



Finding a Lost Lamb

Hunting for a Lost Brother and Other Villains
Part 2 of The Seven Brothers Saga



Chris glared at the red light on his alarm clock, wishing the numbers were a little different. It didn't matter that it was four in the morning, and he hadn't gone to bed until after midnight. He told Vin they would leave at seven, and he needed more sleep. But he was awake and knew from countless sleepless nights that he would not fall back to sleep. It didn't matter, he told himself as he pulled on yesterday's clothes, if he missed some sleep. He'd catch up on the drive down to Vegas with Vin. Now, though, he needed to erase the memories of the dream that woke him, make sure Nathan was all right, and if he picked up a bottle of aspirin along the way, then maybe he could keep his headache under control.

Funny, he hadn't planned to drink quite so much last night. It had snuck up on him. He hoped he hadn't said anything mean or done anything stupid. He had vague memories of Buck helping him to bed. From countless similar experiences, he knew his brother made him take a couple of aspirin and drink a glass of water in the belief it would keep his head from falling off in the morning.

Buck was either right or he hadn't drunk too much. No, he had drunk too much. Either Buck was right, or he was getting mighty used to being drunk.

Walking out into the still-dark hall, he didn't bother switching on the light. He padded down the stairs using the moonlight streaming through the windows to guide him through the den and then the kitchen. He bypassed the stairs leading to the rooms he and Buck had claimed as kids and opened the door leading to Nathan and their father's rooms. The moonlight didn't light this hallway as it had the others, and he trailed his fingers along the inside wall, feeling his way down

the hall, raising his fingers away from the door to his father's room lest they tried to grab the doorknob and force him into the room. He wasn't ready to go in there, not with all the memories waiting to jump out at him. Reaching again for the wall when the danger of his father's room passed, he walked on to Nathan's room.

He opened the door a crack; he didn't want to scare his brother to death in the middle of the night. He just wanted to hear the sound of breathing. He just wanted to reassure himself that Nathan was all right. He leaned his head against the door frame, and when he heard the soft snores, he was sure Nathan was sleeping soundly and comfortably. He closed the door and retreated to the kitchen.

He retraced his steps down the hall, only this time the light from under the door to the kitchen made it unnecessary to use his fingers to tell him the way. Someone else was awake. "You know, you could turn on the hall light," Buck said as Chris stepped into the kitchen, rapidly blinking as his eyes adjusted to the light.

"Where's the challenge in that?" Chris smirked.

"If I recall correctly, you once broke a toe sneaking around in the dark." Buck saw the smirk but didn't return it.

"Didn't mean to wake you up," Chris apologized, bothered by the hollowness in Buck's voice.

"You didn't." Buck finished measuring out the coffee and turned on the machine. "I've been thinking."

"About anything in particular?" Chris asked, his voice carefully neutral; Buck sounded distant.

"Talked with Nathan for a while after everyone went to bed. We didn't talk about anything in particular. Hate crimes, this attack on him, Dad...you."

"Me?" his eyes narrowed in suspicion. Did Buck plan on giving him another talking to? If so, he didn't want to hear it. He pushed his chair away from the table; he would sit in his bedroom for a while, but he caught the look of anguish on his brother's face and sat back down. "What about?"

"I can't keep this up. I have tried and tried to be there for you. I've tried being right there at your side, cleaning up after you, and making excuses for you. I've tried letting you be, letting you drink yourself into oblivion and wake up in your cheap rented rooms surrounded by puke, not remembering or caring about what you did the night before. None of it has worked. I can't watch your back and take care of things around here. Quit drinking, Chris. You have to. If it will help, we'll ban booze from the house. Or you can join one of those self-help programs. I'll go with you."

"It wouldn't be self-help then," Chris joked, trying to lighten the pain in his brother's eyes. It didn't work.

Buck slammed his hand against the table. "Damn you, Chris Larabee, I am serious here." Seeing the faint shadows under his brother's eyes and knowing the attack on Nathan had given his brother another nightmare to add to his collection, Buck's voice softened, "I know I am responsible for Sarah and--"

"What?" The words exploded from Chris's mouth.

"Chris, if I hadn't--"

"Staying was as much my decision as it was yours." Chris propped his elbows up on the table and rubbed at his temples, attempting to ease the tension in his head.

"Buck," he whispered. "I don't blame you." He looked up and saw the disbelief in his brother's eyes. "I know what I've said to you, and I know those things were mean and ugly," he found he couldn't keep looking at his brother; there was too much pain in those blue eyes. "You were, are a convenient target."

"Chris," Buck refused to be derailed as he too often was when he tried to talk to Chris about his drinking. "I love you. You are my brother, and I love you. But you are not the brother I remember." He ran his fingers through his uncombed hair, almost deciding to abort the conversation and turn to more pleasant things, but his eyes caught sight of the empty whiskey bottle in the garbage, and his resolve returned. "These last few weeks, as hard as they've been ...

I kept thinking, at least I have my brother back. And then last night ... If you do not stop the drinking, I will leave. I have spent the last three years watching you drink yourself into an early grave. I will not stay around and bury you."

"Dad's will says--"

"Fuck the will. That was Dad's way of making his dream of having his children together under one roof a reality. That's his dream, not mine." Buck leaned against the refrigerator, eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"What is your dream, Bucklyn?" Chris prayed it wasn't to be left alone.

"My dream? I don't know if I have one. Nathan dreamed of being a doctor. Dad dreamed of us all working together. You dreamed of your horse ranch and me... I was so caught up in each of your dreams, I forgot to dream one for myself."

"Buck, do you want me to leave?" Chris held his breath as he waited for Buck to answer.

"No," Buck shook his head in disbelief. How could Chris believe he wanted him to leave? Damn. Chris spent the last three years blaming him for Sarah and Adam's deaths. And now he was saying he didn't blame him. Lord, didn't Chris see he didn't need his blame or forgiveness; nothing would erase the burden of knowing that by keeping them one extra night in Mexico, he was responsible for Sarah and Adam's deaths. And even if it wasn't his fault that Sarah and Adam were dead, it was his fault Chris spent the years since their deaths, hell-bent on joining them.

He didn't know how to lead his brother off his path to hell. It was his fault; he spent all his life following Chris's lead, and when Chris needed him to take a turn at being a leader, he didn't know how. Every time he had to watch Chris drink himself stupid, he knew he had failed his brother yet again. These failures were like stones weighing him down. He felt crushed beneath their weight. He was dying right along with Chris. Please, Chris, understand... There are days I can't breathe. I need you to be ok so I can remember to breathe. God, he wanted to say those things, but if he did, Chris would take those words and add them to the cartload of regrets he already pulled. He spoke quietly, so quietly Chris had to strain to hear him, "I want you to stop this drinking. I want you to stop dying and start living. I want my brother back."

Chris tried to get up and go to his brother, but his legs were rooted to the floor, and his voice didn't work. It wasn't the things Buck said that turned him to stone; Buck had said those things before. It wasn't his tone; he heard that dreadful, tearful voice many times. It wasn't even the eyes. The powerful force holding him in the chair was the memories of his laughing, happy brother. When had Buck last laughed?

He laughed and smiled every day. He wouldn't be Buck without his trademark smile, but Buck's smile rarely touched his eyes. Had he done that to his brother? Had he taken the light away from his brother? Oh God, he had, he had. What to do? He wished he had words to make everything right for Buck. He shouldn't accompany Chris on his path of self-destruction. Buck was better than this.

Chris let his eyes circle the kitchen, desperately seeking escape from his memories in the redecorated surroundings. Had Dad known how much it hurt to be around the familiar settings? Was that why he had redecorated everything so thoroughly? Had he realized how many memories of Sarah and Adam were embedded in the very structure of the place? Yes, of course, he had. But there were other memories too. Memories of Buck struggling not to giggle while six-year-old Chris gave him a new haircut. Or when he wouldn't back down from the other football team's challenge to fight, he took them all on, knowing Buck would have his back. Or of Buck, studying for long hours at the table, forgoing his favorite television shows because he didn't want Chris to be embarrassed by him bringing home bad grades.

Oh, God. Chris lurched to his feet, not knowing what he would say or do to make it right. Only knowing that if he didn't do something, he would lose his brother, as he had lost his wife and son, as he had lost his father, and as he had almost lost his brother, Nathan. He would lose him and would have no one to blame except himself. He reached the counter and, bracing himself with one hand on the counter, he used the other to grab Buck by the shoulder. He absently patted his brother on the shoulder as he tried to find words to make things right again. He couldn't find the words; he had nothing to say that would magically make things better. He offered what he

could, "I'll try to stay sober, Bucklyn." He felt a hand cover the one he had on his brother's shoulder. "I'll try. I promise. You have my word." He whispered as he felt the hand squeeze his. Buck swallowed hard. He had been afraid his brother would brush aside his concern as he had many times over the past few years, but this time, Chris acted differently. Chris gave his word to try, and for Chris to give his word meant that things would get better. Of course, there would be ups and downs. It wouldn't be Chris if there weren't ups and downs. After all, his mother had been a redhead. And it didn't mean Chris would stay once this year was over; Buck knew being at the Double L was hard on Chris, but if he left, he would leave sober.

Buck brushed, one last time, at his eyes and managed a smile. Turning around, he held his coffee cup out for Chris to fill. "So, tell me about this Mary Travis. Nathan says she was right purty."

"Interested?"

"Thought I would never say this, but no. Not in that way. Of course, I haven't met her, but..."

"But right now, you are very interested in a certain Miss Inez."

"And it's best not to complicate your life by chasing two different ladies at the same time." Chris put a hand over his heart and staggered a bit.

"Never stopped you before. Are you sure you are my brother, Buck?"

"You've met Inez, Chris. What kind of fool do you think I am? I ain't gonna risk pissing her off and losing her before we've even gone out."

"So why did you ask about Mrs. Travis?" Pushing Buck towards the table, Chris rolled his eyes towards the heavens. He hoped Inez was very patient with his brother because women, especially damsels in distress, were a lodestone to his brother.

"Curiosity. Nathan says that she just charged into the thick of things, with her phone taking pictures, and then, with pen and paper in hand, asked everyone questions. Nate's really impressed, and he doesn't impress easily. What do you think of her?"

Chris propped his feet up on the table, then, feeling Sarah's disapproving stare, quickly put them on the floor. Growing up, they had all been prone to follow their father's example and sat around the table, drinking first milk and then, as they got older, coffee, reading the paper, or talking about plans for the day with their feet planted firmly on the table. Dad had never minded. Sarah minded. She would scold him and knock his feet off the furniture. Once, she had used her broom to chase him around the kitchen. It ended with both of them laughing until tears had rolled down their faces, and with his promise to keep his feet off the table. She had kissed him by way of thanks, and that led to a most enjoyable evening. He smiled a little at the memory, surprised that the hollow, lost feeling that had chased him relentlessly over the last three years didn't choose the moment to attack.

"Mrs. Travis? Well, let's see. Tall, blonde hair cut short, beautiful eyes." He smiled widely and added, "Nate's right. She is easy on the eyes."

Buck raised his eyebrows, "Really?"

"Yeah, she's nice looking," Chris admitted, not liking the speculative look in Buck's eyes but not feeling particularly outraged by it. Buck was being Buck. He added, "Before you get into your matchmaking mode, I am not interested in her. Besides, she was Stephen's wife."

"Not pushing you to do anything, but I don't think Sarah would want you to mourn her for the rest of your life." Buck wondered if he had dared too much. Part of him hoped Chris would listen to him. The larger part of him expected Chris to explode and punch him. He didn't want to be hit and had vowed never again to allow Chris to vent his grief by hitting him, but he needed to nudge Chris back out into the world. Waiting for Chris to begin living again had been a complete waste of time. He steeled himself for Chris's reaction.

Chris swallowed hard at Buck's use of Sarah's name. He expected to feel a bolt of agony, the one that made it difficult to breathe and made him hurt all over, but it didn't come. Instead, he felt nothing, and that frightened him. He had lost Sarah and Adam. Was he now losing the pain of their loss? He forced his thoughts away from the possibility and answered Buck. "I know, Buck. I also know you. You won't be happy until everyone in this house has a steady girlfriend. Why don't you work on your own life?"

"Intend to do just that."

"What? You think just smiling at her will do it for you? You might want to ask Inez out?"

"She's not the kind of lady you push. Give me time. So, what's wrong with this Mary?"

"I don't know. Maybe because she is pushy."

"How?" Nate hadn't said anything like that. He had said she was vivacious.

"Real pretty woman, real smart sounding too, but Buck, she had her kid with her. She left her kid so she could rush off and watch some men fighting."

"Think you might be a tad hard on her, pard. She's some kind of reporter. It's her job to watch men fight."

"Not when her kid is there. Those bastards were planning on hanging Nathan. Not a thing you bring your kid to see. She just started asking questions. Who were the men? Had they said anything? Had anything like that happened before? She kept asking questions. Orrin, Miss Evie, and the kid went on to eat. She waved them off, said she wanted to talk to the sheriff."

"Give her a break, Chris. She didn't know what she was running into. I'd bet this ranch she had no idea there was a lynching in progress. She's a citizen journalist, investigating a gunshot. She was doing her job. Besides, Nathan said the kid came running up after his mom. She didn't bring him."

"Nathan wasn't in any position to see anything, but that's no excuse. She's a mother first, and should have stayed with her son. She should have known he would follow her. He hears a gunshot and other noises, and his mother runs down the street to find out what's happening. Of course, he's going to follow. He didn't stay put to watch his grandfather call the police. She should have known he would do that. There was no place for the boy to be. You should have seen his eyes... Nate still had the noose around his neck for God's sake." Chris concentrated on draining his cup. He didn't want to see the image of Nathan with a rope pulled taut against his neck.

"Chris?" Buck's voice broke into Chris's thoughts; worry was evident in his voice.

"He could have died last night. I almost went over to talk to the judge. Miss Evie waved me over, and I almost crossed the street. I would have if Vin hadn't pulled up. I would have been talking to the Judge and Miss Evie while Nathan choked to death. It would have been just like... What if Vin hadn't had a rifle stashed away in his truck? What if those SOBs had decided to fight instead of running? Nathan would be dead. We would be sitting here planning his funeral instead of drinking coffee."

"But we are not... He's alive. Didn't even have to go to the hospital."

"He's got a rope burn around his neck." Chris wanted to throw something, but the house was too quiet. He had indulged himself by getting drunk the night before; he would not start tearing up the place, no matter how good tearing up stuff would feel. "I want to know who those bastards are. They need to be taught manners."

"Vin said the sheriff told him that Nate isn't the first man they have gone after. I looked it up on the internet last night. The first attack happened in late July. Jimenez Santos, the attendant at Henderson's gas station, got himself a black eye and a broken arm. They went into the store, roughed him up, and emptied the till. A few places in Eagle Bend have had their window broken and merchandise stolen. There have been a few more gas stations robbed and one diner."

"Robbery to murder. That's a mighty big jump."

"A case of mob mentality," Josiah's voice all but echoed in the room. He had a preacher's voice, thought Buck, filling without being too loud.

"Did we wake you?" Buck asked. He doubted they had; it hadn't been a good night for sleeping. He, himself, had been up and down checking on Nathan until his brother threatened to make his life miserable if he didn't let him get some sleep. Nathan could be right irritable if he didn't get enough sleep. It was amazing that he kept his temper around his patients after long nights of staying awake at the hospital; he certainly didn't bother to keep it around concerned brothers.

"Brother Vin did that. Walking in dark halls is a good way to stub bare feet on one of the bookshelves. I thought the boy was on the quiet side, but he has a truly extensive vocabulary when hopping around on one foot." Josiah poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down next to Buck.

“Talk to Chris about his experiences with a broken toe. Walking around in the dark must be a family thing. Maybe we should have a family meeting and explain where the light switches in the hall are. Don’t look like that, Chris. The next time you break your toe, I don’t want to hear about it,” Buck balled up his napkin and tossed it at Chris for emphasis.

