

THE HUNTING GROUND

By AJB

CHAPTER ONE

"Larabee." The ATF Agent snapped his name into the phone's receiver in the same direct, no nonsense manner he projected in the office. The tone wasn't so much annoyance as it was simply abrupt, stating clearly that unless there was a reason to interact with members of the human race, Chris Larabee preferred to stay at arm's distance.

The sound of Director Travis' voice merely caused Larabee to focus a bit more closely on his boss' words and accept the fact that he'd have to issue some of his ten words a day reserved for those outside his office.

"Yes, sir," Larabee said between a minute of listening and hanging up. The Team Seven leader glanced at his watch, stacked the few papers on his desk and set them aside, then pushed to his feet and adjusted the gun on his hip as he headed to his office door. "Buck!" he barked as he moved confidently between the half-dozen desks arranged in two rows of three toward the main hall.

"Yeah?" Buck Wilmington rocked back in his desk chair and swiveled to face his supervisor, tipping his neck until it cracked audibly.

The tousled-haired young man seated behind Wilmington cringed. "Ew, Buck, doesn't that hurt?"

"Nope!" The lanky, mustached agent grinned and rose while rubbing his neck. "Felt kinda good, actually. Vanessa sure knows how to give me kinks!"

Three of the seated men groaned. The corner of Larabee's mouth twitched. JD Dunne, the now disgusted youth, rolled his eyes and held up a hand in defeat. "Stop right there. Don't tell me."

Grinning, Wilmington sauntered up to Larabee, who paused by the office exit. Larabee quirked a brow and released a few more words from his limited stash. "Travis' office. Now." Without waiting for a response he pulled the door open and strode out, leaving Buck scrambling to catch up.

"Wonder what's up," Nathan Jackson said as the door clicked shut.

"If it is anything that requires our input, I am sure our esteemed leader shall grace us with all the words necessary to establish our actions." Ezra Standish, looking bored, rocked his chair and adroitly rolled a silver dollar over his knuckles.

"And not any more than that," Josiah Sanchez finished, turning to his computer screen to put the final touches on a report.

"Hope it's another case like the last one," JD said excitedly. "All those guns. What a rush!"

"Followed by all that paperwork," Nathan grumbled. "At least no one got hurt."

Jackson's remark made Dunne bounce to his feet. "Hey, glad you reminded me." The youthful agent went to a large white board hanging on the wall at the back of the room. Off to one side, someone had written, "2 accident free days in a row!" Dunne erased the "2" with the edge of his hand and wrote in "3", then stood back with a satisfied smile.

Sanchez eyed the editing. "Think we'll ever make double digits?" he wondered aloud.

Jackson pounded on his keyboard with a dubious snort.

"The marshals will take custody of Atkins," Director Travis said as he closed a very thin file lying on his desktop. "Your team's job will be to confiscate the still and arrest anyone else on the premises." He folded his hands together on top of the file and looked to the pair of agents sitting before him. "Any questions or concerns?"

"Sounds pretty straight forward," Buck said, nodding agreeably. "They got a layout of the still components?"

Travis pushed the manila folder toward Larabee's second in command and Wilmington picked it up. He flicked through the pages and selected one, holding it up, scrutinizing it closely. "Looks like the six of us can hold a good perimeter," he noted.

"Where do we meet up with the marshals?" Larabee asked, rising to his feet.

"It's in the file, first page." Travis nodded toward Wilmington, also unfolding from a chair. "They're waiting at a rest stop not far from the site."

"Just look for the black sedan," Buck quipped. "Those boys are real subtle."

Chris tipped his head and gave his second a sidelong look. The flicker of amusement in his eyes lasted less than a second. Travis chuckled. "Let me know when the scene's secured. The higher ups want press on this."

"So the good people of Denver can see where their tax dollars go?" Buck ended the question with a short laugh.

"Exactly. It is also a reminder to the public about how dangerous illicit distilling can be."

"Got it. So will any reporters be bugging us at the scene? Mary, perhaps?" He nudged Chris, who ignored him.

"No, but there will be a press conference tomorrow. Mary will be there. Have something for the cameras." Travis pursed his lips and shifted uncomfortably, clearing his throat. "I, ah, promised her."

Buck straightened. "I got more'n those cameras can handle, sir!" he said with an unabashed grin.

Travis pursed his lips just before Chris shoved Buck toward the exit.

"So that's the plan," Chris summed up, standing in the center aisle of the team's desk grid. "Surround, close in, and then assist as requested. Apprehend, if required. A pair of marshals will scoop up Sean Atkins from the still site since he has a Federal warrant and we'll inventory and break down the equipment. We should clear the scene by end of shift."

"And the requisite inventory will take a day longer." Ezra sighed. "At least I have an opportunity to make use of my hiking boots." Although the words used spelled out excited anticipation, Standish's tone reeked of disdain. After speaking, he refocused on filing his nails, expression sour.

"They're sure only Atkins is at the site?" JD asked after poking his hand in the air like a third grader requesting for permission to talk as he spoke.

"Yes. They followed him and scouted the site. He's been in their sights the whole time."

"Booby traps?" Nathan queried.

"Some, but they dismantled what they found. Be careful when we close in." Chris took the time to regard each of his team's faces individually as if looking for questions or concerns.

"Seems one of the Marshals is a shit-hot tracker of some sort," Buck snorted. "Guess they can find their man but need help catchin' him." Buck grinned as he stood. "Looks like Team Seven's savin' the day once more!"

"And the Marshal's office gets the credit," Josiah pointed out as he gathered his things

"Let's get the job done, boys." Chris indicated the meeting was over by picking up his notes.

"Daylight's burnin'."

CHAPTER TWO

A Federal SUV and a box truck pulled into the isolated trail head parking area in a swirl of dust that settled on a parked black Lincoln. Since it was mid-week and late autumn, there wasn't a hiker in sight. The trail would officially close with the first snowfall, which predictions said would be in the next day or two. It was a good time to close down an illegal still before the operators left for the season.

As Buck predicted, a lone marshal exited from the sedan. He was a huge man whose jacket strained at the shoulder seams.

"Agent Larabee?" He swept the group with an evaluating eye before focusing on Larabee when the rest of the team held back to suit up behind his dark form.

"Clark or Tanner?" Chris asked as they shook hands briefly.

"Clark. Tanner's up yonder." The marshal poked his chin toward the high ground to their right. "We're in contact." He patted a hand radio on his hip.

Chris absorbed the information and glanced at Clark's shoes. The barely dusty shine told him two things: First, this was the senior Marshal of the pair and second, he was a lazy bastard. Chris wondered how the absent Tanner, obviously the tracker of the pair, and this city slicker got along.

Then Chris gave a sharp nod. "That's good. Tell him we're comin' his way."

"There are booby traps. I've cleared the area that way," Clark pointed to the left, "and Tanner's cleared what he's come across going that way." He poked his finger to the right. "The suspect's truck is parked over there, in those trees." He nodded toward a copse of scrub oaks at the edge of the road about a quarter mile away.

Chris visually swept the area and then checked that his team was geared up and ready before addressing the Marshal again. "Three of my men will go that way and the rest, with me. You keep an eye on the truck. We'll contact you when the perimeter's set and we move in. Tanner will handle the arrest if you aren't on site yet." Larabee motioned for JD and Buck to take the left side.

"Sounds like a plan," Clark agreed without argument. Chris got the feeling he was glad he didn't have far to go. They synced their radio frequencies and Chris moved toward to the rear of their SUV where the rest of the team geared up

Buck handed his boss a black ballistic vest. "We off?"

"Yup. You, Ezra, and JD go about half way around. Spread out and make a perimeter. Got your map?" He tugged a black "ATF" baseball cap over his wheat-colored hair.

"Sure do. Kid! Let's move!"

Chris winced, "Jesus, Buck, keep it down."

"That's what she *didn't* say," he laughed, giving Clark a friendly slap on the shoulder which was received with a frown.

Clark returned to his car as the ATF team moved off. JD jogged up ready to go and Ezra followed at a more leisurely pace, both armed with vests and weapons. Buck nodded to the brush and they disappeared, single file, into the wild landscape.

Chris, Nathan, and Josiah moved in the opposite direction, finding and following Tanner's subtle trail that began just off the roadway. As Chris suspected, there was only one set of prints and judging by the boot size, Tanner was a smaller man than Clark. Better prepared for bush-whacking, too, based on the hiking boots' super grip sole pattern.

Larabee cracked a tiny smile wondering how long Clark and Tanner had worked together. As he followed the track up to higher ground, Chris realized that most of the evidence of the marshal's passing was invisible; he left just enough to follow, but you had to pay attention. Larabee figured that was the reason for the slow but steady bloom of a headache he felt. It wasn't so much painful as it was constant and irritating.

Chris motioned for Josiah to take a position and wait for the signal to converge on the still site. He and Nathan continued onward.

"You okay?" Jackson whispered. "You look like you're hurtin'."

"I'm good."

"Drink some water. Maybe you're dehydrating."

Chris didn't reply but he did take a swallow from his water pack. The headache hung on, though, and continued to blossom. When Chris motioned for Nathan to take his position, he was glad to be rid of the medic; he noticed too much. Chris wasn't about to put this mission aside for a headache.

The number of visible tracks multiplied and Chris knew he was close to the marshal. He paused a minute to rub his temple and looked around, pleased with the higher elevation – the light wind funneled the sour smell of the still up the slope and Chris was able to pinpoint its location, which he confirmed when he spotted a faint curl of grey steam moving against the verdant canopy.

A few steps later, an odd wave of something washed over him; it wasn't dizziness or a chill - it was more like comforting warmth, invisibly fuzzy. His headache eased back a notch. Chris took a moment to rub his temple and steady his feet.

"ATF I presume?"

The voice was soft, raspy, and so quiet it sounded like a part of the breeze. Chris' hand automatically fell to his gun and he searched the brush for the origin of the words.

"View's better up here."

Chris turned to face a huge boulder, then tipped his head back and saw the lower half of a face under the rim of a dust colored baseball hat. When the bill lifted just enough to reveal a pair of blue eyes regarding him, Chris felt an odd tingle that made the hairs on his arms stand. He successfully fought the urge to step back.

At the same time, the marshal frowned and cocked his head to one side. After a moment of their locked gaze, he wordlessly pointed out the path to his perch and slipped on sunglasses that hid his expressive eyes.

Chris brushed off the electric-like tingle that began when their gazes first met. It didn't abate, but at least it was better than the headache. He rounded the boulder and found that it was an easy climb from the back. Once atop the perch, he saw that there was plenty of room to lie next to Marshal Tanner. Keeping his profile against the hill low to the rock, he positioned himself.

Tanner didn't move and continued to stare ahead as he handed Chris a pair of binoculars.

"You don't need 'em?" Chris whispered as he held them to his eyes.

"Nah. See better without 'em." Tanner extended his arm. "He's there. See that mesquite tree with the pair of crows?"

It took a minute for Chris to find the tree in question. Once he did, he dipped the binoculars and looked again without them. He frowned against the lingering fuzzy-warmth swallowing his body. "You can see the two crows?"

"Yeah." Tanner shifted, threw a quick glance at Chris, and then looked back down the hill. "I got good eyesight. We can move in any time. Your men are in place. Five others?"

"Yeah." Chris looked at Tanner again, expecting so see an ear bud. "Are you in touch with your partner?"

The marshal chuckled. "I was, but those buds hurt m' ears. Steve ain't much for this part of things, anyway. I c'n hear your men there, there, there . . ."

Tanner proceeded to point out where Chris figured his men were, but he couldn't see or hear any of them. "I'd like to lay eyes on Atkins before we move." Chris regulated the puzzle that was Marshal Tanner to the back of his mind.

"He's at the base of the mesquite tree. He just scared off the crows. We've have a good perimeter, so we best move." The odd marshal started to retreat to the lower path. "You can direct from here. Watch for moving brush. Atkins has a handgun tucked in his waistband but that's about it. Oh, and an axe, too. Wouldn't surprise me if he tried to use it."

Tanner disappeared from view in seconds. Chris, unsettled by the whole interaction, found Atkins exactly where Tanner described and gave the go ahead to his men along with the weapon inventory, and used the binoculars to keep tabs on the action. Team Seven looked like a herd of elephants as they moved in but Chris couldn't see any evidence of Tanner's passing through the heavy brush.

Chris spoke lowly, tracking the perp through the binoculars. "He hears you all. He's heading toward me, due east. Keep comin'. . . that's right. I can't see him anymore but I hear him coming my way." Dropping the binoculars, he slipped off the rock, donned his polarized sunglasses to cut glare, and followed Tanner's path.

The team squeezed the perimeter all the way to the still as Chris entered the brush and immediately heard the dry-crunching sound of a struggle ahead, followed quickly by an angry roar and then a crashing noise. Eerie silence followed.

"TANNER!" Chris yelled as he pushed through the tangle of brush. "MARSHAL!" A feeling of dread settled on his gut and Chris broke into a small clearing in a near-frenzied rush. "TAN...."

"Easy, boss, I'm right here."

Larabee skidded to a stop with his heart thumping his ribs, nearly falling over Tanner where he sat on the back of a large, camouflage dressed and red-faced man trying to catch his breath. Atkins was already handcuffed.

The marshal, on the other hand, hopped to his feet without any indication of stress and brushed off his shoulders. "The big ones fall hard. Sorry ta alarm ya."

Atkins swore revenge between gasping breaths. The rest of the team trickled in one by one, puffing and picking sticks and leaves from their clothes and hair. Tanner hauled Atkins to his feet and surveyed the semi circle of men. He removed his sunglasses and tucked them into a pocket before rubbing his eyes as if fighting off a headache.

"Appreciate the assist," he said softly, suddenly wary as his eyes flicked from one agent to another.

Without a thought, Chris stepped to the marshal's side and felt the man relax in a strange, sixth-sense way. Tanner gave Chris an evaluating, head to toe look, surprised, and only tore his eyes away when his black-suited partner pushed his way to the scene. Puffing, Clark took one of Atkins' elbows and pulled him in the direction of the car.

"Good work, Tanner. Let's let the men do their work. Come on, Mr. Atkins."

The other six men watched in shocked silence as Marshal Tanner's arrestee was slickly removed from his possession and tromped off in a noisy retreat.

"Damn," Buck muttered, scratching his neck. "That ain't right."

"I have to agree with you, Brother," Josiah mused.

"Hey!" JD objected before turning to the marshal left behind. "You gonna let him ... Marshal? Marshal Tanner?"

CHAPTER THREE

Six sets of eyes turned to the lone marshal staring off in another direction and standing rigidly still. Seconds passed without movement. Tanner's expression was of utmost concentration.

"I do not think he hears you, Mr. Dunne," Standish offered quietly as he tipped his head and evaluated the stranger.

Chris stood closest to the frozen lawman, brow furrowed as he studied the agent. He shoved his sunglasses up on his head, sending his damp hair into unkempt spikes. "Hey?" he said, narrowing his eyes further. A magnetic-like pull drew the team leader a few steps closer, and Larabee was mysteriously compelled to speak in a low tone. "Tanner. What's up? What do you hear?" The marshal didn't move and Larabee felt as if a giant boa constrictor squeezed his ribcage.

For some reason he did not understand entirely, Larabee knew it was up to him to do something. He stepped in front of the rigid agent and pierced the locked blue eyes with his earthy green gaze. "Take a step back, Tanner. Ease off. Come on." Chris resisted the urge to grab his shoulders and give him a shake. Instead, he clenched his fists at his sides. "Dial it back some. Back off."

Chris kept his voice soft and even, and locked his gaze with Tanner's until the icy hard blue began to defrost. "Now tell me," he said once the marshal blinked into awareness. "What did you see?"

"S . . . see? No, no." A wrinkled V divided the marshal's brows and then he blinked again, connecting with Larabee's intent stare without a flinch. "Hear that?" He cocked his head and looked beyond Larabee's shoulder. "Over there."

He slipped around Chris and moved off with careful steps. Chris followed without question, drawing his weapon. The remaining six exchanged puzzled glances before Buck shrugged and motioned the rest to fan out behind, palms resting on their guns.

Tanner moved with an easy grace that confirmed his familiarity with the back country, passing through the spare brush as soundlessly as a shadow. Only Chris stayed close; the others kept back, still trying to detect whatever held the marshal's attention.

Finally, at the bottom of a gentle slope where the ground opened up and turned powdery soft, Tanner raised an arm and signaled everyone to stop. He sniffed the wind and cocked his head slightly.

"There. Hear that? *Smell* that?"

Chris stilled and tipped his head into the wind, frowning as he scented the slight breeze. "No."

JD concentrated, nostrils flaring, and looked questioningly at Buck, who shook his head. The others shifted uncomfortably, tightened their grips on their holstered handguns, and scanned the area cautiously.

Tanner cocked his head again, intent on a patch of ground about ten feet away. Without warning, he sprinted to the spot, dropped to his knees and started digging with his bare hands, soft dirt flying everywhere. After a moment, Chris holstered his gun and joined him.

"What the hell, Chris?" Buck said, stroking his mustache nervously.

JD's gun arm dropped to his side and he took several curious steps in their direction. "What's going . . . shit! A trap door!" He dashed over to get a closer look.

"What?" Nathan barked. "Did you say trap door?"

The standing five spread out in a protective circle around the men brushing away the last of the loose dirt from a sturdy, metal square. There was a ring on one side. Tanner grabbed it and prepared to tug.

"Wait!" Chris snapped, placing his hand on top of the odd door. "Let's set up for cover."

"No time for that," Tanner snapped right back, making JD twitch. "She's alone and hurt!"

"She?" Standish repeated, surprised. "I still don't hear. . ."

As soon as the rusty square arced upward exposing a dark hole, they all heard muffled, panicked screams. Tanner dropped into the hole without hesitation.

"TANNER!" Chris yelled just before giving Buck an exasperated look and jumping in on the agent's heels. "God damn it, wait a minute!" His voice softened as he disappeared from view.

"Well?" JD said to the others, shifting from foot to foot and dividing his attention from the hole to his teammates and back again. "What do we do?"

"Hold off, we don't know how big it is down there." Buck and the others shuffled slowly to the edge of the opening and looked down into five feet of black hole. "Wait until they clear it."

The muffled screams turned into a louder wail, the woman's sobs edged with panic. The men shushing sounds and soothing words and Chris appeared within the square of light. He held a weeping woman in his arms, her long, stringy hair covering a small visible wedge of her face tucked in the crook of Chris' neck. Bits of gray duct tape clung to her wrists, ankles, and cheek.

"Take her, Buck. Have Nate look her over." Chris hefted her up, calming her with his voice and telling her everything would be okay. Josiah helped Buck lift her from Larabee's arms.

Once Buck took her, they realized that under the layer of dirt she was thin and young, somewhere in her early twenties. He felt her trembling in his arms and Wilmington turned his formidable attention to calming her down along with Nathan and Josiah. JD and Ezra edged closer to the opening.

"Chris, what . . ." JD began, but Chris vanished once again. The young agent dropped to his hands and knees, peering into the hole, reluctant to enter without Chris' order to do so. Although his boss had disappeared from view, both JD and Ezra could hear his steady voice reassuring the marshal. JD wrinkled his nose at a faint, sharp smell emanating from the depths.

Inside the earthen cavern, Chris Larabee's mind automatically clicked off a list of priorities for proceeding forward on what was either a second crime scene or part of the first. The bare-bones meth lab he currently stood in the middle of had to be vented somewhere, because there was only a bare trace of its odor where he stood. The only possibility was the still above ground, which, in Larabee's book, linked the crimes as one.

On top of that, the bound and gagged girl added another element to the scene that caused priorities to jockey for position on his mental list, but the number one item on said list continued to be Marshal Vin Tanner.

"We need to change location, Tanner," Chris said in a flat whisper as if his tone would ignite any of the nearly undetectable fumes; and Tanner said he smelled it above ground? The question sat in the back of Larabee's mind to attend to later, and it wasn't alone. "Come on back. Shut all this down. One thing at a time."

To look at the frozen, wide-eyed marshal, one would think Larabee's words fell on deaf ears, but with each passing second, Chris felt their invisible connection strengthen. He knew he was getting through, just as he somehow knew to hold off on touching the marshal.

Tanner's eyelids finally fluttered and his eyes began to water, breaking him from his rigid state. Chris knew it was time to latch on to the agent's elbow. "Come on, we have to leave," he said, dragging his charge to the hole of daylight that framed Dunne's head like a halo. "Help him up, JD. Fumes."

Chris knew that wasn't entirely true, but since he didn't know what the truth actually was, he elected to keep his words to a minimum. It was a good thing the woman was there to hold the team's attention.

Between JD, Ezra, and Chris, they got the marshal away from the trap door and to one side of the group gathered around the weeping woman. As the Tanner gained awareness, he shrank away from Dunne's grip. Chris felt his pointed unease along their odd mental tether.

"I got him, JD. You and Ezra get a perimeter on this whole area. There's a meth lab down there."

"Holy crap, really? I don't smell it. Who do you think the girl is?"

With each question, Chris felt Vin shudder under his hand. "JD. Go. Now."

"What about the Marshal Clark?" Ezra asked.

"He can leave and process the prisoner. Make it clear that we need to question him later. We'll take care of Tanner. Thoroughly check our perimeter first, though. I don't want any more surprises. "

"Indeed," Ezra agreed.

"Roger." Dunne turned to go, muttering in a lowered voice to Standish, "Not like the guy cares for his partner anyway."

Larabee's cheek twitched, amused by the improvement of the young agent's observational skills.

"Aw, Hell," Tanner moaned, speaking his first words since the tunnel while massaging his temples with his fingertips. "Did ya get her? She okay?" He flashed a sidelong glimpse at the ATF team leader and his cheeks flushed red. *"I hate when that happens,"* he thought.

"Happen often, does it?" Chris asked.

A quiet moment passed before Tanner caught his breath and turned suspiciously slanted eyes in Larabee's direction, where he found that he was the subject of a similar narrowed glare.

"More often than I'd like." Out loud, he muttered, "No, not often."

"Well, which is it?" Larabee demanded in a softened tone that belied his hard look. After a moment, the furrowed lines of his brow deepened with realization of their unusual communication. "You didn't . . . what's going on here?"

"I . . ." The Marshal shifted his stance then took a step back, continuing to rub his temples as he studied the lean agent regarding him. A peculiar aura surrounded the man, one Tanner recognized only from an old story he'd heard from his grandfather. Wonder sprouted in his mind. "Um, not sure whatcha mean," he whispered, unable to tear his eyes away from the pulsing, silvery-gold halo surrounding the shadow-black figure. How did he not notice that before?

His heart raced and he took another step back, his knees wobbling from a sudden swoon. The marshal would have collapsed to his knees if Larabee hadn't stepped forward and snagged Tanner's elbow in a painful grip.

"Nathan!" Chris called, his hard stare still locked on Tanner. "Get over here!" Then, his voice softened at Vin's cringe. "You're not going anywhere at the moment. Sit." Larabee steered the subject of his attention to a nearby boulder, maintaining his grip until Tanner settled firmly on the rock. After a beat of time without Tanner fainting, Chris added in a quiet, yet threatening, tone, "And you know exactly what I mean. Don't know how I know that, but I do."

When Vin's slow gaze found Chris' face, he saw confusion, alarm, and anger battling for the forefront. The marshal was saved by Nathan's appearance, which he felt way before the medic actually arrived.

"Now," Nathan started as he looked Tanner up and down and reached for his wrist. "What's . . ."

When Jackson touched Vin's arm, Tanner hissed and pulled away. "No, don't touch me. Wait . . ."

