



Aftermath of a Shooting

Rooting Out Evil

Part 3 of The Seven Brothers Saga



Recognizing the sound the muffler on Josiah's van made, Chris turned in his seat and parted the slats on the blinds just enough to verify that the cars did belong to his brothers and not a crazy person with a gun. Seeing JD opening the passenger door before Josiah had fully stopped and turned the motor off, he looked around for someone to open the clinic's front door. No one remained in the front office, so he walked over to the door and tried it. Surprisingly, it was still open. He thought they would have locked it when they turned off the outside lights. Someone must have overheard him talking with Nathan and left it unlocked for his brothers. Expecting JD, he was startled when Nathan barreled inside.

“Ezra called and said he thinks you were shot,” Nathan explained as he pushed Chris to a seat and opened up the first aid kit he had brought in with him. “Let me see.”

Seeing the determination in Nathan’s face, he rolled up the shirt sleeve, wincing slightly as it peeled away from his arm. Nathan’s face grew grim, but he silently examined the wound. “It needs a thorough cleaning and could use a stitch or two.” He pronounced as he let out a sigh of relief. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“Nate, at the time, I thought I had skinned it when I fell. Until Ezra called me to tell me about the bullet hole, I didn’t look closely at it.”

“What happened?” Josiah asked from his vantage point behind Nathan.

Using none of the descriptive words Buck would have embellished the story with, he told them what happened. “Someone pulled up into the drive. I thought it was one of you, so I opened the barn’s side door, and the next thing I knew, I heard gunfire. I hit the ground. Jack showed up and got himself shot, and the shooter took off. Ezra and I got Jack in my truck. I brought him here. Doc Anderson is working on him. That is all I know.”

“Is Jack hurt bad? JD asked from his position near the door. Deciding to continue watching the road, so to speak, he had stationed himself by the door so he could see if anyone passed the clinic or pulled into its parking lot.

“Doc Anderson has a lot of experience.” He wished he could offer better news; JD loved the dog and would be deeply hurt if it died.

One evening, after watching JD continue his efforts to get Jack to play with him rather than beside him, he said that JD was acting as if he had never been around a dog before. JD had looked up at him and replied, “I haven’t. You have to pay an extra deposit to have a pet in an apartment. He suggested that he and Josiah try throwing a Frisbee to each other. It had been snowing that evening, but Josiah had gone out with Jack and JD. Jack quickly caught on to the game, chasing after the red frisbee, leaping into the air to catch it, and returning it to Josiah. When Jack accidentally or on purpose brought it back to JD, the kid shrieked in excitement. If Jack died ... Josiah would not be the only one feeling the loss. He wanted to say something positive, but he had seen the hole in Jack’s side and the blood-soaked towels. He was not a vet, but he had doctored enough injured animals to know that Jack’s prognosis was not good.

He wanted to stay until they knew something, but he needed to talk to Mitch. He needed the sheriff to understand the seriousness of the situation. If kids had done the shooting, they needed to be found and punished. This wasn’t a stray dog they had shot; it was Jack. The only dog his father had allowed in the house. “I saw Dad and Jack in town once. I had gone to pick up a few things from the hardware store. I spotted Dad’s truck at the post office. He had gone in to get stamps or something, and had left Jack sitting in the front seat with the window rolled partway down. I remember that I laughed as Jack decided he was not going to be left behind. It took only seconds, and I was too far away to stop him, but Jack squeezed himself through the partially opened window and jumped to the ground. The automatic doors open for dogs as well as they do for people, and before I could react, he was in the post office with Dad.”

Before anyone responded, the door to the back opened, and Leigh walked out. Her appearance, while friendly, did not convey the feeling of optimism. “Doc is still working on Jack. I am here to give you an update.” She paused, searching for words; Doctor Anderson usually talked to a pet’s owners when there was a chance the pet might die, and she was not sure how to proceed. “We took X-rays and can see the path the bullet took. It entered his chest, almost under his front left leg. He must have been lunging for the man with the gun because the bullet went through him and is lodged against his right hip. The bone is not broken, but he may have a limp. The bullet missed hitting all the organs, but it left a lot of damaged tissue. Doc got the bullet out and is closing him up. Bongo has given blood, but he could use more blood, but Bongo doesn’t have any more to give. We are giving him fluids. Jack will make it through the surgery, but he may not survive the blood loss...He is such a sweet dog... I don’t understand people. Doc said for you all to go home. I will stay tonight with him. If anything happens, I will call the ranch.”

She watched as the Larabee brothers stoically absorbed the news, then walked towards the door. “Oh, I almost forgot. She pulled the baggie with the strip of black cloth from her pocket. “This was in between his teeth. Doctor Anderson thought it might mean something.”

It wasn’t Chris but JD who took it from her. “Yes, ma’am. It does.” He looked at the material and handed the baggie to Chris.

"Jack bit the man who shot him." Chris looked at Nathan and said, "As strong as Jack is, he may have broken the bastard's arm. Certainly, he left bruises. We get home, call the hospital. Use the phone in the kitchen." The normal thing after an attack like they had was to call the sheriff, give him the evidence, and then make calls looking for a person with bite marks. Other people might rely on the sheriff's department to make the calls, but they were not other people. They were Landon Larabee's sons. It would be expected of them to take matters into their own hands and hunt the 'kids' who had shot up their place and injured their dog. Later, in the privacy of the middle of their yard, he would talk with JD and Josiah. The strip of torn black cloth meant something.