Josiah snorted into his coffee. They spent the ride up to Bailey Springs trying to figure out traits they shared. Chris, Nathan, and he were all left-handed as their father had been. They all liked their coffee black. They all, except Buck, hated talking on the phone, and he even admitted that while he did use the phone, he preferred face-to-face conversations. They all hated writing letters; if any of them decided not to stay, they would have a real problem keeping in touch. They all loved to ride. He and Chris were both mean drunks, though, unlike Chris, he had not shown his brothers that side of him.

Speaking of whom, “How are you feeling?”

“Surprisingly good, considering,” Chris toyed with his coffee cup and glanced over at his brothers. Buck looked exhausted. The normally happy, expressive face looked pale. Fine lines of worry were etched into his brother’s face. Taking care of everyone was draining his brother. Chris’s face burned; he didn’t remember exactly what he had said to Buck, but he figured it was ugly. He lifted his head and looked at his new, older brother, “I get nasty when I drink. I need to stop drinking.”

“Me too, brother,” Josiah met Chris’s admission with his own, causing both of his brothers’ eyes to widen in surprise.

The three brothers were saved from any further confessions by the timely arrival of Vin, dressed in running shoes and a fraying blue jacket over his black running gear. He checked his watch against the clock on the wall and then the one on the microwave, “Ain’t y’all up a little early. The sun is not quite up.”

“You’re running in the dark? And in this cold?” Chris asked. Why was this crazy idiot planning to run at this hour? Stubbing his toe had not taught him a thing.

“Just up to the main road and back,” he poured himself the last bit of the coffee, emptying the pot. He drained the cup in one long gulp, welcoming the heat as it warmed him. This big old house was a tad on the cold side, though he seemed to be the only one bothered by the cold floors. “I’ve been sittin’ on my butt too long, and we’ll be hours in the car today. Need to get out and run the kinks out before I get all stove-up. The cold?” he shook his head, sending his hair flying, reminding him to stop somewhere and get something he could use to tie his hair back; he was down to his last rubber band. “I don’t get cold in this gear. The problem is when it’s summer and the sun is tryin’ to make you melt into a puddle on the road.”

Chris exchanged looks with Buck. To the main road and back was about five miles, and what did he mean about being stove-up?

Vin almost laughed at his brothers’ looks, especially the one Chris was giving him, which was asking whether he was as crazy as he sounded. “Got me a problem with my back,” Vin said as he twisted one way and then the other. “If I don’t exercise regular like, it gets hard to move, and I have to go somewhere and get a massage.” A sheepish grin, caused by the memory of his last massage, made its way to his face. He hoped his brothers thought it was due to his admitting he had back problems. Let them think what they liked; there was no way he would tell them the real reason for his burning face-- Franny.

One of his friends recommended the lady after he had sat in his truck three straight days hunting down a lowlife who had gunned down a teenager in a convenience store robbery. The scum made bail and disappeared. He had found him easy enough, but since the man decided to hole up in an apartment full of children and had a reputation for not caring who got hurt, Vin had waited in the truck until the POS decided to come out from hiding. He ran the man down and slapped some cuffs on before his back registered the pain it was in. Dan said three days later, when he was still having a problem getting around, to go see Franny. The memory still made him grin. Sure, she had hands of gold, but that lady was no lady, and he came away from that encounter with a lot more than his back taken care of; he still carried her card.

Chris watched as Vin tied his hair back, wondering at the red tingeing Vin’s cheeks, and decided there was a story behind the red, but he didn’t press. Vin wasn’t a man to push for

information. What he told you, he did because he wanted to, not because he felt he needed to do so. Chris figured Vin wouldn't take kindly to someone asking too many questions, and since he had seen the man fight, he wasn't about to back him into a corner. "You plan on running in the cold and in the dark?" he didn't have to push him to question his sanity.

"My runnin' gear is old, but it is of good quality. Keeps me warm and dry. I'll be right warm by the time I get back, and in case you haven't noticed, being so busy drinking coffee and shootin' the breeze, it ain't dark. The moon is still up. Care to join me?" Vin casually tossed out his challenge. He knew that this morning, he would be running alone. Chris was bound to have a bit of a hangover, Buck looked like he had not even been to bed, and Josiah scowled at his suggestion, but he had seen interest in all three sets of eyes. Maybe running was in the blood or something.

Chris glared at his younger brother. He was not in shape, too many nights spent in bars, too many days spent fighting off sobriety, but at one time, he had run track. "Give me a couple of weeks to get back in shape, and I'll run with you," he promised the smirking man.

The rest of them were saved from making rash promises when a yawning, already showered and dressed for work, Nathan stumbled into the room. He didn't bother greeting his brothers as he made a beeline for the coffee. See the empty pot, he began making a fresh pot. "We need to get a larger pot, one of those things churches use. With six people drinking coffee like we do, this little thing isn't cutting it." Nathan's voice was little more than a hoarse whisper, causing his brothers to exchange frowns.

"You sure you need to be drinking it?" Buck asked from his seat, not taking the empty pot from Nathan's hand. If he was going to be stupid enough to drink coffee after being hung, then he could make his own coffee.

"Need it to wake up," Nathan whispered.

"Thought Emmett said for you to take the day off," Buck reminded his brother.

"They are all booked up. Not a good idea to start my first day on the job by canceling patients."

"People would understand," Josiah said, taking the coffee filter out of Nathan's hand. He would make the coffee this time. As far as he could tell, his brothers just dumped coffee into the machine without measuring; sometimes the hit-or-miss approach made good coffee, more often it made really bad coffee. Surprisingly, he seemed to be the only one to notice the difference, no, that wasn't right. Ezra noticed. Several times, he observed Ezra take a sip, frown, then let his coffee grow cold, waiting until the pot emptied, and he could make a pot more to his liking. Chris scowled at Nathan. Emmett told him to take it easy. The older doctor had been visibly shaken when he showed up at the clinic after the police had called him to inform him of Nathan's near murder. He insisted that Nathan take a few days off. Chris watched as his brother turned away from his frowning face. He needed a way, short of locking him in his room, to force his brother to stay home where he could be watched. He took in the squaring of the shoulders and knew Nathan had made up his mind, and no amount of talking would change his mind. He was so damn stubborn at times.

"If I don't go, then they win." Nathan turned around and looked at each of his brothers. "I can't let those bastards frighten me away. I can't let them keep me from doing my job."

"Don't be the last one to leave. Understand?" Chris said sternly. He understood Nathan's need to go to work; he couldn't stop his brother without hog-tying him and tossing him into the barn or something, but he didn't have to get enthusiastic either.

"I wasn't born yesterday. I'll even call the house and let someone know I'm on my way home," Nathan volunteered, wanting to ease the fear in his brother's eyes. His throat was hurting from all his talking, but ready to change the subject, Nathan asked, "When are you two heading out?"

"As soon as Vin finishes running," Chris answered.

"Better get on with it then," Vin walked over to stand next to Nathan. Nathan didn't look as though he had almost died the night before. Of course, having his shirt buttoned up and wearing a tie hid the rope burns, as did the long sleeves; he looked all right as long as you didn't bother to look at the tightness around his eyes and the sadness within them. He wanted to say something

to ease Nathan's sadness, but he couldn't think of anything. Last night, after the house quieted down, he had written for a while in the spiral notebook he used for his poems, but the poem fell short of expressing the horror he felt seeing Nathan swinging from the porch, silently choking. Sometimes, he let poems sit for a while and then would look at them, and he could fix them, make them say what he needed them to, but he reckoned he would never look at this one again.

He patted his brother's arm. He still didn't have the words to make things right for Nathan, but he didn't think there were any. He gave his brother another look and left the room. He needed to get out and run, not think, run. He nodded at JD as the kid made his way into the kitchen and then left.



Mumbling something about needing to check on the horses and ignoring Josiah's request that he wait a minute so they could walk down to the corral together, JD grabbed his coat off the hook next to the back door and walked out. The ferocity of the wind startled him and came close to sending him back inside, but the real need to check on the horses and the personal need to find a place to think made him pull the door shut. He bypassed the steps and jumped off the porch, easily clearing the scattering of shrubs. Hurried strides, closer to a run, took him to the corral's gate, but he didn't open the gate. He didn't check the water trough to see if ice needed to be broken. He didn't check Kelsie's leg. He didn't offer apple pieces to the horses that came up to him, as was his habit. He rested his chin on his laced fingers and stared out across the open expanse of the corral, without seeing the corral, the horses, or the mountains reaching up to touch the sky.

He glanced at the house, guiltily relieved that he didn't see Josiah following him out of the house. It wasn't that he didn't like Josiah; he did. It was that he hadn't missed the look Buck and Josiah shared when Buck pushed Nathan out the door, insisting he would drive him to the clinic. That look said, 'go talk to JD and make sure he's all right.' What did they think he was- a baby? He wasn't falling apart or acting in any way that called for someone to check on him; he just needed a few minutes of quiet to think things over. So much was happening too fast for him to process.

Part of him wondered if he hadn't made a mistake quitting his job and moving here as he had. From the day he received the letter from Judge Travis's office, he hadn't stopped to think about anything. He jumped into this family stuff without learning anything about the men he would call brothers. He hadn't stopped to think about how his life would change when he had agreed to move to the ranch. The only part of Landon's will he had heard was the one about having a family. He hated being alone, of having no one to share the ups and downs of his life with. He had been so desperate to change his life and to fill the empty spaces in it, he had never considered what the rest of being a family meant.

With his mother's death, he had lost not only all the family he had ever known, but he had also lost his best friend and most trusted confidante. He thought, amid his grieving, that having a new job would mean he would make new friends. That hadn't happened. It was his fault, he supposed. At first, a few people asked him to join them for a beer after work, but he politely rejected their invitations – his mother was too much on his mind to go out and pretend he was having fun.

By the time he felt ready to go out and socialize, he realized he hated his job and that many of the people he worked with would do anything to get ahead—lie, badmouth others, and even take credit for the work of other people in their efforts to claw their way out of lower management. He didn't like those people and didn't want to join their ranks.

He hated his job. Every morning, he forced himself to get up, get dressed, and go to work. Nowhere in his childhood dreams had he imagined he would ever be a numbers cruncher, but that was what he did in a little cubicle on the seventeenth floor of a building exactly like many other buildings in a city that had more buildings than it knew what to do with. It had been the first job he was offered, and he jumped on it, thankful that someone had wanted to hire him. Maybe, if he and his mother had been able to talk things out, she would have advised him to wait and find a job that

would have allowed him to stretch his wings, but she hadn't been around, and all he could see were the bills her illness and death left behind. He impulsively took the job and was miserable every day until he got that letter. He had impulsively taken the job and impulsively left it.

Impulsive...that was how he had acted since... since as far back as he could remember. All his life, his mother had talked up college. At first, she had talked about how she wanted to go, but somewhere along the line, she began talking about him going. A college degree meant he would have a good life. He would have job security and a good income. She wanted him to go so badly that he never considered whether he wanted to go. He never considered the possibility of anything else. He snapped up the first scholarship offered, never considering if he wanted to go to business school or study something...anything else. He snatched up the first job offered to him, without realizing that, since he was graduating with honors, more than one company might be interested in him.

He had been miserable. He realized he had made a mistake within a week of starting the job. Within a month, he realized he hated his job and didn't know how to quit. He didn't have any money saved (everything he had that could be called extra went to pay off his mom's medical and funeral bills), and he could not afford to quit or even to take the time off to seriously look for a better job. He was stuck. Then his Dad reached out from the grave and offered him a way out, and he, once again, impulsively jumped at the opportunity to change his life.

He told himself it was only for a year and that anyone could do anything for a year. He told himself that at the end of the year, he would have a million dollars, and even if he decided he didn't want to stay with his brothers, he could take his million dollars and do anything he wanted with his life. He had even lied to himself by saying that if he hated living with his brothers, he could return to Boston and his old life at any time.

He couldn't return to Boston. He sold his car. He gave up his apartment. He left his job. His job! Not only had he left it, but he had left it in such a manner that guaranteed his boss would not take him back. Mr. Chatham probably wouldn't even give him a decent reference, not after the way he smirked when he handed the man his hastily typed resignation and not after the way he laughed when Mr. Chatham said business etiquette demanded he give thirty days' notice.

What had he been thinking? He was thinking he had a family. At long last, he had brothers, and they were everything he had imagined them to be. He thought he was safe and loved. He was hoping his Mom would be happy he wasn't alone up in heaven.

Living with his brothers was nothing like he expected it to be. He wasn't sure what he had expected; he guessed he thought they would all work with the cows, except Nathan, and at night, they would eat supper together and talk about stuff. He expected them to get to know each other and learn to like each other and maybe, if they were lucky, learn to love each other. He wanted a 'Leave it to Beaver' - type family or 'Waltons' family, and at the end of the day, everything turned out all right, and people would call out their goodnights to each other.

The events of last night showed him he must become more than the little brother his big brothers needed to check on. He was not the only one missing a loved one. He wasn't quite sure of the circumstances, but last night he learned Chris had lost his wife and child, and even though he had Buck and Nathan, he still struggled with their loss. And... Nathan ... What happened to him was unbelievable. Sure, there had been a lot of crime in Boston. One of his college friends had been mugged while walking home one night after a movie, and he knew a couple of people who had their places robbed. This was different. This was Nathan. Nathan was family.

The one thing he learned from this is that family took care of family...No matter what. Vin and Chris had rushed into the unknown to save Nathan. He suspected they would have acted to save anyone in a similar situation, but the point was that they had known that something was wrong. How had they known? Was it merely by chance they had heard Nathan, or had ...had their ties of blood, of being family, alerted them?

And Buck... underneath his calm exterior, you could tell how shaken he was, yet he kept on being ...a brother to Nathan, and then, when Chris allowed himself to fall apart, after his near loss, and had begun drinking, Buck had ... been a brother to Chris. It had bothered him to see Chris drunk, but Buck had said that Chris had already lost so much that almost losing Nathan had scared him...

He needed to learn how to do that, accept his brothers for who they were, even when they fell off the pedestal he had put them on. His mother had once said that she would always love him because he was her family. She had said there might be times she did not like him because of something he said or did, but that she would always love him. Last night, he hadn't liked Chris, and he could see Buck hadn't liked him either, but he could tell Buck ... and Nathan still loved Chris. He was still family, warts and all.

He needed to learn to look past his brothers' warts. "JD?"

JD was startled. He thought he had been keeping an eye out for Josiah. "Yeah," he answered before Josiah repeated himself.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" Josiah waved his arms towards the horses.

"Yeah," JD turned his back on Josiah, hoping the man would get the hint that he wanted to be alone. He didn't want to be rude, but he didn't want to talk to anyone.

"Beautiful land. You can see the touch of God's hand here."

Hearing Josiah's sincerity in his simple statement, JD looked up from the spot on the ground he had found interesting ever since Josiah had joined him. "Yeah, I guess so."

Josiah didn't look at JD, smile, or react to him. He kept his eyes on the horses, but he knew the moment JD looked up that he had him, his little brother, who would talk, and he would listen.



"I hope you aren't planning on doggin' me all day," knowing his brother had his back made Nathan feel better than he would ever admit, but as he kept telling himself, it wasn't necessary.

"I'm not," Buck answered, his eyes never leaving the road.

"I'm OK, Buck," Nathan tried to sound as though he were reassuring Buck, but knowing he was steeling himself for the act of getting out of the car and walking that long distance from the parking lot to the porch and then inside. He hoped, but didn't expect, that the signs of the police investigation were gone.

"Know that."

"Tomorrow morning I'll drive myself."

"We'll see."

"Buck!"

"Nathan... This isn't just about you," Buck faltered in his explanation. "I need...we all need to know you are safe."

"You can't follow me everywhere I go." Nathan gently explained. He heard the worry in Buck's voice and saw it in the white-knuckled grip Buck had on the steering wheel, but he had to nip it in the bud. He was a grown man and did not need a babysitter.

