

SHADOWLINE

Prologue - TRAILHEAD

The alarm clock was seven minutes from launch when Vin Tanner's hand slipped from under the covers and slapped it off. Waking before the alarm was his usual routine - he kept setting the device just in case his natural tendencies let him down. Unlikely, but he could recall a time or two the alarm saved him a late arrival at work where he'd then be the prank target for the day. The idea of bumping Ezra from that delight made him smile when he remembered the next torture he'd thought up for his late-rising teammate.

Before throwing the covers back, he rolled to his back and took a moment to gather his thoughts regarding his team. Facing the ceiling but not really seeing it, Vin smiled again when he realized that today was a three-year anniversary - three years ago today he joined the ATF and by accepting a position on a developing team that was now like family. Up until that point, he always worked and lived alone, enduring a series of foster homes and group homes after his mother died just after his fifth birthday and then as an adult, excelling in the naturally solitary position of an Army Ranger sniper.

With a bagful of dark memories and visible scars to remember them by, Vin left the Army to join the U.S. Marshals' Office where he remembered very quickly why he left the Army. He didn't mind following rules, but when they came from a superior he neither trusted nor admired, the job created more stress than he was willing to endure anymore. Only a fortunate series of events causing Chris Larabee to cross his path saved Vin, and he finally found a family.

Excited to start the day, Vin threw back the blankets, sat up and turned, placing his feet on the cool floor. "*It's definitely fall,*" he thought with a shiver. He hustled to the bathroom and started the shower, then trotted to the kitchen and nudged the coffee maker to life. Though the thin apartment walls he heard Maria Hernandez scolding her children in Spanish. Vin chuckled at the exchange - the first day of school was not going over very well next door.

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By the time he returned to the shower, it was warm and steamy and Vin relished the extravagance of a long shower. Once it was over, he dressed, poured two travel mugs of the powerful, black liquid that his teammates refused to acknowledge as coffee, tucked his Glock automatic into his waistband and pulled on a flannel shirt. Juggling the two cups, he left the apartment and locked the door.

“Senor Vin!”

He grinned and turned at the little girl’s voice. “Buenos dias, Esmeralda!” he greeted. Then he looked up to the girl’s mother. “Good morning, Maria,” he said, glancing over her shoulder and winking at the toddler hovering in the hallway behind his mother. “I can walk Esmeralda to the bus if you’d like,” he offered. “I see Jesus is still feelin’ poorly.” The toddler sniffled as if on cue and blinked his watery eyes.

“Bless you, Vin,” Maria sighed. “Wait. I have something for you.”

He smiled down at the excited little girl reciting a half-English, half-Spanish description of the contents of her brand-new backpack. Since moving into the barrio area of Denver known as Purgatorio, Vin helped a lot of the children and their parents with their English. He spoke fluent Spanish, but with a teasing amount of Texas accent. He learned that you could take the man from Texas, but not Texas from the man.

Maria reappeared and handed Vin a warm tortilla stuffed with scrambled eggs and her special, home-made salsa. Vin smiled broadly and tucked one travel mug in his breast pocket. It was a tight fit, but his stomach’s growl forced the decision.

“Thank you, ma’m.” The delicious scent triggered a pavlovian response and Vin swallowed. Maria chuckled. “See you later, ma’m. Come on, ‘merelda, you can tell me about your things as we walk.” The little girl happily chatted all the way down four flights of stairs as Vin finished the burrito.

Esmeralda bounced at his side all the way to the bus stop a block away where she joined the cluster of milling children at the corner. Vin greeted a few of the mothers and they assumed custody of the little girl. He gave his thanks and departed, heading toward the well-schooled Jeep parked around the corner where he could see it from his bedroom window.

After situating the coffee cups, Vin climbed into the driver’s seat and started the vehicle. The drive to the Federal building was a chilly twenty minutes since he never bothered get real windows for the topless vehicle. The heater, though, excelled at warming his feet and between it and the coffee, the chill was tolerable. Vin expertly avoided the congested school zones and other busy streets and pulled up in front of the building’s main doors in good time. A slight, dark-haired young man dashed from his waiting spot at the top of the flight of concrete stairs.

“Hey, Vin!” John Daniel Dunne greeted as he scrambled into the Jeep. “Are you ever gonna get real windows? You may as well ride the Harley.”

Vin chuckled. “I promised Chris I wouldn’t ride it to work anymore, remember?” Vin glanced over his shoulder and merged into traffic. “Fall is in the air, ain’t it?”

JD buckled up and flipped his phone open, his fingers flying over the keys as he texted. “Buck wanted to know when you got here.”

Vin shook his head with a grin. Buck, the team’s explosives and tactical expert, adopted JD the moment they met three years ago. JD, an accomplished computer and electronics genius, was the youngest of the group at 23. Right from the start, Buck was the only one that seemed able to tolerate and control the exuberant kid and took him under his wing to show him the ropes of being an ATF Agent. Even after three years, Buck still acted as the father figure JD never had.

JD finished the text and put the phone away. “Thanks for the ride, Vin.”

“Didn’t make much sense for the both of us to drive to the range.” Vin dodged down an alley to avoid a red light.

“Shouldn’t be too crowded this time of day,” JD said. “I usually qualify during lunch like half the department does.”

“Yeah, I prefer mornin’s for just that reason.”

“I hear that temporary Range Master’s pretty good. Robby McMillan. You know him?”

“Heard of him,” Vin replied, pushing through a very stale yellow light. “From San Diego.”

“Yeah. He was an Army sniper, too, I guess.”

Vin didn’t bother to reply. JD and the team knew he wasn’t much for conversation and JD usually didn’t have a problem carrying on the discussion on his own and the subject changed to the upcoming release of a new video game. JD somehow got a hold of a copy and proceeded to relate to Vin his evaluation of the game. Vin was the only other team member that could best JD in a video game and the mop-haired kid was always up for the challenge. Vin enjoyed the match ups because of the normalcy of it all. Such youthful pursuits were missing in his history. The two of them were close in years, but Vin was much older in life experience. Josiah, the team’s profiler, called Vin “an old soul.”

Tucked behind an industrial area on the outskirts of Denver, the Federal shooting range boasted outdoor and indoor ranges, a small simulated town street that looked like a Hollywood set, and a rifle range complete with varied terrain. With quarterly qualifications under way, there were more cars than usual parked in the front lot.

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Vin and JD jumped from the Jeep and passed through gate security, walking directly to the handgun range. Vin, pleased to find an open end spot, pulled and checked his weapon. JD did the same a few positions away, chatting all the while with his neighbors. To hear him made Vin chuckle. Both of them passed the handgun qualifications with ease and brought up the rear of the line to log their results with the Range Master. A few minutes later, Vin stepped before a man with a clipboard.

“You’re Tanner?”

Vin met Robby McMillan's eyes. “Yup,” he acknowledged softly. McMillan looked older than Vin expected. Steely grey eyes studied him from under salt-and-pepper eyebrows. The man’s hair, though, was completely silver, surprisingly thick and combed straight back. Age lines trickled from the corner of his eyes and mouth. Vin didn’t feel any warmth from the man, and his first impression was to be cautious.

McMillan checked his sheet. “You’re slated for the rifle range, correct?”

“Yup. JD here’s my spotter.”

“I’ll get you a gun.” McMillan turned, but Vin stopped him with his next words.

“Don’t bother. I have my own in the lockers.”

The Range Master checked his sheet again. “Okay, I see that.” He set the clipboard down. “I have to qualify, too, so I’ll join you.”

Vin raised an eyebrow as McMillan walked away.

“Oh boy!” JD breathed. “This should be good! I think you can beat him, Vin.”

Vin shook his head and walked to the armory building. “It ain’t a contest.”

“Sure it is, Vin, Ezra . . . oops.” JD’s mouth snapped shut. Vin stopped and tilted his head in JD’s direction with narrowed eyes. JD offered a weak smile.

“Ezra’s takin’ odds on this?”

JD stuffed his hands in his pockets and hunched his shoulders. “Uh huh. You weren’t supposed t’ know.”

Vin rolled his eyes and continued walking. Ezra Standish, his team’s undercover Agent, also happened to be an accomplished gambler. “That’s why he was so interested in when I was shootin’,” he muttered. “It all makes sense now.”

JD, uncharacteristically quiet since the slipped information, collected a spotter scope and radio as Vin retrieved and inspected his sniper rifle. Vin handled the weapon with respect, checking every part with a sharp eye. He was the only one that used this particular weapon but habit made him check it thoroughly. There was a time in his life when a weapon just like this was an extension of his physical body and the only thing he completely trusted. A lot had changed in the past three years.

Vin, satisfied, hefted the weapon and its tripod and headed to the range. JD followed and kept his silence. He knew Vin needed to find his zone, and wondered if his partner noticed the small crowd gathering just outside the armory. He could see hands flashing as cash crossed palms. Vin angled a wry grin in his direction and JD wrinkled his nose as a reminder that he should never underestimate his friend's observational skills.

An hour later, they were lying flat on the rocky soil, the smell of gunpowder sharp against the scent of the dusty earth. Vin took a moment to find a smooth spot for his elbows among the array of rocky lumps and pitted earth. The rifle felt smooth and warm against his cheek and snug against his shoulder, the familiar sensations comfortable in the roughness of the terrain. Carefully sighted in, he squeezed the trigger in a practiced fashion. The rifle's kickback was a loving push and the target quivered in the scope's cross-hairs.

"Dead center," JD brought the sharpshooter back to the now with his comment. Vin, so tuned to the moment, forgot about his teammate a mere yard away. Then he heard JD say, "1,000 yards and dead center. Can he beat that?"

Vin's eyes slid sideways as JD shook his head in amazement.

A sharp report to their right made JD fumble for the spotter scope. "Damn!" he puffed. "He's dead center, too!" With each shot, JD's usual chatty nature slowly returned.

Vin sat up and collected his small notebook. "Not surprised. I heard Mac's pretty good," he commented softly as he hopped to his feet.

"Pretty good?" JD repeated in amazement. "That's better than 'pretty good,' Vin." The younger man rolled to his feet and gathered the spotting scope. He tucked it under his arm as he fell in beside his team's sniper, tilting his head aside to focus on Vin. "Can you beat him?"

Stepping carefully over the rocky ground, Vin hitched a shoulder. "Don't rightly know."

JD rolled his eyes. "Aw, come on, Vin. I know you have a feeling. We've been here all morning. You can't tell yet?"

"Not yet."

The younger man snorted. "And you're a liar."

Vin laughed and readjusted the rifle sling on his shoulder. He'd wondered himself who was the better shot since he didn't know a lot about McMillan. He respected the sniper's range scores so far, but he chose to hold his opinion until he knew about the man's field success. Paper targets were one thing, but shooting at a live target in a hot situation is what really defined the mettle of a man.

JD touched his ear briefly, obviously listening to the radio chatter, and then raised his eyes to Vin. "1,100?" he asked, his wrist microphone poised at his lips.

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Vin paused and looked back down range in thought. "13," he answered in a soft voice as he continued walking.

"Ha!" JD barked, shaking an accusatory finger at his partner. "You're challenging him, aren't ya? Okay, then!" He keyed the wrist mike. "Setting up at 1,300," he reported, his grin igniting his eyes' twinkle. Releasing the mike button and excitedly repositioning the sniper scope under his arm, JD gave Vin a quick glance. "Too bad Ezra's not here. I'm sure the odds are changing fast."

"You know better 'n to sell Ez short." Vin began walking to the 1,300 yard mark. "He's connected."

JD adjusted his ATF baseball hat. "You're probably right. Want to take a guess on the odds?"

"Nope."

Many questions and 300 yards later Vin settled onto the ground, nestling his elbows into the sparse soil as he set the rifle against his shoulder. JD knew to stop talking at this point so his teammate could concentrate. Vin welcomed the quiet; although he appreciated their friendship and JD's skills, Vin preferred the quieter company of their team leader. They shared something indefinable and were brothers at heart from the very start.

After a few minutes consisting of minor adjustments to his body and equipment, Vin nodded once. "Ready."

JD reported readiness to the Range Master and touched the earpiece. "You're clear. No wind changes."

Vin's attention narrowed to his sites, the target and the very familiar feel of his rifle. He felt his breathing and heartbeat slow as his senses took over. Every nuance of the environment registered automatically in his mind to aim the shot. He held for several long seconds until his instincts told him the time was right. Only then did he gently squeeze the trigger. He knew the results as he shot, but still felt satisfaction at JD's report.

"Dead center! Great shot, Vin!"

"Thanks." Vin brought his rifle's scope to his eye and found McMillan's target. Less than a minute later, he heard a shot.

"Three o'clock on the line!" JD whooped. "He's off center two inches! You beat him, Vin!"

JD's report barely registered in Vin's mind as he frowned and sat up. Slowly standing, he shouldered the weapon and collected his notebook.

"Vin? You beat him!" JD repeated, waiting for a reply.

"I reckon I did," Vin mused as they began their trek to the range office.

Tuning out the excited chatter of his teammate, Vin tried to understand the unease slowly building in the past hour. His adversary's eyes stuck in his mind; something there bothered him and instinct screamed that Robby McMillan wasn't

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all he seemed. Vin couldn't pinpoint any particular reason why he felt that way, but his wariness weighed heavy because there was one thing the Team 7 sniper had learned a long, long time ago: Never ignore your instincts.

Chapter One - PLANNING

It was early afternoon by the time Vin and JD stepped into the office, minutes before the final brief for the next day's operation with Team 5. When Vin moved toward his desk, he noted the smug look of satisfaction on Ezra's face and grinned at his conspirator's two-fingered salute sent his way. The sniper was sure the action had nothing to do with being friendly and everything to do with numerous betting pools. Vin acknowledged the salute with a quick nod.

"Glad you two could join us." Buck, leaning lackadaisically back in his chair, lobbed a wad of paper into a trashcan tucked into a corner. "Nothin' but net!" he acclaimed with fists raised high in victory. "That makes ten in a row! Want to concede or shall I continue?" He spun around in his chair and raised his brows at Josiah Sanchez. The profiler, nodding in silent appreciation, packed his own wad of paper.

"Well, you certainly are on a roll, Brother Buck." Josiah tossed the paper ball between his two large hands as he spoke, his lips pursed in thought.

"Yep, and I'm feelin' pretty good. Ten more would be a snap, I tell ya." He gave JD a wink and received an annoyed eye roll in return as the computer genius paused in front of Buck's desk and hitched a hip on one corner.

"Ten in a row, huh? Pretty good for an old man," JD quipped.

Buck scowled and slapped the boy's thigh. "Bite your tongue, youngster. You're crampin' my karma."

"I bet I can sink this from here," Josiah's deep voice challenged. Just reaching his desk, Vin glanced up, curious, and stopped next to his chair. The profiler's desk was across the room from the trash can in question so the trajectory would have to clear Buck's desk to sink the shot.

Amused, Vin watched Buck gape at Josiah before spinning around to look at the trash can. When he turned around again, a huge smile shifted his thick moustache higher on his cheeks. JD snorted and Ezra tilted his head, a motion that told Vin that the gambler was calculating returns in his mind.

"I would be willing to place a bill on that bet," Ezra interjected, his fingers steepled on his desktop. His index fingertips tapped together as he spoke.

"What?" Buck sputtered. He glanced between Josiah and the trash can again. "He can't make that on a first shot. I'll bet a fiver."

Ezra nodded acceptance. "Five it is, then."

Drawn in, Vin turned his eyes in the same direction as the other three and crossed his arms over his chest. Josiah closed one eye and gauged the distance to the receptacle as he leaned back. The rhythm of the paper ball never varied as it jumped up and down in the profiler's great paw. He tipped his head in thought for a second and then rolled the wad between the fingers of his pitching hand. He cocked back his arm in typical free throw form.

Everyone paused for a long moment, and then Josiah launched the wad. It made a perfect arc across the room, barely missing the ceiling on its way to the bin where it bounced lightly off one wall and fell squarely into the center of the trash can. Buck's jaw dropped in astonishment.

"YES!" JD barked, applauding. "Great shot, Josiah!"

"I'm just blessed," the big man replied, winking thanks to the ceiling.

Vin heard Buck muttering curses and, laughing softly while shaking his head, sat down.

"Shootin' like that almost rivals Vin's," JD said airily. "Shoulda seen him at the range, Ezra."

Ezra cocked a brow. "Whatever makes you think I did not?" He turned his computer screen in JD's direction.

JD frowned and a second later, his jaw dropped. "You hacked the video system at the range? Cool!"

"I have paid attention to your skills, Mr. Dunne. I did manage this little feat, but I daresay that you are still the master."

"What'd I miss?" Nathan stepped into the room drying a coffee cup in his hand with a paper towel. "Jeeze, I take one break and I miss something!"

Vin settled into the chair behind his desk and turned on his computer screen. The pleasant camaraderie relaxed his mind and body, grounding him in every way. A satisfied smile quirked a corner of his mouth just as Chris appeared in his office doorway. Vin knew that his boss and friend was quite aware of the antics in the bullpen but needed to wear his "supervisor face" every now and again.

"Final brief, gentlemen. Let's get it done." Like Vin, Chris was a man of few words.

The others gathered notes and noisily headed to the briefing room, Buck elbowing Josiah, JD grinning like a fool, Nathan mumbling to himself and Ezra maintaining a careful distance as he tugged on a sleeve. Vin and Chris waited to bring up the rear.

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"1,300 yards, huh?" Chris said lowly. "Slacker. Some sorry ass sniper you are."

"Perfect match for a sorry ass team leader, I'd say," Vin replied without hesitation.

"Watch it, Tanner. Performance reviews are due next week, you know. Three years I've been saddled with this bunch." Chris then gave Vin a playful whack to the back of his head. "See? I can hit my targets, too. Remember that."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Badass," Vin chuckled. Chris snorted and pressed his lips together to keep from joining him.

As they entered the briefing room and took their customary places, Buck loudly stated that it was his turn to pick code names for the upcoming detail. Everyone groaned. Chris slammed his notebook to the table a little harder than necessary to gain control of the briefing before it was too late; he'd learned a few things about his team over the years.

"Okay, let's get to it." Chris turned to the large white board at the head of the conference table. Enlarged mug shots stuck to it, arranged in a short pyramid. Chris pointed to a man in the third level. "As you know, he's who we're after. Marko Munos is suspected to be the top man in illegal arms in the south west United States and an integral part of the Carnicero Cartel. He can lead us directly to the leader of the Cartel, Arturo Carnicero." He pointed to the top man of the pyramid.

"Arturo Carnicero?" Nathan said. "He's in Colorado?"

"Not yet," Ezra interjected as a nail file magically appeared in his hand. He worked his nails as he spoke, completely at ease with these men. "Currently, he is in Mexico only. From what I ascertained, he is due to arrive early next week. The upcoming sale with Munos has quite captivated his attention. Marko himself told me of the senior Carnicero's planned visit."

"Arturo has sons, right?" Buck interlaced his fingers behind his head and leaned back. "The three just below his picture, there? Why ain't they handling this for him? I thought Arturo never left Mexico City."

"Normally, that is true." Ezra slipped the nail file in his pocket, clasped his hands together on the table and leaned on his elbows. "There is rumor of skirmishes amongst the sons. Felix has been groomed for years to take over when Daddy steps down, but Adrian and Gustavo seem to be taking exception to that plan."

"So Felix will be there today, right?" Buck asked. "He's the one that contacted Munos."

"No. He is the lead on this exchange but the senior Carnicero has arranged for Munos to close the deal solo."

"Why's that?"

Ezra smirked and sat back just enough for his hands to drop in his lap. "Rumor has it that Arturo has second thoughts about the eldest son Felix - or any of his sons, for that matter - handling this amount of money."

Everyone sat a little straighter in surprise and interest.

"I didn't realize the trust was that broken," Josiah voiced, his hooded eyes alive as he calculated this fact into his evaluation. "This changes the balance of the family."

"Yes," Ezra affirmed. "It does."

"Tomorrow is a first step," Chris summed up. "This family disruption gives us a way to break the Cartel. When we grab Munos, this will not only give us a great source of information, but we can exert more pressure on the family dynamic if we infer that Felix, the oldest son, is helping us."

"Implode the family," JD mused. "Bring it down from the inside. Think they'll go for it?"

"Guess we'll see," Chris said as he sat down. "Now, let's go over the bones of this operation one last time." He flipped open a folder. "We meet Team 5 at the staging area tomorrow at 10:00 for the final brief. Anyone have anything to add?"

"I have call names all ready to go, boss," Buck said as he leaned forward, smiling smugly.

"Great," Nathan grumbled. "I can hardly wait to hear this part."

"Can you get your nose anymore up in Chris' ass, Buck?" Vin commented with a laugh.

Buck simply raised one brow and ran a finger over one side of his healthy moustache. "Jealous?" he said, eyes sparkling.

The others laughed and then quickly silenced by Larabee's warning glare. Vin smiled hugely at the heated look, entirely unrepentant. "Nah," he said lightly, waving a hand in Chris' direction. "This cowboy don't scare me none."

Larabee focused his razor stare on Vin. "Don't call me cowboy," he growled in a tone that sent lesser men scrambling.

Vin smiled back, unabashed. "Gotcha. Can we git to work now, Cowboy?"

After a moment, Chris' tight lined lips curved and parted, revealing to Vin what looked like a predator's teeth. Vin froze.

"Well," Chris started. "I also forgot to mention that today is a special day for one of us." Vin flushed instantly. Chris straightened and surveyed the gathering. "Seems today is the third anniversary of this team being saddled with a certain long-haired, smart-mouthed member." The statement resulted in cat-calls, light applause and congratulations.

"I would think this auspicious occasion requires appropriate celebration," Ezra noted.

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"If that means drinks are on Vin tonight, then you're correct." Chris folded his arms across his chest and gave the sniper an 'I got you good' look.

Buck leaned over and whispered as Vin sank lower in his seat. "That's what you get for proddin' the big dog, boy."

Even with that, Vin still thanked the powers that guided him to friends like these. Within a half-hour, the meeting ended and the team shuffled from the conference room. When the hour hand swept to 5, the office was empty and the first round of beers clicked together with a bawdy toast at The Saloon.

Vin and the others held themselves to two beers and headed to their cars just before eight. Their goodbyes were unusually quiet considering their moods. Vin and Chris were the last to reach their cars.

"See you in the morning, then," Chris said as he fished his keys from his coat pocket. Vin nodded and turned to go, but Chris stopped him with a word. "Hey."

Vin turned. "Yeah?"

"Good job at the range today."

Vin grinned. "How much did ya win?"

"What?" Chris sputtered, trying - and failing - to appear offended. "Gambling in the workplace is not allowed. I know this as your supervisor, wiseass."

Vin cocked a brow and chuffed. "You forget that I know how you got your nickname."

Chris narrowed his eyes. "The only nickname I've heard lately is 'bastard'."

Vin laughed and pulled his keys from his jacket. "Well, that's true, but I'm talkin' about the other one. You know - 'Bad Element' because you're a terrible influence on innocent subordinates like moi."

"Moi?" Chris chuckled as he unlocked his truck. "Ezra's your 'Bad Element', Pard.'Moi'." Chris slipped behind the wheel and his chuckle grew to a laugh when he started the engine. "'Moi?'"

Vin flipped him a familiar one-finger salutation and Chris only laughed harder as he pulled the door shut and gave Vin a dismissive wave. Vin grinned, crawled into his Jeep and followed his best friend from the parking garage, taking the time to reflect on his good fortune and finally comfortable with the idea of being happy with his life. Tomorrow looked to be another great day to add to his three-year run of great days.

Chapter Two - TAKE DOWN

Tucked neatly into his sniper nest high up in the warehouse's cold, metal rafters, Vin shifted and adjusted the harness lines one more time. The bulky equipment made it tricky to maneuver in the tight space but it was his only insurance against squashing like a ripe tomato on the concrete and boxes below if he fell. He chuckled at the repulsive visual image that flashed in his mind. "Like tomato sauce," he thought. "Marinara a la Tanner." He shook his head with the stray thought shoved it to the back of his mind as he wriggled each limb one at a time to keep blood flowing. "Damn, Tanner, get some focus here!" he chastised himself. It was coming up on an hour and a half since he'd been in his snug aerie and his body was starting to complain.

"Falcon, you all right? I saw ya move." JD's voice sounded concerned but Vin couldn't help but wonder if he was getting bored, too.

"I'm fine, Rabbit. Just tryin' to keep loose."

"Keep sharp, everyone," Hound Dog Buck broke in. "I just spotted Lynx comin' in from the east."

"It's about time. My butt's asleep."

"Not the time for it, Bunny," Mantis Josiah scolded in a playful tone.

"It's Rabbit, not Bunny," JD grumbled. "Wait until it's my turn for code names, Hound Dog."

"Quiet!" Grizzly Chris snapped, also clearly tired of waiting. "Lynx's company's comin' in from the south side."

Lynx Ezra's long anticipated meet was just minutes away. All Vin's aches and pains vanished and he visually swept the area below a final time. The storehouse was huge, full of dirty crates and plastic-wrapped boxes. Cobwebs dangled everywhere up here and Vin was sure there were remnants in his hair, but this was the only unfettered spot that had a clear sight picture of Ezra's staging area. With practiced ease, his mind sharpened to absolute focus and his senses

took over when he settled his cheek to the rifle stock. Vin's world was now a tight circle marked with cross hairs.

"Four males entering on foot," he heard Buck report. "Dark green van out front, license 132 AIV, Colorado plates."

"Copy that, Hound Dog."

Vin heard the click of JD's keyboard as he spoke.

"Lynx and Badger incoming."

A few moments later, Agents Ezra Standish and Nathan Jackson, A.K.A. Eli Stanewich and Nelson Johnson, stepped into Vin's sight circle and looked toward the warehouse door. Moments later, four men came into view, stopping a few yards from the undercover agents.

"Good job, boys," Vin muttered to himself as his teammates shifted positions and forced the four newcomers to face the sniper. Ezra's voice carried clearly through the microphone in his collar.

"Senor Munos, always a pleasure. You have met my associate, Mr. Johnson."

The best dressed of the four suspects nodded and then indicated with a flick of his wrist that one of his men pat down the agents.

"I assure you that we are unarmed," Ezra said coolly, raising his arms without fuss. Nathan did the same.

"Consider me careful," Marko Munos said.

Based on their research, Vin knew the truth of that statement. The man was like an eel - slippery, always managing to squirm his way out of formal charges and personal buys. Getting the weapons dealer here had been a real coup for Ezra and Nathan. Vin had to wonder at the viability of the Carnicero Cartel - had the sons' squabbling set up this victory?

Easily picking out Munos' personal bodyguard of the remaining three, Vin fixed his sites on him. The other two men were muscle to move crates. Not known to carry a weapon, Munos usually had more than adequate protection and what Vin saw below was no exception. He rattled off the weaponry he could see.

"Can't see anything on boss man but Blondie has a shoulder holster, right side, Brown Suit has a shoulder holster, left side, and the big fella carryin' the metal briefcase and stickin' close to the boss has one on each side and a suspicious lump on his waistline in back."

"Copy that, Falcon," Buck acknowledged softly.

Snaring Munos - even with his armed entourage - should be a done deal. Vin centered his mental zone and watched the proceedings through the scope, satisfied that the entire building had been secured the moment Munos and his men stepped in the building. Team 7 covered the inside while Mitchell's Team 5 locked down the exterior. Munos was already theirs, really.

Talk on the warehouse stage was brief and strictly business. Voices murmured in Vin's ear bud, blending with the muted sounds of his own soft breathing and steady heartbeat. He watched Nathan open a gun crate for Brown Suit and Blondie while Ezra hammered out details of the order and negotiated payment with Munos. Big Fella stood with them, slightly to one side, eyes in constant motion as he looked for threats while he flexed his fingers nervously. The metal briefcase now sat on the ground at his feet.

Finally, Ezra and Munos shook hands. Big Fella handed the metal case to Brown Suit and Nathan accepted it from him. Then, Nathan moved aside to open it, staying out of Vin's target picture. In his periphery, Vin got a glimpse of cash when Nathan lifted the lid. Anticipating Chris' order to surrender, he braced for action.

An unexpected cold tingle at the nape of Vin's neck sent gooseflesh rippling down his spine. He sucked a quick breath and lifted his head just enough to clear his eye from the scope for a broader visual scan of the staging area.

In that fraction of time, something burned across the top of Vin's right ear and Munos dropped like a theatre sandbag.

A single, sharp pop of gunfire pierced the air.

All hell broke loose.

Honed instinct took over. Vin twisted aside, gaining room to swing around his rifle. In that hot second, he turned and fired in one, well-practiced motion, recognizing a wild shot even as he took it; his body performed automatically as well-honed self-defense kicked in. A barrage of bullets from below forced his attention away from the shooter behind him and back to the warehouse floor.

"SHIT!" Vin yelled, tucking into the joists for cover. A glimpse showed Big Fella raking the air with a concealable Uzi - the suspicious lump from his waistband. Stinging shrapnel nicked Vin's exposed hands and face. He squeezed his eyes shut.

"ATF!" Chris' strong voice cut into the gunshot-punctuated melee, followed by shouting and swearing below. The assault on his post lessened enough for Vin to expose himself and get off two more shots - one missed Uzi-toting Big Fella by millimeters but the second took down Blondie. Vin saw Big Fella go down with another's bullet but he still shot crazily in Vin's direction with surprising accuracy. Folding his body deeper into the small, cold space to make a smaller target, Vin's one, simple hope at this point was to survive. He had absolutely no place to go and the narrow rafters offered little protection. All he could do was listen, pray and think small.

"Throw down your guns! ATF!" Vin recognized Buck's bellow in the chaos. In reply, the shooting grew more furious.

Vin jerked when a pair of strikes hammered his body armor, driving the air from his lungs a heartbeat before fire consumed his left side. He shied away from the pain and another sharp force shoved him backward. Vin dropped his rifle and tried to grab something, anything, but found only open air.

Automatically, he twisted, cat-like, in midair followed the path of his beloved rifle. Vin watched as the weapon hit the edge of a crate with a sickening crack before exploding into a million pieces.

“VIN!” Chris’ hoarse voice rose above all of it just before Vin slammed into darkness.

Where the sight of his best friend and teammate falling from the rafters stilled Larabee’s heart, Vin’s reaching the end of his tether and jerking to a gut-wrenching stop jump-started it again. Chris bolted from cover, vaguely aware of Munos’ surrender and his team convergence on the suspects because his eyes locked on Vin turning slowly in the air just out of reach. Completely limp and obviously unconscious, blood dripped at a steady pace from his beltline. There was a frighteningly large crimson pool on the concrete in the fleeting, few seconds it took Chris to get under him.

Getting Vin down became a difficult and heartbreaking struggle. Team 5 moved in and took custody of Munos’ crew - those that were alive, anyway - freeing Chris and the rest to get Vin earthbound. By the time JD reached Vin’s aerie and released the safety line, Chris heard the sirens of the paramedics. JD lowered Vin enough for Chris to embrace and guide him to the floor. Once there, time seemed to slow down.

Chris stepped back and watched, numb, as Nathan cut away Vin’s harness, jumpsuit and vest to find the gaping wound that scored his friend’s side. The vision of his falling body replayed in silent horror in his mind. Buck’s firm grip on his shoulder finally stopped the mental circle of events and his friend’s solid presence shifted Chris’ mind into gear.

He glanced over to Munos’ still form where he saw a paramedic kneeling, shaking his head. Chris then followed an invisible line from Munos to Vin’s aerie in the rafters, and once again, pieced together the sequence of events. Once done, the perplexing conclusion convinced him that he must have missed something. He stared at Munos.

“Chris?”

Buck’s voice redirected his disturbing thoughts and he became aware of the pain in his hands from clenched fists. Chris forced his fingers open. “What did you see, Buck?” he asked lowly.

Buck’s hesitation sharpened Chris’ instinct. He snapped his head aside and met his oldest friend’s wide eyes. “Nothin’ that would explain this,” Buck replied quietly, motioning toward Vin. “I suggest keeping our opinions to ourselves for

now, Chris. There are too many ears about.” Buck tilted his head slightly toward Team 5. “Mitchell has already called Travis. This is going to be ugly, and you know how I hate ugly.”

Chris started toward Chet Mitchell, the leader of Team 5, when Buck grabbed his arm and stopped him. “Don’t go over there. The less said right now, the better. Let’s take care of Vin, Pard. We all need to have a parley before Travis gets here.”

“So we can get our stories straight?” Chris snapped, managing to keep his voice low. “So we can come up with some reason why it looks like Vin shot Munos in cold blood?”

“Shhh, Chris, don’t do this.” Buck knew he was the person to reason with the team leader because the only other person ever able to calm a riled Chris Larabee was currently unconscious and bleeding. “Not here. Let Mitchell take over and let’s go with Junior. It will be better at the hospital.”

Chris shook off Buck’s hold and watched with growing fury as Nathan prepared Vin for transportation. When the gurney finally arrived, Vin was whisked away with Nathan at his side, leaving the remaining teammates to warily regard their leader. Not one of them uttered a word; even JD lips pressed into a tight line. All Chris had to do was indicate an exit with a tip of his head and they quietly filed out with Chris bringing up the rear. The last thing he heard was Mitchell asking for the Range Master to respond and collect evidence with the Forensic team.

A chill zinged up Chris’ spine as he stepped from the cold warehouse into the sharp, autumn air and the uneasy feeling that his world just forever changed quickened his step.

Chapter Three - AFTER ACTON

The five remaining members of Team 7 climbed solemnly into Larabee's black ATF pool vehicle. Buck grabbed the keys from the stony- silent team leader and drove as fast as he dared from the scene while JD, Josiah and Ezra followed Chris' quiet example. Buck tensed with each mile at the uneasy atmosphere.

Somewhere between the scene and the hospital, JD broke the silence. "I made copies of the video feeds," he said softly. "And the chatter. I put 'em on a thumb drive before Wilson from Team 5 seized the surveillance van."

"That was very astute of you," Josiah replied. "I hope it helps."

"So you saw the same thing?" JD's tone was wary.

"Perhaps we should wait to see Mr. Tanner's status before engaging in any debate," Ezra interjected softly, tipping his head in their leader's direction. Chris' shoulders rode near his ears with tension and Buck gave Ezra a thankful glance in the rearview mirror.

"There was so much blood." JD ducked his head and twisted his fingers together as he whispered the words. He didn't get any reply.

Once at the hospital, the men fell into a flying V formation as they followed Chris, who marched ahead, mute and dangerous. The Emergency Room door swooshed open and they slowed, forming a loose cluster in front of the check-in desk. The moderately boisterous waiting room fell quiet with the arrival of the intimidating five. A battle-worn nurse eyed their approach and moved to the window. "And you are here for . . .?" the nurse began.

"Tanner. Vin Tanner. Ambulance brought him in." Chris' voice was tight, raspy.

The nurse took them all in with once glance. "The Federal officer. We're expecting you. Who is the patient's supervisor?"

"Me," Chris snapped. Before he had a chance to erupt, the nurse shoved a clipboard into his hands and pointed toward the entry door. Chris took the board

and stepped up to the door, shoving it open when it buzzed. The rest of the team stared as it swung shut, their grouping drifting quietly apart afterward.

“Well,” Ezra noted before turning to an empty chair in the far corner. “It appears that we shall wait.”

“Yeah,” JD said, a weary slump to his shoulders.

“Gentlemen,” Josiah started after scanning the room. “Let’s take this moment to clear our thoughts.”

“Amen,” Buck agreed, heading to the exit. “Outside.”

The four men regrouped in the ambulance bay, forming a semi-circle by the large entry doors emblazoned with “EMERGENCY” in red letters. Wire-laced security windows allowed limited sight inside the emergency room.

Josiah started the discussion. “This is what I saw. I was monitoring the video out of sight, so I could not see anything outside the frame of the camera. Munos was facing Ezra and was the first one down.” His face fell when the others agreed. “There goes that hope that something happened outside my field of sight. Ezra? What happened?”

Ezra’s soft southern twang held a bewildered edge. “I did not read anything in Munos that would have initiated that kind of reaction from our illustrious sniper.”

“So you’re sayin’ Vin shot him without a reason?” JD’s ire made his voice louder than he wished. Frowning, he stepped in closer and forced his voice lower. “That he up and murdered Munos? Is that what you’re sayin’?”

“No, that is not what I said, Mr. Dunne. I said I didn’t see any threatening motions from Mr. Munos or his behemoth bodyguard. I did not, however, have a visual on the other two miscreants.”

“I did,” Buck said. “I had a clear shot of them from my position, but I couldn’t see beyond them.”

“JD? Did you hear anything?” Josiah’s mellow voice held a thread of hope.

Somewhat calmed, JD thought back. “I had on headphones and could hear everything clearly. My video was at a 90-degree angle from Josiah’s, which covered what was behind those guys and I didn’t see anything either. Heard the first shot and saw Munos drop. Vin didn’t shoot him!”

“Well, it sounds like we’re going to have a hard time proving that,” Buck concluded. “Ideas? Did anyone get a good view of the impact? Was it from Vin’s direction?”

“Had to have been,” Josiah muttered. “I can’t see how it could have been from any other direction.”

JD’s eyes inflamed once again. “But Vin didn’t do it! He wouldn’t!”

“Then who did?” Buck looked at each one of them, confirming the importance that they stick together for Vin’s sake. “Ideas?”

SHADOWLINE

Ezra cocked his head in thought and frowned. "I know that our Mr. Munos has enemies. None that I am able to confirm are here in Denver, however."

"Where are they?" Josiah asked.

"Mexico, with the majority of the Carnicero Cartel," he replied. "I understand that there is a smattering of loyalists in San Diego, but I do not have names. If we are working on a second shooter scenario, gentlemen, where did said person conceal themselves?"

Buck stroked his mustache as his mind worked, and then he turned to JD, resting a hand on the kid's shoulder. "Unless we can provide an alternative, this is all going to fall on Vin. Hypothetics aren't going to get us very far. We need facts, and some idea of spin. . . something . . . to buy us time." They all nodded agreement. "Chris is gonna blow sometime, too, so be prepared. Now let's check on Junior."

"I am surprised our leader has not exploded yet," Ezra noted.

Just as the men moved toward the entry doors, the first news van arrived. It jerked to a stop and a suit-clad reporter jumped out, pointing at the dish antenna as he barked orders to the driver and technician still inside the vehicle.

"Ah, hell," Buck growled, knowing their wait just got ugly.



Chris stepped into the curtained off cubicle farthest from the lobby, nodding approval at Nathan's arrangement. His first glance at his friend startled him; Vin looked pale in this light, his skin a sickly hue. He looked dead and Chris had to force his gaze to the heart monitor to believe otherwise. Nathan's head shot up from where he checked an IV and he backed from the bed and gave Chris his full attention. His voice was far away in Chris' ears.

"He's doing okay so far, Chris. They got him to x-ray right away. Some cracked ribs from the two bullets that struck the vest, another one tore along his side just under the edge of his vest, and he cracked a vertebra from hitting the end of his tether. It's a good thing he had that or it would be a different story."

Eventually, Chris raised his eyes and acknowledged Nathan with a nod.

"He will probably have whiplash-type soreness, too. His body got quite a shock."

"That why he's still unconscious?" Chris approached the gurney and rested his hands on the cold metal rail, the forgotten clipboard clutched between elbow and side. His eyes locked onto Vin's wan face.

"He must have whacked his head on a joist when he fell. There's a good sized lump near his temple. They think that's why he's still out."

"We will remedy that after I stitch up his side." A young doctor stepped through the curtain, pulling on rubber gloves. A nurse followed close behind and

readied an implement tray. "I could use a little more room." The doctor looked pointedly at Nathan.

"Yes, of course." Nathan turned Chris by his elbow and gathered the clipboard from under his boss' arm. "I'll take care of his check in and fill in the guys. Stay out of the Doctor's way, okay?"

Larabee nodded, unable to tear his gaze from Vin's slack face. He heard Nathan's footsteps fade as he watched the procedure begin.

"Okay, then, let's get started. Annie, we'll need more gauze to clean this." He pulled the sheet back and exposed a ragged, bloody rent in Vin's side. "The bullet skipped across his rib, under the skin and basically flayed him open. Ugly, but easy to fix. Shouldn't be much of a scar." Chris saw the physician give Vin's chest a quick sweep with his gaze. "Obviously, he's not a stranger to scars."

"He's had a rough life," Chris said quietly, surprised as the truth fell automatically from his mouth.

"After this, we'll take him for an MRI to check that knock on his head, just to be on the safe side." He tied off a few stitches. "I'm Dr. Morgan, by the way."

"Larabee. Chris Larabee. Vin's my teammate." Chris thought a moment. "Did you examine him thoroughly? I mean, were there any wounds or anything that would indicate - uh, I'm not sure what I mean to say." Chris massaged his neck and took a deep breath. "Could someone have been holding him from behind? Threatening him, say, with a knife or something?"

Dr. Morgan spared Chris a glance. "No, nothing like that. No other marks other than what you see now. The head wound is toward the front and is consistent with a fall and brush against a beam. I got the impression that there wasn't enough room for two up where he was."

"No, there wasn't." Chris sighed and rubbed his eyes. "I had to ask."

Chris silently watched Dr. Morgan complete a neat row of 25 stitches and pull off his gloves. "After his MRI we'll keep him for the night." He glanced down as Vin's breath caught and his heart rate stuttered. "Ah, it looks like he's waking up. Let me know when the imaging room is ready," he said to the nurse as she disappeared through the drapes.

"Vin?" Chris called, leaning down while Dr. Morgan lifted each of Vin's eyelids and brushed his eye with light.

"Equal and responsive. Good. Keep talking."

"Wake up, Vin. Can you hear me? Vin?"

Vin's head rolled slightly aside and he groaned. Chris could see him working to open his eyes, and he was finally successful after a few disjointed attempts. "C - ssss?" he managed to hiss. "Wh'r'm I?"

"The hospital, Pard. You fell off the joist. You remember? You hit your stubborn head on the way down."

“Oh.” Vin squinted in Chris’ direction. “Ev’rything hurts.”

Chris cracked a sad smile. “Yeah, I’m sure it does, Cowboy.”

“Try to keep him alert. I’ll be back.” Dr. Morgan departed then, leaving Chris alone with his friend.

Chris carefully leaned against the cold metal of the gurney and bent over into Vin’s line of sight. “You’ll be fine, Vin. Looks like most everything’s superficial.”

Vin frowned again and blinked hard. “What happened?”

“You fell off a joist and dangled like Miss Muffet’s spider.” Vin gave him a confused look. “You don’t remember anything?”

Vin winced with an aborted try to shake his head. “No,” he whispered. “n stop hollerin’.”

Chris smirked and patted Vin’s shoulder. “Sure, buddy.”

They waited in silence until the nurse returned and then proceeded to roll Vin down the hallway. “I’ll be waitin’ here for you, okay Vin? I’ll be here.” Chris saw confusion in his friend’s eyes as he was taken away.

Even in his concussed state, Vin knew something was wrong – his pained blue eyes made that very clear. He knew Chris was holding back because the eerie mental link they shared from their beginning made hedging impossible. Outside the pains that plagued his body, Vin Tanner knew that something very, very wrong.

At that moment, watching Vin disappear down the hall and feeling that first jolt of questioning suspicion along their link, Chris knew for sure that Vin was innocent. The problem would be to prove that to the rest of the world.

Chris soon found that standing by Vin’s side as he drifted in and out of awareness was the quieter place to be. In the waiting room, hospital staff finally directed Security to keep the arriving media at bay. The Media Relations Agent finally showed up just as Chris was ready to storm the door and start shooting, and it looked like most of the team would be out there backing him. Once the Media Agent gave his statement in the ER parking lot, the reporters ditched the scene to prepare for the respective broadcasts.

As they parted, Ezra made a cutting comment about how Vin was polite enough to get hurt just in time for the nightly news.

“Has Travis called yet?” Buck asked Chris during one of his waiting room visits.

“Dunno.” Chris pulled his phone from his pocket and looked at the screen. “Eight missed calls. Guess he has.” With a tired sigh, Chris turned aside, separating from the group. “I’ll bring him up to date.”

It was close to midnight before Vin moved from the chaotic E. R. and into a room. Exhausted, he fell asleep as soon as the door swung closed and muted most

of the hospital noises. Chris continued his solo vigil that began in the E.R., leading off a quickly scheduled rotation now that Vin was in a room. Each member departed to clean up and start reports. Chris knew he had to leave sometime, but he had a nagging feeling that if he did, Vin would disappear. His tension grew with each passing hour.

Unable to sit any longer, Chris moved just outside the door and paced a small circle. Nathan eventually showed up to relieve him and offered his boss a large cup of coffee - good coffee, based on the cup logo.

“He finally asleep?”

Chris nodded before he tipped the cup and took a careful sip. “Just got tired. They didn’t give him anything.”

“That’s good.”

The two men stood side by side in silence for several moments before Chris turned and looked down the hallway. Nathan followed his boss’ line of vision and saw their supervisor, Orin Travis, approaching them with an unreadable expression. Another man followed close behind.

“It’s about damn time Travis showed,” Chris muttered.

“Ain’t that Becker from Internal Affairs?” Nathan asked lowly.

“Yup,” Chris replied, his eyes still tracking Travis. “Surprised it’s taken this long.”

“Chris.” Travis extended his hand and Larabee shook it briefly. “How’s he doing?”

“Could be better,” Chris said, his eyes now pinning Becker.

“Um, he’s got a mild concussion, broken ribs, a cracked vertebra and a couple dozen stitches in his side,” Nathan offered

“He was shot, then?”

“Yes.” One sideways glance from Chris stopped any further comments from Nathan.

“He’s asleep now,” Chris said.

“I will be back to check on him tomorrow,” Travis said. “I understand he’s getting released in the morning, so I will be here early.”

“Why?” Chris snapped.

Chris Larabee had the knack of intimidation but Travis was one of those rare men that seemed to be immune to Chris’ dark nature. Whereas Becker shuffled back a step, Travis held the line and met Larabee’s icy stare.

“I think you know why,” Travis replied. “I am honestly concerned with any of my agents’ health, as you know, but this situation is different. Questions need to be asked.”

“Like?”

SHADOWLINE

Becker finally spoke up. "You will get your turn, Agent Larabee, but not here. I need to speak with Agent Tanner in private."

"And with his attorney or Union representative present," Nathan shot back.

Becker nodded shortly. "If he thinks he needs that."

"Then we're done here," Chris growled. "As I said, Tanner's asleep."

The four men exchanged silent looks before Travis turned and spoke softly to Becker. "I'll meet you in the lobby." Becker didn't look happy, but he nodded and walked away. Travis turned to his two agents. "Chris, I need to know what Vin has to say. I think you realize the problem we have."

Chris pressed his lips together and nodded once. "You'll need to interview the whole team."

"Yes. Tomorrow, at the office, starting at 0900. Agent Becker's team will contact you in the morning."

"What about Vin?"

"Becker and I will speak with him here before he's released and inform him of his rights."

"Rights?" Nathan asked. "He's under arrest?"

"Not those rights, his rights as a Federal Employee under investigation."

Chris stood straighter. "Charges can't have been filed already!"

"No, this is still the preliminary investigation on whether he violated protocol," Travis explained. He set his hard gaze on Larabee. "You know this does not look good so far. I've gone over the video and audio of the incident several times, Chris. We have to be careful and thorough."

"I want copies of the reports."

"As your supervisor and an involved member of the team, I can't allow that." Travis held up his hand at the instant protest. "I will keep you informed with whatever I can. We both know this is atypical of the Vin Tanner we know."

"But in I.A.'s eyes, it's possible of any Agent." Nathan flatly delivered the statement.

Travis nodded. "Yes. It is. You know it's how they are supposed to look at things. I expect full cooperation."

Chris, his jaws flexing with pent up anger, could only nod.

"Then I will see you tomorrow. Gentlemen." Travis turned and left the two bristling agents.

When they heard the elevator doors close, Nathan sighed. "I would not want to be in his shoes right now."

"I don't want to be in my own shoes right now," Chris sighed, rubbing his eyes.

Nathan slapped Chris' back. "Go on, Chris. Try to get some sleep. Ezra's spellin' me in four hours."

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Chris' shoulders slumped as he nodded and sighed. "Okay. I'll see you in the office tomorrow morning. After that, I'll plan on takin' Vin home."

The men shook hands and parted, both knowing that the next 24 hours would be harder still.

Chapter Four - WAITING

Visions swirled, refusing to still. Everything was draped in a shadowy darkness so thick that Vin couldn't pin any of these thoughts down. Then a cognizant sentence arose - was this a dream? The question fades and the ritual began again. His eyes snap open. As soon as he realized that he was waking between dreams, the headache bloomed and pain spiked when he moved. Each time he awoke, soothing voices chased it all away - "It's okay, Vin. You're in the hospital." "Whoa there, Junior, keep it slow, hey?" "Go back to sleep, Vin. It's the middle of the night."

Each voice meant he was safe. Even with that, he was reluctant to close his eyes and again enter the fray of thoughts. Finally, he awoke, fully and slowly, cracking one lid and then the other in defiance of the filtered daylight that set his head throbbing.

"Hey, Pard. Let me help you up." Vin recognized Chris' voice, touched by the tenderness. He felt the head of the bed raise with a mechanical hum that tickled his skin, thankful the elevation did not exacerbate the sharp pains throughout his body.

"Chris?"

"Yeah, it's me. How are ya doin'?"

Carefully turning his head, Vin followed his friend's fuzzy form in jumps and starts, causing a new concern when his stomach flipped. When he saw Chris settle next to the bed and offer something with a spoon, he hesitated, waiting to see what rebellion his body planned.

"Ice chips. It'll settle your stomach."

Vin accepted the offering, relieved that sucking on the chips did just that. He laid his head back, staring at the ceiling to minimize visual input and mumbled. "How long I been here?"

"One night," Chris replied, extending another spoonful.

"What happened?"

A significant pause hung in the air before Chris asked, “What do you remember?”

Vin felt his forehead crinkle, each line throbbing to its own beat. He closed his eyes. “Nothin’,” he whispered around the icy chunks. “Um. Throwin’ paper in the office?”

“That was two mornings ago, Vin. Nothing more come to mind?”

Vin searched his elusive, painful thoughts. “No.”

Chris sighed. “That’s okay. Give it some time.” The plastic spoon touched Vin’s lip. “Soon as the Doc checks you out I’m takin’ you home.”

Vin reached up and fumbled at Chris’ arm before latching on to his wrist, refusing the spoon. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing for you to worry about at the moment, Cowboy. Concentrate on getting’ better.”

“Chris . . .” Vin peeled his lids open and twisted his head just enough to focus on the pulsing form of his boss.

“Honestly, Vin, there’s nothing you can do right now. JD will be here in a few minutes to sit with ya until the Doc says you can go. I know you’re in some pain. We’ll talk later.”

“What happened?”

