



Meeting Family

The Reading of the Will

Part 1 of The Seven Brothers Saga



Opening the blinds, Molly scanned the conference room with a critical eye. It was rarely used, as the judge met most of his clients in his private chamber in the back; however, with the number of attendees for this particular meeting, they needed the space this room offered. She stayed late last night so she could talk with Diego and Paulette about the importance of this meeting, and it was gratifying to see they had put in the extra effort to ensure the conference room, as well as the other rooms in the office, reflected the importance of the judge as well as the importance of the meeting. The freshly polished furniture shone, and the spines of the many law books lining the wall were not thrown in haphazardly (as the Judge tended to leave them when conducting research) but were lined up neatly. She nodded her head in satisfaction with the immaculate appearance of the room. From her desk in the reception area to

the bathroom, the conference room, and the Judge's office, every surface in Judge Travis's establishment shone. The office even had a slight smell of apple pie in the air. She hadn't found anything she liked other than apple-cinnamon to make the smell inviting. She had woken up early, worried the scent would be overpowering. She wanted it to be pleasant and not overwhelming or feminine.

It was a pity that no cleaning could remove the sizable blue stain from the oriental rug. She once made the mistake of suggesting a new rug, but would never bring it up again; too many good memories were held in that stain.

Yes, she decided. Even though Four Corners was hardly a speck on the map, they were located on Main Street, and the office itself rivaled anything one of the big corporate law firms in any city could offer.

"Molly?" Orrin Travis called out as he entered through the back door.

"In here, boss," she replied. "Do you think they will all come?" she asked over her shoulder when she heard her boss.

Pretending to look around the room, she covertly studied the Judge. These last few weeks had worn him down, visibly aging him. He never struck her as old before all of this, but now he was. Losing Steven had taken its toll on both him and Evie. She understood that. The thought of losing a child left her with a hollow pit in her stomach. She could not even imagine the anguish he kept to himself so he could be strong for Evie. The sparkle had just started to return to his eyes when Landon Larrabee died. She caught him, more often than he knew, sitting at his desk with a book or paperwork in front of him, but his eyes staring off into space, remembering better times.

Orin glanced over at Molly. He knew exactly what she was thinking. He had to agree with her. This business with Landon consumed him. The work Landon asked him to do kept him occupied during the day and tired enough to sleep at night. He mourned Steven, and, only recently, when he had finally begun to laugh with his best friend, as he recounted the good times he and Steven shared, Landon died.

No one ever guaranteed life to be fair. He was sad and would always hurt every morning when he woke up and realized his son was forever resting under the ground. Stephen would never again answer his phone when his father called to inquire about his plans for the day. But working with Landon, concentrating on Landon's boys, helped remind him that Stephen had blessed him by being a part of his life, and even with Stephen gone, he was still blessed by having his grandson around.

The mess Landon had created with his sons made him realize he needed to focus on his blessings. He had begun to believe Landon could fix things when the man died. He lost not only his best friend but also the life preserver keeping him afloat. Who was he going to talk to now?

He shook his head, clearing it, and saw Molly still staring at him, chewing on her bottom lip. He gave her a quick smile, and she relaxed.

"No. I don't think Standish will show. He hasn't bothered to call, and he was the only one of them Landon had been worried about showing up," he remembered to answer her question.

"Tell you what, boss, I'll bet you five dollars they all show."

"Only five? You don't sound too sure of yourself."

"Hey, boss, I need a raise. The kids took almost all my cash; the Book Fair ends today."

"I'm sure you did nothing to encourage them to buy books.

"What can I say? They must read and be smart because they sure aren't going to make a name for themselves in sports or dance."

Orrin chuckled at the mention of Molly's Evan and Nick. A particular image always came to his mind when their names came up in conversation. The twins, as toddlers, tried to navigate the steps to his house. They made it, but only the reward of looking at the books Molly held in her hands kept them moving. Now eight, the boys had inherited their mother's red hair and their father's myopic eyes. With their reed-thin bodies making them look as if a strong wind might snap them in half, they lacked even the basic sense of rhythm and grace most children possessed.

Molly, over Martin's strong protests, put the boys in ballet hoping they could be taught some coordination, but Evan's pulled groin muscle ended that experiment. Their foray into gymnastics only taught Molly the value of good medical insurance, as first Evan tripped and broke an arm, and then Nick



mishandled a vault, making the boys a matched set. At that point, Martin put his foot down and took his boys out of that dangerous sissy stuff; nowadays, the twins could be found contentedly sitting on the sidelines, reading their books, as their basketball team dominated the league.

"Those are great kids you've got, Molly. You and Martin, be sure to remember that. And as far as that bet, you are on. I've got to go through the stuff in my office. Make sure I bring in the letters and the copies of Landon's rules, will you?"

Molly nodded her head and left the room. She needed to make sure no messages were waiting for her. Satisfied, no one called, wanting last-minute directions, she hurried to unlock the front door.

Walking into his office with its large antique desk that Evie rescued from a garage sale when he first opened his practice, Orrin began sorting through the files on each man, making sure the DNA tests done on each brother were included in his file. Landon had bordered on the paranoid, not about one of his sons turning out to belong to another man, but that someone, someday, would challenge one of his seven sons' paternity. Orrin engaged the services of three detective agencies, dispatching them nationwide with instructions to discreetly obtain DNA samples from each of Landon's sons.

Once, he had confirmation that they were indeed Landon's, Molly and another private investigator worked to create biographies for each man. Christopher Samuel Larabee, Bucklyn Reed Wilmington, and Nathan Daniel Jackson proved easy to track. They had lived with Landon and were open books. Landon wanted more information than the courses they took in college and their grades. He knew all of that. He wanted information on their mothers and other family members, as well as the people they dated and, in Chris's case, married. The other men were more of a challenge, and big holes remained in the biographies. It took four months of hard work, and though Landon had seen the files, completed to the best of their ability, he had not lived to see his dream of having all seven of his boys living under the same roof become a reality.

"You know," Molly stopped in the doorway and waited for him to look up from the stack of pictures of Landon's sons. "At first glance, none of these men look much like Landon and nothing like one another, but put their photos together, and you see Landon. The times I saw Chris with Landon, I thought they looked a lot like each other, but the resemblance is hard to see in these pictures. I wonder why?"

"Attitude. Chris isn't a womanizer like Landon was, and he certainly didn't inherit Landon's people skills, but he commands the attention of everyone in a room, just like his father did." The judge pawed through the pictures, pulling out several of Chris, before continuing, "Chris looks like his mother. He has Landon's build, thin and wiry, but he makes me think of his mother. He has Cassie's smile." Orrin leaned back in his chair, a smile on his face.

"Now, she was a woman worth knowing. With my right hand on the Bible, I swear to you that almost every boy in town would have sworn his love and devotion to her, except, she was known to have a temper. In school, most students and a few teachers were afraid of crossing her. She wouldn't throw things or hit people. Instead, she would put her hands on her hips and start talking. By the time she shut her mouth, the target of her tongue lashing would feel about an inch tall. Her family moved to Four Corners when she and her twin, Curtis, were seniors. They were new to ranching, and she was new to riding. Everyone in her class had known each other since first grade, if not before. Lifelong friendships had already been forged, and she should have been on the periphery of all the little cliques." Orrin paused and stared at a picture of Chris as a teen, seeing Cassie, not her son. He snorted at a memory from long ago but did not elaborate.

"Within a month of enrolling, Cassie ran the school. Evie explained it to me once. Cassie was a massive sun and pulled everyone towards her. She'd smile at you in the hall, compliment your outfit, or tell you 'good job' when you solved a difficult math problem the teacher put on the board, and you would feel as though you had achieved world peace and discovered the cure for cancer at the same time. When you crossed her, she made you feel as though you were dying the death of a thousand cuts. Building people up or taking them down, both came easily to her. With her having red hair, people forgave her temper, saying What did you expect, look at her hair? She wasn't mean, but even Curtis tiptoed around her. She didn't have to stand in front of a mirror, practicing how to yell at the custodians."

"Saw that, did you?" Molly could feel her face burning. "And I didn't yell. I nicely explained to them that this meeting was important and how this place looked would reflect on us all."

"It looks good, Molly, and the smell in the air, Apple Pie, was a great choice. Makes a person think about home and the holidays."

Molly smiled at the compliment but remained focused on learning more. "Go on. Tell me about Cassie," she would never repeat anything she heard in this office to anyone, not even to Martin; that was one of the reasons Orrin paid her as well as he did, but she was curious. She had known Landon; you couldn't live in the area and not know the man. She knew the three sons he raised. She had even dated Buck before she decided she preferred quiet Martin with the non-roving eyes.

But what she knew of the family was its recent history. The files she helped prepare on the brothers left many unanswered questions. If she wanted to spend the next year effectively dealing with these men, she needed a better understanding of them. Orrin could give her that understanding. He had been there with Landon through most of it.

"Cassie," he smiled at the memory. "From her pictures, you can tell Cassie was beautiful. Her beauty wasn't what you noticed or remembered. I always viewed her as a Celtic queen, riding into battle with her blood-red hair flying out behind her. Curtis Marks, her twin, was always at her side or one step behind her. If we lived in a fair world, people would have considered them equals, but she overshadowed him in everything they did. Their folks bought O'Malley's old place. They had this idea of running a small herd and gradually turning it into a large one. Luckily, they had money because Mr. Marks didn't know much about raising livestock and was too proud to ask his neighbors for advice or help.

"Cassie did well in school, but did not attend college like everyone thought she would. Instead, she stayed to help her folks with their ranch. Curtis did not do as well in high school, but his folks sent him to college. After completing his first semester, he returned home and worked with his father and Cassie. I think Curtis came home because he missed his twin." Orrin picked up Chris's file, making a show of examining its contents. He needed time to suss out why his brain thought that. Preparing the information on Chris brought up almost forgotten memories of the twins. Over the years, he had met several sets of twins. None of the twins he knew were joined at the hip to the degree Curtis and Cassie had been. He never visualized the two of them as having an incestuous relationship, but there was something there. The word penance popped into his head, but he had no idea why. He pulled out the pages documenting Cassie's short life. Between her immunization records and report cards, her childhood was in front of him, Everything except her junior year at a large high school in Denver. They had Curtis's records; why not hers?