"You need attention, marshal," Nate said, again reaching for Tanner's arm even as he shrank away in obvious pain.

"No . . ." Vin's verbal plea was soft, but Chris heard a near scream in his own head.

"Nathan, back off." Chris inserted himself between the two men, his back to the medic, and laid the flat of his hands on Vin's shoulders. "He's leaving," he said aloud. Mentally, he instructed, "*Dial it back, Tanner. Breathe, and dial it back. Concentrate on my voice.*"

Even focused on his subject, Chris wrinkled his nose at the irrational aspect of the mental command. Before him, however, Vin Tanner slowly pulled himself together. Finally, after several minutes of precise instructions that came from some well of knowledge Chris didn't know he possessed, the marshal sighed, slumped in relaxation, and nodded tiredly in Jackson's direction.

Nate moved in without a word and started his exam when Chris stepped out of his path.

"What the hell, Chris." Buck's usual exuberant voice was soft to his boss' ear. "Is he okay?"

"Yeah," Chris breathed, raking his hair with trembling fingers. Suddenly, he, too, was exhausted. "I think so." He looked beyond his friend. "How's the girl? Why was she in there?"

Buck followed Chris' line of sight to where the woman sat with Josiah. "Says her name's Alex Wickerman. She says she was kidnapped."

"By whom?"

"Friends of the gentleman that just departed. I get the feeling that this here ain't the whole picture, stud."

Chris nodded in agreement. "Have you notified the locals?"

"Not yet."

"Good. Let's figure out the jurisdictional nightmare first."

Buck glanced back to Tanner, then Chris. "Should we call his partner?"

"No." The reply left Larabee's lips the moment Buck finished the question.

Buck grinned. "Agreed. Asshole." Then he got serious. "Chris, how the hell did he know that girl was down there? Did you hear anything? Or smell anything, like he claims?"

Chris turned his attention back to the slumped marshal, who was muttering replies to Nate's litany of questions. "No, and I have a few questions for him about that."

"Could he be involved?" Buck said.

Chris started to protest the question then realized that he had absolutely nothing to back up his steadfast feeling of Tanner's innocence. "I don't know," he offered instead.

The last part of their conversation was barely a whisper between them, but Vin raised his head and met Chris' eyes the instant he became the point of the conversation.

And for reasons he couldn't verbalize, Chris Larabee was not one bit surprised by that.

CHAPTER FOUR

It didn't take long for Ezra and JD to secure a perimeter and the scene. They reported to Chris before moving on their second order to contact Tanner's partner.

"Stand by on that," Chris ordered, mind ticking.

"What are you thinking, Mr. Larabee?" Ezra's face remained neutral, drawing Chris' attention.

"Not sure," he replied, studying his undercover agent's eyes. "But I'm beginning to get a bad feeling about all of this."

Ezra nodded once and his features relaxed, allowing a suspicious edge to sharpen his features. "I concur." He took a step closer to his boss with one hand held out to stop JD from crowding them. "As you know, I am adept at reading human nature," he started quietly, pausing significantly to await his boss' permission to continue. Chris nodded once and Standish continued. "Although I feel that Marshal Tanner is without guile, I cannot say the same for his absent partner, Marshal Clark."

"Why is that?"

Standish shrugged, frowning, and shook his head as if to clear it. "I cannot pinpoint him with certainty, but I have heard word on the street of a Federal agent that is open to compensation, so to speak, and this situation points toward that kind of situation. But I repeat, I cannot confirm an identity, I am sorry to say."

Chris' mouth twitched as he nodded acknowledgement. "So noted," he replied, eyes alive with whirring thoughts.

"I suggest we proceed with caution."

"Agreed." Chris glanced at the marshal, satisfied that he was good to go. "Marshal Tanner? A word, please?"

Larabee joined Tanner under Jackson's watchful eye.

"What's up?" Tanner asked. "How's the girl?"

"She has some scrapes and is dehydrated and hungry, but otherwise in okay shape," Nathan reported. "She can walk out to the cars."

"Glad to hear it," Chris said. "Nate, go make sure she's drinking water, okay?"

Recognizing a dismissal, Jackson nodded. "I offered something for this one's headache, but he refused," he added before departing.

Tanner turned to Larabee. "You could use something, I think. Headache?"

Chris fought the urge to massage his temple. "I'll be fine. Let's talk about our next step, which is getting out of here."

"What about all this evidence?" Tanner flipped his wrist to indicate the still and meth lab.

"It'll keep. Right now I'm concerned about our safety. I don't like any of this. It feels . . . wrong." Chris felt their unusual mental tether strengthen.

Tanner pushed the bill of his baseball cap up a little higher. He squinted in the sunlight, tipping his head back to study the ATF leader for a moment. "I agree. How do you know I'm not involved, then, Agent Larabee?"

"Gut feeling. It's never wrong. Call me Chris."

"Vin, and I'll take that as a compliment I guess." His mouth slanted into a crooked grin. "Clark raisin' your hackles, then?"

"Not just mine," Chris thought. *"Yours, too?"*

Vin nodded once. *"Yup. From the git go."*

Chris' expression turned sour. "I'm not sure I'll get used to that," he muttered.

Vin chuffed, and then said out loud, "It's my third time workin' with Clark. He has a hard time keepin' partners, so I hear."

"Hey, Chris?" Buck called, getting their attention. "I think we need to get Alex out of here."

"Okay, then, let's get moving." Chris straightened and turned to Vin. "I hear you're a tracking hot shot. How about getting us out of here so we arrive at the parking area from an unexpected angle?"

"Gladly."

It took just a few minutes to check their gear and prepare to leave while Vin and Chris discussed strategy. Then, Vin lined everyone up single file with Alex in the middle.

"Let's move out," Chris ordered. He followed the marshal into the brush without hesitation. They walked just a few minutes when suddenly, Vin Tanner twitched and ducked.

"Hold." Tanner's command was sharp and low, causing the rest to respond without hesitation. He was intent on something beyond their sphere of influence.

Larabee moved closer and thought, "*What?*"

Vin held up a hand indicating that the others should stay put. Then, he slipped silently through the brush with Chris on his heels. They topped a small rise and then, after looking down the slope, Vin hunkered down. Chris crouched behind a healthy lavender sage, a hand on the butt of his gun and his eye locked onto Tanner's profile.

Vin whispered in a tight voice. "We have a problem."

Only then, he turned Larabee's way, tension deepening the lines of his face. He inclined his head in the direction of their parked vehicles. Larabee rose slightly, sidling silently to Tanner's side and turned his attention down the slope. As the trees swayed with the light breeze, he could just see the cars below over the tops of the lower brush.

"Company?" he said softly, squinting in an attempt to make out any details.

"Looks like at least four."

Chris' eyes slanted Vin's direction for a moment before returning to the scene below. "What are they doing?" He didn't question the statement, as unlikely as it was. He knew his eyes weren't as good as they once were, but at this distance . . .

"They killed Clark."

"What?" The leap of Chris' heart rate sharpened his vision some, but the forms below remained too small to discern detail. "How?"

"Garroted, it looks like." The agent ducked down. "Aw, hell, we need t' move." Vin backed away then turned back toward the others. "Atkins gave us up."

With Chris' adrenalin sharpened senses, he discerned the faint pop of a silenced weapon over the rustling leaves. The birds quieted for a long moment. Tanner turned and gave Chris a significant look. "Atkins?" he guessed.

Vin nodded. "They have binoculars and I think they saw us. We don't have a lot of time."

Moving with cautious speed, Larabee and Tanner made their way back to the others.

"We're compromised," Chris said when his team gathered close. Alex stood to one side, eyes widened by terror. "We need to move."

"How many?" Buck's thumb unlocked his side arm with a quick flick.

"At least four, possibly six." Vin answered. "Clark and Atkins are dead."

Alex gasped and the rest instinctively closed ranks around her. "It's Brambilla," she choked out as tears began. Her entire body trembled as she wrung her hands. "He won't stop until I'm dead!"

"You said you didn't know who was behind taking you," Josiah said.

"I . . . I know. I'm sorry! I knew he'd kill me if I said anything!"

"Who?" Chris started, but then he switched focus after feeling alarm from Vin. "We *will* talk later," he snarled at the girl, making her cringe. "First, we need to get out of here."

Things were getting complicated, fast.

Nathan stepped up and using one arm, tucked her into his side. His other hand rested on his sidearm. "Which way?" he asked, looking to Chris.

Before Larabee could reply, Tanner pointed west. "That way." He moved off, skillfully silent, and disappeared into the woods. Larabee tipped his head, motioning the others to follow. They made a broken, single file line with Alex again in the middle, but this time, those that followed drew their weapons. They moved at a quick clip, finding it difficult to keep the marshal in sight.

"Christ, he's like a ninja or somethin', the way he moves," J.D. whispered, fourth in line and behind Buck. Next was Alex, followed by Nathan, Ezra, and Josiah.

"Yeah," Wilmington replied, concentrating on not losing the elusive marshal and his boss. "I'm afraid I'll lose 'em if I blink." After a minute, he slammed to a stop, avoiding a collision with Chris by twisting his body sideways. "Whoa!" he breathed in surprise.

Marshal Tanner stood frozen, listening, just ahead.

J.D. held an arm out, signaling the rest to stop behind him. The only sound was their heavy panting as they clumped together. Chris stepped slowly to Tanner's side.

The quirky marshal stood absolutely still, his head canted to one side, breathing lightly, eyes intent. Tanner didn't acknowledge the arrival, but Chris knew, somehow, that the marshal was aware of his presence.

"*What is it?*" Chris thought. Dread twisted his gut - this couldn't be good.

Vin whispered, sending a chill up Chris' spine - "They're coming."

Buck reached Larabee's shoulder. "Should we trust him?" he asked quietly, nodding toward the marshal.

Chris spared a glance in Vin's direction and felt warmth from their unusual bond, knowing he could never explain the experience they shared to the rest of the team. All he could say was, "Yes," and trust that his team would follow.

CHAPTER FIVE

Chris found it taxing to keep Vin in his sight. The brush was thick and tall, covering all manner of obstacles be it rock or slashes of erosion deep enough to swallow a man. He knew what the terrain was like up at this altitude, recalling the handful of stills he'd ferreted out in the past.

Huffing hard, Chris took a moment to scan the northern direction they traveled - soon, they would be under a canopy of evergreens and the thick brush would thin out. He glanced back and had difficulty locating the rest of their party. When he saw Alex's strained face, he knew they had to stop and recoup. Too busy breathing, he stretched out his mind. *"Vin, we need to stop."*

"Can't yet - I still hear them and weather is rolling in."

Chris held up a hand for those behind him to stop, and they obeyed one by one as they cleared the brush to join him. Six souls gathered in a loose clump, breathing hard. Alex sank to the ground with a weak, keening sound.

Outside their group, Chris heard nothing, and sent that thought to Tanner.

"I hear them, Chris. Can't stop. Not yet. We need a defensible position."

Chris winced; the marshal had a point.

"Come on," he said between gasps. "A little farther."

"She's done, Chris," Buck panted, indicating Alex with a wave of his hand. Then he began loosening his tactical vest, following Josiah's motions. "She doesn't have the shoes or energy for this."

Chris made his way to his long time friend's side. "Listen, we need a defensible position."

Buck gave Chris a sidelong look and spoke between heavy breaths. "We c'n hear anything coming through this dry brush. We'll know when they're close."

"They can hear us, too, and we can't see what we're shooting at. We can't use the radio because they can hear everything in our cars. We may be out here all night, and weather is inbound. We need a better tactical location."

"So, the plan is to find a defensible camping spot? Then what?"

"We can discuss that when we're set."

Buck, breathing much easier now, stood up and took an evaluating look all around. "Don't look like we can hike to civilization from here, does it?"

Chris shook his head. "We need to find water, too." He squinted at the sky. "Did you read up on the weather?"

"A sixty percent chance of precipitation before midnight," Ezra offered, looking unhappy. "There is a possibility of snow at the higher elevations."

"Great," Buck muttered. "I think we qualify being in the 'higher elevations' at the moment, judging by the way I'm breathing. Air's thin."

"Tanner says to keep moving," Chris said.

The statement garnered a variety of looks from his team, ranging from skepticism to confusion. It was Ezra that finally broke the awkward silence. "May I inquire about the whereabouts of Marshal Tanner? I do not recall any point in our escape where you traded views."

The others waited expectantly.

"Just . . . keep moving. Come on, let's go." Chris turned and trudged onward, unwilling to verbalize the nature of his communications with Vin Tanner. It was an odd enough experience on its own.

The sun hovered over the distant peaks, its cold rays riding the rising wind and the promise of an incoming front of clouds. Once under the canopy of trees, its yellow face peek-a-boomed between tree tops directly into their eyes. The group made better time through the thinner shrubs and slowed only when the ground began an upward slope.

Marshal Tanner, many yards ahead, shifted in and out of their sight like a wild thing, unwilling to let them catch up. Chris maintained a sketchy visual on their acquired guide, discovering that the closer he got to Vin, the odd warmth that used to be a headache, thickened.

"Not a headache, really," he explained to himself, trying to define the puzzling feeling. *"More like . . . congestion? Pressure? Whatever it is, it's weird . . ."*

"Chris, we have to stop. It will be dark soon and we need some light to set up . . . something." Buck caught up when Larabee stopped to hear him out. "Not like we have any supplies."

Chris opened his mouth to reply, but stopped when Vin's message entered his mind.

"Rocks just ahead. Perfect place to stop."

The ATF leader relayed the information to a very perplexed Wilmington.

"And just how do you know that?" he said suspiciously, eyes narrowing as he looked ahead. "X - ray vision?"

"You discovered my secret," Chris deadpanned. "Come on." He turned his back on his old friend and hiked off, wondering how to explain something he didn't understand himself.

Behind him he heard the rest of the group uttering relived sighs with the news that they were stopping soon. Chris moved ahead through the trees and saw the rise of rocks flanked by old growth trees. At any other time, he would pause to admire the beauty of the granite stand - cold grey streaked with dazzling white that rose up as high as the trees. Vin was right - it was a good spot. With Vin's extraordinary hearing, he could hear any approach, what with the layer of dead, dry leaves and brush.

Autumn's browning foliage would be their alarm – until it rained. Or snowed. Chris shuddered with the thought.

He followed a narrow path around the base and thanked Tanner for leaving some markers - stacked rocks, stick arrows and the like - that made the climb easier. Near the top, a flat - topped boulder the size of a house made a good perch with room for all of them. A pile of freshly cut branches and fronds greeted him.

"Vin?" he called softly.

"Here."

Chris looked up and dry leaves rained around him. He aimed a glare at the tracker who smirked in reply.

"Good for sittin' on. It insulates the cold rock. Stuff a bunch under that overhang to your right."

Scanning the rock face, Chris saw a shallow cavern big enough to hold three of them. Black spots smudged the upper lip, indicating past campfires in the cave. One by one, Larabee greeted the others as they arrived and scanned the area. "It's best to keep low and not move much until dark."

"I do not understand our course of action, Mr. Larabee. I sincerely doubt anyone is following us all this way," Ezra said, rubbing his neck.

"They are." Morose, Alex sank down, trembling, and rubbed her arms.

After a beat of silence, Chris said, "We catch our breath, and then we talk." He gave her a stern look, then turned and began preparing to take a stand.

CHAPTER SIX

"I've known Carlos Brambilla since high school." Alex, tucked deep into the shallow cave sat with her knees to her chest and her arms locked around her shins, shivered for a myriad of reasons. With JD on one side and Ezra on the other, she had all the protection available from the physical elements. "I finally went out with him right after graduation." Her eyes began to fill. "I didn't go to college, I lived with my mom who pushed me to get a job a move out – Carlos gave me a job. He always had money, even in school, and I didn't ask questions. I needed to get out of my house because my mom was a raging alcoholic. I knew, inside, that his business wasn't exactly legal – we'd all heard the drug rumors in school - but I looked the other way because I was desperate." Alex's voice broke and she swiped at her cheek. "I never really loved him, but moved in with him. It wasn't long until he got rough." She rubbed faded bruises on her neck. "I finally got the courage to leave with help from Sean."

"Atkins?" Ezra clarified. "Was he a friend of Brambilla's?"

Alex shook her head. "No, no. He was a client . . ."

"Brambilla is a high level drug dealer specializing in cheap meth and expensive pills," Ezra clarified. "Atkins was a drug addict?"

“Yes . . . no . . . I mean, I thought he was a distributor. After he got me out of Carlos’ compound, he didn’t let me go. He kept asking about the details of Carlos’ business, the layout of his properties, his security. He only got me out of there because he was paid to do it - he was always on the phone with someone, telling them what I knew.”

“So does Carlos think you were kidnapped or that you left him?” Nathan asked.

Alex shifted uncomfortably, chewing on her lower lip for a moment. “Well,” she choked as the tears began again. “I left a note . . .”

“So he’s out to kill you because of what you know. He thinks you sold out.” Nathan sighed and shook his head.

“This is definitely not over,” Buck muttered. “You’re right. He won’t stop until you’re dead. Carlos Brambilla is known for his brutal, take no prisoners tactics.”

Alex nodded and then dropped her forehead to her knees and sobbed.

Chris low crawled to the edge of their lookout as he listened to the woman’s story, his mind alive trying to find a way out of their current situation. As the sun dropped lower, so did the temperature – the weather was turning against them. At least four pursuers, but more could have come along by now as Tanner suggested early on. He wasn’t sure of where they were or what lay ahead. Phones showed no service and the radios were useless. They had no food, very little water, and limited ammunition.

Then again, their pursuers had the same problems . . .

“*And night’s comin’.*” Hearing Tanner’s voice in his head seemed natural now, and that idea unnerved him. Because of it, however, the headache nagging him before faded. Larabee wasn’t entirely sure that was a good thing. Vin injected his opinion. “*Sure it is. Two’s better ‘n one.*”

“*Stop that.*”

“*Sorry. Can’t. I got the same problem, remember, and my head hurts with all them thoughts bouncin’ around in yours.*”

“*How many are there, exactly?*”

“*Six. They are fanned in a line and easy to hear.*”

Chris snorted. “For you, maybe,” he muttered.

“*I heard that, Cowboy.*”

Amusement edged the words in his head, and Chris realized at that second that there was a hint of an accent, too. How did all this work and why did this – thing – only affect him? “*Did you just call me a cowboy?*”

“*Call ‘em as I see ‘em.*”

Chris turned, raising his chin to find Vin's steady gaze locked with his from where he'd positioned himself above the others. The satisfying warmth tickling his mind spread through his body. The connection was unsettling and comforting at the same time.

"Hey, Chris." Buck managed to approach Chris and stop by his side without Larabee noticing, and he twitched at the greeting before dropping his gaze to regard his friend. Buck frowned, sent a questioning glance in Tanner's direction, and then made a point to turn his back to the marshal before speaking again. "I don't know what you're plannin', stud, but I hope he's not the center of it."

With a snort Chris scanned the woods as he talked. "We need all the help we can get right now. I trust him."

"You barely trust anyone, Chris. We just met him. I don't . . ."

"We don't have time for this. We have to work together."

Buck sighed. "You have a plan?"

"Survive this."

Chuckling, Buck shook his head. "Succinct as usual."

Chris managed a tight smile before pushing back from the edge of their lookout. "Come on, let's make a more detailed plan, then." The friends retreated to the shallow cave and joined the rest of the team, huddling close as a circle.

"JD, how's the cell signal?" Chris started.

"No service here. There are towers around the edges of the park, so I think if we get high enough, there will be a signal."

Josiah asked, "If we do get a signal, can you tell them where we are?"

"With a signal, I should have lat/long numbers, so yeah, I can be pretty accurate."

Chris nodded. "Good. That's your detail, then. Find that higher ground. Josiah, you cover his back. No one goes off alone. Nate, you stay with Alex. Ezra and Buck, we watch the perimeter for now. We may have to move suddenly and quickly."

"It would be nice to know how many there are and what they're armed with." JD checked his weapon and reset his cap, preparing to depart.

"Six." Chris didn't miss the glances exchanged between his men. "Don't know about weapons, though. Our best defense is the cover of night," he continued to avoid further inquiries. "Our next move depends on the movement of Brambilla's crew. Hopefully, they don't track us here before dark."

"What about Tanner?" JD looked up to where the marshal had positioned himself.

"He's fine where he is." Chris recognized the silence that followed as a request for more information, but Larabee wasn't ready to tackle that issue yet. "I trust him."

Buck snorted, but Josiah nodded and said, “Good enough for me.” No other comments arose.

“JD, Josiah, scout ahead for a signal before it gets dark. Stay put once you get a connection, and one of you keep trying to contact one of us while the other gets us some backup and a way out of here.”

“What if you have to leave?” Josiah asked.

“If this position is compromised, continue with your assignment. I don’t like the idea of splitting up, but it may happen, especially if we are forced to move. If we do have to move, we will head west. I think the closest road is in that direction, right?”

“I think so,” Nathan confirmed.

“All right. Head out, boys. I’ll tell Tanner what’s up.” Chris knew that the marshal was well aware of the sketchy plan, but he rose and made his way to the back of the granite outlook anyway and climbed up to find the tracker stretched out at the edge of the monolith. Chris low crawled to his side and the pair watched JD and Josiah until they were out of sight.

“*Not a great plan,*” Chris admitted.

“*Best one under the circumstances. At least we can watch their backs from here.*”

The two agents focused their attention on the slope below them. Chris reflected on the calmness he felt being with this practical stranger, questioning the absence of the caution he usually felt with most everyone he met; he was as comfortable with Tanner as he was with his team, and that said a lot. Team 7 was family, or as close as family could get after the tragic death of his wife and son years ago.

That thought caused the marshal to turn his head and meet Chris’ eyes, and something akin to an electric shock raced through Larabee’s veins – he could see questions in the hard blue of Tanner’s eyes. Just then, dusk engaged the woods with the disappearance of the sun and like the mythical green flash, an emerald aura flared and danced around the edges of Vin’s outline. The shock of seeing it vanished with the sudden flush of sensations – Larabee’s own senses spiked to unprecedented levels. He gasped and clutched at his head. Tanner immediately ducked his head and rolled aside, making distance between them.

“Sorry . . . sorry . . .” Vin mumbled, wincing at the sound of his own voice.

The assault lessened and Chris let out a long breath and dropped his shaking hands. “*Is that what it’s like in your head?*”

“*More or less. Seems to be getting worse . . .*” The thought stopped and Vin focused on the trees vanishing into the falling darkness. “I hear them,” he whispered. “There’s six, fanned out, heading this way. I smell gunfire residue. We can’t stay here . . .”

“How far out?” Chris asked.

“Can’t say. Everything is amplified . . .” Tanner rubbed his forehead in obvious discomfort and Chris found himself reaching out to rest his hand on Vin’s shoulder.

“Pull back,” Chris said. “Concentrate on my hand. Use your hearing and push the other senses back.”

Tanner closed his eyes and steadied his breathing. It took a few long moments for the creases between his eyes to soften. His eyelids popped open and he peered into the darkness. “They know about this spot.” He shook his head and squeezed his eyes closed again, clutching his head. “I hear . . . heartbeats; ours, two ahead, four below, six out there.”

“Can you focus on the six and filter out the rest? Get positions?”

“I’ll try.”

Night arrived quickly in the wilderness and soon Chris could barely make out the grey shape of the marshal. He could, however, feel Tanner’s presence deep in his head and chest, and he struggled to adapt to the blanketing sensation.

“They’re discussing circling around behind us.”

