

7 X 5 X 15: BOOK ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Fall announced its impending arrival with subtle shifts in scent. Chris Larabee hadn't noticed this before and only became aware of the phenomenon when he saw his son turn his face to the wind and close his eyes, tilting his chin just enough so the dry breeze could fully engage his nose. As Vin sniffed, a corner of Chris' mouth twitched with humor because the boy reminded him so much of their dogs on the hunt. Chris stopped shoveling and leaned on the worn wooden handle to take in both sight and smell.

Vin sat astride Peso's bare back, stopped in the center of the tawny grass field that sloped from the turn-out corral to the edge of the woods. The horse's long face also turned into the wind and his shiny mane rippled like breeze-tickled satin. The long, black tail flared and twisted among the golden stalks in an intricate pattern. Struck by the beauty of the pose gilded in late afternoon gold, Chris paused. Time slowed and the awe of the gift bestowed on him made his heart skip.

Chris' grin faltered, though, when he noticed Vin's relaxed expression turn to one of concern as his forehead furrowed. As if mentally connected, Peso bobbed his head and shifted, signaling his readiness to move.

"Vin?" Chris called, hefting the shovel into his calloused hand as he stepped toward the paddock fence. His son's eyes snapped open and Vin searched the paddocks until his gaze found Chris'. Then he smiled and urged Peso forward. The shiny black swiveled his ears to Vin's voice and broke into a gentle jog. Chris crawled between the paddock rails, parked the shovel against the barn and took Peso's reins when they met. "Everything okay?"

Vin slid easily from the horse's back and he claimed the reins with a sigh. "Yeah." He fiddled with reins for a few seconds before looking up to meet Chris' eyes. "It's just . . . school starts soon."

"Next week," Chris confirmed. "It's been a busy summer, huh?"

Vin nodded then dipped his head. Peso shoved him in the back with a blaze-

tipped nose. "Hey!" Vin yelped, barely catching his balance before giving his horse a disapproving glare.

Chris chuckled as he followed the pair into the barn and mentally listed the things they accomplished during the summer: Raised a barn, repaired Vin's previously broken arm, reduced Chris' facial scar which rejoined his left eyebrow, threw a huge thank-you barbecue for their neighbors on the reservation and generally tightened the family bond. "And now it's on to the next big adventure," he summed up aloud.

Vin scowled as he turned Peso loose in his stall. After latching the door, the 10-year-old faced Chris as he coiled the reins and readied the bridle for the tack room rack. His mouth opened as if to speak, but he sighed instead and headed to the tack room. Chris heard him mutter something as he walked away.

It was obvious that Vin wasn't too excited about school. What Chris wasn't sure about was if it was the classes he was dreading or the separation from the ranch and, specifically, his dad. With Dr. Will's help, the separation anxiety that plagued both of them since Vin's return had lessened but had not abated entirely. They both knew painfully well that it was a work in progress. As for school work, Vin was at, or slightly above, grade level for the first time in his life so maybe there was an expectation of pressure to keep it that way. No, stress wasn't a stranger around the Larabee household.

Chris leaned against the frame of the barn door and waited for Vin to come out of the tack room. In the next seven days prior to the start of formal classes, both Buck and Chris planned to introduce the boys to the new school director, Mrs. Gaines, their teachers and Vin's counselor. Orientation on the new campus was tomorrow evening. Chris wondered if they should have taken more initiative and started connecting Vin to the school earlier via summer school. The summer had been so freewheeling and busy. . .

He smiled in retrospect. Nope, he didn't regret taking the time off to be with Vin and JD, not for a moment. "I know how ya feel, Pard. I start work too, you know."

Vin looked up and rolled his eyes. "Work's a lot more fun than school. Uncle Ezra's there, an' Uncle Nathan an' Uncle Josiah."

"You'll have friends at school, too, Vin. The class lists should be posted tomorrow. We'll take a look."

"I've only seen JD's friends this summer," Vin said softly as he toed a hole in the dirt. "I'm gonna be in my own class this time."

Chris reached down and combed back Vin's hair with his fingers as he spoke. "I know," he said softly. "It's going to be different but you'll do just fine. Your school councilor will help you as much as she can so don't be afraid to talk to her, okay? We'll be meeting her tomorrow, too."

Vin nodded and took Chris' hand. When they left the new-wood and earthy smells of the barn and headed up the slope to the house, Chris noticed Vin turn his face into the wind and take a deep breath.

"What do you smell?"

"Change," Vin replied. "Summer's over."

Chris squeezed Vin's hand and smiled down at his boy. "Yeah, it is, but Fall means Halloween's just around the corner. Just think of all that candy."

Trepidation evaporated with Vin's huge smile.



The school grounds had changed. Vin knew about the adjacent campus built in the last year because Chris had driven him by the location many times during the summer. He and JD were starting their middle school track in newly constructed buildings with a staff expanded from the original campus. Vaguely remembering the teachers from the elementary level, Vin wondered if they would cross paths. A shot of anxiety tingled in his gut; how should he respond?

His thoughts must have transferred through his hand because at that exact moment, Chris squeezed it and looked down to catch his eyes.

"I'm here with you, Son," he said, his voice low so the other people around wouldn't overhear. "I know you're worried, but we'll get through this, okay?"

"kay," was all Vin managed with a cotton-dry mouth.

Since school didn't start for several more days, there weren't many people on the wide steps leading through the front gates. Vin appreciated their slow gait which gave him time to scan their surroundings. Administration offices flanked the entry gates and beyond the shiny new entry, there was a grassy amphitheater with wide, arcing cement slabs for seating. He liked the openness of it and the way the rest of the buildings surrounded the area. It was like a fort. He smiled.

JD, dragging Buck in his wake, charged the gate several minutes ahead of them, excitement exploding from every pore. The class rosters posted online the previous night was enough for JD to consider the task of looking for his room some kind of treasure hunt.

"Does the 2 in Room 207 mean I'm on the top floor? Is there an el'vator? C'n I see treetops from my room?"

JD's questions started just before bedtime, continued through morning chores, breakfast, and the ride to the campus. At first, Buck answered the questions as best as he could, then resorted to "I don't know!" Now, he was just making up answers. Buck's outrageous responses helped Vin put aside his anxiousness and eke out a real smile. Upon arrival, Buck had no choice but draft in JD's wake through the school entrance. Vin and Chris followed at a more sedate

pace, stopping within the grassy central amphitheater.

They stood quietly, taking in the campus layout in a calmer fashion. Buck emerged from one of the buildings sporting a huge, dopey smile on his face that grew impossibly larger when he spotted Chris. He raised his arm and waved for them to come over. Puzzled, Vin looked up to Chris.

Chris glanced down at Vin and shrugged. "Gotta start somewhere, I guess," he said, tipping his head in Buck's direction. He gave Vin's hand a reassuring squeeze. "Okay?"

Vin nodded and allowed Chris to lead him toward Buck, who stood at the open door of a large room labeled "Multi-Purpose Room". Vin could see people of all sizes moving around inside. Not wanting to be seen holding hands with his dad, Vin pulled free. Chris looked down as if to ask a question, but Buck sidlined him by talking first.

"You ain't gonna believe this, Chris," he said, chuckling and shaking his head. A suspicious frown creased Chris' forehead and Vin's heart rate jumped.

"What?" Chris asked, suspicious.

Buck, still chuckling, he said, "You'll never guess . . ." He grabbed Chris' shoulder and pushed him toward the open door. "I can't . . . well, just look at who JD's talkin' to."

Buck rested his hand between Chris' shoulder blades when he paused to scan the crowded room from the threshold. Buck gently pushed him through the doorway, keeping constant pressure on his back to prevent him from backing out of the room. Vin, on the other side of Chris, pressed close and tried to find JD among the clusters of bodies.

The room was far from full and most of the people were to one side, fanned around a single woman; Vin could only see the bottom edge of her dark, knee length skirt, her bare calves, and high heels. Between various hips and legs, Vin caught a glimpse of JD standing right next to her, looking up with an awed expression on his face. Not reading any fear in his brother's aura, Vin relaxed a little but immediately tensed again when he heard Chris say, "Well I'll be damned."

"I know! Can you believe it?" Buck said with a laugh.

Vin couldn't pin the emotion attached to his dad's statement. He looked up and traced Chris' line of sight to the woman with JD. Starting at what he could see of her knees, Vin followed her outline upward as the crowd shifted, pausing whenever his view was blocked. The woman's skirt was form-fitting and the shifting crowd revealed patches of a royal blue blouse made of a shiny material, and eventually Vin caught sight a V-neckline and a pendant on a chain.

"Ella Lancaster."

Chris' statement pulled Vin's attention to the interaction between his dad and Buck.

"She still looks great, doesn't she?" Buck nudged Chris with an elbow.

"Yeah, she does."

Chris sounded a bit dazed so, curious, Vin turned back to the woman just as the milling bodies let him see her face.

Vin's first thought was that she had a lot of teeth. Her broad smile, framed by lips the color of dried blood, did little to soften the sharp angles of her jaw. Her eyebrows arched like spider legs and the groove in her chin was disturbing. What caught his attention above all was the way her dark eyes fixed on whom she spoke with, giving Vin the impression of a stalking cat. Then her gaze turned their direction and settled on something just above Vin's head. Her smile widened. Vin glanced up and saw that the target of her focus was Chris.

Vin's hands turned clammy. He wiped them on his jeans, the action putting him a step behind his dad as he walked toward her.

"Christopher Larabee!" The woman gushed when he was a few feet away.

She held out a hand and Chris took it in a firm grip, which she covered with her other hand. Chris' free hand cupped her elbow when he came to a stop well within what Vin considered personal space. He tucked in close to his dad, partially behind one of his legs and tore his stare from her face to JD, who practically stood on her feet as he looked up at the pair.

"You know Chris, too?" JD asked. "Where do you live? How come we've never seen you before?"

"Well, JD," the woman said, hesitating a moment before turning her attention from Chris to the boy. "I just moved here from Atlanta a little over a month ago."

"Atlanta? Uncle Ezra's from Atlanta. You know him, too?"

"No, I don't, but I'd like to meet him sometime."

JD opened his mouth for what Vin knew would be an endless string of questions, but before he could start, Buck elbowed through the crowd and scooped him up.

"Okay, JD, Mrs. Gaines is a little busy at the moment so we need to let her talk to some other folks. Sorry, Ella."

She laughed, the sound causing icy fingers to walk up Vin's spine. Then she looked down to Vin and he saw an edge of frost on her gaze. "And this must be Vincent?"

"Vin," he automatically corrected, unable to tear his eyes away from her focus.

"Vin," she said slowly. The smile held no warmth. "It's nice to meet you." She held out her hand but Vin didn't move to shake it.

"Vin?" Chris said, his tone making it an order instead of a question. He nudged Vin with his knee.

Reluctantly, Vin reached out and shook her cold fingers. "Hi," was all he could muster from his dry mouth.

"I am your new school Director, Vin. It's an exciting, fresh start for both of us."

Vin couldn't reply. The nod he managed came only when Chris gently squeezed his shoulder. Suddenly, the air vanished from his lungs and the press of the crowd was too much.

"Well, you look a little busy, Ella, so we won't keep you. We still need to meet Vin's teacher."

"Of course." She shook his hand again and looked solely at Chris when she spoke. "Mrs. Koske's in room 114. Nice to meet you, Vin. I'll see you around campus, okay?" They turned to go. "Chris?"

Chris paused and looked back at her. "Yes?"

"Mrs. Koske's orientation will take about 10 minutes with the parents, and then she prefers to talk to the kids only. Stop by my office if you have a chance so we can talk about Vin's schedule?"

"Sure," Chris replied with a grin. Then his dad's hands on his shoulders guided Vin as they followed Buck outside. Once in the hallway, Buck, laughing, dropped JD from his hip and leaned toward Chris, whispering. JD hopped over to Vin while chattering about his classroom.

Vin didn't hear him. Instead, he stared back into the multi-purpose room. There was a lingering new construction smell in the air; between that and the unsettled feelings the Director invoked, Vin's stomach churned. He couldn't pin a label on how she made him feel, Bucks' and Chris' obvious affection confusing things for him, but what he did feel was off-setting enough for him to hope he didn't see her too often.

Then he looked up to Chris and Buck talking softly and got an odd sense that he was far from free of Mrs. Gaines.

CHAPTER TWO

Mrs. Koske was a bright, engaging woman with short, blonde hair and an overall approachable demeanor that felt right to Chris. He looked down, a little concerned when he saw the return of Vin's "empty face," which was devoid of any emotion. At least he wasn't obviously scared; he wondered if Vin felt less threatened better because the other 20-odd kids looked just as nervous as Vin probably felt. Chris looked back at the teacher and focused on the points she went over, glad for the print out of what she said resting on Vin's desk. He made an effort to relax so Vin would follow suit, and found that his thoughts landed on memories of Ella.

"Come on, Chris," she moaned in his ear. "No one's around. We're all alone." He could feel every curve of her body as he pressed it against him, breasts against his chest and thigh between his legs rubbing the fabric of the crotch of his jeans. He was hard and aching by the time her sentence ended.

With a raspy chuckle, Ella Lancaster backed off and grabbed his hand. When she spun around to drag him toward the empty bleachers, her pleated cheerleader skirt flew up and he saw the snug, red underwear beneath. Her long, shapely legs, bare from hip to ankle, glistened in the field lights as she moved and her breasts bobbed in unison under the snug sweater bearing their school's logo.

Giggling seductively, she pulled him around the side and into the close, dark space under the bleachers. The field lights cut to parallel streaks of gold, one line falling across her heated eyes. The urge was too much, and Chris pulled her in, one hand running up under her sweater as the other tightened on one firm buttock. His fingers slipped under the edge of the snug panties, finding her already wet and ready. One quick twist of his fingers released her bra and she gasped, throwing her head back with heated passion. Waves of dark hair cascaded down her back, shining red and gold where the lines of light struck.

Cupping her breast and pinching her hard nipple between his fingers, he felt her hand clutch

his ass as she pushed his jeans down, then was immediately lost in lust when she firmly took him in her hand, guiding him into her waiting need.

"Dad?" Vin's voice jerked Chris into the now and he looked over to meet a questioning expression. Around him, chairs scraped the floor as parents stood.

His heart still pounding a bit, Chris blinked away his distraction before pushing to his feet. "Um," he breathed before turning to Vin. He could see wariness in those big, blue eyes and forced his thoughts to align with what was appropriate at the moment. It looked like he was supposed to leave the room since there was a line of parents departing. "You okay if I leave for a few minutes? I'll be right outside when you're done."

Vin chewed his lower lip as he looked around. With most of the parents already outside, Chris drew attention and he knew Vin did not like standing out in a crowd. As expected, Vin nodded. "I'll be okay," he whispered, turning away to focus on the pencil in his hand. He'd drawn several looping circles in the margin of Mrs. Koske's handout.

Chris flipped the paper over to a blank side. "There," he whispered next to Vin's ear. "Use that if you need to."

Vin gave him a troubled, sidelong smile and nodded once. Chris slid his chair under the desk and walked out, resisting the urge to look back before the door closed behind him. Once in the hallway, he examined the building, pleased that there were plenty of windows. Vin shouldn't feel trapped, he knew, but this was a whole new situation.

With that very thought in mind, he strode toward the Administration wing to figure his part in all this. He didn't like the sudden, out-of-sorts way he felt and figured that Ella's familiar presence might be a good thing for him. He snorted and ducked his head with that idea when he felt an immediate flush heat his face. Yeah, figuring Ella's place in all this was a new kind of distraction he did not need.

Did he?



"I've seen Vin's files and I have found the perfect fit for both the school and Vin."

Ella sat behind the huge, polished desk with an aura of comfortable belonging. Chris was thankful for the barrier between them. It would take a bit of time for him to figure how his ex-lover would fit in his life, and for now, he planned to keep back, read clues and find new common ground. So far, Ella exuded nothing but professionalism and he was glad for it.

"I thought I'd introduce you to her while Vin's in orientation."

He nodded from where he sat. "Sounds good."

Ella tapped the intercom on her desk. "Anita? Would you send for Mrs. Richmond?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Gaines."

Once arranged, Ella leaned back and rested her hands on her lap, studying Chris with a faint smile. Her head tipped to one side and a slight grin grew before she spoke. "Look, Chris, I know how uncomfortable all this makes you - new school, our old relationship, Vin's special needs." She met his eyes and swiveled her plush chair slightly back and forth. "I knew about you a few months ago when I first got the roster for the school. I've had time to come to terms with, well, us." She smiled, waving a hand between them without any indication of discomfort. "I am a professional and that's our relationship. Vin's needs come first."

"I appreciate that, Ella," Chris replied, relieved. "This is a bit much. I think the professional way is best, too." Then he gave her a weak smile. "So you knew I was here?"

"Yeah." Her eyes shined and she smiled affectionately. "I'm not lying when I say I was a little shocked. It took me a few days to sort out my feelings. Fresh start, okay? No promises from either of us. We've both had some difficult times."

Chris snorted. "You could say that, yeah."

"So, from the beginning, then." She clasped her hands on the desk and leaned forward. "I did a lot of research on Vin's current needs. It wasn't easy, you know, with such a unique history." She patted a file set to one side.

"I can imagine. It has been a difficult year, but I think we've both turned a corner."

Someone knocked once at the open door and Chris rose as an attractive brunette entered Ella's office. Even though she smiled, Chris noticed that it didn't seem to reach her eyes.

"Charlotte, this is Chris Larabee, Vincent Tanner's father."

"Yes, of course." She reached over and shook Chris' hand in an awkward way, then took the chair next to Chris as Ella directed with a wave of her hand. "Nice to meet you."

"You, too," Chris replied, taking his seat.

"Yes, well, let's talk about Vin, shall we?" Ella flipped open the file and looked up. "He prefers to be called Vin, correct?"

"Yes, he does."

"I noticed that he tested well," Mrs. Richmond started. "We're lucky to have his records from the elementary level. There's quite an improvement; not what I would have expected under the circumstances." She held Chris eyes. Chris did not see any emotion and he wasn't sure how to take that.

"It was a bad situation with some positive aspects. It's complicated, but in essence, he's had some good tutors in the past three years," he said.

The look she gave him before turning to face Ella was one big question Chris was relieved she didn't ask.

"So he has a current tutor, then?" Ella jotted notes.

"Yes. He can stay on as needed."

"He'?" Mrs. Richmond inquired.

Chris hesitated, noting her curious tone. Or was it surprise? He was having a difficult time reading the counselor and assumed that the distraction of Ella was probably the reason. "Um, yes. One of my agents. Vin trusts him. I trust him." He met the counselor's eyes again and held her evaluating stare.

Mrs. Richmond pursed her lips and ducked her head a moment, considering. Then she clasped her hands in her lap and looked back at Chris. "Mr. Larabee, Mrs. Gaines has supplied me with a lot of records regarding Vin. She's taken quite an interest in his well-being and honestly, I can see why. Normally, the function of a school counselor is purely educational. That is, singularly focused on a student's educational goals. In Vin's case, however, there are other concerns that cannot be ignored."

Chris felt an uncomfortable prickle in his gut whenever any discussion angled in the direction of his - or Vin's - personal life. As Dr. Will pointed out many times before, Chris' protection mode was strong and predictable.

"I know you can't be comfortable with this discussion," she continued, "but now is the best time to tackle it so Vin finishes middle and enters high school on an even keel, emotionally. Higher levels of education are difficult anyway. In my opinion, working on the separation anxiety I imagine you both struggle with now is better than later or, worse yet, left unresolved."

He managed to hear her words through the rising wall in his head, recognizing the same ring of Dr. Will's words. Shifting stiffly, he managed to say, "Are you qualified to talk about trust issues, Mrs. Richmond?" His tone held a little frost.

"Yes, I am, Mr. Larabee."

Ella interrupted by clearing her throat to get Chris' attention. "I assure you, Chris, Charlotte Richmond is very qualified. We're lucky to have her here."

Mrs. Richmond continued. "Specifically, I have concerns regarding Vin's relationship with female figures. Just look at his history from an outsider's point of view, Mr. Larabee. I know it's hard, but try. His mother 'left' early on, the woman involved in his abduction . . ."

"That was mostly a positive part of the abduction," Chris ground out.

"Perhaps. Still, she was a drug addict and he was under extreme and unusual conditions."

"Where did you get this information?" Chris snapped. "Those files are sealed."

She smiled in an irritating way. "Newspapers, Mr. Larabee. Public record. I know the news isn't exactly accurate in details, but that part is true, correct? The woman was an addict?"

"Yes," Chris growled.

"Chris," Ella interjected softly. "We're all here to help your boy."

Chris took a deep breath and looked to Ella. Her smile enabled him to back off mentally and regroup. Dr. Will was right; separation anxiety issues manifested in unexpected places. Still, this Richmond woman rubbed him the wrong way.

"Look," Mrs. Richmond started again. "Your team is all men. His tutor, a man." Her face was all business. "At this point, he needs a positive female figure. His teachers from this point on are a mixed bag of male and female. Mrs. Gaines knows my credentials and background. She needed a counselor for the school and felt I was the best fit for both the school and Vin because of my training with social services and children living under duress. She and I would like to try and bridge the area between education and emotional fitness with Vin."

Chris frowned. "What do you mean by that, exactly?"

"What it comes down to is that I will simply be paying closer attention to Vin. Talking with him, working closer with him, perhaps covering some of the tutoring duties - just being there for him so he learns by example how to interact with adults that are not men. In essence, round out him out as a person as well as a student."

"I see," Chris mused, the defiant walls of distrust thinning a little. "So, you would be pulling him out of class more than others? Won't that become a teasing point for some of the other students?" Specifically, he thought of Eli Joe and Freddy Chaney, Vin's past school nemeses.

"Not exactly. I will be making an effort just to be around a little more. Many students have a study hall in their schedule and I will handle Vin's time slot. I will make a point of checking on him, talking with him, socializing by asking questions outside educational ones, like how he's doing at home. That's all. Mrs. Gaines and I came up with this idea because this is such a specialized circumstance."

Although he wanted to, Chris couldn't see any fault with the plan but he also realized the value of second opinions. "Well, before I sign off on anything, I'd like to discuss it with Vin and his doctor. We'll be seeing him on Friday."

"Understandable." Mrs. Richmond smiled rose to their feet. Chris slowly stood, still undecided if she was entitled to the gesture. "Give him my card." She pulled a business card from her jacket pocket and wrote something on the back. "That's my cell number on the back if he wants to contact me." She gave Chris the card and offered her hand. Chris shook it without comment. "Call me anytime, Mr. Larabee. It was nice to meet you and it will be a pleasure to work with Vin, I am sure. His past teachers give nothing but glowing reports. Bring him by my office

before you go tonight so we can meet in private."

With a tight smile and sharp nod, Chris pocketed the card. "Nice to meet you," he managed.

When she was gone from sight, Ella laughed and Chris glanced at her with a lopsided smile.

"Well, that went well." She leaned forward and said in a quieter voice. "Not." Chris shrugged, only a little embarrassed. "Look, you have to trust me, Chris. I thoroughly vetted her. You're very lucky she's here for your son." She smiled and leaned back. "Trust me?"

Chris found it difficult to keep from smiling in return. Seeing Ella again started a spark of something yet indefinable inside. Ella Lancaster was a force of nature from a long forgotten past, and a warmth of familiarity from his ill-spent youth. It felt good. It felt like starting over.

After a moment's consideration, he answered, "I trust you, Ella."



Walking back to her office, Charlotte Richmond's thoughts roiled. Mrs. Gaines was right - the man was rigid and uncompromising, and Vin would be the one to pay the price if things continued the way they were. She vowed to work with the man as much as she could, but Vin's welfare was her main concern. She would see that the boy flourish on her watch; Mrs. Gaines hired her with that purpose in mind and she knew Vin Tanner needed her.

For a moment, her heart twisted with the loss of her deceased daughter. She'd let her husband kill her daughter with the same uncompromising attitude, but she wouldn't allow it to happen to another child if she could help it.



"Hey, Stud, you look like someone kicked your dog." Buck's mustache twitched in amusement when he crossed Chris' path in the hallway on the way to the multi-purpose room. "What's up?"

"Nothin'," Chris muttered as he tried to pinpoint why he was, in fact, annoyed. "Just met Vin's counselor."

"That so?" His friend studied him for a moment and Chris had to laugh at the "dare I tread?" expression, reserved these days when it was Buck's turn to clean the bathroom. "Yeah. I'll tell you about it later. How's JD doin'?"

Buck's face immediately brightened. "That boy's got more charm than me, and that's sayin' a lot."

Chris' dark mood lifted with the thought of his unusual family, but the conversation with the counselor made him stand back and look again - Vin was

surrounded by exceptional men, that was true, but there was also Nettie, Casey and Raine in the mix. Didn't they have equal influence on Vin? Was it an additional aspect of the boy's life he hadn't considered?

"Come on, quit frettin' so much, Chris." Buck elbowed his ribs. "I c'n tell you're over thinkin' again."

Chris' glare just made Buck chuckle. He was saved from any further explanation when they reached the multi-purpose room where the noise level rose considerably. Parents, teachers and students milled around in clustered groups and clearly connected by past school experience. Chris noticed the disproportionate number of women to men. Had it always been that way?

"Hey, Da!"

Chris grinned at JD's boisterous greeting followed by his typical steam engine approach. Somehow, he managed to skid to a stop before colliding with Buck. Trailing behind with a crooked grin, Vin followed at a more sedate pace. When Chris reached out and wrapped his arm around Vin's shoulders and his son smiled up at him, he noticed that Vin much better than he did when Chris left him in his classroom.

