



After the Break

Rooting out Evil
Part 3 of the Seven Brothers Saga



I find myself staring self-consciously at my nails as I fill out the stack of papers in front of the Human Resources secretary. When I applied for the housekeeping job the resort had posted on its website, I had expected only one or two other applicants. I count six other women sitting around the room. They are hurriedly filling out their own set of papers, as though this were a race they needed to win. As long as the secretary kept busy answering their questions and making copies of their driver's licenses, I would take my time. I am not here for the job; I am here to observe Landon's sons' reaction.

Taking a minute, I scanned the room. A tall man with short dark hair, standing in the doorway, has answered his cell phone and has taken off running. No doubt he was one of Botello's security guards, and there is no doubt the doors to Tommy Botello's office will be opening any minute. Sure enough, the boss man himself has emerged from his office and is currently barking orders as he follows the security guard to the elevators. I know exactly where they would be going, just as I know I will not be able to stay to see the brothers' faces from my vantage point in Human Resources. In a few minutes, Botello will order the hotel shut down. It won't be obvious, of course, but one group of security will be scouring the footage from the floor on which Maude's once

elegant suite is located. Another team will place themselves at the doors leading to the streets, looking for anyone trying to escape the resort.

Let them look all they want; they will find no evidence that I exist. The sound of footsteps is fading, but the sounds of the women in the room asking each other what had transpired is enough to keep the secretary involved with the other applicants. Busy reassuring them that everything is fine and that there is nothing to worry about, she merely points me in the direction of the bathrooms when I ask her where they are.

I hate that my nails are unkempt. I suppose I will have to get some press-on nails or something until they grow back, but taking the time to destroy them while in Maude's lavish suite adds another layer to my down-and-out look. She will remember my ragged nails, just as she will remember my buck teeth, and the stench of alcohol on my breath, which is competing with the stench of my body odor. Once, I read that people remember smells a lot more accurately than they do what they see. I will be a test of that theory. It is a pity I will not be around to learn whether the theory has any validity.

None of them is smart enough to realize I planned this. My bag with its false bottom held the wigs I used to disguise myself as the elegant Maude when I broke into her room. One elegant blonde woman wearing sunglasses and a blue suit looks quite similar to any other blonde woman wearing sunglasses and a blue suit. Of course, my suit is not as nice as hers, and I don't wear designer sunglasses, but I am sure it did the trick. The man that I bumped into when I got off the elevator will only remember that I almost fell. That was a deliberate fall; I am never clumsy. I wanted him to focus on my near fall and not my features. I had thought the cameras might cause problems, but focusing on finding my key card in my oversized tote painted a very believable picture of a woman trying to locate her key card while dealing with an unwieldy piece of luggage, not a woman breaking into a room. They may have thought the locks they used were top of the line, but I have had almost forty years to perfect my craft.



That disguise was discarded when I returned to my dingy room, with far fewer cameras. While waiting in Maude's room, I had used her expensive bourbon as mouthwash. Last night, after I had a shower and changed into an old sweatshirt, I turned up the heat and spent the evening exercising. I made sure my sweatshirt absorbed every bit of my sweat, and the odor was noticeable.

I came close to sprinting, but by speedwalking, I was able to make it in time for my appointment without bringing undue attention to myself. My fast pace only contributed to my disheveled look and improved my disguise. I even snapped in place as I hurried, my high-quality buck teeth, a dentist had made for me years ago, when I, playing the rich and bored socialite, told him I wanted some for a Halloween party. Thinking he would be attending the party with me, he made himself a matching set.

Men can be so foolish!

It worked. A woman applying for the job beside me actually moved a chair away from me when I sat down. If asked, both she and the secretary will remember little

more than my buck teeth and my odor. I plan to leave the resort via the service entrance, and as I do, I will use the tail end of my shit to pull the fire alarm.



I am out, and there is mass confusion as staff members warn people not to use the elevators; instead, they are directing them to use the stairs. I am glad I did not have to walk down all those stairs. I could do it, but it would not be fun.

I wonder if Tommy Botello is trying to make it down the stairs or if he is looking at the mess I left in the once pristine suite. I think that he will think about how difficult it will be hauling his fat ass down all those flights of stairs, and like a captain going down with his boat, he will choose to stay and inspect Maude's suite. He will have to replace the bed, the sofa... Hell. He will have to replace it all.

Speaking of Tommy Botello, I wonder why he let himself get so fat? The man I remember was nice-looking. He wasn't as handsome as Landon, but then no one could be. Still, Landon never would have let himself get so very out of shape. Lanson remained handsome. Even as he aged, he remained a man who could attract women. Maybe, if Landon had allowed himself to get old and fat, I would have let go of my anger. On the other hand, I may have ended him myself.

The question becomes, would I have used my rifle or my knife?

I do not know. There have been so many times when I have watched him from afar, held my rifle up, found him in the scope, rested my finger on the trigger, and refrained from pulling. It would have been easy, but to be honest, I did not want him dead. I wanted him to be alone. I wanted the world to abandon him as he abandoned me.

However, if I had ever decided to put him out of his misery, I would have walked straight up to him and plunged my knife into his belly. As he fell to his knees with the blood pouring from him, I would have asked, "Hi, remember me?"

A woman can do so much with a good knife. I would have cut his lying tongue out of his mouth and then... Then, I would have unmanned him. Finally, I would have ended him, and when I realized that he was finally dead, my torment would end. I would have plunged the knife into my own belly, and I would have fallen beside him, so that our blood would have mingled in the dirt.

A hunter should be versatile with all weapons, but today, I prefer my knife.



Vin kept one eye on the screen in front of him, and the other on the ladies bringing in a platter of sandwiches, another one of cookies, and a third one piled high with various cheeses and crackers. When another woman came in pushing a cart holding a steel tub filled with ice and bottles of water, he figured she would leave the cart in the room, but when he saw that she planned to put it on the table, he jumped to his feet, saying, "Here, let me do that."

"I've got it, sir."

"I'm sure ya do, but I can't call myself a gentleman and just sit here and watch you ladies bring in all this good-smelling food and not offer to help." He grunted as he helped her move the tub. "To be honest, I don't know how you do it?"

"Teamwork," she answered as yet another woman entered, pushing a cart with several carafes of coffee on it.

"We are mighty appreciative of the coffee, but you can take the sugar and cream back with you. We all drink it black.",

"Even the lady?"

"The lady," Vin smiled, "has gone to her room."

"No, sir. She hasn't. She is down by Mr. Botello's office, talking with him."

"Really?" Vin frowned. He had thought Ezra was taking his mother to her room to recover from her confession. Had she thought of something?

"Yes, sir. She is talking with Mr. Botello and Mr. Reuben. She's trying not to show it, but I can tell she is upset."

"Is she upset because of the fire alarm?" Of course, he had heard the fire alarm go off, but engrossed in what he had discovered, he began saving the information before shutting down the computer. The way he saw it, Ezra had sacrificed enough of his own money for their family getaway; he couldn't leave the laptop on the conference table in case it got burned up, and he couldn't carry it down the stairs with it open. All the commotion had been for nought. An alert stating the building was fine and everyone could come inside was blasted within minutes of the alarm. He figured some kid had gotten bored and decided to see if he could cause a stampede.

"I don't think so. We were all fairly certain it was a prank. They didn't even get the casino cleared before they were calling everyone back in." Lucinda normally did not talk with the guests. She remembered to smile, say thank you, and politely answer any questions they asked of her, but she never volunteered information. But here she was talking to him like he was one of her friends. It wasn't just talking; what she had just revealed to him bordered on gossip. She should have remembered he was a guest, an important guest, but the way he jumped up to help her, guests did not act like that. Yes, he had helped, but his help wasn't what separated him from the typical guest. He talked to her, and when he did, he looked her in the eyes. Guests tended to look at her without seeing her. Guests treated her as though she, like the furniture or the food she served, was a prop in the luxury resort experience. He treated her as a real person. She wanted to keep him talking.

"I don't know what upset her, but for Mr. Botello to be involved, it must be serious."

Vin had to agree with her. A woman who had raced across the country with a baby in the backseat, only stopping to feed her sister to alligators, was not the kind of woman who would have been frightened by a fire alarm. She would have been annoyed, and if she had found the miscreant who pulled the alarm, she would have made sure he was all kinds of miserable. Something must have happened. Leaving the computer where it was, he moved past the women still setting up the buffet table.