“We need a diversion to split them up,” Chris growled, pushing to his feet. “*Stay here and focus on the three to your right. Let me know when they start to spread out. We can’t let them surround us.*” Not waiting for an answer, he descended from the stony perch to brief the others.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Buck.” Chris spoke softly in the darkness to identify himself and joined the rest of his team outside the shallow cave. “They know our location and are setting up to surround us. You and I are going to split them up.”

“And we know this, how?” Ezra asked as he retrieved his sidearm.

“No time to explain. Vin will cover you from above. Ezra, Nathan, fan out at the edge. At least three should be coming in from that area.” Chris indicated the right side of the cliff face. “Buck, you and I are taking on the ones in the other direction.”

Alex’s breathing stuttered to hyper-ventilation and Nathan paused to coach her into calmness.

“I don’t like any of this, Chris.” Buck’s flat voice doubled down the message. “I don’t trust . . .”

“We don’t have time to debate this. Let’s go.” Buck reluctantly followed his boss and friend. Chris turned back after a few steps and caught Ezra’s attention. “If you have to move out, go west.”

“Yes sir.” The agent gave Chris a solemn nod and touched his forehead in a quick salute.

“*They are starting to circle. I think they are about fifty yards out.*”

Chris applied the knowledge to their departure. “Fifty yards out,” he whispered to Buck as the moved cautiously through the trees. He only got a low grumble in reply and heard more that saw his partner move to his right to set a parallel position.

As he advanced, Chris noted that he could see his breath in the cold darkness. Intent on his quest, he still felt the warm connection between himself and Tanner.

“Thirty yards. One to your left, eleven o’clock, one between you two, one to Buck’s right at two o’clock.”

Chris reached out and tapped Buck’s arm and then signaled the locations. Although he nodded acknowledgement, Chris saw the doubt and anger in his friend’s eyes. Still, Wilmington moved off as ordered. As they progressed, their dark forms blended with the black tree trunks and shadows, becoming invisible in the landscape.

Concentrating on his quarry, Chris gripped his weapon and walked as quickly as he could without making noise. The wind picked up, covering the sound of his movement as well as those of his target. When he estimated the enemy’s location to under ten yards, he stopped and raised his weapon as he swept the area with his eyes, looking for movement against the wind.

Above him, the branches swayed and whispered. At his feet, loose needles tumbled along the ground. He spared a glance upward, hoping for moonlight, but only saw inky canopy. A cold raindrop struck his cheek.

“Ten o’clock!”

A gunshot followed the warning and Chris twitched, realizing after a second that the shot came from the lookout. Urgency pulsed from Vin, and Chris reacted by attacking. He covered the distance in a crouched run with his handgun leading the way. More gunshots sounded to his right and he fixed his target’s location when a muzzle flash nearly blinded him.

Chris fired in response and ducked to his left in pursuit, zeroing his sites on a large, dark form moving away quickly. Icy stabs of rain hit his face as he moved and the two exchanged running shots. Something plucked his thigh and then his bicep, but he pushed on in full-focused hunter mode. He heard shouts and gunfire off to his right and ignored it all to close the gap to his target.

The once quiet woods erupted with blazing guns and storm-lashed rain. Wild winds kicked up sticks and leaves and set branches in hysterical motion. Chris’ boots slipped on the slick ground, but he closed the distance to the threatening shadow with a warrior’s determination. Gunfire deafened and muzzles flashed. Chris ducked around a large tree, circled the damp, musty trunk and charged.

A nova blinded him, gun smoke burned his nostrils, and a giant’s shadow loomed up before him, his enemy’s face a mere yard ahead and etched in hard determination within the notches of Chris’ gun sights. Chris growled and fired. The shadow jerked backward and returned fire as Larabee lunged.

Then they fell, both of them together, tumbling roughly through mud, rain, rocks, and roots. They skidded to a stop in a tangle of limbs, fighting. The shadow man was twice Chris’ size and equaled his determination to survive. The ATF tactical vest softened most of the blows, but he felt every one. There was an infuriating disconnect between his brain’s orders and his body’s reactions, and for a fleeting second the idea of failure flared. Fortunately, his quarry retreated at that moment, hunched over in pain. Chris realized he’d lost his gun and pulled a tactical knife from his boot.

His lungs burned and his legs wobbled but, like a terrier, Chris doggedly maintained his single-minded pursuit. The shadow man stumbled once, twice, and then Larabee was on him, fists flying, and blade flashing. They rolled again, rocketing over a sharp edge as one, airborne for several seconds before striking the ground and sliding, sliding, sliding . . .

The stop was abrupt and the shadow man's breath exploded from his lungs with a nauseating crack when Chris rode the man's spine into a boulder. Momentum ripped them apart and Chris continued down the slope, alone, scrambling and fighting for breath in the cold rain and mud. It felt like he was drowning, and fear blossomed just as his tumble ended with the fall of a black curtain and an echo of someone calling his name.

"Nathan! Are you alright?" Panting, Ezra stole a glance over his shoulder to find his teammate.

"I'm good! I'm good!"

"Miss Wickerman?"

"She's fine! I have her here . . ."

Standish crept cautiously along the edge of their lookout, shivering. The wind and rain lessened and the agent blew out his breath to steady his heart. He shook out the cold water from his hair and searched the swaying woods for any unnatural movement he called out, "Marshal Tanner?"

"Here."

Ezra pinpointed the source of the reply behind and to his right, concluding that the marshal was coming down to their level. He replayed what he saw of the firefight in his head and understood that Vin Tanner was a hell of a shot with the eyes of an eagle. Ezra figured that he clipped one of the miscreants, but Tanner was the one that took them down permanently. He walked the edge once more before holstering his weapon and retreating to the cave.

Nathan squatted by the girl as he rubbed her shoulders and Tanner knelt down on her other side, rubbing his temples. Ezra fished out his cell phone and activated the flashlight, checking the girl first.

"Are you unhurt?"

She nodded. "Did you get them?" Her voice quivered.

"I believe so. Mr. Tanner? You are a remarkable shot." Ezra turned the light to their newest brother in arms, who failed to acknowledge him. "You have blood on your hands."

"What?" Nathan rose immediately and went to the marshal's side. Tanner tried to shy away, but the rocky face blocked him. "Let me see." He reached for Vin's hand.

Tanner rose suddenly as if startled by Nathan's presence. "Don't touch me," he said hoarsely.

"Come on now, let me look . . ." Nate pulled out his phone and turned on the flashlight, and Vin slammed his eyes closed with a groan as he backed away.

Ezra turned his light off and stepped back. “I will leave you and try to reach Mr. Dunne from above, and then I will check the area.”

Jackson spared a quick look. “Don’t go far, Ezra,” he ordered.

“Understood.” Ezra continued up the side and as soon as he reached the pinnacle, he felt his cell vibrate. He smiled at the caller ID before connecting. “We are unscathed here, Mr. Sanchez. No doubt you heard the gun play?”

“What happened? What’s going on?”

“Three of six bad guys are out of commission according to the sure-shot marshal. I was just on my way to verify . . .”

“Five of six.” Buck oozed from the darkness, wet, muddied, and riled. “I can’t find Chris or the sixth man. I’m having a talk with that marshal.”

Before Ezra could stop him, Buck descended to the cave. “Is backup coming?”

“Yes,” Josiah answered. “Did he say you can’t find Chris?”

“He did. It is quiet out there, so we do not know where the sixth man is either. Is the weather discouraging air support?”

“Yes. The front is still moving through so they are coming in on foot from the west and the east and checking the parking lot area. They figure you are closer to the west road, so they plan on bringing all of you out that way. Can you all walk?”

“Most of us can. Ms. Wickerman needs adequate clothes and footwear, size six. Buck, Nathan and myself are uninjured, but Marshal Tanner may be indisposed – Nathan is checking him out, but he was ambulatory.”

“Okay then, stay put until we get there. I’m on my way.”

“I do not believe Mr. Wilmington will agree with that order.”

“Listen, Ezra – we don’t need to lose another man in the woods. It’s dark, rough territory, and we don’t need Chris’ tracks disturbed. We will find him.”

Ezra heard sharp voices below and recognized Buck’s interrogating tone. He assured Josiah that he’d check back in every five minutes and cut the connection, taking a deep, cleansing breath to gain focus. Beyond that, the wilderness had calmed significantly and settled into an eerie silence. He held his phone to his chest and gazed skyward, following the gauzy cloud of his breath.

Drifting down from the blackness above, a white flake of snow settled gently on his nose.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It took well over an hour before the first backup team found them, bringing Josiah and JD along. Ezra relayed to Josiah that most of his time was spent preventing Wilmington from killing Tanner.

"Surely you are exaggerating." Josiah, being the team profiler, glanced at the silently brooding Buck.

"I am not," Ezra replied. "He is convinced the marshal is part of a Brambilla conspiracy to bring in Ms. Wickerman."

"That was Clark."

Standish sighed. "Yes, you and I realize that, but I have spent the last hour between our teammate and the marshal after I convinced Mr. Wilmington to release Mr. Tanner's neck."

Josiah's brows rose. "Really?"

"I suspect he is anxious about our team leader."

"I suspect that you are right. Is Tanner okay?"

"He appears undamaged, aside from a minor scrape along his temple, but I believe Mr. Tanner is hiding something. He does not want to talk or be examined and he has made it very clear that we are to stay away. It seems as if it hurts him to be touched. He massages his temples and drives Mr. Jackson to distraction with his silence. Look at his face – our marshal is in pain."

"'Our marshal', huh?" Josiah did as Ezra suggested and had to agree with the assessment.

"I fear Buck is distracted by the disappearance of Chris, and therefore, his judgement is impaired. Personally, I do not see any signs of deceit from Mr. Tanner, but you may be the better judge of that."

Josiah smiled ruefully and gave Ezra's shoulder a fond shake. "I have complete faith in your evaluation, Ezra. Now, let's go see about finding Chris."

When they joined the rescue team, Alex was in the process of tying the laces of a pair of hiking boots and looked pale and shaken. Buck paced the edge of the lookout like a caged lion, occasionally gracing the stoic marshal with a sharp glare. Nathan checked his gear and stood, ready to move out. Ezra, Josiah, and JD joined him.

"Buck?" JD called. "We're ready."

Those words elicited a reaction from Tanner. His head popped up and he straightened, and then he walked slowly toward the team.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Buck snapped as he, too, joined his teammates.

"Gentlemen!" The leader of the rescue team interjected his body into the group and squared off with Wilmington. "My team will head up the search. You may join us if the medic clears you and you stay out of our way."

"I saw him last," Buck argued. "You need me."

"I hear him." Vin's soft rasp caused a pained wince, but he raised his chin in defiance and glared at Buck.

"You *what?* You *hear* him? Are you insane?" Josiah had to grab Buck's arm to keep him away from the steadfast marshal.

"Fuck off," Tanner whispered, clearly in pain as he rubbed his forehead. "I'm goin'." With that, he stepped back to clear the group and headed off toward the woods.

The rescue leader started to follow, but Josiah stopped him with his physical body. "Marshal Tanner is an excellent tracker. I suggest you use him."

"I don't trust him." Buck checked his weapon and moved out, following Tanner.

The rescue leader shook his head and motioned four of his crew to fall in. He instructed the remaining four to escort Alex to safety, and then they departed on Buck's path. The rest of Team Seven brought up the rear.

They formed a broken line behind Vin, who strode confidently through the darkness. Snow continued to fall halfheartedly, looking like tiny butterflies twisting in the air. At first, it did not stick to the ground and melted immediately, but as the minutes passed, small patches formed.

Nathan kept a close eye on Vin, obviously worried, and Ezra quietly asked about his concern.

"I didn't get to see how hurt he was," Jackson said. "An' he's not walking as steady as he was before all this. Look at him."

In the headlight beams of their rescuers, Standish saw what the medic meant. The smooth, ninja-like action from earlier in the day was gone, replaced by a figure hunched in pain and tight with stress that used the trees for balance.

"Look how he pulls away from the trees he touches. It's like it hurts to touch them. I don't like it." Nathan set his jaw and moved up the line. Ezra saw Everett, the rescue leader, stop Jackson's advance but after a few words, the medic was allowed to continue. He was soon joined by Josiah. Ezra could see that Buck chomped at the bit to lead; JD managed to keep him calm and obey Agent Everett, but Standish knew that the invisible leash was very fragile.

Buck grumbled his agreement that Tanner was, in fact, headed in the right direction and they soon found evidence of a fight etched in the soil. Ezra noted, however, that the marshal didn't seem to notice the physical markers; the man continued on without pause in steady sureness. When they came to a sudden drop off, they stopped. Nathan, though, had to snatch Tanner's elbow to keep him from going over the edge.

Although the rain soaked ground obliterated a lot of tracks, it was clear that someone went down the steep slope. Ezra sidled his way to Nathan's side.

"You can hear him?" Jackson whispered near Vin's ear. Nathan peered down the hill.

Vin nodded, signs of pain on his face deeper than when they started. His entire body trembled, and he jerked away from Nathan's hand. "Don't . . . it's too much . . ."

That got Nathan's attention. "What do you mean? Where are you hurting?"

Vin cringed. "Shhh, stop . . . talking . . ." He stared down the hill and without warning, started down.

"Wait!"

Vin slipped down on his butt alongside the gouge etched in the slope, ignoring the scattered gear abandoned on the hillside. Inwardly, he knew it was as black as pitch outside, but he could still see. Everything had an odd monotone like time was on the edge of dusk and night, but he wasn't using the clues visible to guide him. Instead, he followed the beat of Chris' heart, as clear to him as Chris' voice was in his head earlier in the day.

He couldn't tell the others about what he followed; the notion that the rest would never believe him didn't enter his mind; it was just that everything *hurt*. Touch hurt, smells hurt, voices hurt - hell, even the sound of other's breathing hurt! If it wasn't for the black of night, he knew his eyes would hurt, too. The only thing that made it tolerable was the focused concentration on one thing: Chris' heartbeat.

When he was perched on the lookout before the attack, Vin had an opportunity to reflect on the odd connection with Chris Larabee. When he'd seen the undulating aura around the man earlier in the day, a memory sparked and he went back in his mind to a tribal story his Lakota grandfather once told him about special guardians that appeared once in every generation. They were called sentinels, and they were watchmen for the tribe. Vin remembered how his grandfather looked at him when he told the story. Sentinels, he said, had extraordinary senses. He'd told the story when he'd witnessed the keenness of Vin's eyesight.

Vin also recalled that when a sentinel was born, there was a guide somewhere out there that would enhance, or "turn on", the sentinel's abilities. Supposedly, they recognized each other when they saw the other's "spirit" – which Vin figured was the dazzling aura he'd seen. Since meeting Larabee, all his senses had become sensitive to the point of being painful and Chris' presence became a crazy kind of balm.

Up on that lookout, Vin heard every heartbeat, every breath, and every word. He had difficulty estimating distance through all the clutter of noise and used his mental tether to Chris as a point of reference. As soon as he pinpointed the six intruders, he started shooting. In the melee, he felt Chris' pursuit and fight, and kept track of him as he easily took out the threats clear to him in the dark.

Vin knew Chris was hurt but when their tether cut off suddenly, Vin mentally screamed his name and then lost what control he had over his senses. Now, every fiber in him hurt, and it grew worse with each step. Vin worked to push all other input aside and concentrate on Chris' heartbeat. He knew his conscious connection to his environment was fading away and he was terrified. Finding what he now knew was his guide was the only thing that could save him.

He pushed on, ignoring everything else.

Vin rounded a clutch of roots and stumbled to one knee, an icy rock beneath the slush slashing a deep rent. When he forced his body to rise and go on, a line of deep scarlet marked his leg and oozed blood – he smelled copper. His vision, exquisitely bright, invited icy stabs of clarity as painful as icepicks that pierced all the way through his skull. Footprints in the muddy snow stood out in sharp relief and he followed, engaging all his senses to guide him.

Chris' heartbeat fluttered, pulsed; it was the center of his absolute focus, standing out from the wind's moan, the snowy crunch of his own passing, his own ragged breath, and the thunderous footfall of the men behind him. The men's voices trailed off as if far, far behind, eventually fading away entirely as he continued on.

Chris' breathing hurt his chest. Vin coughed, his dry throat adding talon-scratches to the pile of senses he worked to push further.

The essence of Chris faded. Only damp earth and oily evergreen invaded his nose. Chris' fear dissipated and, realizing that, intensified Vin's senses to a level beyond everything.

"No, no, no, no!" Since experiencing the deep connection with a guide, Vin knew couldn't go back to the separation, the loneliness, or handle the sheer enormity of senses out of control by himself. *"Chris can't die!"*

Vin saw an arm sticking out from behind a snow-frosted tree trunk lying on the ground and knew it was Chris'. He'd known miles back, his guide's bodily signals like neon in the darkness, but now, everything went blank as the faint aura fizzled away. Black silence rose like a poisonous cloud and Vin fell to his knees as every sense sky rocketed beyond redline in a blinding explosion.

Chris was dead.

Vin fell into a black abyss.

CHAPTER NINE

Buck Wilmington sat in the first row of matching plastic chairs while the comings and goings of the University Hospital emergency room blurred the background of his primary focus - the set of doors forbidding him from being by Chris Larabee's side.

The drama of the past hours played as a non-stop loop in his brain: The way the peculiar Agent Tanner collapsed as dead weight; the sight of Chris' limp body and blue lips; Nathan's frantic evaluation and subsequent CPR effort; Chris' cold, cold skin when Buck breathed for his friend; Josiah's big hands working to rub life back into his boss' body; JD's chatter on the rescue team radio; and, finally, their teamwork in moving both bodies to the closest clearing once Chris' heart stuttered into an irregular rhythm.

Ironically, the doctors said that Chris' hypothermia probably saved his life by preventing him from bleeding to death.

Buck's stomach rolled. He sighed and dropped his head into his clammy hands, elbows braced on skinned and muddied knees. The loop began again. Queasiness flared from his gut. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Coffee, Mr. Wilmington?"

"Nah, my stomach . . ."

“It is fortified with my personal stash. Past applications have proven to settle such distress.”

Buck raised his head and his nose caught a cloying scent of whiskey. He sat up and accepted the offering, taking a grateful sip as Ezra eyed the dubious chair next to him. Then, Ezra fingered his muddy turnout pants and sighed in defeat as he eventually settled onto the hard, mustard-colored plastic.

“Thanks, Ez. Just what the doctor ordered.”

Standish lifted his own cup in a silent toast, and then wrinkled his nose and looked at the double doors. “You are welcome, and I doubt a physician would approve. Nothing from Mr. Jackson as of yet?”

“Nah, not yet. It’s all I can do to keep from bustin’ through there.” Buck sat back, slump-shouldered, and sipped the hot concoction. “The girl all settled in?”

“I left her in the secure custody of Director Travis. I fear he is the only one we can trust at the moment.”

“Oren’s got his hands full with that bucket ‘o worms. Glad I ain’t the one havin’ to tell the U.S. Marshal that there is . . . was . . . a rat in their ranks. Any clue how he’s gonna handle it yet? That girl’s got some valuable goods in her pretty little head.”

“Yes, she does. It should be interesting to see how this plays out.”

Several minutes of comfortable silence passed before Buck’s forehead furrowed in thought.

“What the hell happened, Ez? What was all that goin’ on between Chris and Tanner?”

Standish pursed his lips before speaking. “It was – remarkable. I do not recall ever hearing of anything like that, let alone seeing it myself. It was as if they were a singular person at times.”

Buck shook his head. “It was creepy.”

Ezra pulled a silver flask from an inner pocket, unscrewed the lid, and added some of the contents to his cup. “I cannot argue that evaluation.” He held up the flask in offering and Buck accepted by lifting his cup. Ezra poured a healthy dose.

JD and Josiah joined them just as they drained their cups, offering four fresh, steaming cups and a bag of hamburgers. The four men ate quickly and caught up on events, which wasn’t much. The girl was with the ATF supervisor and their team leader was behind the damnable double doors along with Nathan Jackson. The mystery of Vin Tanner remained unsolved. They all agreed, however, that it was good to be warm again.

When Nathan finally ejected through the much studied doors, the four teammates’ anger evaporated and simple worry took its place. They rose as one, wordless, eyes locked on Jackson.

“Chris is hanging in there – that’s the best I can put it. His core temperature is rising but his heart rate is irregular, so they can’t do surgery on the gunshot wounds yet- looks like an artery was nicked in his

arm. The bleeding's under control and it doesn't look like any other major organ was hit, but one of the bullets is still in his thigh and he's lost a lot of blood."

"He say anything yet?" JD asked.

"No, he hasn't come around. It's a waiting game right now."

"What about Agent Tanner?" Josiah crossed his arms over his chest.

Nathan sighed, shaking his head as he ran his hand through his close cropped hair. "One of those for me?" he asked when he spied the cup holder.

"Sure," JD said. "We have an extra." He worked it from the holder and handed it to Jackson, who took a grateful sip. "So, what about Tanner?"

"Well, they won't tell me much, but he's in a weird fugue state – unresponsive with vitals all over the place. They're trying to locate his next of kin and any medical records the Marshal's Office might have."

"No one has come for him?" Josiah looked around the waiting room stopping when his gaze met Buck's. "You were here before all of us. No one's showed up for Tanner?"

"Not that I've seen," Buck mused. "Then again, Travis may be keeping this close to vest."

"That's not right. We'll just have to fill in, then," JD stated. None of the team disagreed verbally, but Buck's eye twitched. "When can we see them?"

"Well, Chris is out of it, wrapped in warming blankets until he's stable enough for surgery and they won't talk to me about Tanner. They said I can bring two back at a time to see them, but only for a few minutes."

"I'm goin'," Buck said as he moved to the door with Ezra on his heels. They stopped at the doors and followed Nathan when he was buzzed in.

They walked in a line past curtained cubicles to the far end where they found their leader, the only parts of him visible being one arm and his head. Otherwise, he was wrapped in warming blankets. Although his face was pale and his closed eyelids practically translucent, his lips had lost its alarming blueness and his cheeks were pink.

"Hey, Pard," Buck said softly when he approached his side. "You look better than the last time I saw you." He rested his hand on Chris' forearm and the heart monitor fluttered.

"His readings are still all over the place," Nathan said. "Don't be alarmed."

"Where is Mr. Tanner?" Ezra inquired.

Nathan tipped his head to indicate a cubicle across the aisle. "Three down," he added.

“It would be easier to watch over them if they were next to each other,” Ezra noted. “Until the miscreant that sent that squad is located, shouldn’t they be under guard?”

Nathan nodded. “Probably so. Since the space next to Chris is open at the moment, it’s best to do it now. I’ll notify the staff.”

Ezra nodded, then crossed the aisle and found Vin Tanner. Except for the small gauze patch covering the scrape on his temple, he looked uninjured. The half-lidded stare, however, was unnerving and not normal. Ezra glanced at the monitors, noting the wild syncopation of the heart line and the constant shift of the blood pressure numbers. Where ever the stranded agent was, it was not conducive to restful state. Standish clicked his tongue with unease.

“Mr. Tanner, I am sorry for your current state,” he offered, reaching out to pat the patient’s shoulder. Before he connected, the privacy curtain was swept aside with a clatter that made both of them jump.

“They agreed to move him,” Nathan reported, stepping aside to allow a nurse into the small area.

Ezra took hold of the gurney frame. The nurse glanced at the monitor then grabbed the frame on the opposite side when Nathan moved to take over the monitors and IV stand. They rolled Tanner into the empty bay next to Chris, and Buck pulled the curtain open between them with a disapproving frown.

The nurse locked the wheels, checked the IV and left the men with a smile. Nathan pulled the main curtain around them, creating a one private space.