"I know, but I won't have to. We are going to find the sons of bitches and make sure..." "They are not going to come after me again," Nathan interrupted.

"They best not," Buck almost growled, getting a chuckle out of Nathan.

"Buck?" Nathan asked after a few minutes of silence, which gave him too much time to reflect.

"Yeah," Buck gave his brother a quick, worried glance.

"What do you see when you look at me?"

"I see my brother," Buck answered with the first thing that came to mind.

"You don't see a black man?"

"Well, you have black skin, so, yeah, I see a black man. But I don't think of you as my brother who is black. I think of you as my brother, period."

"I talked to my Gran and Gramps last night, before ...everything happened."

"And?"

"And they are angry I moved back here."

"They're probably worried they will never see you again."

"Maybe," Nathan said as Buck pulled into the alley leading to the clinic's parking lot. He felt almost grateful for their prompt arrival. He wanted to talk to someone about his grandparents, but Buck would hear him out, tell him everything would be all right, and then leave for Alabama to

explain the error of his grandparents' ways to them. He didn't want that, not yet anyway. Before Buck or anyone talked to them, he needed to understand why they were angry.

"Nate, you want to talk?" Buck turned in his seat to get a good look at his brother. He didn't like the haunted look in Nathan's too expressive eyes. He wanted to talk. He wanted to tell Nathan how scared he was for him and to reassure Nathan that everything would be all right.

"No, I want to get to work. Give me those keys. You take Chris's truck back. I bet it is still parked over at Inez's. Here are his keys." Nathan saw with alarm that Buck was taking his seat belt off, "Buck, you are NOT walking me in. This isn't first grade, and you are not Dad."

"Heck, Nate. I'm just going in to meet your nurses."

"Sit! Stay! I want to keep those nurses."

"You know, little brother, I think you are being greedy."

"There is no one who works here you'd be interested in meeting."

"Now, I don't know about that. I hear Raine Simmons is--"

"Buck, I gotta go," Nathan didn't want to listen to Buck and his matchmaking. There was no way he would ever get involved in an office romance; he wasn't born stupid. He had yet to meet Miss Simmons, who spent much of her time out of the office acting as Community Health Nurse, but Emmett called her a dedicated professional.

Buck saw the faint smile on Nathan's face and knew he had succeeded in redirecting his brother's thoughts. Later, when there was more time, he would corner Nathan and find out what was going on with Nathan's grandparents. It wasn't his attackers who put that kicked-in-the-gut look on Nathan's face.



Vin glanced over at his sleeping brother. Chris said to wake him in an hour or two and let him drive, but he couldn't do it. Chris was too exhausted to drive safely; heck, he needed more sleep if he planned to function through the day. It was obvious to everyone that Chris hadn't slept any of the night before, not that any of them had slept peacefully, but Chris had not been sleeping much ever since he found out why Ezra took the money. This thing with Nathan made everything worse.

Vin, for the umpteenth time, reached for the radio, only to stop himself and put both hands firmly back on the wheel. He could do without the music if it meant Chris got a few extra minutes of sleep.

"Go ahead, turn it on."

"Thought ya were asleep," Vin frowned briefly at his brother before turning his attention to the empty highway.

"I was." Chris straightened up in his seat and peered at the clock through sleepy eyes, realizing Vin had been driving for four hours straight.

"Thought you were going to wake me," Chris all but growled.

"Thought about it. Decided ya needed the sleep."

"It wasn't your decision to make. I told you to wake me up in two hours." Chris reached for Vin's arm to make sure he had his brother's attention.

Vin carefully examined his mirrors before swinging onto the shoulder of the road and slamming on his brakes. Shoulder straps tightened and held both men in place as the truck, throwing roadside gravel into the air, skidded to a stop.

"What the hell?" Chris yelled at his brother.

Vin spun in his seat towards his brother. "YOU!! Listen. The only reason ya ain't walking is I reckon ya woke up grouchy, and I am the forgiving sort. My truck. My contact in Vegas. My rules. Rule One: Never mess with me when I am driving. Rule Two: Never order me around. Make that Rule One. Ya may ask me to do something, ya may consult with me. But I ain't Buck. I don't do what ya say just 'cause you say it."

"Buck ain't like that," Chris ignored Vin's list of rules and defended Buck. "Buck is his own man."

"Hell, Larabee. Anyone with eyes can see Buck, who tiptoes around you. Treats you like he's afraid ya might break, if he even thinks about disagreeing with ya."

Chris looked out the window. Sitting in the truck, the landscape appeared empty and lonely, but he knew if he got out and started walking around, he would unearth all sorts of things. "You don't understand," he said after a few minutes of watching the scenery not change; it was obvious Vin wasn't planning on moving the truck until he answered.

"Then tell me," Vin said. "What happened between ya and Buck that he's willing to take all this shit ya dish out to him. Ya can't tell me that he lets everyone treat him like ya do."

Chris turned to his brother, and for the briefest moment, he didn't see the man sitting next to him, but the toddler Vin had been. He remembered him as having almost blond hair, and his father complaining to Cady to get it cut so people could tell he had a son.

As a child, Vin had two speeds: full steam ahead and stop. Vin could run the legs off a horse, and his three big brothers would collapse in the evening, after a day of watching the kid, and just when they were about to give him back to Cady, he would find something of interest and stop. A bird flying overhead, ants foraging for food, or the antics of the newborn foals in the pasture would bring the toddler to an awestruck stop, and he would watch. Once, he had disappeared; one minute, he had been watching his brothers clean out the barn, and the next, he was gone. For over an hour, he ignored the increasingly frantic calling of his name, and only by luck had Chris found him stretched out on the ground near the creek. Chris, to this day, remembers the dark hole in the pit of his stomach as he approached his brother, sure the boy was dead. He wasn't dead; he, as Chris managed to decipher, was waiting for the rabbit to come back out of the hole... Funny, the things you remember.

"No, he doesn't," Chris told the stranger, who was not a stranger when his thoughts returned to the present day.

Vin nodded slowly, accepting the answer not as a dismissal, but as evidence of a pain so deep that Chris was all but lost in its murky depths. He looked over his shoulder, checking the nonexistent traffic, and pulled back onto the road.

"Buck didn't do anything. He's just convenient at times," Chris said after a few minutes. "I noticed."

Chris heard the unspoken rebuke and flushed. Good lord, what had he said to Buck last night? I was drunk, he wanted to say to excuse his behavior. I don't remember half of what I say or do when I am drunk. I get drunk so I don't have to remember. He thought about those things but didn't voice them. Saying them aloud made them excuses and permitted him to get drunk, and he promised Buck he would stop. The problem was, he, being drunk, had become a habit, a way to deal with the world. He wasn't sure if he knew how to stop. Sure, he could do it for a few days, weeks even; he hadn't gotten drunk since his Dad died. But, as he proved to all concerned, his sobriety had been temporary.

Chris watched as his brother's hand reached out to turn on the radio. After finding a station offering something more than static, he began tapping the steering wheel in time to the music. If Buck had been in the truck, he would have taken the opportunity to talk; apparently, Vin didn't feel the need to talk things to death. Good. He turned his head to stare out the window, although he didn't take notice of the scenery.

Gradually, his thoughts shifted from his drinking and what it was doing to Buck and would do to his other brothers. Nathan really shouldn't be working. He should have stayed at home, where he could be taken care of-- as though that would ever happen.

Nathan was a doctor, but when the table was turned, making Nathan a patient, he would avoid all the good advice he would have expected others to follow. Curious what was happening in Four Corners, he risked a look at the phone between them.

"JD's probably at the ranch; he's searching for me," Vin said. "He'll call if something comes up."

Chris kept his hands away from the phone and the one in his pocket. He had told his brothers they would call in the evening or when they had news to share. It wasn't noon yet, and they had no news. He would wait. If there was trouble, someone would call.

"Does Four Corners see much in the way of crime?" Vin asked.

"No," Chris said. Yesterday, he would have said no and meant it. Today, he only said no.

Vin frowned. Buck said the same thing. Nathan had not answered the question, and Vin was uncertain if the man's throat hurt or if there had been incidents, and Nathan didn't want to talk about them. He fell silent as he mulled the attempted hanging over in his mind, searching for anything he had missed. Vin grew quiet as he concentrated on the road.

Chris welcomed the quiet. He needed to think and couldn't do that, and defend his indefensible drinking at the same time. He turned his head to stare out the window, although he didn't take notice of the scenery. His thoughts shifted from his drinking and what it was doing to Buck to Nathan's insistence on working today. He really shouldn't be at the clinic. He should have stayed at home, where he could be taken care of-- as though that would ever happen.



"Last chance, Ezra. Is there some other way to do this?" Ezra spoke to his reflection in the mirror, pretending he didn't see the circles under his eyes or the glassiness of his eyes. He knew he had a fever, but he couldn't stop to deal with it, yet. Later, after he had sold his car and obtained a new identity, he would find a doc-in-the-box and get something for the fever.

He saw the gray-haired man head toward him, and putting a smile he didn't feel on his face, he opened the door and pulled himself out of the car. "Roger," he hoped he sounded friendly and not at all desperate to get his car sold. Roger was already circling the car; if he smelled blood, he would go in for the kill. He needed the best possible deal, and if Roger thought him truly desperate, he would not get a good price. It wasn't as though he could go anywhere else; Roger was the only one he knew who would give him cash for the car and not bog the deal down in paperwork.

"Ezra..." Roger drawled out around the cigarette he held clenched in his not-too-white teeth. "She looks mighty fine. A car worth driving."

"She drives like a dream, Roger," he replied, hating that their conversation made it sound as if they were friends. They weren't, and he didn't know Roger's last name.

"So, what's the story? The Ezra, I know, loves expensive cars too much to get rid of this." Ezra let a smile he didn't feel work itself across his face. This was the hard part, making Roger want the car without feeling his desperate need to get rid of it. He spent the night trying on different stories. He hoped this one worked. "Ah must admit this is Mothuh's fault."

Roger grinned; he had met Maude on a few occasions. "You having to pay her way out of trouble?"

"No, nothing of the sort. Mothuh is fine. The situation, Ah confess," Ezra smiled and leaned conspiratorially toward Roger, ignoring the protesting of his ribs, "is rathuh awkward and Ah would appreciate, if you keep it confidential." Roger, he knew, loved holding secrets, thinking it gave him one up on people. "Ah am finding Mothuh's reputation precedes me. Recently, Ah have been uninvited from some of the more lucrative games as soon as it became known that Maude is mah mothuh. Her rathuh creative ways of ensuring she wins have become legendary, and Ah fear mah name has become attached to hers in a most disagreeable fashion. After more than a little soul searching, Ah have decided it would be best, for all concerned, if Ezra Standish disappeared."

Roger laughed and continued his inspection of the car. The Porsche was in pristine condition, and already he could think of a handful of men who would love to get the car at the bargain price he'd be offering. He glanced over at Standish; the man was leaning against the car, looking for all the world as though he didn't care whether he sold the car or not. Roger knew he cared; he just wasn't sure how little he could offer without insulting Standish. He didn't want him to go elsewhere and start a bidding war on the car. He circled the car one more time, thinking. Yes, he'd give Maude's son a decent price for the car, not anything close to what he'd get if he went to one of the big dealers and traded up for something nicer, though what that would be was hard to imagine.

He stopped his circling and mentioned a price. Ezra thought about it, then nodded his acceptance. Roger patted himself on the back. He might have gotten the car for a little less, but he hadn't wanted to risk losing it. Besides, the poor man deserved a break for having to deal with the problems associated with having a woman like Maude as a mother.

Closing his eyes, Ezra willed the pain in his chest away. "Coughing is a bitch," he complained to the walls of his empty room. As much as he loathed doctors, he was going to have

to find one. His damaged ribs were not handling the cold he managed to catch at Sophie's. As meticulously clean as Sophie kept her small house, one would think it impossible to find enough germs to make anyone ill. Leave it to him to defy the odds and find the one cold-producing germ and invite it to live in his lungs. Not only his lungs, but his head also hurt, and his stomach hurt; to say he was nauseous was an understatement. Lord, help him if he began to throw up. You would think he'd be improving, but, if possible, he felt worse than he had since being admitted to the hospital. As much as he hated to admit it, he'd been foolish to throw the painkillers away and even more foolish to leave the antibiotic medicine at the ranch; he should have swallowed his pride and asked Mr. Larabee to retrieve the pill bottle from under the bed. The virus he picked up was getting worse, and at a time when he needed to be in top form, he felt as though he were barely functioning.

"Ezra, Ezra," he chastised himself. "Your attitude will simply not do. Be a real man. You must not let a few aches and pains take over your life. You must cease this negative talk. You have too much to get done to be ill, so get over it."

He sat on the bed, beside his purchases, and began sorting through them. Later, he promised himself he would laugh about how easy it had been to morph from Ezra Standish, a relatively successful gambler, to Eddie Simms, an unsuccessful bum; right now, he hurt too much to even think about laughing. He had been stumped on how to make his purchases at the Goodwill store without being noticed. He had thought that his expensive clothes would stand out like a sore thumb, making him memorable, but he needn't worry. His suit jacket and tie were left behind on the hotel's bed, his shirt untucked and his pants wrinkled from driving, combined with his unshaven face and unwashed body, kept anyone from getting too close. He had been one among many, all trying to find something suitable to wear.

It was amazing, if one bothered to think about it, how people turned their heads away from the less fortunate of society. He saw people do it all the time; he was counting on that tendency to help him become invisible, but still, it was a bit unnerving to be the one people turned from. He stood up and walked to the cracked mirror, wondering what people had seen when they avoided looking at him, as he sorted through the used clothes at the store. Sure, he needed a shave, but he had, deliberately, been letting his beard grow; pity it wouldn't grow faster or come in fuller. He'd probably have to settle for a scraggly, unkempt look; he doubted he'd be able to grow a decent mustache in the next few days. Considering his current streak of misfortune, it is likely that his beard would grow as poorly as it did years ago, during his initial attempts to cultivate a mustache as a young man.

Not having a mustache was acceptable. Eddie Simms probably didn't have the time to take care of a mustache, and according to Buck... According to Mr. Wilmington, a properly groomed mustache required a lot of maintenance. Eddie Simms wouldn't want to spend the time, but maybe Evan...Ezekiel...or whoever came next would.

Enough about the facial hair, he decided. He skipped over the shadows under his eyes; he spent the night behind the wheel and could be excused for having shadows. He moved onto the hollows in his cheeks. Losing a couple of pounds had made a real difference in his appearance; he'd have to weigh to know how much he lost, but the loss changed his face, making him appear gaunt.

He turned away from the mirror, not wanting to consider his transformation from Ezra to Eddie any longer. Everything was decided. By day's end, he would be Eddie Simms: high school dropout, sometimes dishwasher, sometimes janitor, and most always, invisible bum. That was the plan: to become someone else. Someone, no one knew, so he could get into Moore's offices and get the information he needed to keep his mother safe. ... and then Eddie Simms would die the same way Ezra Standish died. He would become someone else entirely, someone unburdened by family.

Unburdened. He wondered if Mr. Larabee felt the same way, now that he was gone. Given his anger, probably. It had been a mistake to go to Judge Travis's office. It would have been much better not to know their names or what they looked or sounded like. Certainly, it would have been better to remain a mystery to them. What must they think of him? Oh, he knew the answer to that one, thief. He should have said something to Mr. Larabee. Not that any explanation he could

provide would erase the fact that he was a thief and not to be trusted, but he could have said why he needed the money. He would still be a thief, but then, at least, Mr. Larabee would understand he stole from his brothers to help his mother, not because he was greedy. He should have explained; he would still have had to leave, but maybe ... Damn, he should have said something. He hadn't because he had been too stunned; the feeling of his dreams crumbling away, leaving him falling and falling, had been too overwhelming for him to think.