As they walked towards their vehicles, Nathan grabbed Chris's keys from his hand and tossed his keys to JD. "JD, you and Chris take my car. Chris, don't argue with me. We need to get home so I can properly clean your wound and get you stitched up. We don't need you to pass out and have a wreck. I'll drive your truck home."

It was not a night to prove how tough he was; he would sit in the car and decide on a plan. When they reached the ranch, he would talk to Mitch, if he was still there, and let Nate fix his arm. "Bring the towels in when we get home so we can get them in the washer. Once you get my arm stitched, I'll need to get my truck cleaned up."



Silently sitting in an Adirondack chair, Ezra watched Vin circle his pickup, checking for a tracker. He held a notebook and pen ready to document the make and model number of anything Vin found. He relaxed slightly when Vin gave the all-clear sign before opening the truck's door, and began searching the truck's interior. Vin had searched the horse barn and found nothing that should have made him feel better, but after Vin and Buck reported on what had been found in Buck's truck, he felt nervous. He was determined to keep quiet until all vehicles were checked.

He had hoped Buck would find nothing in the house, but seeing the look on JD's face when he opened the door told another story. The only good news they had that morning was that when Josiah had called to check on Jack, Doc Anderson had shared that Jack had lifted his head when greeted. It was a far cry from Jack's vigorous tail thumping when anyone used his name. When he finally took his shower and saw how long it took the water to clear, he concluded that the likelihood of Jack living through the night was slim. That Jack had survived the night made him, made them all hopeful.

After a small eternity, Vin emerged from the car and gave him a thumbs-up. Three hours later, Vin had completed his examination of all the vehicles, the barns, and the sheds. Reading Ezra's notes, he raised an eyebrow, questioning some of Ezra's comments."

"Why don't we relocate to the horse barn. We can check on the babies and get out of the wind."

"They 'bout finished?"

"If Ah have correctly interpreted JD's hand signals. They are about finished." Without checking to see if Vin followed, he entered the barn. Buck kept telling him that spring was right around the corner, but he had doubts. While the barn was only marginally warmer, he would be out of the wind. Seeing Nathan's sprint from the house to the barn, he surmised that Nathan's declaration of being used to the cold was a lie and that he had become used to the relative warmth of Alabama's winters and felt the cold almost as much as he did.

"Chris said to look this over, and they will be out in a minute. Josiah and JD made sandwiches for us. Buck is bringing us the coffee. Now, don't make that face, Ezra. Josiah made the coffee."

For the next hour, the brothers quietly ate their sandwiches and drank their coffee as Chris and Ezra compared the notes they had taken. Finally, Chris began talking. "The landline is compromised. We only found a bug in the kitchen phone, but since all the phones are connected to one line, all of them, including the one in the barn, we must assume they are all dangerous for us to use. Ezra..."

"The interesting thing about the bug in the phone is that it is old. Ah will have to research it to know for sure, but I believe it came out in the mid to late 90s. There was also one listening device in... our father's bedroom. In a vent above the bed and one in a bookshelf in the library. Both of them were manufactured at approximately the same time as the bug in the phone."

Chris took over, "So Dad had someone listening to him for a long time. Ezra says the rest are newer."

"They aruh expensive, high-resolution recording devices, capable of picking up whispering voices and sending the audio recordings to a computer from which even muffled sounds can be deciphered."

"Can you discover where the signal is being sent?" Josiah asked Ezra.

Studying the remnants of his coffee, Ezra considered his answer. "If Ah was the one doing this, Ah would reroute the signal through servers located around the world. Ah would ensure whoever was

trying to locate me would be overwhelmed by the sheer number of places I sent the signal to. Ah would also have mah system alert me to anyone attempting to trace mah steps. Mah system would shut down before anyone came close to finding me.” He drank the last of his coffee and dropped his paper cup into the garbage bag JD had brought out with the sandwiches.

Buck rolled his shoulders, willing the tightness in them to fade. “So tracking him is useless.”

“If we judge his abilities based on the quality of the hardware he has used, yes.”

Seeing the dejected looks of the men sitting in the barn, Vin interjected, “Don’t go thinkin’ it all over and done with. I have an idea I am tryin’ to hatch. Keep talkin’ while I think.”

Chris didn’t bother asking Vin any questions. He began listing the places where Buck had found devices. “Buck found newer devices in the library, the den, in Dad’s bedroom, Nathan’s bedroom, and my bedroom. He found nothing in the kitchen or the new bedrooms, and nothing in the bathrooms. I think the renovations Dad had done either destroyed the devices or the work being done prevented their installation. I don’t understand why there were no devices in Buck’s room.”

“Perhaps, it was because he knew it was Buck’s room.” Josiah offered.

“Go on.”

“What our father was saying and doing was of interest to two different people. The first person wanted to know who he was involved with, so he would know who he needed to kill. Given what our father suspected about the fire being deliberately set and linking our Mr. X to the newer devices we found, he second person seems to be targeting you, Chris. He listened to our father because he thought that Landon Larabee would lead him to you.

“I can see that, but Buck was the one keeping up with where I was. He should have bugged Buck’s room.”

“You know that, but Mr. X may not have realized it. But getting back to the bedroom...Prior to the funeral, neither you, Chris, nor Nathan was living at the ranch. Mr. X correctly assumed you would move back to the ranch when Landon Larabee died, but he did not know which bedroom you would take, so he bugged both rooms.”