“Look at that, Mr. Jackson,” Ezra whispered. Both Buck and Nathan looked where Standish pointed.

Tanner’s heartbeat strengthened and his head turned toward Larabee. His eyelids slid closed and the arm closest to Chris slipped through the rails. Vin’s fingers twitched as if reaching for his injured neighbor. Just then, Chris’ heartbeat, which had been lazily fluttering, also strengthened, peaking to a point where an alarm rang.

“What’s happening?” Buck sputtered. When a doctor and a nurse pushed into the enclosure, the three agents crowded to one side, out of the way.

The doctor checked Chris’ eyes and pulse, then stood back and studied the monitor after turning off the alarm. The heart line fluttered and pulsed, and then became steady and strong.

“Huh,” Nathan whispered. He pointed to Tanner’s monitor. “They have the same rhythm.”

Dr. Drake picked up Chris’ chart, looked at his monitor, and then picked up Vin’s chart and studied it. “I’ve never seen this before,” he said, turning from one chart to the other, and then to the monitors. “Mr. Larabee’s heartbeat has increased and Mr. Tanner’s has lowered, and now they are in sync. This is very odd.”

Buck and Ezra exchanged perplexed looks, but Nathan spoke up. “We’ll just add that to the rest of the ‘odd’ we’ve seen today.”

“If this improvement continues, we can send Agent Larabee to surgery sooner than later.” Dr. Drake replaced the chart and looked at Nathan. “Let’s keep the visits short.”

“Of course. Ezra? Let’s let JD and Josiah in for a moment.” The two men slipped out of the cubicle and walked to the waiting room in thoughtful silence.

CHAPTER TEN

“Hey, Josiah.”

The team profiler felt a tug on his sleeve and realized he’d been staring at the double doors, lost in thought. He shook his head and turned to JD. “Yes?”

“I called to you twice. Are you okay? What ‘cha thinking about?”

“Nothing I can fully grasp at the moment. Something about the day’s events seem familiar, and I can’t figure out why.”

“Deja-vu?”

“Not exactly.” Sanchez took a thoughtful sip of his coffee before continuing. “Tell me what you saw after you returned to the rocks.”

“Well,” JD started, shifting his weight. Neither of them sat in the waiting room chairs, choosing instead to stand next to the rear wall. “You’d gone ahead after hearing the gunshots, which I thought was a stupid idea, Josiah. You could have been shot in the dark.”

“Hindsight, JD. You’re probably right. Go on.”

“When I headed down, I nearly tripped over a body and was relieved that it wasn’t, you know, anyone on our side.”

“Where was it? The body.”

“To the right, um, south, of the rocks. Probably flanking the guys trying to get around to the back. Lying face down.”

“Could you see the rocks from there?”

“No. It was too dark a pretty far out – twenty yards, I guess? Maybe more. Anyway, I heard one more shot that sounded far away to the north. When I got to the rest of you, I first saw the marshal pacing around. He looked agitated.”

“Did he draw down on you?”

“No, no, he didn’t. He barely acknowledged me.”

“Like he knew it was you before seeing you.”

“Yeah.” He paused to consider that thought, then continued. “Next, I saw Ez and Buck. They were standing by the cave watching Tanner pace. Buck started raising his gun then saw it was me. You and Nate were covering the girl. Buck said he took two out and that he couldn’t find Chris. He was mad when you said to wait for back up to search.”

“I was surprised he didn’t go charging out there.”

“Me too, but I saw that he had his eyes on Tanner. He really doesn’t like that guy.”

“So Ez and I scouted the slope and found two guys on their backs, in the complete dark, each with one bullet hole square in the forehead. One was closer to the rocks than the other, and they were yards apart. We could barely see them; did Tanner have night vision sights? I know we didn’t.”

“I don’t know.”

“Once we confirmed they were dead, we went to the first guy I tripped over and he had the same wound. Crazy. Then we confirmed the two Buck said he got – one had a temple hit along with a chest wound and the other was a chest hit.” JD looked thoughtful. “I’m not so sure Buck’s responsible for both. One, probably. Guess ballistics will tell, huh? Not that it matters. Dead is dead, right?”

Josiah nodded thoughtfully, pulling his thoughts together as he tried to pinpoint an elusive connection. His mental quest was put on hold when Nathan and Ezra appeared through the doors. Giving him and JD the go-ahead to visit Chris, JD jumped on the invite and disappeared, but Josiah took a moment to listen to Nathan’s description of what he witnessed with the monitors.

Josiah noted his own lack of surprise. He added the information to his milling thoughts that included every moment since first laying eyes on Marshal Tanner. Something clicked in his mind causing him to push past his teammates, heading through the doors to see if he could confirm his amazing theory – he still needed more information, but if what he suspected was true, how would this affect the team?

Buck and Ezra discussed a schedule to oversee the injured men while they paced the waiting room hallway, agreeing that it would be trickier once Chris was in surgery.

“I don’t like doing the U.S. Marshal’s job,” Buck grumbled. “Where are those bastards?” The rumble of Buck’s silenced cell phone interrupted Ezra’s reply. He glanced at the caller I.D. “It’s Travis.” He accepted the call. “Wilmington.”

Watching Buck speak with their boss, Ezra noticed the V between Wilmington’s eyebrows deepen with either concentration or anger – at this point, probably both. He waited patiently – and tiredly – for Buck to end the call, but already had a good idea of the circumstances based on the one sided conversation he overheard. As the call came to a close, Ezra turned his weary eyes to the teams second in command.

“Well, this is turning into a shit show,” Buck grumbled as he pocketed his phone. “We’ve become the Marshal’s Office baby sitters.”

“We are taking custody of Miss Wickerman?”

“And Tanner.” Buck scrubbed his face. “The Marshal wants to clean house and both he and Travis want the witnesses kept safe until Brambilla and any rotten apples are rounded up. Since the Marshal’s Office personnel have access to most or all of the Federal safe house locations, they want some place off the books. He suggested that hunting cabin on the backside of Chris’ property.”

“Smart. It does not show up on any official maps.” Ezra scowled. “It does not offer much in the way of comfort, either.” He turned an evaluating eye onto Buck. “You are displeased that Mr. Tanner is included in this plan.”

“Yes . . . no . . .” Buck let out an explosive breath and shook his head. “I don’t know what to think about that guy, Ez. My cop sense says he’s not to be trusted but my gut’s sayin’ otherwise.”

“So your obvious negative attitude toward him is what you would consider a compromise?” The corner of Ezra’s mouth turned up into a wry grin.

Buck snorted. “Compromise my ass. I chose the safer side.” He considered his boots for a moment. “I’m not stupid. We’ve all noticed something odd about the guy; and the way Chris latched on so quickly.”

“Feeling displaced, are you?”

Wilmington raised his chin and met Ezra’s questioning gaze, and then thoughtfully stroked his substantial mustache with one hand. “Maybe. Ain’t that a sad state of affairs for a man my age?”

“You’ve known Chris for a long time. It is understandable, and it is a good thing you are taking that into account. Has our leader’s choice of where he places his trust ever been wrong?”

Buck issued a weary smile. “Just once. It was a ‘Fatal Attraction’ kind of thing with the wrong woman before he met Sarah. It was a long time ago, though. Since it involved a woman, I’m allowing a pass on that one.”

“The female of the species is a conundrum we have all considered at one point in time, I am sure. That said, do you think you can learn to trust Agent Tanner since our leader seems to do just that?”

“Maybe. Looks like I’ll be forced to figure that out now, huh?” Buck clapped Ezra’s shoulder, knocking the agent aside. “You head home and pack up, and kiss that feather bed goodbye. I’ll send Josiah home, too, and then the two of you meet up at the office in the morning and get custody of Alex from Travis. JD and I will get you set up with food and things for Alex.”

“Will you accompany us to the wilderness?”

“JD will, but I want him to do some research first and get what he will need to stay electronically connected up there. Nate and I will get Chris and Tanner up there as soon as we can.”

Ezra raised a brow. “You will be shopping for Miss Wickerman?”

Wilmington’s hand splayed over his heart as if wounded. “Who else is more qualified?” Ezra opened his mouth to speak, but Buck shushed him. “Don’t matter. I’m in charge, remember?”

Ezra rolled his eyes. “Unfortunately, yes. Then I will bid you adieu.” He raised a brow. “Do not linger in the lingerie department.” After exchanging smirks, Standish ducked his head in an abbreviated bow before turning on his heel and leaving.

Buck watched him go with a deep feeling of dread seeding his gut. What little he knew about the Brambilla Cartel was enough to scare him; the possibility that the crook might have Federal assets at his disposal chilled him to the bone. The conflicted feelings he held for the mysterious marshal would have to be put aside for now in order to survive this.

This whole thing was nothing but ugly and Wilmington hated ugly. He set his jaw and swiveled around to face those damned doors again.

Buck heard the elevator doors whisk open behind him and now knowing he was alone, allowed his tired mind to wander back to the moment he decided to give Vin Tanner a second chance – the scene was etched in his mind. He’d kept as close to the marshal as he could during the hunt for Chris in the woods, but at the time it didn’t seem like a hunt. Tanner knew exactly where he was going and he never veered from the course with a certainty that screamed suspicious to Buck.

Then, there was that second that they actually laid eyes on Larabee’s downed form – Buck happened to be looking at Tanner’s face at the time and his eyes were etched in Buck’s memory. What he saw there was something he’d hoped he’d never see again.

He saw complete and total resignation - the same kind of resignation he’d seen once before when a mountain lion took a sheep in its jaws. The sheep bleated once and struggled a bit before being brutally silenced. Then, Buck saw a curtain of doomed acceptance draw across the frightened eyes as the prey simply resigned itself to its fate. Buck saw that same curtain draw across Vin’s eyes before he fell, boneless, to the ground.

Buck shook his head to clear the vision. He rubbed his eyes, let out a big sigh, and then raised his head and focused his substantial experience on saving all their hides and keeping his family safe, a family that now included one wayward marshal.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Chris’ groan of awareness was preceded by a fluctuation of his heart line. Nathan noticed it first and by the time Larabee’s eyelids cracked open; Buck was by his side, leaning in.

“Hey, Chris. Wakey, wakey!”

Nathan gave his teammate a disapproving look before departing to inform the doctors.

Chris blinked lazily a few times before his eyes settled on his friend. “Hey,” he grunted with a wince.

“Good to see you, stud. Don’t try movin’ – you’re going to be a mite sore.”

As Larabee frowned, Buck heard motion in the adjacent bed and turned around to see two confused, blue eyes regarding him. He stepped closer.

“Look whose back.” Buck glanced at the monitors and noted that their readings did not match anymore. “How do you feel?”

“Headache.”

“Yeah, you have a bit of a gouge in your noggin. You’ll live.”

The curtain whisked aside and Nathan returned with the attending doctor, who gave Chris a quick exam and punched notes into the chart. “Good to see you alert, Mr. Larabee. Now that you’re stable, there’s work to be done on those wounds.”

Chris’ brow furrowed.

“You have a bullet in you, Chris,” Jackson explained. “And an artery needs repairing. Shouldn’t take long.”

“We’ll catch you up on everything when you’re out of surgery.” Buck reached over and patted Larabee’s shoulder. “Everyone’s okay, so take it easy. I’ve got everything under control.” Chris’s puzzled frown faded to an expression of weariness as he was prepped and rolled from the room by Nathan and a nurse. When he was out of sight, a pained intake of breath made Wilmington turn back to the injured marshal. Tanner shifted uncomfortably and frowned in distress.

“Hey, now, settle down,” Buck urged, moving to the gurney. He reached out and rested his hand lightly on the patient’s shoulder. Vin cringed, hissing as if the touch was made of fire. Buck snatched his hand back.

Just then, the doctor reappeared with a nurse at his side. Tanner’s readings spiked. The doctor spoke lowly to the nurse who then prepared a syringe. “This should take the edge off, Mr. Tanner.”

“No! I . . .” Vin’s whispered objection faded away as the drug entered his system through the I.V. His body relaxed and the corners of his eyes drooped. His vitals evened out.

“That’s better,” the doctor muttered.

“He okay?” Buck edged closer.

The doctor had a short, quiet chat with his patient before nodding with approval and turning to Buck. “I can find no reason to keep him any longer. I’ll have his release papers ready to go in a few minutes.”

Wilmington looked skeptical.

“All I see is a minor concussion and minor lacerations,” the doctor said with a flick of his pen. “Will someone be with him for the next two days?”

“Yes, definitely. We’re familiar with concussion protocol.”

The physician gave him an odd look. “A printed version will be with the release papers.” He looked at Tanner again, and issued a satisfied nod. “Go to the nearest urgent care if he does not appear to improve. Good luck, gentlemen.”

“Thanks, Doc,” Buck said to a retreating back. Alone again, he studied the silent marshal. Although sedated, he did not look entirely relaxed. His eyes rolled under closed lids and he shuddered once.

Nathan returned in a few minutes with nurse who had papers in hand. “Thought we’d get him checked out while Chris is in surgery,” Jackson said as he looked at the marshal. “He still out?”

“No, he was awake and the doc gave him a something for the pain.” Buck studied the lax, yet twitching, face. “Hit him hard.”

Nathan frowned and stood next to Buck. They both remained silent while the nurse went over the follow up instructions with them, and awakened Tanner enough to sign a release. Nathan accepted the pain medication prescription and stuffed it in his shirt pocket.

When the staff departed, Nate tucked the papers into his pocket and retrieved Vin’s clothes from under the gurney. Buck relayed Travis’ orders and the plan for the marshal and the girl as they worked to get the barely cooperating marshal with limbs similar to overcooked spaghetti, dressed.

“Looks like they’ll be with us for a while, then,” Nate said, straightening. They helped Tanner to a wheel chair Buck commandeered from the hallway. The patient remained oddly silent. The corner of Jackson’s mouth slanted with concern. “Wonder how this one will take that information.”

“Guess we’ll find out soon enough. I’ll get him up to the ranch – we’re staging there. Can you handle Chris by yourself?”

“I have no doubt that Chris will be glad to get out of here. If he’s not discharged, he’ll leave AMA.” Nathan continued thoughtfully. “The docs are rather amazed at the speed his core temperature stabilized.” He glanced at Buck. “Considering what we’ve seen today, do you think Tanner had something to do with that?”

Buck hesitated and caught Nathan’s eyes with his. “Do you?” he asked cautiously.

Nathan chuffed and shook his head. “I’m not ruling out anything.”

“Join the club, Nate. Join the club.”

The men left the emergency room side by side with Wilmington pushing the chair. “Keep in touch,” Buck said as they parted ways in the lobby. “I won’t feel comfortable until we’re all in one place.”

Nathan nodded in unspoken agreement.

Josiah knew he should be getting some sleep but the puzzle of Vin Tanner did not allow it. Josiah rocked back in his home office chair with a weary sigh, rubbing his eyes. The words he just read ran through his restless mind trying to make connections with what he’d seen this past day. It took him most of the night to find the online document he sought because his memory of the particulars was vague, at best.

It was in this very office, years ago, where Josiah read about people with heightened senses. At that time, the document was posted on a legitimate website, not on the current *Urban Legends Busters* site open on his computer screen. Although the author of the original document was the same person now debunking the concept, Sanchez still wondered.

Everything in Blair Sandburg's thesis matched Vin Tanner exactly and Josiah convinced himself that Larabee's reactions to the marshal - bringing him back from "zones" as described in the article - pegged him as a "guide." Both men lent proof to Sandburg's "discovery". The author later debunking of his own research felt false. So, why the retraction of observations that Josiah saw as accurate? This idea of "sentinels" appeared in many other cultures through history, too, so there must be some basis in fact. Where was Sandburg today?

Rocking forward, Josiah's fingers found the keyboard again and he searched for the author. An hour later, he came up empty. Frustrated, he gave up and plucked his cell from the desk top and fast dialed the one person he knew would have better luck.

"lo?" Dunne answered breathlessly.

"Do you have time to find someone?"

"Josiah? Ya, sure, sure. Hang on a sec." Josiah heard paper rustling. Rock music played in the background. "I just finished packing up. I know I'm supposed to get some sleep, but I don't think that's happening." He chuckled. "My brain won't turn off. Okay, shoot."

Sanchez gave him Blair Sandburg's name along with any other information that might prove helpful in locating the scientist.

"I'm on it," JD replied. "Is this about a case?"

"Sort of," Josiah answered, deciding to let JD figure it out on his own. "I just need some answers. 'preciate it, JD."

"No worries."

"I'll pick you up at six and then we'll head to Travis' for the girl. Try to get some rest."

"Same to you. See you in the morning."

The team profiler hung up and rocked back in his chair with a groan when his lower back twitched. He shook his head to loosen the cobwebs, and then punched the print button on his computer. At least he would have some reading while at the cabin.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Buck stopped at a 24 hour Walmart less than a block away and picked up some sweats, T-shirts, and cheap tennis shoes for both Alex and Vin, leaving the sleeping marshal in the truck. The drive to Chris' ranch allowed Buck time to review the day's events and plan the next steps. The remote cabin was well stocked, but it would be tight with eight occupants. Most of the team's camping gear was already at

the ranch, so equipment was readily available. Chris' old four wheel drive truck could get stuff and people close to the cabin, but it still had to be packed in the rest of the way. A couple of horses would get the job done, and a horse or two would be good for patrolling, too. Buck mentally selected the best pair.

It was close to three in the morning when he turned up the long, winding driveway and parked in front of Chris' ranch style home. A waning moon hung in the sky over the black tree tops, casting enough light to move around without a flashlight. The Milky Way stretched across a sky sprinkled with stars and Buck stepped from the truck and took a moment to appreciate the cold beauty before circling around to help Tanner from the vehicle.

"Come on, Junior, let's move it." Buck shook the agent and Tanner jerked to wakefulness at Wilmington's first touch, and then cringed away, blinking rapidly. "Get the seatbelt yourself, then." He raised his hands and stepped back, turning his attention to the Walmart bags in the back seat instead. He frowned at Vin's pained awkwardness.

Buck stood back, holding the bags, and watched his charge practically fall out of the truck cab. Vin caught his balance and stood, swaying slightly as he looked around. The partial moon reflected dazzling white off the fluffy, scattered clouds in the frigid sky. The marshal's head tipped back as he studied the starry expanse and Buck grinned when he saw the pointed stiffness of Vin's shoulders relax into a rounded frame. The light breeze ruffled his unkempt mane and Vin's eyelids slid closed while he took a deep breath. Coyotes yipped in the distance, the trees whispered, and the sound of a horse blowing erupted from the area of the barn and drew Vin's weary attention.

"Horses. I can smell them." He spoke so softly, Buck had to tip an ear in his direction. "Six?"

Buck blinked in surprise. How did he know that? "Yeah." He turned and started walking to the house, shaking his head. "You're a spooky one, Tanner. You know that, right?" He crossed the porch and tapped in a door code, unlocking the door. He shouldered it open and was half way in when he noticed he was alone – Tanner stood where Buck left him, staring at the barn and swaying slightly. Buck dumped the bags inside the door and immediately punched in the home alarm code before switching on a light in the great room. He returned to the porch and called for Vin to come inside.

After a long minute, Tanner finally turned to the house and made an unsteady path to the door. Buck refrained from helping him, but his fingers twitched with the desire to grab an arm; the young man making his way up the steps was a far cry from the stealthy ninja in the woods earlier. He hoped a couple of hours of sleep would help both of them.

Vin jerked awake, the sound of tires on gravel grating on his ears. The unfamiliar room was dark, but the drapes covering the window were edged with daylight, making him squint. His nose wrinkled with unfamiliar smells. Pushing his legs over the side of the bed, he sat up on the edge for a moment before standing and shuffling to the window to peek outside. The tone of the light told him it was just past dawn but still bright enough to awaken a headache. An older Yukon trundled into sight from around the barn. Several horses whinnied and Vin heard a rooster's call in the distance. He smelled damp ground and hay even with the window closed

If his head didn't hurt, it would be an enjoyable setting. Vin watched the vehicle park, absently scratching his arms as he worked to sort and dampen the strange assault on his senses. Remembering a breathing technique his grandfather taught him, he focused on that in an effort to calm his brain.

The Yukon door slammed shut and Vin jumped. Then another door closed and he could hear the house waking up with footsteps, low voices, and beeping panel buttons. He pressed his hands to his ears and steadied his breaths. Still, he could hear Josiah, Ezra, and Alex's voices along with the crunch of their footsteps as they mounted the stairs and crossed the porch.

When Buck's booming voice joined in at the front door, Vin backpedaled to the bed and flopped down, pulling the pillow over his head to block the noise. It became increasingly difficult to rein in his struggling senses.

Following his grandfather's teachings, Vin focused on his breathing – on his lungs filling and emptying and the path of air through his nose and mouth. He visualized the molecules of oxygen entering his blood and pushing out the toxins from his lungs. Focus sharpened, and the assault on his senses faded to the background. He only saw the path of invisible air. He only felt his diaphragm flex and relax. He only heard his breath escape, tasting it as it passed over his tongue. He smelled the wet heat from as toxins left his cells and body.

Soon, it was all he knew.

Josiah escorted a dazed Alex into Chris' great room and guided her to the leather couch.

"Get some rest. I know you were in the office all night, and that couldn't have been comfortable."

"I'd really like a shower first," she said, looking around.

"That can be arranged," Ezra said with a smile. "Buck? Clothes?"

"On the counter. Hers is the pink pile."

Ezra's smile remained, but it became forced when he saw the folded clothes. "Obviously. It is safe to assume, then, that the camouflage, um, 'pile' is for Mr. Tanner?"

"Well, duh." Buck turned to Josiah. "Hear anything from Nathan?"

"He said Chris' surgery went fine and he's in a room now." Sanchez glanced at his watch. "Nate said he's resting well. They want to keep him a day or so."

Buck snorted. "Yeah, we'll see how that goes." He rounded the counter with offerings of coffee in both hands. He walked past Standish and gave them to Josiah and Alex. They both accepted with grateful expressions. Ezra raised a brow.

"I don't have any of that fancy shit, Ez. Want some working class shit?" He gave his teammate an affectionate grin and bumped his shoulder as he passed by. "Specially brewed by Mr. Coffee himself!"

Standish shuddered and sighed. "How can I refuse?" While Buck poured another mug, Ezra transferred the pink clothing to Alex.

She accepted the pile with a pleased look and followed Josiah to the guest room that had its own bathroom. When he returned, he glanced at the closed door of the second bedroom in the same hallway as he passed by. "Vin asleep?" he asked when he rejoined Buck and Ezra.

"Guess so." Buck sipped his coffee, then put it down and got to business. "Did you see Travis?"

"Yes. He's been pretty busy all night and seemed relieved to release Alex to us. Glad it's not our mess." Josiah sat down at the counter stool. "I'll brief you on what he said. He wants to stay off the phones."

"I sincerely hope that the Marshal's Office mess does not spill over into our domain any further than it already has." Ezra leaned against the wall at the end of the counter and scanned the pastoral scene through the large window. "What is our next step?"

"Load up Chris' 4 x 4 with all the supplies we can stuff in and get Alex to the cabin. I know it won't go all the way, but we can get close. I was also thinkin' on bringin' up Pony and Milagro. They can haul the stuff from truck to cabin and we can use them to patrol."

Josiah nodded. "Sounds like a plan. Pony's as good as a watchdog when it comes to intruders and Milagro's attentive. I'll bring up Pony. Ezra? Do you want to ride Milagro up there?"

Standish pulled a sour face. "That is much better than riding in that monstrosity of a truck. I believe I sprained a disc the last time I rode in it."

Buck frowned. "Never heard of someone spraining a disc."