Molly noticed where the judge was reading, the only significant piece of missing information in Chris's files. "I talked with the enrollment clerk at her school in Denver. She said Cassie Marks was before her time, but after all these years, combined with the fact that a new school had been built twenty years ago, it was lucky that anything in anyone's cum folder was still around to be had. I managed to get a copy of both hers and Curtis's pictures in the yearbook. It is clipped together with her report cards."

Orrin looked up and smiled. "Frankly, I am amazed you were able to find as much as you did." For the moment, he would keep the question of the missing year to himself, and later, he would reflect on the word, penance. Perhaps when things calmed down at his house, he would ask her what she thought. Pity, he had not thought of asking Landon about her missing school year. Shaking off his thoughts, Orrin picked up where he left off. "As beautiful as Cassie was, you would have thought, she could have had anyone she wanted, but she frightened off potential suitors not with displays of her temper, but with the fact that she was better than most men, in what around here is considered manly arts of riding and roping. She, genuinely, was a better ranch hand than the men who considered courting her. Her ranching skills, combined with her shadow, Curtus, always hanging around, didn't make it easy for her to date.

Her momma despaired of Cassie ever getting married, and seeing that her daughter graduated high school without a ring on her finger, acted as though she felt Cassie was doomed to be an old maid. She was shocked when Landon showed up on the ranch one day to ask her husband's permission to court Cassie. Even though Landon graduated from high school a couple of years before the Marks family moved to town, our families were acquainted, mostly because she and Evie were friends. Evie and I were engaged by then, and even though we didn't double date, Landon and Cassie were often thrown together because they were our friends. Landon dated many girls from Four Corners and Eagle Bend. Girls who were neither engaged nor married competed for his attention. He didn't ask her out until after he had talked to her father. I never asked, but I believe Landon was waiting to say anything to her until he had something to offer.

"I remember the day he told me he planned on marrying Cassie. We were in the booth next to the jukebox at Doug's Grill. That was way before your time, Molly. The Grill went the way of the jukebox; they

are history, only memories. But back then, if you were young and single, Doug's Grill was the place to be on a weekend night.

"To set the stage...just after my first semester in law school, Evie and I came home for a visit. I dropped her off at her folks, said hi to mine, and met Landon at the Grill. After Landon decided college was not the path he wished to pursue, he returned to Four Corners to work on the ranch with Mr. Sam, and the only time I got to see him was between semesters. Coming home between semesters while in college was hard. When I was in law school, between the cost of tuition and my workload, it was almost impossible to find the money and the time to come home. Landon and I made a point of getting supper at the Grill to talk whenever I was in town.

"So, that night, when we entered the Grill, Landon led the way to a booth in the back next to the kitchen. Anyway, he used the marriage word, and my jaw dropped. The only words that made it out of my mouth were 'Cassie?' and 'Why?' He didn't laugh to signal he was joking. He told me he wanted what I had with Evie.

"The big fights everyone expected because of her temper never happened. Rather, if they did happen, neither Evie nor I knew anything about them. When her parents died in a wreck, Landon grieved right along with her. When Curtis needed money, Landon took out a loan to make sure Curtis wouldn't lose his place. Landon went to his daddy and asked to buy land from him. Mr. Sam would have given him the land; Landon would inherit it all one day, but Landon insisted he buy it.

Said he wanted something of his own, something he had worked for and saved to buy.

"Landon and Mr. Sam, his father, worked the cattle during the day, and in the evenings, they'd work on building a house for Landon and Cassie to live in. Then Chris came along, and Landon was the proudest father in town. He'd take Chris into town and introduce him around; Landon knew everyone, and he made sure everyone knew Chris. Buck inherited that skill set from him. Chris surely didn't. Six weeks after they moved into their new home, Cassie was in a wreck. She had been visiting her brother. The only good thing about that wreck was that Mr. Sam and Mrs. Judy were babysitting Chris that afternoon, and he was not in the truck when it caught on fire. Badly burned, Cassie lived for a month before succumbing to her injuries. Chris was only seven months old when she passed.

"I'll tell you about the rest of them at another time," Orrin promised after checking his watch. Molly took it as her cue to leave and check to see if anyone had pulled up and was waiting to come inside.

Orrin looked at the picture of Chris, the only one of Landon's sons, to carry the Larrabee name. A fine man, though you couldn't tell it the way he'd been carrying on. Maybe Landon's will would do the trick. Certainly, he had seen more of the old Chris since his father's death four weeks ago than he had in the last three years. No, that wasn't the whole story. With his father gone, Chris was angry with himself for acting the way he had, blaming his father and Buck for his loss. Maybe it was the self-recrimination that kept Chris sober, but even though he was sober, he wasn't the old Chris. He never laughed. The old Chris, especially after Adam's birth, laughed. He hadn't laughed or smiled for the past three years. All that Landon's death accomplished was to get Chris to put the bottle away.

Orrin went out to the ranch a few days after the funeral to tell Chris, Buck, and Nathan their father had named all of his sons in his will. If the news bothered any of the three men, he couldn't tell. They had, mostly, been curious about the possibility of meeting their newly found brothers. He told them they had not been able to notify these brothers in time for the funeral, and they had not questioned him about it. After all, they had to wait for the autopsy to be completed before they could bury Landon, but not to immediately notify the other heirs had been his decision. There would be talk around town when these other sons arrived. There was nothing he could do about it.

However, it didn't seem right to allow the talk to start at the man's funeral.

Of course, the three brothers knew about Vin and Ezra and seemed interested in meeting these two 'new' brothers, but Orrin knew Josiah and John David would be a surprise. He shook his head in disbelief at Landon's audacity. Landon thought he would be able to heal the wounds of his children and make them one family. Maybe he could if he were still alive. There wasn't much that Landon was not capable of doing when he put his mind to it.

To reach out of the grave and do this was another matter entirely. Chris would be the key. The old Chris would make this work, but could the Chris who spent the last three years not caring about anything other than his anguish pull it off? Orrin suspected that if he could, then Chris would heal, and Landon could rest easy.

"Don't shred their files, but make sure to put them in the vault before any of them get here, will you, hon?" he called out to Molly.

"Sure thing, Boss," Molly answered. She went into his office and gathered up the pictures and the extensive research they had done on each of Landon's sons. She would do that and, hopefully, have time to freshen her make-up before they began arriving.

She was happily married and flirted with no man, except her Martin, but these were the Larrabee brothers, and she wanted her hair and lipstick to look perfect or, barring that, as close as she could make it. She took her toothbrush back with her. Long ago, Aunt June told her she had beautiful white teeth. 'Remember to smile, dear. Your teeth are so pretty. They will help distract men from your unfortunate hair.' No one had ever mentioned her beautiful teeth. One day, she would ask Martin if he found them attractive. In the meantime, she would make sure her teeth were clean, her lipstick fresh, and, with luck, her carefully styled hair remained as such.



Checking the name and address of the law firm on the envelope against the one neatly stenciled on the door, he slowed the car and began looking for a parking space. There was nothing near the office unless there was parking tucked out of sight, behind one of the buildings, but he did not have enough time to explore. He glanced at his watch. In a few minutes, he would be late, and what kind of omen was that anyway, late for the reading of the last will of the man who fathered him?

It was ludicrous; if a person bothered to stop and think, he would even be here planning to attend the reading of this particular man's will. The man had made it abundantly clear he did not want to be burdened with yet another child. What did he expect to happen? Did he think his brothers would welcome him with open arms? Not likely. The rich stayed rich by not throwing their money away and by not sharing it with the never-before-seen bastard who just happened to show up to find out if he had been left anything of consequence by the dearly departed.

Still, he argued with himself that Larabee's lawyer was the one who contacted him and not the other way around. Perhaps he had been remembered in some, preferably monetary way. Oh, how he would love to say something truly vile and walk away, leaving a pile of money on the table untouched. If he had grown up someone else, he would do just that, but he was Ezra P. Stan, and P stood for prudent, dent, and a Prudent Standish took the money to pay off people with fists the size of Ohio.

Seeing nothing, he circled the block. He needed something close to the building, or he would begin coughing before he got to the meeting. Damn Moore, anyway. The only good thing to be said about the encounter was that at least Moore and his men hadn't touched his face. He poked gingerly at his side as he turned the corner. Ribs healed; he just needed to figure out how to pay Moore before the goon decided he needed a more lasting lesson. Why couldn't the man have waited until after this meeting to show him he meant business?

Well, what was done was done, and now he needed to find out if he had been left any money. Not that he expected any money, at least nothing to amount to much. There would be just enough to entice him to sign on the dotted line of the agreement, saying that, as the bastard son, he would take this pittance, be grateful for it, and never bother the rightful heirs.

He would sign, but only after he got a good look at the men his father called sons. He had their names memorized and pulled them out from the little corner of his mind in which he kept them tucked away. Christopher and Nathan Larabee. What did they have that he was lacking? He wanted to know, and this would probably be his only chance to find out.

Alright, Ezra, once more around the block. If there isn't a parking space, then you know God didn't want you stopping to satisfy your curiosity. Damn it all, he had meant to arrive early, to sit in his car and watch as his 'brothers' walked in to get their share, and then, he would have left, never leaving his car. Well, that had been his plan before Moore showed up; now he needed every dollar he could get his hands on.

His hand reached down to stroke the envelope with the letter safely tucked inside. Nicequality paper often meant money. Larabee's or the lawyer's, he didn't know. The letter, the summons, contained a personal note from a Mrs. Kincaid. She offered to get him a room, rent a car, or answer any questions he had, in short, do anything to make this 'sad and tragic day less stressful'. Sad and tragic, maybe it was for Larabee's other sons; it sure wasn't for him. He didn't even know the man. And answer questions? As

though he would be so crass as to ask, 'What did dear ole dad leave me?' Still, the personal note had been a nice touch.

