

SAVING VIN  
*A Sequel to Saving Grace*

CHAPTER ONE

Home.

The ranch, in all its sprawled, rustic glory, again felt like home. It was how it sat in his heart and the resulting warmth which managed to thaw his soul that wrapped Chris Larabee in a blanket of serenity. All of that emanated from one too-thin essence forever branded on his heart as his son, Vin Tanner. Vin was home. Vin made it home.

Soft breathing called for Chris' stiff fingers to absently stroke through his boy's soft hair as Vin slept, deeply, at his side. Morning light trickled through the slight gap in the bedroom curtains spilling a line of gold across the floor and Chris' chest, and would streak right across Vin's relaxed face if Chris hadn't rolled on his side just enough to block the intrusion. Vin's breath warmed Chris' chest as he gazed down at the beautiful sight of his son sleeping deep and sound - a rarity in the past weeks. Since his return, Vin's nights - and therefore Chris' nights - were usually wracked with nightmares and troubled snatches of sleep resulting from exhaustion.

This was a breakthrough of sorts, sleeping one whole night through. Chris raised his hand and examined his healed knuckles which were still a little pink, but no longer bruised from his fight to protect his family. He wiggled them and returned his hand to Vin's hair, sighing contentedly as he carded through the fine waves.

Cheery bird call and faint dog barking outside added to the serene moment as he relaxed, head propped up on up bent arm. Even the knowledge that there were horses to feed and chores to attend to didn't penetrate his inner calm. Chris knew this was only one tiny step in a convoluted journey ahead - there were still

the items of school, work and family to deal with as well as getting Vin to sleep a night through in his own bed. But for now, this was enough. The world could pause at this moment for infinity and he'd be a happy man.

A soft snick alerted Chris to his opening bedroom door and he shifted his eyes, continuing the soothing rhythm of his stroking fingers. Vin didn't even twitch at the sound. Another tiny victory. Buck Wilmington's stupidly grinning face hovered in the narrow opening.

"Stay put," Buck whispered. "Everything's taken care of."

Motion below his roommate's floating head drew Chris' gaze downward where JD's face pushed into view. One of Buck's wide hands ruffled the boy's dark hair. Miraculously, JD remained silent as his face softened with obvious relief.

"Come on," Buck said quietly to his son. JD tilted his head up and broke into a smile as his Da physically turned his head toward the hall in a motion akin to opening a jar. "Let's leave 'em be." Buck mouthed "Later" to Chris just before the door clicked closed.

Contentment settled on the room once again as a horse's distant whinny drifted through the open window and Chris sighed, allowing his mind to wander. With sleep, his thoughts were now clear and the mental list he assembled didn't seem as daunting in the quiet of a new day.

Today was Friday. Tomorrow his parents arrived, unwilling to stay away any longer. Matt and Claire Larabee were in constant touch, speaking to Vin and JD daily on the telephone and long-distant spoiling the boys with frequent gifts in the mail. Hindsight allowed Chris to admit it was a good thing after all – hopefully as a result, Vin wouldn't be as rattled when they actually arrived. All in all, Vin's fragile demeanor had diminished considerably; he no longer jumped when unexpectedly touched or startled at loud noises or raised voices.

Monday, Chris returned to work, half-days. Matt and Claire would stay with Vin during the day while JD finished out the year at school in a mere two weeks. Vin was to be tested on Thursday to see where he should be placed in the summer session; Chris reminded himself to thank Ezra for all the after work tutoring these past weeks. Everyone was a bit surprised at how well Vin did during those sessions. He'd said that Grace Giltner was a teacher at one time and spent a lot of time educating her partner in captivity; it was the only thing the boy willingly spoke of regarding his two years away. If Miss Grace, as Vin called her, hadn't become a doomed addict after the death of her own son years ago, she may have been able to make it in the world. Instead, her only legacy was bringing Vin up to grade level for the first time in his short life. Chris was grudgingly grateful to have one positive thing in the whole ordeal.

Chris didn't think beyond the coming week as he gazed at his slumbering son. Vin sighed and Chris knew his boy was slowly awakening. He watched, smiling, as Vin's forehead subtly creased and his eyes rolled beneath pale lids just before fluttering in wakefulness. A small hand groggily freed itself from the tangle of sheets and rubbed at his nose and then he took a deep breath and blinked lazily, eyes momentarily unfocused.

"Good mornin', Cowboy," Chris greeted. He brushed soft curls from Vin's cheek. "Hungry?"

Vin's eyes rolled to meet Chris' and he smiled and nodded. "Yeah," he croaked as he sat up. He bit his lower lip and looked at his father's face through long lashes when he realized where he was.

"I brought you in here after you fell asleep on the couch," Chris explained. "Was easier than the top bunk. You're gettin' heavy." Vin smiled sheepishly and Chris ruffled his hair. "Comon', let's eat."

The pair rounded up their slippers and robes and visited the bathroom before heading to the kitchen.

"Where's Buck 'n JD?" Vin asked, rubbing an eye.

"Shopping. We got visitors tomorrow, remember?" Chris grinned, pleased at the thoughtful look on Vin's face. Two weeks ago, there would have been an expression of fear. He pulled a frying pan from the cupboard. "We'll clean up around here a little then there's a special assignment to complete."

Vin paused, a shadow of uncertainty clouding his features. "K," Vin breathed as he slowly climbed onto a chair. Chris took a moment pour some orange juice before reassuring him with a quick ruffle of hair.

"Don't worry. You're coming with me and won't regret it. Trust me." Chris felt a surge of joy that his simple words were enough for Vin when his worried features melted away and were instantly replaced with a bright smile. Chris chuckled and returned to the stove while Vin finished his juice.

"Should I clean our room before we go?"

Chris could feel the return of the wary undertone at the reminder of visitors - he didn't do well with any kind of change and it was the last vestige of their ordeal that only Chris seemed to notice. Both Buck and Dr. Will seemed confident with Vin's progress, Chris felt that there was something else, something unspoken. He heard it in Vin's voice and saw it in his actions. Chris couldn't put his finger on it, exactly, and hadn't mentioned it because describing it would be impossible. It was part of that invisible bond they had and it kept him from being completely satisfied with Vin's progress. "That would be great. JD can do the rest, then."

Vin nodded and smiled. He was back in balance for the moment.

Scrambled egg and sausage burritos were assembled and eaten mostly in the comfortable quiet Vin and Chris relished. When the dishes were done they headed to their respective rooms to clean. When Chris was done he helped Vin finish up and then challenged him to a race to get dressed.

Vin dashed into Chris' room minutes later. "I win!" he announced, jumping onto the bed where Chris sat to pull on his socks.

"Not fair!" Chris chided. "Your shoes aren't tied!"

Vin started working his laces while lying on his back with his feet in the air. Chris quickly put on his socks and then stepped in his boots, purposely fumbling.

"Done!" Vin yelled a fraction of a second before Chris.

"Beat me fair 'n square."

"I get ta pick lunch," Vin said with satisfaction.

"Hold on a second. We didn't agree to that." Chris stood, grabbed Vin's ankles and dragged him to the edge of the bed. Giggling, the boy reached up expectantly. Chris pulled him onto his hip and gave him a quick hug. Vin looked at him with those huge blue eyes reflecting contentment, a hand on each of Chris' shoulders and an expectant expression. "But I'll go along with it this time."

Vin nodded sharply. "All right, then," he said seriously.

Chris coughed a short laugh at the dead-on impersonation of himself and Vin grinned mischievously. Chris' heart skipped a beat at the thrill of seeing that sparkle once again. After another quick hug Chris released him and they headed to the door. Their escape, however, was delayed at the return of JD and Buck. All activity focused on unloading groceries.

Chris held up a predominantly purple box and scowled. "My mom's gonna love this," he muttered at the box of BooBerry cereal.

Buck laughed. "One look at those purple tongues will change her mind. She's mush in these boys' hands and you know it."

Chris snorted as he reluctantly put the box away. "Okay, Vin and I will be back in a while. Vin's cleaned your room already, JD."

The small boy bounced excitedly on his toes. "I'll do the bathroom!"

"Oh no, you don't, sport," Buck interrupted. "You ain't goin' near the spray cleaners again. Here." He plucked a flat box from a pile of groceries. "Rub these over all the wood furniture. It's safer." Crestfallen, JD took the box of moist furniture polish wipes. "If that works out, I'll let ya clean the mirrors next." Buck held up a box of moist glass cleaning wipes. JD's lower lip poked out in a pout.

Vin looked to Chris for an explanation. "Don't ask," Chris said lowly, turning him to the front door. "Let's just say that our tear ducts other mucus

membranes aren't fully recovered from the last time JD was allowed to use spray cleaners." Maneuvering Vin out the front door, he hollered, "Be back in a few hours!" to Buck and directed Vin to the battered old Jeep slouched next to Buck's truck.

Chris gave a confirming nod to Vin's questioning glance and Vin scrambled happily into the passenger seat, twisting sideways in a hunt for the seat belt. Chris climbed behind the wheel as he spoke. "Vin, I promised Nate you'd sit in the back when we used the Jeep." Vin didn't seem to care and crawled easily into one of the rear seats while Chris remembered the exact conversation with the team's medic.

*"That thing is a death trap, Chris. You aren't seriously thinking of putting Vin in that monstrosity, are you? I didn't say anything when it was just you, but now . . ." Nathan seemed unimpressed with Chris' glared response. Josiah cleared his throat and Chris swung the patented deadly gaze onto the preacher. "Don't be lookin' for any back up, Chris," Nathan continued. "It's unanimous."*

*When he turned back, Chris read the tell-tale stubbornness in Nate's crossed arms and the apologetic shrug of Ezra standing behind him. "Fine," Chris muttered. "He'll sit in back." Nathan rolled his eyes. "I can't keep borrowing Buck's truck," Chris growled. "The Jeep's only temporary, anyway."*

The corner of Chris' mouth twitched at the memory and turned over the stubborn ignition several times. Finally, the engine caught and he glanced back to make sure Vin was strapped in. It would be a cold trip with no doors or roof but he knew that Vin loved the vehicle anyway. Chris shifted gears and pointed the Jeep down the driveway seeing Nate's nodding approval in his mind's eye as they headed toward the Dodge dealer in town. His only worry was about Vin's reaction to being inside a vehicle so similar to the crashed truck that marked the event of their two-year separation. He was glad the real thing was finally towed away last week.

Vin's jaw dropped when they pulled into the dealership parking lot. He fumbled with the seatbelt when Chris said he could get out, and jumped down. Without a word he let his dad lead him to the office building where Chris shook a man's hand in greeting and accepted a set of keys. Chris thanked the man and directed Vin to the back of the lot and a shiny new truck. He unlocked the door and still without a word, motioned for Vin to climb in. He got in the driver's seat and sat quietly while Vin visually explored the interior.

"Well?" Chris finally verbalized. "What do you think?" He gripped the steering wheel of the new Dodge Ram Quad Cab and gave his son a sidelong look. Vin's frown was one of utmost concentration as he fingered the air conditioning

vents and simultaneously poked the buttons of the stereo. He nodded seriously and turned his attention to the window switch. Chris started the truck so the switch would work. Once the window performed its up-and-down job with apparent satisfaction, Vin Tanner turned to his father and wrinkled his nose.

“It smells funny.”

Chris nodded. “That’s because it’s a new truck. People usually like that new car smell.”

“Oh.” Vin reflected on that for a moment.

“Smells like leather because of the seats,” Chris pointed out. “Does that help?”

Vin sniffed again. “It don’t smell like my saddle.”

Chris nodded in silent agreement. “No, it don’t . . . I mean, doesn’t.” Vin’s lips pursed in a tiny smile at his dad’s self-correction, eyes sparkling. Chris grinned. “Well, I guess we could infuse some Peso sweat in here to make it more like your saddle.” Vin giggled. “What, you don’t like that idea?” Chris teased as he reached over and pulled Vin into his lap. Vin grabbed the steering wheel and leaned forward to peer over the top. “The cab’s big enough for that beast of yours to fit inside,” Chris pointed out.

Vin paused in his back and forth twisting of the polished wood wheel. “Don’t think there’d be room fer us then ‘n ‘sides, he can’t sit.” He paused for a second as if considering the offer. “I think he’d be happier in his trailer,” he concluded.

“Well, okay, then. If we do this thing, can you put up with the new car smell for a while?”

Vin’s lower lip poked out as he nodded. “Yeah, I think so.”

“What color?”

Vin stilled, then slowly twisted around to regard Chris thorough eyes narrowed in suspicion. After a moment, he asked in a serious tone, “Somethin’ wrong with black?”

Chris tossed his head back and laughed, his unrealized worry for Vin’s reaction forgotten.

## CHAPTER TWO

Spring bloomed unusually bright around the Larabee ranch in the first weeks of Vin's return. The weather, which had been cold and gloomy, turned sunny, melting away the last of winter's snowfall along with Chris Larabee's emotional freeze of the past two years.

With Saturday morning breakfast over and a mug of steaming coffee cradled in his hands, Chris leaned against the porch rail in the morning sun and watched the boys release the dogs from their kennel near the barn. The explosion of fur, laughter and yelps was the best entertainment he could think of at the moment. He chuckled.

"Enjoying the floor show?" Buck asked, relaxing his long frame on the rail alongside his roommate, coffee cup also in hand.

"Yeah," Chris sighed contentedly.

The old friends watched in companionable quiet as Vin and JD heartily romped with Ringo and Elvis, managing to raise the dogs' excitability level to unimaginable heights. The men chortled as they finished their coffee.

When the dogs finally showed signs of exhaustion, the four disappeared into the barn. Chris straightened then, his eyes fixed on the barn's open doors. Buck glanced at him and shook his head with a sigh.

"He's fine in there, you know," Buck said softly.

The relaxed softness in Chris' features tightened slightly as he shifted and gave Buck a brief glare. His body language clearly stated that he wanted to follow Vin but, instead, he rubbed his eyes and let out a tight breath. "He slept through without a nightmare again last night."

"That's great, right? He's getting it behind him, then." Buck paused for a second before firmly meeting Chris' eyes. "It means you can start loosenin' up a bit." Chris' eyes narrowed, sharpening the glare, and then he looked toward the

barn and turned toward the porch stairs. Buck's hand on his arm stopped him. "Chris, he's only in the barn. He voluntarily left your line of sight – it's a good sign."

Chris jerked his arm loose but didn't move. His head tilted slightly and swiveled to face the barn. Faint voices drifted from the wide doorway. "Yeah, it is," he quietly conceded.

Buck glanced toward the noise and grinned, then turned his attention back to Chris. "Come on," he urged, indicating the house with a nod. "We got work to do before your parents get here. Can you overcome your separation anxiety long enough to clean up your office? The guest room's all ready," he said. "I'll work on the kitchen."

With obvious reluctance, Chris followed Buck into the house, grumbling. "I do not have separation anxiety."

Buck snorted. "Yeah, sure, stud, and I don't have a boatload of animal magnetism, neither."

Chris snorted. They entered the house and Chris paused at the sliding glass door a moment before moving down the hall. Buck watched him with a smirk knowing full well that the office window had a clear, unobstructed view of the barn doors.

By the time Buck finished with the kitchen, Chris was straightening the great room and had the floor cleared. Buck grabbed the vacuum cleaner and plugged it in, glancing outside as he did so. Vin and JD were in the yard now, tossing a Nerf football back and forth over the dogs' heads, teasing them into yet another frenzy. As Buck pushed the vacuum around, he kept an eye on the boys through the big windows, noting how Vin gravitated toward the house and how, every now and then, the boy would glance to the front door.

Inside the house, the same act was played out by Chris. As Larabee worked, he ever so slowly found his way to the front door. Buck turned off the vacuum cleaner and leaned on the handle, chuckling and shaking his head.

"What's so funny?" Chris grumbled as he edged toward the door, pausing at the entry table where he picked through the things stacked there.

"You don't even know you're doing it, do you?" Buck accused lightly. Peripherally, he saw Vin drift toward the front stairs and out of his line of sight.

"Know what?" Chris pawed through some loose keys tossed in a bowl.

"You two are attached by invisible string. Right now Vin's at the bottom of the stairs and look where you are - right there by the front door."

Chris raised his head enough and scowled at Buck. Before he could return his attention to the wonders of the junk-capturing bowl, he glanced at the door.



"See? That's what I mean," Buck pointed out. "This ain't gonna do Vin no good when you start work Tuesday. You two have been like a strip of Velcro."

Chris snapped to attention and planted his hands on his hips all but resembling a stubborn mule denying a lead line. One finger tapped his hipbone as his scowl deepened into a glare. "Don't you think you're exaggerating just a bit?"

"No, I don't. Look, I understand the need for both of you to be close, I really do. What that boy's been through . . ." Buck stopped and scrubbed his scalp with one hand and let out an exasperated breath. "He needs normalcy, Chris, and that means he needs to function without you around. You start back to full-time work in a week. After that, he starts summer school. All of that will be hard enough on him even without the separation anxiety."

Buck was surprised when Chris didn't deny the allegation and was even more surprised when the glare melted from his eyes, replaced with a look tinged with – fear?

"He's right there." Chris said quietly, turning his gaze to the door. "I can feel him, Buck. I don't want to lose that ever again."

Buck sighed and repeated the words of Dr. Will. "I hear ya, Pard, but at some point, separation is healthy. It's the only way he'll grow."

"I know, I do. I really do. It's just . . ." Chris' excuse was interrupted by the ringing phone. He gave the door a surreptitious glance before stepping into the kitchen to answer it.

Buck shook his head and chuckled. He backed up enough to where he could just see the front stairs through a window and watched as Vin stopped his climb up the short flight and cocked his head aside, considering. Then a Nerf football hit him square in the butt. Buck grinned at JD's raucous laugh. Vin smiled – a rare but heartwarming sight – then turned and dashed off after his acquired sibling in revenge. It really was no contest – since returning home Vin had regained some lost weight and muscle tone. JD was a pile of giggles calling "UNCLE!" within seconds.

Vin still had scars, however, both visible and invisible. Buck and Chris suspected Vin's arm bothered him but he never mentioned it. Dr. Two Eagles said the old break had healed poorly and interfered with a nerve bundle near the elbow. He advised waiting until Vin was in a better physical and mental state before thinking about treatment.

Disturbingly, Buck noticed that he would sometimes freeze in reaction to things neither Chris nor Buck could discern and one could practically see the wheels turning in the shaggy head as he processed the distraction. It took a few moments longer, however, for him to get back to speed as he returned to what he

had been doing. Sometimes, though, he trembled in those few seconds; other times, he didn't recover at all and withdrew to Chris or his room or any close refuge, but those times were becoming less frequent as well as less noticeable.

At this moment, as he rolled on the ground with JD and the dogs, Vin Tanner looked like any other 10-year-old boy and for that, Buck was grateful.

He heard Chris hang up the phone and join him window. "They're on their way from the airport. Should be here in about 45 minutes."

"Knowing Grandpa Matt, he's gonna be armed with sweets so we'd better feed the boys now."

Chris snorted as he headed to the sliding glass door farther down the wall. "You have no room to talk. You're as bad as he is." Before Buck could protest, Chris called for the boys to come in. "I just hope having them here isn't too much for Vin."

Buck laughed as he headed to the kitchen. "I'd sure like to see you try 'n keep 'em away any longer, stud. Your intimidation techniques don't work too good on 'em, y'know."

"Yeah, I know," Chris muttered just before two boys and two excited dogs invaded the house.

The boys were barely finished washing up from lunch when the crunchy sound of wheels on gravel caused a stampede to the front door.

"They're here, they're here!" JD announced.

"Hey!" Buck barked. "Slow down, son! You'll scare 'em away!" He managed to reach the door first, blocking it until he was sure the car was stopped.

"Da! Open the door!"

Buck laughed and slowly turned the door knob. JD was prancing in place while the dogs milled and whined, but Vin stood slightly aside with a worried expression, wringing his fingers. Chris scooped the boy up in his arms and gave him a hug before facing the door.

"Turn 'em loose, Buck," he said with an evil grin. Vin frowned, not sure how to read the expression.

Buck smirked the tension. "So it's a 'shock and awe' attack, eh?"

Chris looked to Vin and the boy visibly relaxed at the sight of his dad's sparkling eyes. "Well? You ready for candy?"

Vin's eyes widened and he nodded, wriggling for release.

"Daaaaaaaaaaaa!" JD squealed, tortured to his limit.

Buck pulled the door open just as Vin's feet hit the floor and boys and dogs shot outside. The two men waited a few seconds before following and smiled at the scene before them.

Matt Larabee was barely visible behind two demanding dogs as he crouched low with JD in a tight hug – the driver’s door still stood open. Claire, though, had managed to get her passenger door shut before crouching low. One arm was draped around Vin’s shoulders in a loose hold and her face was close to Vin’s, her rapt expression showing a desire to hold her grandson closer. Chris admired her ability to respect Vin’s space when her every instinct clearly wanted the opposite. After a few quiet words, Vin threw his arms around her neck and she drew him in. Tears trickled from her closed eyes as she relished the touch.

Chris felt his throat tighten and he stopped at the bottom of the stairs to give them some time. Buck slapped his back as he passed and threw his friend a wink before approaching Matt and JD.

“Hey, Lil’ Bit, let him breathe! Matt, good to see ya.”

Matthew managed to stand as JD jabbered and jumped at his feet. He reached into a pocket and pulled out small bag. “Well, how did Gummy Worms get in my pocket? That’s gross!” He held the bag out to JD. “Can you get rid of this for me?”

“They’re not gross, they’re good! Hey, Vin! Gummy Worms!”

With JD momentarily distracted, Matt reached out and shook Buck’s outstretched hand. “Buck, good to be here. Now where’s my other grandson?”

Claire held Vin’s hand as the pair circled around the front of the car, releasing it only when Matt’s took its place. Then she turned to her son with shiny eyes.

Chris stepped forward then and opened his arms. Claire melted into the hug, sniffing. “I’m so happy for you, Christopher,” she whispered hoarsely.

### CHAPTER THREE

Everyone relaxed around the ranch on Saturday giving Claire and Matt time to rest and Vin time to adjust. Buck, Chris and the boys went for a short ride at one point while Claire happily assembled lunch. When they returned, the six of them enjoyed a picnic in the yard and planned the next day's barbeque with the rest of the team.

Matt let the boys show him around, pleased that Vin accepted him again. Vin was just as excited as JD about the barbeque, too. Matt gave a quick prayer of thanks that the boy was very close to being the grandson he'd missed for so long and that Chris was again the attentive father he remembered even after the difficult hurdles thrown at him over the years.

Saturday evening brought with it a movie marathon and popcorn fights. Never again would any family moment be considered mundane; instead, they became a celebration.

Chris had company on Sunday morning. How Vin managed to sneak in without waking him got Chris thinking that he must have been more tired than he realized. The day developed a different air about it with the knowledge that Chris' work week would begin on Tuesday and the routine around the ranch would change yet again. Buck had already been back to full days for a week and Vin was tentative for the first days at that time, so Chris decided to bring Vin to the Federal building for a short visit Monday, hoping to soften Tuesday's transition.

At this moment, Vin seemed withdrawn and a little worried. Claire, Matt and Chris all took turns reassuring the boy and by the time the rest of the team was due Vin seemed to be fine. He and JD joyously greeted each member as they arrived, but Vin often checked on Chris' whereabouts until everyone was accounted for.

It was times like this, when activity levels rose and both Vin's and his thoughts were divided, that Chris noticed a weakening of their bond. "Weakening" wasn't precisely the word he wanted, but Chris couldn't come up with any other description. Since Vin's arrival they had worked to keep things calm, so this – situation – rarely arose. Chris shook his head at the frustration of trying to label his discomfort. He couldn't say what, exactly, was wrong so he couldn't get a grip on a solution. It was one of those things he and Vin would have to figure out on their own. Actually, he figured that it would simply work itself out as Vin's self-confidence grew and it would never have to be discussed outside the two of them.

As the afternoon marched on, Chris noticed Vin's energy wane. Technically, he was being forced into mingling with a crowd and even though it was a crowd of familiar faces, there was still stress involved. At first, Chris and Buck noticed that Vin hovered on the edge of the group, usually by Chris' side, but eventually he joined in when the talking stopped and physical activity began.

JD, as usual, was a ball of endless energy all afternoon and Vin stayed right with him as a less boisterous shadow. As sunset etched the horizon in lines of color, a calmer atmosphere settled on the ranch and both boys settled.

"He seems good, Chris," Nathan commented as the barbeque was fired up. Ezra and Matt flanked the two boys sitting on the top step of the porch watching the painted sky fade toward darkness. "He's still keeps some distance from a crowd and his eye on you, but one on one, he's good."

"Each day is a little better," Chris said as he scraped the grill in preparation for the steaks.

"Nights are still a little challenging," Buck interjected as he leaned against the porch railing next to Nathan. "He finally slept through on Thursday and Friday but can't stay in his room."

"How's he doing with Matt and Claire in the house?"

"Standoffish at times, but he usually interacts," Chris said. "A little nervous, maybe. Seems restless, but no nightmares." Chris hung up the grill brush and closed the top. "Grill will be ready in ten minutes."

Buck stood and tilted his head toward the house. "Let's get things together, Pard."

Chris fell in behind Buck. When Nathan offered to help, Chris said, "Nah. Everything's set."

Buck chuckled. "That's what happens when Claire's around - sudden organization." Chris frowned and started to speak. "Yeah, yeah," Buck cut him off

with a backward wave of his hand. “You’re organized, too. That quality didn’t fall far from the tree.”

Chris’ frown deepened. “I’m not sure how to take that,” he muttered as Nathan left to join the others at the picnic table on the grass below. Chris followed Buck to the sliding door, scanning the yard. “Where’s Vin?” He paused behind Ezra, still seated on the porch steps. Buck continued inside.

Ezra gestured over his shoulder into the house. “Young Mr. Tanner went inside. He did not elaborate on any reason but he seemed to be somewhat fatigued.”

When Chris stepped into the house, Buck whispered “Hey.” An amused smile made Buck’s eyes sparkle when he pointed to the couch.

Chris looked over and saw Vin on his stomach, asleep. He’d snuggled deep into a corner, one arm jammed into the space between the cushions and the couch back and the other arm tucked next to his chest. From his location the muted hum of the others’ voices outside was soothing, the sharp edge of the words softened with distance.

Buck chuckled and headed to the kitchen but Chris lingered a moment to watch the gentle rise and fall of his son’s chest. He was pleased that Vin felt secure enough to sleep here, surrounded by family and friends; that had to be some kind of victory, he thought. Carefully, he lifted a light quilt from the recliner, covered Vin’s legs and then gently stroked the tumble of hair from the boy’s face before continuing into the kitchen.

“How long should we give him?” Buck asked quietly as he removed the bowl of potato salad from the refrigerator.

“Twenty minutes should do him,” Chris replied with a final glance over his shoulder. Meeting Buck’s eyes, he added. “Like it does you at your desk in the office.”

Buck snorted and cracked a grin. “It’s beauty rest to keep my valuable assets sharp, boss.”

Chris rolled his eyes and turned away, muttering, “I’m amazed we get anything done.” Buck chuckled and the pair turned their attention to meal preparations.

Matt Larabee rose from the deck step, laughing. Ezra’s replies to JD endless questions had entered the realm of outlandish and he marveled at both his grandson’s ability to find a question anywhere and the agent’s ability to come up with a reply- true or not - without a moment’s hesitation. The two of them seemed to be enjoying their game so Matt took the opportunity of JD’s distraction to see where his other grandson had gone.

Claire stood nearby on the deck talking quietly with Josiah and Nathan and he caught her eye with a questioning look. She smiled warmly in return and nodded once toward the window next to her. Matt stepped to the sliding glass door and spied Vin stretched out on the couch. He, too, smiled at the sight and exchanged contented looks with his wife before quietly entering the house.

Matt stopped at the end of the couch and watched Vin, whose face was completely relaxed in sleep. "*He amazes me,*" the eldest Larabee thought. "*To remain so innocent through all his trials.*" As he watched, though, Vin's expression subtly changed. The smooth brow furrowed and twitched. A soft groan escaped his lips. Concerned, Matt moved in next to his grandson and crouched down.

"Vin?" he called softly. "Vin?" Matt placed his palm between the boy's shoulder blades and rubbed small circles. Vin's frown deepened and his breathing hitched. Matt continued to rub the boy's back with one hand as he reached for Vin's far shoulder with the other, intending to help him sit up.

The reaction he got was completely unexpected.

Vin's eyes snapped open and his forward arm lashed out. The other arm was caught behind him, stuck in the crevasse of the cushion against back of the couch. Matt tried to help him up and Vin exploded.

"NO, NO, NO!" he screamed, twisting away from Matt's touch.

"Vin, son, it's okay!" Matt soothed in vain.

Chris appeared from the kitchen in an instant but he was unable to reach his panicked son. Vin grew eerily quiet as he fought to free himself from the couch, growing hysteria fueling his struggle. Matt leaned forward and gripped Vin's shoulders again, murmuring calmly, but fell backward suddenly when Vin head-butted his nose.

Matt hit the floor just as Vin wrenched himself free of the cushions and kicked to untangle his legs from the quilt. Chris tried to grab him but the couch's high back blocked him. Once Vin fought his way free of the quilt, he thudded to the floor next to Matt, arms swinging and legs pumping.

Chris vaguely noticed the rest of the group spill through the sliding glass door into the great room. "Matthew!" Claire cried as she pushed her way through them. Chris rounded the couch, his focus entirely on Vin who continued to punch and kick in uncontrolled panic. Matt, one hand pressed against his nose, still tried to reassure Vin but Chris knew it was useless – Vin was in the throes of something more than a nightmare.

"VINCENT MICHAEL TANNER!" Chris bellowed from the end of the couch.

From his knees between Matt and the couch Vin froze, gasping. His eyes were wide, round and unfocused as he blinked at his Grandpa. Claire took a step forward, but Chris held up a hand and stopped her with a glance.

“Don’t move,” he ordered before addressing the boy in a softer tone. “Vin,” Chris said. “I’m here, son. I’m here. You’re safe.” He moved slowly as he spoke and then lowered himself to one knee at his boy’s side. Vin trembled as his eyes tracked the voice and his gaze finally linked with his father’s. Chris reached out and lightly brushed Vin’s cheek with his fingertips. “Vin? I’m here.”

Vin’s frame shook violently with the touch and he seemed to collapse inward. Both arms reached out and Chris pulled him into a secure hug. The only sounds in the room were of Vin’s desperate gasps and Chris’ low murmurs of reassurance. Slowly, Chris rose to stand. After adjusting the thin frame in his grip, he turned aside and strode down the hall, away from the crowd.

The group roused from their stunned silence with Claire’s worried voice as she kneeled next to her husband. “Matthew?” She touched the smear of blood exposed under Matt’s hand. “Looks like you have a bloody nose.”

“I’ll get a cold cloth,” Nathan said, heading to the kitchen.

“Is Vin okay, Da?” JD said nervously from the porch where Ezra held his hand. “He was so scared! Is he okay?”

Buck stepped up and gathered JD into his arms. “Shhh, lil’ bit, he’s fine. He was just havin’ a nightmare, that’s all. You know how scary that is, huh?”

“Yeah. It’s real scary.” From his father’s arms, JD looked down the hallway. “Can I go see him? He needs me.”

“Let’s give him and Chris a few minutes, buddy. Here, help me take stuff out to the table first.” Buck carried JD to the kitchen, giving Matt a worried glance over his shoulder.

“I’m okay,” Matt said rather nasally as he gave Buck a wave and accepted the damp, cool cloth Nathan offered. Claire helped him to the couch while the rest of the group tried to act “normal” for JD’s sake. Nathan asked to see Matt’s nose while Claire offered sympathy. Josiah and Ezra exchanged quiet comments as they walked to the kitchen to help with preparations. The knowledge that Vin would be ashamed and embarrassed by his actions shadowed everyone’s thoughts.

Chris concluded that Vin’s outburst was undoubtedly caused by fear or, most likely, terror. The definition slipped from the former to the latter in relation to the time it took for Chris to feel Vin’s heartbeat settle as he rocked the slight frame in the privacy of the boys’ bedroom. Dusk slipped into the deeper shadows of night and Chris could smell the scent of barbecued steaks before Vin found his voice again.



“Chris?” The word tickled Chris’ chest where Vin’s face pressed against him. The awful shaking had finally ceased, replaced by tender clinginess.

“Hey, Cowboy. I’m here.” Vin kneaded Chris’ shirt with a sweaty fist. Chris’ impression was that Vin was still trying to discern if he was real. “I have you now, Vin. You’re safe.”

Several beats of silence passed before Vin shifted in the comforting grip.

He whispered hoarsely. “I . . . I was . . . sleepin’.”

More of a statement than a question. Chris considered it a positive sign.

“Yes, you were. You awake now?”

Vin nodded. “You yelled.”

“Yes, I did. Did I scare you?”

A small shake of his head ended with a nod and a tiny gasp. “Weren’t you that scared me. I . . . I’s dreamin’.”

“You want to talk about it?”

Vigorous shaking of the shaggy head said it all. It was the same response he gave Dr. Will received when asked about his dreams at their twice a week appointments.

“Maybe later, then.” Chris stroked Vin’s hair, concentrating completely on calming his charge and shoving his questions to the deepest part of his mind. Vin shifted again and pulled away a little. Chris looked down. “Hungry?”

“Smells good,” Vin whispered after a moment, studying his fingers entwined in Chris’ shirt front. Pulling them loose, he then examined his nails and glanced sideways at his father. “I’s sorry.” The words were barely audible. His fingers worked into a fist.

Chris tilted his son’s face up with a finger under his chin. “Vin, there’s nothing to be sorry about. You can’t control your dreams.”

“It was . . . so real . . .” Vin clutched at Chris’ shirt again, his hands trembling.

It was at that moment that Dr. Will’s warnings arose in Chris’ memories. *“Vin’s recounted a lot of his time with Grace and Jesse, but there is still the time he spent with Harold Evans to be accounted for. We both know that the facts point toward molestation at the least and rape at the worst. Either way, those memories will surface at some time - probably when he starts to feel safe again - and you’ll have to be prepared.”*

Chris found he wasn’t prepared in the least. With that, he fell back on the one thing that worked – he re-settled his boy in his arms and spoke from the heart. “This is what’s real, Vin. Your family.” Vin’s eyes slid sideways and upward, the blue visible between blond lashes as he regarded his dad. Vin didn’t look entirely convinced.

Chris knew what the boy wanted to hear but he wasn't sure he could sell the sentiment yet; it was, after all, his fault Vin was taken two years ago and the guilt was still heavy inside. Chris held the boy's gaze and forced a smile, saying the words anyway and hoping Vin would believe them. Maybe if he said them enough, they both would believe them. "With your family at your back, you're always safe, son."

It was a long few moments before Chris felt rather than saw Vin's nod. He relaxed his grip when Vin pressed back, twisting his head so he could look at his dad's face. After a moment, Vin raised a finger and traced the corded scar that split Chris' left eyebrow.

It must be their unique bond – strong at this moment - that allowed the boy to immediately zero in on the symbol of his father's guilt, Chris realized. The action was followed by a grumbling noise that broke the deep connection.

Chris chuffed and guiltily broke the examination by pressing Vin's head gently back onto his chest. "Sounds like someone besides me is hungry."

"I . . . I can't." Vin sounded scared, but Chris deduced that he was more than likely mortified by his actions now that he had the presence of mind to remember them.

"Hey." Chris pressed his hand over the small, nervous fingers entwined in his shirtfront, stilling them. "We all have things we're embarrassed about, Vin. But you and I have something some people don't." With charged hesitance, Vin leaned back again and questioningly raised his eyes to Chris'. Chris was relieved he could say something he truly believed this time. "See? You already know. We have good friends and family that stand by us. They understand, Vin, but we won't face them until you're ready."

Chris pulled his boy close again and waited for any signal of the next step. He smiled when Vin's stomach grumbled once more and forced a decision.

"I . . . I need to talk to Grampa Matt first," Vin whispered. "I gotta 'pologize, don't I?"

"If it's what you think needs to be done, son." They separated and Chris stood. Vin looked around, seeming to just realize that they had been on the floor of his room this whole time. "Do you want me to bring him here?"

Vin nodded stiffly. "I . . . um, gotta wash my hands." He rubbed his palms on his shorts.

"You do that and I'll get Grampa Matt. Trust me, Vin, everything's okay." Chris rested his hand on the top of Vin's head for a moment. "Ready?" He offered his hand and Vin took it. Chris opened the room door and they both stepped into

the hall. Happy chatter drifted from the great room, easing Vin's tense posture and Chris turned him to the bathroom. "Wash up and I'll send Grampa to your room."

Vin nodded and darted into the bathroom. Chris smiled as the door clicked shut, knowing this was only another beginning to yet another trial for Vin. His grin faded with his sigh. It was still a long road ahead. It was easier, he thought, knowing of the support that awaited the both of them in the great room. He unconsciously rubbed the scar over his eye and headed down the hall.

