



The Next Steps

Rooting Out Evil

Part 3 of the Seven Brothers Saga



Saying he was going to bed had been the easiest part of the evening. Hearing from the father, he didn't know, was emotionally draining. He could not begin to imagine what his brothers, who knew the man, were going through. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he removed his shoes and tossed them into the closet. "Remembering someone could be listening to him, although why anyone would listen to him snore was beyond his ability to understand, he kept his conversation with the dog casual and uninformative. "You know, we should have brought you back a bone. I blame Chris; he worries that you will bury it in the furniture. Tomorrow, I will get you a rawhide bone and another toy."

Digging his fingers into Jack's nape, he massaged the dog. Listening to the gentle thumping of the dog's tail on the wood floor, Josiah let his mind drift back to when he came home from a stress-filled day of dealing with the problems of others. "Nancy has magic fingers. When she massaged my neck, all the cares of my day would fall away."

He stopped his massage and fell back onto the bed. Staring up at the ceiling, he sifted through memories until he came to his recent visit to see Hannah and then to the mental health clinic. His mad dash, not telling anyone where he was heading or when he would return, was precipitated by a phone call from Sister Anna Marie. The nun, who cared for his sister, said, 'She is having a bad time of it.' It was code meaning 'she is sitting in her closet, hiding and screaming when anyone enters her room. By the time he reached the abbey, Hannah had exhausted herself and was curled up in a fetal position under three blankets, shielding herself from the horrors which still haunted her.

He spent the next two days reading to her or sitting at her side, watching her draw surprisingly sophisticated and detailed pictures of her world. Only when the pictures morphed from the terrors of her memories into peaceful ones of her daily life at the abbey did Josiah feel comfortable in declaring this episode over. He spent time with his sister, discussing his current situation and what living hours away from her meant to her well-being.

Deciding what was best for Hannah was the crux of his problems. No matter what Landon Larabee said or what his brothers said, Hannah's welfare remained his primary concern. He'd give up the money without a second thought if his living closer to Hannah made a difference, but leaving the ranch meant giving up the chance to get to know his brothers. With Nancy no longer in his life, he was alone, and he hated the feeling. If he thought or if the Sisters thought his presence could keep Hannah grounded in the here and now, it would be a no-brainer. He'd forgo the money and find a job, even a menial, minimum wage job that paid only enough to keep a roof over his head and a little food in his belly, if it would make a difference.

He tried to tell Sister Anna Marie about his dilemma. However, after explaining the situation and listening to her response, he remained unsure if her advice to 'Go get to know your brothers' was because she felt his presence made little difference to Hannah or because she was sympathetic to his desire to know the other family members. In the end, it didn't matter what the Sister counseled; the situation with Hannah was his problem to tackle and his decision to make. No matter what his father had said about bringing Hannah to the ranch, and his brothers seemed interested in meeting her, she remained his responsibility. On the other hand, as Sister Anna Marie had pointed out, what would happen to Hannah if something happened to him? Her financial needs were taken care of, and even if they weren't, the Sisters would never abandon her. However, if he was no longer around to remember to send her Christmas and birthday presents, would they if he did not do his part and make Hannah as important to them as she was to him? If something happened to him, who would come to visit Hannah on her good days and not just show up on her bad ones? It was a gentle rebuke, coming from Sister Anna Marie; how could it be anything but gentle? However, it was a rebuke. He had missed spending time with Hannah at Christmas, and even before then, he had never included Nancy on any of his infrequent visits.

It didn't matter what he decided about living at the ranch; he needed to visit more often.

He got up off the bed to change into the T-shirt and sweatpants he wore at night. Then he picked up his shoes and put them in the closet, firmly shut the closet's door; he didn't want to risk a repeat of the house slippers episode in which he had opened his eyes to see the remnants of his slippers hanging from Jack's mouth. He climbed back into bed, turned off the lamp, and closed his eyes, willing sleep to take him.

Lying in bed, looking only at the backside of his eyelids, Josiah excoriated himself for his decision to drop by the clinic on his way back to the ranch. He told himself that he only wanted to see how Nancy was faring, but in the black of night, he tried his hand at speaking the truth. 'I wanted to see that she felt as alone and as miserable as I do.' Sitting in his car in a parking space that allowed him to see her as she exited the building for lunch, he waited with the bottle of bourbon he had picked up earlier that morning. He had told himself he would not drink it, but he held the neck of the bottle in a death's grip. Repeated reminders that he could not have a drunk driving offense on his record if he planned to open a clinic in Four Corners kept him from opening it.

At 12:02, Nancy exited the building with a group of friends. Witnessing her smile as she shared something with her companions hurt; it had been a long time since she had been relaxed enough to smile and laugh like she was at that moment. Getting her ex-husband and then him out of her life had

done miracles, erasing the tension he had never recognized from her face. He released his grip on the bottle; fortunately, it did not break when it hit the floorboard. Something alerted her to his presence, and her visibly frightened reaction to seeing him broke his heart. He picked up the bottle, put it in the passenger seat, started his car, and drove away before he was forced to witness her retreating into the safety of the clinic. He stopped several miles away and threw the bottle into an apartment building's garbage bin, waiting only long enough to hear the shattering of glass.

Josiah sat up in bed and turned on the lamp; his thoughts were dark, and he needed light to counter them. He grabbed the bottle of water and sat on the edge of the bed, ripping the label into pieces as he debated drinking it. He had grabbed the bottle from the fridge on the way to bed. He told himself that he often got thirsty in the middle of the night, and having it on the nightstand would save him a trip to the kitchen in the middle of the night. He reluctantly admitted to himself that having the water in his room would not give him an excuse to go to the kitchen and pick up a bottle of beer instead. One beer would lead to him drinking all they had. If he did that, he would expose his brothers to his inner monster. He didn't want to do that; he had to keep it contained... at least until he could figure out what it looked like.

He wanted to call Nancy and ask, but instinctively knew she had changed her number. Even though he knew in his heart she had, he did not want to dial it and hear that the number he had called was no longer in service. The only thing he felt sure had not happened that night was that he had not hit her. If he had, her children would not have merely moved her out of his home, but would have had him arrested. He wanted to reassure Nancy and her children that he was not like her ex. He didn't hit women, but at one time, Hank had probably made the same claim. Undoubtedly, he had said or done something to remind her of the man who beat her, and apologized the next morning, saying it would never happen again, but it had. He did not ever want to be compared to the man, but he had said or done something to trigger her fight-or-flight reflex.

He opened the water and drained it, hoping it would not mean he would wake up in the middle of the night. The bathroom was too close to the kitchen for a night filled with memories. Picking up the scraps of the label from the floor, he tossed them and the bottle into the waste can beside his desk. He dropped it, and the thud it made had him hoping he did not wake Ezra in his room across the hall.

Speaking of Ezra, in his absence, something had changed. Ezra had followed him into the library, and he felt him shooting daggers into his back when he claimed the chair behind the desk as his own. Denied the barrier of a desk he could put between him and his brothers, Ezra chose the chair next to the French doors, offering him a means to escape. JD and Chris had both noticed Ezra's move, and while they had not commented on it, both men had been keenly aware of Ezra's reactions to Landon's video. When they left, instead of relegating the two shortest members of their family to the back seat of the Cadillac, Chris had herded Ezra to his truck. Vin had prepared to climb in, but JD had stepped in front of Vin, saying he would ride with Chris and Ezra. To Josiah's surprise, Vin had acquiesced. He had been listening to Nathan's enthusiastic description of the food Miss Evie's had served, but he had caught the looks of approval both Buck and Vin gave Chris.