Maude would have already called the lawyer and sweet-talked him into giving her all the details of Larabee's will. If Larabee left him money, she would find out about it and begin scheming how to get control of it. She still insisted she knew what was best for him. Every move he made to gain financial independence, she schemed until she found a way to counter it. Sure, he had his moments of freedom. She would go her way and let him go his, but whenever he had money in his pocket, she would show up to remind him of all she had sacrificed for him. Try as he might to resist her words and tears, he, as her obedient son, would fork over his money to help her out of whatever jam she had gotten herself into.

Funny thing about Maude, with all her successful nights in the casinos, well-played cons, and numerous marriages to wealthy men, it would seem reasonable to think she should be rolling in loot.

Hardly. Money slipped through her fingers as fast as she closed her fist around it.

Long experienced in Maude's ability to sniff out money, he had been very discreet in letting people know where he was heading for the weekend. He told no one; not that there was anyone to tell, but if he had someone in whom to confide secrets, he would have kept this one to himself. If Maude smelled the scent of money, she'd show up, baying for her share of the loot.

If there were no money to be had, she would take the opportunity to inform his 'brothers' of how their father had been such a cheap bastard, of how he had gotten her pregnant and refused any financial support. Her tone would be a careful mix of righteous indignation and long-suffering piety. He'd heard that speech so many times, he could recite it all from memory. Hell, he could give it better than she could.

Growing up, anytime he wanted something beyond what was strictly necessary for his survival or to keep appearances up, she'd haul that speech out, dust it off, and give it. She loved delivering her rant, and no doubt, if provided the opportunity to recite it to Landon Larabee's rightful heirs, she would, hoping that they, full of remorse over their father's scandalous behavior, would hand over their inheritance to her eager, waiting paws. He would die of embarrassment if she showed up, and no doubt, she would step over his rapidly cooling body to deliver her speech.

Sometimes, he thought he hated his mother, but he had never voiced the sentiment or examined it too closely. She was all he had in the world, and had long since learned to live with her shortcomings. It was better than living alone.

He was here in this dusty little God-forsaken town for one reason. He needed to understand what was wrong with him. What was in his nature that pushed his father away and kept him away? He desperately needed to know why his father never cared enough about him to pick up the phone to call or even write a postcard. Was it the circumstances of his birth? Or was there something inherently wrong with him that his father, like his grandmother, could see, but because of the wrongness of his nature, he couldn't?

His mother once showed him a magazine article depicting a handsome man with hair so blonde it was almost white, deeply tanned skin, and intensely green eyes. The man in the photograph had been smiling while hugging two boys. The article named the green-eyed teenager as Chris and the boy with the dark skin and wide smile as Nathan. Chris and Nathan. His mother told him there was a third son, but she was unsure of his name. He committed the name of the ranch and the town in which it was located to memory and carefully cut out the pictures and the article, hiding them away in the Bible Great Aunt Doris had given him for Christmas; she always gave him gifts to help him overcome his deficits and become a better person.

He must have been seven the year he decided to write. The kids at school had been joining teams their dads coached; when they asked if he was planning on playing, he said he didn't like baseball. He wanted to play and dreamed of playing, and in his dream, his dad, with the face from the magazine, neatly cut out and pasted onto a generic body, would run out to the field to congratulate him on a well-played game. The reality was far different. If he had played, he would have had to explain why his father never came to any of the games. Why did he never sign a report card? Why was the only picture he had of the man cut out of a magazine?

He hadn't played baseball; instead, he spent the summer practicing with the deck of cards his mother gave him for his birthday while waiting, each day, for the postman's arrival. After his Mother returned to the arms of her current beau, and he remained in the house with Great Aunt Doris, he waited until she started talking on the phone with her friends. Then he carefully retrieved the article and pictures.

He spent a June day writing a long letter telling Landon Larabee about himself and how he lived with his Great-Aunt Doris and her husband.

He worried about his handwriting and was upset because he guessed how some words were spelled, but his first-grade teacher told the class to sound the words out, and he had. He even colored a picture of himself so his father would know how he looked. He tried to keep the tone light. Mother always said folks don't like to be around whiners, but at the end of the letter, he asked why he didn't want him.

He blinked rapidly, dusting off that rejection, even to this day, which caused his eyes to water and his stomach to churn. The kid who he had been, the one who thought he was so grown up, had walked to the post office and shook out the money he had won from his classmates during recess, onto the oak counter, had asked if he had enough money to send his letter, so his father would have to sign for it. He overheard Great Aunt Doris saying she sent tenants that she wanted to evict a letter like that. He had explained to the lady behind the counter that he wanted to do the same, so he could be sure his father had received it. He had. He still carried the green signature card in his wallet. For long months, he felt sure his father would write back. After all, he included his mother's current address and his aunt's, but as the months turned into years, he realized he would never hear from the man. The card with his father's signature had been carefully tucked into his wallet, but he had quit looking at it, and now he hardly saw the card when he pulled out money or showed his license, and he only touched it when it was time to replace his wallet.

Each time he bought a new wallet, he almost unfolded the card to look at the handwriting. Supposedly, you could tell a lot about a person from how they dotted their i's and crossed their t's. He never looked, though, but he never threw it away. He just tucked it into his new billfold and ignored its existence until the next time he changed his wallet.

Waiting to pull into traffic on Main Street, he told himself it was the last time around the block. He glanced at the clock. He did not have time to circle the block again. It was his sign from Heaven, time to go; he'd figure something out about Moore. He looked over his left shoulder, waiting for an opening in the traffic; whoever would have thought a town this little would have so much traffic? Who, the hell, had ever heard of Four Corners anyway?

Just as he was about to pull away, the car parked directly in front of the office flashed its brake lights. He stopped breathing and watched as the woman in the car looked over her shoulder, asking, with her smile, if she could pull out in front of him. Remembering to check the traffic before waving to say she could go, he let her out and pulled into the perfect parking spot. There were even thirty minutes left on the meter; he wouldn't put any more money in, he doubted he would be here that long.

Painfully, he pulled himself from his car. If he planned to make a practice of letting people hit him, he had best obtain an easier car to get in and out of, something large and American. His mother would die.

He could hear her, 'Ezra, dear, appearances are everything, and American cars just don't say money.'

Putting on his 'face,' the one which protected him and kept his enemies from seeing too much of his soul, he entered the building. A woman, not cute and perky like many receptionists, nor cold and efficient like many others, sat behind a large cherry desk. Real wood, he noted in amazement, not veneer popular in offices.

She smiled warmly, coming out from behind the desk to shake his hand. "You must be Mr. Standish."

"Yes, ma'am, and you are?" Ezra worried about the ma'am. She didn't seem old enough for him to use it, but it seemed polite, and he wanted to leave a good impression with a woman he would never see again.

"Molly Kincaid, receptionist, law clerk, and chief bottle washer for Judge Orrin Travis." "A judge?" Ezra raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"He's not a Judge anymore; he retired from public service a few years ago and now he manages the clients he likes." She smiled brightly at him, her brown eyes studying him, as he pulled off his sunglasses and carefully put them in a case in his suit pocket.



"I must say, you certainly remind me of your father, maybe, more than the others. Most folk would say it is your smile, but I think it is your eyes; his was green like yours."

"Indeed," he smiled wider, exposing his dimples. He hoped she would not hear the sudden thumping of his heart. He noted the platinum wedding band. "Ah must thank you, Mrs. Kincaid, for your kind note."

"You never called," she gently admonished.

"Ah had no questions."

"Not curious?"

"Not in the least," he lied.

Tapping her pen against her chin, she studied him, "You know, none of you look like each other. No one would ever take you for brothers, but this morning, after seeing you all walk through that door, it's amazing how much you all look like him."

"You knew him then."

"Of course. The Judge and Landon grew up together, and he's managed.

Landon's business for the last several years, and I, well, I've been working here for about, uhm, thirteen of those years." She seemed lost in thought for a moment with a sad little smile gracing her face, "I miss him. You couldn't find a better man than Landon, even if you spent the rest of your life looking. But excuse me, I know you want to go back. Everyone else is already in the conference room."

Ezra glanced at the door she had looked towards, thinking that he shouldn't have come. He was setting himself up to be hurt. He swallowed hard. "Perhaps, you could direct me to your facilities before..." before I enter the lion's den.

"Oh, yes. Go down the hall, the last door on the left. I'll just let the judge know you're here."

She watched as he headed down the hall. She knew everyone in the conference room chafed to get this business taken care of, and she was delaying the show. Too bad. She watched the car circling the block and waited patiently. He was nervous. She could tell from the moment he opened the doors and walked inside that he did not want to be there. Well, part of her job was to make clients welcome. Hearing the bathroom door shut, she slipped into the conference room.

Smiling at the men sitting impatiently waiting for the judge to begin, she walked up to her boss and whispered in his ear. She held her hand out, waiting for the five dollars the judge happily lost—the one they had all but given up on, had arrived. She hurried back to the front desk; Standish looked as though he was ready to bolt, and she had promised Landon, in her heart, that she'd make sure that all his boys were sitting in that room, around that table, listening to the reading of his will.



Ezra splashed water onto his face and dug into his pocket for Tums. He ate two, willing his stomach to settle, then, to be on the safe side, he ate a couple of extra tablets. He debated the sense of going ahead and throwing up before going in to meet them. His stomach voted for that choice, but he wasn't sure how well his ribs could handle it, and he felt very certain any vomiting would set off another coughing spell. Though he hadn't bothered to see a doctor, they asked all sorts of embarrassing things, but he was certain that at least two of his ribs were broken.

Damn, mother, for bringing Moore to the game. What the hell was she thinking? She knew his reputation. She had to have known there would be problems. She never thought things through. She never thought about the consequences. She always left him to deal with the repercussions of her actions.

