



Villains and Funerals

The Hunt for a Lost Brother and Other Villains

Part 2 of The Seven Brothers Saga



If he were in a better mood, he'd go make nice with Shelly and dry her tears. No, no, he wouldn't. Let her cry; she'd learn something. When it came to the office, the bitch was worthless; the only reason he'd hired her was because she had a nice ass, but under her mane of tawny-gold curls, there wasn't a brain in her head. He had thought her mighty fine ass made up for her stupidity. He hated to admit it, but he had been wrong; her fine ass was of little use to him, now. He would fire her in a heartbeat if he could get Bonnie back. Bonnie's ass was a little on the wide side, and her roots always needed coloring, but the woman knew how to run an office, and she would have never made the mistake Shelly had. More importantly, she'd know how to fix it.

He allowed himself one more heartfelt expletive and accompanied it with an ashtray thrown hard enough to lodge in the wall next to the door. He could hear Shelly's little screech; the sound of the ashtray's impact renewed her tears. He didn't smile; the situation was too grim for smiles, but he let her tears bring him a sense of satisfaction. She would never do anything so thoughtlessly stupid again. Of course, she'd be running to get his approval for everything she did.

Her insecurities would get on his nerves in a week or two, but he'd rather double-check her work than let her send another wrong invoice. Mistakes like that would land him in jail.

He'd better figure out how to get Bonnie to come back. She didn't get his blood pumping, but he could find someone else for that. Of course, he'd have to do something to guarantee Shelly's silence when he fired her. She was too stupid to realize what she knew about him, his business, and even if she did understand his books, she was too scared of him to cross him, but... but, he could be wrong. He didn't like to think he was wrong. He used to believe he could read a person as easily as a book, but Maude proved he was not infallible.

He snorted his disgust with himself. He had become soft, or he would have spotted Maude and her conniving ways a mile off. Instead, he had listened to her lies, thinking she had become as enamored of him as he was of her. Not that he expected their affair to last much longer than it had. As beautiful as Maude was, as much as he enjoyed her company and the envy he saw in other men's eyes, he had no intention of keeping her around. Long ago, he had decided not to let any woman mean so much to him that he couldn't easily say goodbye.

Even though he had married twice and kept numerous mistresses, he had never found reason to forget his decision. Maude had come dangerously close to making him fail in keeping his vow.

Older than the women he usually chose to grace his arm, he spent as many hours talking to her as he did bedding her. In or out of bed, she was the most exciting woman he had ever come across. It had terrified him the hold she had on him, but he couldn't give her up. It wasn't love or lust, but he had begun to crave her company. Unfortunately, he told her more about his business than was wise. He hated admitting it, even to himself, but he had shared too much in a desperate attempt to impress her.

He decided to cut her loose several weeks ago; she was just too dangerous a distraction to keep, but he kept postponing sending her on her way, wanting to find a way to let her go gently. He promised himself that he, with one last weekend with Maude, would burn himself into her memory. She'd never forget him. Then, he'd give her some extravagant gift and tell her it was over. There would be tears, but she was smart enough to land on her feet. That had been his plan, but it hadn't worked out that way.

She mentioned a card game, said she had run into an old beau, and he told her about a high-stakes game in Reno. Her old boyfriend asked her to go with him, but she turned him down, saying she was with someone else. It touched him that she had given up something she wanted to do. He had been teaching her the game, and she sat in with him and a few of his cronies a few times. He enjoyed taking her to those games. She caught on to the rules of the games fast enough, but she never developed a decent poker face; every time she held cards she didn't like, she'd bite her lower lip, and when she had a good hand, she would become impatient and start tapping the table. He tried to explain the concept of bluffing, but she was a woman used to letting every emotion she felt cross her face as she experienced it. She had been incapable of being a good poker player. She would win a few dollars at one of his games and crow about it; you'd have thought she had won millions.

She enjoyed the game, and he hadn't had the heart to tell her she'd never be good at it. He had been so very blind.

Confident that anything he'd give her to play with would find its way back into his pocket, he had paid both of their entry fees into the game. They had been there long enough to get comfortable when she looked across the table and said, "Why Ezra, fancy meeting you here." The man looked up and answered, "Hello, Mothuh."

Hearing her words, he realized he had been set up. Sure that, as smart as Maude thought she was, he was smarter, he kept playing. Hand after hand, he watched his money disappear, and his rage increased. He should have dropped out of the game when he saw he was not up to the standards of the other players, but he had never been known to back down to a challenge. About halfway through the evening, he became positive that the two of them were cheating. He almost called them on it, but he had no proof, just a hunch, and he knew the other players would demand proof. He hadn't done anything then, but he had promised himself he would take every minute of humiliation he suffered out of Maude's hide. A good whipping, and she would lose her air of superiority.

She must have sensed what he had planned; she disappeared shortly before their host declared the games over. He stormed out looking for her, but she was nowhere in sight.

Swallowing his pride, he'd asked his driver and his bodyguard if they had seen her leave; they hadn't.

He waited a long time, and then her partner, the man she called son, walked out with a couple of men at his side. The three of them had been laughing; no doubt they had been laughing over how he had been duped. The thought made his blood boil, and he acted.

That had been one of his more stupid moves. If he had acted smart, he would have let the son lead him to the mother. She had been the one to leave the game with most of his money. She had been the one to play him for the fool by letting him think she cared and then by cheating at cards. More importantly, she knew more about his business practices than was safe.

Shelly might have pulled a stupid stunt, but he could rectify her mistake. Maude had potentially damning information on him, and if she should sell it to the right people, his life, as he knew it, would be over. It was a wonder; she hadn't played that particular card already. He could only hope she didn't understand the information she had.

There was no way around it. Maude had to be found, and once she was found, he needed to make sure she never used her knowledge against him. Given her familiarity with a deck of cards, he felt sure she would head toward Vegas only the detectives he hired to locate her reported back to him empty-handed; she was nowhere to be found. People knew of her, and it rankled; she was so well known. He knew that behind his back, his detectives laughed at him. He would fire them, but he desperately needed to find her or, failing that, find her son. Surely, if he had her son, the mother would come running.

Stupid detectives, they had shrugged when he suggested they look for the son. They said they needed more than his first name. Without explaining his reasoning, he had suggested they search the hospitals. The look of disgust on the lead detective's face said, the man suspected what he had done to his son and didn't like it. They hadn't even followed his suggestion. More than likely, they were sitting behind their desks, laughing about how he had been hoodwinked by a con woman everyone in Vegas knew. They were thinking that if she could take his money and disappear, they could take his money and pretend to work.

That was it. He needed someone new. He needed to find someone lean and hungry with the skills to hunt, but someone just starting. He needed someone young who wouldn't ask questions about why he wanted Maude. He wanted someone to hunt the bitch down and failing finding her, would find her son.

He wanted someone who would look the other way when he asked Ezra where his mother was. He'd have to be careful who he picked, though. Hungry men could be bought, and he had too many enemies out there, more than willing to pay for information on him. He had some poker buddies in Reno, men who were not business competitors and, more importantly, men who were not the law. He'd give a couple of them a call and see if they knew any men they could recommend. First, he had best call Bonnie. She needed to come back, it might take a raise and a bit of pleading on his part, but she'd be working for him by the end of the day; he'd let her handle firing Shelly.



Tommy Botello strolled through the casino as he tried to do at least once a day. He had begun walking through the place when he was new to the job and was trying to get a feel for the behind-the-scenes work necessary to keep the casino running smoothly. He continued the practice when he discovered employees, never sure when their boss would appear, stayed on their toes, and more importantly, his employees found him more approachable when he wandered around sticking his nose into things.

By walking around, talking to his people, he heard about potential problems long before they became difficult problems. He made it a point to randomly choose two, sometimes three nights, each week, to spend in his suite in the casino so he could meet with the night shift.

Those nights still drove his wife crazy, but at least she had quit asking him if he were involved with someone else, as though he would be stupid enough to have an affair with anyone associated with his casino. Affairs invariably ended, and, too often, they ended badly. Sex and work never mixed. Besides, he was not heartless enough to expose his wife to the gossip that his having an affair with an employee would bring. She, after all, was his wife and the mother of his daughter. She deserved his discretion.

"Mr. Botello?"

He looked up from his perusal of the Daily Room Occupancy Report, his hotel manager had just handed him, to frown at a member of the hotel's security team; he hated to be interrupted. "Yes, Mr. Rueben, what do you have that cannot wait?" he gently rebuked the man, hoping he would take the hint and not interrupt him in the future.

"Normally, I wouldn't bother you with this, Sir, but a man just called your office. Miss Lake referred him to my office, but I think this is something you might want to handle. His name is Moore."

Botello's face eased into a smile; he handed the report back to the hotel manager. "I'll get back to you on this, Phillip. Something I need to attend to has come up." He turned to his security guard as they began walking towards his private elevator.

"Timothy Moore?" he asked, just to make sure they were talking about the same man. He knew he didn't need to ask; Mr. Reuben would not bother him if it was not Timothy Moore, but he had not gotten to be in his position by making assumptions.

"Yes, Sir."

"Interesting. What does Mr. Moore want with me?"

"He claims he has stayed here several times, and you told him to let you know if he ever needed anything." He had politely suggested that Mr. Botello not tell guests something like that, but Mr. Botello liked to meet and greet guests, and saying things along those lines was his way of telling them they were important.

"Indeed," Tommy Botello prided himself on remembering the names of guests who often visited the casino. If Moore was a repeat visitor and he hadn't realized it when Larabee's sons visited, he was slipping.

"I reviewed the hotel's records and noted that he has stayed here on three separate occasions."

"And we don't have a file on him." Botello finished the sentence.

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"He hasn't won enough to pique our interest, nor has he had excessive losses. He did not meet our profile as someone to watch. If I hadn't handled that matter for you last week, I would have considered him merely a man puffed up with his sense of importance and dealt with him myself and not bothered you, Sir."

"You did the right thing." He'd keep an eye on Mr. Rueben; he had shown initiative. They stepped out of the elevator and headed for his office. "Keep holding my calls, Jenny. Come in, Mr. Rueben, and make yourself comfortable."

"Thank you, Sir." Rueben sat down, but he did not relax into the chair. This was the boss's office, and no matter what he said, one did not simply make oneself comfortable in Mr. Botello's office.

"Tell me about this phone call," Botello ordered as he eased into his chair. He reached for the pack of gum Jenny left for him. He hated gum; seeing people chewing gum made him think of cows chewing their cud, and with his size, it was not an image he wanted to project, but he was trying to quit smoking.

"He said you told him to let you know if he needed anything." Botello shrugged at his remark. "He was angry that Miss Lake shunted his call to me. He demanded to speak with you. It took a lot of coaxing to get him to talk with me, but when he realized he would have to talk with me before talking to you, he made sure I knew exactly who he was, saying he was wealthy and someone of importance. He said you told him to let you know if he needed anything. He called to ask you for the name of a good detective, someone new to the business, discreet and ready to work hard. He said, Sir, he thought being in the business that you were in, you would have the names of several such men."

"Did he mention why he needed a detective?"

"Yes, sir. He said he was looking for a man named Ezra..." he couldn't help himself; he paused for the drama of it "and a woman named Maude. What would you like for me to do, Sir?"

"Give me his phone number and I will handle him. In the meantime, I want you to find every bit of information you can on Timothy Moore. I want to know everything... from what he had for breakfast to the time he took his last crap. Everything, understand."

"Yes, Sir, you will have my preliminary report this evening... May I ask, Sir, what do you plan to do?" he asked as he took an index card out of his coat pocket and laid it on the desk.

"I plan on eliminating a debt and, if all plays out like it should, make some wealthy men beholden to me."

"Then I will get right on it, Sir."

Botello watched as Rueben left the room, pulling the door shut as he exited, before he picked up the index card and read the number. He decided to make this call personally, rather than delegating it to his secretary. He knew exactly the right man to recommend for the job. He dialed the number, popping a piece of gum into his mouth.

"Mr. Moore? Tommy Botello speaking. I am sorry for the runaround you must feel as though you received. My secretary is new, and when I am not in the office, she sends my calls to my assistant."

"Of course, I will talk to Mr. Reuben. He is rather... gung-ho, which has its place in my business, but I will make sure he understands I will take your calls. So, tell me, Mr. Moore, how may I be of assistance?"

"A detective...hmmm. I use several different agencies. I wouldn't hesitate to recommend any one of them, but if I am to understand you, you are looking for someone with a little more independence than an agency man. I may have someone who could be of use to you. I have never used this gentleman, but he has developed an impressive reputation that belies his youthful appearance, a real hunter. He started as a bounty hunter in Texas but has recently branched out into other endeavors."

"No, as I have said, I never have used him. No, I doubt he will provide you with a resume. I am sure you understand that the people he has worked for in the past would not appreciate their names being bandied about.

"His name? Vin Tanner. I will contact him, and if he is interested, I will have him get in touch with you."

"I understand you want to call him yourself, but Mr. Tanner is not exactly the type of man you can find on any internet search engine. He gets his work through word of mouth. I don't believe he would appreciate my handing his number out without his permission. There may come a time when I will find myself needing his services. Therefore, I will respect his need for privacy.

"You are quite welcome." He hung up the phone and, with a look of disgust, spat out the gum into the waste can next to his desk. "Jenny," he hit the switch on the intercom, "get me Vin Tanner. You'll find him at Landon's ranch."



"So, you want to go over this one more time?" Chris wasn't politely asking the woman standing in front of him to explain what she said. He heard her and he understood what happened; he didn't understand why she thought saying she was sorry was going to make everything all right. Did she not see his brother? He wanted to know who was responsible; he wanted heads to roll.

"I am truly sorry this happened, but..." she repeated her words, trying to meet his eyes without flinching. He had not raised his voice, but his manner, the way he stood, waiting for her explanation, said he was out for blood. If she didn't want to be the one left mangled and bleeding, then she had better give him another victim. Only that wasn't her job; she was supposed to protect her nurses, not give them up to people ready to ruin their careers.

"Don't say mistakes happen. You've already said that, and I don't want to hear it again," Chris warned her, his eyes cold and hard. "I want to know who is responsible for my brother being as ill as he is."

"Mr. Larabee, please..." Please what? Step back? Stop scaring me? He wasn't near her, he hadn't raised his voice, but he was scaring the hell out of her. Everything about him said he was not going to be satisfied with a lawsuit against the hospital to be fought by lawyers in suits; he wanted a more personal revenge.

"Who?"

"I've already disciplined the nurse involved," she explained, hoping he would believe her and think she had done enough. There were times she considered retiring early; this was one of them. There was not enough money in the world to compensate her for having to explain away the mistake to the man standing in front of her. Her standard speech usually worked to mollify families, but it was not working on him. She had been foolish to try giving it. He was a man who knew when he was hearing bull, and he made no effort to smile, play nice, and agree with her that it was an understandable, if unfortunate, mistake. He was acting as though someone

intentionally tried to make his brother worse, and it hadn't been that way. They were busy and understaffed. She tried to tell him, but instead of being mollified, his anger increased.

She looked over at the tall, dark-skinned doctor standing beside her, and pleaded with her eyes for help--not that she thought she was in any physical danger from the man glaring at her. This was a hospital, and he was a civilized man; he wouldn't hurt her, she hoped. Being the nursing supervisor sucked.

Nathan took pity on the woman; she'd been more effective if she had come in, thrown herself at Chris's feet, and pleaded for mercy, but she hadn't. She had explained how the mistake had been made, apologized, and through it all had been the focus of Chris's fierce scowl--something she didn't deserve. He dropped his hands on her shoulders, turned her toward the door, and said, "I'll talk to him, Mrs. Spry. You go on."

"Thank you," she whispered gratefully before remembering those gentle brown eyes had also been burning with anger just a short while ago when he stood in her office asking the very same questions Chris Larabee asked. When he walked into her hospital, she was struck with a memory of him as a gangly teenager towering over Dr. Griggs as he followed his mentor all over the hospital. She used to believe he was such a sweet boy. He hadn't stayed sweet. He and Chris Larabee might not look anything like each other, but they both had that ... attitude. She should speak with her nurses to ensure they understand not to take any actions that could further aggravate these brothers. They did not need the situation to escalate. Without a backward glance, she hurriedly left the room.

With barely controlled rage, Chris watched the woman leave, glad she had enough sense to shut the door behind her as she left the room. Good. Family discussions were not for public consumption. It sounded as though Nathan planned on defending the nursing staff. If he was ignorant enough to do that, then Chris planned on saying the things he couldn't to Mrs. Spry; she was a woman, and as much as he wanted to, he could not bring himself to go against his father's teachings and curse her. "What the hell happened?" he growled.

Nathan looked up from his visual examination of Ezra; his eyes flickered from Buck to Chris and back again. Chris was angry; you could hear it in his voice, and see it in his stance and face. Heck, the very air around him fairly crackled. But that was Chris and while being around a pissed off Chris was never pleasant, he was more concerned about Buck. Buck stood in the corner looking out the window, his back to the room. He was quiet, and a quiet Buck was not a good thing. "Buck?" he asked his brother to talk to him. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Chris drop his anger and turn concerned eyes on the tall, lanky man.

"Is this what happened to Dad? Is Dad dead because someone made a mistake?" Buck's quietly spoken question filled the room.

Nathan sighed. He should have seen the question coming and been prepared to answer it. "I don't know... not for sure. I've read his hospital records and his autopsy report... more than once." He would never say a word about how hard that was. Treating his father's records as just another case report had been one of the most difficult things he had ever done, but his father had always tackled problems head-on, and he was his father's son.

"I don't like to think of Dad having enemies. He was a good man. Sure, he had arguments with people over the years. Who doesn't? But to make someone angry enough to kill him? ... I just can't imagine why anyone would want to kill Dad. It would be easier, I think, to believe a mistake was made. It would hurt to think he died because someone was careless and gave him the wrong drug, but it's something I could understand. I cannot understand murder. Problem is... Dr. Winn did the autopsy."

"And that means?" Chris prompted.

"Dr. Winn is a pathologist. He is not a forensic pathologist. He was not looking for evidence of murder. He wasn't even looking for evidence of a wrong drug being administered. I think he had Dad's chart in his hands and saw he had been admitted to rule out a heart attack. He took the easy way out and concluded that Dad died from a heart attack without doing a thorough autopsy."

"Did you talk to him about the monitor strip?" Buck persisted.

"A couple of days ago, when it was too late to do any good. I should have looked at the autopsy report more thoroughly before we buried Dad. I should have demanded that other tests be run. I don't know what I was thinking... I don't mean that he didn't have a heart attack. It's possible he did. ... I'm not saying this right." He thought for a moment, his eyes moving from one

brother to the other and landing on the one in the bed, who somehow was managing to sleep through all the noise around him.

He started over, "I don't believe in coincidences. Mistakes happen. Mistakes like the one with Ezra, where the nurse forgot to list all the medications, happen a lot more than anyone wants to admit, and Dad dying... Sure, people have heart attacks all the time, and maybe he was misdiagnosed, or maybe he died because a tired, overworked, underpaid nurse made a mistake. It's just that it's so damned coincidental, Dad dying when he was healthy and Ezra getting worse when he should have been getting better. It bothers me."

"What do you want to do?" Chris asked.

"I think we should have Dad's body exhumed and have someone look for evidence of foul play."

"Shit..." Buck's voice trailed off.

"You think it's necessary?" Chris asked, knowing Nathan did think it necessary, or he wouldn't have mentioned it.

"Yeah... I do. I want someone who knows what he's doing to look at Dad's heart. If he agrees, Dad had a heart attack, then we have an answer, and we can stop looking for a murderer. If he says the heart is fine, then he can start looking for evidence of a drug that shouldn't have been in Dad's system, being there. If he finds it, then we can start thinking a mistake was made."

"And if he can't figure out why Dad died...?"

"Well then, Buck, we are looking at murder."

"I don't follow."

"There are a lot of drugs in the hospital that kill, a lot of them occur normally within the body and won't be picked up on any autopsy. If we don't find any reason for Dad to be dead, then I need to find out if any of those particular drugs are unaccounted for. I think we need to exhume Dad's body. What do you think?" He moved away from his brothers, wanting to give them time to think this through. It would be hard to do, and there was no guarantee they'd get any answers, but he felt they needed to do so. Still, he didn't want to unduly influence their decisions and push them into something that would bother them for the rest of their lives. He picked up Ezra's chart and began reading while his brothers thought about what he was asking.

Buck found himself looking out the window again. Not that there was much to see, just a little strip of grass between the part of the building they were in and the hospital's most recent addition. A couple of nurses walked into and then out of his line of sight, but for once, he didn't notice them; he was too busy thinking. He didn't want to exhume his father's body; bile rose in his throat at the thought, but there wasn't any real choice here. They needed to know if their father was murdered. They needed to know if someone was lying in wait for them, and they needed to know if there was someone who needed to be brought to justice. "It needs to be all of our decision."

"You're right. We all need to talk about this. Can we wait until Ezra is back at the ranch, or should we go ahead and do it?" Chris turned to Nathan and asked.

"It can wait," Nathan answered as he flipped through the pages on Ezra's chart.

"Something wrong?" Chris questioned Nathan's sudden interest in the chart. There had better not be anything wrong.

"No... not really. Has he been awake any?"

"No. He's tried a couple of times, but he can't quite wake up," Buck answered.

"It's good he's still asleep, isn't it?"

"It's not bad. It's just that while we haven't gotten loud, we have not been whispering. He was given a mild sedative at noon. Looks like it hit him fairly hard."

"Was he given the right medicine?" Chris's eyes narrowed in renewed anger.

Nathan arched an eyebrow and counted to ten before answering, "Well, Chris, I didn't see them give it to him, so I can't say for sure, but I tend to think they are being very careful about what they give him."

"But he's been asleep all afternoon," Chris argued. He knew he didn't know medicine, but if one mistake could be made, another could also be made. And if there was someone out there targeting Larabees...

"His body is worn out from fighting the infection. He needs the sleep." Nathan's voice was gentle. "Chris, Buck, it probably was a mistake. They have a new computer system that the staff is trying to get used to. The nurse, Mrs. Rivera, either sent the orders to the floor before she

typed them all in, or she neglected to list all the antibiotics. Mrs. Spry is probably right. This was a mistake, but we caught it and already Ezra's improving." Nathan understood Chris's anger and Buck's worry, but didn't want them looking for murderers everywhere.

"He is better," Buck agreed. Even, he could see Ezra's color had improved, and sweat was no longer dripping off of him.

