



Memories: Goodbye

An Interlude in The Seven Brothers Saga

Listening to the Grandfather Clock in the hall call out the hour, Chris decided it was an exercise in futility to try to get back to sleep. His father had been plagued with bouts of insomnia, and if the last few nights were any indicator, he was following in his father's footsteps. He wished he had inherited his father's smile or his easy way with people; instead, he was an insomniac, and life sucked. Rolling over in his bed and glaring at the alarm clock, he groaned when he saw it agreed with the clock in the hall. Four was entirely too early to get up, but he had too much on his mind to go back to sleep, and his father had always explained his tackling jobs in the midnight hours by saying there was no point lying in bed watching the ceiling.

His Dad had a point. He had spent the last few nights staring at the ceiling, and nothing had changed except that he had become more short-tempered. Something had to give. Kicking off the quilt, he grabbed the pair of jeans he had tossed in the corner the night before and pulled them on.

Turning around before he reached the stairs, Chris easily navigated the moonlit hall leading to his brother's room. Without pausing to think or even knock, he opened the door and flipped on the light. "Are you awake?" he asked when Vin sat up, alarmed, holding a hand over his eyes, trying to block out the invasive light.

"Reckon I am, now." Wondering if he should be relieved that it was only Chris invading his room or whether he should be pissed. He let his eyes adjust to the light and eyeballed the clock.

Seeing the time, he cursed under his breath. Four! Chris was waking him up at four in the morning! "The house had best be on fire," he growled, pushing his pillows behind him so he could prop up against the headboard.

"I need to talk." Chris pulled the chair away from the writing desk, stacked high with clean laundry waiting to be put up. Turning the chair, he straddled it and crossed his arms along its back.

"Couldn't wait until morning?"

"It is morning."

Vin raised an eyebrow, and with a pointed look at the alarm clock, replied, "Not if ya didn't get to bed until one."

"So, how was your date?" Chris asked, embarrassed that he hadn't remembered Vin had gone out. Maybe he should apologize, leave, and let Vin get some sleep.

"Unlike Bucklyn, I don't kiss and tell. 'Sides, if ya woke me up at four to ask me about my date, I reckon I'll have to hit you." Vin teased, wanting to ease some of the visible tension in Chris's eyes. Chris had been out of sorts for several days. Every time he'd tried to talk to him about it, Chris pushed him away. He was pleased Chris finally decided to talk, but wished he could have waited until later.

Chris couldn't help it; he scowled at Vin's words. "Don't joke about that. Don't ever joke about hitting..."

"What's wrong?" Vin asked when Chris's voice trailed off, and it became obvious, he needed prompting to continue.

Chris tried to smile, but the grin never reached his eyes; the effort to keep it on his face proved too difficult, and he let it fall away. He had many answers to Vin's question, but had no clue as to how to start. Maybe this was a bad idea. He probably should have gone to the barn and started on the morning chores; it was what his father would have done. His father solved his own problems and did not depend on others to make things right. Of course, if his father had been a little less independent and a little more willing to confide in someone else, then, maybe, this mess would not be so big.

"Chris?" Chris's silence concerned him more than his showing up to talk in the middle of the night. Chris didn't talk much, but when he did, he went straight to the point with few, if any, extra words.

Chris let the honest concern he heard in Vin's voice persuade him to begin. "In case you haven't noticed, I've been in a real pissed-off mood lately."

"Be kinda hard not to notice."

"You aren't going to cut me any slack, are you?" He tried to make a joke of it and failed.

"It's four in the morning. If ya wanted slack, ya should have brought me coffee."

Chris smiled, briefly erasing the lines of tension around his eyes. "I thought about it, but if I start banging around in the kitchen, Buck will hear and get up."

"He could have joined the party."

"No, I didn't want him here." That answer made it sound like he was angry with Buck, and he wasn't. He continued, "Sometimes, it seems as though Buck has made it his life's work to make things easy for me. When I am acting like a mean son of a bitch he won't call me on it. He'll find some way to excuse my behavior."

"Ah-h-h, I understand. Ya woke me up after getting only three hours of sleep, so I can tell ya that yer a mean son of a bitch. I can do that. Larabee, ya are a mean son of a bitch. Good night."

"This is serious, Vin."

"I am serious, Christopher. Ya have been acting downright mean these last few days, yelling every chance ya get. Ya have been acting like a grizzly. Some tourist woke up so he could snap a picture."

"I know." Chris stood up and walked around the room, picking up and examining the framed pictures sitting on Vin's dresser; they depicted a smiling Cady Tanner showing off her young blue-eyed son. Vin had found both of them in albums in the library. A long-ago memory of a little tow-haired boy listening with attention rarely seen in three-year-olds as his older brother explained why it was dangerous to get near the bull in the holding pen reassured Chris that Vin would listen to his words, and hear not only what he was saying, but also what he was trying to say. "Sarah... Sarah and Adam were my life. I dream of them, and in my dreams, the colors are

so vivid I am all but blinded... In my dreams, they are alive, and we are a family. Nothing bad has touched us or can touch us. Then... then I wake up and it's like I am separated from the rest of the world by a black veil. It filters out everything except my grief. There is no color in the world I see, no music, and no laughter. Even food has no taste. I go through the motions and pretend I am alive, but I am not. I am one of those Hollywood zombies who belong in a grave.

"I am empty, inside, and out, I am empty. After losing Sarah and Adam, I didn't think I could ever see or hear or even feel again, but since... this sounds terrible, but since Dad died, I have felt alive again. I don't know if it was losing Dad or finding all of you, but I feel... I don't feel dead... I want this brother thing of Dad's to work. I don't know if I can stay with you once this year is over. But I need to know you are all here...together. Understand?"

Vin nodded but didn't say anything. Chris didn't wake him up at four to tell him he was alive.

"If you'd asked me a few days ago why I was acting so pissed off, I would have told you it was this time of year... the time when I lost Sarah and Adam and I was missing them." His voice trailed off, but then, visibly shaking off his memories and with his voice strong and steady, he began again. "I am. A minute doesn't go by without me missing them, but I've spent the last few nights thinking about things. I can't blame my mood on missing them, not entirely anyway. I am angry, but I am with Dad. My anger makes me madder. I don't like being angry with him...But I can't reconcile the man I knew with the man who let my brothers go, who abandoned them.

"I think I understand about Josiah. Dad was too young to deal with the reality of having a son, much less an illegitimate son, but by the time you and Ezra came along, he should have been able to handle the gossip; he'd had enough practice... And JD...if nothing else, he could have sent Jenna money to help her. At least until she finished getting an education.

"According to the law, she might have been legal, but according to everything Dad ever said, she was still a child when she had JD. He had no business being with her, not until she grew up. If Dad couldn't keep it in his pants, he should have at least helped her out financially.

"Don't say anything about how he was worried about your safety. We've been looking for weeks for a clue as to what he was talking about, and no one has found anything ... I think ...maybe it was Dad's way of excusing his behavior. Buck argues with me about that. He doesn't want to hear or see anything about Dad, which will tarnish his image of him. He doesn't understand; Dad's image was tarnished long ago. I want answers, not excuses. I want to yell at Dad, but he's not here," he paused.

Putting down the picture he was pretending to study, he turned to face Vin and shifted gears. "I have a short fuse. I blow up fairly easily, but by the time I've finished yelling, I'm over it. Buck and Nate used to be like you and tell me to get over it when I lost my temper. They don't do that anymore. Nate avoids me when I am angry, and Buck... he accepts my yelling at him as some sort of penance. I don't feel better after yelling at him; I feel guilty."

"Ya just yell and act pissed all the time, so ya can get it out of your system."

"Maybe."

"You've been hollering a lot; ya should feel great."

"I guess I should, but I don't. The problem is, I can't yell at you, Buck, or Nate. I'm not mean enough to yell at JD, and only a fool would yell at Josiah, so that leaves..."

"Ezra," Vin supplied the answer.

"I've been yelling at him, only him," Chris said as though his words explained everything. He didn't mention the confrontation he and Ezra had. The memory of which had been keeping sleep away from him. He had been in a bad mood for several days, but it had been a general grouchiness at the world and not focused on anyone.

That changed four days ago. He had woken up worried. Josiah had not yet called them to tell them when he was coming home, and since he hadn't bothered telling them how they could get in touch with him, or when to expect his return, his continued absence kept gnawing at Chris. Something could have happened to his older brother, and they wouldn't know. Then, over breakfast, Buck announced that Vin, JD, and he were heading out to look at a promising cattle dog. Thinking of the work that wouldn't be getting done, but knowing they needed a good dog, Chris left the breakfast table in an even darker mood. Five minutes after they left, the piece-of-junk truck he planned to use for the day decided to quit. He knew the minute he raised the hood and didn't immediately see the problem, he should wait for Buck, but he decided he could fix the

thing. Two hours later, he had the truck in far too many pieces and had no clue as to what was wrong.

Then Ezra, who had slept in late, missed breakfast and had not been seen all morning, made the mistake of walking up, limping. He had been laughing as he explained he needed to remember to check the cinch, but Chris hadn't seen the humor in the situation; his thoughts had been on how easily someone could be hurt if thrown by a horse. Worse, Ezra had told no one where he was riding off to; he could have been lying on the cold ground, hurt and unable to move, and no one would have known where to look.

Ezra's riding was improving, but if he could still make mistakes about the cinch, then he had no business going off alone. Memories of Ezra lying in a hospital bed, combined with his frustration over not being able to fix the truck and his worries about Josiah, caused him to say something truly ugly about worthless brothers, clowning around, doing their own thing, and not helping.

He was just blowing off steam. If it had been Buck or even Vin walking up with torn jeans and a knee leaking blood, they would have known they scared him and would have said something to reassure him they were all right. Ezra hadn't heard the concern and fear in his voice. Instead, he had paled and had taken a step back, briefly raising his arms as though to protect his face and then dropping into a fighting stance with his hands balled into fists.

There had been no fight, but he had yelled, and Ezra had listened, absorbing his words, taking them to heart and never stepping out of his defensive stance. Damn. Chris looked up at Vin and admitted, "I've been working so hard to keep him here, and once again I'm the one pushing him away."

"It may not be as bad as you think, Chris."

"It is. It might be worse." Chris stared at a point just above Vin's shoulder, seeing something he chose not to share. Finally, he asked the question that had been keeping him awake. "Why did he think I was going to hit him? ...I know I've hit Buck, but that was when I was drunk. Ezra thought I was going to hit him, and then, when I started in on him, he just stood there accepting as truth everything I said."

"I know you can't take words back, but after I calmed down, I hunted him down. I tried to explain my temper and tell him I was worried he could have been hurt. He smiled at me. He said he understood, and there weren't any hard feelings, but I could see he didn't understand what I meant. He believes I meant what I said... Even if I did ... Why didn't he yell back? Why didn't he tell me off? What kind of sick puppy just lets another man tell him he's a worthless bag of shit and... not say a word?"

"Ya were gonna hit Ezra, but ya yelled instead?" Vin asked, more to stall than any need to clarify what happened.

"Yeah," Chris's one-word answer was filled with self-directed anger.