He had missed something and wished he knew what it was.



Knowing he risked waking his brothers, Chris silently padded down the stairs, through the living room, and headed to the library. After quietly closing the door, he went to sit at the desk on the far side of the room- the desk they all considered their father's. His new brother did not share the memories of his father sitting at the desk reading, but walking into the library, you could not help but feel Landon Larabee's presence. From the photographs on the wall to the disorganization of the books on the shelves lining the wall, his father's personality permeated the room. It could still be felt, even after all the months since his death. Chris crossed the room and sat in the surprisingly comfortable chair. Pulling open the drawer his father mentioned in the video, he began looking through the files.

The file on their mothers' deaths was no longer in the drawer. Either his father had removed it, the murderer had returned and removed it, or one of his brothers had done so. He could not imagine any of his brothers finding it and not sharing it with the rest of them; he ruled them out. He also didn't see his

father changing where he had left it, without saying he had in the video. That left the murderer, but why take one file and then come back for the other? It didn't make sense.

Neither did Ella Gaines place in the middle of this. They had been an item for a few months, twenty years ago. They had gone their separate ways, and he had not heard from her since the day she had walked out of his dorm room. He focused on his studies and had forgotten all about her until recently. From the very little he learned from her about her life since their time together, she had married, and now she was a widow.

On the other hand, for her to live in Elko and by happenstance, run into both his father and Buck in Four Corners, then, for her to need stitches for a cut on her arm and by chance bump into Nathan at the hospital, stretched credulity. Even if she was tracking their movements, her meeting with his father and then his brothers felt like coincidences. Fate, if you will. On the other hand, what she had said to them seemed...rehearsed.

In the quiet, Chris envisioned the numerous times he had sat at the desk working on homework, with his father standing behind him, guiding him as he solved difficult math problems or wrote an essay on the causes of the Great Depression. His father never did his work for him, but suggested ways to improve on it. He needed his father's counsel tonight. "Dad, if you are somewhere listening in, I need help." Remembering the new rules of the subjects on which he and his brothers could safely speak...cows, horses, fences, and barn cleaning, he began using his inner voice to talk to his father. "Dad, I think you and Vin are wrong about Ella. She has been living at her place in Elko for several years now. If she killed Sarah and Adam to be with me, why has she waited so long to make her presence known?"

Hearing no immediate answer from his father, Chris took out a notepad and pen from his father's desk. "You always wrote your problems down, Dad. I remember you would make a chart and write the pros and cons of any big decision you made. I guess since you have more money than most, it worked for you. But Dad, this is more important than money. This is about people's lives. It looks as though whoever murdered my wife and son, killed Frank Holland, and you, too, Dad. If Ella is responsible, I want her ass rotting in jail for the rest of her life. No, I want her dead...burned beyond recognition.

Chris thought for a minute and then began scribbling down questions and possible means of obtaining answers. After a few minutes of furious writing. He put his pen down and read his list. He had more questions, so very many more, but this would give him a place to start, and he had answered his question about Ella. He pushed his chair back so he could stand up when the library door opened. Ezra, wearing the thick blue robe he favored when wearing his pajamas, blinked rapidly, momentarily blinded by the unexpected lights Chris had turned on in the library.

"Sorry, I woke you," Chris apologized.

"You didn't. Ah was unable to sleep. Am Ah disturbing you?" Ezra waited by the door until Chris shook his head no, then walked across the room to the desk at which Chris was seated, and, needing to know if his brother had been sincere when he insisted he wanted to be friends, he tested the waters. "What is keeping you up?"

"Have a seat. I am making a to-do list. With Vin and Buck going to look at dogs on Tuesday morning, we are going to be shorthanded. So, I made a list of things we need to get done in the next few days." Knowing Ezra worried about whether Chris wanted him included when making family decisions, he pushed the paper he had been working on towards his brother. "See if you can think of anything we need to do that I missed.

Ezra lifted an eyebrow when he saw the list. "Looks like you plan for us to work very hard while Buck and Vin get to play with dogs." He picked up the pen Chris had been using and added a comment. He pushed the paper back, towards Chris, saying, "Ah like dogs. Next time they go on a field trip, Ah want to go."

Chris read the addition his brother had made, thought about how to word his response so that he would get his meaning across to Ezra without alerting any potential listeners. "Your idea of taking the afternoon off to go fishing will not happen...No, do not look at me like that. Let me rephrase that. There is not a good place for fishing around here, and I don't like fishing a whole heck of a lot. It is boring, sitting around on a bank, hoping some Redband trout takes a bite out of your bait. However, while it

would be satisfying to have a whole passel of them to fry up, they are cunning. I saw them outsmart Dad many times. The fish would take the bait off the hook and swim away without Dad even knowing it was nibbling on the worm. When... and if we go fishing, we go better prepared than Dad was. Understand what I am saying? I am not saying no, but I think we need to talk around and find a place where the trout are not so wily.

"In a few months, we will be inundated with board meetings. It is probably good that we have been prohibited from working with any part of Larabee Holdings. We will all be busy then. If we plan to have a family vacation, we need to have it soon. Go somewhere fun."

"Vegas

"Vegas works for me. Buck will enjoy it. Nate will, too, once we get him there. We will probably have to hog tie him and strap him to the top of the car to get him to leave the clinic, but he spends too many hours taking care of other people. We need to make sure he remembers to take care of himself. Do you think your mother will join us if we go to Vegas? She is family."

"Ah will reach out to her and ask. If she agrees to meet us in Vegas, we can't mention Larabee Holdings, or she will do her absolute best to finagle a way to siphon the money from those accounts into hers." Ezra thought for a moment. "Ah will tell her that there is a lucrative investment opportunity; she will show."

"Good, we will talk to everyone tomorrow and see what they think. Now, back to the list. I like your second suggestion of sleeping in, but this is a working ranch, and we will need to plan our snoozefest carefully so the critters don't suffer because we want an extra hour of sleep. Nathan, being a doctor, may not be able to participate. He has to get up early and see his patients at the hospital before he starts work at the clinic."

"Ah understand, but it would be a shame if he didn't have a day he could hit the snooze button a few times."

"I am sure he would enjoy that very much. When he was a kid, he had a hard time waking up. He would put a pillow over his head and ignore Dad calling him to breakfast."

Ezra snorted. "Ah, find that hard to believe. Nathan is too dedicated to ignore an alarm when patients are waiting to be seen."

"His wanting to sleep in is the honest truth. Dad took to filling a tumbler with cold water and a couple of ice cubes in the morning when he started breakfast and letting it sit on the counter while he cooked the bacon. When he started cracking the eggs, he'd call Nathan. If he didn't hear Nathan moving by the time he had the eggs beaten and ready for the pan, he'd snatch that tumbler off the counter and head to Nathan's room. You could hear Nathan from anywhere in the house when Dad poured the water on him."

Ezra laughed, "Really?"

"It took Dad dumping that ice-cold water on him for three days running to break Nathan of sleeping when there were things that needed to be done."

"And he never slept in after that?"

"He tried on occasions, but Dad used intermittent reinforcement to cure him. Now, go on back to bed, we have an early day of it and we don't want to give Nathan any reason to use Dad's curse on us."

"Mah alarm is already set," Ezra assured Chris as he headed to the door before Chris turned off the lights. He'd be sure in the morning that Chris destroyed the list before he left the house. They could not risk an intruder finding it.

