



The Reading of the Will

Restaurants, Hospitals, and Shopping for Groceries

Part 1 of The Seven Brothers Saga



John David rolled his new nickname over his tongue again and again. Never in his life had anyone ever called him anything but John David, except for college professors who called him Mr. Dunne when they checked for attendance and his boss, who persisted in calling him John. It was nice having a nickname, he decided as he sat between Buck and Josiah, the two men dwarfing him. He glanced around the table, his eyes settling on Chris. He wondered how the man did it--made the room his home. He made it appear that even though they sat at a large round table, he was at the head of that table. He did not contribute much to the conversation, but with the occasional nod of his head and his even more rare comment, he controlled it.

JD puzzled over it as he dug into the plate of ribs the waitress slid in front of him. Josiah was the oldest and had a doctor in front of his name. You would have thought he would have taken charge, but he seemed content to let Chris direct things, like choosing where and when they would eat and what topics they would talk about. Chris looked to be about six feet with a lanky build. Except that he was dressed entirely in black; black long-sleeved shirt, sleeves neatly rolled up to his elbow, only slightly faded black jeans slightly scuffed black boots, and a black leather jacket that hung on the coat rack beside JD's own heavy brown wool winter coat which had been new when he started college.

He looked around at the others, suddenly feeling horribly overdressed. He had worn his best suit and a white dress shirt and tie. Although Nathan wore a sweater and dress slacks, and Josiah wore a blazer and khakis, they were not nearly as formally dressed as he and he knew, without a doubt, none of them had agonized over what to wear. Aside from Ezra, who was dressed in a grey suit and dark green shirt, JD was the only other person wearing a suit.

Clothes! What did he need to wear at the ranch? Jeans, he supposed, and boots and some sort of jacket, and... and his bank account was low after buying plane tickets. And he'd have to have money to go back to Boston and pack up his apartment, and he'd have to quit and that would be fun going into his little box of an office, cubicle really, and typing up an 'I Quit' letter after clearing out his desk and deleting his mail. He'd say his goodbyes to a couple of the men working next to him and to Susan at the front desk; he'd never gotten the nerve to ask her out, but that was okay cause he figured that she'd be married and have five children before he'd find the courage to ask her out.

He was starting over. And he couldn't believe it. He had a new job working on a ranch, and the thought didn't scare him. When his mother died three days after he graduated, he had taken the first job he was offered, and he had been scared to death. Every day, walking into that building, he felt scared. At first, he feared he couldn't do the work and woke from nightmares in which he had been fired because his boss discovered how inept he was. One morning, it hit him, he could do the work, but most

of the time, it bored him. His nights became infested by dreams in which he'd grow old and die in that job without ever really living.

It wasn't just the new job; he had a new name, and it didn't sound snobbish like John David. Bless Mom; she hadn't realized what a burden she had given him, saddling him with two names. Buck was right, they were much of a mouthful when said together. JD was the name of a man who could get things done. Dunne. He almost giggled. He glanced around to confirm he hadn't snickered, but they were all too busy eating to notice.

They weren't even talking to each other, just eating. The conversation stopped when the food arrived. He wondered if all the meals with his new family would be like this.

He had a FAMILY. He'd always known he had brothers; Mom had told him about them, but they were unreal, storybook characters. He knew their names: Chris, Buck, and Nathan. He knew about Ezra and how his mom had disappeared with him when he was just a baby, and how Vin's mother was a private eye looking for Ezra.

His mother, Jenna, made sure he understood Landon Larabee had wanted him and did love him, but stayed away for her sake. He hadn't understood why she refused to marry his father, especially when she said Landon Larabee was a good man. He hadn't understood when she refused to take any money from his father. There had been so many times when they could have used it. Once, he came home to find her crying. She admitted she felt extremely tired and was experiencing spasms in her back. He asked her why they couldn't accept his father's offer, made long ago, to help. She had shaken her head and said that she'd explain later. She never had, not to his satisfaction anyway.

He tried to calm down and eat like his brothers were, but it was all too much. When his mom died, he figured he'd be alone forever. He didn't have many friends and had only dated a few times because it seemed to him that it was wrong and wasteful to spend money on himself just to have a few hours of fun when there was so much they needed. He spent his time divided between his school, his after-school jobs, and in the evening talking about his day with his Mom before hitting the books - he needed to get a scholarship, she kept telling him. Then he graduated and he got a job, and his mother was dead, and he had no clue as to how to go about making friends or getting a girl. Now, though, he had brothers, and they were going to be a family, and he could feel the loneliness that had been weighing down his heart, leaving him. They would think he was crazy if he burst into song, but that is exactly what he wanted to do.



Vin thanked the waitress as she cleared away his plate. She and another girl made quick work of clearing empty plates and beer mugs off the table and putting coffee cups and a couple of big, heavy pots in front of them. The girls flirted with all of them as they worked, even with the kid, to JD's obvious amazement, but as soon as they cleared the table, they disappeared. He poured coffee for himself, then poured a cup for Ezra, the man sat stiffly in his chair, and looked as though picking up the heavy

pot would mean it would end up spilled. Certainly, judging by the way he ate, picking up his fork had been too much. He touched little of his lunch, mostly toying with the food rather than eating any of it. Wordlessly, but with a pointed stare at the ill man, Vin passed the pot to Chris.

Couldn't say, he blamed Ezra much. While the platter of ribs Inez had brought over to them was tender, spicy, and delicious, he couldn't see Ezra digging into those ribs and risking getting sauce on his fancy clothes, and if he did have an upset stomach, he did not need to be eating the spicy ribs. Vin crossed his fingers, hoping whatever Ezra had wasn't catching. Then, he dived into the question at hand, "Ya think our Pa was murdered?"



Nathan didn't bother to look up at the men sitting with him. Talking about his father was difficult. With his eyes on the spoon his fingers played with and concentrating more on keeping his voice steady and calm than on the words he used, he explained, "I took a look at the monitor strips, the one taken in the ambulance, the one taken in the ER and the one taken that afternoon. They were right, it wasn't serious. His heart looked strong on the strips. He should not have had a massive heart attack. If I had looked at those strips in the ER and if I did not know that Dad never panicked about anything, I would have sent him home without admitting him. Dad was in good health. He was fine. Nothing was wrong with him. Except Dad died.

"I talked to a colleague in Birmingham and faxed him the strips. He agreed. There were no signs, no real signs; he was about to have a massive heart attack. He was a healthy man."

"Why did they take the heart monitor off him? I mean, it seems to me that if they are thinking a man might have a heart attack, they'd keep watching him," JD asked.

"This is a small hospital compared to what you would see in a bigger city, and in addition to the usual number of patients, the ER was slammed that evening. Their resources were stretched thin. They needed the heart monitor elsewhere, and since Dad was doing fine; they took the one he was using."

"Aren't there drugs that can cause a heart attack?" Josiah's voice rumbled across the table.

"Yes. And before you ask, they found no trace of them when they did the autopsy." Nathan glanced at Buck and Chris. He wished one of them would pick up the narrative. They seemed to think that since he was a doctor, he could handle talking about it more easily than they could. It hurt him to talk about his father's death just like it did them, but Chris was busy being silent, and Buck was looking at something only he could see.

"Would they necessarily show up?" Josiah persisted. He would need his books to check for sure, but he was sure that there was more than one South American plant that mimicked heart attacks.

"Most would," Nathan sighed. They had gone all through this with the police and then with the FBI agents who had come by to talk with them at the sheriff's request.

"Did you find out anything about his investigator, the man who killed himself?" Vin asked.

"No sign of foul play and no suicide note, but the cops say that isn't as uncommon as you think. He had done several things that suicides frequently do. His bills were paid and were waiting on the table, ready to go in the mailbox. His keys were lying on the kitchen table, labeled, so there was no question of which key opened what. The house was cleaned from top to bottom. He had a suit, his ex-wife says it was his best suit and saved for special occasions, and a white shirt still hanging in the dry cleaner's garment bag on the doorknob. His shoes were on the floor by the bed, and his belt, socks, and tie were lying on the dresser. The investigators say they think he was laying out what he wanted to wear for his funeral.

"How did he die?" Vin asked, his brow wrinkled in thought.

"As the judge said, all signs pointed to a suicide. He was found in his bathtub. It looks like he reached down, picked up his gun, and shot himself." Chris answered before either of his brothers.

"Why shoot himself? Ah always thought suicides slashed their wrist when they killed themselves in the tub." Ezra spoke quietly so as not to succumb to the cough threatening to ruin his guise that all was well with him.

Josiah's voice rumbled across the table as he answered, "Maybe it was handy. Maybe he used an electric razor. Maybe he didn't want to be able to change his mind. We do not have enough information to make a conclusion."