"Listen, I've got to go meet Mrs. Travis for a few minutes, and then I will be back. I'll stay tonight... make sure he stays on the road to recovery.

"Evie's here?" Buck asked.

"No... not Evie, Mary. She wants me to talk to her about... getting strung up." He tried to make a joke about it and failed miserably.

Chris frowned. He didn't like the thought of a nosy reporter poking into family business. He wished Nathan had told her to get lost, but Nathan was a grown man, and if he wanted to talk to the woman, there wasn't much Chris could do or say to stop him.

"We'll be here until you get back, and then we'll decide who's staying the night." It wasn't going to be Nathan. He didn't like the thought of his two injured brothers staying alone... in this hospital.



He could hear voices, but couldn't make out what they were saying. He thought someone was calling his name. Manners dictated that he answer, but he didn't have the energy to do so.

"Come on, Ezra, open your eyes. It's supper time. I know you've got to be starving." Not that the food the aide had brought in looked appetizing. "Can't blame him, Chris, I wouldn't want to wake up to eat that," he poked at the tray, "well, they're calling it chicken, but it sure doesn't look like any chicken I've ever seen. Can't rightly blame him for not wanting to wake up to eat it."

"So, what are you suggesting, Buck?" Chris tried to hide his smile.

"Pizza. Pepperoni pizza with extra cheese. No one can resist the smell of a good pizza."

"You don't think Nate will have your hide if he comes in and finds you feeding Ezra pizza?"

"The pizza is for us. The smell is for him. He wakes up and we'll stuff his mouth full of this healthy shit."

Chris tossed the magazine he'd been flipping through onto the foot of the bed and reached for his phone. "One large pepperoni pizza coming up."

"Better make it an extra-large. Nathan talks a good game about eating healthy, but when it comes to pizza, he can sure pack it away, and if he's spent all of this time talking to Mrs. Travis, then he's bound to be hungry." Buck ignored Chris's frown at the mention of Nathan talking to the reporter. He knew Chris's feelings on the subject, but Nathan needed to talk about his attack, and he sure wasn't talking to one of them. A reporter was not his first choice, but this wasn't about him or Chris; it concerned Nathan. He changed the subject, "You planning on calling the ranch?"

"Not until you head out."

"Thought I'd stay awhile."

"You've been here all day, Buck."

"Sitting in a chair, watching television, or sitting on the back of an ornery horse watching cattle, sounds like I did just fine today."

Chris chuckled. Buck could insist that he was perfectly fine to watch Ezra through the night, but he could tell his brother was tired. It'd take a bit of convincing, but he was the big brother. If he put his mind to it, he could get both Nathan and Buck to go home and get some much-needed rest.



"I was beginning to think you'd gotten stuck to your chair," Josiah said when Vin came into the kitchen, turning one way and then another, stretching the muscles in his back.

"Thought I'd come up fer air." He'd been on the internet all afternoon, and since Landon Larabee had thought to have two phone lines put in the house when he renovated, he kept one free in case there was news of Ezra and used the other line to call people he knew in construction to pester them with questions regarding Timothy Moore. Unfortunately, everyone he knew lived in Texas, and Moore was a Californian, and he had learned little.

"So... are you going to tell me?" Josiah asked as he handed Vin the casserole to put in the oven.

“Tell ya what?” Vin pulled the plastic wrap off the casserole and sniffed at the dish—chicken and rice; if it was good as the other things the ladies of Four Corners dropped for Landon Larabee’s funeral and which his brothers had piled into the freezer, he was going to have to do his running now because there was no possible way to run after three helpings. He wasn’t being greedy, he told himself; he was just making sure nothing went to waste. It seemed as though the women of Four Corners were afraid that bachelors couldn’t take care of themselves or, as Buck boasted, the animal magnetism of seven hunks of burning love (counting poor, hospitalized Ezra) under one roof was too much for any woman to ignore and bringing them food was just the ladies way of checking out their studly bodies. Buck was full of it, but he had made them laugh and forget their worry for a few minutes.

“Whatever is on your mind?” Josiah leaned against the kitchen counter; he could and would wait as long as it took for Vin to decide to talk. JD was brushing the horses down and, if history repeated itself, he would spend at least fifteen minutes cleaning off his boots – the boy needed to learn to watch where he was stepping. If Vin didn’t want JD as an audience, he had best open up.

Needing to think, Vin took his time putting the casserole in the oven, twice checking the helpful directions he found taped to the aluminum foil; he didn’t want to misread the temperature and ruin some lady’s hard work. Shutting the oven’s door, he straightened up and stretched. “I have time for a quick run.” He moved away from the stove only to find his path barred by a well-muscled arm.

Josiah slowly nodded, “Running is good. Talking is better.”

Vin studied the arm in front of him. Long ago, He had decided, years ago, not to allow anyone to prevent him from what he planned to do. The arm barring his way was a challenge if he ever saw one. Normally, he’d grab the arm, spin the attached man to the ground, and walk over him, but something about Josiah made him wonder if he should do that.

Josiah might have a lot of gray in his hair, sometimes he didn’t move as quickly as he might have once done, and he certainly projected this image of a friendly, easy-going man, but there was something in his eyes, behind the friendliness, saying, ‘don’t mess with me’. Well, messages like that had been projected at him his whole life, and he had learned not to back down. Intent on getting past his brother, he reached for the arm blocking his way. He wouldn’t toss him far –just move him a little out of the way. He reached for Josiah’s arm only to find himself face down on the counter.

“Some folks say you get slower with age, others say you get smarter.” He leaned down and whispered into Vin’s ear, “I like to think I can still move when I need to, and I know I have gotten a hell of a lot smarter. Now, let me say this one more time. I’ll even speak slowly...I am here if you need to talk.” He released Vin and stepped back, clearing Vin’s path to the door.

Considering his options, Vin rubbed at his shoulder. Josiah was making it very plain that he wouldn’t stop him from leaving, or he could talk. Josiah was making it equally as plain that he would listen. It was up to him. He could ignore Josiah, and Josiah would let him run, come back, eat, and nothing would be said. Or he could talk about what was bothering him. His choice...sharing his past...himself to this stranger or walking away and keeping him a stranger...his choice. “I ain’t been able to find much on this Moore character.”

“What did you expect to find?” Josiah asked.

“I don’t rightly know... I expected to find out what it is that Ezra knows about the man.”

“And you didn’t find it?”

“I know where he lives, where his office is, what he does for a living, how much he paid in taxes last year, and where he likes to shop. Did I figure out what Ezra has on him... no.”

“Thought about asking Ezra?”

“Didn’t Chris find you before he left? Ezra is out of his head... don’t know what he’s saying or doing, and they got him all trussed up.” Vin’s eyes darkened at the thought.

“Chris mentioned something about needing to restrain him. He said they did it to keep him from pulling out his IV again.” So that was what was bothering Vin.

“Shouldn’t have had to tie him in the first place.”

“No. They shouldn’t have had to.”

“He’s not a criminal...treating him like one ain’t right.”

Josiah saw the barely controlled anger in Vin’s eyes and, taking a not-so-wild stab in the dark, asked, “You ever been tied up, Vin?”

"Once," it came out little more than a whisper, but the eyes that met Josiah's warned the older man that he was not to feel sorry for him. "I was a kid, and it was part of a gang initiation."

"What happened?" Josiah asked with obvious concern in his eyes.

"Everyone I knew was a member of the Conquistadors, and I wanted to be one too. They walked down the street, and people moved out of their way. They took what they wanted, and no one told them 'no'. I wanted that kind of power. I begged to be a member. I told them, 'Let me prove my worth.' I was ready to do anything to prove myself worthy. At first, they laughed at me, but I kept on until they agreed to make me a member. 'It wouldn't be easy,' they said. 'I would have to prove myself to them. Prove that I had the balls to be one of them.' 'Anything,' I said.

"They were going to test my courage. They tied my hands and used me for a punching bag. I wasn't supposed to scream, and I didn't, even when they didn't stop. It was supposed to be only a few blows...just enough to prove I had what it took to run with them... but they kept hitting me. They didn't stop, and I couldn't even defend myself. I was helpless." He let his voice trail off.

He wanted to go change so that he could run, but Josiah's sympathetic gaze pinned him to the spot. Why had he said all of that? It was stupid to keep on talking. He could have left it at his being frustrated about not finding something more on Moore, but he hadn't. Stupid ...Stupid. If he didn't get a hold of himself, he'd be confessing all sorts of stuff.

"What happened then?" Josiah urged, saddened for his brother's childhood.

"Harry came along... I got out of the gang." End of the subject, he silently told Josiah. Hoping the man understood what he was saying, he didn't want to be ugly about it, but he'd said way too much already, and the subject was closed.

Vin's story chilled him to the bone, and he wanted nothing more than to wrap Vin in a big hug and tell him everything was OK, but Vin's steady gaze kept him still. He doubted Vin told the whole story, but those eyes said he had gotten all Vin was prepared to tell. That was all right. He could wait until he had earned Vin's trust.

When his brother needed to talk and was ready to do so, he'd be there ready to listen.

"You've mentioned Harry before. Sounds like a man I would like to get to know."

"He's a good man," Vin agreed, relieved when Josiah didn't push for more details.

"You have enough time for a short run if you get moving."

Vin needed to run. He sat in front of the computer screen all afternoon, and his back was beginning to ache. He needed to exercise if he planned on being able to move in the morning, but he didn't want to leave just then. He didn't know Josiah, not enough to confide in him, but man's quiet strength reminded him of Harry, and he felt oddly reluctant to leave. "Do you want to run with me?" He surprised himself by asking.

"How far are you going?"

"Just far enough to run some kinks out of my back."

Josiah snorted; he suspected Vin's definition of a short run was different than his. "If you run me into the ground, you will have to go and get the car to bring me back."

"Josiah, I don't know if I could run you into the ground. You move pretty fast when you want."

"Let me get changed. Want to holler at JD?"



JD snatched up the ringing phone; his brothers were breathing too hard to be understood on the phone. "Hello? Yes, this is the Larabee Ranch."

"Who is it?" Vin mouthed.

JD shrugged at his brothers. He had answered as many phone calls as they had. The only people whose voices he recognized were Molly's, the Judge's, and Miss Nettie's. He had no idea who the lady asking for Chris was. "No ma'am, he's not here. May I take a message?" He reached for the pen Josiah held out to him, but then his hand dropped, and he sank into a chair as his legs gave way. "I'm sorry. So sorry... Yes, ma'am, I'll tell him... Ma'am, I know you don't know me, but if there is something I can do... Yes, ma'am, I'll tell him." He handed the phone to Josiah. "That was Chris's Aunt Amy. Her son, the one who was supposed to have dinner with Chris... he's dead. She wants Chris to call her."

Vin swore under his breath. He didn't know the man, but he was Chris's cousin, and from what Chris said, once they had been close. This was going to hit Chris like a ton of bricks. He didn't need any more bad news.

"We've got to call him," JD said, when his brothers, both looking stunned, did not respond to his news."

"This isn't something you say over the phone, JD," Josiah admonished.

"I'll go tell him." Vin reluctantly volunteered. He didn't want to go back to the hospital. He didn't want to see Ezra like he was, and he certainly did not want to be the one to give Chris the bad news, but Josiah was right, Chris needed to know, and he couldn't be told over the phone.

"No, we'll all go. I plan to stay the night with Ezra. Buck's been there all day, and Chris may want to go see his family."

"I can stay," Vin argued. Josiah stayed the night before and worked all day; he had to be bone tired.

Josiah thought it over. "No. You need to get back here and see what else you can find on Moore. We need to get that cleared up."

"Why don't you both go, and I can--"

"NO!"

JD jumped at the explosive word coming simultaneously from both brothers' mouths. "I can get some--"

"We all go, JD. All of us," Josiah said. He was not leaving JD alone. The boy was too trusting.

Vin nodded, agreeing with Josiah's words. He didn't want to spell it out for JD; if his brother didn't see what had both him and Josiah spooked, then he wasn't going to be the one to explain it to him and give the kid nightmares. Another person connected to the Larabee name was dead. Until they knew more, they needed to act as though someone was actively targeting them all. No one needed to stay alone. "We all need to be there, not just for Chris, but for Buck and Nathan too. They might not like those Marks fellas too much, but they've been through a lot, and the thought of burying someone else may hit them hard."

"But?" JD didn't continue, telling his brothers he didn't want to be the one to tell Chris about his cousin, which sounded childish.

Vin grabbed a hot pad, intending to pull the casserole out of the oven. The timer hadn't gone off yet, but that was okay; he doubted they would be thinking about what they were eating. "Let's eat."

"Shouldn't we just go?" JD protested. Eating, when someone had just died, seemed wrong. Josiah thrust a plate at JD. "Eat, Brother. It looks like it might be a long night."

The ringing of the phone quieted any further arguments. As one, they turned to stare at it, none of them wanted to answer. Identical thoughts raced through each of their heads-- it could be more bad news, or worse, it could be Chris calling to find out what was going on.

On the fourth ring, Josiah picked it up. "Hello," he answered, his voice betraying none of his worry. "Larabee household... Yes, he is. May I say who is calling..." He handed the phone to Vin, "Mr. Botello wants to talk to you."



"Mr. Larabee, I don't know if you remember me, but..." She walked up to the drink machine where the handsome blond man was juggling three cans while trying to get the machine to accept a wrinkled dollar bill. "Here, let me help." She took the dollar from him and guided it into the dollar bill slot. "What do you want?" she asked when the machine accepted the dollar.

"Anything." Chris's eyes raked over her appreciatively as she bent down to get the drink for him. She was beautiful, no doubt about that. She could lose the outfit, find something a little less dowdy, put on a brighter shade of lipstick, and be a real traffic stopper. His lips curved into a smile at the thought of her causing Four Corners' first traffic jam.

"Here you go." She added the can to the pile he carried. "I'm Mary Travis. We met--"

"I know when we met," he interrupted her.

"Well, then," she paused, smiling her most winning smile, the one Stephen had told her made him weak in the knees and unable to think. Not that she wanted Chris Larabee to ravish her, but she had tried the friendly but professional approach with his brother and had gotten nothing she could use. It was as though Dr. Jackson decided to be purposefully boring before talking with her. She needed an honest reaction to the almost murder, and since he wouldn't give her one, maybe she could charm his brother into providing one. "Perhaps your brother told you I am filming a podcast discussing racism in the state of Nevada."

"He mentioned it."

What was it with these brothers? Was she going to have to beg him to give her a quote? Most people loved to talk when they heard they were in front of the camera. Good Lord, if he insisted on walking while they talked, couldn't he at least slow down? "I've already talked to your brother about that night, and I would love to get your reaction."

"My reaction?" He stopped and stared at her.

"Yes, I've been talking to people about you and your brothers. All I have learned is that you are a very close-knit family. How did it feel to see your brother being hanged?" She pulled up her phone, ready to get his reaction.

"If you've been talking to people about me and my family, then you know what I feel." Chris wanted to snarl but kept an insincere smile glued to his face. She had been Stephen's wife, and he owed it to Stephen's memory to be pleasant.

"Mr. Larabee, I know you don't want to discuss your memories from that night. I know it was scary, but you could do a real service for the people of Nevada by talking about the experience. I want my viewers to understand how racism has affected your family, so they see real people and not just numbers when I talk about the increasing number of racially motivated incidents in our state." She had practiced her speech in the mirror several times before using it, and he didn't react to her well-rehearsed, heartfelt question. She didn't have to review what she was recording. The man with his so-very-fake smile, standing in front of her, might as well have been a department store mannequin, and unless he made an effort to share details from that night and showed honest emotions, the video she was taking would be utterly useless. She took a deep breath and tried again. "How has the attack on Dr. Jackson affected you and your family?"

"You know, Lady, if you plan on being a reporter, then you know the answer. A good reporter would ask a better question." He had seen reporters like her, invading people's privacy in times of anguish. He endured it when idiots had shoved their microphones in his face, demanding he make public his grief over the loss of his family. He had not submitted to their demands then, just as he would submit to hers, now. Grief, fear, anger, he would deal with those emotions on his own; they were not something to be used by a reporter trying to make a name for herself.

She could feel her cheeks redden, but she didn't back down. "And the question would be?" She needed his reactions.

He tilted his head to the right, appeared to consider her question, and was formulating an answer. He wasn't. He expected her line of questions. He knew the question he wanted her to ask, and had his answer ready. He prepared it that night. He was debating the wisdom of sharing it. He didn't like sharing, and anyone who knew him knew what he was thinking, but just as she wanted to use him to help with her story, he would use her to get his message out to the men who attacked Nathan. "A good reporter would have asked what my plans are for the men who attacked my brother."

"And what are they?" she asked through a false smile. She had been planning to ask that particular question next.

His answering smile had nothing to do with being friendly; she was glad she had the camera in her phone ready to capture his response; she had almost turned it off when she saw how uncooperative Chris was. The video of this handsome man with his predatory smile on the cover would have so many women flocking to watch her podcast, if only to see his dangerous smile.

"Now, if you would excuse me, I have a brother I need to check on."

"Of course, I am sorry for keeping you from him." She knew a dismissal when she heard one. It took her resolve to present herself to him as a professional to keep the quake out of her voice—she would not cry. After a quick smile, she spun on her heels and began walking down the hall, dodging the staff and visitors as she passed. 'Slow down,' she reminded herself when her legs urged her to hurry. She certainly had not been treated with all the respect and courtesy she could wish for, and it would have been nice to have not had that particular conversation in front of half of the hospital, but it was all part of a reporter's life. She would not let Christopher Larabee see how his abruptness hurt her feelings, and as for the story... she might not have the tell-all interviews she needed, but she had been there. She could fill in the gaps the two brothers left. She was going to make her podcast the most-read thing out there. She would make sure people respected her more than her looks.



Using his elbow, Chris unlatched the door to Ezra's room but didn't walk in. His eyes followed Mary Travis as she hurried out of sight, face flushed with embarrassment and head held high. Maybe he should have given her the interview, and he certainly could have been nicer, but the memory of the golden-haired little boy chasing after his mother wouldn't leave him alone. The knowledge that she let her son run straight into a dangerous unknown worked as well as a bucket filled with icy water at cooling his appreciation of her beauty. He couldn't understand why a woman (or man) would jeopardize the safety of a child. Children were precious; nothing was worth the risk of losing a child. If he knew Mary better, he would have told her that as a mother, her priority was to protect her child, but if he knew Evie Travis like he thought he did, she had already been told.

"Did the pizza get here?" He forced a cheerfulness he didn't feel onto his face and walked in, letting the door shut behind him.



"How's it going?" Josiah asked as he entered the room, thinking that too many brothers stood in the seriously crowded room, but he wasn't willing to send any of them away.

"He's opened his eyes a few times, but I don't reckon anyone's home yet." Buck wafted the steam from his pizza towards Ezra's face and waited expectantly. When Ezra turned toward the smell, he explained, "Told you, Nathan, everyone likes pizza. If this doesn't bring him around to his senses, then not much else will."

"I'll keep it in mind, Buck. Maybe we can do a study or something," Nathan grinned. Trust Buck to find an unorthodox way to wake a patient and for it to work. Most people would have tried to wake a family member by holding his hand and talking or playing music the patient liked, but not Buck. Food and sex were Buck's answer to almost every problem. Pizza was a unique answer, but at least, he hadn't suggested scantily clad dancing women.

"He's still tied up," Vin frowned. Ezra wasn't any trouble. He was just lying there sleeping. They should have freed his hands.

"He'll stay that way for a little longer, Vin. Until we're sure he understands he has to keep still, and isn't trying to pull his drain out, he will stay in restraints," Nate explained. "No one likes putting a patient in restraints, Vin, but he has to be kept still."

"Isn't there another way?" Vin asked, looking anywhere but at the Velcro restraints circling his brother's wrists.

"We could keep him sedated, but sedation interferes with his breathing. The sedative he was given this morning has kept him out of it all day. I don't want, and I don't think Dr. Hartley wants to give him anything more. We need him awake and alert enough to cooperate with the respiratory technician."

"So, you'll free him when he wakes up."

"I doubt it. Given his history of pulling things out." He looked pointedly at Vin when he said this. "Hartley will probably wait to release him until after he pulls the drain."

Vin let his attention be captured by the equipment surrounding Ezra. They told him nothing except that things were still serious. He dropped his hand onto Ezra's shoulder and rubbed it gently. He hoped Ezra felt the touch and realized he was not alone. "I understand what you are saying, in my head I understand it, but I don't like it, and I bet Ezra won't like it either."

"He's going to have to deal with it. Vin, Ezra looks better, a lot better than he did this morning. Even though he still has a touch of fever, he is improving. He's breathing better, and his labs show that the infection is beginning to respond to the antibiotics." Nathan spoke to all his brothers, but his attention stayed focused on Vin. Chris said Vin was uneasy about Ezra being restrained. Nathan understood; it was hard for people to see the restraints and not feel as though their loved one was being punished or being kept still to make the nursing staff's lives easier, but if it was ever the case, it was not the case with Ezra. No one was restraining Ezra for the simple thrill, nor were they trying to keep him still and out of the way to make it easier on the staff. Nathan hoped Vin truly understood and would not hold it against him. "Ezra is better, but he is still very sick. He still has pneumonia; he still has a virulent infection, and his body is still covered with bruises. He messes with the drain, and he could cause himself significant damage. Ezra doesn't have the reserves necessary to recover from another injury. He can be pissed at me, and you can be pissed with me, Vin, but until he understands what's going on around him and until he can cooperate with us in getting him well, he stays restrained. Understand."

"I ain't stupid, Nathan. I know what you are saying, but you hear me. I don't know Ezra. We only talked a couple of times, so I can't stand here and claim we are friends, but I do know he doesn't like hospitals and I ain't sayin' he doesn't like hospitals because sick people are in them. I'm sayin' he's gonna be one unhappy, scared puppy when he wakes up enough to realize where he's at. He's not goin' to take kindly to the fact ya have him trussed up. If yer not careful, he's gonna damage himself trying to get out of them restraints of yers."

"I know." Nathan stood up to look down at his brother. He didn't like intimidating people, but he wouldn't let Vin try to intimidate him. "I understand he doesn't want to be here. I tried treating him at home. Remember. He's here now because of me. Remember. I know he's going to be pissed when he wakes up and realizes he is restrained, but you know what? I can live with it. If he leaves this hospital angry with me, I can deal with it. I can deal with any attitude he wants to throw at me... as long as he leaves on his own two feet and not in a pine box. You might make yourself happy, and you might make him happy by taking off the restraints, but is keeping the two of you happy worth the risk of his dying?"