Problems	Solutions
Is the house bugged?	Vin and Buck will get the equent to find out.
If it is, should we remove the bugs?	If we remove them, we can talk and plan freely, but the person(s) listening will know we are aware of them.
Is there more than one person listening to us?	???  We know someone there who may help
Where do we meet with Maude? We need a safe place where we cannot be observed or overheard.	In state- Vegas, Reno, Carson City? Out of State- Sacramento?
How do I find out if Ella is involved with the murder of my family?	I can keep seeing her and see if she lets anything slip, or I can stop seeing her and see how she reacts.
If I find out Ella killed Sarah and Adam, what do I do?	Simple, I kill her.
If I can think about killing Ella, do I really love her?	I knew I loved Sarah the moment I saw her. If I can think of killing her, then obviously I don't love her.
If it is Ella, how do we discover if she has a partner, and if so, how do we find who it is?	Set a trap. How? <i>If the hospital security guard is involved and if he is interested in me, use me as bait.</i>
What excuse can we give people for going somewhere to talk with Maude?	<i>Let everyone know that all seven of us have been asked to attend a board meeting for Larabee Holdings.</i>

Vin kept watch as Buck turned onto the street he pointed to. He hoped he had managed to keep up his share of the chatter, but doubted it. He was thoroughly pissed about the flat tire on his truck. It was too dark to examine the tire before they left, but he was willing to bet someone had slashed it so they would be forced to take Buck's truck. He tried not to let it show that he hated being in the passenger seat. He let out a sigh of relief when Buck found a parking place and pulled in. He was unsure which was worse, riding with a tired, cranky Chris or an energetic Buck talking nonstop. What

really troubled him was watching what he said in case they were being spied on. "We gonna walk or catch a cab?" Vin asked his brother, crossing his fingers that Buck would say walk. Sitting in the truck's cab as Buck sped down the interstate for hours made his back ache. He needed to run, but he would settle for a quick-paced walk.

Buck considered Vin's question before answering. He was unfamiliar with the area and felt that getting a cab would mean they had found Mr. Botello's casino and did not aimlessly wander in circles, but looking at Vin rubbing his back made him opt for the walk. "We can walk, but only if you promise you can get us there without getting us lost."

Vin glared at his brother, trying to decide if he should be insulted. Deciding Buck did not know him well enough to know his secret superhero power, he explained, "I read my Las Vegas map last night."

Buck made a show of pulling his gloves from his coat's pockets and donning them as he considered Vin's subtle challenge not to doubt his ability to decipher a map. He started walking, crossing his fingers, hoping Vin could get them to the casino and, more importantly, return them to the truck. "Come on. Let's get it on with, MacDuff."

Pleased he didn't need to explain that while he struggled with reading words, he never misread a map, Vin matched Buck's stride, walking by his side. Inside, he was wondering who the heck MacDuff was. The easy way the quote, he assumed it was a quote, rolled off of Buck's tongue and made it something he needed to look up.

After a few minutes of walking and dodging the occasional pedestrian braving the cold, Buck pulled his phone out to check the time. "We have a few minutes before we check in with Chris. Want to get something to eat?"

"Must admit I am a bit famished." Vin agreed and began scanning both sides of the street for a restaurant providing breakfast. He wanted three eggs over easy, sausage, bacon, and a slice of country ham. He wanted a bowl of grits soaking with butter and craved fluffy biscuits slathered in apple butter. He especially wanted to eat it without Chris Larabee's incredulous stare. He wanted a real Southern breakfast; he hadn't had one since moving to the ranch. Nathan and Ezra agreed grits were essential for a good breakfast, but none of their brothers cooked them properly.

A few minutes later, seated in a noisy restaurant, they began discussing their plans to meet with Botello. A waitress refilled their coffee cups and assured them their orders would be out shortly. Buck smiled at the woman, saying, "Thank you, sweetheart." Vin watched, amused, as the woman blushed when Buck's laser-focused eyes and killer smile were directed towards her. When she broke eye contact with his brother and proceeded to another table, Vin asked, "How often do ya come here?"

"Here or Vegas?" Buck joked as he scanned the restaurant. He wasn't sure who he was looking for, but he knew everyone living in Four Corners and most people living in Eagle Bend, but learning that someone may be listening to their conversations, any familiar face would be concerning. Not seeing anyone he recognized, he relaxed slightly.

"Vegas," Vin noticed Buck's examination of the restaurant's patrons. Good! Buck was taking the situation seriously; his brother had been quiet on the drive down, keeping his eyes on the road in front of them and searching the mirrors for evidence of someone following behind them. He had done the same walking down the street, occasionally stopping to look in a storefront, not to look at the displayed merchandise, but taking the opportunity to look at the people behind them. He expected that kind of behavior from Chris and was pleasantly surprised to see Buck exhibiting the same paranoid behavior they all needed to practice until they found the people responsible for the multiple deaths in their family.

Satisfied no one he knew was within earshot Buck answered, "You would think, with all the beautiful women in this town, I would be here every chance I got. I came here quite a few times when I was in college," he paused, and shaking his head at the memory of his younger self, he continued. "You would also think that as much as I like to play cards and as much as I am drawn to beautiful women, I would spend every waking moment in town, but the older I got, the less I wanted to come."

"Why?"

"First of all, beautiful women can be found everywhere, and I don't need to drive down here to find... companionship. Secondly, I like to play cards, but when I play, I like to think I have a chance of

winning. I am a decent player when I play with some good ole boys back home, but I am not Ezra.” He turned to the waitress as she put their breakfast on the table. “Thank you, ma’am.”

When she was out of earshot, he asked, “So, how do we get hold of Botello. He did say to call him when we arrived.”

“Well, Bucklyn, in a perfect world, we would, but how certain are you that our phones are safe to use. It’s one thing to call Chris to say we made it to Vegas and are plannin’ on takin’ in some sights before goin’ to look at the dogs. It is somethin’ different to call Botello and risk our plans being discovered before we can put anythin’ in place.”

“I understand that, Vincent, but we can’t keep him waiting for us. Not when we are the ones asking for a favor.”

Vin leaned back in his chair to think, taking care to keep all four chair legs on the floor; their efforts to be sneaky would be futile if he made the front-page news after tipping his chair over and breaking his arm. Chewing on a piece of bacon, he considered various scenarios before settling on one. “Think you can sweet-talk our waitress into letting us use her phone?” Knowing Buck would see that as a challenge, he pulled his phone out of his pocket and began searching for the phone number to Botello’s office.

Fifteen minutes later, their waitress thanked them for the tip Buck handed her when he returned her phone, and they headed out of the restaurant to another restaurant so they could surreptitiously meet with Tommy Botello. Vin did not object when Buck flagged down a cab. The man suggested they meet somewhere away from his casino and had named a restaurant where they could have a private room in which to talk.



JD sat beside Josiah in his Ford Explorer, thinking that while he did not know much about cars, the Explorer needed maintenance. Josiah had bragged he worked on the car, but he wasn’t convinced Josiah knew what he was doing. It had taken Josiah pulling out his battery jump starter before he could get the engine to turn over, and while waiting for Josiah to get the car running, he had taken a closer look at the tires. They were not threadbare, but it was becoming a close thing. He almost said something about them and would have if it had been Buck sitting behind the driver’s steering wheel, but Josiah was as close to grumpy as he had ever seen the man. Every attempt to start a conversation had been met with silence, so he joined him, and after thanking Josiah for taking him to Ely, he kept his eyes on the road.