“Later, Vin. You’re in no shape now.”

“No shape fer what?”

Chris rose and handed the cup and spoon to another form that somehow managed to join Chris without Vin noticing - that did nothing to help his blossoming concern.

“Hey, Vin. How’re ya doin’?”

JD. Vin now recognized the dark mop and small stature. He released Chris’ wrist and gently rested his forearm over his eyes to combat the sharp and pounding pain in his head. He dared not speak; the fear in his gut was too volatile.

“I’ll be back and get you out of here.”

Vin didn’t bother to acknowledge Chris. Right now, he needed to focus his efforts to make sense of a miasma of thoughts and try not to vomit.



Chris rinsed the soap from his hair. The hard spray of hot water brought him to a better level of awareness and Chris found his brain automatically going over every piece of information from the previous afternoon’s disaster. Glad for the change of clothes in his locker and the locker room showers because jumping from the hospital to the office in the last hours made it difficult to look presentable.

This would have to do for now, he thought as he turned off the water and stepped out to the cold, tile floor.

Chris rubbed his hair dry, fished the small, plastic comb from his locker and dragged it over his head. Then he locked up and glanced at his watch - he would be a few minutes early for his meeting with Travis. He walked through the halls of the Federal building deep in thought and oblivious to the sympathetic glances thrown his way. Travis' secretary greeted him with a slight nod and waved him into the small conference room. Inside, Orin Travis and a man Chris recognized from the legal division sat waiting.

"Chris," Travis started, indicating that his agent should sit. Chris did so and felt his posture automatically stiffen. "This is Reggie Rockwell from legal." Chris nodded once. "How's Agent Tanner?"

Shifting slightly and holding back a rebuke regarding Travis' lack of presence at the hospital, Chris instead replied, "Sore. He's being released in a few hours."

"Good. He needs some down time."

Chris chewed the inside of his lip to keep his building anger at bay. Then he let out a breath. "Yes, he does. What happens after that?" He locked a hard look on Rockwell.

"Agent Larabee, you know this doesn't look good at the moment, but we aren't jumping to any conclusions. There's still a lot of investigating to be done . . ."

"You mean evidence gathering against my team?"

Rockwell blinked. "What?"

"Since you assume Tanner is dirty, the rest of us must be, too, right?"

"I don't . . ."

"Chris!" Travis snapped. "You're out of line!"

"Am I? Then why is my team stonewalled from the investigation? Are you looking into all of us?"

"That's enough, Agent Larabee!" Travis chastised. "You know the rules. Your team is too close to this. You can't be involved."

Inside, Chris knew it was true and made an honest effort to wrangle in his emotions. He was so tired; he raked his hair and shifted in the hard seat.

"Look, you need to take care of Vin and get some real rest. Get Tanner and go home until I call you."

With a weary nod, Chris rose to his feet knowing it would do no good to argue. "So, how telling is the angle of the kill shot on Munos?"

Rockwell glanced to Travis and tapped a finger on the table. Orin's dark eyes softened when he returned Chris' direct gaze, holding it for a moment before speaking. "It's not good, Chris. Now go home."



The trip back to the hospital just happened. When Chris pulled into the parking lot, the realization hit him that he did not recall any of the drive. Even as tired as he was, his brain refused to slow down; the events replayed many times in his mind. He wondered how much of it was true and real. Chris had many experiences with enhanced memories; it was the reason why witnesses were separated as soon as possible. It didn't take much to adopt another's perception as your own and unintentionally alter memory. Still, everything he heard, saw and remembered pointed directly at Vin shooting Munos without provocation.

He shook his head. That couldn't be true. The evidence, though, said otherwise, each and every time he summed it all up.

Letting out an explosive breath as he threw the truck into park, Chris fought to keep the endless loop from replaying in his head and kicked the truck door open. When it cracked into the car next to him, Larabee jerked back into the here and now. "Shit." He slipped out and shut the truck door with less vigor.

Chris looked at the neighboring car and couldn't pick out any fresh damage from the numerous dents already gracing the wounded car's side panel. He smirked and ran a finger over the area. "Fuck it," he thought, squaring his shoulders and settling his jacket. Then he walked rapidly to the building.

JD glanced up when Chris arrived, his entry more abrupt than subtle and very typical of Chris' no-nonsense persona. JD startled a little as he leaned heavily on the handles of a wheelchair while a nurse flipped through some papers with Vin. Chris paused just inside the door, nodded at JD's wide eyes and noted immediately that Vin was in no mood to deal with the woman.

Vin sat on the edge of the bed, legs dangling and stiff. His face, normally open and easy, looked pinched and pale. The angle of his shoulder warned that he was ready to blow, as did his grip on the edge of the mattress.

"Take it easy," Chris said lowly to both of his men. "It's almost over."

A slight, telltale curve to Vin's spine told Chris he heard. JD sidled in closer to Chris when he positioned the wheelchair and whispered, "How's it look?"

Chris knew he wasn't talking about Vin's release papers. He bent his head in close to his Agent's ear. "Not good. The angle of the shot looks irrefutable."

JD chewed his lip, nodding slightly. He flicked his eyes toward Vin, then back to Chris. "I've been looking at that. Can I get photos of the warehouse interior?"

Chris frowned, narrowing his eyes for a moment as he gave Vin a sidelong glance.

JD elaborated, managing to maintain a whisper. "I'd like to play around with some computer modeling. We know Vin's innocent - maybe I can find something to help him."

"Like?"

The youth shrugged. "I don't know. I'd like to look, though."

Chris pressed his lips together, running a list of favors owed to him within the Agency. "I'll see what I can do. We're pretty much locked out of this investigation. You can start with the video you copied at the scene." A look crossed JD's face that gave Chris pause. He narrowed his eyes again. When JD opened his mouth to speak, Chris held up his hand, stopping him. "Don't say anything, JD, if it's better I do not know."

JD's mouth snapped shut and he nodded, and then their attention turned to Vin when the nurse stepped back and assisted him with getting his feet on the floor. Chris saw that the woman's touch was potentially the last straw.

"I got him," Chris interjected. He stepped forward and nudged the woman aside, taking her place without explanation. JD, right on his heels, expertly placed the wheelchair to Vin's best advantage.

Vin divided his glare between the three of them and the clench of his jaw kept the air clear of any regrettable utterances. He grunted when he settled in the chair. When Chris moved in and set the foot rests, he saw Vin's angry eyes and his lips part to speak.

Chris jumped in. "Thank you, ma'm. We got him. He got a copy of those orders? Yes? Then we'll get out of your hair. Thanks again." JD had Vin out the door before Chris finished speaking and they made it inside the elevator before Vin finally spoke.

"Damn it, Chris, where ya been? I shoulda been out of here hours ago!"

"We both know I have no control over your release, Tanner, so get a grip. I know you got a lot on your mind . . ."

"A lot on my mind'? Really? Hell, Chris, the problem is I don't got enough on my mind! I can't remember a fuckin' thing!" Vin kneaded his temple with a trembling hand. Chris noted the IV tape marks on the back of his hand and the general pasty tone of his friend's skin. Obviously, Vin was still in pain.

JD and Chris shifted uneasily at the unusually foul outburst. It was clear that Vin, normally considerate of his surroundings, was worried and edging toward panic. The closeness of the elevator did not help the situation.

"Vin," Chris rebuked sharply, leaning in to snare Vin's glare. Behind the flashing blue eyes, Chris saw fear. "Calm down. This is not the time or place. We got your back, remember?"

A flurry of conversation flew between them, riding on their locked stare; so much said without words. Vin's eyes were always an open book to Chris and the

reverse was just as true for Vin. The rest of the team, very familiar with this pair's silent talking, held the phenomenon in awe as JD did now. He held his breath, gripping the wheel chair handles tight enough to sting his hands until he saw the tension in both men melt away. JD exhaled and rolled his shoulders while Chris stood straighter. Vin tipped his chin downward and became quiet in both voice and overall appearance, and much closer to his usual nature. When the doors slid open, they moved forward.

JD left them at the hospital pickup area, returning the wheelchair and eager to start on his computer project. The positive energy he exerted helped to steady Vin a bit more before they parted and Chris hoped the effect wouldn't evaporate too soon. It lasted for the entire ride, making the trip as comfortable as past events allowed.

On arrival at the ranch, Vin grumbled when Chris tried to help him walk to the house, so, instead, Chris dropped back and shadowed his friend right up and through the front door. Once inside, Vin wobbled to the couch and dropped down with an explosive sigh, groaning as he carefully kneaded his skull. "Think I'll take one of them pain pills. Do y' mind?"

Chris chuckled as he pulled the pills from his pocket and twisted off the cap. "Do I mind if you take the pills or if I get 'em for ya?"

"Smartass," Vin hissed as he lay back. Chris handed over the pills and retrieved some water from the kitchen. Vin eyed the glass with annoyance. "I'd rather down 'em with beer."

"And I'd rather avoid Nathan's wrath. Drink up."

As Vin tossed back the pills, Chris sat down next to his friend and sank back into the soft cushions, finally allowing his eyelids to slide shut. He felt the pillowy couch back shift as Vin settled in beside him. A long period of silence between them allowed the sounds of birds, a gentle wind and a whinnying horse to drift in the house. It did a lot for Chris' peace of mind and he hoped it did the same for Vin, because the next weeks were going to be hell on all of them. This small respite might have to take them a long way.

After a welcome period of country quiet, a revving motor and crunching gravel jerked Chris to awareness. He glanced around, shocked to see that he'd been asleep for almost two hours. Then he winced when the soreness of his neck made him a believer. Rubbing his neck as he rose to his feet Chris glanced Vin's way, pleased to see he was still out. He'd also slumped to one side, utilizing the arm of the couch as a pillow. Chris grabbed a quilt from Sarah's rocking chair and threw it over his friend before easing the door open and slipping outside.

Buck and Josiah emerged from the profiler's ancient Suburban. Chris put his finger to his lips in time to keep them from slamming the car doors. Josiah ambled

up to Chris, who leaned against the porch rail, and tilted his head to one side. “How’s he doing?”

“Asleep on the couch. Pain pills.”

Josiah’s expression gave nothing away but Buck’s fingers fiddling with his moustache didn’t bode well. Chris pinned him with a stare when his long-time friend stopped at the foot of the stairs. Buck was an easy read for Chris and he didn’t like what he saw.

“Tell me,” Chris ordered.

“Turn your phone on, Chris, ya got a few missed calls. Vin’s suspended. Travis wants to make sure you turn in his badge and gun to his office. He can keep the ID for now.”

“Hell.” Chris rubbed his gritty eyes. The news wasn’t completely unexpected, but the surge of anxiety in his gut did surprise him; he couldn’t shake the heavy shroud of dread the information produced. “It’s only the beginning,” a little voice whispered. “What else?” He knew there was more. Buck ducked his head, avoiding Chris’ eyes, so he turned to Josiah. All he saw in the deeply hooded blue was sorrow. Chris’ gut flipped. “What. Else,” he ground out from clenched jaws.

Josiah delivered the news. “Chris, there’s talk of charges against Vin. Murder under color of authority.”

Unable to speak, Chris looked deeply into Josiah’s eyes and found no shadow of deceit. Nor did he see any light of hope. The shroud of dread squeezed his chest.

Without a word, Chris pushed his way between the two men and headed to the barn. “Keep an eye on him,” he said over his shoulder, his movements stiff and automatic. When he stepped through the big doors into the darker interior, he didn’t notice the earthy smells there that usually comforted him. All he felt was sorrow, knowing how much Vin would miss this. Then he slammed his fist into an upright support beam.

“Stop thinking like that,” he scolded himself. Then he wondered if he would be able to hold it together for Vin’s sake.

Chapter Five - SEEKING CLUES

The weeks that followed were a rolling nightmare. As soon as Vin healed enough to move without pain, he returned to his apartment in Purgatorio. Chris felt the move was motivated more by embarrassment than necessity; with the injuries and suspension, Travis ordered Vin to stay home. Any time he was in the Federal building, he needed an escort and that was enough to keep Vin out of the building. It seemed as if the team sniper was purposefully distancing himself, which worried Chris more than anything else did.

The rest of the team gathered in the office as usual, but there was a disjointed feeling that lent to an awkward atmosphere. Although forbidden access to any of the investigation, they cashed in on various “favours owed” by other teams which proved rich in information - too rich in some aspects.

“A deposit where?” Chris roared from within the compounds of his private office. Ezra winced at the volume sitting across his boss’ cluttered desk.

“It seems that I.A. traced a five hundred-thousand-dollar deposit into a local account in Mr. Tanner’s name about three months before the operation. It did not linger before being transferred to an account in the Cayman Islands.” Ezra extended a placating arm as Chris shot to his feet. “Please, Mr. Larabee, we both know how easy it is to arrange such appearances. Our problem is to prove exactly that.”

Rage at the helplessness they all felt burned hottest in Chris, forcing him to pace off the effects of boiling adrenalin. His stomach constantly churned and stung, and he figured at least one ulcer brewed there. His heart raced and the fight-or-flight feeling was getting impossible to manage. He stopped at the window, his back to Ezra, and looked down at all the citizens of Denver milling on the streets unaware that his world slowly crumbled around him.

Ezra cleared his throat and Chris heard the squeak of the couch as his undercover specialist rose. “This is hurting all of us, Mr. Larabee. We are not at

our optimum functioning level. We are wounded and I plan to do all I can to save our offbeat family.”

Chris nodded without comment, not trusting how his voice would sound if pushed past the lump in his throat. A knock at the office door was a welcome respite. He turned enough to meet eyes with Buck as he half-stepped into the office.

“Come and look at this, Chris. We may have something.”

Chris followed silently, hearing Ezra at his heels. In the main office, Josiah and Nathan stood behind JD sitting in the chair, the trio focused on JD’s computer. The standing pair shifted as Chris approached, allowing their boss a clear sight picture of the screen.

“Look here, Chris,” JD said excitedly, his hand expertly driving the wireless mouse on his desk top. “It took a while to get the photos I needed but I finally got a good 3-D model of the warehouse.” The wire-frame lines on his monitor twirled and spun, the aspect zooming out until Chris finally recognized the image of the building. They all had studied the photos of the interior prior to the disastrous operation so the digital representations of the stacks of crates and building features were very familiar.

Even though the people-shaped renderings did not have enough detail to identify the individuals, each of them knew their names because the actual scene had been branded in their minds.

“Here’s what Vin saw.” JD spun the picture so quickly Chris had to catch his balance by gripping the back of JD’s chair. His stomach flipped. In moments, they saw the line of men from the sniper nest. Although not needed, JD rendered Ezra and Nathan in blue and Munos’ party in red. The point of view did nothing to settle Chris’ stomach.

“We know he had a line on Munos,” Chris snapped. “Those were his orders!”

“Wait, wait,” JD continued excitedly, oblivious to his boss’ dangerous tone. “Look at it this way.”

The lines swept a 180-degree arc and stopped at Munos’ point of view. Chris saw the blocky stacks and blue outlines of their two teammates. JD brightened the colors so the subtle outline of Vin’s head, shoulders and rifle popped on screen. The sight was damning.

“That doesn’t help, JD,” Chris snarled lowly, shifting his feet.

“No, look, Chris. Look at Vin’s position.”

Chris stiffened, unable move his focus from the roundish shape that represented Vin’s head. The last of his patience drained away. “He’s got a clean shot! We know that! How the hell is this supposed to help?” Only the firm pressure of Buck’s hand on his shoulder kept Chris from spinning apart.

“Behind him, Chris! Look!” JD pointed a finger to a rectangle over Vin’s shoulder. “This window!”

Narrowing his eyes, Chris focused on JD’s offering. Behind Vin, on the end of the building opposite of Munos, a line of narrow rectangles indicates a single row of small windows probably intended for light and venting. The line of windows hovered over the slope of Vin’s right shoulder.

“There’s nothing listed in any of the reports about that window. One photo of the scene shows that window,” he indicated the one directly behind Vin, “was gone. Completely removed.” JD stopped and gave Chris a nervous glance over his shoulder, realizing he’d just let slip how much information he had. “Uh, well, I got into . . .”

Chris threw up his hand in a stop motion. “I do not want to know where you got the information to make this report.” JD gulped and nodded. “Tell me more.”

“Um, yeah, well, I didn’t have a complete building schematic from the photos, diagrams and reports so I went down there myself and took them.” He opened another window on his monitor and quickly scrolled through a collection of photos, stopping on one in particular. He zoomed in on the line of windows and Chris noticed that the rectangle in question appeared clear and clean compared to the rest. JD then brought up the wire frame scene again.

“That part of the building was ignored, probably because it was so distant from the, ah, scene.” JD spun the picture 90 degrees sideways and backed the point of view off until the entire outline of the building fit on the monitor. JD pointed at a raised part of the roofline where the windows would be and punched a button. A yellow line appeared. “The angle of this line follows the path of the bullet that killed Munos. It passes right over Vin’s shoulder and rifle barrel, and out that one missing window.”

Silence hung between them as the implication sunk in. “Another shooter?” Nathan finally said aloud.

“You’re saying this is a grassy knoll situation? Vin didn’t do it?” Buck asked.

“Of course Vin didn’t do it!” Chris barked.

Buck immediately backtracked, “I know, I know, Chris, that’s not what I meant. The investigators . . .”

“Gentlemen,” Josiah intervened, his calm baritone asking for focus. “It’s clear we need to put our energies into getting more information.” He pointed at the monitor. “What other buildings are around that one?”

“I don’t have that, but here’s a good start.” JD clicked on a link and the Google Earth globe dominated the screen. Dancing fingers on the keyboard made the picture change, the view zooming to North America, the United States and then deep into Colorado. The specific block appeared on screen, each building

clear in a bird's eye view. "Here's the warehouse. There's the line of windows." JD's fingertip stroked the monitor. "So, beyond that . . ." His finger stopped on the closest neighboring building.

Someone whistled. "How far away is that?" Nathan asked.

"I would estimate 600 yards. But does that roof have the appropriate elevation?" Ezra questioned. He pointed to the suspect windows. "To acquire the needed angle to strike the target, the shootist would have to be high."

"How about this one?" Nathan indicated the second building over. "It's hard to tell from a top view."

JD's fingers flew over the keys and street view of the block popped up. "Here's our building," he said as a building passed across the screen as if they were in a car driving by. "Here's the one next door."

"It's too low," Chris noted. "So is the next one."

"Bingo." JD froze the screen at Josiah's utterance. "That seems high enough."

"That would be an exceptional shot," Ezra murmured.

"Vin's an exceptional shooter," Josiah added. "There has to be more like him for hire."

"And would know the when and where of the operation?" Buck said darkly. "Another agent?"

They all turned to their leader, whose laser gaze locked on the screen. "We need evidence," he said. "Nathan and JD, get to those windows. Broken in or out? Removed with skill? When? Josiah and Buck, check the surrounding buildings. Get photos, lots of them, and get them to JD. I want a pinpointed location of that second shooter."

"You gonna tell Travis?" JD's voice had an optimistic edge rarely heard these past weeks.

"Not yet," Chris said. "We need more. Ezra, before you go, tell JD what you told me about that deposit. Maybe he can trace the origins." He looked to their youngest member and felt a spark of hope when he saw the excitement in JD dark eyes. "Don't get caught."

"Psh," JD uttered with a grin and a flip of his wrist. "Not a problem, Chris."

"I'll go fill in Vin. He needs this."

"He still doesn't remember anything, does he?" Josiah asked.

Chris shook his head. "No."

"Internal Affairs must see that as a bit too convenient for our dear sniper." Ezra said as he donned his jacket.

"I'd think that, too, if this wasn't Vin." Nathan tipped his head toward the door and spoke to JD, who was gathering up his laptop. "Let's go."

While the others migrated to the exit, Chris detoured to his office to grab his jacket. How he would explain the team's ignored workload was still an issue,

but not enough to give pause. As he slipped the jacket on, he turned and raised his gaze to the brilliant white clouds billowing behind the distant Rockies. Vin would appreciate the sight. Smiling for the first time in weeks, he spun on his heel and left the nearly empty office.

Crossing over the invisible line that demarked the area known as Purgatorio from the rest of Denver, Chris wondered again about the affection Vin had for this part of town. When he first came to the city as a bounty hunter, Purgatorio filled Vin's needs for low key, cheap, temporary housing. He hadn't planned to stay beyond the conclusion of his quest.

During the hunt, Vin unexpectedly crossed paths with Chris Larabee in a dark alley, both of them following trails of different wanted men. Chris grinned, recalling the encounter. As soon as their eyes met across that stinking alley, they struck an immediate understanding and without one word, fell into instant sync as they stalked the length of the alley. At the dead end, they found Nathan on his knees, bruised and panting, with two guns to his head.

Two dirty, sweaty wanted men stood behind the captured agent, chests heaving from the relentless pursuit. Chris acted as soon as the flash of a plan entered his head, and both he and Vin fired simultaneously. Nathan, saved, was first story of their non-verbal communication in action. The phenomenon and the story became fodder for many jokes, comments and statements. Whatever it was he and Vin shared, Chris accepted it without question and knew that Vin did too, even though they never discussed it. They didn't have to. The circular thinking caused Chris' lips to purse in amusement.

Chris turned the corner to Vin's street and a tingle of alarm chased away all humor. The three cars parked at the curb in front of Vin's apartment building were too new and too clean and the sole, black-suited man standing guard at the building's entry was clearly law enforcement. Chris' stomach dropped and he jerked his truck to the curb, angling into an impossibly small space between cars. The front wheels climbed onto the sidewalk to make the fit.

Chris jumped out and jogged to the entrance, gaining the attention of the suited guard. He noticed a badge clipped to the man's waist and the automatic reach for a holstered weapon.

"Larabee, ATF," Chris snapped without slowing. He pulled his badge from his belt and flashed it, slowing when the guard didn't move.

"Stop right there." Although he didn't draw the gun, his hand rested on its butt. "I know who you are, Agent Larabee. You're not allowed inside." He stepped in front of Chris, stopping his charge.

The man was as tall as Chris but much wider, with bulky muscle straining the collar and shoulders of his clothes. Chris drew up, placed his feet and

threatened the edge of the guard's personal space before leveling a hard glare. "Let. Me. By."

"Take one more step and you're up on charges, Larabee. The F.B.I. has jurisdiction now."

Enraged, Chris bristled for another volley but motion from within the building caught his attention. A group of suits headed his way from the lobby stairs, clustered together. Over the shoulder of the lead man, Chris saw a familiar face and his heart sank.

Surrounded by grim-faced men, Vin's slight form look small, pale and defeated. Downcast eyes accented his hunched posture. He stumbled, but his escort's firm grip on his upper arm kept him upright. Chris groaned when he saw that his friend's cuffed hands.

"Be careful!" Chris snapped, unable to breach the wall of bodies as they passed. "He's injured!" The door guard held him back and Chris tried to shrug him off. "Vin!"

Ignored, Chris could only watch as they loaded Vin in one of the vehicles and drove off. Jerking free of the guard, Chris stood in the middle of the sidewalk until the vehicle was out of sight. Then he spun on his heel and saw three men carrying boxes exit the building. They loaded boxes into the other vehicles. Vin didn't have a lot, but whatever he did have was precious to him and would easily fit into those boxes. Enraged, Chris turned on the guard who stepped up to the challenge.

"You know the procedure, Larabee."

"Who's locking up the apartment?"

"There are men stationed inside Tanner's place until arrangements are made for the removal of the gun safe."

Vin's gun safe. Chris pictured it in his mind, tucked away in a corner of Vin's bedroom and holding his friend's collection. Again, there wasn't much in there, but the various handguns and rifles meant a lot to Vin. The violation of his friend's privacy sickened him.

"Are they taking him downtown?" Chris finally asked as his suddenly tilted world settled down to a to-do list.

"Yes. He should be booked tonight and arraigned tomorrow morning in Federal court."

Stumbling, Chris made his way back to his truck and crawled inside. It took a moment for his shaking hand managed to insert the truck key. Twisting it to start with perhaps a bit more muscle than was needed the truck roared to life and Chris concentrated on getting to the holding facility to exhibit some of the Larabee charm. He wanted to be Vin's first visitor and ensure he had proper representation. Who would help him?

Chris pulled out his phone and called Travis's direct line. "Orin?"

"Chris? Where are you?"

"On my way to lock up. They arrested Vin."

The slight pause was telling. "I know."

"How long have you known? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I only learned about the arrest warrant an hour ago. The team was already in route. I didn't want you to interfere and make things worse."

Chris grip on the steering wheel whitened his knuckles. Suddenly, the sound of Travis' voice made his skin prickle. "It can't get any worse, sir. I'll be downtown."

"You need to come back. Now."

"I'm not abandoning Vin," he said with an accusatory tone. "I'll be back as soon as I know for certain that he is all right and no sooner." Chris disconnected and then a hit speed dial number. "Come on Ezra, pick up."

"Mr. Larabee?" Ezra answered.

"Listen, they've arrested Vin. I'm almost at Federal lock up. Can you make sure he's got representation? Someone from the Union?"

"Certainly. It would also behoove Mr. Tanner to have outside council and I know just the person."

"Good. Good. Keep me informed."

"Mr. Larabee? Chris?"

The concern in Ezra's voice eased the grip on Larabee's steering wheel. "Yes?"

"Inform Vin that we are doing all we can. We - all of us - believe in him."

Chris knew the extraordinary depth in meaning for Standish to use that term. Ezra's life experience yielded very few people that ever said that of him and for the longest time, Chris wasn't sure if Ezra would ever believe in anyone. Again, the indefinable magic of the combined seven men is what made them such an unbeatable unit.

Until now.

"I'll tell him. Thanks, Ezra."

The satisfaction of one detail correctly and confidently handled was the first step of a very long road, Chris realized. When he reached Federal holding and parked the truck, Chris was ready to wait as long as it took to see Vin. This time, though, he would wait as an outsider.

Chris prowled the waiting area for the hours, alternately annoying and scaring the staff to ensure they were aware of his presence. From this side of the glass, everything looked different and Chris felt out of his element. The rest of the team arrived in irregular spurts bearing food and coffee, reinforcing the message that they were there for the duration.

SHADOWLINE

A little past eight o'clock, a pair of beefy uniformed men entered the waiting area and told them that Vin would be allowed one visitor. Chris stalked forward, eyes blazing, making one guard swallow hard. He silently fell in behind the pair and entered a small search area where he surrendered his gun, pocket knife and identification. He waited impatiently, tapping his boot toe on the linoleum floor with arms crossed over his abdomen and leveling his glare at every person that crossed his path. Finally, a door buzzed and guards pulled it open from the other side and he stepped through, immediately met by a pair of stern-faced men.

"Agent Larabee," the bigger of the two men started. He was lean and older, and Chris pegged him as the intake Commander. "This visit is irregular and only offered because you are a Federal agent. I want to make it clear that you have no access to the investigation or the investigators. You are only here because of my respect for your name and position. I expect the same respect from you regarding your behavior while you are here. Agreed?"

Chris nodded sharply, and was then escorted to a surprisingly clean visitor area. The Commander directed him to window number three and left him alone. It felt odd being on this side of the thick glass, Chris realized. There was a round stool bolted to the floor on the other side along with a phone receiver that looked exactly like the one on his side. Beyond the round seat, there was a door with a square of security glass in the center. He was familiar with the interrogation rooms, holding rooms and intake area on the other side of that glass, but this side was undiscovered country. The alien feeling intensified when he saw movement behind the window and, after a loud click, the door slid open and framed a uniformed woman. She paused, finding Chris with her emotionless gaze, and then stood aside, allowing Vin to pass.

Chris felt sick. Vin wore a typical bright orange prisoner's jumpsuit that hung loosely from his shoulders, making him look small. His hair was damp and hung in clumpy waves to his shoulders; it was a style unacceptable to the Department, but Travis wasn't one to bust the chops of a successful team.

Vin shuffled to the seat, eyes downcast, finally giving Chris sidelong look that defined exhaustion before lowering himself onto his seat.

Chris forced a tight smile, dropped onto his padded chair and lifted the receiver. Vin followed suit in a much slower, stiffer fashion and Chris noticed a tremor in his hand when he lifted his receiver. Chris leaned forward onto his elbows and Vin mirrored the motion, finally raising his chin to meet Chris' gaze squarely. The fluorescent lights colored Vin's face a sickly yellow; a slightly darker patch marking the recent faded injury near his temple.

"Hey," Chris started.

"Hey," Vin responded. There was a few seconds' pause. "Thanks for the back up." Vin's voice sounded brittle.

“Ezra’s doin’. They take care of you?”

Vin shifted. A smile twitched and disappeared. “Yeah. They did all the talkin’.”

“Good. Who was the Union rep?”

“A woman named Betsy. She knows Buck.” A tiny grin lingered a bit longer. Chris forced a chuckle. “I’m sure she does. What about Ezra’s lawyer?”

Vin’s eyes flashed with humor. “Talks fancier ‘n Ez. Got ‘em just as steamed as Ez gets you.”

“That’s good. I think.” Chris hunkered a little closer. “How are you feeling? They check you out?”

“Yeah. I’m in the infirmary for now. They’re keepin’ me separated.”

“That’s the norm for incarcerated law enforcement,” Chris thought. “Good,” was all he said, chastising himself for over his choice of words. There was nothing good about this.

“Look, Vin, you have to hang in there. The boys and I are working every angle we can. Hang tight, okay?”

“k.” The reflection in Vin’s eyes when he breathed that one-word reply nearly ripped Chris’ heart out. The depth of despair stole his breath and clenched his throat.

Vin’s mental force, usually something that rivaled his own, was barely there. Being the one of the seven that valued physical freedom and the open air to the highest degree, this containment affected every level of Vin’s psyche. With Chris’ fears for his friend currently running hot, that single look pushed the line in Chris’ mind toward “terrified.”

“Vin. Try to remember that night. I need to know one thing. . .”

“I’ve tried to remember that night, Chris! It’s not there - gone - It’s just gone!” Even anger looked better than despair in those blue eyes.

“No, listen. Quiet now, and listen. When you were up there watching, were you looking through your scope? Do you remember that?”

“No. But I would be using the scope at that distance.” Any sign of emotion was now under tight control and Vin’s eyes were void of expression. They looked cold.

“Do you remember any noise from behind you?”

Vin frowned. “There was no ‘behind’ me. I’s in the joists.” A few heartbeats passed. “Right?”

“Do you remember anything at all?” Chris could tell by the distant look in his friend’s eyes that something was there. He may not actually remember, but there was an inkling of doubt, a shadow of a feeling through their strange connection. JD’s idea had merit - it was the only explanation - but there wasn’t enough to present to Travis.

SHADOWLINE

Vin rubbed his forehead. "I don't . . ."

"It's okay, Vin. I know. We'll be here for you, Pard, you know that. For now, get some rest and save your strength. Eat. Remember the rules of capture."

Vin snorted. "Eat whatever they give ya, drink whenever you can and always look for escape?"

"Okay, I think that last part may get you more trouble than you already have. Focus on the first parts. Your arraignment's tomorrow?"

"Yeah, nine o'clock."

"I'll see you then and get you out of this place."

That snapped Vin to attention. "Don't put yourself out on a limb for me, Chris. Don't take chances on me."

The comment surprised Chris. "That horse has already left the gate, Cowboy. You haven't disappointed me yet."

Vin merely grunted. Chris heard the cackle of a keyed mike just before a voice announced that their time was up. The door behind Vin slid open again and the uniformed guard stood just beyond.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Vin."

"Sure. Thanks for everything you've done." He offered a weak smile.

"You know it's not a problem or an issue. We're here for you. I'm here for you."

Vin only nodded and hung up, and then turned and shuffled out of sight. It took Chris several seconds to realize he still held the receiver in his hand - something about Vin's demeanor caused him to watch his friend until he was out of sight and the door secured.

Then it hit him - for once, Chris didn't feel the natural bond they always shared and its loss was a rip in his soul.

Chapter Six - CHARGES

The night passed slowly, crawling from hour to hour as Chris tossed and turned and tangled the sheets of his bed. He gave up just before dawn and started the day by watching the sunrise with a fresh cup of coffee on his back deck. From there, he could see the barn slowly emerge from the darkness and felt the teasing rise of the wind. It was fall, but Chris could tell by the feel of the breeze that an Indian summer was stalking. He let the coffee's steam trail in front of his face as he cradled the ceramic mug between his hands.

This was Vin's venue, he thought, a tug at his heart making him gasp. Normally a fighter, Chris intended to go down swinging defending Vin even though everything they had still made it look hopeless. Mentally running all the facts and timeline through his head again, the ending remained the same.

Vin was going to be convicted.

Chris' eyes burned and he stood straighter, chastising himself for losing faith so easily. They still had JD's electronic diggings, physical evidence at the warehouse and the strengths of the other teammates. With that, Larabee downed a gulp of caffeine and resolutely turned and went back in the house as the morning sun brightened the sky.

Chris fed the horses in record time and was on the road for the office by five-thirty. When he keyed into the empty Federal building, his feet echoed on the marble floor. The guard just waived him through security and Chris entered an empty elevator, unable to enjoy that rare experience because he was so focused on his "to do" list.

Entering the Team 7 offices, Chris slowed, stunned, then pulled up short as five sets of eyes turned his way. Each occupied desk held a red-eyed team member with shoulders hunched in weariness. He regarded them in warm silence for a few moments, grateful for their simply being here.

SHADOWLINE

“Vin’s arraignment is at nine,” he said hoarsely. “I want all we can get our hands on by then. If we can’t prove his innocence now, maybe we can at least instill doubt at a trial. JD, let’s start with you. In my office.”

Chris was proud of the determined nods he received in reply. They would need all of that fortitude to get through this.



Departure time came quickly but the team was ready. The stash of clean court clothing came in very useful, and, after cleaning up, only their red eyes hinted at their bone-deep exhaustion.

They arrived at the court early enough to be first in line to enter the courtroom. Chris nodded to Orin Travis when he showed up a few minutes later and the seven of them wiped their faces clear of emotion when the first of the reporters arrived.

Mary Travis, Orin’s daughter in law, arrived shortly before nine, ducking her head as she approached the group. She quietly acknowledged each of the Team’s greetings with obvious awkwardness. Mary was a reporter for one of the television stations and Chris was grateful that she did not press the advantage of knowing the current newsmaker - her hands were empty and she was alone.

“I left the camera outside,” she said quietly to Chris. “I just . . .” she pressed her lips together and clamped her arm across her stomach. “The idea of Vin . . . of what they want me to say makes me sick.”

Chris reached out and squeezed her elbow. “Vin will be glad you’re here.”

“I hope so.” Her smile was weak as the doors opened.

The group claimed seats in the front, giving Vin a clear view of his friends.

“I hope he looks better than he did yesterday,” Nathan muttered as he looked around. “I spoke with the jail infirmary and updated them on Vin’s care.”

“He okay?” Chris asked sharply, concern shadowing his eyes.

“Yeah. Stress ain’t helpin’ none, though.”

The courtroom filled and after quieted by the bailiffs, there was motion by a side door. Vin appeared, still wearing the orange jumpsuit and cuffed at the wrists, waist and ankles.

“I personally delivered a suit to the holding facility, just as you asked, Mr. Larabee.” Ezra made the statement in response to Chris’ startled hiss. “But it seems Mr. Tanner does not have much faith in today’s outcome.”

Ezra was right. Vin shuffled in the room between two burly bailiffs and looked completely beaten. He studied the floor, sparing his friends a short glance and a tumultuous smile before ducking his head again. The garish suit hung on bony shoulders and did little to enhance Vin’s slight frame.

“He needs to eat more,” Buck mused, obviously shaken. The rest of them were quiet as the crowd behind them chatted softly.

One bailiff pulled out a chair for Vin and he dropped on it, shifting his focus from the floor to the table top in front of him. It was all Chris could do to stay seated - he dug his fingernails into his thighs to keep control of his simmering anger.

A pair of men strode down the galley aisle and slipped through the low gate that separated the audience from the cast of players. A bailiff checked their credentials and motioned for them to Vin’s table. They took seats next to Vin.

“That’s his attorney Liam Nelson,” Ezra whispered. “He’s the best in the state. I was lucky to gain his employ.”

“Where’s the Union representative?” Chris growled.

Ezra shifted uncomfortably and glanced at Buck. “You did not inform Mr. Larabee?”

Chris shifted his glare to Buck, “Um, no. I thought Travis. . .” he started, saved when Orin interrupted, placing a firm hand on Chris’ forearm.

“I wanted to tell you in person, Chris. Vin has been relieved of duty.”

Chris blinked. “You fired him?” His voice dropped to dangerous levels.

“I didn’t. The Director did after he read the preliminary investigation notes. I’m sorry, Chris. I tried to get them to wait . . .”

Travis’ voice, as well as the voices in the courtroom, faded to a dull roar in the back of Chris’ skull. This was not the time or place to react - even now, he saw the tentative glance Vin gave him. Chris knew he had to cool down but this was a train wreck happening right before his eyes. His inability to help in any way only fed his frustration and anger.

Chris felt Buck haul him to his feet by his elbow and Chris glanced up to see the black robed Judge Curtis enter and take his seat. A ridiculous number of bailiffs surrounded the bench; Vin looked so small to Chris that the whole scene looked like something from *Through the Looking Glass*.

“Is the defendant ready?”

Counselor Nelson shot to his feet. “Yes, your honor.” He reached over and tugged on Vin’s bicep, dragging him to his feet. Judge Curtis looked at him over the top of his glasses, holding a thick file in front of him.

“Vincent Michael Tanner, you are charged with murder for hire and assault under color of authority. Do you understand your charges?”

“Yes, sir.” The soft Texas accent was barely discernible when the audience broke into furious whispering.

“Quiet in the court!” Curtis bellowed. “This court will not become a circus. Be quiet or be removed.” He paused until silence ruled. “Now, to the charge of murder for hire, how do you plead?”

“He pleads not guilty.” Nelson’s voice was firm. He’d stopped Vin from speaking by squeezing his bicep. Vin glared at him.

“How does the defendant plead to the second charge of assault under color of authority?”

“Not guilty.”

“Both ‘Not Guilty’ pleas are entered in the court. I will set a trial day two months from now, on the 15th, 10 A.M. here, in this courtroom. Now, about bail. Mr. Guandara?”

A man rose at the Prosecutor’s table. “Your honor, the People ask that no bail be set and that the defendant remain in custody. He has out of state contacts and is a flight risk.”

Nathan snorted softly. “What out of state contacts?” he said as the others nodded. “His home’s here.”

Nelson answered immediately. “Your honor, the Defendant’s accounts have been frozen and he has no income at the moment. Mr. Tanner owns property here, has built a life here in the past five years, and has no other family. He has been a reliable worker since becoming an adult. He is not a flight risk and I request that bail be set.”

“Your Honor,” the Prosecution started, silenced by a wave of the Judge’s hand.

“I do not see Mr. Tanner as a flight risk, Counselor. He has ties to the community and no other family. Based on the nature of the charges, bail is set at \$1.5 million.”

“Thank you, your honor.”

Vin’s shoulders slumped and he sank into the heavy wooden chair. Nelson copied his motion, leaning in and speaking quietly the whole time. Chris saw that Vin did not acknowledge the man in any way. The Judge dismissed the parties and swept from the room. Chris’ hope to say a few encouraging words to his friend vanished as the giant bailiffs moved in and quickly escorted Vin out of the room. Chris watched his back, unable to speak.

“Well that went better than I thought.” JD’s comment received grumbled replies from the other. “At least he got bail. I expected it to be higher, too.”

Chris gripped the rail that separated him from the court area and found he couldn’t stand yet. Buck moved in closer and whispered. “You okay?”

“No,” Chris choked. “None of this is okay.”

Buck nodded and clapped a big hand on his friend’s shoulder. “I know, I know. We still got some work ahead of us. Don’t give up on him, okay? Chris? Vin needs ya, you know.”

Chris nodded and straightened, his back cracking like brittle rock. “Yeah, I know. He just looks so defeated. It’s hard to watch.” Buck nodded and dipped his gaze. “Well, let’s get him out. Come on.”

Buck frowned. “Are you using your place as collateral?”

Chris shook his head. “I don’t think I have to. Vin has that property next to mine, remember? He paid that off late last year. I just have to get the deed.” He scrubbed his face. “I can’t stand the idea of him being in there, Buck.”

“Yeah, I hear ya. He’s one free spirit. Come on, then, let’s do this.”

By the time Chris turned to leave, the courtroom was empty except for five very determined looking men waiting for their next orders. They left the courtroom, forming a loose V in order to cut through the gathered reporters. Questions bombarded them from all sides and they all went unanswered.

Nearing the glass, Courthouse doors Chris saw Mary on the sidewalk standing in front of a news van, her attention focused on her cameraman as she spoke. Unable to hear her through the tumultuous crowd that surrounded him, Chris watched her lips move and noticed the cold look in her eyes. It was clear to him that she was not happy about any of this; he knew exactly how she felt.

Once outside, they moved together along the sidewalk until they were alone and able to talk.

“I’m taking care of the bail. Ezra, go ask Vin where his land deed is and call me. I’ll head over to his place. The rest of you get to work and make sure our current case load is up to snuff. Buck, you’re in charge. Get some rest if you can. I plan to take Vin to my house this afternoon and skip the office today. I expect you at my place tonight.”

Chris did his best to ignore the weary slump of shoulders and chose to focus on the burning determination in everyone’s eyes as they nodded and moved off. Taking a moment, Chris took a breath and upon exhaling, commanded his body to relax and loosen up. He shook his arms, closed his eyes and allowed his head to shift back as he lifted his chin.

“Where are you, Tanner?” he thought, trying to open his mind. The dark emptiness there deepened his sorrow. “Let me in. Please.”

Nothing echoed and Chris felt the familiar sharp stab of loneliness.

Chapter Seven - PARTING

Chris parked his truck in front of Vin's building still hating what he saw in the courtroom. He'd never seen his friend give up on anything before and he wondered if that was what he saw at the hearing.

Even though Travis' obvious ploy of piling the remains of his team with administrative type jobs did, in fact, keep the group busy, the team still managed to gather a formidable amount of information for Vin's case. Although locked out of the formal investigation, Buck and Ezra wheedled a lot of information from in-house contacts regarding the physical evidence. JD and Josiah pieced together an accurate 3-D model of the physical site and the Nathan helped nail down the numerous bullet trails on the computer program by somehow gaining access to the autopsy reports.

Chris was proud of what they'd accomplished but they lacked one vital thing and Vin was their best source. Tonight, Chris planned to obtain a list of snipers of Vin's caliber and better because that was the only kind of person capable of making the shot that JD's computer model suggested.

Determination surged from within and Chris climbed the flight of stairs to Vin's floor two at a time. Once at the top, he saw a woman with two small children in front of the apartment next to Vin's. Her eyes were wide in surprise and her free hand instinctively tucked her children behind her.

"I'm sorry," Chris said, forcing himself to slow down. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

"You are Senor Vin's friend, yes?" Esmeralda pushed away her mother's hand and stepped out from behind her. "Where is he? I miss him."

"Is he coming home?" Maria asked. The fright in her eyes changed to worry. "So many people coming and going. So many questions!"

Chris forced a smile. "Vin will be back soon. He's staying with me for a while." He glanced to Vin's door and saw that the yellow "crime scene" seal on the

door was now gone. "I've come to get some of his things. He's still not quite up to being on his own."

"I have some things for him," Maria said excitedly. "I've frozen some food. I will bring it down when you are ready to go."

"He'd like that, I'm sure," Chris said. "He's told us about your tamales." His smile softened and was glad to see that Maria returned her own smile. "So there have been people in and out of his place? I hope it didn't disturb you too much."

"Well, not so much since the first day. Lots of questions the first day, but after that they ignored us."

"They were noisy," Esmeralda said wrinkling her nose. "They woke me up in the middle of the night!"

"Really?" He looked to Maria.

She nodded. "Si. Lots of banging and bumping. Only one night. Esmeralda came in with me that night."

"I'm sorry. That must have been when they removed the gun safe, I guess. It's heavy." Chris wondered aloud as he turned to go.

"No, it wasn't." The speed of the woman's statement made Chris pause and give her his full attention. "They did not remove the big safe until the next afternoon. And why would they be in there at 2 in the morning?"

Chris, surprised, couldn't answer that one. "I don't know." He smiled down to the children. "It's over now, though. It should be quiet from now on."

"We miss him." Maria sighed and turned back to her door. "I will get the food ready, si?"

"Okay. I'll let you know when I'm leaving." The small family entered their apartment and Chris stepped up to Vin's door. A sticky residue from the evidence seal fouled the edge of the door and frame, adding to Chris' disquiet. He pushed the door open and stepped inside, taking in the scene with a snort of disgust. Whoever searched the premises did their job without any finesse. The place was trashed - bookcases pulled away from walls, furniture over turned, cabinets standing open and shelves emptied onto the counters. Food containers dumped, searched and poorly cleaned. The complete violation of Vin's space angered Chris.

Chris picked his way through the living room and headed to the bedroom, snagging a gym bag from the hallway floor. "Assholes," he swore under his breath when he saw that the destruction was no better in Vin's bedroom.

What he saw in the closet brought him up short. Chris dropped the bag and stepped closer, hoping a play of shadows teased him. Eyes locked on a dark spot at the back of the closet, Chris shoved the door aside and confirmed that it wasn't a shadow. Looking down, he verified the previous location of the gun safe by the flattened carpet. He returned his gaze to the large hole in the wall, realizing it was just tall and wide enough for the safe to cover it completely.

SHADOWLINE

Chris grabbed his phone and called JD. "You still in the office?"

"Yes I am. What's up?"

"Can you access the list of what they took from Vin's apartment?"

"You mean the one Ezra got from his source?"

"No, there has to be more. Check again."

"Um, sure. Hang on. I'm getting into the Evidence computer - Uh, says here two rifles, four hand guns, gun safe, ammo - HOLY CRAP!"

Chris' stomach flipped.

"Chris, it says here they found nearly half a million in cash!"

His sixth sense for trouble was right again and he was sure the middle of the night visitor that awakened Esmeralda was the one that planted the money. An incoming call beeped and he glanced at the number. "Gotta go, JD." He cut off a sputtering JD and accepted the call. "Ezra?"

"Mr. Tanner reports that the deed is at your establishment. It is in a folder, in the desk, in the spare room fittingly regaled as 'Vin's Room'. He says that you should not have any difficulties using it for his release." Ezra paused. "Mr. Larabee, Vin's demeanor when he told this me was - unsettling."

"What do you mean?" Chris rubbed his forehead as a headache bloomed.

"I believe our intrepid sniper has given up any hope of acquittal."

I know how he feels. The thought ambushed Chris' mind and he mentally squashed it, wishing there was something he could hit. Hard. He exhaled sharply. "But we aren't." He snapped the phone closed.

He almost forgot Maria's frozen enchiladas. Esmeralda's standing in the middle of the hallway didn't let him forget.

Chris had plenty of time to air his discontent during his drive to the ranch. Free to unleash, he did exactly that until his throat hurt. By then he was on the edge of the city and crossed into a zone of open road where his outrage settled to a steady simmer. He glared at the road and began ticking off the evidence against his friend in his mind once again. After that, he imagined a blank sheet titled "Evidence For Vin" - and drew a breath.

Other than "Teammate's Personal Knowledge About Vin Tanner", there was nothing. He reached his driveway and pulled up to the house with a larger than necessary rooster tail of dust in his wake. Chris threw the truck into Park and forced his cell phone to submit and call Buck.

"Hey, Chris," Buck barked.

"Get Josiah and check out that building where a second sniper could have staged."

"Good afternoon to you too, boss." Albeit the choice of words suggested disgust, Buck's tone sounded simply tired. "Josiah and I can do that. We're nearly done with all this busy-work bullshit - JD and Nathan can finish up."

“Let me know what you find. See you later.” Chris snapped the cell closed and somewhere in the back of his mind, he acknowledged that Buck would forgive the encounter. Through the years, his friend had been on the receiving end of much worse and Chris trusted that he would forgive and forget.

He pushed into the house and strode directly to the guest room desk, vigorously yanking open the desk drawer. There, on top of all the loose items that clutter-danced in response, floated a thin manila file. Chris lifted the folder, flipped it open and found a surprise that turned him cold: The property deed that Vin was so proud of had been replaced with a Quitclaim deed in Chris' name.

It took Chris a few stunned moments to understand what he held in his hand. This meant that Vin expected the seizure of all his property and that all his assets would be frozen; he anticipated the eventuality the moment he left the hospital - hope never existed in his friend's mind because this whole thing was a familiar game to Vin. Chris felt sick that the horrible event involving Vin and the U.S. Marshal's Office taught his friend such a lesson.

Worse than that, it was happening again. Chris ranted anew on the drive back to Denver, his voice hoarse and raw by the time he arrived at the bail bondsman's office where he turned the Deed in as collateral for Vin's release.

They released Vin remarkably fast and Chris was there to greet him when Tanner stepped through the sliding, barred doors looking beyond disheveled. Ignoring the pointed glances from the jail staff that screamed “Traitor!” Chris focused on Vin and took his arm in their familiar forearm grip, setting his jaw at the weakness of Vin's grasp. Thin, pale and alarmingly frail looking, Chris wasted no time or words and directed his friend to the parking lot.

“Let's get you home,” Chris said lowly. He didn't expect a reply.

Once out of the building, reporters appeared from nowhere and swarmed, firing questions, shoving mikes and blinding them with spotlights. Vin ducked his head and Chris kept close to his shoulder, pressing a hand against his friend's knobbed back to guide him. The crowd resisted parting, but with their prolonged silence, finally relented and the pair pushed their way to the truck.

With Vin safely inside, Chris made his way to the driver's side using his glare to part the crowd like an ice cutter's prow. They escaped without injury - mentally, though, Chris worked through many variations of disembowelment.

Vin's dry chuckle diverted his mental rampage. “What?” he snapped.

“Thanks, Chris.”

Chris snorted. “Anytime, Vin.”

That was the extent of conversation, and all the pair needed. Vin immediately fell asleep and stayed that way until Chris parked at the ranch.

“You need to eat. Your neighbor supplied enchiladas.”

Vin smiled sadly. “She knows I like ‘em. I’m gonna see Peso first.” Vin pushed the truck door open and headed to the barn. In the adjoining pasture, Chris saw a blaze-striped, black head pop up from the group of horses and left the beast to comfort Vin for the time being.

The quiet of the afternoon turned dusky as evening encroached. Chris tossed the frozen enchiladas in the oven spent his time prepping additional food for the expected arrivals. Vin joined the effort after tending to Peso, showering and changing clothes, still looking like some kind of refugee’s ghost. They worked in silence, anticipating each other’s actions as usual, but Chris missed their mental connection. It was a lonely experience.

Ezra, JD and Nathan arrived together a little after six and after quiet greetings, opened beers and joined in after turning on the television for the hockey game. The announcer’s voice murmured lowly in the background. Finally, crunching gravel announced Buck and Josiah’s arrival.

