



Conversations

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

Buck shook his head, silently telling Nathan it was not Chris. “Ma’am, Vin isn’t here. May I take a message?” Buck did not recognize the voice, though why he thought he ought to know the voices of Vin Tanner’s friends was beyond him. Still, something about this woman’s tone said he needed to get her to say something so that he could take a message.

“Ma’am?” She didn’t hang up, but she hadn’t said anything more. Under other circumstances, he would hang up if someone didn’t talk, but the silence told him this time to wait; the woman was thinking something through.

“He gave me his card. He told me he was looking for his brother.” The woman on the other end of the phone sounded hesitant, as if she was unsure whether she should be calling.

Damn. Damn. Damn. He should have paid more attention to what Vin had said about his meeting in Ely. Something about asking a girl, Mary, no, that was the reporter, Mona... Monica, yeah Monica. “Monica.” He crossed his fingers, hoping he had the name right, knowing the woman was very close to hanging up.

“Yes.”

“Well, hey, Miss Monica,” Buck smiled into the phone, hoping she would hear it. “My name is Buck Wilmington. I am one of Vin’s and Ezra’s brothers. Vin said you might be calling.”

"My aunt said not to. She said Ezra didn't want anyone to know where he is."

"Yes, ma'am, I am sure he doesn't. He is one mule-headed boy, but--"

"He hasn't called," Monica interrupted.

"Ma'am?"

"He said he would call and let us know he was okay, and he hasn't called."

"Do you know where he is?" Buck asked her, not bothering to keep the excitement out of his voice.

"Not exactly. He left for Reno yesterday."

"Do you know where he was planning on staying?" Buck quietly asked, afraid he would scare the already shaky woman."

"No, sir."

Buck banged the back of his head against the wall, wincing at the slight pain. "Ma'am... Monica... please, we need to find him. Did he say anything about his plans ... or did he say anything about this Moore character? Anything?"

"He and my aunt talked some, but I don't know what he told her. All he told me was he was going to Reno to sell his car."

NOT THE CAR!!!! Buck almost groaned at the thought. "You sure?"

"Yes, sir. He said he was going to Reno because he knew someone who could...remake him?"

Buck didn't ask Monica what remake meant; he could tell from her voice she was as confused by the word as he was. "Monica, sweetie, did he say anything about this Moore character?"

"Not much...he said something about Mr. Moore being a piece of trash, disguising himself as a businessman... and ... he said Moore had a lot of money, and it sure would be interesting if the building, I think he said the building authorities. No, that's not what he called them."

"That's okay, honey; I know what he meant. Go on." Buck encouraged her.

"He said they would be interested in how Moore managed to turn such a handsome profit on his buildings."

"Moore is a contractor?" Buck couldn't help the grin spreading across his face; that was a big piece of information.

"I guess... I don't know."

"That's okay, sweetheart. You've been a big help. Listen," Buck hurriedly added before she decided, she had told him all she knew and hung up. "Can you tell me how Ezra is?"

"Aunt Sophie said he had been beaten... she helped him wrap his ribs. She couldn't understand why the doctor didn't do it... If it were a broken leg, he would have it in a cast. Why didn't they do something to keep his ribs from hurting?"

"That's a good question. I don't know."

"He promised he'd call and let us know when he got to Reno. He promised to call. If he could call, I know he would, because he's a gentleman. Gentlemen like him keep their promises."

Please, be right, he wanted to say, but she had already hung up. Buck rejoined his brothers and shared his information, wincing at Nathan's voice as he cursed under his breath when Buck relayed that Ezra wrapped his ribs.



"You've been here, what, thirty years or so?" Tommy poured his assistant a bourbon. It was the end of the day for both of them; the rule about no drinking on the job did not apply. Besides, he wanted Lou to understand this was an informal conversation, not an interrogation.

Accepting the glass, Lou corrected, "Thirty-three. I was hired when this place opened. I started in the mail room, so to speak, and worked my way up." Lou settled back into his chair, wondering where Tommy was heading with this.

"Did you know Landon Larabee back then?"

"Knew him well enough to say hello and to ask if he needed anything. We never drank together or anything."

"Do you know he died?"

"I heard he had a heart attack, and that's what killed him."

"Do you think it was a heart attack?" Tommy had mulled the question over in his mind while waiting for Lou.

Lou examined the amber liquid in his glass thoughtfully, taking his time to consider the question before responding. "To be candid," he said, "he appeared to me as the type of individual who might meet his end through a tragic accident, such as being caught in a stampede. Never struck me as someone with heart problems."

Tommy nodded his agreement. "A man of his wealth likely had some folks who didn't like him."

"I don't think many people realized he was rich. He seemed to keep that part of his life well under wraps."

"You are right. I knew him for years. Thought of him as a rancher for the longest. Only recently did I find out that he had his irons in a lot of fires. He left his heirs more than his ranch. Quite a bit more. What do you know about his heirs?"

"To be honest, not much. They never frequented Vegas, so I didn't look into them. I think he has three sons."

"I'm counting five. Chris Larabee came to visit me today with his brother, Vin Tanner.

Seems they are looking for another brother, Ezra Standish."

"Oh," Lou let the name sink in. "Maude's son?"

"Apparently."

"I thought Larabee met her a few years back and didn't recognize her."

"I was there. Their meeting occurred about twenty years ago. He didn't know her, and she didn't know him. He told me his Maude had stolen a treasure from him and he wanted it back."

"Sounds like Maude."

"Exactly. Maude Standish is an unusual name; there can't be too many women with that name. At the time, I thought it was a case of our Maude stealing the identity of his Maude or vice versa. I still do. I can't see how Ezra plays into it." Tommy poured himself a second drink, holding the bottle out to Lou.

Shaking his head no, Lou finished his drink and placed the empty glass on his boss's desk. "Sounds like you are handing me a puzzle."

"I am. Landon was a friend, and I owe him. More importantly, I owe his son, Ezra. You were in Atlantic City when Debbie was going through chemo. She was managing it like a champ. I was the one who wasn't sleeping, and I was feeling the lack of sleep in a meeting with Frank and his assistant. We were discussing a problem concerning Daphne Walden. She was still Daphne Dumont then. The woman causing the problem was Maude. I am sure you know Maude's usual target is the unattached, lonely man. For some reason, she set her sights on Daphne's husband, Bart. Bart was quite surprised that Maude, who is both remarkably attractive and highly intelligent, had expressed interest in him.

"You know Daphne. There was no possibility she could compete, either in the looks or the intelligence department, and win. What she did have was her Daddy ready to solve her problems, and she threatened to tell him about Maude. She also said she would tell him about certain hotel staff members who provided the couple with a room in which to engage in their illicit affair.

"I figured if Paul got involved, either Bart or Maude, probably, both would find themselves dead. I didn't care about either of them, but we were trying to build up our family trade, and after the Jimmy Barnes incident, we did not need any more dead bodies.

"Anyway, we are talking, and this kid, wearing a cheap suit, dares to barge in. He put a binder in front of me just as my guards came running in. He doesn't bat an eye; he just starts talking. I waved my guys back. There was something about this kid, he couldn't have been more than twenty, that made me want to listen. He says, and I quote, 'This is a detailed analysis of your security. Ah have identified several areas in which you need to make improvements. Ah will give you one week to peruse my report, and then Ah will return. You will want to hire me.'

"He was so very confident. I almost hired him on the spot. I read the binder's name, Ezra Standish, and remembered being introduced to him a month or so earlier. To make sure, I asked,

'Any relation to Maude?' He nodded, 'Yes.' I couldn't help myself. I told him, 'No child that Maude Standish had raised would ever be hired by me or anyone else in this town interested in keeping their cash.' The kid stood there, silently absorbing my rejection, before he smiled and said, 'Of course, I understand.' He walked out, but left the report on my desk.

"I could have handled it so much better. My only excuse was that I was sleep-deprived and already dealing with a Maude issue. A couple of days later, I read his report. Excellent work. I should have hired him, but I couldn't get Maude and the problems she had created out of my head." "Did you know he was Larabee's son?"

"No, of course not. I thought Maude had taken cash, not a kid." Tommy swallowed the remnants of his drinks and put the bottle back. "He comes to Vegas to play poker. By all accounts, he is very good with cards. He plays a different game than Maude, you know. She collects attention and uses the attention to select her mark. I've seen him play from the camera's perspective; I doubt he would appreciate me being in the same room with him; he only comes here when he has an invitation to sit in on a game. He plays for the challenge of competing against other good players." He sighed, "I wish I had known Landon's treasure was a who, not a what."