Nodding his head in agreement as Josiah named possible reasons for the use of a gun, Chris took over the narrative, surprising Nathan. "The police called it a suicide, and the coroner agreed. There were no signs of a struggle or a break-in. Nothing to indicate anyone else had been in his home. The doors and windows were locked. If his ex-wife hadn't shown up that evening to talk about increasing his child support, he wouldn't have been discovered until he began to smell." "Is his ex-wife in the clear?" Vin asked.

"No one has even seriously considered Carmen a suspect. Besides being a wreck, she also has an alibi. She left their son with a babysitter at six thirty. She was seen arriving at his duplex at 7:00, and folks heard her screaming a couple of minutes later. The duplex had been theirs, and she still had a set of keys." Buck explained as he toyed with the empty coffee cup.

"Not to state the obvious, but why are you not saying anything about anyone hearing the gunshot?" JD asked the others.

"No one did, JD," Chris answered, trying out the new nickname the kid had been given.

"That doesn't make sense. Surely, if her screams were heard, a gunshot would have been heard." JD argued.

"You would think," Chris concurred. "The FBI said his death was between two and four. School hours. Kids were still at school or on the way home. All the adults were at work or were waiting in a car line to pick up their kids. No one was nearby to hear a gunshot."

Vin leaned his chair on the back two legs before he remembered he was in a restaurant in the town in which he would be living for the next year, and if he fell backward, knowing how small-town gossip worked, it would be remembered and talked about for a long time. Not wanting to be a source of ridicule, he settled his chair back onto four legs and looked at his brothers. No one was saying it, but chances were that they were thinking it. "Sounds like the police didn't do a good job investigating."

"Sheriff Harris is the sheriff in Four Corners, and while he is not directly involved in the investigation in Eli, he says Ray Benson has the manners of a porcupine, but he does know what he is doing. When Dad's obituary came out in the paper, he contacted Mitch. He told him Dad had said something about how he was going to be the next one to die. He and Mitch got the FBI on what would normally be considered a natural death." Buck's face was uncharacteristically somber. All his life, he had looked for good in every situation, but this mess, apart from meeting family, had no good to look at. "The sheriff is a good man. He and Benson requested that the FBI double-check the work that Benson's men did on Holland, but they couldn't add anything. There is no trace of anyone in the place other than him and his ex. They,...we all, brainstormed for any way it could be murder, but we couldn't find anything to explain it as anything other than suicide."

"Other than the fact that Dad said they scheduled a meeting with him to go over something he had learned," Nathan interrupted. "They did not find anything in the place or in his office to say a meeting was planned. There was nothing about a meeting on Holland's calendar, and Dad kept stuff like that in his head. The two men involved in the meeting are dead, and we can't ask them anything."

"Where was Holland's underwear? You talked about him laying out his clothes, but you didn't say anything about underwear."

"I don't know," Chris answered, his mind considering the reason for the question.

"Seems to me, it is important if he didn't lay out any. Might be something we need to know."

"Might be at that," Chris looked at his brother with respect. That had been a damn fine observation. He had missed it, hell, the sheriff and FBI had missed that, and they were trained professionals. How did Vin know to ask it?

"I don't understand," JD admitted.

"Well, kid. The way I see it, ya could look at this suicide two ways," Vin answered after getting a nod from Chris. "First way, this is suicide. Classic signs of

suicide and no sign of foul play. The second way, Mr. Holland found information for an important client. He gets his best suit out and hangs it up on the door, along with a good shirt. He lays his socks and shoes where he can reach them easily, the same with his tie and belt. He wants to look respectable for this meeting and might get more business swung his way if he comes across as competent and professional. He strips and gets in the tub. He's soaking in the tub when someone comes in and kills him." "Another thing we need to consider is the timing." Josiah waited until he had all their eyes on him. "Who gets ready for an important meeting, the day before the meeting? Especially in the early afternoon. A man doesn't arrange a meeting, and then kill himself, just like he doesn't take a bath in the middle of the day, instead of showering the day of the meeting."

Buck looked up as a thought struck him. "A man who thinks he is about to get lucky would bathe and shave in the middle of the day. His ex-wife was coming over. Maybe that was the meeting he was preparing for. Maybe he had plans to wine and dine her, get her back. He is getting ready; it doesn't matter if the suit is for the date or the meeting. Either way, his not laying out his underwear doesn't mean anything. It was his home; he would be comfortable walking around in nothing but a towel."

"So, it appears, he probably did not lay out his clothes to make it easier on his family when planning his funeral." Chris glanced at his brothers, Nathan and Buck, wondering if they were also thinking about how hard it had been to find the right clothes to bury their father in. "It seems, to me, in the light of having two meetings to get ready for, Fred Holland did not kill himself. It was murder," Chris stated, with little room for rebuttal.

"No-o-o. I don't buy that. No one is going to sit there and just let someone kill him. He would have fought; there would have been signs of a struggle." John David protested. He hated going against Chris Larabee, but if they were going to do the right thing in this inquiry, he had to voice his concerns and thoughts.

"Maybe he was unconscious when he was killed," Nathan said automatically as he reread the coroner's report in his head.

"Still no. Someone comes up and knocks him unconscious, the autopsy will find it out," JD insisted.

Ezra shook his head, amused at the innocence of youth, "You are assuming competency on the part of the Medical Examiner. Dr. Jackson, do you know the ME's skills?" He told himself he didn't care how Landon Larabee died or whether his detective committed suicide. He was merely interested in getting the facts straight. Nothing could be figured out if the facts were not all in.

"Hold on, Nathan. Before ya answer, let's look at this scenario. Holland is murdered, and the killer begins looking for his notes, or his evidence, whatever. He does a thorough search, cleaning as he goes. This accomplishes two things. He finds what he's looking for and the house gets cleaned, getting rid of the evidence he's been there and helping him set it up to look like a suicide."

"The underwear?" Chris asked, a slight smile on his lips; he liked the way this man thought.

"If it was in the bathroom, Holland was planning on living. If there wasn't any, then it was removed from the scene, or he never got it out of the drawer, and he was planning on walking around the house in a towel. If there was underwear in the bathroom, he was murdered," Vin pushed his hair off his face and continued, "If his underwear is not in the bathroom, but with his other clothes, we can consider it a suicide. No man lays out everything for his funeral, a man who makes it easy for whoever has to come in and clean up after he is found, a man who has labeled all his keys for his family and paid the bills; no man who did those things would forget to put out nice clean briefs."

"Might ah inquire if any notes on the case he was taking care of for Mr. Larabee were found?" He didn't care about the way they looked at him; he was not ready and doubted if he ever would be ready to call the man father. Landon Larabee was just so damned predictable. Sure, he handled the doling out of money in a unique manner, and he must be given points for that, but he ruined it all by tacking that saccharine spiel onto the letter. Now, Ezra knew the price of getting into heaven: one million dollars per child. How the hell did money of any amount erase the debt of never being there? Someone better explain it to his satisfaction if they expected him to call Landon Larabee 'father.'

"No. No notes were found in Holland's office or home about his investigation for Dad. Chris chose not to challenge the man's decision to ignore Landon Larabee as his father. It irritated him, but he could understand it. Respect was earned, and just because he loved and respected his father, he was not blind; there was no evidence Landon had done anything to earn his other sons' allegiance and love.

"And, Ah suppose, neither you nor your brothuhs, have uncovered any notes...your fathuh may have made regarding the investigation of his dead ...loves." He stumbled on the word. What did a gentleman call the mothers of all these sons? Paramour would get him hit, and he did not want that. Wife was not an appropriate word for most of the women. 'Girlfriends' lacked the deep emotional commitment Mr. Larabee felt for the women; his mother was the understandable exception proving the rule. Loves was the politest and most accurate word he could find.

"We've been looking, Ezra, but we haven't found them," Buck answered when he noticed Chris's clenched jaw. Diplomacy was not Chris's strongest point, and he could tell his brother had decided every one of their brothers would follow their father's wishes. In his mind, Chris already had the others unpacked and working the cattle. If any of them chose not to follow Dad's idea then Chris would hit the ceiling; Chris was pretty torn up about the way he had treated Dad, and anybody could tell by the way he was glaring, like it or not, he was going to make sure each one of them followed Dad's wishes to the letter.

Oh, he'd be fair, and tell everyone the danger they were in, but then he'd hog-tie them and keep them that way for the entire year, if he needed to, just to make up for

the way he had blamed Dad for his wife's and son's deaths. Buck wondered if Chris was ever going to stop blaming him for making them stay the one extra night in Mexico. More importantly, he wondered if he'd ever stop blaming himself. A pretty face, a night of passion, could never be worth what Chris lost; hell, what he lost, too.