Chris looked to their faces when they entered without knocking. Josiah came in first, his face unreadable outside a tired smile. Buck’s eyes, though, told Chris a grim story when their gazes connected. With a nearly indiscernible shake of his head, Buck signaled that now was not the time to talk. Instead, he refocused on Vin, his expression coming alive with its usual joviality when they briefly man-hugged.

Meat was grilled, salad served and enchiladas dispersed in their usual, efficient manner, accented by hockey game banter and subdued cheers. Then, dishes were washed and stored, and fresh beers distributed before the matter of Vin’s predicament was on the table.

“Well, we all know most of the evidence on hand and it looks pretty damning.” Josiah leveled an apologetic gaze on Vin.

“We know that,” JD interjected. “We need to find a way to present the second-shooter theory.”

Buck tipped his head as if readying to speak, but Chris stopped him with a glance. Instead, the team leader turned to Vin. “We need a list of snipers that could pinpoint a long distance shot that are in this area.”

Vin frowned. “How long are we talkin’, here?” JD pulled a paper from his pocket and unfolded it, then shoved it across the table to him. Vin’s eyes widened as he studied the diagram. “This is your theory? That someone shot from behind me?”

“It’s plausible,” Chris said. “But the list of that kind of shooter has to be short.”

“It is,” Vin agreed, calculating in his head as he fingered the drawing. “Well, there’s me and MacMillan. I heard of a couple guys on the P.D. Shelby Winter in

Miami. Zac Sheldon in D.C.” Nathan jotted the names as Vin spoke. “There’s more, but I’ll have to think a bit.” He ran his hand tiredly through his hair.

Next to him, Chris warmed when he saw a spark of life in Vin’s eyes. “Okay, you do that.” He wanted to find out what Buck and Josiah found but from their initial expressions when they arrived, he knew it was not good. Chris debated bringing it up when JD beat him to the punch.

“Hey Buck, what did you and Josiah find at the scene?”

Josiah stiffened slightly and panic fled across Buck’s face. Vin - who never missed anything - sat up and balled his hands on the table.

“Buck?” Vin asked, eyes hard.

“Uh, we did find a couple of pried doors and evidence of someone being at the window in question . . .” he glanced to Josiah for help as his words petered out.

“The place was dusty and dirty. There was a clear imprint of someone sitting in a chair behind a tripod . . .” Josiah paused to take a breath.

“Bullet casings? Please say bullet casings.” JD sounded anxious.

“No, no casings. But there was a pry tool left. It fit the tool’s pry bite in the doors . . .”

“Any chance of fingerprints?” Nathan asked with hope.

“Yeah, there is.” Buck smoothed his mustache, flicked an apologetic look to Chris then rested his gaze on Vin. “Vin’s probably. It was a screwdriver from your Jeep.” Any sprout of possibility started in Vin’s eyes withered and died right in front of Chris. The men blinked in shock. “We can’t bring up the second shooter scenario to anyone without admitting the screwdriver as evidence. Someone has been a step ahead of us this whole time. They set up the second shooter scenario, who knows when.”

“And the Prosecution will say that Vin set it up as his alibi.” Ezra shook his head.

“But Vin wouldn’t be stupid enough to leave a screwdriver behind!” JD shot to his feet. “This is beyond stupid! No one that knows Vin would believe that! He wouldn’t be dumb enough to hide cash in his apartment, either!”

Vin’s eyes snapped to JD. “What?”

JD’s indignation floundered. “Uh, I guess you don’t know about that?”

“About what?” Ezra demanded.

Chris stood and all eyes turned to him. “Half million in cash found in the wall behind the gun safe.”

Astonished silence ruled the air. When Nathan spoke, his words seemed loud. “That’s why they’re charging you so quick. They have everything they need.”

“And we have nothing.” Chris’ voice sounded surprisingly calm in his own ears but there was a rising panic invading every limb. He punched the table with his fist and met Vin’s eyes.

SHADOWLINE

The others exploded into heated debate on the merits of the evidence and any next steps, and didn't notice Vin push back from the table and head directly to the porch doors. After a moment, Chris followed, snatching a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels on the way. When he slid the door closed behind him, the loud voices cut reduced to muted thunder.

Vin leaned against the porch rail, his eyes looking in the distance where the moon hovered over the inky silhouette of mountains. He accepted the bottle when Chris offered it and took a swig. Chris didn't ask him to return it. Minutes passed. Chris heard owl chatter and crickets on the cool breeze. The trees rippled and it washed the heat from Chris' cheeks. Normally, this quiet existence gave him comfort, but with the absence Vin in his mind, he only felt coldly exposed.

"I had my house all built in my head," Vin finally said. He took another swallow of Jack and handed it to Chris without taking his eyes off the horizon. "Wasn't too big. Lots of windows. I didn't really need much."

"It can still happen, Vin." Chris felt his resolve establish once again but did not hear the same in Vin.

"Maybe." Jack crossed back to Vin's hand. "I've been lucky, I suppose." He took another swallow.

Chris frowned. "Meeting us? You got it backwards. We've been lucky." He indicated the others with a tip of his head. "This isn't over. You know that, right?"

Instead of answering, Vin's eyes slid sideways toward Chris where they paused, holding a strange connection. In that moment, Chris read many things and saw a lot of emotion, but there wasn't one thing that he could label. Vin's eyes slipped away, recaptured by something in the distance and Chris suddenly felt cold.

For the rest of the night, the unsettled feeling festered like a wound. When the others left, Vin expressed his thanks and agreed to hang in there. It was past midnight before Vin headed for the spare room - his room.

Chris tossed and turned during that short night. Everything tasked him and weighed heavy on his racing thoughts. No path was clear, and no way out found in the facts. He didn't even realize he'd dozed off until he jerked awake at the grey-pink of dawn, feeling empty and barren.

Chris wasn't at all surprised, really, when he rose and found Vin already gone.

Chapter Eight - CHECKING IN

Spring's chill faded to an early summer and Chris Larabee started to consider that he just might have to live with the empty spot in his mind. Vin's vacancy balanced on the edge of where Sarah and Adam's dark vacuum existed. A handful of times in the past three months, the voids, like black holes in space, sucked Chris toward their darkness where he circled and threatened to disappear. It was Buck that usually dragged him back to life and both men had bruises to show for it.

Tonight, Chris felt a call very different from the power of said hole in his mind. Compelled by some inner force to search for his lost friend, Larabee found himself walking the streets surrounding Purgatorio, seeking the shadows.

Cheery banter and drunken laughter from a seedy bar faded into the street sounds as Chris Larabee strode briskly down the damp sidewalk. The day's unusual heat hadn't abated but simply changed into a heavier form. The mugginess was out of character for Denver; the late evening thunderstorm rolled east leaving behind hot, steamy roadways that smelled of baked asphalt and stung the agent's nose.

Chris' booted feet thumped heavily as he walked. The black t-shirt he wore was thick with dampness and he hoped to feel a breeze along his arms and neck if he walked rapidly enough. But that wasn't the reason he'd escaped the rowdy bar; he knew he wouldn't find what he sought there. Vin would be out here, somewhere in the easily escaped, open darkness because Vin wouldn't be caged again.

Purgatorio streets weren't safe in the light of day and here he was prowling around on a suffocating night when every kind of element would try to escape the heat. In Purgatorio, the typical household didn't have air conditioning because it was simply too expensive. Therefore, escape was in the streets and in all kinds of forms.

Chris turned down a narrow alley and headed toward his truck parked behind a row of boarded up buildings. He vaguely wondered if the vehicle was still in one piece. When he reached the corner, he saw that it had survived and painted a sickly yellow by the only surviving streetlight in the immediate area.

Issuing a grunt of surprise, he arched an eyebrow and stepped clear of the corner. Three strides later, a pair of shadows detached from a building to his left and materialized into solid forms that blocked his path.

“Gimme your wallet,” the bigger of the two men growled.

Chris stopped, his arms dangling at his sides as he glared at them. In their early twenties, they both had the sharp, hungry look of addicts and wielded knives in a low, threatening manner. Before Chris could open his mouth, the scuff of feet behind made him glance over his shoulder where three more scraggly shadows solidified. One held a baseball bat, one a knife, and the third man’s hands clenched into fists the size of sledge hammers.

Chris slowly turned back to the pair before him. “You don’t want to do this,” he said calmly, his order of attack already planned in his mind. The physical pain of a fight just might be what he needed right now; his mouth slanted to a thoughtful tilt when he thought how that might piss off Nathan.

“Don’t fuckin’ tell me what I want, fuck-head. Wallet. And keys.” The speaker sniffed, his nerves edgy with the need for a fix. “Those faggot boots must mean the truck’s yours.”

Chris’ lips pressed into a hard line. “I won’t let you take my truck,” he said with enough projected anger to make the perpetrator blink and shift his feet. “Back off, and we’ll pretend this never happened.”

Saving face, the speaker stabbed the air between them and took a step forward. “Shut the fuck up, cowboy, and hand ‘em over or we’ll cut ya.”

“Oh, now you’ve done it.”

A deceptively soft voice carried from the deepest dark off to Chris’ right. He turned his head slightly to find the speaker as the corners of his mouth pulled into a grin.

“He hates bein’ called a cowboy,” the familiar voice said. “Now you’re just gonna hafta deal with the consequences.”

Vin Tanner crossed the line between embracing darkness and pitiful light. The pair in front of Chris turned slightly in his direction, trying to hold ground. The one closest to Vin faced him fully and raised a shaky blade. “Back off, asshole!” he warned. Uncertainty made his voice as unsteady as his hand.

The half-lit apparition shook his head and chuckled. “Cain’t. Sorry.” Pulling his hands from his jean pockets he added, “Just remember that you were warned, ‘k?”

“Hey,” Chris greeted lightly as if surrounded by five puppies instead of five armed and nervous tweakers. “Good to see ya, Pard.”

“Chris.” Vin took another step and stopped, hooking his thumbs in the loops of his jeans. He planted his feet at shoulder width, keeping his knees slightly flexed. His white tank top hugged a hard, lean torso and a well-defined six-pack. The thin material as damp as the night and his skin shined with fine layer of sweat. His worn jeans hung on hipbones rounded with muscle. And was that a tattoo on his bicep?

The strange interaction and lack of fear made the attackers nervous.

“Shut up and give up your wallets or you’re both dead!” The bigger one barked, waving his knife in figure 8 pattern. Behind him, Chris heard the baseball bat slap against a hand and the shuffling of feet as they repositioned.

Vin’s eyebrows rose. “You know you’re threatenin’ a Federal agent?”

Chris snorted.

“F . . . fed . . . what?” The moment of hesitation passed when the thug realized his cronies were looking to him for an indication of what to do. He managed to regroup and look threatening again. “Shut the fuck up! Get ‘em!”

Chris had time to note Vin’s eye roll before spinning and concentrating on the three behind him. He quickly disarmed one and threw the second into the third, and was stepping up to finish them when bravado deserted the crew like fleas from a drowning cat. The muggers scrambled off into the night, snarling curses and vowing revenge.

Chris turned around, shaking his bruised fist and pleased that the fist’s recipient was in much worse shape. Vin studied a long bladed knife with admiration, tilting it from side to side in the meager light. Not wanting to scare him off, Chris stood where he was and appraised his friend.

The last time he’d seen him, Vin had been thin and pale from weeks of constant physical and mental stress that successfully crushed the spirit that defined Team 7’s sharpshooter. The day he’d been arrested and subsequently fired was forever etched in Chris’ brain. On that horrible day, Vin Tanner wasn’t anything near the proud, self-confident man Chris had come to know over the years.

It had been ninety days since he’d put up the bail for his best friend. Twelve weeks since he’d last seen him at the ranch. Three months of worry, sleepless nights and fruitless searching. In that time, Team 7 managed to chug along, but without its heart, it didn’t feel the same. When Vin jumped bail all those months ago, Chris knew it was the final act of a sick and desperate man.

Now here Vin was, looking much better than Chris remembered. He’d been too thin before; now he was athletically lean and ready to rumble. Long lines of toned muscles defined his arms and torso. With his hair tight against his head in a

ponytail, his solid, thicker neck was exposed. His face was smooth and evenly toned, the dark hollows that had pocked his cheeks and hung under his eyes faded away, as were the bruises. He looked great – and dangerous.

The biggest shock, though, was the goatee. Vin must have felt the stare because he grinned and reached up, stroking the circle of hair that framed his mouth and covered his chin.

“Somthin’ different,” he said in a way of explanation.

Chris chuckled and shook his head, dropping his eyes for a moment. When he looked up again and took a step, Vin moved in the same motion and extended his arm. They joined in the familiar forearm grip that defined their brotherhood.

“Damn, Vin, where you been? I’ve looked everywhere.”

“Yeah, I know,” Vin sighed. “Sorry ‘bout runnin’ out. I have to finish this.”

“I know. I still want to help you.”

“Don’t think you can without bringin’ yourself down. I can’t have that, Chris. This is my fight now.”

Chris didn’t know how to reply. The team had been at a dead end for eight weeks. “Still, we want to help.”

“Thanks.” Vin paused and tucked his newly acquired knife away along the small of his back. Then he shifted nervously and ducked his head. “I didn’t want to lose my land, you know. My jumpin’ bail – ” He sighed and shook his head, not able to find the words.

Chris gripped Vin’s shoulder, the skin under his hand slick with sweat. He gave his friend a shake. “We bought it back, Vin. It’s waiting for you.”

“You shouldn’t a done that. Puttin’ yourself out like that . . .” Again, words failed him. He lifted his chin and met Chris’ eyes. “I can’t guarantee I’ll be back.”

“No guarantee’s needed, Pard. Let us help get you back on the team. Please.”

Vin worked his lips a moment, then nodded shortly. “If I need ya, I’ll holler. I’m checkin’ something’ out right now. I know you’ve been comin’ ‘round and I was lookin’ for you. To warn ya off.”

“Warn me off?”

Vin nodded and tilted his head, catching Chris’ confused gaze with narrowed eyes. “Yeah. I’ve found a thread and I’m goin’ under. Deep under. You lookin’ for me will scare ‘em off.”

“Who?” Chris demanded, his heart shocked into a staccato rhythm. “Scare who off, Vin?”

Vin shook his head and clamped his jaws shut. Chris could see the muscles in his cheeks working under the skin. He spoke between gritted teeth. “No. It’s better this way.” Vin took a step back and out from under Chris’ hand, again meeting Chris’ eyes as he slowly backed away into the shadows. “Don’t come back to Purgatorio, Chris. I’m leavin’ Denver. Headin’ south.”

Chris caught his breath and took a step to follow. “Vin! Don’t do anything . . .”

“Stupid?” his friend finished with a smile. Vin paused, half black and half highlighted in sickly yellow.

“Couldn’t even hope for that,” Chris desperately teased, trying to keep the terror from his voice. “I was going to say, don’t do anything you’ll regret.”

“Oh,” Vin said, his smile fading away. He took another step back and became engulfed in darkness, his words a haint in his wake. “I think it’s too late for that. Just don’t believe everything you hear, okay?”

“Vin . . .” Chris found he was speaking to empty shadows.



Buck knew immediately that Chris found something. He’d known his boss for a dozen years now and could read every nuance in his expression. Buck also knew that Chris had been patrolling Purgatorio regularly. There had to be a connection to Chris’ distracted demeanor.

He slouched against the doorway of Chris’ office. “You found him, didn’t ya?” It was a rhetorical question, really.

Chris glanced up briefly before dropping his gaze to the well-worn file in front of him. The air hung heavy between them for a long handful of seconds. “Yeah,” he finally confirmed.

Buck glanced over his shoulder to the rest of the team. Confident that each was otherwise occupied, he slipped into the office and quietly closed the door.

“Well?” Buck demanded. “What did he say?”

Chris leaned back and ran his hand through his hair. “Nothin’. He didn’t tell me a damn thing.”

Buck went for another tack. “What did he say, exactly?”

Leaning back in his chair and blowing a frustrated breath of air, Chris scowled. “Said he was going’ under.”

“What? Where?”

“South. That’s all he said.”

“How south? Where south? What the hell did he say, Chris? We can’t help him if we don’t know anything!”

Suddenly, Chris surged forward and slammed his palm on his desk. “Damn it, Buck, you don’t think I know that?” He pushed to his feet. “You don’t think I’m worried that he’ll go off like he’s bulletproof or something? He scared me, Buck. You shoulda seen him. He was -” he circled a finger in the air as his thoughts formed. “- haunted. He like a dead man walking’ and he knew it.”

Buck regarded his friend. “What do you mean, exactly?”

SHADOWLINE

“Vin said he had a lead and he was following’ it. He said to ignore anything we heard. Buck, he meant business. God, he had a tattoo!”

That caused Buck to blink as if he doubted what he heard. “A what? A tattoo? Vin?”

‘Yeah, and he had one of those beards – you know, a goatee?’ He circled around his mouth with a finger. “And he’s been working’ out. Solid as oak. He’s going’ in for a kill and I really believe that he’s not planning’ on comin’ out.”

Buck digested that information with a ripple of various expressions – shock, humor, wonder and then finally, concern. “You think he’s gonna get himself killed?”

Chris could only nod. Then he stepped away from his desk and began to pace the small office. “He had this look in his eye that scared the shit outta me. He looked like some kind of predatory animal. There was no peace. The Vin we know wasn’t there. This one was hard.”

He paused in his actions and the two longtime friends held gazes for a moment, trying to find some firm ground in this information. Chris’ gut instincts were nothing to ignore and they both knew it.

“Well,” Buck finally drawled as he smoothed down his moustache and squared his shoulders. “We’re gonna have to work just a little bit harder to make sure he comes out standing’ in the end, then, won’t we?”

Chris managed a half grin. “Damn straight,” he hoarsely acknowledged with a sharp nod. “Any ideas where to start?”

“South?”

Chris rolled his eyes, his attention separated from Buck with the swish of the office door opening. Ezra entered the room as if it was a gentlemen’s salon and shut the door with a soft snick. Just inside, he paused to study the men. Something about Larabee’s expression made his eyes narrow and his head tip to one side questioningly. “What news?” He asked without preamble.

“How . . .” Buck started, perplexed as he looked Ezra over.

Ezra’s condescending sigh applied to either the exam or the question, but probably both. “It is obvious from Mr. Larabee’s expression that there is news. His general appearance is less . . . black.”

Buck’s mouth quirked and Chris snorted. When Buck shrugged at Chris’ questioning look, he said, “I saw Vin.”

Ezra’s eyebrows rose in tandem. “Really? Our Mr. Tanner must have had some information, then.”

“What makes you say that?”

Ezra sighed again as if saddled with half-wits. “Because our sniper is as skilled at hiding from the public eye as I am. He found you, Mr. Larabee, not the other way ‘round. So, what did he impart?”

Chris pursed his lips, turning Vin's explanation over in his mind. "All he said was he found something and is going under somewhere south."

"South, you say?"

Suspicious, Buck said lowly, "You don't sound surprised."

"No. Not really, but before I propose my theory, I must do a little more research."

"Ezra," Chris warned.

"It will not take long, I promise, Mr. Larabee." Ezra was already turned and heading back out the door. "I will contact you post haste." He slipped out before Chris demanded an explanation.

Chris circled back to his chair and dropped down. Buck wandered to the office window and looked out over the street below. Both men turned over all the information - it wasn't much.

"I guess all we can do is wait," Buck finally summed up.

"I hate waiting."

"No shit, Sherlock. Well, at least Orin's been keepin' us busy. I also heard from Debbie in Personnel that he's going' through some replacement sniper files."

"No one can replace him."

"Sheeit, Chris, we know that." Then he turned from the window with a predatory smile. "But at least we'll have some entertainment to fend off the boredom."

Chris chuffed, shook his head and held up his hand in a "stop" motion. "I do not want to hear another word. Just remember the term 'plausible deniability', okay? Now get out."

"Yes sir, Boss man!"

Chapter Nine - IN MOTION

Regret made a poor traveling companion; it made a long road endless and vexing thoughts fester.

The road from Denver to Mexico, usually wide open and mostly straight, allowed Vin to sort his thoughts and settle his emotions through the trademark growl of his Harley. This time, knowing that anyone else on the road could be looking to bring him in, he was unable to completely relax and enjoy.

Jumping bail was something he was all too familiar with albeit from a different perspective, and Vin didn't like this side of that line one bit. It didn't take long to adjust, however, because he knew the ropes both as hunter and hunted. He preferred the hunter end of things, though, and with that thought, regret bared its ugly fangs once again.

By now, he had to be in the system, Vin figured. A fugitive. A fugitive with a goal, he reasoned, but he had nothing positive or solid in which to explain his goal. The only plus on his side was the team he left behind and he knew that even in the face of all the evidence telling otherwise, they believed in him. Their faith maintained his spark of life and gave him the incentive to get back to them, no matter the cost.

Well south of Las Cruces, Vin checked his rear view mirror for any sign of police cruisers or possible tails. He was glad he didn't have to deal with Texas law enforcement because they looked for guys like him – long haired renegades riding chromed, iron horses – but New Mexico was a little more forgiving, especially south-bound. In Texas, he had viable contacts but it was too risky to be on the road that long in the U.S. Fortunately, the best person right now was just ahead, a stone's throw over the Mexican borderline. Vin squinted and studied the roadway ahead, searching for a particular marker. Finally, he saw it and a sense of accomplishment replaced regret.

Vin's growling monster slowed and he steered off-road onto a hard, worn dirt trail not intended for an asphalt eating Hog. The machine bucked and fought

him until his wrists and back ached, adding dust to the attention grabbing noise of the bike. A wash of relief came over him when he saw his final goal: The Rio Grande, which separated the U.S. from Mexico. Usually heavily patrolled where it marked the international border, Vin knew all eyes here usually sought individuals traveling south to north; going the other direction was easier.

Vin shut the bike down and sat for a moment, the engine popping as it cooled. Dusk was minutes away and the quiet was deafening. He surveyed the terrain beyond the river, searching for the one spot he knew would be safe for the night. The last light of the day finally highlighted the unique rock formation and he dismounted.

Vin slung his compact backpack over his shoulders and walked to the edge of the water. The tugs and aches of his trip so far were tolerable as he slowly entered the water and checked both his footing and the current. Wading in to his knees, he turned and gave his beloved Harley a long, final look. It surprised him that he felt no sadness at leaving it behind because the sacrifice's reward would be well worth it. He dug the key out of his pocket and regarded it in his palm. The chrome "7" on the key ring flashed gold in the disappearing light and his heart skipped once. Vin separated the "7" from the ring, tucked it into his pocket, and threw the rest toward the Harley parked on the American side, turning to complete the crossing before they struck beach.

The warm desert night dried his clothes by the time Vin made it to his makeshift camping spot. He circled it slowly in the darkness to ensure no one else claimed it, and settled in with a weary sigh. His brain automatically switched to survival mode and he ran down a mental list of tasks as he prepared his bed. The Army Ranger skills had never really left him, and it saddened him for a moment at just how easy it was to get back into that frame of mind. This was a mental place he'd hoped never to revisit, but he knew it was the only thing that would keep him alive during this self-prescribed mission.

Vin spent the night in a cold camp, dozing and preparing his mind for the work ahead, warmed by the remaining heat of the rocks. His last pang of real feeling struck him when a cluster of flashlight beams danced on the horizon in the area where he left the Harley. As he watched, feelings trickled away and when the lights eventually danced to the throaty sound of the Hog, Vin watched them fade away through the icy eyes of the predator.

When the rocks cooled, he knew dawn was near so he gathered his scant possessions and struck out, settling into a steady rhythm that ate the miles and maximized his energy reserve. His recent wounds prickled occasionally, especially around the cracked vertebra, but his mental discipline filed everything away until only a bare framework of fight - or - flight responses and hyper-vigilance remained.

SHADOWLINE

When he was a boy, a journey like this was second nature. Orphaned at a time when most children entered kindergarten, Vin found the foster system too suffocating and violent. His peers carried most of the blame for his negative experience. That had been in a small, west Texas town called Tascosa. Across the border in Mexico, just a stone's throw from Tascosa, food was easier to steal and hiding places easier to find. Vin learned a lot by watching the Mexican coyotes - men hired to lead Mexicans illegally to America - from afar, and those skills proved valuable in his Army Ranger days and later during his bounty hunting career.

When the sun pushed over the horizon, he picked up the pace and pounded on, his feet rising small plumes of dust with each print. For now, it did not matter, but as he got closer to his goal, his method became covert. As the sun chased away the night's chill, Vin, in a hypnotized pace, barely felt the light, cooling sweat covering his skin. His arms pumped in concert with his corded legs, and his chest rose and fell in a controlled rhythm as he inhaled through his nose and exhaled through his relaxed jaws. A finely tuned machine after months of physical therapy and a single-minded training regimen, Vin started down a pre-determined path whose purpose was to maximize stamina, build contacts and gain a reputation. It ended in Tijuana. Beyond that - well, if he lived that long - he'd would play it by ear.

The intelligence he'd gathered that sent him south came from keeping his eyes and ears open while biding his time and building his physique in and around Purgatorio. Neighbors had children, who knew people, who knew gang members and, eventually, he picked up a piece of dirt regarding Munos' murder: It hadn't been a contract kill.

Munos' execution had also been a complete surprise. Someone wanted something so valuable that retaliation from Munos' cartel was an acceptable risk. If anyone knew retaliation, it was the Mexican drug cartels. Anyone going against them was either incredibly stupid or incredibly greedy. Vin voted for the latter. So, all he had to do was find out who gained the profits from the murder and that would lead him to the exceptional shooter that ruined his life.

It was full daylight when Vin slowed his pace at the first sign of civilization - a hard-packed road. He searched for an aerie in the stark rock formations that surrounded him. He spotted what he needed and trotted to the base of a granite hill, climbing easily to a good perch. From here, using his binoculars, he spotted a small village ahead and observed the movements in and around the gathering of buildings. It wasn't long before he caught his breath, finding the woman he sought. Vin smiled as he watched her through the glasses.

Celia Nova Guerrero, now close to seventy years old and as round as a whisky barrel, shuffled out of her small, dirt-roomed house waving away a pair of small children from her front porch. The woman's yellow-toothed smile dispelled

any semblance of anger. The children raced away and joined a small group walking into the heart of the village.

“You never give up, do you *Mamacita*?” Vin chuckled, remembering being one of those children. From his vantage point, he watched Celia stop with her hands on her hips to watch the rambunctious group. He pocketed the binoculars when the woman stepped back into her home and prepared to descend. From what he just saw, the rhythm of life here had not changed in his years away. This was a good time to call on his long-ago friend.

Vin instinctively circled wide on his approach to the tiny house. Dirty, disheveled and toting a backpack, he kept his blue eyes averted and walked as if he belonged, but he did not pass anyone. It wasn't long before he tapped on the doorway frame with a knuckle.

“Celia?” he called.

“Yes? Who is there?” The woman stepped into view, holding her broom in an unfriendly manner.

“Whoa, I didn't mean to scare you.” Vin took a step back, put up his hands and raised his chin, smiling.

Celia blinked at him for a moment then lowered the broom with a gasp. “Vincente! Oh, my, look at you!”

Vin just laughed, dropping his arms around her as she swooped in for a hug. He could feel her breath warm his chest where she laughed. “How are you, Mama?” he asked quietly.

Celia stepped back, eyes shining and hands latched to his arm. “Better now, little one!” She tugged him inside. “But you are not so little anymore. Please tell me how you are? Are you here to tell me you are getting married?”

Vin allowed her to tug him into the cozy house he remembered from his youth. Concrete replaced the hard-packed dirt floor he remembered and colorful rugs brightened the interior. It was neat and clean, but seemed so much smaller than he recalled. “No, no, not anything like that,” he chuckled. “I am sorry to say that I can't stay long.”

Celia pushed Vin into a chair and she bustled into the kitchen, immediately organizing a small meal. Vin knew better than to refuse - and the hunger-awaking smells of roasting onions and peppers couldn't be ignored. He shrugged off his backpack and watched her work.

“I've missed you, Celia. I've been doing well. I have some good friends in Colorado.”

“Colorado?” she said as she added spices to the cooking vegetables. She glanced up at Vin with a look that he knew well - Celia could read him nearly as well as Chris Larabee. “But there is more. You are not happy.”

SHADOWLINE

"I was, but something happened." Vin paused and regarded his fingernails, picking at a chipped spot on one edge. "I can't tell you any details, Mama. For your safety."

She smirked at him and cracked two eggs over the pan, whipping them into the mix as they cooked. "My safety? That must mean that you are in jeopardy. What can I do?"

"I need to go west. I need to get to Tijuana, but not too quickly. I need to gather information as I go."

"If you are the Vincente I remember, you walked here. You need a ride, yes?" She summed up as she slipped the plate of hot food in front of him along with a small bowl of her home made salsa and a roll of fresh tortillas.

Vin nodded, "Yes," then he tucked into the offering like the starving man he was. Celia came over and placed a glass of water near his plate and then sat across from him. "And thank you for this. I've missed your cooking. And you."

"I still hear Texas in your Spanish", she teased. Celia studied him for a minute, smiling, before her expression turned serious. "Is the happiness you lost in Tijuana?" she asked somberly.

Vin met her eyes and after a moment and shook his head, his mouth too full to speak. He chewed and swallowed, then drank the water, watching her watch him. "No," he finally said. "I have to right a wrong first. After that -" he shrugged, and picked at the food. "Happiness may follow. I have to take the chance it will."

She sighed and sat back in her chair, her large frame making the wood squeak in protest. "I will help you, but you must promise to come back to me. I need to know you are happy. Now tell me about Colorado." Motioning him to clean his plate, Vin started to eat again and told her all about the six men that made up his family. His descriptions were brief, but as he spoke of each one in turn clear memories cluttered his mind. He felt closer to them as he spoke but Vin knew he couldn't think of them again after this day if his vague plan had any chance of working. They had to be his secret.

Celia knew exactly what was going through his head and Vin knew his secret was safe here. They then talked of the past, of Vin's sporadic appearances at her home and the mischief he got into, until his plate was clean.

She snatched up the dish and deposited it with a few others in her dish pan and wiped her hands on her apron. "I suppose you need to go right away," she pointedly asked. Vin nodded. "Then I will be right back." When she passed Vin she ruffled his hair and disappeared out a side door.

Vin took the time to wash the few dishes and then dry them. He just hung up the dish towel when Celia returned with a skinny, older man trailing behind. "This is Tomas and he agreed to let you have his son's motorcycle. Ramon went

north last year and has not returned. Tomas says he does not need it anymore. I hope it will do.”

Vin nodded a greeting to the man and stepped around them. Parked next to the house was a grey and black dirt bike. It was older, but exceptionally well cared for.

“I owe Senora Celia much,” Tomas’ hoarse voice scratched. “It is yours as a gift.”

Vin smiled. “It’s perfect,” he said. “Thank you.” He pulled some money from his boot and insisted the man take some of it. When he refused, Vin suggested that he donate it for school supplies and Tomas took it with a smile before shuffling away. Then, Vin turned to Celia. “Thank you. I will pass through here again, I promise.”

Celia patted his cheek, her eyes shining. “I will pray for you, my Vincente.”

Vin donned his pack, pecked her on the cheek and mounted the bike. It started with ease. He waved farewell and pointed the machine west, leaving a long tail of dust behind. Ahead, miles of deadly desert waited.

Chapter Ten - TRANSITION

Vin traveled at a slow, steady pace, stealing in and out of the shadows of any gathering large enough to be a town. He kept his ears and eyes open, gathering information while keeping to himself. Although he wanted to, asking questions was risky. For now, he needed the time for his body to adjust to the arid desert and keep himself toned and sharp. A little more than half-way to his destination and more confident in his Spanish speaking skills, Vin slowed his pace and picked up odd jobs. He worked hard, saved his money and sought remote areas to test a series of weapons he'd collected along the way.

Vin still had the knife he picked up during his final meet up with Chris and it held a special place in his mind - he knew its balance intimately. Now, he had another knife tucked over his shoulder and between the two, his throwing became deadly accurate. Still, he missed the certain finality of a gun. Actively seeking the darkest parts of the stops that could be called a town, Vin honed his fighting skills, gathered gossip and eventually picked up a very nice Sig Saur automatic that melted into his grip like a familiar sporting gal. Summer's heat was fading when Vin was ready to move, and he headed to the launching site of his plan.

Mexicali could only be described as ragged. On the edge of the Sonora desert and the largest city that he'd seen since crossing the border, Mexicali was a crossroad for travelers of all kinds. People passed through while escaping Tijuana to the west or collapsed from the rigors of the Sonora wasteland to the east. It was the perfect source for the information that Vin required.

He ditched the dirt bike there, trading it and some cash for a beat up Jeep that was nothing more than a frame and engine, both of which were deceptively sturdy. He rented a room that overlooked the main street and found a low key job moving liquor crates throughout the city from a main warehouse. There were plenty of stories out there to absorb.

The first step of finding housing checked off his list, Vin shifted to step two: Weapons. In preparation, he pried up the floorboards under his lumpy mattress

and fashioned a snug niche to store most of his money, the gun, and one knife. Once they were safely stowed, he relaxed enough to sleep - keeping the Denver knife tucked under his thin pillow. Before moving on, he hoped to have two more handguns and a reliable rifle, and a safe way to transport them.

The South Texas accent of his Spanish had faded and soon Vin blended in with the community. Working nights and avoiding daylight darkened his hair, which now touched well below his shoulders. He kept it in a neat pony tail and maintained a clean presence, always working alone. In his weeks there, Vin eventually recognized most of the locals and where they fit in the landscape of the city, and knew when a new face in the crowd was there "on business." The latter individuals were twitchy and desperate, uncomfortable wherever they were and always disappeared without epilogue; Vin suspected they were mules for product moving through the city. This was the path Vin sought because it would lead him to Munos' shooter. Guns and drugs were a natural combination. It didn't take long for him to identify two main arteries through Mexicali: Drugs went north and weapons went south.

Vin lay down from a busy Friday night of work, barely aware of the dawning day burning a rectangle of light around the blackout curtain in his sole window, and stared at the stained ceiling of his room. He thought of everything he'd learned in the past months.

Only two family Cartels battling for the two arteries because all other challengers were dead and buried all through the Baja peninsula and the east edge of the Gulf of California. Burying the bodies became unimportant; leaving decapitated bodies visible was an effective deterrent. The two Cartels still in play were the Zamora and Carnicero families, the former coming up from Belize and the latter ensconced on the east edge of Mexico City. Either one had the ability to hire the man that ruined his life. He had to narrow his focus.

Using Ezra's example, Vin upgraded his wardrobe and left the shadows, finding a job as a bartender in one of the Zamora-held nightclubs. It didn't take long for the Club managers to use his bilingual skills - useful this close to the border - and soon Vin was in the thick of a night scene vastly different from hauling liquor crates.

His reputation as a quiet, reliable and strong worker, who was unafraid to step in the middle of any fracas, grew rapidly, to the chagrin of his peers. When he came out on top during the handful of challenges from those not happy with his moving into perceived territory, Vin's stock rose in the ranks, his progress marked by a growing collection of scars.

He moved living quarters often now, knowing he had to be ever vigilant as his list of enemies lengthened. He rented a small place out of town at the edge of

the open desert, installed a gun safe and worked to fill it up. During any free time, he kept his skill honed.

Vin worked his way into a bouncer's position at a Zamora owned nightclub, and from there, fought his way to the private levels above the pounding dance floor. Often stationing himself against the guardrail, Vin watched sickening displays of over indulgence in all vices: Alcohol, drugs, sex and some he couldn't categorize. His quiet display of might, common sense in avoiding all temptation, and loyalty finally paid off one Tuesday night.

"Mr. Michaels?" Vin turned at his new name. Vincent Michaels was close enough to his real name that he'd avoided any slips - another lesson from Ezra. "Mr. Zamora would like a word."

Vin raised a brow and pulled a man from another assignment to cover his post before following Oscar, Zamora's weasely assistant, to a back office Vin had yet to enter. He knew it had a separate entry from the secured parking basement and often heard angry conversation behind the door. Vin figured a lot went on behind that door. Vin also knew that Oscar skimmed cash from the bar. He had many similar bits collected from his time in the establishment.

Weasel Oscar elbowed his way between the hulking twin door guards and knocked on the door. Vin's sharp eyes quickly picked out where the twins kept their firepower and other weapons; it was second nature to him now. The door cracked open and Oscar pushed in with an annoyed grunt. Vin followed, giving the hulk that stayed behind a wink and a grin as he passed. The giant scowled and narrowed his eyes but did not move. "No love lost there," Vin thought drily, following Oscar and the other bodyguard inside to a dark anteroom.

"Stop," the bodyguard Vin knew as Zero growled.

Figuring what was next, Vin raised his arms without a fuss while Oscar complained bitterly about the lack of trust. Zero plucked Vin's Sig Saur from the small of his back and the Denver knife from his boot and tossed them in a drawer before moving to Oscar. Vin smirked as the assistant was frisked in a much rougher manner. Oscar shot him a glare as he angrily re-arranged his clothing into some semblance of order. Vin was sure he saw a glint of humor in Zero's eyes as the giant tilted his head to indicate their release.

Oscar patted what remained of his hair into order (reminding Vin of every comb-over joke JD ever told) and moved to open a solid oak door. He knocked lightly first and then pushed the door open. Vin blinked at Oscar's sudden change of demeanor when he crossed the threshold; instantly, he was subdued and polite. Closer scrutiny revealed a growing shine of sweat near the man's temple when he passed. Vin followed with caution.

Vin's foot sank into luxurious carpeting with his first step over the threshold. The room reeked of masculinity from the dark wood paneling to the

elegantly carved bookcases. A glass domed clock's spinning pendulum whirred softly above the club's muted noise. Framed black and white photos, expensively matted and carefully hung, were of landscapes that could have been anywhere in Mexico or South America. A single guard, lean and hard, stared at him from the far corner and Vin gave him a level look as he stopped in front of a neat and gleaming mahogany desk. He automatically struck an "at ease" posture - hands clasped behind his back, feet shoulder length apart and knees slightly flexed. Unafraid, he blinked once and met the dark, predator eyes of Alberto Zamora, first son of Roberto Zamora and head of the Zamora Cartel.

Alberto rocked back in his leather chair, legs stretched out with ankles crossed, and rolled a fat cigar between his lips with nimble fingers. The silver smoke undulated lazily upward from the ashy end and a dark pair of intense eyes bore a hard gaze through it, veiling any thoughts. Alberto's thick hair, shot with grey and combed straight back, had a slight wave. His suit was something Ezra would die for.

Zamora's personal body guard took one step closer and stood at attention. He looked relaxed but Vin knew better. As Vin and Alberto silently sized each other up, Oscar rattled off a short introduction and moved to stand at Alberto's shoulder. Whereas Vin portrayed calm, confident strength, Oscar displayed a tight, nervous demeanor that made Vin wonder if he'd missed something. He quickly banished the thought, knowing any flash of doubt would show in his eyes.

The corner of Alberto's mouth twitched and Vin knew his brief thought showed itself. Still, he held the gaze and carefully wiped his face of emotion.

"You do not disappoint, Senior Michaels," Alberto finally said. Oscar frowned and glanced between the two of them, clueless to the subject. Alberto uncrossed his ankles and scooted his chair to the desk where he carefully tapped the cigar's ash box into an ash tray. Vin's eyes tracked the motion and then flicked up again, but he found his gaze irresistibly drawn back to the bowl. A cupped, mummified hand held the cigar dregs.

"I see you noticed my ash tray," Zamora chuckled with flat eyes.

"Well," Vin drawled. "Whole animal butchery is the fad these days."

Zamora cocked his head for a second and then burst out laughing. Then he stood and patted the corner of his eye with a linen handkerchief pulled from the pocket of his suit jacket. He rested the cigar between mummified fingers and extended his hand over the desk. Vin took just enough of a step to complete the handshake, which caused the bodyguard's shoulders to twitch. Once released, he retreated to his original stance. The bodyguard relaxed again.

Zamora sat again and let out a breath, amusement still clear in his shining eyes. He looked Vin up and down. "Vincent Michael Tanner," he said, "also known in these parts as Vincent Michaels. You have an interesting history."

SHADOWLINE

“Not so interesting to me,” Vin answered calmly.

“I suppose living it is a different thing all together.” Alberto pulled a file from the top drawer and dropped it on the desktop. He flipped it open. “Orphaned at 5 years old, resistant to the system, citizen by choice of both Mexico and America, lackluster grades in school when you bothered to attend, but quite the Army Ranger.” He leaned back again. “You found your skill as a sniper.” He regarded Vin.

After a few seconds, Vin shrugged. “Your point being . . . ?”

“Well, finding one’s skill isn’t a gift unwrapped by everyone,” he said. “I understand that the skill comes with a preference for isolation. Working alone suits you?”

“Yes.”

Alberto tapped the file with his finger. “It must. You left the Army and worked alone quite successfully as a bounty hunter. Why did you join the U.S. Marshals?”

“Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“But you had some trouble, some unsubstantiated allegations of bribery, I believe? Then back to bounty hunting?”

“So?”

“Then a stint with the A.T.F. and more allegations? You really aren’t a team player, are you?”

Vin headed off the rise of anger. He knew the investigation was inevitable but having someone discuss his life so freely was uncomfortable. Vin cherished his privacy. Instead of showing that weakness, he asked, “Was your ashtray a team player?”

That made Alberto chuckle again. “He was. Then he wasn’t. We all find our level of existence, don’t we?” Vin eventually nodded agreement and silence hung in the room for a few long moments. Appearing to make a decision, Alberto leaned forward, elbows on the file and his chin resting on steepled fingers. “I like you Senior Tanner. Or Michaels. My sources tell me you’re a reliable and discreet worker. You don’t cause trouble, but you stop it when it comes your way. You try to stay out of the limelight. I like you, but people that desire an anonymous lifestyle make me nervous.” He tapped his lower lip as he studied Vin again. “I guess I just do not understand why someone would not desire power. I like to know what drives a man and I cannot see what drives you. That makes me nervous.”

Vin did not move a fraction and did not speak. Oscar’s beady eyes darted between the two nervously, the sweat sheen spreading across his wrinkled forehead as he tried to grasp the undercurrent of the conversation.

Alberto leaned back. The chair squeaked. “What drives you, Senior Tanner?”

“What drives anyone, sir. Whatever makes me happy.”

“What would that be, exactly?”

Vin shrugged. “I am generally easy to please.”

Alberto chuckled again, shaking his head. “This is what I think,” he said. “I think you want to find out what happened in Denver. I think you want to know who set you up and you think I am possibly that man.”

“Are you?”

The intensity of the gaze between them made Oscar shift nervously in Vin’s peripheral vision. The man remained silent the whole time, his neck twisting back and forth with the volley of words. Now, his entire face shone with perspiration while he tugged at his tie and nervously cleared his throat.

Alberto Zamora slowly pushed to his feet, his face nothing but stern, sharp lines. “No,” he said. “But I know who is.” He paused. “Is that worth something to you?”

Vin rocked back on his heels, clenching his hands. The burning anger proved more difficult to knock down this time. Did he really know who ruined his life or was it a bluff? “Yes,” he answered slowly. “Yes, that would make me happy.”

“I tell you what,” Alberto started. “I will give you a test. You pass, and I give you a name.”

“What if I don’t pass?”

Alberto shook his head slowly as he picked up the smoldering cigar. “I do not think that will happen, Mr. Tanner. I think you have nothing to lose right now so any gain would, um, ‘make you happy’, am I right?” He didn’t wait for a reply and flicked his wrist, dismissing Vin from his presence. Oscar skittered around the desk and took Vin’s elbow but Vin shrugged him off and issued a warning glare. Oscar cleared his throat again and sidled to the office door, opening it with wide-eyed fear.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Zamora,” Vin said with a slight nod of his head.

“You’ll be hearing from me soon,” Alberto replied.

In the outer office, Vin retrieved his gun and knife while the lean guard ghosted the office doorway. Then Vin shoved out the exit and strode between the door guards, Oscar on his heels. Oscar, now busily quiet, moved to Vin’s side and kept glancing at him as if he were a newly discovered creature. Although it amused Vin, he knew better than to show any sign of letting down his guard. He was sure Oscar had his own minions at his bidding and didn’t really want to invoke unwarranted trouble. Keeping an eye on Zamora would be difficult enough.

Once at the bottom the stairs, Oscar disappeared into the crowd and Vin cut through the gathering mob at the bar to get a beer before returning to his less crowded post on the balcony. It was times like these where he really missed the

group dynamic of Team 7. With six brothers backing you, it was impossible to fail. Alone, he felt adrift, and Vin marveled at that thought.

When did he become a team player after all?

Vin's shift ended at 4 AM and he left the club without a word. He walked to his small place, alert for trouble, but tipping his head back to take a moment to enjoy the stars. It was a clear night, brisk and desert-cool, and the sparking gems of the night soothed him knowing that in Denver, his friends and brothers slept under the same canopy of light. Even though they were physically distant, like the stars, just knowing they were there gave him comfort.

Stopping at the entrance to his building Vin remembered wishing on the stars to get his mother back. It didn't work then, but he uttered a small wish anyway. "Let me get home," was all he said.

His words carried away on a puff air, Vin waited until a light breeze carried them away before heading inside. Ever vigilant, his eyes looked for any possible trouble. None found, he was relieved to make it to his door unscathed. The meeting with Zamora was what he had been working toward but now that it happened, Vin did not like the extra press of caution it brought. As with any Cartel member, Vin knew Zamora could not be trusted and now that he had Zamora's attention, eyes would be on him constantly.

Sighing, Vin closed and locked the door, and then dragged a heavy chair snug against it. It was the normal routine for the night, not really meant to stop any forced entry but designed to give him some time. He scanned the room, then the bathroom, and then headed to the bedroom. Everything looked as it should except - Vin glanced around again. An envelope rested on his flattened pillow.

Moving so that his back was to an interior wall, Vin then approached the bed and lifted the envelope. The initials "V.M.T.", written in an elegant script, decorated the front. He flipped it over and slipped a folded card from the unsealed envelope that vaguely smelled of cigar smoke.

The front of the card was blank. Inside, the same script etched three names and Vin felt a chill zing up his spine. His reaction was so automatic he didn't recall retrieving his gun from his waistband. Vin visually checked the room again before reading the line under the list of names.

"For your own ashes," the line read. Above it were the names of Arturo Carnicero's three sons, collectively known as The Butchers of Baja: Felix, Adrian and Gustavo.

Vin had just contracted out to kill high ranking members of another Cartel.

Cold sweat percolated at the nape of his neck. What had he gotten into? How could he do this without losing himself? Would this make it impossible to go home again? He crumpled the note in his hand, the previous star-gazing calm completely gone, and Vin fell into that familiar rabbit hole where he dwelled for so

long as a Ranger. It was a world where only the mission mattered, but deep down he knew if he was not careful, Team 7's Vin Tanner would cease to exist.

The hunted had just become the hunter.

Chapter Eleven - ALLIED

When one was a quiet, diligent worker who kept opinions to themselves and made a point not to garner attention, Vin found that he heard quite a lot. In his time working the clubs, he learned whom the players were in the Ecstasy and cocaine game, where the stuff came from as well as where most of it went. Mexicali's supply simply greased the wheels for the trip across the border to the wealthy American pipelines.

So, when Zamora's trade-for-information card crossed Tanner's hand, he knew exactly where he had to go: Tijuana. From there, the Butchers of Baja could ship via ocean, tunnel, in trucks or on bodies all along the U.S. border. The multi-pronged approach always netted results on the plus side.

With the sudden absence of Munos, Vin planned to enter the final battleground where the two Cartels fought to make a stand. Street shootouts were common in Tijuana, as well as the sudden appearance of decapitated, tortured or bullet-riddled bodies on the public thoroughfares. The Butchers proved to be the most violent, fighting to keep their place after the murder of their top broker. Zamora's family, however, had the most to gain and the resources to win this far north.

Vin did take the time to obtain a referral. The club's manager did not seem surprised when Vin asked. Alberto gave him all he needed to obtain a legitimate job when he made it to Tijuana.

As Vin drove west, he was well aware of the close proximity of the U.S. border to his right and worked to push all such distraction aside. He stopped often and exercised, keeping tone so when he reached Tijuana he would be a focused Ranger machine ready to find his targets. Days later, when he crossed the line from bleak desert to bustling city, Vin Tanner was lean muscle and on the hunt. Upon arrival in the ramshackle Jeep, his first task was to find safe place for his guns.

His time in Mexicali allowed Vin to garner two more handguns and one nice rifle that met his needs. All were in good condition and "borrowed" from wares

that originated in the States. Vin wondered if his old team knew about this pipeline.

Skirting the edge of Tijuana, he finally settled on a storage facility to the south with adequate security. Vin knew that a place like this was easily breached; the secret was not tipping anyone off as to what the locker contained. Because cash spoke a universal language, the proprietor didn't ask, Vin didn't tell, and there was no paper trail to follow.

After that, he carefully entered the city from the east, getting the lay of the land and a feel for the population. Dirty, thin children ran wild in the street, harried women in tattered clothes walked hurriedly with ducked heads, and overdressed business owners stood like sentinels in front of their stores. As the weak afternoon sun sank to sunset and the legitimate business started locking their doors, Vin began to think about finding his work contact. While driving the main road at a reasonable speed, a black SUV with a red and blue light bar pull in behind him. Vin knew this wasn't by chance - he'd just stepped into the game.

When the unit's light bar came alive, he was glad he'd stashed the guns first. Vin pulled off the main road to a cross street with less traffic and the SUV stopped behind him. Vin rested his hands on the top of the steering wheel in plain sight and watched two hefty Officers approach in his rear view mirror. They both carried assault-style rifles slung over their shoulders that caught his interest; he could guess what side of the border they came from, too. The Jeep was open to scrutiny with the vinyl side panels removed and the only thing visible was his bag of clothes.

"Identification," the officer said at Vin's door. The other Officer continued to peer in the Jeep, his rifle muzzle pointing to the ground.

In Spanish, Vin asked to reach for his wallet. Vin couldn't see the Officer's eyes because he still wore very dark sunglasses, but Vin did see his forehead wrinkle in surprise.

"Slowly," the man replied in Spanish.

Vin pulled out his Denver driver's license. He knew better than to ask why he was pulled over; Vin recognized a shake down when he saw one. The Officer snatched the ID from Vin's fingers and slipped it into his shirt pocket, behind the tarnished badge. "Get out."

Vin obeyed silently, rather amused by the whole encounter. To which Cartel were these men loyal?

The Officer motioned with the tip of his rifle for Vin to move to the sidewalk. Vin walked around the front of his Jeep, keeping an eye on both rifles. The other cop started digging through Vin's bag. When they reached the sidewalk, the Officer with him pushed him up to a wall and roughly patted him down. Vin

took the abuse silently even when the man roughly checked his crotch with the edge of a hand.

