



# Sunday

Rooting Out Evil  
Part 3 of the Sven Brothers Saga



“What are you doing up? It’s” Ashley glanced at the alarm clock on the nightstand on her husband’s side of the bed. “Not even 4:30. Come back to bed.”

“I can’t sleep.” Garret did not turn to look at his wife; his eyes remained locked on the mountain – the mountain from which Junior’s body had been recovered, the mountain from which he and Jason had thrown it.

Ashley slipped out from the covers and grabbed her robe as she went to comfort her husband. Wrapping her arms around him, she whispered, “You have to let it go.”

“I can’t.”

“You have to. This is eating you up, and you have to let it go. If he were here to talk, he would say the same thing.”

“No, Ash, I don’t think he would.”

“Sure, he would. If the roles were reversed and if you had been the one Father Marks killed, he would have done the same as you and Jase. He would have protected the family.”

“You’re wrong, Ashley.” He turned away from the mountain and looked at his wife. She had supported what he and Jason had done. At the time, he had been grateful for her resolve in protecting their family from what his father had done, but now it bothered him. He wasn’t sure how he had wanted her to act, but her willingness to help keep the lie was one of the things that kept him up at night.

“Junior would have picked up the phone and called the police. He would have let the chips fall where they may. If Pa was found guilty of murder, he would have expected him to deal with the consequences.”

“The family would have been destroyed. Our reputations would never recover.”

"You are right, but if that is what I had done, maybe I could sleep at night. Maybe Ma wouldn't be studying every little crook and cranny as though a spot in the corner would tell her what happened. She would not look at me and see a liar."

"Don't talk that way. Garrett, you are a good man."

"I once was a good man. Now, I am little more than a man who is well-versed in the art of lying. I lied to Chris, you know, when he called. I told him Ma had gone to a church meeting in Carson City and Dad was asleep. I have no clue where Ma is. Her disappearance is just like she used to do. I have dealt with her doing this at random times throughout my life; I could cope with her being gone because there is a pattern, a history, and I know what to expect. But where is Pa? Is he with her? I honestly don't know."

"What I do know is that she never took Pa with her when she needed to get away for a couple of days. It was her time alone to get over being mad at us and to remember that she loved us. She never said where she had been or what she had done. I never asked. I was just relieved she was home and in a good mood. I doubt Pa ever asked her. After all, he had his own set of secrets. If Pa is with her, why didn't she say something? The least Ma could have done was leave a note and tell us that Pa is with her."

"Garrett, honey, I didn't know why she left or why she didn't leave a note, but I am sure he is with her."

"I am not. He has Alzheimer's. He could have just wandered off. It gets cold, and if he is wandering around, lost, he could be hurt."

"I am sure he is with Mother Marks."

Garret pulled away from his wife, his voice turning sharp. "You don't understand. I lied to Chris. I told him Pa was sleeping, and if Ma comes back in the morning and Pa is not with her, I will have to call the sheriff and ask for a search party to help me look for him. It will come out that I lied about where he was, and when it does, Chris will wonder what other lies I have told. He'll figure out about Junior."

"You didn't kill Junior; Chris will understand that you were only trying to keep your father from having to go to trial for murder."

"That is just it, Ashley. The more I replay that morning in my head, the less convinced I am that Pa hit him."

"Garrett, there is no one else who could have done it. Your father is not thinking like he should. He gets annoyed when he can't remember something he is trying to say. You remember, he was trying to tie Erin's shoelaces; he got so upset when he couldn't remember how. He may have gotten upset with something Junior said."

"What did he do when he couldn't remember how to tie Erin's shoes. He was mad at himself, cussed a bit, and then picked her up and said, 'Erin, I am sorry. I don't remember how. You'll have to ask your brother. He was upset, and he felt humiliated, but he did not hit her.'"

"Of course, he didn't. Erin is his granddaughter."

"Junior was his son."

Garret walked over and picked up the boots he had peeled off the night before. "It will be light soon. I am going to get Jason. We will get a couple of horses saddled up and start looking for Pa like we should have done yesterday. If we find him and he is OK, we will bring him home. If he is with Ma, it is still a salvageable lie. If we don't find him or if we find him hurt or dead, everything will unravel. If it does fall apart, and it looks like I am going to jail, I want you to divorce me and take the children to a place where they don't have to grow up knowing what I have done."

"I love you, Garrett. I won't abandon you."

"Sell the Mountain's Edge, and, if you are so inclined, take Ma with you and disappear. Promise me."



Ashley looked in his face, and seeing his need for her to do as he asked, said, "I promise."

"I don't understand why you insisted on us meeting so very early," Maude spoke from her bedroom as she dressed.

"We need to talk."

"That sounds ominous."

Ezra didn't reply. He would wait until she was dressed and he could talk with her face-to-face. He had spent too much of the night planning what he would say and would not shout through closed

doors to say it. He needed to see her face so he could judge her reaction. She needed to see his face to see the seriousness with which he spoke. He turned towards the bedroom door as she opened it and stepped into the living room.

"So, what do you think?" Maude slowly turned around to show him her new outfit, "It's a little number by Carolina Herrera."

"The red suits you, but it's too short for a woman of your age."

"Nonsense, my legs are my best feature and deserve to be seen. Are you ready?" Her dress was too flashy for breakfast, but it was new, flattering, and sure to attract attention at any restaurant her son picked.

"I know you are wearing something new and desperately want to show it off, even if the only people who will see you in it are strangers who you will never see again, but I have already ordered room service."