"Nate," Buck warned his brother to calm down. "I think Vin just wants to make sure you are prepared for what happens when Ezra does wake up." He didn't give Nathan or Vin a chance to say anything more, but continued, "So, why are you boys here? Did you get bored at the ranch? I was planning on heading back in a few minutes; you should have given me a call and told me to pick up a movie or two on my way home."

Reminded of why they were here, Vin, Josiah, and JD exchanged looks, each look saying, 'Not me.' No one wanted to break the bad news. They had planned what they would say on the way to the hospital, but now that they were here, none of them wanted to begin.

"What happened?" Chris demanded when their silence stretched on too long.

JD cleared his throat, "We got a call, and I took it. It was--"

Vin interrupted JD, "Botello called. Timothy Moore needs a detective to find Maude and Ezra. Botello recommended me. I made an appointment to talk with him tomorrow at Moore's office in Sacramento."

"Good. We'll leave in the morning." Chris stood up. This was good news, and it energized him. He had never been one to sit around and wait. Now, he could do something. Kill one of the demons plaguing his family, so to speak.

"I'll go, not you."

"You're not going alone. We've been through this." Chris turned angry eyes on Vin. When would the fool understand now that he had a family, he didn't have to face things by himself??

Vin's eyes flickered from Josiah to JD. They weren't stepping in to help him, dammit. Of course, he wasn't following their carefully prepared script either. Damn! He plunged ahead. No matter what Josiah said, there wasn't a good way to say this. "Yer Aunt Amy called. They found yer cousin, Junior. He's dead. Ya need to be with her."

His mouth went dry. It was a weird thing to think of, but he noticed it because he wanted to argue with Vin and tell him Junior was pulling one of his famous disappear-for-a-few-days acts. Aunt Amy was wrong. Junior would be walking through her front door at any moment. His mouth was too dry to argue with Vin's news. In the instant it took him to realize his mouth was dry, he saw the truth in Vin's eyes. His cousin was dead, and his aunt needed him. He found his voice. It surprised him by sounding normal. He would have thought it would sound tearful or sad, but it sounded just like it always did. Maybe he was becoming used to bad news. "I'm going out to their place. See what I can do to help. Vin, you, and Buck go in the morning. Take him; I don't want you going alone. Understand."

"I hear ya, Chris. Ya go on. Buck and I will make a plan for tomorrow."

Buck waited until Chris was out the door before swearing softly. "How did he die? Was it a wreck?" he asked.

JD shrugged, "She didn't say. She just asked me to tell Chris that her son was dead."



"Aunt Amy?" Chris almost missed her sitting in the dark, still as she was. He was surprised to find her sitting alone and out in the cold.

"Chris." She didn't get up; instead, she patted the seat beside her on the swing.

"Why don't we go inside? It's too cold out here for you."

"No, sit with me, please. I don't want to go in... there are too many shadows in the house."

Puzzled by her comment, Chris sat beside her, wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and pulled her close. "I'm so sorry, Aunt Amy," he murmured into her hair.

"I know." She leaned into him, trying to draw strength from him. "Thank you for coming. I wasn't sure you would."

"Of course, I would come." He deserved her remark, he supposed, but it hurt to hear her say it.

"Yes, I suppose you would. I thank you, anyway." She was tired of being strong; it had always been Curtis's job to be strong, not hers. She rarely took the initiative to solve a problem, but when she had, it drained and haunted her. She wanted to let go and depend on Chris to get them all through the next few days, but she wouldn't fall apart, yet. There were the shadows to puzzle out, and until she knew what brought them into her home, she would remain strong. "He made this swing; did you know?"

"No, Aunt Amy, I didn't."

"He made this for me as a Mother's Day present. He knew I liked to sit out here and watch the sun go down before I did the supper dishes. I don't know if I ever told him how much I enjoyed it. I don't think I did."

"I'm sure he knew."

"You think? I hope so. There are so many things I didn't say to him that I should have. And I said so many things I shouldn't. I don't think I ever told him I was proud of him... How could I have not said that to him? I knew how hard it was for him to leave this ranch; he was the one who had the ideas and the personality to make this place work as a dude ranch. All I could see when he left was that he was abandoning us. He wasn't. It was hard for him to go. He needed to do so, or he would have been under his father's thumb and never be his own man.

"I blamed his leaving on Joan. I prayed they'd break up and he'd come home. That was so wrong. I should have welcomed her... maybe, if I had, he would have come home. She loved him; did you know?"

"I don't know Joan, but Junior was easy to love."

"Chris?"

"Yes, Aunt Amy?"

"They say he killed himself."

Chris swallowed hard. Had Junior been depressed? How had he not heard it in Junior's voice? "I should have..."

"I don't believe them." Amy's voice cut into Chris's words. "Everyone acts like he killed himself, and they won't listen to me." She turned to face Chris. "He came here. He was upset about something, but it wasn't... he wasn't upset with himself. He had a problem, and I didn't listen... I was furious he didn't understand about his Pa. Garrett tried to talk to him about Alzheimer's, and I did too, but he didn't want to see the man Curtis is becoming. He kept pushing his Pa to be... normal. He refused to understand, and I refused to see that something was bothering him." She sighed.

She could hear Garrett and Joan's voices coming from inside the house. No doubt they were planning the funeral. She should go in there and help, but she didn't have the energy to deal with her family.

Chris saw his aunt looking through the window into the house. "Are you ready to go in?"

"No, not yet. You know, I used to love this house. I was so proud when Curtis brought me here as his wife, and now, I don't want to go inside. This house has shadows. The shadows have secrets waiting to be told. The darkness scares me."

"Maybe, there are too many memories here for you right now. Would you like to come home with me and stay at the ranch with us for a while?" Chris did not take the time to wonder what she meant when she mentioned shadows in the house. His aunt had endured a shock and needed a place to recover her equilibrium.

"You're sweet, but no, I'm needed here. Curtis, he's been better today, more like the man I married, but it won't last. If I'm not here, he will get confused."

"I'm sorry. It must be hard on you."

"I think God is punishing us." Her voice was barely audible.

"Why? Why would God want to punish you?"

"Lots of reasons. We were not as good as we should have been. The shadow bothering me now is how we treated our boys. Curtis was hard on them. Harder than he needed to be. They

tried their best to live up to his standards. No matter how hard they tried, they were never good enough for him. I saw what was happening. I should have put my foot down and said something, but I didn't. I thought back then, he wanted them to be strong like you. I wanted that too, so I kept my mouth shut when he held you up as the shining example of a real man..." She shook her head, clearing the images from her head. "I have been thinking about my sons these last few days. I understand, now, why they could never be you.

"You see, Curtis was not Cassie. Just as he measured our boys against you, he measured himself against his sister. She was beautiful, smart, and so full of life.

"She and Landon... they were good together. He never felt threatened by her, not like Curtis was. It sounds awful to say; it's something I only realized earlier today, but it is true. Curtis adored Cassie, but she constantly showed him up. It didn't matter what he did; she did it better. He tried to run the ranch, but he was so young, not in age, but he was a kid, not yet a man, when his parents died. He was so unsure of himself. He pretended everything was all right. He was too inexperienced to run this place. He'd check with Cassie first, to get her opinion before making a decision, and then he'd be angry with himself for not making the decision himself." She released Chris's hands and burrowed her own into her jacket's pocket. "The problem wasn't that our sons weren't as good as Chris Larabee; The problem has always been that he was not as good as his twin. In his parents' eyes, in his eyes, and to be honest, in my own eyes, he has been and always will be the second-best twin."

"Aunt Amy, I don't remember my mama, so I can't say how my mother and Uncle Curtis got along. What I do know is you have good sons. They don't have to be me. They already are men to be proud of."

"I know ... now. I wish I had told them while they were growing up." She swiped at the tears forming in her eyes. She didn't have the time or the right to feel sorry for herself. She needed to be brave for her family as they dealt with Junior's death. In the meantime, she needed to do what should have been done long ago. She needed to stop living with the shadows and start living with the truth. "Chris, they said Junior threw himself off the edge of Cutler's Point. They say he deliberately killed himself. You know, and I know, even if he did kill himself, he wouldn't do it there, not like that. I don't deem that to be true. I think he came back here because he found out something that frightened, or at least, greatly concerned him. He came to his Pa wanting advice. I think someone murdered him because of what he found. Find out who killed him...please."

Chris reached for his aunt and pulled her close. "I don't know what I can find out, but I will do what I can. I promise." Keeping the swing gently rocking, he held his aunt as she cried. He didn't immediately release her once her tears stopped. He kept the swing gently swaying as he stroked her hair. He held her tight, offering what comfort he could. When she pulled away, he asked, "Are you ready to go in? It's very cold out here."

She didn't want to go inside, but she smiled and let him help her to her feet. Looking over her shoulder at the swing her son built as a surprise for her, she saw him sitting in it. It was no doubt her imagination, but she wanted to believe he had been there, listening. "I love you, Junior," she whispered to the shadow in the swing.



"Thought you were going to get some sleep," Josiah spoke, a disembodied voice in the dimly lit room.

"If I wanted to sleep, I would have gone home. Hospitals want their doctors to pretend they have beds for them when they need a place to crash so they can get a few minutes of sleep, but they aren't beds. They are traps. You get so tired you can't move, and then when you begin thinking you can go to sleep, someone comes in with a problem."

"I thought you weren't on call."

"I'm not, but it doesn't matter. I am here, I wear a white coat, and I get the honor of handling things. After all, why talk over the phone with the on-call doctor when around the corner, a doctor, trapped in bed, is waiting to talk?"

"Are you going to be able to work tomorrow?"

"Sure, a pot of coffee and I'll be fine." Nathan flipped open the chart he'd picked up from the nurses' desk. He read, the dim light in the room not bothering him. "I hear he woke up for a few minutes."

"He doesn't like getting blood drawn."

“Me neither. If someone looks at me with a needle in their hand, it’s all I can do to keep from passing out.”

Josiah grinned, “I would have thought you were immune to that sort of thing.”

“Oh, I’m fine when it’s not my blood. I can cut and sew with the best of them, but don’t stick me with anything to get my blood. Hey... Ezra. You think you might want to wake up for us. It’s kind of late or early, depending on how you read the clock, but you’ve been asleep for a very long time. I’m thinking, you might want to wake up and get something to drink.” He turned Ezra’s face toward him, and as he talked, he used an age-old means of checking for fever; he felt Ezra’s forehead and then the back of his neck. “You say, he woke up when they drew blood. How did he seem then?”

“Groggy, mostly. He let her take his temperature and blood pressure without complaint. He said he was feeling fine and asked if he could leave, but when the lady from the lab came in to get his blood, well, to say he was unhappy is an understatement. Called her an addlepat, bottom-feeding scum with delusions of becoming a leech in her next life.”

“Endearing himself to the nursing staff, I see.” Nathan chuckled. He moved his hand from Ezra’s neck to his shoulder but did not let go. During a rotation, as a medical student, he followed one of the most famous internists in the country, marveling at the man’s great wealth of knowledge. About halfway through the rotation, another student asked the internist how he could tell so much about a patient in just a few minutes. He told her he touched them. Nathan gave it a lot of thought, and early in his career, he decided the internist’s answer was not flippant. While it wasn’t magic, and couldn’t replace other diagnostic tools, it had its place. No machine on the market could tell the doctor as much as his hands. More importantly, patients needed to be touched. Either in fear of hurting the patient or in fear of catching something, too often, family and friends forgot about the power of touch.

“She wrote it down. She said if he could say all those fancy words, he was on the road to recovery.” Josiah noticed Nathan massaging Ezra’s shoulder. Good, there was nothing like the power of touch to let people know they were not alone.

“Ezra, wake up.” Nathan smiled when Ezra’s eyes fluttered open, and he mumbled something. “Say it again... Déjà vu? I guess it does feel like Déjà vu. Let’s see, the last time we met like this, I told you that you had been very sick but were getting better. Guess what? You’ve been very sick, but you are getting better.” He turned to grin at Josiah, his grin visible in the dimly lit room.

“Mouth...” Ezra croaked.

“Your mouth is dry? I bet it is. Let me get your water.” Groping with one hand for the Styrofoam glass of water Josiah was handing him, Nathan leaned over, trying to catch the words coming out of Ezra’s mouth. “Whiskey? No, but I will get you some orange juice.”

Ezra squinted up at Nathan, “Ah only drink orange juice if it has vodka in it.” He was appalled at how weak he sounded. He tried clearing his throat.

“Here. Drink this. The oxygen is making your throat dry.” Nathan didn’t wait for Ezra to ask for a brandy or scotch. He slipped a straw in Ezra’s mouth, grinning as Ezra’s better sense took over and he began sipping at the iced water.

“Vin said you’d wake up in the middle of the night. Something about you being a vampire.” Josiah’s voice rumbled in the darkened room, causing Ezra to flinch. He hadn’t known Josiah was there.

“Listen up, Ezra. I want to ask you a few questions, and then you can ask me some. Sound good?” Nathan didn’t give Ezra any time to think it over, but began asking the questions, gauged to help him determine Ezra’s mental and physical condition. After only a few minutes of questions, Ezra fell back asleep.

“He can’t get past the fact he’s restrained.” Josiah chuckled, settling back into the chair beside the one in which Nathan had collapsed.

“Didn’t ask any questions about his treatment plan, just wanted me to untie him. Asked me ...what four times?” Nathan yawned.

“Five, but who’s counting?”

“He’s going to drive us crazy, isn’t he?” Nathan tried to sound put out, but he wasn’t. Now wasn’t the time to say it, but he had been so scared. This Sunday, come Hell or high water, he was going to church and properly thank God.

“You were the one who insisted he wake up,” Josiah reminded Nathan with a grin.

"Yes, I guess I'll just have to deal with his complaints." He couldn't keep his face straight, his smile reached from one side of his face to the other, and his eyes shone with happiness. His eyes flickered back to Ezra; Ezra had the right idea. It was time to get some sleep. He should go crawl back into bed and make use of the remaining few hours before morning rounds. He didn't get up; if he stayed right where he was, no one would come in and ask him stupid questions. He closed his eyes.

Nathan was right, Josiah thought. It did feel good knowing Ezra was going to be a pain in the ass for the next few days. The alternative was something that did not bear thinking about. He stretched out the best he could in the chair, his eyes falling on Ezra's bound hands. He had seen the flash of panic in Ezra's eyes when he realized he couldn't move his hands. Vin had a reason to hate the thought of being bound. Did Ezra also have a reason to be scared? Lord, he hoped not.



Keeping his mind on the road was more difficult than he had imagined. The driving wasn't demanding because he was tired. He was exhausted. The knowledge that his brothers would worry if he wasn't home when they woke up, combined with the serious cold outside, kept him from pulling off the road and getting a couple of hours of sleep. He knew these roads, almost as well as Buck, and if he needed to, could get home on autopilot. It wasn't his exhaustion wreaking havoc with his driving skills. His ability to drive was hampered by the bits and pieces of conversations that kept replaying in his head.

'Something was bothering him, Chris. I should have talked to him.'

'I don't understand why they say something was bothering him. He was happy. He had just gotten a new promotion. We were thinking about adopting. We had so much to look forward to, he wouldn't kill himself.'

'He was angry. He didn't understand about Pa.'

'Something was going on at work.'

'He had just gotten an important promotion. He was so proud of himself.'

'He hated working for an insurance company.'

'He should have stayed home where he belonged. He loved the land. He loved ranching.'

'He loved you, respected you, Chris.'

"He hated being compared to you, Chris. He always fell short of Dad's expectations."

"He was a great son. The best a man could ask for. Why did he die?"

"Why didn't he come and talk to one of us? We are family."

"Why did he kill himself?"

"Why weren't you there for him, Chris? He depended on you."

"Depression like this doesn't build overnight. He's been sad for a long time."

"He was happy."

"He always came to you, Chris."

"He loved you, Chris."

"Anytime there was trouble, he always came to you, Chris. Why weren't you there?"

"He respected you, Chris. You were the one person he could count on."

"I know it pissed you off to solve their problems, but that is what big brothers are for."

"What do you mean, do another autopsy? A forensic autopsy? That's just cutting him up more. Isn't his being dead enough?"

"No one killed him, Chris. The police say he went to Cutler's Point, got out of his car, and jumped. That's not murder; that's suicide."

"Just because you think your father was murdered doesn't mean Junior was. Not everything is about you, Larabees."

"He wouldn't have killed himself."

"He was happy. We were talking to an adoption agency. We were going to be parents."

"He was my son, and I know him. I know my mind is slipping, but I've got enough of my mind left to know he needed to talk to you, Chris Larabee, and you

weren't around. Maybe if you had been there for him, he would have told you what was bothering him. The last time I saw him, he was yelling. I hope the next thing I forget is that the last thing my son said to me was that he hated me."

"Something was bothering him. He needed to talk, and if you hadn't been so wrapped up with your new brothers, then you could have been there for him."

"You have all those brothers, but once we were close. We are your family, too. What happened?"

Chris pulled off the side of the road. He leaned back against the headrest and closed his eyes, letting the voices talk. Had Junior been in trouble? Had Junior wanted to come to ask him for help, and had he sounded uninterested? Face it, he had been uninterested in what Junior had to say. He hadn't wanted to be pulled into another Marks' family problem, but that didn't mean Junior couldn't come to him. Did it? "Dear God, please don't let him have killed himself because he felt he couldn't talk to me. Junior drove me crazy, but I loved him. I love all of them. They are family, and I love them." He spoke into the empty darkness surrounding him, hoping that if God existed, he would hear him.

A long way off in the distance, he heard a coyote. He listened to the lonely-sounding howl for a minute. Then, looking over his shoulder, he examined the empty road before pulling back onto it and heading home.



"I understand what you are saying about Nate being busy with doctoring and how he won't be much help. I understand JD being a kid. I even understand Chris being needed by Junior's family. I understand that only Josiah and me are left to watch over Ezra. What I don't understand is how you expect me to tell Chris all of that. He doesn't comprehend people making decisions counter to the ones he has already made."

"Tell Chris, I know I promised him I wouldn't go after Moore alone, and I am not goin' after him. This is a reconnaissance mission, nothing more."

"Chris is going to be royally pissed." Buck emptied the coffee into a Stanley cup he had found in a kitchen cabinet, screwed the lid on and handed it to Vin.

"I might be wrong here, but it sure seems like Chris is pissed a lot. Me heading out this mornin' won't make him any madder than he's goin' to be when he realizes you let him sleep in."

"Chris didn't get in until around three. He needs sleep. You're heading out on your own will worry him, and he doesn't need more of that." He wanted to add that Vin should have seen Chris before the fire; that had been the real Chris, but he kept quiet. Either the real Chris would return, and Vin would see for himself the man with the laughing eyes and friendly smile, or the real Chris would not return, and someone else would take his place.

"Moore wants a detective. I'm going to go in and offer him my services. He doesn't know me, so there's nothing to worry about. I'm just goin' in and findin' out what he knows and why he wants Ezra and his ma."

"You can wait, at least until you get the information Botello promised. By then, Junior will be buried and Chris--"

Vin interrupted, "I can wait, but I don't know about Moore. He might go and hire someone else. Yes, Botello said he had someone lookin' into Moore's background, but we can't depend on him findin' anythin'. What we do know is that we can depend on Moore hiring someone who will eventually find Ezra. If it's not me, it will be someone else. Ezra checked into the hospital using his real name and is as helpless as a newborn calf. Even a dim-witted numbskull of a detective who couldn't find his ass without a road map can find Ezra. Putting him in the hospital using his name, I sure as hell don't know what we were thinking, but we might as well have put a neon sign on the hospital's roof. Even when we get him out of the hospital, there will be records with his name on them, and those records will lead Moore to this door."

Buck shifted uncomfortably; he had been the one who had checked Ezra in the hospital. He had been aware that Moore was searching for his brother, but when checking Ezra into the hospital, he had been focused on Ezra's breathing difficulties. "I apologize; I did not consider it," he explained.

"I didn't mean it like that. I ain't blamin' ya. Ya ain't use to thinkin' like that, Buck. I am, and I didn't think about the danger until yesterday. A few days with this family and I am already gettin' soft."

Buck heard the self-recrimination in Vin's voice, and his hand shot out, grabbing Vin's shoulder, preventing him from turning away. "There isn't anything wrong with getting soft when you have brothers at your back."

"Tell that to Ezra if Moore gets his hands on him."

"He won't get near Ezra, I promise."

"We can't watch Ezra forever, and I got this feelin' we might need to, unless we can convince Moore it would be in his self-interest to forget Ezra and his Ma exist."

"Vincent James Tanner," Buck sternly began, "I want your word you won't do anything stupid." He didn't like the dark scowl on Vin's face.

Vin's face softened and he smiled to reassure Buck, "As a Tanner, I give you my word I am only goin' to get hired as Moore's detective. I am not goin' to do anything risky. I'll be back tonight, tomorrow at the latest."

"Be sure you are. If you're not, then I'll have to help Chris hunt you down, and neither one of us is going to be very happy about it."

"Look, Bucklyn, I'd take you with me, but you are needed here. When I made this appointment with Moore, he sounded rabid. Rabid dogs don't care who they bite. He finds Ezra, before we get what we need, it's not just Ezra we have to watch. You need to be here."

"Yeah, I understand. I'll watch Ezra, and I'll watch the rest of them, but you watch yourself." He walked Vin to the door and watched the old, battered truck take off down the gravel road before he headed back into the kitchen. He didn't like it, not one bit, but Vin was right; he was needed here. He hoped he could explain it to Chris. Maybe, he could keep JD quiet, close the curtains, unplug the phones, and Chris would sleep the day away. Yeah, that'd happen when pigs learned to fly. The best he could do was leave a cryptic note, something about his brother going to look for strays. Chris had a hard time reading his handwriting. With luck, he'd read the brother as brothers.

"Buck? Where's Vin? I thought we could take a few minutes and plan on how to deal with Moore." Chris asked as he walked in, pulling his shirt up around his shoulders.

Ah shit!!!



"Want some more?" Buck offered to pour Chris more coffee.

Chris pushed his mug towards Buck, "Thought you had gotten a new coffee maker?" he said when Buck poured him a refill.

"I did, but I didn't see any sense in getting it out, since it's just us drinking. Of course, given the way you look, maybe I should've used the big pot. Did you get any sleep last night?" That was a stupid question. The only times Chris sat at the table with no shoes and his shirt unbuttoned was when he was sick, hungover, or when he'd been up all night.