“That makes sense, but it also says that he doesn’t know this family as well as he thinks,” Nathan spoke up. He was furious and was finding it difficult to contain his anger. Someone listening to his conversations with the hospital concerning patients was invasive. Someone listening to his conversations with Raine was invasive and frightening. But someone listening to his father so he could target Chris was a different level of scary. He felt as though he needed to do something, but he did not know what that something was.

“What about the trucks and cars?” asked JD.

Seeing that Vin was still thinking, Ezra answered, “Except the Cadillac and Vin’s pickup, everything has a tracker on it. The Caddy and the Ford have very powerful listening devices in them.

Ezra’s words triggered a thought, “Dad liked driving the Ford, and when he wasn’t in it, he drove the Caddy,” Buck informed his brothers.

Chris nodded slightly as Buck spoke. The words evoked memories of his father sitting in the Ford with Jack at his side. He turned to look at JD and said, “I know you and Josiah are eager to check on Jack, but before you leave, tell Buck and Vin about what you saw when you went to Ely. How does it relate to what Doc Anderson found?

With only a few interjections from Josiah, JD spent the next half hour talking about their trip to Ely and the figure in the black coat.

“Nate, what did you find out about anyone showing up with a dog bite in the ER?”

“I called ERs in Eagle Bend, Ely, and Elko. I got nada. Hearing about how thick JD said the coat was, I think it is unlikely that Jack’s teeth penetrated the skin. He may not have gone to an ER.”

“Pity this didn’t happen in July. The SOB would have a broken arm.”Chris spat.

“If he managed to keep the arm,” Buck said, thinking of the power of the massive dog’s jaws. “He will have bruises... Hard to explain bruises.”

“It is cold outside. He will be wearing long sleeves.”

“Yes, he will, Chris, but he will be favoring it.” Nathan smiled at the thought.

“Vin, have you finished hatching a plan?”

“Don’t get your hopes up; if the guy is as wily as he seems, it will amount to a little bit of nothing. But let’s look at the serial numbers of all those devices. We can find out what store they came from and who bought them.”

“That is a damn fine idea,” Seeing hope, Chris praised his brother.



Garret gave up trying to make the bow in his daughter's hair stay in. Three times he had been forced to stop what he was doing to replace it, and each time he thought it secure, she had proved him wrong. "You know, darling, I brushed your hair. I think it is your mom's turn to help you."

Seeing her nod of agreement, he put the bow in her hand, chubby little fingers closing tightly over it. Kissing her on the forehead, he turned his youngest in the general direction of his father's study, where he heard Ashley talking with his father as she cleaned the room. When she heard her mother's voice, his daughter began running, and he returned to his to-do list.

Granted, they were not at full capacity with children begging to learn how to ride and everyone needing help with something, but the list was a mile long with things needing repair or replacing. At breakfast, his mother said the garbage disposal wasn't making a weird noise and had asked him to take a look at it. The children in Family Cabin 4 had broken a window in one of the bedrooms. Fortunately, no one was injured, and it would be easy enough to replace, but it would take a while. The guest in Blue Spring Cabin was complaining about the water pressure in the shower and claimed that since he was paying an arm and a leg for their best cabin, he expected to be better accommodated. How was he going to improve that?

The decision to cater to the families wanting to experience ranch life and not to the hunters looking to take down a trophy elk or a bighorn sheep had been a strategic one. For the most part, it had been a good one, but some days, he longed for the hunters who came, dumped their luggage in their cabin, and disappeared for a week as they traipsed through the mountain looking for their trophy elk or bighorn.

He usually left the hunters for the bed and breakfasts in Four Corners and Eagle Bend to accommodate. He didn't have to deal with harvesting the dead animals or arranging for them to be taken to a taxidermist. During hunting season, he did take in the overflow from the towns' Band Bs, but the ones he rented cabins to were experienced, did not need a guide, and made arrangements to deal with their kills all by themselves. If most of the hunters were that independent, he would have changed the focus of the ranch.

Hearing his brother enter the kitchen, he said, "Having you around, Jase, sure has made things a lot easier."

"I don't mind helping as long as I don't have to handle any plumbing or electrical issues. Horses are about all I know."

Garrett was about to reply with something along the lines of 'I will never again make the mistake of asking for your help with a plumbing problem,' when he glanced out the window and saw his mother open the Bilco doors leading to the root cellar. "What the Hell?" He exchanged a look with Jason, who merely shrugged. Sure, they kept the things his mother spent the summer and fall months canning in the cellar, but as far as he knew, not once had his mother ventured into the underground room. Grabbing his jacket from the coat tree in the hall, he hurried after her.



Amy did as she had been doing since she buried her eldest son; she searched the shadows. She knew if she could uncover what the shadow hid, she would know why her son died. "Can I get you something?" she asked her son when he joined her, interrupting her exploration of the cellar. She wished he would go back up the stairs.

"Thought you hated coming down here," Garret said from the stairs.

She smiled. The simple question was one she had been expecting. "When I was a kid, my mother would send me to our root cellar to fetch whatever she needed. It was not as well lit as this one, and each time I went down, I expected some monster to jump out from behind a row of pickles or canned beans, but she would give me her look that said to get moving. Walking down the steps, I would search for monsters, get what she needed, and run back to the bright, sunny kitchen as fast as I could. But I always did as she asked. One day, I reached for a jar of peaches when a snake fell on me. I screamed and screamed. Daddy came flying down the steps to rescue me... I never went down to the cellar again. Mother went herself. I don't know what happened to the snake."

"I bet it did not follow you here."

"It may not have, but I have always worried that he sent his relatives here to terrorize me."

"You never told me that story," Garret said, thinking her story explained so much.

