



# Final Ride (Taming the Stallion #12)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** After years of serving as the Sheriff of Harrison County in Montana, Travis Frost makes the decision to retire and return to his home state of Texas. With a vision for the future and two young sons by his side, Harlan and Virgil,

Travis packs up their lives and sets off on a new adventure. The dusty roads stretch before them as they travel from ranch to ranch, taking in the vast expanse of land and endless possibilities that await them in Texas.

Excitement mixes with nervous anticipation as they wonder what their future holds. Join Travis and his boys as they embark on a journey filled with challenges, growth, and ultimately, the chance to start anew.

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# Page 1

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Sunday, July 21 st .

Harlan and Virgil's Birthdays.

Wild Stallion Ranch. Montana.

I woke up early and it was barely light. Not time to get up for chores yet. Looking across the room at my brother Virgil sleeping, I remembered what day it was. Today was his birthday and he was turning seventeen.

He had grown a lot in the past year and was almost as big as me. I outweighed him by a few pounds but not much. The way he ate, he'd pass me in a month.

We were two years apart and shared the same birthday. I was born two years ahead of him—not that I remember—and I'm gonna be nineteen today.

Our mother couldn't take care of us, and she gave us up when we were little. Neither one of us remembered what she looked like. Didn't matter now. We had a new home. Not a new mother, but a new father.

We both grew up in the foster system and survived it—barely. Both served time in juvenile detention and survived it. Then Travis Bristol, Sheriff of Coyote Creek, Montana, former Marine, former biker and a real tough guy, took us to his ranch and adopted us as his own boys. Why he wanted to take a chance on two bad boys like us I haven't figured out. Maybe I never will.

Me and Virge got new lives and a fresh start.

Today we had a choice to make.

“Happy birthday, boys,” said Billy, when we walked into the kitchen after chores. “You both have done a lot of growing up in the past year and you done good. Didn’t know what to get you for a present, so I got you a new set of tires for your Jeep. God knows you need them.”

I laughed. “Thanks, Billy. You’re the best. We do need those tires so fuckin bad. That’s a great present. Thanks.”

“Thanks Billy,” said Virge. “I kept putting Harlan off because I didn’t want to come up with my half. Make too big a hole in my bank account.”

“Virgie is so cheap,” I started in with one of my cheap jokes and Dad pointed at the table for us to sit down.

“I made y’all pancakes for your birthday. There might be enough syrup if y’all don’t let Virgil have it first.”

I made a grab for the syrup and Billy beat me to it. “No way I’m going second after Virgil.”

“This is Sunday, so we don’t have to go to the station,” said Travis. “You boys want to go for a ride this morning?”

“Yeah, I was thinking about doing that, Dad,” said Virge. “You coming with us?”

“Yeah, I’ll go. I’ve been neglecting Outlaw something awful. When I try to saddle him today I wouldn’t be surprised if he kicked me in the nuts.”

We laughed at Dad. He could be funny without trying.

Loaded up with too many carbs after all those breakfast pancakes we ate, we saddled the horses and took off through the evergreen windbreak surrounding our ranch house.

We galloped across the first field of our thousand-acre ranch and when Dad got to Uncle Carson's grave marker, he reined Outlaw in and dismounted.

Me and Virge did the same figuring that's why Dad wanted to ride back here. He wanted to have the big birthday talk to us out in the open.

We sat down on the grass and Dad started talking about selling the ranch. "What's gonna happen is more of a swap out. Sell this one and buy one in Texas. Land might cost more in Texas, but I don't know that for sure until we start looking for another ranch. That'll be the eye-opener."

"We love this ranch, Dad," I said, "but you want to retire in Texas, and we totally get that. You're from Texas and that's where you want to live."

"You boys have had a decent amount of time to think about it and this is the day y'all are gonna give me y'all's decision. You can stay in Montana where y'all were born. Stay with Billy—maybe not here, but I'll get y'all a place—and work at the station, or you can come with me, and we'll all make the change to living in Texas."

"We're going with you, Dad," said Virge.

"Yeah, I didn't have to think about that for even a minute, Dad. Me and Virgie go where you go. Simple as that."

"Thanks, boys. I want y'all with me more than anything, but y'all will soon be adults and you should have the chance to make your own decisions."

“Are we gonna sell this ranch right away?” asked Virge.

“We’ll put it up for sale tomorrow, but no telling when it will sell. I’m done work on the last day of July, and we might leave then or wait. Don’t know yet. Depends on the situation at the other end of the line. We need a place to go to in Texas before a lot of other decisions can be made.”

If this ranch doesn’t get sold before we leave for Texas, Billy will be here until the new people take over.”

“We’ll miss Billy and the station,” said Virge, “but I’m keen to live in Texas. Don’t know what I’m gonna do there, but I’m keen to be a Texan.”

“We’ll fly down to Texas and take two or three days to look around and find ourselves the perfect ranch.”

“Is our new ranch gonna be near Annie’s ranch?” I asked.

“That’s one thing we have to decide before anything else. Where do we want our ranch to be? That has to be first, then we can get us a real estate agent in that area and set him or her to work.”

“Where did you grow up in Texas, Dad?” I asked. “Maybe you want our ranch to be near there.”

“South of San Angelo. That’s about a five-hour drive from Annie’s ranch.”

“Five hours,” said Virge. “Huh.”

“It will have a lot to do with what’s for sale, too,” said Travis. “Might take a while before we find the perfect place.”

“I can’t wait to start looking,” said Virge. “Be nice to have an area where we can ride our horses. And it would definitely be good to live near a town with a lot of hot girls.”

Travis laughed. “Yeah, I don’t think they put that stat on the maps, Virge. You and Harlan have to find that out for yourselves.”

“Our first project in Texas,” said Virge.

Watson Residence. North Carolina.

Tammy sat at the kitchen table for breakfast with Willy-John and it made his heart pound faster to see her healing and making so much progress.

But she was young and had that going for her. Truly a beautiful girl. She was almost twenty and he would soon be forty. Willy kept asking himself if he was in love with a girl half his age.

And if he did love her and wanted her to stay, then what? She admitted she was a wanted fugitive. Did he want to risk aiding and abetting a fugitive? He could spend years in jail for helping Tammy like he’d already done.

“I can cook,” said Tammy. “My mama is a super cook, and she can make roast beef dinners and bake the best pies you ever ate, and every morning she makes biscuits for her cowboys at her ranch.”

“Your mama got a lot of hands on her spread?”

“Yeah, there’s a lot of them, and she loves them all.” Tammy smiled. “I guess I won’t ever get to go back there, me being wanted by the law n’all.”

“I’d like to think you could straighten a lot of that out, Tammy. Possibly with a good lawyer.”

“Don’t think it’s possible, Willy. I did some pretty bad stuff when I was out of my tree.”

“That’s it right there, Tammy. If you were mentally incapacitated and didn’t know what you were doing, the judge might take that into consideration and go easy on you.”

Tammy laughed. “I’m worse than you think, Willy. I am one badass that you don’t want staying in your cabin. The sooner I leave here, the safer it will be for you and George and Gracie.”

Willy took the dishes over to the sink and turned on the hot water, and that’s the moment George and Gracie raced to the door and barked their fool heads off.

“Lock yourself in the bathroom for now, girl. I’ll tell you when to come out.”

“I should just put my hands up and get it over with, Willy. I’ll walk out with you onto the porch.”

“No. Not yet. Please, stay in the bathroom until I see who’s at the door. Might be somebody who needs stitches or a mustard plaster.”

Willy opened the door and released the hounds. George and Gracie ran like the devil was up their butts circling around the sheriff and his deputy, yipping and snarling at them.

“Lay down,” said Willy-John and both dogs flopped down on the porch and never moved.

“This is our second round of canvassing, Doc. We’re still looking for the driver of the wreck and his passenger—if they ain’t dead. I’m guessing you haven’t seen any strangers, or you would’ve called the station.”

“That’s right, Sheriff. I said if I saw anybody wandering around I didn’t know, I’d call, and that hasn’t happened. This is a quiet road, and the mountain folk don’t have many visitors unless it’s their own kin.”

“True enough,” said the sheriff.

Tammy sat on the side of the bathtub and waited for Willy to be done talking on the porch to whoever was out there. If it was the sheriff again, Tammy needed to leave, or Willy-John would be in big trouble for helping her and she couldn’t let that happen.

Willy was a good man who did love her. She could tell that. He wasn’t like Eldon who only pretended he loved her, took the sex she offered, and then when it came down to the nitty gritty, he dumped her in a rest area with a taser burn on her neck.

Tammy opened the bathroom door when Willy-John tapped twice. He smiled and pulled her into a hug. “It’s all okay. They’re gone.”

“I need to leave here, Willy, or you’ll be in big trouble when the sheriff finds out you’ve been helping a wanted fugitive. Can you drop me in town at a bus station?”

“You’re not fit to go anywhere on your own yet, Tammy. The healing of your leg wound is still going on and you can’t move around too much yet. Please, sit down and we’ll work out a plan.”

“Do you have an idea?”



Willy chuckled. “I think I’m hatching one, but I’m not ready to tell you about it yet. My brain needs to do more work on it.”

Tammy sat on the sofa and said, “You’re a good person, Willy, and I’m a bad person. I can’t stay here, or I’ll turn you into a bad person like me and I don’t want to do that. I love you too much to hurt you like that.”

Willy smiled. “I love you too, Tammy, and I know you’re a lot younger than me, but I can’t deny how I feel. I don’t want you to leave. If you do leave, I want to go with you.”

“You would leave your cabin and go with me?”

“That’s what I’ve been thinking of doing. Yes. I’d leave here and go with you if we were going to try life as a couple.”

“I’ll ruin your life, Willy.”

“My life isn’t much now. There isn’t much for you to ruin, girl.”

“Where would we go?”

“Let’s have a coffee and think about that a little more.” Willy-John smiled and felt a surge of excitement race through his body. “We might be close to solving this problem.”

“I think there is a solution,” said Tammy. “And this is it. I should give myself up and you should pretend you never met me. That’s the only thing I see as a solution.”

Willy smiled. “That’s not even close to what I’m thinking of doing.”

“Tell me your idea.”

Shadow Mountain. West Virginia.

Bobby slept late and made himself some breakfast when he got up. There was nothing to do at the cabin and some days were so long and boring, he nearly lost his grip on reality. He understood now why mountain people went hunting. It was something for them to do to stay sane, but hunting wasn't for him.

When Ray was with him, he was irritated and annoyed most of the time with Ray's constant worrying, but he was never lonely and never bored.

Every single day, he cursed Tammy for killing Ray.

“Do you think we should look for Tammy and make her pay for Ray, Cleo?”

Cleo wagged her tail and Bobby nodded. “I'm thinking of doing exactly that. Just need to plan how we're going to find that looney and then we'll go get her and put a bullet in her head. Same as she did to Ray. Payback, Cleo.”

Cleo pushed her huge body closer and licked Bobby's face a couple of times.

“Wish you wouldn't do that, Cleo.”

An hour later, still with time on his hands, Bobby cleaned up and drove down the mountain to Shadow Valley. The pool hall on the main street of the little town was a good place to hang out and he liked the girl who ran it.

Beautiful girl with pink hair, a perfect body and a strong West Virginia accent, she'd given him a couple of free lessons. Great little pool player and from their last conversation, he gathered she was thinking of moving back to West Virginia

permanently with her two kids.

“Maybe I should get to know her a lot better. She seems like someone who could cure my boredom.”

Coyote Creek Inn. Montana.

Travis arranged a big birthday dinner for the boys. The Inn was already up for sale, and this might be the last time they could hold a birthday dinner there, so Travis thought he'd make it a big one.

He invited Molly and Ted from the station to join him, the birthday boys and Billy for the celebration, and when they were all together and had drinks in their hands, Travis made his official announcement.

“Tomorrow I'll be talking to the county office about my retirement and Billy will officially take over as sheriff of Harrison County on the first of August.”

Molly wiped a tear from her eye. “I knew this was coming, Travis, but I'm still not ready to accept it.”

“We'll miss you, boss,” said Ted. “What are y'all gonna do in Texas?”

Travis shrugged. “I'm buying another ranch so our lifestyle will be similar to what it is now. Not much of a change. As far as work goes, I'm not sure. We'll see what turns up, but I have a few options I can pursue if I need to.”

“Want to share your ideas for the future?” asked Molly. “I'd love to hear your plans.”

“I'm not sure I'm ready to do that yet, because I have to run it by the boys and get them on board before I do anything else.”

Virgil's eyes widened. "Get us on board with what, Dad?"

Travis laughed. "Let's order and have some fun. I'm not ready to talk about any of that stuff yet. I need more time to get a few things solidified."

The food was fantastic like it always was at the Coyote Creek Inn. For dessert, Susan, the manager, brought out a huge chocolate cake with both boys' names written on the thick icing.

Happy Birthday, Harlan and Virgil. Best boys ever.

Travis thought he felt a tear creeping up on him when the boys blew out their candles.

"You blew out some of mine," said Virge.

"Did not," said Harlan.

"Did so. I was counting."

Everybody laughed at Virgil.

Dry Run Roadhouse .

After the fantastic birthday dinner, Molly went home, and Ted followed them to the roadhouse. They picked a booth where they wouldn't be disturbing other customers and Travis bought pitcher after pitcher of Miller to celebrate the birthdays of his boys.

Savanna joined them a little later and so did Jack Johnson, the owner of the place. He brought over a couple of complimentary pitchers to keep the party going.

Because it was a special occasion, Travis let the boys drink a little more beer than he usually did when they were out in public. The boys were underage drinkers, but they were also the law in Harrison County. That's the way things worked.

Travis held his glass up for a toast. "Here's to the future. Me and my boys and all the other boys we're gonna put on the right path."

"What's that mean, Dad?" asked Virgil.

"I'll tell y'all my plan when I'm sober."

"I'll drink to that," said Virge, and clinked his glass against mine.

Best birthday ever.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:58 pm*

Monday, July 22 nd .

Wild Stallion Ranch. Montana.

After chores, me and Virge ran in for breakfast and we had a million questions for Travis about his idea for our future. He said he'd tell us when he was sober, and he'd sobered up overnight. He must have.

He set plates of bacon and fried eggs in front of us and turned back to the counter to pop down more toast.

“You’re stone-cold sober now, Dad, and we want to know about the idea we’re gonna do on our new ranch in Texas,” said Virgie. “Me and Harlan can’t figure out what exactly you’re thinking of for our future.”

“Well, boys, this is it.” Travis sat down at the head of the table and leaned back in his chair. “I figure I’ve been catching the bad guys long enough and while I’m retired I’m gonna concentrate more on preventing crimes—and I’m gonna start where it usually starts—with teens who go the wrong way.”

“Okay,” said Billy. “I understand that thought, and it’s a damned good one, Travis. How you gonna put that thought into action? Obviously you’ve got a plan in mind.”

“Tell us the plan, Dad,” said Virge.

“I’m gonna run a rehab ranch for juvies. Get them paroled into my custody—selected carefully—the ones who still have a chance. The ones I can work with and change

their direction.”

Billy listened as he sipped his coffee.

“But it won’t be an easy job. The boys will be messed up and it will take work—a lot of work to get through to them.”

“Messed up like we were,” I said, and Virge stared at me.

“Exactly,” said Travis. “I’ll have to get the support of the State of Texas and help from a lot of other agencies. Annie will help me a ton because she knows the ropes. She already did this with the young bikers she rescued.”

“It’s a great idea, Travis,” said Billy.

“I’m not sure we want a bunch of juvies living on our new ranch, Dad,” said Virge. “I lived in juvie for months on end, and those guys can cause a helluva lot of trouble.”

Travis laughed. “The boys we try to help will be a lot like the two of you when I first got hold of y’all. Ever think of that?”

“Nope,” said Virge. “I’ve got to ponder this a helluva lot more.”

“You do that, Virgil. “Let me know when you’re ready for a discussion.” Dad turned to me. “You too, Harlan. Think about it and talk to your brother.”

“Will do, Dad.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek. Montana.

Travis sat in the break room with a mug of coffee in front of him and a big stack of

reports that needed his signature. There was a mountain of paperwork he had to finish before he left the sheriff's position at the end of the month.

His cell rang and he wasn't prepared for the call. "Sheriff Frost."

"I hope I have the right person," the caller said. "Sheriff Frost, do you have a daughter named Tammy Traynor or Tammy Bristol?"

"I do. My adopted daughter. Did you find Tammy? Where are you calling from?"

"This is the Oxbow Country Sheriff's Office in North Carolina calling, sir. Your daughter's belongings and personal effects were found at an accident scene in our jurisdiction, but your daughter was not found in the vehicle or in the vicinity. Her body wasn't there either, and I'm only saying body because a life-threatening amount of her blood was present in the wrecked truck."

"I see. Could you send me copies of the accident reports, Sheriff? I'll give you the email for our station."

"Happy to do that, Sheriff Frost. I'm sure you're aware of your daughter's legal status. She's listed as a parole violator and a wanted fugitive. Armed and dangerous, but I'm sure you know all of that."

"I'm well aware, sir. If I knew where Tammy was, I'd pick her up and incarcerate her myself. She was paroled into my custody, and I'm responsible. I need to find her."

"I hope the reports help you, Sheriff, but there's not much evidence there. We still haven't found the driver of the truck. It's been days and he must have wandered off from the crash and died in the woods. The truck was found in a heavily treed area of the mountains."



“Who was the truck registered to?” asked Travis.

“Darryl James, with a Lubbock Texas, address.”

“Was his home address checked?”

“I believe local officers were dispatched to the driver’s address and nothing came of it. It’s all in the reports I’m sending you.”

“Appreciate the call, Sheriff. I’m looking forward to reading those reports.”

Travis hollered for Billy and trudged down the hall to wait for the reports to show up on the office computer. Billy and the boys joined him in the office and while they waited, Travis explained what the sheriff in North Carolina had told him.

“North Carolina? How far away is that, Dad?” asked Virge.

“Helluva long way from here,” said Billy.

“They’re still searching for Tammy and for the driver of the truck,” said Travis.

“Did you tell them Tammy can drive one of them big mothers, Dad?” I asked.

“I did not, Harlan.”

“Huh.”

We were all thinking about Tammy and what the hell she’d been doing since she ran away from us at the ranch. Molly gave a shout out from the squad room and playtime was over. We had to work.

“What is it, Molly?” Billy hurried down the hall to the dispatch station to see what Molly had.

We agreed that all incoming cases would belong to Billy. Me and Virge and Travis would help him until the end of the month, and then he’d be on his own. Him and Ted. Billy would still have Ted.

Molly read the details from her notepad. “Vicki Temple says her mother is missing and she’s been gone for two days. The girl runs the laundromat across the street for her mother.”

“Vicki’s mother is missing?” asked Virge.

“Do you know Vicki, Virgil?” asked Billy.

“Took her out a couple of times.”

“Let’s walk across the road and talk to her in person,” said Billy.

“Y’all go ahead,” said Travis. “I want to read Tammy’s accident reports, then I have an appointment in Cut Bank.”

“Copy that,” said Virge. “Shouldn’t take us long to sort Vicki out.”

Duds & Suds. Coyote Creek.

Billy and me found Vicki in the office rolling the coins from the washing machines. They took five quarters for every load of dirty clothes and six for the dryers. Cost a lot to wear clean clothes in Coyote Creek.

“Hi, Vicki, I’m Sheriff Billy Johnson from the station across the road. Do you mind if

I get a few more details about your missing mother?”

“I’d rather talk to Virge. He’s my boyfriend.”

Billy raised an eyebrow at that newsflash. “Okay, why don’t you talk to Virgil, and I’ll just stand here by the door and listen?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

I sat on the edge of the desk and asked, “When was the last time you saw your mom, Vicki?”

“Saturday night. Her boyfriend came to pick her up and that’s the last time I saw her.”

“What’s her boyfriend’s name?” I pulled out my notebook and turned to a clean page.

“Derrick Forbes.”

“Got an address for Derrick?”

“Nope. Never been to his place, but I think he lives in Shelby.”

“Did you try your mom’s cellphone?”

“You think I’m a doze-out, Virge? Of course I did. Since Saturday night I called her about a thousand times. Her mailbox is full and that’s a dead-end.”

“Your mom been doing anything that could’ve gotten her into trouble lately, Vic?”

“Maybe, but I can’t tell you guys because then I’ll be a rat. I want her back, but I

don't want her back and in jail. What's the point of that? She might as well just be goners. It's the same either way—I'm left alone running this fucking laundry hell-hole..."

Billy took a step away from the wall, "Mind if I say something here, Virge?"

"Go ahead, Billy. What did you think of?"

"I'm thinking if Vicki's mother was doing something illegal—don't care what it was—then she might not only be missing, but she might also possibly be in danger."

"You mean like those mob guys might kill her?" Vicki blurted out her question without thinking.

"Mob guys, Vic? Is your mom's boyfriend a wise guy?"

"I'm not aware of mob activity in Northern Montana," said Billy.

"Show's what you know, Mister Sheriff," said Vicki. "Fuckin' cops never know what's going on under their noses."

"What's your mother's first name, Vic?" I asked.

"Tanya."

"You going to be okay staying alone until we find her?" I asked.

"I hate staying alone in our house, Virgie. Can you come and sleep over tonight?"

"I'll see what Travis says. He may want you to have protection if there is mob involvement."

Billy nodded. "Let's work with what we have and see if we can come up with an address in Shelby for Mister Forbes."

"Will you let me know what's going on, Virge? I want to know what you guys are doing to find my mom."

"Yeah, sure. I'll text you as soon as we know something."

Me and Billy left the laundromat, and he said, "I don't like the sounds of her mother being involved with the mob, Virgie."

"We've never had the mob stirring up trouble in our county," I said. "Maybe Vicki thinks the boyfriend is a mob guy and he's just a regular felon."

"We can hope for that," said Billy. "I'm not keen to match manpower with the mob."

"Yeah, five of us against how many? Five hundred?"

Billy laughed. "We don't stand a chance."

Harrison County Office. Cut Bank. Montana.

Travis was five minutes early for his appointment with Lyndell Gibson, the county supervisor. Gibson's secretary showed him in, and the big boss greeted Travis with a grin. "Pleasure to see you, Sheriff Frost. Have a seat."

"Thank you. I just dropped by because I wanted to tell you in person that I'm retiring at the end of the month and passing the badge to Undersheriff Billy Johnson."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Travis. You've been a stellar sheriff for Harrison County, and I'm not sure you can be replaced."

“Billy will be every bit as good as me, sir. In some ways—technically—he’s much better than me. He’s also way above me filling out reports and keeping records. I’m sure he’ll be exactly what you need until election time and then it will be up to the voters.”

“He’s a good man,” said Gibson, “but I’m sorry to lose you all the same, Travis. The citizens of this county love you and trust you to keep them safe. You’re a little young to retire, aren’t you?”

Travis laughed. “I’ve taken my share of beatings and some days I don’t feel too young. I have something I want to do and I’m going to stop into Gloria Grafton’s office and talk to her about it while I’m here.”

Gibson raised an eyebrow. “Something to do with children, Travis?”

“Juvenile offenders. I’m thinking of opening up rehab ranch for them when I move to Texas. Give me a challenge in my retirement.”

“Certainly will. Kudos, Travis. Wish you luck with that endeavor.”

“Thanks. I’ll definitely need it.”

Travis strolled down the hallway to Gloria Grafton’s office and stuck his head in to see if she was busy. Gloria had helped him a lot with the red tape surrounding both Harlan and Virgil, and he wanted to ask her about agencies in Texas he should contact.

She glanced up, saw who it was and smiled. “Travis. Nice to see you. Can I help you with something?”

“You can help me with a lot, Gloria, if you have the time.”

“I always have time for you. What’s up?”

Forbes Residence. Shelby. Montana.

Billy took me and Virge with him when he went to Shelby to check out Vicki’s mother’s boyfriend—the mob guy.

Derrick Forbes answered the door of his big two-story house and invited us in like he was a big shot, and he loved having the law come over for a coffee.

“Come in and sit down. Make yourselves comfortable. Coffee? Tea? A cold drink?”

“We’re fine thanks,” said Billy. “Do you know a woman named Tanya Temple?”

Derrick loosened his tie and put a fake thinking expression on his face. “The name sounds familiar. I might have met her, but I’m not sure. What do you want her for?”

“Nothing illegal, sir. She’s been reported as a missing person. We’d like to find her. That’s all. No other reason.”

“Why would you come to me looking for her?” asked Derrick. “You think I’m hiding her here in my house?”

“Possibly,” said Billy. “Do you mind if we search your premises?”

“I certainly do.” He laughed. “You’ll have to get a search warrant to do that, Sheriff Johnson.”

“Do you live alone here, Derrick?”

He grinned. “At the moment, but not for long. I have a wife and three kids. They’re

back in Chicago and haven't moved out here yet. They're coming soon. They are gonna love living in Montana."

"I'm sure they will," said Billy.

We left the boyfriend's place, and I had a bad feel from the dude and from his slick attitude.

"What did you think, Harlan? Was that guy lying, or what?"

"Sure was, and he was enjoying it too. Those guys love fucking the cops over."

Billy raised an eyebrow. "You know that how, Harlan? You see it on TV?"

"Might have."

ReMax Office. Coyote Creek. Montana.

Travis dropped into the ReMax office to discuss the offer that had been made on the Inn. He hated to sell it because of what it had meant to Olivia, but when he moved back to Texas, he was cutting all ties with Montana and starting a new life.

I have to get back to where I belong.

Selling everything he held an interest in up here in Montana would eliminate the need to come back to fix problems in the future.

His agent, Bob Crockett, pushed a copy of the offer across the desk to him. "You can see where the buyers are offering seven hundred and twenty-five thousand for the Inn and the property, not including the chattels. An evaluation will have to be done on the furniture, bedding for the rooms, dishes...everything that isn't part of the Inn or the



grounds around it.”

“I understand, and the girls are working on an inventory now. I’ll have a figure for the extras by tomorrow.”

“Good,” said Bob. “For this sale or any other, you’ll need that number.”

“Yep,” said Travis. “If they want to come up to seven fifty, they can have it. I’m okay with that price.”

Bob made the changes in pen and Travis initialed them. “I’ll take it back to them, Sheriff and I think they’ll go for it. They are in love with the Inn, and it is in pristine condition. You’ve kept it the same way the Best family maintained it for years. The Inn is a landmark in Coyote Creek.”

“Yes, it is. I have to clear out the private apartment. That’s not done, and I’ve been putting it off. I’ll work on that today. Let me know if it’s a deal.”

Crockett smiled. “I’ll call you right away, Sheriff. I haven’t had any action on your ranch yet, but my ads are just coming out in the city papers across the state. I have a gorgeous video tour of The Wild Stallion Ranch online. Your property will sell quickly.”

“I’d better move my ass and get down to Texas and find a replacement or me and my boys will be out on the street.”

Crockett laughed. “Possible.”

Travis left the real estate office and walked to the market down the street. He needed cardboard boxes if he was intending to bite the bullet and pack up Olivia’s belongings.

I've been putting that off way too long.

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

Travis had been out of the office all morning and when he got back from his errands, he checked in with Molly and she filled him in on Vicki Temple's missing mother.

"That's all Vicki was able to tell us?"

"Uh huh. Billy took the boys to Shelby to question the boyfriend."

"Is Virge upset?"

"He didn't seem to be," said Molly.

"Good. I don't want him blaming himself for it."

Molly nodded. "He does that sometimes."

"Yeah, he does. I haven't eaten, so I'll be across the road at the diner. Call me when Billy gets back from Shelby. I want to hear what he found out from the so-called mob guy. Is the girl alone or does she have siblings?"

"Alone as far as I know, Travis. Just her and her mother. Vicki runs the laundromat during the daytime and the mother is never there. She didn't mention what her mother did all day."

"That might be important to find out, Molly. Why don't you do a little digging and find out why the kid runs the business every day while the mother never shows her face in the laundromat?"

“I have wondered about that several times since Virgil showed an interest in Vicki. It’s an unusual setup.”

“Yep, it is. The mother has to have another day job where she can’t watch the laundromat. We need to know what that job is if we’re expected to find her.”

“Why wouldn’t Vicki tell Billy that during the interview?”

“Another good question. Make a list, Molly. Tanya Temple disappeared for a reason. When we find out the why it might tell us the where .”

“I’ll work on it, Travis.”

Shadow Mountain. West Virginia.

Bobby found himself spending part of every day in the town of Shadow Valley at the pool hall. Gillette had gone back to her home in Texas, and she wouldn’t be back for another month. What the hell was he going to do until then? She’d only been gone one day, and he was bored to death already.

“Come on, Cleo. Let’s take a beer outside. We’ll sit on the porch and try to figure out where that bitch Tammy is. I want to kill her for killing Ray. We have to avenge Ray’s death. She blew him away for nothing. He never did anything to her—he never even met her for chrissakes.”

Cleo wagged her tail.

“Where do you think she might be?”

Bobby spread his map of the southeastern states out on the floor of the porch and stared at it. “Do you think she’s near us, Cleo? Or out west?”

“She’s always tracking me, so why don’t I let her find me? As soon as she does, I’ll kill her and then we can make peace for Ray.”

Cleo whined.

“Yeah, I hear you. You’re wondering how we’re going to let her know where we are. I’ll get another beer and think on it for a minute or two. Don’t you worry, I’ll come up with the answer.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek. Montana.

Billy and the boys returned from Shelby, and they were no further ahead. Billy sat down in the break room and told Travis about the interview with Derrick Forbes.

“Typical arrogant made guy,” said Billy. “Says his wife and three kids are coming from Chicago to join him and he claims he never heard of Tanya Temple.”

“He did look like a mob guy?” asked Travis.

“Yep, he did. Nice house, dressed in a suit and tie. Nice shoes. Denied knowing Tanya.”

Billy stood up. “I’m going to call the FBI field office in Great Falls and talk to their organized crime division.”

“You think that’s a good idea this early in your case?” Travis was never keen on involving the feds. Didn’t feel right and never worked out. He’d always regretted it every time he had no choice but to include them.

“If Tanya is in danger, we can’t afford to wait and see if she wanders back to Coyote Creek,” said Billy. “What if she saw something. Witnessed a crime by accident,

found out something, and now the mob is eliminating her...like that?"

"Then she's a goner," said Travis. "Not much we can do to prevent it if they already have her."

"We need to talk to Vicki again."

"Molly and I were talking about it a little and she wrote down some questions that need answering."

"Thanks," said Billy. "I'll get your questions from her before I interview her again."

"Copy that."

Watson Residence. North Carolina.

With each passing day, Tammy was healing and doing better. She wanted to leave the cabin before anyone found out Willy-John Watson had been helping her.

Willy was one of the best guys she'd ever met—next to Travis—and leaving the cabin was the best thing she could do for Willy after he'd saved her life. A life that wasn't worth saving.

Willy called and pulled her back to reality. "Breakfast, Tammy. Do you need help to get to the table, or can you make it on your own?"

"I'm stronger than you think, Willy."

He laughed. "Attagirl."

Tammy limped from her bed across the room to the kitchen table and sat down.

Willy sat down across from her and smiled. "I want to tell you about my plan."

"I don't want you to have a plan for us," said Tammy. "It won't work out and you'll go to jail for even knowing a person as bad as me."

Willy laughed. "I can't believe you've done half the terrible things you told me, Tammy. You're not some insane killer like you're trying to make me believe."

"I am, Willy. I'm exactly the person you just described. I've done a lot of bad shit. Really bad, and I don't want you to get hurt. You're too good for me. I can't be with you in your cabin or in your life. Best for both of us if I leave right away."

"We'll both leave, Tammy. That's my plan. We'll pack up what we need and go someplace where no one will ever find us."

"There is no place like that," said Tammy. "I know because I tried to find that place already."

"Where did you look?"

