Former Army Ranger, Vin Tanner, newly married, goes from being a new sniper for Colorado ATF to Special Agent in Charge. How will he handle the challenges?  

**Later chapters mention cannibalism.**

NOTE: To know the characters and the back story you should first read... "Tanner Ranch - Texas"
CHARACTERS – TANNER RANCH / COLORADO

ATF Team 7 – Denver, CO

- Chris Larabee – team leader
- Vin Tanner – Sharpshooter / Linguist -- a new hire
- Buck Wilmington – demolition expert
- JD Dunne – computer forensic analyst
- Ezra Standish – undercover
- Nathan Jackson – EMT
- Josiah Sanchez – profiler

- Judge Orin Travis, gravely injured in plane crash, retired.
- Capt Vin Tanner - appointed to Travis' position

Opa = Dutch for Grandfather

- Michael Kevin Tanner, Vin’s son
- Wolf Weber, Michael’s bodyguard
- Miss Nettie Wells
- Anna VanBuren, sister to Michael’s mother (Patricia)
- Joseph A Bebee, US Diplomatic Corps / wealthy Texas entrepreneur
- Joseph is Vin’s biological father

Other Characters

- John Maloney – former Texas Ranger = New ATF Director in Washington
- Cary Armstrong … assistant to the US President
- Jeffrey Rockland, Medical Examiner/Denver (high school friend of Vin Tanner)
- Moose = Robert James Charles Henry Brown
- Mrs. Hawley – housekeeper for K9 agents
- Colorado State Police - Sgt. Terry Blackman
- Harry Brothers - BBC Investigative Reporter (Friend of Vin's)

- AI Computer = Maggie / Margaret

Rangers that came to Denver

- Romeo
- Dennis + Justin - Vin's bodyguards by Order of the President.
- Corliss Archer
- Aaron Wright
- Trevor (computer wizard)
- Spider

- Colt Hammer
- Carter Bebee (son of Joseph; half brother of Vin)
- Wolf Weber

Name of Hotel = Federal Hotel
ATF Snipers

- Rory Golden
- Todd Burton
- Tanner Henry "TH" Houston - hired to replace sniper - Vin Tanner

ATF Forensic Computer Analysts

- John Daniel "JD" Dunne
- Mark VanClef
- Tory Goodfellow
Early morning traffic gawked as two military helicopters landed on the grass next to a building that had seen better days.

Trevor geared down motioning the gun ship to do the same.

“Captain, this is a sad looking building. But, a good sand blasting, or even a power wash with fire hoses would perk it right up,” Trevor remarked looking around. “Sure hope this grass belongs to us.”

“All the way to that corner, belongs to us,” Vin answered pulling out his phone.

“Colt! Time to get up! We’re here,” Tanner barked into the phone.

“Trev, tell the guys in the gun ship to step out, except for Aaron. I want the pilot to stay in. Have them stand at parade rest next to the bird.” Vin said as he opened the side door.

“Captain. We have two cops coming in behind us,” Trevor reported.


“Vin, why don’t you step out with the uniform over your shoulder?” Anna asked as she unzipped the suit bag.

“I second that,” Trevor replied. “Your face and uniform have been all over the news. I’ll open the side vent. You can hang it on the window.”

“Nope,” Tanner said as he pulled out his new badge and slipped it around his neck. “Meeting me will soon ruin their whole day.”

“HEY BUDDY!” One cop called. “This here is private property.”

“Oh shit!” The other mumbled. “He’s wearing a badge.”

Vin ignored the officers and walked toward the building scanning every inch of it. Running his hand across the surface, decades of dirt fell.

“TREVOR!” Tanner yelled.

The two officers watched in astonishment as the pilot’s door opened. The pilot climbed via a ladder to the top of the chopper.

“This looks like it is mostly dirt,” Vin exclaimed. “Any way we could cover the windows to keep water cannons from breaking them?”

“Spider could. But, there are too many windows. Sandblasting might be the only way. They cover the windows with a special material before blasting,” Trevor explained.

“Captain!” Aaron shouted, his voice raw. “My thermal imaging camera is picking up a body on a bench over there.”

Tanner turned a glare to the two officers.
“It’s just a homeless man. He usually sleeps there every weekend,” one officer said with a shrug.

“You weren’t listening, were you?” Vin ground out. “He said there is a BODY there. Not a man there.”

Tanner pulled his phone and hit the 9-1-1 button.

“911. How can I help you?

“This is Special Agent Vin Tanner. I am at the corner of Lathrop and Lundy. There is a man on a park bench here that has died. According to Officers Hunter and Cramer, he’s nothing to worry about. They have driven by all weekend but have never stopped to check on him. I suggest you send a supervisor … and the Coroner.”

“Sir….

“This is Lieutenant Candy. Who are you, please?”

Maloney! I am going to get you for sending me here.

“I have replaced Orin Travis! My name is Vin Tanner! If you have watched the news Lieutenant, you know damn well who I am. One of my Rangers will be protecting the body from the stray dogs in the area. I would suggest you get the Coroner rolling.”

“Dennis … take your partner and go guard the body,” Vin said quietly.

“YES SIR, CAPTAIN!”

“Agent Tanner. I suggest you have your ID available when I arrive.”

“I am wearing my ID, Lieutenant. And may I say, in my years of being a Texas State Trooper … heading up their Special Sniper Squad… that was available to every police department in the State of Texas … I have never encountered such incompetence in officers as I have in my first hour in Denver,” Vin ground out harshly before terminating the call.

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An older man in a three piece suit stood shaking his head as he observed what just went down.

“You imbeciles have no idea who that is, do you?” Roared the Chief.

“Chief, he’s some guy who…” Lieutenant Candy began.

Pointing to a small monitor that was showing Vin Tanner getting the Dutch Cross, Chief Andre said curtly, “THAT is who Tanner is! He was awarded the Dutch Medal of Honor two days ago. He is taking Judge Travis’ place! He has a direct line to President Bush! He is not some guy, Candy! I suggest you go have a talk with those two officers. They are suspended as of right now! That man on the bench could be alive if they were doing their job. And watch your step… you may be suspended also if I find out your officers are ignoring the needs of the homeless.”

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“VIN!” Colt called as he and Spider came out of the side door.

Vin hit Maggie’s code. “Maggie. Call the Coroner. We have found a body on the corner of Lathrop and Lundy. He appears to have died a few days ago.”
“Shall I call Miss Nettie’s favorite news reporter?”

“Yes.” Vin answered before slipping his phone back into his jeans pocket.

“Colt! Let’s get this bird unloaded. We brought our wedding cake. We never got to serve it.” Vin said as he walked back to help Anna and Michael out.

Tanner was just handing his gun cases to one of his Rangers when the Coroner and a news van arrived.

“Spider! Get Michael inside! Don’t want him on the news,” Tanner shouted.

Spider grabbed Michael around the waist and made a dash for the automatic doors.

“Vin. You need to call Joseph and get him up here. He can work with Colt on the hotel. It appears ATF is a mess here,” Anna said quietly.

“Anna….” Vin ground out.

“Vin. He’s lived in Austin most of his life. It’s where he and Catherine were together. He said he was letting his condo go. Where will he go? Michael needs a grandfather. You need a father,” Anna explained. “Besides, he is the one who knows Lookout Mountain. He’s part of your mother … you are part of him.”

“He’s a billionaire, Anna, he can live anywhere,” Vin answered. He knew it was a lame excuse.

“You’re a millionaire. So what’s the difference?” Anna rasped. “Vin. I heard the FBI agents talking. Catherine is who talked Joseph into going undercover to get these guys. It cost her, her life. How do you think he is feeling now … it also cost him his son.”

“Oh shit,” Vin mumbled.

His new bride kissed him on the cheek. “I’m going in to investigate this place. You take care of our Rangers.”

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“Soldiers.” A gray-haired man said coming up to Dennis and Justin.

“Captain Tanner asked us to protect the body, sir.” Dennis replied.

“Those officers,” Justin said pointing back toward the helios, “said they have driven by this man for several days. They never stopped to see if he needed help.”

“A thermal imaging camera on one of our birds picked up no life.”

“Tell your Captain thank you. We’ll take over now,” the Medical Examiner stated calmly.

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Lieutenant Candy parked his unmarked police car next to his two officers. He stared at the jacket full of ribbons that was hanging off Tanner’s shoulder.

“THAT’S A WEDDING CAKE IN THERE! YOU GUYS BETTER NOT DROP IT!” Tanner shouted.
“Captain,” Dennis said coming up next to Tanner. “The Coroner has arrived. He said to thank you for protecting the body.”

“Yeah, Captain. That Coroner looks pretty young to have gray hair,” Justin put in.

“Young? Did you catch his name?” Vin asked, looking in that direction.

“Jeffrey ..something,” Justin replied.

“Help unload our bird. Take this inside,” Vin said handing Dennis his jacket. “Keep Michael inside. I’ll be right back,” Vin said, turning toward the CSI group.

“Justin. You better go with him. Maloney said we need to protect him,” Dennis declared.

Vin stopped several feet from the park bench. He watched his Texas friend Jeffrey Rockland study the victim. Listened to Jeff’s assessment of the death.

When his friend stood up, motioning to his assistants to take the victim, Vin quietly said the man’s name. “Jeffrey.”

“VIN!” Rockland exclaimed as he turned to see who called his name. “What are you doing in Denver?”

“Last I heard you were taking a job in New Mexico,” Vin replied.

Stepping closer to his high school friend, Jeffrey said, “I showed up for that interview …along with three other Jeffrey Rocklands. They thought we were all one person living at different addresses. I bowed out. A recruiter called me about this job. Came up here to have a look and have been here for five years now. What brings you here?”

Vin motioned his friend away from the scene, while telling Justin to stay put.

“I’m the new agent in charge of Denver ATF. Taking over for Orin Travis. Can you tell me why there is an ATF building but no agents are in it?” Vin asked.

“Judge Travis. Still can’t understand why they call him judge. He’s never been appointed to the bench. From what I’ve heard, he wanted to be in the Federal Building because he was a criminal lawyer…”

“And he wanted to be around his old cronies,” Vin answered.

“You got it. What are you doing at this place?” Jeffrey asked pointing to the building behind Vin.

“I bought it. I’m turning it into a corporate hotel,” Vin answered turning to see what was going on behind him.

“It’s beautiful inside. One of these days I’ll stop by,” Jeffrey remarked. “I heard John Maloney is the new man in Washington. He the one who put you here?”

“He is. I need to call him. He’s the only one who can order those agents to move back where they belong.”

“Jeffrey. Keep me abreast of this man,” Vin stated quietly, nodding toward the dead man. “He is too well dressed to be a homeless man.”
“I noticed that too. Manicured finger nails. Clean shaven.”

Vin pulled out a card and wrote an 800 number on the back. “This number can always reach me.”

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Walking back to the hotel, Vin got a better look at the gun on the roof of Aaron’s chopper.

“Justin. What’s in the cannon?” Vin asked pointing to the gun on Aaron’s bird.

“Confetti. We had planned to shoot it when you and Anna came out the front of the church. But… that never happened.”

“Can you point it straight up and shoot it?” Vin wanted to know.

“On top of everyone here?”

“Yes.”

“You better ask Aaron. He won’t believe me if I ask him to do it,” Justin responded.

Jogging over to Aaron’s bird, Vin opened the copilot’s door and stood on the skid.

“Justin said the cannon is full of confetti. Can you position it straight up.. and shoot it off?”

“Captain. I have no clue how high it will go,” Aaron answered.

“How about aiming it towards the top of the hotel. It would drift down, right?”

“Yeah. That would work. Same as aiming it at the church. I don’t want a ticket though.”

“I ordered it. I’ll pay the ticket. Then we have to find a place to park these.”

“My crew, except for Dennis and Justin, are heading up to your mountain. We’ll sleep up there. We have camping gear onboard. We felt it needed to be protected until others come.”

“Let me get my Army jacket on .. and Anna out here. Position it. I’ll give you the signal,” Tanner replied with a grin.

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“This is Rocky Allan with News8. We are at the old Federal Building in downtown Denver. We have learned that Vin Tanner is part of the corporation that recently purchased this building. They plan to turn it into a corporate hotel. They have been unloading gear from one of the helicopters, including that huge box …which someone said was the wedding cake they weren’t able to enjoy yet.”

“OH MY GOSH! The other chopper is turning its huge gun toward the hotel. It appears Captain Tanner has ordered them to do that.” Rocky exclaimed excitedly.

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Mike, Hannah and Joseph sat in Mike’s study watching the morning news, when national news cut in.

“I can’t believe they’re going to do it!” Hannah exclaimed.

“Good lord! They’re going to fire it?” Joseph yelped.
Hannah laughed. “Aaron asked me if they could do it when Vin and Anna came out of the church. But then they never came out the front.”

“What’s in it?” The men asked.

“Confetti!” Hannah laughed as she watched a huge plume go skyward.

Seconds later multi colored confetti sprinkled down on everyone.

-=-=

“You saw it here first, Ladies and Gentlemen! A cannon shooting off confetti! Army Rangers celebrating their Captain’s wedding. With Captain Tanner being awarded the Dutch Cross following his wedding on Saturday, they never got to do that. I think they have just started a new trend.”

-=-=

Henry stared at the incoming call. FBI? He hit open just before it went into voice mail. “Henry.”

“Henry. This is FBI Agent William Wilbur. Just wanted to inform you that numerous arrests are being made thanks in part to Joseph being undercover for us. You are very lucky he contracted you on a month by month basis. Otherwise, you would be in FBI custody being questioned about the activities of certain people in The Foundation. Hopefully, you are not involved with any of the people that are being listed in the news. Please don’t hold it against him. He merely wanted to keep you alive.”

“Undercover for the FBI?” Henry mumbled. “Hell, that explains a lot. I bet some of those tracking bugs were the FBI keeping an eye on him.”

Henry sat in his blue bird looking at the place his sister-in-law owned. He had a feeling he paid for a lot that was in the house. He’d just spent an hour at his bank. His wife had spent over ten thousand dollars during her two weeks here. He couldn’t see anything that was worth that. He had opened a new account in his name only and transferred all of the payments from Joseph into it. He closed their savings account which was almost empty because of her spending. She was now the sole owner of their checking account.

“HENRRRY!”

Henry turned to see his wife and her sister leaving yet again. Stepping out of the blue bird, he headed for the house.

“Packing up what is mine and heading to Austin. Will get my things out of our house before I call Joseph and tell him I’m available. Or, maybe I’ll stop at the Tanner ranch. He might still be there.”

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Vin leaned against Trevor’s bird and watched several people sweep up the confetti. As soon as they were done he and Trevor were flying over to the ATF building to have a look around. He had already called John Maloney who had been appalled that Travis had so blatantly ignored a direct order to stay in the ATF building. Before the day was out, Maloney was personally going to talk with each Team Leader as well as Travis’ secretary.

Vin remembered John’s words … *They will have until the end of the week to move, or they will be terminated.*
Vin would shortly be flying over there to check out the building. He had also learned that Justin or Dennis would always be shadowing him. Orders of the President because of things Vin had done for Bush.

Vin stared at his phone. Anna’s words …now he has lost you… echoed in his head.

The red phone buzzed on the end table next to the bed, unheard by anyone.

*Do I call him Dad or Father. My Dad, Mike, raised me. Joseph fathered me. Hell, I don’t know.*

When voice mail came on, Vin almost terminated the call.

“Dad. I’m sorry. I’m pigheaded and stubborn. I’ll try again later. Am on my way to the ATF building. Where no agents are. Travis, who I am replacing, took all the agents to the Federal Building because he wanted to be near his lawyer cronies. I heard from Wilbur. He was calling Henry …telling him why he was month to month. Telling Henry you saved the man’s life. I’ll call again. Oh yeah. This hotel has a odd mini mall attached. Great for offices. Have reserved one for Joseph and Company. And one for Red Feather Corporation. I love you.”

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Andy Tanner peeked into the guest room. He had followed a weird noise to Joseph’s room. As he pushed the door slowly open, he watched a small red phone stop vibrating as it slowly fell to the floor.

He heard laughter coming from the study. He decided he’d better take the red thing to Joseph. Could be an important call.

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Hannah’s laughter filled the room. “I cannot believe they are showing it again!”

“It is pretty spectacular,” Joseph answered. “Leave it to Army Rangers to think of something like that.”

“Joseph.” Andy said coming into the room. “This thing has a weird ring. It’s been buzzing for a while. Hope it’s okay. It fell off the table it was on.”

Joseph stared at the phone. *The only one who knows the number is….VIN!*

“Thanks, Andy.” Joseph said getting up. “Think I’ll take a walk outside.”

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Joseph walked down to Cat’s barn dance. Quietly pushing the door open, he discovered no one there. Walking over to the bandstand, he sat. He sat staring at the red phone Catherine had given him. He’d waited five years for Vin to call. So much had happened since that first call. Now… what would the future be for them.

“Dad. I’m sorry. I’m pigheaded and stubborn. I’ll try again later. Am on my way to the ATF building. Where no agents are. Travis, who I am replacing, took all the agents to the Federal Building because he wanted to be near his lawyer cronies. I heard from Wilbur. He was calling Henry …telling him why he was month to month. Telling Henry you saved the man’s life. I’ll call again. Oh yeah. This hotel has a odd mini mall attached. Great for offices. Have reserved one for Joseph and Company. And one for my Red Feather Corporation. I love you.”
Joseph sat with his head bowed. He listened to the message three times. He didn’t hear Hannah and Henry enter. It was a soft touch on his knee that startled him out of his thoughts.

“Hannah. I’m sorry. I didn’t hear you,” Joseph rasped.

“Is Vin alright?” Hannah asked worried about ‘her boy.’

“He’s got a real mess there. The man he’s replacing was a criminal lawyer before he was appointed. Defied some direct orders from Washington,” Joseph related.

“Henry!” Joseph yelped. “Are you okay? How’s your wife?”

“She is shopping with her sister! Has spent ten thousand dollars in the last two weeks! I’ve left her. She doesn’t know it yet. She’s too busy spending money. Went to a branch bank up there. Changed out our checking account and closed what was left of the saving account. Am on my way to Austin to take some things out of our house. Then I thought I’d see if you and Vin could use a pilot.”

Jumping off the bandstand, Joseph barked, “Not only could we use a pilot, but I need a ride to Austin so I can pack up. Plus, do you still have that magnet on your bird? Vin’s jeep is still here.”

Henry stared at him. “Haven’t done that in years. Have never transported one that far.”

Andy came through the open door saying, “I told Vin I’d bring the Jeep up when I head up to Colorado Springs. Hopefully he doesn’t need it for another week. Want to have a look around up there before I start my business down here.”

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Trevor landed on the helipad outside the new ATF building. Easing out of the cockpit both men walked around the front looking at various things.

“Get your gear. I want the offices that ATF will be using scanned. In fact…,” Vin started as he pulled out his phone. “I think the whole place needs to be scanned.”

Vin hit the speed dial to Rangeman Security in New Jersey. In a few short minutes he discovered that Ranger was in Denver just finishing up a job.

“Patch me through. I have a big job right in front of me. Two in fact.”

“Hey, Falcon, my friend. Where are you?” Ranger asked.

“In front of the ATF building. Where ATF agents are supposed to be, but aren’t,” Vin growled.

“I have my Army Ranger equivalent of you here. But scanning this place is too much for him alone. Then I also have another building I just bought I want scanned and high security in. Where are you? I also need a car for a week until my Jeep gets up here from Texas.”

“We’re about five minutes away. Or maybe not. I see the green cammo bird.”

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Joseph was still holding the red phone in his hand when his personal cell went off.

“Joseph.”

“It’s Wilbur. You are not going to believe this. Hell, I hardly do. Two of my men followed Jackson
from his heli-pad to downtown Austin. He parked at your condo building. They were shocked to hear, as they followed him in, that he was to meet Shelby in your condo.”

“What?” Joseph barked loudly, making Hannah jump. “Security knows that no one is allowed in my condo.”

“They showed their badges. Informed the security man that he was violating the security procedures. My guys got a pass key and went up. Once inside they heard music, peeked around the corner and almost fell over. They backed up and texted for immediate backup.”

“What the hell did they see?”

“Shelby! Out of her wheelchair. Dancing with Jackson. We’re just now serving a search warrant on her place. Some of your missing pictures are here. Catherine’s sketches.”

“She’s the one who has been stealing Catherine’s sketches from my office and my condo?”

“She is the silent partner in the Foundation. We found several documents relating to that. She’s been taking her salary, plus part of the ten percent … plus an allowance her father gives her. The old man is in the hospital, by the way. He had a heart attack when we showed him the video of his daughter dancing with Jackson.”

“I suppose my condo is a crime scene now?” Joseph asked wearily.

“No, my friend. It is clear. But you definitely have cause to break that lease. Security violated your privacy.”

“The only things I will take from there are the desk Catherine gave me, and the bookcases and books. Everything else can be replaced. Henry is here. Thanks for enlightening him.”

“He’s a good man, Joseph. Don’t let him go.”

“What?” Henry questioned as Joseph pocketed his phone.

Joseph looked at his long time pilot and friend. “Shelby’s not paralyzed. FBI caught her in my condo … dancing with Jackson.”

“I never did like Jackson,” Henry admitted.

An hour later Henry was circling to land at Joseph’s condo’s helipad.

“I need a reliable mover, Henry. Do you know one?”

“Check that notebook between the seats. Should have three or four. In fact, I think one of them was at the wedding.”

Joseph pulled out a small tablet and wrote down the name. “I remember this man. I talked to him. Good. Thanks my friend.”

“I’d call them now, Joseph. Make sure they are available.”

“Good idea,” Joseph replied pulling out his phone.

Henry smiled as he listened to Joseph talk. He could hear the pride in the man’s voice as Joseph
talked about his son.

“Okay. They will be at the condo in an hour to see what needs to be moved. Then they can give me a time frame for moving it.”

Henry burst out laughing. “I would bet they are rearranging their whole schedule so they can do it now.”

Joseph pulled his suitcase off the blue helio.

“Henry. I’m leaving Catherine’s sketches in here. Whenever you’re done, just come back here.”

“I’m just picking up some personal things …and those Kachinas I brought in Scottsdale, Arizona. Do you know my wife has spent most of our Saving account on this two week trip? And she and her sister were off shopping when I landed. She didn’t even stop to talk to me.”

Joseph put on his sternest face as he walked into the lobby of his building.

“Mr. Palmer! I’m putting in my notice right now! YOU have violated my contract! It specifically states that NO ONE can occupy my condo when I am away. NO ONE. Not only was Shelby lying to everyone. She was stealing Catherine’s artwork. You do remember Catherine, right! Veterans Moving will be here shortly. Please give them directions to my condo.”

The two security men stared at Joseph as he walked to a bank of elevators, inserted a card and stepped in.

“What are we going to tell Mr. Levy? Joseph is one of our richest clients.”

Before the other man could answer, Mr. Levy barked behind them. “WELL … what have you assholes done now? Joseph is one of the most well respected men in this city. Why is he moving out?”

“We… ah… you see…sir…”

No one noticed a man with a military haircut entering the lobby. He answered the question.

“Joseph just found out that the security of building is not safe. Someone has been letting people in to use his condo when he isn’t there. Could you give me directions to his place, please.”

“You two are fired,” Mr. Levy growled. “I’ll call in our temps. They are considerably smarter than you are.”

Looking at the neatly dressed man, Levy answered, “Joseph is on the 12th floor. Take that second elevator. Turn left and you’ll see his name on the door. If no name. Number 1212.”

Vin stood between Trevor and one of Ranger’s men. Each were using a tablet to control the drones who were roaming up and down walls and ceilings. They had already disabled a camera in the dome of the lobby’s ceiling.

“When they turn that camera on to pick up the tape… it will ooze chocolate. Any voices will come up as gibberish.”
Ranger’s man chuckled. “It will also start a virus that should destroy where everything is saved.”

Vin frowned as his phone buzzed with an unfamiliar ring. Backing away from the two techies, he pulled it out and saw the word, ‘Joseph.’

“This is Special Agent Tanner,” Vin said as he walked to a far corner.

“Special Agent in Charge? What senator thought that one up?”

“Dad,” Vin responded quietly.

“It’s a good thing you kept your young friend from coming here. The Foundation is a real mess. My assistant, Shelby, isn’t paralyzed at all. She’s also been embezzling funds. I do hope there is a place for me to live there. The only things I am taking from here are a large set of bookcases and their contents. Personal stuff … and a beautiful desk that Catherine gave me when you were ten years old.”

“I know about the desk,” Vin answered quietly. “I helped pick it out.”

“Vin. I’m sorry I never answered the letter I found in that secret drawer. I didn’t even know it was there until a hour ago. In fact, Marcus is the one who found it.”

Vin leaned back and laughed. “You’ve had that for twenty years and just found it today?”

“To answer your question, in the letter. Yes. I would very much like to be a part of your life.”

Vin swallowed. He had asked his mother every week for months, ‘do you think he’s found my letter yet?’

“Be sure you ask Marcus how to open that drawer. Might leave another message or two in there.”

“I love you, Vin. To hold you in my arms when you were born was one of the most wonderful moments of my life. The hardest part … not being there to see you grow up. I very much would like to be with you and your son … and to help him grow in ways I couldn’t help you.”

“I’d like that too, Dad.”
Who Is This Guy?

Chapter Summary

A deranged man. A leaking bomb. The new ATF boss-- who is he really?

“Son. I don’t need a penthouse or a fancy office. Most of my deals are done at lunch or supper meetings. A good restaurant with a private dining room is all I need.”

“We have that. Just closed the deal last week with Mimi’s Café. They won hands down by the staff that is already here. Breakfast, lunch and dinner.”

“Wonderful! They have the best pea soup … best I’ve tasted anywhere in the world. Look forward to it. I may be up there as soon as tomorrow.”

“We will be staying here until our house and barns are built on Lookout Mountain. Since you have already scoped that out with Catherine, I look forward to suggestions on where to put the structures.”

Vin pocketed his phone and looked around. Ranger and Trevor were in deep discussion with the chief of building security.

“Captain!” Trevor called loudly. “Can we get Maggie into the system? Head of Security here says they have someone coming in the backdoor and his techs can’t seem to stop it.”

“You bet! Let’s go.”

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“Okay, Trev… take over one of those computers and dial up our girl.”

“Trevor Brown. What can I do for you today?” A sweet female voice asked.

“Maggie. We are in the new ATF building. Someone is sabotaging the computer system. Destroying files. Copying security tapes. They also have put cameras on every floor. We need that backdoor closed. Need to know who is doing it and why.”

“Yes. There is more than one backdoor connection. One goes to a senator in the State Legislature. One goes to … oh my… Germany. It appears that Senator Baylock wanted this property for a super hotel. A German company is backing him. They found a loophole in the contract. Something about if it is vacant for three years the building goes on the market. There are cameras in all the halls upstairs. These are not built into the security system of the building. These are those cheap stick-on kind.”

“Maggie. Vin Tanner. What I’m going to ask you to do, is totally illegal. Hopefully no one in this room will rat me out,” Vin stated looking around.

Head of Security grinned. “Go for it! We’re frustrated. My staff will swear we have no idea what happened if the senator comes calling.”
“Okay, Maggie. That Russian computer you play chess with. Have him take out the German connection. Eat everything. Send it back as gobbly-gook. Then have him send in a virus… one of the cooking ones.”

“Wait ten minutes, then close the senator’s backdoor. We need everything they have taken from here destroyed. They have been doing this for a year. But if they track you, back off.”

“Vincent Michael Tanner! I am a super artificial intelligent computer. No one tracks me! Besides, there are a couple others here I can call upon. Hang loose.”

The four security computer analysts who were seated at consoles around the room stared at Tanner.

One finally asked, “She’s an AI? Like NASA has?”

“She is, yes,” Vin answered as he watched two monitors.

“Wow! Look at her go,” Trevor barked as he watched lines of html appear and disappear. “She is destroying everything.”

“Vin!” Maggie yelped. “They have info on all the ATF agents. I’m putting what they have into a secure file. You can go over it later.”

“Good girl,” Vin muttered as his cell rang.

Vin stepped outside the room when he saw the caller was Maggie.

“What’s up?”

“Vin. This senator has done some very bad things. Should I send what I have found to the FBI? He has some police officers in his pocket but I haven’t found any Feds being paid by him.”

“Send everything you have just told me to the local FBI office. But, also to the local Chief of Police. From what I have read he is a ‘straight arrow.’”

“Will do.”

Stepping back into the security computer lab, Vin said he was taking Ranger’s man and walking through the building to look for the other cameras.

Reading the name on the ID Badge of the head of security, Vin said, “Mr. Rogers, would one of your men like to walk through with us?”

Once Tanner left the area, Mr. Rogers asked Trevor, “Who is he?”

Without moving his eyes off the screen in front of him, Trevor Brown answered, “Army sniper … Army Intelligence. He’s damn good at what he does.”

-=-=-=

Carlos Manoso and one of his men. Vin Tanner, Dennis and a building security guard walked through the six floors of the ATF building. As they checked the first three floors they discovered the cameras were only in the halls. Especially near the elevators.

“It seems they are only interested in who is coming and going,” Vin said. “Are all of these telephones active?”
“Far as we know,” the guard offered.

Walking into one of the offices, Vin picked up a phone and discovered a dial tone. He punched in the number for Travis’ office.

“This is Special Agent Vin Tanner. What is the latest on Travis?”

“He is heavily sedated in Intensive Care,” came the answer from a woman Vin didn’t recognize.

“Where is Shirley?” Vin asked.

“She has packed up. She is gone. Someone from Washington said they all have to move to that cold, glass building.”

“And you are there to give callers information on Travis?”

“I am, yes. Who did you say you were?”

“Vin Tanner. New head of Colorado ATF.”

The woman on the other end was so shocked, she hung up. Vin just stared at the phone. Laughing, he dropped the receiver down and walked out of the office. Then he stopped abruptly and stepped back into the office and took a good look at it.

Looking directly at the security guard, Vin growled, “Where the hell are the mini blinds? Get your maintenance man up here now!”

Ranger stepped into the office Vin was in. Pointing to the tracks near the ceiling the men had a long conversation in Spanish.

Carlo reverted to English as the Maintenance Chief appeared. “It appears, Agent Tanner, that someone is sabotaging this building. No wonder no one has moved in.”

“I have copies of all receipts for everything that was delivered to this building. Every single office has white wooden venetian blinds… the outside, facing the hall is white. The inside for the offices are a variety of scenes.”

Looking up into the stunned face of an older man, Vin asked curtly, “Where are the blinds for all these offices? Why haven’t they been hung?”

“Mini blinds?” The man asked.

“Yes,” Vin rasped. Extending his arms he explained they came in long boxes.

“Oh sure. We have a whole storage room full of those. None of us knew what they were for.”

Vin looked at Carlos who muttered some very bad words in Spanish.

“Are you not the building maintenance chief? The person responsible for fixing things? Hanging drapes … blinds… moving furniture?”

“Yes. I have a very efferent crew.”

“Then SIR… why are not the blinds hung in all these offices?”

“Who are you any way? Giving me orders?” The older man asked.
“I, sir, am you new boss! The head of Colorado ATF… Denver Division.”

Back downstairs, Vin found Shirley Mattson, Travis’ secretary. She had several boxes on a trolley.

“Shirley. Vin Tanner. Just park your gear along the way somewhere. I have just discovered that maintenance has done absolutely nothing to prepare this place for occupancy. I wonder if I can resign?”

“Please don’t. We need you.” Shirley responded. She gasped as she saw a man that retired years ago.