He looked in the mirror as he straightened his tie, checking, without conscious thought, that his gold chain with its protective charm still hung around his neck. Not too bad, he decided, a little on the pale side, but he doubted if anyone would notice. It was time to see what Larabee had wanted with him. Probably, the old man had decided that he had better right wrongs if he was going to get into heaven. His voice from the past would say, 'My dear son, I am so sorry for not being in your life when you were a child, but now, on my deathbed, I want to rectify that error and make amends. Here is some money, go somewhere, buy a drink with it, toast my memory, and remember to have a great life.'

So, the question became, if Larabee was doling out cash to grease St. Peter's palm, how would this last act of his translate into American dollars? He squared his chin as he gazed into the mirror. Now remember, Ezra, whatever happens in there, it means nothing. He had his chance. You are here to satisfy your curiosity about your brothers, and if a few dollars get tossed your way, you take them.



Nathan heard the door open and listened as Orrin greeted the man they had been waiting for, but he didn't bother to look up from the floor. A blue stain adorned the rug, and he had spent the last several minutes trying to figure out what it was and why Orrin hadn't replaced it. Orrin had money; he could get it cleaned or replaced, but the stain remained, and its existence made Orrin appear cheap.

He wished Orrin would get this show started. He listened as the latecomer was introduced to everyone, and he even managed a handshake when it was his turn, but all he heard was the grandfather clock in the hall as it chimed the hour. The appointment was for ten, and it didn't matter to Orrin that he and the others had arrived early. The judge insisted they wait until the last brother showed or until the hour. All right, he is here, and the hour is at hand, so please, Orrin, let's get this over with. It's tearing me up to be sitting here with these strangers calling themselves brothers and my daddy lying dead, in a hole in the ground.

I need to go somewhere I don't have to be strong for Chris and Buck, somewhere I can take the smile off my face and throw things that break, somewhere I can grieve. These last weeks have been a blur. Buck called in the middle of a busy morning, words tumbling all over one another. 'Dad has had a heart attack. Come home, now!'

He remembered hanging up the phone and calling the hospital in Eagle Bend. He talked with the cardiologist, who assured him that while the tests were not all back, it appeared that this was more an anxiety attack rather than a heart attack. They would keep him overnight for observation, but would probably release him in the morning. He should have asked, What reason did Dad have to be anxious? His father was as cool as the proverbial cucumber. Even when he had a problem, he never let it stress him; he faced it head-on and took care of it.

Nathan debated about not going; he had patients to see, and it sounded as though nothing was seriously wrong, but this was his daddy, and he, the son who never did anything impulsive, began making a series of phone calls, starting with the airlines.

The last thing he clearly remembered was that after the plane landed on the small airstrip in Eagle Bend, he had taken a cab to the hospital. He smiled the whole ride over; he would ask his dad to forgive him, and then he and Buck would sit down and talk sense into Chris. Everything would be good again. He walked into the hospital with the stench of disinfectants heavy in the air and the lights burning too brightly after the taxi ride in the dark, but he saw Buck and grinned until Buck turned to him with his eyes, red and puffy, and leaking tears.

It was like being on a roller coaster. He was in a car that ever so slowly made its way up to impossible heights, and just as it reached the top, he could feel happy that his life was back on track. The car sped rapidly to the highest point on the tracks and then plummeted. He started falling faster and faster to the ground. Even though he knew he'd survive the landing, he was screaming, begging for someone to take him off that horrible ride. Seeing Buck's eyes was like that, and he knew his brother was on the rollercoaster, too, screaming along with him.

The staff packed away all the equipment, and the doctor came out and said all the right things, just like they were taught. All that was left for him to do was to go in and say goodbye before they wheeled his daddy down to the morgue. He kept thinking, this must be a joke, or a bad dream, something, because his father wouldn't die, not with things between them like they were.



Orrin Travis took his time studying the faces of the men sitting around him, trying to determine the strength of their character. Of course, he knew Chris, Buck, and Nathan. He'd been there, pacing in the hall alongside Landon when Chris had been born, had bullied his way through child services to get Bucklyn turned over to Landon's care when his momma died, and had fought Clara's family tooth and nail when they wanted to take Nathan.

They were good boys, all three of them. Landon had done well with them, although it had all but fallen apart three years ago when Chris lost Sarah and Adam to the fire that had torn through his house and barns.

Chris left, and Nathan left, but for different reasons. Only Buck remained to help keep the place running. Landon had been a fine man, a shrewd businessman, and a good friend, but when he screwed things up, he did it in a mighty big way. For example, that business with Nathan should never have happened. He loved the boy more than life itself. He had been proud of Nathan and his every accomplishment. He made sure the whole town knew of every shining star the boy brought home.

Landon had been scared. When Nathan was young, Clara's parents tried to take him. That's why he had never formally adopted the boy; he had been terrified that a judge would look at the color of the baby's skin and give his son to Clara's parents. Landon did everything he could to keep them out of court. The things Orrin knew about and pretended he didn't were delaying tactics, threats, and bribery. He suspected there were other things Landon had done that he would rather not even think about.

In the end, it had blown up in his face. Nathan went to medical school in Alabama. There he met his mother's family. It hadn't been a TV type of reunion, full of weeping women sweeping the long-lost Nathan into their family circle. That, Landon could have combated. It was more insidious, and the evil seed they planted caused feelings of insecurity. Of not knowing his place in the world, feelings Nathan had never known. They asked, 'If your father loves you, why didn't he give you his last name?' By the time Nathan decided to ask his father their question, it had become his own. Landon's explanation of his grandparents' ruthlessness while trying to take him away conflicted with the sweet, loving family he had met and grown to love. This was especially true when Clara's mother decided to set the record straight and told him the tactics his father used to keep them away from his son, their grandson.

Nathan came home right before he graduated to talk to his dad. A shouting match ensued. All he could say on the matter, with any authority, was that while it took a lot to get Landon riled, Nathan's questioning of his love cut him to the bone, and Landon had reacted poorly. When the shouting ended, Nathan stormed off the ranch and took a job at University Hospital, ignoring his promise to return to Four Corners and set up a clinic. Orrin was convinced that once the two stubborn men cooled off, they would find their way back to each other.

He laughed when Landon told him about the fight. It had felt good to discover that Landon was having problems dealing with his sons; it made him more human. Orrin gave them two months to work things out, and it would have, except for the fire.

Orrin's eyes turned to Chris and Buck. You couldn't say one name without saying the other, as different from each other as night and day. Most people understood Landon needed solace in a woman's arms after Cassie's death. They felt finding comfort was perfectly understandable, but finding comfort in the arms of Rosie Wilmington was not acceptable, and frankly, it disrespected Cassie's memory. Yes, Chris did need a mother, but as Mrs. Elizabeth and Mr. Sam frequently explained to Landon, if he needed a wife and a mother for his son, he should be looking for one at their church. They would tack on at the end, a little church-going would not hurt Chris any.

Landon stopped leaving Chris with his parents when he saw Rosie on Saturday nights. He either got a babysitter or dropped Chris off with him and Evie. Folks claimed Rosie enticed the lonely man to her bed, but that was not the truth. Orrin had been there for enough of it to know better. Rosie listened, listened without judgment as Landon poured out his pain. One thing led to another, and Bucklyn Reed Wilmington was born. Rosie laughed at Landon when he offered to marry her; she also refused to let Landon adopt Buck. Those refusals killed their romance, the refusals along with the arrival of Clara, Nathan's mother.

Fiercely independent, Rosie turned down any monetary aid Landon tried to give her. The clothes he bought for Buck were returned to the store, and his money would be waiting on the counter on his next visit. She would give him her speech about how the two of them were fine, and while he could visit Buck whenever he came to Eagle Bend, he was to remember that Buck was her boy. It took Clara's intervention to convince Rosie to allow the three-year-old boy to spend occasional weekends with them.

Clara turned Landon's life upside down. She made Buck a true member of the Larabee family; he even had a role in their upcoming nuptials. She didn't stop there. She convinced Landon to reconcile with his parents. Then, she convinced them that she was the best woman to be Landon's wife. There was a courtship, plans for a wedding, and problems with her family. She took it in stride. She had a handle on everything when she discovered she was pregnant.

Landon wanted to move the wedding up, and she said she needed more time to convince her parents to attend. Then something happened. She never said what, but she packed her bags and went to live in Ely to think about the future. Nathan was born in Ely, but she and Nathan came home when Nathan was four months old. She and Landon resumed their wedding plans, deciding to keep it simple. When Nathan was six months old, three days before she and Landon were to be married in a simple church ceremony, some blasted hunter, probably, a tourist wanting a trophy for his wall, shot into her car, hitting her in the chest. She bled out before the ambulance made it to the scene.

Then, there was Landon with three of the cutest, most doted-on boys you could ever hope to see, Stephen, only being slightly cuter. When Landon had Buck for the weekend, he became 'Super Father,' letting his ranch hands deal with the ranch as he spent time with his sons,

Chris was ecstatic on the weekends when Buck visited the ranch. He had a brother with whom he could play. As tall as Chris, and then passing him, Buck looked older than he was, and he had a raw edge that came from living over a bar and dealing with some of the folks coming through the bar on a nightly basis. It was hard for people to remember he was the younger of the two boys. He could tell stories that made your hair stand on end, of drug dealing, of pimps beating on whores, and once of finding a dead woman in the dumpster.

After hearing those stories, Chris would go to Landon and beg him to take Buck to the ranch, where he would be safe, but Rosie wouldn't budge, and Landon's name was not on Buck's birth certificate.

For years, Orrin teased Landon about his boys. At times, they seemed joined at the hip, even little Nathan tagged along with his brothers and joined in their more hair-raising adventures. During Chris's senior year, he was the quarterback while Buck played the wide receiver. Together, they led their team to victory at All-State. On Saturday nights, the boys could be seen cruising around the town. Chris drove, and Buck would talk girls into joining them.

Rosie had not been big on book learning, so when Buck needed help catching up in school, Chris tutored him until he made straight A's like his brothers. They went to the same university, and both excelled, graduating at the top of their classes. They began going to horse shows together, and when Chris was twenty-eight, he and Buck made an appointment with their father and Orrin, outlining a proposal to breed quarter horses.

