Sons, Lost and Found

by BlackRook

Summary

Ezra Standish is Chris's firstborn from one-night affair long ago; Vin Tanner is his foster son. Will the 'family thing' work for these three, when they are under same roof? Written in 2009 for sga_rocks challenge.

Notes

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Chapter 1

1.

London, June

Ezra P. Standish, a too-smart-for-his-own-good 15 year-old, stared at the monitor of his home desktop. It showed two windows; one was a web-page with a list of the private boarding schools in Colorado; the other contained a letter from Mr. Buck Wilmington. Said Mr. Wilmington had been, and still was amazingly, the best friend of Mr. Chris Larabee, the man who had the dubious honor to occupy the father's line on Ezra's birth certificate. The letter was dated in April; Ezra already knew its contents by heart, and surely there wasn't any further point in staring at it. The boy groaned in frustration, sharply turned his rotating chair, stood up and paced to the window. The curtains weren't closed, and outside there was a good view of London lit up in the night. Ezra sighed, to calm himself, and folded his arms on his chest. His gaze drifted from the window to the bookshelf, to an old, small leather photo album. It had a lock, like a girl's diary, the lock hadn't been opened for years now, but Ezra could still recall every picture in it. He looked out into the night again and remembered the events which were captured inside the old leather book, and the ones that had lead from them to the letter glowing on the monitor...

Maude Standish, an outstanding poker player and con artist, had gotten careless one night in Vegas, and that turned her into Ezra's mother. As she had several times pointed out to her son, it was carelessness and not some long-term ploy. And he believed her, because what could she have possibly gained from a young Navy officer on vacation? He'd been an honest man though, had admitted his fatherhood and sent Maude money for child support regularly. But he never claimed any rights until Ezra was four; by that time Chris Larabee had retired from the Navy, married a lovely woman, and been living on a ranch in Colorado. Maude had grown tired of having a toddler under her feet, so she'd happily dumped him at the ranch for a couple of months.

Ezra smiled sadly. His memories about that first visit were foggy, but warm nevertheless. Chris had been awkward, most of the time not knowing what to do with a child who already talked in full, long sentences and preferred puzzles and board games to cars, balls, and any outdoor activity (that had eventually changed with the discovery of the horses though). But Mrs. Sarah had felt no confusion at all; she'd welcomed and accepted her husband's bastard with all her heart and had made Ezra feel at home.

After that year, he'd spent two months at the ranch every summer. Maude hadn't been particularly happy about his visits; she used to say that he brought back some vexing habits from the ranch, and that he had gotten out of practice in most of his 'God-given talents'. But, fortunately, she hadn't tried to stop them, not willing to risk an open confrontation with Larabee, a police officer at the time. Adam's birth hadn't complicated things a single bit. Ezra had adored his baby brother, and loved playing with him, and had even managed to keep the energetic toddler occupied when both his parents had been exhausted already. All in all, Ezra P. Standish had been completely content with his place in the Larabee family. Until it all had ended one fateful spring day, with phone call from Mr. Wilmington.

Maude sometimes had the notion to act decently, so they'd made it to the funeral. Chris hadn't noticed, but then he hadn't been noticing anyone or anything, all the arrangements had been made by Buck Wilmington. After the funeral, Maude had taken Ezra to Atlanta, her hometown, and signed him up for therapy. She had even encouraged him to trust the therapist and had stayed close for the whole period. It was the most un-Maude thing Mrs. Standish had ever done in her life, but it had helped. Six months later Ezra insisted on visiting Denver on Adam's birthday;
Maude had arranged for him to stay with Ms. Nettie Wells, a retired social worker and Larabee's neighbor. Mr. Wilmington would have gladly received the boy himself, but he'd been too busy looking after the vessel of whiskey Larabee had turned himself into. Ezra had seen his father twice at the time, and it had been more than enough, he'd left not sure he would ever return. Mr. Wilmington, though, had kindly promised to stay in touch and inform the boy about his father's state.

Ezra sighed and came back to sit in front of his desk. Buck Wilmington had kept his word; he'd sent Christmas and birthday cards, and a letter every month. The letters had all carried pretty much the same message: 'Situation has improved a little, but it's still too early for Ezra to visit'. Time had fled and Ezra had stopped waiting for something different; he was now sure that Chris had never loved him at all, and had welcomed him before only because of Mrs. Larabee. It sounded strange, but was entirely possible. And now, five years after the tragedy, this letter had arrived. According to Mr. Wilmington, Chris had finally pulled his life back on track; he was working in the ATF now, leading his own team (with Buck as second-in-command) and more or less stayed away from the bottle. He'd even expressed a desire to meet with his son and start afresh. With another sigh, Ezra closed the letter. He was glad Mr. Larabee was back among the living, he truly was, but he highly doubted Chris really wanted to settle things with him; most likely, he just felt obliged to.

But the point was, what did he, Ezra P. Standish, have to lose? The boy glanced around his neat, but empty, room in the London house of Mr. Wilson; Maude's latest conquest. Nobody gave a damn about him here. Maude was too busy enjoying the fruits of her victory, and Mr. Wilson…

Well, he wasn't that bad, he just could not tolerate more than one Standish in his life. Actually, Ezra understood him completely on that matter; besides, the man wasn't a complete villain. He'd set the price range and offered to sign Ezra up at any boarding school in the States within it. And that's why Ezra had been studying what the Denver educational system had to offer; the St. James School seemed the most appealing, it just might be the perfect solution. Ezra definitely was not ready for 'summer at the ranch' and he was sure Chris was not either. But living in the school an hours drive from the ranch might provide the opportunity to settle things without rushing them. If things worked out, he would spend weekends and holidays at the ranch; if they did not…well, as long as the school had a rich library and a steady Internet connection, it would be as good as any other place he'd stayed in over the last few years. Taking a deep breath, Ezra reached a decision; he sent the school information to Mr. Wilson and he would write to Mr. Wilmington as soon as he got his official acceptance papers.

2.

Larabee's ranch, August

"Nervous?" Buck Wilmington asked Vin Tanner, a lanky 14-year-old Texan.

"Yeah, some."

"Don't fret, Junior. It'll be okay."

Vin half-shrugged, and Buck smiled reassuringly. They were at the ranch, waiting for Chris to bring his son from the airport. His oldest son, Buck corrected himself. They had three days before Ezra had to show up at that fancy school; and Buck actually had to give Standish some credit for that idea. Boarding school would give father and son space they might need, because reconciliation after five years of silence couldn't be easy, especially with what Buck knew about how Ezra had spent those years. And Buck had no idea if Vin's presence would simplify things or, do the opposite, complicate them.

Averting his gaze so as not to embarrass Vin, Buck smiled lightly, remembering how a blue-eyed runaway had become their charge.
The bust at the abandoned warehouse had gone wrong; it would have gone ugly if not for some divine intervention. Well, maybe not divine, but someone from above did throw a rock with deadly accuracy and thus saved Nathan's life. A momentary confusion among the bad guys was all that Chris and Buck had needed, and couple of minutes later everything was over. They looked up and saw an obviously stray teen with a slingshot.