All eyes were on him when he stepped into the room but they visually relaxed when he nodded, each of them returning to their dinner preparation duties. Chris didn't see his father at first and headed toward the kitchen at Buck's head tilt in that direction. There, he found his mom fussing over his dad.

"Let me see, dear."

"I'm fine, honey. Really." Matt sounded like he had a head cold.

"How's Junior?" Buck's question pulled Chris from his parents' interaction.

"Fine."

Buck rolled his eyes and stood in front of Chris with his arms crossed over his chest. "Of course he's fine. Where's he now?"

"Washin' up." Chris glanced around the kitchen.

"JD's with Josiah at the grill," Buck added.

Chris nodded and turned back around. "Dad?" His mother dabbed his father's nose with a damp washcloth. Chris raised an eyebrow at his father's swollen face. "You all right?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine. How's Vin?" Matt's eyes refocused on Claire and he sputtered, "Enough, woman, I'm fine."

Nathan snorted as he entered the kitchen. "That's where they get that," he muttered on his way to the sink.

Chris didn't acknowledge his teammate. He addressed Matt with a slight grin. "He wants to see you in his room."

There wasn't any hesitation as Matt started from the kitchen. Chris stopped him with a hand on his arm. "I think he remembered something," Chris said lowly, meeting Matt's eyes. "Don't press."

"I won't." Matt reached up and patted Chris' cheek. "You're a great dad," he said before turning down the hall.

Chris watched him disappear into the boys' room then turned back to find the others smirking at him. "Dinner ain't gonna serve itself," he growled, as he lifted a large knife from the counter. "Who's burning the meat?"

Nathan and Buck bolted from the room as Claire frowned disapprovingly at her son.

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“Vin?” Matt tapped on the bedroom door and waited. His nose throbbed but he chose to ignore it for the moment. “Vin?” he called again, fighting the urge to press his ear to the door.

“Grampa Matt?”

Vin’s soft voice behind him made him jump before turning to the boy in the hall. Vin looked small and very worried. Matt immediately dropped to a knee. “Vin?” he queried, touching his grandson’s shoulder. “How are you doing?” He ached to wrap his arms around his grandson but instead, stroked back Vin’s wavy hair.

“I’m fine,” he said quietly. “I’m . . . sorry, Grampa. I hurt you.” Vin’s voice quivered with the last words and his fingers twisted together.

Matthew Larabee was a man that easily stood up for himself but with this heartbreaking apology, any semblance of decorum fell aside. Without another word, he gathered Vin in his arms and drew the small body to his own. “Oh, Vin,” he began in spite of his tight throat. “You have no need to apologize. I’ll always love you, no matter what. I want you to always believe that but until your heart believes it, it won’t be true.”

The statement seemed to upset Vin. He dropped his eyes and concentrated on his writhing and entwined fingers.

“Vin?” Matt said softly, laying his big hand on top of the busy fingers. “It just takes time, that’s all. Your heart will come around. I promise.”

“What about Dad’s heart? Will it believe, too?”

The question astonished Matt - not for the fact that Christopher wrestled with guilt about Vin’s disappearance, but that, above his own personal agonies, Vin noticed the depth of Chris’ pain, too. It took a bit of time for Matt to collect himself enough to speak.

“Yes,” he rasped lowly. “It will. With your help, it will.”

Matt felt the tenseness melt away from Vin’s body as the boy finally returned the embrace. “I was dreamin’,” he started, “n he . . .” It seemed he was going to say more, but his voice caught and he swallowed hard before falling silent. Matt felt a shiver roll through the tiny body.

“I’m here, Vin. We’re all here for you. We love you. You remember that when things get tough, okay?”

Vin’s cheek rubbed against Matt’s chest as he nodded. “kay,” he whispered.

Matt held him a minute longer and then sniffed the air. “Hey,” he said. “I smell steak. Ready for some food? I know I’m hungry.”

“Yeah,” Vin acknowledged after a moment before wiggling free and turning those wide, blue eyes to his Grandpa.

Matt saw that a trace of uncertainty still hovered there so he slowly stood, unable to contain a slight groan from overtaxed knees, and took Vin’s hand.

The uncertainty fled with concern. “You okay, Grampa?” Vin asked, holding Matt’s hand tightly.

Matt chuckled. “Nothing that some more time with my grandsons won’t fix,” he replied. Vin managed a tiny smile as Matt tugged Vin toward the great room. “Come on, kiddo. My knees may not work right anymore, but there’s nothin’ wrong with my stomach!”

Vin’s face brightened with his smile and they headed back to the gathering.

## CHAPTER FOUR

After Sunday's festivities, Monday morning seemed overly quiet. With Buck at work and JD at school, Chris, Vin, Matt and Claire enjoyed a quiet breakfast and lazy morning. After that, Chris and Vin readied themselves to pick up the new truck and trade in the Jeep.

Vin was sad about getting rid of the "death trap on wheels"; Chris had considered hanging on to it for him but that thought had been summarily crushed by the rest of the team the very first time it was uttered aloud. He had to grin every time he recalled the appalled looks he'd received at the idea.

After picking up the truck and getting lunch, Chris planned to drop by the office and pick up a little work and reacquaint Vin with the place. Matt and Claire would pick up JD from school and then meet them at the ranch. While Chris worked on files, the boys would be treated to movie and dinner with Grandma and Grampa in town.

Chris knew Vin would figure out the underlying plan to ease into their separation. He couldn't think of a better way to soften the needed steps; Claire and Matt were perfect for the assignment.

The only glitch in plans was the phone call Chris received just as they left the car dealer. Buck called to tell him that Travis just called a meeting and requested Chris' participation.

Vin's grip on Chris' hand tightened with their first step into the Federal Building and grew more damp as the crowd thickened near the security line. He looked down briefly with a confident smile and Vin gallantly tried to return the gesture. To Chris, he just looked a lost. The fun and excitement of picking up the new truck had run its course.

"Nothing's changed much here, has it?" The question aimed to keep Vin slightly distracted as they cleared security and headed to the elevator banks.

Before answering the boy looked carefully around and finally shook his head. “No,” he said softly. His grip loosened slightly.

Silver doors slipped open with a muted metallic thump. Chris stepped in first with Vin a half step behind, followed by a half dozen or so other riders. It was a close atmosphere and Chris felt that Vin probably needed further distraction. He leaned over a spoke lowly into his son’s ear. “14<sup>th</sup> floor.”

Vin scanned the numbered circles, poking the appropriate one. The other riders smiled amusingly and verbalized floors, keeping Vin occupied for a short while after the doors swooshed shut. By the time he was finished, their stop was upon them. The small hand initiated its grip again.

“I’m sorry about the change in plans, son,” Chris said in a soothing voice. “Shouldn’t take long – I just have to pick up a few things after I meet with Travis and then we’ll have lunch and get on home. Give the new truck a real road test.”

Vin nodded exhaled a little sigh. Looking down at the soft, wavy tresses of his boy’s head, Chris was once again extremely grateful to have this second chance with the son of his heart.

When the doors opened on the 14<sup>th</sup> floor Vin scooted out a half step ahead of his dad and lead the way down the hall. Chris quirked a grin, pleased that he remembered the way. Smiles and murmured greetings followed them as they passed various clerical staff and agents. The story of the emotional rescue had spread to every corner of the floor.

Vin paused a second as if pulling from a memory and pushed open the appropriate door, releasing Chris’ hand and walking inside ahead of him.

“Well, look who has graced us with their illustrious presence! Master Tanner, you are looking well today.” Ezra rose from his chair and moved closer, extending his hand.

“Hi, Uncle Ezra.” Vin shook the offered hand shyly and then turned a bright expression in Chris’ direction.

“Vin,” Nathan greeted warmly when he stepped from the break room. “It’s good to see you. How are the new wheels?”

Chris took the opportunity to find Buck as both Nathan and Ezra gave Vin their full attention regarding the new truck. The boy’s slow, soft words warmed him – Vin’s self-confidence blossomed in familiar territory. Chris found Buck and Josiah in his office. Buck was leaning back in the chair with his feet on Chris’ desk, crossed at the ankles. Josiah stood next to him, his finger tapping a file folder in Buck’s hand. Chris and raised a questioning eyebrow at the pair. “Comfy?”

Buck looked up and broke into a grin. “Hey, boss, just getting’ things all organized for ya, that’s all.”

“What’s this meeting about?” Reluctant to be sucked into his workspace, Chris stayed in the open office door and glare. “It couldn’t wait?”

“I’ve got a few theories on Faraday,” Josiah said, taking the folder back from Buck. “Travis says he has some new information.”

Buck waved a hand and picked up the phone. “I know you gotta get Vin back home to meet up with JD and your parents. I told Travis that.” He punched a few buttons and spoke into the receiver. “Chris’ here. We’re headin’ up now.”

Buck stood and playfully pushed Chris into the bullpen with Josiah trailing behind. Vin sat on a desk chair, swinging his feet a looking not only relaxed, but happy and involved with whatever had Nathan and Ezra had going.

“Vin? I’ll be right back. I’ll be up in Travis’ office.” Vin glanced up and nodded, then returned his attention on a handful of playing cards. Chris didn’t have to ask where they came from.

“We have everything under control here,” Ezra said as he pulled a card out of his jacket pocket. “Is this your card?” He asked, looking back to the boy. Nathan snorted and Vin cocked a suspicious eye at his uncle.

Chris shook his head, chuckled at Vin’s glare and left the room behind Buck and Josiah. Once in the elevator, Buck leaned close and said, “So you’re okay with leaving him two floors down?”

“Shut up, Buck,” Chris growled half-heartedly. There was no way he’d admit any reservations now, especially with the understanding smile plastered on Josiah’s face.

Travis’ secretary greeted the agents warmly when they walked in. “The Director is waiting for you in the conference room.”

Chris glanced at Buck, who shrugged. “Someone else here?”

“There’s a Dr. Beauchamp in with Director Travis. That’s all I can tell you.” She pointed at the closed conference room door. “They are expecting you. Go on in.”

A tiny thread of dread began to knot in Chris’ gut when he lightly rapped the door before pushing it open. The feeling that they were getting bushwhacked crossed Chris’ mind.

“Chris, Buck, Josiah I’m glad you’re here. Sorry for the suddenness, but I think you need to see this.” Travis sat at the head of a small table and waved a remote control in the general direction of a video screen on the wall. “This is Dr. Elliot Beauchamp.” The Director gestured to a balding man sitting to his right. Open files and loose sheets papered the table in front of the pair. “He’s the psychiatrist the Feds contracted to evaluate Jesse Faraday – or the man that calls himself Jesse Faraday.”



Buck greeted the doctor but Chris' eyes narrowed at Travis. "If he's not Jesse Faraday then who is he?"

Josiah sat next to the Doctor and asked to peruse a file on the table. Beauchamp slid it over to the big agent as Travis motioned for them to sit and they did – Chris reluctantly.

After a moment, Travis spoke. "I know you haven't officially returned to full duty yet, Chris, but I thought you'd want to know about this. Remember when Vin couldn't pick out Faraday in the photo line-up we showed him at his doctor's office?"

"Yeah."

"That's because none of those photos were of the man we know as Jesse Faraday. The man we have in custody is someone else."

"Who?"

"We still don't know. No prints on file, no facial recognition software hits, no DNA matches, nothing. We even tried voice recognition. The Jesse Faraday that was Grace Faraday Giltner's blood brother died six years ago."

Dr. Beauchamp spoke. "I was asked to interview the man in question and evaluate his mental condition at the request of the Agency," he said. "I've had a several interviews with him in the past two weeks. That is what I have here." He motioned toward the monitor.

Travis pointed the remote at the screen but Chris stopped him with a raised hand. "I'm sorry, I have to ask. How long will this take? Vin's supposed to meet my parents at the ranch in about two hours."

"It may take a while, Chris. Maybe one of your team could take him home?"

Chris instantly bristled at the idea of separating from Vin, but at the same time he recognized the feeling and gave Buck an annoyed glare. There was no way he'd yet admit how much truth there was to his friend's evaluation. Buck's returned smirk was definitely the "I told you so" kind.

"Call Nathan," Buck suggested. "He was planning on taking off early anyway and the ranch is in the same general direction as Raine's clinic."

Chris ground his teeth and stood. "Excuse me a minute." He moved out to the reception area and dialed his cell phone. "Nathan? Can you take Vin home? I'm going to be tied up longer than I thought and my parents are picking him up there. Hit McDonald's on your way out of town."

"Sure, Chris. No problem."

"Thanks, Nate, I appreciate it." He worked to convince himself that this brief separation might be a good thing for Vin – for the both of them. "Let me talk to Vin."

“Sure.”

Although Chris kept his tone upbeat he could tell that Vin was disappointed and tentative at the change in plans.

“When ya gonna be home?” Vin asked softly.

Chris could see him in his mind’s eye holding the phone close and hunching his shoulders over in an effort to conceal his worry. “Before you and JD, I’m sure. You’ll have fun with Grampa and Grandma – I know they’re looking forward to it. We’ll have some cocoa before bed and you can tell me all about the movie, okay?”

“Okay.” The reply was a bare whisper.

“I love you, Vin.”

“I love you too, dad.”

Chris closed the phone and let out a frustrated breath. Carding his hair with his fingers Chris glanced up to see Travis’ secretary looking sympathetic. “Tough being a parent, isn’t it?”

“Sometimes, yeah.” Returning a tightlipped smile, he rejoined the meeting and tried to focus on the meeting.

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“Let me guess.” Nathan said as they headed down the highway to the ranch after driving through the Golden Arches. “You’re saving the other half of that apple pie for Peso.”

The medic was glad that Vin seemed to be comfortable around him; because of that, Nathan refrained from any comments about the downside of food from the Golden Arches. Although Vin wasn’t as animated as he’d seen him in the past weeks, his body language reflected contentment. Not usually chatty in any sense of the word, Nathan wasn’t concerned about the stretches of silence during the drive. Vin replied to all his questions and had even asked a question or two of his own regarding Raine. The apple pie observation even made him smile.

“Yeah,” Vin admitted as he cradled the golden arches bag in his hands. “Chris says he’s a junk food junkie like me ‘n JD.”

Nathan cringed and they shared a laugh, then it was quiet for a minute or two. “So,” Nathan started. “Chris tells me you’re getting tested for school on Thursday? You nervous about that?”

Vin glanced his way and then stared out to the road as it unwound before them. “A little,” he said quietly.

“Is it seeing the kids at school again or the test itself that makes you nervous?”

“A little of both, I guess.” Vin dropped his gaze and fingered the fast food bag. “Not sure what I’ll remember.”

“You mean what kids you’ll remember?”

Vin nodded. “Yeah. I just . . .”

“You don’t want them looking at you like you have two heads or something.”

Vin’s head jerked up, the flash of surprise quickly replaced with a shy smile. “Yeah. Like that. I don’t want ‘em lookin’ at me.”

“*Well, that hasn’t changed one bit. Still doesn’t like too much attention,*” Nathan thought. “I’m sure it will be very low key, Vin. Testing like this is a private thing and the school is required to keep it that way. Chris said he’d be there, too. It’ll be fine, I’m sure. Nothin’ like having a Larabee shield.”

That seemed appealing to the boy and after a small smile, he sighed and looked outside. The wind had picked up and the tree tops gently twisted against a spotty blue sky. Puffy clouds tumbled lazily across each other. “It’s supposed ta rain later,” Vin said.

“You hear that on the news?” Nathan asked. He hadn’t paid attention and now wondered about his and Raine’s plans to go shopping.

“Nah. It just . . . feels like it. I better make sure the horses are in.”

“How about I drop you at the barn?” Nathan thought the solo chore was a good step in Vin reclaiming his self-confidence. “I’ll head up to the house and get it unlocked.”

“I need to bring the dogs up, too,” Vin added. “They get scared if they stay in the kennel during a storm.”

“Sounds like a plan. Come and get me if you need help with anything.”

By the time they rounded the final, long turn and the ranch driveway came into view, the wind had picked up and the patches of blue in the sky were quickly filling in. Although the clouds weren’t dark at the moment, Nathan knew how quickly things could change. He stopped behind to the barn, close to the rear door and pleased to see that Chris’ wrecked truck was finally gone; things were looking up at the Larabee household. Smiling at the thought, he glanced at the turn-out pasture as Vin exited and noticed that it looked empty. He also heard the dogs barking rather furiously and figured they heard his car. “Sounds like they’ll be happy to get inside.”

“Yeah. I’ll make sure the barn’s closed up ‘n give the horses some feed.” Vin’s hair fluttered in the rising wind as he turned to close the car door. Hugging Peso’s treat close to his chest, Vin waved and smiled, his small figure quickly disappearing inside the barn.

Nathan chuckled and continued around the barn and got a first look at the house as he continued up the drive. It always seemed impossibly quiet when the boys were gone; a slight feeling of melancholy put Nathan in a somber mood.

He parked the car around the back, as close as he could get to the house, and entered through the kitchen door after fumbling to find the right key. Once inside, he quickly strode through the kitchen to the front door where the alarm panel was mounted. His mind was completely distracted by thoughts of the devastating events this house had bared witness to over the years as he dropped the keys in his pocket and lifted his arm to the panel. When he raised a finger to punch the security code, Nathan was momentarily stymied when he realized the digital display was blank.

Instantly alert, a faint noise down the hall instigated reaction and his gun was in his hand without thought. Nathan froze – listening. The power appeared to be out, but something about that and the alarm didn't add up – there should be a battery back-up so the system couldn't be disabled.

Nathan held his breath and visually checked the great room and kitchen before moving carefully to the hallway and the source of the muted sound, reaching into his pocket to turn off the phone – he didn't want it to ring and give away his position.

The only noise he heard was that of the growing storm and the distant barking of the frenzied dogs in the kennel; had he imagined the sound or was there a reason the dogs were upset? Nathan cautiously crept down the hall and paused at the first door, which was on his right and partially ajar – the boys' bathroom.

When Nathan pressed the door fully open and glanced inside the small room he heard rustling from the boys' room and spun around. Muzzle flash from the bedroom doorway surprised him into returning fire at the same time he felt a fiery jab in his thigh.

Nathan fired again in the general direction of the flash, seeing an indistinct shadow sink deeper into the small bedroom. He heard barked orders and realized he was out-numbered on top of being seriously injured and instinctively turned to retreat and regroup. Nathan managed several strides before his leg collapsed. Using the forward motion, he rolled and crawled to the kitchen and then hauled himself to his feet using the kitchen table.

*“There should be more pain.”* The thought crossed his mind as he stumbled through mud room, fumbled with the door lock and fell out to the porch. Another shot hit the door frame and splinters peppered Nathan's cheek – no time to escape in the car. Instead, he used it as cover and bolted for the nearby trees, thankful for the adrenalin that allowed him to function.

Once under the concealment of the trees, Nathan began a wide circle toward the barn and Vin. Only after he was with the boy would he think of escape; for now, he had to be quiet and quick. The wind was in his favor at the moment. Being the leading edge of a storm Nathan knew it would rapidly grow in strength until the first downpour, and then it would quickly dissipate as the front blew onward. For now, he could use the growing tempest to help mask his movements but he had to move fast.

The blossoming pain in his thigh forced him to consider his ability to move at all by the time he'd reached the back of the barn. Wrenching the shuddering door open, Nathan used it as a crutch as he made his way inside.

"Vin!" He wanted to shout at the top of his stressed lungs, but he had no idea where the shooters were. The fractious door challenged his balance and pain dangerously narrowed his vision. He had to get the boy out of here. "Vin!"

He had no idea where he came from, but in the next instant Vin was at his side, supporting him with eyes as wide as a turbulent ocean. Still, he bravely stood his ground.

"Vin, you have to ride." Nathan's voice was breathy, the groans he tried to hold back eking out between clenched teeth.

"No!" Vin refused bravely, his voice quivering.

"You have to go," Nathan gasped, dragging the boy toward Peso's stall. All the horses milled nervously, banging the walls, their eyes white-edged in fear. Managing to drag a bridle from a hook beside the door, Nathan released Vin and used an elbow for traction to push his way up the wall where he started working the stall door's latch. Shiny blood oozed from his thigh, shadowing the hole in his jeans with red. "They want you, Vin. You have to get away and hide."

"No, Unca Nathan, I . . ." Terror edged Vin's voice to a higher pitch.

"They can't follow you. The rain will cover your tracks when it gets here. It's the best, Vin. Ride west, toward the city. Use the hills and trees for cover." As he spoke, Nathan managed to free the latch then slumped aside to open the stall door. The straw in Peso's stall rustled and the animal snorted nervously.

Vin breathing stuttered as he fought tears. "Unca Nathan . . ."

"You have to, Vin." Nathan stumbled into the stall, using the wall to keep upright. "Your dad will find you. One of us will find you. Come on . . ." He directed toward the sketchy horse suspiciously regarding him from across the stall.

Nathan spoke softly in an effort to calm Peso but the horse was having none of it. The big animal shifted, planting his feet, busy ears reflecting conflicted thoughts before finally pinning back; he zeroed in a targeting glare. As he bunched to charge, Vin stepped between them and the horse aborted his lunge.

“Hey there, Peso. Stop it. You know Nathan.” The boy’s voice was remarkably calm. Without dropping his gaze, Vin reached back and Nathan shoved the bridle into his hand. He could now use both hands to keep atop his failing legs.

The fleeting seconds it took for Vin to approach and slip on the headstall allowed the searching voices outside to grow much louder, even in the rising wind. Roof shingles rattled and the barn walls shivered with an especially hard gust. Vin kept Peso distracted and focused on him as he led the horse to the stall’s corner manger. Once there, Vin crawled up onto the edge and easily slipped onto the wide, black back in one smooth motion.

Nathan stood frozen during it all, afraid to move and break the calming spell Vin weaved with his words. Once the boy was mounted, though, a long groan slipped from Nathan’s throat as he pressed the heel of his hand against his wound. Pushing back against the wall he worked his way out of the stall and stumbled to the rear barn door. Peso’s dark shadow followed. Nathan managed a firm hold on the resisting rear door and pushed it open, exposing the distant hills, the growing black sky and roiling trees. He struggled to keep his feet as the door fought him.

The wind moaned. Vin legged Peso forward into the coming darkness. Nathan could tell that the boy was as scared as he’d ever been but Vin still managed to keep the fractious horse calm. His ability to look collected in the heart of chaos reminded Nathan of Chris and he caught his breath at the sudden revelation.

The pair eased outside, Peso’s ears flicking constantly, his manner tense yet obedient and trusting. Vin was the animal’s sole anchor at the moment.

“Here.” Nathan slipped out of his jacket and handed it up to Vin. “Wrap up and git. My cell phone’s in the pocket. Don’t call here, understand? Get away then call Travis. His number’s on my ‘Contacts’ list. Get to a safe place first.”

“Nathan . . .” Vin started, hugging the jacket to his chest and fighting to keep Peso reined in. His hair whipped wildly in the wind, a living frame to the depth of fear that colored his eyes.

“Go, Vin!” Nathan could hear voices at the front of the barn. They were out of time. He pulled his gun from the small of his back and stumbled into the barn, wrestling the door behind him.

Vin had no other choice. Nathan watched through the door’s closing gap as Vin reined Peso toward the distant mountains and leaped away into the trees. With the door fully shut and latched, Nathan leaned against it for a moment, mentally counting until he was sure Vin was out of sight. Then, dragging his wounded leg, stepped deeper into the barn and tried to think. Terse orders

shouted just outside the double doors facing the house kept him moving – he had to find a place to hide and give Vin time to get some distance between them.

Something banged the doors. Nathan ducked into Peso's empty stall and fell, his agony-ripped leg finally giving away for good. He managed to drag his protesting body under the manger and pushed himself into the corner; the location wouldn't hold up under a careful search but the small space under the solid, wall-mounted manger was deep enough and dark enough to pass a first glance. Nathan pulled his wounded leg in close and worked to ignore the eye-watering effects of the manure and urine-laced straw that pillowed his body. He pushed it in front of him as cover and clutched his weapon to his chest, listening hard over his runaway heart.

He heard the main doors slide open and felt a solid thump on the stall wall as Pony paced his enclosure next door. Each stall had an outside paddock and Nathan could hear the other horses milling both inside and out as threat approached from all directions. The dogs' barking had become furious. A deep roll of thunder caused nervous nickering – Nathan had a hard time hearing the approach of his adversaries.

A low voice spoke sharply at Pony's stall door and Nathan tensed. Another replied from somewhere else in the barn. A stall door rattled, followed by a thump.

"SHIT! He attacked me!"

"It's a horse not a guard dog!" the sharp voice snapped right next to Nathan. A pair of worn work boots stopped in Peso's stall, an arm's reach away.

"Okay Dr. Doolittle, *you* go in there and check!"

"It's the storm, you moron. They're scared and want out."

"There's nothin' here anyway . . ."

Nathan heard the boot wearer swear softly and the sound of rusting clothes. "Yes, sir?" the voice said, answering a cell phone. A momentary pause, then, "We've searched the house and grounds. There was only one guy. We winged 'im and he's hidin' somewhere. We're searchin' the barn. No sign of the kid. I don't think he's here." Another pause. "What?" followed by, "The house too? I don't think we'll have time." The boots stepped out of the stall and out of Nathan's view. "Yes, sir." The phone snapped closed and the speaker barked words that made Nathan instantly break into a cold sweat. "He says burn it."

"Gladly!" the other voice snarled. "Fuckin' animals." A stall door was kicked – Nathan couldn't tell if it was by horse or human. "There's some gas cans in the tool room over there."

## SAVING VIN

Swallowing rising bile, Nathan visually measured the distance from where he was to the outside paddock – if he used the smoke as cover, he prayed to make it out before he burned to death.



## CHAPTER FIVE

When realization struck, Chris pushed instantly to his feet. “Are you saying that he’s planning an escape?”

Josiah nodded while leafing through the doctor’s notes. “It’s the only conclusion I can draw with this additional information. I wouldn’t be surprised if a plan was put in motion the day he was arrested.” He tapped Dr. Beauchamp’s folder. “He has no fear of incarceration. This man truly believes that this isn’t his destiny. He is a paranoid and meticulous planner. Nothing is out of his control.”

Dr. Beauchamp nodded in agreement. “That is why I brought this information to you so quickly. My last appointment with him was Saturday afternoon.”

“And from what little we know of him personally, we know the depth of his connections,” Travis said lowly. “He even had one of our own on his payroll! How do you think he found out about our raid on his place and got our tactical gear? I have no doubt he already has a plan in action.” Usually, the Assistant Director was a picture of control. This suggestion, however, obviously rattled him. Buck could see his mind racing with possible scenarios; trying to outthink this particular foe was not so simple.

“This man has always had a plan set,” Beauchamp continued. “He always has a contingency. That is why he is so hard to trace – he’s thought of everything.”

There was a beat of tense quiet. Chris snapped his gaze to Travis and pinned him with a glare. “You knew this?”

“Suspected the possibility. That’s why the Doctor’s here now. After reading Agent Sanchez’s evaluation last week I arranged for Dr. Beauchamp’s final interview to be bumped up to Saturday. I’m sure Faraday is not the easiest nut to crack, but it looks like it’s not an ‘if’ for an escape attempt. It’s a ‘when’.”

“And that ‘when’ is close,” Buck said. “Once he’s moved to the high security lock up, it will be nearly impossible to escape.”

“No,” Josiah corrected, “not impossible for him. The connections we’ve found so far are alarming, but I have a feeling we have only scratched the surface. I have no doubt he’ll use everything he has this time and we’re in for some big surprises. He will not fail.”

“I concur.” Beauchamp indicated Travis to start the tape. Jesse Faraday looked into the camera lens as he spoke with the complete confidence and presentation of a tenured politician. Each question was answered briefly, as if simply tolerated. It was as if he was already gone from captivity in his mind. It was chilling.

Travis’ phone flashed and he picked it up as the rest of them watched the last interview with the man calling himself Jesse Faraday. He had the same predator-hard eyes as Ted Bundy and Charles Manson.

When Travis hung up the phone, the look in his eye caused Chris’ posture to stiffen.

“That was County jail. Carl Harrigan was just found stabbed to death.”

“Harrigan,” Buck repeated. “One of the two guys we arrested at Faraday’s place?” Travis nodded. “The other guy – he hung himself in his cell a week ago. All witnesses we had are now gone and Faraday has the perfect alibi – he’s in lock up.”

Travis nodded again, but Josiah spoke. “Loose ends tied up. Any connections to the jail staff?”

The hesitation was enough of an answer; it was suspicious. Faraday had payroll on the County staff, too. Chris held his boss’ hard stare. He could see it in Travis’ eyes – he’d come to the same conclusion. “He failed once,” Chris noted darkly. “Vin’s the only living witness against him now. The things he saw at Faraday’s place? He tried to get Vin at the scene.” Chris flexed his knuckles at the memory.

“And was thwarted in his attempt.” Beauchamp claimed Chris’ glare and flinched.

“I have absolutely no doubt that he will try again, Chris.” Josiah’s higher tone and quickly spoken words relayed his alarm. “And if he still wants an alibi, the attempt will be while he’s still in custody.”

Chris’ voice was icy cold and his eyes just as sharp as they turned to Travis. “When is Faraday getting moved?”

“This evening.”

Chris was through the office door before anyone could blink. Buck was a fraction of a second behind.

“Agent Sanchez, wait.” Travis managed to grab the profiler’s arm as he charged after his teammates. “I want Vin in witness protection until this is over, until Faraday is securely locked down.”

Josiah paused long enough to hear out his boss. “Pardon me, sir, but it sounds like that’s probably not going to happen in the near future. We can’t trust anyone with Vin’s security until we know the depth of Faraday’s infiltration. Right now, our family is in danger. Excuse me.”

Travis was on the phone the instant the door closed.

Chris barreled into Team 7’s office with his cell phone to his ear. “God damn it, Nathan!” he snarled. “Pick up!”

Ezra startled at the brutal entrance and shot to his feet. The expression on Chris’ face was all the persuasion he needed to don his jacket.

“Try the house on the land line,” Buck said loudly as he snatched the receiver from the cradle on his desk. Chris disappeared into his office. Buck spoke as he dialed. “Josiah, you and Ez head out to the ranch and brief Ezra on the way. I’m callin’ Matt and Claire and telling them to bring JD here to wait.”

“Wait for what, may I ask?” Ezra asked. Buck glared at him in response.

“Come on, brother,” Josiah said, pulling Ezra out the door by his arm. “I’ll explain, but we have to move now.”

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Josiah’s Suburban rumbled down the winding road at a white-knuckle pace. As Ezra gripped the dashboard and door’s arm rest he again thanked any God above that the road was still dry. Although the tempestuous wind-rocked trees and the roiling black clouds thickly blanketing the sky foreshadowed the coming storm’s violence, the rain delayed. He only hoped it would hold off long enough . . . for what, he couldn’t quite name.

“Where’s the rain?” Josiah murmured as they crossed the double yellow lines to cut the corner of the road’s curve.

“Do not borrow trouble, Mr. Sanchez. I would prefer the roadway remain dry at the moment.” Ezra braced his feet on the floor for the next wild turn but still slipped a bit along the bench seat. He pulled himself back into place.

“Me too, but that doesn’t bode well,” the profiler noted.

Ezra glanced at him and then followed Josiah’s troubled gaze outside. A dark grey haze hovered before them, beyond the curve. As the vehicle plunged into it, Ezra realized with one breath that it was smoke. Chris’ driveway was the next right turn. “Can’t you go any faster?” he snapped. When he reached for the county-

wide radio in the glove box and alerted the fire department, Ezra hoped that whatever was burning wasn't on Larabee's property.

Josiah straightened from the curve and then made a hard right onto the dirt turnoff to the ranch, inadvertently following the smoky trail. The SUV slewed sideways around the first gentle turn of the driveway and once they cleared a copse of wildly flailing trees, they saw bright orange flames in the belly of the barn.

"Holy mother of God." Josiah straightened out the Suburban and drove as close as he dared to the double doors before hitting the brakes. Ezra jumped out as the vehicle slid to a stop. No other cars were in sight – he hoped no one was here.

"Check the house!" Ezra yelled, running to the smoking structure. "I'll let the horses out!"

Pony and Darlin' frantically circled their outside paddocks trying to escape the inferno. Ezra could hear panicked calls of other horses on the far side of the barn. He vaulted over the top rail of the turn-out pasture and reached the first corral gate as Darlin' slammed against the fence. "Easy, girl," Ezra said automatically as he worked the latch. When it was free, he threw the gate open and the grey horse bolted into the lower pasture.

Ezra heard a shout and looked up to see Buck's truck lurch to a stop next to the Suburban. Both doors flew open and Chris and Buck leaped out. Ezra could hear sirens in the distance as he moved to Pony's corral. The black danced in place, crowding the gate, eyes rolling as Ezra fell on the latch. The other two men ran around to the back and the other paddocks. When Pony sprang free, the other horses joined him and stampeded away.

Ezra rapidly backed away from the smothering smoke. When it was clear enough to breathe, he stopped and searched for Buck and Chris and spotted them bent over, hands on knees, coughing hard, Ringo and Elvis cowering at their feet.

The wind pushed the black smoke away from them as bright flames licked the walls. Hot, orange fingers shot from the loft window above, instantly engaging the roof beams. The three of them hacked dry, burning coughs. Ezra's eyes stung, red from the swirling smoke. Forced back by the growing heat, the trio stumbled to a halt, shoulder to shoulder, away from the doomed structure. Approaching thunder rolled and the hairs on Ezra's arms leaped to attention.

"Peso!" Chris gasped. "He didn't come out!"

"He must be out already!" Buck rasped.

Chris quickly scanned the outer pasture where the horses milled. "I don't see . . ."

He never finished his sentence. Josiah yelled and they turned to see him waving wildly. What he shouted froze their hearts. “Nathan’s car’s in back! I can’t find him!”

Ezra didn’t hear the rest – he was already running to Peso’s corral where a lone figure crawled from the barn, just visible underneath billowing smoke. Ezra sprinted through the open paddock gate and was immediately swathed in hot, gritty clouds. His eyes instantly teared up. Before his vision completely failed, he managed to grab two full handfuls of Nathan’s shirt. They both wheezed with effort, struggling to breathe, but the adrenaline surge in Ezra’s blood did the work for both of them. Together, they stumbled a safe distance away before falling.

Ezra sat up to check Nathan, sprawled across his legs, and realized his teammate had passed out, pinning him. Still fighting to draw a breath, Ezra looked to his other teammates through a crushing black tunnel narrowing his vision. What he saw turned his stomach with horrid realization.

The roaring pulse in his ears overshadowed fading senses and the acrid scent in his nostrils. He didn’t need to hear anything, though, because he could clearly read Chris Larabee’s lips as he screamed for Vin. Both Josiah and Buck held him tight, fighting to keep him from charging into the flames. Ezra used the last of his strength to turn his throbbing head and stare at the barn.

“*Vin!*”

The only reply to his haggard shout was rolling thunder. He welcomed the darkness when it finally came and spared his breaking heart.

Rain poured from the sky in a crescendo of explosions and fire. Lightning lashed the heels of the downpour, quaking the surrounding earth. The first of the fire trucks slowed and stopped by the barn but the firefighters inside hesitated as the deluge did their job for them. The paramedic unit passed them and headed to Ezra and Nathan lying still on the ground.

The futility of the firefighters’ intervention flew through Buck’s head as he fought to keep Chris from killing himself. His friend’s voice was raw from screaming and Buck’s ears rang. For as long as he lived, he knew he’d never forget the sound – Vin’s name would join Sarah’s and Adam’s as an echo in his mind. Desperately, he clung to Chris’ body.

Josiah grunted when Chris managed to clip him with an elbow.

“LET ME GO! VIN!”

A loud hiss erupted from the barn as black steam carried on the wind. Bright orange still undulated in the barn, visible in the wall seams and framed by the loft window when the outside flames sputtered to death. A red and black tongue shot from Peso’s stall and was quickly killed by the downpour, the resulting black puff

torn asunder and quickly followed by a dull roar when the roof tumbled inward. Chris' hoarse scream, backed with a peal of thunder that carried the storm front eastward, tore painfully at Buck's ragged heart.

"Chris!" Buck begged. "Chris, stop! Stop!"

"Vin's in there! Let - me - go!" Chris threw his weight forward, dragging the two large agents several steps closer to the inferno. "VIN!"

Buck's throat clenched tight, strangling words. Josiah must have managed to trip their boss because the three of them crashed to the muddy ground, gasping. The volume of rain made it hard to see and grief made it impossible to breathe. Buck concentrated on keeping Chris' face out of the mud lest he suffocate, but Buck wasn't sure the man would realize he was dead if he did smother himself because he was already in Hell.

