



Multiple Levels of Crazy

Rooting Out Evil

Part 3 of the Seven Brothers Saga



Anyone who saw me and noticed how I watched for her arrival would name me a stalker. I don't think that is an accurate description of me. I once called myself a hunter, but that, too, is inadequate. Although the title of Terminator has already been taken, it comes closer to describing who I am than most other words. I thought about the word liquidator, but that makes me sound like a comic book villain. And as we all know, villains are always caught. Unlike comic book villains, I have not only never been caught, but I do not think anyone suspects that anyone Landon loved was deliberately removed from his life.

When I think about my actions, I don't see myself as a villain. I feel justified. The two people who are aware of my existence must agree with me on some level because they have not only kept quiet through the years, but they have also provided me with money when my funds are low and information about Landon. Neither of them will betray me. They are my co-conspirators in my effort to destroy

Landon. More to the point, they are both aware of the lengths I will go to avenge myself on anyone who betrays me.

One of my co-conspirators was not only willing to help me, but she also takes pleasure in knowing that Landon was destined to remain alone. I am unsure as to why she feels that way. She told me she had offered herself to him, but he had rejected her. I tried telling her that her pain did not equate to mine because he had told me he loved me, and as soon as I gave him my heart and a child, he began looking for someone to replace me. I have lost so much because Landon became bored with me.

I had nothing to do with his truck catching fire and roasting the woman inside it, but as I watched him cry beside the burned woman in the bed, I came to resent her existence.

I did not see the results of the fire, but I heard the nurses talk. The woman's nose, lips, and ears were burned away, as was her hair. The nurses whispered that most of her fingers were gone. The only time she seemed aware of what was happening was when they had to debride her burns; she would moan and turn from their touch. They said to each other, but not where Landon could hear them, that it would be a mercy for Cassie Larabee to die. I prayed for the death of the woman swathed in white bandages.

My co-conspirator never understood the difference between her relationship with Landon and mine. Of course, I forgave her for saying that she felt that she was as betrayed as I was. I couldn't afford to offend her because she kept me informed about what was happening in Four Corners. Constantly, I had to fight the urge to remind her that she and Landon had never dated, and he never swore he loved her. When she began prattling on about how Landon had essentially betrayed her, too, I would let my thoughts drift to the time he had been mine.

I thought my work was done after I learned that Landon died. When I heard of his death, I was stunned. Stunned and profoundly disappointed. He owed me so much more time. It wasn't fair. I had years of loneliness planned for him to match my own.

I honestly once loved him, but that love vanished when I saw him crying for the burned husk of a woman in a hospital bed. He didn't even turn around when I stood in the doorway watching him weep. I remember him once telling me, as he held me in his arms, that he always knew when I was near because he recognized me by my scent. I had laughed as I melted into his embrace; I asked him what I smelled like. He said he would always recognize me by my scent, which smelled like sunshine after a cold, rainy day.

He was always saying things like that. He made me believe I was his one true love. He constantly told me I was the only one for him. When I became pregnant, he swore he loved me even more, but he didn't. He became distant and forgot my existence. I remember watching from the doorway as he whispered to the woman swathed in bandages 'I need you. I love you. It was a knife to my heart. I was standing there, and he didn't even turn to look at me. He didn't smell the sunshine after the cold rain.

It took her a solid month to die. I kept telling myself he would notice me when she died. When I heard the burned woman had finally died, I celebrated. I thought he would realize that she wasn't me and turn around to see me. I began entering the house he built. I would sit in the oak rocker in the baby's room and pretend that I held my son as I rocked. I thought Landon would catch my scent in the house when he came back in the evenings holding his boy, but he didn't. No wonder. The house smelled like spit-up formula and dirty diapers. The scent of sunshine after rain could not compete.

Landon's world narrowed. I watched from afar as, every morning, he would wake up, feed his son, take the boy to his mother, and leave with his father to attend to whatever needed to be done on the ranch. In the evenings, he would take his baby from his mother, return to his empty home, rock the baby to sleep, and go to bed himself. Every day, the process would repeat.

I was torn. I wanted to reclaim what we once shared, but I am not sure what he would have said to me. I had called him a few times to hear his voice, but he would quickly hang up when I didn't respond to his hello.

If he really and truly loved me, he would sense my presence. But everywhere he went, he had his son in his arms. I could not approach him when all his focus was on the child. The occasional hello was not enough to know if I still had a place in his life... if he could center his world around me. That is when I decided to plant listening devices in his house. It took a little research, but I found where to get what I needed and how to use them. I told myself I only wanted to find out if he missed me.

All I learned was that Landon Larabee loved his son. Landon talked all the time. He was on the phone with Orrin or Evie Travis, who called him almost every day. Or he was on the phone with his

father to discuss what they needed to do the next morning. Occasionally, he called Curtis. I was surprised at that. I am not sure why.

When he wasn't on the phone, he talked to the baby.

I remember, as I reflect on those years from so long ago, that I once had a baby. I remember holding the child, but I misplaced it. I do not know where I put it. I remember I was angry because Landon replaced me... I had the baby in my arms. I wanted to yell and scream... rage against the injustice of Landon ignoring me, but I couldn't, so I put the baby somewhere... and I remember watching Landon crying in the burn unit. Try as I might, I can not remember the time between those moments.

I spent days, even weeks, listening to Landon. I wanted him to say my name, but he didn't. One night, he took the baby to his mother's house and left. I tracked him down and watched him as he entered a bar in Eagle Bend. He stayed until it closed. He drove to his parents' house and spent the night with them in his old room. I know because I looked in the window and saw him sleeping in the bed with his baby tucked under his arm.

I went back to the hole in which I had been staying, feeling defeated. I am not sure why I expected him to see me sitting in the car in Eagle Bend, but it hurt that he didn't. At one time, he would have caught my scent in the air and turned to greet me with a smile. On that night, he walked past me without raising his head. He studied the road as he crossed it, and when he stepped up onto the sidewalk, he studied the cracks in the sidewalk just as hard as he had studied the road.

At first, I followed Landon, but I quickly learned the signs that told me he was heading to that bar. I would arrive before he did and watch as he trudged across the street. He would order a beer and sit alone at the bar nursing it. His aloneness suited me. It matched mine. Then one night, the woman behind the bar began talking with him. He smiled. I could not understand why, but he definitely smiled. He spent the night in her bed.

I understood his need for solace, but he could have turned to me. Why her? I quit watching him and started watching her. When I witnessed her belly begin to swell, I stamped down on my desire to wipe her from the face of the earth. I had no problems with removing her from Landon's life, but everything I thought of would also harm her unborn child. I had lost my child and would not harm another.

I pledged that while I needed for Landon to be wrapped in a blanket of loneliness as I was, I would never put a child in my crosshairs.

I am getting lost in my thoughts. I meant to spend the time waiting for Maude Standish to appear, considering Landon's recent death. I need to understand how and why he died before I tackle the question of how Maude survived my vengeance.

A heart attack, they said. I don't believe it for a minute. Landon would not leave this world in such a mundane manner. He was the type of man who would have reached a hundred years and still be riding out to tend to the cattle on his ranch. Ranching was in his blood. Even with all of his investments making money for him, the ranch ruled his life. He put his ranch before everything else, including his sons, his friendships, and, I hate to admit it, including me.

A man like that would not have had a heart attack. He would have died saving children from a menacing flood. He would have died stepping in front of an assassin's blade to protect a foreign dignitary. I can also visualize him dying after falling from a cliff while trying to put a baby eagle back in its nest. He did not die from a heart attack. There is no universe in which he would have died from a heart attack.