Vin shifted uncomfortably; he didn't like speaking for others, certainly not for a man he barely knew, but he thought he understood why Ezra reacted the way he had. "Sometimes," he tried to explain. "When ya've been moved from home to home, ya get so desperate to stay...to belong, ya become willing to do about anything, accept anything. If yer not careful, it becomes a habit."

"Was that the way things were for Ezra?"

Vin mulled the question over, thinking of what Ezra had told him over the last several weeks and, more importantly, what he hadn't told him. "He ain't said, and I don't understand why, with him having a ma, but yeah, I reckon, that was how things were for him."

Chris stared hard at Vin. There was too much knowledge in Vin's words. "Was that the way it was for you?"

Vin met Chris's eyes for a moment. Then, he blinked and looked away. "Sometimes."

Chris winced; their father had so much to answer for. He waited for Vin to say more, but after a minute of silence that seemed to stretch into forever, it became clear the subject was closed. "I don't know how to make things right with Ezra. I have been messing things up with him. Even if I wasn't, he'd still hurt. Dad's abandonment wounded him, and I don't know how to heal Ezra's wounds. Dad has a lot to answer for. I used to think he knew everything. Now, I think he knew nothing. He was wrong. How he treated you all was wrong, and now I think he was wrong about Ella."

"Ella? That bitch in heat who keeps calling here?" Shit! Was Larabee spending time worrying about the woman? He didn't understand it; the woman sent chills up and down his back whenever he had to talk to her. And how did he go from Ezra to Ella, other than their names both start with an E?

"Being kind of harsh there, Tanner." Chris's eyes narrowed. He wanted Tanner to help him figure out whether he should take Ella out somewhere to reminisce about old times or keep putting her off until she lost interest and quit calling. He did not need his brother to call her names.

"Calling it like I see it, Larabee." Vin met Chris's look, refusing to apologize or back down.

Chris bit down on the angry words he wanted to use and slowly exhaled, "She's not a bitch. Not really. She's lonely...I am, too." There he had said it; he had given voice to the rest of what was keeping him awake. He was lonely.

"Loneliness ain't a reason to get hooked up with a viper."

"I'm not asking for your approval. If I want to see her, then I'll see her." Chris snarled. What the hell was wrong with Vin? Ella had gone out of her way to make his brothers feel welcome at her ranch last weekend. She could have kept it all business by selling them horses, taking their money, and saying goodbye. Instead, she spent the day showing them her place, explaining her breeding program, and then she topped off the day of horse-talk with a delicious dinner. She had done her best to make them all feel welcome. Why the hell, was Vin acting like this?

"If ya don't want my approval, then why are ya here at four fuckin' o'clock in the mornin'?" Vin growled.

"You know, I don't know." His eyes flashing in anger, Chris walked to the door and flung it open. "Sorry to bother you." He turned off the light, but instead of leaving as had been his intention, he stood in the doorway. "Sometimes, I am so lonely... I miss Sarah and Adam so much. Ella... Ella doesn't remind me of them. Ella and me... we were together for a while in college. She and I have a past... and it has nothing to do with Sarah."

"She wants ya, Chris."

"Is there something wrong with that?"

"I don't know. Yer the one in here wanting to talk."

Chris stepped back into the room, shut the door behind him, and slid down the wall to sit on the floor. "I loved Sarah... more than anything, I loved Sarah. I felt centered with Sarah. I knew what I wanted when I looked into her eyes. I was happy and contented. Ella was nothing... is nothing like Sarah. Life with Ella was unpredictable. It was wild excitement followed by moments of pure terror. I never knew what to expect when I was around her, and the not knowing excited me all the more. ... Things ended badly between us. There was some trouble, and I had to call Dad to get me out of it. He told me Ella was destroying my life, and I listened... I never gave her a chance to explain. Dad said she was bad news, and to stay away from her; I obeyed him. I missed her, but agreed with Dad; she wasn't for me.

"I went on with my life, met Sarah, and I didn't think of her again until, well, until Nathan mentioned seeing her at the hospital. Since seeing her last weekend, I've been wondering if Dad and I had her pegged all wrong. Certainly, he had no right to pass judgment on her. Look at how he was running his life. Women and children everywhere, and he never stopped to think what he was doing to them... to us... and he was an adult... I don't know what I feel for Ella. I was too young to know what love was when I was dating Ella, but we had something. I owe it to her, to us, to see if that something is still there. If there isn't anything there, I owe it to her to say goodbye properly."

Vin wanted to tell Chris that Ella Gaines made his skin crawl, but he suspected that if he said anything more against her, Chris would defend her and be angry with him. He didn't want to drive Chris into her bed, so he'd keep his mouth shut... for now. "So did we get yer problems solved?"

Chris accepted Vin's closing of the subject of Ella. No doubt, he'd hear more about her from Vin and maybe Buck, too, but until he got how he felt about her sorted out in his mind, he had finished talking about her. He snorted, "No. I just came in to explain why I've been a bit pissy this week."

"A bit? Try a lot. Face it, Christopher, ya ain't been fit company fer the devil's own tea party."

"I ain't?" Chris smiled and got to his feet. "You're probably right about that. Better get back to sleep. We've a bunch of cattle to move today, and we are out of here in two hours. Chris laughed when the pillow hit him on his back. He tossed it back towards the bed. "You will need this if you plan on getting your beauty sleep. You'll need to keep your looks if you plan on having a reason to stay up all night."

"The fact that I can is a good enough reason," Vin smirked, letting Chris know he could take Vin's reply on any level he chose to.

"Too much information, Vin." He closed the door behind him and headed for the kitchen and coffee. He hadn't figured out how to apologize to Ezra or what to do about Ella, and he certainly had no idea in what light he should view his father, but things looked better...brighter, maybe even more colorful.



Using his towel to wipe the mirror clear of the fog his shower had created, Ezra scrutinized his reflection as the steam trapped in the bathroom, he and Josiah shared, slowly misted the mirror again, blurring his image and turning him all but invisible. Too bad he couldn't turn invisible in real life, he thought. Invisible people didn't get in the way. Invisible people didn't make people mad at them. Invisible people didn't get hit. Not that he'd been hit...but experience told him it was only a matter of time before he pushed Chris or another one of them into hitting him.

He glanced at the clock; he had told JD to give him a few minutes to get ready, and even though more than a few minutes had passed, JD had not banged on the door demanding he hurry up. Josiah would have been rattling the doorknob by now, telling him he was holding up the show, but JD was not like Josiah; he was probably sitting in the den playing on Vin's computer or flipping through television channels.

Ezra didn't want to admit it to himself, but he would miss them both: the youngest and the oldest, the most honest and the most secretive, the one who never demanded answers and the one who always demanded answers. If he were truthful, he told himself, he would acknowledge the fact that he would miss all his brothers, but if he thought too long and too hard about all of his brothers and his home with them, he wouldn't be able to act. It was enough, he told himself, to admit he would miss Josiah and John David.

Poor JD, he thought with a smile. He couldn't decide whether to be appalled by the boy's innocence or protective of it. JD seemed to take everyone at face value. While he had been sure to show the boy only his good side, it was a new experience to be so readily and easily accepted. In all his years, no one, except for Mama Jones, had ever been as accepting of him as JD was. He luxuriated in the feeling of approval, wanting to wrap it around him like a cloak he could show the world. JD made him feel as though he was valued, worthy.

Of course, JD was looking at him through the rose- colored glasses called brotherhood. If JD ever bothered to ask him questions, he would be forced to answer, and as much as he would regret seeing JD's acceptance of him vanish as he heard the truth, he would be honest with those answers. JD's inherent truthfulness demanded truth from him in return. Unfortunately, in answering his youngest brother, he'd destroy JD's innocence. JD would learn that there were men like him in the world. JD would see behind his mask and see the monster, and like the Medusa whose horrible visage destroyed heroes, he would destroy JD. He needed to leave before that happened, before the innocent JD asked him questions that should not be answered. If he left now, he could leave JD's virtue intact, and he could leave believing there was one person who believed in him.

So, why wasn't he leaving? Why couldn't he say goodbye? He had gotten the duffel bag down from the attic yesterday and had spent an hour sitting on his bed looking at it after everyone else had called it a night. He had told himself he was waiting for Josiah to return so he could say goodbye to him, and after repeating the lie over and over, he eventually slept. This morning, listening to Larabee bark out orders, he realized his time was running out, and he was merely stalling.

He wished Josiah would return soon so he could say goodbye. If he had known his brother would receive a call from some mystery person in California, barrel out of the house and into his car without a word of explanation as to where he was going or when he would return, then he would have pulled him aside, thanked him, and said something. At least that is what he liked to think he would have done. In reality, he reluctantly admitted that even if Josiah was here, he probably would not hunt him down to say goodbye. He wasn't given to handshakes and hugs

when he left places; his style was akin to a fox leaving a chicken house—quietly, stealthily, and with at least one chicken tucked under each arm (or money and assorted valuables). He had perfected his style of leave-taking while still at his mother's breast (assuming, of course, she had nursed him-- which she hadn't.)

Still, he knew that just as he would miss JD's easy acceptance of him, he'd miss Josiah's interrogations, which were cleverly disguised as chit-chat. Josiah, with his gray eyes that saw too much, kept him on his toes. Their conversations were like walking through a minefield. Each seemingly casual remark became a carefully concealed mine on which only the dull-witted tread. The lies and half-truths he used to defend himself against Josiah's probing questions littered their battlefield of wits and lay waiting, like unexploded ordinance in a true battlefield, for him to make a misstep. One wrong move and his lie would trip him up; he would be exposed, and as forfeit, for losing the game, he'd have to pay Josiah with a piece of truth. Too much truth and his real self would be exposed, and although there was a depth to Josiah, something in the carefully phrased questions said Josiah knew more about him than he had confessed; he remained careful in his conversations with Josiah. It would be a relief to admit his faults and sins to someone, but if he were wrong and Josiah was not as accepting of him as Ezra hoped, then to expose his true nature to Josiah and confess his sins and assorted misdeeds would be a horrible mistake. As much as he wanted a confidant to absolve him of his sins, someone who, like Mama Jones, said he was still good, he couldn't risk telling Josiah the things he had done. Ezra P. Standish was nothing if not prudent, and prudence demanded he not test his theory of Josiah's ability to handle the truth about him.

Ezra wiped the mirror clean again. It surprised him so much time had elapsed during his reverie -- the mist on the mirror coalesced into tears which ran the length of the mirror and pooled along the top of the vanity. He wasn't sure which bothered him more, the thought of tears or the realization of how much time he wasted thinking about leaving. He'd think about leaving later. Right now, he had agreed to join JD at Miss Nettie's ranch.

He sighed. He didn't particularly want to go to Miss Nettie's, but when JD asked him to join him after Chris told him in no uncertain terms, he wasn't joining the rest of them on the round-up, he grabbed at the chance not to stay at the ranch alone.

He should have made some excuse and used the time to pack. He could have packed, left a note about the Cadillac at the bus station, and been halfway somewhere before lunch. Instead, he chose to help JD with repairs at Miss Nettie's. He doubted there were any actual repairs. At least he hoped there wasn't. JD and Vin made it a point to stop by every weekend to help the women with repairs and do the work they thought women shouldn't be doing, though only heaven knew what that would be. He thought there was little those two women couldn't do. Casey might be a "little thing" (really, JD, you need to quit calling her that, as it makes her sound like a leprechaun), but she was infinitely capable of doing whatever needed doing, and Miss Nettie... well, Miss Nettie was a tough old bird.