"Some... I had some thinking to do."

"Planning on sharing?" Buck forced himself to ask, not sure if he wanted to hear the answer. He knew how to deal with a laughing Chris, an angry Chris, and a grieving Chris. He had never dealt with a seriously reflective Chris and had no idea what to do.

He expected Chris to chew him out for letting Vin go out on his own, but Chris merely nodded and, in his bare feet, shuffled to the kitchen – he looked old.

"Yeah... I think I need to." Chris pushed away from the table and began to pace. He spent the last few hours of the night hunched over on the edge of the bed, unable to relax enough to stretch out, and afraid that if he gave in to his need to pace, he would wake his brothers.

Words never came easy to him, even with Sarah, he had found it difficult to put feelings into words, but he promised himself he was not going to let another sun set without saying a few things. "Bear with me; I thought I could put some order to my thoughts, but here it is morning, and everything is still a jumble."

"I have as long as you need, Chris."

"Where is JD?" he stopped pacing and asked; much of what he had to say was for Buck's ears alone.

"The boy is exhausted. This business with Ezra is dredging up some bad memories for him. We talked for a while last night, but he's having a hard time sleeping, so I snuck into his room and turned his alarm clock off after he drifted off. Thought I'd let him sleep in."

"He might not appreciate you doing that," Chris warned.

"He might not, but the boy needs some rest. He's been working like a dog around here. Reckon he needs a little sleep before he gets so tired he can't stay on a horse."

Chris smiled at Buck's words. He wondered if it had occurred to Buck that if he were sitting up late, talking to JD, he wasn't getting any sleep either. Buck's ability to care never ceased to amaze him. "Maybe, you should have slept in, too, Buck."

"I have huge reservoirs of energy, Chris. A man can't impress the ladies if he doesn't have stamina, if you know what I mean." Buck waggled his eyebrows and smirked. He didn't like this serious Chris.

"Are you serious about Inez?" This was as good a place to start as any others that came to mind, and Buck did provide the perfect opening.

Buck studied the coffee in his cup as he gathered his thoughts. He hadn't been expecting that question, not at all. He glanced over at Chris and saw Chris waiting for a serious answer, not the flippant reply he usually gave to those types of questions.

"Yeah... I think so." He softly answered, searching his brother's face for any signs of laughter.

"She's a very nice woman. If you like her ... if you are thinking seriously about her...quit dillydallying around and ask her out. Life is too short to waste. Today, not tomorrow, not when things calm down, and not some undetermined point in the future, but today, you are to call her and ask her out."

"I can't ask her out now. There is too-"

"There is always something going on, Buck."

"Where can I take her? Even if she agrees to go out and I can pry her away from the restaurant for an evening, there isn't any other decent place to take her in town." He winced when he heard his words; he sounded like some teenage virgin going out on his first date.

"Buck, you're the expert when it comes to impressing women. It doesn't have to be dinner." He almost laughed at Buck's total look of confusion. His brother had it bad if he couldn't think of a place good enough for the lovely Inez. He thought for a moment. "I took Sarah to horse shows. Inez might not enjoy a horse show, but you can think of something."

"Chris, I think I should wait until-"

"I understand, Buck, but I am serious. I want you to ask her out... life is too short. Listen, meeting Sarah was the best thing to happen to me. Her not being here hurts." He continued the speech he had practiced, but only in his head. 'Every morning that I wake up without her, it hurts. Every time I hear a joke, I find myself wanting to share it with her, and at night, when I turn over in bed, I reach for her, and wake up when my arms find nothing. Sometimes I hurt, physically hurt, because I miss her so much and I want to fight or drink ...something to distract me from the emptiness in my life. I miss her more than I can say. I wish for a way to deal with the pain, but I have never wished I didn't know her... I still find it amazing that she returned my love.'

"You know, asking her out was the hardest thing I have ever done. I was sure she would turn me down. I even practiced the things I could say when she told me she had to wash her hair or something. I also knew even if she told me to drop dead, I couldn't not ask her out."

"Sarah would never tell anyone to drop dead." Buck smiled at a memory of Sarah.

"No, she wouldn't. She was too soft-hearted to say anything mean."

"She was too kind-hearted, period. Remember how she'd make you carry crickets and spiders outside rather than step on them."



Washing his hands in the sink, Vin checked his appearance in the mirror. He didn't think of himself as a vain man; most of the time, he grabbed the nearest shirt and the cleanest jeans, ran a comb through his hair, a brush over his teeth, and considered himself ready to face the day. He had taken more thought this morning; he had one shot to make an impression on Moore, and it had to be the right one. He gambled on Moore's previous detectives having been desk jockeys wearing starched white shirts and navy-blue suits.

As he had explained to Buck before he left, television made detective work sound exciting and dangerous. The reality was more boring; much of modern-day detective work was spent in front of a computer screen, followed by a few days of surveillance work. Maybe once, before modern technology came into use, detectives chased lowlifes into dark alleys and beat information out of them, but while there were exceptions to prove the rule, those days were history. He'd much rather be a bounty hunter

and hunt the dregs of society than do divorce work. Occasionally, he'd considered police work, but nowadays it seemed as though the police were hampered by too many rules to be much good.

He ran a comb through his long hair. He'd been meaning to get a haircut, but there hadn't been time, probably a good thing. With a haircut and clean-shaven cheeks, he looked too young and too... nice. Moore, he suspected, wanted a TV detective; he planned to provide him with one. Scuffed boots, jeans, a deep chocolate brown shirt, and the tweed jacket he'd picked up at a neighbor's yard sale, combined with his unruly curls and three days' worth of stubble-covered cheeks, gave him, he hoped, the lean, hungry look Botello said Moore was looking for.

He turned to get a better look at his back. If you knew what to look for, you could see the outline of his gun. Most people wouldn't notice, but Moore would probably be looking for it. Vin snickered to himself. Buck's reaction to his shoulder holster disappointed him. He had expected Buck's eyes to bulge when he strapped on his holster instead, his brother had taken the gun and asked a few intelligent questions about whether he was licensed to carry a concealed weapon, and handed it back to him.

He hoped Buck understood; he was wearing it for Moore's benefit, not because he expected trouble. He had guns, of all sorts, and was more than capable of handling any of them, but he didn't like to use them. It didn't matter how good a shot he was, and he was better than most; mistakes happened. Try as he might not to take a runner anywhere near innocents (Runners ran, and too often they headed for someone they could use as a shield.), the risk was always there. If there was any way he could trap a runner without the use of guns, he did that. Sometimes, it meant a few extra days of waiting, but he'd heard stories about bounty hunters who had gotten innocents involved, and he didn't want a similar story associated with his name.

He gave his appearance one final check, assumed the steely, unfriendly persona of the man he pretended to be, and left the restroom. Striding across the lobby towards the elevator, Vin's eyes, without seeming to, took in everything. By the time he left his meeting, he planned to know the floor plan of the building and the number of businesses located in it. He also would have a thorough understanding of the security measures Moore took.



Josiah turned the television off; The Price is Right was not fun to watch without sound, not that he'd ever watched it. He thumbed through the car magazines Buck left behind for a few minutes before he decided reading them was as much of a waste of time as watching a muted game show. He'd brought a mystery but had figured out by page ninety-three the entire plot. After checking the ending to confirm his detective work, he had tossed the book aside.

He settled back into the chair and studied his sleeping brother. Ezra was a puzzling set of contradictions. Driving a car, only the seriously rich owned, wearing clothes that screamed money, and talking as though he were educated at the finest schools, he proclaimed himself one of the privileged few. Yet, he had no job, had little (very little) money, and according to Vin's internet search, had not attended college. Ezra needed money to maintain his lifestyle, yet he was the only one of them seriously fighting the one-year for one million dollars deal their father set up. Even if he chose to leave at year's end, and not work in the family businesses (whatever they were), a million dollars was a lot of money to pass on.

Josiah mulled over the few times he and Ezra had talked before Ezra's hospitalization. Pleasant, charming, and talkative, all those adjectives could be used to describe his younger brother, but they would describe only the side Ezra wished to show his brothers. Adamant that he was leaving as soon as they discovered whether his mother was in danger, he had shared a lot about himself without revealing anything.

Josiah chuckled ruefully. He should have picked up on what Ezra was doing, but he hadn't. Ezra told any who cared to listen that he wanted to leave sooner rather than later. Certainly, he had done nothing to bond with his brothers, but he was the one who roamed the house at night when everyone else was asleep.

Normally a sound sleeper, Josiah had not slept well since moving to the ranch. His sleeplessness was caused partly by the strange circumstances he found himself in, but was largely due to the mammoth dog sleeping beside his bed. Every noise in the house woke Jack, who, in turn, whined until Josiah was up and investigating with him. Twice, they had startled one of the barn cats chasing what he assumed was a mouse in and around the rocking chairs on the porch, once they caught Vin raiding the refrigerator, twice they had to step out into the cold night so Jack could growl at whatever menace his ears were picking up.

Both Tuesday and Wednesday nights, Jack led him to the library and there, sitting in a chair with only one lamp lit, going through a photo album, was Ezra. Thinking Ezra's cough woke him up, Josiah hadn't scolded him too harshly for being up rather than trying to get some much-needed rest. Ezra apologized for bothering him, reluctantly returned the albums to their places, and returned to his bedroom. Maybe he shouldn't have urged his brother back into his bed. Perhaps, he should have spent the quiet of the night helping him discover the information he needed to explain their father to them.

Ezra was curious about their father and his brothers. He didn't ask his brothers questions about themselves and made a point not to ask about their father, but only an idiot would miss his ears perking up whenever Landon Larabee's name came up. If he was so eager to learn about their father... and about them. Why was he so intent on leaving? Josiah wanted to blame it on the unanswered letter Ezra had sent their father years ago.

His eyes rested on his brother, and he wondered again how life would have turned out if Landon Larabee had kept in touch with his sons. Maybe, if he had his father to talk to when things got bad with his grandfather, he would have stayed home to take care of Hannah instead of running off to join the army. Maybe, if Landon had taken Vin instead of leaving him in foster care when Cady Tanner died, Vin would not have turned to a gang to find love and acceptance. Jenna Dunne had done a good job raising her son, but how would JD have turned out if he had financial and emotional support from his father? And Ezra...

If Landon Larabee had found Ezra and brought him home to raise with his other sons, would he have been in a position to get the shit beat out of him? Would he have stolen the money, or would he have had enough trust and faith in his brothers to ask for help? Would nightmares torment Ezra's sleep if his father had tucked him in at night?

Buck seemed convinced there was a good reason behind Landon's abandoning his children: he hoped so because if there wasn't, he hoped his father burned in Hell. There were no good reasons to leave a son to whatever had happened to cause him to flinch in fear when someone touched him. Josiah shoved his thoughts about his father aside. Little could be learned about the man through speculation, and even if there was, right now was not a good time for it.

He was tired and angry. That was not a good combination to have combination was not a good one if he planned to have enough objectivity to unravel the mess his father had made. Until they had some answers, he did not want to cloud his opinion of the man who fathered him. Sighing deeply, Josiah focused his attention on his brother. He wished he had brought his journal with him; he always thought better when he wrote down his observations. His tendency to write before reacting to things drove Nancy crazy. Every time, they had disagreed, he'd get out his journal and write down both sides of the argument, usually to show her why he was right. She claimed he didn't know how to turn off doctor mode and honestly react without having to think everything through. She told him she wanted to see the real him, not the professional, caring man, but the one hiding behind his degree. He finally obliged her. He'd shown her the monster he kept bottled up; she left, and now he was alone.

No, not quite alone. He had a family... brothers. He hoped they didn't ask to see the real him. 'Stop it and quit feeling sorry for yourself. You showed Nancy your temper, and now you must deal with the consequences. You have no time to sit around feeling sorry for yourself; you have a sick, hurting brother to help. Be a professional; ask yourself how you plan to help him.'

Good question. He couldn't exactly gather Ezra into a bear hug and tell him everything would be okay. Not only did he have tubes running in and out of him, making hugs a dangerous thing, but Ezra shied away from any touches meant to comfort... no, that wasn't entirely accurate. Ezra didn't like his face to be touched. When someone touched him on the shoulder, he relaxed. Josiah decided he needed to find ways of letting Ezra know he wasn't alone, that did not involve touching him.

Josiah shook his head, trying to clear the fog, the lack of sleep wrapped around his brain. It was all well and good to recognize his brother had a problem that needed to be dealt with, but what could he do right now? He studied his brother, curled up on the bed, and realized Ezra was cold. Ezra kept kicking the bleached-white thermal blankets the hospital provided onto the floor. Maybe a heavier quilt would stay on. A quilt from home would bring some color to the room and hopefully make Ezra think of the ranch and not his incarceration in the hospital.

Ezra needed pajamas or sweats, too. Having to deal with all the paraphernalia attached to his little brother would mean it would take a major feat of engineering skill to get Ezra out of the hospital gown and into something a little less revealing, and it would go a long way in making him more comfortable and feeling less vulnerable. Hospital gowns were made for the medical staff and not the patient.

And maybe some cards to keep his hands occupied when they freed him from his bonds. Ezra liked to gamble; they could use the cards to keep his mind busy and his hands occupied. He reached for the phone, wanting to catch his brothers before they left the ranch.



Fowler smiled at the nurse as he passed her in the hall. Mousy and easily forgettable, she reeked of desperation, and he despised needy women whose only purpose in life was to get a man. If he were passing through the area, he'd snap her neck just to put her out of her misery, but she wasn't worth the risk. Besides, by gracing her with an occasional smile and an even rarer dinner, he had her salivating in her desire to be next to him. She used him to feel desirable, and he used her for information.

"Hello, Cletus." She pushed her hair into place and smiled when the security guard approached.

"How are you doing, Denise? Keeping busy?"

"It's always busy around here."

"I know. They need to hire more nurses. They expect too much out of you ladies." It was amazing how far a kind word went with her. He could set the hospital on fire right in front of her, and she would still tell the arson inspectors what a nice man he was. Maybe, he needed to rethink his decision not to kill her; there ought to be a law against stupid people. He arranged the charts on her cart so she could put the thermometer down.

She blushed at his concern. "It'd be nice if they did hire more help, but I am not holding my breath." She smiled at him. Working the long hours she did, she didn't have much of a chance to date, and he was so nice. "I hear you were the real hero yesterday."

He pretended to be puzzled for a moment. "Oh, you mean the incident with Mr. Standish." He shrugged off her admiring look. "All I did was hold him until someone could sedate him. It was nothing." The reality was the feel of living flesh beneath his hand and the knowledge of how easy it would be to turn the living man into a corpse fed him. He held the man's life in his hand. A decision needed to be made in those few seconds, and he had decided to be magnanimous and let the man live.

His actions yesterday had not ended with the thrill of the kill, but they had been enough to occupy his dreams until he had the opportunity to hunt. He replayed the event over and over, throughout the night, shaping his memories until he had a dream sequence satisfying his needs. He would talk it over with Ella, but he suspected she would love his plan for the man's future. Let them get him home. Let them get him well. Let Miss Ella snare Chris Larabee and then... then he'd take Standish... maybe he'd kill him outright, or maybe, he'd keep him alive for a few days. Either way, it was a win-win situation.

Ella would benefit when Chris turned to her for comfort after the lifeless, obviously tortured body of his brother was discovered. She would chain Chris Larabee more securely to her, and he would have the thrill of the kill. More than that, he'd know, he'd taken one more person from Chris Larabee. Chris Larabee's wife, son, even his dog, and his horses all burned because of his actions that night. Then, right in front of him, he had taken the life of Chris Larabee's father. It was only fitting that he killed at least one of Chris Larabee's brothers before he left town. He'd kill the brother and drape his battered body across the front porch of the Larabee ranch house. He'd leave a note pinned to the body, explaining that Sarah, Adam, Landon, and Ezra had all died because...he needed to work on the because part of the note.

He couldn't say anything about Ella and saying they'd died because he wanted to see the pain on Chris Larabee's face made him sound like a madman. He'd work on his explanation, and he'd find a place to keep Ezra Standish. Then he'd see what havoc he could cause. When he left the area, he'd be the bogeyman parents used to keep their children in line.

"... helping them like that. I'm sure they'd appreciate you stepping in so they can thank you." Cletus Fowler forced himself to decipher her words. When she stopped talking to take a breath, Cletus patted her arm and began walking away before she could start on another topic. He had more important things to do than to spend the day chattering. He had an injured man to check on.



"Mr. Moore will see you now," Bonnie told the detective as she led him into the inner office, stepping out of his way so she could watch him as he walked in. She caught Mr. Moore's glare and, surprisingly, did not react. He could act possessive all he wanted, but she had decided that morning that she no longer belonged to him.

Sure, once she dreamed of the day when he'd see her as something more than a secretary but, when words of love never left his mouth, she, reluctantly, came to the conclusion he wanted nothing

more than the occasional roll in the hay and her secretarial skills, not necessarily in that order. For several years, their occasional rutting had been enough; she used him for sex, just as he used her.

When the first lines appeared around her mouth and the scale told her she was at least thirty pounds overweight (all the excess weight having centered around her hips where she didn't need it and none around her bust where she did), he became a stranger to her bed. She consoled herself by saying that even though she didn't have a ring on her finger, she had a good job. Then, he fired her and replaced her with the bimbo, Shelly. She quickly found another job, but her new boss didn't pay as well as Timothy had, and she had to give up some of the extras in life she once thought a necessity.

Last night, when Timothy showed up at her apartment, saying he missed her and begging her to return to work, she came very close to tossing him out on his ear, but then he smiled at her. They ended up in her bed. By morning, she had forgiven him, and after the promise of a substantial raise, she called her new boss and quit. Sitting beside him as he drove them to his office, she chastised herself for taking him to her bed. She accepted the raise as her due, but he wasn't to think he could crook his little finger and she'd come running, especially, as soon as they arrived at the office and before she even had her purse stowed in her desk, he made a beeline to his office and shut the door. She couldn't hear what he was saying, but she could tell from her phone, he was talking to Shelly. He had done that sort of thing before. His chasing other women had been a character flaw she had accepted. Not anymore.



"Thank you," Vin grinned at the woman. Her interest in him was obvious and flattering. Equally as obvious, her interest irritated her boss. Good.

"Mr. Tanner, it's good of you to come." Usually, Timothy Moore waited behind his cluttered desk for his visitor to approach him. As a rule, he acted impatient and annoyed at being interrupted to make his visitors feel uncomfortable; uncomfortable men gave up their power to him. When his new detective strode into the room, Moore forgot about his power games and came out from behind his desk to welcome the man. Even though he appeared young, Vin Tanner radiated power, and no matter the sense of accomplishment that might be had in getting Tanner to recognize him as the alpha male in the room, Moore restrained himself. He needed Tanner, and besides, he never played a game he might lose.

"Mr. Botello told me you had a problem." Vin came right to the point.

"Yes, I do." Moore found himself under the scrutiny of intensely blue eyes, and to his dismay, he felt himself squirming. Hoping to mask his discomfort, he cleaned off a chair, cursing himself, he should have used the other office, the one with the polished wood surfaces and plush chairs. He liked using that office when he had to deal with corporate types or building inspectors; in it, he was always in charge. He hadn't thought he would need to impress a young, just-starting-out detective. He thought his working office with its old, battered desk covered in watermarks no amount of polish could hide and the old chairs with cigarette burns on the armrests, would be enough to impress the detective, but the man did not look impressed. He looked bored.

He wanted to lead the man into the good office, but to do so would be to lose face. He gestured to the nearest chair. "Make yourself comfortable, I'll get Bonnie to make coffee. How do you take it?"

Drinking coffee with this man, acting as though they were friends, was the last thing Vin wanted to do, but he was there to find out what he could about the man and remembering the beating the man had given his brother, smiled at him, "Black, I like my coffee black." Ezra, he thought when Moore yelled for his secretary, you owe me.



"Molly sent this," the Judge handed Chris a large Tupperware container filled with cookies. "She said to tell you they look funny because the twins helped, but they are edible."

"She didn't have to go and cook for us." Chris frowned; he would have to remember to call Molly and thank her for her thoughtfulness. He'd tell Buck to take care of it; Buck always knew how to sound sincere when he said thanks. Chris put the container between the one holding Mrs. Potter's brownies and Miss Angie's lemon bars. Miss Evie left a cake at the nurses' desk with strict instructions that they were to give it to the Larabee brothers. Wondering where to put it in the increasingly crowded room, Buck had countermanded her order, telling the nurses to put it in their breakroom to eat.

The cookies and cakes were tasty, but the hospital room was not a bakery. Chris wanted to tell the women sending the treats, but lacked the nerve. He wished that if they were going to keep sending food, they would send meat and potatoes. He was tired of sweets, and one more fast food anything was

going to put him in the hospital. He wanted green beans, a baked potato, and a thick steak cooked medium rare and smothered in mushrooms.

Unaware of the path that Chris's thoughts took, the judge continued, "She wanted to do something. She said she was sorry she hadn't been up here, but the twins have a cough and she didn't want to expose Ezra to anything." The judge didn't miss the way Chris's eyebrows lifted slightly. "I'm sure the cookies are safe."

"I'm sure they are," Chris lied.

"If you toss them in the garbage, you'll hurt her feelings."

"I'll give them to Buck." Buck will eat anything.

The Judge smiled and, looking at the empty bed, asked, "Did you misplace him again?"

"He's down in radiology getting X-rayed." Okay, so who told the judge Ezra had been missing? He wasn't sure but knew it wasn't one of his brothers.

"How is he doing?" The judge pushed the chair away from the bed so he could sit.

"He's better. If the X-ray looks good, Dr. Hartley is removing the drain."

"Good... good." The judge shifted uncomfortably in the chair. He should have insisted that Evie come and talk to the boys; she made talking to Chris Larabee look easy, but he had business to discuss. They could chat after he said what he had come to say.

"I heard about your cousin. I'm sorry about that. Junior was a good man. I talked to your aunt. She's taking it hard. With Curtis being the way he is, she can't lean on him. It's hard losing children."

"I know."

"I suppose you do." The Judge shifted in his seat. He wasn't sure how to broach this without sounding insulting, but... "The funeral's tomorrow."

"Yes, it is."

"Are you going to be there?" It was not as stupid a question as it sounded.

Under most circumstances, sober or not, Chris could be counted on being there for family, but the will of Landon's demand that the brothers live together to get to know each other, he wasn't sure how Chris would react to his cousin's death and his aunt's need to lean on him.

