





JD walked into the saloon, his eyes avoiding everyone except the red-jacketed man leaning heavily against the bar. “Ezra,” he said in as firm a voice as he could manage. “I’ve got a warrant here for your arrest, you’d best come with me down to the jail.”

The words came out harsh, and Ezra’s shoulders slumped; then he straightened slowly, drained his glass and turned around, keeping his hands in plain sight. His black hat shadowed his face, concealing his expression as he walked toward the young man he’d grown up with like a brother and extended his hands for the shackles without a word. JD sighed. “I don’t think I’ll need to do that, will I Ezra?” The gambler shook his head, and the young sheriff took his arm and led him unresisting out of the saloon and to the jail. He felt a shudder ripple through the silent man as he steered him into the waiting cell but received no other reaction.

Nathan got up and walked over to stand beside him, watching as the prisoner settled heavily onto a corner of the cell’s rough cot. “Guess you was right, JD; you didn’t need them shackles after all.” The words brought Ezra’s head up, and the doctor gasped, taking an involuntary step forward and grasping one of the bars. “Ezra?”

JD had gasped too; Ezra’s skin was unhealthily pale, his face thin and drawn, his green eyes haunted and sunken. “Ez, my god, are you sick?! Why didn’t you say something, I wouldn’t have...”

His hand, reaching for the cell door, was stopped by Nathan. The healer had recollected himself and come to what—for him—was the obvious conclusion. “He ain’t sick, JD, he’s just been livin’ down to his baser nature all this time; bet he ain’t done an honest day’s work in a real long time.”

JD leaned closer to the bars, looking hard; then he pulled back, shaking his head. “Well, that’d explain why Vin ain’t with him; bet he couldn’t stand to ride with him no more. Ezra, where’s Vin now?”

A spark that might have been hope died in Ezra’s eyes, and he sank back into himself, wrapping his arms around his chest. And he didn’t move again until the lawmen from Texas came to get him the next morning—and even then, he didn’t speak. The big deputy, a man named Eli Joe, asked JD and Nathan if they knew Vin’s whereabouts but didn’t seem surprised that Ezra hadn’t told them. “Think the two of ‘em might’ve had a fallin’ out on the trail or somethin’—left town together an’ then this one comes ridin’ back alone grinnin’ like a cat in cream. Been chasin’ the slippery little bastard ever since, almost eight months now. Soon’s I find that kid’s body, Red Fox,” he threw at Ezra through the bars. “I’m gonna hang you from the nearest tree an’ leave you for the crows, you got that?”

JD cocked his head at the big man. “Red Fox?”

Joe snorted, gesturing at the silent figure in the cell. “It’s that damn red coat,” he explained. “Like a fox flashin’ his tail, got to be his trademark; son of a bitch slinks around here an’ there and then out he’ll pop just darin’ us to catch him. Guess this time he done raided the wrong coop, though, huh Sheriff?”

JD hadn’t had an answer, sickened that the man he’d grown up beside could have turned so bad in such a short time. “He shouldn’t have come back here,” he said finally. “Maybe he thought we wouldn’t arrest him ‘cause we’ve got history...but he should’ve know that wouldn’t hold no water once we found out about Vin. You certain he’s dead, that Ezra killed him?”

The big man shrugged. “Only one knows for certain is him,” he said, jerking a thumb in Ezra’s direction. “An he ain’t talkin’—yet.” He grinned mirthlessly at the prisoner. “Long way to Texas, Red, a real long way.”

No sound, no movement; no one could see the shudder that ran up Ezra’s spine, and his frightened eyes were concealed by the brim of his hat. He knew he’d never make it as far as Texas.



“NO!” Ezra was too weak for the shout to come out as much more than a loud moan. He forced his eyes open, pulling himself out of the comfortable semi-conscious state he’d been resting in to plead with his father. His breath was coming out in short, harsh pants. “No...please. Don’t want to...die in jail. Please, Father, don’t go.”

Die in jail?! What in God’s name had been going on?! Josiah cradled the frightened young man’s head in his large hands, forcing himself to meet his son’s eyes calmly. “Ezra, it’s all right; I won’t let anyone take you anywhere. And I won’t get Nathan...but I’m going to need some help. Who can I ask for help, Ezra? Vin? JD?”

The resulting sob shook Ezra’s entire body, and the hopeless look in his eyes before they slid closed again almost broke Josiah’s heart. “No one,” he whispered. “There’s...no one, anymore.”

“I’m here,” the preacher reminded him softly, soothingly, in spite of the growing rage that made his voice tremble. *I asked them to look out for him...and they said they would.* “I’m here and I won’t go away, Ezra. I don’t understand what’s been going on in my absence...but you’re safe now, I promise.” He leaned over and kissed his son’s forehead, feeling the fever already radiating from the too-pale skin. “You know I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Ezra’s eyelids flickered, but he couldn’t manage to open them again. “I know. So tired, Father.”