"I think you are acting paranoid. The madman who did that to my things is more than likely long gone."

"You were right. It wasn't a man who killed my mother, but a woman. However, she is not the reason we are eating in. We need to talk, and Ah would prefer to do so in private."

"Ezra"

"No, don't talk. Ah need you to listen to me. Ah have been up all night, thinking, after Ah spent several hours playing blackjack. Ah won enough to keep you living in style for at least six months, maybe longer if you don't fritter it away. When we finish our talk, you will pack your things in the new luggage Mr. Botello bought for you. Then, Ah will take you to the airport, where you will find a ticket waiting for you. You will fly first class to Charleston. You have two choices at that point. You may choose to fly directly to New York, or you can rent a car and drive to our little whistlestop of a town and visit the graves of your sisters as you told Chris you would."

"Now, listen here, Ezra. You will not tell me what to do."

Ezra kept on speaking as though he had not heard her protest. Long years of dealing with her had taught him not to acknowledge her protests; she would focus on winning the argument and not on his words. "Ah don't care which option you choose, but the one thing you will not do is show your face in Four Corners. You will not even return to Nevada. For the next six months, you will act as though nothing exists west of the Mississippi. At the end of six months, I will be in touch with you. If you are safe, I will tell you, but even if the woman has been found and apprehended, you will not come to Four Corners. You will not contact any of my brothers or anyone you might believe to be an associate of theirs. Also, you will not contact me. I free you from the burden of pretending to be my mother."

Maude sank into the chair opposite the man she called her son. The idea that he would say words such as those angered her. "You have no right to say those things. I might not be your biological mother, but I raised you."

"No, you did not. You gave me to other people to raise. That is, until I grew old enough to be your useful tool in your get-rich schemes."

"I taught-

"Do not tell me you taught me a useful skill. You didn't. You taught me how to lie, cheat, and steal. I realized last night, after I returned to my room, that the incident in your room, under other circumstances, could have been a plan you orchestrated to get a hotel to buy you new things and to give you free, luxurious lodging."

"Are you accusing me of staging what was done in my suite?" She knew she sounded shrill, but didn't care.

"No, I was fairly sure you did not, but Ah also know that if you had thought of it, you are very capable of committing a similar act of vandalism. If you believed management would have reimbursed you, you could have been responsible for the absolute destruction of your room and belongings. Ah am so sure that you could have done it, that at two o'clock this morning, Ah talked to the lady who runs Room Service. Ah needed to know the time you were brought your lunch order and the time Room Service removed the remnants of your lunch. There was no time for you to have created the chaos."

"So, what, exactly, are you accusing me of?"

"Ah am accusing you of being the type of person who Ah could so easily envision having done such a thing."

"I have never done anything like that."

"No, you haven't. You have done much worse. Yesterday, you talked about the men in your life, how they were glad to have known you. But what about their families? How many families did you

destroy? You may have targeted single men, but if a married man appeared, you didn't turn him away. Putting the number of families you destroyed aside, Ah have to ask: How many men have you coerced into handing you the money and othuh assets they worked so hard for? While Ah do not know the number of men you obtained the money from to fund your lifestyle, Ah can name more than a handful Ah helped you swindle.

He shook his head no when he saw that she was ready to protest and continued, "When you realized Ah had a certain talent for forging your signature on mah report cards, you encouraged me to develop that questionable talent. So, Ah did. Ah signed all sorts of documents for you, which allowed you to enrich your bank accounts. Chris told me, after Ah forged his signature, that Ah must have done it before. Ah will nevuh forget the look of scorn on his face when he realized Ah had stolen from the family. Ironically, Ah stole the money so Ah could save you from Timothy Moore's anger. Ah stole what Ah needed to get invited to a game in which Ah could win an amount large enough to appease Moore. Ah did not even consider what the loss of the money would mean to the running of the ranch. If mah theft had not been discovered, and the money returned to the account, Ah could have been responsible for crippling the ranch."

"I never asked you to take that money. I would have dealt with Timmy."

"No, you didn't directly ask me to steal, but you assumed Ah would take care of Moore, and no, you would not have been able to deal with him. Do you have any idea how badly he hurt me? Ah had a catheter running from mah neck into a vein near mah heart so Ah could administer the powerful antibiotics Ah needed to fight the infection mah beating caused. Ah wore the PIC line for three weeks... Some of mah bruises have yet to fade. If Moore had beaten you as badly as he did me, Ah doubt you would have survived.

"I didn't know." She tried reaching for his hand, but he pulled it away.

You didn't want to know."

"Ezra, I know I have not been a good mother. But-"

"Ah am not faulting you for mah beating. Ah am not faulting you for mah choice of stealing from mah brothuhs. Ah am not faulting you for your lack of concern for mah well-being. If anyone is at fault, it is me; Ah trained you well. You make a mess, and Ah willingly jump in to clean up behind you so you don't need to get your hands dirty... Ah have willingly taken the blame for your misdeeds. Case in point, when one of your forgeries was revealed as a fake, because your forgeries are not as believable as mine, Ah willingly confessed to the crime. You told me that since Ah was a minor, nothing would happen to me. You told me the worst they would do to me would be try me as a juvenile and that if Ah was convicted, Ah would only serve a few months. It was mah first offense, at least, the first one Ah went to court for, but they tried me as an adult. Ah spent six months in prison before mah court-appointed lawyer managed to get me released on a technicality. All the while, you were living in Monte Carlo, while the gossip implicating you in the forgery died down."