"Damn, Junior, but aren't you a sharpshooter!" Buck exclaimed. "Come down here, I want to shake your hand!"

The kid looked like he was ready to bolt, but then he locked eyes with Chris…and actually came down.

A week after that, Chris Larabee was officially fostering Vincent Tanner. Buck didn't even want to think about how many favors Nettie and AD Travis had to have called in for that to happen; he was just glad it did. Because it had been Vin Tanner who'd returned joy and interest to Chris's life. For the first time in years Buck could stop worrying Chris would lose it the minute he left him alone. A few short months had brought major changes, and in the kid himself, too. He'd been as jumpy, and as dangerous, as a frightened wolf cub in the beginning, seemingly not knowing the meaning of the words 'trust' and 'home,' but for whatever reason he'd trusted Chris unconditionally from the start. And later he expanded this to the rest of Team 7. Buck glanced askance at his 'honorary nephew,' the teen looked perfectly calm, but Buck knew better.

When Ezra's letter had arrived, Vin had immediately stated that Chris's firstborn should spend as much time as possible at the ranch; Chris was relieved that the boy hadn't been afraid of losing his place. And Ezra seemed to react well to Vin's existence, at least judging by his letters and couple of phone calls. But it was a big question - if the two very different boys would get along. And would Chris be able to handle the situation without being torn between his job and two teenagers with pasts? Well, at least he wouldn't be alone in this. All four 'Honorary Uncles' would offer all the help and advice they could.

A car noise interrupted Buck's musings; Vin stood abruptly, and Buck followed his example. A couple of minutes later, Chris and Ezra entered the living room.

Ezra had grown up from a charming kid to a real heartbreaker; and his obsession with neat clothes, as it seemed, had only worsened with time. He didn't look like a teenager who'd just survived all the delights of a transatlantic flight; heck, he looked like a President ready for his inauguration speech. But he was still a kid, visiting his father for the first time since the tragedy; he could use a warm welcome. Besides, Buck had truly missed the little dandy.

"Hey, Ezra! Look at you, almost a grown man now! It's awful good to see you in the flesh again, pard!" Something in Ezra's demeanor stopped Buck from giving the intended hug and so he settled for a handshake instead. The boy had a firm grip.

"It is nice to see you again, Mr. Wilmington," Ezra gave that mischievous smile, which was both irritating and charming all at once. It amused Buck that the boy hadn't lost it over the years. Vin had come closer, and so Buck stepped aside; it was Chris's job to formally introduce the boys.

"Ezra, meet Vin Tanner. Vin, this is Ezra Standish."

Yeah, ol' Chris never used a word he could do without. The boys surveyed each other, obviously appraising; a perfect gentleman and a cowboy. Then Vin offered a hand:

"Nice to meet ya, Ez."

"The pleasure is mine, Mr. Tanner," Ezra took the hand, but it was the slightest and the shortest
handshake Buck had ever seen.

Yup, things definitely wouldn't be easy. But they sure would be interesting.
3.

Larabee’s ranch, middle September, Sunday

Whack. A ping pong ball collided with an illustrated pine on a Yellowstone Park poster and sprang back to the couch where Vin Tanner caught it effortlessly and threw it again, this time at another pine. He’d been shooting down the poor poster for half an hour now, trying to calm down and sort out his emotional turmoil. One part of him wanted nothing more than to have an ‘old-fashioned’ fist fight with that smart-mouthed peacock, namely one Ezra P. Standish; another part felt gratitude mixed with a reluctant admiration, and the last part was just plain baffled. For the third time, Vin replayed the day’s scene from the study in his mind, trying to apply Josiah’s lessons of reflection to find out the reasons, if not for Ezra’s actions and words, then at least for his own reactions to them.

Well, Vin had to admit, he hadn’t been in such a good mood from the beginning. Chris, Buck and Josiah had left the house early, to take care of some chores at the far side of the ranch. Vin would have gladly helped, but his math problems had been holding him hostage. Ezra had stayed too, stating he had homework of his own. A plain lie. Ez had never had schoolwork on weekends (the ball collided with the wall a bit harder, but endured), he’d just wanted to avoid any ‘menial labor’. Chris had bought it though; or maybe he’d just known Ezra wouldn’t be any help at all. Something felt wrong about this thought, but Vin put it aside to think on later. Anyway, Ez had been sitting in the study with him; reading one of his books. The book must have been boring though, as he’d soon turned to looking into Vin’s papers and teasing him. Between the unyielding equations and Ezra’s remarks, he had finally lost his patience.

Vin threw his pen on the table and hissed “Okay, I got it. You’re a genius. But you know what Ez? Not everyone out there had a chance to go to such fancy schooling, some of us had other problems to deal with first!”

“You are absolutely correct, Mr. Tanner, and there is no shame in that. But one must remember, it is you who should find the time for the books, not the other way round. And that is the most wonderful thing about them.”

While Vin was figuring out if he’d just been insulted or not; Ezra leaned forward, grabbed the pen, wrote something on a clean sheet of paper, and then left the study. Vin wanted to follow, but he still didn’t know what to say, other than with a right cross, and that was hardly fair. Of course, there were words that justified such a result, but Ez hadn’t actually crossed that line yet. So Vin just read what Standish had written; twice. And realized suddenly that it was a shortcut to his math problems, a shortcut he’d been failing to grasp for the whole week. Damn, why couldn’t Ez just explain without being an asshole?

Vin finished his Math, rather amazed at how easy it seemed now, and went looking for Ezra, to try and set things straight. But Chris and the rest had already returned, and neither of the boys wished to bring the incident up in their presence. And right after dinner Buck and Josiah went home, and Chris drove Ezra back to school.

And now Vin wanted to sort everything out in his head before Chris got back home, since Chris would definitely feel it if he was still confused. Ezra’s last phrase kept turning in his head; there were something he’d missed about it, something familiar. “…it is you who should find the time for the books, not the other way round. And that is the most wonderful thing about them...”. Catching the ping pong ball one more time, Vin suddenly froze, remembering. One old lone hunter back in...
the reservation had told him once - ‘Trees and mountains are better than people, boy. They don’t betray’. And, unlike people, trees and mountains always have enough time for you, Vin had learned that himself. Apparently, it was also true for books. Had books been Ezra’s friends and family over the years, just like the woods and mountains had been his before Chris?