“What is Mr. Lapeer doing here? He retired three years ago.”

“Mr. Lapeer?”

“The older gentleman there. He was a maintenance man at the Federal Building for years.”

“He said he’s head of maintenance here.”

“Oh good heavens no! No wonder nothing have been done.”

Walking over to the older man, Vin tried to be calm even though he was ready to rip the man’s head off.

“Mr. Lapeer. You can go home now.”

“Go home? Absolutely not! I have things to do.”

“Mr. Lapeer. You are not in maintenance here. You have retired. You are not part of this building.” Vin responded sternly.

Mr. Lapeer stared at Vin not moving. Behind him, Vin heard Shirley call 9-1-1 explaining that Mr. Lapeer had escaped again.

“Mr. Lapeer,” Vn continued. “What have you done with Jeffrey Leeds?”

“That upstart! He wanted my job! I slashed his tires and put salt in his gas tank. He hasn’t been back since. Had an accident I think.”

Vin watched two officers enter the building. Thankfully not the ones he’d seen this morning. It appeared to Vin that these officers were familiar with Mr. Lapeer.

Speaking separately to one of the officers, Vin asked if they knew someone name Jeffrey Leeds.

“Earlier this year, Leeds had a really bad accident. Someone tampered with his car. A driver in another car was killed when Leeds’ car exploded.”

“That man, Mr. Lapeer, just confessed to tampering with Leeds’ car so the man wouldn’t bothers him ever again. Leeds was head of maintenance here.”

The officer called his partner over and explained what Tanner had just told him.

Shaking his head the Sergeant confessed, “Mr. Lapeer has escaped from every place he’s been confined. Hopefully he won’t escape from jail.”
After a long conversation with Jack Maloney in Washington, Vin called Jeffrey Leeds using the number Jack had given him. He assured Leeds that Mr. Lapeer was gone and should he return Vin would personally arrest him.

“Mr. Leeds, I am the new man in town. Head of Colorado ATF. This building needs to be finished and occupied. There is a store room full of mini blinds that need to be put up ASAP! Furniture that needs to be placed. If you are not able to organize this and get it done, then I want the name of someone who can.”

“Who did you say you were?” Jeffrey asked.

Vin swore in Comanche and three other languages. Then he cut off the call. Walking over to Mr. Rogers he asked the man to have all the maintenance men come to their main office. Then asked for directions to that office.

“CARLOS!” Tanner shouted.

“Amigo, you have a problem here.”

Vin looked at his friend. “Only one?”

“Maggie just discovered a bomb in the basement.”

Vin left out a long breath as he watched the police sergeant stop in his tracks.

“Now I know I’m going to resign! Let’s go.”

---

Walking back into the security computer labs, Vin asked, “What have you found Trevor?”

“This!” Trevor Brown answered bringing up an image of a large tank with legs.

“Where?”

“Well, we haven’t figured that out yet.”

Vin Tanner studied the images for several minutes, then he asked, “Anyone have a pointer that extends?”

“I do,” came a voice behind him. Vin turned to see the police sergeant standing just inside the door.

Vin stared at him for several seconds, then took the object and moved toward the large monitor.

Using the pointer he tapped the end of the tank. “Enlarge this area. Maggie. Get me Joseph in Austin on an encrypted line.”

“This is Joseph.”

“It’s Vin. I’m in the ATF building. There are police present as well as Trevor Brown and several employees of the building’s security cyber section.”

“What do you have that you need my help with?”
“I have a bomb. A bomb that doesn’t seem to be connected.”

Using the pointer again, Vin circled an image low on the tank. “Trev… enlarge this area.”

“Here is the ID plate… International BOB. Under that appears to be a serial number.”

“International Bomb of Bombs. Believe it or not, that is what it means. It can level a building in minutes. However, give me the serial number before I tell you more.”

Behind him, Vin heard that whisper again… “Who is this guy?”

Joseph also heard the whisper. His response brought a smile to Vin’s face.

“Vin. Maybe you want to have another talk with Jack about being appointed Head of Colorado ATF if this is the way your day is starting.”

“Joseph. I am seriously thinking about that. There are no desks in the offices. No blinds on the windows. Some old geezer took over maintenance and put the real head of maintenance in the hospital.”

“Okay, dad, here’s the number… ADAM-7-4-4-9-2-CHARLIE-DAVID-0001.”

“Repeat … A as in Adam. 74492. C as in Charlie. D as in David. 0001.”

“Any letters under those. Trevor. Enlarge it more.”

Vin stared at the letters SYR.

“Vin?” Joseph questioned in a loud voice.

“The letters are SYR. It was made in Syria, right? Who is head of Demolition at Fort Carson?”

“Colonel Baptista.”

“Oh hell. Does it have to be the one Colonel I never got along with? Maggie.”

“On it. You want it on speaker? There are officers here. Using your code name may be a problem unless they agree to leave the room.”

Vin turned to see who was there. He was surprised to see two men in SWAT gear. Picking up their thoughts, he discovered they were from the bomb squad.

“You gentlemen ever see one like this?”

“No.”

“Then you don’t need to be here.”

“We’d like permission to stay.”

“Maggie. Call the Colonel. I’ll just have to put more bodyguards around my wife and son.”

“Baptista!” Came a fierce growl.

“Colonel. It’s Falcon.”

There was just a brief pause and then what was said had Vin Tanner staring at his phone.
“Hear you got appointed to Judge Travis’ job. Know you’ll do a hell of a lot better than he did. They never should have put a lawyer into that job. What can I do for you, son?”

“I’m in the glass house of the ATF. We have just discovered a Syrian International BOB in the lower level. Actually, we haven’t pinpointed where it is yet.”

“SHIT! Thought we’d destroyed all those. Do you know who placed it there?”

“Trevor…”

“This is Trevor Brown, sir. Fingerprints lifted off the side belong to Senator RG Baylock. We’ve been told the FBI have already arrested him.”

“Falcon. I’m actually in Washington at a conference. I’m bringing Major Vander Mullen online. Do you know him?”

“Loper. Yes sir.”

“He’s in charge when I’m away. Good luck.”

“Falcon. Congratulations on making Captain. I don’t think anyone’s been promoted for getting off that list before.”

“It was news to me, Major. But, no one argues with the President.”

“Okay. I’m deploying several things. We’ll be on the road in thirty minutes. Bringing a tanker with us. See if you can pinpoint where this baby is. And let’s hope it will fit in the freight elevator or we may have to take down some walls.”

“There’s one thing. We can’t see the other side. But we know the detonation cables on this side are not connected.”

“Can you read the serial number on it?”

“ADAM-7-4-4-9-2-CHARLIE-DAVID-0001”

“Well, the good thing is. This one needs both ends connected to blow.”

“Maggie! Trevor! Keep looking for this thing.” Vin ordered.

“Mr. Rogers. I need to see the plans for this building. They should be in large tubes about six inches around. And a table to spread them on. AND… we need to evacuate the building.”

Evacuating the building didn’t exactly go as Vin had hoped. Shirley and several ATF agents were hunkered down in one area of the large circular lobby, Several were huddled around Agent JD Dunne and his laptop.

Then Tanner saw Rocky Allen and his news crew.

DAD! IT’S A ZOO HERE!

You are a sniper, Vin. Go into your zone. Shut everyone out. You are already on probably every station in the world. Get into you zone. Shut out the voices you hear in your head
“Maggie! Tell Aaron I need Spider back here now!”

“On it.”

“Agent Tanner,” Fred Rogers said coming up to Vin with three huge tubes in his arms.

“In there,” Vin said, pointing to an office with two tables.

---

“This is Rocky Allan of Denver TV8. We are in the ATF building that was supposed to be occupied last year. No one knows why Judge Orin Travis did not move here. However, the new Special Agent in Charge is obviously in control of things. Considerably younger by thirty years than Travis, he is a former U.S. Army Ranger that received the Dutch Cross just two days ago. He is a former Texas State Trooper. Was a bounty hunter when he got out of the Army. He was also on some kind of a list many Rangers and Marines are on because of their specialties.”

“Agent Tanner has asked to have the building evacuated yet no one has moved. No one moved in spite of the fact they have discovered some sort of bomb in the lower level.”

“Many rumors have swirled for years regarding Senator RG Baylock and it appears he has now been arrested by the FBI. We don’t know what evidence they have but … what we do know is the bomb pictured on the monitor in front of us … has his fingerprints all over it.”

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“Wolf…, “ Michael Tanner moaned. “Is my dad going to die there?”

Wolf looked at Anna who was quietly fingering a small wooden cross she held in her fingers.

“I can’t answer that, Michael. But, I am pretty sure he wouldn’t be standing there if he thought that thing was going to blow up.”

Anna stared at the TV remote that had slipped between the seats of the couch she was sitting on. She glanced up at Wolf who gave her a nod. Smiling, she clicked the TV off and slipped the remote behind one of the cushions.

“Hey! What happened?” Michael yelped.

There was a loud knock at the penthouse door. Before anyone could move Colt Hammer walked in.

“Just want you to know the TV’s in the whole place just went off. AND… Mimi’s is giving all the residents and staff free lunch today. Is anyone hungry here?”

“YES!” Yelped Michael. “We’re starving.”

---

Special Agent Vin Tanner, Security Building Chief Fred Rogers and the newly appointed Head of Maintenance Jamison Cooper huddled around the architectural plans of the building.

Vin had shoved several pages aside until he found the Lower Level.

Jamison admitted that no one from maintenance had been down to Lower Level II.

“We haven’t either, Vin,” Rogers admitted. “I need more staff for monitoring security. Both for the
Vin looked at the new maintenance chief he’d just appointed.

Jamison stared back at him. “The pool. That’s why we aren’t finding any leakage.”

Suddenly there was a knock on the door and a tall wry man stepped in.

“Captain.”

“Spider. You bring our walking shoes?”

Pulling a small knapsack off his back, the man said, “Right here.”

“Put them on. I’ll explain what I need. Also there is a newscaster out there.”

“Not a problem. I was all over Dallas TV last year.”

-=-==

As Spider sat on a chair in the room to change shoes several Army men walked into the lobby.

“Looks like Fort Carson has arrived,” Rogers stated.

“Ready, Captain,” Spider said standing.

“Jamison, keep this page open. Major Vander Mullen will want to see it.”

“Falcon!”

“Loper!”

The two officers high fived each other, each grabbing the others hands and twisting their elbows around.

“Damn good to see you’re alive, Falcon!”

“Me too.” Vin laughed as they broke apart. Turning, Vin showed the man what they were up against.

“Spider. Need you to go up the wall and check out that top right corner. We can’t enlarge that cap any bigger. Need to know if the cable is connected there and if it is leaking.”

“I heard you evacuated the building,” Spider muttered looking around. “How come nobody left?”

“ATF aren’t used to following orders.” Came Vin’s simple answer.

-=-==

“Are you getting this?” Rocky Allan gasped in a hoarse voice. “Hell, I wouldn’t believe it … if I wasn’t seeing it with my own eyes.”

“Ladies and Gentlemen. We have a human fly. No, human spider… walking up the wall to look at an image on a huge screen.”
“How does he do that?” Loper asked.

“Got me,” Vin answered. “He’s been doing that since he was three. They’ve called him Spider ever since.”

“Captain!” Spider shouted.

“Go!”

“It looks like the cable has been pulled out, but not entirely. And it is leaking. Ahhh, boss... the thing is inside something else. Looks like a swimming pool.”

Vin turned to Vander Mullen saying, “It’s all yours, Major.”

“I have a question for Joseph,” Vander Mullen ventured looking around.

“This is Joseph, go ahead.”

“Do you know what is inside? If it leaks out, can it safely be siphoned out?”

“I don’t have an answer for that. I was in the diplomatic corp. I do know we kept several of these from entering the US. But, obviously the senator found a way around that. The source I have here only says it is both liquid and granule. Yes, you could probably suck it up but... you would have to be extremely careful that it wasn’t charged or electrified. Otherwise, it is similar to dynamite.”

“If it is in the lap pool, you had best get the contractor of the building there. The tank is big, it would have been put in when the building was going up.”

“OH SHIT!” Falcon and Loper growled in unison.

JD Dunne yelled, “Vin! Rory Lockhart was the main contractor.”

Vin spun around looking for the police sergeant. “Sergeant! Bring the man here. In handcuffs if you have to.”

“ON IT!”

-=-==

In the dining room at the Federal Hotel, the televisions suddenly popped back on.

“Wow! Look! It’s Spider!” Michael shouted.

Anna was not the only one who gasped at the sight of a man on a wall.

“Colt,” Anna said seriously, “You should get him to fix that ceiling light in the lobby.”

-=-==

“JD!”

“Yeah, Vin.”

“See if you can find info on the contents of this thing.”

“Okay.”
“Spider,” Vin called looking up. “Find anything else?”

“This plate here… that says International BOB. It was screwed in instead of glued on. Captain, this thing has probably been leaking every since it was made.”

---

When the police sergeant returned with Rory Lockhart, Vin was glad to see the man was not in handcuffs. Under questioning, they found out that Senator Baylock had insisted it was a backup water tank for something that was going to be used in the future. Lockhart came close to fainting when Tanner told him it was a bomb.

“Captain.”

“Yes, Trevor.”

“Thanks to JD, we have a picture of the lap pool. It’s fairly deep. It’s a composite he made. Shows the depth with the tank in it.”

“Good work, JD,” Vin replied with a smile as they all looked up.

In the silence that followed, Chris Larabee’s low growl was heard by everyone.

“How the hell do you know JD? You just arrived today.”

Vin Tanner turned to face the man. “Sit down Larabee!”

**SIT DOWN NOW! OR THAT COCK THAT IS GETTIN’ HARD WILL BE WRAPPED AROUND YOUR THIGH AND STUCK UP YOUR OWN ASS!**

“Now Larabee!”

*Oh son. I’d like to see that.*

Vin had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing at this father’s comment in his head.

Around him, Vin heard…

“Who is this guy?”

“No one makes Larabee obey?”

“Don’t know who he is, but I like him.”

---

“Tanner. Show me the plans. Then we will evacuate. My team will go down and see what can be done.”

Tanner and Vander Mullen spend several minutes looking over the building plans. Lockhart offered some suggestions but they all agreed the tank would probably always be there. There was no way to get it out now that the building was up.

While the Major and his team headed to the lower level, Vin asked Trevor to put his image on the big screen.
“ATTENTION! We are evacuating the building! I know all the ATF agents here came to move in but obviously that will not be happening. Hopefully, by Monday morning we will be able to. Shirley. Do you have those packets sent by Washington?”

“I do, Vin! They are all labeled by individual names. If the agents would line up in front of me, I will be glad to distribute them.”

“Gentlemen! Denver and Colorado are one year behind the rest of the United States in the changes that have occurred regarding the ATF and its battle against crime. I suggest you read through these thoroughly. We will be following the national guidelines.”

-=-==

All the ATF agents were gone. The news was gone. Ranger had left hours ago to go to the hotel to do a security survey with Colt Hammer. Fort Carson demolition team was still in the lower level when a young man in green fatigues walked in.

“Excuse me.”

Vin looked up, shocked to see Tanner Houston standing in the doorway.

“Houston? What are you doing here already?” Tanner croaked out.

“I was aroused from sleep. Told to pack up my guns and stuff. Was stuffed into an F-16. My stuff and weapons in another one, and flown to Fort Carson. Someone there drove me here.”

“So you haven’t been debriefed in Washington?”

“No.”

“Nothing was explained to you.”

“No.”

“Who was your C.O. there?”

“General ..Baboon.”

Tanner burst out laughing. “That is a good name for him. Okay, follow me.”

-=-=-

In the computer room, Trevor hooked up to the Department of the Army and found a ranking officer that could debrief Tanner Henry (T.H.) Houston from the front lines of Afghanistan.

Then Vin called Shirley and discovered she had Houston’s package. The man could be swore in on Monday morning.

“I’ve arranged for you to board with Mrs. Nettie Wells…”

“Mrs. Frank Wells?” Houston asked surprised to hear the name.

“You know her?”

“She was my grandmother’s best friend. I used to play in her attic when I was a kid.”
“That big old historic house is walking distance from here. Trevor? Where are you staying? You didn’t leave with Spider.”

“I already called your hotel. I’m staying there. Figured if Ranger is putting in the security and everything is computerized, I better be there.”

“Okay. Tell Anna and Michael I’ll be back …when I get back. Knowing Miss Nettie she’ll want to talk a bit. Dennis.”

“I’m here.”

“VIN!” Jamison called. “I have called in two crews. The mini blinds will be hung on the first four floors. And we’ll get as many offices put together as we can for Monday morning.”

“Okay. I have offered the US Marshals the 4th and 5th floors because they are really cramped for space. I doubt they will be here before Wednesday to look the space over.”

“Can we get part of their budget?”

“I left messages in Washington to see about them paying rent directly to us.”

“Let’s go T.H., I’ll tell you why you’re here as we walk up to Miss Nettie’s huge Victorian house.”

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Brownies

Chapter Summary

Buck Wilmington's date finds his Little Black Book. Brownies connect Larabee's new sniper fresh from the war zone with his computer whiz, JD Dunne.

“Oh my lord! Tanner Henry Houston!” Nettie Wells exclaimed as Vin and Houston entered one of the oldest homes in the downtown district of Denver.

Houston looked wide-eyed at Tanner. “Looks the same but different,” the sniper mumbled.

“T.H., I was thrilled to hear you were coming when Vin said he had a fellow Ranger coming in. I, well, I remembered how much you loved the attic. So I hope you don’t mind, I … oh hell, let’s just go up and show it to you.”

The two Rangers followed Nettie Wells up two flights of stairs to the third floor. At the far end of the third floor was a metal spiral staircase.

“Didn’t there used to be a pull down ladder here?” Houston asked looking up.

“Years ago, when you were small, yes. That was changed when my daughter was sleepwalking and smashed into it breaking her nose.”

Houston and Tanner grinned at each other as they followed her down a carpeted hallway.

“How many rooms do you have available?” Vin asked, thinking this would be a great place for JD.

“Well, not too many. I did follow your advice and turn that big old parlor into a nice room. The closet has a built-in bunk. Big armoire with drawers and hangers. Nice little computer niche. So far, no one has been interested in it.

“I wonder if you’d give JD Dunne a call. Wilmington has kicked him again because he’s bringing his date home tonight. I think JD is paying more of the rent than Wilmington is.”

“Oh he is!” Nettie fiercely exclaimed. “Poor JD. Just believes everything Buck tells him. But Vin, you have a real connection to him. I think you need to call him too. Then you and Houston can borrow my truck and go get him.”

-=-=-=-=-

Up in the attic Tanner Houston was standing in awe at the transformation of the attic he remembered.

“Wow!” Vin rasped as he looked around the place. “A bit bigger than the barracks.”

“Captain. I left a wee corner cot in Afghanistan with all my gear stuffed underneath. This is like a mansion compared to that. Look, she even has the Matchbox cars I played with as a kid.”

“Wonder how she got that bed and mattress up here?”
“It wasn’t easy, let me tell you,” Nettie reported coming up through the hole in the floor.

“There is a way to close this off for privacy,” Nettie explained as she pulled a large round object out from behind two metal poles.

“Just lay this over the hole and fold this pipe down. Now Vin, I talked to JD.”

“And.”

“Buck has him brainwashed. You need to show him what that apartment is really costing Buck Wilmington. JD is paying far more than he should. But… he has agreed to come for the weekend.

“But…,” Vin said with grin, “You need Houston and I to go and pick him up.”

“Yes! And bring all of his stuff too. Casey will be here tomorrow. And with Houston here, I bet we can convince him to stay here.”

---

Vin called and talked with Anna who told him to take care of business. She was learning about the hotel and Michael and Wolf were investigating some places, somewhere.

Borrowing Miss Nettie’s pickup truck, Vin explained to T.H. about John Daniel Dunne.

“JD is a brain. A genius, really. Graduated from high school at age twelve. Took four years of college in three years with a double major.”

“He was a college graduated at fifteen!” Houston gasped.

“Yes. Then he went to graduate school. First at Boston University and then at MIT. His brain works like a computer. But…”

“But really, he is still a teenager,” Houston answered, already knowing what his Captain was going to ask him to do.

“You got it. That is why I want him out of where he is and living at Miss Nettie’s. She has a variety of boarders. And she won’t rip him off like Agent Buck Wilmington is doing.”

Vin watched T.H. pull out a small notebook and write down the street address and apartment number, as he parked the truck.

“I’ll just look this up online and see what I can find out. I’m pretty good with a computer too.”

It took a lot of coaxing on Vin’s part for JD to agree to take ALL his stuff.

It was Houston’s comment about how often JD had to camp out somewhere when he was paying the rent, that finally made JD decide to check out Mrs. Nettie place.

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By the time Vin and Dennis walked back into the Federal Hotel both men were starving. They headed straight for the kitchen area and raided two refrigerators.

“You know, Vin, this food might be for someone tomorrow,” Dennis said as he devoured cold meatloaf and a cottage cheese fruit salad.
“Looks like leftovers to me,” Tanner stated pulling a beer off another shelf.

“What are you two doing here?” Colt Hammer barked as he walked in.

Vin whipped around staring as his friend. “We’re eating! What else does one do in a kitchen?”

Dennis watched the interplay between the two. He wasn’t sure they were friends or not.

“About damn time you two showed up! We were ready to call those ATF hounds to track you down.”

“We had one last thing to do, and I hope it works.”

“Houston get settled in at Miss Nettie’s.”

“He did. He was blown away. She fixed up the attic he used to play in as a kid. It’s really quite something. Anything happen here I need to know about.”

Colt shook his head and grinned as he watched the two men devour their feast.

“Joseph’s condo is packed up. He and Henry are staying in a hotel tonight. Tomorrow he is meeting with the Foundation board. They may dissolve the whole thing. He said letters are going out to everyone who is paying that ten percent. Some funds will be refunded. He is resigning from the Foundation and several other boards he is on in Austin.”

“He said he might be here tomorrow,” Vin replied. “Has that changed. I have a couple of messages from him I haven’t had time to pick up.”

“He said it depends on what happens at the board meeting tomorrow. He feels someone on the board has been in on Shelby’s scheme.”

“Yeah. I told him that too. Do Dennis and Justin have a place to stay?”

“They do. Justin explained to me what their function is. We could protect you, but I understand where the President is coming from. They are, actually, being paid by the White House.”

“Colt. What was decided about me having an office here? I need a separate one from the ATF.”

“Bring your beers and we’ll walk over there. You can check out the area we set aside for Joseph. He sent me a picture of that desk you and your mother gave him. Pretty nice piece of wood.”

Vin laughed. “We picked it out when I was ten years old. It has a secret drawer in it. Ten year-old me left a note in that secret place …and he just found it today!”

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“This is the area I thought Joseph would like,” Colt explained as the entered a small sitting area.

“He has an electronic sign in, which we could put just inside this door. Chairs and benches around those two walls. A free standing magazine rack over there up current business and financial magazines.”

“Then going through here… this is a much larger room. Desk placement, probably in the middle of the room. Has a half bath over there. Closet over there. There are no windows but he said he’d be hanging Catherine’s sketches on the wall in here and the waiting room.”
“Once his desk gets in here,” Vin put in, “will his printer, computer, fax fit in here too? I was thinking more of this area for the toddler daycare room we were talking about. Half bath, plus the area the parents wait to pick up their kids.”

“We have no clue how many that is going be, do we?” Colt questioned looking the space over from that angle.

“Not until we start acting on the applications we’re getting.”

“Maybe you need to let Joseph decide,” Dennis suggested.

“Okay, let’s look at the other places.”

Back out in the hall of the small mini mall they found Michael and Wolf peeking in windows.

‘HEY YOU TWO!” Vin barked, laughingly.

Wolf jumped in front of Michael reaching for his weapon as he turned toward the voice.

Vin automatically raised his hands, as did the others.

“Easy, Wolf.”

“Sorry boss. Had some kids in here earlier. Called Security to have the door at the end locked. We also put a big sign on the door saying “Under new management.”

“Get that notebook out, Colt. Need painted signs on that door. ‘Joseph & Company’ … plus ‘Red Feather Corporation.’ “

Tanner Houston looked over his notes a third time. He found it hard to believe that Agent Buck Wilmington was cheating young JD Dunne. He had done the same thing to his last three roommates. Picking up his charging cell phone he punched in his new boss’ number.

“Agent Tanner.”

“Captain. T.H. You’re not going to believe this, but Wilmington has cheated every roommate he’s had. Because he is a longtime resident there, he’s locked in at $800 a month.”

“Eight hundred! He told JD the rent was a thousand dollars a month and they both paid half.”

“The $1000 a month are the newer ones, and that price is for an efficiency apartment. A two bedrooms like they have … in the newer buildings are $1200 to $1500 a month.”

“Okay, Tanner Henry Houston. I want you to take that information to John Daniel Dunne. Introduce yourself as the new sniper for Team 7. Chat with him. Ask about the team …and then clue him in on what you found.”

“He called you Master… in his head. Do you still do that now that you are married?”

“There are many ways to do it, Houston. If you have the need…I have ways that will blow your mind without the standard way of penetration.”
“I am in need.”

“A suggestion. Invite JD up your new pad. Ask him privately if he has a Master that might help you. You might just invite him up there and lay everything on him there.”

-=-==

Vin stepped out of the room he’d gone into to take the call.

“Everything okay with Larabee’s new sniper?” Dennis asked, handing Vin’s beer back to him.

“Yup. He found out that Wilmington is cheating JD big time. We discussed a way to help Agent Dunne find out.”

“What did Colt show you?” Vin asked looking at his watch.

“Two separate stores down here with their doors right next to each other,” Dennis explained as his partner Justin appeared.

“Justin. You settled in, wherever you two are.”

“We are on the fifth floor near the stairway. Colt has ordered up twin beds with two dressers, rather than what is there.”

“This is what he thinks would work for you,” Justin explained pointing to the wall in front of them.

“The door on the right would be Red Feather Corporation … painted in scroll on that big window. The blinds are already there, though probably need to be cleaned. This door on the left … would be Colorado ATF Conference Center. We all figured you would prefer to have meetings away from that glass house. Plus you can order lunch for anyone here.”

“I’m going to have to change my ways, if ya’all know what I’m thinking.”

Vin walked into the ATF area and could envision several round tables and chairs.

“This looks good. Now we just need to find something for Joseph.”

Justin pointed to two other stores toward the side door.

“One of these is really big. One isn’t. I saw a picture of that desk you and your Mom gave Joseph. Come on,” Justin remarked. “I really think the bigger one would be better. I’d want to show off that desk if I had it.”

-=-==

Vin concentrated on where his father was still standing in his condo.

“He has four huge bookcases,” Vin said as he did a slow turn. “They could probably go along that wall. They would take up that whole wall and be away from the work area.”

“If I remember right, the desk is the length of a … it’s about the size of a super twin bed. Lots of work space. Plus a swivel chair.”

Vin watched his bodyguards pace out the length.

“Okay. Plus some chairs over there. Maybe a table …there for coffee. THIS IS the place! All right!
Justin make a note and let Colt know. This is the future home of Joseph and Company.”

---

“WOW!” JD Dunne exclaimed as he emerged through the hole in the floor and stepped into the attic. “This is really cool.”

JD spotted the Matchbox display right away. “Where did Miss Nettie get these? They are collector items.”

“I played with those as a kid. My grandmother and Miss Nettie were best friends.”

JD turned toward Houston but he eyes fell on the open computer. “What are you looking up?”

“In flight, I was looking for a place to stay. Didn’t know Captain Tanner had already arranged a place here. I’ll show you.”

“This is a map of the complex Wilmington’s place is in. These are some notes I made. All this new stuff here,” T.H. said, his hand moving over the map. “Those new ones cost $1000 to $1500 a month. A MONTH!”

“The one you have in the new section would be $1500 a month! But the one you have. Well, Wilmington has … that is only $800 a month. Plus I found out that he is one of ten original renters, so he is locked into that amount for another five years. Then they will redecorate and charge the going rate.”

Houston looked up to see JD standing with his mouth hanging open. “JD! Are you okay?”

“EIGHT HUNDRED A MONTH? Buck said we were splitting the cost! No wonder he’s got money to wine and dine. Does Vin know about this?”

“Don’t have a clue. But I’m sure he has investigated all the agents. He probably found out Wilmington has had several roommates. Doubt he’s had the time to find out why.”

“Miss Nettie said I can rent that room downstairs for three hundred dollars a month. Plus you get her breakfasts.”

“Maybe you should go down and tell her you’re taking it? Then I have something personal I want to ask you,” Houston said quietly.

“Okay! I’ll be right back.”

---

“Dad!” Michael called from the lobby.

Jogging down to see what his son was pointing to, Vin came to a stop next to Wolf.

“What’s up?”

“The glass house is all full of lights. Shouldn’t they have a flag flying?”

“Michael, you are right on. Let me call over there and see if they found it. Good job.”

Scrolling down his contacts, Vin was surprised to see numbers appearing before his eyes.
“Thank you, Maggie,” Vin said quietly as he tapped the number for Jamison Cooper.

“Cooper.”

“Vin Tanner. Have you found the flag for the big flagpole yet? It appears the lights around it are dawn to dusk?”

“I think Fred Rogers found it, hang on.”

Vin looked down at his son who was grinning up at him. Father and son did a high five.

“Yes, it’s been found. Fred is having two guys put it up now. The ATF goes under it right?”

“Yes. The American flag is always the one on the top. I noticed all the lights are on. Did you get a crew in already?”

“Well, I tapped a source I have found dependable in other things and that is Rocky Lane from the local news station. I told him we were taking applications for maintenance and if anyone was looking for a job to come and help us get this place operational. If they worked at least six hours they could list us as a reference, though they wouldn’t get paid for the work.”

“How many people have shown up?”

“Twenty-five men and six women. And I have to say, I will probably be hiring the women. They know what they are doing and have offered some insight in arranging furniture that us men never thought of.”

“One thing the Army taught me… is that women are capable of a lot more things than we’ve ever given them credit for. I will probably stop by tomorrow.”

“The head of the US Marshals is here, along with three others. They are amazed at the space. They’ve called in some workers too.”

-=-=-=-=-

“What’s this?” Houston asked as JD came back carrying a foil wrapped plate.

“Fresh brownies. Miss Nettie’s making several pans for some dessert for tomorrow’s supper.”

“I love brownies,” Houston moaned. Especially stuck in your lover’s navel and licked out crumb by crumb…

T.H. swallowed as he watched Dunne’s face turn bright red.

JD just stared at the team’s new sniper. His cock growing hard in his pants.

“Should I close off the stairway?” Houston rasped.

“Yeah.”

Houston closed his laptop. Taking the brownies out of Dunne’s hands, he laid the plate on top of his laptop before moving to seal them in the attic.

“I noticed at Wilmington’s place that you had some connection with Vin. Is he your Master?”
“He saved my life in Boston. Taught me how to really enjoy my need instead of being used as a slave.”

“Do you need his permission to do it with someone?”

“I, ah, I don’t know. Guess I could call him. Don’t have his number yet though.”

“Since he got me out of the war zone to here, I’ve got his number. Why don’t you copy it into your phone.”

---

“Where is the wedding cake? When are we going to cut into that?” Vin asked looking around the large dining room.

“Anna has it hidden, Dad. She’s afraid you’ll eat the whole thing,” Michael put in, while grinning at Wolf.

“Wolf. Do you know when Bebee’s coming? I was told he was going to be assigned, along with you, to be Michael’s bodyguards.”