He smiled as he finished shaving. He could understand JD's fascination with the Wells' ranch. After all, Casey returned to the ranch almost every weekend, and until JD got the nerve up to ask her out on a date (New Year's Eve didn't count), seeing her while he helped Miss Nettie would have to do. Ezra wished he understood the motivation driving Vin to sacrifice his weekends to help Miss Nettie. Vin said something about her reminding him of his mother, but Ezra couldn't see any resemblance.

As far as he was concerned, spending the day with Miss Nettie was an experience best left for another. He had spent only one day at her place, and it had been enough to last a lifetime. While he could admire her, he didn't like being around her, and it was clear to anyone with eyes that she wasn't fond of him. She never came out and said anything about him, not measuring up to the rest of his brothers, but she didn't have to; he'd seen the look too many times not to recognize it. He used every bit of charm he had in him on the old woman, and she had not responded. The words, manners, and clothes that had women and men of all ages commenting on his good upbringing did not impress her. If anything, his good manners, well-spoken words, and new clothes only differentiated him from his brothers, and the comparison left him looking bad. He had wanted to impress the woman, and instead of coming across like a man worth knowing, he had come across like a dandy capable of little except making inane comments about the weather.

His face burned at the memory of their first meeting. He was no longer able to look in the mirror. Securing the towel around his waist, he opened the bathroom door and padded down the hall to his room. He hated when memories came up out of the past and laughed at him; he did everything he could not to examine past humiliations in too great detail and he usually succeeded in keeping embarrassing memories buried, but this one was too new to be ignored and when he opened his closet to find clothes for the day his dove-gray suit leaped out in front of his eyes, mocking him.

He usually made a point of ignoring the suit, but even though he was taking quite a bit longer than he had told JD he would be, his hand reached for the suit and pulled it out of the closet. Sitting on the bed, he held it, stroking the soft wool. Years ago, he promised himself he would only wear the best; he never again wanted to be seen as the poor relation wearing someone else's cast-offs. As recently as a few weeks ago, his closet had boasted designer suits, shirts with mother-of-pearl buttons, and Italian leather shoes, but he exchanged them all for faded jeans, worn work shirts, and ragged shoes. It had been a temporary necessity, he told himself every morning when he dressed, but it wasn't one he had been in a hurry to remedy. Lately, he had been too interested in discovering who his father had been and who his brothers were to be distressed by his change of attire.

That all changed when the invitation came. It hadn't been a formal invitation. There had been no note, only a phone call, but there had been the same sense of command that those called before the queen must feel. An old family friend, that's how Chris described Miss Nettie. Vin called her a remarkable woman. JD had merely named her Casey's aunt. All those words terrified him. Nettie Wells was a contemporary of their father. She probably had met his mother and, having known her, what would she think of him? Would she call him his mother's son, and not see any of his father in him? Would she measure him against his brothers and find him lacking? He didn't want to know the answers to either of those questions.

After a particularly bad dream, in which a faceless woman, using a voice from his past, told his brothers his faults, he tried to find a suitable reason for not going. Playing on his ill health, he told his brothers he wasn't well enough to attend the dinner. Chris had come close to excusing him, but then Nathan opened his mouth, saying he thought it would be good for him to get out for a while and if he got too tired, Miss Nettie would let him lie down on the spare bed... As if he'd ever be that rude. With his best argument countered, it was decided they all would spend Saturday at Miss Nettie's.

Knowing a suit wouldn't have magically appeared, he searched his closet anyway. Deciding there was no way he was going to meet a "family friend" wearing his secondhand clothes, he pulled out the roll of money he kept hidden in a shoe in his closet. On payday, Chris offered to get his check cashed and an account opened for him, but he asked only for the cash, saying he'd open an account later...like when Hell froze over and demons went ice skating.

He hated spending his "get-out-of-town" money, but he had been determined to go, looking as if he was somebody and not the forgotten bastard. He had come close to asking Buck to take him to a men's shop, and in reflection, he realized that if he had, then Buck would have told him they didn't wear suits to Miss Nettie's, but at the time, he hadn't even considered asking any of his brothers for a ride into town. He had waited until they all got busy with their work around the ranch, and then, taking the keys to the Cadillac off the key rack, he drove himself to Eagle Bend. The trip exhausted him, but he had come back with something decent to wear.

Saturday morning arrived, and ignoring the aches still plaguing him, he spent a good bit of it preparing to meet Miss Wells. Deciding that sitting in his room gave him a case of nerves, he waited in the library for his brothers to get cleaned up. Standing, so as not to put unnecessary wrinkles in his suit, he ran through the things he would say to charm the woman, and then, one by one, his brothers joined him in the library.

To his horror, all of them were dressed in jeans. Laughing, Buck told him he looked like he was planning on attending a funeral. Chris smirked and said they'd wait for him to change, but he refused. He needed to make a good impression.

He'd made an impression all right. He sat, utterly useless in his new suit, on the porch, and watched as his brothers scurried about mending and repairing everything in sight. Even Mrs. Wells and Casey helped, while he watched. He cringed at the memory.

And now JD wanted them to go and spend the day with her. He stood up, hung his suit back up, and grabbed his jeans. Quickly dressed, he took a moment to glare at his image in the

dresser mirror, wishing it wasn't himself he was seeing, but someone entirely different, a man more like Vin. He didn't understand how Vin had done it. The man had walked into the house and effortlessly made himself an integral part of the Larabee clan.

Vin made it look amazingly easy to be accepted, not just by their brothers, but by the whole community. JD was accepted, but there was no trick there. JD, with his innocence and his personality, could go anywhere and have people want to claim him as family. In a way, the same could be said for Josiah. People genuinely liked Josiah. He wasn't as bubbly and pleasant as JD, nor as outgoing and friendly as Buck. If you looked closely enough, you could detect, hidden by his calm exterior, the potential for violence. However, he could listen to those around him, and people responded to him.

Vin wasn't like them. He was rough around the edges, dressed atrociously, and mangled English every time he opened his mouth. While never particularly rude to anyone, he wasn't overly friendly either. He hadn't grown up on a ranch, but Chris and Buck included him in their decisions regarding the ranch. He didn't try to hide the anger he felt towards their father, and yet he was the one who got his brothers to share their memories of the man. He had layers of secrets an inch thick and knew all manner of unseemly people, yet, of all of them. He was the most trusted.

Vin cooked an inedible meal, forcing everyone to run to the bathroom all night long, and it was 'Thanks, Vin, for cooking supper.' He burned the roast and was told, 'You're wasting food, Ezra.' Vin drove the Cadillac to Ely on a date, and Chris asked him if he had a good time. He drove it to town and was asked if he had put gas in the car. Vin took the day off to ride along with Buck and JD to look at a mutt, and it was just fine with Chris Larabee. On the other hand, when he took an hour off to practice riding, Chris yelled at him for not helping.

He didn't understand what happened. Chris had seemed so determined to have him at the ranch. He knew Chris's talk of a murderer had been a ploy to get him back to the ranch, and he had been grateful to Chris for giving him a way to return to the ranch without losing face. Even though his brothers seemed more interested in running the ranch than they were in discovering whether a murderer had killed their mothers, he had pretended that finding the culprit was a priority and had spent every free moment searching the library for clues.

The one thing he had been unable to do was to read the letter his father left him. He planned to read it, and every morning when he was lying in bed thinking of the day before him, he vowed that today would be the day he would read it. He would think about the letter as he dressed; on a few occasions, he had touched the torn-in-half envelope, but he never could bring himself to pick up the two halves and pull out the letter.

Thinking of the letter made him nauseous. One time, when he heard him throwing up, Nathan explained that the powerful antibiotics he was taking were upsetting his stomach, and he might want to eat more yogurt. What could he say to that? 'No, it's that damned letter waiting for me that is making me sick.' As much as he wanted to say that, he couldn't. So, he ate the yogurt.

He foolishly believed his brothers wanted him with them. They spent little time in the library and never asked if he had read his letter. Instead, they kept the house warm and asked him what he could eat without upsetting his stomach. Chris even took him to Ely to get clothes and boots so he could learn to ride.

He took their concern for love and had grown soft. He thought he was being careful and acting like they expected him to act, but somehow, he angered them... Chris. He had done something to anger Chris. He knew he had a smart-ass mouth on him, but he thought Chris didn't mind his sass. He thought Chris understood he didn't mean anything by it. He had misjudged the situation. You would think, after all of Maude's tutelage, he would be able to read people better than he had. She would be so ashamed; though, she'd be more ashamed of him if she ever found out he gave up the money.

He leaned towards the mirror, examining his eyes. Once, he had an aunt tell him she could look into his eyes and see he was bad. He left the corner as soon as she let him out and ran to the bathroom, climbed up onto the vanity, and spent the afternoon searching his eyes for whatever it was she saw. He didn't find it, but apparently, everyone else did. They would tolerate him for a while, for Maude's sake, but then, one day, they would ask him to leave. He learned at a very young age not to get too attached to any place or any person.

The only exception to the rule had been Mama Jones; she told him she loved him, and try as he might, he could not help but love her back. She would come up behind him and drop a

hand on his shoulder while they talked about the garden, and just before she let go, she'd give his shoulder a little squeeze and tell him she loved him. She'd also say things like he was a good child or how sweet he was; he kept her words close to his heart, wanting to believe them, but how could she be correct in saying he was good when everyone else saw he was bad?

He asked her once why she thought he was worth loving when no one else did. He remembered her pulling him into her arms and telling him she knew he was worth loving because he held so much love in his heart, waiting to give it to anyone ready to receive it. She told him other people might look into his eyes and think they saw a bad boy, but she looked into his heart and knew better. He wished he could believe her, but his history proved her wrong; if she had lived to see the things he had done, she would have seen how mistaken she was about the bastard child she had sheltered under her wings.

He gave up searching his eyes. Running a comb through his hair, he steeled himself for the day ahead. He may be spending the day with a wizened old crone, who despised him and thought him something of a dandy, but his days in the Larabee household were limited. He wanted to create enough memories to last a lifetime.

He tried on a smile and waited in front of the mirror until he had it right and was sure it wouldn't slip off. It hurt; he had been trying so hard to be whoever it was that they wanted him to be. Like always, he failed. He knew the signs; he was going to be asked to leave.



Atop his horse, Chris watched as Ezra drove their father's Cadillac down the long gravel driveway toward the road. JD, riding shotgun, waved goodbye as they passed. Ezra kept his eyes on the road. Chris dipped his chin in a mute reply to JD's vigorous waving, his heart heavy. JD would make sure Ezra came home this evening, but unless something changed soon, Ezra would leave, and damned if he knew what to do to stop him. He'd done too much to make him want to go. It'd been much simpler when Ezra had been recovering from his bout with pneumonia and all the complications associated with his illness. For about a week after they brought him home, all he'd done was sleep. Hell, he'd all but slept through Christmas and New Year's.

It'd been hard on them all, with him so sick, but at least they'd known where he was and his complaining when they shooed him back to bed or handed him his medicine and a glass of water reassured them, he was still with them. Chris wasn't sure how much longer they'd be able to say that.