Vin quickly tried to recall all the conversations involving Ezra that had taken place during the last month, all of Ezra’s icy remarks, all his clashes with Chris. Damn! The ball smashed into the wall, cracking and falling to the floor. What if all that ‘I’m perfectly fine and don’t need anyone’ attitude was just a mask? And all the ‘I’m better than you’ barbs just a defense? What if…

Vin hid in obscurity and silence, Ezra in flamboyance and chatter, but what if they both hid the same things? The hurt, the loneliness, the fear of being abandoned? Vin sighed, came down from the couch, picked up the poor ping pong ball and sent it to the trash can with a final throw. Next weekend he would start paying much closer attention to his brother. Vin chuckled, realizing that for the first time he referred to Ezra as his brother and actually meant it.

4.
**St. James school, early November**

“Good morning, darling,” Maude’s voice shed sweetness through the phone. As usual, she’d forgotten about time zones, it was about 10 p.m. in Denver.

“Good morning, Mother, thank you for your call. I hope you and Mr. Wilson are well?”

“We are, my dear. How are you faring?”

“Excellent, Mother. I won school competitions in History and Math last…”

“Oh, sorry, darling, the taxi has just arrived, we need to go. I shall try and call you from Tokyo.”

“Of course, Mother. Have a nice trip and give my regards to Mr. Wilson.”

Maude disconnected, and Ezra set the phone on his desk, close to two freshly printed award certificates he’d received today, and stared at all three objects in disgust. Interesting, he wondered idly, with this pair did he have enough commendations to cover all the walls in this room? Yes, definitely. Twice.

Ezra took a deep breath, suppressing the sudden desire to shred the certificates into tiny pieces. There was nothing new in Maude’s reaction after all; she’d never shown any pride in his achievements, least of all in academics, only disappointment when he failed. He had given up on even telling her about his victories; so why was he starting again now? Ezra sighed; he knew why. Last Friday had left such a bitter aftertaste, that he had stooped to seeking comfort from Maude. A very stupid idea. Ezra sighed once more and went to prepare his bed, again thanking Heaven he didn’t have a roommate.

Funny thing, the Friday evening had actually begun well enough…

School had ended early, and Ezra had made it to the ranch at the same time as Vin; Chris was stuck at work. One needn’t have Ezra’s observational skills to notice that Vin was beaming and near to bursting with some good news; Ezra didn’t ask though, sure Vin wanted to save the news until Chris got home. However, Vin had exploded just after the boys had had their snack meal and cleaned up after it. He’d extracted some papers from his school bag, which had turned out to be his last work in English class, nearly bouncing with excitement, he showed Ezra the last page of them, where an ‘A’ stood proud in red, accompanied by ‘Excellent work, Mr. Tanner’.

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“You see, Ez? It's really an ‘A’, I still can’t believe it!”

“I fail to see what it is you find so amazing, Vin. Although, it is good to know your English teacher possesses at least objectivity, if nothing else.”

Vin gave him that irritating ‘I-see-through-you’ smile and said earnestly “Thank you, Ez. I wouldn’t have made it without your help.”

“You are exaggerating as always,” Ezra answered, pleased nevertheless.

Actually, he was truly glad for Vin. He had recognized very early, that Vin’s potential was at least as great as his own, and that all Vin needed to realize this potential was a stable life and a couple of good teachers. And since Vin’s school obviously lacked in the latter, Ezra had been happy to step in. He had always loved tutoring, and Vin was quick to grasp new things. And it was nice to know that Tanner had appreciated his efforts.

So yes, Ezra had found himself sharing Vin’s joy, and they spent the next couple of hours discussing, with enthusiasm, what changes should be made to Vin’s latest prank so that Ezra could pull it on a couple of seniors at St. James. And then Chris had come home. Oh, there had been no big words, or cakes, on the occasion of Vin’s first ‘A’, only the look Chris had given his foster son. Only the look, but it had been enough to shatter Ezra’s good mood into tiny pieces.

Ezra glanced again at his damned certificates. He might win a Nobel Prize one day, and he still wouldn’t receive a look like that from anyone. And that was that.

The rest of the weekend had done nothing to alleviate the bitterness of the realization, since Chris had spent most of it in his office. There had been a horse ride, of course, but horses had actually done more talking during it than people. Chris’s priorities had never been more obvious; Vin came first and foremost, Chris’s job and teammates followed closely, and Ezra was the last, a mere obligation. With another sigh, the teen got under the covers.

He had tried to take it one day at a time, but maybe it was time to analyze the outcome of the last two and a half months. He had to admit it openly – he was jealous of Vin. Of the comfortable silence he always shared with Chris, and of their mutual understanding, while every second conversation Ezra had had with his father had lead to a disaster.

Ezra studied the shadows dancing on the ceiling; he was tired of hitting his head against a brick wall. As long as he could remember, he had been trying to impress his parents (not an easy task, Maude and Chris had two very different sets of morals), to earn their respect, if not love… fruitlessly. Maybe he should, well, not give up, but at least change his priorities. He had a dream of his own, a dream of owning a restaurant one day; maybe he should focus on that and not on the much more elusive idea of family and home. It wouldn’t even require any major changes in his current life; St. James’s was a fine academic establishment with a good faculty and an even better reputation, a good start for any career. He could even continue visiting the ranch, not weekly, of course, maybe just on the big gatherings…

All personal relations aside, Team 7 consisted of some very interesting people; he had never met the likes of them in his mother’s world. And that men like these did actually exist reconciled him with the Universe, a little. And no matter what Maude had said, there were things he could learn from them, even from Mr. Dunne, who in some ways was younger than Vin.

And then there was Vin.

Well, if he was being honest with himself, he had to admit that he liked Vin Tanner. He had wanted to hate him, had even tried to, but just could not, despite all his jealousy. He liked that
half-cowboy, half-Indian, better than all his present, or past, schoolmates. Vin was actually the
first person who came close to the term ‘friend’...and just maybe, there would be a chance for real
friendship if he stopped fighting with Vin over Chris’s time and attention. That fight had been lost
before it started, anyway.

Ezra reached to turn off the lamp. He would try to talk with Chris on the following weekend, to
tell his father he was free of any obligations towards him. Deep down in his heart a hope lurked; a
hope that Chris would somehow prove Ezra wrong, and that Chris did give a damn about his
firstborn. Ezra rolled onto his side. He had three and a half days to strangle this hope.
Chapter 3

5.

Larabee's ranch, the next weekend

Chris was going to be late again, he'd been for most of the week, as their latest case was in its final stage. It meant that, at least for the most part of Friday evening, Vin and Ezra would be on their own. Not bad news actually, when alone they got along much better than when in Chris's presence. But today something was wrong with Ezra. Mighty wrong, if Vin could sense it right away. Of course, the fact that the older boy had actually asked when Chris planned to get home, and asked twice, was a big sign, and Vin didn't like it. He'd tried to get Ezra to talk, but Standish didn't even bother to change the subject, giving only monosyllabic answers, or plain ignoring Vin.