He pushed the clothes to the edge of the bed, the thoughts of his family tiring him, as his cold had not. He stretched out on the bed, pulling the edges of the bedspread around him. He had an hour before he was to meet Manny. He'd use the time to rest and recoup some of the strength his cold was leeching from him. He would rest and not think about his family. He wouldn't wonder if Buck, Mr. Wilmington, and Mr. Dunne returned from Boston. He wouldn't wonder about Mr. Sanchez and the big dog that followed his every move. He would not wonder whether Dr. Jackson had begun working at the clinic. He would not wonder about Mr. Tanner and the friendship they almost had. He would not wonder about Mr. Chris Larabee.

Lord, if Mr. Larabee were to see him now, he would discover he had been right about his younger brother. He would have to admit to Mr. Larabee that he had nothing. He would have to admit he was something less than his father's favored sons. His car was gone; sold to provide funds for his change of identity. He no longer slept in the finest hotels; Eddie Simms wouldn't even be allowed in the lobby of a decent hotel. He didn't eat at five-star restaurants; he might get a job in the kitchen of one, though. His expensive clothes were gone; Eddie owned more than slightly worn jeans and faded t-shirts. He couldn't even be accused of living out of his suitcase; he had been reduced to a backpack. The only thing he had left was his portfolio of stocks and bonds. Those papers were hidden in a locker in the bus terminal, waiting for Eddie to die. The only good thing about it all was that Mr. Chris Larabee, the much-beloved son of Landon, was not around to see him.

Didn't matter, he told himself. With luck, he would not be Eddie for too long. He'd take care of Moore, and then he could become someone else. He couldn't go back to being Ezra Standish, but he could become someone better...someone trustworthy...someone people respected...someone people turned to in times of trouble... and then years from now, he'd return to Chris Larabee and show him... show him the real Ezra.

It didn't matter that he lost his dream; he would dream another one and let the new one carry him through for the rest of his life. He would not think about his brothers, but he would think about the words Monica claimed Vin Tanner asked her to pass on. He would pretend Vin Tanner said those words and, having said them, actually meant them. He would pretend his other brothers said those words, too. He would hold onto the words, and, during bad times, he would take them out and let them warm him. But he was Ezra P. Standish, and P stood for pragmatic, and a Pragmatic Standish understood that it was best to cut all ties with Vin Tanner and the other members of his family. Chris Larabee had made it plain, they did not want or need him, and it was best if he returned the sentiment.



Following Vin to the front desk, Chris was astounded by the number of children in the lobby. It had been a while since he was in Vegas, and he knew many of the casinos were trying to get the family trade, but still, it seemed as though there were an extraordinary number of children milling about. One child, in particular, seemed taken with Vin. It took him a moment to realize why. His brother, dressed in faded jeans, a red flannel shirt, scuffed brown boots, and with his long hair loose under a floppy cowboy hat, which he said he found in an antique shop, looked as though he had just come in off the range. Thankful, he had left both his duster and hat in the truck. Chris grinned when Vin turned away from the man behind the desk and found himself the object of intense scrutiny from several young faces.

"Are you a real cowboy?" the bravest child asked the question for the other children, beginning to crowd around the two men.

Vin forced a smile onto his face; he hated it when he became the center of attention. "Yep, I reckon you could say that. My brother and me both are," he was not going to get stuck answering a thousand questions all by himself.

"He doesn't look like a cowboy," a little girl with long dark braids said, obviously doubting the veracity of Vin's words.

"He's wearing cowboy boots," Vin persisted.

Chris thought a glare at his brother, but leaned down to better look at the child in her eyes,

"You're right. I am not a cowboy. I am a rancher."

"So, Chris, what do you have on this ranch? My guess it would be cows. Cows... Cowboy. Not a big stretch," Vin winked at the children, thankful for their presence. Chris wouldn't like his news, but at least he wouldn't explode with all the children around.

Chris stood up and mock-glared at his brother, "Good thing you drove, 'cause if I was driving, you'd have a long walk home for calling me a cowboy."

"Call 'em like I see 'em, Christopher," Vin's smile fell from his face as he leaned in closer to talk to Chris in low tones, "Botello's been delayed. He is still going to meet with us, but his secretary told the front desk to tell us it might be an hour or more before he'd be free."

Chris swallowed the curse that came to his lips. There were too many children about to use that kind of language, but still, the news of the delay sent a chill running up his spine. They needed to find Ezra soon. Not just because he was coughing as the girl, Monica, told Vin, but because he was coughing and wrapping his ribs. He better not have caught pneumonia. Nathan would have a fit.

"An hour? Not enough time to do anything other than wait," Chris swallowed another expletive. Even in the best of times, he hated waiting, and these were not the best of times. He could hear a clock ticking every time he closed his eyes. Time was running out in their search for Ezra; he could feel that deep in his bones. They needed to find their brother quickly and not because he probably had pneumonia. With each passing minute, Ezra was closer to disappearing forever. They needed to find Ezra and get him home, where he could get well. The ranch was a place where he could keep Ezra and his other brothers safe.

"You sure this Botello can help us?" Chris asked.

"Not sure of anything. Leon said Botello knows everything that happens in Las Vegas and much of what happens in Nevada. Does he know where Ezra is? I don't know."

"Wait, it is." Botello was a better lead than anything else they had.

An hour later, Chris stood up, glaring at the hapless clerk who shook his head no to Chris's unspoken question of whether Botello or his secretary had called for them.

"Going to stretch my legs," he told his brother.

"Uh-huh," Vin answered from beneath his hat, pulled low over his eyes.

"You awake?" Chris asked.

"Yep."

Satisfied Vin was not asleep, Chris decided to check out the casino. Long strides took him through the lobby and into the crowded casino. Intent on checking every face in the room, Chris made no effort to appear friendly and didn't bother to change his visage as people bumped into each other in their efforts to give the man with the angry eyes a wide berth. He didn't expect to find his brother in there. Part of him would be disappointed if he stumbled over Ezra at one of the gaming tables; he expected more from his brother. While hiding in plain sight was said to be an effective way to become invisible, it had been done to death, and he suspected Ezra rarely did the usual or ordinary. He gave the room another searching look, but in his heart, he knew Ezra was not there.

His brother had gone to ground and was waiting until the right moment to strike out at Moore. He could only hope, he could find his brother before he did something stupid.

A glance into the lobby showed Vin still sitting in the chair he claimed more than an hour earlier, looking impossibly comfortable with his long legs stretched out in front of him. Satisfied there was no news, Chris returned to his examination of the gamblers. This time, though, he didn't look for his missing brother. This time, his eyes searched the crowd for Ezra's mother.

It didn't matter that he had not seen the woman for almost thirty years. It didn't matter the last time he saw the woman; he was a child. It did not matter that age changes the looks of people. Years ago, he promised to never forget the face of the woman who stole his baby brother

away from him, and he had not. He doubted she would be there; like Ezra, she would be difficult to find, but still, he searched the crowd for the thief. If, by chance, she was in the throng of people, he would find her. Finally, satisfied neither Ezra nor his mother was in that particular room of this particular casino, and knowing a room-by-room search of Las Vegas was highly impractical, Chris turned his back on the gamblers intent on losing their money and strode back towards Vin and to the waiting.



“Please accept my apologies for making you wait. I was attending to a problem with one of our guests. It took longer than I had expected.” he hated bringing the police into the casino; it made the guests nervous to see uniformed officers walking about, but there was no help for it. Alex Richards had been caught red-handed exiting a suite that was not his, carrying rather expensive jewelry that was not his either, in his coat pocket.

Fool. Did he think he could steal in this casino and get away with it? Fortunately, one of his security men thought he recognized the jewel thief from a problem in another hotel, and Richards was shadowed from the minute he walked out of his room until the moment he walked out of Mrs. Harriet Carson’s suite. Unfortunately, while the police detectives had carted Richards off to jail with promises of a lengthy sentence, Richards would be out on bail by evening. Too bad, he couldn’t do as his predecessors were rumored to have done in the past. He loved the thought of dispensing a little justice of his own.

Tommy Botello gestured for the two men to take a seat as he walked back behind his desk and sat down. He vowed, as he heard the chair groan, he would go home early and take his wife for the long walk his doctor recommended. As much as he hated to admit it, the doctor and his wife were right; he needed to find the time for exercise if he planned to be around to take his grandchildren fishing. As he did, frequently, since the nuptials, he examined the picture of his only child in her wedding dress, smiling stiffly into the camera, as though wondering what she had gotten herself into. He wondered too. The idiot she married, to flaunt her independence from him and her mother, wouldn’t or couldn’t treat her right. Ben was too self-indulgent to put Beth’s needs first and too stupid to realize how much of a mistake he was making by not doing so. And now, there was a baby on the way. Not even married a year, and she was pregnant. He knew, in his heart, Beth had gotten pregnant deliberately, in a last-ditch effort to make her husband grow up. It wouldn’t work, he wanted to tell her, but she would find out soon enough. Without sighing, he turned to the men sitting across from him, even as he promised Beth through her picture, This will be my last cigarette of the day. She couldn’t expect him to quit all at once, could she?

“Leon asked me to talk to you, Mr. Tanner. So, here I am. How may I help you?” Botello asked pleasantly, but his thoughts were not pleasantries; he was needed elsewhere in the casino, and only the fact that he owed Leon a favor kept him from breaking this appointment entirely.

“I appreciate you talking to us, Mr. Botello. We know you are a busy man,” Vin spoke before Chris had a chance to. He allowed Chris to come with him only after his brother swore he’d keep his mouth shut and let him handle things. This was what he did for a living, after all, and he reckoned he knew what he was doing. Nathan’s stories of how Chris’s idea of getting information out of people usually involved grabbing them by their necks and shaking them until they coughed up answers had him make Chris promise to let him do the talking.

Shaking information out of people sometimes worked, and he, too, had used it with great success, but with a man like Botello, it could prove dangerous. He preferred a more subtle, even deferential approach in this instance. When he parked the truck, he reminded Chris, right politely too, to let him ask the questions. Chris reluctantly agreed, and Vin believed Chris would do his level best to keep his word, but Chris was waiting for a reason to explode, especially after having to wait for over an hour. He had his fingers crossed that Botello didn’t toss any matches Chris’s way.

Tommy Botello waved Vin’s words away, dismissing the need for buttering him up. “Leon asked me to listen to you, so tell me how and why I should help a bounty hunter. I don’t like bounty hunters in my casino. Guns make my clientele uneasy, and uneasy people become unhappy and unhappy people spend their money elsewhere.”

Leon told him Vin Tanner was a bounty hunter, a good one, and with a few more years under his belt, he could be one of the best; sort of like, who was it, the Canadian Mounties, he would always get his man. The best or not, he still didn't like the thought of a bounty hunter roaming his casino and resort searching for his quarry. Guests picked up on things like that. "I walked through your metal detectors, so you know I am not carrying a gun," Vin bristled at the suggestion he would endanger innocents by arresting a runner in the middle of a casino.

Botello recognized the anger in the blue eyes and nodded, slightly, as much of an apology as he was willing to give.

Tanner accepted the apology and continued, "Leon told me ya know everyone in this town and nothin' happens around Vegas without ya being aware of it. My brother, Chris Larabee, and I are lookin' for a man named Ezra Standish." Vin finished his sentence, but shifted forward in his seat, aware that something had just happened and unsure of what. He didn't need to look at Chris to know he, too, felt the change in atmosphere in the room.

Botello took a second look at both men as he casually leaned back in his chair and blew smoke into the room. Larabee and Tanner. Interesting. He hadn't known who the man in black was, but now that he had a name, he could see the resemblance. This changed things; he had thought to listen to Tanner, find out why he was after Standish, and then send him on his way, but this changed things. So, Tanner was one of Larabee's sons? And the legitimate heir was at his side.

He tried not to betray his interest in the Larabee name, but judging by the narrowing of both men's eyes, he knew he had not succeeded. He'd listen to them; it wouldn't hurt to have the sons of Landon Larabee feel indebted to him. "And?"

Vin shook off the feeling of having just been put under the microscope; he would examine it later, and continued, "Our father died recently, and we all got to meet brothers we didn't know we had. One of our brothers, Ezra Standish, came to the reading of our father's will severely beaten. He left the ranch a few days ago, and we think he has gone after the man who beat him, someone named Moore."

"There are a lot of men named Moore." This was definitely a good day to have gotten out of bed and come into work, not that he missed any days, ever.

"Men named Moore are asked to high-stakes poker games?"

"How high?"

"Moore lost fifty grand to Ezra alone, more than that to Ezra's mother, Maude."

"Ah... so the lovely Maude was at this game. Have you asked her about your Mr. Moore?" It sounded as though it was not a true high-stakes game, but still high enough to make it interesting for some people.

"You know Maude?" Vin tried to keep the question casual and to keep the incredulity out of his voice. "Maude Standish?"

"Standish, is Maude calling herself Standish again?"

"We don't know what she is calling herself. Or, where she is. Or, how to get in touch with her. Do you?" Chris asked, keeping his voice soft and pleasant. A person hearing his voice would be tempted to write the man off as too mild-mannered to be a threat to anyone, but Botello had not gotten where he had in life without being able to see the man behind the voice. And the man he was currently looking at held tight reins on a barely controlled temper that, if unleashed, would make the man very dangerous.

Botello tapped out a second cigarette and thought a sincere apology at the picture of his daughter. Putting the cigarette into his mouth, he offered the pack to the brothers, thinking that if he got rid of the cigarettes, then maybe he could keep from smoking all afternoon. "Want one?" He asked, thinking how much he hated to gossip, but this one time, he'd tell the men what they wanted to know. Not because the man in black particularly scared him, although he admitted to himself, if he weren't here in his office, surrounded by his people, and if this Chris Larabee were just a little more aggressive, he might, just might, be a little nervous. But he was in his office with a panic button next to his knee and big, burly men with even bigger guns waiting for his signal on the other side of the door, and he calmly met the glare from Landon Larabee's son. He would tell

them what he knew, not because he was scared, but because these were Landon Larabee's sons, and he had liked Landon and was prepared to like the man's sons.

"No thanks," Vin answered for them both.

"Filthy habit," Botello inhaled deeply, "I promised my daughter I would quit. I've promised it many times, but this time, I mean to really quit. She's pregnant, our first grandchild."

"Congratulations," Vin said.

Botello ignored the congratulations, seemingly intent on his cigarette. "Of course, I know Maude. Most of the people in this town, anyone who has been in this town any length of time, know Maude. She was here when I got here, and I've been here for twenty-seven years."

"Do you know how we can get in touch with her? Her last name or something?" Chris leaned forward in his chair. Maude would know who this Moore character was, and that bit of knowledge would get them much closer to finding Ezra.

"Maude has had so many last names that I gave up trying to keep up with them long ago. She is simply Maude. As to where she is now, I don't know. Couldn't even begin to guess. She had family in South Carolina, but she never spoke of them, and I don't have any names to give you. She's not in Vegas, hasn't been here in several months.

"You said she won big at a game, then she's got money in her pocket, and if she has money, she's off somewhere seeing how quickly she can spend it. The best way to find her would be to find the latest hot spot for the rich and famous and go there. She will be there looking for her next victim."

"Victim?" Chris asked.

"That's what I would call them. Surprisingly, few of them think of themselves as her victims. In fact, most of the men she latches onto count themselves fortunate to have known her. Maude is a beautiful leech, draining her men of their money," he didn't try to hide his disgust with the woman, though he knew the men across from him would not realize his feelings toward the lovely Maude were not based on the way she treated her victims, but because of the way she treated her son.

Vin didn't look at Chris; he could feel the waves of anger radiating off him as Botello talked. Chris knew something about Maude, but he hadn't bothered to share with the rest of them and probably wouldn't anytime soon. "What do you mean?" He asked Botello. Maybe Botello would tell him what Chris wouldn't.