"So, you want me to find out how Maude got her hands on Landon's son?"

"I doubt you will find out anything. Over several years, Landon hired several detectives to look, but they couldn't find the kid. Landon's other sons are looking for Ezra. If they find him, they will solve the puzzle."

"If they don't find him?" Lou asked, suspecting what Tommy wanted, but needing confirmation before he acted.

"Find the woman; she can explain things to us."



"Have ya figured out what ya will say to him?" Vin asked. It wasn't much of a question, but it sure as hell beat mentioning they had not moved more than an inch in the last half hour; the wreck stopped traffic, both coming into and leaving Vegas.

"I still don't know how to explain to Buck why we haven't called."

"Buck, neither one of us charged our phones last night, and we are saving the batteries on our phones. I don't know about ya, but the truth works for me."

"Buck will never let us live it down. After he quit laughing at us, he would want to know why we took so long to find a pay phone, and then I would have to explain that the phone companies had taken all of them down. Then he would say, You could go into a service station and ask to borrow their phone."

"Can't help ya there. We passed plenty of service stations. Yer the one who kept saying, we'll get the next one, and then there wasn't another next one, and now we are stuck in the middle of the road, waiting for the ambulances to leave and the tow trucks to clear the wreckage."

Chris didn't answer. Vin was right; they passed up several opportunities, but those places had been in bad parts of town. If it had been only him, he would have stopped, asked the attendant his price for the privilege of using the phone, and paid it. But he had spent the last three years making Buck bleed, had chased an injured brother away, forcing him to handle a dangerous situation by himself, and had almost seen Nathan die. He was not ready to put Vin at risk. The places they passed up had been rough-looking, and he had no problem imagining a thug with a knife slipping out of the shadows and ending his brother's life.

He knew he was being that foolish. He knew he was capable of handling himself in most any situation that might come up, and he strongly suspected his younger brother was also capable; look at his job. But a feeling that someone was watching them wouldn't leave him. So, even with no evidence of a car tailing them, he kept pushing to find a more suitable place to ask about a phone. He thought about telling Vin about his feeling of dread, but without any proof, he kept his mouth shut.

"Want to hand me one of those Cokes?" Vin asked when it became clear Chris had finished their conversation regarding phones.

"We have a lot of driving ahead of us. Pit stops are going to slow us down," Chris warned as he handed his brother a Coke.



"Well, hey, good buddy. I was beginning to wonder if you'd forgotten our phone number." Buck joked, relieved to hear Chris's voice.

"Long story, and I don't have but a minute," He was being charged twenty dollars a minute by an opportunistic, shaggy-haired clerk, to use the store's phone. Chris glanced towards the well-lit restrooms, wanting Vin to hurry up. "Everyone all right?"

"We are all fine," Buck said, thinking maybe, since Chris finally called, Nathan would head on to bed. "Listen, tell Vin that Monica girl called. Said Ezra is in Reno, and Moore is a contractor."

Stretching the phone's cord as far as he could without pulling it out of the jack, searching for a modicum of privacy, he listened as Buck relayed his conversation with Monica. Buck's news, confirming the information Botello gave them, energized him as Vin's chocolate had not. "Good, good. Let me tell you what I know..."



"I should have asked Buck if he ever heard Dad mention Botello." Botello didn't strike him as the type of man who handed out free favors. He had only seen them because Vin's friend called in a favor. It had been obvious that the man planned to let the two of them have their say and send them on their way empty-handed. It was equally obvious that Botello changed his mind the minute he heard the Larabee name. Botello not only discovered which city Ezra had run to, but he also found the name and address of the hotel where he was staying. The question was, why was he going to all **this** trouble?

"Would he remember?" Vin asked.

"A name, yeah. Buck remembers things like that. If Dad mentioned Botello, Buck would remember. Would he mention Botello to Buck? Who knows? My question is, how did Dad and Botello know each other? Botello isn't a wanted man or anything, but there are a lot of rumors suggesting he didn't get to where he is by playing by the usual rules. A few weeks ago, I would have said Dad would never associate with someone like Botello. Now, it seems like there is a lot I don't know about my father. Maybe they met in the casinos when he was in Vegas looking for Ezra. They could be business partners. Or fishing buddies. Who knows? I don't, but I do know something changed in his office when he learned we were Larabees.

Vin reached to turn on the radio, then stopped himself, "Will it keep ya from getting some sleep?"

"You are not driving for nine hours straight," Chris growled.

"Wasn't planning to. It's yer turn in Tonopah, provided ya get some sleep. Don't want you to be falling asleep behind the wheel."

"You will wake me?"

"Yep."

"I have your word."

"You have my word as a Tanner that I will let ya drive my truck, provided ya get some rest now. Don't need it wrecked jest when I got it broke in good." Chris couldn't help himself. He laughed.



"I swear, JD, if you don't quit, I am putting you back outside, and you will be spending the night out there. Alone. In the cold."

JD smirked. Josiah could act like a grouchy old bear, all he wanted; he knew better. He wasn't so blind that he didn't realize Josiah did not go out with him and Jack because he was interested in showing him how to get the dog's interest; Josiah wanted to take his mind off the waiting, like Buck did with his storytelling. He didn't need babysitting, but it had been a nice thing to do, and he found a way to get Jack to fetch the ball for him. "Come on, Josiah. Just one time." "One time, and then I am going to bed."

"Okay. Okay. Guys," he turned, checking to see if Nathan and Buck were watching him.

"You know I have spent all evening trying to get Jack to play."

"Be kinda hard to miss JD."

"Yeah, I know. He loves Josiah, and that's fine, but I want him to pay some attention to me. I had this brilliant idea. Ready... drum roll please." JD's grin could not get any wider. He stepped behind Josiah and tossed the ball. Jack's jaws snapped at the ball, but he missed. The ball bounced around the room and down the hall. Jack, slipping and sliding on the wood floors, followed it.

"See...see?" JD ignored the barking dog and grinned widely.

"Dog that size, you might want to go outside to play fetch, JD," Nathan said as he stood up and began picking the scattered papers off the floor. He was tired and ready for bed, and now the dog, who had been as quiet as the proverbial mouse, was barking its fool head off.

"You didn't see it? He caught the ball or tried to anyway because he thought I was Josiah. Don't you see? He catches the balls I throw while I stand behind Josiah, because he believes Josiah threw them.

"Then, JD, he's still paying attention to Josiah and not to you," Buck pointed out.

"For now, but each day I will get a little further away from Josiah and pretty soon he'll play fetch with me."

"And you think this will work?" Buck had his doubts.

"Sure. Just watch. This time next week, and he'll be my dog."

"Maybe," Nathan tossed the papers onto the table. "But for now, you got him riled up, so you best get him quieted down. I am tired and I want to go to sleep."

"Been telling you to go to bed," Buck muttered.

JD chased down the hall after the dog, muttering under his breath. He thought they would be a little more excited about things. Things were finally looking up. They'd get Ezra home, have a nice Thanksgiving together, then do some Christmas shopping, and somewhere along the way, Jack would learn to play fetch... with him.

JD turned on the light in Ezra's room, thinking someone needed to make the bed in the morning. "Did the ball roll under the bed? See, I told you; you needed more practice." JD pushed the dog out of his way and looked under the bed. He grabbed the ball and handed it to Jack. Then, with his heart beating loudly in his ears, he reached a little further and grabbed the pill bottle. He knew, at once, what it was and to whom it belonged, but he checked the label anyway, Ezra's antibiotics.

And he was going to have to be the one to tell Nathan. Shoot. Nathan would probably take one look at the bottle and start foaming at the mouth or something. Well,... he probably wouldn't foam, but he would say something about a stupid man who would not follow his doctor's advice.

As soon as they got Ezra home, Nathan would probably corner him and explain in excruciating detail how broken ribs should be treated. Ezra was on his own for that lecture. Unfortunately, he made the mistake of asking Nathan why he was so upset about Ezra wrapping his ribs; protecting those ribs seemed like a good idea. Nathan, then, spent what had seemed like hours explaining how the lungs worked, how pneumonia attacked the lungs, and how important deep breathing was. Talk about information overload. Add that to what Nathan would have to say about Ezra not taking all his medicine, the poor guy was going to hear an earful, and he, JD, was going to be smart enough to be elsewhere.