Wolf looked around. “He had to report back to his base to pack up. Plus pickup that paperwork. I got notified that I’d be discharged at the end of the month, also for the purpose of protecting Michael.”

Vin pulling his vibrating phone from his pocket. He didn’t recognize the number.

“Special Agent Tanner.”

“It’s JD.”

Vin walked away from the group to the far side of the room. “What’s up JD?”

“Houston. Ah.. T.H. and me have been talking. I’m moving in here. Buck’s place is $800 a month not $1000 like he told me. But we, ah, that is…”

“JD, if you want to connect sexually with Tanner Henry Houston … you may absolutely do that! You don’t need my permission to enjoy mind blowing sex with someone else.”

“I don’t?”

“You absolutely do not. But if he has brownies … be careful, JD. Brownies really turn him on. Better gag both of you. Don’t want Miss Nettie up there.”

“OH HECK NO! Okay, thanks.”

---

“What?” Houston questioned seeing a wide grin on the younger agent’s face.

“Don’t need his permission,” JD replied looking at the brownies.

Houston followed JD’s line of vision. “Did he say something about the brownies?”

“He said if you had brownies … we better gag ourselves. Said you were really wild if there were brownies close by.”
“My master knows me well,” Houston admitted in a bare whisper.

Vin slipped his arm around Anna’s waist pulling her close.

“Any chance I can get some honeymoon time with my bride?”

“I would like that a lot, Vin. It takes a lot of energy walking around this place.”

“Don’t you fall asleep on me,” Vin rasped, kissing her on the cheek.

“Wolf, Michael should be in bed in a couple of hours, are you…”

“We have an appointment with the Pastry Chef in about three minutes. She is going to show us how she makes her fancy frosted cupcakes. Don’t worry I won’t let him get too much sugar.”

“Please, please, please, do it again!” JD moaned as Houston’s tongue curled and licked brownie crumbs out of Dunne’s navel.

“Going to suck your cock dry, John Daniel,” Tanner Henry rasped as his face moved lower.

“Going to swallow all of it. I’m claiming you for me, computer man.”

“Do it! Do it!” JD moaned. “So good. It’s so good.”

Master Vin. Thank you. T.H. screamed in his head.

Houston was surprised when he received an instant, ‘You’re welcome.’

It was much later when TH showed JD how to get down the ‘servants stairs’ to the first floor. A secret passage the two would use from now on.

“And just why are you smiling so, husband of mine?” Anna asked as he carried her over the threshold of their penthouse.

“Two young men starving for love have come together. They are the same mind yet opposites. A good match.”

“Master Vin as done it again,” Anna rasped, as her arms tightened around his shoulders.

“Well, Miss Nettie helped too. It was her brownies that got them started.”

“Vin. Will that building be safe with that thing in the basement?” Anna asked worriedly as she slipped from his arms.

“It’s not connected. They took the wiring completely apart. And the Major said they have vacuumed up most all of the granule explosive material. It no longer will take the building down, if that is what worries you.”

“Why don’t you call Joseph, while I lay out Michael’s pajamas.”

“You’re going to fall asleep on me, aren’t you?” Special Agent Tanner remarked with a knowing
grin.

“Probably…but it will be with your arms around me.”

---

Vin eased out of the bed, being very careful not to disturb Anna. His father was pacing. The man was in his head. He had brought a man off, from two states away. He was going to try the same thing to his father.

---

Joseph was restless. He wasn’t really sure what was bothering him. He’d tried sleep but now, just wearing boxers, he paced.

“**STRIP!**”

Joseph spun around. “Who’s there?”

“*Take the damn boxers off Joseph!*”

The voice in his head was harsh. Who was this man?

“You can feel the light touch of a hand on your spine. Move into it. Fingers squeezing your buttocks. A finger…one… then two, rimming that hole. You want it. You need it.”

Joseph dropped to his knees. Sweat forming on his face. “Who are you?”

“You are in need. You called. I answered.”

“Strip the boxers off… but keep them around your penis. Keep that cock covered.”

For the next thirty minutes Joseph listened to the voice in his head and obeyed. He came hard, crying out Catherine’s name as he exploded into his shorts.

“Crawl into bed. Bring the blankets up. “

“Please…! Who are you?” An exhausted Joseph pleaded.

“Night, Dad. See you on Monday.”

Joseph Bebee bolted upright. “VIN?” Looking around he saw only nighttime shadows coming through the windows. Then his eyes fell on the shorts. Falling backwards, the billionaire slept soundly for the first time in months.

---

A naked JD Dunne sat at his computer pulling up the links that Houston had given him. Then he composed a short email with the links and sent it off to Buck. He didn’t tell Buck where he’d found a cheaper place. Plus he knew Buck wouldn’t even read it until he got to work on Monday. As an after thought he sent one to the address for Vin that Houston had given him. He wanted his master to know he was safe. And he thanked him for allowing him to have mind blowing sex.

“Shit. I shouldn’t have told him THAT!”

---
Chris Larabee was surprised to see his old friend and team mate driving in. Looking at his watch, Chris wondered what happened to the date Buck had talked about all week.

“Buck! What are you doing here?”

“Marianne found my little black book! I swear I had it hidden. I KNOW I did not leave it on top of the TV! I brought her home after dinner for some cozy time under the sheets. She walked into the TV room and started looking at the DVD collection. When she stood up …her hand touched the book and she started paging through it. Saw other women she knew. Didn’t like how I ranked them.”

“You rank them?!” Larabee gasped loudly.

“Hell yes! Not every woman likes to suck cock. I like ones that do. Like ones that love their ass being used. Marianne loves being taken that way,” Buck exclaimed as they headed for the house.

“Why not find a male lover, Buck? It sounds like that is what you really want.”

“Hell no! I mean … you and me can come together, no problem. But the cleavage on you just doesn’t match up, Chris. Sorry. My hands love gripping full breasted women as I fuck their asses. Maybe it comes from how I was raised. But you can’t get a women pregnant, if you fuck their ass.”

Larabee stared at his long time friend as he pulled his vibrating phone from his pocket.

Sebastian passed you to me. FUCK the man! Use him hard. Make him beg for it.

“Chris, what’s the matter?” Wilmington blurt out as he watched disbelief spread across his friend’s face.

“Got a text from someone I don’t know. I’d like to know how he got my number. Why don’t you go inside and take a couple of steaks out of the freezer. Put them under the stove light.”

“Sure.”

Larabee walked around the side of the pool as he dialed Sebastian in New York City. He had done all his Dominatrix training under the man. He had only heard of a handful of Doms that were passed to other Masters. Usually for discipline problems.

———-

“Christopher. What can I do for my blond stud?”

Stud?

“I just received a text … saying I was passed to another master. Plus orders to take someone down.”

“Ah yes. I am a bit too far to discipline you, Christopher. Your need has gotten out of control from the reports I’ve gotten on you.”

Reports? He has a spy here?

“Reports?” Chris growled.

“Oh yes, my blond stud. I keep track of all my favorite Doms. I have given you to Vin Tanner. He is exceptional. Mental telepathy at the highest level. Used it in Army Intelligence. I have watched this man bring a man to the highest peak of pleasure and hold him there while Intel questions him. They
spill their guts as they beg for climax. He is truly amazing. My advice … don’t disobey him.”

“Are you telling me I don’t have a choice?” Chris ground out.

“Christopher. I know what your hunger is. He knows what your hunger is. Do NOT disobey him or you may …”

Larabee did not like the laughter he heard. Didn’t like that he was passed to someone else like a piece of meat on a platter.

“You love fucking men, Christopher. Do what he says or you may end up fucking one of your horses like you did that pony in the Navy.”

Chris Larabee almost fell backwards into his swimming pool he was so stunned by that statement. Sebastian’s laughter still rang in his head as Buck rushed to his side pulling him away from the pool.

“You all right, Stud? You damn near fell into the swimming pool.”

Larabee shook himself. *Telepathy across miles. Whoever heard of that?*

*FUCK THE MAN NOW. While the steaks unthaw.*

---

“Holy shit, Chris! How long has it been since you had good sex? And dang, if you aren’t still hard. Come on. I’m on top now. Then we’re cooking those steaks.”

*Hold the glass tight. Let you cock fill, expand inside it. Slowly slide the glass up and down in rhythm with the man fucking you. You cannot come until he has emptied himself and starts to pull out. Then scream the word, MASTER, as you explode into the glass.*

---

Vin Tanner stood looking out the windows of his penthouse. He grinned as he stared at the mountains. He’d been really surprised when Sebastian had called him. He had met the man only once, while in Army Intelligence. But he knew the man’s power and reputation. The fact that he was passing a Dom like Larabee off to another Master meant Chris Larabee was out of control. And Sebastian did not like his men out of control.

He would have to talk to Joseph and Colt on how to use the blond inside the corporation. There were plenty of men and women who would love to have such a blond available to them.

“And, just why are you grinning, my husband?” Anna purred coming up behind him.

“Thought you were asleep.”

“Oh no you don’t! You answer the question?”

“I was just given an ATF agent who is a Dominat. His New York master is too far away to bring him into line.”

Anna grinned. “He’s not ready for us, is he?”

“No, he definitely isn’t. The ATF isn’t ready for us either.”

---
“Dad….” Michael whispered inches from Vin’s ear.

“Michael. What time is it?”

“The church bells are ringing. Should we be getting up?”

Vin glanced over at the clock and couldn’t believe the time. He never slept beyond six in the morning and it was almost eight.

“We won’t be going to church until we know more about the city, Michael. Is anyone else up?”

“Wolf is still sleepin’ on the couch. Bebee arrived. He brought up all kinds of boxes for breakfast, I think. He said just to let you sleep.”

Vin pulled Michael into his arms and kissed him on the forehead. “Why don’t you go ask Bebee to call Joseph for you? Ask how he is doing this morning.”

“Okay. I can find out when he’s comin’? Can I call him Opa since Texas Opa isn’t here?”

“I think Opa Bebee would love that.”

-=-=-=-

“TH.” Nettie Wells said quietly, not wanting to disturb others who were coming down to breakfast.

“Yes, Miss Nettie.”

“Would you please check on JD? He hasn’t come to breakfast yet.”

“He hasn’t? Sure. The parlor behind the stairs, right? What if the door is locked?”

Houston watched as she turned and walked into the kitchen. Minutes later Miss Nettie appeared with a strange looking hook.

“Take this. Slip it between the two doors with this hook up. Push it up and then flip it to the right. Since he has moved in there, we really need to find a better way to lock that.”

“You know, that attic is really huge. It runs the whole length of the house. I wouldn’t mind giving up half of it to JD. And the parlor could be turned into a computer room. Frankie said last night he wished there was a room he could use to do his research without disturbing his roomie.”

“That is a wonderful idea,” Nettie Wells answered smiling. “Why don’t you talk to him about that
Standing in the parlor JD and TH were trying to decide what to take and what to leave.

“Have to move the bed up,” JD said.

“Don’t really need two beds,” TH answered grinning.

“But we do,” JD replied gesturing towards the door.

“Oh, right. Okay. The bed goes. That dresser stays. No way will that fit up those stairs.”

“She has some furniture in the basement,” JD offered. “Let’s go down there and look. We could make that sleeping closet into something to hold my printer and Frankie’s fax machine.”

“You’re on.”

Two hours later, the bed was upstairs. Two short console tables each with two chairs were along walls in the parlor. A bean bag chair and a platform rocker were also fitted in.

“My land!” Miss Nettie exclaimed. “I can’t believe what you boys have done here. Houston! I am so glad you came to Denver. Can I bake you something special?”

Houston looked at JD. “I really love your brownies.”

“Brownies? Brownies it is. I’ll call up when they’re ready.”

Joseph looked around for his ringing phone. He’d been up for an hour. Had showered twice. Gotten dressed but was still in a daze after his experience last night. Finally seeing it on a table near the window, he grabbed it just before it went to voice mail.

“Joseph.”

“Kunu. Are you up yet?”

“Michael!” Joseph yelped a little too loud, but it broke through the haze of the night.

“Yes, your grandfather is up. How are things in Denver?”

“Did you see the news last night? Dad was on television. There was a big bomb in the basement of his building.”

“Bomb?” Joseph Bebee gasped walking over to turn on the television. He vaguely remembered something about that.

“This is Wolf. There was no real danger, sir. Vin handled it well. He was calm under fire. He always is.”

“No one was hurt?”

“No sir. He contacted the Army. They sent someone down from Fort Carson who took care of it.”

“Is Vin there? I need to talk with him.”
Wolf grinned. “Captain is still asleep. Don’t want to disturb him. I don’t think he or Anna have had a full night’s sleep since they left the Netherlands.”

“I have a meeting here at one. Tell him I’ll be calling him after that. I may be coming tonight if I can see the people I need to see today.”

“Wait! Wait! I gotta ask him something,” Michael shouted as Wolf ended the call.

“I have this cooler,” JD ventured, holding up the red and white thermal container. “We can put the extra brownies in here for later. No need to return any.”

“I don’t know JD. If we keep them up here, we might never get to work.”

Chris Larabee rolled over. He could hear Buck in the kitchen rattling pans and making coffee. For the third time, he rolled to the edge of the bed and looked over the side. The plastic glass he’d ejected his load into last night was still there. Why had he slept without dreams last night? He always had dreams. Dreams of navy days. Dreams of losing Sarah and Adam. Now he was afraid to get up. Afraid he’d be pulled into the rear end of a horse. How the hell did Sebastian know about the freaking bachelor party with the pony?

<KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK> HEY CHRIS! YOU GOING TO SLEEP ALL DAY? IT IS AFTER NINE O’CLOCK!

“All right already,” Larabee moaned throwing the blankets back. Standing. Stretching. He grabbed his terry cloth robe and headed to the shower.

“He’s in the shower now, my husband,” Anna purred softly as she wrapped her nude body in a large towel. “Show him there is someone fiercer than he.”

Vin shook his head. Until now, he’d never believed the mystic he’d met in Germany. He’d been told his soul mate would be a woman who understood his telepathy powers and had a few of her own. Though hers would only surface after much trauma in her life.

Locking the door Anna had just gone through, Vin turned and concentrated on the empty shower.

The blond was standing with his hands on the wall of the shower. The rain head spraying over his body. His back to the shower door. Smiling, Tanner opened that door and stepped in.

Hearing the shower door open and close, Chris turned expecting to see Buck. But no one was there. Yet he knew someone was.

“Who are you?”

Larabee’s eyes closed. His body tensed, as hands grabbed his hips. He was pushed forward as a rock hard cock pushed against his ass.

You are a taker. But now, you will be taken.
GOOD GOD! I CAN FEEL HIM IN ME!

Monday morning. ATF Headquarters. When I call you into my private office, you will go into my bathroom. Strip down. And we will do this again. No longer will you go to The Office Bar to pick up men on Monday nights. If I find out you are still there on Mondays … your nights will no longer be your own.

Suddenly Chris was pulled off the wall, twisted around and forced to his knees.

This is your first lesson. Do as you are told or that pony you fucked in the Navy will be in your barn.

-=-==

Vin Tanner walked into the large living area of the penthouse to discover Bebee, Wolf, Justin, Dennis, Colt, Anna and Josh.

“We having a party?” Tanner asked looking around.

Dennis stepped forward with a note saying, “Jamison Cooper called. They have set up a buffet in the lobby for everyone who has helped and is helping put the place together over there. This is an invite for you and anyone else.”

“What time?”

“Eleven thirty to two. Wolf and I were thinking you might want JD Dunne and TH Houston to go with you. Each could check out their divisions. See what Dunne thinks about the computer labs. See what Houston thinks about the sniper pad and lockdowns for weapons.

-=-=-

TH Houston stared at the food Miss Nettie was putting on the huge English sideboard. Real food! Not K rations. Not powdered eggs and jerky. Real food.

“Looks good, huh,” JD ventured, coming to stand next to him.

Someone said, “whose phone is that ringing?”

TH pulled his vibrating, ringing phone from his pocket and gasped, “Oh no.”

“Houston.”

“I want you and JD at ATF Headquarters in twenty minutes. We’re doing a walk through.”

“Captain. Miss Nettie…”

“Is making pot roast. She does that every Sunday, Tanner.”

“But Sir! Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve had real food?”

Vin smiled. He did know.

“Tanner. If you ask her, she will save you some. Twenty minutes.”

“That was our boss, JD. We have to be at that ATF building in twenty minutes.”

“Tanner,” Miss Nettie said quietly.
“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’ll save you and JD some.”

“Thank you, Miss Nettie. I really appreciate that.”

“You the Ranger that was flown in from Afghanistan?” Asked the man who wanted to know whose phone was ringing.

Houston looked the young man up and down before answering. “I am.”

“Cool. I’m taking a Journalism class. Could I interview…”

“No!” Houston blurted out. “JD. You wearing your weapon? We need to go.”

“Shoot! No! Be right back.”

---

Chris Larabee sat on the cold shower floor gasping for breath.

“How? How could I feel him inside of me? Was it a cock? Was it a fist?” The blond muttered softly, still trying to understand what just happened.

“Hey Chris! Did you fall asleep in there,” Buck hollered from the hall.

Shivering, the blond pushed himself up and quickly rinsed off in warm water. How was he going to survive? Every time this man looked at him, he knew he’d have a hard-on.

||

“You okay, stud?” Buck asked for the umpteenth time.

_Hell no! I’m not all right! But no way you’d believe me._

“You didn’t have any dreams last night, did you?” Buck said quietly studying his friend.

“No.”

“Maybe you need hard sex like that every night. It sure has taken the edge off you.”

Beep-beep-beep…

Both men reached for the cell phones. Before they could answer, Vin Tanner’s voice came through.

_“I’m asking all Team Leaders and their Second in Command to come into ATF Headquarters for a walk through. We want to make sure everything is as it should be. Don’t want any surprises on Monday morning. Building security is putting together a large buffet for all those who worked yesterday and through the night to put offices together. You are also invited to that feast. Be here before noon.”_

“Looks like I better head for home and change clothes,” Buck said putting his coffee in his travel mug.

Buck was barely out the door when Chris’ cell rang. “Larabee.”

“Bring clothes for Monday work day. Call your college boy to take care of the horses tonight and in
the morning. You will be staying at the Federal Hotel tonight. This is not an option you can refuse. Take care of the glass under the bed before you leave. You were given directions for it last night. The best place to do that is in the shower.”

Larabee stared at his phone. Directions for the cum in the glass? What the hell are they?

Larabee stood in his shower for the second time that morning. Only this time he was holding a 12 oz. plastic glass filled with semen.

“WHAT THE HELL AM I SUPPOSED TO DO WITH IT?” Chris shouted to no one.

Take a sip. Bigger! A mouthful. Better. Pour the rest over your genitals. Wash yourself off. Turn off water. Step out. Eat breakfast naked. Call college boy. Get dressed… do as you were previously told.

“Vinnn,” Anna purred, coming up behind her husband. “I think you are having too much fun with him.”

“Well, darling. I think I’m going to let you put the cock ring on him,” Vin rasped quietly. “He hasn’t had a woman touch him since his wife died.”

Anna stared at her husband. She was seeing several things through his eyes. “He likes men. In high school. In the Navy. Before and after marriage. He doesn’t miss his wife… he misses his son.”

“Yes.”

Vin pulled his phone as the song Texas Rose started. “Joseph?”

“I was just talking to Wolf and heard Michael yell ‘wait’ ‘wait’. Do you know what that was about?”

“Since Texas Opa is in Texas,” Vin responded with a chuckle. “He’d like to call you Opa here. He likes that better than Kunu.”

“Or maybe!” Michael yelped, suddenly coming to a running stop in front of his father.

“Maybe I could call him grandfather? Bebee said his father was an important man. So maybe Grandfather would be better.”

‘Put me on speaker Vin……. Michael. I would love to be called Opa. I bet no one there has a grandfather they call Opa.’

“Nobody I met yet,” Michael responded brightly.” Okay! Opa… Opa. Are you coming home soon?”

Vin turned off the speaker as his father rasped, “Home. I can’t remember when I’ve had a real home.”

“You’d best get here so you can start building one for the Tanner family on the mountain you and Catherine explored.” Vin responded.
“Franklin gave me some builders’ names. I’ll look over what I found too. Want to interview each one. Also want to meet with you and Anna to see what exactly you want in a house.”

“Look forward to it.”

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“Houston! Can you slow down?” JD rasped. “We’re not in a race here.”

Tanner Houston grinned. “JD. The Captain is going to have us running some mornings. You better get in shape.”


“You’re an agent, JD. Agents have to be fit. Doesn’t matter if you are a sniper or a desk jockey. You still need to be able to take down someone if you’re asked to.”

“Ya.. well, my scores on the range aren’t too hot. I barely made my score last month.”

“I’ll work with you,” TH said slowing to a normal walk. “We’ll see if they have a range in the basement of this place. I’ll check you out. Get you to relax…”

“Yeah, well… you can’t get me any more relaxed than I am right now,” JD ventured his face turning pink.

Dunne and Houston walked through the doors of the glass ATF building. The two young men stopped dead and stared at the banquet of food along one wall.

“FOOD!” Tanner Houston barked.

Vin turned, reaching for the loudspeaker as people stopped and stared at the two men who just entered the lobby.

“Tanner Houston.”

“Sir!” Houston barked, coming to attention.

“The food will still be there when you are done doing, what you’re going to be doing,” Vin reported.

“Are you sure, Captain?” Tanner questioned, gaping at the display of foods on four long tables.

“Ladies and gentlemen. This is Tanner Henry Houston, better known as TH. He is a new ATF sniper. He just arrived from Afghanistan. He probably hasn’t had real food in a couple months.”

“46 days, sir!”

Vin chuckled. “You may also notice that he calls me Captain. That is because he served in one of my sniper units in the Army.”

“JD. I’d like you to get the other two cyber hunters here and head up to the computer lab on the fourth floor. Check it out. Boot everything up.”

“TH. You are the only sniper here so far. I’d like you to check out the sniper squad division. There are lockable weapon closets. Need you to check them out. Need to know if the locks have been tampered with. Are they vulnerable.”
“Could I take some food with me, sir?” Houston rasped, drooling at the display in front of him.

Vin stared at the young man.

“Vin,” Shirley called from one of the tables. “There are sandwiches here and burritos. I’ll put some in a box and he can take them up.”

“Go…” Vin rasped, holding back a laugh.

TH stood next to the ATF secretary as she picked up mini burritos, mini eclairs, small ham sandwiches, egg rolls, some raw veggies and a small cup of dip.

“At the end of the table there is a big tub of ice with soft drinks. Take one of those. Before you leave today, I need to see you in Vin’s office. I have the paper work you need to sign so you can be sworn in as an ATF agent.”

“Yes ma’am,” Houston replied with a grin. Then he was off to the stairs.

“He’s climbing the stairs with all that food?” Cooper asked Tanner.

“He’s running the stairs.”

“Running?” Jamison Cooper croaked out.

“You’d have to know me … and the Army. We run. I’ll be running through the city every morning with whoever wants to do it with me. We will be running the stairs as well. Fitness is the new thing. Anyone with a beer belly won’t be cutting it.”

Four flights of stairs were easy for TH Houston. He’d already devoured the mini eclairs and the egg rolls. Got to find out where those egg rolls are from. Yum!

Stepping out of the stairwell, TH looked at the sign in front of him. ‘Sniper Squad Division’.. the arrow pointed left. As he walked down the hall, he didn’t like what he found. It was at the end. No way out except how he came in. Should be two exits here. He’d have to investigate that. In case of fire, they would be trapped.

JD Dunne and three other computer agents stood in awe inside the Cyber Forensics Lab.

“Wow! JD. This is awesome,” Team 3’s computer geek barked out.

A voice startled the four young men. “John Daniel Dunne. Computer Forensics Analyst of Team Seven. Welcome. Please pick a station.”

“Who are you?” JD asked, not moving from where he stood.

“I am a computer here to assist all who are Computer Forensic Analysts. Others present please state your name.”
TH stood at the end of the hall staring at the wall. “No way would the Fire Marshall approve this without another exit.”

He set his box of food on the floor. Walking along the wall, he pushed on it every foot or so. Then suddenly he started to fall as the wall opened in front of him. He grabbed the side of the door to keep from falling head first down some stairs.

“SHIIIT! This needs to be marked,” the former Army Ranger growled.

Looking on the backside of the door, he discovered a handle. On the front, however, there was nothing. He would check with the Captain. They definitely needed a handle on both sides.

Hanging onto the back handle, Houston looked over the edge. “What the hell!? The stairs go down to a blank wall.”

Picking up his food, he walked into the Sniper Squad area. Cubicles. Computers. Round table and chairs. Where the hell are the weapon closets?

TH walked to the third cubicle. Put his food box down. Took out the two burritos and walked the perimeter of the room. He found the weapon’s closets on the far wall. The same wall that the stairs were behind.

Ten closets.

Using his right boot, he tapped the bottom of each door. He was surprised when the sixth one opened. He tested the rest and then walked back to number six. Easing the narrow door open, he stared into it. Shotgun shells on shelf. Not good. Dust round the bottom but not where a gun was stored.

Houston stared at each locker. “Fingerprint opening, maybe. No way for a padlock. Better have the Captain look at the plans.”

Searching through several desks, TH finally found some evidence bags. Carefully he lifted the box of shotgun shells and slid it into the evidence bag. Then he sprinted for the stairs.

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Only a few people were in the lobby when Houston burst through the stairwell door.

“CAPTAIN!!” Houston shouted, coming to a stop near the four men he was talking to. TH knew instantly the blond was Chris Larabee. JD had described him perfectly.

“Found these in one of the weapons lockers. From the dust on the floor of the locker … a weapon’s been stored them but it’s empty now. Also, just using my boot I opened this guy’s locker. The rest … there is no visible way to open them unless it is by fingerprint.”

“Also, sir. There is no escape exit on that floor. Only the elevator and that stairway I came out of. There is a door, without a handle, near the sniper squad. I almost fell through it when I was leaning on the wall. There is a handle on the backside but not on the front… but from what I could see… the stairs only go down to a wall.”

“Good job TH. Building security better go through this whole place before we move more people in.

“Turning, Vin called, “Cooper! We’re going to need those plans out again. And find Fred!”
“Maggie! Who is the computer here?” Vin questioned quietly.

“She has just been activated by Agent Dunne. Each Computer Forensic Analyst has a camera with a scanner in their cube. Scan anything for prints. Lilly can run them. She can also tell Agent Houston about how to get into the weapon’s lockets.”

Buck and Chris looked around trying to figure out where that voice was coming from.

“TH… until we get more snipers…”

“Got two here, sir,” A young man with curly brown hair said, stopping next to Houston.

“Rory Golden. And this is Todd Burton.”

Vin watched as Houston quietly introduced himself to the two, blushing when they asked if he was the new guy from the war zone.

“Okay, TH take them up to the Sniper Squad. Explain what you found. When you hit your floor say the name ‘Lily.’ Tell her to have JD come down with his camera to scan the weapon’s lockers.”

“Then… I want you three to investigate that stairwell. Do not all go into it! Find a way to tie the door open or completely take it off.”

“Captain. You’re thinking someone’s down there?” Houston asked.

“What did you smell when you opened it?” Vin Tanner asked quietly.

Tanner Houston stared at his former Captain, his eyes going wide. “SHIT! There’s a body down there.”

Vin nodded. “One of the security guards here, said he heard what he thought were shots fired somewhere in the building. They checked the firing range in the basement and several floors without finding anyone.”

“Maggie! Put my name and number into their phones… ATF Boss, Vin Tanner and my 800 number.”

Wilmington looked at Larabee saying, “I thought it was Special Agent in Charge?”

Tanner just shook his head saying. “Too many characters for a cell. Boss is shorter. Go TH. Call me if you find something.”

Turning to Chris Larabee and Buck Wilmington, Vin asked, “Have you read your packets yet?”

Buck looked at the floor. “Left it on the dining room table.”

“And yours is where, Larabee? On the kitchen table?”

“You know where it is?”

“Buck, take Chris to your place and read it. Team Leader’s first pages are different but all the rest is the same.”

Vin was in a conference with Head of Security, Fred Rogers and Head of Maintenance, Jamison Cooper. Vin discovered they had never gone room by room since the building opened last year. They took the Inspector’s written report that everything was set to go.

Rogers stared at the signature on the report. “This man retired three months later to Key West. As I remember, several City employees wondered how he could afford to do that.”

Cooper and Tanner spoke in unison. “He took a bribe.”

Vin pulled his phone and speed dialed Major Vander Mullen.

“Falcon.”

“Major. Do you have any troops that need practice in search and find? We have just discovered the inspector who signed off on this building retired to Key West shortly thereafter. We have stairwells that go nowhere. Need trustworthy men to search each level, every room. I don’t want cops and firefighters tripping over each other.”

“You want trained men you can trust to go in and out quickly. Give an assessment without personal involvement. I can have twenty men there by copters in fifteen minutes.”

“Do it.”

“Houston.”

“Send your two snipers down. Go pick up JD and the two with him. We are evacuating the building,” Boss Tanner ordered.

“We got a body here, sir. The owner of the shotgun shells. He tried to blast his way through a cement wall. Don’t think he was even aware that the slugs were bouncing back into him.”

“Pick up JD and get out of there now!” Vin growled curtly.

“Yes sir.”

The mysterious Sergeant that always seemed to materialize when Vin needed him, ordered police cars to block off the square the Federal Hotel was on. Across the square was the brand new glass ATF building.

Maintenance and security men of the glass building carefully carried the four tables of food across the blocked streets to the small park next to the Federal Hotel. US Marshals had evacuated the building. They along with ATF agents, that had arrived thinking there were going to move in, stood around munching on the food.

TH Houston was asking someone about the egg rolls and JD was having a third piece of chocolate cake.

Four Army helicopters were parked in the ATF parking lot. Vin Tanner had briefed the men, telling them to look in every room, every closet, bathrooms. From the basement to the fifth floor. If they saw a door investigate what was behind it.
Vin greeted his old friend, Jeffrey Rockland, the Medical Examiner.

“Jeffrey. I think you are going to have to wait until I get a report on the building before you can go in. So far, there is only one way to get to him, and it isn’t easy.”

“What can you tell me about him? Do you know long he’s been in there?”

“He is in the bottom of a stairway that should have a door at the end. Instead there is only a cement wall. Plus once the upper door closes, you cannot open it again from inside the stairwell.”

Tanner turned at the sound of a weird noise. His eyes scanned every inch of the building.

“MAJOR!!! GET YOUR MEN OUT NOW. NOW!” Vin screamed at the top of his lungs while pointing to the glass.

Vin ran for the lobby. Stepping just inside the door, he shouted, “LILY! EVACUATE THE BUILDING. TELL THEM TO RUN. GET OUT NOW. GET THEM OUT NOW!”

News broke into afternoon sport games around the nation as pictures of a bright glass building came up on the screen.

In Austin, Joseph stopped in mid-stride as he left his first meeting. Staring at the glass ATF building as Army men and others raced through the doors.

In Washington, D.C., Jack Maloney and his wife Betty were just getting ready to leave for a late lunch when their television beeped on with the breaking news.

“Jack! Look at the crack in that glass…. Oh my gosh, is that Vin?!”

In the White House, the President’s assistant rushed into the Oval Office and turned on the television. President Bush gasped as he watched his sniper standing in an open door urging Army men running for their lives as windows cracked and fell above them.

In Texas, Hannah, Mike and Andy watched ‘their’ Vin run full out as a five story glass building collapsed into itself.

“Oh my land!” Hannah gasped.

