



Stepping in to Help

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

Sophie pulled the door shut to room 201 and pushed her cart to the next room, hoping it wasn't in as bad condition as the last two rooms she had finally finished cleaning. What about some people made them turn into such slobs whenever they stayed at a motel, tossing things all over the floor and getting water all over the bathroom? Those people were the same people who went screaming to the management if something of theirs turned up missing, and yet, would leave with four or five towels stuffed into their suitcases. She wondered how they slept at night after accusing her of theft while taking home as much as they could tote. As though she would steal anything anyway. Even if she decided to risk her job by stealing from the motel's guests, the people who stayed there didn't own anything worth taking.

She stopped in front of Room 203 and knocked, making sure she could be seen from the peephole. Hearing nothing from the room, she looked around the almost deserted parking lot and amended her earlier statement. She knew nothing about cars but could recognize money when she saw it, and the gray sports car screamed 'money.' It stuck out like a sore thumb in the motel's parking lot, making the other cars look like junk and the hotel look cheap and squalid.

She knocked harder, hoping the car parked in front of the room meant the occupant had walked somewhere and not that he was just now starting his shower. She had better things to do than to wait on some guy who had decided to sleep the day away. She tried her master key, keeping her fingers crossed that if the door opened, she wouldn't be interrupting anything embarrassing; that had once too often to be considered amusing.

The door opened and then held as the inside chain caught. Great! She glanced at her watch. It was after eleven. Hadn't Mr. Nedley said everyone had either ordered an early wake-up call or was checking out? Blast Rita. Rita, know-it-all Rita, forgot the wake-up call again. Too busy playing tonsil tag

with one of her boyfriends, no doubt. One day, Nedley would realize Rita was bad for business and let her go. Yeah, right, Sophie, let's hear another.

Sophie leaned against the cart and studied her fingernails as she considered her options. She could leave and use the tip money from the morning to go, get some pretty fingernail polish, and get Monica to do her nails. Monica always made sure she looked nice. In comparison, she often felt old and dowdy when standing beside her. Not that Monica was doing anything with her youth and her looks. That child was scared of her own shadow, and the only type of men interested in scared women were the types she shouldn't be around. She should call it quits for the day, run around to the other side, and help Monica finish. Then they could get some polish and play beauty parlor; her niece would like that.

She should do that and let Nedley handle the man in room 203 when the poor man realizes he did not get a wake-up call. The problem was that Nedley was particularly inept in dealing with customer complaints. He always took the complaints as a personal attack and went on the defensive. She overheard one of the corporate bigwigs lecture Nedley on resolving a problem before it reached the district manager's attention; it went in one ear and out the other. Bad enough that this part of town was no longer safe, and the customers were seeing more and more 'guests' who were the pay-by-the-hour types rather than the all-American family on vacation, without Nedley running the business into the ground with his attitude.

She'd preferred that not to happen since this was the only place she had worked since her husband got sent to prison. As bad as this place was getting, at least it was a bad one she knew and could deal with. She didn't fancy looking for a job.

She steered her cart to the side. Briskly walking, she headed to the lobby, deliberately swinging her arms as she hurried. She'd read somewhere that it was good for the heart to walk vigorously. She did it because she needed to get answers as quickly as possible. Too many people working here needed their jobs to let Nedley handle another complaint.

"Cindy!" she announced herself to the lone occupant of the lobby.

Tossing her thick mane of black hair back, Cindy looked up from the biology book and smiled. "Hey, Sophie, want some coffee?"

"Sit still, I'll get it. How's school going?" Cindy was making a wise decision about going to school. It was hard for her to work, study, and help care for her Grandmother, but in the end, when she had a diploma in her hand, she would be set for life.

She wished she could get Monica to go to school. It didn't have to be college. Monica was talented when it came to fixing people's hair and make-up, but rarely brushed her own hair and only wore makeup unless she was going on a date. She should enroll in cosmetology school and do something she was not only good at, but also enjoyed; Monica balked whenever the subject was mentioned.

"We just finished finals; this is for next term. Thought I'd get started with next semester's reading.

Sophie walked behind the counter, which technically, she was not supposed to do, but did anyway. What could Nedley do to her if he found out she broke one of his rules? Fire her? Hardly. He might be considered management, and she might work on the clock, but she knew too much about running the place and too much about Nedley for him to follow through on one of his threats to fire her. Will you look up Room 203? Was he supposed to get a wakeup call?"

"Rita forgot, again? I need to sit her down and share with the lazy woman her job responsibilities." Cindy's long, manicured fingers flew through the files, and Sophie resolved that no matter what, she would have Monica give her a manicure that afternoon. "Here it is. Sophie, I have to take back what I just said about Rita. Mr. Standish was called at 7:00."

"Call him again. He's still in there and he's not answering the door," she said as she crossed her fingers, hoping he'd answer. Once, she had a customer who didn't answer. They ended up calling the fire department to break down the door. The man inside had overdosed. His death had caused quite a stir, and folks from all over waited in the parking lot for the EMTs to bring the body out. Ghouls, the lot of

them, when they received their thrill for the day, they disappeared, going back to whatever hole they had come from. Afterwards, once the excitement was over, she had entered the room and conducted a thorough scrubbing.

Cindy dialed and held the phone out so Sophie could hear the busy signal.

“Should I call the police?” she asked.

“No. Not yet. I’ll go back and try again.” Her heart hammering, Sophie all but ran out the door and down the walkway to the locked room.



Somewhere, someone was calling his name. Ezra desperately wanted to ignore the voice, but it wouldn’t shut up. Calling his name for the entire world to hear, announcing his name, his location; that couldn’t be good. His eyes blinked open, and without checking to see whether he was awake, Ezra grabbed the gun under his pillow, rolled out of bed, and to his feet, ignoring the pain in his chest and the weakness in his legs.

The door was open as far as the straining chain would allow; reddened and chapped fingers were thrust into the gap between the door facing and the door, preventing him from closing it. A woman’s voice called insistently, “Mr. Standish, please open the door.”

He mumbled something which, by her actions, came out more coherently than he felt. She withdrew her fingers, and he gently pushed the door shut. She wasn’t yelling his name any longer, but he knew she was waiting on the other side of the door. Frantically, he tried to recall the previous day’s events. Who was she, and why was she banging on the door in such a state of panic? He scrubbed his eyes, willing his brain to give him the information that he needed to reply to her. The only thing it gave him was the details of his various aches and pains. He didn’t need to know about them.

He leaned against the wall, lowering the gun, still tightly gripped in his right hand, to his side and waited for inspiration to strike. His breathing quickened as the door pushed open; he didn’t need any trouble. Please, he prayed, let there be no trouble. Please, don’t let anyone follow her in.

“Mr. Standish, it’s me, Sophie Malone. I am the housekeeper. I clean these rooms. Are you all right?” She was tall, and though thin, her figure had nothing to do with a model’s elegance and everything to do with a life of hard work. Her hair was cut short in a no-nonsense, blow-it-dry-and-be-done-with-it style. She wore no makeup; he easily detected the beginnings of wrinkles around her eyes and lips. She was not the type of woman who would be with Moore.

Her lips were moving, asking him if he needed help, and her eyes shone with the sincerity of her concern.

“Ah’m so sorry.” Ezra began, and he did not know whether he was apologizing for the fact that he was rather inappropriately dressed to be talking to a lady or for the gun he held at his side. He watched her eyes darken not with arousal but with anger as they roamed his body. He knew she was not seeing him, but the bruises marring his body.

“Ah must not have heard the wake-up call.” He looked at the phone lying on the floor, hearing the operator telling him to hang up and try again. “Or Ah suppose, Ah did not want to hear it.”