"Planning on it. Unless Ezra takes another turn for the worse." His smile was deceptively calm as he answered the Judge. How dare he act as though Chris had forgotten Junior!

Oh well. He'd already stepped in it; he might as well go on and finish his train of thought. "Your father wanted you to get to know each other, Chris; he didn't mean you needed to be joined at the hip. There is a lot of talk about how you and your brothers won't leave Standish alone, even for a minute. They say you double-check everything they do. They-"

Chris interrupted, "They fucked up once. He almost died. They are not getting another chance to take anyone else from me."

"That's another thing... Are you planning on digging your daddy up?"

"How did you hear about that?" They talked about it, but he just couldn't see Nathan running to Orrin to discuss it.

"Rumor mill. Someone overheard Nathan talking to some big-shot pathologist in Reno, and he put two and two together."

"We've talked about it, Orrin, but nothing has been decided."

"Look, I know you are upset about your dad. I know you are upset about Ezra, but I have had three board members call me this morning wanting me to ask you if you are planning to sue. You have a case, but to follow it through would hurt Nathan's career here."

"You know, Judge. One, concerning the funeral, I am going. Buck and Nathan will probably go too. Junior was family. I spent the other evening with my aunt and my cousins. I told them I would do anything I could to help them, but I have a sick brother to consider. I did my best when we were kids to solve their problems, but they are now grown men. Even if Ezra was well, I can't keep holding my cousins' hands. They shouldn't, and you shouldn't expect that of me." He held his hand up to keep the Judge from interrupting. "I am their cousin, not their brother."

"Two, this business with Dad is not settled. We do think Dad was murdered, but we haven't decided about digging him up. If we do, it will be our decision, not anyone else's."

"Three, Ezra came very close to dying, and if he wants to sue the hospital, it will be his decision."

"Four, if this hospital holds Ezra's suing them against Nathan, then the Larabee brothers will withdraw any funds our father chose to give this hospital, and while I know we won't have access to Larabee Holdings for a year, and I don't know for sure how much, Dad gave this hospital, but if I know Dad. If he had the money, you claim he did, he generously helped fund this place. We can wait. You go

back to the hospital board and tell them I said if they want to get into a pissing contest then fine, go right ahead." He knew he had hit the nail on the head when Orrin startled. He patted himself on the back; he hadn't thought about Dad giving money to the hospital until just then. Good for Dad.

"Fair enough." Orrin wanted to be indignant, but Chris sounded so like his father just then that he had been forced to bite his tongue to keep his grin off his face.

Landon would have said it better; the man had been positively charming when he wanted to, but for a moment, it was as though Landon stood in the room with them, whispering into Chris's ear. Orrin waited, looking around the room until he could control his smile. Then, he changed the subject to another issue bothering him. He jerked his head towards the empty bed. "He was beaten." It wasn't a question. The boys hadn't come by to tell him anything about Standish's collapse at the restaurant. When they hadn't shown up to get the specifics of the will after their lunch, Molly found out why.

"Yes, he was."

"He left the ranch after he got out of the hospital." Again, it wasn't a question. Word had it that Standish left the ranch, and the Larabee boys had been frantic to get their brother back. After seeing Standish's reluctance to stay, even when offered a million dollars, he thought the man had chosen to pursue his own life rather than fulfill Landon's wishes. He wondered if there was more to the story.

"Yes."

"You want to tell me why?"

"Judge, I don't mean to sound rude, but it's not your business." Chris knew the judge did not deserve the hostility he was showing. His excuse that he was tired sounded hollow. Later, when things were on a more even keel, he would have to find a way to apologize.

The judge could feel his hackles rise. It was all well and good that Chris sounded like Landon, but this was pushing it too far. "By the terms of your father's will"

"It's family business, and even though you and Dad were best friends, you are not family." Chris hit back.

Orrin bit back his temper. Nothing would be gained by pushing Chris into telling him what happened. In his will, Landon had a clause saying the brothers were to inform him if any of Landon's sons left the ranch. The clause had not been included, so he could dispense some form of punishment to a son not honoring the terms of the will. It had been included so he could act as a mediator and head off trouble before it got out of hand. Orrin hated the fact that Chris, for that matter, Buck, and Nathan, too, had not bothered to come to talk to him, but this wasn't about him. This was about Landon's boys. If his sons took care of their problem with Standish by themselves, then good, it was a better solution than him stepping in. "Then the problem with Standish is settled?"

"Almost."

Orrin looked into Chris's face, trying to read what Chris meant by his answer.

Once again, Chris sounded eerily like his father, except this time, rather than bringing a smile to his face, Chris's voice sent chills down his spine. The word held a promise of retribution, but against whom? Not Ezra, not after the trouble they went to find him and bring him back, and not after the care they were taking, making sure he was not left alone. That left the hospital for the mistakes worsening Ezra's condition... or the people responsible for hurting him in the first place? "I hope you and your brothers aren't planning something stupid, Chris."

"Judge, I never plan something stupid."

"I mean it, Chris. I don't want to have to bail you boys out of jail."

"Don't worry about us, Judge. We know what we are doing."

"I hope so," the Judge sighed. He wanted to know what Chris and his brothers planned so he could be prepared to help them out of whatever trouble they got themselves into, but as an officer of the court, it was best if he didn't know about it. He sternly glared at Chris, hoping the man would understand he wasn't to do anything his father wouldn't approve of, which, considering the lengths Landon had been willing to go to keep Nathan, wasn't much.

"How's Miss Evie?" Chris asked. It was not a neat segue, but he did want the Judge to understand this was not his business, and the discussion was over.

Just like his father, you couldn't tell Landon's anything either. Landon must have had a whole pack of guardian angels looking over his shoulder, the way he ran headlong into things and came out unscathed. Then, on the other hand, the man was dead, wasn't he? So much for guardian angels.

"She's keeping busy. You know our grandson is with us."

"I heard." Chris wondered how rude it would be to turn on the television. Deciding it was less rude than the things he had to say about Mary Travis, he picked up the remote.

“Thank you, Mr. Larabee. Ah feel so much better now.” It wasn’t his best attempt at sarcasm, but he was tired and achy... and absolutely filthy. “A shower would be nice,” he said wistfully when Chris settled back into his chair and picked up his magazine.

“Don’t think you’re ready for one, Ezra.” Walking to the bathroom and back had worn Ezra out earlier, leaving him shaking with fatigue; tack on a few minutes to shower and... well, he just wouldn’t be able to do it.

“Ah am more than ready for one. Mah hair is positively greasy and Ah...smell.” He wrinkled his nose as he sniffed at his underarms.

“A nurse can give you a sponge bath.”

Ezra stared at Chris, waiting for the smile, showing he was joking, to appear. “Surely you jest,” he said when Chris didn’t break into a grin.

“You are not strong enough to get a shower.” Explaining the obvious to Ezra was getting old. Ezra should be able to see for himself how tired he was. A morning of activity after days of sitting on death’s door had to have left the man exhausted. So, why didn’t he do the sensible thing, give in to the demands of his body, and go back to sleep?

“Ah think you underestimate what Ah am capable of,” Ezra muttered. The more he considered the shower, just a few feet away, the more a visit to it was becoming a necessity. He was dirty. He needed to get clean if he was to get any rest, and Christopher Larabee could just get the idea of sponge baths out of his head. There was no way a person could get clean that way, and, frankly, the idea of someone else sponging him off was abhorrent.

“The drain may be gone, but you still have an IV,” Chris pointed out the obvious while reaching across the bed to pull Ezra’s fingers away from the piece of tape holding his IV in place.

“As though Ah could forget, but Ah don’t think having one precludes me getting a shower.”

Chris put his magazine down and, biting back an order to keep quiet and go to sleep, he said more or less agreeably, “I’ll go find a nurse.” Hopefully, the one he found would be able to make Ezra see sense.

Three hours later, Chris sipped at the coffee Josiah tracked down before heading out to find something for them to eat, which wasn’t a cookie, a brownie, or something that had spent the last few months in a vending machine. His eyes on his sleeping brother, he reviewed the day, wondering if there was anything he could have done differently.

Other than asking Buck to stop at Inez’s and bring something decent for him to eat, he couldn’t think of anything he could have done differently. He hadn’t thought of it when Buck called, though; he heard evasion in his brother’s voice, and his brother’s attempts to redirect his attention set off all sorts of alarms. He was probably overreacting, and the worry that had been his constant companion ever since talking to Buck was unnecessary, but on the other hand, he knew Buck. Whenever his straight-to-the-point brother got evasive, there was cause for concern. They were up to something, and it made him nervous. He needed to be with them to oversee whatever it was they were doing, but he couldn’t leave Josiah here; he was worse than useless in keeping Ezra resting. He crossed his fingers, hoping his brothers were not at the ranch making the mess Ezra was in any messier, but he knew wishing the impossible was a waste of time.

He’d send Josiah or Nathan to talk to them, but they both had let him down in their dealings with Ezra, and he didn’t trust them not to add fuel to the fire the others were building. You would have thought, since his father had seen fit to sire seven sons, he would have found a way to pass his common sense on to at least a few of them, but as far as he could tell, he was the only one who inherited that trait. Before all of this with Ezra, and his need for a shower, he would have thought both Nathan and Josiah could be considered good, sensible men, but after an afternoon of them not having his back as he tried to deal with Ezra, he had been forced to revise his opinion of them.

Ezra was adamant about needing a shower. The white-haired battle-ax of a nurse should have reassured him he did not indeed stink or at least, tell him it was more important for him to get some rest and not to do anything to trigger a relapse; she hadn’t. Choosing her had been a mistake on his part. He hadn’t seen it then, but now it was obvious- she wasn’t intelligent. The woman, old enough to retire, succumbed to Ezra’s dimpled smile and his (suddenly) heavy southern accent. With her head bobbing up and down, keeping a beat with Ezra’s words, she had

not only agreed with the dimwitted, stubborn man but encouraged him. Chris had been caught off guard by her pronouncement that a shower was a wonderful idea and had not known how to counter her offer of providing Ezra with the necessary supplies. He would have argued more vehemently with her, but he thought she would grant Ezra's request for a shower with the typical speed everyone did everything in this institution, and felt he would have plenty of time to track down Nathan and get him to put a stop to this farce. Instead, she quickly returned with her arms loaded with towels.

Watching her, Chris decided the next time he had to get a nurse, he would find one in which senility had not so blatantly taken over; while he was at it, he had best find a male nurse who would not succumb to Ezra's charm. Seeing that the representative of medical authority had fallen victim to Ezra's honey-toned voice, Chris turned to his older, supposedly sensible brother for help.

Rising from the chair in the corner and stretching the kinks out of his back, Josiah approached the bed. Watching Josiah examine Ezra's pale face, Chris felt sure the man would instruct Ezra to get some rest. He hadn't; instead, he encouraged the weak Ezra by helping him to the bathroom. Having succumbed to Ezra's pleading for a shower, Josiah should have at least stayed in the bathroom to make sure the idiot didn't fall; instead, he stepped out to give Ezra some 'privacy.'

Ezra was in the hospital, for Pete's sake. He had given up any rights to privacy when he chose to get so very sick. What good was privacy if he fell in the shower, or something? What good was a brother who didn't have common sense?

Unwilling to stay to witness any mishap, and unable to go far, in case he was needed, Chris spent the half hour it took for Ezra to get showered and back in bed, hovering outside Ezra's room. He probably would have calmed down and forgiven Josiah for his stupidity, but then Nathan showed up to check on Ezra.

After reading Ezra's charts and hearing Ezra was getting a shower, Nathan predicted Hartley would be sending Ezra home in the morning. His announcement had led to a heated, if quiet, argument with Chris declaring Ezra unready for life back at the ranch, and Nathan pointing out the hospital was not a hotel. The term convalescent home came up, and both men shuddered and quit arguing. They knew very little about Ezra, but they knew enough to know Ezra would view a stay in a convalescent home as a betrayal; it was not an option to be considered. Nathan tried to tell him the best place for Ezra was at the ranch, but Chris ignored him. He wasn't going to waste his breath talking to a brother who thought it was perfectly normal to go to work a day after being hung. He'd talk to Dr. Hartley; the doctor seemed like a man who had his head on straight. He would understand that taking Ezra home any time soon was a disaster waiting to happen.

Chris sighed and tossed the empty cup in the garbage, and stood up to get a better look at his sleeping brother. Hartley echoed Nathan's words, saying if the lab work continued to show improvement in the evening and the morning, then they could take Ezra home with a PIC line-whatever that was. He couldn't wish for the lab work to come back bad; Ezra had been too sick for him even to momentarily wish that, but he honestly didn't think Ezra was ready to leave the hospital, and the availability of immediate care.

Did any of them think Ezra would follow instructions about getting well? He could see it now. Ezra would not stay in bed getting the rest his body needed; he'd be in the library looking for the files their father had secreted away. He would not eat anything remotely healthy; he'd be eating whatever looked interesting. He would not take his medicine; he'd hide his pills under the bed or something. The only good thing Chris could see in bringing Ezra home was that they would all be under one roof and not spread all over the county. He'd be able to watch over them all, keep them all safe.



Josiah fell into step beside Nathan. They hadn't planned on meeting for lunch, but after overhearing Chris and Nathan's discussion of what to do about taking Ezra home, he decided to swing down and check on his brother before heading out in search of something to eat. Fortunately, it was quiet, and Nathan, after informing everyone he was heading out for something to eat, joined him.

"Are you all right?" Josiah asked, concerned that the anger pouring off Chris had affected Nathan.

“Me? Sure? Why?” Nathan, honestly confused by the sound of worry in Josiah’s voice, looked up from the list he held in his hand. It seemed as though everyone, within the sound of his voice, requested him to pick up their lunch; he’d spend his entire lunch hour filling the list. Oh well, it was all part of working in an ER, and if he was bombarded with requests for supper, he was being accepted. He pocketed the list and the wad of cash that had piled up alongside the list and turned his full attention on Josiah.

“Chris flew into you. I just wanted to make sure you didn’t take anything he said personally.” Still shaking his head over Chris’s attitude toward the possibility of Ezra being discharged, Josiah followed Nathan out of the hospital.

Nathan pulled his coat closed and shivered theatrically. “I don’t know about you, but the wind goes right through me.”

Josiah glanced over at his brother, his expression saying he was not going to be tempted into changing the topic.

Nathan sighed. He didn’t like having to explain Chris; he felt as though he never quite got it right. “C’mon. I’ll tell you about Chris while we get something to eat.”



Ella swore softly as she watched the two tall men walk through the automatic doors leading out of the Emergency Department. There were several entrances to the hospital, and she, being only one person, could not cover them all. She chose the Emergency entrance as the most likely exit Chris would use. Fowler said they took turns getting supper. She had come in the hopes of seeing Chris.

Thinking, she would be so fortunate as to bump into Chris was a bit far-fetched, a fantasy on her part, she reluctantly admitted, as her eyes followed the dark-skinned man and the gray-haired, white man as they wove through the parking lot. She had been sure, when she woke up at dawn, that this was the day she would run into Chris. She built an entire daydream around the thought.

She would wait in her car until she saw him come through the doors. Then, she would climb out of her car and, wrapping her coat tight around her, she would run for the door. Only, she wouldn’t make it; there would be a stone to trip over and twist an ankle, making her fall. Chris, being the gentleman he was, would rush over to help her to her feet. He would reach for her... she would look up and silently mouth his name; the shock of running into him after so many years of not hearing from him would be clear in her face. Chris would reach out to touch her face... no... he would drop down to his knees beside her and, whispering her name over and over, he would pull her into his arms. He would bury his face into her hair to hide his tears of joy, and she would start to cry too. Only Chris would think she was hurt. She would insist she was fine, but he’d sweep her into his arms and carry her into the hospital. His voice would ring through the hospital corridors as he yelled for a doctor to come and help. A nurse, a plain little thing... with buck teeth and bad skin, but a sweet smile, would gently insist he come with her and sit in the waiting room until the doctor had a chance to examine her.

Chris would turn on the nurse, poor thing, she had no idea she was dealing with Chris Larabee, and he would exclaim, his voice deep with passion, ‘You want me to leave my Ella, the love of my life. I will not leave because I could not go on if she were to disappear from my life again.’ She’d reassure him she was not going anywhere, but he still wouldn’t want to leave. His hand would be clutching hers, and as he talked, he would move closer until they were mere inches apart. His breath would be warm on her lips. Closer, he’d move and no longer talk. His tongue would gently caress her lips and ... and she needed to snap out of it.

With icy cold fingers, she cranked the car’s motor. The warm air from the car’s heater erased the remnants of her daydream as it chased away the deep chill that had set in. She punched the button on her armrest, and the window rolled up. Idiot, she chided herself. Sitting in the car without heat and with the window rolled down is a good way to make yourself sick. She shrugged as an answer to the chastising voice in her head. She had been sitting in her car, waiting for a glimpse of Chris. He was bound to come out sooner or later. It was his turn to get lunch for his brothers. She could not sit in the car with the heater on. What if he had come out, and she missed him because the windows were fogged up?

The voice told her he probably wouldn’t leave the hospital; he would stay with his sick brother and roll up the window. She told the voice to shut up because she would risk getting sick even if there was only one chance in a billion of seeing her beloved.

She sighed; she should not have walked away from Chris. She knew it for a fact, he loved her, and she had foolishly thrown his love for her in his face. The suffering she caused him was unforgivable, and yet, she knew he would do just that. The pictures Cletus took of him showed lines of pain etched deeply into his soul. It broke her heart, knowing she put them there. Damn her and her stubborn pride, she hurt him so much by leaving him all those years ago.

Things would change now, though. Nothing was standing in their way anymore. With the stubborn fool of a father gone, there would be no one whispering into Chris's ears that they didn't belong together, and with the twin nuisances of his wife and son disposed of, there was no one demanding his loyalty.

She debated telling him what she had done for him. He would be angry at first; his temper would flare because she took the decisions, of what to do about them, away from him, but he would see, when his temper cooled, the depth of her love for him. On the other hand, he might not understand Cletus. At times, dear Chris could be jealous; he hated the thought of any man being with or even near her. He simply couldn't understand. Cletus was a partner, nothing more.

She knew she needed to leave while she was able. Too much thinking about him walking through the doors would have her turning off the motor and waiting again, or worse, running into the hospital in search of him. He wouldn't hurt her intentionally, she knew, but his worry over his sick brother would stand in the way of their joyful reunion.

He would be conflicted if she showed up now. His natural inclination to be reunited with her would be to sweep her into his arms and to run out of the hospital and into the nearest bed. She snickered at the thought that while a hospital bed would be the nearest bed, the things they would be doing in it were not things you should be doing in a hospital. He would want to hold her close and make up for their lost time together, but he would be torn, needing to care for his brother. Sweet, gentle Chris, she wouldn't put him in the position of having to choose. She would wait for the perfect moment.



"It's going to be all right," Ashley whispered into her husband's ear as she massaged, without success, away the tension in his neck.

"No... no, it's never going to be all right." He pulled away from her fingers, refusing her solace. He knew he hurt her by doing so, but he didn't want comfort; he didn't deserve it.

Ashley wrapped her arms around her husband, laying her head against his back. "You did the only thing you could do."

"I know," he answered, thinking, if he were any sort of man, he would turn around and pull her into his arms, hold her tight and soothe her or at least accept her tender ministrations but, he couldn't tear his eyes away from the window and the sight of the mountain looming so close, blocking the sun.

Ashley followed his gaze, cursing him for choosing that mountain. Had he made his choice intentionally, she wondered. Every day, when he opened his eyes and stepped outside to greet the day, he would be reminded of what he did, but what exactly had he done? As far as she could see, he had done nothing except protect the living.

"Garret..."

"I know Ashley... I know there was nothing else to do, but knowing it doesn't ease the pain or make me less guilty."

"You are not guilty of anything."

"Tell that to Joan. Tell that to Ma... Ma suspects something. Her eyes follow me everywhere."

"She knows you and Jase are hiding something from her. She would understand if you told her the truth."

"I can't... to tell her would undo everything we did to protect her."

"Then remember this... you did what you had to do, nothing more, nothing less."

"I know... in my head I know, but Ashley... he was my brother ... and I threw him away like a piece of garbage, and then I prayed he'd never be found. What kind of man... what kind of brother does something so heartless?" He pushed his wife away. "I need to finish getting ready." He couldn't hold himself together if she kept holding him. Tears threatened, but he had done enough crying; he needed to start acting like a man, he needed to pattern himself after his cousin. He needed to quit the sniveling and remember he had done all this to protect his family; falling apart now would only make things worse for everyone.

Waiting until Ashley shut the door behind her, he picked up the black leather shoes that he had spent an hour polishing. They hadn't needed polishing; he had bought them years earlier for his wedding and they sat, unworn, waiting for the day he and Ashley left the ranch to trade his degree in business management for a job in a tower of gleaming steel and glass in a city where no one had heard the Larabee name. That day had never come, but the shoes sat in his closet as a symbol of the world outside the ranch; the world for which he longed and now was forever out of his reach.

Every Sunday, Ashley would lay them out beside his church clothes, and every Sunday, he'd put them back in his closet, tell Ashley he was saving them for a special occasion, and pull on his newest, cleanest, or most recently polished boots to wear to church. He wasn't leaving the ranch, but he supposed a brother's funeral was a special occasion. He wondered if Ashley would notice he wore the shoes. She'd best take a good look, because he knew, no matter how long those shoes sat on the floor of his closet, he'd never wear them again.

With work-roughened hands, he deftly tied his shoelaces and stood up. He pulled his suit jacket on, not caring that it pulled a bit through the shoulders. He'd bought it the day before, and Ashley spent the evening hemming the pants; he'd told her not to bother altering the jacket, and she'd not questioned him. Maybe she knew, like the shoes, he'd never wear it again.

A glance at the clock told him he had hidden in his room long enough and needed to go help his ma get his pa ready, but he couldn't make his legs cooperate and move towards the door. He let them carry him back to the window and then let his eyes go to the mountain.

"Garrett?"

Garrett hadn't heard the door open, nor had he heard Jason walk into the room, but he didn't startle. Where else would his partner in crime be at that moment, except at his side? "Is Pa ready?" he asked, surprised at how little he cared.

"He's dressed, but I am not sure we should take him." Jason rested his hand on his older brother's shoulder. He wanted to pull Garrett into a hug or something, but he knew any offer of comfort would be rejected. "He's not acting quite right today," he said, hoping Garrett would agree with his assessment.