Beside him, Buck knelt down to JD eye level. "Hey, lil' bit! What's new?"

"It's all new, Da! It still smells like a new building in my class, doesn't it Vin?"

"I'm not in your room," Vin answered, rolling his eyes.

"I know that," JD said, a little miffed. "I mean in your room, too?"

"I guess."

Chris noticed an uncomfortable look grow on Vin's face when they stepped in the multi-purpose room. His arm automatically tightened across Vin's shoulders; was this the closeness that Mrs. Richmond meant? He looked around and saw how most of the other children stood next to their mothers.

"Come on, guys," Buck said. "Let's sit and get this over with. I hear McDonald's calling us."

"Yesssss," JD hissed, leading the way to the back row of folding chairs.

Chris noticed then that the rows filled from the front and once again wondered about his influence on Vin. Damn that woman for planting a seed in the area of his brain he usually ignored. Once seated, Chris' attention moved to Ella as she entered the large room. She greeted parents, children and teachers with grace and confidence and Chris couldn't take his eyes off her. The suit she wore had classic, clean lines that accented the figure he remembered. His fingers twitched.

"Hey."

Chris blinked, realizing Buck just nudged him. Looking ahead, he saw Ella step up to the podium and was unable to tear his eyes from her calves. He shifted in his seat to relieve the pressure on his suddenly snug pants.

"That the counselor?"

He forced his eyes to follow Buck's pointing finger. "Yeah. Mrs. Richmond."

The object of Buck's question sat in a chair at the back of the small stage.

Buck looked quizzically at him for a moment and then broke into an irritating grin when Chris' eyes flicked back to Ella. "I see Ella's got your attention again."

"Shut up." Chris felt his cheeks heat as Buck chuckled and sat back in his chair with a smug expression. Vin looked up to him, questions clear in his eyes. Chris cleared his throat. "That's your counselor in the back." He pointed her out. "Dark hair, red blouse?"

Vin studied her a moment. "She looks nice," he said neutrally.

Chris, though, picked up on his wariness. He patted his son's thigh. "She's nice. I met her earlier. We'll stop by her office on the way out."

"Okay."

Ella started to speak and Chris watched her mouth, remembering what it felt like on his neck. Damn, this school year was going to be tough on both of them.

CHAPTER THREE

"Well," Dr. Will began as he sat with Vin and Chris that Friday. "School starts on Monday. Do you have everything you need, Vin?"

Vin twirled the toy car in his fingers a few moments before nodding his shaggy head. "I guess," he said, eyeing every detail of the tiny, metal Mustang. Knowing that wasn't going to be an adequate answer based on the past experiences from the weekly meetings all summer, he released a resigned sigh and put the toy down on the circular table they shared and looked up. "I have a backpack 'n school supplies. New clothes." He glanced at Chris. "Dad wants me to get a haircut." He wrinkled his nose.

Dr. Will smiled. "Not too keen on that idea, huh?"

Vin shrugged and brushed the bangs from his eyes. "He says I look like a sheepdog."

Chris and the doctor chuckled and Chris leaned over to tuck the tawny wave behind Vin's ear. "Just the front, if you want. Maybe even up the rest?"

Vin nodded. "Okay."

"Are you happy with the way you look, Vin?"

The boy looked at the doctor. "Yeah, I guess. It's just that . . ." He squirmed in his seat as he searched for words to describe what he felt. "I don't know. I'm a little scared, I guess."

"You've been scared before in much worse situations. Do you feel safe?"

"Yes."

"Do you trust your dad?"

"Yes." He frowned at the audacity of that comment.

"So, let's try to pinpoint what scares you. Is it the school itself?"

Vin thought about the open amphitheater in the center of the school and the wide, green track and field area behind the buildings. "No. It's nice."

"Is it the school work?"

A vision of Ezra leaning over a book with him popped into Vin's head. The regular tutoring sessions over the summer that kept him on track for the

upcoming year had been . . . fun. He smiled. "No. Uncle Ezra's been helpin' me."

"Tutoring, yes, you've told me about that. So, it's not the campus or the work - what about the people at the school?"

"I met my teacher, Mrs. Koske. She's really nice."

"Vin warmed to her right off the bat," Chris added with grin.

"And I saw Mrs. Richmond, my counselor." Vin paused, recalling the wash of warmth that came over him when he first met the woman after the orientation. Where Mrs. Koske was nice, she was teacher-like and down to business. Mrs. Richmond was much more - approachable. Softer.

"Will you see her much?"

Vin nodded. "Yeah. She's going to be in my home room, I guess, and pull me out of class sometimes."

Dr. Will looked to Chris.

"Because of the dyslexia. Vin's doing fine, but they want to make sure it doesn't become a problem again." He reached into his shirt pocket. "Here's her card. Her phone number's on the back if you feel the need to call."

"Ah, good." Dr. Will made a note and tucked the card away. "So, what about the students?"

Frowning in thought, Vin went over the faces he saw at the orientation. He remembered some of them from years ago, especially Freddy Chaney and Eli Joe Chavez, and although it made him a little nervous to think about them, he wasn't really scared and said as much. What rose in his mind that made his spine tingle was Mrs. Gaines feline face. He also remembered his dad's open smile at seeing her and decided at that moment that it must be some kind of silly jealousy. He wanted to think over that idea before telling Dr. Will, though. If she made his dad happy, then she had to be a good person.

"Well," Vin started, deciding to use his old nemeses as his excuse. "They were pretty mean to me."

"I know. I read about them in your journal at the time and we did talk about them. We can go over the tools I gave you to deal with them, if you want."

"No, I'll be okay." He smiled at Chris and got one in return.

"So, what we're left with is that old separation anxiety, huh?"

Vin ducked his head and toyed with the Mustang again. "Yeah, I guess." After a short silence, he looked up. "Are there tools for that, too?"

Chris chuckled and ruffled his hair while Dr. Will sat back with a smile. "Kind of, but we will start slow. No one can blame you for wanting your dad close, Vin. You have every reason to want that. There's nothing wrong or odd or weird about the need. It's completely normal. You understand that?"

"Yeah."

"At the same time, Chris has to go back to work and you have to go to

school. Separation is natural, too."

"I know."

"With that in mind, we will take it slow. We'll start with school. That should take care of Monday through Friday, but there's the weekend. Your assignment for the next appointment is to come up with a list of some things to do on the weekends that you could do by yourself. Away from the ranch would be better."

"Like a sport or something?" Chris offered.

"Exactly. A sport would be a good way to work on independence skills and team building. You would be there, Chris, but watching from a distance and Vin would learn to work with an authority figure outside his family. It would be good for JD, too."

Vin sat up at the idea, the Mustang forgotten. His expression brightened.

"Does that sound like a good idea, Vin?"

"Sure, I guess. Yeah."

"Good. So, unless you have any other concerns to talk about . . ." He looked from Vin to Chris, who both shook their heads. "I'll see you in two weeks."

Father and son didn't speak as they headed to the truck, the easy comfort their particular brand of silence being the basic nature of their bond. Once Vin was secured and Chris pointed the truck toward home, Chris asked, "So, maybe you could see what sports the other kids at school play. I know there's football, basketball, lacrosse -"

"What's that?"

By the time they reached home, they'd reviewed every sport Chris knew and filed the information for further thought. The reason for the discussion wasn't so scary anymore.

"Who knows," Chris said as they pulled into the ranch driveway. "Maybe you'll be in the Olympics someday."

"The what?"

Chris glanced at his son with surprise. Reviewing Vin's history in his mind, he realized that his boy probably never had the opportunity to experience the global event. Other than cartoons, television and newspapers were never a big part of Vin's life. Chris spent the remainder of the day with Vin and JD, working around the ranch and explaining the Olympics. The two boys made a list of sports they wanted to try and Chris felt an incredible sense of peace listening to their plans. For the first time in his recent memory, his son was excited about the future.

Monday, school started for the boys and full time work started for Chris. He would miss these moments, but knew it was inevitable.



Meanwhile, the rest of the team spent their last leaderless Friday afternoon at the office and Buck let Chris' past with Ella slip out. He was busting at the seams to mention it earlier in the week but wisely decided to ask Chris about it first. Chris' only request was to do it when he wasn't in the office. He didn't want to be around during that revelation.

"Are you serious?" Nathan sounded skeptical. "This is a real woman?"

Buck chuffed and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, Ella's real. I remember her from high school. I think everyone was surprised she and Chris never hooked up after high school."

"What happened?" Josiah asked.

Ezra leaned back in his desk chair and sipped a latte. "I would assume he met the future Mrs. Larabee," he offered.

The four of them were in the bullpen pretending to be interested in reports. Except for Ezra, of course, who looked to be taking full advantage of Chris' absence from the office. Buck continued, deciding to take Ezra's attitude and copied his restful repose. He interlaced his fingers behind his head as he spoke, clearly abandoning his work. "They were quite a pair. They went everywhere together. She was a cheerleader and he was the quarterback - God, it was the classical high school story."

"I take it she was pretty hot, then." Nathan quirked a grin as the others chuckled.

"Oh, yeah. Curvy in all the right places, big boobs, big hair, big smile." Buck waggled his eyebrows, and then said, "Big sexual appetite."

"Ah, youth," Josiah sighed.

"Yeah, Chris used to tell me some stories. Ella was a creative one, all right. They kept it up for three years. Something happened right after graduation. Not sure what it was, but I think it had to do with his acceptance to Annapolis. He didn't talk much about it. Then he met Sarah in his second year, and that was that."

"Huh." Everyone mulled over that information while Buck stared at the ceiling with a goofy smile.

"Is she married now?" Nathan asked.

"Not that I saw in my research," Ezra answered. They all looked at him with amazement. "You know I did research before they started school. After that Faraday/Griffin debacle, I felt it was necessary. I know Vin appreciated it."

"So she's single."

"Twice a widow, I believe. I did not delve into her personal life, gentlemen, just her qualifications to oversee the boys' education."

"Well, this ought to be interesting," Josiah said with a toothy, side-slung grin. "I wonder if that ember will flame again."

"I, for one, hope it lightens up our prickly leader," Ezra muttered.

Buck snatched a paper clip from his desk and flicked it at Ezra. "You're just hopin' he'll lighten up on your expense reports."

The others laughed as Ezra plucked the clip from his chest and arched it into the trash with a snap of his wrist.



The next two weeks were busy ones and passed quickly. In that time, Josiah Sanchez unexpectedly shined as a time accountant. Nathan jokingly coined the term when he compared the profiler's ability to construct and maintain Vin and JD's school and activity schedules to Ezra's numerous spreadsheets regarding investments and wagers. Josiah preferred the title "Activities Director". Ezra currently searched the web to see if his teammate's time could be written off as a charitable donation on his taxes.

"I do not desire monetary profit on my time with the boys," Josiah said calmly as he jotted notes with pen and paper then headed to the copier.

Nathan, who peered over Josiah's shoulder as he fed the copy machine, said, "You know, putting that stuff on the computer would probably make it easier to keep track of."

Josiah hit the copy button, then lifted the originals and tucked them between the pages of the equally worn, leather-bound Bible that always rested on his desktop. "I believe in a hands-on approach," he said with a satisfied smile, holding the book to his chest as he walked back to his desk.

"So what are the boys up to now so I can adjust Chris' first aid kit?" Nathan asked as he headed to his desk.

In the three weeks since the boys started school, Buck and Chris took Dr. Will's suggestion of a strict and consistent schedule to heart and ran themselves ragged until Josiah offered to take over the afternoon schedules. The benefit was three-fold: Chris' work schedule was consistent, Buck used the after school hours for one-on-one time with JD if he wanted, and Vin learned to deal with his separation from Chris.

"Vin's decided he wants to try Peso at the local horse shows," Josiah said. "Since he and JD are swimming together during the week, it will give Vin an opportunity to find friends in his own circle, like those boys on his after-school track team."

Nathan looked thoughtful then shook his head. "Between that and the occasional weekend swim or track meet, weekends are pretty booked."

"It surely does, but that's the point. To keep the boys occupied." The profiler grinned again. "Sounds like the typical soccer mom schedule."

The three men's chuckles cut short with the abrupt entry of their boss. "Don't EVER refer to me as a soccer mom," Chris growled, pausing at the copier along the route to his office. He plucked the sheets from the tray. "This the new program?"

"All there," Josiah replied. "The first horse show is this Saturday. I'll meet you at the show grounds."

Chris scanned the papers. "It's going to be a long day."

"I know. I thought you might like some relief since Buck's taking JD on a picnic trail ride that day. Maybe you could find something to do Saturday night?"

The light tone of Josiah's suggestion made Chris look up. His three teammates looked at him with curious expressions. He frowned. "Am I missing something?"

Ezra leaned back in his chair, elbows resting on the padded arms and his hands steepled at his chin. His eyes sparkled mischievously. "Apparently so."

"Well," Nathan started. When Chris shifted his focus to him, he nervously cleared his throat and shifted his feet. "Seems like there's . . . ah . . . well, you know. Dinner or something."

Josiah chuckled, drawing Chris' irritated glare. "Well, Chris, it's clear to all of us that there's something between you and Ella Gaines."

"So?"

"Well, she has been a great asset to the boys this year. And finding Mrs. Richmond for Vin was an over-the-top effort. Maybe she deserves a thank you?"

"That's none of your -"

"I think it's a great idea, Chris." Buck cradled a steaming coffee cup in hand that had "World's Greatest Dad" emblazoned on the side. He took a careful sip while regarding Chris with smiling eyes, completely unabashed as he leaned back in his chair with his feet on his desk.

Chris unconsciously adjusted his stance, falling automatically into the firing range posture with gun side turned away from the threat. He tucked the papers under his left elbow as his right hand drifted to his hip without thought.

"Come on, now, stud," Buck laughed, dropping his feet to the floor and standing. With his coffee cup in one hand, he stepped up and took Chris' elbow. "Don't get your hackles in a state." The rest of the team visibly relaxed as Buck propelled their boss to his office. Once inside, he let go and settled onto the well-worn couch arm and cradled his mug between his hands again.

Chris stalked to his desk and sat down, his posture stiff. "I don't know where they got that impression," he grumbled.

"Guilty," Buck replied. Chris shot him a glare. "Well, they asked."

"What did you tell them, exactly?"

"Well, that you dated her in high school and that you were very close." Strong willed in her own right, Ella not only managed to keep up with Chris, she kept him in line. She was Chris' energy outlet; The sex aspect of their relationship was full of passion. Without it, Buck surmised that Chris would probably have been expelled along the way for fighting. Yes, theirs had been a very powerful coupling.

During their time in Annapolis, Chris met Sarah and everything changed. Since Chris never returned home to Missouri, Ella disappeared from Chris' life. Buck wondered if, with their paths crossing again, that relationship could rekindle, especially since Ella hadn't lost any of her - assets. She was a beautiful woman and maintained her strong force of personality. She could still handle Chris.

Chris sat back, his shoulders softening as he thought. "She sure hasn't changed much, has she?"

"Nope."

A wry expression crossed Chris' face. "I suppose they've already checked her out."

"The very next day, stud."

"Quit calling me that."

"Come on now, don't be bashful. If I recall, Ella had no problem with that aspect of the Larabee personality." Buck laughed at Chris' pained expression. "I know you haven't read Ezra's full report, but she's been married twice, first to Bryan Lester and then to Robert Gaines and ended up a widow both times. Lester died in a car crash and Gaines by a heart attack - he was about two decades older 'n her." He paused thoughtfully. "Had to wonder about her motives the second time because Lester left her quite well off. Gaines about doubled her wealth. She has no need to work, Chris, so you gotta admire that she does. Maybe that's why she doesn't put up with the parents' bullshit at the school."

That observation made Chris snort, his shoulders dropping with relaxation. A tiny grin cracked. "She doesn't suffer fools or 'Helicopter Parents'," he agreed. "That, I admire. I'd throttle 'em."

Buck raised his mug in a mock toast. "And that's why you are our fearless leader." He took a sip as they considered the conversation. "Did you know Ezra's been looking into getting teaching credentials? For tutoring?"

"No. Ezra never said anything and I'd bet he didn't tell you, either."

"Weeeell, I just happened to be lookin' over his shoulder while he was checkin' into it. Guess he finds the experience rewarding."

"And it would annoy the crap outta Maude."

"That, too." A stretch of thoughtful silence allowed Buck to rise and stretch

before turning to leave. "Well?" he asked before walking out.

"Well, what?"

"You gonna ask her? Vin's going to be pretty tuckered out after the horse show and I'll be home with JD."

"You think I should?"

Buck rolled his eyes and chuffed.

"What I mean is, is that such a good idea? She's the Director of Vin's school. Won't that bother Vin? It's his first horse show. Or JD? Isn't it too soon?"

Buck's mustache twitched into a smile. "Well, looks like we got tonight's dinner conversation lined up, don't it?"

Chris leaned back with a fond grin. "Just make sure those jokers know this isn't their doing." He directed his chin to the bullpen.

Buck headed out. "Yeah. Good luck with that dream, boss."

CHAPTER FOUR

"Nervous?" Chris put the truck in park and turned to him after shutting off the engine.

Vin looked up at Chris, knowing he didn't have to say anything. Chris just knew how he felt, always. Still, he nodded and chewed the inside of his lip. It was his first horse show.

Chris gave Vin a reassuring grin and brushed his bangs from his eyes. "Just ride like you always do and you will do fine. This is for fun, remember?"

Vin smiled back even though his stomach flipped and made him feel sick. He followed his father's lead and pushed open the truck door, careful to keep his jeans clean. His hat, shirt and shiny polished boots were in the trailer along with Peso and a clean saddle, bridle and pad. It seemed like a lot of work, but when he slid from the truck and looked around, he was glad for it. There were horses tied to trailers and people everywhere, and they all seemed impossibly spotless. Coats and tails shined like satin.

"Are you riding?"

A girl's voice brought Vin's scattered attention back to his immediate surroundings and the trailer parked next to him. A thin girl with brown hair stood a few feet away wearing tan English riding pants and shiny, black knee-high boots. Her shirt was light pink and a pin sparkled at the base of her throat in the morning sun. Vin stared at the flat, complicated braids that ran back from her temples. Beyond her, a dark bay sported the same, complicated braids in both his mane and tail. The girl cleared her throat, and he saw her eyes narrow as she planted her hands on her hips with a huff.

Vin blinked. "What?" he asked, feeling his face flush. What was it with girls and braids? He was glad he rode Western.

"Are. You. Riding."

He looked at her. "Yeah."

"Cool!" Her face shifted to a look of delight. "Western?"

"Uh, yeah." Pointed to the braided horse tied to the trailer behind her. "Is that your horse?"

"Yeah. This is your horse, huh?" She walked toward the black and Peso immediately responded to her. Generally, he tolerated children and usually stood with a bored patience. This girl, however, seemed to fascinate the normally prickly animal. As soon as he heard her voice, his ears pricked forward and his eyes brightened. When she approached, he dipped his head low and gave her hair a good snuffle.

"Hey!" she yipped. "Don't mess it up!"

Vin snickered and Peso pressed his inspection by poking his nose in her ear and making her squeal.

"Hasn't your horse ever seen a girl?" she giggled, turning to pet his nose.

"Not many," Vin replied.

"He's nice." Peso's eyes glazed in dopey glee as the girl instantly began braiding his forelock.

She glanced back and then nodded. "My horse's name is Sam. Come and meet him, he likes everybody. My name's Patrice."

"I'm Vin."

And before Vin knew it, his nervousness vanished and he had a new friend. She kept Vin talking without the mindless chatter that most of the girls at his school offered, and could even hold a conversation with Chris without showing any fear. Patrice appeared to be a showing veteran based on what Chris could hear. As she and Vin interacted, Chris silently retrieved the brushes. She immediately grabbed a brush and started on Peso's tail.

Chris grinned at Vin's momentary surprise as he blinked at his new acquaintance, but she got him moving again with one quick glance when she said, "The English classes go first. Will you watch me? I'll watch you. Have you entered yet?"

"Uh," Vin looked to Chris with such wide-eyed astonishment that Chris had to laugh.

"Patrice! Let's saddle up!"

The girl beamed and handed her brush to Chris. "That's my mom. MOM! Come here!"

A woman that was clearly related to Patrice rounded the corner of the neighboring trailer smiling, but looking a bit disheveled.

"This is Vin and Peso. That's his dad. Am I entered?"

The woman let the rapid-fire speech roll off her back as she walked up to Chris. "Hi. I'm Nancy Naylor." She stuck her hand out. "I haven't seen you before. First show?"

"Chris Larabee," he said as he accepted the quick handshake. "Are we that

obvious?"

Nancy laughed and shoved a loose lock of hair behind her ear. "Need any help? I can show you the entry booth and forms while Patrice warms up. Western classes won't start until 10:00 or so."

Once Peso was given a loaded hay net and his tie rope checked, Vin and Chris followed Nancy, who trailed behind the mounted Patrice.

"Sometimes I wish we'd taken up a normal sport like soccer," the woman chuckled. "My husband and I switch off shows and try to limit it to two a month."

Chris had done his homework and knew there was an active show circuit in the area, but listening to Nancy made him wonder what they'd gotten into. By the time noon rolled around and Vin had a couple of classes under his belt, he realized that he would have no regrets. Vin and Patrice immediately clicked and rooted for each other throughout the day.

Whereas the morning classes were simple, based on how horse and rider looked while going through various gaits, the afternoon classes brought more adrenalin to the day with performance classes: Barrel racing and other gymkhana-style events in one arena and jumping classes in another.

Both he and Vin admired Patrice's ability on the jumping courses where she earned a ribbon every time.

"That looks fun," Vin said.

Where Chris' nervousness increased with the height of the jumps, Vin just got more excited. By midafternoon when Josiah arrived to take Chris' place, he knew Vin was hooked.

"How's it going?" Josiah asked, taking a seat next to Chris on the small stand of bleachers. "Where's Vin?"

Chris pointed to a cluster of mounted kids watching the more experienced riders jump the bigger fences. "They go back and forth between arenas. Vin's fittin' right in."

"Peso's behaving?"

Chris grinned. "Who would have thought, huh?"

The both chuckled. "Well, I'm pretty sure Vin's going to sleep without any problems tonight," Josiah said. "I'll get them both home safe. It's time for you to get out of here. Nervous?"

"What? No!" Chris could tell that Josiah didn't believe him. "I'm just wondering if it's too soon."

"Chris, it's been a month and Vin and JD are doing great. Their schedules are busy but structured, and they are thriving. Keep the momentum going. By year's end, they'll be well on their way to functioning on their own. That's what middle school's for."

Chris scrubbed his scalp then stood with a sigh. "Yeah, I know. It's just

hard, letting go."

"Yeah, it is, but it's not like there isn't a safety net. That's what family's for."
Chris nodded. "Thanks, Josiah. I'll see you Monday."



When Chris arrived at the ranch, JD and Buck were back from their day ride and the livestock fed and cleaned up, leaving Chris plenty of time to prepare for his date with Ella. Buck, of course, had plenty of advice. Chris was relieved to be in the truck and on the road to have some peace and quiet.

It felt strange to be out alone and that's when the true meaning of "separation anxiety" struck him. He thought about his own life and the various milestones of growing up, and knew, intellectually, that Dr. Will and the others had a right to be concerned about that kind of anxiety. Still, looking back at his school days he wondered if the lack of communication between him and his own parents fueled his wildness in high school. What degree of involvement was best for Vin?

Chris sighed at the dilemma and figured that he had at least three years to answer that question. Right now, he had to make it through the evening.

Ella's neighborhood was just as he expected. Her condo complex was situated in a gated community that made Ezra's brow rise when Chris mentioned the name. Chris knew she was well off financially, but seeing proof of it was still impressive. Maybe he should have rinsed off Buck's truck; at least the interior was clean and the faint odor of French fries finally banished. He eyed the tacky evergreen tree dangling from the rear view mirror for a moment before snatching it from its perch and stuffing it in the glove box.

Once outside, he took a moment to slip on a jacket and look around. Fall colored some trees flaming red which made the evergreens stand out. The air turned colder as the sun fell and it would be dark very soon. It felt odd to be going out this time of day; he'd grown used to evenings at home.

He followed the walkway to Ella's address and knocked on the door. When the door opened and he saw Ella's smile, a jolt of nostalgia hit him.

"Come on in," she said, standing aside. Ella wore a turtle neck sweater dress that clung to every curve and her hair framed her face just as Chris remembered. A wide necklace made up of various lengths of gold chain draped from her neck and she fiddled with an earring as he passed her. Her heels were tall and delicate, bringing her eyes nearly level with his. She stepped back, allowing him to shut the door. "Almost ready."

Chris paused in the foyer, a bit stunned. "You look great, Ella."

She stilled, hands at her side, and chuckled. "You look pretty good yourself,

Chris." She took his elbow and turned him to the living room. "Something before we go? I have beer on tap."

"Really?" Chris scanned the living room, impressed. "Wow. This is quite the set up."

Ella left his side as he wandered the big room and slipped behind a small bar tucked in one corner. Two beer tapper handles stuck up from behind a polished wood bar top. "Only the best, I say." She expertly tapped two beers and put them on the bar, then circled around and perched on one of the high, leather stools. She patted the one next to her. "Just like the old West, huh?"

Chris sat and raised his mug, and the clicked a toast. "Not exactly," he grinned. "But I like it."

They consulted the huge Grandfather clock and decided they had time to finish the beers before heading out.