Landon had been surprised; he had always figured the boys would come and work with him. Orrin had seen it coming. It was obvious to anyone who cared to look. Chris felt that he needed to get out from under Landon's shadow, and of course, where Chris went, there went Buck.

Well, except to the altar. Chris ended up marrying the sweetest, most gentle woman in the whole state of Nevada. The daughter of a rancher, Sarah had been on a visit home from a woman's college back east when she met Chris at a rodeo. Her father objected not only to Chris but also to her marrying before she completed college. His objections fell on deaf ears, and with Buck's help, Sarah and Chris eloped.

Orrin's eyes fell on Chris. The man seemed sober. Orrin suspected he had been ever since he had returned to the ranch. He was sober, but the fire, the rage, still smoldered in his eyes. Only the careful calming influences of his brothers kept the man still and in his seat. This meeting may be due to his father's death, but the anger in those eyes went back to the night three years ago when Chris's ranch burned.

It had been a long, dry summer, not drought conditions, but a summer drier than usual. A summer that had everyone searching the sky for signs of rain. Chris and Buck took a trip to Mexico to look at a stallion they were considering for their breeding program. Sarah had originally planned for her and Adam to accompany them, but morning sickness had hit her hard, so she and Adam stayed behind. Landon promised his son he would check on them every day and used Chris' instruction to 'watch out for them' as an excuse to play with his grandson. Chris and Buck were supposed to return Thursday night, but Buck wanted to spend one more night with a woman he met.

After calling Sarah, Chris agreed, saying he would be home the next day.

Landon had planned to go into town to pick up a pizza, but called Sarah to cancel when he began throwing up after lunch. Drained from his stomach bug, he went to bed early. That night, the incessant barking of his dog, Jack, woke him. Thinking of dry pastures, the acrid smell filling the air sent Landon into auction. Calling out for his ranch hands to wake up, he instructed Jerry to call the fire department and nearby ranchers. They needed to get the fire under control before it spread. Thinking they able to contain the fire with a trench, he loaded his truck's bed with every shovel in the barn, jumped in, and followed the smell of smoke to its might be source. Two of hi ranch hands grabbed his arms so firmly they left bruises on his arms as he tried to rush into the smoldering ruins of Chris's home.



Chris and Buck returned from their trip pulling an empty horse trailer. Buck later recalled the sense of dread filling them as they traveled. Neither Sarah nor their father had answered when Chris called to see how Sarah was feeling. Their feeling of foreboding increased long before they reached Chris's home. The smell of fire tainted the air as they drove through town. The looks they exchanged reassured each other; both men were thinking that if the fire had been on either their father's ranch or Chris's spread, the smell would not have reached Four Corners. It was not them; it would be a neighbor who would feel the devastation fire leaves in its wake. Both men scoured the sides of the road, searching for the source of the smoke cloud billowing in the sky, wondering if the fire was out or if their help would be needed.

They ignored the bouncing, as first the truck and then the empty trailer crossed the cattle grid, and Buck sped up the gravel road towards Chris's house. Met with the grisly smell of burned horseflesh hanging heavy in the air, clawing at their throats, Buck slowed the truck to spare a glance at the smoldering remnants of the barn. Then he floored his truck past the vehicles lining both sides of the drive, past the grim-looking, soot-covered men and teens hovering uselessly, waiting for someone to tell them what to do. Buck passed the small grove of trees Sarah had nurtured, hoping one day they would produce enough fruit for her to make jelly.

The firetruck and ambulance parked in what had once been the front yard of Chris's home gave them a flash of hope that someone had survived the flames that consumed the house. At another time, the smell and the sight of the burned husk of a barn would have been enough to bring grown men to tears. On that morning, it gave the folks who had shown up to help put the fire out something on which to focus so they did not have to see the blackened bones of the house, smell charred human flesh, or witness the shredding of a man's life as he realized what happened. The house was little more than ashes; Sarah's and little Adam's bodies were tucked into black bags waiting for the ambulance to take them to the morgue. People wearing white rubber gloves swarmed through the ashes searching for clues, sifting through the debris of Chris's life.

Jumping out of the truck before Buck had brought it to a complete stop, Chris spotted the black body bags. Dropping to his knees, he began screaming; he wouldn't quit. He said horrible things to his father and worse things to Buck. After the funeral, he started drinking. For three years, Chris drank, taking small jobs to pay for his bar tab when his bank account was emptied, and his father cut off the money.

At first, Buck tried to keep tabs on Chris. He felt compelled to keep him from ending each day in a drunken stupor. After almost two years of Buck spending his weekdays helping Landon on the ranch and spending his weekends sobering Chris up, Buck came home with his lip split and one of his eyes swollen shut; he didn't say anything to Landon, but he didn't go back out after his brother again.

Orrin finished his reminiscing, knowing these men were waiting for answers. "I've never been one to beat around the bush, and my wife has, frequently, told me I need to learn tact. Figure she might be right," he glanced around the room. The eyes, meeting his, ranged from openly curious to closely guarded.

"You are all here, as sons of Landon Jefferson Larabee, to hear his will. Rest assured, I will read it, in its entirety, to you, but it is a long, dry document. I will first tell you what he wanted done and why." His eyes circled the room again; he had lost them already. The men were busy examining the other occupants of the room. Some, for the first time, registering an enormous family had suddenly been thrust upon them. He gave them a moment to stare at each other and digest the news.

"Excuse me, Mr. Travis."

"Yes, Ezra, isn't it?" He knew exactly with whom he was speaking, but didn't want these men to realize or even suspect he had researched their lives and possessed extensive dossiers on each of them.

"Yes, suh, Ezra Standish," Ezra wanted to look around the room, but the laughter building up in him would escape if he connected with any other faces saying they also saw the humor of the situation. "Am ah to understand that we aruh all sons of Mr. Larabee."

"Yes."

"And except for Mr. Christopher Larabee," Ezra nodded his head once in Chris's general direction, "We aruh all, how shall Ah say it, born on the wrong side of the blanket."

Travis nodded, halfway angry at the amusement dancing in the young man's eyes and halfway grateful for it.

Ezra couldn't help it; he started laughing. Wiping at the tears threatening to roll down his cheeks, he struggled to compose himself and answer the incredulous looks tossed his way. "Ah know, Ah know. This

is supposed to be a most solemn occasion, and ah am being extremely rude, mah mothuh would roll in her grave, but it just struck me that," he waved his hand around the room to include them all, "our Mr. Larabee collected bastards like other men collect stamps."

Ezra heard the growl and hastily apologized, "Ah am sorry if ah offended you, Mr.

Wilmington." The tall man sitting on the other side of Chris Larabee must be the other son Landon raised. Chris, Buck, Nathan. He filed the names away for later, when he'd have the time to figure out what his father found in them, which made him keep them, the element he lacked.

"Are you ready to continue?" Orrin asked the chuckling man.

"Oh, mah yes, please proceed."

Travis settled in his chair and steepled his fingers. "Your father knew of each of you and prepared a personal letter for each of you. Suffice it to say he recognizes each of you as one of his sons. Landon knew this might be hard for all of you to accept. He was not proud of his actions regarding his children, and in your letters, he explains those actions or, in some cases, inactions. He did not do this in the will because it would become public domain. These letters are private communications between you and him. Each of you may decide on how much, if any, of your letter you wish to share with your brothers or with other people.

"Having said that, I must also say, he has stipulated in his will, if any son, and I stress this, any son attempts to prove another son is not the true son of Landon Larabee, he will forfeit his entire claim to his share of the estate. Landon was very sure that you seven men are his sons. While he knew in his heart that each of you was his son, and while he did not believe any of you would question the claim of his calling you sons, he did worry that a non-family member might. He didn't want there to be any questions. Therefore, he had DNA collected from all seven of you, tested to verify his decision to call you sons. Before you ask how, we had very good detectives collect samples from cups that had been thrown away and the like. I have the results in my safe. Are there any questions?" Orrin studied each face, not one of them revealed the confusion he must be feeling; in that, they were all Landon's sons.

"It is my personal belief Landon wanted every one of you, and if certain circumstances had been different, he would have happily raised every one of you," Travis smiled at Josiah Sanchez whose salt and pepper head almost rivaled his own, "Although, I am not sure how good a father he would have been at sixteen." Josiah broke into a large grin that threatened to split his face in half.

"Almost a year ago, Landon came to talk to me. He was extremely worried about his deteriorating relationship with his son Nathan, and Chris's increasingly inappropriate behavior." Orrin looked over at Chris as he spoke, catching the flash of guilt crossing Chris's face. Good. Maybe there was hope for the man after all. Maybe Chris was beginning to see how destructive his actions were.

Not wanting to embarrass Chris further, Orrin continued, "Landon worried that Buck would get hurt in his roles of playing peacemaker and guardian angel as well as practically running the ranch by himself and doing the work of three men. He did a lot of thinking and decided he messed things up with all of you, and he was desperate to set it right." He stopped to take a sip of water, surprised to find, even as seasoned as he was, having spent a lifetime dealing with all sorts of people, some of them less than savory, having those seven sets of eyes so much like their father's, focused on him, unnerved him.

He cleared his throat and continued, "Landon was an extraordinarily successful rancher. Unfortunately, being successful does not always translate into being wealthy. Up until about fifteen years ago, Landon had little cash. He had enough to take care of his boys. Enough to send them to school. Enough to help Buck and Chris get their horse ranch started. Enough to fund Nathan's schooling, but everything else, he plowed back into the ranch.

"On my advice, he began diversifying. He gambled in a big way in the stock market. He provided financial support to various small enterprises within the community. He bought and sold real estate across the state. Everything Landon did, he did well. He has left a sizeable estate. But as with all good things, there is a catch."

"That catch being?" Chris's quiet voice almost echoed in the room. The judge told them about the brothers, but he had not discussed the terms of his will. He merely stated Landon wanted all his sons to hear those terms together.

"Landon desperately wanted to get you all together. He planned to bring all of you to the ranch after we found you. He wanted to sit down and get to know each of you. Writing his will was a contingency plan.