“You like that, eh?” the cop said as he pressed Vin closer to the wall. He could smell the damp rottenness of the decaying wood under his cheek. Still, Vin did not react.

“I’m just trying to get to my job,” Vin said, his words a muffled from his cheek-to-the-wall position.

“Where’s that?”

“Coyote Flats.”

“What do you do there?” His questioner’s breath was hot against his ear as he pressed closer. “Do you escort perverted old men who like pretty boys like you, huh?” Vin felt a hand under his shirt, flat on his stomach.

“No.”

“No? Lace your fingers on the wall over your head,” the Officer growled. The clammy hand moved downward and fingertips slid under the waistline of Vin’s jeans. “But you are advertising so much. I have not seen you before and I know Coyote Flats.” Vin felt the man’s thigh high and tight between his legs, the cold wall through his thin shirt and the Officer’s other hand squeezing his clasped hands against the building. The rifle had to be slung along his back, Vin thought.

“I’m new.” As his interrogation continued, Vin’s peripheral sight kept track of the second Officer. With the contact now so close, the second man turned his back on the Jeep and watched, smiling and moving closer with each invasion of Vin’s body. “Just a little closer,” he thought.

Fingers brushed the top of his underwear and Vin was glad he wasn’t going commando today. His attacker’s full body now pressed fully against Vin, a hard line of flesh indicating the man’s excitement. Hot breath dampened Vin’s neck as the uniformed body squirmed against him. Vin’s eyes flicked sideways - the other man was close enough for Vin to see his dilated eyes when he lifted his sunglasses to rest atop his head.

“Ahhh,” the attacker sighed.

Then Vin moved. He jerked one arm free and the assailant’s ribs cracked with his powerful elbow jab. An “oof!” of wind emptied the man’s lungs and he sputtered. A quick spin and jab broke the man’s nose and he fell back. Vin’s side-kick bent the partner’s knee backward. Both men dropped to the ground, rifles clattering on the broken cement. Vin second kick connected with the second Officer’s chin and sent him to oblivion. He followed through with a final kick to his attacker’s jaw, and both Officers were down and out.

Vin collected his I.D. and picked up the rifles, tossing them in the Jeep before driving directly to Coyote Flats. After tucking the weapons under the seat along with loose clothes, he jumped out, ran his fingers through his hair and

regrouped with a deep sigh before strolling to the front door where an obvious bouncer stopped him by barring the open doorway with an impressively muscled arm.

“Closed.”

“Jesus is expectin’ me,” Vin said, looking right in the mountainous man’s eyes. He held up the piece of paper from his former boss. “Name’s Tanner.”

A broad, shaved head twisted on a tree-stump neck as the bouncer looked just inside the door. Vin could see a pair of eyes reflecting light in the shadows, the body shrouded in darkness. The eyes studied Vin for a moment before a vague, dark outline of a head nodded. The mountain man’s arm fell away.

“Thanks.” Vin tipped his head then tilted it sideways, giving the man a sidelong look. “There’s a couple rifles under my car seat that belong to some local cops. I’m sure they’ll be by to pick ‘em up.”

The bouncer’s face remained expressionless, but the sudden twinkle in his eyes told Vin the message was positively received. Vin then stepped past him and into Coyote Flats just in time to see the shadow person disappear down a hallway off one end of the bar.

It took a few minutes for Vin’s eyes to adjust. With the sun just setting, the room was not as crowded as it would be later but he was surprised that every seat at the bar was already occupied. Music pulsed from a neon jukebox to one side of an empty, postage-stamp sized dance floor; Vin figured it was the normal state. A couple of pool tables occupied the back area and small, round tables were scattered around the rest of the floor. Coyote Flats wasn’t a huge place but Vin got the feeling that it pulled in a good share of the night crowd in this part of town. Apparently, the locals liked it.

Old cigarette smoke permeated everything and the place had a heavy, used feeling but Vin could see that it was surprisingly clean and the fixtures well cared for. This wasn’t the kind of place where American teens, drawn by the under 21 drinking age, clumped and drank themselves sick; this was a place where deals were made. He’d seen plenty of places like this all over the world.

When the mystery shadow person returned, Vin realized it was a woman. Her clothes were dark and blended in with the shadow but the edges of her neckline and sleeves sparkled with gold beading. She was small framed, but stood confidently with her shoulders back and chin raised, and brazenly scanned Vin from head to toe with bright, intelligent green eyes. A taller, broad man wearing a yellow polo shirt backed her.

“Mr. Tanner,” the man greeted, stepping around the woman and offering his hand. “I was told you would show up eventually. I understand you are quite a worker.”

Vin nodded, wondering exactly what the man was told, and shook his hand. "I get my jobs done," he said lowly. He winked at the woman. Her eyes turned stormy and narrowed as she spun on a heel and returned to the bar.

"That is Ronnie. I am Jesus. You can start tonight, yes?"

"That's why I'm here."

Jesus gave Vin a quick tour and then tipped his head to the hallway off the bar. "Come. We will talk."

They passed the elbow-to-elbow, packed bar and Vin saw Ronnie at the far end filling a beer from tap. She spared him a cold glance before turning her back to him. Two other bartenders appeared from the far end and dealt with the growing crowd while the jukebox kicked to life with a scratchy version of "Cheeseburgers in Paradise". Vin slipped into a small office at the end of a short hallway and Jesus told him to close the door. The bar noise cut to a dull throb.

Jesus dropped into a battered desk chair with a sigh and plucked a half-burned cigar from a pottery ashtray. Vin noticed the tray's molded cigar rest was a set of ample boobs. His lips twisted in amusement. Jesus motioned for him to sit in the only other chair. Vin felt it wobble when he sat.

"I know why you are here. Word travels in the Zamora family. Understand that I cannot directly help you, but if you keep your ears open, you will hear what you need in this place." He drew a circle over his head with smoke from the cigar in his fingers. "I stay neutral. I am the Switzerland of Tijuana." He laughed.

"Switzerland wasn't as neutral with the Nazis as first thought," Vin said, leaning back so his chair squeaked.

"True," Jesus agreed, nodding. "But at the time, not so obvious, yes?"

"I got it."

"I can get you what you need when the time comes. Just let me know."

"Will do."

There was a knock at the door just before it cracked open. Tree-neck poked his ham-sized head in. "Espinoza and Hernandez just stopped by. I didn't let them in. They got what they wanted."

Jesus looked to Vin. "Espinoza and Hernandez the local cops?" Vin asked.

"Yes. They are lap dogs for the Butchers." He sucked on the cigar and blew out the smoke as he dismissed Mountain Man with a flick of his wrist. "I take it they introduced themselves in their normal, charming manner?"

Vin chuckled. "Yeah. I kept their guns safe in my car until they could hold 'em again."

Jesus snorted. "How kind of you. You certainly started out on the right foot."

Rising from the chair, Vin headed to the door. "I'll get right to work."

"I have a room upstairs. You can stay there until you find another place."

“Thanks.” Vin slipped from the room, surprised to see that the place had filled to capacity in the few minutes he was gone. “At least I’ll be busy,” he mused, heading to back the bar staff.

Moving in and out from behind the bar as the night wore on, Vin appreciated the fact that he’d picked up his Spanish quickly. He didn’t say much, as was his normal taciturn way, and he knew that his time in the sun lightened his hair just enough for most everyone in the bar to treat him with obvious suspicion. Even with that, he was surprised at the things he overheard. Keeping a schooled expression at all times - a knack he’d perfected from watching Ezra - made patrons believe he did not understand them.

The most difficult to ignore were the flashy, obviously spoiled young women dripping with sparkly things and wearing scant skirts and mind-boggling, spiky heels. The overly made-up eyes that belied their youth raked Vin’s body with heated intent made him squirm, but what they whispered to each other about what they wanted to do to him . . . it repulsed, entertained and struck Vin ridiculously funny all at the same time. They were easy to avoid in the press of the crowd.

Ronnie pointedly ignored him the first week. If her part of the bar needed stocking, she went through the other bartender, Eddie. Eddie was a young, good looking man who was as vain as the sparkly girls he served. His white uniform shirt was usually unbuttoned more than it should be and Vin had no doubt he worked out. Usually, he acted as if Vin didn’t exist, speaking to him only when the bar needed stocking.

Mountain Man, whose name was Xavier, was the leader of the bouncer staff and treated Vin as if he’d worked here for years instead of days. Vin wondered if he had Jesus’ ear like Ronnie did. The three of them called the shots here, that much was clear.

All of it was fine with Vin. With his total immersion in Mexico, he now thought in Spanish and rarely used English. Using what he overheard in the Club, Vin separated the wheat from the chaff - the players from the watchers - within a week. Watchers were merely baubles but the players would get him closer to the Carnicero brothers and this mission’s end.

From there, he would find the one that set his life a downward spiral. Vin shook his head and scolded himself. “Mission first.” He sighed and looked up, surprised to see Ronnie regarding him with a perplexed frown from the far end of the bar. He schooled his face to blankness and returned to the task of stocking the shelves.

The night was unusually busy and from what Vin was able to overhear, there was a consensus that something big would be going down soon. He made a point to work through the crowd and appear busy to the players Vin ranked at the

top of the list - pushers with an impressive list of clients and whores - and those regarded as reliable mules.

Finally, well after midnight when the crowd was thickest and well-oiled with drink and recreational supplements, Vin finally heard the names he sought.

“Adrian’s not happy but the other two insist.” The speaker was an acne scarred man Vin recognized as a regular. He had rat-like eyes, broad shoulders and sleeves of tattoos - he was a mule known for working the numerous tunnels under the border.

Vin worked in closer, collecting glasses and wiping wet rings from nearby tabletops. The music was thumping loud and bodies writhed together in sweaty dance moves. It was hard to hear but Vin was close enough to catch most of the conversation.

“. . . from his station down south . . . some kind of hit . . . Felix’s territory . . . border . . .”

“Hey, there!”

A sharp - nailed hand squeeze his ass cheek and Vin jumped, bumping the table and causing the drinks on it to wobble precariously. Someone giggled near his ear. He smelled pot, cigarette smoke and Jägermeister.

“Oh, don’t go,” the woman purred as she pressed in closer. She held a shot glass in one hand while the other roamed freely over Vin’s back, shoulders to . . . !

“I did not mean to disturb you,” Vin said stepping away. The girl - Vin figured she was barely twenty - was backed by three other girls just as drunk and about the same age. Their dark makeup, smudged from sweat and Vin hated to think of what else, gave them raccoon eyes. They frowned for a second.

“You talk funny.”

“I know that accent,” one of the clump slurred. “Texas!”

“Yeah!” another agreed.

The first one moved in closer, stopping Vin’s retreat by grabbing his belt and pulling him in. “I have an Aunt in Texas. Maybe we’re related.” She giggled and tried to press her nose under Vin’s ear.

“What are you doing, slacking off?” Vin flinched at the sharp voice behind him, relieved when Ronnie pulled him away. She dragged him through the tightly packed bodies, releasing him when they reached the sanctity behind the bar.

“Thanks,” Vin said as he automatically wiped the spot on his neck where he could still feel old lipstick.

Ronnie snorted, unable to check a smile. “You looked in trouble. I know those girls. You didn’t stand a chance.” She snatched a towel from the bar top and quickly rubbed his cheek. “Mascara,” she said. “It doesn’t become you.”

“I hope not.”

Ronnie chuffed, smiling, and thrust the towel into Vin's chest. "Stay back here for a while, Cowboy. It's safer." She then left him for her end of the bar.

Vin turned over the nickname in his mind and a wash of loss came over him with the memory of his old friends. He missed them. Then he gritted his teeth and shook his head. "Get over it," he muttered to himself.

Dawn lightened the windows when Xavier threw the last customer out on the sidewalk. Eddie quickly departed after cleaning his area, hooking up in the back alley with a swaying girl that Vin figured must not be freezing due to the alcohol content of her blood even though she wore a barely-there dress. Eddie had teased her all night and now his reward was near. Vin chuckled, imagining Eddie would get more than he bargained for.

As Vin went through the motions of cleaning up and closing the place down, he caught Ronnie studying him when she thought he couldn't see. He ignored her, wanting nothing more than to finish up and see what else he could hear on the street about the Carnicero brothers.

The other bouncers left except for X, as Vin called him now, who waited by the door to escort Jesus to the bank to make the morning deposit. Jesus emerged from the back with a briefcase and nodded to Vin and Ronnie as he headed out with X on his heels.

Ronnie slipped to the back and Vin heard her drag out a bag of trash. Then he heard her return followed by the familiar snick of the back door lock. Ronnie ambled into the room, wiping her hands on a towel. Vin straightened, stretched and pitched his towel onto a pile on the bar. Ronnie stopped and watched him, her head tipped aside.

Vin couldn't help but return the look. Ronnie was, as Buck would say on his polite days, a looker. Slim, athletic and nicely curved in the right places, she had a great body but Vin found himself drawn to her hazel eyes. With her dark hair and skin, they stood out even though she wore minimal makeup. He didn't know much about her, really. She always seemed to be as far from him as she could manage. Except now.

"What?" he asked, a little self-consciously. "Do I still have mascara on my face?" He touched his cheek and grinned.

She gave him the first real smile he'd ever seen on her face and it was stunning. "No, you're fine." Her cheeks flushed slightly and her eyes widened. "No. Well, I mean . . ." she sputtered. Vin just laughed and her eyes narrowed. "You aren't going to help me here, are you?"

"Nope." He headed to the door. "Can I walk you somewhere?"

Her mouth opened, snapped closed, and opened again before saying. "Sure. I mean, you won't get us lost so I have to save you again, will you?"

Vin smiled and it felt good. He realized he hadn't done that in a while. "I promise. You're in charge, boss."

"Okay, then." She grabbed her purse from the back, slipped on a coat and tossed Vin his jacket. After stepping to the sidewalk, she turned and locked the door.

It was cold. Vin slipped his jacket on and wished he'd brought a warmer one. He turned up his collar and jammed his fists into the deep pockets. Ronnie pulled out a scarf and wrapped it around her neck. The sidewalk was damp with morning dew and littered with trash. Vin saw an arm sticking out from the adjoining alley, flat on the dirty asphalt. He recognized the clothing as a patron of the Club.

Ronnie snorted and took Vin's elbow, snuggling in close. "I don't know how they do that to themselves," she said lowly. "I just don't get it."

"Neither do I." Vin's side warmed with her presence. "It's a waste."

They walked in silence for a short block or two then Ronnie tipped her chin and looked up at him. "I know a place that has great coffee. Game?"

"Sure."

Ronnie walked faster, pulling him along as she made a few twists and turns between buildings. Vin's bump of direction told him he wasn't far from the small apartment he'd acquired two days ago.

"Here." She pushed open a door and they stepped into a very small café. Half of the tables were already full of people ready to start their day. The smell was incredible - coffee, chocolate, peppers, tortillas - Vin's mouth watered instantly. Ronnie led him to a far corner, unwrapping her scarf as she settled into a sturdy, bright blue chair. All the chairs were painted bright colors, each one unique.

Before taking his seat, which was lemon yellow, Vin scanned the room and automatically catalogued the customers. None of them appeared to be a threat so he relaxed after turning his chair so his back was to the wall. Ronnie laughed and shook her head.

"What?" he asked.

"You are always so guarded," she stated. "Looking, analyzing, studying. You don't miss a thing, do you?"

"No, not really." He smiled at the girl - barely twelve, he estimated - that brought them coffee in heavy, white mugs. Vin wrapped his hands around the mug and enjoyed the hearty scent wafting by his nose.

Ronnie collected her mug and picked it up, resting her elbows on the table. From there, her hazel eyes studied him through the steam cloud. "I think I know why you're here," she said quietly.

Vin raised a brow and took a sip. Heaven in his mouth! After the short appreciation, he decided to play things close to the vest. He didn't really know

alliances in this town. “Looks like I’m here having the best cup of coffee I’ve ever had.”

Anger flashed through the dusky green, reminding Vin of Chris. “Don’t play games. I want to help.”

Vin took another sip. “Help?”

She put her cup down and leaned in. “You’re here for the Butchers aren’t you?”

Careful to keep any reaction from his expression, Vin took another sip as his mind raced. What gave him away? What had she heard? If she read him, who else could?

“Look,” she said, gripping her mug tighter. “I do not like what the Cartels have done to this city. Tijuana has never been an international garden spot, but it’s my home. It used to be like any of your American towns - like in Kansas.”

“You’ve been to Kansas?” Maybe distraction . . .

Her eyes glowed and her jaw jutted forward. “Do not tease me, Cowboy. We both know how serious this is. This place - my home - is a powder keg with a very short fuse and my friends and my family - what’s left of them, anyway - are in the middle of it all.”

Distraction wasn’t going to work. He regarded her, every sense alert. “I am just working, Ronnie. As soon as I have enough money, I’m leaving.”

She looked insulted. “I doubt that. I mean, you’re leaving, true, but money isn’t the reason.”

Vin frowned, hoping to cause doubt. “I don’t know what . . .”

“Stop. Just stop,” she snapped, straightening into the back of her chair. The server girl returned, doubt in her eyes when she looked at Ronnie. Realizing she must look upset, Ronnie exhaled and smiled at her. “We’ll take the eggs, tortillas and salsa, Carlita. Your mama makes the best salsa in Tijuana.”

The girl smiled and relaxed. “Yes,” she said. “She does. I’ll be back.” She scurried off, and Ronnie smiled after her.

Then she turned back to Vin. “Sorry. I hope you like tortillas.”

“Of course I do,” he said.

Ronnie rolled her eyes. “Look. You don’t belong here. It’s obvious. Your Spanish is excellent, but there’s a Texas accent you can’t shake. You’re fit and healthy and American and I have the internet - I know who you are, Mr. Tanner. That spells trouble in itself, but I also know that you just came from Mexicali. That means Zamora. Zamora and Tijuana add up to war, and you are a soldier. I want to help.”

Vin saw no sense in denying anything she said. “If that were true, isn’t that just changing one Cartel for another?”

SHADOWLINE

“Zamora is the lesser of two evils. The Carniceros are the worst of the bunch. Killers for the sake of killing. My brother . . .” Ronnie’s voice hitched. She took a moment to gather control. “I’ve seen what the Butchers are capable of. I want them out of my city. We have shootouts in the streets. Kidnapping. Beheadings. It’s ugly and unsafe. We can’t walk our own streets. Everyone is afraid.”

Vin dropped his eyes and gazed at the swirl of vapor rising from his mug. He not only felt her sorrow, he knew it. Lived it. Worked in it. As a Ranger, he truly believed that what he did helped towns in the same turmoil to gain stability in a crazy world.

Here and now, it was all about one thing: Getting his life back. Listening to Ronnie, he felt a twang of guilt for being so self-centered. But like she said, this was not his country, it was hers. If his singular goal helped her home town, so be it, but Vin fought the notion of being some kind of urban guerilla.

Ronnie read his discomfort. “I know you aren’t a hero,” she said, surprising Vin with her perception. “I just want to help. Your goal is my goal.” She grinned and sat up as Carlita delivered their food. Ronnie thanked her and gave Carlita’s small wrist a squeeze, drawing a bright smile from the girl before she left.

Vin inhaled the aroma coming from his plate and his mouth watered. He tore a bit of tortilla, used it to gather up some of the eggs and spooned a dollop of salsa on it. Once in his mouth, it melted together into absolute deliciousness.

Ronnie let him swallow the first bite before saying, “I can get you to the Carnicero boys. Two of them, at least.” Vin avoided choking by gulping a mouthful of coffee. Ronnie looked at him thorough her lashes, amusement crossing her features. Her outline wavered in his watering eyes as pepper burned the back of his throat.

“You what?” he gasped.

“I always know when they come through town and I heard they are coming here soon.”

“Do you know why?”

She shook her head, spinning her fork in her downy eggs. “It’s always for revenge. They seek tight control by using fear. It works. Someone always dies when they come here.” She became somber. “I grew up with them, you know.”

Vin suddenly knew exactly why Zamora sent him to Coyote Flats. “All three of them?”

Ronnie nodded. “The middle one, Adrian, and I are the same age. We went to the same schools. All three brothers were mean and cruel as kids and have only gotten worse. They moved to Oaxaca after school. Their father moved up quickly in the business and the Carnicero Cartel became the biggest drug runners around Mexico City. They have always had a hand in things here. Their biggest dealer

came from here, but he was killed months ago – as you know." She gave him a level look. "Now, there is competition to regain that spot. We live in a war zone because of it. My brothers, my uncle . . . all victims."

Vin reached over and covered her hand with his. "I'm sorry," he said softly.

She returned the sentiment with fire. "Don't be. It won't bring them back and sorrow dulls the fighting spirit. I will take you to them."

Still not ready to admit anything, Vin only nodded and returned to his meal. They finished in silence, but it was a silence laced with shared desires. Full of strong coffee and good food, Vin escorted Ronnie to her home. The morning sidewalks bustled with people getting to work. Cars honked and blocked the intersection by her house.

Vin touched her elbow with the intention of guiding her around the stalled traffic, but when he felt her stiffen under his hand, he immediately glanced to her face. Ronnie, wide eyed, only hesitated a second before grabbing Vin's hand and tugging him down the next alley.

Vin followed, glancing back in time to see two men with assault rifles bear down on the stopped cars from opposite directions. Gunfire erupted and Vin took Ronnie in his arms and pressed against the alley wall. He could feel her heart thundering against him as screaming and the staccato sound of gunfire dominated the air.

Then it was quiet. Vin's ears rang as the sharp scent of gunpowder stung his nose. After a minute, he felt Ronnie squirming in his arms and he finally stepped back and released her. Ronnie darted to the street and stopped, furious rage hardening her face. Vin joined her at a slower pace as he scanned the area.

"This is what I mean," she snapped. Vin looked at a bullet riddled car in the intersection, the interior splashed with shiny, red blood. "This is my home. I want it back." She turned stormy eyes to him. "I will fight for it, Mr. Tanner."

Chapter Twelve - DEJA VU

The following days brought Vin a steady stream of intelligence through Ronnie. Although she was the only one to speak with him, he knew from the information that it was a collaboration of several sources because she never missed work and she still looked great - Vin blushed and took a step back at that assessment while watching her work the bar. What he meant was, he corrected mentally, she did not look as if she was neglecting sleep and he did notice Ronnie speaking intimately with several different people this week. As he watched her, he felt a dangerous heat in his belly and alarms sounded in his mind.

Vin shook his head and shifted focus to his work. He also knew that since the Carnicero brothers came from this area, they and Ronnie more than likely had the same connections. What this added up to in his mind was that Ronnie could end up one of the decapitated bodies found around here on a regular basis. He appreciated the intelligence, but also knew that their relationship could not go any further. Information burned in both directions.

In addition, Ranger training taught Vin to work alone and that added another spin to the entire partnership. He recognized the uneasy feeling because he worked through the same mindset when he joined Team 7. The pull to work alone was strong and difficult to resolve in this situation. Vin hoped this would be over soon, but part of him wished things would keep on as they were.

He didn't need this distraction. He could picture Buck's shit-eating grin at this predicament.

One night five days after their informal declaration of partnership, Ronnie came into the Coyote later than usual, out of breath and her hair slightly disheveled. Behind the bar where he filled her usual spot, Vin ignored the other offerings of cleavage and batting eyes and watched her weave through the crowd with singular purpose until she was at his side.

"I have a date and location." Ronnie's eyes, bright with excitement, met his with unwavering directness. "There's no exact time. Come." She pulled on his

elbow, oblivious to the irritated and angry glares burning her way from the side clientele. Ronnie dragged him from the bar with a surprised expletive from Eddie.

“Hey, I can’t hold this down by myself!” he complained, hands dancing along bottlenecks as he mixed one of his powerful concoctions.

“I’ll be right back,” Ronnie said as she retreated. “He’ll have to work a little instead of building up his next conquest,” she muttered just loud enough for Vin to hear. He chuffed a short laugh.

She pushed open the back door to the alley. A moist, rotten smell reminiscent of vomit greeted them as Ronnie stopped him just outside the door and glanced around.

“There’s a Judge in San Diego that the Carnicero boys want to see gone. He’s pushing for increased Federal funding and manpower in an area the brothers need to stay status quo. They want to send a message beyond Tijuana. They plan on murdering him.”

“By contract?”

“That would be the usual way, but I hear that Adrian wants to handle this one himself. There’s some kind of rally scheduled the tomorrow, but this Judge - Conklin? - is coming down earlier in the day to brief the participants. The public rally is scheduled to be in time for the five o’clock news.”

Vin absorbed the information, his brain automatically falling into planning mode as he calculated equipment and travel needs. “Where?”

“The rally organizers are grouping near the Otay Mesa checkpoint on the U.S. side. There’s an unused storage yard near the crossing that can handle the crowd.” She read from a piece of paper. “He arrives at two o’clock. I haven’t been able to confirm the exact speech time but there is an off-site briefing at two-thirty. Then he visits the local courthouse before the live speech in the storage yard around five o’clock.” Ronnie thrust a paper into his hand. On it was a crudely drawn map with an X marking the address. “I’ve included a contact to cross the border.”

Vin regarded the map. “I need a computer. I need to see the buildings around this area.”

“My place,” she said, pressing a key into his palm. “I’ll hold the fort here so Eddie doesn’t have a meltdown. I’ll tell Jesus you’re sick.”

The mission was finally in motion.

Vin spent the night memorizing the area and its buildings. Although the online, street view feature was a big help, he knew he had to get there as soon as possible to scout the best areas to watch for Adrian’s arrival. He’d hoped to get the brothers together but realized that in reality, the Carnicero family was smarter than that; three separate targets were harder to kill than one. If Adrian was,

indeed, the worst of the bunch - and Vin believed that to be true from both Ronnie and information he'd gathered on his own - killing him would be a good first step.

That thought brought Vin up short. First step to what, exactly? Doing this on American soil would make him unredeemable and set him on a path away from Denver and Team 7. Could he - should he - do this? All Vin's previous enthusiasm evaporated. Knowing he wasn't getting any more done this night, he shrugged on his coat and locked up Ronnie's apartment and headed to his own small place.

During the time in her apartment, Vin, focused on getting information and didn't give much notice to the interior. Now, as he walked with fists jammed in his coat pockets and a ribbon of vapor trailing from his breath, he reflected on what he saw there.

Ronnie's space was colorful and practical, a direct reflection of its owner. There were few pictures on the wall, but plenty scattered about in bright frames. The kitchen counters, which he saw on his way to the office, held labeled containers and bowls of fruit. A small table, covered with a green table cloth, sat in the center of the space with four simple wooden chairs. The living room area was tiny, holding a small couch, colorful lamps and abstract art.

The computer he used was something JD would be proud of and Vin grinned at the thought. It was fast and easy to use. The monitor background was of Ronnie and what Vin thought was her mother - the similarities were obvious. They wore vivid print skirts and yellow blouses, and posed in the middle of a colorful street fair. They both smiled in the picture, looking carefree and happy. He took a moment to wonder about it, fighting to ignore a pang of emotion.

Vin finally reached his place and did not feel like sleep, so he jumped into the cold Jeep seat. The ignition tried to deny his request to turn over but finally gave up and choked to a start. He pulled out of the narrow alley, zigzagging around a collection of corners that led to the main road and stopped at the last intersection before the main thoroughfare where a black and white police unit parked across the street caught his eye. In the poor cast of the remaining streetlight, Vin recognized one of the two officers he'd met on his arrival in the area. Since then, he'd seen them occasionally, watching him from afar. Ronnie told him that she'd made it clear to them that Vin was rightfully employed at the Coyote so they left him alone. Still, he knew they monitored him.

He accelerated around the corner and out of habit, kept an eye on the unit. It did not move from the curb. Satisfied he was safe, he found his way to his storage unit. It was a fast trip to the lot and Vin was impressed that the uniformed security guard at the gate was still awake in these early hours of the new day. Using his keycard to open the main gate, he waved at the guard and got a dark glare in return. Vin arrived at his small unit and separated the lock's key on his key chain. The chrome 7 clattered against the door.

Once inside, he surveyed the small collection of gun cases. In his spare time, Vin hunted down suitable weapons usually hand guns, because he'd become fond of his one rifle. With surprisingly little practice, he became as accurate with it as he had been with his Team 7 rifle. Now, he lifted the long case and set it aside, stacking two boxes of ammo next to it. He considered another handgun, but the Sig Saur tucked in his waistband felt like enough. He grabbed an additional clip, already loaded, and tucked it in his beltline. He added another knife to the nape of his neck to go with the Denver blade he always carried in his boot.

Vin stuffed the other ammo into his coat pockets and unlatched the rifle case. Satisfied that nothing was amiss about the weapon, he secured the lock and hefted the case. With it in hand, he left the unit and locked the door. He made sure case was out of sight in the Jeep and headed north from the facility and out of the city, stopping once for bottles of water and a few packs of jerky.

Approaching dawn slowly extinguished the stars and the sky was grey when he reached the border crossing area marked on Ronnie's map. According to Ronnie, crossing the border to get to the other side of the fence was easy here; getting to where you wanted to be on the other side was harder. Vin smiled at the thought, since he'd discovered the same thing as a young boy in Texas.

Vin followed Ronnie's directions in his head. Not one to write things down, Vin's skill in remembering directions was one of the things that made him a successful Ranger and U.S. Marshal. He quickly found the area she described, noting that the subtly lit building actually teemed with life even in these wee hours of the morning.

Stopped no less than three times before getting to the front of the building, Vin followed Ronnie's instructions to not appear stealthy and to use a certain phrase to confirm his trustworthiness. Finally, he waited for the person in charge and recognized him immediately. Vin didn't know him by name, but by the way he carried himself and directed the others. The portly, older Hispanic gentleman now coming his way was definitely the one in charge.

"Ronnie sent you?" the man said abruptly after scanning Vin top to bottom from his protective circle of guards.

"Yes."

"You need to cross, then. Come."

The guards eyed Vin with hostility, not giving an inch in their security. No names, either; Vin understood. He also knew to keep his eyes off his host and keep his hands in sight. No one commented on the case slung over his back.

"Go through there," the man said, turning away right after he pointed. "Tell the man on the other side when you expect to come back. I will not be here."

Vin nodded and the clump of men moved away. He headed to a smaller building set behind the larger one where he parked his Jeep. There was one door

visible, standard size, without any exterior lights. In the pale light, he saw peeling paint and a thick coat of dust made the building look unimportant. At the door, Vin tried the knob and, to his surprise, found that it turned easily. He stepped inside, closed the door behind him and became shrouded in darkness.

He waited for his eyes to adjust, feeling his heartbeat in every fingertip, and pulled his coat close. It was colder in here and when he shuffled his feet, Vin could hear a slight echo; there was more to this small structure than its appearance indicated. When his eyes finally adjusted to the dark, he noticed a dim, rectangle of light in the floor and slowly moved toward it. His toe felt a dip in the floorboard, framed by the gold light, and reached down to find a cold, metal ring set in the floor. He lifted it, and pulled.

The hatch lifted easily, revealing a short flight of stairs going down to a dimly lit passageway. He descended carefully, pulling the hatch closed behind him, and ignored the flutter of claustrophobia that made his heart race. Once at the bottom, a long, dirt tunnel stretched before him, supported up and over with sturdy wood beams. The footpath was shiny with wear, at least six feet wide and Vin didn't have to duck to avoid scraping his head. Bare light bulbs dangled at uneven distances from the ceiling. This was a well-used path under the border and Vin chuckled at how his past employers would love to know its location. That idea, and the fond memories about his six friends that followed, kept the close press of earth off his mind as he walked.

Circles of light were like stepping stones as Vin walked. In a few minutes he came to another flight of stairs and ascended, forcing caution in his escape from the tunnel. At the top of the stairs, he pushed against the ceiling and it opened, allowing him to enter a small building similar to the one south of him. As he knelt to close the hatch, Vin realized he was in the United States and that the bounty on his head was up for grabs. Vin stood and paused to collect his wandering thoughts before stepping outside onto his native soil.

With the door closed behind him, Vin cautiously looked around at a neglected storage yard. Old cars, stacks of tires and weathered crates surrounded him and the small building looking like every other dilapidated part of this facility. With the day blooming, Vin moved out, following a worn path in the dirt that led him to a sagging section of the chain link fence that easily bent aside at Vin's touch. He slipped through the fence and paused on the other side. Looking back at the small structure, he would never guess what the small shed in the center of the yard contained. He took a moment to orient himself and blinked at a bright edge of rising sun.

"Hey," a disembodied voice hissed in Spanish. "This way."

Shifting to full alert, Vin headed toward the voice. All he saw was a broken down car - a lime green Gremlin, to be exact. Vin smirked at the absurd vehicle

when he saw a small head poke up through the driver's side window frame. When he got closer, Vin saw it was a young boy.

"You're supposed to go that way," the boy said. His dirt smeared face and long hair shaggy from sleep belied the presence of the pricey iPod in his hand. One ear bud dangling loose and the sleeping bag that drooped from his shoulders was top of the line. This gatekeeper was well paid.

Vin nodded once and set out, anxious to get to the meeting area before full daylight. With that in mind, he set off at a ground eating, yet energy efficient jog, breathing easily. He continuously scanned the area and knew exactly where he was as well as where he wanted to be. He altered his course slightly and soon found the block of buildings he sought.

He'd come up north of the main U.S. roadway that followed the border with Mexico, the same road he shadowed during his drive to Tijuana. Traffic was heavy and Vin saw that the line of cars and trucks headed toward the Otay Mesa border crossing checkpoint. He located a building he wanted to investigate and found his way to the roof, where he walked the perimeter and stopped at the east edge. Vin gently laid his rifle case down and pulled the spotter scope from within. He scanned the area slowly, identifying the compound where the Judge's meeting was to take place.

Tactically, Vin saw that a sniper shot was limited. The yard in question, which he could see was already bustling with activity this early in the day, was protected by tall structures on one side and impressive solid walls.

Part of being a sniper was knowing your enemy. In this case, Vin knew that Adrian Carnicero was the least patient of the sons, hot tempered and arrogant. He could shoot - he'd proven that bloody point enough - but preferred the close proximity of handguns. His weapon of choice, however, was a knife because he liked blood on his hands. If Adrian was going to take a rifle shot, it would be from the south or east. Vin pinpointed two buildings that could easily cover those areas as well as the other scenarios. He put the scope away and left the building, satisfied he would be in place well in advance of his adversary.

With the next-to-nothing information he had, success was heavily stacked against him. Vin also realized that all of this started with a deal with Zamora, whose track record made the man a poor choice to trust. He wondered what Ezra would think of the odds of the situation. Leaving the building, Vin headed to the sniper nest of his choice and reached it just as the sun topped the mountains and cast the first full shadows of the day. Vin used the spotter's scope and scanned the area again, satisfied with his choice.

Preparations begin at nine. Trucks unloaded folding chairs and a small stage and people milled within the fenced enclosure, inspecting every square inch of the property. Vin watched hired security teams outside the fenced area checking

nearby buildings, post guards at entrances and slowly build a secure perimeter. He hunkered down in the shadows, satisfied that they wouldn't check this building because it was outside the zone of perceived safety. Vin leaned against the wall and drank a bottle of water. He then ate the jerky for breakfast, pulled his knees up and tucked himself tight. Now was the time to catch some sleep.

He jerked awake when the late morning preparations spilled into the early afternoon. Vin watched every move and had a good feel for the event and the people in charge. There were a several rows of seats in front of a small stage for dignitaries, an open, roped off area behind the chairs for the public, and an area set aside for press. The press section began filling first right after lunchtime. Vin sipped water while he watched.

Vin saw news trucks and vans from all over the County, and as far east as Arizona. Once all the television towers were set, the well-dressed reporters jostled for positions and interesting background for their introductory reports. Vin was glad that he was far off with the sun to his back; it would discourage cameras from swinging his way. Around 3:00, the spectator area began to fill and Vin's work really began.

Using his sniper scope, Vin scanned each and every face as they arrived and was satisfied Adrian was not yet present. Vin figured he'd arrive around the same time as the Judge and guests and use the confused energy of their arrival to cover his work; that's the way he'd done it before – quickly in, quickly out. Vin suspected the hit area would be around the short steps leading up to the stage. From there, it was a clear dash to the cars and escape.

The hours of surveillance took its toll on Vin's neck and shoulders. Frequent stretching breaks kept him loose, and in those times he missed JD. His friend was a good spotter and, amazingly, kept quiet at his post. Vin shut down the thought before feeling any twang of loss and shook his head. I just must be tired, he thought. He downed half of his last bottle of water and tucked the half-empty container into his jacket pocket.

By four-thirty, the spectator areas were full and the rally started with short speeches from lesser known politicians and civic leaders. Vin kept ever-vigilant, his mental list of participants in the "non-threat" column growing very long. The other side was much shorter – although Adrian was not present, some of the security officers' body language made Vin uneasy. His feelings were confirmed on the Judge's arrival.

The black limousine was too obvious for Vin's taste. He watched the Judge appear from the back seat, behind the stage. The gathered crowd, clapping and cheering for the current speaker, kept most everyone's attention from Judge Conklin, and the Judge himself was practically forehead to forehead with another

man, so deep in conversation he wasn't aware of the form moving with purpose from the rear of the limo.

Vin recognized Adrian immediately and his focus became absolute. He settled in deeper, setting the rifle butt comfortably against his shoulder as he estimated his path. His mark wore dark glasses and a light grey suit, blending like a chameleon with the crowd around him. Vin saw a metallic flash for a fraction of a second near the man's wrist; Adrian was moving in for the kill from the Judge's rear.

Vin had a clear shot but he wanted Adrian nearer to the Judge. He wanted the danger to be clear to everyone. With each step that moved Adrian closer to the Judge, Vin's existence narrowed. Outside sound faded away: All he heard was his careful breathing and the pulse of blood in his ears as. All he saw was the world within his scope and behind the crosshairs.

Adrian was almost there – Vin held his breath and smoothly tightened his finger of the trigger –

When suddenly Adrian's head disappeared in a red haze. The shot sounded microseconds later and Vin abruptly exhaled, released the trigger, and watched the middle Carnicero brother fall without firing a shot.

Immediately scanning to the Judge, Vin watched as Conklin froze, then moved, pushed by one of the security guards. Conklin twitched and grabbed his shoulder while being shoved into the limo, the second shot sounding fractions of a second later. Then the whole gathering erupted in panic.

Spectators ran as politicians hit the ground under piles of security. The black limo raced away, rubbing two cars in its escape and sending a third spinning. Once clear of the crowd, the rear window shattered and Vin swung around to zero in on the third shot. Heart pounding, Vin managed to keep steady as he scanned the other buildings, mentally chastising himself for not considering another sniper.

As he searched, seconds ticked away in his mind – he had to get out soon or get caught. He could already hear a helicopter somewhere, probably the News, but not something from which he wanted attention.

"Where are you, asshole?" Vin whispered as he scanned. Finally, he saw motion at the rear of a building two blocks over.

A man hurried to a waiting car, tugging the collar of his jacket up to cover his face. Even though his arms were empty, Vin suspected he was the shooter. When the man paused to open the driver's door, Vin's world spun on its axis when he caught the profile, his guess glaringly confirmed.

Instantly, things fell into place – this was the man responsible for Vin's downfall. This was the person that set Vin up, killed Munos, snatched Vin's life away and probably laughed all the way to the bank without raising a hint of

suspicion. Vin watched him slip into the car and move off, the license plate gone from the back of the car. He didn't need it, though; Vin already knew his name.

Robby McMillan, ATF Range Master, was the new center of Vin's world.

Approaching sirens snapped Vin to action. Spitting curses, Vin roughly packed his rifle, slung it over his shoulder and ran along his escape path to the tunnel yard. He expected responders would be focused on the building where McMillan made his shot, so he was caught flat footed when a marked Police cruiser rounded the corner ahead of him.

Vin immediately changed directions and dropped his pace to a more casual speed. In his peripheral vision, he saw the unit slow. Then he heard the electronic click of a keyed microphone. "You with the long case! Stop where you are!"

Vin took off. He heard tires squeal and a door slam as he bolted down the first alley which was too narrow for the car. Footfall pounded behind him. "STOP! POLICE!"

Vin sprinted hard and shot from the alley onto a busy street. He ducked and weaved between honking cars, grateful that the vehicles blocked the additional units he could now hear coming his direction. A woman screamed, a man shouted and different an officer's voice to his left demanded that he stop. Vin ducked into another alley and visualized an angled approach to the tunnel yard from the opposite direction.

The sound of pursuit faded and he took the final turn to the yard, swearing when he saw a uniformed officer talking with a pair of kids near the fence line. The officer's head snapped up and Vin changed directions. He heard a shout and then two shots. Something shoved him hard on one upper arm and he stumbled, but Vin managed to regain balance and disappear between some buildings.

Vin knew his only chance was to keep moving until full dark covered him. He had to be in hiding before the Police helicopter, equipped with FLIR night vision and spotlight, arrived. Tracking dogs were another possibility.

After a few sharp turns and focused sprints, Vin found himself on the outskirts of the industrial area and farther north of the border that he intended. Here, the terrain became hilly and the buildings more spread apart; the benefit being less eyewitnesses, the danger being lack of water. Vin knew dehydration would be his downfall now.

Darkness fell with agonizing slowness. When he finally felt safely blanketed in black, Vin stopped and tended to the deep throb in his upper arm. He tore a sleeve from his light jacket and used it as a binding, and kept moving. Once in the quiet foothills, Vin stopped and looked for signs of pursuit. In the distance, he saw bright white lights and throbbing blue and red lights. A helicopter traced the border with its spotlight - heading to the hills was a good call.

Vin caught his breath and ignored his lightheadedness when he stood. When his heart settled and his breathing eased, Vin turned east and set out, settling into the ground-eating jog from his Ranger days. He could usually maintain this pace for a very, very long time, but the growing burn and painful throb of his wound told him it would soon be an issue. So, he pushed the idea of his injury to the back of his mind, blanked his thoughts and brought his incredible ability of focus to bear on one thing: Putting miles between him and the unfortunate situation where Adrian Carnicero died.

Once safe, he would then shift his deadly focus to rogue Agent Robby McMillan.

Chapter Thirteen - CONTACT

The cold hours passed one stride at a time. Vin's throat, raw from the steady inhalations of his pace, felt dry and tender but he pressed onward while he still had the benefit of darkness. He didn't allow his mind to wander; he needed miles and he pressed to get them.

He did, however, allow three pauses in push: One, to obtain clean bandage material in the form of a stolen t-shirt neglected on a clothesline. Two, to bind his wound securely - the deep gouge in the meaty part of his bicep was messy and ragged. And finally, to take in any water he could find. He could not ignore the effects of blood loss. Hydration meant staying conscious.

If he wanted to stop because of sore, blistered feet or cramps in his calf or burning, over-taxed muscles, Vin could; he had all those things, but his desire to beat this audacious set up, to stop this unbelievable tampering with his life, was all there was. No one else determined Vin Tanner's destiny. Fury's embers kept him moving with purpose.

Vin used the setting sun, and later, the swing of the stars to estimate the time when he finally slowed his brutal pace to a wobbly walk. Figuring it to be around ten o'clock, he cleared his mind and turned south. If it was risky for him to be in the States before, now, after this fiasco, it was downright life threatening. He knew he had to get back over the border but wasn't entirely sure how far it was from where he stood. There were no buildings to mark the line in the dark.

He pressed his injured left arm across his abdomen without thought. His right hand trembled uncontrollably as he searched his pockets for anything to trigger an idea. Deep in a front jean pocket he found loose change and immediately thought "pay phone" before the harsh reality hit him that there weren't many of those anymore - except in Mexico. Vin swallowed a harsh sigh knowing he only had himself to rely on right now, so he started walking and hoped his legs wouldn't betray him.

Again, crossing south would work to his advantage. Vin stumbled through the dark terrain and tried to remember what he knew about the area. He recalled the road from Tecate to Tijuana, the rough terrain east from where he stood, and that he had a much better chance of finding a pay phone somewhere along that lonesome highway. With that in mind, he pushed on through the brush with the moon's glow his only company.

Vin finally spotted the borderline he sought and glanced at the sky. It was well past midnight. Puffing and shivering, he crouched within a cluster of sagebrush and watched a U. S. Border Patrol unit speeding west on a dirt road below. The unit scanned to the south with spotlights. When the dust plume dissipated in the icy-pale moonlight and the vehicle disappeared in the darkness, Vin crossed the road and slipped into Mexico.

He followed road signs to the town of Tecate, staying off the road itself, and stopped at a crossroad that obviously catered to the through traffic. He headed to an abandoned building, shuddering where he sat pressed up against the cold, plaster wall of a closed convenience store. As far as he could see, Tecate existed only as a pit stop for eastward traffic on their way Mexicali, or westward to Tijuana. Even now, in the middle of the night, traffic flew by in both directions along the one major roadway that made up downtown Tecate.

Across the street, cars waited in line at one of several gas stations that dotted the strip of road. One place with a small, all-night mini-mart seemed busier than the rest probably because it was the only clean, well-lit establishment within Vin's line of sight. He could see a pay phone on one side of the sole building but was reluctant of the exposure he would have to endure.

His arm throbbed. Vin drew his knees to his chest, supporting his arm against his torso with his thighs. He wrapped his other arm around his knees and tucked in tightly, watching the mini-mart as his weary mind weighed his options. He fought the pull of sleep. Or unconsciousness - he couldn't tell the difference at this point.

"I'll rest just a bit," he told himself with a shudder. Sitting still invited in the cold. He was glad to have his rifle case to sit on because the crumbling asphalt would leech his body heat.

Vin shifted to get as comfortable as he could, twitching awake as he fought sleep, when he saw a shiny Mercedes-Benz sedan pull up to the gas pumps. It was a far cry from the usual fare of dusty work trucks and beat up cars. This was unusual, and he managed to focus his wandering mind on that fact, fight off flagging lids and pay attention.

As he slowly blinked, he saw the sedan's front passenger door open and after a moment, a man stepped out and stretched. It took that moment for Vin's

muddled brain to work, but when it kicked into gear and he realized whom the man was, his eyes snapped open and his heart leaped into double time.

Oscar, Alberto Zamora's weasely assistant from Mexicali, stood by the open driver door as he lit a cigarette. Vin heard the click when Oscar flipped his lighter shut, and watched as he walked around the rear of the car and headed to the building. Then the passenger door opened and to Vin's utter shock and surprise, Robby McMillan unfolded from the inside.

Vin's breath hitched and every pain washed away in an instant surge of adrenalin. He fought his instinct to rise and attack and instead, froze, knowing he was well-cloaked by darkness. In the seconds that followed as his brain engaged, he realized just how set-up he'd been - Zamora and MacMillan were working together. Zamora maneuvered him to front and center stage as a pawn in . . . what?

He blinked as his awakened mind raced. Obviously, Zamora was making a play to take over the Tijuana hub. He'd arranged for both Munos' and Adrian's murders and handed MacMillan a patsy each time. Those two cops in Tijuana must have reported Vin's every move. Then Vin heart stuttered - was Ronnie part of this sham?

No. He wanted to believe she was manipulated just as easily as he had been but a dark part of him said, "That's what you get for trusting." He shook his head to gather his thoughts and stared at the shiny Benz as the two men settled back inside and drove east toward Mexicali.

Vin's next step was clear. First, he needed a safe place to heal up. Unfortunately, he didn't know where that would be. Like every other Ranger black operation, he was in hostile territory and on his own. What made this worse was that his enemies knew exactly who he was.

But he wasn't a Ranger anymore and he wasn't truly alone. Vin eyed the pay phone across the street. It was time to call the only person he truly trusted but he had to convince his body to obey. He gritted his teeth and pressed back into the crumbling wall, using it to gain his feet. Partway up, his leg muscles seized. "Aw, hell!" he thought as the world first grayed around him then faded to black.



Buck tapped on Chris' office door and pushed it open without waiting for permission to enter. He could tell by his friend's posture that something bad had happened. Chris sat in his chair, hunched over the desk top on his elbows, his head held up by his hands. He was staring at a short stack of papers and didn't twitch at Buck's intrusion.

"Hey," Buck called softly after easing the door closed. "We still briefing at eight-thirty?" Chris' lack of response heightened Buck's concern. "Chris?" Slowly,

his boss and friend raised his head and met Buck's worried gaze. The sorrow Buck saw in those hazel eyes made his heart clench. "What?" he whispered.

Chris sat up straight and shoved the stack of papers toward Buck with a pained sigh.

Two strides put Buck alongside the desk. With trepidation, he released his gaze from Chris' and dropped it to the stack of papers. The top paper was a small color poster. Across the top were the words "The FBI's Ten Most Wanted." Below that, two rows of five mug shots, neatly aligned. A pair of very familiar blue eyes stared out from the second row, third photo with "Vincent Michael Tanner" printed underneath.

"Shit," Buck sighed.

"I don't know what we can do to help, Buck," Chris said. Sadness and angry frustrations shadowed the words.

"Is there a report there?" Buck fingered the pile under the poster.

"Yeah. It says he tried to kill a judge in San Diego. He did kill some Mexican drug cartel family member. There was a blood trail and a rifle left behind." Chris' voice dragged to a stop. "The blood was Vin's. And the rifle was a kind he'd used before." He raked his hair with a ragged sigh. "I miss him, Buck. And he needs us. And I hate to say it, but a tiny part of me wonders if he's really guilty this time. He's been out of touch for so long."

There was a slight pause before Buck asked. "Prints on the gun?"

"No. Wiped clean."

"Was there an eyewitness to the shooting?"

"No. All the evidence is circumstantial as far as I can find out." Buck picked up the papers and sank into the small couch as he flipped through the briefs, oddly quiet to the point where it caught Chris' attention. "Could be he was set up - again," Chris said slowly as he watched for a reaction in Buck.

"Yeah." Wilmington's lips pressed into a thin line, a dead give-away of him thinking hard. "You said a rifle was recovered?"

"Yeah."

"Then why would Vin be carrying a rifle case during his escape?"

Chris stared. "What?"

"Right here. Two witnesses and three cops say he was carrying a rifle case. Didn't you read this?" By the slight rise in Chris' shoulders and his brighter eyes, Buck knew he'd rekindled hope. He smirked. "Just as I thought. You just skim our reports and check the evidence, don't you?"

Chris ignored the poke. "It still doesn't look good for Vin."

"I agree." Buck studied him for a moment; his oldest friend seemed to have aged a decade in the past few months. Larabee looked haggard. These past few months had been a hard ride for everyone but the man before him had taken this

hardest of all. Dark hammocks hung under his eyes, stark against pallid cheeks made up of hollowed planes of flesh. Buck couldn't remember the last time Chris enjoyed anything. With Vin gone, the best of Chris had disappeared, too. He only debated a few seconds before deciding it was time to share.

"Well," Buck started. "We wanted to give you plausible deniability since we were using Federal time and money, but J.D might have something."