"Come here," Ella said impishly. Chris found familiarity in the sparkle in her eyes and followed her without hesitation. "Look what I found!" Ella sat on the larger of the two couches and patted three thick books on the coffee table.

Chris looked at them as he sat near her and recognized the cover of the topmost volume. "Yearbooks. I haven't seen those in . . . Well, forever." He knew exactly where he last saw his own. They'd burned up in the attic of his house along with . . .

"Look at us, Chris." Ella flipped the book open to a picture of them dressed up and wearing shiny crowns. "King and Queen of the prom," she giggled. "Remember that?"

Looking at the photo brought a flood of good memories that quickly pushed the bad ones from his mind. "Damn, we were young," he chuckled, allowing the force that was Ella draw him into her wake. Lost in memories for a while, the grandfather clock reminded them of the time.

"Oh, dear, we better get going," Ella said as the clock chimed. She closed the yearbook and rose. She walked to a coat draped over the other couch and Chris found his eyes locked on the sway of her hips.

"Allow me," Chris said, shooting to his feet. She stood back, smiling, as he helped her on with the coat, and Chris felt a flush of something nearly forgotten.

It was a good thing they were leaving the house. He wasn't sure he could deal with the long dwindled lust that arose from nowhere. He cleared his throat and gestured toward the front door, feeling as if he were in full retreat.

Dinner was more enjoyable than Chris ever imagined and when the night ended, he was disappointed. Ella was fun, sexy and smart, and he found her company both exhilarating and fulfilling. After dinner, they strolled downtown and window shopped. Neither one made any moves beyond those of friendship and after a rather chaste kiss goodnight on her doorstep, Chris drove home

planning a second date.

It was only when he drove the truck up his own driveway that Chris realized that there was not one mention of Vin; a trio of texts throughout the evening kept him updated on his son's whereabouts and that was enough. He smiled. Trusting from the start of the night that his son was safe made the difference. Maybe he had a handle on this separation anxiety after all.

CHAPTER FIVE

The next two months flew by with Chris measuring the passing time by the number of incoming he reviewed and cases closed during his hiatus. A busy summer raising a barn and repairing fences turned into a fall of casework and family activities. Halloween and Thanksgiving were a blur of family and food.

The tight schedule of school, homework, sports and chores, interrupted only by holidays, showed Chris that Vin thrived with the regularity of work and play. By winter break, he was confident that his son was on a path to success. Some of the swim and track teammates turned into school friends, and Patrice became his horse show cheerleader. Vin had an established social life, something Chris fretted about from the start of their odd family.

JD, too, was doing well. He and Vin hung out at school and during swim, and JD accompanied Vin to some of the horse shows but his interest turned to the area of computers and robotics. Buck, perplexed by the subject, still supported the activities with all the enthusiasm typical of his personality.

"What do you think about a week in Aspen after Christmas?" Chris asked one night while doing dishes. "Ella offered up her condo."

"Just us boys?"

"Yes, Buck. Just us."

"That's pretty generous. You two are getting on quite nicely, ain't 'cha?" Buck inquired, wagging his eyebrows.

Chris dried the last of the dinner skillet and thought back over the weeks. He and Ella managed three dinner dates and none of them ended up physical, but he knew that's the angle where Buck sought information. "It's not like high school. We're both pretty busy. She goes to Malibu a lot of weekends to manage her accounts."

"Ahhh, California in the winter. Can't blame her, especially when she's got her own jet. That will make joinin' the Mile High Club a snap!"

Chris rolled his eyes, not bothering to comment. After the last dinner dish

was stored, he sat at the table and sorted through the day's school fliers and held up a bright blue sheet. "Ella told me about this," he said scanning the page.

"What's that?" Buck dropped into the chair across from him and popped the cap from a long neck beer.

"A school trip to Washington D.C. It's a 6th grade thing, I guess. Isn't JD's class going to the Capitol building in Denver in January?"

Buck swallowed a sip and nodded. "Oh, I forgot to ask the boss for time off. I volunteered to chaperon."

Chris chuckled. "Granted. Don't think anything's pending at work. I guess the crooks are taking the holidays off. Just remind me after the holidays. Can't guarantee I'll remember your request."

Buck's eyes gleamed. "Sure is gonna be a great Christmas, Pard."

This was the first Christmas after Vin's return and Chris had no need to ask for anything - he'd received the gift of his son back and he intended to make it a memorable celebration. The tree was huge, easily occupying a quarter of the great room and every person considered family contributed to the decorations. It rivaled the Denver Capitol tree in everyone's opinion and every time Chris spied Vin staring at it with open-mouthed awe, his throat clenched and he wished the moment would keep forever.

Chris' parents, Matthew and Claire, spent the entire week spoiling the boys and adding to the bright pile of presents that took up one more quarter of the great room. By noon Christmas day, sixteen people milled in the remaining open half of the room, the kitchen and the heated back deck. Chris kept a worried eye on Vin at first, looking for signs of being crowded in but there was a huge smile on his face the entire time and Chris allowed himself to enjoy every minute. It was a double celebration of life.

The next week, the family of four traveled to Aspen where Ella's condo housed all of them with room to spare. Learning how to snowboard, ski and ride snowmobiles kept everyone busy to the point of exhaustion and sleeping was not an issue for any of them. One night, Buck headed to the lodge for an evening of fun and Chris relished the quiet of the snowy terrain surrounding them. Buck was back before midnight sporting a huge grin and sparkling eyes.

"I take it you had a good time." Chris glanced over his shoulder as he settled the fire for the night.

Buck slapped his hand over his heart. "I think I'm in love," he sighed.

"Again?" Chris said dryly, poking a large ember.

"No, really, Chris, this woman's amazing. A. Maze. Ing. I tell ya. Glorious red hair, outstanding body, impressive . . ." He held his hands out in front of his chest and Chris gave him a warning glare. "Assets. I tell ya, every curve was a work of art."

"What's her name?"

Buck dropped his arms and then plopped down on the leather sofa and tugged his off his shoes. "That's the fun part, Stud. She wouldn't tell me. How she managed to brush all this charm aside, I have no idea but the game is afoot."

Chris smirked and headed to bed. "Ya only got two more nights before we leave."

"One should be plenty," he said dreamily, sighing to the ceiling. "Oh, yeah. She's playing right into my hands."

Rolling his eyes, Chris bade his hopeful friend good night and chuckled all the way to his room. This was the most memorable winter break he ever had and for once, he expected nothing but happiness in the future.



School started with a bang and January brought JD's class trip to the Denver capitol in the third weekend.

"DA!" JD's insistence on using the endearment and his complete frustration with the subject of his outburst made both Chris and Vin chuckle.

"WHAT!?" Buck's expected bellow boosted their chuckles to outright laughter. Vin and Chris were in the kitchen eating a leisurely breakfast while the subjects of their entertainment were down the hall in their separate bedrooms, packing. The sun had been up for an hour. "WHERE'S MY UNDERWEAR?"

"WHERE IT SHOULD BE!"

"WHERE'S THAT?"

"JD, IF YOU DON'T KNOW THAT BY NOW I TRULY WORRY ABOUT YOUR BRAIN!"

Both Chris and Vin had to put down their spoons to keep from choking at this point and Vin brushed the heels of his hands across his teary cheeks. Chris recovered first after Buck's half of the conversation dropped to incomprehensible mumbling accented by banging drawers. When they finally parted for JD's overnight school trip to the Capitol building, the house would be quiet. Unusually quiet.

"We may hafta keep the TV on or somethin'," Vin said when he could speak again. He lifted his spoon and took a bite, continuing the thought while chewing and before Chris had a chance to respond. "And, yes, I know where my underdrawers are." Chris wasn't surprised that he and Vin were on the same wavelength; it was just the way it was between them.

There was a whoosh of audible action accented with short, snippy comments before their two roommates appeared in the kitchen with overnight suitcases in tow. "Well, guess we're ready." Buck took a breath and grinned when

he reached back and ruffled JD's hair. JD slapped his hand away with a frown. "I guess we're outta here. You two have fun!"

"I know you will," Chris said with a serious face.

JD headed to the door. "See ya later, alligators!" he yelled, wrestling the rolling bag over the threshold. "Come on, Da!" And he was gone.

Buck watched him depart, grinning and shaking his head. "I do not think it will be boring, that is a certainty." He waved at the pair. "Later, guys."

Chris and Vin heard continual banter until Buck's truck engine turned over and the doors slammed shut. Once out of the crunchy gravel of the parking area and down the driveway, peaceful silence settled over the house. The grandfather clock ticked softly and a horse called in the distance while they finished their breakfast and cleaned up. Outside regular chores, there was nothing planned.

"How about a sleepover at the lake?" Vin asked as they put the dishes away.

Chris glanced out of the window. "Snow camping?" Vin shrugged and gave his dad a lopsided smile. "All right. No turning back if you get too cold, though."

Excited, Vin agreed and dashed out to start feeding. Chris heard the dogs' happy barks when they Vin released them from the barn along with the nicker of hungry horses. He knew that he was more likely to bitch about the cold, but Vin's happiness over-rote any hesitation. Life was good and he planned to seize every moment.

The pair spent the entire day and night side by side, exchanging about 10 words between them in absolute comfort. Chris marveled at the old soul Vin seemed to possess and their simpatico relationship. Without discussion, he knew that the both of them were rested and refreshed when they heard Buck's truck rattle up the driveway Sunday night. Similar to their companionable silence, Buck and JD's invisible energy filled the house before the Buck threw the vehicle into park. Vin and Chris exchanged smiles over hot chocolate at the kitchen table when JD burst into the house.

"Hey, you were there when we left! Ya didn't move all weekend?" He shoved his bag deeper into the great room and was jostled aside when Buck crossed the threshold.

"You ain't gonna believe what happened, guys. Really. It was amazing."

"Ya! You shoulda seen the Cap't'l building! It's painted in gold!"

By the way Buck gave JD an amused look, Chris knew that his friend's amazement fell along other lines. "Vin, help JD get unpacked?" Vin nodded once and pushed away from the table, hesitating for a moment. "I'll take care of that," Chris said regarding Vin's dirty mug. His son jogged from the room and the happy sound of JD's chatter erupted from their room.

Buck slid into Vin's chair, a proverbial shit-eating grin plastered on his face.

"I live under a lucky star, Chris. You'll never guess who works at the Capitol

building." All Chris had to do was raise a brow. "Remember the redhead from Aspen? Well, she's as perfect as I remember! Every part!"

"Really? What does she do there?"

"She's an assistant to a Senator and she gave some of us a private tour." Buck waggled his brows and his mustache rode his smile like caterpillar on a leaf. "We have a dinner date next Friday. I think this is the one, Chris, I c'n feel it in my bones." He sighed and leaned back with his hand over his heart and cast his eyes upward. "Thank you, my guardian angel, for sendin' me such a gift."

Chris chuckled into his mug and before taking a last sip, said, "I'm happy for you, Buck, really. Good luck. I guess she finally told you her name?"

"Louisa Eleanor Perkins. Brains, beauty - the whole package." Buck continued to smile at the ceiling, his mind elsewhere, and then suddenly stood. "Well, guess I'll unpack." He leaned over and said emphatically, "Best. Field trip. Ever," practically in Chris' ear, straightened, and strolled down the hall whistling a jaunty tune that made Chris grin and shake his head.



When January rolled into February, both boys thrived in all aspects of their lives. Chris, especially thrilled that Vin enjoyed school, did not want to inadvertently rock the boat by showing up in or around campus unless he absolutely had a reason to be there. Since JD wavered on the line of dependence because of his age, Buck was on campus more often and Chris trusted his and Ella's observations and input. Whereas Vin appeared to handle their separation well, Chris knew he still had issues and made a point to address them. Dr. Will was satisfied that Vin's anxiety level had definitely dropped and he was on the path to a socially well-adjusted life; all Chris had to do was fully accept the opinion.

Yet, he couldn't. Not entirely. Ella made him face the final step.

"Charlotte Richmond and Vin have a working bond, Chris. She's not replacing you, she's augmenting you. With her, Mrs. Wells and Charlotte, Vin has strong female support base. His social adjustment is on track. You should be relieved and pleased."

It was their fourth dinner date and Chris found that he couldn't take his eyes off her. In high school, he remembered her as dressing rather on the slutty side and found that exciting at the time. Now, with a bit more maturity and the realities of an aging body, the professional, classic lines she wore worked to magnify her allure. Ella was no stranger to highlighting her strengths and Chris appreciated every line and curve. He realized he was staring when he noticed her crooked smile and sparkling eyes meeting his gaze.

"Like what you see?" She said in a lower tone that sent a zing through Chris' groin. Ella twisted slightly sideways and crossed her ankles, showing off her long, shapely legs. She rested lightly on one elbow, swirling a glass of white wine in her hand. The other arm, well-toned and well adorned, draped casually over the arm of her chair as she studied him with amusement.

Chris grinned wolfishly, not embarrassed in the least. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I do."

They watched each other for a stretch of seconds, neither one backing down. Then Ella slowly uncrossed her legs and leaned in, reaching out to rest one hand on top of Chris' knee without breaking their locked stare. "Tell you what. Let's set a goal. I understand your connection with Vin and the difficulty of letting go, so let's visualize the next step."

Between Ella's heady scent and physical connection, Chris found his thoughts a little more jumbled than usual. It wasn't exactly unpleasant, either. Her warm palm and light squeeze on his leg was - exciting. "All right," he drawled, covering her hand with his.

"The D.C. trip for Vin's class. Let's make it happen without you going along." At first, the very thought of Vin being half-way across the country without him caused a flutter in his heart and a flush of cold sweat over his palms. His grip tightened on Ella's hand and she looked down at the connection. When she looked up again, she had a wry smile. "I guess that hit close to the mark, didn't it?"

Admitting to himself that she was right was an enlightened moment. Chris took a mental step back and told himself that this trip was an established, safe and well-attended event. He had no logical basis for unreasonable anxiety.

That was the point, exactly: Was he being unreasonable?

"Tell you what," Ella continued. "Let me sweeten the pot. The trip is in the spring, and I'm telling you that spring in Malibu is absolutely wonderful."

He glanced up. "That so?"

"Oh, yeah." She smiled and ducked her head just enough to look up at him through long lashes. "Unforgettable, really."

Chris remembered the particular smile she gave him that moment and the resulting heated rush he felt made his shift in his chair to adjust. This goal sounded better by the second.

CHAPTER SIX

Vin glanced at the school clock and smiled to himself. The momentary distraction caused a few letters to jump on the page before him but they quickly fell in line in his mind. He thought that maybe he should mention it to Mrs. Richmond, whom he should be seeing in - he glanced up again - 3 minutes. He paid no attention to the muted buzz of the classroom intercom and the soft words that followed, but closed his book when he recognized the voice. Mrs. Richmond was early!

He stood before Mrs. Koske spoke and she grinned. "See you later, Vin!"

Vin nodded, shouldered his backpack and slipped from the room. The hallway funneled a cold wind, but beyond that, it was a clear, crisp February day. He looked to the distant mountains and saw that more brown showed though the white caps. Spring was on its way and with it, a new horse show and swim team season. Patrice had promised to let him try jumping her horse this year.

The Resource Room was pleasantly warm and Vin gave the volunteer a wave in greeting. She smiled and waved back just before Vin ducked in to the small alcove he thought of as being his and Mrs. Richmond's.

"Hello, Vin," she greeted with her usual soft smile. It always made Vin feel comfortable and safe.

"Hi, Ma'am," he replied as he set his backpack on the floor. He slid into the seat next to her and purposely sniffed the light floral scent that he connected with her. Giving her a sideways glance, he noticed the tiny flower earrings dangling from her ears and immediately had an idea for a Valentine gift for her. Maybe Nettie would help him with shopping . . .

"How is Algebra going?" She asked, pulling him from his thoughts.

"Fine. I guess." When he looked directly at her, he knew he was caught by the amused angle of her red lips and twinkling eyes. "Well, maybe that order of function thing confuses me," he confessed, delighted by her soft chuckle. "'N some letters were movin' on the book page today."

"Okay, then," his counselor breathed, scooting closer. "Let's go over some Algebra first and then some exercises for that other thing."

Vin felt a glowing warmth where her arm brushed his, and then he turned his attention to the work in front of him. Just having her there took him to a place of trust and comfort that he only felt with Chris, Nettie and Buck, which enabled him to fully concentrate on the work itself.

The time passed too quickly and when the bell rang, Vin reluctantly shoveled the worksheets into his backpack.

"Here's something else I want you to consider, Vin." He stood and turned to face her, glancing at the folder she held out. "It's the 6th Grade field trip information. I think you'd benefit by going. I promise you that it will be amazing."

Vin took the sheet even though he felt a sudden pulse of anxiety. He'd heard about the trip and knew it involved flying half way across the country. He gulped to dampen his suddenly dry throat and managed to choke. "Oh." When he took the edge of the paper, Mrs. Richmond held on. Reluctantly, he looked up to a sympathetic face.

"I know it sounds scary but you will be so busy you won't have time to be scared. I'm going, and you can be in my group. Would that help?"

He nodded, whispered, "Yeah," and she released the information. Then, Mrs. Richmond rested her arm across his shoulders and turned him to the exit. She pulled him to her side in a quick hug.

"You are doing so well, Vin. I know this will be much easier that you think. Remember how we talked about action putting emotion in order?" He nodded. "There will be so much action on this trip you won't have time to be anxious. Trust me?"

Vin stepped from under her arm and turned aside to look at her from the threshold. There was flash of debate before he realized the truth about what he felt. "Yeah," he said with a tentative smile. "I'll think about it."

"Good. See you later, Vin."

"Bye."

Charlotte Richmond watched her boy leave the Resource Room, maintaining her bright smile until the door closed behind him. Only then, she allowed it to fade, the fierce protectiveness she felt for him bubbling to the surface as worry and anger. Feeling someone's stare, she turned to see the Resource volunteer regarding her with a puzzled expression. Charlotte forced the smile back and turned her back on the woman to collect her things. Apparently satisfied, the snoopy woman went back to whatever she was doing behind the long counter.

"Nosy bitch," Charlotte thought, mentally putting the woman on her list of things Ella needed to fix - perhaps a transfer to the kitchen was in order.

Charlotte gathered her few things and left the room, wondering as she

walked how the State allowed such a sweet boy to stay in that horrible home situation. That man claiming to be Vin's father hadn't set foot on campus all year and preferred to bundle Vin off to numerous coaches and sports teams instead of fathering the poor child; and the way Vin craved attention was appalling! One kind word and a soft touch was all the boy needed to thrive and it seemed that Mr. Larabee was incapable of even that. As for that other "father figure," Mr. Wilmington was about as mature as that "son" of his. No wonder Vin Tanner was in the Resource program; Larabee didn't even have the grace to share his name with the boy!

Vin was dangerously adrift and she knew it was her job to save him from this terrible situation. She thought back to how Ella Gaines had sought her out before accepting the role of Director at the school, spelling out Vin's situation in well-studied detail. Mrs. Gaines struggled with the responsibility of molding the child's future, and if she couldn't save one little boy then perhaps she shouldn't take the position.

Between the two of them, they formulated a well thought out plan that made sense and got the job done. It was the resulting confidence that motivated Mrs. Gaines to accept the Directorship and as a result, earn Charlotte's respect and admiration.

Ella's personal knowledge of Chris Larabee's history was what sold Charlotte on moving to Denver in the first place. Before meeting up with Ella Gaines, Charlotte was, herself, adrift, unable to function since the death of her child and the resulting breakup of her marriage, but she intended to turn her negative situation into a positive one unlike Mr. Larabee.

She also knew that Vin was very perceptive as well as stuck in a cycle of abuse, so she made sure her feelings for Vin's "father" never rose to the surface; Ella depended on that and Charlotte would not let her down. It helped that the man was never on campus - it separated her from him in Vin's eyes and very astute mind.

"Some people should not be parents," she muttered as she headed to her next counseling appointment, smoothing her face into a mask of pleasantness as she walked.



Mrs. Potter picked up Vin and JD right on time. Once buckled in and ready to go, JD brought up the Valentine Dance.

"You gonna go, Vin? Wish I could, but our class in havin' a party instead. You're in sixth grade now so you can go. There's gonna be a DJ and games and stuff! You're so lucky!"

Vin screwed up his face at the thought.

"Are you going, Vin? Do I need to make some chocolate chip cookies?" Mrs. Potter asked to the rear view mirror.

"Na, I don't think so," he said, noticing JD's fallen expression. "But cookies would be real nice!"

"Yeah! We can make some heart-shaped ones for my party! And you can give one to Patrice!" JD laughed and elbowed Vin.

Vin pushed him back with a scowl. He felt a heat rise on his cheeks. "Shut up, JD," he growled, embarrassed.

JD's spirit, though, failed to dampen. "Hey! Can we make oatmeal cookies for the horses? Milagro loves oatmeal cookies!"

"Well, that's a grand idea, JD!" Mrs. Potter agreed. "We can put together little cookie baskets for your dads and uncles."

Vin brightened at the idea. "That sounds great," he agreed, thinking, "*and I can save one for Patrice and Mrs. Richmond.*"

"Yeah, let's do that!" JD agreed.

Suddenly, having a loud little brother who managed to embarrass him at least once a week made the field trip to D.C. seem interesting. Vin pulled the brochure from his backpack to look at it, which caught JD's attention. "You should go, Vin! The Capitol buildin' here was so cool! I bet the country's capitol buildin' is huge! Maybe it's all gold!"

"I don't know," Vin muttered, turning the pages. It was exciting and scary at the same time so he couldn't pinpoint his feelings about the trip. The fact that he could go made him feel so much older than JD. Mrs. Richmond would be there - could Chris go, too?

As Vin read and visualized the trip, the idea of not seeing his dad for so many days in a row made him nervous. Vin shoved the papers away, deciding to bring it up at dinner tonight. Maybe Chris would make the decision for him and he'd be done with it, he thought with a sigh.



Chris knew Vin had something on his mind as soon as he picked the boys up from swim practice. Both of them handed over their upcoming meet schedules while JD chattered about the big, year-end robotics club competition. It was clear that the latter trumped the former in his mind. Vin sat quietly all the way home, which wasn't unusual, but when Chris glanced in the rear - view mirror, he saw that his boy was turning something over in his mind and JD's soliloquy was just background noise.

He knew his son well. He could tell by Vin's eyes what degree of worry he

should possess before words exchanged between them. He also knew how perceptive his boy was; his thoughts were as easily read by Vin as an old Dick and Jane book.

The corner of Chris' mouth tweaked into a half-grin. Right now, Vin's eyes told him there was nothing to fret about and he was simply trying to figure out how to say something. The issue must have quite a few parts to lie straight, but once arranged, Vin would reveal his thoughts.

Just then, Vin glanced to the mirror and caught Chris' evaluating look. Those amazing blue eyes took a crescent shape with his smile and Chris, chuckling, turned his attention back to the road ahead.

"So which one, Chris? 'Blue Meanie' or 'Chomper'?"

Somehow, Chris developed the skill to listen and think two different subjects at the same time and knew JD wanted to know his opinion on the name of the club's robot. "Not my call, JD, but I'm leanin' toward 'Blue Meanie.'"

"Chomper'." Vin immediately offered, turning to look outside.

"You guys are no help," JD huffed.

Chris glanced at the rear-view again and saw Vin give him a sidelong grin. Chris chuckled again.

Vin didn't say what was on his mind until after dinner and homework. They sat at the kitchen table putting away books and paper when Vin pulled a blue pamphlet from his bag and looked at it.

"What's that?" Chris asked.

"Field trip stuff," Vin said, extending his arm after a moment. "I think I'd like to go."

"Well, let's see." Chris knew exactly what trip he meant and a shot of nerves made his gut tingle when he reached for the paper, the gist of Ella's offer adding to the jolt. He opened the pamphlet. "Mrs. Gaines mentioned this. It looks pretty exciting."

"Have you been there?"

"Yeah, many times. The museums are great and even with the length of time you'd be there, you'd only see a tiny bit." He looked at the information but didn't really see it as he tried to sort his feelings on the subject. Should he suggest it? Would Vin ask him to go along? "It is a great opportunity, Vin, and I'll leave the decision up to you. I think you'd like it."

"Really?"

"Really."

Chris held the information aloft. "I'll keep it here, with the bills. They don't need an answer for another week so let me know as soon as you decide, okay?"

"Okay."

"And let me know your concerns so we can talk about it. We'll re-visit this

over the weekend." He put the papers down. "Find out who else is going."

"Mrs. Richmond is going," Vin said immediately. "She said I could be in her group."

"Well, that's good, isn't it?" Vin's fondness for the Counselor wasn't lost on Chris. He was glad to see Vin open up to an adult outside their "family" circle.

"Yeah." Vin finished packing his backpack and shouldered it before heading to his room.

Chris watched him go and saw a glimpse of a future, confident young man. It was very satisfying. He heard Buck's truck stop in front of the house and glanced at the clock, surprised he was back from a dinner date with Louisa. He could hear Buck's whistling and knew the evening went well before the door banged open.

"I'm home!" Buck yelled, getting the expected screech from down the hall. JD charged in, already in his PJs and launched himself at his Da. "Hey, Lil' Bit! What's up?"

"Done with homework. How's Miss Loooooooooioisea?" He dragged out the syllable when Buck swung him around once.

"Beautiful!"

"Eww. Did you kiss her?"

"What? Why do you wanna know that?" Buck dropped JD to his feet and ruffled his hair, laughing.

"Cuz won't ya get cooties? I don't want cooties, Da."

"JD, if that's how ya git cooties, I'm afraid I was infected a loooooong time ago!"

"Eww!"