I know someone murdered him. I find myself in an unusual situation. I am unsure who killed Landon. Usually, I keep tabs on him, his sons, and his friends. I listened to him talk as he made breakfast. I listened to Landon talk to his big dog when he went into Four Corners or drove to Eagle Bend. Even though I didn't particularly care about Nathan, I listened to them as they argued. I listened to him as he mumbled to himself as he wrote letter after letter to the son who had left. There were times when I heard the despair in his voice when talking with his son, Buck, about his eldest son. I felt some sorrow for him, but I enjoyed his pain as he experienced the loss of his sons.

Landon, with no woman in his life and with two of his three sons abandoning him, remained wrapped in loneliness. Satisfied, I left the area. I don't feel safe anywhere near his ranch. I have changed a lot, but I worry someone will recognize me, and I prefer to stay in the shadows.

I made a mistake in how I eradicated his latest lover, and the babies in her car died. I did not plan her death as well as I should have. I punished myself by not listening to Landon grieve for her and their children. Therefore, I missed the path he took, which led him to his murder.

I also missed a great deal of what happened when all of Landon's sons moved into the ranch house, but by chance, I heard the one named Ezra refer to his mother as Maude when he invited her to Las Vegas. Maude... Maude Standish, I killed her. I know I did.

I am here now waiting for her arrival. It has been thirty years since I ripped her open. I can only hope I can still recognize her and that she does not remember me.

What do I do when she walks through the lobby doors? I intended for her to die that night. She should be rotting in the ground. How did she survive? Do I let her stay in the land of the living? Or do I now remove her, as I thought I had already done? Do I let her continue with her life? Or do I finish the job I started? If I eradicate her, I need to plan. This resort is huge. It is filled with loud people, but people can be dealt with. I am sure cameras are everywhere, and they will be a problem. I do not have the technical skill I need to disable them. I will have to find her room to see what is in it that I can use because I left my rifle behind.

If I decide to let her live, I will check out of my room and leave. However, if she needs to be removed from the board, I need to get inside her room.



He assumed one of the brothers had told Maude about their phones being potentially bugged because when they returned to the conference room, she silently passed him her phone to use. He thanked her and then said, "Evie won't recognize the number and may not pick up."

"Text her to let her know you will be calling," Maude suggested. "Or you can keep calling her until she picks up."

Orrin snorted at the image of Evie receiving call after call. "I'll text. She'd assume it was a telemarketer and turn off her phone if she received multiple calls from the same number. She has no patience for telemarketers. Says they always call when she is making supper." He forestalled Chris's reminder about the possibility of Evie's phone being bugged, "I am texting her on her sister's phone. She will get Evie, and then Evie will call back."

Placing the phone on the table in front of him, he waited for it to ring. They didn't have long to wait before it began vibrating. Orrin picked it up, and after checking to make sure it was Allison's number, he answered. "Hello Evie, yes, everyone is with me... Maude too... No, she is not the Maude we remember, but I will tell you ...Alright, I will put you on speakerphone."

Not waiting for hellos to be said or introductions to be made, Evie immediately began talking. "I am sure you are calling with questions, but I need to tell you something that happened. It might not be anything, but I wanted you to know." She sounded flustered, and being a woman who rarely rattled, she managed to scare Orrin.

"What happened?" Orrin didn't mean to, but he used the voice when a reluctant witness began beating about the bush instead of getting to the point. No doubt, his wife would have something to say about the tone he took with her, but she would wait until they were alone to say anything.

"Before you ask, everyone is fine. Mary called Allison a couple of hours ago. She wanted to know if Allison had any way of getting in touch with me because she had tried both of our lines, and we were not answering. Allison told her that the reception might be bad in the middle of the ocean. She asked if there was anything she could help with. Long story short...Mary took Billy to the park today. On the way there, Billy pointed to a man peering into the windows of your office. She thought it was probably one of your clients, hoping you had returned to town and didn't think anything about it. But when she locked up after supper, she noticed a man standing in front of Katie's Fabrics. Now, you know Katie closes her place early on Saturday so she can take her mother to Walmart before it gets too late, and it seemed suspicious that a man would be standing in front of a fabric store. She said she thought he was staring at her place. She made sure the bolt was on the front door and checked to make sure the back door was locked as well before going upstairs. She told Allison she kept the lights off in her room and looked out the window to see if he was still there. He was. She said he was definitely looking at her building. She said she feels sure he was the same man who had been peering into the windows at your office. She called the sheriff's office, but the man had disappeared. She said it might be the man who killed Stephen."

Evie's hurried explanation had each brother frowning, but it was Chris who spoke. "Miss Evie, we have done our level best to keep Mary and Billy out of our problems, but it could be related to us. Did Mary get a description of the man?"

"It is not a good one. She was worried he would see her watching him."

"Anything she can remember might help," Chris prodded.

"She said he was average height. He wore a navy parka... He had his hood up, and therefore she did not get a look at his face... That was about all she got."

"It's not much. He could be anyone." Chris did not bother to hide his disappointment.

"Christopher, think about how poor the lighting is on that side of the street, and she was trying to keep out of sight." Evie knew Chris wanted a better description; they all wanted a better description. They didn't get one. Too bad. Mary did the right thing by calling the sheriff.

"She said the coat was navy?" Josiah asked. "Could it have been black?"

"I honestly don't know. Does it make a difference?"

Josiah saw the subtle shake of Chris's head. His brother was correct. There was nothing to be gained by sharing that the man who had shot Chris and then Jack had worn a black coat. Information like that would only serve to scare the women. "No difference. Just wanted clarification."

Evie shifted her attention from the description of the man to the possibility of Mary getting swept up in all of this. "Orrin, I think I should call Mary tonight, and I think we need to go home. Forget this pretense of being on a cruise."

After being married for as long as he had, Orrin knew better than to tell his wife what to do; She had a mind of her own, and it was a sharp mind. "Evie, wait until I get back. We can sit down and talk about how to explain why we are not on that cruise."

"I have that covered, Orrin. We are going to tell people that when we were getting ready to board the ship, we saw that there was no one our age in line. We decided that we wouldn't lose any money since I won a contest, and that we would feel like everyone's grandparents if we went. So we decided to rent a car and spend a few days taking in the sights of the antebellum homes in Savannah. Then we drove to Mobile and on to New Orleans."

"That is what we did, Evie. Well, not the part about being the oldest on the ship, but the rest is true."

"And therefore we will be believed. We can leave out the part about you going to Vegas and me being here with Allison and Tony."

Orrin's eyes swept around the room, checking to see if the others in the room felt as though Evie's plan would work. They were all, to a man and a woman, weighing it in their minds. Was there anything in what she said that would alert their Listeners? When the last brother nodded his agreement to the plan, Orrin said, "There are many reasons I married you, Evie. You just provided another one. We will do it your way, but wait until I get home tomorrow."

Should I call Mary? Tell her I heard from Allison and that I want her to be careful."

"Call her after we talk, but use your phone, not Allison's. I will call Mitch and ask him to keep an eye on her place. He knows Stephen was murdered, and when he learns that she is worried that she is now a target, he will make sure all his deputies know to keep watch on her place and for any strangers loitering in FourCorners. He is a good man and will do it without asking questions about where I am."