Chris' eyes flicked to Buck's and pinned him. He knew exactly what risks Buck took telling him even that much. "What did you find?"

Buck stood, dropping the papers onto Chris' desk on his way to the office door. He pushed it open. "JD? Bring your stuff in here."

Quick footsteps made their way to Chris' doorway and JD's wide, brown eyes quickly scanned the room as he entered, flash drive in hand. Buck motioned for him to engage Chris' computer. Chris yielded the space, rolling aside in his desk chair, and the shaggy haired youth plugged in the drive.

"You remember the computer modeling I did? The one that showed the shot that killed Munos was from another building?"

"Yes."

"Well, a shooter like that needs to be good, as good or better than Vin." Chris' hard stare told JD this was not anything new. "So, I've done a little . . . um . . . research."

Chris raised a sandy brow at the statement, understanding immediately why Buck said he needed plausible deniability. Hacking employee records was illegal any way you spun it. "And?"

JD's fingers clacked over the keyboard and a list of names popped up. "If the shooter is an ATF mole or some other kind of double agent, he - or she - has to have a weapons history. I also checked the agencies we usually notify when we're putting together a bust or whose resources we tapped during research, like the local P.D. and the F.B.I."

"That's a lot of names," Chris stated.

"Which is why it's taken so long. I looked for backgrounds similar to Vin's - Rangers, SEALS, etcetera. And range scores. Over the years, the best shooter's scores will drop without practice. This guy practiced." JD hit a key and leaned away to give his boss full visual access to the screen as the page count dropped from fifteen-hundred to twenty. "Still, that's a lot of names."

"The thing that's tangling' my brain is the evidence," Buck said as he rubbed his eyes. "The bullet that supposedly hit Munos."

"It was clean," Chris said.

"Yes, too clean. No blood, no markings, nothing really indicating that it passed through Munos at all."

The team leader tipped his head aside. "Evidence tampering?"

“If that’s true, it narrows the list a lot.” JD tapped again and twenty pages dropped to five. “But if this guy’s knowledgeable enough to pull this off, that may be a bad assumption. He may have snuck in and out of evidence without being on this list. I’ve been going through the Evidence Room video feeds and have been checking everyone with access, but it’s taking a while.”

“Keep it simple, stupid,” Chris uttered, his eyes on the monitor but his mind obviously elsewhere.

“What?” JD frowned.

Buck straightened. “What are you thinking, Chris?”

“Right track, wrong time frame. The evidence never made it to the Evidence Room.”

The three of them exchanged looks, JD’s doubtful. “I checked all the names that collected evidence.”

“Did you check financials?” Chris asked. “Did any of the investigators suddenly get an influx of cash?”

JD’s brown eyes flashed like an LED power lamp as his mind spun. “Yeah.” His attention now on the screen, JD placed himself in front of the screen and his fingers danced. Chris rose and shoved his chair under JD’s butt and the agent sat without acknowledgement. Screen images flashed by at a dizzying speed. “Without checking sources, there are six with large deposits. I’ll cross check for out of country sources -“

Chris glanced at Buck. “Since those deposits in Vin’s account came from out of country, we’ll assume the same.” Chris nodded.

“One,” JD announced, sitting up with a grin. “Patrick Watson. Forensics, second floor.”

A feral grin allowed Chris’ teeth to show as if baring fangs. “Let’s go.” He headed for the door with Buck on his heels, but stopped dead when JD breathed an expletive.

Buck stopped Chris by grabbing an elbow. “Why don’t I like the sound of that?” he said in a wary tone.

“He’s dead. Two weeks ago. Car crash.”

Chris deflated right before Buck’s eyes. “Who investigated the crash?”

“Highway Patrol. It was out of the city -“

The phone on Chris’ desk rang, causing the three of them to twitch in unison. JD shot to his feet and shuffled aside when his boss moved wearily in its direction. JD pulled the flash drive and shuffled from the office, muttering something about getting a copy of the accident report. Buck closed the door behind him and slouched against it as Chris dropped on his chair and snatched up the receiver.

“Larabee,” he snarled.

SHADOWLINE

Buck took a step toward the couch but the look on Chris' face stopped him cold.

"Vin?" Chris slowly rose to his feet, the receiver pressed tightly to his ear. "Vin. Talk English. Where are you?"

Buck moved in until the desk stopped him.

"Talk to me in English, Vin. Are you hurt?" Chris' gaze met Buck's, which seemed to kicking both of them into investigator mode. He quickly motioned for Buck to trace the call.

Buck gave him a sharp nod and bolted to the doorway. He yanked it open and snapped his fingers at the first person he saw. Ezra looked up with a disgusted expression.

"Really, Mr. Wilmington . . ."

"Trace the call, Ezra. It's Vin!"

Without another word, Standish sprang into action. Buck turned back to Chris's office and punched the speaker button on Chris' desk phone and then snatched the receiver from his friend's hand and placed it gently on the cradle.

"Vin?" Chris said again, staring at the speaker.

There was a long moment of near silence. All they heard was static and the faint sound to passing traffic. A stressed sigh then dominated the connection. "Chris?"

"Where are you?" Chris demanded.

"*No estoy muy seguro.*" The voice cracked, stressed, and then there was a pause accented with a sharp intake of air.

Chris expelled a frustrated sigh. "Vin. English! My Spanish only includes tacos and burritos, you know that."

A short groan followed a dry chuckle. "South."

Chris' hands curled to fists atop his desk. "Just keep talkin'," he urged. "Stay with me. You're hurt?"

"Yeah." A raspy groan. "Was set up again, Cowboy."

"I know. Where are you?"

"I's stupid. Didn't think . . ."

"Vin! It's okay. We'll help. How bad are you hurt?"

"Um. Shot. In th' arm."

"Where are you?" Chris repeated.

The pause was too long; Vin was thinking too much. Buck glanced up and saw Josiah and Nathan crowding the office door. Chris whispered a swear word and spoke again.

"Vin," he said in a gentle voice. "You called up because you need us. Let us help you."

J.D. slipped between the two large agents and inserted himself behind Chris' desk. He drew the computer keyboard toward him and brought up a map on the screen, pointing at a red dot. "We can only go as far as here on the trace," he said lowly.

Chris squinted at the screen. J.D.'s finger hovered over a spot on the California/Mexico border. Then, J.D. suddenly frowned and his arm shot out, grabbing Chris' arm. Chris turned a deadly glare on the young Agent and shook off the grip. Oblivious to the danger zone he'd entered, J.D. frantically shook his head and made a slashing motion across his neck. Chris froze, staring, and suddenly Buck grabbed his other arm. He turned his murderous glare on the offender.

"What?" Chris barked, yanking his arm free.

Buck shook his head and mouthed "NO!" as he pointed at the phone, then to the desktop where J.D. just finished scribbling "Tapped!" on the closest sheet of paper.

Chris glanced at the word and then back to J.D. who whispered, "No descriptions! We're close enough on the trace!"

Chris slowed his raging thoughts and leaned closer to the phone microphone. "Vin?"

There was a long pause making Chris wonder if his friend passed out. The speaker whooshed with static and car noise, but then two sounds stood out in the background: A steady, intermittent click and then - bells? He glanced up to see Buck frowning at the speaker. Before he could ask what it was, Vin spoke again. His voice so soft, they barely heard his words.

"J.D. tracin' m' call?"

"Yes." Chris wanted to say more, but didn't dare.

"I'll call when I cross over." Then he hung up.

"VIN?" Chris yelled, as he hit the table. "Aw, SHIT!"

"What was that noise?" Buck asked.

"It was a train crossing klaxon," J.D. replied, his fingers flying over the keys. He lowered his voice to a bare whisper so Chris and Buck had to lean in close to hear. "The trace stopped in Tecate, California. There's also a Tecate, Mexico, and there's a railroad crossing that goes between the two cities. It's a tourist train for the Tecate Brewery in Mexico, it says here. It's closely monitored for illegal crossings."

"I bet Vin can get around all that," Buck said with a wistful, half-smile.

"Maybe when he's in good shape, but he's not at the moment." Chris paced a short track. "He was shot."

Nathan clucked loudly from the doorway where he stood with Josiah. "I'll get packed."

Chapter Fourteen - CORNERED

U.S. Deputy Marshal Raylan Givens settled his Stetson back on his head with a light hand and blew out a sigh. There were always boring and mundane tasks with any job, but since transporting fugitives bore the least amount of paper work, he really didn't mind the duty now and again. He preferred pursuit, but the mountain of reports required after the fact often took the fun away. The paperwork almost doubled if the incident included a "discharged firearm". Since Raylan had a chronic case of writer's cramp lately, this transport job was well timed.

Raylan grabbed his jacket from the San Diego office bullpen coat rack and checked his watch – just enough time for lunch before his flight home. A name spoken aloud at a nearby desk, though, caught his attention as he shrugged the jacket over his shoulders. Angling his head toward the voice on the phone, he located the source and walked to the desk, waiting for the man - Deputy Marshal Jarrod Adamson, according to his desk name plate - to finish scribbling notes and get off the phone.

"Yeah," the man said. "I got it." He hung up and noticed Givens standing near. "Can I help you?"

"Tanner," Raylan said. "I know him."

Adamson stood and began donning his jacket. "A lot of us know him. He's a fugitive."

"No, I mean I know him," Raylan clarified. "We worked the range together at the academy."

Adamson gathered his gun, checked the clip then holstered it as he evaluated Raylan's statement. "So he's a friend?"

"Not really. He's an aloof guy. He can shoot, though, and we did talk about tactics."

That made Adamson pause. "So you know his thinking?"

Raylan tipped his head aside, holding Adamson's attention. "Enough to be useful."

The man grinned. "Good. Then let's go. I just got some intell on his whereabouts."

Givens followed Adamson, mentally writing off both lunch and his flight back to Kentucky. He hadn't elaborated on his relationship with Tanner because his purpose in asking to tag along was to make sure the ex-Deputy Marshal got a fair shake; something about this whole Tanner affair didn't feel right from the beginning.

Yes, he'd worked with Tanner at the range and yes, he was aloof, but Raylan appreciated the man's low-key ways. Tanner was a talented sniper prone to fading into the background of a crowd. They'd had many quiet talks at the range and Raylan's respect for the quiet agent was high; much higher than many of his current, so-called peers.

The talk surrounding the Munos affair surprised him when he first heard about it and he chose to keep his opinion of Tanner to himself; tar and feathers always flew fast when talk suggested that an agent went bad. Raylan followed the intelligence with deep reservations. None of what he read or heard fit the profile of the Vin Tanner he knew. Stationed in Kentucky, Raylan couldn't justify getting involved but now that he was in San Diego, how could he turn his back when his gut instincts belied all facts?

Marshal Givens knew that once he spoke to Tanner, face to face, he would be able to determine his guilt or innocence. Vin was smart but lacked guile - the man's eyes usually told the whole story. So, with an unconscious adjustment to his Stetson, he followed Adamson to the garage. Once in the car and on the road he notified the Kentucky office of his delay and received approval (visualizing his supervisor's eye roll at the request) to work the assignment. Adamson filled him in as they drove.

"Tapping his old unit's phones finally paid off. Tanner checked in and gave good indication that he'll cross the border at Tecate. The phone trace ended there, anyway. We need to be in the area when he calls again. Tecate is a pretty small place and we should be there long before his old team."

"Yeah, what's with them, anyway? They'd be better off washing their hands of this guy." Givens picked up the thick case file and raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Yeah, go ahead," Adamson said with a wave of his hand. Raylan opened the file while Adamson spoke. "I don't have much detail but there wasn't enough to charge the whole team. Maybe they're waiting to get enough to nail the whole unit."

"Or maybe Tanner's workin' alone."

“Maybe,” Adamson conceded. “Time will tell, I guess. Anyway, it’ll take at least an hour to get in the area, so get comfortable.”

Raylan flipped through the file. As far as the Munos case went, there wasn’t anything new but there was more on the latest shooting. He started at the beginning again, quickly skimming the things he’d already seen and absorbed the new stuff. He studied both ballistics reports closely and then rechecked the evidence lists.

“Seems kinda odd there was no blood on the Munos bullet, doesn’t it? Especially since there was a lot on the Judge’s case?” he said. “And isn’t the fact that Adrian Carnicero was killed but the Judge only wounded a bit weird?”

“Not my concern,” Adamson stated bluntly. “I’m just picking’ him up.” He gave Givens a sidelong glance. “You with me here?”

“Yeah,” Raylan nodded as he put the report aside. “Don’t think it’s gonna be easy, though.”

“The intell says he’s injured so he’s not up to par. How often do we get a stab at one of the Top Ten Most Wanted?” Adamson said, brightening.

Raylan didn’t grace Adamson with a reply and, instead, watched the landscape fly by as he ruminated over the new information.

Tucked away in dusty hills dotted with yucca, cactus and mesquite, Tecate was very easy to miss if it wasn’t your destination. “Town” was a generous description, but Raylan knew the scattered, sun-punished structures he saw held their own stories; it wasn’t much different from the hollers in Harlan County, Kentucky. These people were survivors.

Adamson pulled off the empty main road onto a side street and tucked the obvious sedan away several blocks from the train station. “Let’s do a little recon. There’s an airstrip just outside town where Tanner’s team will probably land. There are too many buildings to watch, so let’s sweep the area and then keep an eye on that tourist train station until I hear that his friends arrived. Then we’ll follow them.”

Raylan nodded. That plan would work for him because it gave him time to look at the surroundings and figure where Tanner would feel most comfortable. “Okay, then,” he said, stepping from the sedan and donning his Stetson. “Be faster if we split up.”

“I’ll take the south side of the street.”

“Okay,” Raylan agreed, not surprised Adamson would choose the area closest to the train station. “Meet back here in an hour?”

Adamson snorted. “A place this size won’t take that long, but okay. We’ll figure the best place to set up then.”

They parted, walking opposite directions. As soon as Adamson was out of sight, Raylan stopped and studied the town, searching for the high ground he knew snipers preferred.



Three hours. Chris stared out the window as he calculated. It had been three hours since hearing Vin voice on the phone and now Chris was on a small plane headed to the airfield closest to Tecate, California, along with Buck, Nathan and his sizeable first aid pack, and Ezra. With that thought, he gave Ezra a subtle look – the agent seemed anxious to get to Vin and had arranged this flight in record time.

Knowing Ezra as well as he did, the “anxious” part of his evaluation came from experience. To an outsider, Ezra looked as he always did – calm, coiffed and altogether too snooty for Chris’ taste - but there was an edge to the man’s eyes visible only to someone that knew him well.

Ezra’s insistence of being here was suspicious, to say the least. When the six of them realized a tail followed them after leaving the Denver office, they made a quick decision. JD and Josiah volunteered to lead the tail astray while the rest of them headed to a small, private airport where they boarded a Doctors Without Borders craft bound for Tecate. No one asked how Standish managed the transportation on such short notice.

They touched down in a tiny airfield in the middle of a big patch of dust and rocks. Warm, dry air hit Chris’ face when the door opened and he smelled mesquite on the breeze. He swept the horizon with his gaze, waiting for Nathan’s final goodbyes to Dr. Pilot, as Chris dubbed the man. The two of them talked medicine the entire trip and Chris was relieved to pass the time without speaking; instead, his brain whirled and he tolerated Buck’s worried glances. Ezra sat oddly silent in the rear of the small craft.

As soon as Ezra’s Italian shod feet hit the tarmac, he excused himself. “I will obtain a vehicle,” he said before heading to the solitary airfield structure that was a cross between a hanger and a business office. He hadn’t uttered one complaint since Denver. Something was, indeed, up.

Buck joined Chris a few moments later and then after a bit, Nathan, hoisting his kit over one shoulder.

“Dr. Fellows gave me some good stuff,” Nathan said brightly. “Sorry for the delay, but it could help.”

Chris grunted an acknowledgement and followed Ezra’s path, the three of them forming a loose triangle as they walked. They were a few yards from the

doorway when Ezra reappeared with car keys. He paused, giving Chris an evaluating look and Chris returned the stare.

“I’m not asking questions, Ezra,” Chris stated after several silent seconds.

Ezra nodded, turned aside and motioned for them to follow. Around the corner, Chris saw two unassuming sedans and a beat up truck parked in a small, dirt lot. “Unfortunately, I only have access to one vehicle. It will be very easy for the agents watching us to follow.”

“We’re being watched?” Nathan said as he inched closer.

“I observed them on our approach,” Ezra explained. “They are in a black Lincoln parked on a frontage road near the exit.”

“Not surprised,” Buck muttered. “We’ll have to split up in town.”

Chris pulled out his phone and powered it on. “Since they know we’re here, I may as well see if Vin’s checked in.” He dialed voicemail and he felt a wash of relief at the short message. “He’s here at some empty building at the east edge of town. It’s an old ‘Free Clinic’ building, two blocks north of the main street.”

Chris turned to Buck and Nathan. “You two lose the tail. Ez and I will find Vin. Pick us up when I call.”

“That’s a pretty weak plan, Chris,” Nathan protested. “And I should see him first. He’s injured!”

“And they know that from the phone tap. They will follow you.”

Nathan couldn’t refute that, which added to his annoyance. “Well, take some first aid stuff with you, then.”

“Let’s get moving,” Buck said, nodding to Ezra. “Which one?” He indicated the vehicles with a sweep of his hand.

Ezra headed to the bigger, American made sedan. “Rather plebeian, but one has to do what one can under the circumstances.” He wrinkled his nose as he handed the keys to Buck before rounding it to the passenger side.

“Nate, get in behind Buck. I’ll sit next to you and get some supplies. Buck, drive around and get the lay of the land then dump Ez and me and ditch the tail. I’ll call you.”

“Got it.”

They piled in the car.

“What then, Mr. Larabee?” Ezra asked as Buck left the lot. “Our options are few in a town - and I am being gracious with that moniker - this diminutive.”

“We’ll figure that out once we talk to Vin,” Chris answered. Then he got busy loading his pockets with gauze, tape and antiseptic wipes.



"I don't know how they did that," Adamson snarled. He stopped in the middle of an empty intersection and craned his neck checking all directions. "I can't believe I lost them!"

Givens tipped his head and slid his eyes in his partner's direction. He decided it was best to keep his mouth shut.

"Larabee activated his phone just before they left the airport. Tanner must have left a message." Adamson stomped on the accelerator and turned toward the small train station. "If he's here already, he must be in walking distance of the station. We'll start there."

"He might not even be here yet," Raylan offered, amused at adding to the flustered agent's thoughts.

"He's here." Adamson sounded like he was trying to convince himself. "This is a once in a lifetime arrest. I won't let this one slip by."

Raylan cocked a brow at the comment and quickly figured the best way to get away from him: Offer up the chance that Tanner would practically walk into his arms alone. "Well, why don't you drop me here and I'll start lookin' for sign. You check the station again. Maybe he hasn't crossed yet and now that he knows his friends are here, he's on his way." A frown indicated that Adamson wasn't quite convinced. "Well, they do keep a pretty sharp eye on those trains," Raylan added, waving a finger at the uniformed border agent stalking the tracks near the platform. "I really don't think he'll be able to get by 'em, do you?"

Adamson watched the station and considered for a moment. "True. Okay, let's do that."

"All right." Raylan slipped from the car, then leaned in. "I'll make sure they spell your name right in the papers." He slammed the car door without waiting for a reply, chuffing as the car headed straight for the station lot.

Finally alone, Givens straightened and stepped up onto the cracked sidewalk. He stopped, turning a slow circle as he recalled his conversations with Tanner. He was injured and help was on its way; where would he hole up?

He scanned the area and headed east toward the first taller building he recalled, looking for pay phones along the way since Tanner would use one before. He reached the structure without results and began a spiral search pattern from there. The first pay phone he saw was in front of a busy convenience store. Well, what constituted as busy for Tecate, anyway. The Marshal only saw three cars on the road and a single car stood in front of the establishment. He felt it was too open for Tanner's taste but checked it anyway. The phone was clean.

The next payphone he spotted hung on an alley-side wall outside a liquor store. It, too, was clean. The next two he found as his spiral expanded were broken, the twisted metal cords dangling with exposed wires where the receivers had been. Finally, Givens came across a phone attached the wall of a small,

boarded up market. Looking closer, he saw rust spots he suspected to be blood on the receiver. A flattened spot in the dirt directly below told him that someone sat here leaning against the building and the same rust colored spots were on the paint-chipped stucco.

Raylan turned his back to the wall and surveyed the area. All the businesses in this part of town were boarded up. Faded graffiti decorated most of the structures and there was no foot traffic. The closest two story building, two short blocks back, looked like a home. When Raylan got closer, it, too, appeared abandoned like the rest of the block. An old, wooden sign, chipped and faded with age, dangled by one nail next to the front door, the words "Free Clinic" barely readable. A rusty padlock secured the door.

When he was close enough, Givens noticed a smear of blood on a porch pillar near the front door and ducked to one side. After circling to check that the windows and back door were boarded shut, he approached the front entrance, cringing when the front step creaked noisily. In the distance, he heard a train whistle and used the noise as cover. Gun in hand, Raylan saw that the door only appeared to be locked - the padlock was open and the door ajar. He touched the termite pocked door and it swung open just enough to pass through the doorway. He ducked low so his hat cleared and once inside, he paused and listened.

Givens scanned the room until his eyes adjusted to the dark and then moved on with his gun raised. It smelled like dust, mold and neglect. Dirt and debris covered the floor and he saw a disturbed path leading to the staircase. Slowly and cautiously, he ascended the ramshackle stairs. Near the top, Raylan pressed against the wall and froze when he heard muted voices coming from a room at the end of the short hallway. When he reached the doorway, the voices stopped.

Raylan paused to see if they alerted to his presence. When he heard a guttural groan followed by a sharp apology, Raylan stepped into the shadowed room and found the business ends of two automatics pointed at his heart.

Chapter Fifteen - RECOVERY

Vin Tanner, crumpled in a dusty corner and in obvious pain, still held his gun in an unwavering grip and his fever-bright, tired eyes bored into Raylan's like lasers. A man kneeled beside him, pressing a scarlet-stained cloth against Tanner's upper arm. A gauze roll unraveled on the floor by the man's knee where it had fallen as he drew his weapon with unimaginable speed. The trio froze, unwilling to engage quite yet.

"U.S. Marshal Raylan - "

"Givens," Tanner finished for him in a raw voice. His weapon, though, remained trained on its target.

"So you remember me."

"Yeah." A few heartbeats passed and Vin's weapon wavered.

"Vin?" The second man's voice lilted upward at the end in question, his gun holding fast when he flicked a sidelong glance.

Raylan saw an entire conversation in the action, surprised that the Tanner he knew allowed such closeness. "You must be Chris Larabee," Raylan surmised. His reward was the full heat of Larabee's scrutiny.

Vin chuckled and his gun arm sagged to the floor. "Been readin' up on me, Raylan?"

"Well, it's been a page-turner, that's for sure." Given's drawl wasn't quite up to Vin's Texas version, but it was enough to quirk one corner of Chris' mouth.

"Hell, another good ol' boy."

"He's okay," Vin breathed. "Shoots good, too."

It was Raylan's turn to chuckle. "Can you tell your boss there to put his gun down?"

"Yeah, but it won't happen," Vin sighed.

"What are your intentions?" As usual, Chris shot from the hip.

The wording of the question amused Raylan. His eyes brightened with humor. "Well, I do not intend to ask for his hand in marriage, Dad."

SHADOWLINE

Vin chuckled, causing a hiss of pain. Chris, decision made, holstered his gun and resumed wrapping Vin's bloody arm, eliminating any levity. "If you're gonna shoot, at least let me finish this before he bleeds to death."

Raylan considered a moment before holstering his gun. "I do have an unsuspecting partner out there so we better get on with it."

"We?" Chris growled as he worked on the wound.

"I need some questions answered first," the Marshal said as he stepped in to help by picking up the roll of gauze and straightening it out. He squatted beside Chris.

"Me too," Vin mumbled, squirming.

"Make it quick," Chris snapped.

Raylan addressed Vin, waiting until they were eye to eye. "Did you shoot Munos?"

"No."

"Did you shoot Adrian Carnicero?"

"No, but I wish I had."

"Did you shoot Judge Mitchell Conklin?"

"No."

"Any idea who did shoot at the Judge?" Givens narrowed his eyes in thought for a second before adding, "I don't really have any qualms on the other two."

Vin dropped his eyes and hissed when Chris hit a sensitive spot, then said, "Yeah," he stretching out the word in obvious consideration in spite of the pain. He didn't look back to the Marshal.

Raylan leveled an expectant look at Vin. All he received was silence. "Always knew you weren't much of a talker, Tanner."

That made Chris snort as he worked.

"I want 'im," Vin croaked. When his eyes reconnected with Raylan's they were dark with anger. "He's mine."

"Well, leastways we know it's a 'he' but the pool of suspects is still a tad large." Raylan stood, adjusted his hat and handed Chris scissors and tape before taking a step back.

Chris finished the bandaging and hurriedly packed away the debris before turning his attention to getting Tanner on his feet. Raylan moved to Vin's other side and between the two of them, managed to get him upright. Tanner swayed on his feet as he tucked his handgun away.

"Hand me that, will ya?" He pointed to a banged up rifle case off to one side and Givens retrieved after a significant look that yielded no more words. Vin tried to take the case, but Chris intervened and slung it a shoulder.

"You need to find your partner and go," Chris suggested in a fashion that sounded like an order.

The look Marshal Givens gave him suggested a disrespectful comment. Vin started to laugh but cringed in pain and issued a sharp gasp instead.

“That’ll show you,” Raylan snipped. He turned on a heel and walked away, pausing in the door frame. “Listen, I can’t promise anything if we cross trails again.”

“My team has information that may flush out the shooter. After this is over, Vin may need a friendly escort home.” Chris maneuvered Vin toward the exit.

Raylan ducked his head once in acceptance, then stepped to the nearest window and peeked between the boards covering the frame. “Which way you goin’?”

“East,” Chris replied, his full concentration on Vin.

“Wait five minutes before leaving. I’ll clear the area.”

“It’ll take that long to drag his scrawny ass down the stairs.”

Vin puffed once. “Ain’t scrawny. I’m svelte.”

It was Chris’ turn to laugh. “You been talkin’ to Ezra too much.”

“Thanks, Raylan.” Vin’s gruff whisper earned him another nod from the Marshal.

“Good luck.” Raylan then slipped away.

“You trust him?” Chris asked, directing Vin along the same path as the Marshal.

“He shoots as good as me. I gotta trust him.” Vin muttered before sagging against Chris.

“Damn, you’re burning’ up.” Chris shifted Vin’s weight more to his side and listened to his friend’s raspy breathing until five minutes passed. “Let’s go, Pard.” No response, verbally or consciously. “Oh, now you don’t contribute.” Chris tucked him into his side and walked him to the door, where “walked” was a relative term. “Damn Texas slacker!” he grunted as he dragged Vin down the stairs and out of the building.

He stopped on the run-down porch and hitched Tanner higher at his side. “Speaking’ of Ezra, where the hell is he?” Chris scanned the area. “He’s supposed to direct Buck in. We’re too exposed out here.”

Cursing softly, Chris dragged Vin down the questionable steps with the intention of tucking the both of them into the corner where the stairs met the house. Dead vines clung to the siding and an abundance of dead bushes and a tumbleweed or two made scratchy, but adequate, cover. Before he could reach it, though, Vin’s weight seemed to double suddenly when he passed out.

“Shit!” Larabee huffed, dropping the rifle case so he could use his arms to slow Vin’s descent. Just when he thought things couldn’t get worse, he heard a car approach and saw a black sedan jerk to a stop in front of the house. Still juggling Vin’s weight, Chris reached for his gun when he heard the car door open. Relief

flooded through his veins when he saw Ezra step from the car, but anger flared. “Where the hell have you been?”

Standish trotted over and latched onto Vin’s other side. “Quickly, Mr. Larabee, our time is short. I will explain everything very soon.”

“Whose car is this?” Chris grunted as they dragged the unconscious Vin to the idling car.

“I suggest we ensure Mr. Tanner’s safety first,” Ezra said. “The tale is a wee bit . . . involved.” He left Chris to get Vin in the back seat while he retrieved the rifle, threw it in the trunk and slid in behind the wheel. Chris crawled in next to Vin and closed the back door. Once inside, he positioned Vin across his lap, glad that the vehicle had tinted windows. His friend was hot against his thighs.

Ezra accelerated smoothly from the curb and headed east, avoiding the main road. “I will leave you and Mr. Tanner well out of town and return the vehicle. I will rejoin Mr. Wilmington and regroup when I am sure it is safe. The Marshals were getting closer than is desired.”

“One of ‘em knows Vin. In a good way,” Chris said. He looked up and saw the slash of Ezra’s green eyes in the rearview mirror. They sparked with rarely seen glee.

“I realize that, Mr. Larabee. Where ever do you think I got the keys to this car?”

Chris frowned, opened his mouth to demand more, but his attention returned to Vin when he began to shiver. “I can’t wait to hear that story, but he needs Nathan - now!”

The sedan accelerated with a muffled growl and Ezra weaved his way around a maze of streets and away from the main clump of buildings that a vivid imagination could call downtown. Chris didn’t pay attention to the scenery but when the car came to a smooth stop and he looked up, he saw that Ezra parked the car out of sight behind a deserted, tumble-down structure that vaguely resembled the Bates Motel minus the charm.

As soon as the engine cut off, Vin became alert, struggled against Chris’ grip and sat up.

“Lemme go,” he muttered, twisting around as he scanned the car with fever-bright eyes. His disjointed motion became frantic. “Where is it?” he said, growing more frantic as the seconds passed. “WHERE IS IT?”

“What the hell are you doing? Sit still!”

“What did you do with m’ gun?” Vin writhed in the seat as he checked the area. “I gotta go,” he mumbled.

“You aren’t going anywhere, Vin. Sit still or you’ll bleed to death.”

Chris’ stern voice could freeze a grown man but Vin was oblivious and becoming hard to handle. Chris’ options were limited, so when the door opened

and Ezra shoved the rifle case into Vin's arms, he was pleased to see his friend calm. Vin latched onto the case and wormed his way out of the car. Ezra grabbed his shoulders and turned him toward the decrepit, low-slung building.

"Take him, Mr. Larabee. I really must return the vehicle."

By now, Chris was out of the car. He took Vin's elbow in a firm grip and directed him toward the building. "We'll be in one of the rooms. Hurry back."

Ezra snapped off a two-fingered salute and slid back in the car, dropping it into gear and fanning a spray of gravel from the tires as he departed. Vin weaved heavily under Chris' hand and lost power with each step. The afternoon sun, now directly in their eyes, did little to warm Chris and the infrequent breeze was cold. Vin, however, was alarmingly hot to the touch and the poor bandage job sodden with blood and dust.

They rounded the corner between two low, ranch style building and Chris pushed open the first door he saw. He stuck his head in and smelled rotten wallboard and rat urine. Vin resisted his pull and tried to duck away, but Chris tightened his grip on Vin's elbow and stopped him.

Then, Vin froze, every muscle tense and hard. His stance rang alarms in Chris' mind; he stood stiffly straight with his knees slightly flexed and protectively hugged his rifle case as his wide eyes swept the interior of the old motel room. Chris could see his nostril flare as he sniffed the air like a bloodhound.

Something tipped Chris - a breath, a twitch, a change of focus in Vin's eyes - and he drastically adjusted his grip and wrapped both arms around his friend from behind. A heartbeat later, Vin exploded.

Even weak from blood loss and fever, Vin was an armful and Chris worked hard to get him into the horrible room. Vin's breath wheezed from his raw throat as he twisted to gain his freedom in eerie silence. He didn't seem to hear any of the reassuring words Chris uttered near his ear.

Afraid of hurting Vin even more, Chris frantically scanned the room and spied an old-fashioned, iron heater still secured to the floor with rusted piping. He forced Vin down, cringing at the dirt and filth but knowing he had no other choice. He yanked his handcuffs from the back of his belt and slapped one cuff on Vin's good wrist, the other to the heater, then stood back to catch his breath. His stomach was queasy at what he had to do.

Vin struggled to a sit. The Spanish words that spewed from his mouth were hoarse, incomprehensible and definitely not polite. Once the realization sunk in that he wasn't going anywhere, Vin stopped struggling and leveled Chris with a deadly look, fogged with fever. He clutched his rifle case like some kind of life preserver while a bright red line trickled from beneath the grimy bandage and dripped from his elbow. It was a scene from a Stephen King novel.

Finally, Vin caught his breath and seemed to settle some. His bright blue gaze cleared a little and remained locked on Chris as recognition slowly returned.

“I’m not done,” he rasped. “I’m going back.”

“You need help, Vin.”

“I’m fine. Lemme go.”

“I seem to remember that you called us,” Chris pointed out, crossing his arms and leaning against the door frame. In reality, he wanted to sit down next to his friend and clean his wounds but he needed to reconnect with Vin, especially in his precarious state.

“LEMME GO!” Vin yanked on the cuff, then seeing it did nothing to gain his freedom, he began fumbling with the latch on the rifle case.

Chris raised a brow in concern, dropped his arms to his side and balanced his weight on his feet. “Are you going to shoot me because I’m tryin’ to help?” He spoke slowly. At the same time, he monitored Vin’s poor progress with the latches.

Vin ignored him, growing frustrated with the latch and his limited movement.

“You’re sick,” Chris said softly. “Let us fix you up first. I don’t want to shoot you because you won’t listen.” One latch clicked open. Chris gauged the distance to the rifle case. “You know I will get to my gun before you get to yours.”

Vin paused a moment, then remembering his revolver, moved a shaky hand to his waist band.

“Looking’ for this?” Chris drew Vin’s Sig from the small of his back. “I can get that case from you, too, but I do not want to hurt you any more than you already are. Come on, Vin. Settle down.”

Vin narrowed his eyes - Chris wasn’t sure if it was from pain or concentration.

“Please?”

Vin blinked, confused. It was a word Chris rarely used and it surprised Vin enough to stall his destructive motions. Chris squatted down so their eyes were level and they waited like that, faintly feeling the connection they once had.

By the time he heard the sound of gravel under tires, the heat of exertion was gone from Chris’ body and he pulled his jacket tighter to his body. He wanted to give Vin his jacket, knowing he had to have a chill even with the fever, but judging from Vin’s body language that wasn’t happening without a fight. Keeping his face toward his friend, Chris rose, backed to the open doorway and glanced out to direct the others in. Buck spotted him first and jogged over.

“We got to get movin’, Chris. Not a lot of time. . .” Buck cleared the doorway and his eyes immediately found Vin. “Jesus, he okay?”

“Physically? No. Mentally?” Chris gave Vin a sideways glance and then met Buck’s eyes again. “No.”

“Fuck you!” Vin croaked.

“Damn, Junior, you sound like a sick frog!”

“Fuck you too, Bucklin!”

Buck broke into a huge smile. “Good to see you too!” He pushed past Chris and strolled up to Vin, crouching down just out of kicking range. “Really, Vin, it’s good to see you. Now please tell me what’s going’ on here and why you’re bleedin’ all over the floor of this fine establishment?”

“I think fever’s making’ him delirious. He thinks I’m lettin’ him walk away alone.”

Buck’s evaluating look covered Vin from head to toe. “That true?” he asked as he shed his coat. Vin didn’t reply but challengingly returned Wilmington’s stare. When Buck held out his jacket, Vin snatched it from his hand.

“Thanks.” Vin’s voice was a tortured whisper and he winced using it. He awkwardly worked the jacket over his shoulders so it covered his chest.

“You don’t look so good. Why don’t you let us fix ya up before ya leave?”

“Buck!” Chris barked. “He can’t leave!”

By this time, Nathan and Ezra also crowded the doorway, wise enough to read the room and hold their ground. Chris held them back with a partially raised arm and saw that Nathan’s eyes reflected sympathetic pain as he scanned their lost member.

All the while Buck maintained eye contact with Vin, keeping his voice low and even. “Well, he can’t leave right this second, that’s for sure. There’d be a blood trail as visible as one of Ezra’s flashier jackets in a crowd. Then he’d pass out, and then the circling’ buzzards would be like the neon ‘Vacancies’ sign this place had in its heyday. You’d be rounded up like sheep to slaughter.”

Chris chuffed and shook his head. Vin didn’t respond, but the lines of anger faded until he just looked sick and weary. His head fell back and hit the radiator in resignation. Buck pulled his handcuff key from his pocket.

“Leave him a minute, Buck. Let’s talk first.” Chris lowered his arm and Nathan pushed past him.

The “fuck you, Larabee” flared clearly in Vin’s eyes before the lids slid closed and he surrendered to Nathan’s clucking and prodding.

Buck chuckled. “Yup, good to have ya back, Junior.” He rose and followed Chris through the doorway.

Outside, the sun ducked below the hills and a cold breeze bit Larabee’s and Wilmington’s necks and cheeks. Chris turned up his collar but all Buck could do was hug himself and hunch his shoulders.

“Damn. At least Vin’ll warm up my jacket for me.”

“He’s sick and stubborn. He needs some downtime.” Chris stared out across the empty lot. A tumbleweed rolled by, bouncing airily over the pitted asphalt.

“And after that?” Buck asked. “Look what bein’ on his own has done to him, Chris. He needs us.”

“I know that.” Chris kicked a termite hollowed rail as he replied. “I just don’t know what to do next. He can’t be on this side of the border.”

A few yards away, Ezra leaned against the warm hood of their car parked between two buildings and hidden from the street. He shot his sleeves, one at a time, as he listened to his teammates with his head cocked to aside. As usual, his expression was unreadable. Seeing the level of frustration rising in his teammates, he pushed off the car and ambled over to the pair. They looked to him on his approach.

“Well, I do believe the only thing we can do at this moment is to wait for the results of Mr. Jackson’s magic.” He tipped his head to the door. “As much as I abhor the thought of entering that cockroach den, I do believe it will cut the wind. Our show of support may sway Mr. Tanner’s inclinations.”

Before moving, Chris studied Ezra; something did not feel right, but he couldn’t pin it down. “When did you come across Givens, anyway?”

Buck looked surprised. “Who?”

Chris quickly brought him up to date on meeting Givens while watching Ezra for any outer clues to his question. When he was finished, Buck, too turned to Standish.

“Well, I covered the outside and saw him enter the building. I did not dare cause a scene outside, not knowing if there was another about. I followed him in and upon hearing your conversation, deduced that there was no danger, so I retreated to my previous post. We conversed during our walk back to his vehicle.”

“He told me he was going back to the train station, where his partner was.”

“Yes, well, our path altered when I suggested that Mr. Tanner needed additional distance from the station.”

There was a stand-off of sorts while Chris, suspicious, pinned Ezra with his glare. Ezra, as usual, remained unflustered and merely returned the look with cool confidence. Buck, after several long moments of splitting his visual exam from one to the other, suddenly laughed and slapped Chris’ shoulder.

“We both know he’s up to something’, Chris. We also know he ain’t spittin’ a word until he’s ready. Let’s go check on Vin.” He shoved Chris toward the door, breaking the connection.

“Spittin’ a word’?” Ezra disdainfully repeated. “I have never ‘spit a word’ in my life, Mr. Wilmington!”

“Yeah, well you better do something soon or you may be spittin’ teeth.” Buck gave Chris another shove when Larabee threw Ezra another pointed glare over his shoulder.

“Yes, well, I will certainly keep that in mind.” Standish smoothed the collar of his jacket and then quickly touched his chest, checking that the contents of the hidden inner pocket were safe. “Indeed,” he muttered quietly as he followed along.

The only improvement to the situation inside the room was the quiet. Nathan barely offered a glance at the men as he worked on Vin’s limp arm.

“I knocked him out. He bitched too much.” His large, dark hands belied their size with their quick, sure motions. The ugly wound was already cleaned, but bright red and oozing steadily. Nathan changed gloves and prepared to suture. An I.V. trailed from Vin’s other arm. “I’m rehydrating and pumping him with antibiotics. Don’t ask.”

Buck shrugged, “Hell, Nate, I ain’t one to pry.”

Nathan snorted. “Right. Now get down here and hold up his arm. Gloves first! Ezra, I need some light. Chris, move that rifle case across the room. Vin here’s a little too squirrely at the moment for my taste.” He tossed Chris his handcuffs. “I waited until he was out to take ‘em off. Good idea.”

Everyone shifted around, attending to their assigned duties without comment - they knew who was boss for the moment. Chris cleared a spot on the floor and spread out a thin blanket he found in the trunk of the car and when Vin was cleaned, sutured and wrapped, the three of them moved him to the area and laid him down.

“He should be out for at least six hours. I suggest we all take advantage of that.” Nathan repacked his bag then sat next to Vin, crossing his legs with a tired sigh. Chris and Buck arranged their own spots on the floor, but Ezra refused to comply and with a wrinkled nose, offered to stand watch from the car.

The hours passed slowly in the cold, dark and smelly room, but the three agents spent the time cooking up, and then throwing, out several plans. Any way they looked at it wasn’t good for Vin. The lack of evidence was painfully apparent; the only plan they had was to stash Vin somewhere and reconnect with JD and his stack of information.

Right now, though, they could not contact anyone and give their position away so all they could do was wait. When Vin was hydrated to Nathan’s satisfaction and the infection under control, they could move. Until then, they would stay put and survive the night on Nathan’s collection of protein bars and water, under the white light of their MiniMag collection while Vin soundly slept.

Near midnight, the wind picked up, howling through loose boards and rattling the shingles. They waited in silence at this point, all plans talked out. The full moon was sharp-edged and clear as it rose over the inky mountain line, perfectly framed in the broken out window. It was bright enough for the team to store their flashlights. The beam stretched across the frightful floor, the scattered trash raising stark shadows.

“Nathan, you and Buck grab some sleep in the car. The seats have to be better than this.” Chris’ comment was accented by a faint skittering noise in one corner. “Ezra and I will keep watch.”

“I ain’t going’ anywhere,” Nathan stated with a yawn. “I’m lying right here.” He claimed space next to Vin on the meager blanket. “Don’t think I’ll sleep much, though.”

Chris stood, silently cursing the stiffness in his knees. He was pleased to see a twitch in Buck’s face that said he had the same issues. He grinned.

“Don’t be laughing’ at me, stud,” Buck said with a groan. “I know you’re in the same boat.”

Chris did not even try to deny the fact as he hobbled to the door. When they reached the car, he felt pretty good and those cloth car seats looked damned inviting. He tapped the window and pulled open the door.

“Sorry, Ez,” Buck interjected with glee. “Time to share. What the hell have you been doin’ out here all this time? Playing’ with yourself?”

Ezra snorted in disgust. “Hardly.” He stepped from the car without complaint. “Enjoy, gentlemen.”

Buck and Chris watched him enter the building without another word. Chris frowned.

“Well, that’s refreshing,” Buck said cheerily and he sat down. “Ahhh, almost heaven. Would be heaven if Bitsy Cummings was here. Such an appropriate name.”

Chris turned his frown to Buck. “Please. No details. Just sleep.”

Buck snuggled down in the seat with a smile and shut his eyes. “And sweet, sweet dreams.”

Chris rolled his eyes and shut the door, falling asleep within minutes.



Inside the room, Ezra leaned against the only clean spot on the wall and watched Vin closely. Nathan dropped off in no time, his deep, steady breathing adding a steady calm to the gusting wind outside. As he watched, Ezra considered his well-spent time in the car. Overall, he was pleased and sure Vin would take the deal that had taken so long to arrange. The untraceable burner phone in his pocket was dead forever, but it was no longer needed.

He kept his eyes on Tanner, walking a shiny silver dollar back and forth across his knuckles, the rhythm familiar and soothing. The bright moon beam swept across the floor in a slow march and when the first edge struck Vin’s face, Ezra noticed animation returning - a ripple of his eyelids followed by frowning creases deepening across his forehead.

Ezra pocketed the coin and quietly made his way to Vin's side. He knelt on the blanket by his friend's shoulder without a second thought, waiting patiently until Vin opened his eyes fully and met his.

"I have an offer for you, Mr. Tanner," he said quietly. "Are you ready to listen?"

Vin nodded and Ezra leaned in to whisper in his ear.



Chris jerked awake with an unsettled feeling. Buck snored in the front seat, unaware of the sun poking over the mountains. The wind died sometime during the night, but the outside chill caused their breath to fog up the interior. Before kicking the door open, Chris carefully looked around - they were still alone.

Satisfaction was brief and did little to vanquish the unrest in his gut. He reached for the door and pushed it open just as Nathan burst from the room, looking around frantically. He saw Chris and charged over.

"He's gone!"

Chris' heart jumped and Buck lurched awake with a "huh?"

"He pulled out the I.V. and took off!"

Leaping from the car, Chris raced by Nathan and looked in the room.

The thin blanket was empty and the rifle case gone.

Chapter Sixteen - BACKED UP

Chris swung around, visually searching the area as his mind clicked and his eyes eventually fixed on Ezra. The others moved through the shabby grounds looking for Vin in every far corner, but Ezra's body language screamed at Chris - it lacked the tension the rest of them felt. In addition, he hovered closer to Chris as if debating something.

"Ezra." Chris' ice pick tone cut through the morning chill with ease. When Ezra's cloaked gaze met his, the team leader knew where their answers lay. "Where is Vin?" he asked in a no-arguing-with-me, flat tone.

With a quick glance to confirm the distant locations of Buck and Nathan, Ezra ambled over to stand before the team leader. "Mr. Larabee," he began lowly, holding a palm up to stop Chris from exploding immediately. "All I ask is that you listen before unleashing your wrath. Will you hear me out first?"

Fury roiled through Chris' heated veins and his jaw muscled rippled as he clenched his teeth, but the cool sureness of Ezra's expression enabled him rein back. He focused on relaxing his fists instead. "This better be good," he growled.

Ezra ducked his head in appreciation and he hung his hands on the lapels of his jacket. "In a nutshell, Mr. Larabee, I have made it possible for our sharpshooter to return to the fold if he so desires. Although the details are classified, I will relate to what I can and leave it to your judgment regarding dissemination." He paused, and then continued after Chris' sharp nod of agreement.

"Very good. When Mr. Tanner first informed you of his intention to head south, I made some inquiries and have monitored the activities involving several Mexican drug cartels and active cases within our government. I will not give you the details of my contacts in either direction, sir, in able to maintain your level of 'plausible deniability'. As a result, I uncovered a strong lead for Mr. Tanner to follow in an ongoing Government investigation in Mexico. Next, I contacted the Central Intelligence Agency and brokered a deal. In essence, Vin Tanner is now under their employ and working out of country."

Chris blinked in astonishment - the information came so far from left field, it was from the next county. "What?" he sputtered. "How . . .?"

The corner of Ezra's mouth twitched into a short lived grin. "All I can say is that his Army résumé was closely consulted."

No more information came forth, but Ezra held Chris' stare with obvious significance and things fell into place in Chris' brain: All the redacted pages in Vin's military records, his knowledge of military black ops and Vin's remarkable skills. Throw in the CIA and that could only mean . . .

"He's a mercenary?" Chris breathed in shock.

Ezra nodded once. "I forwarded all the information we gathered in the Munos and San Diego shootings, including our off-record follow up and . . . subsequent information. It was enough to establish a target. Our Government's desire is to stabilize Mexico's illegal drug and gun trade. To calm the violence, so to speak."

Chris found himself at a crossroad between utter rage and blessed relief and fought to keep his voice low. "Why didn't you say something? I am your boss! Vin is my best friend! You put me - you put your team -" he ranged an angry sweep of his arm to encompass the others, still searching, and pinned Standish with the full concentration of his glare, "through all this! All this! This is my team!"

Ezra, however, did not cower and stood his toe-to-toe ground where other men would bolt. There was a tick of hot silence before he spoke with a rough voice, lowered to a raw whisper. His eyes were hard. "I beg to differ, Mr. Larabee. These are not my teammates. These are my friends and it saddens me that I am required to address that point; I wished, after all this time, that I would be awarded some benefit in this doubt but it seems as if I have, again, overestimated the nature of our relationship." He paused, the only shift in his expression being a ripple in his throat as he swallowed - gulped, really. "Have I done that, Mr. Larabee?"

Chris Larabee's reputation was that of a hard, unwavering, alpha male that demanded, and received, respect. Those that heard of the reputation, and avoided him because of it, never learned that the same respect reflected back when it was earned in Larabee's eyes. Larabee was, in fact, a fair man that simply did not suffer fools and surrounded himself with only those he respected. Ezra, therefore, hadn't really gambled; he'd simply forced his friend to review the facts.

Chris backed off and ran Ezra's words through his mind. Then he took a breath before speaking in a softened voice. "By 'subsequent information' you mean the information that could affect my 'plausible deniability'?"

"Yes."

SHADOWLINE

Chris narrowed his eyes and Ezra held the gaze with a familiar blank expression. Chris had to admire his ability to keep secrets. “Would this information, if exposed, be detrimental to you, too, Ezra?”

Agent Standish’s tell was a nearly unperceivable tightening of his lips. “Very,” he finally breathed. After a moment, he added softly, “I would appreciate discretion in that area, Sir.” Something resembling fear flashed across his emerald eyes, surprising Chris.

“All right,” Chris replied slowly. Secrets are a double-edged sword and Ezra’s dancing’ on the tip, he thought, wondering how his undercover specialist slept at night. “But I do - request - that you give me any details if the situation warrants. I mean it, Ezra. I don’t want any of us to walk into a hazardous situation, blind. Understand?”

“Agreed.”

“And keep me updated on anything you learn about Vin's whereabouts. What about his injury?”

“The fever was down and he was lucid, and after an inventory of the contents of Mr. Jackson’s medical pack, Mr. Tanner felt it would increase his odds of success if he took it along. Additionally, his new employer has vastly improved his monetary situation. The bills are untraceable, of course.” Ezra paused before adding, “There is only one caveat to the deal. To be considered for reemployment on U.S. soil, Mr. Tanner has to produce any piece of solid evidence in his favor in the Munos case. Along with the questionable money trail we have already uncovered and . . . other things . . . it should be enough for a dismissal of all the charges against him without going to trial.”

Chris rolled that information through his mind and finally released Ezra’s locked gaze. He shifted, bracing his hands on his hips and dropping his chin to nudge a rock with his boot toe. “What you’re saying is that none of the additional evidence you obtained to find this target is admissible in a U.S. court, and that some or all of this information puts you at risk, am I right?”

“Regrettably so.”

Chris looked back at this enigma of an undercover agent with added appreciation. “You put yourself on the line to make it possible for Vin to come home, didn’t you? You brokered quite a deal here, Ezra. Especially that last caveat.”

“We both agree that what we can gain in such a deal is well worth the effort, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yeah,” Chris nodded. “I am sure we can all agree on that, although it still pisses me off that Vin’s on his own with this. He's gone dark, hasn't he?”

Ezra shrugged his accord with that assessment. “All we can do is prepare and ensure that his return is as easy as possible. We, too, shall be busy.”