He was prevented from leaving the room by Buck and JD coming in. Damn, Chris had given them thirty minutes to stretch their legs. Was the thirty-minute break already over? He hadn't even gone to the bathroom, not that he needed to, but he did need to stretch. "What is going on?" he asked. "I jest learned Maude is in Botello's office, lookin' upset."

"Don't rightly know, Vin. Chris went to find out. Nathan and Josiah went along to see if Maude needed their help. I only got a glimpse of them, but Ezra looked angry,

and she appeared scared. She is as white as a sheet; I didn't think people could get that white. Something must have scared her pretty bad."

"She may be shaken, but she is mainly pissed." JD contradicted Buck's assessment.

Buck thought about JD's words. He wasn't sure what the long-term outcome would be with Maude not being Ezra's biological mother, but the man who had gone after Timothy with no regard for his own health or safety was back. He reached out an arm to prevent Vin from joining the others. "Reckon, Miss Maude needs a few minutes to compose herself. We can give it to her. Josiah or Nathan may stay with her and Ezra, but Chris will be in any moment to tell us what happened. We can wait." Buck looked around the room, seeing the buffet table laden with food, and pushed his brothers towards it. "It's going to be a long night. We need to eat."

"But," JD protested. "We need to wait and see what happened."

"JD, you remember what I said when we learned about the attack on Nathan?"

"You said that we couldn't do any good standing around worrying about Nathan, and the needs of the animals came first."

"This is the same sort of situation, JD. Only this time, we are taking care of the needs of our bodies so we can better deal with whatever happened and not worry about our stomachs' growling." Buck was speaking to JD, but he hoped that Vin was hearing and processing his words; he didn't feel like tackling either brother if they tried to leave the room, but he would. Maude might look like she was planning on spitting fire, but he could also feel her fear. They needed to give her time to regain her equilibrium before they began interrogating either her or Ezra. Besides, at any moment, Chris would appear and let them know what happened.

He relaxed his grip on JD's arm and let him pick up a plate. He felt the tension in his body go down a notch when Vin did the same. Now that he didn't have to be concerned about them taking off to check on Maude and Ezra, he could focus on the few details he had noticed when he had gotten off the elevator.



When Chris had given them instructions to take a short break, they had all obediently filed out of the room, except for Vin, who shooed them on, saying he was working on something and didn't need a break. Chris had shrugged and said something, not quite under his breath, about Vin being a hound that had caught the scent of something interesting. Engrossed in something on the screen, Vin hadn't even looked up from the laptop, but had given a slight nod of his head as they left. Orrin, Ezra, and Maude had already left the room and headed for the elevators. Orrin's task was to call Mitch. Ezra was to escort his mother or aunt, depending on how you looked at things, to her room and get her situated. The rest of them had headed for the very nicely appointed men's room.

They had heard voices, but the thick doors of the restroom muffled the words. They hadn't paid any attention to the voices; instead, they listened to Josiah as he said, "I don't think we should rule out your Uncle Curtis quite yet."

Chris had been washing his hands at the time, and though Buck had half expected an angry reply from Chris, he had nodded his head in agreement. That was when the fire alarm sounded.



It was an annoying, piercing sound, deliberately designed not only to get people's attention, but to get them moving. A loud and commanding voice came over the loudspeakers embedded in the walls, instructing people not to take the elevator but to head to the nearest stairwell. Employees heading to their assigned posts rushed past them, pushed open the doors, and headed up or down the stairs, depending on their duty assignment. Buck grabbed the door before it slammed shut and waited as his brothers hurried past him.

Chris had taken no more than three steps when he spun around and started heading up the stairs, saying over his shoulder, "Orrin may have trouble climbing down the stairs. His heart is not as good as he pretends it to be. I'm going to go get him; the rest of you get out of here."

"You will need help," Josiah said, explaining his presence beside Chris as he began his ascent, taking the stairs two at a time, setting the pace for his brothers, who, ignoring Chris, followed him.

It had been easy to say that they would climb the stairs to Orrin's room, but it proved to be much harder to do as men, women, and children poured into the stairwell, forcing them to maneuver around them. Three floors into their climb, they heard a woman begging her toddler to walk. Josiah reached her first. Obviously struggling with the toddler holding his hands over his ears, the woman's eyes filled with grateful tears when Josiah swung the child up in his arms, saying, "Let me help." He let his brothers continue their journey as he headed down, whispering reassurances into the little boy's ears. Minutes later, he rejoined them. Panting hard, he explained, "Her husband showed up and took over."

"Are you OK?" Nathan asked.

Josiah didn't answer the question; he asked his own. How many more floors?"

Chris answered, "Three. We should have met him by now."

Nathan paused midstride, "This stairwell is the one closest to his room, but he may have taken another." Leaning on the rail, he peered upwards, searching for signs of anyone coming toward them. "No one else is coming down." The alarms silenced, and the all clear started to sound. He took the opportunity to rest and sat on a step. Looking up at Chris, he said, "We need to find Orrin and make sure he is alright."

"OK. Nate, you and Josiah go on up to his room. My room is on this floor. I will turn my phone on. Use his phone to let me know if he's all right. If I don't hear from you in, say, five minutes, take the elevator and go to the conference room, see if he is there, and call me. If he is not, we will fan out and begin searching the other stairwells."

Reaching his room, Chris opened the door, and without bothering to hold the door open or to invite Buck and JD in, he headed straight for the suitcase he had not bothered unpacking and pulled the phone out of a side pocket. As if by magic, the phone rang as soon as he wrapped his hands around it.

"Just wanted you to know that Evie and I ended up not going on the cruise."

"You didn't?" Chris hoped he sounded appropriately surprised; acting had never been in his repertoire of skills.

"Yeah, when we got to the port, we went to check our luggage, and standing in line, we realized we were the oldest ones checking luggage. Every which way we looked, we saw kids. One of those kids, who looked to be about JD's age, called me

Gramps. I told Evie that if I had to stay with children calling me Gramps, I would end up being seriously depressed. Evie suggested we rent a car and see the South.

"Listen, I just spoke with Sheriff Harris. Evie talked with Mary a little bit ago. Mary was spooked by a man watching her house. She called the sheriff's office, but the man had disappeared by the time they arrived. Mitch promised that he and his men would keep an eye on her place, but we are cutting our trip short. I think we will both feel better if we were home."

"Yes, sir. I am sure Mary will appreciate you being home."

"Did you and your brothers take the family vacation that Ezra was talking about at our little dinner party?"

"Yes, we are here, but I have lost track of my brothers."

"I am sure they will be banging on your door any minute now, wanting to take you to a show or something."

"Speak of the devil, someone is banging on my door now."

"Go answer it. I will see you soon."

When JD answered the door, a laughing Josiah and Nathan strode in.

"Give me the abbreviated version," Chris commanded. "We need to get back to the conference room."

"We are using the elevators, right?" Buck asked.

"Might be faster to take the stairs. Everyone is trying to get back to their rooms." Nathan said. It was a dare he hoped someone would decline to take him up on.

Chris stared at his brother as he thought through the options. He and his brothers were in good shape and could just as easily go down the stairs they had just climbed. Going down would be easier than the climb had been because gravity would be working in their favor. They didn't even look seriously winded. He knew they would do as he asked, but there was no urgent reason to push them. He tossed his phone back into his suitcase and buried it before he turned to his brothers, "I don't know about you, but I am tired and I am feeling a mite peckish. Let's try to get an elevator. Botello said he'd have us some sandwiches waiting for us when our break was over."

As he closed the door behind him, he asked, "Where was Orrin?"

"He was talking with Mitch," Nathan answered. "He felt that what he needed to tell Mitch was more important than running down multiple flights of stairs because some kid pulled the fire alarm."

"I'll bite," JD asked when Buck and Chris didn't. "How did he know there wasn't a fire?"

"He said that the same thing happened when they were in Mobile," Josiah answered.

"But what if he had been wrong and there was a fire?" JD persisted.

"You know, JD, I asked him that very thing... He said that he knew, and I am going to quote him... He said, 'He knew the character of Landon's sons and that they would rescue him.' Then he said he'd join us in a minute." The more he thought about it, the more humbled Nathan felt. People constantly put their lives in his hands when they showed up in the ER, but this was another level of faith entirely.

They were in luck. They only had to wait a few minutes before an empty elevator opened its doors and let them board. JD leaned against the wall. "I guess this

is an adventure we can share when we get home.” Grammatically, his words were a statement, but his voice made it a question.