"OK. I gather you have questions for me. Fire away." The worry evident in Evie's voice had been replaced by her no-nonsense voice. Let's get this show on the road, attitude. A smile settled on Orrin's face when he heard the change. Her voice matched the one she used every morning when he had first started his career as a prosecutor. She'd straighten his tie and tell him to leave so he could make the world a better place. "You are right, we do have a few questions for you."



He had made a mistake when buying the navy parka. He knew it was a mistake the moment he tried it on in a store in Elko. But it was the end of the season and there were few coats to select from. He had checked the size, bought the thing, and hurried out of the store before anyone noticed the torn sleeve of the black coat he wore. He had come up with a plausible excuse for the tear, saying he had torn it on a nail protruding from the fence at his apartment complex, which seemed to him to be a reasonable explanation. It would not explain the bruising on his arm, but no one would see his arm. However, when he used his excuse to explain the jagged tear to a coworker, the look the retired cop gave him made him rethink it. Deciding to drive that evening to Elko, he bought the first thing in his size. It was nondescript, and it was the right size, but it was too bulky for him to move easily. If he had been forced into a fight while wearing it, he would have lost. He needed to find something else.

Tossing his parka on the couch, Cletus studied the rabbit. Getting it to trust him again had proven more of a challenge than he thought it would be. He had thought that a rabbit possessed the intelligence equivalent to that of a squirrel. The wariness the rabbit displayed when he approached the

cage to entice it with lettuce and carrots demonstrated the creature's ability to remember, and that he might need to reconsider his approach. Returning the rabbit to its previous state would take a considerable amount of time, and he asked himself if he wanted to invest that much time into the thing.

I don't know rabbit. I thought our little game might prove interesting, but I hate admitting that I bore easily. You need to prove you love me. I will give you a deadline to learn to show happiness when I enter this place, or I will wrap a noose around your neck and hang you from the ceiling fan and see if you decide to die before the room becomes too cool for me and I am forced to turn it off. If you die, I will skin you and roast you for dinner. If you live, I will skin you alive, roast you, and eat you. Today is Saturday. You have until next Saturday to become my friend. Understand?"

Laughing at his words, Cletus opened the fast-food bag he bought for supper. He almost began complaining to the rabbit about his wasted afternoon, but he quickly closed his mouth before any words came out. Miss Gaines had proven herself very competent at snooping, but even though they were partners, he would not put it past her to put a few of her devices in his apartment. He had searched all the usual spots for listening devices she may have planted to keep tabs on him, and had found none, but she knew where he lived. It was prudent to keep his thoughts to himself. He liked working for Miss Gaines. She paid him well, and his assignments were usually interesting, but she was certifiable. Like him, she was as crazy as a loon. Only he knew he belonged locked away from polite society, and she saw her actions as justified to reunite with her true love.

Take today, for example. He had the weekend off and planned to drive to a larger city- a place where he could quench his hunger without the risk of being caught. He had even cleaned Rabbit's cage and filled its water bottle so it would not become dehydrated while he was otherwise involved. Almost as though she had heard him pick up his keys, she interrupted his day by phoning with a new request.

"Cletus, I hope I am not interrupting any plans you have for the day, but is there any way you can check to see if Judge Travis and his wife have returned?"

Before he could answer, she began a long, rambling, unhinged rant. He listened carefully as he pulled meaning from her words. He could have summarized her forty-five-minute rant in a few short sentences. The brothers had gone to Las Vegas, and she felt their explanation of spending family time in Sin City sounded implausible. For a minute, he allowed himself to hope she would ask him to check on what kind of trouble the brothers were getting into, thinking he could get into some of his own making. Nope, that is not what she wanted.

"Cletus, I need you to check to see if the judge is back from his cruise. That will only take a moment. You can stop by his house and his office to see if there are any signs that he has come home. I called the cruise company, and they would not give me any passenger information. I can't imagine his wife and him abandoning their cruise to come back to this backwater, but the suddenness with which he left, and then Molly Kincaid leaving. It was plain hinky. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, ma'am. It is as though they all wanted out of town really fast."

"That woman..."

"Woman?" he asked, even though he knew exactly to whom she was referring.

"Mary Travis. Do you think she plans to join Chris in Las Vegas?"

"I don't think so. Doesn't she have a son?" he asked as he began to consider the best way to set the home on Main Street on fire. She hadn't asked him yet, but it was only a matter of time. From the moment he mentioned Mary Travis talking to Chris Larabee at the hospital, she had fixated on the woman.

"Yes, she does. Don't you see? Chris Larabee is going on a family getaway. He is not going to Vegas to gamble or to see some ridiculous show. He wants to spend time with his family, but any family will do."

"His family is his brothers." Cletus tried to reassure her. Her current line of thinking would lead her to ask him to burn Mary Travis's home down, killing her and her son. It wasn't that he was in any way repelled by the thought, but the house was within walking distance of the sheriff and fire departments. The likelihood of it burning long enough to kill the woman and her son before someone alerted the fire station was slim to none existent.

"Cletus, silly man, you don't understand. I know Chris did not invite her, but I know women. She is interested in him. You can tell by the way she chased him all over the hospital. She will show up in Las Vegas and find a way to bump into him. Then, she will use her son to ask Chris to take them to see a show, and Chris will. Chris is a gentleman, and he will not see through her scheme to get her claws into him. She will learn there are no rooms available for her

and her son, and she will weep crocodile tears. He will offer her his room. Before you know it, she will be in his bed. Then she will claim to be pregnant with his child. Chris is an honorable man. If he thinks he is the father of her baby, he will marry her.

"Cletus, I have worked too hard to remind Chris of what we have together. I will not have her come between us, as that other woman did. I do not know what I will do if she is with Chris."

"Don't worry, Miss Gaines. I will find out if she is at home."

"I know you will, but you need to keep an eye on her today. Make sure she doesn't go to Las Vegas. If you see any sign that she is leaving, do something to her car."

And he had. He checked to make sure the Judge and his wife had not sneaked back into town. Then he spent hours watching the woman and her son. While they were occupied, he walked to her parking spot behind her home. He had used all of his trackers and could not put one on her car, but he took note of the make and model of her car and committed the license tag to memory. Then, he opened the back door and toured her home.

It was only a matter of time before Miss Gaines would ask him to set another fire. Setting the fire would not be a problem, but making sure Mary and Billy Travis died in it... He needed to think more about how to accomplish that.

He had promised to call her when he had news. He might as well get it over with. He sat on the floor next to Rabbit's cage as he made the call, thinking that Rabbit needed to get used to his presence. He might as well kill two birds with one stone, so to speak.

"I am back, Mis Gaines... I saw no signs that the judge and his wife have returned to Four Corners."

"The bitch?"

"She is still in Four Corners. She spent the afternoon in the park with her son."

"That is interesting, Cletus. Do you know what that means?"

"No, Ma'am. I am not sure I do." He wasn't trying to play her ignorant servant; he honestly did not know. There were days when he understood what she wanted before she put her request into words, but this wasn't one of those days. She needed to spell it out for him.

"It means Chris has stayed true to me. He has not succumbed to her feminine wiles. With the judge being out of town, her personal conduit to Chris has not been around to help her. She may not have even known Chris had gone to Las Vegas... She missed this opportunity, but when the judge gets back, I have no doubt he will help her find ways to spend time with Chris. You know, he wants her to marry Chris."

Cletus obliged her by asking, "Why?"

