

# SHOP WITH A COP

By AJB

## Prologue

Christmas in July. Sgt. Larabee snorted at the idiocy of the event. Understanding the principle of the idea was simple enough, that was a given; to an adult, it was one more chance during the year to feel better helping the unfortunate. To a kid, it was another chance to rake in more useless gifts that would be appreciated for about a week before relegating it to the Pile of Unloved Toys.

The label brought forth a mental vision of a Claymation Rudolph and the Island of Misfit Toys with the very sharp memory of Adam's giggling at Yukon Jack and that white Yeti creature . . . and Larabee's throat tightened.

A well-practiced combination of clearing his throat, looking elsewhere, and directing his thoughts to baseball or cleaning the barn or harvesting dog poop in the yard – anything else – worked to banish the raw, long suppressed emotions. Chris forced a strangled sigh, pressed his lips into a hard line, and then refocused his attention on the broken, squirming line of County foster kids on the sidewalk leading to Jumbo Jim's Discount Toy Warehouse waiting, impatiently, to be paired with a uniformed Denver Police Officer.

Sgt. Larabee managed to avoid the traditional December event for the last five years. Now, here he was at the summer “holiday” debacle which happened to coincide with a Denver Rockies double header.

"Whose brilliant idea was this fuckin' thing?" he growled as sweat rolled between his shoulder blades and under his Kevlar vest. "The timing sucks."

Beside him, Corporal Buck Wilmington's earthy chuckle did little to soften Larabee's ire. "Come on, Chris, it's better 'n directing midday traffic at the stadium. Then again," Buck mused while tapping his upper lip in thought, "all them pretty baseball fans in those skimpy summer dresses . . . Hmmm. Maybe you're right, Pard."

"What's the matter, Buck," Larabee goaded with little glee. "Denver's County caseworkers aren't good enough for ya?" He nudged his longtime friend and subtly tipped his head toward a grey haired Amazon of a woman clutching a clipboard and ticking off names with sure flicks of her pen.

"Damn, Chris, she scares the bejesus out of me!" Buck whispered, maneuvering behind his shift supervisor. "She works with kids?"

"She's here, isn't she?" The pair watched the sturdy social worker stop to speak with two boys, her stiff posture spelling out her displeasure. The smaller boy shrank back and tucked in behind the taller boy, who not only stood his ground; he also set his jaw and met the woman's eyes without flinching.

"Well, lookie there," Buck chuckled. "Looks like the old bat met her match."

The rest of the line of children edged back from the trio, leaving a circle of open sidewalk and reminding Chris of a shooting target. The defiant boy never uttered a word and was not cowed. By the way the woman gripped the clipboard, Larabee could tell her anger slowly approached rage. He moved without thought and found himself at the boy's side just as the woman reached out to grab a skinny arm.

"I think the heat's getting to all of us," Larabee said sharply, inserting his body between the two and leveling a look at the woman that usually sent people into frightened retreat.

"Look here, Officer," the social worker started.

"Sergeant, not Officer."

As the unpleasant woman opened her mouth again, another voice eased the emotion in the air. "Thank you, Jessica, I'll take it from here." A tiny woman took the Amazon's arm and steered her away from the two boys.

"I told you that boy shouldn't be here, Nettie. It's no wonder no one will take him. He's trouble, like I told you."

"Yes, you did. Now take care of the next group, please."

Larabee blinked when the newcomer ignored him completely and smiled down at the defiant boy. "It's okay, Vin. You and JD are staying."

As she spoke, Nettie rested her hand on the skinny boy's shoulder and the fighting stance loosened, leaving a gangly limbed, awkward child behind. Chris realized then that the kid couldn't be more than 10 years old although his first impression had been that the boy was a short teen.

Vin nodded and turned just enough to check on his charge, whose relief was obvious, before raising his eyes and connecting with Chris gaze. The weary sadness Chris saw in the depths of those blue eyes stole his breath. He may only be a boy, but this child had the eyes of someone much, much older.

"Sergeant?"

Chris blinked and the connection broke. He looked to the boy's champion, realizing that she was speaking to him. "Um, yes, Ma'm?" he answered, thrown by the unsettled feelings sparking inside. "Uh, Larabee. Chris Larabee."

"Well, Sgt. Larabee. How about you accompany our friend Vin Tanner here for a shopping trip?"

Chris stared at her a moment, surprised how things got this far so fast, and in the next second found himself nodding and reaching out to rest his hand on a very boney shoulder. It was like instinct made his body move.

"Wait, JD . . ." Vin's eyes reflected panic as they flicked between Nettie and Chris.

"Not a problem," Chris heard himself say. He felt the hardness of his face melt into a genuine smile as he drew the boy's eyes back to his own. "Got the perfect addition." He turned to call to Buck, but found his friend just a step behind and looking at him with an amused smirk. "You. Go with that one." Chris tipped his head sharply in JD's direction.

Buck glanced down and laughed as JD's eyes widened. "Just ignore this 'un, Little Bit. His bark's worse than his bite. I'm Buck." He held out his paw of a hand and the little boy's head tipped farther and farther back as he inspected the newcomer. Then, he reached out his tiny hand and it was fully engulfed within Buck's as they shook. "Ready for some toys, JD?"

"Yeah!" The pair headed to the front doors and the Christmas in July Shop With A Cop event began. JD dragged Buck along while Chris and Vin followed in a more sedate manner, side by side, but with a span between them that marked the clear line of Vin's personal space.

Tanner wasn't compelled to talk much and glanced back often to make sure that . . . well, Larabee couldn't quite pinpoint why his kid seemed so suspicious of everything

around him, but the boy's quiet way felt comfortable and the Sergeant appreciated it. Larabee allowed his charge to lead the way, noticing that Buck and his exuberant assignment never left Vin's line of sight for very long.

Several minutes passed before the first items made it to their shopping cart. Vin pulled the cart down the empty camping gear aisle where the boy tossed a small tent and a camouflage sleeping bag inside. Chris glanced down the packed main aisle and saw that Buck's cart was half full of brightly colored toys before they disappeared around a corner. Chris could hear JD's chatter above the rest, amazed that it still maintained an exuberant level. He turned his attention back to his cart frowned when the next items hit the cart – hiking boots. Two pairs.

"Hm, Vin?" Larabee said. He waited until the boy's eyes met his, causing them to stop in mid aisle. Chris could hear happy laughter and delighted squeals from the other aisles. "Don't you want anything fun? Toys?"

Guarded blue eyes held his gaze as if the kid was debating how to reply. Spontaneity was not a trait Chris associated with Vin Tanner, and that idea increased Chris' curiosity about the boy.

"Okay," Vin finally replied rather sullenly.

Chris tipped his head toward the main aisle and Vin dropped back enough to walk by the Sergeant's side. This main aisle was crowded, but when they turned down the toy aisle, they ran into a roadblock of carts, uniforms, and kids picking through a vast wall of Legos, Hot Wheels and building sets. Although Larabee's mere presence magically create a path, Vin's distress resonated clearly with his suddenly stiff posture. Chris noticed immediately and he changed tack, finding Buck and JD in the press of people stopping his cart next to Buck's. Vin slithered from Chris' side between the two carts and placed himself at the front of the baskets, his back to the wire as he watched JD paw through the Hot Wheels.

"You think they'd never seen new toys before," Buck chuckled.

Delivered as an innocent statement, the words sent Chris' thoughts to a dark area that, for once, did not hold visions of his deceased wife and child. By JD's actions, Larabee believed the boy had toys at one time in his life, but Vin's way-of-being made Chris wonder on the truth of Buck's observation. Now, looking at the waif of a boy watch JD, there was just a hint of amusement in Vin's features and it was the first loss of wariness Chris witnessed.

"Vin?" Chris asked, causing the child to look his way. "Go ahead and pick out a Hot Wheels. It's fine. Do you like trucks?"

Chris then moved to Vin's side and, ignoring the boy's stiff posture on his arrival, rested his hand between the wings of shoulder blades easily felt under the thin shirt. Vin did not twitch or stiffen and graced Chris with a ghost of a smile, nodding once.

"Well," Chris started, turning his focus away from those huge eyes to the rack of cars. "Here's a red one. Looks like a Chevy. You like that?"

Vin studied the small vehicle for a moment before focusing the hanging vehicles. After a few seconds, he reached out tentatively and lifted a black pickup truck from a hook.

Buck snorted. "He's got your taste, boss."

Vin froze and raised his gaze to Chris, and Chris found himself smiling. "Looks like it," he agreed. "I have a truck just like that," he explained to the child.

Vin's shoulders relaxed and he held the truck close.

When their hour was up, the four of them checked out and left the store. Outside, volunteers labeled each item in permanent marker with the boys' names. Nettie appeared when the last item was tagged and gently rested a hand on a shoulder of each boy.

"Thank you, officers," she said, smiling up at them. "We'll take it from here. What do you say, boys?"

JD yelled "thank you!" while Vin uttered a quiet "thanks".

"You're welcome, Little Bit!" Buck replied, ruffling JD's hair

Chris smiled at Vin and nodded once, and then Nettie wrangled the pair toward the waiting school bus.

Chris found himself watching his charge until he was out of sight in the mob of kids boarding the bus. Buck nudged him to move and Chris shot him a glare.

"Well, looks like someone cracked that invisible wall," Buck laughed before walking away.

Chris frowned at his departing friend, wondering with irritation if Buck was right.

## Part One

The next morning, a moderately unsettled Chris Larabee entered the sergeant's office to relieve the night shift sergeant and stopped dead when he saw the picture of a familiar face looking up at him from the watch commander's desk. The murmur of voices and the police radio faded to the background as his heart fluttered.

"What's this?" he demanded, cutting off the sergeant's verbal brief as he pointed at the photo.

"Missing kids at risk," Sgt. DeMarco replied while unbuckling his gun belt. "Looks like they ran away. Two of 'em. The BOLO came in about an hour ago."

"Vin Tanner and John Dunne."

DeMarco's brow arched. "You know them?"

"What?" Chris looked up from the photos. "No, well, sort of. I met them yesterday at the Shop With A Cop thing."

Surprise crossed DeMarco's face as he shrugged on a cover shirt over his uniform. "That's weird," he said. "There's not much to go on. They were discovered missing at morning bed check from two separate facilities."

"They're together," Chris said with enough certainty to make DeMarco pause.

"Maybe."

"Definitely. And I might know where they are, the area anyway." Chris collected the flyers, grabbed his patrol car keys, and left the office, striding past the briefing room.

"Hey!" Buck's voice carried from the room. "What about briefing?"

"Skip it. Buck, you're with me. Grab your car. Sanchez, Nate - head on out and cover the beat." Chris hit the exit door into the secured parking lot and Buck jogged to catch up.

"What's up?" Buck asked when he reached Chris' car. Chris shoved the boys' fliers into Buck's hand. "What's this . . . hey! It's those kids."

"Yeah, and I think I know where they are."

"You do? Did Vin here tell ya?"

Chris paused and looked at Buck. "Not exactly, but remember what Vin bought?"

Buck nodded, "Yeah, a tent, sleeping bag, boots . . . kinda weird."

Chris chuffed as he unlocked the Sergeant SUV. "Not if you plan on running away."

"That's true, I suppose, but where did they go?"

"The kid . . . Vin . . . lifted a map of local parks in the camping area of the store."

Buck thought about that a second. "The closest campground to his facility is Boulder Creek," he said.

"True, but the one closest to JD's facility is Tree Crest. There are several volunteers searching around the facility, so let's check the campground."

A humid blast of wind made the men shiver and Buck looked at the sky. "Well, where ever we search, hope we find 'em before that front moves in. They're predicting lots of rain and parts of Tree Crest are susceptible to flash floods."

"Then we better hurry." Chris slipped into the unit and fired it up.

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The small tent shuddered with the wind's sudden onslaught. Vin, his head poking out from the light sleeping bag, snuggled closer to JD. He wished he got another sleeping

bag, but he didn't want to explain why he needed two. They both fit inside one bag, but JD wiggled around a whole lot when he slept.

Vin scanned the interior of the tent, satisfied it wouldn't blow away, and noticed that he could see the outlines of the swaying trees. It was lighter outside, but muted with overcast skies. His stomach grumbled on cue. The biscuits he'd stolen from the center's kitchen were good, but they ate them all for dinner. A couple apples, a loaf of bread, and some funny smelling water from the campsite bathroom was all they had left and he figured it had to last another day or so. According to the map, there was a store a couple miles east, right on the route to the reservation. Once they reached their destination, he was sure they'd be okay. Vin felt the hard, sock full of coins tucked away under the sleeping bag; it was enough to get supplies at the store.

Vin thought it was smarter to pitch the tent away from any actual campsite, but the campground was full of summer campers anyway. After filling the canteens in the pre-dawn darkness, he'd dragged a tired, complaining JD deeper into the woods and put up their shelter against a rocky slope that had a nice, sandy base. Being the only flat spot large enough for the tent he could find in the dark, the curve of the slope protected them from the worst of the wind and Vin smiled at his luck for finding the spot.

The tent shuddered again and the wind whistled through the trees creating a soothing whisper that made Vin drowsy. He'd decided it was best to lay low today and start moving again at sunset when most people settled down. Keeping JD quiet and in one place wouldn't be easy, but the small boy usually did what Vin told him to do and there were some new toys to keep him busy. Vin couldn't imagine anyone cared enough to search for very long, anyway.

When the first light drops dotted the tent top Vin relaxed, sure that no one would search in the rain. With the comforting sound of gentle rainfall and JD's soft breathing, he drifted back to sleep.

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"Are you sure about this, Chris?"

Buck and Chris, after studying the campground map posted at the entrance, picked a quadrant that would most likely appeal to the escapees. First, they checked every one of the campsites and spoke with the campers - due to the rainfall, a good majority was still on the grounds. Only the adventurous patrons were out hiking in the weather.

"I know they're here. I just have this feeling . . ." Chris scoured the forest edge with sharp eyes, looking for any hint, any clue. He refused to voice that in reality, he wasn't sure what direction to take.

Buck squinted skyward, tugging the hood of his rain gear lower on his forehead. "Well then, let's figure where they won't be first."

"The riverbed. It's overgrown and dry, but it's where the flooding would happen." Chris tipped his head aside and met Buck's troubled eyes.

"Well, it's where you and I wouldn't be, that's for sure, but maybe we'd best check there first?"

Chris nodded once and stepped onto the path leading to the riverbed. Somewhere inside he understood Buck's logic was why they were at that particular trailhead - his gut led them here, and he knew better than to ignore his instincts.

"At least it's not raining hard yet," he muttered as he walked.

"True, but you know it's heavier in the hills and that's where the flood water comes from. We don't have a lot of time."

Fear flared low in Chris' stomach. He knew that, too, but couldn't put the fear into words.

"Hell, this may all be some wild goose chase, right?" Buck, following his friend's footsteps, gave him a light hearted poke in the shoulder.

"Right."

Chris knew that wasn't true.

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"Is it rainin'?" JD muttered as he rubbed his eyes and sat up.

"Yeah. It's getting a little harder." Vin handed his small friend an apple. "Here. Want some bread?"

JD frowned and pushed out of the sleeping bag. "I gotta go potty," he said. "Bad."

"Okay. Put your shoes on and you can pee just outside the tent door."

JD giggled at the idea and hurriedly poked his feet in the new boots while Vin unzipped the tent flap. He slipped on a tattered windbreaker with a hood and when Vin pushed it aside, a wet, earthy smell blew inside causing both of them to grin. It smelled a lot better than the County rooms.

"Oooh it smells like trees!" JD squealed when he stepped outside.

"Just don't let the wind blow your pee inside," Vin giggled.

JD glanced back at him, delighted. "Don't look at me!"

"I'm not watchin' you, I'm lookin' at the trees! Jeeze."

"I'm goin' over here." JD took two steps around the side of the tent and Vin soon heard the sound of JD's business hitting the rocky wall that curved around them. He knew the noise because he'd already done his business in the same place.

Vin smiled and admired the view outside the tent doors. Now that he could see, he saw that they sat in the curve of what looked like a dry riverbed, sitting on higher ground against a rocky cliff face. Beyond the rock-strewn sand, the woods seemed endless and there wasn't a person or vehicle in sight. The light patter of rain made the whole scene seem magical and Vin wished they didn't have to leave.

JD came around the corner and dropped clumsily onto his butt just inside the doorway.

"Ew, you're all wet. Take that coat off."

JD did as he was told, stuffing the damp jacket into a corner of the tent. Next, he kicked off his boots and sat next to his friend to watch the rain while he ate his apple.

"We gotta move when it gets dark," Vin said quietly, reluctant to break the spell of the woods. "Luckily, the rain will keep anyone for lookin' very long, so we'll be safer moving at night."

"Can't we stay here longer?"

"No, we need to get more food. And when the rain stops, there's gonna be more hikers around here. We gotta move."

There were several long seconds of contemplative silence before JD spoke again.

“D’ya think anyone really cares enough to look for us?”

A thoughtful crease crossed Vin’s forehead. “No, but they gotta make the effort to cover their own butts,” he said wisely. “They’ll stop after a while. We’ll be on the reservation by then.”

“Are there really horses there?”

“There were when I was there with my grandpa. I bet they are still there.” Vin knew it had been a few years ago when his grandpa died, but hope was a rare bright spot in his mind. All he wanted was for things to be the way they were before his last family member died and the State stepped in after he and JD lived on the streets for awhile. He wasn’t sure it was even the same reservation, but Vin decided that JD didn’t need to know that; the boy trusted Vin, and Vin trusted him, and they wouldn’t ever be separated again if Vin could help it.

“It’s raining harder.”

Vin listened a moment. “Yeah,” he said slowly. Suddenly, his stomach felt funny, reminding him of how he felt when he visited a doctor. Unsettled, he stood and slipped on his jacket.

“Where’re ya goin’?” JD asked.

“Nowhere.” Vin stepped outside the tent door and concentrated on listening to the woods and rain.