Thick silence hung between them as they turned and watched the others for a moment. Chris then sighed and briefly massaged his temple before calling them in with a sharp whistle and wave, all the while considering what to say. What the hell is Vin walking into? Chris thought worriedly.

Ezra stood back and forced his shoulders to relax, relieved that Larabee did not probe further and ask for the name of the CIA target, because he had deep doubts it was same person that Tanner hunted. Ezra was sure, however, that the two men were connected, and all the intelligence Vin now possessed would get him where he wanted to be. Although his teammate would not tell him the name of the person he sought, Ezra had a good idea who it was – that is, his connection to the cartels, anyway. His real name remained elusive but his moniker, Tiger's Eye, was well known in Mexico and South America as a premier assassin. When Vin admitted he was certain the man he was after was Tiger's Eye, Ezra told him that information alone could earn his return to the States.

Tanner's intention regarding Tiger's Eye, though, was more complex, personal - and permanent, and Ezra added another secret to his load.

On top of everything, if Vin failed, they would never know his fate. Rubbing his chest in an unconscious motion, Ezra held no illusion that neither he nor Larabee would remain ulcer-free through all of this.



Vin found his return into Mexico easier than he had any right to hope for. Using the newly obtained bankroll, he bought a reliable, desert-worthy vehicle and pointed it toward his closest source of information: Mexicali and Zamora.

He lightened his load early on by hydrating with the saline packs and running a course of antibiotics, using all the knowledge he'd gathered from Nathan and Ranger training. Vin's dark thoughts brightened slightly when he pictured Nathan's satisfaction that the pain relievers were being used, albeit at a rate slower than the good medic would probably prefer. All Vin cared about at this moment was racking up miles and gathering strength.

The intelligence Ezra gave him was remarkable in both its extent and detail. It was everything he needed to find MacMillan – Tiger's Eye, he was sure. Vin shook his head and chuffed – the fact that the CIA didn't know about MacMillan astonished him. No wonder the man got away with so much.

When he reached the outskirts of Mexicali, Vin parked his vehicle south of the city and out of sight. He broke down the rifle into portable parts, checked his handgun and Denver knife, and tucked everything away. Water, some antibiotic pills and energy bars filled the remaining pockets. Nathan's stitches were clean

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and secure, so Vin cleaned the wound and wrapped it with a new Ace bandage before layering clothes and heading out.

Since he was still recovering, Vin forced himself to walk slower than he really wanted. The first part of his mission was to extract information. The intell he had on Tiger's Eye said the assassin's targets were Carnicero Brothers' enemies in and around Belize and Mexico City – well out of ATF jurisdiction and probably Vin knew little about him. The skill level, though, sounded like MacMillan – it had to be him. If that was so, then why did he kill Adrian Carnicero, his employer, and why was he hanging around with Zamora, another Carnicero rival? These questions needed answering before Vin stepped into the hostile territory known as Mexico City.

Sunset hovered in pink clouds when Vin finally picked his observation point near Zamora's club and office. A pair of shiny black sedans with dark windows stood in the private parking area in the back. Vin smiled. Zamora was home. Now all he had to do was watch and wait.

Chapter Seventeen - COLLATERAL DAMAGE

As expected, the club where Zamora holed up slept during the daylight hours. Vin had a clear view of the gated rear parking lot where two, side by side black sedans nosed against the building. As evening approached, Vin noted the arrival and departure of the liquor trucks and other supplies, but no Zamora. Using his shooting scope, Vin checked every face that came and went from the building. Some people he remembered, but most of them were new, young faces looking for a place in either the business or the Cartel.

When it grew dark and the club opened for business, Vin's patience paid off when he saw the private back door open and watched a bulky security man step out and visually inspect the secure lot. A flash of irritation burned when Oscar stepped out on the man's heels, alone. Vin could see Oscar's mouth moving rapidly and a sneer of disapproval furrowing his face. Oscar made an abrupt gesture with his hand toward the dark sedans and turned, barking orders back into the open door. Knowing Oscar rarely left Zamora's side, Vin had to assume that Zamora wasn't in the building; he recognized the dictator-like attitude that Oscar boldly flaunted only when he was left in charge. The motion of the side gate to the parking area sliding open caught Vin's attention.

It took just a few seconds for Vin to pack up and move. The darkness allowed swift travel to the structure and through the open gate, where he slipped along the building wall to the sedans. Oscar stood in the doorway, chastising the big security guard whose back was to Vin. Vin dropped to the ground and moved to the lead car and let the air out of a tire, Oscar's tirade covering the soft hissing noise. Then he retreated to the far side of the second car and waited, watching for the driver from under the vehicle.

Oscar fumed by the doorway and slapped the back of the driver's head when he hurried through the club door. The large security guard didn't move from the doorway. Vin heard the chirp of the first car as it unlocked, then a door opened and Vin saw Oscar's feet disappear into the back seat. The driver moved to the

front, opened his door, and his feet, too, disappeared as he took his seat. After a moment, the engine turned over and he heard crunching gravel as the sedan moved. Seconds later, the car jerked to a stop and he saw the driver's feet reappear and move around the car as he checked the tires.

Vin couldn't help but smile when he heard a quiet curse and a louder explanation, followed by muted, angry words from Oscar, still inside the car. The security man stepped over and let Oscar out and Vin shifted into a ready crouch as Oscar stomped around to the second car and paused, a metallic click signaling that this car was now unlocked. Oscar yanked the door open and climbed in, verbally berating the driver all the while. Vin was happy to see the security man heading back into the building.

The first car turned off and Vin heard a quiet "asshole" exchange between driver and security man as they passed. Vin grinned at that, and then he rested his hand on the back door handle as he pulled out the Sig from the small of his back. The security man disappeared inside the building while the chauffeur headed to the driver door of the second car.

"Do not think this incident will go unreported," Oscar snapped from the rear seat. The car jiggled. "You are paid to maintain these cars and I am sure there are others quite willing to replace you! I am sure they are more capable, too!"

Vin rose to the balls of his feet. The driver pulled his door open and Vin burst into action. He simultaneously yanked open a rear door and shoved the Sig into Oscar's side as he joined him in the back seat.

"Drive," Vin barked.

Oscar froze with an undignified squeak; Vin was not surprised he did not fight, but the driver was a wild card. Pleased, Vin saw that the driver also froze, one hand on the wheel and the other stuck under his jacket.

"Don't. Your brain will be all over the windshield before it clears the holster." The driver slowly returned his hand to the wheel. "Now drive."

He closed his door and obeyed.

"You!" Oscar whined, blinking at Vin.

"You remember me. Now shut up." Vin told the driver turn west and at the edge of town, ordered him to pull behind an empty building and park. He had the driver drop the keys on the floor of the car and exit. Vin shoved Oscar out directly behind the driver while maintaining a bruising grip on Oscar's arm. Using him as a shield, Vin had the driver drop his gun on the ground and lace his fingers together on his head, then marched him to a stout telephone pole at the back of the lot. He had the driver hug the pole.

"Here." Vin shoved Oscar toward the man and pulled a roll of duct tape from a jacket pocket. He tossed it to Oscar. "Tape his mouth and then tape him to the pole."

Oscar's weasel features twitched and as he opened his mouth to protest, Vin loosened a shot that splintered the wood just above the driver's head. "Next one's in your knee. Do it." Even with shaking hands, Oscar finished quickly. Vin motioned for him to return to the car, following closely on his heels without a backward glance, and shoved him behind the wheel. Vin climbed in behind and pressed the gun in the nape of Oscar's neck. "Drive."

"You're . . . you're supposed to be in jail. Or dead." Oscar followed Vin's directions, glancing sporadically at the rearview mirror. Nervous sweat beaded on his upper lip and temple, and he blinked rapidly.

"Then think of me as a ghost."

Vin directed him to a deserted lot north of town and instructed him to park next to Vin's waiting Jeep. He hauled his captive from the sedan and shoved him to the ground where he used the duct tape to bind Oscar's hands behind him. Then, Vin pulled him to a sit and secured a bag over his head, hauled him to his feet and pushed him into the Jeep's passenger seat, securing him with the seat belt. Oscar, dripping with sweat, begged pitifully for his life.

Vin paused a moment, hands on hips, as he considered the situation. Oscar jumped on the hesitation with hope and the bribes and offers reached outrageous levels. Vin sighed, rolled his eyes, and then reached over and pulled the bag off.

Oscar quit blabbing and stared at him through wide, hopeful eyes. Vin returned the stare with a frown, then snorted once and grabbed the tape, ripping off a long section. It didn't take long to tape Oscar's protesting mouth shut.

"You're makin' my ears bleed," Vin growled before replacing the bag with a sharp tug. Oscar's verbalizations were reduced grunts and squeaks.

With his captive secured and some quiet arranged, Vin slipped behind the wheel and fired up the engine. The night stole all shadows as he headed northeast to the open desert and absolute privacy.



Oscar's body ached. Each rough mile vaulted fear to another level and eventually depleted all adrenalin. Without it, he felt all the aches and every grain of dust grinding into his sweat-dampened body. He had to focus on breathing, finding that any elevated rhythm grayed his consciousness. The last thing he wanted to do was pass out because he wasn't sure he would wake up again.

The black bag nixed any ability to tell night from day, but the cool wind told him that the sun had set. He'd lost complete track of time and direction and instead, tried to use the ache of his body to gauge how long they'd been driving. It was impossible to do so because Oscar hadn't been this sore, even in those rough days as a coyote running illegals north over the border. Well, there was that first

summer when he was new at the job and found how hard it actually was, leading men, women and families to America. He'd discovered a shortcut early on - take their money and leave them in the desert before he taxed his own body. No, Oscar Rogelio Cruz hadn't been close to this sore in a long, long time and he didn't like it.

Finally, the Jeep stopped and the motor quieted. Absolute silence, interrupted by heated pops from the engine and his own breathing, caused his ears to throb. He felt his seat belt release with a click, then heard Tanner leave the vehicle. He shifted, checking to see if the bonds loosened during the ride. They hadn't - all he felt was gritty sweat and rising alarm. It was too quiet.

Suddenly, Oscar hit dirt hard after being yanked sideways from the vehicle without warning. He kicked and squirmed when a strong hand grabbed the back of his collar and pulled, dragging him through warm sand. His struggles lessened as the collar dug into his neck and pinched his throat - all his energy eventually centered on sucking his next breath through his nose. He grew dizzy.

Under the black bag, Oscar blinked, realizing that he must have passed out. He gulped air, noting that the tape gone from his mouth. His cheeks burned where the tape had been and his throat throbbed, along with his shoulders, head and every other part of his body. The black bag still covered his head. Cool air brushed his chest and legs . . . what?

"Where are my clothes?" he croaked.

"It's a nice night. You don't need 'em." The slightly raspy voice was soft and close, somewhere behind him.

Oscar twisted his torso, discovering that he was duct taped around his waist to some sort of pole, sitting on the ground. "Wha . . . what do you want?"

Tanner's dry chuckle popped goose bumps on Oscar's skin. He twitched in fright when Tanner spoke so close to his ear that his lips brushed the bag. "Tiger's Eye," was all he said.

"I . . . I don't know what you mean . . ."

Again, the chuckle. "Maybe, maybe not."

Oscar missed the frightening laugh when he felt cold, sharp steel against his throat instead. "Really, I know nothing! Zamora . . . he has what you want. I don't know anything!" The blade dug in, cutting off his words.

"Then tell me everything you do know and maybe I'll let you live."

The blade shifted pressure to its tip and Oscar felt a long line cut into his skin at the edge of the suffocating bag. He screamed.

"No one out here but coyotes, but you already know that." Tanner paused, and Oscar did, indeed, hear the distant yowl of a pack. "I've read all about you, Oscar. I read all about the men, women and children you left to die out here."

The blade tip turned 90 degrees and traveled downward next to his spine. Oscar's scream turned into a petrified moan. The tip turned another 90 degrees and trailed parallel to the first.

"Lots of families would like a piece of you, I'm sure. I know the U.S. government does. We're in Mexico at the moment, but the U.S. is only about 20 feet to your left. You c'n go either way, Oscar."

Oscar panted, feeling faint and unable to answer. Warm blood dampened his shoulder and trickled down his back and chest.

"But you're not the one they want me to get. You're just - collateral damage, I guess."

The knife lifted from his stinging neck, the pain easing a little. Oscar caught his breath. "Who . . . do . . . you want, then? Zamora?" It was impossible for his voice to stop squeaking. "He's in Mexico City!"

A disgusted chuff was his reply, and then the knife tip was back, tapping at the burning area near his spine. "I already know that." Then Tanner leaned in, his voice intimately loud next to Oscar's ear. "Feel this? Imagine your skin as a piece of tape." The sharp tip flicked an edge of the newly carved line. "I'm just gonna peel up the end here . . ."

Oscar screamed again as exquisite, unbearable pain exploded on his neck. When the pain ebbed, all he could do was sob.

"There. I've peeled back about an inch of your skin. If I peel the whole thing back, I'll have a piece of your skin about the size of a band aid." Tanner flicked the hanging skin with a fingertip. Oscar's body twitched. "Just think how it will feel if I carve out a piece the size of, say, a dollar bill. Or a piece of paper. . ." The knife tip scored a line down the middle of Oscar's chest. "Or maybe enough to make a vest. How's that sound? All those exposed nerves . . ."

"No," Oscar gasped. "Please, no!"

"Then tell me what MacMillan's up to. I saw him with you. Tiger's Eye."

Oscar felt the cold tip nip and dig into the hollow of his throat and start a downward line.

"They didn't tell me! I only heard! They were talking!"

The knife paused. In the distance, the coyote pack broke into excited yips as they cornered their prey. Oscar's stomach turned obscenely.

"About?" Tanner leaned a little into the knife.

"Getting rid of Adrian and Gustavo Carnicero!"

"Adrian's old news, Oscar." One inch of flesh burned at the knife's tip. "What about Felix?"

"He's part of it!" The knife stopped and Oscar's heart tattooed against his chest for several seconds causing the knife to niggle painfully against a rib. "Felix and Zamora had Adrian killed and Gustavo is next!"

The knife pressure disappeared. Oscar heard gravel crunch as Tanner took a step back. In the distance, the coyotes quieted to share their kill and silence hung heavy between the two men. A tiny breeze rippled the bag against Oscar's sticky face.

"Felix had MacMillan kill his brother?"

"Yes!"

"Zamora and Felix Carnicero are working together?"

"I don't know for sure! I . . . I think so!" Oscar panted heavily. His head was light and spinning and the exposed raw patch on his neck screamed with every puff of wind.

"Is Arturo Carnicero dead?" Tanner asked.

"I don't know. No one knows. No one's seen him in over a month. Felix is running things right now."

"Where was Arturo last seen?"

"Mexico City." Oscar sagged against his bonds as shock began to settle in. He blinked, still seeing nothing but black, but knew he was about to pass out. He forced his mouth to work. "Please. Don't kill me."

Then there was a flash of bright light followed by dark nothingness.



Vin panted lightly as he climbed in and started the Jeep. It was an hour or two before dawn and he knew he had to be out of sight at sunrise. Even though this was the middle of an unrelenting, killer desert, he knew the U.S. Border Patrol would soon be along the desolate road looking for signs of crossing over. They would find it here, and at the end of the trail they would find Oscar Cruz, a little bruised and scarred, but alive. Ezra's packet included an arrest warrant on Cruz for murder. Many people died in this very desert when Cruz deserted them after taking payment. Now, he was out of the way.

Vin rolled the new information Oscar supplied around in his mind. Things finally fell in place - Zamora and Felix planned to take control of the entire drug and weapons trade in northern Mexico. The C.I.A. had no idea. Along with the rest of the world, they thought Zamora and the Carniceros were fighting against each other.

Arturo Carnicero, Felix and Gustavo's father, was the subject of Vin's C.I.A. mission. Being the head of the Carnicero Cartel, the C.I.A. figured that if Arturo was out of the way, things would settle down to petty bickering among lesser cartels. Little did they know, things were about to get worse. Much worse. Working together, Zamora and Felix would be unstoppable.

And MacMillan worked for both of them.

Vin headed south. He had until Mexico City to come up with a plan.

Chapter Eighteen - IN FLAGRANTE DELICTO

“The players in this game, Mr. Tanner, are both numerous and fierce. It is best to focus on the major powers.”

Ezra’s voice was clear in Vin’s mind as he moved south. He had paper files, too, but he remembered words much more clearly. Hearing Ezra’s voice, even in his head, firmed his resolve for success.

“The Zamora and Carnicero Cartels are top dogs at the moment. Smaller families nip at their heels, but as it stands, are inconsequential. Although most of their business is based around inland northern Mexico, the Zamora family began in Jalisco. The Carniceros started in Mexico City, south and east of Jalisco. The Butchers, that charming moniker for the Carnicero sons, moved north along the coast and the Zamora clan simply stepped east and out of their way. They are the two most powerful groups, but they are still men. They have egos. They do not trust each other. Because of that, conflict between the two families is inevitable. Use that, if you can, to bring down your target and bring you back to the fold, as Mr. Sanchez is fond of saying.”

Vin snorted. Ezra’s information, though not quiet on the mark, was still something to consider. Ego; the only drive stronger in both families was survival. Maybe hitting both of those points was a good way to start.

The diagram of the Zamora compound sprang up in Vin’s mind. Ezra’s notes said that Alberto, Vin’s old boss, made it a habit to stop in often. Would he do so on his way to Mexico City? The man was in no hurry and Vin doubted he would spend any time with the Carniceros because any next moves would be after Gustavo Carnicero was out of the way. Zamora’s preference would be to wait at home. Vin allowed a small grin and turned at the next fork in the road that would take him to Jalisco.

This part of Mexico was new to Vin; he’d never been beyond the tip of the Baja peninsula or outside the influence of the Great Sonoran Desert. Outside

Jalisco, there were green, rolling hills and neat rows of agave plants for tequila production. The beauty, however, met with a blind eye because Vin's mind focused on tactics. Using the map in his head, Vin's bump of direction took him along the ridgeline of hills flanking Zamora's property.

He drove as far as he dared and then stashed the vehicle and took off on foot, easily falling into the familiar singular line of thought and mission. Vin's steady, ground eating pace ate the miles and preserved his energy. The healing wound in his arm, now a red, puckered line with black stitching on his bicep, did not require a bandage anymore and only throbbed occasionally. Vin easily ignored the sensation as he covered the miles.

Finally, he topped a ridge and saw the compound he sought sprawled along the floor of the wide valley before him. Tucked safely back in the valley, easy access only came from one direction. It was defensible and easy to detect anyone approaching by the single road.

A feeling of *déjà-vu* fell over Vin as he studied the ranch through his sniper scope; he'd done this before in Afghanistan, Pakistan and North Vietnam. The ease at which he fell into the mission frame of mind caused a spark of alarm that quickly died when his mind kicked into gear. Vin moved quickly and silently, masking his face and skin with mud and moss as he moved to reduce glare and soften his outline against the native shrubs. By the time he thought he was in a good position to take a shot, Vin settled down to watch and wait. He had enough food for three days, if he rationed harshly, and water for two. After checking and assembling his rifle, Vin set the scope, put down a mat so he wouldn't lose body heat, and stretched out.

Using the spotting scope, Vin mapped the entire valley in his mind. He figured that he was almost a mile away. The weather was mild and the forecast held no surprises. Being near the ocean, he hoped there would be some cloud cover so the nights wouldn't be cold, but Vin didn't count on that. Cold he could handle. Hunger he could endure. He'd quench thirst using his surroundings. He wasn't used to counting on anything.

He was, though, counting on the suspicious and volatile nature of a Cartel leader. If Vin could take a shot and convince Zamora that Felix was responsible, it would set one at the other's throat. Vin could follow him right to Felix and Arturo, and from there, MacMillan. Tirelessly, he watched the comings and goings of the property, noted access points, and through the circular world of the scope, had a good idea of the main house layout.

The afternoon turned into early evening and Vin's bicep began to ache. He rolled aside to shake it out and when he rolled back, saw a line of three SUVs charge up the valley to the main gate of the property. Vin watched the gate open automatically and in perfect timing so the vehicles never slowed as they raced

under the stone arch. The ant-like line followed the gentle curve of the long dirt drive, the hard packed ground throwing minimal dust.

The SUVs swung around a final curve, crossed through a secondary gate, and pulled up in front of the main house where they stopped, nose to tail-lights. All the doors flew open, except for the rear door of the lead vehicle, and well-dressed men stepped out. Vin could see that they were laughing and relaxed, their mouths moving with silent words. One man opened the remaining door and Vin was pleased to see the form of his former employer emerge from the SUV.

He could take a shot now, and Vin did think about that, but he decided to make the shot more personal - that was Tiger's Eye style. A majority of his victims were taken out in the most private parts of their own homes. Such a vile intrusion added to Tiger's Eye's mystique.

Vin put the scope down and began a final check of his rifle.



Alberto Zamora paused beside the black SUV and took a deep breath through his nose. The smell of home always eased his mind and soul. Smiling, he strolled away from the cars and surveyed his land. His eyes followed the sweep of the valley and the rise of the distant, green hills and satisfaction rose in his heart. Soon, he would have another plot of land along the coast of Baja, an area previously out of his reach. Yes, working with Felix promised substantial reward; once in place, however, Zamora planned to take Felix's share, too. Power was an aphrodisiac and Zamora planned to be completely sated in the next two years.

He also knew young Felix probably had the same plans. First, he had to get out from under his father's influence. Arturo, near death and safety tucked away at the Carnicero compound, was physically out of the picture now but he had loyal legions and Felix needed to get them under his control first.

For now, Alberto had time relax, reflect and see to his holdings. He also planned time with his new wife, Claudia. Being a former Miss Jalisco and international model, she was a spirited handful but money kept her satisfied and when she adorned his arm, Alberto knew he was the picture of a man's man and the envy of all. The paparazzi loved them.

He turned to the house and ambled to the massive oak doors of his house and crossed the threshold when they opened from within. A butler and a maid obligingly held the doors and Alberto swept by them without a glance.

"Alberto!" Claudia called from the top of the curved, marble staircase. Smiling down at him with perfect make-up and ample cleavage, Claudia tilted her head, allowing shining, auburn hair to cascade over one bare shoulder. A clingy, crimson dress with a long slit from hip to calf flowed from the other shoulder. She

struck a pose with her hand on the rail before descending, a long section of thigh showing with each stiletto step. "You are home! What have you brought me, my darling?" Red lips held a promising smile.

Alberto chuckled, following her with hungry eyes as she approached, and took her hand when she reached the last step. She smelled of jasmine and sex and Alberto, 30 years her senior, pitied those without his power. "A mere trinket, I am afraid." He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a palm-sized box, which Claudia plucked from his hand before pecking his cheek. "A charming set of diamond ear-rings." She stood close enough for her breasts to brush his chest as she opened the box. Close to ten carats of sparkling diamonds glittered on platinum and royal blue velvet.

"Oh," Claudia uttered, tipping her head aside as she studied the gems, obviously disappointed. "These are nice."

Alberto laughed. "I planned on taking you out tonight to find the matching necklace and bracelet, my dear, and perhaps a gown to go with it?"

"Alberto!" she breathed, eyes aflame with seduction as she leaned closer. "You are such a good man!"

"Let me show you how good, my treasure. Come." Claudia slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow and they ascended the stairs, Claudia's hips swaying in a ripe rhythm as the house staff scurried to prepare a light meal before the pair left for the evening.

Alberto smiled, enjoying his hardness as Claudia relayed her boring and trivial chatter and they headed to the master bedroom suite. He closed the white double doors after stepping into the suite and turned to the bar. "Champagne?" he asked.

"You know how I like Champagne," Claudia said lightly as she shimmied to the large, glass balcony doors. "And I know how much you like the fresh air." She flung the doors open and stood in the threshold for a moment before turning slowly to face him. "I also know how much you like black lace."

Shifting her weight to one leg and flexing one knee over the other, Claudia slipped a manicured finger under the sole strap of her dress and pushed it aside, allowing it to slide down her arm. Red silk billowed to the floor, covering her matching red Ferragamo heels and leaving her in a lacy black thong and push-up demi bra. A red bow settled fetchingly between the mounds of her breasts.

Alberto's eyes burned as he took her in, and then they walked toward each other. He held out a bubbly flute and she took it with a soft "Thank you." She took a sip and locked his gaze to her, then took the crystal from his hand and stepped aside to put both flutes down. Moving to him, she began a slow, teasing removal of his clothes as she hummed a haunting melody.

Jacket first, then her red, manicured nails lightly scratched as she undid his shirt buttons. She smiled up at him and worked the belt. Alberto released a groan-like sigh and allowed his eyes to slide shut as he enjoyed the feel of her hands on him. His hands brushed over her shoulders, down her warm, soft sides, and then kneaded her round buttocks. A slight breeze smelling of mesquite, jasmine and Claudia cooled his face, and then his torso as she worked downward. His hot, hard prick twitched when she pushed his pants and boxers to the floor. The breeze tickled his skin.

Unable to stand still and being a man of action, Alberto took over and pulled her close, rubbing his erection on the black lace of the thong. He commanded her lips and forced his tongue in her mouth, grabbing her hair from behind and forcing her head back for deeper conquest. Claudia's moan ignited a zing down his belly that set his groin on fire.

"Oh, woman, what you do to me," he growled. Abruptly, he turned her around and found his heated gaze locked on another deep red bow attached to the thong, just at the top of the glorious groove of her ass.

"Open me, Alberto!" Claudia moaned.

He grabbed the bow and gave it a vicious tug, releasing the skimpy thong. He threw the piece of lace aside and pushed her to the intricately carved wood foot board of the massive four-post bed. He bent her over it, the sight of her red nails clawing the pristine white of the bedspread hardening his resolve. His hands found her firm breasts under the bra and he pinched hard nipples.

"Oh!"

Claudia's gasp drove him into her and the hot silk of her was glorious. He ducked his head and he felt hot flicks of pain on his cheek.

"Oh!" Claudia shrieked in a higher octave. "ALBERTO!"

He felt her shift sideways and his grip tightened. His cheek and shoulder burned oddly.

Then Claudia screamed but the tone of it penetrated Alberto's brain just before she dropped to the floor, hysterical and scrambling away.

He turned, fighting his passionate blood, and a sharp burn scored his back, across his shoulder blades. A second later, hot pain dropped him to his knees and he looked frantically around.

One post of the bed's foot board was shattered, the once graceful carving now split into ragged shards. The board itself sported a jagged hole and feathers from the spread floated lazily downward.



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After the second shot that scored Alberto's back, Vin immediately began breaking down his rifle. His movements were clean and quick as his hands worked without thought. He pictured the two shots again - the first was less than an inch from Alberto's head when it hit the bed post and the second skipped along Alberto's shoulder blades and into the bed frame.

It was odd, intending to miss, and Vin mulled that over a moment. When Alberto's head centered in his sights Vin's finger tightened on the trigger but pure control held the squeeze a few moments longer. The same supreme control avoided the center point of Alberto's back and heart and, instead, left a long, jagged slash before punching through the intricately carved wood.

And the situation could not have been more intimate, he thought with a dry laugh. It was textbook Tiger's Eye style. If Alberto Zamora was anywhere near as vengeful as his reputation, Felix Carnicero was in for a surprise and Vin intended to be there to see it. The distraction should allow him to locate both Arturo Carnicero and Robby MacMillan.

Then Vin could go home - a place he hadn't given himself the luxury of thinking about because if he failed, it would remain only a dream.

Chapter Nineteen - INTEGRATED

Mexico City was enormous. Vin's Jeep jerked to a stop on the shoulder of the road and below him, from the base of the foothills and as far as the eye could see, a collection of humanity survived together under smog-stained skies. A chill zinged down his spine and his stomach clenched; how could people live like this, he wondered.

It was late afternoon and the sun warmed his back. The hot engine popped as it cooled and the frame rocked as Vin stood in the driver's seat and leaned his crossed arms on the frame of the windshield. His shirt, sticky with sweat, clung to his body and Vin's fingers felt sweaty grit on his forearms. With a sigh, he closed his eyes and tipped his head back, allowing the wind to filter through his hair and dry his scalp. The corner of his mouth slanted into an amused angle when his own smell reached his nostrils. Then he chuckled, picturing Ezra's disgusted face and Chris' sour expression when same scent hit their noses.

Vin allowed the mental distraction for a minute more, then pushed everything in the past out of his mind and imagined a blank screen, like in a movie theatre. Mentally, he saw himself walk in front of it, sit taylor-style on an empty floor, and focus on the center of the vast whiteness.

In the center, a layout of the Carnicero property began to take shape. Lines, boxes and other shapes indicating buildings popped up as Vin recalled the aerial photos, sketches and diagrams from Ezra's package. All along his journey, Vin committed every page to memory and then burned them, leaving damning Cartel information behind in a trail of ash. As the image came together, the process slowed and then paused. Vin rotated the depiction in his mind, viewing it from all angles in a way only he could manage. It took him many years to realize this was a special gift that only he seemed to possess; he'd stopped trying to explain the process to others after they'd looked at him like he was nuts.

It's funny, he thought with a snort; the one thing that once made him feel like a freak of nature ended up being the thing that gave him the gift of confidence.

It was a gift only appreciated by the Army and his ATF team and for once, he wielded it with complete selfishness because it was all he had.

Vin opened his eyes and immediately scanned the edges of the city below, not long before he picked out both natural and man-made landmarks that told him where the Carnicero compound was located. This compound, unlike Zamora's place, was perched on a far hill top. At night, the lights of Mexico City below would spread before it like a carpet of sparkling diamonds for nearly 180 degrees. It had to be spectacular sight, and it would also be nearly impossible to approach in the light of day.

Pursing his lips in thought, Vin retrieved a water bottle from the passenger seat and took a long pull, nearly emptying it. He poured the rest over his head, not caring that he splashed the seats. Dropping the now empty bottle to the floor, he shook his head, shooting out an arc of drops and absently combed the mop back with his fingers. Using an elastic band dug out from the deep of a pocket, he wrestled his hair into a shaggy tail and dropped back into the driver's seat.

"Last leg for now, Nettie," he said to the machine. The name came easy as the silver-grey Jeep reminded him of his tough and trustworthy friend in Denver - he'd never tell her about it, though. Tanners, generally, weren't stupid.

The engine caught with the first twist of the key and Vin dropped it into gear, starting the zigzag trip off the mountain to the floor of the wide valley and the choking cluster of city. On the other side, overlooking the dirty gathering of humanity, Vin hoped to end this hated existence.

Traffic jams, pedestrians, bikes and mopeds topped the list of Things Vin Hated Most In The World just behind Tiger's Eye by the time he'd fought his way to the other side of the city. He felt dirty, inside and out, from the polluted air and longed to escape but one glance at his goal perched smugly on the distant hills refocused his resolve. Vin stuck to his plan of getting to the edge of the city closest to the compound. He figured that any supplies for the household would be close, increasing his chances of locating at least one of the Cartel workers.

Getting close to the Carnicero's home would be much harder than getting close to Zamora's, and Vin planned to get very, very close. He stopped the Jeep at the edge of town he felt was nearest his goal and looked around. Long shadows told him sunset was close and he needed to be settled by dark. He needed food and sleep, too, so Vin shut down the Carnicero part of his brain and pursued comforts.

Vin spotted a small market and parked in front. Inside, he picked up a few items, enough for a day or two, and studied the people inside. It was easy to pick out the woman in charge - she bustled through the store, answering questions, pointing out discrepancies and issuing order all with a no-nonsense attitude. Vin watched her until she stopped at the end of the long check-out counter and started scribbling on a clipboard.

He approached her with a leisurely stroll, holding his items to his chest. She glanced up when he was a yard or two away and he gave her a tired smile. "Can you help me?" he asked. She gave him a long look, trying to place the northern accent of Vin's Spanish. "I need a room to rent for a few weeks. Do you know of anyone in the area?"

With that statement, her scrutiny turned from curious to suspicious. Her dark eyes raked him from head to toe, lingering on the tattoo on his one bare bicep and the scruff of beard on his chin. He also saw her check what she could see of his forearms. "She's lookin' for needle tracks," he realized. Vin knew he looked a mess and he didn't want this woman thinking he had anything to do with any Cartels.

"I'm a geologist." He shuffled his armload of brightly packaged, Mexican junk food to one side and offered his hand after wiping it on his jeans. "Buck Wilmington. From Texas. I'm studying' the, um, landscape around here."

She quirked a brow and allowed Vin to shake her fingertips. "Mayra Hidalgo," she replied slowly. "Texas?" Recognition of the accent clicked into place and Vin noticed it in her eyes.

"Yeah. Grad student. University of Texas. Hook 'em horns!" he laughed shortly after making a longhorn figure with his fingers, then he had to concentrate on his shifting armload. "Longhorns. Football team? Um . . ."

His nervousness made her smile, and she jotted down an address. "This place is around the corner. Ask for Juan Perez. He usually has rooms."

"I really appreciate it. I'll get out of your hair now." He smiled and ducked his head in thanks. "I'll see you around, Ms. Hidalgo."

She watched him with some amusement as he bought his things and left, noting how Rebecca, the checker, batted her eyes and smiled much too largely at him. When he walked away, Rebecca stared wantonly after him. Mayra clucked with disapproval and made a mental note to speak with her but a moment later, she realized she'd have to address the entire female staff because every one of them watched the stranger exit with the same shocking expression as Rebecca. With a flustered huff, Mayra spun around to return to her office. "Girls these days have no shame!" she muttered, exasperated.



"Who?" Chris looked up at Ezra through headache-narrowed eyes from his desk chair. His long fingers rubbed his temples as he clumped through his brain trying to place the name Ezra just said.

"Oscar Cruz. He is a person of interest south of the border." Ezra spoke in a matter-of-fact way that told Chris that his undercover agent was trying to tell him more than with words alone. JD confirmed weeks ago that the office was bugged

so they slowly developed verbal language that included body language. Only the team was able to decipher it amongst themselves.

If his head wasn't pounding, the complete message would be clearer.

Ezra shifted slightly, which, for him, screamed impatience. "Mr. Larabee, I would like to speak with Border Patrol and gain permission to speak with Mr. Cruz. He is being held in San Diego."

San Diego. That place shined bright in his cluttered memory. Chris sat up then pushed to his feet as the headache suddenly waned. "Is this about . . . guns?" He tried to put more meaning in the last word.

Ezra smirked. "That is what the 'F' part of our agency's moniker stands for, is it not?" The distinct and careful nod that followed confirmed what Chris suspected - this was about Vin. "My contacts hinted that he may be involved in that shipment seized in July. I will let you know what I find out, of course, but you may get a call from the supervisor."

"Sure, sure." Chris waved Ezra away. "Send JD in will, ya?"

"Certainly." The dismissed Agent slipped through the doorway and the door clicked shut. Chris let out a breath and wandered to the window where he stared at the surrounding mountains without seeing them.

It seemed like eons since they'd last seen Vin and his bloody visage was not the best last sight Chris ever hoped to have in his head. He missed him; Vin's sure and steady solidness at his side meant more than he could ever put into words and Chris hoped this nightmare would end sometime. He'd given up on "soon" long ago.

The second of Vin's replacements left just last week and the third one looked to be hot on his tail. This team needed a sniper and only one man fit the bill, so they viewed replacements as temporary fixes and treated them as such. Chris thought about installing a revolving door.

"You needed me?" JD's perky voice jarred Chris from his thoughts.

"Yeah. My computer's acting up and I'm about to shoot it." Chris' words didn't match his motions and JD frowned. Chris returned to his desk and began scribbling on a pad as he talked. "Can't tell if it's the keyboard or the monitor."

On the pad, he wrote: "Find out what you can from Ezra's contact in San Diego. Get the stuff they won't share." Chris tapped on the keyboard as he turned the pad for JD to read.

JD skimmed the message and nodded. "Um, yeah. Here, let me sit there."

Chris moved and let JD take the chair. The boy's fingers flew over the keys and Chris stood back. Images and lines of code flashed on the screen, one page instantly replaced by another before Chris could draw a breath. He marveled at the boy's speed. "Why can't I stop thinking of him as a boy?" Chris wondered.

"Here," JD said, standing a few minutes later. "All done."

Chris looked at his screen and saw that his screen background was now the head of the Terminator. One red eye stared at him from the familiar silver head. Chris snorted. "That's why," he muttered, answering his silent question as he reclaimed his chair. One file folder floated, centered on the screen.

"What?" JD asked, grinning. "When you log out for the day, power down the machine and things will go back to normal." He cocked his head, waiting for an indication that Chris understood.

Chris jotted a note. "That will make the file disappear?"

JD nodded. "Anything else?"

"No. Get out." Chris crumpled the note and stuffed it in his pocket, weary of this subterfuge. All he wanted was Vin back where he belonged.

With the door shut, Chris opened the file and began to read. On the surface, Oscar Cruz sat in Federal lock up charged with human trafficking and murder. Beyond that, the names Chris noted in the file as the man's associates rang very familiar bells and he had no doubt he crossed paths with Vin fairly recently. He flipped back to the beginning of the file and the account of his arrest. Reading it confirmed his suspicion and he understood why Ezra was interested.

At the end of the report, Chris perked up when he saw a video interrogation file attachment and he hit the play button without hesitation.

The angle was from an upper corner of the room, behind the interrogator. Chris could see a vivid white bandage on the man's neck where Vin left his mark. Oscar Cruz was disheveled and shaken and speaking rapidly in Spanish, which annoyed Chris without end. Still, he listened to the weasel and snarled when he heard Vin's name, "Americano" followed by a vulgar expletive, and eventually, "Mexico City".

That's all he needed to hear to feel closer to his lost brother. Just knowing Vin was in Mexico City brought him alive in Chris' mind, brightening the dark hole of worry just a little.

Chapter Twenty - JOINED

In the late afternoon of Vin's second day in Mexico City, grey clouds rolled in from the west on a cool wind, prickling his blood with a feeling of unrest. He edged the Jeep off the narrow, brick street into a questionable parking spot right in front of his small rented room on the second floor above an old, empty market. A rickety wooden staircase zigzagged along the alley side of the building and led to his peeling front door and from there, a small window facing the street overlooked his Jeep and the low-slung factory building across the street. He could just see the rooftop of the Carnicero mansion in the light of day.

Standing next to his vehicle, Vin shrugged his coat higher on his neck and worked to close the zipper. He'd been all over the hills in the past two days, both on foot and in the Jeep, and confirmed that any stealthy approach to the compound would be difficult if not impossible. He'd mapped the land, though, and had ideas on his next step, but right now his growling stomach needed attention. He grabbed a worn baseball hat with a threadbare *Diablos Rojos del Mexico* team patch on the front and tugged it down over his light hair.

Bundled against the sharp wind, Vin sniffed as he walked and calculated that rain would fall later tonight. Just then, a faint roll of thunder confirmed the assessment and he headed up the street to the main thoroughfare. As he'd done the afternoon before, he intended to cruise the bars and eateries looking for people and vehicles from the compound. Today, though, dinner came first. He tugged at the waist of his jeans, noting its looseness. "Nathan would not be happy with the weight I've lost," he thought with a wan smile.

Vin dodged traffic as he crossed the main road and ducked down an alley he knew was a shortcut to one of the restaurants he had in mind. He walked rapidly with his hands deep in his coat pockets and his eyes scanning his path. Ahead, near the end of the alley, he saw three men around an agitated woman wearing a bright skirt. Instinct told him she was in trouble; he automatically melted into the shadows and shifted his weight to the balls of his feet as he approached.

The men laughed but the woman was angry and Vin paused; he knew that voice. Two of the men chose that moment to grab two of Ronnie's arms while the third moved in and roughly fondled her breasts. "Ah, *chica*," Vin heard him growl. "You are very ripe!" They all laughed as he dodged her kick, moved in close to grab her jaw and pushed her mouth closed with one hand while the other groped further.

Vin's blood boiled as he walked rapidly to them, his eyes locked on his first target from the shadow of his hat brim. They didn't know he was there until he was upon them, grabbing the groper by his right arm and snapping the forearm bones cleanly with one smooth move. The man screeched and dropped, clearing Vin's way to the two that held Ronnie. A quick kick shattered a kneecap and a follow up jab broke the nose of one, his scream garbled when he fell.

The third man happened to be the biggest. Ronnie snarled and twisted in his grip, trying to rake his face with her nails but he held her off like a puppy by the scruff of her neck. He focused on Vin and dropped into a defensive stance before tossing Ronnie aside and into a wall where she fell into a dazed heap.

Vin shot a kick with blinding speed aiming for the crotch, but the big man twisted and Vin hit a rock-solid thigh. He flexed low and pushed off, arching a second kick to the man's jaw and connected, knocking him back.

Vin landed awkwardly, wobbling a second to gain balance and then spun on the ball of one foot to avoid the swipe of an enormous knife. Vin grabbed the wrist as it passed and forced the motion beyond what was intended, pulling his opponent off balance. Vin twisted the arm a bit and leaned down on the back of the man's elbow, bending it the wrong way. It cracked like a dry stick.

The bigger man dropped like a rock with a yelp and Vin kept moving, grabbing Ronnie and dragging her around the corner where they crossed a busy street and headed to an area packed with vendor tents, running children and unrepentant scooter jockeys riding on the sidewalks. The air was heavy with smells - smoke, exhaust, body odor and the unexpected cooking odors that made his mouth water. Ronnie breathed unevenly and trembled under Vin's hand as he pulled her along, but she kept up without falling apart. In the thick of everything, Vin slowed to a walk and she caught up, and then he laced her arm through his elbow. He gave her a sidelong look from under the brim of his hat.

"You all right?" he asked as they weaved through the crowd at a leisurely pace.

"Yes, yes, I am fine, fine." She took a breath. "Thank you." Ronnie adjusted her blouse and turned her wide eyes to him, and then gasped. They jerked to a stop. "Oh, my God, Vin! I did not recognize you! Everything happened so fast . . ."

"It's okay," Vin said lowly. "Let's keep quiet and get you out of here. Where to?"

“It does not matter. They will find me again.”

Vin swore softly and changed course. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing!”

Vin shushed her and hurried to a large stationary crowd waiting outside a small restaurant. They hovered just outside hearing range.

“I thought you were dead,” Ronnie said when they stopped. “Or in prison. I have heard some things . . . “

“I didn’t kill Adrian or shoot the Judge.” Vin shifted his stance to check the area as he spoke. “Who were those guys?”

“Butcher wannabes.” She said the second word in English. “Is that the way to say it?”

Vin issued a short, sharp laugh. “Yeah, that’s right. You find them or did they find you?”

“The second thing.” She paused as they released hands to allow a woman with three kids clinging to her like limpets to pass through the waiting crowd. “I came down here to see Felix, to ask him to keep the violence out of my city.”

Vin had to give her points for pure gumption. “How’d that work for ya?”

“I can’t get in,” she said angrily. “All this way and I can’t get the last kilometer.”

Satisfied that they were not followed, Vin took her hand pulled her along at a strolling walk away from the crowd. “It’s better you stay clear of the place, Ronnie.”

She slammed to a stop, planting her feet and throwing her shoulders back. The burn of anger in her eyes reminded Vin of Inez, the bar owner where Team 7 held many “debriefings.” Both women were passionate when it came to things they loved.

“You are the reason I am here.” Ronnie’s grip on his hand tightened. “You were doing something. You weren’t taking your trials lying down. You inspired me to fight.”

“You don’t -“

“You’re are right; I don’t know much about you but I do know that you are driven by passion - passion about something very close to you. You are fighting for it and I am doing the same.”

Their eyes locked while she stood in toe to toe defiance. Vin finally nodded once in acknowledgement.

“True,” he admitted. “But I know how to fight. And this will get dangerous. I would never tell you to go home, but I am asking you to stand down. Just for now.” Vin wasn’t sure exactly when her cause became part of his, but it seemed like a natural fit.

A wash of emotions came over Ronnie's features as she thought, but it wasn't long before she nodded. "I do trust you," she said. "And I know nothing about you. Is that crazy?"

He gave her a wry smile and dropped his chin to study his feet. "I've heard crazier things."

"I've heard some things, too, since I have been here. Zamora is looking for you."

Vin's head snapped up and he locked eyes with Ronnie. "Do you know why?" he asked cautiously.

"No, not exactly," she said slowly as she studied him. "I can arrange a meet if you wish to find out why. It wouldn't be with Zamora personally, though. It would be an intermediary. His people know me."

Vin wondered what that meant. Did his plan to implicate MacMillan and Felix fail? Did Zamora suspect him? There was only one way to find out. "Do it," he said. "How soon can it be arranged?"

"Tonight," she said. Bells from a nearby church rang the hour and Ronnie glanced in their direction. "I know where he is staying. Meet me in front of the church at nine tonight. I think I can get him there."

"Ronnie –" Vin started, concerned. Moving around in this city after dark was never a good idea.

"Shh, I will be fine. Be there." Ronnie stepped back and turned to go. "Nine o'clock."

All Vin could do was nod and watch her disappear back into the crowd. He felt a cold drop of rain hit his cheek and looked up. It would be an uncomfortable night.



Somehow, the fat clouds held back a downpour and instead, sprinkled Vin's shoulders and hat with a fine mist instead. The wind died right after dark and the intermittent, throaty thunder faded. Vin walked with his fists deep in his pockets and his coat collar up, his pace and posture emanating an easy, relaxed air. In reality, all his senses were alive as he approached the church at the assigned time.

Two figures huddled against the stone entry of the church, Ronnie easily recognizable wrapped in a bright coat. The other person was much bigger and clad entirely in black. Vin strolled up on Ronnie's side and stopped, nodding silently in her direction. She flashed a nervous smile in return.

"You Tanner?" The dark man said without preamble.

"Yeah. What do you want?"

SHADOWLINE

The man gave him a visual head to toe exam. "Zamora heard you were still alive and after Tiger's Eye."

"Where'd he hear that?"

"Oscar Cruz."

Vin pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes. "I heard he's – indisposed up north."

"That's true." The man paused, and then added, "Cruz had one phone call. It was to Zamora."

"So the weasel did his job," Vin thought with satisfaction. Aloud, he said, "Go on."

"Zamora wants to help you in your quest."

"I heard Zamora and Tiger's Eye were in bed together," Vin said, trying for a wary tone.

"Not since Tiger's Eye tried to kill him a few days ago. Now, my boss wants him out of the way."

Vin tipped his head at the term. "Revenge?"

The man shook his head. "Not against Tiger's Eye. He needs the dog out of the way so he can deal with the master."

Inwardly, Vin smiled – his plan worked. Zamora wanted to take out Felix, and handed him MacMillan to clear the way. He nodded. "Are the Carniceros aware of this – situation? Will I find obstacles?"

"Maybe. Meet me tomorrow for a location."

"And money. Cash. Lots of it."

The man cocked his head. "How much?"

"One million, American. Half now, half later. Cash."

The man nodded. "I will make the offer. Veronica will tell you the location tomorrow."

They parted just as the rain began. Ronnie draped her scarf over her head and snuggled into Vin's side. "Come. My place is close."

Vin's mind raced as they walked, working out a way to make sure Felix and Zamora met and exploded. He needed all the distractions he could get to find. He wanted Mac, but getting Arturo Carnicero, as the CIA wanted, was the only way to get home; he still needed proof of his innocence, too. Maybe something was inside the mansion – all he had now was hope.

They picked up food from a street vendor and Ronnie took him to a small room off a woman's dress shop that was much cleaner than the place he'd found. They talked and ate by candle light, sharing a sweet sangria.

After, she led him to her bed.

Chapter Twenty-One - PROOF AT LAST

Vin awoke to darkness with his inner clock telling him it dawn was close. The warmth of Ronnie's body against him sparked something deeper than carnal lust - it stoked an old fear that he was destined to be alone.

Her back fit in the curve of his body, his nose buried in the thick of her hair just below her ear. Slowly, he stroked the length of her from shoulder to thigh in an effort to regain a positive center; he couldn't afford to fall apart from old fears now. Doubt and hope were his enemies. Today, he could only think of his next step. He could not afford this distraction, no matter how sweet.

Vin shifted back and then rolled aside through sheer force of will, fighting to gain the narrow vision of a Ranger on assignment. The floor was cold under his feet when he rose to gather his clothes. Closer to the window, he heard soft dripping and realized it was raining - because of it, the Jeep would be risky on the raw mountain trails but he had an idea about an alternative, formed when he scouted the area. He thought of his sure-footed Peso back home and hoped to get something close.

Now, while most people were sleeping, Vin planned to gather and assemble his tools and move them to a safe location. He knew his plan was flimsy, but the two basic points were solid: Kill MacMillan and kill Arturo Carnicero. Opportunity dictated the order of the tasks and Vin needed complete focus.

Dressed, Vin gave Ronnie on long, last look before slipping outside. He would find her later for the location of his meeting. It was time to prepare.

The soft click of the door closing and the faint smell of rain roused Ronnie from sleep. She knew he was gone the moment her eyes opened to the fading shadows night; she missed his warmth. Gazing at the dark rectangle of the closed door Ronnie mentally scolded herself. "This is not the time for relationships." She forced her thoughts to home and the families and friends she grew up with, and the fact that Tijuana was under siege. Drug cartels made her home a battlefield and

it had to stop. She had to see the Carniceros and open their eyes. She had to get into that compound. She needed more information.

Ronnie rolled on her back and stared at the ceiling, sleep forgotten. Vin would know how to get inside. She knew he wanted her out of the way for now but “now” was all she had - her finances were running low and she had to return home soon. She needed to do something different. She needed to play by the men’s rules to get results. She needed something they wanted.

Then she realized she had the upper hand after all. She had all the information she needed. She hoped it didn’t alienate Vin, but her home depended on her getting to the root of all the violence. Vin might become . . . what was the term? Collateral Damage? Her heart fluttered erratically.

Thinking like a man did little to keep Ronnie’s eyes from tearing up. She rolled to her stomach and buried her face in the pillow, greeting the first hour of rain-grayed dawn with frightened sobbing.



The rain eased to occasional drizzle shortly after sunrise and spots of blue peeked above the line of mountains in the west. On the east side of the city, Vin noted the clouds breaking and worked the forecast into his sketchy plans. He parked the Jeep off-road as far as he dared in the slick mud. This location was perfect for a quick escape from the city; the Jeep, fully gassed and stuffed with weatherproofed provisions and water, would stay here until the end. Vin threw camouflaged netting over it to break up its boxy shape.

That done, he turned to his next task - weapons. Since his arrival in Mexico City, the only tool he kept with him was the Denver knife, tucked away in a snug sheath and always in easy reach. Guns, previously disassembled and stored in different areas, were now in disjoined heaps on a thick packing quilt waiting for cleaning and assembly. Vin spent a little over an hour with that task, each minute aligning his mission with his emotions, convincing himself that there was no right or wrong in this - it was justice. It improved the Big Picture. It would save future lives. Losing his soul - again - was a small price to pay.