He tried his patented sheepish grin, the one he spent a lifetime perfecting, the one that made women forgive him all sorts of misdemeanors. She wasn’t buying it, and for a microsecond, his grin faltered. He opted for the one he reserved for use in the exclusive hotels he once stayed in, and seemingly forgetting she was a person, coldly instructed, “Ah’m planning to stay tonight, too. Therefore, if you could leave a clean towel and a couple of fresh cups, Ah think the cleaning can wait until tomorrow.”

She nodded, lost in thought. Ezra figured he had probably scared her with the gun, but she headed out to the cart to get the items he requested.

He took the opportunity to disappear into the bathroom. After firmly shutting the door and locking it, he grabbed the edge of the sink and examined the image in the mirror, seeing his pale face and the shadows under his eyes. Good Lord, what had he done? He snatched the bottle of painkillers out of his shaving kit. Exactly how many had he taken? He knew he had taken one when he left the ranch, one when he found the room in Ely, and one when he went to bed. That was all he remembered, but the number of pills remaining in the bottle and his inability to wake up indicated he had taken more at some point.

He poured the remaining pills into his hand and, with desperate eyes, counted them. Fifteen. He had taken two pills he did not recall taking. His ribs hurt, but not enough to warrant the risk of taking them. His knees weakened, and he sat heavily on the tub's rim. He could excuse himself, saying he was in pain from the driving. That would not be a lie. Every move he made introduced him to a part of him that hurt; even breathing was becoming a chore he'd rather not do. He had every right to take those pills; he was not an addict, not anymore, not after all these years.

In truth, he could use another pill right then. His chest hurt and his leg throbbed, and the day had not even begun. He looked at the pills, tempted to take another. Common sense dictated that he take one to relieve the pain; that was what they were there for, why the pharmaceutical companies made them, and why doctors prescribed them. He was in pain and could justify taking one more to himself or to anyone (No, Mr. Larabee, I am not an addict). That other stuff happened when he was a kid, barely a teenager, and he had broken the habit by himself, if you could call it a habit. It had been more of an occasional weekend thing. He had not been an addict.

Addicts were the people who needed drugs to get through the day, and he wasn't one of those. He didn't know about other people, but he knew he couldn't live the life he led and be dependent on anything, especially pills, if he wanted to continue being a successful gambler. He needed to be able to think clearly to use his God-given talents. And no matter what Chris Larabee said, he was a successful gambler. He only took the pills because he was in pain. He would take the pills at the regular prescribed intervals, and when the bottle was empty, he would not seek another.

He was Ezra P. Standish, not some street bum... living out of his car...Dammit, he was not living out of his car. His car was worth more than some people's houses. So, what was the problem with living in hotel rooms and eating in restaurants? He had maid service, and he didn't have to cook or wash his dishes. And even if the only thing he owned was his car, and it wasn't, he was not, repeat NOT living out of it, and most definitely, he was not addicted to anything.

He carefully poured the pills back into their container and stood up. He needed to get a shower and get his day started. The first order of business was to find a pharmacy and get an Ace bandage to wrap his ribs. Forget what Nathan said about the dangers of pneumonia; he'd worry about that later. Right now, he had too much to do to run around without support for his ribs. The second order of business was to get to work on his laptop. He needed to contact a certain businessman in Reno about a new identity...Eric, maybe Ethan Samuels. He needed to think about it.

So, yes, it looked like he was heading to Reno.

All right, he told his reflection. One decision down, let's see how many others I can make. Before he could complete another thought, his eyes were pulled to the bottle he had just set down. He snatched up the bottle that sang such an enticing song. Popping the lid, he told himself there wasn't any harm in taking another pill.

He held his hand out open, ready to catch the capsule. It wasn't like he was taking it to get high; he really hurt. He looked in the mirror as if seeing the bruising would confirm his need to answer the song the pills crooned to him. He saw the bruises, and he saw the self-reproach in his eyes. Without conscious thought, he poured the pills into the toilet and flushed.



Sophie Malone made up the bed in the otherwise spotless room. The towels she had brought in were on the counter in the back of the room, where he could easily reach them. She almost left the room. She heard the shower; decided Ezra Standish was not in immediate danger of dying, and remembered to call Cindy to let her know everything was fine. She walked to the door, opened it, and almost stepped out before she shook her head no, walked over to one of the room's two chairs, and made herself at home while she waited for the man to finish.

She heard the water stop and stubbed her cigarette in the ashtray. The bathroom door opened, and steam rushed out, warming the room. She sat still, giving him time to recover from his shock at finding her still in his room. She studied her hands, seeing again how old they looked; the man behind her had softer, better cared-for hands than she did.

"Pardon me, ma'am, but may I assist you?"

She colored slightly; it had been so long since anyone called her ma'am, and that voice, a woman could just flat out fall in love with that southern accent. She smiled and peered over her shoulder at him. Standing near the bed, his hands betrayed his attempt to look calm and collected, with the white-knuckled grip he had on the towel knotted around his waist. She turned in her chair so she could face him.

"You're in trouble. I can help."

Buck tossed his bag and then JD's into the back of Josiah's van while JD silently climbed in, leaving the passenger seat for Buck. "Hear anything yet?" Buck asked Josiah, noting that in the bright sunlight, the older man's face appeared drawn and tired.

"Not a word from Ezra, but Vin called from Vegas early this morning and said he'd found him in a motel in Ely. Chris and Nathan went to fetch him home."

"Shit. I was hoping that" he slammed the back of the van shut, "I'd get here before Vin found him. Chris is about as diplomatic as a grizzly roused by campers."

"Brother Chris had best work on his diplomatic skills then," Josiah said angrily.

"I take it you're not too happy with him?"

"Should I be? He ran our brother off the ranch."

"Now come on, Josiah, how do you know that's what happened? You saw Ezra. He didn't want to be here in the first place," Buck defended Chris, hoping he was correct in doing so.

"Yes, he did," Josiah picked up his sunglasses from off the dash and polished them with the white handkerchief he pulled from his pocket; it might be cold, but the sun's glare still hurt his eyes and made it difficult to see. "He wanted to be here. He needed to be here. But more importantly, he's going after the man who beat him, going alone. What do you reckon his chances are? In the shape he's in, what do you think his chances are of not getting himself seriously hurt or killed? Think about it."

"Oh hell, Josiah, if any of us knew that Ezra planned to go after this Moore character, do you think we would have let him? I don't understand why you are making Chris the villain in this."

"Because I can tell Chris is not telling the truth about what happened to make Ezra leave."

Buck walked around the van, climbed in, and waited until Josiah had started the engine and begun driving before saying anything else, "Chris is close-mouthed about most things, but if Chris made him leave, and I am saying if, it was for a good reason. You can bet your life on it."

"Did he bet Ezra's life on it? What happens if Ezra gets himself killed?" JD asked from the backseat. He didn't know what bothered him the most: Ezra leaving to chase after bad guys or that Chris hadn't been able to convince him to stay. Or worse, that he could have prevented the whole thing by telling someone what he had overheard

"Look. I know you folks don't know Chris, don't know any of us, but Chris would not have just let him go or run him off. Not unless there was a damn good reason and

I'm not sure if there is a reason good enough for Chris to tell Ezra to leave, not when it would mean going against Dad's wishes. I know for a fact Chris would never have let him leave if he thought he

was going after the man who beat him. Chris thought, I thought, and you probably thought too, this beating was a done deal. Not a one of us thought he'd take off after this guy. And no, JD, you may have known about his Mom's involvement in all this, but not for a minute do you think Ezra would take off after Moore, not alone and not in the shape he is in."

"Damn," Josiah beat his hands against the steering wheel in frustration. He had thought he had seen God's hand in this gathering of the seven of them. He had thought God was giving him a second chance with these brothers, a chance to atone for his mistakes, to make up for past wrongs. Maybe God was telling him some debts could never be repaid.