"In the bayou. I heard of a spot in the swamp where outlaws go to hide out and I went there for a while."

"But people found you?"

"My mama hired a bounty hunter to find me because she was worried."

"And you didn't stay with her after she found you?"

"Mama put me in a hospital, and I didn't get any better. My brain drain made me run away again and I did more terrible things."

Willy looked Tammy in the eye and hesitated for a moment before he asked his question. “Have you killed people, Tammy?”

“Lots of them.”

She answered so quickly and off-hand that Willy was shocked. He nodded and couldn’t think of anything else to say to her. Maybe running away with Tammy wasn’t such a great idea after all. He needed to think on it a lot more.

Wild Stallion Ranch. Montana.

After feeding the horses, we came into the house for dinner with a lot of questions for Dad about moving the horses to Texas.

“Will we be taking Tammy’s horse with us, Dad?”

“Uh huh. The barn will have to be empty and clean when the new owners take over the ranch.”

Travis’ cell rang and it was Bob Crockett. He put the call on speaker so we could hear what the real estate agent was telling us.

“The buyers accepted your price, Travis, and the Inn is sold. If you can come into the office tomorrow, we’ll finish up the paperwork and finalize everything.”

“Sure, I can do that.”

“Also, I have more news.”

“Go ahead.”

“I have a viewing scheduled for your ranch at ten in the morning. I’ll give you a call or drop in at the station afterwards and tell you how it went.”

“Thanks, Bob. Things are moving quickly, and I better get into gear. I’m not nearly ready to go to Texas yet and look for a property.”

Billy didn’t say much during breakfast, and me and Virge could tell he was sad.

Travis noticed and said, “The offer stands, Billy. I said you could come with us to Texas, and I meant it. Your decision.”

“Appreciate it, Travis. I was fairly sure I wanted to stay here and continue on with the sheriff’s job, but now that all of my family is going—for real—I’m not sure I can stay.”



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:58 pm*

Tuesday, July 23<sup>rd</sup> .

Wild Stallion Ranch. Montana.

Me and Virge spent an extra hour in the barn cleaning up for the viewing. When we made it to the house for breakfast, there was barely time to eat anything.

“What took you boys so long?” asked Billy.

“Cleaning up the barn for the people coming to look at the ranch,” I said.

“The house could use a cleaning too,” said Travis. He cracked a half dozen eggs and threw them into the frying pan. “Maybe I’ll stay behind and run through the house before I come to the shop. Did you boys make your beds?”

“Umm...no,” said Virge, “but I was just gonna go do that, Dad.”

“Eat your breakfast first. We’re already late.” He turned to Billy. “You go on ahead and I’ll tidy up while the boys eat. We won’t be too far behind you.”

“Copy that.” Billy picked up his keys and left for the station.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

First thing Virge did when we got to the station was ask Billy if he had any news on Vicki’s mother.

“I went across the road to talk to Vicki again, Virge, and the laundromat is closed. Vicki isn’t there.”

“What? She’s always there. The laundromat opens at eight in the morning.”

Billy shook his head. “The door is locked, and the closed sign is in the window.”

“Did you go to her house?” asked Virge. “Maybe she’s sick or worried over her mother and she took the day off.”

“We’ll go over there right now, and talk to her,” said Billy. “Let’s not panic until we find out what’s going on. She might have heard from her mother and gone to pick her up.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Virge ran out the back door without waiting for me or for Billy. He had the squad running when Billy hopped into the shotgun seat, and I got in the back.

Temple Residence. Coyote Creek.

The old Ford Focus that Vicki and her mother both drove wasn’t in the driveway and the front door was locked when Billy tried it.

Virge pounded on the front door and hollered for Vicki. I left him there shouting and ran around the back to see if I could get in that way.

Back was locked, but I opened it with my pick set, ran through the quiet house and let my brother and Billy in. “There’s nobody here. The house is empty.”

Virgil ran like a madman through every room.

“No sign of her?” asked Billy.

“I wish I’d slept here like Vicki wanted me to do,” Virge was hollering at the top of his lungs. “She was scared and asked me to sleep here last night. Damn it, Billy. I should’ve done it. I told her I’d ask Travis if I could, and I forgot to do it. This is on me.”

“Not on you, Virge, if she left on her own to find her mother. That’s probably what she did. She got tired of waiting for her mother to come home and Vicki went looking for her.” Billy pulled out his phone. “I’ll look up the tag and put a BOLO out on the car.”

“Yeah, that might give us a locate on her.”

“Should we check the mob guy in Shelby again?” I asked Billy.

“I’ll send Ted over there right away to keep an eye on him. If the guy goes out, maybe Ted can get a tag in that house and that will help us out.”

“Can I do a thorough search of this house?” asked Virge. “Might come up with something on the mother.”

“Sure. Why don’t you and Harlan do that? I’ll drive back to the station and send Ted to Shelby. Virge, do you have Vicki’s cell number?”

“Yep.”

“I know you’ve tried time and again but keep calling to see if anything changes on her end.”

“Already called her twenty times and she didn’t answer, but I’ll keep trying.”

“Attaboy.”

ReMax Office. Coyote Creek.

Travis was a little overwhelmed by how quickly things were moving. He figured he had tons of time to pack and get ready to leave Montana, but now he didn't have much time at all.

The Inn was sold, and the ranch would be next. The thing bothering him the most was the location for the new spread. The boys were keen on not being too far from Annie and the kids—their extended family—and he wanted Harlan and Virge to be happy above all else.

The location didn't matter so much to him. He'd grown up south of San Angelo and that was a helluva long way from Annie's ranch.

In Bob Crockett's office, Travis signed everything marked with a little yellow 'X'.

“That's it, Travis. You're all done with the Inn until the closing date. The ranch is next on our list.”

“I've been thinking about it and you'd better search for a ranch for me and the boys within a fifty-mile radius of Austin. The boys don't want to be more than an hour away from their step-mom and their foster family. They are attached to those kids.”

Bob grinned. “That helps narrow it down a lot, Travis. Texas is a big state.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“I've got buyers meeting me at your ranch this morning, so I'd better get up there. Talk to you later.”

“Yep. Let me know if they like it.”

“You’ll hear from me.”

Coyote Creek Inn.

Travis left the office and stopped by the market down the street to pick up more cardboard boxes. He didn’t have nearly enough. Next on his list was something he didn’t want to do but couldn’t put off any longer.

He parked behind the Inn and entered through the back door next to the huge restaurant kitchen. On his way in, he spoke to Susan Westfall, the manager.

“I’ll be in the apartment this morning, Susan. The Inn has been sold and I have to pack the apartment up and clear it out.”

“I’m not sure I’m looking forward to meeting new owners, Travis. We’ve had such a great working arrangement, and you’re the best boss we could have.”

“You’ll meet the new owners soon and I think you’ll like them. They seem like nice people.”

“They won’t be as nice as you.”

He laughed. “Sure they will be.”

Carrying an armload of boxes, Travis unlocked the door of the apartment and went inside. He had no intentions of moving anything from the space except for Olivia’s personal belongings.

Before starting his off-putting task, Travis tried to prepare himself. He sat on the end

of Olivia's bed and lit up a smoke. Had he ever smoked in here before?

Couldn't remember, but there were a lot of other memories that wouldn't be leaving his head anytime soon. He'd never forget Olivia Best.

This might be the hardest thing I've ever done.

Shadow Mountain. West Virginia.

After straining his brain for hours, Bobby almost gave himself an aneurism, but he finally figured out a way to find Tammy. Not find her accurately—pinpoint her location or anything like that—but find a location close to where she was.

Using Fletcher Bowden's name, he called Texas Ranger Headquarters in Austin and asked his question. The girl on the other end of the phone got the information quickly for him and made Bobby smile.

"Tammy Traynor/Bristol's last known whereabouts was at the sight of a vehicle wreckage in the Smoky Mountains north of Asheville, North Carolina. Hope that helps, Ranger Bowden."

"Tremendously. Thanks so much."

He put the phone down and patted Cleo on her big, black head. "North Carolina, Cleo. Are you ready to go for a ride in the Jeep?"

Cleo wagged her tail and ran to the door.

"Hey, wait for me. I have to pack." Excited that he had a new purpose and destination, Bobby ran into his room and filled a duffel with clean clothes. He grabbed his toiletries from the bathroom, the gun from the top drawer of his dresser

and his wallet.

“I’m ready to go.”

On the way out, he locked up the cabin hoping no more squatters would break in while he was gone. “They better stay out if they know what’s good for them, Cleo. You can take a big chunk out of them when we get home if you want to.”

Bobby sat behind the wheel and reached for his map. “Let’s have a look at the big picture before we program the address in, Cleo.”

He lowered the passenger window for Cleo to stick her big head out, then reached under the seat to affirm that his tire iron was laying there if he needed it.

Touching the cold steel made him smile. That thing felt so good in his hand...and it had been a while since he’d used it.

“We’ve got the tire iron, Cleo. Let’s go find Tammy and bash her brains out.”

Cleo wagged her tail and Bobby laughed.

“It’s gonna be a great day, Cleo.”

Watson Cabin. North Carolina.

Willy was tired out after the day he’d spent in limbo. All day long, he’d wrestled with himself mentally and emotionally trying to figure out if he should let Tammy go like she wanted to or go with her and try to make a life with her on the run.

Hardest decision Willy-John ever had to make, and he wasn’t doing well at it. After hours of thinking on his decision, he was still confused.

He wanted to be with Tammy but if she had killed a lot of people and she was telling the truth about that, then he had to wonder how they could start a new life.

The police will catch up with her. They always do.

Willy thought about getting her a used car to drive and just letting her go. That might be the best plan.

They didn't talk much during dinner and after cleaning up the dishes, Tammy went straight to bed.

Willy took the dogs out onto the porch and he sat in one of the old chairs and strummed his banjo for a while. Not loud enough to wake Tammy up. Then he came in and didn't turn the lights on.

Without bothering to get undressed, he lay down on his cot and let the sadness and disappointment flood over him.

Worst feeling ever. He had high hopes for a life with Tammy and now...he couldn't fathom life with a wanted murdered. They'd always be looking over their shoulders.

How could it be anything but one day at a time?

Willy pondered that concept for a while. Would he be satisfied with one day at a time?

Never once did Willy-John think of Tammy killing him.

No recollection of dozing off to sleep, but he woke when George and Gracie barked and ran to the door. Willy jumped up off his bed and ran to look.



When he opened the creaky cabin door, the dogs bolted outside on the run and Willy saw Tammy sitting behind the wheel of his truck with the motor running.

Willy ran down the porch steps and jerked open the passenger door. “No, Tammy. Please don’t leave me behind. I’m begging you not to.”

“I wrote you a note, Willy. I don’t want to leave you, and I don’t want to steal your truck, but I have to keep you safe. Believe me, I’m doing you a favor. I’m trying to protect you.”

“Come back inside and help me pack, Tammy. I want to bring my medical supplies and things for the dogs. Please, I’m not ready to go yet.”

“Willy, I’m trying to save you from me and from all the harm I will bring you. You don’t deserve to have your life ruined by a terrible person like me. You don’t know me or what I’m capable of.”

“Wait for me inside, Tammy. I’m afraid you’ll leave me if you don’t get out of the truck and come inside.”

“Oh, Willy. I wish I didn’t love you so much. You’re making me do the wrong thing. It’s wrong for us to run away together thinking things will work out. So wrong.”

Tammy followed Willy and the dogs inside and they spent a half hour packing and loading the truck with everything they might need for their new life on the road.

Willy made coffee in traveler mugs, and he drove with Tammy sitting in the passenger seat sipping her caffeine.

Big smile on his face, Willy asked, “Which way are we going, Tammy? Do you have a destination in mind?”

“Go north, Willy. We’ll be safe in Canada.”

“I’ve never been to Canada. I’ve heard it’s beautiful up there.”

“It is. We’ll go way up north, and nobody will ever find us. You, me, George and Gracie.”

“I can picture it,” said Willy. “We’ll be like pioneers in our little cabin in the middle of nowhere.”

Tammy smiled.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:58 pm*

Wednesday, July 24<sup>th</sup> .

East of Knoxville. Tennessee.

“Junction of route 40 and I-81.” Willy turned to look at Tammy for direction.

“This is where we take the interstate all the way to the Canadian border. All we have to do is follow eighty-one all the way to the bridge. We cross over and we’re there. A lot safer than we are here.”

“Wonderful,” said Willy. “Nice and simple for an inexperienced driver like me. I haven’t roamed far out of North Carolina and I’m anxious to see the rest of the continent.”

“You can see the scenery a lot better sitting up high in a big rig,” said Tammy. “If we had enough money, we could buy us a cab—Freightliner—and be long haul truckers for a living. It’s a fantastic life and I miss it so much.”

Willy laughed. “I’ll have to think about that, Tammy. I guess I wasted a lot of my time going to med school when I could have been driving a truck and living the fantastic life.”

“I didn’t mean it that way, Willy. You’re a doctor and that’s a fantastic job too. Everybody looks up to a doctor and you had to go to school for so fucking long. Brutal. Only guessing it was brutal. I only went to school until I was ten.”

Willy shook his head at that revelation and pointed off to the right. “There’s a rest

area coming up, Tammy. Let's stop and take the dogs for a walk."

"Sure. We're in no hurry. Doesn't matter when we get to Canada, or even if we don't."

"That's part of being free, isn't it? I love the way you think."

After they covered the dog trail through the woods and tired themselves out, Tammy sized up the trucks parked in the second area dedicated to the larger vehicles.

"How do you like that red one, Willy?"

"Big and shiny red. I like it. Why?"

Tammy smiled. "I want to get you the one you like. No point in stealing one otherwise, is there?"

Willy shook his head. "I don't want you to steal a truck for me, Tammy. That's the last thing I want you to do. I hope you're only kidding."

"Red is nice," Tammy said. "Nice and bright."

Bluefield. West Virginia.

Bobby stopped for coffee as he drove through Bluefield and while he waited at the drive-thru window, he checked his map to be sure he was on the right highway heading for North Carolina.

"We're going the right way, Cleo. It won't be long before we find out where Terrible Tammy is hiding."

Passing all kinds of traffic coming at them from the south, Bobby found himself looking at every vehicle and wondering what Tammy was driving.

“Guess it will be a surprise, Cleo.”

Cleo stuck her big head farther out the window to keep watch.

Wild Stallion Ranch. Montana.

Travis cracked a couple of eggs into the frying pan and stopped cooking long enough to answer his phone. “Bob, have you got something going on this early in the morning?”

“I do, Travis. I’ve lined up a bunch of Texas properties for you and your boys to look at online. If any of them appeal to you, then you’ll have to fly down to the Lone Star State and have a closer look.”

“We’ll come to your office right after breakfast, and take a look at the pictures when we get there.”

I was listening to Dad talking to the real estate guy and so was Virge. “Where are the ranches, Dad?” asked Virgie.

“Are they near Annie’s ranch?” I asked.

Travis held up a hand. “Hold on, boys. I have no idea where they are, and we won’t find out until we get to Bob’s office. Don’t ask me more questions because I don’t know the answers. You’ll see the pictures and get all the facts and the details at the same time I do.”

“Got it,” said Virge.

Dad finished cooking our eggs and me and Virge didn't ask any more questions. He was getting stressed out by all the added pressure the move to Texas was putting on him.

Risky business.

ReMax Office. Coyote Creek.

Before we went to the station to start work, Dad drove us to the real estate office to look at the ranch pictures Bob Crockett was excited about.

Bob showed us into his office at the back of the building. He was the boss and had the biggest space. He pointed to chairs and turned his screen around so we could watch the virtual ranch tours.

"Three different ranches recently came on the market in the area you're targeting, Travis. Different locations, but all within a fifty-mile radius of the City of Austin."

"Does that answer your first question, Harlan?"

"Yeah, it does, Dad. Don't get pissed at me, okay? It was only a question."

"I'm not pissed," snapped Travis. "Look at the pictures."

All three spreads looked great in the videos. Three different sizes—in acres. Different sized barns, bunkhouses and main houses. All of them had good points and bad points.

"We need to fly down to Texas and do some looking at these three properties and probably a few more before we decide," said Travis.

“Let me know when you’re making the trip, Travis,” said Bob. “As soon as you have an arrival date, I’ll call the various brokers and make the appointments for you and the boys.”

“I’ll figure the work schedule out with Billy at the shop, book a flight for me and the boys and get back to you later today, Bob.”

“Fantastic.”

Bob Crockett shook hands with all of us before we went to the station to start work. We soon wouldn’t be working as deputy sheriffs, and I wondered how that would feel. Virge hadn’t mentioned it to me, but he must be thinking about it too.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Travis closed the office door to talk to Billy in private. “We need to talk.”

“Sure. Go ahead. What are we talking about?”

“Bob Crockett has three properties for me to look at and I have to move my ass and go to Texas if I’m going to have a place for the boys to live. I have a ton of vacation days coming to me that the county owes me for and I’m going to take them to finish out my month. If I don’t, the ranch will be sold, and we won’t have any place to fuckin go.”

“Sure. You can do that. All we’re working on is Vicki’s missing mother and for all we know, she might’ve just taken off. We don’t even know there’s been a crime committed.”

“No, we don’t. I’m going to look for a flight for tomorrow morning from Grand Falls and take the boys with me. Can you and Ted handle the office?”

Billy laughed. "You used to be here alone."

"Yeah. I did it alone for a long time." Travis went to the door to leave. "Don't forget you're thinking on coming with us. I'm waiting to hear about that."

"I'm working it out in my head."

Travis moved to the break room, poured himself a coffee and Virge came barreling in. "How can I go to Texas to look at ranches with Vicki missing, Dad? I have to help Billy find her."

"I want you with me when we pick out the ranch, son. Billy and Ted can find Vicki and her mother."

"I'm not sure I can go, Dad. I'm not being an asshole neither."

Travis smiled. "You seldom are an asshole, Virgie, and neither is Harlan."

Billy joined them in the break room with news. "I just got a call from the Butte police department."

"What's up in Butte?" asked Travis.

"Vicki's mom's old Ford Focus was found in the Target parking lot down there in Butte. No sign of the driver and nothing in the car."

"If Vicki was searching for her mother," said Billy, "she knew enough to go to Butte. Looks to me like they changed vehicles. There's not a damned thing you can do about Vicki from here, Virgil. Vicki and her mother are up to something, and they might not be in trouble at all."



“Why did Vicki come to us then?” asked Virge. “If they were doing something on the down-low, why call us?”

“Maybe her mother hadn’t clued her in from the first. Vicki gets scared and turns to you and then her mother is pissed her kid involved the cops.”

“Huh,” said Virge. “I guess it could’ve been like that.”

“Okay, let’s do this,” said Travis. “Before we drop the case completely, let’s go over to the laundromat and do a thorough search of the office. We haven’t looked through Vicki’s desk yet.”

“Okay, and if we find nothing crime-related, I’ll pack and go with you and Harlan tomorrow.”

“Thanks, son. Let’s go do that now.”

Duds & Suds Laundromat. Coyote Creek.

Dad went with me and Virge across the street to the laundromat. We left the closed sign in the window, and we took every single piece of paper out of that old desk where Vicki sat and worked all day long.

“What are these?” I picked up a handful of papers with a rubber band around them.

Travis took them from me and said, “These are betting slips. Was Vicki’s mom a bookie for the mob? She couldn’t have run her business from here in the laundromat.”

“She never came here during the day, Dad,” said Virge.

“Did you ever see Vicki on her phone, Virge?” asked Travis.

“Not much.”

“Okay, we can safely assume it wasn’t Vicki taking the bets,” said Travis.

“The house didn’t look like a place of business,” I said. “We were careful when we did the search.”

“So, if Vicki’s mother was a bookie, we have no idea where she operated from,” said Travis.

“Huh,” said Virge. “This is a crazy mixed-up mess.”

“Now that they both took off and left their business and their home behind,” said Travis, “something must be coming down on them.”

“They’re running,” said Virge. “That’s easy enough to see. There were no clothes in either one of their closets. I checked.”

“You didn’t mention it,” said Harlan.

“Far as I can figure,” said Travis, “it has to be either the mob or the feds. Sure as hell ain’t us, and we’re the only ones left on the list.”

“Shitfires,” said Virge. “I never knew Vicki was badass.”

“Live and learn, son. You gotta put this behind you and get ready to go to Texas tomorrow.”

Cracker Barrell. Roanoke. Virginia.

“I love this restaurant, Tammy. I don’t think I’ve ever eaten here before.”

“Popular spot on a lot of the interstates,” said Tammy. “I’ve been into a few of the ones on the chain. They have decent fudge and a lot of candy and good peanut brittle.”

“I like licorice,” said Willy.

“They have that, and they offer a different special for each day of the week.”

“What day is it?” asked Willy and then he laughed at himself.

“I think it’s Wednesday, but I can’t be sure,” said Tammy. “I haven’t been out of the cabin until today. It could be winter for all I know.” She laughed and Willy laughed with her.

After the Wednesday special of broccoli cheddar chicken, followed by lemon meringue pie, Willy browsed through the old-fashioned country store wanting to buy Tammy a gift. He finally decided on a rainbow T-shirt that reminded him a lot of her.

“Will you wear this?”

“If you buy it for me, of course I’ll wear it, Willy. Thank you.”

“You have no clothes, Tammy, after the police taking them out of your truck. We have to think seriously about shopping for you.”

“I could use a change of underwear.”

Willy winced. “We’ll definitely work on finding you the basics today.”

“Thanks. I don’t need much to get by,” said Tammy, “as long as I have you.”

Willy Watson squeezed her hand.

Great Smoky Mountains. North Carolina.

Carefully studying the accident report, Bobby found his way to the lookout point on the side of the mountain. Didn’t take much brainpower to see the section of guardrail that had been recently replaced.

Bobby stood behind the shiny new metal and peered down into the deep gorge that seemed to go on for half a mile below him.

“Look down there, Cleo.” The locals can’t afford to get the truck Tammy stole out of the hole she put it in. Are you up for a hike down the side of the mountain?”

Cleo wagged her tail and Bobby took a couple of deep breaths before starting the treacherous trip downward to the wreckage.

Bobby checked his watch when he reached his destination, and it had taken him a full half hour to get down the mountainside without falling ass over tea kettle and breaking his neck.

When he got to the truck, Cleo was already down there waiting for him. She had far less trouble balancing on the steep decline than Bobby did.

“Freightliner, Cleo. Tammy stole another Freightliner because that’s the truck she can drive best. I wonder where the poor guy is who owns this truck. Do you think he’s lying dead someplace?”

Cleo wagged her tail, her tongue hanging out panting.

“I can picture it, Cleo. That bitch Tammy turned on the guy and took his truck after he was nice to her. We have to get even for this guy and for Ray and especially for me. Who knows how many other guys she killed and took their trucks or their fucking wallets?”

Driver’s door was smashed in and jammed shut, so Bobby had to climb in the passenger door. He searched the cab, glove compartment and under both the seats.

The cops had been there and taken what was in plain sight, but how thorough had they been? Bobby stuck his hand under both seats in the cab and came up with nothing but Tammy’s phone.

Bingo .

“Look at this, Cleo. We’ve got her now.”

Climbing up the side of the mountain took longer by fifteen minutes. Forty-five minutes to climb up the steep embankment and when he got to the top, Bobby had to sit behind the wheel of the Wrangler for a solid five minutes to rest before he got his wind back.

“Tammy’s phone is dead, Cleo. What we need is a charger to fit her phone, then we’ll be able to find her. Let’s go find one.”

Newport Service Center. North Carolina.

Bobby pulled into the service center in Newport and filled the Wrangler with gas. Next stop was the convenience store, hoping they had a charger that would fit Tammy’s phone.

The store had several different models and one of them was the correct one. Bobby

bought it along with a few other things he needed for the trip. Water, beer, snacks and more dog biscuits.

He jumped into the Jeep and patted Cleo on the head. “Now we need to find a motel where we can charge the phone.”

Best Western Hotel. Staunton. Virginia.

Celebrating their first night on the road together, Willy wanted something special. He got a room for them at the dog-friendly Best Western.

They checked into the room like a couple of honeymooners and Willy couldn't ever remember being happier.

Leaving the dogs in the room with their bowls of kibble, Willy and Tammy ate dinner in the hotel restaurant. After dessert and coffee, they returned to their room, leashed the dogs and took them for a long walk.

As they got into bed together for the first time, Willy was elated and romantic, but Tammy felt like she was cheating on Eldon. A powerful feeling she struggled to get out of her head.

To counteract the guilt, she kept telling herself that Willy loved her, and Eldon didn't. She knew it was true, but it still broke her heart.

Super Eight Motel. Newport. North Carolina.

Bobby was anxious to check into the hotel, charge Tammy's phone and see if he could get the tracker working.

Finding the phone was a gift and Bobby took it as a sign that he was meant to find

Tammy and put an end to her killing spree.

He was close to her now and could feel the excitement of the chase.

Bobby stuck the charger into the phone and plugged it into a wall outlet while he fed Cleo. He took a shower and cleaned up for dinner, then checked the phone and it wasn't finished charging.

It had to come all the way back from the dead. It had been under the seat of the truck for a long time.

He left it plugged in, left Cleo watching it, and walked down the road to a diner. Sitting alone, he ate a burger and an order of coleslaw.

Bobby didn't eat much anymore. He lost his appetite when Ray died and never really got it back.

When he got back to his room, the phone was fully charged. Bobby sat on the end of his bed and scrolled through the phone looking for a tracker.

"Anybody who knows Tammy is aware of her stealing and killing to get through the day. I'm guessing she stole this phone from her family or somebody close to her, and for their own sanity, that mom, dad, brother or sister placed a tracker on her."

Bobby found the tracker and opened the little map. There was the red blip on the interstate in Virginia. This phone belonged to somebody who cared about Tammy and where she was.

"There she is, Cleo. Tammy is in Staunton, Virginia at the Best Western. We'll get up early tomorrow and catch up with her. All I want to know is where she is. She ain't gonna live long after I catch up with her."

Wish I knew what she's driving.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:58 pm*

Thursday, July 25<sup>th</sup> .

Wild Stallion Ranch. Montana.

I set my alarm for a quarter to six and I was in the barn at ten to. Virge lagged a little behind because he still had dust on him from the Vicki fiasco and it was slowing him down.

Not fair of her to take off and leave him like that. If I ever saw that snarky little bitch again, I'd tell her to her face that my brother deserved better than her.

After chores, we washed up and changed into traveling clothes, then carried our luggage downstairs and set it by the door. Not much time to eat before we had to leave for Texas.

While Dad made fried egg sandwiches to eat in the truck on the way to the airport, Virge and I made sure Billy didn't forget anything about the horses while we were gone.

Billy laughed at us and said he had it all written down and wouldn't forget a thing. I didn't see notes anywhere and I was worried.

"Trust me, boys," he walked us onto the porch laughing. "I can feed those horses every bit as good as you and Virge can. I been feeding horses since I was six months old."

That's when I really started to worry.

We tossed our bags into the back of Dad's Ford and waved goodbye to Billy. He stood there on the porch holding Max and Sarge by their leashes and they didn't look happy about it. They wanted to go wherever Dad went, but they wouldn't be coming with us until the day we moved from Montana to Texas.

"I hate leaving the dogs behind." Travis drove out the laneway and couldn't bear to look in the rearview.

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek. Montana.

Billy arrived at the station with Max and Sarge and the minute the dogs ran in alone, Molly was in tears. "It feels like Travis and the boys are already gone."

"It does feel a tad empty in here," said Ted. "What have we got going on today, Billy?"

"Not much. Call it a catch-up day and for me it will be more of a thinking day. I have to decide what I'm going to do at the end of my term as undersheriff."

"You won't leave me and Molly here all alone at the end of the month, will you, Billy?"

"I might not be able to. If I do decide to go with Travis and the boys, the county will require me to finish out my term and leave after the election of the new sheriff in November."

Molly reached for another tissue. "If you decide to leave in November, Billy, it will be time for me to retire. I'm not starting over with a brand-new sheriff. It would be impossible for me to get used to somebody new after I've worked with the best there is."

Ted nodded in agreement and Billy felt bad for both of them. This move would be hard on the entire staff of the Coyote Creek Sheriff's Department.

Super Eight Motel. Newport. North Carolina.

Bobby grabbed a coffee and a muffin from the free breakfast buffet and after Cleo went for a short run around the Super Eight property, they hopped into the Wrangler and headed north.

Keeping a sharp eye on the tracker, Bobby was pleased to see that Tammy was still in the same spot. She was staying put at the Best Western and that gave him time to gain on her.

"Keep sleeping, Tammy. Let me catch up to you and whoever you're with. I doubt if you'll be alone. That's not how you operate. You take advantage of men and leech off of them. Take what you want from your next target and then dump them or kill them.

I know the feeling, girl. I've had worse treatment from you than most. You almost succeeded in killing me more than once."

Bobby reached over and patted Cleo on the head. "Tammy will soon be done, Cleo. We'll cut her down to size for Ray, then we can go home to our cabin and live in peace."

Cleo wagged her tail.

Best Western Hotel. Staunton. Virginia.

With Tammy lying in the queen-sized bed right next to him, Willy-John woke up in a relaxed and lazy mood. All the years he'd practiced medicine and made it his life's

work, he'd avoided relationships with women since the breakup of his marriage. It had all been a stupid waste of time on his part. He realized that now.

Mesmerized and a little shocked by the rugged night of sex with Miss Tammy, Willy needed time to get into the shower and rev himself up to start a new day.

"I'll take the dogs out, Willy. You seem to be still tired. I'll bring you a coffee when the dogs and I come back to the room."

"That's so nice, Tammy. I could use a few more minutes in bed." He laughed. "You're young and more resilient than me."

"You're not old, Willy. Don't give me any of your old man doctor shit."

Willy chuckled, then a thought crossed his mind, and he sat straight up in the big bed. "You're not going to take the truck and leave me behind, are you, Tammy?"

Tammy giggled. "Course not. We're a team now, Willy. A couple living our life on the road."

Willy let out the breath he was holding. "Okay, good. I don't want you to leave me stranded at the Best Western."

Great Falls Airport. Montana.

Travis parked in a short-term lot, the boys grabbed their luggage, and they all headed for the terminal. Inside, he checked himself and the boys in at one of the kiosks. They only had carry-on luggage, and nothing needed to be checked. After clearing the check-point, they went right through to their gate.

He checked his watch. "Forty-five minutes until we board. Time for a second

breakfast.”

“You read my mind, Dad,” said Virge. “That fried egg sandwich was good, but I could’ve eaten three of them.”

“No time to make you three. You’ll have to have a coffee and a muffin or a donut to keep you alive until lunch.”

“I can make it until noon on a couple of chocolate glazed.”

“Glad to hear you might make it all the way to Texas, son.” Dad turned to me. “Go pick out what you want, Harlan, and bring me a coffee.”

“Copy that, Dad.”

Washington. D.C.

Tammy was behind the wheel of Willy’s truck when they began passing the exits for the capital city.

“I’ve always wanted to make a trip to the capital of our country and see for myself all the historic places. Do we have time to drive by the White House, Tammy?”

Tammy laughed. “We can do anything you want to do, Willy. If you want to spend today looking around Washington while we’re so close, we can do that.”

“Thanks. I want to see it all so badly.”

She turned on the signal and took the next exit. “Here we go for our history lesson.”

Willy chuckled as they drove around the exit ramp and followed the signs. “This will

be a great day, Tammy. We'll be doing the very thing I've always wanted to do."

"Before we do anything else, we'll get a hotel for tonight. If we get tired, we can come back to our room and rest before we go on another tour."

"Great idea. It will be wonderful to have a place to crash when we're ready to fall down." Willy laughed.

"Make a list of what you want to see, and we'll cross them off one by one."

"Let's start with the White House and then the Capitol Building. Lincoln Memorial. Then the Smithsonian."