"Now get to bed with a book and I'll be down in a minute. Better hurry or I'll cootie you!"

"NOOOOOO!" JD took off, giggling, toward his room.

Buck sauntered into the kitchen with a swag that told Chris volumes. "So she's gonna see you again, huh? And I thought this woman had brains."

The smile that exploded on Buck's face brightened the room. "Chris, I never thought it was possible, but I think this is the one."

Raising his brows, Chris tried to recall if he'd ever heard those words cross his friend's lips and came up empty.

"Yup, Ol' Buck's finally found his match, stud. Now all I gotta do is convince her to follow me into paradise!"

"Huh," Chris commented, still a bit stunned.

Buck, oblivious to Chris' shock, pulled a beer from the refrigerator and floated down the hall on his own Cloud 9. Chris felt a shift in their world and wasn't sure he was ready for it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Chris noticed Vin's excitement with the approach of Valentine's Day but didn't want to embarrass him by pressing for any more information than his son offered voluntarily. Instead, he watched with amusement as both boys baked a rather large number of heart-shaped cookies and decorated them, with the kitchen taking the brunt of frosting abuse.

Next came the separating. Chris nodded at the expected number of piles and only had to raise a brow and look at Vin to get an explanation.

"Mrs. Richmond, Ms. Nettie and Patrice," Vin said quickly when JD was out of earshot. Then he looked up hopefully to his dad. "C'n you keep Patrice's cookies in your room?"

He didn't have to explain any further. It was best to avoid both JD's and Buck's teasing in any way possible.

"Sure, Cowboy. Not a problem." He picked up the colorful bag with "Patrice" written on the outside. "I'll put it in my closet next to my hats so we don't forget them."

Relief washed over Vin's face and he smiled brightly. "Thanks. I'll give the rest out on Friday 'n take Patrice's to the horse show."

"Sounds like a plan."

While Chris stashed the cookies in his closet, he scanned his clothes, wondering what he should wear to his Valentine dinner with Ella. Buck planned to dine with Louisa in Denver that night, Nathan and Raine looked forward to an intimate dinner at a new French restaurant and Ezra was rather evasive about his Valentine plans.

"I believe brother Ezra's lovely mother may be in town," Josiah informed his boss with a sparkle in his eye. "I thought I might ask if I could relieve him of that burden, but I don't think he'd be very willing to take me up on that."

Chris snorted. "I think you're spot on with that call, Josiah," he agreed. "I don't think he's warmed up to the idea of you being his step-daddy."

Josiah rolled his eyes and tipped his chin skyward, his hand over his heart. "She is a real woman," he said with a sigh.

"Well, I'm sure JD will keep your mind off Maude for the night. He'll be plenty wired on sugar from his school party to run the shelter shindig all by himself."

The profiler nodded and clapped Chris' back. "I will keep him busy and try to tire him out before Buck picks him up." He gave Chris an amused, sidelong look. "Where are you takin' Ella while Vin's at the dance?"

Chris narrowed his eyes. "Out," he replied. "Don't you all get any ideas," he warned. "I know you've been talkin' about us."

"We're just pleased how things are goin' with everyone, that's all. It's been a good year so far."

Tipping his head in thought, Chris had to agree. "It's only February," he said, "but, so far, I'm inclined to agree with you."

It was Wednesday afternoon, and the two were the last ones to leave the office. Josiah said his goodbyes and departed, humming a familiar hymn that made Chris smile.



Friday arrived on a wave of excitement. When the time came for Buck to take the boys to school, Vin waited at the front door with a small plate of cookies, a card, and a small box in hand. JD, loaded with a larger plate of cookies, urged Buck out the door a few minutes earlier than usual. Chris touched Vin's shoulder, halting his exit on their heels. He looked up at Chris with excitement in his eyes.

"Hey, Cowboy, you have a good time at the dance, okay? Josiah's going to bring you and JD home, so give him a call when you're ready to come home." Vin nodded. Chris touched the small box. "Nettie tells me that's for Mrs. Richmond? Earrings?"

Vin nodded and Chris noticed a blush bloom on his cheeks. "Yeah. Feathers," he said softly, ducking his head as he glanced at the door. "She's one of the dance chaperones."

Chris chuckled. "Okay, then." He resisted ruffling the wavy curls and instead, patted him on the back. "You have clean clothes to change into after track practice?"

"Yup."

"Sounds like you're ready to go, then. Have fun."

That made Vin glance up and grin in return. "You, too."

"Ah . . . Okay." Chris replied, not really knowing what to say. Dating in this environment introduced odd challenges. He wasn't entirely sure what Vin thought

of Ella because he'd never thought it was relevant to ask. It wasn't that kind of relationship. Was it even dating?

"Bye, dad!" Vin said, bolting out the door in response to Buck's honking the truck horn.

Chris watched his family depart, unsettled by mixed feelings.



Color dotted the inside of the Federal building in the form of flowers, cards and balloons with an abundance of red. Chris didn't recall noticing the phenomenon before so it made him wonder if it was, in fact, something new or he was just now aware. He relegated the puzzle to the back of his mind along with the constant wonder of how women's minds worked and if there was a difference between laundry detergents.

There was enough on his plate for the day to keep his brain engaged and Chris was taken aback when five o'clock rolled around sooner than he expected. Josiah departed around three to pick up JD, and Nathan, Ezra and Buck bailed about an hour later.

Chris was the sole occupant of an otherwise empty office. He powered down his computer with a sigh, stretched, and then departed, locking the office door behind him before heading to the basement locker rooms.

He glanced at his watch before stripping to shower, satisfied he would have enough time to pick up the flowers he'd ordered on his way to Ella's. He'd selected the restaurant with care, all the time juggling long forgotten emotions as he looked for a place that balanced professional and "date-like". The thought of it brought his initial musings for the day to the forefront.

What, exactly, were he and Ella doing, anyway? Was going out to dinner on Valentine's Day appropriate? What did this all mean?

None of the questions slowed his preparations. Chris showered, shaved, combed his hair and with towel around his hips, and removed the suit bag from his locker. Before unzipping it, he questioned his selection, scolded himself silently for thinking about the choice now that it was too late and jerked the bag open to reveal the suit within.

Definitely not a court or work suit, Chris finally admitted to himself and finally accepting the fact that this was a real date.

His stomach flipped.

Chris dressed slowly, keeping an eye on the time, and left the Federal building right on schedule. The flower shop was busy but his order was ready and waiting. As he paid, he didn't second-guess the burnt-orange roses, which were far from sex-asking red or innocent white. That decision had been easy, but from the

way the store clerk smirked at him when he paid, he questioned himself again.

He shoved the flowers in the back seat and settled behind the wheel. Before turning the key, he noticed his palms were damp. Doubting his decisions was new territory and he didn't like it.

"Jesus, Larabee," he growled to himself. "Get a fucking grip!"

By the time he knocked at Ella's door, he'd shoved it all aside again in his overworked brain. When Ella opened the door in the sexiest dress he'd ever seen, all was forgotten. He gaped like a sixteen-year-old. Ella's smile grew and her eyes danced.

"Are those for me?" she finally said, laughing.

"Uh. . . Yeah." He lifted the flowers and covered her ample cleavage when he extended his arm and found himself fumbling for words. "What does orange mean, anyway?" he blurted, feeling out of his element completely.

Ella accepted the gift and stood aside so he could enter, her amusement softened with puzzlement. "What?"

Chris entered and turned, shaking his head. "Roses. Flowers. Orange. Does it mean something? You know, like red means love?"

She closed the door while smelling the roses and then undulated past him and through the living room to the bar area. Chris stared at her firm ass moving under the snug material for the entire distance.

Ella laid the bouquet on the counter top and turned slowly, reclining back so that her arms extended out from her sides and rested on the elegantly curved edge of the highly polished wood. One heel cocked up behind the other and her jewelry sparkled as she moved.

Ella tipped her head before speaking. "I don't know, Chris," she said with a hungry look. "Do you want me to look it up?"

Chris' gaze started from her dark, smoldering eyes, to her swept up hair and down her long neck draped with golden chains. The dress was dark crimson flirting as black, snug to every curve with a cowl neckline that embraced and framed her ample breasts in a shameless fashion. Any possible misinterpretation he had of the display was put to rest by the short, tight nature of the hemline and the towering style of her matching ember-red shoes.

Blood surged to places Chris tried to ignore.

"Come here and we'll talk about it," Ella purred, reaching out a hand. Long, diamond encrusted earrings swayed and bedazzled as she moved.

The next thing he knew, they were pressed together from hips to lips, moaning in exquisite pleasure. The silkiness of her mouth hinted about her readiness in other places and Chris' hands felt their way downward, releasing her breasts with a heat-filled gasp. Carnal power unleashed and Chris scooped her up, blindly heading to the sole hallway as their tongues probed mouths, ears and

necks. She nipped his earlobe and Chris tingled all over.

Then they collapsed on a downy bed smelling of fresh linen and Chris dived into a pool of long-forgotten, sweaty passion.

When his head eventually cleared from the electric meeting, he blinked and looked aside, spotting various parts of his suit and Ella's dress strewn about the room like debris from a tornado.

He twisted his head the other way and found Ella grinning at him. "Orange means desire," she said.

Chris blinked. "What? Oh. The roses." He chuckled. "That would explain the look the clerk gave me."

Ella's head rested on Chris shoulders, both of them sticky with dried sweat. She traced circles on his bare chest, her long, red nails tickling pleasantly as she chuckled and snuggled closer. He could feel her breasts and pubic crest rub against his skin, creating heat. He rolled aside and pulled her closer, rising to the occasion.

"I do have a dinner reservation," he muttered in a husky tone fraught with need before sucking his way down her neck.

"That's nice," she moaned, "but this is soooo much better."

"Agreed."

The second time brought more exploration, teasing and a slow burn that eventually flamed bright as the sun before they again sprawled panting and exhausted. The clock in the living room chimed eight o'clock.

"Damn," Chris breathed.

"Double damn," Ella added with a smile.

After a long moment, he voiced his earlier thoughts. "I've been wondering where this was going," he said. "This changes things."

"For the better, I hope," Ella replied. "I really didn't expect this, Chris. I want you to know that. I know how complicated things can be when children are involved."

"I know. He does have to be my first priority."

"I understand, but he's growing up, Chris. You know that and I think you are doing splendidly with the separation anxiety. I know it will take time. I don't plan on going anywhere." She propped up on one elbow, leaning her head into her palm. "We won't rush this." Ella dragged a fingernail from his navel to his collarbone bringing a line of shivers. "I do understand."

He smiled at her.

"Remember my Malibu offer?" she teased, tracing the edge of his jaw. "It's a good working goal. Did you discuss it with Vin yet?"

"Yeah, I did. I think he's leaning toward it, but we still have a week or so until the deadline. I don't want to push."

"Good. I'm glad he's open to the idea. That's a good sign, Chris, really." Ella leaned in and nibbled his ear lobe.

Chris leered in her direction. "Guess dinner's off, huh?"

"You bet, mister. My appetite requires a different menu."

Chuckling, he found her mouth with his and they stayed in for the evening.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The game had definitely changed, Buck noted, eying his roommate with heady amusement. Flashes of the Chris he remembered from high school showed in his mood and expressions. Gone was that indefinable sharp edge that kept people at bay. Vin's arrival filed it down quite a bit, but now . . .

Buck's amusement was still in evidence a few weeks later when he observed the puzzled look on Ezra's face while he watched Chris walk from the bullpen. Ezra must have felt his teammate's stare because he glanced Buck's direction, read his face and put two and two together - his expression smoothed and he nodded once and said, "It appears our Mr. Larabee has worked things out with Director Gaines?"

Buck chuckled. "That's one way to put it. They're seeing each other at least once a week now." He rose and strolled over to Ezra's desk, hitching a hip on the corner.

Ezra tipped his chair back and rested his elbows on the padded arms, lacing his fingers together while his index fingers tapped together in thought. Although his face appeared expressionless, Buck knew his mind whirled with speculation. "Mr. Tanner has not elucidated any knowledge during our sessions," he stated after a moment's consideration.

"Me 'n Chris talked about this before and it came up again when I began seein' Louisa." Buck plucked the glass paperweight from Ezra's desk and rolled it between his hands as he perched on the edge of the desk. Although Ezra offered nary a twitch, Buck knew it irritated him to no end. "Women won't be introduced to the boys unless there's a long-term relationship in the works."

"And at what point does that caveat come into play?"

"Well, I said six months of exclusive dating." Buck's tone made it clear that he considered that time span equated a lifetime. "Chris says one year because it takes at least that long to speak your mind honestly." He tossed the glass orb in one hand. "Or somthin' along those lines. Speakin's the point with Chris."

Ezra pursed his lips at the same time his narrowed eyes gave away his annoyance. His sharp gaze followed the up-and-down movement of the paperweight as he spoke. "With which opinion does Dr. Will align his opinion?"

Quicker than Buck expected, Standish snatched the ball in mid-air and placed it back on his desk gingerly and far outside Wilmington's long reach.

Buck rolled his eyes with a chuff and crossed his arms over his chest acknowledging defeat. Now devoid of his toy, his knee began to bounce, causing the desk to tremble. "The Doc said eighteen months! Can you believe that?"

"So Mr. Larabee won?" Ezra frowned and he shoved Buck from the desk with one well-placed push.

Buck stumbled aside, arms akimbo as he caught his balance, scowling feigned displeasure. "That's not what I said."

"It is what you inferred."

Buck stood a moment, soaking in Ezra's tone. Then he tipped his head and studied his teammate more intently. "You don't like it, do you?" he said. "Chris and Ella?"

Ezra's practiced blank face veiled any surprise at Buck's deduction. He remained silent.

"Why?" Buck asked, more curious than insistent. "I thought she'd lined you up with that credential program at the college. For tutoring? Teaching credentials, right?" Ezra looked away and Buck knew something troubled him. "Look, I've known Ella a long time. She's really settled down. So has Chris. This is good for both of them."

"Perhaps."

"Then why the bug up your ass?"

Ezra wrinkled his nose. "Crass, Mr. Wilmington, really . . ."

"Distraction ain't workin'. Spit it out."

"I do not wish to impart my prejudice on the situation."

"Bullshit." Buck sidestepped and reached for the paperweight but Standish pulled it into his lap where he rolled it between his hands.

Ezra's head tipped and he stared at the colorful swirls within the smooth, glass surface. After some consideration, he said quietly, "If you must know, I am simply troubled by the coincidence of it all. I do not believe in the concept."

Buck stood back, thoughtful. "You mean Ella taking a job in Denver?"

"I mean Mrs. Gaines showing up at all and especially at my nephews' school."

Buck laughed once, shook his head and paused before turning to go. "You checked her out. She's legit. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, Ez."

"Perhaps," Ezra muttered as Buck left him. His gaze centered on the paperweight balanced between his hands without really seeing it, and he replaced

the orb on his desk with care.



March rolled through bringing a slew of cases and back up assignments; spring showers revealing more than colorful flowers through the muddy snow.

"It's like the crooks are comin' outta hibernation," Nathan grumbled as he restocked his response bag at his desk.

Josiah stood by the copier, churning out pages of reports with tired-sounding wheezes. "Well spoken, brother. The hills are alive with the sound of . . ."

"If you break into song, I will smack you."

Josiah chuckled, unperturbed. Buck's fingers flew over his keyboard while he chuckled and Ezra sighed into his coffee. Then Chris strode into the room and snapped, "Conference room."

Nate rolled his eyes, dropped what he was doing and followed. Buck and Josiah fell in behind with shrugs and as usual, Ezra brought up the rear. Chris starting to talk as soon as the door snicked shut.

"There's a line on a new player trying to pick up where Lyman left off. No names yet."

"I wondered when this would happen," Josiah said. "Lyman's arrest last fall left quite a vacuum in the handgun trade. I'm sure he and his are missed."

"Any idea where the new guy's coming from or what part of town he's snoopin' about?" Buck asked.

"Not yet. With that in mind, Ezra, as soon as we do get some more to work with, I'm sure you'll be going in so don't make any plans."

Ezra gave him a sour look. "I am to put my entire life on hold?"

Chris snorted. "You don't have any long vacations planned any time soon and Travis thinks that this will come down fast. Just have a persona or two in mind."

"Certainly, Mr. Larabee. Director Travis' wish is my command."

Nathan's frown relayed that he wasn't sure how Ezra meant the words to be taken. Chris' chuff and tight grin said he knew exactly the spirit in which he made the comment.

"Well," Buck said, with a quick slap to the table. "I guess I'd best get some datin' done while I still can!"

Josiah glanced his way. "You and Louisa certainly are gettin' along," he said with a smile. "I believe this is the longest monogamous stretch I have ever witnessed for you, Buck."

"Amazin', isn't it?"

"Speaking of vacations, you four have any plans for the boys' spring break?"

"Swim meets, track meets, a horse show, and a robot thing, I believe," Buck reported. "All local so that leaves most of my evenings free. Chris? We still have to work out a schedule."

Larabee nodded. "Tonight. Meanwhile, let's outline what we knew about Lyman's contacts."

The five men put their heads together and refreshed their memories regarding the old case right up to quitting time.



Spring break at the Larabee/Wilmington ranch brought yellow, white and purple flowers, frisky horses and just enough structured time involving sports tournaments to keep everyone busy, yet connected. Each evening, dinner was a family event where each of the day's victories and losses were unveiled and discusses, ending the day with an upbeat feeling. Vin basked in every homey moment.

Vin watched the sun drop low, painting the scattered clouds with pastel fire in soul-warming silence with Chris by his side, mounted on tired horses that smelled salty with sweat. He felt safe, secure and alive. He felt excited and scared at the same time. Vin couldn't quite figure out the scary part.

"Dad?" he asked, his palms suddenly clammy.

"Yes?"

Vin frowned, unable to vocalize what he felt. He saw Chris glance his way when the silence stretched several seconds.

"Can't find words?" Chris asked gently, understanding.

Vin shook his head, shifting in the saddle and fingering Peso's black mane before meeting his father's eyes.

"Well, let me say how I'm feeling right now and maybe that will help." He smiled at Vin's obvious relief. "You and JD are growing up so fast." He turned his attention to the impending sunset. "This time of year, everything feels so new and fresh – like everything's starting over. New grass, new flowers, color exploding after months of cold white and gray.

"Change is everywhere, and change, or the thought of change, makes me feel unsettled. Not scared, just unsettled and I've discovered over the years that if you allow yourself to be open to change, the fear goes away.

"Like I said, you're changing from a boy to a young man and things will seem different just because of that; the seasonal shift adds to the feeling that things aren't the same."

"Different how?" Vin asked.

"Well, you'll get taller, more muscles," Chris began. "Your body changes

along with the way you think. You'll want to be more independent and have more say in your life. It's a confusing time, but I will always be here if you need to talk. Just remember that everyone goes through these changes but not everyone has the family support you and JD have."

He turned then, facing Vin with a sad smile and Vin knew that Chris understood exactly what he felt. Still, it didn't help dispel the unease. Neither one of them liked change.

"Well? Does that help?"

"Yeah."

"My job in all this is to guide you to your path, Vin, and there will be conflict. When we disagree, just remember that it's normal, I always want what's best for you, and that we can work things out as long as we're open with each other. Okay? It's your job to push the independence envelope."

Vin nodded, noting that the sun balanced on the top of the far range. "Gonna get dark soon. We better turn back."

Chris's mouth softened into a shadowy smile – not as sad, but not entirely happy, either. "Good idea," he said after a second or two and Vin wondered if these mysterious changes spooked his dad, too.

They reined the horses toward home, following a wide, clear fire break. Peso and Pony perked their ears and quickened their step, recognizing the path's direction. Vin moved up to walk alongside his father. "Dad?" he asked.

"Yes?"

"Are you gonna marry Mrs. Gaines?"

He saw Chris straighten in surprise and wondered about the quick glance thrown his way. Before he felt any alarm at the reaction, his dad smiled and let out an amused snort as he ducked his head. Vin felt confused rather than scared. It took a long moment for his dad to answer.

"You know that Ella – Mrs. Gaines – and I have been on a few dates, and that's where I intend to keep the relationship, son. You are my priority and she knows that. She and I have a history and it's been nice remembering those times. It was a fun time for us and it's nice to reminisce with someone who was there, that's all." He looked over to Vin, meeting his gaze with bright eyes. "This is your time, Vin, and I want to make sure you end up a strong, independent young man. I have no intention of putting that goal aside for anyone, including Mrs. Gaines. If it bothers you, I will stop seeing her."

Vin rolled that around in his mind as they rode and the sound of crickets and frogs increased as creeping darkness veiled the woods. The horses' heads bobbed in rhythm with their confidant, steady pace. Yellow pins of light in the growing shadows marked their destination.

What did he think about that? Vin recalled the uneasy feeling that rolled

over him when he first saw the new Director and the feeling never changed, but he could not sum up why he felt that way; the woman always smiled and seemed polite, and the teachers and Mrs. Richmond liked her. There was no reason not to like her. Maybe that's what his dad meant about growing up and new thinking. Maybe he just didn't understand his feelings right now.

"She doesn't talk to me," Vin found himself saying as he tried to work out what his gut was telling him.

"To tell you the truth, Vin, that's Mrs. Gaines' idea. She doesn't want you to think she's trying to become part of our life outside of school. She's keeping her distance to show you that she and I are just friends. That's all." Chris reached over and rested his hand on Vin's shoulder. "She knows how hard it is to be in middle school and wants you focused on your school work. Okay?"

"Okay." Vin felt a little better knowing that his feelings weren't unexpected or weird. He just had to get used to them. He smiled at Chris, both relieved and thankful they were family and that he finally had a normal life.

Vin's mind wandered to the D.C. field trip and all that it entailed, and decided that sleeping that far away from home wasn't as daunting a thought as it was a month ago.

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"I think I want to go on that field trip. It sounds fun."

"Then let's pull out all the paperwork when we get home." Chris reached over and gave Vin's shoulder an affectionate squeeze. "I think we'll both be fine."

CHAPTER NINE

Chris flipped the family calendar on the last day of April wondering how May managed to sneak up on him like this. It was impossible for it to fall into the realm of a surprise. The second week of the new month – which was four days away – was highlighted in eye-popping neon green with the words "VINS' TRIP" neatly printed in black, stretching from Monday morning to Friday afternoon. Below that, scrawled in faint pencil, "Chris to L.A." huddled below the neon green line in a more tentative fashion.

Looking at both lines of writing nudged a small zing of anxiety to life in his gut so he took a moment to reflect on the feeling before wadding up April. He glanced at the loose page in his hands; April had been a very busy month and Chris chuffed and smiled at the first picture that entered his mind: Truck talks while acting as chauffeur.

Both Vin's and JD's after school lives kept everyone on the run and, looking back, it seemed like the only time they had to talk was in the Ram en route to one event or another. It was an absurd amount of time behind the wheel, but Chris wouldn't change anything about their activities. Vin's innate shyness, usually edged with strong caution, lessened as the season rolled on and Chris could see a confident young man rising to the surface. He had to admit that Dr. Will's "solid foundation at home" theory worked. As soon as both JD and Vin believed in the reliable strength of family – that they had a secure home base that would always be there – venturing out wasn't as scary as it had once been in the past.

Chris wadded up the large sheet of paper with a snort. Whom was he fooling? Venturing out was as daunting to him as it was to his young charges. Malibu wasn't that far, really, when you factored in airplanes and cell phones. Physically, he and Vin would be separated by miles but digitally, they remained connected and only a plane ride away. This month would be a giant leap in personal growth for both of them.

The growing thunder of feet rolled down the hall toward the kitchen where

Chris stood and life spilled into the room in the form of two happy boys followed by one scowling adult. "Chris, tell JD that homework is not stored under the bed."

"I wouldn't a forgot it!" the smaller boy chirped, unrepentant and giggling.

"He just likes to watch Buck crawl under there," Vin added, giving his dad an open, vibrant smile as he grabbed their two lunch bags from the counter.

The door barely slowed them as they pushed their way outside. Buck paused long enough to fill a travel cup of coffee, grumbling, "My knees can't take that abuse anymore."

Still holding the ball of paper that was April, Chris opted to use the unexpected ammo and bounced it off Buck's head. His friend shot him an astonished glare. "Et tu, Bruno?" Buck whined.

"I think that's Brutus," Chris corrected, grinning. He crossed his arms and leaned back against the counter. "See you at the office."

Buck fitted the lid to his mug and grabbed a pile of folders from the kitchen table, talking as he arranged his grip on everything. "You do understand that you get double duty carpool to make up for next week since I have to drive two weeks in a row."

Recalling his previous thoughts, Chris nodded once. "Sure," he said before retrieving his coffee mug from the counter and taking a careful sip.

Buck nodded once. "As long as we're clear then. Later, boss." He slipped out the door without spilling a drop and moments later, Chris heard truck doors slam and the engine turn over.

Chris left the house at a more leisurely pace and scanned his land before slipping behind the wheel. Usually, taking in the extent of his home comforted him, but today, it left him feeling unsettled. Frowning, he started the Ram and swung down the long lane to the main road.

Chris went over the facts of their current case. Ezra would be going undercover in about a week, right after Chris' return from Malibu and the amount of intelligence to sift through was substantial. He knew his undercover agent would be up to speed on everything before he left the team, but everyone felt better sitting down one last time before Standish morphed into a different person. Since Chris was leaving for Malibu and leaving Buck in charge, their final briefing was moved up to tomorrow afternoon to accommodate his travel dates.