"Anything is possible with that horrid vehicle, Mr. Wilmington. It is an extreme stretch of politeness that classifies it as a vehicle. It is more aptly qualified to be regarded as a torture device."

"Okay, then, Milagro is yours. I'll throw a bale on the truck for 'em. Let's get movin', boys. The sooner we're off the grid, the better."

"Perhaps I should remain in house to keep watch over Miss Wickerman?"

"Tell you what, Ez," Buck said with an evil smile. "Make us all breakfast and do the dishes, and we will start the manual labor. After that, you're pitchin' in. No excuses."

Ezra frowned. "I suppose that is the best offer to be had. I will get right on that, Mr. Wilmington, as soon as I stomach this concoction that vaguely resembles coffee."

The others chuckled and finished their doses of caffeine. Josiah shoved his empty mug across the counter in Ezra's direction. "There ya go. I'll get Vin moving and brief him. Be sure to check the oil in that truck, Buck. I saw spots under it a couple weeks ago."

"Will do. Let's ride, gents."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was a fuzzy, foggy world that greeted Chris Larabee when he cracked open his eyes. The steady beep of a monitor came through effortlessly, however, giving him a solid clue as to his whereabouts.

Along with growing awareness came a rising anxiety, enough to trigger a fight or flight reflex. His body reacted.

“Whoa now, Chris. Hold still.”

Nathan Jackson’s familiar voice provided focus for Chris’ jumbled feelings and the warm press of his teammate’s palm on his chest gave his hand something to grab as a physical anchor.

“What’s happening?” Larabee managed to croak.

“You got sewed up a bit. No rush to go anywhere, Chris.”

Larabee’s gut told him another story. He frowned and struggled to sit up. Nathan pressed him to the mattress.

“Wait a sec . . . wait! I’ll raise the bed.”

Chris stilled long enough for the rumble of the bed to stop in a mostly upright position. He blinked at the whiteness of the sheets and the brightness of the room. “Gotta go . . .”

“You have a catheter to take care ‘o that.”

“No, no. Gotta go . . . needs help . . .” He attempted a drug – infused glare in Jackson’s direction after a weak paw at Nathan’s hand failed to move it.

“What? No, everything’s under control. Alex is safe. All you gotta do is rest.”

Chris followed the words as the fog slowly lifted from his mind, but an unexplained urgency failed to abate. “No,” he insisted, tightening his grip on Nathan’s wrist. “No, something’s wrong . . .” He frowned at his inability to pinpoint the heart of his concern.

“Whatever it is, Buck will handle it. You lie still until the doc checks you out.” Jackson pressed the call button and eyed the flickering monitor. “Chris, lie still.”

He could feel his heart racing, pounding his chest like it was trying to escape.

Escape. The word brought a swarm of recent memories – woods, rocks, gunfire . . . and a rope like mental tether connecting him to the marshal that twisted and frayed as a repeating GIF file in his mind’s eye. When the doctor entered the room, Chris shot him a piercing glare. The doctor’s stride stuttered, causing the following nurse to bump into him.

“Well, you’re awake,” Dr. Drake said, hesitating a second before dropping his eyes to the bedside chart.

“When can I leave?”

“That idea’s a bit premature, Mr. Larabee. You’re just out of surgery . . .”

Chris gripped the bed rail. “I’m leaving. Nathan, get my clothes.”

“Chris . . .”

“Mr. Larabee, your wounds are just starting to heal. It’s not advisable . . .”

Larabee turned his penetrating stare to Jackson. “I just have stitches, right?”

“There are several layers of them in your leg where the bullet was removed. There are more holding a hole in the artery in your arm closed. You can’t be poppin’ any of ‘em any time soon.”

Chris glanced to his arm, realizing just then that it was secured to his chest to limit motion, and then looked to his leg. “Looks protected to me. I can rest other places than here.”

Exasperated, Nathan turned to the doctor who said, “I can’t sign off on that.” He reached over and probed the bandage on Chris’ thigh, making his patient gasp and glare. “It’s not adequately healed, as you can see. Tomorrow, maybe.”

“Today. Now.”

The observing nurse’s head looked like she tracked a high velocity tennis match.

“Mr. Larabee . . .”

“Get out, then.” Dismissing the man by focusing on Nathan, Chris growled. “Get Buck on the line.”

“I will if you lie still.”

“You can’t use cell phones in here,” Dr. Drake said.

Both men swiveled their heads to face the doctor. He cleared his throat, tapped on the electronic chart, and then handed it to the nurse. “I’ve noted your request on your chart along with my disapproval, Mr. Larabee. I can only cross my fingers that you will take my advice for your well-being.” With that, he turned on his heel and left the room.

As soon as he was gone, Nathan retrieved his cell phone and tapped on the screen. The nurse remained silent but raised her eyebrows for a second before replacing the chart and checking the IV and bandages, unaffected by Chris’ following glare. “I’ll change them now so they’re clean when you go,” she said with resignation. Larabee nodded once.

“Buck? Checking in . . . yes, he’s awake now . . . everything looks good . . .”

That was as far as Jackson got before Chris’ outstretched hand demanded the phone.

“Buck. Is Tanner there?” Chris hissed as the nurse cut off the wrapping on his thigh, but his deepened frown made it very clear that he was not happy with Wilmington’s answer. “Check on him. Something’s wrong . . . what? No, I mean it. Go check on him!”

Without a word, Nathan set his jaw and walked to the tiny closet to gather Chris’ bloodied clothes.

Josiah pushed open the guest room door and paused a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, hesitant to flip on the light. Instead, when he could make out the inky objects in the room, he shuffled to the window and pushed the curtains aside. Sunshine poured in and over the tight ball under the bedcovers.

“Vin?”

Josiah, surprised that Tanner hadn't yet moved, took careful steps toward the bed, mindful that the marshal could have an explosive wake-up common to ex-military and law enforcement.

“Hey, Vin.”

Reluctant to touch him, Josiah studied the covered lump. A swatch of tawny hair was the only visible part of the man, and as the seconds passed Josiah noted the heavy, yet steady, breathing, realizing it was not the quiet kind connected with sleep; this was . . . tight. Bending closer, he then noticed the fine quiver that encompassed Tanner's entire body.

“Vin. Vin!” The profiler abandoned all caution and moved in, shaking the distressed agent's shoulder. “Vin! Vin Tanner!”

Getting no response, Josiah tugged the blankets away and sat on the edge of the bed and looked closely at Vin's face. Tanner's eyes, half-moons of blue visible under drooped eyelids, were dilated and void of awareness. His too-deep breathing headed toward hyperventilating and his face was mapped with tense lines and creases. In fact, every muscle in Vin's body appeared tight, locking the marshal's body in a fetal-like position.

Josiah quickly checked for fever and finding none, shook him again while calling his name. In response, Tanner whimpered once as if in pain, squeezed his eyes closed and tightened into a smaller, unresponsive ball.

Just then, Buck appeared in the doorway with his phone to his ear and Ezra on his heels.

“What's going on?” Buck asked, big-eyed.

“He's not responding.” Josiah shook his head, frowning. “He's alive and breathing, but he won't wake up.”

“Damn, we didn't check him. I didn't think the concussion was that bad . . . what?” Buck refocused on the phone and after a second, pulled it from his ear and hit a button. “Okay, we're on speaker, Chris. Vin's not waking up.”

“Put the phone by his ear,” Chris ordered.

Josiah motioned to Buck, who handed the phone over. He held the phone over Vin's ear and Chris began to talk. At first, there was no response, but with a minute of Chris' voice, Josiah could see some of the lines around Tanner's eyes begin to loosen. Chris spoke steadily, asking for Vin to hear him, and Tanner's body responded as his posture softened. Josiah had never heard his boss talk so long and so

gently; he got the immediate desire to read what he'd printed out from his computer along with whatever JD find regarding Blair Sandburg.

With that thought, he heard a motorcycle crunch its way up the driveway and Vin's face twitched. That was the only warning he had before Tanner's entire body stiffened again and his breathing became erratic.

"JD," Buck said, backing out of the room. Ezra took a stand next to Josiah, concern clear in his usually unreadable eyes.

Josiah's lips tightened. He turned off the speaker function and spoke softly to Chris. "You need to get here as soon as possible," he said. "He's not doing well at the moment."

Josiah was relieved that the phone disconnected without Chris demanding any more information; it was time to go through the pages about sentinels that were printed from the internet of things. Josiah met Ezra's eyes again, and Standish instinctively talked in a hushed voice. "We need to move Ms. Wickerman, Josiah. I feel that you have a bit more understanding of the marshal's condition, so perhaps it is wise that you stay here? I will inform Mr. Wilmington."

Relieved, Josiah gave his teammate an affectionate squeeze to his shoulder. "Thank you. I think that's best."

As he turned away, Standish paused and gave Tanner a thoughtful look. "Will he be all right?"

Josiah sighed and looked skyward. "Lord only knows. I am going on intuition at this point."

"I trust your intuition brings a positive ending to this condition."

"Me too, Ezra. Me, too. I'm flyin' by the seat of my pants here, but have faith."

Ezra pursed his lips a moment before speaking. "It is you that relies on faith, Mr. Sanchez, and I have to admit, it has done well by you so far. Let's hope it does the same for Mr. Tanner." He then touched his brow in an informal salute and left the room.

Josiah gave a sidelong look to the heavens. "Just to be safe, I'm crossing my fingers, too. No offense." Then he took a deep breath and collected his backpack from the hallway where he'd dropped it, returned to Tanner's room and settled in a chair to watch over his charge and read up on the sentinel phenomenon.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The scruffy man shifted uncomfortably in the passenger seat of the parked, pristine Mercedes, very aware of his sweaty palms. The driver, without moving his eyes from the emergency room exit, said, "Patience is a virtue, you know." He sat so still in his ebony-and-scarlet leather seat that he became part of the car's interior, invisible.

The passenger gave him a nervous glance. "Not used to sittin'," he grumbled. "And I'm hungry."

The dark man remained a calm pool of shadow. "This, too, shall pass."

The passenger wondered if he was being laughed at; it was hard to tell with Esteban. Motion at the hospital exit deflected his attention. "There," he said, pointing unnecessarily. "The only gunshot guy in there. They look like cops, too. They're packin' – I see shoulder rigs."

The pair watched as a black man helped a man in black into a modest sedan. The Mercedes driver remained motionless, watching the scene play out before him.

"It's not Clark's partner," the passenger noted, frowning. "Must be ATF guys."

A single finger tapped the leather-wrapped steering wheel, Esteban's only movement in the hours they'd been watching. "Indeed," he agreed softly. "The Marshal's Office has been oddly absent."

"None of our contacts in the Marshal's Office know nothin', either. Brambilla suspects another Federal office is takin' over. We gonna follow 'em? We know the girl's alive. She's gotta be somewhere an' he's all we got."

With the patient loaded, the African-American agent circled around and slipped into the driver's seat. After a moment, the engine fired up and the sedan drove slowly from the parking area. As it pulled onto the street, Esteban reached down and tapped the Mercedes start button. The engine obediently purred to life and the driver shifted into gear.

"Yes," Esteban agreed. "He is all we have at the moment."

"Should I call Brambilla?"

"Not yet, Senor Huerez. We will notify Senor Brambilla when we have something more concrete."

The Mercedes oozed onto the street in calm pursuit as the last shadows of night fled the dawn.

Alex made a wary appearance in the great room shortly after JD's arrival, barefoot and picking at the pink sweat pants in an edgy fashion. Ezra escorted her to the kitchen and offered her coffee without any accompanying opinion on quality. Her hands trembled when she lifted the mug to her lips and she silently surveyed the interior of Larabee's home.

"We will not be staying here," Ezra offered. "Once you are ready, we will move you to a more discreet location."

"Are you coming?" she asked.

"Yes. Agent Dunne and Wilmington will accompany us. The others will arrive later." Ezra gave her a non-threatening smile and proceeded to roll a silver dollar over the knuckles of his left hand while he leaned against a wall. "We are watching over both you and Agent Tanner for the time being."

"Will I have to testify?"

“More than likely, but that is something to fret about in the future. Your safety is paramount at this point in time.”

Buck’s cell warbled *The Stripper*. He drew it and answered in one smooth motion. “Yeah?” He listened for a few seconds and then turned to look out the picture windows. “Gotcha. See you soon.” He spoke as he slipped the phone back into his pocket. “Okay, guys, let’s get movin’ and get Alex to the cabin. Nate’s on his way with Chris.”

JD looked surprised. “He’s out already?”

Buck’s mustache shifted with his wry grin. “You know Chris – he released himself. You got what you need in the truck, JD?”

“Yup. I’m set.”

Buck clapped his hands together and rubbed them in an enthusiastic circle. “Alrighty, then. Let’s get the first load up there. Ezra, by the time you get there with Milagro, the supplies will be stacked and ready to go the rest of the way to the cabin. Pick up what you can, then stable Milagro in the corral and stay with JD and Alex. I’ll shuttle the others up as they arrive and get Pony up there later when I bring the truck back. Let’s move.”

“I’ll get Josiah,” JD offered, turning toward the hallway leading to the guest room.

“No,” Buck stated quickly. He studied the hallway thoughtfully for a moment before meeting JD’s puzzled eyes. “He’s looking after Tanner. Leave them be for now.”

JD tipped his head, surprised by Buck’s soft tone regarding the marshal, then shrugged. “Okay. Let’s get to it, boss.” He cracked a smile.

Wilmington chuckled and then shoved his teammate in the direction of the front door. “Not for long, kid, not for long.”

Nathan eyed his passenger with pointed intent and a *“He has no business being here”* expression. His lips pinched from scowling, but the effect was lost on his boss. Larabee sat hunched with pain but did not utter a sound of discomfort, resulting in a trip shrouded in sharp silence.

When they pulled off the smooth highway onto the winding and somewhat rutted drive to Chris’ ranch, Chris writhed to an upright position with a low grunt and squinted in the growing daylight. They rounded the barn and saw Standish leading the sturdy bay Milagro toward the clump of cars parked in front of the house. Buck dropped some things in the bed of the work truck and waved at them. JD had Alex by the elbow, helping her into the cab.

Nathan pulled up to the front porch stairs and parked next to the old 4X4. He jogged to the passenger side and helped Chris out. “I’m checking your stitches when we get inside.”

Walking was an awkward endeavor that had to be painful, but Chris didn't utter a sound and acknowledged his teammates with a stiff nod. With Nathan on one side and Buck's arm around his waist on the other, they essentially carried Larabee into the house.

"Take me to Vin," he whispered hoarsely, refusing Nathan's attempt to put him on the great room couch.

It was a tight fit down the hallway to the spare room where Josiah stood waiting. The lump on the bed that was Tanner didn't move, but Chris' eyes were on him from the second they entered. Nathan steered Larabee toward the bedside chair.

"Bed."

An exasperated sigh from Nate was the only comment on the demand as he and Buck did as asked. Chris blew out a pained breath when he sank down on the edge of the mattress. He unwound his good arm from Nathan's shoulders and immediately reached out and rested his hand on Vin's hip, turning his torso so his back was to the others. From that moment on, Vin was the only person in the room as far as he was concerned.

Chris leaned nearer to Vin's ear. "Listen to me," he whispered. "Listen only to me, Vin. I'm here to bring you back."

Josiah watched with fascination as the bonding he'd read about just hours ago began. The ritual started so naturally; it was exhilarating to see, and the desire to speak with the sentinel/guide manifesto's author made his brain itch. Josiah barely noted Jackson cutting away Chris' scrub pants, but Buck's still presence beside him caught his attention – Wilmington studied Chris' actions with muddled concern. Josiah got his attention with a light touch and tipped his head toward the hallway. When they stepped from the room, Josiah closed the door.

"What's going on in there?" Buck asked lowly. "With Chris, I mean. What is it with that guy? He's a complete stranger."

"Not to Chris. When we have the time I'll try to explain, but I'm telling you now, Buck – Vin Tanner's not going away any time soon."

Buck frowned, looking more confused than angry. "We won't be guarding him forever."

Josiah's deep chuckle drew Buck's full attention. Sanchez clapped his shoulder and raised the sentinel documents. "This might help you understand - we may not be guarding him forever, but I think the reverse is inevitable."

"What the hell are you talkin' about?"

Shaking his head, Sanchez turned Wilmington back to the great room. "Later, brother. Later. Let's get Miss Wickerman to a safe place now. One thing at a time, okay?"

Buck agreed with a lift of his chin. "That I can do. Let's get going."

The purr of the Mercedes engine idled downward as it passed by a dirt driveway punctuated with a lone mailbox. A dissipating plume of dust was the only clue of a car's passage. A very slight turn of the driver's head indicated awareness of the information.

"Looks like they went that way," the passenger said with a nervous hue.

"Hmmm," was all Esteban said resumed speed. "Curiouser and curiouser. The game is afoot."

"Uh . . . okay . . ." Huerez reached for his cell phone. "I'll call Senor Brambilla."

"No, not yet." Esteban countered. "Research comes second."

"Second? What comes first?"

Esteban's slight smile gave Huerez a chill. "You will soon see."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Listen, Vin, I don't know what I'm doing here, but I know I should be here. I never ignore by gut instincts." Chris noted the shudder of Tanner's shoulder under his hand. "*Even though this is the craziest thing my gut's told me to do.*"

"Chris?"

Larabee smiled involuntarily as the mental tether re-established. It had a tenuous hold, shaky and tremulous, but the inner warmth he felt from it grew as he locked on with a mental picture of his hands on a golden rope. "*Yeah, it's me. Now follow my voice. Listen.*"

Vin let out a long-suffering sigh and the tense curve of his body relaxed as Chris continued.

"I'm right here, Vin. Focus on me and this room. Feel my hand, hear my voice, smell the pines on the breeze – you can almost taste it. That's good. Come on back. Open your eyes when you're ready. Relax, now. . ."

With a cleansing breath, Tanner's shoulders released their tense hold and his eyelid slipped open. He blinked then twisted his head until his foggy blue gaze connected with Chris' eyes. Chris offered a crooked grin. "Welcome back," he said after a moment.

"You're hurt." Vin sat up quickly and he visually scanned Chris from head to toe. He reached out and laid his hand on the thick bandages encasing Chris' thigh, eyes intent.

"Careful there," Chris teased nervously. "I'm not accustomed to men fondling my thigh."

Vin snatched back his hand and there was a ripple of awkward tension between them. "Uh," he breathed as he shifted and placed his feet on the floor, rubbing his head. "Um, guess we need to talk."

Chris chuffed, amused, and then clenched his teeth when pain flared with Tanner's movements.

"Yeah," he grunted. Vin reacted immediately, concern sharpening his features. "I'm okay. Really. Or I will be."

Vin massaged his temple and studied Chris skeptically before finally shaking his head with a resigned sigh. His gaze dropped to study his feet. "I . . . um, well, we . . . I think I know what this is."

"This', as in you talking in my head?"

"That's part of it, yeah."

"Will telling me about 'this' take long?" Vin straightened and gave Chris a sidelong look. Larabee didn't need their mental connection to conclude that his new acquaintance was annoyed. Chris managed a short laugh, followed by a gasp of pain. Vin shot to his feet in alarm and Chris held up his hand in a stop motion. "Calm down. We're okay for now, but we have to move. You can tell me about 'this'," he waved his finger between them, "later. Can you walk?"

"Pot. Kettle. Black." Vin held out an arm to help Chris to his feet. "You need a pain pill." His eyes narrowed in a squint. "You're hurtin'."

"Yeah, yeah, I noticed. Let's go."

Buck managed to shuttle everyone and supplies from the house to the trailhead of the remote cabin in an efficient and organized style; once focused, the man could get things done. Nathan snorted when he wondered if that was the very element that Buck called his "animal magnetism" when applied to females.

"That's it for now." Buck's swagger as he mounted the porch steps made Jackson's mouth angle with a grin. "Just us left. Can we move them?"

"Not if we have a shred of common sense."

Buck grinned tightly and gave his teammate's shoulder an affectionate shake. "Come on Nate. You know our sense ain't common!"

They turned toward the house together, but Jackson swallowed his parrying retort with the sight of Vin helping a very infirmed Chris into the great room. Chris was pale, damp with sweat, and trembling from pain.

"What the hell?" Nathan snapped. "Sit down before you fall down, you fool!" He strode forward only to find his path blocked by Vin Tanner. Surprised by his sudden reposition, Jackson stopped just shy of a collision and looked up, seeing only fury in Vin's heated eyes. Nathan took a step back. His jaw dropped open with the frightening hostility.

"Vin." Chris' pained voice was a calm near-whisper. "It's okay. He's okay."

Nathan wasn't sure who Chris' last comment referred to – him or Tanner – but as a result, Vin stepped aside with obvious reluctance. Jackson moved in and took Chris' elbow. "I'll stay here with you while Buck takes Vin . . ."

"No," both Vin and Chris barked simultaneously.

“Chris,” Jackson started, ignoring Vin.

“We aren’t splitting up. We all go.” Chris, leaning heavily on Jackson, headed to the door.

“That doesn’t make sense,” Nathan argued. “You aren’t in any shape . . .”

“That’s an order.”

Nathan managed an impressive glare, but he knew a losing battle when he saw one. “Fine.”

“Since he’s up, get him in the truck now,” Buck said. His attention, however, was on Tanner. Wilmington’s head tipped slightly to one side as he pointedly studied the marshal, who followed Chris very closely.

“It’s not going to be a comfortable ride, you know. I’ll give you pain meds in the truck,” Nathan offered levelly, his eyes flicking warily between Chris to Vin and back.

Buck moved to Chris’ other side and told his friend and boss about his plan as they made their slow way to the 4x4. “We can’t leave the truck at the trailhead to the cabin. It’s too visible. I’m gonna bring it back here and then ride Pony up. You can ride him from the trailhead to the cabin, so stay there until I get to you.”

Chris nodded, unable to talk because of his labored breathing. Vin circled around them and yanked the ancient truck’s door open. Buck didn’t miss the marshal’s vigilant scanning of the area around them when he wasn’t hovering over his and Nathan’s efforts to get Chris in the vehicle. He got the feeling that there would be dire consequences if they injured their boss any further; Buck added the inkling to his long list of questions regarding the peculiar marshal.

Huerez dragged the back of his hands across his slick forehead, wiping salty sweat into the grit powdering his face. He whispered a string of curses while he repositioned, hoping to see through the front windows of the house below. Thick forest edged a clear area surrounding the house; it was too far to see any detail, but he did recognize one of the cars parked in front, though, so at least he had the right place. He tucked into the trunk of a large pine and waited for an opportunity to get closer.

He froze when the front door opened and four people emerged, three leading and the fourth partially hidden behind. Huerez immediately recognized the two cops from the hospital and wondered why they were leaving when they just got there; when he saw the fourth man, it suddenly made sense.

“That marshal – Clark’s partner. He must know something if he’s with them,” he muttered to himself. “Must be stashing him somewhere . . .”

Suddenly, the marshal, holding the truck door open while the injured cop was helped inside, looked his direction. Huerez pulled back behind the tree trunk and froze; he even held his breath. Clark said the guy had unusually keen eyesight, so he didn’t budge until he heard the old truck start up and move. He kept the tree between him and the long driveway, but the truck never passed him. Taking a chance, he peeked around the trunk and saw a curl of dust hovering over a dirt road leading into the hills.

Waiting until the dust settled, Huerez kept in the trees and got as close to the house as he dared. It didn't look like anyone was there, but he had to make sure. Esteban made his skin crawl and he wasn't about to return with a half-baked report. He scowled picturing the pompous ass sitting in his spotless car doing who knows what while he was out here in the wild, but he had to admit that he felt safer with a good distance between them. He'd heard Esteban was an assassin for hire but he wasn't about to ask questions.