“Look, there’s a river now!” JD pointed at the line of brown, foamy water that followed the etched lines in the sand. Soon, it was a steady stream.

Something felt . . . off.

“JD, put on your boots and jacket,” Vin said, staring upstream.

“Why? I just took ‘em off!”

“I’ll help you with your laces.”

Vin broke his stare with a sense of doom and donned his before squatting down to ties JD’s laces.

“Wow, the water grewed.”

Hurriedly working the bootlaces, Vin glanced aside and saw that the water was rising fast. Leaves and twigs rolled with the muddy current. “Grab the food, JD. We gotta go.” JD darted inside and came out with their backpack of food and Vin started to collapse the tent.

“Vin?” JD sounded worried.

Vin turned around at the sound of a loud roar and saw that the water was only a foot away from their feet and there was no dry path out of the notch where they’d camped.

“Come on. Climb.” Vin shoved the small boy to the rocky face and pushed him up. “Hurry, JD!”

Vin felt a rush of wind before he saw a wall of water barreling through the tangle of trees. The dry bed was now a rage of foam and branches and tore away their tent. Vin scrambled up behind JD, pressing the small boy between his chest and the cliff face.

“Keep going!” Vin screamed.

JD was eerily silent but Vin could hear him gasping for air. The roiling water sloshed over Vin’s lower legs. One foot slipped.

“I can’t hang on, Vin!”

“CLIMB!”

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Their path led Chris and Buck to a rustic wood bridge that spanned a trickle of brown water.

"Guess that's usually dry," Buck said, mid-span. Chris stopped, looking down, and Buck stopped a few paces later on the far side. "What?" he said.

At that moment, their hand held radios crackled to life. "Flash flood watch for the County areas," the dispatcher reported. "All units, be aware of road closures."

The two of them had heard that warning countless times in their career. The same roads always flooded, and there were always idiots that attempted crossing them. Someone always had to be rescued and the dispatcher's verbal warnings always caused annoyed grunts and rolled eyes from the officers.

This time, however, the warning raised alarms in Chris' gut. He charged across the bridge and turned south, following the creek bed. Buck opened his mouth to yell, but a distant rumble he'd hardly noticed had grown to a frightful roar.

Flash flood.

"CHRIS!" he yelled - but he was already out of sight. Buck immediately got on the radio. "Flash flood at Tree Crest County Park. Possible victims north of the camping area." He dashed after Chris without waiting for acknowledgement.

Chris crashed through the trees heading directly into the sound of chaos. The roar grew until it covered all other sounds, including his police radio ear bud. He was above the flow, on a winding ridge that contained it, but the noise of the rushing water was unexpectedly loud. Chris glanced at the opposite ridge and was shocked to see how fast the water rose. At one point, he heard something and stopped, panting hard. He tipped his head, straining to hear, and ripped out the ear bud to stop the radio chatter. There - a voice?

Chris pushed onward and a slower pace, concentrating on sound and scanning the opposite cliff face where the torrent continued to climb. He stopped again, hearing . . . crying?

Chris tipped his head to locate the noise when Buck joined him. Chris raised his hand and Buck frowned at him, silently wiping the rain from his face. Chris took another careful step, and then looked down.

"Watch the edge," Buck managed to get out before Chris dropped to his knees, then his stomach and reached over the cliff.

"Hold on!" Chris yelled. "I can't reach them, Buck! Rope!"

"What? Buck leaned over Chris and looked down, where he saw two pale, frightened faces looking up at him. The water lapped at their heels, and the boys gasped and clung frantically to the rocks when a large branch brushed against their legs. "Aw, hell! Dispatch? We need ropes now! There are two kids trapped by the flood! The ranger is closest - "

"I'm at the park entrance," Officer Sanchez's voice instilled calm, and Buck was momentarily relieved that he was the one responding. "Where are you?"

"Follow the creek path by space 7, cross the bridge, turn left." Buck was distracted by Chris, who was removing his gun belt. "What are you doing?"

Without answering, Chris backed over the crest and lowered himself over the edge. "I'm helping them hang on." He disappeared from sight.

Buck dropped onto his belly and peered down; even though the rain had stopped, the water continued to rise. Chris was to the right of the two boys, and luckily, the slope of the cliff face wasn't as severe as other areas, and there was a good selection of large rocks to hang on to.

The water battered the boys' feet. Chris reached down and initiated a wrist to wrist grip with the smaller child against the rocks. "Come on, just a little higher and you can rest," he said evenly. The boy - JD, Chris recalled - was shivering and terrified to near catatonia. "Come on, JD. Just a few feet."

He pulled and JD finally responded with a gasp, his cold fingers clutching Chris' forearm as far as his fingers could reach. The boy managed about three feet, clearing his feet from the water to find a good rock to anchor himself. "Got it?" Chris asked before letting go.

JD just blinked, terror clear in his eyes.

"I have to help Vin now, JD. You're safe here if you hang on. You need both hands. You hear me?"

JD just shivered and clung to Chris' arm with one hand while the other hugged the rock.

"Hey, JD! Up here!" Buck called in a firm voice. "You're fine where you are, Little Bit. Can you look at me please?" Finally, the boy cautiously looked up and Chris freed his hand. "There ya go! Easier to hang on with two hands, right?"

Chris quickly climbed down until his legs were even with Vin's torso. With JD on the rock, there was no place for Vin to go, and Chris frantically worked to come up with a plan. "Hey, Vin," he said, looking over his shoulder at the wiry boy. Without JD under him, Vin pressed against the cliff face like a stubborn tick, but Chris knew he was wearing out. He could see the boy's muscles trembling and he was breathing hard and shivering.

The water surged and rose to Vin's knees. Chris instantly reacted by reaching down and grabbing Vin's collar. "Hang on, son," Chris breathed, feeling his position slip. The water crept higher. Chris tugged and Vin edged sideways until he pressed against Chris' side.

"Hang on, Chris! Almost there!"

The sound of Josiah's voice renewed Chris' grip on the wet jacket. Vin moaned. Chris felt the tiny body quivering against him, and then he felt it slip. "No!" he growled, readjusting his hand so it looped under the boy's shoulder. "You aren't going anywhere, you hear me?"

Vin's breathing was labored. Chris felt the water soaking his feet. "No. . ." he snarled again.

"CHRIS! To your left!"

Chris felt a rope brush his left shoulder. He couldn't grab it and keep his grip on the rock, and he couldn't let go of the boy.

"I'm coming down!" Buck yelled as Chris felt loose rock slide along his left side.

Chris focused everything he had on the child in his grasp. He looked down and met terrified, exhausted blue eyes and knew he would save this boy or die trying.

Another surge struck Vin, lifting his body from the cliff face.

Chris held on to him and felt his grip on the rocks loosen.

“Chris! Hang on! Chris!”

In the next second he fell, his grip on the child's collar tight when the plunge into icy water stole his breath.

## Part Two

“NO!” Buck choked off his shout when he saw the small boy tremble. “It’s okay, JD. I gotcha.” Trying to stay calm for the child, it took focused intent to keep his voice calm as he lowered himself to JD’s side.

“We’re good here, Buck. Grab him.” Officer Sanchez’s voice helped Buck focus.

Buck drew in the shivering child and spoke encouragingly until JD’s grip on the rocks loosened, then he engulfed the child in a desperate bear hug. “Hang on. You’re okay.” Only then did he dare to look downstream at the rushing water. There was no sign of Chris nor Vin, and Buck’s heart twisted.

Once over the edge of the ravine, Nate Jackson pried JD from Buck’s desperate grasp. Buck collapsed in the mud, emotionally spent, for several seconds before Sanchez’s mountainous form leaned over and extended an arm.

“Come on, Buck, we gotta check downstream. Weather’s keepin’ the chopper grounded so it’s up to us. There are units posted at the cross streets to the south, outside the park.”

Accepting the arm, Buck pulled himself to his feet and Sanchez shoved a dry towel in his hands. “Did . . . did you see them?”

Sanchez hesitated, giving Buck an evaluating look. “Yeah. Last I saw, Chris had the kid against his chest and he was on his back, legs pointed downstream.”

“Like we trained. Let’s hope it saves him. Them,” Buck quickly corrected, glancing to the sobbing JD who called for his friend between gulps of air while tolerating Nathan’s exam. “Come on. I can’t stand to listen to that much longer.”

Sanchez gave him a warm smile. “Understood all too well, brother. Let’s go.”

Buck knew perfectly well that Josiah Sanchez realized that his reluctance was sorrow based; Buck liked kids and it nearly broke his heart to hear JD’s wails. Wiping his face with the towel, they jogged to their respective patrol cars, leaving Nathan with the paramedics and their terrified patient.

The power of rushing water astounded Chris. He struggled to keep his and Vin’s faces out of the vicious pull just enough to get air, gasping like landed fish at every opportunity. Keeping the boy cocooned in his grip gave him little reserves to use in getting to shore, so he concentrated on keeping his legs downstream and their faces out of the water.

Chris felt like a punching bag. All manner of things crashed into his body, and when something hit his head, he saw stars. At one point, they ricochet off a cliff face and tumbled like a lopsided pinwheel, completely submerged, and it was the longest span of seconds Chris ever endured when he fought to reach the surface again.

Exhausted, his focus of awareness narrowed dangerously to a point where all that was real was Vin’s weight against his chest and the racing heartbeat under his arms - he would save this boy; there was no other option.

Chris forced his gaze downstream and concentrated on their curvy, watery course. Trees hung over them from rocky mud walls, so thick that no one could be following their path. “*There has to be a break soon,*” Chris reasoned, hanging on to consciousness with sheer determination. His head throbbed. A leafy, spinning bough raked one cheek and bounced painfully from his shoulder. Chris kicked his legs in an effort to get to one

side of the stream, at least grateful that he still felt his legs. His other shoulder rapped a boulder and he yelped as the world darkened.

*"No! I can't. . ."* Blinking to clear his vision, Chris saw where a space the walls sloped down and the bank opened up - it was coming up fast. He moved without thinking, twisting their bodies in an alligator roll and kicked his legs. Sputtering, his hip suddenly hit ground in shallower water and Chris tightened his grip on Vin while digging his heels in the mud and rock. Just as he felt his cheek on the muddy shore and he shoved the boy onto the precarious band of beach, a sharp, blinding pain exploded in one leg and all went dark.

The sudden push from Chris broke Vin's grip and he flung his arms out and clawed the muddy shore, scrambling for solid ground as the current battered his legs. Once free of the rushing water, Vin, gasping painfully, scrambled away on shaky hands and knees.

Free, Vin flopped down onto his side and gagged, heaving water from his nose and mouth. Gulping mouthfuls of air, he pushed to a sit and scanned the torrent, oblivious to the light rain, and saw a body caught on a partially submerged tree trunk, half out of the water with one arm stretched onto the bank.

It was Chris. With a frightened sob, Vin crawled to the man that saved him. Foamy water swirled around Chris' hips as the torrent trapped him against octopus tangle of exposed roots, the banks' shallowness turning away the full rage of the water from the still form. Vin sat back hard onto his butt and scooted alongside his rescuer, his heels dug into the mud under the shallow water. Now that he was closer, Vin could see the bruises blooming under the cold, pale skin of Chris' face, neck, and chest.

Without a second's thought, Vin braced his trembling legs and leaned forward at the waist, willing his wiggling fingers to snag the sodden uniform shirt. Once latched on, he pulled, grunting, and the body came his way. Vin managed to float Chris' torso clear of the water, but that was as far as he could manage the limp body.

Only then did the thought cross his mind that Chris could be dead. A zing of terror shot up his spine, but he only gave a second's pause before patting the still man's chest to look for a heartbeat. Finding none, panic swelled but it cut short when he saw the edge of a bullet proof vest. Vin's cold fingers worked awkwardly, but he finally got the uniform shirt unbuttoned enough to work out how to release the vest and slide his palm underneath where he felt a reassuring beat. Pulling back, Vin took a breath to calm his nerves before leaning over again to lift a pale eyelid.

The black of Larabee's eye shrank with the light and his cheek twitched. Vin released the eyelid and gently patted Chris' cold cheek. "Please wake up?" he croaked. "Please?" Finally, a reaction to his desperate pleas made Vin's heart race. Chris groaned and rolled his head aside, and Vin sagged, eyes hot and burning. "Mr. Chris?"

Chris' eyes worked beneath the vein-lined lids, which then fluttered open. He groaned again, flailed his arms to find support and issued a sharp hiss when he rolled to his side. Chris blinked a few times before his eyes focused enough to track the length of Vin's form. He lifted his chin and connected with Vin's eyes, and the boy felt a fuzzy warmth roll through him as their gazes locked.

"Vin?" Chris croaked. "You okay?"

Vin could only nod, his throat clenched too tight to speak.

“Help me.” Chris’ arms moved to pull himself from the water, but he stopped with a gasp.

“What?” Vin managed to squeak, hands full of Chris’ shirt in his attempt to help.

“Leg,” Chris growled. “Might be broke.”

Vin looked down and saw that Chris only used one leg to dig into the mud. The other floated at the mercy of the tide.

“What do I do?”

Chris found Vin’s eyes again and offered a tight grin. “It’s all right, son. Just help me out.”

Working together, Chris managed to get to the muddy shore and Vin helped him to sit up. Chris, gripping his right thigh with both hands, maneuvered the leg until it laid straight and then used his good leg, arms and Vin’s encouragement to scoot far away from the water’s edge and under the canopy of trees.

“I think that’s far enough,” Chris breathed. “Don’t think the water will reach us here.” He tipped his head, breathing hard, and gave Vin an evaluating scan. “You okay?”

Vin nodded, the mop of his hair quivering around his face in watery dreads. “JD?” he whispered, voice raw with fear.

“Buck got him in time.”

Vin searched Chris’ face and then nodded once, convinced it was true. Chris scanned around damp woods, the smell of earth and wet leaves a welcome change but the lack of any other people disappointing. He checked his pockets, not surprised to find them empty after the tossing they’d received. He snorted - as if a cell phone would work after such a dunking, anyway.

“Guess we’re gonna be hard to find, huh?”

Chris raised his brows at the question that was in the same vein as his own thoughts. “Well, guess we just have to make it easier to be found, then.” For the first time, Chris saw a genuine smile from the small boy and he returned the gesture. Then, he gasped as pain erupted from his leg.

Chris squeezed his thigh between his hands and spoke through clenched teeth, trying to remain calm for the boy’s sake. “Need to immobilize my leg first,” he managed. He felt more than saw Vin’s puzzlement. “Keep it still. Brace it. Find some branches to splint my leg.”

When he did look to Vin, he saw understanding dawn. “I’ll look around.”

“I’ll wait here.” He gave Vin a reassuring smile and saw the boy relax with a nod before turning to inspect the area.

Chris was grateful the trees protected them from sprinkles, but he knew that could change at any moment based on what he recalled from the weather reports. They still had a good half-day of light, bettering the odds of being found prior to night fall but Chris had to decide what to do: stay put or find open ground? Rugged terrain made up this part of the park and any cross roads visible to traffic were miles away. Chris scanned the trees, noting the tight canopy and steep hills surrounding them, then consulted the map in his brain before concluding that rescue was not imminent. They had to move to higher ground, away from the canyon shadows, and find a break in the trees.

He also knew it was going to hurt like hell. Already, it was difficult to think and he was sitting still.

"How are these?" Vin returned dragging a half-dozen branches, being careful they didn't bump Chris.

Chris looked at the collection and realized he had a better option. He pulled off his belt and began removing his shirt. "New plan. I need a crutch."

Vin regarded the branches. "These are too wobbly but saw good crutch ones over there." He pointed back along his path.

"Good. Hang on a second and you can take me over there." As soon as Chris tugged his vest off, Vin caught on and helped Chris to wrap the stiff material around his lower leg. The boy held it tight while Chris wrapped his belt around the bundle and cinched it down with a grimace. Then he added the Velcro straps that came with the vest.

"I'm sorry," Vin whispered. His hands started to shake and Chris felt the tremble through the vest.

"No need to apologize, Vin," Chris breathed. "Just wish I was bigger 'round so the belt could do a few more wraps." The comment coaxed a weak smile from the boy. Chris winked. "Us skinny guys have to stick together."

As it was, the leather mostly surrounded the area directly above the break and the webbed strapping secured above and below. Chris thought a moment then pulled off his T-shirt and tore it into long strips, showing Vin how to wrap the rest of the makeshift splint and secure the Velcro tighter. The final product turned out better than Chris hoped.

Still hurt like a bitch, though.

"Okay, now, let's make a crutch." Chris pulled on his damp, chilly uniform shirt and hoped it would dry at least a little. As slight as Vin was, Chris realized the kid needed to get moving to stay warm. The slight shiver was difficult to ignore.

Once they fashioned a knobby wood crutch, Chris struggled to his feet using it and Vin for balance. He set the crutch and nodded in the direction away from the rushing river. He and Vin stepped off, side by side, in search of an open spot.

After an hour or so, the river behind them and out of sight, Chris stopped to rest. His leg and head throbbed painfully and the makeshift crutch was far from comfortable, causing a raw sore under his arm. Chris panted and felt a line of sweat around his hairline but Vin looked like he was taking to the excursion quite well. At least he wasn't shivering anymore and stood sniffing the wind with a frown. Chris leaned against a tree and slid down to sit, his wrapped leg sticking out in front.

"Smell that?" the boy asked quietly.

Chris tested the wind and picked up the scent, too. "Fire. Must be a hunting cabin."

Vin's evaluating head to toe scan of Chris almost made the Sergeant laugh, but he was too sore and tired to bother.

"I'll check it out. You stay here."

"What? No. We stay together," Chris insisted.

"You can't even get up," Vin said, crossing his arms over his chest. "I won't get out of your sight."

Chris glared at the boy, who didn't even flinch. Vin's frown deepened. Chris had to admit the boy was right, but he just didn't like the idea of a child wandering alone in the woods. This was the thickest part of the forest in the Park, and had the steepest hills. It was rugged country.