He never expected to die and thoroughly expected to mold you all into one big family. Frankly, I didn't think it could be done, but he was adamant, saying that you were all Larabees, and blood would tell in the end.

"Chris," he used Chris's name, but spoke to them all. "He has left each of you one million dollars, provided," he paused; he knew it was a little too dramatic, but he wanted them all to hear and understand this provision. "Provided you live together in the ranch house as brothers and run the ranch together. Landon made it clear how he wanted things done. I will give you his conditions in a moment.

"Assuming you meet his requirements, to live at the ranch and help run it, one million dollars will be deposited in your bank account. A million dollars for each of you staying for the entire year. If you leave before completing the year, your million dollars will be given to the charity of your choice. In addition, if one of you leaves, your brothers will, each, forfeit one hundred thousand of their million dollars, to be given to a charity. At the end of the year, you may take your million and leave if you desire. If you choose to leave, you will always be welcome back at the ranch, but you will not be entitled to share in the rest of the family holdings unless your brothers unanimously vote to allow you back into the business."

"Orrin, I worked right alongside Dad for the past three years and there isn't seven million to be had unless you start selling off land and stock," Buck objected thinking of when the second year of the drought hit the ranchers, he and Dad stayed up many a night trying to make ends meet, without having to dig into the reserve in the bank. If there was so much money to be had, why didn't they spend it?

"You're right, and you're wrong, Buck. When your father began diversifying, he worried about losing the land. He could have dealt with losing money, but he wanted the land to be always safe from any fluctuations in fortune his investments might bring.

"The Double L Ranch and Larabee Holdings are two separate entities. None of you may touch any part of Larabee Holdings until this year has passed, and you have committed to working with your brothers in the running of the Holdings. Stocks, bonds, and all investments are frozen for one year. Beginning in the morning, nothing will be bought or sold."

"Is that prudent?" Ezra asked. He made himself mad by speaking again, but the thought of money, with no one to watch over it, subject to the vagaries of the economy, made him nauseous, and he was nauseous enough as it was without having to worry about that money.

"No, but it is the way your father set it up. He was confident, the lot of you could quickly reverse any reversal of fortune," Orrin answered. He had wondered which of them would be the one to bring up the flaw in Landon's plan. He thought it might be John David, fresh out of Business School, but he wasn't surprised the gambler had brought it up. He reached into his stack of papers to pull out copies of the conditions for getting the million dollars and began handing them out.

"Read this. It is not the letter he wrote to you. These are his conditions you must follow if you plan on inheriting. These are copies of the original, which is part of his will and will become part of the public record." Once each man had a copy of the rules, he began watching them as they read.

How to Earn a Million Dollars in Seven Easy Steps

1. You will live on the ranch for one entire year, that year beginning the day following the reading of my will at ten in the morning. Some of you will have to contact employers and such. So, leeway will be given at Orrin Travis's discretion on how long this will entail.
2. Each of you will have a room at the ranch. The room is furnished. If you need more, it comes out of your allowance. Yes, Bucklyn, there was a reason for the remodeling I've had done, sorry I couldn't share those reasons with you.
3. Each of you will receive an allowance of \$1500.00 per month for personal use, payable out of the ranch coffers. You will receive this money on the first day of each month.
4. The estate has two pickups, and both trucks are in good condition. It also has a four-door sedan. The ranch funds repairs, insurance, and upkeep for these vehicles as it does for the tractors and other equipment. However, your cars are your own and are to be taken care of by you, not by the ranch, even if you use them for ranch business. Deal with it.
5. You will not hire housekeepers, cooks, or groundskeepers. Calvin Yosemite, and his two brothers will help with the ranch, but only work part-time. Their involvement does not excuse any of you of your responsibility to do your share in the running of things. Remember, the Yosemite brothers have their place to look after. If circumstances dictate the need to hire additional people, you may collectively decide to do so, provided the ranch accounts are in such a state as to allow you to pay for said hiring.
6. You are not chained to the ranch, provided your work is done. I encourage you to dine out, meet your neighbors, date, and so on.
7. The ranch is to show a profit at the end of one year.

There is one exception to these rules, and that is Nathan. I know, son, you have been resistant to starting a practice in this town. I know that decision is most probably due to our argument. Please read the letter I wrote you, as I hope it will explain my actions to your satisfaction, and you will consider opening a practice here. Your presence is needed in Four Corners. Doctor Griggs is nearing retirement age and cannot manage things alone. If you choose to work with him, I will relieve you of the day-to-day ranch work provided you are at the clinic or the hospital. I do not relieve you of the burden of living with your brothers, and I am smiling here as I remember how much you loved living on the ranch. I do not believe your brothers will prove to be too great a burden. I do not relieve you of your responsibility to take part in making decisions concerning the ranch.

To all my sons, I am sorry for my mistakes. I can only hope that by giving you to each other, I can help rectify those mistakes. Even if, at the end of this year, you find you cannot live with each other and want no part in the operations of the Ranch or of Larabee Holdings, I hope you leave with some measure of love for your brothers and me. If you do leave, take your money, live as well as you can, and never hesitate to ask your brothers for help, that is what families are for.

With all my love,
Your Father,
Landon Jefferson Larabee

Orrin leaned against the window, watching as the men read. Nathan brushed tears off his face and sat motionless, lost in thought. He felt reassured by Nathan's reaction. He knew the man would read the instructions and think, not only of his words but also of the love he and his father had for one another.

Josiah fingered his ornate cross as he read. He carefully folded the note and put it in his breast pocket when he finished reading. He bowed his head and either prayed or fell asleep. After a moment of watching him, Orrin decided the man was praying; he looked as though he would be the type to snore when he slept.

Orrin could read every emotion as it raced across Buck's face. Yes, Dad. So, these men are why you added all those rooms to the house. Yes, of course, I will stay for the year. I will help the others, and we will become a family. This will be good for Chris; this plan will give Chris something to focus on other than Sarah and Adam. Yes, I will make sure Nathan comes home. I will take care of things until Chris can. Love you, too, Dad.

It was harder to figure out what Vin Tanner was thinking. His long, curling, brown hair fell into his face as he read, but Orrin could tell he was mouthing the words, and the length of time he took to complete the letter, he was having trouble deciphering it all. He didn't think the man was slow. Yes, he had made only average grades in school, but he and Landon had talked about Vin's school transcript, and the two of them figured his lackluster grades were more a result of moving in and out of foster homes rather than any lack of intelligence. Besides, his brilliant blue eyes were too observant for him not to be intelligent.

Ezra had been smiling as he read the instructions, but paled as he read the last paragraph. Now, he sat stiff and erect in his blue leather chair. He looked as though he might be ill, but Orrin wasn't sure. He didn't look long at his face; it was devoid of emotion; he could easily pass for a department store mannequin. It was painful to witness.

Orrin glanced over at John David Dunne. He missed seeing him read, so he decided to watch him as he tried to get better looks at his brothers without them catching him. Buck had caught his attention and winked, and you could see the tension melt away from the young man. He'd stay; he was desperate for a family after having just lost his mother. He could heal at the ranch.

Orrin didn't bother to look at Chris' face as he read. That face, etched in anger and pain, revealed little. His actions would reveal more. He could be the glue binding them together, or... he could take his brothers with him on his little path of self-destruction.

"Before we make any decisions regarding this, Orrin, I think you need to tell us why you had the police and the FBI talking with us these past two weeks," Chris challenged Orrin.

"That's fair," Orrin said as he pulled his chair out and sat back down. "Several months ago, Landon asked me to find his missing sons so he could bring you home. He had a health scare. Went in for a routine physical, and Dr. Griggs did a biopsy on a 'suspicious spot on the back of his hand. Emmett scared him by using the 'C' word, and he decided he didn't have time to waste. He came in asking me to hire investigators to find his sons. He had a list with their birth dates, mothers' names, and any other information he thought might be helpful. I asked him how he planned to get grown men to come to Four Corners. He didn't have a good answer. He just said when I found you, he would talk to you and bring you home, and I quote his words, 'where you belong.'

Orrin picked up the envelopes neatly stacked in front of him and absently began shuffling them from one stack into another. He had already had this conversation more times than he cared to, first at the hospital with Chris and Buck and then later with Mitch Harris, Ray Benson, and some man from the FBI whose name he could not recall. He didn't want to relive the events of that Friday morning. In a way, it was harder than learning of his son's death; he supposed it was because he was there with Landon. He didn't want to talk about it, but he would; he owed it to the men sitting around the table who were new to the family.

"Everything changed, not on the day your father died, but the Friday before Landon's death. A private investigator named Frank Holland committed suicide. Landon called me that afternoon to tell me his PI was dead. I must say that I was confused because I had hired three firms to find you all, and I had not heard of any of them dying. I asked Landon what he was talking about, but his answer was as vague as all get out.

"I had no clue that he had hired anyone else until the afternoon after Holland's wife, Carmon, discovered Frank Holland's body. Landon called me from the parking lot of a police station in Ely to tell me about the death, saying he wanted the man's wife and his secretary taken care of. He said it was his fault that Holland was dead, and he felt obligated to ensure Holland's widow and secretary were financially secure. He wanted me to get the paperwork done. Said he would be in in a few days to sign it. He hung up the phone before I could ask why he had hired another PI.

"He was preoccupied the whole week. I called him repeatedly, but he either would not answer or would say he was busy and hang up when he did answer. After a couple of days of not talking with him, I took matters into my own hands and made some calls. While I have not been on the bench for the past few years, I am still in contact with people in law enforcement. From what I learned from asking around, Holland was considered a very capable investigator with contacts from all over Nevada, California, and other states. I contacted the police in Ely and tried to talk with the lead detective investigating Holland's death, a man named Ray Benson. I said I tried because he shut me down, saying 'no comment' and hanging up on me." Orrin snorted and then explained, "I was hung up on more times in that week than I have ever been in my career as a lawyer, a judge, and a semiretired attorney combined."

