



The Hunt for a Lost Brother and Other Villains

Driving a Stake Through the Villain's Heart

Part 2 of The Seven Brothers Saga



Nathan dropped his overnight bag on a chair and headed for the coffee pot. "Who made it?" he asked Chris.

"Josiah," Chris answered, his eyes on the overnight bag, and a scowl settled on his face. "Thought you had patients." It wasn't a question. Nathan did have patients to see. He couldn't just get up and go like the rest of them.

"Had is the operative word."

Without seeming to move a muscle, Chris's scowl deepened. Seeing his expression, a lesser man would have backed away from Chris and stammered out some hasty explanation; Nathan poured his coffee, took a sip, and then smiled, waiting for the explosion.

"What do you mean had?" Damn it, Nathan was trying to build up his practice. He couldn't just start gallivanting around the country on a moment's notice.

"I talked to Emmett last night and explained the situation. I'll see patients this morning and cancel those for this afternoon and tomorrow. You can pick me up as you head out."

Chris counted to ten and then up to fifty. Deciding he had control of his tongue, he began talking, using his most reasonable tone, "We don't need you, Nate."

"Excuse me?" Nathan asked. He had known Chris would adopt this attitude, but he was a Larabee, too, and Chris could get over it.

"You have a practice; people need you here."

"They've done fine without me for the last several years. They can do without me until Wednesday."

Where exactly did Nathan get his mule-headedness from, Chris wondered. "Nate, we are just going to talk, nothing more. We don't need you. Heck, if I could figure out a way to keep Ezra here, I would, but he won't listen to reason."

"I'm going, Chris."

"Nate"

"Chris, I know you don't need me to intimidate Moore. I reckon, one look at you, and he'll piss his pants. I know you don't need me to watch Ezra. You're quite capable of making him rest and take his medicine. I know I'm not needed, but I am going."

"Nathan"

"This is family business, Chris. I am going."

There was no arguing with that. "We'll be by to pick you up at ten; be ready."

Nathan drained his coffee; he had to get to work if he didn't want to keep his brothers waiting.



"Did you get any sleep?" Buck asked when Chris slid into the booth in the hotel's restaurant and reached for the coffeepot the waitress had left for them.

Chris shot him a look that spoke volumes about his lack of sleep and the reason for it. "Where is everyone else?"

"I think Josiah is still getting ready, and Vin and JD went looking for a permanent marker," Buck answered. "You know you could have bunked with me, and JD. You may have gotten some sleep."

"Should have. Ezra coughed all night, and Nathan kicked in his sleep." He studied the coffee in his cup before looking up and admitting, "I know it sounds stupid, but I thought if I had them where I could watch them, I could keep them safe."

Buck didn't ask, safe from what? He knew exactly what Chris meant. He wanted to reassure Chris that everyone was safe, but he did not have the words, and recent events had shown that such reassurances were not truthful. He settled for handing Chris a menu and giving him some advice, "In the future, if you decide to take us on another of these road trips, we should call ahead and get a suite of rooms, or at least adjoining rooms. That way, Nathan could have his own bed, and you wouldn't have bruises all over your legs."

"Not planning on any more road trips for a while. We've got too much work we've been neglecting at the ranch. We'll get his business taken care of, then we have to put some serious effort into the ranch, beginning bright and early tomorrow morning." He didn't mention the

murders on purpose; he wasn't going to ruin his day worrying about the man or men intent on killing his family.

"So, you're saying there's no time to take in the sights."

"Stock comes first, Buck. We're just lucky Yosemite has been available to check on things for us this past week; otherwise, some of us would have had to stay home, and our show of force would not be much of a show."

"After spending the night sharing a bed with Nathan, I reckon you could put on a show of force all by yourself." He became quiet when the approaching waitress stopped in her tracks. She had been flirting with him all morning. Now, she guessed she'd return to the kitchen and reevaluate how much she wanted to get to know him... darn.

"Living with you has taught me how to endure almost anything," Chris spoke loud enough for the retreating waitress to hear. He grinned innocently when Buck scowled at him.

Buck's scowl turned into a chuckle; Chris didn't do the innocent look very well. Chris was waiting for him to say something about the waitress so he could bring up Inez's name. He wouldn't give Chris another opportunity to lecture him, so he changed the subject. "What about Christmas?"

"What about it?"