"I won't go beyond those rocks," Vin added, pointing at a huge boulder jutting out from a nearby hill.

Chris had to admit defeat. "All right then," he agreed. "No farther."

Vin took a breath and walked away with the longest strides his legs could handle. Chris followed his progress, holding his breath each time the boy was out of his sight while crossing a valley or crevasse. Finally, he had to smile when he saw the small figure scramble up the hill and climb the boulder as if he did it every day. He watched as Vin searched the terrain then suddenly dropped flat on the boulder, intent on something beyond the crest of the hill.

When Vin first saw the origin of the smoke, his hopes soared. At the far end of his visual field, he saw a faint curl of silver-grey rising from a rustic, wooden cabin. When the figure of a man stepped through the weathered door, Vin almost called out but the clear shape of the gun tucked in the man's waistband that silenced him. Vin dropped flat on the boulder, heart racing as he studied the man.

The guy wasn't a hunter. He was big and wore a button-down white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, dress pants, and was stalking back and forth in front of the structure with an outstretched arm, intent on something in his hand. Vin recognized the movements of someone trying to find a cell phone signal, and he waited patiently until the man stalked angrily out of sight and away from the steep slopes on either side of the tiny cabin.

Vin slid from the boulder and headed straight to the building. Once close enough, he listened for other occupants, unwilling to show himself. He did not like the feeling of the one that left.

The small cabin had one little window that was placed too high for Vin to look inside, so he edged up to the door that was standing slightly ajar and peeked inside.

There was only one room in the cabin. A pot bellied stove, the source of the smoke, stood tucked in one stone-lined corner and there was one cot-like bed and a small table. Vin poked his head in and saw only one chair and it had a bloodied and rumpled man duct taped firmly to the arms and legs. Vin's eyes widened.

The captive slowly raised his chin and blinked his one working eye in Vin's direction. The other eye was purple and swollen shut and the man's clothes, clearly expensive, were ripped, dirty and extremely disheveled. His hands, dangling from the end of the chair's arms, looked puffy and his breathing rattled from between puffy lip. Dried blood marked a line from one nostril to one corner of his mouth.

Vin stared.

The man frowned, puzzled, before speaking with a pained lisp. "Well, now. With whom do I have the pleasure of meeting in such a disagreeable situation?"

The man did his best to straighten up with a wince and spoke with slow difficulty. Vin still discerned an accent.

"Please excuse my unpardonable appearance, young man. My present situation leaves little opportunity to maintain my normal mode of appearance. Ezra P. Standish at your service."

The man's words were slurred. Vin felt off kilter hearing such fancy language coming from a wreck of a man. "Vin," he replied after a moment just before stepping inside the cramped room.

"A pleasure to meet you, Master Vin. Please excuse my inability to shake hands."

Vin stood still, giving the man a sidelong look. "You talk funny."

"Ah, yes, I understand why you may think that, but before we embark on a session in which to we may get better acquainted, I must warn you that a rather unpleasant miscreant shall be re-appearing at any moment. If you help me extricate myself from this deplorable situation, I would be eternally grateful."

"How'd you get here?" Vin asked as he scanned the room again, looking for anything that would help him and Chris.

"There is a utility vehicle a short distance from here which would be a lovely hike, I am sure, under vastly different circumstances. The, um, gentleman - and I use that moniker with the deepest reservations - that stepped away has the keys in his possession. I do believe I can convince him to lend us the purveyance, but I will need my hands free."

Vin studied the man again, and then sidestepped to grab two bottles of water and a pair of energy bars from the table before heading for the door to leave.

"Vin, my boy, hold on there . . ." the man started, the formal edge of his words taking on panic.

"He's back," Vin whispered as he slipped outside and melted into the trees. From a safe distance, he watched as the big man rounded the edge of the structure and step inside. The burly stranger did not look happy and Vin felt a spark of fear in his belly. Would the fancy man say something?

He scrambled back the way he came and had a guilty moment when he saw Chris' shoulder slump in relief when he came into sight.

"Don't ever -" Chris started. Vin shushed him into silence and handed over one energy bar and bottle of water. Surprised, Chris raised his brows for an explanation.

"There's a hunting cabin, like you said," Vin started, his voice low as he described what he saw.

When Vin finished, Chris, thinking hard, scanned the area and regretted dropping his service belt before climbing down to rescue the boys. All his weapons were on that belt - except for the survival knife in his boot. At least he had that because, instinctively, he knew things had just gotten impossibly worse.

### Part Three

Josiah pinned one corner of a creased map to a corkboard propped up haphazardly in the cargo area of the Police Department SUV. His huge palm covered most of the map while he pinned the other corner. "Here's where we are, and here's where the posted units have reported in." He pointed to six various points on the river's path depicted by a wavy blue line. "These officers and firefighters have good sight pictures on these crossroads. They haven't seen anything yet, and they report that the main rush of water has passed. The water level is closer to normal, which is good, but that can change at anytime according to the weather reports in the mountains."

"We also have a half a day of daylight and it's summertime, so there is less worry for hypothermia - don't mean it can't still happen, though," Nathan added. Standing beside Josiah Sanchez, he surveyed the assembly of rescue workers. "We have to be careful and not rush. They could be anywhere."

"When will the river rescue crew launch?"

"Soon. They're gearing up now that the river seems to be calm at the moment." Josiah's finger drew a large circle over an area south of their location. "This is where we come in. This is an area of thick trees and steep terrain. The river makes many turns through here and they could have beached in any number of areas, or been caught in eddies of current any where through here. The river patrol will check the parts that are inaccessible by foot. We have the rest. We will make two long lines on either side of the river and try to cover every inch along the riverbed. There's another group starting from the first crossroad and heading our way. Questions?"

After a few seconds of silence, the volunteers started talking amongst themselves.

"Okay, then. Let's move - check in with the team leaders at the bridge for your assignments. Dismissed."

The large group moved south as Josiah and Nathan turned together and headed to the Park office. Nathan pushed open the door, causing a brass bell on the inside of the door to peal. He winced when he spied Buck sitting in a desk chair, cradling the small boy in his lap. JD was obviously asleep, his one visible cheek flushed and tear stained.

"Sorry," Nathan whispered when Buck lifted his eye and their gazes met. Buck eyes were bloodshot and wide with sorrow as he gently rocked the chair. "When's that County lady supposed to get here?"

"Soon," Buck said softly. One hand stroked JD's dark hair. "Her name's Mrs. Wells. Look out for her, will ya? I'm not movin'."

It was more than offsetting to see the normally laughing and jovial Wilmington so morose. Choosing not to dwell on the reason for his partner's mood downturn, Officer Jackson turned his mind to the job at hand. "I'll let 'em know," he said.

"What are the chances of findin' them, Josiah?" Buck directed the question to Sanchez, who once led the Department's Search and Rescue team.

"We got time and weather mostly on our side," the big officer replied, his eyes locked with Buck's as he spoke so Sergeant Larabee's longtime friend could see that he spoke truthfully. "And it's summer. All good things." Buck just stared at him expectantly. Josiah sighed, and then said, "50/50. That's taking Chris past rough-water rescue training and SEAL experience into account. Plus, he's fit."

Buck ducked his head and nodded once. "Then get to it, boys. I don't want to disappoint this little one again."

Nathan exchanged a glance with Josiah. "It wasn't your fault, Buck," Jackson said softly.

"You c'n keep tellin' me that, Nate," Buck said softly. "Maybe I'll believe it one day. Hope I do, anyway."

Nodding, Officers Jackson and Sanchez slipped out of the office to join the search.

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Chris found it difficult to think now that pain awakened in his body. He knew by the way Vin walked that the boy was hurting, but Vin's only reply remained, "I'm fine," and he wouldn't allow Chris to inspect him too closely.

Not wanting to get involved with whatever was going on at the hunting cabin because of his small charge, Chris made the decision to find the SUV and take it from there. Vin issued a silent nod and helped Larabee to his feet.

Every part hurt but Chris managed to work through the body aches and throbbing, bone-deep pain radiating from his leg as they unlikely pair worked their way around the cabin and followed a probable path that could lead to the vehicle. After an hour or so, Chris braced against a tree to rest. Vin scouted ahead, keeping just within his sights. Their ragged path loosely paralleled the deep valley floor leading from the shack and headed toward the nearest fire break. Chris reasoned it was the only possible way to get a vehicle in here; if they didn't come across it in this valley, then the SUV had to be on the fire break itself, a wide path carved by tractor that gave brush fire rigs access to the area.

This routine set in with Chris' tree hopping rest stops. Finally, Chris spied the fire break between the trees and as he leaned painfully against a gnarly pine, the real worry about the armed man became his prime concern. Chris didn't want to cross paths with that unknown element.

"I found it," Vin whispered on his return from scouting ahead. "It's just up ahead."

"Great," Chris replied, fitting the abrasive crutch to his raw armpit. "No one around it?"

Vin shook his head.

"How are you feelin', Cowboy?" Chris asked, holding Vin's gaze so he wouldn't duck his head.

After chewing his lip for a moment, Vin finally admitted, "I'm a little sore but I c'n keep goin'."

"Really?"

"Really."

Chris knew the boy was telling the truth, so with a sigh and a quick, reassuring pat to Vin's shoulder, Chris hobbled the last stretch with Vin at his side. It wasn't long until he saw a faded red Bronco parked under a thick section of forest canopy and in the middle of heavy brush, making it invisible from the air and the plowed fire break. His hopes elevated - not only was it a slightly lifted 4X4 and looked well cared for, it was pre-1990's which meant he could hot-wire it easily.

Then it struck him - could he drive it with this leg? When they arrived at the driver's door and Chris peered in, a groan escaped him before he could choke it back.

"What?" Vin said looking, suddenly, on alert like a rabbit ready to run.

"It's a stick," Chris said. "Don't think I can handle it like this." He nodded to his leg. After beat of silence, he said. "Our best bet is to get to the middle of the fire break and look for rescue helicopters." He eyed the low ceiling and chose to keep his doubt smothered.

Clearly, Vin wasn't fooled. "The guy in the cabin can drive," he suggested after a time.

"No. Not happening. I don't know anything about them or that situation - it's too dangerous." Every part of his body throbbing in pain, Chris turned and was about to direct Vin to the fire break when, suddenly, a trio of birds burst from a bush at the sound of breaking branches. "Get under the car," Chris ordered harshly, pushing Vin down and staying hidden behind the truck until the pair of tiny boots disappeared. Chris then craned his neck until he could see in the direction of the noise while his fingers traced down his pant leg, lifted the edge, and removed his survival knife.

It wasn't the first time he'd brought a knife to a gun fight, but he wasn't a busted up in those times, either. The other hand gripped the crutch for extra back up he hoped he wouldn't need.

He heard a man's voice swearing before the subject stepped into sight, wearing the clothes Vin described earlier. The man swatted at his head with one hand and regarded a cell phone in the other as he grumbled, obviously not a fan of the outdoors. Chris' mouth quirked at the state of the man's pants and shoes as he gripped the knife tighter.

Larabee waited patiently, hoping the man would simply leave, but as the minutes passed and the man zigzagged all around and turned circles in the space between them, the sergeant realized that if there wasn't a cell signal here, the next step would be to drive to the top of the ridge. Additionally, Vin was right - there was a silver automatic tucked in at the man's waistline.

When the stranger moved in the direction of the Bronco, Chris hunkered down and concentrated on the approaching footsteps. His heartbeat strengthened, edging out pain, and he prepared to attack.

As soon as the man rounded the front of the vehicle, Chris pushed off with a growl.

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Vin knew the importance of stillness and silence. He'd learned long ago how to ignore all else to remain undetected - the sting of dry sticks, the poke of sharp rocks, the smell of gasoline and rubber - and to use all his senses to find trouble before it found him.

Chris must have learned the same lessons because he was as still as Vin - waiting, focused on the cadence of footsteps coming their way.

The speed at which Larabee attacked surprised the boy. From his vantage point, he saw dancing feet scrambling for purchase and heard frightening gasps and grunts as the two men collided and struggled. A hard thump shook the vehicle just before the pair hit the ground.

Vin gasped, unable to stop a twitch of fear. He gripped the ground, holding fistfuls of dirt, dry grass and pebbles as he watched the fight, unable to tear his eyes away.

He saw Chris' arm around the stranger's neck as Larabee clung to his opponent's back with his good leg clamped over kicking thighs. They rolled away and Vin caught a glance of Chris' face - a frightening mask of sheer determination and exhaustion. The urge to do something, anything, to help his friend drove the boy from under the SUV, rocks slicing his knuckles and knees as he crawled out.

Vin circled to the fighting side and froze, uncertain. The two men rolled again and then broke apart. Chris arched back, pushing off the ground with one hand while gripping a knife with the other. His opponent scrambled to his feet, then reached for the gun, and Vin knew instantly that Chris would be too late.

The man pulled the weapon free and brought it up.

Vin yelled, drawing the shooter's attention his way, and when angry eyes found him, Vin threw the two handfuls of dirt he didn't realize he held right in the man's face.

The stranger staggered back a step, and Vin heard a hollow thump just before the man slumped against the vehicle, gurgling, and sunk to the ground slowly, knees akimbo. Vin saw the hilt of a knife sticking out from the base of his throat. Blood streamed down his chest in twin trails as he took two choking breaths and then seemed to collapse into himself.

Chris crawled to the downed figure and watched it twitch a few times before growing still. Panting, he lay on his side and reached over, removing the gun from the stranger's lax hand before falling back to stare at the sky.

Unable to find words, Vin's shaking legs and wobbling knees resulted in a less than straight path to Chris' side and once there, the boy knelt down. "C. . . Chris?" He finally managed to choke out, concerned. The sergeant's eyes slid closed and he relaxed onto the ground. "Chris?" Vin shook his shoulder, getting no response.

Vin's heartbeat stuttered in fear and he fell back onto his butt, fighting the urge to scuttle away like a crab. Instead, he forced his eyes to stay on his friend, relieved when he saw that Chris still breathed.

"Help," Vin whispered.

Finally tearing his gaze away, he looked around and confirmed that they were alone. Vin pushed to his feet and sidestepped to the path made by the newcomer. He stood for a moment, confirming that the man was not breathing he turned his back and started for the cabin. Three steps away, he paused, turned back, and headed directly to the dead man, swallowing his fear when he realized he had to touch it - him.

The urge to run nearly overwhelmed him as he stood over the bloody figure. Vin felt like he was in a dream or under water; he only heard a faint buzz and everything seemed cloaked in eerie fog. He saw a hand - his hand - reach for the knife hilt and barely felt its stickiness when his fingers wrapped around the cold metal. The first tug made the body twitch, and the second, adrenaline fueled tug freed the blade so abruptly that Vin stumbled back a couple of steps.

The body didn't move. Fat, black flies hovered over the blood.

Vin turned and ran toward the cabin.

## Part Four

Ezra Standish could not feel his fingers anymore. His eye stung, his shoulder throbbed, and he generally ached all over, but the state of his custom tailored suit trousers and silk shirt is what hurt the most. Yes, he knew there was a chance he could die this day, and he damned the individual that would be responsible for his being an untidy corpse.

He chuckled at the audacity of his thoughts and then gasped when pain's daggers dug its steely knives deeper into his temples. He slammed his eyes - eye - shut and stilled, riding the sharp sensation to its lowest level. He released a hissing breath.

"Courage, Ezra," he muttered softly. "At least the cretin placed the jacket aside." He turned a bleary eye its direction and his heart stuttered when he saw the same small boy from before standing wide-eyed and silent in the doorway. "Oh! Hello again. Master Vin, wasn't it?" Hope raised its glorious head and Standish's brain kicked into gear. He schooled his expression into one of friendliness, wondering how he actually appeared to the child.

They studied each other for long seconds, Vin as still as a statue and Ezra trying not to appear desperate.

"I need help," Vin finally said.

"I can help you," Ezra replied, cringing inside at the speed of his offer. "I mean, I would truly like to help you, but as you can see, my movement is limited at the moment." Ezra wiggled his fat, tingling fingers.

The boy tipped his head as if in thought and then broke eye contact to study Ezra from head to toe.

"Although it is wise to examine this situation closely, my young man, I must remind you that our time may be limited. Perhaps the knife on the table will suffice in cutting these bonds?" Standish lifted his chin to indicate the location of an item.

Vin glanced at the tabletop then raised the hand that gripped Chris' knife.

"Hold on, young man, is that blood?" Standish choked, heart suddenly racing. The boy's fist and the frightening, serrated knife were shiny red. Vin walked toward him and an unwelcome vision of Norman Bates, Janet Leigh and a shower flew through his mind. "Mr. Tanner! What are your intentions?" Ezra managed to press back into the sturdy chair as far as he could and squared his shoulders.

Vin stopped, clearly puzzled, and then glanced to the knife. "I'm cuttin' you loose." Then, he turned his eyes to the captive and that's when Ezra saw fear in the boy's eyes. "Will you help me? If I cut you loose?"

Standish's body relaxed as he released a relieved breath. "Certainly, my boy, but you better hurry . . ."

"That other man won't be back," Vin said in an odd, flat way as he approached Ezra and started sawing on the tape holding Ezra's left hand.

Standish saw that Vin's eyes swam with banked tears. The kid was on an emotional edge.

"Is that so?" Ezra kept his voice low to keep from spooking his only chance of release. He paused, weighing the wisdom of his next question. "Did you - use the knife on him?"

Unkempt locks swept back and forth when Vin shook his head, his eyes locked on his task. "No," he whispered in a raspy voice. "Chris did."

"I see." *The Neanderthal that brought me here was Wilmont. Wherever did this Chris come from? Or this boy, for that matter?*

Standish twisted his wrist from the cut duct tape and he hissed after losing a large patch of arm hair. Vin stepped back and froze, and then huge ocean blue eyes snapped to Ezra's face.

"Don't go! I apologize. I did not expect . . . well, it hurt a little but I am all right." *This child is rather skittish. I must be careful.* Ezra smiled. "I did not mean to scare you. I apologize."