Chris took the question seriously and mulled it over before answering. “Leave out the part about climbing a gazillion steps to save the judge, and I don’t see a problem with you talking about the Great Vegas Fire That Wasn’t.”

The elevator door opened, and Chris caught a glimpse of the back of Ezra’s head as he and Maude entered Botello’s office. Maude was absolutely ashen. Something was very wrong. He turned to Buck and saw the worry in his eyes, and knew his brother had also caught a glimpse of Maude. “Take JD to the conference room. If Vin isn’t there, have him paged. Stay put until I find out what has happened. Josiah, Nate, you are with me.” It didn’t matter that they had spent the last thirty minutes climbing stairs, and it didn’t matter that both Josiah and Nathan were taller than Chris; it was they who had to break into a trot to keep up with him.

Pushing JD towards the conference room, Buck sent up a prayer that Ezra and Maude were OK.



Chris burst through the door to Tommy Botello’s outer office. He expected to see Botello’s secretary behind her desk typing furiously on her computer. He had expected Botello to be talking with Ezra and his mother. What he was not expecting was the gun pointed at him by a grim-looking Lev Reuben. The man who had been helpful when Vin and Buck traveled to Vegas, supposedly looking for cattle dogs, the man who had been so cheerful earlier that morning when he had shown Chris the layout of the conference room, had vanished. Instead of a smile, Lev’s face was hard and unyielding. Chris instinctively flung his arms out to cover his brothers’ chests. He wasn’t sure what he could have done to protect them if lead started flying, but using every muscle in his body, he shoved his brothers back, trying to put them both behind him.

For a second, all of them froze in place, giving their brains time to process that a once-friendly man now perceived them as possible threats.

Lev slipped his gun into his shoulder holster, but he didn’t apologize. “They are safe, but there has been an incident.”

Ezra’s many explanations of Maude’s greedy nature had Chris running through scenarios in which Maude had stolen something. He quickly discarded each scenario. Even if she had shown up with a plan to take even a penny from the resort, there had been no time for her to enact her plan. “Are you planning to tell us what happened?”

Lev shook his head no. “Mr. Botello is waiting for some security footage to be made available. When it is, he will bring it to the conference room and tell you what happened.” Lev was smiling, but the smile did not come anywhere close to reaching his eyes.

Chris noticed then that Lev was not watching him or the brothers beside him, but the door behind them. Lev was waiting for something or someone dangerous to come through the door. Moving slowly and deliberately, he stepped to the side, taking his brothers with him and giving Lev a clear line of sight to the door. It might have been his imagination, but he thought he witnessed a slight relaxing of Lev’s stance. The man

was ex-military for sure. More than likely, he had been in special forces. He had definitely seen combat.

Chris knew exactly what Nathan was thinking and agreed with him one hundred percent. He didn't know, not with the certainty he did with Nate, but he felt sure Josiah's thoughts aligned with theirs. They had stirred up a hornet's nest by coming to Vegas. He hoped Maude and Ezra had not been too badly bitten.

"Mr. Reuben, I am not sure what we have just walked into, but I suspect it is tied to the reason we came to Las Vegas, and for bringing it here, I apologize."

Lev briefly took his eyes off the door so he could meet Chris's eyes. "Mr. Botello and I discussed the probability that trouble would follow you here and knock on our doors. We accepted the risk and prepared as best we could."

"But there was trouble?" Josiah asked. His usually booming voice carried no further than to the ears of those men in his immediate vicinity. The quietness of it contrasted sharply with his usual powerful, carrying rumble and reminded Chris that Josiah, too, had once been in the military. Josiah didn't whisper. Each word was distinct and easily understood. He lowered the volume so the enemy could not hear.

Lev slowly exhaled. He wished Mr. Botello would come out of his inner office and deal with the questions. "In a fashion."

"I am sure you are aware that both of my brothers hold doctorates. Doctor Jackson is trained in medicine. Doctor Sanchez is a psychologist. They will stay here in case their services are needed. I plan to return to the conference room to my other brothers that something happened, but we don't yet know what." He stressed the word yet. "Given that only a few moments ago I had a gun pointed in my face, I feel that my brothers and I need to be properly armed."

"I will have no difficulty procuring what you need. However, I am reluctant to hand out weapons to people who are not trained to use them."

Chris nodded his head in agreement. Obviously, you couldn't just hand a weapon to anyone without them being trained. But his father had trained him and his brothers to use a variety of firearms. They could hit what they aimed at. They knew how to clean and maintain their firearms. More importantly, they knew when to use them and when to use other means when confronted with a threat. "Our father trained Nate, Buck, and me. Consider us proficient. Josiah was trained by the military. Vin is licensed by the state of Texas to be a bounty hunter. I am sure you know they demand their bounty hunter to have firearm training before they are given a license. Ezra already carries a Sig, but will need a shoulder holster. The only one of us who needs training is JD, and we will make sure he receives it."

Lev nodded. "Good, that is the only reservation I had. The next step is choosing what you want. I will take you to a store that will open tomorrow for us. It will take three days for the state to run its background checks before they can be released to you. How about I run them up to you on Thursday? Can you stay alive until then?" He asked the question with a smile, but his eyes revealed he was asking a serious question.

Chris considered the question with the same level of seriousness with which it had been asked. Nate was carrying their father's weapon. Josiah possessed a wicked hunting knife, which he regularly honed. Ezra had his Sig. Vin had his rifle, and while

his father once had an antique, metal gun safe in the library, it was missing. "There is no waiting for a rifle, is there?"

"A hunting rifle, no."

"We will need at least six."

"Will meeting me at 9:00 be too early?"

Nathan snorted. "We are ranchers, that's half the day gone."

Chris tried his hand at lightening the mood, "You are a doctor, not a rancher."

"Chris, in case you don't remember, I was a rancher before I became a doctor. Besides, more often than not, I am the first one up."

Chris didn't try arguing the point, but he stood stock still, listening for sounds of life coming from behind the closed doors of Tommy Botello's office.

"Mr. Botello meets with many people in his office who do not want their personal business aired; the room is soundproofed." Lev recognized the look of intense concentration on Chris Larabee's face. He knew about the soundproofing and yet, he, too, had worn that same look as he tried to gauge whether his boss was with someone and would not want to be interrupted, or if he was out on the floor somewhere and had merely closed the door when he left.

When he left, Chris didn't bother offering his hand for Lev to shake. The way he saw it, Lev was the only one armed in the room, and needed his gun hand free if Danger walked through the doors. Confident that both Nathan and Josiah understood their roles, he left.



Orrin walked into the conference room expecting the brothers to be eating, and they were, the three who were in there. "Where is-"

Buck spoke before Orrin could finish his sentence, "Something happened, and before you ask, we don't know what it was. Until we know what happened, there isn't much we can do. Go ahead and get a plate. There are all kinds of sandwiches. Pick whatever. I don't think you will be disappointed." Seeing the judge pick up a plate, he turned to examine the laptop's screen. "Sonovabitch," he muttered angrily. "Nate and Chris will need to take a look, just to be sure, but that's Dad's gun safe."

"We are going to need it back," Chris said as he entered the room. "You sure?"

"Here, take a look." Buck pushed the laptop towards Chris.

Obligingly, Chris sat in the chair beside Buck and pulled the laptop close. "JD, if you're finished, would you mind fixing me a plate while I look through these pictures?" He quickly scrolled through the pictures, then went back to the first one and examined each one more thoroughly. Without looking up, Chris remembered to thank JD when his brother placed a plate next to the laptop. Keeping his eyes on the picture on the screen, Chris fumbled for a sandwich.

"Careful," Vin warned. "That's Ezra's laptop, and he'll have a hissy fit if I give it back to him with crumbs in the keyboard."

Chris pushed the laptop across the table to Vin and finished his sandwich. Wiping his mouth on the linen napkin JD had placed beside the plate, he said, "That took the edge off. Something happened, I don't know what, but it spooked Lev Reuben, and something tells me he doesn't spook easily." Chris did not need to say anything about the gun Lev had pointed at him or the look in his eyes that spoke volumes about

his willingness to use it. "You saw as much of Maude as I did, and only saw the back of Ezra's head. Botello had them squirreled away in his office. I didn't see his secretary, either; I forgot her name, you know, the one who was so helpful the couple of times we came down." He did not wait for Vin to supply her name, although he was sure Vin remembered it. After all, she had not only given him her name, but she had also been sure to include her phone number when she gave Vin a typed list of nearby restaurants. "She is probably in his office with Maude."