"Would you rather that I were sent to prison? The prosecutor was running as a tough-on-crime candidate. If I had been charged with that forgery, he would have done everything in his power to make sure that I would still be sitting in a cell. Is that what you want?" She paused, waiting for him to answer. When he didn't, she asked, "Where is all this anger coming from?"

Ezra sighed, searching for the words he needed to make her understand, "It is rathuh pathetic if you think about it. Ah did so many things trying to get your attention, if not your love. Ah wanted a mother who loved me. Someone who cared more about me than she did about how she looked in the latest fashions from Dior or Chanel or Gucci, or whoever."

"I never went to college. I have no marketable skills. The only thing I have is my looks. Men want to be seen with me, and they were willing to pay my price."

"JD's mothuh cleaned houses."

"Well, whoopee do. She was a saint."

"She didn't steal. She didn't sell herself."

"Sell myself?" Realizing she was dangerously close to yelling, Maude took a deep breath, lowered her voice, and asked? "Are you calling me a whore?"

"You don't have to stand on a street corner to be a whore. You just said men paid your price. Is that not being a whore? Ah am merely giving your self-description its propuh name."

"I do not steal, and I am not a whore. The men I have been with didn't care if I ended up with some of their money; they gave me things not to just show off their wealth, but to make me happy. They were happy, and I was happy. When we parted ways, we remained friends. Those men understood that our time together had run its course, and it was time for me to move on."

"They had to stay friendly or admit to their friends that the only reason you were with them was their money. The fact that you did not love them or care about them must have hurt. Ah am truly surprised that Moore was the first man to want revenge on you."

"Tell me, Ezra, how else would I get the money we need to live?"

"The money you needed to live, to support your lifestyle."

Maude didn't immediately respond. When she did, it was with quiet, barely controlled anger. "I sacrificed my dreams for you."

"Ah know. You were placed in the unenviable position of having to claim me as your own."

"I didn't mean it that way. I took you to protect you from the monster who killed Eddie."

"Ah know you did what mah mothuh wanted and you did what you thought best, and maybe it was. We will never know what would have happened if you had called the police, or even if you had just left me to be found when her body was discovered. Maybe, mah fathuh would have raised me... You did what you thought was appropriate at the time. Ah understand. Ah really do understand. Ah do not fault your actions for taking me."

Ezra marveled at how calm he sounded in the face of her anger. "Ah sat on the balcony last night, trying to remember if you have ever once, in mah life, said you loved me. Ah could not think of one single instance. The closest you have evuh come to telling me that is to say that Ah was a clever boy. Ah have spent mah entire life wondering why mah fathuh didn't want me, but Ah have also spent mah life asking mahself why mah mothuh couldn't tolerate being in mah presence. Ah have always thought Ah had a defect which made me unlovable, but last night, it hit me. The only person you ever loved, besides yourself, was your sistuh. You took me from that motel room because your sistuh asked you to. It wasn't because you were concerned for mah safety. It is equally obvious that you didn't take me because you loved me. Your sistuh probably thought you would love me, if not immediately, that you would eventually grow to love me."

"I do love you."

"Those are empty words. Actions speak louder than words. Tell me, did you evuh keep any of the pictures Ah drew for you when you were away? Or did you throw them in the garbage the minute Ah left the room?... You don't have to answer that; Ah know what you did."

"Do you know that Ah developed mah talent for forgery when Ah began forging your signature on mah report cards and field trip permission forms so no one would know how little time you were home. They wouldn't suspect that even when you were home, you didn't spend time helping me with mah homework...or tucking me in at night... or simply sitting beside me while Ah entertained mahself watching TV. Ah, did not want anyone to know that you spent your time looking for another man to take advantage of and once you had a man targeted, your time was devoted to finding someone else to watch me while you," Ezra made a half hearted attempt to grin as he said the next words, but failed, "worked on accumulating, and show off wealth."

"Do you realize the only times you talked to me were the times we spent playing cards, or when you drove me to where Ah would be staying while you went off... somewhere, anywhere Ah wasn't. We talked in the car, but our talks involved little more than the name of whoever you were leaving me with, vague details about where you were going, and the adventures you would be having. You would end those little talks by instructing me to be good. Ah have to ask: did you evuh wonder what Ah was doing, how Ah was doing when you left me in the homes of strangers?"

"They were not strangers."

"They were to me, and you are focusing on the wrong things." He glanced at the decorative wall clock he could see over Maude's right shoulder. Their breakfast would be arriving soon. He didn't need to air their dirty laundry in front of anyone, so he needed to wrap things up.

"All of mah life Ah have done whatever you needed me to do. Ah did things that Ah knew were questionable in the hopes you would notice me and treat me like your son and not an inconvenience you were saddled with."

Maude scowled at him. Her lips thinned in anger as she searched for the magic words that she could utter and return him to the obedient son who did not accuse her of not loving him. Licking her lips, she retorted, "I never wanted children, but I did the best I could. I might not exhibit signs of my love like you believe they should be shown, but I do love you. I want to be part of your life."

"Be that as it may, Ah want you, Ah need you to disappear for two reasons. The first is for your safety, and the second is so Ah can have a chance to prove that Ah am bettuh than a man who steals from family. Ah am not sure Ah am strong enough to be the kind of man mah brothuhs aruh, but Ah

want to be. Ah do know Ah cannot be that man if you are around wanting mah help in one of your schemes.