"Oh, Cletus, it is obvious. Landon Larabee left Chris a good bit of money. He wants to get Chris to marry Mary so he can have access to Chris's fortune. We cannot allow those two to manipulate Chris. They must be stopped. Chris is such an innocent. He will not see through their plans and will be hurt by their betrayal."

"Are you sure? Orrin Travis is a lawyer and has made a good bit of money for himself." Cletus argued, not because it mattered to him, but because she needed to justify herself.

"Yes. Orrin Travis is well off, but compared with Landon Larabee, he is little more than a pauper."

"Landon Larabee left his money to all of his sons." Cletus reminded her.

"I know. I am not stupid. Travis plans to get them married, then he will find a way to eliminate Chris's poor brothers. He is a crafty old man, evil and devious."

"Yes. It sounds like he is extremely crafty."

"And evil," Ella prompted.

"And evil," he agreed, but he smiled as he said the words. He loved working with this woman. Her plan to allow him to kill Chris Larabee's brothers in interesting ways was what kept him working with her. At some point, he would need to remove her from his gameboard, but for now, she was his queen.



I positioned myself on a leather couch in the lobby, along with a book discussing the must-see sights I needed to visit while in Vegas. I blended in with my surroundings, and no one bothered me as I waited for her arrival. I covertly watched as Chris, equally covert, hovered near the brother named Ezra. I recognized Chris, of course. Throughout the years, I had kept an eye on him and his brothers, Nathan and Bucklyn. I had many sleepless nights fretting about those boys. I am a firm believer that children need the love of both of their parents to grow up strong and with a well-developed sense of

self-worth. I often considered the impact losing their mothers would have on Landon's sons, but like Derrick, Landon had to be punished.

I observed the sons last night at the restaurant. I sat two tables away from them, and while I could not hear them as they talked to each other. I didn't need to hear their words. I read their body language; the stony faces told me all I needed to know. No matter how many lies they told the people of Four Corners about their wonderful family getaway, they were on a mission.

In my head, part of me still thinks of them as babies, but each of them had become a man. I wonder when that happened. They were no longer boys. Even the youngest, the one whose mother was smart enough to leave the state, had lost his youth. I am sure he would be able to put on the soft look boys wore if he felt the need. I had no doubt he could pull the veneer of youth on faster than I could put on the makeup I used to hide my scars. Watching him shift from innocent youth to hunting predator and back again would entertain me. If I ever decided to end the sons, he would be the last one.

Eating my salad, I immediately knew that all seven of them felt my eyes on them. Not all at once, but separately, they raised their heads and looked for me. Not for me exactly, but for the reason the hairs on the back of their neck stood up. I am convinced that the lifting of the head and the eyes searching the room was not a random scanning of the restaurant. Nor were any of the seven looking to see if they recognized any faces in the crowded steakhouse. Rather, on some instinctual, gut-level, they reacted to my presence. They realized they were being watched and looked for the person observing them. I took pride in their behavior. I am responsible for it. Imagine that if I had not robbed Landon of my replacements, these men would be in their recliners, eating chips, drinking beer, and watching whatever game was on television as they grew fat and lazy.

I pretended to chatter on my phone as I signaled my waiter. He obediently brought my check. Within a few minutes, I had my bill settled and was able to put my phone in my purse and leave.

That was last night.

This morning, I concentrated on being someone else. Someone who faded into the background. Someone whose appearance was different enough from the woman in the restaurant that they would link me with her.

I pretended to be engrossed in my book of Fascinating Things to See and Do While Visiting Las Vegas. As far as I can tell, everything fun and exciting involved throwing money away. Pretending to read might be an acceptable way to blend in with the background of some places. But in this lobby, it was a poor way to remain anonymous. Not with the sounds coming in from the casino's floor. I had only been sitting for a short while, but already staff members had asked me if I needed something. I could call checking once to see whether I needed something, a courtesy, but three different times? Each time I showed them my book, my cane, and told the staffer that I was waiting for my son.

I am staring at a page, but I am not reading it. My thoughts are on the staffers who had approached me. I know a hunter when I see one. Those people checking to see if I need anything are security personnel looking for me. They do not know who I am, so they are not specifically looking for me, but they are looking for anyone looking out of place. I know that my reading a book in the middle of the lobby of the grandest resort in Las Vegas would call attention to me. But last night, after I ate, I examined the seating at the slot machines nearest the lobby. Deciding that I would not be able to monitor the lobby when Maude Standish came in, I abandoned my plan of pouring money into a slot machine as a cover.

This morning, as I put on makeup, I deliberately aged myself. I hoped my appearance and my cane would be enough to keep anyone from questioning why I lingered in the lobby instead of taking a turn at winning a fortune at one of the tables. Clearly, the staff were not satisfied with my disguise or with my explanation that I was waiting for my son. Three times they had approached me. Have they stopped to ask anyone else whether they needed anything? Yes. I closed my eyes and replayed the last thirty minutes in my head. As I opened my eyes, I did so with the realization that I am the only one they have repeatedly approached.

Are they looking for me? No. No one had any reason to think that the Liquidator (I really need to find a better name for myself) was in the middle of their magnificent lobby. Or is there something in the way I am acting that has distressed them?

Needing to see if they would follow me if I left the lobby, I dropped my book into my oversized bag and pushed myself off the couch. I groaned slightly as I grabbed my cane and stood. I wobbled as I hobbled over to the rack of pamphlets praising the area's sights and various shows. Their suspicious looks changed to looks of concern when I came close to losing my balance and had to lean on my cane

as I recovered. I could feel them as they turned to ask each other if they should get me a chair. I may have overplayed my old lady act. They would keep their eyes on me and would no doubt remember the old woman in the lobby. I hoped my disguise would hold up to their scrutiny. Leaning on my cane, I dropped my bag beside my feet and pretended to be interested in the wall of pamphlets in front of me. I opened random pamphlets, and I made sure to appear to read. If another staffer approached me, I would ask her to suggest an activity my eight-year-old grandson would enjoy. As I continued my pretense of being engrossed in the wall of advertisements, I occasionally wobbled, but not often enough to bring someone over. I know they were looking for someone, but I convinced them it wasn't me.

Periodically, I turned to look for my non-existent son. In reality, I looked for Ezra, and, through him, Maude. As luck would have it, I heard her voice before I saw her. I identified her by her voice before she had walked halfway into the lobby. I risked taking a look to see if I was correct. I was. She might use the name Maude Standish, but she is not the woman I sliced open thirty years ago. She is the woman Landon had met in this very casino twenty-five years ago. He had called her name, she turned, and his shoulders slumped. He spent a few moments talking with her, then they parted ways. I had assumed, as Landon had, that the name Maude Standish was more common than we thought. How and why had she claimed that name as her own? More importantly, why did Ezra think she was his mother?

I hate puzzles. I need to put this one together before doing anything. I can not afford to make another mistake like I did with the babies. I watched the hands above the elevator as they pointed to each floor as it passed. It seemed to take forever, but it finally paused on the twenty-first floor. I didn't immediately follow her. Instead, I waited for the bellhop to exit the elevator with his empty luggage trolley. No one else had entered or exited that particular elevator. She was on the twenty-first floor.