"So, what do we do now?" JD asked. He had done a lot of thinking since their earlier meeting, and as yet had not decided if he should let go of his anger towards Ezra's mother. On the one hand, she had treated Ezra horribly, and he had witnessed how her treatment had left Ezra damaged. On the other hand, circumstances had forced her into a role she had not wanted; so, was she responsible? The one thing he was certain of was that she had grit. No matter that she claimed that Eddie was the brave one, Maude proved by her actions that she had more courage than most people. He could not begin to imagine what had left her looking as pale as she had. If she had been crying, he would have considered whether she was acting, but it didn't matter how good an actor she was; there was no possibility that she could drain all the blood from her face on command. She drove across several states with her dead sister in the trunk, and then she dumped her sister's body in a swamp. A person who could do that did not frighten easily.

Buck was the one who answered JD. He pushed his chair away from the table, stood, and retrieved the platter of cookies. Placing them on the table within everyone's reach, he said, "We are going to eat cookies and wait. Anyone want coffee, I'll play mother." Seeing the faces looking back at him with confusion written all over them. "Don't tell me, none of you watch British TV."

Chris couldn't decide if he should bang his head or Buck's against the table while reciting 'Be serious!' over and over until Buck begged him to stop. Then he heard Orrin snicker and instantly forgave his brother. It was good to hear Orrin laugh. There was a time when Orrin and his father would sit in the chairs near the grill and trade stories only the two of them fully understood. Miss Evie would stare at them in mock disapproval before reminding them to check the burgers. While he watched all sorts of comedies with Sarah and cartoons with Adam, about the only time he watched television was when one of his favorite teams was playing. He was comforted by Orrin's laughter, but more so by the puzzled frowns Vin and JD both wore; they matched his own.

Getting his laughter under control, Orrin said, "Evie likes to watch Masterpiece Theater."

Before Chris could react to the nonsensical explanation Orrin provided, the door to the conference room opened. His brothers, all three of them, walked in, followed by Tommy Botello.



Botello pointed to the table and told the brothers to get a plate while he set up. "This room is the one we use when we have an incident we need to review. Ezra will tell you what happened, and then I will show you what my security team found. If they find anything they think might be relevant, they will let me know." As he spoke, he used

the remote control in his hands to lower a screen from the ceiling and to turn on the projector housed in the wall on the opposite side of the room. "The projector is connected to the computers my security team uses. I will get a notification on my phone when and if they find something they feel I need to see, and I will let them know when to put it on the screen." He pulled out the chair Maude had used and sat, waves of anger pouring off him. "Ezra?"

Ezra looked up from the plate of food he was not eating and started, "Ah escorted mah mothuh to her room. Our meeting took a lot out of her, and Ah suggested calling room service instead of coming back for this session. She debated, saying that while she was tired, she felt she owed it to her sister to be there. Ah pointed out that she knew fewer people in Four Corners than Ah did, but she just patted mah arm and told me that Ah would get to know people. When we got to her room, she asked me to come in. She said she wanted to apologize for being less than the mothuh Ah deserved. Ah told her Ah would stop by in the morning, and we would have breakfast, and that we could talk then. She opened the door, and a most noxious odor emanated from the suite. She had turned to say something to me, so I smelled it first. Ah told her to wait in the hall while Aj checked the situation, but she followed me inside.

"The smell came from the bedroom. Her bed had been doused in gasoline. A lighter was on the nightstand in an unopened package you can get from most any gas station selling cigarettes." Ezra could see Nathan straighten at those words and unconsciously touch his throat. Ezra knew, as Nathan's fingers traced where the rope had cut into his skin, that even though the rope burn had long since healed, the memories haunted the man.

Not pausing to give anyone enough time to comment on the similarities between what Nathan suffered and the damage to his mother's bed, Ezra kept talking. "That wasn't the worst...Every item Mothuh had taken from her suitcases and hung in the closet or placed in the dresser was shredded and thrown about the room. Even her intimate apparel was ruined. Her shoes were lined up beside the bed; their heels broken off. The clutch I gave her for her birthday had huge gouges in the leather. And ...above the bed, the words 'You interfered, Bitch' were carved into the wall. Not painted or written, they were carved. Without bothering to inspect the condition of the rest of the suite, Ah turned Mothuh around and we left. As soon as we shut the door behind us, mothuh began retching in the hall. A housekeeper saw Mothuh and hurriedly approached us. Ah did not give her a chance to chastise Mothuh for not throwing up in a toilet or to make any suggestion that Mothuh had overindulged. Ah told her to call Lev Reuben and tell him he was needed in Maude Standish's suite, that it was an emergency. Ah must say, Mr. Reuben reached us in moments. Mr. Botello was only a minute behind him. Then the fire alarm went off, but we all stayed rooted in place as Mr. Reuben's security team arrived. They began cataloguing the destruction, and we stayed out of their way." His voice trailed off, and he said nothing when Botello took over the narrative.

"Before I show you the pictures the security team took, I must apologize. I failed you, and I am truly sorry. When you made arrangements to stay here, I knew about the deaths you are investigating and planned to give you a safe place to do your work.

"I have, arguably, the best security in Las Vegas. Government officials from around the world meet here, knowing that no details of their meetings will be leaked.

Corporations do likewise. They do not come to gamble or see the shows; they come to solve problems and make consequential deals without involvement from other parties who may try to skuttle what they have worked on.

The men and women on my security teams are chosen for their ability and their discretion. We have two types of security. In most cases, you will never be aware of their surveillance. The first group is the chair jockeys. They monitor what the cameras see. If they see someone they believe needs to have a closer look, they alert the second group, the foot soldiers. The problem is taken care of without any disturbance.

"The men and women who work security for me are second to none. For example, in the last six months, they have prevented two murders from taking place, a half dozen rapes, and kept several thefts from both guests and the casino from happening. We are making this resort family-friendly. We are continually taking steps to prevent prostitutes from working here. We keep the drug dealers off the premises, and as recently as last month, we joined forces with the LVPD to shut down a child trafficking ring attempting to set up shop in Las Vegas.

"Every day, we search for Waldo, the one person hiding in plain sight, waiting for an opportunity to strike. I am telling you this so you understand that when I told you that you would be safe here, I was confident that we would spot Waldo before anything happened. I can not even offer the excuse that we didn't know if Waldo was a man or a woman; my people have worked with far less and have been successful in apprehending all sorts of wrongdoers. Usually, our guests remain unaware of any problems.

"Like you, we had no idea who killed your mothers, Holland or Landon, but we assumed he would show up. Many of us knew Holland, and a few had worked with him. Landon, ... Lamdpm was universally liked, and we all mourn his loss. We told ourselves we would not allow any harm to come to any other member of his family while we were in a position to prevent it. That is why we had you meet in this room rather than in one of the usual conference rooms. This morning, while Ezra and Chris were waiting for their brother to arrive with Mrs. Standish, we had a team in the lobby and another team patrolled the casino. They were not just waiting for trouble; they were searching for the one person who seemed out of place. The bellhop who took Mrs. Standish and her luggage to her suite was one of my best. Judge Travis, when you ordered room service this morning, a man from my security team brought it to you. When the rest of you left for lunch, you were followed. While you were meeting, extra security was stationed on the floor. We genuinely thought we had all the bases covered and were prepared for anything. We were not prepared for this."



With that said, he began the slideshow. It started in the living area of the suite. He talked, explaining the pictures as they appeared on screen.

"Someone took a knife to the furniture. Nothing escaped, not the sofa, nor the wingback chairs, nor the table, nor the lamps. The upholstery on all the furniture was slashed not only through the fabric but also into the foam padding. Carved into the top of the dining room was the word 'Leave.'

"We think Waldo attacked the bathrooms first. Tomato juice was poured onto all the marble surfaces, etching them. In addition to the etching, Mrs. Standish's make-up,

bath products, and hair products were gathered in piles and doused with gasoline. Her perfume bottle was wrapped in a towel and shattered. Mr. Reuben believes that was done to keep anyone from hearing it being smashed. More than likely, he used a hammer.” He paused on a picture of the cracked mirror with the profanity written in lipstick scrawled across the glass. Then he moved on.

“The wood floors in the suite were marred with profanity and threats carved into them. The carpet around the bed had gasoline poured on it. A knife or carpet shears was used on the carpet nearest the bedroom.”

An image of the message carved into the wall ended the slideshow. Hitting the pause button, he gave them time to read it for themselves without commenting on the message. As he expected, judging by their eyes, they caught the same discrepancy his team had.