“Then by all means, go to sleep,” Josiah allowed, patting his cheek. “I’ll take care of everything.” He stayed frozen in place until he was certain Ezra was asleep and then stood up, looking down at his son with a frown. “I’m so sorry, son,” he murmured. “I asked them to look out for you while I was gone; guess I put my trust in the wrong people.” Then he shook himself, looking around the dilapidated room. “Wood for the stove,” he said, thinking out loud. “Plenty of that out front, I suppose. And then I’ll need a bigger pot to heat water, and clean bandages and herbs...but first the fire.”

Leaving the room reluctantly, Josiah went back into the main room and gathered two armloads of scrap wood that he then piled neatly beside the small stove in his room, thanking God that the stovepipe was still apparently in one piece. A larger piece of scrap went up to cover the broken window, and he lit the small lantern from his kit to replace the morning light now shut out of the room along with the cold morning air. “I’m going to go get some water,” he said unnecessarily. “Don’t worry, I’ll be right back.”

He was about to slip out the back door of the church to go check the well when he heard voices outside the front doors—familiar voices. The rage swelled up in his chest like a live thing, and this time he didn’t need to hold it back; he stalked back across the room and reached the doors just as they swung open. “You boys just hold it right there,” he growled.

Vin almost fell backwards into Chris, and Buck jumped; all three men turned white. “J-Josiah,” Buck stammered. “But you’re...”

“Home just in time, apparently,” the preacher interrupted. “Don’t tell me, you’re lookin’ for Ezra, right?”

“We finally found his trail,” Vin said, wide-eyed. “Thought he might’ve dragged himself in here...”

“You thought right,” Josiah said coldly. “And now that you know, you can all just go right back about your business.”

Vin looked at Chris, who was frowning. “You know, you look awful lively for a dead man, Josiah.” The preacher snorted and Chris shook his head. “Later. Is Ezra all right?” Josiah waved a hand at the blood on the floor, and Chris shook his head again. “Okay, is he going to be all right?”

“Now that someone’s here to look out for him,” Josiah snapped. “But you ain’t takin’ him anywhere, any of you—and I ain’t lettin’ you in here to try. Looks like my boy’s been through enough since I left.” Vin winced, and the large man’s lip drew back in a snarl. “Yep, that’s what I thought.”

Chris stopped Buck from saying anything with a look. “We ain’t gonna settle this now,” he said sharply. “Josiah, what do you need? We’ll get it for you—and we won’t try to come in, you have my word.”

“Like I had your word you’d look out for Ezra while I was gone?” the preacher said bitterly. This time it was Chris who flinched, but the big man just shrugged. “Bandages and herbs, and a pot big enough to heat a bucketful of water—and any man who comes farther than this door gets stopped with a bullet. You be sure to tell the other two as well.”

The door slammed shut in their faces, and Vin turned to his father with tears in his eyes. “Pa, I...”

Chris pulled him into a hard embrace. “Ain’t your fault, Vin, ain’t your fault. Man comes home after almost two years to find his home a wreck and his boy...well, I probably would have shot first and asked questions after. Buck, you go tell Nate and JD to stay the hell away from here, I’m gonna watch this door while Vin gathers up those supplies—don’t want no one walkin’ in here unannounced.” He gave his son a little push toward Buck. “Get on now, time’s a wastin’.”

Once they were gone, he leaned against the wall and stared out at the street. “Josiah.”

The door opened. “You wouldn’t have shot first any more than I would have, not knowin’ exactly what was goin’ on.”

“Might’ve.” Chris pulled out a cheroot and rolled it around in his fingers thoughtfully. “He gonna make it?”

Josiah sighed. “Don’t know; fever’s already started, and there’s about nothin’ left of him to fight it with. How come he’s afraid he’ll die in jail if I let you boys in here?”

Chris echoed the sigh. “Long story.”

“That’s what he said.” The big man shook his head. “He about had a heart attack when I suggested getting Nathan.”

“I could understand that,” Chris said. “Buck and I were out on the trail, but JD told us some—he’s actin’ sheriff, by the way.”

“Take it he had some ‘help’,” Josiah replied softly. “Where’s my boy been, Chris?”

“Runnin’.” Larabee turned and looked at the big man directly. “About six months after you left, man showed up and said you were dead; then he took over the church and threw Ezra out, pretty much ran him out of town. Vin went with him, never could keep those two apart. What I hear, Vin got framed for murder someplace down in Texas and Ezra busted him out of jail, left him with the Comanches for safekeeping and then took off to lead the hounds away from the scent. Them hounds been huntin’ him for near eight months now.” He sighed and tucked the cheroot back in his pocket. “Like I said, I wasn’t here, Josiah; but from the way JD described his looks when he showed up here in town three days ago, I think maybe he knew he just couldn’t keep goin’ any longer.”