"Let me live without you in mah life, for six months. Don't get into trouble because Ah will not be available to help. Ah will reach out to you and let you know if you aruh safe and inform you of the results of mah little experiment."

"You won't know where I am. You won't know how to get in touch with me," Maude protested.

"Ah know you. Ah know the places you go. Additionally, Ah have your phone number."

"I might get a different phone."

"Undoubtedly, you will purchase a new one as soon as the latest update is available, but you will keep the same number."

"You might lose my number."

"You forget Ah have an eidetic memory." He got up to answer the door, allowing the man bringing up the brunch to enter. "Ah could not forget it, even if Ah tried."



Josiah, eschewing the room's desk, sat in one of the two upholstered lounge chairs in the room. It was more comfortable than the desk. Typically, when he had an office, he would write his notes after each session in his chair, with his legs crossed and his leather notebook propped up on his knee. He always found that he recalled more about the session when he could look over to the seat his client had just vacated and visualize the client's actions, mannerisms, and the words used. He reserved the use of his desk to transcribe his handwritten notes onto the computer at the end of the day.

He had not thought to bring his notebook, but fortunately, he had located a notepad in a desk drawer. He didn't believe any of them would forget any of Maude's story, but habit made him start with it. He listed the devastating destruction of Maude's belongings and of her suite. He detailed Waldo's changing appearance and included their speculation of the tools she used, asking himself if she had bought them locally or had brought them with her. Under most circumstances, he would have ended his summary with the call exonerating Curtis and implicating Amy. He couldn't put his thoughts on paper just yet. Something was nagging at him, and he would ponder on it while his roommate, Orrin, got ready for their gun shopping excursion.

Leaning back in the chair, he threw his arm over his eyes, blocking out the lamps' light. He needed to think. He sat up a minute later; he had it. Curtis had blamed Amy for his sister's wreck. From what Orrin had said, everyone knew that Cassie drove too fast. A person who drove too fast on the mountain roads was bound to get into an accident sooner or later. But Amy had blamed herself for not stopping her because she was in one of her moods. What did she mean? Had they ever experienced violent outbursts? More to the point, since Cassie was dead, did Curtis also have those mood swings?

Many people with mood disorders suffer from being bipolar disorder. Had she been bipolar? And if she had been, was Curtis also bipolar? Twin studies indicated that it was a real possibility. He would have to look through his psychology journals to be sure of the exact percent, but he recently read a paper stating that the changing of seasons triggered about 25% of those with Bipolar Disorder.

If Cassie suffered from seasonal affective disorder, the changing weather could be the reason she was in one of her moods. If Curtis also had Bipolar Disorder, chances were good that he, too, was impacted by the changing seasons. If he were, it could be that memories of his sister, combined with the coming of spring, were enough to set him off. That theory would only hold water if he blamed Landon for his sister's death and wanted to punish him. The problem was that to cast him as the culprit also meant he had an accomplice.

Before he shared his theory with anyone else, he needed to answer the question of whether his need to place the blame on Curtis was being unduly influenced by his own desire to pay back the men whose vicious attack on his sister, taking away her sweet, trusting nature, and replacing it with a wounded woman who could not recover.

Josiah's moment of self-reflection was interrupted by the ringing of the hotel phone on the nightstand between his and Orrin's beds. He glanced at the clock even as he jumped up to answer it. They were not due to meet for another twenty minutes; something must have happened.

"Hello?" His salutation was met with silence. He tried it again, "Hello?" Silence. Recognizing the scare tactic, he held his index finger to his lips when Orrin came out of the bathroom, obviously concerned. Two could play the game, and he waited for her to say something. He wished there was a way to put the phone on speaker so Orrin could hear her voice, but he did not want her to hear any sounds except for his breathing, just as he could hear hers.

He checked his watch. Five seconds of silence, fifteen seconds, forty-five seconds. He waited. It was difficult not to repeat hello or demand that she answer him, but he had dealt with difficult people before, and he was stronger, more in control of himself than she was of herself.

One minute and seven seconds later, she hung up, and all he heard was the dial tone.

"It was Waldo." He said, affirming the supposition Orrin had made when Josiah raised his finger to his lips in the universal gesture for quiet.

"Why did she call us?"

"Not us, you. This is your room. She was calling you. The better question is, how did she know what room to ask for? I might ask her that when she calls back."

"You think she will call back?"

"I didn't talk. I didn't play her game. She is bound to be disappointed. She will call back. We need to get ready. Take your cell phone into the bathroom and remember to talk quietly. I doubt that she can hear you talking on the phone through the bathroom doors, but we do not want to alert her that there are two of us in the room. Call Chris's room; he has his phone turned off. Let him know we need to find out who is using a hotel phone. She is probably using one of the phones in the lobby." Before he could give any more instructions, the phone rang again. He let it ring twice before answering it, "Hello?" and was met with silence.

He didn't respond to the silence; instead, he listened to the woman's breathing. Each breath she took was pronounced; she was purposefully using it to replace words and to make sure that he knew she was there. As the seconds ticked by, the sounds of her breathing grew more distinct. Counting the seconds between each breath, Josiah decided Waldo was fighting to stay calm. Her breaths were coming closer together, indicating that his continued silence was unnerving her.

Josiah glanced at his watch when he heard the click followed by the dial tone. She had been on the phone for one minute and forty-five seconds. "She didn't know how to counter my silence. Hopefully, she will call back and talk. Or, she may explode and do something violent."

