

THE TIES THAT DIVIDE  
Two brothers, one woman, scores to settle

© 2020 Jack Cameron

PART 1

Chapter 1

1971

My real name is Elmer. Elmer Elmore. I hate my name, but I'm telling you now, at the beginning of my story, because I want you to trust me. I'd never lie.

I've been called "LB" as long as I can remember. "LB" means "Little Brother." In school, it means "Lean Bean," because I'm tall for my age and skinny, or "Lame Brain," when I make a mistake. My big brother is Gabe. He's 14 and I'm 12. That's only two years, but I'm forever the little brother.

Gabe is the star of the family. He's actually my half-brother. His mother, Helen, died in a car crash, and my father took up with my mother, Sara. They never married, so I'm technically Gabe's bastard half-brother. Younger, bastard, half-brother. It doesn't bother me that they never married. Usually.

I was too young to remember, but Gabe likes to tell me that Sara and my father fought all the time. He enjoys saying things that make me sad. One rainy night, he says, my father got so mad that he punched her. I know she punched him back. I know it because I got my temper from her. She left in her car and hasn't been seen since. I guess she must've been unhappy here, but it seems cruel to have left her baby with these people.

We live in a little town called Arboleda de Sicómoros, or Sycamore Grove. The town has about 9,000 people, and is in the valley about 35 miles east of the Pacific Ocean and California's

Central Coast. Father, always with a capital “F,” is the mayor and owns the only heavy equipment rental business in the valley. He also owns our big ranch house on the outskirts of town, and the seven acres that surround it.

Gabe and I have been rivals as long as I can remember. Father likes it that way. He sets us up to compete with each other. Gabe was always better at everything when I was little, but I know the exact moment that started to turn around. We were in the back yard on a hot Sunday in June, and Father was teaching us how to throw a football. I caught every pass and threw perfect spirals back at him. Gabe was all thumbs. Father actually praised me, saying things like, “Hey, LB, there’s my little quarterback.”

When Father got tired, Gabe and I walked to the house together. I felt close to him for the first time, and thought he’d be proud of me for earning Father’s praise. I carried the football, like it was my prize. When we passed behind the big escallonia bush that blocked the view from the house, Gabe knocked the ball out of my hands. I lunged for it, and he tripped me. I fell flat on my face. Then he sat with his knees on my shoulders and yanked my arm up my back so hard that I yelped in pain.

“You’re still a bastard,” he whispered in my ear. “Everything was perfect ‘till you came along.” He started to get up, but dropped down again, whispering, “Do you know why your mother ran away? It’s because she hated you, that’s why.” He punched the back of my head. “Why don’t you go find her, if you miss her so much. Show her what a wimp you are.”

Picking up the football, he climbed off me and sauntered to the house, spinning the ball in his hands. I lay in the grass, cradling my sore arm and trying desperately not to cry.

## Chapter 2

“Why don’t you go find her.” I tossed and turned all night with Gabe’s taunt echoing in my head. How did he know that’s what I wanted more than anything? “When I’m 16,” I told myself over and over. “When I can drive.”

But where would I search? All I knew about my mother was that people said she loved Big Sur and the ocean. Well, I did know what she looked like. There was a picture of her and Father in his office. She was pregnant with me, and I could tell she was sad. Father’s smile looked fake, like when you have to smile for the school photographer. A piece of paper taped to the glass said, “Christmas, 1960 (maybe has to be 1958 or 1959 if he’s 12 in 1971).” I was born the next month.

I’m sure I wasn’t supposed to know about the picture. One of Father’s rules was that I wasn’t allowed in his office, but I snuck in whenever I could to look at it.

My sleepless night dragged on. I dozed, in and out of dreams, wondering about my mother. Was she nice? Why wasn’t she happy? Did she really hate me? In the wee hours, I thought I heard a big truck approach the house, with its engine idling and its tires crunching on the gravel driveway. I’d heard the sound before in the dead of night, but this was the first time I thought anything of it. The engine noise stopped, and I heard men’s low voices. I think I heard them, but I finally fell asleep, so I may not have.

At dawn, I got up to do my chores. The chickens had laid about a dozen eggs, and I carried them carefully into the kitchen. Trimming the oregano patch was next. I had to jump to reach the nippers on a peg behind the kitchen door. Nippers in hand, I walked back outside into the early morning sun. It was peeking over the hills far to the east, lighting the sky with pink and gold.

I never wondered why Father had a big patch planted with oregano. All I knew was that one of my chores was to trim the mature growth from a different row every few days, tie the leafy

stems into bunches, and carry them to the drying shed for one of the Mexican workers to do something with. Remembering the noise last night, I suddenly was curious. I walked to the barn on the far side of the driveway and stuck my head inside. Nothing seemed out of place in the dim light, although the hay smelled more pungent than usual. “I must’ve imagined the noise,” I decided.

Back in the kitchen, I put away last night’s clean dishes and set the table for breakfast. Letitia, the housekeeper, would arrive soon to cook the morning meal. Sleepiness from my wakeful night overtook me, and I sat. I couldn’t help resting my head on the table, breaking one of Father’s cardinal rules.

Gabe shambled in a few minutes later. I jerked upright. He looked exhausted, like he’d never gone to bed. “Are you alright?” I asked. He fell into the chair across from me and said, “Shut up.”

Father walked in. He was freshly saved, but looked tired also. He said, “Letitia’s sick. Peg’s going to be here in 10 minutes, so get a move on. We’re all going to go inspect a job site that I’m gonna bid on with her.”

“But, Father,” Gabe protested. “What about breakfast?” I had the same question, but let Gabe stick his neck out. Father didn’t tolerate having his pronouncements contradicted.

“Grow up, boy. You’re not always gonna get three squares a day. Time you get used to it.”

I groaned silently. I was really hungry, plus I faced spending the day in the hot car with Father and my jerky brother. But, I suddenly saw an opportunity. If I stayed here, I could look around Father’s office without fear of getting caught. Tantalizing as that was, I had to tread carefully. I said, “Umm, Father, can I stay here? I can do Letitia’s chores, and ... and pull weeds in the oregano patch. And the chicken coop needs —”

“You mean, stay here an’ pound your little pud,” Gabe interrupted.

“Gabriel!” Father snapped. “We don’t talk like that in this house.”

I shot back, “Yeah, Gabe, what’re you doing in the bathroom five times a day.”

“Homo,” Gabe sneered.

“Queer.”

“Knock it off, both of you,” Father roared. “No more back talk. Ten minutes, or the belt comes off.”

“Yessir,” we both mumbled. Gabe added, “Where are we going, Father?”

He said, “Big Sur. Now get your butts in gear.”

Those two words were magic. Big Sur. My mother’s favorite place in the whole world. I could finally see it for myself. And the ocean she loved so much. I might even see where she lives, and, did I dare to hope, see her.

The sun found the kitchen window and flooded the room with bright light. “It’s going to be a good day,” I told myself.