"That should be enough for one day, Willy. I'm tired just from hearing your list."

"The Smithsonian is huge. We might not be able to see all of it today."

"There are acres of stuff in there," said Tammy. "I saw it on TV. It will take all day to see half of it."

"It's not that big."

"Is so. Leash the dogs, Willy. We'll have to take them with us."

"This is going to be one of the best days ever."

Tammy had her doubts, but it was what Willy wanted to do and it was his truck...at the moment.

Red Roof Hotel. Martinsburg. West Virginia.

“Look at that, Cleo. First we were behind her and now we’re ahead of her. Tammy turned off the interstate and drove into Washington, D.C. Do you think she’s having a patriotic moment?”

Cleo wagged her tail.

“I don’t think so, girl. Tammy is only true blue to Tammy. Nobody else counts in her world. She’s in her only little crazy place robbing and killing her way across the country.”

“She’ll come back to the highway when she’s finished her business in the city. She’s heading for Canada and the I-81 is the best way to get there from here.”

“There’s no way we can search for her in a city jammed with feds who are looking for us, girl. We’ll wait right here for her. It’s the safest way for us.”

Austin-Bergstrom Airport. Texas.

The plane touched down in Austin and I hadn’t slept much but Virge did. He was out cold a few minutes after takeoff and didn’t open his eyes until the landing gear bounced down on the tarmac in Texas.

Dad stayed in his seat and didn’t try to get into the aisle until a bunch of the passengers cleared out ahead of us. No point. We were all going to the same place anyway and we’d have to line up again soon enough.

At the National rental counter, Dad took care of the paperwork for the Cherokee we’d be using while we were in Texas. The clerk gave us the key fob and we picked our ride up out back. Dark blue.

“Where to from here, Dad?” asked Virge.

“Budget Inn in La Grange. That hotel should be handy to everything we need.”

I programmed it into the nav system.

Budget Inn. La Grange. Texas.

It took more than an hour to get clear of the Austin traffic and drive out to our hotel in La Grange. Dad told us that was the closest town to Annie’s ranch, and that’s where Virge and I wanted to be. Being close to Annie’s ranch and our family was the whole thing for me and Virge.

Dad checked us in, and our room was nice. We wouldn’t be staying in it a lot anyway. Not if we were out looking at ranches every day.

Travis sat in the easy chair in the corner of the room and called Annie to tell her we were in Texas. While Dad tried to hear, Virge scrolled through the TV channels seeing how many we could get.

“Put the sound on mute, Virge. I can’t hear Annie.”

“Hey, Travis.”

“We’re here, Annie-girl. On a mission to find us a ranch.”

“I’ve already had a preliminary chat with Kevin Bennett at the ReMax office in Smithville and he’s getting properties ready to show you and the boys.”

“Thanks. You’re way ahead of me.”

“Give him a call and see what he’s got lined up for you for tomorrow, then come to Boots later and we’ll make a plan.”



“Sure. We’ll drive up to Giddings later on.”

“Where does Annie want us to go, Dad?”

“To her roadhouse. We’ll drive up for a pitcher and some dinner and sort out a plan for tomorrow. Meantime, I’ll call and talk to her real estate guy and see how many ranches he’s got lined up for us to see.”

“Copy that, Dad,” I said. “It sounds like you’ve got a hold on a plan already.”

“Annie is helping me out, son. She did the legwork and all I have to do is call the guy and tell him who I am.”

“Mom is organized, Dad,” said Virge.

“Yep, she is, son.” Travis made the call. “Mister Bennett, this is Travis Bristol calling. I believe Annie Powell told you I was coming down from Montana to view some properties.”

“She did, Sheriff Bristol, and I’ve got a half dozen beauties lined up for you to see tomorrow. What time would you like to start?”

“Umm...could you meet us at the Budget Inn in La Grange around nine-thirty?”

“Perfect. I’ll pick y’all up and we’ll have us a time.”

“Thanks. I’m looking forward to it.” Travis ended the call and told the boys there were six ranches lined up.

“When are we going?” asked Virge.

“Right after breakfast tomorrow morning.”

Boots & Saddles Roadhouse. Giddings.

Annie’s roadhouse was noisy and loud and about ten times busier than the Dry Run we always went to in Coyote Creek. This place was huge and there was a big pool room at the back just about doubling the size.

We walked through the double doors at the front and Annie waved to us from behind the bar. She ran around the old cowboy bar to give us all hugs. It looked just like the ones you saw in all the old Westerns.

As soon as we found an empty booth, one of her servers set us up with a pitcher and a big spread of food. Ribs and potato wedges and coleslaw and cornbread.

I couldn’t match the number of ribs that Virge ate, but I ate a lot. All that warm cornbread I couldn’t stop eating almost put me to sleep, but I couldn’t waste time sleeping. Annie sent us to the pool room to play some free games while she talked to Dad about our new ranch.

“What do you think about my juvie ranch idea, Annie-girl?”

Annie laughed. “How could I think it was a bad idea when it’s basically the same principal I operated my foundation under?”

“Yeah, that’s true. Only the background the boys will be coming from will be a little different.”

“I can put a folder together for you of all the people you need to communicate with in the State of Texas. Some of them could be new staff from when I started, but the departments will be the same. If you need help from higher up, Jesse is the one to talk

to.”

“Yeah, I thought of talking to Jesse. I might give him a call tomorrow if there’s enough time left after all the viewings.”

“How many does Kevin have lined up?”

“Six, so far.”

“Nice round number. That should keep you and the boys going all day. Come to the ranch for dinner when y’all are done and tell us all about the ranches you liked and didn’t like. The kids are anxious to see Harlan and Virgil.”

“Thanks. We’ll do that.”

She stood up and lingered at the end of the booth for a minute. “You worried about any of your old enemies coming at you if you move back to Texas?”

“Nah, not really. Most of them probably forgot about me by now.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:58 pm*

Friday, July 26<sup>th</sup> .

Budget Inn. La Grange. Texas.

“I can’t believe how hot it is here, Dad,” said Virge.

“Not hot all the time. Only in the summer.”

I laughed. “Texas is hot, and Montana is freezing. We should live some place in the middle.”

“This is the middle,” said Travis. “I used to live down near the Mexican border at the bottom of Arizona. My place was so close to the line, I could sit on my back porch and look at Mexico.”

“You never mentioned living near Mexico before,” said Virge.

“Didn’t think of it.”

“Huh.” Virge had to think on that, and he made me laugh.

“Get showered and dressed, boys. We have a full day of ranch looking ahead of us. I’m going to call and see how Billy is doing at the station. I hope he and Ted don’t get new cases while we’re gone.”

“Ask him if he fed the horses,” said Virge.

“I am not asking him that. Billy won’t forget the horses, or anything else. He’s competent and totally accountable.”

“Wish Max and Sarge could talk on the phone. I miss them.”

“Get your ass in the shower, Virgil.”

Virge finally headed for the shower, Dad called Billy, and I texted Lucy while I had the chance.

“We’re looking at ranches today, then coming to your ranch for dinner.”

“I’m so happy y’all are in Texas.”

“Me too.”

“Pick a ranch close to us.”

“Try to.”

We were finished breakfast and drinking a second cup of coffee when Kevin Bennett came to pick us up.

Big grin on his face as we climbed into his SUV. “It’s going to be a great day for y’all. We’ll find y’all the perfect ranch.”

“Hope we can do it in one day,” said Travis. “I have a helluva lot to do at home to get ready for this move.”

“Moving ranches is a heavy chore,” said Kevin.

Holiday Inn. Washington. D.C.

“Our second day in the capital city, Tammy, and I have to say that yesterday was an uplifting experience. Just by being here and seeing all these historic buildings and monuments, my patriotism escalated by leaps and bounds.”

“I’m happy for you, Willy. I think mine stayed about the same.”

Willy laughed.

“This morning we’ll walk the mall and pass the reflecting pool and the good part of that is George and Gracie can come with us.”

“Wonderful. Breakfast first and then off we go again. I’m having the time of my life.”

Tammy smiled at Willy. She enjoyed seeing him so happy after all he’d done for her, but her heart wasn’t in touring Washington and soaking up history. She had other things on her mind.

Red Roof Hotel. Martinsburg. West Virginia.

“I can’t figure it out, Cleo. Why is Tammy hanging around D.C. so long?”

Bobby showered and dressed and went down to the breakfast room for food and coffee. He checked the tracker periodically, and there was still no movement.

Back to the room with a second cup of coffee and after that, he couldn’t sit still.

“Come on, Cleo. A long walk for you and then we’ll check the tracker again. I hope we don’t sit around this motel for another whole day.”

Lexington. Texas.

The first ranch Mister Bennett took us to was outside of a little place called Lexington. Seven hundred acres, a small loafing barn for cattle. No bunk house.

Long, low ranch house in good condition but not suitable for what Dad had in mind.

“What I’m looking for, Kevin, and I should’ve gone into more detail at the outset, but I want a fairly big place where I can run cattle and horses and take in juvenile boys on parole and rehab them.”

Bennett smiled. “Okay. That’s a tall order, Travis, but I think the next one we’re scheduled to see up in Round Top will come closer to your specs.”

“Great,” said Travis.

Round Top. Texas.

“This is a bigger spread,” said Kevin. “With more acreage comes a higher price tag. I’m sure you’re aware of how that works.”

Travis laughed. “Sure am. What kind of dollars are we looking at for this one?”

“Fifteen hundred acres with a big barn, bunk house and a decent main house is going to run you about five million bucks.”

I looked at Virge and he rolled his eyes.

“Not surprising,” said Travis. “Let’s take a look at it.”

As we walked towards the house, I leaned close to my brother and asked him, “You

think we can afford five for a ranch?”

“No fuckin’ way. Do you?”

“Nope.”

We toured the house first and it was nice. Four bedrooms at the one end. Big family room. Huge kitchen with a woodstove. Mud room and laundry at the back entrance. Long porch across the front of the house for sitting outside.

Virgie was in love with the barn. Beautiful stalls and eight on each side of the aisle. Big tack room and a full loft up above for the hay and straw storage.

“I could live in this barn,” he said to me as we left to check out the bunk house.

Travis seemed to be most interested in the bunk house, and I figured it was where he planned to house the juvies when we got them.

Two big bedrooms with four bunks each. Common room and a galley kitchen if they wanted to make themselves something to eat.

If they were on parole, I couldn’t see them staying on the ranch unless they were handcuffed, but Dad might’ve had a plan to keep them there. If he did, he hadn’t shared it with us.

“I like it a lot, Kevin. Couldn’t touch it until my ranch is sold, but my guy in Coyote Creek thinks it won’t take long. Land in Montana is at a premium right now with the millionaire ranchers scooping up all they can get.”

“I’ve heard about the high prices in certain areas up there in Montana, Travis. This might be the perfect time for you to sell your ranch.”



“My timing usually sucks, but this time maybe I’ll get it right.”

“Hope it works out for you. Got four more to show you and none of them are as costly as this beauty. First I’ll take you and the boys for lunch at a spot they’re gonna love.”

“Virge will love it,” said Travis. “He likes food of any kind.”

That made me laugh.

Red Roof Hotel. Martinsburg. Virginia.

Bobby and Cleo were stretched out on the big bed half asleep when his phone beeped, and the red dot started to move. “Whoa, Cleo. We’re up.”

Bobby jumped up and startled Cleo and she woofed a couple of times.

“Let’s get packed, girl. As soon as Tammy comes back on the highway we’ve got to get behind her.”

Cleo ran to the door and scratched to get going while Bobby packed up his toiletries and made sure he cleared the room.

Last thing he did was take all the money out of the safe and pack it into his aluminum briefcase.

“Time to get this game of follow the leader back on track, girl.”

Long Horn Barbeque. Round Top. Texas.

“Good barbeque at this place, boys. Hope y’all are hungry.”

“I could eat,” said Virge. That made Travis laugh.

Kevin ordered a pitcher of beer and the lunch special for all of us. The food was great, and the plates were heaped up with meat, potato wedges and slaw.

The ribs at Annie’s roadhouse were better but I didn’t say that to Kevin. This brisket was damned good too.

Dad got a call from Annie while we drank coffee and rested up a bit before going to the next ranch.

“Yep, we’re going pretty well,” said Travis. “Saw one this morning that ticks all the boxes. All I have to do is sell my ranch first.”

Fayetteville. Texas.

The first one we saw in the afternoon had a cheaper price tag but that didn’t seem to matter much to Travis. He had nothing good to say about the house and when we toured the barn, me and Virge didn’t like the stalls.

Tack room was too small for all the equipment we were bringing with us, and if we had juvie kids and more horses and saddles, this one wouldn’t cut it.

“I think we like the one in Round Top better than this one, Dad, but it costs the most.”

Travis laughed. “That’s why we like it the best.”

“True dat,” said Virge.

“What’s your opinion, Harlan?” Dad asked.

“Hate to, but I got to agree with Virge, Dad.”

We all laughed.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

Me and Virge and Dad were tired from tramping around ranches all day, but after a beer on Annie’s porch with our step-mom and the kids, we got our second wind.

“Tell us all about the ranches y’all saw today,” said Jackson. “Where were they? Very far away from here?”

“Not far,” said Travis. “One in Lexington, one in Fayetteville, and the one we liked the best and might offer on is in Round Top.”

“That’s not far,” said Annie. “I go up there all the time antiquing for my stores.”

“Yep. I saw antique stores,” I said. “Quite a few of them.”

“How many acres in the ranch y’all like the best?” asked Lucy.

“Fifteen hundred,” I said. “Bigger than our ranch in Montana, but not huge.”

“Manageable with just me and the boys,” said Travis, “if we don’t have extra boys from juvie, we can handle the work ourselves.”

“Bunkhouse?” asked Annie. “Is it suitable?”

“Yes. That’s one of the selling points for me. Very little I’d have to do to it. Room for eight boys at a time.”

“Love to see it,” said Annie.

“You should have a look before I worry about putting an offer in. Can’t do that anyway until my ranch sells.” Travis lowered his voice. “I could even without, but I don’t want the boys to know that.”

Annie giggled. “Don’t let them know the deep, dark ones, sugar.”

“Nope. I never do.”

The kids took off to the barn to look at the foals and Travis and Annie had an opportunity for a private talk on the porch.

“You worried at all about the club finding out you’re back in Texas?”

Travis shrugged. “Not much. It’s been so long, I doubt they’d spend the time or the money to do anything for payback now.”

“With the clubs, you can never be sure, sugar. Just be extra careful, okay?”

“Yeah. Head on a swivel, Annie-girl.”

After dinner, me and Lucy got a chance to walk down to the river alone. We sat on the sandy bank of the Colorado River and listened to the frogs croak and the fish jump. So peaceful. I held her hand and kissed her a few times and never wanted the night to end.

“When you move down here, Harlan, are we going to be allowed to date? Like I mean—out in the open with Mommy and my Daddy and Travis okay with it.”

“I’ve been wondering how Dad and Annie are going to look at it too. Let’s worry

about that after we get moved.”

“Yeah. It’s something I worry about all the time.”

“I kind of worry about what your daddy will think of me. He’s a big biker who doesn’t take any shit. Makes me a bit nervous.”

Lucy giggled. “Yeah, he’s a tough guy but when my mom left us down in Victoriaville, he’s the one who raised me with Mommy’s help. I only remember having Annie and Jackson in my life when I was little. Annie’s my real mom.”

“I know she is.”

Martinsburg. West Virginia.

Bobby checked out of the hotel before another day clicked off and he owed more money. “We’re on the road again, Cleo.”

He drove as far as the ramp for the interstate and parked on the shoulder. “We’ll sit here and wait for Tammy to go by. When she does, we’ll see what she’s driving and who’s she’s with.”

Cleo sat with her big head hanging out the window panting while they waited.

Bobby sat with the phone in his hand and watched the red dot on the screen. “Here she comes.”

He started the Jeep, put it into gear and when the red blip went by him, he went down the ramp, changed lanes a couple of times and pulled in two cars behind the old truck Tammy was driving.

“Where’d she get that old wreck, Cleo?”

Bobby followed the truck north.

“Yep, she’s going to Canada. Easy to read, isn’t she? Can’t wait until I kill her for Ray. Partly for me too, but mostly for Ray. He had talent and would’ve been a great songwriter.”

What a fucking waste.

Budget Inn. La Grange. Texas.

The boys were beat when they got back to their room, and they flopped on their bed and went to sleep. Annie had offered them guest rooms at her ranch and the boys would’ve liked staying there, but Travis wanted to be on his own. They’d only be in Texas for a couple of days this time and a hotel was the way to go.

He sat in the easy chair in the corner of the room, lit up a smoke and sorted out the ranches in his head. He thought about calling Jesse and having a conversation about the juvies but saved it for the next day.

He texted Billy and checked in.

“Anything new at the station?”

“Nothing. We’re bored.”

“Good enough. Stay bored until I get back.”

“Copy that.”

Travis used the bathroom, then stripped down to his boxers and was about to climb into bed when he heard the rumble out in front of the hotel.

Staring out the window he counted about a dozen bikes, but in the dark he couldn't make out the logo on the cuts. Trying not to wake the boys, he rummaged in his go-bag until he found his spotting scope and his Sig.

Another trip to the window facing the front of the hotel and he read the name of the club.

Black Breed.

Yep. They're here for me. The fuckers never give up. Annie was worried about this happening.

Intent on watching the Breed, Travis didn't notice Virgil wake up and get out of bed. He was standing beside him peering out the window.

"That another thing you forgot to mention, Dad?"

"Yeah, one of them."

Holiday Inn. Scranton. Pennsylvania.

Bobby pulled into the hotel parking lot following after Tammy and the guy she was with. They grabbed a parking space and walked two dogs. Looked like hounds.

Cleo growled and snarled at the other dogs and at Tammy. Bobby thought she recognized Tammy from the attack in the Midway house. The way she was snarling and snapping it was evident Cleo hated Tammy as much as he did.

“Shh, girl. They’ll go inside in a minute, and you won’t have to look at them until tomorrow.” Bobby laughed. “This will be your last night, Tammy. Make it a good one.”

Tammy and the guy came back to their truck after the dog walk and got their luggage. They walked around to the front entrance and disappeared inside.

Bobby and Cleo waited in the Jeep for another ten minutes to be absolutely sure Tammy and the old guy didn’t see them. “Let’s get our room, Cleo. You want to lie on the bed and watch a movie?”



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:58 pm*

Saturday, July 27<sup>th</sup> .

Budget Inn. La Grange. Texas.

At breakfast in the room off the hotel lobby, Virge asked Dad questions about the bikers who were swarming the hotel the night before. I had no clue what he was talking about.

“What bikers, Virge?”

“They’re a bunch of guys who don’t even know me,” said Travis. “I was in that club before their time, but they think they still owe me payback for shit I did to their club.”

“What did you do to them, Dad? How many came to the hotel? Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“About two dozen,” said Virge. “No point waking you up, bro. We didn’t go outside and cap any of them—nothing like that. We watched them out the window and that was it.”

“I was a Texas Ranger working undercover for Violent Crime way back then and I busted up their club after working my way up in the hierarchy. I was club boss before the takedown. Took me two fuckin’ years to get ‘er done.”

“As Dale Burden, right Dad?” asked Virge.

“That’s right. The club is all new guys now and I bet not one of those guys who

showed up on their Harleys has ever met me.”

“But they want to kill you anyway for an old grudge?” I asked.

“That’s about the size of it.”

“The fact they know you’re here in Texas, ain’t good news, Dad. Means they have intel on you. Maybe you’re safer in Montana.”

“If they wanted me bad enough, they could ride up to Montana and knock me off, but they didn’t—at least not yet. Forget about them. I’m phoning Bob Crockett to see if there are any offers incoming on our ranch.”

While Dad called Crockett, Virge gave me an eye signal that we weren’t done talking about the bikers watching Dad. They knew we were in Texas and that didn’t have a good feel to it.

“Hey, Bob. This is Travis Frost calling you from Texas.” Dad put the call on speaker so me and Virge could hear.

“How is the ranch hunting going, Travis?”

“Not bad. We found one we liked yesterday, but I’m gonna need five million bucks. Can you help me out?”

“I’m working hard on it, Travis. I’m hoping to have a bidding war going on your thousand acres later today. Three different buyers have expressed an interest, and I told them to get their offers together and we’d have a sit-down in my office to see who was going to come up the winner.”

“Sounds promising. Hope it goes well.”

“Can I call you back when I have a solid deal cooking for you?”

“Sure. Why don’t you do that, Bob, and I’ll tell my guy down here that we’ve got action in Montana.”

“Good enough. Talk to you later.”

“Is our ranch almost sold, Dad?” I asked.

“Bob has a couple, maybe three buyers bidding on our place. He’ll call later when he’s got something definite on paper.”

“Wow. We might be able to buy a ranch while we’re down here,” I said.

Travis’ cell rang and it was another real estate call.

“Kevin Bennett here, Travis. I just got wind of a dandy ranch that came on market last night and no one has viewed it yet.”

“Where is it?”

“Not far from La Grange. Just outside of Lincoln. Do you feel like looking at it this morning?”

“How many acres?”

“Just under two thousand. They’re asking six million for it and that’s a real deal on today’s market. The pictures look fantastic, and it has all the features y’all are looking for. I know y’all like the one up in Round Top, but this one will give y’all a comparable and might help you decide.”

“Sure, Kevin. Let’s go see it. We can be ready by ten.”

“I’ll be by to pick y’all up.”

“Thanks for the call.”

“We have another ranch to look at, Dad?”

“Yep, brand new on the market, Harlan. Let’s get cleaned up and eat breakfast. Kevin’s coming to pick us up.”

Holiday Inn. Scranton. Pennsylvania.

Bobby set his alarm to get up extra early. He packed up his money first, then everything else in the room. After double-checking to make sure he had everything, he made two quick trips down to the Jeep.

That done, he walked Cleo and put her in the Wrangler to wait for him. The staff were setting out the breakfast buffet when Bobby sneaked into the room before they were ready looking for coffee.

He fixed himself two cardboard containers of caffeine, helped himself to two muffins and a shiny red apple and retreated to the parking lot.

“I’m back, Cleo.”

Bobby hunkered down behind the wheel to wait for Tammy and her new boyfriend to come out of the hotel.

Willy walked out of the shower in a happy mood and while he dressed in clean clothes fresh out of his suitcase, he asked Tammy where they’d be going today.

“This will be a long driving day, Willy, but we’ll probably cross into Canada after dinner and our hotel tonight will be on the other side of the border.”

“We should get our passports ready then.”

“We’ll get them out of our suitcases before we leave and put them in the glove box, so they’ll be handy.”

Willy was all smiles. “This will be my first trip to Canada and I’m excited to see it.”

“Canada is great, Willy. I think I was born there, but I can’t be sure.”

“You mean you don’t know where you were born?”

“Isn’t that what I just said?” Tammy’s anger flared and she snapped at Willy.

“Don’t get mad at me, Tammy. That was a question of concern.”

“No need to be concerned about me. I can take care of myself.” Tammy leashed the dogs and pointed at the suitcases by the door. She led the way to the elevator, and they went downstairs to check out.

Before eating breakfast they carried their luggage out to the truck and stowed it. Tammy glanced around, a little wary of the parking lot. From being a cop, her sense of danger was elevated.

“What are you doing, Tammy?”

“Looking at the other vehicles parked here and listening to my built-in radar. I think somebody is watching us.”

Willy laughed and poked fun at her. “Nobody is watching us, Tammy. That paranoia is all in your head because you’ve been in a bit of trouble with the police in the past.”

“I may be the paranoid one, Willy. But I’ll be the one who saves your over-trusting lax ass from getting dead. You know nothing about surviving in the real fucking world.”

“I’m sorry, Tammy. I didn’t mean to upset you. I was only joking around trying to keep things light. Sometimes you look like you’ve got the weight of the world on you.”

They walked the dogs in silence, put them into the truck, then went back inside the hotel for the free breakfast.

Bobby watched with diligence and unwavering interest until Tammy came back to the old truck with the guy—somewhere in his forties—and they weren’t talking.

He could tell they’d had a fight, and he laughed about it with Cleo. “Look at that, Cleo, their last fight.”

Cleo wagged her tail.

“I know you hate her, Cleo. Join the fuckin club. We’ll both celebrate when Tammy stops breathing.”

The old truck chugged a couple of times when Tammy started it, but then the engine turned over and she pulled out of the parking lot.

Bobby put the Wrangler into gear and followed. “At last we’re moving, girl. I can’t wait to catch them in the next rest area when they stop for the dogs.”

Cleo whined and wagged her tail. She was up for it.

Lincoln. Texas.

Kevin Bennett picked them up at the hotel at ten and drove up to Lincoln. He was right about it not being too far. Lincoln was only a few miles from La Grange.

As they approached the gate, Kevin slowed down. “Nice gate at the end of the laneway. Defines the property.”

## RIVER BEND RANCH

“Look at that,” said Virge. “This ranch has a name, and we don’t have to think one up on our own. Saves burning out our brain cells.”

“You’d better save all you can, little bro.” I laughed at Virge, and he punched me.

As soon as we drove down the long laneway and parked near the big corral, I took a look around and I liked the ranch right off. The barn was large and looked like it had been freshly painted a dark rust color.

We hopped out and Kevin started the tour with the barn. The stalls were excellent. And then the bunkhouse next to it. It was roomy and similar in setup to the one at the Round Top ranch.

We walked through the house next, and I could tell Travis liked it a lot. Big kitchen with a woodstove. All the rooms on the main floor were large. Four bedrooms and two bathrooms upstairs.

A bedroom for each of us and one for Billy if he decided he was moving to Texas with us.

Big front porch and a woodshed out back half full of wood for the kitchen stove. This ranch had outbuildings like we had on our ranch. Double garage with room for a workshop at the back. Outdoor lean-to shelter for horses at the side of the barn.

Driving shed for the tractor and other equipment like a riding lawnmower. The rancher had a green John Deere that caught Virgil's eye.

And a chicken coop. The present owner or maybe his wife had chickens walking around, pecking the ground, making chicken noises.

"What do you think, boys?" Kevin Bennett asked us before we got into his SUV to leave.

"The barn is dandy," said Virgil. "Nice big tack room. We have a lot of saddles and tack to put away and I think it would all fit."

"We could try an offer and tie the ranch up for a few days until y'all hear from your agent up in Montana," said Kevin.

Travis didn't think about it for very long before nodding his head. "Yeah. Let's do that, Kevin. I like this ranch, and it has everything we need. The location is next to perfect."

"I didn't see the river," I said as we climbed into the truck. "Or the bend like the ranch name says."

"Runs alongside the laneway back there apiece," said Kevin. "I'll show you the pictures and save y'all walking for a mile."

"Copy that," said Virge. "Save these old legs from getting tired."



Travis chuckled. “Wish I had seventeen-year-old legs, Virgie.”

Budget Inn. La Grange.

Dad decided we’d put a bid in on the ranch not far from Annie’s spread and me and Virge were happy about it. We liked that ranch a lot and it was only a short drive away from Lucy, Jacks and Davey.

Kevin asked at the reservation desk if the hotel had a business lounge, and the clerk told us how to get there. Not far from the main lobby, we found the room and it was totally empty.

A bunch of desks with computers on them. A couple of printers on shelves off to the one side. Lots of outlets and charging docks for phones.

Kevin sat down at one of the desks, plugged his laptop in and typed in the offer we were putting forward on the ranch in Lincoln.

The printer spewed out three copies and Dad read one of them over. He signed on the dotted line to make the offer official.

“You can see here where we gave them forty-eight hours to decide on your price, or they can make a change and adjust the price and sign it back to you.”

“Yep. I understand the process, Kevin. I’ve bought and sold property before.”

“I’ll see what I can do for you, Travis, to make this go smoothly.” Kevin packed up his laptop and put the offer in his briefcase. “Y’all will hear from me later today.”

Dad shook Kevin’s hand, and we went up to our room to get cleaned up.

“How about beer and pizza?” Dad asked us. “That’s what I feel like having for lunch.”

“Copy that,” said Virge. “Meat lovers for me.”

“Any kind for me. I’m starving.”

Pizza Heaven. La Grange.

The hostess showed us to a booth and Travis ordered a pitcher of beer while me and Virge decided which toppings we wanted on our pizza.

“All we have to do is wait,” said Virge. “How long will it take them to decide if your price is okay?”

“No idea, son, but they can take up to two days. That’s what we put in the offer, so we’ll wait and roll with it. Let’s enjoy our beer and pizza, hope for the best, and celebrate a little in advance.”

“I’m for that,” I said. My brother was the nervous, antsy one in our family. It wasn’t me.

The server brought our two large pizzas, and me and Virge had no trouble polishing them off. Dad helped us out a little by eating three or four slices, but he left the rest to us.

The three of us were sitting back, stuffed and hardly moving waiting for Kevin Bennett to call. Travis’ phone rang and it wasn’t Kevin at all, it was Bob Crockett calling from Coyote Creek.

“Travis, good news. I’ve got an offer in hand and it’s a good one. I had three bids

come in at the same time and this is the best one. More than you'll need to secure your ranch in Texas."

"That is good news, Bob. What do you need me to do?" He put the call on speaker so me and Virge could hear the directions—especially me because I was the computer guy in the family.

"I need you to receive the offer by email and read it over. Make any changes you need to make."

"Okay."

"Then when you're satisfied with the price and the terms, sign it and send it back to me so I can negotiate on your behalf."

"Hang on a second, Bob."

Dad looked at me and I said, "Give us ten minutes to drive back to the hotel and set up my laptop. In the meantime, you can send the offer to this email." I recited my email to Bob Crockett, and he thanked me.

"I'll send it off right away and wait for your response, Harlan."

"Copy that, Mister Crockett. We're leaving for our hotel right now."

Dad paid the check, and we had to move it.

Budget Inn. La Grange.

I took my laptop out of my backpack and set it up on the table by the window in our hotel room. The offer was sitting there at the top of my emails with an attachment,

waiting for me to open it.

“It’s here, Dad. Come and read it over.”

Dad pulled a chair up so he could see the screen and read the small printing. We went over it line by line, and I changed everything Dad didn’t like.

When we were done the read-through, I typed Dad’s name on the bottom line and sent it back to Bob Crockett in Montana.

“Good, that’s done,” said Travis. “Nice job, Harlan. I’d better call Billy, tell him about the offer and bring him up to speed.”

“Yeah, the closing date is at the end of August. He should know about that if he’s not coming with us,” I said.

“I’m still hoping he is,” said Travis.

Me and Virge were too, but Dad told us not to be saying stuff to Billy to sway him. Best to let him make up his own mind.

“Hey, Travis I was about to call and tell you about all the people who’ve been here looking at the ranch. Seems Crockett had a run on the place.”

“Yep. He’s got an offer that we’re almost settled on. Down here, we’ve got action too. We’re waiting to hear back on a ranch we offered on this morning. It’s been a busy day.”

“You coming home soon?”

“Be back tomorrow. I’ll book a flight right now and let you know the time we’ll be

landing in Great Falls. If the sale is solid, we've got a helluva lot of work to do in the next few weeks."

"Sure do. Tell the boys the horses are dandy. I think they're missing the way the boys fuss over them."

"How about Max and Sarge?"

Billy laughed. "Those two big crybabies? I had to let them sleep on my bed for chrissakes."

Travis chuckled. "Tell them we'll be back tomorrow."

"Copy that."

Boots & Saddles Roadhouse. Giddings.

"It's our last night in Texas for several weeks, boys. Y'all want to go to Boots tonight and celebrate with Annie?"

"Sounds like fun, Dad. Let's do it."

We drove up to Giddings around nine and got us a booth near the dance floor. Annie sent us over a couple of pitchers of Miller along with chips and salsa that she gave to every table free of charge.

We'd been there for a couple of hours kicking back when a few bikers started drifting in. They weren't local. They wore cuts that said Black Breed, Houston Chapter.