Standing across the street, Vin and Jeffrey looked at each other.

“You know, Texas boy,” Jeffrey started, “this reminds me of something.”

“Those guys never got caught doing that in high school,” Vin answered as cops around the two men turned to stare.

“It wasn’t five stories high. Nor did they think the thing would collapse,” The Coroner answered.
chuckling. “Sure the hell scared Miss Whittaker.”

“You boys want to confess something,” a cop said behind the two.

Tanner turned to look at the smiling Sergeant behind him.

“Afraid you’re not going to be able to retrieve that body now,” Vin ventured turning back to his friend.

“If that stairwell is protected, we might be able to get to him in a few days. Agent Houston have any idea how long he’s been there?”

Vin looked around for his sniper. “HOUS…TON! Over here.”

Jogging over to his boss and friend, TH Houston said, “Sir.”

“TH. This is Jeffrey Rockland, the Coroner. He’d like to know the condition of the body you found.”

“Sure. Male. Heavy set. Dead less than a month, I’d say. Bled out. It appears he used his shotgun to try to blast a hole in the cement wall. But never realized the bullets were ricocheting back to him. Mostly upper chest wounds.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome sir. Captain. Would it be okay of JD and I headed home? Miss Nettie’s making frosted brownies.”

“Haven’t you eaten half those tables already?” Vin questioned.

The cops behind Tanner began to snicker at Tanner Houston’s pouting face.

“I know,” Vin started causally, “you were in Afghanistan for 10 months on K-rations. Beef jerky. Stale cookies sent from home three months old. GO!”

Jeffrey looked back at Vin as TH took off. “Thought they feed our troops better than that.”

“Instant anything,” Vin moaned. “Everything comes in a package. Add water and you have … cereal, mac and cheese, scrambled eggs, instant bacon, instant anything. That’s why most troops are so thin when they get home. The food doesn’t sustain them. Even officers. If I ended up with a real piece of meat… I guarded it with a weapon or two.”

Vin pulled his beeping phone without looking at who was calling.

“Agent Tanner.”

“DaDDD! Opa called. He’s comin’ home after five. Anna and Josh need your help. And Dadd… is it okay that I call Anna, mom?”

Vin was acutely aware that silence suddenly surrounded him.

“I think Anna would like that very much, Michael. Opa say anything else?”

“Just that he was really glad to have his family here.”

“Tell Dr Bird I’ll be in shortly.”
“Patricia’s son?” Jeffery asked quietly.

Vin looked around. Only the Sergeant was behind him now. “You on guard duty?”

“Looks like you might need one.”

“You grab me. You’ll be taken down in seconds.”

The Sergeant decided to test that theory and grabbed Tanner around the neck. Seconds later Dennis had the man on his knees with one arm bent behind his back.

Vin threw up his hands to the cops that suddenly headed his way with their hands on their weapons.

“EVERYTHING IS OKAY! Sergeant wanted to prove a point… “

“You heard about Patricia?” Vin questioned, surprised that he had.

“My mother and Hannah are good friends. Don’t know what caused it but Mom said Patricia was on life support so the boy could be born.”

Vin turned and looked at the Sergeant. “Who asked you to protect me?”

“The new Chief. Said you’ve done things for the President and needed protection.”

Vin stared at the man, taking in his thoughts. “Ahhh, one of his grandsons was in my unit. Think he came down for the wedding too. Tell your Chief I’m protected. As are my wife and my kids.”

Vin watched Josh Bird jog out of the side entrance of the Federal Hotel. He’d started for Vin and then veered over to Major Vander Mullen who was talking with two Army pilots.

Vin stared at Josh. Turning suddenly, he called to Jeffrey.

“Jeffrey! Looks like the collapse may have freed up the victim. Come.”

Taking his high school friend over to Josh and the Major, Vin introduced them.

Josh explained that Rocky Allen’s pilot had seen a man trapped in debris. But after zooming in discovered the man to be dead.

Jeffrey questioned the Major asking him, “Any of your pilots do search and rescue? I’d like to get that body out as soon as possible.”

Josh spoke first. “Why don’t I take the Coroner up first. We can make an assessment on the body. See if it can be retrieved without anyone getting hurt. Vander Mullen can have a team on standby. If I give the go ahead, they can come right in.”

Two Army helicopters full of men had returned to Fort Carson. Two others shielded the public from the Coroner and his team as they examined the body retrieved from the destroyed building.

“Your sniper was correct, Vin. The man literally shot himself as he fired into the cement wall. Every single bullet bounced back and hit him. Twenty pellets in his chest alone. Dozens more in his shoulders and groin.”
“What I am thankful for is,” Rockland continued, “you got everyone out when you saw that crack. Otherwise there would be more bodies. Bodies that may not have been retrievable.”

Vin looked up into the face of the Colorado FBI chief.

“What I’d like to know is why Senator Baylock was involved in building this place? Why he put a bomb in the basement? And why and who he planned to kill once they were here. It is quite obvious, the more people in the building …opening and closing doors triggered the implosion.”

The FBI chief stared at Tanner. “I had a long conversation with several people in Washington this evening. Army Intelligence suggested that you ‘talk’ to the man in the morning.”

“Yes, I would definitely like to talk to the man. I’d would also like to bring two others,” Vin stated calmly. “They can stay in the observation room”

Walking back into the Federal Hotel, Vin looked around. Nodding to three security men, he walked down the hall to the Red Feather office and the ATF conference center. He pushed through the door that had ATF in big black letters on it and blinked as lights automatically came on. The Special Agent in Charge abruptly turned when he didn’t hear the door close behind him.

“Sorry. You want me in or out?” Justin asked.

“Got some calls to make. Out.”

Looking around, Vin headed for a swivel chair where he could stretch out and put his feet up on a desk.

The team on Lookout Mountain was standing in the old miner’s cabin.

“Think we should tell the Captain about this? We’ve cleaned it up. Got the stove working. Better than that tent we slept in last night.”

“He’s going to call in a few minutes,” Aaron said. “In the meantime, let’s turn that one room into a sex play room. Have the feeling we’re going to have company tonight.”

Vin pulled up Aaron’s number and stared at the name. Closing his eyes he concentrated on the man.

*They found the miner’s cabin. Wow. They have really cleaned it up. Pot belly stove is cooking and warm. Larabee could drive directly there. No need to cancel his student who takes care of the horses. Change of clothes are in his truck.*

Tapping on the number, Vin waited for an answer.

“Yes sir. We’re ready.” Aaron replied knowing who was calling and why.

“Place looks great, Aaron. You’ve done well. I’m sending you Chris Larabee to use until tomorrow morning. Our friend Sebastian wants him retrained. He has gone over the edge. Using his Dominant to just take men and leave them. He is back to being a slave. Use him as one.”

“Pain? Whip? Belt?”
“No marks. No blood. Cock ring behind the head. Use his mouth, his ass. Especially his ass. Let him enjoy fucking … but no release for him. He’ll beg. Let him. Tell him he is a slave sent for you three to enjoy. He has no rights. See that he gets home in one piece. No later than nine o’clock tomorrow morning. He drives a big black RAM pickup. I’m sending him directly to you. Should take him about forty to fifty minutes to get there.”

“Corliss, Romeo and I will thoroughly enjoy the gift you have sent us. Romeo and I will personally drive him home. Let him awaken in his own bed.”

“Park the truck in his garage. It is part of the house. I’ll check in later tomorrow for a report.”

“Thank you for the gift, sir.”

“You’ve earned it Aaron.”

---

Chris opened Buck’s condo front door and was surprised to see a good looking but hefty woman about ready to knock.

“Buck! You have company. I’m heading home.”

Behind him, Chris heard his longtime friend gasp.

“Marianne!”

---

Just as Chris put his key in the ignition, his cell rang. Looking at the caller ID, he groaned loudly.

“Larabee.”

“Do you know where the miner’s cabin is? Just beyond your upper pasture.”

“I do,” Chris answered. He had totally forgotten about the five o’clock appointment the man wanted him for.

“You are to drive directly there. Do not come here or go home. A man named Aaron is expecting you. You are his slave for the next eight hours.”

“Look Tanner….”

“Have you tried calling Sebastian?”

“Yes.”

“Did you get to talk with him?”

“No!” Larabee barked angrily. “I was told there was no Christopher Larabee in their system.”

“That is because you have insulted the man who trained you to be a Dom. Instead of taking a lover, you have become a sadist. Just going after and enjoying men. Now, you are back to square one. A slave. A slave to be used. You are due there in forty minutes. Don’t be late.”

---
Vin watched Anna walk up to Justin with two cups of coffee in her hands. She handed on to Justin and offered him one through the window. He shook his head no.

Anna opened the door and stepped in. “You sure you don’t want coffee? It will take the edge off before you call Joseph.”

“No coffee. But if you could find me a beer… that would be good.”

“A beer, it is.”

Vin watched his wife leave. Her power was getting stronger. She was seeing the blond already being used. Standing, Vin went to the door. Opening it, he told Justin to stay where he was, though he was going into the office that was going to be Joseph’s.

---

Henry and Joseph has just checked out of their hotel and were sitting in the hotel’s coffee shop. Both men looked up when FBI agent Wilbur walked in.


“ Heard you resigned from three boards today, Joseph. In fact, in the Foundation board meeting you named two men who were receiving thousands of dollars in kickbacks. I’m interested to know how you found out that information.”

---

Sitting on the floor in Joseph’s future office, Vin could almost see his father’s image in a coffee shop. Henry was with him and Wilbur. Wilbur wasn’t happy.

Vin looked at the two numbers he had for Joseph. One of them said ‘red phone.’ That was the one he called.

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Joseph was startled when the red phone in his inside suit jacket pocket started vibrating.

Vin!

Pulling it out, he swiped it open as he said, ‘Joseph.’

“Tell Wilbur you received information from an unknown source… on FBI letterhead. Which you shredded after seeing the names and their pictures. Give him the other facts you have. Let him take it from there.”

“Good to talk to you too, Vin. Henry and I will be heading up there in about an hour. Henry’s going to need a place to stay. From what we saw on TV, there isn’t room for two helicopters there.”

“I’ve purchased another building within walking distance. Though I may have to use two floors for the ATF now that the glass building is dust.”

“I will take your suggestions and give what I have to Wilbur.”

“I’m sitting on the floor of your new office. I think you’ll like it. It has a half bath attached. Room for those huge bookcases that were in your living room. And of course, plenty of room for that desk. Michael looks forward to having a grandfather. I look forward to having a real father.”
“Hannah said there were more pictures in Catherine’s closet. We’re stopping there on our way up to Denver. Should be home before dark.”

“Look forward to it.”

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Vin heard the office door open. Smiling, he stood and stretched as Justin spoke.

“Marcus is here, Captain. With Joseph’s things.”

“Let’s get it unloaded. Most of the things go in here.”

-=-=-=-

Chris Larabee parked the RAM. Easing out of the driver’s seat, he used his remote to lock it up. Smoke was coming out of the chimney, yet he saw no vehicles or horses around.

“Good evening.”

Chris spun around, swallowing hard as he took in the man standing on the porch.

Young. Late twenties, early thirties. Military haircut. Solid chest…abs. tattoo on left shoulder. A cock, hard and ready.

“Come. Larabee. You are on our menu.”

[[]][[]]

He was naked. Begging. Sweating. Still the man kneeling next to him tormented him with a gloved hand. Squeezing his balls. Stroking his cock. His cock. Full blown and hard with no place to go. The gold cock ring glistened in the light of the flame of the wood stove.

“Pleaseee, I need relief,” Chris Larabee moaned.

“You may ride that ass in front of you for as long as you want. But relief will not come until morning. Now mount him!” Aaron demanded.

So damn good to be in an ass. So good!

Corliss squeezed the cock riding him. Again and again, he tried to milk the screaming man knowing the cock ring held it firm.

“Time out!” Aaron shouted.

Everything around Larabee stopped. The three naked men suddenly disappeared from the room, yet he was still on his knees. Wrists cuffed to his ankles. His swollen cock hurting.

Somewhere, Chris heard a phone beep. Aaron’s voice said ‘yes sir.’

[[]][[]][[]][[]]

“Take him to the toilet and empty his bladder and semen. Move the cock ring to the base so he cannot get hard. You are doing an excellent job, Aaron. Corliss also. Send Romeo back to your bird. More troops are coming with orders from me. Joseph will be on the mountain later this week. He knows of some pioneer houses that are livable. From what I have seen so far … you may be given
the role of taking Larabee down. Don’t blow it. Continue to use him without stressing his health.”

Larabee swallowed as Aaron walked back into the room wearing boxers.

“Romeo! Oh, Romeo!”

Romeo came out through a side door. He was half dressed, wearing black jeans and tucking in a long sleeved shirt.

“Looks like I drew the short straw, right?” Romeo groaned.

“Afraid so. More troops are coming to the mountain. Joseph will be here later in the week with information on livable pioneer homes. Need you to stay near my bird.”

Chris looked at the three. They all had military haircuts. All were physically fit. Young in the late twenties or early thirties.

Tanner’s men! Sebastian had given him to Vin Tanner. These were some of Tanner’s Army men. Men he…

“You’re thinking too much, Larabee!” Aaron shouted into the man’s face as he jerked the cuffs loose, and pulled the blond to his feet.

“Corliss! Get the john ready. He needs to be emptied.”

Vin leaned against the wall. A beer in one hand, his other hand on his wife’s back.

“Joseph’s desk looks good in here,” Vin said as he sipped his beer.

Anna VanBuren Tanner stared wide-eyed at her husband. He wanted to fuck her on his father’s desk.

People could see us through the glass!

Vin chuckled, whispering close to her ear, “In the small bath then. You on the counter.”

“When I’m pregnant, will you be taking the blond?”

“After what happened this morning … your ass riding me. Driving us both insane. That is how I will take you, darling. Not taking any man.”

Larabee once again stood naked in the center of the cabin. A bed had been uncovered, but no move to put him there had been made.

Aaron was standing at parade rest in front of the blond. Looking at Corliss, Aaron nodded.

Chris frowned. Then he felt it. Felt the leather around his neck and the clasp tightening.

Aaron stepped forward, bringing the leash that was behind him to the front. He snapped it on the collar’s hook.
“Corliss and I have work to do. Inside and outside the cabin. You will do as you are told… as the slave that you are. If you do not obey, Corliss will whip your ass with a belt … four times. If you behave, you will be rewarded.”

“Do you understand?!” Corliss barked behind him.

“Yes…” Chris ground out.

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“M-M-Marianne? What are you talking about?” Wilmington gasped as his Saturday night date walked back into this condo.

“You date numerous woman, Buck. How many have had babies in the last nine months? Do you even know? Two have. And they are having DNA tests done to find the father.”

Buck Wilmington’s hand tightened around the beer in his hand. This couldn’t be happening.

“Now, things are happening in my family and I am in need of a husband.”

“Husband?” Buck muttered, sweat forming on his face.

“Yes, Buck Wilmington! A Husband! You are the only man I have hot sex with so – you are the man I have chosen.”

“Why?”

“My Great Uncle has left my sisters and I considerable money. However, we will only get this wealth if we are all married! I am the only one not married. I have already talked to your friend Ezra Standish. We can fly to Vegas tonight.”

“WAIT! You told Ezra about this?” Buck barked, not believing what he was hearing.

At that moment, Team Seven’s undercover agent walked through the unlocked condo door.

Looking from one to the other, Ezra offered, “Limo is waiting, Miss Sales. Plane on standby. What is Mr. Wilmington’s answer?”

“How much money is involved here?” Buck wanted to know.

“Millions!” Marianne and Ezra answered in unison.

“Can I keep my job? ATF agent?”

“Certainly. You will have to move into my townhouse. However, I do believe we will keep this place as a love nest,” Marianne replied.

Buck looked from one to the other. *A hot ass. My salary is mine to spend. No rent.*

“I will buy this condo. You can come here anytime. I will be your only woman though. You will have a good allowance, Buck. Please, let’s do it.”

*Allowance!*

Buck looked back and forth between the two. “Okay.”
Ezra Standish waited until they landed in Las Vegas before calling his friend Vin Tanner.

“Ezra.” Vin rasped as he lifted his wife off the bathroom counter.

“Mr. Wilmington and Miss Sales have arrived in Las Vegas. They will shortly be married and the news will hit Denver papers Monday morning.”

“Heiress marries longtime womanizer… how you going to word that?”

“Heiress woos longtime bachelor and wins him,” Standish stated with a chuckle. “Mr. Wilmington in a tux is quite dashing. I’m sure Mr. Larabee will be shocked. As for myself, I accept your offer. I have been undercover long enough. I may still need a bodyguard, but yes, your proposal is most interesting. Look forward to it.”

Anna’s arms tightened around her husband. “Good and bad things happened today. An out of control Dom is back to square one… being a slave. JD Dunne is much happier and not being robbed. The man with the mustache who loves women got trapped by a woman who can’t have children.”

“And, I’m getting worn out by a woman who may already be pregnant. I’ve asked Josh for a pregnancy kit.”

“Oh Vin. He or she is already talking to me. How will I survive nine months?”

“Mind control, Anna. Divert that energy elsewhere.”

“Joseph’s calling,” Anna said, reaching for a washcloth to rinse the sweat off her face. “I think Hannah and Mike want him to spend the night.”

Vin swiped his phone and answered the call before it even rang. “Dad.”

“My twin is here talking to Andy. Hannah would like Henry and I to stay the night.”

“Do it! You won’t be seeing them for many months. Good to spend a day or two there. I’ll explain it to Michael.”

“Thank you.”
Buck discovers he and Marianne knew each other as kids. He still has all the Matchbox cars her father brought him every month. Martin Sales set up a trust fund for the child of the mother he visited. Buck meets his sister-in-laws and their ‘trophy husbands’.

Buck Wilmington stared into the full length mirror. He looked damn good in a tux. He couldn’t believe it when Marianne told him he was the only man she had dated in the last five years. Of all the women he had dated, she was most interested in what he did.

*This means I can’t be Larabee’s fuck buddy any more, but maybe that is a good thing. Chris has got to get his life together.*

“Are you ready, Mr. Wilmington?” Standish asked coming into the room.

“Any idea on where this surprise honeymoon is?”

Ezra pulled out a small slip of paper. “Something to do with Barrett & Jackson,” Standish mused.

“The antique collector’s car show in Arizona!?” Buck choked out. “Oh god, she really does know me.”

“Are you sure you want to do this, Buck?” Ezra asked quietly.

Wilmington smiled. Ezra had never called him by his first name before.

“Erza. Marianne knows more about me than any other woman I’ve ever dated. Yeah, this old bachelor is ready.”

“But wait Ez! JD?”

“Mr. Tanner informed me that Mr. Dunne has already moved to Mrs. Wells boarding house. He is rooming with the new ATF sniper that arrived from Afghanistan.”

“He was the guy devouring all the egg rolls.”

“Yes.”

“JD’s in good hands then. That sniper will take good care of my ol’ buddy. Let’s go Ezra. Don’t want to keep my lady waiting.”

---

Vin, Josh, Dennis and Justin were having a meeting in the corner of the penthouse living room when Michael ran into the room.

“Dad! Shouldn’t Opa be here by now?”
Vin’s head jerked up. He’d forgotten all about telling his son of Joseph’s change of plans.

“Hannah and Mike asked Joseph to stay with them tonight. Hannah found more pictures of Catherine’s,” Vin explained.

Watching his son’s shoulders slump, Vin added, “Remember, Joseph won’t be seeing them for a long time because he is moving up here to live with us. Opa Joseph is going to help us build a house on the mountain. He’s going to need your help.”

“He is?”

“You are the only one who knows what needs to be in a house full of little boys… bedrooms… pintsize places for saddles and that in the horse barns. You remember all the things you talked to Texas Opa about.”

“Texas Opa didn’t listen to me,” Michael pouted.

Dennis looked at his boss grinning. “I bet Opa Joseph will listen to you. Better start making a list.”

“A list! Right!” Michael yelped, turning on a dime he disappeared down the hall.

“You do realize,” Vin stated with a grin, “he will stay up all night making volumes.”

Josh looked around at them. “He’ll ask Colt for one of those three ring binders and….”

“Dad!” Michael called racing back into the room. “I need paper… and ah, pencils. Erasers. Maybe a binder….”

The four men burst out laughing. Finally, Vin said, “Son. It’s late. In the morning, after breakfast, we’ll have Colt get you what you need.”

Looking around Michael offered, “I could use the shopping list tablet.”

Vin looked his son in the eye saying, “Michael Tanner. In the morning.”

“Five minutes until morning Dad.”

Tanner looked at the clock. Sunday midnight.

“In the morning … after breakfast. Now, off to bed.”

Michael put on a pouty face and looked at each man, then he turned and stomped off to bed.

Vin looked at Dennis and Justin. “Maybe I should…”

“No way!” Dennis growled. “We’re protecting you by order of the President!”

“Okay,” Vin said standing. “Everyone off to bed. And Josh, I need you to fly out and pick up Aaron in the morning. Need his mind when I talk to the Senator.”

---Monday---

Chris Larabee groaned as he rolled over. Suddenly alert to all too familiar sounds he abruptly sat up.

“How the fuck… did I get home?” groused the blond.

“Good morning,” said a voice of a young man who walked into Chris’ bedroom.
Larabee’s hand went to his neck and gave a sigh of relief not to feel a leather collar there.

“I’ve started your jacuzzi. It should be warm by now. I suggest you soak for fifteen minutes or so. You had a rough night. I’ve left two telephone messages on the kitchen counter.”

“Who are you?”

“Corliss Archer.”

“Military?”

“Former Army Ranger, sir.”

“Corliss? Archer?”

“Yes sir. It was a program my mother listed to a lot.”

“What are the phone messages?” Larabee asked as he pushed the blankets back and slowly stood up.

“One is from Special Agent Vin Tanner. All Colorado ATF agents are standing down until another building can be found.”

“Building? What happened to the building?” Chris barked as he looked for his robe.

“Your robe, sir. Is next to the jacuzzi. The glass building imploded. I’m sure it will be all over the news this morning.”

“The second message is from Agent Standish. He said to tell you that Buck Wilmington got married in Vegas last night.”

“BUCK DID WHAT?” Larabee shouted. “MARRIED? NO WAY IN HELL!”

“Would you like bourbon in your coffee this morning?” Corliss asked with a grin.

“Double shot!” Chris barked stepping around the young man, he headed for the bathroom.

“Aaron, what’s the report this morning?” Vin asked as he watched his son with Colt.

“Corliss is spending the day at Larabee’s. He got the blond into the jacuzzi for twenty minutes. Shower. Breakfast. Coffee with two shots of bourbon. The blond is not happy that Wilmington got married.”

“Does Chris know there are cameras in his house now?”

“No. Chris hasn’t left the house yet. He’s watched Cory work with his dog. And the man has watched the news. Several different stations. He has called Buck five times. Swears at the man at the top of his lungs. Cory is working in one of the empty stalls in the barn. It should work for us in bad weather when we can’t get to the cabin.”

“Tell Corliss to go ahead and use him … if Chris asks for it. Josh is on his way to pick you up. Need another mind reader in the room when I met with Senator Baylock.”

“You need a new building for ATF. Does it have to be new?”
“It needs to be structural sound. Good working shape. No renovation. What are you hearing?”

“Last night when I flew Spider in. Got some vibes regarding a huge house up from Mrs. Wells. All the people on that street are being pressured to sell so someone can tear now the historical houses and build a modern structure.”

“Give me a name and I’ll ask Miss Nettie.”

“Something like Rutherford. Josh is here. Need to give orders to the troops that have arrived.”

---

Vin talked to Anna at length, telling her about Michael’s project. Suggesting that she also write down what she wanted in a house. Suggested she ask Josh to get a pregnant test kit.

“The manager of Mimi’s asked to meet with me. He wants to put together some specialty dishes from various countries. What countries are businesses coming from?” Anna wanted to know.

“England. Spain. Germany. Dubai. Plus the U.S., of course. I’m buying two other buildings. The government doesn’t know it yet, but they are going to be renting space from me for the ATF. What else is on your schedule today.”

“I’m meeting with Colt and a woman named Sally about a daycare somewhere. Where she wanted it though, is now Joseph’s office. Where you want to put it, she says is too small. Colt told her it was only for people at the hotel, not the whole community. I don’t think she liked that answer.”

“This is a corporate hotel. Businesses are coming here, not families. We really don’t need a daycare. However, we will need a home school area. There will be some businessmen that may bring their spouses or kids. If she is looking to rent a place for the public to use, this is not the place.”

“Good. I didn’t like her attitude yesterday. She thinks she can walk in here and demand because we are a hotel.”

“We are a private hotel. Just watch Colt. If he starts getting angry with this woman, step in and explain she would have to lease a suite of rooms in order to use any daycare that is here. Once she sees the prices, that will kill her idea.”

“Could I ask Colt for the price list of rooms before we meet her?”

“Go for it, darling. You are representing me and the hotel.”

“We don’t want any bitches running around here telling us what to do,” Anna growled.

Vin laughed. “You are right, mama bear, we don’t.”

---

Vin looked at Dennis and Justin. “Why are you both here?”

“We don’t think you really need us at night unless it is business. You’re going in and out of several buildings today…”

“Okay. Dennis wait here for Aaron. Then bring him up to Miss Nettie’s.”

Jogging up the street to Nettie Wells Boarding House, Vin pulled his phone and called his accountant. Told him what was coming down and what could they afford.”
“You can afford most anything Vin. Joseph and Company made an incredible deposit into two of your accounts this morning. I called Maloney’s office. Told them what you were thinking. It would have to pass a budget committee but … they said go for it.”

Vin stopped outside Miss Nettie’s.

“Okay. I’m not sure when Standish will be back from Vegas. But we definitely want that building up the street for more hotel. Have a waiting list already, so need to get cracking. There is a four story house plus attic up the street here. I’d like to buy that and use if for the ATF. In the long run, perhaps a house for the family rather than the hotel where we are now.”

“Ezra left me the name of the realtor you’ve worked through. I’ll call him. Have you meet him at this place. I know the neighbors would love to have someone buy it and not tear it down.”

“It is an incredible structure. Hasn’t the Historical Society tried to block that commercial realtor?”

“Don’t know. Let’s get it off the market before he knows what’s happening.”

-=-==

Walking into Miss Nettie’s house, Vin and Dennis heard an argument going on. Following the voices, Tanner came to the open door of the parlor. His new sniper was standing on a table, in a small closet. JD Dunne was sitting on a bean bag chair with a ripped shirt. And Miss Nettie was standing just inside the door shaking her head, saying, “Boys. Boys.”

“HOUS-TON! What the hell are you doing?” Tanner barked.

Vin did not miss the look that passed between JD and TH.

“Well?”

“I was, ah, moving boxes up here and discovered a trap door. But upstairs ..ah…”

Tanner stepped into the room and looked up. “Probably because there is a false ceiling in here. Possibly used for storage, though most likely a hiding place for family or slaves. Miss Nettie, I need to talk to you about the house up the street.”

Nettie looked at her two boarders before giving Vin a nod and leaving the room.

“Go with her Dennis,” Vin ordered as he closed the door behind the man.

Turning, Vin glared at the two young men.

“Zip up Houston. No more brownies for either of you. You do realize, that as much as she loves you Houston, she can still kick you out. You too JD. You do not go around fucking each other just because you feel like it. You do it in the attic with the entrance sealed shut. Or you rent a motel and fuck like rabbits. You do not do it in a public place!” Tanner rasped angrily.

“Now. Get upstairs and get dressed. I need your input on a house I’m thinking of buying for the ATF. Make sure you have your ID and weapons.”

[[][]]

In the dining room, Aaron was introducing himself to Miss Nettie who had laid out several papers on her dining room table.
Dennis showed Vin floor plans of three houses up the street. Two smaller two story houses and the large three story house.

The doorbell ringing surprised everyone. Dennis answered it, bringing in a smartly dressed man with a briefcase.

Vin and the man exchanged greetings as Vin showed the man the three houses.

“Are you thinking of buying all of them?” Robert Stark gasped.

“This large one for the ATF. Who knows how long it will take to rebuild or find another place. These two smaller ones would actually be part of the hotel. I have European companies who would like to house their executives with family in a house.”

“Oh Vin! That would be wonderful.” Miss Nettie gushed.

“Red Feather Corporation would buy all three. But they would be used as houses.”

“The man who wants them,” Stark began, “is petitioning the city to zone those commercial. You would have to get permission from the city to use that larger one for the ATF. I don’t see a problem with that.”

Vin looked at JD and TH as he spoke to Stark. “So Robert, shall we go up and buy them before this other guy knows what is happening?”

---

Buck and Marianne Wilmington were just stepping out of an elevator in Scottsdale, Arizona when three women in designer suits stepped in front of them.

“Oh no,” Marianne rasped. “My sisters.”

Buck looked at the three women. *Bleached hair, thin as rails. Bet they were New York models.*

Turning to his new wife, Buck whispered, “You better tell them to stay inside. They’ll blow away in that wind out there.”

Marianne Sales Wilmington gave him a surprised look and then burst out laughing. She was sure he’d see them as a conquest, but he didn’t.

The newlyweds tried to walk around the trio but soon lost the battle.

“Buck, right?” One of the bottled blondes questioned.

“Yes ma’am. Buck Wilmington,” Buck answered politely, his arm slipping around Marianne’s waist.

“We’re just interested in how much she paid you to be her husband,” bitch number two asked.

“Paid me?” Buck gasped. *These three bitches are going down. No wonder Marianne didn’t want to meet them.*

“Yes. Half a million? A million? For a year of marriage.”

“Is that how you got your husbands?” Wilmington asked, looking each one in the eye.

“She asked me, and I said yes. Why? ’Cause she’s one hell of a woman in bed,” Wilmington
remarked, shocking everyone including his new wife.

“Darlin’,” Buck rasped with a grin, “We’re going to be late.”

Marianne bit her tongue to keep from laughing. No one had one-upped her sisters before.

“Do we have a car waiting for us?” Buck asked as a valet stepped forward.

The new Mrs. Wilmington pulled a set of keys out of her pocket. “That white BMW SUV.”

Another shock wave hit the sisters as they watched Buck open the passenger door for his wife, before walking around to the driver’s door.

Getting in the car was not an option for Buck as two cars rolled up on either side of the BMW.

“Come on!” Bleached blonde said. “Bet the dude is going to get arrested.”

[[[[]]]]

From inside the car, Marianne asked, “BUCK! Who are they?”

“ATF agents, Marianne. Something must be going down. Stay here.”

The three sisters, now joined by their husbands, stopped in their tracks as Wilmington greeted four men warmly.

“Shit! He’s a cop or a Fed!” One husband barked a little too loudly.

All eyes turned to the sisters and their husbands as Buck walked back to the passenger side. Bending, he opened the door and assisted his wife out.

“Any reason your brother-in-laws are afraid of a Federal agent?”

“I’ve suspected they’ve been doing bad things with father’s money for a long time.”

“Guys!” Buck barked loudly. “I’d like you to meet my wife!”

“WIFE? Someone finally trapped you!”

“Good! More women for us then.”

“What’s going down?” Buck asked quietly moving away from the cars and the people.

“The middle guy there, do you know him?”

“They are my sisters and brothers-in-law,” Marianne replied. “I’m pretty sure that one, and maybe all of them, are embezzling my father’s fortune.”

“I doubt, my sisters are that smart. We have the same father, but not the same mother.”

“Where are you two off to?” The team leader asked.

“Antique car auction,” Marianne and Buck replied in unison.