After returning from their so-called dinner party, he and Ezra had escaped to the barn and had begun shopping. Ezra typed in the list of what they needed while he chattered to the cats who kept trying to supervise their work. When he finished adding things to the Cart, Ezra swapped his laptop for a cat so JD could review the list. Under other circumstances, JD would have been tempted to give the items in the cart a cursory look and say, ‘It looks good.’ These were not normal circumstances, so he took his time. He wasn’t familiar with the software Ezra had included, but he had helped enough of his friends build computers to recognize Ezra had chosen quality components.

Ezra had eschewed the brand names for the components if he considered a lesser-known part a better choice. Not only did he know the brands, but he also knew what they should cost. Ezra had explained in low whispers why he preferred one brand over another. As he walked to the barn with Ezra, he confessed that although he had participated in his high school computer club’s building of the ‘perfect computer that was to be auctioned off to fund the club, and helped friends in college build theirs, he had only built one by himself. Hearing that, Ezra shared that even though he liked to read about the latest developments in technology, he would be more comfortable if JD built the thing.

That morning, he had climbed into the passenger seat armed with several topics on which they could safely speak. Speaking of the newly born foal, which he and Chris had watched being born, had fallen on deaf ears. He put talking about the newborn filly on the back burner and tried talking about the dogs, Buck and Vin were (supposedly) going to Vegas to purchase. He tried to tell Josiah how much fun Jack was going to have with new pals running around. Josiah grunted, but did not do his part in keeping the conversation going.

He tried talking about the cover story they had chosen to explain their trip to Elko. "I know it is old school to go to a store to buy games, but I like looking at them. Back in Boston, there was a little store near where I lived where you could go in and try the games before shelling out any money."

Josiah gave him a look that said he was not following JD.

JD took that as an opportunity to share what he knew. For thirty minutes, he talked, but Josiah remained focused on the road and his thoughts. JD wondered if he was thinking about his sister. He couldn't ask Josiah about her because he didn't want to be the one to let it slip that there was one more Larabee, but he was curious. Later, when the bad guy was behind bars, he would sit with Josiah and ask about her.

Back when he was in the seventh grade, he had a classmate who had Down Syndrome. He had been embarrassed when his teacher had placed Paul in his group when his class went to the Museum of Science to tour the dinosaur exhibit. He was too polite to say it out loud, but he figured she had put Paul in with the geeks, because his other classmates would either ignore him or bully him. He expected he would have to dumb down the information about each part of the exhibit, but the dumbest kid in school spent their time touring the museum, sharing an incredible wealth of knowledge with the members of his group. By the time his group reached the Brontosaurus exhibit, many classmates were listening to Paul speak, asking him questions.

After that day, Paul joined the geek lunch table. He didn't contribute to most of their conversations, but his happiness at being included and having friends was contagious, and JD was proud to count Paul as a friend. When Paul's father took a job in Minneapolis, his mother stopped by to thank him for helping give Paul such a wonderful year.

He hoped he would have a chance to be Hannah's friend, too.

They needed to catch the killer or killers soon. JD kept his eyes on the road behind them.



Lev Reubens watched attentively as his boss chatted amiably with Kevin Hernandez, the owner of Kevin's Taqueria. The restaurant, with its sunset-orange walls, carved and painted furniture, and the small fountain in the corner near the counter stacked with menus, resembled many Mexican restaurants he had visited. Mr. Botello liked coming to Kevin's for the food and, more importantly, for the private backroom, which he used to talk without risking being overheard. Even though Mr. Botello trusted Mr. Hernandez not to share anything said in that room, Lev felt better sweeping the room himself.

Upon finalizing the report concerning the risks associated with interacting with Timothy Moore, he took it upon himself to attend the meetings held by Mr. Botello with Lou Simms. These seven Larabee brothers, because, if for no other reason than they were sons of Landon Larabee, were bound to become players in Nevada's business world. His first loyalty was to Mr. Botello, but if he planned to manage a casino of his own one day, it wouldn't hurt to know these men.

"Have you eaten, Mr. Reubens?" Mr. Botello finished his conversation with Mr. Hernandez and walked to his security guard.

"If you don't mind, Sir, I will eat after the meeting is over."

Tommy Botello nodded his approval at Reubens' reply and clapped him on his shoulder as he passed the man, heading into the room. Mr. Reubens stayed near the backroom door and waited for the arrival of the two brothers.

He didn't have long to wait. Recognizing the men, more from their attitude than from their photographs as they strode into the cantina, pausing momentarily to let their eyes adjust to the lighting, they exuded confidence. He met them with his hand outstretched in greeting. "Mr. Wilmington, Mr. Tanner," he shook each man's hand as he said their name. "I am Mr. Botello's assistant, Lev Reubens. Please come with me." Lev quickly led the brothers to the backroom without giving them a chance to ask questions. Once they were in, he stood next to the door, surveilling the dining room for any potential disturbance.



Sitting at a desk in the doctor's on-call room, Nathan worked on Mr. Johnson's discharge note. He typically updated his patients' charts while standing at the nurses' station, but found himself preoccupied with thoughts concerning yesterday's so-called dinner. Those thoughts, combined with the

persistent noise of nurses' chatter, turned what should have been a routine task into a challenge. He found himself rewriting the same sentences, misspelling words, and dropping in words such as murder. Deciding he would have more luck working in a quieter environment, he retreated to the on-call room. Rereading what he wrote, he decided that too much of it bordered on the incoherent and vigorously used the delete button to erase the incomprehensible nonsense he had spent the morning writing.

He stood up, stretched, and walked to the vending machine searching for the highest caffeine drink he saw. Settling on a Diet Coke, he returned to the waiting chart. Finishing it, he sent his orders to the nurses' desk and sat back in his chair, letting his mind run wild as he tried to process the things his father said.

He wished either Buck or Chris were there to talk with, but Buck was on a mission with Vin, and Chris and the rest of his brothers were busy pretending to the outside world everything was normal, while knowing 'normal' had long since ceased to exist. He spent the nights since seeing the tape, reviewing everything his father had said as he waited for sleep to take him; the more he thought, the more sure he was that the house was bugged. It was worse than that. His father said he had the jitters, not a particularly scientific term, but an extremely accurate one.

He replayed the last tape segment of his father's hand shaking as he held the coffee cup. His father never got shaky. He had not shaken the time the new stallion kicked him and broke his arm in two places; he had not only been steady and calm, but he also spent the car ride to the hospital correcting fourteen-year-old Chris's driving. He had been as white as the proverbial sheet when he brought Buck home the day Miss Rosie was killed, but he had not been shaky. According to Buck, his father had been crying the night of the fire, but had managed to stay calm enough to thank the men and boys who had arrived to help with the fire, and remained calm when he asked Buck to get Chris out of there. If he took time to think about it, he was sure he could easily recall a dozen or more times in which his father remained calm when those around him were falling apart.

And blaming it on the coffee... his father liked to tell the story of the times when he went to visit his grandfather and the older man gave him coffee to drink so they could enjoy the warmth of the coffee before going out to check on the critters; his dad said he had been five or six at the time. Coffee was his preferred beverage from early morning to late evening, more so than beer, water, or soda. Landon Larabee had a cup of coffee in his hand.

It hit him. There had been something in the coffee his father drank as he filmed the last segment of his talk with his sons. He had filled his thermos with the same coffee. Darn, he wished he could call Chris and Buck to verify with them, but there had been no remnants of coffee in the pot when they came home from the hospital. Even if he had drunk one cup and poured three into a thermos, the way his dad made coffee was by the potful. There should have been a cup left in the pot. Instead, the pot was clean, as was the filter. His dad was notorious for unplugging the coffee maker when he was out working, but he would come in at lunch and pour a cup of the cold coffee into a cup and nuke it in the microwave until it was close to boiling. 'Waste not, want not,' he would explain to his sons who wanted freshly brewed coffee.