"JD will bring him home," Chris couldn't help but smile when Vin unknowingly echoed his thoughts.

"He will be home tonight, but what about tomorrow night or the night after that?" Chris asked his brothers, not expecting any answers to the mess he had made.

"He's a grown man, Chris. He's going to have to make his own decisions. If he wants to go, then there isn't much we can do to keep him here." Nathan's sad eyes followed the car until it disappeared from sight.

"Dad wanted us all here, Nathan. He wanted us to learn to be a family," Chris snapped. He didn't want to hear anything about free will; he wanted to know how to keep his brother at home, where he could be kept safe.

"If Dad wanted us to be one big happy family, then maybe he should have done something about it years ago." Nathan retorted, surprised at how bitter he sounded.

They all agreed there had to be a reason for their father not to, at least, keep in touch with his sons, but they sure hadn't been able to find out what it was. Of course, Ezra had been the only one to tackle the chaos, laughingly referred to as the library. Nathan figured his other brothers reasoned as he had, that as soon as Ezra discovered whether his mother was in danger, he'd leave. Rather than help Ezra sort through the boxes, books, and files their father left behind, they all made it a point to get him out of the library as often as possible. For a while, it had meant out of the library and into his bed to rest, and then, as his strength returned, it had meant out to the corral and onto a horse for the riding lessons Chris was 'secretly' giving Ezra. He had hoped he would glue Ezra to the ranch until the rest of his brothers figured out how to forge their own bonds with him. Time was running out. Ezra's need to leave was stronger than their ability to make him stay. Their father should never have let it get to this point.

"Nathan, you are not being—" Buck began.

"Hush, Buck. I'm tired of you defending Dad. Sure, there may be a reason for him handling things the way he did, but I have looked and looked, and I can't see it. All I know is we are about

to lose a brother before we are even a family, and I am helpless to stop it. I fucked up with Ezra; I crossed a line he didn't want crossed, and I didn't even see the line. I don't understand what I did wrong."

"You treated him like an invalid," Chris said. He sighed wearily. He'd told Nathan, on more than one occasion, to back off and let Ezra decide what he felt like doing, but his demands fell on deaf ears. Nathan, he supposed, couldn't help himself. It was his nature to nurture; Chris doubted Nathan realized how pushy and demanding he became when someone was sick, and he was trying to bully them into getting well.

"What was I supposed to do, Chris? Do any of you realize how close he came to dying?" Nathan reached down to soothe his horse. Arguing on horseback was not a good idea; horses were too sensitive. "And don't you talk to me about how I treat him. I'm not the one who finds fault with everything he does."

Chris rubbed the bridge of his nose; the day was half over, they had at least two days' work to finish before nightfall, everyone was getting pissed with each other, and now, he was getting another killer headache. "His being sick was hard to miss, Nathan. What I am trying to say is, you talk a good game about him being an adult when it comes to whether he can decide to stay or leave, but when it comes to letting him decide whether he feels like doing something or not, you treat him like a two-year-old."

"And you don't. He wanted to come today. You say he has surprised you by how well he has taken to riding. Yet on a day when we could use him, you told him that he's not good enough to join us."

"That's different, Nathan. Riding is different than rounding up cattle. He made a stupid mistake the other day and ended up on his ass. He does that in the middle of a moving herd, and he's not going to get up and dust himself off. He'll be hurt." Chris took a deep breath. "Ezra is good; in a few months, he'll be ready for anything, but he isn't ready now. JD is a good rider, too, but there is no way I was going to let him help us today. I don't want anyone in the hospital."

"Did you ever tell him that?" Buck leaned forward, resting his arm on the saddle horn. "Did you ever tell him he is a good rider?"

Chris shifted uncomfortably in his saddle about his interactions with Ezra. When he began helping Ezra with his riding, he knew Ezra had no experience with horses and had merely hoped to make his brother comfortable working around them. He had been surprised at the ease with which Ezra took to riding and pleased to see the empathy Ezra shared with his mount, knowing without being told which horses needed a firm hand and which could be given their head. Surely, he had said something to Ezra, something positive to take the edge off all his yelling.

Buck correctly read Chris's look. "I can answer you there, Chris. No, you haven't. You just assumed he knows what you are thinking. That works with me and Nate, hell, it works with Vin too, but don't you go thinking it works with the rest of them. It doesn't. Not yet, and it might not ever. They didn't grow up with us and they ain't used to reading between the lines. You want to tell them something, you need to open your mouth and use words." He turned to face Nathan. "It's not that you treat him like a two-year-old. He can take that. You treat everyone like that. It's that you are always touching him. He doesn't like being touched."

Nathan frowned, said like that. he sounded perverted or something. "I don't touch him all the time," he argued.

"Yeah, you do, Nate. It's just been recently that you've quit checking him for fever when you come home at night."

"It's just been recently that he has quit running a fever, and how does me feeling his forehead for fever all of a sudden turn me into a ... pervert."

"Give him a thermometer," Buck answered.

"I tried... several times. Ezra just smiles, takes the thermometer, asks me about my day, and the next thing I know, the thermometer is back in the medicine cabinet, and his temperature hasn't been taken. The back of a hand on a forehead isn't scientific, but at least I get an idea if he is feverish again. ... Look... if he had a real problem with me touching him, all he had to do was to ask me to back off." Nathan turned indignant eyes on Chris when his older brother snorted. "I do listen."

"Yep, 'bout as well as I do," Chris replied. He hadn't thought about it until then, but Buck was right, and what did that say about Ezra's past? He wasn't sure he wanted to know. His words were spoken more to himself than to any of his brothers.

Shaking his head in denial of Buck's observation, Nathan continued trying to explain his actions., "When he was so sick in the hospital, I put my hand on his shoulder. He needed to know he wasn't alone. He relaxed when I did that. He did." He hoped Ezra had. He didn't want to think he'd been forcing his 'touch' on someone who didn't want it.

"Maybe, but he doesn't when you reach for his face. I know you are touchy-feely, Nathan. I am sure it works great with your patients. It doesn't work with Ezra. You need to keep your hands to yourself," Buck commanded, thinking he should have said something sooner.

Nathan studied the ground as he digested what Buck said. It was true, he realized as he replayed the past few weeks in his mind. Ezra didn't like to be touched on his face. He had flat-out ignored how Ezra moved out of reach when he tried to check for a fever. He had always prided himself on his empathy with his patients, but when it came to this brother, he had not only missed the boat, but he had jumped off the dock, missed the boat, and landed in the river.

Chris straightened up in his saddle. "Get a digital thermometer, Nathan. One of those that you run along the forehead. We had one for Adam. I am sure you use them at your clinic." He stopped himself, expecting the wave of pain that mentioning Adam's name usually brought. It didn't come. The absence of that familiar pain scared him. He swallowed hard. "We've got too much to do to figure this out now." Without a backward glance to determine whether or not his brothers followed, he kneed his horse into a trot. He didn't have any answers. He wished he did. He wished he could take back some of the things he said, and barring that, he wished he could corner Ezra long enough to get him to accept his apology. He wished... He wished he didn't see Adam when Ezra smiled.



"They aruh going to return this evening, tired, dusty, and smelling of cattle. Ah suppose we should count ourselves lucky we were not asked to join them," Ezra said as he watched his brothers in the rearview mirror. He flashed a smile at his brother at his side. "Though, no doubt, we shall return covered in fur and smelling of dog."

JD smiled back, hoping Ezra couldn't read the inner turmoil in his eyes. He shouldn't be the one doing this; Chris should, but Chris had his head stuck in the sand and did not see what he was doing to Ezra. When Chris announced they would be spending Saturday in the saddle, Ezra's eyes lit up with excitement. Then, Chris pulled Ezra aside to tell him he wasn't ready to ride all day, the same eyes filled with hurt before Ezra's false smile and easy acceptance of Chris's decision hid his pain. He had seen it; why hadn't Chris? Shoving aside the worry Ezra's false smile caused him and, focusing on another problem, JD asked, "What do you have against Miss Nettie?"

"Me? Nothing. She is a remarkable woman."

"She really is. Correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems you don't like her. Why?"

"You have a lot of questions this morning, JD."

"You took forever in the bathroom, so I had a lot of time to think them up."

"Ah'm sorry Ah took so long. It was unconscionable of me to dally when Ah knew you were desirous of spending time with the lovely Miss Wells." He flashed another quick smile at JD, hoping he would change to a benign topic. At the least, he hoped his brother would find something else to look at. The young man had been studying him ever since they got in the car, and those intense brown eyes were unnerving.

"Actually, we're early. Miss Nettie and Casey had to go into Eagle Bend for something. They don't expect us until later this afternoon." JD answered truthfully, hoping his answer would not cause Ezra to turn the car around to head back to the ranch.

"May Ah ask, then, why we are on the road? Is sleeping in a foreign concept? If so, then certainly, there are things at the Larabee ranch we could be doing." Ezra's eyes flickered from JD to the road and back to JD. Something was up, and he was sure he wouldn't like it.

"Jack needed a change of scenery." JD dropped his arm behind the car seat to the dog stretched across the back seat to let his fingers card through the dog's fur. It wasn't a total lie. "He's not handling Josiah being gone. Every morning when I let Jack out to run, I half expect him not to come back. I keep thinking this is the morning he will run away to search for Josiah." He hoped Ezra would accept the lie for the moment and not question him further. He didn't want to start throwing questions at Ezra. He needed to start a conversation. Not that he wasn't worried about Jack; he was, but bringing Jack had been an afterthought; he planned to talk to Ezra and find out why he was so ready to leave.

"And so, you think by taking him to Miss Wells' ranch, you are going to trust him not to go off after Josiah. What happens when we open the door to let him out of the car? By the way, Ah must strenuously object to your turning this vehicle into a pet taxi, but no mattuh... Let me see if Ah understand. After expressing your concern about the behemoth, we laughingly call a dog, running away in search of Josiah, you aruh planning to let him out of the car when we reach the Wells' ranch. Am Ah missing something? Aruh you not concerned he might take off when you open the door? If he does, let me assure you right now, Ah have no plans to throw mahself on top of him and wrestle him to the ground."

"I hadn't thought of that." He hadn't thought much beyond getting Ezra in the car and telling him they needed to talk.

"You may want to give it some consideration. If Jack roams the ranch, he, at least, is familiar with the area. Ah am not sure how well he will navigate the Wells' land if he decides to run off. And Ah, for one, have no plan to spend the day in the saddle looking for him. Besides, Ah am most sure my riding skills are not up to the task." His hands tightened on the wheel when he realized what he had said. Maybe JD missed it. He glanced over at the young man. No such luck, JD was giving him a strange look.

"I don't know if Chris tells you this. He doesn't hand out compliments, but you are a good rider."

"Thank you."

"I'm serious, Ezra. I might not know much about cattle, but I do know a few things about horses. Every summer, I worked at one of the most prestigious stables in Boston. I have watched enough rich folk come in for lessons to speak with some authority. Even with the best of instructors and years of lessons, I can't think of one of them who rides as well as you do. And it's not just me who thinks that; Buck says you are a natural."

"So much for secret lessons." He hoped he kept the bitterness out of his voice.