Marianne blinked. “How? It was supposed to be a surprise.”

“Ezra told me.”
“Buck. Spend the day there … or out somewhere. We’ll be picking up two of those men in short order. Their rooms will be searched and I’m sure their wives will not be happy.”

“Do you know how much they’ve gotten?” Marianne asked worriedly.

"ATF isn't involved in money laundering usually," Buck said looking at one agent.

"Guns, Buck. Weapons of destruction. Buy from one, sell to another for more. Enjoy your day."

As the new Mr. and Mrs. Wilmington walked back to their SUV, two of the Phoenix ATF agents yelled, “Wilmington! Congratulations! What’s the ATF in Denver going to do now that your building blew up?”

“Hell if I know! Got two weeks off. Hopefully by the time I get back they’ll have an answer.”

[ ]

Once again sitting in their SUV Buck looked at Marianne who was holding in a laugh. “What?”

“I haven’t had this much fun, in I don’t know when. No one has ever rendered my sisters speechless before. They completely snowed their mother. Father was wise to them but their husbands… they all saw the gold cow and agreed to anything to be kept men.”

“Never heard of ‘trophy husbands’ before, but reckon they are around.”

Marianne looked at her watch. “Time is wasting, Buck. The show has already started.”

Buck turned to look at his wife. It had taken him a while to understand what he’d done here. The more he’d thought about it, the more he realized he’d made the right decision.

Turning in his seat, the former ladies man asked, “Where would YOU really like to go? Is there something you’ve always wanted to do in Arizona but have never done?”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” Marianne asked. He really was asking what she wanted to do.

“I am. Being married, means we share likes and dislikes.”

“Well, I’ve always wanted to go on a Pink Jeep Tour in red rock country in Sedona.”

“Coffee pot rock! You’re on!” Buck yelped.

“You’ve been there?” Marianne gasped.

“Long time ago. When I was in the Navy. Maybe we should get an overnight bag… or not,” Buck chuckled keying the ignition.

==-

Tanner’s group had been in the huge historic house for over forty-five minutes. A whistle from their boss brought everyone down stairs. Mr and Mrs Rutherford were amazed at the politeness of the young men.

“JD. Where would you put your computer section?” Vin asked.

“The dining room. Pocket doors… love those. Accessible to any agent coming in or going out. If we need to set up an antenna, there are three good sized windows.”
“Houston.”

“Any bedroom upstairs. Well, two in the back. Definitely on the second floor. Basement storage for the weapons. Mr Rutherford already has a safe down there. That would be good for several things. Plus … I think the K9 officers should live here with there dogs. This place has a nice backyard, though you’ll need a higher fence. And the… ah… maid’s quarters would be good for them because there is space for big dog crates in there.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Rutherford, do you have any answers on the use of your house?” Vin asked.

“If the ATF finally gets a building, what happens to our house then?” Mrs. Rutherford asked.

“A youth hostel or an in-between place for people like Houston. Day before yesterday, Tanner Henry Houston was in the war zone in Afghanistan. He arrived here with no place to live. The K9 agents are in the same boat. They were told to report with their dogs … they have yet to find a place that will allow their dogs. So living here would protect the house and the property.”

“What about the other two houses you want to buy? What are they going to be used for?”

“My Red Feather Corporation would be using them as guest houses. Company executives come in the winter time with families. Some shop. Some ski. Some just want a change.”

Pointing to Mr. Rutherford, Vin continued. “You’re coming to Denver on business in February. Your kids are on break. Your family wants to come too. They aren’t going to like sleeping on rollaways in your suite. You all would be staying in one of those houses.”

The Rutherford’s eyes widened. They chatted back and forth in German. Vin looked at Aaron and they both grinned.

Mrs. Rutherford pulled out a cell phone and called someone else. Then called someone else. Pocketing her phone she said, “My neighbors up the street want to deal with you.”

Vin’s phone went off as he looked at Robert Stark. “Let’s go through the house, every room.”

“Special Agent Tanner,” Vin answered walking into the dining room.

“The interrogation with the senator has been moved to 2 p.m. I have more information on the scalp and hair the Coroner’s men found. It belongs to the Senator’s personal assistant who disappeared a few months ago. FBI is going into the space to see what else can be found.”

“Okay. I’m closing a real estate deal, so that works better for me. I might even get to have lunch with my wife.”

“Good luck with that. Heard anything else on the building from the ATF.”

“Haven’t heard anything from Washington on the collapse of the building. I will be asking your jailbird about that, though.”

“My folder is getting thicker and thicker on that man. Enjoy your lunch.”

Vin swiped off his phone and looked into his realtor’s face. “What’s the deal?”

Robert ushered him into the kitchen.

“Your men are walking through the other two houses. They are priced at $200,000. It is the going rate for houses that size in the historical district. The builder was offering them less than that. This
house… Rutherford wants $800,000. Definitely not worth that. If you really want this house, $400,000. Not a penny more.”

“Plus, Vin. That building you just purchased. Many of those offices could be made into family suites.”

“Is Aaron still here?”

“Yes.”

“He and I will walk through this house. Then I’ll tell you my decision. But write up the papers for the other two, depending on what the troops say.

As Vin walked out to get Aaron, ‘the troops’ reentered the big house.

“Houston. In the dining room.”

“Go.”

“Those two houses are in excellent shape. That corner one has a new roof. Both houses updated their kitchens. Definitely worth $200,000. I’d offer $250,000 each. They want to retire away from the snow. Have you walked through this one yet?”

“Aaron and I were just going to do that.”

“I’ll walk with you and Aaron if that’s okay.”

“Tell me what you really found here.”

“Could we go into the kitchen or the backyard and talk?”

“Kitchen.”

“Okay. Water damage in the attic that goes down the wall into one of the bedrooms. Couple of bedrooms on the third floor has really squeaky floors. They kind of move when you walk on them. Second floor. All rooms are carpeted and a couple look like they are carpeted over carpet. I don’t think this is the house for us, sir.”

“Good job.”

“Aaron.”

“Mr. Rutherford wants $800,000. I don’t think he is going to take less. His wife…she wants out of this house. Thinks he is a stubborn fool. I agree with TH. This is not the house for you or the ATF. It would be better to take a floor of that other building you bought.”

“Robert. Let’s go meet the other two owners and sign some papers.”

“Do you really think Mr. Rutherford is going to be sleepin’ in the garage?” JD asked as the group walked up the street.

“I think they are both going to be shocked when they get the appraiser’s report. I don’t know any realtor in town that will pay that price for that house,” Robert Stark ventured.
“Robert. Call that appraiser. Tell him you have a buyer who wants to know what it is really worth.”

“You can’t be serious, Vin.”

“I’m thinking of tearing it down. Those bricks… ten to fifteen bucks a piece. Aaron. Remember that place in Germany where the men would sit and place checkers and chess…”

Aaron stopped, turned and looked back at the house. “That lot would be perfect for that. Cement tables with a checkerboard embedded. Cement stools.”

The two looked at Robert who was now staring at the property too.

“Eat lunch and play chess. I like it. And you’re right, those bricks are worth a fortune.”

-=-=-=-=-

“I think, darlin’,” Buck said getting back into the BMW after filling up its tank, “that my credit card will be maxed out on this trip.”

“What about … oh wait, I didn’t give that to you did it?” Marianne mused looking through her purse. “Oh good heavens, don’t tell me I left it at the hotel.”

“What are we looking for?” Buck asked.

“Here! Here it is!”

Buck stared at the little flat box.

“My father’s attorney said I was to give you this as a wedding present. I’m not sure what is in here, but he said a man should always pay. My father said that too.”

Buck stared at the box. Slowly he unwrapped it and lifted off the cover. Inside was a dark blue Chase Sapphire Bank card with his name on it.

“Marianne….”

“Look! There is a note under it.”

Buck slipped the paper out from under the card.

“This card is for the little boy on the bench that I visited with once a month. Love you, little Buck. Take care.”

Buck stared at the note. This man was one of his mother’s clients. He came every month to have sex with her. He always brought him a Matchbox car or truck.

“Little boy on the bench?!” Marianne shrieked. “Oh my god! I was the little girl with her nanny who would sit on the swings while he talked to you. Buck! We’ve known each other since we were little!”

“You were the little girl in the sailor’s suit. You wore it every time.”

“I was.”

“I thought you said your father died last year.”
“Yes and no. He’s been comatose in a hospital for over a year. Dead to the world he knew. Through his lawyer I get these CDs with messages from him. He never thought I would ever marry because of my weight. I take after my father not my mother. She was skinny. I never knew he made these things. Videos to be played after he died. Even though he hasn’t officially died, his lawyer decided to start sending these. None of my sisters have ever watched them. I was the first daughter. I related to him. They didn’t.”

“Buck. I don’t even know how his lawyer got this thing so fast. I called him from Vegas. Told him I was getting married and gave him your name. This was handed to me when we signed in. Maybe we should call the lawyer. I’m remembering something else…” Marianne said pulling out her phone.

“You wouldn’t have a picture of your father, would you?” Buck asked as he looked around the Pink Jeep Tour parking lot.

“Sure. Hang on.”

Buck Wilmington stared at an old picture of Martin Sales. He knew the man. He would never tell Marianne how he knew him, but he did remember the summer of his ninth birthday when the man from the East came to see his mother. It was the last time he came. He still had every car the man had given him. The man’s daughter was always on the swings while the man talked to Buck. Now that little girl was …his.

Marianne stared at him. “Your mom was a ‘lady of the night.’ We have history. This is wonderful!”

Buck stared at her.

“Something happened to my mother when she gave birth to me. She never slept with my father again. He told me years ago, the love of his life was someone his family would never let him marry. It must have been your mom. I know he was really sad when he found out she had died.”

“Could we call the lawyer? I need to find out about this?”

The man answered on the first ring. Buck had a feeling he was expecting the call.

“Agent Wilmington. First, congratulations! Martin would be overjoyed to learn that his favorite girl has married the little boy he wished was his son. He never produced a boy and visiting you and your mother once a month was a joy I know he still misses. You also need to know that he set up a trust fund for you. He wanted you to be able to have things that your mother, whom he loved very much, wasn’t able to give you. I kept track of you until you went into the Navy. I did discover you became a Navy SEAL but once you got out, you seemed to disappear off the radar. My investigator got your fingerprints off a glass in Las Vegas which is how the Sapphire card was manufactured so fast. This card is tied to your trust fund. It is your money. Quite a lot of money, in fact. When you get back to Denver, I would very much like you to visit Martin. Perhaps the voice of Little Buck will bring him back into our world.”

Buck Wilmington sat stunned. A man he barely knew. A man who loved his mother but couldn’t marry her, had left him a trust fund. A trust fund.

Grinning, Buck looked at Marianne. “So, Mrs. Wilmington. Shall we do the jeep tour?”

“Absolutely, Mr. Wilmington!”

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Dennis was inside the Federal Prosecutor’s office along with Vin and Aaron. Justin was outside the
office door. The group had been in a discussion for over thirty minutes, going over things from the Coroner’s office.

“All any report from the Fire Marshal on why the building collapsed?” Tanner asked.

“We’ve called in several State and Federal inspectors. Washington is all over this. We’re damn lucky no one was killed. Everyone is crediting you for getting people out of there alive.”

“Can I put the senator on the spot? Flat out ask him why he rigged a building to collapse? Who he really wanted to kill? And how many people he’s already killed in the stairs that go nowhere?”

“Aaron, what do you think?”

“I can tell you the senator is already worried. I’d like to observe him before you go into that room. Give you some insight into what he’s thinking. What he’s worried about.”

“Hold on a minute here!” The Federal prosecutor barked. “Tanner, you want to explain this?”

“Are you using Lily?” Tanner questioned.

“Yes! She is fantastic! Best computer geek I’ve ever talked to.”

“Lily. Please explain who you are.”

“Do you think that is wise, Vin? We are getting this information without a warrant.”

“We can always get a warrant later,” the prosecutor replied.

“My name is Lily. I am a super computer put together by NASA for the Red Feather Corporation. Vin Tanner’s corporation. I assist in running his hotel. His ranch when it is built. ATF offices. I can draw on any other super computer in the NASA network to get information, fingerprints, bank accounts. Anywhere there is a computer I can go.”

“Holy shit!”

Vin grinned, saying, “Now, your computer people are using her. They are going through channels. She is just navigating those channels at super sonic speed.”

“With Aaron, he has mind reading capabilities. He was born with it. His father had it. His grandfather had it. He and I can talk mentally. He can read the senator’s mind and translate that to me without saying a word.”

There was a knock on the door, and Dennis answered it.

“Sir. It’s the Coroner.”

“Jeffrey,” two men said at once.

“Vin. Gerald.” Jeffrey stated tightly, walking in and laying several pieces of paper on the Prosecutors desk.

“Evidence against the senator. His DNA was in the pieces of scalp retrieved in that stairway, as well as her body that was found a few hours ago. Along with her body another body was found. That body was a man who has been missing for five years. He also had worked in the senator’s office. Clasped tight in his frozen fingers was a leather glove. I’m sure the senator worried where he lost it. This is what you need to present to the judge… for no bail.”
“Looks like we don’t talk to the senator today,” Vin stated calmly.

One of Gerald’s men walked in without knocking, saying, “We just got a call from the senator’s lawyers. One is on his way over. He wants to know exactly what you have on the man. I got the impression, the senator glossed over most of the things he was suppose to have done.”

“Aaron and I would like to be here when he arrives.”

“Definitely! You have first hand information on that bomb in the basement and on that stairway to nowhere.”

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They sat around a large conference table … the Federal Prosecutor, ATF Head, Vin Tanner and Jeffrey Rockland, Medical Examiner, plus two high priced lawyers. Standing in the corner, Aaron Lockhart.

The lawyers were each looking through folders of evidence. The Coroner’s reports. The fingerprints off the bomb in the basement. Several fingerprints of the senator in the stairway to nowhere. Plus some things that Lily had found relating to the secret backer the senator had for the hotel he wanted in that building.

“Gentlemen,” Vin started. “How well do you even know your client?”

Instead of an answer, one lawyer asked, “Are you interested in making a deal?”

Gerald and Vin answered in unison, “HELL NO!”

Then they looked at each other and grinned.

Tanner suddenly pushed his chair out and stood up.

“You want to make a plea bargain? Did you read those papers in front of you? Your client is responsible for two deaths. Probably more but we have evidence of only two… so far. He put a bomb… a bomb! In the basement of that building. He was just damn lucky it was leaking. It could have killed the people working there. And yes, there were people working in that building. He made a fire escape with no exit! Not only was there no door at the bottom, but if you ran back up to the top where you can in … that door was sealed. You could pull on the handle until doom’s day ….it won’t open.”

“I don’t think even one of your thousand dollar an hour criminal lawyers will be able to do a plea bargain. Because what we haven’t even considered yet is the banker in German. That man is just now realizing that his trusted American friend …this senator … rigged the building that was to be his super American hotel to explode. Explode with people inside. I suggest you go back to the drawing board. Get with someone who knows international law. You are definitely going to need it.”

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Jeffrey had left. The lawyers had left. Gerald, Vin and Aaron sat around the conference table drinking coffee.

Looking up, Vin said to Aaron, “You’re father was a lawyer, wasn’t he?”

“Yes. And I was getting so many different things from both those guys. I was sorting it through things my father used to talk about after his cases were done.”
“You were shooting things through my brain so fast, I wasn’t even sure what I was saying.”

“You were shooting things through my brain so fast, I wasn’t even sure what I was saying.”

“Good thing, it was recorded,” Gerald answered.

<knock knock>

“Come.”

“Judge Black just ordered No Bail for Senator Baylock.”

“HOT DAMN! Dinner with the family tonight,” Tanner yelped.

Gerald stood up, saying, “I’m not sure my wife knows who I am anymore.”

Beep, beep… Vin pulled out his phone and looked at the text.

Joseph arrived. He loves his office. Michael is thrilled to have Opa here. We are meeting at Mimi’s for dinner. Invite the prosecutor and his wife… on us.

“Mimi’s Café is officially open. Call your wife, Gerald. Dinner is on me.”

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The People

Chapter Summary

A drug dealer attempts to bribe Vin Tanner. A young Ranger that Larabee loves is attacked by Team Leader One. ATF looks at a possible new home office.

Note: The character Randy Bartel and his father was taken from a personal family experience in 1952.

“Aaron, where are you?” Tanner barked into the man’s phone.

“At Larabee’s. He is pissed because of the cock ring I put on, on Sunday night.”

“I would like you, Spider and Romeo to come into town. I’m looking at an abandoned school for the ATF. It is in a transitional neighborhood. Near a place called Hanover Park.”

“Hanover Park?” Aaron repeated.

Larabee spun around. “HANOVER PARK IN FULL OF HOODS AND TRASH. HOMELESS AND….”

Aaron reached for Larabee’s exposed cock and yanked it to the floor.

Vin figured they heard that scream all the way to the fifth floor.

“Robert Stark has told me about the neighborhood. The school grounds include a half mile track. Some bleachers. A small clubhouse… good for K9 units. Agents Houston, Dunne, Golden and Sanchez are walking through also. I want Spider to check out the roof, vents, and so on. Need your input for any onlookers.”

“I’ll call Spider. Have him fire up my bird. Corliss can finish with Larabee. Chris might need your direct attention. His whole attitude has changed since Wilmington got married.”

“You tell him he doesn’t want me in his face. He’s already experienced me NOT being there. Ask him if he remembers what Sebastian did to him when he didn’t obey.”

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Vin holstered his phone and looked at Joseph. “Questions?”

“How did you work me off and not even be there?” Joseph Bebee asked dropping into his desk chair.

“Your mind wanted it. You body craved it. I talked to your mind … just the same as when you and I have none verbal conversations. It’s like a dream, only someone is controlling it. And… you want it. Want it bad. You expose your feelings to me and I translate that back to you. So you let yourself go, and your mind takes you there.”
Before Joseph could answer Justin burst through the door.

“Captain! We have an ATF helicopter landing outside. JD said he’s never seen one before.”

“Okay, let’s go have a look.”

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Josh Bird met Vin as he approached the side entrance.

“Aaron is on his way in. I’d like him to look at this too,” Vin said as the two men pushed through the door.

“Oh man, this is old,” Vin gushed.

“I love it!” Josh croaked as he peered into the small cockpit. “Vin, it’s like the Bee only older.”

“Looks like an old Sheriff’s copter,” Colt put in.

Vin heard Aaron’s bird approaching. “We’re going to have to take those trees down so we have space for birds. We have three with Henry’s blue bird.”

Colt Hammer stepped away and looked down into the small park. It was barely half a block long.

“Vin,” Colt called, motioning his friend and partner over. “We could take the trees out and put a low hedge all around the outside. Just make three cement circles … painted for helipads. Leave the rest in grass.”

“Miss Nettie, plus the two houses I purchased, have wood burning fireplaces. We could stack the wood in the backyards of all three houses. Henry is going to be living in the house on the corner, along with the K9 agents. Long term, he’s not sure.”

Behind him, Aaron put in, as he leaned out his cockpit door, “We have troops on the mountain now who could take down the trees and cut them into cords.”

“I saw a moving van at the second house from the corner. They must be really anxious to get out of town,” Spider put in.

“They have a place in Arizona ready to go. They aren’t taking any furniture, just personal stuff. I’m going to have to find someone to live there and take care of the place, until we decide how we’re going to use it.”

Josh looked at Aaron and Henry, who had walked out to see what was going on.

“Why can’t the helicopter pilots live there?”

Vin snapped around and stared at the man.

“Vin,” Josh continued. “We have Aaron’s military bird. My jet bird. And Henry’s blue bird. They would all be parked here. This little thing would fit in the backyard of one of those houses.”

“I’m not sure I want this bird exposed to the neighborhood. Someone could steal it. Plus the house on the corner… Mrs. Hawley is going to be the housemother to those living there. She sold the house but … I’ve given her a deal to live there rent free, if she would be in charge of the guests. The place she was going to move to, was destroyed by that last Florida hurricane. It still hasn’t been rebuilt. She lost a hunk of money. Plus she is a dog person so the canines fit well there.”
“I was actually thinking the Tanner family could live there…”

“NO!” Came the sharp reply from Dennis, Justin, Colt and Aaron.

“Anna and Michael and even Joseph need the protection of the hotel. Everyone in the hotel watches out for Michael. Even the wait staff in Mimi’s.” Colt explained.

Aaron looked at his Captain saying, “Joseph resigned from five Board of Directors in Austin. At The Foundation’s meeting, he exposed two men who were taking kickbacks. Like it or not, he is going to need a bodyguard.”

Looking around, Tanner asked, “Do we really need this ancient copter?”

“Josh is on call so he won’t be here all the time. Henry is going to be employed by the Red Feather Corporation. That means he will be transporting anyone related to the hotel as well as Joseph or me. Aaron will mostly be on the mountain but… I’d also like him as my pilot because his bird is armed.”

Aaron walked around the four-seater copter. He opened the doors and checked out the inside.

“If you buy this property we are going to look at, could this be housed there? It could be used for short hops to Court or the Hospital. It could also be used from the hotel to the mountain. And … it does have a gun in here. Though you might have to hang out the window to shot it.”

“Captain. Let Spider and I talk to the guy who found this. It might not be worth overhauling if its been in a shed for forty years.”

“Go. We need to meet Robert Stark at the school property in thirty minutes. And… I want to take your bird Aaron.”

“Sir! Call the K9 units. They better search this place too. Never know what the neighbor kids might be hiding there.”

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People in Hanover Park slowly disappeared as an Army helicopter and several cars began parking in the abandoned schoolyard.

K9 agents with dogs, both wearing vests with ATF in big letters on their vests and harnesses walked the property.

People came out with folding chairs and sat along the sidewalk as Spider climbed the brick sides to the roof.

People watched the spider man on the roof call to someone, who was obviously in charge. That man walked to the spider man, communicating with some strange hand signals.

“What do you have Spider?” Vin asked glancing toward their spectators.

“Roof looks to be in fairly good shape. Just one spot probably needs repair. But this new foam stuff they have. Might be worth getting an estimate for that. Insulates in the winter, keeps it cool in the summer. Did you know we have an audience, sir?”

“I have noticed that, Austin.”

Spider growled. Only his grade school teachers called him Austin.
OH MY GOD! IT’S FALCON! HE’S ALIVE!

Tanner spun around and looked at Aaron.

“Has to be someone in the audience, sir.”

“See if you can narrow it down. I’ll be inside.”

Vin found Josiah Sanchez, Dunne, Houston and several others in the principal’s office.

“Tell me what you think,” Vin said, jumping to sit on a built-in desk. When no one said a word, Vin called on Houston first.

“TH.”

“Classrooms would be good for the divisions the ATF has now. Lots of rooms for offices. This one, the old principal’s office would be good for you. It has lots of potential.”

“Padre. What about the kitchen and gym for what we talked about? Neighborhood gatherings. Or feeding the homeless.”

Agent Sanchez smiled as Vin called him Padre. A profession he gave up years ago.

“Vandals have destroyed the kitchen. We’d have to start over there. Unless we are going to house security people to guard the property, I don’t see the need for a commercial kitchen. Given the neighborhood and Hanover Park being a big hangout, keeping this place safe may be a problem.”

Vin looked at the one K9 agent that had entered. “What is your input?”

“I don’t think the clubhouse would work for anything. That should be torn down. A lot of graffiti in there. One of the locker rooms would be good for us. Also those bleachers need to be trashed.”

“JD.”

“Vin. They actually have an old computer lab here. No problem with updating that. And,” JD started looking around. “A new set of bleachers on the north side of the track … ‘cause TH and I were thinking, kids from the neighborhood might want to use the track once they see us using it.”

Grinning, Vin looked at Houston. “You’ve got him running?”

“I told him you’d probably come through here on your morning’s run. Well, you and whoever is brave enough to run with you at six o’clock in the morning.”

The other K9 agent walked in saying, “Good, Bart and I won’t be running alone then.”

“I don’t run the same pattern more than twice. Give Lily your email addresses. I’ll send you the routes when I start running, which should be soon.”

“Given the homeless situation in the park. The audience we have across the street. Do you think we can get this place up and running so we can be operational by the end of the month?”

Agent Sanchez looked out the window saying, “I think we have neighbors out there that would love
“Okay. Walk me through every place you have already looked, plus places you haven’t. K9’s … have you found anything?”

“Found some drugs in the clubhouse. Mary Jane mostly. We collected it all and carried it out to a dumpster that was ready to be emptied. It if belonged to anyone watching… they saw it go.”

An hour later, a big red X was sprayed on the bleachers and the clubhouse. Several more ATF agents had arrived plus two more Army helicopters with men onboard. Everyone spread out with orders to look in every corner for anything that might be hazardous to the job.

“Sir,” Aaron said softly coming up next to his Captain. “Randy Bartel is on the sidewalk with his father. From what we have gathered, his dad has kept him locked in the house since he got home. Several neighbors were surprised to see him. Seems his father told everyone his son was dead.”

“I’d say we’d better do an intervention. Has anyone talked to Josh?”

“They have,” Josh Bird answered walking up to the two. “Called two surgeons at the Trauma Center. An air ambulance is on standby for us. You get on a microphone and explain what is happening here. Moose and Bear and Jimmy will get Randy. Once he is on this property… I’ll key in the air bird. You should also know, Rocky Allen and his crew is here plus a couple others. Doctor I talked to, said no charge to Randy or his family. There are Foundations that pay for what he needs.”

Looking at Aaron, Vin stated quietly, “Have Romeo move your bird so his side door opens to the street. I’ll stand in the side entry with your bird’s microphone. While all eyes are on the helicopter, have them get Randy.”

Vin Tanner jumped up into the open bay of the Army helicopter as he heard Mr. Bartel screaming he was going to call the cops for his son being kidnapped.

“PEOPLE! MAY I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION, PLEASE,” Vin barked over the loudspeaker.

“I am sure you have all wondered what is going on over here. My name is Vin Tanner. I am the new man in charge of the Colorado ATF.”

Tanner let that news settle for a moment before continuing.

“Agents, please assemble to my left. Rangers to the right.

“If you don’t already know, I am a former Army Ranger. Randy Bartel was in one of my squads. Several men here are alive because of his bravery. As Army men, we are doing an Intervention today. Randy has been a virtual prisoner in his father’s house since he returned. Why? Because in his father’s mind, his son is not whole, so therefore he is dead. It doesn’t matter that he has a brain. A damn smart brain too. The problem is he lost his legs, so therefore he can’t possibly be a man.”

Pointing to the young man with curved prosthesis, Vin continued. “Now Jimmy here, he runs marathons. He also plays a mean game of wheelchair basketball. And he is a helicopter pilot. He is definitely not dead.”
“Mr. Bartel, you have an outstanding son. But, what you have done for the last year …”

“I CAN DO ANY DAMN THING I WANT TO HIM. HE IS MY SON!” Bartel yelled from the middle of the street. “IF HE WANTED TO LEAVE, HE COULD HAVE!”

Before Tanner could say a word, Moose walked to the edge of the school property.

“PRETTY DAMN HARD FOR HIM TO LEAVE WHEN YOU LOCKED UP HIS WHEELCHAIR! YOU CHANGED THE LOCKS AND DIDN’T GIVE HIM A KEY. YOU SIR, MADE HIM A PRISONER OF WAR. A PRISONER IN HIS OWN HOUSE!”

“You see all these former army rangers behind me. We are going to see that Sergeant Randall Bartel gets the treatment he should have gotten when he got home. He’s getting a new set of legs. An apartment with one of us, and we will make damn sure he is never locked up again.”

As Moose stepped back, all talking stopped. Vin had never heard such silence.

“Sorry for interrupting you Captain,” Moose said in a normal voice. “We are all pissed that a parent would make a prisoner, of a war hero.”

Looking around from his perch inside the helicopter, Vin spotted his realtor. Hooking the microphone on the inside wall, Tanner hung out the door and called to Stark.

Still talking on his phone, Stark walked over to Vin as he jumped out of the copter.

“Yes sir, I’ll speak with him now,” Stark replied to the voice on his phone.

Vin smiled and waited.

“We are the show of the day,” Robert said quietly. “Numerous veterans are up in arms about Randy being held captive. His father may end up without a job. The City Council held a rare emergency video conference regarding this property. If you – personally – buy this property, you can have it for $100. If your Red Feather Corporation buys it… then the cost is $200,000.”

“They don’t want a corporation coming in here and putting something else up, or changing everything around. Don’t they know I can still do that?”

“They probably do, but aren’t really thinking in the broad spectrum.”

“Okay. I need to make a phone call and then I’ll let you know,” Vin said turning and walking back to Aaron’s bird. He rolled inside and closed the door.

“Are we staying? Do you want me to leave?” Romeo asked from the pilot’s seat.

“You’re fine Romeo,” Vin answered as he speed dialed Joseph.

“You know son, I don’t always carry this red phone. You should really use my regular cell.”

“Well, father of mine, I like being the only one who knows about that red phone.”

“Go with the hundred dollar offer. There is a lot we can do with that building if the ATF ever gets another building. Community wise and commercially.”

“In other words, I can use it either way. So, go with the hundred dollar offer as a private citizen. I’ll
have to go back to the hotel for cash…”

Vin stared at the two fifty dollar bills Romeo was handing him. “I’ll loan it to you, sir. There are four guys here that don’t have jobs or any place to live. And, you’re going to need guards here. Even after the ATF move in.”

“Looks like you have your answer. There are a lot of homeless veterans, son.”

“Okay, dad, thanks.”

“You sure about this, Romeo?”

“Best investment I’ll ever made. I’ll introduce you to the four guys once things wind down.”

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“The door’s opening. Zoom in! Zoom in!” TV8’s studio man shouted.

Vin Tanner stepped into the Colorado sunlight once again. This time he had two fifty dollar bills in one hand.

Robert Stark grinned. “I have the paperwork in my car. I’ll put that together while you explain yourself to the neighborhood. By the way, several neighborhood cops have agreed to help clean up the area on their off time. The Chief of Police called me personally.”

“Hopefully, that means our guards won’t have trouble here.”

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Once again Tanner hung out the side of the Army helicopter. This time he hooked a headset on and asked Lily to broadcast for him.

“Ladies and Gentlemen … I am not a speech maker. As my Rangers here…,” Vin began, gesturing to his right, “will tell you, I am a man of very few words.”

“The City of Denver has just made me an offer concerning this property, and I have excepted their offer. Let me explain what we’re going to do with it. As many of you know, the glass building on the downtown square collapsed yesterday. That means the Colorado ATF has no place to go. I understand Orin Travis used the Federal Court Building over that last four years, however, the ATF is not related to Federal Court, Superior Court, lawyers, etc. We are crime fighters.”

Vin jumped down from the bird and walked toward the curb. Immediately, Justin and Dennis were visible on either side.

“Guys! Can’t I even go to the john without you tailing me?”

“NO!” Came the collective answer from his bodyguards and numerous former Rangers.

Looking back at the people Vin asked, “How many of you work for the government?”

Pointing to the six people who raised them hands, Vin said, “Then you know how fast the government works.”

Laughing, one barked, “A snail’s pace.”

Another shouted, “An eternity.”
“That is why I purchased this property. Because as the new head of the Colorado ATF … we need a place to meet and to work. It is going to take some collective community work to get this place up and running.”

Walking toward the broken bleachers, Vin pointed to them. “These will be taken down. A new set will be on the opposite side of the track. The track will be resurfaced. Again, my Rangers know that I run every morning. The ATF guys … they are just now … learning that they are going to have to do that too.”