The three of them had come in exhausted from the events at the hospital. They should have gone to bed and tried to get some sleep, but none of them had wanted to be alone in their rooms, so they had sat at the table. Looking at the streaks of egg yolk on the plate on the table had forced him to get up and begin cleaning the newly redecorated kitchen. He had noticed the house's renovations, but Buck had not explained. Neither he nor Chris had asked. Closing his eyes, he forced himself to remember that night.

He stood up and began cleaning when Chris said there were calls to be made. He ignored his brothers as they made the list and Buck made the calls. He only had the plate, the pan, a fork, and a spatula. Where was his father's coffee mug? If his father had bothered washing it, he would have washed the other dishes. Mentally, he retraced his steps...He had seen the clean pot and remembered thinking he had best open the basket to remove the filter and used coffee grounds; his father typically neglected to do that until he was ready to make a fresh pot.

Focusing on keeping it together, he had missed that. What else had he missed? He sat up straight in the chair. He hadn't exactly missed it because until the other night, he hadn't known it was important. He had cleaned the dirty dishes, and there had been no mug. There hadn't been a thermos

either. Buck had driven Chris and him into town the next morning to Spencer's Funeral Home to make arrangements. The funeral had been delayed until the autopsy was completed, but that morning, they sat with Myron Spencer and made decisions. Afterwards, he drove Dad's Cadillac back to the ranch...the immaculate Cadillac did not have a thermos in it. It didn't have a thermos, a Stanley cup, a kitchen mug, or a paper cup from McDonald's.

There was something else he needed to remember, but what? He needed to walk, but the room, with the bed on one wall, was too small for pacing, and he did not want to go into the hall where a nurse would see him and ask him a question. He needed to stay where he was, but he had too much energy. He needed to burn some of it off in the hopes the fog enveloping his memory would likewise be burned away. He dropped to his knees and began doing push-ups. Mindless push-ups kept his body busy as he focused on counting the number of push-ups he had done and not on trying to remember. He stopped when he reached seventy-three; he had remembered three things.

That night, with his need to do something, he had scrubbed the counters, table, and stove. He opened up the refrigerator and pulled out a couple of containers he deemed old enough to toss, and then he opened the freezer, thinking he could defrost it, but the new refrigerator had no ice buildup, and he had reluctantly shut the door. He had desperately wanted to do something, but could not physically make himself leave the kitchen with his brothers sitting at the table. He had tossed the containers into the empty garbage can and took a seat next to Buck, listening as he called the people who had been his father's friends.

The things he had not noticed that painful night were that there was no open bag of coffee in the freezer or the refrigerator. Dad swore that keeping the coffee in the freezer made it last longer. There had not been an empty coffee bag or can in the garbage, just as there had been no used coffee grounds at the bottom of the garbage bag. His dad had used the last of the opened coffee because Buck had to open a new container the next morning. There were no used coffee grounds, used filter, thermos, or dirty mug. What happened to the coffee his father spoke of making, the coffee he was drinking in front of the camera that last morning?

He needed to talk with his brothers. Though his fingers were wrapped around his phone, itching to dial numbers, he restrained himself. He wasn't sure how easily cell phones could be monitored, but in case his phone was hacked, he needed to say something innocuous that his brothers could decipher. Following him to his car that morning and standing in the empty yard with the cold wind blowing, making a lie of Saturday's promise of spring, Chris confessed he and Ezra had used code to talk Saturday night. He couldn't think of anything he could say that would convey his discoveries that his brothers would understand while keeping the man listening to them in the dark.

He longed to share what he remembered, but he couldn't risk someone realizing he remembered his father had coffee that morning. That coffee had been laced with something. That something had sent his father to the hospital and ultimately to his death. He doubted they would find anything if they had a new autopsy done on their father; a person who was smart enough to poison the coffee his father drank and clean up after himself would not leave many clues for them to discover.

Laying his cell phone on the desk, he picked up the black hospital phone used by staff to communicate. For a minute, he toyed with the idea of using the hospital's phone to call Raine, but he put the receiver back in the cradle. Chris was right. Until they figured out what the hell was going on, they needed to keep the outsiders out. It didn't matter how much he missed talking with her; he needed to keep her safe. He had missed bumping into her yesterday at the clinic, but he would see her. her later that morning. He would say something about having to deal with family drama. It would be an easy sale.

He picked up his phone and keys, thinking he'd return the iPad to the nurses' desk, and stick his head in to say goodbye to Mr. Johnson to be sure his patient understood how to take his medications. Then, after a quick scan of the room to ensure he was not leaving anything behind, he stepped into the hall, and only quick reflexes prevented him from bumping into "Mr. Fowler!"

"I am sorry, Dr. Jackson. I wasn't looking where I was going. Had my mind on other things."

"No worries. Have a good day," Nathan smiled at the man. He had often seen him in the halls or sitting at his desk in the ER lobby, but he hadn't had any conversations with him since Ezra's discharge. With JD's words cautioning him, he kept his smile plastered on his face as he said his goodbyes at the

nurses' station and dropped the iPad off before heading to Mr. Johnson's room. He resisted the urge to turn to look behind him to check whether Fowler had continued walking down the corridor or if the security guard had stopped to watch him knock on Mr. Johnson's door before entering the room.

He sternly told himself that Cletus Fowler worked at the hospital and that their paths were bound to cross, but he had not heard the footfalls he normally heard when someone walked in the hospital. While he wanted to say it was his imagination, he could feel the man's eyes on his back.



He liked to think the main reason he had gotten where he was in life was his keen ability to judge character. You could learn facts about a man from a report an underling wrote, but facts only told you things such as where a man worked, whether he was married, or how much money he owed. A photograph merely told you how a man looked at a particular point in time; few photographers had the requisite skills to capture the essence of the man. Observing the man, watching the man as he interacted with the people he could call his superiors, told you one thing. Watching him interact with people he considered his inferiors told you more. He hired people based on their resumes, recommendations, and their performance during the interview process. He occasionally terminated individuals due to their incompetence. However, the majority of his terminations were caused by conflicts with colleagues. A man's disposition told you whether a man was someone you wanted at your side, to cover your back.

Ending his conversation with the restaurateur, Tommy Botello walked to the private room Kevin had set aside for his use that morning. He needed time to think and decide on a plan of action before the brothers arrived. He didn't like imposing on Kevin's hospitality, but he needed a place to meet with these men that afforded them privacy. He had asked Kevin to delay opening the taqueria until one, and although he expected their business to be completed before then, the extra time would allow them to come in, talk with him, and leave without having to make their way through a crowd. Kevin's was always crowded, and he had no doubt Vin Tanner and his brother could easily navigate through the crush of people waiting for a table, but the closed sign kept the masses from standing in front of the door. Sitting in his car, Lou had a better chance of recognizing someone following the brothers.



Lou had spent several days at the hospital in Eagle Bend observing the comings and goings of the hospital staff and visitors on the second-floor ICU, and then on the floor watching Ezra's door.

Lou hadn't discovered the culprit's identity but felt sure the medicine list sent to the third floor had been deliberately edited. While there, he had also done some poking into Landon's death. He had produced a list of doctors, nurses, and other staff members who had access to Landon and to Ezra's medicine list. The list was surprisingly long, and neither of them had yet figured out a way to whittle it down to a manageable size. Hence, the reason for Lou watching the street.