Stubbing out the cigarette, Botello crumpled the cigarette pack and tossed it in the garbage before he could light another. "Let me explain about the people who come here. Walk through a casino, and you see all these people gambling, and you tend to think of them as 'Gamblers.' Not true. Most people come here for the experience of a first-class hotel where you are treated like royalty. They want to eat gourmet food, see the shows, and only incidentally do they gamble. When they gamble, most of them lose, but they do not lose enough to ruin their vacation, and they leave happy. They have seen Vegas and have stories and pictures to show the folks back home.

"Then, there are the people puffed up on the success of their Poker Nights with the boys. They think they can come here and win big. Some can. Most can't. They want to gamble and win, take some money home, and tell everyone how they won big in Vegas. If they are smart, they learn an important lesson: they aren't as good as they think they are. If they aren't smart, they get angry."

"Sounds like Moore," Vin muttered softly.

Botello continued as though he hadn't heard the interruption; "Next, there are the people who come because they can't stay away. They need to play. If they are not in the casinos, they are at the tracks or spending grocery money on the lottery. Their bookies see more of them than their families. Bleeding hearts see them and go on all the talk shows to talk about the evils of Vegas. Idiots. If we weren't here, those people would find other ways to get their thrills, other addictions," he all but sneered his contempt, "and some of those addictions may be a lot nastier than gambling.

"Finally, there is the professional gambler. Maybe he has deep pockets and maybe he doesn't, but he is here for the challenge of the game."

"Sounds like the addict."

"No. The addict plays to play. He can't help himself. If there isn't a poker game on, he'll be equally as happy with a slot machine. He can win everything or lose everything in a single throw of the dice or turn of the card. He lives for the rush that gambling causes. A real gambler is a skilled artist. A pleasure to watch. He doesn't live for the rush; he lives because he wants to be the best. A subtle difference, but it is there.

"Maude's a professional gambler?" Vin asked, knowing without asking, that his brother is one.

"Maude is very good, better than most, but no. I wouldn't call her a professional. Maude is a breed apart. She doesn't come to Vegas to gamble. She does gamble, and she always walks away from the table with more than she had, but gambling isn't enough for her. Maude comes because this is where the money is," he paused and looked the two men over: Landon Larabee's sons. No question about who sired them; you could see Landon in every move they made. Tanner favored his father more than his brother, but Chris Larabee radiated the same energy and charisma that drew people to Landon.

Later, he would send someone to find out both the names of the bastards Landon claimed as his and the details of how he bequeathed his rather substantial fortune. Obviously, Tanner and Larabee knew of Ezra since they were here looking for him, which meant Landon claimed Ezra as one of his. He didn't know whether to hope for the kid's sake that Landon left Ezra a bundle or not. If Landon left Ezra any money, Maude would be showing up sometime soon to wrench what she perceived as her share from him. Poor bastard.

He inhaled deeply, enjoying the taste of the cigarette before continuing, "Vegas is one of the places where money can be found. There are many other places oozing money, and I am sure, Maude knows them all. Maude's incredibly beautiful, even after all these years. Witty and fun-loving. Men are drawn to her, like moths to a flame. And she's attracted to them, provided they have enough money. She's gone through more boyfriends, fiancés, and husbands than I could even begin to count. Seems like every time she blows into town, she has a new name. She doesn't keep her conquests for long. I guess that she bores quickly. The point is: Maude makes money gambling. She makes more money by marrying. She makes even more when she divorces. And if she's between husbands, she'll whisper in some man's ear about a bargain, a deal, a stock, and hold out her hand for him to fill with cash. She should have more money than Bill Gates, but she doesn't. She never hangs on to it; she runs through it faster than water through a sieve."

"So, how does this help us find Ezra?" Chris asked impatiently, with this man and the way he had been studying them.

"It doesn't," Botello almost grinned. It sounded as though Landon Larabee was in the room.

"Then we are wasting our time," Chris said.

So, like his father, Tommy Botello thought. It was eerie. "No. You're not," he reached for his phone, "Let me make a few calls. Go eat. Jenny will tell you where. After lunch, I will have something for you."

Silently, Chris followed Vin to Jenny's desk. He let his brother talk to the secretary as he replayed their conversation with Botello through his mind; later, he'd talk to Vin and check his feelings against those of his brother's. It wasn't obvious, but Botello had reacted to the Larabee name. Why?

"Ready?" Vin's question broke into Chris's thoughts. "Miss Lake gave us a list of places to choose from." He pushed Chris towards the elevator's door and turned to flash the attractive secretary a wide smile.

"Let's see," Chris snatched the neatly typed list out of Vin's hand when his brother stopped to put what appeared to be a pager into his pocket. He lifted an eyebrow in question.

"She said she'd page us when Mr. Botello was ready to see us again. That way, we wouldn't be tied to the lobby."

Chris punched the down button for the elevator and turned to look at the doorway to the office suite they had just vacated. "Think he's going to find him?"

"Don't know, but I think he's gonna try."

The elevator door opened, and they stepped inside. Vin pointed with his eyes to the camera in the corner of the elevator. "They are everywhere. I counted six in the lobby, and I'm sure I missed some."

"Paranoid, aren't they?"

Vin shrugged, "A Lot of money in this town. Lots of information, too."

Chris figured, even though he didn't have anything to say worth anything to anyone listening, he'd keep quiet, at least while they were on the elevator. He didn't like the thought of anyone collecting information on him, no matter how innocuous the information was. He glanced down at the list he had grabbed out of Vin's hand, seeing the phone number scrawled across the top of the page. He didn't think the number belonged to the phone in Botello's office, not when the office's number was neatly typed on the letterhead. He glanced over at his brother, another question on his face.

"Some women like men who smile. Ya might want to try it sometimes."

If Buck had said something about him not smiling (and he had on more than one occasion), he'd just chalk it up to Buck being Buck. Somehow, coming from Vin, the remark stung.

"I do okay."

Vin stepped out of the elevator, dodged the people trying to get on, and turned to Chris,

"So, when was the last time ya got laid?"

"What?" It was like talking to Buck.

"Paying for it don't count."

He was not having this conversation with this man, a man he had only known for a handful of days; no matter that with every fiber of his being, he knew the man to be his brother. He was not having this conversation in a casino lobby. Most definitely, he was not having this conversation in front of cameras. He made a show of looking at his watch. "He told us to get lunch. It's closer to supper time."

"Careful, Larabee, someone might think yer a cowboy or somethin' and never been to Vegas. People in Vegas start their day later than ranchers."

Chris shook his head in amusement, "No one is going to think I am a cowboy, not with you walking beside me." Chris made a point of looking at Vin's scruffy-looking boots and equally scruffy hat.

Women are attracted to cowboys. It's the hat."

Well, there wasn't much to say after that. "You come to Vegas often?" Hopefully, that was a safe topic of conversation, and if Vin were familiar with the area, he could choose some place off Miss Lake's list or recommend something else.

"Never been here before," Vin admitted with a grin.

"Never? So, you're getting your facts about Vegas from where?"

"Television. Where else?"

Chris laughed, "You ever worry about TV getting it wrong?"

"Hey! TV is never wrong. Ask anyone." Vin stopped and turned to look at Chris, his face suddenly serious. "Be thankful for television. All I know about ranching I learned from Bonanza reruns."

Intent on wondering why the sudden seriousness had appeared on Vin's face, Chris almost missed what he said. When the words sank in, he muttered, "Oh shit. A comedian. " Vin grinned. Chris walked into that one.



Lost in his thoughts and fears, Nathan entered the clinic. He could hear someone talking, but ignored it. He wanted to get to his office, exchange his overcoat for a lab coat, and sit behind his desk reading charts until patients started arriving; he didn't want to talk about what had happened or answer stupid questions about how he was feeling.

Busy telling himself he was fine, he didn't see it coming. He only felt the blow, and before he could realize he had just had the air knocked out of him, he was falling to the floor.

"Oh. I am so sorry. Are you all right?"

Nathan looked up from the most undignified position of being sprawled out on the floor and decided the woman who had just run him down with her cart filled with medicines and files had the most extraordinary eyes.

"Dr. Jackson, are you all right?"

Absolutely gorgeous, and he was sitting on the floor looking up at her, unable to think of anything that sounded remotely like English. Somehow, that didn't seem fair; he knew Shakespeare backwards and forwards and very often quoted sonnets to his dates. Right now, a simple hello would do. He nodded.

"I am so sorry. I was in a hurry and not paying any attention. I just wanted to get my car loaded so I could get going. I am heading out to Cooper Flats, and that means it will take close to an hour before I can see my first patient," she paused, mortified that not only had she knocked him down, but that she was babbling. She held out her hand; helping him get up off the floor was the least she could do after knocking the air out of him, making him look, as he struggled to breathe, like a fish some fisherman had just tossed up on the bank.

Nathan accepted her offered hand and let her assist him to his feet. She was just as beautiful when he was standing as when he was sprawled across the floor. Amazing.

Emmett Griggs rounded the corner and stopped in surprise to see Nathan standing there. "Nathan, son, you didn't have to come in today," he began to chastise his young colleague, but then he saw the stunned look in Nathan's eyes and, following the direction of Nathan's gaze, he understood.

He said, his voice colored with humor, "I see you've met Raine."

Nathan wanted to acknowledge Emmett's presence, but his eyes remained fixed on the vision in mustard yellow scrubs, not his favorite color, but perfect on her.

He opened his mouth to say hello to prove to her she hadn't addled his senses when she had knocked him down. He opened his mouth to introduce himself as Doctor Nathan Jackson, but instead, words he had no control over poured out of his mouth. "Emmett never told me you were the most beautiful woman on Earth."

He closed his eyes when he realized what he had just said. He had not been at work for more than five minutes, and he had just given the clinic's nurse practitioner good reason to hit him with a sexual harassment suit. "I mean," he tried again, unsure of what he should say to pull him out of the hole he had just dug. He lived with Bucklyn Reed Wilmington, the man who had suitable words for any woman, any occasion; why hadn't any of Buck's knowledge rubbed off on him? "I mean," he looked up into her beautiful eyes and saw they sparkled with humor, "would you care to join me for lunch?"

Raine bit down on her bottom lip to keep from laughing. She knew he was thoroughly embarrassed and, if she laughed, he would think she was laughing at him. She was, but not for any bad reason. He was so cute stumbling around searching for words; it was almost as though he was a teenager asking a girl out for the first time.

"No, I can't. I am sorry."

The angel smiled, and engrossed in the perfection of her smile, it took Nathan a moment to process that she had declined his invitation. "B-b-but."

"Can we make it another time?" Raine asked. She knew she shouldn't be doing this. Dating doctors was never a good idea. Dating them meant playing second fiddle to their patients, and she had promised herself never to play second fiddle again, not after Gary. Still, she crossed her fingers as she searched his eyes, liking what she saw in them. It wouldn't hurt to go out just once; it wasn't as though she didn't have a long list of patients to care for. "I have so many patients to see today, I probably won't even stop for lunch."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes. No. I can't tomorrow." What about this man almost made her forget she was leaving, in the morning, for a trip to Los Angeles to see her father? She had been planning the trip for weeks.

"Oh." Nathan hoped he was still smiling, "Maybe another time then."

"I'll be back next Monday." Raine spoke all in a rush, not wanting him to turn away without understanding, "I'm leaving in the morning to help my father move. He's sold his business and is

moving in with me. His health hasn't been good since my mother died, and I thought I could keep an eye on him if he were here."

"Well, then Monday," Nathan knew he was grinning like an idiot, and a small part of his brain rejoiced that neither Buck nor Chris was around to see him at this particular moment. A larger part of his brain was dancing; his angel had agreed to go out with him.

"Lunch? Or would you prefer to go out after work for supper?"

"Lunch," Raine answered. "I have to fix supper for my father, or he might get involved with his music and forget to eat."

"His music?" and no, he was not just delaying her, keeping her near him with questions. He was genuinely interested; her father must be a truly remarkable man to have created an angel.

"He writes songs."

"Really?"

"Yes, really." Raine took a moment to pretend to check the supplies in her supply cart, a smile escaping her attempt to appear detached and professional, but her sudden thought of promoting using carts to bump into Mr. Right hit her like a song her father could write. No, and no, again. It was too early to call him Mr. Right. He was... an interesting man. That was all. Period. She flushed and hoped the doctor didn't notice. He was merely an interesting man; he was an extraordinary man... Handsome, smart, and so much more. She had to talk to her friends who had grown up in For Corners and ask them their opinions of him. "I'd best get going."

Nathan released his grip on the cart when her eyes looked pointedly at them.

"Drive carefully," he called out to her back as she began wheeling the cart toward her car.

"I will," she tossed over her shoulder, not allowing herself the luxury of looking back at him.

"Hey, Emmett," Nathan began walking backward toward Emmett's office, reluctant to take his eyes off the door lest she return through the door. "What can you tell me--?"



"Something bothering you, Buck?" Josiah asked.

Buck frowned, considering his answer. After a moment, he nodded his head, "Had an interesting experience this morning. Don't know quite what to make of it.

"Want to talk?" Josiah asked as he unpacked the large coffee maker Buck had brought home and began to wash it out.

Buck shifted his weight from one hip to the other, obviously debating the merits of talking.

Sighing, he pulled a chair out and sat down. "You going to get some coffee brewing?" "I will as soon as I read the instructions."

"Oh hell, Josiah. It's a coffee pot. You don't need to read any instructions. Put some coffee into the basket thingy and water in the pot and plug it in."

"That's one way to do it," Josiah replied as he quickly scanned the instructions. "I am trying for something a little more palatable."

"You saying my coffee ain't fit to drink?"

"Tell you what, let me fix this pot and then you can compare." Josiah took his time measuring the coffee, wanting to give Buck time to decide if he needed to talk. The two men were quiet as they waited for the coffee to brew.

"JD will be another half hour or so, finishing up in the barn," Josiah said as he handed Buck a mug, the coffee looking rich and fragrant. He hoped Buck would tell him what was bothering him, and perhaps, armed with the knowledge that the chances of JD barging in were slim, he would feel free to discuss what was bothering him.

"Smells good," Buck stalled, telling himself that it wasn't anything to get upset about. A chance meeting, nothing more. He was blowing it all out of proportion, but maybe he should tell Josiah about it. Get a second opinion. He didn't want Chris to think he'd been talking out of turn. Still, it was weird.

"I used a measuring cup."

Buck snorted, shifting his focus to a different matter, instead of the unusual minutes earlier. "That's one way to do it. I need to get you out on the trail. Out there, waking up before the sun,

spending every bit of daylight searching for those strays that have managed to get separated from the herd, you don't much care what coffee tastes like. All you want is the coffee to wake you up and get you moving. Still, this stuff tastes mighty."

"So, what happened to cause you to come back angry?" Josiah glanced at the clock on the wall and decided to get the ball rolling; they didn't have all day.

"I ain't angry," Buck smiled at Josiah's arched eyebrow; it said he didn't believe that statement, not for one minute did he believe. "Maybe, a little angry, but it's not a new anger, more like it is a remembered anger. Know what I mean?"

"No."

"Yeah. Well, I dropped Nathan off and made sure he got in OK. I would have gone in with him, but he made it real plain he didn't want me walking in with him. The stubborn fool should have stayed home. He didn't say anything about it, but he was hurting and is more than a little shaken up about walking up those steps and going back to the office."

"He's very brave."

"Well, that's Nathan for you. Brave...Determined...He sets goals for himself, and there ain't anyone who's going to tell him he can't make them. Those algae-eating, bottom-feeders might have killed him last night, and he knows it, but did they scare him off? No, not for a minute. He has just dug in his heels. ... They scared him, but he won't back down.... And something's going on with his grandparents. Won't tell me what, but he will, and soon."

"Nathan always tells you things?"

"Mostly."

"So, you are upset about the attack on Nathan."

"Sure."

"And?" Josiah prompted, knowing there was more.