"We don't have any presents."

"Buck, when has there been time to get presents?"

"We've got to do something, Chris. We can't have our first Christmas together without presents. You know how Dad went all out at Christmas? We need to do something."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. We need to do something special... something which says we are a family."

"Again, like what?"

"Well, Chris, I don't know...yet, but I'm working on it."

"When it comes to you, let me know."

Buck leaned back in the booth. When the rest of his brothers joined Chris and him, he barely acknowledged their presence. His mind was too busy coming up with and discarding ideas to talk.



According to the large clock in the lobby, it was four minutes until ten o'clock when the seven men walked into the Sherrill—Haynes Building of downtown Sacramento. Most people paused when they entered the lobby, taking a moment to adjust to the difference in lighting and another moment to appreciate the ornate glass and polished steel surfaces surrounding them. These men did neither. Moving in a phalanx towards the elevators, their long strides matched each other's with a precision that drill instructors could admire.

Though none of them made any threatening moves, people scurried out of their way, and the lobby grew silent. One of the seven broke formation and moved in long, ground-eating strides, which made a lie of his graying hair, towards the information desk and took the phone away from the receptionist, placing it back in its cradle.

"There's no need to call the police, sister. There won't be any trouble."

She mutely nodded and kept her hands clutched tightly in her lap, her eyes followed him, as he, without seeming to increase his pace, caught up with the other men. When the men disappeared behind the polished steel doors of the elevator, she let out the breath she had been holding. Still mute, she watched along with the others standing in the lobby as the numbers above the elevator lit up one by one. The numbers stopped when they hit the seventh floor. Moore Enterprises: She should have known.

After a moment, she unclasped her hands and picked up the phone. She called her supervisor and told her she was feeling ill, which was not entirely a lie. She asked if Jody could come down to replace her. She hung up the phone and began gathering her things; the moment Jody stepped off the elevator, she would leave.



Furious did not begin to describe Timothy Moore. He had returned from a long weekend with Shellie only to find Bonnie gone. Not only gone, really gone. Her desk was empty, and her apartment was empty. She couldn't leave; she knew too much about his books to be allowed to walk away. Charley and Johnny spent Monday talking to neighbors and Monday night talking to people in the bars Bonnie frequented. According to Charley and Johnny, no one knew anything. "That is not an acceptable answer. Someone knows where she went. Find them, and use whatever means you need, but find her?"

"But, Boss," Charley began. He didn't want to contradict his boss, but people took one look at the two of them and fled. The few people sticking around to talk to them didn't seem to know where she was.

"Don't ...don't say another word unless it's to tell me you found her. Do you know what she could do with the knowledge she has in her head? She could sell me out to the DA. If she does, I'm history. If I'm history, so are you. Do you understand me? Do you understand what she can do?"

"They might not, but we do."

All three men spun around, startled by the voice. "Who the fuck let you in," Moore spat out.

"The lady behind the desk, Shellie," I think she said. Don't worry about her; we sent her home."

"I don't know who you think-"

"Do you boys want to be here?"

Johnny Calhoun stepped in front of his boss just as he always did when some punk got upset with the 'changes' Mr. Moore made in their building. Most men took one look at his size and the scars running along the side of his face and backed down. The others who refused to back down were taught the error of their ways, and, afterward, they always agreed to sign off on any changes the boss wanted. Intimidation wasn't work requiring brains, but he learned long ago his size made him more valuable to certain people than any amount of brains. He straightened to his full height and flexed his meaty hands, turning them into fists. He looked down into the blond man's green eyes and felt the first tremor of fear he had felt since he shot up past his Pa and told the son-of-a-bitch, that if hitting needed to be done, he'd be the one doing it. He stepped back, not knowing he had done so until he felt the back of his legs against Mr. Moore's desk. He licked suddenly dry lips and tried to tear his eyes away from the icy green ones; he couldn't.

"Are these the boys who beat you, Ezra?" a deep voice rumbled across the room, but Johnny couldn't look away to find its source; the green eyes held him rooted in place.

"Strictly speaking, Josiah, they held me. Moore did the hitting."

"Is that so? Doesn't sound quite fair. Does it? Sounds like some men here need to repent of their sins. How should we lead these lost lambs back on the road to righteousness?"