Chris spoke first, “It looks like ‘You interfered’ was written first. The word ‘Bitch’ appears to have been written by a different tool.”

“I’ve done some woodwork. A detail knife likely caused the cuts in the wood furniture and floor. It appears that a utility knife may have been used on the first two words of the message. The depth of the cuts and the ragged edges on the word ‘Bitch’ suggest a keyhole saw.” Buck theorized.

“Also, look at the way the words ‘You interfered’ are centered behind the bed. ‘Bitch’ is off to the right side. It may have been added as an afterthought.” Nathan pointed out.

Josiah said, “It is as if Waldo,” to use Botello’s word for their Listener, “wanted to make sure that Maude understood the message was for her. I suppose the interference he is referring to occurred when she disposed of Eddie’s body and removed Ezra from the crime scene.” Examining the image on the screen, he deliberated on the meaning behind the message before adding, “I don’t think Waldo knew what to say. The damage to Maude’s clothing is significant. And the room’s destruction is staggering and will be costly to repair. Replacing the items Maude lost will also be costly.” He hoped Ezra had pulled enough money from his accounts to restore some of what she had lost; Maude had expensive tastes.

Botello emphatically stated, “We will take care of replacing the items Maude lost. Even as we speak, Jenny is taking her on a shopping trip. Two of my security staff are accompanying them.”

Ezra shook his head no. “Ah appreciate your generous offer, but Ah will reimburse you for replacing the items of hers that were destroyed, and for the cost to repair the suite. Ah brought Maude here. Her presence caused your suite to be vandalized. Mea culpa. Ah will make you whole.”

Chris leaned forward in his chair, prepared to argue that the ranch would pick up the bill, but before he could utter a word, Tommy Botello responded, “No, Mr. Standish. You will not. I let you down. Neither my team nor I expected this kind of attack. It is our fault.”

“Ah insist.”

“I have insurance.”

A smile played on Vin’s lips as he observed the exchange. It was not as entertaining as when Chris and Ezra locked horns, but it served to ease the tension

that watching the images of destruction brought to the room. However, it needed to stop. "Face it, Ezra, his insurance beats your hand,"

Ezra blinked, then smiled. "Ah suppose it does. The question on the table now is, How much are you willing to pay us for this little training exercise?"

Rather than take offense, Tommy burst out laughing. Struggling to keep a grin off his face, he replied, "I should have hired you all those years ago. I suspect your wit would have kept me greatly entertained."



Josiah ignored the showdown; instead, he concentrated on the image still on the screen. "You know, this level of destruction means: one, Waldo brought several tools with him, two, he spent a lot of time in the room, and three, he had to be fairly strong. I believe that Waldo has the presence of mind to plan for what he needs. He also, after all these years, is fueled by a rage powerful enough to sustain him through what had to be an exhausting, explosive attack. Judging by the depths of marks in the wood and the strength needed to rip through not only Maude's clothes, but the upholstery and the bedding, we may be looking at a man, not a woman."



"I agree with most of your assessment, but I don't think it was a man. Mr. Botello, may I take over?" Botello handed the remote to the man who had entered the room without anyone other than Chris noticing. Taking the remote, Lev started a second slideshow. The first image was of a blond woman wearing a blue suit walking down a hall in the hotel. She appeared to be looking for her keycard in a massive brown tote. Several pictures captured her journey from the elevator to the door of a suite whose number everyone in the room recognized as Maude's. The last picture was of her entering the room.

"Her hair, her suit, a casual glance, and you would think she was Maude," Ezra spoke up when Lev stopped the slideshow.

"Notice the time stamp on the lower right corner. She exited the elevator about fifteen minutes after you started your meeting. Because she is wearing large, dark sunglasses and because she is keeping her head down as she searches her tote for something, we do not have a clear image of her face. She appears to be somewhere between five four and five six, is in her late forties or early fifties, and is slender. That is all we know from these pictures."

"How did she get in the room?" Vin asked the question they were all thinking.

"To be honest, we are still working on it. Possible answers include: she used a master keycard that she lifted from the front desk, or from a cleaning cart, which is what we think she did. She could have identified herself as Maude Standish and asked for a duplicate key card, which we are sure she did not do. Or, she could have had an accomplice who works here. If anything of value had been stolen, we would be looking at that as a strong possibility. I don't see her having a partner who would risk jail by giving her access to the suite so she could trash it. Having said that, we are looking into the possibility. There is a video on the internet showing how to use a credit card to

gain entry into a room, but I like to believe our system is a little more sophisticated than that.”

“There are apps you can put on your phone that interfere with the keycard system and will let a thief in. What? I did some reading on the plane when I flew in for the reading of Dad’s will. I had never been in a hotel before. I wanted to know how easy it was to get into a room and what I could do to prevent that from happening.” JD explained, seeing the looks his brothers were giving him.

“You are correct. We find an app, make changes to protect our system, and another app comes out. That is an avenue we are also exploring.”

Chris wasn’t mad. Waldo or the Listener, however you wanted to name her, had been killing for many years without getting caught. It would have been a stroke of extraordinarily good luck for them to have caught her. Actually, he was impressed by her confidence. That confidence worried him.

How was he going to protect his family? He knew how to use a firearm and could hit his target without fail, but he did not have the experience he needed to fight effectively. The only time he had purposefully killed another living thing was when coyotes targeted calves or when he encountered a rattlesnake. He could ride any horse that threw other men out of the saddle. He could calm stampeding cattle. He could repair most anything on the ranch. He could feed and protect the herds when winter storms hit. He could look at a calf or a foal and see what it would become. He was a very good rancher, but this was new. He had no experience with this type of situation. He was not a lawyer; he was a rancher.

Calm down, he told himself. You will do whatever you need to do to keep her from his brothers. He would outplan her and outsmart her. He was Landon Larabee’s son, and he would prevail. He would not allow her to harm anyone else.

He said, “So, we don’t know who she is, what she looks like, or how she got in.” Chris listened to his words and detected none of the panic he felt.

“Wait, don’t go jumpin’ to conclusions, Chris,” Vin interjected. “Do we have any pictures of her letting someone in to help her?”

“Shortly after she entered the suite, something interfered with our system. We lost communications for about forty-five seconds before everything returned to normal. If someone knew the cameras were going to go down and hurried, she could have let them in without our seeing them. Getting out is another matter. We have pictures of her leaving.”

“How long was she in there?” Nathan asked.

“Two hours,”

“Can we see the one with her leaving?”

Lev obliged them, and an image of the same beautiful blonde woman in dark sunglasses appeared.

“I don’t see how she did it. It took an immense amount of energy to destroy everything. She should have been exhausted and, at the very least, looked disheveled. Yet, she looks the same as she did going in, not a hair out of place, and her clothes look immaculate.” Nathan turned the puzzle over in his head. Everything he knew about human anatomy said that, by judging by her appearance, she could not have done what the timeline said she did. She must have had help.

"It is easy, Doc. I once had a runner who had broken into several homes in Houston and stolen the valuables without leavin' any trace evidence. The only way he was caught was because the family who lived in the house he picked to rob was dog-sitting a Doberman who wouldn't let him leave."

Vin cocked his head to the side and let a grin spread across his face as he recounted the steps the thief had taken to prevent leaving DNA behind. "Seems Bernie shaved his head, shaved his whole body before he robbed a place. He would put on a wig, break in, strip naked, and put on gloves like the ones doctors use. He avoided leavin' hair samples or fingerprints. The dobie, I think his name was Steve, woke up and watched Bernie as he made a big pile of the things he planned on leavin' with in the middle of the dinin' room table. The thing was, he had stripped the moment he entered; it seems he worried about leavin' fibers from his clothes at the scene. Steve just moseyed over, plopped down on his clothes, and began tossing the wig up in the air, catching it before it hit the ground, givin' it a good shake or two before repeatin' the whole process.

"Even if Bernie wasn't worried about bein' seen as nekkid as a jaybird, his keys were in his pants pocket, and the keys, the pants, and Steve were between him and the door. Steve would lift his lip and show a bit of teeth every time Bernie moved from his designated spot. Later, when the owners got home from their date night, they found a very nekkid and very distressed Bernie and Steve waitin' for them. They called the police, and then they called Steve's owner with an offer to buy the dog they had previously thought to be nothing more than a couch potato. I got involved when a soft-hearted jackass of a judge set Bernie's bail ridiculously low, sayin' the poor man had been traumatized by the event.

"I don't know rightly know if that is what she did, but if I were plannin' on tearin' up a place and leavin' no clues behind, I would have at the very least considered it."

