange, if you thought about it. Had their father, and his many women, scarred them all? There were seven of them, all of them of marrying age and not a one of them had ever been married, except for Chris. What were the odds on that? He didn't know his new brothers well enough to say anything much about their state of bachelorhood, but he could speak for Buck, Chris, and himself.

Buck loved women and treated each woman as if she were the most extraordinary woman on earth. It was not merely a phrase Buck employed to lure a woman into a romantic encounter. He treated all women, young and old, beautiful and plain, as though she was truly special to him. Buck believed it, too. He truly loved women. Nathan decided, long ago, that the secret to Buck's success with women was that he was genuine. The reason he wasn't married was less obvious. Had he just not been able to find someone special? Was he merely following the example their father set, or was he incapable of having a long-term relationship that would lead to marriage?

Chris had been on the opposite end of the spectrum from Buck. While Buck happily chased after members of the opposite sex, juggling several girlfriends at once (amazingly enough, none of his harem seemed to mind sharing him), Chris was almost shy in his dealings with the fairer sex. He dated numerous girls but had avoided commitments of any type with any of them until Sarah. He had fallen hard for her. There was no mystery why. Sarah had been the perfect complement to the quiet, introverted, and too often moody Chris.

The question he asked himself about Chris was whether Chris would ever marry again. Far too often to count, he witnessed Chris's teeth bared in a barely controlled rage when their father went out on a date. Not that Chris had begrudged their Dad dating, but he wanted him to settle on one woman and stay with her. He never said it, but Nathan knew Chris made a conscious decision not to follow his father's footsteps, at least in the way their father dealt with women. He poured every part of his soul into his relationship with Sarah, and with her gone ... Well, time would tell.

And what about him? He always used the hospital as an excuse for not getting involved with anyone. It was easy to do, and people admired him for his commitment to helping his patients. He was committed to medicine and wanted to be the best doctor out there, but was he giving up on finding a wife before he even looked? He didn't want to end up living just for the job.

He finished reorganizing the closet and leaned against the doorframe. He wished he could get his thoughts about these new brothers as organized as he had made the closet. He tried to make sense of his feelings; find some coherent thought in the swirling chaos the thought of his expanded family produced. The only consistent feeling he could identify was that of betrayal. How could it be that he felt betrayed? And if he had feelings of betrayal, what did his brothers feel?

He briefly considered joining Chris; maybe they could share some quality time getting drunk; Chris would want something to drink after dining with Junior and hearing his current tale of woe. No, that was a poor idea; he'd start work with a hangover and wouldn't impress anybody. More importantly, Chris was making a concerted effort to stay sober and didn't need to do anything to derail his work. He'd come to the clinic to look around, not to brood; he'd best get busy. He pushed away from the door and began roaming through the clinic, making mental notes concerning the layout of the clinic and the contents of each room.



Chris climbed out of his pickup and checked his wallet, making sure he had enough cash to pay for lunch. He glanced up and down the street, seeing the empty parking spaces; it appeared most of the after-church crowd had already eaten and returned home. That suited him; he had no desire to gossip with anyone about his family's affairs or, rather, his father's affairs. He was there to eat a good middle-of-the-day meal and deal with Junior. It was a good day to eat out, even if he had to do so with Junior. Buck was cooking, and he knew, from a lifetime of experiences, that Buck followed no recipe books and tended to throw things together; sometimes, his experiments worked, and sometimes, they didn't. He was too sore from yesterday to deal with an upset stomach.

Buck spent the entire morning acting nice, and it was getting on his nerves. And Nathan was standing there with his bottle of pills. Nathan did not need to be smirking; he hadn't bothered to ride. He had been too busy at the clinic meeting with Emmett's staff. In fact, when was the last time Nathan spent the entire day in the saddle? It had been years, and no matter how much time his brother spent in one of

those health clubs, he could guarantee Nathan wasn't ready for a day on a horse either. That will change soon. Forget the being doctor stuff, Nathan lost that refuge when he laughed this morning.