Vin set his jaw when he clicked the last piece in place and set the Sig automatic at the end of a neat row of guns. He heard his Army commander barking orders in his head and tried to picture Chris in his place. The Army had no problem ordering a sniper to take out a target. Neither did Chris, but the stark difference between them was murder versus immediate protection. In the end, was there any difference?

Thinking was over-rated. It just caused headaches. Vin shut down emotion and gathered his arsenal, carefully stowing them away in a large, waterproof

container hidden in a small arroyo. He was ready. All he needed were the locations of his targets and some temporary transportation.

Vin hiked toward the city making one stop along the way.

Vin found Ronnie just before noon in the plaza near her rented room. He expected questions. Instead, he noted a ghost-like shadow in her eyes and emotional distance. Instead of surprise, he felt relief and convinced himself that it was better this way.

“Let’s eat,” she said in a matter-of-fact way. “You have time.”

He nodded and let her lead him to a sidewalk café. Vin’s stomach growled and he realized he hadn’t eaten yet today. Ronnie’s mouth curled into an amused smile and he grinned at her.

“Sorry.”

“We cannot control our urges,” she said with a sparkle in her eyes. “I understand.”

Vin knew she wasn’t just talking about his stomach and he felt his cheeks flush, saved further embarrassment with the arrival of their lunch.

They ate with little conversation and when the waiter took their plates, Vin put down more than enough money to cover the meal. He glanced around at the closeness of the other diners and stood, offering his hand. Their gazes locked and she silently took his hand and allowed him to take her to a secluded spot near a huge oak tree.

“You know where the meet is?” he asked, taking both of her hands and pulling her close so they could whisper.

“Yes.” She held his eyes and swallowed hard.

“Well? Where is it?”

“I need information first.”

Vin blinked. “What?”

“Vin, you have information I need. I will trade you. Isn’t that how it works?”

Vin took a half-step back. “Ronnie . . .”

She gripped his hands tighter. “I’m fighting too, Vin. I need to get into that house and I need information to do that.”

“It’s too dangerous.” He squeezed her fingers.

“I know how dangerous this is. I’ve seen it first hand, remember?” Ronnie’s anger flared and she threw his hands back at him and planted her fists on her hips. “I am not a China doll. I will get an audience with the Carniceros if it kills me, Vin. Many of my friends have already died. Children, women, young men - my future - it’s a war I intend to stop or die trying!”

Vin fought to keep his temper but when he looked into her eyes and realized her passion, all argument died in his throat. They were too much alike that way. He couldn’t keep her safe so the best he could do was arm her with truth. He

glanced around to make sure they would not be overheard and grabbed her hand, pulling her close.

"I know a way, but you must promise to have your say and walk away. You hear me? I need you to be . . . away."

She nodded, her eyes still smoldering. "I will try. That is all I can promise."

Vin took a deep breath and chewed his lower lip a moment, hoping this mistake wouldn't haunt him later. "Tell Gustavo that Felix plans to be the sole heir to the Carnicero business. He and Zamora had Adrian killed. Gustavo is next. Arturo may already be gone because no one has seen him in over a month."

Ronnie gasped in horror. "Is this the truth? How do you know?"

"It can be confirmed by Oscar Cruz, currently in Federal custody in the U.S. I am sure the Carnicereros have connections enough to get confirmation."

She gaped at Vin and he could see her mind working behind her eyes. "That should do it," she muttered softly.

"I don't know how you'll get to Gustavo, though."

"I do."

Vin tipped his head aside. "You've been busy this morning."

"Just trading information. That's the way it's done, no?" She smiled at him.

"Yeah, it is." Vin shook his head in defeat. "Now, where is my meeting?"



Vin waited in the shadows at the edge of a park watching children play around a colorful water fountain. The cold drizzle ceased hours ago and sluggish clouds uncovered more blue sky every minute. He heard mothers and nannies warning the children away from the temptation of the waterfall, but small fingers still got wet.

Right on time, Vin saw the man from the previous night stroll to the far side of the water feature and stop to light a cigarette, placing a duffle bag on the ground to one side first. Vin turned up his coat collar and approached, coming up from behind. The man did not startle; instead, he spoke without turning around as soon as Vin was in hearing distance.

"Your target will arrive at the Cartel house at five o'clock. My employer will arrive in town at seven. That is your window. Zamora wants proof that Tiger's Eye is out of the way before he goes to the mansion."

"That's a small window."

"This is a lot of money." The man took another hit on the cigarette. "The balance will be with Zamora. He will trade it for the proof."

"He have something specific in mind? A scalp, maybe?"

The man chuckled darkly. “Tempting, but Tiger’s Eye wears a talisman around his neck. Zamora has seen it.”

“What’s it look like?”

“It is a glass vial with a spent bullet inside. He says it is testament of his cunning and skill.”

Vin frowned. He didn’t recall MacMillan wearing any jewelry at the shooting range.

The smoking man continued. “He says it’s the bullet that killed Marko Munos, which is the contract that made him partners in the Carnicero Cartel.”

Vin froze and his stomach turned. He fought to keep his cool as his thoughts raced. If that was true, and if there was still blood evidence on the bullet fragment, he could go home!

It took some effort to keep an even tone when he spoke again. “I will get proof.”

The man strolled away and Vin picked up the duffel, his mind whirling. That’s why the bullet in Denver didn’t have any of Munos’ blood on it - someone tampered with the evidence. For the first time in a long, long time, hope awakened in Vin’s heart.

Chapter Twenty-Two - CONFIRMATION

Ronnie's afternoon was torment. Her mind whirled with Vin's information, making her comb her memories for any clue that would have predicted the behavior of Felix Carnicero.

She remembered playing with the boys at a young age, before they left for Mexico City. Gustavo was younger but they had the same teacher because he skipped a grade. Adrian was her age and rarely in class. Felix was older and although she remembered all of them, they were outside her circle of acquaintances and most of what she knew of them she learned from Gustavo and her own observations.

Ronnie remembered Adrian as being the wild one and he always got hurt due to crazy stunts. Gustavo's mother spent a lot of her time rounding him up and patching his wounds; Ronnie recalled one time when the woman apologized profusely to another woman in the Carnicero kitchen while Ronnie and Gustavo ate a snack at the dinner table. Apparently, Adrian convinced another boy to jump off a roof with him.

As for Felix, Ronnie remembered him as aloof and always on the sidelines, watching. She was a little afraid of him because he usually had a scowl on his face and Gustavo made it a point to avoid him. That brother had a dangerous reputation but he did not appear to be out of control like Adrian. Ronnie wondered now if there was physical abuse among the brothers.

As for their father Arturo, Ronnie never recalled seeing him at all. Their mother was very kind, but seemed harried and worried. She died a few years after leaving Tijuana and Ronnie never found out the cause.

Gustavo was quiet and smart, excelled in mathematics and did not get the same amount of attention as Felix or Adrian. Ronnie missed him when he moved away. They crossed paths a handful of times in Tijuana since then when Gustavo passed through on business.

Ronnie shook her head with a sigh in an effort to clear her mind. She pulled out the remains of her cash, noting that she needed to make headway soon – she

had less than a week's worth of money before she had to return home. Counting out a few bills for a meal, she tucked the rest away and turned to the mirror to fix her hair.

Tonight, she would approach one of the Cartel members she knew was in town and request a meeting with Gustavo because she had information. She practiced the request in her head to make sure she didn't give up too much – she had to convince him that this was for Gustavo's ears only, and that task would not be easy.

Finally, she was ready. Ronnie took a bracing breath and then snatched her colorful shawl from the bed, throwing it over her shoulders as she left her small room.

The humidity of the late afternoon made Ronnie's clothes stick to her skin but the walk was comfortable. Once she reached the main plaza, she visually scanned the business fronts for familiar faces. The dinner crowd gathered and clusters of people crowded the sidewalk chatting and laughing. She weaved between them at a pace that appeared leisurely but her heart clutched with urgency.

Near the end of the pavement, she finally spotted one of the men she knew to be a Cartel bodyguard standing outside a café door; it was the only eatery without a line waiting outside. Ronnie paused, adjusted her hair and shawl, and approached with a lifted chin and determined eyes.

The man watched her approach and once he realized the he was her destination, he shifted his body to face her and let his arms dangle loosely at his sides. She stopped at the edge of his personal space.

"I need to speak with Gustavo. Alone."

The man cocked his head, considering. Ronnie glanced aside into the small restaurant and saw Gustavo sitting against a far wall chatting with a waiter. The Carnicero brother was alone at the table, much to her surprise. This was a perfect opportunity. She took another step and looked back at the guard.

"Mr. Carnicero wishes to eat in private," the man said.

"He knows me. I have information - "

"Mr. Carnicero does not wish to be disturbed."

Ronnie scowled and adjusted the grip on her shawl. "It is important." She considered telling him something to convey the threatening nature of her warning, but then she realized that none of the Cartel bodyguards could be trusted. Any one of them, or even all of them, could be under Felix's control.

She moved instinctively and without warning, grabbed the café door and stepped inside before the guard reacted. Gustavo's head turned her direction at the noise.

“Gustavo!” she called, meeting his eyes immediately. The guard clamped down on her arm one step beyond the threshold and she cringed at the sudden pain. Two more men appeared from the depths of the eatery.

“Enough!” Gustavo shot to his feet and the guards froze, but did not release her. He glared at the guard holding Ronnie’s arm. “Release her. Go back outside.”

The guard did as he was told, giving her a steely glare that gave her a chill before going back outside.

“Out of my way!” Gustavo snapped as she shouldered by the waiter and one of the guards. His features softened as he approached Ronnie and he extended his arm to cup her elbow. “Veronica. I am so sorry. . .”

“I’m all right,” she breathed, trying to control her sudden trembling. Her heart pounded and she worked up a smile when faced him. “Really, I am all right.”

“Join me. I insist.” He led her to his table and pulled out a chair. The waiter hurried to fetch another setting for the table and had it in place by the time Gustavo retook his seat. Ronnie saw that he had a half glass of red wine and a small plate of fruit and cheese. He poured wine into the glass that appeared in front of her out of nowhere. “This is just an appetizer, courtesy of the house. Please, help yourself.”

Ronnie lifted the glass and noticed how the liquid quivered. It took a moment of determination to quiet the shaking before taking a sip. There was a hint of berries and pepper, and the liquid gave her throat pleasant warmth when she swallowed. “Thank you.”

Gustavo leaned back, smiling, and took a sip from his glass. “Veronica Cerritos. It has been a while.”

“Yes,” she replied, working to slow her racing heartbeat.

A slight furrow appeared between his eyebrows as he thought. “I do not believe I have ever seen you outside our little hometown,” he said. “First time in Mexico City?”

“Yes,” she said again, annoyed at sounding like a broken record. A flutter of anger did much to strengthen her resolve.

“So,” he said, leaning in. “What brings you here?”

Ronnie glanced pointedly at the security guards that hovered closer to the table than made her comfortable. “Um, it is good to see you again, Gustavo. Really.” And she meant it. She’d always liked his deep voice and the way it sounded so calm no matter what was actually going on around them. He had been that way, even as a young boy.

He noticed her discomfort and shooed the men away with a scowl and a wave of his hand. The men stepped back, faces unreadable.

Ronnie took another sip of the wine and lifted a piece of cheese from the plate he offered.

“Better?” he asked with a tiny smile.

“Yes, thank you.” She put down her glass and leaned in. “I am sorry about Adrian. Really.”

He shrugged as a wash of sorrow crossed his face. “Me too. He was lost a long time ago, though. He is finally at peace.”

She wondered about that for a second, and then continued. “Gustavo, I have to tell you something that you may not believe or want to hear. I want you to know first that this information can be confirmed, and I am telling you to protect you.” Gustavo’s eyes shuttered, becoming unreadable. Ronnie knew at that second that she had to be entirely truthful with him if he was going to listen, really listen. “I will admit, there is another reason, actually. I want something in return. I want to make a deal with your family.”

“And why should my family make such a deal?”

The flatness of his voice carried disappointment that made Ronnie flush. She sounded just like any other greedy Cartel associate and she did not blame him for his wariness. She leaned in and connected with his eyes, praying that he would see the truth of her words.

“I want the violence to end in Tijuana, Gustavo. This bickering, this . . . evil . . . is destroying everything good about my home. Everything. It has to stop and you are my last hope.”

Gustavo’s eyes softened with that and a touch of amusement traced his lips. “You have always loved that place,” he said softly. “And I can see in your eyes that it is the basis of why you are here in this ugly city.” He paused, considering, and tipped his head aside as he regarded her. “You are the best thing in that town, you know. I have always admired you for your devotion.”

Ronnie felt her body relax and she took another sip from her glass. “But you think it’s for naught, don’t you? Like sweeping sand from a beach?”

He chuckled and shook head, ducking it downward for a second. “Your pureness is refreshing.” He spoke so quietly, Ronnie barely heard it.

She smiled a sad smile and waited to see what he would do. Gustavo watched her quietly, absentmindedly twisting his wine glass back and forth on the crisp, white tablecloth. “I can only control my actions,” he finally said. “I can make no promises for my family.”

“Fair enough,” she replied. “Gustavo, I know who is responsible for Adrian’s death and you are the next target.” Pursing his lips, Gustavo failed to look impressed. He just looked sad, and slightly puzzled. She took it as her cue to continue. “I know you think that American agent shot him, but he didn’t. You also think he shot Marko Munos, but he didn’t do that, either. It was a plan to set the agent up and it worked.”

Now, Gustavo looked skeptical. “You know this American. He worked with you in Tijuana. How do you know he isn’t lying?”

Ronnie shook her head and reached across the table to rest one hand on top of his, stilling the wine glass. “Vin isn’t who I am talking about. Oscar Cruz can confirm what I have to say. He’s in custody -“

“- in U.S. Federal holding, awaiting trial. I know this. Alberto Zamora did this?”

“Not alone.” Ronnie took a breath. This was much harder than she’d anticipated. “Gustavo, Felix ordered Tiger’s Eye to kill Adrian. You are next on his list, along with your father.”

“WHAT?”

The guards immediately stepped closer, their hands on the butts of their handguns. Ronnie’s heart raced again, alarmed at the number of guns that suddenly appeared. She froze, even as Gustavo snatched away his hand and pushed back in his chair.

“Please,” Ronnie said. “Please, I said you wouldn’t want to hear this! I have no reason to lie, Gustavo. Why would I lie? You know me!”

Gustavo’s steely glare chilled her to the bone, but she didn’t dare move. He rose, slowly standing until he looked down on her. Ronnie held the look, willing back her urge to bolt. She forced her hands open and rested both palms on the table to still their renewed shaking. She’d forgotten how frightening any of the Carniceros looked when angry.

A thousand emotions swirled through Gustavo’s eyes, pushing anger aside. She could see his mind working, working, working; somehow, his face remained unreadable but his eyes were very open. Several long seconds passed and she counted his breaths, his speedy rate nearly matched hers. Finally, after an adrenalin heated eternity of moments went by, she saw his eyes flick to the bodyguards and she saw trust crumble right before her eyes. He pulled out his cell phone and spoke as he dialed, keeping his back to the wall.

“Leave us,” he said to the guards. “Now!”

The three men traded glances before standing back and letting their hands fall to their sides. With great reluctance clear in their every line, they moved back and out of hearing distance.

“They did not hear me,” Ronnie whispered. “They were too far -“

“Quiet,” Gustavo snapped. He stepped away and had a short, whispered conversation on the phone before disconnecting and slipping the device into his pocket. He stood with his back to her, hands on his hips and completely still. Eventually, his arms dropped and he returned to the table, sitting down with a stiff back.

“You will not leave until I confirm this, Veronica. If you are lying . . .” he ran his hand through his hair.

“I’m not. I’m sorry. I didn’t know how -“

“Let’s not talk about this now,” he said with fresh sorrow. “Let us have a nice meal.”

“Which could be my last,” she read in his face. She smiled sadly, certain that she couldn’t swallow anything at the moment. Her throat clenched with sadness for him and his loss. If he had been a boy with a different last name all those years ago in Tijuana, things would be so much different right now. She grieved for him. “Okay,” she croaked, nodding. “Sure.”

Chapter Twenty-Three - POISED FOR ACTION

Felix Carnicero reclined in the chair at the head of the massive oak table and sighed. The eleven other chairs surrounding the table were empty, but he did not feel neglected in any way as the server and maid made sure his coffee cup was full and his appetite sated. They whisked away the dishes and met his every need before retiring to the kitchen when the *Jefe* rose and excused them with a flick of his wrist.

He moved to the window and looked out over the vast yard, green against the natural brown of the surrounding hills. Water here was plentiful if you had enough money for a well, and Felix had six. The lush lawn, surrounded by thick, ornamental hedges trimmed into rigid rectangles and perfect circles. Felix enjoyed this compound - it was a peaceful respite from the madness beyond the walls and a perfect reminder of the power to come. Only his father, Arturo Carnicero, was in his way.

Joyful barking, muted by the thick glass of his home, caught his attention and he looked far to one side. He could barely see the tails of a pair of dogs, but it was clear they were intent on something. Felix wandered from his dining room to the wide outside veranda, passing through massive walls of glass that parted at a touch. He pulled a cigar from his breast pocket and lit it as he walked, turning a corner to find some of his men on the stone patio where they usually waited for any other orders before going home for the night.

Felix moved toward them, lording over the small party with simple command presence. Obviously older than the half-dozen men scattered over the roomy patio, the earned lines and inflicted scars that mapped Felix's tanned, square face summed up his life philosophy - work hard, fight for your place and dominate those that dare to function in your world.

The patio was an extension of the hacienda's elegant great room, separated by the same floor to ceiling, bullet proof glass walls that embraced the dining area. The flagstone tiled, outdoor area pushed out to a low wall boundary that curved

like a pond's edge with no sharp corners or angles. A fire pit blazed at the north end and comfortable outdoor chairs sat in loose groupings.

Felix worked the dampened end of the Cuban with his lips, causing the cherry embers at the opposite end to flare as he studied the men with dark, unreadable eyes. It was near sunset and the long, cool shadows dotting the warm stone did little to dampen the younger men's chatter. Beyond the low wall, four bulldozer-shaped dogs toyed with a terrified cat.

Felix heard the men betting amongst themselves on which dog would kill the cat. For now, the animals were entertained with the slow torture. After one dog - the oldest and largest of the four - caught the wretched creature, it held it down, allowing the other dogs to tease, nip and otherwise torment the prey. After a few minutes, they released the cat only to catch it again to entertain the younger dogs.

Money flashed between the excited men. Felix watched them and considered, and then stretched his back. They cheered and Felix shifted his eyes to the dogs as the frazzled cat bolted yet again. The elder dog held back, allowing one of the younger pack mates to dart past and overtake the exhausted creature. One dog clamped his powerful jaws around the cat and gave it a vicious shake. When he released his catch, it fell, lifeless, to the manicured lawn. Disappointed, the other dogs nudged it a few times before plucking it up and engaging in a happy game of tug of war.

Cheers and groans emanated from the observers. Money shuffled between hands with lots of back-slapping. Felix strolled toward them, his attention on the dogs. When he was close to the men, they quieted and watched him with lowered eyes. More than one of them flinched as their boss casually pulled a large hand gun from his custom carved, leather shoulder holster and raise it to the romping dogs, firing one shot that rang their ears. Felix holstered in a smooth, practiced motion, stopping a few feet from the group. Frowning, he removed the cigar from his lips and rolled it between his fingers, studying it. The dog that put the cat out of its misery sprawled on the grass, dead.

The men stood stock still for a few, long seconds, glancing between their boss and the dead dog, now uninterested in the remaining pack that continued to frolic with the feline body, tossing it happily between them.

Finally, one man spoke. "Shall I bury the, um, body, *Jefe*?"

After a moment, Felix shook his head, his attention on the now dying cigar. "No, leave it be."

Another man, the one that profited on the dead dog, sounded perplexed when he spoke. "May I ask why you shot him? He was a fine animal, Sir."

Felix Carnicero flicked the remains of his cigar over the low wall and onto the grass. He felt his shirt pockets, frowning, and then smiled slightly when he

located a new Cuban in the interior pocket of his leather jacket. The men waited as he lighted the new cigar and closed his eyes with pleasure at the first puff.

He turned to go and then paused, allowing a glance toward the dark lump on the grass as hot, blue smoke escaped his lips and drifted skyward.

“He killed too quickly.”

Explanation given, Felix strolled back into his hacienda a few minutes before his last appointment of the day. Once inside the house, Felix raised an eyebrow at his waiting attendant before glancing at his Rolex. The appointment was early and his attendant knew how Felix hated any glitch in his routine - the attendant looked nervous. It amused Felix. His power over others showed in so many ways.

“What?” Felix finally snapped at the nearly simpering man.

“There’s someone here to see you, sir.”

“I know that. Show him to my office.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tiger’s Eye was early so Felix smiled at the idea of making him wait.



The moment he put his foot in the stirrup and mounted, Vin fell into a single-minded, mission state of mind and pointed the horse’s nose to the muddy hills. The sure-footed creature showed more bone than Vin liked so he’d paid a higher rate than what would be considered reasonable to rent the animal from a local family. He smirked, pleased that C.I.A. money was actually helping a family. He planned to give them more upon the animal’s return.

Vin reined in the solid-tempered bay at the closest ridge to the Carnicero mansion and dismounted. He tied him to a stout Manzanita tree with a kind word. The animal, the complete opposite of Peso in every way, settled immediately with a forlorn sigh, complacent with its lot in life. Vin pulled his rifle from the saddle sheath and automatically checked it over.

The horse hitched a hind foot as his eyes drooped to catch a nap while Vin prowled the ground seeking the best place to set up. Finally satisfied, Vin rested his rifle on a tripod and threw out a padded mat to lie on. He set up a spotter’s scope alongside the rifle and checked every nook of the compound while he still had daylight.

As the orange ball of the sun hung well above the farthest mountain top, he watched Robby MacMillan arrive at the compound in a whirl of dust behind the wheel of an obscenely shiny, black Hummer. When the vehicle stopped at the entry gate, Vin checked his watch - 4:45. Tiger’s Eye was early.

Vin knew his primary target was supposed to be Arturo Carnicero but he reasoned that with Mac's removal, Arturo would be easier to find because in all his surveillance, he'd never seen the man. He'd speculated if Arturo was still alive but nothing he'd turned up said he was dead. It was a mystery, really, and the information he'd received from Ezra came to the same conclusion, which explained the C.I.A.'s interest. Confirmation either way would satisfy them.

Vin watched and waited for a clear shot at MacMillan, but the Hummer circled to the far side of the house and well out of sight. For now, it came down to simply waiting and the well-schooled, ex-Ranger had plenty of patience.



If sorrow could be measured, Ronnie saw more than a single share in Gustavo's eyes when he answered his phone at the table. They'd shared a bottle of wine and two servings of appetizers, neither of them able to stomach more than that while waiting for confirmation of her information.

The bleak report that registered in Gustavo's eyes was brief, quickly replaced with something much, much harder which shot a quiver of fear up Ronnie's spine. This was the Carnicero part of Gustavo's genetic make-up clicking into action and Ronnie knew that whatever connection they had would always be tainted by this genetic reality; they could never be anything more than they currently were - acquaintances with a what-could-have-been history.

Gustavo's fingers flew over the keys of his smart-phone for what seemed like an eternity, but in reality was only a minute or two. Then Gustavo stood, his chair shove back with a gritty scrape of wood on tile, and he waved the restaurant owner over with his hand. The other hand pulled his wallet from his pocket. When the proprietor arrived at the table, Gustavo pulled out a fat stack of bills.

"I need the internet access in your office. Your place is closed for the night. This should be enough to cover your expenses and your silence. Go home."

The slight man took the money and bowed nervously as he backed out of Gustavo's way. He snapped at the waiter to lock the doors and the small staff disappeared through the kitchen.

Gustavo moved away from the table and stopped in the middle of the establishment, signaling Ronnie to stay at the table. When he called his bodyguards from the recesses of the room, Ronnie's mouth went dry at the figure Gustavo cut - it was both frightening and awe-inspiring at the same time. A leader of men appeared from nowhere.

"I don't know where your loyalties were when we entered this place," he started, his hand resting on the butt of a gun at his hip that Ronnie hadn't noticed. "But hear me now: I control the Carnicero fortune. From this moment on, neither

SHADOWLINE

Felix nor my father have access to any funds. Whatever was promised is now void. You will follow me. Understand?"

Ronnie watched in morbid fascination as a silent conversation carried between the four guards through their eyes. Finally, one stepped forward and gave Gustavo a nod. "We understand, Sir. What are your orders?"

"Watch the doors and prepare the car. We will leave in twenty minutes." The men spread out, and one disappeared to check the back door. Gustavo's hard gaze turned to Ronnie and immediately softened. "You spoke the truth and I am grateful." He reached out to her and Ronnie moved without thought, taking his hand. "You have my deepest appreciation, Veronica." He smiled a sad smile. "I know the weight of my family's name so I will leave it up to you if you go with me now or return to Tijuana. Either way, I will do what I can go honor your request." Gustavo watched her with sad eyes.

Unable to speak, Ronnie just nodded and squeezed his hand before stepping away. She saw understanding in his slow nod just before his eyes shuttered once again. When she turned to the door, he heard Gustavo order her safe return to her apartment before he disappeared in the restaurant office.

Clutching her shawl close, Ronnie rode in the car wondering what she'd set into motion and how it would affect Vin.

Chapter Twenty-Four - EYE TO EYE

Felix Carnicero smiled to himself as he took his time to join Mr. MacMillan, who waited in the office. He strolled to the bedroom where his father lay, where he had lain, for the past month.

Arturo Carnicero, shrunken by age and illness, was nothing anymore. Felix stepped into the room and nodded at the nurse sitting nearby, who then shot to her feet and exited the room with a polite nod of her head. Felix approached the bed chewing his cigar and then gave the oxygen tank an annoyed glance. He plucked the Cuban from his mouth, eyed the large, glass ash tray next to the bed, and knocked off the ash and ember into the bowl. He rolled the rest of the Cuban between his fingers and regarded his prone father.

Oxygen hissed softly in rhythm with the attached pump and the mask over Arturo's mouth which seemed entirely too large for his face now. Felix studied the pale, wrinkled features, noting how much his father's cheeks had sunk in just one day; he was as withered and delicate as an autumn leaf. "Death will be your companion soon," he thought before smiling broadly. "And none too soon for me, you old goat."

He leaned down so his lips were mere inches from his father's ear and spoke lowly. "This will all be mine after tonight, old man," he said with a sparkle in his eye. "Your day is over. It's my turn now, you bastard. You'll be out of the picture before midnight." Felix straightened and dropped the remains of the cigar on the thin blanket, right on top of Arturo's crotch and chuckled. "It is bigger than you are," he said of the cigar. "You're nothing now."

Before leaving, Felix pulled out the hydrating IV from his father's arm and turned off all the monitors. He paused a few seconds before unplugging the oxygen and pulling off the mask. His father's lax mouth hung partially open, dry drool crusting the corners of his lips.

"If you make it to midnight, I will put you out of your misery and all this will be mine alone."

With a smug turn of his mouth, Felix strolled from the room, fired the nurse and pointed her toward the exit. One security man escorted her out. Felix adjusted the collar of his shirt while he watched the nurse drive away and then admired the beauty of the surrounding mountains for a minute.

Finally glancing at this watch, Felix walked to the office.

"I don't appreciate being made to wait," Robby MacMillan snarled when Felix joined him. He slowly stood from a corner chair, well away from the picture window next to the office desk.

"I was tending to business," the eldest Carnicero son said without apology. He circled the desk and sat down without meeting MacMillan's eyes. Picking up a file from the desktop, Felix opened it and began to read, ignoring his hired killer.

MacMillan opened his mouth to speak but his vibrating phone distracted him. He plucked it from his shirt pocket, glanced at the number, and took the call. "Yes?" he said sharply. After a moment, he said, "Uh huh," and turned his attention to Felix. Then, he ended the call with a quick thank you.

"Gustavo is in town," Felix said as he perused the file, treating MacMillan as a second thought. "We are to meet here at six-thirty. You can set up anywhere between here and the town. He will be an easy target."

"There's been a change in plans."

Mac's tone caused Felix to look up. Mac stood by the door with his feet shoulder-width apart and knees slightly bent, his hands clasped together in front of him; it was a deceptively relaxed stance that caused the hairs on the nape of Felix's neck to tingle in warning.

"I did not order any changes," Felix growled. The folder dropped to the table.

"I want cash up front. Now."

"What?" Felix pushed to his feet, his hands clenched in fists. The security man appeared in the doorway.

"Cash. Word has it your funds are cut off, Felix. No cash, no contract. Your credit has been revoked."

"WHAT?"

"I'm not interested in the family dynamics. I'm interested in cash. Now, or our partnership is over."

"How dare you!"

Mac did not back down and the security man - realizing this new bit of information may affect his future - failed to respond and just listened. Mac gave him a glance before refocusing on Felix.

"I understood taking Adrian out of the picture," Mac said. "He was a wild card and sampled a bit too much of your product. And your father - well, we both know he simply is not a player anymore. But Felix, I am afraid we both underestimated Gustavo." He nodded to the desk computer. "Apparently, he is a

master with the family books. Find my cash - now - and I will finish this. Otherwise, Gustavo has won.”

Felix huffed in disbelief and attacked the keyboard. His face reflected the monitor’s glow and as numbers, passwords and web addresses flashed across the screen, living tattoos crossed Felix’s features. Under it all, as his typing became more frantic, disbelief morphed through panic and then, finally, he erupted in absolute fury.

“NO!!” he screamed, throwing the computer to the floor where it shattered on the tile.

MacMillan took a step back, along with security man, and turned to go.

“NO! You have to kill him!” Felix raged across the room, tipping tables and throwing chairs out of his way. “KILL HIM!”

Mac side-slipped from the room holding Felix’s crazed glare. “I do nothing for free, Felix. I’m leaving.” He spun on his heel and headed for the door as the security man glanced back and forth between the two.

“Don’t let him go!” Felix bellowed. “Hold him!”

The man paused a moment and then followed Mac outside, where they were met by more of Felix’s men. They surrounded the assassin but stopped their advance to listen to both Mac and the inside man.

Felix stormed into his father’s room. “I should be the head of this household! I deserve it more than anyone else, including you, old man!” He grabbed Arturo by the throat and hauled him up, shaking him like a rag doll. “DIE! Just DIE! Your time is over! It’s my time now!” Arturo’s windpipe crackled in Felix’s hand and he died with after one rattled breath, hanging in his son’s white-fisted grip.

Then there was silence. Felix stared at his father’s glassy, dead eyes, breathing raggedly and shiny with sweat. Finally, he released his hold and Arturo fell aside and slumped over the edge of the bed. Felix quickly backed out of the room and stopped, turning crazed eyes on the small group of men gathered at the door.

“He’s dead now.” Felix held his hands out to his side. A maid and a cook scurried out a side door, terrified. “This is mine!”

“No,” Mac corrected sharply. “It’s Gustavo’s.” He turned a hard eye on the men and they parted, allowing Tiger’s Eye to leave.

Felix blinked in disbelief, looked back toward his dead father - and a fine thread of sanity snapped.

“HE CAN’T HAVE IT! IT’S MINE!”

Felix came alive again, charged to the huge stone fireplace and began throwing smaller pieces of furniture into the massive hearth. End tables splintered, lamps crumpled and couch cushions smoked as the fire consumed the new fuel. Felix ripped the curtains from the windows and threw one end in the growing

flames, then dragged them all over the living area. Soon, carpets, books and drapery caught and the fire eagerly consumed and grew.

The other men stepped inside with trepidation, terrified by the actions of their usually controlled boss. When Felix retrieved a gun from his room and began shooting out the windows, the men bolted outside. Black smoke billowed at their heels and Felix's furious screaming accompanied the wild shots.

Everyone ran as the mansion burned.

Vin watched it all from the hillside, taken aback by this unexpected turn of events. He saw the birth of the inferno through the mansion windows and witnessed Felix Carnicero's raging, and wondered for a moment what was the catalyst of this meltdown.

MacMillan managed to stay out of Vin's sight, but he knew the man was there and must have been responsible for the chaos. When the gunshots began, panic flashed - was Mac dead inside? How would he get the evidence he needed?

Like ants, the workers fled from the scene in all directions. Vin looked for Mac in the crowd but the black smoke billowing from the building made it impossible to see.

"Fuck!" Vin snapped. He rolled to his feet, leaving the rifle and snatching up his handguns. His sudden action woke the horse and it pulled back, eyes rolling in fear. Vin forced himself to calm and spoke soothingly, settling the animal enough to mount up. "Good boy," he said softly. "Let's go."

Vin reined the horse downhill, urging him forward into a frightening pace. Vin felt the horse's hind legs tuck deeply under, allowing a quick descent as he sat back, using his front legs to control speed and direction - this horse knew this terrain well.

They crashed through brush and low limbs, arriving at the bottom amidst a landslide of rubble. Vin kicked hard and the horse leaped in response, charging ahead toward the road. The sun was almost gone and the settling grey of the coming night slowly turned into black shadows. The horse leaped over boulders and brush, and Vin saw Mac's black Hummer burst through the compound gate.

He urged the horse on and charged the vehicle at an angle. Vin pulled out his Sig and shot out all the windows on the passenger side, emptying the clip before the Hummer weaved precariously on the dirt road, finally spinning out and slamming the right side into a stout scrub oak.

Vin reined around and stayed on the crumpled side, using the vehicle body as cover. Hauling the horse into a sliding stop, he jumped off and pulled out his Glock, and then ran to the steaming car with the gun raised and ready. The air stank of hot antifreeze and burned rubber. The horse wasted no time turning for home, and Vin heard hoof beats fade away, leaving behind the groans of the damaged Hummer.

Vin stopped a few yards from the back of the vehicle and slowed his approach. He could hear people running into the trees and down the road, and other cars raced by without pause - they had other concerns. Vin had only one. He caught his breath, tightened his grip on the Glock and stepped around and into the open on the driver side of the Hummer - and right into the gun sight of Tiger's Eye.

Chapter Twenty-Five - SHOWDOWN

"It's impressive how much damage this vehicle can take, isn't it?"

MacMillan's comment, in the circumstance, should have been comically absurd but Vin replied as if discussing new cars on a sales lot.

"They are a from the Army. They're a tough bunch." Vin said, his body turned sideways and his arm aloft marking a straight line to a spot between MacMillan's eyes. "I 'spect you're not even bruised."

Mac chuckled, the tip of his Desert Eagle looking like a large, unwavering black hole. He, too, had turned to lessen his body's target area. "You'd be right."

Vin, however, read something in his adversary's frame – maybe it was the ever-so-slight curve of one shoulder that nearly formed a hunch or the flat nature of his eyes, but Vin's instincts whispered that Mac was hurting. The Humvee door was wide open and he stood just outside after climbing down from the absurdly high driver's seat. Peripherally, Vin didn't see any blood on him and any further inspection would have to wait because for now because he didn't plan to release the hold of MacMillan's hard stare.

The two simply paused in time as they measured and weighed for a handful of long and drawn out moments.

Then Mac shifted his feet, causing Vin's heart to slow even more as he dropped into his targeting frame of mind. This was sniper territory, the waiting, but the clipped distance between them added an unfamiliar sense of exposure. Vin felt as naked as shorn lamb before a hungry wolf. Anyone else would feel fear or anxiety, he thought with a passing memory of JD, but instead he simply settled comfortably into this familiar mental zone. Vin felt the corner of his mouth tilt into a lopsided grin.

The talisman necklace was out of sight but even though Vin did not see it, he knew it was there. Because of it, he only had one choice guiding his aim: Right between Mac's eyes. The target area was so small Vin needed every advantage and

his suspicion about Mac having an injury gave that to him. Mac, on the other hand, had Vin's entire torso - the largest body mass - for his target.

Somewhere in the compound behind them, Vin heard shouting and the crackle of fire and smoke made his nose tingle, but all of that was mere background to the situation at hand.

"Shall we make this sporting?"

Vin narrowed his eyes at the question. He didn't hear any stress or note any sign of pain in MacMillan's voice and his arm remained steady as oak. Vin held his pose, crosshairs centered between eyebrows, as dark curiosity tickled. "Go on," he finally said.

"Quick draw. Like a couple of cowboys." Mac grinned, baring teeth. "Then one of us will die with some dignity."

"Is he fucking nuts?" crossed Vin's mind in a voice sounding strangely like Chris Larabee's. He studied Mac's eyes. "He's serious."

"Hm," Vin mused. "How would we start?"

Mac twisted his wrist and in a second that made Vin's finger twitch until the Desert Eagle pointed skyward. Slowly, he exposed both palms and held his arms wide at shoulder height. Vin's heart fluttered and, without releasing his eyes from Mac's, he mirrored the action a second later. Then, together, their arms fell at a slow, measured pace to their sides until both gun muzzles pointed to the ground.

Mac's dark eyes smoldered with something resembling respect. His lips parted in a smile. Vin got the feeling he'd done this before and suddenly felt like his edge was lost. In quick compensation, he sharpened his focus to the small target area of Mac's forehead and soon all he heard was his own breathing and heartbeat and all he saw was that singular sweet spot and the book that was Mac's eyes.

Seconds stretched and everything slowed. Vin's grip on his gun was sure and steady, his footing secure. He counted two breaths and was surprised to see a drop of sweat slide through the kill zone in his sights - the fleeting realization that his foe was hurt vanished when the anticipated cue reared in Mac's eyes.

Two shots, nearly simultaneous, rang Vin's ears. He saw MacMillan's head snap up in a weirdly silent way and Vin lost his visual target as an invisible force shoved him back. Vin grunted when he finally came to Earth, briefly tasting sooty dust before an explosion of pain bloomed fireworks across the sky. Then, suddenly numb, his world collapsed into complete darkness.



The city's edge came to a standstill when the first curl of smoke rolled upward, a black smudge against the fading blue-gray sky. Terror tingled her spine

when Ronnie noticed that the immobilized crowd around her looked east and whispered in shocked awe. She turned slowly while dread twisted her stomach, knowing exactly where the smoke originated. Fear froze her, and then a loud boom boiled more smoke and she ran.

Ronnie fisted her skirt away from her legs and dodged the gathering crowd, weaving a path back to Gustavo. He was the only other motion in the stalled scene of spectators, heading toward his car as his security men broke a path between bodies.

“Gustavo! Wait!”

He glanced up at her voice, stopping next to a black SUV at the curb. Ronnie got there just as security opened the door. Panting more from fear than exertion, she reached for his arm and was instantly blocked by one of the guards.

“Let her through!” Gustavo snapped. He took her hand and pulled her to his side, and then into the back seat of the car. The vehicle leaped from the curb seconds later.

“Sir, this may not be a good idea,” the driver started.

“Shut up and drive!” Gustavo ordered before turning to Ronnie and meeting her eyes. “This will be dangerous,” he said to her. “Are you sure about this?”

Ronnie nodded and squeezed his forearm. “Yes. I have to know!” Her gut told her that Vin was at the center of it all, but she needed to see for herself to ease her mind.

Gustavo nodded and flipped a console open, retrieving a large handgun. He quickly checked it and slipped it under his coat and out of sight. Ronnie swallowed hard to settle her stomach. All she wanted to do was scream.

They weaved up the road, leaving the city behind and soon ran into opposing traffic. Cars, trucks and motorcycles shot down the road in quick succession and then the road was clear. One more turn revealed people alongside the road, trudging along in a broken line. Their eyes were wide with fear.

“Ana,” Gustavo whispered as they passed. “Rosa, Ramon - the house staff.”

Ronnie squeezed his arm again and chewed her lip. They followed a trail of blue-black smoke which began to thicken over the road. The driver slowed and turned on the headlights but it did little for visibility. Another muffled explosion rattled the windows and caused the thinning line of people to hunch and quicken their pace.

The SUV crawled around the final turn to the compound and the driver braked suddenly. Ronnie saw a black Hummer crumpled into a tree and partially blocking the road. Their driver edged around the corner of the vehicle. Ronnie saw a figure on the ground.

“Vin!” she screamed, yanking the door handle. She jumped from the SUV while it still moved and ran to the prone form, falling to her knees at his side.

“Vin?” She wanted to gather him into her arms, but Ronnie refrained and her shaking hands quickly checked for any obvious injury. She gasped at the bloody hole near his left armpit. “Oh no! No!” she breathed, plucking up one of his arms to check for a pulse. Holding her breath, she forced herself to calm and concentrate, rewarded when she felt a strong beat under her fingers.

“The other one is dead.” Gustavo crouched near her. She glanced over and saw Gustavo’s men next to another man. “Ronnie - I have to leave you.”

Ronnie gave him a fleeting smile. “I know. Thank you. Find your family.”

He nodded and rose, calling for his men. Ronnie turned her attention back to Vin and looked for something to bind the wound. She heard the car doors slam and when the SUV pulled away, she felt terribly alone. Just when she decided to search the other body for bindings, Vin’s eyes fluttered.

“Vin?” Ronnie stroked his cheek.

Vin groaned and his features hardened with pain. She leaned over him and encouraged him to focus. Finally, his eyes drifted open and he found her through pain-crimped lids. “Ronnie. Get his necklace. I have to . . .” His effort to rise ceased with a distressed groan.

“Lie still! You’re hurt.” She pressed against the freshly oozing wound.

“I need it. His necklace. Please, I need . . .”

Ronnie knew he wouldn’t stop. “I’ll get it, you stupid fool.” Tears burned her eyes. “Now lie still!” She pushed to her feet and moved to the other body, her step faltering when she saw the red hole in the exact center of his forehead. Glazed eyes stared skyward; the dull reflection bumpy from smoke and dirt, a small detail Ronnie knew she’d never forget.

She forced her eyes away from the forever stare to the dead man’s neck, seeing nothing at first. The uncontrollable tremble of her fingers made the search tricky, but Ronnie managed to tug at the shirt collar until she uncovered a leather lanyard. She pulled at it, noting the artful carving in the narrow strap and wondered what it meant. Something caught, and Ronnie jerked the strap hard to release a small vial that rattled a grey-colored lump inside. It held fast.

Curiosity disappeared with another explosion from the compound and fine debris rained down a moment later. Ronnie yanked the necklace over the corpse’s head and hurried back to Vin. He was panting hard and his face was damp with sooty sweat.

“I have it. Look.” She held up the leather strap and let the vial dangle before Vin’s eyes. Etched pain lines softened for a moment when he saw it.

“Thank you,” he breathed. “We need to get out of here.”

“Hold on.” She slung the lanyard over her head and tucked the vial under her blouse, and then helped him to sit up. “I need to stop the bleeding.”

“I know where he stays. He has a Jeep.” A boy appeared from nowhere.

Surprised and a little ashamed that the boy managed to sneak up on her, Ronnie gave him a quick glance. He looked to be about twelve years old. She recognized him from the city. "Give me your shirt," she said. "I need a bandage."

The boy took off the button-down shirt he wore over a well-worn t-shirt with a faded design. "Here. I'll help."

"Omar," Vin rasped. "It's too . . . dangerous."

Ronnie and Omar worked quickly. Vin groaned as the pressure bandage did its work, and although his head reeled and his vision tunneled dangerously, the pair managed to get him to his feet.

"Where?" Ronnie asked, pulling Vin's good arm over her shoulder.

On Vin's other side with his arm around Vin's waist, Omar nodded down the road. "That way."

"Quit talkin' like I ain't here," Vin mumbled, head lolling forward.

"Shut up," Ronnie snapped, fighting to keep balance. "You're getting out of here."

Vin snorted as he awkwardly shuffled his feet. "Okay, boss lady."

Ronnie had to smile. "Glad you finally figured that out," she shot back. "Now move."



Gustavo's driver got as close as he dared and stopped the car. In unison, the doors opened and four men cautiously exited, their eyes fixed on the burning structure. A scattered few men with hoses aimed alarmingly poor amount of water on the inferno. They were black with smoke.

"Get those men back," Gustavo ordered. "Water around the house. Try not to let it spread."

Two of his men dashed away, shouting orders. The remaining guard stood close, ready to protect his boss if needed.

"The house is gone," Gustavo said matter-of-factly. "I need to find Felix."

He took off at a fast walk, unable to tear his eyes from the lava-like fire devouring the family home, and Gustavo wondered why he felt no remorse; this was never home to him, not really.

"Sir."

Gustavo stopped and faced a young man streaked with soot like everyone else. "Elario." He recognized one of the grounds keeper's sons. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, sir, but Mr. Felix is still inside. He would not come out. He was crazy." Elario stopped talking and his eye grew bigger when he realized what he just said.

"It's all right, Elario," Gustavo soothed. "I know."

“He broke everything and screamed and started the fire. We didn’t know what to do!” Elario twisted his fingers together as he spoke. “Your papa, the *Jefe*, he is inside, too.”

Gustavo spun around and took a step toward the house, but his guard stopped him. Just then, something cracked inside the inferno and part of the roof collapsed in a shower of embers. Elario gasped.

“I am so sorry, sir!”

Gustavo, unhearing, simply watched hungry flames devour the structure with an odd sense of how beautiful the orange monster was in the growing dark. After this painful death, he would be reborn. Gustavo Carnicero realized at that moment that he could stop the madness his family started. He finally had control.

He felt - relief.

Chapter Twenty-Six - HOMEWARD BOUND

Relieved that Vin concentrated on moving his feet instead of talking, Ronnie wondered about the man she helped. She'd heard all the rumors about Vin being an assassin but the violent ideal did not fit the person she knew. That idea skewed crazily once she and Omar found Tanner's cache.

Vin, barely conscious by then, made sure that the various weapons he'd stashed were broken down and scattered in the rough terrain. Ronnie was not sure what was more disturbing - that Vin had these weapons or that Omar, a boy barely in his teens, knew how to break them down.

It was Omar's idea to bury the ammo in the creek bed where they would eventually soak into uselessness. He covered the spot with rocks so the pathetic creek flow wouldn't carry the items away. Vin described where his final rifle lay and she chose to put aside the alarm she felt when she realized that it was in position to cover the Carnicero mansion. Omar promised to retrieve and dismantle it as soon as possible.

Ronnie worked on Vin's wound while he issued orders to Omar, but she knew immediately that this was more than she could handle. She suspected that the bullet was still in there, lodged in the area of his shoulder blade. With firm packing, the wound's flow reduced to a manageable ooze.

"No hospital. Juarez." Vin muttered before passing out, collapsing like a deflated balloon.

Ronnie allowed Omar to help load Vin in the camouflaged Jeep before shooing him away with a wad of cash she found on her patient. Vin's last words drove home the danger of the moment: Cartels loved retaliation and Tanner was the only viable target in the area even if he wasn't directly responsible for this mess. His tie to America was reason enough to enflame paranoia.

With Vin safely stowed, Ronnie drove north, allowing only one glance back at the burning Carnicero compound. An orange glow stained the surrounding hills and black smoke blotted out emerging stars. She knew she'd never return.

Once the lights of Mexico City and all its influences disappeared in the rear view mirror, Ronnie allowed her thoughts on the consequences of all this to surface. So many unknowns; the vacuum of power wouldn't last. Zamora and Gustavo were sure to challenge each other, she knew, and she selfishly hoped they kept it out of Tijuana. It was possible. She needed to get home and prepare.

Vin shifted in his seat and gasped. Ronnie rested a hand on his forearm and he turned narrow, pain-filled eyes in her direction.

"You couldn't stash a Mercedes?" She had to speak up because of the wind noise. "It will be a rough trip in this car." She tipped her head to indicate the canvas doors and roof.

Vin managed a weak smile. "Sorry," he muttered huskily.

Ronnie handed him a bottle of water. "Drink."

He drank, eyes drifting closed at the joy of wet coolness, pausing only after half the bottle was gone and asked, "He's dead?"

"That guy with the hole in his forehead? Yeah."

"The necklace?"

The Jeep wiggled within its lane when Ronnie pulled the necklace over her head. She held it up and saw instant relief in Vin's eyes.

Vin took it from her and clenched it in a bloody fist which he then rested over his heart. He fell silent until he shifted in the seat a few minutes later. "Shit!" he hissed.

"That'll teach you to move. I went through a lot to stop that bleeding." Ronnie hoped her alarm did not carry in her words.

Vin chuffed then puffed a few times to control the pain. "Look," he finally said in a tight voice. "I have to get to Juarez. There's a woman there, Celia Guerrero. She'll help."

Ronnie glanced at her passenger, the growing dark masking Vin's face. "Can she get you home, Vin? Because I'm not leaving until you are home. Until you are across the border and safe."

"Ronnie,"

"No. I'm driving so I'm in charge." She attempted a glare. It fell flat. "Can she get you home?"

"I wouldn't ask her to." Vin groaned and pressed his hand on his wound. "But she can get word to someone that can."

"Good enough." Ronnie gripped the steering wheel harder and checked the speedometer. They didn't need to garner any attention at this point.

"Ronnie, if . . . if things go south . . ."

"Don't say that."

"I need to tell you some names. Please."

She clenched her jaw in an attempt to lessen the burn growing in her eyes. The adrenalin rush from the afternoon was gone and all she felt was shaky and faded. She wasn't sure how much more she could handle. "Vin . . ."

"No, listen. Raylan Givens - he's a U.S. Marshal. He can get me home. Chris Larabee . . ." Vin paused with a pained hiss. "Larabee's an A.T.F. agent in Denver. Let him know . . ." Vin swore softly.

"Juarez. Celia Guerrero. Raylan Givens. Larabee. Got it, now shut up." When there was no reply, sarcastic or otherwise, she glanced over. Vin's closed eyes and face were frighteningly lax and his body slumped to one side. The fist that held the necklace, however, remained tightly closed, but his hand had fallen to the seat. "Vin?"

Ronnie risked reaching over to feel his neck and finding the pulse wasn't a relief because it just made the distance to Juarez seem as long as a trip to the moon.

Fighting all instincts to pull over Ronnie pushed on and mapped the trip in her mind. With each mile away from Mexico City, the number of cars lessened and it was close to midnight before she considered stopping. Traffic was sparse now and the night was good cover, and she was beyond worried because Vin hadn't uttered a word since giving her that list of names.

She spotted a side road and took it, stopping when she was sure they were not visible from the highway. She turned off the headlights and swore softly when she realized that the only interior lighting was from the dashboard display. Ronnie ran around to the passenger side and searched the glove box, finding a mini LED flashlight. She clicked it on and turned it to Vin's face.

He was warm when she cupped his cheek with the palm of her hand. Ronnie combed his hair back with her fingers and confirmed that there was no head injury. Deciding to check him over, she ran her hand down the nape of his neck and upper back, under his clothes, and bumped a hard object. Her fingers carefully ran over it - it was a knife in a sheath.