Admitting his defeat, Chris pulled into a gas station and waited impatiently while Nathan went in to buy a city map. He had not included a GPS in his truck, thinking that when he bought it four years ago, he knew the way to anywhere he wanted to go. Apparently, he didn't know the way to the motel Vin said Ezra was at. When his brother came out with the map and their breakfast, he got out of the truck. Together, they unfolded the map on the truck's hood and searched for the street on which the Inn of the Americas could be found. "There it is," he said as he checked the street signs and found their location. "Kinda off the beaten path," he observed, wondering how Ezra had found it. As far as he knew, Ezra had never been in this part of the woods. Of course, he knew next to nothing about the man.

"You sure Vin knows what he's talking about?" The motel was six, no seven, streets from the interstate and, if memory served him, was located in an older part of town.

"I reckon he does; Vin hunts people for a living," Chris folded the map so the area they were in was exposed, and handed it to Nathan.

Nathan frowned at the image Chris's statement produced and shook it off. "Exactly, how did he find Ezra was registered at this place?"

"I think he hacked into the computer systems of hotels around the state until Ezra's name popped up."

"Doesn't that bother you?" Nathan finished the sausage biscuit and tossed the wrapper and the rest of his coffee into a trash can.

"Came in kinda handy, having a brother with that kind of expertise," Chris threw his things away and got behind the wheel.

"Isn't it illegal?" Nathan persisted as he pulled the seatbelt across his lap and clicked it.

It probably is illegal and certainly unethical, but they needed to find their brother before he went and got himself killed. Sometimes, family was more important than legalities. Chris shrugged. "Ready?"

Three blocks north and then a mile to the east, they found the motel hidden between an abandoned building and an old strip mall. The motel was concealed by overgrown shrubbery. Only the fact that they were looking for it prevented them from passing the entrance—that and Chris's willingness to back up in the middle of the street.

Nathan eyed the strip mall with narrowed eyes. An adult video store, a liquor store, and a 'gentleman's club' were the only three stores in the mall still in business, but people gathered in groups of twos and threes on the sidewalk. "This doesn't look like the kind of place Ezra would stay at."

"Sixty-five dollars in his pocket, he probably didn't have a choice," Chris answered as he pulled under the tattered awning covering the entrance to the lobby. "Are you coming in?"

"Are you going to be polite?"

"I am always polite."

Nathan rolled his eyes but climbed out. Chris had a temper. Under the best of circumstances, he managed to keep it under control. These were not the best of circumstances, though. He knew Chris had not slept well the past couple of nights; he had been snapping at everyone. Nathan came along to make sure Chris didn't hog-tie Ezra and toss him in the back of the pick-up if Ezra made the critical mistake of saying he didn't want to return to the ranch.

“May I help you?” the woman behind the check-in desk asked.

Chris didn’t have to remind himself to smile as he approached the desk. The young woman had a smile that reached her eyes, and with her dark hair and equally dark eyes, she reminded him of JD. “Yes, you can. I need to know in what room Ezra Standish is staying.”

“I’m sorry. It’s the policy of Americas Inns not to give out information on our guests,” she smiled as she answered, but it no longer reached her eyes.

“Listen, ma’am. We know he’s here. He told us to meet him here, and if you don’t want us to start knocking on every door in this place, you’ll tell us which room he’s in.”

“I really would like to help you. I would, but management has made it very clear it will not tolerate employees giving out information on guests.”

“Nathan, take the north side, and I’ll take the south.”

“Sir, if you bother our guests, I will be forced to call the police. I will have you removed from the property.” Her eyes were large and round, and her lower lip quivered slightly, but her chin tilted up in defiance of the look the man in black was giving her.

Nathan pushed in front of Chris; they didn’t want trouble before they even found Ezra, and he had no doubt the police would be far more willing to listen to the pretty young lady in the navy blazer than they would to a pissed off Chris. “Ma’am,” he read her name tag, “Miss White, we must get hold of Mr. Standish. Is there anything you can do to help us?”

Cindy tore her eyes from Chris and turned to the friendlier face belonging to Nathan. “I can call his room for you and let you speak to him,” she replied as her hand reached for the phone.

She made a show of looking for his room number on her dinosaur of a computer, but she knew the number just as she knew there would be no answer. Once, she heard the phone begin ringing, she handed it to the still-smiling Nathan; she did not look at the other man.

“He’s not picking up,” Nathan frowned.

“Has he checked out?” Chris held his hand out for the card she held in her shaking hand.

She took a step back, but returned Larabee’s glare with one of her own. She had been working at this hotel for almost a year now, and the things she had seen driving to work and the people she had dealt with while standing behind the counter had only made her more determined to finish her education and get out of there. In the meantime, she would not be intimidated by this man. She wasn’t particularly worried that these men would hurt her, but the man scowling at her was making her stomach upset, and she was worried she would start crying in a minute, but decided she would not betray a confidence, and she would not back down.

The tension in the room broke when a bright yellow Toyota pulled behind Chris’s truck, and a blonde woman wearing a navy blazer identical to Cindy White’s jumped out and hurried in. “I left my purse,” she announced as she rushed through the door. She paused at seeing the two men. Her eyes, at once, focused on Chris.

Licking her bright pink lips, she stepped behind the desk. “Hey, honey, you checking in?”

“No, but I could use your help,” Chris answered, not hiding his appreciation of her more than ample bosom, made more noticeable by the unbuttoned top three buttons of a white blouse.

She leaned forward, resting her arms on the desk, making sure Chris got a closer view of her charms. “How may I help you?” she used the same words her co-worker had uttered a few minutes earlier, but she somehow loaded them with promises of earthly pleasures.

“We are looking for Ezra Standish. We need his room number,” Chris answered.

She didn’t bother to look at the card in Cindy’s hand but walked over to the computer. Her nails could be heard clicking on the keys as she called up the information on Ezra Standish. “OH! I remember him. He’s the one who didn’t answer his wake-up call. Beautiful eyes and that accent, he was from the south somewhere. Have you met him, Cindy?”

“No, I haven’t, Rita.” Her cheeks red with anger, she pushed Rita out of her way and walked from behind the desk. “As long as you have things under control, I will be in the back.”

Rita frowned as the door slammed shut and then shrugged. She had never been able to figure Cindy out. "Your friend is in room 203. He paid in advance for three nights, cash. He should be checking out tomorrow. Does that help?" she smiled at the handsome man standing across the counter.

"Yes, ma'am, it does," Chris answered, the leer falling from his face as he turned to Nathan. "Let's go get him."

That proved easier said than done. The parking lot appeared empty. Well, not empty, but it was definitely lacking the distinctive Porsche that their brother owned. They exchanged glances, asking each other whether Ezra had already left.

Chris banged so hard on room 203's door that a man from room 201 came out and frowned at them before returning to his room, shutting and locking the door behind him.

"He's not here, Chris."

"I know that," he almost kicked the door in frustration. "Do you think he has moved on or is just out getting breakfast?"

"He hasn't checked out, so it's probably breakfast."

Chris looked around the parking lot. "Reckon we should move the truck. If he sees it, he may recognize us and take off."

"What exactly happened between the two of you?"

"Nathan, I am not going into it. Period." Chris climbed into the truck. "I'm going to park over there. We can still see him, but with luck, he won't notice us."

"You do that." Nathan fished some change out of his pocket. "Want a Coke?" he asked, but didn't wait for an answer and angrily strode off towards the lobby. Coke machines were bound to be somewhere nearby, and if it took a few minutes to find them, that was fine. He wasn't sure if he wanted to sit in the truck cab with Chris anyway.