"See, Josiah, there you go getting all religious on me. I want to cut their balls off and make them eat 'em." Chris's voice, though lacking the deep rumbling quality of Josiah's, equaled Josiah's in menace.

"That works for me," Josiah's voice echoed in the still of the room; the cheer in which he spoke at odds with his words.

Johnny didn't move; the eyes held him. He briefly wondered why Charley wasn't doing something, but didn't turn to check on his partner. He tried to tell himself he and Charley could take them. They had faced worse odds than seven men, and if it came to it, Mr. Moore knew how

to fight, but those green eyes read his thoughts and promised him if he started something, he would lose.

"Now, boys, I thought we had it all worked out? We would let these lowlife lackeys crawl back to the pond they call home."

"Are ya sure, Bucklyn? I thought we came to see blood. What do ya want to do, Little Brother?"

Johnny risked looking at the man sitting in the chair across from his boss. He didn't try to figure out how the man had moved through the room without his noticing; he was too busy trying to place him. Then it came to him, he was the punk the boss worked over for cheating at cards. Johnny closed his eyes and tried to ignore the sweat running down his back and under his arms. He knew what his boss had done. If these men were the card sharks' brothers, ... He turned his eyes back to the blond man. The blond smiled, and Johnny Calhoun could feel the blood drain from his face. His eyes widened as a younger, dark-haired man holding a black permanent marker stepped forward. He stood very still as the young man, not much more than a teen, used it to draw an elaborate mustache on his face.

"Ah think the humiliation of having to walk through the lobby looking like they do would be a most satisfying revenge," said the one Moore had so ruthlessly beaten.

"Reckon, ya might want to git while Ezra's feeling charitable. Once those pain medications wear off, he gets a mite tetchy."

"Ah do not."

"Boys, we'll know if you boys don't go straight down the elevator and out the front door. This is your punishment for messing with our brother. Take it and don't make us come looking for you."

The green eyes dismissed him, and Johnny Calhoun moved towards the door only to be stopped by an arm blocking his way.

"If you have any of the sense God gave you left, you will find a different line of work. If you keep this sort of thing up, we'll know and we'll be back. We won't be so forgiving next time." The gray eyes held him until Johnny nodded. "Good then, go in peace and sin no more...or else."



Those folks milling about who had witnessed seven men enter the elevator several minutes earlier, collectively turned to see if those seven men would emerge. When only two men stepped out, the relief of those watching was almost palpable. Sure, the two men were huge and under normal circumstances, they would have been intimidating, but after witnessing the seven Spartans (As one onlooker described them to his wife.) cross the lobby acting as a disciplined, well-trained squadron marching into an enemy fortification, the two hulks did not cause worry or alarm.

The people in the lobby returned to their conversations, ignoring the two men hurriedly walking to the lobby's entrance, when a child looked and pointed at them, snickering. Like dominoes falling one after the other, people abandoned their conversation to look at the muscle-bound men not in alarm but with mocking laughter. Faster than the two men could escape, the news of their decorated faces spread, and laughter followed them through the front doors. Somehow, the two hulking, menacing men did not seem so large or dangerous.



"You are going to have to do a lot better than that if you're trying to scare me." Timothy Moore let his anger with Vin Tanner chase away any fear he felt.

"We're not here to scare you," Chris slid into the chair beside Ezra, but didn't check on him. The effort of marching through the lobby had taxed Ezra's strength, but he would not check on him until this business with Moore was settled. He would not embarrass his brother by letting Moore see how much damage he had done.

"Oh! What was this little show then?"

Chris cocked his head to the side and made a show of thinking. His grin grew, and he answered truthfully, "This was fun."

"All right, I'll bite. What do you want? To beat me up? Go ahead, but once you start hitting, you had best make sure you kill me because by nightfall, I'll have ten men hired to replace the two you just chased off, and I'll be coming after you. All of you. Tanner, you're dead meat. Nobody plays me for a fool and lives." Moore looked around the room at the hard, cold faces of the men who had invaded his office. They were trying to intimidate him, but he made his mark on the world through intimidation, and they would have to do better if they wanted him to squirm.

"Are you threatening our young brother? Christopher, did my ears deceive me, or did he threaten Vincent?"