Huerez waited a while, listening, and finally got the nerve to approach the house. He peeked in all the windows and finally saw something in one of the bedrooms that made him grin – a woman's blouse. And he'd seen Brambilla's bitch wearing one just like it in the past.

Pleased, Huerez walked wearily into the woods and headed back to where Esteban waited.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Buck's mind whirled during his trip back down the mountain. He knew the drive up was a painful experience for his boss, but Chris' damned clenched jaw kept him from expressing it. Buck knew the look. Chris Larabee had been a stubborn cuss for as long as Wilmington knew him. Riding Pony to the cabin would be just as agonizing. Nathan would have to be on one side while Buck was on the other. On top of that, he needed a lot more padding in the cabin itself.

The solution would be to pack in more gear – blankets, lots of them, plus some cushions and more camp chairs and sleeping bags – and the best way to do that would be by adding a pack horse to his trip up the hill on Pony.

Buck sighed; Chris had a pack horse, but that beast was a barrel full of trouble. They'd rescued Peso from a wilderness outfitter because no one could ride him, but he was sturdy and sure footed and could handle a lot of weight. The problem was surviving the actual packing part. The mule-headed varmint could kick with all for legs in every direction imaginable, and he used his teeth with devilish glee. Once loaded up, however, the ill-mannered black behaved enough to get to their destination. He was less grumpy when unloading – at least he was smart.

Peso was on his way to the auction block after nipping a customer when Chris intervened. Their relationship was contentious at best ever since, but having a designated pack horse had been good idea. Buck sighed and mentally prepared for the battle ahead.

Chris settled in the shade of a gnarled pine, shifting every so often to spread out the pain. Nathan sat quietly beside him, holding his tongue. Vin prowled around them in an ever-growing circle until apparently satisfied. Then, he returned and settled close by in a similar shadowy spot that kept Chris between them.

“So,” Chris said eventually. “Might as well let me in on what you know.”

Nathan raised a curious brow, but remained silent.

Vin nodded and picked up a stick, fiddling with it as he spoke. “My granddad was Lakota. His son married my ma, but died before I was born. I spent a lot of time on the reservation. He taught me how to shoot, track, hunt, and survive in the wilderness.” Vin broke the stick and tossed it aside before facing the pair. “He taught me about the Lakota ways and beliefs, one being the story of sentinels.

“He said that every generation produced a sentinel to watch over the people. Sentinels had heightened senses, with the legendary ones having all five senses enhanced.” Vin shifted uncomfortably and ducked his head. “He suspected I was one.”

Nathan shook his head with a snort. “That sounds like a fairy tale. There are lots of folks out there with good eyesight and hearing.”

Vin shook his head. “It’s more than that.”

“So how do I fit in this story?” Chris asked, cutting off Nathan. “I know I do – you know I do.”

“The stories say that every sentinel needs a guide. A guide’s job is to keep the sentinel centered. When a sentinel focuses too much on one sense, they get . . . lost. They zone out.”

“Like you did.”

“I think so, yes.”

“What happens if you have a ‘zone’ and there’s no guide?”

“I don’t remember what granddad told me. I don’t know. All I know is that your voice was the only one I heard.”

“This is ridiculous,” Nathan stated. “If that’s true, how did you survive all these years? Wouldn’t you zone your way into a hospital or mental ward or something?”

Chris winced at Nathan’s obvious skepticism, but it was a good question.

“A sentinel isn’t activated, turned on – I don’t know a fitting term - but they aren’t a full sentinel until they are put under pressure in a live or die event.”

“Like a shootout in the wilderness,” Chris offered lowly.

Vin nodded and he studied the ground between his knees. “Yeah.”

“So your senses are suddenly off the charts when they weren’t before?” Nathan’s tone was still sharp and Vin winced. “That doesn’t sound possible.”

“Nate,” Chris chastised softly. “Take it down a notch. He’s on our side.”

Nathan looked at Vin through narrowed eyes. “Is he?”

“Nathan . . .”

“Look, Chris. We’re hiding in the wilderness with two strangers we found under very suspicious circumstances. I’m sorry if I can’t get on board with this fairy tale, but I know we’re in this together. I *will* be keeping my eyes open. Just sayin’.”

Chris nodded once in understanding, and then turned back to Vin. “So I’m your guide, then. That’s why we ‘talk’ the way we do and why you heard me back at the house.”

“And why I feel the need to protect you especially, yes.” Vin flushed with that admission. “I can’t help it. This is new to me, too. I don’t really know how it all works on a day to day basis.”

Chris smiled. “We’ll figure it out. One step at a time, okay?”

Vin nodded. Chris faced Nathan expectantly.

Jackson rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Whatever,” he muttered. “I see you believe it. All I care about is we all survive this, hopefully in one piece. Right now, you need to rest and let those pain meds sink in. Ridin’ the rest of the way ain’t gonna be a picnic and you’ll need your strength.”

Chris sighed and closed his eyes, allowing his head to rest against the tree. “Actually, that doesn’t sound too bad right now.”

Satisfied, Jackson settled down to wait for Buck’s return. Vin leaned back and studied the treetops for a few minutes before rising.

“I’ll just . . .” He tipped his head toward the forest. “You know . . . look around.” He moved off without waiting for any reply, remaining within Nathan’s watchful sight. He tried to relax but sharing Chris’ pains and the drive to protect made it impossible. Instead, he studied the lay of the land with a defensive eye, committing all he saw to memory as he built a mental map.

Hours later, he heard the steady tread of horses approaching and returned to the trailhead to meet Buck. Chris managed to fall asleep at some point which left Nathan to witness Vin’s return.

Vin placed himself between the two men and the uphill path. Jackson eyed him curiously. “Buck’s comin’ in,” Vin informed him quietly. “Two horses.” Nathan stood up and looked down the rough road, arms crossed over his chest. After several minutes, Vin smiled and the tension drained from his face. “Yup, it’s Buck. Sounds annoyed. He’s swearin’.”

Nathan moved to stand beside Vin. “If you’re right about the two horses, I know why he’s ticked off.”

Several minutes later, Pony’s black face appeared around the turn in the road followed by Buck’s mounted form. His attention was on the taut rope in his hand that trailed behind him.

“He’s mad,” Vin noted.

Nathan chuckled. “Yeah, I’m sure he is.”

At the end of the rope came a white faced black horse with ears pinned tightly back. Buck issued a string of swear words aimed at the animal that resulted in the horse baring his teeth and snapping at

Pony's flank. Pony jumped sideways, and by the wet, rumped look of his flank hair, it wasn't the first nip he'd received.

"Hey, Buck! I see you brought trouble along with you." Nathan walked down and took charge of the blaze-faced terror.

"Damn bastard's tryin' to dislocate my arm!" Buck winced as he rolled his shoulder.

Vin wanted to follow Nathan but the urge to keep Chris close was too strong. Instead, he walked back to his guide's side, pleased to see that he was awake and smiling.

"How ya doin'?"

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not."

"Then why'd you ask?"

Buck slid to the ground and led Pony to a level spot close to Chris. "Hey, stud, I see you're still kickin'. You ready for this?"

Nathan dodged a sly bite and kept the tree trunk between him and Peso while tying the horse up. "Hang on, I'm coming." Between the three of them, they managed to get Chris up onto the patient Pony. Chris' jaw was locked hard and a trickle of sweat emerged at his temple. "Buck, get on the other side and let's move before he passes out."

"Not passin' out."

"Shut up and ride." Buck turned to Tanner and pointed at Peso, who ripped bark from the tree and stomped a front foot. "Tanner, Peso; Peso, Tanner. Try to keep up and keep your arm."

Pony and trio moved off. Vin sauntered up to the irritated horse and untied him. Peso pinned his ears and snaked his head around with bared teeth. Vin didn't budge and gave the horse a well-timed flick on the nose, causing the horse to abort, snort and jump. His ears pricked forward. Vin, standing to one side, leaned over and blew into the startled horse's nostrils.

Vin could see the wheels turning in the horse's head as his ears swiveled and nostrils flared to take in the given breath. Tanner chuckled. "Just sayin' howdy, boy. Now, behave yourself and make this easier on the both of us. Come on." Vin turned around, placed himself next to Peso's flat jaw and started walking. The puzzled black moved out without hesitation, staying even with the newcomer's unmolested shoulder all the way to the cabin.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

When the group rounded the final turn of the switchback trail ascent, Vin grinned with pleasure. The ground opened up before him, revealing a log cabin snuggled against the edge of the forest. He could see sheltered corrals beyond where a lone bay horse eagerly watched their arrival. Three ATF agents

milled around the outside collecting wood and sorting supplies paused when they approached. Slushy snow spotted the shady sides of the trees and there was a chill in the light breeze.

The best part of the location was the view. The cleared ground in front of the rustic structure ended with a sharp drop opening the western view close to 180 degrees. Valleys and trees stretched as far as the eye could see and a distant, snow-capped range stretched a ragged line across the horizon. The sun hovered over it all on its way to a cloudless sunset. He drank in the surroundings and then continued to a hitching post near the porch where he tied Peso and began unpacking.

Getting Chris off of Pony and into the cramped cabin was enough to make the stoic Nathan swear. Vin experienced every gasp and stressed heartbeat, but he managed to focus on what was before him and leave the transfer to Chris' teammates. During the hike, Vin learned that the original cabin was built for two and the owners before Chris and Sarah expanded the structure to comfortably hold six, but it was still a two-room building. As he was half carried across the porch, Chris insisted that he be positioned near the front window so he could see outside. Because of that, some major interior re-arranging occupied part of the team to make it so. Vin felt more that he heard Alex's presence inside the structure; her heartbeat indicated stress.

Vin let out a sigh once he felt his guide was settled. When Chris and Buck began to hammer out a patrol schedule, Tanner allowed his senses to relax and wander. He found himself a solo worker at unpacking Peso; the others kept a healthy distance from both the front and back end of the animal, and once unsaddled, Vin was instructed to put the horse in the second corral, alone. Pony and Milagro, together in the larger corral, watched the prickly horse enjoy a back-scratching roll and kept their distance. Vin leaned against the top rail and scratched behind Peso's ear when the black completed his inspection of the space.

"Did you drug him?" JD asked as Tanner gently pushed Peso away. The young agent kept a wary eye on the horse in question.

"What? No. He's fine." Vin looked around and saw by their facial expressions, he was the only one with that opinion. "I'm guessin' he's just misunderstood."

Nearby, Ezra emitted an uncharacteristic snort and shook his head.

Josiah, on the other hand, pursed his lips as if considering a problem, and then said, "Maybe it's your – standing."

JD frowned. "What's that mean?"

"Head to the cabin, JD. I'll explain there. Vin? May I speak with you a moment first?"

JD and Ezra paired up and headed up the short path to the cabin. Josiah moved as close as he dared to the marshal leaning against the corral, careful to stay beyond Peso's snapping range.

"Have you heard of a man named Blair Sandburg and his research on tribal sentinels?"

Tanner's eyes widened and he nodded once. "Heard about sentinels," he answered slowly. "From my grandfather. He hinted that I might be one."

It was Josiah's turn to be surprised. "So are you?"

Vin shifted uncomfortably. "Looks like it. I think Chris . . ."

". . . is your guide, right?" Sanchez's face brightened with excitement. "Have you spoken to him about this?"

A dry chuckle escaped Vin's throat. "Yeah, some."

"How does that connection work? Do you need to be close, physically?"

"No . . ." Vin straightened from the corral fence and his fingers fiddled with the rope halter in his hands as he worked to find the right words. He dipped his chin, forehead furrowed with thought. "I . . . feel . . . his heartbeat here," he tapped his temple, "and can hear his voice."

"I have some research in the cabin that may interest you. It's Sandburg's thesis and related documentation. I think the others need to know our assets and you are one." Josiah watched Tanner's face as he considered. "Chris, too. We need to know what to expect and how to use your skills, and all of our resources, to keep Alex, and us, safe."

Vin looked toward the cabin. "Not sure I'm welcomed by all."

"You are. Buck and Nate are simply over protective of Chris, that's all. Trust me, you will fit in. They all know a good agent, and a good man, when they see one."

Vin's eyes snapped to Sanchez's with that last comment; he didn't see himself as "good" as much as a "survivor". He rolled the idea around in his head.

Josiah grinned and reached out, giving Vin's shoulder a firm shake. Peso immediately pinned his ears and reached over the top rail, his big, yellow teeth bared and targeting Sanchez's hand. Josiah snatched back his hand, escaping the bite. The black muzzle then rested on Vin's shoulder for a moment before retreating, making the marshal laugh. He turned and briefly scolded the unrepentant animal, who shook his head before retreating to a far corner. Vin hung the halter on the corral gate before he stepped to Josiah's side with a crooked grin.

"I think you have a protector, there," Josiah said lowly, giving the black horse a quick glance as he held his arms tight to his chest.

"Aw, he's just a mite scared, that's all."

They headed along the path to the house and Josiah raised a brow. "Scared, you say? I'm not sure that's what 'scared' looks like."

Vin patted Josiah's shoulder. "He's okay. Just ignore him."

"And stay out of his way," Josiah muttered.

Huerez called Esteban after watching the tall agent ride off with a pack horse. He was instructed to wait until he wouldn't be detected by the animals before following the dirt road. Once at the trail head, he was winded and gasping for breath. His shirt was soaked with sweat even in the cool shade of the forest – hiking was on his list of favorite pastimes. Spending money, however, was, so he kept his cursing to a minimum and waited until his breathing evened out before reporting in.

No signal.

Swearing again, he hiked back down the road until he finally picked up a couple of bars. Esteban answered after the second ring and Huerez reported his findings. "They packed in supplies. I couldn't see where they went, but it isn't accessible by vehicle. Maybe a hunting cabin or campground?"

"Come back in. I will see what I can with satellite images." His chuckle gave Huerez a cold chill. "This is shaping up to be an exciting hunt."

Huerez disconnected and continued down the mountain, unable to shake a feeling of doom.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Nathan, please escort Alex around the perimeter of the area." Josiah spoke lowly and offered her a consoling grin. "She should know how to find the restroom in the dark."

Ezra snorted. "To call that ramshackle structure a room of any type is an insult to rooms all around the world."

Nathan chuckled and swept an arm toward the door. "Your tour awaits, young lady."

Alex hadn't said much since arriving at the cabin and spent most of her time cowering in a corner so there was a feeling of relief when she rose with a shaky smile and made her way to the door.

"Courage, Miss Wickerman. We will survive this." Ezra said as she passed.

Nathan took her elbow gently and guided her out the cabin door.

Josiah closed the door on their heels and faced the others crowded together in the main room. He held up the sentinel manuscript. "We need to discuss this." He looked to Vin, standing adjacent to Chris who shifted uncomfortably in a chair entirely unsuitable for his injuries. Vin's hand moved to rest on Larabee's shoulder and he frowned. "Vin, before we get into this report, tell us your story as a kind of introduction. I know you have talked with Nate already."

Buck looked like a statue where he stood, stone-faced with arms crossed over his chest. Ezra leaned against the wall next to him and hooked one heel on the wall. JD sat cross-legged on the floor with a bright expression, ready to learn.

Vin cleared his throat and then began speaking in a quietly rough voice. "My dad died in the Army before I was born. My grandpa took my mom in, but she died when I was five. Grampa was Lakota and lived on a reservation in South Dakota. I with him until I left for the Army when I turned 18. We spent a lot of time outdoors camping and hunting and working with horses. He was the first person to

notice my eyesight and hearing and told me stories about sentinel tribesmen, and how one is born to every generation. A sentinel has at least one enhanced sense, he said, and their job was to keep the tribe safe. They were guards and warriors. It was many years before he actually told me he thought I may be one."

Buck snorted and JD scowled up at him.

Vin let out a nervous breath and slipped into a hipshot stance, keeping his hand on Chris' shoulder. "Grampa told me not to be surprised if one day, in the right circumstances, my senses might – 'turn on' is the only way I can explain it." He ran his free hand through his hair and Chris whispered something to him. His posture relaxed and he dipped his chin.

Ezra wore an unreadable expression that was well within his normal parameters. "What kind of circumstance?"

"Highly stressful. Life threatening." Vin stood square again and held Ezra's now thoughtful stare.

"So you've never been in that kind of situation before, then? I find that unlikely," Buck stated. "You're clearly ex-military and being a law enforcement officer of any kind is stressful. Why now?"

Vin nodded. "True," he said. Then he turned to face Chris, who steadily met his gaze. "The other thing that had to be there for my senses to turn on was a guide. My granddad said I'd know right off who it was."

"Your guide is Chris," Josiah said gently.

"What does a guide do?" JD asked.

"A guide's role is to keep the sentinel on task and watch his back. That's all I was told."

"Chris, do you believe all this?" Although Buck's question was edged with skepticism, the anger was gone and the query seemed to fall on the curious side. His posture softened and he tucked his fingers under the top edge of his jeans as he slouched against the wall.

"I can't explain it, Buck. Ever since we crossed paths, there's been this . . . connection." Chris shook his head. "I keep him centered. I can feel when he's over focused on one sense and bring him back." He rubbed his eyes. "It's hard to describe. We've already gone over this with Nathan."

Josiah perked up. "Which senses have you dealt with?"

Chris thought a moment. "All five, actually, but he's gone off the charts with hearing and smell to the point of freezing up."

"It's called a zone," Josiah offered.

Vin shifted nervously before nodding in agreement.

"This might help." Josiah held up the manuscript. "I've heard stories of sentinels and guides in my cultural studies. Many cultures around the world hold the same belief regarding them. This is a very detailed thesis by an anthropologist in Washington state spelling out his finding a modern day

sentinel with all five senses enhanced – apparently, it is a rare phenomenon, even in the folk tales he studied, to have all senses enhanced. He's very detailed in his descriptions and they all fit Vin here to the last detail."

A long stretch of silence ended with JD's thoughts. "I printed that stuff out for Josiah, but didn't get a chance to really read it. The few things I saw match what I've seen between Vin and Chris. It must be true."

A sigh escaped Ezra's lips and he dropped his arms in apparent surrender. "Well, I cannot dismiss what I have witnessed and we really do not have the luxury to debate this situation. Presently, our little tribe is all we have and we need to work together, regardless."

"Agreed," Buck stated. "Chris, *physically*, makes us a man down. We think that the best way to work this is to have two outside at all times working in shifts. Catch sleep when you can. Eat when you can. JD has a satellite phone for emergencies and Director Travis will use it to keep us informed."

"Travis thinks this will be over in a couple of days," Chris continued. "Once he has a safe location secured for our witness, we can hand her over. Until then, we are camping out. JD, do you have any ability to get online?"

"Cell phones, of course, are a no-no because they are too easy to trace. The sat phone can be used sparingly, no more than 10 minutes at a time and in a different location each time. I need to scout around to see if I can get a connection with my secured tablet. Since we're up so high up, I think I can connect with at least one tower and satellite is always an option. There's no generator here, but I do have a solar charger."

Josiah handed the sentinel documents to Buck. "Since you're in charge for now, read this so you have a better idea of the tools in our toolbox."

Buck took it and tipped his head toward the door. "JD, you and Nate start your shift outside and take your tablet to find that online sweet spot. Keep Alex in sight at all times. Vin, since you get along so well with that alligator horse, make sure him and the other two are looked after. You and I have the next shift outside. Chris, you just sit there and not bleed anymore."

Vin's lopsided grin was a mirror image of Chris'. Buck rolled his eyes with a chuff and dropped to the floor to read.

Huerez hugged the Wal-Mart bag close to his chest with one arm. A pair of hiking boots dangled from his other hand and a walking stick was tucked into his arm pit. The time away from Esteban allowed him to finally relax and he'd taken advantage. He'd left the unnerving assassin at a nearby Denny's restaurant where he blended in with the crowd, amazingly enough, while examining Google maps and sipping tea.

One full day had passed since they followed the agents. They were miles from the Larabee place and inconspicuous in every way. Given the way Esteban made his skin crawl, Huerez was slightly amazed how easily the man fit in with the public. He was like a chameleon. He was creepy. No one in the popular restaurant realized there was a killer in their presence and the recent spike in senseless public

shootings suddenly made sense; you could never tell who stood next to you. He decided then and there to move out of the city and become a hermit.

Huerez tossed the items into the Mercedes and slipped inside. As he did so, the small, wireless printer in the back seat lit up and began belching out a map. He turned his head and watched an aerial map roll onto the leather seat. A red X marked a spot on the edge of a clearing in the trees. The opposite side of the clearing ended with a sheer drop.

The quarry was targeted. Huerez took a deep, bracing sigh and started the sedan when his cell rang.

“Yes?”

“Come and pick me up. I will drop you to get an off road vehicle while I get my things.”

“Yes, sir.”

He didn't bother to ask what “things” he needed because he didn't really want to know. Ignorance, in fact, was bliss in this case.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The serenity of the trees and mountains did its job and a sense of calm settled on the group by the time night fell. Vin and Buck readied for their patrol time and downed a dinner of reconstituted chili while Nathan assisted Chris with creating a comfortable sleeping area.

“Check his arm,” Vin mentioned around a mouthful of chili. “It's hotter that it was earlier.”

Chris gave him a glare. Nathan snorted and helped him remove his shirt. Vin smiled at the snippy interplay between the two during the cleaning, and Alex stayed to herself, trying to become invisible. During the day, Chris adapted to the role of being her in-house guardian, keeping between her and the door.

“Let's go, Tanner.” Buck headed to the door and Vin followed after collecting the dirty dishes to deposit near the outside water pump where Josiah was preparing to take dishwashing duties.

It didn't take long for darkness to blanket them when the sun set. The two men split off and walked in opposite directions, giving Vin time to watch the stars emerge and breathe in the cold air. He turned up the collar to his worn jacket and tentatively stretched his sense of hearing as he moved in a broad circle. He sniffed the wind with chin high and connected scents with sounds – deer, raccoons, insects, horses, and the rest of the crew settling with the night's arrival. He focused on the cabin for a moment, grinning at Chris' grumpiness and Nathan's tenacity.

“Something funny?”

Vin heard Buck long before he spoke. The marshal wondered if Buck was testing to see if he could surprise him. “Larabee's not much for fussin', is he?”

Buck glanced at the gold rectangle windows of the otherwise black cabin. “Never has been.”

“You’ve known him a long time.”

“Yep.”

Vin met his eyes for a second before returning to his scan of the surroundings.

Buck tilted his head and continued to study Vin. “Chris and I have been through a lot. Served together as SEALs and in Denver PD before joining the ATF. He’s like a brother to me.”

“I see that. Must be comforting having family.”

Buck frowned at the marshal. “Sure, I guess.”

“Ain’t got no family myself. Not used to this.” Vin made a vague circle with his arm, taking in the cabin and people. “Crowds make me edgy. Connecting with Chris makes this easier.”

Buck tipped his head and continued to study Vin. “Let’s walk.”

The pair moved off, shoulder to shoulder, and then drifted apart to keep space between them. Their eyes constantly scanned the area as they walked.

“Must be tough with me in the picture.” Vin’s voice was soft and Buck could hear the edge in the statement.

Buck sighed. “Well, you gotta admit, this whole thing is hard to swallow. I’ve never heard of anything like this before and yeah, I’m skeptical, but I know Chris and I’ve never seen him like this before.” He shook his head and then chuckled. “I’m trying to get in tune with this, Vin, but it’s a big thing to swallow, if you know what I mean. Unbelievable, really, but I can’t deny Chris or my own eyes.”