"Chris said he'd call Lev. If she acts out, hopefully someone on his security team will catch her before anyone is hurt."

Not daring to move, Josiah glanced at Orrin. "Be ready when she calls. I'll hold the phone so you can hear her too."

Orrin sat next to Josiah and opened the controls on his phone. "I'll listen, but let's try recording her voice. Evie may recognize it if I don't."

They waited for her to call once more. Five minutes passed, and Orrin admitted, "I don't think she will call."

The two men waited, staring at the phone, willing it to ring. They both startled when it finally did. Waiting until Orrin had his phone ready, Josiah let it ring three times before answering.

"Hello?"

"You have gotten old, Orrin." Josiah looked at Orrin in shock. It wasn't a woman's voice they heard, but a man's.

"People get older or they die."

"Who killed Landon?"

"I thought you did."

"Landon belonged to me."

"Landon was my friend."

"Who killed Landon?" the voice repeated. Josiah noticed something about the question and glanced at Orrin, hoping he was hearing the same thing. "I thought you had killed him."

"Landon belonged to me. Who killed Landon?"

There was a minute of almost silence, then "You have gotten old, Orrin." The phone went dead.

Orrin turned the voice recorder on his phone off and tossed it on his bed. "The same words, the same rhythm, and the tone, she was using a device of some sort to read what she had written. We are not going to get anything from that."

"The others will be waiting for us; we had better get moving." Orrin picked up his key card and slipped it into his wallet, preparing to leave, but when the phone rang, he snatched his phone off the bed and pulled up the recorder.

"Ready?" Josiah asked. When Orrin nodded yes, he picked up the receiver and answered, "Hello?"

"Who killed Landon?"

"I don't know."



"I don't believe you. I am sure you were there. Did you kill him?"

"I did not kill him. He had a heart attack."

"You are lying to me. I know he did not die of a heart attack."

"How do you know?"

"Landon would never die of something so mundane as a heart attack." There was another unnatural pause; Josiah assumed she was typing her response, so he waited. He wanted to keep her on the phone long enough for Lev and his team to find her.

"I will give you that lie, but no more. The next time I call you, I expect the truth, or I will take away the people you love, just as I did Landon."

"Threatening me won't work. I honestly do not know who killed Landon." Josiah said the first thing that came to mind. He prayed it was enough. There was a long pause. He didn't know what she was doing. He wasn't sure what she was doing, if she was typing a message into her device or playing her quiet game again. He didn't consider hanging up; if she had anything more to say, he had to allow her to say it.

"You have one week." She hung up.

"I am not sure what we learned." Josiah felt he had let Orrin down, but was not sure what else he could have said.



Last night, I became a sixty-something brunette with coal black eyes, carrying a purse filled with quarters. I kept feeding the slot machine I sat in front of, as I waited for the brothers to come out of an elevator and head into the casino. I was sure they would spend the night playing one game or another, as they let their brother (They had called him a gambler on more than one occasion, as I listened to them plan their family getaway.) lose his money.



From my vantage point, I counted the brothers as they entered the casino. Imagine my surprise when Orrin Travis strolled in with them. He walked right past me without looking my way. Not that I had expected him to recognize me; after all, it had been many years since he had seen me, and a few necessary visits to a surgeon had altered my appearance. However, it doesn't seem fair that even though he looked older, he hadn't changed much at all.

I knew when I spotted him that Orrin was somehow involved. Had he aided the fake Maude in hiding Maude's body and in stealing Landon's baby? If he had, the level at which he had betrayed Landon was beyond my ability to comprehend. If I could hear his voice, I would be able to hear if he had interfered with my plans for Landon. I decided then and there that I needed to find out what his room number was. I needed to talk with him.

Even though I made a point of not appearing to look for him, I did keep an eye on his whereabouts. I told myself that watching him with Landon's sons would do until the one I really wanted to see appeared: the woman calling herself Maude.

I needed to know who she was and how she had managed to hide Maude's body (which I meant for Landon to find) and then to disappear with his baby.

Not knowing what happened to Maude and to his son tormented Landon, but it wasn't the torment I planned for him. That woman either hated Landon as much as I did, or she did not understand the pain of losing a child, of not knowing if the child was getting fed properly, had warm clothes when the winter winds blew, or even got hugged when he skinned his knees. I knew that pain. I once had a child, but I lost it.

I used to pray that Landon would again look at me the way he once had. Then, I prayed he could tell me where my child was. Then, I prayed to find ways to make him as lonely and miserable as I was, but now he was gone, and I find myself praying that I discover who killed him. Perhaps, if I could find the killer, he could tell me where my baby was.

Stop! I will not go there. I must stay focused.

When I realized the fake Maude was not coming to the casino, I changed my mission. I chose to put aside my desire to understand how she had managed to take Maude's identity and why she had stolen the baby, but that could wait. I would find out where she lived and show up on her doorstep to



ask my questions at a later time. For now, learning what Orrin knew about who caused Landon's death had become my new priority.

I easily located Orrin standing with the brothers on the casino floor and changed to another slot machine so I could covertly observe his movements. Landon's sons were gathered around the one they had named the gambler and were cheering him on. Orrin stood in their midst, chatting with them as though the day they had ended was just another day. What I had done in the fake Maude's suite should have frightened them, but last night, I had not seen fear in any of their faces. I had not destroyed the Pretender's room to frighten Landon's sons. I merely wanted her to realize how easily she could have been the one I ruined.