He knew he was stalling, but didn't want to be the one to give them anything more to worry about. Still, they needed to be told. "Nathan," he called as he walked down the hall and into the den.

Alerted by JD's tone, Nathan stopped in his tracks, waiting as his youngest brother hurried over to him and dropped a bottle into his hand. Wordlessly, Nathan's hand closed over the bottle. He didn't look at the label; he knew what he held, and, unlike his brothers, he understood what the bottle's presence meant to Ezra. "Buck, in the morning, when Chris and Vin call to say they found him, I need to talk to them. If I am already at the clinic, have them call me there, get me a number I can reach them at."

He tossed the bottle into the air, caught it, and threw it across the room, the plastic container splintering into long shards when it hit the fireplace, the pills scattering along the hearth. "I'm going to bed."



Chris gave up fighting yawns and began looking for an exit sign touting the availability of gas and food. He was tired, and even though they were on the outskirts of Reno, he needed to stop for a few minutes. He needed a large cup of coffee, a bite to eat, and a few minutes walking around to get his blood pumping, or he would not be functional for much longer.

Vin had driven the first leg of their trip, telling him to get some sleep. It had been one of those, easier said than done, deals. Part of the problem was that he couldn't get comfortable. As spacious as Vin's truck might be, it wasn't made for sleeping, and his legs needed room to stretch, but it wasn't his discomfort that kept jerking him awake. It was the questions.

True to his word, Vin had pulled over to let Chris take over the driving. Vin was asleep by the time Chris pulled out of the truck stop. If Buck had been in the passenger seat, Chris would have had a chatty passenger the whole way into Reno; Buck believed talking kept people awake,

and the best solution for a problem was to talk it over with someone who cared. Nathan wouldn't have gotten out of the driver's seat; he would have refused to let Chris drive. They would have pulled over for the night and prayed that Ezra would still be in Reno come morning, or Nathan would have done all the driving. Vincent Tanner was a refreshing change.

Chris wasn't sure if it was due to the change in speed, the change in the road, or something else entirely, but as he pulled off onto the exit ramp, Vin woke up. It wasn't a bleary-eyed, taking-a-moment-to-figure-out-where-I-am coming awake; Vin woke, as he had gone to sleep, instantly. His eyes flitted over the dashboard to check the time, then the gas gauge. "Are you all right?" he asked when he saw they still had almost half a tank of gas left.

"Need to stretch a bit. Thought we could get something to eat, and a map, seeing as you don't have GPS." It bothered him, for reasons he had problems naming, that Vin came awake so easily. Was that ability a result of his job or a survival skill learned long ago? The thought of his little brother growing up in a hostile home without his brothers to watch over him gave Chris a renewed sense of frustration with his father. What had the man been thinking, not raising, or at least not keeping up with, his sons?

"Food sounds good, but I've got a map." Vin frowned at Chris. The man looked dead on his feet, and it would probably take more than a cup of coffee to keep him moving. Then again, the man was nothing if not stubborn. Chris would probably keep going, relying on nothing more than willpower, not resting until he had Ezra herded safely back into the fold. Stubborn...kinda reminded him of one or two other brothers he could name.

"A map to Reno?" Chris couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice. Vin Tanner just happened to have a map of Reno. Where had he gotten it? It hadn't been in Vegas; he had been with him the whole time.

"Yep. I picked up one at a welcome center when I moved here from Texas."

"Why Reno?" He could understand a state map, but why pick up a map of Reno?

"Why not? Got one for Vegas, too. Ya never know when ya might need a map."

"Be prepared. Let me guess, you were in the Boy Scouts."

"Nope, but I bet ya were."

Chris chuckled. "Dad was a den leader. We'd leave right after school to pick Buck up, have our meeting, and take Buck home. For years, I slept through most of Wednesday, despite my teachers' notes to Dad about my lack of sleep, which he ignored. He said being a Scout was important for our character development."

"I reckon, ya didn't sleep in the car then, any better than ya do now," Vin said rather than ask. He pointed out a parking space to Chris. As soon as Chris parked and turned the engine off, he began rummaging through a plastic crate stowed behind the passenger seat, filled with what appeared to be a never-opened emergency kit, a hopefully empty thermos, a pair of binoculars, and many, many maps.

Chris watched silently as Vin sorted through his things, his face creasing into a frown when he spied several wanted posters at the bottom of the stack. With the rifle not in its rack and his brother's ready smile, it was easy to forget what his brother did for a living.

Vin followed Chris's stare back to the wanted posters. "I haven't gone after the scum yet, but I will. They," he nodded as he spoke, and Chris knew Vin was seeing the faces on the posters and was thinking about the crimes those men committed. "They need to be brought in." For a moment, Chris didn't see the young man with the lazy smile as a predator.

"Did you find it?" Chris asked as Vin began dumping things back into the crate; he noticed Vin made a point to put the first aid kit on top. The fact that it hadn't been opened reassured him about his brother's abilities, but the care that Vin took in placing it within easy reach reinforced the idea that his brother led a dangerous life.

"Yep. Let's go in, see what's on the menu."



"Coffee's on," Buck told Nathan as his brother walked into the kitchen.

"Hope you didn't get up to see me off," Nathan grumbled as he grabbed a mug off the rack and stood in front of the coffee pot, waiting for the machine to finish brewing.

"Are you feeling better?" Buck ignored Nathan's typical first thing in the morning attitude. A cup of coffee and some breakfast, and the man would become civil.

Nathan leaned back against the counter, "Throat's better, and I slept better. So, I guess you can say I'm better."

"But?"

"But what?"

"But how are you?"

"I am really and truly pissed, Buck." Nathan slammed his hand down on the counter, causing the mug to jump. He picked it up, decided he had waited long enough on the coffee, and poured himself some. He didn't sit down, though; instead, he paced around the room, looking at every change their father had made in the kitchen rather than at Buck. Finally, having exhausted his perusal of the kitchen, he began speaking,

"You know, growing up. I thought we all had roles to play. I don't think our roles are as black and white as I once thought, but they haven't changed. Chris was the best at everything. Go into the library and you can see it for yourself. Look at all the trophies and the awards and think about the scholarships he won without even trying.

"You," he turned to face Buck, "you were the one who made Dad laugh. You were his pal. You did fun things together. When you two were together working on a car or talking about going fishing, hell, even when you were getting chewed out by Dad, you could hear the humor in his voice. Me... I saw my role as being the good one. I did my best never to cause any trouble. Did you know that my grades were as good as Chris's? But I didn't bring home the awards like he did. That was okay because he was the best and I was the good one. All my life, I measured myself against this invisible yardstick, which would tell me if I was being good enough for Dad. I have done only a couple of things of which I am ashamed, and they were things kids around me were doing, and I ... and I think... the logical, reasoning part of me thinks, I was a kid when I did those things, they weren't that bad, and I should get over it. The other part of me wakes up in the middle of the night from dreams in which Dad finds out I am not as good as I pretended to be."

Buck waited when Nathan paused to get his breath, knowing that if he said anything, Nathan would quit talking, and he needed to talk about it. He hated to admit it, but Nathan's remarks about their roles were on the money. But to say them like Nathan did, made them roles, just roles anyone could act out. Their lives had been far more complex than a silly little play.

"I spent my whole life being good. I didn't fight, I didn't do drugs, I didn't drink. I did date and I am not a virgin, but I didn't sleep around, and I didn't get anyone pregnant or get any diseases. I almost got a tattoo once, but I decided it wouldn't show up on my skin too well, and what is the point of getting a tattoo if it can't be seen? I did get my ear pierced, but the next day I took the earring out and let it heal up. You can't even tell I ever did anything to my ear.

"I judge everything and everyone as being good or bad. I have to stop doing that. I judge myself more than I do others, and I am, at least I think I am, a good person. I want to be. I want to help people..." His voice trailed off, and then he sank into the chair across from Buck. He placed his now-empty mug in front of him. Looking into its depths, he asked Buck. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Aren't you going to say something?"

"What is it you want me to say?"

"I want ... I want you ... to explain what I did wrong. Why did those men think that I needed hanging? I understand they wanted to get into the clinic and see what they could steal, but I don't understand why they wanted me dead."