"So, you think they were stolen, too?" Josiah asked, pulling Buck back into the present.

Buck looked at Nathan, and then they both looked at Chris. Their eyes met and held each other's; finally, Chris broke the gaze and answered. "Anything catching Dad's interest, he kept a file on." The humor in his voice softened his face somewhat, making him look more approachable.

"Lots of things caught his interest," Buck interrupted, shaking his head, enjoying the first honest bit of mirth he felt since Orrin called, saying to meet him at the hospital. "Files and files and files and only Dad knew how he filed things."

"And he tucked things away," Nathan added, thinking of all the books in the library. The ranch house, although large, especially since the remodeling, was not truly exceptional until you walked into the library. There was no organization to the library; it was divided into the books Dad had already read and the books he wanted to read, and although Dad could always walk right to any given book, the library was a source of chaos for everyone else. It would take forever and a day to find the file if he had stuck it in one of his books, as he was prone to doing.

"One moruh thing," Ezra promised himself that he would ask this one last question, and then he would keep his mouth shut. "Where is his computer? He may have kept his notes on it."

His burst of laughter caused coffee to explode from Buck's mouth. Looking at Nathan and Chris as he dabbed at his mouth, he explained. "Dad was a Luddite. He wouldn't touch a computer with a ten-foot pole."

JD had jumped in to voice his incredulity before Ezra could get over his shock. "There were no computers in the house. I don't believe it. Everyone has a computer."

"We had them," Buck reassured JD. "There is an ancient one still in the library, with a modem sitting right beside it. Dad did not know what to do with it when it gave up the ghost. Dad would not use them, though. He said he could get more information from his books than he could from any computer."

"Ah did not know the man, but Ah assure you he had one."

"And what are you basing that opinion on?" Chris challenged. The man steadfastly had refused to acknowledge Landon Larabee as his father, yet he was claiming to know something about the man that the sons who had grown up with him did not.

"A man, as successful as Judge Travis says Mr. Larabee was, needs a computer to keep up with his investments." Ezra was somehow relieved when both Vin and John

Daniel nodded their heads in agreement. He continued. The documents Mr. Holland had are missing. Is it a stretch to believe a computer is also missing?"

Chris nodded thoughtfully before saying, "Good point, but I don't see Dad keeping notes on a computer. They would be in the library, stuck in whatever book he was currently reading."

"He may have done both. If someone broke in to look for the notes, the thief may have taken the computer for insurance." Josiah added. "When I have important information on a patient, I put a handwritten note in his file and another in his chart on my computer. Having information in two different places accomplishes two things. First, it ensures information does not get lost or deleted. Second, it helps to verify your memory of what was said. If both accounts match and then match what you remember, you will be a formidable witness if you ever need to be."

"True," Nathan agreed, after giving Josiah a studied glance. Those words spoke of at least one experience in court. "I hated thinking of Dad being killed because of his 'investigation.' I hate the thought of our mothers being murdered. I have no problem believing that once, having started his investigation, Dad would have found a way to safeguard what he discovered. He would not rely on Holland having the only copies of whatever they had unearthed."

They all reached for their coffee at the same time, though only JD noticed. The cups were drained and put back in their saucers when Chris nodded slightly as though he had made up his mind about something. "Buck, go sweet-talk Inez into giving you some paper and pens. I'm sure she has something lying about."

"And real mugs, these cups are too dainty. Feel like I'm going to crush this one every time I take a sip," Josiah added, his big hand wrapped around the cup, all but hiding it from view.

"Inez got out her best because she knew I was coming," Buck smirked as he left the room.

"Sounds a bit smitten," Vin smirked at Buck's retreating.

"Wants to put another notch in his bedpost," Chris answered Vin's observation.

"Now, I don't know about that. He waxes poetic about her beauty and her virtues. He might really care for her," Nathan objected.



"Pardon me, if one of you gentlemen could direct me to the facilities." Ezra pushed away from the table and stood up. He had held off the coughing as long as he could and needed to get somewhere more private to hack up a lung or two. "Ezra, why don't you let--?"

Ezra abruptly cut off Nathan, "Ah must admit Ah am not feeling mah best, but Ah'm sure it is nothing for you to worry ovuh." He turned away, determined to leave the room while he could still manage a dignified exit. With a little luck, he could escape the restaurant and make his way back to his car before any of them noticed. He needed to

get away now; he could feel them trying to draw him in, and his damn curiosity was making their job easy.

He had to leave, but leaving was easier said than done, he realized as he struggled to put one step in front of the other while keeping his face smiling and devoid of pain. Every breath he was taking was sending blinding tendrils of pain across his chest, making him both nauseous and struggling to smother a cough. A hand clamped down on his shoulder. "Ah must insist you release me," he licked his lips, tasting bile and what may be blood in his mouth.

Nathan let his hand fall to his side. He didn't like how pale the southern man had become or the slight tremors he could feel under his hand. Still, he couldn't force his brother to accept help. Wait, yes, he could; he was a doctor.

"Ezra, stop," Nathan grabbed him by the upper arm, jerking the man back, thinking to stop him. He expected another demand for release, or given the greenish tinge to the man's face, he wouldn't have been surprised if he threw up all over the place. He didn't expect the violent hacking or the blood around Ezra's lips. Only years of working in the ER prepared him to catch Ezra as all color drained from Ezra's already pale face, and he eased the man onto the floor.

"Nathan?" Chris, in that one word, asked what he could do to help. He didn't know if any of the other men noticed when Ezra turned, to ask Nathan to release his arm, coughing instead, his mouth was filled with blood.

"Call 911. Vin, I need a couple of chair cushions." With fingers experienced from numerous nights working in the Emergency Room, he checked his brother's airway and pulse before he began loosening his tie and undoing his shirt buttons. He peeled open the shirt and hissed, "Oh shit."

"Where do ya want these?" Vin, holding two cushions, dropped beside Nathan. His face blanched at the bruising he saw.

"Under his feet." Long, nimble fingers loosened Ezra's belt. "I want to see if your belly's soft or if you are bleeding inside," he told his brother as he gently palpitated the bruised abdomen.

"Stop," Ezra's eyes fluttered open, and his hand reached to push Nathan's hand away.

"Shh. I'm stopping. No, don't try to get up. Chris has called for an ambulance. It will be here in a few minutes."

"Ah don't want to go to a hospital," Ezra tried to push up onto his elbows. "Ahm fine."

"No, you are not fine." Nathan splayed his fingers across Ezra's chest, gently preventing him from moving. "You try sitting up, you're probably going to pass out again."

"Ah just need to get to mah feet," he protested. He had driven from the hotel in Eli that morning without too much difficulty. He was fine. He just needed a day or two to recuperate.

"No. I want you to lie still and give me your history. Are you taking any medications?"

"If ah tell you aruh you going to let me up?"

"No. Have you taken anything for the pain?"

"You're the doctor, figure out things on your own," he retorted, pushing against the hand restraining him.

"Ezra! I need to know," asked Nathan, concern coloring his voice; the heart beating under his fingertips was too fast. He could feel broken ribs. Broken ribs and coughing up blood usually meant a bruised lung. Painful, but not fatal, if it was treated in a timely manner, and pneumonia did not set in.

"Let me up," Ezra tried sitting again, scowling when the large hand easily held him down.

Chris came back in time to hear Ezra argue. He growled out Ezra's name, but Nathan's headshake kept him from interfering. He could see that Nathan had the situation under control and did not need him. This was Nathan's realm of expertise, and unless his brother said he needed help, he would stay out of the way. Besides, he had never really seen Nathan on the job. He knew his brother was smart; Nathan could line several walls with the awards he won in medical school. Watching him in action validated the awards; he was exceptionally good, both academically as well as with patients. It was not just a big brother saying that. The easy, confident way Nathan took over easily demonstrated, he was a man who knew his job.

Funny, how Nathan, from as far back as he could remember, loved doctoring. The rest of them could doctor a horse or cow if they had to, and when Buck had been thrown and broke his arm when they were kids, he had managed things all right. But neither he nor Buck was drawn to medicine like Nathan. It wasn't just that Nathan genuinely loved working on hurt folks; it was that he was curious about things. Medical school had given Nathan a chance to try and satisfy his curiosity. During vacations, their father and Nathan would closet themselves in the library, only to come out for meals, discussing the things Nathan was doing and learning. The discussions had not stopped at the library door but had been continued over supper at the kitchen table. While Chris was not particularly squeamish, some of Nathan's medical school tales about dissecting cadavers were gruesome, and the worm stories should have remained in the library, but that was his dad and Nathan for you.