Chris stilled from exhaustion as great, sobbing waves of sorrow rolled through him. Josiah, panting, sat back on his haunches but kept a large hand and a knee on their leader's quivering back as he whispered empty platitudes.

Buck rolled onto his back and let the cold rain numb his body. A sharp crack, followed by a heavy rumble announced the collapse of the barn walls. Buck winced and rolled his eyes toward the pile of blackened wood and wondered dumbly at the purpose of the firemen standing in a half-circle around the dying fire. A small, 10-year-old's body would be tough to find in the remains - that much he knew for certain.

Buck gasped at the last thought and the tears started, unchallenged, mixing bitter salt with the falling rain. Bright yellow firefighters' turnouts trotted in his direction from the rescue rig while another pair headed toward Ezra and Nathan.

"Any injuries?" The coat collar flipped up over part of his mouth muffled the medic's voice. He squatted next to them. Water dripped from the edge of his helmet.

"The barn," Buck choked. "Vin . . ."

The medic paled and he keyed his radio. "Chief, there's possibly someone in the structure." The reply was scratchy. Buck didn't try to make out the words. "Okay," the medic replied and then turned back to the trio. "They're looking. I'm sorry."

After the initial down pour and the leading edge of the storm had passed, the rain lessened and the wind died. The thunder faded as the front pushed east.

The medic reached for Chris but Josiah grabbed his hand. "No need," the profiler said quietly. "His injuries aren't treatable."

The yellow-hooded head nodded briefly in understanding and he wisely rose and backed off. After a moment, he turned away and jogged toward his partner.

This was unbelievable. Unimaginable. Not fucking fair. Buck pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes closed willing himself to fill that space once again for both Chris and JD. The very thought made his tears run heavier; could he do it again? In that place deep inside where Buck had always managed to find a spark of drive, he found nothing. The well was dry.

Through the visceral sound of rainfall, Buck heard motion at his side. Visions of Chris storming his way through hot and soggy coals flashed in his mind's eye. He forced his eyes open and ordered his body to sit up and found Chris mirroring his posture. Buck also saw a raw emptiness in his long-time friend's eyes and it tore at his heart.

When Chris struggled to stand, Josiah was there to help him and Buck was grateful; he wasn't sure his own legs would hold him at the moment. Josiah moved in close, careful not to touch his boss but making it clear that he was there. Chris ignored him – his hollow eyes locked on the barn. Rain ran down his face unnoticed, his breathing was ragged and forced. Mud embraced him from head to toe and as he stood, knees locked and his body stiff, nature's shower slowly peeled it away.

Chris stood for a long minute before finally taking a wobbly step. Buck tiredly pushed to his feet and tried to find that buried reserve of strength.

"Chris!" Ezra's voice was sodden with rain, faint to their ears and peppered with coughs. "Chris, wait!"

Buck turned toward the normally dapper agent plowing his way through the mud. It struck him as odd; Ezra should have been either swearing bullets or choking on tears like the rest of them. But he was . . . bright. Buck frowned at the conundrum.

Huffing and choking on rainwater, Ezra slogged his way to Chris' side, intercepting him halfway to the barn. Curiosity piqued, Buck lengthened his stride to catch up.

"Mr. Larabee, Vin is fine! Do you hear me? Chris? Vin's fine!"

Buck slid to a stop, grabbed the soaked Loro Piana coat sleeve and yanked Ezra away from Chris. "What the hell are you saying, Ezra?"

Ezra jerked his arm away and managed a glare at the taller agent. "I said, Vin's fine. Mr. Jackson said that Vin got away on Peso. He is uninjured and has Mr. Jackson's cell phone."

Chris stiffened and he slowly turned to Ezra, green eyes glowing. Buck wasn't sure if he was angry or happy. He grabbed Chris' shoulders. "You hear that? Vin's alive! Chris! He's fine!"

“Who did this?” Chris growled, turning to Buck. “I want ‘em flayed and salted!” He turned back to Ezra and grabbed the scruff of his neck, giving him a shake. “WHERE ARE THEY?”

“I arrived at this travesty at the same time you did! Unhand me!” Ezra shrugged off Chris’ hand and their lean leader strode toward Nathan with a snarl, pulling out his cell phone as he moved. Josiah jogged to catch up.

“Damn, Ezra, that’s good news.” Buck wiped his face and glanced upward, surprised that it was raining. “How’s Nathan?”

Ezra’s posture rounded as he relaxed. “Our healer will be fine when he sees a doctor. He was shot in the leg, attained burned hair follicles and inhaled some smoke, but is otherwise relatively unscathed.” He pulled his coat together with a muttered curse. When he saw Buck looking in Chris’ direction, Ezra followed his gaze.

Chris’ determined push stopped at Nathan’s side and he fit himself between medics. As he spoke, Chris poked at his cell phone with growing irritation. Buck counted four attempts to connect with Vin and on the fifth unsuccessful try he was sure Chris would crush the phone in his fist as he snapped it closed. Even at this distance, Buck could see the tremble of his long time friend’s hands as he wrenched the phone open for a sixth try.

“It appears that Master Tanner is not picking up,” Ezra said quietly.

Buck swore softly and scratched his scalp. “Let’s see if Nathan knows where he went. If Vin’s bein’ followed I think the hounds of Hell will soon be on their heels.”

Ezra used an absurdly wet handkerchief from his jacket pocket to swipe at the trail of mud running down his forehead. “I almost feel sorry for the responsible miscreants,” he said as he followed his teammate.



## CHAPTER SIX

Every ounce of Vin's concentration was on the trail ahead. Even though the unrelenting rain washed away every vestige of a discernable path he was able to guide Peso by the characteristics of the trees. Deeply hidden memories rose as a road map in his mind's eye – the tree with two trunks; the one with a barn owl family in residence; the one that looked like a scarecrow because of a vague face in the bark's pattern and two spindly arm-like branches that portrayed an "Oh No!" posture.

Forever seemed to pass before his vague goal finally materialized before him in the form of a sign that proclaimed his arrival onto reservation land. Vin fleetingly recalled the first time he'd seen the sign and how he'd asked Chris what it meant. "*Real Indians live here?*" he remembered saying. *Chris chuckled as he rode by the sign. "Yep. We'll probably run into one of 'em soon enough."*

Vin was both thrilled and worried when he learned that Larabee land adjoined Indian land. He'd learned that the occupants were very good neighbors and had even befriended a slightly older boy name Chanu. In his prior life with Chris, he and Chanu often crossed paths with the young Indian on the trails winding through these hills.

Vin shivered. He still clutched Nathan's jacket against his chest in a wet wad. Reining Peso over the imaginary line separating the properties Vin was driven by a suddenly realized hope to run into Chanu. Vin had never seen the heart of the reservation or any of its structures so he pointed Peso's nose toward where he thought the middle of the land would sit even though Nathan told him to go west.

The wind eventually died, taking with it the sting of raindrops. Although the rain itself thinned to sporadic sprinkles, hanging drops that broke free from the branches overhead caused showers that smelled strongly of the forest.

Peso walked through the trees at a comfortable rhythm; ears twitching with a calm curiosity that helped ease Vin's worries about Nathan. He ceased twitching with each fat drop or wet leaf that fell on him. Both of them were soaked to the skin but only Vin shivered, chilled by shock that seemed to grow worse as the surge of panic receded. He hunched his shoulders and drew his arms and the jacket tighter against his body in an effort to control his shaking. Peso proceeded calmly forward for several minutes before his ears suddenly pricked forward and his pace faltered.

Vin frowned and peered suspiciously between Peso's ears, wondering if he should rein to a stop. Peso seemed curious more than upset so Vin let him continue. He gripped the slippery, wet reins tighter. Finally rounding the tight fairy circle of a tree family, Vin saw a roughly assembled lean-to fashioned with branches and leaves protecting a faded yellow dome tent. Peso stopped a few yards from the tent when the door flap fluttered. The flap edge separated with the sound of a zipper and Chanu stuck his head out. He eyes widened with surprise and then he broke into a bright smile.

"Vin!" he cried. "What are you doing out here? You're riding in that storm?"

Since Vin's teeth chattered uncontrollably all he could do was nod.

"You look pretty cold." Chanu slipped from the small tent and shrugged his coat snugly close. He tilted his head as he studied the boy. "You okay?"

Automatically, Vin nodded but then he felt the burn of held-off tears and inhaled a sob as he shook his head instead. Chanu came to him, talking softly to Peso at first and then focused on Vin upon reaching his left knee. Taking the rein in his hand, Chanu searched Vin's face. "What happened?"

"I . . . I need t' find Chris," Vin stuttered through icy lips and hot tears. "Nathan . . . shot . . ." Unable to continue, he sobbed.

"What? Shot?" Chanu rested his other hand on Vin's thigh to prevent him from falling off the slick black. "I'll help you home . . ."

"No!" Vin managed. He sucked in a pair of breaths to control the tears. "I need to talk t' Chris first. I need t' find him . . ." He tried to turn Peso away but Chanu gripped the rein harder.

"Vin, you're freezing. Take my coat. It's dry." He released Peso long enough to slip off his coat and took up the rein again as he handed it up. Vin took it and pulled the coat on, releasing Nathan's jacket. Chanu caught it. "Where you gonna go if you don't go home?"

Vin thought about that for a few seconds as he worked to control his tears. "I. I don't know. Uncle Nathan needs help." The warmth of Chanu's jacket thawed him a little and he reached for Nathan's jacket, remembering the cell phone. When

he pulled it out and turned it on, nothing happened. He started to cry again as he poked numb fingers frantically on the numbers.

Chanu noticed and took the phone from him and examined it. "I think it's broken because it got wet. Mr. Larabee isn't home?"

Vin shook his head and pulled the warm coat tighter, working to control his tears. "Only Uncle Nathan's at home and he's hurt."

The Indian boy's forehead furrowed as he thought. "Well, the phone won't work. The reception here isn't good anyway. Maybe if the battery dries it'll work. That worked for my cousin once." He separated the battery from the phone and put them in his shirt pocket. "Come on, let's get to Granddad's place. It's the closest. We can dry the phone in the oven." Chanu released the rein and returned to the tent. When he came out again, he had on a long duster that had seen better days. "It sheds water pretty good," he said as he buttoned it up. "Go over to that rock 'n I'll get up behind ya."

Vin maneuvered Peso to a large boulder and Chanu slipped onto the horse's back. Peso's ears flicked rearward with the extra weight and he looked clearly unhappy.

"Best not touch 'em with your feet," Vin warned. "He's likely to dump both of us."

When Chanu chuckled Vin felt a pulse of warm air on his neck. His new passenger found a handhold on the belt loops of his jeans. "That way," Chanu pointed out. "There's a path 'tween those two trees."

Vin saw the trail and reined toward it. Peso felt oddly humped for a few strides and then settled down with the extra load. The closeness of Chanu's body helped Vin to warm up and subsequently relax. He glanced up. When the storm front moved on it took the rain with it but left behind a layer of threatening clouds overhead that mirrored his dark anxiety.

Weaving through the trees with Chanu's soft directions Vin was glad his friend seemed at ease without conversation. Vin didn't want talk – his mind was filled with chaotic thoughts. He wasn't sure he could speak a coherent sentence and his throat was constricted and raw from crying.

Instinctively he knew that Faraday's men shot Nathan; he'd seen enough of the man's brutality to recognize the work and he worried for Chris. Had they been watching all this time? What were they going to do at the ranch? Why now? The thoughts that tumbled through his head finally formed one clear realization: Jesse was after him and because of that, it was too dangerous to be with Chris or any of the others; Nathan was proof of that. Vin's teeth clenched and he pulled Peso to a stop.

“What?” Chanu queried.

“I can’t go back,” Vin said aloud, his voice gruff with emotion. “I don’t know what to do.”

After a few moments, Chanu spoke. “No one will find you out here. The rain covered your tracks. Granddad can help,” he said. “He knows all about hidin’ in these woods. Anywhere on the rez, actually. He’s done it before.”

Chewing his lip in thought, Vin tried to come up with any other option. There were none. “D’ya really think he’d help?”

Chanu shrugged. “I think so. Plus, he’s got a phone that works. Ain’t a cell phone.”

“Okay,” he whispered as he reined Peso to follow Chanu’s directions.

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"Give me your phone."

Josiah handed his cell phone over to his boss without a word. In the time they had searched the ranch on foot Chris had killed his own phone's battery trying to contact Vin. It was understandable.

The house yielded some clues and as well as some blood evidence. Nathan managed to hit one of his assailants and there was a red smear that confirmed it on the hallway wall. The boys' room, hall, kitchen and great room were currently off limits while technicians photographed and collected trace evidence.

The property hummed with activity. The last of the firefighters loaded hose and cordoned off the remains of the barn. F.B.I. agents hovered around the evidence techs, who looked mildly exasperated at the interference. News crews, held at bay at the foot of the driveway, erected portable dish antennas for the upcoming news hour as sharply dressed reporters pushed the limits of the yellow warning tape. Well-dressed media liaisons from both the F.B.I. and A.T.F. huddled close and knocked heads just out of the reporters' hearing range. Director Travis stood near them, frowning in irritation. Mud dotted everyone following the wake of the hit-and-run storm.

Chris swore softly and jammed Josiah's phone in his pocket. Josiah raised an eyebrow at Ezra as he approached. According to Travis, Josiah's sole job was to keep an eye on Chris so as long as there were functioning cell phones within his grasp he figured the job wouldn't be too difficult. Chris plucked the phone free once again and jabbed the keys. Josiah quirked his mouth and turned to Ezra. “What news, brother?”

"It looks like the goons parked their vehicle just off the road beyond your driveway," Ezra informed them as he absently picked at his ruffled hair.

"Unfortunately, but not unexpectedly, the rain obliterated any useable footprints or tire tracks. Your neighbor across the street, Mr. Yosemite, recalls a dark sedan."

"Not much to go on," Josiah mused. The two of them spared a quick glance to Larabee when he growled at the phone in his hand. "They managed to disable the house alarm system. Buck's checking on the company employees."

"What is the word on our esteemed medic?"

"Raine met Nate at the hospital. He went directly into surgery to repair some muscle damage but should recover."

Chris' hand radio came to life. "Agent Larabee, there's a man here with some saddles?"

"Let 'em through," he snapped. Pocketing the phone again he motioned for Josiah and Ezra to follow. "Yosemite's here with some tack."

"Chris," Josiah said when he realized his job just became more complicated. "Perhaps you need to stay here . . ."

"Vin won't come back here, not without me at least." Chris waved at an old, red pickup truck crawling up the drive, directing it to the gate of the turnout pasture where the horses milled. "He's holed up. I know places to check. You two see what Buck's found and take over. He needs to get JD settled. And keep me updated on Nathan. If he remembers anything more, call me. No one comes here – it's not safe."

With that said, their leader turned his back to them and joined Yosemite at the truck. Ezra and Josiah slowed and then stopped as Chris out-paced them.

"I think we have been summarily dismissed," Ezra said. Josiah noticed that his teammate was incapable of standing still - he shifted constantly, tugging and picking at his damp clothing with an annoyed frown.

"We all need some dry clothes." Josiah scratched his still damp scalp. "I'll update Travis and we'll go. I recognize a futile effort when I see one - Chris is unstoppable."

Ezra stilled as he watched Chris catch Pony. "I feel for any immovable objects he may encounter."

"Amen to that."

Chris had Pony saddled in a matter of minutes even though the animal defied his owner at every turn. Still wary, the horse was not happy about leaving the security of his herd and taxed Chris' patience to its limit. When the agent finally swung into the saddle, Pony resigned to the inevitable and settled. His ears cocked sharply backward waiting any commands.

“Thanks, Yosemite,” Chris said as Pony spun on his quarters with a touch of the reins. He headed to Travis, who watched him approach with a frown. “Orrin, I’ll be in touch. I know a few places to check.”

“I’m as disturbed about this as much as you are, Chris,” the Director noted. “That boy needs protection. We’ll talk further when you find him.”

Chris nodded sharply. Pony impatiently worked his mouth on the bit and pranced in place, anticipating action. When Chris wheeled him around, the black launched into a choppy lope toward the trees.

Once out of sight of the barn, Pony settled into a steady trot. Chris scanned the ground as he guided the horse along a lazy, zig-zag course, hoping to find a sign of Peso’s tracks. The downpour, though, managed to wipe out any trace of a trail so Chris started thinking about Vin’s possible destinations. Nathan told the boy to call Travis, so finding a place with a good signal could take him up the nearest peak or down along the road. Figuring he’d avoid people and the road, Chris pointed Pony toward the lake trail which would eventually rise into cell range.

It didn’t feel right, though. Vin would go into hiding first, at least for a while. But where? Sunset Caves, maybe? The quickest route crossed through the reservation and for some reason it seemed right. Pony shook his head and flicked his ears at the change in plans when Chris pressed him into a faster pace.

When Chris noted the sign marking the boundary of reservation land, a feeling of satisfaction blossomed with the discovery of fresh horse tracks in the soften clay. Several minutes later he spotted a lean-to and tent, as well as an additional set of boot prints. Small prints, he noted, and relaxed knowing that Vin found company. He followed the trail easily along its muddy path, wending through trees and brush at an even pace.

Pony’s ears pricked forward as they exited the trees. There, tied next to a lone, faded brown trailer, was Peso. The gelding whinnied a greeting and Chris’ heart raced with joy. There was no need to guide Pony – he made a beeline to his stable mate who managed to look happy and perturbed at the same time. Chris pulled Pony to a stop at the small porch and leaped from the saddle. “Vin!”

The trailer door flew open and a blur of boy descended the three steps before Chris hit the ground. Vin charged into his arms and Chris pulled him in tight. He couldn’t speak or even think; the warmth of Vin’s body against his own was all he needed for the time being.

Chris crouched and buried his cheek in Vin’s soft hair, working to ease his trembling. “It’s okay. You’re safe. Everything’s okay,” Chris murmured softly. He finally felt the desperate clinging loosen a bit and pulled back just far enough to

see the tear-stained face. He brushed back Vin's hair with a rough palm and assessed his son. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

Vin shook his head and sniffled. "Nathan?" he whispered.

"He'll be fine. He's at the hospital with Raine." Motion in the corner of his eye caused Chris to pull Vin close and automatically reach for the gun tucked away at his hip. When his eyes locked on two people at the top of the stairs, he aborted the motion. "Chanu?" he said, flicking his gaze to the old man behind the boy. "Kojay."

"Hello, Chris." Kojay stood behind his grandson with a hand on each of the boy's shoulders, silver hair shimmering in the dull light. The man's eyes were deep brown and mesmerizing, radiating a calm that eased Chris' heart. "I am glad you are here. The boys were telling me a story."

Chris snorted and rose with Vin riding his hip. "I don't doubt that."

"Please, come in. Vin needs to keep warm."

"Thanks."

Vin didn't utter any manner of disagreement for the situation and clung tightly to Chris as he climbed the stairs and entered the trailer.

"I'll see to your horses," Chanu said, disappearing outside.

The inside of the trailer was comfortably warm in both temperature and atmosphere. Mellow shades of earthy orange, dusty green and burnt red reflected from the rugs and artwork scattered comfortably around the small interior. The aroma of peppermint and chocolate drifted from the kitchen space where a variety of ceramic mugs formed a loose circle on a small table.

"We were warming up with some hot chocolate. Would you like some?" Kojay moved into the kitchen and got another mug from the cabinet without waiting for an answer.

Chris sat at the table and settled Vin on his lap. "Sounds good, thanks."

Vin leaned against his chest. "It's got mint in it. It's good," his son said softly.

Chris kissed the top of his boy's head. "It does smell good. Here," he reached toward the nearest abandoned mug. "This one yours?" Vin twisted his head around, looked at the mugs and nodded. Chris pulled it closer.

Kojay's unremarkable actions in the kitchen and the quiet of the room allowed the pair to gather their wits. By the time the old Indian handed Chris his mug and sat across from them, Vin was recovered enough to sit up and reclaim his drink. When Kojay spoke his voice was scratchy and soft and most importantly, calming.

“Vin tells an intriguing tale,” he began, cradling the ceramic cup in his hands. The kindness in Kojay’s eyes kept Chris grounded. “May I ask what your plans are from here, Mr. Larabee?”

“To keep Vin safe.” Vin glanced back at his father’s face with a tiny, nervous smile. Chris pulled him closer. “Find a safe place until we hunt down . . .” he felt Vin stiffen and Chris softened his tone. “Until we find the men responsible for today.”

Kojay’s quiet demeanor encouraged Chris to speak and organize his thoughts in an unthreatening way for Vin. For a man accused of only speaking three words a day, the allotment for this day seemed endless as he recounted what they knew up to this point. Chris spoke without pause, each minute increasing the relaxed slump in Vin’s posture. Chanu returned at some point and fell asleep on the nearby small couch as Chris aired it all - every fact, every innuendo and every need.

Regrettably, no matter how his thoughts ranged, the path always returned to Vin. Since every clue they had lead nowhere, they needed more information. Orrin was right - they needed to know what his boy saw at the Faraday compound.

The realization flared as quiet desperation in Chris’ eyes when he finally fell silent and met Kojay’s solemn gaze. He felt as if he were contemplating throwing his son to the wolves.

“So examining Vin’s memories might help?”

Chris nodded as he unconsciously ran his hand through Vin’s unruly hair. The boy was nestled deeply against Chris’ chest, silent and on the edge sleep. “I hate having to even consider it,” he replied. Chris ducked his head just enough to meet Vin’s trusting look given under heavy eyelids. “He’s been through so much.”

“Vin?” Kojay said. Vin roused and turned wide, blue eyes his way. “Do you want to tell what you know?”

“No.” The raspy voice was barely a whisper. Chris ran a hand down his back and he snuggled closer. “I . . . I don’t know. I don’t want anyone to get hurt. I don’t want . . .” Vin ran out of words for the moment.

“What is it you do want, little one?”

“I just want ta forget. Why can’t I just forget everything?” Vin’s fingers became active, picking nervously at Chris’ shirt front as his voice became tight. His chin dropped. “I don’t want to be scared anymore.”

That did it for Chris; it was enough to confirm that their bond wasn’t what it once was. He gathered Vin close and started to rise, his mouth a tight line.

“Wait,” Kojay said extending a hand, palm down. “I may be able to help.”



“How?” Chris growled. “Can you make all this magically disappear?”

Kojay drew his arms together and settled deep into the kitchen chair with a calm demeanor that now irritated Chris. Weathered lines that mapped the elder Indian’s life on his face framed unusually clear eyes – eyes that radiated warmth and wisdom. “No, and I would not want to. Memories are what make us who we are. It would be wrong to deny them.”

“Even if they’re painful? Or unfair? Or so far beyond the realm of what’s normal?”

“All I am saying is that hiding from one’s memories can deny the spirit.”

Chris frowned, not sure how to take that. There was a beat of silence as he turned the idea over in his mind. “So,” he uttered darkly. “How is it you think you can help, then?”

“For Vin to explore his memories safely, he needs a guide. You are already his protector in this time, that much is clear.” The greyed elder nodded at the relaxed boy in Chris’ lap. “You can do the same in past times. That way, he can examine his memories knowing you are there to keep him safe. There will be no fear. Isn’t that what he needs? Isn’t that what he wants?”

‘Yes.’

The reply came into Chris’ mind through the bond they shared from the beginning. It was a mystical thing that could not be rationally explained, and it was something they both trusted since their eyes first met, but since Vin’s return, it seemed – frayed. Chris realized then that he’d pinpointed the cause of his continual unease and the reason he felt that Vin wasn’t healing. He looked down and locked eyes with his soul mate, knowing instantly that Vin wanted this.

“What do we do?” Chris asked, keeping the visual connection with Vin and noting the deep weariness that had no place in the eyes of a 10-year-old child. “Do you want to do this?”

“Yes.” Vin’s reply was sure.

“Okay, then.” Chris pushed back his son’s thick hair and held his gaze. “Let’s do this.”

The chair scraped the floor as Kojay rose. “It will take a little time to gather what is needed.” Chris nodded and figured it was a good time to tell the others that he’d found Vin. When he pulled out his cell phone, Kojay paused then pointed a knobby finger at it. “The air is open and free to anyone.” Then he turned and shoved an old, rotary-dial phone on the kitchen counter toward Chris. “Use this.”

Chris hesitated calling the old man on his paranoia; he was right. Chris looked back at the small device in his hand and realized how the ease of convenience had dulled his sensibilities. Not only could a conversation be easily

intercepted, the GPS capabilities of a cell phone could pinpoint their exact location. Now, Chris knew better than to underestimate Faraday. Vin's life depended on it.

Accepting that technology could work against them, Chris removed the battery. It was time to go back to basics. He lifted the chipped and worn receiver from Kojay's phone and dialed Travis' office.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Matthew Larabee was usually a patient man, but the unknowns of this situation chafed the raw ends of his nerves. Buck's clipped and brief message to come to the Federal building left no room for discussion; the urgency in the normally good-natured man's voice was enough for Matt to accept without question.

Time passed agonizingly slowly without any further information while they waited in the team's empty office. JD entertained himself well enough on Buck's computer, especially when either he or Claire sat with him, but as the hours passed Matt noted the boy's growing edginess. Vin could detect another person's emotional state with a glance but the more self-absorbed JD usually took a little longer. When he subconsciously did pick up the stress of a situation, the detection presented as whininess.

"Where's Da?" JD finally asked, looking tentative. "I'm gonna call him."

"No, honey," Claire said calmly, intercepting his tiny hand when it reached for the desk phone. "He said he'd call."

Well, not exactly, but Matt excused the small lie.

"But I'm bored! When's the movie? Where's Vin? What's for dinner?" JD swung his feet as he sat, his right foot connecting with the desk's side with each arc. Bang. Bang. Bang.

"I know, honey, but something came up. He didn't tell us what but he said to wait here. That's all we know."

"But we'll be late!" Bang. Bang. "I'm hungry!"

Claire stood and took his hand. "Come on," she said with extraordinary patience as she helped him off the chair. "Let's go find a vending machine."

"I don't wanna . . ."

JD's tirade cut off when a pair of agents stepped into the office. "Hello!" he chirped, all smiles. He pointed at the leading man. "I know you!"

"Well, hello yourself, JD," the older agent said cheerily. "Are these your grandparents?"

"Yep!" He pointed a pudgy finger. "This is grandma and that's grampa."

"Matt Larabee and my wife Claire," Matt clarified as he offered his hand. At the same time, he worked to ignore his alarm at the agents' arrival.

"Chris' parents. Nice to meet you both. I'm Agent McKellen and this is Agent Boise. You can call me Steve. Director Travis asked us to escort you to his office."

"That's Billy's grampa," JD said. "Is Billy here?"

"No, he's not. Sorry about that, JD." Steve grinned and ruffled JD's dark hair. "How about I let you push the buttons on the elevator?"

"Okay!" JD broke free from Claire's grip and bolted for the door. The four adults followed.

"What's going on?" Matt asked quietly. It didn't escape his notice that the other agent that trailed behind visually swept their surroundings as they moved along the hallway. Claire stepped up the pace to keep JD in sight and McKellen extended his stride to keep up. "I thought Chris was going to meet us here. Something's happened, hasn't it?"

The agent looked apologetic. "I'm sorry, Mr. Larabee, but I really don't know what's going on myself. I was just told to get you upstairs."

That information did little to soothe Matt's nerves. He was grateful that he and his wife worked so well together in stressful situations; having Chris as their son had certainly forced them to be that way.

Matt grinned to himself with that thought, remembering how the strength of his son's character was clear from the day he was born. The horrible time that immediately followed Sarah's and Adam's death was the only time he and his wife were "disconnected" from their son. Vin was the one to bridge that gap and Matt's eyes burned with the memory, thankful again for the boy's gift of just being himself. Worry arose in his heart.

"Here we are." Agent McKellen indicated the outer door to Travis' office. He and Boise flanked the doorway as the three family members entered. Steve closed the door behind them.

JD, holding Claire's hand, looked expectantly around and broke into a huge smile when he saw Mrs. Clark, Travis' secretary. "Hi, Miss Barbara!" he chirped. "Here's my grandma and grampa!"

Mrs. Clark beamed back at the boy. “Hello, JD! Hello Mr. and Mrs. Larabee.” She reached into a drawer and pulled out a large zip-lock bag full of crayons and a stack of coloring books. “Here, why don’t you color something for me while Mr. Travis speaks with your grandparents? They’ll be right in there. You’ve been in Mr. Travis’ office before, haven’t you?”

“Yep! He’s got a big window,” JD said, a bit of reluctance in his tone. Matt realized that the small boy, too, felt the tense air that enveloped this unexpected visit. Mrs. Clark clucked and fussed over the boy as she got him settled beside her at the desk. She glanced up and told Matt and Claire to go on in to the office when JD was finally involved with the books.

Claire’s eyes rounded with anxiety and she took Matt’s hand in a firm grip. “*She’s used up the last of her cool,*” Matt figured. He cleared his throat, assured JD that they would be right back then pushed the door open, trying not to feel like he was lining up for a firing squad.

“Matt, Claire.” Orrin Travis stood as they entered and waved at JD through the open door. When the boy returned to his picture at Mrs. Clark’s urging, the Assistant Director rose and closed the door. As he did so, Matt noticed streaks of dried mud marring Travis’ dress pants and the distressed state of his shoes. The sight of it fueled Matt’s alarm. Travis motioned for them to sit down and, noting Matt’s observation, brushed some of the dried mud from his knees as he sat. “I know you must be worried,” he started, sitting up and giving them his full attention.

“Yes,” Claire said. “What’s happened? Are Vin and Christopher all right?”

“Yes. I’ve just returned from his ranch. Let me catch you up.” He briefed them on the day’s events, keeping his voice low and calm. Claire clutched her husband’s arm as the story unfolded and gasped at the news of the barn fire. Matt felt her tremble.

“Chris and Vin are together now at an undisclosed location. The team and I all agree it’s for the best until we know whom we can trust. There will be no cell phone usage – it’s too easily monitored. My offices have been swept for listening devices but that’s only a temporary reprieve. If someone in the building is dirty, and I have no doubt there *is* someone, any of the lines coming in are suspect.”

“So how will you communicate? Can we talk to them?” Claire asked.

Travis’ smile lacked any mirth. “Looks like it’s back to the old days,” he said. “Pay phones and encrypted messages. Fortunately, there’re a few of us that remember those days.”

Matt grinned. “I know Morse code,” he joked.

Claire snorted and unwound a little, leaning back in her chair. Travis chuckled. “Good to know. It may come in handy.” He got serious again and leaned forward onto his desk, hands clasped together. “Vin will be put into protective custody as soon as I can arrange it. We will try to accommodate all of you but I can’t guarantee anything at this point. Only myself and Team 7 are need-to-know. I anticipate that you will feel left out at times, and for that I am sorry, but it’s the way it has to be for the time being. I hope you understand.”

“All we care about is Vin and JD’s safety,” Matt said with Claire nodding in agreement as he spoke. “And we want to help along those lines.”

“I am leaving those details up to Chris and Buck. For now, I’d like you to stay with JD, here, until we have a plan put together. Chris and Vin will stay right where they are for now. Agent Jackson is out of action for the moment so Buck, Ezra and Josiah will be pretty busy. I’m glad you’re here for JD.”

“So are we.” Matt squeezed his wife’s hand and grinned at her. She reciprocated with a shaky smile.

“Now, here are a few basics on living under the radar,” Travis said as he began the Larabee’s education on how to be invisible.

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While he spoke to Travis, Vin grew heavy in Chris’ lap and finally succumbed to sleep. Curled slightly into himself, Vin’s ear was firmly against Chris’ chest and one hand loosely gripped the front of his father’s shirt. The other hand - the one he favored from time to time - was cautiously tucked close to his body. Chris wondered if any pain was real or remembered.

Realizing any phone lines into Travis’ office held the possibility of being bugged or monitored Chris managed to reach his boss through the building’s public line in the lobby. Tracing any calls to or from that number would be a nightmare. They quickly set up another conference time for later in the evening. Avoiding technology was going to make things difficult.

When Chris mentioned Kojay’s offer about becoming a guide in an effort to not only calm Vin, but to get information, Travis brought up many good points.

“This isn’t hypnosis, is it?” He asked. “Chris, if you do this, be very careful. You know the risks surrounding the power of suggestion. Do not interfere with Vin’s memory; that’s the quickest way to get any of his statements thrown out if we try to use it in court. You know that. Remember back in the ‘80’s, all those ‘false memories’ implanted in those preschool children accusing their caretakers of Satanic rituals? You’re walking a fine line.”

Chris assured Travis that he would stop anything that looked like it would go that way. He was reluctant to refuse something Vin obviously wanted or pass on a chance to correct their frayed bond.

Travis was right. It would be a fine line to tread. He agreed that if they were to explore any of Vin's memories with hypnosis, it would be in the presence of Dr. Lowrey and the District Attorney.

Vin roused when Chanu entered the trailer. He and Kojay had been outside preparing a site for the "spiritual re-connection" as the elder called it. There was mention of a sweat lodge and Chris grinned as a story Josiah once told him flashed through his mind.

Always a willing explorer into the spirituality of other cultures, the team's profiler had experienced a sweat lodge once. All Chris recalled was that it involved incense, nudity, questionable libations, lots of sweat and a surprise visit by a Catholic elementary school field trip. Chris couldn't recall the details but the mental picture he'd formed at the time still scarred his brain.

Vin tilted his chin upward and frowned at him, blinking sleepily. "What're y' laughing at?" he rasped.

"Remind me to tell you a story about Josiah's sweat lodge experience," he answered as he brushed Vin's hair from his eyes. "Right now it looks like Kojay's ready for us."

Vin exhaled a deep breath and nodded, and then slipped from Chris' lap. Taking his son's hand, they headed to the trailer door and followed Chanu outside where the moisture thickened air was heavy with the earthy scent of woods. The sky was alive with shifting clouds but the drizzling rain had stopped and the wind capricious, yet light. They crossed the muddied grass in front of the trailer and entered a stand of trees lining a worn path.

"I took the horses to our neighbor's barn. They're dry and fed."

"Thank you, Chanu. You've been a great help and we appreciate it."

"You're welcome."

Beyond the trees, the trail cut along the face of a gentle, brushy slope. They followed the sweeping curve of the hill as the trail angled downward and passed through stand of trees. Once clear, they saw a dome-shaped structure perched on the bare top of a lofty hill. As they drew closer, Chris saw that it was made of tightly laced branches. Smoke drifted lazily from a hole in the center of the roof and the door was a faded blanket nailed across the doorway's header. Stacks of leafy branches stood to one side of the doorway and three buckets of water made a line on the other side.

Chanu told them to remove their shirts and then gave each of them a pine bough. The chill caused a rash of goose bumps on both his and Vin's arms. "It is warm inside," Chanu explained, gathering their clothes. "I will be out here." He held the blanket aside and Vin brushed past Chris to enter first.

Chris was surprised by the high humidity inside. He'd expected it to be like an old Vegas casino with several feet of dry, choking smoke hanging from the ceiling. Instead, the damp fog smelled of pine, rosemary and other rich vegetation and was constantly in motion. Kojay lazily fanned the glowing embers in the center of the room with his pine fan, causing the smoke to ebb and flow. The hole in the ceiling, as well as a window cut in one side, allowed fresh air, warmed by the hot smoke, to circulate.

The view through the rough-cut window centered on the highest peak of the mountain range across the green valley spread below. Rocks circled the fire pit and held the embers' warmth and hissed when Kojay sprinkled water on them to release steam. It was surreal and Chris felt instantly transported to another era.

Vin sank to the ground with a relieved-sounding sigh, crossed his legs and moved as close to the embers as he could. Chris settled beside him, taking a moment to allow his tense muscles to stretch and relax.

Kojay, sitting across from them, indicated that they should wave their fans, and close their eyes. He spoke lowly and continuously, describing how to fan properly and increase focus through rhythm thus becoming aware of the connection between their bodies and the world that surrounded them. This connection, once opened, allowed their inner spirit to reach out and touch the spirits of other living things.

Momentarily distracted, Chris was sure he heard the voice of Obi Wan Kenobi in his head explaining how the Force connected everything, and squelched a laugh. Kojay's verbal litany paused. Chris cracked open one eyelid and saw the Indian's dark eyes sparkling at him.

*"It is not so different."*

Startled, Chris snapped both eyes open and stared at Kojay, whose voice he'd just heard in his head. Smiling, the old man's eyes slipped shut. Vin giggled. Chris looked over and saw that his son's eyelids remained closed. After his heart quieted Chris sighed in resignation and shut his eyes again *"You're laughing at me, aren't you?"* he thought.

*"I'm laughing with you,"* Vin replied, repeating Buck's often used phrase.

*"Nobody likes a smart aleck,"* Chris answered jokingly.

*"What about Buck?"*



Chris snorted and he heard Vin giggle again. “*Ya got me there.*”

Kojay cleared his throat. “If you two will allow me to continue?”

“Sorry.”

“Sorry.”