Walking around the room, pretending to examine the folk art hanging around the room, he considered the words Vin Tanner had shared. Landon, the crafty fox, had found a way to let his sons know what he had learned. Botello felt confident he had a good read on the kind of men Chris Larabee and Vin Tanner were. They found their brother, dealt with Moore, and Chris and Vin drove to Vegas to thank him for his help. They had shown determination and intelligence in their search for their brother, and in thanking him, they demonstrated their gratitude. Landon's blood ran true and strong in them. He would assist them in acquiring the necessary equipment, offer some recommendations, and ensure they departed before their absence from Four Corners was noticed. While doing that, he would take the measure of Bucklyn Reed Wilmington.

The door opened, and Vin Tanner strode in with his brother at his side. Botello smiled and stood prepared to shake their hands as they entered the room, but he focused on the tall, lanky man walking beside Vin. As he walked into the room, Buck wore a smile. To the casual observer, the man exuded friendliness, but Tommy Botello, in his business, observed people. He caught Buck's quick scan of the room as he entered, and when he shook the man's hand, he saw steel in blue eyes.

"You shut down this place for our meeting?" After shaking Botello's hand, Buck looked around the room, taking in the lack of customers; the main room had also been empty. The 'closed' sign on the door

surprised him. If he had been alone, he would have passed the place by, thinking he had the address wrong, but Vin had reached for the doorknob and pushed the door open. Even as he asked the question, he felt conflicted by the empty restaurant. On one level, he felt pleased by the seriousness with which Botello was taking the situation. On another level, he was alarmed for the owner. Knowing from Inez how slim the profit margins for many restaurants were, he was trying to figure out how to repay the owner for the loss of business he suffered by allowing them to meet in private.

"Don't worry, Mr. Wilmington. Mr. Hernandez has been well reimbursed. He waved his arm towards the table and chairs. "Please have a seat, gentlemen. Kevin will be in shortly with a sampling of some of the best Mexican food you will eat north of the border. If you try nothing else, you must try his tamales. He steams them wrapped in banana leaves fresh every morning. Exquisite!" Almost as though he heard his name, Kevin appeared, placing plates, napkins, and silverware on the table while his daughter took their drink orders. Within minutes, the table was loaded with platters of burritos, tamales, sliced skirt meat for the fajitas, and the usual accoutrements. After making sure the three men did not need anything more, Kevin and his daughter left the room.

For a moment, silence reigned as the men filled their plates, then, swallowing his bite of a tamale, Botello began talking, "From what you have said, we are going to be making plans to take down not one, but two killers. I very deliberately chose this place for our meeting so you did not run the risk of being seen in the casino and associated with me. My involvement in this hunt will be more effective if I work behind the scenes. I often eat here. No one would question my being here. My associate, Mr. Simms, is reading a newspaper in his car, watching the street for anyone showing too much interest in this establishment or anyone who may have followed you here. Mr. Reubens has checked this establishment for cameras and listening devices.

Buck exchanged a surprised look with Vin, asking, in his look, 'Why does Mr. Botello think it necessary to assure us that no one could listen to our conversation?'

"Before we go too far down this road, I have to ask, why are you doing this? You have given us a lot of help, providing us with information, funding this meeting, and agreeing to buy the things we need using your name."

Botello noticed the almost concealed look of surprise between the brothers and answered Wilmington's question: "Anytime I meet with someone, in my office or off-site, I make sure no one can hear me or record me." He watched the brothers process his words. They were relieved, either by his explanation that for him, this was business as usual or because no one could know what they said.

Buck took the menu from a man who had appeared as Tommy Botello spoke. He asked for a glass of water and the combo # 3, then waited for Mr. Botello and Vin to order. He wasn't hungry, but it seemed rude to reject Mr. Botello's offer of lunch. Judging by his order, Vin felt the same or had a hollow leg. When Kevin left with their orders, he thanked Mr. Botello for his help with locating Ezra and with dealing with Timothy Moore. Chris and Vin had driven to Vegas after their visit to Moore's place to thank Mr. Botello and to let him know the outcome of their quest, but it didn't hurt to tell Mr. Botello, he, too, appreciated the help. Mr. Botello waved off the thanks, so Buck began his story.

Thinking brevity would be something Botello valued, he chose to forgo his usual entertaining storytelling style and focused on the highlight. He mentioned their suspicions about their father's death, the mishandling of Ezra's medication, the video they received from their father, and the lengths he had asked Judge Travis to take to make sure they watched it in private. Vin interjected, saying their father's lawyer had discovered a camera in his office. Then Buck concluded by saying they needed

Wiping his mouth with a large napkin, he placed the napkin to the left of his plate and the fork and knife, knowing that Kevin would be arriving momentarily to whisk away the empty plates. "You sound like your father," he told Buck. The words Buck used, his tone, and his cadence reminded him of Landon, and as he spoke, he easily could see Landon's influence on his son. When telling a story or giving a report, most men tended to repeat themselves or get lost in the telling. Buck's recounting of the event leading to their trip to Vegas was concise. Not once had Buck checked to see if he was keeping up; he trusted that if he had questions, they would be asked. It was as though Landon had leaned over his son's shoulders and helped him with the outline... This is your topic sentence. Here are the three

supporting details, now for the conclusion... Part of him wished he had recorded Buck so he could replay it later as a training video for his staff.

Botello waited until Kevin cleared the table before speaking. When the door closed, he began, "As I understand the situation, Landon felt his house, your house now, contains electronic surveillance allowing someone to spy on him. You are concerned that the devices are still in your home, and you are still being surveilled." He didn't wait for them to nod their heads in confirmation, but continued. "You are making a compelling case for your father having been murdered rather than dying of natural causes and for someone setting events into motion that could have ended with Mr. Standish's death. Your explanation for Landon's death is far more plausible than his dying of a heart attack.

"When we leave here, Mr. Reubens will purchase what you need. When you finish looking at the dogs, call him and he will meet you with it." Reaching into his suit's jacket, he pulled out a card case and a pen. Writing a number down on a card, he pushed the card towards Buck. "This is Mr. Reubens' cell phone number. Put it in your phones and instruct your brothers to do the same. This number will not lead back to me, but call him when you need to speak with me, and I'll call you on a secure line."

Buck asked what he considered an obvious question: "Is he going to be able to show us how to use this equipment?"

Botello looked surprised at the question. He understood Ezra's not participating in this meeting. He needed to apologize to Ezra for his actions all those years ago, before Ezra would talk with him. He almost said something along the lines of 'Mr. Standish can show you.' He congratulated himself for keeping his mouth shut. "Of course.

"You have questions as to why I am helping you. I am sure you know of my reputation and wonder what I get by helping you. Let me answer the question you have been too polite to ask." He paused, thinking of the best way to frame his answer. Nodding ever so slightly, he began, "I am a man with very few friends. I have many acquaintances. I see a man and I ask 'How is Dana? I hear little Bob made the All-State team. Congratulations.' The man believes himself to be a friend, but our conversations are all superficial. I have many people working for me, and while I hire only the very competent, do not keep fools around, and enjoy talking candidly with some of them, it is always business. I know how to make my customers feel welcome, and if they become repeat customers, I recognize their faces and greet them like long-lost friends. I love my wife, daughter, and grandson; I will do anything to let them know I cherish them.