Around 7 p.m., Chris called, telling the boys to eat dinner without him since he most likely would be trapped in the city until midnight. Vin was disappointed, but Ezra's reaction was close to relief, and that worried Vin, but now there wouldn't be any chance to learn what was up. All in all, the Friday seemed to be doomed, but was suddenly rescued by a marathon showing of old Star Wars movies. Vin had accidentally discovered them while flipping through the channels, and, on silent agreement, dinner was moved to the couch in front of the TV. By the middle of "A New Hope" the boys were already trading flippant comments and sharing memories about their first meetings with the legendary epic.

Close to the end of the third movie, Ezra again grew quiet and thoughtful; but it was already past midnight, and Vin was half-sleeping himself, so maybe it was just tiredness. Vin was sure tomorrow would be better.

Saturday morning Vin got up with the sun and came down to the kitchen, to find Chris already sitting there, with a coffee mug in one hand and a sort of printed map in the other.

"Morning, Dad," Vin poured himself a glass of water.

Chris raised his head and smiled, though the smile didn't hide the weariness.

"Morning, Cowboy."

"You're leaving?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. Have to pick Buck up and relieve Nate and Josiah at the stakeout." Chris finished his coffee with one big gulp, then crumpled the map and put it in his pocket. "We have to finish that damn case by next week, or everyone will go insane."

Vin nodded solemnly, and Chris stood up and came closer to him.

"You do know, son, that I'd rather stay here…"

"…than sit in the car staring at an empty warehouse?" Vin gave a small grin. "Yeah, Dad, I know. Be careful."

Chris, with a grin of his own, ruffled Vin's hair.

"I will. You boys behave yourselves here, okay?"

"Okay. Hmm… Dad," Vin began after a pause, but Chris was already at the door, speaking with
Buck over his cell, so they just nodded to each other as Chris left. Damn, the weekend may be as awkward as yesterday; nevertheless, the horses still needed tending. He left a note for Ezra near the coffee pot, just in case Standish woke up before Vin returned (hardly possible but who knows), and then he took a water bottle from the fridge and went out to the barn.

Vin came back after a couple of hours and found the note, and the coffee pot, untouched; Ezra must still be sleeping. He began to make himself breakfast, but failed to locate his favorite mug; it had probably been left in the main room. Vin went there and saw the mug on the coffee table near the couch; he bent over and picked it up, and then was startled by a strange sound, like a strangled sob. He looked to his left and stopped dead in his tracks. Near the fireplace, with his back to the entrance and Vin, stood a fully dressed Ezra. He held a large picture of Sarah Larabee in his hands, and was apparently talking to it. Vin knew he should leave, but he was afraid Ez would hear him if he moved now; and some moments just shouldn't be interrupted, even if it meant eavesdropping.

"I know it's not his fault, Mrs. Sarah," Ezra said in a muffled voice. "He didn't take my place, he just succeeded where I failed, where I didn't try… I ran out on Chris back then, and I shouldn't have, I should have stayed. I shouldn't have waited to be invited back either, and I shouldn't have left it all to Buck…"

"But he's okay now, Vin saw to it, you don't need to worry. And don't be upset with him, he tries to do the right thing, it's not his fault he doesn't want me. He never really did…"

Vin finally realized what Ezra was talking about, Buck had told him enough about those dark years. Damn, did Ezra really blame himself for not staying by Chris's side, for not keeping him out of the bottle? 'Damn it, Ezra', Vin wanted to shout, 'You were ten years old! You lost half of your family yourself, did anyone understand that?' Did Chris even realize that, at least now?

"You are confusing me with yourself, Mr. Tanner."

"Ez, I ain't a thief. Never was, even on the streets."

Ezra finally turned around fully and faced the other teen. "I never thought you were. Vin, I'm not accusing you of anything. Besides, you can't steal from me something I have never possessed in the first place."

"That ain't true!" Vin knew he was repeating himself, but he couldn't help it. "He does love ya, and he needs ya!"

Ezra smiled sadly. "You have a very big heart, Vin, for someone with your life experience." He took a step to pass Vin, but Tanner stopped him, laying a hand on his shoulder and squeezing it. Holding his gaze, Vin said, quietly, but vehemently:
"Chris and other adults can do whatever they like, Ez, but I, with my life experience, know a good friend when I see one. You are a good friend, Ezra Standish, and a damn good big brother. I wouldn't dream for a better one."

Vin watched as his words sank in; Ezra looked away for a moment, then returned his gaze and laid his own hand on Vin's shoulder.

"You are a good friend, too, Vin Tanner. And a good brother."

Vin allowed a small smile, "Does this mean you ain't doing anything stupid, like leaving Denver?"

Ezra grinned in response, "Yes, I guess it means I'm not doing anything stupid, like leaving Denver."

The boys dropped their hands but kept their eyes locked, and a second later grasped each other's forearms in a warrior's handshake, sealing their brotherhood.

The rest of the weekend was divided between chores, TV, horseback riding, and practicing shooting a bow. It was fun to exchange the roles of tutor and student for a while; Vin even shared some tales from his own first experience with a bow, from back on the reservation. He'd never discussed this time with anyone except Chris, but he felt he owed it to Ezra for eavesdropping earlier, and he didn't regret the conversation. When he wanted to be, Ezra was a damn good listener, and some things he understood even better than Chris.

Chris himself didn't make it home Saturday at all. He called several times in the evening, but Ezra was always leaving the room with the first ring of the phone; Vin decided not to push it yet, besides, he could really do little in that direction in Chris's absence. On Sunday, Nettie drove both boys to the bus stop; she seemed pleased with Vin's desire to accompany Ezra, and with Ezra's lack of argument. The latter pleased Vin even more than it had Nettie.

Coming home after seeing his brother off, Vin thought about how he had five days to set Chris straight. Of course, he'd promised Ezra not to mention the scene at the fireplace, but there were other ways to make Chris see what was going on. Because if Chris didn't do something by next weekend, it would be too late. It might be too late already…
Chapter 4

6.

**Denver, the next week**

The bust, to finish Team 7's latest case, was set for Wednesday, so Vin decided to postpone his talk with Chris until after it. He knew firsthand that lives depended on quick reactions during a bust, and it wasn't a good idea to distract Chris with family problems right before one.

Vin knew that his father's team was the best; and yet he'd spent the whole Wednesday on pins and needles, and had been staring at the phone since he'd gotten home. Finally, it rang.

"Yeah?"

"It's over, Cowboy. We got the bad guys and everyone is okay here." Chris sounded hoarse, but content; Vin let out the breath he'd been holding. "I'll be late tonight, but tomorrow will be all ours, I promise."

"Oh, really?"

"Really, Junior," either Chris had him on the speaker or Buck had grabbed the receiver. "I just told that father of yours I'll shoot him myself if I see his sorry hide near the office tomorrow."

Vin grinned. "Thanks, Buck, knew I could count on you,"

"Always, Junior. See you this weekend."

That was followed by some indistinct noise, and then Chris was back, obviously amused, "You heard him, son, you know now I don't' have a choice."