“I understand.”

They patrolled in silence for a few minutes, enlarging the circle around the cabin until they were in complete darkness, where the rising moon was unable to pierce the canopy. Vin moved like oil on water to Buck’s side and gently tapped his shoulder, signaling to stop. Buck started to raise his rifle, but Vin’s hand on his forearm stopped him. Buck, frowning, looked at his partner and saw Vin’s finger to his lips, indicating silence, but he could see the tiny smile behind the finger and the bright sparkle in Vin’s eyes.

Keeping his motions very slow, Vin pointed off to their left and then tapped the night vision glasses hanging from Buck’s neck. Ever so carefully, Buck held up the glasses and looked in the direction Vin indicated. It took a few seconds, but he finally saw some motion and a green flash of reflected eyes.

The mule deer buck was huge – nearly as big and broad as the horses - and sported at least twenty points on an impressive set of antlers. Sensing their studied gaze, he turned to face them. His breath puffed from his nostrils as cottony clouds and his nose shined as it flexed with breathing. The three of them stood frozen, staring at each other for the longest time. Then, as calm as could be, the animal turned and strode away, head high, and faded from sight into the shadows.

“I’ll be damned,” Buck whispered. “Heard stories about that guy. Didn’t believe ‘em. That old man’s been around awhile.” He removed the glasses and turned to Vin, his big grin glowing in the dark. “Chris’ll be pissed he missed seeing that!”

“I bet,” Vin laughed.

They continued onward and completed their circle, and Buck stopped Vin near the cabin. “Let’s split up. I’ll keep close to the cabin and you circle again. We’ll swap when you get back.” Vin nodded and turned to go. “Hey, Junior . . .”

Vin paused and looked back, puzzled at the nickname. Buck grinned at him.

“Thanks for that.”

Vin returned the smile. “Anytime . . . Bucklin.”

Buck blinked in surprise and opened his mouth to counter, but Vin had already vanished.

They were relieved close to three A.M. by a grumbling Ezra and a weary Nathan, who asked Vin to check Chris before retiring.

“He’s sleepin’ rough, but sleepin’. If you can feel a problem without waking him, that’d be great.” Nathan looked uncomfortable asking the favor, still leery of this sentinel idea but using the theory to the team’s advantage. As Vin and Buck turned to go, Nathan touched Vin’s shoulder. “Hey,” he said. When Vin met his eyes, the medic said, “Good to have you aboard, Vin. Now get some sleep. You do sleep, right? The research says you’re ‘ever vigilant.’ That doesn’t sound healthy to me.”

“I’ll let you know. Some of this is new to me, too, but I’ve slept before.”

Jackson’s serious face dropped and he laughed as he replied, “Long as it ain’t sleepin’ around like Buck.”

Refusing to take the insult, Buck instead smiled and puffed his chest out. “You’re just jealous, what with you bein’ stuck with just one lady.”

Nathan winked happily. “The best one, Buck. The best one.”

Dawn broke coldly and Huerez appreciated the seat heating aspect of the rented SUV. After nearly an hour long drive, they left the paved mountain road for a questionable path of dirt leading, apparently, to nowhere. Esteban finally parked the SUV within a copse of trees surrounded by high brush. They exited, and Esteban slung an impressive looking rifle over his shoulder. Their feet crunched on the ice-frosted soil as they walked away in the cold morning air. The sky was still grey in the pre-dawn light and their breathing produced a trail of wispy clouds that followed and eventually faded. They stopped at the edge of the mountain. The valley spread below like a grey-green carpet, sharp and frozen. Huerez, glad for the stop, squinted toward Esteban, puffing diaphanous cotton balls of air.

“I believe this is the cliff edge that shows on the aerial map. Follow it to the clearing – I’m sure there is a cabin near there.” Esteban checked his Rolex, not the least bit winded. “Be back here at noon, nonetheless. If you find nothing, we will move closer. If you see a cabin, do nothing and report back. Understand?”

Esteban’s sharp eyes gave Huerez a chill – he was glad to be away from this man for a while. “Si, I understand.” He took a drink of water and turned to go.

“Remember, do nothing if you see a cabin or those men.”

The chill in Huerez’s spine turned into a shiver. “Si,” he replied. As he walked away, he worried his lower lip, feeling like there was a target between his shoulder blades. The unease eventually drained away once his scary companion was out of sight. Huerez hooked his thumbs on the straps of his day pack and he whispered a short prayer.

Esteban watched his minion disappear into the woods with a hard grin. “*The trap is baited,*” he thought. A spark of excitement fluttered in his gut. He pulled the rifle to the front and raised the barrel, the spot where Huerez disappeared centered in the sights. “Let the hunt begin,” he said flatly.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Chris choked back a groan in his initial attempt to stand. Instead, he channeled the wash of pain through the white-knuckle grip on the rough window ledge and forced his knees to straighten. Once standing, he took a moment to study the still figure curled in the sleeping bag on the floor next to him. It had taken quite a while to convince Vin that even sentinels needed sleep, and once satisfied that he was as close to Chris as he could manage without raising questionable eyebrows, Tanner crashed hard.

At first Chris was amused, but as time passed the invisible bond they shared felt like a physical link and Larabee felt his pains easing. Did this guide thing have more rewards than he first thought? He breathed a deep sigh and the corner of his mouth twitched contentedly at the warm feel of their special tether. Describing it verbally was going to be a challenge, but it was a challenge he was glad to accept.

He leaned on the rough sill of the dirty window and looked outside. It was mid-morning and he took a mental count of his men – he knew Buck was asleep in the far corner of the room. Outside, he saw Nate working with a temperamental cook stove on the tiny porch while JD prowled at the edge of the overlook. Ezra and Josiah were unaccounted for and probably patrolling.

Alex moved like a wraith around the front of the cabin in the cleared area between Nate and JD, drifting from one thing to another like a ghostly butterfly. Chris thought that she wasn’t really seeing anything her fingers investigated – that girl had to have a hurricane of thoughts going on in her head. He just hoped she would open up to one of them soon; it would be a bonus to know exactly where her loyalties really were; his restlessness, he decided, was a symptom of questioning her motives.

As he turned toward the door to respond to the call of nature from his bladder, he saw Alex drift toward JD. When he opened the door and carefully edged out to the porch, receiving an evaluating

scan from Nathan when he paused to catch his breath, Chris saw Alex and JD heading down the path to the outhouse. "Wasn't expecting a line for the bathroom."

The statement earned a smirk from Nathan, who then repositioned himself at Chris' side. "Then there's no rush, is there? Here, use my shoulder for balance."

The two men shuffled slowly along the path, taking time to enjoy the smell and sounds of nature. They paused just shy of the outhouse when they spotted JD standing uneasily at guard. Nathan grinned when JD noticed them and came over.

"Not comfortable waiting outside the ladies' room?" Nathan joked.

"Kinda stupid feeling like a pervert in this situation, isn't it?" JD said with a sigh, causing an amused snort from Chris. JD hooked his thumbs onto his waistband and relaxed. "How are you doing?"

"I'm moving. Painfully."

Before JD could reply, a noise in the brush captured their attention. JD took a step to stand between the outhouse and the disturbance, his hand settling on the butt of his sidearm at his waist.

A man with a walking stick emerged from the woods, circling around a broad clump of trees. Although he was sweaty and breathing hard, his clothing appeared to be clean and new. He swatted away clinging leaf from a vine with a soft curse before looking up, stopping quickly in surprise when he saw the three men.

"Oh!" he breathed, surprised.

"This is private property," JD said.

"It is? I'm sorry. I must have taken a wrong turn." He pulled a map from his back pocket. "Can you show me where I am?"

"Sure." JD started walking toward him while Nathan and Chris watched.

Just when JD reached for the map, the outhouse door swung open and Alex stepped down. Once on the ground, she looked up and gasped when she saw the stranger, fear clear on her face. She knew him.

"Get down!" Chris shouted at her as he fumbled for his gun. Instead, she bolted into the woods.

The stranger poleaxed JD with the walking stick and the young agent dropped to the ground before he could draw his gun. The hiker yanked a small gun from the small of his back and pointed it at Chris. Nathan pushed Chris to the ground and reached for his own weapon.

The stranger shot. Nathan dropped and rolled, returning fire wildly and causing the stranger to dart into the woods precisely where Alex disappeared.

Chris, swearing, saw stars due to his suddenly awakened wounds and rolled to his side, gasping in pain. Through tunneling vision, he saw Nate on his hands and knees with blood dripping down his

face, looking dazed. In the background JD struggled to his feet and staggered toward them, hunched over like an old man and wheezing horribly as he fought to breathe.

Josiah appeared from somewhere, his head swiveling and gun drawn, looking for a target. Chris managed to point in the direction Alex fled, and the profiler managed a few steps before the sound of pounding hooves stampeded in their direction.

All Chris saw through his pain-spiked vision was Vin crouched low on Peso's bare back as they charged through the scene in pursuit, side swiping Josiah and spinning him aside and into Ezra, who seemed to materialize from nowhere.

"Go, go!" Was all Chris could muster as his two teammates caught their balance.

Josiah and Ezra, guns drawn, started to follow Vin but a sudden gunshot splintered a tree trunk just ahead of them and they automatically ducked. A second shot followed, hitting a lower spot on same tree – the shooter was behind them. Sprayed with splinters, the men hit the dirt.

"Sniper!" Ezra yelled as a third shot struck the base of the tree just over the top of his head. He scrambled for cover behind an exposed boulder while Josiah threw himself behind a hefty tree trunk. Another pair of shots sounded from the direction of the cabin, followed shortly by the arrival of Buck, half dressed and gripping his gun with both hands. "I shot in his direction, but probably didn't hit him. I think he's gone. Where's Alex?"

Josiah and Ezra answered by running into the woods.

"There was a man . . ." JD managed to croak as he pointed after their two teammates. "Had a gun . . ."

"In addition to the sniper?" Buck deduced while he quickly checked the dazed Nathan.

"Yeah, Vin's on him." Chris struggled to his feet with Buck's help. "Let's go."

"Stay here, Chris. Nate's bleedin' but JD's coming around. Guard our six. JD, come on! We gotta keep that sniper off the others!" He hooked JD's arm and half-dragged him in the direction the others had taken.

"What happened?" Nathan muttered as he stood, swaying, with the palm of his hand pressed to his temple. Blood seeped from under his hand. "Where's the girl?"

"In the woods. Come on, let's get on the radio to get some backup and get some binoculars to find that sniper."

Using each other for support, the worried men made their way back to the cabin.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The thickening forest forced Vin to slow Peso's charge. He sat up and leaned back, pulling up on the only piece of "tack" he'd had the time to grab – a lead rope he'd thrown around the black's neck. Peso obeyed, shaking his head in frustration, and slowed to a jog. Using his legs, Vin directed the horse's

weaving path through the trees while extending his hearing and focusing his sight on a very faint trail of mused leaves and broken branches. Soon, Vin heard heavy breathing and rustling foliage, and his nose picked up two distinct body scents – one light and the other thick and heavy.

He focused his senses on the heavier.

As they moved forward, Peso calmed and lowered his head as he zigged and zagged through the trees, watching his footing and traversing obstacles of rock, branches, and downed tree trunks. Vin shifted his weight back, slowing the horse to a walk. The scent of rage hung heavy in the air and he knew they were close.

The dappled light shimmered with the swaying canopy of trees and dotted ground. Generous layers of leaves softened their footsteps and the musty smell of old forest cloaked everything. Vin lightly tugged on the rope collar and Peso stopped. Sliding from the horse, he touched down and stepped into the lead position. The horse touched his muzzle to Vin's rear pocket as they started forward, following closely and flicking his ears alertly.

Vin crept onward following a clear path of scent and sound. He could hear Alex crying softly and her pursuer swearing under his breath. The man knew she was nearby because Vin heard him working to coax her out of hiding.

“I'm not going to hurt you, girl. Brambilla just wants you back. Come out, and I will take you to him.”

Vin slowed, his own approach sounding too loud in his ears. He worked to focus his attention on the voice.

“I hear you, girlie. You sound scared. I can get you out of here.”

Finally, through the waving leaves and brush, he saw the dark outline of Brambilla's man. Vin quietly pulled his gun from his waistband and held it up, waiting to obtain Alex's position in terms of cover before moving in.

“I won't hurt you. I was ordered not to hurt you. Come out, now.”

Vin stretched out his hearing, focusing less on sight and smell. He could hear Alex sniffing, as could her pursuer, but he also heard her fluttering heartbeat and the sound of her clothing scraping along something – tree trunk? Rock? He squeezed his eyes shut and concentrated, settling on the latter. Opening his eyes, they watered at the sudden brightness he perceived in the cloak of shadows. Blinking rapidly, he scanned the area beyond the gunman. His position was poor, but Vin finally picked out low cluster of rocks that was lighter in color and nearly blinding to him, pinpointing her location. A prick of pain hit his temple. Then he heard her speak and the loudness of her voice made him twitch.

“You . . . you'll take me back?” She breathed.

The man straightened, using her voice to triangulate her location. He lifted his handgun and pointed it in the direction of the rocks. “Yes, I promise. Those are my orders. Come on out.”

Vin's concentration wavered with the flash of pain behind his eyes. He pushed his hearing to keep track of Alex and then glided quickly forward, gun raised, pressured to move in before she exposed herself.

His vision swam through his watering eyes. A flicker of sunlight through the trees flashed like a blinding nova.

The trees' rustling expanded until it sounded like a roaring waterfall and he plummeted toward an unstoppable zone. Shoved to the ground by a force from behind, a deafening explosion forced Vin to roll into a ball of noisy misery.

The gunfight was short and the result empty.

Josiah and Ezra, shoulder to shoulder, stepped forward quickly to the small opening of trees where Peso stood, ears pinned back, snorting, and defying the agents to come any closer. Vin's tucked body was carefully caged within the horse's four legs.

"Where did he go?" Ezra snapped.

"Not sure," Josiah replied, somewhat breathless. "I didn't see him. I just heard the shot and returned fire after Vin dropped."

"I did not see him either, but I did see that monstrous horse charge someone after knocking Mr. Tanner to the ground."

The men scanned the area carefully from a spot well out of Peso's defensive zone. The irritated horse shook his head at them in warning; his ears pinned back far enough to disappear in his flying mane.

Josiah straightened and holstered his weapon, keeping his actions slow and deliberate while in sight of the black. "Keep an eye out," he said softly. "I'll try to get to Vin."

Ezra let out a short, tense laugh and hitched his gun a little higher as he scanned the woods. "I am not a horse whisperer, my dear Mr. Sanchez, but even I can see that your proposal is not only unwise, but dangerous as hell."

"Thanks for your concern, Ezra," Josiah said in a calm, melodious way as he stepped forward and tried to make his substantial body appear unthreatening. "But it looks like Vin needs our help." When he got closer, he reached out. "Easy, boy."

Peso lunged, his hooves avoiding Tanner but his teeth right on target. He snapped the air where Josiah's hand had been a moment earlier. Josiah fell on his butt with his hasty retreat. Peso repositioned his legs like pillars around Vin's still body.

"Hell's bells!" Josiah breathed.

"That is a devil horse, for certain," Ezra said in a shaky voice. He spun around at commotion from behind and crouched with his gun held aloft. "Halt!" he yelled.

“Ezra? Don’t shoot!” Buck sounded winded and soon jogged into sight with JD on his heels. “Where are they?”

With a peeved sigh, Ezra straightened and lowered his gun. “It is extremely fortuitous I did not fire, Mr. Wilmington. As to where ‘they’ are . . .”

“Vin!” JD called, skirting around Buck to Josiah and helping him up while noting Peso’s protective stance. “We gotta help him.”

Brushing off his pants, Josiah tipped his head to the infuriated horse. “Be my guest, son.”

Ezra brought Buck up to speed as JD slowly approached the black. He spoke softly and kept his eyes averted, relaxing his body and trying to seem small. It took several minutes to gain Peso’s tenuous trust, allowing JD to penetrate the comfort zone and finally rest his palm on the horse’s sweaty neck.

“It’s okay, Peso. Easy, boy. Hey, Buck? I think he’s been shot.”

“Vin?” Wilmington’s worried tone made the muscles under JD’s hand tense.

“No, no. Peso’s been shot, haven’t you boy?” The animal relaxed again and JD took hold of the rope around Peso’s neck.

“Too bad it was not between the eyes.” Ezra’s voice was low and calm. “That animal does not have one single iota of manners.”

“He’s just scared and hurt. Looks like a graze along his shoulder,” JD crooned. Peso dipped his head and took a step back to touch the nape of Tanner’s neck with his nose. His nostrils flared and Vin’s hair fluttered. “We’re here to help, boy. Come on; let’s get out of the way.” He pushed on the horse’s chest and, surprisingly, the animal backed away. Josiah made his way to Vin’s side.

“Did you see where he went? Was Alex with him?” Buck quizzed while he and Ezra walked a perimeter.

“We can only assume they are together and departed in that direction.” Ezra waved vaguely in the direction of the rocks. He turned to look at Vin. “I believe that our only hope to follow successfully falls to Mr. Tanner. Josiah?”

“I don’t see any wounds,” Sanchez reported. “We need Chris.”

“I’ll get him.” JD fashioned a wholly inadequate bridle with the lead rope and maneuvered Peso to the low rocks, using them to mount up. Peso’s ears flattened again and his tail switched in irritation, but JD got him moving. He disappeared into the stand of trees.

“Will he get there alive?” Ezra wondered aloud.

“Can’t wait to see,” Buck said as he tucked in his shirt. “Come on, Ez; let’s see what we can see. Maybe Alex left a trail.”

“I doubt that very much, Mr. Wilmington. There is the possibility that she went with him willingly. I believe that girl is as trustworthy as a coiled rattler.”

“Then it’s a good thing I’m here to win her over. Let’s go.”

With a roll of his eyes, Ezra followed Buck beyond the rocks.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Getting Chris mounted onto Pony was difficult but eventually achieved. Loaded with painkillers and his shoulder wrapped snugly, Larabee focused solely on getting to his wayward charge. The connection was raw and faint, but he headed off into the woods without hearing Nathan’s sharp warning. Chris didn’t wait for the medic to mount up on Milagro or for JD to fit a proper bridle on the fractious Peso.

Nathan sported a large square gauze pad on his temple where the bullet skimmed his head and knocked him off his feet. He blinked to clear his vision and urged Milagro onto Chris’ trail and wondering what they would find.

Peso, ignoring JD’s request to slow down, pushed forward to Pony’s side to eventually lead the way by a nose. Josiah’s voice came within range and soon his hand took hold of Pony’s rein. Behind him, Vin huddled on the forest floor, frozen. Peso stopped as soon as he was close enough to nuzzle the marshal’s hair. JD slipped down, looking unsure about approaching the agent while holding the horse’s reins.

“Let me help you down, boss,” Josiah said softly. He supported Chris in the dismount and his hobble to Vin’s side before handing JD Pony’s reins.

“Ah, Vin,” Chris breathed. With a squelched groan, he knelt beside the sentinel across from the worried Peso. He rubbed small circles on Vin’s back as he spoke instructions in a low, quiet, level voice.

Time stretched several minutes before the hunched body loosened and relaxed. With a deep sigh, Vin blinked into awareness and rose to his hands and knees. He looked around owlishly before lurching to his feet. “We have to find her,” were his first words.

“Can you hear her?” Chris asked. “Reach out, but not too fast. Stretch . . .”

Vin’s gaze swept the forest and locked in the direction of Alex’s disappearance. “I hear footfall . . . breathing . . . Ezra – he’s swearing. That way,” he stated, heading off after taking hold of Peso’s reins. He swung up on the black with a grunt using a handful of unruly mane. The black shuffled impatiently in place.

Larabee moved slowly to Pony’s side with Josiah’s assistance and took the reins from JD. “We tried to radio for back up but couldn’t get through. Can you . . .”

“On it,” JD said. “Although I’m not sure what to tell them.” The young agent rubbed his chest where he’d been struck with the walking stick and winced.

Chris turned to Josiah. “Road blocks? Helicopter?”

“Got it covered, Chris.” It took Josiah’s substantial strength to help Chris mount up. Once he was sure Larabee would stay put, he took a step back and looked to his shorter teammate. “Come on, JD.” The pair took off in the direction of the cabin.

Nathan, who remained quietly in the background, studied Chris for a moment. “I can’t guarantee to catch you if you fall off,” he said lowly. “My head’s still spinnin’.”

“Just stay back and don’t get shot again,” Chris responded just before nodding toward Vin. Peso moved off with a light nudge. Chris lifted Pony’s reins and the horse fell in behind Peso at a respectful distance.

After a moment, Nathan followed, muttering, “Sound medical advice from a bossy amateur doctor.”

“You’re hurting me!” Alex complained as Huerez tightened his grip on her bicep and propelled her through the trees.

“No puedo ver una maldita cosa. Follando árboles,” Huerez grumbled. He gave his captive another yank when she tripped over a root.

“What?” she gasped. “Are we lost?”

Panting, Huerez stopped, maintaining his painful hold on the girl. He reached into a pocket of his vest and found the compass tucked into a deep corner under his handgun. Quickly wiping a trickle of sweat from his temple, he squinted at the quivering arrow and then scanned the woods. “That way,” he snarled, dropping the compass back into the pocket as he pulled Alex to the west and down a gentle slope. Just as he began to think that they might actually be lost, he found the familiar path along the valley edge. Relieved, he quickened their pace down the narrow trail, essentially dragging the girl along by her elbow.

When the path finally leveled and Huerez realized that the SUV he’d arrived in was tucked away in the trees ahead, relief washed over him. He was still alive! In addition, Brambilla would surely reward him for bringing in the girl – this was a good day. All he had to do was get to the vehicle before his creepy partner showed up.

He tugged Alex’s arm and when she complained he told her to shut up. After several minutes, he spotted the SUV and pointed it out to her. Once reaching it, they both leaned back to catch their breath.

“What are we waiting for?” Alex whined.

“Nothing.” Huerez pulled the spare SUV keys from his pocket. “Get in.”

“Stay where you are.” Esteban materialized from the shadows like a wraith and Huerez jumped at his stealthy appearance.

“Jesus! I could have shot you!”

Esteban merely chuckled. “Doubtful,” he replied softly as he moved in and stood close to the pair.

Huerez raised a brow and shifted uncomfortably. “Okay, okay. Let’s just get out of here.” He turned and fumbled with the keys.

Esteban turned his attention to the girl, studying her with flat, dark eyes. “You are Alexandra Wickerman, then?”

Seemingly frozen from the predator evaluation, it took a moment for Alex to respond. “Um, yes, yes,” she breathed, pressing against the side of the SUV and nervously shoving her hair from her face. “You are taking me to Carlos?”

“Si,” was all Esteban answered with one final look before turning to Huerez. “I told you not to do anything.”

Huerez stood tall with the comment and met the assassin’s eyes. “An opportunity arose and I took it.”

Esteban moved so quickly and smoothly that Alex did not realize anything was amiss until Huerez gasped and his hands fluttered to his chest where Esteban still gripped a knife handle. He twisted the blade, angling it upward and shoved again. He pulled his victim close, growling, “I will not be disobeyed.”

Alex shrieked, earning a backhand slap across her cheek from the assassin. Reduced to a whimper, she held her face and slipped down along the vehicle into a horrified crouch. She was sole witness as Esteban took a step back and freed the weapon with one hard tug. Huerez slumped to the ground; eyes bright with terror as the light of life fled into the shadows. Left behind was a dull forever gaze.