I had work to do. Making sure to hobble, I left the lobby and began walking toward the parking garage several blocks away. I couldn't afford to stay in the resort. I had a room of much lower quality at another establishment. I needed to change my clothes and my makeup so I could become someone other than the seventy-something old woman I had masqueraded as



"I hadn't thought of it like that, but you may be right," Evie's voice trailed off. When she stopped talking, Orrin held his hand up to signal for the brothers to be quiet. He knew his wife was thinking. More than likely, she was sitting at the table in Allison's immaculate kitchen, toying with the quilted placemats Allison changed depending on her mood. Having gathered her thoughts in a nice, orderly fashion, Evie began. "You said the person responsible for killing Cassie and the other women in Landon's life could have been a woman. It took me a moment. I have no problem believing that a woman could kill. I just thought that if a woman killed another woman, she would do it accidentally in a cat-fight, or if she would poison her. For a woman to pick up a rifle and shoot someone... the thought messes with my head. What?" Her audience could hear a woman's voice in the background, but she spoke so softly her words were impossible to decipher.

Evie repeated what her sister had said, "Allison says I am wrong. If a woman has had the training, she is just as likely to use a rifle as a man when she has murder in her heart. She is probably right." She cleared her throat. "Let's set up the parameters for my search down memory lane."

Chris reached for the phone, "First, since the murders started with Nathan's mother, we"

"Chris, you are assuming that they started with Clara, but why?"

"My mother died after being in a wreck," Chris stated, as though it was obvious his mother was not part of the long list of victims, but even as he spoke, he realized Evie was right. "It would be easy to tamper with Dad's truck, wouldn't it?"

"Cassie drove fast, so we can't rule out a genuine accident, but we should consider her accident as a murder." Evie reminded Chris.

"If we are thinkin' along the lines of a planned accident, then we need to determine who knew enough about cars to know how to cause an accident, had access to the truck, and had a reason to kill her," Vin interjected.

"And who was a marksman?" Nathan added.

"Wait a minute," Buck ordered. "We are assuming someone wanted Cassie to die. We don't know. A year or so ago, Dad and I were heading over to Miss Nettie's place. A storm had plowed through and knocked out the electricity everywhere. You might not realize it yet, being new and all, but

the ranches are the last to get electricity restored, so we all have generators. We need them, if for no other reason, to keep our freezers running. Anyway, we had experienced back-to-back outages because a long line of storms was barreling through, and Dad worried that Miss Nettie might not have enough gasoline on hand to keep her freezers going. I put a couple of containers of gasoline in the back of the truck and hopped in. Dad had been in the driver's seat, but he got out and checked to see if I had secured them to his standards.

"He must have seen the question on my face when he got back behind the wheel, so he said, 'Chris's mother, Cassie, used my truck when she went to visit Curtis and Amy; She had a wreck on her way back. I had two cans in the truck's bed. I had planned to go out to Silas's Creek in the morning and needed the gas for the chainsaws. I had not finished putting what I needed in the truck, so the cans weren't secured.' He went on to say, 'I didn't know she would take the truck. The fire that burned her so badly was my fault.' Buck looked at his older brother before adding, 'It was the only time I can think of that he spoke about her.'"

"Landon blamed himself for her being burned. He had a hard time with it." Orrin explained.

"The cans added to the problem, but they didn't cause the wreck," Vin insisted.

"Let me finish." Buck looked around the table as he took the phone from Chris, "We are saying that someone with knowledge about cars may have caused Cassie Larabee to wreck, but it would have been easy to damage a tire. Everyone says that Cassie liked to speed. It is hard to control a vehicle when there is a blowout. You have a blowout when driving at high speeds, and you will wreck. Then consider that she wrecked on a two-lane road with dangerous curves. A wreck on that road would have been bad even without the fire."

"She didn't have her seat belt on," Orrin said thoughtfully. "Her burns were what killed her, but if she had been knocked unconscious, or simply stunned when the fire started..."

"All right, at this point, we don't know if she was a victim due to careless driving, or if the truck had been tampered with. If we assume the truck was tampered with, we need to know who had access to it. According to what I've been told, she left the ranch, dropped me off with my grandparents, and drove to Uncle Curtis's place. So, that is Dad, my grandparents, but since they died before the attack on Eddie, I think we can rule them out. That leaves Uncle Curtis and Aunt Amy. Both of them are skilled sharpshooters." It physically hurt to point fingers at his aunt and uncle, but while showering that morning, he had promised himself that he would face head-on whatever they discovered and not hide from the truth.

"That's not right, Chris. Amy called me the morning of the wreck. She said that a few of the girls were getting together to cook and decorate for the bridal shower, which she was hosting for Penelope Mitchell. I remember that because I had to give her step-by-step instructions for making my pineapple gheeseball and my ambrosia salad. Stephen was teething and fussy, and I came close to losing my patience with her."

"Do you remember who was helping her?"

Evie replayed the conversation in her head, "I don't remember her mentioning anyone other than Angie Delany. The only reason I remember her name is because Amy said Angie was going to do the grocery shopping before heading over. I told her that she should not have waited until the last minute. It was her first time playing hostess. Instead of telling her that the shower would be fantastic, I caused her to cry."

So many years ago, and she still felt bad about what she had said. She had excuses. She was dealing with a colicky baby. She was busy trying to get the laundry done. She was operating on too little sleep. The excuses did not matter. She had been deliberately cruel. It didn't matter that Cassie's wreck had caused the shower to be postponed. She was in the wrong. She didn't think she had ever apologized. That day, when she had hung up the phone, she had intended to immediately call Amy back, apologize, and say a few words of encouragement, but Stephen wouldn't stop crying, and then. Then, the phone rang; Orrin was calling with the news of Cassie's wreck, and all thoughts of owing Amy an apology had evaporated. She hoped Amy had forgiven her.

Evie swallowed hard. This was not the time to wallow in self-recrimination. She needed to do her part and unravel the mystery Lanson had presented. "Moving on. You wanted to know how many women in Four Corners could have made the shot. Let me give you a list. First on that list is Nettie Wells." She could easily imagine every jaw in that room, including her husband's, dropping in astonishment.

"Miss Nettie?" Vin decided right then and there that there was no possible way the sweet, tough old lady could have killed anyone."

"But... but she is old." JD blurted out.

"She is only a few years older than your father. Besides, you were asking who could have made the shot. Nettie sponsored our girls' rifle club. She taught us, and we were good. Not me particularly. Even though I wore glasses, I had trouble hitting the long-range targets. If you ask me if I think she is responsible, I would have to say no. The year we were seniors, she was married. She came to our competitions and gave us advice, but her eyes were only for her husband. I don't think she even knew Landon existed except as a neighbor. Landon was more of Dwight's friend than hers. If you want to talk about who else could shoot Clara and Cady, look no further than the rifle club. If she had not died in the wreck, the person at the top of my list would be Cassie Marks. I am saying that not just because she could hit anything she aimed at, but because Landon finding comfort with another woman after she passed would have pissed her off."

"Can you explain what you mean?" Chris asked, ignoring the fact that Evie had said 'pissed'. Piss was a word he used, not regularly, but often enough that he was comfortable using it, but hearing it come out of Evie Travis's mouth made it sound especially vulgar.

The question was met with silence. Orrin knew his wife was thinking through her response, searching for the words she could use to speak the truth without casting Cassie in a bad light. He held his hand up again, signaling for patience.

"I liked Cassie, I really did. I felt privileged to be counted among her friends. You know the scene in The Wizard of Oz, how the movie begins in black and white, but when Dorothy lands in Oz, everything is in color?" Evie waited for a response.

"Mom and I watched it, so, yes, ma'am. I know what you are saying." JD finally spoke up.

"When you get back to Four Corners, watch it with your brothers. I don't care that you are all big, strong, manly men. Everyone of you should have been able to answer me." She continued speaking, not quite keeping the disbelief out of her voice. "It is a classic. I would wager that not a one of you has ever seen It's a Wonderful Life, either."