By the time he parked the truck and entered the Federal building, Chris' mind moved forward to what information they still needed for the meeting. He was the first one in the office and he appreciated the brief time of quiet. Dumping his briefcase on his desk, Chris grabbed his coffee cup and turned to head to the break room when his phone rang. Director Travis' office number showed on caller ID and the earlier unsettled feeling returned to his gut as he reached for the receiver. "Yes?" he growled.

"Come to my office. I have some new information."

"On my way." Chris hung up, instinctively knowing things had changed.



Ezra Standish strolled into the office, instantly aware that he was not the last one to arrive. "Where is our esteemed leader?" he asked as he circled around to his desk. Buck stood at the fax machine frowning at some papers he held where Josiah and Nathan sat at their desks.

"Don't know. His briefcase is here, so he must be up with Travis." Nathan's eyes never left his monitor as he talked.

"I see," Ezra said as he settled into his chair. He logged in and waited for his computer to boot, taking the time to think about the upcoming weekend and Vin's departure. Although he was excited for the boy and his big adventure, there was a certain level of suspicion that tickled his sensibilities when he thought about the boys' school.

He'd been discreet in his investigation of Ella Gaines and found nothing incriminating on the woman, but the idea of coincidence still did not sit well with him. He pursed his lips in thought, mentally running through Ella's background again. There were some gaps in information and that was becoming bothersome. It wasn't long until he had to put this aside for awhile, so he decided to look at what he had once more.

Ezra logged in and opened the last financial holdings file of Ella's he'd received from one of his many sources and scanned the list of stock holdings. He kept one eye on the door knowing it was a huge understatement that Chris would not be happy about his having this information. The imagined blow up caused a twitch of a smile to one corner of Ezra's mouth.

A moment later, Chris strode into the room. Without uttering a word, he still managed to impart the impression of a black thunderhead.

"Ready for briefing?" Chris snapped as he stormed to the conference room without pause.

"I just have to -" Josiah started.

"The question was rhetorical," Chris growled, shoving the door open. "Conference room. Now."

Ezra sighed and closed the file, rising to his feet with reluctance. He was the last one in the room and closed the door under Chris' pointed glare. The team leader started talking as soon as the door clicked shut.

"I hope you're up on your persona, Ezra, because Lyman's vacant spot is being filled by a man named Jacob Bain and the time line's been moved up."

"I see," Ezra answered, careful to sound calm. "So how much time do I have

to prepare? A week?"

"How about two days?"

"What?" Ezra sputtered, dropping into his chair with less grace than usual.

"That's preposterous!"

"Preposterous or not, word is that Bain's workin' up an order of guns to go to Mexico and that the delivery date will be soon. We need you in there yesterday."

Chris continued, ignoring Ezra's gaping mouth. "Lucky for us, Bain's ex-bookkeeper got picked up on charges unrelated to Bain and he tells us that Bain's looking for a new money man - you."

Ezra's mouth snapped shut as his mind raced. So much to do and so little time! He sniffed and shifted. "I must log my objection on the record, gentlemen. This will not be easy."

"You make it look easy, Ezra," Buck interjected in a soothing tone.

"Just use the personality you used in the Perryman case a few years back," Josiah said. "It'll work great for this."

Chris leaned back in his chair and gave Ezra a hint of a smile before turning to Buck. The acknowledgment stoked the pride he felt being part of this unusual brotherhood, and Ezra acknowledged the smile with a slight nod of his head. Chris continued. "Agent Wilmington will be taking lead on this because I'm leaving on Monday."

"There ya go," Buck said brightly, picking up the thread of the brief, craning his neck to scan Chris notes. "Does Lyman's old buddy Esteban show up in this mix?"

"Looks like it," Chris said, shoving the notes over the Buck because his friend would pull a muscle trying to read with his head at that angle. "He's a good in for Ezra. Esteban Gallegos - he's always been on the fringe but it looks like he may be stepping up to be a player."

The next hours were crammed with information.

Afterward, Ezra left the building headed home to cut and bleach his hair. Once in his car, he looked in the rear view mirror and examined the nearly closed hole in one ear lobe with a frown. Working the small, gold ball earring into the tiny dimple would hurt, but it was still possible. "*Edwin Stewart should really be much thinner,*" he thought, clucking to himself as he started the Jaguar. "*Maybe that recent vacation in Germany will account for the gain.*"

This attention to detail is what set Agent Standish apart from all other agents and fit into the unconventional family Team 7 had become. So, by the time he got to his condo, Ezra was, mentally, Edwin Stewart and he felt a trifle uncomfortable in his own home.

Tomorrow, his acquired family memories would be tucked far away into the

recesses of his mind.



There was no reason for Chris Larabee to set his alarm for Monday morning; he'd slept very little since Ezra went under on Friday. His first check-in wasn't scheduled until after Vin's flight landed in D.C. Between his worry and getting Vin ready to go, sleep remained elusive.

So, when the rising sun's first weak rays gave him just enough light to keep him from smashing his toes on the furniture, Chris rolled from the rumped sheets and started his day. The first thing he did was slap off the alarm while grumbling the uselessness of the device and the second thing he did was pull on the sweats piled on the floor, bedside.

The past two days had been difficult. Chris knew Vin picked up on his anxiety about Ezra, and he envied Buck's ability to shield his emotions with humor. Whereas Standish was a master of disguise, Wilmington was a master of deception in his own, Buck-like manner. JD seemed oblivious to Chris' stretched resolve and for that - and Buck - he was grateful. He just wished Vin was as oblivious.

Chris shuffled to the kitchen and started coffee, then wandered into the great room to see if it was light enough to feed the horses. Since he could barely make out the barn let alone any of the horses, he grunted once in irritation of the sun's obvious lack of integrity and decided to get dressed, hoping for enough time to squelch his emotions before Vin arose.

"Dad?"

"*First hope of the day dashed*", he thought before replying. "Hey, Cowboy." Vin emerged from the hall shadows in a noiseless fashion that Chris both admired and regretted. They met a step within the great room and Chris' hand automatically smoothed back the sleepy tangle of Vin's hair. "Up a little early, aren't you?"

Vin forehead furrowed. "I heard you. I was awake anyway."

Chris had no doubt about that and had to smile. "Come on. Let's watch the sunrise."

There was a time when this event was standard morning fare. When the boys first came to the ranch, Vin had a need to see the fading darkness unveil the barn every morning as if he didn't believe it was really there during the night. Once Vin understood that that this was his forever home and he trusted that his home wasn't a dream, he slept through the night through the rising of the sun. To have Vin sitting next to him again before the sunrise was a disconcerting way to start the week.

Chris made microwave hot chocolate for his son and poured a mug of coffee

for himself. Sitting on the smaller love seat, snuggled together sharing a warm blanket as they sipped the warm drinks, Chris and Vin watched the growing light paint the day with color in their usual quiet way.

Although the forgotten ritual began with the both of them feeling somewhat out of sorts, by the time they spied the bright gold ball peek over the trees, they both felt centered.

"Are you worried about Uncle Ezra?" Vin finally whispered.

"A little. I know he can take care of himself but I'll feel better when I hear his voice."

"Are you gonna talk to him before you go to Malibu?"

"That's the plan. It's also the plan for you to check in with me when you get to D.C." Chris said with a slight grin. "I'll feel better when I hear your voice, too."

Vin returned the smile and nodded. "Me, too."

"You are going to see a lot of neat things. D.C. has more stuff than you can ever imagine. Be sure to send me some pictures, okay?"

Vin frowned. "I don't know if I'll have any email," he said. "And I didn't check the batteries in the camera." He chewed his lip for a moment before looking aside guiltily. "N I ain't sure where the camera is, neither."

"Aren't sure. You aren't sure where the camera is."

Vin rolled his eyes and ducked his head. Chris fought the urge to laugh. "Hang on a sec," he said, putting his coffee down and rising from the couch. "I have something for you." Chris entered the kitchen and picked something up from the top of the refrigerator, then returned to the couch. "I figured it was time you had one of these."

He held up a brand new cell phone. Vin's eyes rounded in shock, and then his face erupted with a smile. "Really? It's for me?"

"Yes, but there are a few rules. The trip sheet did not forbid cell phones, but they strongly suggest not bringing them, so don't show it off or let anyone else use it." Chris didn't add that he didn't trust most boys Vin's age, but knew his son would appreciate the idea of a connection even if he never used it. By the look of relief on Vin's face, he was glad he followed his instinct. Chris handed it over and pointed to a button. "It's all charged. Let me show you how to do a few things."

They spent the next few minutes going over cell phone basics and were so absorbed that it took the call of an impatient, hungry horse to get them off the couch. From that moment, time flew too quickly.

The house was alive with JD's chatter upon their return from the barn, and it was nonstop until they dropped him at school. Well out of sight from the other kids, JD hugged Vin good bye and then ran inside.

Both Buck and Chris took Vin to the airport, finding the large, active school group with ease. Buck laughed at the harried looking faces on most of the

chaperons.

"Remind me to be busy when it's JD's turn for this, will ya, Pard?"

"Gladly," Chris muttered, eying the wild bunch in search of Mrs. Richmond. He spotted her at about the same time he felt Vin tug at his sleeve.

"There she is," Vin said, towing Chris along.

Charlotte Richmond stood with steady calm amongst the chaos, calmly speaking to both adults and students. In the very few times Chris met the woman, he felt as if there was some kind of invisible, defensive barrier between them. She was polite, but seemed wary of him, and Chris didn't quite understand Vin's attraction. Even now, as she turned toward them, he saw her face light up at seeing Vin, then suddenly shutter when her eyes met his.

"Mrs. Richmond," Chris greeted.

"Mr. Larabee," she replied in a rigidly polite way.

"Vin's very excited. Buck's checking the bag." He nodded to the teeming group of students. "Is everyone here?"

"Yes," she answered. Her smile seemed forced. "Vin will be fine, won't you Vin?" When her gaze fell on his boy, her features softened and she even broke into a genuine smile when he looked up at her with excited eyes.

"Yeah."

"Okay, then." Chris squatted down just enough to see eye-to-eye with his son and refrained from pulling him into a hug. "You have fun, Vin." He leaned in so only Vin would hear him. "Use that new phone when you get to the hotel. Remember, you can only use it at the hotel. That's one of the trip rules."

"I know. Thanks, Dad." Vin surprised him by giving him a hug in front of everyone.

When he stood and looked into Vin's eyes, all he saw was excitement, and he knew he'd be fine.

"It's time to check in and board," Mrs. Richmond said, turning Vin to the others with a hand on his shoulder. She gave Chris a cold look. "He'll be fine, Mr. Larabee. We've talked about this. Don't worry." Then she turned and walked away with Vin under her hand.

Chris watched them herd the students into two lines and proceed through security. Buck stood at his side.

"She's one cold woman," Buck muttered.

Usually, Chris would tease him about losing his touch, but this time, he had to agree. Once clear of the check point and moving again, Vin and nearly half of the other students turned and waved. Chris and Buck, along with a crowd of parents, waved back and Vin disappeared down the long hallway. Some parents sniffed and some sighed happily as they all broke away and exited in different directions.

"Well, that's it," Buck said, slapping Chris' shoulder. "Let's get busy so we

don't think about it." He shoved Chris toward the door.

Chris couldn't find the words to reply. He felt - empty and strangely untethered. Buck must have picked up on his friend's state because he didn't try to hold a conversation on the way to the office and, instead, hummed along to the country music station.

Once at the office, Chris headed directly to his office and dropped in his chair. In the bullpen, he heard Buck say, "Give him a little time, guys. I think he's a bit shell-shocked."

It dawned on Chris that Buck was right - that was exactly how he felt. He decided right then to make a point to not punish everyone for his stupid anxieties. To get his mind on to another track, he picked up the phone and called Ella to confirm his arrival time in Los Angeles that evening. It was time to act like a parent and be happy for his son's independence.

CHAPTER TEN

Late Monday morning, Denver, Colorado

Chris entered the bullpen after speaking with Ella, brain elsewhere, when he saw Buck twisting his chair back and forth all vim and grins and zeroed in on Chris' hot cheeks.

"I don't think Agent Badass here's gonna be too much help today, boys," Buck stated cheerily, leaning back, hands behind head.

"Buck," Chris warned. His longtime friend ignored the low snarl.

"Really?" Josiah bravely questioned. "A bit distracted, is he?"

"Yup. Not only will he be constantly checkin' Vin's flight status, he'll be considerin' Ella's offer, too, I'm thinkin'."

"Offer?" Nathan said, perking up when Chris' cheeks flushed darker.

"Offers, more 'n likely, am I right, buddy?" Buck waggled his eyebrows, Chris reciprocating with a burning glare. "Boy, she can make ol' Chris fidget like a cricket on a hot plate!"

"It's okay, Chris," Josiah eased into the exchange. "We're just a little jealous, that's all. What time's your flight?"

Larabee allowed his glare to ease and he almost offered a tiny smile to his profiler. "Around 1:30, so I don't have a lot of time. Ezra check in yet?"

Nathan glanced at the wall clock. "No, but it's still a bit early. Don't worry none, I'll call ya as soon as I hear from him. No new information came in over the weekend, either." He sat down and leaned back in his chair. "Raine was happy that I finally had a quiet on-call weekend."

"Speakin' of getting' together, when are you and Raine naming a date?"

"We're just waitin' for you, Buck, so we can have a double wedding."

Nathan's smart-ass smile made everyone chuckle.

"You just may be doing that sooner than you think," Chris said before turning to his office.

"Really, Buck?" Josiah and Nathan turned to the now frozen Wilmington,

who stuttered as he replied.

"Well, maybe, yeah, probably . . . I still get a tad shaky when I think about it but I can't imagine being without sweet Louisa." His goofy smile made the others laugh. "I'm serious! It's scary, the power of love!"

"Let's get to work, boys." When he sat at his desk, Chris looked at his desk clock and calculated the time until he heard from Vin.

Early Monday Afternoon, Malibu, California

Ella regarded her slim wrist and the jeweled watch that rested there, pleased that her plan was falling into place. Once Charlotte confirmed her arrival and room number, Ella would get the documents moving. "Sure is convenient having my own jets," she thought happily. Everything would be in motion before Chris even arrived in California; all there was to do now was live their life together.

"Chris, honey, soon you'll be mine," she said to her reflection. The gilded, oval mirror encompassed her entire body and the luxurious bed behind her. Her eyes took in the silk brocade bed covers and a shiver raced up her spine at the idea of rolling with Chris Larabee in the satin sheets underneath. "We'll finally be together, forever."

Breathing an impatient sigh, she wrapped her gossamer robe around her naked body, tying it closed as she left the bedroom and walked down the hall. Ella stopped in front of a locked door at the end farthest from the front door and reached up enough to rise up on her toes to retrieve the door's key from the frame edge. She unlocked the door, leaving the key in the lock, and stepped inside, stopping just beyond the threshold.

As she scanned the room in the near darkness, Ella lifted a necklace from her neck, gripping the locket in her hand. Once removed, she spread her fingers and allowed the fine, gold chain to drape across them like spider's silk. She looked at it a moment, then popped the locket open and hung the chain on a corner of an 8 by 10 silver-framed photograph perched on the top of a long, low table.

Her eyes trailed the chain then drifted to the framed photo where Chris, looking so handsome in a tuxedo, stood next to his bride. The gown and veil were beautiful, but scratches obliterated Sarah's face. Ella pursed her lips.

"You'll soon be holding me close again, lover. I had you first, after all."

Ella then shifted her attention to the dangling locket. Vin's face, scarred by a ragged X carved, was barely recognizable. The other side held a tiny oval of Chris' smiling face.

"And I'll soon be in your place, you little runt," she whispered at the defaced image.

Then, humming the Wedding March, she stepped back and then out of the room. With the door locked and the key replaced, Ella's thoughts turned to what

she should wear to the airport.

Late Monday Afternoon, Arlington, Virginia

Vin, somewhat surprised that they were landing already, leaned over his seat mate to look out of the window. Washington was a lot greener than he expected and there were splashes of color in the canopy of trees below. Mrs. Richmond said there were lots of dogwood and cherry trees in D.C. and they had very colorful blossoms, so he wondered if that was what he was seeing. Since he didn't remember any of those trees around Denver or in Texas, Vin looked forward to seeing them.

With a couple dozen classmates aboard, the chaperons were busy keeping the noise level down. Once Vin explored the bathroom and the in-flight movie began, he found the only reason to leave his seat on the aisle was to let his row-mates in and out. Time passed more quickly than he expected.

As the plane touched down, Vin looked across the aisle and smiled at Mrs. Richmond.

"Excited?" she asked, reflecting the smile.

Vin nodded. "Yeah," he answered truthfully.

Disembarking tweaked his nerves a little when the passengers pressed close in the aisles and the cabin became warm. Before departing Denver, they received instructions to stay seated until the rest of the passengers left so they could all leave in one group. Mrs. Richmond must have noticed his distress at the crowded condition because she gave him an understanding look and said, "It will be over soon. Just shut your eyes and think of horses."

Vin put the suggestion into action and felt his body relax. When it was their turn, things moved quickly and soon he plucked his suitcase from the baggage area and their group boarded a waiting bus. Mrs. Richmond dropped in beside him.

"Whew!" she said. "We're here!"

During the trip to the hotel, she pointed out a few sights and Vin was drawn into the history and the excitement.

Their group didn't linger long in the hotel lobby and soon they were divided into groups and heading to their rooms. Mrs. Richmond was two doors down and he knew liked the three other boys sharing his room. They ran track together. He looked at the room clock. An hour until dinner; he had time to call Chris.

Leaving the boys in the process of unpacking and throwing clothes, Vin entered the bathroom and pulled out his new cell phone. Chris picked up on the second ring.

"Vin?"

"Hi Dad!"

"You get there okay? No lost luggage?"

Vin giggled at the question, knowing his voice probably sounded as relieved

as his dad's did. "I got everything. It's nice here."

"Glad to hear it, Cowboy. I just got off the plane myself."

It did wonders to hear Chris' voice and they exchanged flight stories for a few minutes before someone pounded on the bathroom door.

"Shit or get off the pot!" Brendan Fischer, by the sound of it, shouted causing the other two to screech in laughter.

"Sounds like you gotta go," Chris chuckled. "Give me a ring tomorrow night when you're in for the night, okay? And you can text me anytime. Just be sure no one sees you because I might get in trouble."

Vin grinned at the mental vision of the portly Mrs. Abernathy chastising his dad, head tipped back and finger poking. "Okay. I love you."

"Love you too, Cowboy. Have fun!"

After hanging up, Vin tucked his phone away in his jeans pocket and realized he was hungry.

"Hurry up! I gotta pee!"

Vin unlocked the door and allowed Brendan to take his place. In the room, clothes were scattered everywhere, the television blasted Phineas and Ferb and his remaining two roommates shared Sour Patches and Twizzlers. He smiled. Maybe this was going to be fun.

Mid Afternoon, Los Angeles, California

Chris disconnected from Vin and felt a stab of loneliness as he strode down the hallway to the baggage area. He'd expected a voice mail, so the sound of his voice - live - lifted his mood. Vin sounded good and relief eased his mind. He slipped the cell into his pocket.

"Hey, Bareback." Ella's low, sultry voice caused a bubble of lava heat to burst low in his gut.

Chris turned and there she was at his elbow. When she took his arm, he caught the scent of her and he face slid into a wolfish leer.

"Hey, yourself," he growled as his gaze rose from her dazzling display of cleavage, over her broad, hungry smile and stopped at her smoldering eyes. He pulled her aside, out of the mill of bodies and turned her to him, and pulled her into a deceptively chaste kiss.

"That's all you got?" She purred, running her nails up and down his back.

"For now," he replied, drinking her in. "We don't need to be arrested in Baggage Claim."

Ella chuckled, thrilling Chris again, and clasped her hands behind his neck as she looked up at him. He rested his hands on her hips and held her at arms' length, appraising her outfit. He scanned her bare, tanned legs and impressive

white stiletto heels upward over the short, white skirt that hugged her curves in all the right places to the clingy, sleeveless blouse curved around the edges of her impressive rack. He barely noticed the muted floral print of the blouse.

"Hey. Eyes up here, buster," she laughed. Then she leaned in so he had to duck his head to place his ear next to her red lips. "Plenty of time for that later, Stud." He gasped at her quick nip to his ear lobe and his jeans tightened in response.

He straightened and groaned, eyes cast upward. "Gimme a minute. Don't think I can walk quite yet."

Ella sultry laugh didn't help very much but Chris managed to shuffle his way to the carousel while keeping an arm around her. Something in his eyes cleared a path through the crowd and in a matter of minutes, he had his bag and they were out the door. He squinted in the abrupt brightness.

"Damn," he breathed when he realized where she was leading him. A white town car with tinted windows sat curbside as a uniformed driver trotted up and took his suitcase.

"And there's a soundproof window between us an' him," Ella whispered in his ear. "And I seem to have forgotten to wear any underwear."

Chris groaned as she darted away and ducked into the back seat, glad that the driver's dark glasses hid his eyes and gave Chris the ever-so-slight hope that he was clueless.

Then he snorted, remembering Ella's less-than-shy ways in high school. "Fat chance," he muttered as she pulled him inside.

Late Afternoon, Denver, Colorado

When the dummy phone line rang, Nathan's shoulders slumped in relief. Ezra was a few minutes late.

"Pizza Palace," he answered, trying to sound bored. The others in the office turned his way.

"I w...w... ould like to order, p...p... lease."

The words and the stutter told JD that the undercover agent was not alone. "Hold on a sec," Nate replied, looking to Josiah to make sure the call was recording. When the profiler nodded, Nathan continued. "Okay, go ahead."

"Two m...m... edium number f...f... our p...p... pizzas."

"Large!" a man's close by voice barked in the background.

"M...m... make that l...l... large," Ezra corrected, but Nathan the code word "medium" already told them that there were two men in the room with the undercover agent. Number four meant an untapped line.

"Esteban and Bain?" Nathan guessed.

"Yes, th...that's right," Ezra continued. "Delivery." That meant the address given would be the location of Bain's work space, not his living address. Nate jotted it down.

"Pepperoni, s... sausage, mushrooms," Ezra said. Three toppings meant he was in place and hired. "Extra cheese." He hadn't seen the guns. "Onions, b...b...lack olives." Nathan wrinkled his nose. Those last two meant Ezra's partners in crime had no taste when it came to pizza.

"Got it." Nathan waited for Ezra to hang up first, which he did after rather abrupt thanks.

"Now we're gettin' somewhere," Buck said moving to a big map posted on the wall. He stuck a red pin in the address Ezra gave. Black and yellow pins already showed the location of Bain's competitors. "He's well to the east. That puts him closer to the industrial area. What's at that address, Josiah?"

"Looks like a business - a bar, I believe, called the Black Serpent."

"That's a dive neighborhood," Buck chuckled. "I'm sure old Ez is havin' the time of his life."

"I'll let you know," Nathan said brightly, calling in the pizza order. "I'm outta here. By the time I get the Pizza Palace hat and pizza boxes, the order should be done."

"Don't forget the magnetic sign," Buck said, laughing.

"It's me, remember?" Nathan chuckled, remembering the time Ezra refused to attach a Pizza Palace sign to his Jag when an unmarked pool car wasn't available. It had become a team joke.

Nathan trotted out the door feeling, his mind on the delivery and the job. Chris' obvious absence failed to dampen the undeniable trust that tied this team together, and there was no sign of the upcoming trouble that would push their bond to unwelcome extremes.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Late Tuesday Morning, Malibu, California

Ella, dazzled by her inner glow of satisfaction, lazily rolled her head at a buzzing sound. Chris' phone danced on the end table, stopped, and danced again where Chris left it after Vin woke them. Frowning, she glanced toward the bathroom to make sure the door was closed before reaching for the annoying device. Buck's name showed on the screen. She pursed her lips and turned the cell phone off, then regarded it a moment. Sometime today, it would have to disappear.

She heard the toilet flush and put the phone down. Then the sink faucet squeaked and water rushed for a few moments before the bathroom door swung open. For just a second before the interior light clicked off, she enjoyed the outline of her lover's naked body, pleased with its athletic proportions and confident grace.

Finally, all that was hers. Satisfaction aroused and her want for him blossomed once again as he strolled to the mussed up bed. She threw back the sheet and reached for him, and he gave her a lopsided smile.

"Well, looks like you're ready for round two," she purred, taking his hand and pulling him down.

"I may be up for that," he teased.

She hungrily devoured his mouth and rolled him into the drift of satin sheets. The romp was everything she ever dreamed, as was every penetrating encounter. Ella had to push him last night to be the physically demanding kind she remembered, wondering at one point when her dream man had become so irritatingly gentle, but it wasn't long before he was the pillar of power she remembered.

Now, she shrieked at an orgasm bringing her to levels she'd only dreamed of these past years. Ella sank back with a gasp and watched with exhausted, wicked pleasure as Chris flushed with exertion and came hard inside her. After, he dropped to her side, panting, and their sweat-slick bodies cooled together with an

ocean breeze.

Once she they caught their breath, Ella rolled her head aside and met his eyes, narrowed with his grin. Chris slipped his arm under her shoulders and he sighed, settling back to look at the ceiling. Ella drew her fingernails diagonally across his abdomen and chuffed when he shivered.

"We could run away," she said lightly, circling his nipple. "I hear a lot of the moms talking about running away."

He chuckled dryly. "Sometimes the family day to day does get a little mundane, but I can't get over how lucky I am to have another chance."

"*With me?*" she immediately thought, but Ella knew better than to fall in that trap. Now wasn't the time to ask for commitment. That boy needed to be out of the picture first. "Family man Chris Larabee. Never thought I'd hear that," she said softly. "I see how much it means to you, though. You're quite a man, you know that?"