"However, there are fewer than a handful of people I can call my friend. They say you may go months or years without seeing a real friend, but when you pick up right where you left off when you do see them. Your father was my friend. It took him years of looking for Maude before we sat down and talked. Even more years before I called him a friend, but he did become my friend, and I will miss him. I want the person who is responsible for taking Landon from this world, depriving me of a friend, to meet his maker. I want vengeance." He looked into the brothers' faces, almost expecting to see revulsion at his claim of wanting vengeance on Landon's murderer, and found agreement. Good. These were men with whom he could work.

"Let's get Mr. Reubens in here. He can assess your needs and make recommendations.

D 

"Okay. I feel accomplished," Buck said, grinning. "We drove down, had some good grub, and bought some dogs. We have some decisions to be made. We can get some rooms for the night and go somewhere to see a show. We can get a decent night's sleep and get up early. We can leave early and get back to the ranch while it's technically morning. Or we can drive back to Four Corners, get in late, and possibly be allowed to sleep until breakfast."

"Putting it like that, it should be a no-brainer to stay the night, but I am going to be contrary and say let's head on back." After casting his eyes at the packages stored behind them, he searched for an explanation that would sound plausible to their unknown eavesdropper. "I can't wait to show JD the videos I took of the dogs we bought."

"Yep, the poor boy's eyes will bug out of his head when he sees Toby and Rufus do their thing." Buck used his rearview mirror to check on the equipment Lev had spent the last half hour showing them how to use, and incidentally discovering both the tracker and the listening device.

Following their meeting with Botello, Lev Reubens appeared to talk to them in the one place where they could safely converse. Showing them a map, Lev circled their current location, the kennel, and a parking lot on Upper James Street.

They agreed to have a 'misdeal' to let Lev know they were leaving the kennel, and he would meet them with the items he would purchase. Vin's proficiency in map reading, meshed with Lev's accurate directions to easily guided them to the nearly deserted street, lined with shuttered and boarded-up shops. Confident they were in the parking lot where Lev was to meet them, Buck pulled into a parking place and turned off the truck's motor to wait for Lev. "You know, Vin, a short while ago we were part of the mass of humanity crowding us and each other on well-lit streets, the emptiness and darkness of this one makes me expect zombies to burst out from that dark alley in search of fresh brains to eat."

When Lev pulled in several parking places away, Buck hopped out of his truck and walked with Vin to meet Lev beside his car. "What happened here?" Buck asked as he waved his arm to indicate the empty street.

"The pandemic happened, and in this part of Vegas, away from the locales tourists like, the businesses couldn't hold on. Like dominoes, they closed. One after the other." Lev looked up and down the street and, seeing nothing, gestured for them to move to his car. "I doubt if anyone will drive down this street, but if someone does, act like you are lost and are asking for directions. Getting lost should be your cover story. But let me show you what I have for you. Then we will practice using it by checking vehicles for tracking and listening devices.

"There are directions, and you can read them when you get home, but let me walk you through it all. We will start with my car. I placed a tracking device in it, and you can find it using two methods. The first way is to look for it and feel for it. Trackers are usually no bigger than a pill bottle and can be placed almost anywhere. Physically looking for it can be time-consuming because there are many places to hide a tracker, and they are relatively easy to access. Start by examining your bumpers, tire wells, under the hood, and the undercarriage. A determined man will open locked doors inside your vehicle to place it in the glove compartment, between seats, or under them." Lev said as he opened a box and pulled out a device not much larger than a ballpoint pen.

"This is known by a few names: GPS sniffer, bug detector, or electronic sweeper. It will quickly find most trackers, but there is one problem when relying on it. Several trackers turn off if the vehicle is not in motion, and it will not find those devices. He handed Buck the sniffer, saying. "Mr. Tanner, if you don't mind, take a few minutes and see if you can find where I hid the tracker in my car. In five minutes, we'll let Mr. Wilmington use the sniffer."

Vin immediately began running his fingers along the outside of the car, searching the obvious places before exploring potential hiding spots in the interior. The beeper on Lev's phone chimed. Vin, admitting defeat, climbed out and watched as Buck approached with the sniffer and followed the beeping sound to the ashtray.

Buck pulled the ashtray open and looked up, puzzled. "I don't see it."

Lev instructed, "Do not merely open the ashtray. Instead, pull it out completely."

Buck did as instructed. Behind the ashtray was the tracker. "Shit," he muttered under his breath.

"Exactly. I broke into my locked car and hid the tracker in less than three minutes. And I am not experienced in breaking into cars. Chances are that a listening device will be harder to find because they can be so small. Let me give you my best advice before we look at the truck. Never assume you are free of trackers. Remove it, and you have told him you are aware of him. He may put another tracker on your car or act more strongly. If we find one, leave it alone. Don't let on that you know you are being tracked, but always assume you are. Assume that you are being listened to and watched. If you go anywhere you normally don't go, have a believable reason to go there, and talk about that reason where he can hear you. Like you did, coming to Vegas, saying you were looking for a dog." Lev paused his lecture. Looking at the men, he could see they had already thought this through, but he added one more warning, "Listening devices are even harder to locate. I will give you some tips, but if I were you, have a safe place to talk. Somewhere close and convenient to talk, but a room you are in frequently. Let me go over some tips for locating listening devices or cameras. Mr. Botello said your father recently renovated the house. If I planned to spy on someone, I would take advantage of the renovations and

plant cameras behind mirrors, in the drywall near outlets, and in ceiling fans or fire alarms.” He spent the next few minutes outlining methods to find cameras using their phones and how to use an RF device.

Finally, he declared they had the basics down, but told them that if they ran into anything they were concerned about and if Mr. Standish couldn’t resolve the problem, he would pretend to be a friend of Vin’s and show up for a visit. He noticed both men startle when he brought up Standish’s name, but they didn’t ask questions, and he didn’t explain that when he took his job, Mr. Botello had given him a copy of Standish’s report, asking him to make note of any equipment he would recommend updating. There were a few updates to equipment he felt needed to be made, but those were due to technological improvements.

“When you go back to your truck, talk about being lost. Getting lost is easy to do in this city. If anyone is looking at your GPS, the roads you took to get here will make it appear you were trying to get to the main drag. Talk about stopping several times to ask for directions.

Going over to Buck’s truck, he used the GPS sniffer and located the tracker under a hubcap. He showed it to the brothers and replaced the hubcap. Using the RF module, he found a listening device under the driver’s seat. Backing out of the truck, he returned to his car. “I must apologize.” At the brothers’ quizzical expressions, he said, “I didn’t plan for a camera to be in the truck. There isn’t one there,” he reassured the men. This man means business, and there could have been. You can tell he either did his research before getting his hardware or has done this before. The tracker he used is of good quality, but the listening device is top of the line. He probably didn’t feel the need to put a camera in a truck; there are only a limited number of places he could have placed it to get any helpful visuals, and I am sorry to say, I counted on that.” He let out a slow breath.

“You have been real helpful and we appreciate it.” Buck reached out to shake Lev’s hand and was surprised when Lev took his hand in both of his.

“I only met Landon Larabee a couple of times, but he was the kind of man you couldn’t help but like. Seeing the devices he had in your truck... I am glad I parked where I did; any closer, he would have heard us talk.”

Vin turned from his perusal of the contents of the bag Lev had placed in his hands, “He can hear us talkin’ even when we aren’t in the truck?”