Kojay waited until his guests settled down and their fan action fell into synch before guiding them through the steps that brought heightened awareness. Chris found Kojay’s voice mesmerizing and as the minutes passed, the stress of the day’s events gradually seeped from his body. Eventually, Chris was so physically relaxed, he felt like he was floating and drifted along with Kojay’s soothing cadence as if it was a marked trail. On the outside he figured he looked asleep, but in reality, he was acutely aware of every detail around him; it was what he expected an out-of-body experience would feel like.

With Kojay’s rhythmic step-by-step coaching, each sense sharpened and cleared. He heard vehicles on a roadway, miles away, smelled the damp earth outside through the scented smoke inside and he could taste each individual flavor of that smoke. His skin prickled with the press of the air that surrounded him. And finally, Chris saw the golden thread of his bond with Vin woven tightly through all of it, tying everything together and causing it all to make sense.

With that focus, he “saw” their bond become stronger. The warmth he felt from it was electric and energizing, causing him to inhale a deep breath and open his eyes.

Chris blinked and looked to Vin. He wasn’t sure where the tired, scared and wary boy from earlier went, but he was certainly thrilled to see this happy, secure Vin beaming at him once again with clear, shining eyes.

When he finally broke their gaze, Chris was shocked to see that it was dark outside and that not minutes, but hours had passed. He felt rested. Vin’s stomach growled.

Kojay uttered a raspy chuckle and started to rise. “Come. We are finished here. Chanu has prepared a meal and then you need to contact your boss man.”

Their elderly host pushed to his feet, his knees cracking like popcorn. Once standing, he waved in the direction of the exit. Chris found their shirts hanging just outside the door. As he worked the buttons, Chris tried to understand what just happened.

Kojay read his mood. “I was merely a visitor today because your connection was open for a while,” the old man said, “and I understand the nature of such things. Outside of this exercise, I do not share what you have between you. Guard it carefully, my friends, and use it as a guide wire to find each other when you are lost. It is a rare and beautiful thing.”

Vin found Chris' hand and squeezed it in silent agreement.

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Buck discovered that it was tougher than he expected to find a payphone since the cell phone revolution. What made it harder still was the active nature of his son.

"Da!" JD hollered from the ball pit as Buck stepped into the McDonald's Playplace. The boy's grinning head floated on the top of a sea of primary colored plastic balls. "I found a quarter!"

Matt chuckled from where he sat next to his wife at a hard, plastic, French-fry covered table. Claire also smiled at Buck but her worry showed plainly in her expression. Buck dropped down beside them.

"Nothing yet?" Matt asked quietly.

"Not yet." Buck glanced at his wrist watch. "We'll connect soon. Try not to worry."

Since his return from the ranch, Buck had called Kojay's phone every hour from a public pay phone. Finding one within visual distance of a busy McDonald's was lucky, but JD was growing bored with the place. After connecting with Chris and working out a plan, they could move but for now, ensuring that they were surrounded by people was the best he could do. So far, Faraday's minions seemed to avoid public confrontation and were solely focused on Vin alone, but that could change at any time and the agent was not about to take any chances with his odd family.

"I'll try again in a half-hour." Buck patted Claire's hand. "They're fine where they are."

JD spent a majority of that time in Buck's lap, whining and asking for Vin. When Kojay finally picked up on his next try, Buck's relief made him sag against the wall.

"Buck?" Chris sounded as tired as Buck felt.

"Damn, Chris, it's good to hear your voice. Vin okay?"

"Yeah, we're good. Listen, I thought of a place we can hole up. Remember that old place at the east end of the reservation? Near the small lake?"

A vague vision of a remote, tumble-down cabin came to mind. "You mean that old hunting lodge?"

"Yeah. It's not easily accessible and as far as I know, it's not in County records. I tried to find it once."

Buck rubbed his tired eyes. "I remember the place. We'd need horses to get there."

"Taken care of. Come onto the reservation and Kojay will set everyone up."

Buck's cell phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out and checked the number, surprised to see that it was Travis. "Hold on, Chris," he said, and then he flipped the cell open. "Yes?" he answered, a feeling of dread stabbing his gut.

"Faraday's escaped." Travis, too, sounded weary. Buck swore softly and repeated the message to Chris. Travis continued, his voice clipped. "Two U.S. Marshals were killed and an internal investigation is already in motion. This wasn't anywhere near subtle."

"Faraday's desperate. He knows this could be his final play," Buck added after relaying the news to Chris. "He's tapping deep into his connections."

"And if he gets away this time, we'll never find him." Chris' angry desperation was clear through the phone line.

"We need to play that final card," Travis said mysteriously. "The possibility we discussed when Chris and I last spoke."

Buck didn't know what the man meant but when he repeated it to Chris, the message was obviously clear because his friend snapped, "Tell him to arrange it. Where I said, Buck." And then the phone was dead at his ear.

Wilmington hung up the payphone and walked quickly toward McDonald's as he spoke to Travis on the cell. "We need to move fast. I'll get the rest of the boys together."

"My part will take a little time," the Assistant Director said. "Meet me tomorrow morning, 0900, in front of Mary's work. It's a busy street. There will be four of us."

"Sounds like a plan." They disconnected just as Buck reached the Playplace. JD sprang into his arms.

"Can we go now?" JD whined. "I wanna see Vin."

Buck forced a laugh and found it easier to pull off than expected. "Never thought I'd see the day you *begged* to leave Mickey D's! Get your shoes, little britches, and we're outta here."

ef

Slouched in the back seat of an unremarkable coupe with heavily tinted windows, a small man in the remains of a rumpled suit dug out his cell phone from a pile of drive-through coffee cups, empty energy drink cans and cigarette butts

piled on the seat. Wiping grease from his fingers, he flipped the phone open and dialed in a number from memory. The recipient picked up after one ring.

“It’s Casselman. I think I have a lead.” The caller tried to sound like a force to be reckoned with but the shake in his voice betrayed him. “If I tell you, you’ll let her go? That’s the deal, right?” He listened for a few seconds and then panic bloomed. He threw the Federal issue listening device aside and sat up, rigid. “Look, my job is at stake, too, you asshole! Tell your boss that once I’ve done this I’m out! I’ve paid my dues!” Sweating, he rubbed his forehead worriedly and trembled.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he let out a soft string of profanity and then gulped. “Look, hey, I’m sorry, okay? Don’t hurt her!” Tears clouded his eyes and he gripped the small phone until his knuckles turned white. “Okay, okay. Wilmington’s going to meet Travis sometime between now and nine o’clock tomorrow morning. From there, it sounds like they’re hooking up with Larabee. It’s a sure bet the kid’s with Larabee.” He listened and rubbed his forehead, fighting back tears. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll stay on him but only until you get someone to replace me. Wilmington knows me from the office so if he spots me . . .” he trailed off. “Fine. Let me talk to her first?”

His grip relaxed a little and he took in a pair of breaths to try and gentle his tone. Upon hearing the voice on the other end, he broke into a distraught smile and the tears he fought to hold back unleashed. “Hi, honey. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. You just do what they say, alright? Okay? I know you’re scared. I’ll get you out of there soon, I promise you. Becky? Wait! Becky? You fucking asshole! Don’t hurt her! Don’t . . .”

Realizing the connection was cut, Casselman snapped the phone shut and threw it at the car’s dashboard. Sniffing to control his tears, he crawled to the front seat, buckled in and wiped at his eyes. “What the hell have I done?” he whispered desperately as he twisted the car’s key. “I’ve signed on with the devil. I’m fucked.”

Before pulling away from the curb, Agent Casselman centered on his A.T.F. training and focused on the job ahead – following his friend and fellow agent Buck Wilmington directly to Vin Tanner.

For his own sanity, he didn’t think any further than that.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Yellow light from a camping lantern flickered in the shadows of the simple barn as Chris finished shortening the stirrups of the borrowed saddled on Peso's back. The unruly black stood patiently enough for that, but when Chris tightened the cinch one last time the horse pinned his ears and angled his head slightly toward Chris' rump.

"Do it and you're dog food," Chris muttered lowly.

"Dad!" Vin protested as he reached up and stroked the horse's nose. Then he spoke seriously to the animal. "He didn't mean it. Honest. He loves you, too."

Chris raised an eyebrow at the smug, smiling face of his boy and the prickly Peso, whose eyes melted into an unbelievably sappy gaze under Vin's ministrations. Chris could only shake his head in amazement and then turned to check Pony's cinch. Kojay and Chanu approached, carrying stuffed saddle bags and sleeping gear.

"Thanks, Kojay," Chris said as he accepted the items. "I don't know how to thank you for all of this. I hope none of this comes down on you."

"We can take care of ourselves," Kojay replied sagely. "The trail to the cabin is faint but Chanu knows it well. There is enough moon for a safe journey."

"Couldn't be in better hands, I'm sure. And thanks again for the use of your smoke lodge tomorrow. You be sure to keep clear of the place. It's safer if none of your people know what's going on."

Chanu helped Vin tie down the gear and then swung up on his own pinto while Vin climbed onto Peso. Then, they waited patiently for Chris.

"Thanks again for everything." Chris clasped Kojay in a forearm grip for a moment and then mounted Pony.

"Let us know where your path leads," Kojay said as they reined away. When the trio disappeared into the forest, he turned around and whistled a short bird's

call. A boy of Chanu's age trotted into view from the trees near the trailer. "Are they assembled?" Kojay asked the boy.

"Yes, grandfather."

"Then let's not keep them waiting."

ef

When he threw the truck into park and cut the engine next to the old barn, the first thing that Buck noticed was the silence. He had spent the night in a lower end hotel on a noisy street along with JD, Claire and Matt, while Ezra and Josiah alternated taking watch. The night had seemed unnaturally long and Buck was very tired.

Apparently, so was JD. It had taken a while for the boy to go quietly along with the plan to lay low after leaving McDonald's. As soon as the feeling of adventure wore off, the boy's anxiety started to show and he had slept restlessly and asked about Vin throughout the night.

Right now, the boy and his grandparents slept soundly in the rear seats of Chris' new truck, not even stirring during the drive on the packed-dirt road that threaded through the reservation. Chris' parents were certainly troopers, the weary agent thought with a sigh. Buck exited the truck and quietly closed the door, giving his passengers a few seconds more rest.

He glanced around. Although he didn't see anyone, Buck knew that they had been under scrutiny by the cautious reservation dwellers and decided to let them choose the time to make their presence known. For the moment, he felt safe enough from Faraday and his ilk, so he leaned against the truck's fender and let the quiet settle over him.

The peacefulness lasted a little over a minute before a swirl of dust announced the arrival of Josiah's sturdy Suburban as it maneuvered to park behind him. By the time the dust settled around the vehicles, Josiah and Ezra were out and scanning the area. Knowing how tired they all were, Buck couldn't help but chuckle at Ezra. Somehow, the dapper agent had managed to refresh himself in the two hours since Buck last saw him. He never knew jeans could hold a crease that sharp. Josiah, on the other hand, looked like Buck felt.

Buck saw Josiah nod in the direction of the old barn and he turned, spotting a pair of boys in the doorway. He recognized Chanu and raised a hand in greeting. The boy replied in kind and then the pair disappeared into the structure. Buck turned back to the Suburban and waited as his remaining teammates opened the rear doors. Travis and the boys' psychologist, Dr. Will Lowery, exited first,

followed by two others. Buck recognized the lead D.A. investigator Bryce Patterson - but the last man was unknown to him.

Travis approached and extended his arm, shaking Buck's hand with a firm grip. The Assistant Director tilted his head in the direction of the other men.

"You know everyone, except Dr. Steiger."

Buck studied the man for a moment. Steiger was an older man with receding gray hair and a wiry, athletic build. The agent guessed his age to be somewhere in his late 50's, and amusedly thought that he looked exactly like a psychiatrist.

"Roger Steiger," the man said, as he shook Buck's hand.

"Dr. Steiger is one of the few court recognized experts in hypnosis therapy," Travis explained. "We were very lucky that he was available."

"Well, Doc, I hope you've been on a horse before," Buck greeted.

"I'd say it's been about twenty years," Steiger replied. "Isn't it like riding a bicycle with attitude?"

Buck laughed, instantly liking the man. By the time he greeted the others, Buck's passengers had awakened and emerged, sleep rumpled, from the truck. He scooped JD into his arms as the boy rubbed his eyes. "Ready to ride?"

JD blinked a few times, looked around, and was instantly awake. "Chanu!" he squealed, pointing at the young Indian leading three horses from the barn. "Which one's mine?"

"Sorry, Little Bit," Buck said, ruffling JD's hair. "You're ridin' with me. We need to move fast."

JD frowned at first, but the thought of going fast obviously overruled his desire to have his own horse. Buck let him sit in the saddle while he spoke to Chanu. Afterward, Chanu and his cousin quickly matched the men to their mounts, murmuring quiet instructions and adjusting stirrups all the while. Buck made sure everyone's cell phones were turned off to shut down any GPS capabilities.

Patterson looked decidedly uncomfortable in the saddle with the telltale slumped shoulders and heels-up posture of a first-time rider. Travis and Steiger looked a little better, but it was Dr. Will who surprised Buck.

"Hey, Doc," Buck said brightly as he reined his horse alongside. "You've ridden before?"

"Grew up on a farm in the mid-West," Dr. Will said with a smile. "Had a mare called Babe that all us kids rode, usually bareback. We were all over the place on that horse." He looked to JD. "Hey, JD, have any tips? It has been a while."

JD, clinging tightly to Buck's belt, chirped, "Just cover your nose when you eat our dust!"

While most of them laughed, Patterson only offered a sickly smile as he clutched the saddle horn. Chuckling, Josiah fell in beside him and offered suggestions. Buck waited for Chanu to mount up and when he did, the agent reined in behind him and the others followed in a loose line, with Ezra bringing up the rear.

ef

Chris stretched, feeling the pull of sore muscles the down length of his back. Although he and Vin had slept through the night like logs on the cabin's narrow cots, waking up brought a painful reminder of the previous day's events that had brought them there. Was it only yesterday he'd watched his barn burn to the ground? Now, it wasn't too far past dawn and he and Vin were following Chanu back to the smoke lodge. Once they cleared the trees and the structure was within sight, Chanu reined his pinto onto another trail and departed to fetch the rest of Chris' team.

Chris turned and smiled at Vin, happy to see that his son looked rested. They were both comfortable here, but that didn't help ease the trepidation Chris felt when he thought about what they were about to do. Did he really want to know what lurked in Vin's memories? Would it really help his son to walk through them? Could he really help Vin?

The two of them nudged their mounts forward and found a suitable spot to secure them. Chris' muscles complained once more when he swung his leg over to dismount and he let out a short hiss.

"I'll take care of 'em," Vin offered softly, taking Pony's reins.

While Vin tied up the horses, Chris walked around the smoke lodge to loosen up and get his nervousness under control; when he focused on it, that's when he felt the strength of his bond to Vin. He glanced up and caught Vin smiling at him and his boy's confidence in him chased away the anxiety. Together, they would get through this. Together, they could get through anything.

By the time Chanu returned with the others Chris and Vin had arranged the interior of the lodge to fit at least five adults and Vin. They wouldn't be firing up the smoke, but, instead, chose this location not only because it was familiar and comfortable for Vin, but very remote and difficult to find without a guide. The cabin would remain elusive to all but "family".

Vin appeared at his side and took his hand as the others approached, trailing from the woods behind Chanu in a loose and broken line. Orrin carefully scanned the area, sitting comfortably aback a lean roan while Matt and Claire looked



relaxed and happy. That made Chris smile. Dr. Lowery – looking surprisingly comfortable on his chestnut – chatted with a grey-haired man Chris assumed was the Federal shrink. Ezra was ever alert as he brought up the rear and Josiah was talking to a dandy he recognized as Patterson who wasn't at all thrilled about the transportation. Neither was the dark bay he rode, if the pinned ears were any indication. Chris chuffed - the man wore khaki Dockers and dress shoes, for Christ's sake!

Chris could "feel" Vin's amusement when Patterson's knees wobbled as soon as his feet hit the ground. Josiah's quick grab for his arm prevented a face plant, which made Vin giggle aloud. Chris felt his own cheek twitch with a grin, which grew wider when JD slipped down from behind Buck and charged in their direction.

Vin broke ranks and the two tumbled together in a brotherly heap just ahead of Buck, who dropped down and pulled the boys into a noisy, raucous hug. Buck's boisterous greeting had lightened an atmosphere that could have been so much darker. Even Patterson managed a weak grin as he limped beside Josiah. Chris made his way to his parents and Claire wrapped her arms around him.

"Oh, Christopher, I'm so happy to see you," she said in a quavering voice. She stood back and put her hand on his cheek. "And Vin seems just fine."

"Yeah, he's good, mom." He kissed her cheek and turned to his dad. "I see you remember how to steer a horse."

"It felt good," Matt said, giving Chris a quick hug. "And I guess we're continuing onward?"

"It's probably better that you wait at the cabin with JD. I'm not sure how long this will take."

"He's been a little soldier but I know he's worried. Buck's told him just enough to explain why we're doing this, but I'm not sure he understands all the . . . possibilities." Claire's eyes told Chris that she did know all the possibilities. He was very sorry she was in this position, but was also so very grateful she was here.

"Well, the sooner we get to it, the sooner it's over." Chris excused himself and veered off to give JD a welcoming embrace before approaching Travis.

The boys had about a half hour of vigorous play with their fathers before taking the next step. Deciding that Ezra would accompany Matt, Claire and JD to the cabin, with Chanu as their guide, the remaining group saw them off with promises to see them later. Dr. Will then moved in with Dr. Steiger and met up with Chris while Buck entertained Vin a little longer.

"This is a very different experience for me but from what Dr. Lowery's told me, I think it's the best we can do for Vin," Dr. Steiger started, putting Chris a bit

more at ease. "Is Vin going to be comfortable with the number of witnesses we have here?"

"I've explained it to him. I think he'll be all right, especially with Dr. Lowery here. And as for the others," Chris locked eyes with Steiger, "he trusts my judgment." Chris decided not to mention the strong thread that connected him with Vin. He was sure it was something Dr. Lowery didn't completely understand, even after all this time.

Vin's therapist asked for Chris' attention. "I want to make clear what my job is here, Chris," Dr. Lowery began. "My concern is solely for Vin. There's a good chance he will encounter memories other than what Director Travis and you are looking for. I want you, especially, to be aware of this; it could be very difficult. I intend to make sure they do what's in Vin's best interest." Dr. Lowery sought and held Chris' concerned glare. "You need to be prepared for how . . . sensitive . . . this could become. You need to be Vin's stable influence the entire time."

Chris was grudgingly impressed with both Dr. Steiger's silence and Dr. Lowery's directness. The two doctors had obviously used the riding time to hammer out some guidelines and limits, and he was again grateful for Dr. Will's professional dedication; Chris was sure the man never expected to be out in the woods on horseback at this moment, but he definitely knew his job and steadfastly maintained his professionalism. Chris nodded his acknowledgement.

Breaking the heavy silence, Dr. Steiger met Chris' stormy eyes. "How about you introduce me to the young man of the moment?" Steiger obviously knew who Vin's protector was and he didn't intend to cross any lines. Chris was grudgingly satisfied.

Buck, noting the shift of bodies, brought Vin over and left with Travis and Patterson to find their spots in the smoke lodge. Chris and Dr. Will then introduced Vin to the man that would start the boy down what could be an ugly trail.

Chris stood aside, but well within Vin's line of sight, and quietly watched the interaction. At first, Vin was visibly tense but when Dr. Steiger crouched down to the boy's eye level, Chris focused on their bond, using it to ease his son to a less stressed state. What convinced Vin to continue was when the older man asked his permission to do so. Chris felt a flash of surprise, followed quickly by boosted confidence.

Chris smiled at that. They all knew this interview was inevitable - it was the very purpose of this collection of individuals. It never occurred to Vin, though, that he had a choice to decline and Chris felt that wonder clearly through their link.

In response to the query, Vin shuffled sideways and reached for his father's hand. Once physically and emotionally connected with his "rock", Vin nodded and whispered, "I'm ready."

Satisfied, Chris led Vin into the lodge, followed closely by the doctors, while Josiah stood guard just outside the door.

Chris sat first, Buck on one side while Vin settled on the other. Dr. Will flanked the boy. Dr. Steiger placed himself across from Vin, keeping about three feet between them. Travis and Patterson tucked themselves back in a corner along with recorders and notepads - any questions were to be written down and asked by Dr. Steiger alone. It was essential to have a record of the session for the court.

Steiger nodded to Travis and the recordings began.

"This is Dr. Roger Steiger and this is my first session with Vincent 'Vin' Michael Tanner. Also present are Vin's regular therapist, Dr. William Lowery, Vin's father, Agent Christopher Larabee, Agent Buck Wilmington, A.T.F. Assistant Director Orrin Travis and Denver District Attorney Investigator Bryce Patterson. Well, Vin, would you say it was a little cozy in here?"

"A little," Vin replied timidly. He reached for Chris' hand and pulled it into his lap.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, let's get started." Dr. Steiger ran through a list of easy questions about Vin's age, address and home life, designed to make him less nervous. Chris could feel Vin slowly unwind, but an edge of apprehension was clearly apparent; it wasn't an unusual response with the presence of so many adults outside his home, though. Chris did his best to reassure his son with his touch and thoughts.

Once the doctor recognized that Vin was in a receptive state, Steiger began a relaxation routine that wasn't unlike their session with Kojay. Chris felt himself fall easily into the now familiar state and Vin followed along, but Chris fell short of the depth he'd gone with Kojay. Vin, however, slipped further along, their bond keeping the boy grounded. It was like mental rappelling, Chris reasoned. Soon, his son's eyes closed and his hand became slack within his father's.

"So, Vin, let's go back to the accident in your mind only. Remember, these are only memories and they can't hurt you. It's like looking at a picture book."

"Okay." Chris wondered if Orrin's recorder would pick up the soft voice.

"Do you remember the accident?"

"No. Just a noise. A loud bang."

"Look back to the next thing you remember and tell me what it is."

“It’s dark.” Barely audible, Vin’s voice was a rough whisper. “It’s . . . dark an’ . . . an’ it smells funny.”

“What’s it smell like, Vin?”

“Bad. Like dirty socks. An’ a doctor’s office.” Vin scowled. In any other situation, the expression would have been funny. Chris glanced at Buck and saw the same grim expression that probably mirrored his own.

“Are you outside or inside?”

“Inside.” Vin shifted, but he still felt relaxed to Chris. “It’s dark.”

“Are there any lights you can turn on?”

Vin shrugged slightly. “Yes . . . no.”

“Let me ask that another way, Vin. Is there a light switch near you?”

“Yes, but I can’t . . . reach . . . it.” Rather than looking upset, Chris thought he looked puzzled. “I can’t . . . move.”

“Do you hear anything?” Chris appreciated Dr. Steiger’s deflection.

“Voices. Harry’s talkin’ to someone.” Vin grew still and his voice dropped as if he didn’t want to be noticed. “He’s going to hurt me again.” He frowned, and the way his voice quivered set off every parental alarm in Chris’ head. If it wasn’t for Buck reaching over and grabbing his forearm, Chris would have swept Vin up and run far, far away.

“How do you know that?”

“I’m on my stomach and he gave me a shot. He always hurts me when I’m like that. I don’t like layin’ on my stomach. I can’t breathe when . . . he . . .” Vin’s voice hitched.

Chris glanced sharply at the Buck, recalling the incident involving Matt waking Vin on the couch - the boy had been on his stomach. Chris felt sick as he connected the dots just before a wash of terror, helplessness and shame nearly overwhelmed him; the impression of rape focused exquisitely and painfully clear and Chris gasped - Vin’s grip tightened on his hand.

“Vin. It’s only a memory. No one can hurt you now. Understand?”

How Dr. Steiger managed to keep his voice so level was beyond him as Chris fought to regain their previous calm. He squeezed his eyes shut and worked to control his breathing the way Kojay had taught him. The intense feelings of absolute fear and deep embarrassment that emanated from Vin were impossible to put aside; Chris could only accept them and although it wrenched his stomach to do so, it was the one way he found that he could get a grip on his emotions. He had to push aside his explosive mix of primal fury and profound sadness while letting the rest of it pour over him. It was akin to being doused with gasoline.

Once done, once the tide ebbed, Chris was able to focus on that golden bond once more and build their strength. It seemed to take a lifetime, but once successful, he heard Vin sniff and then sigh in relief.

Chris took a breath and opened his eyes, still a bit stunned, and glanced at Buck. Numb, he was saddened to see silver tears trickling down his friend's cheeks. Buck released his grip on Chris' forearm and only then did Chris feel the hot lines trailing from his own eyes. He absently scrubbed them away with his palm and took a shaky breath. He glanced up and saw Dr. Steiger give him a concerned, sideways look while Dr. Will was wholly focused on Vin's face.

"Yeah," Vin finally replied to Dr. Steiger's question. Chris inhaled deeply and centered himself on the connection that bound them. Vin visibly relaxed at his side and Dr. Will looked relieved. Chris swallowed hard realizing it was his boy's trust in him that made it possible to maintain their positions. When he glanced at Buck, he was sure the flicker of guilt he felt was visible in his eyes by the tight smile and the slight shake of the head that Buck gave him.

"Can you hear what Harry's talking about?" Dr. Steiger asked as if the delay never occurred.

"No. They're fuzzy. The shots make things sound fuzzy. I kicked him."

That made one corner of Chris' mouth twitch and he heard Buck snort.

"You're safe here, Vin. No one can hurt you now. It's only a memory."

"I know," he sighed. "My dad's here t' keep me safe," he said with confidence. Buck nudged Chris at that.

"How did you leave Harry's house?"

"Mr. Jesse took me."

"Mr. Jesse was alone?"

"Yeah. I remember Mr. Jesse carrying me outside 'cuz I was sleepy from th' shot. It was cold when we got there and it smelled like hay. I woke up in Miss Grace's house 'n I could see outside." The relief in that revelation was very clear and Vin's body relaxed even more. So did Chris, grudgingly grateful to Miss Grace.

"What do you see out of the window?"

"Sky. Trees. A bird's nest. An owl." Chris smiled slightly. Vin continued. "Train cars. Trucks."

"Train cars?" Dr. Steiger asked. "Is there a train close by?"

Vin frowned. "No, just big boxes that look like train cars with no wheels in the yard. Mr. Jesse keeps stuff in 'em. I've seen 'em on trains before. The trucks bring stuff in and take stuff away."

"Big trucks?"

"Yeah. With trailers. Like the ones that deliver stuff to Wal-Mart."

Buck chuckled softly.

"What else do you see out of the window? Do you see cars?"

Vin frowned. "Yeah." He shifted, suddenly uncomfortable and frowning. "Ain't supposed to look," he whispered.

Chris felt the bond waver. "*Vin?*" he thought, watching how his son absently rubbed his arm. His left arm, Chris noted - the one that had been broken.

"It's just a memory, Vin. Nothing here can hurt you."

"But I . . . I can't help it. It was right under my window. He always parked it there." Vin hugged his left arm close to his body and became absolutely still. Chris focused on the bond and mentally drew Vin back to him as he found his boy's hand again.

"Vin, I want you to take a deep breath. It's only a memory. It can't hurt you."

*"Don't leave me!"*

*"Never, Vin. I will always be here. Always. You know that in your heart."*

After a moment, Vin sighed, but the tight grip on Chris' hand remained. "I know," he said softly.

"Now," Dr. Steiger continued. "What was right under your window?"

"The green car." Vin frowned again but this time, remained calm. "The one the red-haired man drives. It's right under my window. I can't help but see it. He's the only one that parks there." He abandoned Chris' hand and hugged his left arm across his narrow chest while Chris felt a rise in anxiety. "Jesse saw me lookin' 'n grabbed my arm . . ." Vin shuddered and his shoulders hunched.

"It's just a memory, Vin. Like in a photo album, it can't hurt you."

Vin's body language tore at his heart and Chris fought to stay in control. He claimed Vin's hand once again and used it to strengthen the visual picture of their connection. Eventually, Vin responded and the tension left his grip.

The next words that came from his son shook Chris viscerally.

"I heard it snap." It was an odd juxtaposition to hear the boy's words when he looked so relaxed. Vin's hand slipped from Chris' and he rubbed his forearm near the elbow, a perplexed expression washing over his face. "It hurt."

Buck gripped Chris' forearm again and he was sure there would be bruises. He heard his friend groan.

"The car is green?"

Chris again appreciated Dr. Steiger's deflection.

"Yeah. It has no top 'n y' can see the engine. It's got silver stripes."

Dr. Steiger glanced at Patterson, who nodded encouragingly and handed over a note. The doctor read it and then handed it to Chris.

"Vin, have you seen a car like it before?"

A furrow of thought wedged between Vin's eyebrows. "Yeah."

"Where?"

"At Dr. Will's office."

Surprised, Dr. Lowery cocked his head and scribbled a note.

"Where at Dr. Will's office? In the parking lot?"

"No, in the toy box."

The DA investigator wrote furiously and handed over another note. Chris managed to exchange some of his tension for curiosity.

"Vin, do you think you would recognize the red-haired man if you saw him again?"

The relaxed curve of Vin's body immediately stiffened as an expression of fear overtook his features, catching Chris completely off guard. "No!" he cried softly, releasing Chris' hand and hugging his arm to his body. His voice rose in pitch. "I'm not supposed to see! He'll hurt me!"

Chris gasped and instinctively pulled Vin close, murmuring soothing words and stroked his hair. Vin trembled, and in the eye of Chris' mind, he saw their bond shorten, bringing them close and separating them from the outside world, and drawing them into a safe cocoon. Vaguely, Chris heard Dr. Steiger's voice in the background.

"Okay, Vin, I want you to count from five to one. On one, you'll wake up and feel completely relaxed. Start counting. Five, four . . ."

Vin's slight body relaxed a little more with each number until he felt boneless in Chris' embrace. When Dr. Steiger reached one, a whispered word warmed Chris' ear. "Dad?"

"You okay?" Chris asked lowly as he continued to rub Vin's back.

"Yeah." Vin pushed back and Chris let his arms fall away. His son looked around, appearing a bit dazed before finding Dr. Steiger. "Is it over?"

Dr. Steiger smiled and patted Vin's knee. "All over. You did great, Vin. How do you feel?"

"Fine." Vin blinked and sought out Chris' eyes. Chris saw questions milling around in his boy's head; questions that would not be verbalized here in front of these men. He also knew that Vin wasn't fine – he was worried.

After reassuring Vin that everything went well, Dr. Steiger excused himself and followed Buck, Travis and Patterson outside. In the privacy of the lodge, Dr. Will moved closer and ducked his head to capture Vin's attention.

"Do you want to talk about anything? Do you remember what you told us?"

Vin worked his fingers nervously and his gaze dropped. “I ‘member,” he said softly. “It was like a dream.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what it’s like. A dream or a memory can’t hurt you, but the feelings you had at the time can confuse things. It’s hard to separate the feelings from the thoughts, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” He raised his chin a little and looked at Dr. Will through blond lashes.

“If there are any feelings or other things you don’t think you can say out loud, you can write them in your journal, Vin.” The Doctor rubbed Vin’s leg in sympathy and then glanced at Chris before continuing. “I’m sure you know that they will want to look for that car in the toy box. Was it there the last time you were in my office?”

Chris wrapped a protective arm around Vin’s shoulders as the boy nodded. “Yeah. I didn’t touch it.” He dropped his gaze again fiddled with the hem of his shirt. “Th’ car in the toy box is blue but it’s the same car. I remember.”

“You did great, son.” Chris held Vin close as he spoke to Dr. Will. “Josiah will go back with you and look through the toy box. Thanks for being here. It’s been a great help.”

Dr. Lowery stood and brushed off his jeans. “Unless things change, I’ll plan on seeing you next week at your regular time, okay, Vin?”

Vin nodded and Chris knew they had taken the first steps along a difficult path.



## CHAPTER NINE

Vin was quiet on the ride back to the cabin while Buck filled Chris in on the supplies the group had packed in. The twisty trail required some attention, but Chris managed to find their way back without any missteps.

When they reined to a stop in front of the rustic structure, Chris took a few moments to study the area and evaluate their security. Buck dismounted and was immediately assaulted by a chattering JD, who managed to divide his substantial attention between his Da and Vin without pause. Matt leaned against the door frame, smiling.

“Breathe, Li'l Bit!” Buck chuckled. JD paused long enough to sigh and roll his eyes before launching into his next block of information. Buck herded the two boys and two horses toward the hastily assembled lean-to and rope fence acting as both barn and corral.

“I’ll check the perimeter,” Chris said, kneeling his mount forward. “I’ll be right back, Cowboy.”

Vin managed a stress-free smile for his dad while JD demanded his attention regarding the evidence of mice in the cabin.

When Chris rode past his father, Matt said, “Claire’s making lunch. We’re fine here.”

Grateful, Chris gave a sharp nod and continued onward.

The tree line was close to the cabin, the abundant crowns of various species sufficiently hiding the cabin from any aerial surveillance. The trees and hilly nature of the land rendered long-distance observation impossible. There was no road anywhere near their location, making horses or hiking the only way to get here. Chris knew he should be satisfied with the security the remote location offered, but he still felt uneasy. He stopped Pony to regroup mentally when a familiar form stepped from behind a wide tree trunk.

Ezra brushed a piece of tree bark from his jacket sleeve. “After this ordeal has come to its conclusion, Mr. Larabee, I shall require vacation time in a populated, civilized location to re-obtain what our esteemed profiler refers to as my ‘balance’. Las Vegas, perhaps.”

Chris chuffed and dismounted, automatically scanning the area as he joined his teammate. “I know a nice sweat lodge that may fit the bill.”

Ezra rolled his eyes, reminding the team leader of JD. “Please. Although I do not discount the relaxing properties some may find in that venue, I require five-star accommodations surrounding it.”

Chris chuckled.

“You have returned sooner than I expected,” Ezra said. “I assume the meeting was successful?”

“We’ll see. We may have a lead. Vin saw a car at Faraday’s compound.”

“A car? How is that helpful?”

Chris scrubbed his forehead. “Well, from the layout of the house and where Vin’s room was, this car had to go around the entire house to park where Vin could see it. We think the driver was parking out of sight from the main roadway.”

Ezra frowned. “Any postulation as to why?”

“Not sure. Either the car or the man was easily recognizable. Vin said the driver had red hair and the car looked like one of the toy cars in Dr. Will’s office toy box. Faraday was angry when he found out Vin saw the car.”

There was obvious heat in the last of Chris’ words. Ezra looked at him expectantly, knowing instantly that there was more to the subject.

Chris glanced at him and shook his head as he dropped his gaze. “Faraday broke Vin’s arm for looking at the car.”

Ezra closed his eyes and tilted his head back. “Good Lord,” he breathed. “It’s no wonder the boy has nightmares.”

“Yeah.” Chris found that he was unable to say any more as he tried to hold back welling fury. He wasn’t ready to share the other revelation brought forward at the “meeting”. After a few moments of silence, Chris turned and led his horse toward the makeshift barn. “I’ll relieve you after I grab a bite so you can get some lunch.”

“Thank you. I will make one more circuit around the premises and meet you here then you may take your leave.”

With a backward wave, Chris walked away and tried to recapture the sense of peace this place usually gave him. The horrifying thoughts and resulting emotions that swirled in his mind from Vin’s interview refused to go away and he

again thought of Dr. Will's warning: ". . . *those memories will surface at some time - probably when he starts to feel safe again - and you'll have to be prepared.*"

Chris blew out a sharp breath of frustration. He was beginning to think he'd never be prepared. The somewhat mindless chore of putting Pony up gave Chris the time he needed to get control of his roller coaster emotions and regain composure. Vin already had a blast of his father's horror and Chris knew the boy was a bit shaken up both by the recovered memory and his father's reaction. Chris had to make it clear that none of the past horrors were Vin's fault and that he had been in a completely powerless position; Chris also admitted that he had to personally accept the fact that he was powerless, too. The latter part was his current problem.

Chris inhaled deeply through his nose and he patted Pony's long neck. Pony's ears flicked before he shook his head and sidled up to Peso to steal a share of the scattered hay.

Chris headed toward the tiny cabin and met his father at the front step. "I'm going to eat and then relieve Ezra. How are things here?"

"Pretty subdued for those boys," Matt said honestly. Like his son, he didn't say much but the questions in his eyes were clear.

"It wasn't pleasant," Chris said lowly, dragging his hand across his forehead. He found he couldn't meet his father's gaze because he was afraid of revealing too much pain; his father and mother had seen too much of that in his eyes already. Still, even with his eyes cast downward, Chris could feel the weight of his father's gaze. "Vin remembered being raped." Chris choked on the last word, his throat suddenly tight. The suddenness of tears caused his eyes to burn and he rubbed his eyes again, unable to say more.

Matt didn't say anything. Instead, Chris felt his father's consoling arm around his shoulders and after a few seconds, his father cleared his throat. When he spoke, his voice was husky with emotion.