The preacher’s brow furrowed. “So he came home to get help; why didn’t he?”

It was Chris’ turn to snarl. “Nathan convinced JD that he had to act on the warrant sight unseen, told him if he didn’t he was riskin’ everything he had in this town. Nate was convinced that Ez had just gone bad.”

“Like he always expected him to do,” Josiah filled in grimly.

“Like he always expected him to do,” Chris agreed. “He saved Vin’s life, Josiah.”

“Ain’t the first time.”

“Nope, it ain’t.” He looked at the preacher again. “Glad you ain’t dead, you know.”

Josiah didn’t quite chuckle. “So am I, Brother.” He sighed heavily, looking at the church. “I’m gonna need your help, I think.”

“You didn’t even have to ask.” Chris offered his hand; Josiah took it. “Get on back in there with Ezra; I’ll bring in the supplies myself, don’t want him to wake up alone.” He saw the preacher’s dubious look and shook his head. “I’ll leave Buck on guard, he won’t let anyone else in; but...I need to see, Josiah. Whatever happened to him out there, it happened because he was savin’ my son; I need to know just how much in Ezra’s debt I am.”

Josiah was silent for a long moment, thinking of the scars he’d seen, some of them from bullets; of the once strong and healthy young body now gaunt and wasted; of the green eyes once filled with laughter now tired and sunken and haunted. “Ain’t a debt I think can be paid, Chris,” he said slowly. “But like I said, I’m gonna need your help...so you can come in.” And without another word, he slipped back inside and closed the door.

Buck was still watching the door—while re-hanging it on new hinges—when Nathan showed up at the church that afternoon. “What’cha want, Nate?” the cowboy demanded shortly, not really looking at the man; Josiah had let him in briefly to see Ezra as well, and he was consequently more than angry. “Whatever it is, you’d best look for it away from this here door.”

“I plan on goin’ in that there door, Buck,” Nathan told him irritably. “I need to make sure Ezra’s all right.”

“He ain’t,” was the reply, punctuated by a blow from the hammer as Buck secured the upper hinge. “Now git.”

Nathan folded his arms stubbornly and held his ground. “I need to check on Ezra,” he repeated.

Buck set another nail. “Had your chance three days ago.”

“That was different.” The healer was plainly disgusted. “Ain’t nothin’ I can do about that boy’s lifestyle...”

The hard blow that impacted his chin came as a complete surprise, as did his sudden impact with the ground; Buck was standing over him, his pleasant face livid. “You know, you bastard, this is the second time that you tellin’ JD what to do has almost got Ezra killed, and as that boy’s father I’m tellin’ you to keep your ‘advice’ the hell away from my son from now on.” He paused, taking a breath. “And as someone who’s been your friend all these years, I’m warnin’ you to stay the hell away from Josiah and Chris because they’re both hot for your blood.”

Nathan sat up, gingerly rubbing his jaw. “And you ain’t?”

Buck shook his head and went back to the door. “If I was you wouldn’t be gettin’ back up, now would you.”

Eventually everyone was allowed inside the church except for Nathan and JD, and the building once again began to resemble a house of worship instead of a neglected ruin. At Josiah's insistence, Ezra's old room was completed first. "I want him to wake up in his own bedroom," the preacher insisted. "I just wish all his books weren't gone, he really loved his books."

"Don't I know it," Chris smiled at him, and the next day the books were back on their old shelf as though they had never been gone. The only person who didn't appreciate the miracle was Ezra himself, whose sole conscious moments were weak, restless bouts of delirium in which he insisted over and over again that he didn't know where Vin was and felt around frantically for something that wasn't there. Chris settled a small fraction of his debt by solving the latter problem; a small unloaded gun placed in the searching fingers stilled their wandering immediately and appeared to relax the young man. "He's been sleepin' with a gun in his hand," Chris told a worried Josiah sadly. "I've done it myself once or twice, when it was just me on my own; we'll have to break him of it once he's stronger or he'll do it for the rest of his life."

A gasp from behind them turned out to be Vin, who after one guilty, horrified look at Josiah bolted from the room. Chris made to go after him, but to his surprise was stopped by the preacher. "No, Brother, I think this one is mine to settle," the older man said, shaking his head. "You mind stayin' in here with Ezra for a bit?" Chris' answer was to settle himself into the rocking chair they'd placed next to the bed, and Josiah went after Vin.

The young tracker was outside, slumped against the adobe wall with one arm flung over his eyes; he stiffened when he heard Josiah's approach. "Don't wanna talk about it none; kindest thing y'all could do for me right now is to shoot me."

"Don't think Ezra would appreciate that much," Josiah said quietly, and Vin jumped at the unexpected voice. "Don't think any of the rest of us would, either."

Blue eyes met blue eyes, and then the younger pair looked away. "Don't see how y'all can even stand to look at me," Vin said bitterly. "I'm the reason he's...he's..."