Growing up, he had often wished Nathan would get his head out of the books and help around the ranch. Now, watching Nathan work, he couldn't imagine the man doing anything else.

"There is supposed to be some give and take in negotiations, suh." Ezra panted as Nathan's hands ran up one side of his ribcage and down the other.

"We are not negotiating, Ezra. We are waiting for the ambulance," Nathan replied while debating whether he should go ahead and cut the shirt and suit jacket off or wait until the paramedics arrived. He knew they were broken when he felt them, but he didn't know if there were other injuries hiding under the suit. He would be more comfortable if he could get a better look at the rest of the man. The first thing he had learned in the ER was that clothes hid injuries.

The ambulances were garaged just up the street. He knew paramedics would be arriving momentarily, and so he decided to wait before he began cutting off his clothes. Besides, without a blanket, the floor was too cool to serve as an exam table. More importantly, he didn't think the man under his care would appreciate being exposed for all the world to see and would fight him on the matter. The condition of his ribs alone, never mind his other injuries, made fighting a bad decision.

"Ah don't think you understand. As Ah tried to explain..." Ezra struggled to catch a breath; the pain in his chest was making it difficult to breathe. He collapsed back to the floor; if he could take one deep breath, he'd be all right, and he could explain to them, convince them to let him up. He was Ezra P. Standish, and P. was for Persuasive.

He could talk anyone into anything. He just needed to catch his breath. Why was it so hard to breathe? One good breath, please, he needed to explain to someone why he couldn't go to the hospital. He looked around for someone who would listen as he explained. He couldn't see anyone other than Dr. Jackson and Dr. Sanchez, and clearly, they weren't listening to him. He could hear the siren, and he moved, struggling to pull his shirt closed.

"You must ..." he tried, but he couldn't get the rest of the words out. He couldn't catch his breath. Was the man leaning on him?

"Ezra, calm down." Nathan let Ezra pull his shirt back up and sat back on his heels, his hand hovering over Ezra's shoulder, prepared to stop the man if he should try to get up. Ezra's breathing was too fast, and his heart rate was making Nathan nervous. He watched with relief as the medics came in with their equipment. Now, he told himself, if Ezra started going bad, he had equipment with which to work.



Chris stood along the wall and fidgeted as the two medics broke through the barrier of spectators and dropped to the floor to talk to Nathan. Never good at standing on the sidelines, he fought the urge to take over the situation, put the stubborn bastard on a stretcher, and load him onto the ambulance. He kept telling himself Nathan was more than capable of managing the situation and would view anything he did to get them moving as unnecessary meddling.

He knew his faith in his brother was well-placed when the southerner lashed out at one of the medics, kicking the man in the hand and knocking the blunt-nosed

scissors out of his hand. Holding up his hands, signaling the medics to back off for a moment, Nathan leaned forward and whispered something in Ezra's ear. Whatever he said worked because, with incredulous eyes, the Southerner became still and allowed the medics to lift him and put him on the gurney.

While one of the medics strapped Ezra onto the stretcher and the other man nursed his wounded hand, Nathan stood up and walked over to Chris. "I think I'd better ride with him, keep him in line," Nathan said with a self-satisfied grin.

"What did you say to him?" Chris had been impressed by Ezra's sudden willingness to cooperate.

Nathan's grin grew, "It's a professional secret." He looked over his shoulders, watching as the two medics headed towards their ambulance with Ezra. "I've got to go."

Chris shared a look with Buck as they followed Nathan and watched the ambulance leave. "Remind me not to ever get hurt. I don't believe Nathan is nice at times."

"Pot talking about the kettle," Buck mumbled, not quite speaking under his breath.

Chris glanced over at him, but rather than comment on that truth, he asked, "Did you settle the bill with Inez?"

"All taken care of," Buck answered, handing Chris his jacket. Chris slipped it on and began heading to the car parked three blocks away. He didn't bother looking behind him. He knew his brothers were following him, matching his hurried steps with their own.



Chris looked up when he heard the door leading to the ER open and watched as a petite blonde nurse padded down the hall. Her sweater obscured her name badge, and for the life of him, he couldn't remember her name, although her face looked so damn familiar.

"Hey, Missy. You got news for us?"

Thank God for Buck, Chris thought as he watched his brother wrap the diminutive nurse in a hug. He could never figure out how Buck remembered everyone. As a teen, he'd tease Buck about knowing all the girls in town, but the truth was, once Buck met anyone, he never forgot their name. Years ago, Chris quit trying to be Buck. He'd never be any good with names. Nowadays, he settled for pretending that he knew who he was talking to if he liked the person, or glaring until introductions were remade if he didn't.

"Hey Buck, Chris," she gave Buck a peck on the cheek and held his hand as she looked around at the others, "One of you boys needs to go settle Nate down. He's got his tail feathers in a ruffle because they are having him stand in a corner and observe."

"They're not letting him help?" Chris frowned. That made no sense; his brother was a damn fine doctor.

"It's not a big deal, but he doesn't have privileges here. If he does something, then the hospital can get into big trouble. It's a formality, but he can't touch a patient until he goes before the hospital board."

"Buck," Chris nodded towards the double doors leading into the ER, asking his brother, the one who knew everyone and remembered their names, to take care of the Nathan situation.

"Already on it," Buck dropped Missy's hand, and the rest of them watched as his long legs ate up the distance, and he disappeared behind the doors.

"What can you tell us, Missy?" Chris asked, pleased to have a name to call the woman; he had found that people were more cooperative if he used their names rather than growling.

"Nathan said to tell you that Ezra is stable, and they will probably be moving him to a room depending on what Dr. Craig says about his kidney," Missy replied, hoping she had not said too much with those few words. Dr. Craig liked to be the one to talk to family; in fact, he had chewed her out after she told the parents of a little boy about his lacerated kidney.

"And?" Chris asked for the rest of what she had to say.

Missy crossed her fingers hoping she would not be written up for a HIPPA violation, and in an almost explosive release of breath, she began, "Dr. Craig is a nephrologist, and they want him to examine Mr. Standish," she also hoped Chris, or someone would explain who this Ezra Standish was; he looked familiar for some reason, but she couldn't put her finger on why?

"If he thinks it's not alright?" A long-haired man standing on Chris's right spoke up for the first time.

"Then, Dr. Craig will come out and talk to you," she had grown up knowing the Larabee brothers. She thought highly of them, and their father had been a nice man. Generous to a fault. Childhood memories prompted her to talk to Chris, but she was not planning to second-guess Dr. Craig again and risk getting chewed out. He wasn't from around these parts and tended to follow rules other doctors ignored when talking to kinfolk. Craig chewing her out or reporting her was not the issue. She was fine shooting the breeze with the Larabee brothers, but she had already said too much because she and the Larabees went way back. She needed to remember to keep her mouth shut. She had been warned only last week about sharing personal information. There was no way she would discuss some unknown man with strangers. Again, a huge HIPAA violation. She had her career to think of.

"Missy," Chris needed more information, but he felt Vin's hand on his arm. Vin was right; she was doing them a favor, so there was no need to try to intimidate her into giving what-if answers. "Thanks."



Nathan walked toward the group of men, his brothers, standing in the waiting room. He passed them, dropped the bag in a chair, and, reaching over, snagged the Coke out of Chris's hand before sinking into a chair. He drained the Coke, crushed the can, and tossed it over their heads into the waste can next to the TV before speaking, "You can all sit down," he ordered. "I'm tired. I'm sitting. You can sit, too. The lot of you standing around looking like a pack of wolves waiting to devour any poor soul with information scares the staff."

Chris made a show of looking at his watch. He was tired of the waiting and wanted to know what was happening, but he did as Nathan requested and sat across from him; he noticed the other men also complied, pulling chairs closer to be within earshot. "Nathan, we wolves have been waiting four hours."

"I know it seems like a long time, but everyone has been moving quickly. Getting X-rays and a CT scan takes time, as labs do. Be nice to people. Put on your friendly face. All of you. They're getting a room ready for Ezra as we speak. He's not happy about being here, but he's medicated now, and so he's not giving anyone too much grief."

"Was it safe to leave him?" Vin asked, not sure of whether he was more worried someone would harm Ezra or that Ezra would harm someone; He had seen the way the paramedic nursed his hand after Ezra kicked him.

"Buck is with him," Nathan swiped a hand across his face, trying to wipe away the smile, attempting to look the cool professional. He gave up and explained, "Buck tried talking with Ezra, but the meds hit him hard, and he can't keep his eyes open, so Buck has a captive audience. The poor man has to listen to Buck's Top Ten." "Top ten what?" JD asked in all innocence.