"Oh hell, Nathan, if I had the answer to that question, I'd be able to make world peace. I don't think they needed a reason."

"I know... I know that. In my head, I do know that. But I keep thinking ... I keep thinking that I try to help people... I try to make a difference. Why couldn't they see that? You know, my being a doctor has never been about money. If it were, I wouldn't have been working in the clinic at the hospital. I had offers, not just in Alabama, but other places where I could have made good money."

"You are a good doctor."

"I know you're saying that because you are my brother, but you are right, I am a good doctor." He pushed his chair away and grabbed both of their mugs. He poured them a second cup and took a sip before sitting back down. "You know, I worried about having to deal with prejudice when I went to Alabama. I prepared myself for it. You hear all those stories about the Klan and burning crosses, but I never saw any of that. Maybe it was the people I hung out with, or the way I

dressed, or the places I went, but I didn't see it. It never occurred to me that I would come home and I would have to worry about that stuff. Now, I have to wonder if my being black played a role in their decision to hang me, lynch me... For God's sake, this is my home and ... it makes me so... angry ... so very angry."

"Tell me, Nathan, did any of your patients cancel yesterday?"

"No."

"Did any of them say they wanted to see Emmett rather than you?" "No."

"Do you think any of those patients won't want to see you again?"

Nathan tried to wipe a smile off his face and failed. "Mr. Hibbits won't be back."

"Because of the color of your skin?" Buck let a smile slip onto his face. He knew Ron Hibbits and doubted Ron had even noticed the color of Nathan's skin.

"No... I told him that he needed to go on a diet, and he wasn't happy. He wanted a pill to make him feel better. Doesn't want to give up food. He'll probably shop for a doctor until someone gives him his magic pill or until he has a heart attack." He stood and stretched before heading to the refrigerator. "Yogurt?" he asked as he passed his brother.

"To use a JD word – gross."



"Seems Ezra knows all the best places," Vin quipped without humor. His eyes scanned both sides of the street, searching for the address Botello had given them. He hadn't spotted any signs for the White Springs Hotel. He didn't know whether or not to hope the address Botello was phony. He wanted to find Ezra, but not in a place like this. Ezra, wearing his expensive clothes and driving his expensive car, did not belong in this neighborhood.

He glanced at Chris and, seeing the thin line his lips had become, decided not to say anything more. Instead, he fastened his eyes on the faded numbers on the buildings and began counting, searching for the address that would lead them to Ezra.

The neighborhood wasn't too bad, he told himself. He knew those words to be a lie before he had finished forming them in his head. He had lived in a neighborhood not much different than this one. Without knowing the names of the streets or the names of the people, he knew this place. He knew most of the people who still lived in these buildings with the broken and boarded-up windows, and the graffiti-covered walls stayed because there was nowhere else for them to go.

Some of the people were homeless and lived in the shelter of the abandoned buildings, scurrying out at night. Others were elderly and would fearfully treat each outing as though they were walking through a combat zone, and they were right to do so. When the sun rose a little higher in the sky, children in their ill-fitting hand-me-down coats would come out to play on the broken sidewalks because suffering from the cold outside was, too often, better than staying inside. Later, when the sun began setting, the addicts would start congregating on the corners. Some would have money, and many more would only have plans to get money by selling the things they stole or themselves.

He knew that many of the people of this neighborhood felt as though their situations were hopeless, and the best they could do was to survive. He wanted to tell the inhabitants that life here wasn't hopeless; you are not trapped here. People could get away from these places. He had. It had been a close thing, and if Harry hadn't been there to show him the possibilities, he would have succumbed to the feeling of hopelessness. He got out. Every morning when he woke, he thanked God for sending Harry into his life, and he thanked Harry for being a man who had cared. But even though Harry had stepped in and changed his life, he knew he would always carry the scars he received in living it.

"There it is," Chris unclenched his fists long enough to point out the building.

Vin nodded and began looking for a parking spot. After a fruitless search for a legitimate parking space, he parked his pickup in a service alley for one of the boarded-up buildings. He locked the truck with a rueful grimace; in this neighborhood, he doubted a lock would protect the truck's contents or the pickup itself. His only hope was that the early hour meant potential thieves and vandals were still asleep. Of course, the chances of it being robbed diminished only if they got Ezra before anyone woke up. He hurried to catch up with Chris.

Chris strode into what, only in jest, could be called a hotel. After letting his eyes adjust to the dim light, he walked over to the cage, which he supposed was the check-in desk. The

pockmarked, grey-haired man in the cage was focused on a TV whose skewed color declared it had lost the ability to broadcast red tones and was as old as the man watching it. Reluctantly, the old man turned off the television and pushed himself out of his chair. Grabbing a cane from where he had stored it beside the chair, he hobbled up to the counter.

"Yeah," the man's eyes narrowed with suspicion at the appearance of the two men walking into his place at such an early hour. They weren't here to check in, of that he was sure, and he'd already paid his protection money for the month, so they could only be in this establishment to find someone. He hoped everyone concerned would leave peacefully -- having to call the cops always ruined his day.

"We're looking for Ezra Standish," Chris said, his nose wrinkling at the smell of an unwashed body.

"Don't know the name."

"You don't mind if we look at your book," Chris told the man with a glare daring him to object.

"Help yourself." These men smelled like cops. Best to let them go about their business. He used his cane to help pull himself back to his chair and, with a thud, dropped into it.

Chris opened up the ledger and began scanning the page. He saw no Standish, but another name written in small, textbook-perfect lettering caught his eye. It had to be him. He asked the old man, "This Eddie Simms, what does he look like?"

"Don't know." He bristled at the look the man in black shot him. "I just give them a room and take their money. Pay no attention to what they look like. It ain't my business."

Chris could feel the anger in him rising, but a calming hand on his shoulder kept him from exploding. He looked at the ledger again and noticed something else -- Eddie Simms had overpaid. Chris knew from experience the going rates for rooms such as these with their paper-thin walls, lack of heat, and communal bathrooms. When his father refused to continue to fund his nights in a bottle, he didn't care. He had money in the bank, and when it was gone, he had the money from the insurance policy Sarah insisted they take out on her. Why did she want those policies? He had teased her; they were going to live forever.

She hadn't lived, and the money he earned through her death had come in handy by funding his years of drunkenness. He spent the damned money on the cheapest room he could find, the cheapest whiskey his stomach could tolerate, and he found solace in his drunken oblivion. He didn't drink every night; some nights he'd sit in his dingy, dirty room and think about what he'd lost, using his pain and loneliness to flagellate his soul. When he could stand it no longer, he would reach for the ever-present whiskey bottle. That had been his life, but Ezra wasn't him. Ezra didn't belong here.

Vin looked over Chris's shoulder to see where his brother was pointing. It took him a moment to decipher why Chris was pointing to the amount this Eddie Simms paid, but when he did, he asked, "Why did this Simms fellow pay double everyone else's price?"

"Oh, him. I do remember him. Prissy little man. He wanted his own bathroom. Told him he should go to the fuckin' Hilton if he was too squeamish for this place. He wanted to, but I guess he didn't have the money. Told him I had a few rooms with their own facilities, his word, not mine. I usually keep them for the whores working the corner, but he was only going to be here the night, so I let him have it."

"For a price," Chris added.

"This ain't a charity."

Vin dropped a hand onto Chris's shoulder, "Let's go get him, Chris."

"Where are the stairs?" Chris looked around the lobby. There was no way he was riding in the elevator. The chances were that the thing would either break down and they would be trapped for hours, or the cables would snap and they would plunge the three floors, if not to their deaths, to a broken bone or two. He wasn't being morbid; he was being practical. This place may have once been decent, but it had been gutted and remade into a cheap flophouse. The way he figured it, he did not need to find out if the cut-rate materials and shoddy workmanship evident elsewhere in the hotel extended to the elevator.

"The elevator is right over there." The man didn't bother getting up; he merely pointed to the elevator three yards from the desk.

"Where Are The Stairs?" Chris barked at the old man.

"Down that hall, past the phone." He shook his head; three flights of stairs were a long way to walk when a perfectly good elevator was right in front of them.



"To what reason do Ah owe the pleasure of your company, Mr. Larabee?" Ezra asked as he grabbed the shirt he had discarded sometime during the night and pulled it on. His usually nimble fingers were clumsy and slow as he buttoned the worn shirt. He brushed a hand over his eyes, trying to clear the cobwebs. He cursed his foolishness for draining the bottle of useless cough syrup. It hadn't done its job; he still spent most of the night coughing up his lungs, and now his brain felt like sludge.