"Chris never said anything, but we all live at the ranch. We would have to be pretty stupid not to notice." He hurried on before Ezra could say anything, "Nathan about had a fit. He kept going on about how stupid Chris was and how you had no business getting on a horse, but Josiah told him to drop it, and he did." He paused, took a deep breath, and jumped back into his explanation. "I'm probably why he didn't want you to go with them. Both Chris and Buck act like I can't do anything without someone looking over my shoulder to make sure I am doing it right."

"Been there and Ah'm still doing that."

"Well, yeah, but in your case, it's because Chris worries about you. I don't know if you noticed, but you scared him bad by being as sick as you were. He's worried you are going to do something to get yourself hurt and end up back in the hospital. In my case, he thinks I am too young to be left alone. You're going to get well, but I'm afraid I'm stuck with being the youngest. I'm not sure if I will ever be old enough to stay by myself."

"Perhaps, we will discover Landon left another bastard, and you won't be the youngest."

JD looked horrified, but only for a moment, then burst out laughing, "That's terrible, Ezra. You might not want to say that in front of Chris, Buck, or Nathan. I'm not sure they'd find any humor in it."

"Trust me, Ah am intelligent enough not to say things like that in front of them. Ah am not overly fond of black eyes."

"They wouldn't hit you," JD replied. He knew Ezra was teasing, but he reassured his brother without thinking. "Chris yells, but he doesn't hit. Besides, he likes you."

"Perhaps," Ezra agreed with a smile, thinking that JD missed how angry he had been making Chris lately. He thought a more likely reason for his exclusion from the roundup was that Chris needed a break from him, not because he wasn't yet able to ride all day or because JD was not old enough to go on a round-up.

"So tell me, why don't you like going to Miss Nettie's?"

"Ah don't mind Miss Nettie."

"Pigs fly and cows line up each night to practice jumping over the moon."

"You've been listening to Vin. If you aruh not careful, you will be sounding just like him."

"That'd be cool. I like his accent."

"He mangles English and turns it nearly incomprehensible."

"I like your accent too. I just can't use the big words you use without sounding like I ate a dictionary."

"Ah'd settle for your not using ain't."

"Ain't. ain't ain't. Does it make your skin crawl to hear it?"

"As a matter of fact, it does."

"I had a teacher who once told us that. We used it every chance we got."

"Please don't."

"So why ain't you told me why you don't like Miss Nettie?"

Ezra sighed theatrically, "Miss Nettie is a fine woman. Ah do like her. She is a saint among women and is much admired."

"But you didn't really want to come."

"Not particularly, no."

"And the fact you didn't want to come has nothing to do with the work that needs doing."

"You and Vin Tanner go to her place every weekend; Ah doubt there is much work to do on her farm."

"So... it is her."

"No, John David, it is me," Ezra reluctantly admitted. "Ah fear Ah made a horrid impression on her, and Ah have no idea how to rectify the situation."

"You've only been there once; I don't remember you making any bad impressions."

"You don't remember the fact that Ah sat on the porch while the rest of you worked."

"You honestly think Nathan would have let you do anything. He was really upset when he saw that suit of yours. He kept asking everyone who took you into town to buy it. When he figured out you went to Eagle Bend to buy it yourself, he hit the ceiling. He was so mad at you." JD chuckled. "Chris gave him a hammer and told him to fix the back steps; he sure can hammer fast when he's mad."

Ezra smiled at the memory; Nathan had walked past him several times, and each time he had been glaring and pounding the hammer into his open palm, obviously trying to get some sort of message across. He hadn't known what Nathan meant then, but now that he knew, it was amusing. "Ah am sorry Ah distressed him. Ah mistakenly thought a suit would be appropriate for an evening spent dining with an old family friend, and so Ah went to Eagle Bend to find it."

"The suit didn't bother him, heck, if anything, I think we were all a little jealous at how well you cleaned up. It's just that you did it on your own. You could have asked one of us to take you to get it. You were not supposed to be driving."

"Ah must admit, it did not occur to me to ask anyone to take me."

"I know. It's hard, isn't it, to get used to the fact we have brothers to help us get things done."

"Yes...yes, it is."

"You shouldn't have gone by yourself, you know."

"I thought we went over this," Ezra caught the recrimination in JD's eyes and fell quiet.

"You driving to get a suit doesn't bother me. Going by yourself does."

Ezra looked a question at JD.

"I don't know how much you remember, but someone may have tried to kill you while you were in the hospital. We all agreed we would not go anywhere by ourselves. You did."

"That happened before Christmas. Nothing has happened since."

JD reached back to pet the dog. He knew he had no hope of getting Ezra to understand how certain he was that Ezra had been intentionally targeted. Heck, he didn't understand it himself. Deciding to drop that subject for the moment, he returned to that of Miss Nettie. He fairly bounced with excitement at the thought of solving one problem, of making things right between Miss Nettie and Ezra. Just to make sure, he asked, "So, you've been embarrassed about not helping out that day. That's why you've been avoiding going to visit. Right?"

"You certainly have a lot of questions." Ezra could feel his head spinning with his effort to keep up with JD's subject changes.

"Right?"

"No. Not entirely." Damn his stupidity for swearing to himself that he was going to be honest with JD. "Ah showed her mah less than stellar qualities. Ah showed her mah greed. Ah doubt if she will welcome me with open arms."

"I don't follow you, Ezra." Miss Nettie always asked about him.

"When Vin needed money to get the things to patch her roof, he came to me."

"Well, yeah, you are the only one of us who carries cash," JD interrupted.

"Ah wasn't aware my tendency to carry cash was well known." Did he have no secrets left?

"Sure, Chris just about had a fit when you didn't open a checking account. He doesn't like you keeping a bunch of money under your mattress."

"Ah don't keep it under the mattress," Ezra retorted indignantly. It was better hidden than that.

JD wisely decided not to tell Ezra; he, too, thought he should have the money in the bank. "Anyway, you were saying Vin came to you for money."

Ezra turned onto the road to Miss Wells' ranch. She wasn't there; maybe, they could get whatever needed repairing taken care of and get out of there before she returned. He concentrated on avoiding the potholes dotting the road, delaying answering the question until it was apparent JD was planning on waiting him out. "Ah protested him using mah money on her roof."

"She was going to pay it back as soon as her social security check arrived."

"Why couldn't Vin use his debit card?" Ezra pointed out. All of his brothers had them, so why did Vin want cash?

"I don't know Ezra. I think he has his eyes on a saddle he wants. But back to Miss Nettie, she was planning to pay you back on Wednesday."

"Ah know." Ezra pulled up to the barn, turned the motor off, and shifted in his seat so he could look at JD. "It is just that the money represents mah... ability to take care of mahself." He really needed to rethink his decision, to be honest with JD. This conversation was getting perilously close to things of which he did not want to converse. "Ah do not like being dependent on the generosity of others... Ah know it sounds crazy, but Ah need the money to..." He didn't have the words to explain what the money meant to him.

"Do you need it to feel safe?" JD asked, his voice soft.

"No, yes, something like that. Sounds silly when you say it out loud, but Vin asking for my money... he surprised me. Ah did not even realize he knew Ah had it. He took me by surprise, and Ah said something about loaning him the money when the sanctified dead rose from their graves."

JD laughed, "You didn't."

"Ah did." It did make a funny story, but retelling it did nothing to ease the shame he felt when he recalled the look in her eyes. "Ah knew she would repay me, but Ah was loath to loan it to her. Even with her saying her check would be in by Tuesday, Ah was reluctant to hand it over. All Ah could think was Ah would have no money, no independence."

"You know you don't need the money. I know it's nice to be getting it, but you have a place to live and food to eat. It's your home, too. You know that, don't you?"

"Mah's needing the money is not based on logic. It's based entirely on a lifetime of..." Did he want to go there? No, but he had begun this and would finish it. "Not having it, in mah experience, being penniless means being at the mercy of others. It means Ah can't leave." He smiled, reassuring JD he was fine. "Of course, Ah had to make things impossibly worse by calling her a crone."

"O-o-o-oh, not a good move," JD said the first thing to come to mind to keep the conversation going while he thought about what Ezra said about leaving. He had been right to be worried that Ezra was thinking about leaving. For once, he'd give anything to be wrong.

"Ah have always had a smart mouth. Ah have allowed it to get me into trouble more than once."

"Can I ask you something, Ezra?"

"Yes, you may." Ezra corrected. His stomach churned at the thought. Rule number three: Never give anyone more information than necessary, and when cornered, lie, lie, lie. Remember, his mother told him on more than one occasion that the more people know about you, the more information they have to use against you. He wasn't sure what JD wanted, but JD's hesitant question told him it was personal. He didn't want JD to know too much about him. He had steered as many questions away from himself as he could, but he wouldn't lie to the boy. JD deserved to know the truth, no matter how much it hurt telling it, or how much it destroyed when heard.

"When are you leaving?"

Ezra had been expecting the question, not phrased as politely as that, but he had been bracing himself for it. He just hadn't expected JD to be the one to ask it. He hoped JD did not

notice the grip he had on the steering wheel and did not hear the pounding of his heart. Wetting his lips and remembering to smile, he turned to face his brother. "Ah can be packed in an hour. Would you be available to take me to the bus station?"

"I didn't mean it like that, Ezra... It just seems as though you are inching out the door. Every time I look at you, you are looking at the door. If you are going, I want to know when, so I can say goodbye... I am not asking you to leave... I want you to stay..." his voice trailed off. He found he could not look at Ezra. Afraid of what he would see in Ezra's face, he kept his eyes on the massive dog in the back.

"Why?" It was spoken so softly that JD almost missed it.

"Why do I want you to stay? Isn't it obvious? You are my brother." JD risked taking a look at him. The open anguish on the face of a man who always seemed to be smiling and laughing caused tears to fill his eyes. Not bothering to hide the tears, JD continued, "I have spent all my life wondering about you guys. I don't know you yet, and I am not ready for you to go. More importantly, I like you. I want you to stay."

"And if Ah am ready to go?"

"Are you?"

"Ah think it's best for all concerned if Ah do."

"At the risk of sounding selfish, it's not the best thing for me. I don't want to lose my brother."

"Ah appreciate that JD, but the reality is you don't know me. You won't be missing much."

"WHAT! How can you say that? Is that what you think about us... About me? That you won't be missing much by not getting to know me?"

"John David," Ezra began, only to be interrupted.

"Be quiet for a minute. Just be quiet." For a long minute, the only sound in the car was Jack's panting in the back seat. "What kind of comment was that—you won't be missing much?"

"John David, of course, Ah will miss you, all of you, but you the most."

"Then why?"

"JD, you have five other brothers ... fine, good, men."

"And you're not?" JD interrupted again.

"No... Ah'm not." Ezra could feel his face burning. Shame, making his movements jerky and graceless, he groped for the keys in the ignition. Miss Nettie was not home, so he would take John David back to the ranch, get packed, and be gone before Chris and the others returned. Maybe he could get JD to take him to the bus station, and by the time night fell, the ranch and his brothers would be nothing but memories.

JD watched as Ezra's long, slender fingers fumbled with the keys. "Leave them alone, Ezra," he commanded. "We are not going anywhere until I understand."

"There isn't anything to understand. It's time for me to go."

"Who says? Chris? Is this about Chris yelling? Ezra, Buck says he yells all the time."