"Buck likes women and he likes to talk about his," Nathan searched for a less crude word than the one that popped into his head and settled for, "adventures with the ladies in detail."

"Isn't that rather tacky?" Josiah asked with a hint of a smile, wondering what he was getting into with this family.

"Buck changes the names and some of the details, but yeah, it is tacky," Nathan answered.

"So, what happened to Ezra?" Chris moved the conversation back to the problem. He didn't know the man and wasn't prepared emotionally to acknowledge him as a brother, but Ezra was his father's son, which meant, as a Larabee, he had become his responsibility.

"I asked him about the bruising in the ambulance. He said he had a collision. After we got his shirt off, which, by the way, he informed me when we tried to cut it off cost \$800.00, I saw..."

"Damn," Vin interrupted in shock. The shirt cost more than all of what he had on, including his boots and jacket. Heck, it was worth more than his entire wardrobe. "I guess he doesn't shop at Wal-Mart," he quipped.

"Yeah, I thought I was overspending when I spent a couple of hundred on a shirt last spring," Nathan agreed. He ignored the incredulous look Chris shot at him. The shirt had been a necessary expense; he had been invited to a fundraiser, and he had been determined to dress as well as his counterparts. Besides, he worked hard for his money, and Chris could wipe that look off his face; the Birmingham social scene was quite different than the one here.

"Pretty steep... what does he do for a living?" Josiah asked.

"Besides getting beat up?" Nathan replied.

"I thought you said he was in a wreck," Chris spoke sharply. This latest information sent alarm bells ringing all through him.

"He said he was in a collision. On further questioning and with me pointing out a few inconsistencies with his story, which became obvious when we got his shirt off, he admitted he collided with fists," Nathan continued. He stole a glance at his watch. "Give them a few more minutes to get him settled, and then you can go in and ask him the who, what, and why. He graciously informed me when a person says it's a long story, they are trying to be well-mannered enough not to say, 'Mind your own damned business.'"

"Wears fancy clothes; gets beat up and won't talk about it. Does he deal drugs?" Chris asked, not sure why that profession popped into his mind. Maybe it was because he had a problem seeing that brother with his practiced, but fake smile and too expensive clothes, doing anything remotely legal. More than likely, he thought that way because of his decade-old memories of the man's mother. It didn't matter why he had thought it, just as it didn't matter about Dad's wishes. Brother or no brother, he was not staying at the ranch if he was involved with drugs.

"Don't know if he deals them, but he doesn't use them. His blood work-up didn't show any trace of drugs, and he got upset when Dr. Abernathy gave him painkillers." Nathan cringed at the memory of the stricken look on the man's face. He looked betrayed when the needle slid into the IV. Didn't he understand that they were trying to help him? "He says he can't think if he has pain medication on board."

"So, how is he?" JD asked. He didn't think Ezra sold drugs and wasn't interested in discussing that possibility; after all, Ezra was his brother, and surely someone related to him wouldn't be mixed up in anything criminal.

"He is covered in bruises. Not the kind you get from bumping into a table or tripping over something left on the floor. These bruises are the kind you get in a car wreck or when someone intends to inflict a lot of damage."

"He was in a fight then," Chris interrupted, thinking this brother sounded like trouble.

"Wait. Let me finish," Nathan ordered. He could read where Chris's thoughts were taking him. "His chest was struck several times. Those blows broke two ribs and cracked three more. He has bruises, handprints really, on two places on each arm, his biceps, and his forearms."

"Two people were holding him," stated Josiah. He knew, but he waited for Nathan's nod to confirm his suspicions. "Add another man to strike the blows. Speaks of excessive rage."

Nathan flexed his right hand, holding it out for his brothers to see. "I wrapped my hand around Ezra's bicep, covering the bruises, if I had to guess, both men, holding him, were at least my size, or rather, they had hands as large as mine."

Nathan looked at the men sitting in a semicircle around him. Judging by how they threw ideas around at lunch, he felt they had seen the same sorts of things he had, working in the ER. Different perspectives, but the same things. He hoped he was right about them, but he didn't know. However, he knew Chris and he knew Chris would not be able to prevent himself from going into protective, big brother mode once he heard the rest of what he had to say. "He's got two broken ribs on his left side, three with cracks in them on the right. Both lungs are bruised. He has an injury-related traumatic pneumothorax. This means one of his broken ribs nicked his lung. Sounds awful and it is, but it could be worse, much worse. He has a minor lung wound that will heal without surgery. If he rests, does his breathing exercises, and takes his medicine, he will be fine."

"And his kidneys?" Chris asked impatiently when Nathan quit talking. Not that he wanted there to be more injuries, but Missy said something about an injury to Ezra's kidneys, and while he didn't know much about medicine, he knew kidney damage ranked up with a punctured lung, and both were worse than broken ribs and bruises.

Nathan raised his eyebrow. It had been a mistake to let Missy talk to his brothers. "He was kicked in the back, and he is pissing blood. Dr. Craig came in to take a look. He said we would monitor him overnight, but he doesn't think he will need surgery. Just plenty of water and rest."

"And?"

Nathan saw Chris' frustration and hurriedly continued, "X-rays didn't show any breaks in his hip or leg, but sometimes breaks don't show up on X-ray for a few days. He starts having problems walking, and he'll need another set of X-rays. The bruising on the kidney shows up on ultrasound, and he has blood in his urine. Dr. Craig came over and took a look. He says he wants to keep him overnight and will reevaluate him in the morning. Kidneys heal pretty well, if the damage isn't too extensive, and no one wants to open him up unless he starts looking worse. If he looks better in the morning, then he'll be placed on antibiotics and sent home."

"Do you think we could go see him now?" Josiah asked.

"Yeah, but first, we have one more problem," Nathan opened the plastic bag and, after rustling through the clothes, produced Ezra's black wallet, tossing it to Chris.

Chris caught it one-handed and flipped it open to reveal the South Carolina driver's license. "I'll bite, Nathan. What am I supposed to be seeing?"

"It's empty. No money, although I did find seventy-five dollars tucked up in his shoes. No money, no credit cards, no pictures, and no medical insurance card. He didn't have a phone on him, either. Everyone has a phone." "Robbery?"

"The money is not there, but you won't get him to say. He explained, in detail, that since he doesn't believe in using hospitals, he doesn't waste his money on medical insurance. Furthermore, 'and I am quoting here, 'since we brought him to the hospital, despite his protests, when it is obvious to even the village idiot that all he has is a few bruises and since we are now holding him in said hospital against his will, we can pay the bill'." Nathan shook his head and chuckled. "The ladies in admitting are standing on their heads and having cows, all at the same time, because he doesn't have insurance. They hate it when the hospital eats the cost."

"Thought you said that he said pain meds kept him from thinking."

"Thinking maybe, talking no," Nathan smiled, "you could almost hear the morphine kicking in. It's a good thing I've spent the last few years in Alabama, or I wouldn't have a clue as to what he's been saying. Had to act as an interpreter a few times."

Chris listened with one ear as he examined the wallet. All he could determine, from the look of the wallet, was that even if it had money, it would fold, nice and flat; judging by the way he was dressed, Ezra worried at the thought of a thick wallet wrinkling his suit. Black, expensive, empty wallet. He pulled a folded green card out of the wallet.

"What's this?" Chris asked Nathan.

"I didn't look," Nathan answered and nodded his agreement with Chris as he slid the card back into the wallet without opening it. When he looked in the wallet, he, too, left the card untouched; it seemed old and almost sacred. He didn't know the man well enough to examine something obviously personal, and if the torn-in-half half letter he discovered in the coat earlier was any sign, he was unlikely to ever know him.

"All right, I'll talk to admitting and have the bill sent to the ranch. You boys go over to Ezra's room. Get with Buck and make a shopping list. He said something about the cupboard being bare. Nathan, make a list of what Ezra will need when we take him home tomorrow; we can get it when we do our shopping."

"Chris, he doesn't want to come home with us."

"He's busted up. He needs a place to stay."

"Yes, he needs a place to stay, but I don't think he wants to stay at the ranch. We should call someone for him, his mother, or a girlfriend."

"Nathan, I said, he's coming home with us. Besides, didn't he say something about his mother being dead?"

"In the ambulance, he mumbled something about needing to talk to her. We should see if the Judge knows anything about how to reach her. Speaking of the judge, did anyone call him and let him know about this?" Nathan asked the group surrounding him; he didn't think he needed to expand on what 'this' was.

"Josiah called on the way here. Ezra can call his mom from the ranch if he wants to."

"Christopher," Nathan began in his most patient I-am-talking-to-an-imbecile voice. "If you take someone to a place they do not want to be, it is considered kidnapping."

