

**THE TIES THAT DIVIDE**  
Two brothers. One woman. Scores to settle

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PART 1

Chapter 1

1971

My real name is Elmer. Elmer Elmore. I hate my name, but I'm admitting it now, at the beginning of my story, because I'm honest. I'd never lie.

Everyone calls me "LB." It means "Little Brother." In school, it means "Lean Bean," because I'm tall 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'll always be the little brother.

Gabe is the star of my 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 actually Gabe's bastard half-brother. Younger, bastard, half-brother. It doesn't bother me they never married. Well, usually.

I was too young to remember, but Gabe likes to tell me Sara and my father fought all the time. He likes to say things that make me sad. One rainy night when I was three, he says, my father got so mad he punched her. I know she punched him back. I know it because I got her temper. She left in her car and hasn't been seen since.

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 edge of town, and the seven acres around it.

Gabe and I have been rivals as long as I can remember. Father likes it that way. He makes us compete with each other. Gabe was always better at everything when I was little, but I know exactly when that started to change. 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 Father's view, 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 I cried 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 got up and sauntered to the house, spinning the ball in his hands. I lay in the grass, cradling my sore arm and trying not to cry.

## Chapter 2

"Why don't you go find her." I couldn't sleep that night. Gabe's taunt echoed 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 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 the school photographer makes you smile. A piece of paper taped to the glass said, "Christmas, 1959." I was born the next month.

I'm sure I wasn't supposed to know about the picture. One of Father's rules was Gabe and I couldn't go in his office, but I snuck in whenever I could to look at it.

My sleepless night dragged on. I dozed, wondering about my mother. Was she nice? Why wasn't she happy? Did she really hate me? About 2:00 or maybe 3:00, I thought I heard a big truck outside. Its engine idled and its tires crunched on the gravel drive. I'd heard the sounds a few times in the middle of the night since I started using the bedroom close to the driveway, but I never 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 maybe I didn't.

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 grabbed the nippers off the nail behind the kitchen door and walked back outside into the early morning sun. It was barely over the hills in the east, and it lit the sky with pink and gold.

I never wondered why Father had a such a big patch of oregano. All I knew was that I had to trim the 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 was curious. I walked across the driveway to the barn and stopped a few steps inside 'till I could see in the dim light.

Nothing was different, except for the smell. Hay was always in the air, but now I smelled something sweet and bitter too. In the left bay, there was the plywood table where the Mexican workers ate lunch and Father did paperwork sometimes. Plywood for the new roof was stacked on the ground by the wall. Rolls of plastic sheeting lay next to the stack. There was Father's

giant meat freezer in the far corner. He owned a grocery store before I was born, and the freezer had been there as long as I could remember. It was always locked, except when he put in meat from a hunting trip. The compressor started up, rumbling like a truck. I decided that must've been the noise I heard last night.

Back in the kitchen, I put away last night's clean dishes and set the table for breakfast. Letitia, our cook and housekeeper, would arrive soon. I sat down and couldn't help resting my head on the table, breaking one of Father's rules.

Gabe shuffled in a few minutes later. I jerked awake. 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."

I wondered if he'd heard the truck noises last night, even though his bedroom was on the other side of the house next to my old room. "Hey, did you hear a truck in the driveway last night?"

"No. Don't talk to me."

Father walked in. He had shaved but looked tired also. He said, "Letitia's sick. Peg's going to be here in ten minutes, so get a move on. We're all going to go inspect a job 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 like having his orders questioned.

"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 was going to be in the hot car with Father and my jerky brother all day. But, I suddenly saw an opportunity. If I didn't go, I could look around Father's office without worrying about getting caught. The hard part was asking for permission

without making him mad. 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.

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

“Yeah, Gabe,” I said, “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 was finally going to see it for myself. And the ocean she loved so much. I might even see where she lives, and maybe even see her.

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

### Chapter 3

Peg pulled up to the house fifteen minutes later. Father called through the screen door, “We’ll take my Blazer. We need four-wheel drive.” He walked down the steps, and they stood next to her car, talking quietly.

Father was big. He was about six-foot-three and had been a linebacker in high school. He still looked like a football player, only heavier. His brown hair was the same color as mine, but his sideburns were getting gray.

Peg Harvey owned the only truck rental business in the valley, and she and Father worked together on a lot of construction projects. Her trucks often rumbled past our house on their way to the equipment yard in the back of our property. The workers would load one of Father's front-loaders or Bobcats on the trailer, and they'd drive off to the jobsite. Gabe said they got jobs as far south as Santa Barbara, and as far north as Monterey. He said they'd done business with each other as long as he could remember.