I knew right away they were the same guys who came to the hotel in La Grange looking for Dad.

“Should we leave now Dad? Those are the guys who don’t like you from a long time ago.”

“Hell no,” said Travis. “I ain’t running from those punks.”

“Okeydokey. If you’re sure.”

Wasn’t long after that Annie came over to our table and sat with us. “I’m watching them, sugar. Gilly and Mick are on alert in the pool hall. We should be okay.”

“Course we are, Annie-girl. Running scared ain’t my style.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:58 pm*

Sunday, July 28<sup>th</sup> .

Days Inn Hotel. Watertown. New York.

Bobby followed Tammy and the old guy she was with all the way to upstate New York. Only twenty-five miles left to the Canadian border when they pulled into this hotel the night before and stopped for the night.

Bobby couldn't figure it out, but it was a gift to him in the end. He'd been hoping to get a chance to grab Tammy and kill her as they drove north yesterday, but no opportunities came his way.

It seemed to Bobby like she'd become aware of him following her and she was on high alert doing everything she could to avoid him catching her.

Before first light, he packed up his room, made sure he remembered the money in the safe and he left with Cleo on her leash.

After his belongings were loaded into the Wrangler, he walked Cleo around the hotel property and then put her in the passenger seat of the Jeep to wait until it was time to leave.

He picked a heavily treed spot near the fence that marked the hotel property line and hid himself in the foliage. Bobby waited in that spot for at least half an hour, batting away mosquitos, hoping Tammy would come out alone to walk the hounds.

She'd walked them herself the previous morning and Bobby hoped she'd be by

herself again. That would make things a lot simpler for him.

After all that waiting and watching, Bobby was in luck. Tammy came out the side door of the hotel with the two hound dogs on leashes.

When Tammy passed Bobby's hiding spot, he jumped out, snatched her off her feet, slapped a strip of duct tape over her mouth and tossed her over his shoulder.

The hound dogs ran off barking and baying as Bobby ran to the Wrangler, opened the hatch and tossed Tammy in. He had everything ready to tie her up.

He smacked her in the face with his fist, knocked her out and the rest was easy. Using plastic ties, he trussed Tammy up like a pig for the barbeque.

"There you go, you murdering bitch. You haven't got long now."

Eyes wide with surprise, she yelled at him from under the duct tape and Bobby laughed. He threw the dog's blanket over her to cover her up and keep her out of his sight.

"I can't stand to look at you. This is for Ray and for all the times you tried to finish me. Mostly for Ray."

Cleo jumped from the front seat to the back and hung her huge head into the hatch while Bobby did his thing. She growled and snarled at Tammy like she wanted to tear her limb from limb.

"You'll get your chance at her, girl. You hate Tammy almost as much as I do. She won't be here in the land of the living too long, Cleo. We'll get rid of her soon."

Willy waited in the room for Tammy to come back with the dogs and after an hour,



he began to worry.

“Did she take George and Gracie and leave me behind?” Willy checked the bathroom and Tammy’s toiletries were still on the vanity. “Her suitcase is here, and it’s not zipped up. She must be outside.”

Willy took the elevator down to the main floor, crossed the lobby in a hurry and ran to the spot where they’d parked the truck the night before.

The truck was sitting in the same spot, and both dogs were sitting next to it waiting to get in. Leashes dragging on the pavement.

“Where’s Tammy, doggies?”

The dogs were happy to see Willy and it was mutual. He gave them each a hug, took the leashes off and put them in the truck. “Wait here for me. I’ll be right back.”

Willy ran back to the room, packed up everything belonging to himself and Tammy and the dogs, and hauled it all out to the truck.

“The cops must have picked her up while she was out walking the dogs. It’s the only explanation I can think of. Maybe Tammy wasn’t being paranoid after all. She was on edge all day yesterday. I shouldn’t have made fun of her and pissed her off like I did.”

He slid behind the wheel and started the engine of the old truck. “Nothing we can do if the police have Tammy, doggies. We’ll go to Canada anyway now that we’re this close.”

George and Gracie wagged their tails. They were happier than Willy was.

Budget Inn. La Grange. Texas.

Virge and I were up early getting ready to fly home to Montana. It was an hours' drive into Austin to the airport and we had to allow time for breakfast before we left.

Kevin Bennet knocked on the door before I had my stuff packed. He had things for Dad to sign before we left. With him coming at the last minute, it was going to be a rush.

Dad let him in, and they sat at the table and went over the changes the people who owned the ranch in Lincoln had made.

"This is the amended offer, Travis. You can see here where they raised the price a little and they approved the spot where you aligned the two closing dates more closely so you could close the Montana ranch first and then have the Texas ranch close the next day—just to make it a little less hectic."

Dad nodded and Kevin handed him a pen. "Everything looks exactly like we agreed."

Dad signed everywhere he was supposed to, and Kevin shook his hand. "Congratulations, Travis. You just bought yourself a ranch in Texas."

"Thanks. That's a load off. Now I have to fly back to Montana and clean up the mess I've made up there."

"No mess, Dad," I said. "We'll clean that end up in no time flat."

Travis laughed. "Glad you think so, Harlan. There's a little more to it than you know about."

Austin-Bergstrom Airport.

Dad turned in our rental Jeep and we checked in for the flight to Montana. I hated the thought of being on the plane that long and the only thing that kept me sane was knowing I'd be able to text Lucy.

"You boys might as well sleep until it's time to land and eat lunch," said Travis. "This is a long boring flight but it's the last time we'll have to do it. Next time we come to Texas, we'll be driving and hauling all of our stuff with us."

"A truck, a Jeep and towing three Harleys and a horse trailer."

"And Billy will be driving his own truck," said Virge. "A huge fuckin' convoy, Dad."

"We're not sure about Billy yet," I said.

Travis laughed. "Billy has to make his decision first, Virgie. I hope he's coming with us, but it's up to him. None of us are going to talk him into it if he wants to stay in Montana. Wouldn't be fair."

"He ain't gonna stay in Montana," said Virge. "I think he's pretty much decided already."

"My brother is a mind reader."

"Ain't saying that," said Virge. "I can just tell."

Ivy Lea Bridge. New York State.

As he got closer and closer to the border crossing, Bobby watched for a spot where he could kill Tammy and get rid of her body. He couldn't cross with a prisoner in the back of his Jeep.

He turned down one of the many river roads that led to cottages and fishing camps all along the Saint Lawrence River. Cruising by slowly searching for the right spot, Bobby came across a camp that seemed deserted.

“This looks like the place, Cleo.”

Bobby eased along the dirt path leading to the little wooden shack, looking for any sign of habitation and there was none. Grass and weeds had grown high since the last fisherman had been here.

“Could be a rental, Cleo. Nobody’s been using this place for a while.”

He parked the Wrangler in the long grass and shut off the engine.

“You can have a run, Cleo, but don’t go far.”

Cleo jumped out and took off exploring while Bobby walked around to the hatch of the Jeep and opened it. “Time to move, Tammy. We’re here at your final resting place.” Bobby chuckled.

Tammy’s eyes were wild as Bobby tossed her over his shoulder and hauled her inside the fishy smelling shack.

The second he ripped the tape off her mouth, she shouted at him, “You can’t do this, Eldon. We’re meant to be together. I’ve been searching all over the country for you so we could get married and be happy.”

“You’re a nutcase, Tammy. You always were since the first day you hopped into my truck. At first I was too hard for you to see it, but my vision has cleared up a lot in the past few months. You are a genuine murdering whacko.”

Tammy kept screaming crazy stuff at him and Bobby's uncontrollable anger took over. He lost it completely, ran out to the Jeep and jerked his tire iron out from under the front seat.

He ran back to the shack waving the tire iron in the air and shouting curses down at her. "You almost killed me twice and I owe you for that, but this is for Ray. You killed Ray for nothing. You didn't even know him, and he didn't do a damned thing to you. You fucking maniac bitch."

Tammy screamed when she saw what was coming at her and tried to roll out of Bobby's way.

Bobby leaned over and took a swing at Tammy's head. He was deadly and well-practiced with his weapon of choice.

They were screaming curses at each other so loud, Bobby barely heard Cleo barking and clawing at the door to get in. His fit of anger had taken over so completely, he'd forgotten he'd left Cleo on her own outside.

He left Tammy bleeding from her cracked skull—limp and almost dead on the floor of the fishing shack—and ran to the door barely hanging on its hinges to let Cleo in.

"Cleo, get in here and take a chunk out of Tammy." Bobby yanked the door open, and Cleo ran in growling. Right behind Cleo stood Tammy's boyfriend pointing a gun at him.

Willy drove north from the hotel not knowing quite what he was looking for. He broke speed limits thinking he had catching up to do, but he didn't know with who.

By chance he happened to spot the black Wrangler with the huge Newfie dog in the front seat. He was positive he'd seen that Jeep with the huge dog at the hotel. It made

him think that it wasn't the police who arrested Tammy at all.

Somebody was following her.

"That guy with the dog might have taken her." He talked to George and Gracie in the back seat of his truck. "Do you think that might be Tammy's old boyfriend with the dog that did the damage to her leg? What was that dog's name again?"

His dogs couldn't give him an answer. Willy made up his own mind to find out and he followed the Wrangler north towards the border.

They weren't many miles from the crossing point when the Wrangler turned off the highway onto one of the winding river roads.

Willy followed along a good distance behind and when the Wrangler turned on a dirt path that led to a fishing camp, he waited on the road until the guy took Tammy out of the hatch and went inside.

As soon as the old boyfriend went into the shack and closed the door behind him, Willy pulled in behind the Jeep and cut the engine of his truck.

Before he jumped out, he reached across the console and took Tammy's gun out of the glove box. Willy made sure the gun was loaded before heading for the shack.

"I'll shoot him if I have to. I have to save Tammy."

He let George and Gracie out to run free and hopefully distract the killer black dog as he ran to the door of the shack.

Willy was halfway there when the black dog ran to the shack and scratched on the door to get in. He hung back so the dog wouldn't attack him.

The boyfriend jerked the door open, the dog ran in, and Willy was ready.

He pulled the trigger.

Bang.

Bobby was surprised to see the old guy standing there with a gun. Even more surprised when the old fart pulled the trigger and shot him. A horrible shot even from that close.

The bullet nearly missed him, but not quite.

It sizzled through the skin in Bobby's side and made him bleed like a good thing. It hurt like a fucker and the pain made Bobby groan. He clutched his side but had nothing handy to stop the bleeding. His head got all dizzy and he figured he was either gonna puke or pass out.

"Cleo," Bobby mumbled, and she took over.

Cleo jumped on the old guy before he had a chance for the kill shot. She clamped her iron jaws on the old guy's left leg, tore through his pants and took a huge chunk out of him.

He hollered as he fell to the floor and Cleo had him then. She went after his other leg, and he was toast.

Bobby kicked the gun out of the old fucker's reach worrying that other fishermen or cottagers had heard the shot and would be doing their fuckin' duty and pressing the 911 icon on their phones.

"Be right back," he hollered to the old guy.

For good measure, he bashed Tammy over the head one more time with his tire iron, picked her up and ran out the back door.

Her hands and ankles were zip-tied, and she'd drown in a matter of minutes. His life-blood leaking out his side, he barely had the strength to carry Tammy to the river.

Fighting to keep from passing out, Bobby relied on sheer willpower and adrenaline to carry Tammy's weight.

He let out a sigh of relief and sank to his knees when he dropped her off the end of the dock. She sank like a stone and disappeared into the deep water.

"Bye-bye, Tammy. This is for Ray, you murdering bitch. I been waiting too long for this."

He whistled for Cleo and dragged himself around the shack to the Jeep. Slipping under the wheel, he paused to catch his breath before starting the engine.

The motor turned over and Bobby had to maneuver around the old fart's truck to get to the lake road.

He'd be in Canada twenty minutes later if he didn't bleed out before then.

Willy lay on the floor of the fishing shack thinking he'd never walk again. The black dog had done so much damage to his legs. The only thing that saved his life was the boyfriend whistling for the dog and taking off.

"Where's Tammy?"

Willy tried to get to his feet to look for her, but he was bleeding so badly, he didn't have the strength to get up off the floor.



He tried to whistle for his dogs and didn't have the breath.

Crawling on his belly, Willy headed for the back door. Not far. The entire shack was only about twelve feet square.

Lying on the floor at the open back door all he could see was a crumbling dock and a wide river.

The bite on his right leg was up higher in his thigh and he'd lost so much blood from that one he figured the dog's fangs might have nicked an artery.

"I need to get to my medical bag in my truck."

Lying right there at the back door of the shack, Willy had to make a decision. An important one.

If he crawled to the dock, he'd bleed out and have no chance to save Tammy.

If he turned around and crawled to his truck and reached his medical bag in time, he might be able to stop the bleeding and save himself.

One of them would be alive.

Hating himself for doing it, Willy turned away from the river and crawled the opposite way.

It took him too long to crawl to the truck and get himself inside. Then another few minutes to find the medical bag in the back and dig out the QuikClot.

Once he had what he needed, the bleeding began to ease up. It stopped up enough to keep him conscious. Without going this route there was no chance for him to get to

Tammy.

He sat in the truck for ten minutes before trying any heroics. Then he took a couple of deep breaths, eased himself out of the truck and forced himself—sheer willpower alone—to stumble around the shack to the dock.

Willy peered into the dark river water and saw nothing. No body anywhere close to the dock. He collapsed onto the dock and sobbed. “She told me I’d get hurt if I came with her and I didn’t listen. She was trying to protect me from the first day I found her, and I didn’t believe what a bad girl she was.

People were after her and she wasn’t paranoid at all. She tried to tell me I was in danger.

Love is blind.

Great Falls Airport. Montana.

Virge slept the entire way home and I wasn’t that lucky. Dead tired as we walked to the parking lot to pick up Dad’s truck and then a long drive home to Coyote Creek, I was a zombie.

“My truck is still here,” said Travis. “That’s a gift.”

“Maybe the strobes scared them off, Dad.”

“Probably what it was, son.” He laughed. “You slept all the way home, Virgil. You get to drive.”

“I’m up for it, Dad. I’ll get you and Harlan home.”

“Thanks. Wake me up when we get there.”

“You got it, Dad. No worries.”

“I’ll worry for both of us, Virge. I hope I’m asleep when we crash.”

“Shut up, Harlan.”

Wild Stallion Ranch. Montana.

Max and Sarge went nuts when we jumped out of the truck with our suitcases. They were so excited they were jumping three feet off the ground and nearly knocked the three of us over.

Dad squatted down and hugged them until they settled down and stopped yipping and whining and doing that crazy jumping.

“Good boys. You were missing us a lot.”

Billy nodded. “They were big whining babies, that’s what they were.”

Dad laughed. “Next time we leave, y’all will be going with us.”

Billy had already fed the horses and bedded them down for the night by the time we got home from the airport, but me and Virge hung out in the barn for a while anyway.

We brushed our horses and told them about the new ranch and about moving to Texas. They seemed to be listening, but I couldn’t be sure.

One thing they wouldn’t like, was the long ride in the horse trailer to get from Montana to Texas. They’d kick up a fuss over that.

Guaranteed.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:58 pm*

Monday, July 29<sup>th</sup> .

Wild Stallion Ranch. Montana.

We had tons of stuff to tell Billy about the new ranch at breakfast, and he asked a lot of questions. It sounded to me like Virge might be right and Billy was giving a lot of thought to coming with us.

“The ranch closes at the end of August,” said Billy. “If Travis is done at the shop on Wednesday, what’s he gonna do for a month?”

Dad laughed. “I’m gonna get ready to go and it’s going to take me a month to do it. There are a lot more things to tidy up here in Coyote Creek than you might think. Uncle Carson owned bits and pieces of so many businesses and properties up here, I doubt if I’ll have it all done when we leave.”

“Huh,” said Virge. “You never said you were all tangled up like that, Dad.”

“No need to worry my boys over paperwork. We have an accountant working on it. Let her straighten us out. That’s what I figured, and that’s what I’m paying her for.” He laughed.

“Molly and Ted are worried about y’all leaving,” said Billy. “Molly says if I don’t run for sheriff when it’s time, she’s retiring. She’s not breaking in a new guy to run the station.”

“Huh,” said Travis. “I guess it might be time for her to retire, but I’d hate to think I

caused it to happen. She's so damned good at her job, she could teach the new sheriff a lot."

"We'll miss Molly when we go," I said. "Max and Sarge will miss her the most. She spoils them every single day and they soak it up."

"I'm not trying to make anybody sad," said Travis. "But it's time to retire and go back where I belong. That's all it is."

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

Max and Sarge ran in the back door of the station barking their happy bark and ran straight to Molly.

"My dogs are so happy this morning, that can only mean one thing." She turned in her swivel chair and smiled at us. "So happy you're back. We haven't had much to do while you were in Texas, and it was pretty boring."

Billy laughed. "Boring means there's no crime in Harrison County. Can we complain about that, Molly?"

Before she could answer, the landline rang, and Molly reached for her pen. "Yes, I've got it down, sir. The sheriff will be along shortly."

"What happened?" asked Travis.

"Two men broke into McNeil's Outfitters in Cut Bank and stole guns. They killed the owner."

"Aw, shit," said Billy. "I've known Charlie McNeil for years. He's a friend of my dad's."

“Sorry, Billy,” said Molly. “You boys better get over there and give the staff in the store some help. Pauline is the name of the girl in the office who called it in.”

“Pauline,” said Billy. “Got it.”

River Medical Center. Gananoque. Ontario.

Willy’s legs were so badly chewed up and mangled, he had to stop driving because of the pain. Spotting a medical center was a stroke of luck. He pulled into the parking lot and slept there, waiting for them to open.

One of the nurses arrived early and she found Willy unconscious in his truck. Two dogs barking at her—one in the front seat and one in the back—put her a little on edge. Their tails wagged and they didn’t seem vicious, so she eased the door of the truck open and saw the blood soaked through both legs of the man’s pants.

She went inside the clinic and got one of the night cleaners to help her with Willy. Between the two of them, they got him inside to an examination room.

By the time the first doctor came on duty, the diligent nurse had removed Willy’s torn and blood-soaked pants and cleaned up both of his legs to get a better look at the damage.

The doctor examined the wounds, decided the damage was far beyond his capabilities and called an ambulance. He sent Willy to the Health Sciences Center in nearby Kingston.

When the night cleaners left for home, one of the ladies took the two dogs and their food from Willy’s truck. She couldn’t bear to leave them in the parking lot or have Animal Control come and pick them up.

McNeil's Outfitters. Cut Bank. Montana.

Travis and the boys arrived at the scene of the crime in Cut Bank, and it wasn't a pretty sight.

Rows of showcases had been smashed and the floor of the huge outfitters store was littered with shards of glass.

The victim, Charlie McNeil, lay dead behind the front counter in a pool of his own blood. The cash drawer was open and empty, and the number of guns taken was anybody's guess. There were many vacant spots in the cabinet.

Doctor Olsen, the Harrison County Coroner, was close by for this homicide. The morgue and his clinic were at the other end of the street.

Cause of death was easy enough to ascertain. Charlie had been shot in the chest by a shotgun—one of his own—at close range.

"We have a witness in the office, boss," said Ted. "The lady who called it in was in the office the entire time. She stayed out of sight and stayed alive."

"Fantastic. She'll be able to help us out a lot." Travis waved Billy towards the office and pointed at Virge, "Get in there and record the witness's statement. Take notes as well and don't miss anything."

"Copy that, Sheriff."

I followed Virge into the office and the witness was a woman from Cut Bank, Pauline Welsh. She'd worked at the store for five years.

Billy talked quietly to her for a few minutes to calm her down so she could think



more clearly. A lot of witnesses had trauma-brain after a life-changing experience and their account of what had happened right in front of them wasn't always accurate.

"Harlan, find the lunchroom and make coffee," said Billy. "I'm sure Miss Welsh could use a cup."

"Copy that."

When the coffee was ready, I brought her a cup and she had stopped crying long enough to give us her statement.

"There were two of them. Big guys wearing those scary ski masks. They yelled at Charlie and told him to open the gun cases—the ones where we keep the rifles and the shotguns. We don't sell any tactical weapons."

"Did Charlie open the cases for them?"

"No. He figured they wanted the guns for something crime-related and he refused to do it and that's when one of the robbers started smashing the glass."

"What did he use to smash the cases?" asked Billy.

"Umm...I didn't notice what he had in his hand. Sorry."

Billy turned his head, "Ted, figure out what the guy used to break the glass. Might be prints on it."

"Copy."

"They had no idea you were here in the office?" asked Billy.

“No. I called 911 and stayed in the office, but I could hear what they were yelling and what Charlie was saying back to them...”

“That was a good decision,” said Billy. “Does the store have security cameras?”

“Yes. Inside and out. I can show you what the cameras saw, if you’d like.”

“We’ll have to have copies, Pauline, but if you can put the pictures on the screen, I’d like to take a quick look.”

The interior cameras recorded exactly what Pauline told us. Two big guys wearing ski masks smashing the gun cabinets and helping themselves to several guns. One of them being a Winchester shotgun that was the murder weapon.

The camera at the front of the store showed the main street of Cut Bank and several parked vehicles.

“Harlan, write down all those makes and models parked out front and any partial tags you can make out.”

“Copy.”

“When the robbers left,” said Pauline, “after they took the guns and ammo they wanted and killed Charlie and took the money out of the cash, they ran out the back door. I think they might have parked out back. The camera facing the back lot isn’t working. We were waiting on a repair.”

“Okay, thanks. That’s good information.”

“Were the robbers talking to each other?” asked Travis. “Hollering to each other while they were smashing and grabbing?”

“They yelled a lot at Charlie when they were trying to make him unlock the gun cabinets,” said Pauline.

“Anything else?” asked Travis. “Any words you overheard would be helpful.”

“The only words I remember recognizing were Big Bear.”

“That’s the casino in Conrad,” said Virge. He lowered his voice and whispered so only I could hear him. “I used to score there when I was somebody else.”

“Good one,” said Travis. “They may have needed the guns to rob the casino.”

“Too bad we don’t know when,” I said.

After Ted drove Pauline home, we helped Doc Olsen get Charlie into a body bag.

Virgil sealed the store with yellow tape, and we went back to the station to sort it out.

Holiday Inn. Kingston. Ontario.

After Bobby tossed Tammy into the river, he headed for the Canadian border. A little nervous that the border cop would notice he was hurt and not let him cross, he got his passport and ID ready beforehand, so he’d be quicker getting through.

The lineup was long, and the customs officer barely looked at him. Checked his passport and glanced at his driver’s license and waved him through.

Bobby let out a sigh of relief and kept going into Ontario. He made it as far as Kingston before he was forced to do something about the wound and the pain.

Bobby stopped at the first drugstore he happened to see and went inside. He bought a

variety of medical supplies he thought might be useful in patching up his gunshot wound.

There was no way he could go into a clinic or a hospital with a gunshot without involving the police. His picture was on wanted posters and there would be some asshole who would've seen his face.

Once he had what he needed to patch himself up, he pulled into the nearest hotel—which happened to be a Holiday Inn—and rented a room for him and Cleo.

Bobby stripped off all his bloody clothes, walked into the shower in the ensuite and stood under the hot water until all the coagulated and crusty dried blood gurgled down the drain.

He stood in front of the vanity mirror with the wound perfectly clean. The stitches he needed weren't to be had, so he applied antiseptic cream generously, then bandaged himself up the best he could.

With three Advil extra-strength under his belt, and Cleo fed, Bobby crashed.

Sleep was the best healer of all.

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek. Montana.

Molly had a lot of questions when they returned to the station from the scene of the crime. "Any idea who the robbers were, Travis?"

"Not yet, but we might have an idea what they needed the guns for."

"More crime?"

“Pauline heard them mention Big Bear,” said Travis, “and we’ll check out that lead.”

“The casino in Conrad?” asked Molly. “That would be a daring robbery for two men.”

“They took more guns than two,” said Virge. “More like six or eight guys will be robbing the next target.”

“Oh, my,” said Molly. “It gets worse instead of better.”

“I know Mrs. McNeil,” said Billy. “I’ll do the notification myself.”

“I know her too,” said Molly reaching for a tissue. “Nadine and Charlie were such a happy couple.”

“Did Mrs. McNeil work in the store sometimes?” asked Travis.

“Yes. She and Charlie started the business as a joint project about fifteen years ago and they ran it together. A very successful business.”

“I’ll talk to her about the store while I’m there doing the notification,” said Billy. “Today may have been her day off.”

“The boys and I will take a drive down to Conrad and check out the security situation at the Big Bear Casino,” said Travis. “I’m thinking it wouldn’t be an easy place to rob.”

“Unless you had help from the inside,” said Virge. “I saw a movie like that once. The guy on the inside rigs the lights or the alarms or like that...tells the outside guys when the cash is being taken to the bank...like that. The robbers know the exact day to come to the casino and it makes it a lot easier.”

“Good one, Virge,” said Travis.

“I’ll take my kit to the store and start on the fingerprints,” said Ted.

“Copy that.”

Big Bear Casino. Conrad. Montana.

Dad drove us down to Conrad to the casino and it was pretty impressive from the outside. All glass and lights and Vegas glitz and glitter. I’d never been there, but Virge used to hang there when he was on drugs and lived in East Conrad.

I was so fuckin’ thankful those days were over for my brother. Getting him back was hard enough. I wouldn’t want to go through that again and neither would Travis.

Plain to see why Dad was getting the ranch in Texas and going with the new Juvie plan. It was because of me and Virge. He figured he could turn out a couple more winners like us during his retirement years.

Travis parked in the massive parking area, and I glanced up at the marker poles. An animal picture on each one to help people remember where their vehicles were.

“Gray Wolf section, Dad. Row ‘B’.”

“Remember that, son.”

Inside, we toured around the gaming floor and Dad asked twice to see the manager on duty before anybody volunteered to show us where the guy was.

One of the casino slot attendants was more friendly and she said, “I’ll get you an escort, Sheriff.” She called on her hand-held and a guy in a dark green suit came

along to fetch us to the boss.

“If you follow me, Sheriff, I’ll take you to the casino manager’s office.”

We took the elevator to the second floor and followed the guy in the green suit to a closed office door. He knocked and a voice inside told us to come in.

The guy stood up and introduced himself. “I’m Ollie Stubens, Sheriff. What can I do for you and your deputies?”

“Earlier today, there was a robbery up in Harrison County. The robbers took a number of guns and several boxes of ammo, and we have reason to believe they stole the guns with the specific intent to rob your casino.”

The chunky casino manager laughed, took off his glasses and wiped his eyes. “You’ll have to forgive me for laughing, Sheriff, but we’re pretty secure here at Big Bear. All the latest equipment and guards around the clock. We don’t spend much time worrying about being robbed.”

“As long as you’re not worried,” said Travis.

“Not a bit.” Ollie strolled around his desk and handed Travis several little coupons. “I appreciate you driving all the way down here in person to warn me, Sheriff. You be sure and take your boys for a free meal before you head back home.”

“Thanks.” Dad gave the coupons a glance and shoved them into his shirt pocket.

With our escort, who waited in the hall for us, we took the elevator back to the gaming floor and me and Virge argued about which restaurant we’d try.

“I vote for the steakhouse,” said Travis. “Might as well start at the top.”

“Okay, Dad. We’ll give you your own way, this one time.” Virge chuckled.

Dad made a good choice. The steaks were great and the coffee hot and fresh.

While we ate, Dad said, “The manager doesn’t want us helping him out, but you boys can come back tonight with Ted. No uniforms. Y’all look like customers and hang around a while.”

“Ain’t our county, Dad.”

“No, it ain’t, Harlan. Those robbers that might show up here are wanted for murder in our county, son. This might be our best chance to get them for Charlie McNeil’s murder.”

“Yep. I see what you’re saying, Dad. Ain’t our county but they’re our murderers.”

“You got it, son.”

Virge was deep in thought while he stuffed cherry pie into his mouth. “Be nice if we could find out if any ex-cons were hired on and had access to the security system.”

“You on the inside man theory still?” I asked my brother.

“Hell yeah. It’s the one that makes the most sense. You can tell by the robbery at the outfitter store that these guys ain’t the brightest stars. There’s got to be somebody smarter running the show from the inside. Somebody who knows what he’s doing.”

Travis nodded. “It does make sense, son. Let me ask Billy how we’d find out something like that.”

McNeil Residence. Cut Bank. Montana.



Billy volunteered for the difficult task of telling Charlie McNeil's wife that her husband of many years was dead. Murdered by robbers in his own store. A tragic end to a life and to a marriage.

The notification was softened a little by a friendly face. Nadine McNeil knew Billy Johnson and both of his parents for years. Both families were originally from Shelby.

After delivering the news and giving the widow an appropriate amount of time to get over the shock, Billy asked a couple of questions about the store.

"It was time for Charlie to retire," said Nadine between sobs. "I wanted to sell the store and there was a lot of interest. It was past time. I used to work there seven days a week, but it became too much for me. I started cutting back and hired more staff."

"Charlie didn't want to sell?"

"He loved the store and enjoyed talking to the customers. He enjoyed going to work every single day and he wasn't ready to give it up."

"Do you have family you can call to come and stay with you, Mrs. McNeil?" asked Billy.

"The kids will have to be told, and they'll come home as soon as I call them, Billy. I'll be fine. Thank you for coming in person to tell me."

"No problem. I'm so sorry about Charlie, and I know my parents will be too."

"He died in the store he loved, Billy. I guess that's something to be thankful for."

Billy nodded.

Health Sciences Center. Kingston Ontario.

Willy opened his eyes and realized he was in a hospital in an intensive care unit. He should know—he'd been in enough of them.

The first thing he thought of after that realization was George and Gracie. When he passed out they had all been together in the truck.

"Excuse me, ma'am. Do you know where my dogs are?"

"I'm sorry, I don't," said the nurse. "But I'm happy you're awake. I'll get the doctor for you."

The nurse returned with a smiling doctor. "I'm Doctor Adamson, Willy. I'm pleased you've regained consciousness on your own."

"I'm pleased about that too," said Willy. "Were you able to repair the nick in the femoral artery?"

"Are you a doctor?"

"A surgeon. Yes."

"Dog bites on both of your legs?"

"Yes. Newfoundlander. Quite vicious."

The doctor opened up and explained to Willy in detail what he had done on the operating table.

"I'm thankful someone found me at the clinic. I passed out in my truck and like I was

asking the nurse earlier, my dogs were in the truck with me. I have to locate them.”

“Let me see if the nurses at the desk can track them down for you, Willy.”

“I’d be so grateful, thank you.” The drugs in Willy’s system took over and he faded into a deep sleep.

Wild Stallion Ranch. Montana.

Virge and I did the barn chores, then had dinner with Dad and Billy. After that, we cleaned up and changed our clothes for our surveillance gig at the casino.

I asked Dad what we should wear, and he said wear what kids always wear. Jeans and a T-shirt.

Didn’t take us long to get ready and we had time for a coffee with Dad and Billy before we left.

Travis remembered about Virge talking about the inside man and he said to Billy, “Virge thinks a casino would be almost impossible to rob without a man on the inside. What do you think?”

“Good thought,” said Billy. “Those places are heavy on security—that’s for damned sure.”

“How would we get the employment records from the casino?” Travis asked.

“You realize when or if the casino does get robbed, it won’t be our case, Travis. The casino people will turn over their records to the cops in Conrad or the state police or to the reservation police. Not to us.”

“We have an interest,” said Travis. “The initial murder investigation belongs to Harrison County.”

“Two guys ain’t enough,” said Virge. “Our robbers—killers—were stealing guns for a larger gang.”

“I agree with you, Virge,” said Billy. “Or else they took more guns to sell—if they weren’t robbing a casino in Conrad.”

“Yeah, there’s that,” said Travis.

“I don’t agree.”

“Why not, Harlan?” asked Dad.