"Yeah, Dad, I got it. See you tomorrow and good luck with the paperwork."

Chris groaned.

Vin finished the conversation and then started dialing Ezra's cell number. He might be hiding it, but Vin knew the other boy worried too. Besides, he had to make sure Ez would come next weekend; he even had an ace up his sleeve in case Ezra started some 'don't want to intrude' bullshit. Yeah, saying that he needed help with preparing for some tests next week would be a low blow, but Ezra had to be home on Friday. And Vin would see to it that Chris would be ready for him. Tomorrow, Chris should finally have time to listen, and Vin was ready to give their father a piece of his mind.

7.

**Denver, Thursday**

Chris drove through the streets of Denver, noticing the weather for the first time in two weeks. Twelve hours of uninterrupted sleep had done wonders, and now he was slowly coming back to reality. The McKenzie case was the DA's headache now; of course, the next month would be filled with paperwork, especially considering the amount of arms they had secured and the fact that three of the bad guys, including McKenzie Junior, were killed during the bust. But the bust had been done by the book, so the future paperwork was probably endurable, and thus it didn't darken Chris's good mood.
He found a parking spot, left the car and went into Vin's school; he'd promised to spent the day with him and was looking forward to fulfilling that promise. It was still a bit early, but a school guard recognized him and let him in, and even showed him the way to Vin's classroom. Chris intended to talk with some of Vin's teachers as well while he was there, as he'd rarely had the opportunity before; and a visit to Vin's favorite bakery was planned for after, in case the conversations were unpleasant for them both.

It turned out that his fears had been unfounded; Chris especially enjoyed talking with Ms. Walters, Vin's English teacher. He enjoyed even more Vin's blushing at her praise though.

"Your son has shown amazing progress during the last months, Mr. Larabee."

Chris started to answer, but was interrupted by the ringing of his cell; seeing it was Travis, he apologized and walked to the far corner of the classroom.

"Sir?"

"Chris, bad news. McKenzie Senior escaped two hours ago."

"What?" Chris exclaimed, then, remembering where he was, lowered his voice. "How?"

"I don't know the details yet, but he must have had help. Two guards have been seriously injured."

"What else?" Chris just knew there was something that he was going to like much less than even McKenzie's escape.

"Chris, he told the guards 'Tell Larabee I'm taking his brat to get even'."

Damn. Yeah, it had been him who had fired that bullet into McKenzie Junior, he hadn't had a choice actually, but that hardly mattered to McKenzie Senior. Damn. He glanced at Vin, standing with Ms. Walters; thank Heaven he'd already driven here.

"Thanks, Orin. We'll handle it from here."

"Chris, the Marshal's team will be here soon, if you need any help…"

Someone had already helped McKenzie to escape; no way was Chris going to trust Vin's protection to anyone outside Team 7. He finished his conversation with Travis and started calling his men.

8.

Denver Federal Building, later that day

Chris didn't tell Vin about the threat, only about the criminal getting loose. He knew it probably wasn't right, but he just didn't want to frighten the teen. Okay, Vin wasn't easily frightened, but he sure wouldn't react well to someone using him against Chris. Of course, if they didn't catch McKenzie soon, Chris would have to tell him everything, but he hoped they'd get lucky and nail the escaped bastard quickly.

Vin had nothing against going to the ATF office, since Chris's presence was required there now. He liked visiting the Team and watching their work, and he'd never distracted anyone while there, unless he thought they needed a break. And in that assumption he'd usually been correct.
It was decided that Team 7 would handle the office end of the search, while Marshalls and local PD would be in the field, checking possible hidey holes. Chris had agreed to that, since the Marshall's team was led by Tim Bradley, his and Buck's old buddy from the Navy, a capable and reliable lawman.

The first hours of the search had brought nothing besides some hints that McKenzie was still in the area; Chris was going to need a good reason for Vin to miss school the next day, if he still didn't want to tell the boy the truth. Turns out he didn't have to create one though, some admin from the school had called his office at the end of work hours and said there was some kind of incident with the school's sewer and plumbing, and that the school was officially closed till Monday. With that news, the idea of staying in town and spending the night at Josiah's seemed only natural.

The breakthrough in the search happened Friday afternoon; they found the hole McKenzie had been hiding in. Marshalls and PD men were securing the area and preparing to go in; Chris and his Team observed from the office and handled communications.

"Larabee, quit glaring at the screen, you still can't be in two places at the same time," Buck's voice broke the silence in the conference room. "Take Junior and go get a hot meal for you both, you have at least an hour before the show starts."

"You know, Chris," Nathan added, "That's the wisest idea I've ever heard from Buck."

Chris redirected 'the glare' at his teammates, but they actually had a point; he went down to his office, where Vin lay on the couch, reading a book about Native Americans he'd borrowed from Josiah.

"Hey, Cowboy," he asked, peeking inside. "How about lunch?"

Instead of answering, Vin closed the book and stood up.

"You located him?"

"Seems so. Hopefully in a few hours he'll be back where he belongs."

"Good."

Something was clearly on Vin's mind today, something hardly concerning McKenzie; maybe he'd talk at lunch.

They went to the cafeteria, a dozen floors above ATF headquarters; the crowd there was tolerable, they spent only about ten minutes in the line and then found a more or less isolated table.

"So," Vin began when he'd arrived at dessert, "We're going home tonight?"

Chris shrugged.

"Hope so."

"When?"

"We'll know in the next couple of hours." Bradley had to catch McKenzie, preferably smoothly, and then they had to find out if the bastard had already hired anyone else for his revenge plot.

"I see."

Vin was obviously waiting for Chris to say something else, but Chris failed to see what exactly.
"Vin, something wrong?"

"Ain't sure yet." Vin put the spoon down and looked Chris in the eyes. "Dad, you know it's Friday today?"

"Yeah…" Well, actually Chris hadn't really paid attention to the days of the week lately, and a feeling began to form in the back of his mind, like he was missing something important. He'd had this feeling a couple of times during the last 24 hours, he tried to catch that elusive something, but Vin drew his attention when he spoke again, and this time his expression and tone had changed drastically.

"Chris, you plan on at least giving Ezra a call and update on things? Or do you want him to come home alone to an empty house and figure everything out by himself? Damn it, Chris, he already thinks you don't give a shit about him, do you want to prove him right?"

Chris was stunned, at first by the mere idea of quiet Vin shouting at him in pure rage (it didn't matter that he'd actually whispered, it had still been a shout), but then Vin's words penetrated and united with that elusive feeling, and he was filled with apprehension. Ezra. Friday. Chris glanced at the wall clock – 2 p.m. Oh God. Any minute now Ezra would be leaving St. James's – alone and unprotected. Chris reached for his cell, but it had already started ringing. Buck's name was on the screen, turning his apprehension to dread.
Chapter 5

9.