"Go inside now. Vin needs you." Matt gently gripped Chris' shoulder and gave him a reassuring shake. "I don't think you need to say anything, son. He just needs to know you're there."

Chris cleared his throat and nodded once, not trusting his voice. Then he stepped inside where he saw his son sitting at a small table, eyes wide and fixed directly on him. At that moment, when he felt the strength of their bond, he knew for a fact that words weren't needed between them. He smiled at his son and Vin visibly relaxed and returned the smile. Chris warmed all over and then moved in to join his son at the table.

ef

Josiah embraced the quiet on the return ride, leading the remaining men back to the reservation barn in a direct and timely manner. The fresh chop from their horses' hooves made the trail clear and easy to follow. Steiger and Dr. Will rode side by side, conversing in low voices. Travis looked thoughtful. Patterson looked less panicked and more pained, based on the way he clutched the saddle horn - his horse looked equally unhappy. The profiler smiled, content that his flock would make it back in one piece.

When the barn came into view, he was surprised to see a group of the reservation dwellers standing together in front of the barn doors with Kojay standing slightly apart and obviously waiting for them. The elders' posture as he stood in the middle of the trail told Josiah he wanted them to stop short of the structure. The others grew silent as they reined in behind the profiler and Kojay approached.

"My people have found something that may interest you," the old man said as they all dismounted. Patterson nearly went to his knees as soon as his feet hit the ground so Kojay turned and motioned for a sturdy young man to take the investigator's mount, allowing Patterson to wobble to the nearest supporting post. Meanwhile, Kojay moved closer and spoke quietly to Josiah.

After hearing Kojay out, Josiah smiled grandly and handed off his reins to the young helper before addressing Travis. "As Assistant Director, sir, you may want to accompany me."

Travis raised a brow and immediately passed his reins to the waiting boy. He joined Josiah and cleared his throat before muttering, "Why do I get the feeling I'm not going to like what I'm going to see?"

The two men followed Kojay to the barn where two teenage girls pushed open the doors just enough for them to slip inside. Josiah blinked in the darkness, his eyes taking a few seconds to adjust. Then he saw the subject of Kojay's message and grinned again. "Well," he said, crossing his arms across his broad chest. "What do we have here?"

"Aw, Hell," Travis growled.

A.T.F. agent Todd Casselman, Team Three's computer expert, was gagged and trussed snugly to the barn's center support beam looking a bit mussed, partially muddied and wholly resigned to his dubious fate.

ef

It took less than an hour for Casselman to spill his tale and put Travis on the edge of a rage. The only fact the captured agent withheld was the name of the man giving him his orders.

"I'm just supposed to tell them where the kid is! They have my wife," the man choked. "They have Becky. If they know I'm talking to you, they will kill her. I have no choice!"

Travis stepped close enough to the bound man for his low tone would be heard clearly. "You had the choice to stop gambling. Your debts," he poked Casselman's chest with a finger, "*your* debts, have put your family in danger, Todd, no one else. I know for a fact that you are a dead man, too, along with an innocent young boy and your wife if you don't stop this now; we already know that this bunch leaves no witnesses behind. We will do what we can for the innocents in this mess, but for you there are no promises." Travis paused, letting his words sink in. "Now, man up for once and give me a name."

Sweating, Casselman's eyes darted around the shadowed barn as he thought. Josiah pegged the moment the captured agent gave up - his shoulders slumped and his eyes closed in defeat.

"Assistant Director Fitzsimmons," Casselman whispered.

Stunned, Josiah turned to Travis. His boss' jaw was clenched so tightly, Josiah expected to hear the sound of cracking teeth.

"He flew in from the San Francisco office and spoke directly to me," Casselman babbled. "I don't know if he spoke to anyone else while he was here. That's all I know."

"Shut up," Travis snapped, clearly troubled. "Just shut up for a minute." Travis grabbed Josiah's arm and pulled him aside and spoke too softly for their captive to hear. "Jesus, Faraday's got the Assistant Director of the western division! We may have to get some outside help - Federal Marshals? The U.S. Attorney's office?"

"I suggest that the idea is a bit premature, Orrin," Josiah said. "We still don't know who to trust and how to communicate safely. Agent Casselman is good bait, but we need to have an idea who he will attract. I suggest we hold him while we follow up on the car lead Vin gave us. Perhaps we can combine the information and use it to our advantage."

"We're clearly dealing with much larger numbers than our own, Agent Sanchez," Travis said.

Josiah's eyes sparkled. "Theoretically, David said the same of Goliath, sir."

Travis narrowed his eyes for a few seconds before finally shaking his head with a bark of dry laughter. "Well, then, let's see what we *do* have first. Take

Steiger back to his office and then you and Lowery find that toy car. I'll talk to Patterson."

Josiah exited the barn and sent Patterson in. The two doctors were obviously curious but knew better than to ask anything. Sanchez sent them to the car and waved Kojay over.

"That was a helpful surprise," he began, "but you may be putting your people in danger."

"This is our land, Agent Sanchez," Kojay firmly replied. "We will protect it as we see fit."

"Understood." Josiah glanced at the cars. "I suspect one of the vehicles was tagged with a GPS device." He scratched his chin in thought. "I should find out which car . . ."

"Agent Wilmington's truck. It's under the right front fender."

Josiah's shaggy brows rose in surprise. "That certainly saves me some time," he chuckled. "I'll dispose of it."

"Wouldn't it be better to know where your enemy is focused?" Kojay asked.

"Well, yes, but it puts your people in danger."

The elder's ageless eyes held Josiah's gaze. "Our defenses are already in place. Do not worry about us. This reservation has many acres and plenty of places to get lost."

Josiah regarded the man for a few long moments. "I do not think I will ask what you mean by that," he finally conceded. "Did our wayward traveler in there have a vehicle?"

"Yes. It is concealed just outside the reservation and off the main highway." Kojay motioned a young man over, who brought a bulging burlap bag. "The car was not 'tagged', as you say, but he did have some interesting equipment."

Josiah accepted the bag and peeked inside. "Hm," he said. "The best listening devices our office can offer." He closed the bag and handed it back to the boy. "Give this to Travis. These things may come in handy for our side." Kojay's tribesman trotted to the barn with the offering. "I'll be back. Thanks for your help, but you need to be very careful. We're dealing with dangerous men."

"I understand."

Josiah climbed into the old Suburban and headed out. After dropping Dr. Steiger at his office, he continued to Dr. Lowery's building where the two of them emptied the office of every blue toy car they could find. With that done, Josiah bade the doctor farewell and headed to the nearest store that sold prepaid cell phones.

Knowing that time was of the essence now that they had a captured spy, Josiah headed back to the reservation with his collection. He didn't think he was followed but with the depth of their foe's resources an unknown, he still felt uneasy.

Josiah's horse was ready for him on his return. Patterson and Travis were settled in the barn with Casselman, unwilling to move him until they had a plan. He left one of the untraceable phones with Travis.

"Well," Travis said as he opened the package. "They can still hear us if they have any more people using that quality of equipment," he said, glancing at the items recovered from Casselman's car, "but they can't trace the numbers now or pinpoint our location."

"So the conversations will have to be encrypted," Josiah agreed.

As he turned to go, Travis stopped him with a hand on his forearm. "We don't have a lot of time," he said quietly.

"I know, sir."

Outside, Josiah mounted up and headed to the cabin, the bag full of toys and phones tucked safely against his body.

ef

Chris and Buck managed to keep the boys busy by helping them make a fort out of branches and sticks while Claire and Matt watched from the porch. Chris could tell that his parents wanted to join in, but was grateful that they held back. The physical activity, under Ezra's watchful eye, was helping all of them burn off the anxiety of the situation.

JD and Vin kept racing back to where their grandparents sat, looking to see if the fort was invisible to the eye. "Cammieflagged," as JD put it.

"I do believe Mr. Sanchez is coming in," Ezra finally announced from the edge of the woods.

Chris and Buck started to the cabin while JD excitedly tugged on Vin's shirt. "Come on!" he squealed. "Let's see if Unca Josiah c'n see us!"

Chris saw Vin's demeanor change with the word of Josiah's return. As JD tried to get his attention, Vin caught Chris' gaze and held it, uncertain. Chris forced a smile and nodded toward the small fort. Vin then seemed to finally notice JD's urging and followed along.

A couple of minutes passed before Josiah appeared and reined in. Buck stepped up and accepted the bag Josiah offered.

"I'll put my horse away and give Ezra a break," the profiler said.

Buck looked in the bag. “I didn’t realize there were so many toy cars in that office,” he muttered.

“I collected anything that was close,” Josiah explained.

Buck pulled out one of the phones and Chris smiled tightly when he saw them. “Good idea,” he said, taking one.

Josiah looked around and returned Matt and Claire’s waved greeting. “Where are the boys?”

“They want you to find ‘em,” Buck said with a grin. “We built a damned fine camouflaged fort. Chris? I’ll take these inside.”

Chris nodded as Josiah scanned the area. “Hm. I feel like I’m being watched.”

“You are, I’m sure,” Chris said with a tight smile. “I’ll put your horse away. Shouldn’t take you long to find ‘em - you know JD and hiding.”

“I’ll just listen for the giggling.” Josiah cautiously moved forward, peering into the natural shadows. As predicted, the slight shushing noise and repressed giggling got him going in the right direction. “I declare; Davy Crockett couldn’t have hidden himself so well. Where are you two?”

The question was too much for JD as he popped into view. “Here we are, Unca Josiah! Isn’t our fort neat?”

Josiah had to agree that they had done a fine job. JD’s head sticking up over the edge of the roof was all he could clearly see. When he circled around to the entrance he found JD bouncing in place.

“Come in! It’s so cool!”

Part of the fort was subterranean. JD disappeared into what looked to be a hole in the ground and Josiah had to sit and wiggle his way through the narrow opening. Once inside, he found it roomy and dark. Enough light filtered through the thatched roof for him to find that Vin looked unhappy. Josiah settled next to him.

“Heya, Vin. Nice digs you have here.”

“Yeah,” Vin agreed. “Did ya bring ‘em?”

“*So much for the subtle approach,*” Josiah thought. “Yep. Your dad has ‘em in the cabin. We won’t look until you’re ready, Vin.” He knew the pressure of time was not what Vin needed right now.

JD felt the serious turn of subject and snuggled next to Josiah and grew quiet. Vin dropped his chin as heavy thoughts seemed to weigh on him. Then, with a deep sigh, his shoulders relaxed and he sat up. “Let’s get this done.”

Josiah smiled at how much of Chris had rubbed off on the small boy. He reached out and patted Vin’s shoulder. “You’re a remarkable boy, Vin. Just remember we’re all watching your back. You’re safe.”



Vin's smile was nervous and tentative. "I know," he whispered before crawling out.

JD stared at the exit for a second and then rolled his eyes up to look at his acquired Uncle. Josiah wouldn't have been surprised if the small boy had stuck his thumb into his mouth, but instead, he asked a question in a very serious tone. "Is Vin gonna be okay? He's sad a lot. Isn't he happy to be home?"

Josiah gave him a quick hug. "Yes, he's very happy to be home, JD. Vin just has other worries we need to help him with. You're doing the most to help him, you know."

"I am?"

"Yep," Josiah grinned. "You just keep reminding him he's a boy, not a grown up, okay?"

JD frowned. "How do I do that?"

"By doing what you do best. By being yourself, JD."

The boy didn't look convinced, but he nodded anyway. "Okay," he finally agreed. "I can do that."

"Yes, you can. Now, do you want me to help you make a door for this creation?"

ef

Buck upended the bag and a small avalanche of wheeled toys tumbled onto the table. "Looks like Josiah just grabbed everything that's blue." He held up a blue Weeble car. "If I ever see a car like this on the road, I'm gettin' outta the way."

Chris snorted. "You know Josiah. No stone unturned."

A collection of footsteps on the front step prepared them for the cabin door when it swung open. Matt held it open for Vin, who stepped in holding tight to Claire's hand. He glanced at the tableful of toys just before meeting Chris' eyes. In those few moments between the table and meeting his gaze, Chris saw the resolve solidify; his boy was taking a stand against his fear and Chris was nearly speechless at his son's trust.

Buck must have seen his friend's temporary inability to speak so he stepped in without pause. "Hey, Junior! I hope this ain't the car we're lookin' for." He held up the plastic absurdity and got the laugh he was going for from Vin, Matt and Claire. It was short, but it helped to ease the tension. Claire released Vin's hand with a supportive smile and he moved in to Chris' side.

“Let’s see what we’ve got, here,” Chris urged, sitting, and then pulling Vin into his lap. Once settled, Chris spread the toys out with a hand. “It has a stripe, you say?”

The question broke Vin from a momentary pause and he began picking through the pile with his father. Buck remained standing by the ancient table and fingered a few of the choices. “Lookie here, Chris! Here’s the Mustang that assho - I mean, that guy from our old unit had.”

Chris chuckled when Claire smacked Buck on the back of the head and chided him for his slip of the tongue and Chris felt Vin’s stiff posture release a little with the teasing. The next collection of seconds passed in silence and then Vin finally lifted a Matchbox type car from the pile and froze.

With his hand flat on Vin’s back, Chris could feel Vin’s suddenly racing heart and the hitch in his breath. The easy silence became instantly electrified. Chris wrapped his arms around his boy and whispered that everything would be all right.

“That’s the one, huh?” Buck’s normally boisterous voice was calm and coaxing. “Well, let’s take a look at it, Vin.” He slowly reached for the toy and gently took it from Vin’s fingers. Vin folded back into Chris’ arms and nodded.

“That’s it, ‘cept it’s really green and the stripe’s silver,” Vin said quietly.

Buck studied the car. “Holy cow, Vin, I ‘kin see why the car was not hard to notice.” He looked at Chris. “Exactly how many 1966 Shelby Cobras do you think are in the state, let alone the county, boss?”

“Not many. Get the search parameters to the Department of Motor Vehicles. It shouldn’t take long to get a list. And do the same for the surrounding states.”

“On it.”

Matt grabbed Buck’s arm and stopped him. “You need to check online for sports car clubs, too. There’s bound to be at least one that’s exclusive to Shelby Cobras.”

“That’s a good call, Matt,” Buck said. He then looked to Chris for any more orders.

“Call Travis and tell him what we need.” Chris tossed him one of the pre-pays and Buck grabbed it from the air.

“We’re gonna get him, Junior, and he’s gonna lead us to Faraday. This *will* be over soon, son,” Buck encouraged before slipping outside.

Vin sighed and continued to sit quietly, obviously happy in his father’s arms. Matt and Claire picked up the rest of the cars and decided to take them outside for JD to play with for a while, leaving the two alone.

As always, Chris and Vin were content to simply sit in silence and just revel in each other's presence. Chris felt the warmth of their bond and allowed himself to relax and allow others to keep watch over them for the moment.

"Do ya think it's true, Dad? What Buck said?"

"About this being over soon? Yeah, I think it's true. You just gave us a huge hint. It's a lot more than we had before and it's going to help a lot."

Vin tilted his head back and searched Chris' eyes. Apparently satisfied with whatever he saw there, he reached up and traced the thick scar that marred his dad's left eyebrow.

Chris sat still as his son studied him. Vin gently felt all around the edges of the scar and then followed the slanted angle from end to end.

"Does it bother you?" Chris whispered.

"Sometimes," Vin replied in the same quiet tone. "It reminds me that I was gone."

"I feel the same way when I see you rub your arm."

"I'll try to stop."

"Don't. I'd rather make it stop bothering you."

Vin's forehead knitted. "How?"

"Well, Dr. Two Eagles said they could do it with surgery. You'd be asleep."

The boy frowned and thought about that. "If he fixed it, would it stop bothering you?"

Chris smiled. "Yeah, but I won't let him do it if you are afraid. I don't want it to bother you when you're older, though, so I think it would be best if it was fixed."

Vin was quiet a little longer. "If you get that fixed for me," Vin touched Chris' roughly healed injury, "I'll get my arm fixed for you."

Chris cocked an eyebrow in surprise. "That sounds like a plan, Cowboy, but we have time. We won't do anything until I'm sure we are all safe. Does that sound good to you?"

"Yeah," Vin answered as he settled deeper in his father's embrace, satisfied that there wasn't any place that could possibly feel safer to him.

CHAPTER TEN

“Nathan!” Surprised, Raine yelped from the doorway of her husband’s hospital room, her hand flying to her heart. Recovering quickly, she then narrowed her eyes in suspicion and spoke sharply. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Startled by the suddenness of her appearance, Nathan’s eyes rounded and his good leg buckled. He grabbed wildly for the metal railing of his bed and let out a gasp.

“Oh!” Raine darted forward to keep him from hitting the floor. Planting her leg solidly under his butt she grabbed his arm for stability, stopping his slow fall.

“Wheelchair,” he gasped.

With a little help, he was able to get his good leg under him again and balanced enough for Raine to draw the wheelchair into an appropriate position. Nathan hopped once and settled into the chair with a relieved sigh.

“I repeat,” Raine said reduced heat. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Helping Chris and Vin.” Nathan unlocked the wheels and started forward, but found his path blocked by his grim-faced spouse. She stood with fisted hands on her hips and pinned him with dark glare. He managed to hold her laser stare without flinching. “It’s stitched closed and wrapped tight, and I have some great pain meds. If I keep my weight off of it, I’ll be fine. We have crutches at home.”

“And you plan on getting home . . . how?”

“I had hoped that by beautiful, compassionate wife would stand by my decision and help me help my team.”

“How can you help? You can’t even stand!”

Nathan sighed and looked down for a moment to gather his thoughts and diffuse the urgency that threatened to show itself as anger. “Josiah called. They need me to do some research at the Denver Police Department. It’s sit down, computer work, honey. They need my help. They can’t trust anyone else.”

She stood firm for a moment longer; Nathan expected her toe to start tapping on the cold floor any second but instead, she let out a deep sigh and relaxed her stance. “One condition - I’m there with you. You can’t go jumping around like a maniac.”

He looked insulted. “I don’t jump around like a maniac. You’re confusing me with the other guys.”

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes’. And Nathan, I swear, if you ever say ‘I’m fine’ in response to a question, you’ll be back here so fast it’ll make your head spin. Understand?”

“Again, you’re confusing me with . . .” The glare his normally lovely spouse leveled at him made Nathan swallow the last part of his sentence. He cleared his throat and surrendered with a nod. “Yeah. Understood. Now let’s go.”

Raine gave him a sweet smile and then slipped around behind the wheelchair. Nathan wondered if she was going to send him down the first set of stairs they came across and nervously gripped the cold, metal arms of his ride as they left the hospital room.

Later, Raine pulled into the headquarters parking lot of the Denver Police Department and parked. She wrangled the wheelchair from the hatch and patiently helped Nathan into it before asking the obvious. “Now, why are we here instead of at your office?”

“Travis thinks the team is being watched and doesn’t want me to use the computers in our building. That’s all I know. Josiah’s supposed to meet me here.”

When they entered the building, Raine maneuvered him expertly through the sparse crowd until they reached the reception desk, where a beefy, annoyed-looking, uniformed officer sat. Nathan gave his name and driver’s license to the officer. After carefully checking both his and Raine’s photos, he directed them to a door off to one side. Nathan heard a “click” when the electronic lock released and Raine pushed him through.

It was a beehive of activity with both uniformed and plain clothed personnel behind the door. Phones rang, computer keyboards clacked and many different conversations were going on consecutively at various levels of volume. Nathan and Raine stopped just inside the door and looked for a familiar face. It wasn’t long before a door opened at the end of a long hall and Josiah’s large frame came into view and waving for the pair to approach. Raine pushed her husband down the hall, past rows of cluttered cubicles corralling detectives with loosened ties barking into phone receivers sandwiched between hunched shoulders and reddened ears.

When they passed Josiah and he pulled the door shut behind them, all the noises changed. Here, in the prisoner holding area, sound echoed on the Spartan, linoleum floors and plain, undecorated walls. Nathan rolled past tiny, windowed interview rooms to a secluded office tucked in a far corner. Once pushed into the office, he was completely surprised to find Agent Ted Casselman handcuffed to a prisoner bench. Nathan craned his neck and gave Josiah an astonished look.

“Ted, here, is in that area known as between a rock and a hard place. He’s volunteered to get us some information.” Josiah handed Nathan a folder. “This is what we know so far. What we need is a plan that will recover Becky Casselman, Ted’s wife, and won’t tip our hand. The others are in seclusion and working on another angle.” As he spoke, Josiah uncuffed Ted and moved him to the chair in front of the computer. Josiah lifted a set of ankle chains from the corner and secured Casselman’s legs. “Send anything he finds directly to Travis via fax.” He pointed to a fax machine/telephone behind the computer monitor. “Here’s the number.”

Nathan accepted the business card offered by his teammate. “Is that all?” he said with a hint of sarcasm.

Josiah chuckled and gave Nathan’s shoulder a shake. Josiah pointed at the folder. “While he’s doing that, you have your own work. What we need is in that file, last page. You should be getting several faxes from these people.” Josiah pointed to the contact information for the Department of Motor Vehicles of Colorado and surrounding states. “Perfect for a man in your infirmed state.”

Raine chuckled and Nathan scowled as he rolled his wheelchair behind a second computer screen situated closer to the fax machine. “Do I have a contact here? Is this place secure?”

“It’s the best we can do for now. Buck and Chris have an old friend here that they trust - Bob Niley. He’s the precinct Captain. He’ll be keeping an eye on you and knows that no one should be bothering you.” Josiah pointed to a camera mounted high in the room’s corner.

“I gave my name to the desk officer. Was I not supposed to do that?”

“It will be purged momentarily. I will be in the next room checking web sites,” Josiah said.

“You look like you need sleep,” Raine pointed out.

“Can’t fool you!” Josiah chuckled as he left. “As I said, we’re spread thin. Any way you can find to help, Miss Raine, would be greatly appreciated.”

She sighed and then grumbled, “Sounds like I’m making coffee.”

Josiah gave her a grin and patted her shoulder. “You are an angel. Really.”

Nathan just snorted.

ef

The two men eyed each other from their respective seats across DPD Captain Niley's meticulously ordered desk. Both men's faces were impassively set, not giving any hint of a clue as to what was running through their minds.

"So, Mister. . ." Niley glanced at a piece of paper in front of him. ". . . Baker. What's this all about?"

Keith Baker appeared to be in his mid-thirties, clean-cut and neatly dressed in a plain suit. Niley's first impression was "cop", but the man had presented himself at the precinct front counter as a citizen seeking an audience with the Captain. Now that the man was here, there was an obvious game of cat-and-mouse in play. Caution reigned.

"I have a complaint," Baker said slowly, holding Niley's gaze to a point where it felt like a challenge. "Regarding a man named Sean Griffin."

Niley ran the name through his head and came up blank. "Is this a complaint against one of my staff or something personal?"

"I'm not sure." Baker spoke as if he was dancing on eggshells, but his eyes never left Niley's face.

Captain Niley considered the name before saying, "In what context would this Mr. Griffin work for me if he was on my staff? An officer? Clerk?"

The fine muscles around Baker's eyes twitched as if fighting off the urge to narrow his stare. "Well," he said slowly, "actually, it's Dr. Griffin."

Niley's leather chair squeaked softly as the Captain shifted his weight and leaned back. After a moment, he tilted his head and replied, "We don't have a whole lot of doctors on the Denver PD staff, Mr. Baker, unless you're referring to a Doctorate's degree. What kind of doctor is this gentleman?"

Baker searched the Captain's face for a good long while, appearing to be carefully considering. As he did so, Niley looked more closely at the man seated across from him. Tiny clues like tension lines around his mouth and the corners of his eyes, along with the faint, dark semi-circles high on his cheekbone told him that Baker was under stress, and had been for a long while. The man was haunted. Niley felt as if he was being circled by a starving pit bull seeking an exposed jugular vein.

"He's a medical doctor," Baker finally said with questioning slowness. "A plastic surgeon."

That took Niley by surprise and he was unable to keep it from showing in his eyes. Then he frowned, completely perplexed. "Why would we have a plastic

surgeon on staff? Shouldn't you be talking to the County? They are the ones that take care of inmates, not the P.D. They would have doctors on staff."

The charged silence and the barely suppressed waves of expression on his visitor's face told the Captain that the man before him was waging some kind of internal battle. Niley saw the exact moment that Baker arrived at some sort of decision and surrendered when the man's shoulders slumped wearily and he sighed in exhaustion. Drooping, his eyelids managed a slow blink.

"I have to be honest with you, Captain," he started in a hoarse voice as he rubbed his eyes. "I really have nowhere else to turn and I'm out of options." He carefully reached into his jacket and pulled out a flat wallet. "My real name is Lee Barnette and I'm a D.E.A. agent." He flipped open his ID and handed it to Niley. "I'm backed so deep into a corner I haven't seen daylight in months. Do not call my office. I have no choice but to trust you."

Niley looked closely at the ID before answering very carefully. "Why do you trust me and why do you have no choice? And most importantly, why shouldn't I call your office?"

"I didn't see any sign of lying when I mentioned Griffin. It's taken me a while, but I've learned to trust no one. I only have my instinct and my instinct tells me I can trust you. I have to."

Intrigued, Niley leaned forward and offered back the flat badge wallet. "Why don't you start from the beginning, Agent Barnette?"

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Buck, Chris and Matt should have been enjoying the quiet time watching the boys play from the small cabin's porch. Instead, Buck sat on the top step and the other two leaned on the porch rail in an uneasy silence. JD and Vin were busy making a new camouflaged fort using all they had learned from the first one.

"I feel so damned useless," Chris muttered, tossing a splintered wooden match to the ground. He'd picked it to bits with his fingernails.

"It's tough being out of the action," Matt replied softly. "But you know Vin needs you the most right now."

"Doesn't make it any easier, feeling like a sitting duck 'n all."

Buck rose to his feet. "I'm gonna help the boys," he said, jogging to the tree line. A few moments later they heard surprised yelps and giggles as Buck invaded the boys' construction site.

Matt laughed and Chris couldn't help but smile. He was still chuckling when the disposable phone in his pocket rang. "Larabee," he growled after



snapping it open. He listened for a long while, his face a mask, before uttering. "Bring everyone here, Josiah. I have an idea. And bring more phones."

Chris' father looked expectantly at him as he pocketed the phone and straightened. Apparently, something showed in his expression, causing Matt to say, "The sitting duck is turning into the hunting dog, I suspect?"

One corner of Chris' mouth curled upward. "That obvious, huh?"

Matt also straightened and stretched his back. "Well, son, you never were one for waiting."

Turning serious, Chris caught his father's eyes. "Are you okay with being here alone for a bit?" He pulled his duty weapon from his hip. "I'll leave this with you along with the shotgun inside. It won't be for long."

Matt accepted the weapon, inspected it, and then nodded. "Vin won't be happy."

"Neither am I."

Chris called to Buck and Ezra, and the three saddled their horses. Vin and JD hovered nearby with Claire at their back, trying to reassure them. Once the horses were ready, Chris led Pony to where his boy stood with his concerned grandmother.

"Hey, Cowboy," Chris said as he squatted down. "I won't be gone long. You won't be alone and you're safe here. Will you be all right for a little while?"

Vin's fingers intertwined nervously even though he nodded and whispered, "Yeah."

"I'm not leaving the reservation, son. I need to talk to Kojay and the others. We'll be at the barn just down there." Chris pointed in the general direction of the structure. "Keep workin' on your fort and start another one. They may come in useful."

That last bit stalled Vin's fingers and dried the threatening tears as curiosity rose.

Chris smiled and quickly kissed him on the top of his head. "You aren't much for waiting either, are you? I'll be back soon. You and JD get busy."

When he rose to go, Claire gave him a questioning look and stopped him with her hand. Chris turned to her and waited, but all she said was, "Be careful, son."

He offered a sardonic smile and patted her hand. "I will, Mom."

After Buck gave JD a reassuring hug, the three men mounted up and headed out. Once out of hearing range of the cabin, Ezra spoke up.

"Since we are departing our idyllic lodgings am I to assume there is a plan that we will be informed of soon?"

“It’s still in the works,” Chris growled, “but I have an idea.”

“Wonderful. I am waiting in anticipation.”

Chris turned and glared in response to Ezra’s sarcastic tone. “You got something to say, Ezra?”

“Where shall I begin?” Ezra trotted his horse next to Chris’. “I do not like being in the wild. I do not like feeling like a target. But most of all, I do not like leaving them alone in that prehistoric shack without any kind of cover or trained back up.”

Chris was unperturbed by Ezra’s rant; his agent’s thoughts were too close to his own to dispute. After a moment, he responded with a question. “Who do you think taught me to shoot?”

It was a rare thing to see Ezra caught by surprise, and Buck laughed at the expression that crossed the gambler’s face. “Both Matt and Claire can shoot the spots off a ladybug,” Buck said jovially. “Just be sure to announce yourself when we return, Ez.”

Speechless and grudgingly satisfied for the moment, Ezra fell back and followed his boss and friend.

When they emerged from the trees and entered the barn, Chris asked one of the resident boys to get Kojay. By the time the horses settled, the elder tribesman had joined them and the four men sat on bales of hay and planned. Ideas were etched in the dirt, smudged away and re-drawn. By the time they heard the crunch of wheels on gravel outside, a temporary plan had been agreed upon. Before Kojay departed, Chris retrieved the new batch of portable phones from Travis and gave them to his friend.

Orrin watched Kojay issue quiet orders to a pair of young men and leave the rest of them alone in the barn.

“What’s that about?” Travis asked Chris.

“A perimeter,” Chris said as he eyed Casselman and the stranger with them. “This the guy?”

“Agent Barnette, meet Agents Larabee, Wilmington and Standish,” Orrin started.

None of the three offered their hand.

“You sure about him?” Buck asked, clearly suspicious as Chris raked Barnette with his laser glare. He got points for not flinching under the scrutiny.

“Yes.”

Meanwhile Casselman, handcuffed, snapped, “He’s fine. Now can we save my wife?”

Chris turned a furious glare on Casselman, barely restrained by Ezra and Buck when he took a step toward the wayward agent. Travis stepped between his agent and Casselman and glared right back.

“Casselman is one of our top intelligence agents, Chris, which is why he’s in the position he’s in - his expertise is worth lots of money outside the A.T.F. He knows he’s caught dead to rights, and the only thing he’s good for at this moment is saving his wife. That’s motive enough for me. I’m sure it would be the same for you, Chris, given the circumstances.”

Travis had him with that one. If Chris had been given the chance to sacrifice his career to save his wife and son five years ago, he would have done it in a heartbeat.

“Casselman hacked into the D.E.A.’s files and found some interesting similarities. Everything Agent Barnette told me has been backed up by the information Casselman found in the D.E.A.’s files. Let’s get over this and save a woman’s life and hopefully, Vin’s, for God’s sake.”

The tense silence hung like an impending storm but Chris finally nodded in agreement and Agent Lee Barnette started his tale.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“The brief version,” Barnette started, hugging a thin file to his chest. He stood center stage to an arc of openly wary A.T.F. agents in the reservation’s barn, where Josiah had delivered him less than an hour before. “A little over two years ago I noticed that some evidence was missing from one of my cases. It was a small amount of Oxycodone, but traceable because it had unique packaging. I’d seen it before in other cases. When I tried to find it, there was absolutely no trace of the items; like it never existed. Someone knew how to make it disappear.”

Chris shifted silently, already not liking the direction this story appeared to be taking.

“When I tried to follow through, I was blocked and contradicted at every turn. I was even accused of bribery and misappropriation of property. When it came to the point of pushing the issue and getting a formal investigation or just dropping it, I dropped it. But I didn’t forget. Clearly, to me, at least, something wasn’t right. I started my own, personal investigation under the radar and found a link - medical grade pharmaceuticals and one Dr. Sean Griffin.”

At this point, Barnette dug into the front pocket of his pants and then held up a flash drive. “I have here all I could find on Dr. Griffin. It’s taken me nearly two years to compile. I’ve found my home and phone bugged, my car GPS tagged and files wiped from my computer. I even found things planted in my office and on my hard drive that would make it look like I was on the take. I stopped digging. I can’t trust anyone in my agency. I didn’t know where else to turn.”

“So, what brought you to us?” Ezra asked in that deceptively light tone of his. Josiah then took a small, sideways step away from the arm that housed his teammate’s hidden derringer.

“This.” Barnette dropped the file on the bale of hay acting as a table between them. Ezra picked it up and Buck read it over his shoulder. “Motor vehicle

registrations.” The dry rustle of paper was loud in the momentary silence before Barnette cleared his throat and then clarified, “I have one contact who I trust in the state registration division and I had her flag all vehicles belonging to Dr. Griffin. When you initiated your search for the Cobra, she traced the security release code to Denver P.D. and the fax number to the main office. I immediately came in and spoke to Captain Niley. I figured that anyone doing a blind search like that had to be looking for clues, just like I did.”

Chris and his team members quickly shared a glance. “Did you know about this car in particular?” Buck asked.

“No. I flagged all his cars. He is a collector, it seems.”

“Say again how you found Griffin, exactly?” Buck’s tone was still suspicious.

“I heard the name once from a snitch my old partner used a lot.” Barnette snorted and shook his head. “A partner that fell into some money and suddenly left the Agency. The snitch disappeared just prior to his leaving.”

Chris gave Travis a knowing look.

“The name stuck in my head but I could never connect him with anything after that first bust where my Oxy went missing. My partner and I got that tip from the now missing snitch. It was a complete hunch, but I did find that the deeper I dug into the man’s background, the more things happened to threaten my career and my life. My brake lines were cut twice and the gas in my house sprung a convenient leak once. After that, I dropped all inquiries while at work and laid low. I know all about this guy and suspect he moves an enormous amount of Oxy and probably other drugs, but I can’t pin down a distribution network, how he gets the stuff or what, other than the Oxy, he distributes. The medical board started an investigation on him about nine years ago but he was exonerated – and interestingly, the lead investigator in that case committed suicide less than a year later. I can’t trust anyone in my Agency and everything is a dead end.”

“That’s because every weak link is snuffed. Like the snitch and the investigator.” Buck pulled a paper from his back pocket and unfolded it. “This him?” He held up a photo, taken from a webpage, that Josiah had printed out at the police station. It was of a red haired man standing next to a green Shelby Cobra.

Chris’ heart raced – Vin was right in every detail. If this man was one source of Faraday’s riches, it was no wonder he wanted the boy dead; the things Vin had seen while at the house must be damning. He was, possibly, the only connection between Faraday and Griffin and probably the only one, aside from Grace, that had ever seen them together. An icy chill shivered down Chris’ spine at the implications.

“I believe so. Photos of the man are difficult to come by. And don’t fool yourselves,” Barnette added. “If I found you, so have they, whoever ‘they’ are. You can’t go back to the P.D.”

“Where’s Nathan?” Chris snapped, looking to Josiah.

“Home. Niley erased any written log of his time in the station, but I’ll call him and advise him to make himself scarce, just to be on the safe side.” Josiah got one of the cells from their dwindling stash and stepped aside to make the call.

Ezra quietly studied Barnette’s file as the others talked. “Mr. Larabee,” he called at the first lull, getting both Chris’ and Buck’s attention. “I think there is a connection worth examining. If memory serves, Faraday originated from Ohio?”

“That’s where Grace was from,” Buck said. “We assume the man we know as Faraday came from there, too. He took Grace’s brother’s name, but we don’t know who he really is.”

“Dr. Griffin also hails from Ohio - Gallipolis, to be exact. That was the city on the Ohio driver’s license photo of Faraday we showed master Tanner, was it not?”

“Can we get the internet out here?” Barnette asked. “I looked at Griffin’s high school yearbook online once. Maybe your man is in there, too? Who is he?”

“Griffin’s distribution network, probably,” Buck said. “It’s worth a shot to look. We ain’t got much now.”

Chris stopped everyone in their tracks with a raised arm and a stern look. “We need to take advantage of this advanced warning,” he started. “Before we can go balls to the wall after Faraday and Griffin, we need to stop being on the defensive and turn this around. End the hunt for Vin and get your wife to safety first.” He glared at Casselman.

“And how do you propose we do that?” Travis asked.

Chris’ grin looked like a wolf’s snarl and his eyes were hard, green emeralds as he scanned the group of men. “Simple. Just let ‘em come,” he said dangerously.

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Ted Casselman felt like vomiting. His hand shook and sweat tickled the nape of his neck as he turned off the car motor. Grasping the steering wheel for support, he took two deep breaths and mentally went over the plan once again. With his rebelling stomach eventually under control, he kicked the car door open and exited the vehicle to stand on shaky legs.

Forcing his limbs to move, he schooled his expression to look casual as he started up the path leading to a nondescript little house on a quiet street lined by

similar little houses. It wasn't a place where conflict would go unnoticed; even now, a window curtain fluttered across the street where a silhouette peered out for a moment.