"I ended up calling Mitch Harris." Looking at the lack of reaction from the men new to Four Corners, he elaborated, "Four Corners does not have its police force; we rely on the county's sheriff department to provide law enforcement for the area. Their office and the county jail are a couple of blocks down the street. Sheriff Harris is the man in charge. More importantly, he keeps his ear to the ground and knows about anything that may impact the people of Four Corners.

“Mitch picked up the phone on the first ring, saying he had been expecting my call. In a concise, matter-of-the-fact manner, Mitch gave me the details your father had not. Holland was found by his wife in his tub with his gun on the floor beside him and his brains sprayed on the wall behind him. There was no note, but his place was tidied up, and a suit, according to his wife, his best one, hung up on the doorknob of the bedroom’s closet. The police in Ely think it was suicide, but your father showed up and made a stink about it being a murder.

“Your father claimed Holland had scheduled a meeting for the first thing that morning because there had been a new development in the case Holland was looking into for him. Your father said something to Benson at their meeting that Benson recalled after hearing your father had died of a heart attack. Landon told him that if he ended up dead, any time soon, to remember he did not believe in killing himself. That’s when the FBI was called in.

“I am getting ahead of myself. Let me go back to the morning Landon came in. Molly and I had just finished looking at the appointment schedule for the day, and she went to unlock the doors while I began turning on the lights. He must have been standing at the door, waiting for the sound of the door unlocking, because he didn’t give Molly time to back away from the door when he shoved it open. He came barreling in and came extremely close to knocking Molly to the ground. “‘Orrin, I need to talk with you,’ Landon declared as he made his way to my office. I had never seen Landon deliberately rude; he never said a word to Molly... there was no excuse me or I am sorry, nothing, and his unusual behavior kept my mouth shut as I followed him to my office.

“Normally, I shut the door when meeting a client, but I didn’t that morning. I felt I needed Molly to witness whatever he planned to say.

“He sat in the chair and crossed his legs, shifting his position several times before I walked around my desk to my chair. The calmest, most laidback man I have ever known was ... the best I can describe it was jittery. ‘Are you ok?’ I asked even though it was clear that he wasn’t.

“‘Orrin, I have a lot to do. I may not have the time to finish. I need you to listen.’ “‘OK,’ I answered, deciding to let him talk.

“I engaged Holland to investigate an unusual incident at my home months ago. We ended up falling into a rabbit hole.’ He reached for the legal pad on my desk and grabbed a pen, but he put the pen down when he saw how badly his hand shook.

“‘Did you create trusts for Holland’s wife and secretary?’ he asked.

“I opened the file drawer in my desk and pulled the documents out. He took the papers, but instead of leaning back in his chair to peruse them, which he normally did, he reached for the pen and signed both documents. He signed them, but his hand...arm was shaking so much, the signature was almost unreadable, and you know how neat and precise his penmanship was. Molly had been standing in the doorway, and when she saw he planned to sign them, she got her notary seal and notarized them on the spot.

“Getting that done seemed to relieve him, then he said, ‘Orrin, they will need help closing up his business. If you and Molly can help, I would certainly appreciate it.

Kathy will need to find a new job. Can you help her?’

“I nodded I would, but then I asked, ‘What is going on?’

“He looked up at me and answered, ‘I have had too many people I love die, and now Chris has too. Holland and I were putting the pieces of the puzzle together. He had something to tell me, but he is dead. The files he had are gone.’

“I was going to ask more questions, but Molly walked in and knelt by Landon. ‘Let me take your pulse, Landon,’ she said, grabbing his wrist before he could say anything. She looked up at me and mouthed, “It’s too fast. Call an ambulance,’

“The sirens could be heard, but I was listening to him say, ‘I wanted to know who and why?’

“I wanted to ask him about his copies of the files he and Holland made. He kept copies of everything... I didn’t get a chance to ask; the EMTs had entered and were fitting an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth. Brian, one of the EMTs, said, as he was slamming shut the back of the ambulance, that Landon might be having a heart attack.

“Thirty-eight minutes. It took thirty-eight minutes to get him to the hospital,” Orrin spoke, almost to himself. Those thirty-eight minutes had been an eternity.

"Buck made it to the hospital before Molly and I did. He was on the phone, tracking Nathan and Chris down when the ambulance pulled up.

"After a while, the doctors came out and told us it wasn't a heart attack. More of a panic attack, they said, but they decided to keep him overnight for observation. They gave him something to help him sleep." Orrin's voice faltered, and he took a couple of deep breaths. "Chris showed up by then, and we were sitting in the lobby waiting for Nathan to get there; he'd said he'd catch a cab as soon as the plane landed. We were talking when people started running to his room. He died, had another heart attack, and died.

"They held the body until the results of the autopsy were in. The autopsy showed he had a massive heart attack. That morning, the doctors said his heart was fine. Orrin quit speaking; he turned away and looked out the room's lone window, waiting until he could control the trembling in his voice.

"In short, something happened. Dad decided to hire a private investigator. The investigator commits suicide after making an appointment to see Dad. Then, a week later, Dad gets admitted to the hospital and dies," Chris ticked off his points in a quiet voice that carried throughout the room.

"This is true. We have no reason to believe you, any of you, are in danger, but we also can't be sure of your safety." Orrin waited for someone to say something, but they all sat still, digesting the information. He wanted to guide them back to the matters at hand. "Do you, any of you, have any questions regarding the terms of your father's will?"

"So, all we have to do is live and work at the ranch for a year to get all that money?" John

David did not want to think about any more deaths; he was still reeling from his mother's death last June. He could think of Landon Larabee and his will, without hurting. Landon Larabee was just a name; the name of a man who left him a million dollars.

A million dollars! He had never dreamed of having that kind of money. He and his mother had scraped by on her job cleaning houses. It covered the bills but left no room for luxuries, and she had insisted that his money from afternoon and summer jobs go into the bank for when he went to college. With a million dollars, he could have bought a house for her, a new car, and beautiful clothes. She wouldn't have had to work so hard, and her hands would be soft and manicured, not rough with broken nails. She would have had time to go to college herself.

He sighed. He had those dreams for years; now, he wouldn't be buying her any of those things; he'd be buying her a tombstone. He looked up from the stain on the floor, which had captured his attention as he listened to the Judge talk about his father's death. Glancing around the room, he asked, "Who's doing this? Staying for the year, I mean?"

"I'm in. A million dollars is a lot of money for doing' ranch work," Vin answered. He wanted to know more about his mother and how she died. It sounded like the best place to start looking would be at the ranch. The money sounded nice, too, but with this other stuff about family, he'd wait and see how things sorted out. He'd been introduced into too many homes, each saying they were his new family, to get excited about this new promise of kinship.

"Might be interesting having a family," Josiah's voice boomed. This sounded like the opportunity he had been waiting for. It was an opportunity to take his time to decide how he should spend the rest of his life.

Orrin glanced at Josiah, noting that he was tall, but not extraordinarily tall or big, yet he carried an aura of physical and mental strength. He seemed like a man who had seen many different things in life. He would be an interesting man to get to know. Maybe after Josiah settled in at the ranch, he'd invite him to lunch. He thought he'd like to get to know Landon's sons.

"The ranch was my home," Chris glanced over at Buck and then at Nathan. He owed it to his father to get this brother-stuff settled and to find out how and why his father had died. Then he'd leave, with a million dollars, and he could drink until he vanquished his pain.

"I'm staying," Buck answered. He loved the land, but more importantly, he loved Nathan and Chris, and for his father's sake, he'd give these others a chance. And, if someone had killed Chris and Nathan's mothers just as their father had been killed, he couldn't assume his brothers were safe. No matter his inheritance, he'd stay and watch over them.

"Orrin, I'm going to need help getting out of my contract," Nathan said. He loved Birmingham, loved his work at University Hospital, and he loved his mother's family. This was home, though. Until he had returned, he had not known how much being home meant to him.

Even if he did not have his brothers at his side, even if he did not live on the ranch, and most importantly, even without the lure of money, he would stay. The people in Four Corners needed a doctor; Doctor Griggs was getting too old to manage things alone, and the nearest hospital was in Eagle Bend, a good forty-five minutes away.

"I'll schedule you for an appointment at 9:00 tomorrow morning," Orrin said as he scribbled himself a note and then looked up at the last one. Ezra, are you in?"

"A year... chained to a ranch. No, Ah think not."

"A million is a tremendous amount of money. Where else make that kind of money in a year?" Chris spoke, irritated that the man was not doing as their father requested.

"Ah have other prospects, and while they may not provide the same expectation of me ending the year with a million dollars in mah pocket, they are lucrative, and Ah will not be living on a ranch." Ezra checked his mask, making sure none of his thoughts were leaking out through his eyes, and looked around the room, trying to find a way to fit in. Maybe, if the offer had been made only to the other forgotten sons, and to Buck, with his easy, infectious smile, then, maybe, he could do it. He couldn't stay at a ranch with Chris and Nathan living there; he would spend each day looking at them and then looking at his reflection in the bathroom mirror, searching for what they had, but he lacked. Every time searched their faces and compared them with his own, a little piece of him would break off and disappear. By the end of the year, he would have money, but his self would have dissipated into nothing.

"Before you decide to forfeit the million dollars, let me give you the personal letters your father wrote," Orrin said, breaking the tension between Ezra and Chris. He reached into his stack and pulled out white envelopes thick with pages of love stuffed into them.

"I don't know what is in these letters. His instructions were for me to give them to you and for you to read them at your earliest convenience. There are no copies of these letters, and they will not appear in any form in the will; there is not even a mention of them in Landon's will. Landon realized his will would be open to public perusal, and these letters are intensely personal. He did not want you to read each other's letters, nor did he want you to ask each other about the contents of the letters.

"If at some time one or more of you decide to discuss your letters, you may, but there is to be no pressure on anyone to do so."

Orrin gathered up the envelopes made thick with the words Landon wanted to share. These letters had been his suggestion. He had never expected to pass them out. He had only suggested Landon write them as a prudent move, as protection against unforeseen tragedy. He thumbed through the envelopes, finding the one marked Ezra. He held out the letter, meeting the eyes of the one brother, ready to leave. "This is yours," he said.