Moore turned to glare at the man with the booming voice, and his eyes widened slightly; the older man had the largest hunting knife he had ever seen and was sharpening it with the whetstone he held. He couldn't help it; he froze for a second, staring at the knife, imagining the damage that a knife that large could do to him. Forcing his eyes away from the knife, he turned to the man who had claimed humiliating his men had been fun. He considered apologizing, but quickly discarded the idea. He doubted they would be satisfied with an 'I am sorry.' He could not back down. He was Timothy Moore and had a reputation; they needed to be reminded of it. He blustered, "I'm not paying you a dime."

"We don't want your money," Chris smirked as Moore reconsidered his options and his anxiety level rose.

Timothy Moore reached into the top drawer of his desk and pulled out his checkbook. "Everyone has a price. You're upset because I took the punk's money and marked him up some. Fine. You tell me how much it's going to cost me to get this matter resolved and get you bastards out of my office. I have work to do."

"You are still missing the point. We aren't here to beat you up, though the thought has crossed my mind. We aren't here for your money either. We dropped in to let you know, we are putting you out of business." Chris grinned, took the thick manila envelope Nathan handed him, and pushed it towards Moore. "I think this explains it all. I have it on good authority that this is enough to take you down."

"You have nothing." Moore refused to acknowledge the thick envelope on his desk, though his fingers yearned to grab it and rip its contents into pieces.

"No, not nothing. It seems there was an apartment fire last April. According to what a little birdie told us, it was your building."

"I've been investigated and cleared. That building burned because some fool smoked in bed."

"That's what the Fire Marshall testified to, you're right. But I find it interesting, and I think the DA will too, the Fire Marshall investigating the fire deposited 25,000 dollars into his account the day after an identical amount left yours."

JD had discovered that Timothy Moore's success was because he underbid everyone else. The reason he could underbid them was that he used substandard material. The big question was, how had he gotten away with his shoddy work for so long?

Then, Mr. Botello emailed Vin a file containing the names of the people in bed with Moore. Included were the names of Building Inspectors and the like. Vin consulted with JD, and together they examined the financial statements and records from more than a dozen companies doing business with Moore. Comparing the bank records of numerous contractors, project managers, and safety inspectors, they found evidence of bribes. They hadn't included the evidence they found in their packet for fear some clever defense attorney would claim the bank records were doctored, but included the list of the names and dates the bribes had occurred as well as a very detailed comparison of the materials Moore claimed to use and the materials that were actually used in several buildings including the building which caught fire.

Moore's face paled. "You're doing this because I hit the little bastard?" He didn't believe them for a moment. They had to be with the mob. Botello was rumored to have connections with the mob, and he provided Tanner's name. Botello was behind this; he had to be. The mob wanted his territory, and these men were enforcers working for some gangster. Shit! What was he going to do? The man he'd beat was probably someone important; he would lose his business because he slapped around some gangster's son. He may end up in jail! It wasn't fair!

Chris watched Moore as one emotion after another flitted across his face. He could understand how Ezra had so easily beaten the man at poker. The madder and more out of control Moore became, the easier it was to read him. When Moore refocused his attention on Chris, Chris answered his question. "We are not here because you hit Ezra. We are here because you had your hired men hold him so you could hit him."

"Is that what he told you?" Maybe there was a way out of this. "Sure, we had a little fight. He was cheating at cards, and real men don't cheat. We fought, but it was just between the two of us. Look at me. Do you honestly think I need someone to hold him? I'm twice his size. And I didn't hurt him. I just knocked him to the ground. If anything else happened to him, it was done by the other players. No one likes a cheat," he quit his rambling to breathe.

"Are you finished?" Chris waited for his nod. "Good. You did hit my brother. You did have your thugs hold him so you could hit him. You are responsible for three people dying in a fire. I feel no qualms about taking you down. As we speak, copies of what is in the envelope on your desk are being delivered to agencies across the state.

"Copies are also being sent to newspapers and television stations. If I were you, I'd change because it won't be long before a TV crew is here sticking a microphone in your face."

"Look, I have a right to know who you are."

"We are a family. We are the sons of Landon Jefferson Larabee." Chris stood up and walked out of the room without a backward glance, knowing Vin and Josiah would stay with Moore until they were out of the office and holding the elevator. Chris smiled; life was good.



Buck smiled as he trailed his brothers out of the Sherrill-Haynes Building. It was over with. Moore had been taken care of, and no blood had been shed or police called. He even had an idea for their collective Christmas present. Life was certainly looking up.