"It was plain weird." Buck studied the bottom of his mug for a minute before continuing, "It's nothing bad. I guess, you'd put this in the Twilight Zone category more than in the get upset category..."

"And?" worse than pulling teeth came to mind as Josiah waited for Buck to get to the heart of the matter.

"I dropped Nate off and waited a bit. I needed to make sure everything was OK. Then I went to Keller's to get the coffee maker. I was putting it in the trunk when I heard a woman calling my name, 'Buck? Buck Wilmington, is that you?' Now, Josiah, I am particularly good at putting faces and names together, but I'll be honest. When I turned around, I had no idea who I was talking to. 'You don't remember me,' she teased, and I had to admit, I didn't. For a moment, I thought she was someone I had ...you know, spent some time with. It was plumb embarrassing. 'Don't tell me, I have changed that much?' she said. She held her hand out for me to shake, and I did, while I was desperately racking my brain for a name. 'It's Ella,' she said. 'Ella Gaines.' Then I remembered. She and Chris were an item during his freshman year at college.

"It might be hard to believe, but Chris was even quieter back then than he is now. He dated, but...well, he wasn't like me. All he did during his first year of college was go to classes and get good grades. Then he met Ella at the end of his freshman year, and I guess the best you can say is that he turned a little rebellious. During the summer break, he didn't come home to help out like he usually did. Instead, he and Ella went up and down the California coast partying. He didn't come home all summer. The few calls we got from him were collect calls and always ended with him and Dad yelling at each other. Chris didn't register for college that fall. He called from California to say he and Ella were going to hitchhike across Europe instead of going to school. He said he'd learn more, seeing Europe, than he could by going to college.

"Dad was livid. You couldn't mention Chris's name those days without Dad blowing up. Then something happened, I'm not sure what, but Dad got a call in the middle of the night, and he left the next morning without saying where he was going. He returned with Chris two days later.

Chris was shaken up, but he never said what happened.

"Ella called a handful of times. Chris talked to her, but he stayed in the kitchen where we could all hear his end of the conversation. He was polite when speaking to her. Nothing ever came of it. He didn't ask her to visit the ranch, and he didn't travel to wherever she was. He

returned to school that winter, and Ella quit calling the ranch, and things returned to normal. Then, I guess it was the end of his sophomore year, and I was visiting him, getting to know the campus before I started in the fall. We were in his room, talking, and there was this knocking at the door. It was Ella. The only time I ever met her face-to-face. She came in, ignoring me completely, saying how sorry she was. Saying she loved him and knew he still loved her...Chris asked me to go and get some drinks from the vending machine or something. I left, got them, and hung outside, talking to some girls for an extra twenty minutes before I headed back up. She was still there. I could hear her through the door.

"She said Dean asked her to marry him, and maybe she would when he came back from his European vacation. She came out of Chris's room, her arms wrapped around Chris, telling him goodbye, saying maybe one day they could get back together, and if it didn't work out, that way then they could still be friends. Chris hugged her back, said goodbye, and let her go. Chris never talked about her after that, and I never saw her again until today.

"She said, 'Ella Gaines.' I asked her how she was doing. 'Fine,' she said. Then, she started talking about how she had heard about Chris losing his family in a fire. She explained she hadn't come to the funeral because her husband had been in the hospital, but she had thought of Chris. 'Losing someone you love is hard,' she said. I reckon her husband must have died, but I didn't think to ask whether she was talking about herself or Chris. I was surprised to see her and astonished that she remembered me. I mean, she met me one time, and I was only a teen. I can understand her recognizing me if we had been close friends," He shook his head in bewilderment.

"Josiah, you've seen those pictures of me from when I was in high school. I was tall, but I grew another two inches after I started college. The time we met, I was still in my gangly kid phase. Since then, I have gained a lot of weight, muscle weight. I don't understand how she recognized me."

Josiah refilled their coffee mugs and pushed one into Buck's waiting hand. While Buck sipped at the coffee, Josiah took the opportunity to formulate a question. "Tell me, Buck, did you recognize her once she told you her name?"

Buck held the mug in his hands, staring into the liquid as he considered his answer. "Like I said, when it comes to remembering a face, I am as good as Dad was. I only met her once, and she was no longer in Chris's life. I didn't bother remembering her; she wasn't anyone I thought I would ever see again.

"I recognized the name, but only because of how angry the little romp through California she and Chris took made Dad. You see, Dad didn't let things get to him, except for the times he and Chris locked horns. This was worse than the two of them locking horns. Dad spat nails any time Nathan or I used Chris's name. More notably, he used language to describe her and her hold on Chris that he never used. I was downright scandalized by the words he used. Nate and I would get out of his way whenever he received a call from Chris. I remember the two of us would bolt out of the house to find some chores that needed to be done. I don't know if I was more horrified, Dad knew those words, or that he used those words when talking about Chris's girlfriend."

Josiah smiled at the image of Nathan and Buck hightailing it out of the house to avoid the fallout from Chris's phone call. "Do you think Chris would have remembered her?",

"Josiah, this is good coffee. Made with a measuring cup, you say," he poured a third cup and took Josiah's cup to top it off before he turned serious. "Like I said, Dad and I remember people, but not Chris. You have to be pretty important to him for him to put your face into long-term memory. I doubt he would have bothered to remember her. When they were over, I am pretty sure he put her behind him.

"Back to this morning... I remembered to ask her what she was doing in Four Corners. 'Just brought a couple of brood mares to Stewart James.' She went on to say she owned a horse ranch just outside Elko. 'You and Chris, stop in and see me. If he is still as interested in horses as he was when we were kids, he'll want to see what I have done.' Then we said our goodbyes.

"Anyway, that's what happened...It was all very casual. A chance meeting." Buck's voice trailed off as he thought about the woman.

"Sounds like an interesting encounter."

"I guess so. It just bothers me... and it bothers me that she is doing business with Stewart.

James."

"Who's he?"

"Rancher. Some of our land borders his. Land we don't use much."

"Why?"

"Things happen. Nothing to call him on. Just things happen." Buck slapped the edge of the table and stretched. "Work ain't getting' done with us in here jawing. Reckon we'd best go give JD a hand. He's a hard worker, but he can't do it all by himself."



Vin began, after having given the waitress his order for another slice of chocolate cake. He saw Chris's eyebrows raise when he ordered his second dessert, and he was a little concerned about what Chris would think about him; he had briefly considered not giving in to the demands of his sweet tooth, but damn, the cake was good. Deciding to keep Chris from thinking about the cake, he asked, "Who are these cousins of yours, and what about them sets Buck off?"

Chris almost gave a flippant answer, but he heard the honest desire for knowledge in Vin's voice. It reminded him that the man, sitting across from him with the too-long hair, which kept falling in his face, obviously irritating him, was his brother. The brother who had been kept, through no fault of his own, from growing up in the home in which he belonged. "Not much to say.

Uncle Curtis is my mother's twin. He's got three sons, Curtis Junior, Garrett, and Jason."

"Buck doesn't like them much. What's that about?"

"Here I was congratulating myself that I finally had a brother who wasn't nosy."

Uncomfortable with the question, Chris tried to redirect his brother's attention.

Vin shrugged as though to say whatever, but Chris saw the brief flash of hurt in his eyes and kicked himself for putting it there. He searched for words to explain his complicated relationship with his cousins and their and his brothers' mutual animosity. "Reckon Buck has reason not to think much of them. Uncle Curtis made it plain, a long time ago, that the only son of

Landon Larabee was interested in letting his boys call cousin, was me."

"Oh." It wasn't much as replies went, but Chris heard the silent condemnation in the short comment. He heard, "Why do you associate with people who don't accept your brothers?' He heard the 'if you do that to the brothers you were raised with, what will you do to me?' Damn, he couldn't leave his brother thinking those things. He had already thrown one brother off the ranch; he didn't want to chase this one away, too. "It's not easy to explain," he began.

"OK," Vin smiled to show he understood, and he did; some people had a hard time talking about themselves. It looked like Chris was one of them.

"If you stay in Four Corners any time, you will run into Uncle Curtis and his boys. Reckon it's only right you know about them." Chris looked around the restaurant; it wasn't the one Botello's secretary recommended. They walked into that one, took one look, and turned around and walked away in search of something more to their liking. That one had been a little too pricey; not that they didn't have money, they did, and apparently a lot of it, but neither of them had wanted to eat at a place where you couldn't pronounce the items on the menu and where they had to remember which fork to use. They walked out of the casino, down the street, and stumbled across this place. Even though it was mid-afternoon, they waited in line for fifteen minutes before being shown a table. It had been worth the wait. The service was good, and the food, though plain and ordinary, was excellent.

He was stalling, he knew. He began talking suddenly and without preamble, knowing that if he waited too much longer, he'd end up not saying anything. "I don't remember my mother. She died when I was a baby. Dad never wanted to talk about her. In our house, she was a name, nothing more, and her name was rarely even mentioned. It was different when I visited Uncle Curtis. He and Aunt Amy talked about her, and it wasn't just talk; they made her come alive for me. They made her a real person in a way Dad never even tried to do.

"Maybe it was hard for him to talk about her." It was more a question than a statement.

"It was, but I wanted, I needed to know about her. Spending time with Uncle Curtis gave me a part of my mother. Something Dad couldn't or wouldn't give me."

Vin nodded slowly; he could understand Chris's need to know his mother. That same need drove him, years ago, to talk with the detectives about his mother's murder.

Lost in his thoughts, Chris missed Vin's nod of understanding and continued, "When I would ask Aunt Amy about my mother, she'd say, 'Look at your uncle and you can see your mother; they were like peas in a pod.' She said they were more than siblings; they were best friends, and my mother's death about broke Uncle Curtis' heart." Vin silently urged Chris to continue.

"It was years before I realized how angry Uncle Curtis was with Dad about Nathan and Buck. When I first started going over to visit, Buck lived with his mother still, and Nathan was too young for overnight visits. So, I didn't notice they were being shunned, but you know, even if I had noticed his attitude towards them, I don't know if I would have quit going. Going there made me feel like I was part of a real family. Something ... I loved Dad, but there were times I would get so angry with him."

"Why?" Vin prodded when Chris stopped talking.

Chris propped his chin on his hand. "Lots of reasons, mostly kid stuff." There was no way he was going to explain how he had resented his father for not settling down and marrying one woman. He would not discuss how humiliated he felt when, by accident, he overheard two teachers talking about Landon Larabee and his bastard sons.

Nor would he say how angry he had been with his father for not adopting Buck and Nathan. He understood now why he didn't risk going to court over Nathan, but why hadn't he done something about Buck? Why hadn't he given his name to his other sons? "I enjoyed being at my Uncle's, and I suppose I just didn't want to hear the things he said about Nathan and Buck. I had fun there. I could play at being a big brother without any of the responsibility."

"I don't understand."

Chris ran a nervous hand through his hair. "I am not explaining this well. I don't know how to explain it... When I went over there, everything I did, said, or thought was right in my cousins' eyes and, more importantly, in Uncle Curtis's eyes. I am sure I got in trouble over there, but for the life of me, I don't remember when. Once, Dad grounded me for something, I don't remember what; I just remember thinking Dad was being unfair, and I not only said so, but I told him Uncle Curtis loved me more than he did. It was a horrible thing to say, and if I had the sense God gave me, I wouldn't have ever hurt Dad that way. As soon as those words left my mouth, I regretted saying them and wished I could call them back. I knew I hurt Dad, but he just smiled and said uncles are allowed to have favorites and are allowed to spoil them, but fathers loved all their children equally and had the duty of making sure they grew into responsible adults. I was arguing about you, I think. He was leaving to be with your mother when you were born. I yelled at him for missing baseball tryouts, but what I was mad about was that I was getting another brother I would never see.

"Your mom wasn't like Ezra's; she brought you over for visits a lot, but I was so sure she'd disappear with you."

Vin smiled slightly at the mention of his mother, but he didn't say anything. He didn't want to do anything to break the mood. On a gut-deep level, he knew Chris rarely talked about his feelings, and his reluctance to talk was more than just the typical man's inability to discuss emotional issues. This was deeper, almost a shyness, almost a fear that talking about personal things would expose a weakness which could be used against him.

Chris swallowed hard as the memory of his father standing over Ezra's empty cradle resurfaced. He hated the memory. "Anyway, I liked going over to Uncle Curtis' place. That year, when Dad went to be with your mom, Uncle Curtis took me to tryouts and then to my first game. It was a Saturday, and the whole town was in the stands – at least it seemed as though they were. There were only two decent baseball fields in Four Corners, and the high school teams were playing on theirs and so we had to share with the little kids.

"I remember being so surprised at how well Nathan played. He was such a bookworm, even then, that I didn't expect him to know how to hold a bat, much less make three home runs. I

was about to bust a gut; I was so proud of him. You would have thought it would have gone to his head or something, but he just shrugged as though to say he didn't understand it either, and then he grabbed up his book and went up into the stands to watch my game.

"My team was heading out to the field to warm up before the game, when I heard the Coach talking about Nathan. He was saying how he couldn't wait until Nathan was old enough to play for him. I was grinning ear to ear; it was sorta like when one brother does good, the rest of us look good —reflected glory. Then, I heard my uncle talking, didn't see him from where I was standing, but there was no mistaking his voice... He said What else would you expect. Black people were always good at sports. Except he didn't use the word 'black.' He said something crude and offensive. He never used crude language, and here he was using it about my little brother.

"I couldn't get his words out of my head; they kept buzzing around in my head, mixing with the odd remarks Uncle Curtis made over the years about both Nathan and Buck. I couldn't concentrate, and finally, the coach pulled me out of the game. He wanted to know what was wrong with me, and what could I say? My uncle was a bigot, and I, only then, realized how blind I had been."

"Here you go, sweetie," their waitress interrupted Chris.

"Thank you, Ma'am," Vin grinned up at the plump middle-aged woman who persisted in calling him sweetie every time she stopped by the table. He listened to her as she tended her tables; she seemed to call everyone at every table 'sweetie', so he wasn't offended or anything. He met Chris's amused smile with a resigned shrug. Funny, how she hadn't called Chris 'sweetie.' Grateful for the interruption, Chris leaned back in his chair and fished out the pack of cigarettes the smoke from Botello's constant smoking had urged him to buy. Tapping out a cigarette, he asked, "Do you mind?"

"Nah, go ahead. It's a shame, though."

"What's a shame?" Chris asked, bracing himself for a comment or two about the evils of smoking.

"Figure, if ya smoke, you'll never be much of a challenge when ya start running with me." Chris lifted an eyebrow in surprise; Vin's comment was not at all what he expected. Carefully, he stubbed the unlit cigarette into the ashtray; he suddenly wanted to test himself against his younger brother. "In two weeks, we run," he promised.

"Seein' as how yer so old, I'll give ya a head start or somethin'."

"Won't need it."

"Think ya might."

"Not with the way you're eating, I won't."

Vin looked at his fork loaded with frosting, paused, looked at Chris, and then at the fork. With obvious enthusiasm, he ate it. His eyes twinkling with humor, he quickly polished off the cake. "Blame it on Miz Hicks, Miz Edith Hicks."

"Who is she?"

"Was. She died a few years ago. I went to her funeral just to make sure she was dead."

Chris waited patiently. He has revealed some of his childhood, and Vin was about to return the favor. And, favor, it was. He knew, without asking, that talking about himself was as much an ordeal for Vin as it was for him.

"Seeing her dead, stretched out in her coffin, she looked so little. She didn't seem little when I was living with her. She didn't seem little, didn't seem old; the only word I can use to describe her is mean. She was a mean, old woman. She was angry all the time. Not sure why. I used to think it was because God had shortchanged her in the looks department. She looked like she'd been left outside too long, and the sun had sucked all the life out of her. Left her with skin that didn't fit good anymore. It hung from her bones, and she would flap when she walked. It was really bad around her neck; the skin had wrinkles upon wrinkles and sorta hung from her chin; turkey neck is what they call 'em. I remember wonderin' if she had to shake those folds out when she went to bed to get rid of the crumbs."