"Nope, you ain't." The words startled Vin all over again, and this time Josiah laughed. He sobered quickly, though. "Vin," he told the young man seriously. "Did you ask my boy to bust you out of jail?" A negative shake of the golden-brown head. "How about askin' him to lead the pursuit away from you, did you do that?" Another shake, this time with a slightly affronted frown. "So I'm guessin' you were the one that told him not to tell nobody nowhere where you were at?"

"Of course not! I wouldn't have done that to Ez! He just..." Vin's voice broke and he suddenly rubbed at his eyes. "Hell, I didn't even know what was goin' on until he'd been gone almost two weeks. The Comanches told me he'd said for me to stay there until he came back, so I waited..."

"Got right settled in after a while, I bet? Liked livin' with them?"

The young man's voice and face filled with self-loathing. "Yes! There I was just livin' and havin' a purty good time while he...while he..."

"Wasn't," the preacher finished, nodding sagely. He dropped a heavy hand on Vin's shoulder and squeezed reassuringly. "Vin, do you think Ezra is going to hold that against you?"

"He should." It was a whisper, bitter and broken. "You all should."

"We don't." Josiah pulled Vin into his arms and held him tightly, feeling him start to shake. "He won't, either; he's just gonna be glad to see you again, Vin—and after all this, I bet he's gonna be damned glad to know you're alive and safe." He reached up a large hand to stroke the young man's long hair. "I know I am...and I know I'm more than thankful we've got the both of you back home where you belong."

Vin cried even harder, and Josiah just held on and let him. *Wish it would be this easy to help Ezra*, he thought sadly. *But I know it ain't.*

Ezra's fever lingered three more days, finally leaving him so weak that he could barely be seen to breathe; the hour it broke, the battle to keep him alive had begun. Josiah, Chris and Buck had already carefully laid out their plans, combining decades of personal experience with advice from almost everyone they knew. They fed the young man every two hours, alternating broth with water, sliding a spoon between his unresponsive lips and massaging his throat until he swallowed. Morning and night they rubbed his emaciated arms and legs to increase the warming flow of blood in the cold limbs; he was never left alone, always being talked to, read to or touched, and he was never allowed to become cold or uncomfortable in any way. And then they waited to see if the plan would work.

After two days, he swallowed without encouragement for the first time; by the end of the third, he was opening his mouth for the spoon. And the day he closed his mouth and tried to turn his head away to refuse any more water, Josiah put his head down on the bed and cried hot tears of relief; Ezra was coming back to them. In two more days he had opened his eyes for the first time since his fever had broken and had recognized his father, trying hard to smile at him before falling asleep again. Progress slowed a little after that; he was staying awake for longer periods but still wasn't talking. They added soft foods to his diet, custards and soups and soft-boiled eggs, and a hint of color started to come back into his pale face. He was moving around more, too, and trying to tighten his thin fingers around the warm hands that grasped his cold ones.

The break came one day when Chris had been reading to him. Ezra had fallen asleep and Chris, lulled by the warmth in the room, was starting to doze off in the rocking chair; neither heard the soft knock at the door, but when Vin slipped into the room and quietly called to his father, Ezra was the one who opened his eyes first. Every bit of color drained out of his face, and his emerald eyes were as round as saucers. "Vin?" he whispered.

Vin started violently. "Ez? You're awake?" He moved silently to the other side of the bed and sat gingerly on the edge, looking down at his now shaking friend with concern. "Ez, what's wrong?"

The emerald eyes filled with tears. "Vin," he breathed again, shaking his head. "You...you're *alive*."

Vin caught his breath and nodded, tearing up as well. He patted Ezra's cheek gently. "Thanks to you, pard."

Ezra shook his head again. "Couldn't...come back, Vin. They kept...following me."

"Not anymore," Vin reassured him. "We caught up with 'em, Ez; they ain't followin' anybody ever again. Me an' Pa and Buck, we planted 'em for ya."

Ezra smiled, turning his face into the warm hand as his eyes slid shut again. "Glad you're okay, Vin. I was...so worried."

Vin dropped his head with a soft sob. "Oh Ez..."

"Vin?" Chris was awake, and looking at him worriedly. "Son, I thought I told you to..."

"I came in to fetch you for JD," Vin said softly. "He woke up, Pa, he...he was worried about me. Just like Josiah said." Then he remembered exactly what it was he'd come for and he stood up. "Pa, you need to get over to the jail, there's some folks over there and...well, they ain't too happy."

Chris sighed and pushed himself up out of the rocking chair, laying the book aside. “Yep, I’ve been expecting the townsfolk to react to what happened. You stay here with Ezra, son. Don’t you leave this room until one of us comes to relieve you.”

“I won’t.” Vin traded places with him and started to sit down in the rocking chair, then looked up at his father with a hard expression on his young face. “Pa, about JD...”