Except for a few frowning ATF agents, everyone laughed.

“Vandals have trashed the commercial kitchen that was in the school, so troops or agents working or living here are probably going to go hungry until we have a solution.”

“We also need electricians. Once the electricity gets turned on…. Whoa!” Vin yelped as lights went on inside and around the track.

“Captain… Sir!” Moose’s voice boomed out again.

“You have a brand new wife you haven’t even spent a whole day with yet. Agent Sanchez and I are going to organize things. A lady over there is putting together a potluck supper for anyone who works here. The electricity is on. We have electricians here that can check it through the whole building. The four men standing over there talking to Dr. Bird will be the guards living here and watching the place. We’ll make sure they got food and that the bathrooms are working for everyone.”

Jimmy stepped up next to Moose, saying. “We’ll teach the ATF agents some things too. Especially that it is a group effort. There is no ’me’ ‘me’ I can do it better.”

Vin held in his grin. The ATF agents weren’t ready for this but they sure did need it.

*In his ear Vin heard, “The water is turned on. The electricity is turned on. No gas service.”*

“Lieutenant!” Vin barked.

Moose came to instant attention. “Yes sir.”

When his Captain just stared at him, Moose knew he had overstepped.

It was a good five minutes before anyone spoke, as Vin stared at Moose. Finally Tanner responded, “Thank you for taking the initiative to take over. However, I am still going to be hanging around. Because every married man here knows … that when your wife tells you to go to work, you’d better not come home early.”

“You got that right?”

“No dinner if you do?”

“She’ll think you’ve been fired!”

Holding back a grin, Vin turned and walked over to his realtor.

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Chris Larabee was kneeling in front of his fireplace watching the news. The news that was on every channel. The blond was begging for relief. Relief of the dildo that was pumping so damn slow, Chris
was going mad.

“FASTER CORLISS! FASTER!”

“You don’t have a say in this, Chris. You begged to be fucked. It’s happening, my way, not yours.”

Chris closed his eyes, his jaws tight. The damn cock ring was keeping his cock from filling. His balls were bursting.

“Cor…liss. Pleassee. Fuck me faster. Please.”

Corliss picked up the egg timer once again. He set it for five minutes. Placing it on the hearth in front of his slave.

Cory grunted, “Five minutes. No begging for five minutes. Then I will up the speed.”

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“Vin,” Joseph muttered quietly through Tanner’s earpiece.

“Joseph.”

“Jimmy and his father really want to buy that little bird. Let them. Henry knows of a newer one that is available. Bigger than the Bee. One you could fly, with space for your bodyguards … or me or Anna. Four passenger plus pilot and copilot. Henry thought it should be tagged with US Army, Red Feather and ATF going up the tail.”

“How much will that cost me?”

“It will come out of your college fund!”

Vin burst out laughing. The college fund he never got to use. “Do it.”

“Okay Robert, let’s go over those papers and get them signed. I’ve got work to do.”

---

Vin leaned against Aaron’s bird. He had stashed the purchasing documents in the locked case behind the pilot’s seat. He was now calling Nettie Wells to see if she knew any of the ladies on Hanover Drive.

“Oh Vin. I saw where you are on the news. I’ve already called and talked to three of my friends from the church guild. No boys working there will go hungry. They are all so thankful that property is going to be used. Lots of gangs used that clubhouse. They all want to know about that man that can climb the walls without help.”

“His name is Spider. No one knows how he does that. Even his parents don’t know. They found him sitting on the wall when he was three. He has done some incredible rescues because of that talent.”

“You let Lt. Moose know that Mrs. Garvay is organizing a potluck for those still working this evening. And anyone that spends the night… breakfast will be delivered too.”

“Don’t know how many will be here tonight, but four will be guarding it every night once the building is occupied.”

“They are homeless veterans, aren’t they? That is so sad.”
“They have no family, Nettie. Now they will have a job and a place to stay.”

“There are other churches around there. We will take care of them Vin, don’t you worry.”

“Thank you, Miss Nettie.”

Vin heard but didn’t acknowledge Moose’s approach or his “Sir.” Tanner just watched the activity happening in front of him.

“Captain.”

“Lt. Moose,” Tanner chuckled. “Don’t be surprised if the ladies call you that.”

Moose raised his eyebrows. “Because you called me Lieutenant. And the guys called me Moose.”

“Yeah. Neighbors are planning a potluck for whoever is working late. They will also make sure the four guards get food. By the way, I’d like to meet them.”

“Aaron wants you to walk through again. We are stacking all the chairs from the classrooms in the gym. Taking down pictures and boxing them up. Bart and his drug dog are walking up and down the hall checking lockers. And the other canine guy, Bruce, is checking for explosives.”

“Okay. I need to talk with Jimmy and then I’ll be ready.”

---

Vin shook hands with Jimmy’s father, telling them both that he was not going to buy this helicopter. Vin could tell by the man’s face and Jimmy’s that this was good news.

“But James,” Vin rasped, pointing a finger at the young man. “I want you to hang loose with it. Tomorrow morning, I will call Washington to see if any ATF units around the country has helio pilots. Salary for that would be something like $50,000 to $60,000 a year. And, I don’t know if that includes a fuel allowance.”

“$50,000 a year! For piloting ATF agents around?”

“Yes, little bird man.”

“My dad and I have already decided to buy it, if you didn’t. He’s a mechanic. He said it was in very good shape.”

“I’d like you to keep me updated on Randy Bartel too.”

“Be glad to. I plan to check on him every day. Will be able to do that now with this little winged man.”

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“Just tell me where they are, Aaron. I want to just observe them and things for a bit.”

“Most activity is centering around the gym right now. We found several wrestling mats and some were put in the principal’s office because that is near the main entrance. Others are in the men’s locker rooms ...because we found some contraband there. More than four will be here tonight. Several nights actually. Several are between jobs. They think this is a great idea and they want to protect it.”
“What about the police? I saw a Lieutenant’s car here earlier.”

“I think Moose has his card. He shook hands with several Rangers. Gave them a special number to call if gangs showed up. I think Moose told him gangs would be in for a shock if they tried anything. Also Bart and his drug dog are staying tonight, and Bruce and his bomb dog will be here tomorrow.”

“I don’t want you scaring the people who live here, Aaron. Are you staying? Who is watching the mountain?”

“Jonathan, Jerry, Peter and Henry were there when I left. Also Franklin is arriving today or tomorrow. Oh yeah, Franklin said he talked to several other ranchers around your family’s ranch. He interviewed two ranch managers who had worked ranches that Peterson closed on. Mike Tanner agreed he’d rather have a ‘native Texan’ as a manager. So Franklin is coming up here to work with Joseph on the mountain.”

“Did you walk away from a job to come to the wedding and up here?” Tanner asked seriously.

Aaron looked to the ground. “Sort of.”

“Explain, sort of. Do you have a job to go back to?”

“No. I went back after the wedding and gave my notice. I’ve got some funds saved up. Wanted to be up here.” Cause I love you so damn much, can’t stand to be away. You’re married but… I want to be here.

In a bare whisper, Falcon stated tightly, “Being married is irrelevant. I can bring you off to a screaming high without fucking you. Ask Joseph. I did it to him when he was in Texas and I was here. If you’re sleeping in your bird tonight, it better be alone … and strap yourself down.”

Aaron’s eyes went wide as his Captain slapped him on the shoulder and walked into the main entrance of the school.

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Walking through the school’s halls, Tanner heard a variety of conversations. Several involved Chris Larabee… why wasn’t he here? Why wasn’t Wilmington here? Two agents figured the old friends were at Larabee’s fucking each other. Several talked about driving out to find him.

Vin watched two of his Ranger storm out of a room mumbling and cussing. Suddenly seeing him they were about to spout off when he put his finger to his lips.

Stepping into the doorway of the room his former Rangers had just left, Vin pulled his ear piece down. In a bare whisper he told Lilly to tell him what team they were on.

“Okay you assholes,” Vin Tanner growled fiercely, “What are your names?”

‘Four are long time agents. Team one. Two are new, with Team three.’

“Two newbies and four seasoned agents. All of you are suspended for thirty days with no pay!” Vin Tanner spat out.

“WHO THE HELL YOU THINK YOU ARE? YOU CAN’T DO THAT!” The leader of Team One shouted, jumping to his feet.

“I’m your boss. Appointed by Washington. I am not a milk toast former lawyer biding my time in an
office so I can retire. I was hired to kick your lazy butts out of your chairs and get you to work!"

“Since your heads are in the sand, you missed the announcement that Buck Wilmington got married and is honeymooning in Arizona. He has two weeks off.”

“Buck got married?” One of the Team 3 men gasped.

“Chris Larabee is on an undercover assignment. His cell is off. Hopefully he left it at home. Don’t go out looking for him. If you blow his cover, you will be fired.”

“Lilly. Put their names in the system. No pay for thirty days. Send them a reminder of when to report back here.”

“I will be glad to do that Vin.”

Vin turned and walked back into the hall. Three grinning Rangers stared at him.

One burst forth in a loud voice, ”Sure am glad you didn’t want us to hang them naked out in the trees. That would really scare the neighborhood.”

“Might keep the gangs away,” another chortled.

“Gentlemen.”

“We’re out’a here sir.”

“Wait! Escort these men off the property.” Vin ordered as he walked down the hall, holding back a grin.

_He only did that once. And it still haunted him. Hogtying a Ranger upside down from a tree, stark naked._

_Still, it had kept a lot of smart mouth men inline since then._

-= -= -= -=

Spotting a Boys bathroom, Tanner ducked in. He checked out every stall. Scanned the walls for cameras before pulling out his phone and calling Corliss.

“Archer.”

“Hide Larabee. Away from any windows. Put our code on the security system. Some disgruntled agents may be coming out to look for him.”

“I just put him into the soundproof stall in the barn. Aaron called. Said several agents were bashing him and Wilmington.”

“If you are questioned by anyone, you are a friend of the family from Indiana. You are there to rest and work with the horses while your cousin is on assignment.”

“Got it, sir. After they leave, do you think we should move him to be cabin?”

“There is no place he can be left alone there, is there?”

“Not a place that is heated. Though the barn isn’t heated either.”
“Stay at the ranch. I’ll check in later.”

-=--=-

The invisible man, Vin Tanner, leaned against the wall under one of the basketball hoops. He’d been there for thirty minutes. No one had noticed him, even though several asked ‘when was Tanner going to show’.

He watched Agents Dunne and Houston work with two teens who were sitting on the stage. It was obvious from the teens expressions that it had to do with something online.

An older man, from the neighborhood, came and stood next to Vin. Twenty minutes went by before he spoke.

“Your troops are well disciplined. Polite as hell. They have all the women here snowed. Nice to hear, ‘sir’ and ‘ma’am’ again. Today’s kids don’t know manners at all.”

Vin suddenly realized his bodyguards were nowhere in sight.

Aaron! Where the hell are my bodyguards?

-=--=-

Aaron Wright charged out of the principal’s office. Seeing the Rangers Vin had interacted with earlier, he shouted, “FALCON’S UNPROTECTED IN THE GYM! GET THERE!”

Scrolling down his phone, Aaron was desperately trying to remember the computer’s name.

“Oh hell, what is that computer’s name?”

“Lilly. What can I do for you, Aaron?”

“Dennis and Justin! They are suppose to be guarding Vin. Find them.”

-=--=-

Without looking at the man next to him, Vin was sizing him up. Just from his smell and his attitude, Tanner knew he wasn’t a friend.

Lilly silently called the police Lieutenant who had been out earlier. Cluing him into a conversation that was about to start.

“You’re a dealer? Definitely not an undercover cop. How much did you lose in the drugs that went in the trash?”

“You are very astute for someone your age,” the man answered.

“That’s why I’m called the invisible man. How much did you lose? Let’s see, a garbage bag of marijuana and a box of white powder. Yeah, I bet you lost some big bucks.”

“I could kill you right here. No one would even notice.” The man grunted.

Vin was suddenly aware of Spider’s aftershave. The man had to be above them. He’d probably been walking around the walls all morning so no one noticed him now.

“You threatening a Federal Agent? That is big time jail.”
“Everyone has a price. Heard you have a wife? I’m sure you want to keep her alive.”

Vin’s whole demeanor changed with the threat to his family.

“You don’t have enough money to buy me off,” Vin rasped, suddenly aware of a whisper from Lilly that the conversation was being recorded, and the cops were listening.

“You paid a hundred bucks for this property. I think a million dollars will buy you off easy.”

Tanner laid his head back and looked up. Spider grinned at him, as he signed in their Special Forces language.

“You know what, Mr. Drug Dealer, a million dollars is pittance. I paid cash for the old Federal Building which is now the Federal Hotel. Saved two historic houses from being bulldozed by some Yankee builder who hates the history of this town. I’m buying a jet helicopter. No, your million dollars isn’t going to cut it at all.”

“I’m sure your wife goes shopping….”

It happened so fast even Spider was shocked.

Tanner’s right arm came up against the man’s throat, as Vin turned. His left hand grabbed the man’s belt. The drug dealer’s eyes widened as he was thrown to the floor.

“MOOOOSSSEE! AARROON! HANG THIS SHIT BAG OF A DRUG DEALER UPSIDE DOWN ON THE FLAG POLE… IN HIS SHORTS!”

-= -=-

The people in the neighborhood came over to look at the man hanging from the flagpole.

Several news vans were parked around Hanover Park. Reporters and cameramen dotted the street.

“Who put that sign on his shorts?” Someone asked.

“How’d they even get him up there?”

“Reckon we don’t have to worry about drugs here anymore.”

-= -=-

At the Federal Hotel, Anna and Joseph, Lt. Bebee and Wolf with Michael watched Agent Tanner talk to the media.

“Opa, my dad’s really doin’ a good thing, isn’t he?” Michael remarked from his grandfather’s lap.

“He is, Michael. He definitely is.”

-= -=-

In front of several microphones, Vin Tanner once again spoke about the future of the old Hanover School.

Pointing to the man hanging upside down, Vin stated tersely, “This man is a drug dealer who bragged about controlling this neighborhood. He offered me a million dollars to move on. Find another place. Then he threatened my family. That’s when I took him down.”
Looking at the man, Tanner continued, “I did this once before in a country I can’t name. Lassoed a perk, stripped him naked and hung him by his ankles on a tree. It is amazing how much respect you get from an enemy when something like this happens. I don’t know who put the sign up … but it pretty much says what will happen if any drug dealers come around again.”

Mess with this place

Threaten our loved ones

Cops will pick you up here

“We have already notified the police that we will patrol this property. They don’t need to put on extra manpower for us. While the ATF agents are green rookies in regards to patrolling the perimeter, the former Rangers who are here, are not.”

Pointing to Josiah Sanchez, Vin continued. “Agent Sanchez volunteers in one of the homeless shelters. Both he and I are aware of the homeless veterans everywhere. They are homeless because they have no family. Or have been kicked by family that don’t understand what they have been through. Some hit the ground when a car or truck backfires… because to them, it is the sound of a fire fight. Bombs going off. To them it is a threat.”

“Troops are trained for war. Sadly, there is no way to untrain them for civilian life.”

“They all have nightmares. I have nightmares. You do not want to wake up a soldier who is having a nightmare because he will think you are part of that nightmare. You could get seriously hurt because he will think you are the enemy in his dream.”

“What Sanchez and I would like to do down the line, is redo that kitchen so we can serve the homeless in this area. That takes people. That takes community support. That takes community volunteers.”

“My long term goal … is to use some of those classrooms for sleeping quarters…. Not on the floor. Bunk beds attached to the walls. But you won’t be able to just fall in and sleep. You need to work in the kitchen or trim the trees. Cut the grass. Run the track. Fix the broken fences along Hanover Drive. Help Mrs. Daley get her trash out on Monday mornings.”

“That is a long term project. There is no way a commercial kitchen can be put together overnight. No way the bleachers can be replaced. No way the clubhouse can be torn down and removed. It is a long term project that needs to be started sooner rather than later.”

You know damn well what is going to happen here, sir, Aaron rasped.

They will come during the night and do it. Better get to sleep early.

“Rocky. Any questions?” Vin asked his favorite reporter.

“I think you covered it all, Vin. We are already getting calls into the station from companies that want to help. Who is in charge here tonight?”

Falcon looked over his Rangers, smiling when he saw Moose pointing to himself.

“You sure, Lieutenant?”

“Yes Sir!”
“Moose has volunteered to be in charge. Moose is his code name. He was a Lieutenant in the US Army Rangers, Special Forces.”

Vin watched several cameramen zoom in on the man.

“His real name is……”

“OH HELL SIR, DON’T TELL THEM.”

“Robert James Charles Henry Brown. I think that covered every grandfather, didn’t it?”

“Yes sir.”

“Those that are staying. Meet on the bleachers in the gym. For those perks who think they can sneak in here, be aware that one of the K9 agents will be patrolling the area. And every Ranger here is very good at being invisible when patrolling the perimeter.”

“Falcon,” Aaron spoke quietly, waiting for him to finish his instructions to Moose.

“Aaron, what happened to Justin and Dennis?”

“They are being treated by two ATF paramedics. They got snookered by a fake cop. They’ve given that Lieutenant a good description of the man. The officer thinks it is someone who was kicked out of the Police Academy. I brought you here. They’d like to stay for a while. Spider and I are stepping in for them.”

“Special Agent Tanner.”

“It’s Buck Wilmington. Just checking in. We’re back in town. I should be available by Monday, next week.”

“You have two weeks. You can use them if you wish. Everything okay with you and your bride?”

“It’s good. Real good. We discovered we knew each other as kids. Best decision I ever made.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Buck. Larabee has gone off the deep end. I have two specially trained people with him. I’d ask you not to drive out and see him.”

“Fine with me. He has more ups and downs than a roller coaster.”

“I’ll see you Monday … have you seen the news?”

“We have. My wife is in public relations. She’s offered some bono work if you need it.”

“Thanks. We probably will need some free PR in the future.”

“Let’s check on my two bodyguards and then head out to Larabee’s. We can park in the pasture.”

Aaron came in low at treetop level. What Tanner saw, he didn’t like. The three loud mouth Team
One agents had Corliss up against the barn door.

Vin pulled a rifle from the rack, checked the load and had Spider slid open a side door.

“Hover low as you can and put me on speaker.”

“BACK AWAY FROM HIM NOW!” Vin shouted as the draft from the helio hit them.

The team leader reached for Corliss’ throat and Vin fired, putting a hole through the man’s shirt.

“THE NEXT SHOT WILL BE IN YOUR HEAD, ASSHOLE. YOU ARE UNDER ARREST! NOW BACK OFF.”

*Land behind them. Block in their car.*

“Lily. Get me the State Police. Tell them what happened and get paramedics out here.”

“I’ve called Dr. Bird, he is already airborne. I believe you need someone besides Aaron to stay with Larabee. Romeo and maybe Spider.”

All of a sudden two other Army helicopters came from the mountain and hovered overhead. They stayed in the area as Dr. Bird landed. Josh and two other paramedics raced down toward Corliss Archer who was slowly sliding to the ground.

Spider and Vin jumped from the bird to allow Aaron to park in on the hill.

“You can’t arrest me, Tanner!” Team One’s loud mouth leader boasted.

The siren coming up the long driveway startled the agents. Vin just grinned at them.

III

Using sign language, Corliss Archer explained to Tanner what happened. Telling him the man ripped off his Medical Alert dog tag and took his wallet. When Cory tried to defend himself, the hood smashed his jaw against the barn door and clipped him in the ribs with his fist.

*I think he broke my jaw.*

Vin translated the attack to the State Police. The ‘I can do it better because we’re number 1’ team leader was arrested for assault. His pockets were searched for Archer’s wallet and medical dog tag.

The other two agents were suspended indefinitely for not stopping their team leader.

Josh confirmed the man had a broken jaw, plus two cracked ribs. He would soon be airlifted to the Trauma Center.

Vin had Lilly call Moose, telling him that someone needed to stay with Corliss 24 and 7.

Once the State Police, the agents, Josh and Corliss were gone, Spider, Aaron, Romeo and Vin opened the barn to check on the horses and get Larabee in the house.

“Horses are set. Cory was probably coming out of the barn when he was attacked. Let’s get Larabee in the house. I asked Cory to put our code back on, so we could just lock him in his house.” Vin suggested.

“Spider isn’t interested men,” Romeo ventured. “But he will drive the man wild sitting on the wall. I
think Aaron should fly you home, Falcon. Spider and I can handle the blond. In fact, it would be good not to use him. Make him wonder what he did not to be used.”

“Who said I don’t like men?” Spider barked jumping on the wall.

Tanner laughed. “This is the door. It slides that way. Open it slow.”

The three men stared at Chris Larabee sound asleep wrapped in a horse blanket. Aaron and Romeo picked the man up and carried him to the house. Vin gave Spider the code to use, so Vin could stay and close up the barn.

=-=-=-=-=-

With Larabee sound asleep in his own bed, the three former Rangers sat around the kitchen table discussing the situation.

“I really think Spider needs to go back to the property,” Tanner suggested. “There are a lot of ceiling lights that he could work on. Is there anyone else on the mountain that could come and take care of the horses in the morning. That way Romeo wouldn’t have to let the blond alone.”

“Jimmy could fly out in his new little bird. Stay with Larabee while I let the horses out. Or, I’ll just code him in,” Romeo offered.

“Call Jimmy and ask him,” Vin replied. “Aaron and I need to fly Spider back, and then I need to go home for a while.”

Spider looked at Aaron. “Looks like you are the new bodyguard for now.”

“And I need to get the property papers out of your lock box,” Vin yelped pointing to Aaron.

=-=-=-=-

The three stopped at the Federal Hotel to check in and get some food. Aaron and Spider once again met Anna VanBuren Tanner and Joseph Bebee.

Vin handed Joseph the papers for the property purchase, asking his father to put them in that secret drawer.

Aaron frowned as Anna looked him over and then looked at Vin who grinned and nodded. Whatever was going on, he couldn’t translate their thoughts, which had never happened before.

=-=-=-=-

“What the hell?” Tanner barked as they hovered over Hanover School.

“Where the hell am I going to park? There are people everywhere,” Aaron groused.

“Lilly! Tell Moose we need a space to land.”

Like magic the crowd in the middle of the track disappeared. The engine barely shut down when Moose was at Vin copilot door.

“Sir,” Moose rasped, as he let his Captain out. “You aren’t going to believe this but … since you left, people have been coming. Cleaning windows. Cleaning floors. And then those to trucks came.”

Tanner looked around. There were more people here than lived in the neighborhood.
“Sir. By morning… we will have a commercial kitchen.”

Vin stared at the man.

Aaron moved up beside Vin saying, “You issued them a challenge and it is happening. They want it to happen. You paid a hundred dollars. They are putting the community back into their community school.”

Spider looked at the empty flagpole. The man was gone but the sign was still there.

“You showed them that you don’t back down,” Spider put in. “You have given them the courage to step out and reclaim their neighborhood.”

“It is going to be expensive with an all electric kitchen,” Vin began.

Moose cut him off saying, “The gas company came out shortly after your news conference ended. After you left. They reconnected the gas line. All the stoves … big six burner stoves … three of them. They are all gas. Plus someone came and put in a big wash machine and a gas dryer. We’ve got two freezers. A commercial dishwasher. Hell, I got out there before someone plugged me in somewhere.”

“How’s Justin and Dennis?”

“They spent three hours in the Emergency Room. Josh dropped them at the hotel on his way to pick up Corliss. They have orders to take it easy for at least a week. We all heard what happened to Cory. The ATF agents here were really pissed off at the dude that assaulted him. I guess that guy spouts out a lot about being number one because he is the team leader of Team One.”

“I’m pressing charges against him for assault. Corliss was terrified. The man broke his jaw and several ribs. He…”

Everything stopped as a small helio hovered overhead. On the tail were symbols for the ATF, the US Army, and a long bright red feather.

Vin Tanner stared at the small helicopter. It was bigger that the Bee but how? How did Joseph and Henry get it here already?

The pilot’s window slid open and Carter Bebee’s head appeared.

“They need you at the hospital now! Something to do with Corliss. Where the hell can I land?”

“Take your bird up, Aaron.”

“Falcon, you don’t have any bodyguards.”

“He does now!” Buck Wilmington barked as he and two ATF agents walked up.

“Buck, you’re on your honeymoon,” Vin groaned.

“Marianne told me after the miracle I performed earlier today … that I’d best get my butt down here.”

“Miracle?” Numerous people questioned.

“Her father. A man I knew as a kid. He has been in a coma for over a year. I talked to him. He used to call me Little Buck. Gave me a Matchbox car or truck every time he visited us in Vegas. He’s
conscious now."

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In the ER, Tanner found a terrified former Ranger. His arms up keeping nurses and doctors away. His rib cage turning purple. Screaming words no one could understand, through a jaw he couldn’t open.

“EVERY ONE OUT!” Special Agent Tanner shouted.

“Bebee! See that no one comes in. Find Dr. Bird.”

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Gently touching Corliss’ chin, Vin whispered, “Relax. Chris is safe. We found him sound asleep. No one will hurt him. Romeo is there.”

He let go of all his anger. At his wife. At his football coach. At everything that has ever pissed him off. He… he asked me to move in with him. Can I do that?

“My mission with him was to bring him back to who he really is. You have done that Cory. He poured out his years of grief to you, and you took it and through it away. It is gone. Your mission with this project is over. Yes, you are free to do that. You are free to live with him. Love him. Help him to enjoy life again.”

Falcon. Could you put him down as my next of kin?

“I can do that my friend. I can definitely do that.”

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Chris Larabee bolted upright in bed. The sun was out. The house was too silent.

Grabbing his robe, Larabee marched into the kitchen.

“Who the hell are you? Where’s Corliss?” The blond barked into Romeo’s face.

Romeo noticed immediately this man wasn’t as hostile as he was two days ago. “Cory was airlifted to the ER. Team One’s team leader attacked him outside the barn.”

“Find my truck keys, while I shower. We’re going in.’

[]

Romeo called Aaron to see where Larabee’s truck keys were hidden. Lilly interrupted the call and routed it to Vin.

“Romeo,” Vin burst in, “I will fly out and pick up Larabee. You call Franklin. Have him pick you up. Make sure he knows someone has to take care of Team Seven’s horses. You both need to know that Corliss has asked that Larabee be listed as his of kin. Chris has asked him to live with him and Corliss wants to do that.”

“That is great,” Romeo gushed. “Corliss lost his parents some time ago and his brother has pretty much abandoned him.”

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Vin waited for Franklin to move his ATV so he could land his newest toy. Vin discovered that Joseph had ordered this bird just after the wedding. Before things all went to hell and Peterson was arrested.

Stepping out of the pilot’s seat, Vin talked to Franklin first. The Texan was told that two pioneer cabins were found and troops were divided between the two. Franklin had already talked with Joseph and plans were being made.

Looking at Larabee, Vin said, “Chris. You’d better bring an overnight bag. I’ve listed you as Corliss’ next of kin. The only brother he has, hasn’t spoken to him in years. His parents are gone.”

The blond nodded and started for the house. Seeing Aaron in the copilot’s seat, Chris called to him saying, “Where’d you hide my truck keys?”

Aaron stared at the man. They drove the big black truck into the garage. Oh hell! I locked the keys in the truck!

Jumping out of the mini bird, Aaron spun around to face his boss.

“You locked the keys inside?”

“Yes.”

“Not to worry,” Franklin responded. “I have a universal key that adjusts to anything.”

Chris Larabee stood staring out the window of the Surgery Waiting Room. He’d been there almost an hour, without moving.

Two Rangers watched him, silently talking to themselves.

“Are we sure that is Larabee? Usually he’s demanding to know what is happening.”

“Looks like Corliss tamed him.”

A female in scrubs, pushed through a door calling his name. “Chris.”

“Dr. Stone. How is he?”

“Everything went well. The jaw wasn’t as bad as we first thought. It is wired partially open. He’ll have to be on a liquid diet for a while. We’ll give you some recipes.”

“When can I see him? What about the ribs?” Larabee pushed.

Dr. Stone chuckled. “We super glued his ribs back together. He’ll be sore for several weeks. No horseback riding. No heavy exercise.”

Stone looked around. “The clerk, there, will give you his room number when we get it. You can wait there for him. He’ll be in Recovery for a while.”

“Thank you.”

The two Rangers got and walked down the hall. Near the elevators they stopped to call Falcon.
Tanner told one to stay and one to come to the property.

“All let Larabee know, there will always be one Ranger with Corliss as long as he is in the hospital.”

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Vin Tanner stood in the kitchen of Hanover School. If his jaw could, it would be dropped to the floor. Three large, six burner, gas stoves were along one wall. All being tested to make sure they were up to code. The was a new dishwasher. A huge new sink with an arched spray attachment.

Down the hall was a ‘wash closet’, or so the sign on the door said. Two wash machines and two dryers were inside.

The People had taken over his property. Vin Tanner couldn’t be happier.

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The Community

Chapter Summary

Chris Larabee tamed. Buck discovers his new father-in-law is someone he knew as a kid.

Corliss Archer came to in a place he didn’t recognize. Had he been shot? Was he wounded? His movement brought a blond man dressed in black. He knew this man. He loved his man. But who was he?


Falcon!

“Take it easy, Corliss,” Vin Tanner cautioned. “You were attacked by Agent Snyder. Do you remember that? You were protecting Chris. Larabee’s been here since we found him in the barn. Do you remember hiding him so Snyder couldn’t find him?”

I love this man! Why can’t I remember him?

Vin looked up into Larabee’s green eyes.

“I love him too,” Chris rasped. “Maybe when he’s back at the ranch, he’ll remember.”

THE RANCH! MEN CAME TO THE RANCH FOR LARABEE! I WOULDN’T LET THEM IN. FALCON! THEY TOOK MY WALLET! MY MEDICAL ID!

“Corr…liss,” Chris rasped tightly as he reached into the side drawer and pulled out his lover’s wallet and Medical tag.

“We got them back. That man is in jail.”

CCHHRISSS!!

“I’m here. I’m not leaving anytime soon,” Larabee rasped, as he bent over to kiss his lover on the cheek.

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“Buck,” Tanner declared outside Corliss’ hospital room. “Step in and meet the new Chris Larabee. The young man in there with the broken jaw helped Chris get rid of his anger.

“Do you know how many Anger Management people he drove to drink? This I have to see,” Buck answered.

“Wait! You’re not going to disappear on me again, are you?”
“I’ll be at the Nurses’ Station,” Tanner answered with a twinkle in his eye, as Wilmington walked into Archer’s room.

“Course I didn’t say which station that would be,” Vin whispered as Joseph exited the elevator and walked toward him.

-=-==

Buck Wilmington walked into the hospital room and stood rooted to the floor. His old friend. His Navy buddy was calming talking to the young man he’d seen on the news. Chris wasn’t pacing. Wasn’t grumbling…

“Who are you?” Buck asked.

Larabee turned. “Buck! Vin said you were on your honeymoon! How’s married life?”

“Who are you? What have you done with Chris Larabee?” Buck questioned walking further into the room.

_HAHAHA. No one knows the new Larabee._

“Corliss Archer … Buck Wilmington. Cory and I have that silent talking that you hate so much.”

Buck smiled at the young man with the bandaged jaw.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you this calm since before SEAL training.”

_You were a SEAL? Do I need to purge that too?_

“No! You don’t need to purge that to. I was a ….” Larabee began until he saw the grin on Buck’s face.

Buck Wilmington burst out laughing. “Damn, stud! Don’t think I’ve ever seen you embarrassed before.”