"That sounds entirely plausible." Lev agreed. "We are fairly certain that she wore a wig. We believe she used the carry-on bag to carry the gasoline, tomato juice, the knives, and the hammer into the suite. And as Dr. Jacson stated, she looked immaculate when she left. You would have thought that, given the frenzy in which she destroyed the suite, she would have splashed gasoline or tomato juice on herself."

"You say she wore a wig. What makes you think that?" Chris asked. He wasn't sure if he wanted to know the extent the woman had gone to look like Maude, but if he planned on protecting his brothers, he had to know every detail, no matter how small.

Lev read the determination in Chris's grim face, the lifting of his chin, and the squaring of his shoulders. He doubted Waldo realized the force of nature she had awakened when she had gone on her rampage. The murder of their mothers, their father, and even Holland had been clean, clinical deaths. What had happened in Maude Standish's suite had been an exhibit of uncontrolled rage. Like a bloodhound, Chris would hunt her. Lev could only hope that when Chris found her, he wouldn't let the bloodhound morph into a wolf.

"We have two other sightings of women we believe are her. I will show you the pictures, then I will tell you why we believe the two women are Waldo."

An image of a woman appeared on the screen. She was as different from the sophisticated blonde woman as night was from day. The woman's face was dominated

by her large bucked teeth, and long, uneven bangs fell into her eyes. She wasn't quite emaciated, but her thinness accentuated the lines on her face.

"Waldo 2 showed up in our Human Resources office twenty minutes before the fire alarm went off. She was there to apply for a job in housekeeping. After starting to fill out the paperwork, she asked Miriam where the bathrooms were, then left and never came back. Ten minutes later, we have evidence that she pulled the fire alarm and left the building. HR is located on the same floor as this conference room. We believe she wanted to be close to the conference room, but saw the security and decided to leave. We do not know the reason she pulled the fire alarm."

"Lev, let's take it one step at a time. Why do you believe they are the same woman?"

"Chris, when the fire alarm went off, my desk jockeys did not evacuate. They began searching for the location from which the alarm was pulled. The picture you see in front of you was taken from the camera next to the fire alarm in the instant that it was pulled. As you can see, she stared into the camera and smiled, even as she pulled the alarm. Then, she left, mixed in with the people exiting the hotel and the casino.

"Danny the Brat is my facial recognition expert. He is still in high school, and knows facial recognition better than anyone that I have seen outside of the military. He has standing offers from law enforcement, big tech companies, and universities. Right now, he spends his weekends working for us because we give him free rein to tinker with and improve our facial recognition program. He knows we take security seriously, and he knows we prosecute people who maliciously pull the fire alarm. Needless to say, when the alarm went off and we found the picture of who pulled the alarm, he ran her picture through his program to trace her steps through the resort. He saw that she had been in HR only minutes earlier and advised Allie to interview Miriam.

"The Brat didn't stop there. He looked to see if she had been in the casino or the hotel at any time over this past week. He wanted to know if she had staked out the hotel or if this was someone wanting to cause a little chaos for the thrill of it. He found her coming into the hotel using the service entrance, but he kept going and found this woman. He is 75 percent sure she is the same woman as the one who pulled the fire alarm."



A picture of an older woman sitting in one of the chairs near the entrance to the resort appeared on the screen. The woman, obviously, was in her seventies and wore a thick purple cardigan over a shapeless checked blouse and black pants. A second picture of the woman's feet appeared. She wore well-used, black, orthopedic shoes. The gap between the bottom of her pants and the top of her shoe exposed knee-high stockings that she had rolled down to her ankles. The picture also showed the bottom of a tripod cane and beside it a black tote.

"Wait for it," Lev commanded as a picture of Waldo 1 came on screen. The tote Waldo 1 had on her arm was identical, except for color, to the one on the floor beside the old woman.

"She slipped up," Buck hissed.

“Or it was a deliberate move on her part. She knew that security would be reviewing every image of every person who had been in the casino and hotel that day. She wanted to be connected to the woman in the hall.” Ezra said quietly. “She wanted us to know she was not just listening to us, but watching us.”

“But... but she is old,” JD objected. She looked like Mrs. Simms, who had the apartment next to his and his mom's when he was a kid. Mrs. Simms, with whom he stayed after school until his mom got home. Mrs. Sims, who baked him cookies. Mrs. Sims, who often wore an oversized purple cardigan and wore black orthopedic shoes, and carried a tripod cane when she walked to the store. Mrs. Sims, who slipped on an icy patch, fell, hit her head, and died all alone on a cold February day.

“I know her!” Not acknowledging the fact that everyone was staring at him, JD continued, “Her picture is in the box of pictures I brought from Boston. Mrs. Simms lived in the apartment across from ours. She fell and died when I was about 10, but I swear that is her.

“JD, it might look a little like her.”

“No, Buck, I can prove it. When Mom was in the hospital, she often wanted to talk about people who had been kind and helped us. One night, she said that she hoped she would recognize the kind people who had already passed when she got to Heaven, so she could properly thank them. I went home that night and took pictures of the photos we had of anyone and everyone who had helped us over the years, even those who had already passed. We spent several evenings talking about the nice people we knew.” As he talked, JD headed towards the door. “Give me three minutes and I will prove it.” With that said, he ran out the door. The steps of the security guard following him echoed in the hall as JD's had not.

Closer to five minutes later, JD came running into the room. “Here she is. Here is Mrs. Simms.” Taking his seat, he held the phone so that Buck, who was peering over his shoulder, could see, then handed the phone to Josiah, who swore softly before handing it to Nathan.

JD was right, Chris decided as he took the phone from Ezra and passed it across to Tommy. Mrs. Simms's face was fuller, but they wore the same black rimmed glasses and the same thick purple cardigan.

Orrin stared at the picture of the old woman leaning heavily on her cane, smiling into the camera. “She is even wearing the same shoes.”

Vin took the phone from Orrin and compared it to the woman on the screen before handing it to Lev. “JD, where is this box of pictures?”

“On the shelf in my closet. You think she's been in the house? I don't see Jack letting anyone in.”

Lev answered before Vin with a question of his own. “Is there any way Waldo could have discovered where you and your Mom lived? Could she have been responsible for the death of your friend?”

JD did something he rarely did; he cursed. “Hell.”

The room fell silent as its occupants digested what they learned. After a moment, Tommy looked away from the screen and at Lev. “Your team outdid themselves today, Lev.”

Lev hid his surprise at hearing his boss call him by his first name. “Thank you, sir. The Brat was instrumental in making the connection between the Waldos 2 and 3.

Miriam told Allie that she thought Waldo 2 wanted to be noticed; her wearing a dirty, smelly sweatshirt was either a cry for help or one for attention. Her hair was barely brushed, and her fingernails were torn and ragged as though she had just chewed them off.

"Sheila noticed Waldo 3 this morning. She called me about the same time Mrs. Standish arrived and asked me to check out an old woman in the lobby; she felt there was something hinky about her, but she couldn't put her finger on it. It only took me a couple of minutes to get to the lobby, but by the time I reached it, Mrs. Standish had already gone up to her suite, and the old woman had hobbled out the front doors. The old woman was already on our radar. The Brat's work confirmed she should be."

"Did he run facial recognition on the woman leaving Maude's room?" Chris asked.

"Yes, but with her sunglasses on, he said his program could only confirm they were the same woman with a twenty-five percent accuracy."

"Then, we don't know if it is one woman or two." Buck wanted it to be one woman, but making that assumption because they had a similar purse was not reasonable.

Lev knew what he was thinking and answered, "We don't make calls like this based on one thing. You can thank Cory for catching this." He quickly scrolled through the images of the fake Maude walking toward the suite and copied and pasted it beside one of her leaving the suite. "Do you see the difference?"

Vin noticed it before anyone else. "Her nails. She has long nails going in and short, chewed-on nails coming out."

"You and Cory both must have the eyes of an eagle. I had to have the picture blown up before I saw it."

Buck patted JD on the back and walked over to the buffet table. He poured some surprisingly still hot coffee into a cup, turned to face the screen: he thought better when he had a sufficient amount of caffeine in his system. Apparently, so did his brothers. Around the table, his brothers picked up carafes and poured fresh coffee into their cups. Buck brought clean cups to Lev and Tommy. In his mind, he discarded their last names. The two of them were working the case with him and his brothers, which made them friends, and friends called each other by their given names.