Orrin redirected her back to Cassie. "This phone battery is not going to last forever. He mouthed 'Thank you' when Maude reached into her bag and produced a charger. Vin took it, spotted an outlet, and stretched the cable to the phone. It reached the phone lying beside Orrin, but it barely reached. Until the phone charged, everyone would need to speak up if they wanted Evie to hear.

Unaware that the danger of a suddenly dead phone had been averted, Evie said, "Sorry. I just wanted you to visualize how Cassie lit up Four Corners when she and Curtis arrived. They came at the beginning of our senior year, and she took the school by storm. It wasn't just that she was new. It wasn't just that she was gorgeous. She was a magnet. When she entered a room, everyone's eyes were pulled to her. I remember feeling sorry for Curtis. He was sweet, cute, and had a killer smile, but when she was around, he became invisible... I am not saying that right. He wasn't invisible; it was more like her presence overshadowed him." She paused, "But you were asking why I said she would be pissed.

"One Friday, she invited a group of us over for a sleepover. I hadn't been to a sleepover in years, and she made it sound as though it was going to be the must-attend event of the season. Angie, Amy, Connie, and Trish were all there, and we felt special to be the friends Cassie chose to invite. She had chosen us, the members of the rifle club, and, except for me, the members of the Girls Rodeo Team. Anyway, we did the usual sleepover things: hair, makeup, nails, and then we gossiped. Again, our gossip covered the usual things: boys, who was dating whom, more boys, teachers who gave too much homework, and boys. Then someone, I don't remember who, but it was probably Connie, asked if anyone had heard why Babs Kenny had left school. Of course, we all had realized that she wasn't at school, but I hadn't given it any thought. Connie whispered that she overheard her Mom talking on the phone and that her Mom said that Babs was pregnant. She went on to say that her folks were sending her to her aunt's home to have the baby. I never saw her again. Her parents moved a few months later." Evie paused as she tried to put a face to the girl she had once counted as a close friend.

"You were going to explain why you thought Cassie capable of murder," Orrin gently prodded before Chris could open his mouth.

"Putting it like that makes her crazy. I don't know how to explain... One of us asked, probably me, who the baby's father was. No one knows. No one stepped up to claim responsibility for getting her pregnant. We were looking at each other, each of us was staring at one another as we tried to think of anyone she dated, when Cassie exploded. Yes, saying that she exploded is the best way to describe how she acted. I had seen her mad before, but even when she was chewing someone out, she was in control of her anger. As soon as she said her piece, she would turn off the anger... That night, she was

unhinged. She paced around the room, and we fell all over ourselves to stay out of her way as she ranted. I don't remember her words exactly; I think I deliberately forgot them, but I will never forget the gist of what she had to say. She was angry that Babs was foolish enough to get pregnant. But she focused her fury on the 'worthless man who betrayed Babs by not stepping up and marrying her so her child would not be a bastard, and she would not have to live in shame.

"She said that if she were Babs and had been so horribly betrayed, she would do everything in her power to make sure the fiend would never know a minute of peace. He would spend every moment looking over his shoulder for her as she took away everything and everyone he loved. You would have thought that she would have worn herself out, but she didn't slow down. Then Curtis knocked on the door and entered.

"I have often thought of Curtis as being a weak man, but when I remember him standing in the doorway, what I remember is his strength. He quietly said, 'Cassie, you are upset. Do you want to tell me about it?' She instantly calmed and said, 'Oh, Curtis, it is awful. Someone got Babs pregnant and has refused to step up and take care of her. He betrayed her.' He just stood there, nodding his head in agreement, and she became calm. He left, and we went to sleep. The next morning, everyone pretended that she didn't have that moment of deranged behavior. I never saw any evidence of it again."



The silence in the room matched that coming from the phone. Maude began tapping her fingers against the table. Ezra grew still, placing the pen in his hand on the paper in front of him, and waited. His mother... Maude, he would have to ask her what she wanted him to call her... She had the annoying habit, when she planned to say something controversial and wasn't sure how her listeners would take her words, of tapping her nails against something. She had tapped each time she decided to leave him with one of her so-called family members. She tapped all night before rejecting Albert Johnson's offer of marriage. Later, she told Ezra that the man had a violent side she could not control, and while he had never hit her, she did not want to give him the opportunity. She had tapped for hours before informing him she would be removing him from high school so he could help her with one of her schemes. Only she didn't call it a scheme; she called it an asset redistribution. He could spend hours reflecting on the decisions she made while tapping. He shoved the memories aside and waited as she tapped. One, two, three, pause, one, two, three, over and over as she stared at a spot on the wall no one else saw.

The clicking of her nails against the polished wood almost echoed in the room. Ignoring the stares she was receiving, Maude kept tapping her fingers against the table as she thought. Finally, she stopped tapping and put her hands in her lap. She turned to Orrin and asked, "How sure are you that Cassie Larabee is dead?"

After hearing his wife talk about Cassie's outburst, Orrin had been expecting the question. "I am reasonably certain. Do I know one hundred percent? No. A woman was found in Landon's truck. She was Cassie's height, but her body had been extensively burned. I was in her room with Landon when the staff came in to change her bandages." He swallowed hard, fighting to suppress the bile in his throat that the memory caused. "Forgive me for being graphic... Her hair had been burned away, her face was unrecognizable... She never spoke and never regained consciousness." Orrin's voice trailed off.

"I do not mean to belabor the point, but... did anyone compare dental records?"

Orrin wanted to tell the woman to be quiet, but after she had bared her soul for them, he couldn't. Besides, she was right. They needed to be sure that Cassie was not the woman who had hunted the women in Landon's life. "At the time, we were all sure she was Cassie, so no, we didn't."

Satisfied with the answer, Maude turned to Chris, "I am sorry for pushing this, but the things that Mrs. Travis said about Cassie struck me as being the same type of behavior the supposed woman who killed my sister exhibited- uncontrolled rage."

"We could dig her up and get DNA." Chris offered. The thought did not bother him as much as the prospect of digging up his father had. He supposed his detachment was due to having no emotional connection with her.

"No!" Josiah and Orrin said in unison. They exchanged looks, saw they were thinking the same thing, then Orrin sat back in his chair, studying the brothers' faces as Josiah explained.

"Chris, if the body belongs to your mother, we have tipped our hands, and our Listener might as well have been here listening to us today. And if it is not your mother, then while we can assume she is

our Listener, we haven't learned anything about where she is, but she will know we are looking for her. There has to be another way."

"Ya know, yer a tough bunch, but ya ain't educated on hunting folks," taking his eyes away from Ezra's computer screen, Vin said. "First, ya talked about Landon bein' at the hospital, but what about Curtis? Seems to me, her twin would be there."

"It was pure chaos when she was med-flighted into the hospital in Ely. Landon called me and told me that Cassie had been in a wreck and asked if I could go to the hospital. He wanted someone to be there because it would take an hour or longer for him to reach the hospital. Curtis, Amy, and Angie beat him there. Angie had driven them there, and when she entered, she took on the task of speaking with the nurses and the doctors. I remember being grateful that she took charge; she knew the questions to ask. Curtis stood in the doorway, waiting for Landon, and I went to sit with Amy... Amy said they should not have let Cassie drive off; that she was in one of her moods. She said that it was her fault if Cassie died. I asked her what she meant, and she just cried harder. When she calmed down some, I asked her again. She said that Cassie had been in one of her moods, and Curtis had taken her into his office to talk. She said that she was angry that Cassie had disrupted the preparations for the shower and had walked out of the house to cool off. When she went back inside, Cassie had come flying out of the office spewing nonsense. She said that she could tell Cassie was still upset and that she should have followed her to the truck and made sure she was able to drive, but she was angry, tired of Cassie's theatrics, and wanted her to go home."