"And you're quite a woman." He kissed her temple and absently stroked his fingers through her hair for a few minutes. "Can't help but feel a little guilty, though. Not used to bein' away on personal time."

"Everyone needs a break and Vin is fine, right?" He nodded once. "Dr. Will says he's doing great and Charlotte is there. Is he going to call again tonight?"

"No, they have a group study tonight. He'll call in the morning. It seems so far away."

"*Good God,*" she thought, but said aloud in a school teacher voice, "Calling usually makes home sickness worse. Keep that in mind, Dad." She twisted to lie on her side and snuggled in close, loving the feel of his long body against hers. She gazed beyond the bed and out of the window. "Look at that ocean."

Chris angled his head at the request. "It is beautiful. Haven't been on the coast for a while."

"I think tonight's a perfect skinny dippin' night. Remember the quarry?"

Chris laughed heartily and pulled her close. "Oh, yeah!", he chuckled. "Can't forget that place!"

"I believe it was where the nickname Bareback Larabee was born."

Smiling, he rolled into her arms and lustily fondled her breasts, causing her to gasp in pleasure. "I still think you planned that," he said, pushing her hair aside as he leaned in and nipped her ear lobe.

Shivers coursed through her and they kissed some more before she finally mentioned Buck's call. Chris sat up with a sigh and retrieved the phone.

"Probably lettin' me know Ezra's checked in." He punched a number and smirked at her pout. "Last call of the week unless everything goes to hell, I promise."

"Okay," she moped, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. "I'll get us

something to drink."

"Coffee?" Chris asked hopefully.

Ella threw a diaphanous robe over her shoulders and offered a smoldering smile at Chris' raised eyebrows and pleased expression, and she was suddenly happy again. "Your wish 'n all that stuff," she said with a wink and twirl toward the door.

When Chris and Buck started talking, Ella headed to the kitchen with a different plan in mind. She started the coffee, removed a burner phone from a drawer and made a call. A man's voice gave a one-word greeting. She felt a bolt of energy surge through her veins.

"Get it in motion as soon as it's ready," she said. "Call me when it leaves Denver."

She didn't wait for an answer before disconnecting. Her heart raced. This was it. The next call she received started the countdown to her new life. The thought served to accentuate her excitement and made a moan of want part her lips. Finding her knees suddenly weak, Ella sagged against the counter, slipped one hand under her robe and down the length of her torso so she could feel the wetness that was Chris. She relished the thrill that zinged to the tips of every limb.

God, getting what you wanted was an amazing aphrodisiac!

Early Tuesday Afternoon, Denver, Colorado

Edwin Stewart parked his sensible sedan behind the closed club, noting how ugly this part of town was in the cruel light of day. He put the car into park and checked his hair in the rear view mirror, then slipped from the driver's seat and retrieved his jacket from the rear seat, shrugging it on as he looked around.

Bain's car was here, as was Esteban's unsightly raised truck and a third vehicle he did not recognize. He memorized the plate as he lifted his small briefcase, locked the vehicle doors and strolled toward the bar that was his new place of employment. He paused on the sidewalk, ensured that the face of his wrist watch faced the unknown vehicle, and clicked the disguised camera button.

Satisfied with the idea of catching another spider in this investigative web, Agent Ezra Standish schooled his character's features back into their non-threatening softness. The slight stutter had been a brilliant touch. Edwin Stewart was so meek; everyone at the club spoke around him as if he wasn't there. From what he overheard, this cache of imported handguns and, to his delight, Cuban cigars would be rounded up by the end of the week.

Edwin reached the back door and rolled his shoulders downward, creating an illusion of a much shorter man before pushing the heavy door inward. He

wrinkled his nose at the stale smell and blinked in the sudden, damp darkness. Shuffling his feet until his eyes adjusted, Edwin made his way through the small, disgusting kitchen that contained nothing more than a freezer, a sink and an industrial microwave for cooking up a pathetic selection of "hors d'oeuvres".

It was distasteful to even consider a Tater Tot a hors d'oeuvre. Tater Tots - if he hadn't become Vin and JD's adopted uncle, Ezra Standish most likely would have never crossed paths with such a food item.

Edwin crossed through the swinging door separating kitchen from bar and stopped. Before him, Bain straightened from a prone body at his feet, and wiped bloody knuckles on his jeans. An unknown man sitting at the bar chuckled and sipped a long neck.

Ezra thought this assignment couldn't end too soon.

"Stewie!" Bain called, his grin a checkerboard of teeth and gaps. "You're early!" The words carried on a wind of tequila.

"S...S...Stewart. It's Mr. S...S...Stewart," Edwin muttered, wrinkling his nose and pulling his heavy briefcase to his chest. He wrapped his arms around it as if trying to shrink and disappear, then gave the downed man a wary look.

"Ah, don't worry 'bout ol' Esteban. He's okay. I's just makin' a point."

"Oh." Carefully, Edwin shuffled around the body that he now recognized as Esteban and circled around to stand behind the bar. The floor was as sticky and as wet as the bar itself and for some reason he'd yet to figure out, the cleanest, driest spot was usually right next to the minuscule sink. That's where he set the briefcase down.

"Pour yerself a drink. Day's just startin'."

"Um. Y...yes," Edwin stuttered. "I j...just need the receipts and I will g...g...get to w..work." As he spoke, Ezra's quick eyes took in everything he could see around the stranger at the bar, hoping to match a name to one of the few players he hadn't met in the past four days. He didn't expect to see what rested on the bar: two brand new United States passports.

"Like what you see?"

The unknown man's tone was hostile and Ezra slowly raised his eyes, mind racing. "P...pardon?"

"I said, like what you see?" The stranger picked up the booklets and fanned them in his meaty hand.

Bain gave Esteban an affectionate kick in the side before lumbering over to stand, swaying slightly, by the speaker. "Best paper man in the biz, Stewie, don't believe anyone else. Does great work. Ain't cheap, though."

Edwin straightened a bit. "P...p...papers? Like, c...c...counterfeit?" This was an unexpected turn of events.

The man slapped the table with a crack then leaned in toward Edwin, eyes

aflame. "It's ART, you pipsqueak! Fuckin' ART! Look at that!" He flung the top booklet at the agent, who juggled it in surprise before getting a grip. "I nail every detail, even the holograms. I. Am. The. Best." He punctuated each work with a finger poke to Edwin's chest

"Um, o...o...okay." Quivering, Ezra's sharp eyes examined the passport cover and had to admit, it was good. He opened it and looked closer, then turned to the page that identified the owner.

It was all he could do to hold in a gasp; instead, his fingers tightened imperceptibly on the falsified document and it wasn't too difficult to maintain his scared rabbit look.

Vin's face stared at him from the pages, but the name next to it was Michael Kevin McKenna.

"Gimme that back, boy, I gotta get these on a jet to Washington." He finished off the long neck and snagged the forged passport from Ezra's grasp, grinning stupidly. "These are prob'ly for some Senator's secret mistress," he laughed. Ezra's mind spun as he watched the man stroll from the bar, out of reach and whistling.

There was no way to contact the team with this alarming discovery for at least an hour. Ezra focused his scattered thoughts when Bain dropped on a barstool and motioned for Edwin to hand over the books. Reluctantly, the undercover agent opened his case and pulled out the ledger that contained the real numbers Bain earned, and then handed it over. Next, he pulled out the laptop that held the laundered I.R.S. version of Bain's business.

Clutching the laptop to his chest, Edwin circled around the bar to sit by his boss, jumping when the forger slammed the back door. Ezra's mind wheeled; he had to do something.

"Wh...what is that m...m...man's name?" he asked Bain as he sat gingerly on a sticky, torn stool next to the gunrunner. Esteban snored on the floor behind him.

"Dickie O'Shea"

"Irish. How q...q...quaint," Edwin said, his thoughts racing with escape scenarios.

Bain flipped the ledger open and ran his finger down the columns as Edwin turned on the laptop. The second hand on his watch moved in torturous slowness for the next hour.

Late Tuesday Afternoon, Washington, D.C.

Charlotte Richmond's practiced smile made her cheeks ache. She glanced at her watch in a well-rehearsed motion and worked to ignore her impatience as she watched over the dozens of students eating box snacks in a park. In the midst of

them, Vin stood out in her eyes. She could tell by his posture and tentative smile that being in this crowd for the better part of a day wore on him.

She glanced at her watch again and estimated the earliest she could get her package from Mrs. Gaines - sometime around nine tonight. Huffing once with irritation of waiting, a chaperon beside her gave her a glance.

Charlotte forced a grin. "My feet hurt," offered in explanation. The other woman smiled back and nodded in sympathy, then turned back to the group.

Taking a moment to gather herself, Charlotte waited a few more minutes before deciding on action, and then scanned the crowd for the trip leader, Tony Clemmons. He stood off from the main bunch, under a tree with clipboard in hand, nodding as two other teachers spoke using agitated hand motions.

Vin wasn't the only one feeling pressure.

Charlotte strolled over to the trio just in time to hear Mr. Clemmon's low, calming voice putting matters right. She paused until the two teachers appeared satisfied and walked away, and then approached.

"Tony," she greeted. "Problems?"

He smiled at her, looking tired. "Hello, Charlotte. No, no problems. Nothing unexpected, anyway. What's up?"

"Nothing much. I was just watching Vin . . . Vin Tanner? I'm a little concerned for him."

"Really?" Tony flipped through a few of the sheets on his board and consulted one. "He's the boy you're assigned to, yes?"

"Yes. He has some social issues due to his circumstances and I think he needs a little break from the pressing crowd." She held a polite smile.

Tony read a sheet as she spoke and nodded when she was through. "Well, that's what you're here for, right? What's the plan?"

"The next stop is the American West exhibit, right?" He nodded. "Vin needs to do a report about it, so I thought I'd have him bring his dinner to my room and he can eat and write in peace."

"Can I join you?" Tony laughed.

Charlotte forced a short chuckle, panicked that he might just do that very thing. "Sure, but the TV stays off, so you'll miss the game." She vaguely recalled something about football. Or golf. Maybe it was basketball...

"Drat," he snorted, grinning. "Okay, then, you're on your own. Let his lead chaperon know."

"Will do!" She gave him a pleasant smile, relieved. See you later, then."

There was a bounce in her step as she walked away. Exhilaration made her blood race.

Mid Afternoon Tuesday, Malibu, California

It was an odd feeling, walking around Ella's Malibu home stark-ass naked with endless views of the ocean through every west-facing window. Chris smirked as he tucked the towel around his waist and cracked the bathroom door to let out the shower steam.

Since there was no mirror in the elaborate marble shower, he had to shave over the glass bowl sink instead. He'd have to tease Ella that there was, in fact, something lacking in this house. He proceeded to lather his face with the provided shaving brush.

"Vin would love this place," he thought as he took the first swipe with his razor. He let his mind drift to his son's adventure. "I wonder how he's doing." He acknowledged the flash of guilt and worry that thoughts of their separation evoked, but put it quickly aside. Yes, he was making progress on that front. "I wonder if Vin still gets anxious?" he automatically thought.

After the final swipe of the blade, Chris rinsed the brush and blade, and put them aside as he patted his face dry. There was a light knock on the cracked door and Ella half-stepped into the room with a sparkling smile.

"I laid out those slacks and shirt I told you about. I'm sure they will fit you." She eyed him blatantly from head to toe, leaning against the door frame. She wore a lacy bra and scant, matching thong.

Chris leered at her as he hung up the hand towel. "How long do we have to stay at this thing?"

Ella chuckled. "Not long. It's just cocktails. I just have to acknowledge some of my husband's business investors, that's all. My continued investment in the company allows me to keep this house, you know."

"Guess that's reason enough." He leaned in and kissed her velvety soft lips, then straightened as he grabbed another towel and ruffled his hair. "Can we be late?" he teased with burning eyes.

"There will be lots of time for that later," Ella said hoarsely. She watched him for a few seconds, and then scanned the sink area before picking up the used razor. "I'll take this," she said. "I have a better one you can use from now on."

Chris shrugged. "Okay."

She withdrew, disappearing into the hallway. Feeling a bit overheated, Chris opened the bathroom door fully and leaned out to watch her walk away. When she reached the end of the hallway, she stopped at a door that Chris assumed was a linen closet all this time and took something from the frame over the door.

"A key," he realized as she worked the door knob. He heard the familiar sound of a lock disengaging and cocked his head in puzzlement as she disappeared in the dark room, shutting the door behind her. "So it's not a closet," he thought with

a shrug before returning to dry his hair, the incident forgotten as his thoughts returned to their antics of the day. They had yet to go outside.

He smiled as he cleaned up after himself in the bathroom and headed to the bedroom, where the clothes Ella mentioned lay on the elaborate, four-poster bed. He blamed himself for not packing better clothes, but then again, he wasn't expecting to attend any business events, either.

He pulled on his briefs, then the slacks, pleasantly surprised at the good fit. From the few photos of Ella's most recent, deceased husband, he saw around the place, he didn't figure they would wear the same size. Just lucky, he supposed.

"I don't trust coincidence."

Ezra's voice slipped through his mind and Chris shook off the wariness that followed. *"I've got to work on leaving work, at work,"* he thought.

The rest of the items – shirt, jacket, shoes – fit just as well as the slacks and he was just brushing the slacks smooth when Ella walked in wearing a very flattering cocktail dress that caressed every curve of her body. Her hair swooped up in an elegant way that left her neck bare.

"Whoa," he said with a smile. "Very nice."

"Should be for fifteen-hundred dollars," she quipped, sashaying past him to stop at a velvet jewelry box. She opened the lid and looked back over her shoulder with smoky eyes. "A little help, here?"

Chris stepped up behind her and reached around, pressing his body to hers, as he reached for the dazzling necklace in the box. He kissed her neck as he lifted the jewels and she sighed as he draped the diamond encrusted creation around her neck and worked the closure. He felt her eyes on him in the big oval mirror before them as she donned the accompanying earrings.

"Nice," he whispered, resting his hands on her shoulders. The fine material under his fingers was warm from her body heat. "Silk?"

"Yes," she replied. With earrings placed, she reached back with both hands and firmly grabbed his ass with a teasing grin. "It comes off very easily."

Chris nibbled at the enticing space just behind her ear lobe. "Let's get this over with so I can see if you're lying." He stepped back and looked around, absently patting the jacket pockets. "Have you seen my phone?"

"Nope. We'll look for it later because we have to go. Get the door?" When Chris was out of the room, Ella turned on a towering heel and opened the bedside drawer. Lifting out Chris' cell phone, she took a moment to tuck it under the mattress. "I have my phone," she called. Then she checked her hair once more, smiled at her reflection and joined Chris at the front door. She took his hand and they walked out together. "We won't be long," she promised.

Side by side, they descended the short flight of stairs to the curb and approached a waiting limo.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mid-Afternoon, Tuesday, Denver, Colorado

"Something is amiss," Ezra stated firmly. Josiah could tell by his tone that this was serious, and the fact that Ezra whispered meant he was afraid of being overheard and the profiler couldn't recall a time where Ezra put himself in such a precarious position.

"Can you talk?"

"I have a few moments. Someone needs to collect Mr. Tanner. He is in danger."

Alarmed and completely blindsided by Ezra's words, Josiah shot to his feet and glanced around the office. Luckily, Buck chose that moment to enter the bullpen and Josiah frantically waved him over and punched the button for speaker phone.

"Vin's in D.C. We can't get to him," Josiah said.

"Then contact someone who can! About an hour and a half ago, I examined a counterfeit passport with his photograph and a different name."

"What the hell are you talkin' about?" Buck slammed his coffee cup on the desk, slopping hot liquid over the edge. Nathan jogged in from the break room in alarm and came to Buck's side.

"Someone requires a forged passport for Mr. Tanner and it is being delivered to D.C. as we speak."

"Are you sure?" Josiah still tried to fit the elusive piece of information into growing puzzle.

"Yes, damn it, I am sure!" Ezra snapped in a low voice. "Why ever else would I take this chance to contact you?" There was a pause and the agents heard him take a breath. When he spoke again, he was calmer. "The only other information I have is the forger's name, Dickie O'Shea. Irish, obviously."

"Never heard of him," Buck snapped.

"You may want to check on Mr. Tanner's well-being and speak with Mr.

Larabee regarding coincidence."

"What are you talking about?" Buck demanded.

Ezra's voice dropped to a near whisper as background voices grew louder.

"Remember our conversation. I have to go. Find Vin. Now."

The phone disconnected abruptly. The three agents exchanged bewildered expressions.

"What conversation was he talking about, Buck?" Nathan asked.

Buck, squeezing the back of his neck as he tilted his head back, recalled the brief talk he and Ezra had regarding coincidence and Ella Gains. "Ezra looked into Ella Gaines' background because he thought her arriving in Denver was not coincidence."

"So, what's that got to do with Vin?" Nathan questioned.

Josiah's head tipped in thought. "Ezra thinks Ella arranged for the passport? Since she's in California and she's the one that found Charlotte Richmond. . ."

"The only fact we have now is that passport," Buck said as suspicion bloomed and panic sparked. He plucked his phone from his pocket. "I need to contact Chris," he muttered. He was well aware of Nathan and Josiah's eyes on him. "Dammit, Chris, pick up!" A second later, he swore and redialed. "Voicemail!" He ended the call with an impatient jab, muttered to himself and tried another call. "All that damned paperwork for the field trip is at home. Fuck! The school office is closed for spring break!"

"Is Mrs. Potter still at your place?" Nathan asked.

Buck started dialing again. "I'll try her. Josiah, you dig up what you can on that O'Shea character." Josiah hit the keyboard, fingers flying. "Richard 'Dickie' O'Shea has priors for forgery and grand theft. His last contact with law enforcement was a little over a year ago." The big man picked up his desk phone and tried a number. "Disconnected," he said right after. "Any luck with Mrs. Potter?"

"Not answering. She's probably drivin' around with JD." Buck trotted to his desk and grabbed keys. "Tell Travis what we know."

"It's not much," Josiah pointed out.

"I know, I know. I'm on my way home to find that field trip paperwork. I'll find Ella's number in Chris' cell bill, too." Buck looked to Nathan. "In the meantime, keep tryin' Chris."

"And I'll send the P.D. to O'Shea's old address," Josiah said

"Good, but right now the priority is getting Vin somewhere safe. Nate, brief Travis!" Buck yelled as he sprinted from the office.

Early Tuesday Afternoon, Malibu, California

Chris fidgeted as he and Ella posed for a photograph just inside the entrance of the biggest house he'd ever seen. When the limo pulled through the main gates

and started up the circular drive lined with limos, Porsches, Bentleys and even a Tesla, he laughed aloud.

"Jesus, Ella, what kind of business was your husband in? I've never even heard of Cletus Fowler! Christ!"

She tossed her head and laughed, wrapping her arm around his. "Oh, they just like to show off. You're a better man than any of them I've met, Bareback."

They chuckled and made bawdy comments about the other guests they could see until it was their turn to off load.

"Let's have some fun," she said with a big smile as the door opened. Chris slipped out, adjusted his jacket, and then held out his hand for her. She rose from the limo with complete grace and took his arm. They strolled across the portico looking indifferent.

Uniformed hired help that could have been butlers, security or servants checked their names on the list and sent them to the photographer along with flutes of champagne. Chris, still blinking from the flash, ushered Ella into the main room where they mingled and dined on the innumerable hors d'oeuvres until the sun hovered over the horizon. Ella dragged him to the wide balcony high on a cliff overlooking the ocean and they watched the sunset while listening to a string quartet.

"We can have this, you know," she said, snuggling close. "You could stay here with me and we could live every day to the fullest."

"Yeah," he drawled, looking outward. "Vin would want a barn, though."

After a fleeting second, she said, "Of course. A barn. I could wear my heels in a barn."

"You could wear whatever you wanted in a barn," Chris said lowly. "You could wear your birthday suit in the barn, too. I'd prefer the latter, of course."

They chuckled and he pulled her in tighter to his side. "I mean it, Chris," she said. "We are so good together."

"Well, I still have Vin to think about. He's my first concern, Ella, he has to be. It may be a little too soon. It hasn't been a year . . ."

"Since he's been back? Yeah, I know, but kids are resilient. They like to see their parents – or parent – happy, too. It's good for them. A stable base."

They watched surfers from the deck with several other guests, enjoying the piano player's skill that spilled outside. After a while, Chris straightened and turned to the house, glancing at his watch. "You ready to blow this joint yet?"

A subdued Ella walked a little apart as they crossed the deck. "Well, I didn't tell you that I'm here to talk a little business, too. Why don't you go on and get the house opened up? I'll be right along."

"I could wait," he said.

"I don't want you alone with all these cougars," she teased, taking his hand.

"And besides, there will be overseas calls involved so it may take a little longer than I want." She stroked his face. "I'll be along."

He leaned down and kissed her. "Should I send the limo back?"

"No need. Let Simon go home for the night. I'll borrow one of Cletus' cars. He has at least a dozen, and we can use it to drive up the coast a little tomorrow. I'm fine." She returned the kiss, deepening it to the brink of obscene.

"Oh, you're more than fine," Chris replied.

Ella gave his hardening crotch a playful swipe. "Just wait for me at home, lover." She winked and turned away while he headed out the door.

Waiting for the limo, he absently patted his pockets as he stood on the marble stairs. "Maybe I'll look for that damned phone," he muttered.

Late Tuesday Afternoon, Washington D.C.

"Chaperons! Make sure everyone is cleaned up and ready for dinner! We'll meet in the lobby at six o'clock!"

Charlotte Richmond was glad that she wasn't the lead on this trip, and gave an acknowledging nod at Mr. Clemmens' announcement. She knew she should be as exhausted as the other teachers and chaperons appeared, but in reality, her blood raced with excitement. This was really happening; their new lives started tonight. Saving a boy from a horrible life and gaining a son made her heart soar.

Forcing her focus back to the now, Charlotte took a deep breath and looked for Vin's lead chaperon, spotting her off to one side by the elevators. Students and adults formed ragged lines, waiting their turn to load up. Janice VanDorn looked tired. Charlotte squelched a smirk as she approached.

"Janice," Charlotte greeted when the woman turned to her. "I'm taking Vin Tanner for some down time. I'll handle his dinner."

"Okay." Janice managed a smile. "Wouldn't you rather take one of the louder ones?" she joked.

Charlotte laughed. "Maybe next time."

She gave Janice's shoulder a sympathetic pat before moving down the line to Vin's side. She'd noted his location before coming over and felt a comforting warmth wash over her when he looked up at her arrival. "Come on, Vin. Let's take the stairs."

She was glad that Vin didn't like crowds. Where they were going, he'd have an entire rain forest to explore and a small town to call home. It would be a far cry from Denver's choked streets and the isolated ranch where his adopted father kept him. Vin had the potential to be a great environmental scientist, what with his love of nature, and Brazil would be a perfect fit for them.

"What's your favorite thing so far?" She asked as they ascended. Just talking with her boy calmed her world.

"I really liked the Indians. And that swinging thing. The one where the earth

turning makes it move?"

"The perpetual pendulum? I like that too. Did you understand why it swings?"

The two of them talked about the pendulum and what Vin's report would contain. When they reached the room Vin shared with three other boys, she saw him stiffen. Behind the closed door was the sound of things being thrown and laughing. Charlotte put a hand on his shoulder and made him face her.

"Things okay in there? I know it's probably a little loud."

Vin shrugged, raising his eyes from the floor to meet hers. "It's okay. Just loud all the time." Then he smiled. When his whole face lit up and his eyes brightened like a spring sky, Charlotte felt her heart race.

"How about we have dinner in my room and you can start your report?" she said, giving his shoulder a squeeze. "I don't think you'll have much of a problem writing it, but I think you need a little break from the crowd. How about it? I already cleared it with the higher-ups."

Vin nodded, looking relieved. "Okay." He stuck his key card in the door and pushed into the room. "I'll get my stuff. It'll be quiet when I call Dad, too."

Her heart shuddered. Soon, that man would be out of his life. She nodded at him and forced the smile to stay on her face. "Wash up and I'll order our dinner. Come to my room in about fifteen minutes?"

He nodded. "Okay." He stepped into the room and was immediately whacked on the head with a pillow.

A boy's voice shouted, "Sorry!" and Vin shut the door.

Charlotte Richmond stared at the door and found that although her feet wouldn't move, her mind raced.

This was her last night with this name. When she and Vin boarded Mrs. Gaines' jet later tonight, she would become Adelaine Francis McKenna and have a fresh, new beginning as well as a son to fill the void left by her own lost child.

She patted her pockets in search of her room's card key when something vibrated in her hip pocket.

The burner cell. A zing of excitement made her fingers tingle as she put the device to her ear. "Hello?" she breathed.

"It's time, Charlotte." She could feel the smile on Mrs. Gaines face as she spoke. "All the documents will be on the jet. It will touch down a little after eight."

"That's wonderful," Charlotte whispered, her throat suddenly tight as tears banked in her eyes. "It's finally happening!"

"Have a great life, Charlotte. You are doing that boy a great service."

Butterflies swarmed in Charlotte's stomach, making her giddy. "I know. Thank you from both of us. Good bye, Mrs. Gaines."

"Good bye and be happy."

Energized, Charlotte powered off the phone and pushed into her hotel room. Looking around, she realized how little she actually needed to start a new life. Dropping the burner phone in the trash was like cutting the umbilical cord of this life; she blew out a deep breath to collect her thoughts. They should leave for the airport in about two hours. Long enough for Vin to eat and keep busy on the report he'd never turn in. Charlotte called the front desk from the bedroom phone and ordered a taxi for that time and then headed to her makeup case.