As soon as he finished eating, he would walk over to the clinic, and if Nathan was still there, he planned to inform his younger brother that he would spend next Saturday separating the year-old heifers from the rest of the herd. It wouldn't be entirely a revenge thing. They needed to get those heifers to closer pasture, where they could be watched, and without the dogs, they needed every one of his brothers out working.

The dogs, shit, which was another puzzle they needed to work out. He and Buck had talked for a while yesterday about Dad's two Kelpies, both of them poisoned in late August. At the time, Dad and Buck had thought the dogs had gotten hold of something in the tractor shed where the two men had been working on getting the farm equipment ready for the coming of the cold weather. Buck said the dogs disappeared that afternoon, and it had taken three days for them to find Duke and another two to find Darlin.' They buried the two dogs in the graveyard for pets behind the cattle barn and spent the next several days looking for the remnants of whatever the dogs ate. They discovered nothing and came to the reluctant conclusion that they had not been vigilant in watching the antifreeze when they winterized their vehicles.

Last night, Buck had brought up their dogs' deaths, wondering if there was a more sinister element to them rather than his mishandling of something toxic. Chris agreed with him. He knew that both their Dad and Buck were compulsively neat around the cars and the farm equipment. It was impossible to conceive of them leaving out anything the dogs could have gotten into. In light of the way their father died, and in the way his investigator died, they needed to ask, had the dogs been deliberately poisoned as a warning that Dad had not understood?

It was all too much to think about. His dad considered no one in the world an enemy. He got along with everyone, and even if he angered someone, at some point, certainly, it hadn't been anything worth killing over.

"Good afternoon, Señor Chris," Inez broke into his thoughts, a smile lighting her face. "Is it just you today?"

"I'm here to meet Junior Marks."

"And not for my cooking?" Inez teased.

"Certainly, for your cooking. Meeting Junior here is just an excuse to get a steak cooked to perfection. Besides, this afternoon is Buck's turn in the kitchen," he explained. "And it's safer to eat here."

"Ah, yes, I have heard his meals are unique and interesting experiences."

"Maybe you can take the day, one day soon, and come out to the ranch and let him cook for you?" This was the test; if she agreed, she was interested in Buck.

Only a few people remained in the restaurant, and Inez wove them around tables, chairs, and busboys to a table in the back corner. "Will this do?" She ignored his question but couldn't keep the smile off her face, from behind the hand she used to try to cover her it.

"Perfect." Only because he was waiting for her reaction, was he able to catch a glimpse of her smile.

Perhaps, Buck was right, and she was interested in him. He wasn't sure if he should encourage it or not. Inez was a lovely lady and did not deserve to have her heart broken if Buck pursued her, thinking only of a one-night stand.

"Would you like some tea?" she asked, breaking into his thoughts.

"Please, unsweetened," he wondered if his reputation for drinking had preceded him. He almost ordered a whiskey to spite all the gossip, but didn't. He was going to have to deal with Junior's problems, whatever they were, and he'd best be sober if he planned on listening to Junior without saying anything ugly.

It wasn't as though he wanted to hurt the man. Junior was family, but he had never found the words he needed to make Junior understand that he must learn to stand on his own two feet. Today, he had problems of his own to solve. He didn't need Junior's problems to increase his burden. At thirty-five, Junior needed to start taking charge of his life, as his younger brothers, Garret and Jason, had. Garret

was successfully running the dude ranch his father started. Word had it that Jason was working as an organizer for the rodeo circuit.

The waitress brought Chris his tea and a menu. He thanked her, told her he'd order when Mr. Marks arrived. After he sent her on her way, he checked his watch. Junior better hurry up or he'd forget his manners and order without him; he only had a piece of toast for breakfast and was starving. He looked around the restaurant, had Junior come in without him noticing? Nope, no Junior. It wasn't like Junior being late. He opened the menu; he wouldn't give him five more minutes, and then he was ordering.