Chris sighed again, and nodded. “I know, Vin. I know you agree with them and I understand why. We’ll talk about it later, right now I need to go stop this from gettin’ any uglier than it has to.”

“Yes sir.” Vin let himself settle back in the rocker, trying to let the motion of it soothe him. He’d spoken to his cousin only when he had to since he’d found out what happened, finding it very hard to forgive him for siding with Nathan and giving Ezra to Eli Joe, for not even asking Ezra what was going on but instead letting the judgmental healer come to his own twisted conclusions and then going along with him all the way. Were they Comanche, Vin knew, both Nathan and JD would have been beaten out of the tribe for their betrayal and never allowed to return...but they weren’t Comanche, and so he’d defused some of the angry citizens by sending them after Nathan and then come to get Chris to protect JD.

Because God help him, he had no desire to protect his cousin himself.

>>>>>>>>>>

*Chris goes to the jail, and finds a large number of townspeople gathered there, all angry with Nathan and JD. Emotions are running high, and they are rapidly working their way into being a lynch mob.*

>>>>>>>>>>

“I seem to recall,” Chris interrupted in a clear, strong voice. “That you and some of these other folks did the same thing not two years ago.” Silence fell and startled, angry faces turned towards him, and he took advantage of their distraction to push through the crowd and plant himself in front of the jail. “You must all have some pretty short memories if you don’t remember how you helped that carpetbagger run Josiah’s boy out of town before – and since that was why he and my boy were out there on their own in the first place you are all damn well as guilty as Nathan and JD.” He turned to the boy he’d helped raise without softening at all. “Give me your badge, JD.”

The young sheriff’s brown eyes widened...and then, dropping his head in shame, he did as he was told. Chris took the shiny star and immediately pinned it to his own shirt. “That settles that,” he informed the murmuring mob. “The judge won’t be back through here for another three weeks at least, so until then I’m taking over as sheriff. Now all of you get back about your business.”

“What about Jackson?” The strident demand came from Olaf Rikersen, the blacksmith. He was usually a pleasant, gentle man with a friendly manner, but there was nothing friendly or gentle about the way he looked now. “The boy is just a boy, we all know that. But Jackson is a man and he knew better than what he did, he can’t be let to get away with it, ja?”

“I don’t think so, no,” Chris agreed slowly, but he quelled the babble of opinions that admission brought forth with one upraised hand. “Under normal circumstances I’d let you run the bastard out of town on a rail, but these ain’t normal circumstances; Jackson is the only healer anywhere ‘round these parts at the moment, and at the moment I’m thinkin’ that we can’t afford to get rid of him. What I will do, though, is lock him up for a bit, give him some time in the jail to think about what he did – so if there’s any emergency that comes up, one of you folks come get me or Buck and we’ll bring Jackson around to do his part.”

And with that he grabbed the shocked healer by the arm and dragged him away from the dispersing mob and into the jail, where true to his word he marched him straight into the nearest cell and locked him in. Nathan grasped the bars in his hands, his face reflecting disbelief and a touch of anger. “You can’t lock me up for makin’ a mistake, the law don’t ‘low...”









Her indigo eyes widened...and then filled with tears. Juliet dropped her head and nodded. "But they won't let..."

"That doesn't matter." He squeezed her hands, torn between anger and anguish by the desolation that marred her beautiful face. "Darlin', there's a travelin' preacher camped out south of here, and once he's married us we can be together for the rest of our lives. Do you trust me enough to run away with me?"

Juliet's head snapped up, and for a moment he was afraid of what her answer would be. But all she said was, "When?"

Ezra let out the breath he hadn't realized he was holding and pulled her into his arms in a crushing embrace. "Now?" He felt her nod against his chest. "If there is anything you need to retrieve..."

"No." She burrowed closer for a moment and then pulled back to face him. "They...they've always told me that if I were ever to leave it would be with only the clothes on my back, if that. Everything I use belongs to them, even my hairbrush. I...I'll be coming to you with nothing to offer, Ezra, not even a change of clothes."

"You have plenty to offer, ma cher," he corrected quickly. "And as for clothing, I believe that may not be so much of a problem as you think." Grabbing her hand, he pulled her into the church and left her standing by the door while he darted into his room. When he came back out his arms were full of a carefully folded blue dress and he was blushing mightily. "This...this was placed in the box some weeks ago, and as I knew the box was where Mrs. Willis was wont to procure your clothes, I...I had been in the process of making some alterations to it before putting it back there for her to find."

Juliet took the dress from his arms and shook it out...and gasped. "Oh Ezra..."

"You don't like..."

She shook her head, her eyes filling with tears. "It's so beautiful. I...I haven't had a pretty dress since...since Mama and Papa died."