He couldn't wake up. He hadn't, as he usually did, woken up instantly aware of his surroundings when the banging at his door started; instead, he let the insistent voices calling his name make him sit up without regard to his damaged ribs. After recovering from his coughing fit, he compounded his mistake by standing up and jerking the door open, leaving his gun hidden under his pillow, where it did him absolutely no good.

"We need to talk," Chris stepped further into the room, letting Vin squeeze into the room behind him. He gave the room a brief once-over, then settled his gaze on Ezra, evaluating his condition and not liking what he saw. The coughing sounded bad from the hallway, but he hoped Ezra had merely had dust or something caught in his throat. Unfortunately, with deep shadows under his eyes, Ezra looked as bad as he sounded.

"Ah thought we covered everything," Ezra said. He had done what he had said he would do.

"No. I don't think we did." Chris looked around for a place to sit; there wasn't anything except the bed, so he perched on the edge of it, his eyes returning to his brother. Damn, how could a man look so much worse in so few days?

"W-well, then. How may Ah help you?" Ezra winced as he stumbled over his words. Chris Larabee didn't make him nervous; he wanted to explain; he was tired.

"Thanksgiving is on Thursday." Chris almost shook his head in disgust at the words jumping out of his mouth. Vin had been right to ask him if he knew what he would say to Ezra. It wasn't as though he hadn't tried to come up with something; he had spent much of the night trying out and discarding speeches. He walked up three flights of stairs, hoping that inspiration would hit him before he faced Ezra. It hadn't. Approaching the door with fingers crossed, he hoped words would jump out of his mouth when Ezra opened up the door. If there had been any words, they had hightailed it when he heard Ezra's cough. There were days he'd give his right arm to have Buck's knack with people.

"How did you find me?" Ezra asked, ignoring the Thanksgiving comment. He had more important concerns than worrying about holidays. If they found him, then Moore could discover him, and if Moore found him before he had the information he needed to protect his mother, all his sacrifice was for naught.

"Vin is a bounty hunter... he finds people for a living," Chris answered automatically as his eyes studied his brother. He wasn't Nathan, but even he knew the sheen on Ezra's skin and the glassiness of those green eyes meant fever, and he didn't like the sounds Ezra was making as he breathed.

"There is a bounty on me?" How had Moore gotten a bounty on him? He thought you had to be arrested to get a price put on your head.

"NO!" Vin's explosive answer reminded both of his brothers that he was in the room. "It ain't like that, Ezra. I... we... all of us have been looking for ya."

"Why?" Oh Damn. They were going to hold a grudge.

"Because Dad wanted us to get to know each other," Chris answered.

"He's dead. What he wants doesn't count," Ezra couldn't help himself; he snarled out the words. Landon Larabee may have been saintly according to Christopher Larabee, but he, Ezra Standish, didn't see it that way. Not at all. He owed nothing to the man, except his existence, and as soon as Manny called with his new identity, he wouldn't even owe him that.

"Does what we want count?" Vin asked from his spot next to the door.

"No." He knew he was acting excessively rude, but he was tired, his chest hurt, and at any minute, he would cough. He didn't want to cough, especially in front of these men.

"So, who does count, Ezra?" Chris asked. "Your mom?"

Ezra could feel the blood drain from his face. “Has she been in touch with you then?” He hoped they didn’t hear the slight quake in his voice. If they did and called him on it, he wasn’t sure if he could say, with any degree of accuracy, whether he was more concerned with them meeting his mother or Moore finding out she returned to the country. While he was concerned with Maude’s safety, the thought of her talking freely to his bro—these men without him to referee tied his stomach in knots.

“No. But we do know she is the reason you took the money.” At Ezra’s look of confusion, Chris explained, “JD overheard you talking to her.”

“Mr. Dunne should ...” not have listened to a private conversation. There was no way he would disparage John David’s lack of etiquette when he had stolen ten thousand dollars. Somehow, John David’s accidental eavesdropping, which he was sure was accidental, did not equate with his deliberate theft.

“Ezra, how dangerous is this Moore?” Vin asked when Ezra fell silent.

“He’s not your concern. She’s mah mothuh and as such, Timothy Moore is mah responsibility.” Under no circumstances would he permit these men to become involved with Timothy Moore. The one good thing about leaving the ranch was the knowledge that Moore would not find out about these men; he didn’t want them dragged into Moore’s world.

“You’ve got that wrong, Ezra,” Chris said, surprising himself with how much he sounded like Buck. “Moore is not just your responsibility. He is our responsibility.” He moved closer to his brother, daring him with his eyes to contradict him. “You are our brother. What affects you affects us.”

“You told me to leave.” Ezra reminded him.

“Yes, I did. If you remember, I also told you I have a temper. I have a strong tendency to react first and think later. We both made mistakes last Wednesday. I should have asked more questions, and you should have told me about the threat to your mother. We made mistakes, and we need to get past them. That’s what brothers do,” Chris instructed softly. “I am asking you to forgive me for my temper and come home.”

“You don’t understand what you are asking of me.” He couldn’t go back. Why didn’t Chris see that?

“Come home,” Chris insisted.

“The ranch is not my home.” Ezra carefully enunciated each word.

“And this is?” Chris looked around the room. “This is not a home. It’s a room and not much of a room at that.”

“At least Ah am not living in mah car,” he tried to joke, but the words sounded more defensive than humorous.

“Your car would be a step up.”

“Well, yes, but sometimes changes are called for.”

“The changes include calling yourself Eddie Simms?”

“Ah thought it might be difficult to sneak up on Moore if Ah used Ezra Standish.”

“Tell me what you are up to.” Suddenly, everything fell into place. Ezra wasn’t just trying to hide from Moore; he was disappearing.

“This is not your business.”

“The hell it isn’t.” Chris thrust his hands into his pockets to keep himself from grabbing and shaking Ezra. “You got rid of your car?”

“Eddie Simms doesn’t drive expensive cars,” Ezra stated simply.

“Ezra Standish does.”

“Ezra Standish does not exist anymore.”

“He’s standing right in front of me.”

“Look, Mr. Larabee...”

“Chris. A man calls his brothers by their first names.”

“Having the same father does not make us brothers.”

Chris didn’t have a ready answer for that. Ezra was right; brotherhood was more than blood. He ran a nervous hand over his face. He wanted to turn to Vin and ask him for help, but he didn’t; Vin wasn’t the one who made this mess. He had, and it was up to him to fix things. He didn’t have any magic words; he never did, so he spoke what was in his heart. “You’re right. It doesn’t, but it is a place we can begin from.”

“That’s assuming we want to be brothuhs. Ah don’t want to be your brothuh.”

"You don't want to be my brother, fine. Go back to the ranch, and I will leave."

"No," he wasn't explaining anything right. "Ah don't want any of you for brothuhs. Ah don't want the responsibility."

"Tough. We are related; deal with it."

"We were related when you told me to leave."

"Dammit, Ezra! I told you I have a temper. I am sorry." He ran his fingers through his hair.

"Ezra, I am not good at apologizing. I hate to be wrong. Too much pride, I guess. But I am saying I was wrong to tell you to leave. I am sorry, and I do want you to come back."

"Why? Why is it so important for me to come back?"

"You are a Larabee—" "

"NO! Ah am not a Larabee. Mah name is Standish," he didn't mean to snap, and he certainly did not mean to make that sudden move triggering another coughing fit, but he did not want to be called Larabee.

"All right, Standish, it is. As long as you know that it is not Simms," Chris snapped back without thinking. Watching Ezra hold his ribs as he coughed, he regretted his display of temper. He tried again, "You belong at the ranch with us. We will find a way to take care of Moore.

Together. As brothers."

Ezra heard the sincerity in Chris Larabee's voice and was genuinely touched by it, but he couldn't go back. "Thank you, Mr. Larabee. Ah appreciate the offer, but Ah can't go back."

"Why?" Chris interrupted. He heard in Ezra's voice his determination, and once again, he was losing a battle with Ezra. Damn, the stubborn man. Couldn't he give in on this one thing? Couldn't he admit he wanted to come back?

"Ah am used to being mah own man. Ah don't wish to be encumbered by familial responsibilities."