Chris dropped his hand on his too-tall brother's shoulder and looked him square in the eye as best he could, considering he lacked the four inches he needed, "When he leaves the hospital, he's coming home with us."

"Chris."

"At least until his ribs are healed," Chris tried to compromise.

"Chris, he doesn't want to come. Haven't you heard anything he said today?"

"I heard what he said, I have just been listening to what he hasn't said. He wants to do this. It just won't be easy getting him to admit he does." Satisfied he had made his point, Chris turned towards the door with the placard 'Admitting.'

"He's a royal pain," Nathan muttered to Chris's back, disgusted with Chris and the situation. Didn't he realize, hadn't Dad realized, you couldn't snap your fingers and make everyone one big happy family?

Chris heard Nathan and retorted over his shoulder, "I'm a bigger pain than he is."

"I was talking about you."

Nathan chuckled when Chris raised his arm, saluting Nathan and Nathan's opinion with his extended finger.



Vin had to walk quickly to keep up with Nathan as he turned down corridors leading into other corridors. Vin Tanner, he chided himself, it's not that big of a hospital, and if you lose Nathan, I'm sure you could find your way to Ezra Standish's room just fine. It wasn't that he was worried about getting lost; it was that he was worried about getting lost, opening a door, and seeing something he didn't want to see.

And why, while he was thinking about it, was Nathan moving at about one hundred miles per hour? Weren't you supposed to walk through hospitals? Not that Nathan was running, part of the problem was the man's impossibly long legs ate up the ground, and because he was moving as though... as though someone's life depended on it. Vin decided he'd watch Nathan outside the hospital and see if he moved like that all the time.

Vin whispered out of the side of his mouth to his younger brother as they hurried along, "Think we should suggest that it might be a good idea to install some traffic lights around here?"

"The way he's moving, I think Nathan would just ignore them."

"Yeah, he looks like a man on a mission." Vin watched Nathan and Josiah turn the corner. Josiah easily kept pace with Nathan, and though they were talking, with Nathan pointing as he talked, neither man slowed.

"I ain't running in a hospital," Vin said to JD as it became plain, they were losing ground on their brothers. He wasn't particularly worried about someone stopping him and verbally chastising him for running, but somehow running down the long halls, dodging nurses and patients with their IV poles, seemed wrong.

The two, by mutual agreement, slowed down. It wasn't as though Ezra was going anywhere, anytime soon. Besides, they were forced to slow down to a crawl as the corridor suddenly turned into a nurses' desk complete with nurses, doctors, patients, and a whole slew of other people milling about, and the people didn't get out of their way as they had for Josiah and Nathan. They kept their brothers in sight but gave up any hope of catching up to them when a door opened and three women in scrub suits wheeled a gurney out of the room.

The woman on the gurney, pain contorting her sweat-streaked features, reached for them as she wheeled by. Vin and JD backed up against the wall as the nurses aimed the gurney down the hall, running alongside it at breakneck speed.

"Nathan's led us through the maternity ward." Vin's explanation was unnecessary. JD gave his brother a look that said I'm not stupid but didn't make the comment aloud.

"Do you think that she'll be all right? They all look worried."

"I don't know, JD," Vin suddenly smiled, but it wasn't a pleasant smile; it was more of a lopsided grin, full of mischief. "There are windows in those doors, you can go check," he challenged.

JD rolled his eyes, "Yeah, right." He started walking in the general direction Nathan and Josiah had taken.

"Wonder why they put those little windows in the doors, anyhow?" Vin asked JD's back. "Don't seem privacy is too important around here." He followed JD around the corner. Josiah and Nathan were waiting for them by a Coke machine, drinks in hand.

"Thought we'd lost you," Josiah teased.

"Nah, we just had to stop and give some expert advice to some woman fixin' to have a baby," Vin quipped.

"Come on," Nathan said. "We are almost there. I want to make sure Ezra got settled into the room without any problems and see how he's reacting to the meds."

They turned one more corner and almost ran into Buck leaning against a doorway, chatting with a silver-haired nurse with a beautiful smile. Vin stopped in midstep. Did Buck know everyone? He certainly was on friendly terms with every woman they met today. This one, though, was old enough to be his mother.

"Miss Angie, how are you?" Nathan enveloped the buxom woman in a brief hug.

"Never better," she beamed up at Nathan. "Buck tells me our Mr. Standish is one of your long-lost brothers."

"Sure is. Hope he doesn't give you too much trouble."

"Don't worry about it; many people don't want to be here. Are you going to introduce me?"

"Yes, Ma'am. This here is JD Dunne, that one is Vin Tanner, and this is Josiah Sanchez."

If the woman saw anything unusual about meeting all these grown brothers with different last names, she didn't show it. Instead, she shook each man's hand, smiling up warmly at each man as she welcomed him to Eagle Bend.

"Where's Chris?" she asked, worry evident in her voice.

"He's trying to take care of the paperwork."

She wanted to ask how he was holding up and if he was still drinking, but she didn't; you didn't ask the Larabee boys, things like that. They would look you in the eye and smile, then tell you everything was just fine. "I hope he doesn't get the ladies all in a tizzy, pouring on the Larabee charm."

"Well, Miss Angie, maybe I should have gone down there if they need to be charmed," Buck volunteered with a smile, thinking Miss Angie ought to know better. She should know the only person Chris had ever poured on the Larabee charm was dead. His good mood at seeing the woman evaporated. As frustrated as he was by Chris's behavior, he understood the depth of Chris's loss; he wished other people could.

"Bucklyn, you go down there, and the ladies would never let you go," she reached up and patted his cheek. "You are just too cute for your own good."

Nathan cleared his throat, a little embarrassed about his brother's reputation, and turned to his newfound brothers, "Ms. Angie Delaney, better known as Miss Angie, worked with my mother when my mom worked here, and then she went and joined Dr. Murdoch's staff. He was our pediatrician. She always made going to the doctor a little less scary."

"Tell the truth, Nathan. You were never scared at the doctor's office. We all knew right then you were heading for medical school. Took after his mama," she patted his arm. "She was the loveliest woman, a good nurse, and a sweet soul. If only she could see you now. She would be so proud of you, Nathan."



Buck leaned against the doorway, smiling at Miss Angie as she petted Nathan on the arm, but his eyes were not on the reunion, but on the memories of his father, seeing Miss Angie brought back. Going to the pediatrician or the dentist had been secret trips his dad insisted they make. His mom had nothing against going to the doctor when a body was sick, but when it was healthy, she figured it was a waste of money. As far as he knew, she never realized that he was vaccinated against all the childhood diseases, and had his teeth cleaned every six months.

He tilted his head to the side and smiled, pretending he was listening to Miss Angie go on about Clara Jackson. Sometimes, he wished people remembered his momma the way they did Cassie and Clara. Folks loved talking about the beautiful, laughing Cassie and the sweet, caring Clara, but they never said much about his mother, not to him anyway. They never talked about how beautiful she was... and she was. They never talked about how good she was... and she was. They certainly never thought she was a good mother, and she was the best.

He knew how she came across other folk; they thought his mom was neglectful. They lived over her bar, she didn't take him to the doctor, and she let him skip school more than he should. On the other hand, she always had time for him. Not just a pat on the back or a quick hug, but real-time. They walked on mountain trails, and she would name each plant and tree they saw. If they came across a creek, they would take off their socks and shoes and roll up their jeans to walk in the water. She burned almost every batch of cookies she baked, but she always let him help mix and lick the spoon. The house was a mess most of the time, but that was because she opened her doors to runaways who needed a place to stay. She shopped at secondhand stores, but that was because she was always buying groceries for folks having a hard time with things. They never took vacations, but every holiday, she served food at a homeless shelter in Ely.

He'd tell her he loved talking to her because she listened so well. She'd joke and say a good bartender needs to know how to listen. But she was more than a good bartender. She was the kindest, bravest person he knew, and she took not only good care of him, but excellent care and not just of him.

Anyone who needed a champion, she was there. Like when Dee Dee's pimp beat her black and blue, his Momma paid her doctor's bill and then told Eddie if he ever thought about hitting one of his girls again that she'd shoot his balls off--he'd been listening from the stairs and if his momma had known that he was up there she wouldn't have used that language. Or the time little Callie Davis found out she was pregnant, she went with her and held her hand when she told her folks. Or when Donnie Walters came into the bar saying he wanted to get clean, she found a clinic and bullied the doctors into moving Donnie to the head of their waiting list.