Their gazes held for a quiet span of time and Standish saw the wheels begin to turn behind a pair of eyes that seemed older than they should be. Ezra maintained a mild expression, not allowing the shock of recognition to show on his features; He'd seen the same shadow of maturity in his own eyes at a much younger age. A sympathetic smile came easier than he thought it would.

"Shall we finish this dance, young sir, so I may reconnoiter the situation outside?"

Vin blinked, breaking the spell, and frowned. "What?"

Ezra chuckled. "If you would please free me, I will see what is going on outside."

"Oh." Vin stepped forward again and position the blade on Ezra's the other wrist.

Standish hesitated a moment, then slowly reached his free hand over and took the knife handle between his fingers just in front of Vin's. "Let me. I do not want you injured." Vin released the knife after a second and took a step back, absently wiping his bloody hand on his jeans and leaving a dark spot behind.

"Sergeant Larabee's hurt," Vin said. His raw voice trembled a little.

Luckily, Standish's attention was on his wrist at the time and Vin didn't see the flash of surprise that Ezra felt. *Good Lord, a law enforcement officer is out there? I am forced from the frying pan into the fire thanks to you, Mother!* He continued sawing at the tape as his mind calculated and plotted. "So, young man, why aren't other officers helping this Sergeant? Surely, they know where he . . . you are."

"We fell in the river. Chris saved me."

Those unnerving eyes swelled again with tears and Ezra had to give the boy points for not allowing them to fall. He swallowed back a rise of feeling for the child, silently chastising himself for the weakness of emotion and, instead, concentrated on cutting through the tape. It was loose now, and he rolled his wrist from the silver strip, moving a little slower this time. He silently gritted his teeth with the slow rip of pain from the crude depilatory.

Releasing his legs was painless, save for the hurt of seeing decent trousers fouled in such an obscene manner. Once free, Ezra rose slowly, feeling every ache, pain, and bruise inflicted on his body. He refused to groan.

Vin watched him with growing caution clear in his body language. It was extremely distracting for Standish to focus on an escape plan under the child's continued examination; he had no doubt that the diminutive Tanner was a learned observer, just as he was. Ezra knew he had to control his every expression.

With a final stretch, Standish allowed a groan to escape, and mentally patted his own back when he saw Vin's eyes lose some of their wary edge.

“Well, then,” Ezra said as he shuffled forward. “Let us evaluate the situation, shall we?”

“Chris needs help.”

“Yes, you said that.” *And I need to separate myself from this entire situation.* “Lead on, Master Tanner.”

With one last head tilted glance, Vin turned and headed to the door, disappearing outside. Once out of sight, Ezra quickly headed to the sink and snatched a small derringer from where his kidnapper had tossed it away, and tucked it in his jacket pocket. Then he lifted the coat, draped it over his arm with a loving stroke, and stepped, blinking, into the wild out-of-doors.

“Good Lord. What an ungodly time of day,” he muttered as he followed his rescuer. When his eyes finally adjusted to the brightness, he saw that Vin waited for him at the first curve of a narrow path, impatience oozing from every pore. “I am coming, my good man. Have faith.”

As he walked, or perhaps shuffled, in Vin’s path, Ezra looked and listened. Everything smelled of recent rain and he moaned at the squishy feel of the earth under his Italian shoes as feeling tingled back into his feet. He also noticed the silence: No helicopters or calling searchers. He might make it out of here after all. It was still a debate if it would be with or without the Sergeant or the boy

When they rounded the last curve of the crude road, Standish was both delighted and appalled: He was happy a marked police unit wasn’t in sight, but he loathed the idea another ride in the barbaric vehicle that got him here. This time, at least, he would not be bound and blindfolded. Spotting Wilmont propped against the rear wheel cut short his stilted joy.

“Oh my,” he said, gulping back a sudden rise of bile. Flies hovered around cloudy, unseeing eyes drooped at half mast and the body slumped in a clearly lifeless style. Standish pressed the back of his hand against his lips and stopped, mesmerized.

“Over here,” Vin said, worried, jerking Ezra’s horrified stare from the dead man. He gathered scattered wits enough to note the small boy’s wide berth around the body.

“Um, yes, coming, coming.” Wavering, he followed the same path, averting his eyes. He hoped Sergeant Chris wasn’t in the same state as Wilmont, but then he considered that maybe that would make things easier. *No, Ezra. Dead policemen never make the situation better.*

Vin crouched by a still body dressed in a uniform - mostly dressed, actually. *What is that on his leg?*

“His leg’s broke,” Vin said in eerie reply.

“I see.” Standish edged closer and peered downward. “Interesting use of a ballistic vest. I am sure his leg is quite stable.”

The Sergeant appeared pale, but his breathing was steady. Ezra slipped his coat on, comforted by the weight of the Beretta in the pocket, and then squatted down. Every joint made themselves known and he felt a wave of dizziness.

Larabee groaned and rolled his head aside. Vin gently patted his cheek. “Chris? Chris?”

Ezra felt the man’s cheek with the back of his fingers, then felt for a pulse at his neck. “His heartbeat is strong and he appears to be in good condition, considering. Do you know where the vehicle keys are, Master Tanner?”

Vin shook his head. "That guy proly has 'em."

"Oh, yes, indeed." Ezra straightened and stood, his desire to flee overriding his revulsion at the idea of searching a dead body. "Let me take a look, then."

He found the keys in Wilmont's front right pocket, precisely where Standish knew they would be. He started for the driver's side of the car and spied a cell phone on the ground. He picked it up and read the screen.

"That's his," Vin said, pointing to Wilmont.

"Indeed?" *Did he make contact with Iovanni?* Ezra quickly searched prior calls and his heart sank. Wilmont had made contact with Alonzo Iovanni less than an hour ago! *I have to get out of here!*

"I will get help. You stay here with Chris." Ezra started for the car again and made it two steps before the heavier-than-he-looked child latched onto his leg.

"No! We're coming with you!"

Standish lurched to a halt. "OOF!" He thought fast. "Vin, my boy, he needs a doctor. We can't risk moving him." As he spoke, he worked to peel the boy's fingers from his thighs.

"No!"

*Damn it all to hell, is this child related to a limpet?* Ezra picked, pulled and pushed with zero success, and when he tried to walk, the weight on his limb caused his foot to drag. "Master Tanner, stop this foolishness at once. Help will come here for him!"

"I don't believe you."

The statement was flat and held no doubt. Ezra looked down into a pair of stormy eyes. Vin Tanner's jaw was set and did not flinch when their gazes locked. There was no doubt the wiry kid read him precisely - there would be no fooling him. Their likeness in that respect made him pause; Ezra knew the circumstances that formed his own ability in this area and a wash of sorrow went out for the boy.

His Mother would be furious at the feeling. Then again, it was his Mother who got him into this fix to start with. He dragged his personal baggage another foot before giving up with a sign. "Fine. You win." Vin affixed him with a suspicious glare. Ezra rolled his eyes and brushed the boy off, this time successfully. Vin, however, stood firm with clenched fists and made it clear he was ready to launch another assault if necessary.

The thought to run passed quickly. Standish turned stiffly and reluctantly moved toward the uniformed body with Tanner in his wake.

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Buck Wilmington looked out the window with anxious hope, but the cloud layer still rode too low on in the sky. The search, then, continued on foot. He tried not to think of the vast, treacherous area involved. If Chris and the boy did manage to get to shore, there was a small window of time left until night and the darkness loosened another kind of danger. Wolves, bears, wildcats - they were all out there.

He felt his charge shift in his arms. "Vin?" JD's sleepy whisper was hoarse with the promise of a cold.

"We're lookin' for him and Chris. Don't worry, we'll find 'em." Buck brushed back the mop of dark hair with his palm. "You hungry?"

As if on cue, the Ranger cabin door swung open and the woman from the shopping event slipped in with bags of food in her arms. "Officer Wilmington? I'm Nettie Wells. I believe we've met before."

"Yes, ma'm, we sure have." He shifted the sleepy JD until he sat up. "Hey, Little Bit, I think I smell hot chocolate."

Mrs. Wells smiled. "You certainly do." She put the bags down and brought two covered cups over. "Along with coffee for you."

"Is there whipped cream?" JD asked as he took the cup.

"What's hot chocolate without whipped cream?" Nettie replied. After he took the cup, Nettie cupped his chin in her hand. "Hmm, you may have a fever, young man."

"I thought so, too." Buck carefully took a sip from his own cup and sighed. "Thanks. I needed this." He took another sip and tipped his head in the direction of the cabin door. "Anything new out there?"

"Not yet as far as I know."

"I want Vin." JD's voice was small, but his fear and disappointment was the biggest thing in the room.

"I know you do, son. So do I. We're doing all we can."

Wilmington prayed it would be enough.

## Part Five

Scenarios ran through Standish's mind in quick succession. Thinking with any speed increased the pounding of his head and the precariousness of his vision, but he sorted through the ideas and dismissed them one by one as unfeasible. He needed more information.

He squatted next to the uniformed body, his pulse spiking when he saw that a gun rested between the sergeant's lax hand and stomach. He toyed with the thought of taking possession of it for about a second because just then, the lawman groaned.

"Mr. Chris?" Vin asked, hopeful. He knelt across from Standish and gently shook Larabee's shoulder. "Chris?"

Ezra put a hand under the khaki shoulder and helped the sergeant to sit up. "Careful, sir, there is a firearm in your hand."

"Uh, what?" Blinking rapidly, Larabee twitched all over as he awakened and fought for balance. Ezra felt the man's muscles tense under his hand.

"Are you okay?" The boy studied his rescuer's face with obvious relief.

Larabee looked down at the gun in his hand and then looked around, pausing when he saw the body against the car. Then he looked up at Standish and leaned away from him, shoving Vin behind him as he faced the stranger. "Who are you?" he demanded, raising the gun.

Ezra took a step back and rose, raising arms half way up, palms out. His rescued suit jacket lay in a heap on the ground beside Larabee and Standish took a moment to mourn its loss before responding. "Ezra Standish. I do not intend to make trouble, Sergeant. Master Tanner - um, Vin, here - enlisted my help in taking you away from here. He is concerned about your physical well-being."

Sergeant Larabee kept his sharp gaze locked on Standish and quietly asked Vin to find his crutch. In the mean time, he struggled to one knee, stopping once to catch his breath. Vin shoved the crutch into his hand.

Time ticked on in Ezra's head as he counted down from the timestamp on the last call to Lovelli. He needed to be out of here, now; Lovelli's minions were, at best, a half-hour out and Standish still hoped to be far, far away upon their arrival. "As I stated, I only intend to assist you into the vehicle and drive us out of this unfortunate situation." The idea to sprint to the car and depart alone crossed his mind. *Surely, he wouldn't shoot me for such an action . . . would he?* He smiled pleasantly. "Unless, of course, it is a better solution for me to leave and summon assistance?" He pointed at the vehicle with one raised hand.

"Nobody leaves alone." Chris relaxed a little and tucked the gun into his waistband. "Help me up," he said softly to the boy, eyes still on Ezra, who decided that standing motionless was his best action for the moment. With one hand on Vin's shoulder and the other on his crutch, he levered himself to a wobbly stand, still holding Standish's attention. Larabee finally released Standish from his hard gaze when he tried to walk - he grimaced and caught his breath when the toes of his injured leg caught on the uneven ground.

Standish stepped forward immediately and supported Chris' elbow, and the lawman wavered to a stop and again pinned Ezra with his glare. "I keep the gun."

"I prefer, sir, to avoid firearms at all costs."

Larabee's glare heated. "I know there's more to your being here, Standish."

"And I will happily fill you in on the details, sir, you see . . ."

"Later," Larabee snapped. "First thing is to get this boy to safety." He indicated Vin with a slight tip of his head.

"I heartily agree. Let me assist you, then."

They started moving forward again and Ezra found himself chatting the entire time about the uncouth image of handguns and how they ruined the line of a good suit, hoping to hurry along the departure as the clock ticked down in his head. Plus, he didn't want to encourage any further questioning by the sergeant. Ezra just wanted to be gone as soon as possible. The Sergeant maneuvered into the back so he could extend his leg. Ezra fetched his jacket with an air of loss and rolled it, then tucked it under the injured leg. Mentally, he told the beloved garment goodbye. Meanwhile, Vin scrambled into the front seat and sat there, his wide eyes looking a little glazed. Ezra knew the kid must be exhausted.

"Buckle up, Master Tanner." Standish figured the boy needed to focus on something else as he circled around the front and slid behind the wheel. He fiddled nervously with the keys.

"Move the body." Larabee's tone brooked no discussion.

Ezra ignored the tone. "I certainly will not." He finally fitted the key in the ignition.

"Move it."

Ezra felt cold metal against his head. In his peripheral vision, he saw Vin give him a pleading look. Ezra looked beyond him and saw the dead man's reflection in the large rear view mirror on the passenger's side. He refocused on the boy. *Those eyes are worse than bullets*, he thought, disgusted with how easily the boy unknowingly manipulated him. *Mother would be appalled.*

Ezra exited the vehicle with a resigned huff and circled around so his back blocked Vin's view before stopping. A zing of fear raced down his spine. He shook his head at the feeling and choked back a laugh. *What are you expecting, for God's sake? This isn't a zombie movie!* He still harbored a tiny thought that the dead man's hand would grab his ankle as he approached. *Tick, tock, Ezra!*

Once at the body's side, he bent over and gave the body a one-handed shove. It didn't move. *Of course not*, he thought wryly. Ezra bit his lip and shoved harder with both hands, this time rewarded when the form slipped slowly aside, gained momentum and thumped to the ground.

It remained visible in the mirror. Ezra rolled his eyes skyward, counted to three, then moved quickly to grab the body's collar and drag it behind the SUV and out of sight. He wiped his hands on his ruined suit and gave the body a wide berth when he returned to the driver's seat.

He slipped in behind the wheel with a loud sigh. "All right, now, here we go," he said brightly. The door creaked when he pulled it shut. Ezra started the vehicle and it lurched forward, snapping his neck painfully. Larabee hissed and Vin grabbed the door handle. "I do apologize, sirs, for the bumpy start. There is a clutch, I see now. It won't happen again, I assure you. It will take just a moment to adjust to this primitive nature of this vehicle."

"They should have taped your mouth shut," Chris ground out from between clenched jaws, his white-knuckled grip on the seat back pointedly jostling Ezra, who winced when he grinded the gears into place. The car bounced forward.

Standish eventually maintained a smoother pace across the muddy, uneven path following the natural terrain. Each significant bump elicited a feral grunt from the sergeant and a wince from Ezra as he waited for the lawman's hands to lock around his neck. *Time is running out.*

A light sprinkle forced Ezra to find the wipers. The first sweep of the blades rewarded him with a muddy smear.

"I can't see!" Vin worried aloud. His grip on the door's arm rest and the edge of the seat assisted the seatbelt with keeping him in place during the rough ride.

"I do not believe approaching traffic is a hazard at this time, my boy. It should clear up..."

The next swipe of the blade cleared the glass enough to see the undercarriage of another off road vehicle loom before them like gaping jaws as it surged over the edge of the hill and directly at them.

"AHHHHH!" Ezra and Vin chorused as Standish jerked the steering wheel aside. Larabee to yelp in anguish when he slammed into the backside of the front seats. Tearing metal screeched and their SUV jerked to an abrupt halt.

The Sheriff car lurched aside, missing them, and slipped to a stop just a few feet away. There was a moment of stillness. The windshield wipers sounded two gritty swipes just before the sky opened and rain fell in a torrential downpour.

"Of course," Ezra mumbled with an exasperated sigh. His heartbeat settled and he fumbled for the seatbelt.

Vin's door suddenly opened, revealing the yellow-slickered, uniformed figure of a black man with a worried expression. His attention immediately focused on the boy.

"Vin Tanner?" Vin nodded, mute. "Thank God! Are you hurt anywhere? Let me look." Nathan Jackson reached in but boy pushed his hand away.

"Mr. Chris' hurt!" Tanner squirmed to his knees, slipping from under the seatbelt, and turned to the back seat. "Chris? Chris!"

Nathan retreated, leaving Vin's door open, and yanked open the back door. "Chris? Hold on, don't move..."

Ezra's door opened without warning and he startled. His heart rate shot up again.

"Officer Sanchez," the hooded officer said in introduction as he visually evaluated Standish. "You all right?"

Ezra sputtered in disbelief. "Do I *look* all right to you? I obviously need medical attention! I demand you take me to a hospital immediately!"

"Calm down, sir. All in good time. Let me help you."

"I do not need *your* help! I need a doctor, post haste!" Ezra threw off Sanchez's paw of a hand and struggled with the seatbelt. *If I can get out of here now*, he thought, his brain constantly calculating the odds of his escape. Currently, they were in his favor, but only if he departed *now*.

"Josiah, I need your help!" Jackson called.

"I'll be right back." Sanchez offered what Ezra perceived as the big man's reassuring smile and stepped away.

"Wait, now! Come back here!" Ezra tried to get out, found the seatbelt still secured, and fought to untangle himself. Once undone, he scrambled out and his feet slipped in the mud and flew in two directions. He hung from the door until he gathered his feet and sloshed around the front of the Bronco, mentally bemoaning the loss of his Italian leather shoes in the drenching rain. "I demand immediate evacuation!" he yelled.

Sanchez and Jacksons' bright slickers hovered on either side of Larabee as they worked him from the rear seat. The sergeant's face twisted in pain. Aside from Jackson giving Ezra an irritated glance, they ignored him.

"Get the boy into our unit. Your car ain't goin' nowhere," Nathan ordered.

Ezra scowled at the double negative and opened his mouth to demand clarification when he caught the dark look Sanchez' sent his way. The pleasant officer had morphed into a frightful figure and Ezra shut his mouth with the image of those large hands clamping down on his arm . . . or neck. He gulped once, felt his neck absently, then made his way to Vin's door and leaned down. "Master Tanner? It seems that we have orders."

"Is he okay? Is he goin' with us?"