The few minutes of wait they had expected turned into over an hour. The occupied rooms emptied, and the two maids could be seen working their way through the complex. Chris reached across Nathan to open the glove compartment and pulled out an all-but-crushed pack of cigarettes. "Don't start," he commanded his brother as he lit one of the unbroken cigarettes.

"At least roll down the window," Nathan griped. He hated the smell of cigarettes; it clung to a person. He wished Chris would put it out, but did not chastise his brother for smoking. He wasn't worried about Chris smoking too much; long ago, when Chris was a teenager, he promised Nathan to smoke no more than once a week. That was when Chris was in high school, and many of his friends smoked. Chris had never been one to cave into peer pressure, but Nathan had caught him smoking and hit the ceiling. Chris smoked on occasion, but as far as he knew, Chris had never broken his promise. Chris took promises very seriously.

Chris jabbed his cigarette in the general direction of one of the cleaning ladies, "Looks like she's going to be the one cleaning room 203. How about we talk her into letting us in?"

"How about you let me do the talking," Nathan said. He didn't want to get the police involved. He had an appointment to walk through the clinic with Emmett in the morning and did not want to postpone it because he was in jail.

"You think you can get us in?" Chris smirked as he climbed out of the truck.

"Faster than you can."

"Go right ahead and sweet-talk the lady," Chris replied. He knew that between the two of them, Nathan was more likely to get results.

Nathan slipped a smile on his face and slowly approached the woman, his hands down by his side, palms open. He knew, given the part of town they were in, chances were that a woman would see his height and the color of his skin and view him as a threat. Not for the first time, he wondered what it would be like to have Chris's or Buck's fair skin. He shoved the thought down and stomped on it hard. He was who he was.

“Excuse me, ma’am.” The woman, her face too plain to be interesting, looked up at him even as her hand darted into the canvas bag hanging on her pushcart. Nathan stopped in his tracks, praying she didn’t have a gun in there. “Excuse me. We didn’t mean to startle you.”

“You didn’t startle me none. You have been sitting in that truck all morning. Been wondering when you were going to get out.”

“Yes, ma’am. We need to find the man in room 203, Ezra Standish.”

“And what does that have to do with me?”

“Will you let us in?”

“Letting men into a guest’s room is a good way to get fired. I need this job.”

Chris pulled out his wallet, opened it, and peeled off two twenties. Holding them out to her, he said, “We just need to know if his things are in there, if he’s out for a while, or if he’s left. You can stand in the doorway and make sure we don’t take any of his things.”

Sophie Malone gazed at the money as though deciding whether to take the bribe. She and her southern gentleman had discussed the possibility of someone showing up, searching for him. She would take the money and let them in. Nothing remained in the room that would give them away. She pulled her hand out of the canvas bag; in it, she held her master key. She exchanged the key for the money, holding Chris’s hand in hers until she had his attention, “If he’s in there and he makes a fuss, I’ll say you forced me to give you the key and I was scared for my life. I promise you, I will be believed.”

“He isn’t in there. We’ve already knocked,” Chris tried to reassure her.

She tucked the money into her pocket, shaking her head, “I knocked yesterday, almost had to break down the door before he decided to open it.”

“Was something wrong?” Nathan asked, going into doctor mode. His brother was too banged up to be out gallivanting all over the countryside, planning to do who knew what.

“Don’t think so,” she answered as she walked away from the door, letting Chris open it.

The two men went in, and she let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. She saw her niece heading toward her, and she warned her off with her eyes; Monica was sweet, but she rattled too easily. If the men started asking her questions, she would tell everything she knew.

Chris flipped on the lights and pulled open the heavy drapes, cursing as he did so. The place was empty. Worse than empty, it looked as though it had been emptied yesterday. The bed was neatly made. Clean towels lay on the counter in the back, and beside the towels were two plastic cups still in their cellophane wrappers.

“He’s not here,” Nate said as he walked in behind Chris. “Think Moore took him?”

Chris froze at the thought, and then he thought of his younger brother and the streak of stubbornness the man had, and answered, “No. The place is too neat. I don’t think anyone could just come in and take Ezra anywhere without him putting up one hell of a fight.”

“He’s got busted ribs, Chris. He can’t fight.”

“You’re wrong, Nathan. Busted ribs might slow him down a bit, but he would fight. He wouldn’t go anywhere he didn’t want to go peacefully.”

“Then where is he?”

Chris shook his head, “I don’t know. Maybe he just left.”

“Without paying his bill?” Nathan asked, a little outraged.

“He had sixty-five dollars in his wallet. He might be conserving his money.”

“Since he paid in cash, they probably asked for the money up front,” Nathan disagreed.

“I don’t know what to say, Nathan. Maybe he got into a card game, but if they did not ask him to pay first, he may have left without paying.”

“Don’t make it right.”

“No, Nate, it doesn’t, but it’s understandable,” Chris sighed as he looked around the room. “Check the bathroom. I’ll go through the drawers. Maybe he left something we can use to find him.”

Nathan nodded, giving Chris's back a reassuring pat as he passed him. A minute later, he came out of the bathroom holding a small wastebasket. In it were three items which, grim-faced, he showed Chris. "It's his pain killers, the container, not the pills, a plastic cup, and the box for an Ace bandage."

Chris felt his blood run cold at the sight of the empty bottle. "What does it mean?"

"The Ace bandage means he's moving more than he should, putting strain on his ribs. It also means he's setting himself up for pneumonia if he doesn't remember to un-strap it and breathe deeply every hour or so." He watched as Chris fingered the empty prescription bottle.

"The bottle? I don't know. When we brought him home, he was adamant about not needing them. As far as I know, he didn't take any."

"But he didn't do any real moving around either. Slower than a tortoise," at least that was how Ezra moved until he had snuck off to go to the bank.

"Driving the way I saw him drive, he was hurting by the time he got here. He probably felt he couldn't go any further, found this place, checked in, and took a pill." Nathan grew still as his mind pieced together the information they had. He lifted reluctant brown eyes to meet Chris's green ones. "He took too many. That's why he didn't answer the wake-up call and why it took him so long to answer the door."

"Did he take them all?"

"Not then. He would have never woken up if he had."

"So where are the rest of them?" Chris hissed at his brother.

"Chris, I don't know?" What was he? A psychic? "Maybe he put them in something else?"

"Why?"

"I don't know?"

"Do you think he flushed them?"

"I don't know," Nathan answered, irritated. He didn't know what Ezra was doing or why. For all intents and purposes, he had just met Ezra. Chris had known him longer than he had. He looked at the empty bottle and pushed aside his irritation. "If he was in a lot of pain, I don't think so. He would have kept them around, especially if he was planning to drive."

"If he planned to drive around with a pocketful of pills, he would have kept the container. It has his name on it to prove the pills were prescribed."

"So, what's your take on this?"

Chris covered his mouth with his palm, thinking. Finally, he answered, "I don't know. He did one of three things. He sold them, he flushed them, or he swallowed them."

Nathan sank into the chair beside the table. "This neighborhood... selling them makes sense. Flushing them...if he took too many on Wednesday night, he might have been scared. So yeah, flushing them works. Taking them, all of them at once...That would be suicidal, and he doesn't strike me as the type to kill himself, and obviously, he didn't do that; there is no body lying around."

Chris didn't let Nathan's words pry the cold hand off his heart. Nathan had not heard the things Chris had said, and Nathan hadn't seen their brother's blank face when he returned the ten thousand dollars. Did Ezra's carefully controlled expression hide despair? It might. If his brother had done the unthinkable, it was his fault.

"Let's go talk to the cleaning woman," Nathan suggested.

They left the room and walked over to the concrete stairs on which the woman was sitting, with her arms folded across her stomach and her eyes gazing across the parking lot.