Buck slipped back into the room to check on his brother; Ezra appeared to be sleeping, so he pulled up the blanket and tucked it in, covering the bruised flesh. You look as though you could use a friend, he thought. My mother always worried about folks. I bet she would have worried about you like she did Chris and Nathan. They never knew it, but she worried they didn't have a mother, and when she worried about my brothers, I would realize how lucky I was.

Buck stepped back into the hall; Nathan read Ezra's chart as Angie chatted amiably with his brothers. She turned to him and, reaching up, patted him on the cheek, "You take care of these brothers of yours, Buck."

"I'll do my best," he wanted to pat the top of her head in retaliation, but restrained himself.

"I know. Listen, I must go back to the desk and check on things. If you need anything, just buzz me," she graced each man with her smile and walked down the hall, disappearing when she turned the corner.



"Nathan, is it just me, or does this hospital have a lot of corners?" Vin asked as he watched the nurse disappear.

"Seems that way," Nathan chuckled. "History has it that there was a decision back in the 1920s to put a hospital in the area. Both Four Corners and Eagle Bend sent delegates to the legislature. See, the state had grant money set aside for building a hospital, and the two towns knew that having a hospital meant their town would have a better shot of flourishing. The delegates from Four Corners took sick, and the delegates from Eagle Bend took the grant money. Rumors flew that the Four Corners contingency was poisoned. Nothing was ever proven. Anyway, the hospital was built and built some more, and then about ten years ago it was built some more. It is not big; they just continued building it without thinking about where they were going.

"The thing is, there is no logic to it all. A person could get turned around in here real fast. I've done it more than once, and I've been hanging out here pestering doctors for years. Not that either town saw a boom, but with the new hospital, Eagle Bend came closer to prospering than Four Corners." Nathan explained. If these men were going to live in the area, they needed to know a bit about the rivalry between the two towns. That competition not only survived through the years but was going strong, and not just when the towns cheered on their respective high school football team in the annual match-up. It went deep and was hard to explain, but extremely easy to see. The strength of the delegation each town sent to lobby at the Capitol too often determined which roads were resurfaced or which school had a leaky roof repaired. His Dad mentioned, in the letters he wrote Nathan to remind him of what he was missing, living so far away, how close the towns had come to war when Walmart decided to build one of their superstores in the area.

"As soon as I got my driver's license, I started hanging out here after school," Nathan smiled at the memory of himself, a tall, gangly boy looking more like he

belonged on the basketball court than in a hospital ward. Dr. Griggs was the one to answer his questions, show him around the place, and introduce him to other doctors. Not all the doctors had been interested in answering his questions. Some had been too busy to worry about a kid. A very few had made openly racist remarks that wounded his soul, but which he had never mentioned to his Dad or brothers. Some, though, took time with him, encouraging his questions and giving him things to read. Later, those men wrote recommendations for him, helping him to get into medical school.

"Is he sleeping?" Josiah interrupted Nathan's musing by asking Buck about Ezra.

During their conversation, Buck had blocked the doorway, sticking his head in every little bit to check on Ezra. "He's acting like a two-year-old fighting sleep; he can't keep his eyes open, and he can't keep them shut."

"When have you ever been around a two-year-old?" Nathan teased as he thrust the bag of clothes at Josiah and started to push past Buck. He saw the flash of pain in his brother's eyes and answered his own question. Adam. Squeezing Buck's shoulder in mute apology, he paused, searching Buck's eyes for the forgiveness he knew would be there. Sometimes, he said things without thinking. Buck nodded ever so slightly and moved out of the doorway, letting Nathan go in.

"Is Ezra worried about those men coming after him again?" JD asked, eyes large and round.

"So, I asked him about it, and he said something about how it was over and done with. He'd been taught his lesson," Buck answered. He tried talking with Ezra in his more lucid moments, but the morphine had a stranglehold on Ezra, and their conversations were short, with Ezra offering little information about himself or how he had come to be in this state.

"Lesson in what?" Josiah grumbled. The last time he looked, hitting someone rarely taught them anything.

"Hey, that's all I got from him other than 'where's mah clothes,'" Buck glanced down at the bag Josiah held. "You take those in there, and he'll be gone. The only reason he's still in that bed is he can't figure out how to get back to his car without being arrested for indecent exposure."

"He'll stay. He needs the rest, and Chris is taking care of the hospital bill, so he has no reason to leave." Nathan said as he reappeared at the door. He grabbed the clothes from Josiah and carried them into the room.

"He doesn't leave much room for argument, does he?" Josiah asked no one in particular.

Agreeing with Josiah, Buck laughed.



JD knew he'd made some sort of mistake by offering to help with the shopping when Buck smiled at him, the grin reaching all over his face. Then Chris confirmed his fears by asking in a soft, almost gentle voice, "You sure?"

He could have backed down, but he just couldn't figure out why he should stay in that car. "Yeah, of course," he said as he climbed out behind Josiah and went to stand on the curb, looking around for Buck.

"He's over there," Nathan said, reading JD's mind and pointing to their brother, who, only seconds before, had been at their side but was currently helping an elderly woman push a grocery-laden cart to her car. JD frowned as his eyes followed Nathan's pointing finger. "How did..."

"I think he has some sort of radar for ladies in distress," Nathan answered as they waited for Buck to unload the frail-looking woman's groceries.



Chris watched Buck load the woman's groceries with a slight smirk. When he heard the passenger door slam shut, he didn't wait until Josiah had his seat belt buckled before he started the engine. He rolled down the window of the gray Cadillac and told JD and Nathan, "Don't take all day." He didn't fail to notice the puzzled frown JD still wore on his face. Good. Buck will make the kid forget the events of the day.

"Nice car." Josiah eased the seat back to accommodate his legs a little better. On the way to the hospital, he rode in the back alongside Buck and JD while Chris took them on one of the most hair-raising rides he'd ever been fortunate enough to survive. Coming out of the hospital, he had quietly slipped into the back with JD while Nathan, Buck, and Chris argued about who got to sit in the more spacious front.

Chris ended up driving while Buck mumbled about how all the short people should be sitting in the back and how people of decent height needed the legroom of the front. Nathan just told Buck to shut up; he had pulled the seat up as far as it could go. It appeared to be part of a long-standing argument.

Josiah suspected Chris rarely, if ever, let the others drive. He closed his eyes when the bickering continued, partly because he was trying to tune them out and partly because he wanted to send a heartfelt prayer up to God asking him to make Chris not speed and to remember to slow down on the hairpin curves. God heard his prayers, and even when Nathan hissed something to Chris that couldn't be heard over Buck's complaints and Chris's anger became something that could be felt throughout the car, Chris did take it easy on the gas pedal.

"Dad bought it not quite a year ago. At the time, he told Buck he was tired of driving a pick-up everywhere and wanted something more comfortable. Buck found me to discuss the situation. At the time, I was ... not on the ranch and did not know about the remodeling Dad was doing. I only heard about the car when Buck started in about Dad buying it. Around here, most people drive trucks. He was worried that Dad was sick and just not telling him. I guess he got the car at the same time he started thinking of you four. Same time, he hired an interior decorator and remodeled the house."

"Does it bother you that he started thinking about us?"

Chris kept his eyes on the road, thinking about the question. "Do you want an honest answer?"

"If you can give me one."

"I don't know. The money doesn't matter. I think if Dad said, 'Here is some money' and everyone took their share and left, it would be easier."

"Easier on you. What about Nathan and Buck? Would it be easier on them?"

"You ask hard questions."

"Easy questions I can figure out on my own."

Nathan's home is here. This will of Dad's gives him an excuse to come home."

"What about Buck?"

"Buck needs to play brother," Chris said, thinking 'and with luck, he will latch onto one of the others and let me go, and I can leave knowing he won't be alone.' "He seems pretty sincere to me."

"He is," Chris looked over at Josiah, quickly turning his eyes back on the road, not bothering to finish his explanation aloud. 'Josiah, Buck wants to save the world, save me. I can't get him to understand that I don't want to be saved.' That was too personal, and brother or not, he had only met this man a few hours ago.

"What are you going to do about Ezra?"

"I don't know. Nathan has a point; I can't just kidnap him. I don't even know if I want him on the ranch. If he's doing something illegal, he could destroy us all."

"Let him go then. Accept that he doesn't want to be with us and let him go."

"No. That's not an option."

After a brief pause, Josiah changed the subject. "I met him once, you know."

"Who? Standish?"

Josiah shook his head, "No, not him. Our father."

"And?"

"He and you are cut from the same cloth, I think."

"How so?"

"The best that I remember, you look a little like him, but the real resemblance is the way you act."

Chris didn't know how to respond, so he asked, "How did you meet him?"