She dug around a moment and pulled out a small prescription drug bottle. Inside, mixed in with her Xanax, were four other pills. Charlotte separated one of the odd tablets and went over the dosing in her mind. She broke the pill in half, dropping one part back in the bottle and tucking the other half in her jean pocket. She and Mrs. Gaines had gone over the roofie dosage several times, and Charlotte had done some research on her own at a public computer, so she was confident on the dosage. By the time they got to the airport, Vin should be sleepy. He wouldn't remember anything of the trip from D.C. to their new home.

Starting fresh. Exhilarated, Charlotte gathered a few things into a backpack. The wait would be nerve-wracking, but the result would be well worth the worry.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Late Tuesday Afternoon, Denver, Colorado

"Dammit, Chris! Pick up!" Buck disconnected the call with an agitated finger poke as soon as he heard the first syllable of Chris' voice mail message. He charged up the path to the ranch front door and unlocked it with focused intent and pushed his way in without pause. He headed directly to the den, the front door slam shaking the house.

Buck gave Chris a mental nod for his neatness, finding the D.C. trip packet neatly stacked on one side of the desk. He snatched it up, flipped through the papers and seized the "Emergency Contact" sheet where he looked for something more personal than the hotel front desk. The chaperon list fit the bill and he started by calling Charlotte Richmond's number. It went directly to voice mail.

Buck did his best to ignore Ezra's quip regarding coincidence as he started at the top of the sheet to call every listed parent. The first of the "Bs" answered. Background noise nearly overpowered a woman's voice.

"HELLO?"

"Elaine Becker? This is Buck Wilmington." He remembered her from numerous school assemblies as a well-rounded redhead.

"WHO? I'm sorry, it's noisy here! Hold on a second."

Buck tapped his toe counting down the seconds, listening to shrieking kids and scolding adults as Mrs. Becker left the crowd, puffing in Buck's ear. Suddenly, the background noise muffled considerably.

"There, that's better. Now who is this?"

"Buck Wilmington? Vin Tanner's guardian?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Wilmington!" her voice brightened. "How can I help you?"

"Are you with Vin's class? Is Vin with you?"

"Vin? No, he's not in my group. We're eating in shifts here in the hotel."

"Could you look for him, please? It's very important."

"Certainly. Hang on a minute."

Buck heard shuffling, and then cacophony returned in his ear. He could see the woman in his mind's eye scanning the room, and then quiet ruled again.

"I don't see him or Mrs. Richmond. She's been keeping a close eye on him. They must have the next shift? Do you have her cell number?"

"Yes, yes, thank you." Buck considered keeping her on the line and getting her to check Vin's room, but he didn't want to leave the children without a chaperon. "I'll try it again. If you see her in the next few minutes, have her call me, please?"

"Of course."

"Thank you, Elaine." He disconnected and went systematically down the rest of list. Only a few picked up, and they said the same thing as Mrs. Becker. The ruckus of dinner made it a poor time to call any of them, and it took nearly an hour to finish the list. A handful of chaperons did not answer and Charlotte Richmond was among them.

Buck looked at Chris' grandfather clock – time was slipping by. He tried Chris, then Ella after he found her number on an old cell phone bill. Both went directly to voice mail and he squelched the desire to slam his cell on the desktop in frustration.

He couldn't deny the fact that something bad was happening. Ezra was right.

Just then, he heard the front door open and the sound of grocery bags and entering footsteps, followed by JD's familiar chatter. How could he possibly explain Vin's disappearance again?

He couldn't, and he wouldn't. Determination resolved, Buck rose from the desk and schooled his expression so he could face his son.

Early Evening, Washington, D.C.

Charlotte glanced at her watch, unable to keep still any longer. After gathering their dirty dinner dishes and putting them just outside the door, there was nothing else for her to do but wait. Vin sat at her desk, writing, and she saw him give her a concerned look. "*Oh, dear, I must remember how perceptive you are.*"

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, smiling. "Yes, I'm fine. How are you doing?"

He relaxed and returned to his writing. "I'm fine. I think this needs spell checkin' though." Vin sighed. "I know what I want to say, but sometimes it just don't look right."

Charlotte walked over, sharply aware of her happy, pounding heart, and rested her hand lightly on Vin's shoulder, pleased that he didn't shrink away. They'd made so much progress together!

"Want me to look now?"

Vin fiddled with his pen. "Okay."

She looked it over without really seeing it and praised the work. Vin broke into a smile and fiddled with his pen.

"It's about five o'clock at home, ain't it? I mean, isn't it?"

"That's right." Charlotte put the report on the desk.

"Buck's on his way home and JD's feedin' the dogs. The horses are prob'ly hollerin."

"I imagine so. You like having a horse?"

Vin nodded, "Yeah. Peso's great, but Chris says I may outgrow him soon. We still get to keep him, though."

"It's nice to have a friend," she said. *"I'm sure you cried in that horse's mane a lot. You can have lots of horses in Brazil. They have good horses down there."*

She couldn't stand this inaction anymore. "Oh," she said patting her hip pocket. "Phone. Keep writing." She put the phone to her ear and feigned a conversation. After hanging up, she dropped the burner phone in the bathroom trash, out of Vin's sight, and then used the room phone to call the front desk. She asked if there was a taxi there now and excitedly bit her lip at the positive reply. *"This is destiny,"* she thought. "Hold it for me. I'll be right down," she told the front desk.

Then she turned to her future son.

"Vin," she said, "There's been a change in plans." She turned him toward the elevators, speaking quietly as they walked. "I don't want you to be alarmed, but they got a call from your dad and he wants you home early."

"Is he okay?" Vin asked instantly, eyes wide.

"Yes, he's fine," she smiled. "Everyone's fine. He said something about a case and wanting you close, that's all. I just talked to Mr. Clemmons." She pushed the down button. "Your dad is fine."

"Okay." Vin's forehead furrowed as he thought for a moment, then he said, "I need to get my stuff."

"No, it's okay. Mrs. Green said she'd get your stuff together. They'll be back home the day after tomorrow anyway. They're arranging a plane for us so we really have to go."

"I guess dad didn't call me because my phone's off." He pulled the cell from the small, outer pocket of his backpack. "I should call him."

"No, there's no need." Charlotte said, earning a perplexed glance from Vin. "Um, he said something about being in court, and that he'd call you as soon as he could."

Vin's anguished look tore at her heart. *"So misguided,"* she thought, but said, "You can try at the airport, but you may have to leave a voice mail, okay?"

He nodded and rose and put his notebook in his backpack, which he slung over his shoulder.

Charlotte grabbed her purse and backpack. "Let's go, then."

The hallway was blessedly empty as they waited for the elevator, and she prayed that the lobby would be the same. By now, all the students and their exhausted chaperons should be in their rooms.

The floor bell rang and the silver doors slid open. Charlotte ushered Vin through the lobby, breathing a sigh of relief at the emptiness. She saw the concierge watching her, and he smiled at her. She managed a nod in return and waved her thanks for arranging the taxi.

A uniformed employee held the exit door open for her. "Have a good evening, ma'am," he said pleasantly.

"Thanks," she quipped. Their ride waited at the curb. She ushered Vin inside and didn't look back when the taxi left the curb.

It took longer than she expected to reach the commuter section of Reagan Airport. With commuter rush-hour long over, the area was nearly empty. She guided Vin to the Culpepper Airways desk, which was unmanned, and glanced at the giant clock mounted over the desk.

"We're a little early," she said, pointing at a cluster of chairs. "We're supposed to wait here."

Vin, clearly unhappy, sat on the edge of a chair, his fingers winding in the strap of his backpack.

Charlotte's heart broke at his distress. Chewing the inside of her cheek, she looked around and saw an abandoned wheelchair at the end of the check in counters. An idea struck.

"Do you have a water bottle in your backpack?"

Vin turned wide, fear-tinged eyes to her and nodded.

"May I have some?"

He nodded and wrestled it from the bag.

"Thanks," she said, opening it and taking a drink. "I'm going to look over there, okay? Don't move."

Charlotte walked to a corner of the waiting area, retrieved the half-pill from her pocket, and slipped it in the water bottle. As she peered around the corner to the gate area, she gently shook the bottle until the pill dissolved. Then she turned back, handed the bottle to Vin and said, "They'll make you throw this away, so you better drink it. We have time."

Vin nodded and took a half-hearted sip. Charlotte sat next to him and kept his attention until the bottle was empty. According to her research, Vin should be sound asleep by the time they boarded. There would be one stop for fuel before starting their new life in Brazil.

Denver, Colorado, dusk

The air sizzled with tension in the ATF bullpen as Josiah and Nathan flushed out every bit of information they could on Charlotte Richmond. They found no connection beyond what they already knew about Ella vetting Charlotte for Vin.

"Things just may be face value, boys," Josiah sighed, scrubbing his face after scanning Charlotte's financials. "It looks like Mrs. Richmond is working alone, if, in fact, there is an abduction going on."

Nathan slapped his phone closed. "That was Buck. He found the chaperon and emergency contact roster and called everyone on it. No Vin, no Charlotte. He's called the hotel manager."

"I'll talk to Travis," Nathan muttered as he reached for his desk phone. "I think we need to put a jet on standby."

"Probably a good idea. Did Buck get a hold of Chris?" Josiah asked.

"Nope. Ella isn't picking up, either. I'll get a tech to ping 'em."

"Didn't Chris say he got Vin a phone?"

"Yeah, he did. I'll have them ping that, too. Do we know Ella's address? We could send local law enforcement by the place."

"Workin' on it," Josiah said, eyes locked on his computer screen. "She has very diverse holdings. Power, electronics, oil, air lines, even part of an oil tanker, hotels." Josiah's eyebrows twitched when he realized Ella Gaines had the money and resources to do whatever she wanted. The big man sighed and rolled his head to loosen his shoulders. Outside, he glimpsed a crow alighting on the blossoming tree just outside the window.

And damn if Ezra's "coincidence" didn't popped into his mind just then, too.



Buck managed to convince JD he just forgot something for work, and as a result, had to stay late and finagled Mrs. Potter to stay at the ranch. Buck could tell by the slant of her eyes that she knew something was going on. She agreed without discussion. Buck also asked her to contact him immediately if Chris or Vin called. That request caused the lovely woman to bite her lip and nod her head, worry clear in her eyes.

Buck knew he shouldn't be on the phone while driving, but this was an emergency. The front desk clerk at Vin's hotel answered the phone after two rings.

"Listen, I know you're all pretty busy and I know you can't keep track of every customer, but I'm talking about possible child abduction."

Buck ground his teeth at the hum-and-haw at the other end and demanded

to talk to a manager.

There was a momentary pause as Buck swung around and passed a slower vehicle. "Hello? This is Federal Agent Buck Wilmington. I suspect there is a child abduction in progress. I need you to check the rooms of Charlotte Richmond and Vin Tanner." He explained the field trip and snapped at the manager's hesitation. "Look. You start looking for them now and I will get police units over there to help you. Yes. Police. What?" He rolled his eyes and then grimaced as he barely made the yellow light and barreled through an intersection. "Are you serious? Really? Well I tell ya what, you got ten minutes to find 'em before that lobby is swamped with uniforms and cars and flashin' lights. Yeah, I thought you'd see it my way. Call me as soon as you're done. I'm sending in uniforms in ten minutes."

Buck rattled off his digits then hung up. He dropped the phone on the seat beside him and blew out a breath.

His gut instinct was screaming. Ten minutes later, convinced that Charlotte Richmond and Vin weren't in the hotel when the manager called back, the informal investigation became formal and Buck called in the FBI and sent uniforms to the hotel. The next call went to the office where Josiah turned his profiling prowess toward the missing counselor.

Late Afternoon, Malibu, California

The limo leaped from the curb like a panther, stealing into the night time traffic. Chris watched it go then took a moment to inhale the salty offshore wind. There was a light fog creeping in, but visibility was good and he looked up the long stretch of sand and the people dotting the waves.

His thoughts wandered to Vin and there was a tug at his heart. It was nice here, truly, but it was just another place without his son. Once corner of his mouth crinkled into a lopsided grin and he headed to the house.

Inside, the low position of the sun over the horizon sent rays that painted the house's interior bright gold and the muted rush of distant, perpetual waves soothed Chris' mind. He dropped the house key in a bowl by the door and began unbuttoning the dress shirt as he wandered through the kitchen and dining room, idly looking for his phone and relishing the seaside quiet. By the time he circled the living room, his shirt was off, leaving him in the sleeveless, form-fitting muscle-t that Ella preferred. The reflection of a small mirror near the couch made him stop, and a wry grin appeared when he spotted a hickey where his collarbone met his shoulder. He brushed it with his fingertips.

"There," she'd said. "I've marked you as mine."

Chris brushed at the red mark and laughed, "I'm pretty damn sure that's not the only mark you've given me."

"Well," she'd replied with dancing eyes. "It's the only one you can see, lover."

Chuckling with the memory, Chris headed to the master bedroom. Taking advantage of the afternoon sunlight, he scanned every surface. No phone. He checked the dressing area and dropped his shirt on the vanity, recalling the last time he used it. He kicked off his shoes.

"It must be close," he reasoned aloud, stripping off his socks and slacks. He dug through a pile of his clothes on an elegant chair and found a pair of jeans and pulled them on, then checked the pockets of the clothes in the pile.

Nothing.

Giving the room another look, he also noticed with a little embarrassment the mess that was the bed. Deciding to change the sheets, he headed down the hall to look for clean ones. When he came to the door at the end, he was a little surprised to find it locked. "Not a closet," he reminded himself as he pictured the floor plan in his head. No, it was a room. Not a big one, but another room none the less. "Probably uses it as a closet," he muttered acknowledging Ella's abundant clothing selections. He turned around and finally spied what looked like a linen closet.

"Success!" he said as he opened the door, revealing a display of silky, expensive linen. One set, however, caught his eye and he happily pulled out the black satin sheets and returned to the bedroom. He poured a couple fingers of whiskey along the way and took a sip before tugging the dirty sheets from the bed.

A noticeable clunk caught his attention and there was his phone, at his feet on the floor. "*Must have gotten tangled in the sheets,*" he thought. He tucked it in his pocket and bundled the old sheets before heading down the hall toward the laundry drop.

As he walked, he pulled out his phone and powered it on.

Fifteen missed calls since early that afternoon and most of them were from Buck.

Chris turned cold.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
Denver, Colorado

"That's it, I'm sending the uniforms to Ella's house," Buck said after sweeping into the office and getting caught up on the others' progress, or lack thereof. "I need to get to D.C. Did Travis okay the company jet?"

"Yes. He managed to convince the transportation division for the need," Nathan briefed. "He was supposed to be at Langley the day after tomorrow so he just bumped the schedule. He'll be waiting on the tarmac."

"So, Orin's coming along," Buck said, rubbing his face as he thought. "Someone needs to stay here."

"I can do that." Ezra's arrival turned every head in his direction

"What are you doing here?" Buck snapped as he flipped open the inter-agency phone book for the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department contact information in Malibu.

Unfettered by Buck's question, Ezra moved to his chair and tapped his computer to life. "Mr. Bain, a heathen if there ever was one, is going to visit his mother, whom, in my opinion, must have obtained a sperm donor from the zoo for such a boorish result, in Iowa for next two days. I am available until his return and have no inclination of ignoring this situation." He looked up and locked eyes with Buck, daring him to challenge the statement.

Buck just snorted and copied down the Malibu's FBI and ATF contact numbers. "Well, we can use ya. I need an address in Malibu to send in the uniforms. Does anyone have that bit of information?"

"I may also use the time to ponder how a mentally deficient specimen like Jacob Bain shoehorned his way into the illicit firearms business." Ezra continued as his deft fingers tickled his keyboard. Then he seamlessly shifted to the subject at hand as he typed. "So, in the meanwhile, I can tell you this: Mrs. Gains has properties in Santa Barbara and Marin, but only the one domicile in Malibu." Ezra rattled off the address before Josiah could take a breath. A beat of silence

made the undercover agent look up, where he saw his teammates staring at him in surprise. Ezra quirked a brow. "I merely recall the properties from my previous inquiries."

"Damn, Ezra, you're like an elephant." Nate stated in awe.

Ezra wrinkled his nose. "I would debate that unfortunate comparison and remind you of my propensity for numbers, but I think time is of the essence, gentlemen."

Buck called the L.A. Sheriff's Department. Buck's tone had an emotional edge as he carefully justified his request over the phone and relayed the address from Ezra. Even though the others continued to work at their desks, they were very aware of the worst case scenario all their facts suggested. All they could do now was focus on the hunt.

Malibu, California

The forgotten sheets dropped to the floor from Chris' arms. He skipped listening to the voice mails and called Buck.

"Jesus Christ, Chris, where have you been!" Buck answered the phone.

"Listen, there's a problem, Pard. No one seems to be able to find Vin in D.C."

"What?" Chris, frozen, listened with horrifying disbelief when Buck filled him in on the passports, their searching and that the cops were on the way to Ella's house and the D.C. hotel. "Vin's been out of sight for too many hours and Josiah has a theory."

"Theory?" Chris' own voice sounded far away. "Not again!" repeated though his mind, making his stomach churn.

The phone clicked to speaker mode and Josiah's calm, level voice captured Chris' attention. "Yes. Since Charlotte Richmond is missing too, Vin could be a replacement for her dead child."

As soon as the counselor's name passed Josiah's lips, Chris remembered why he parted ways with Ella the first time: she was too possessive. He didn't question for second why his thoughts went directly from Charlotte to Ella; he embraced his gut instinct. Somehow, Ella was involved.

His gaze lifted and settled on that locked door at the hallway's end. The phone drifted down from his ear. The voices from Denver reduced to background static, unimportant now. He stared to walk, drawn to the locked door.

"*I do not believe in coincidence.*" Ezra's words echoed in his head. How many times had Chris heard that refrain from their undercover specialist?

"Neither do I," Chris growled in agreement as he kicked in the door with one determined attempt. Buck's tinny voice chirped from the phone clutched in his hand as Chris stepped into darkness, his nose immediately awash in a sickly mix

of perfume and candles. Blinking in the sudden darkness, he noticed fine, parallel lines of fading sunlight through shuttered windows. He groped the wall, feeling for a switch and flipped it on.

Chris staggered back a step when the reality of what was before him hit; this was a shrine dedicated to him.

Photos filled nearly every space on every wall, and each one was of him. Gaping, he swung his head, scanning from left to right, and followed the progression of his life. To his left were baby and family pictures from Missouri, followed by images of his elementary, middle and high school years. Where his and Ella's heads were close, red hearts framed their faces.

His Navy career came next, followed by the beginnings of his law enforcement career. After that was a montage of hundreds of small, candid shots he'd never seen before, encompassing an entire wall in a quilt-like pattern. As he turned, stunned, his hip bumped a table and drew his stupefied attention. It took a moment for his mind to register what he was seeing.

Items he'd thought he'd lost from various times of his life were scattered atop a long, low table. The latest item placed front and center: the razor she'd taken from him earlier today.

The icy coldness of shock that crawled through his limbs began to melt with the rise of something dark, hot and explosive. Rage shook his voice when he lifted the phone to his ear and spoke. "She's stalking me," Chris uttered between clenched jaws.

"What?" Buck sputtered, perplexed.

"Look!" Chris took a panoramic photo and sent it off, working in furious silence as anger built inside. While he waited for Buck's comments, Chris turned and saw another small table shoved deep into a dark corner behind the opened door. He edged over, heart pounding, and found photos of him and Vin - well, probably Vin. It was hard to tell because the face was scratched out, leaving only a halo of hair.

Beyond the small cluster of vandalized pictures stood a silver-framed photo he knew very well. Chris picked it up with a trembling hand and his stomach flipped at the ugly marks marring Sarah's beautiful face framed in her wedding veil. Beside her, Chris beamed in a tuxedo and held his bride close.

The last time he'd seen this picture was on the dresser at his house before it burned down. A dainty chain, looped around the top of the frame, twisted in the meek light; a familiar pendant dangled at its end.

It was Sarah's etched gold pendant - the single item outside her wedding ring she never removed.

Chris assumed all this time that he'd lost all these things in the same fire that Sarah and Adam. He opened the pendant and saw his own smiling face.

Opposite was another mangled face – Adam's.

All air left his lungs. The room tilted.

"How did it get here?" He thought a moment before realization pierced him and a deep, dark rage ignited his soul.

"Chris!" Buck yelled through the phone. "You gotta get out of there!"

Then, Chris heard someone pounding on the front door. On his way to the front door, he ducked into the bedroom and dug his gun from the bottom of his suitcase, tucking it in the small of his back. He gripped the open phone in his left hand as he approached the front door, Buck's voice a distant buzz through growing fury.

He took his time getting to the door, working to rein in the beast rising inside.

"Chris Larabee!" A man called from the front door before pounding again.

"Here!" Chris yelled through his dry throat in a moment of control. Once at the door, he swallowed hard and cracked it open to find a pair of uniformed deputies on the porch. The sight of uniforms and the rationality they represented leveled his roiling emotions.

"Agent Larabee?" the taller deputy asked. "Deputy Morton, sir. There's some kind of emergency at your home in Denver. An agent . . ."

"Buck Wilmington. Yeah, I just found my phone." He held up the cell. "I have a gun here, too."

"Yeah, we already checked you out. So you're okay? Anything we can do?"

Chris' mind whirled. No, he was not okay. He needed to plan. "Yes," he said after a long moment. "As a matter of fact, there is something you can do. Let me walk you to your car. I'm sure you'll need your supervisor's approval and maybe a warrant."

He followed the deputies to their black and white squad car, barely feeling the warm, lumpy asphalt under his bare feet, and then asked them to check outgoing calls from the house.

"Here? This house?"

"Yeah." Then his brain kicked into gear and he realized that Ella was smarter than that. "Belay that, Deputy. Check another address first." He gave them Cletus Fowler's party house address where he'd last seen Ella. "It's in relation to a kidnapping." Saying those words nearly choked him and his mind reeled.

He put the phone back to his ear to keep Buck in the loop and to sort things in his swirling mind. Chris stood behind the marked patrol car on the side of Highway 1 talking to Buck when suddenly, the nape of his neck began to tingle.

Suddenly in full alert, he turned a slow circle, scanning his surroundings as he reached for his gun at the small of his back. "Hold on a second, Buck," he said softly.

The police radio chatter was a low and mesmerizing background for the steady rumble of passing traffic. The sun hung low in the west, throwing long shadows across Highway 1. The offshore breeze was cool on his arms. Every distraction faded, however, when Chris' eyes focused on a car stopped at the curb two houses away, its engine idling like a purring lion. Waiting.

Chris hooked his phone on his waistband and brought up his weapon up in a two-handed grip, lining up his sights on the dark windshield just above the steering wheel. His stride ate away the distance between, one long step at a time. He vaguely heard the deputies' alarmed queries because his focus on the car was absolute.

It was her. Every cell and nerve in his body knew it was her. Inner fury awakend the beast from deep inside like a phoenix, burning all away else except rage.

"ELLA!" he bellowed, finding a glint of her eyes in the sights of his gun. He was close enough now to see her shocked expression and her tense grip on the steering wheel. Suddenly, the engine raced.

"YOU MURDERING BITCH!" he screamed, firing at the same moment tires squealed and the car jumped toward him. Squinting, he held his ground and methodically pulled the trigger, three, four, five times before the roar of the car became deafening. He stepped right, keeping to the edge of the car's direct path.

"WHERE'S VIN!" Chris continued to fire and held a line treacherously close to the car's line of travel. "STOP, YOU BITCH!"

Horns honked and there was a metallic crash, but Chris kept her in his sights and pumped the trigger. The car wiggled, bounced off the vehicle in an adjoining lane and then veered straight for him.

Enraged beyond all reason and refusing to yield ground, Chris's bullets cratered the windshield right up to when the car plowed into him.

Then everything slowed down and Chris felt oddly weightless. The wind, forced from his lungs with a grunt, stole his voice. He twisted mid-air and heard the metallic bang of his gun on the hood, feeling weirdly disconnect as it flew from his hand and skidded across the hot metal. Then he fell and hit the ground in absolute silence, rolling aside to where the curb stopped him with sickening abruptness.

In the seconds before darkness engulfed everything, sound roared back and he saw Ella's car fishtail then straighten, then speed away while deputies yelled, blue lights flashed and the scent of hot asphalt burned his nose. At the end, failure shrouded his soul.

Denver

"FUCK!" Buck yelled into the phone. "CHRIS, GODDAMN IT! CHRIS!"

"Hello?" a breathless woman said over the open line.

"WHO IS THIS?"

"I . . . I'm just a witness! That man . . . it was awful! I think this is his phone!"

Buck fought to calm his voice, well aware that all of this was on speakerphone for all to hear. "Tell me what happened." He managed to say in a close to civil tone.

"The car hit him! He wouldn't get out of the way and it hit him! There's blood . . . oh gosh, I feel sick!"

"Are the police helping him? Is he talking?"

"No, no he's not talking. I think he's dead. No, wait; the deputies are giving him first aid. He's alive, I think."

"Mr. Wilmington!"

"Madam, put the phone in the police car and stick around. They'll need your statement."

"Mr. WILMINGTON!" Ezra's rare yelling got his attention and Buck's head snapped up.

"Shut up, Ezra!"

Josiah's mouth fell open in surprise but Ezra was not put off.

"BUCK! At this moment, Mr. Larabee is beyond our help but Vin is not. He needs our help. Let the Malibu authorities take care of Chris. We must concentrate on Vin."