"He doesn't yell at you." He knew he sounded like a petulant child, but it hurt that Chris never found fault with anyone else.

"You are right, he doesn't. That is why Buck is around. Every time I do something stupid, Buck yells at me."

Ezra refrained from snorting his disbelief. Sure, Buck yelled, but when he raised his voice, he did so with a twinkle in his eyes and a humorous quip on his lips. There was nothing humorous about an angry Chris Larabee. He doubted JD could see the difference, though; Chris never got angry with JD. Seeking another way to explain his decision to leave, he said, "JD, Ah came back because there is supposedly someone out there killing our mothers; there isn't, at least Ah haven't been able to find the supposed file and since Ah am the only one looking, Ah conclude the rest of you also doubt there is a file."

"I think there is a file, but there has been so much going on that there hasn't been enough time to look. Chris may have asked you to come back to help figure out the mystery, but it is not why he asked you back. You belong here with us... I have to ask; is that the only reason you came back? Weren't you just a little bit curious about us? Don't you want to get to know us?"

"Ah must admit Ah have been excessively curious about you, all of you."

"Then why are you thinking about going. Don't you know we are curious about you, too?"

"Maybe Ah do not want you to get to know me?"

"Why?"

"Look, JD, you have five other brothers. They are all good, decent men. Get to know them."

"You keep saying stuff like that. Why?"

"Ah am saying is Ah am not the type of man you need to waste your time on."

JD didn't take time to marshal his thoughts or compose his questions, speaking rapidly as though he suspected he'd only get one shot to get Ezra to listen. He asked, "Why do you think I shouldn't get to know you. You make it sound as though you were a mass murderer or something. Tell me why I shouldn't bother to get to know you, why I wouldn't want to have you as a brother, because I sure haven't seen anything about you that makes me feel like it would be a mistake to claim you as my brother."

"There are a myriad of reasons."

"Name them."

"Every family has a black sheep; someone they'd rather not claim. Ah am that person. Can we leave it alone, please? Ah don't want to have to bring out every one of my dirty secrets to get you to understand why Ah don't belong here; don't make me."

"Don't make you tell me why it's all right for you to just walk away from us, from me... and disappear? You have to give me a better reason than this shit about you being the black sheep."

"Let me go," he begged. "Ah will stay in touch with you."

"No, you won't. I may not know much about you, Ezra Standish, but I know the minute you go, I won't see you again. If I have to say goodbye, then I want to know why you left."

"John David...JD, Ah am not like Chris and Nathan. Ah am not a good man."

JD leaned against the car door, ignoring the armrest, jabbing him in the back. He tried to sound calm; in the back seat Jack moved restlessly, either trying to get comfortable or moving in response to the rising tension in the car. "That's not a reason... You know what I think?" JD didn't wait for Ezra to try to guess but answered his own question. "I think you are a good a man, and I think you are telling me you are this big, bad monster to keep me at arm's distance. I think you are scared to let me get too close to you. I think you are scared I will disappoint you. I won't, you know."

"It is not a matter of you disappointing me. Please understand... Ah see you, all of you, and Ah see men of honor. Ah don't see anything honorable when Ah look into the mirror."

"What do you see?" JD still spoke quietly and calmly, only now he did it to reassure Ezra that all was well and not to reassure Jack.

Ezra slunk into his seat as his eyes studied his reflection in the rearview mirror. He didn't want to answer, but he had promised himself he'd never lie to John David. He licked his dry lips, "Ah see a man Ah don't like."

JD wished someone else, Josiah, would be a good choice, was here asking the questions. He felt as though he was swimming in the deep end and on the verge of drowning. He moved so he could see Ezra's reflection in the mirror. "I see a man I do like."

"You don't know him. You are seeing what's on the outside, not the inside."

"I don't know. The man I see is the man who talks to me like an adult. He is the one who sneaks food under the table to the dog and buys treats for the barn cats. He is the one who spent all night putting poultices on the leg of a horse that came up lame. He is the one who is sending half his paycheck to Sophie Malone so her niece can go to beauty school. I don't know about you, but he sounds like a good man to me."

Ezra furrowed his brow, wondering how JD had found out he was sending money to Mrs. Malone. He mentally shrugged his shoulders. How JD found out was not what was important; making JD understand why he had to leave was. "A few good deeds do not make a good man."

"Ezra, I think that you are a good man. You are going to have to come up with something pretty good to make me want you to leave."

Ezra looked around the car, his eyes seeking a way out of the corner. JD's questions pushed him in. He had no way to explain himself to JD without revealing a past he needed to keep buried. "Mrs. Wells isn't here. We are trespassing. We should go."

JD reached across the seat and snatched the keys out of the ignition. Stuffing them into his jeans pocket, he ignored Ezra's startled look and said, "She won't mind. I want to talk to you. I have some things to say."

"Ah don't think Ah want to hear anything you have to say." He could hear the tremor in his voice, and no doubt, JD could also. He just hadn't expected those words to come out of JD's

mouth. He had heard them so many times from so many people; they were always the prelude to a litany of his shortcomings, the reasons he could not be a part of whichever family he was staying with. He had heard everything there was to say on the subject of Ezra Standish and his many faults; he could not endure listening to JD's rendition of that particular song. "Ah doubt you can say anything Ah have not heard before. If you don't mind, return the keys. Ah need to pack." Ezra held out his hand expectantly.

"No." He couldn't believe the way he sounded, as though he expected Ezra to sit back and listen to him. John David Dunne did not tell people to do things; not like this, anyway. There was no backing down, though.

"Talk to the slobbering beast you insisted on bringing then, as Ah do not wish to converse." His eyes on JD, he blindly groped for the door handle.

"If you get out of this car, Ezra, I'll get out too, and if you run, I swear, I will chase you and I will tackle you to the ground and sit on you if I have to, but you and I will talk," JD warned.

Ezra chewed on his bottom lip. If it came to it, he'd win any sort of fight with JD, so the thought of a scuffle was not what held him frozen in place. He didn't want to end things that way. It was bad that JD was the one forcing him to leave, but to have his last memories of JD be those of them rolling around in the dirt, fighting, was unbearable. He settled back into the seat, resigned to hear whatever JD wanted to say. "Fine. Talk."

Startled by Ezra's capitulation, it took JD a moment to begin. "This might not be the best place to talk. I probably should have found a better place, but I couldn't think of any. I know you don't like being here. I know you are afraid Mrs. Wells will think we are trespassing or worse, she'll drive up in the middle of our talk, but I know we can't go back until after we talk. If we go back now, you'll find a way not to talk to me, and one day I'll wake up and you will have walked out the door without saying goodbye."

"It's better to walk out under mah own power rather than wait to be thrown out."

"No one is going to throw you out."

"You don't understand." Ezra looked around, wondering whether he should just get out and start walking. Walking away was the only thing he could think of to do to get JD to quit asking questions.

"Then make me understand. Tell me why I shouldn't want you as a brother."

"Please...please take mah word."

"No. If you are planning on just leaving, I need reasons. It's only fair. Give me one good reason I should just let you walk away from us."

"There are so many."

"One will do. If it's sufficiently awful, I will go home, help you pack and take you wherever you want to go. I won't even tell anyone where you went, but it's got to be bad."

"Ah am a murderer." Ezra turned to look JD in the eye, steeling himself for the revulsion he would see.

JD blinked rapidly, thinking he had stepped in it when he started this conversation. A murderer! He hadn't expected that. "Who did you kill?" he asked when he could find his voice.

"Mah three-year-old cousin." I killed my beautiful little cousin, who laughed and danced all the time. One moment, she was smiling, and the next, she was dead because I had to show off.

"Why?"

"There wasn't a why. Ah just did it." Hearing the way Ezra spoke, his voice flat and unemotional, angered JD; Ezra sounded as though he had stepped on a roach and not as though he had killed someone. He wanted to say how he felt, but he couldn't find the words. Years later, he would look back and thank his lucky stars he didn't have Ezra's way with words or Buck's glib tongue. His muteness gave him a chance to see the pain in Ezra's eyes and ask, "What happened?"

"Ah wanted to show off. Ah wanted to show her how far Ah could kick the ball. Ah kicked it out into the street. She followed the ball and was hit by a car."

"You kicked a ball to a three-year-old, and it rolled into the street. How old were you?"

"Does it matter? Ah killed her. Ah knew not to let her go onto the road. Watching her was my job, and Ah not only didn't keep her away from the road, Ah practically threw her into it."

"How old?"

"Ah was around six."

"Six... You are holding yourself responsible for something that happened when you were six?"

"Ah was responsible for her. Ah was staying with my aunt and uncle. They took me in, and the only thing they expected of me was that I watch her. I fucked up. I kicked the ball, and she died...Have you ever heard the sound a three-year-old body makes when it hits a windshield? Ah have."

"That's a tragedy, Ezra, not a murder."

"All Ah had to do was keep her out of the street."

"There is no way you were responsible for a car hitting her. I don't know what you were told to make you feel as though you murdered her, but it wasn't murder. Not even close." JD made a show of checking on Jack. The dog whined as he ran his fingers through his coat. After a couple of minutes of soothing the dog, JD was ready to face Ezra again. "You are going to have to come up with something better than that for me to let you go."

"Ah used drugs," was Ezra's prompt response.

"I know that. You already told me. Next."

"Ah never told you what Ah did to get them."

"You prostituted yourself?" JD asked, his heart breaking.

"Ah didn't have to. Ah sold them, too."

"Same question, how old were you? Twelve, right?"

"Yes, and don't say AH didn't know what Ah was doing. Don't insult me that way. Ah knew what Ah was doing. Ah knew exactly what Ah was doing."

"Then tell me why?"

"The usual reasons: Ah wanted to be like everyone else, Ah wanted to dull the ache of loneliness, Ah wanted to be cool. ..." He let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He licked his lips before beginning again. "Ah was staying with mah Uncle Daniel and his wife Elizabeth. He was a strict man, a hard man. One of the few places Ah stayed where Ah was treated like a member of the family. Ah don't mean to say Ah felt loved and welcomed; Ah didn't. Ah mean, he treated his children as though they were just one step away from sinning, and he treated me no differently. Eating dinner was more of an inquisition than a family meal. On Sunday, after church, he would give us a list of verses to memorize, and the Lord help if we did not know them by the next Sunday. Fortunately, Ah have consistently been able to recall what Ah have read with ease. Mah uncle was fooled into believing mah recall of scriptures meant Ah was a virtuous child, and his obligation to repay his debt to Mother was not so demanding. He rarely took his belt to me..."

He stopped talking and turned to JD. "Ah need to get out. Ah am not running away, JD. Ah just need to get some air." Ezra didn't wait for JD's reply; instead, he fumbled for the door handle and bolted out.

JD followed Ezra out of the car. He let Jack out of the back, not particularly caring if the dog disappeared. He wished he could take back his demand that Ezra tell him this, but he didn't know how Ezra would take his asking him to quit talking. If Ezra lived this, the least he could do was to listen.

Leaning against the car to let the car support his trembling legs, Ezra continued, "Andie was wild, but Uncle didn't see it. She would come home stoned out of her mind, and since he didn't smell alcohol on her breath and since she still wore the long, shapeless dresses Aunt Elizabeth sewed for her, mah uncle thought her incoherent ramblings were a teenage girl thing."