Ezra couldn't help himself, he enfolded her in his arms dress and all. "Oh my love, you deserve wardrobes full of them. And you'll have them, if I have to sew every one myself." He held her tightly a moment more, then gently pushed her away. "All right, we haven't time to spare if we're to get away. You remain here..." He saw her quick glance toward the back of the church and shook his head. "My father is...indisposed, he likely won't waken until morning and I doubt he'll even recall my existence before noon. I shall go get Porthos from the livery and bring him around the back, then I'll throw a few necessities in a bag and we'll be off."

He leaned down for a quick kiss and she patted his cheek. "I'll ready your bag, Ezra – you're right about not having time to spare, if Mrs. Willis decides she wants me for something she might come looking and then we'll never get another chance. Is there anything specific you want to take?"

"The Three Musketeers," he told her. "And the gray book of sonnets, if you would. Two changes of clothing and your dress should fit in the carpetbag under my bed if you pack the books in first, and my shaving things and hairbrush are on the washstand. I'll be back as quickly as I can, if anyone comes to the church just stay in my room behind the door and I'll take care of it, all right?"

"All right." She stood up on tiptoe and kissed him again, then darted into his room and pushed the door closed behind her. Ezra bit his lip, then straightened both his clothing and his expression into normalcy before strolling out the front door and heading for the livery stable. He forced himself to take his time readying Porthos, acting as though he was merely heading out for a short ride and not preparing to flee the town and everyone in it. He responded with forced casualness to one or two people in the street as he led



“Or maybe because he’s gone to warn him of what’s going on,” Josiah countered. “If my boy comes back you’ll be arresting him, right?”

“I won’t have a choice.” Chris clenched his jaw and hit the top of the table with his fist. “It’s my fault too, Josiah; Ezra tried to talk to me too and I did almost as bad as you did. What I was thinkin’ at the time was that maybe he needed to get stronger before he tried to take on responsibility for startin’ a family, but I didn’t come right out and say that and I may have given him the idea that I didn’t think he’d be a fit husband and he ought to just forget about it.”

Josiah felt a twinge at those words. “I...suspect I may have made that same error, brother,” he said heavily. “Every time I’ve turned to the wrong spirits for comfort I’ve hurt the boy, and look what came of it this time. He’s my son, he should have been able to stand here in this very church to be married, should have had a wedding celebration and a feast the whole town could share in...and instead what did he get? He had to steal away like a thief in the night, whisper his wedding vows to a traveling preacher and then partake of unleavened bread and river water before riding back into the night in fear with his new bride.”

“He didn’t have to do those things, he wanted to,” Chris felt obligated to point out. “But he wanted to for all the right reasons, can’t fault him for that. I had to send off some telegrams asking after the two of them, but I sent them to places I was pretty sure he wouldn’t go – told everyone that he was too smart to stop anyplace close.” He chuckled with a wry face. “Of course, I’m pretty sure they’re either in Eagle Bend or Riley, but I ain’t plannin’ to share that with anybody.”

“I thank you for that,” was the preacher’s reply. “I wish he’d come home so I can make amends – to both of them – but a part of me hopes he’ll just keep ridin’ and find a place to settle down and be happy.”

“I know what you mean.” Chris clapped a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “I’d best be gettin’ back to the jail, I’ll let you know if I hear anything.”

Josiah looked up at him miserably before dropping his head again. “I’ll be praying you don’t, but I appreciate it all the same.”

Two days went by with no word and no sign of Ezra, Juliet or Vin. It was on the third day that two horses and three riders were spotted coming down the road from Eagle Bend, and by the time they arrived half the town had gathered in the street to see them. Several people tried to congratulate Vin for ‘capturing’ Ezra, but the young tracker brushed them off rudely. “Wasn’t my idea to come back to this God-forsaken place,” he declared loudly. “I was just followin’ Ez, why don’t you ask mister ‘I can’t let you leave your family ‘cause of me’ over there why me not leavin’ Pa is so damned important he’s willin’ to make his new wife a widow over it.”

“I couldn’t be responsible for taking you away from your family, what choice did you leave me?” Ezra dismounted and then lifted Juliet down from her seat as carefully as though she were made of china, and then he turned to face Chris and Buck, waiting.

Chris sighed; he didn’t want to do this, and not just because it was so like what had happened with JD the year before. The irony wasn’t lost on him. “Ezra, you need to come with me to the jail, you’re under arrest.”

“I had expected that,” the young man said evenly, and Chris was relieved to see no blame or anger in his eyes, only weary resignation. “However, first one thing must be taken care of.” He slapped aside Mr. Willis’ hand as it reached to grab Juliet’s arm. “Sir, you will keep your unworthy hands away from my wife. Father,” his confident mask faltered for a second, revealing a flash of fear and uncertainty. “If I might presume upon you, as a man of God, to look after my wife until this unpleasantness is settled...one way or the other?”