I would like to be able to say that I had intended to only shred some of her beautiful clothes and write something on the bathroom mirror, but I have to be honest with myself, I carried the tools I needed to destroy the room. As I walked down the hall towards her room, I promised not to lose control, but I could feel my rage building as I walked down the hall with its beautiful wallpaper and opulent fixtures. How is it that she is living like a princess and not me?

My father called me his little princess, but I committed one senseless act, and he quit calling me that. My mother never called me a princess, but she did promise me that I was destined to have a great life, and even if I never got the castle my dad promised me, I would have a grand house. I was a good girl until the one time I wasn't, and they removed their blessings.

Those thoughts were tumbling around in my head when I entered the suite, and I had lost control. I kept hearing them say: How could you? Why did you? How are we going to explain this? And I remember crying as I tried to explain to them that I didn't mean for it to happen. I wanted everything to return to the way it had once been. I begged their forgiveness, and my mother just sat there crying. Even Dad was crying. In that moment, I quit being their golden child and became their cross to bear. They pretended otherwise, but while they pretended to support me, it was obvious things had irreparably changed. They told me that they were there for me, but the truth is that they abandoned me and couldn't wait until I disappeared from their lives. I thought Landon would step up and keep them from leaving me, but he hadn't. Landon abandoned me, just as they had. The difference between Landon and my parents was that I removed them from my life before they had the chance to remove me from theirs. I wonder if Landon realized what I had done, and if that is why he became so distant?

I only have one, no two people in my life whom I trust, but I have never confided in them, my desire to keep Landon as lonely as I am. I have never told them about my baby, a son, I think, who is lost. They would not understand and would try to convince me otherwise.

In that room, in that moment, they did not matter. My rage at the unfairness of life consumed me. When I calmed, I was a little shocked, but mostly pleased when I went from room to room, seeing the destruction I had caused. I expected the fake Maude to be devastated and check out, probably go home, taking her pretend son with her. I expected Landon's other sons to be shocked and worried, maybe a little frightened. I did not expect them to be whooping it up, encouraging Maude's son as he won hand after hand.

I must admit to myself that I was truly impressed by Landon's sons. Instead of cowering in their rooms, they were seemingly enjoying themselves in the casino as they cheered for their brother. They were, and I must include Orrin here, in a good mood as they celebrated each time the gambler won. I would have thought they would have been shaken, but if they were, their faces did not show it.

Putting one quarter after another into the machine, I made a plan as I watched them laugh.

When Orrin and two of the brothers left the gaming tables, I, several steps behind, followed. There were so many people milling about that they did not notice me. I let them get settled at a table before I followed them into the bar. They took seats at a table in the corner of the room, and I took a seat at the bar, near the cash register. While they chatted about who knows what, I became a talkative tourist and engaged the cashier in small talk about playing the slot machines for hours and not winning a dime. If she is ever asked to describe me, she will say that I was a friendly woman with curly back hair and too much makeup, trying to figure out how to strike it rich in a casino. I made it a point to marvel at how she was able to keep everyone's orders straight and remember how much they owed. She had laughed when I said that and confessed that most people asked to charge their drinks to their rooms. I only got a glimpse of the bill she held up to show me the room number written down, and as luck would have it, Orrin's signature at the bottom. I chatted a few more minutes, paid for my rum and Coke, and left.

This morning, I entered the casino as a slightly younger Brunette with shoulder-length hair. I



walked into the resort as though I owned the place. I got on the elevator and waited. When the elevator stopped at the fifth floor, a woman with a toddler on her hip and holding the hands of a curly-haired four or five-year-old entered the elevator. The boy, in the few minutes we were together, complained nonstop about having left his iPad in the room. The woman tried explaining that he would be too busy in the pool to play on the tablet. She looked at me and said that if their father didn't hang up the phone and get down to the pool to help her, she would shoot him. I chuckled and mentioned that she'd end up raising her kids on her own. She smiled, ruffled his hair, and assured him she'd set a twenty-minute timer on her phone; if he wasn't

enjoying himself by then, they'd return to the room so he could play on his tablet until lunch.

I got off on the next floor and used the stairs to return to the fifth floor. Luck was with me; a man in swimming trunks and a T-shirt exited his room and headed for the elevators. Waiting until the elevator door's closed and it began its descent, I entered his room. I had to step over several toy trucks, but I reached the desk. Beside the phone was the laptop open to a spreadsheet he had been working on. I minimized the spreadsheet and opened a new Word document.

I didn't want to be caught in their room, so I set the timer on my phone for ten minutes, reached for the phone, and called Orrin's room.



Ezra lifted his hand, prepared to wave goodbye to his mother. He had done this many times before: waiting for her to turn and wave goodbye before she got into her car, taxi, or disappeared behind the security check before she boarded her plane. She always turned. She always waved, usually with a promise that she'd be back soon. Today, she did not turn; she kept her back to him, dismissing him.

She was fuming. The only reason she had been remotely pleasant during the car ride to the airport was due to JD had volunteered to drive them, and she did not want to air her grievances with an audience present.

Ezra dropped his hand when it became clear that she was not going to say goodbye. He turned to his brother and said, "Thank you."

JD did Ezra the courtesy of not pretending to know why he was being thanked. From the moment Ezra and Maudy had entered the lobby with a bellhop pushing a trolley piled high with newly purchased luggage filled with equally new clothes, the tension between the two was apparent. One look at Ezra's face was enough to tell him that the smiles on both Ezra's and Maude's faces were lies. They told the rest of the story that the luggage had begun; Ezra was sending Maude away, and she was not happy about it.