Orrin took up the story then, "I got to the hospital about the same time as Landon. He was as pale as a ghost and immediately began asking how Cassie was and when he could see her. A sheriff showed up and asked about the gas cans in the truck's bed. Landon said he had put them in the truck and was planning to take them to Nettie Wells' home. He said that he hadn't known that Cassie would take the truck."

"Wait." Buck interrupted Orrin. "It would have taken a lot to ignite those canisters. Being bounced around in a simple wreck should not have done it." He exchanged a look with Chris, waiting to see if his brother agreed with his assessment.

"Buck's right. The only way I see the fire happening is if the tops on the cannisters were not screwed shut. During the wreck, two things must have happened. During her drive down the mountain, one of the cannisters leaked, and then when she wrecked, a spark from the wreck must have ignited the gasoline."

"Dad would have made sure the lids on the can were on tight," Nathan said. "I remember him checking and rechecking that the caps were on securely."

Chris nodded in agreement, but then said, "He did, but that may have been a habit he developed after my mother's wreck."

"Nah," Buck disagreed. "I remember, once, when I was mowing the yard, he came over and checked the lid on the gas can. He said that his father told him that if a can got knocked over in the barn, and any gas leaked from it, the gas spilled, it would not only smell bad, it would ruin the hay and potentially cause a fire."

"Can I git back to my second point?"

"Go right ahead, Vin." It stung a little that Vin had all but called them amateurs in the way they were searching for the Listener, but he was right.

"Thanks, Chris. I hafta ask, where was her wedding ring? I mean, most women are right proud of their rings and won't take them off for any reason."

"Vin, it is obvious you have never been pregnant," Evie said.

"No ma'am, I reckon I ain't. What did I miss?"

"Many women have problems with their feet swelling, but some of us have problems with swelling in our hands. Cassie had a bad problem with her hands and feet. During the last few weeks of her pregnancy, she not only wore the widest set of flipflops she could find, but she also took off her rings and kept them in her jewelry box."

"So the rings were in her jewelry box," Vin dejectedly stated. He had wanted to prove the burnt woman was Cassie Larabee.

"No. You see, after Chris was born, Cassie continued to feel her hands were swelling. Several times she showed me her hands, and while I didn't see much swelling, the rings were tight. When Landon offered to get them resized, she started crying and said that she would lose the baby weight and be back to her old self soon." Orrin explained.

"So, she gained a lot of weight when she was pregnant?" It was understandable when a woman gained excess weight while pregnant, but it clashed with the image he had of his mother.

"No, not really. She once confided to me that she had ten pounds that she couldn't get rid of." Evie recalled.

"It doesn't sound like much. But I take it by your tone, the ten pounds upset her," Josiah said.

"It did. The day she came home from the hospital, she called me in tears because her favorite jeans would not zip. I laughed and told her that the weight would come off. She quit crying and said that having Chris was worth any extra weight, but that's when she began complaining about her rings being tight. She would take them off and then have a panic attack when she couldn't find them. She wasn't wearing her rings when she wrecked, and Landon tore up the house looking for them."

"He found them, though. He gave them to me when I asked Sarah to marry me." There, he had said her name, and it didn't rip him up inside. Instead, he found himself smiling, remembering her answering smile, her embrace when he had proposed, offering her his mother's engagement ring.

"He didn't, Clara did. She found them in the barn's tack room. Your father was so embarrassed. He said he kept the tack room immaculate, and if they were there, he would have seen them. I told him he needed glasses."

"Orrin is right, he was embarrassed, but he was also upset. He had wanted to bury her with her wedding band and engagement ring. When Cassie passed, I helped him search the ranch for them. He felt it was important for her to have them with her. I convinced him that Cassie would understand and that when he did find them, he could save them for Chris."

Chris straightened in his chair and looked around the table at his brothers. "I will grant you that we don't know for sure that the woman who burned in the wreck was probably my mother, but we are fairly certain it was. As I see it, what we need to focus on is who had access to the truck before the wreck. By all accounts, Dad was working that day on Gramp's spread. I think we can safely rule him out. Orrin, if I remember correctly, you were in court in Ely, and Miss Evie was at home when they med-flighted my mother to the hospital in Ely. You have an alibi, and Miss Evie did not have time to do something to the truck and then drive back to your home in Ely, all while taking care of Stephen. I feel ridiculous stating what should be obvious, but I think the first step in discovering the identity of the listener is to eliminate the people who it can't be. The next step is to get the names of the women who were with Aunt Amy preparing for the shower. We need to cross-reference those names with the names of people who possess the skill set the Listener obviously has.

"Don't forget the girl who left Four Corners because she got pregnant." Ezra checked his notes. "Babs Kenny. Ah know she left town in disgrace, but our Listener has proven particularly adept at blending in. If our father was the man responsible for her being pregnant, she may have wanted revenge."

"If Dad got a girl pregnant, he would have done the right thing." Nathan insisted. He knew that both Buck and Chris were nodding their heads in agreement. His face fell when he saw the frown on Orrin's face. "What?"

"I was besotted with my Evie years before we actually started dating. Landon... wasn't like me. He had a new girlfriend every week. I am confident that he had sex with any number of them."

"But he would have offered to marry her if he got her pregnant." Buck took his turn at insisting.

"I like to think he would, but the man you knew as your father was not the same man as the one who married Cassie. Until he met her, no, that is not right... Until he asked her to marry him. Landon was involved with several girls. Evie and I were married almost as soon as she graduated from high school. To be honest, Landon and I tried to stay in touch, but we led very different lives. I was the married student who spent all day and much of the night studying. What time I had left over, I spent with Evie. Your father worked hard during the day... but he played hard when the day's work was done."

Chris, not feeling as outraged as Nathan and Buck, asked the question begging to be answered. "Was he involved with this, Babs Kenny?"

"I don't know. We met when Evie and I came to town to see our folks. We'd catch up on what was happening in each other's lives, what I was learning in my classes, what books he was reading, but he never said anything about Babs. From what I remember about her, she wasn't his type."

"What do you mean?" JD asked.

"Evie, help me here."

"What Orrin is trying to say is for you to think of your mothers. Each one of them was not only beautiful, but she was smart. None of your mothers could be classified as overly boisterous, but she

could carry on conversations with anyone about anything. They could listen. Consciously or unconsciously, what Landon looked for in a woman was someone who could stand at his side, work with him to make the Double L successful, and help him raise a family.

"If you never saw her when we competed against other rifle teams, you would have called her a timid wallflower. If she didn't have us to sit with at lunch, Babs would have probably eaten by herself. While she didn't fail any classes, she didn't excel in any..." Orrin could visualize Evie shrugging her shoulders as she continued. "I went to school with her and I was on the rifle team with her, but I can't reasonably say I knew her."

"It sounds as though she may have been vulnerable and allowed herself to fall prey to anyone who sweet-talked her." Observed Josiah.

"Doesn't mean Dad was the one who did the sweet-talking."

"No, Buck, it doesn't. Doesn't mean she is our Listener either. It means we need to find out more about her."