Casselman rapped on the door and the shade on the adjacent window flickered. A lock clicked loudly and the door opened a crack, allowing Ted to slip through the narrow opening. He blinked in the dimness while the door was secured behind him, the heavy, pungent air within threatening to lure his stomach from its settled state. A strong hand clamped on his elbow and propelled the agent forward into an empty living room where two shadow-darkened figures waited.

"Where is he?" the taller of the two figures snapped.

As his eyes adjusted to the low light, Casselman recognized A.D. Fitzsimmons. The other two men – one at his side and one next to Fitzsimmons – were strangers.

"Where's my wife?" Ted demanded in return. "I need to know she's all right."

Fitzsimmons held Ted's angry glare as he tipped his head slightly to the man next to him. "Get her," he ordered darkly.

The man disappeared down the hall and Ted heard muffled noises that hinted of a struggle. After a moment, the henchman returned, dragging Becky Casselman in his wake. Her wrists, ankles and mouth were duct taped, and the whites of her wide, fear-laced eyes stood out in the shadowy light. Ted broke his glare with a pained groan and took a step toward her. The other goon clamped onto his arm in an immobilizing grip that sent an electrical zing down Ted's spine and legs. Tears glittered on the silver tape across Becky's mouth.

"Now tell me," Fitzsimmons said flatly.

Ted's stomach lurched again. "The woods. They escaped your lapdogs here," he indicated the other two men, "and headed to the woods. The GPS in Wilmington's truck is at the trail head. I can lead you in from another direction."

"Show me." Fitzsimmons shoved Ted across the room to a dark, wooden table that showed its age with its sturdiness and stains. A county map covered the tabletop.

Casselman managed to tear his eyes from the sight of his weeping wife hanging in the grip of Fitzsimmons' henchman and focus on the map. He pointed to the edge of the reservation. "H . . . here's Wilmington's truck. The cabin is in this area." He waved his finger in a wide circle, north of the GPS location. "It's easy to get lost. I'll have to lead you in. Straight trade, the boy for my wife."

Fitzsimmons frowned and then nodded once as if in thought. Faster than he ever expected, Ted's throat was seized in the A.D.'s strong hand and Casselman was slammed against the wall.

"I don't like this," Fitzsimmons growled. "I don't like getting summoned to a state I despise by a crazy man. I don't like working with low-class criminals like dumb and dumber, here. I don't like to have to clean up after the fucking mess these two geniuses made at Larabee's ranch. I . . . don't . . . like . . . getting my . . . hands . . . DIRTY!" The enraged Director slammed Ted's skull into the wall with each clearly enunciated word. "And I really, REALLY despise answering to the likes of YOU, Agent Casselman!" The last words, delivered less than an inch away, scorched Ted's cheek. He hung in the A.D.'s grip for a few seconds before Fitzsimmons leaned back and released him. Ted coughed. The A.D. prowled a few steps away and then turned. "Take these fools and get the kid. Bring his dead body to me and you'll get your wife."

"I'm not dragging a dead kid around with me!" Casselman argued. "That's too risky! I'll bring him to you breathing. Once Becky's safe, I'll . . . do what's needed." Ted swallowed hard through a suddenly dry throat. He hoped the terror he felt didn't show in his eyes as he held Fitzsimmons' glare.

Ted felt his heart pound several beats before the A.D. flicked his eyes toward the hallway and Ted's wife. The man holding her dragged her to the table. The other goon and Fitzsimmons stepped in between Ted and the woman, blocking any advance.

"I need insurance," the A.D. said softly, demanding Ted's full attention. Then, louder, ordered, "Do it."

Ted Casselman could only watch in horror as his wife's bound hands were slammed onto the table, held still by the man controlling her. With a crazy grin, the thug next to Fitzsimmons drew out a folding blade from his inner pocket and pulled it open.

"No!" Ted choked through rising bile. "Don't!"

Becky Casselman's scream, largely muffled by the silver bonds, still pierced deeply into Ted's heart as her little finger was severed from her hand with one clean slash.

"Her throat is next if you don't deliver."

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"I don't like having to trust that worm," Buck muttered. "This don't feel right, Chris."



“I know, but it’s the only way. I don’t like it either.”

Evening fell silently around them. Vin lay at his side, tucked in close, with JD snuggled on the other side. Buck sat next to his boy, the adults acting like bookends to the smaller pair. Vin and JD were looking at a picture book of American Indian stories in the dancing, round glow of their small flashlights. They whispered excitedly to each other. JD seemed totally absorbed in this adventure, but every once in a while Vin would turn his worried eyes to Chris in a silent question. All Chris could do to ease his son’s worries was to murmur that everything would work out and rub the boy’s back reassuringly.

It had been full dark for over an hour when Chris noticed the sudden silence outside their camouflaged hiding place. The absence of the crickets’ song made the shrubs’ rustle unnaturally loud – someone was out there.

Buck quietly shushed the boys and the flashlights winked out. Chris released his sidearm from his holster and strained to hear from which direction the noise had originated. Seconds dragged into an unimaginably long minute.

“Chris?” Even in a whisper, Josiah’s voice was recognizable.

The four of them let out a long breath and Chris holstered his gun. “Here,” the team leader said aloud. He winked and grinned at Vin as Buck slithered from their hidey hole.

“There you are,” Josiah chuckled as JD clambered out next. “It’s over. We’re ready for the next step. Give us fifteen minutes and you can return to the cabin.”

Vin crawled out next, closely followed by Chris. “Everyone alright?” Chris asked as he brushed the dirt from his jeans.

“Went down just like we planned.” Josiah removed the wrist radio, which had been part of the surveillance equipment confiscated from Casselman’s car and let it dangle from his fingers as he held it up. “Kojay wants to know if they can keep the equipment. I think he was joking.”

“I *hope* he was joking,” Buck laughed. “Sometimes he’s as tough to read as Ezra.”

“I tell ya, Chris, Kojay’s team was impressive,” Josiah reported. “Silent as shadows. Those guys were overpowered before they even knew anyone was around.”

Chris grinned and wrapped an arm around Vin’s shoulders, hugging the boy to his side. Vin smiled up at him, relieved. “We c’n go back to the cabin now?”

“Yup. Grandma and Grandpa should be on their way from Kojay’s as we speak.”

When a quarter of an hour had passed, Josiah clicked on his large flashlight and led the way, forming a tight line with Chris bringing up the rear. Their plan to

have Casselman bring in Fitzsimmons' goons had its risks – discovery of the cabin's location being one of them. There was no way any of them trusted the wayward A.T.F. agent, so he was supplied with directions to another area of the reservation, the path lined with reservation dwellers from start to end. The trio had been under surveillance from the moment they had crossed on to reservation land, thanks to A.T.F. equipment and fast-learning tribesmen. Once everyone was satisfied the intruders were alone, they were surrounded and “taken into custody,” Indian-style.

“Those people sure know some interesting knots,” Josiah said, garnering soft chuckles from Buck and Chris.

As an extra layer of safety, Vin, JD, Matt and Claire were secured far away from the cabin. Once the boys and grandparents were reunited, the rest of them would proceed to the next stage.

They reached the cabin minutes ahead of Matt and Claire and there was a happy reunion without the underlying tension of before. Josiah suggested that it was time to move and when Chris and Buck finally joined him, he could see reluctance in their eyes.

“Leaving the boys must be difficult,” Josiah said quietly.

“You have no idea,” Buck breathed. Chris remained silent, his lips a tight line.

“Then let us go, Brothers. The sooner we leave, the sooner we can return.”

Josiah and Buck waved a final farewell and headed over to the saddled horses. Once mounted, Josiah and Buck headed out but Chris stood rooted in place, his arm raised in a reluctant wave. Vin was on the porch, his eyes locked with his father's. They stood like that, exchanging a bonded gaze for nearly a minute before Claire leaned down and whispered something in Vin's ear. He blinked, and the spell was broken. He glanced at his Grandma, allowing her to turn him toward the womb of the cabin. Chris then ducked his head and joined his teammates on the trail to the barn.

When they arrived, Ezra and Patterson were waiting for them in the aged building. Ted Casselman, looking a bit ruffled and dirty, glared at them from his position, cuffed around a support pole. The two assassins, gagged and secured back to back, sat on the dirt floor in the middle of the barn. Two rather buff Indians guarded them silently.

“Our two guests have agreed to take the deal Mr. Patterson offered,” Ezra said, sounding a bit smug. “I must say, I did not know the District Attorney's office retained such devious employees.”

Patterson laughed. “Hey, remember that we’re attorneys. We’re naturally devious.”

The men took the time to decompress and re-check the bonds of their captives. In that time, Travis had joined them, along with Kojay and a sharply dressed tribesman toting a thin, carved leather briefcase. His shiny black hair, pulled back into a neat, single braid, made a perfect line down the middle of his back. Ezra seemed to be jealously eyeing the man’s suit.

“This is Freddy Blackhawk,” Kojay said in introduction. “He is our tribe’s lawyer and spokesman.”

Chris took the man’s hand, impressed with the firm grip. “You ready for this?”

Freddy smiled, revealing a row of perfect, white teeth. “More than ready. Have you made the calls?”

“Done and done,” Travis replied. “Mary’s on the way and,” he tilted his head and glanced to the door, “I think I hear Captain Niley’s men.” The eerie wail of sirens was soft at the moment, but grew louder with every second.

Ezra withdrew a small bottle from his jacket pocket and Josiah picked up a canteen slung over a hook. Then, they walked over to the prisoners. Josiah uncuffed them and allowed them to remove the gags.

“Showtime, boys,” the profiler said as Ezra shook some pills from the bottle.

The bigger of the two goons eyed the pills when they tumbled into his palm. “You’ll protect us, right? That’s the deal?”

“That’s the deal,” Patterson reaffirmed. “Time to play dead, boys. It’s the only way to keep Faraday from killing you and you know it.”

The two men quickly downed the pills, gulped water from the canteen and then laid down on clean saddle blankets.

“It’s time for Mr. Casselman to depart,” Ezra informed Chris. The sirens were almost on them as Ezra waved a couple of women over. Between them hung an effigy of Vin, the resemblance uncanny. From a little distance in the dark, it was easy to mistake the ‘body’ as real. It gave Chris a chill. Buck released Ted and he came over, rubbing his wrists.

“Your escorts are waiting behind the barn,” Kojay said.

Ted gathered up the blindfolded, gagged Vin figure. “This had better work,” the agent grumbled. Chanu appeared at the back door and they disappeared into the darkness outside.

Ezra squatted next to the remaining captives and checked their pulses. “They will be out soon. Gentlemen, we need to depart now if we are to oversee the next chapter of the plan.”

Chris glanced at the prisoners and then turned to Freddy and Kojay. “You okay here?”

Kojay nodded slightly. Several men came in and surrounded the drowsy men on the floor. “We have our story and will stick to it,” the elder said, smiling deviously.

Chris shook Freddy’s hand. “I have no doubt you’ll sell this,” he said. “Faraday has to believe those men are dead.”

Freddy’s grin was made-for-television perfect. “The unfortunate shoot out will be well documented,” he said.

Buck laughed and slapped a hand on Chris’ shoulder. “Let’s go, Pard. We got us a crooked A.D. to round up.”

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“The shootout occurred deep in the woods on tribal land,” the serious looking blonde reporter said on the television. She stood in front of an old barn in the wash of floodlights. Uniformed people milled behind her. “Tribal spokesman Fred Blackhawk has told me that there were two casualties.”

The camera swung around, showing two gurneys topped by two black body bags stopped behind the open doors of the Coroner’s van. The woman’s voice continued off-screen. “Although Mr. Blackhawk stated that poachers are common on their land, he stopped short of the accusation. The incident is under investigation. I will keep you updated as information comes forth. This is Mary Travis, reporting live from the Kiowa Reservation.”

Fitzsimmons swore softly as he slapped the television into silence. He furiously paced the small living room as his patience ebbed away. When his pre-paid cell phone rang, he angrily flipped it open. “What happened?” he snapped. “Casselman? The Tanner kid better be in one of those body bags I saw on television!”

“I have the boy. Just remember our deal. If I have to off the kid, I’m not doing it in that house – the entire neighborhood will hear! Meet me at the abandoned warehouse south of the airstrip. Off Kennedy Road.”

“Who are you to dictate terms to me?”

“The one with the kid that Faraday wants so badly. Maybe I’ll go directly to him instead.”

“Do that, and your wife is dead,” Fitzsimmons snarled.

“I figure she’s dead already. Prove otherwise and meet me at the warehouse in a half hour.”

The phone went dead and Fitzsimmons roared, throwing the phone at the wall where it shattered into pieces. He stormed down the hall and dragged the crying woman to her feet. There was a bloody towel wrapped around her bound hands and she was pale with shock. He dragged her down the hall, through the kitchen where he wrenched open the door to the garage. By the time he shoved her into the trunk of his car, the woman was semi-conscious.

“At least you’ll be quiet.”

Fitzsimmons slammed the trunk closed and slipped in behind the steering wheel. Taking a deep breath to calm his raging temper, he punched a button to open the garage door and started the car. As he backed out, the A.D. tucked his gun into the holster under his jacket and looked like any other neighborhood resident. Once in the street, he closed the garage door and headed south.

“You’re a dead man, Casselman,” he growled.

It took forty minutes to get to the warehouse. The dilapidated building stood alone near the end of an old, unused runway. In the weak moonlight, the window remains looked like broken teeth. One of the massive sliding doors was partially open and Fitzsimmons could see the flickering brightness of a flashlight inside. He drove inside and the headlights of his car swept over the figure of Ted Casselman, hunched over a body on the floor. The agent threw his arm up to cover his eyes and rose. Fitzsimmons smirked at his advantage.

“Turn off the fucking lights!” Casselman yelled.

The A.D. put his car into park and stepped out, leaving the door partially open when he walked around it and leaned against the warm front fender. “I rather like the light,” he said with a laugh.

Casselmann stood with his foot on the boy’s neck, keeping him down. The long, wavy hair was exactly what Fitzsimmons remembered about the picture he has seen of Larabee’s kid. He looked up to see Casselman’s gun pointed at his chest.

“Where’s Becky?” Ted growled.

“In the trunk. She’s alive - for the moment, anyway. Now, do the kid and let’s get on our way.”

“Call Faraday. Tell him you have the kid.”

Fitzsimmons blinked, surprised. “What?”

“You heard me. Call him. Use speakerphone.”

The A.D. paused. “Why?”

“Because neither one of us is hauling this body out of here, and I need to be satisfied that Faraday knows I got the kid. I want to hear it with my own ears. We can even send a picture. Now do it.”

Fitzsimmons shrugged, pulled out his phone and dialed. It really didn't matter to him, but he did have to agree that the sooner Faraday was happy, the sooner he could get back to his Santa Monica beach house. Actually, doing the kid here and leaving the body behind was a pretty good idea. He wasn't about to tell Ted that, however. Neither was he going to tell Ted that he and his wife would be joining the kid in the warehouse.

The call was answered with a soft "hello".

"Got the kid. I'll send conformation." He flipped the phone closed. "He knows. Now do the kid."

"Get my wife out of the trunk."

Fitzsimmons' easy mood slipped away once again. With a disgruntled glare, he strode to the back of the car and right into the muzzle of what seemed to be the biggest gun he'd ever seen.

"Let me help ya there, sir," Buck Wilmington offered, pushing the gun a little closer. "Keys?"

Fitzsimmons hesitated, his hand hovering near his open coat and gun.

Buck smiled widely and solidified the grip on his gun by adding his other hand. "Oh, please go ahead, Assistant Director. It would really make my day."

Behind Buck, Josiah snorted. "Dirty Harry you are not." He held out one big hand, palm up, as he used the other to remove the A.D.'s gun. "Keys."

Once disarmed, Fitzsimmons seemed to shrink in size before their eyes. As Josiah opened the trunk and easily lifted out the stunned woman, Chris Larabee and Orrin Travis emerged from the darkness. Larabee didn't utter a word as he cuffed their man, spun him around and patted him down, but Buck recognized the barely restrained fury that boiled behind those dusty green eyes.

"Looks like housecleaning has just begun, boys," Travis said as he studied the prisoner with disgust. Fitzsimmons opened his mouth but Travis stopped him with a glare. "Save it, Bob. You're done." He nodded his head sharply and Larabee handed the cuffed man off to Ezra.

An ambulance rolled into the building and Josiah carried Becky Casselman to them. Buck cuffed an anxious looking Ted, who craned his neck in an effort to see his wife. Buck took a firm grip on Ted's elbow and pushed the captured agent toward the ambulance.

Chris glanced to the Vin doll on the dirty floor before turning back to Travis, who spoke first. "I have Bob's phone. I'll take care of the proof-of-death picture he said he'd send."

"Thanks," Chris muttered, giving his son's eerie doppelganger another sidelong glance. "It's a bit too realistic for me."

“I figured. You go on with part two of this plan, Chris. I’ll finish up here.”  
With a silent, tired nod, Chris walked outside to join his teammates.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It felt like a brand new game, being on the offensive. Once away from the warehouse, Chris felt a surge of energized blood ignite in his veins. The hunt was on, he thought with a tight grin, welcoming it.

Beside him, Buck flipped open one of the cheap phones, saying, “That felt good,” as he dialed.

“I agree wholeheartedly,” Ezra sighed from the back seat. The usual formal edge was gone from the Southerner’s voice as settled into the darkness of the vehicle’s interior. “Ferretting out the current location of the esteemed Dr. Griffin will be much more difficult.”

“Agent Barnette has a good start. He and Patterson should have a property list ready for us by now.” The twin beams of the car chased the broken white lines of the road before them and held Chris’ attention for the moment.

“Hey,” Buck spoke into the cell. “You set up?” After a pause, he said, “See you in a few,” and disconnected. “Nathan emailed a link to Faraday’s and Griffin’s online high school yearbook. Kojay’s set for us at his trailer and sent for Vin and the others. How do you want to split up, Chris?”



“Ezra, run down the property list with Patterson and Barnette. Figure out the best way to get some search warrants, *quietly*, and get on it. Buck and I will see if there’s anything in the yearbook that will help us. We’re running out of time. Now that Vin’s supposedly out of the picture, they’re free to move, and I think they’ll move fast. If Griffin and Faraday are together, they won’t be for long. If we find one, we’ll find the other, but we have to hurry.”

It was just short of an hour before they arrived at the reservation. When Chris bypassed the turnoff to the barn, the agents could see the lights that indicated the presence of police investigators and tenacious reporters. Chris slowed and turned up a very narrow, overgrown road about a quarter mile from the well-used barn drive. The car bounced over crusty ruts carved into the earth, and at one point, scraped the undercarriage on a particularly resistant ridge. He finally stopped when the lane took a sharp right turn and the headlights reflected red off the eyes of a waiting horse.

It took a little time for the agents’ vision to adjust to the darkness when Chris turned off the car and killed the lights. They moved carefully from the vehicle and in the direction of Chanu’s soft voice. Chris wondered if the boy ever slept – it had to be close to one in the morning.

They mounted up and all three agents felt the pull of tender muscles. Tired, they allowed their mounts to follow Chanu’s without much guidance. When they arrived at Kojay’s trailer and slipped to the ground, Chris wished for a surge of adrenalin but knew that caffeine would have to do. He could smell the welcome brew as he pushed the door open, and was pleased to be greeted by Claire.

In the muted light of the trailer’s interior, Chris saw a lump on the couch. His mother gently rested her hand on his forearm, softly shushed him and whispered, “JD and your father are asleep.”

Chris nodded, half-turned and passed the message to Ezra and Buck before locating Vin in the glow of a computer monitor tucked into a far corner. Vin’s eyes flagged sleepily and Kojay sat next to him, murmuring softly. Something he said caused Vin to straighten and look up. The tired smile given to Chris immediately sharpened his own senses.

Claire moved to the kitchen area and started pouring cups of coffee as Chris settled next to his son. Ezra disappeared into one of the back rooms to contact Patterson while Buck stretched out on the floor next to the couch with a groan.

“How’re you doing, Cowboy?” Chris asked quietly. He rubbed Vin’s back and studied the boy’s face as he waited for a reply, trying to see if their effort to keep Vin away from danger was, in itself, stressing the boy. All he saw was a sleepy child doing his best to stay alert. Chris smiled.

“I’m okay,” Vin replied. “Kojay just woke me up.”

“I know, and I’m sorry about that, son. We just need you to look at some pictures Nathan found. We need to know if you recognize any of the people in them. Then you can go back to sleep.”

“What about you?” Vin asked. “You need to sleep, too.”

“I know, and I’ll get some soon, but now that we have somewhat of an advantage, we need to keep going.”

Vin nodded and glanced at Kojay before turning his eyes back to the computer screen. Chris followed his lead and focused on the pages displayed before them. Kojay scrolled down through rows of pictures, easily recognizable as school photographs. “Gallopolis Freshman Class” showed on the title bar of the page. Soon, the sophomore class made their appearance.

Chris snorted. “Small class,” he noted.

“It’s a small school,” Kojay said.

Vin was silent as the sophomore class rolled by, replaced by the junior class. After six rows, he let out a gasp. “Miss Grace!” he whispered, pointing at the face of a pretty brunette.

The screen stopped and Chris leaned in. The much younger Grace Faraday had a delicate face and wide, dark eyes. Her smile was bright and full of confident promise, framed by long, thick hair that fell as a soft wave at her shoulders. The delicate neck and the graceful way she posed hinted that she may have been a dancer. Frozen in time, the girl’s image showed no hint of her dark future.

Vin’s finger traced her sweated shoulder. “I miss her.”

Unable to speak, Chris simply drew his son closer and kissed the top of his head, grateful to have him there. “I know,” he was finally able to say it without any trace of the stifled anger he felt inside. “*So many lives ruined,*” he thought.

Kojay continued to scroll down when Vin dropped his hand to his lap. The junior class rolled away and the larger photos of the senior class dominated the screen. Vin's head cocked aside at one point and Kojay stopped the march of portraits.

"I seen him before," Vin said, pointing at a dark-haired young man. "He was in those pictures Unca Nathan showed me at Dr. Will's."

Chris squinted at the name under the photo. "So that's the real Jesse Faraday," he said. Looking closer, he noticed familial similarities to the woman.

The trio's attention was then drawn to the living room where Buck dragged to his feet with a grunt. "Okay, you got me. I gotta see this."

Vin snickered and Chris grinned. Claire had been standing quietly to one side watching the progress and now poured an additional cup of coffee, shoving it into Buck's hands as he stood next to her. "You're moving kinda slow," she teased.

Buck sipped the coffee and sighed happily. "Slow's good, so I'm told," he said with a wink.

Claire rolled her eyes and Chris snorted. Vin frowned. "Huh?"

Chris cleared his throat. "Never mind him," he muttered.

Buck squinted at the screen. "Grace's brother, I'm guessin'? He died, what, ten years ago?"

"Yeah. Looks like our mystery man took his identity."

The two men thought that over as Kojay again got the pictures moving. Chris felt Vin stiffen almost immediately. When Chris looked at the photos, he saw why. Dr. Sean Griffin had a crooked smile and a very youthful face, but it was clearly the same person that had posed with the Shelby Cobra online.

"So the mysterious Doctor and the real Jesse Faraday were in school together, just like Ez guessed."

"And look who's between 'em," Buck said, pointing to a dark haired senior with a perfect smile. "Cory Giltner. I bet that's Grace's future husband."

"The gang's all here," Chris murmured as he studied the screen. "Except . . ." Chris was poised to say more but Vin's startled gasp re-focused his attention. He instinctively pulled his son close and saw that Vin's gaze was locked on the next row of photos, eyes wide with fear. Reluctantly, Chris turned his attention to the display.

“It’s him,” Vin whispered hoarsely. “His . . . his face ain’t quite right, but those are his eyes.” He raised a trembling hand and pointed to a photo of a thick necked boy with the sharp eyes of a predator.

Greg Hafner had an oval face and a very strong jaw. He wasn’t smiling, but Chris felt that it wouldn’t have mattered if he had – those distinctive eyes, hard and piercing, would always dominate the man’s face. Chris remembered those eyes as they bore into him outside the Faraday compound, full of triumph. He remembered the cold anger in those eyes as Chris pounded the man into submission. He also recalled the infuriating smugness that they had emanated during fruitless interrogations.

“Griffin is a plastic surgeon. That would explain the different face,” Buck said, and then realization exploded.

“He’s holed up,” Chris blurted. “I bet Griffin is changing his face as we speak, Buck.” He stood and caught his friend’s attention. “Now’s the time to strike. Faraday – or Hafner – has to lay up for a while. One of those properties on Barnette’s list could be set up as a surgical suite. That’s why it’s so important to Faraday that no one sees him and Griffin together; they’re a team. They grew up together. They only trust each other.”

Buck’s forehead furrowed. “Or he took Faraday’s name so he could hide finances and property under his true name.” He put his cup down and opened his phone. “We’ll start with Griffin’s property and I’ll get Nathan searching for any and all properties owned by Greg Hafner.”

While Buck spoke to Nathan, Chris turned to Vin and gave him a reassuring grin. “We got ‘em, Cowboy. This will be over soon.” Vin visibly relaxed and his features slumped in exhaustion. Chris immediately leaned over and picked him up in a loving embrace. Vin rested his head on Chris’ solid shoulder and his eyes slipped closed.

“This way.” Kojay, smiling, had stood up and now waved for Chris to follow him down the short hall. “He can rest in the spare room. Have Buck bring in JD so they can draw comfort from each other while we work.”

Chris followed the elder to the dark room and settled Vin on the wide bed. The boy fell asleep almost instantly. Chris stroked back the wavy tresses from Vin’s relaxed face and then joined Kojay in the doorway.

“I can’t thank you enough for all of this,” Chris whispered. They watched the boy sleep in the shadows of the room. A line of silver moonlight allowed them to see the gentle rise and fall of Vin’s shoulders. “There was no one we could trust.”

“You are welcome. I am glad we are able to be good neighbors.”

Chris turned to his friend with a thankful smile. “You’ve gone above and beyond, Kojay. You, and your people. I don’t know what I can do to repay . . .”

“Just keep doing your part to remove evil from this world,” Kojay returned. “You are helping us all with what you do. It is us that should be repaying you.”

“I consider us more than even. Thank you.”

By the time JD was settled with Vin, Ezra had shuffled into the living room and parked next to the coffee machine. Claire and Matt blinked sleepily while leaning against the kitchen counter. Ezra joined them and was briefed on the yearbook find, and then the men began putting together the next steps.

“If Mr. Faraday is changing his look, he may be changing his name, too,” Ezra offered. “And, if he follows course, he will go to the best for false documents.”

“They need photos for those documents and it’ll be days before the surgical bruising heals,” Buck said. “*If that’s what’s happening.*”

“I have no doubt about it, Buck. Somewhere, Faraday is under the knife and that gives us more time.” Chris rolled his neck and sighed. “Buck, let’s look at Barnette’s list while we wait on Nathan’s search. Ezra, get together a list of successful forgers he could contact. I’ll fill in Josiah and Patterson and get Orrin up to date. Let’s go, gents. Kojay?” He turned questioningly to his friend.

“I will let them know when they wake up. You will find Chanu with your horses in the barn. You may have to wake him.” There was a sparkle of amusement in the old man’s eyes.

The three agents left the trailer in high spirits, glad to be finally ahead in this game.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Vin slept until late morning, but it wasn't a peaceful sleep. Seeing those predatory eyes again had brought many memories to the surface, all of which seemed to plague his rest. He had awakened with a start on an hourly basis, and near dawn, he jealously glared at JD as he slept sound as a rock.

When he finally woke up at ten o'clock, realizing that he'd slept five straight hours, JD was gone and he could hear hushed movement in the living room area of Kojay's trailer. Outside, he could hear the calming noises of nature – rustling trees, chattering birds and the far-off sound of a dog barking. Vin relaxed into the pillow as he convinced himself that he was safe.

A few minutes later, he crawled from the bed and made his way into the small kitchen.

“Good morning, honey!” Claire crooned, setting aside a bowl and moving to his side. She sat on a chair and held her arms out and Vin was drawn to her embrace.

Vin allowed the intimate gesture, and felt safe and secure for the first time in a long time.

“Breakfast? Or brunch?”

Vin frowned against Claire's shoulder. “What's brunch?”

“Late breakfast and early lunch. A mix of both foods. What do you feel like eating?”

Vin pushed back and looked around. “Where's JD?”

“Out with Grampa. We didn't want him waking you.”

“C'n I just have pancakes?”

“Sure!” Claire smoothed his hair back, and then stood and moved into the kitchen area. It took only one soft suggestion to bring Vin to her side and helping.

The gentle chatter and clatter of kitchen noises was a balm to his soul. The normalness of it all lifted a great weight from his shoulders.

Even out in the woods, in a strange house, Vin felt at home, and the warmth of contentment made him feel like a normal boy again. He smiled.

ef

When the men left Kojay's, it was after midnight. They needed a computer to research, but still didn't feel safe using PD or Federal facilities. Buck opened his thick, little black book and retrieved Inez's home phone number – she had a computer in the restaurant office.

“I have to admit,” Chris said, shaking his head. “I don't think I woulda come up with that one. Don't think it'll be a point on your side to call her in the middle of the night.”

Buck only smiled hugely as he dialed. “Aw, she loves me. She's just playin' hard to get.”

“For six years?” Ezra inquired.

Now it was nearly noon and they had amassed a lot of information. Beyond the walls, the agents could hear the clatter of a working restaurant and bar. Inez had even provided breakfast.

“There's an awfully long list of properties here, Chris.” Buck dropped the folder on a table in the empty banquet room of The Saloon that they occupied. He yawned and scratched the stubble on his chin.

“Does this include Hafner's property, too?”

“Nate hasn't sent that yet.”

“How about Grace and Cory's holdings?”

Buck nodded, and then tilted his head in Ezra's direction. Ezra had lined up several armless chairs to create a makeshift bed, and was currently sound asleep.

“Should I wake him?”

“Not yet. Two hours' worth should be good so he has about twenty more minutes.”

They spread out the reports and stood a moment, staring. Chris suddenly realized that this would be like looking for a needle in a haystack. “How should we divide this up, Buck?” He was tired, and his question sounded close to a whine. Chris stifled a weary yawn and rubbed his eyes.

“Well, let's see. What's the time frame on this supposed surgery? What would he need?”

After a second, Chris stiffened and any sign of exhaustion disappeared. “Electricity. Let’s see if any of these places’ electricity jumped in the middle of the night.”

Buck reached for the wall phone tucked in a corner behind a small bar area while Chris began separating the commercial properties by location, and handed Buck the ones closest to Faraday’s estate.

About fifteen minutes later, Chris’ cell rang. Ezra stirred from his sleep, muttering soft curses and holding his lower back as Chris flipped the phone open.

“What?” he snapped into the receiver. He listened for a moment and then broke into that feral smile that made the green of his eyes glow. “That’s great news, Orrin. We’ll be right in.” He closed the phone and jammed it in his pocket.

“You wear the guise of the proverbial cat that ate the canary,” Ezra said, still rubbing his back.

Chris nodded shortly, still grinning. “They picked up Dr. Griffin. He’s being transported to P.D. headquarters.”

“That’s great!” Buck said, standing.

“Josiah and Patterson are on their way over there.” Chris pulled his keys from his pocket. “Ezra, stay here and look for any properties in this area. He jotted down the area of Griffin’s arrest on a bar napkin. Look for a spike of electricity use between nine PM yesterday and seven this morning. Call in Nate if you need to.”

“I will endeavor to do my best, but it would be most helpful if you could entice the fair Miss Recillos to provide coffee on your way out.”

“Will do.” Buck pulled out car keys and, shoulder to shoulder, walked with Chris out of the room.

ef

It took a scant hour for Chris and Buck to reach the Police Headquarters. In that time, however, a lot had happened.

“His attorney is here already?” Buck said, startled. “How long has Griffin been in custody?”

“About three hours.” Captain Niley sounded as disgusted as Buck. Chris remained frighteningly quiet. “We have about 69 more hours to hold him without formal charges but I don’t think we’ll get anything. He’s lawyered up tight as a clam.”

“How is his attitude?” Buck followed Niley into the observation room that looked into the interrogation room where Griffin sat looking bored.



“Cool as a cucumber,” Niley answered. “The man is in no hurry; I can tell you that. And his attorney is doing a bang-up job harassing the shit out of me. The man knows how to apply pressure.”

Chris stood close enough to the window to fog the glass. Buck noticed his clenched hands and intent stare, and wondered what, exactly, was running through his head because if it was possible to think a man into a bloody pulp, Griffin would be a puddle on the interrogation room floor right now. Both he and Chris were beyond tired. This was a time to pay close attention, because this was the exact scenario where mistakes happened. Buck rubbed his burning eyes and tried to think of the next step.

“I want to talk to him.” Chris’ voice was deceptively soft.

“No way, Chris,” Buck said immediately.

Niley glanced at the two of them. “I agree, Chris. Not a good idea.”

The muscles of Chris’ jaw flexed. “Has his car been stored? Are the forensic guys looking at it?”

Niley raised a brow. “Aside from illegal drugs, do you want to give me an idea of what to look for?”

“Blood. Check the seat, steering wheel and carpet. I want to know if Faraday’s blood was on him.”

“Okay,” Niley replied, pulling out his cell phone.

Buck leaned in. “You think he’s already done the surgery?”

“That would explain why he’s so cool,” Chris growled.

The two of them studied Griffin in silence for several minutes while Capt. Niley spoke on the phone. They heard him finish talking to Forensics and then switch to another call, where he listened for a long time before giving a brief reply and disconnecting. “I have them checking the car. Chris, Agent Sanchez is here with Mr. Patterson. I authorized a conference room for you.”

Chris nodded sharply and spun on his heel, stalking out. Buck and Niley followed behind, looking grim.

Once they arrived in the small room, Buck knew he wasn’t going to like what they were going to say. Josiah’s face was too neutral and Patterson looked a bit too tense. They were tired, too, but something else was going on here. The three of them sat across the table from them.

“Chris, I’ll tell you right now you won’t like this.”

Buck cringed as if struck. The anger emanating from Chris was almost palatable.

“We need to do a line-up,” Patterson said without preamble and managing to hold Chris’ glare. Buck was glad there was a table between them when he saw the white-knuckled grip Chris had on his chair.

“I sure hope you mean a photo lineup,” Buck said quickly.

“No. I mean a physical line-up.” Patterson was very firm and Buck had to admire the man’s nerve.

“No fucking way,” Chris snarled a bit too quietly for Buck’s taste. The tall agent pushed his chair back a bit so he had room to physically intervene if, no, when, needed.

And yet Patterson kept talking, seemingly unaware of the danger that sat in front of him. “It’s the only way, Agent Larabee. We only have one witness. We need to be absolutely sure.”

“No.”

Patterson let out a frustrated breath and started to lean forward but Josiah’s big hand suggested otherwise. “We’ll only have one chance at this. One. Chance. Photo line-ups are good with several witnesses because it becomes an odds thing, but physical lines-ups are the best way with a sole witness. Photos don’t show enough. They don’t show how the person walks, their expressions or other physical peculiarities. You know all this.”

Chris rose slowly to his feet like a lion ready to charge. He leaned forward over the table on stiff arms, closing the distance between them. “No.” The deadly tone urged Buck to his feet. The scrape of his chair legs on the floor jarred sharply like fingernails across a chalkboard.

Patterson had the presence of mind to stay seated and appear unchallenging. “Agent Larabee . . . Chris . . . it’s the best way. I know you know this . . .”

A ruby flush crawled up Chris’ neck. Buck expected steam to jet from his nostrils at any moment.

“Chris.” Josiah’s calm, resonant voice acted like the lid on a boiling pot. “He wants Faraday as much as we do. He’s not the enemy here. He’s wants an airtight case. You can’t blame him for that.”

Chris’ eyes snapped to Josiah’s. “That means that we will undo everything we’ve accomplished in the past day. That puts Vin right back in the firing line and I won’t have it! There’s no place safe for him out here. We have no idea who’s on Faraday’s side! We have nothing *except* Vin! I have nothing except Vin! You can’t really condone this, Josiah!”

“I condone it, Chris.” Orrin Travis’ entrance had gone unnoticed by the others. “It’s not what I’d hoped for, but it is definitely the best way.”

Encouraged, Patterson continued. “The only other thing we could do is run a ruse line-up. That is, make Griffin *think* Vin is there to pick him out, but this attorney won’t go for that. He’s too smart. He’ll demand proof of a witness and we’ll have to give it. He’ll demand to be in the observation room. Griffin needs to know that we really, truly have him. It’s the only way he’ll talk.”

“And we need him to talk to find Faraday,” Orrin said. “Vin’s the only way to get Griffin to talk. Once Faraday’s out of the picture, Vin’s safe. Forever. That’s what it comes down to, Chris.”