When Ezra walked over to where Chris, Josiah, and Lev were talking, JD grabbed Buck by the arm and said, "I am going with Ezra when he takes Maude to the airport. I won't be any help choosing a gun or a rifle. Can you get me what you think I need?"

"Sure thing, kid." Even with a smile plastered on her face, Maude looked ready to spit nails. "You go and referee."

He hadn't had to tell them to go to their corners, but that was because neither of them was talking to the other. If he hadn't asked the inane, touristy questions about everything that could remotely be considered a landmark, and if Maude hadn't felt compelled to give better, more complete answers than Ezra, they would have ridden in silence.

When they had reached the airport, Ezra had led the way to the ticket counter and deposited Maude's several pies of luggage on the scales for an agent to weigh and tag before sending them on their way to the waiting aircraft. He paid the extra luggage fee without a fuss and without saying a word to Maude, or she to him. They had walked side by side in stony silence, nodding and smiling pleasantly as they passed. No casual observer would notice the tension between the two, but he wasn't the casual observer; he had been studying his brother for months now, and while he didn't have a PhD behind his name like Josiah did, he could write an extensive paper on Ezra and his moods.

"Part of me expects her not to get on the plane. Ah am standing here waiting for her to come back through those doors to tell me Ah can not send her anywhere. Ah expect she is waiting to board, trying to decide the merits of getting off to prove Ah can not tell her what to do versus staying on the plane with her new clothes. Ah think it could eithuh way. Do you mind if we wait a few more minutes?"

“We can wait, but doesn’t she understand that you are sending her away for her own safety?”

Ezra made a face. “Ah must admit that Ah told her that while explaining to her the need for her to leave, Ah said a few things that may have hurt her feelings.”

JD didn’t ask what those things were. He had felt really sorry for her after hearing how her sister had been murdered, but feeling sorry for her did not erase all of the many complaints he had about the way she had treated Ezra. He knew that Ezra had only touched the surface of what his childhood had been like when they had talked at Miss Nettie’s farm. Ezra’s list was bound to be longer than his.

JD nodded his head, agreeing to wait until the plane took off.



“So this is another picture of Waldo,” Tommy spoke loud enough for Lou and Lev both to hear, but he was talking to himself. He arranged the pictures side by side, starting with the picture of the old woman in the lobby and ending with the most recent one of her breaking into a room. “Your young man couldn’t figure out what she looks like?” He asked it as a question, but held out no hope that the Brat would be able to do so. “She looks so different in each picture,” he murmured. Finally, he took his eyes off the pictures and looked at the men sitting across from him. “How did she figure out which room belonged to Travis. For that matter, how did she even find out he was here?”

“The best we can figure out is that she spotted him in the casino when they followed Ezra to watch him play,” Lou answered. He kept to himself his thought that the brothers and Travis should have stayed in their rooms.

“But, we are sure these two women are different versions of Waldo?”

“Yes, sir. We have a good shot of her face when she was in the bar, and facial recognition matched her to the other pictures. That last picture shows her entering the room from which the calls came. Facial recognition confirms a 50 percent match to the woman who pulled the fire alarm. Additionally, the timestamp on the picture shows she entered the room shortly before the calls started and left after the calls stopped. We were able to trace her to the lobby, but she merged into a large wedding party getting into cars outside.”

“We don’t have anything we can give Landon’s boys, do we?”

“Other than providing them with guns, nothing concrete. There is one thing, but I don’t know how accurate the information is or how they can use it, but the photos were on the conference room screen when Judith Meyers came in to see what we were doing. She said the woman at the bar appeared to be a woman who came to her clinic, back when she worked for Dr. Ben Winn a few years ago. He retired, but she is arranging a time when she and I can go see him in the morning. If he believes Waldo is the woman he performed surgery on, he might be able to give us a name and a picture of what she looked like before her surgery.”

“Good. Don

“Good. Don’t get their hopes up in case Dr. Winn does not pan out. With luck, maybe, you will have something to give them by Thursday.” He gathered the pictures and handed them to Lev. “Make sure everyone sees these and has a way to easily pull them up on their workstations. She can’t have an unending supply of disguises. Give the Larabees several copies so they can share them with law enforcement.”

“Yes, sir.” Taking the pictures, Lev stood up and headed out of the room, but before he was able to close the door, he heard his boss ask Lou, “What are the police saying?”



Maude stared out the window, but she wasn’t seeing the cloud in the blue sky. She saw her son. Even though Eddie had given birth to him and despite his claim that she had let others raise him, he was her son. Why couldn’t he see that? There was no doubt in her mind that she should have been a better mother. She should have paid him more attention, but she loved him. Why couldn’t he see that?

She could feel her eyes fill with tears, and immediately stomped down on the emotions causing them. Careful not to smear her makeup, she took a tissue from her handbag and dabbed at her eyes. Satisfied she had her need to cry under control, she found her compact and refreshed the powder on her face, and applied a fresh coat of lipstick. When the steward stopped by to ask her if she’d like a drink, she smiled, thanked him, and declined. She knew that if she took one drink, she’d ask for another and then another. By the time the plane landed, she would be incapable of making anything close to a rational decision about her future. For that, she needed a clear head.