He walked closer to the screen and looked at the damage Waldo had done to her nails. Most of the women he knew went to great lengths to make sure their nails looked good. The ones who didn't bother going to a nail salon kept their nails neat and clean. He knew of a couple of girls who bit their nails when stressed, but Waldo had not ruined her nails because of stress; she had done so to perfect her disguise. It was almost a form of self-mutilation.

"What the hell did Dad do to this woman?" he asked no one in particular.

"Maybe nothing," Josiah said. "We may have been looking at this the wrong way. The rage exhibited in that room was committed by someone out of control. I can almost understand a woman saying, 'Landon Larabee did me wrong, and what he did to me was serious enough for me to take steps to keep him from being with any other woman.' It is a sick, twisted logic, but it is a logic I can follow."

"There was no logic to what she did in that room. I think she woke up this morning with a plan to scare Maude, maybe even murder her, but somewhere between

leaving the resort as a little old woman and returning as a cultured, suave woman, she devolved. Murder and Mayhem are words that come to mind. She was probably toying with frightening Maude with a little mayhem, but I think she lost control. She destroyed everything in that room, went back to wherever she is staying, changed, and reappeared as someone else.

"She had planned to watch us when we learned what happened to the suite, but she couldn't get close enough. Denied seeing our shocked faces, she decided to create a little more mayhem by pulling the fire alarm." He let his words sink in before adding. "I am willing to bet that now that she has a taste of mayhem, she will start looking for ways to create more."

"I think you are right about her losing control, but she planned to do more than scare Maude. She brought her tools with her as well as the gasoline. Setting fire to the room may have been her plan all along." Nathan spoke quietly. In his mind, he could still smell the gasoline he had been covered in.

"Will she stay here to create more problems, or will she follow us to Four Corners?"

"That is the million-dollar question, Chris. I could make a case for either one." Looking at Tommy and Lev, Josiah explained. "The wording she used to write her message above the bed was vague. I am not sure if she even knows what the message is supposed to mean. I think she will focus on us, but there are few opportunities, if any, to create the level of chaos that she was able to achieve when she pulled the fire alarm. Causing problems like that may be enough for her for now, but given her history, I think she will escalate, and people will die."

Lev stood up, saying, "I had best go and brief my team. In the morning, when we meet to look at guns, I will have a binder for you with the pictures we have. Who knows, the Brat may have figured out a way to scrub her disguise off her face, and we can get a look at who she really is without the false teeth and wigs." He stopped at the door and turned to look a question at his boss.

"I will spend the night here tonight. Keep me informed." Tommy reached for the remote. The image on the screen disappeared, and the screen and the projector began slowly returning to their cabinets. "Ezra, if I know Jenny half as well as I think I do, she and your mother have several hours of shopping to complete before they call it quits. Before you retire tonight, stop by my office, and I will let you know which suite Maude will be in. Security will watch her, of course, but I don't think Vegas is a safe place for her to be."

"She's flying out in the morning." Ezra firmly stated.

"Does she know?"

"Not yet, but I am sure she will see the logic."



Chris waited until Lev and Tommy were well down the hall before announcing, "New rules. I know Ezra went to a great deal of trouble and expense to get each of us our own room, but tonight we have to double up. I have two queen beds in my room. I assume that is the same for everyone. That goes for you, too, Judge."

Orrin briefly considered protesting Chris's edict; after all, one of the perks of this excursion to Las Vegas was having his own room, but he nodded his head in

agreement. He wasn't a fool and could easily imagine what would have happened if Maude had been in her room when Waldo went on her rampage.

"That is settled then," Chris said when he saw the slight nod the judge gave,

"No. I don't plan on sleeping tonight. I plan on going to the casino."

Chris cocked his head to the side as he counted to ten, then to ten again, before calmly asking, "Care to explain why?"

"Maude needs to leave Vegas. It will be easier to get her to leave if I can hand her enough cash to sustain her for a while."

"How much do you need?" Chris asked. He had a couple of hundred in his wallet that he had brought in case he got the crazy idea to throw it away. He was reasonably certain his other brothers had done the same.

"The more she has, the longer she will stay away. I would feel better if she stayed away for at least six months."

"Sounds reasonable. How much does that translate into?"

"For Maude? I doubt she will agree to stay away for anything less than \$100,000." It was an embarrassingly large sum of money for men living on a ranch in Four Corners. He tried to explain, "New York is an expensive city to live in."

"I thought she was going back to her hometown."

"That's news to me, but even if she does, she won't stay. There are not enough things to do, places to go, and more importantly, there are not enough people to flaunt her wealth in front of."

Chris almost argued the point, but he saw JD nodding in agreement with Ezra. Damn. What did JD know about Ezra and Maude that he was not sharing? On the other hand, even though he had listened to the story Maude shared only hours ago and had felt great sympathy for her, he hadn't grown up with her; Ezra had. "Can you make that much money by midnight? We need to meet with Lev in the morning."

"One never knows what will happen at the tables, but Ah certainly have the incentive to try," Ezra replied with a confident smile. The issue was not whether he needed an incentive, but understanding what paradigms he used to base the incentive. He wanted to keep his mother, his Aunt Maude, safe, but he wanted her out of Nevada before she learned how rich Landon Larabee had been and showed up in Four Corners demanding her fair share. Even if only one of his brothers fell for her spiel, she would return again and again. Each time she visited, she would demand an ever-increasing amount in compensation, not only for raising Ezra but for the trauma she had endured. She would turn all their lives into a living hell in which they would look back at chasing a murderer or two and think of it as the good old days.



Nathan took the momentary lull in the conversation to say, "I think we can safely eliminate Nurse Angie as a suspect."

The thought of the rather buxom and at least forty pounds overweight Angie Delany as being the svelte blonde woman they had seen entering Maude's room brought a grin to Chris's face, which he didn't even try to control when he answered, "I reckon you are right, but we still need to talk with her. She may remember something about that pregnant girl."

"Barbara. Her name is Barbara." Buck reminded Chris.

"OK, that pregnant girl, Barbara."

Josiah interrupted what he was quickly learning was a long-standing feud about the importance of names. Buck valued learning the names of everyone. Chris only bothered to learn the names of the people he respected or cared for, and not many others. "Before all of this, I had something I wanted to throw out to the rest of you to discuss. I think we have pretty much eliminated the possibility of a man being the murderer, but I have a nagging question that won't leave me. Is there any way Curtis Marks is involved?"

Chris had seriously considered the question ever since Josiah asked it of him before the fire alarm went off. "As you know, he and my mother were twins and by all accounts were very close, but I don't see it. What are you seeing that I am missing?"

"There have been many studies on the bonds between twins. I am sure you have heard about twins feeling each other's pain, getting pregnant at the same time, choosing similar career paths, even when not raised in the same home. I am not a twin, but I guarantee you that if I ever have the opportunity to face the cretins who harmed my sister, Hannah, they will suffer the consequences of their actions.

"What I am wondering is whether your uncle blamed your father for the fire? After all, he was the one who had put the gas cans in the truck."

Chris did not immediately answer. He went over to the buffet table and grabbed a couple of cookies. "I don't know Josiah. I do know he was angry that Dad had moved on and had become involved with a succession of women. I remember overhearing him in the kitchen, telling Aunt Amy that when a man marries, he is married to her for life, no matter her faults. At the time, I remember wondering if he was talking about my dad and mom or about himself and Aunt Amy.

"All I really know is that he loved to talk about my mom. He would get angry because Dad didn't talk about her. He would start a story with 'Let me tell you a good story about your mother. I asked him once if there were any bad stories about her, and he got quiet. He finally said that all people had good and bad stories you could tell about them, and he felt that he needed to share the good ones.'" He looked at the judge, "Do you think my uncle blamed Dad?"

"Your uncle stayed mad at your dad for many things. The main fault he had with him was that he had moved on. I really don't know if Curtis thought your father was to blame for the wreck. Evie and I didn't live in Four Corners at the time. I don't remember a single time Curtis's name came up in any of our conversations. And Curtis, I knew him well enough to wave if we drove past each other on the road, but we have never been friends."

"Boys, boys, boys. You are missing the obvious. All we have to do to rule out Curtis and Amy is to call them. If they are at home, we can mark them off the list." If things had been less serious, Buck would have had a field day teasing his brothers about how easy it was to rule both Curtis and Amy. He put their, even Orrin missing the easy test, as being caused by the stress of the day. "Like Dad, they don't rely on cell phones; the reception isn't any good up where they are."