“Because, if they were taking the guns to sell them, they would’ve taken all of them.”

“Yep.” Travis nodded. “That makes sense. They would’ve taken more than they did.”

Holiday Inn. Kingston. Ontario.

Tired from blood loss and exhausted from driving around wounded, Bobby wanted to do nothing but sleep.

Tammy the Terrible was dead, and Bobby no longer had plans or a mission in his life. He and Cleo would stay in the hotel and rest until they had somewhere better to go.

Bobby needed time to heal physically and time to regroup and put his life back together. No Ray to hang out with, and now no Tammy to hate, he had nothing to focus on.

Big Bear Casino. Conrad. Montana.

Me and Virge picked Ted up at the station and drove down to Conrad to the casino.

“Ever been here before, Ted?” asked Virge.

“Yeah, I brought a couple of girls here for dinner and a night out. Like that.”

“Together or one at a time?” asked Virge.

Ted snorted. “One at a time, you asshole.”

“You make any cash money?”

“Hell no. Casinos are for losing money, not making it, Virge.”

“Some people win jackpots,” said Virge.

“The casino wants a few people to win jackpots. They take the pictures of a few winners holding those big fake checks and that’s how they lure more people in to take their money.”

“Huh.”

“You got your fake ID?” I asked my brother. “I think we have to be twenty-one.”

Ted laughed. “I’m over twenty-one. You guys can wait in the truck.”

The security guy on the door scanned our IDs and gave both of us a second look. Especially Virge. Right away I was suspicious of him. He could let people in to rob the place if he wanted to. I was sure he was one of the inside guys.

“Why were you staring at that security guard?” Virge asked me.

“Didn’t trust him.”

“I’m going to write down the name and employee number of every guy I see who looks like a con,” said Virge.

“What about girls?”

“Okay. I guess there could be con girls too. Even girlfriends of the robbers who might work here. If we had the IDs of the guys who robbed the Outfitters store, we could find out if their girlfriends worked at this casino. Make that connection and we’d have them by the fuckin’ nuts.”

“Possible.”

“Ted is working on the prints at the store, and he might have an ID on one of the robbers by tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, if I get lucky,” said Ted. “That’s a huge store to print.”

“Did you find what they broke the glass in the gun cabinets with?” asked Virge. “Dad thought that was your best bet for prints.”

“Can’t find it.”

“They might’ve brought it with them,” I said. “Like a tire iron from their truck and then took it with them when they booked it.”

“Yeah, could have, Harlan.”

Virge wrote down names as we slowly cruised through the casino. Don't know what good it would do, but he was committed.

Dry Run Roadhouse. Coyote Creek.

While the boys were at the casino, Travis and Billy drove down to the roadhouse for a beer. They sat at the bar to talk to Billy's cousin Jack to catch him up on what was going on at the station. He liked to know stuff like that.

After telling him about the robbery and Charlie McNeil being dead, Travis told Jack all about the new spread in Texas.

"Billy is wavering on whether he's going to Texas or not, Jack. What's your opinion?"

"Try something different, Billy. Hell, you might love it in Texas."

Billy laughed. "Yeah, I guess I might."

"You still considering it?" asked Travis.

"Yep. Haven't ruled it out."

"Good."

Tuesday, July 30<sup>th</sup> .

Wild Stallion Ranch. Montana.

Billy and Travis had lots of questions about the casino surveillance for me and Harlan at breakfast. “No sign of any robbers,” said Virge. “I took down the names and employee numbers of possible inside people. Everybody me and Harlan thought looked like a con.”

“You can tell at first glance, Virge?” Billy had a smirk on his face.

“Takes one to know one,” snapped Virge. He helped himself to two more eggs from the platter in the center of the table.

“Guess that’s true,” said Travis. “I can tell a cop when I’m looking at one.”

“Soon as we get to the station,” said Virge taking another slice of toast, “I’ll get Molly to run the names through the police database and see who has priors.”

“Wouldn’t hurt a bit to check those people out,” said Travis. “We might get lucky.”

“Might also be a huge waste of time,” said Billy. “I don’t see a casino hiring people with prison records. “I’m sure they vet all of their prospective employees thoroughly before hiring them.”

“Always a way,” said Virge. He took the last piece of bacon, placed it on the last piece of toast, covered it with a layer of ketchup, rolled it up and ate it.



I laughed at my brother and poked fun at him. It got my day off to a good start. “You an expert on casino hiring practices, bro?”

“Maybe I know more about it than you. When I needed money for drugs, I tried to get a job there. One of the girls got me an app and told me for sure I’d get hired. Her aunt Lizzie would put my application through, and they’d never know about my time in Juvie.”

“Huh,” said Billy. “That’s interesting, Virge.”

“Ain’t it?”

“Why didn’t you fill out the application?” I asked.

Virge shrugged. “Can’t remember, bro. Probably couldn’t find a pen.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Just like Virge said at breakfast, as soon as we got to the station, he and Molly got to work on the employee names.

“We were on surveillance last night at the Big Bear, Molly, and me and Harlan scouted out all the employees working on that shift who had an ex-con look to them. These are the ones we need run through the database to see if they have records.”

“I don’t think the casino would hire ex-cons, dear. Not with all that money lying around. Too much of a temptation.”

“Billy said the same thing, but Dad said we’d run them anyway.”

“Okay,” said Molly. “Let’s see if we can catch a live one, Virgil.” She laughed.

Virge pulled a stool up next to Molly's desk and watched her screen. After about half an hour of doing one after the other they caught a girl.

"Got one, Harlan. Come see."

I ran over from my desk on the other side of the squad room and Virge was writing down an address belonging to Susan Mannington. "She lives in Shelby, Billy. Your hometown."

"Doesn't mean I know her, Virge. Give your head a shake."

"Harlan, keep going on the names with Molly. Me and Billy are going to Shelby to talk to Susie-Q."

Travis laughed. "Go get her, Virge."

Billy shook his head. "I'm not sure about this, Travis. The girl might have only made one mistake and now she's just doing her job and trying to make a living."

Travis hollered from the door of the break room, "Molly, what did Susan do time for?"

"Let me check, dear. Here it is. Armed robbery of a convenience store."

"Bingo," said Ted. "Hope I catch another live one at the store today."

"Call if you get something hot, Ted," said Travis. "Your day will be long and boring. Make sure you take time for lunch at the diner."

"Copy that, boss."

Mannington Residence. Shelby.

Billy knocked on the door and a tall guy answered. He stared at their uniforms and his smile vanished. “Help you, Sheriff?”

“Does Susan Mannington live here?”

“She does. I’ll get her for you. Hang on a sec.”

A woman came to the door. Short, dark hair. Early thirties. Scar on her cheek. Cigarette in her mouth. “What’s up, Sheriff?”

“Can we come in and talk to you for a minute, Susan?”

She stepped out and closed the door behind her. “Better if we talk out here. My brother doesn’t need to know my private business.”

“That was your brother?”

“Yep. My brother Matt. What do you want to see me about? I’m not on parole any longer. Been clean and on my own for two years now.”

“There was an armed robbery in Cut Bank a couple of days ago, and we’re checking everyone in the county with a record,” said Billy. “Routine check. That’s all it is.”

Susan laughed, but her voice was a little shaky. “I ain’t robbed any stores, Sheriff. I’m living the quiet life now, like I told you.”

“What does your brother, Matt, do for a living?” asked Billy.

“Umm...he’s between jobs now, but he’ll get work. He’s a mechanic and a good

one.”

“How long have you worked at Big Bear casino, Susan?” asked Billy.

“Six or eight months. Why?”

“Like I said, this is a routine check of ex-cons in Harrison County.”

“Harassment is what it is. I ain’t done nothing wrong, Sheriff. And I’m not answering any more of your routine questions.” Her right hand made the slightest motion towards her back, then she thought better of it, and she pulled her T-shirt down instead.

Billy tilted his head, and Virge was behind her in a flash. He yanked the gun out of her waist holster and cuffed her.

“Why are you carrying inside your house, Susan?” asked Billy.

“Because I want to.”

“Sheriff Frost will have a few more questions for you at the station. Let’s go.”

Virge secured Susan in the back of the squad, and as they pulled out the driveway, Matt pulled the curtains back and watched out the front window.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Billy and Virgil brought Susan Mannington in for questioning and charged her with carrying a firearm without a permit. Something to give them time to check her out. Check out her brother too.

I printed Susan and took an updated mug shot and I was ready to lock her in the run when we got a break in the case.

Ted called Travis with a print he'd found at the store. He'd been eliminating employees and regular visitors to the store and the print he'd found was unaccounted for. Nate Telling.

"Ted's got a print," hollered Travis. "Nate Telling. I'm running him now."

Virge and I ran into the break room to see what Dad had and he said, "He lives in Sunburst Acres. Let's go."

"Course he does," said Billy. "You go get him and I'll stay here and work on Miss Susan."

"Copy that," said Travis. "Let's go, boys." He whistled for the dogs, and they raced for the back door, always excited when they got the chance to go with us and work.

Sunburst Acres Trailer Park.

"That's it there, Virge." Travis pointed at a rusty-looking single-wide on the back street of the mobile home park. This particular park was about twenty miles from the Canadian border and handy for those interested in international trade.

"Block the pickup in."

"Copy, Dad." Virge parked the squad sideways across the end of the dirt driveway.

"Let's see what Nate Telling is up to."

Dad took the front door of the trailer with my brother—Virgil being our designated

shooter—and I took the back door on my own.

I circled around avoiding several trash bins overflowing with garbage. Looked for a dog chained out back and there wasn't one. Lucky.

Tried the back door and it was kind of locked. Supposed to be secure, but the doorframe was warped so bad the lock wasn't clicking into place like it should.

Pushing the door open slowly so it wouldn't squeak, I went inside and listened for Dad and Virge coming in from the front.

Travis knocked at the front and a kid came to the door—no more than fourteen. “What do you guys want?” He stood with the door open and hollered over his shoulder, “Dad, it's the fuckin' law.”

Nate Telling sauntered towards the door with a smirk on his face. Tall guy with shaggy dark hair and a mustache. Shiny earring in his right ear. Diamond? Probably not.

“Hey, it's Sheriff Frost himself at my door. Heard a lot of stories about you, Sheriff. Always wondered how many of them were true.”

“Overexaggerated,” mumbled Travis.

“Under,” mumbled Virge.

“This is a red-letter day for me,” said Nate. “Travis Frost coming to my house. Heard Frost was an alias, but what do I know?”

“Need to talk to you, Nate.” Travis ignored Nate's sarcastic chatter. “Got a minute?”

“I’m pretty busy drinking a few cold ones with my friends. Could you come back another time?”

“Nope.”

“What did I do, Sheriff? Can’t wait to hear what you’re trying to lay on me.”

“I’d like you to provide me with an alibi for your whereabouts the day the Outfitters store was robbed in Cut Bank, and the store owner was murdered.”

“That’s easy. I was in Canada when that went down. Heard about it when I got back.”

“I didn’t tell you when the robbery took place, Nate.”

“Don’t matter. It was a couple days ago. I been away for a week and just got back last night. I wasn’t even in this country, Sheriff.”

“Anybody across the border in Alberta who can verify that, Nate?”

“Don’t need nobody. The government will do it for me. Easy to check with the border guards when I crossed and when I crossed back.” He grinned. “That should keep you busy for at least an hour.”

“I’d like to meet your friends,” said Travis. “Who have you got visiting you today?”

“Couple of my good buddies stopped by for a beer. Come on into the kitchen and see for yourself.”

Travis followed Nate into the kitchen and Virge was right behind him.

Nate’s two buddies were more nervous than he was and had their guns drawn and

pointed at Travis when he walked into the kitchen.

Time for me to move in. “Guns down,” I hollered from the doorway into the hall. “Put your guns down and your hands in the air.”

“Don’t think so,” said buddy number one. Fat belly and beard. Looked like he belonged on a Harley.

Bang.

Virge didn’t give second chances. He shot beer belly in the knee and knocked him to the floor. Beer belly fired a wild shot on his way down to kiss the linoleum and shot out a window on the other side of the trailer.

“Hey, take it easy,” shouted Nate at his buddy. “You might hit my boy.”

“Guns down,” hollered Virge. “You assholes deaf?”

I moved in closer to the action, pointing my shotgun at the buddy who wouldn’t lower his weapon.

“Put your gun down, Pat,” said Nate. “These boys mean business.”

Pat somebody—buddy number two—a short stocky guy with a mop of sandy hair—laid his Glock on the kitchen table and started to raise his hands in the air.

“Call an ambulance, Harlan, for the guy on the floor,” said Travis.

“Copy that.” The second I was busy with my cell, buddy two—Pat—reached for his boot knife.



Travis saw him go for it, whipped his blade out of the sheath on his belt and fired it across the room. The movement was so lightning fast none of us really saw it happen.

Heard it.

That whizzing sound the knife makes when it's breaking the fucking sound barrier.

The knife was deadly on the mark and stuck right in buddy two's jugular. Pat collapsed into a bloody heap right next to buddy one who was still breathing and gagging and hanging onto his bleeding-out knee.

"Listen up, idiots," Travis was deadly calm. "Nate, you're coming with me to the station for questioning. Down on your knees and assume the position."

Nate dropped to his knees, and I ran across the living room to cuff him.

Travis walked over and pulled his knife out of buddy number two's throat. He wiped the blood off on buddy's plaid shirt and put the blade back where it belonged.

"Harlan, get Doc Olsen up here from Cut Bank. We have a customer for him. Virge, secure Nate in the back of the squad. I'll cover you."

"Copy, Sheriff."

Once Nate was secure and we were waiting for the ambulance and Doctor Olsen, Virge and I searched the trailer for evidence and found plenty.

We bagged up all the opiates and a couple of bags of meth. Two more guns, but they weren't the guns we were looking for from Charlie's store. Nope. No rifles or shotguns.

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

We hauled Nate Telling back to the station along with a lot of drugs and a few handguns collected from his trailer.

Before we left the trailer park, Nate sent his son across the road to stay with his grandmother until he got back from jail—no telling when that would be.

“How'd that go?” asked Billy as Virge and I brought Nate in from the sally port.

“Pretty good,” said Virgil. “Good outing.”

Once Nate was printed and booked and locked in a cell, Billy went into the run to talk to him about the robbery.

“Hey, Nate, I'm Sheriff Billy Johnson and I'd like to know why your print was found in the Outfitters store if you were in Canada when the robbery went down.”

“Can't explain it, Sheriff. All I can tell you is me and my boy, Chris, have been in that store in Cut Bank more times than I care to remember. Chris loves that store, and he always wants to go there and look at the knives and the guns in the showcases. That ain't a crime.”

“No, it isn't. The drugs found in your trailer, that's a different issue,” said Billy.

“Yeah, a different issue.”

“We'll have your tag checked out at the border crossing and if that's verified, you'll be clear of the robbery.”

Nate smiled. “One down.”

“Yep. One down.”

Before leaving the run, Billy asked Nate if he knew Susan Mannington in the cell at the opposite end of the run.

Nate took a good look at her and shook his head. “Never seen her before, Sheriff. She a robbery suspect?”

“One of them.”

“Sorry. Can’t help you out.”

Health Sciences Center. Kingston. Ontario.

Grieving for Tammy, there was nothing Willy could do but lie flat on his back in his bed and accept the care he received from the dedicated hospital staff.

He was lucky to be alive and he knew it.

Willy cheered up considerably when one of the nurses breezed into the room and told him his dogs had been located in Gananoque.

“A member of the cleaning staff who works at that clinic saw your dogs in the truck and took them and their food to her house. She’ll take care of the dogs until you’re released and come to pick them up.”

“That’s wonderful news,” said Willy. “Thank you so much for going to the trouble of finding them. I’ve had George and Gracie for years and those dogs are my family.”

“No problem, Willy. Happy to help you.”

Holiday Inn. Kingston. Ontario.

Two days of resting and relaxing at the Holiday Inn did wonders for Bobby, and Cleo didn't mind either. She enjoyed sleeping on a big comfy bed as much as the next dog.

"I think this may be our last night here, Cleo. I want you to think about where you want to go tomorrow. Okay?"

Cleo wagged her tail.

Wild Stallion Ranch. Montana.

At dinner, we went over the case and what we had so far was Susan Mannington. A girl with a record for armed robbery who worked at Big Bear Casino.

"What about her brother Matt?" asked Virge. "That dude could use some surveillance."

"Yeah, we'll put Ted on Matt Mannington tomorrow," said Billy.

"Also, we have Nate Telling who left his print in Charlie McNeil's store, but according to Mark at the border, Nate was in Canada when the robbery went down," said Virge.

"Thanks for the recap, Virgie," said Billy. "Where do you suggest we go from here?"

"I guess we'll have to dig in and work harder on it tomorrow," I said.

"Guess so, Harlan," said Billy. "Hard work solves cases like nothing else."

"Guess work never cuts it," added Travis.

“Tomorrow is Dad’s last day as sheriff. Are we having a party for him at the Run after work?” I asked Billy.

“Sure as hell are, boys.” Billy had a big grin on his face. “We’ll make sure it’s one night he won’t forget.”

“Does that mean I’ll have a headache for fuckin’ days afterward?” asked Travis.

Virge laughed. “That’s exactly what it means, Dad.”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:58 pm*

Wednesday, July 31 st .

Wild Stallion Ranch. Montana.

Me and Virge finished the morning chores and Virge kept on with his fretting about transporting our horses to Texas. “Three days in a trailer, Harlan. They ain’t gonna like it.”

“They’ll hate it, Virge. You see how crazy Lucy’s horse was when she took it out of the trailer a couple of weeks ago—the day they got here from Texas?”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m talking about.”

“Guess we’re taking Tammy’s horse with us.”

“Have to. We can’t leave Bonnie Grace here by herself.”

“Think Dad is sad inside him about Tammy? Like in his heart?”

“Yeah, I do. I’m sad and I ain’t Tammy’s daddy,” said Virge.

“Where the hell is that girl, Virgil?”

“Wish I knew—mostly for Dad’s peace of mind. He’s responsible for all the shit she’s done and he’s feeling it.”

“Think we’ll ever see her again?” I asked Virge as he locked up the barn.

“She can’t come back here ever again, Harlan. She’ll go straight to fuckin’ jail.”

“Yeah, there’s that.”

Billy cooked breakfast for Dad’s last day of work.

“You don’t need to do that, Billy. I can make breakfast for y’all same way I always do.”

“I’m doing it today, Travis. You just sit there and drink your coffee.”

Travis laughed. “Okay. Last day of work ain’t a big thing to celebrate. Ain’t like my wake or nothing.”

“Big enough,” said Virge. “We’re gonna party all day and deep into the night. Me and Harlan are done working too, and we’ll be doing some moon-howling tonight.”

Travis laughed.

“We’re hanging up our utility belts and our badges, Billy,” said Virge. “Harrison County will go to hell in a handbasket, but we’ll be kicking up dust in Texas and we won’t know a thing about it.”

Virge made me chuckle.

“You guys like working as deputies,” said Billy. “I don’t know too many guys your ages who work as hard as the two of you.”

“Thanks, Billy.”

“I agree,” said Travis. “You boys are fuckin’ great deputies. Best in Montana.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I gave Travis a fist bump and he reached across the table and gave Virge one too.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Molly was ready for Dad’s last day when we got to the station. She had a big cake on the gallery part of her desk up above where she worked. Paper plates, napkins and forks there too.

The words written on the chocolate icing said— We’ll miss you Travis, Harlan, Virgil, Max and Sarge —and there were pictures on the cake that looked just like our dogs.

Almost brough a tear to my eye.

“I ain’t eating a piece with a dog on it,” said Virge.

“Wow, that’s some cake, Molly,” said Travis. “Thanks for being so thoughtful, and for all you’ve done for me since the day I got here as a rookie.”

Molly smiled. “You’ve never been a rookie, Travis. Marines are not rookies.”

Travis laughed. “Guess that might be true.”

“We’ll cut the cake at morning break,” said Molly. “We have arraignments this morning.”

“Me and Virge will get the prisoners ready to go, Dad. You have a coffee and stare at your cake.”

“Thanks, Harlan.” Travis laughed and went to get himself a coffee.



I could already tell Dad's last day of work was going to be one we'd remember.

Harrison County Courthouse. Coyote Creek.

The arraignments were boring as hell. That's why nobody ever came to watch them. Same old. Stand in front of the judge and enter the plea. Bail or no bail.

The best stuff happened in the parking lot after Susan Mannington made bail and her brother, Matt, came to pick her up.

Both of our prisoners made bail, and they weren't coming back to our jail. Happy about that, we were getting into the squad when Virge saw Matt open the door of his truck for his sister and then Matt kissed her like guys never kissed their sister.

Unless you were me and Lucy.

"What the fuck?" hollered Virge. "That ain't his sister."

"Drive closer and get the fuckin tag on Matt's truck," said Travis.

Virge veered over near them and hollered out the letters and the numbers.

Travis punched it in, and the Ford came up registered to Matt Goreman. "His name ain't Mannington. It's Goreman."

"He got a sheet?" I asked.

"Hang on a second." Travis ran the name through the police database. "Yep. Here he is. Matthew Goreman. Armed robbery."

"Could've been the same convenience store as Miss Susie," said Virgie.

“Yeah. Coulda been, Virge. Get us back to the station. I’m putting Billy and Ted on Matt Goreman.”

“Copy that, Dad. Making a run to the station.” Virge squealed the tires on the squad as we zoomed out into the street. He made Dad laugh.

Mannington Residence. Shelby. Montana.

Billy and Ted got the job of watching Matt and Susan after Susan was released on bail.

Using Billy’s pickup, they were out of sight parked halfway down the street in a residential part of Shelby.

“This is a good spot,” said Ted. “I’ve got a scope anyway if we need to ID somebody in a hurry.”

“Like who? Some famous robber knocks on Susan’s door?”

Ted laughed. “Yeah, like that.”

Billy and Ted had both finished the coffee they’d brought with them and were thinking of going for more when a van and a pickup pulled into Susan’s driveway.

“Huh,” said Billy. “Looks like they’re having a meeting. Five more guys coming to the party.”

“Susie is the inside person,” said Ted. “Virgie is sure of it.”

“Virge is right more often than not,” said Billy. “He picked Susan and there is a lot of convincing shit circling around her, Ted. I’m starting to think Virge may be right on

the money. Now her fake brother is one of the puzzle pieces. They're a team."

"Should we pay another call on the casino boss and tell him the thing is heating up?"

Billy shrugged. "What's the point? We tried to help him, and he laughed in our faces. Said the casino couldn't be robbed."

"Guess we'll let them have at it then," said Ted. "We can't arrest this bunch. Not yet anyway. Talking about a robbery ain't much to bring them in on. They haven't committed a crime."

"Not yet," said Billy.

Wait for it...

Maynooth. Northern Ontario.

Bobby decided he had nowhere better to go so he headed for the cabin in Northern Ontario that Tammy talked about all the time when they were a couple.

Her mama's cabin on Baptiste Lake.

Bobby had no idea if he could find it, but it would give him and Cleo something to do. And if he did find it, it should be a safe place to stay for a while.

"Can you remember where Tammy said the key was, Cleo? We might have to hunt for it—like a treasure hunt."

Cleo wagged her tail.

Bobby pulled into the gas station on the corner of the highway in Maynooth and filled

up the Wrangler. He filled his lungs with fresh northern air and wondered why anybody would want to live anywhere but up here. Trees and lakes and rivers and not too many people.

“Yep. I already love it here, Ray. Wish you were with me.”

Bobby went inside to pay for the gas and asked the clerk at the cash. “You know where Annie Powell’s cabin is? It’s on North Baptiste Lake. Am I close to that?”

“Yep, you are. Want me to draw you a map?”

“That would be fantastic,” said Bobby.

The girl drew a map on a scrap of paper and marked all the turns. “That’s the north lake road. Once you turn onto that road, you’ll have to watch the mailboxes to find her cabin. I don’t know which one it is. Sorry. Don’t know her.”

“This will help a lot. Appreciate it. I should load up on some groceries while I’m here. I’ll fill a cart and be back to check out.”

Bobby bought enough food and water for a few days, paid the bill, then loaded up the Wrangler.

With the map in his hand, he drove south down the highway and watched for his turn.

“Tell me when you see North Baptiste Lake Road, Cleo. Your eyes are better than mine.”

Bobby cruised along until he saw the sign, turned on the lake road and drove slowly reading the name on every mailbox.

“Left side, Cleo. See that? We’re here.”

Cleo hung her big head out the window.

“Whoa. Helluva steep driveway, girl.”

Bobby pounded the gas and rammed the Jeep into four-wheel drive to make it up the hill. Once he was up and in the clearing, he could see how cute the log cabin was. He drove around back where the Jeep was out of sight and cut the engine.

“This place is nicer than the one Ray and I had in West Virginia, Cleo.” She was running wild, sniffing the ground and growling.

“Don’t you go too far. Might be wolves or something around here.”

Bobby started looking for the key. Lifting flowerpots and running his hand along the tops of windows. Wracking his brain, he couldn’t remember where Tammy told him it was.

“I should’ve been listening, Cleo. Guess I wasn’t.”

Trauma Unit. Watertown. New York.

“Is the Jane Doe awake yet, nurse?” asked Detective Carmichael.

“No, sir. She’s in a coma and her injuries are so severe, she may never wake up. You should get ready for a long wait before she ever talks to you, sir.”

“It would help me out a lot if we could take her prints, ma’am. If we knew who she was, we could call her family and find out what happened to her.”

“The doctor left orders that no one was to move her or touch her, Detective. You’ll need the doctor’s okay before taking her fingerprints.”

“When will the doctor be in, ma’am?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Could I have his cell number, please?”

“Of course. Let me get it for you.”

Carmichael sighed. He was getting nowhere fast on Jane Doe’s case.

Dry Run Roadhouse. Coyote Creek. Montana .

The end of Travis’ last day as Sheriff of Harrison County and me and Virge were anxious to celebrate. We cruised into the roadhouse after work and Jack had a special booth set up for us.

Savanna had decorated it with a sign that said,

## SHERIFF FROST’S LAST DAY

We laughed, but Dad thought we were making too much fuss over his last day of work. He wasn’t laughing.

“Did you boys just walk away from your surveillance on Susan Mannington and her crazy brother, Matt Goreman?” asked Travis.

“Yeah, I guess we did,” said Billy. “We didn’t want to miss your party. Nothing happening there and it’s not our case anyway. If they head south to rob Big Bear

there's not a damned thing we can do about it, Travis. The Conrad cops will catch it."

"Yeah, I guess," said Travis.

Travis was surprised how many local people showed up for his party. County Supervisor Lyndell Gibson, Doctor Olsen the County Coroner, Gloria Grafton from County Child Services, and the DA for Harrison County even showed up with a couple of his assistants.

They just kept on coming in through the front door of the roadhouse and congratulating him.

"This is embarrassing," Travis mumbled. "I'll get Billy for this."

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:58 pm*

Thursday, August 1 st .

Wild Stallion Ranch. Montana.

Me and Virge were so hungover from Dad's party, we didn't get up on time for chores. I dragged myself out of bed and had the horses fed and the barn almost cleaned up when Virge staggered in.

"Did I hear you puking outside in the dirt?"

"You might've," he mumbled.

Out of sympathy, I tried not to laugh, but it was damned hard not to. What a mess he was. "How much did you drink last night, bro?"

"Same as you."

I laughed. "Calling bullshit on that one, Virgie." I pointed at a straw bale. "Sit there and try not to puke on the floor I just swept. I'm almost finished here."

"Thanks, Harlan."

"No sweat, little bro. You'd do the same for me."

"Yeah, I owe you one."

We headed into the kitchen for breakfast, and Virge was in dire need of black coffee.



Billy was on the phone finishing up a call to somebody. “Yes. Thanks for the call.”

“What’s that about, Billy?” asked Travis.

“Six guys robbed Big Bear and got away with three million dollars,” said Billy.

“Wowzer,” said Virge. “Bet you saw those guys at Susie’s house. You and Ted saw five more going in, didn’t you?”

“Yep. Five guys went in, and Matt Goreman was already in there with his fake sister.”

“Who’s calling us with the news?” asked Travis.

“Montana State Crime,” said Billy. “They are the guys coordinating the investigation between the Res police—where the casino is situated—and Conrad PD.”

“Any fatalities?” I asked.

“Four dead at the scene including Susan Mannington.”

“Huh. I guess something went wrong for her,” said Virge. “Her pretend brother didn’t save her ass.”

“Did they use the guns from Charlie McNeil’s store?” I asked.

“Not sure they know that yet, Harlan,” said Billy, “but I’ll tell you one thing. Another robbery and murder so close to home made me decide something for sure.”

“Tell me what I want to hear, Billy,” said Travis.

“I’m done here when the election rolls around in November. I’ll have to finish out my term, but I’m not running again. Harrison County can get somebody new before I get shot and don’t get to enjoy my retirement in that hot state of fuckin’ Texas.”

Travis grinned. “Best news I’ve had today.”

Billy sighed. “Ted and I will tough it out together until then. Molly will probably decide the same thing when I tell her I’m going to Texas. She’s ready to pack it in too.”

“Good decision, Billy,” said Travis. “The boys will have your bed all made up for you when you get to our new spread in Lincoln.”

Billy grinned. “Thanks, guys. I just can’t picture staying here in Montana without my family. It would be the high shits.”

Billy left for work after making his big decision. Travis left for Cut Bank to finish odds and ends with his accountant, and that left me and Virge to get started on our ‘moving to Texas’ list.

It was a long one and we had so much shit to pack up and move it was scary.

“Dad wants to be in Texas at least a week ahead of when we’re closing on the new ranch,” I said to Virge, “so that means in two weeks we’ll be leaving for the drive down there towing the bikes and the horses.”

“Yep. It will take us at least four good days of solid driving to get there, all that stopping and whatnot.”

“When’s Dad renting us the big horse trailer?”

“Next week, I hope.” Then he paused, looking thoughtful. “When we get to Texas and our ranch ain’t ours yet,” asked Virge. “Where we gonna lay our heads down?”

“Not sure about that, but he did mention putting the horses in Mom’s corral while we waited.”

“Okay. We’ll be staying there then,” said Virge.

“Hope that’s true. Then I’ll have a week with Lucy before we move twenty or thirty miles away.”

Virge laughed at me. “Twenty miles ain’t far, you big wussy. You could run that far on foot with your backpack on your back if you had to.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

We went into the garage to start packing it up and throw out crap we never used. Virge pointed at the bikes. “Three bikes to trailer and our trailer only holds two. One will have to go in the load bed of one of the trucks.”

“Yep. Look at all that shit on the shelves and the workbench, bro. This is stuff we have to sort out this week. Go get a couple of trash bags from the kitchen.”

Virge lit up a smoke and sat on his Harley. “You go.”

Maynooth. Northern Ontario.

“This cute little cabin we live in, Cleo, is on a lake and we haven’t found the path to the water yet. It has to be through the woods and down the hill because we’ve looked in all three other directions. Come on, girl. Let’s go find the water.”

Cleo bounced around wagging her tail at the mention of the water.

“Yes, I know what breed you are. You’re a Newfoundlander and you’re the rescue dog for the Rock—that’s what they call Newfoundland in Canada.”

“Just like the Saint Bernards in the mountains, you do your rescue work in the ocean. How far can you swim, girl?”

With Cleo sprinting ahead, Bobby stomped through evergreen trees until he found the path and once he began following it, he was surprised how steep it was.

Hanging onto tree branches all the way down to keep from flying ass over teakettle, he made it to the bottom. Taking a breath on the shore, Bobby took in the nearly-new dock and the boathouse and marveled at the huge, shining lake in front of him.

“Look at that, Cleo. Fuckin’ amazing. What a gorgeous sight that is. If you want to go for a swim, don’t let me stop you.”