"He never figured out her boyfriend, Buddy, son of the town's most successful farmer, was the town's biggest drug dealer. He never figured out Buddy was not her boyfriend either. Buddy was her dealer. The sex they had was her payment for the drugs he gave her. She told herself they were in love, but if it ever came down to it, she would have chosen the drugs over Buddy any day."

Ezra let his head fall back, and he studied the sky. "Ah told mahself Ah was in love with Buddy, too. Around Buddy, Ah didn't feel invisible... He'd leave Andie in the bedroom, and come out to watch TV with me. He'd offer me a beer, a joint, or a pill, and we'd watch television. He didn't like to watch sports; he liked documentaries... can you believe it? Andie would be sleeping off the sex and the drugs in the bedroom, and we'd be in the living room getting high while watching lions eat zebras."

JD wanted to reach out to offer comfort, although he didn't know what to say or do, and he was unsure how anything he did would be received, so he kept his fists clasped to his side. He feared any movement on his part would shut Ezra up.

"One night, Ah guess Ah was too quiet or something; Buddy asked me if Ah was all right. Ah don't know if it was honest concern, Ah heard in his voice, or if Ah just needed to talk, but Ah told Buddy that

Uncle Daniel had taken his belt to me. He wanted to see. It didn't seem wrong to show him mah back, so Ah did. He was so angry, and his touch was so gentle. He got some ointment and rubbed it into my back and shoulders. It felt good, the medicine or his touch, I don't know which, but it felt good. Ah felt cared for. It was a heady feeling. It felt so good to have someone touch me...you know, when they weren't angry. The next weekend, he wanted to check and see if AH was healing, and Ah let him look, and Ah let him rub in more ointment."

"He started treating me like Ah belonged to him. We did stuff together, went to movies, or went to get hamburgers, and once he drove me all the way to the zoo. We were in the car for an hour there and an hour back, and Ah got to see all the animals that were on television.

"Sometimes, Andie was with us, and it was like Ah was the third wheel on their date, but sometimes it was just Buddy and me. Occasionally, he'd ask me to take things...you know, drugs, to people. 'Make sure you get the money,' he would say. Ah would, and Ah would be so proud when Ah handed it over to him. He'd ruffle mah hair like Ah was his pet dog, and Ah would climb in the car to sit beside him, pretending Ah was someone important.

"Ah started skipping school to be with him. He needed me to sell the drugs for him, and Ah needed the attention he gave me. If we had a really profitable day, he'd take me to his apartment and he'd give me something to make me fly, and sometimes he'd take me to bed. We never did anything; he made it clear he wasn't interested in me in that way. We just talked about everything...If things had stayed like that Ah would still be there, but one day the school sent a note to mah uncle inquiring about mah health. Ah, came in, and there he was waiting with a belt...Afterwards, Ah packed mah stuff, climbed out the window, and left.

"Ah thought Buddy would take me in. He met me at the door; it was the middle of the night, and he had a party going on. Ah should have figured out he was high, and just waited outside until morning, but Ah let him pull me in. He took me back to the bedroom and he handed me a pill, to calm me down, he said.

After Ah quit mah blubbering, he asked why Ah had come there. Ah told him Ah wanted to stay with him. Ah said Ah couldn't live with mah Uncle anymore. He told me Ah was a beautiful little boy, but he wasn't queer. He said that Ah needed to go.

"Ah begged him, Ah pleaded with him. Ah told him Ah would sell more merchandise... anything. He made a show of thinking about it. Then he started unzipping his pants. He told me to get on the bed. For a moment, Ah thought Ah could do it, but Ah grabbed my backpack and ran out the door. Aa Ah escaped. Ah could hear him and his friends laughing.

"He tried to rape you?"

"It isn't rape when you ask for it."

"It is if you are a child. It is if you were given a drug and couldn't think for yourself." The story Ezra shared hit JD hard, and he felt physically ill. "What did you do?" JD asked when he found his voice.

"Ah went to uncle's house. Ah got back before he banged on the door and told me to get up and get ready for school. He drove me to school and told me that if Ah left before the last bell, Ah would find out the real meaning of being in trouble."

"What happened?" JD prompted, not sure if he wanted to know.

"Two days later, Andie overdosed. She was found in an alley where Buddy would transact business. Not in his home, which was where she most often took whatever he had on hand. She ended up in the hospital. Uncle and the police wanted to know where she got the drugs. She protected Buddy and said she had found them in my room. She said it was her first time using any kind of drugs. She said that Ah must be some sort of addict. They believed her.

"Truth is, Ah was an addict. There is no denying that, but Ah nevuh brought any product home. Stealing from Buddy was nevuh an option. Ah, nevuh took anything Buddy didn't give me. Ah thought Andie did the same.

"What happened to him?"

"Ah really don't know. Uncle would not let me in the house after Andie told him the drugs were mine. He told me Ah was nevuh to darken his doorstep again. He told the police he would get in contact with my mothuh, but he washed his hands of me. They wanted to charge me with drug possession, but Uncle convinced them any sort of trial would tarnish both his and Andie's good names."

"So, your mom came and got you?"

"Of course."

"Was she the one who helped you get off drugs? Did she take you to a rehab clinic?" JD asked, thinking, maybe, he could see her in a better light if she had done so.

"No, JD. I have already told you. I did that mahself."

"I don't understand."

"I could not get mah hands on any drugs in juvie, so I got off them."

"You were in juvie! Why? I thought you said they didn't charge you."

"JD," Ezra started and then rethought his explanation. "Uncle didn't want me in his house, and they had nowhere else for me to stay until Mother got there."

"So, you weren't there long, then. You must not have been as addicted as you say if you got clean waiting for your mom to come get you." JD stopped suddenly, knowing there was more to the story.

"When did your mom come get you?"

"In October."

"I worded that wrong. How long were you in Juvie?"

"Three months," Ezra readied his defense of his mother—She had been in France with her current beau and, had to be sure the romance was over before coming to get him.

JD chewed on the three-month statement, deciding he couldn't handle any more information about Maude Standish right then. "Why did they put you in juvie? I thought they didn't charge you. Surely, they would have put you in a clinic or something to help you."

"Ah needed to be taught a lesson... to know what jail is like."

"But why?"

"Ah have been trying to tell you. Ah am a bad seed. Ah do not belong around good people. Landon Larabee knew that. Mah Aunts and Uncles knew that. The law knew that. Mothuh knows that. Don't you understand? Ah do not belong with the rest of you?"

Ezra stepped away from the car. He needed a minute to compose himself before the young man asked any more questions. He had promised to be honest with JD and ended up exposing too much of himself. He wished he had kept his mouth shut and just left.

"You are my brother. I still want you to stay." JD said, coming up behind his brother.

"Haven't Ah told you enough? Don't you understand what Ah am."

"You haven't told me anything that makes me accept you leaving," JD cleared his throat, "I do have a question though...if you want to answer it."

"Ah will answer." What did he have to say to make JD understand?

"Where was your mom?" JD interrupted.

"Maude?"

"Yeah."

"Ah don't understand your question."

"You were staying with an uncle who didn't take a belt to you too often, but when he did, he left marks that were still there a week later. Where was your mom?"

"JD, Ah don't wish to discuss Maude."

JD kicked at a tire and then, not caring if he scratched the Cadillac or not, JD flopped onto the hood; he simply didn't have any energy left with which to stand. The non-answer Ezra gave him answered many questions he had about his brother. The thought of a mother leaving her only child with someone capable of beating him stunned him.

He watched a bird soaring far overhead and concentrated on figuring out what kind it was rather than thinking about what Ezra said. When the bird disappeared from view, he turned to Ezra. "I know you came back to the ranch to find out if your mother was in any danger, but do you think that maybe you could find it within you to stay a while and get to know us?"

"Ah thought Ah had explained."

"I know you gave me these reasons why you weren't good enough to be with us... the black sheep, you said. I'm saying, I know there is a lot you haven't told me, and if I let you, you could probably spend the rest of the day finding reasons for me not to like you. If you want to tell me those things, I will listen, but you are not changing my mind. I want you to stay. I want to know you. The man I am looking at had some bad things happen to him, and he still grew up to be a man I like. I want him around; I need him to stay."

"Chris may not agree with you."

"Then that's his problem... I want you to stay. Please. Look, if nothing else, we can look for who the real man Landon Larabee was. If there is a good reason for him not raising us, we can find that out together. If he was a low-down good-for-nothing, we'll find that out too."

"JD..."

"All I am asking is for you not to judge me based on the other people in your life. If Chris starts acting like a bastard, tell him so, and I will back you. Of course, if you start acting like one, I will let you know, too."

"And if Chris wants me to go?"

"Then he had better have a damned good reason and be prepared to share it. I won't accept the things you did when you were a kid as a reason for your leaving."

"And if it is something Ah did as an adult?"

"Frankly, Ezra, I think you have already used your best ammunition, but even if you have a few more skeletons rattling around, we start from day one, and that day was the day we met at Judge Travis's office."

Ezra didn't have an answer to that. He stretched out on the hood beside JD and studied the cloudless sky. In the distance, he could hear Jack barking; he hoped they could get the dog back in the car. He didn't want to have to explain how they lost the beast.



JD tossed the oven mitts onto the counter and glared silently at his brothers, daring any of them to say anything about the meal he had prepared. It wasn't too badly burnt, and if they didn't like it, they all knew how to make a peanut butter sandwich. He was tired, had a massive headache, and he was not about to take any lip off of any of them. "You can go ahead and eat. Put your dishes in the dishwasher when you are finished. I am going to bed."

"Are you feeling all right?" Buck asked.

"Me? I am fine. I have a headache, but I am fine."

"Where's Ezra?" Chris asked the one question the rest of them were too scared to ask.

"Do you care?" JD spun around and growled at Chris.

"I wouldn't ask if I didn't care," Chris growled back.

"He's in bed. We came back from Mrs. Wells, and he went to bed. He was tired." Revealing things you had spent a lifetime covering up was exhausting work, JD supposed. It had certainly been exhausting to hear.

"He didn't work himself too hard, did he?" Nathan asked. His instinct was to go and check on Ezra, but his brothers' words were still in his head, and he didn't move.

Vin, puzzled, looked up from his chair. "What did you two do? I thought we had about everything there fixed."

"We worked on repairing something important, and if you are all as smart as I like to think you are, you will work on it, too."

"JD?" Chris hated cryptic remarks.

"We worked on being brothers. That's all."



JD sat on his bed listening to the silence of the night. He had turned off the lights and was grateful when no one came knocking at the door demanding a more complete explanation. He didn't know what he could say to explain his day. He wrapped his arms around his knees as he replayed the afternoon. He hadn't extracted a promise to stay from Ezra. The only promise that had been made had come from him when he swore nothing they talked about would ever be repeated. He wished he hadn't promised. He wanted to talk to someone about the things Ezra said. He wanted to talk to Maude about the kind of mother she had been. He couldn't do either thing. He had to sit there with his mouth shut and hope the things he said would be enough.

"Momma," he whispered into the dark. "Thank you for being you." He wiped the hair out of his eyes and remembered a snippet of their conversation. It started as an almost pleasant moment, one on which he could reflect, without the pain in green eyes intruding, but it ended up being the one moment from their afternoon that angered him the most.