"He's not quite right? Jase, he hasn't been right for a while. Welcome to my world." He could feel his brother stiffen at the bitterness in his voice, but he couldn't be bothered at the moment to fix it. He was too busy looking at the mountains, wondering if he ever would see just them and not see Junior's body as it tumbled down the mountainside, bouncing and tearing on the rocks. It had seemed so easy then; he had been working on adrenaline and it gave him the ability to sit with Chris and lie to his cousin, but then he'd spent the night throwing up everything he'd so heartedly eaten.

"I know Garrett." Jason followed Garrett's gaze and physically flinched. "He'd understand." He wished he hadn't come home early. He'd planned to spend a few days with his girlfriend, her son had been ill, and she had been preoccupied with caring for kid. The kid's whining had gotten on his nerves, and so he came home to surprise his folks with one of his rare visits. He'd been the surprised, though.



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He had pulled into the driveway just as the sun was brightening the horizon. He rolled down the window, pulling the morning paper out of the mailbox, and tossed it onto the seat next to him. Just before he got to the house, he killed the motor, put the battered truck into neutral, and pushed it up to the house. With visions of his ma's look of surprise to remind him to keep quiet, he had snuck into the house and sat at the kitchen table. Surprised at not seeing his pa sitting at the table, sipping on a cup of freshly brewed coffee, he made himself at home. After pouring a glass of milk, he sat down, opened the paper, and began reading when he heard footsteps.

"Oh, it's you." It sounded awful, but he had been hoping Ma would be the first one to make an appearance; he was starving, and just sitting in the kitchen brought back memories of her blueberry pancakes.

"Morning to you, too."

Jason tossed the sports section of the newspaper toward his brother as a way to apologize, but Junior ignored it. "Didn't know you were coming home this weekend," he said to Junior.

"Didn't know you were planning on being here, either. Getting tired of what's her name?" Junior asked.

"Dana, her name is Dana. Maybe, if you and Joan came home a little more often, you'd remember."

Junior opened his mouth, but instead of the retort Junior usually flung at him when he criticized the rarity of Junior's visits, Junior merely shrugged. After a moment of studying the pattern on the linoleum floor, Junior lifted his eyes and looked around as though remembering his original purpose in coming into the kitchen. "Have you seen Pa?"

"No, though he might be in the barn, but he didn't come out to see me when I pushed my truck up to the house." The grin, creasing his face, almost hiding the diagonal scar running across his cheek, faltered when Junior didn't return it. He purposely mentioned pushing his car into the yard, as teens, his brothers and he had done just that so their folks would not hear them returning from dates. Junior should have smiled; it had been his idea, his rebellion against their eleven o'clock curfew.

"Do you honestly think he would understand why we took his body and threw it off a mountain? I don't know if I would?"

"He'd understand." He said the words with a conviction he didn't feel. "He'd know we were just trying to spare the family the trauma of Pa being arrested."

"Pa killed him. Don't you think he needs to be arrested and pay for his crime?"

"Pa has Alzheimer's. He didn't know what he was doing. He doesn't even remember doing it. You saw how he was; you know what I mean," Jason reminded his brother.

Realizing the house was silent and curious as to the reason, he put down the container without checking its contents and walked through the breezeway to the room that had been added years ago to serve as Mountain Edge's office. He pushed the door open and bit back the scream tearing at his throat.

"Pa...oh my God, what have you done?" he asked the stranger sitting behind the desk, opening his mail while his brother lay stretched across the floor unmoving. He knelt beside his brother and gently turned him over; the blank, unseeing eyes told him his brother had lost the argument, and he chuckled hysterically at the thought even as his fingers searched for a pulse. Gently, he laid his brother down and stood up. "Pa? What happened?"

"Jason," his father broke into a smile. "When did you get here?"

"Pa...Junior..."

"Is Junior coming, too? Your Ma is going to be so happy to have all of you back in the house. Course, she won't like it if he brings that wife of his. She's never forgiven him for eloping; I don't know what he was thinking. Have you seen my ashtray? I always keep it right here. Doesn't matter. Your Ma's been after me to quit; she's probably gone and hidden it somewhere."

It must be like being on drugs, Jason thought, as his brain tried to sort through what it was hearing and seeing. It was obvious what happened, but nothing made sense. He tried to process the fact that his father had just killed his brother, but his brain couldn't handle the information. He'd never been overly religious. He only attended church when he was home for the weekend and his ma forced him into getting ready and attending, but he found himself standing there and praying he was in a nightmare from which he'd awaken.

"Alzheimer's... It's so easy to blame everything on that, but Jase, many people have Alzheimer's, and they don't kill anyone. A person having Alzheimer's does not suddenly turn a man into a murderer. He has to know what he did. It wasn't just that he got angry at Junior and hit him. They argued all the time. This was not their usual fight. He picked up his ashtray and hit him over and over. He bashed Junior's head in."

"What do you want me to say? Yes, we should have called the police. We should not have covered up for Pa, but I didn't act alone. Yes, I was the one who asked Ma to fix pancakes, but you were the one who used my distraction to sneak Pa past the kitchen. You were the one who made sure he showered and washed away all the blood. When you let him out for breakfast, he was dressed and ready for church. You were the one who put him in the car to sit by your kids as

your wife drove the family to church, so we had an empty house to get rid of Junior and the ...evidence. You were the one who ate lunch with *our cousin* so you could pretend *our brother* was still alive.”

Garrett turned around and leaned against the wall. The vibrant man had disappeared. A defeated, broken man stood in his place. “I wasn’t thinking either, but what we did was wrong. The idea that Junior killed himself is hurting both Ma and Joan. Last night, Joan asked me to forgive her for not being the wife Junior needed. Ma is haunted by her belief that she failed him. Have you noticed his obsession with the lights? Every room in the house has to have every light on. I go behind her, turning off the lights. Yesterday, I asked her to leave a few lights off. She said she needed to rid the house of its shadows. We didn’t kill Junior, but we sure as hell are killing them. What Pa did was a momentary fit of rage. What we are doing is cruel and cold-blooded.”

“So, what do you want us to do? If we go and tell the sheriff we tossed our dead brother over a cliff to protect our Pa, do you think he will believe us?”

“It’s the truth. We didn’t kill Junior.”

“Innocent people get sent to jail all the time. People who did nothing died in the electric chair. We did something. We packed his clothes; we drove him and his car out to a lonely mountain, and we tossed his body down the slope. We are accessories after the fact. Even if we don’t go to jail for killing him, we could go to jail for covering it up.” Jason spoke fearfully. He had to convince Garrett to keep quiet; no one would believe them if they started speaking the truth at this late date.

“That’s what Ash says. Don’t worry, Jason, I’ll keep quiet.” He pushed away from the wall. “Come on. We have some more lies to tell.”



Nathan ran the electric razor across his cheeks; he preferred using a razor and shaving cream, but getting a proper shave in while on call was impractical, and he kept the electric razor in his kit at the hospital. Puffing up his cheeks, he examined his face for signs of missed whiskers. Deciding he had shaved as closely as he could without a proper razor, Nathan blew into his hand to check his breath.

“You ready?” Buck asked from where he was leaning against the wall.

“No, but I’ll have to do.”

Buck made a show of looking Nathan over. “Get you out of those puke green scrub suits you like to wear, and you clean up pretty good.”

Nathan shook his head in mock disgust. “It’s not a beauty pageant, Buck. It’s a funeral.”

“Yep, and it’s a plumb shame Junior’s dead, but you and I both know how it’s going to be. One hair out of place and Curtis Marks is going to be insulted because we aren’t paying enough respect to his son.”

“Remind me, why are we going?” Nathan asked as he slipped his suit jacket on. He was tired, bone tired, his eyes had circles under them, and if he found anything to lean on, he’d probably fall asleep. Between sitting with Ezra, working at the clinic, and helping out in the ER, he had moved past exhaustion and was working on collapse.

He’d planned on going home with Chris and Josiah the night before, but a car filled with teenagers had slid on ice, and he spent the night assisting in surgery. He wanted a reason to release him from the responsibility of attending the funeral. Some people, like his grandmother, enjoyed going to funerals. Not that she was happy that someone she knew had crossed, but she enjoyed getting together with friends and family to share pleasant memories about the dearly departed. He had to admit that sharing memories with his brothers helped him get through burying his father. Unfortunately, he didn’t have pleasant memories of Junior to share with the Marks family.

“For Chris, we are going for Chris,” Buck answered, wishing he could tell Nathan to go home and get some rest. His brother looked as though he’d forgotten what sleep was, and as everyone knew, a sleep-deprived Nathan was an unpleasant Nathan.

However, he also knew if he and Nate didn’t show, their absence would be noticed and commented on. Not that he minded. Various members of the Marks family had been making disparaging remarks towards him and Nate for years, but those remarks ceased to hurt long ago. Those remarks still hurt Chris, and Chris was hurting enough as it was. Though Chris hadn’t said anything, it was obvious from his somber mood and self-recrimination that the Marks family had gone and done it again. They’d found a way to blame Chris for their woes. As far as he was

concerned, they could all take their attitudes and ... well, he wouldn't think that. Not since they were on the way to a funeral, but Curtis Marks and his boys had best remember their manners. Chris did not need anything else dumped on him. "I am certainly not doing it for them. In case you didn't notice, not one of them came to Dad's funeral."

"Amy Marks sent flowers and a note." Nathan tried to be fair, but the truth was it hurt him, for Chris's sake, that his cousins hadn't come. He doubted Chris noticed their absence, but he had. It was one of the reasons he was going to the funeral of a man who'd made a point not to call him family. All his life, the Marks made him and anyone else who would listen aware that they were not related, and he was nothing more than Landon Larabee's illegitimate, Black son.

Today, he planned to show them how an illegitimate, black son acted; by his presence, he would repay cruelty with kindness. "Where's Chris?" Chris brought him his and Buck's suits, but it had been Buck who tracked him down to give them to him.

"He's upstairs giving Ezra orders to behave."

The mention of Ezra's name sent a wave of guilt through Nathan; he'd meant to go up there and check on him, but last night had been crazed, and he hadn't had a chance to check. He hadn't checked that morning, choosing to get a couple of hours of sleep instead. "How did things go last night?"

Buck shrugged his shoulders. "He doesn't like being here." He could have added a few comments about how much Ezra didn't like the IV, the food, or the staff, but he figured Nathan knew Ezra's opinions. He could have also said something about Ezra's nightmare, but bringing it up seemed too much like gossip. Besides, Nathan had stayed with Ezra; he probably already knew about the monsters chasing Ezra in his sleep.

"Most people don't." Nathan held the door open for his brother. "C'mon, we'd best track Chris down before he decides he waited long enough and leaves us."

"And that would be bad, how?"



"Joan?"

She had moved away from the knot of people surrounding the Marks family; their murmured condolences and brief hugs gave her no comfort. Wanting to grieve alone, she ignored the man calling her name, but she couldn't be rude, not at her husband's funeral. She turned ... and stared up into the face of her husband.

"Joan? It's Chris."

The voice convinced her she wasn't seeing her husband more than the eyes that were green and not blue, or the hair that had too little red. "I'm sorry... for a moment ...I thought you were him...it was going to be like a movie, and he was going to return from the dead because there had been some horrible mistake." She almost reached up to run her fingers across the face of the man, looking worriedly at her. She realized what her hand was doing and dropped it. "You look so much alike."

"I didn't mean to startle you. I should have let someone else get you."

"No... I'm the one who is sorry... I should have been keeping up with things. I guess we are moving things back to the house."

"Are you ready to go?" Chris spoke gently to the fragile-looking woman. Her appearance surprised him. When Junior married, Amy pleaded with him to stop her son's marriage to the cold fish, Joan. Amy told him Joan was domineering and demanded too much of Junior's time.

"No, but I suppose I should-"

"No, we can wait here until you are ready to leave," Chris answered.

"I just...I thought if I were here and watched them fill his grave, I could accept that he's gone... They didn't let me see the body; they said they didn't want me to remember him like that...like how? Torn apart by the rocks... I wouldn't have seen that...I just wanted to hold him... to tell him I was sorry."

"Sorry for what, Joan?"

"For not being a good wife...when we got married, Amy was so angry. I overheard her tell him I was cold and unfeeling, and he needed a good, loving wife ... he defended me. He told his mother I was perfect. He said that while I wasn't a social butterfly like Ashley, I was loving and someone on whom he could count. I remember thinking he sees me... he can see the real me. I am shy and I know it would be better for his business if I was social, but I thought...all these years I thought he could come to me and tell me anything."

"Was there something bothering him?" Chris reached over and pulled the teal blue scarf up around her neck.



"He gave this to me... he said it brought out the blue in my eyes... Something bothering him? I didn't think so. I thought we were happy. He had gotten a promotion, and we had made plans to adopt. We had filled out the paperwork and heard last week, there is a baby, six months old, she's deaf, but there is a school nearby... we were going to celebrate this weekend, but when I came home from work, he was in the bedroom packing... said something had come up and he needed to go home for a few days. I asked if his father was all right, and he said he didn't know anything about his father. He said he loved me, and he kissed me goodbye.

I went to a baby store, and I spent hours shopping and bought a carload of stuff... onesies, bibs, and blankets... anything that caught my eye. He called me that afternoon, and I babbled on and on about what I saw and the things I bought. I told him I was spending the rest of the weekend painting the nursery. I didn't stop to ask him if he was OK, if we needed to talk. I just went on and on about the baby and did not give him a chance to say anything, to tell me what was bothering him.

She raised a delicate, well-manicured hand to her mouth, trying to keep a whimper from escaping. "I turned my phone off so no one would interrupt me, and I forgot to turn it back on. If I had turned it back on, we could have talked, and he could have told me what was wrong; he'd still be alive... This is all my fault."

Chris pulled her close as she cried. Over her shoulder, he could see both Nathan and Buck waiting near the car; most of the mourners were gone, but they remained, waiting until he was ready. "Come here, I want to show you something," he said when she began to calm down. Keeping his hand on the small of her back, he guided her away from the church and graveyard. "You see that? That's the mountain where they found Junior." He could feel her tense at his words, but his hands on her shoulders kept her from moving away.

"There is a story I need to tell you." He looked down at her, trying to gauge if she was listening to him or if she was too tortured by the view of the mountain to hear what he said; she was listening. "Dad saw scouting as a way to kill two birds with one stone. He saw it as a way to teach us about how to be men, and, as a way to have some quality time with us... he enjoyed it too. When he became a scoutmaster, he invited Uncle Curtis's boys to join us. Uncle Curtis decided he'd start a troop of his own, rather than letting his sons join Dad's troop.

Looking back, I'd have to say Uncle Curtis viewed everything Dad did as a personal challenge. Scouting was no different. The summer I was eleven, there was going to be a big Jamboree in Ely. One of the events we were going to compete in was Trail Survival. We were going to pit our map-reading knowledge and hiking skills against other teams. Dad had us making maps every night and testing them on each other. We learned to read everything from Nathan's crude maps to sophisticated road maps. On the weekends, Dad gathered up all the kids in our troop, and he and a couple of other fathers took us hiking. Uncle Curtis found out how hard we were practicing, and he started working with his troop. One weekend, we were all out on that mountain, and an informal contest began between our two troops. Our troop was older, more experienced, and it was a given that we would win, but those kids kept pushing us.

"I remember Dad frowning and being surprised that he was getting mad because we were losing. I started watching him and found he was watching Uncle Curtis coach his kids. It quickly became apparent; Uncle Curtis was not coaching them in anything resembling safety; he was letting them take dangerous shortcuts. When Dad called a break... we all gathered around him, saying that we didn't need a break when we heard a scream... Junior fell." Chris felt her shudder under his fingers, and he pulled her closer.

She wrapped her arms around herself, unable to tear her eyes off the mountains, remembering how much Curtis had loved the outdoors. They had more camping gear than any one family needed, but he could have survived with nothing more than a fishhook and a match. All the camping they did, and not once had they gone up into the mountains; she never gave it any thought, but now, it made sense.

"He landed on a ledge... it took two hours for the rescue squad to get to him. Another hour before they were able to get him off the mountain... He was pretty well out of it. I don't think he ever realized how hard so many people worked to get to him.

"I talked to him in the hospital... he said he had thought he would die, and he was worried no one would find his body and bury him. He swore he'd never go hiking again. Not on a mountain, anyway.

"You're saying he didn't kill himself..." For the first time in days, she felt able to breathe. She wasn't an ill-tempered shrew who turned her troubled husband away. He loved her and she loved him and... and... if he hadn't killed himself, "Then who?"

"I don't know."

"It had to be a family member...one of his brothers...No. I don't, I can't believe that." She turned to look into Chris's eyes, anguish all over her face. "His family, they are all so close. They loved him...they wouldn't."

Chris cupped her face with his gloved hands, stilling her frantic movements. "I don't know Joan. I have a hard time thinking any of them hurt him, but someone did...It may have something to do with my family."

"How?" she whispered.

"Come on to the car. Let's get you out of this wind, and I will tell you what we know and what we think."

She followed his gaze back to the cemetery. Two tall men she recognized as Chris's brother leaned against a dark sedan. Mutely, she nodded her head, agreeing to listen to what Chris and his brothers had to say.



"No."

"C'mon, Ezra. I need yer cooperation to make this work."

"Then it is not going to work. It is a ludicrous plan, thought up by an ignorant, Boorish man."

"It was Buck's idea," JD interrupted, brushing tears away; the look on Ezra's face when Vin explained his idea had sent him into a fit of laughter that had left him gasping for air.

"Ah rest mah case." Ezra crossed his arms across his chest; the IV line, running from the back of his hand to the pole behind him, flopped against his face, ruining the air of righteous indignation he was trying to project.

"Ezra, Ezra, Ezra. Ya don't have to do anything. All ya have to do is sit and look sick. Shouldn't be any problem; you have the looking-sick part down pat."

"What part of 'no' is beyond your understanding?"

Seeing Ezra planned on being stubborn, Vin plopped down on the bed beside him and made a show of examining his face and checking for fever. "Ya know ya are lookin' mighty puny. I can understand how sitting in a wheelchair could be too much fer ya. Yer, right, ya don't need to be up and about quite yet." Before Ezra could feel as though he had won his case, Vin used his trump card, "I'm not sure Dr. Hartley understands how sick ya are. You may need to stay in the hospital for a few more days. Wouldn't take much to convince Hartley fella to keep ya fer another day or two. With the way Chris acted, when he said he was letting ya go, I reckon the man is prayin' fer a reason to keep ya here. A relapse sounds like a mighty compelling reason."

"Ah have not had a relapse," Ezra growled.

"Sure, looks like it to me. JD, why don't you go find a nurse and tell her Ezra is looking right puny."

Ezra sputtered, "You aruh blackmailing me?"

"See there, he isn't as stupid as Nathan's been saying." Vin grinned over his shoulders at JD.

Ezra frowned. He hated the thought of letting an insult pass, but Nathan wasn't here, and he had a bigger problem on his hands. "Surely you aruh jesting. You aruh not going to call a nurse."

"Of course I am gonna call one. See, Little Brother, I really want to do this."

"You aruh blackmailing me." Ezra rolled his eyes theatrically but didn't protest Vin calling him 'Little Brother'; he'd find a way to comment on Vin's youth... in a most inopportune time, if fortune favored him, and broken ribs aside, fortune always favored him. Instead, he considered Vin's threat and considered the most appropriate reaction. Finally, he grinned, "Ah am so proud of you."

"What?!?" JD took his turn at sputtering. It wasn't that he had lost his bet with Vin; it was that Ezra caved so easily and so happily.

"Little Brother has just realized he's not the only sneaky bastard in the family, JD. Just think of his reaction when we tell him about Moore," Vin explained.

Ezra's smile faltered; Moore was his problem. He didn't want his brothers involved in anything that might get one of them hurt. "What about Moore?"

"Later, we're gonna get ya rolled around the hospital before Josiah comes back with the paperwork discharging ya."

Ezra tried to recapture his mood of barely constrained laughter, but fear of what Moore was capable of when crossed kept him sober.

Seeing the look of worry in the green eyes, Vin patted Ezra on his leg. "Later, I promise."

Ezra looked from Vin to JD, both of the men reassured him with their smiles, and he found the knot of tension in his chest, which had suddenly made breathing difficult, dissolve. Sighing, he said, "Ah trust it is a sufficiently vile retribution."

"Let's just say, he's goin' to be too busy to worry ya or yer ma." Vin met JD's eyes and, as one, they turned to Ezra, their grins saying more than Vin's cryptic comment.

"Ah must say, you two look positively evil," Ezra laughed. "Ah certainly would hesitate to irritate either of you. What does Chris say?" he surprised himself by asking.

"He says 'it doesn't pay to fuck with a Larabee brother'," Vin smirked, his grin faltering as Ezra's answering laugh turned into a bone-jarring cough. When Ezra fell back onto his pillow, Vin handed him his water. "Thought they said ya were better, ya still sound rough to me."

"Ah assure you; Ah am much improved. This cough will soon be a distant memory," he said as he handed his glass to Vin. When Vin reached to take it, he held onto the glass until Vin looked at him in puzzlement. Please, he begged with his eyes, ignore it. "Shall we go over this great plan for meeting women again?"

Vin hesitated; Chris said he didn't think Ezra was ready to come home, but he assumed Nathan and Hartley knew what they were doing, and Chris was overly protective. Listening to Ezra cough, he wasn't sure if he disagreed with Chris. "We don't have to--"

"Sure, we do," JD interrupted by pushing the wheelchair closer to the bed. "I don't know anyone in this town, and meeting girls this way has got to beat letting Buck fix me up with his version of the perfect woman." Silently, he warned Vin not to make an issue of Ezra's cough.

"Ya have a point, kid." He held up the green robe for Ezra and frowned when he realized the presence of the IV would make it impossible to get the robe on his brother. "How did you get yer pajamas on?" he asked, tossing the useless robe on the bed.

"Carefully," Ezra deadpanned.

"Seriously."

"Ah waited until a nurse changed the IV site."

Vin had noticed the bandage across the top of Ezra's hand but had not thought about it; his brother had several bandages on him, courtesy of his multiple blood tests. "They moved it? Why?"

"The skin began looking puffy, or something; they changed it last night. Ah thought that, since the doctor is discharging me, it wasn't necessary to change it. The nurse disagreed with me. The lab is either the top money maker for the hospital, or the hospital staff is composed of evil people who enjoy having human pincushions around." He displayed his arms, which were dotted with bruises.