Chris told Moore they were family, and he was right. They might not all realize it, yet, but they were a family. And what did families do on special occasions? They got their pictures made. Even families who couldn't stand each other pulled on their Sunday best and smiled for the camera at Christmas.

They could join the ranks of millions across America and get a family picture made. They didn't need to wear their Sunday best; work clothes would do. He'd tell them they didn't even have to shave, which would make Vin and JD happy. All they had to do was to show up and look into the camera. He'd let them decide if they wanted to smile.

Chris would hate the idea- too bad. He was the one in charge of getting Christmas together. If Chris didn't like the thought of getting his picture made, he should have taken on the job. Of course, he couldn't exactly force Chris to cooperate. Getting Chris to pose for the camera with the rest of them called for subtlety. Someone else needed to bring up the idea; someone Chris couldn't refuse. Someone whom none of them could refuse. Someone like... "Hey, JD, come back here. I want a word with you."



Christmas was not sneaking up on her, Cecilia Hays thought; it was moving with the speed of a runaway train. There was no possible way she would get everything done she needed to do without major help. It wasn't just the usual Christmas season filled with shopping and cooking, slowing her down, but the fact that two of the senior staff had pulled rank and taken time off so they could be with their families. Everything they had left uncompleted had been dumped in her

lap. Well, as her Dad used to tell her, way back when, every problem was an opportunity in disguise; she intended to make the most of this opportunity.

She had given Rob a detailed list of what to buy each of their children. He'd probably get his secretary to do most of the shopping, and once upon a time, his dumping his responsibilities in his secretary's lap would have insulted her, but nowadays, she just shrugged, thinking as long as the shopping got done, it didn't matter. Her sister-in-law gave her the name of the maid service she used; she would give them a call to see if they could squeeze her house in. With the house and shopping taken care of, the only matter left to resolve was the food; surely, no one would mind if she found some deli or grocery store to do the Christmas turkey. After all, turkey was turkey, and hers had always been a little on the dry side. Maybe she'd luck out and find someone who knew how to cook a turkey like her grandmother had. Then they'd start a new tradition of hiring someone else to do the cooking for all the important family meals.

The elevator door opened and closed; the men who had gotten on with her on the ground floor got off without acknowledging her presence. That was all right. She wasn't there to gab; she was there to get a head start on the day. It was early, and she probably would be the first in the office. She wondered if it was her work or her tendency to arrive before anyone else that got her promoted to Assistant District Attorney in charge of Building and Code Violations. She didn't have a real title. She called herself that based on the work she did.

She sighed. She needed a really good case to get her some name recognition, or she'd be stuck there forever while younger, fresher faces got the big juicy murder trials.

She studied her reflection in the elevator's steel doors. Forty-five, and she didn't look a day over forty-two. Pregnant at seventeen, married two months later, she delayed her education until her children were in college. Their independence gave her the courage (or desperate need to fill the void in her life) to go back to school. Fortunately, Sam was supportive and earned enough to put both the children and her through college. He even took up the kitchen duties for a while before Miranda, declaring Dad incompetent in the kitchen, had taken over. Now, she needed something to prove his faith and her children's faith in her was deserved.

Plastering her best I-am-happy-to-be-here here smile on her face, she grabbed her overflowing briefcase as the elevator doors opened, and, wishing for something with wheels, walked down the hall. With a brief nod to the secretary talking on the phone, she headed to her office and the mountain of paperwork she needed to review before tackling any of the many waiting cases.

"Joy," she called out to the secretary when she opened her office door and discovered the morning mail had been dumped on her desk. "Any reason all this is on my desk?" As though she didn't have enough to do.

"Mr. Simon isn't coming in this morning. He called and said you were to handle everything until he got here," Joy yelled back without putting the person she was talking to on hold—probably her boyfriend.

"Great," she muttered to know one in particular. On top of everything left on her desk to complete, it looked like she had been placed in charge of the mail; it was her punishment for being a go-getter. She began sorting through the pile when she came to a thick manila envelope. Intrigued, she put aside the remainder of the mail, opened the letter, and commenced reading it.

Half an hour later, she began scribbling down names. Forty-five minutes after that, she screamed for Joy. Waiting for Joy, she said a quick prayer of thanks. Someone somewhere had sent her enough information on a Timothy Moore to make a case.

She clutched the envelope tightly; her career was made.