Gabe called Peg "Turnip Woman," because she was short, with a big round middle and a skinny top. I disagreed with Gabe on everything, but he was right on this one. Looking out the window at Father and Peg as they talked, he towered over her. He spoke in a loud voice because she was a little deaf. They seemed to be talking seriously. Father pounded his fist into his palm, and a moment later, threw up his hands. I heard him say, "Dammit, it was the only thing I could do!"

He turned to face the screen door. "Gabe! LB! Front and center, on the double."

The sun was already hot outside. We walked slowly to Father's Chevy Blazer, parked under the big oak tree in the corner of the yard. I pictured us bouncing around in the cramped back seat for the rest of the day. Gabe whispered, "Shotgun." That meant he was claiming dibs on the seat behind the passenger, which would have more leg room because Peg was so short. I was mad at myself for not thinking of it first.

Just before we reached the Blazer, I heard Peg's car door slam closed behind us. A second later, someone crashed into my back, knocking me to my hands and knees. When I got up, Peg's nephew, Roscoe, stood there with a big grin on his face. He said, "Hey, Lean Bean. Got you good that time."

Roscoe was the clown of our seventh-grade class. He was fat and had red hair and freckles, and would wear his tee shirt inside out rather than find a clean one to put on. He always forgot to

tie his shoelaces and would walk into class late and trip on purpose, just to get a laugh. He was my best friend.

I smiled. “Hey, Rock Head. I’ll get you back, and you won’t even see me comin’.” I play-punched him in the stomach.

He kicked at the dirt with his sneaker. “Aunt Peg said I’d just get in trouble if she left me at home,” he said sheepishly. We both thought of ourselves as young men, so it was hard for him to admit that, but I was pretty sure Father thought the same thing.

I laughed. “You get in trouble? Could never happen.”

“Hey,” Roscoe said, “I got a new joke I just made up. Ready?”

“Yeah.”

“OK, OK. Remember in science class, what you saw when you looked at a drop of water under a microscope?”

“Umm, amoebas?”

“Yeah, but what else?”

“Yeah, there was something else .... I know. It was, whadaya call ‘em ... parameciums.”

“That’s right. Parameciums. OK, OK, now what do you see if Chrissy Smithers bends over in front of you?”

Chrissy Smithers was a transfer student. She must’ve been older than the rest of the kids, because when school started in the fall, she wore nothing but baggy sweatshirts, but by June, her blouses were so tight they looked like they’d pop open. The boys all stared, and the girls treated her mean and acted jealous.

I said, “Her butt?”

“No, no. OK, OK, what if she bent over facing you?”

“Her blouse?”

“Jeez, Elmer, are you dense? C’mon, you’re messing up my joke. Now think. What if she was wearing a bathing suit?”

I was lost. All I could think of was, “I’d see ... her bathing suit?”

“You are such a lame brain! Think! She’s wearing a bathing suit and she’s bending over in front of you. You’d see her bazongas, her boobs, her tits.”

“So what does that have to do with ...?”

“A pair-of-me-see-ums. Get it? You’d see a pair-of-me-see-ums!”

His eyes crinkled and his cheeks turned red, like he wasn’t going to laugh until I did.

I finally got it. Parameciums and pair-of-me-see-ums. It was the stupidest joke I’d ever heard. But I laughed anyway, ‘cause it was kind of funny, and when I did, the creepy memories of last night faded away. As soon as I laughed, Roscoe cracked up, and we both laughed until we cried.

“I wonder what they’d look like,” I sputtered, causing more giggles.

Gabe stood a few feet away, watching us. He spat into the dirt. “You’re both idiots.”

“Like you’ve ever seen a pair-of-me-seeums,” I taunted.

Gabe mumbled, “You two better stay outa my way. And you, lard ass, don’t crowd me in the car.”

Father interrupted us. “Alright. The three of you, in the back, now.”

We climbed in. Gabe and I sat by the windows with Roscoe in the middle, shoulder to shoulder and butt to butt. I was glad my friend was going with us, but it was already hot and cramped and stuffy.

Peg pulled herself into the passenger’s seat. Father ground the gears shoving the shifter into first. We lurched down the driveway and took the road into town. At the end of Main Street, he turned right onto Highway 101.



That meant we weren't going to Big Sur. Father's office had a wall-map of Central California, and I traced the route to Big Sur with my finger every time I snuck in there. We were on the wrong road. He should've turned left to get to Highway 46, which would take us west to the Pacific and Highway 1, where we would turn north to get to Big Sur. The road we were on went north, but was inland from where Father said we were going.

Disappointment hit me like a punch in the stomach.

Bored and unhappy, I leaned my head against the window and watched the golden-brown fields and hills go by. The sun was hot. The tires rumbled, the engine buzzed, and the wind roared. Before long, I was sleepy. "I guess Father changed his mind," I thought as I dozed off, "or maybe he just plain lied."