They were both sitting on the car's hood, leaning against the windshield. The barn blocked the wind, and the heat from the sun was almost enough to make them believe they were warm. Neither one of them said anything for the longest time. If Mrs. Wells and Casey drove up, they probably wouldn't see anything wrong other than both men were sitting on the car's hood, obviously exhausted, and not a bit of work done.

JD ran his fingers through his hair, brushing his too-long bangs out of his eyes. "I should have gotten a haircut," he explained to Ezra when he realized his brother was intently looking at him. He didn't want to talk about his hair; he hadn't gone through all that with Ezra to talk about

hair, but now that he had Ezra's complete attention, he had run out of things to say. One wrong word, and the fragile bond of friendship they had forged would break, and he wasn't sure if there was anything else to replace it.

"Momma thought I looked best in short hair, and gave me a haircut every Friday night. When I was little, it didn't bother me too much, but as I grew older, it embarrassed me. I couldn't go to a professional to get it cut. Mom tried, but she never quite got it even. I used to beg her to let me let it grow out some, and she would for a couple of weeks. Then it would start looking shaggy, and she'd insist that she cut it. I didn't get a real haircut until after she got sick and couldn't do it herself. By then, I would cringe knowing how much a haircut and a tip would cost. I remember thinking if I just let it go for another week, there would be that much more money for her medicine... There were so many times I would think about Dad and this ranch, him having money and us having none – I would get so angry."

"Did you know he was rich?"

"No, not like millionaire rich. I just thought he had to have more money than us; everyone else did... Mom worked so hard because of me. She sacrificed so much for me. I wish things had been different."

Ezra spoke softly, but firmly, "John David, Ah never knew Jenna Dunne, but Ah can guarantee, she did not feel as though she sacrificed anything. Ah know, without a doubt, she felt blessed to have you in her life."

"She always made me feel as though she wanted me. She never said anything about how much better her life would have been if she hadn't had me, but I am not stupid. I know she would have had a much better life if she had aborted me."

"Maybe, but maybe she would have had an empty, lonely life. Maybe, you gave her life meaning."

"I hope so."

"Ah know so."

JD smiled at the sound of conviction in Ezra's voice. "Maybe... I just know life would have been so much easier if we had a little more money. I know you don't believe anyone was killing our moms, but you never listened to how scared my mom was whenever I mentioned contacting my father."

"Maybe she was scared of him."

"You don't believe that, do you? I don't think she was scared of him. Mom always said he was a great man. It was obvious that she loved him."

"Loving someone doesn't mean you can't be scared of them."

"Is that the voice of experience talking, Ezra?" JD kicked himself for asking the question. Ezra had already dug up so many painful things; it wasn't right to make him go through more. Before he could think of a way to take away the question, Ezra answered.

"It's been mah experience that some lovely people have particularly violent tendencies. It is entirely possible to love them and fear them at the same time."

Many thoughts he didn't want to consider ran through his mind as JD stared at his brother, then asked, "Who else hit you? Your mom?"

"Maude? Heavens no. That would have meant she was with me long enough to be irritated by mah smart mouth."

JD sighed his relief. It would have been awful to know Ezra's mom hit him. Then another thought hit him. "You were being hit, and she knew?" JD ignored the way his voice squeaked at the end of the question.

"Mother liked to... not notice things. To do so would mean she would have to take me with her, and Ah would have put a damper on her lifestyle. Imagine if you would, her toting a snotty-nosed six-year-old with her as she tried to snag her next husband. It just wouldn't work."

JD couldn't waste time imagining anything; he was still trying to wrap his mind around the concept that his brother's mother knew her son was being hit and did nothing. "I'm sorry... but your mom is a real bitch."

Ezra momentarily froze, hearing the anger in JD's voice. Then he spoke up in defense of his mother. "Ah have to ask you, not to call mah mother that."

"It's true. She should have taken care of you. I don't understand why she didn't."

"Maybe she had a disappointing son."

"You don't believe that, do you?"

Mothers love their children. They want to take care of them. It's part of their nature. It's ingrained in them. Ah must conclude, therefore, the fault lies with me. In fact, Ah have been assured by many good people that the fault is mine."

"I don't know about that, Ezra. I think your mom may be missing the mother gene."

"Maybe, she assuredly is not your traditional mother, but we have strayed off topic. The point Ah was trying to make is that maybe your mother was scared of Landon Larabee and not some imaginary predator."

JD accepted Ezra's redirection of the topic away from himself. This stuff about their father needed to be cleared up, too. "I don't think so, Ezra. I can't see Mom spending one minute with a violent man, and she did stay with him. Until she got pregnant, she was with him."

"Maybe he was angry she got pregnant."

"No. She was scared, but it was not because of him. Besides of all the things the other guys have said about our dad, nothing has been said about him being violent."

"Maybe they didn't give him a reason to be violent. Maybe they did what they were told."

"Chris? I can believe Nathan was good. He probably doesn't even know how to spell 'bad', but Chris and Buck are different stories."

"Maybe Chris wasn't obedient, but you can't deny he was a good son, the kind any father could be proud to claim as his son. Sometimes, obedience isn't what people want. Sometimes, people only want good children. Good children don't make other people hit them."

JD felt bile rise in his throat as he processed what Ezra was saying. He spoke slowly, trying to think each word through before he uttered it. "There are some people, Ezra, who hit for no reason. They hit children because they can."

"And there are some children who would try the patience of a saint."

"A saint would not hit a child. Not ever."

"Sometimes children are hard-headed and need to be taught how to behave."

"You don't teach a child to behave by hitting them."

"Parents spank their children all the time."

"Spanking is not the same as hitting."

"It's just a matter of degree."

"No. You are wrong. Spanking is done to change the child's behavior. Hitting is done for the benefit of the hitter... Ezra, are you worried about being hit? Is that why you are talking about leaving?"

"Ah swore Ah would never stand still to be hit again. If Ah am hit, Ah will hit back, and Ah will seriously hurt whoever hit me. Ah don't want to hurt any of you."

JD nodded slowly; he had seen the men who held Ezra so their boss could beat him. They'd been huge, but seeing the look in Ezra's eyes, he'd bet any amount of money they had their hands full when they grabbed Ezra for Timothy Moore to use as a punching bag. "You know, none of us are going to hit you."

"That's easy for you to say now, but the truth is Ah make people angry."

"You don't make me angry."

"Ah will."

"You might make me mad, but people get mad at each other, then they get over it. That's normal. Hitting is not normal."

Ezra rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "You don't understand."

"You are right. I don't understand how you can sit there and tell me it's the child's fault that he is hit. Would you hit a kid?"

"Of course not." His voice told JD Ezra felt insulted by the question.

"I didn't think so." He wished Ezra would look at him. He needed to see Ezra's eyes to see if his brother was hearing and understanding him, but he didn't reach for Ezra. "Ezra... It is not your fault you were hit." Ezra didn't move. "Ezra, you jerk away when people move near your face. Did you get hit in the face?" If you say yes, I will hunt down every teacher you ever had and have a very frank discussion on the laws for reporting child abuse.

"Ah don't."

"You did when you were sick." He saw the look of horror on Ezra's face and added, "You were running a high fever then and weren't responsible for your actions. It was probably my imagination."

JD easily read Ezra's look. He was appalled he had revealed so much of himself; JD expected him to clam up, but he hadn't. Instead, he answered, "Ah had an uncle, not Uncle Daniel, but another one. He'd tap my chin to make sure he had my attention before he'd beat...spank me. He'd tell me what Ah had done wrong, and Ah was expected to listen to mah faults and repeat them back to him. Ah hated his hands on mah face. It always meant that Ah had done something wrong and was about to get punished."

"Jeez, Ezra, did you stay with anyone that didn't hit you?"

"It wasn't like that."

"What was it like then, because I sure don't understand."

Ezra stared at the ground, trying to find the words to explain. Finally, he looked up and began. "Where we lived, girls got pregnant out of wedlock, but they had the sense to marry the boy responsible. The baby was born prematurely, and everyone could continue with the fiction that only people married to each othuh had sex. Mah mothuh came home with her claim that her husband had died, but even though they did her the courtesy of not challenging her lie, they did not believe her. Although mah grandparents lived in the same town, I rarely saw them and assumed it was because of the shame mah presence brought to the family. Except for the times mah great uncle was doing poorly, Ah lived with him and mah great aunt until Ah was nine. When he was in a bad way, Ah was farmed out to one of my aunt's tenants for a few days or months.

"In an area suffused with poverty, families were eager to accept the cash mothuh offered them or the decrease in rent mah great aunt proposed in exchange for mah care. Ah nevuh went hungry, Ah had clean clothes, a bed to sleep in, so Ah was not neglected. Ah went to school and did well. Often, Ah outdid the othuh children in the household with mah academic endeavors... Mothuh would advise me to try to blend in, but Ah felt what Ah learned could not be taken from me as could mah toys. Sometimes, Ah was praised for mah learning, and othuh times Ah was resented. When she dropped me off with a family, Mothuh would advise me to be agreeable and helpful." He smiled. "But the real problem lies with mah inability to know when to keep mah mouth shut. That, and Mothuh's inability to tell time."

"I don't understand."

"Exactly, no one understood. She would roll up in her expensive, new car, wearing her expensive new clothes, and with tales of her latest beau, who could afford to give her those things. Ah am sure she thought she was making a good impression, but she never saw their eyes when she arrived to pick me up days, weeks ... and on a few occasions, months passed the day she was to retrieve me.

"Mothuh thought she would impress my so-called relatives with her expensive things. And yes, they took her money with a smile. They told her Ah was no trouble while they hastened to put me and mah luggage in her shiny car. But I knew, even if she didn't, the contempt in which they held her. And Ah was her bastard son."

Ezra grew still. No doubt, he was lost in his memories.

Lying in bed under a pile of quilts, JD thought about Ezra. No doubt his brother was lying on his bed, in the dark, trying to figure out how he managed to expose so much of himself. In the morning, he'd come with a smile on his face to breakfast, but with his walls firmly in place. That was alright, JD knew some of what lay on the other side of those walls, and he'd help Ezra dismantle it, brick by brick, memory by memory. He wished, though, he could tell his brothers about the things Ezra told him. He needed to make them aware of how sensitive Ezra was to words. They might not perceive words as threatening, but Ezra did. The problem was that he didn't know how to talk to them without betraying Ezra's confidence.

He pulled his blanket up close around him and whispered into the dark room, "Momma, if you can hear me, do something to fix things, please. His mom wasn't like you, and he doesn't understand that he's a good person. Please, if you can, fix things."



Kicking off the quilt, he grabbed the pair of jeans he had tossed in the corner the night before and pulled them on. Chris easily navigated the moonlit house as he padded down the stairs and then went down the hall leading to his brother's room, avoiding stepping on the dog stretched out in the doorway of Josiah's bedroom. Giving the dog a quick pat as he climbed over

him, he stopped in front of a closed door and hesitated. Then, without bothering to knock, he opened the door and flipped on the light. “Are you awake?” he asked when Ezra sat up in alarm, holding a hand over his eyes, trying to block out the invasive light. “Good, we need to talk. I have an apology to make, and you need to listen closely, cause if you don’t, I’ll be coming back every night until you do. Got it?”