Bobby was surprised when Cleo ran along the dock and jumped right off the end into the water like she’d done it a hundred times before. Maybe she had.

He watched her swim a good ways out towards the middle, then turn a circle and swim back to him. With her great strength, she had no trouble jumping out of the water onto the dock.

“Wow, you were amazing, Cleo.” Bobby backed up. “Don’t you shake all that water all over me.” He laughed. Cleo shook twice and the water flew from her thick, black coat and made Bobby jump clear.

“There’s a boathouse over there, girl. Do you want to go fishing? Do you like riding in a boat?”

Cleo followed Bobby to the boathouse and jumped right into the boat and waited.

“Yep, you’re used to being near the water. This is going to be fun.”

Trauma Unit. Watertown. New York.

Her vital signs improved enough that the doctor taking care of her gave in and allowed Detective Carmichael and his partner to fingerprint the Jane Doe who had washed up on the bank of the Saint Lawrence River.

When they finished up and had the results, Carmichael said, “This girl is Deputy Sheriff Tammy Traynor/Bristol, and she’s wanted for several murders. She’s an escaped fugitive wanted for crimes all over the U.S.”

“Wow,” said Jones, Carmichael’s partner. “We grabbed us a winner.”

“She’s not a win for us if she regains consciousness,” said Carmichael. “There are a lot of charges ahead of us waiting for her. This girl will be spending her life in a prison infirmary somewhere other than New York State.”

“Yeah, I can’t see her recovering from this,” said Jones. “She’s pretty close to closing the book, and what is she?”

“Nineteen,” said Carmichael. “Unbelievable, a girl of nineteen could have committed all these thefts and murders and the kidnappings Tammy is charged with. Amazing.”

Jones frowned. “She’s a Deputy Sheriff, for chrissakes, Brody. What do you make of that piece of news?”

“Don’t know. It’s all pretty crazy. We’ll take this information back to the station and make some phone calls.”

“Roger that,” said Jones.

Health Sciences Center. Kingston. Ontario.

Willy had been getting out of bed sporadically and limping around the room and down the hospital corridors when he had spurts of energy and the pain in his damaged legs wasn't too excruciating.

Anxious to get back to Gananoque to pick up George and Gracie, Willy talked to the nurses and obtained the address he needed. He thanked them for all the trouble they'd gone to for his dogs.

When the doctor made his rounds later in the day, and saw how well Willy was walking, he agreed to release him, with certain restrictions.

Willy had to get going and didn't object to any restrictions. He agreed to all of it. Taking it easy, taking his meds, walking with a crutch for support, and a few more things.

Nothing he couldn't handle.

On leaving the hospital, Willy waited for a cab outside on one of the benches.

The driver pulled up and was patient while Willy took a little extra time getting into the back seat. “You been in the hospital long?”

“Just a few days,” said Willy. “Dog bite. Nothing serious.”

“Where to?”

“The clinic in Gananoque. That's where my truck is parked. They transferred me

here.”

“Got it.” The cabbie took him back to the clinic where he’d been rescued from his old pickup and luckily, his truck was still there in the same spot. Not stolen or stripped of its tires.

Willy paid the driver and limped inside the clinic using his crutch. He wanted to see if the lady who had his dogs was at the clinic or if she was at home on a different shift.

While he waited in line, Willy heard the nurses talking to each other about a Jane Doe who was found floating in the Saint Lawrence River.

“Where did they take that girl?” Willy butted into the conversation because he had to know.

“To the Trauma Center in Watertown, New York. Last I heard, she was in a coma.”

“Thank you.” Willy stored that information away and asked about his dogs. He was told the lady who had the dogs was off shift and he’d find her at home.

He limped back to his pickup a little shook up. Tammy wasn’t dead. She was in a coma. That meant she had a chance to wake up. Wonderful news.

He drove to the cleaning woman’s house, not far from the clinic, and picked up the dogs and their food. George and Gracie were crazed to see him and amid jumping and barking and drooling, he managed to give the kind woman who cared for them fifty bucks for her trouble.

Willy’s direction changed when he found out about Tammy. She was alive and he couldn’t ignore that. Willy had to return to the U.S., and happily, he was only a few

miles from the bridge.

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek. Montana.

Billy received the strange call from Detective Carmichael of the Watertown PD. "Sheriff Johnson, I'm looking for Sheriff Frost. I have information about his daughter, Tammy."

"That's wonderful," said Billy. "You can tell me. I'm Sheriff Frost's partner and a member of his family."

"Tammy Traynor/Bristol was found floating in the Saint Lawrence River in upper New York State. She had no identification when found, and was brought in as a Jane Doe. She's now resting in the Trauma Care Unit in Watertown."

"Is she badly injured?" asked Billy.

"Very badly injured and she's in a coma. The doctor isn't sure she'll ever wake up."

"I see. I'll tell her father, and he'll probably call you for more details, Detective."

"That's fine. I may have more information on her by the time he calls. She's wanted on a great many charges if she ever does wake up."

"That's true. She was in a mental facility for a long period of time," said Billy. "Things have been difficult for her father, him being a county sheriff and Tammy being one of his deputies—it's been hell for him."

"I can imagine. Tell him I'm looking forward to his call."

"I'll do that, sir. Appreciate hearing from you."



Billy called Travis straightaway and relayed all of the information including Carmichael's cell number.

"Holy shit, Billy. What do they want me to do?"

"Nothing you can do, Travis. Tammy is in a coma in a hospital. Talk to the Detective and have him call you when she wakes up and they move her. That's all you can do. They won't let her go."

"Copy that."

Wild Stallion Ranch. Montana.

Me and Virge came in the from the garage to take a break from our packing and Travis had just hung up from a call from Billy. "Sit down, boys. Gotta tell y'all something."

"What, Dad? You look kinda pale. They find Tammy?"

"Yep. Tammy was found floating in a river in New York State and she's in a coma in a trauma unit out there. They know all about the charges against her and they'll call us when she wakes up."

"Huh," said Virge. "I guess it's good to know where she is. That's one thing less to worry about."

Travis nodded. "One less thing, son."

Trauma Unit. Watertown. New York.

Willy crossed the Ivy Lea Bridge into New York state and drove twenty-five miles

south to Watertown. Following the directions in the GPS he arrived at the Trauma Unit.

“This is where Tammy is, doggies. Aren’t y’all happy she isn’t dead? I know I am. Maybe someday we’ll all be a family again.”

Using his crutch for support, Willy limped through the hospital. He asked at two different nurses’ stations where Tammy was and finally arrived at the intensive care unit.

Thinking he’d soon get to see her, he stopped abruptly when he saw the guard standing at the door of the ICU. No way he could get in to see her.

Once he explained who he was and why he wanted to sit with Tammy, he would’ve implicated himself and confessed to aiding and abetting a wanted fugitive.

He turned around before anyone noticed him and headed back to the parking lot.

Sad and close to tears, Willy climbed into his pickup. “We can’t see Tammy, doggies. She won’t be better or out of jail for a long, long time. We’ll go home to North Carolina and wait in our cabin until the dust settles around Tammy.”

George and Gracie both had sad faces when they heard the news.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:58 pm*

Monday, August 25<sup>th</sup> .

Wild Stallion Ranch. Montana.

Three weeks had gone by and today was the day we pulled out of Montana and headed for our new life in Texas. The house movers were scheduled to come tomorrow and pack up all of our furniture and belongings and bring the load to our new ranch in Lincoln, Texas.

Billy had decided to live with his parents in Shelby for the two months until his term was up, then he'd fly down and join us on our new ranch. That made Dad happy. He wanted Billy in Texas with us, and so did me and Virge.

The horses were loaded in the long, rented trailer and that trailer was hooked up to Dad's big Ford. He wanted to haul the horses because the weight of the trailer would be harder for Virge and me to handle if it was hooked to our Jeep.

Virge didn't see it that way and he protested a bit when Dad told us how it was going to go, but Virge liked to argue just for the sake of it.

Travis had sold our small two-horse trailer, so we didn't have to haul it with us. Good move. We had four horses now and more coming when we got to the Texas ranch.

Yesterday, before we loaded the tack and all the rest of it, we all rode together out to the back of our thousand acres. Dad wanted to have one more look at the wild horses that often ran across our land with their tails and manes flying in the wind. Our ranch was named for the mustangs and yesterday, we were lucky enough to spot a couple of

them.

While we were way back there, Dad spent a few minutes sitting at his Uncle Carson's grave. He said his goodbyes and thanked Uncle Carson for the ranch and for giving us a good life because of it.

We were keeping the cabin he gave us up Black Wolf Mountain so we could come back to Montana anytime we wanted and have our own place to hang out.

Dad told me and Virge that we were born in Montana, so we should have a piece of property here for our heritage. Our own little piece of Montana. I loved that cabin, so I was glad we weren't selling it along with everything else.

After breakfast, we said goodbye to Billy. Dad put him in charge of packing up everything in the fridge and taking it all to his mother's house. We had the rest of the stuff from the pantry packed in boxes and ready for the movers.

We'd already said goodbye to Molly and Ted at the station and that was a sad time yesterday, with Molly crying 'n all, but we got through it.

Molly was only staying until Billy was done at the first of November. She'd made up her mind. It was time for her to retire.

"You ready, boys?"

"Ready, Dad," I said.

"Nice and slow, Virgie, with the bike trailer on behind. You're hauling precious cargo, son."

"I've got it, Dad. I'll be right behind you."

We drove out the laneway and it was kind of sad for me and Virge because this was the first real home we'd ever had. But Dad gave us the choice.

He offered to keep this ranch for us, but he wouldn't be here with us no more. He had to live out the rest of his days in Texas. Had to. Couldn't get away from it.

Me and Virge chose to leave Montana and stick with our Dad, and it was the right choice for us. Travis didn't spawn us—we didn't know who did—but Travis was our real dad. Couldn't get any realer.

Butte. Montana.

Dad pulled into a truck stop outside of Butte for our first rest stop. The dogs needed a run and Virge needed food.

Me and Virge leashed Max and Sarge and took them for a long walk around the highway property before putting them back in the truck and going into the restaurant to eat.

We glanced at the menu while the waitress stood at the end of the table coming on to Travis. Me and Virge loved to watch it.

“Hi. I'm Wanda and I'll be your server.”

Whatever chicks needed for a fuckin magnet, our Dad had a truckload of it. Didn't matter a whit if he was pushing forty. I winked at Virge, and he already had a smirk on his face.

“You on a trip with your boys?” She flipped up the end of her dark brown hair and laid a huge smile on Travis.

“Yeah, we’re moving to Texas.”

“You have a Texas accent already,” she said.

“Uh huh. I’m going home to retire.”

“Retire? You look kinda young for packing it in, cowboy.”

Travis laughed. “I’ve got a lot of miles on me.”

“Few good ones still left. I can see it in your eyes.”

Virge could see Dad starting to get a bit antsy, so he said, “What’s the special, Wanda?”

Wanda turned and pointed to a blackboard up above the counter—a long section with stools in front it. “Lasagna and garlic bread. Comes with coffee and a slice of pie.”

“Good enough for me,” said Virge. “I’ll have that.”

I nodded. “Me too. I love lasagna.”

“Make it three,” said Travis.

“Got it,” said Wanda. “You boys are easy.”

Wanda spun off to put our order in and Virge leaned closer. “That girl is so hot for you, she was ready to do you in the fuckin booth, Dad.”

“Shut up, Virge.”

I couldn't stop laughing and Dad gave me a look.

Montana/Wyoming Line.

Dad sat on a bench under a big old shade tree while me and Virge ran with Max and Sarge along the dog path. This rest area had a huge wooded section for the dogs. Lots of trees and bushes and a creek running through the bottom of the little gully.

When we ran out the other end of the loop, three bikers had parked their rides in the big rig area, and they were standing in a little hub close to Dad's bench.

Three against one was about normal odds for bikers. Dad told us most bikers were cowards and they needed the safety of the club behind them to give them false courage. If they were one on one in a fight, they weren't tough at all.

We ran back with the dogs and stood next to the bench and listened to the bikers trying to get something started with Travis.

They were young—all in their twenties—and they probably saw Travis sitting alone and figured him for an easy mark.

"Yep," said Travis. "Y'all walk away while y'all can."

The three of them laughed. "You trying to scare us? It ain't working."

"Nope. Just sayin' I don't want to hurt y'all for no reason."

"What if we gave you a reason, cowboy?"

"Be stupid on your part."

“Don’t see it that way,” said the tallest one. He seemed to be the leader of the three.

“You go ahead and see it anyway you want,” said Travis. “The result will be the same.”

Tall guy pulled his knife, and Travis gave a hand signal to Max. More of a flick of a finger.

A loud growl and one leap, Max had that biker pinned on his back with jaws of steel clamped around his throat.

“Trained dogs. We get it,” said one of the other guys. “Get your dog off Bruno.”

Travis whistled and Max released Bruno and let him up. “Get away from me and my boys and let us be.”

Without any more pissing around, they got on their Harleys and rode off.

Travis gave Max a hug. “Good boy.”

Watertown Trauma Unit. New York State.

Tammy opened her eyes and stared up at one of the ICU nurses. As soon as her eyes were open, she set off a whole chain reaction of activity.

The nurse ran to get the head nurse, who called Tammy’s doctor, who came running and then called in a specialist.

They all hung around Tammy’s bed in a group while the doctors made lists of tests they needed to run.



From the nurses' station, the head nurse called Detective Carmichael to give him the good news.

"You won't be able to speak with her until the doctors are finished running their tests. It might be two days or so. Would you like me to give you a call back when you can see her?"

"Yes, thanks for the call." Carmichael wasn't happy, but he called Tammy's father to let him know his daughter was out of the coma.

"This is Travis Frost. Help you?"

"Detective Carmichael from Watertown PD. I just received a call from the trauma unit in Watertown and they tell me your daughter is awake. She came out of the coma."

"Thanks for the call, Detective. I'm in transit and I can't get to New York State for a few days, but I'll keep in touch with the hospital. Appreciate the information."

Super Eight Hotel. Buffalo. Wyoming.

We stopped driving at dark and pulled into the Super Eight in Buffalo—a place in north Wyoming. Took us all day to get out of Montana. The horses would be tired and cramped up and they needed to be exercised and fed before we got fed or slept.

That made Virge work harder and faster. While the two of us took care of the horses, Travis walked the dogs and got us a room.

We grabbed our luggage, cleaned up in our room and walked down the service road to the bar and grill next door to the hotel.

Cowboy Jack's Grille. Buffalo. Wyoming.

Dad ordered a pitcher of Miller as soon as we sat down and while we waited for the beer, he laid the news on us.

"Tammy came out of the coma today, boys. The doctors at the trauma unit are running tests on her."

"How bad is she hurt this time, Dad?" I asked. "How come she was floating in a river anyway?"

"I've got none of those answers for you, son. I had Detective Carmichael send copies of his reports to Billy. He'll have the same information the police have, and he can pass it on to us."

"Do you think she was trying to kill somebody else?" asked Virge.

"No way of knowing, son. The tests will show if she's in her right mind or not. They may send her back to the same hospital for another round."

"Pick a different place," snapped Virge. "They let her out too soon from that last hospital. I wouldn't trust those fuckers again."

"Good point," said Travis.

The server brought our beer and did a lot of staring at Travis while he read the menu and tried to decide what he wanted to eat.

"My name is Bonnie, and I'll be your server."

"Thanks, Bonnie," said Travis. "How are your steaks?"

“Prime Angus cuts, grilled to perfection. Add mushrooms or fried onions or gravy. Customize your steak exactly the way you want it.”

“Sounds good,” said Travis. “I’ll have the ten-ounce ribeye, medium rare, with mushrooms and onions. Hold the gravy.”

“That comes with mashed or home fries, carrots and a garden salad.”

“Home fries,” said Travis. “What do you boys want?”

“I’ll have the same with mashed,” said Virge. “Save me burning out any of my brain cells.”

I nodded at the server. “Make it three. No mushrooms for me.”

She smiled. “Got it. Let me put your order in and I’ll bring you another pitcher of Miller.”

“Thanks, Bonnie,” hollered Virgil.

“Slow down, Virge,” said Travis. “I’m not carrying your drunk ass back to the hotel.”

“No worries there, Dad. I can handle myself.”

Right after we finished eating, Virge headed for the men’s room.

He didn’t come back right away and then we heard a ruckus at the back of the restaurant.

“Go get him, Harlan, and he’d better not be fighting again.”

“Aw, Jeeze.” I got to Virge in time to see a big biker slam him into the door of the men’s room and knock the wind out of him.

With a loud groan, Virge slumped to the floor in a breathless heap.

“I’ll take my brother.”

“Yeah, get him out of my face unless you want some of the same.”

I tossed Virge over my shoulder and went out the emergency door to the parking lot. Dad caught up after he paid the bill, and I had to carry Virge all the way back to the Super Eight.

Maynooth. Northern Ontario.

Bobby didn’t know why he woke up, and it took a minute before he heard the growling and the crashing around on the back porch of the cabin.

Cleo was on her hind legs barking and jumping up at the window as Bobby dragged himself out of bed.

“What the hell is out there, girl?”

No lights on inside or out and Bobby could see the outline of a huge furry body.

“Bear, Cleo. A huge fuckin bear. You can’t go out.”

Bobby flopped back down on the bed and tried to go back to sleep. Nothing he could do about the bear but wait for it to go away.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:58 pm*

Tuesday, August 26 th .

Super Eight. Buffalo. Wyoming.

I was too tired to get up, but when my alarm went off in the gray light before dawn, I dragged my ass out of bed. The only thing keeping me going was thinking about seeing Lucy at the end of this long trip to Texas.

Virge never said a word as he went with me out to the hotel parking lot to feed the horses. He stumbled around behind the horse trailer, and I could hear him puking back there. Tried not to laugh but it was hard not to. He liked to brag about how much beer he could hold, and we both knew it was a joke.

Dad came out later with the dogs on their leashes and took them for a walk twice around the hotel property while he had a smoke.

With the chores all done for the morning, we went back to our room and packed up. Dad checked the room to make sure we didn't forget anything, Virge spent another ten minutes in the bathroom pulling himself together, then we went downstairs for breakfast.

By the time we got through the lineup at the buffet, and I saw food on my plate, I was the next thing to starving. My brother didn't wipe out the buffet like he usually did. This morning he wasn't eating. Only black coffee on his menu.

While we drank a second coffee before we left, Dad called Billy to see how he was doing.

“That Detective from Watertown called again, Travis.”

“Did Tammy say something?” asked Travis.

“He didn’t say. All he told me was he sent all the latest reports on her to the station email.”

“You get a chance to read them yet?”

“Not yet, but I’ll forward them to Harlan’s email, and you can read them for yourself.”

“Thanks. I’d like to read what the doctors are saying about her. If she’s been running crazy again, she may have to go back to the mental hospital for another stay.”

“Yeah, there’s that,” said Billy. “Hope that ain’t true, but the hospital might be easier on her than a women’s prison.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” mumbled Travis. “I’ve heard horror stories about girl gangs in the slammer.”

Billy laughed. “Hope I never personally find out about how brutal those girls can be. Ain’t on my bucket list.”

“Same.” Travis chuckled. “That’s one experience I don’t need before I cash out.”

Trauma Unit. Watertown New York.

Tammy woke from a drugged sleep and glanced around the room she was in. In the back of her brain she had a picture of Eldon trying to kill her with his tire iron at the fishing camp.

Could've been just a dream. I wonder where Eldon went. I have to find him and stop all this fighting. We love each other and we shouldn't fight. He was mad about Willy.

Her garbled thoughts turned to Willy, and she watched the door to see if he was waiting for her to get better. Possibly the hospital staff wouldn't let him in to see her because she was a prisoner.

Yeah, that must be it. He can't get in to see me. How long has he been sitting in the waiting room?

Maybe Eldon killed Willy. Be just like him. He was always jealous. Then she remembered Cleo growling and jumping on Willy at the fishing camp.

Tammy hoped Cleo didn't hurt Willy too badly. He was a good person and didn't deserve to be chewed up by that huge, crazy dog.

A nurse came in and smiled at her. "How are you doing today, Tammy?"

"Okay. I'm okay. Thanks for asking."

"Well, aren't you the nice polite little girl. Do you feel like eating some Jell-O?"

"I'm not too hungry."

"We'll get you on regular food soon, young lady. All of us here at the trauma center are happy you're going to make it."

"Thanks for being nice to me. I don't deserve it."

"Nonsense. Everyone deserves the best care we can provide."

Maynooth. Northern Ontario.

As soon as Bobby opened his eyes and the morning sun blasting through the window almost blinded him, he heard Cleo whining. She was determined to go outside and investigate the bear's nighttime visit.

"I'm tired, Cleo, and I don't want to get up this early. Can't you wait for another half hour?"

Cleo could not wait. Barking to get out, she scratched at the back door.

"Damn it, Cleo. I'm coming. Let me check outside first. I don't want you running into Mrs. Bear out there and getting torn to bits. You have no idea what kind of a mess you could get into."

As soon as Bobby opened the door a crack, Cleo pushed her huge body through the opening and was gone.

Nose down, she sniffed around the porch then followed the bear's scent to the trees at the side of the cabin and kept going down into the ravine.

Bobby whistled for her, and she didn't come back right away. When she did return, Bobby put her in the truck to get her mind off the bear and headed for the store.

There was a little white frame general store not even a mile down the highway from the cabin. The old guy who owned it sold groceries, gas and seasonal items for the cottagers who came in droves starting every year at Easter weekend.

Bobby bought a case of beer, a carton of smokes and a few groceries. He filled the truck with gas and paid for it all at the counter.



Without knowing who he was or where he came from, the old guy asked, “Mrs. Powell at her cabin? She hasn’t been up here for a while. I know she lives in Texas. Beautiful lady.”

Bobby grinned. “She’s here now. I’ll tell her you were asking about her, sir.”

“Thanks. Appreciate it.” The old guy grinned.

Bobby loaded his purchases into the truck and said to Cleo, “That old guy is creeping me out, Cleo. He knows where we’re staying. The only way he could know that, is if he was watching us. Fuck. He might give us trouble.”

Cheyenne. Wyoming.

We drove south for hours through Wyoming. Needing food and a rest for himself and the boys, Travis pulled into the Golden Arches for a break.

I followed him into the parking lot, and it was a good place for us to stop with two big rigs. This parking lot had lots of room for the horse trailer and the Jeep towing the Harleys.

We parked near the back of the area and Travis let the dogs out and stayed with them while me and Virge went inside to order.

Travis held both leashes and at times it was a battle of strength between him and the dogs. Max and Sarge were wiry and muscular. Incredibly strong.

He tried to hold them back, but they insisted on pulling him over to the fence between McDonald’s and the Citgo gas station next door.

The dogs whined and rooted in the long grass that lined the fence. Travis moved

closer to see what they were after.

“Okay, I see him.”

He could see a kid lying there all beat up and he told Max and Sarge to sit while he knelt down and pulled the weeds away to take a better look.

“Hey, what are you doing here, son?”

The boy didn’t answer right away, but he was alive and breathing.

“You need help, kiddo?”

“Nope.”

“Okay. If you decide you do need help or some food or a drink, my boys will run in and get you a burger and a Coke.”

“I’m good,” he mumbled. “I don’t need nothing.”

“Whatever you say. I’ll be over there with the horse trailer if you change your mind. We’re on our way to Texas and we got room for one more if you’re looking for a ride or some new scenery.”

Travis walked back to the trailer and took the dogs with him. He sat the dogs down and lit up a smoke while he watched the boys come back from the restaurant.

Carrying bags and a drink tray, they hurried towards him. “Who were you talking to over there, Dad?” asked Virge.

“Homeless kid. I offered him food. Best if we let him come to us on his own.”

“I can’t see him too good in the weeds,” I said. “How old is he?”

“Fourteen, fifteen at the most. He’s small for his age. All beat to hell.”

“On drugs?”

“Could be, but he looks like he got himself beat up recently. The cuts are fresh and barely crusted with dried blood. He’s not moving too fast.”

We were leaning against the truck eating our burgers and drinking our shakes when the kid pulled himself out of the weeds and limped across the parking lot towards us. He was hurt bad but wasn’t complaining.

“You want a burger before we leave here?” asked Travis.

“I guess I could eat.”

“I’ll go,” said Harlan. “Anything special you want?”

“Nope.”

“Be right back.”

I came back with a burger and fries in a bag and a large Coke in my hand for the kid. He was sitting in the front seat of Dad’s truck, and it was easy to see he was in a lot of pain.

“This is Corb, Harlan. He’s decided to ride with us to Texas. Y’all take Max in the Jeep and Sarge can ride with me. Corb might need room in the back to lie down after he eats.”

“Copy that, Dad.”

Virge and I went to the Jeep, and it was my brother’s turn to drive. He slept all morning he was so hungover. My turn to sleep. Right after I checked to see how far it was to Texas and looked to see if Lucy had texted me.

Colorado/New Mexico Line.

Crossing into New Mexico, Dad pulled into the welcome rest area to give the dogs a run. Virge parked our Jeep next to Dad’s big Ford, and I leashed Max.

He whined to get out and go for a run with Sarge, but Dad was slow getting Sarge out of the back of his truck because the boy had fallen asleep half on the dog.

Black and blue marks were showing up on his face, neck and arms, and the kid must have been in pain. I figured Dad would be stopping at a clinic soon enough.

Longhorn Motel. Amarillo. Texas.

We put in a helluva long day of driving, and it was late when we stopped at a motel in Amarillo, but we made it to Texas and that was our goal.

Travis didn’t mention it to the boys, but as soon as they crossed the line from New Mexico into Texas, he noticed half a dozen bikers trailing their little convoy.

He kept his eyes open while the boys exercised the horses and fed them and bedded them down for the night. Travis took the dogs on a stroll out to the road where he walked up and down looking for the Harleys and he didn’t see them.

After the chores were done, he put the boys in the room and went to Taco Bell alone. He brought back a load of Mexican, and the boys were happy enough to eat in the

room and crash. They had no idea he was keeping them in the room for a reason. They were as tired as he was.

Before going to sleep, Travis called Annie.

“Hey there, Annie-girl. We’re in Amarillo, and with any luck we’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Great. You’ve still got some miles ahead of y’all, Travis. Jacks and Lucy are ready for your horses.”

“Thanks. Only for a few days while I run around and do the legal stuff to close the ranch.”

“Happy to have you, sugar. Kids are counting the days until the boys get here.”

“Bringing one more,” whispered Travis. “He’s a rescue.”

“Can’t wait to meet him. We’ll have a couple of beers together tomorrow and talk about that phase of your new operation.”

“Copy that.”

The boys were asleep when Travis heard Corb get up and go into the bathroom. When he came out, Travis sat on the side of the bed and talked to him in a whisper, “You need some Advil to help you sleep?”

“Maybe it would work.”

“I’ve got some in my shaving kit. Hang on a minute.” Travis gave him two Advil with a glass of water. “Tomorrow we’ll stop at a clinic just to get you checked out.”

“Thanks for helping me. Don’t know why you would.”

“I’ve got boys of my own. Guess that’s why.”

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:58 pm*

Wednesday, August 27<sup>th</sup> .

Longhorn Motel. Amarillo. Texas.

When me and Virge got up to do the horses the room was empty. “We’re the last ones up,” said Virge. “Better move our butts if we want to get to Annie’s ranch by tonight.”

We pulled on our jeans and rushed out to the parking lot. Travis, Corb and the dogs were outside smoking, and Travis was telling Corb the way it was in our family.

Corb seemed to be listening to every word Travis was telling him and that was a good thing. Travis got pretty pissy when he had to repeat himself on any of the rules.

Travis didn’t follow anybody’s rules, but he expected us to follow the ones he made up for us—to the letter. He also knew when it was time to relax the rules and let us try new stuff. That’s what made him a great father.

“Get the horses done boys. I think we’ll make it to Annie’s by tonight and this is the last time you’ll be feeding them in the trailer.”

“They’ll be happy for that,” said Virge. “They’re getting a little testy.”

We went into the restaurant attached to the motel for breakfast and Corb drew a few stares with his messed-up face and torn clothes. Only clothes he had, and he was too small to wear mine or Virge’s.

“After breakfast we’ll hit a clinic, Corb,” said Travis. “I think you might have a fractured rib. You short of breath?”

“A little.”

“Won’t hurt to get an x-ray and find out for sure.”

“I ain’t never been to a doctor.”

Travis smiled. “You won’t mind it much. You ain’t getting stitches or needles or anything like that.”

Virge made a face.

Medical Center. Amarillo. Texas.

Travis punched medical into the GPS and the map lady took him to the closest clinic. They were just opening for the day and there was nobody ahead of Corb in the waiting room.

The doctor on duty checked him out. An X-ray confirmed Corb had two broken ribs, a sprained wrist and a lot of bruises.

“I’m going to give you some tape, son, to help with the ribs. Not common practice, but your breathing isn’t the best and I think it’s the thing to do in your case.”

“Thanks, Doc,” said Travis. “He’s in considerable pain. Can’t sleep much.”

Corb came out of the exam room with a bandaged wrist and a lot of tape holding his ribs together.



“Wasn’t too bad, was it?” asked Travis.

Corb smiled and that was new. “Piece of cake.”

Travis paid the bill, and we headed south.

Trauma Center. Watertown. New York.

Tammy was allowed out of bed for the first time, and she took it slow. Her head was dizzy, and she was wobbly and a little unsure on her feet.

One of the nurses helped her to the bathroom and back to her bed. “You’re doing well, Tammy. That was your first time out of bed. A couple more times today, and you’ll be able to go to the bathroom on your own.”

“Thanks for the help.”

“That’s what we’re here for.”

Tammy lay on her bed thinking about finding Eldon and having make-up sex with him. Her head swam after getting out of bed and her thoughts were fuzzy.

She tried hard to remember Eldon and how much she loved him, and she couldn’t recall a lot of the past except for the part where they were riding in the truck and heading for the depot.

Trying to picture his handsome face, it kept getting mixed up with Willy’s face. She smiled when she remembered Eldon letting her drive the big truck.

Tammy tried so hard to remember the kind of truck it was. She knew the name and it wouldn’t come to her.

I have to think of the name of the truck.

Maynooth. Northern Ontario.

Bobby sat on the back porch of Mrs. Powell's sweet log cabin wondering if the old guy down at the general store planned to call Tammy's mama down in Texas and rat him out.

"I love living here on the lake and if you make me move, that will really piss me off, old guy. You do not want to piss me off." Bobby patted Cleo's big head. "Maybe he doesn't have her number, Cleo. That would be best for us, wouldn't it?"

Cleo was concentrating too hard on the bear smell to pay much attention to who had who's phone number. The scent was so strong all around the cabin, Cleo couldn't leave it alone. She followed the trail down into the ravine over and over.

The result was the same. No bear.

"Should I just sit here in paradise and wait to get kicked out, or should I go down to the store and do a little head bashing?"

Cleo ran off into the woods and didn't answer.

Abilene. Texas.

Dad towed the big horse trailer into Whataburger, and I followed with the Jeep and the bike trailer. My turn to drive. The best burger place in Texas, according to Dad. It was busy and the parking lot was crowded.

The outdoor patio was jammed with people and their kids, so we ate inside. Corb talked a little more now that he was on the pain pills regular and wasn't hurting so

fuckin' bad. His face was still a black and blue mashup. It would take some time to heal.

"Were you born in Wyoming, Corb?" asked Virge.

"Guess so. Never thought about it much."

"You got family who would be looking for you, son?" asked Travis. "You're only a teen so you must be in the system someplace."

"Yeah. Guess I've always been in the foster system. Got no real parents looking for me, if that's what you're asking."

"Good enough," said Travis. "I don't want you getting into trouble if you're supposed to be somewhere else."

"Nobody would notice if I was gone to fuckin' Mars."