"Ma'am?" Nathan started, only to be interrupted by a short laugh.

"Wait. Let me see if I got this right. Your question is whether Mr. Standish gave me any clue about where he was heading. My answer is no. Do you honestly think the likes of him had anything to say to me? I bet the bastard didn't even leave me a tip. I saw him leave at about the same time I left yesterday afternoon. I didn't notice he had packed up his car. I didn't think anything of it. I figured he was off to find something to eat. But you saw the bed, just like I left it yesterday, and I sure haven't seen that fancy car

of his back into the parking lot. He left and didn't come back. Reckon he knew you fellas would be showin' up today."

"Yesterday, when he opened the door, how did he seem?" Nathan didn't think Ezra would be worried about them showing up, but maybe he was worried about Moore.

"Seem? I don't pay much attention to guests, but ... h-h-m-m ...he looked like he'd fallen asleep in his clothes. Pretty clothes, but they were wrinkled. Moved kinda stiff like. Damn, if he took off without paying and without turning in the key, we'll have to get the lock re-keyed. I guess I'd better make sure Nedley knows. He'll be pissed. Imagine! Nedley having to do some work around here? Won't happen. He'll get Cindy to take care of it for him," she muttered, seemingly oblivious of the two men standing in the room with her. Then, having said all she planned to about Nedley and his lazy ways, she stood up and scowled at the two men. "Why are you looking for him anyway?"

"He is our brother," Chris stated, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something in her behavior had him studying her face, looking for the lie. He felt the lie but could not see the benefit to her of misleading them.

She looked them over and laughed, "If you say so." She turned away and walked back to her cart.

Three hours later, Chris pulled the truck into the flow of traffic heading north, cursing under his breath. He had been covered in oil after helping Buck work on his car. He had worked, hot and sweaty, for a week at a time, as he brought cattle in from the range with nary a bath in sight. He had been in sleazy bars and sat on floors that had never seen a mop and puked his guts into toilets that hadn't been cleaned since the last drunk fouled them. He had done those things and worse, and never had he felt as filthy as he did after being near the scum, he and Nathan had coerced into talking.

"It's not right," he said. He would not apologize for his actions.

"No. It isn't, but knocking men into walls doesn't help those girls," Nathan said, knowing Chris was talking about the last girl they had seen. They had talked to several men, asking them about Ezra with little luck. Both of them had become increasingly frustrated with their lack of success. Then, one man made the mistake of sending one of his little girls over to offer her services to them. Bruises showed up under her heavy makeup, and the dark smudges beneath her eyes made a lie of the enthusiasm with which she offered herself. Chris had taken one look at her and headed for the pimp. He remembered to ask about a dark-haired man with green eyes, but only after he had explained the inappropriateness of pimping children in excruciating detail.

"Maybe I didn't do it to help those girls," he spoke sharply; he didn't want to hear it again.

Nathan explained, after the first pimp slash drug dealer they had spoken to, lay curled into a fetal position on the ground, that hitting lowlife was not going to get them the answers they needed, nor would it help those girls. He wasn't an ostrich with his head in the sand; he knew the police they called could do only so much, and the girls hanging on the arms of those men were probably runaways and more than likely would end up on the streets mere hours after being carted away by the police who showed up. But he couldn't just stand around and not do something, and, if a few men spoke up against that kind of scum instead of looking the other way, there would be fewer children out on the streets.

"So, you feel better?" Nathan didn't look at Chris. He was busy studying the bruises on his fist. He might control his temper better than Chris, but that last man...He flexed his fingers; he didn't think anything was broken.

"Getting there," Chris smirked. Hitting the sleaze ball had felt good indeed.



Buck and Josiah helped JD carry in his bags, then left him in his room to settle in. Buck walked into the kitchen, thinking to grab a snack before heading down to the barn. Instead, his eyes caught sight of the envelope with Ezra's name on it lying on the kitchen counter. Neatly torn in half, it was obvious the letter had never been read.

"The son of a bitch couldn't be bothered to read it," Buck angrily muttered, upset that the man had not even given their father a chance to explain things, to try to make things right.

"Maybe he was afraid to," Josiah said, walking into the kitchen. "That stuff on the table was in his garbage. He left the room as neat as a pin. Took the linen off the bed and put it in the hamper. Do you realize how much doing that must have hurt? He left the warm-up suits you bought him folded up on the dresser. It's as though Ezra didn't want to take anything that would link him to the ranch or us. Look at that stuff. He even threw away the house key. Look at the green card, that's from his wallet."

Buck picked it up and read the front. "That's Dad's signature ... The boy sent a certified letter..." Buck fumbled behind him and pulled out a chair, sitting heavily in it. "He's carried this in his wallet for over twenty years. Why?"

"Open the Bible."

Buck didn't read the inscription; his eyes fell on the picture and the article, both fragile with age. "I had the chicken pox, so I wasn't here at the ranch the weekend the writer came. I was so gry with Mom for keeping me home, especially after the magazine came out," he said, almost to himself. A framed copy of the article and picture hung in the library, but it did not have creases and smudge marks from frequent reading; it had a carefully cut-out picture of him glued onto the photo, Chris's work. He had been upset that Buck was not even named in the article and had made sure everyone coming to the ranch would know Buck was part of the family. He looked up at Josiah, "The article ran in Modern Ranching, never had a big circulation. It went belly up fifteen or so years ago. How the hell did he get it?"

"Look at the edges of the picture." Josiah pointed to the uneven edges.

"Yeah, and?"

"Looks to me like a child cut them out. Read the top of the page."

"It says when the magazine came out...so?"

"Read the third paragraph."

"Landon Larabee, owner of the Double L Ranch in Four Corners, Nevada, believes the key to" Buck quit reading and carefully tucked the picture and article into the Bible and closed it. "He had an address and wrote Dad a letter. Does Chris know?"

"Yeah, he does. He said Ezra said something in the hospital about having written a letter and never receiving an answer."

"Dad answered. If he got a letter from Ezra, he would have answered it. He probably hopped in the first available plane..." Buck's voice trailed off. He looked at Josiah, trying to hide the stricken look in his eyes.

"He didn't hop on any plane and go anywhere, did he?" Josiah said his gruff voice was surprisingly gentle.

"There was a reason," Buck insisted. "You were not here, but... but Dad was all tore up about Ezra. He hired Cady Tanner to find him..." Buck's voice trailed off, and without looking at Josiah, he gathered up the things Ezra had thrown out and left the room.



The 10:00 news over, Chris turned off the television, not caring if the others were interested in watching something else. He was tired of the not-so-subtle looks Buck had been casting him all evening. "Buck, if you have something on your mind, go ahead and spit it out."

Buck rubbed at the back of his neck, stalling for a minute as he tried to decide if confronting Chris on this, at this time, was the best move he could make. Chris was pissed, had been pissed ever since he and Nathan returned empty-handed; his brother had counted on Vin being able to find Ezra so he could correct the mistake he thought he had made in letting him go.

Now, though, armed with his new information, Buck wasn't so sure Chris had made a mistake. He stretched his long legs in front of him, staring at his scuffed boots. He marshaled his thoughts, knowing

everyone was waiting for him to explain. "Okay, Chris," he looked over at Chris and winced at the pain in those eyes that used to laugh, "I think you need to tell the rest of us the rest of the story."

"What are you talking 'bout, Buck?" Chris asked, tensing as he turned to look Buck square in the eyes.

"That ain't the whole story," Buck gestured at Ezra's things lined up on a bookshelf. "That stuff paints a picture of a lonely little boy rejected by his dad, and our hearts break for him. That stuff makes you feel guilty, and the rest of us angry. Angry with yourself because you let him leave, and angry with Dad for not writing back to him. Think, Chris, is there anything that could have happened that would have kept Dad from going to get Ezra if he knew where he was? Something else must have happened."