Chris turned his back on Patterson and drew himself up into the full, black personage that turned so many lesser men’s knees to water. He took a step, and Buck decided it was time to interfere – he laid his hand firmly on Chris’ forearm and prevented the next step. Chris turned his smoldering eyes on Buck, wordlessly demanding a reply.

“I’m with you, Chris, but you need to bring it down a notch.”

Chris stood taller, shifted his shoulders and pinned Travis with his eyes. “You are asking me to *deliberately* put my son in the line of fire.”

Orrin held the challenging stare. “Yes, I am,” he said. “And the *only* reason I’m allowing it is because of who stands behind him.”

That gave Chris pause, and prodded his brain into gear over his emotions. “I want to be in full charge of the viewing,” he said flatly. “I want to pick the place, the time and the staff. I want absolute control, and I will not proceed if Vin decides to back out, Orrin. It’s the only way I will allow this.”

“It’s in your hands, Chris, but we have two and a half days. That’s it. After that, we have to release Griffin.”

Chris just nodded once then brushed Buck aside before striding from the room. Capt. Niley, who had been mostly quiet, followed behind and Buck trailed them after throwing exasperated looks at both Orrin and Josiah.

Buck had a tough time catching up. Chris’ purposeful stride was long and fast, and when he did get to Chris’ side, he could tell that the man’s brain was in full swing.

“Bob, we need to brainstorm about a location, but I won’t talk about it in this building. It must be close to reduce the risk involved in moving Griffin and there’s one other thing that I need. Buck, I’ll need Josiah and Ezra available by sunset. Keep Nathan on those property holdings.”

Capt. Niley pointed down a hallway and said lowly, “Let’s hit the garage and get a random vehicle. There’s no way a pool car is wired for sound.”

Once through the door, Niley personally plucked a set of keys from the key board and led the group deep into the underground garage, where he took custody of a standard sedan. Once out of the building and on the street, Chris spoke.

“I need a place near here that has an upper level line-up room and is rated for rooftop aircraft.”

“You’re flying Vin in?” Buck asked with a smile. “That’s a great idea, Chris. Josiah can fly the helicopter and we won’t have to give away where Vin’s at right now.”

“Finding your line-up room’s going to be trickier,” Niley said. “The closest place I can think of is the Federal building.”

“Not the best place,” Buck said. “Too many leaks, as we’ve discovered.”

“Not if we do it at night,” Chris considered. “After hours. Transfer Griffin from your heliport in the parking lot to ours on the roof. Maybe you can let it leak that Griffin is sick and you’re taking him to the hospital. Leave here, meet there, and then back again. It can be over and done with in under an hour.”

The long stretch of silence was punctuated by the muted sounds of the car’s engine and the softly murmuring police radio.

Finally, Niley nodded. “Sounds doable. I can call Mercy air for a medical pick up and commandeer it in the air. It’s the safest way. No one flying the chopper will know anyone involved.”

“The sooner, the better. It’s dark by six-thirty.” Chris’ inborn leadership was in full gear, Buck realized with a grin as Chris laid out the plan. “I’ll send Travis and Patterson to the Federal building to arrange the room. Number Six is the closest to the roof access. Do not tell them how this is going down. No chances, Buck.”

“I think this’ll work, Chris,” Buck said.

Chris quickly turned to Buck with a stern look. “It has to work. If it doesn’t, Vin’s life is forfeit.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Thanks to Josiah's army connections, arranging for the helicopter proved to be the easiest part of the preparations. Even though Nathan was physically down for the count with his leg injury, he was still a great communications and information base. Buck, however, chose to stay with JD, Claire and Matthew through it all.

"Vin's being taken away in a spectacular way and JD's bound to be affected somehow," Buck reasoned. "And the bad guys know we're holed up on the reservation; not the exact location on the res, thanks to Kojay's people, but it's only a matter of time before they get closer. I'm not willing to gamble on any of their safety."

Chris had to agree. It made him realized how tired he really was, and how he, too, wanted this whole thing to simply be over.

Ezra was the player Chris considered at the moment. Two places still needed coverage for him to feel any modicum of satisfaction with this plan: The Federal building's 14<sup>th</sup> floor and the P.D. heliport.

Although Chris felt that Capt. Niley could handle the transport, there were simply too many unknown eyes in that building. With the heliport at ground level and behind the station, it was visible to curious and prying eyes. It was too much area for one agent's eyes to cover, even those of the ever-vigilant gambler's. Still, he had Travis at the Federal building, so perhaps the best use of Ezra would be at the P.D.'s station.

Chris expelled a weary breath and raked his fingers through his hair, causing Vin's head to pop up from where he, JD and his grandparents huddled over a scattered puzzle. The concern in those wide, blue windows was clear to Chris and he smiled in an effort to comfort from across the room. Vin's expression smoothed a little but Chris knew the reassurance was temporary, and knew very

well that Vin realized it, too. Sometimes, their deep connection was inconvenient. This was one of those times. He winked and smiled, getting a tiny smile in return from Vin before his attention returned to the puzzle.

Straightening with a stifled groan, Chris felt the twinge of tense muscles in his back as he headed to the door in search of Ezra. He was surprised to find the dapper agent on the tiny outdoor landing, leaning against the trailer and walking a silver dollar across the knuckles of one hand and appearing pensive.

“Ezra.”

“Mr. Larabee.”

Chris looked out from where he stood, allowing the steadfast yet peaceful forest calm his worries. Beyond the canopy of trees that sloped slightly downward before him, the distant peaks of the mountains that surrounded them felt like a warm embrace. What he had here - his family, his friends, his team - was a solid foundation that would not fail him, and with the strength of that idea, the doubts of his plan slipped away like mist in the sun.

“I’ll need you at the P.D.’s heliport,” Chris said softly, his eyes still absorbing the atmosphere’s calm. “There are too many variables there that worry me.”

Peripherally, he saw Ezra nod once. There were several beats of silence before the gambler spoke.

“They are out there, Mr. Larabee,” Ezra uttered calmly. “I am sure you have considered all the variables, but that is one fact that must be in the forefront at all times. You are too experienced of a leader to see otherwise, but I feel I must elucidate the point.” Ezra then turned and caught Chris’ attention. The silver dollar slowed its endless, circular journey. “There will be interference. The number of possible manifestations is tempered only by the depth of Faraday and Griffin’s treachery, and I fear that well taps deep.”

The corner of Chris’ mouth twitched once before he snorted and refocused on the beauty around him. “So you’re expecting reprisals no matter what we do.” In his mind’s eye, he saw a furrow on the brow of his agent’s poker face.

“Yes. And it will be devastating, Chris.”

Ezra’s use of his given name punctuated the depth of Ezra’s worry, and for a moment, doubt shadowed his thoughts. Chris looked at the powerful slopes in the distance, vertically shadowed by the sun, and was again bolstered by their strength. They had taken a stand by launching an offensive. This was not the time to retreat, because if they did, they’d be forever on the defense and he knew the toll on a life lived that way; it defined his time between the loss of Sarah and Adam, and the gaining of Vin, and he’d be damned if he’d live like that again. He couldn’t allow Vin that life, either.

“There’s no turning back, Ezra,” he firmly said.

Ezra nodded and pocketed the coin in one smooth motion. With a tug at his cuffs, he eased from the wall and started to the stairs. “I will be standing by with eyes open.”

“This has to look legit, Ezra,” Chris said. “Everyone has to believe that Griffin’s getting picked up for medical reasons.”

Ezra paused at the bottom of the steps and gave his boss a sideways glance, eyes glittering. “Deception is my forte, Mr. Larabee.” After a quick grin, he headed to his car, parked out of sight.

Chris chuckled and shook his head. There was no better man for the job and he was thankful for the individual skills each man in his command possessed. Between them all, they would save Vin.

He glanced at his watch and took a bracing breath. Even though he’d shoved the operation willingly into motion, the zero hour was coming too soon.

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“COOL!”

JD’s excitement cut through the loud, windy arrival of the Hughes 500 helicopter. Chris twitched at the bright red color - not exactly subtle, but he couldn’t complain. Josiah was reluctant to say why a retired military buddy turned flight school owner was so quick to loan the craft, and Chris didn’t press. Even for the usually open profiler, some memories were still painful.

“Whoa, son!” Buck laughed as he grabbed JD’s shirt, halting a headlong bolt for the machine. “We’ll check it out later.”

“But it’s so COOL!” the boy lamented on the edge of pouting.

Vin hadn’t uttered a word, and Chris felt the sweaty, tight clutch on his hand tighten. He looked down as Vin looked up, and he saw trepidation in those impossibly wide, blindingly blue eyes. Chris returned the hand squeeze with confidence, knowing he was Vin’s lifeline to strength at the moment. He grinned.

“Ready to ride, Pard?” he asked.

Vin glanced at the chopper and back to his dad, and then nodded. He wasn’t entirely convinced this was a good idea, Chris could tell, but he could feel Vin’s total trust in him through their bond. He smiled again, and turned to Buck.

“See you soon, stud!” Buck yelled. “Enjoy the ride!”

“Keep an eye out, Buck!”

Buck knelt down and corralled a bouncing, squealing JD in his arms. “Always!”

Chris started forward, tugging Vin's hand, and they both broke into a slow trot over the uneven ground of the small meadow. It had been a bit of a walk to get here, but the spot was perfect for the helicopter pick-up. They were again indebted to Kojay's knowledge of the land.

Chris ducked low before crossing the threshold of the spinning blades. Josiah wore mirrored aviator sunglasses and large headphones with a microphone arm. His broad smile, though, easily dominated his face. Chris picked Vin up and put him inside, behind the pilot's seat.

"Hi Unca Josiah!" Vin yelled excitedly.

"Come on up, Vin!" Josiah patted the seat to his left.

Vin looked to Chris for permission, and he gave it with a smile and a nod. As Josiah chatted to the boy and handed him a matching headset, Chris fiddled with the 4-point seatbelt harness until it was snug. Then he donned his own headset, tuning into the middle of Josiah's instructions on how to use the talk switch. He couldn't help smiling at Vin's efforts as he fastened his own harness.

"Everyone ready?" Josiah's voice asked through the headset.

"Yep!" Vin replied.

"It's a go," Chris agreed.

As the craft's motor revved and grew louder, Chris looked out the side window and waved to Buck, JD and Chanu. They became smaller as they lifted off, and with a smooth dip to one side, disappeared in the thick forest.

Brown dirt roads criss-crossed through the greenery below and turned into thin, tan lines as they gained altitude and speed. Chris marked their exit from reservation land when they crossed a wide, black roadway. The same road led to their house and he regretted the fact that they were flying in the opposite direction - Vin would get a kick out of seeing his home from the sky. He wondered if anyone else was studying the area from the sky.

Automatically, he scanned the sky and road for parked cars or anything else that could indicate surveillance. It would be nearly impossible to tell, though. There were campsites and ranches scattered below them, and any one of them could be a base of some kind. Chris hoped he'd caught them off guard with the helicopter. He also hoped that the quick turnaround would prevent anyone from getting organized enough to try to interfere. He glanced at his watch - so far, so good.

Once they entered city airspace, the headset chatter ceased. Josiah's profile was a picture of professional concentration as he took the most direct route to the Federal building. With the headset being so quiet, Chris wondered if Josiah even



filed a flight plan. He decided that ignorance was bliss at this point. He'd deal with the fallout later.

"Ezra called. Griffin's ready," Josiah reported after a minute.

"Right on time," Chris replied, nerves waking up with a tingle.

Chris spotted the Federal building and leaned forward. He tapped Vin's shoulder and pointed, and after a moment, Vin nodded. Prior to the flight, Chris had taken Vin aside and went over the plan, step by careful step. He made it clear that Vin was to stay with him at all times, and it would be quick in, quick out. Josiah would stay in the helicopter and keep the engine running for a fast withdrawal. Vin was scared to see Griffin again, that was obvious, but Chris was proud to see the way Vin faced that fear. He was going to be quite a man someday.

The wind sock on the building roof directed Josiah to sweep around in a half-circle before touching down.

"Bull's-eye!" Josiah proclaimed as the runners touched the center of the landing circle, provoking a nervous laugh from Vin. "That perfect landing would win me a case of bee - a beverage of my choice - in my military days," the big man commented as he unbuckled his small passenger. Chris was thankful for the chatter that kept Vin at ease.

Chris hopped down, pulled open Vin's door and helped him down. "I'll let you know when we're headed back," Chris yelled over the whirring blades. Josiah nodded and produced a lazy salute.

When Vin's feet were firmly on the ground, Chris ducked and trotted to the roof access door. He swiped the electronic lock with his card key and when the light turned green, he pulled the heavy door open.

"Careful," he warned Vin. "It's a little steep."

Their feet echoed on the metal steps as they descended through a narrow hall. Chris held Vin back with an arm as he pushed the door at the bottom of the stairs open. Quickly scanning the hallway and being satisfied, Chris directed Vin to the right. Since the building automatically locked down after five o'clock, the hallway was at half lighting and lacking the normal workday foot traffic. They passed by several closed office doors before encountering a windowless security door.

Chris' cardkey allowed passage, and they stepped into a plain hall with linoleum floors that made their footfall echo. The other end of the hall ended with silver elevator doors. The wall to their left opened up into an office area, but labeled doors lined the wall to their right. Ezra stood outside the nearest door and smiled at their appearance.

"Gentlemen," he greeted. "Shall we?"

“Why are you dressed like that, Uncle Ezra?” Vin asked, confused. His favorite Uncle was dressed in surgical scrubs.

“Simply playing the part of the trauma team,” Ezra said, looking down at himself briefly. “Rather drab attire, in my opinion, but serves its purpose.”

Even Chris smiled. Ezra held the door open and the pair slipped inside a darkened room.

“What is that child doing here?” an unfamiliar voice demanded.

Chris felt Vin sidle up to him, and he put a protective arm around the narrow shoulders before shooting a deadly glare at the speaker.

“The witness,” D.A. Patterson said in a sharp tone. “Now shut up, Mr. Myers, or you will be escorted out.”

“You can’t do that,” Griffin’s attorney snapped.

“All we have to prove is the existence of the witness and we’ve done that,” Director Travis said lowly. “Anything beyond is out of the goodness of my heart. Now sit.”

During the interchange, Ezra picked up the wall phone and pressed a button. He whispered something in the receiver, and hung it up again. Chris glanced around at every corner, satisfied it was just the six of them. Ezra stepped around so Vin was between them, breaking Vin’s locked stare at the sputtering Mr. Myers.

“He will be quiet now, Mr. Tanner. Director Travis has his cell phone.” Ezra winked when Vin looked up at him, winning a tiny smile. Then he addressed Chris. “He’s also been checked for electronics. I believe we are secure.”

“Good job, Ezra,” Chris said softly. Then he focused on Vin and dropped to a knee next to him, directing Vin to look through the glass into the next room. “Some people are going to come through that door. Don’t say anything until we ask you a question, okay?”

“kay.”

“Remember, Vin, you can see them through the glass, but they can’t see you. The other side is a mirror.”

“Yeah, like on T.V.” Chris wished they had time to alleviate Vin’s worries by showing him the other side of the glass, but he wanted to be out of here as soon as possible. “Okay, here they come.”

In the line-up room, a door opened and several men filed in. They all wore plain clothes and the only way to tell who the agents in charge were was by their actions. The lead man stopped at the opposite wall and turned around, motioning for the men following him to turn around, their backs to the glass. When the seven

men stopped, the last man in closed the door and told the center six men to step up to the wall and stand under the number painted on the wall over their heads.

As they positioned themselves, Chris got Vin's full attention and spoke quietly, eye to eye. "Okay, Vin, when they turn around I want you to look at each man standing under a number. It's important that you look at all of them. Understand?"

Vin nodded nervously.

"We're recording everything, son, so you have to answer out loud."

"Yes, I understand."

Chris studied the familiar eyes he loved, looking deeply to be sure Vin was good with this. "Just remember they can't see you, okay? "

"Okay."

"They're ready," Ezra said. "We are right here with you, Mr. Tanner."

Vin smiled up at Ezra, looking more at ease, as Chris stood. Each man held one of Vin's hands as he looked through the glass.

"Look at each one, Vin." Chris watch as Vin began at Number One. As instructed, he studied the man carefully. Chris glanced at Travis and got an encouraging smile. Beyond him, Mr. Myers surreptitiously studied Vin with a poker face as flat as Ezra's. The man glanced up at Chris, caught, and Chris narrowed his eyes. Mr. Myers turned his full attention scribbling on the legal pad on his lap.

Then Vin's breath caught.

"Vin?" Patterson asked, voice soft. "Did you look at everyone?"

"Yes." Vin's voice trembled, and Chris was surprised at the strength of Vin's suddenly clenched hand.

"Do you recognize anyone in the room?"

"Number Four," Vin answered immediately in a trembling voice. "He's the man I saw at Miss Grace's."

Chris was proud of the way Vin fought to stay strong.

For the first time, Chris turned his full attention to the men behind the glass. He, too, recognized Sean Griffin as the man standing under the number four from the Cobra web page and the yearbook. The man lacked any expression and Chris couldn't decipher any nervousness. "*Too confident,*" he immediately thought.

Patterson keyed an intercom and instructed each man to step forward, turn a circle, and step back. Chris read via their bond that any further action from the line-up wasn't necessary - Vin easily picked their man, but Patterson wanted to any possible future objections to be completely covered. So did Chris, and he knew Vin felt the same so he endured and focused on Vin's well-being.

“Almost done, son,” he soothed.

“kay,” Vin breathed shakily.

When it was Number Four’s turn, the man took a step, grinned cockily, and turned.

And then he scanned the mirror and raised one hand. He held it aloft for a moment, then smirked and bent his fingers into the shape of a gun, the pretend muzzle pointed directly at Vin.

“Bang!” he mouthed as he pulled an imaginary trigger.

“Get him out! Now!” Patterson snapped as Vin gasped.

Chris swept Vin up in his arms and charged from the room as every man in the line-up room surrounded a laughing Griffin.

He could vaguely hear and feel Ezra ahead, wrenching the doors open and barking orders into a microphone, but he was painfully aware of the shocked stiffness of Vin’s body as the boy clung to his neck. When the ascended the noisy metal stairs leading to the roof, he finally heard his son speak.

“You said he couldn’t see me!”

Chris’ stomach turned sickeningly. “He couldn’t, Vin. It was a wild guess and he got lucky. You have to trust me, son.”

He burst onto the roof and jogged toward the waiting helicopter, still clutching Vin to his chest.

“Then why are we running away?” Vin asked in a scared voice.

“We’re not running away. We’re going home, and I don’t want to waste a minute getting there.” He ducked low and felt the wash of wind over them. “There’s an ornery horse or two missing us.”

Vin relaxed enough for Chris to set him inside the craft, and then climbed into the seat next to his dad. Ezra took the one next to Josiah. They concentrated on buckling up for the next minute, and within two, were airborne.

“Home again, home again, jiggidy, jig,” Josiah sang in their ears.

Chris forced a smile and took Vin’s hand. Eventually, as Vin relaxed, the smile reached his eyes and became genuine.

“I, for one, am looking forward for that culinary treat you promised me, Mr. Tanner.”

Vin frowned as he worked through his memory. “What’s cul-nary?”

“Why, tasty foodstuffs. What was that charming name? It involves graham crackers?”

“s’mores?” Vin queried.

“Why, that’s it. S’mores. Do we have enough chocolate to create this delectable?”

“Ezra,” Josiah laughed. “You can never have enough chocolate.”

As the plans grew around the preparation of their evening snack and Vin visibly relaxed, Chris finally felt the weight of the day slip from his shoulders.

He still wanted to kill that fucking Griffin, though. The thought of beating him to death with Myers’ arm made him sigh happily and he settled back in the small seat, allowing his head to loll to one side so he could look out of the window. He grew calmer as the green edge that marked the end of the city grew closer.

*“It was a coincidence,”* he thought, recalling Griffin’s threatening gesture. *“He was guessing the witness location. Now his lawyer knows who the witness is. Now that they know Vin’s alive, this may never end.”*

A dark melancholy shrouded Chris as he thought of the time between now and the trial. It would, no doubt, be a long trial, and until he testified, Vin would be a target. So much for that normal life he wanted for his son. There would be an end, though. Together, and with his team, they would prevail.

As his thoughts ran to their end, Chris returned to his vigilant state. They would be at a secondary clearing very soon - not taking any chances, Chris arranged to bring Vin back via a different location on the Reservation. They were crossing the road that led home, and dropping lower to the rabbit-run of dusty trails.

Josiah swept to the north in an arc so they would arrive at the meadow on the down slope. Not quite as flat as the first meadow, this one was more of a challenge on the approach; with the prevailing breeze, Josiah had to drop below tree level and drift uphill slightly to get to the flatter center of the meadow.

It was low now, drifting sideways uphill so Vin and Ezra would get out on the upslope. Chris opened his mouth to complain about having to risk a downhill slide on his side when he noticed a puff of dust rise above the tree tops.

It wasn’t from the chopper - it was dust from one of the dirt trails. Just as the left skid lightly touched Chris saw several dirt bikes moving behind the tree trunks. Before he could order Josiah to abort, gunfire erupted from the trees.

Chris threw his door open and returned fire, and Josiah ducked low as his side window shattered. The craft shifted sideways.

“GET US OUT OF HERE!” Chris yelled, causing Vin to cringe away from him. Chris continued to fire out of the open door and Ezra backed him up, the gambler’s arm stretched out behind Josiah’s seat.

The sideways slip of the aircraft slowed and Chris felt the nose tip as Josiah attempted to lift off. The gunfire was deafening, and the muzzle flash inside the

## SAVING VIN

craft blinding. Chris, nearly blinded by acrid gun smoke, saw their vehicle rise away but the smooth action was interrupted by the scream of metal.

He flung sideways and partially out of the open door when the tail section slammed into the gentle slope. Chris then lurched the other way and grabbed for Vin, but his fingers wrenched loose as the body of the craft rolled sickeningly. He heard a scream and saw rich, green grass through his window just before sparks flashed and darkness swallowed him whole.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Suddenly, the world was eerily quiet as Ezra automatically shifted into survival mode. If his hands shook while disengaging the seat harness, he didn't recall. If he yelled to Vin, furthered any injury or even gained new ones, he didn't realize it at that moment. Action slowed, washed in an underwater feeling as Standish dragged Vin's resisting body from the twisted wreck and jumped.

He hit the ground running, stumbling, at first, over the uneven, sloped grass terrain, but managed to keep his feet; considering how his center of balance was drastically altered by holding a struggling Vin close to his chest, it was a remarkable feat.

Ezra thought of none of this as he fled. His focus steeled on one ideal - safety.

The cloak of the woods pulled closer with the falling sun. The canopy above became thicker and the shadows fuller as he plunged into the depths of the trees. He heard his heart pounding in his ears. His breathing burned deep in his lungs. Somewhere along the line, Vin stopped struggling and his clutch around Ezra's neck became the center of everything.

It was silence that eased Ezra into the now. His step faltered and slowed, and he settled into a long-strided walk, eventually stopping in the midst of a tree family. Here, the trunks grew in a tight circle, close to a wide-girthed matriarch which created a feeling of guarded safety. Ezra, panting heavily, leaned against the mother and slowly sank to the ground as sharp focus faded and general awareness returned.

Vin sobbed in disturbing silence. Ezra could feel the spasmodic gasps and sniffing that indicated sorrow and held him closer. "Shhh, shhh," he soothed, rubbing the knobby back with the flat of his hand. "We're away, Vin. It's over." He

repeated the calming words for both the boy's and his own nerves. Eventually the panic eased.

"Dad," Vin choked. "Is he dead? I . . . I can't feel him, Unca Ezra. He's not there!" The words were accented with Vin's desperate, shifting grip. It seemed to the agent that the child was confirming their existence.

"I honestly don't know, Vin. I could tell you he's fine, but I have a feeling you wouldn't believe me, would you?"

Those words were enough for Vin to relax his grip enough to lean back and find Ezra's gaze. They studied each other's eyes for a few moments before Vin shook his head and dipped his chin. His fingers fiddled with Ezra's shirtfront and his lip quivered. Ezra's heart broke for the child and every instinct told him to offer condolence, but the professional part of him knew they were in danger and Vin needed to know that. That knowledge was integral to their survival - they needed to be sharp and aware.

"Well," Ezra started, raising one shaky hand to brush back Vin's hair. Debris fell from his touch. "We need to figure out our next step. Are you hurt?"

"No," Vin breathed.

Ezra could feel his own scrapes and bruises beginning to throb and doubted Vin's assessment. "Let me look." Vin tensed. "The sooner I check you over, the sooner we find out about your dad," Ezra said firmly.

He took Vin's hands in his and looked down at them, and then trailed up his arms to his chest. There were smudges of dirt and spots of blood, and his was shirt torn on one side. A bright red rash ran up either side of his neck where the harness had rubbed, but overall, Vin was intact. Ezra looked at his face again and traced a lump just above his left eye, causing Vin to twitch.

"It appears that you have hit your head, but other than that, you seem uninjured. Do you have a headache?"

Vin frowned and touched the tender spot. "Didn't know it was there 'till you touched it," he said in a ragged voice. Then he rolled his scared blue eyes and blinked. "Are you okay?"

Ezra opted to play down the sharp pain rising along his right side. He suspected a cracked rib or two, but he couldn't allow the discomfort to dull his focus. He ruffled his hair with his fingers and, as with Vin's, bits of glass flicked away. "I seem to be mostly unscathed," he summed up, keeping his voice low.

Vin slipped around to his knees at Ezra's side and looked around. Ezra slipped a sore arm around the boy's shoulders and listened for any sign of pursuit. His senses met with a disturbing quiet. Shouldn't he be hearing gunfire?



Ezra took a breath to still his unease. "I know it is dark and getting darker by the second, but would you happen to know in which direction the cabin is from here? Or, perhaps, Kojay's abode?" He looked down to Vin and saw the boy's forehead furrow.

Vin scanned the area slowly, and then nodded. "I think they're both that way," he said, his voice a little stronger as he pointed ahead and slightly to the right.

When he pushed to his feet, Ezra stifled a groan. Vin scrambled to his feet and looked at him worriedly. Ezra forced a grin. "I am not used to the exercise," he uttered lowly. Vin relaxed a little, but his eyes were still wide with fearful worry. Rather than leaning over and irritating his sore ribs, Ezra leaned back against the tree and raised his left foot to dig out the small gun from his ankle holster. He frowned when he realized what clothes he still wore. "At least the hospital scrubs are taking the brunt of the elements rather than my own wardrobe."

Vin blinked again and visually took in the filthy outfit. "You don't look like you," he commented. "Cept for those." He pointed at Ezra's scuffed Italian loafers.

Ezra chuffed and gathered one of Vin's hands in his own before moving out of the circle of trees. "They are not quite the proper attire for the environment, are they? I must be sure to note their sad loss on my expense account." He kept his tone light and gave the boy an encouraging smile. "Shall we?" He noticed Vin's longing look back before they started out. "I am sure your father will join us, Vin, especially if we wait for him in a place he knows how to find. We have to be careful, though."

"I just wish I knew he was okay," Vin whispered roughly.

Ezra squeezed his hand. "Mr. Larabee is the most resourceful man I know. The best thing we can do for him is to keep you safe. That way, he needs only to worry about himself." He paused, frowning. "Does that help at all or am I just managing to make you feel worse?"

Vin tipped his face up and managed a weak smile. "It's okay," he said. "I'm glad you're here, Unca Ezra."

Ezra returned the smile, his resolve to keep this boy safe strengthened. "I am glad to be of service. Now, let's get going."

ef

Buck Wilmington spat curses as he raised his gun and sprinted from the forest. He could barely see Kojay's people advancing through the concealment of the trees on either side of the meadow. They were seconds too late, unable to stop

the gunfire that took out the tail rotor of the helicopter that caused it to spin into the gentle slope. Luckily, the craft was barely off the ground when it was hit and didn't have far to fall. The long main blades shattered as they struck the hillside and Buck was forced to wait until the shrapnel and bullets stopped flying to approach.

He didn't anticipate the firepower of the opposition, either. After Josiah lifted off to go to the city just over an hour ago, Kojay's lookouts reported the presence of motorcyclists in the area. It wasn't unusual; some campsites scattered around the periphery of the reservation were frequented by off-roaders, but Buck did not want to take any chances.

Leaving JD with Matt and Claire at Kojay's trailer, he checked his duty weapon and grabbed a rifle before heading in the general direction of the drop off meadow. Only he and Josiah knew the exact location, selected from a list Kojay had supplied. The bright red helicopter was easy to spot on its return, though, and Buck was surprised by the quick response by the bikers. He and Kojay's people were too late to stop the crash, but at least they kept the bikers from swarming the wreck.

The helicopter still rocked from the impact when Ezra spilled from the doorway in the spray of deadly shrapnel. Buck watched in horrified amazement as his teammate pulled Vin from the teetering wreck and ran - it would be a miracle if neither of them were hit by debris. Buck longed to give chase but he knew his job now was to cover their escape and allow Ezra's risky move to pay off.

Their numbers allowed for a short engagement. Some bikers escaped, but most of them were forced to surrender. He sent some men to look for Ezra while the others checked the area. As soon as Buck felt things were under control he ran to the smoking remains, tilted at a sharp angle against the slope.

"CHRIS!" he yelled as he holstered his gun and tried to find a way in. "JOSIAH!"

He heard someone cough, followed by a muttered curse. Encouraged by the sounds, Buck decided on a frontal assault and pulled the shattered windshield out of his way. "Josiah?" He reached inside and felt around the large man in search of the harness release. Josiah groaned. An arm moved. "You hear me?"

Buck found the buckle and gave it a hard tug. It took two more tugs to unlock the buckle and the sharp motions roused the profiler into awareness. Josiah groaned and straightened. His helmet was pitted and scratched and streaks of blood slashed across one cheek.

"Josiah?" Buck called. "Nice landing, Pard."

A flash of white was all the smile Josiah could muster. “Ooooh,” he groaned. “I hate it when this happens.” He blinked, dazed.

Buck chuckled nervously. “You mean this isn’t an unusual landing? Remind me not to fly with you ever again.” Buck helped him shift into a better position to gain his feet before letting go. Josiah’s eyes widened. “Vin?”

“He and Ezra got out. They’re okay.” Buck hoped he wasn’t lying. “Let me get to Chris.”

Josiah wiggled to one side and Buck worked his way between the front seats. “Chris?” he called, worried at the lack of response.

He craned his neck and saw his friend slumped against the crumpled door, and then reached for Chris’ limp wrist. Buck exhaled with relief at the strong pulse. “Hey, partner. You look to be in one piece, at least.” Buck squeezed into the back and quickly checked for any broken limbs before unlatching the harness.

Generally, Chris looked pretty good for a man unconscious in a crashed helicopter. The only visible wounds were tiny, red nicks across his face and exposed arms, and a bloody lump above his left temple. With sunset complete, it was hard to see how his eyes reacted when Buck peeled back a lax lid, but the motion teased Chris awake. His face crinkled and he turned away from Buck’s intrusive touch.

“That’s it, Stud. Wakey, wakey!” Buck gently patted Chris’ cheek.

Chris groaned, frowned, and then his eyelids parted enough to squeeze out a heated glare.

“Damn, Chris, you sure know how to arrive in style.”

“Fuck you.”

Buck laughed. “Come on, let me help ya outta here.”

“Kay.” Chris leaned forward and then abruptly stiffened. “Where’s Vin?” He pushed Buck aside.

“Slow down! Ezra got him out. They’re in the woods.” Buck regained his balance and grabbed Chris’ arms to slow his bolt.

“Is he hurt? Where is he?”

Agitated, Chris fought past Buck and jumped from the wreck, falling into a startled Josiah’s arms. The profiler had just gained his own balance before catching Chris so the pair collapsed to the ground in a heap. Buck managed to land on his feet next to them, then stood back to give them room. He shook his head as they extricated themselves from each other. Josiah lurched to his feet and pulled off his helmet as Chris stood, frowning and rubbing his shoulder.

“Which way?” Chris snapped at Buck. Buck wisely kept quiet and pointed. Chris stalked away.

Josiah stood next to Buck and watched their leader depart, lurching with an unsteady gait. “He gonna find ‘em in the dark?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me in the least,” Buck sighed. “Let’s clean up here. I want to make sure everyone’s accounted for.”

Josiah nodded and gave the wrecked craft a sad look. “I’m thinkin’ this is the last time Rich’ll loan me a helicopter,” he muttered. He turned to follow Buck, but then paused and regarded the helmet tucked under his arm. With a resigned sigh, he tossed it into the metal hulk before continuing along Buck’s path.

ef

Ezra felt his ankle swelling with each step. He realized he must have twisted it in their mad dash from the crash and in the heat of the moment, failed to note the injury. As the adrenalin faded, pain flared and it was now impossible to hide the injury.

“I think we’re almost there,” Vin said, a tinge of worry coloring his words. “I think you need to stop.”

Ezra could feel the boy’s evaluating gaze through the darkness. He barked a short laugh. “You and your father may not be related by blood, but you possess the same judicious eye and astute judgment.”

A beat of silence. “Huh?”

Ezra chuckled. “You are right, my boy, I should stop but I fear that if I do, I will be unable to start again. Therefore, I will boost my resolve and push onward.”

Vin’s head tilted in the dark. “You’re not stoppin’?”

“No.” he chuckled. “I think - “The agent was shocked into silence when Vin grabbed his arm and motioned for silence. He obeyed without question.

Something moved out there. He didn’t hear it at first, but after a moment, his ears picked it out. Their eyes met, each trying to draw some conclusion from the other. Ezra slowly raised his gun and pointed it in the general direction, but the night noises of the woods and the wind made it impossible to pinpoint an exact direction. For the first time, Ezra noticed the rustling sway of the leaves in the light wind and was amazed that Vin had picked out the unnatural noise.

A snap.

Ezra's head twisted, but he found himself pulled behind Vin. He didn't ask questions or demand reason, but simply followed the boy and covered their retreat. Adrenalin lessened the pain in his ankle, but he was still relieved when Vin stopped and pulled him down.

"In here," Vin whispered. Ezra recognized one of the hidden dugouts the boys had made a few days ago and choked down a near-hysterical chuckle.

*"Thank the Lord for boys and their toys,"* the agent thought as they quietly tucked their bodies in the small space. Vin pulled the woven branch cover over the small entry. Ezra made sure the boy was safely behind him and trained his gun sights on the covered entry. His ankle throbbed in time with his heart as they held their breath and listened.

After a few long seconds, there was a rustling sound that went against the rhythm of the wind. If Ezra hadn't been listening for it, he doubted he would have heard it, but now it sounded loud in his ears. His focus narrowed to the small opening and all else faded away - he was sure he felt the earth quiver with each approaching step.

They were close. The faint squeak of leather boots became exquisitely clear. Ezra held his breath and felt Vin become as still and silent as stone behind him.

A click.

*"Gun!"* Ezra's mind screamed.

A shadow crossed the vague line at the edge of the cover and Ezra exhaled and prepared to shoot.

Suddenly, there was a rush of leaves and a feral grunt. A shot fired, and Ezra twitched when Vin gasped. Guttural noises became loud and close, and the branch cover caved inward. Ezra didn't fire, but instead, pressed Vin back into the dirt while the struggle played out above them. The action rolled away from the entry, and then there was a long silence, finally interrupted by a deep grunt and the sound of something heavy hitting the earth.

Then silence.

Ezra hesitated a few seconds and then dared to breathe. He inched forward, and shoved Vin back when he tried to follow. Ezra gathered his feet under him as much as he could, then twisted and motioned Vin to stay put. He held his gun in both hands, mentally counted to three, and launched himself from the pit, his gun

pointed directly at the threat. “FREEZE! A.T.F.!” he yelled at the dark forms mere yards from the entry of their safe place.

Heavy breathing met his challenge, and one of the forms rose to his feet. The other lay quiet on the ground.

“Don’t move or I’ll shoot!” he snapped, trying to step from the hole with some semblance of grace. He failed.

A dry chuckle greeted him. “Ezra. Where’s Vin?”

There was an explosion of joy from the hole as Vin launched his small body into his father’s arms. All Ezra could hear was smothered tears and soft crooning, and he was both surprised and amazed that such a soothing noise could come from Chris Larabee’s throat.

Exhausted in more ways than he cared to admit, Ezra plopped to the ground and allowed his heart to start beating again. “Mr. Larabee,” he said evenly. “Your arrival is most fortuitous.” He holstered his gun and gave the pair a chance to reconnect. “Is that one of gang that ambushed our landing?”

“Yeah,” Chris replied over Vin’s shoulder. “Call Buck. Tell him we’re okay and get an update. There may be more around here.”

Ezra did as he was told, for once without comment. When he flipped open his phone and turned it on, he was surprised to see that nearly an hour had passed since the crash. He called up Buck’s entry and pushed the button to connect.

“Ezra? You okay?” Buck answered.