"Ouch." While he didn't shudder, he came close. Ezra had been put through the wringer. Making Moore pay was going to be fun.

Ezra squirmed under the renewed scrutiny Vin gave him. He slid into the wheelchair, managing not to wince as his ribs and assorted bruises protested. Afraid Vin would insist he get back into bed, he smothered a cough. "Shall we go?"

Vin nodded slowly, wishing he had not mentioned this idea of Buck's. Buck had been joking about it, but he saw the possibilities and pushed Ezra into this. He didn't care about meeting women, at least not like this, but he did care about the possibility of someone in the hospital targeting Larabees. It would be interesting to take notice of anyone who watched them as they strolled around the hospital. He would remember the faces of anyone showing either too much or too little curiosity about his brother.



She knew people were beginning to watch her with worried eyes, but she didn't care. Dealing head-on with the secrets hidden in the old house would be the only way to destroy the

shadows surrounding her. Ignoring the voices of those who had come to pay their respects, she pulled another photo album from the bookcase and carried it to her bedroom. Telling Ashley something about needing to see Junior again, she waited until the door closed before she opened the book. She had done this each night since realizing her home was shrouded in shadows. She hoped to find something in the fading pictures to trigger a memory to explain what had settled in her home – what evil resided in the house. The simple solution would be to talk to Curtis about it, but either he was being purposely obtuse, or the disease had taken more from him than she thought.

Tears welled up in her eyes at the thought of her husband and his disease. With each passing day, huge chunks of his mind were being eaten away. Garrett claimed the medicine was helping, but it was becoming harder and harder to see her husband in the man she had sworn to love until death parted them. Soon she would be left with nothing but an empty husk, and ...and an empty husk could not tell her about the shadows in the house.

Slowly, she turned the pages in the album. Another time, she would have sat down with one of her sons or Ashley, and she would have told the story behind each picture, and, together, they would have laughed at the clothes and hairstyles. Her job, however, was not to entertain or ease the hurt in her children by rehashing stories of Junior's childhood. Today, and every day until she solved the mystery, her job was to remember ... for certainly somewhere in her memories there was an explanation for Junior's death. She needed to find that explanation because Junior would not rest until the mystery of why he was found on the side of a mountain was solved. She had failed her son in life; she would not fail him in death.

She also needed to know what role she played in inviting the shadows into her home.



Joan Marks stepped out onto the porch; there were too many mourners in the Marks household for her to think, and she desperately needed to think. Normally logical and practical, she had been running on emotion ever since she woke up on the couch and realized it was Monday morning and her husband had not come home. She must have looked a sight, standing in the middle of her immaculate living room floor with the throw blanket in one hand, the book she had been reading in the other, and a confused look on her face. It had taken her a full minute to realize the jarring sound filling the room belonged to the alarm clock in the bedroom; it had been so long since she had heard it, she almost didn't recognize it for what it was.

Leaning against a porch post, she smiled at the thought of alarm clocks. Her job demanded that she wake up early to get to work on time. Every night, she set the clock on her phone early enough so she could hit snooze once. The only times she ever heard the alarm were the times when Junior was out of town on business. It didn't matter what time she set the alarm; Junior always woke five minutes before it sounded. He would turn it off and wake her with a kiss; he said waking to a kiss was a much more pleasant way to start the day than waking to the shrill sound of an alarm, and she agreed. She was going to have to get used to the sound of the alarm from now on. She didn't know if she would be able to awaken to the alarm or if, without her kiss, she would sleep the day away.

Did it matter? Her husband was dead, her parents were dead, she had no children, and now, without a husband at her side, she may never be allowed to adopt the little girl she spent Saturday shopping for. Her arms would forever be empty. She was alone; her life was over. Junior's family pretended differently; they acted as though if they all pulled together, things could return to normal. At least Junior's brothers did; they were as thick as thieves, each watching, almost hovering over the other. Their worry and concern were everywhere.

Garrett kept reaching for Ashley or one of his children (bless them, they didn't understand what was going on and were bewildered by all the people in the house) and Jase had suggested she move to Eagle Bend or Four Corners where they could look after her-- did he honestly believe she would do that. Both brothers had made a point of reassuring her she was part of the family and always would be, but she knew better. Even if she felt comfortable in this house, and even if Jase was sincere about wanting her to move near them, she knew she had never been part of the family, and without Junior at her side, she would never be. In a couple of years, she would not be anything more than a name on their Christmas card list.

It should hurt to know, the only family she had left was not her family, but it didn't. She hadn't particularly enjoyed coming to the few family gatherings Amy insisted they attend. She

wouldn't miss the gatherings and, now with the words Chris Larabee spoke running through her head, she looked at all of them with suspicious eyes.

Chris Larabee, she'd only met him a few times and couldn't claim to know him, but he'd talked to her in a quiet but intense voice, and she had known, with some instinctive gut feeling, he was a man to be trusted. He exonerated her of any blame in her husband's death, and for the first time in days, she remembered the love she and Junior felt for each other. He had not been running from her; he had not killed himself.

The cold emptiness she felt when she learned of Junior's so-called suicide left her with Chris's words, only to be replaced with a cold fire of rage. She wasn't sure who she was angrier with: those people who kept looking at her, wondering what had happened between her and her husband to make him kill himself, or the person responsible for his death; the murderer, of course, but it was a near thing. She wanted to sweep the food-laden table clear and demand that everyone go home. She wanted to throw things until everything in the house was as broken and shattered as she felt. She wanted to do those things and more, but she wouldn't. She never called attention to herself; she wouldn't start now.

She spoke to the man who had become her official shadow, "I wish I had taken him back to my home to bury."

Buck moved closer. He had been waiting for her to acknowledge him. Her pain was etched into her face, and he wanted to pull her into his arms and hold her until she cried herself out, but he didn't. Joan didn't look as though she was ready to cry. Joan Marks was coming to terms with the idea that her husband had been murdered. Her back had straightened as Chris revealed what they suspected. She stood now with her head held high, and a blaze of anger had finally replaced the lost, haunted look he had seen on her face while in the graveyard. He said, "It's not too late to move him."

"If I took him, it would mean a fight with Amy. Besides, I will always have him in my heart; I don't need a grave, I can visit him every day because I hold him within me... We were happy. I let everyone convince me otherwise for a few days, but they were wrong. We were very happy. You might find it hard to believe, but he was happier with me than he ever was here."

"I don't find it hard to believe, not at all."

She kept talking as though he hadn't spoken, "He loved this land and his family, but he wasn't happy here. You tell your brother...you tell Chris Larabee, he wasn't to blame for Junior's leaving." She felt Buck's fingers on her shoulders, and she leaned back against his strong body, accepting the concern he offered. "I heard them the other night. They told Chris, over and over, he was to blame. They said he let Junior down. He didn't. Contrary to what they like to think, Junior had grown up and was his own man... Junior...I hated calling him that... It sounded so ... I wanted to call him, Curt, or Curtis, but he said he would not answer. Curtis is his father's name. ... I used pet names for him, which is so not me. He thought it was sweet. If he had a name to call his own, I would have used it instead."

"Or maybe you would have used those pet names anyway."

"Probably," she agreed with a soft smile. "Buck, I hope you and your brothers understand. I am leaving in the morning. This isn't my home. It never has been and never will be. I can't stay here."

"You can stay with us. You don't need to be alone for Christmas."

"I won't be. Contrary to what Amy likes to tell people, I have friends. One of them just went through a bad divorce, and she hurts, too. Her husband took everything, but the kids; he had a good lawyer. I'll let her move in until she gets back on her feet, emotionally and financially."

"That sounds like a nice thing to do."

"It's an extremely selfish thing to do. I can lose myself in her problems, and I will provide her children with a good Christmas. Maybe, I will remember this is supposed to be a joyous season."

"I hate to ask, but are you going to be all right financially?"

She blinked back tears and choked on a laugh, "Junior was in insurance. I will have more money than I know what to do with, and I will be fine. I will stay busy, and I will go on."

"Don't forget to grieve."

"I will...once this numbness wears off, I will grieve."

"Are you coming back?"

"Yes. I'll be back when you and your brothers find out who killed my husband. I will be back for the bastard's trial." If the anger and bitterness in her voice surprised Buck, he didn't let it show; his fingers kept on with their gentle massage.

"You think like Chris, then, that these deaths are connected?" he asked.

"I don't know... I do know, we were happy, and happy people don't kill themselves. I want to believe Junior found something related to insurance fraud and that he couldn't, for whatever reason, talk to his boss about it. I want to believe he turned to his father for advice, and some unknown villain killed him."

"You don't believe that, though?" Buck asked.

"I don't know what to believe. When Junior first disappeared, I believed he had been in an accident on one of these blasted roads. I had visions of him lying trapped in his car, slowly freezing to death, wondering when help would arrive. Then, everyone told me he killed himself, and they told me I was responsible. Now, I look at the people in this house, and I ask myself if one of them is responsible. I find I don't believe that either. Look at them when you go in, look at them. That is genuine grief in their faces. They loved him."

Buck sighed; she was right. The Marks family was shaken to the core by Junior's death. As much as he would like to blame them for it, he couldn't make himself believe one of them was responsible for Junior's death. He had to ask since she hadn't spoken on the ride from the graveyard. Chris thought the question had best come from him, "Have you talked to them about why Junior came up here?"

It was her time to sigh; she wanted nothing more than to find a blanket, cover her head with it, and pretend it was all a torturous dream, but she would not dishonor Junior's memory that way. It hurt to talk about him, but Chris Larabee and his brothers swore they would discover who killed Junior and the reason he died. She would tell them what she knew. "No one knows. Amy thought he had argued with me. Ashley accepts Amy's reasoning, but then again, Ashley always agrees with Amy. His brothers... just shrugged their shoulders; Jason wasn't here, and Garrett says Junior didn't confide in him about any problems. And Curtis, have you tried to talk to Curtis? I have. It's like being in the Twilight Zone. He looks normal. There is no disease-ravaged body to clue you in, and when he talks, he sounds the same as he always has. You find yourself thinking everyone is wrong, and he is fine. Then he'll say something, and you realize he's talking about something that happened long ago. It's not just startling; it's scary.

"Sometimes, he seems like the man Junior introduced me to all those years ago, and sometimes he doesn't. This morning, he talked about getting ready for his sister's funeral. For a few minutes, I thought he was talking about another sad time. Then it hit me, he thought we were getting ready to bury his sister, not his son. If he knows why Junior came here, I don't think he's capable of saying why Junior was here. Garrett says he has some good days and some bad ones. I have yet to see a good one."

"You're right. Nathan talked to him a few minutes ago. He says Curtis had no idea who he was speaking to."

She pulled away from the comforting hands. "I guess we need to go in."

Buck stopped her. His blue eyes searched her brown ones, then he asked, "Are you going to be all right?"

She considered the question. "I won't ever be all right, but I will survive."

"If you need anything...ever..."

"I'll be in touch." She looked across the expanse of the yard and to the empty cabins dotting the landscape. Garrett had been expanding. The ranch now offered guided hunting tours, an idea courtesy of Junior, and had been doing a brisk business.

Garrett explained to his guests about a family emergency and found them other places to stay, but come Monday morning, things would return to normal, sort of. She turned to her shadow and smiled wearily, "Will this day never end?"

"Everyone will understand if you lie down."

"I'll think about it," she said, knowing she wouldn't; this day was something she would endure for Junior's sake. She led the way back inside, the warmth of the house in sharp contrast to the numbing cold of the porch. She wondered if this was what Hell felt like, warm and inviting and very lonely.



Cletus Fowler silently congratulated himself for having the good sense not to call in sick. Not that he was sick; he never was ill. He was just restless and needed a quick trip to Las Vegas or some other large city to find a whore or some other outcast of society to relieve some of the tensions and frustrations which had been building over the past few weeks. He constantly fought the need within him, and more times than he liked to think, he came close to succumbing to it. To have his chosen prey so near, to know the feel of his skin under his fingers, to have the music of his screams in his ears, and not to be able to act, was torture of the worst kind.

Several times, he found himself hovering outside Standish's room, trying to come up with a reason to go in and see his beautiful quarry. The fingers of his hands ached to touch, to stroke, and then to mar the soft skin. If the brothers had not kept constant vigil, he might have succumbed to his urges. The knowledge he collected on the brothers for Ella made him wary of being near them.

The man-child would not recognize him for the predator he was. He doubted the doctor would either, and for the moment, the long-legged, too-friendly Wilmington, currently had him pegged as a hero and smiled every time they bumped into each other in the hall. He couldn't count on Wilmington staying friendly. He had spent the last three years watching the man hover over his older brother, trying to pull him back from the brink of despair. Wilmington would fight hard, and he would fight to win if he ever caught a glimpse of his predatory nature. The older man was a chameleon. On the surface, he resembled a middle-aged man, but he did not move like a man who was beginning to feel his prime slipping away. And his eyes, though friendly on the surface, looked too deeply into people for him to be a safe man to be around. His eyes looked for secrets.

The other two were both predators like himself. They did not indulge in the same activities he did, but they were hunters and might smell the danger he presented. He had too much fun in life to risk being caught. He would stay clear of the family. He'd hunt, but not until he knew how to avoid them. They were not like his usual prey; he needed to be cautious, but he would discover their weaknesses, and when he knew how to keep himself safe, he would test his skills against theirs. He would terrorize them. When he hunted, it would be under the circumstances he alone chose.

It was better this way; he would hunt his prey when he was healthy; no culling of the herd like he usually did. He would hunt a prime specimen and pit his skills as a hunter against his prey's survival instincts. When it was all over, he would take a trophy and mount it on his wall. No of course, he wouldn't hang anything on the wall. That was all he needed; one of his infrequent guests finding it, but he would keep something to remember the hunt by.

He watched his quarry and the long-haired brother, Tanner, stop and flirt with nurses, cleaning staff, and patients alike. He smiled; his prey was something he wished he could watch. Still ill, with pale skin and hollowed cheeks, the man drew women to him, and with a few words, he made them smile and blush like teenage virgins.

Cletus wanted to join the group of twittering nurses to hear the words he used to make them laugh. He ached with hunger, the need to be close enough to touch him; he could pass it off as an accident, he told himself, but he remained glued to his chair, reading his magazines and sipping on his coffee.

He had not remained free for as long as he had by giving in to his urges. Tanner, parading his brother around the hospital, was sniffing the air for his presence, daring him to show himself. He was baiting a trap; Cletus could feel the steel jaws waiting for him to make a misstep. Another hunter, one without his self-control, would have sprung the trap by now, but his age and experience kept him safe.

"Morning," he smiled at the one he had chosen and Tanner as they wheeled by.

"Morning," both men said in return, but he only listened to one voice. Later, he promised himself as he watched the two men head towards the elevators. When you are fit, I will hunt you down.



Bonnie hung up the phone with a smile. A date and a new job all in one day; life couldn't get any better. Better yet, the new job was in LA. She had taken a chance, called Dennis, and explained why she quit like she had. Surprisingly, he listened with real sympathy and offered her a job in the office he was opening in LA.

She would run the secretarial pool in the office as well as be his secretary when he was working out of that office. It meant moving, but LA was a huge place and when the shit hit the fan, she planned to be far away, and so well-hidden Timothy Moore would never find her. Dennis sweetened the deal with the promise of having his realtor find her a nice place by the time she got her things packed. She had agreed to it all in a heartbeat.

Then the UPS man brought in a package and asked her out. He suggested a movie and pizza. Once again, she agreed in a heartbeat. She was moving, she said, without telling him where, so there would be only one date. He said something sweet and gallant about making it a date she would never forget, and she had found herself blushing. He walked out without telling her the specifics of the where and when, but she had been too stunned by the fact that a man wanted to go out with her to notice. A few minutes later, the phone rang, and a very sheepish voice asked if he could pick her up at seven. She glanced at Timothy Moore's closed office door and decided to head out. She would get her hair fixed and then shop until she found something right for pizza and the movies.

After checking her desk for anything personal, she scribbled a note saying she was heading out for lunch. Timothy would eventually open his door to yell for her, that is, if he ever came up for air. Shelly was in his office proving she had skills other than her nonexistent secretarial ones. Eventually, he would read the note. It would be Monday before he figured out that this time, she had not waited to be fired but had quit.

He would be stunned and then pissed. He would drop everything and hurry to her apartment to either bully her into coming back to work or to beg her to do so. Her empty apartment would scare him; she knew too many things about him, and he would be thinking about each one of them.

He would panic. His first instinct would be to call Vin Tanner, but she had removed the number, the handsome detective left with them, from the computers and Timothy's Rolodex. He would start sweating bullets enough to stain his expensive shirts. He would check the calendar and see that Vin Tanner had an appointment with him for Tuesday morning. He would let the thought of having Tanner on the case of the missing secretary soothe him. For some reason, he had decided that Vin Tanner was the greatest thing since white bread.

She wished she could be here, but he would take one look at her face and would see her betrayal written there. She couldn't risk her life to satisfy her need to see his reaction. Her eyes swept the room for anything she might be leaving behind. She hoisted the box the UPS man found for her to pack her things in and fumbled for the door.

"Good-bye," she whispered to the office, to her job, and to the man she had wanted Timothy Moore to be. When she got to LA, she'd say hello to her new life.



"That's a beautiful picture, Billy. Why don't you tell me about it?" Mary slid into the chair beside her son. Her arms ached to hold him, but after enduring only the briefest of embraces, Billy made it plain he didn't want her touching him.

"It's for grandma," he answered without looking up.

"I'm sure she will love it. Is that a dog?" She tried to keep her voice calm and cheerful. This was so wrong. She should not be the one dropping in to babysit her son.

Baby-sitting was what Grandparents were for, but the moment Evie called and suggested Mary come over and spend time with her son while she and Orrin went to a funeral, she eagerly agreed. She would do anything to get Billy to let her near him again.

"No." He chose a broken red crayon and, with short, furious strokes, obliterated the 'dog'.

Mary tried again, "I like to color. May I color something with you?"

Billy looked at his mother for the first time that afternoon. After a long minute of intense scrutiny, he pushed a piece of paper towards her. She smiled; it felt as though a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders with that one, simple gesture from Billy.

Her feeling of elation died at about the same moment she felt it; Billy handed her the basket of crayons, stood up, and walked into the den, saying something about seeing what was on the Disney channel. She wanted to cry, but she drew a picture; it was of a mother rocking her baby son.



If he had one fault, one really bad fault which was going to get him killed one day, it was curiosity. He had an excessive amount of curiosity, at least that was how his science teacher explained the smoldering ruins of a science lab to the school administrators; she had been rather pleased by his excessive curiosity and was forever asking him 'what would happen if' questions. His teacher had loved his inquisitive mind and did everything she could to encourage him to develop it.

Miss Jansen encouraged questions. She said the only way to develop an understanding of the world was to question everything, and he spent his adult life following her advice. Though his brothers did not share her philosophy. Every time he asked about Moore, they frowned and mumbled something about talking later. If he persisted with his questions, they suggested he take a nap. A NAP, at his age!!! He was an adult and did not take naps. He especially did not take naps when there were questions to be answered.

Besides, what was the use of getting out of the hospital if he was going to be forced to stay in bed? Staying in bed only directed his attention to the tubing dangling from his arm. He thought getting out of the hospital meant getting rid of the tubing feeding him antibiotics. Hartley had shown up a short while after their stroll around the hospital to congratulate him on his walk, and then to explain the necessity of a PIC line. He had managed to allow a virulent germ to invade his body. If, according to the doctor, they didn't do a good job of killing off the invader, it would multiply, and he would end up in the hospital on death's door, again.

Having decided his stay in the hospital was an experience he did not want to repeat, and thinking a pill or two a day was something he could handle, Ezra agreed with the doctor about taking antibiotics. He had not realized that taking these super antibiotics meant having a long needle inserted into him and tubing attached to it.

He considered bolting, but Josiah's question of whether he needed a sedative had him shaking his head no. He chose not to listen to or watch the proceedings. Let Josiah worry about the details.

All right, the trip back to the ranch made him a trifle tired, and he slept for a little while, but that was no reason to keep treating him like a porcelain doll that might break, broken ribs aside. Every time he moved, trying to find a position that didn't dig into a bruise or make his ribs remind him how damaged they were, someone would ask if he was okay. Or worse, when he coughed, someone would appear with a Kleenex and a glass of iced water. If they were going to wait on him hand and foot, the least they could do would be to get him something decent to drink, like a properly aged bourbon.

Chris laughed when he suggested just that thing, and Nathan spent entirely too long explaining why he couldn't drink alcohol while taking all the medicines Hartley prescribed. His suggestion to chuck all the medicine out the window stopped everyone in their tracks. From the looks he received, he gathered they were going to watch him like hawks, making sure each dose was taken at its appointed hour. They didn't realize he was thirty and had been taking care of himself for many, many years.

Strangely, though, the thought of the others hovering over him did not drive him crazy. He found it ...nice. He felt warm, and it wasn't just the quilt young John David draped over him when he fell asleep on the couch. Nor could he attribute his feelings to the fire blazing brightly in the hearth or to the warm plate of food Buck had set beside him and insisted he eat. It was something more than those things, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

He didn't want to be in this house his father had built, and he certainly didn't want to hear any more about the man, but he was so very curious about these men who were his father's sons. He didn't know them, and he didn't understand why they wanted him with them. After all, he stole money from them, and reasonable, honest men would not tolerate his company. Yet, they were not only tolerating it, but they also went to great lengths to make sure he was one of them. He didn't understand it.

Later, after they told him what they planned for Moore after he made sure they weren't going to do anything to get themselves hurt, he would examine what he was feeling and what it meant. For now, he would savor the moment. He closed his eyes, listening to the sound of his brothers talking in the kitchen as they cleaned up the supper dishes.



"Want to wake up? You know you are going to get a crick in your neck if you keep falling asleep on the couch. I figure you have enough aches and pains to last a lifetime. You know you

do have a bed.” Chris smirked as Ezra blinked owlishly at him, obviously trying to figure out where he was.

“Mah apologies,” Ezra said. Pushing himself upright, he triggered a coughing attack.

“Nathan!” Chris called when Ezra didn’t stop coughing. Nathan hurried over and laid a hand on Ezra’s forehead.

“Ah’m all right,” Ezra pushed the hand away.

Nathan straightened up and looked at Chris. “Chris, he’s fine.”

“He’s still coughing his lungs up,” Chris objected.

“And he will for a while, he is not well; he’s just not sick enough to stay in the hospital.”