Travis felt bad for the kid.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

We pulled through the gate into Annie's ranch just as the sun was going down. Another long day of driving and we were finally here. Only twenty or thirty miles from our new permanent home in Texas.

Jacks and Lucy helped us unload the horses and get them into the corral. We fed the horses and tossed them a couple of slabs of hay and gave them carrots to celebrate the end of their long boring trip.

Annie took us into the kitchen and fed us leftovers from dinner. Her leftovers were

like a gourmet meal to us. She was a fantastic cook and so was Riley.

After dinner and a slice of Annie's butterscotch pie, Davey took Corb to the garage to see his dog, Bear.

Lucy and I went for a walk down to the river and we were so happy to see each other, we did a lot of kissing and making out.

Annie found places for all of us to sleep, then she and Dad left us to watch movies while they went to the roadhouse for Annie's shift.

Boots & Saddles Roadhouse. Giddings.

Annie started her shift behind the bar and Travis sat on the end stool with a pitcher of Miller in front of him.

He began to unwind from the long day of driving just as several members of the Black Breed strutted in the front door of the roadhouse.

Four of them walked past the long cowboy bar and chose a booth where they had a clear view of Travis. Two more sat at the opposite end of the bar and stared at him from there.

Travis tilted his head at the guys in the booth and Annie whispered, "I saw them. You expecting trouble, sugar?"

"Nope. Don't want any, if I can help it."

"I'll check it out," said Annie. She walked over to the booth to deliver their beer and set her tray down. "Why are you guys so far from Houston?" She set their pitchers of beer on the table along with glasses and coasters, salsa and chips.

“Guess we felt like a nice long ride. That ain’t a crime, is it?”

“Nope. Always a treat to have the Breed drop in for a pitcher. How about some queso?”

“Appreciate it, ma’am. Y’all are pretty neighborly here. I figure we’ll be spending a lot more time in this part of Texas.”

“Happy to have y’all as long as you don’t cause me any trouble.”

He laughed. “We never cause trouble, ma’am. But we don’t back down when people cause us problems.”

Annie walked back to the bar, pulled her Beretta out of her waistband and laid it on the bar where it was visible for all to see.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:58 pm*

Thursday, August 28<sup>th</sup> .

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

So many people to feed, Annie held two sittings for breakfast at the long harvest table in the kitchen. Once the cowboys ate and went to the barn or to the fields to work, she sat down to eat with Travis and all the kids.

Rosalie and Riley were both hard at work in the kitchen. As soon as they finished with breakfast, they moved onto preparations for lunch. A full-time job feeding the forty odd people who lived on the Coulter-Ross ranch.

Corb was a quiet kid, but he seemed to be settling in well. He was a couple of years younger than Harlan, Lucy, Virge and Jacks, and talked to Davey more than the older kids.

“You have errands to run today, Travis?” asked Annie.

“I have to drop a check off to Kevin Bennett for the closing of the ranch tomorrow. My ranch in Montana closed yesterday and Billy collected the money from the lawyer’s office and put it in the bank for me. If it’s all square, I should be covered for today when I write the huge check I don’t want to write.” He laughed.

“Well planned, sugar,” said Annie.

Travis laughed. “Most of my brains have been pounded out, but I managed that one on my own.”

Annie glanced at Corb, “You’ve got a good start on your new project.”

“Happened by chance,” said Travis. “He’s a good little guy.”

“Have you heard anything about Tammy?”

“Yes. I found out a couple of days ago that she’s in the trauma center in Watertown in upper New York State. She was found in the Saint Lawrence River, tied up and badly beaten. Half drowned and in a coma.”

“Do they have any idea who would’ve done that?” asked Annie. “And why way up there? Was she on her way back to Canada?”

“No idea. Before that, all I knew was the location of her truck accident. That was in North Carolina.”

“She gets around,” said Annie.

“Makes me nervous,” said Travis. “If I hear anything else, I’ll keep you posted, Annie-girl.”

“Thanks. I worry about her constantly.”

Smithville ReMax.

Travis left Harlan to take care of the horses and spend time with Lucy like he wanted to, and he took Virge and Corb with him to the real estate office up in Smithville.

“Welcome, Travis.” Kevin Bennett stood up to shake Travis’s hand when he walked into the office. Kevin was a large guy who wore cowboy shirts with one of those little string ties with a bull on it. Always smiling. He was either a happy guy or faking it.

“Did your sale in Montana go well for you?”

“Yes. My partner handled all the details for me, and it went smoothly.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Kevin. “Sometimes things can get badly messed up.”

“Nope. All good. The check I’m going to write you should be good as gold.”

Kevin laughed. “That’s good news. We’ll avoid all kinds of legal hassles.”

Travis sat down at Kevin’s desk, pulled out his checkbook and signed away a few million bucks. He hadn’t had it in his possession long enough to get used to being a millionaire.

“Practically painless.” More laughing from Kevin as Travis handed him the check for the new ranch. “Tomorrow I’ll pick up everything from the lawyer’s office and bring it all to you.”

“Thanks. I’m staying at Annie’s one more night, and my horses are in her corral for a couple more days.”

“Won’t be far to trailer them once you’re settled in.”

“True enough.” Travis shook Kevin’s hand one more time and the deal was done.

“Done deal, Dad,” said Virge. “We get our new ranch tomorrow. Wonder when our furniture and all the rest of our shit is coming on the big truck?”

“Supposed to arrive tomorrow, Virge. If it doesn’t, we’ll be spending a night at the Budget Inn.”



“That’s okay. We can hack it for another day, Dad. We’re almost home free.”

“Yeah, we are, Virge. We’re almost all the way there.”

Route Seventy-One. Southeast of Smithville.

Heading south on route seventy-one back to Coulter-Ross, Travis heard more than one Harley behind him. He glanced in the rearview to confirm it.

“Yep, there they are, Virge.”

Virge was already on it. “Six of them, Dad.”

A deserted stretch of highway came up and the bikes ganged together and forced Travis’s pickup off the shoulder of the road.

“Good a place as any to kill them, Virge.” Travis pulled over and parked the truck. He grabbed for the door handle and shouted at Corb. “Lie down on the floor, Corb. Do it now.”

Virge jumped out of the passenger seat with his gun in his hand and came around the truck from the opposite way.

Three of the Breed were on Travis before he could get a shot off at any of them.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Virge took the other three down with lightning-fast knee shots and when they fell, he finished them with head shots where they lay. No chance of them shooting at him or Travis when they were down. That happened to him before, and lesson learned. It would never happen again.

He ran around the truck where Travis was fighting off three big bikers waving blades.

Bang.

He had a clear shot at the back of the head of one of them and that guy toppled into the ditch with his brains leaking into the long grass.

Virge shouted, "Get off him or I'll kill both you fuckers."

Bang.

Another one rolled off with a bullet in his gut from Travis's Sig.

Bang.

The last one raised his knife to plunge it into Travis again and Virge shot him in the ear. The fuckers were too stupid to give up.

In a frenzy of adrenaline mixed with fear for Travis, Virge kicked the bikers away from Travis to see the damage done to his father. A lot of blood gushing through Travis's clothes. There were at least two, possibly three stab wounds.

Travis held his phone in his hand pressing a number. "I'm okay, Virgie. You did good."

Virge opened the back door of the truck. "It's okay now, Corb. Dad ain't dead, but those assholes were giving it their best shot."

Corb sat up, pale as death himself and peered at the carnage.

"I called Blacky," said Travis. "He'll be here soon and he's sending an ambulance."

Virge, I want you to stay here and hold the scene when the ambulance comes and give your statement to Ranger Blackmore. Corb can come in the ambulance with me. You come to the hospital in Smithville to get us when you're done."

"I got it, Dad. Sirens coming now."

A big Escalade parked on the wrong side of the road and two big guys with long black hair hopped out and came rushing over.

"Casey," said Travis. He was lying in a pool of bloody gravel on the side of the highway. "Hey, Blacky."

"Jesus Christ, Travis. This is one fucking mess."

Travis smiled. "Virgie is my designated shooter."

"Nice job, Virge," said Blacky.

"Thanks. Those fuckers were bent on killing my Dad."

Blacky grinned. "They have been for a while now. This was a pretty close one, by the looks of it."

The ambulance came next, and the paramedics loaded Travis and took him and Corb to the hospital. I was glad Corb was gone with Dad because he was close to puking or crying or some of both. Don't think the kid was used to being deputy sheriff's like me and Harlan were.

Ranger Blackmore was nice and so was Casey, his brother—looked like his brother. I told them what happened, and they didn't seem surprised.

“The Breed knows Travis is back in Texas,” said Casey. “This won’t be the end of it.”

“They hate him from when he was Dale Burden,” I said.

“Yep. The club has a long memory,” said Ranger Blackmore. “They’ll make an effort every now and again to settle the score.”

“Think that’s enough for now?” I asked.

Blaine shook his long black hair. “Doubt it.”

“Shit,” said Virge. “Now they’ll be pissed at me.”

Smithville General Hospital.

The GPS found the hospital for me, then inside I was on my own to find Travis. He was in one of the emergency treatment rooms being sewn up and the nurse with him sent me to the waiting area.

Corb was curled up in a chair in the corner looking scared and pale. I sat down next to him and pulled out my wallet. “I checked on Dad and the doc is sewing him up. You want a Coke and a candy bar?”

“I could use a drink.”

I gave him five bucks and sent him off in search of a vending machine. “Don’t get lost. I’ll be right here waiting for you. I have to call Harlan and let him know about Travis.”

“Okay. I’ll be right back.”

Harlan answered on the first ring and snapped at me. “Why the hell aren’t you and Dad back yet?”

“Them Black Breed assholes caught us on the highway and I’m at the hospital in Smithville—wherever the hell that is—and a doctor is sewing Dad up. Had to wait for the Rangers n’all to come for the guys I had to shoot.”

“Jesus H., Virgil. I want to hear every fuckin’ detail. Why did I have to miss that?”

“Soon as they let Dad go, we’ll be home. Corb is getting us Cokes out of a machine, but he was kind of shaken up and scared shitless.”

“Okay. Waiting for you on the porch.”

“Copy that.”

Trauma Unit. Watertown. New York.

On one of her frequent trips to the bathroom, Tammy wandered out the door of her room and slipped unnoticed into the room next door.

Two women were sleeping or unconscious and they were almost completely covered by blankets. Tammy couldn’t see their bodies to gauge what size they wore.

She opened the closet and grabbed the first bag she saw. Walked a few steps down the corridor and went into the ladies’ room.

The clothes were too big, but they had to do until she found a better fit. The jeans were the worst, but the cotton shirt covered the sagging waistband. A belt would be helpful, but there wasn’t one in the bag.

The shoes barely stayed on her feet as she walked, but she'd get rid of them soon enough. Tammy slipped them off once she entered the stairwell.

With the trainers in her hand, she ran down to the main floor barefoot. She stuck her feet in the shoes at the bottom level, opened the door and ran out the closest exit.

In a hurry to get to the street, she moved too fast for the condition she was in and was forced to sit down when she came to a low stone wall in front of a big house.

She sat there until her head cleared and had enough strength to stand up again. Gingerly getting to her feet, Tammy tried one step at a time until she was sure her legs would hold her.

She shuffled along—walking slowly and carefully until she had to sit down. She rested and then began walking again.

Using this method, she found what she was looking for several hours later. On the other side of a six-lane highway, Tammy spotted a truck stop.

International Truck Stop. New York State.

Without her purse, her wallet or a nickel to her name, there was only one thing Tammy could do. She sat at one of the picnic tables outside the truck stop restaurant and watched the trucks pull off the highway.

Finally, a big red Freightliner drove in and parked in the long line of shiny eighteen-wheelers. Tammy let out a sigh of relief as she got to her feet and followed the driver into the restaurant.

The restaurant was busy like all the other truck stops she'd been to, and there was a lot of noise and movement of customers and servers.

Tammy felt the warmth of familiarity. Long days of trucking with Eldon filled her senses and warmed her heart. A sense of belonging filled her and made her smile.

She edged closer to the driver's table where he sat alone. The owner of the red Freightliner was a cute guy in his thirties with shaggy brown hair and when he noticed her and looked away from the menu, he had a nice smile.

He reminded her a bit of Eldon and she spoke to him in a weak but friendly voice. "Sorry to bother you, but I'm looking for a ride."

He stared at the scabs and bruises all over her and for a second she thought he was going to call security.

"I don't always look this bad," she said, "but I just got out of the hospital."

"You sustained a lot of damage to your face and arms there, girl. It looks like somebody laid a bad beating on you."

"Yeah, they did." Tammy felt faint and asked, "Do you mind if I sit down for a minute?"

Without waiting for an answer, she slid into the bench seat facing the trucker and lowered her head until the dizziness passed. When she looked up again, she said, "I'm Tammy."

"I'm Glen. Do you want water or a coffee? For a minute there, you looked like you were passing out."

"A coffee would help. Thanks. I lost all my stuff when the guy beat me up and tossed me into the river. I'm not homeless, if that's what you're thinking. I do have a bank account but no card to access my money."

“You have to get a new card at the bank,” said Glen. “Then you can access your account.”

“But they won’t even talk to me without ID. They’ve got me there.”

“I see what you mean. You’re in a predicament. How about a sandwich?”

“I’m okay,” said Tammy. “Don’t waste your money on me, Glen.”

Glen waved the server over and ordered the lunch special for himself and coffee and a turkey sandwich for Tammy.

“Where are you headed?” Driven by an unknown source, even in her most weakened condition, Tammy pursued her quest to find Eldon.

“I’m hauling a load to Northern Ontario.”

Tammy was happy to hear Glen’s destination. She wasn’t sure where Eldon was, but she thought he might be hiding out at her mama’s cabin.

When they were together as a couple, they’d talked about the cabin on Baptiste Lake and discussed going there to hide out if they needed to. Eldon would’ve remembered that because he was smart, and he was a good listener. He never got mixed up in his head like she did.

“You mind if I catch a ride to wherever you’re going, Glen? I won’t cause you any trouble. I promise you that.”

Glen laughed. “I don’t see how you could cause anybody too much trouble, girl. You’re pale and look as weak as a kitten. I believe your story about being in the hospital.”



“I was in the ICU for days.” Tammy took a bite of the sandwich the server brought her. “Not sure how long I was in there. They said I was in a coma.”

Glen’s eyes widened. “How did you get here from the hospital? I know how far it is from the highway.”

“I walked.”

“Jesus, Tammy. No wonder you look like walking death.”

General Store. Gray Hill. Northern Ontario.

Bobby and Cleo drove down the highway heading for Bancroft to do grocery shopping at one of the bigger markets.

As they passed the little general store not far from their cabin, Cleo barked at all the cars and vans clustered around the store and parked on both sides of the road.

Cops were milling around and stringing yellow tape all over the place.

Bobby slowed right down and hung his head out the driver’s side window. He hollered to one of the looky-loos and asked what was going on.

“Somebody killed the old guy who runs the store. Smashed his head in.”

“Huh,” said Bobby. “Too bad. I liked that old fart.”

“Yep. It’s a damned shame. He’s owned that store for as long as I can remember.”

“Yep. Damned shame.” Bobby turned to Cleo, “I guess he won’t be making any phone calls to Texas anytime soon.”

Cleo wagged her tail.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange. Texas.

Virge drove Travis home from the hospital full of stitches, covered in bandages, high on pain meds and barely able to move.

Harlan ran down off the porch to help Virge get Travis out of the Jeep. “Jesus Christ, Dad, why did you leave me at home? I could’ve helped you and Virge with the fucking bikers.”

Travis gave Harlan a drugged glance. “Didn’t expect them in broad daylight, son. Never crossed my mind.”

“Six of them, Harlan,” said Corb. “Virge did good. He shot them like them crazy cops do on TV.”

“Yep, I’m sure he did. Know how I know that? Because my father is still alive. That’s how.” Harlan was pretty worked up.

Virge on one side and Harlan on the other, they walked Travis up the porch steps and sat him down in one of the wicker chairs.

Annie came running out with a coffee and a shot of whiskey for him. “Here, drink this, honey bun. Harlan told me what happened.”

“Thanks.” Travis tossed back the shot and then sipped the hot coffee. “Yeah, six of them. Good thing I had Virgie with me.”

“They’re coming at you pretty aggressively in broad daylight, sugar pop.”

“Yeah,” Travis sighed. “Blacky is going to pursue the attack at the top of the club level. He warned me to step away from it.”

“That’s exactly what you should do. If Blaine says he’s on it, then his boys will go to Houston and do what they do best.”

“Not sure I can let somebody fight my battles for me, Annie-girl. It’s my fight.”

“Yours and mine,” said Annie. “They just don’t know about me.”

Travis smiled. “And I don’t want them to.”

Annie sat down next to him and stroked his blood-splattered hair.

Maynooth. Northern Ontario.

Bobby had the groceries all put away and he was enjoying a beer on the back porch when Cleo barked and ran around to the front of the cabin.

Taking his time, Bobby sauntered around figuring it had to be the cops. They’d be knocking on every door on the lake road looking for a lead into the old man’s murder.

“Howdy, sir,” said the cop in the dark blue uniform. OPP embroidered on his pocket and on his hat.

These guys were provincial. Probably no local cops up here. The population was too small to warrant it.

“You probably saw the police presence at the general store and know what happened to Mister Peck. News travels fast up here.”

“Yeah, I heard when I went to Bancroft for groceries earlier. Too bad. Nice old guy. I buy my gas and smokes at his store. Did.”

“Yeah, a lot of local people will miss Old Peck.”

“That’s a fact.”

“If you happen to see any strangers hanging around, would you call the Bancroft detachment of the Ontario Provincial Police?” The cop handed Bobby a card.

“Sure. I’ll do that. Was it a robbery?”

“Looks like it. Only the cash was missing from the register. Nothing else was touched.”

“Huh.”

After the cop left, Bobby and Cleo took a walk down the steep hill to the lake. Bobby stood on the end of the dock and tossed his old blood-encrusted tire iron way out into the middle of the calm water.

“I bought a new one at Canadian Tire when we were in town earlier, Cleo. I wouldn’t want to be without one for too long. That’s like being without my best friend.”

Peterborough Logistics. Northern Ontario.

Glen pulled into the depot in the industrial park just off the bypass in the city of Peterborough. He backed up, dropped the loaded trailer and left Tammy in the cab of the Freightliner while he went into the office to sort out his paperwork.

While he was inside waiting to pick up his money, Tammy climbed over into the

drivers' seat, started the truck and drove out to the highway.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:58 pm*

Friday, August 29<sup>th</sup> .

Maynooth. Northern Ontario.

Tammy arrived at her Mama's cabin after dark and getting the big Freightliner up the steep driveway was a bit of a challenge. After three tries, she made it and congratulated herself on being a great truck driver.

She parked the big truck next to a black Jeep and smiled. "Eldon is here. I was right."

Elated everything was going according to her latest plan, Tammy made her way to the cabin in the dark. She remembered Mama saying the key was around the back and she followed the log walls until she reached the long porch that ran the entire length of the back of the cabin.

Feeling her way along the windowsills and stretching to check the tops of the windows, the growl behind her caught her attention, but not in time.

The huge paw stuck her back like a hammer and knocked her down flat. Having the wind knocked out of her and no strength in her body, Tammy lay on the plank floor of the porch completely defenseless.

The bear growled and grabbed hold of her and there was no way she could prevent the huge beast from dragging her off.

Bobby startled awake when Cleo barked and jumped off the bed. She ran to the garden doors at the back of the cabin and scratched to get out.

“No, you don’t. I can hear growling out there and that means the bear is back. You’re staying in here with me, girl. We’re going back to bed. You can’t go out until she goes back to her cave in the morning.”

Cleo whined and lay down on the mat at the door.

Shortly after dawn, Cleo whined again to go out and Bobby dragged himself out of bed. “I’m not letting you go out there alone, girl. We don’t know for sure that we only have one bear. We might have two and that means double trouble for you.”

Bobby stuck his feet into his boots and grabbed the shotgun that came with the cabin. “Come on, we’ll go out the front door this morning, just in case.”

He opened the front door and stepped out onto the porch. His mouth hung open for a minute while he stared at the amazing sight in front of him.

It was not a bear.

“Well, Cleo, would you look at that big red beauty sitting there. Miss Tammy must have taken a lesson from that last beating I laid on her. She brought me a present to make up for all of her disgusting murderous and kidnapping behavior.”

Bobby walked over to the truck and jumped up on the sidestep. He peeked in the driver’s window and took it all in.

“She’s gorgeous, Cleo. I’ll take you for a ride later, but first we’d better go look for Tammy. If she arrived in the middle of the night, that old bear might’ve got her.”

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

While Travis and Annie drank their morning coffee on the front porch, Kevin Bennett

arrived with the paperwork and keys for Travis' new property.

"Congratulations, Travis. You are now the proud owner of a beautiful spread up in Lincoln." He handed Travis the package and shook his hand, then explained what each of the keys were for.

"Thanks for bringing it to me," said Travis.

"You okay? You look a little more damaged than when I saw you in the office yesterday."

"Had a little mishap on the way back to Annie's ranch," mumbled Travis and his hand inadvertently went to the wounds in his side.

"Sorry to hear that. You won't be in top shape for your moving day, then."

Travis laughed. "Definitely won't be lifting much. I'll have to leave that for my boys."

Kevin left and Travis tried to get out of his comfy porch chair. "I guess we'd better get over there and wait for the moving truck."

"You and the boys go ahead," said Annie. "I'll make some sandwiches and follow y'all over in a bit. I bet you don't have any food over there."

"Not yet, but I'll make a list and send the boys to the store later." Travis hollered for the boys and when they came running out of the house, he said, "Virgie, you and Harlan get the horses loaded. It's time to get over to our new place."

"Copy that, Dad. Virge, help me cut our horses out of the corral."



“I’ll give you a hand,” said Lucy. The three of them ran to the corral to get started.

River Bend Ranch. Lincoln. Texas.

On the final leg of their move, Travis led the way pulling the horse trailer, with me and Virge behind him towing the Harleys behind our Jeep.

I clocked the mileage from Annie’s ranch to ours and it was exactly twenty-nine miles. Not far at all. A half-hour drive.

Driving through the fancy gate at the end of our lane felt like coming home. “We’re here, Corb. What do you think?”

“Nice ranch so far. I like the gateway. The ranch has a name—River Bend. Is there a river?”

“Yep. Haven’t seen it yet, but we have one.”

“Hope the furniture truck don’t take too long to get here. I might want a bed to sleep in tonight,” said Virge.

“If it don’t come, Dad said we’d sleep in a hotel. Either way, you’ll have a bed, Virge. You big wuss.”

Corb laughed and it might have been the first time.

Dad had the horse trailer backed up to the corral but that was as much as he could do. Even driving the truck was a new hell for him.

The horses unloaded a lot easier than they loaded at Annie’s place. Maybe they knew they were finally home. Virge gave them carrots for being so cooperative and they

settled right down.

Me and Virge and Corb went into our new barn to see if the previous owners left it clean for us, and it wasn't too bad. All the stalls were cleaned out and there were no big messes to clean up.

"Looks pretty good in here," said Virge. "You want to pick a stall for your horse, bro?"

"Don't think it matters, Virge. The stalls are all the same."

"Some are closer to the tack room than others," said Virge.

"That only matters if you're too fuckin' weak to carry your saddle a bit farther. That would be you and wouldn't apply to me."

"Shut up." Virge came at me to punch me in the gut, and I got him first. That made Corb laugh again.

Annie and the kids came a while later and brought us sandwiches and Cokes. We were all sitting on the porch steps eating when the huge furniture truck pulled in and parked. That was when the work started for real.

"Wish I could help y'all," said Travis, "but sadly, I can't. My stitches will rip out. I'm happy to supervise and be the moving boss." He laughed.

Maynooth. Northern Ontario.

Bobby took the rifle he found under the bed and made sure it was loaded before he and Cleo searched the forest for Tammy.

“If I have to take Tammy away from a bear, Cleo, it’s not gonna be easy. Truth be told, the bear might have done us a huge favor and put Tammy out of her misery.

“After our last meeting in that fishing shack, I was pretty sure I wouldn’t be seeing her again, but it seems like she’s got nine lives like a cat.”

Cleo growled at the mention of a cat and Bobby laughed at her.

“That girl ain’t right in the head, Cleo, and it makes me wonder how many people she’s killed or stole from since I last saw her. And now a new Freightliner? Some poor bastard is crying over that for sure.”

Cleo’s tail wagged the whole time she ran through the woods with her nose to the ground. She tracked the bear smell more than Tammy’s scent, but it worked the same way. Find one and find both.

The dog stopped outside a cave almost half a mile from the cabin. Bobby figured the cave was at the back of someone else’s property. They’d come too far for this to be all Tammy’s mama’s land.

“We’re not going into a cave when we know there’s a bear in there, Cleo. That would be fuckin’ suicide.”

Holding onto Cleo’s collar, Bobby stuck his head in and hollered, “Tammy, are you in there?”

A loud growl came back at him from not too far inside the cave.

“We woke up the bear, Cleo. Come on, we’ve got to run for it.” Over his shoulder, Bobby hollered, “Thanks for the truck, Tammy. I truly love it, girl.”

The growl got louder, and Bobby ran faster.

River Bend Ranch. Lincoln. Texas.

By supper time, all the furniture had been unloaded and taken inside the house but none of it was in place. Just in there, piled and scattered around willy-nilly.

“We’re taking a break for beer and pizza,” said Travis, “and all we’re doing after supper is setting up the beds. Y’all have done enough work for one day.”

“Good call, Dad,” said Virge. “I could eat a large pizza all by myself, I’m so fuckin’ hungry.”

We were about as tired as we were gonna get when we finished setting up the beds and finding the quilts and the pillows. We didn’t bother with the sheets. None of us knew what box they were in. Some of the cartons weren’t labelled. That was on Virge.

Travis didn’t want Corb sleeping in the bunkhouse until there were other boys out there, so he put him in one of the twin beds in Billy’s room. At least for the next couple of months. When Billy arrived from Montana, they’d sort things out.

“Been a long day, boys, and this old man is beat. We’ll get the internet set up tomorrow and y’all will be able to get games and whatnot on the TV. Harlan will be able to use his computer and catch up on his emails.”

“Me and Virge will do the grocery shopping tomorrow, Dad. We need to find the best market around here. We’ll go see what kind of stores Lincoln Texas has to offer the new arrivals.”

“Yeah, I’ll leave that in your hands, Harlan. I won’t be moving around much for the

next few days. I don't want to be ripping out the stitches that are holding me together."

"You think the bikers will be mad you killed some of their guys?" asked Corb. "They won't come here, will they?"

"Might come for payback, Corb," said Travis. "If they do come, I want you to stay inside the house. Promise me."

"Okay. I will. I don't know how to shoot like Virge."

"Yeah," said Virge. "Few people ever get to my level."

I punched him in the gut and doubled him over.

"Soon as we get organized, I'll teach you how to shoot and defend yourself," said Travis. "Lessons you need to learn to survive."

"Thanks. I wouldn't mind learning how to shoot a gun."

Maynooth. Northern Ontario.

When night fell and the bear left the cave to hunt, Tammy left the tiny spot between the rocks she had squeezed into. She'd hidden herself at the back of the cave and hadn't made a sound for hours.

When the bear left to hunt for food, Tammy came out of her hiding spot and ran off into the forest.

Trying to remember which way the bear had dragged her the night before, she peered through the trees looking for a light from the cabin.

Every time she heard growling, she turned and ran the opposite way. The best part was knowing that Eldon had come looking for her and he thanked her for the truck. She heard him holler to her and wanted to answer him, but she couldn't give herself away.

That means he still loves me. I can't wait until we're back together as a couple.

A horrendous growl right behind her set Tammy off running at full speed. She ran through the woods for what felt like a mile, then climbed up the side of a rocky ravine as fast as she could go.

When she reached the top, she saw the light from the cabin.

Growling and snarling and running up the steep bank on all fours, the bear was right on her heels. The truck was parked directly in her path, and she didn't have a chance to make it as far as the cabin.

Tammy jumped up on the sidestep, slid in the passenger door and slammed it shut. She climbed into the sleeper and flopped down to catch her breath.

That was close.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:58 pm*

Saturday, August 30<sup>th</sup> .

River Bend Ranch. Lincoln. Texas.

Me, Virge and Corb were up at daylight to feed the horses. Our new bedrooms felt a little different. Virge and I were used to sleeping in the same room and we were gonna ask Dad if we could do that again. Free up a room for Corb and we liked to be together.

Never had our own rooms before and it felt weird and kind of lonely.

We left Dad sleeping and headed for the barn. Everything had been unloaded from the horse trailer but there was a ton of work to do to get all of the tack organized.

We'd brought some hay, oats and straw with us, but used most of it up on the trip.

"We need to find the closest feed store, Harlan. Put in an order for hay, straw and oats, and set up an account so we can call in."

"Yeah, we'll do that today, Virge." I was in the process of making a mental list when Lucy texted me.

"We're coming over in a while to help get the house set up for y'all. Mommy doesn't want Travis moving around today. He did too much yesterday, and she's worried about the stitches pulling apart."

"Great. I'll tell him to stay put and I'll see you later."

“Was that Lucy?” asked Virge.

“Yeah. She and Mom are coming over to straighten up the house. They don’t want Dad trying to do it.”

“Fantastic. I don’t know where to put all the kitchen stuff. Be great if they organized it for us.”

“Yeah, I love Mom’s kitchen at her ranch with the big, long table and the fireplace.”

“We don’t have a fireplace in our kitchen, but we do have a woodstove, and Dad is pumped for it. He talked about chopping wood more than once.”

We came in from the barn and washed up. We looked to see if Dad was up yet and found him upstairs out of breath trying to get his boots on.

“Dad, what the hell are you doing?” asked Virge.

“There’s no food in the house, so we have to go out for breakfast.”

“Nope. You’re not going. Mom is already on you about doing nothing today and she’s coming over. I’ll take the boys into Giddings, grab breakfast and bring you back food and coffee. Sit on the porch and have a smoke until we get back.”

“Good copy, Harlan. My side is giving me a bit of trouble this morning.” Travis sat on the end of his bed trying to get a hold on his breathing.

Not a pretty sight. He was in serious pain.

“You’re a mess, Dad,” said Virge. “Slow down and don’t go any farther than the porch.”



“Copy that, Virgil.” Dad smiled.

I rounded up Corb, laid down the plan, and the boys piled into the Jeep. Max and Sarge wanted to go for the ride, but I told them to stay on the porch with Dad.

They whined but did as they were told.

Golden Arches. Giddings. Texas.

Giddings had the closest drive-thru for breakfast and coffee and it didn’t take us long to get there. Our new ranch was close to several little towns.

“I’m worried the bikers will come back and hurt Dad again,” said Corb.

I noticed it was the first time the kid had called Travis Dad. Felt sorry for him.

“We’ve got our order, Corb, and we’re on our way back to the ranch now. Ten minutes and we’ll be there. Dad hasn’t been alone long enough for bikers to find our new ranch and come grab him.”

“Bikers ain’t riding the roads at eight in the morning, Corb,” said Virge. “Don’t fret about Dad.”

Ten minutes later, I drove down our lane and as soon as I got near the house, I could feel something wasn’t right. I parked the Jeep near the garage and had already noticed Dad wasn’t sitting on the porch in one of the wicker chairs where he was supposed to be.

“Where the hell are the dogs?” I hollered.

Virge jumped out of the Jeep and was gone. He was running through the house

hollering his head off for Dad before I got to the porch steps.

He ran out the door panting for breath. “There’s no blood and the dogs are gone. Where is he?”

“The bikers took him.” Corb had gone a snowy shade of pale. He leaned over and puked into a flower bed full of purple flowers.

“Stop puking and check the barn, Corb,” hollered Virge. “They must’ve locked up the dogs.”

Corb took off on the run and I plopped down on the top step and called Annie.

“Hey, Harlan. We’re coming over soon to help y’all with the house.”