"And?"

"Look," Ezra crossed his arms in front of him. Not wanting to admit even to himself the kind of man he was, he didn't speak for a moment, but the weight of Chris Larabee's and Vin Tanner's combined gaze was heavy and pulled the words out of him. "Ah stole from you once and Ah will do it again. Ah am greedy. It is mah nature." He sighed. Now, they would leave and let him get on with his new life.

"You won't steal from us, not again."

"No? Maybe, maybe not, but I would do something else." Talk about having to draw someone a map; did Larabee not understand he was a con artist?

"And I will probably get pissed and yell at you. I might even throw you off the ranch again, but we are brothers, and will work things out."

"Mr. Larabee, please understand—AH AM NOT RETURNING TO YOUR RANCH."

Chris was quiet for a full minute, then said, "All right then. If that's the way you want it." He had nothing he could use to convince Ezra to return to the ranch and let them help. His apology changed nothing. Ezra was a man of an age to make his own decisions. It didn't matter that he chose not to get to know his brothers and had decided to give up his inheritance. He was making a dangerously stupid decision about whatever he planned for Moore; he was adamant about not returning.

Chris turned on his heels to face Vin and the door; he needed to get out of the room before he hit something or someone. Behind him, he heard a soft sigh of relief, and froze. What was it Vin had said— something about not frightening a feral cat. Whether Ezra was frightened was debatable; he didn't know him well enough to tell if there was fear in those green eyes, but he knew this brother with the friendly smile and polite manners was running from him and from the reality of having brothers.

Vin didn't know what had changed, but something had. Chris had been ready to throw in the towel, but now something in his eyes said Chris was preparing to strike. Ezra would not even have a clue as to what hit him. He hoped that was a figurative hit, but he wouldn't put it past Chris to pop Ezra on the chin if he thought he could get him in the truck and heading to the ranch by doing so.

"Ezra," Chris turned back around. "A couple of things I want to run by you before we go."

"Yes?" Anything to get them on their way because he was beginning to hurt.

"We were talking the other night, you know how brothers do; sit around in the evening and talk... and something came up that bothered us all... a lot," he waited a heartbeat, then looked up

to see if he had Ezra's attention, and then waited a bit longer for emphasis. "Your mother, Maude, is the only one of our mothers who is still alive."

"Yes, suh, I think we determined that when we first met."

"Yes, we did. But I guess what was interesting was the timing of their deaths, and some things said to JD and Vin?"

He didn't want to ask any questions; he really didn't, but his mouth opened up and asked anyway, "What things?"

"It would be easier putting two and two together if we had Dad to answer our questions. We haven't found the files his detective was working on for him, but it seems as if Dad made a conscious decision around 2000 not to contact his kids. From some things Jenna Dunne told JD and from what was written in Vin Tanner's letter, it seems Dad was worried about the safety of his children. It's hard to say for sure, but when you factor in all the deaths and the timing of his dropping you, Vin, and JD from his life, it seems he felt someone was intentionally targeting his family. Did he say anything in his letter to you about that?"

"Ah ... Ah don't know." 2000? Did it mean something? Was there a reason for his father never answering his letter?

"You don't know? Haven't you read your letter?" he knew he hadn't. The letter was on the bookshelf in the den, torn in half and unopened.

Ezra looked around the floor, not seeing anything, his mouth opening and closing as he searched for an answer that did not reveal the pain behind his decision to keep his father's letter unread. "Well, actually, suh, Ah am loath to admit Ah have misplaced mah letter."

"Oh." Oh, yes, he had him hooked, now to reel him in. "Buck's mother, Nathan's mother, and Vin's mother were all murdered, and Jenna wouldn't let her son contact Landon out of fear for his life... or for her life." He might have exaggerated the last bit, but he wanted to keep Ezra hooked. "When you find your letter, if it says anything that might tell us what was going on, will you call or write us and let us know... and you might want to speak to your mother... with Dad and his PI both having... I guess you would call them suspicious deaths... well, you might want to warn her to be careful."

Ezra swallowed hard. He knew Chris was telling him all of this to get him to return to the ranch; he was not stupid, but if he spoke the truth... If there was a reason why Landon Larabee abandoned him, he wanted to know it, and if his mother was in danger, he needed to know. "Mistah Larabee, Ah left the letter at the ranch. Perhaps you could retrieve it from... the trash ... and read it. Ah will contact you in a few days and--"

"No."

"No?"

"Dad said the letters were private. I won't read it until after you read it and permit me to do so."

"Given the circumstances"

"No. Listen, never mind. Don't worry about it... We'll figure things out, and your mother... well, it's probably all coincidences. She probably isn't in any danger."

"Perhaps ... I will drop by the ranch after I have dealt with Moore. If you would be so good as to hold the letter for me until then, Ah would be most appreciative?"

This was better than he expected, but it was not enough. "Why won't you come now. If someone targeted our mothers, we need your help."

"Yes, Ah understand, and Ah will give it to you, but Timothy Moore has threatened mah mothuh. Maude does not take his threat seriously, but Ah do not believe she truly understands his anger. He feels humiliated by her, and he is not a man known for his ability to handle humiliation well. Ah am proof of that. Ah must take steps to protect her from him, then Ah will come to the ranch... for the lettuh."

"I have a better idea. You come home, read your letter, and while you help us figure out why our mothers are dead, we'll help you keep your mother alive. Think. There will be seven of us to protect your mother... Seven is a lot stronger than one..."

There was more he could say, but sometimes silence was better than speech. He waited as Ezra thought things over; he didn't look around, but he could feel Vin standing next to the door, smiling. Vin knew, as he did, Ezra was coming home... at least until they figured out the mystery of the deaths of the women Landon loved, and if, during that time, they could tame the feral cat, they could keep him.

Ezra looked at Chris, studying his face for any sign of deceit. He saw nothing there, and he liked to think he could read faces, especially the face of a man like Chris Larabee, for whom the word subtle might as well not be in the dictionary. "I suppose, then, Ah must impose upon you and ask you for a ride back to the ranch."

"You got one... as long as no one has stolen Vin's truck."

"Who'd want it?" Ezra smiled to take the sting out of his words.

"Hey?" What's this with the dissing of his truck? It was a great truck. It ran like a dream.



"Thought you were going to call to let us know you'd found him," Nathan nailed Chris with his version of the infamous Larabee glare; he found it particularly useful when dealing with recalcitrant patients and brothers who forgot what phones were used for. He spent the night tossing and turning, waking up every few minutes, wondering about the condition they'd find Ezra in, and he spent the morning jumping every time the clinic's phone rang. Not that Chris's calling would have changed anything. Chris would have said he's coughing. Then, he would have used his years of training in the medical field to tell Chris to take Ezra to a hospital. Then Ezra would have said, 'Hell would freeze over before he'd step one foot inside a hospital' (if he acted anything like he did the day they met), and they would have ended up here anyway. Still, it would have been nice to know his condition instead of worrying all morning.

"I planned to, but we decided to keep driving once we had him in the truck. Figured you could take care of him." Chris answered as he watched a middle-aged nurse escort their brother to an exam room. Satisfied, Ezra wouldn't attempt talking his way out of the clinic. Chris decided his presence was no longer needed to keep his brother in line. He turned to take a long look at Nathan, searching for signs that would tell him Nathan belonged home, in bed, and not working. Other than his bandaged finger and the uncharacteristic presence of a tie, Nathan looked fine, but he knew that too often looks lied. When they got home, he'd find a way to talk with Nathan in private, or he'd talk to Buck; Buck would know how Nathan was dealing with his attack.

Nathan shifted uncomfortably under Chris's gaze. He wanted to tell Chris he was fine, but could never lie convincingly. If he talked to Chris now, Chris would see his fear, and Chris would react without thinking. He didn't want Chris to go and do something stupid that would land him in jail, so he redirected his attention. "Ezra hasn't been taking his antibiotics. JD found them last night under Ezra's bed. Looks like they rolled under the bed, and Ezra couldn't be bothered to get them. Wish he had been taking them; if he had, he might not have that cough of his." His eyes narrowed as he contemplated Ezra's irresponsible behavior regarding his health. He hoped, if nothing else, his new brothers had inherited their father's intelligence. That gene skipped this younger brother. Ezra was given a typed list of instructions when discharged from the hospital. He knew, because he had stood beside the nurse when she explained the dos and don'ts on the list.