"I do not know on the former and yes on the latter." He took Vin's hand and helped him out. "Come on now. I would like to get out of this dreadful precipitation, although I fear it is too late for this particular suit." He brushed a clump of mud from his thigh. It left a wide, brown stain behind. "My haberdasher will be appalled," Ezra muttered, garnering a confused look from the boy. Ezra sighed. "Come on."

The pair made their way around the Sheriff's unit and crawled onto the back seat. From there, Ezra saw that the Bronco had high centered on a partially buried boulder. No, it wouldn't be moving, but hopefully, it would be a distraction to Lovelli's men once they arrived. *But first, we have to be gone!* He turned his attention to the trio poised at the rear hatch.

The hatch popped open and the two officers lifted Chris until he was able to sit in the cargo area. Jackson fussed with arranging the sergeant's various limbs while Larabee groused about his hovering. Sanchez came around to the driver's side and got in.

"I demand . . ." Ezra started.

"Shut up." Sanchez replied, lifting the radio microphone.

"How rude!" Ezra said. A small hand on his forearm made him look down into a pair of very worried eyes. The raw emotion behind the look made Standish swallow any more complaints. "Um, yes," he mumbled, patting the boy's hand. "Courage, Mr. Tanner. Everything will turn out all right."

The words echoed in his memory. How many times had he told himself that very thing?

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"They found them!"

Buck struggled out of the chair, waking the sleeping figure he held to his chest. "What? Where?"

"Are they okay?" Nettie Well rose with him and moved to his side.

Holding JD close, Wilmington stopped at the office door where a drenched Park Ranger stood, hand on the door knob and dripping rivers onto the floor. "Just heard it

on the police radio. They were picked up on the firebreak and on their way in." He smiled at JD, who blinked sleepily back at him. "You're friend will be here soon, kid." Then he turned to Nettie. "They requested an EMT. I don't know why."

"I guess we will wait and see. The fact that their coming in with the unit is good," Buck clarified, smiling. "Is the EMT here already?"

"Yes, sir. Eli Joe's bringin' them to the fire break trailhead from the main lot." He cocked his head, listening. "I think I hear 'em leavin' now." The Ranger stepped back and closed the door.

"Vin's coming?" JD asked, waking quickly.

"Yup. Here, stay with Mrs. Wells for a bit." It took a little work to peel JD's clingy limbs from his torso. JD whined about staying behind. "Dang, you're like an octopus, son!"

Nettie laughed and took the boy from the struggling officer, then set him down on a table top where he stood looking grievously affronted. "Vin needs me!"

"I know he does, JD, but he needs to get out of the rain, too." Nettie said, turning him toward the water streaked window. "It's pouring out there."

"I'll get him in here as soon as I can, I promise." Buck shrugged on his slicker. "Be right back."

He slipped from the office and hurried to the closest idling Sheriff's unit, where he pulled the door open. He closed the door against the rain and sat in the unit. After listening to the radio traffic for a minute, he changed the setting from "all department" to the less formal, unit-to-unit frequency. "Eli, you there?"

The radio crackled. "That you, Buck?"

"Yeah. Who's the EMT for? And was that the coroner I heard on the air?"

"The EMT's for Larabee and someone else, don't know who; the kid, I assume. The order came from Sanchez. I guess there's a body at the scene, too."

A chill of fear made Buck shiver. "Who is it?"

"Don't know yet. They didn't establish ID before evacuating Larabee and the kid."

Buck frowned. There were too many bodies in his mental count. "Okay. See you in a few."

Wilmington threw the unit into drive and set a course to the fire break trailhead.

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Eli Joe Chavez hung up the unit microphone with a curse. There were already too many officers to deal with, and now Wilmington sticks his nose into the scene. Mr. Lovelli couldn't risk showing his face here, not until the scene sorted itself out and he had more information, the most important fact being the identification of the dead body.

Officer Chavez dug out his personal cell phone and made a call.

## Part Six

Eli Joe Chavez smelled opportunity as if it were blood in the wind to a starving wolf. This was it - he'd been waiting for almost three long, often nerve-wracking yet always exciting, years. He was going to *be* somebody and the life he deserved was finally within reach. He worked to keep the tone of his voice professional.

"So, I bring in Standish and you bring me into your organization. New name, new place, new life - that's the deal, right? I earn a place in your business, Mr. Iovelli? Because, I'm risking everything here. Turning my head to some drug deals is one thing. This is another."

"Yes, Mr. Chavez, that is the deal. Mr. Standish, alive. Once you have him, I will supply the location."

"I understand, sir. I won't let you down."

Eli Joe eagerly disconnected the call. He had to be very, very careful. He relaxed his grip on the unit's steering wheel and puffed out a breath to cap his rising excitement. It still poured rain outside and the fire break was slick and muddy so he backed his foot off the accelerator and let the SUV do its thing. The plan came to him in a flash and he needed these next minutes to run it through his head for potential problems. The few issues he noted were nothing he couldn't manage. It may not be a clean escape, but who cared? After today, Eli Joe Chavez would cease to exist. He would be reborn into a new life. A better life. A *richer* life!

Finally, he saw Sanchez's unit alongside a Bronco high-centered on something. He saw two yellow slickered forms that turned his direction and the rain lessened enough to recognize Sanchez coming his way. Jackson leaned into the other police unit. Eli Joe swallowed hard, concentrated on slowing his racing heart, and exited his vehicle.

"Hey, E.J., good to see ya." Sanchez stopped by Chavez's driver door and waited until Eli cleared the vehicle.

"Josiah. Guess I'm here to evacuate someone?"

Sanchez turned back to his own unit and Eli Joe fell in step beside him, both men slipping in the treacherous mud. The rain cooperated, remaining light.

"It's a damn muddy mess. The EMTs can't get out here so we gotta take these guys to them. They're at the trail head, right?"

"Almost on scene," Eli confirmed. His mind raced as he waited for the opportunity to see the survivors. A few steps later, he saw Standish's bruised face inside the police unit and his spirits soared. This was his day! Then he realized Josiah was still talking.

"We got Chris pretty settled in our car so you'll need to evacuate the other two. All of us won't fit in one vehicle and we need to get back to the body and secure the scene after we drop off Chris with the EMTs."

"Wait, what?" Eli Joe frowned. "I'm taking two people?"

"Yeah," Sanchez replied. "The victim/suspect and the kid, Vin Tanner."

"Why don't you take Tanner? Then I can go straight to the station . . ."

"No, both Tanner and Standish need to be medically checked out first." Josiah paused, frowning at Chavez. "I thought you knew that. The boy's social worker is meeting you at the hospital. She'll take custody there, then, after Standish checks out,

you bring him to the station so we can get his statement. We'll have some more information from the scene by then. Besides, we can't fit anyone else in our unit."

"Oh. Right. Sure." *Damn, wasn't expecting the kid.* "Can they walk?"

"Yeah, they're ambulatory. Looks like bruises - Vin's are from the river and Standish was beaten up. Chris is the one that's really hurt. Busted leg."

It took Eli Joe a few seconds to realize Josiah was waiting for a response. "Damn, that's too bad," he finally stuttered before breaking his beat partner's stare and moving toward the victims.

Josiah caught up and spoke again in a low voice. "We don't know the story on Standish yet. We think he's a kidnapping victim but he's not talking." Josiah sighed and rolled his eyes skyward for a moment. "Let me rephrase that, he *is* talking but he's not telling us much. The whole thing's kinda hinky, so watch yourself."

"Then maybe I shouldn't be taking the kid, too. Be sure he's not endangered."

"You'll be handing the boy off soon enough and we need units at the scene. For now, his presence will prevent Standish from picking up any of our suspicions. Besides, he and Vin seem to get along pretty well."

*Damn.* "Okay, then, let's get this show on the road. It's not good for any of them to be in this rain any longer."

"Amen, brother."

*Small fly in the plan, but it's still workable.* Eli Joe smiled.

Finally, he'd shed this God-awful uniform and start dressing with some style.

-----

Vin couldn't stop shivering. He didn't really feel cold and the car was warm, and the blanket the big officer gave him was soft and dry but still, he shivered.

"Come here, Vin. Scoot closer." Chris looked awful but Vin overcame his fear of hurting him further and wiggled a little closer to his friend's shoulder. Without his uniform shirt on, the sergeant looked smaller. His face was pale planes and shadowed lines of pain radiating from the corner of his eyes. Vin knew he was hurting, but Chris managed a smile and patted Vin's thigh. "You're going to be fine. I'm going to be fine. You're just tired, so try to relax. We'll take care of you for now."

"Okay," Vin managed as he gathered the blanket tightly across his chest. "I'm sorry you got hurt."

"Yeah, I am too." Chris smiled as he spoke, softening the words. "But everything will be all right."

Vin dipped his head in silence. *No, it won't be. They'll make sure I never see JD again.* His eyes burned.

"Come on, now. Don't cry." Chris pushed up on an elbow and then reached over and adjusted the blanket before swiping Vin's bangs aside with his fingers. "You're just tired. Once I'm out of the hospital, I'll come see you. How's that? Can I visit you?"

Vin nodded, emotionally embracing this near stranger that felt so familiar in so many ways. Trust wasn't something he felt very often, but Vin recognized the feeling. "K," he whispered.

“Now, here’s what’s going to happen, Vin. I’m going back in this car with Nathan and Josiah, and you and Mr. Standish are getting a ride in that other car.” Chris tipped his head in the direction of Chavez’s SUV. “Both of you are going to the hospital . . .”

“Pardon me?” Ezra interjected, suddenly interested in the conversation. “I am not going to a hospital. If the officer cannot take me to my hotel, then I demand a cab . . .”

“Shut up, Standish, and listen. There’s a dead man back there that beat you up and tied you to a chair. We need your statement . . .”

“Rubbish! I won’t press charges! You can’t do this . . .”

Ezra’s outburst sputtered to a stop when Eli Joe pulled open the door. “Ezra Standish? You’re coming with me.” The uniformed officer reached in and took Ezra’s forearm. Ezra shook it off.

“Unhand me! I’m not going with you!”

“Then how are you getting’ out of here?” Chris snapped. “Flying?”

Vin made his face an unreadable mask as he watched the adults. Everything in him screamed to stay with Chris, but he wanted to show that he was brave.

“Come on.” Chavez tugged on Standish’s arm and turned to speak to Vin. “You too, kid.”

“His name’s Vin,” Chris said in a pained voice.

“Vin, then. Let’s go.” Eli Joe got Standish moving, complaining the entire way.

“I’ll help you.” Josiah scooped Vin up in his trunk-like arms. “It’s pretty wet out here so tuck in tight. Say goodbye to Chris.”

Vin turned his wide, tired eyes to his friend and found himself unable to speak.

“Bye, Vin. I’ll see you later.” Chris laid down across the seat with a tired sigh and when Jackson stepped in to check him over, Vin lost sight of him.

He suddenly felt very weary.

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Thoughts tumbled through Ezra’s brain in a torrent. Things were happening too fast and his options were too limited. Once they were out of this infernal hill country and in the hospital within more civilized surrounding, he could make his move and leave all this behind.

Damn his mother for all this! Her skillful ability to lure rich men into her arms was topnotch, but Ezra thought she would have picked up a sense of *where* the money came from by this time! Every now and again, it proved prudent to let the mark go rather than take on the risk of bodily injury or death. *But then again, she’s the one in the wind and I’m the one taking the punishment!*

Things were looking up for him now, though. The police unit slipped and slid its way back to the main trailhead where the EMTs waited for Chris’ arrival. Ezra was thankful that the officer driving their vehicle weaved his way through the flashing emergency lights and small cluster of what appeared to be reporters. He wished the rain would pick up again, but it had frittered down to a bare drizzle at this point.

Ezra let out a satisfied sigh when they reached the highway and the ride smoothed. Then, he looked over and felt his heart clench and the pitiful sight of the boy huddled beside him. Without though, he found his arm around the boy’s shoulders and drew him to his side.

“There, there, Master Tanner. All is well.”

All he got in reply was a snuffle. Ezra rubbed the small boy’s back and felt himself relaxing with the action. Vin finally leaned into him and closed his eyes, shocking Ezra with the satisfied feeling washing over him.

He’d never been needed like this before. He liked it. His body reacted to the unfamiliar feeling and relaxed. Suddenly, he was very tired and his body throbbed and ached. Standish imagined that the boy felt much the same, and when he looked down, he saw that Vin’s eyes were closed. Ezra’s eyes drooped as weariness took hold.

Then he heard the officer’s voice.

“I’ve got him. Where am I going?”

Alarms flared like fireworks in his head and Standish’s eyes snapped open and tracked to the rearview mirror where he saw the driver’s eyes reflected back. They sparkled with demonic joy.

“I’ll be there in about ten, Mr. Iovelli.” The officer disconnected the call with a feral grin.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Ezra demanded. He felt Vin jerk to awareness next to him.

“You’re my ticket out of this miserable town,” Chavez informed him. “So shut up and enjoy the ride.”

Ezra cursed himself silently when he realized there was no way out of the prisoner area of the police unit. There were no door handles inside and wire mesh separated him from the front seat and rear cargo area.

They were trapped.

## Part Seven

Chris ground his teeth as the EMTs, Josiah and Nathan transferred him to the waiting gurney. Even with the Larabee grit and intimidation, pain wasn't fazed and flared with enthusiasm.

"Snarlin' at it won't make it hurt less," Nate said as he straightened. "I'm sure they'll give you something at the ER."

"Don't want anything until I hear about Vin," Chris growled at the closest EMT, who took a step back.

"He don't bite," Josiah assured the medic. "But he does bark."

"We gotta get back to the scene, Chris. We'll check on you later." Nathan tipped his head in Josiah's direction and the pair moved away.

Chris didn't bother to reply and instead, focused on trying to withstand the pain emanating from his leg. He was glad the EMTs didn't pepper him with questions and simply did their job. Once secured to the gurney and his vitals checked, he was loaded up and on the road. The smoothness of the roadway and the warmth of the vehicle helped him to relax and he felt his eyes droop.

"We'll be at the hospital in about 15 minutes. Go ahead and relax. The docs will give you something for the pain when we arrive."

Chris grunted a reply, too tired to talk. He closed his eyes and let his mind wander and his thoughts drifted toward the brave boy he'd fished from the river; Vin certainly had a backbone, and Larabee couldn't help but wonder what the child had faced in his life to make him that way.

He was at the edge of exhausted sleep, the kind where a body gives in to stress and settles in a state of peace when unexpected alarm erupted like a nova and he gasped. Chris' eyes snapped open and he batted away the oxygen mask as he strived to sit up.

"Hey!" one of the EMTs yelled. "Don't move!"

"Let me up!"

"Not when the unit's moving!"

Larabee's arm shot out and he grabbed the nearest sleeve and reeled the occupant in. Although there wasn't a clear picture in his head, he knew that his former charge was in trouble. "Call the hospital now! Something's wrong with Vin!"

"Who?"

"The boy! The kid taken from the scene! Something's wrong . . ." Chris frowned in his struggle to pinpoint his urgency. The only clear picture ghosting him was Vin Tanner's fearful eyes. "He's . . . he's supposed to be at the hospital . . ." The two medics hesitated and exchanged looks, enraging Larabee as his gut instinct solidified. Tightening his grip on the EMT's sleeve, he dragged the medic close enough to feel his hot breath. "Call the ER now or I'll break what I have to and do it myself." He pinned his trapped victim with a deadly stare. "Do I make myself clear?" He barked.

Both medics scrambled for their radios.

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Vin startled, jerked from the stress-induced function of his body closing down at the tone of Standish's voice. With his mind still too muddled to make out the words and his adrenalin-fueled eyes blinked frantically, the boy only had fleeting bits of information, but he instantly assessed the body language of both adults. He snapped into wakefulness.

Ezra must have felt him twitch, because his new acquaintance tightened the grip around Vin's shoulders and looked down. Their eyes met and Vin read trouble.

"What about the boy?" Ezra said, obviously speaking to the officer as he held the gaze. His face remained stoic but Vin read the dialogue in his eyes.

"You shouldn't be thinkin' about the kid, Standish."

Vin felt reassured with Ezra's connection before he looked away and addressed driver. "I suppose not. He is, after all, excess baggage."

"And you aren't stupid."

With one final squeeze, Standish released Vin and made a show of shoving him aside. "You should divest yourself from the lad, then. He is a distraction Lovelli will not want to deal with."

"Why do you care about what Lovelli wants?"

Ezra issued a pained sigh, appearing resigned to his situation. Vin cowered against the car door, his face blank. What he saw in Standish contradicted the man's words; his inner voice - which guided him most of his life - told him to be patient, alert, and wait.

"I have no feelings for the man one way or another. I met him only once at his and my mother's wedding."

Eli Joe snorted. "You're related? That's a laugh!"

Standish covered a fleeting look of sadness by straightening his rumpled sleeves and smoothing his hair. "Related? Hardly. My mother changes husbands as frequently as I change shirts. Her conquests are not relatives - they are more akin to sporting matches and my mother usually wins. At the moment, my only concern is to keep my meeting with Mr. Lovelli uncomplicated. It would be in my best interests."

The officer's eyes narrowed in the rearview mirror as he thought about the statement. "How do you mean?"

Vin read the flash of victory in the glance Standish gave him. The bait was taken.

"Well," Ezra sighed, relaxing into the back seat. "As I said, the boy is excess baggage. When we arrive, he will have to be - handled. If you catch my meaning."

A beat of silence confirmed that Chavez understood. "Go on," he said lowly.

"There will be too many witnesses. Too much ugliness, too soon in the gathering. Loose ends, so to speak. Starting any negotiations with loose ends is not smart business." Standish tipped his head aside. "I assume you want to appear smart, correct? I certainly do. Appearing to be in control is the best way to impress. The presence of loose ends does not give the impression of control. And appearances, as we know, are everything."

"So, you're saying . . . ?"

Ezra rolled his eyes. "I am saying, sir, to get rid of the boy prior to our arrival. It is *both* of our best interests."