Chris choked on his coffee at the vivid image Vin had provided. "Go on," he encouraged when Vin stopped talking.

"I don't reckon she knew how to smile. She sure didn't smile at any of us. She took us in for the money the state paid. Told us she was doing us a favor, taming us breeds." Vin saw Chris's question and, straightening his back, he answered, "My mother was half Cherokee." He searched Chris's face for any negative reaction and almost sighed with relief when he read the acceptance in Chris's eyes. "I don't look Indian, but that is all Miz Hicks saw in me. She made it seem bad, something to be ashamed of, and for a while I was," Vin laughed, but it wasn't a pleasant sound; it was a short bark full of anger. "When we kids played, I always made sure I was a cowboy, never an Indian. Didn't anyone else see whatever it was Miz Hicks saw in me?" He looked away from Chris, his face closed off and distant, obviously remembering unpleasant things.

Chris didn't say anything. After a moment, Vin shook himself free of his memories and began again, "Harry changed the way I saw myself. He taught me what being Indian meant. He gave me a history, a heritage. He gave me a lot."

"Sounds like a man I'd like to meet."

"We get this with Ezra taken care of, and I'll take ya to meet him. Ya'll like him. He's a good man."

Chris wanted to say their father was, too, but he had no explanations for his father's abandonment of his sons and suspected that if he said anything positive about Landon Larabee, Vin would nod politely and not believe a word he said. His father had a lot to answer for; he could only hope one day they would find out the reason, the kind and loving man he called father had ignored the existence of four of his sons. He couldn't offer any defense of Landon Larabee until more things were known; he had none. Instead, he asked, "So what does a mean old woman have to do with chocolate cake?"

Looking on both sides of him to make sure he wouldn't hit anyone, Vin stretched and then slumped a bit in his chair, trying to find a position that would give his stuffed stomach some room without making it obvious he had overeaten. "Not much to tell," his eyes met Chris's, and for a moment, Chris saw once again the hurt and anger making a lie of those words, and then it was gone, and Vin continued. "I guess ya'd call Miz Hicks a Sunday Christian. Ya know, the kind who gets down on her knees in church every Sunday mornin', but the rest of the week sits at the feet of the devil. Her favorite line was the one about spare the rod and spoil the child, and her best friend was the switch.

"Wouldn't have been so bad, I knew how to take care of myself, knew how to stay out of her way, but some of the little ones didn't. I tried to watch out for them, ya know, clean up when they made a mess, and keep them outside when she wanted to watch her soaps, or had her friends over, but I couldn't be there every minute. I hated going to school and leaving them alone with her. I stayed at home, more than I should, I guess, but she'd get in one of her moods and someone had to watch out for them, or she'd take a switch after them. Don't think it's right to expect little ones to be quiet all the time.

"Harry once told me everyone had at least one redeeming quality. I remember spending one entire evening sitting out under the stars trying to figure out what Mrs. Hicks' redeeming quality was." Vin looked across the table at Chris, laughter dancing in his eyes. "Can you guess?" "Her cake," Chris answered confidently. After Vin's build-up, what else could it be?

"That mean, old woman with the turkey neck could make the best cake in the world. I hated every moment I was in her house. Probably would have taken off if it weren't for the kids, but I reckon I ate better under her roof than I did anywhere else. I keep trying, but I ain't never found a chocolate cake as good as hers."

"So that's why you had two pieces. You were taste-testing?"

"Hell, Chris, I knew it didn't measure up after the first bite. I just like chocolate cake." "Be careful, or you might like having a fat gut."

"That's why I run."



She didn't know how she managed to stay within the speed limit. The whole way home, her eyes sought out the plain, unmarked envelope on the seat beside her; the excitement of knowing what it held competed with her desire for privacy, making it difficult to keep her foot off the accelerator. If she did get pulled over, she would only need to flirt a bit to talk her way out of

any ticket she might have earned. Today, though, she didn't want to waste time charming a sheriff out of a ticket, but with her driving record, she couldn't afford another one; she was only a few points away from losing her license. Not that she'd let losing her license keep her from driving, but it would be such a bitch having to deal with the law if they caught her speeding again. She eased up on the accelerator; there was too much to do to waste time dealing with a sheriff.

Ella sighed with relief as the gate marking the entrance to her ranch came into view. Only a few minutes more before she'd be inside, locked in her bedroom with a whiskey and the envelope. She would open it and settle in to read what Fowler found out about Landon Larabee's will and those men he named as his sons. Then she'd start making plans.

She and Chris had spent entirely too long apart. His father, may the bastard rot in hell, kept Chris away from her and poisoned his son's mind against her. When she stormed out of Chris's life, she expected him to follow her. She'd been hurt and angry when he hadn't and had turned to other men. Years later, she had come to understand that a man, like Chris Larabee, had his pride, and she had wounded it.

She convinced her husband, Allen, that her dream of owning a horse breeding facility was his. Together, they had scoured the southwest for a suitable property. It had been hard to turn down the Fresno land with its beautiful home and stables fit for champions, but she persuaded him it would be more satisfying if they built their equine breeding facility from the ground up. She painted a compelling picture of the two of them building a grand facility that would draw people from around the country wanting to purchase a quality riding companion.

Allen had wanted to buy something close to Vegas. She mulled that option over as they toured a couple of tracts of land near the city. Personally, she would have preferred living near the excitement of Vegas, but it wasn't about her wants and desires. It was about conveniently running into Chris and rekindling their fire, luring him back with her ready-made horse ranch. She found a place in Ely and two in Elko. All three were far enough from Chris to make their accidental meeting the work of Fate. Allen chose one of the places in Elko and built a home he declared 'would showcase her beauty.'

She returned to Nevada, intending to cross paths with Chris and pick up where they left off, but he married that woman. Ella knew it wasn't his fault. He thought of himself as being alone and turned to the first pretty face he found. He never imagined she would return. Silly man, they were fated to be together.

Allen contracted a mysterious illness and died. Then, Chris's wife and child tragically died in a fire. Finally, the old man had a heart attack. It was all incredibly sad, and she expected Chris to mourn the loss of his wife and son because he was an honorable man, and that is what honorable men did. She had done the same, mourning her husband a full six months before resuming her quest to remind Chris his heart belonged to her. She expected Chris to demonstrate his devotion to his dead Sarah, but she had not expected Chris to wallow in self-pity for so long.

She screamed her frustration into her pillow many nights before she remembered Chris did not know she was waiting for him. The poor, dear man thought he was alone. He was not meant to be alone. He needed her. They would be together except for the old man. He had brought his sons to Four Corners with the lure of money. Now, instead of Chris suffering, waiting for her to rescue him, he was surrounded by 'brothers'

She glanced at the envelope again. It held a copy of Landon Larabee's will and pictures of his sons. She made the mistake of not understanding how loyal Chris could be to those sharing his name. She would not make the mistake of making him choose between his brothers and her. To do so was too risky. She'd woo him and charm them. She'd find out everything she could about every one of them and make them her teammates, and...And if they didn't want to play the game by her rules, she'd take them off the playing field.

Chris was her man. She had always known it. She just hadn't known how to make Chris realize they were irrevocably bonded to each other. She did now.



"Of course, Ah understand. Yes, these things happen. Ah will meet you in the morning then. Yes, ten is good. The same place? Goodbye then." The smile Ezra kept on his face throughout

the call, he kept as he hung the phone up and walked back up the stairs to his room. It fell away as he replayed the conversation in his head.

Something was up. He couldn't figure out what that something was and what it meant to his safety. This morning, posing in his 'new' Good Will clothes for his 'new' driver's license had been the first time he had met the man, but he had known of Manny for years and the man's reputation for not only the quality of his work but for the timely manner in which it was completed made him worth the exorbitant prices he charged for forging a new identity.

There had to be a logical reason for Manny to postpone their final meeting.

Maybe it was just as the man said, he had a family problem. Manny, having a family problem, made more sense than his wanting to keep him waiting in this blasted room. The only reason to keep him waiting was that Moore was on the way, and to worry about that was just plain stupid. He had not told Manny anything about Moore. Even if Moore had realized that Maude was out of his reach, even if Moore decided to hunt him rather than Maude, and even if Moore knew about Manny, there was no possible way Moore asked Manny to keep him there, just as there was no way Manny sold him out to Moore. Manny was a businessman aware of the consequences to his business if he started selling his clients out.

See, Ezra, he sternly told himself, this delay is nothing. You are jumping at shadows. Manny may be a businessman, but he is one encumbered by the burden of familial responsibilities. He will have your documents ready in the morning, as he said.

All right, that makes sense. Then, why do I feel as though I've been set up?

I feel that way because I have always trusted my instincts, and they say something is wrong. They say Manny is lying. They say, I need to get out of here. He ran a nervous hand through his hair, a task more to soothe his nerves than to bring order to his dirty hair. As much as he felt the need to leave, he'd stay. He didn't have a choice. Manny's services were expensive, and while he still had money left over from the sale of his car, he needed the money for his next change of identity.

He sat heavily on the bed, his fingers plucking distastefully at the bed linen. He rented the room that morning but had planned to transform himself into Eddie and be gone by late afternoon, thus negating the need to sleep in the filthy place. No telling when the bedding had last been cleaned, and if he could catch a cold in Sophie's immaculate home, then there was no telling what he could catch here.

"Oh, Ezra," he sighed, "How the mighty have fallen." He reached around himself to pull the pillows out from under what could laughingly be called the bedspread and positioned them so he could lean against the headboard. He was tired, and as much as he did not want to lie on the bed, he needed to rest. He looked around, a grimace of distaste on his face. If staying at America's Inns had been a fall from his usual standards, it had at least been clean. This dingy room, with its threadbare carpets and dirty linen, proved he could now consider himself living with the dregs of society. Please, let it be a temporary visit.

He shifted position in the bed, seeking some way to lie that didn't make him feel as though someone were sitting on his chest. He felt his forehead, checking for fever, and laughed at himself. He wasn't sure if he could feel his fever. He was hot, but it might be just the room. He debated all day the wisdom of going to a doctor, and each time he had come close to leaving the room, to find one he found a reason not to go. Doctors liked payment, and they charged big bucks; he didn't have insurance, and he didn't want to dig into his meager reserves to make a rich doctor even richer. He only had a cold, and everyone knew there was no cure for a cold.

The best a doctor could do was to tell him to drink plenty of fluids and get bed rest (in this bed?), and then he'd be charged enough to pay off some third-world country's debt. More importantly, the doctor would see his bruises, and though many had faded, some still were rather impressive, and the ones on his legs and back were still very tender. No doubt the doctor would comment on them. He did not want to have to come up with an explanation. Probably, the doctor would insist on his going to the hospital, and he didn't have the energy to argue. The best thing for him to do was to continue taking his selection of over-the-counter drugs and wait out his cold. He had his reasons for not going to see the doctor, and they were all valid reasons, making it unnecessary for him to think about the reason hospitals scared him. Contemplating those

memories was best left for the middle of the night when the dreams woke him up, sweating and scared.

That was enough thinking. He refused to consider himself ill any longer. Any fool knew the best way to get better was to not get sick in the first place, and if you had made the mistake of succumbing to an illness, you were better off not dwelling on it.

He sat up, wincing at the movement. He promised both Monica and Sophie, he would call them. He should have done it while he was downstairs, but the need to examine the conversation with Manny pushed him back up the stairs. He promised to let them know he was all right, but to keep his promise meant walking down three flights of stairs, and at the moment, that was beyond him. He sank back against the pillows. That wasn't true, he told himself. He could go downstairs if he wanted to, but the truth was, he lied to those lovely women. He had no intention of ever calling them again. They were too nice and too trusting of people. Associating with the likes of him would only get them hurt, and they, especially Monica, had been hurt enough.

He had done all he could to repay their kindness by leaving the six hundred dollars in the nightstand by Sophie's bed. He wished he could leave more, but that had been half of his emergency fund, and his priority was making his mother safe.

Perhaps, after he took care of Moore and after he became whoever he morphed into next, he would send some money their way. For now, though, the six hundred dollars and the gold pendant he gave Monica would have to do.

He stared up at the ceiling. He couldn't get the two women, who had been so nice to a total stranger, out of his thoughts. They took him in, gave him a place to sleep, and fed him without a thought as to how he came to be in such a condition. He could have been a mass murderer, beaten while escaping from the law. He wasn't, of course, but they didn't know that. They were too trusting. He tried to explain to Sophie, she needed to be more suspicious of the men she brought home, but she laughed his warning off, saying she possessed an uncanny ability to see in the hearts of people and could tell the good ones from the bad. She said she had never been proven wrong. He countered with: It only took one mistake, one time, bringing home the wrong person, for her and Monica to end up very dead. He could tell; she hadn't listened; her need to help those less fortunate than herself worried him. Overall, he judged Sophie Malone as owning great survival skills; look how well she managed to live on her paltry income, but she was a crusader and would get hurt in the end.

He tried but was unable to convince Sophie to curb her altruistic nature. He didn't want to think about where she'd end up, so he decided to worry about her financial situation instead. Even though Sophie managed her money well, there wasn't enough of it to stretch from the first of the month to the end. The number of bills, neatly stacked in a basket on a counter in the kitchen, told the story only too well. Wondering how she had managed to accumulate so many bills and have so little to show for them, he spent Friday morning sorting through them. The bills told part of a story; a conversation with Monica gave him the rest. It seemed Sophie was using a sizable chunk of her paycheck, paying restitution to the family of the man wounded when her husband and his cronies robbed a convenience store. According to Monica, her Uncle Tony hadn't known what his friends were doing when they asked him to pull into the store's parking lot. Maybe he hadn't. Maybe he was as honest as Sophie, but he'd been laid off and was hurting for money. It hadn't looked good in the eyes of the jury. Only his lack of a criminal record, combined with the fact that the clerk was wounded and not killed, kept the DA from throwing the book at him, but only just. Even with time off for good behavior, Tony had four more years to serve.

Ezra mentally shrugged. He didn't know Tony. Maybe the man was innocent, or maybe he was as crooked as they come. The point was that Sophie barely made ends meet. The money he left would help, but it would be a short-term solution only. The hotel, for which the women worked, was hanging on, but only by a thread. It might have been a decent place once, a family place, Sophie called it, but hard times and the slumming of the area crippled it. Soon, it would be closing its doors, and the ladies would have nowhere else to go. They were simply not trained for any other type of work.

Then there was Monica. He tried not to think of the childlike woman; she wasn't his problem. He pulled the spread over him, closing his eyes, trying to shut out the memory of a very

naked and very young Monica climbing into his bed. In other circumstances, and with another woman, he would have welcomed the company, but she was not much more than a child despite what it said on her driver's license. She had no business climbing into his bed, or, for that matter, any man's bed. She was not some object to be used by men. She was something more. She was a kind, young woman with a loving heart who deserved something much more than a quick roll in the hay. He tried to tell her that, to make her see he wasn't rejecting her for the wrong reasons, but for the right reasons. He didn't think she understood.

His extensive vocabulary had been useless when explaining something as complex as self-worth. In the end, he tore the gold chain from his neck and showed her the worn angel. He told her to wear it and to remember that she was worthy and God loved her.

He wasn't sure he believed in God, but he did believe in Mama Jones. Her words had sustained him through many bad times; he hoped they would sustain Monica, too.



"Joan called," Amy Marks broke the silence at the supper table with her simple comment. Her sharp eyes caught the flush burning Garrett's cheeks. His skin was naturally ruddy; she almost missed it, but she knew her sons, especially her favorite. She stared at him, waiting for him to say something.

Garrett took a sip of the tea and added another spoonful of sugar before responding, "Did she say why Junior left like he did?"

"She wanted to know when he was coming back. I told her he left yesterday, before church. She's calling the police and hospitals. She's trying to find out whether he's been in an accident. Has he?"