"It sounds foolish to be a grown woman sending her sons into a danger she is unwilling to face."

"Nonsense, that is what sons are for." He saw her wince and kicked himself for reminding her of the son who would never run to the cellar to retrieve a jar of pickles for his mother.

"My sons are grown and are busy now. I woke up this morning thinking that it was high time for me to face my fears." She ignored the hand reaching to pull her into a hug and turned to look at the room. She was searching the shadow in the corner, looking for information to remind her why she was scared of the brightly lit room. She knew he thought she was looking for snakes, so she took her time. She turned to her son, "Go on, I'm fine."

"I am proud of you, Ma." Garret's praise was sincere. It hurt when she refused his hug. She never said anything, but since Junior's passing, she had refused to let him or Jason hug her. She knew they had done something; she didn't use any words to accuse him, but sometimes, he felt the condemnation in her eyes. Ashley and Jason both said he was imagining it, but he knew he wasn't. He smiled at her, and she smiled back. "Well, I will leave you to it."

She listened to her son as he walked back upstairs, but she kept her eyes on the shadow. Walking to the first row of shelving, and ran her hand along the edge of one shelf. It didn't belong. How did she know, she asked herself? She could not recall a single time when she had been in the room, but she knew things were in the cellar were different. Had Curtis shared the changes that he made with her?

She examined the lights and, like the shelving, she knew the double rows of fluorescent lights had been installed since the last time she had entered the room. She turned around, and a memory she pulled from some long-buried time in her past superimposed itself over the room she was in. She named the changes. The lights were once a single bulb hanging from a spot in the center of the room, its long cord drooped from its base to run across the ceiling to where it was roughly connected to the electric outlet by the stairs. The wood floors had replaced the packed-earth floors. The rows of shelving housing the jars of food she spent the summer canning had replaced the cardboard boxes of Christmas ornaments and the stack of folding chairs.

How could she recognize the changes in a room she had, to her knowledge, never been in? Resting her hand on a shelf, she searched for something to sit on. There in one corner was a rocking chair. Without bothering to pull it out of its corner, she sat. "Cassie." The room had been renovated for Cassie. She knew it had. But when? Why? Had Cassie's parents done it so their daughter would not be scared to go into the cellar? She couldn't see it. Cassie feared absolutely nothing.



Rocking slowly, she noticed one other thing. There was virtually no dust in the room. All rooms collected dust. And spiderwebs. Even with someone coming down daily to grab something from one of the shelves. There should have been a layer of dust. Someone had been down here cleaning the room. Before the babies, she could see Ashley doing it, but since her children had been born, Ashley did not have enough hours in the day to dust her own house, much less come down to the root cellar to dust. Curtis must be keeping the place clean and tidy. But why? He had spent his life taking care of the cabins, the horses, and the needs of their customers; he did not have time to come down here to dust.

Glancing at her watch, she decided to give herself another thirty minutes to think. Then she would have to go upstairs and get lunch started for their guests.

"If gossip runs its normal course, everyone in town is speculating about what happened here last night. I appreciate you canceling your morning clinic, Nate, but I want you to throw some fuel onto the gossip when you go in. Don't volunteer information, but keep track of anyone asking you about me being shot. Tell them something vague like it sure could have been worse, and Chris acts like he's fine, but he is in more than a little discomfort."

"Sounds like the truth to me."

"Pretend you are Buck and dress it up so that it sounds like a harrowing story fit to be a best-selling novel. Tonight, when you are ready to head home, call and see how I am doing. I will bitch about my arm hurting. Say you will bring something for the pain home and that you will change the bandage when you get home."

"Sounds suspiciously like the truth to me." He glanced at Chris's bandaged arm and then at the hole in the wall. He may have had a little difficulty with geometry, but he could easily see the bullet's trajectory and knew Chris had been lucky.

Chris saw the path Nathan's eyes took and hastened to reassure him. "Nate, I am a little sore, but it's a scratch, not a rush to the hospital time. I want you to call me on the kitchen phone, and when you rebandage my arm tonight, do so in my room. I hope to get a reaction from someone."

"If you are thinking that it's Ella listening to us, I am not sure how you will recognize a reaction. She calls here a lot."

"She has, but I like to think that if she calls and asks me how I feel after being shot, I will take that as a hint that she knows more about what is going on than she should."

"Chris, you were shot; you need to be careful. Don't go and get yourself killed because you used yourself as bait."

"Nate, I got shot in the arm, it seems a waste not to try to get a reaction from someone."



I am lost. I thought that with Landon dead and in the ground, I would find peace, but I haven't. He was supposed to die of old age. I needed him to be as shattered and alone as I am. I needed to tell him what I had done and why. I needed him to understand my fury and beg for my forgiveness. I needed to watch life drain from him until he was an empty husk.

I promised myself that when he was finally crushed by life, I would reveal myself to him. When he dropped to the floor with the weight of the anguish I have felt for all these years, I told myself I could let go of the darkness that fills me. I would no longer be forced to wear the mask I show the world. I could take it off and revert to the person I was all those years ago. Family and friends would recognize me. They would feel wonder and joy when I disclosed myself to them.

For so many years, I watched from afar as Landon consoled himself by burying himself in the task of raising his sons, and I was content to leave him to his loneliness. Then, I discovered that he was renovating the ranch for another woman and her daughters, his daughters. If I had only realized what he was doing sooner, I could have acted differently. I could have made plans before my rage consumed me. If I had, the babies would be alive, and I would not have the weight of their deaths burdening my soul.