Outside, the rain turned gentle and the thump-thump of the windshield wipers seemed loud. Vin sat with his knees drawn to his chest and felt his heart beating against

his ribs in odd syncopation as the silence stretched. He bit his lip and hugged his legs, looking beyond the cold sweat on the inside of his window to where a dark grey patch of pre-dawn sky showed between black clouds.

“I know a place,” the driver finally said, breaking the quiet.

Vin caught his breath and stole a sidelong look. Ezra broke eye contact with the driver with a blink and gave Vin a tiny nod. Apparently, the next move was in their favor. Vin wished he knew what the next move was, but since Standish was confidant in the change of plans, the frightened boy could only hope his instincts wouldn't let him down.

## Part Eight

Chris reached the ER in full mission mode, refusing pain killers and snapping at the staff until Buck swept the privacy curtain aside.

"Where's Tanner and Standish?" the sergeant demanded.

"Not here and Mrs. Wells is asking questions. What's going on?"

"I don't know, but the kid is in trouble. I can't explain it . . ." Chris hissed and glared at the nurse and intern working to remove the makeshift splint. Buck stopped tirade before it started.

"Let's get your leg in workin' order, stud, then we'll see what's up. Meanwhile, I'll check with dispatch. The GPS on Eli Joe's unit should tell us where they are."

Chris gripped the gurney frame and clenched his jaws, managing a tight nod. As his friend turned to go, Larabee said, "He's scared, Buck. The kid's scared. That's all I know."

Wilmington didn't bother for clarification. He'd known Chris for over a dozen years and knew when to shut up, making words unnecessary. Larabee was thankful for that. Instead, Buck nodded once and disappeared behind the curtain. Then, Chris turned his formidable attention to his injured leg, now exposed. It was an ugly purple and misshapen by swelling.

"Off to get an x-ray now, Sergeant Larabee. We'll know after that if surgery is required." The intern edged to the curtain and called for an orderly to take Chris to the imaging room.

"Surgery will wait."

"I don't recommend that."

"I will leave against medical advice if I need to."

The orderly arrived and unlocked the gurney wheels, ending the standoff. Chris laid back and tried to relax but the press of anxiety from an invisible source lead his imagination to places he didn't want to go, distracting him throughout the x-ray session. Thankfully, the technetium was fast and efficient and Chris was back in the ER in under a half hour.

Buck arrived soon after, looking puzzled.

"What?" Chris barked, concern's ugly head rising in his chest.

Buck ran his fingers over his mustache before replying. "Eli Joe's unit is stationary off Blanton Road, north of the highway."

Chris frowned. "That's the opposite direction from where it should be."

"Yeah, I know. I'm heading out now to check. Everyone else is out at the scene with the body."

Chris sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the gurney and immediately paled. Buck grabbed his shoulder, steadying him. "Whoa there, Chris."

Larabee spoke with clenched teeth. "I'm going with you. Wrap it up, now."

A nurse and the intern swept into the cubicle and a short, terse exchange of opinions ended with Chris lurching from the building swaddled in an inflatable splint, layers of bandages, and leaning heavily on a cane. Buck shadowed him with a frown.

As they stepped out into an evening heavy with dampness, Buck finally let out a short laugh and shook his head. "You ain't 25 anymore, stud. You know that, right?"

"I'll take care of myself later. The kid needs me, Buck, I can feel it."

“Then I’m with you. Let’s see what’s going on.” He helped Chris into the waiting unit and then slipped behind the wheel. “Meanwhile, I’ll fill you in on what I dug up on Ezra Standish.”

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The roadway ahead, brightly awash with light from the police unit, was blinding compared to the inky darkness of the surrounding woods. When Eli Joe pulled off on the muddy shoulder and pushed his door open, the smell of damp forest and mud rolled over the pair seated in the back.

Ezra knew he only had seconds before the officer reached Vin’s door. “When he opens the door, you run, you hear me?” Vin gave him a wide eyed nod so brief it was hardly noticeable. Ezra gave him mental kudos. “I will slow him down as much as I can.”

“What about you?” Vin managed just as Chavez’s hand found the door.

“I’ll manage,” Ezra started, his voice low. When the door cracked open, he raised his voice and changed his tone. “Sorry, young man, but business is business.” Standish called on all of his self control to examine his fingernails instead of reaching for the boy as he scooted as close as he dared and positioned his feet to launch toward the door.

“Come on,” the officer barked after he yanked the door open. When Vin didn’t move, Chavez reached inside and grabbed the boy’s shoulder.

Vin immediately turned, bit his forearm, and bowled into him, going low and jamming an elbow into Chavez’s below-the-gun belt sensitive area before rolling off and falling into the mud. The rogue officer let out a pained “OOOFF!” and doubled over, and Ezra took advantage of the moment.

“Run!” Ezra yelled as he pushed into Chavez.

The officer fought to straighten up as he fumbled for his gun. Ezra concentrated on keeping the weapon in the holster and the pair danced in a tight circle, fighting to keep their balance on the slick ground. Ezra spared a sideways glance and saw the boy at the edge of the wood, poised to bolt but hesitant to leave.

“Go! Now!”

Vin obeyed and disappeared from sight. Ezra was in close to Chavez, one hand on top of his gun hand, pushing down to keep the gun in place. His other hand held a fistful of the officer’s collar, yanking it aside in an effort to pull his adversary off balance. It worked for several seconds and the pair grunted and turned a tight circle.

Eli Joe’s free hand shot upward and clamped on Ezra’s jaw, pushing it up. Ezra countered the move by shifting sideways and shoving his hip into the officer. They twisted sideways and fell down, rolling through the mud.

Chavez came out on top, snarling and furious. Still clamped onto Ezra’s jaw, Eli Joe released the gun and decked Standish with a right cross that made Ezra’s world go dark.

The world came back into semi-focus as sporadic flashes of awareness bright with pain. Chavez cursing; cold mud; a pair of gunshots that made him twitch. Ezra rolled to his side, blinked at the grayness of the wall of trees with the outline of someone storming in his direction, and barely made it to his hands and knees when Standish felt an iron grip around his arm. Unceremoniously dragged back to the car, he was dumped on the back seat like a bag of feed. When the officer slammed the door, the car rocked. The inside warmth twisted his stomach and made him gulp.

*"Oh, dear,"* he thought fuzzily. *"This cannot be good."*

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The two shots exploded loud in the darkness. Vin circled around as best as he could, falling every other step while invisible sharp things tore his tattered clothes even more. The squad car headlights became vague glowing between the trees and he kept it at the center of his rough arc. Gasping for breath, Vin finally stopped and leaned wearily on the wide, rough trunk of a tree. His knees trembled and worry made his stomach flip.

Driven by desperate curiosity, he moved carefully forward until he could see the outline of the car. He saw a dark form shove a writhing body into the rear seat and breathed a sigh of relief that the gunshots weren't directed at Standish. Vin grabbed a tree for support when his legs threatened to give away and he watched the unit fishtail onto the highway. He watched the red dots of the taillights draw together and then disappear.

Then he realized how dark and quiet the woods really were. Dawn was trying to break through the clouds, but it was still night under the thick canopy. A moment of panic bloomed and Vin considered just collapsing and giving up; he was simply too tired to fight any longer. Then, his mother's voice sounded in his head: *"Always remember that you are a Tanner."*

Vin ached at the sound of her voice and a sob escaped. He envisioned her face smiling down at him and fear drained away. Vin sniffed, pushed off his tears with the heel of his hand, planted his feet, and stood strong.

His first thought was to get back to Officer Larabee. Vin took a deep breath and started back to the road with a plan to return to the campground. The path he took was crooked and hazardous, and Vin fell many more times before reaching the pavement. The setting moon peeked between the clouds upon his arrival at the asphalt edge and the shiny ribbon of wet road twisted out of sight into the blackness. Undaunted, Vin turned and started walking.

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Chris and Buck listened to the radio traffic to follow the current investigation as they drove. They didn't dare try to raise Officer Chavez and tip their hand; neither man wanted to believe anything untoward of their partner in arms, but neither of them could come up with any other explanation for the actions of the wayward squad car's GPS reading. They travelled in a grim kind of silence.

"Up ahead," Chris nearly whispered, pointing to the roadside. "This is where he stopped."

Chris' stomach churned uncomfortably as the car slowed. The wide roadside turnout showed fresh ruts, heavy shadows painted with their headlights. Buck stopped in the road just short of the turnout and they exited the vehicle, Chris' movements slower and narrated with groans and hisses. Wilmington stood at the edge of the road long enough to find the signs of a struggle in the mud with his flashlight in the time it took Larabee to join him.

"Something happened here," Buck mused, playing the light around in an ever widening arc. "Looks like someone rolled in the mud."

"How many sets of footprints?"

"Hard to tell," Buck said. He walked farther up the road and then stepped into the mud. "The ground's undisturbed here." He waited for Chris then checked that each step forward was on unfettered earth, Larabee on his heels.

"There." Chris pointed ahead. "Footprints going into the woods."

"They look small," Buck said as they approached. Chris moved to go around Buck. Wilmington threw out his arm and stopped him. "Where do you think you're going?"

"He's out there. I have to find him." Chris challenged Buck with his glare.

"Look, it's almost daylight and the clouds look to be breaking up. We can't risk losing the trail and messing things up with our prints." Chris' narrowed eyes were the only assenting clue Buck noted. "Let's check the GPS and see where he is now."

Buck could see the battle behind Chris' eyes and part of him cheered to see the protective part of his friend rise from the ashes. Another part dreaded a bad ending to this event and he wondered if that would be too much for his long time friend.

"I need to find him, Buck," Chris roughly whispered as they returned to the roadway. "He's out there, I know."

"Holy Shit!" Buck exclaimed, coming to an abrupt stop.

Chris hissed with pain as he ran into his friend's back, and then looked up. Suddenly, his heart lifted when he saw the scruffy, rumped, muddy form of Vin Tanner standing in the shaky flashlight beam. His bright blue eyes were the only color in the light.

Chris slipped around Buck and forged a crooked path to the small boy, ending with him pulling Vin into an engulfing hug.

"You scared the bejesus out of me, kid," Buck laughed. He approached and stood next to the pair. "Make some noise next time, will ya?"

Vin started a slow collapse in Chris' arms and they both sat down roughly on the roadway. After a moment, Chris pushed to his knees and held both of Vin's shoulders, pushing him back to arm's length for a visual examination. "You okay? We were worried."

"We gotta help Ezra." Vin's first words surprised Buck. "He saved me. He shot at me."

"Who shot at you? The officer?" Chris asked.

Vin nodded and tears pooled in his eyes. He wiped them away impatiently. "We gotta go."

"Where are they going?" Buck asked. "Do you know?"

"The cop's takin' Ezra to a guy. He wants Ezra."

"Do you know why?"

Vin shook his head and looked to Chris. "We have to help him."

Chris stood and drew Vin to his side. "Let's get in the car, son." He guided the small boy to the unit.

"Are we gonna help him?"

"You need medical attention first."

Tanner stopped and fully faced Chris, his head tilted back to meet Larabee's eyes. For a minute, Buck saw the child as a miniature version of his friend. Then Vin's next word confirmed and planted the vision in Buck's memory.

"No," the boy said. Buck almost laughed. "We're helping Ezra first."

“Vin,” Chris started, the curve of his shoulders telling Buck that his friend felt his pains. “It’s too dangerous.”

“He needs help.”

“Ezra Standish is an adult.”

“Then I’m going alone.” Vin twisted aside and started up the road. Chris grabbed a handful of shirt on Vin’s back.

“Wait. Okay, we’ll go.”

Vin turned and pinned Chris with an impressive glare. “Promise me.”

Chris threw up one hand because the other leaned on his crutch. “Promise,” he ground out.

Then Buck did laugh. Chris Larabee had finally met his match.

## Part Nine

Ezra, surprised by how unencumbered he felt now that the boy was gone from the equation, lined up several possible scenarios in his mind of what to expect once he was delivered to Lovelli. Knowing the man's history, Standish didn't expected expensive port and imported cigars. "Pity," he thought. "*Perhaps I should point out that even death row prisoners obtain a last meal.*" He smirked at the grim thought.

Ahead, as they rounded a long curve in the roadway, a pair of amber fog lamps glowed in the grey shadows of the forest's dawn. Eli Joe flashed the headlights and the parked car responded in kind. He slowed, and the crunch of gravel under the wheels raked Ezra's nerves as they pulled over and stopped so the vehicles faced off.

"I suppose it is too late to discuss this?" Standish inquired.

"Shut up."

The car rocked when Chavez slammed the door. He could only sit and watch as the dirty cop walked toward the other vehicle. A man wearing a black raincoat stepped out to meet the officer. Ezra watched closely, reading the body language of the pair then prepared for the worst when Chavez returned to the unit.

Chavez yanked open the back door and Ezra scooted sideways away from him.

"Get out," Eli Joe barked.

"Now just hold on a minute, officer," Ezra began.

Chavez pulled his tazer gun. "This isn't my first choice, asshole," he snarled as he pointed the device at Standish. "This would be my first choice." He patted his Glock service weapon with the other hand. "Either way is not good for you. Get out."

"I see your point." Ezra slipped from the car and Chavez kept just out of striking distance. With a resigned sigh, Standish walked to the second car where the black coated man held the rear door open. Standish sat down and Chavez shoved him over and sat down next to him, leaving the patrol unit idling on the side of the road.

The two men in the front seats remained silent as they pulled away. Ezra looked out the back window as the police car disappeared from view and his stomach churned.

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The sun hadn't topped the distance mountain range when Chris and Buck came upon the abandoned patrol unit. Thin, grey vapor puffed from the exhaust pipe. Vin and Chris remained in their vehicle while Buck circled the unit and checked the immediate area on foot. Vin, exhausted, leaned into Chris' side.

Buck jogged back to the car, talking as he got inside. "Looks like they met another vehicle. It turned around and continued down the road."

"GPS readings show that the unit's been stopped here for about ten minutes. What's around here?"

Buck's forehead furrowed. "Well, we know most of the residents. Any abandoned property? Hell, they might not even be in the county anymore."

Chris looked down at the boy, his hand automatically moving to stroked Vin's unruly hair away from his tired face. Vin sighed and blinked rapidly to stay awake. Chris' mind wandered and his thoughts strayed to Adam. A memory rose.

"Sorensen's barn," Chris said when he recognized the setting of his memory.

"What?" Buck replied. "The old candle place? That's been abandoned for years."

"I know. Sarah and I used to take Adam there. We made candles." Chris frowned. "I know the main house burned down, but the barn's still standing. Didn't someone buy that recently?"

Buck's head tipped aside in thought. "Yeah. A corporation bought it about a year ago. Nothin's been done with the property, though. I swung around there just last week." He broke into a huge smile. "Off duty, with Belinda Sykes." His eyebrows waggled. "Security check, y'know."

Chris rolled his eyes and Vin looked confused. Buck's happy expression turned thoughtful.

"Y'know, I noticed that the drive up to and around the barn seemed cleaned up. Someone could have been there recently."

"It's worth a shot," Chris said, rubbing his eyes.

They arrived at the base of a long, dirt driveway and the car slowed when Buck lifted his foot from the accelerator and prepared to turn in.

"Keep going," Chris said suddenly, straightening. Vin became instantly alert at his tone while Buck continued smoothly on down the road.

"What did you see?" Buck asked without looking around and suddenly all business.

"Not sure. Something was in the trees just beyond the Candle Factory sign. A lookout, I think." He rubbed his eyes again. "Or I'm just seeing things." He looked down and met Vin's serious eyes, feeling a zing of confirmation. Vin believed him.

"You're gut instinct's saved our bacon more than once, stud. What do we do now? Call it in?"

"I'll use the phone. Eli still has his hand held radio on him. Others could be on the take, too." He thought a moment and then Chris speed dialed Josiah Sanchez. "Hey, Josiah," he started. "You alone?" A few beats later, he continued, quickly explaining where they were and what brought them there. "Outside of you and Nate, I don't trust anyone on the department," Chris said. "Can you get here?" He nodded after a moment. "Okay. We're off the road about a half-mile north of the Candle Factory driveway. We'll move in to see what we can. Go dark, Josiah. Dispatch knows about Eli's unit, but not that Eli's not with it. There will be questions if you tell 'em where you're going. Call me when you're set up on the other side."

After Chris disconnected, Buck gave him a long look, shaking his head. "That, stud, is a plan weaker 'n my great grandma's bladder control."

"You don't know your great grandma."

"You get my drift." Buck paused and shifted his eyes to Vin. "What about him? Or you? You definitely aren't in any shape to sneak up on anyone."

"We'll go in together. Vin and I will stay back. It's a lot less visible than stayin' with the car."

Buck nodded as he pushed open the door and popped the trunk. "Got me there. This could get us in a whole lot of deep shit, you know. A civilian tagging along."

Chris opened his door and exited, swallowing the groans from pain and leaning heavily on the side of the unit. He stopped Vin as the boy turned sideways to step out. "Now listen to me, Vin. You have to be quiet and you have to do *exactly* what Buck and I

say. I don't like this, but this is just to gather information. No one's going in, guns blazing. You understand?"

Vin nodded and said "yes" in a dry, raspy way that made Chris scowl.

"This isn't right. You should be in bed and safe somewhere."

The look Vin issued sent a chill through Chris. *"I wonder if this kid's ever felt safe anywhere,"* he thought.

"I'll be fine with you."

Vin's quiet replay gave Chris pause as a comforting warmth inexplicably stole through him and chased away the lingering chill. The notion scared him, and he broke eye contact. "Buck? Give me your tazer."

Wielding an assault rifle he'd retrieved from the trunk in one hand, Buck came around and handed off his tazer without question. Chris took it and turned to Vin.

"Have you shot a gun before?"

Vin nodded. "Rifle. M' grampa used to take me huntin'. He taught me about guns."