"He didn't go Buck because" Chris looked up, his face lined and tired-looking, and when he spoke, his voice sounded equally as tired. "That summer, I was part of an All-Stars League. Dad was at every game."

Buck's face blanched, and he felt as if Chris had gut-punched him. No! He refused to believe that was the reason that prevented Landon Larabee from finding his lost son. That was not the way their father acted. Landon Larabee would have explained to Chris that he couldn't stay to watch him play, expected Chris to be adult enough to understand, and then he would have left to find his other son. Hell, he wouldn't have just gone to see him; he would have brought him home, the consequences be damned. There was something else they were not seeing. There had to be.

Buck sat up in his chair and took a long, searching look at his older brother. Stupid, stupid man. He did not need to carry the weight of the world, nor the blame for their father not finding Ezra. As much as Landon Larabee had enjoyed watching his sons play sports, there was no way he would risk missing a chance to get Ezra just so he could watch Chris pitch a game. His fingers nervously smoothing his mustache, Buck said, "Chris, think for a moment. Think of the money Dad spent looking for Ezra. Think of the times he flew out of here, chasing down a lead. Do you honestly believe Dad would have passed this one up?" Buck didn't scream or throw things; that wasn't his way, but he was thinking of grabbing Chris by the shoulders and shaking some sense into the man. Chris did not need to feel guilty about anything else. It was not his fault that their father had not gone after Ezra.

"Buck..."

"No, Chris, it's like a puzzle that's missing a whole bunch of pieces, and until we find those pieces, we don't know what the picture looks like. We don't know why Dad didn't go get Ezra. Maybe Ezra wrote something in his letter to keep him away."

"The boy who kept that card with Landon Larabee's signature on it for more than twenty years expected a reply of some sort," Josiah argued from the corner of the couch. He had been watching his brothers as they talked, and bristled at the idea that Ezra had written something to keep his father from responding. Buck obviously wanted to keep their image of their father untarnished, and he could understand his wanting to do so, but blaming a seven-year-old boy was not fair. Anyone with eyes could see Ezra had wanted to communicate with his father then, just as they could see the man desperately wanted to be at the ranch, now. Ezra, when he had gotten up and moved about, had walked around the house looking at every picture he could find, memorizing a past of which he had not been a part. His hunger for information about Landon Larabee had brought him to the ranch. It was interesting that the man had not read the letter Landon had written to him. Was he scared of what he would read in the paper or of what he would not read?

Buck glared at Josiah and ran both of his hands through his hair, searching for the words he needed to keep Chris from the bottle. He liked Ezra Standish, but everyone was pissed at Chris, and Chris was sitting there letting the others make him the bad guy, and when everyone else went to bed, Chris would start pouring the whiskey. The reasons their dad had for doing what he had were pieces of a puzzle they probably would never find, not unless Standish returned and read the blasted letter and shared its contents, but he was certain the reasons had nothing to do with Chris.

This other business of Ezra leaving the ranch, well, that was one of those puzzles he had the pieces for. As bad as he felt for Ezra, Chris was his first concern, and the man had only begun digging himself out of the grave he had made for himself, and he was not about to let him crawl back in, not over this. “Chris-s-s.”

“Buck, we find him. It’s settled.”

“Fine. It’s settled, but the rest of them get to know the whys and the wherefores of Standish’s leaving,” Buck argued. He could feel the eyes of his brothers on him, and he knew questions were on their faces, but he didn’t look away from Chris. He hated going against Chris’s wishes, but in this case, Chris was wrong to keep silent. “Seems Ezra took ten thousand dollars out of the ranch’s account. Care to tell us about it, Chris?”

“He took it. I put it back,” end of story his expression told Buck.

“Chris, you don’t think that’s something you should have told us.” The medical journal Nathan had been thumbing through hit the floor with a loud thud.

“No. Told him I wouldn’t,” Chris took a long sip from his beer. “Doesn’t matter, we still have to find him.”

“He stole from us, and you want to bring him back?” Nathan was incredulous.

“Yep, this is his home, too. Dad wanted everyone here, Nathan.”

“Do you think Dad would have wanted a thief in the house? A man who doesn’t know right from wrong?” Nathan’s face burned at the memory of the time when he had taken a toy his Dad refused to buy for him from a store. When his Dad found the toy, he had been adamant that a Larabee did not steal, ever. His father had made him go back to the store, give the toy back, and apologize to the clerk he had sneaked the toy past. Stealing was unacceptable behavior for a son of Landon Larabee, even if the son was only four years old.

“If he ain’t been taught right from wrong, then it’s time he learned, and he ain’t going to learn all by himself,” Vin said, speaking for the first time that evening. He drove through much of the night and all of the day to get here so he could start a real search for Ezra. He knew he had done good to discover Ezra was checked in at a run-down motel that was part of a chain, thinking about going bankrupt, but he felt as though he had failed them all when Chris and Nathan returned to the ranch empty-handed. He planned to hunt when he got his computer set up and running.

“Besides, he needed money to help his mom,” JD interjected into the conversation when Vin grew silent and turned back to his computer. He flushed when everyone turned to look at him, but didn’t back down. “I mean, his mom is in danger.”

“We find him,” Chris told Buck, hoping Buck would just drop things.

“You know, Chris, I saw the stuff he left behind, and my heart just about broke, and then I saw the bank envelope and called the bank.” Buck turned to face the others. “Ezra walked into the bank with a check that carried Chris’s signature, and he sweet-talked the cashier into cashing it with no questions asked. If Jimmy hadn’t called Chris, no one would have been the wiser until checks started bouncing. I went down and looked at the check. It is a great forgery. He’s done this before.”

“What did Ezra say about it?” Vin asked without turning away from his computer. He could understand Buck’s anger, but he trusted Chris’s desire to get their brother back.

“He said he needed it to get into a game. That he planned on paying it back before we knew it was gone,” Chris said between clenched teeth, angry with Buck for forcing him to break his word.

“Of all the idiotic things to do, what if he lost?” Nathan asked. Didn’t the beating teach the man anything?

“He said he would sell his car if he needed to.”

“You had us chasing all over creation for a thief. You should have told us. He left, fine. That was his decision. Bringing him back, that is our decision. This is not something you decide by yourself.”

“He’s coming home, Nathan.” Chris glared at Nathan until his younger brother broke the gaze. Chris let his eyes sweep the room, daring anyone to contradict his decision. He made a mistake; he was going to rectify it. The rest of them had better adjust.

“What if he gets it into his head to do a little more creative financing of his gambling habit,” Nathan persisted, his eyes on the ground, not challenging Chris, but his face was hard and angry, and his voice steady.

“Will you listen to yourself?” JD spoke angrily. “I don’t know about you guys, but I would steal a million dollars in a heartbeat if I thought it would keep my mom safe.”

Buck glanced over at the youngest, thinking how the boy had cried at his mother’s grave. He recognized that for JD, this had nothing to do with the theft of money and everything to do with a man protecting his mother. “Chris, I’m not arguing with you about bringing Ezra home. We need to do that, but I want things out in the open. He took the money, and while I could understand him taking the money if he thought he needed to pay off this Moore character, I don’t understand him not talking to us first.”

Vin spun on his computer chair to face Buck; he had been content to let the others hash things out while he connected his computer and its peripherals, but he reckoned it was time to speak his mind. He looked at his brothers, “I don’t know about y’all, but I read my letter the first moment I was alone. I needed to understand why I was not part of my father’s life. Ezra had his torn up and, in the trash, before we left the Judge’s office.”

“Twenty-two. Twenty-three years is a long time to wait for a reply.” Josiah said.