"I'd been pestering Mama about my father for weeks. Contrary to what people said, I knew that Mom knew him, and she knew where he lived and how to get hold of him. I wouldn't let her have a minute's peace. My grandfather was away; otherwise, I

would not have said anything, but I had a hunger, a longing to understand why the other kids had fathers and I didn't.

"One morning, she woke me up early and told me to come on. We got in the truck and drove for hours until we came to a truck stop. I didn't want to go in. Even though I don't look like a Mexican, Mama did, and we spoke Spanish. I'd seen what happened when people entered places where they weren't wanted. I was big for my age and didn't look Mexican, but I knew I couldn't take on grown men if they came after Mama.

"You won't believe it, looking at me, but she was beautiful. Not movie star, beautiful but beautiful just the same. We sat down at a booth. A man, tall, blond, and golden from the sun, sat down across from us. He had this aura about him, confidence in himself. He was a man who owned any room he walked into.

"He took Mama's hand, and I knew, I just knew who he was. Mama said, 'Josiah, hijo, este es su padre. Talk and I will be back to get you.' We talked for a while, an hour or two. I don't remember, but it was enough for me to get a feel for the man, to understand who he was. I was eight, and I stood taller because I knew my father to be a man I could be proud of. It didn't matter what anyone said about me not having a father. I knew the truth. Then Mama was back, and he was hugging me, telling me goodbye."

When it became clear that Josiah was not volunteering any more information, Chris did what he usually did not do and asked a question. "Do you resent him for not being there for you?"

"No." Josiah turned to look out the window, thinking, 'What can I say, Chris, Father was white, and my mother was a Mexican woman fighting her people. How could she explain to her supporters that she had a child by a white man ten years her junior? Knowing his daughter had not been raped as she claimed, and instead had seduced a sixteen-year-old child, would have killed my grandfather or pushed him further into the fires of religious fervor. I know, Mama, seduce is too strong a word. Just as I know that you fell in love with that sixteen-year-old man-child. I could see love in your eyes when you looked back at him as we left. I heard it in your voice when you whispered, 'Vaya con Dios, my love. Go home to your wife and child.' So, Chris, you see it would never have worked.'



JD wondered if his embarrassment could get any more complete. It seemed like a good idea when he said he would help Buck do the grocery shopping. Certainly, it seemed better than sitting in that car listening to Chris be quiet.

Growing up, he felt sorry for kids who lived with yelling. He once thought it would be very bad to be yelled at. Now he knew being quieted at was worse. It started with something Nathan said to Chris; he hadn't heard what, but he felt Chris's anger instantly, and from where he sat, squished between Buck and Josiah, he could see the white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel.

Oh, he had been young and foolish then; he remembered thinking about how glad he was that Chris wasn't the yelling type. Five minutes of quiet had him sweating; fifteen minutes had him willing to confess to sins he hadn't committed to get the quiet to stop.

Buck talked over the quiet, but it was still there, and you could tell that Buck didn't like it any more than he did. It had gone on and on until they pulled up into the shopping center parking lot. He volunteered to help Buck shop while Nathan looked for medicine and stuff, to get out of the car while Chris and Josiah went to check them out of their hotel rooms.

'It had been a good idea,' he told himself over and over. At the time, he had not been able to conceive of anything worse than sitting in a car with Chris being Quiet. Now he could. Now he understood the smirk on Chris's face.

Buck was a maniac when he shopped. They started with the beer and then they moseyed, Buck's word, not his, on over to the soft drinks, then back to the beer, and then over to the dairy aisle for two gallons of milk, butter, and three cartons of 'becareful-of-the-eggs-they-break JD', as though he were an idiot. Then another trip back to the beer for another six-pack, chips, and more chips, and then back to the dairy aisle for the dip. On every aisle and in between aisles, it was either a 'Hey sweet thing, how are you doing, or, if not that, it was a hug and a kiss for every woman Buck met. While he hadn't hugged any of the few men in the store, he stopped to shake their hands and ask them how things were going. Then, he listened to them as they told him how things were going for them.

Then, on the canned goods aisle, JD discovered Buck liked to throw cans. He did not gently toss them so JD could put them in the cart, but lobbed them like a football.

JD felt certain Buck was going to kill someone with one of those throws and knew, somehow, he would be the one people blamed. People liked Buck too much to find fault with his behavior.

JD looked at the overflowing cart and considered banging his head against the handle. Surely it couldn't hurt any less than the headache he acquired in the produce aisle. Buck was talking with, surprise here, another woman, so JD took the opportunity to rearrange things and catch his breath. Twice already, he had suggested getting a second cart, and both times, Buck had replied that there was plenty of room. Did the man not have eyes?

Tuning Buck and his lady friend out, JD began to think. What a day. I woke up to find I have six brothers, and in a year, I will be a millionaire. That is good. One brother is in the hospital, which is not so good. That brother is probably a criminal, unbelievably bad. One brother is scary, and the friendly one is too friendly with, oh... let's estimate -- everyone in the store...and he is crazy on top of being too friendly. Criminal brother, scary brother, crazy brother. Not exactly the way he wanted to start his new life. He hoped he could deal with it all.

He wasn't sure if he could ever go shopping with Buck again. Let's see, what could be more fun than shopping with Buck? Jumping off a high cliff with no bungee

cord would be more fun. Being held hostage by a crazed psychopath with an automatic rifle and a nervous finger would be more fun. Being on a 747 flying over the Arctic Ocean with the pilot and co-pilot unconscious would be more fun. Swimming in the Amazon with a school of piranhas in a feeding frenzy would be more fun. Stopping a train with-

"Come on, kid. Quit dawdling."

"Me. Me!" Oh No! Did his voice squeak?

"Well, you're the one just standing there. We'd better hurry, cause Chris is just pissed enough to make us walk."

"Hurry? I can't believe you are saying that. I haven't been the one talking to everyone, and I do mean everyone, we see." JD protested.

"Here, put this cereal somewhere," Buck tossed a box over his shoulder.

"Where, Buck? Where?" JD stopped and looked at the cart. There was no feasible way it could hold anything more.

"On top there."

"No. We need a new cart," he put his foot down.

"Nonsense. We can't get another cart."

"Why not?"

"Two carts are more than a few things. I told Chris we'd only be a few minutes because we only needed a few things. Besides, with Nathan's cart, it wouldn't be two carts, it would be three. Can't take out that many things. Didn't you notice the mood Chris is in?"

"You don't think he will notice we have more than a few things?"

"Not if they are all in one cart," Buck explained as though he made perfect sense.

"Buck, that is just plain crazy," he knew he was close to yelling, but he couldn't stop himself.

"Look, if we have one cart and are late, we can say we were stuck in a long line, and he can't be angry. More than one cart means we went shopping, and he's going to be ticked off. Do you want to sit with an angry Chris Larabee for the next forty-five minutes?"

JD stopped, thought, and then yelled, "Buck, you are so full of crap!"

Startled by the loudness of his voice, he hung his head, afraid to look up and see people staring at him. His face burned as he realized he had just used not-so-nice language in public. It wasn't bad language, but for Pete's sake, he yelled it in a grocery store with women and children all around. He was new in town, and they didn't know he knew better. One of those manager types was going to descend upon them and ask

them to leave. He'd never been asked to leave a store before, and now... oh my goodness, did he just scream?

"Did I startle you?" Nathan asked as his hand dropped away from JD's shoulder.

Surely, it was a little yelp and not a scream. Girls scream, not guys. I am never going to be able to come to town again. And if I do, I will not go anywhere with Buck. "No. I'm fine."

Nathan examined the cart with a critical eye, "Getting a little top-heavy there, Buck."

"Now, see Nathan, that just goes to show you why you had trouble with geometry."

Nathan decided not to touch that line with a ten-foot pole. No telling where Buck would take it. "Buck, we need bread. You get it, while JD and I get the vegetables you passed up. Some of us might enjoy something green to eat. No. Come back here. You loaded that cart; you take care of it."

For two aisles, neither man talked as Nathan pulled things off the shelf and handed them to JD or placed them in his nearly empty cart himself. Finally, JD asked, "Is he always like this?"

"Who, Buck? Buck clowns around, but don't ever think he's a fool. Cause he isn't. He's sharp as a tack," Nathan eased back on the intensity he knew was in his voice. "Just don't go shopping with him. That man knows everyone, and folks will come clear across the store to say hello to him."

"He said Chris would be mad about us taking so much time." "Chris, nah, Chris knows exactly how long it takes Buck to shop." "Too long," he said with an exhausted sigh.

"No. Long enough for Chris to get over being angry with me."

JD looked across the store at the long-legged man heading towards them, smiling at some people, and speaking to others. He needed to think some more about these brothers.