If I were cruel, I would have taken his sons from him, but I didn't. I didn't even care when he had the occasional dalliance. I followed the rules and only took those women whom he claimed to love. I only acted to punish him, and he has escaped my punishment.

He swore he loved me. He swore he would love me forever, and he didn't. He fell in love easily. I left a hole in his heart, and he filled his emptiness with others. He forgot me. Just like Derik, he swore to love me forever, and just like Derik, he lied.

I feel compelled to act, but I don't know the direction I am supposed to move.

I heard on my police scanner that the deputies had been called in to the Double L. Something about gunshots being fired. Why? With Landon in the ground, who had been targeted? If someone is hunting the children, do I let him or do I hunt the hunter?



Examining the bruises on his arm, Cletus Fowler attempted to calm the raging woman on the other end of the phone. When she finished her rant against the 'kids' who tried to kill her beloved Chris, he soothed, "Miss Gaines, after I heard about the shooting on the police scanner, I talked to the people in the ER. He never came into the ER. No one came into the ER with any bullet holes. The only people who came in were an elderly man with breathing difficulties and a kid who decided to break his arm by falling on a spot of ice. The story I am hearing is that it was kids who shot up the side of his horse barn."

He listened for a few more minutes as she began responding to his words and not to her panic. When she began talking rationally, he relaxed. She was a woman who tended to act impulsively when it came to Chris Larabee, and that tendency worried him. He had known she would lose control when she learned that shots had been fired at the Double L. She would have ruined everything if she had rushed to check on Chris. Someone would have questioned how she had known about the shooting. Under most circumstances, she would have a believable answer prepared, but she often lost her ability to think where Larabee was concerned.

It could have been worse, he thought as he adjusted his shirt sleeve so that it covered the bruised flesh just above his wrist. It was tender to the touch, but his coat had provided a protective cushion for his arm. No obvious pattern of a dog's bite was left on his arm, and though the bruising looked ugly, he had full mobility of his arm..



Leaning on the desk at the nurses' station, Nathan considered Chris's words as he completed his notes on his patient. Chris wanted him to take note of any suspicious questions about the shooting at the ranch. The problem was that everyone had heard about it. His quick thirty minutes to check on a couple of patients before clinic had stretched into an hour; too many people had heard of the shooting

due to a police scanner in the ER, and they had all stopped him to ask if everyone was alright and was it true that some teens had thought it would be a good idea to take a gun to the Double L and shoot up the place.

Listening to the police scanner was a novel way to prepare the ER for wrecks and other situations that could send injured people their way. It was novel, practical, and it led to gossip. He understood how tittle tattle flew through a hospital. Hospital staff frequently 'shared info' to deal with long hours and difficult situations. Today, everyone wanted him to tell them more than what they had heard on the scanner. Each group stopping him to ask about last night's events, sought to hear the story straight from the horse's mouth. There wasn't much he could add to what the police scanner had reported, except that Jack had been shot after stopping the shooter. Contrary to Chris's desire to turn himself into bait, he did not say anything about the bullet that had grazed Chris's arm.

Finishing his notes, he closed the iPad and said his goodbyes to the nurses and to the security guard hovering near the nurses' station while drinking coffee. The guard said goodbye with a nod of his head and smiled at the man, trying to detect whether the guard was favoring an arm due to Jack. Unfortunately, the man's uniform was long-sleeved; he couldn't tell if either arm was bruised, and nothing in his behavior indicated he was in pain. Picking up his coat from the chair in which he had dumped it, Nathan walked away.

Before he had taken three steps, he heard his name being called. He stopped and waited as Nurse Angie caught up with him.

"I just heard. Are you alright?"

"I am fine. A few holes in the barn and Dad's dog, Jack, was shot, but none of us were injured," he lied.

"The poor dog. Is he going to be ok?"

"I sure hope so."

"Landonsure loved going places with him."

"Yes, Ma'am, he did." He watched her as she stared expectantly at him. She wanted something else, but he wasn't sure what. He said, "Thank you for asking, Miss Angie, but I have to go to the clinic and I am already late."

"Of course. Be careful on the road. It started snowing a few minutes ago, and the roads are bound to be slippery."

"Thank you for letting me know. I will be careful." She did not say anything else, but stood quietly, her eyes boring holes into his back as he walked to the elevator.

That night, after he finished clinics and got home. Chris would want a full report. What could he say? Staff from all over the hospital asked about the 'incident' as they were calling it, but he had not detected any weirdness in their questions, only concern. Fowler was hovering, listening to the nurses as they asked him questions, but he did not say a word. Chris would ask if there were signs that Fowler had been bitten. The only answer he could give would be 'Who knows?'

Then there was Nurse Angie. Something was off, but he could not figure out what. Her questions were appropriate. She acted as he expected her to act. Still, something in their encounter felt off, forced. Thinking of her warning about the slippery roads and then about Vin's flat tire, he circled his car, examining his tires before he headed out. Deciding, he should ask for a Jack update, Nathan called Chris. He would make sure to tell his brother that he was late leaving the hospital, but was heading straight for the clinic. On his way to the clinic, he needed to find a way to tell Raine what happened without alarming her.

He would do his best Bucklyn imitation and tell a story about a group of teens with a gun. At the end of the story, he would shake his head and say, with a tone of disbelief, 'Today's kids spend too much time playing video games.' Everyone would return to their jobs, shaking their heads over today's youth and not connect the shooting to his near hanging or to his father's death.