"Ma!" Garrett was genuinely shocked that his mother would ask such a question of him.

"Garrett, don't lie to me. You don't do it well. Where is your brother? Did the two of you have words?"

"Junior spoke two words to me the whole time he was here. If he had words with anyone, it was with Pa. Why don't you ask him?"

"Don't take that tone of voice with me, son. I am still your mother." She waited until he muttered an apology, then she said softly, "Garrett, you know I can't ask your father. I no longer know if he is talking about something that happened today or twenty years ago."

"Then maybe you should make more of an effort to keep him away from the phone," Garrett almost growled the words.

"What are you talking about?" She hated the way Garrett acted lately. Sometimes, he seemed angry when his father was mentioned.

"Nothing, Ma. I am just tired of cleaning up behind Pa."

"Garrett, I am trying to keep your father out of the office, but he's never been one to just sit in front of the television. What has he done now?"

"Nothing," he said, seeing the disbelief in her eyes. "I am just tired."

"I know, son. You do the work of ten, and I don't mean to bother you about Junior. I was hoping you'd know where he took off to."

"Ma, I don't know where he is. I thought he had gone home. Maybe, we should do some calling and see if anyone has seen him." He looked at his wife for support and smiled appreciatively when she began to talk.

"Mother Marks, he was in a strange mood when he came up here. He talked to Father Marks for a while. I don't know about what, but he was upset when he got here and even more so after talking to Father Marks. I don't think he fully understood, until this weekend, about Father

Marks. Maybe he has gone somewhere to think."

Amy Marks' eyes darted from her daughter-in-law to her son, and back again. Maybe Junior had left so abruptly because it finally hit him that his father was no longer the man he had been. She half-feared and half-hoped his being so upset when he arrived unexpectedly meant he and Joan were finally going to call it quits. She was not good for her son, never had been. She tried to tell her son he shouldn't marry Joan Gossett, but he claimed to love the woman. Joan was

not the wife for Junior. She was too focused on her career and not on making a real home for Junior. She was nothing like sweet Ashley.

She hoped his coming home meant he had finally realized how inappropriate Joan was for him, but as the weekend wore on, he not only did not make an announcement, he went out of his way to avoid her. More importantly, Joan had not sounded like a woman in the middle of a divorce; she had sounded like a concerned wife.

"Maybe he is having problems at work?" Ashley offered quietly as she dodged the grubby fist of her youngest as she helped Erin climb off the booster seat. "George, take your sister to the bathroom and wash her hands and face," she gently pushed Erin towards her big brother. As an afterthought, based on experience, she added, "Clean your hands too. OK."

"I don't know what his problem is. Like usual, he ran to Chris," Garrett tossed his napkin onto the plate, the meal, with all the talk of his brother, ruined. "But you said he didn't meet Chris," Amy objected.

"No, Ma, he didn't, but he didn't talk to me either."

"Do you think something has happened then?"

"Ma," Garrett softened his voice. "If something happened to him, we would have been contacted."

"Then, where is he. This is so unlike Junior."

"No. It's not. Sure, he's dependable as all get out if we are talking about getting to work on time or not being late for a dental appointment. But every time something big comes up, he takes off to think things through."

"Garret, there is no need for you to go and badmouth your brother."

"I am not. I am stating the truth. Look at how he took that job without talking to any of us. Or the way he snuck off to marry Joan. He's probably somewhere thinking. Probably doesn't even realize he is worrying us."

Amy stood up and began clearing the table. "I'll make a few calls, and then I will call Joan and see if they have had some trouble between them. I will invite her to come here to stay. He disappeared after leaving here; she'll want to be here."



Tommy Botello watched as the elevator closed behind the two brothers. He hoped they understood the need for swiftness. He managed to delay their brother's transformation, but not stop it. This time tomorrow, Ezra Standish will cease to exist. Manny agreed to delay handing over Ezra's new identity, but he did not divulge the name Standish would be using after their meeting.

Botello had not pushed him for it. Instead, he politely thanked him; Manny was a professional, after all, and by even acknowledging he was acquainted with Ezra Standish, he risked his reputation.

Turning from the elevator's closed doors, he smiled at his secretary as he headed into his office. "I appreciate your help today. One more thing, would you call Lou Simms and ask him if we can meet in about 15 minutes? After that, go home." He didn't wait for her reply, entering his office and closing the door behind him. Landon had been working here far longer than he had. Perhaps, he had answers.

Sinking into his chair, he reached for the gum. Things were calmer now, and he would try to honor his promise to his daughter.

Funny, how things worked out. Of course, he heard about Landon's death. The man's untimely death sent shockwaves through Nevada's real estate community. He was curious about how he died, and the inquiries he made alarmed him. Landon dying after being thrown by one of his horses, or in a wreck, he could understand. Landon biting the bullet due to a heart attack was beyond comprehension. He considered sending one of his men to look into it, but his man at the FBI informed him that Larabee's sons had asked them to review everything. John said he'd been impressed with them. He decided to step back and see how Landon's boys handled things. Imagine his surprise when two of them walked into his office, asking about a third son. Exactly how many sons did Landon have?

He gave the two men an address, but he left out so much more. He hadn't told them by morning, Ezra Standish would be gone, and even he did not know the name their brother would

take. He didn't tell them the hotel he was staying in was little more than a hole-in-the-wall dive, a place where the drug addicts and the winos slept when they had a few extra dollars to use to get in out of the cold. He didn't tell them their brother was very sick. They would find out soon enough. More importantly, he didn't tell them about the numerous favors he called in to find their brother. If he had, then they would have wondered why he was so invested in their search. They would ask questions; he was not prepared to answer.

He did not want to tell them how he met their father twenty-something years ago. He would have had to say that Landon frequently arrived at his casino, looked around as though searching for someone, and occasionally he'd pull out of his wallet and ask if anyone had seen the woman in the photograph he took from his wallet. Usually, Landon would walk through the place, and when he did not find who he was searching for, he'd then leave.

He'd have to tell them about the day Landon found a woman named Maude hanging on the arms of her latest conquest. He was curious about who the man searched for, stepped into the man's path, and asked Landon Larabee if he could help him. When Landon Larabee told him he was looking for a woman named Maude Standish, he pointed the man in the direction of the blonde woman who stayed at the casino occasionally. He had already pegged her as a predator and hoped the man would take her away from the casino and the current man she had ensnared.

He kept his eyes on the man as he approached Maude, ready to intervene if there was trouble. The man walked up to her and said something.

There had been no alarm in Maude's eyes when Larabee approached her. She excused herself and went to speak with him. They stood in the middle of the casino, talking, having a private and intense conversation with people all about. In the end, she returned to her conquest, and Landon bought himself a drink.

He followed the man into the bar and introduced himself. After more than a few drinks, Landon Larabee confessed, he was searching for a woman who stole something very important from him, but the beautiful blonde with the name of Maude was not the woman he was searching for. That had been the start of their friendship.

Their friendship was not enough for him to call in the number of favors he had that afternoon. The reason for the phone calls and the strings he pulled was due to a mistake he made years ago. One for which he was ashamed.

Ten years ago, a brazen young man wearing an ill-fitting suit of poor quality marched past his secretary and barged into his office and interrupting a meeting. Handing him a binder an inch thick, he stated, it was a detailed analysis of the casino, showing potential problem areas with security, and contained recommendations for fixing them. The young man stood in front of him, looked him in the eye, and said, 'I know you will want to review the contents of the folder. I will give you a week to discuss my findings with your security team, and then we'll talk about your hiring me.'

He had taken one hard look at the kid; it had been a long day, and he didn't want anything more to deal with, especially Maude's son. He recognized him from an introduction Maude had made a month earlier. Funny, even though he knew of her from her meeting with Landon years before, and his subsequent encounters with her, when she came to Vegas to hunt, but until that introduction, he had been unaware she had a child. It hadn't sunk in until that moment, in his office, when the young man— kid really asked for a job. He opened his mouth and, rather than the polite dismissal he usually used, he told the kid there was no way he would ever hire anyone related to Maude Standish. The young man flushed red, but stood his ground, insisting he read the report. He didn't even touch it. He told the kid not only would he not hire him, but that he would make sure every casino in town knew he was related to Maude. No one would want him. He spat out that anyone Maude had a hand in raising could not be trusted around money. The kid stood there, silently absorbing the rejection, before smiling. Saying, he understood, Ezra had walked out of the office, leaving the report on his desk.

He knew he had made a mistake as he watched the young man leave. Later, he confirmed his error when he read the report, but he hadn't taken any steps to locate the young man. The meeting, Maude's son interrupted, had been about her.

The daughter of an especially important man called him that morning to complain about Maude. Maude always had a man at her beck and call. Usually, she targeted the never-married man or the recently divorced, but the latest man, caught in her web, happened to be married. Daphne threatened to call her father, saying he would make heads roll. Botello knew the man and knew her father doted on her and would make heads roll to keep her happy.

While he didn't feel he owed anything to Maude, he did not want any of his employees endangered by Don Walden's need to avenge the dishonor done to his daughter. A few employees provided the means for Maude and her married lover to meet behind his wife's back. The employees, of course, were dismissed, but there still was the possibility that Walden would make an example of Maude and do it in his casino.

He couldn't let that happen. In his desire to eliminate the Maude problem, he destroyed her son. He had been willing to sacrifice Ezra to ensure Maude Standish could not disrupt his establishment ever again. Later, when he read the report, he realized he had humiliated a man who could have been a valued employee. He tried to tell himself that he had done the right thing. If he had hired the kid, Maude would have found a way to use her son's job to infiltrate his casino to hunt for her next sucker.

Certainly, he had not connected her son with the thing of value that a woman named Maude stole from his friend. If Larabee's other sons found their brother, then with luck, he could have a way to repay Landon for his friendship and make up for that wrong.



"Face it, JD, Josiah has that dog's heart, and there isn't a thing to be done about it," Buck said with a grin. JD shot him a look that said to stay out of it. It was true, though.

Tired of sitting, waiting for the phone to ring, JD wanted to take the dog on a walk. He had tried everything except snapping the leash onto Jack's collar and dragging him out the door. Not being born stupid, and certainly not wanting to look so, in front of his brothers, JD decided early in his attempts to get Jack to move that 130 pounds of pure muscle could not be dragged, pushed, or pulled anywhere. He left the leash hanging in its spot in the utility room, and when Jack had not responded to the command 'walk' nor to the enthusiasm with which JD had issued it, JD began his campaign to bribe the dog into obedience.

Jack enjoyed the ear scratching and had left a trail of doggy slobber across JD's face to say thank you but had not budged when JD jumped up to his feet, clapped his hands a couple of times and with a voice pitched deliberately high (in a futile effort to get the dog excited and up on his feet) had said 'let's go'. Jack looked up at Josiah with adoration in his eyes and, seeing his best friend and beloved master was not putting on his shoes, decided he, too, was uninterested in going.

Jack lifted his head off its resting spot beside his master's socked feet when JD bounced the ball in front of him, but it was only to check and see if Josiah planned on playing. When Josiah didn't move, he sighed as only a truly contented dog can and lay his massive head on top of Josiah's feet. If his master even thought about moving, he would be up and ready to go in a heartbeat, but until then, he would stay put.

"Dang it. He acts like I don't exist," JD complained to no one in particular as he headed into the kitchen. Not prepared to concede defeat, he returned a few minutes later with a hand filled with cheese crackers, Jack's favorite treats. Giving Jack one, JD held the rest just out of the dog's reach. He hoped that if he could get the dog up and moving, he could then get the dog out the door. Jack, for his part, had no intention of moving. He had lost one master already and seemed determined not to lose this one. He thumped his tail against the floor a couple of times and gazed longingly at the treats JD held, but he did not move to take them.

JD groaned in disgust when it became plain that the huge, white dog planned to stay right where he was. Tossing the crackers so Jack could reach them without having to move, he stood up and walked over to the computer, checking for any sign Ezra had done something to set off one of the alarms Vin had made. If his brother checked into any motel or hotel in the state of Nevada, ended up in a hospital, or got ticketed by the police, a little flag would appear in the corner of the screen. If that happened, he was supposed to call Vin immediately. Barring that or another emergency, they were to wait for Vin or Chris to call.

JD hated waiting. Waiting made him feel as if bad news was heading his way, and he had enough bad news to last quite a while. Seeing nothing on the computer, JD decided against playing another game of Solitaire. He walked over to the couch, plopped down on the floor, and picked up the magazine he had discarded. If he couldn't get the dog to go out, if he couldn't get the computer to give him a message, and if he couldn't get the phone to ring, then he would read about horses.

Buck hid his amusement behind the latest issue of Sports Illustrated; it wouldn't do to let his youngest brother think he was being laughed at. That would only upset the kid, and he looked upset enough. JD was unnerved by all that had happened over the last few days. They all were, but Buck feared JD might get it into his head that these new brothers of his were a little more than he bargained for and return to Boston. If he did leave, JD would spend the rest of his life regretting that decision.

Buck tried to think of something reassuring to say to his youngest brother, but nothing came to mind. He looked at Nathan for inspiration; Nathan was a doctor after all, and was supposed to have all sorts of good advice on the tip of his tongue to ease bad situations, but one look told him Nathan would be no help. He lay stretched out along the couch with his eyes closed, but Buck knew Nathan hadn't fallen asleep and would not rest until the phone rang. When they finished supper, Buck told him to go on to bed, but instead of following the good advice, Nathan carried the paper to the couch and read while the rest of them cleaned up the kitchen.

Buck figured the events of the night before made Nathan reluctant to leave their company, and Buck couldn't blame him. Not wanting to see the wounds on Nathan's neck and wrists, he quit looking at Nathan; bad enough to know they were there without searching for them.

Buck watched Josiah for a minute, a wistful expression settling on his face. Josiah didn't look like their father, but sitting in the red leather recliner their father preferred, a book in one hand while the other hand gently petted the dog at his side, he reminded Buck so much of Landon Larabee, Buck almost couldn't breathe. Forcing himself to look at the man in the chair and not see his father, he saw that while his brother held the book open and occasionally flipped the pages, he wasn't reading. When he looked closely, he saw the tension in his brother. Buck wondered as he watched those long fingers thread through the dog's thick white coat, if petting Jack was keeping his brother from throwing himself into mindless activity as JD was doing.

Buck's eyes returned to his youngest brother. No wonder the boy had been miserable working in that office in Boston. JD had too much energy to sit still; sitting in front of a computer all day long must have made him feel as though he were suffocating. However, while JD did not belong in front of a computer all day long, he did understand how to talk to them.

Before he and Chris left for Vegas, Vin explained how he set up a computer program to search for signs of Ezra, then said he needed someone to keep tabs on the computer. Most of what Vin said flew over Buck's head, but JD nodded in understanding, all through Vin's explanation. Relieved to have something to do, he enthusiastically volunteered to keep checking to see if anything had changed.

JD checked the computer throughout the day, and the responsibility of keeping tabs on the various searches Vin had left running had gone a long way in keeping the kid grounded. It had been a long day, and with the chores around the ranch done for the day and the computer offering nothing, the kid fidgeted.

Moving from the computer to the kitchen, where he could be heard opening the refrigerator door and rummaging around in it, he would come back into the den empty-handed and plop down on the floor in front of the couch and pick up the paper. He pretended to read for a moment and then tried to get Jack's attention. Failing to get the dog to leave Josiah's side, he would stand up, stretch, check the time, and check the phone in case it had mysteriously quit working since the last time he had checked. Then he would begin his circuit of the house again.

They were all tense, pretending not to be. Chris said he would call after supper, and the food had been eaten, and the dishes washed, dried, and put away without the phone ringing. No one answered their multiple attempts to call them; instead, their calls were sent to voicemail. If he or Vin didn't call soon, and let them know what was going on, they'd all go crazy. Good thing all the guns were locked in the cabinet, or JD would have been the first victim of their wait.

Buck decided he had best do something to ease the anxiety level in the room before anyone started sniping.