"JD, can I borrow your phone?" Waldo was on to them, and even if there was a second Listener, JD's phone was probably not compromised; the kid kept it glued to his hand.

JD slid his phone down the length of the table and allowed himself to grin when Chris struggled to remember the number. After a short eternity of Chris trying to recall the number and failing, Vin looked up the Marks' dude ranch online and found two numbers. Chris picked the one he recognized as being the house number and began dialing when Vin helpfully asked whether Chris knew what he would say.

"It ain't like ya can jest come out and say that yer callin' to rule them out as suspects. That is bound to offend."

"Have I ever told you how annoying you are?"

"I annoy you because I plan what I say? I don't think you are bein' reasonable."

Chris ignored Vin's smirk and thought hard. "Got it," he announced and began dialing. When the phone began ringing, he put the phone on speaker so they all could hear and set it in front of him. On the other end of the line, Garrett answered with a cheery "Hello-"

Not giving his cousin the time to say anything more, Chris, putting as much of a smile into his voice as he could fit Chris said, "Hey, Garrett, it's Chris."

"Well, hi!. I didn't expect you to call. You are supposed to be in Vegas with your brothers."

"I am, but how do you know?"

"Ma came back from Wednesday night church services saying that she heard some of the ladies talking."

"Is that so?"

"Yep. So, what can I do for you?"

"I was actually wanting to talk to your Mom or Dad. We got into a discussion about how the ranch got the name of the Double L."

"Isn't that obvious, Chris?"

"You would think, but I think that, but I have a memory of Dad saying it stood for the Lovely Lady."

"Does it matter?"

"Not really. It's just that Buck has been telling stories about Dad. One of them was how Dad said that he couldn't think of what to name our place, and so he settled on the obvious and unoriginal Double L. I have another memory of him telling me that he chose the Lovely Lady to honor my mother. Buck is saying that I am wrong, and while they have all moved on, it is nagging at me. I was wondering if Aunt Amy or Uncle Curtis remembered. I'd like to prove Buck wrong."

"Of course. Look, I would love to help you, but Pa is asleep in his office and Ma took off yesterday for a Ladies Leadership conference in Carson City. She won't be home until sometime late tonight."

"She didn't drive alone, did she?" he looked around the room and saw the sudden interest in everyone's face.

"I argued about her not going with one of the other ladies, and she said that she needed to get away for a while. Living with Pa, especially the way he is now, can be difficult, and then Junior. She has been having a hard time with it all."

"I am sorry. I can imagine the pain she is in, losing Junior."

"I am sure you can. Don't worry about Ma. She takes off when she gets stressed."

"She has done this before?"

"Not since Ashley and I married."

"I know Ashley has been a real blessing to you, and it sounds like to your mother, too. You are really fortunate, Garrett. I hope you remember that."

"Are you sure you are Chris? You're sounding a mite maudlin there."

"Blame it on the talking of family we have been doing. I miss Sarah and Adam. I guess I am a bit melancholy." Surprising himself, Chris realized he wasn't melancholy; his anger with the Waldo situation overrode any of the melancholy he usually felt when he thought of Sarah or Adam. Besides, he could hear Sarah's voice telling him it was all right.

"I am so sorry, Chris."

"It is all right, Garrett. Listen, sometimes we need to put things into words. I have a couple of things to say, and I need you to hear what I say because I may never say it again. I want you to know that I envy you not only your Ashley and your children, but also your Mom and Dad. I have always viewed them as the perfect couple."

Garrett let out a heartfelt sigh. If he was the type to cry, there would have been tears forming in his eyes as he listened to Chris's words and tucked them away in his heart. Swallowing hard, he cleared his throat and admitted, "Looks can be deceiving, Chris. I think having us three boys one after the other about did Ma in." He tried a laugh, but it did not have the same degree of sincerity that Chris's words had, so he shared a memory.

"You know how it is in the spring, everything is thawing, and there would be mud everywhere. Ma would work so hard making sure the house was spotless, but Pa and me and my brothers would track mud all over her clean floors. Most of the time she would just sigh and remop, but every once in a while she would throw the mop at Pa, grab her purse and keys, and head out. She'd tell us that she was tired of living in a pig sty, and she expected the house to be spotless when she got back. Sometimes, her mad would last a couple of hours, and sometimes it would last a couple of days, but she always came back with a smile on her face, saying she missed us... Good Heavens, Chris. Speaking of bringing up memories. I had not thought of those days in forever."

"Now, I am sorry. I didn't mean to bring up bad memories."

"You don't understand. They weren't bad, Chris. Sometimes Ma and Pa would fight. He never laid a hand on her, but hurtful words would be used. Those times Ma left, Pa would tell us, as we scrubbed the house, to remember all the things Ma did for us, and that we all needed to thank her. When she got back, she would hug each of us so tight it would almost hurt, and say she was the luckiest woman in the world to have us."

"Hey, listen, Chris, I gotta go. Ashley is calling me. I think George is trying to murder Erin." With that, Garrett hung up the phone.

"Feel like a heel later. You may have manipulated Garrett into giving you the information we need, but it was necessary," Buck said when Chris just sat in his chair reflecting on the conversation he had with Garrett.

"To be truthful, Buck, I don't feel like a heel. I said something Garrett needed to hear, and he gave us information we needed."

"It sounds as though we can take yer uncle off the suspect list and yer aunt just moved to the top of the list." Josiah rumbled.

"Amy doesn't look anything like any of our Waldos," Buck protested.

"None of the Waldos look like each other. It is truly amazing what someone who knows makeup can do. And it is not just makeup. She probably used facial prosthetics to transform herself." Ezra said thoughtfully.

"I have never heard of that. Are you saying that she can transform herself into anyone by using a prosthetic and makeup? How the hell are we going to find her?" The more important question was: How was he going to protect his brothers?

"It may be easier than you are thinking. I know prosthetics are used when accidents or illnesses disfigure someone," Nathan said thoughtfully. "I will start reaching out to hospitals and rehab centers when we get back."

"I'm thinkin' we need to talk to the makeup artists Hollywood uses."

Josiah's voice filled the room, "I think we need to do those things, but chances are if she is devolving, she will strike again soon. We need to consider where she will strike. What places are vulnerable in Four Corners?"

"Off the top of my head, I'm thinking Walmart or one of the schools. Josiah, why don't you and I talk to Mitch when we get back?" Buck suggested.

"



"I know we need to get out of here, so we can let Ezra win a fortune, but do we have a minute to talk about the gun safe?" Vin asked as he pulled up the pictures of the safe that both Buck and Chris identified as belonging to their father. "Here, Nate. Do ya mind takin' a look while I talk?" He didn't bother waiting for Nathan to confirm or deny the safe as the one that had been in the library, but jumped into an explanation of how he had found it.

"The Friday our Father was taken to the hospital in Eagle Bend, a certain Mr. Albert Hawley rented a U-Haul from a place in Carson City. Mr. Hawley is an antique dealer in Fresno who specializes in historic weaponry from the turn of the century. I emailed him and said the gun safe featured on the front page of his current catalogue appears to be the one stolen from my father's ranch house outside of Four Corners while he was in the hospital. Within minutes of my sendin' him the email, he replied that, before his havin' a crew pick up the safe, he had corresponded with the lady of the house for six months about purchasin' it.

"He says that he would be willin' to meet us any day next week." Vin began reading the email out loud. "If ya can confirm the presence of certain identifyin' marks on the safe, I will show ya the bill of sale, the correspondence I had with Mrs. Larabee, and we can discuss the situation like gentlemen. I will not be in my office until Monday. When ya call, we can decide on a time to meet. I will arrange for the men who made the actual pick up to be at the meeting, and they will answer any questions I can not. Ya may reach me at, and he gives me the phone number listed on the website and another number, which is probably his cell phone."

"Mrs. Larabee? Can this day get any weirder?"

"Now you know, Christopher, you are tempting fate by saying things like that."

"Well, Bucklyn, after all we have been through today, I don't think Fate has anything left to throw at us."

Buck shook his head in disbelief as Chris had all but dared fate to do her worst. As always, Chris spoke without thinking through the consequences. Fate might view

his words as a challenge. Of course, if it turned out that his aunt was Waldo, then Fate had been cruel to a good man who did not deserve any more cruelty in his life. "Ezra, go start winning money. Make sure you lose occasionally, so no one will accuse you of cheating and run you out of town. I'll go thank Tommy for his hospitality."

"Not alone. No one goes places alone in this town." Chris reminded Buck.

Buck didn't argue. "C'mon, kid. You're with me."