"Anderson just finished checking on him a few minutes ago. Jack's anesthesia has worn off, and he is alert, but he is still dealing with blood loss. He is weak and needs to keep quiet." Leigh smiled at the men. It was nice to know that people were out there who loved, truly loved their pets.

"How much pain is he in?" JD asked. Josiah had been tight-lipped on the drive to the vet's, but his not talking was different from what it had been on the drive to Ely. Then he had been mulling over his sister's situation. Today's quietness was fueled by anger. He talked so that Leigh knew they appreciated her dedication to her job and did not feel that Josiah's anger was directed towards her.

“Some folks say that animals don’t feel pain like we do. I don’t think that is true. I think animals mask it better than humans. I took him out after the doctor saw him, and even though he was slow, and we didn’t go more than a few steps, he wagged his tail. For now, he is in a crate. That is so we can limit his movements and give him a chance to heal. When he goes home, you will need to keep him in a crate for a while and walk him on a leash until he has done some more healing and gets his strength back.

“He is going home then?” Josiah asked, feeling the weight of worry for this dog who had adopted him, evaporate.

“Yes, sir. Barring any unforeseen complications, he will go home.”



Sitting cross-legged on his bed, Vin observed as JD, with intense concentration, built the computer. Mindful of the listening devices scattered in many rooms of the house, there had been a discussion, mainly in pantomime, of where to locate the computer. With the old wing and most of the ground floor compromised, he and JD had tossed a coin to determine which of their bedrooms would become the home for the PC. His room had, depending on how you looked at it had either won or lost.

Looking at the number of brothers invading his room, he decided he had lost, but could not find a way to suggest they move it to JD’s room without coming out and saying that he hated having his space invaded. And it wasn’t just their invasion of his room; it was the judgment in their eyes when they saw the mound of clean laundry that had to be relocated to the chest of drawers and the dresser before they could clean his desk and begin the build. Until they got this mess sorted, he would have his brothers constantly dropping in for a few minutes on the dang thing.

He needed to set some ground rules for when one of his brothers could intrude on his privacy. Ezra had a laptop of his own, so he doubted that particular brother would climb the stairs and take over his room. And JD had assumed the role of keeping his computer occupied by playing the games he had purchased on it. Nathan spent too much time at the clinic and the hospital. Normally, he ate supper and took over one of the spots in the den so he could pretend to watch TV as he read in one of his journals. Buck said he would use his iPad to keep appearing on social media. He and Chris had mentioned when they were in the barn, checking on the new mothers and their foals, that they needed to install an app called Equine Management, and its companion, Bovine Management. He had no idea if Josiah planned to use it.



Watching JD and Ezra talk quietly to each other as they ran tests on the software Ezra had installed. Buck kept his thought of ‘finally we can get out of this room’ to himself, but knew Chris read his mind and shared a similar line of thinking. Knowing the importance of having a computer that their nemesis had not compromised, he offered his silent support to his brothers as they worked. They needed one on the ranch that Vin could use to work his magic and follow any breadcrumbs that Mr. X had let fall. “Are you finished with these boxes? I can take them to the garbage.” As soon as he saw JD absently nod, Buck reached for the largest box and about jumped out of his skin when Vin, who had been as quiet as the proverbial church mouse, swung his legs off his bed and hissed, “No.”

“Why?” Chris asked the question they all had.”

Vin began gathering the packing material. Sorting the material into separate piles on his bed, “We put this garbage, and anyone who sees it will know what we have been doing. We had better burn it. We can get rid of the cellophane in the garbage, but first, we need to make sure that all the labels have been removed. A name, a price tag, or a barcode could tell our nosy monster what JD and Ezra made. The Styrofoam we tear up, so there is no shape left to identify what it protected. We put all the cardboard boxes in the burn pit and burn them so completely that the only thing left is ash.”

No one questioned Vin’s supposition that Mr. X would sift through their garbage to learn more about what they were doing. The numerous listening devices in their home and vehicles told the story of someone obsessed with the Larabee family.

Ezra interrupted the separation of the trash littering the floor in Vin’s room by asking, “Who wants to be able to get on this computer? I need to set up the security procedures.”

“Just Vin and JD,” Chris answered. “If we all start traipsing up here, we might as well draw giant arrows pointing to the computer. JD and Vin coming up here won’t look suspicious. We don’t want our Mr. X getting curious and breaking in and finding our secret computer.”

“About that...Ah think we should put ring doorbell cameras on the doors to the house and on the barn doors,” Ezra said. “With Jack out of commission for no telling how long, a Ring Doorbell will give us

a warning if someone shows up unexpectedly. We may even end up with photographic evidence we can use."

Chris, nodding his head in agreement, said, "I am throwing this out for us to consider before we go downstairs. What if we talk about this in one of the rooms where Mr. X can hear us?"

Buck hated the way he was being forced into thinking, but he was one of Landon's sons and would face the prospect of danger head-on. "It would be nice to believe that Mr. X would rethink coming out to the ranch if he realizes he might be caught on camera. However, it might make him more cunning and devise a new way of attacking us. We won't know the direction he is coming from."

"True, but the natural reaction of someone being attacked is to take steps to prevent another attack from occurring a second time."

"That's a good point, Josiah." Chris crossed his arms, leaned against a wall, and thought of possible options. "What if we stay quiet about the Ring Doorbells and talk about fixing the gate?" Explaining to the brothers who had not grown up on the ranch, he continued. "We used to have a gate across the driveway. About ten years ago, the garbage truck backed up into it, and Dad decided to remove it rather than repair it."