“Yes, we have just liaised with Mr. Larabee and are fine. We will be -”

“Get to the cabin, pronto,” Buck barked. “Griffin’s bailed out.” Before the call disconnected, Ezra heard Buck yelling orders.

Ezra closed the phone. He felt Chris’ stare before he raised his eyes to meet it. “It seems that Dr. Griffin has wasted no time in meeting bail,” he started. “Mr. Wilmington says he’s already out of custody.”

Holding Vin close, Chris turned on his heel and led the way to the cabin. Much to Ezra’s dismay, he realized that he welcomed the idea of reaching the rustic structure. Limping quickly to keep up, he wondered what his mother would think of him now.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

So many emotions boiled in Chris' brain, the lump and scratches on his head didn't grab his attention until he dropped onto the hard chair at the cabin kitchen. Vin, silent and clingy, remained in his protective hug, shifting to accommodate his father's change in position. Once seated, Chris sighed and reached up to gently probe his injury. He winced and hissed in pain at his own touch.

Only then did Vin push away far enough to study the face of the one he loved. Chris saw the worry and exhaustion in his boy's face, interlaced with something else – guilt? The last thought was confirmed when Vin wouldn't hold the visual connection; instead, he dropped his chin and leaned back into Chris' chest.

"I'm okay, Vin," Chris said quietly. "None of this is your fault. You know that, right?" He was sure Vin heard his words over the growing background noises of the others' arrival. He pushed Vin's hair back with one hand and cradled the back of his head, holding tight. "The fault belongs to some ruthless, greedy men. You just happened to be caught in the middle, son. I'm proud of the way you're holding up through all of this."

Chris felt Vin's body relax a little with each word. He gently stroked the wild, wavy hair, waiting for any reply.

"Are you really okay?" Vin finally whispered. "You're bleeding." He tipped his head back and looked at the darkening lump rising on his dad's temple.

“I’m fine. This will be over soon, I’m sure. I need you to be strong for just a little longer.”

A handful of seconds passed before Vin stated, more than asked, “You’re going after them?”

“Yes.”

Vin tucked in closer in response and Chris took the time to look around and gage their readiness. Josiah and Buck arrived with twigs and leaves in their hair, sticky with sweat and covered in dust. Josiah’s face was tattooed black where smoke and dirt mingled with bloody nicks. Framed with filth, his toothy smile seemed whiter than usual. Buck was on a cell phone, rapidly shooting questions, as he looked Ezra over.

The latter was collapsed on the tiny couch looking as disheveled as Chris had ever seen him, but saw that the undercover man still had the energy to slap Buck’s hand away. Ezra then brushed off leafy particles from his arms and Chris smirked at the dirt-encrusted hospital scrubs his teammate still wore. With a final tug to put the costume in place, Ezra took a deep breath and found Chris’ gaze.

Chris’ throat tightened with gratitude when he gave Ezra a sharp nod. He saw a flash of surprise cross the usually unreadable agent’s face just before returning to a neutral mode. Ezra nodded slightly in acknowledgement then turned to face Buck when he spoke.

“Nate’s got something, Chris. Captain Niley got a head’s up about Griffin making bail, so he waited outside in an unmarked car and followed the ‘im when he was released. Griffin’s attorney gave him a ride to the impound yard to collect his car and then he took off. Niley stopped following when they got out of town and there wasn’t enough traffic to keep out of sight.”

“Where’d he lose him?” Chris’ arms tightened around Vin.

Buck snapped the phone shut. “That’s the good news, boss. Griffin went right back to where he was stopped. It’s an industrial area, usually closed up tight at night and Nate’s pinpointed three buildings with spiked electrical usage.”

“We don’t have the manpower to hit three places,” Josiah pointed out.

“Don’t need to. One of the places is on our list of Griffin’s property holdings.” Buck smiled hugely and rubbed his hands together. “We got ‘em if we hurry. Nate directed Niley in and he’s got the place in view. Griffin’s car is there.”



Chris' blood surged. He kissed Vin on the head helped him slip to the floor. Chris held Vin's hand as he stood, grimacing at the sound of popping knees and the twinge in his back. Vin gave him a worried look. Chris offered a weak grin in return.

"You gonna make it, old man?" Buck teased.

"Come Hell or high water," Chris replied, holding Vin's gaze. He winked, and Vin's grip relaxed a little. "Come on, son. Let's go find JD and your grandparents."

Ezra let out a groan as Buck pulled him from the couch and Josiah hobbled to the door. The few minutes of relaxing in the cabin had obviously allowed the effects of the crash to settle deeply into their muscles and bones.

Buck chuckled at the men and shook his head as he moved into the woods. "You're the sorriest bunch of agents I've ever seen," he laughed.

"That's what I've said from the beginning," Chris immediately replied.

Buck paused, and then frowned as he considered the comment. "I think I've been insulted," he said.

"I *know* you have been insulted," Ezra muttered, rubbing his back as he limped into the darkness. "You should be used to it by now, Mr. Wilmington. I certainly am."

Buck's frown deepened as they picked up the pace. "Wait a sec. Are you sayin' you're used to *me* getting insulted or *you* gettin' insulted?"

"Shut up, Buck."

"Dad, it's not nice to say shut up."

"You are quite correct Mr. Tanner."

"Shut up, Ezra."

Josiah laughed.

They walked the rest of the way to Kojay's trailer in charged silence, Vin's hold on Chris' hand never loosening. The group had to move slowly because what little moonlight there was failed to pierce the canopy above. Two flashlights recovered in the cabin threw weak beams, the batteries near death. Josiah's light, in fact, sputtered out as soon as the trailer came into view.

Buck called out to JD when they were close, and JD dragged Grampa Matt out of the trailer in response. "Da!" he yelled, running into the tall man's arms.

Buck hoisted him up and spun the giggling boy around. When he settled on Buck's hip, JD looked around, bright and happy. "Hey, Vin! How was the hellycopter ride? Was it cool? Did it feel like a roollycoaster?"

"Um," Vin started, looking to Chris for help.

"It was exciting, JD." Chris raised his eyebrows at Vin, who nodded in agreement.

They hustled the boys inside and Buck gave Matt, Claire and Kojay a quick rundown of their plans. As he did so, the fear was obvious in Claire's expression when she met Chris' gaze. He directed Vin to her side and she absently reached for his hand, but the bump on Chris' head held her attention.

"It's okay, mom," he said as he squatted down next to Vin and laid his hands on they boy's narrow shoulders. Chris smiled at him. "Just a little longer, Cowboy, then we can go home," he said. "Everything's going to be fine."

"Kay." Vin breathed, the word not entirely convincing. Vin hooked an arm around Claire's leg, his wide, blue eyes never straying from Chris' face. Chris got the feeling that Vin was committing his features to memory.

Between Vin's and Claire's frightened stares, Chris almost gave in to his desire to stay. He could think of nothing better than snuggling with Vin and reading aloud one of the boys' books that they knew by heart.

He also knew that he couldn't relegate Vin's safety to anyone else. He couldn't fully relax unless he, personally, saw Faraday put away. He was the only one Vin trusted, and, therefore, the only one that could assure the boy he was safe.

For Vin's sake, he had to leave. Chris managed to swallow his groan when he stood. "Let's get this done, boys."

The four men filed outside.

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Chris was surprised when he found Nathan and Raine with Bob Niley. The two cars pulled off the roadway were nearly invisible in the darkness. Nathan was on crutches and Raine was beside him, her mouth quirked in a familiar line of annoyance. Niley rolled open a map on the hood of his car and played the beam of a small flashlight over the print. The team gathered around the circle of light.

They were on the outskirts of a large industrial area. Nathan pointed to the location of the building he'd found. "There are two ways out of this building," he said. "Here and here. A man at each of these corners can visually cover the entire perimeter."

"Josiah, Ezra, take the corners," Chris ordered. "Nathan, you're our communication center. Park your car here." He pointed to a lot close to the building but out of sight. "Bob, do you have schematics of the inside?"

"No. The electrical bills indicate that three businesses are at that address, one on the bottom and two upstairs. The unit powered up right now is upstairs, west side. One person can cover the upstairs egress – the stairway and elevator bay are here. The only other ways out from the second floor would be through the windows. There's one fire escape ladder for each upstairs unit. Sanchez and Standish can see those from their positions."

Chris straightened and checked his weapon. The others followed suit without comment. Nathan issued earpieces and wrist microphones confiscated from the disgraced Agent Casselman's car. They were ready to go in a scant few minutes.

Chris took a moment to study each member of his team and hoped his gratefulness for their dedication was clear; he just didn't have the words. Finally, he lifted his chin and locked gazes with his oldest friend and supporter. Buck met his eyes and nodded once in acknowledgement. The team leader took a deep breath and became all business. "Buck's with me. Let's do this thing," he growled.

They established positions outside of the building in complete silence, the night's shroud of darkness covering their every move. Brief, whispered confirmations told Chris that it was his turn to move in. Buck and Niley moved quickly through the shadows in his wake and they slipped inside the small lobby access to the upper level with ease. Niley nodded when he settled in a position that covered both stairs and elevator. Chris started up the stairs, his gun leading the way and Buck on his heels.

A hallway divided the second level of the building. Chris positioned himself in front of the west-side door when he heard a sharp hiss. He glanced at Buck, who pointed to a far corner and the surveillance camera pointed in their direction.

“Shit,” Chris hissed. “Camera,” he informed the others. Immediately trying the door, he was surprised that it was unlocked. Although the word *trap* popped into this head, he knew they were committed at this point. He shoved the door open and quickly entered, gun raised. Buck rolled right.

They quickly checked the small room, which only contained a stocked desk. “Clear,” Buck reported softly. “One more door.”

Chris barged through the second door with Buck covering his back, and instantly trained his gun on the cluster of people behind a glass partition.

“A.T.F!”

A woman in the enclosure screamed and backed into the far wall as something clattered to the floor. In his peripheral sight, he saw Buck bust through the sole door and enter the well-lit surgical suite, pausing just inside. “Stop what you’re doing!” Buck ordered, gun trained on one of the two men hovering over a body on a table.

Chris followed his partner in and focused on the occupants. The three people wore surgical scrubs, complete with masks, caps and booties. At Buck’s order, one of the men backed away with bloody hands raised and cowered next to the sobbing woman slumped against the wall. “Hands up!” Buck snapped, and the woman complied. The pair visibly trembled as the agent covered them. “Don’t move!”

The third person calmly took a step back and raised his hands. Blood covered the surgical gloves he wore. Even though Chris could only see his eyes, he recognized Griffin immediately. Once the doctor was against the far wall, Chris allowed his gaze to catalogue the suite.

A whining monitor showed a glowing flat line. A ventilator hissed regularly as it continued to pump. Overhead lights centered on a prone man, naked from the waist up. Wires trailed from the round leads taped to his chest to the squealing monitor, and the ventilator tube snaked from his mouth.

Chris cross-stepped twice and looked down on the bruised, bloody face of Jesse Faraday. Fresh, red incisions along his jaw line were disturbingly bloodless because, as the monitor reported, the man’s heart had stopped beating.

Chris felt strangely cheated. He turned his attention to Griffin. “Turn it off.” He motioned with his gun for doctor to shut off the monitor, and the man did so

without a word. "Get Nathan up here," Chris told Buck, the muzzle of his gun never wavering from Griffin.

Keeping the other two covered, Buck reported in and told the others to secure the rest of the building and bring up Nathan. "Look, Chris. Security monitors. He saw us comin'."

Chris glanced around and saw small screens mounted high on the walls, above the surgical equipment. Black and white images of his team entering the building played out on two of the screens. Griffin knew they were coming in; that only made sense if . . .

He refocused on Griffin, eyes narrowed. "You killed him," Chris stated flatly.

"I don't know what happened!" The man in Buck's sights babbled. "He was in good shape! I had the right mix! He did fine last time!"

"You worked on him before?" Buck asked. "You changed his face?"

"No! I'm the anesthesiologist, that's all! He was fine before! I don't know what happened!" The nurse beside him hiccupped between snuffles.

As the man rambled, Chris studied Griffin.

Griffin pointed at his surgical mask. "May I?" he asked, voice muffled. Chris nodded and he used one finger to pull the mask down. "Do you have a warrant for this intrusion?" The man's arrogance ratcheted up Chris' ire.

"You don't seem too concerned about your friend's condition," Chris said instead. "You've known each other a long time."

Griffin looked down at Faraday and snorted. "Greg was a bully."

"Greg Hafner, Jesse Faraday; the name doesn't matter, does it? He was always the one in charge, wasn't he? Thanks to him, you lived a lavish lifestyle, Dr. Griffin." The doctor looked back at Chris and smiled. "Then Jesse - Greg - became a liability. His first mistake was bringing that boy to Grace. His next mistake was letting the boy get away. Things were falling apart, weren't they? You couldn't risk getting connected, so you killed him."

"You will have to speak with my lawyer." Griffin's smug demeanor was irritating. "And I am sure the A.T.F. will be paying a huge bill for the trampling of my rights."

Chris moved around the body and crowded Griffin, forcing the man to back into the wall. With his gun barrel less than an inch from Griffin's nose, Chris leaned in, his deadly glare causing a line of sweat to glisten at the doctor's hairline. Griffin blinked, but held the stare. Chris' voice was hard, but barely audible.

"With Faraday gone, that leaves you in charge of the empire, doesn't it?"

Griffin didn't flinch, and he spoke slowly. "I have no idea what you mean."

Chris kept the man pinned to the wall as the sound of their back up came into the suite. He finally backed off when Ezra cuffed Griffin and dragged him away. Chris holstered his weapon and looked around.

"Nathan," he called when the medic finally hobbled his way to the room with Raine at his side. "Check out the body but try not to disturb anything. This is a murder scene." Jackson nodded and moved in. "Bob, see the D.P.D. secures the outside perimeter." Chris put his hand on the man's shoulder and met his eyes.

"Couldn't have done it without you. Thanks."

Captain Niley raised an eyebrow. "Thanks. I think. If you get sued for this, Larabee, keep my name out of it." He shook Chris' hand and left the room.

Chris grinned and suddenly felt very weary. All he wanted to do was return to Vin and sleep for a week, but some unspecified thing nagged at him. He rubbed his eyes and sighed.

"Chris?"

Buck was standing close when he opened his eyes again and he recognized the unsettled look reflected from his best friend's face. "Something doesn't add up," Chris stated rather than asked.

"You felt that, too?" Buck said, tiredly scanning the room as if looking for something they missed. Nathan and Raine had their heads together at Faraday's body while Ezra and Josiah corralled the three prisoners on the other side of the glass. Soon, the place would be swarming with Forensics teams and other agents.

Chris pulled out a cell phone. "I'd better let Orrin know what's happened. Maybe some fresh eyes will figure it out, Buck. I need to get back to Vin."

Buck scrubbed his bristled cheek. "Yeah, maybe so."

"Chris!" Nathan's tone made both men snap to attention. "Come here!"

A questioning look passed between them as Buck and Chris approached the table. Chris happened to glance through the glass when he reached Nathan's side and saw Griffin watching them closely.

Chris paused, his instincts tingling. "Wait a minute, Nathan." Chris saw Griffin notice him and instantly turn away. Chris was sure he saw a flash of concern. He tipped his head, considering. After a moment, he called to Ezra.

Agent Standish came into the suite, the look of disgust mixed with queasiness as he worked to keep as much distance as possible between himself and the body. "You bellowed, Mr. Larabee?"

"Take those three out of here. I don't want them to see what we're doing."

"Gladly. I believe the first of many squad cars are now on scene. May I ask what charge we are using to detain our captives?"

"Murder sounds good."

"Homicide it is." Ezra said without pause, quickly retreating.

Chris motioned for the others to be quiet until Josiah and Ezra left with the prisoners. "Okay. What did you find, Nathan?"

"This." They turned their attention to Faraday's cold torso, dotted with leads and blushed red over the sternum where the anesthesiologist had attempted CPR. Nathan used a gloved fingertip to gently lift one of the lead pads. The circular pad just below the ribcage still stuck to Faraday's skin at one edge, but Nathan raised it enough so both Chris and Buck could see the slightly gaped incision beneath. The edges of the wound were red, but didn't bleed. "It was made after Faraday's heart stopped. No bleeding that I could see."

"What's the incision for?" Buck asked.

"I don't know," Nathan replied. "I think it was intentionally hidden by the lead."

"What's in that area?"

"That's just it," Nathan said, sounding perplexed. "There's nothing in that area requiring an incision like that. Especially after he's dead."

Chris looked around. "Maybe . . ." he stopped. "Are there x-rays around here? Other than those?" He pointed to the light boxes on the wall that held film of a skull – probably Faraday's.

"I'll look around," Buck said, turning away.

Chris turned back to the body. "Let's look inside, Nate."

Nathan only hesitated a moment. "Okay." He carefully removed the sticky pad and leaned in. "Honey, can you redirect the light?"

Raine reached up and moved the light as her husband ran a finger over the cut. "It feels thick, Chris, like a scar. I think it's been cut before. He carefully inserted his fingertip. It's not very deep. There's a pocket just over the rib where the muscle's loosened from the bone. No sign of anything there. Maybe something was cut out?"

Chris stared at the spot, the sound of Buck searching drawers and cabinets echoing in the sterile room. *Cut out?* He thought. *Removed...*

They found no other film. They did find files in the little office that showed the former appearances of Faraday. From the photos mixed in with the surgical notes it looked like Greg Hafner was at least two other people before Jesse Faraday.

"I have to admit, Griffin is a damned good plastic surgeon," Raine said when she saw the photos. Chris had to agree. In all the photos, Faraday was unrecognizable - completely different in appearance - except for the eyes; even with colored contacts and altered brow ridges, the eyes marked the man.

"Can't change the intensity there," Josiah said, pointing at the eyes that stared back from the past. "Makes the argument about a man's eyes being windows to the soul."

With the surgical crew secured in the back of three different patrol cars, the rest of the team had returned to search the offices. They had hardly started when Orrin Travis arrived and stopped them.

"Go home, Chris," he ordered. "You know as well as I do that both of us have a lot of dancing around to explain our presence here without a warrant."

"He's hiding something, Orrin." Chris couldn't justify any more investigation, either. "Can we get him for murder?"

Travis pointed to the door where Buck and the others reluctantly exited. "I'll do my best, you know that, but I think you should be glad that you achieved your goal. Vin is safe now that Faraday is gone. Now get some rest. I'll call you when I need you."



Suddenly drained, Chris felt more than weary. Every ache and injury he'd accumulated in the past few days surged to the forefront, which made descending the stairs a painful journey. Buck met him just outside where the night was painted red, white and blue by the lights of the squad cars. The area teemed with activity and radio chatter. Chris noticed three of the marked vehicles guarded by an abundant amount of uniforms.

“Captain Niley ain't takin' any chances,” Buck said with humor. “He's got the men watchin' each other as well as the prisoners, and he's watchin' them.” He pointed out the familiar form leaning against his unmarked car, arms crossed across his chest. “He said his next job is finding the dirty ones in the Department. He's pretty pissed havin' all that goin' on under his nose.”

Chris chuffed. Something about that idea bothered him, but he mentally waved it off and gave in to his tiredness. He blew out a breath and clapped his friend on the shoulder. “Let's get our boys and go home.”

Buck grinned. “Now *that* is a great idea!”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The minutes before dawn were the most peaceful moments Chris could ever remember. He blinked silently awake in a familiar room tinted with comforting grey-gold hues that announced the sun's intention to show itself. As he lay quietly with the warm huddle of Vin curled against his side, the room slowly brightened and birds awakened. Each one of Vin's slow, even breaths added to the deep and total contentment he felt.

A faint, smoky tinge from the burnt barn still lingered, but it only served to remind Chris that everybody was safe. Only Nathan and Raine hadn't returned to the ranch when they departed Griffin's office. After collecting the others from the reservation, family and the rest of the team sprawled around the house in well-deserved rest.

Chris grinned as he absently stroked Vin's hair, wondering if anybody ended up in Vin's upper bunk; the idea of Josiah or Ezra climbing the narrow ladder to nestle into the narrow twin bed lent to an amusing picture. The office couch was probably the likely resting spot for one of them, along with JD's lower bunk. JD, no doubt, snuggled in with Buck the same way Vin did here. Claire and Matthew slept in the guest room.

Dawn arrived in golden glory. Chris drifted in and out of awareness as he relaxed, finally roused into alertness when Vin awoke. First, Vin's eyes blinked slowly and then he nestled closer with a deep sigh. His small arm reached across

Chris' chest as Chris continued to comb his boy's hair with his fingers. Cat was lovingly crushed to Vin's chest with his other arm.

After a few minutes, Vin raised his chin and met Chris' eyes.

"Mornin'," Chris whispered.

"Mornin'." Vin's voice sounded gravelly with sleep.

Their greeting aroused the dog that had been sleeping next to the bed. Ringo rested his muzzle on the edge of the bed, his body undulating from his wagging tail.

Vin reached over and scratched behind one fuzzy ear. "I think he missed us."

"I'm sure he did. I don't think Yosemite plays with him like you do."

Vin giggled, which increased Ringo's wiggles. The dog licked happily at Vin's wrist, his pink tongue quick and darting. Vin giggled some more and teased the dog's ears, dodging the searching nose. Ringo's playfulness surged and he jumped onto the bed, pouncing on the boy with a busy tongue.

"Hey, now!" Chris said, laughing and sitting up. "See what you did?"

Vin had little luck fending off the wet attack on his face. "Help me!" he begged, laughing.

Chris slipped off the bed, grinning, and pulled on his robe. "Oh, no, you don't. You started it. I'm not getting involved."

The play war continued as Chris visited the bathroom and generally woke up. When he put his hand on the bedroom door's knob, though, Ringo abandoned his lick-fest and bounded off the bed, nosing his way out of the room when Chris cracked the door open.

Vin sat up with Cat hugged to his chest, and wiped his face with a pajama sleeve. "Yuck!"

Chris chuckled and shook his head as he left the room. As he shuffled to the kitchen, he barely glanced at the blood smear on the hallway wall and the remaining yellow "Crime Scene" tape that drooped to the floor in the great room.

It was behind them now, all of it, he told himself. He'd hoped to feel more unencumbered with the case closed, but, for some unknown reason, it didn't quite feel over.

By the time Chris got the coffee started, Ringo was joined by Elvis. Chris let them both outside before heading back to his room to get dressed. He heard the

horses' whinnies, demanding to be fed, then met Vin in the hall. He held his clothes and whispered, "Unca Ezra's in JD's bed."

Chris smiled and leaned over, keeping his voice low. "And I bet Uncle Josiah's in the den. Let's feed the horses and let 'em rest." Then, judging by the noises he heard in Buck's room, he realized that JD was awake. Chris herded Vin into his room where they dressed. By the time they were ready to go outside, JD, still in his pajamas, was looking around the great room with wide eyes.

"Hi Chris, hi Vin! Cool yellow ribbon! Is it okay to watch TV? Where's the remote? You feeding the horses? Where's Uncle Josiah? Can I have some cereal?"

Buck dragged into the great room from the hallway, scrubbing his stubbled chin, his eyelids flagging. "Coffee?" he croaked.

"Nearly done. We're feedin' the horses."

Buck waved Chris away, nodding and smacking his lips. When JD's chatter turned on him, Buck seemed to perk up.

Outside, the smell of the burned barn was heavier. Chris didn't recall noticing it when they came home last night, but now it seemed to be everywhere. He paused at the bottom of the stairs, his gaze sweeping over the black pile of destruction. The turnout corral was intact, and the horses lined the fence with their ears pricked in his direction.

Vin's warm hand slipped into his and squeezed. When Chris looked at him, Vin regarded him with worried eyes. Chris smiled and returned the hand squeeze.

"I see Yosemite stacked some hay by the corral," he said. "How about you check the water trough while I break open a bale?"

Vin visibly relaxed and then nodded. The initial anger Chris felt at the sight of his burned barn disappeared. They were all safe, and that's what mattered. The dogs ran to them as they walked to the corral and cavorted around them, nipping and yipping as they played.

Completing the simple chore did a lot for Chris' peace of mind and he suspected the same for Vin as he watched his son interact with the animals. Chris was satisfied that their life was returning to normal.

If only the tiny flicker of unease that hovered in the back of his mind would go away.

Once Ezra was forced awake, the morning progressed through a boisterous breakfast and a busy round of cleaning house to clear away the “crime scene” appearance of the interior. Ezra, JD and Claire made a store run that culminated as a substantial lunch spread for the crew. By early afternoon, those that weren’t in front of the television watching football or in the kitchen adding ingredients to the aromatic, slow cooking stew, settled on the porch to watch the boys play with the dogs and talk to the horses.

Chris, with Ezra next to him, propped his feet on the railing, leaned back in his chair with a sigh and rolled a cold beer bottle between his hands. The two of them simply enjoyed the peace and feeling of normalcy.

Ezra eventually broke the quiet, his eyes focused on the boys as he spoke. “I realize you have not had the time to consider the situation, but may I ask if your plans regarding Vin have changed?”

Chris took a moment to recall the plans made before the recent fiasco. His eyes narrowed as he sipped his beer. “Guess not. I’m not sure about the timing, though. Vin needs things to get back to normal.”

“What is ‘normal’, exactly? School?”

“The routine would be a good thing, according to Dr. Will. We still have to come up with some way to thank Kojay and his people and rebuild the barn, so scheduled routine would help him settle in. He carries too much on his shoulders, Ezra. He needs to be a boy.”

Ezra nodded and stretched his legs out in front of him, looking like a picture of contentment. It made Chris remember how long it had taken for the man to trust the team enough to simply relax around them; Vin, though, still needed some time.

“You still willin’ to tutor Vin?” Chris asked. “You’ve helped him a lot, you know. I want to thank you for that.”

Ezra smiled and tipped his head enough for Chris to see his sparkling eyes. “You are very welcome. I enjoy our time together as well. Are you going to reschedule Vin’s placement testing? What about summer school?”

A dry chuckle escaped Chris’ throat as he returned his gaze to the playing boys. Peso had poked his head between the rails and Vin stroked his horse’s nose

as he fed him dandelions. The animal actually looked happy. “Well,” Chris started. “I’m thinkin’ he’s gonna be too busy helpin’ us build a barn.”

“I must agree with your evaluation,” Ezra answered. “I believe we can all use the bonding experience.”

Their conversation was cut short when Claire brought the phone out and handed it to Chris. “It’s Nathan, dear.”

“Thanks, mom.” Chris put the receiver to his ear. “Nathan?”

Vin gave Peso a final pat and raced JD and the dogs back to the porch. While JD played with the dogs, Vin sat on the porch stairs near Chris’ feet, close enough to overhear Chris’ end of the conversation.

Nathan was telling him about the autopsy results. Chris’ attention was divided between Nathan and Vin, not sure he wanted his son to hear any of this. He was thankful when a Gameboy magically appeared from Ezra’s coat pocket, and drew Vin’s attention to the device.

Chris, in turn, gave his attention to Nathan. “The M.E. came up blank on that incision over Faraday’s ribs. He said the same thing I did, that it had old scarring on the outside and that maybe something was removed. There was some scarring on the inside, too. Maybe whatever it was grew back and they removed it again; that would explain the scar.”

Nathan’s report renewed Chris’ unease. Both Faraday and Griffin were masters at hiding things. Was this just another way to hide something? But what? What was it that Griffin risked so much to retrieve, if something was, in fact, there?

As he thought, Chris watched Ezra reached into his pocket and produce a small, square item that Chris recognized as a Gameboy game cartridge. He watched Vin pull out an old game cartridge from the Gameboy and replace it with Ezra’s offering. Realization struck like lightning.

*That’s it!*

Chris shot to his feet, causing Vin to jump and Ezra to reach for his hidden weapon. The Gameboy cluttered to the deck.

“Nathan,” he barked. “Listen to me. Get to the M.E.’s office now. I want that incision area thoroughly examined and documented. Measure it, scan it, M.R.I. and x-ray the area. I’m calling Orrin and Bob.”

Stunned, it took Nathan a few seconds to catch up. “What are we lookin’ for Chris?”

Ezra pulled Vin in his lap and wrapped his arms protectively around the boy, and they both stared at Chris. Vin seemed shaken, but Ezra’s face had gone unreadable and blank. His stare, though, was piercing, demanding a reason for upsetting Vin.

“A chip. I think Faraday’s records could be on a computer chip and Griffin removed it.”

Chris held Ezra’s stare and saw realization melt away any guardedness.

“I’m on it,” Nathan said, hanging up.

Chris dropped the phone on the chair and rubbed his face. “That’s it. That’s the thing that’s been bothering me all along. Why would Griffin kill Faraday after all this time?”

“Faraday became a liability at some point,” Ezra said. “But I have to ask how you came up with the idea of a computer chip implanted in Jesse Faraday’s chest?”

Chris grinned lopsidedly and reached down to retrieve Vin. He held the boy close. “The Gameboy cartridge reminded me of something I saw on television once.”

Ezra’s nose wrinkled with distaste. “I find it difficult to find anything redeeming about television programming,” he said. “Your scenario, however, would explain why we never found anything at Mr. Faraday’s home or in Dr. Griffin’s office. And it fits the paranoid profile. He would always have it with him. There is no safer place. But where is this supposed chip now? Our arrival on scene left no time to secure it away and Dr. Griffin did not appear to be extremely concerned about us finding anything.”

Chris’ grin turned feral. “I’m bettin’ it’s inside Griffin.”

Ezra’s eyes widened. “He swallowed it? It will be nearly impossible to get a warrant for that extraction, Mr. Larabee!”

“All we need is some time,” Chris said, looking to Vin. The puzzled expression on his boy’s face slowly changed to one of astonishment.

“Ewww!” Vin squealed.

“I agree, Cowboy.”

Ezra's face looked pained. "Dare I ask what lucky constable will be tasked with . . ."

"Poop patrol?" Chris asked. Vin giggled. "I think that will be Bob Niley's call but we'd better get things in place now before we lose the evidence."

As the trio started into the house, Ezra muttered something about the plethora of jokes and comments that he would be forced to endure as the rest of the team bandied about the possibilities.

JD, noticing the withdrawal into the house charged up the steps, passed them and flew right into Buck.

"Oooph!" Buck grunted before lifting JD up. "What's the hurry, Lil' Bit?"

Before the boy could answer, Chris briefed Buck on his suspicions. Buck laughed and JD screwed his face up in disgust. "It's like when Elvis ate my quarter!" Everyone laughed, and then Chris dispatched Ezra and Josiah to question Dr. Griffin about the possibility, and, hopefully, close their part in this case.

Nothing would please Larabee more than to put the last two years of misery behind them. He dropped on the couch and pulled Vin next to him, resting an arm across his boy's narrow shoulders and simply absorbed the atmosphere and companionship. The downtime helped ease the most painful sores, both physical and emotional

The rest of his family milled around them, doing routine and mundane things. Buck tried to talk JD into cleaning his room, Josiah and Ezra were preparing to depart and Claire hummed softly as she worked in the kitchen.

Matthew entered the great room, sat next to Vin and started to put on his tennis shoes. Chris saw his father give them a sideways glance as the tied the laces to his shoes. "Things are going to be kinda boring now, aren't they?"

Chris smiled and pulled Vin closer. He looked down into those bottomless blue eyes and felt completely and totally satisfied.

"We'd like nothing better," he said.

Matthew's expression turned serious and he faced Chris. "I know how you are, son. It's difficult for you to let things go, let others take up the reins, so to speak. Are you going to be all right with another agency doing the follow up on Griffin? Is this really over for you?"



Chris pursed his lips and tilted his head in thought as he considered his father's concern. Time and events had altered the granite in his soul; the hard line didn't seem so important anymore. As Chris noted the smattering of bruises, cuts and open sores on his body and then looked down to the sweet face of his son, he knew he was done with it. His family was intact and safe. His second chance had turned into a third chance, and he wasn't going to take any of this lightly. His priorities were forever shuffled and he was looking at the blue-eyed top of his list.

"Yeah," he said slowly, a corner of his mouth shifting into a satisfied grin. "I'm definitely done. My only priority now is sittin' right here and needin' a haircut."

Vin then gifted his dad with a real smile, the first in a long time, and Chris knew that, for now, life was good and he intended to revel in every trivial, boring and mundane moment that it entailed, and be forever grateful.

## EPILOGUE

The summer passed. The unconventional family bonded over barn raising, barbecues and trail rides. Sundays brought everyone together and usually involved touch football and general companionship. The group expanded their carpentry skills by repairing and updating many of the Reservation buildings. They were all invited to use the sweat lodge, but Josiah was the only one to take Kojay up on the offer.

The fact that Chris was correct regarding the computer chip being inside Griffin was the focus of many conversations. Most ended with a shake of the head and musings about Chris' near mystical abstract thinking. Chris finally made it clear one day to Nathan that there wasn't anything mystical about it.

"You really did see it on a television show?" Nathan asked, cornering his boss one day when he was finally released from Raine's watchful eye and was allowed to hobble around on crutches at the first of many gatherings. "What show?"

Chris hesitated for a moment before ducking his head and saying, "24."

Nathan stared at Chris for a moment before laughing. "I'd never peg you for a Jack Bauer fan!"

"I'm not. I just happened to see a few episodes."

"Don't worry, your secret's safe with me."

"It's not a secret! I'm not a fan!"

“Sure, sure.” Nathan turned to go but couldn’t resist a parting shot. “Not a surprise, really. Always thought they modeled that character after you.”

From that point, the summer conversations shifted to possible Chris Larabee inspired plotlines for television. So much for Nathan’s secret-keeping. Nathan healed, and by the fall, did not need a cane. The limp was practically gone by the time the air turned cool.

After the new barn was finished, Chris and Vin fulfilled their promises to each other and completed surgeries that erased Chris’ scar and repaired Vin’s arm; Vin’s cast would be off by the time school started and the constant ache in his elbow that he’d experienced for so long, disappeared.

Josiah’s main project of clearing the Reservation of the crashed helicopter was completed, and, surprisingly, his buddy Rich allowed him to fly the Huey that hauled away the largest portion of the wreck. Josiah asked if the boys wanted to ride along. Buck took pictures, knowing JD could use them for a future school report. JD was visible, waving from the windows in most of the photos. Vin chose a pass on that particular offer.

Buck and JD remained Buck and JD, their easy relationship becoming the touchstone for the family’s well-being. Their lighthearted attitudes lifted spirits and allowed hearts to heal and fears to abate. There were all the normal growing pains of learning to be a family again, and the boisterous, jolly pair was the heart of it.

Matthew and Claire stayed the entire summer and by the time fall showed its colors, they were satisfied that their “kids” were going to be just fine and Claire handed the housekeeping baton back over to Mrs. Potter. The only thing that made their parting bearable to the boys was the promise that they would be back for Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Today, Ezra had the duty to escort Vin to his placement testing exam while Chris made one of his rare appearances at the office to prepare for his full-time return. Both Ezra and Claire had tutored Vin all summer, and Ezra was pleased to report to Chris that not only did Vin pass all subjects in his grade level; he scored in the top 25% of the class. He handed the written results over to his boss. The papers also contained the boys’ schedules and teachers for the upcoming school year.

Vin and Josiah hovered over something on Nathan's computer screen while Ezra briefed Chris on the school papers in Chris' office.

"Vin scored well, but, as you know, he still has to keep constant vigil on his dyslexia," Ezra said. "The school is aware of this, and Vin has been assigned a counselor to ensure that he stays on track. She will oversee his progress and ensure he receives all the help he needs."

"She must be a new hire. I don't recognize the name."

"Yes, she is newly acquired, but very qualified."

Chris glanced up at Ezra and smirked. "So, you've already checked her out."

"Thoroughly. Charlotte Richmond will be a good match for Vin."

Chris nodded and shuffled the papers again before dropping them on the desk and leaning back in his chair to stretch his arms. "There's a new school director, too, I see."

"Yes. I have not had the pleasure of meeting her. There is an informal gathering planned to introduce her to the parents. I informed them you would attend. The date is in the paperwork."

Chris chuckled. "I saw it. Sure is nice having a social secretary taking care of these details for me."

"I am not, or ever will be, anybody's secretary, and especially not yours, Mr. Larabee. I already have too many opportunities to solicit your wrath." Ezra replied lightly as he turned to go.

"Did you check her out, too?"

"The new director? No, I have not had the time to do a thorough background check. On paper, she appears to be well qualified."

Chris picked up the top paper. "Ella Gaines," he read aloud.

"Yes." As he walked out, Ezra added, "We can only hope she will be as good an influence as the past director."

After Ezra's departure, Chris leaned back again and turned his attention to Vin. His son had come a long way in a few short weeks. The tentative, scared child was gone, replaced with the boy he remembered. That alone was an amazing feat, considering the roller-coaster ride of events they had been through. Their connection, again strong and soothing, filled the empty spot he'd had for so long.

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Chris realized he was content, and contentment was more than he ever expected and surely more than he ever deserved.

A family ripped apart was a family reborn.

For the first time in many years, Chris Larabee felt blessed.

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