She explained everything on the list. Then she asked if Ezra had any questions.

The fool smiled and said he understood everything and would follow her instructions.

Maybe Ezra possessed a reading disorder. If he had to make an educated guess as to what Ezra had been up to these last few days, he'd bet money on Ezra doing everything he'd been told not to do and had neglected things like taking the antibiotics and resting.

"Nate. Go easy on him," Chris warned. He wasn't born stupid. He knew Nathan had brought up Ezra to divert Chris's attention and not answer any how are you feeling "questions. He also knew that while Nathan succeeded in keeping him from asking questions, he also made himself mad. He knew the look. Nathan was climbing onto his soapbox and preparing a speech. Nathan had best change his attitude. As far as Chris was concerned, he had gone to too much trouble to get Ezra back to let Nathan scare him off. Perhaps he should get Vin to tell Nathan about feral cats.

"Did you hear him breathe? Did you listen to him?" Nathan indignantly retorted. How dare Chris look at him like that! He was not the one who ran Ezra off, and he certainly was not the one who decided not to take his prescribed medicine. If the idiot paid any attention to what he'd been told, he'd be on the road to recovery instead of sitting in the exam room sounding as if he were trying to breathe underwater.

"I've been listening to him all morning," Chris answered with eyes glued to Nathan, willing him to do as instructed. He did not want to get into an argument with Nathan, but he had better not go in and ruin all his hard work.

"If you noticed his breathing, you know he's sick. Had he followed directions, he wouldn't be this ill."

"Nate, I know you. I am telling you to go easy." Chris returned the look Nate gave him, but aware that people were trying to hear what they were saying and hating the thought their business was about to become fodder for the town's gossips, he kept his voice low; "He was planning to disappear. He sold his car. Those fancy clothes of his are gone... Nate, he paid a lot of money to become someone else... He's only here because he's worried about his mother." He didn't know why. As far as he could tell, Maude didn't reciprocate Ezra's concern, but Ezra Standish was prepared to sacrifice a lot to keep his mother safe. Chris scowled, thinking that Nathan better plan on getting over the attitude he was adopting because, frankly, he had a raging headache brought on by too little sleep and too much worry; he was ready to yell at someone. He didn't want that someone to be Nate, but if Nate kept pushing...

Vin made a noise, something between a laugh and a cough, and both brothers turned to him. If it had been under other circumstances and if he had been another man, he might have been intimidated by them, but the two men seemed comical with their twin glares and clenched fists. Flexing his mouth to make sure no hint of a smile was on his face, he turned to his two riled brothers. "Doc, we know he's sick, and even though ya won't get him to admit it, he knows it too."

"Then why didn't you take him to the hospital in Reno?" Nathan hissed out between tightly clenched teeth. Were all of his brothers idiots?

"Yer right, we probably should have taken him to a doctor, but once we got him in the truck, it seemed foolish to stop and give him a chance to rethink coming home to the ranch." There was no doubt in his mind that if Ezra had felt only marginally better, he would have jumped onto the nearest moving train when they picked up his things at the station. Fortunately, he had been struck by a coughing fit, which left him weak and cooperative as they hurried through the station. However, after a few more rounds of coughing, each of which left him gasping for air and weak as a day-old kitten, he agreed to Chris's suggestion that he stop at the clinic to see Nathan before heading out to the ranch.

Nathan raised an eyebrow and swallowed hard; he wouldn't ask. Sometimes the less he knew was better, but he hoped Chris had not simply grabbed Ezra and thrown him in the truck. He didn't think Chris would go so far as to kidnap Ezra, but it was hard for people to stand up to Chris when he had determined a course of action. He sighed, "I'd better go check him out."

"Nate," Chris had seen the questions in his brother's eyes that couldn't hide anything. "He came back because he wanted to find out what happened. I didn't hold a gun to his head."

"Didn't think you had," he lied. It had been a brief image, but it had been there.

"I considered it," Chris admitted with an almost smile.

"I imagine you did. One day, you're going to get into trouble." Nathan warned half-heartedly. Chris would never change; it was his way or his way.

He patted his brother on the back and walked into the exam room feeling like a Christian going in to face the lion.

Chris leaned against the wall as his exhaustion hit him. He had never been one for naps, but he was exhausted, his head felt as though it was considering exploding, and every muscle ached. He wasn't sure if he should blame his discomfort on the horse ride Bucklyn suggested, being trapped in a truck and riding all over the state, the tension caused by worrying about Nate's safety, having to deal with Ezra, or if he ached just because he was acutely tired. Whatever the reason, bed sure was looking like an option. Maybe he could send Buck to the grocery store for a few hours so he could lie down for a bit. If Buck ever caught him napping, he'd never hear the end of it.

He didn't realize he had closed his eyes until he felt Vin's eyes on him. He forced his own eyes open and pushed himself away from the wall. "Let's find Nate's office." If he were going to fall asleep while standing up, he would do it away from curious nurses and patients. He didn't turn around to check, but he knew Tanner was smirking; that did it. Tanner might be a few years younger and have the stamina to handle their travels around the state better than he did, but that did not mean he, Christopher Samuel Larabee, was old.

After a good night's sleep, he would begin doing whatever was necessary to get back into shape, and then he'd teach his brother about running. He'd take him up into the mountains for a little camping trip ... where the air was thin, and the roads were nonexistent, and he'd challenge him to a race back down the mountain. Yeah, it might kill him, but at least he'd die knowing he had wiped that smirk off Vin Tanner's face.



Several things were on the tip of Vin's tongue to say, but he decided Chris probably wouldn't appreciate hearing about how drained he looked. Hell, he probably didn't look any better, and he was used to the long hours they had been keeping. After all, hunting was what he did for a living.

He was a professional bounty hunter and chased down evil men with no one at his side to watch his back. He traveled from one side of Texas to the other, with no one beside him to take a turn behind the wheel, and he survived without too much effort. He sat for days staking out an apartment or house, waiting for his quarry to return with only catnaps from which any noise or change in his environment brought him to full wakefulness, and he still managed to catch his man.

He did those things and never felt as drained as he did now. The only difference he could see was that, in this case, he was dealing with his brothers.

This brother business was complicated, and he hadn't expected that when he moved in at the ranch. At first, when Travis explained the conditions of their father's will, it seemed an easy way to earn more money than he ever dreamed of having. Now, though, he saw it for what it truly was – a trap. The ranch was a beautiful place, and his brothers seemed to be fine men, but this whole setup was a clever trap Landon Larabee designed to tie his sons to each other.

Landon caught Buck long ago. It was obvious from the looks Buck gave Chris and Nathan, as well as the tone he took with them, that he would do what was needed to keep them safe and happy. He would do anything for them, even sacrifice his freedom. The only way Buck would leave his brothers or the ranch was if he were carried off in a pine box.

Nathan thought he had been given his freedom when he left for Alabama, but like a fisherman with a strong fish on the line, Landon allowed Nathan to run with the line and wear himself out before he reeled him in. The bait Landon used to hook Nathan had two hooks in it. One was his love for his brothers. The other was his need to help people. Any man who got up the morning after being nearly hanged to head off to work, rather than disappoint patients, had a serious need to play doctor. Vin didn't know if he should commend his brother for being a selfless man or recommend that he seek professional help. Either way, Nathan was truly trapped.

The mere mention of having a family had JD walking into their father's trap. No fishing line had been needed to reel him in. JD had willingly jumped into the boat. Even though there was the possibility of rough waters with Ezra and with Chris's behavior, there was no chance of the kid leaving.

Did Josiah see the trap? Probably. The question became, did he care? He simply had not seen enough of the man to figure him out.

Ezra recognized the trap for what it was. The twin lures of having family and money may be enticing, but they were not enough to keep him. If they solved the problem with Moore and did not find any real danger to Maude, Ezra would use any excuse he found to leave.

And then there was Chris. He didn't know the entire story behind Chris and his family, and he wouldn't ask, but it was equally obvious that Chris, like his brothers, had sprung his trap. Unlike them, he was fighting it. A person could tell he loved his brothers, but he wasn't staying at the ranch for them. He was staying out of some sense of loyalty to Landon Larabee's wishes. He'd respect his father's wishes and stay the year, but beyond that, Vin doubted if Chris knew what he would be doing. The man was like a wolf gnawing at its leg, trying to get free of the trap. Only, Chris didn't eat at his own flesh and bone; he struck out at those he loved and pushed them away.