"Called it a nuisance." Buck smiled. "Of course, as a security measure, it was useless. Dad gave the code out to everyone who brought anything to the ranch. Said it took too much time to run down to open the gate for deliveries."

"It was hard to see at night. I almost hit it a couple of times, so I cheered when he took it down." Nathan added.

"I don't know how much of a deterrent it was. Something happened to scare my mother, made her leave, and kept her from contacting my father."

"If we fix the gate, we are doin' it to appear we are takin' action to prevent another shootin'. We use the Ring Doorbell to catch him."

"Sounds like I need to take JD to get another game."

"Nah, Cindy has to work the second shift all weekend. I told her I'd bring her supper on Friday. I will leave a little early, drop by the store, and get what we need. We can plan it like we did for Josiah and JD. I'll walk in, go to the service counter, pick it up, and go before I get supper."

"I thought you were going to put the brakes on that relationship."

"Well, Chris, I was, but I thought if we all ditched our girls in the same week. Cindy is being temporarily reassigned to a motel in Phoenix. She's getting a significant bonus, which will cover someone checking in on her grandmother."

"You didn't do anything to help her get transferred, did you?"

"I would have if I thought of it, but my hands are clean. She got the job entirely because she is needed and can do the job. She plans to take a couple of courses online and show up in person for tests; the move won't interfere with her workin' on her degree. And while it will affect us, it won't be a death blow. There is a modern invention called a telephone; We'll use it to keep in contact."

"Ezra, I just had a thought. If Mr. X has cloned or taken over our phones, won't he be able to see that we have the Ring Doorbell app on our phones?"

Ezra's grin disappeared when he heard Buck's question. Holding up his index finger in a sign for his brothers to give him a minute to think, he closed his eyes, quickly reviewing and discarding options. When he opened them, he was taken aback by the expectant looks on their faces. "Short of getting additional phones to put the app on, there is not a good way to do it and keep it secret. We can all shut down our phones and choose new passwords to access them. We would need to do that often and would need to commit our complex passwords to memory. But even if we do that regularly, if Mr. X hacks even one of our phones, that secret will be exposed."

"Let's not worry about keeping our Ring Doorbell a secret," Joshiah had been mulling the situation over, trying to understand the person who had stalked and probably killed their father and was now targeting them. "Getting it is a perfectly natural reaction after a 'deranged' individual or individuals shot up the ranch. The problem is that we may encourage Mr. X to attack us when we are not at home. He can target us when we are out checking on the cattle or in town getting a pizza."

"We know the original Mr. X is a marksman, and we have to assume Mr. X 2.0 is also. We need to find out who they are. Ezra, we need Maude. Will she come to Four Corners?"

Hoping he hid the shudder he made at the thought of Maude learning that the extremely wealthy Landon Larabee had left his fortune to his sons. "Ah think, she would prefer to meet in Vegas."

"Great, we can ask Mr. Botello"

"No," Ezra interrupted Vin. "It would be best if Ah pay for our rooms. Ah think we need to use mah idea of a family trip, but Ah will inform Maude there is a lucrative investment opportunity to be had in Vegas, and that Ah will have a room waiting for her when she arrives."

"She'll come?" Chris asked.

"She will be broke after a week of shopping in Paris. She will come flying, thinking to replenish her coffers."

"Do you have the money?" Chris asked even though he realized Ezra planned to cash out at least some of his investment accounts to fund the meeting. The idea bothered him, and he wondered if Ezra was reluctant to stay at Botello's casino.

"Ah have the funds... Ah think our trip should appear as though Ah am celebrating mah return to good health with mah family."

JD had been running a Speedtest and had not been giving the conversation around him his full attention, but when Ezra used the word 'family', his head jerked up and he smiled. Turning back to his task of testing the computer's capabilities, he couldn't concentrate on the information on the monitor. Ezra sounded suspiciously close to admitting they were a family. If he called out Ezra for his word choice, Ezra would claim he had merely used 'family' as an acceptable descriptive word. He would deny any familial feelings. Volunteering to cash out his stocks to fund this meeting proved he meant to stay. Any claim otherwise was a lie. Keeping his back to his brothers, he watched them as they reacted to Ezra's admission.

Based on what Vin and Buck had shared about their meeting with Mr. Botello, he interpreted the look Vin and Buck exchanged as saying that both of them were working to process Ezra's reluctance to use the ranch's money or the help Mr. Botello had offered. Both men had missed Ezra's use of the word family. He could tell Chris had understood the importance of Ezra's words.

He could see that Josiah's mind was still focused on the danger they were in and was attempting to devise a plan to avoid the threat. From the way Nathan kept glancing at Chris's bandaged arm, he would bet that Doc was thinking the same thoughts as Josiah. If things had gone a little differently, they would not be in Vin's room building a computer; they would be arranging a funeral. A guardian angel must have been sitting on Chris's shoulder.

Although Ezra's other brothers may not have recognized the significance of his use of the term "my family," Chris's fleeting, quickly suppressed smile indicated that he understood its importance. It was evident that Chris was already formulating a plan to strengthen the connection between Ezra and his brothers.

He grinned to himself when Chris pushed away from the wall he had been leaning on, and announced they all needed to go downstairs, check the score of the game they had left playing on the TV.