“I still say he should be in the hospital.”

“And you got your degree where?”

“At the school of common sense,” Chris shot back.

Ezra made a face, mimicking both of the men standing over him with crossed arms and angry faces, glaring at each other. He wished they would move away from him; he hated people standing when he was sitting, unless he was at a restaurant, and they were waiters. He especially hated people talking about him as though he wasn’t there or as though he were a child not to be included in adult conversations. Seeing neither brother caught on to his aping them, he opened his mouth to complain, but then JD moved into sight and winked at him. It wasn’t much as support went, but it was enough for him to see the humor in Chris and Nathan arguing over his coughing. He smiled and winked back.

“Ah believe you gentlemen were going to explain what nefarious scheme you have devised for Mr. Moore. Every time Ah ask, you say later.” He glanced at the clock and frowned. It was almost ten, the evening was all but over, and he had managed to sleep through it. Was he doomed to sleep his life away? He looked back up at his brothers. “Sit down and tell me what’s going on. Any later and it will be early.”

Ezra didn’t get the chuckle he was hoping for; instead, Chris glared at him as though he had just brought up something distasteful. Had he misread the situation?

Chris could feel his jaw tighten at the mention of Moore’s name. The plan JD devised was brilliant in its simplicity and none of them would get tossed in jail, which was good, but damn it all, there was no place in it for him to explain to Moore, in rather crude and forceful means, the mistake the son of a bitch made in touching one of his brothers. He glared at his younger brother, the navy sweatshirt Ezra wore hid his bruised chest and covered the bandage over the hole the presence of the drain made in his flesh, but in his mind, he could see every bit of painfully discolored flesh, and he hungered for vengeance. He spun on his heels and in long angry strides headed for the kitchen, tossing over his shoulder, “I’m getting a beer. Anyone else want one?”

Buck shook his head when Chris left the room. At least, he thought, he isn’t taking his worry and frustration out on any of them, yet. Maybe he’d drink the one beer, let the day catch up with him, and go to bed. Ha! Christopher Larabee hadn’t admitted he was tired and needed to go to bed since he was two. The best the rest of them could hope for was that he’d keep it to one beer. He glanced around the room and seeing the rest of his brothers’ eyes on the door, he explained, “Chris has a lot on his mind. After the funeral, we went over it a dozen times; there was no way Junior killed himself.”

“Another murder?” Josiah asked, not bothering to ask himself why he was so sure his father’s death was a murder. He didn’t know Landon Larabee, had only met him one time, but he was somehow sure his father had not died of natural causes. “Does he think they are connected?”

“As Chris says, coincidences are truly amazing things. Me? I think Junior has enough of a temper to have rubbed a few people the wrong way; he’s not Chris, but he did blow up on occasion.”

“Chris has a point, though,” Nathan argued. “It seems unlikely two people are out there killing Larabees.”

“What does his family say?” Vin asked. All he knew about them was what Chris said, and he was curious as to how they were dealing with Junior’s death. Chris had been remarkably close-mouthed about them.

Buck sighed, “Jase and Garrett blame Chris.” He stopped talking as what he said hit him. How many times had he wished for Chris to quit blaming him for Sarah’s and Adam’s deaths? Too many times to count, he prayed for Chris to see him as a brother again and not as the man

responsible for the deaths of his wife and child. Now, when he and Chris were beginning to repair their relationship as brothers, this happened. Finally, the shoe was on the other foot, and Chris was the one being blamed for a death he was powerless to prevent. Whoever said, Be careful of what you wish, was right. Had some Fate heard him and maliciously twisted his unvoiced wish?

Buck didn't have time to reflect on his wishes and the consequences of those wishes; Chris came in with a six-pack and a glass of water. Buck smiled and settled back in his chair to enjoy the battle of wills that would come when Chris handed Ezra the water.

"Take your pills," Chris ordered, pushing the water into Ezra's unresponsive hand. "You don't take the glass, I'll drop it," Chris warned when Ezra refused to take the glass. "You'll be wet, and you'll still have to take your pills."

"Ah don't like the way they make me feel." Ezra took the water, but refused the capsules Chris held in his hand. It was bad enough having to endure the injecting of medicine into his PIC line, but he loathed taking pills.

"You like the hospital even less," Nathan said, earning himself a glare from both men. Fine. It was all right to call on his judgment when Chris was worried about coughs and fever, but not about preventing those coughs and fever. Fine. If Chris wanted to be the doctor in the family, then let him. He wanted to hear Chris explain what each of those pills did and why they were so necessary.

If he hadn't felt Ezra's real reluctance to take the medicine, Chris would have lost his temper standing there waiting, but he could feel the tension in his brother as he debated taking the pills. "I know, but take them anyway."

"I'd prefer a beer." Ezra took the medicine. In the hospital, taking the medicine had not bothered him overly much. He hadn't liked the way it made him feel, but it hadn't brought back those damned memories. He swallowed one pill after the other before he lost his nerve; he hoped Chris hadn't noticed his fear.

Chris ignored Ezra's comment about the beer as he silently handed out beers to his other brothers. He felt Ezra's hand tremble. Ezra wasn't just reluctant to take the medicine; he was afraid to do so. Why? Deliberately, he tucked the question and his observation away for later examination. There was a story there and day, Ezra would feel comfortable enough to share it, but to ask him to share it tonight would only serve to push him away. Besides, they had other things to discuss. "Fact one," he began without preamble. There have been way too many deaths associated with the Larabee name. Fact two, Dad died in the hospital, and Ezra almost did. Fact three, Junior Marks died a suspicious death, and some members of his family are too eager to call it a suicide."

"You are pretty sure it wasn't, then," Josiah asked.

"If he had been found with a bullet in the brain or hanging from the rafters, then I could see suicide as a possibility. There is no way in hell Junior would have thrown himself off a mountainside." Chris wanted to cringe away from the pictures he was painting. The thought of his cousin, the one who looked to be a twin, the one who followed him everywhere, the one who felt it necessary to be Chris Larabee... the thought of Junior dead in any manner hurt, but someone needed to look at this calmly and coolly if there was any hope of finding out why his cousin was dead.

"What about the autopsy?" Josiah asked.

"As I've told Chris and Buck, the autopsy is only as good as the man doing it. I've only talked to Winn a couple of times... but he may not be the best man for his job. He doesn't think in terms of murder... doesn't look for the evidence. The sheriff called it a suicide, and he didn't look for any other possibility."

"The same as with Dad," Buck whispered to no one in particular.

"Which brings us to another point: do we want to dig up Dad?" Yes, he knew exhumed sounded better, less messy, and less like grave-robbing, but he didn't want them hiding behind fancy words. There would be a lot of emotional trauma associated with exhumation. He needed all of his brothers to consider whether the facts they might get from having their father's body examined by an expert equated with the pain they would feel.

"What will we learn?" JD surprised them all by asking.

"Good question. I've been giving this a lot of thought. If he were found dead anywhere but a hospital, I'd be pushing for an exhumation." Nathan took a sip of beer, wishing the beer would wash away the lump lodged in his throat. "In a hospital, there are many drugs if administered

wrong, could kill more or less instantly. It doesn't even have to be something mysterious. Potassium could easily kill. It's all over the hospital, especially in Labor and Delivery. Wish I could say it's kept under lock and key and watched like a hawk, but the truth is the only drugs that are truly watched are the ones drug addicts would want. The rest..." he shrugged his shoulders. "Then, of course, the problem caused by potassium is that it is found in the body naturally. Nothing out of the ordinary will show up on an autopsy."

"Then you don't think we'll find anything out if we exhume his body," Josiah asked.

"I don't know. I keep going back and forth on it." Nathan let his head fall back against the back of the couch, and his eyes studied the beams supporting the high ceiling. "Even if we find something, what does it tell us? It doesn't tell us if it was a murder or an accident, and it certainly doesn't tell us who is responsible."

"We need to look into the detective's death first. Suicide is awfully hard to fake. Maybe there is something there to find," Vin suggested.

"Okay... okay," Chris shook off thoughts of his father and turned his attention back to the immediate problems at hand. "Did you get any results from your fishing expedition, Vin?"

Vin smirked. He hadn't talked about his plan with Chris, but it didn't surprise him that Chris knew of it. He suspected there was little Chris didn't know about. He replayed their walk around the hospital in his mind, again searching for anyone whose response to his brother was inappropriate. He shook his head, "I can't rightly say. We earned ourselves some attention. Most of it came from nurses who heard of Ezra, but I just can't picture a nurse as a killer."

"I don't know about that. There was a case of a nurse in Texas a few years ago, and there was a case of a doctor in England not long—"

"Wait a minute. This fishing expedition ... Ah was bait for the killer!" Ezra scowled at Vin.

"See, Nate, I keep telling ya he ain't too stupid. He figured it out all by himself. Course, we had to draw him a map before he caught on," he answered Ezra's scowl with a grin.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Nah, it wouldn't have worked if ya were watching the folks watching ya."

"You didn't learn anything, so apparently, mah unenlightened participation did not garner the results you desired."

"May not have, but I got phone numbers."

"So, it was a waste of time," Chris said. He hadn't expected them to learn anything, but he felt disappointed they hadn't.

"You didn't notice the security guard?" JD asked. "The guy sitting at the desk in the lobby."

"Saw him looking at us, a couple of times, but I didn't see anything strange, out of the ordinary. What did you see?" Vin turned serious. He had wanted JD to push Ezra around the hospital so he could watch people's reactions, but JD had turned so red at the thought of walking around trying to get people's attention, he gave him the assignment of watching. Damn.

"He didn't do anything wrong. He didn't watch you guys all the time, or look especially interested in Ezra, but there was something off. I've been thinking about it, and ... and it was as though he was making a point by not watching you. Thinking back, everyone was watching you. Wherever you went, you had people surrounding the two of you, and the people who weren't around you were watching you. The security guard looked at you, but he didn't watch you. It was as though he was making a point of not watching. Are you following me?"

"Yeah, JD, we are. Good work," Chris said. His thoughts turned to the times he had bumped into Cletus Fowler in the halls, so he missed the way that his small bit of praise had JD sitting taller in his chair. "Do you know anything about this Fowler character, Nate?"

"Not much. I have been back for only a very short time. I am not in the know when it comes to gossip. I can say he's been around for three or four years, maybe five. Everyone seems to like him. He dates some of the nurses, but other than that, I don't know. I can ask around some."

"Then, start asking."

"No, don't start asking anyone, anything," Josiah countermanded Chris's order. "If he's our man, you'll tip him off. If he's not our man, your questions could ruin his reputation, and," Josiah could see Chris was not at all worried about ruining anyone's reputation so he hurried on, "if he isn't our man, you may scare the real murderer into hiding, and we don't want that. He's gone to a lot of trouble to make his murders look natural. He doesn't want to be caught, and if he thinks we

are even aware there is a murderer out there, he may go into hiding. If we want to catch him, we need him to think it's safe for him to try again."

"Then you're saying we probably should not exhume Dad's body," Buck said.

"No, I'm saying if we do decide to exhume, we need to say we are doing it because we think there was a medical mistake. We should not mention murder as a possibility."

"Will doing so make things hard on you, Nate?"

"Yes," Nathan answered honestly. "But we need answers. We don't need any more deaths."

"If we don't ask questions, we won't find answers," Vin said. He could see where Josiah was heading, and he agreed with him, but questions had their place, too.

"In my line of work, we find direct questions rarely tell us what we need to know. We gather a lot of our knowledge through observation, like JD did. It seems as though Fowler was interested in Ezra. He might be, but he may have been thinking how inappropriate people were behaving. Perhaps, he was thinking, there goes the man I helped save. Or he may have been thinking, there goes a man I find attractive. The point is, we don't know what he was thinking, and it is a mistake to decide anything based on one observation. We need more evidence before we can believe he is our killer."

"All right," Chris said, standing up. He wanted to pace around the room, but with seven of them in it, there was no room. He walked over to the fireplace and threw another log on.

"Ezra, if Fowler is our murderer, he may still be interested in you. I know you have doctor appointments that you will keep, but you do not go to Eagle Bend alone. Hear me?"

"Ah am not a child."

"Do you hear me?" He was dealing with a two-year-old.

"Yes, Ah hear you." Loud and clear, I hear you, but hearing you doesn't mean I have to obey your every command.

"Good." He turned around and looked at his other brothers. "Ezra may be a target, or he might not. The rest of you watch yourselves."

Buck hated asking, but he knew if he didn't, Chris would stay up all night thinking about it. "What about Junior's death?"

"When we get back, I need to talk to my cousins. They sure are eager to call it a suicide." And awfully eager to blame me. As far as I can tell, I am not responsible for his death, and I hope I never find out differently, but I do need to know why they are so eager to make me at fault.

"Maybe they are hiding something," Vin suggested.

"No, I don't think so. I think they took the sheriff at his word when he said it looked like a suicide. They are too much in shock to think it all through," Nathan disagreed. "Brothers may fight, but they don't kill each other."

"Some do," Josiah replied. He had seen too much over the years to believe families incapable of hurting each other. They needed to consider the possibility.

"Maybe," Chris said. The thought of his cousins having something to do with the death of their brother hurt him more than the thought of Junior killing himself. He wanted to strike the possibility of fratricide from his list to consider, but he was his father's son and would examine everything, no matter how painful. "The problem with fratricide is it doesn't take into account the deaths of our mothers or what happened to Dad and Ezra." It also didn't explain what happened to Sarah and his son. One day soon, he was going to get his courage up and find out how his wife and son died. He needed to know if it was an accident or if they had been murdered. He shook off thoughts of the fire; he couldn't deal with everything else if thoughts of Sarah and Adam kept intruding.

"So, then we are looking for two murderers," Ezra said from his spot on the couch. He didn't know these cousins and didn't want to talk about them. He wanted to know about this plan to get Moore, but these other things were important too.

"Maybe so..." Chris said. "Look, whatever is going on, we'll get it figured out, but first we need to take care of Moore. We do have a plan."

"No, no, Chris. You just sit yourself down and let me do the telling," Buck stood up and shoved Chris toward the seat he had vacated.

"This ain't a fuckin' fairy tale, Buck," Chris growled, but he did sit; Buck could make a short trip to the grocery store sound like a wild adventure, and after the day he had, he needed

something to ease his mind. The thought of teaching Moore a lesson certainly eased his mind. He wasn't aware of it, but a menacing smile creased his face at the thought.

Buck grinned when Chris capitulated and settled into the recliner. His grin grew when Chris's face lost some of its fatigue, and an evil smile appeared. Buck explained, "Chris ruins every story he opens his mouth to tell. He uses five words instead of the five hundred and –"

"It's called getting to the point, Buck," Chris growled again, but his eyes were twinkling for the first time that evening.

"It's called telepathy, Chris, and while your telepathy works sometimes, it's not a skill you should rely on, cause most of the time your thoughts don't beam into others' minds like you think they do. That little telepathic beam of yours just totally misses its mark, and all the information you were transmitting ends up on Jupiter or something. A real story needs words."

"Then get on with it," Chris said.

"I am. Give me a minute." He checked each of his brothers, wanting to make sure he had each brother's complete attention, which, of course, he did. "Now, as Chris so eloquently put it, when we were contemplating what to do about Moore, no body fucks with a Larabee," he pretended not to notice the look that flashed a cross Ezra's face when he included Ezra as a Larabee. At least, Ezra hadn't protested being lumped in with the rest of the sons of Landon Larabee.

Buck made a show of flexing his fingers, rolling his shoulders, and clearing his throat, "We had a problem; how do we make sure Timothy Moore learns he doesn't touch one of us –ever? We had several options. Chris, the Bloodthirsty, wanted to go pound the man into the dirt. He and Josiah both, are more than a little pissed I found a flaw in their plan."

"And the flaw was?" Ezra obediently asked when Buck paused and looked at him. It wasn't what he wanted to ask. He wanted to know why they were doing this for him. He wasn't a Larabee. Not only did he not carry the Larabee name, but his father was also and now, always would be, a stranger, a name, nothing more. Why were these men insisting he was related to them? They only shared a bit of biology, and biology alone wasn't enough to make him their brother. He could not understand why they couldn't see that? And why was he so reluctant to point it out to them?

"Why, Ezra, I thought it should be obvious. We'd end up in jail. Now, a jail term might not matter much to some of you, but I can say there would be mourning amongst the women of the world if Buck got locked up."

"And their husbands would be celebratin'," Vin quipped.

Chris lifted an eyebrow in question at Buck. "Inez," he said, coming straight to the point.

Buck looked sheepish for a moment, then he grinned, "Ain't any harm in looking."

"Not going to get too far with Inez, if she knows you are looking," Chris warned.

"A man always looks Christopher."

"A man won't look if he wants a particular woman to notice him, Bucklyn." He kept his tone light, but he hoped Buck was hearing him. His brother had been chasing after women ever since he first noticed there was an opposite sex. It was too much to hope he'd settle down cold turkey to just one woman, but Chris hoped Buck realized Inez wasn't the type to look the other way if he started fooling around.

Buck groaned; he briefly wondered if his brother had turned into something of a nag. Maybe later, he'd test Chris and see how dedicated Chris was to getting him and Inez together, but not now. Right now, they had Ezra's problem with Moore to fix. "I hear you, Chris," he said before he turned his attention back on Ezra. "The point is, while you are our brother, and brothers watch each other's backs, we don't want to go to jail. We had to devise a plan which would, in effect, rip the balls off Moore and do so without earning us a jail sentence. Nathan suggested we talk with the man, a show of force, if you would. We go in mass, explain who we are and what the consequences would be if Moore so much as thinks about you or your ma.

"None of us have any objections to a show of force; in fact, Bloodthirsty and his pal, Retribution, really liked that idea." He grinned at Chris and Josiah as he spoke. It was nice, in a sort of weird way, that the two oldest were the most ferocious.

Josiah raised an eyebrow and mouthed 'Retribution?' at Chris, who only shrugged.

Buck caught the exchange and gleefully decided to explain, although he was sure both men knew what they had said to earn such labels. "You live more than a week or two around here, and you are going to catch sight of Chris throwing a tantrum. Now, don't argue about that,

Chris. You know you do," he said when Chris opened his mouth to protest. He chuckled when Chris crossed his arms and mock growled something about showing him what a real tantrum was. Ignoring Chris, he continued talking. "Chris, getting his dander up is not unexpected; he gets royally pissed when the little old lady in front of him at the ten or less checkout line at the grocery store has a cartload. So, you can see how the thought of the low-life snake Moore having his thugs hold you, Ezra, so he can knock you around, would make him see red.

"Even if you weren't our brother, he'd be pissed because it wasn't a fair fight. Heck, if it had been a fair fight, Chris would probably have just told you not to pick fights you couldn't handle, but this..." he shook his head. "Even, if the bastard was not threatening your ma and even if you weren't family, Chris would be ready to kick ass just so he could explain to the snake, how real men fight. Right, Chris?"

Chris looked up from his job of peeling the label off his beer. He frowned at Buck, then shrugged. "Yep." The part where Buck thought he was worried about Maude was wrong, but he had the essentials down, more or less correctly. Even if he wasn't feeling guilty about kicking Ezra off the ranch, and even if Ezra hadn't been family, he would have a few choice words to deliver to Moore. Men didn't fight like Moore had.

"Now, where was I?" Buck asked, knowing full well where he was in his tale.

"You were about to explain Josiah's new name," Vin helpfully supplied after making sure Josiah had nothing near him with which to throw.

"Thanks," Buck turned wide, seemingly amazed, eyes on Ezra and leaning forward, whispered, "Did you know our oldest brother, the one with all those letters after his name, meaning he knows how to deal with people, doesn't like talking. He prefers head-smashing. He got downright biblical on us, quoting scripture and everything.",

"Sounded just like a Fire and Brimstone Preacher all wound up on Sunday morning," Vin agreed.

"You know, they are supposed to be our elder brothers and the voices of reason around here, and we had to practically sit on them a couple of times to prevent them just taking off and handling our little problem all on their own," Buck explained to Ezra's increasingly perplexed expression.

Chris's attitude hadn't been a surprise to anyone who knew him. Buck wished he could say Josiah's attitude had been, but there was something dark and dangerous lurking in Josiah's eyes, and every day Ezra worked on turning his lungs inside out, the darkness grew closer to the surface. Most people would miss seeing it and underestimate the danger. Years of dealing with Chris clued him in, and he hadn't been surprised when Josiah began detailing his plans for Moore.

"Buck's right." JD leaned towards Ezra and in a mock whisper added, "Don't mess with them. They had some real evil ideas."

"So, as I was saying," Buck took over the telling. "We managed to convince the two of them, we could take care of Moore without resorting to the sort of things which would get us thrown in the slammer. We would still be sitting on our asses, getting the details of a plan down, if a certain Mr. Tommy Botello hadn't helped. He --"

"Botello? Tommy Botello out of Las Vegas?" Ezra interrupted. As though there were more than one Botello.

"You know him?" Chris asked, curious as to the reason Ezra paled.

"In my profession? Of course, Ah know him."

"Does he know you?" Chris persisted. He wanted to know what it was that had Ezra so bothered.

"Ah suppose he would. A man like him knows everybody." But why would he help? What was this help going to cost him?

"Yeah," Chris said, not buying a bit of it, but unwilling to make Ezra reveal his secrets. When he and Vin talked to Botello, he thought Botello's willingness to help had been due to their father, but now he wondered if it had been Ezra that Botello wanted to help. Whatever Botello's motives were for getting involved, Ezra didn't look happy.

"And what did Mr. Botello do to help?" Ezra asked Buck.

"Quite a lot actually," Buck answered. "It seems our Mr. Moore was in dire need of a reliable detective, and Botello put him in touch with the up-and-coming super sleuth, Vin Tanner. Guess what his job is."

“To find me,” Ezra answered. Good Lord, what did Botello want in return for his help? He certainly wasn’t helping Maude Standish’s son out of the goodness of his heart. There was bound to be a catch. And what were they thinking, letting Vin meet with Moore? Sure, it was brilliant, in a way, letting Vin go in undercover as himself, but if Moore found out... “He’ll come after you. He finds out you played him for a fool, and he’ll come after you.”

“I wasn’t born yesterday, Ezra. He doesn’t know anythin’ about me I don’t want him to know,” Vin reassured Ezra, thinking maybe Ezra needed something thrown at him for even suggesting he did not know what he was doing. “And after we finish with him, he’ll be too busy to worry about me.” Vin grinned and settled back to hear Buck’s telling of what they had done.