Josiah felt a sharp pang as he realized that his son half expected him to refuse, the memory of his unremembered words haunting him; had he hurt the boy so badly over this as to destroy the trust Ezra had in him as his father? They would have time to discuss it later, though. “My daughter in law will always be welcome in our home,” he responded gravely, stepping up behind the young woman and slipping one large arm around her slender shoulders. He could feel her trembling, apparently Ezra wasn’t the only one who’d been unsure of his support, and he tightened his hold reassuringly. “It will all work out, son, don’t you worry.”

Ezra nodded, then enfolded his now-tearful wife in a gentle embrace before turning away and offering himself into custody. At Chris’ nod Buck reluctantly placed the manacles around the young man’s wrists and fastened them, wishing he could lay a comforting hand on the slumped shoulders but knowing he couldn’t under the circumstances. “Come on then, let’s go.”

The sound of Juliet crying and a torrent of demands and imprecations from the bank manager countered by angry replies from Josiah and Vin followed them, and they had only gotten a few yards away before Olaf Rikersen’s deep voice rose above it all. “This has gone far enough, ja? Mr. Willis, sir, call them off and let the boy go.”

Chris turned around. Rikersen was looming over the rotund bank manager with another decidedly unfriendly expression on his face – and most of the rest of the crowd appeared to be backing him. “He’s right, this is obscene,” Mrs. Potter chimed in. “We all know what that girl is to you and your wife, Mr. Willis, and it certainly isn’t a daughter. And I for one will not stand here and let you drag her back into servitude while the man who loves her rots in jail!”

“I agree,” Mary Travis said seriously. “We should have stepped in sooner before it went even this far; if your wife won’t do her own housework, Mr. Willis, then you need to hire someone to do it.” Her voice dripped frost. “Or I suppose you could always adopt another one.”

Willis flinched. He wasn’t as uncaring about the situation as it appeared, but he was totally and completely ruled by his domineering wife – and right now, he was more afraid of her than he was of the townspeople. He quickly resumed an air of haughty authority. “I really don’t think...”

“Obviously not,” Josiah rumbled, the barest of smiles dawning on his face. “But apparently neither did any of us – and we still aren’t, brothers and sisters. This whole mess can be settled with a single question. Juliet, did Ezra kidnap you?”

Wide indigo eyes looked up at him in shock. “No, of course not! He...he asked me to marry him and I said yes. But no one would...no one would help us, so we had to run away.”

The preacher’s smile widened, and answering ones appeared on Chris and Buck’s faces. “Buck, get those shackles off,” Chris ordered. “Sorry about that, Ezra, I wasn’t thinking. You’re free to go.”

“But...but you can’t do that!” the banker spluttered indignantly. “He took her...”

“She went with him willingly – no kidnapping, no crime,” Chris corrected. “Which also means that the marriage is completely legal. You don’t have to like it, but the law has no right to interfere.”

“It does when thieving is involved!” Mrs. Willis’ carping voice startled everyone. The rotund woman pushed her way through the gathered crowd and pointed an accusing finger at Juliet, who cringed. “You can arrest that ungrateful little trollop and I insist that you do it right now! She stole from my husband and I, money and who knows what else...”

“Do you have any proof of that?” Chris cut in. He wasn’t about to make the same mistake twice in one day.

“Don’t you wish I didn’t!” the angry woman sneered up at him. “The very clothes she’s wearing are proof enough, she had to buy them with something and I would never have allowed her to dress so above her station in my house...”

“For your information,” Ezra said icily. “The dress she is wearin’ was a gift from me; some kind soul left it in the box at the church and I remade it to fit Juliet.” He met his little wife’s eyes with a look of wry, fond sadness. “At the time, however, I did not realize it would end up bein’ her wedding dress.”

“I wouldn’t have wanted any other,” Juliet replied softly. Then she turned to look at the fuming older woman and visibly drew up all the courage she possessed. “I did take something from you, though – at the time I had little choice, but now you may have it back.” She went to the saddlebags and tugged one of them open, standing on tiptoe to pull out a bundle of brown and white fabric which she presented to Mrs. Willis proudly. “You always told me that if I ever were to leave your house it would be with nothing but the clothes on my back, and not even those if you could find so much as a rag for me to cover myself with in their place. I was well aware when I left that I couldn’t take so much as the hairbrush I had the use of because it did not belong to me, nothing I used did. So here, here are the clothes I was wearing when I left, even the shoes and stockings. I took nothing else.”

Even Mr. Willis flinched when his wife snatched the bundle from the young woman’s shaking hands. “Nothing but a harlot and a thief,” she hissed. “You all heard her, she stole from us! I demand that she be locked up!”

Ezra had had enough. He pulled Juliet into the protective circle of his arms. “Father, I think Juliet and I had best be on our way now...”

“Wait, please,” Josiah requested. “Chris?”