Esteban pulled a white cloth from a pocket and carefully wiped the blade clean before sheathing it with one smooth motion. He then turned slightly and extended his hand to Alex. “Come,” he said.

“Don’t kill me. Please don’t kill me. We have to get out of here. One of those cops has super senses. I’m sure he can hear us now . . . please . . .”

Alex babbled as she was pulled to her feet and once standing, immediately cowered when Esteban moved to strike her again. Instead, he paused with raised hand and cocked his head aside. “What did you say?” he asked lowly.

“The long haired guy – I heard them talking – he’s some kind of freak. He can see and hear things the others can’t . . . they didn’t think I could hear. Their boss – the blond guy – he’s the only one that can hear him . . . or deal with him . . . it’s confusing how it works. I’m sure he can hear us . . . the freak . . .”

Esteban lowered his hand, gripped her bicep and gave her a shake. “Shut up, you silly girl.” Thoughts whirled through his head at her words – old stories told by his grandparents came rushing back, stories that fascinated him enough as a teen that he sought out all he could find on myths about clan guardians. Super warriors that came once in a generation, it seemed; to him, it explained why he had the skills he did and why no one could challenge him and win. He was a guardian. Was this stranger he’d been watching the only person that could truly challenge him? He’d seen his actions in the camp and now they made sense. Another, younger guardian was in his presence.

Esteban grinned. He’d finally been presented with a viable opponent! This was the test he’d been waiting for all his life and a plan instantly formed in his mind. He pulled Alex to the back of the SUV

and let go of her arm long enough to open the hatch. She relaxed and started to walk to the passenger side door, but her captor grabbed her again. She let out a startled gasp.

“Guardians deserve respect, woman!” He shook her hard. “We are not freaks. You have no idea how lucky you are to be in our presence.”

Alex blinked and whispered, “You’re crazy! Let me go!” She pulled back and he punched her in the face, breaking her jaw and knocking her out cold.

He rolled her into the cargo area and slammed the hatch, then locked the vehicle with a disgusted snort. “No respect for a God. You will learn.” The assassin took several steps back, quickly checked the rifle slung across his back and visually scanned the area, and then returned the concealment of the trees using all his skills to cover his tracks.

Esteban couldn’t stop the growing smile to welcome the challenge.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Ezra and Buck came upon the SUV ahead of Vin and Peso. The two agents circled the area before moving in. Buck checked the body, giving Ezra a negative head shake after checking for a pulse. Ezra cautiously checked the vehicle, holstering his weapon when he spotted the girl.

“Miss Wickerman is here.”

“Well, that’s good news . . . isn’t it?” Buck skirted the body and joined Ezra as he opened the rear hatch, then leaned in. “She’s breathin’. That’s good.”

Rustling brush and a horse’s sneeze announced Peso and Vin’s arrival. “Nathan’s on the way,” Vin said softly. He reined to a stop and spoke again as his gaze swept the forest. “She’s going into shock.”

Pony emerged from the shadows with Chris’ normally straight posture severely hunched indicating his level of pain. His face, however, was set in its normal intimidating expression featuring clear, sharp eyes that took in everything at once. Pony stopped at a safe distance beside Peso. Nathan appeared from the trees, reining Milagro to the rear of the SUV. “Don’t move her,” he said as he dismounted stiffly. He puffed a breath, and then ground tied his mount and focused on Alex.

“Must have been the sniper,” Chris concluded regarding the dead man. “Was it close range?”

“Looks like it. Knife.” Buck stepped up to his boss. He tipped his head to the body on the ground. “Don’t know if it’s before or after stuffing Alex in the car.”

“Why didn’t he take the girl? Wasn’t that the plan?”

“Maybe we scared him off.” Buck hitched his hands on his hips and frowned, scanning the woods. “Maybe he’s settin’ up to get us now.”

“No.” Vin’s immediate response resulted in all eyes turning his way. “He went that way and he’s moving away from here.” He turned Peso away from the team.

“I did not see any sign of a path. Nor did I find any sign of a third person here.” Ezra narrowed his eyes at Vin. “He is obviously very well trained in covering his tracks.”

Vin nudged Peso.

“You can’t go alone,” Chris noted, straightening painfully while focusing a glare in the sentinel’s direction.

“And you can’t keep up. He’s gettin’ away.” With that, Tanner lifted the reins and Peso moved off into the woods at a trot.

“Vin!” Chris’ call didn’t slow the tracker. “God damn it!” He directed Pony toward Nathan. “Nate, give me some painkillers.”

Nathan was already digging through his pack. “Hang on, Chris; I’ve got to stabilize her jaw and neck.”

“I’ve got to go!”

“And she’s got to breathe! Her jaw’s busted and it has shifted enough to partially block her trachea.” Pulling out a self-adhering bandage, he called Buck over to assist. “Now get back, Chris, I gotta get to this first.”

Torn, Larabee backed Pony a few steps and divided his attention between the girl and where Vin had disappeared. Ezra stood at the edge of the trees where they last saw Tanner, and turned to meet Chris’ eyes. Larabee nodded once and Ezra followed the sentinel’s path, drawing his gun once again.

Vin could hear his quarry’s heartbeat. After several yards, he gave up looking for sign because it was clear that the sniper indeed knew how to cover his tracks. Vin stretched his hearing with caution – a zone now would be disastrous – and only heard the steady thrum of a working heart; he’d expected to hear foot fall or disturbed shrubs but the man’s skill was top-notch. Other than a very faint and fading scent of gunpowder, he didn’t smell him either. The man was careful – no cologne, scented laundry soap, or even sweat. He squinted into the shifting dark and light of the forest, but knew the ghost was still too far away.

Not too far for a bullet, though.

The sniper was extremely skilled and the thought that he was being lead into a trap crossed Vin’s mind. He stopped Peso every dozen steps to see if the heartbeat drew closer or away, or paused. After three stops, he noticed a change of direction and nudged Peso onto the new track. Finally, the suspect stilled, as did Vin. The slight wind was at his back and the sun would be in his eyes once he cleared the woods – he’d been lured into a position benefitting his quarry.

Tanner had a good idea of the terrain from what he remembered at the cabin outlook. The sniper, now on higher ground, had the upper hand; he simply waited for Vin to break from the trees. In response to the information, Vin stopped and concentrated on hearing, pushing slowly to the edge of a zone to pinpoint the location of the hidden killer.

He heard the faint click-and-rasp of a round being chambered and noted a skip in the heartbeat; then, a rough rustle of cloth on rock. Vin frowned. Was he visible to the sniper? He didn’t think so, but he

reined Peso ninety degrees and kneed him forward just in case. He noted that the trees thinned after several strides and figured that a horse and rider profile was a bigger target than he should present.

Vin dismounted and slipped the bridle from Peso's head, setting it quietly on the ground. "Stay back, mule, you hear me?" he whispered. Giving the black a quick scratch behind his ear, he then pulled his Sig from his waistband, taking a moment to miss his trusty rifle before moving on. Peso dropped his head and nibbled a leaf that crunched loudly in Vin's ears – he winced and refocused.

As the trees dwindled, the rocks increased, as did the slope. If Vin looked up, the brightness of the sun was blinding so he kept his head down and worked to dial back his sight. It proved to be tricky trying to suppress one sense while pushing another and ignoring the rest. He wished for Chris' help to banish the distraction of self-equalizing. Tanner paused behind a wide tree trunk at the base of a granite behemoth to segregate his senses and focus on hearing. It took longer than was comfortable to gain desired results – acknowledging that a guide changed everything. He worried his lower lip a moment. Since meeting Larabee, all his senses kicked into overdrive. Vin shook his head, let out a long breath to settle, and then tuned in to what he could hear.

Through a suddenly loud environment, he managed to locate a faint heartbeat ahead and up, but there was an additional pulse emanating from the woods behind him and off to the right. Vin frowned. Buck? Ezra? He shifted concentration, tapped his sense of smell and defined Ezra. The breeze carried the characteristic mixture of his hygiene products. Was he following Peso's tracks? He took a moment to find the answer.

Ezra's sign did not shift to Peso's path and he headed directly toward the sniper nest. Vin's pulse shot up and his senses rose, threatening a zone. He fought for control and refocused on the sniper's location. He noted a slight increase of the heartbeat and the sound of a slowly released breath – Ezra was in the suspect's crosshairs.

The time for finesse was gone. Vin broke cover with a low curse and bolted toward the rocky slope. There was a stutter in the sniper's breathing just as the heart rate spiked. Vin felt the suspect's trigger pressure on his own fingertip, and Tanner knew he was too late.

"NO!" he cried a microsecond before the rifle cracked and his senses reeled. Vin stumbled, fell to his knees and careened sideways, losing his gun and unaware of anything but the struggle to control all he felt, heard, and saw. The knowledge of danger, though, remained painfully clear in the chaos of his mind. Vin focused all remaining effort on that alone and his body responded automatically. A feral version of Vin Tanner came instantly to life and plunged into action.

A quarter-mile away, Chris Larabee gasped and was nearly unseated as a kaleidoscope of senses exploded in his head. He gripped the saddle horn, reeling, and Pony shook his head and danced in place with the sudden pull on his mouth.

"Easy, easy," Chris breathed, squeezing his eyes shut and speaking to both Pony and Vin – but what he felt from Tanner had shifted into something unrecognizable.

Fear stabbed his heart; this wasn't a zone.

Vin Tanner was out of control.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Ezra heard Vin's voice and the gunshot simultaneously and before he could act, sharp splinters bloodied his cheek. He threw himself down and rolled, snapping off a pair of shots in the general direction of boulders before using his heels to shove his body behind a gnarled tree trunk. Heart racing, he sat up and touched his cheek and picked out the larger shrapnel. Twisting aside, he peeked around his cover and saw a bullet crater marring the neighboring tree.

"Good Lord," Standish whispered, realizing how close he'd come to death. Taking a deep breath, he adjusted his pistol grip and listened. Some kind of skirmish sounded from the rocks and he carefully peeked around the tree again and worked to slow his pulse and quell his shaking hands.

A small rock fall rained down the face of the granite but Ezra couldn't see the cause. He took a bracing breath and moved, darting from tree to tree to get closer, hearing grunts and footfall from the fortress of rock. By the time he swung wide and came in from the side, the combatants were gone. A deadly rifle Ezra did not recognize, however, remained. After a moment, a soft sound behind caused him to spin and raise his gun.

"Easy, Ezra, it's me." Chris, astride Pony, stepped into the clearing from between the rocks. "Where's Vin? Did you see him? Are you okay?" The team leader's anxiety was unusual and disconcerting.

Ezra lowered his gun and plucked a handkerchief from his pocket to dab his cheek. "Unfortunately no, I did not see anyone. I assume, then, that Marshal Tanner distracted the shooter?" He pointed to the rifle.

"Yeah, I think so." Chris reined in next to Ezra and they both surveyed the area in tense silence.

Ezra noted the pinched lines of worry and pain around his boss's eyes. "It's been fired recently, presumably at me. Fortunately, he missed." Chris frowned at the bloody spots on Standish's cheek. "Splinters only, thanks to the marshal."

Chris nudged Pony around the side of the rocks and nodded toward the scuffed up ground. "Looks like Vin's on his trail," he said softly. He looked to Ezra. "You okay to keep going?"

"Most assuredly," Ezra said with determination. "And I should be inquiring the same of you, Mr. Larabee, but I'm sure the question is moot." He glanced up to Chris steadying himself in the saddle. "The trail is clear enough for me to track at the moment but your inexplicable connection with the marshal would be the better compass, I believe?"

"That way." Larabee nodded, urging Pony onward and keeping Ezra at his mount's shoulder. Together, they moved into the woods with Pony chomping on the bit.

Esteban moved through the trees using shadows and brush as cover clutching his throbbing wrist pressed protectively against his chest. He could just hear his pursuer and managed a tight grin – a few

more yards and the tables would turn. Pleased that his non-dominant arm took the damage in their meeting, the assassin took a second to regret the loss of his rifle and at the same time realized that it was not the weapon that would matter at the end of this situation; the opponent was too close. His grin grew into a tight smile, welcoming the idea of a close contact confrontation. This time, he was prepared. He only needed to find the proper stage for his exceptional knife skills.

Jogging at a steady clip, Esteban followed his mental map and adjusted his path toward a ring of trees surrounding a tight, open area resembling an arena. It excited him to end this in such a perfect setting – a natural coliseum for a natural gladiator. His steps lengthened and he marveled at his even breathing and strong heart.

With the location in sight, Esteban reached back and unsheathed the large blade from between his shoulder blades with his dominant hand. Ignoring the pain, he quickly leaned over and pulled a second knife from his boot. Although it was shorter, the sharp, serrated edge made it dangerously ugly. Entering the organic circle with a respectful step, he straightened, planted his feet, and faced the approaching warrior. A flash of regret that there was no audience dissipated leaving Esteban poised and ready.

“Welcome to my world!” he announced with a confident smile when he spotted his opponent surge from a low tangle of brush.

Tanner stopped at Esteban’s challenge. Vin’s cold, blue-steel gaze glinted in the feeble light and a chill of excitement made the assassin’s body tingle. He noted a trickle of blood staining the left side of his pursuer’s face and tipped his head with further evaluation. Esteban’s only warning of an attack was a guttural snarl when Vin charged, a shiny survival knife raised high.

They collided in the center of the ring with neither one going down. Feet dug into the soft soil and arms struggled for dominance as they wrestled. Esteban managed a vicious cross slash with the big blade, but immediately lost his grip on it when Vin ripped open his knuckles with his weapon. Esteban hissed and managed a hard elbow jab to his attacker’s throat, forcing Vin back a staggering step.

Tanner gasped for breath. The diagonal slash across his chest oozed red and the blood on his face smeared to look like war paint. Chest heaving, their eyes locked – and Vin shivered. Esteban spotted weakness. The newcomer’s stance had become unbalanced. The cold hardness in his eyes melted. Vin staggered back and outside the natural arena.

Disappointment flooded Esteban’s mind as he gained balance and worked to control his pain; this wasn’t the challenge he’d hoped for after all. He dropped his arms and waited to catch his breath, watching the distressed warrior struggle to keep his feet. Once still, the assassin bent and picked up his lost blade. “I will make it quick, I promise you,” he announced boldly, firming his grip on both knives. “It is my responsibility as a guardian.”

Fresh pain overwhelmed him, and once acknowledged, input to his other senses jumped beyond the red zone. While focused on tracking and pursuit, all his senses were sharp and focused. When his prey turned to fight and first blood was drawn, all sensations skyrocketed out of control.

Vin shook his head and slammed his eyes shut, but the sound of his own breathing and heartbeat packed his brain. The grip on his knife became fiery painful and he dropped it – and the sound of it hitting the soft earth made him gasp. The surge of air suffocated his nostrils with mildewed dampness, sharp earthiness, and icy coldness.

He stumbled back. Chaos swirled his thoughts. Words painfully blasted into his brain.

Vin clamped his hands over his ears and dropped to his knees with a pained groan. The footsteps as they approached sounded like a giant's and Vin curled into a ball as every sense grew to a miasma of bright, swirling sound, feeling, and scent. Coppery blood coated his tongue and the outrageous metallic taste sent him to a pit of cold darkness.

Chris' bee-line direction of travel never wavered and Ezra finally spotted a flash of motion ahead. Thick trees and dark shadows made it impossible to make out a target and although Ezra prided his visual acuity, he knew there wasn't a chance of a clear shot even if he knew what he was shooting at.

"Slow down, Mr. Larabee. We need to ascertain our target," he whispered. Pony kept on, however, and Standish resorted to grabbing a rein after a few more yards to halt his motion.

"Let go!" Chris snarled. His attempt to kick his teammate only resulted in a flare of pain and he hunched over Pony's neck with a groan. "Vin needs me. Let go!"

"We are going," Ezra said in a low, clipped tone. "Albeit more slowly than you wish. Hang on."

The trio moved forward as quietly as possible. They proceeded carefully to a point where they identified Vin dropping to the ground in a heap at a stranger's proud words. Ezra stopped Pony then and raised his gun, taking aim as he saw their quarry slowly cross a small, natural circle - the trees ringing it, though, made a shot at a moving target impossible.

"HALT! FEDERAL AGENTS!" Ezra shouted in desperation.

The man's head jerked up with surprise, oblivious to their existence. Then thunder exploded and the ground shook, the cause of it bursting past Ezra from behind as a black blur spinning him aside.

"HEY!" Ezra yelped, tipping into Pony's broad chest. He flailed and regained his balance, then raised his gun again. Through the weapon's sights, he was immediately mesmerized at the unexpected turmoil unfolding before him. His gun dropped slowly as he gaped.

In the center of the ring, the assassin roared a challenge at the furious creature charging the arena. It slid to a stop with an unearthly scream and the man raised his weapons, but the creature reared up and its flailing legs cracked the gladiator's arms, chest and head; the knives flew aside. In a shadowy flash, the enemy was down and the ebony storm pounded his foe into the soft earth with pointed accuracy. Muddy hooves issued strike after strike accompanied by furious squeals and flashing teeth. The stark white blaze on the black attacker's face glowed and grew spotted with crimson drops. Deadly dancing hooves stained with blood continued pounding even as its target ceased moving. It was all over in mere seconds.

“Good Lord!” Ezra sputtered, rooted in place by the viciousness of the assault. Only his shaky grip on Pony’s mane kept him on his feet.

“Peso,” Chris gasped painfully while Pony stood calmly and observed it all in apt attention.

Frozen in shock, both men watched the huffing, four-footed bundle of fury eventually calm and dip his head for a quick sniff of the motionless clump at his feet. Black ears swiveled forward, then pinned back a final time as Peso stomped once more. Then he snorted, spun on his hind feet, and trotted to his master huddled on the ground outside the fairy ring of ancient trees. Worried ears flickered as he nuzzled an unresponsive shoulder and whickered encouragement.

Pony nickered softly. Ezra wobbled toward the pair with the horse on his heels. They stopped a short distance away. Ezra curbed the urge to go directly to the marshal when Peso shook his head in their direction and moved to stand over Vin.

“Help me down,” Chris ordered hoarsely.

For once, Ezra did as he was told without comment. When the team leader found his balance, Standish whispered, “Did the dearly departed say he was a guardian? Did he mean a sentinel, like our Mr. Tanner?”

“He’s no sentinel,” Chris growled. “He’s just an asshole.”

Ezra’s quick mind came up blank for any argument. Instead, he holstered his weapon and steadied Chris on his feet. Then he walked to the pulp that was once a man, already wondering how he would report what he’d just witnessed.

Pony stood obediently still while the guide approached the sentinel. Peso, appearing to acknowledge Larabee’s connection with his master, stepped back, releasing Vin from the safety of his four bloodstained legs. The black beast extended his neck and ruffled Vin’s hair gently with his breath, seeming to turn over the responsibility of Vin’s well-being. With an acknowledging nod, Chris lowered himself to one knee with a hiss of pain and made sure his mind was clear before touching his friend.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Cloying warmth spread through Vin’s body from the spiked touch on his back. The roar in his ears softened the background thunder allowing a soothing voice to the ease to the forefront of his senses. Scenting shifted from a muddied, nauseating mix to a sharp salt-and-iron combination eventually recognized as sweat and blood. The spreading warmth cloaked his nerve endings, dulling all but the warm palm and slightly pulsing fingertips where Vin felt his heartbeat slow and merge with another’s. Blackness faded to a foggy grey and he allowed his eyelids to relax and flutter.

He saw dirt, smelled its dampness, and felt its pressure on his forehead.

Vin followed the breathing directions the trusted voice murmured and finally calmed enough to slowly shift back and rest on his knees, trembling. He blinked to clear his vision. He heard relieved words behind him and mentally clutched at the landline leading to Chris Larabee.

“You’re safe, Vin. You’re safe. Get centered and breathe. Follow my voice – hey, you with me now?”

Nodding shakily, Tanner blew out a long breath, easing the sharpness of his headache and settling his churning stomach. “Yeah,” he croaked, angling his head in his guide’s direction. “You’re hurtin’ . . .”

The dry chuckle response sounded like home. “Can you stand?”

“I reckon.” Instead, Vin stayed put, not trusting his legs yet, and looked around. He smiled at Peso’s watchful eyes where he stood next to Pony. His gaze moved to Ezra leaning over a body on the ground and a zing of fear raced up his spine. “Is he . . .?”

“Dead? As a beaver hat, thanks to your personal guardian.” Vin gave Chris a puzzled look and Chris indicated Peso with a tip of his head. “Not sure I ever want to witness anything like that again. Or get on that animal’s bad side.”

Vin turned his focus to the horse. “So that ain’t mud on his hooves.”

“Nope.”

“Damn.”

“You’re tellin’ me.”

Both sentinel and guide took time to rest and gather their strength. Truthfully, Chris was the one that needed the down time and Vin hovered like a mother hen to make sure his guide abided. Ezra took control of the scene by directing incoming personnel to document the crime scene and connected with Josiah and JD to do the same at the cabin.

Swabbing Peso’s hooves for evidence was out of the question for the newest arrivals. Photographs were the best the forensic team managed, with Vin physically collecting the samples under their watchful eye. Buck arrived shortly after the forensic team, disappointed that he missed all the action and relieved that his teammates were all right. After a leisurely inspection of the gruesome scene, he helped Chris onto Pony and mounted up behind his friend. Vin swung lithely up on Peso’s back, impressing the others that 1) he made it on the first try and 2) Peso allowed the action at all. In fact, to their amazement, the horse was over-the-top besotted with the sentinel.

The four agents finally departed a scene in long shadows and dropping temperature, meeting Nathan on Milagro not far from the SUV. Ezra climbed aboard behind Nate, grumbling about equine perspiration ruining the seat of his pants.

“Looks like Alex will make it,” Nathan said with a satisfied expression.

“I do not think you are referring to Ms. Wickerman’s chances at living a successful lifestyle,” Ezra said, shifting his precarious position.

“Depends on your definition of ‘successful’,” Buck challenged.

“Perhaps you are correct,” Ezra thoughtfully added. “She would make an excellent prostitute or drug mule”

“So she’s made some bad choices,” Chris offered. “She has time to turn her life around.”

“She’s in others’ hands right now.” Nathan wearily rubbed the back of his neck. “Not our problem anymore. Travis’ new special team escorted her to the hospital and they’re takin’ it from here, thank God. There’s a sizeable crime scene on this mountain and I don’t know about y’all, but I’m so tired that my sleeping bag at the cabin is even lookin’ good!”

Ezra snorted. “I loathe agreeing with you, Mr. Jackson.”

“Well, that’s a first,” Buck laughed. “Wait, I gotta get a picture of you two all snuggled together on that fine animal.”

Ezra and Nathan voiced their displeasure as Buck fumbled for his phone. Vin listened to the gentle banter and smiled, catching Chris grinning at him as they rode side by side through the trees. The horses seemed to know the path to the cabin and moved out under long reins.

“That’s the sound of brotherhood,” Chris thought.

“I like it,” Vin replied.

“Good, because like it or not, you’re part of the family now.”

“Then I guess that’s that.”

“You know,” Chris said aloud. “My team needs a sniper to round it out. Know anyone?”

“I just might have a guy in mind.”

Buck whooped, spooking Pony, and causing the lanky agent to slip off and land on his butt with a loud “OOOF!”

Laughing, the others steadied their mounts and then kept moving.

“Hey!” Wilmington yelled. “Come back here!”

“Just follow the tracks, Buck. We’ll put some food aside for ya!” Nathan yelled back.

“Maybe!” Chris Larabee settled back in the saddle, ignored the pain radiating from his shoulder, and focused on the next steps to add a sentinel as the seventh member of his magnificent team.

The End