“Ss..tud,” Cory gushed through braced jaws.

_You were a stud. We are going to burn that too Chris Larabee!_

“Cory. My hormones were out of whack in high school and into the Navy. You don’t have to worry.”

Buck walked up next the hospital bed with a big smile on his face.

“Don’t know what you did to ol’ Chris here, but I’ve never seen him happier. Never seen him apologize for being bad before either. Whatever you are doing, keep doing it.”

_Tell him thank you stud of mine._

“He says, thank you.”

“So Buck, which woman did you marry? Are you happy?”

“Best damn decision I’ve made in years. Married Marianne Sales. Turns out we knew each other as kids. Her father visited my …mother.”
Chris nodded. He knew the kind of work Buck’s mother was in.

“You know those Matchbox cars and trucks in my safe. Her father brought me those. One each time he visited Las Vegas. He’s been in a coma for over a year… until yesterday. Yesterday, I talked to him for half an hour. Telling him I was ‘Little Buck.’ Told him I still had every Matchbox he’d given me. Whatever I said, broke through his unconscious state.”

“Where are you two going to live? The team probably won’t be hanging out at your condo anymore. And what about JD?”

“JD moved out before I got married. He’s renting at Nettie Wells boarding house. Rooming with the new sniper. I notified the condo manager that I was giving up mine and moving out.”

Buck walked over to the window and looked out.

“Her father knew I had no clue who my father was. My mom didn’t know either. You know what my mom was.”

“I do.”

“Marianne’s father, Martin Sales,” Buck started turning from the window. “Set up a trust fund for me. A trust fund for a bastard child. I couldn’t believe it. On our honeymoon, his lawyer told me, they had kept track of me until I was in the Navy. Once I began a SEAL no communication could be found.”

“Our life depended on no one knowing where we were,” Chris put in.

Buck reached for his wallet and pulled out the gift he’d been totally floored at receiving.

“The unconscious man, through his lawyer, gave me this credit card. There’s no limit on what I can charge.”

“About time you got something good like that, Buck. You look happy. Satisfied and content.”

“We’re keeping Marianne’s townhouse, but we’re moving into her family home in the Hanover Park area. It is some big historic place. We both want to help her father get back into the world of the living.”

“She’s got three half-sisters too. Met them in Arizona. Snooty. Get this..they have ‘trophy husbands.’ I’d never heard of that before.”

“Hey Buck!” JD yelped coming in the door. “Vin’s leaving! Better get downstairs.”

“Shit! I already lost him once today. ATF agents don’t cut it as bodyguards.”

“Hi, Chris!” Agent Dunne barked. “You doing okay? Need anything?”

“Everything is good, JD. What do you know about the ranch?”

“Oh yeah, messages.” JD pulled out a little notebook.

“Ah, hmmm. Okay. You’re college boy got a scholarship to veterinary school. Romeo is staying at the ranch to keep away any unwanted visitors. Spider is taking the horses out every morning on his way into town. Ah, Franklin will put them in at night and feed them, etc. Let’s see… Tanner picked up your mail from your post office box. Important stuff was delivered to your lawyer. Don’t know what that important stuff was. Romeo is a really good cook. He’s making a bunch of stuff and
“Plus the restaurant in Four Corners will be making things for Corliss when you two get home. Several frozen fruit and yogurt smoothies that can be unthawed for him. They are also going to be delivering thick soups.”

Looking up, JD said, “Evidently Snyder threatened some people in Four Corners and bragged that nothing would happen to him because he was a Federal agent. So, that is why the community there is doing this.”

Chris looked at Corliss. The young man had tears on his face.

“Thanks, JD.”

“Ok. I have to get back to Hanover Place. I’m the message guy. I’ll stop by before going home. See if you need anything. Just call me if you want burgers or something. Probably couldn’t sneak a pizza up here for you.”

“Couple of roast beef sandwiches from Arby’s, would be good. And curly fries.”

“It’s a deal.”

Chriss… how long have I been here?

Larabee bent down and kissed Corliss on the nose.

HOW LONG LARABEE?

“Three days.”

And you’ve been here the whole time.

“Yes.”

That why no Rangers have been here?

“Aaron’s been here. Spider’s been here. Vin’s been here. Spider stops on his way to Hanover Place. Aaron usually comes around noon, depending on what is happening at the school. Vin…”

Tanner burst into the room just then with four Rangers and Dr. Bird.

“We’ve moving you out! Get your gear, Chris.”

“Look Tanner! I’m not going anywhere without him.”

“Something is going on with Snyder. He’s hired a big fancy criminal lawyer. You both are going to a safe house. Get you stuff.”

Chris watched a wheelchair come in, along with a man who looked a lot like Cory.

“You’re putting in a …”

“We don’t have time to jabber. Get your stuff.”
They left by the service elevator, getting off in the basement. Aaron wheeled Cory up a ramp into a delivery area. Then into a panel truck marked ‘Springtime Cleaning.’

“Larabee. You’re not going.” Vin stated firmly holding up his hands to stop an outburst.

“Your truck is parked out front. They need to see you leave. You will probably be followed home. Once they see you are home, they will make a grab for the patient they think is Corliss. My mini bird has been flying back and forth to the mountain all week. Hike to the miner’s cabin with a backpack of clothes and I will pick you there.”

“And you will explain all this to me later.”

“I will.”

---

The Springtime Cleaning van and an ambulance arrived at the Sales mansion at the same time.

Cory was walked in, between two Rangers, covered with a variety of sheets and blankets on big hangers.

Martin Sales was transported into his house by stretcher flanked by two burly looking paramedics.

“Marianne..., Buck..., you sure about this?” Tanner questioned.

“Absolutely Vin!” Marianne Wilmington gushed. “They wanted to put my father into some rehab home. With your people, I couldn’t think of a better place to bring him. And Cory too. Dad’s lawyer has already talked to a Federal judge. If they try to kidnap Cory’s stand-in, that lawyer will lose his license.”

“Buck. Call Chris. Make sure he checked the back of truck.”

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Larabee had taken his phone off and put it on the dash. He swiped it on when he saw it was Buck calling. “Go.”

“Did you check the back of your truck when you left?”

“Got six bags of kitty litter back there. And I threw my backpack on the back seat when I got in. I do have a tail though. Have had since I left the hospital. Do you know what’s going on, Buck?”

“Can’t say old man. Tanner pushed me back into honeymoon status. I lost him twice today. Marianne’s working at Hanover Place. Call me when you get home.”

Old man. Hanover Place. Honeymoon status. Buck’s on guard at the Sales place. Cory and her father. Let’s give our tail something to worry about.

Larabee pulled into the last gas station before Lookout Mountain Road. He topped off the tank before pulling into a parking space. Walking in he paid for his gas, then looked through several sweets. Picking up two packs each of Twinkles, Ding Dongs and Dove Chocolate, he quickly paid for them and headed back out to his truck. Checking the truck over thoroughly, he climbed in with the treats for him and Cory and headed home.
Chris stopped at the mailbox out front and watched his tail speed past him. He was just about to put the truck in reverse when Romeo tapped his window and motioned him forward.

Rolling down his window, Chris didn’t get a word out before Romeo barked at him.

“Go forward! Park where you always do. We are being watched. You back up now, you endanger Cory, yourself and a lot of other people. Your mail’s been put on hold.”

Romeo jogged up the driveway before calling Falcon on his red phone.

“Boss. Chris tried to turn around and go back into town.”

“We need to move Corliss. Buck … damn, he used a code that Michael could understand.”

“Why can’t we use the hotel? It’s the original Federal Building. Got rooms, jail in the basement. Your Red Feather office as three or four rooms behind that front office…”

“In plain sight. Good idea. For now, code the blond in his house.”

Vin called Joseph and told him what was happening. Vin was shocked to learn his mini helio could fit into the lobby.

“I’m leaving you in charge, Dad. You’re the espionage guy. We’ll be there in a blink.”

Looking around. Vin saw Corliss sitting in a chair looking forlorn. All activity was centered around Martin Sales.

Walking over to Cory, Vin touched his knees. Where’s your stuff?

‘There.’

AARON! BRING THE LITTLE BIRD AROUND BEHIND THIS HOUSE. CORY’S BEEN COMPROMISED.

“Ease up slow. We’re going out the back. Chris is locked in his ranch. Buck blew your cover. Larabee tried to return to come here.”

I can walk. Been practicing when Larabee sleeps.

Tanner grinned as he hoisted the small backpack over his left shoulder and put his right arm around Cory’s waist.

In the kitchen, the two men found an open elevator and took it down one floor. Stepping out in the lower level, Vin groaned. There was a wall of windows but no door that he could see.

Over there, your left. A bucket. Gardening stuff.

Vin quietly, slowly moved toward the door. Cory turned the knob and they stepped out. Both men were relieved to see a red, white and blue helio waiting for them.

Aaron slide the door open and helped Corliss in. Vin followed.

“The hotel. Land as close to the side double doors as you can. Cut the engine, and everyone stays inside.”
Joseph stood as a commanding general in front of several hotel security men and Rangers.

“Slide open those doors all the way until they click. Put the skid under the helio and pull it in. Put it on that round mosaic. Once they are in, close the doors. Corliss and Vin go to the office we’ve already set up.”

“Carter. You’re the driver of the truck that is in underground parking. The other two men in the bird need to be escorted with Carter. One of you stay in the back with … Aaron and Jimmy. The other one rides upfront with Carter. Make as quiet a entrance into Hanover Place as you can.”

Carter looked at Joseph. Like Vin, he didn’t always call him Dad. “Joseph. What if the truck is pressed into service?”

“You are there to deliver, in this case men. If they need your truck and your help, do it. We have others here who can relieve Wolf.”

Colt Hammer watched Joseph Bebee. He’d learned that Joseph had been in the Diplomatic Corps and had been involved in several international negotiations. Colt was more the General Manager of the hotel, but what he was seeing was the perfect person for head of security. Joseph was the man who could deal with their international clients. He’d have to talk to Vin.

“THEY’RE HERE!”

It went like clock work. The mini helio was pulled across the marble floor to the round mosaic. Carter and two others took Aaron and Jimmy toward an elevator and disappeared into it. Corliss was helped into a wheelchair and zoomed down the hall to Red Feather Corporation’s suite of rooms.

Dr Bird helped Cory into some comfortable pajamas, before offering him a raspberry, strawberry smoothie.

Anna looked at Josh who nodded. Letting her know there was a sleep sedative in the smoothie.

“Want you to just relax and get some real sleep, Corliss,” Vin offered. “I’m pulling Romeo in from the ranch. Anna will be here until he arrives.”

“What about Chris?”

“For the next twenty-four hours Larabee is a prisoner in his house. His house phone is monitored and so is his cell. I talked to several Rangers who had come up to see you. Larabee told them you weren’t allowed visitors.”

I know you love him. He probably loves you too, but … he has always been possessive. And hoarding all your time isn’t right.

I thought I heard him arguing with Aaron and a couple of others. But I couldn’t respond.

“You get some rest. Someone will always be with you here.”

Vin. Should I keep him as my next of kin? What if my brother shows up after all this time? I don’t want him in my life again.
Son. I’ll be his next of kin. We can stop by the hospital on the way to Hanover Place. I’ll have Lilly print something out. We need his signature on it.

Corliss. Did you hear that?

I DID! Who is that?


Sounds good to me, bro.

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Stepping out into the Red Feather office, Tanner asked for an update.

Joseph looked at Colt saying, “He wants an update.”

“I heard.”

Vin looked at one and then the other. Before he could respond, Joseph remarked.

“Lilly! Turn on the TV and give the boss an update.”

“I shall do that Joseph. The paper for Cory to sign is printing out in your office. You’d best have him sign it before that sedative in the smoothie gets working.”

Vin stood against the wall and watched TV8 news giving a synopsis of an attempted kidnapping at Denver General Hospital.

“Unbelievable! A well known criminal lawyer was involved in the attempted kidnapping of Corliss Archer. Archer is the former Army Ranger who was viciously attacked at Chris Larabee’s ranch in Four Corners.

“ATF agent Curt Snyder was arrested for that attack. He is presently housed in Federal jail. We have learned that Snyder purposely burned two of his fingers to obscure his fingerprints. However, when State Police pressed his whole hand onto their new electronic fingerprint screen, alarms went up all over the world. Snyder is wanted in England and in Brazil for international crimes. How he got to be an ATF agent, no one knows.

“Corliss Archer and Chris Larabee are now under wraps at a safe house.”

Vin watched Joseph rush passed back into Cory’s room. Hopefully, they could get a good signature.

Dennis stepped just inside the main office door. Looking directly at Tanner, he asked, “Beer or coffee?”

“Strong black coffee.”

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Chris Larabee was pacing in his den. The TV had flipped on without him touching the remote. He had searched several rooms looking for cameras, but hadn’t found any. Yet, he had the feeling he was being watched.

Twice he’d tried his code in the security system. Each time it came up wrong. He was locked in his own house.
Finally, he called Buck, only to discover that Corliss had disappeared. He and Marianne had searched every room. Cory wasn’t there.

“WHOEVER THE HELL YOU ARE! TELL ME WHAT’S GOING ON? WHERE IS HE?”

“He is safe. That is all you need to know,” came a man’s voice from somewhere in the room.

Larabee sprinted for the front door when he heard honking.

Roméo greeted the man in the red pickup truck. *God, not more casseroles.*

“Mr. Lion. Our freezer is already stuffed. Any chance you could tell the ladies we have enough.”

The older man burst out laughing. “Son. That is like telling the sun not to shine today. Put them in that little helicopter that flies back and forth. Have them take the food to Hanover Place.”

“I don’t think their freezer is big enough for what we have stocked up already.”

“They will have plenty of room by tonight. A walk-in freezer has been donated to that big school kitchen. Some veterans in Indiana are paying for it. It arrived this morning and is being installed this afternoon. You tell Agent Tanner, he’s got the whole U.S. rethinking what they can do with abandoned buildings.”

“What about these dishes?”

“No problem. These ladies buy them by the dozens. Just refill them and use them again.”

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Agent Tanner looked at his vibrating phone. He, Colt and Joseph had been in conversation for the last half hour.

“Agent Tanner.”

“It’s Aaron. You aren’t going to believe this but we’ve just had a huge walk-in freezer donated from a veterans group in Indiana. The City of Denver is hooking it up for free. Jimmy is flying out to Larabee’s to pick up a box of casseroles brought there for Corliss. I hope you’re keeping Larabee away from Cory. That blond has kept friends away from him too long.”

“Who do you think would be good sitting with Corliss? Someone who doesn’t have a family to go home to every night. In a couple more days he will be walking the halls. But it will be three weeks before the brace comes off his jaw.”

“Keep Roméo at Larabee’s. Have him use the bastard. Dennis would be good for Cory. I heard he and Justin are being paid by the White House. You might want to call your contact there. See if he can be used elsewhere. Bear would make a good bodyguard for you, though he doesn’t have telepathy.”

“Dennis and Justin don’t either. I’ll call my White House contact. Dennis said that Bush told them their job was to protect me. But, I’ll ask.”

“We’ve had some guys show up here today from your first Elite Squad. Let me talk with them. See if any live in Denver. Might have some male nurses here for Corliss. Are you coming here today?”
“Yes. No news people though. I will not answer any questions. Joseph and I will be there. Have to stop at the hospital first …hold on, just got a text for Romeo.”

‘Mr. Lion just brought more casseroles. Need you to pick them up and take them to the new freezer he said Hanover Place was getting.’

“Aaron. Looks like that freezer is going to be full of casseroles from Four Corners. More were just delivered to Larabee’s.”

Vin Tanner and Joseph Bebee met with the Director of Medical Records at Denver General Hospital. Vin explained that Corliss’ parents were gone and he hadn’t had contact with his brother for over twenty years. Vin also shared with the woman that police in his hometown felt that brother was responsible for their parents death. But nothing could be proved.

Joseph pulled out his international diplomatic ID. Explaining he was Tanner’s biological father. Joseph also explained that Chris Larabee had been isolating Corliss Archer. Keeping his Army friends and others away from him.

The Director groaned loudly. “Chris Larabee is a pain in the butt! Big time. We always give them a suite when one of them is hurt or shot. He is more of a mother hen than the hen ever thought to be.”

“I will make several copies of this, you keep the original. I will pass a copy to the ER as well, in case Corliss comes through there again. How is he doing?”

“He was enjoying a smoothie when we left, and looking forward to a nap in a real bed,” Vin answered.

The mini bird circled above Hanover Place.

“What the hell! No signs at the roadside. Shit, that is all we need. Announce to the world where we are,” Tanner burst out angrily.

Vin dropped the bird right down on top of the men who scurried out of his way. Opening his pilot door, he reached out and pulled out the post they were getting ready to plant. Tossing it to one side, he landed over the spot they were preparing.

Dennis and Joseph stepped out one side, Justin and Vin the other.

“HEY! WHO THE HELL YOU THINK YOU ARE?”

Tanner turned and stared at the man, who suddenly realized who he was.

“Do you own this property?” Vin growled at the man.

Turning to look at the others, he asked the same question.

“I own this property! I am the one who has a say on what happens. Now this is a very nice sign but … obviously you did not ask Aaron or Moose about it. If you had, you would know that there will be no signs indicating what this property is used for.”

“Don’t see that it makes any difference. People want to know…..”
Tanner turned his blue eyes on the man. “You really want to broadcast to the world what this property is for?”

“Sure why not?”

“You put this sign up … the first yahoo that comes along that hates Federal agents or veterans… and opens up with an AK47… I will be on your doorstep with a warrant for your arrest… you are an accessory in the murders than take place.”

The man paled. Looked one way and the other.

“I bought this place because it is far from the road. You have to step in to see what is here. You want to put the sign up in front of that building… okay. But on the street… no!”

“What if we put it up after you leave?”

“Two things will happen,” Vin started coldly. “One… I’ll put up a ten foot fence around the property with a guard on the gate. Or, two… everything that is in that building will be gone and it will once again be for sale. Since you live on this street, sir… you are telling me that we are open game for anyone who wants to kill us. And that is not going to happen on my watch.”

Vin turned, reaching for the pilot door, he opened it and slid in.

Justin screamed, NOOOO, as he dashed for the skid and wrapped his arms around it as the bird went up. Pulling himself up to a standing position, he stood there until Vin landed in the backyard of the Sales mansion.

Vin locked up the bird as he grinned at Justin. “Nice show.”

“Hell, Falcon! You can’t take off like that! Anything happens to you… Bush will have our necks.”

“What exactly did the President tell you?” Vin asked as he walked to the door by the windows.

“He said you had done some impossible things that no one else had been able to do. And because of that, certain people in certain countries, might try to kill you.”

“Did he tell you what?” Vin said as he opened the door and they entered.

“No, but he said you had saved….” Justin’s eyes went wide. In a bare whisper he gasped, “You were the sniper that… Holy shit.”

Vin patted Justin on the shoulder as they stepped into the elevator.

“Hold that thought. Don’t tell anyone. Not even Dennis.”

“You got it.”

Vin and Justin were leaning back against the wall when the elevator opened into the kitchen.

Staring at Wilmington and one of the Army paramedics, with drawn weapons pointed at them, Tanner said coolly, “You really need to lock that door down there. Anybody could walk right in.”

“Boss!” The paramedic barked. “You scared the shit out of Mrs. Wilmington.”

“How’d you know about this, Tanner?” Buck asked, motioning them in.
“This is how I got Corliss out.”

“Why did you move him?” Buck asked putting his weapon away.

“Because you gave a kindergarten code to Larabee telling him where he was.”

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Larabee stood at his front door watching a young man with springs for legs help Romeo load casseroles into a tiny copter.

Outside, Jimmy looked over his shoulder. “That him? Standing at the front door.”

“Yes. He is a coiled spring. Pissed that he doesn’t know where Corliss is. We found out he kept a lot of Rangers from getting in to see Cory.”

“You know where they have him stashed,” Jimmy asked innocently, as he loaded the last casserole.

“No. Wouldn’t say if I did,” Romeo responded. “Twenty-nine casseroles. That should keep those guys going for a few days.”

“When they find out these were made by ‘church ladies,’ they will be devoured in seconds,” Jimmy replied slapping Romeo’s shoulder.

“Let me know if you get more.”

---

Romeo started for the back door but quickly diverted to the front when he saw Larabee leave the front. Within seconds, he stepped through the front door and rekeyed the code.

Romeo smiled as he heard Chris swear. He must have gotten to the back door just as the code reactivated. Walking through the den, Rome spotted the black leather collar. He picked it up, opening and closing it. Grinning, he was going to enjoy putting this back on. He had watched the tapes of Corliss taking Larabee down. *Yes sir. I will enjoy repeating that progress.*

Quickly he rolled the black leather into a tight ball and pocketed it. Seconds later the blond roared into the room.

“WHERE IS HE?!”

“Corliss is safe. Being tended to by an Army nurse. Being seen by friends that can help him.”

Chris growled.

“Were you ever held prisoner when you were a SEAL? Or confined to quarters for being bad? That is what you did to Cory, isn’t it? You isolated him so only Tanner could see him. Blocked out all his friends. Kept him a prisoner … A PRISONER … in that hospital room.”

“I wanted him safe.”

“You wanted him for yourself, like a prize bull.”

Larabee’s mouth opened and closed. *Is that what I wanted? A fuck buddy for the rest of my life?*

“When one of your team is injured, do you isolate them like you did Cory? Refuse to let other team
members or family see him?”

“No, we share…”

“You share times so they are never alone.”

“Yes. There is always someone with them.”

“Except with Cory, you didn’t want a Ranger who knew him better than you,” Romeo rasped as he picked up the remote and clicked on the TV.

“Holy Crap!” Romeo and Chris barked in unison as the image of Justin hanging off a helicopter skid came on.

“What happened down there,” Romeo responded quietly. “Has Tanner pissed. And you don’t want to be in his crosshairs when that man is pissed off.”

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Joseph watched the helio take off. He didn’t move when Dennis urged him to go inside.

“Get Aaron or Moose out here now. I don’t believe we will be staying here.”

Dennis stepped behind Joseph, pulling out his phone as he turned his back to the man.

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In the Sales living room, Justin pulled out his beeping phone. “It’s a Warrior Alert. Coming from… Falcon …!”

Tanner came over and looked at the screen. Joseph was standing his ground against those Vin just left.

“Lilly! Pull this up on a screen.”

Everyone turned as local FOX news came on the air.

“We are once again at Hanover Place. Agent Vin Tanner just had a run in with some neighbors who wanted to put up a sign advertising this was the home of ATF agents. Agent Tanner wasn’t too happy about the sign. Personally, we wouldn’t be either.

“This man also got off Tanner’s helicopter. We are just getting ….oh man. This is Joseph of Joseph and Company. Joseph was in the Diplomatic Corps through several Presidents. Has done international negotiations in numerous countries. We will see if we can get closer.”

[[[]]]

Dad. Are you sure you know what you’re doing?

Absolutely. I also think this is not the place for you. But … it is a place for the veterans.

Joseph heard someone say his name behind him yet he ignored the man.

“Sir, what is your name?” Joseph asked staring at the man who had sent Vin off in a rage.

“None of your damn business, fancy pants.”
Joseph let out a gasp. “Of course! You are the brother of the drug dealer that was hung from the flagpole. That is why you want the place shot up. You want retaliation. Probably you were getting kickbacks as well.”

Dennis and others watched people move away from the man.

“I am going to strongly urge Agent Tanner not to bring his agents here. But,” Joseph began, holding up one hand as other protested.

“I am going to tell him this is a perfect place for veterans. A lot of homeless vets would love to have a job. But you need an address for that. Here is that address. Here is the place for…. Sleeping. Eating. Working. Showers. A thrifty shop of men’s clothes. Shoes. Boots.”

“This gives them the address they need for a work application. This gives them a place to shower. This gives shelter for their animals. Some will always be homeless. Some will work themselves back into the land of the living… as you and I know it.”

“Veterans from Indiana have donated a walk-in freezer that was delivered earlier today. Casseroles by the dozens that have been delivered to Larabee’s ranch will end up here. Day old donuts can be warm up and refreshed as new.”

“As a Veterans Halfway House this will soon be up and rolling. But just from what I see from all of you …. Federal cops are not what you want here.”

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“Justin! Is there a place to land behind that place, so we can walk in from the back?”

“Yes. Aaron parks his bird back there.”

“Buck. If anyone calls about Corliss…”

“I have no idea where he is! I’ll come with you so I can lock that door you came through.”

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Several people saw the red, white and blue helio come in low and disappear behind some buildings.

Aaron told Moose to watch Joseph’s back. Don’t let anyone get to him. Then Aaron jogged off through a sea of Falcon’s men.

Vin was locking down the bird when Aaron came into view.

“Falcon! Do you know this guy Joseph?” Aaron asked.

“He’s my biological father. He is also Carter Bebee’s dad. He is an international negotiator. I think he is right on. This is a perfect place for a veteran’s halfway house. Now I just need to find a place for the ATF.”

“I…ah, walked through with Colt that other building you purchased. There is kind of a mini mall on the first floor. Looks like some are offices. But the second floor also have offices. Maybe if you looked at that building, it would work for ATF. Then you could park the birds in the park by the Federal Hotel.”

Vin stared at him. This Native American, German, French, Mexican and who know what all, former Ranger.
“You’re hired! My personal assistant. Doing all the ground work I don’t have time to do.” Tanner gushed.

Grabbing Aaron’s head, Vin kissed him lightly on both cheeks.

Justin grinned as the man turned several shades of pink.

“You’ll have to live in the hotel with these guys,” Vin said pointing to Justin. Then Vin turned and headed for his dad.

Tanner pushed through the Rangers. He came up behind Moose and goosed the man. Moose swung around to flatten the man who dared to that. He was met by his grinning boss.

“One of these days Falcon,” Moose growled.

Vin came to a stop next to his father. Vin watched the people, mostly men, look at Joseph and then him.

I think they think we’re related.

You think so?

Aaron found a place for the ATF. Think I’ll use it since I already own it.

“Good idea. Close to everything. Plus it has a parking ramp.”

After this I’m taking you suit shopping.

What? Like you’re wearing?

You are an executive now. Three piece with a vest.

“Hell no!” Vin burst out, forgetting where he was.

“Problems, Falcon?” Moose groused behind them.

“Sorry Moose. No, its okay.”

Looking over the crowd, Agent Vin Tanner spoke.

“I appreciate Joseph coming here to explain what Hanover Place is going to be used for. With his help, I will be incorporating a halfway house for veterans. Some of these veterans may be homeless and living on the streets. Some may be homeless because they had no family to start with and joined the military to find that family.”

“The ATF will be moving into the second floor of the former Jasper Building that is next to the Federal Hotel. It is in the same area as the glass house that disintegrated.”

“What happened to Randy Batel? We’ve called every hospital and he’s nowhere.”

“He was flown to St. Joseph’s Hospital in Phoenix, Arizona. That is where the specialist is that he
was originally referred to. Two Foundations have come forward to pay for all his medical needs. His former Captain also lives in that area. He is putting together what we call a ‘hospital squad.’ That means men and or women that Randy serviced with … that live in the area … will be with him 24 and 7. He will not be alone.”

“So, he’ll be coming back here in a few months?”

“That is Randy’s decision, not mine. But it will be at least a year before he will be fully discharged with new legs. He was dehydrated. He’d lost over a hundred pounds. It will take some months to build him up so he can endure the surgery.”

“I would like to thank the Indiana Veterans group that has donated the walk-in freezer for our kitchen here. We have already stocked it with 29 casseroles. We appreciate the Ladies Guild of Four Corners for thinking of Corliss Archer… but ladies…. Neither Larabee or Corliss have room for any more. However… Hanover Place will never turn down a homemade casserole.

Joseph reached inside his suit jacket and pulled out a list. Scanning it, he handed it to Vin.

Vin’s eyes scanned the typed list, his eyes widening. “Seriously?”

“Yes.”

“Walmart has agreed to give Hanover Place one hundred bunks beds. This includes bunks, mattresses, pillows and appropriate linens.”

“Target is donating blankets, rugs, drapes, curtains,” Vin explained.

“Van Hill Furniture has a store they are liquating and are giving us the opportunity to walk through to see what we need. Moose. You have a list for those needs yet?”

“We do, sir.”

Half turning to Moose, Vin asked, “Is there a smaller gym here besides that basketball court?”

“There is. We’re not sure what we’ll use it for though.”

“I have a use right here,” Vin said holding up the list.

Turning back to the crowd, Tanner asked, “Is Mr. VanderWerf here?”

“I am, yes.” A smartly dressed man in a thousand dollar suit answered, pushing through from the back.

“Are you sure about this?” Falcon asked. Donating two pool tables was a hunk of money.

“I am donating them in memory of my son who died during Iraqi Freedom. He was an avid pool player. I can’t think of a better memorial for him.”

Before Vin could speak, Moose stepped up next to him. “We are sorry for your loss, sir. We appreciate the gift every much. Most every man behind me plays that game. It is the most relaxing game a soldier can play. We all sincerely thank you for this gift.”

Turning from the crowd, Tanner talked to Moose as he handed the man Joseph’s list.

“I need a list of everything that has been donated so we can put a thank you in the paper. Who is staying here?”
“About twenty of us are staying here, for at least the rest of this week. Then Aaron and I need to get with you on the physical running of this place.”

“Joseph and I will sit down together on what kind of staff we need. I want as many people with military backgrounds as we can find. You might also start a list of veterans who are looking for jobs that fit into here.”

“I’d like to be the man in charge, sir.”

“I thought you had a software company?”

“I can do it from my laptop.”

“-=-=-=-=-

“The Jasper Building? He’s putting us in the Jasper Building?” Larabee barked as he walked out of the kitchen back into the den.

“Cory isn’t going to be happy that you are back to your old self,” Romeo moaned patting the collar that was in his pocket.

“Who said I was back to my old self? I’m not throwing things.”

“Not yet. How long before that chicken enchilada casserole will be ready?”

“Thirty minutes.”

Romeo studied the blond. He was smart. Junior college than joined the Navy. Was a homicide detective, then an ATF agent. This place, this ranch, belonged to his grandparents.

“Were you ever captured when you were a seal?” Romeo asked out of the blue.

Chris relaxed into his recliner, saying, “No. Got close though. Laid in the jungle for hours while headhunters looked for us.”

“A rescue operation. Were you successful?”

“No. The man was already dead. We got his ID, jewelry, than rendezvoused with others to get us out.”

“You have a nice place here.”

“Belonged to my grandparents. They left it to me. No one wanted it, but I did. Wanted to live here since I was a kid.”

Romeo looked at the man. Maybe Larabee had changed. I doubt he’d normally share something that personal with a stranger.

“Any chance I can talk to Corliss?”

“You’d have to go through Tanner for that. I have no clue where he is.”

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Vin and his two bodyguards, and Joseph spent an hour walking through Hanover Place. They made a decision on where the sleeping rooms would be. Decided they would use the dining room of the
school rather than the gym. Told Moose to use the principal’s office for his office.

“As soon as I walk through the Jasper Building, Moose, I want to get together with you and pick through the furniture Van Hill is offering.”

“I’m making a list. We did find a stack of folding tables that are probably from the dining room. But we need smaller tables for card games and such. This place really has great potential.”

Vin pulled his buzzing phone.

“Agent Tanner.”

“Dadd. When are you coming home?”

“Michael. I was home this morning, remember.”

“I know but, we miss you. And Mimi’s is having barbecue ribs tonight. They might be all gone if you don’t get here pretty soon.”