“Mom...I think the Breed took Travis.”

“What?”

“We went to McDonald’s in Giddings for food and coffee and Travis ain’t here. We were only gone a half hour tops.”

“I’ll get some help for us and come over. Stay there and don’t leave without me.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“What did Mom say?” asked Virge.

“She’s rounding up a whack of help and coming right over. Run upstairs and get our guns and holsters and bring extra ammo.”

Virge took off and Corb came back from the barn out of breath. The dogs were with him, jumping and whining and doing the thing they always did when they couldn't find Travis.

"Nobody in the barn," said Corb. "Just the dogs."

"Why didn't the dogs attack the bikers?" I asked Virge.

"Bikers must have been ready for the dogs and tranq'ed 'em," said Virge. "I'm bloody thankful they didn't shoot them. If they came to kill Dad, I don't know why they wouldn't kill the dogs too."

"I don't like what you're saying, Virge."

"Can't help it. Facts are facts, bro."

"I need a gun," said Corb, "and I don't have one."

"You won't need one, Corb. We'll protect you."

"I want my own."

"Dad won't let you have your own until he teaches you to shoot first. You've got to learn safety."

"I watched you out on the highway, Virge. I'm pretty sure I can do it without shooting myself in the fuckin' foot."

Twenty minutes later, Mick and Annie arrived with all the kids. Annie hopped out of her truck, and she was pointing southeast. "I sent the squad to Houston and that's where we're going too. Mick will stay here with the kids and watch over them. Lucy

will do the grocery shopping while we're gone."

Mom was talking fast, and I nodded as I listened to her plan. Dad said that Mom was a born leader, and I was seeing that coming from her now. True dat.

"Let's go. You boys have your guns?"

"We're ready, Mom."

"Pile in my truck," said Annie. "I'll drive."

Maynooth. Northern Ontario.

Bobby let Cleo out the front door for her morning run and saw Tammy climbing out of the cab of the red Freightliner.

"Hey, there you are, Tammy. Me and Cleo went looking for you way back in the bear cave."

"I got away from the bear and ran like hell. She's pretty fast down on all fours and I almost didn't make it to the truck."

Bobby stared at all the damage he'd done to a once beautiful face and felt a couple of pangs of remorse.

"I'm sorry I beat you so bad, Tammy. You just did so much stuff to me, I guess I wanted a little payback."

"I deserved it, Eldon. I almost killed you twice, taking you away from the hospitals that were trying to save you. Sorry about that."

“Yeah,” said Bobby. “I’m sorry too.”

“Do you think we can start over and go on the road again as a team? I got us a truck you’d like.”

“I do like it. Matter of fact, I fuckin’ love it, but I’m not sure trucking would be the safest thing for us to do right now. But I do love the truck, Tammy. She’s a beauty and almost a dead ringer for the one I had to sell. I’ll think about it and we’ll have a serious talk about it in a couple of days.”

“Are you going to make me leave Mama’s cabin?”

“I need time to think things over, Tammy. Why don’t we have a coffee and some breakfast and see how it goes?”

“Thanks for the chance, Eldon. I really do love you. Like, you are my forever love.”

Bobby held Cleo by her collar, so she didn’t rip another chunk out of Tammy. He may have had the tiniest bit of feeling left for Tammy, but Cleo had none. She hated Tammy with a vengeance.

Great Smoky Mountains. North Carolina.

Willy arrived home at his mountain cabin and George and Gracie seemed to be a lot happier about coming home than he was.

He walked inside and the place where he’d once been so happy felt cold and empty like his heart.

Willy squatted down, picked up his hatchet and began chopping kindling.

If Tammy never gets out of jail what will I do with the rest of my life?

Can I go on living without Tammy?

Black Breed Clubhouse. Sugarland. Texas.

Blacky arrived at the Black Breed clubhouse in Sugarland with the gang squad and the Night Vipers all outfitted in tactical gear.

He parked his monster truck close to the door and his men parked their Harleys and pickups behind him. On the drive to Houston, he'd alerted the Houston SWAT team to meet him there at the club.

Parked in a neat row outside the clubhouse were about a dozen bikes but it was only noon and not prime time for bikers. Most of them partied late and were still in their beds sleeping.

"Doesn't look like too many here, boss," said Farrell.

"Don't matter," said Blacky. "We're taking the entire club down, so we'll roll these fuckers up first and then go for the ones who are missing."

"Good copy," said Farrell. "How many ways in they got?"

"Check it out and get your men into position."

Farrell hollered for his guys, Lukas, Dusty, Gene, Caleb and his righthand, Jimmy Jeff. "Take half our guys Jim, and position them where you want them."

"Copy."

Blaine and Casey did the same with the day shift and they were ready as soon as the SWAT team arrived.

“On my count of three,” hollered Blaine.

Blaine counted down. They stormed the clubhouse, and the members were taken by surprise. “All of you are under arrest for kidnapping,” hollered Blaine. “Cuff them boys. The bus should be here for them any minute.”

Farrell did a thorough search of the clubhouse and didn’t find Travis. “He ain’t here. We’ll have to move on to the boss’s house.”

Blacky held his Beretta to the head of one of the Breed members and asked nicely, “Where’s the guy y’all kidnapped this morning?”

“We never kidnapped nobody. Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The SWAT team stood guard around the perimeter of the meeting room while the squad cuffed every biker and lined them up for the bus.

“Bus will be here for y’all soon but y’all still have time to tell me where they took Dale.”

Farrell watched the faces of the bikers as Blacky talked and as soon as Dale’s name was mentioned, one of the Breed twitched.

Farrell moved closer to that guy and shoved his shotgun into the big guy’s chest. “Where’s Dale?”

“I ain’t telling you, pig.”

Blam.

Farrell shot a hole in the floor right next to the biker's Harley boot.

The noise was horrendous and made the guy holler out, "Don't know where he is. I swear."

Blacky tilted his head, and the squad began marching the prisoners out to the transport vehicle.

Annie arrived with Harlan and Virge as the clubhouse was being cleared out. She handed a piece of paper to her son, Blaine.

"I have the names and addresses of the top three here, honey bun. I'm betting they weren't here at the clubhouse."

"No, they weren't," said Blaine. "Let's start with the president. Where's he live?"

"Fat Boy Rayfield. He's right here in Sugarland."

"Let's pay him a visit," said Blaine. He pointed at Casey, and he got behind the wheel of the monster truck—the one Harlan and Virge were staring at.

"Like your truck, Ranger Blackmore," said Virge. "Fuckin' amazing."

Blacky chuckled. "I don't get to take my baby off-road enough. Maybe I'll pick you boys up and we'll go out to the swamp down Black Snake Road. That ain't far from where y'all bought your new spread."

"Yeah, for sure," said Virge. "That would be fantastic."



Rayfield Residence. Sugarland.

Blaine led the way to Fat Boy's place figuring Travis wouldn't be there. Too fuckin' obvious. The club leader was smart enough to know we'd look at him first.

"I think the Houston club is only grabbing him for the Vegas chapter," said Casey. "The big boss in Sin City is the one who wants Dale Burden for payback."

"Yeah, you're probably right. Houston chapter grabs him and holds him until the Vegas guys come to get him. That means Houston can't kill him."

"Not yet," said Casey.

"Who's the current guy causing all the trouble in Vegas?" asked Blaine.

"Army Vincente. Some say he's as bad as the twins used to be—Bruce and the Deuce."

"Doubt if anybody could measure up to the vileness of those two sewer rats," said Blaine.

The convoy parked in front of Rayfield's shabby frame bungalow and surrounded the place.

"Breach front and back doors on the count of three," hollered Farrell.

They swarmed the place and found nobody. The house was empty.

"Snag and bag everything we can use against Rayfield," shouted Farrell to his gang squad boys. "Guns, drugs, all of it."

“Copy, boss,” Jimmy Jeff hollered back. “Rolling it all up.”

Annie, Harlan and Virge stood at the end of Fat Boy’s driveway talking to Blaine. “According to Kamps, Dempsey lives in a trailer park near the Gulf and it’s a more likely hiding place for Travis.”

Blaine nodded. “Yeah, away from civilization. Could be the perfect spot. We’ll hit Dempsey next.” He turned to Harlan and Virge who were looking pale and worried.

“Travis ain’t here,” said Virge.

“I don’t want y’all to worry too much about Travis being dead, because he won’t be. Annie and I talked it over and we believe the Houston chapter snatched Travis for the guys in Vegas who really want him for payback. He’ll be alive until the Vegas guys get here.”

“What if they flew?” asked Virge. “They might be here already.”

“If they flew, honey bunny, they’ll still be a bit behind us. We’ll be at Dempsey’s place in about twenty minutes.”

“We’ll be in time,” said Harlan, but he didn’t look like he believed his own words.

Dempsey Residence. Arcola.

Twenty minutes later they pulled into Arcola Estates, Mobile Home Park. “What street does this guy live on?” asked Virgil.

“Seascape Lane,” said Harlan reading from the GPS. “Sounds nicer than it looks. This trailer park ain’t high end.”

Annie glanced at the screen and followed the colored line to Seascap. "Find number twenty-nine, boys."

"We're passing twelve," said Virge.

"Opposite side of the street," said Harlan, "where the odd numbers are."

"I see it."

The squad blocked the narrow street and surrounded the single-wide trailer. They came in from the front and the back at the same time, ready to take down anybody in their path.

Me and Virge stood out of the way and watched these guys perform and couldn't believe their skill level.

I think both of us decided at the same time that we wanted to be on the gang squad and be one of these guys. Compared to us being deputy sheriffs, this was a whole 'nother level of takedown.

"Might be best if you boys waited out here," said Annie, "I'm talking for safety. But I'm not telling you to if y'all want to watch the squad work."

"Thanks, Mom. I think we want to go in."

Me and Virge ran in the front door of the trailer and Farrell had already searched every room for Dad. "Travis ain't here. Roll these guys up and we'll leave them for the local cops."

Farrell pointed at the three bikers drinking at the kitchen table and Dusty, Jimmy Jeff and Caleb pulled cuffs off their belts and approached the table.

Guy at the end of the table wearing only a Breed cut and his boxers grabbed his blade off the table and jumped up to plunge it into Jimmy Jeff's side.

Bang.

Farrell shot him in the face.

The other two guys put their hands on their heads and that was the end of the bullshit.

Blacky took over and called the local cops and the medical examiner. "We'll be here for a while."

"Sure," said Annie. "You boys have got this."

Annie took me and Harlan out to her truck. "Travis isn't here, and Vincente hasn't had time to get to Houston so that means Fat Boy took him to Vegas already. We've got to get going."

"You sure?" asked Virge.

"Pretty sure, but even if I'm wrong, they'll kill him in Vegas anyway so we might as well be there waiting. It will save time."

"Okay," I said. "I see what you're thinking."

"Drive home, Harlan, I've got to make some calls."

We rolled out of Houston on the I-10 and the Gladiator was a dream to drive. Virge and I loved our Jeep, but Mom's truck was a sweet ride too.

I turned the radio down while Annie talked on the phone.

“Mick, we’re coming home now. Take the kids to Coulter-Ross but before you leave Travis’s place, tell Lucy to pack bags for Harlan and Virge. We’ll be going to Vegas as soon as we get home.”

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

Mick and Corb were in the garage with the dogs when we got back to Annie’s ranch. Lucy had packed for me and Virge, and our stuff was sitting on the porch.

“Give me five to pack, boys,” said Annie, “and we’re heading for the airport.”

“Who will feed our horses?” asked Virge.

“I’ll have Monroe and Lucy drive over to your ranch and do it, honey. Don’t worry. They’ll be taken care of.”

“They ain’t used to being at the new place yet.”

“Your dogs are here, so Mick brought them with him. Davey and Corb will take care of them.”

Virge blew out a breath. “One less thing to worry about.”

“Sit at the kitchen counter and have a coffee and Riley will make y’all a sandwich. Then I’ll be ready to go.”

“Good copy, Mom,” said Virgil.

We finished the last bite of our sandwiches and Annie came down the hall carrying her bag, her rifle slung over her shoulder.

“Tell Mick we’re ready to leave.”

“Is Corb staying here?” I asked.

“Ask him if he wants to come with us or stay with Davey until we bring Travis back,” said Annie. “I’ll load my stuff, and I want to check my shotgun under the seat of the truck to make sure it’s loaded.”

Corb came running out of the garage with Mick and Davey and the dogs. “I’m staying here, Harlan. Max and Sarge are going nuts without Travis. I should stay with them.”

“Okay. We’ll be back with Dad as soon as we can.”

Mick tossed his bag in the back of the truck and slid behind the wheel.

Executive Airport. Austin.

The inside of Annie’s jet smelled like new leather, and we weren’t all crowded in like on a regular plane. I noticed near the back close to the washroom that there was a bed where Dad could lie down on the way home—that’s if the bikers had beat him all to hell.

“I like your plane, Mom,” said Virge. “How long will it take us to get to Dad?”

“Two hours we’ll be in Vegas at my house, and we’ll work our plan from there. Sleep while we’re in the air. We won’t be going to bed when we land in Vegas. No time for sleeping if we want to find Travis alive.”

“Copy that.”

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:58 pm*

Sunday, August 31 st .

Harry Reid International Airport. Las Vegas.

Couldn't believe how fuckin' hot it was in the middle of the night in Vegas. Dark and hot and not a breath of a breeze as we walked through the rental lot to pick up the black Hummer Annie rented for us.

"Can I drive this baby?" asked Virge.

"Remember it's a little wider," said Annie.

"Yeah, I've got it."

We loaded our luggage into the back and Annie programmed the address of her Vegas house into the GPS.

"Get us there, Virge. I need a cold beer, and I need to think."

"Copy, Mom."

Summerlin. Las Vegas.

Virge pulled the Hummer into the driveway and shut off the engine. "Wow, Mom. This is a beautiful house."

"Neil did the house shopping in Vegas for me, and he picked this one. We all like his

choice.”

“Love the way you can’t see the front door from the street,” I said. “Nice and private.”

“Neil loved that feature, Harlan. My son is a very private person.”

Annie unlocked the door, and we carried our bags inside and set them down in the foyer. “I’m going to call Kamps and get information for us. You can put your stuff in one of the bedrooms. The big one with the walkout to the pool is my room. Take any other one and help yourselves to a beer from the fridge.”

“Okay, thanks.”

Virge and I got beers out of the big fridge in the kitchen and joined Annie and Mick out by the pool where she was waking a guy up to find out about the Breed Clubhouse in Vegas.

She put the call on speaker so we could hear.

I lit up a smoke and leaned back in my chair breathing in the dry desert air. The water in the pool sparkled from the underwater lights and made me want to jump in the water and go swimming.

No time right now for that.

“Sorry to wake you up, sugar. Can you get me the addresses for Army Vincente, Chip Maitland and Ronnie Kuzenko?”

“Why do you want the Vegas Breed, Beauty? That will only get you into trouble. Who’s with you?”



“Mick is with me, and Travis’s boys. The Vegas Breed have Travis. Pretty sure.”

“And you’re going to confront them? Not a great idea.”

“Just find the addresses for me, hon bun. I have to get there before they off Travis.”

“Dale Burden payback. Yeah, I get it.”

Annie waited and then wrote down what we needed to know.

“Promise me you’ll be extra careful,” said Kamps. “Those guys are brutal assholes, and they’ll kill all of you.”

“Not if I kill them first.”

Hearing the other guy warn Mom made me a bit nervous, but we had to get Travis back—no matter what.

Before the drive to Boulder City, Annie worked out a plan with Mick. He took the grenades he needed from her stock of ordnance in the Vegas house.

Me and Virge couldn’t believe the stock of weapons she had there locked in her stash.

Annie gave us a short course on what we were going to do when we got to the clubhouse and how we’d get it done.

Me and Virge listened up because Dad’s life depended on us getting him away from the Black Breed.

Black Breed Clubhouse. Boulder City. Nevada.

Mick drove past the clubhouse driveway and backed in. He parked close to the door and me and Virge knew what we had to do. We ran around to the back door and got ready to kick it in as soon as we heard the first shot.

Annie knocked on the front door and had to pound again before she got an answer. Mick stood just behind her and to her left, so he was out of the line of sight.

One of the Breed opened the door and sneered at her, then hollered over his shoulder, “It’s a woman.”

In a sweet voice, Annie asked, “Is Army here, sugar?”

“No, he ain’t.”

“Where is he? I need to talk to him about something important.”

“He’s taking care of business.”

“At his house?”

Because she was a woman and to him she presented no danger, the biker didn’t care a blue whit about telling her where his boss was. “Yeah, private business. What’s it to you? You one of his bitches? Haven’t seen you hanging around before.”

“Something like that.” Annie raised her Beretta and shot the biker in the head. When he crashed backwards onto the floor, Mick tossed the grenade.

“Frag,” one of the bikers yelled as they dove for cover.

Harlan kicked in the back door and tossed his grenade, then he and Virge ran for the parking lot and Virge pulled the pin and tossed his into the row of Harleys.

Leaving the blazing inferno behind them, they ran for the truck that Mick left running, piled in and headed for Army Vincente's house up in Henderson.

"Nice work, boys," said Annie. "That will set them back a little."

"I wanted Travis to be there," said Virge.

"I didn't think they'd hold him there," said Annie, "but we had to be sure. The mess we made will create a busy diversion for any survivors while we concentrate on getting Travis away from the big boss."

Vincente Residence. Henderson. Nevada.

The National President of the Black Breed lived in a flat-roofed frame house with a tin-roofed lean-to attached for his Harley.

Two other bikes were parked under the shelter next to the boss's ride.

"Top three are here but only three," said Annie. "The rest will be coming to watch the boss kill Travis, but we'll be gone before that happens."

"What's the plan?" asked Virge.

"Mick and Harlan come in from the back, so nobody squirts out. Virgil and I will blast in from the front and try to knock all three of them down on the first round of shooting."

"Copy that," said Virge. "Long as I know what you want, Mom, I'm good for it."

Annie smiled. "You're a good boy, Virgie."

As soon as Mick and Harlan were in position in the tiny back yard, Virge kicked in the front door. Adrenaline pumping, he and Annie ran in shooting.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Virge fired off three quick head shots and dropped all three of the Breed before they knew what happened.

Annie didn't have to fire her gun and that made her smile. She could make Virgil into something special. She was sure of it.

Mick and I blasted in from the back and Virge had already killed the Breed fuckers. I ran past their bodies in the blood-drenched kitchen, focused on finding my father.

He was tied to a chair in a small storage room at the back of the dirty house. He'd been beaten and stabbed again and was covered in blood and dirt.

But he was breathing.

The Breed were killing him a little at a time.

"Boys, cut Travis loose and put him in the back of the truck. I'll ask the GPS for the closest hospital."

"Keep breathing, Dad," said Virge as he cut the ties and released Travis from the chair.

Travis stared at us with half-dead eyes. He was only semi-conscious, not aware of what was going on around him.

Virgil freed him and without the ties holding him to the chair, Travis slumped

forward and collapsed onto the floor.

“I’ve got him, Virge. Get the door of the truck open.”

“Copy that, bro.” Virge ran the length of the shitty house and out the front door to the truck. We loaded Travis into the back seat and climbed in with him.

“All set, boys?” Annie climbed into the front. “Let’s get him to the hospital.”

Mick started the truck and turned on the strobes and the siren. We made a fast trip to the hospital.

Saint Rose Hospital. Henderson. Nevada.

The trip to the hospital didn’t take long, but by the time we got there, Dad had lost consciousness.

Mick parked the truck in the Emergency loop and Annie ran inside to get help. She was back seconds later with an orderly pushing a gurney.

Me and Virge helped the big guy in the blue scrubs get Dad out of the back seat and secured on the stretcher. He never said a word. Just worked real fast and as soon as Dad was strapped on, he ran with the gurney into the hospital.

We sat in the waiting room and drank strong coffee until a doctor from the emergency room had examined Travis and came to talk to us.

“I’m taking Major Bristol into surgery now to clean up his wounds. I’ll stitch the fresh ones and re-stitch the ones he sustained before that. What are the older ones? A couple of days old?”

“Yes. Two days, Doctor. A bunch of bikers are trying to kill our dad,” said Virge.

“Your father will be heavily medicated when he gets to the ICU a couple of hours from now. I suggest you call in later for an update, then come back in the morning after I’ve had a chance to examine him.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” said Annie. “That’s exactly what we’ll do. Come on, boys. Let’s go get dinner and then we’ll call and check on Travis.”

“I don’t like leaving him here,” said Virge.

“This is the best place for him, honey. Like the doctor said, when he comes out of the operating room, he’ll sleep until tomorrow. He won’t miss us at all.”

“I guess you’re right. Seems wrong to leave him.”

Outback Steakhouse. Las Vegas.

Me and Virge didn’t like leaving Travis at the hospital and Annie tried to cheer us up. “We’ll have a great dinner, then we’ll pick up some cream for coffee and more beer and snacks so we can survive until we’re allowed to see Travis tomorrow.”

“I am tired and hungry,” said Virge.

“I’m starving too, Mom, but I feel better now that we got Travis back and he’s got doctors and nurses taking care of him.”

“It will take him a long while to recover,” said Annie. “You boys will have to run the ranch and carry the load for the next few weeks.”

“We can do that,” I said.

“Yeah, we can,” said Virge. “Harlan can cook a couple of things, and we can survive.”

Mick was quiet in the restaurant, and he looked tired. We drank a beer before our steaks came and they were cooked to perfection. Virge could hardly finish his and we had no room for dessert.

One cup of coffee and Mick drove us home to Annie’s house in Summerlin.

Crazy day. Helluva day.

Summerlin. Las Vegas. Nevada.

“Do you think any of the Breed will be waiting for us at your house, Mom?” asked Virge.

“Anything is possible, but we eliminated a lot of them today and they might need time to regroup and bury their dead.”

“Hope they do,” said Virge. “I’m dead beat and I don’t want them killing me in my sleep.”

Annie laughed. “I’ll make sure they don’t do that, Virgie.

We drank a couple of cold ones out by the pool, and it wasn’t a bit cooler than it had been all fuckin’ day. Dark but still about a hundred dry, crackling degrees.

Annie made phone calls to Blaine, Farrell and the kids while I texted Lucy.

“We got Travis and he’s in the hospital.”

“Fantastic. When are you coming home?”

“Don’t know until we talk to the doctor in the morning.”

“I miss you.”

“Same. When things settle down at our ranch, we’ll go out on a real date, okay?”

“Okay. I love you, Harlan.”

“Same.”

After talking to Lucy, I felt better like I always did. Her life was so solid, she grounded me. I glanced over at Virge, and he was asleep in his chair.

I roused him out of his chair and hauled his tired ass into the house. “Time to sleep, Virgie. Tomorrow might be another long day getting Dad home to Texas.”

“Yeah, I need sleep.”



Monday, September 1 st .

Summerlin. Las Vegas. Nevada.

Annie had coffee made when I got to the kitchen. She and Mick were sitting at the kitchen table talking. “Hey, honey. Did you get enough sleep?”

“Still a bit tired, but I’ll be fine. I want to get to the hospital to see how Travis is doing.”

“I called,” said Annie. “He’s not awake yet. Doctor Canton is meeting us there at ten. That’s when he’ll be finished his rounds and able to talk to us.”

“Ten? I was hoping it would be earlier.”

Annie shook her head. “Nope. Ten it is. We’ll be packed to leave in hopes Travis will be released. Then we’ll go straight to the airport.”

“Hope so.” I poured myself a coffee and sat down.

“Virgil still sleeping?”

“No, I’m not.” He staggered into the kitchen and headed for the coffee maker. “I didn’t want to miss my ride to the hospital.”

“You didn’t miss it, sugar,” said Annie. “We’ll pack up and go to IHOP for breakfast on the way. We can’t see Travis or talk to his doctor until ten o’clock.”

“Ten o’clock? Shit.”

Annie pointed at a chair. “Sit, Virgil. It will work out. Travis is going to be okay. I’ve seen him in a lot worse shape than he was yesterday.”

Virge raised a black eyebrow and stared at Annie. “When was that?”

“Long while ago.” She shrugged it off and wouldn’t tell him.

Saint Rose Hospital. Henderson. Nevada.

At ten, Doctor Canton appeared in the waiting area and sat down to have his little chat. “Sorry to keep you waiting. Major Bristol and I had a little discussion, and he seems to think he’ll have no problem flying home if I release him.”

“We can take care of him, Doctor,” I said. “All we have to do is get him to Mom’s jet and he’ll be able to lie down. Texas is only two hours away.”

“Mom’s jet?” the doctor found that funny, but he didn’t offer any further comments. “All right then, I’ll inform the head nurse, and they’ll get the major ready to leave.”

“Thank you so much,” said Annie. “I know Travis is anxious to get home.”

“Why is the doc calling Dad major , Annie?” asked Virgil in a whisper.

“The doctor may have served and Travis is probably using his own military status to get his own way. I wouldn’t doubt it. He can be devious when he wants something.”

“Huh,” said Virgil.

The nurse rolled the wheelchair to the elevator and across the lobby to the front door

of the hospital. Mick waited with the motor running in the pickup loop, and he helped us get Travis into the back seat.

“You okay, Dad?” asked Virge.

“All good, son.”

“I’ll sit in the back with him, Harlan,” said Annie. “You ride up front with Mick. Virge can squeeze in with me.”

Harry Reid International Airport. Las Vegas.

Getting Travis into the plane was the most difficult part. The steps were killer for him, and he had to stop on every step to catch his breath.

Once he was in the plane and comfortable lying on the bed at the back of the cabin, he was good to go.

Virge and I sat back there and watched over him for the flight home. A couple of hours and we were back in Texas.

During the trip, Dad didn’t talk much. He asked about Max and Sarge and Corb and that was it. The rest of the time he slept.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange. Texas.

All the kids ran out to meet us when we got home to Annie’s ranch. Me and Virge helped Dad into the house and Annie put him to bed in the guest room.

“He can rest while we get things sorted out at your ranch, then I’ll bring him over later and put him straight into bed. He needs sleep in order to heal.”

Once Travis was settled at Annie's, me and Virge collected Corb and our dogs and headed for our ranch.

"I'm coming to help y'all," hollered Lucy at the last minute. She ran and jumped in the Jeep.

River Bend Ranch. Lincoln. Texas.

First thing we did when we got home was check on our horses. Just like Annie said, Monroe had been there with Lucy and fed them. They had lots of water and there was nothing to worry about.

"I want to know all the details about how you got Travis away from those bikers," said Corb.

"Sure," said Virge. "It will take a while to tell you all of it, Corb. Took us most of yesterday to get 'er done."

"Wish I was there to see Virge shooting again."

"Yeah, he made a big mess in the president's trailer," I said, and Lucy made a face.

While Lucy made coffee in our kitchen, I sat at the table and called Billy to tell him about Dad.

"Harlan, I was worried when I didn't hear from Travis yesterday or the day before."

"Black Breed kidnapped him, and we had to chase him down, first to Houston and then to Las Vegas. We just got back today and he's not okay."

"How bad is he?"

“Been stabbed several times and has hundreds of fuckin’ stitches. Be a long time before he can move around much.”

“How are you and Virge managing with the new ranch? That’s a lot for the two of you to handle on your own.”

“Annie has been helping us get settled in but there is a lot to do. I know there’s no way you can come, but I wanted to tell you anyway.”

“It sounds like you need me there, Harlan. Let me talk to the County Supervisor and see if I can work something out.”

“Thanks, Billy. Travis would never ask you to come and help him, but we could use you here.”

“I’ll call you later, Harlan. I’m going to drive up to Cut Bank right now and talk to Lyndell.”

“Copy that.”

County Supervisor. Cut Bank. Montana.

Billy had a quick chat with Molly and Ted and outlined his spur-of-the-moment plan. He took Ted with him to the supervisor’s office and explained his predicament.

Lyndell Gibson was a reasonable man and had a good grip on Harrison County, holding the welfare of its citizens as his first priority.

After listening to Billy and sorting out a plan that would work, Lyndell said, “Since there is only one month remaining in your term, Billy, and Ted is a shoo-in for the sheriff’s job, I’ll promote him now and work on your severance. I may be able to

round him up a deputy in the next couple of weeks. You go ahead and get to Texas and see if you can help Travis and our good boys.”

Billy let out a sigh of relief as he shook Lyndell Gibson’s hand. “Don’t know how to thank you, sir. Harlan says Travis is in a bad way. Hundreds of stitches and he’ll be sidelined for weeks.”

“And they just bought that huge ranch,” said Ted. “A lot for Harlan and Virge to handle.”

“Indeed it is,” said Lyndell. “Let’s take a minute and we’ll get Ted sworn in.”

Ted beamed a wide smile. “Never expected winning the election would be this easy, Mister Gibson.”

Lyndell laughed. “You caught a break, Ted. I know you’ll make a dandy sheriff. Look at the two men who’ve been teaching you. No better lawmen in Montana than Billy Johnson and Travis Frost.”

“Copy that, sir,” said Ted, as he raised his right hand.

River Bend Ranch. Lincoln. Texas.

Late in the afternoon, Annie brought Travis to our ranch. We got him up the porch steps and inside and he lay on the sofa in the front room to rest. He cheered up a lot when Billy called and told him Lyndell promoted Ted to sheriff, and he was coming to Texas earlier than planned.

“Can’t believe it,” said Travis. “Billy talked to Gibson and talked him into letting him leave Montana early.”

“That’s amazing, Dad. When’s Billy coming?”

“Tomorrow,” said Travis.

Annie and Lucy made lasagna and garlic bread while we were at the barn organizing the load of hay and straw that came from the feed store in Giddings.

“I can’t wait until we saddle up and ride to the back of our ranch,” said Virge. “I want to check out every acre of the property we own.”

“Yep, we’ll do that soon and take the dogs with us for a run.”

“Can I come?” asked Corb.

“Sure. You can ride Tammy’s horse. Bonnie Grace needs exercise real bad, Corb. You can be in charge of her and give her the attention she needs. She needs brushing and more loving than she’s getting since Tammy ran away and blew her off.”

“Tammy is our sister, right?”

“Yep. Went a little nuts, but she’s still our sister,” said Virge. “I’ll show you her picture, Corb.”

After dinner we were stuffed full of lasagna, but still had enough energy for a poker game. We all played, and it was a fun time.

Travis could hear us hooting and laughing in the next room and he shouted out to us. “I want to play poker with y’all.”

“Tomorrow, Dad,” said Virge. “We’ll deal you in tomorrow.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:58 pm*

The following day Harlan and Corb picked Billy up at the airport in Austin while Virge stayed with Travis.

“Hey, you must be Corb,” said Billy. “Nice to meet you.”

“The boys talk about you a lot, Sheriff Billy. We’re happy you could come to Texas and help us with Dad.”

Billy grinned. “You don’t know how happy I am for that, Corb. I’ve missed my family so much I could barely stand it.”

“Wait until you see our new ranch, Billy. You’re going to love it.”

Up in Northern Ontario, Tammy and Bobby were staying together for the time being. Both fugitives on the run, they took comfort in each other’s company.

Cleo was a big problem. Her hating Tammy like she did, she didn’t want Tammy anywhere near Bobby.

And Bobby didn’t trust Tammy for a second because he was certain she was a bit crazy.

Their relationship was a bit of a stand-off, but in a weird way they were temporarily living together in Tammy’s Mama’s cabin.

Travis’s plans for taking in Juvie boys from the Austin Detention Center was put on hold for a few months until he recovered from his injuries and was able to fix up the



bunk house the way he wanted it.

Harlan and Virgil accepted Corb as one of their own and they all shared the work that the ranch demanded.

They often saddled up their horses—Bonnie Grace for Corb—and rode to the back of their new ranch. There were no wild mustangs galloping through their property, but they had a river running through it and they sat on the bank and were thankful for Travis and Billy and their life in Texas.