Trapped in a tin can, higher than she cared to think about, there was nothing she could do at the moment. She shivered, but her involuntary shiver was not caused by fear of flying, nor was it caused by the cool air blowing on her. She shivered because she had seen a future in which she was alone.

An attendant, having seen her shiver, brought her a blanket. She remembered to smile and thank him as she took the warm blanket and tucked it around herself. Cocooned in the blanket, she stared out the window at the empty skies. Was that the future waiting for her: empty?

She and Ezra had fought before, but he always apologized. He was just as frightened at the thought of being alone in the world as she was, and he always forgave her, no matter her crime. He had to. She was the only family he had, but now he had brothers. He was right, they were good men. They were men who would have his back. They saw him as family. During yesterday's, she guessed she could call it a meeting; they, each and every one of them, surreptitiously kept an eye on Ezra's reactions to the tale she told. He might not have consciously noticed, but she knew that deep inside his bones, he was aware of their concern and allowed it to keep him warm, and all she had was a blanket.

She knew her pride would get her into trouble one day, but she had never expected that she would allow it to keep her from saying goodbye to her son. There had been many times she had pushed Ezra away because his presence was inconvenient, but she always said goodbye. It was a ritual; they shared. She would go off into the unknown on some adventure, and he would stay behind, but they would wave at each other. She knew he would be watching her leave and waiting for her to turn, smile, and wave, but she had chosen not to participate in the ritual.

Their relationship was built on little rituals. The waving when she left, him running to greet her when she returned, her showing him her new clothes, shoes, and jewelry, and him oohing in appreciation, her telling him about Paris and London, and him listening, her holding up a new sweater which was too small for him, and him pretending it didn't matter. Him trying on a new shirt, and her pretending not to notice the bruises. Her stories, her adventures, her fun, and his acceptance that he was not meant to share. She tried to protest and say that she had taken him with her when he got older, but he saw himself as a tool in her efforts to add to her bank accounts. He was right. She did use him.

She fought the bile rising in her throat. She was Maude Standish, and Maude Standish did not ever get sick in public. She did not get sick when she had her botched abortion; she had declared her freedom. She did not get sick when she dumped her sister's body in a swamp; she did what she needed to hide the baby. She did not get sick when she learned of the fire that had taken the life of Mama Jones, who had been an old woman when she was young; she mourned the loss of a woman who had been a friend to her and to her son. She didn't get sick when she saw bruises on her son's back; she got even.

She would not get sick now, as she examined her conscience and saw how much of her life had been devoted to making herself happy and how little of it had been dedicated to giving her son a happy life. She deserved it if he chose to abandon her, but she would do everything in her power to become the mother he wanted and deserved. He might not believe it, and she definitely had not shown it, but she did love her son... Her son, not Eddie's.



"I've been thinkin'."

Lev turned to the man who had quietly walked up behind him. He had been aware of Tanner's presence, but had to admire the man's ability to move without making a sound. "I'm listening."

"My brothers and me have been talkin'. If Waldo can't or won't act against us. She is goin' to pick a new target. Judge Travis has been talking to his wife about keeping her, his daughter-in-law- law, Mary, and his grandson Ezra has moved Maude out of reach, we hope. With them out of reach, Waldo might target Mr. Botello, you, or the resort. Ya need to be careful."

"I appreciate your concern. We are keenly aware of the possibility and are taking steps to safeguard ourselves and the resort."

"Figure ya would. But we feel responsible for her targeting ya... When ya get our guns, give me a call, say somethin about bein' an old friend wantin' to catch up. I will meet you in Ely. Hopefully, ya can stay off Waldo's radar."

"Sounds good. I'll speak with a Texan twang. If Waldo is listenin', she won't recognize me." Lev replied with a very passible Texan drawl.

Vin laughed, "Got yerself a hat?"

"Yep. Sure do. Got well-worn boots, too. Ya won't recognize me."

“Thanks for filling it up,” Nathan told Ezra when his brother handed him the keys to the Cadillac and they stepped away from the car in case anyone was listening to them..

“It was the least Ah could do,” Ezra responded as he helped Nathan put his, Buck’s, and the judge’s luggage in the car’s trunk. “Chris wants us to meet in Tonopah at the gas station on the left at the third exit. He didn’t remember the name, but said Buck would know which one.”

“Are ya’ll planning on being ahead of us or behind?”

“Josiah and Vin have already taken off. Vin is letting Josiah drive, so if they run into Waldo, he can grab his rifle. They will pull off the highway to change a flat tire if it appears they are being followed. You pass them, there may be trouble ahead. They will follow you into the gas station. Vin knows which one Chris is talking about because he said he had planned to shoot Chris if he didn’t stop there, so he could use the facilities.”

“Sounds like Chris. He thinks that don’t drink and drive is talking about all beverages.”

“Buck and I were talking this morning. When we get close to Ely, we are going to peel off the highway and take backroads to Elko. I have Dad’s gun in the glove compartment. I’ll be ready if Waldo shows up.”

“Remembuh, she is in her sixties, and if you start shooting little, old ladies, you may find yourself on the wrong side of the law.”

“Ezra, I promise you, I am not the kind of man who jumps at shadows. But I will keep the judge and Buck safe.”

“You too.”

“I will keep myself safe, too.”

“Ah plan to hold you to your word.” Looking at the door to the garage, he added. “Buck and the judge will be here momentarily. As soon as they arrive, you all need to leave. As soon as they arrive, Ah will join Chris and JD at the valet stand where they are waiting for his truck to be brought around. We will be about ten minutes behind you.”