And what did he want? He didn't know yet. He liked Chris, liked having him watching his back, and his other brothers seemed like men he wanted to know, but he didn't like the thought that he could be trapped like they were. He had always been his own man. He came and went as he pleased and answered to no one. He had only vague memories, feelings, and impressions of his life before his mother's death. What did he remember of those days? Nothing. What stuck with him were the memories of growing up on his own; those memories were the ones that haunted him and had shaped him into the man he was. These men might be his biological family, but until a few days ago, his only family was Harry. If any thought to ask, he would say he was a loner, always had been, and he didn't know if he wanted to change.

He would keep a careful eye on the trap. He didn't want to spring it and become trapped, too.



Shutting the door behind him, Nathan took a minute to read the chart on the iPad in his hands before looking at his brother; he could hear the effort Ezra took in taking each breath. There wasn't any way he could have gotten to him any sooner, but he wished he had. He'd get X-rays to confirm the pneumonia, but for now, he would talk to Ezra and listen to his chest. Then, he would ask him if he had bounced when he got dropped on his head as a baby; it was the only explanation for such pig-headed stupidity.

He had glanced up from the iPad his nurse had deposited in the chart holder beside exam room two, when out of the corner of his eye, he saw Chris and Vin walk with Ezra into the clinic. He paused before entering the room to watch as Chris walked up to talk to the clinic's receptionist, Mrs. Dawson. All morning, his anger with Chris had grown as he waited for Chris or Vin to call. Deciding to put his anger on the back burner, he took a good look at Ezra as the man gingerly dropped into a chair. Without being able to hear Ezra from his spot in the hallway, he used his eyes and watched as the man struggled to breathe. Quickly, he made his preliminary diagnosis. It wasn't the broken ribs causing Ezra's problems; more than likely, pneumonia had set in. He wanted to put the chart he was holding down and go straight to his brothers, but knowing it would take a few minutes for the LPN to take his brother's vitals, and since he had already opened the door, he went in to treat Mrs. Henderson's cold.

With a forced smile on his face, he took a long, hard look at his brother, comparing the man sitting on the exam table with the man he had taken to the hospital only a few days earlier. He was appalled by the changes he saw. Even beaten, with more bruises than could easily be counted, a punctured lung and broken ribs, the Ezra he had first met with his carefully styled hair and clean-shaven cheeks looked as though he had walked off a GQ page.

Some might have been self-conscious about wearing those expensive, noticeable clothes in this small western town where jeans and cowboy boots were the norm, but not Ezra. This Ezra, the one hunched over with his arms wrapped around his middle, was unkempt; his chestnut hair darkened with sweat and dirt, and his face boasted the beginning of a beard. Gone, too, were the expensive clothes; Nathan helped unpack Ezra's things and knew the man did not own any threadbare, faded-almost-white jeans.

While those changes bothered him, they weren't the ones concerning him. The apparent loss of weight and his sunken eyes were another matter, and unlike the jeans, the dirty hair and unshaven face, those changes could not be ignored. It hadn't been that long since he last saw the man. He shouldn't look this different, and yet Nathan knew, without a doubt, if Ezra had been in a crowd of people walking past him, and if he did not see those green eyes, he would not have recognized him.

"You left your antibiotics behind," he winced at the anger in his voice, knowing Ezra wouldn't hear the concern and would feel as though he were being attacked. It was because he wanted to explain that Ezra looked like hell.

"Well, yes. Ah believe recent studies show today's doctor overprescribes antibiotics, and with the prevalence of antibacterial just about everything, we are creating super germs. When the medical community acts in such a foolhardy manner it becomes imperative that each individual take steps to assure this does not occur." Ezra kept his voice barely above a whisper in an attempt to keep from coughing.

"You're right, some doctors do over-prescribe, and there is legitimate concern we are creating super germs, but that doesn't mean antibiotics don't have a place. The safe way to use antibiotics is to prescribe them when necessary and then for the patient to complete the course of treatment. Now, may I listen to your chest?" Nathan reached towards Ezra with his stethoscope.

Ezra stiffened; Nathan wasn't sure if it was a reaction to Nathan being the one examining him or if he didn't want medical care. He knew he was being overly sensitive, but he couldn't help it; he asked, "I am fully qualified to treat you, but since we are brothers, perhaps you would rather see Dr. Griggs." He knew he was making it a statement, and not a question, and was appalled by the irritation in his voice.

Before he could explain or apologize, Ezra answered, "We may share some genetic material, but we are not related. Ah suppose if Ah need treatment, you will do as well as any othuh."

Ouch! The bantering tone in his voice, as he tried to come up with an excuse for not taking his antibiotics, was gone, replaced with a practiced disinterest. Ezra would let him examine him, but only because he was too sick to do otherwise.



"I admit it." Nathan slammed his office door shut and glared at the men who made themselves at home. "The man makes me furious." He glanced at Chris, sitting behind his desk, flipping through the latest JAMA. He didn't like other people sitting behind his desk, but making Chris move wasn't worth the effort; he plopped down into the chair next to the one Vin made his own.

"What's he done to rile ya?" Vin asked, not bothering to take his feet off of Nathan's desk, nor did he bother to remove the hat he had pulled down low on his face to shield his eyes from the light streaming in through the window.

Nathan didn't immediately respond. It was hard to pinpoint why Ezra infuriated him. Vin wanted him to say Ezra makes me mad because ... and he had nothing with which to end that statement. "He's sick."

"So, you get mad at people who are sick," Vin teased.

"Sometimes."

Chris put the journal down and asked, "How bad is he?"

"He's been wrapping his ribs and not bothering to do any of the deep breathing exercises he was told to do. Consequently, he has developed pneumonia."

"How bad is it?" Chris persisted. He wanted all the information up front, so he'd know what it was they were dealing with. Years ago, he had contracted walking pneumonia, and it had mainly been a nuisance rather than a source of concern. Considering the way Nathan was acting, Ezra's pneumonia was more serious than his had been.

"It's bad. On top of the pneumonia, he's dehydrated, and he wasn't sure when he'd last eaten... Sunday lunch, he thinks."

"Does he need to be in the hospital?" Chris asked, worried. He hadn't gone to the trouble of bringing Ezra back, only to watch him get sick and die. Sometimes, it didn't matter what a man wanted; you focused on what he needed.

"I'd feel better if he was hospitalized, but he refuses to go," Nathan explained. Chris warned him to go easy on Ezra, and he had been right to do so. Calling Ezra stubborn in his refusal to go to the hospital would be short-changing the man's convoluted argument against hospitalization. Plainly, the thought of being in the hospital terrified the man. Some people were like that, and when they were, you tried to respect their wishes. This was important to remember if you expected them to work with you on getting well.

"Thought you had some magic words," Chris said, remembering how Nathan got Ezra to the hospital the first time.

"He is sick, Chris and I wish he were in the hospital getting IV antibiotics and fluids, but I am not sure being in the hospital is what he needs right now. He's scared of doctors... some people are... I told him as long as he followed my every instruction, and as long as he didn't get worse, I would treat him at home."

"Nathan! If he needs to go to the hospital, he goes." Chris stood up, knocking his chair into the wall. This was insane. He told Nathan to go easy on Ezra, but he didn't mean for him to capitulate. Nathan was worrying him with his talk of IVs and dehydration. If Nathan didn't make Ezra mind, he would.

"Chris, I'm serious about this, so listen up. Ezra is very sick. But he is not at the point where being in the hospital is imperative. We need to consider his feelings. Saying he's scared of being in the hospital is an understatement. I guarantee you that if we make him go to the hospital, he will do everything he can think of to get out, and if he disappears again. In his shape... he might not make it."

"Then, I reckon we need to get him to the ranch. What should we be doing fer him?" Vin asked. As far as he was concerned, the issue was settled. Nathan read Ezra correctly. The man would spend all of his energy finding a way to get out of the hospital. He would not concentrate on getting well. He'd be better off at the ranch.

Chris righted his chair and sat back down, burying his head in his hands. He had a raging headache. He wanted to blame it on someone, but he wasn't sure who was at fault, Nathan or Ezra. Probably both, and while he was at it, he might as well blame Vin, too.

Vin frowned. He felt Chris lump him in with Nathan and Ezra. What had he done?