*Denver Memorial Hospital, Friday, late afternoon*

Buck raised his head and looked at his teammates occupying the small waiting room with him. Chris, in bloodied and torn clothes, was sitting in the chair closest to the OR, with his elbows on his knees, staring blankly at the OR doors. Nathan stood beside the OR doors, shifting his gaze between the semi-transparent door glass and JD. JD himself sat on a chair in the corner and paid no attention to the nurse who was stitching his cuts; his eyes instead were firmly fixed on the OR doors. Of course, medical treatment in the waiting room wasn't allowed, but there was no way JD would allow himself to be anywhere but here right now. Buck sighed; his pride in JD was the only positive emotion he felt right now. The Kid really had done good today.

"Buck, you think Chris and Vin will be able to go home today?" JD asked, when they collided in the break room near the coffee pot, shortly after Chris and Vin had gone for lunch.

"Should be, if Bradley doesn't screw up, and Bradley usually doesn't screw up."

"Good. It's Friday already and I don't think Chris has seen much of Ezra lately."

The second JD finished speaking, both Agents were struck by the same thought. They glanced at the wall clock – nearly 2 p.m. – and then stared at each other, nearly forgetting to breathe.

"JD," Buck said in a voice suddenly gone hoarse, "get on your bike and fly to St. James, now!"

"Got it, Buck," JD had already put his mug down and was headed out the door. He added from the corridor, "I'm already there."

Buck rushed back to the conference room, on the run searching for Ezra's number in his cell. Ezra didn't answer his phone, and the school guard said he'd already left when Buck tried the school next. Wilmington then called Bradley and told him to back off the bust and keep his eyes open until further notice.

JD made it to the St. James bus stop just in time to see some bastards dressed in black pushing Ezra into a dark blue SUV with covered plates. He hadn't been able to stop them, but he had followed, and with him calling in directions and the known location of McKenzie himself, they were able to intercept the SUV at one of the highway exits.

And then McKenzie's goons lost control of the car, and it went over the fence and rolled down the embankment.

Seeing the crash, hearing the screech of JD's bike braking, watching Chris dash from their car before it had fully stopped, it all seemed to happen so quickly. When they caught up with Larabee, he and Ezra were both covered in blood and soot, and were about a dozen feet away from a now burning SUV. Nathan's sharp commands, the howling of the ambulance sirens…

A sudden sound of footsteps interrupted the flashback; Buck blinked and saw that the nurse had already left, and that Josiah had just brought Vin from the ATF office.

"No news yet," Nathan said instead of a greeting.

Vin nodded silently and went to sit near JD, ignoring the empty chair beside Chris. He looked
more angry than scared and, damn it, the boy had every right to be angry with them! They shouldn't have let this happen. It didn't matter that Chris had actually told them that Vin had been the target, they should have thought about protecting Ezra. *He* should have thought about the older teen…

'Damn you, Wilmington, some uncle you are!'

Buck looked at Larabee again; the man obviously hadn't even noticed Vin's arrival. Buck recognized the signs in Chris's slumped posture and glazed stare, and he didn't like them at all. Fear and guilt were eating up every adult in the room, but they were crushing Chris completely. And a crushed Chris was not what Ezra needed right now.

Buck stood up and came to Chris, standing between him and the OR, thus making Larabee look at him.

"Chris, listen to me," Buck said in a voice quiet, but thick with emotion. "That boy in there has a rough road ahead of him, and he'll need support every damn step of it. The support from a strong father, not a guilt-ridden wreck!"

The expression in Chris's eyes changed, showing he had heard Buck's words, heeded them and pulled himself together. The old friends nodded to each other, and Buck went back to his chair.

10.

*Denver Memorial Hospital, Saturday*

Chris sat at Ezra's bedside, looking at the pale and injured form of his son, covered with tubes and sensors. His heart was clenched tightly by guilt, fear and self-loathing; the memories he'd been keeping at bay for so long due to the pain they caused, now marched freely through his mind...

A four-year-old with green eyes occupying half of his face, a perfect little gentleman already. "Good day to you, sir. Are you my father?"... The first poker game he'd lost big time to the 6-year-old, the tongue-lashing Sarah had given him after that, for setting such a bad example... A lot of following card games, for candy, when Sarah wasn't looking...

"Damn you, Larabee, you are a blind idiot," Chris whispered to himself. Why did it take nearly losing something to realize just what it had meant to you? Oh, he'd been lucky this time, Ezra's life was out of danger, but... he might have lost him even before McKenzie's interference. Vin's words from before kept ringing in his head, *he already thinks you don't give a shit about him*...the most dreadful thing about it, was that the boy had reasons to think so. Chris's initial reaction to McKenzie's threat was just a logical conclusion of the last exhausting month, and the fact that he was with Vin at the time of the warning call. And the knowledge of that made Chris want to hit the mirror in the hospital bathroom. But he had no right to wallow in guilt and self-hatred, Buck was right about that, he needed to be strong. Ezra's prognosis was good, the doctors had promised a full recovery, but it wouldn't be quick or easy. Chris needed his strength to be there for his son... if Ezra would allow it.

Chris sighed, covering Ezra's hand, still and white, with his own. If Ezra gave him the slightest chance - he would do anything to earn his trust back. And Vin too, because he might have lost both their trusts completely over this...

Chris jerked in surprise, suddenly feeling a hand on his shoulder; he looked up and saw Vin, who must have just materialized in the room. Chris caught his son's gaze with trepidation... and saw no condemnation in the clear blue eyes.
"He'll be okay, Dad," Vin said simply. "And then we'll make it right."

Chris nodded, feeling that a part of the weight on his shoulders had just been lifted. Maybe he would get that slightest chance after all...

Vin squeezed his shoulder slightly, walked around the bed and sat at the other side. Chris clasped Ezra's small hand between his two larger ones.

"You've got to wake up soon, son. We have fifteen years to catch up on."

*Two hours later*

Ezra floated in the darkness, occasionally disturbed by colorful images.

*Miscreants, pushing him in a dark blue car... Sitting in the back seat, smashed between two gorillas... An attempt to learn what was going on, which earned him a couple of heavy elbows to the ribs... A glimpse of Mr. Dunne on his bike, caught in the rear view mirror, and the realization that, whatever was going on, he wasn't alone in this... The familiar silhouette of Chris's car on the left, he'd never been so glad to see it... And then a sharp turn, tumbling, pain and smoke... Firm hands, dragging him somewhere, a fight with the upcoming darkness... And the voice of his father in the ocean of pain 'I got you, son'... And then he let the darkness claim him.*

But now he was trying to surface, orienting to bleak light, rhythmical beeping, both calming and slightly irritating, and a familiar chemical smell.

Ezra finally opened his eyes (after the third attempt) and saw Chris's face above him. The man looked like hell, something must be wrong.

"Dad? What happened?" his lost his voice halfway through, and immediately felt an ice chip on his lips.