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Ezra took the letter because he could not think of a gracious way to refuse, but he felt as though he had just placed a rattler in his pocket and was waiting for it to strike. I wrote to him once, and he is just now getting around to writing back to me. No, and Hell no. I will not read this missive.

"Ah think it is best if Ah leave." Ezra stood up, his ribs protesting the movement.

As he straightened, the room blackened, and all he could see were tiny points of light. He knew they were talking, protesting his leaving. He could hear Chris speaking angrily, but could not make out the words. He waited, and his vision cleared, and his hearing returned.

"Are you ok?" Nathan asked, knowing the answer was no.

"Of course, Dr. Jackson, Ah merely stood up too fast." He pasted his smile on, making sure it reached his eyes and held out a hand, "It's been a privilege to meet you, Dr. Jackson."

Absently, Nathan shook Ezra's hand, noting the sweaty palm and the thin bead of sweat across the man's upper lip, "I don't think you should be leaving right now."

"Nonsense, Dr. Jackson Ah must be on mah way,"

Ezra turned to shake hands with Vin Tanner, only to find Chris standing there. "Mr. Larabee, mah condolences on your loss." He smiled as brightly as he could, but the man didn't return it.

"We are going to get something to eat over at Inez's. Even if you don't want to spend a year with us, you can find the time for lunch," Chris ordered. He knew he sounded angry with the man, and he was: Standish was not even considering their father's request.

"When you put it like that, how can ah refuse? If you could give me directions..."

"It's three blocks, we'll walk. Are you up to it?"

"Of course," oh, damn it all, he thought, furious with himself. No. He wasn't up to it. He had broken ribs and was seriously wondering if he would be able to walk to his car. "Ah need to use the facilities first, if you don't mind."

"Molly will show you the way," Chris replied. He didn't like the way the man looked. He'd ask Nathan about his brother's health. A sick man could not make good decisions. He could not decide whether to throw away money or the opportunity to get to know his brothers. He could wait and make his decision when he was better.

"Thank you. Ah'm sure I can manage."

Chris watched him walk gingerly out to the hall before turning to Nathan. "Well?"

"He ain't gonna make it to Inez's," Nathan replied, and then realized ain't had crept back into his vocabulary. He could only hope the stir Ezra was causing would keep his brother from catching his slip-up.

"Five says he does," Tanner said as he opened his wallet. The smile tugging at his lips grew when his brothers (and would he ever get used to saying that?) began reaching into their wallets to pull out money.

"You go by Vincent or Vin?" Josiah asked after he made his bet.

"My friends call me Vin." Vin leaned against the wall and brushed his hair out of his eyes. He had started his day with his hair pulled back, off his face, and secured with a rubber band. Sitting in his truck and using the vanity mirror to try to work in a loose strand, he broke the rubber band right before the meeting at Judge Travis's office. His hair had been irritating him, as of late, and he was considering cutting it. He just hadn't found the time yet. "You?"

"What's in a name? Joe, Josiah, Mr. Sanchez, or Dr. Sanchez, I answer to any of those names. On the other hand, a man once called me Little Joe, and I didn't like it much."

"I'll remember not to call you Little Joe."

"Play it safe, call me Josiah," the man winked at his younger brother, and they both broke into grins.

Chris checked his watch and announced, "I told Inez we'd be there 'bout noon. She's holding her back room for us. We'd better head on over. Judge, would it be all right if we came back...say about two o'clock to finish?"

The judge nodded, feeling inordinately pleased with the way things had gone. Chris was doing his work for him; he'd hate to be in Standish's shoes right now because Chris was preparing to pressure the man into agreeing to follow the dictates of the will.

Smiling, he left the room. He'd have Molly call his two o'clock and ask him to come in later. He made his request and then exchanged grins with Molly as Buck's voice carried in from the street to fill the small lobby.



"Boys, you are in for a treat. Not only does Inez serve up the best steaks and ribs in the state, but she is the purdiest little spitfire and--"

"And she's one of the handful of ladies around these parts not at all interested in Buck," Chris said as he joined them.

"Chris, I tell you, she's playing hard to get."

"Well, Buck, tell me, how long is she planning on playing this game?"

"She loves me, Chris. Anyone with eyes can see that. Hey, kid, you ready to put some meat on those bones?" he threw his arm over John David's shoulder. "Say, what kind of name is John David?"

"What's wrong with it?"

"Don't get upset, kid. It's a fine name," Buck reassured as he pushed the boy out the door. "Kind of long, though. Don't you think?"

"My momma called me John David," he scowled at Buck, daring him to say one more thing about his name.

"It might have worked in a city like Boston. But kid, if you ain't noticed, you ain't in Boston. Do you see any pretty skyscrapers? Not around here, you don't. Tomorrow, I need you and yell 'Hey, John David, shut the gate before the cows get out!' and by the time I've said your name, half those girls are packed and are on their way to California."

"You want to call me John, that's fine."

Buck scrunched up his face thinking about it, "No, kid, I can name about half a dozen Johns right off the top of my head and there ain't no call to go and make you one of that herd. Chris, help me out here."

"JD," Chris obliged without hesitation or humor. If Buck was going to saddle the kid with a nickname, it had best be one that the kid could grow old with, because it would stick.

"Chris...I better go and--" Nathan looked worriedly at the empty stretch of sidewalk in front of the Judge's office. He started to go back in, but Chris's hand grabbed his upper arm, stopping him.

"Vin went to get him. If he needs you, he'll get you."

Nathan, surprised, looked around at the cluster of strangers. He had not seen the man slip away from the group, nor had he seen any sign Chris had noticed, and he had been keeping an eye on Chris. "But--"

"Nathan, let's get moving so we can eat. We need to get back here by two and get this finished."

Nathan glanced back inside Travis's office. The judge and Molly sat at Molly's desk quietly talking. There was no sign of Standish or Tanner. Reluctantly, he began following Chris toward Inez's restaurant. Standish looked ill, and Nathan was loath to leave without checking on him. On the other hand, the judge introduced him as a doctor. Both Tanner and Standish were grown men, and surely, if he was truly needed, they'd get him. He lengthened his stride and easily caught up with the others.



"Ya all right in here?"

Ezra didn't startle, but it was more a matter of not doing so because his side couldn't take it, rather than being aware Vin Tanner had entered the room. What happened to respecting a closed bathroom door, or at least knocking? He would suggest getting a lock for the door when he wrote Mrs. Kincaid a note thanking her for her hospitality.

"Ah'm sorry, ah must be holding up things."

"Nervous stomach?" Vin offered a plausible reason for the man having bolted out of the conference room.

"Ah am fine," he lied; he had nerves of steel. It was just that every breath he took made him relive the impact of each blow. He reminded himself to avoid deep breaths, at least until he was away from the strangers. Wondering whether the man heard him hacking, he consoled himself, thinking that at least he hadn't cried out as his ribs protested the movement his coughing caused.

"Yeah," Vin said, his expression saying that he didn't believe the pale man, not for one minute. "If you're finished making the acquaintance of the toilet, let's get goin' before Nathan gets it into his head to join us."

"It would be rather cramped in here," Ezra said. He turned on the water in the sink and, using cupped hands, rinsed his mouth. Straightening, he saw that Vin's eyes were watching his every move. He frowned and asked, "What?" "I've got five bucks on ya."

"You bet on me? What sort of bet?" his eyes narrowed with suspicion as he followed Vin Tanner out the door, letting the man hold it open for him.

"We're bettin' on whether ya can make it to this restaurant of theirs."

“There is a wager on whether ah can walk three blocks?” Exactly how bad did he look if they were betting on him? He had to do better. Remember, he told himself, be witty. That usually was enough to distract people and keep them from prying into his business.

“Nathan doesn't think you can do it. And him being a Doc, he thinks he knows.” He doesn't know me.”

“Exactly.”

Ezra ignored the fact that he had walked right into that one. “Ah am more than capable of walking to this establishment,” Ezra said, unsure if he was more irritated that the man was smirking or because he had to walk three blocks to prove he was indeed fine. Life would be much easier if he just got in his car and drove off. Damn his curiosity, anyhow. One day, it would get him killed.

“Yeah, that's what I said. Josiah, Buck, and the kid think you'll get about halfway there. Chris and me think you'll make it. Ya ain't gonna make me lose my money, are you?”

“Ah get half of the winnings.”

“Nope. Ya didn't place a bet.”

“Ah didn't realize that you all were the sort to make wagers of this type.” “A lot about us ya ain't realized.”

“Haven't.”

“Haven't what?”

“Realized.”

“You've completely lost me.”

“Don't use ain't. It sounds uncultured.”

“I ain't cultured.”

Perhaps not, but you are too intelligent to use such words.” “Habit.”

“Break it.”

“Make me.”

Ezra shook his head, “You'll have to do this on your own. Ah will not be staying.” “Even if we want ya to stay?”

“You don't know me.”

“I know ya are proud, stubborn, and courageous.”

“This is the first conversation we have ever had, and you have learned this how?”

“Ya are too proud to read your letter; I picked it up out of the trash.” Vin handed the letter, now torn in half, back to Ezra, who sighed his displeasure at the letter's return but put both halves in his suit's inner breast pocket.

Vin continued when Ezra began walking again. They were moving slowly, but he noticed so were the others walking in front of them. “Ya are too stubborn to lose the bet.” “It's three blocks, not a marathon,” Ezra interrupted.

“And ya are courageous enough to try this for a year,” Vin continued as though Ezra had not opened his mouth.

“Mr. Tanner, you are hard of hearing. Ah have definitely said that after this lunch, Ah would be leaving.”

“Best start calling me Vin.”

For a moment, there was quiet between them as Ezra battled the pain caused by the jolt of stepping off the curb. Walking across the alley with their destination in sight, he wondered how he was going to manage the step up, but a sudden hand under his elbow helped him maneuver the step. As suddenly as it appeared, the hand withdrew, and Ezra was allowed to walk up to the others under his own power.