Chris wondered at that for about a second. "Well, this is easier. Lighter. Point and shoot, but your target has to be in close. There's no bullets, but it will stop them. I don't plan on anyone getting that close, but . . ."

"Better safe th'n sorry," Vin finished.

Chris stifled a grin and handed Vin the tazer. "Point it to the ground and keep your finger off the trigger. Can you walk okay?"

Vin nodded.

Chris heard Buck's chuff just before he mumbled. "You should talk. Here." Buck gave Chris a handgun. "Recon only, right?"

"That's the plan. Let's go." Chris tucked the weapon in his belt, gathered his crutch and gave Vin's shoulder a reassuring squeeze before the trio faded into the trees.

## Part Ten

Once dragged from the back seat of the sedan, Ezra blinked in the meager daylight. The darkly tinted windows made it impossible to see outside so he couldn't tell where he was; he just knew that they stopped after driving up a rough road - not rough enough to be off-road, so he surmised it was a driveway of some kind. Spotting the large barn, he confirmed the latter. They parked behind the structure and were well-screened by the buildings and a large stand of trees behind.

*"I have always abhorred the country,"* he thought with a shiver. Ezra shrugged back his shoulders to stand tall. *"Historically, there is not much to work with."* He looked about as his fellow travelers shoved him in the direction of the barn and a sinking feeling opened in his gut as he confirmed his initial evaluation; save for a soot-etched stone chimney slouching at the edge of the woods, the property was void of any signs of life.

"Ahem," Standish began, crossing the threshold into the surprisingly clean wooden structure with some prodding, "Really, gentlemen, there must be an equitable solution to this situation."

"What situation is that?" the driver replied. "The one where you have no say?"

Eli Joe snickered. Ezra shot him a glare then turned back to the driver, his face schooled in a pleasant way. "One always has a say, especially when the one speaking has, well, deep pockets, so to speak?" He smiled.

The driver studied him for a moment before shoving Ezra backward, where his calves hit an obstacle and he plopped roughly down on a prickly bale of straw. "Oof!" he grunted on impact.

Eli Joe snorted and grinned. The driver's partner moved to stand behind Ezra and motioned for Chavez to do the same. Meanwhile, the driver pulled out a cell phone, poked out a short text, pocketed the device and settled into a comfortable stance in front of Standish.

A long minute passed in silence. Ezra felt the throb of his various injuries and rubbed his wrists as he looked around. The only door standing open was the small side door where they entered, but there were typical large doors at each end of the barn. The hard-packed dirt floor, lightly strewn with straw, had seen heavy traffic in the past. There were no livestock stalls, but there was a scattering of display wooden tables just starting to reflect their neglect.

Knowing he could not out run or out fight his captors, Ezra continued to scan the area for any weapon-like item as he brushed down his clothes and tried to arrange them back into some semblance of neatness. After several minutes, he spoke again. "Is Mr. Iovelli joining us?"

"Shut up."

"There is no need for crudeness. We are all civilized here." The man behind him smacked the back of Ezra's head. "Ow!"

"I said shut up."

Mad, Ezra shoved to his feet. "See here, sir! There's no need for - oof!"

The driver doubled Ezra over with a punch to the gut with blinding speed. Rubbing his stomach, Ezra began to mentally regroup and found that the trials of his night left

him feeling numb and incredibly tired. He sat down again and remained quiet, blinking away exhaustion.

Eventually, he heard another vehicle coming their way. He sat up straight and looked around again while his captors shifted just enough so Standish's view out the open side door became clear. Ezra looked outside, noting that it was nearing full daylight and that the second car was coming around the back, too. Then he blinked, his tired brain trying to understand what he saw beyond the parked car - people, two at least, were in the woods, almost invisible. He stared and worked to keep surprise from his expression when he barely made out the face of the river sergeant . . . Larabee.

Ezra's pulse quickened. When the second vehicle rounded the corner, Larabee and the other man-form faded into the trees like wraiths.

Were they actually there? *"Really, Ezra, do not allow hope to reel you in so easily. Chin up, now."*

He regained composure as car doors slammed outside and the approaching sound of footsteps brought Nickolas Lovelli through the barn door. Flanked by two bodyguards, Lovelli's eyes held Ezra's level gaze until the elder stopped three feet in front of the prisoner. Ezra started to stand, but a hand from behind pushed on his shoulder, keeping him seated.

"Well," Nikolas started, breaking the gaze and scanning Ezra from head to toe. "Maude's little boy, Ezra Standish in the flesh." Nikolas Lovelli was a tall, slender man with neat, silver-grey hair and an air of dangerous sophistication that was out of place in a countryside barn. He removed a pair of glasses and a small cloth from the breast pocket of his pressed Polo shirt and began cleaning the lenses. "How fortuitous."

"It's nice to see you again, sir, even in such abysmal circumstances. You have been well, I hope?"

"More or less," Lovelli replied slowly, carefully rubbing circles on the glass with the cloth. "I could be better. I could be in Italy right now."

"Ah, yes, Florence is beautiful this time of year."

"Yes. It is." Lovelli donned the glasses with deliberate care. "Regarding that, I brought you here to ask a favor."

"A . . . favor?"

"Yes." The tall gentleman leaned in and the dangerous aspect of his reputation glowed brightly in his eyes, magnified by the perfectly clear lenses. "Tell me the whereabouts of my lovely wife - I mean, lovely, *former* wife - Maude, and you may leave here unscathed."

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"Holy shit, Chris, do you know who that is?" Buck whispered in surprise. He nudged Larabee and pointed at the tall, grey-haired man exiting the dark sedan. "That's Frank Lanza! He's a big time mobster from Atlantic City!"

Chris shifted so that he remained in the thinning shadows, his attention divided between the pain of his leg, Vin's well-hidden location two trees back, and Buck's exhausting enthusiasm. "What's he doing in Denver?"

"Rumor has it that he disappeared to avoid prosecution. He made a clean escape - changed names, left companies, and abandoned families both biological and business, if

you know what I mean." They watched the small entourage enter the barn, leaving the door open and one man by the car.

"Well, I saw that guy in the trees near the road, and there's this guy by the car. You didn't see anyone else on your sweep here so it odds look pretty good out here."

"Eli's still got his weapon and you can bet his playmates are armed. With Eli and Lanza, that makes six others inside."

"Eight to two. Not great odds."

"Nate and Josiah should be here any time. And you forgot that the Standish guy's not cuffed that we can see, and Vin's got the tazer." Buck made the last observation lightly and attempted to sell it with sparkling eyes and waggling brows.

Chris' eyes narrowed to a knife's edge width that sharpened his glared reply. "I don't trust Standish. Eight and to four and a half," he growled. "Vin's out. No jokes."

"Buck snorted and scanned the area again. "Hey, I call it as I see it. So, what next, boss?"

"You have your utility knife?" Chris asked as his brain kicked into gear. He dropped to his good knee and tightened the splint on his throbbing leg. *"If it wasn't a compound break yet, it just may become one soon,"* he thought just before pushing the idea and the relentless pain aside. Adrenalin was a reliable painkiller. "I'll send Vin back to lead in Josiah and Nate. He can hunker down in those big rocks we passed back there."

"I'll go tell him," Buck volunteered, clapping Chris' shoulder lightly. "Be right back. Don't go nowhere."

Chris gave him a silent nod, his eyes locked on the scene before him. His mind raced with plan after plan and the term "we need a bigger boat" popped into his head.

Nathan Jackson and Josiah Sanchez rolled by Eli Joe's parked unit slowly, thoroughly eyeing it and the surroundings without stopping.

"It goes against all my instincts to pass that by," Nate commented as the vehicle disappeared in the rear view mirror.

"I copy that," Josiah agreed. "Having faith in our brothers in arms is trying at times."

A couple of minutes later, they passed the Candle Factory driveway without pause. Beyond that, Nate spied Buck's unit tucked away off road and he pulled over.

"Did you see anyone at the driveway?" Nathan asked as he edged his vehicle next to Buck's.

"No, but that doesn't mean they're not there." He released his seat belt and opened his door.

"The definition of faith," Nathan pointed out, turning off the engine and mirroring his partner's moves.

"Exactly." Sanchez eased from the vehicle, scanning the area as he moved. "Well, what have we here?"

Josiah closed his door quietly and stood motionless, arms loose at his sides, looking into the trees as Nathan circled around to join him. He followed Sanchez's line of sight, his hand resting on his gun. "What do you see?"

"I believe our guide is waiting for you to relax, Nate."

Jackson gave his friend a glance, noted his casual stance, and dropped his hand to his side. "I feel exposed," he said quietly.

“Not nearly as exposed as our small contact.” As Josiah quietly spoke, a small boy eased out from a tight stand of trees. He paused, his eyes taking in every detail of the two men. “Suspicion is strong in this one,” he said, smiling at their diminutive guide.

“Is Chris crazy using a kid at a crime scene?”

The boy froze.

“Better scale back your outrage, brother,” Josiah suggested, still smiling when he slowly raised one hand and motioned their contact over. “He’s well versed in body language.”

Josiah maintained eye contact with the kid and worked not to laugh at Nathan’s whispered grumblings. He knew his partner’s issue revolved around everyone’s safety and this was merely his way, but the kid - Vin, he reminded himself - only saw uniforms.

Vin stopped in front of Buck’s vehicle, well beyond both officers’ reach. His arms hung at his sides, but the right hand, cocked aside and behind his back, obviously hid something.

“We’re Sergeant Larabee’s - Chris’ - friends,” Josiah started. “I’m Josiah and this is Nathan.”

Wide blue eyes darted from one to the other and back again. “Vin,” he said in a dry voice.

“You need some water,” Nathan said taking a step. Josiah’s arm stopped him.

“What do you have, there, behind your back, Vin?” Sanchez said lightly. “Are we safe?”

Vin hesitated and then his arm relaxed, allowing the hand holding the tazer come into view.

“Is that a tazer?” Nathan squawked.

Vin tensed, but held his ground. “Chris gave it to me.”

“Is Chris out of his mind?”

“Well, I guess Chris and Buck do need our help then, right Nate?” Josiah’s jovial tone smoothed the surreal atmosphere and Jackson sputtered into exasperated silence.

Nathan’s next words were genuinely concerned. “Looks like they do. Hey Vin, I have some water here. Why don’t we have some before we go?”

Vin walked closer, eyeing Josiah while Jackson retrieved the water bottles. “You were at the house.”

“Yes, we both were.” Sanchez smiled down at his new and ever so wary partner. “Now let’s go help out our mutual friend, shall we?”

## Part Eleven

Chris and Buck welcomed Josiah and Nathan with Glocks to their faces followed by Apologetic nods.

"Glad you're here." Chris asked for Josiah's phone and his fingers worked the buttons before he looked to Vin who stood behind and to one side of the newcomers. "Buck, take Vin to the rocks back there. I'll go over the plan with these guys. Vin, you stay out of sight. Do not come out until it's safe, you understand? Here's a phone." The boy edged in and took the device. "Miss Nettie's number is in there."

"It is?" Buck asked with a grin. "Bit of a cougar, is she?"

"Shut up, Buck. Get going, and hurry. I don't want to blow this chance."

Buck ushered Vin out of sight.

"What is that kid doing here?" Nathan demanded.

"I couldn't leave him alone and I didn't want to lose the trail." Just then, the sound of someone being repeatedly struck came from the barn. Chris described the situation, including Eli Joe's apparent defection. "We could still be too late if we don't move. Nate, take out the lookout. Lure him away from the open door before you take him down *quietly*. There's another lookout around somewhere, but I'm pretty sure he's down by the road, so let's keep it quiet and remember he's there. I can watch for him from my position in the doorway. After Nate's done, Buck will disable the front car by puncturing the tires. The other car is too close to the door, but I'll keep it covered. I'd like to wait for them to leave the building before we move in, but it sounds like our only option is to move in and spread out inside."

"Buck and I can go in hi/low," Nate said. "Josiah can follow. If we move fast, we should pull it off."

Buck returned. "I sure would like more backup, but Eli Joe's situation makes trust problematic. You guys ready?"

"Is Vin safe?"

"As safe as he can be in the situation. He knows to approach anyone, including uniforms, with caution. He'll call that social worker woman if he needs to." Buck shook his head. "He wasn't happy about staying behind. That's one tough kid."

Chris snorted. "But a kid none the less. Come on, let's move. Nate, you're up."

The four of them moved in closer and Jackson headed off. Chris hobbled and cursed silently at the pounding pain in his leg. His position after they moved would be in the doorway, and the shortest path was between the two parked cars. He stopped near the edge of the woods and watched the sole lookout playing on his phone. Then, the man's head snapped up and he looked to Chris' left, pocketing the phone as he walked back down the drive with his hand resting on the gun in his waistband.

*"Good job, Nate. So far, so good."*

A stretch of silence ended with a faint rustle of bushes. Chris looked to his right and saw Josiah step into sight with a thumb up; Nate's job was done. Buck appeared from the trees to Chris' left and carefully slashed two tires, using the vehicle body as cover. Once done, he moved around the front of the car and flattened against the barn, left of the open door. Nathan slipped in behind him and Josiah found his position against the

wall on the right side of the door. Chris was the last in place, wincing as he stayed low between the cars. The door was in front of him and slightly to the left.

Currently, it was quiet inside the barn. Chris waited for some noise to cover their advance, but the distraction came from an unexpected place when the loud, tell-tale pop-and-crackle of a deployed tazer quickly followed by a shriek and crashing brush surprised them from the woods to the right.

“What was that?” Someone inside the barn yelled forcing Chris to move.

With one eye nearly closed from swelling and the dried cake of blood on his lashes, Ezra blinked rapidly to see clearly. His body would have preferred to slump into tired unconsciousness, but he recognized the outside distraction as the only event up to now that could work in his favor. Chance-fueled adrenalin surged. So, as his captors sprang to attention and turned away from him, Ezra Standish seized the opportunity and used the puffy appendages formerly known as his dexterous tools - his hands - to grab the nearest obstacle in his path. It happened to be Officer Chavez.

Ezra didn't question why none of his captors bothered to secure him up to this point. He knew he'd put on a very convincing pitiful/helpless/compliant act and now was the time to get moving and use every ingrained skill, but he had to admit that part of his act was, in fact, real. Standish did manage to knock Chavez down, but his fat fingers functioned like alien beings and his body sluggish to react. The neat weapon take-away he saw in his head wasn't nearly as pretty in action and he struggled to make the sausages currently acting as digits obey his commands.

“FREEZE! POLICE!”

Ezra merely noted the motion by the door in the periphery of his vision and barely flinched at the bellowed notification because all of his concentration focused on keeping Chavez under some semblance of control as they rolled on the hard, hay-strewn dirt floor. Ezra's thighs clamped around Eli's waist, effectively blocking the holstered weapons and the effort eventually stabilized Standish in a kneeling position. They both twitched at the sound of close, multiple gunshots which also refueled their energies.

The officer's fingers clawed Standish's exposed throat and he batted them down, and then Ezra focused his attack by pounding Chavez's face, finally finding a use for his mitten-like hands. Pummeling his foe into stillness, Ezra rolled aside and yanked the officer's gun from the holster. The vigorous exercise reduced his puffy fingers enough to allow one to slip in the trigger guard. He rolled again at the next gunshot, pressing his back into something solid before sitting up.

Ezra found himself at the edge of a bar fight. Dust billowed over the melee but he made out uniforms and suits and flying fists. Two still forms huddled on the floor amongst the junk, flanking the bright rectangle of daylight marking the open door. Quickly, Ezra's marked a path of escape in his fuzzy mind. He pushed to his feet and moved, keeping to the outskirts of the pulsing donnybrook.

Through the roiling dust, he recognized the officers from the cabin crime scene and a surprising, as well as unfamiliar, sense of wonder fluttered at the back of his mind, rising up through the recognizable, self-centered feelings for survival. Ezra crawled, scrambled and wove his way toward the light, avoiding the grunting conflict by following a circuitous route. He clutched Chavez's gun to his chest, at the ready.

The door frame seemed elusive, as Standish's path involved duck-and-weave as well as leap-to-avoid. At one point, the frighteningly familiar face of Officer Larabee

appeared at his feet, the memorable razor glare aimed at an impressively bloodied face looming over him. Ezra froze like a cornered rabbit.

He almost interfered. Ezra felt his trigger finger twitch as he thought to step between them. Then the opportunity passed when Larabee yanked his opponent down and they tangled together and rolled aside, clearing Ezra's path. Still, Standish found himself unable to move for a long moment as he wondered how Larabee fared with an injured leg.

Then Maude's boy shook back his shoulders and pushed onward, feeling inexplicably tethered to the scene.

A yard from the door, the stout and sturdy Officer Sanchez slammed into the wall, shaking the massive structure to the bone. One grunt escaped and he blinked twice before showing teeth in a wolfish grin, impressing Standish that a man his age seemed to thrive in the ruckus. Sanchez then launched back into the fray, flooring his much younger opponent and confirming Ezra's observance with a single ham-fist to the nose. Ezra winced at the wet-yet-crunchy result before trotting unsteadily out the door.

The air suddenly seemed sweeter as Ezra coughed dust from his lungs. He stopped just outside and swiped his watering eyes. *"Come, come, Ezra, freedom is nigh!"* he thought with little relief. This barn was still too close, but two cars were gloriously closer!

He grinned and set forth.

One step away from the first car a slight form stepped onto his path. Ezra stopped, surprised, and blinked his better eye until he saw a diminutive Larabee glare searing his way.

"Whaaa . . ." he managed as he tottered on one foot. It was that kid, and he had what looked like . . . "Is that a tazer?"

Before the child-man could reply, a reflection in the sedan window garnered Standish's attention - behind him, Lovelli stumbled through the doorway, spied Ezra, and raised a gun.

Without turning around, Ezra slipped the gun muzzle under his opposite arm and shot backward. Lovelli slammed into the barn and slithered to the ground, blood oozing from low on his left shoulder.

"Wow!"