Ronnie gulped, hardened her resolve and continued her exam, relieved that she did not find anything else. In the weak light of the tiny flashlight, the rose of blood on Vin's bandage looked black. She toyed with the idea of removing the three layers of shirts Vin wore because they were so dirty, but the thought of disturbing the bandage nixed the thought. She left it alone. The fever, though, was a problem she had to deal with now.

She checked the back of the Jeep and found several bottles of water, a meager amount of food and a pair of full, red, three-gallon gas cans - it wasn't enough to get to Juarez, which was another twelve hours on the road. Ronnie's optimism now outweighed her fears; one or two stops to refuel were all she had to think about, along with driving carefully to not draw attention.

The screw top of the water bottle fought for a second and burned her hand, but Ronnie won the battle and tossed the lid aside.

“Vin.” She gently patted his face, biting her lip with worry at the heat. “Vin, you have to drink.” Alternately stroking and patting his cheek, Vin’s eyes finally fluttered and he groaned. Ronnie softly urged him into awareness and he blinked in an effort focus his eyes. The normally intense blue was foggy. “Drink some water.”

His lips fumbled on the spout of the bottle but he managed to swallow the offering. She patiently helped him to drink half of the water and he whispered “Thanks” before drifting off again. She got back in the Jeep and hit the road, maintaining the nursing routine through the night.

An hour or so before dawn, Ronnie’s eyes drooped heavily and she knew she had to stop and rest. Taking the next off ramp, she drove to the first side road that led to a dark, unlit area, and found a wide oak. Carefully easing the Jeep under the low-hanging branches, she turned off the motor and checked on her passenger. Vin’s dry skin was alarmingly hot.

Exhausted, Ronnie dampened his clothes and hair with the dwindling water supply, answered the call of nature in the near-by bushes, then crawled behind the steering wheel and immediately fell asleep.



Chris Larabee tugged at the collar of his dress shirt and glared at the glowing elevator numbers. His lips, a thin, hard line, frowned as he worked to loosen the strangling tie and shirt button beneath. He didn’t notice that the four other passengers pressed against the walls to distance themselves from his irritation.

One floor below his, the car stopped and the doors slid open. Buck Wilmington’s blue eyes quickly scanned the situation and he stepped inside with an amused grin, tucking a folder under his arm. Chris gave him a pointed glare. Buck chuckled.

“There’s a real ambiance around you, huh, Chris?”

Chris grunted and aimed his annoyance at the row of numbers again. He stomped from the elevator at the next stop with Buck on his heels. Seemingly oblivious to his boss’ bad mood, Buck caught up and strolled alongside whistling a jaunty tune and offering warm greetings to the support staff they met along the way.

Buck’s carefree attitude fueled Chris’ bad mood. Since they’d last seen Vin, Chris felt ungrounded and disconnected; a part of himself that he couldn’t define was missing in action and it was unsettling. The rest of the team appeared to be

fine, but Chris knew better. The recently empty desk was testament - the fourth sniper replacement bailed just yesterday. He glanced at the desk every day when he stepped in the office, just as he did this moment. The void pained him.

“Chris!”

JD’s excited call was like a poke at a tender bruise. Chris stopped and Buck’s annoying whistle sputtered to silence. “What?” Chris snapped, his hands resting on his hips, fingers clenching the black dress belt.

“Something’s happened! I’m not sure what, but the bugs are gone.” The fingers of JD’s left hand flew over his keyboard as the right hand moved the computer mouse around. His eyes were intent on the monitor.

“What?” Buck replied. He moved toward JD first, breaking Chris’ shock as he followed.

“What about the phones?” Chris asked sharply.

JD tapped a few more commands. “Gone. We’re clear.”

Buck turned to Chris and a thousand silent questions exchanged between them.

“And, here - look at this!” JD twisted his monitor so Chris and Buck could see. The screen title read The F.B.I.’s Top Ten Most Wanted. Vin’s photograph was gone from the gallery.

“Looks like our wayward lamb got the job done.” Josiah somehow moved to Chris’ shoulder unnoticed which was quite a feat for a man his size.

Chris looked toward Nathan. His eyes were wide with hope. “Get a hold of Ezra, Nate. Have him check his sources. Buck, my office.”

Chris strode quickly into his office and closed the door. “We need to contact Givens and see what he’s heard.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “I hate this. Where is he? What happened?”

“If there’s one thing I’m sure about, Stud, it’s that Junior didn’t finish this quietly. We just need to keep our ears open.” Buck reached out and grabbed Chris’ arm and gave it a shake. “I know patience ain’t your thing but that’s all we got at the moment. Hang in there.”

Larabee stilled, displeasure smoldering his eyes smoky-green.

Chapter Twenty-Seven - A BUMP IN THE ROAD

Low clouds muted the late morning light and made the air thick. Ronnie jerked awake in complete confusion and for fleeting moments, forget where she was. The ache in her back from sleeping in the Jeep's seat quickly put her thoughts in order and she looked to her right. Her passenger slumped against the door and she waved off a fat, black fly crawling on the red-black stain just below his left shoulder. A charge of fear made her fingers tingle.

"Vin?" She swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. She cautiously checked the bandage. It was sticky and damp. "How are you?"

He didn't move and Ronnie's hand automatically moved to Vin's cheek. She stroked the wild stubble with the backs of her fingers, jaw to temple, and her alarm vaulted with the heat she felt there. Moving quickly, she twisted a water bottle open and dampened his hair and the neckline of his filthy t-shirt, and then patted his face with wet fingers.

Next, she jumped from the Jeep and answered nature's call. Queasiness prevented any feeling of hunger, but she knew she had to eat something. When she returned to the vehicle, she unzipped the passenger side window to allow a breeze and stood by the door, talking as she worked to rouse Vin.

"We still have a ways to go," Ronnie said as she dug for an energy bar in the back. "I hope I can find this Celia woman because I need help." She tore the bar open and took a bite, frowning. "Why do these things always taste like mud?" As she ate, Ronnie gently raked Vin's damp hair away from his face and studied the pinched, dirty lines of pain. She noticed her hand trembled.

It took a few mouthfuls of water to get the dry food down and dampened her patient's hair again. Then she worked to get Vin to take a few sips. Her persistence roused him enough to swallow about a quarter bottle's worth. When his heavy lids parted, revealing glazed, unfocused eyes, Ronnie gulped and her heart fluttered in fear. This was well beyond basic first aid. "Well," she said with a quiver in her voice, "we better get going."

Ronnie checked the vehicle over and decided to use the gas cans. She was glad for her decision when only a small amount remained in one can; it gave her time to look for a gas station. When she climbed in behind the steering wheel, she felt the lump of her cell phone crowd her hip. Once inside, she eased the device into her hand.

It was past eight. Ronnie winced - she'd slept longer than she'd intended. Looking at the phone again, the desire to call someone, anyone, was strong but she couldn't think of anyone that could actually help. She glanced to Vin's still form. Is this lonely feeling of hopelessness what he lived with all this time? How did he bear it?

Ronnie sighed. Determination to succeed flared and mentally steeled her, so she dropped the phone in the center console and started the engine with resolve. The closer she got to the border, the better his chances of survival.



The hour between 8:30 and 9:30 was the slowest sixty minutes Chris ever endured. When Ezra finally slipped into the office and Chris pushed from his desk chair, the remaining team members twitched and he realized they were as tense as he was.

“Ezra,” he snapped a bit more sharply than he intended. “What’s going on?”

Standish stopped at his desk, turning to face the others. He held his hands up, palms out. “I do not have as much as you would like, I am sure, but it seems to have been an action-packed night in Mexico City.”

Chris got right to the point. “Is Arturo Carnicero dead?”

“Yes, it seems so at this point.”

“You don’t know for sure?” Nathan asked.

“Unofficially, yes, he is, along with his son Felix. They were in the Cartel mansion when it burned to the ground last night.” He glanced at Chris’ pained expression. “It may be a while until the bodies are identified, but there were plenty of witnesses, among them, an undercover C.I.A. agent who has been watching the Cartel family for months.”

Buck frowned. “Was he watching’ Vin, too?”

“When he could,” Ezra continued. “Confirming the conclusion of Mr. Tanner’s task was part of his assignment.”

“So he’s coming home?” JD’s hopeful tone caused the other’s to lean in with anticipation.

Ezra frowned. The air sizzled with tension. “I cannot say for sure.”

“What do you mean by that?” Chris snapped.

Ezra tipped his head to face his boss. "There was another casualty that puzzles the C.I.A. at the moment."

"What's that got to do with Vin?"

Bracing back against the edge of his desk, Ezra reached into an inner coat pocket. "Just outside the Carnicero compound gate, they found the body of one Robert MacMillan next to a bullet riddled Hummer. The cause of death is obvious." He pulled out two photographs and handed them over to Larabee.

Chris snatched them from his hand. The first picture showed the body of the former Range master splayed on his back on the ground. The second, a close up of the dead man's face, showed glazed eyes and a neat, red hole between his eyebrows.

Buck sidled over to his friend and craned his neck at the photos. "MacMillan. What the hell . . ."

JD's fingers flew over his keyboard, its clackity-clack the only noise for a few seconds. "He retired not long after Vin was fired," JD reported. "He was on my list to check, but there was nothing obvious -"

"He collected evidence at the scene," Nathan said. "I remember him coming over to check on Vin."

"Yeah," JD agreed. "He's retired to Belize - hey, remember Patrick Watson?"

Buck and Chris exchanged frowns.

"Forensics?" Josiah said from his desk in the corner. "He was at the scene, too."

Bucks stood up straight. "He's the guy that died in the car crash shortly after that, right? You found a big deposit in his account just before?"

"We assumed he tampered with the evidence," JD said as he typed, "but both he and MacMillan sealed the bullet evidence envelope. I didn't check the envelope photo before. I just read the paperwork."

"They worked together," Chris mused. "Then MacMillan killed him. There was paint transfer on Watson's car, right? At the accident scene?"

"Yeah, but they assumed it was old. There were drugs in his blood. They concluded that Watson was intoxicated and that's why he crashed." JD's fingers paused and he stared at the screen with wide eyes. "Damn."

"What?" Buck said as he moved to JD's side. Chris remained frozen, staring at the photographs.

"MacMillan's got quite a hunk of money," JD said.

Ezra cleared his throat, gaining everyone's attention. "I believe if you delve further into Mr. MacMillan's investments, you will find more than you expect."

Chris' eyes turned hard and crystal sharp. "Why?"

"It seems that the C.I.A. feels that MacMillan may have been Tiger's Eye."

“The assassin?” Josiah broke the moment of silence. “Brother Vin’s tangling with a dangerous crowd. Tiger’s Eye has been credited with some major kills. No one knows who he really is.”

Chris turned his attention to JD. “Find out all you can about MacMillan and those kills. It could clear Vin.”

“But didn’t the C.I.A. agree to clear Vin’s record?”

“Yes, but Vin needs this to come home to us. He needs proof in case he didn’t find any of his own.”

“I’m on it.”

Chris rubbed his eyes. “Givens said he hasn’t heard anything. We still don’t know where Vin is.”

“And he may still be in trouble,” Ezra said. “With this power vacuum comes opportunities. Mr. Tanner would be a great catch for anyone in either the Zamora or Carnicero Cartel. Mr. MacMillan’s murder is a good reason for revenge.”

“Revenge for what? Killing a murderer?”

“As you already know, Cartels are very close knit. Any individual deemed to be working against them is fair game. The Carniceros will want revenge and the Zamoras will want leverage. Vin offers both.”

Buck scrubbed his face. “Great.”

Chris shifted his jaw. “Then we’ll have to find him first.”

“You know, the FBI and U.S. Marshals may not be watching’ us anymore,” Josiah pointed out, “but the Cartels may be doing just that. We can’t tip our hand, Chris. We have to work as if we are still under surveillance.”

“Which means we stay clear of the border,” Chris finished, “but that doesn’t apply to Givens - he’s our ace up the sleeve.”

“We just have to figure out where Vin will show up. I think there are two possibilities,” JD said. “At the border where he left his motorcycle in Arizona or in California where we last saw him and met Givens.”

“Arizona,” Chris said with pointed certainty. “I’ll call Givens and fill him in. We may have to be his diversion.”

The hard lines of the team leader’s face made it clear that he was not happy with the role.



Chihuahua was the last substantial city before Juarez and Ronnie was worried.

So far, the drive had been, long, dusty and uncomfortably warm and although Vin did not seem to be any worse, his condition scared her. Difficult to rouse and alarmingly hot, Ronnie felt the pressure of being his sole guardian. The

openness of the desert and light traffic so far made it easier, but now they had to pass through a city that had a multitude of eyes, all of which were under Alberto Zamora's influence. Ronnie didn't know if Zamora wanted Vin, but that was the pressure of guardianship: Take no chances. Any kind of play confirming power was valuable to the Cartels, and Vin was a perfect target. She was altogether too familiar with the way Cartels functioned and the idea of her friend in their hands made her eyes burn with tears.

Beyond Chihuahua lay brutal desert. Both of them needed more than water and energy bars. Ronnie figured that just one stop for an electrolyte-infused drink was worth the risk, and if there was such a thing as an international capable burner phone, Chihuahua was the last possible place to get one.

She crossed the edge of the city late in the afternoon and pulled into the first alley she saw and parked. The engine popped and sizzled while Ronnie took a deep breath. Her hands, sweaty on the steering wheel, trembled. She was hot and exhausted, and the thought crossed Ronnie's mind that she may not be thinking clearly because of it. A short giggled edge with hysteria escaped her lips.

"Come on, woman, get it together," she muttered to herself before exiting the Jeep.

Ronnie circled around to Vin's side, unzipped the flimsy door and tried to look at him with new eyes - how would he draw attention? She rolled her eyes at the stupidity of the question. The huge, sticky stain on his shirt had to go.

"I am sorry, my friend, but I have to do this."

It was not easy to remove the shirt. Not only did she have to wrestle it over his head, it also stuck to the poorly bandaged wound like fly paper and her actions roused him into awareness. He blinked at her with fevered, pain filled eyes. His one hand still clutched the small vial as it had through the entire trip, but the other moved unsteadily toward the hidden knife against his shoulder blade. She stopped to reassure him.

"No, Vin, it's me, Ronnie. You're safe. You're safe with me."

Something shifted in his eyes as he tried to focus on hers. "Juarez?" he rasped.

She smiled, but her throat clenched. She cleared it before talking. "Not yet, but we are close. I need to clean you up. Can I use your knife?" Ronnie touched the handle, moving slowly.

Vin nodded, fighting to stay aware. Ronnie removed the knife and cut off the rest of the shirt, biting her lip at the gore underneath. She did not take off the bandages. Pulling a shirt from a bag in the back, she cut it into strips, marveling at the sharp edge of the knife. Vin helped as much as he could with the re-wrap and Ronnie was pleased that the new bandage on top of the old ones remained clean.

Next, she slipped another shirt over him with the injured arm underneath, covering his full fist against his stomach. Ronnie fitted the knife into his other hand and pushed his arm down to his side so the blade rested along his thigh.

“Just in case,” she told him. Vin, fighting to stay awake, smiled. Ronnie warmed at the expression. It reaffirmed her reasons for involving herself in this madness. “Can you sit up straighter?”

She helped him reposition, wincing at his pained groans. Once arranged, she combed his hair into some semblance of order with her fingers. The action relaxed him and he croaked his thanks. His eyes softened.

“You’re still too hot and it worries me.” She gave him some water and he managed an entire bottle, along with part of an energy bar. He frowned at the taste. “Mud. I know. Sorry. I can get you something else since I have to stop anyway.”

“Twinkies.”

The request came a micro-second after the offer and it made her laugh. He tiredly grinned again and her spirits lifted. She patted his cheek. “That sounds like something really bad for you.”

“It’s food.”

She rolled her eyes and he chuckled shortly before hissing in pain and squeezing his eyes shut.

“I’ll see what I can do.” Although she kept her tone light, worry slammed home once again as she closed the side panel. Ronnie pushed fear aside and settled at her place behind the wheel. Ronnie glanced at him when she twisted the key. “Try not to look dead, alright?”

“No promises.” Vin’s voice was a pale, dry shadow of what it should be and the planes of his face were sallow and sickly. His unshaven face helped cover most of it, leaving only the sooty sashes under his eyes visible to the world.

“Not funny, Vin,” Ronnie answered sadly, shoving the car into gear and focusing her attention on the road; she couldn’t look in his eyes right now. “You can’t leave me now.”

Ronnie eased the Jeep out of the alley and blended into the traffic of the main road looking for the one stop that would offer both sustenance and, hopefully, burner phones. She would be very happy when Chihuahua was behind them.

Chapter Twenty-Eight - BERSERKER

Alberto Zamora was used to getting what he wanted. He had enough money to buy his desires in just about every arena and the businessman part inside him never slept, so disappointment was a rarity.

When he had all the information regarding the Carnicero debacle at his fingertips, Alberto saw nothing but opportunity. Years ago, he'd stepped aside and allowed the Butchers to plunder their way from Mexico City up the west coast of Mexico to Tijuana; he'd done that to preserve his workforce. Now he had the opportunity to regain lost ground and he needed a bartering advantage.

With the two unpredictable and more vicious Brothers out of the way, Alberto knew this was the time to deal. Gustavo, the most reasonable of the bunch, needed to save face with Cartel members and he needed to do it quickly to hold his ground; Vin Tanner - American, usurper and undercover mole - was the perfect sacrifice to attain that goal. A very public execution would do a lot to save face for Gustavo and Alberto planned to be the one offering up Tanner on a silver platter.

Even if Gustavo didn't want the sacrifice, Americans always paid hefty ransoms. Alberto knew a win-win situation when he saw one.

Obtaining Tanner was an investment, pure and simple. Successful businessmen spent money to make money and the bounty on Tanner would be substantial because of Tanner's training and skill; brute force - and lots of it - was the only way to bring him in alive.

The inland parts of Mexico were Alberto's stomping grounds and putting out the word to find Tanner came easy. All he had to do now was wait, allowing the time for his dogs to hunt. Tanner would be his within the day because all roads north from Mexico City crossed through Zamora territory.

Alberto Zamora settled back in his Tecate office and glanced at his Rolex. Twelve hours ago, the Carnicero compound burned to the ground. Tanner - surely

running on the eighth of his nine lives - should be under his control soon. A generous bounty guaranteed results in Mexico every time.

"Money well spent," he murmured, leaning back to enjoy a fresh Cuban.



Nothing in Chihuahua went the way Ronnie planned. From the moment she stepped into the mini mart/gas station at the edge of town, she felt eyes watching her. The eyes of the clerk and the girl stocking the shelves lingered a bit too long on her and the Jeep. Asking about burner phones was too risky so she grabbed some food, topped the tank and fled.

Two hours from Juarez the feeling was stronger than before so Ronnie stopped to rouse Vin. She dampened his face with water, ran her fingers through his hair and called to him. The heat she felt was frightening but he roused with a reasonable amount effort. "I think we are being followed," she said to his blinking gaze. "I don't know what to do."

Vin's eyes cleared but Ronnie could see the struggle to get there. He moved slowly as if each limb were made of concrete and a burden to maneuver. Vin slowly eased upright to sit straight and then, panting, tried to unzip his door.

"Hold on." Ronnie jumped out and ran around to help. Once the panel opened, Vin twisted around with a groan and sat sideways. "What do you want? I can get it. Tell me." He held out the lanyard and vial necklace and she draped it over his neck. He tucked it away under his shirt. Vin spoke as he moved to exit the Jeep.

"Floor panel. In the back."

"Stay!" she ordered sharply, stopping him with one hand on his shoulder. With his exasperated/pained/angry look, she softened her tone. "I'll look. You stay here."

Ronnie moved to the back and lifted out the red cans and the duffle, then shoved everything else aside. All she saw was carpet. Frowning, she picked at the long edge along the back and the thick cloth lifted. She tugged it up, the short sides stubbornly resisting, and folded most of it back. She saw a rectangular cut in the bed that was not standard in any car she'd ever seen.

One notched corner allowed her to lift the panel. Her heart fluttered nervously at what she saw: One huge hand gun, a short stocked rifle of some kind, loaded magazines for both and a box snuggled comfortably in foam. She lifted the box lid, finding a phone, cash, a smaller box with a red "X" on it and three passports: Mexico, the U.S. and Guatemala. "Guatemala?" she muttered, noticing how her hand shook when she picked them up. Chewing on her lip, she replaced the passports, picked up the phone and quickly tucked it away in her bra. Then

she replaced the lid and walked back to Vin. Once there he lifted his eyes and she saw they were alive with questions.

She fished the phone from her bra. Vin's eyes widened in what looked like shock and she laughed. "Really? You have guns and knives stashed everywhere and a phone in my bra shocks you?"

His pale cheeks flushed. She shook her head and, smiling, held up the phone. "Will this reach your friends in America?"

"From Juarez," Vin croaked. "Find Celia. I sent phone numbers to her."

Vin described Celia's location on the north east edge of Juarez and Ronnie saw what that effort took out of him. Still, he insisted on getting out and walking around. He tucked the knife in his waistline and after relieving himself several steps from the vehicle without falling down, tried to access the guns on his return.

"I'll get it," she said, seeing that every movement pained him and that exhaustion dragged on his shoulders and eyelids. Ronnie lifted the panel but before reaching in, she carefully scanned the surroundings and met his foggy gaze. "You feel it too, don't you? We aren't alone." He nodded, so Ronnie crowded the back of the Jeep to hide the handgun she retrieved. Vin took it and tucked it in the small of his back, unable to hold back a breathy groan. She looked at him worriedly.

"The little box," he said softly.

She pulled it out the box with the red "X" and handed it to him. It was the size of a pack of cigarettes and he gripped it so tight she thought he'd crush it. Then, he shuffled painfully back to the Jeep. "Let's ride," he panted after she helped him inside.

She didn't comment on the new, bright red flower on the shoulder of his shirt.

Ronnie glanced at the gas gage, noting that the needle hovered close to the "E" with little worry. She was so hyper-alert at this point that there was no room for worry. In fact, worry at this point was a luxury; for the last hour her entire body balanced precariously between fight and flight modes.

Vin, somehow, also managed to stay alert, too, and the cost of the effort showed. Every line in his face carved deep shadows of pain. Under his scruffy beard, his hollow cheeks made his clenched jaws more pronounced as he ground his teeth in pain. The wide, blue of Vin's eyes looked grey and flat. The crimson stain bloomed slowly at his shoulder. Dehydration became a real possibility. Ronnie marveled at the fact of his consciousness; Vin's determination was palatable and it was what kept her going.

She circled the outskirts of Juarez at a casual pace but the tension in the Jeep was heavy. Ronnie's hands hurt from her death grip on the steering wheel.

"Go straight," Vin rasped when they approached a "T" intersection. Straight took them off road, but a well-used path was clear.

Forced to slow along the bumpy dirt, Ronnie didn't like the dust rooster tail that followed them. It was as obvious as a large, blinking neon arrow pointing at them proclaiming "Here They Are!" Ronnie shook her head at the absurd vision - she must be losing her mind.

"Bear right." Vin's whispery voice sounded like dust, too.

They rounded the base of some low foothills and Ronnie saw a haphazard collection of buildings that could be called a village. A nostalgic yearning rose from within at the homey feel of the place - it had a close knit, community feel that Tijuana lost long, long ago. Being so close to crime-ridden Ciudad Juarez and having such a community feel was a rare thing. She stopped the Jeep near a small market.

When she turned to Vin she saw a feeling of peace in his eyes and noticed how his features looked more relaxed, but his rapid, shallow panting revealed his pain. She touched his forehead and felt the dry burn under her fingertips.

"Hurry," he croaked. "Take the phone. Find Celia. Call Raylan Givens. No one else."

Ronnie fled.

Vin knew the noose was drawing closed. It wouldn't take Zamora's men long to figure out where he was; this was the last haven before the border and he was known here. He twisted his neck aside and spotted the jutting rock formation in the distance that marked the edge of a shallow river just beyond. This shore was Mexico, the far shore was America and it was heavily patrolled and dry as desert-roasted bone. He wouldn't make it very far in this condition, but it was a good place to wait for Givens.

The edges of the small box cut in to his hand. The content was a last resort for his final push. Vin knew the infection was bad, but the pain was the most debilitating. When the time came to move, he had to move, and move quickly. The ampoules within the box would help him do that and it scared him because he'd overcome morphine's cloying call once before, but he wasn't sure he could do it again.

Vin eased from the Jeep and immediately collapsed, the jarred wound sent icy, razor pain down his arm and across his chest. His vision narrowed, a gray tunnel closing in. He heard muzzy voices and the scent of dust invaded his nose.

"I have you." Ronnie. Vin allowed himself to let go and everything went black.

He awoke in small, white-washed room that had green ivy stenciled around the window and doorway. Lacy yellow curtains twitched with the faint, hot

breeze. Late afternoon light stole in the edges of the window. Vin smiled. He knew this place.

"I'm glad one of us can smile."

Vin carefully rolled his head against the fire-shots of pain blazing from his shoulder. Ronnie held up a cup in one hand and a spoon with the other.

"Ice chips."

She offered a spoonful and Vin gratefully accepted. The cold wet was glorious trickling down his throat. After two more spoonfuls, he felt able to speak.

"Thank you."

Ronnie nodded once and tried to smile, but she was clearly scared. Vin felt a rush of alarm.

"Celia is quite a woman," Ronnie said softly. "She is respected here. I can see why."

"What happened?"

Ronnie rested the cup in her lap and twirled the spoon in her fingers as she spoke. "You passed out and opened the wound when you fell. It started bleeding again." She choked, wiped an eye with the back of a hand and continued. "I helped clean you up." At that point, Ronnie met his gaze. "It looks bad, Vin. The bullet's still in there. Celia cleaned it as well as she could and you have new bandages but . . ." Unable to finish, she bit lower lip and ducked her eyes. "I finally got Givens on the phone. He's a Deputy U.S. Marshal!"

"I know."

"He's on his way to get you. Can he do that? Cross the border?"

"Yeah." Vin shifted in an unsuccessful attempt to ease the deep throb in his joints. "One way or another."

"Will he take you to jail?"

"We'll see."

"Vin - I'm worried!"

Vin worked up a smile and even that hurt. "I'll be all right. You've done enough, Ronnie. You need to go home now. There's nothing else you can do. I'm grateful -"

Ronnie's eyes turned stormy. "I can't leave you like this. I can't! Don't ask me to!" She surged to her feet, anger replacing fear in her eyes. "This isn't over. We both know that."

Just then, Celia swept in, her tiny form seeming to claim more room than it should. "Awake, I see." She smiled and approached the bed, opposite from Ronnie. "You have been asleep for hours, Vincente. I will not ask you how you feel." She felt his forehead.

"Thank you for all you've done. Ronnie? When did Givens say he'd be here?"

She glanced at a small, antique clock at the bedside. "Anytime now. He flew into Las Cruces and is driving in."

"If he is not here within the hour, Vincente, I fear the worst." They both looked at Celia. The smile was gone, replaced with a grim expression. "My boys tell me that armed men are on their way from Juarez."

"How much time until they are here?"

She shrugged apologetically. "One half hour at the soonest."

Vin pushed to a sit and felt his wound tear. His stomach rolled and the burn of his injury made him hiss in agony. "I'm going now. To the river. Send Givens there, I can't stay here."

"No, I have guards outside . . ."

"Celia, they are your friends and neighbors. I will not put them at risk. Please."

No amount of pleading stopped Vin as he dressed, Ronnie handing him clothes one piece at a time. She didn't even try to persuade him to stop because she knew exactly how he felt; she would do anything to keep her home town safe, too. In fact, that's exactly what she'd been doing for years now.

Ronnie laced the used boots on his feet and helped him to stand. He zipped up the clean, worn jeans, but she reached over and buttoned them for him. Vin's flushed cheeks darkened. She forced a smile and quickly kissed the rosy patch. "For luck," she whispered in his ear as she eased the Denver knife sheath around his shoulders, followed by a clean shirt. Vin pressed his lips together and studied his toes until the shirt was fastened.

Then, he glanced around the room. "Knife?"

Ronnie retrieved it from the bedside drawer and he carefully slipped it home. Every movement agonized. He felt light headed. Ronnie pressed the automatic into his hand and he slipped it in the waistband at the small of his back and pulled the shirt tail over it.

Then he locked his eyes on hers. "Box?"

She studied him for a moment before fishing out the red marked box from the very depths of the drawer and held it against her chest for a moment as she studied him. Vin held out his hand, ignoring the tremble, and met her stare. After several seconds, she placed it in the palm of his hand. Then she pulled the phone from her bra and slipped it in his back pocket.

"Thank you. I can't thank either of you enough. It's time for me to go."

Vin shuffled to the door, knowing the two women were right behind and waiting for him to fall, but he wouldn't. He couldn't allow it. Cartel bounty hunters would be here soon and then no one would be safe. He found the Jeep outside and walked a shaky line to it.

"I'll drive you. Just to the edge of town." Ronnie slipped between him and the Jeep. "You can't work the gearshift."

Vin frowned at her, knowing she was right. "Then you head home. Take the money in the Jeep and go home."

There was a small stand off as they stared at each other, but it broke off at a faraway yell.

"They are here," Celia said. "Run. Now."

The seconds seemed to race faster as Ronnie practically dragged Vin to the passenger side of the Jeep and shoved him in. She got behind the wheel and spun the tires in her haste, leaving a billowing cloud of dust behind. Ronnie weaved around a few houses, using them as cover, and then broke into the open and roared north.

She'd gone less than a mile when a black sedan charged across their path from the east. Ronnie tried to go around, but the car counter matched her moves and gently tapped the Jeep and pinned it against a rocky swell. Ronnie fought to throw the vehicle into reverse.

"It's okay," Vin snapped, grabbing her hand on the gearshift. "It's Givens."

Raylan's lean form unfolded from the sedan and he jogged over, adjusting his Stetson and then opened Vin's door.

"You don't look much better 'n the last time I saw you, Tanner." He scowled. "Can you run?" He took Vin's elbow and glanced at Ronnie while he dragged Vin from the Jeep. "Ma'm. You best get outta here. *Comprende?*"

Vin realized then that Givens suggestion was in English. He repeated it in Spanish. Ronnie glanced from him to Givens - unsure.

"Go," Vin said, allowing Raylan to guide him. "Thank you, Ronnie, for everything. Now go!"

As Vin turned from her, he collapsed against Givens. The worry in Raylan's wide eyes vanished as he set his jaw. "In the car." He shoved Vin in the back seat and jumped in, reversing the large sedan to release the Jeep. Ronnie turned sharply south and fishtailed toward Juarez.

A half-dozen vehicles formed a broken line heading their way.

"I don't think they're friendly," Raylan noted quietly as he shifted. "We need to cross the river, here. Now."

He glanced over to Vin just as Tanner pulled a peculiar vial away from the crook of his arm. Vin dropped the ampoule and lifted his sorrowful, fevered eyes to Givens. Vin Tanner looked like walking death.

"I c'n move now," he gasped, and rolled his eyes as the wonderful, hated warmth spread through his veins. Pain retreated, swallowed up with an enveloping fuzziness. In his last microseconds of clarity, he pushed open the car

door and stumbled north. Although Givens was on his heels, the only thing Vin saw was the over-bright sparkle of water that marked the way home.



"Here they come."

Josiah's rumble of a voice issued the statement with an eerie calm. Chris stepped out from the rocky protuberance and looked south. Two forms moved unevenly across the sandy plane that dropped into a water-scarred bed dirt, bisected by a wide, shallow and lazy stream of water too sluggish to be called a river. Evidence of past flooding scarred the dry banks: Stumps of cottonwood, sun-dried trunks, exposed boulders and carved sandstone humps shaped by rushing water.

It was the only cover or concealment between them and the two stumbling forms heading their way. Beyond them, a line of cars bore down. The six of them stood.

"Border Patrol is on their way, Chris," Nathan reported.

"I do not think they will be arriving in time for the party," Ezra said quietly after gauging the movement across the river.

"Spread out," Chris barked. "We need to hold 'em back. Give them time."

JD glanced at the team leader. "There's an awful lot of 'em."

"And there's a lot of us. Let's go." Buck grabbed JD and moved into position behind a rock. JD set up just beyond, behind a huge boulder.

The moment they moved, the gunfire began. It started slowly, sporadically, and then grew exponentially as the distance between the running men and the cars shortened.

Vin and Raylan dodged and weaved, stumbled, slipped and tripped but kept moving. Chris didn't have time to think how they managed that; he was too busy taking shots and realizing his friend might not make it.

Their line held, returning fire that, at this distance, was really only for cover. Vin needed to be closer, a lot closer.

The pair hit the ridge of the mild slope to the water.

"Come on, Vin," Chris yelled, taking aim. He shot and moved forward - a spray of bullets raked a boulder and shrapnel ripped Chris' cheek. "GET DOWN!" he yelled across the river. "GET DOWN!"

Vin did not seem to hear but Raylan obviously did; he launched into Vin and shoved him down behind a wide tree stump that clung to the riverbed with octopus roots.

The other side of the stump exploded with bullets, but held.

"VIN!" Chris called, shooting as he moved forward. Then a bullet seared his temple and he half-fell, half-dove behind an edgy point of sandstone. His ears rang.

The pop-pop-pop of gunfire grew to a singular roar. The air sizzled with bullets and the burning scent of gunpowder. Chris looked left and saw Buck dive behind a boulder, bullet peppered dirt erupting at his heels obliterated the boot prints in his wake. JD, covering Buck's movement, ducked to avoid rock shrapnel from multiple strikes. One cheek dotted red.

When Chris looked right, he saw Ezra reloading as he pushed his body farther behind a dirt knoll slowly chipping away in a rain of fire. The gambler's eyes were hard with determination. Just beyond, Nathan belly crawled away from his position behind a Manzanita splintering away to nothing. Josiah hunkered behind another huge boulder covering Nate's wild scramble.

The reality of the firepower they faced washed over Chris as he reloaded – plan after plan raced through his mind in those seconds, each one mentally dismissed as futile. Vin and Raylan cowered down just on the other side of the sluggish creek, half in algae ridden water and half on the clay based mud, sharing the same low, cottonwood stump for cover. Each time Raylan moved to take a shot, return fire forced him back and down. His Stetson rested at the water's edge, upside down. Chris hadn't seen Vin move since the Marshal dragged him behind the stump.

Suddenly, all noise faded in Chris' ears and time slowed. His breathing sounded loud when he slammed his last clips home. Outgunned and pinned under a deluge of bullets, Chris gripped fully loaded weapons in both hands and was completely helpless; there was nowhere to go. The idea of defeat sparked, but when Chris looked once again at his best friend lying so exposed in the mud, a furious fireball of anger and rage exploded within and he reacted without thought.

Chris rose to his feet with a roar, "NO!" He raised both guns shoulder high, firing with absolute focus, each shot hitting its mark with gory finality.

Two went down. Then it was four . . .

"NO!" he screamed again, advancing with each pull of the trigger. Two determined strides put him in the creek, a few more beyond that found sluggish water soaking his thighs. The roar of the firefight rose and deafened.

"CHRIS!" Buck's call followed seconds after the reality of the situation unfroze his shocked mind. He scrambled to his knees and stretched his arms over the top of the bullet-scarred boulder and fiercely covered his friend's advance.

Chris moved forward step by deliberate step, each shot from his unwavering weapons accurate and deadly until he reached the center of the creek that marked the border of the two countries. There, he paused, set his jaw, and picked off shooters one by one with Buck's help.

Eight down. Nine.

SHADOWLINE

The others of his team roused from their astonishment to back him, the noise of the firefight shifting to their side of the river.

Ten down and Chris still stood unscathed like some kind of avenging angel.

Raylan's incredulous look broke off at Vin's short, sharp laugh. "Your friend's over the top crazy. I've never seen anything like that!"

Vin, grinning, nodded once and then his eyes slipped closed and his body went limp. The spent gun slipped from his grip.

"God damn it, Tanner, don't you die on me now!" Raylan shifted his position and entered the fight with a vigorous adrenalin surge, rising quickly to join Larabee's stand. He saw bodies scattered on his side of the creek and another bunch retreating, shooting wildly as they ran. Behind him, a line of six men stood their ground with steadfast strength.

A swirling dust cloud on the horizon announced the arrival of their back up.

The shooting slowed and became sporadic, and then stopped altogether, leaving only the sound of retreating vehicles. Then there was a charged pause as they evaluated; no one moved until Chris put away his guns and slogged to Vin's side.

"Agent Larabee," Raylan greeted. "And I thought this one was a handful." He nodded at Vin as he holstered his weapon.

Chris spared him a glance of acknowledgement, his features softening as he dropped to his knees. "God, Vin," he whispered hoarsely. Chris' hand trembled as he brushed back the filthy hair from Vin's stubbled face. "Vin?"

Nathan appeared at his side and felt Vin's neck. "He's got a hell of a fever and his pulse is racy, but it's there. Let's get him out of this dirty water."

Without another word, Chris slipped his arms under his friend and stood, tipping Vin close to his chest.

"Hell, Chris I didn't mean this second!" Chris ignored Nathan and crossed the lazy creek in an unwavering line to bring Vin home.

Raylan and Nathan followed while the others held position and kept watch, ensuring a safe crossing. Chris struggled a bit when he left the water as the stubborn mud grabbed his boots, but Nathan and Raylan each held an elbow and steadied him. Once clear of the creek and its banks, Chris kept moving until they reached the safety of their vehicles and even then, he was reluctant to let go.

Vin's long ride was done and they were seven again.

Epilogue - LIGHTNESS OF BEING

Chris Larabee stood stiff-backed and straight, arms crossed in front, staring down at the still figure in the hospital bed. Standing so close that his hip touched the hard, plastic side railing, Chris fought the urge to reach over and touch his friend to confirm that he was real.

The steady bouncing line on the heart monitor said Vin was not only real, but strong. The corner of Chris' mouth twitched at the thought. Strong didn't begin to describe the man before him; the trials of his life put him well above that inadequate descriptor. Not only did his friend come home, he returned to them with the hard evidence needed to clear his name - something none of them could do these past months. Chris knew Vin would scoff the prick of guilt he felt about that. MacMillan was a master of lies and deceit. Only a man like Vin Tanner could bring him down and bring him down in such a spectacular manner. Chris knew he shouldn't be surprised. He just wished it happened sooner.

Once at the hospital and quickly examined, Vin went straight to surgery and still wasn't entirely cleaned up. Thick layers of bright white bandages encased his shoulder and torso, and were the cleanest thing on him. A rich crop of stubble surrounded the ridiculous Van Dyke style beard Vin sported, hiding his strong and striking jaw line. Scar tissue from the wound Tiger's Eye gave him in San Diego obliterated the tattoo Chris had seen on his bicep those many months ago. Chris chuffed at the freakish wound of coincidence.

This whole year had been weird and right now, the single thing that would set everything back on course for Chris was to see those pale, thin eyelids slide open and feel that lost connection once again.

It had been a long night of waiting. Chris sighed and released the tense hold of his arms, allowing them to hang and loosen his shoulders. He rolled his head and felt his neck crack.

"That must have felt good."

Chris stepped one leg back and opened his stance, turning to face Nathan as he entered the small room. Ezra followed on his heels. Chris realized Nathan was right; the unintentional adjustment eased the headache dogging him.

“Yeah, it actually did.” Chris rubbed his neck and raised a brow at Ezra. “What’s happening?”

“Good morning to you, too, Mr. Larabee.” Ezra stopped at the foot of the bed and gave Vin a head-to-toe scan before meeting Chris’ tired glare. “The item in the vial was, as we suspected, a spent bullet. Agent Givens and I witnessed its collection and transport, and maintained a presence when they removed the bullet from the vial and swabbed for blood. Our names ensure an unbroken chain of evidence on this side but we still need a witness from Mexico. Specifically, someone that can attest to where Mr. Tanner collected the item.”

“Did they find any?” Chris asked. “Blood, I mean, on the bullet?”

“Yes, it tested positive for blood. They are running the DNA now against samples from Marko Munos.”

“Is there a witness?”

Ezra tipped his head and his features softened - a rare tell his teammates could read. I meant he was pleased. “I believe so. Deputy Givens has already arranged an interview through the C.I.A. He saw a woman with Mr. Tanner in Juarez and apparently, she has been calling him with annoying regularity from a burner phone the C.I.A. gave to Mr. Tanner.”

Chris smiled slightly and wearily scrubbed his face. “If she confirms where Vin got the bullet, then he can re-join the A.T.F. again? That was part of your secret deal with the C.I.A., right?”

“Like a multitude of things connected with our Mr. Tanner, the procedure is unusual but not complicated. His re-hiring can be classified as a lateral transfer, not unlike his move from the U.S. Marshal’s office to the A.T.F.” Ezra, satisfied with what he saw in Vin’s still form, walked to the single chair in the room and sat down, stretching his legs out with a weary sigh. “We are very fortunate to have Deputy Givens as our middle man. It removes any question of evidence tampering or impropriety on our part, especially now.” Ezra laced his fingers together on his abdomen. “After the confirmation of the source of the evidence, all that remains is for Mr. Tanner to accept the offer.”

“Why wouldn’t he?” Chris snapped. His frame tightened once again and the headache spiked.

Nathan picked up the question. “He’s been through a lot, Chris.” Nathan wrapped one arm around his waist and then supported the elbow of his other arm as he rested his chin in the V of his thumb and forefinger and studied the unconscious sharpshooter thoughtfully. “We don’t really know what he did down there. There may be things he won’t be able to reconcile with.”

“Are you talking about some kind of post-traumatic stress?”

“Exactly. He may need some time. If he does, we need to be prepared to give it.”

“Not a problem,” Chris stated with a hard edge. He turned back to Vin and crossed his arms again. “He’ll get whatever he needs.”

The hallway was quiet, save for the shuffling sound of nurse’s feet as they passed the doorway. It was the middle of the night and Chris finally felt the first signs of exhaustion - his eyelids suddenly seemed entirely too heavy.

“I’ll check back in the morning,” Nathan said after a few minutes. A large yawn followed the statement and Chris smirked. “We’ve worked out a schedule already. Ezra’s supposed to bring breakfast.”

The two men looked over to the man in question. Ezra was sound asleep in the chair. Nathan snorted.

“He’s gonna feel that in his neck when he wakes up.” Nathan said. “I’ll adjust the schedule and bring breakfast. See you later.” He clapped Chris’ shoulder and headed to the door, pausing in the frame. “I’ll get another chair in here.”

“Thanks.” Chris nodded. He turned back to Vin and yawned.

An inhospitable hospital chair sounded pretty good right now.



Vin’s rise to consciousness was painful and slow, taking most of the day to achieve in a worrying up-and-down cycle of confusion and catatonia. He was addled far beyond any state Chris had ever seen before and as a result, the team leader clocked over 24 hours at his friend’s side.

The fever finally abated in the early evening and with its ebbing, Vin’s eyes lost confusion and his understanding of English reappeared. Panting, his eyes narrowed while studying Chris’ face leaning over late in the afternoon.

“Chris?” he croaked, a little perplexed and perhaps a bit suspicious.

“Yeah, it’s me.” Larabee dabbed a line of sweat shining at Vin’s hairline with a wadded cloth. “You with us now?”

“I ‘spect.” Vin’s eyes rolled to take in his surroundings, and then his neck slowly twisted on the pillow until it pulled his wound. He hissed in pain.

“Hate to tell ya, Pard, but you have to stay down a while,” Chris said softly. A worry furrow V’d Vin’s forehead. “You’re home. We have your back. Rest. You deserve it.”

Vin blinked and the fear and suspicion haunting his eyes all this time drained away leaving the calm, wide, blues Chris remembered. The long missed tingle of their odd bond awoke and Chris felt anxiety drain away. He grinned down at his friend.

“kay.” The lines aging Vin’s face smoothed as he dropped off into real, restful sleep, taking away the lines until he again looked younger than his years.

Relief flooded through him and Chris scanned Vin’s relaxed features. With the over-riding worry and fear gone, Chris could now look at him through clear, untroubled eyes and his mouth quirked at what he saw. That hairy mess on Vin’s face had to go.

Two days later, a Federal helicopter transported him to Denver with Chris at his side. Vin slept the entire trip. Instead of a hospital, Vin moved into a rehabilitation center. Instead of industrial food, his six team mates supplied meals. Someone always stayed by his side - mostly Chris. Between the daily therapy and edible food, Vin soon looked like his old self.

Once convinced that Vin was on his way to being discharged, Chris relaxed his vigil and allowed the rest of the team to stand their watch without him. Somehow, between the ranch, the office and field work, Chris managed to be at Vin’s side at every physical therapy session and run interference with the alphabet soup of agencies requesting interviews. During those first two weeks Chris never pushed, never asked, never questioned. He knew Vin would tell him everything somewhere along the line. Chris had already pieced a lot of the action together just listening in on the interviews.

Finally, one day after a third D.E.A. agent left his bedside, Vin got word of his release from the hospital.

“Tomorrow, huh?” Chris said from his seat. Vin sat up in the bed looking decidedly pale. The release news brightened his features.

“Looks like it.” Vin squirmed and shifted, dropping his legs over the side of the bed. “Shoes?”

Chris stood and grabbed the tennis shoes under the bed. “Going somewhere?”

“Outside.”

Knowing not to push, Chris helped him with his shoes and off the bed, and then kept Vin’s slow pace down the hall and out to a broad balcony corralling scattered chairs. A nurse sat far to one side chatting on a phone and smoking. Chris wrinkled his nose.

Vin carefully lowered himself onto a chair, careful not to bump his bandages. His right arm was still wrapped firmly to his chest, immobilizing the shoulder area. Once seated, he blew out a breath and glanced at the nurse. “Think she’d know better, huh?”

“You’d think.” Chris stretched out his legs and crossed them at the ankles, and watched Vin from the corners of his eyes as he struggled with his thoughts. Finally, he spoke.

“I need to tell you all of it, Chris.” He shifted his injured side. “When I was a Ranger, so much of what I did was ‘need to know’ shit. You know what I mean.”

“Sadly, I do, but Buck was usually on my team so we could talk it over. Didn’t you have a spotter?”

“Usually.” Vin paused and a faraway look crossed his eyes. “I came back alone more than once. All that put me in a bad place - the keeping it quiet. Secrets. It rots you from the inside if you let it.”

“True.”

Vin glanced out to the distant mountains and started talking about the loneliness, the mission state of mind, the running, the inability to trust and how Ronnie crossed that line. He spoke of the fear and rage, the feeling of betrayal regarding MacMillan, the sorrow at the loss of innocents. Vin didn’t stop until it was all out in the light and his voice was rough and worn. The sun set and the pale moon showed itself in the darkening sky when he finally stopped.

They sat in silence then, both enjoying the lightness of being when the truth was told. Then, Chris leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. He tipped his head aside and caught Vin’s gaze.

“You know what I find good in all this, and why I think you’re gonna be just fine, is that others did your C.I.A. contract work for you.”

Vin frowned.

“You were sent there to kill Arturo Carnicero. To do that, you hired out to kill two other Carniceros. Then, you somehow managed to arrange it so they all pretty much killed themselves. Mac was pure self-defense. You should be proud of yourself, Vin, because your hands are clean. You followed Army orders without question when you were a Ranger. This time, you followed your own orders. You’re a good, decent man, Vin Tanner, and if you don’t know that by now then we’re gonna have words.”

The two men regarded each other as the dark fingers of night wrapped around them. Eventually, Vin sat back and pursed his lips in thought as he weighed the idea in his head. “Huh,” he finally uttered.

Chris leaned back, smiling. “I knew it. You used all your intelligent words in one blitz. You’ve been saving’ ‘em up for so long they finally exploded.”

“Fuck you, Larabee,” Vin chuckled.

Chris laughed. “See? Nothin’ intelligent left. Now let’s get you inside so your brain can rest.”

One Month Later

“Well, look what the cat dragged in!” Buck’s desk chair rolled sideways as he stood, bumping into JD as he walked while reading a file, resulting in a surprised squawk.

“Watch it, Buck! Jeeze!” Then he turned to the office doorway. “Vin! Hey, you’re back!”

Their missing member sauntered into the room with a pleased smile, Josiah close behind. The thick layer of bandages was gone, replaced with a light sling.

“How’s therapy?” Nathan asked, stepping forward to be the first to shake Vin’s hand.

“Hurts like hell, but no pain, no gain, right?” Vin said brightly.

Nathan stepped back, allowing Buck to ruffle the sniper’s unkempt hair. “You’re still looking’ a mite scruffy there, Junior.” He tugged at the beard on Vin’s chin. “Ya ain’t ever gonna top my moustache, so you might as well give up on this disaster.”

Vin grinned and stroked the line of hair from under his nose down both sides of his mouth. “Don’t tell Chris, but this thing drives me nuts.”

Buck chuckled and leaned down, whispering, “You’re just sportin’ it to irritate him, aren’t ya?” He grabbed Vin’s good shoulder and gave it a shake as he straightened. “Don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me!”

“What secret?”

Buck turned on his heel and headed to his desk. “Just giving’ Junior the secret of my success, is all.”

“Right.” Chris walked up to Vin and stopped. “Josiah bein’ a good chauffeur?”

“Yeah but I can’t wait to drive the Jeep again. Doc says I can handle a stick shift in a week or so.”

Chris raised a brow. “He doesn’t know about your Jeep, does he?”

Ezra’s entrance saved Vin from a reply. The gambler’s usually unreadable face brightened. “Why, Mr. Tanner! It’s good to see you back with our motley crew.” He shook Vin’s hand and angled his head as he looked him over. “It has only been one week since I last saw you and I can see a vast improvement. You look well.” He stepped back to allow JD in to shake Vin’s hand.

“I feel great. I start back here in two weeks. Light duty, a course.”

Chris crossed his arms over his chest. “Thank Ezra and Travis for that. I don’t think the A.T.F. has ever hired someone this unfit for duty.”

Vin glanced to Ezra and gave him a knowing nod of thanks. “I’m just glad things worked out.” He turned to Chris. “Just lettin’ ya know we’re headin’ out now. I’ll be back in time for my next therapy session, so don’t worry, okay?”

“Can’t help but worry when you’re involved. Trouble always seems to find you. Josiah? Keep a constant eye out?”

“Sure thing, boss. A little road trip to San Diego will do us both some good.”

JD snorted. “Too bad the Mexican government’s got you on their ‘no entry’ list. You did ‘em a favor.” He hopped up and landed on the edge of his desk.

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“That will be lifted when he’s gainfully employed again,” Chris said. Then they looked pointedly at Vin. “You be careful. Show Ronnie a good time in San Diego.”

“I’ll see you soon, then.”

Chris headed to his office as Vin and Josiah turned to go.

“Vin?”

Tanner paused at the door and looked back to find Chris glaring at him. “What?”

“Step into this office again with that fuzz on your face and you will know pain. Clear?”

Vin’s smile - open, real and confident - locked the seven back into their brotherhood. “As crystal, Cowboy.”

He ducked out the doorway before Chris could respond.

THE END