Lev replied, “He can hear you smile.” He glanced at the truck and then at the brothers, “I am now convinced your father was murdered. You and your brothers must be careful.” He slid behind the wheel and started his car, but did not leave until Vin Tanner and Buck Wilmington entered their truck, started the motor, and drove away. As they left the parking lot, he muttered aloud, “I forgot to ask if they found a dog.”



Standing in the doorway of her son’s bedroom, Mary watched her son sleep without any signs of the nightmares that had plagued him. Smiling at the sight of her son clad in his Spider-Man pajamas and clutching his Spider-Man action figure, she felt the tension in her shoulders fade away. She turned away and walked into the kitchen, saying, “I am sorry, Inez. Billy sleeping here is still a new experience for me. I hear him every time he turns over in his sleep, and I have this overwhelming need to check on him to be sure he is not having a bad dream.” She slid into her chair at the kitchen table and took a bite from the slice of Key Lime pie Inez had brought over. “Oh my goodness, this is so good!” she said when she swallowed.

“Thank you. I was torn between bringing it or bringing chocolate cake.”

“Billy will love the cake, but the pie is delicious. Thank you for bringing it.” She took another bite and began talking. “You asked me how I convinced Billy to stay. Well, Evie did something to her ankle Friday morning. She called me and said I would have to come to their house after school, get him, and bring him here. When I arrived, Orrin had already told Billy that he was going home with me because Grandma had hurt her foot. The next thing I know, Billy and I were hosting a sleepover with Molly Kincaid’s twins because Molly and Martin would help her and Orrin entertain Landon Larabee’s sons.”

She stopped talking and cocking her head to the side, considered the revelations that they were not only having a party without inviting her, but they were leaving for a cruise and an extended vacation. She wanted to shove the thought that she was deliberately being excluded aside. She wanted to believe

they were the injured ankle, the party, the sleepover, and the extended vacation were their way of forcing her back into the role of mother. But it all seemed contrived and rushed.

She turned to Inez and asked, "Do you have time to listen to me complain?"

Inez smiled, "Everyone needs a friend who will listen to them. I have time."

Mary didn't bother to take time to sigh in relief and immediately began sharing what happened to Stephen, Billy's nightmares, and her reluctance to force Billy to live in her home with her rather than with his grandparents. When Inez reached out and took her hand in mute understanding, Mary continued, "I don't understand why Evie didn't ask me to help her entertain. Stephen and I often had dinner parties. She knows that."

"Maybe she asked Molly because she wanted to give you time with your son."

"I want to think so."

"Did he have fun with twins?" At Mary's hesitant nod, Inez asked, "Has he had any nightmares since being here?"

"No. He does call her before he goes to bed and before he goes to school."

"It sounds like it has all worked out for the best."

"It has, and I should be on my knees thanking God, but something feels off... It feels like everything... the last-minute party, the last-minute cruise. I mean, everything is rushed. They are leaving in a few days to meet the cruise ship, but who has heard of winning a contest with a cruise as the prize and only having a week to plan for it? The only thing I have ever won was a free makeover, and I was given a month's notice."

"Did Evie explain what happened?"

"She said there had been a problem with the mail." She repeated Evie's words, but as she spoke, she recognized them as a lie.

"Did you ever think that maybe, this is part of some elaborate plan to get Billy to move into your room for him?"

"I did. I hope that is what all the mystery is about, but it doesn't explain why Molly is pulling her boys out of school to go live in San Diego so Martin can work on a project at his company's headquarters. The timing is wrong."

"I think you are looking at it backwards. I will bet any amount of money that Martin was asked to work on this project of his, and when Molly told the judge, he decided to close his office for a while and take Evie on a vacation. Knowing the judge, he and Evie carefully orchestrated events so Billy had to come home." Inez said a prayer that Mary would believe her explanation, drop the subject, and enjoy having her son to herself.

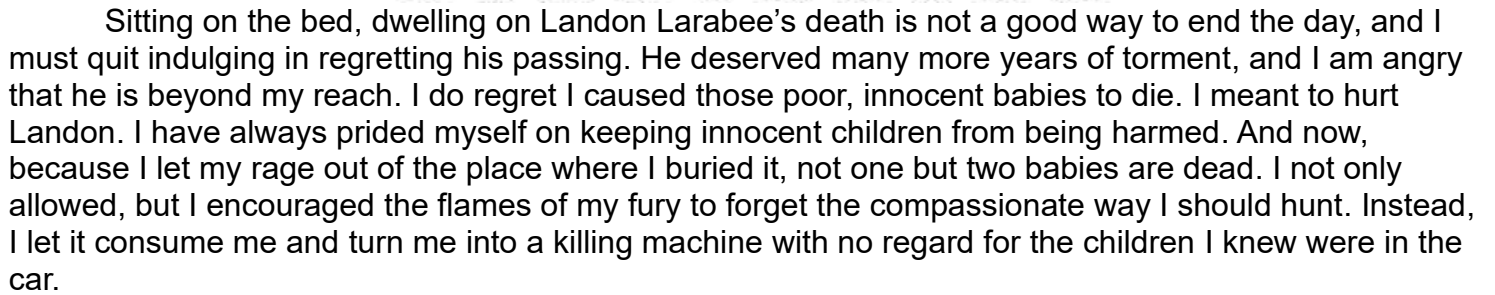
"I suppose you are right," Mary admitted. Inez's explanation of Orrin and Evie, especially Evie, scheming to force her work as hard as being her son's mother as she once had, seemed far more plausible than anything she had come up with. The party had probably not even been a party but a stern warning to the brothers to behave because, with Orrin and Molly out of town, there was no one they could turn to if problems arose. She relaxed.

The two women spent the next hour gossiping about people, most of whom Mary did not know. Then, getting a glimpse of the time, Inez excused herself, saying she needed to go and put the restaurant to bed, so to speak.



Saying goodnight to the last of her customers and then to her staff, Inez checked that the doors were locked and walked up the stairs to her apartment. After thinking carefully about what she wanted to say, she hit the speed dial to call Buck. Keep her out of things. Hah! He had better be glad he had told her the reason they were cooling things off. Otherwise, she might not have seen the need to redirect Mary's attention from her conspiracy theory.

"Hello, Buck. I hate bothering you, but I don't know who else I can call without bringing the health department, but I saw a rat in my kitchen when I was closing up... No, I did not get my rifle out. It was not that big... I think I scared it off using my broom... It is not an emergency, but if you get a chance sometime this week, could you come over and help me look for it, and maybe you can suggest a quiet, but effective way to get rid of it... Bye."



I blame Landon for taking up with yet another woman. I had not expected him to do that. I thought he had finally understood that any woman foolish enough to believe his promises of love and loyalty had become nothing more than a tool I could use to torment Landon. They didn't even need to die. One had chosen to remove herself from Landon's life, and I let her. She had understood the steps she needed to take to keep from becoming an instrument I could use to make him cry out in loneliness and despair. Her disappearance from his life caused Landon as much grief as her death would have. I know he spent many nights pacing in his room, wondering if he should find her and bring her and the baby back to the ranch.

I suppose he believed I had forgotten him because he began using those words to convince a woman she was loved and to climb into his bed. I saw him fussing over his daughters, and I could not help myself. I picked up my rifle and followed her. When I realized where she was heading, I got ahead of her. I waited. I did not even think of the babies as I watched her car flip over when she lost control.

I blame him for their deaths and for the horrible manner in which they died. I have made a point to make the deaths of my tools as quick and pain-free as possible. I have not always succeeded, but I have always tried. I am not a monster.

Every night and every morning, I ask myself: What must I do to atone for the sin of killing those innocent children? I am not sure if I can.