“I’m not doing anything,” Larabee said, making a face. “Ezra, why don’t you and Juliet wait for us in the church until this is all straightened out? I promise you both, no one is going to bother you on my watch.”

“I’ll put up the horses,” Vin said quickly, nodding to Ezra. “And then I’ll join ya over there, okay?”

“Very well.” It was painfully obvious to everyone that Ezra’s trust was in Vin, not in Chris or his father. “We will wait in the church then, Father.”

“I’ll be in as quick as I can,” the preacher told him. “You two go ahead and put on the kettle for tea, all right?” He waited until they were well on their way to the church before turning back to the fuming Mrs. Willis. “May God forgive you for your actions here today, sister. That was the most unchristian display I’ve ever had the misfortune to witness.”

The banker’s wife drew herself up, radiating righteous indignation. “Of course *you* would say that,” she sneered. “You didn’t bother to train that one of yours properly, filled his head with nonsense about being a son, and look what came of that? He’s gambler and a criminal and he doesn’t even have the decency to be ashamed of it! And he brought out the bad blood in the girl, too, undid all my training, convinced her she’s just as good as anyone else. Well, she isn’t! If that family of hers had been good, God-fearing people the Lord wouldn’t have taken them, now would he?”

Dead silence; even Josiah was speechless. Buck alone found his voice, and it was angrier than anyone there had ever heard it. “Just what are you goin’ to do with the girl’s clothes? You for damn sure can’t wear them yourself.”

An ugly, triumphant smirk twisted her lips. “I’m going to burn them. I have no doubt that she has plans to steal them back, the next time I see her I’ll throw the ashes in her face!”





People kept moving around, quietly. Business seemed no busier than usual at any one place, and although several people cast narrow-eyed glances in the direction of the Willis' house, no one seemed to be avoiding the bank and business came and went there in its usual steady trickle. At noon Mr. Rugger, the bank clerk, locked the doors and went to the restaurant for his lunch while Mr. Willis went home for his. The bank manager was avoided, but several people stopped to speak to Rugger both on his way there and on his way back. Buck spoke to him when he came out of the restaurant as well, and was assured that everyone was being perfectly polite with their questions.

Buck and Chris thought over that and didn't like it. Several people entered the bank after Rugger opened it back up, and a little while after they'd come out several more people entered. And then a few more, and a few more. The two lawmen moved out to the porch in front of the jail and got comfortable, watching. Mary Travis left the newspaper office at the same time that Gloria Potter left her store, and both women made their way to the bank with the rest. Olaf Rikersen came out to stand in the doorway of his shop at about that same time, watching. He spotted Chris and Buck and nodded to them; they nodded back. "Someday we ought to deputize that man," Buck told Chris.

Chris thought about it, then stood up. "Maybe today's that day," he answered. "Might need him, and even though I think he'd help anyway I'd rather have it be official – saves trouble in the long run. I'll be right back."

More people went to the bank while Chris was at the blacksmith's shop. When he left it, Rikersen went back to his post in the doorway, this time with a very proud look on his face. But the face Chris presented to Buck was worried. "It's gonna be a run on the bank," he said once he was back on the porch. He didn't sit back down. "Go on over there and act like you're just makin' sure everything's okay, but when you go in get our money and close our account. Rugger's in on it, you won't have any problem."

"Kind of thought he might be, since everyone was bein' so nice to him," was Buck's reply. "What did Olaf think?"

Chris didn't quite chuckle. "He's pretty happy right now, just as proud as punch. We should have done that a while back."

"Well, at least somethin' good will come outta this. I'm gonna go see what's goin' on over at the bank." Buck adjusted his hat and went down the street. As per Larabee's instructions he stopped several people and apparently asked them what was going on, and he asked a few people coming out of the bank as well before going inside himself. He came back out about fifteen minutes later and repeated the procedure, then ambled back to the jail. He was grinning, and there was a suspicious bulge under his vest. "Got it – JD's too," he told Chris. "Rugger has his resignation all written out, and I guess he wired somebody at the next bank up the line to say they had a problem at the bank and could they get somebody out here 'cause he couldn't 'in good conscience' work for Mr. Willis no more himself."

"I bet that got someone's attention." Chris eyed the house that was just visible down the street from the bank. "Nobody's told Willis yet?"

Buck shrugged. "Don't think anyone's goin' to. The way folks' faces wrinkle up when they say his name, I think that story from yesterday got around." He saw movement from the direction of the church, squinted and then grinned. "Mrs. Standish is out hangin' laundry."

Chris looked too, shook his head. "Not alone," he corrected, shaking his head. Ezra had come out to help her, and a bulky shadow near the back door was most likely Josiah. "Doubt they'll be leavin' her alone as long as that Mrs. Willis is still in town."

"Doubt she will be, for long." Buck shrugged again. "Ain't no woman in town gonna speak to her after that scene yesterday. She always wanted to go back East anyway, now's her chance."