Buck forced himself to relax. He understood Josiah was merely trying to examine all the possibilities. It just bothered him to think of his father, a man he so greatly loved and admired, as being someone who would abandon a pregnant girl, even if she had only been a one-night stand. "I suppose we do need to find out more about her. We had best find out more about the other members of the rifle team. I guess, we need their last names, Miss Evie."

"Of course. Angie Delany. She married a doctor when she graduated from nursing school, and lived in ... I am sorry, I don't know where, but they were divorced within a year. She took back her maiden name when she moved back ... at the same time that Clara started work at the Eagle Bend Medical Center. If I remember correctly, she and your mother became good friends." I am fairly certain she still works at the hospital, but it has been years since we talked."

Nathan hadn't known his mother, but he had grown up knowing Miss Angie. The thought of her being their Listener made him ill, but he was his father's son and moved on. "Connie?"

Buck answered before Evie could. "Connie White?"

"Well, yes... only her name was Connie Townsend. She married a truck driver by the name of ...Daniel... No, it was Dean. Dean White. He had one of those big rigs and was gone for a week at the time. Connie knew what he did for a living when she married him. She claimed that she would get a lot of studying done when he was on the road. She got her teaching certificate and taught school in Eagle Bend. Rumor has it that her husband got home a day early and found her in their bed with the school's principal, by the name of Harvy Cantrell. Dean went to prison, and after the trial, Harvey left the area. Dean died in a prison brawl a few years later. As far as I know, Connie never remarried."

"Trish?" Ezra looked up from his notes and prompted."

"Trish, Patty, or Patricia Ferguson moved in with a boy from Elko a few days after our graduation. It was quite a scandal at the time. Our mothers were friends, and I remember her saying that Elenor was absolutely distraught. Supposedly, he was some musician who played on Friday nights at some bar while Trish worked for little more than the tips she earned at a" Evie paused as she searched for the appropriate word. "A gentleman's club."

"She stripped?" Buck blurted out. How in the hell, heck did genteel Miss Evie have friends like the ones she was describing?

"She told her mom that she was the hostess... Anyway, she left the musician, or he left her. I never got that straight, and she went to school and studied"

"Social work." Chris didn't even try to make it a question. Angie, Trish, Connie, and his Aunt Amy were the concerned women who had butted into his dad's and Rosie's business all those years ago.

"How did you know?"

"I don't mean to be rude, but Orrin can fill you in later. Why don't you call Mary? Judge, you can call Mitch. Use your phone so our Listener can hear. The rest of us need a break."

Taking the phone Chris handed her, Maude said, "Mrs. Travis, before you hang up, I have one last question. "Were any of these women enamored of Mr. Larabee?"

"We all were. Well, not me. I knew who I loved and who I planned to spend the rest of my life with, but Landon was handsome, smart, and funny. Face it, Orrin, you have never been the life of the party. Everyone enjoyed being around Landon, and we all knew he was going to do amazing things in his life. I am only half joking when I say this, but if Landon had said he wanted a harem, it would be filled. To us girls, Landon was the most amazing thing since sliced bread. There, Orrin, you said I would never get a chance to say that and mark it off my bucket list."

Laughter could be heard coming from somewhere in the kitchen, but none of them could understand the words Evie's sister spoke. Sensing their collective confusion, Evie explained, "Whenever my mother would see some new gadget advertised in a magazine or on TV, she would say, 'That is the most amazing thing I have seen since sliced bread.'"

Chris pushed his chair back and stood up. He could see that both Vin and Josiah had something they wanted to say, but Maude looked drained, and the judge needed to call Mitch. "Ezra, your mother could do with a break. Why don't you escort her to her room? We will reconvene this meeting in thirty minutes." He tried to put a smile on his face as he directed his brothers to take a break, but he had heard too much to keep it there.



Maude's suite smells like money. I find myself a little envious as I drop onto the sofa. Silk? I have never thought of using silk as a fabric for anything other than a beautiful dress or a parachute. I could get used to living like this.

No, I really couldn't live like this. People who live in luxury get noticed. If I became noticed, I would be concerned about people interfering with my mission. I would be forced to deal with. I would have to make decisions about removing them from the game. Those kinds of decisions exhaust me. I have to be so careful not to make mistakes. Removing a pawn from the chessboard is easy enough. Determining if it should be moved is more difficult.

I was right in removing Maude. I had it all so very well planned, and then she escaped. I could not allow her to hide for a few days. I know her type. She would have returned to Landon with tears in her eyes, and he would have forgiven her. I gave her every opportunity to leave, but she wouldn't. I know that because she left her clothes... those beautiful dresses which looked better on me than they ever had on her. I saw through her plan to return and circumvented it. I took her clothes and his money. If she had managed to escape removal, she would not have been able to explain to Landon about the missing clothes or money.

I let her think she had escaped judgment, but I had a tracker on her car, and I followed her. Like a rabbit being hunted by a wolf, she sensed my presence. When she ran, as all rabbits do, hence the term 'rabbited', I followed a safe, more leisurely pace. I am sure that she spent the evening searching for signs that I had picked up her trail, but I kept far enough behind her, trusting I could ferret her out of whatever burrow she found to hide in.

Pizza! She must have felt she was sufficiently hidden from me if she thought that it was safe to get pizza. Originally, I had planned to shoot her in the head as I had the other one. It would be less messy. The noise would have reverberated throughout the doors would have cracked open as heads cautiously peered out, searching for the source of the noise. Some brave soul would have eventually stepped outside, and her body would have been immediately discovered. The baby would have been found and returned to Landon for him to raise. And Landon would have had to plan another funeral. So sad. So very sad. So very justified.

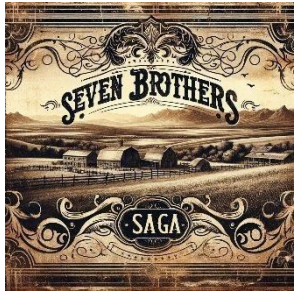
He once spoke words of love to me. He enticed me with his promise that we would spend forever together. It had been a lie. My child had disappeared. I held the baby, and someone, I think it was Landon, took the baby from me. I don't remember those days very well, and I have worked hard to reconstruct what happened. I had a baby taken from my arms. I had a future with Landon. Then, something changed. He quit telling me I was beautiful and that he loved me. He left me to seduce other women. I could feel sorry for them, but each one of them allowed him to pull them into his lies with his lies of love.

I have to stop. I am losing myself in the past. I do not know how Maude escaped me with her son. I let the adrenaline from my hunt disrupt my plans. I walked up behind Maude as she took the pizza from the car and plunged the knife I always carried into her. I thought I had disemboweled her, but when neither she nor the boy child turned up, I assumed her thick

I had been satisfied when she stayed away from Landon. I thought she had learned that Landon could not be trusted. He did not mourn her. He did not hunt for her; he only wanted the boy returned. Then, he received a call from Tommy Botello informing him that Maude Standish was at his casino. Landon had taken off to confront her. Curious, I disguised myself and followed. I was pleased it wasn't her; I didn't have a plan to remove her if it turned out she was the woman who had taken his son. I will never forget the look on Landon's face when she turned to him and realized he had made a mistake.

There was so much more to the story than I was privy to. I don't think I will ever learn how the Maude, currently talking to Landon's sons, managed to steal Maude's son and her name. She had confused things, but she didn't deserve to die; at least not yet. She needed to be warned first.

I took my knife from my dainty leather clutch.



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