“That is not fair. Dad tried to find him. Hell, Vin, that’s how Dad met your mother,” Buck said, becoming indignant at the renewed attack on his father.

“Buck, you know that. Ezra doesn’t,” Josiah said, his eyes on the ripped-in-half letter. “And even if he one day knows it here,” Josiah tapped his head, “He may never know it here,” he tapped his chest.

“Look at things from Ezra’s point of view. He sent a letter to the father whom he didn’t know. The letter obviously reached Landon. He has the proof that it did. He waited for a reply, and he finally got one, but he is no longer a child waiting for a visit from his father, or a phone call, or even a postcard; he is an adult, and his father’s reply arrives decades too late.”

“And even if he decides to read it one day, it might not be enough,” Vin said, the bitterness in his voice surprising the others.

“What do you mean?” Chris asked Vin.

“My letter left me with more questions than answers,” Vin drained his beer before continuing. He hated talking about his past, but he owed Ezra something; he wasn’t sure what, only he felt he had let him down that night at the hospital. “Landon Larabee wrote he loved me. He said his memories of the times Mom brought me to the ranch were ones he cherished. He said by the time he learned of my mother’s death, I had already been placed with a family. He met with them, and they wanted him to stay out of my life for a while. He said I seemed happy and thought it best I stay with them. He said they had more to offer me than he did, and I would be safer with them.”

Vin pushed out of his chair, slamming into the desk, and in long, purposeful strides left the room. The others waited, listening to the sounds coming from the kitchen: the thud of Vin’s empty bottle landing in the garbage, the opening and closing of the refrigerator door, the ping of the bottle’s cap missing the garbage can and bouncing on the floor, and the muffled curses as Vin chased it across the kitchen floor. Finally, he came back to the room, his bottle already half empty in one hand, with another bottle in his other hand.

“I do not understand his meaning of safe,” Vin spoke angrily. He didn’t return to his seat; instead, he paced from one side of the room to the other. “The Phillips gave me up when Terry lost his job. They promised they would come and get me as soon as they could, but they never did. I bounced through,” and he made a show of counting on his fingers, although the number was burned into his brain. “Seven foster homes from the time I was eight until I graduated high school and the State deemed me old enough to be on my own,” he tossed his empty toward the fireplace, not reacting as Chris’s hand shot up

and grabbed the bottle in mid-flight, preventing the mess a broken beer bottle would have caused. One day, when he was in a better mood, he would comment on Chris's fast reflexes, but that was for another time. He had things to say and would not allow himself the luxury of taking a detour to comment on Chris's interception of the bottle.

"The last man I brought in, Eli Joe...We grew up together. Some of the same homes. Some of the same gangs. When I hung around Eli Joe, I did some stuff I ain't real proud of... probably would have turned out just like him if Harry hadn't taken me under his wing. Harry taught me about being a man."

He glared at his brothers as though daring them to say anything. "Ya talk about how our father couldn't stand a thief," he nodded several times and checked each of their eyes to see if they were listening. "Kids don't magically know how to act. They need parents to show them. Our father wasn't around to teach me right from wrong. Landon Larabee left that job to another man. Harry took the time to teach me. Maybe there wasn't anyone in Ezra's life willin' to take the time to teach him."

Five men watched mutely as Vin crossed the room, sat in his computer chair, and turned his back to them. They could hear his breathing as he repeatedly sucked in deep breaths and exhaled slowly, pushing the air between almost clenched teeth. They watched his fingers as he checked the connections and began tuning on the computer and monitor. Once the screen lit up, showing a scene of a hawk in flight, he turned to the others. "Ezra turning in that house key like he did, he ain't plannin' on coming back. That other stuff, he's been waitin' on his answer... guess it wasn't good enough."

He drained the last of his beer and considered getting another. If anyone had offered him one, he would have taken him up on it, but the room was silent, and his energy was spent. So, he sat.

"Vin?" JD broke into the silence, startling everyone. "Did he say it was safer?" "What?"

"Did he use the word safer?"

"Yeah, his exact words were... 'Given the circumstances at the time, I felt it was safer for ya to remain where ya were.' Why?"

"Momma used that word once. See, my momma had me when she was very young. She never attended college, and she took jobs cleaning houses to support us. She used to talk about college. She'd get, not sad... wistful, I'd guess you'd call it, and she'd talk about how she had wanted to be a teacher. Oh, she always made sure I knew she loved me, wanted me, and never resented my having been born, but you could tell she had meant to go to college, and my being born had messed things up for her. Sometimes, she'd get catalogues from different schools. She'd read them and choose the classes she wanted to take, but she never took any classes or visited campuses. There was never enough money for her to do that.

"You have to understand, we got by all right, and I never went without things; heck, I was the first kid in my class to get a computer. Momma took a lot of pride in giving me everything the other kids had. Sometimes, though, there were more bills than money. I had jobs, but Momma made me put that money in the bank for college.

"In our apartment, we could hear yelling coming from other people's homes, but Momma never yelled. Not even when I did something stupid or brought home a bad grade. Even when she was tired, she never yelled at me or hit me, nothing like that.

"When the money was tight, I'd say, 'Why not call my father,' and she'd just laugh and say, 'No.' She never said why, even when I asked about him. She had tons of pictures, and when she was in a good mood, she'd get them out and talk about my dad and you guys, well, not you, Josiah, she didn't know about you, I guess. She had all these stories about living here, and she made this place seem magical. She'd say my father loved me, and he had wanted to get married, but she had wanted to make it on her own, and she had been the one to cut the ties with him.

"It just never made sense, her leaving him. I would say, let's call him, and she'd say no. I used to write him letters, and she would tell me she'd mail them, but when I found one in the garbage, I knew she had thrown them all away. I didn't ask her about it; I was chicken.

“When I was eleven or twelve, we were going through a tough time, and she was scared we’d get evicted. One of the ladies she cleaned for had not paid her for the entire month, and then the lady up and left for a Caribbean vacation. Momma was worried about how she would pay the rent. I could hear her at night pacing, and, in the morning, the kitchen would be full of cigarette smoke. I begged her to call Landon Larabee. If he were such a great guy, surely he would loan her a little until we got back on our feet. For a week, I begged her, and she would shake her head no without answering me.

“One day, I came from my after-school job and handed her the money I’d earned, hoping it would be enough. She burst into tears and took it. She never took the money I earned; she always said it was for college, and we’d get by. For her to take the money meant that this time things were not just hard but extremely bad. I saw red. I told her we needed money. I said she should have gone to school; she should be a teacher and not a maid who people forgot to pay. I told her if she didn’t pick up the phone and call my father, I would... My Momma slapped me. She wasn’t angry, I remember thinking, ‘She’s afraid.’ She said I was never to call Landon Larabee or even tell anyone he was my father ... that it wasn’t safe... that she’d left the only man she loved to keep me safe. She made me swear on the Bible that I would never contact Landon Larabee...” JD fell silent and rubbed at his cheek, trying to erase the memory of that long-ago slap.

Chris rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “Did she ever tell you what she was trying to keep you safe from?”

“No,” JD almost added a sir. Chris had that kind of effect on him, making him want to stand at attention and salute.

“Do any of you remember anything happening at the ranch?” Josiah asked. Mothers dead, children in danger, what the hell had been going on?

When Nathan and Buck shook their heads no, Chris stood up and got a notepad and pen from a drawer. “Josiah, is your mother dead?”

Josiah stopped petting Jack’s massive head that had somehow made its way into his lap. He hesitated before speaking, “She died in 1989. She died by drowning.” Josiah quit talking. There was one more bit of information, but he did not feel ready to share it. They might be his brothers, but they were not Hannah’s; she was his responsibility. Ignoring Jack’s plaintive whining when the scratching behind the ears stopped, he crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair, wanting to see their reactions.