"Shhh," Chris said in low voice. "You were hurt, but you'll be okay. Everything will be okay now, I promise."

Chris Larabee always kept his promises, so everything really would be okay. Ezra closed his eyes and relaxed back onto his pillows; already falling into the arms of Morpheus. As he nodded off, Ezra heard Chris whispering:

"Never scare me like that again, kid."

Strange... neither his being hurt, nor Chris being scared was a good thing in itself, but somewhere between these two statements a good message was hidden... he would decipher it later.
Chapter 6

11.

Denver Memorial Hospital, the next Thursday

Chris stood in the hospital corridor and watched through the window his sons talking with each other in Ezra's room. Vin had just come from school, and Chris was giving the boys some privacy while Ezra was awake. The injured boy still tired quickly; it wouldn't take long before he fell asleep again.

Chris smiled, seeing Vin gesturing animatedly as he was speaking. Lord, during the last few days he had learned more about Ezra than in all the previous months combined – and most of it just by watching the boys together. And there were some revelations about Vin along the way too.

"Your coffee, stud."

Chris looked to his left and saw Buck, who'd driven Vin to the hospital from school that day, handing him a cup, he must have won against the coffee machine this time.

The team had established a routine. Chris stayed in the hospital, on a 'parent' cot in Ezra's room, and left the room only if it was necessary – or to give the boys some time together, like now. Vin wasn't allowed to stay for the nights, so he'd been staying with Josiah, who had dropped him off at the hospital in the mornings and picked him up in the evenings. Until Tuesday, when Ezra had been coherent enough to insist Vin shouldn't miss his classes; taking this insistence as a sign that the worst was over, Vin had agreed. So the last few days Josiah had driven him to school, then Buck and JD had alternated picking him up there and bringing him to Denver Memorial. (Though McKenzie was again safely locked away, nobody wanted to take chances and have Vin travel alone just yet.) Nathan usually dropped by early in the day, to back Chris up in questioning Ezra's doctors during morning rounds. Josiah appeared on his way home after work, taking Vin with him after visiting hours were over and they were kicked out. The ranch was being looked after by Nettie and a couple of the guys who worked for her; Buck had been there on Sunday and brought back everything Chris, Vin and Ezra might need in town.

"Those two are sure a sight for sore eyes, aren't they?" Buck motioned with his cup towards the window.

"Yes, they are," Chris answered, returning to his earlier musings. "Did you know Ezra has been helping Vin with his schoolwork since September?"

"For free?" Buck asked, half-teasingly.

"For free." Something in Chris's tone made Buck grow serious. "They've managed to become brothers, Buck, truly brothers while I was busy catching the bad guys and making an ass of myself."

Buck sighed. "Believe me, Chris, when it comes to being a blind jackass, you're in good company. But you know what, stud? We're damn lucky jackasses; we still have the chance to fix our mistakes."

"Yeah…" Yeah, he still had a chance to fix his mistakes, especially if he avoided making new ones in the process.
So far things had looked hopeful – Ezra had been accepting his presence and his care, and had almost been forgetting to call him 'sir'. The boy was too weak to have any of his masks and defenses up, so Chris finally began to realize just what exactly he'd been missing – and what he might still lose, if he didn't do everything right. And he didn't want to lose it, but what if Ezra closed up again when he regained his strength? Chris knew he had to talk with his son, and he intended to do it when Ezra would be up to it, probably when they released him... hospitals weren't too good a place for such talks. The problem was, Chris wasn't sure what he should say to the son he'd let down so - and what he shouldn't.

Ezra knew that he'd been kidnapped by Larabee's enemies, who had been caught by now, and it pained Chris to see that the boy, in some twisted way, felt honored at being picked by them. But Ezra didn't know the details yet, didn't know that there had been nearly 24 hours between the actual threat and JD's appearance at St. James's. And Chris couldn't decide if he should tell him. He had his reasons for both 'yes' and 'no', but they were his reasons, and it was Ezra who mattered here.

Chris again focused his eyes on what was happening in the room, and saw Vin carefully removing a glass from Ezra's hand and lowering the upper side of the bed. Sleep had won again. Well, Chris remembered suddenly, there was a person who understood Ezra much better than anyone else. Finishing his coffee, Chris reached a decision; the first opportunity they had for a chat without the chance of Ezra overhearing them - he would ask for Vin's advice.

The opportunity presented itself later that day, when they were waiting for Ezra's return from X-ray. Having given up on finding a suitable lead in, Chris just asked straight away what Vin thought he should tell Ezra.

Vin looked around for a bit, thinking, and then said firmly:

"Ez doesn't need to know this." And after a moment he added, looking his father in the eyes and emphasizing each word: "It's enough that I know."

Chris, feeling like a criminal who'd been released with a warning, nodded solemnly. And Vin did warn him, that he wouldn't forget and wouldn't allow Chris to play favorites again – in any way. And Chris couldn't help but feel a touch of pride at hearing that warning. At the end of this whole mess, he found that he was actually proud of Vin, nearly as much as he was disgusted with himself. Vin hadn't acted like a shy teenager, avoiding rocking the boat; he'd acted like a man, protecting his own. And Chris was sure, if the situation was somehow reversed, he would have received the very same warning from Ezra.

Larabee nodded one more time, silently promising himself that, in the future, his boys would never need to protect each other from him.

12.

Larabee's ranch, the next Tuesday

Nearly two weeks after the crash, and Ezra was finally being released from the hospital, with a long list of medications and a therapy schedule. Just in time, because, as Chris had realized only a day before with astonishment, it was Thanksgiving week already. Buck and JD had plunged happily into planning for a Thanksgiving dinner at the ranch and managed to drag Nathan and Josiah in with their enthusiasm. Chris didn't interfere; it was safer than the 'get-well party' they had planned at first, anyway. But Chris himself carefully avoided thinking about the holiday celebrations – he had to talk with Ezra first. And he hoped to do that today.

Around 11 a.m. Chris completed the necessary paperwork at the hospital, and he and Buck settled
the sleepy teenager in the back seat of Buck's truck and drove to the ranch. Vin was at school, and Chris suspected that he'd actually gone there today not because of the test in History, but to give Chris and Ezra some space.

The roads weren't in their best shape, so the ride was long and slow, but uneventful; the threesome had lunch at the ranch together, and then Buck left for work. Ezra didn't resist the idea of going to lay in bed right after lunch, but stating that he'd slept soundly all the way home, he instead used his pillows to prop himself up. Seeing that the boy really was wide awake, Chris decided that there was no time like the present for a little father-son talk.

"Ezra, we need to talk. Could you listen to me now?"

The boy nodded, looking slightly surprised, so Chris took a low stool and sat on it beside the bed, this way their faces were on an even level. Then, taking a deep breath, he began, looking at the wall behind Ezra's head.