Listening to Ezra weave a tale designed to entice Maude Standish to trade the luxury of her hotel room in Paris for an even more luxurious one in Vegas while keeping their Listeners in the dark was an eye-opener. Ezra exchanged a few pleasantries with Maude, then jumped into his story about an opportunity to meet some very important and wealthy individuals. He told her that he had mentioned her, and they were eager to meet her. Ezra laughed at his mother's response and added that yes, he had only slightly embellished her numerous accomplishments. He ended their conversation by promising to send her an itinerary and her flight information later in the day. 'Of course, first class. '

As soon as he hung up, Chris handed him a cup of the coffee Chris had brewed as he eavesdropped as Ezra conversed with his supposed mother. "So, she's coming?"

"If Ah had said that Ah was planning a family gathering, she would not show, but mah calling y'all important and wealthy piqued her curiosity. She will come, not just to rub elbows with the wealthy and important men Ah described, but to satisfy her need to find out how Ah met these wealthy and important men."

"You told her the truth. According to Orrin, we are wealthy, and to some people, we are important. I, for one, am very anxious to meet her." Not wanting the haunted look to return to Ezra's eyes, Chris did not point out that she was the only one of their mothers still alive, if she was, indeed, Ezra's mother.

"Did Vin or Buck tell you about running into Mr. Botello when they went looking for cattle dogs?"

Allowing himself a smile, Chris answered, "Yeah, Buck said they stopped by the casino. When I asked him how many cattle dogs he saw at the gaming tables. He claimed they reached Vegas earlier than they expected, and what else was there to do in Vegas? Seems they ran into Mr. Botello, and Buck

took the opportunity to thank him for his help in locating you.” Chris knew both of them were spinning the story for the Listeners’ benefit.

“Ah know Vin had a friend who called in a favor to get Mr. Botello to talk with you, and technically, Ah don’t owe him anything, but Ah feel as though Ah do. Ah will reach out and arrange rooms at his place for us.”

“Don’t you want to look around first?” Knowing Ezra’s history with Botello, he wanted to give his brother an out.

“No. When Mothuh learns she is meeting with family and not with men she can drain of their wealth, she will go to the gaming tables and hunt for her next husband. She will view Botello’s casino as a good place to hunt. She will want to leave our family get-away with a man on her arms, and Mr. Botello can protect his guests from her.” After their computer-building session, Vin had cornered him and said that Mr. Botello had offered his help. Not understanding Ezra’s reluctance to accept the offer, he had pointed out that the casino’s security would protect his mother. Ezra had almost laughed at the thought of Maude Standish needing protection, but he thought her prey might.

“Tell you what, talk to the others. Vin said something about wanting to check on his friend, Harry. Says he is getting old. He wants to check on him. I told him to take Josiah with him.” Until they discovered the identity of Mr. X, their Listener, none of his brothers were going anywhere alone. That is, if he had anything to say about it. “Josiah mentioned a while back that he was interested in Native American culture, and he might want to meet Harry. They can meet us in Vegas.”

Ezra let out his put-upon sigh, but Chris was starting to read his brother well enough to know the sigh was faked. “Ah suppose that means we will be doubling up on our work around here, at least until they get back.”

“Harry is part of Vin’s family. I told him once that I wanted to meet the man, but my arm is bothering me, so I will give my seat to Josiah. Besides, Vin has a lot of rules he expects his passengers to obey when they accompany him on a road trip.” He shook his head, negating Ezra’s look of concern when he mentioned his arm. It wasn’t hurting unless he bumped it against something. He said it bothered him for the benefit of Mr. X 1.0 and Mr. X 2.0. Maybe, Listeners was a better, more appropriate word.

Visiting Harry was the excuse, not the reason, for Vin’s trip. He wanted to talk to the detectives who investigated his mother’s death, but life at the ranch kept getting in the way, and he kept postponing his return. After hearing what their father had to say in his taped message, it seemed imperative for Vin to speak with the detectives, and not just as a means to bring closure.

Vin planned to spend a couple of weeks talking to people who had known Cady. Chris had wanted to sit in the passenger seat with Vin, but now, especially after the shooting, he was reluctant to go and leave Buck to watch over the others by himself. Not that Buck wouldn’t take the job seriously; he would. And it wasn’t that Buck couldn’t protect the others; he could. He felt that if either Mr. X were to attack them again, he would attack at the ranch or in Four Corners, and not in Texas. He and Buck would both be needed at the ranch.

Chris asked Josiah to go with Vin because he trusted Josiah to not only have Vin’s back if a situation arose, but to pay attention when Vin questioned folks. Josiah understood how people thought and acted. Josiah could pick up on lies and could verify the veracity of what folks told Vin without beating it out of them; Chris hoped.

Chris pushed away from the table. “Want to get breakfast going? I’ll go check on the babies, then I’ll come back and give you a hand. He didn’t wait for Ezra to reply, but grabbed his jacket from the chair where he had left it earlier, before the computer building party, and headed out the door. As far as he was concerned, mucking out a stall was preferable to making breakfast.



They are having a family getaway in Vegas. I can understand their need to go somewhere and connect as a family. What I don’t comprehend is why they are including Maude. I cannot wrap my brain around their talk of bringing her. How? She should be nothing more than bones, but her son just talked to her on the phone. I recollect my head hurting that night, so I don’t remember it as well as I should. I don’t clearly remember any of those times. I should, but I don’t. I almost remember sitting in my car, using baby wipes to clean my hands before eating pizza.

Funny, ever since, I have celebrated my success with pepperoni pizza. I usually have hamburgers or chicken, but pizza makes me feel in control. Whenever I feel as though my life is running amok, I eat pizza until I am capable of mastering my decisions and emotions.

Is Maude a zombie, one of the walking dead? Surely, people would have noticed. Do I need to go to Vegas and put Maude in the ground again?