Ezra looked down to Vin, whose mouth still gaped. "Don't be impressed," Ezra noted, suddenly feeling utterly exhausted. "I aimed for his head." His legs threatening to give way, he shoved Vin back between the cars and around to the far side. Using the vehicles as cover, Standish sank down with the boy next to him, waiting for the swirl of spots before his eyes to settle.

The chaos in the barn quieted and the pair heard sharp, spoken orders. Ezra clutched the gun and squirmed into a position where he could peek around the edge. In that burning moment before anyone appeared, Standish questioned why he wasn't walking away - the woods were temptingly close and the cars were literally under his fingertips. Why wasn't he putting distance between him and this ugliness? Why was this scene a ball-and-chain on his self preservation?

Then, two figures appeared in the doorway gasping for breath in the settling dust and fighting for balance. Officer Jackson's firm grip on Larabee's arm slung over his

shoulders was the only thing keeping the exhausted man on his feet . . . foot, Standish corrected when he noticed the bulkily-wrapped leg dragging behind. Even in his sorry state, Chris Larabee's sweeping gaze was hunter bright and as sharp as a knife's edge.

"Chris!"

Standish startled and Vin leaped up, dashing past Standish, who grabbed at the boy but closed on air. He looked back toward the barn and happened to see Larabee's reaction when the boy came into his sight. All the edgy, tired yet killer sharpness melted away from those intimidating eyes and Larabee's face softened as exhaustion disappeared. The resulting smile made Standish issue a tiny gasp of surprise; who knew the man could actually appear gentle?

Vin skidded to a stop before carefully wrapping his arms around Larabee's better leg and embracing him with a desperate hug. Meanwhile, Chris looked down, smiling, his hand hovering over the boy until he was still. Then the tough as nails sergeant rested his palm ever-so-gently on the child's head, his fingers stroking wild hair into line. Officer Jackson stood quietly by as Larabee's physical crutch, also smiling.

A tall, mustached officer stepped from the barn a few seconds later, coming to an abrupt stop when he could see why his fellow officers just stood there, and he, too, broke into a grin.

It was a bizarre of a scene as Ezra had ever witnessed.

What was the power this scruffy orphan wielded?

## Part Twelve

**B**uck Wilmington usually managed to emit an air of comfort no matter where he landed and the emergency room was no exception. Currently, his rump occupied the lone plastic chair while his long legs stretched over the doctors' round, wheeled stool as he flexed his ankles with a long sigh. Reaching for the ceiling with a slow movement to lengthen tight muscles, the pleased expression he exhibited made Chris smirk.

"Comfy?" Larabee asked in a tone thick with sarcasm.

"Always!" Buck said in a breathy reply, ignoring the tone in a practiced manner. Finally, after a satisfied groan, he laced his fingers and rested them on his belly.

Chris studied his friend's bruise-mottled face for a moment. "I take it your being here means the scene is secured?"

"Yup. Feds swooped in and booted us out without a word of thanks. Snobby bunch, if you ask me." Buck cocked his head. "They took quite an interest in that Standish fellow." He leaned aside and pushed the privacy curtain away to look down the row of emergency room bays. "He's two beds down. Nate's with him."

Larabee frowned. "Why?"

Buck resumed his laid back demeanor and wiggled his butt to settle in the chair. "That's what I'm here to tell you. Standish requested it, and he requested to speak with you in private when you're available."

"Why would I do that?"

Wilmington's mouth quirked in thought. "That's what I thought at first, too, but he dropped some pretty interesting info bombs, Chris. He knows the locals better than the department dicks. He dangled some carrots that are hard to dismiss."

Buck hesitated to gather his thoughts in a way that piqued Chris' curiosity, so when his longtime friend dropped his feet to the floor and scooted the plastic chair closer, the sergeant couldn't help but lean in to meet him partway. Buck's voice was almost a whisper.

"He's got info on department brass that will curl your hair, Pard. I only got a taste, and it's enough that I'm thinkin' on bailing ship."

"If the info is good," Chris replied, lying back as Buck settled in once more.

"Still worth checkin' out. I wouldn't dismiss him too quick, boss. He said he'd only talk to you."

"Why'd he tell you so much?"

Buck shrugged then broke into a huge smile. "Look at this face. It's just irresistible."

Chris rolled his eyes as his friend chuckled. "How are the kids? Vin and JD? They okay?"

Buck's eyes lit up. "They're both doing better than I would at their age," he started. "Mrs. Wells is with them down the hall in a quieter room to get them checked out. She'll make sure they're housed together after they're released. I think she believes another escape attempt is inevitable if they're separated again."

Chris automatically smiled at the thought of the two boys plotting against the establishment. "Vin's got some spunk, that's for sure."

"They are quite the pair," Buck agreed, grinning at his friend's reaction.

"I want to check on them when I'm out of here," Chris said with a wince as he shifted his injured leg. "Find out where they're going."

"Already done."

Their conversation was cut short when the privacy curtain was pushed aside and an unfamiliar man wearing an expensive black suit stepped into the bay. He was older with gray hairs outnumbering the dark as they swept back from his temples, and his thin lips pressed into a tight line above a deeply dimpled chin. His sharp eyes flicked from Buck to Chris in quick evaluation.

His hard gaze settled on Chris. "Sergeant Chris Larabee?"

"Who's asking?"

The man extended his hand. "Director Orrin Travis, ATF." He fished out his identification and showed it to Chris and Buck. "And you are Bucklin Wilmington?" he asked, eyeing Buck as he tucked away his flat badge and ID.

"Last I was told," Buck replied soberly. "What's the ATF doing here?"

Director Travis moved in close and spoke softly and quickly. "I don't have the time to explain everything to your complete satisfaction, gentlemen, but I would like to speak with you once are discharged, Sergeant. You, and some of your men - here is a list." He handed Chris a small paper. "All I can tell you is that you have stepped into the middle of a dangerous situation and you will need help to get out of it. I'm that help."

Buck and Chris exchanged dark glances. "We're gonna need more than that, Director."

Travis nodded once. "I know. That's why I would like to meet later. I can't talk freely here." His expression turned sour. "I can also tell you that Mr. Standish will only speak with you, and I need to hear what he has to say."

Chris blinked in surprise, and then frowned. "I know nothing about the man."

"He, apparently, knows all he needs to know about you, however. Anyway, here's my card. I wrote an address on the back to meet tomorrow afternoon, if you're willing." Travis handed Chris a business card and offered a slight smile. "I could really use you, Sergeant. You, too, Officer. I also request that, outside of that list I gave you, you do not mention my presence to anyone else."

"I think we can honor that request," Buck said softly.

"There's a Fed with Mr. Standish and one of your men at the moment. I know you don't have enough to trust me, but I can tell you that Mr. Standish's request to keep your officer nearby is something to consider. I will be taking Mr. Standish with me right now. I'm glad to have met you." With one slight nod, the man slipped away.

There was a long stretch of thought filled silence before the doctor arrived with all he needed to apply as cast to Chris' lower leg.

"Black? A black cast?" Chris noted while Buck edged away.

"Come on, Chris," Buck laughed. "We all know that's your favorite color. Hey, I'll check on the kids and see ya later!"

Buck escaped before Chris could reply and grumpily allowed the procedure to begin to expedite his release.

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The slightly battered crew gathered in the parking lot once released from the emergency room an hour later. They successfully skirted a small gathering of reporters peppering black-suited Feds with questions before meeting by a squad car. Chris, moving stiffly on crutches, was the last to complete the small circle made up of him, Buck, Josiah, and Nathan very late in the morning. Now safely away from any unknowns, they studied each other with bemused expressions and bright eyes.

"Well, we're about the sorriest looking crew I've ever seen," Jackson stated. He moved slowly and cringed when he extended his arm to unlock his marked unit.

"I've seen worse," Josiah said. He massaged a bicep and winced. His puffy lower lip was black with a line of stitches and one puffy eye was purpling.

Buck flexed his fingers. "I guess there's no one left from the station to see us off," he noted, looking around the lot.

"I spoke with the Lieutenant on the phone," Chris said. "He said the Feds are taking the investigation, but our department is holding the perimeter and stretched thin. He said for us to take some sick time."

"I don't think he wants us to talk about Eli Joe at the station." Buck looked at each man in turn. "Did that surprise any of y'all? Eli jumpin' sides like that?"

"Surprised me," Nate said, shaking his head. "Then again, we weren't that close."

"About that . . ." Chris mentioned his and Buck's meeting with Director Travis and showed them the list provided to him. "We are the only four on this list because I suspect Travis has already checked us out. I hate to think that this is a list of the only people he thinks he can trust in this Department."

"Travis did say we'd stepped into the middle of something," Buck noted. "And that scares me."

The four friends and patrol partners agreed, obviously troubled. Chris shared the address and time written on the back of Travis' card and ended their informal meeting. "I'm leaving it up to each of you. If you don't show up tomorrow, all I ask is not to mention this to anyone."

Nate and Josiah left in one unit. Buck pointed in the direction of his unit and Chris hobbled at his friend's side. Buck helped Chris inside the black and white SUV, neither one speaking again until they were on the road.

"You going tomorrow?" Buck finally asked.

"Yeah. How about you?"

"Yeah, I think so."

Silence hung between them for several blocks.

"Buck, can we . . ."

"We're almost there, stud. Mrs. Wells gave me the address. They should be there through tomorrow." Buck chuckled at Chris' surprised expression. "I know you too well, Chris. I saw how you were with that kid. And I have to say, I know how you feel. JD's gotten under my skin, too."

A few more seconds ticked by.

"What about Standish? You gonna to meet him?"

Chris looked out the side window, blind to the scenery racing past. "I don't see how I can at the moment. Let's see what Travis says."

## Part Thirteen

Vin slowly blinked awake, stirring the seed of apprehension when he felt a mattress under him. Feigning sleep a little longer, he peered between his lashes and saw a bright yellow wall and a second bed. Faint, familiar snoring emanated from under the covers and Vin finally made out the shock of wild, dark hair sticking out from the edge of the sheet. JD, safe. Vin sighed contentedly and opened his eyes the rest of the way and looked around.

The institutional feel of the small room was familiar, as was the closed door with a small window glass laced with chicken wire. He glanced to the foot of his bed and saw another wire reinforced window. His pulse leaped with the thought of being trapped and sleep was forgotten.

He sat up and rubbed his eyes, then kicked his legs over the edge of the bed and sat up. It was day time, but rain clouds darkened the room and raindrops etched veins of water on the glass. Vin slid to the floor, noting that he only wore underpants and a tee shirt, and made his way to the door. It was unlocked. Relief washed over him as he cracked the door open.

Beyond the door was a reception area and he recognized Mrs. Wells sitting at a desk as he wrote. Another woman, pinch faced and scowling, typed on the computer with stiff resolve. Vin read the tension between the two women easily. He also noticed two brown, paper lunch bags on the desk and his stomach growled.

Food being a convincing motivator, Vin looked around the room and saw a worn but folded, clean pair of sweatpants on the little table at the foot of his bed and he pulled them on, satisfied with the black color but annoyed with the fact that the elastic waist was still too large and the pants sagged on his hips. Fisting the waistband to keep the pants up, Vin escaped the room and allowed his complaining stomach to guide him to Mrs. Wells. She looked up at the motion and smiled.

"Well, look who's up. How are you doing, Vin?"

"Fine. Kinda hungry."

She laughed, but the other woman frowned at him. Vin ducked his head. He heard Mrs. Wells huff, then she handed him one of the lunch bags. "Here. Sit with me while you eat."

Nettie cleared a spot and Vin climbed into the chair and investigated the bag. He attacked the thin sandwich first, no fussy with the contents between the slices of bread. He felt Mrs. Well's eyes on him and he shifted his eyes to meet hers.

"You've got a few scrapes and bruises, young man. How do you feel?"

"I'm fine," he said as he devoured the sandwich. Next, the mushy apple.

Mrs. Wells smirked. "Of course you are. You've had a very busy few days. Did you get enough sleep?"

"Yes'm." Vin tucked the apple core into the bag and pulled out a bag of Fritos, which defied his efforts to open.

"Here. Work on this and I'll work on that." She handed him a juice box.

Vin drank half the box by the time Nettie handed him the open chip bag. "There is more, you know. You don't have to hurry."

Now that his stomach had something to work with, Vin felt a flash of embarrassment as he took the small bag. He paused before fishing out a few chips and popping them in his mouth. "How long have I been sleeping?" he asked quietly, remembering seeing dawn sometime before.

"Only a few hours. I imagine your stomach woke you up. It's about three in the afternoon."

Vin nodded and ate the Fritos, tipping the empty bag into his mouth to get every crumb. He tried not to show his disappointment, and was both surprised and grateful when he looked up to see Mrs. Wells smiling and handing him another sandwich.

"Thank you, ma'm," he said softly, accepting the food.

"You're a growing boy. No need for thanks."

Vin took a bite and looked toward the front of the building at the sound of someone stomping to the entry doors. Without much grace or calm, the door flew open and a tall, mustached officer stepped in and held the door open. Vin froze, the forgotten sandwich clutched in his hand, when he saw a familiar figure on crutches wobbled over the threshold.

A strange warmth awakened Vin's senses as he visually scanned the only adult figure he trusted. At the same time, a nauseating tingle flickered in his stomach as a small part of him questioned the bond he felt; every adult figure in his life eventually left him, and the lack of any genetic connection numbered the days in this relationship, too.

Didn't it?

Chris hobble-walked a less than straight line in Vin's direction, his immediate attention focused on avoiding furniture and navigating over a loose floor rug. Vin, absolutely still as he sorted his rush of feelings, felt his heart pounding in his chest as he studied the approaching adult. Although the urge to flee sparked with his feelings of self preservation, a larger part of him calmed with the growing warmth.

Then, Larabee raised his chin and their gazes linked. He smiled, and all doubt disappeared. Unable to find any words, Vin's head tipped back to maintain the welcomed bond as his life saver approached. Words swirled around them, coming from Mrs. Wells and Officer Wilmington, but Vin didn't bother to pay attention. All he needed to understand stood right here in front of him.

"Hey, Vin," Chris said softly. "Can I join you?"

Only then did Vin notice the smell of French fries and hamburgers. Mouth watering, he managed a nod. Chris sat, placed his crutches on the floor alongside and nudged Wilmington.

"Oh, yeah. Here ya go." The tips of the man's dark moustache curved up with his smile. He dropped two McDonald's bags on the table and put a tray of drinks beside them. "Lunch is served! Where's Little Bit?"

"I'm sure you mean JD," Nettle chuckled, pointing down the hall. "Right there. Keep it down, Officer. There are others in the back."

Buck touched his forehead in a sloppy salute. "Yes'm. No need to warn this one about noise." He affectionately shoved Chris' shoulder, still grinning like a fool. "He's already used up his ten words a day." With a final wink to Vin, the big man strolled away with food offerings as if he owned the place.

Nettie snorted. "No confidence problems there," she chuckled, shaking her head.

There were no comments from her table mates. Instead, they were already down to the business of divvying up the spoils in an eerily comfortable silence. She raised a brow, well aware that there was a conversation going on between them, even without words.

She pushed to a stand. "Well, I'll just go finish this over there." She was ignored, which for some reason, pleased her immensely. Nettie quirked her mouth and before leaving, lifted a pamphlet from the reception counter behind her. "Here," she said, tucking it under Chris' forearm where it rested on the table. "Read that. Both of you." The distraction was enough for Chris to give her his attention and Nettie indicated the departed Wilmington with a tip of her head. "I think it's what all of you need."

Then she left the table. Chris glanced down at the colorful Big Brothers of America pamphlet and grinned.

## Epilogue

Assistant Director Orrin Travis looked at the disheveled man through one-way glass and felt an inkling of hope. Ezra Standish, as dicey and convoluted as his history was, reeked of possibilities. Travis glanced at his watch, the looming deadline closer than he'd like. He'd have to charge the man or release him. The former was impossible, and the latter, undesirable. Once released, Travis knew the man would disappear like smoke in the wind.

There was a light knock on the door and Travis' only hope to keep Standish around stepped in the room.

"Officer Sanchez," Orrin said, offering his hand which Sanchez's paw engulfed.

"Director Travis." Josiah glanced through the glass. "He's why I'm here?"

"Yes, he is. I want this man recruited as a confidential informant, and we have less than four hours to do so."

Josiah nodded thoughtfully. "Don't you have agents from your office to do this?"

Travis weighed the question against his "need to know" rules. He knew calling in Sanchez was premature to his plans; he hadn't even had his meeting with Larabee and the three others on his list. Sanchez was on that list, but revealing his intentions earlier than he'd planned went against personal protocol.

It at that very moment Travis realized that everything about his plans went against any agency's protocol and he had to embrace the unconventional aspect of these men and his plan if any of it were to work.

He narrowed his gaze and Orrin Travis dared to take a step into unknown territory. "Let me brief you on a new team I am putting together, Officer Sanchez. That man there," he indicated Standish with his chin, "will be part of that team along with you, Sergeant Larabee, and Officers Jackson and Wilmington."

Josiah's bushy brows lifted, opening his hooded eyes in surprise. "Am I the last to hear of this team?"

Orrin chuckled. "No, actually, you are the first, and I'm counting on you to bring them all on board, starting with that one, there." Sanchez's bright eyes were alive with questions, and Travis gripped the officer's forearm in a sympathetic squeeze. "Let me give you the brief version, Mr. Sanchez, but I have to tell you that by law, I need to release that man in four hours unless I can find something to charge him with. When you have the basics of my plan, I'm counting on you to win Mr. Standish over. I have already set up a meeting with those that I want on my new team through Sergeant Larabee - he will contact you about it soon. The meeting is tomorrow."

Josiah Sanchez's expression turned thoughtful. "It sounds intriguing already." He crossed his arms over his chest. "Fill me in."

In less than thirty minutes, Travis had the first man of his new team on board. Watching Sanchez introduce himself to Standish on the other side of the glass, he was confident that he'd soon have a second. *"Three more to go."*

The next few months looked to be the most satisfying in his career. Orrin Travis smiled.

**The End**

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