Chris looked up briefly, but seeing the way Josiah’s hands were fisted, he did not ask any questions. Neither did anyone else. He finished writing, ripped the page out, and handed it to Josiah.

Josiah read the list to himself. He told himself, if they were looking for some type of connection in these women’s deaths, he doubted Anna Sanchez belonged on the list. No, Josiah, be honest with yourself, even if you do not speak of it to these other men. Hannah. Was she the connection? As scared as his mother was of the ocean, she had walked out into the waves only three days after Hannah was born. His grandfather said her shame made her take her own life. As far as he knew, except for the time his mother took him to meet his father, she had not seen Landon Larabee since their brief affair.

Was he wrong? Had she killed herself because of the circumstances of Hannah’s birth or for another reason? Was that reason related to Landon Larabee? Was that man Hannah’s father, too? Or did someone believe he was? As far as he could tell, Hannah didn’t look like Landon Larabee, but he didn’t look like Landon, either.

He did not want to believe his beautiful mother had killed herself. She was a devout Catholic and knew she was condemning herself to eternal damnation if she committed suicide. So, why had she walked out into the ocean knowing she was a poor swimmer? She had seemed happy when introducing him to his new sister. Even his grandfather’s scowls did not dim her smile.

He considered telling his brothers about Hannah, and discarded the notion. She was his sister and his responsibility. He needed to learn more about these other men before sharing information about Hannah with them. He finished reading and handed the list to Buck. Buck studied the list, retrieved a red pen from the same drawer from which Chris had taken the notepad. He circled three places on the list

	<u>Mother's Name</u>	<u>Cause of Death</u>
Josiah	Anna Sanchez	Drowning
Chris	Cassie Larabee	Wreck on Road
Buck	Rosie Wilmington	Gunshot
Nathan	Claire Jackson	Gunshot
Ezra	Maude Standish	disappeared
Vin	Cady Tanner	Gunshot
JD	Jenna Dunne	Cancer

and showed it to Chris before handing it back to Josiah. Josiah glanced at Buck's additions and handed the paper to Nathan. In minutes, all six brothers had seen the list and were sitting quietly, letting the implications set in.

"Seems to me that we'd best discover what was in those missing files," Josiah finally broke the silence by saying what they were all thinking. "The likelihood of three of our mothers being shot is very low." His mind had moved from the list to how his brothers had joked about their father's ability to lose things in the mess called the library. They talked about looking for the file, but the reality of

moving in and the subsequent problems with Ezra had pushed the mystery surrounding their father's death to the back burner.

"Assuming the deaths are connected, we need to tread carefully," Nathan advised. "We start asking the wrong questions to the wrong people, and we could end up dead."

"We are going to get to the bottom of this, Nathan," Chris said.

"Of course we are. This isn't getting swept under the rug. I think, Christopher, we don't need to throw people into walls."

Chris couldn't help but smile, "You're taking all the fun out of things, Nate, but you are right, we need to be sneaky and devious."

"Guess that means we do need to get Standish home," Buck laughed. "Face it, Chris. Sneaky and Devious are not your middle names; Blunt and Obvious are. Now, Ezra, he talked the bank into handing him ten thousand dollars, no questions asked...not then anyway. The point is someone who could walk into a bank and then out again with his wallet stuffed with big bucks...that man is sneaky and devious."

Chris flashed a quick grin, acknowledging the truth of Buck's words, before letting his face turn serious. "Sneaky and Devious Standish may be hard to find. Vin, can you do it?"

"Yes. If I can find him before he finds Moore finds him, I don't know. Depends on how well he hides." Vin saw the anguish almost hidden by the grim flint of determination in Chris's eyes.

"I'd say he hides pretty well," Josiah said. Nathan had described the motel, and in a thousand years, he would never have guessed the debonair brother in the designer suits would have stayed there. "You know, it might be easier to find Moore."

"You might be right, Josiah." Vin straddled the computer chair and rested his chin on its black leather back. His eyes were open, but he wasn't seeing his brothers. Instead, he became the predator searching from high cliff heights for his new prey.

"All we know is his name. Moore. I bet I can open any phone book in the country and find at least three Moors listed," JD said. It would be nice to find Moore, but he didn't see how it was possible.

"No, JD. We know a lot more than that. We have a last name. We know he has money to gamble. We know he has a violent temper when he loses. We know he has at least two huge men working with him, willing to help him beat another man. And we know he's angry with Ezra's mom," his eyes lost their faraway look. "Actually, we know a whole lot."

Any other thoughts Vin might have shared were lost to the jangling ring of the house phone. Their father had never felt compelled to use cell phones. Even though he carried one, he had kept the landline. Friends and family knew the best hope of getting in touch with anyone living at the ranch was to dial the landline's number.



Buck stretched to snag the phone from the end table. There was only one person he, and he suspected he could speak for his brothers, too, wanted to talk with, but he doubted that man would be calling anytime soon. “Hello? Why, hey there, Junior.” Buck stretched the name out too long, openly mocking the man to whom it belonged. “Uh-huh. You’re back in town, you say. Want to talk to Chris?” Buck nodded yes just as hard as Chris was shaking his head no. “Of course he’s here, Junior. Where else would he be? Hold on, and I’ll call him...No, it’s no problem...CHRIS-S-S,” Buck yelled, deliberately projecting most of his voice into the phone’s receiver before handing it to his brother.

Chris snatched the phone from Buck, smacking him upside the head with the sofa’s pillow as he took the phone to the kitchen. He didn’t particularly want to talk to Junior, but Junior was nothing if not persistent, and long ago, he learned the best way to deal with his cousin was to give him a few minutes of his time. In the long term, it was best to keep tabs on what Junior was up to and to redirect some of the man’s more harebrained schemes into something more thought-out.

He could hear Buck and Nathan snickering as he closed the kitchen door. He knew Buck and Nathan would spend the next few minutes telling the others about Cassie Marks’ twin brother, Curtis, and his three sons.

His conversation with Junior ended quickly, once Chris agreed to meet him to discuss a problem that had come to his, Junior’s, attention and needed to be acted on promptly.

Chris swore softly as he hung up the phone; that was all he needed – another problem. Why couldn’t the man go somewhere else?

Rotating his shoulders, easing some of the tension that talking with Curtis always inflicted on him, Chris tossed the receiver to Buck for him to hang up. “Wants us to meet me for lunch on Sunday.”

“You going?”

“Yeah,” Chris groaned in reply. He would rather be drawn and quartered than have lunch with his cousin, but he hadn’t seen any of his cousins ... since the fire. Junior had been insistent, and since he had already pissed off his immediate family by running Ezra off, he wasn’t in the mood to piss off his cousin by telling him he didn’t have the time or energy to deal with whatever he had stuck in his craw now.

“Better you than me,” Buck spoke more into his beer than to Chris. He could be polite to Chris’s cousins most of the time. Sometimes, he could even be friendly if pushed, but a lifetime of the Marks brothers worshipping Chris, while looking down their noses at him and Nate, made him wary of them. The trouble that seemed to follow them made him suspicious of their motives whenever one or more of them called, wanting to speak with Chris. They’d all been careful with what they said and how they acted, all three of them, but he’d seen their eyes, on too many occasions, after Chris had mediated another family squabble, and those eyes bothered him.

Those eyes said they resented Chris Larabee something awful.

Chris shook his head at Buck’s muttered response, but he didn’t say anything. He didn’t want to deal with Buck and his views on the Marks brothers, right then. They weren’t his favorite people either, but they were family, and a man had to take care of family. He grabbed a chair and dragged it to where Vin sat typing on his computer. “Show me how you are going to find Ezra.