"Ezra… I let you down, son. And not for the first time. I've been letting you down for all these years…I know there is no apology strong enough, but," he now looked straight into those bright green eyes, "I'm sorry, son."

Before Ezra could react, Chris continued:

"I want you to know – that Friday, I have never been so scared in my life. And I'm still scared that I might lose you without ever knowing the real you. I want to know you, I want to be there for you, I want to be your father like I should have been from the beginning. And I'm asking you – could you give me another chance?" Chris trailed off, patiently waiting for a reply.

Ezra was shocked. With the apology, with the request, and with the sincerity he could detect in both. He recalled the resolutions he'd made three weeks ago – was it possible he had been wrong then? Chris Larabee (well, at least sober Chris Larabee, added some irritating voice inside his head) usually meant what he was saying; and, after days in the hospital, Ezra knew that Chris cared. Oh, of course, obligation and guilt, imaginary or real, were there too, but care and concern were stronger. Ezra couldn't deny it. And there were some other things the boy had to admit also, however reluctantly.

Enduring a treatment, or waiting for pain-killers to kick in, had been easier with Chris holding him, telling him it was okay to cry if it hurt like hell. His steady presence, reassuring, but not overwhelming, had kept the nightmares on a tight leash; and all fears and doubts about any permanent damage had been chased away by his father's silent faith. Ezra had had his share of hospital stays before, but this had been the first time he'd never been left alone, the first time he felt safe. He'd never had so many visitors before, either, and he'd tried to tell at least Chris that it wasn't necessary, but he could never bring himself to actually say it. Maybe because, deep down, he'd known that Chris needed to be with him even more than Ezra had needed his presence there. For the first time since his last 'summer at the ranch' of so long ago, Ezra had felt himself a part of the family. He'd been a son, a brother and even a nephew. And though he should know better, he wanted to preserve that feeling.

And now he was being asked to give this family another chance. That same irritating mental voice, sounding suspiciously like Maude's, kept telling him that giving others second chances was foolish, and only led to hurt and disappointment; but another voice, with Vin's intonations, argued that the possible outcome was well worth the risk, that the hand should be played out. And Ezra decided to side with the second, Texan voice.

He smiled, openly and genially, and outstretched his hand:
"I think we could give it a try."

Relief lit up Chris's eyes, as he grasped Ezra's forearm the way Vin had done earlier. Ezra returned the grip, putting all the strength he had at the moment in it. It wasn't much, but Chris smiled – the same smile Ezra had last seen on his face nearly six years ago.

A sudden cough attack saved both father and son from any awkward silence that might have followed; Chris held Ezra, rubbing his back, till the attack passed and then eased him back on the pillows. Chris's cell beeped shortly after, signaling it was 2 p.m. – time for Ezra to take some of his medications. Chris picked out two tablets from the medical box and gave them to the boy with a glass of water. Ezra, finally having calmed his breathing, scowled but took them without a complaint; he really hated being so weak and exhausted.

"Well," he commented after he had swallowed. "if I recognized the foul taste of that particular medication correctly, it will send me into the arms of Morpheus within five minutes."

Chris chuckled. "My Grandmother used to say that sleep is the best medicine," he stood up to help put the pillows down. "I guess she was right." Chris restrained his urge to actually tuck in the blanket – after all Ezra was fifteen, not seven - and continued: "Rest now, you'll make it all up later, I promise."

Chris went to the window, to close the curtains, but Ezra's voice stopped him,

"No need, Dad, leave them open."

"Okay," Chris turned back to the bed and saw that Ezra was already yawning. "If I'm not here, I'll be in the office. I'll leave the doors open so just holler when you're awake, okay?"

"Okay," Ezra carefully turned to his side and closed his eyes.

Chris waited till the boy was sound asleep, then, laughing inwardly at himself, did rearrange the blanket a little. He made sure that the glass with water was within easy reach, but not in danger of falling from the night stand, and quietly left the room.

A pile of papers Buck had dropped off waited for Chris on his desk. He glared at them, but alas, they didn't vanish. With a sigh, Chris admitted it was a time to start catching up on his paperwork, he even grabbed the upper folder, but his mind was elsewhere, and he found himself making notes on a clean sheet of paper about what should be done in the near future. Some things should be arranged to make Ezra's recovery as smooth as possible; and some major changes should be discussed with both boys in a week or two.

Chris chuckled, remembering 'the most enlightening', as Ezra himself would have said, phone conversation with the Dean of St. James. The woman, very polite and obviously concerned, had told him to focus on Ezra's recovery and not to worry about the academic program. And that even if Ezra missed the rest of the Fall semester, he would still be ahead of the program on most subjects.

Well, anyway, as far as Chris was concerned boarding schools were out of the question now. He had less than three years before college with the boy – and he wasn't intending to lose a single minute of them. Too much time had been lost already. Of course, there was the unpredictable factor called Maude Standish, but so far she seemed content to leave Ezra alone; and if she tried to make Ezra do something he didn't want to, Chris still had enough information in his old files to make her think twice.

About an hour later Chris went quietly to check on Ezra – and stopped in surprise, seeing that the
door to the boy's room was closed and hearing voices from behind it. Chris leaned on the wall, shaking his head. Vin, that little Indian brave! Nettie must have already driven him home, and he'd managed to sneak in his brother's room, with Chris sitting on the same floor with his door opened and straining his hearing every five minutes in case Ezra had awakened or moaned in his sleep. Yeah, the blue-eyed teen sure had a talent. Chris had to suppress a chuckle, realizing suddenly that the idea of signing the boys up for the same school might be considered inhumane – in regards to the teaching staff. Chris pondered if he should go back to the office or knock at the door, when he clearly heard Vin asking a question and decided to stay in place, listening. Okay, maybe not listening, but eavesdropping; just this once.

"Chris talked with ya?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"We decided to give it another try."

"Good."

Chris let out the breath he'd been holding.

"And Vin? Stop calling him Chris for my sake. He is your father, too."

Oh. Chris hadn't paid attention before, but come to think of it, yes, during the last months Vin really hadn't call him 'Dad' in Ezra's presence.

"No need to blush, Vin. Of course I noticed and I appreciated it. But if we want this 'family thing' to work – we must all participate equally."

"Including the bunch of crazy Uncles?"

"I'm afraid yes, including them."

Chris smiled, blinking away the moisture from his eyes. Buck was right, he was one damn lucky bastard. He had four crazy brothers whom he owed more than he could ever repay and two extraordinary teenagers as sons. Not a traditional family, but a family nevertheless. And for the first time in years, Chris was actually looking forward to Thanksgiving dinner. Family dinner. He had reasons to be thankful – and the most precious two were laughing behind this door right now.

Chris unstuck from the wall and went the three remaining steps. This 'family thing' would work, if he didn't screw up. And he wouldn't. Chris knocked at the door.

"Come in, Dad," two voices answered in chorus.

And Chris Larabee walked in, entering the next chapter of his life.

The End!