Buck, torn, wobbled over, gathering his wits as he moved. "This better be good, Ezra," he threatened in a tight voice. Voices murmured over the speakerphone in his hand.

Ezra jumped right in. "I have never believed in coincidence and have worked under that premise since our arrival here in the office. I have investigated Ella Gaines before, as you know, and as I have said before, her holdings are very diverse."

"Get to the fucking point, Standish!"

"I am endeavoring to do just that . . ."

"NOW!"

Ezra sat up straight and his eyes bore into Buck's. "I, too, am horrified and distraught but do not have the luxury of expressing my grief at the moment. I am focused on finding my wayward nephew." He held Buck's glare with hard eyes.

"Are we crystal clear, Buck?"

Ezra's use of his first name was enough to jolt Buck back into focus. "What, then," he deferred, running a hand over his mustache. "Tell me what you have!"

Ezra's eyes calmed. "An airline. Ella Gaines is a major stock holder of Culpepper Airways. It is a commuter company based on the east coast. In fact, they have an office at both Dulles and Reagan airports in the D.C. area."

"How does that tie in to Vin's disappearance?" Josiah asked.

"I spoke with the officers on scene at Mr. Tanner's hotel to obtain more details. He said a woman matching Charlotte Richmond's description asked for a cab and left with a young man matching Vin's description. Now where would a cab normally take someone who does not intend to return?"

"How do you know she's not returning?"

Ezra took a breath. "The same officer checked her room and found a disposable cell in the trash. Important items are missing, like a purse and make up, and the items left behind are easily replaced. She is not returning. Additionally, the ping of Vin's cell phone showed him in the area of Reagan Airport a few minutes ago. The signal's off now, so the phone is powered down."

"When did you find all this out?"

"While you were speaking with the deputies in Malibu."

Buck wiped his face with a hand. "Well, that nails it, then." He gave his cell a distraught look before disconnecting, his expression reflecting his mental shift in priorities. "I need to get to Vin. Someone needs to stay here and be the central contact."

"I will stay," Ezra volunteered.

"Good. Josiah, Nate you go to L.A. and find Chris."

"We have another jet somewhere?"

"I'll ask Travis. He and I will go to D.C. Let's go."

The men grabbed their coats and followed Josiah as he called the motor pool for a car. They left Ezra at his computer, his face glowing from the monitor's light.

Buck remained focused on his family as he walked and called Nettie about reliving Mrs. Potter. Hopefully, she and Casey would keep his son busy in his absence. The call was short. Nettie quickly assimilated the circumstances and the need for action.

"Just find our boy, Buck," she said firmly.

"Yes, ma'am, I surely will," he responded with conviction before disconnecting.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Reagan International Airport, commuter terminal

"Adelaine McKenna?"

The uniformed young man spoke twice before Charlotte raised her head at her new name. "Yes?" she replied with a smile, reminding herself that things had changed.

"We are ready to board. I believe you are expecting this?" She noticed a patch on his lapel with "Culpepper Airways" stitched in elegant script. The man held out a thick, padded envelope.

"Yes, thank you."

"Do you need help with the young man?"

Charlotte glanced at Vin, asleep in a wheelchair by her side, the empty water bottle in his lap testament that the drug was doing its job. "Yes, thank you."

Charlotte allowed the man to lead the way, pushing the wheelchair, while she opened the envelope. Her fingers walked through two passports, a stack of paper Brazilian reals and some coins, a few photographs and a map. She let a relieved sigh escape from somewhere deep inside, and with it, released her painful past forever. She lifted her chin, feeling years younger, and lengthened her stride until she walked next to her boy. The final deed to separate Vin from Michael took place just before entering the jet way as she dropped Vin's cell phone in a trash can.

Completely relaxed and blinking sluggishly, Michael leaned slightly to one side, his hands resting on his backpack in his lap. Charlotte – Adelaine – gave into the need to touch him and gently combed through Michael's tawny curls. It felt like silk and up to this point, she never had the opportunity to caress him like this.

"Michael," she said softly, brushing his bangs aside. "I love you so much."

Once outside the building and at the short flight of stairs leading into the small jet, Charlotte stopped and allowed the man to gather the small boy in his arms and take him inside. With one last look at the lights of the city, Charlotte

Richmond said goodbye to her old life and ascended the stairs to embrace a life as Adelaine McKenna.

Denver, Colorado

Buck's brain spun into a mode that set emotion aside in a small box on a deep mental shelf as the rest of his mind assembled an immediate to-do list - "mission mode", he called it during his S.E.A.L. days.

Vin's welfare topped that list the moment he disconnected from all worries regarding Chris. He dialed Travis, knowing as he pieced together some sort of plan that he required some pull and influence in D.C. Fortunately, his best chance for that option waited for him at the airport. Between Orin and a couple of connections wearing Admirals' stripes at the Pentagon, Buck felt he had the resources he needed. He could feel the others' eyes on him as they waited for the pool car.

"Orin?" he barked without preamble. "I need another jet, and I need it yesterday. Chris is in trouble in L.A."

A flash of gratefulness enabled Buck to take a breath when Travis reacted without questions.

"I'll see what I can do. Something should be ready by the time you get here." Orin replied. "Any quick details on Chris' situation I should know about?"

"I just know he's hurt and on his way to a hospital. He was hit by a car. That's all I know, sir, but I need to concentrate on Vin. Nate and Josiah are going to check on Chris."

"Sounds like a divided front. All of you be careful."

"Yes sir." Buck obtained the tarmac contact names and hung up. He went over the plans in motion as he paced, stopping when Josiah pulled up in a roomy SUV. The three men piled in without a word and Josiah drove from the lot and headed for the airport.

A glance at his watch told Buck he had to call JD to tell him he wouldn't be home tonight. He knew JD's anxiety might be an issue if he saw Nettie pull up to the house without warning. He couldn't blame the boy for getting upset at the unexpected; he'd had a lot of "unexpected" in his life already.

"It's your dime!" JD's sweet voice chirped.

Buck broke into a smile as soon as he heard the greeting, thankful that at least one part of his life remained unspoiled. "Hey, Li'l Bit!" he replied as a nugget of satisfied warmth eased his nerves.

"Da! You on your way home? Mrs. Potter's pot roast is 'most done and my stomach's grumbly."

Buck's spirit continued to rise with each of JD's simple concerns. "So's mine but I have to suffer a little longer. You go ahead and start without me, son, I'm gonna be late."

"Again?" J.D. managed to stretch the word and infuse a large amount of disappointment into the tortured syllables.

"Yeah, again. Sorry, but it happens. You know that."

"Yeah," J.D. sighed in resignation. "When you comin' home? I'll save the potatoes for ya."

"Thanks, that'd be great. Not sure how long I'll be. Nettie and Casey are on their way over to stay with you so Mrs. Potter can go home. It may be a couple of days."

"Really?" The small boy perked up at that. "They're sleepin' over?"

"That they are. You be sure to help out Ms. Nettie, okay? I'm relying on you to make sure the horses are fed, J.D. No riding until I get back, though."

"Aw, Da!"

"I mean it, J.D. No riding." Buck felt relief that he hit a subject to distract his unusually perceptive son. Vin was the harder of the two to hide things from, but J.D. had skills in that area, too. "Tell you what - let's call this a test. You do a good job with the horses and dogs, take proper care of them this time and if you pass we'll talk about your riding by yourself when I get back."

"I'm earning the prv'ledge?"

"Yes. Understand?"

"Can Casey help?"

"Yes, if it's okay with Ms. Nettie. I'll tell her we talked."

"If Vin gets back before you, am I in charge of him, too?"

Buck's heart skipped and he bit his lip so pain created focus. "Yes," he managed to choke out.

"Deal. Love you, Da."

On point once again, Buck replied warmly. "Love you too, J.D. See you soon, okay?"

"K. Bye!"

"Bye, son." He disconnected with a sigh and rubbed his eyes as he sank into the seat.

"Well done, Buck," Josiah said lowly, giving Buck a quick glance. "I am sure that was not an easy facade to maintain."

"I hate this."

"You're certainly not alone. Vin seems to garner more than his share of misfortune." The profiler adjusted his grip on the steering wheel. "Both those boys are exceedingly lucky to have you and Chris in their lives."

"Not just Chris 'n me," Buck stated without hesitation. "Without all of you . . ." Words failed him, but Josiah got the message. Buck quirked a smile in spite of the situation and then his phone rang. "Ezra? You find something?"

"Yes. I managed to obtain inside numbers to the two towers where the

Culpepper jets operate in the D.C. area. There have been 15 departures in the past hour from both locations. To ascertain the flight plans for those that are Culpepper Airways airships, I need the tail numbers or call signs."

"How are you going to do that?"

"The task is already in progress. My tower contacts should be checking in at any moment."

"Then what?" Buck asked.

"Remember that this is still supposition, Mr. Wilmington, as I still need to peruse the information. I believe we will have a course of action by the time you reach Washington."

Buck hoisted his cell and rubbed his weary eyes. "That sounds great, Ez. Thanks."

"No thanks needed. I will check in soon."

Thirty minutes later, they reached the airport.

Culpepper Airways over the U.S. Atlantic coast

Charlotte stopped reading aloud when she saw that Michael was asleep. She closed the book and smiled as she studied the boy's beautiful face. Just looking at him softened the sharp pain of loss that had dogged her these past years. Between the satisfaction of saving a poor innocent from a dreadful existence and gaining another child, elation easily eased the ache of losing her own child.

Michael was a wonder to her. His loving personality and positive outlook amazed her because the traits blossomed in such a toxic environment.

Pressing a button on the armrest to recline a little, Charlotte turned her head and stared out the small window to the darkness. The jet's powerful hum relaxed her as they headed south along the Atlantic coast. The twinkle of lights that marked the edge of the United States would soon fade in the distance as they crossed open ocean and island countries on their way to Brazil.

In essence, they were already beyond U.S. soil. The one stop to refuel wasn't on American soil and even when they touched down in the Dominican Republic, Michael's absence in D.C. wouldn't be discovered for hours yet.

She smiled again. Mrs. Gaines' entire plan played out like a classic kid's con where two friends told two sets of parents that they were sleeping at each other's houses when, in fact, they attended a forbidden party. This time, though, it wasn't simply for a good time; it was for a new life. Two new lives, together.

Charlotte reached into pant pocket and pulled out a worn photograph of their destination in Brazil. Michael would love everything about it from the various livestock, to the open feeling of the house, to the remote location.

Yes, their life from here on out would be nothing but good once Michael understood that he was safe from the man he called his father.

Her only regret was that Chris Larabee would escape prosecution for child

abuse. She broke into a huge smile when she realized that he would be taking on the pain she'd carried all these years.

Yes, that would do quite nicely. Satisfied, she allowed her eyes to close but knew the smile would remain even if she slept.

Denver

"I have uncovered the probable flight information: Brazil, via San Juan in the Dominican Republic for refueling." Saying it aloud lit a spark of panic in Ezra's gut and he struggled to push the ember aside to report. "Of the 15 flights, three were Culpepper Airways jets. Of those, one only had two passengers – one adult and one minor. I have no doubts on this scenario, Mr. Wilmington. The odds spell it out."

There was hard determination in Buck's tone. "We have to hold her in San Juan, Ezra. If they get to Brazil . . ." The fleeting pause was enough for Buck to maintain his composure. "I'll get us re-routed somehow."

"And I will look at keeping her in San Juan."

Ezra disconnected and returned his attention to his laptop to initiate a video call. He knew Buck, with Orin's help, would manage to arrange the new route, but all of them knew they would not reach the Dominican Republic in time. Stalling her in San Juan was their only chance for success.

Ezra knew just the person who could arrange that very thing. Although he loathed several of his mother's past husbands and household situations, the secrets of countless influential men he'd squirreled away over the years often proved quite invaluable.

"Ambassador Rockwell's office." The woman's face on the screen appeared slightly disheveled and Ezra pursed his lips, amused. She frowned back as she unconsciously readjusted her hair. "Can I help you?" she snipped.

"No, you cannot. I require a brief meeting with the Ambassador. Label it urgent."

She narrowed her eyes and drew a definite line with her demeanor. "That is not possible."

Ezra's eyes sparked at the challenge. "I know that is not true, my good woman. I will wait while you announce that Ezra Standish wishes to speak with him."

"Again, it not possible, Mr. Standish. I will take your name and . . ."

Ezra interrupted her with a wave of his hand and a dark chuckle. Then he wiped all amusement from his face and leaned closer to the screen. The woman, responding unconsciously to the indication of a secret, also leaned in with poised pen. Taking in the detail that there was not paper under the woman's pen tip, Ezra

dropped his voice and spoke slowly and clearly.

"Ezra Standish, madam. Please relay to the Ambassador this information: Barcelona, December 16, 1982, and Miss Candy." The woman blinked. "I am sure you will be seeking a new employment opportunity if you do not pass on my request posthaste."

He saw the calculations cross her mind via her eyes. "Hold, please," she said as she stood and walked off screen.

Ezra noted her buttoning her blouse as she departed.

Federal agency use jet, eastbound from Denver, Colorado

Buck watched Orin's return from the cockpit, noting his grim expression. "Well," he started, rubbing his eyes as he sat, "I've got us re-routed. Our pilot says we don't have to refuel to get there but we will for our return trip."

Buck watched every nuance of Travis' face as he talked. "Is that a heavily edited version of your actual conversation with our pilot?"

Orin winced as he shifted in his seat. He almost looked guilty. "We will make it to San Juan."

"But he advised refueling, didn't he?"

"We'll make it."

Buck ran basic fuel estimations in his head. "On fumes, I'd say."

"You could say that." Orin leaned his chair back with a sigh and turned his head to look into the icy darkness beyond the glass. "But we'll make it."

Even though he sounded like as if he were trying to convince himself, Buck latched on to the bit of hope and fanned it to a flame. He debated if it was a good call to take the Federal jet instead of the privately-owned jet Orin somehow wrangled for Nathan and Josiah since they were crossing international borders. Maybe the lack of a Federal connection would have been better. . .

Buck sighed. That horse had not only left the barn; it was stampeding wildly over the hills to the great beyond. There was going to be plenty of explaining to do on their return. Currently, that was the least of his worries. Buck followed his boss' lead and stared out into the dark depths of space, the weight of each passing second pressing on his heart.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Josiah and Nathan touched down at the Santa Monica Airport, glad to avoid Los Angeles International. In the relatively short time it took to get there from Denver, both men decided to not get involved in any poker games with Director Travis. The pilot, a friend of Orin's, owed Travis the jet use when he lost a lively game of Texas Hold 'Em at a charity banquet.

Heading toward the tiny car rental office, Nathan gave the jet a last look over his shoulder. "Maybe I should start goin' to those banquets," he muttered.

Josiah snorted. "Ezra'd probably win everything."

"Good point." Nathan flipped his cell phone open and re-dialed a number. "I'll get directions. You get the car."

They were on the road in minutes, glad for the GPS capability of Jackson's phone as they drove the unfamiliar streets in the dark, heading south to the UCLA Medical Center. Once there, they parked and entered the emergency room and saw two uniformed deputies.

"Agents Sanchez and Jackson," Josiah began. "We just got here from Denver."

"You're here for Agent Larabee?" the taller of the two deputies said. He looked tired. "I'm Deputy Morton." He tipped his head to his partner. "This is Deputy Oliver."

"Were you there? What happened?" Nathan asked.

The deputies began with their radio call and described in concise words all the events up to Chris getting mowed over by the car.

"Good Lord," Josiah breathed.

"It's one thing to come up on an accident that's already occurred. It's something else entirely to witness one like that," Deputy Oliver admitted, liking a bit pale.

"What injuries?" Nathan's voice sounded papery thin.

"Head trauma from the curb, broken arm and leg as far as I could see. His knee is pretty mangled." Dep. Oliver shook his head. "It was unbelievable. Kept

screaming about how the driver was a murderer, kept shooting . . . the driver headed right for him."

Nathan swallowed hard. "What about . . . her? In the car?"

"She kept goin', shot out windshield and all. Took out at least two other cars."

"She got away?" Josiah asked, shocked.

"Initially, yeah, but the car was pretty easy to pick out. L.A.P.D. found it in a parking lot off Highway 1, south of here."

"And?" Josiah's hands were fists hanging by his side.

"Shot to shit and empty. Lots of blood inside, though. They're still searching. The car's registered owner wasn't much help. He didn't even know the car was gone."

Nathan snorted. "But Ella probably knows him. There's nothing in her background relating to auto theft."

"Ella?"

The two agents filled in the blanks on the subject of their search including her past with Chris.

"She owns the home Agent Larabee came from," Deputy Morton said. "She had a lot of pictures of Larabee in one room in the house. That answers the question about their relationship. We'll get some pictures of her out to the patrol guys."

"Classic stalker look to the room," Deputy Oliver noted. "It was creepy."

"Chris sent some photos to us when he found it. I agree," Josiah murmured. "She's had this planned for quite a while."

"Oh, by the way, here's Larabee's badge. We found it in the house." Oliver pulled the shield from his pocket and handed it to Josiah. "His gun's evidence, though."

"We understand."

"There's the E.R. doctor," Morton interrupted, pointing to a lean older man entering the waiting room. The doctor noticed the uniforms and waved them over. Nathan and Josiah followed, pulling out their badges.

"I'm Dr. Jamison. Let's talk over here." He led them into an empty bay of the emergency room where he inspected Josiah and Nathan's identification. "Mr. Larabee will be taken to ICU when he gets out of surgery."

"What's the surgery for?" Nathan asked.

The doctor gave Nathan a long look as if debating how to frame his words. "Well," he started, "I think we can save his right foot. We will monitor for internal bleeding and keep an eye on the skull fracture, but I think he'll live."

"Good Lord," Josiah breathed.

"What about his knee?" Jackson asked, remembering what the deputy told

them earlier.

"His knee is the least of his worries. I'm sure that can be repaired at a later date. First, we tend to the foot and broken bones. I'm sorry. It was a hard hit, gentlemen, and a car bumper is devastating at any speed."

Josiah could only nod but Nathan asked what the profiler was thinking: "Is this a career ending injury?"

Dr. Jamison looked directly into Jackson's eyes and replied without hesitation. "Yes."

Final Approach, San Juan, Dominican Republic

Buck waited impatiently for the jet to touchdown on a runway that looked entirely too short in the darkness. The line of lights marking landing path blinked in a come-hither pattern that did little to bolster his confidence. This entire affair felt as out of control as a cattle stampede. He dragged a hand over his eyes, exhausted, but unable to rest. The past hours passed in a flurry of phone calls and he knew both he and Travis owed some big favors in the future.

But so far, luck was on their side.

Both Buck and Orin stood as soon as the jet rolled to a stop and they were at the door before it opened. Even in the middle of the night, the air was warm and heavy with dampness as they descended the short flight of stairs. A marked police vehicle rolled up and a uniformed officer stepped out and spoke in heavily accented English.

"Orin Travis?"

"Yes," Travis replied rolling his shoulders back and straightening. Buck knew the man was tired, but right now he looked like a force to reckon with and Wilmington felt lucky to be under his command. "Take us to her."

They climbed in the back seat of the car and headed toward the only lighted structure on the field. It was miles away to Buck and the officer did not drive fast enough.

"Remember, this is a sensitive diplomatic situation," Travis reminded his fidgeting agent. "Our goal is to get Vin home, not to take custody of Ms. Richmond. The consular representative will handle that. Any charges here will be handled first."

"Yes sir, I know. I'm just . . ." Buck let out a nervous breath and shook his head. "I just have to see that he's okay."

Travis' featured softened for a moment and he offered a sympathetic smile, his weariness showing in his eyes. "I know, Buck. Let's not go in all gang-busters, all right? They are holding her at the request of the U.S. They don't have to do that."

"And I'm grateful they are," Buck answered, the tense set of his shoulders relaxing only a little. "It was a doctor that checked Vin, right?"

"Yes. It's a doctor our Embassy knows and there's an urgent care room in the facility. He's fine. There's an FBI attaché with him. Vin's not alone."

Buck's eyes turned a hard, steely blue. "He never was."

The unit came to a smooth stop and Buck erupted through the door, striding to the building entry. He could see people moving around inside and none of them were Vin. He remembered Travis' request before hitting the door and paused just long enough for his boss to catch up, motioning his superior to proceed first. Orin sighed and touched Buck's elbow in understanding, and then pushed the door open without delay.

The lobby wasn't very large and woman in a black suit, clearly F.B.I., was standing near an inside door. Her hand hovered over her exposed sidearm and she stared at Wilmington's approach.

"Urgent care?" he breathed.

"Agent Wilmington?" she said asked, hand still poised for action.

Reluctantly, Buck slowed and reached for his I.D., his eyes flicking between her and the door. He paused just long enough for her to inspect the document, and then pushed the door open, striding immediately to the medical bed within where Vin's small body rested. The steady rise and fall of the boy's chest lifted a great weight from the agent's heart. Eyes burning, Buck smoothed back Vin's hair and swallowed back a sob. He barely heard the sound of the female trailing him.

"How is he?" he whispered roughly.

"He's fine." Buck glanced aside and noticed the agent's kind face. "There were roofies on the suspect and she confirmed that she gave some to your boy." Buck appreciated the concern in the woman's voice. "The doctor confirmed that, of course. He checked Vin over and gave him a bag of saline. "She indicated a Band-Aid at Vin's inner elbow. "He felt he could wait for you before administering anything to neutralize the drug. He'll be here in a minute." She pointed to her right, and Buck glanced at a bald man talking with Travis. "Basically, when Vin starts to come around, make him drink water and this." She indicated a bag that contained several bottles of Gatorade on an adjacent chair. "We took up a collection and got a couple of flavors. I have kids. I know how they can be about flavors."

Buck choked out a short laugh and felt hot tears trail from his eyes. "Thank you. I'm grateful, you have no idea."

"I can only imagine how you feel," the agent replied quietly. "And I hope to never feel that way. If there's one positive aspect about all this, one after-effect of roofies is amnesia. He won't remember much about this day."

Buck nodded and scooped Vin up. He turned and sat with the boy secure in his arms. Vin roused a little, sluggishly opened his eyes and blinked owlishly at Buck, then smiled and snuggled closer.

"I'm tired," Vin muttered.

Buck broke into a smile and chuckled, tightened his grip and said, "I know. Just sleep, Cowboy. I gotcha."

Charlotte Richmond was the farthest thing from his mind, Buck trusting that Travis would attend to that prickly detail. For now, all he wanted was to feel Vin's heartbeat and soft breath against his chest.

Orin Travis gave Buck and his charge a long look and felt his chest burst with pride. The coordination of information that took place for the three of them to be here, now, was nothing short of miraculous. He knew his part, but there were a lot of questions he had that were probably best left unasked of Ezra; his hand was deeply involved in places Travis would rather not know about.

The ultimate end was that Vin would be released to his custodian of record and Charlotte Richmond would have to answer to drug smuggling and false document charges in the Dominican Republic before being shipped to the States to face kidnapping charges. That first part was not going to be pleasant.

Travis broke a tight smile at the thought, then turned from Buck and followed the officer to Charlotte's holding cell. When the door opened, her head jerked up and chains rattled at her wrists and feet. Apparently, she didn't come off the jet peacefully and racked up some battery charges along the way.

"Who are you?" she snapped. Her brown hair was wild around her face and zebra-like stripes of mascara marked her cheeks.

"Assistant Director Travis of the ATF, Ms. Richmond."

"My name's McKenna, not Richmond," she snapped. "Get me out of here! I'm an American!"

"Well, actually, you're an expatriate at this point. I couldn't take you back even if I wanted to."

"What? No, no I have to get out of here. My boy needs me." The speed of her emotional shift confirmed the doctor's report for Travis. She wouldn't fare well in prison, here or in the States, and probably needed psychiatric containment. Those wheels moved slowly, however, and that issue would be resolved through the Ambassador's office.

He had a fleeting thought that Agent Standish might exert some influence in that area, but thought it best to divorce that suspicion from his mind right now.

"Um, well, we will look into that. It may help your case, though, to help us now."

She blinked and her tears stopped immediately. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. The abrupt change was unnerving. "What do you mean?"

"Tell us how you know Ella Gaines and I will speak to the constable. I can't make any promises, but I will see what I can do."

"Ella Gaines?" For a moment, it Charlotte's expression was confused, like

she had no idea who the woman was but suddenly every feature of her face turned angry and Travis had to fight his reaction to step back. "She's the one you want, not me. She made me do everything against my will."

Travis sighed. This would take more time than they had and made the decision to turn her over to the FBI. "All right. You tell the FBI everything and we'll see where we are. Good night, Madame."

When he left the room, Charlotte erupted in anger and a slew of verbal fury followed him out. Once in the lobby where he joined Buck, her tirade was a thrum in the background.

"Can we go home now?" Buck sounded Vin's age and Travis broke into a grin.

"Yes, if these good folks are done with us and the jet's refueled."

"It's all ready, sir," the female agent said.

"Thank you Agent . . ."

"Becker, sir. Alyssa Becker. It's been a pleasure. I'll be contacting you for follow up."

Travis shook her hand and Buck rose to his feet with Vin in his arms.

"I c'n walk," Vin mumbled, his body boneless.

"I know, but I want to do this." Buck whispered, kissing Vin's wavy crown of hair and garnering a sleepy frown from his charge. "Just go to sleep, son."

"k."

Travis accepted the grocery bag from Agent Becker and the three of them exited the building.

Home felt much closer now.

END OF BOOK ONE