Son, I think we better go. Moose has things well in hand. He is the man in charge. We’ll figure out a salary for him.

“Okay, Michael. Tell Anna we’ll be there soon,” Vin stated quietly. Pocketing his phone he looked at Moose.

“Robert James Charles Henry … you are in charge of Hanover Place. We’ll figure out a salary later.”

“I am not going by that name … except on paper, maybe Robert James CH Brown.”

‘On paper. Deal.”

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The Vault

Chapter Summary

Vin Tanner buys a building by paying off the back taxes. (Law in many U.S. cities.) An ancient Native American icon is found. Corliss returns to the safety of Larabee's ranch, and Chris' love. Buck Wilmington is happily enjoying married life.

Vin Tanner stood in the computer-security lab of the Federal Hotel, checking on a variety of places.

“Are we still on an open one way Skype to Larabee’s ranch?”

Trevor pulled up that screen. “We are. You want sound too?”

“Yes.”

Romeo and Larabee stared at each other across the room. Tension radiated in the den.

“Maybe I’ll just put this collar on your neck and fuck you like Corliss did!” Romeo blasted.

“Joey, call Franklin. Have him go and pick up this bastard. Romeo is no longer on the elite squad,” Tanner growled.

“Give them a view of us,” Vin ordered.

“Romeo! You have crossed the line. Pack up! Franklin is coming to pick you up.”

“Aaron told me to fuck the bastard! He kept us from seeing Cory!” Romeo blasted back.

“Larabee was doing his job. Keeping Corliss safe. Keeping him quiet. Half drunken soldiers are not what Cory needed. Now pack up! You are back on the work detail on Tanner Mountain.”

“Larabee. Let me know when he has left. Trevor will give you the code and tell you how to reprogram it.”

Bending low, Vin whispered, “the code times 3. Larabee, Archer and Joseph.”

Vin leaned back against the wall, out of sight of the screen Larabee was on. Joseph was explaining to the blond why Joseph was now legally Corliss’ next of kin.

“Why did you go to a Judge for that?” Larabee wanted to know.

“One because Corliss loves you. There aren’t many men that Archer trusts. You also have a
dangerous job. If you are killed or seriously wounded, he would have no one. But mainly because of his brother. His brother, Daniel, who you have already met, abandoned him. It was one of the reasons Corliss chose to go into the Army. To find some brothers. Now his brother has suddenly surfaced. No one knows why. A quick call to Elkhart, Indiana Police Department told us new DNA shows Daniel may have murdered their parents. They died two days before their father was putting together a new will. He had not made a new will since Corliss was born. Corliss lost everything that was in the house. His brother sold the house and everything in it.”

Tanner moved off the wall to stand next to his father.

“Larabee. Could you tell me why you don’t like the Jasper Building?”

“Old man Jasper disappeared about five years ago. He has a huge old mansion on the east side of the mountain. Police searched that place and the building. He wasn’t found anywhere. Some say the place is haunted.”

Vin looked at Joseph. “Is that on the property I bought? Do you remember that man? Would it be in Catherine’s journals?”

Looking back at Chris, Joseph asked, “Is that a huge stone house with a turret?”

“Yes.”

“Wait! He disappeared five years ago?” Tanner blurt out. “No taxes have been paid in five years. That’s how I bought the place. By paying the back taxes.”

Larabee stared at the two men who were having a silent conversation. He picked up only one word… vault.

“Vault!” Larabee barked

Joseph and Vin jumped.

Tanner answered. “When Robert Stark, my realtor, and I walked through the building… all ten stories, we found a vault in one of the shops on the first floor.”

“Tell me a cop I can trust in this city. So far, the three I have met were idiots!”

“Cold Case detectives would be handling his disappearance. Todd Bekkering. Hang on, I’ll get his number.”

Joseph stepped away as Wolf came in to say Corliss was packed and ready to go. They were just waiting for Jimmy to arrive.

“Tell them to wait. I haven’t told Larabee Cory is coming yet.”

“Yes sir.”

Joseph waited until Vin was done programming the detective’s name and number into his phone.

Jimmy is on his way here.

“Chris.”

Larabee’s head shot up. Tanner had never used his first name before.
“Jimmy is delivering Corliss back to you. You will notice he has a different jaw brace. He still cannot chew. I am also giving you two weeks off to use up some of the comp time you have on the books. If you need groceries, Cory has Jimmy’s number. Call in your order and Jimmy will pick it up.”

“Thank you,” Chris responded quietly.

“Joseph will be flying out also. He has a couple of things you need to know and I don’t trust phones for this. Also both he and Corliss need to open and close a door with the keypad. After that, you three are the only ones who will have the code… other than Trevor.”

“Do you think his brother will come here again?”

“Don’t know. We haven’t discovered why he is looking for him.”

“When he was here, he was walking around looking at the barn and the house. Like he was assessing the cost. What it would sell for? He was disappointed when I told him I owned it. And my grandfather built it.”

“Then it would appear he has used up the fortune his father planned to leave both boys, but that Daniel reaped.”


Looking at Larabee, Vin said, “You protect this man. Or you’ll answer to me.”

“I’ll resign, if I have to. Corliss means everything to me.”

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Robert Stark and Vin Tanner unlocked the double doors that lead into the first floor of the Jasper Building.

“You really think the man might be in that vault?” Robert questioned looking into the small bank.

“The detective I talked with said no one even thought of looking in there. In fact, while I was on the phone, he pulled up the file and looked at several pictures. There is a steel bar through the circular lock.”

“Which means it could be murder and this whole building could become a crime scene.”

“Oh hell, Robert,” Tanner moaned.

[[]]

“Excuse me, Agent Tanner,” a tall man with sandy hair called from behind.

“Detective,” Vin said turning.

“You asked me to pull up the original picture of the safe, compared to what we found. “

“Is there a difference?” Vin asked walking up to the man. He noticed three uniform cops coming up behind the man.

Looking at a folder one of the uniformed officers was carrying, Vin asked if they had a picture of
Staring at the image, Vin growled. Pulling his phone he called Joseph.

“Dad, I need you to come to the Jasper Building. Bring that picture you found. The one with you, Catherine and the mountain man. We’re on the...ah.. west side, first floor.”

Looking up at the officers, Vin explained, “Joseph will be here shortly. My mother was an explorer. One of the places she explored was Lookout Mountain. I recently purchased that mountain with my Army hazard pay that I’ve banked for three years...”

“Must be some paycheck,” one of the officers gaffed.

Bekkering stared at Tanner. “I believe Jasper’s house is on that mountain.”

“Joseph might know. He accompanied by mother several times. The picture he has is my mother, Joseph and a man. They refer to him as a mountain man. And from this picture you have, it might be him.”

Pulling out a ring of keys, Tanner explained, “From what we could tell, this was a small walk-in bank. It consists of three rooms and the vault.”

Detective Bekkering suggested using the counter to lay out the pictures.

Vin was staring at the house with the turret when Joseph walked in.

“Vin,” Joseph called, walking in behind the group.

Detective Bekkering gasped at seeing the man who was responsible for saving his father’s life. “Joseph!”

“Todd. How is your father doing?”

“Good. Real good,” Todd answered, looking between Tanner and Joseph. “He called you Dad. Is Catherine…?”

“Yes. Catherine is … was his mother. He just discovered four days ago that I was his biological father.”

“Was?” Todd asked, looking back and forth between Joseph and Vin.

“Peterson killed her,” Tanner said tightly.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Bekkering answered. “My father and I met her. She was some lady.”

Joseph walked to the counter, unzipping a leather case as he walked.

As he laid out photos of Catherine, himself and Jasper, Joseph explained, “I called the man that helped to build this house. Reinhold Jasper built it without checking to see who owned the land. He figured it was part of the free land that used to be available years ago. He faxed me a map. It is within in the boundaries of the mountain you bought. You bought four strips of land, correct?”

“Yes. Two pieces were landlocked. Two others front all of Lookout Mountain Road from Larabee’s to the Forest Preserve,” Vin answered.

“Here he is with Catherine and I. Todd, is this the missing man?” Joseph asked.
“It is,” Todd answered quietly. Looking at Vin, the detective said, “Let’s go check out this vault.”

“Let’s look at the photos you have first,” Vin put in.

It was Joseph who quietly whispered, “Looks like this rod was jammed in there to keep someone in. Vin, you better call your friend the Coroner.”

Todd looked up. “You know Rockland?”

“We went to high school together. Ran track together. He is one hell’of’a chess player,” Vin said as he pulled out his phone.

One of the officers blurt out, “Why does he dye his hair gray?”

Tanner spun around and glared at the officer. “Every man in the Rockland family is gray before they turn 21. It’s been that way for generations. No one knows why. I would not make assumptions until you know the facts, officer.”

“Jeffrey.”

“Don’t tell me you found another body.”

“Detective Bekkering and I are in the bottom floor of the Jasper Building. We’re pretty sure that there is a body in the vault of this small bank. We’re not sure how we’re going to get it open yet.”

“I’m just finishing up here. I’ll be there is thirty minutes.”

“Thirty minutes, okay,” Vin answered. Looking at his phone, he strolled down to Standish.

“Ezra…”

“Standish!” The same loudmouth officer yelped. “That twerp…”

Tanner was in the man’s face in a flash. “You say one more derogatory word about someone without knowing the facts; I will have your badge!”

*Vin. Son. Take it easy.*

“You may be a Federal Agent,” one officer started, “But who you going to call? You’ve been in town two whole days.”

Todd looked at Joseph who raised his eyebrows.

“Well, how about your Chief of Police?” Vin said quietly, scrolling down his phone contacts.

“Hmm…Jeremy White… the Chief’s favorite grandson. A former Army sniper. Trained by an Army Captain named … Vin Tanner.” Tanner spoke coldly into the eyes of the startled officer.

Then Vin swiped the Call button. Walking away from the group, Vin turned the corner and stared at the vault.

“Ezra. Remember that vault in Turkey you helped to open? Yeah. I have another here in Denver. And we might have a body in it. Where are you?”

“It would take me an hour to get there, Mr. Tanner.”
“We have an ATF pilot now with a four seater helicopter. I’ll have him come pick you up.”

“A tin can of a copter. Are you serious?”

“Come on Ez. You were in the Air Force.”

Joseph watched the three officers stare at each other, their eyes going wide as Vin talked on the phone.

“Actually it looks like the exact same model of the vault in Istanbul.”

“I was never in Turkey. Is this conversation for someone present with you?”

“Yes.”

“Officers of the law.”

“Yes,” Vin answered as he stared at the vault. He was seeing several ghostly images.

“Ezra! Never mind. I think I see a solution.” Vin barked, abruptly cutting off the call.

Vin pulled a red phone and called the hotel. “Colt! I need your maintenance man here at the Jasper Building with his fancy red toolbox. “

“He is on his way. Anna found me. Said you needed an old vault opened.”

“Okay, thanks.”

Vin stared at the vault.

*A house with a turret for fighting the Indians. Built of stone so it wouldn’t burn. Joseph. Have you been in that house?*

*Yes. It is a mansion. There is even a paved road.*

“Vin,” an older man said as he walked into the room.

Tanner turned, “Sir. I need your help.”

‘The man’ walked over to Vin and looked at the vault.

“Oh my. This is really old. First, we need a sledgehammer to pop out that steel rod.”

Detective Bekkering dismissed the three uniform officers when it appeared they were just messengers. He called his own CSI unit to come and work the scene.

As ‘the man’ slowly pulled open the vault, Bekkering and Rockland looked at a perfectly preserved body in the airtight vault. Reinhold Jasper was sitting on a stool with his back to a wall. An open ledger on his lap.

Jeffrey gave orders to his team about protecting the body that would soon start to decay outside the vault’s environment.

Todd Bekkering and Joseph identified the man as Reinhold Jasper.
“Bekkering. How much of this building will be a crime scene?” Tanner wanted to know.

“What do you need it for?”

“The floor above here is going to be the new ATF offices.”

“We’ll walk through there, and the rest of these on the street level. But, personally I think this is the only crime scene.”

Rockland bent down to take the ledger from Jasper’s hand. In his peripheral vision he saw it.

“DON’T TOUCH HIM! GET OUT! GET OUT NOW!” Jeffrey shouted.

Standing, he quickly pushed his crew out, while shouting to Vin, “Vincent! Close it now! Bolt it!” Jeffrey urged.

The Coroner’s crew stared back at Rockland as did everyone else.

It was Joseph and Vin who were seeing through Rockland’s mind, what Jeffrey had seen. The Tall Man, a Native American icon, missing for years, was in this vault.

“Are you sure it was him?” Vin finally asked.

“Damn sure! Need a picture. Do you have one?”

“Joseph?” Vin asked.

“You want to tell me what is going on here?” Detective Bekkering questioned. “You just closed the door on a body.”

Suddenly, Rockland was concerned about his crew. “Frankie. Did you touch him?”

“Just barely. He… it felt,” Frankie started. He continued only when Tanner gave him a nod.

“Stone. Perfectly dried out, but hard as a rock. Like he was petrified… like he’s been turned to stone.”

AARON WRIGHT! I NEED YOUR GRANDFATHER HERE NOW! AND WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU – MY PERSONAL ASSISTANT?

Looking around, Joseph asked no one, “Is there a computer monitor on the wall here anywhere?”

Officer ‘Twerp,’ who had come back into the building, found one in another office to the left of the vault.

Joseph walked over to it while talking on his phone in French. Suddenly the monitor lit up and an image of a sacred Indian relic came up.

A unison gasp came from Rockland and his crew.

Frankie quietly said, “I saw something out of the corner of my eye. It felt like someone was staring a hole in my head.”

“Jeffrey,” Vin ventured.
“It’s him. And I have to say… the legend we’ve heard is true.”

Joseph turned to look at his son and the Coroner. “How did Jasper get it here? He had to have help. We need to go through that mansion.”

Vin yanked his phone that was playing a war dance. Even though he knew who was calling, he answered, “Special Agent Tanner.”

“I’m getting mixed thoughts. What’s going on? Why do you need my Grandfather?”

“The Tall Man’s been found.”

“The… the… holy crap. Four of them are in Greeley. I’ll fly up and get them. Where are you?”

“The first building beyond the Federal Hotel. First floor on the side closest to the hotel. He is inside a vault. And Aaron… there is body in there also. It appears the man knew what would happen, and stayed any way. “

“I’ll call them right now. I’ll try out my super warp speed on this thing. I’ll call when we are on our way.”

Clicking his phone off, Vin looked at Joseph. “When you and Catherine were exploring the mountain, did you come across any burial grounds?”

Bekkering held up his hand, “Wait! Please explain! We have a body which you just sealed up again. Why?”

Vin looked at his dad. Negotiator…

Joseph looked up at the image on screen. Turning, he looked at his friend, Detective Bekkering, and the other officers.

“None of you have seen this before?”

“No,” came the unison answer.

“This is known as The Tall Man. He is a Native American icon. This is equal to a mummy-case. It is made of a variety of metals. This is probably a hundred to two hundred years old. The Tall Man is entombed in this. He is a man who grew taller than any Indian of his time. I don’t know the legend behind him, but when he died… those that loved him, wanted him preserved. So they built a unique coffin to preserve his body.”

Jeffrey gawked at Joseph, but he asked Vin, “His corpse is inside that thing?”

“Yes. But…,” Vin continued, “Legend says that anyone who feasts his eyes upon him will be turned to stone.”

“Well, that guy is definitely stone,” Frankie blurt out. “Though being in an airtight room for years might also do it.”

The monitor suddenly came alive again. This time with a real person.

“Falcon. This is my grandfather. He has some questions.”

“Go ahead, sir,” Vin replied walking up to the screen.
Vin was suddenly aware of his father next to him. Vin saw the Chief’s immediate recognition of Joseph.

“Joseph! Has the Tall Man been found?”

“The Coroner saw him for just a second. But we have verified through pictures that it is the Tall Man.”

“The Coroner? There is another body with him?”

“Reinhold Jasper. It appears he may be responsible for acquiring The Tall Man. And he knew what would happen if he stayed in its presence.”

“And they wish to get the man out?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, I and one other Elder will come down with my grandson, Aaron. You will need hazamat suits to retrieve the body. Under no circumstances look at the Tall Man.”

“Joseph. Who owns this building?”

“My son,” Joseph answered, pointing to Vin, “He bought it yesterday by paying the back taxes which hadn’t been paid for five years. Before that, it was owned by the dead man inside, Reinhold Jasper. However, Vin owns the land the house was built on.”

“You also need to know, that this is Catherine’s son. At her written request, he has purchased all of Lookout Mountain so what is there can be protected.”

“This is Catherine’s little one? The Army sniper who blew away every score on record. The invisible man? I will be very glad to meet you Vin Tanner. You are a legend according to my grandson here.”

Aaron, you are in so much trouble. Think naked! In my sound proof room.

“Look forward to meeting you, sir.”

Joseph stared at his son. You have a sound proof room?

You wish to have your dreams come true …that is the place.

Forty minutes later, two sharply dressed men, with long black hair well past their shoulders, walked in with former Army Ranger Aaron Wright. Joseph made introductions to Jeffrey Rockland and Todd Bekkering.

Jeffrey explained, that he had ordered up hazamat suits for his team, so the body could be retrieved safely.

“Before anyone goes into this vault again, I’d like to have Aaron send in a specially made drone. We need to make sure this is The Tall Man. We also need a view of the inside of the vault to see what else is there.”

Aaron. What language do they speak?
“Sir!” Vin said, cutting the man off. From then on, the conversation was in rapid fire French. Tanner wanted to know if other icons were missing. Would there be any danger to the building or its occupants from what was in the vault.

“You speak excellent French for a Texan,” Chief Richman said as the two men paused.

Easy son.

“Thank you. I speak several oral languages as well as deaf sign language.”

“With the same fluency as French?”

“Dutch, Russian, German, Italian, Comanche, Polish .. a little Czech.”

“And you are a Texan?”

Vin looked at Aaron.

I think he is making a joke. But I don’t know.

“Many Texans can’t speak English. They have their own slang depending on where in the State they live. Much like the Comanche or Arapaho whose teens develop a slang their Elders can’t understand.”

The Chief burst out laughing. “I like this man, Joseph! He is very much Catherine’s son!”

Looking at Vin, the man spoke, “Your mother also came back in my face. Which was a first for me, as women in our tribe dare not speak against the Chief. But her point was well taken. It caused me to think … how you say … outside the box.”

The Chief looked around and spotted ‘the man’ from the hotel, asking him to once again open the vault.

“Aaron. Get ready. We need every wall scanned. Do not under any circumstances step inside.”

Looking at the Coroner, the Chief stated calmly, “Once I see what is in there, then you can suit up to remove the body. If the body can be moved. It is possible, that he may have to stay there for eternity.”

Thirty minutes later the drone’s video was being projected on the screen.

Joseph and Vin mentally exchanged several conversations as they watched.

How the hell did Jasper get away with stealing all those things?

When Catherine and I met him he was not interested in anything inside the mountain. But these, these are from inside the mountain. You must read her journals, Vin. Soon.

He couldn’t have done this alone.

“Does Jasper have property somewhere? A house?” The other man with the Chief asked.
“He has a stone house with a turret,” Vin answered.

“The Stone Mansion? Joseph, have you been there?” Chief Richman blurt out.

“Yes. Catherine and I have been in it. But only on the first floor. It is on the property Vin now owns. It has a very elaborate lock on the front door.”

“Which means he has things there he does not want discovered.”

Pointing to the video, Vin asked, “These icons appear to be hand carved, yet they are not wood.”

“They were once wood. There is something about the atmosphere in the vault that changes the composition over time.”

“Are we in danger?” Tanner wanted to know. “Can the rest of the building be occupied? How will we keep this safe, now that it has been discovered?”

The other man answered immediately. “I have texted the warriors. There will be guards here, around the clock, to guard this. We hope you will allow that.”

“Certainly. Does that mean the rest of the building can be occupied?” Vin pushed for an answer.

Onto the screen came, Trevor Brown. “Vin. I’ve been researching the building. It was built around that room you are in now. That vault was built in the 1940’s. It is triple the thickness of most vaults today. It was built to resist World War 2 bombs. It is airtight. There should be no problem occupying the building.”

Tanner stared at the vault. Pointing to the steel rod, he asked no one, yet everyone.

“Could he have closed himself in there? Or did he have an accomplice that closed him in?”

It was the man from the hotel that came forth with the answer.

“I have seen a safe similar to this, in my younger years. When the vault is open, the rod is usually propped against the wall. If the man left it up along this ridge…” he explained pointing to a lip along the top. “Then when he pulled it closed from the inside, the rod would slide quietly into position. You could fingerprint it, but … I believe, he purposely locked himself in.”

“Why would he do that?” Officer ‘Twerp’ asked.

Joseph stepped forward, answering, “Greed. Fascination. Awed by what he had. We definitely need to go through the mansion. There may be some answers there.”

“There may be bodies there that have helped him over the years,” Bekkering put in. “Do I need a warrant?”

“Vin.”

Tanner looked over at his two bodyguards whom he had totally forgotten about. “Dennis.”

“Justin and I have walked through the other seven shops here. They are all empty. Not even a cobweb in one.”

“No dust?”

“They could all pass a white glove inspection. Nothing. No furniture. No trash. Just bare.”
Looking around for his realtor, Vin called, “Robert.”

“Haven’t even had time to call for an inspection yet. Which we have to do before you can move in.”

The Chief turned to Jeffrey Rockland. “Is it possible to write a death certificate without the body? The man is obviously dead. The body is not retrievable at this time. Probably never.”

“Yes, it is possible. Todd, do you have next of kin in your files?”

“I don’t believe he has any next of kin,” Joseph replied. “He told Catherine and I that he’d outlived his two sons and three wives.”

“The next question,” Vin ventured quietly. “How do we keep the public away?”

The Chief smiled. “No need for that. New locks on those doors. The vault is around the corner from the main room. They will only see two guards in ceremonial dress.”

“Grandfather,” Aaron started quietly. “Would you release one of the pictures from the drone for the Coroner’s report? Or for the newspaper. They will surely ask for one.”

“No!” The answer was short and tight.

It was Tanner who explained why. “Not possible, Aaron. Because … every one with a drone will want permission to try to get their own pictures. However, I think if you check, you will find the pictures are no longer there.”

While Aaron checked the drone, Vin answered his son’s call.

“Michael.”

“Anna says we are having early dinner tonight. She wants to know if Aaron is staying. She got dinner from Mimi’s again. And she says you two has to cut the wedding cake. Somebody already took off that little top layer.”

Joseph and several others laughed.

“Yes, Aaron is staying. Did Anna make cupcakes today?”

“No for us. She make a bunch of different kinds for Mimi’s chef today. I think they want to hire her.”

“When we are done here, Joseph and I and Aaron will be there.”

“Okay dad! Love you.” Click.

The Chief asked Michael’s age.

“Five going on a hundred.”

Plans were made to go through the Jasper Mansion in the morning. Robert Stark left to check with the County on who now owns the Jasper Mansion.

Jeffrey and his crew left. Detective Bekkering, his CSI squad and the police officers left.
Now Joseph, Vin, his bodyguards and Aaron were waiting with the Chief and the Elder for a limo to arrive.

Staring into Aaron’s eyes, Vin’s mind connected. You are spending the night little Indian boy. You who said he wanted to be my personal assistant and then disappeared. Naked. In a sound proof room. You and I will come to an understanding.

Tanner turned as he heard chuckling. Vin was surprised to see a grin on the Chief’s face. Take him down hard. He has too much of a free spirit since getting out. He needs a tough hand to show what he is capable of. Fist him hard!

Vin Tanner’s mouth opened and closed, but no sound came.

You are Catherine’s son. You are a Master. Even your father wants what you can give him.

Vin turned to look at his father who was staring at the floor with pink ears.

A limo arrived to take Chief Richman and his Elder to a sanctuary, as a runner arrived from the hotel.

“Trevor said this is a map of how to get to the turret house,” Carter Bebee informed the small group. “He suggests that the Chief and his group meet you and Joseph there. And whoever else is going can meet there too.”

“Carter. Have Trevor blow up the image of the lock on this house. See if ‘the man’ of maintenance can find a way to get through it.”

“Okay. And Vin… Anna said to give you this. And to open it in private.”

“Chief. When will the warriors arrive to guard this?”

“They should be in the limo. It will now be guarded round the clock.”

Vin walked down three stores, telling Dennis not to follow, which he did anyway. Leaning against a solid wall, Vin unfolded the note.

‘Darling husband. I looked up your place in New York City, the Master Shop. Talked to the boss man. He said there was already a room here. A sound proof room with all the things you want. For slave or lover. He told me where. It is wonderful. We can enjoy it too. Good place to take Aaron down. Joseph too. You can project images of Catherine for him. Love you. Not pregnant yet. No yellow lines.’

Dennis swallowed hard as Tanner’s eyes roamed over every square inch of his body.

“Crrr…is,” Corliss slurred through a braced jaw. “m..ore. Suck ‘anana again.”


“Please. Again. Again.”

“How about time out for a smoothie?”

“sick of slurpies. ‘ya or ‘nana ‘uck me. ‘uck me chrisss.”
“One more time… baby mine. Then we are having real food.”

“no ‘aby…lover. ‘m..ain man.”

Chris slipped on another condom. No anger or frustration had surfaced today. No thoughts of his late wife or Buck Wilmington. Only Corliss Archer. Corliss was his. Totally his.

Corliss had used his hands to bring Chris to more than one screaming climax. Fingertips caressing every erotic spot on his body. Places Larabee had never realized made him so hot, he begged to be brought off.

They had spent the afternoon experimenting different ways of satisfying each other. It had been wonderful.

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Two naked lovers were sitting on a bench in a large shower. Marianne had nestled her buttocks down tight around her husband’s rock hard cock.

“Buck…. The sisters are coming,” Marianne Wilmington moaned.

“I’m just sittin’ here, darlin’. Enjoying the view,” Buck Wilmington purred in-between sucking the hard tits that were in his face.

“I suppose we should think about getting dressed,” Marianne rasped. “Though I much prefer this position to anything else.”


As Mr. and Mrs. Wilmington dressed for dinner, Buck offered, “I think we need to soundproof the bathroom. Your climaxes are probably heard all the way to the basement.”

“A sound proof room? There was a hotel in town…. Buck! Your new boss, Vin Tanner, owns the Federal Hotel. We need to ask him. He has one in that hotel. We need to make one here. Yes! We definitely need to make one here!”

“Also a good place to hide out from your sisters,” Buck put in as he tightened his tie.

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Chapter Summary

Tanner wedding cake devoured. Buck and Marianne discover what love is. Special Agent Vin Tanner and his agents make plans to storm Jasper's stone castle.

In Mimi’s empty dining room, Miss Nettie Wells, two K9 agents along with Mrs. Hawley, ATF agents Dunne and Houston, plus numerous Rangers watched Mr. and Mrs. Tanner cut their wedding cake. Within thirty minutes, the three tier cake was quite demolished.

“Good thing someone save that top,” Michael blurt out as his finger scraped up some frosting.

“That top is to be shared by Anna and me on our one year anniversary,” Vin explained. “Now I think it is time for you to get to bed, son of mine.”

“Wolf said we could watch Star Wars tonight,” Michael said boldly, looking around to see if Wolf was there.

“I said what?” Wolf Weber yelped bolting upright from where he was wiping up spilled crumbs.

“oh oh,” Michael mumbled.

“I’ll do it, Wolf,” Carter put in, “you’ve had him for most of the day.”

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Dennis and Justin had crashed after the cake cutting. Relaxing in their mini apartment down from Tanner’s penthouse, they were in deep discussion.

“I think we need to renegotiate whatever we have with the White House,” Dennis said. “No need for both of us to be with him all the time.”

“Especially if Aaron is going to be working with him. No one would get past him. He knows what you’re thinking before you do,” Justin remarked.

“Yeah, I hate it when he answers a question before I even ask it.”

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Aaron Wright stared at Falcon. The man was dressed in tight black leather. The only skin visible was his face and neck.

“What exactly did my Grandfather tell you to do?” Aaron mumbled as he stripped.

“He just confirmed what I had already planned to do. Though he did suggest one thing… that we will definitely do.”

“All off! Naked!” Tanner ordered.
Aaron stripped out of his briefs, he eyes on the man he loved. Try as he did, he could not read the
man’s thoughts. He had no clue what was going to happen.

“Step there,” Vin ordered pointing to a pair of rings hanging from the ceiling. “Grab the rings.”

“Lower! Cuffs!”

Aaron yelped as he was jerked up and then dropped to his knees. Looking up, he saw cuffs around
his wrists.

“Now little Indian boy, I am taking away your sight,” Vin rasped as a blindfold was strapped around
Aaron’s head.

“And… except for this one ear bud in your left ear, all sound now ceases.”

Aaron was hot. He was sweating. His cock had never been so hard.

My name is Master. You have no say in what happens here. Do you understand, little Indian boy?”

Aaron swallowed. “Yyy..es.”

“Various things will happen now. Pain and pleasure. You may scream… you may cry…if pain gets
too bad… say Red Light. To continue… say Green Light.”

Aaron’s mind raced. He remembered Randy and others who had been taken down. Awesomeness.
Mind boggling. Spanking till your butt hurt. The touch. The climax. They all said it was worth it. Is
it?

Vin watched the emotions roll across the man. He wanted it, as they all did. But Aaron was the first
who showed fear.

Vin searched deep into Aaron’s mind to find out why the man feared being touched. And then he
saw it. Ten years old… tribal women slapping him. Taunting him because he was not full blooded.
Rescued by his Grandfather, yet punished by that same Grandfather for not standing up to the
women.

Instead of the spanking, the Master planned to caress, touch, and whisper.

“Little Indian boy,” the master rasped into his mike, “make this hard for me.”

Vin’s gloved hand stroked the penis in front of him. “Harder. You want a mouth to suck it. Make it
harder!”

“Master…I’m…I’m not afraid.”

“Little Indian boy… I know what you are afraid of. I know how the women treated you. I know
about your punishment. …Aaron. Every one of my slaves are taken down differently. None are ever
the same. No matter what you heard, it will be different here.”

“Could… could we start again?”

Vin smiled. “Yes, Aaron, my love. We can start again.”

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Dinner was over and dessert was on the buffet. Marianne and Buck excused themselves. They had had enough of the three giddy step-sisters. The two husbands had not said one word. Even though Buck tried to get them to talk.

The Wilmington’s walked into the library where Martin Sales was sitting with his lawyer.

“Those other daughters of yours, Martin. Do they ever shut up? I thought JD talked a lot. Those three… not even close to him.”

“Buck, sit.” Martin said pointing to a chair.

“Those girls were smart as whips until they reached high school. Then suddenly they discovered I had a bit of money. They became people I don’t even know. I divorced their mother long ago. She has remarried twice since. Why they still come around here, I have no clue.”

“Because father,” Marianne began, “you set them up with little trust funds.”

Martin looked at the family lawyer.” Perhaps you need to tell the girls, Gregory, that they have spent all of their trust funds.”

“Actually,” Gregory began, “their mother knew the funds wouldn’t last forever. Obviously she never told the girls. They will shortly be getting bills for their charge cards.”

“Father, they have never had a job in their entire life!” Marianne rasped.

Buck jumped to his feet as screams were heard from the dining room.

“Sit, Buck,” Martin ordered. “I believe the girls have discovered the envelopes that were on the dessert trays. Statements that say their trust funds no longer exist.”

“Gregory.”

Buck and Marianne watched the family lawyer leave the library.

“So, Little Buck, when do you go back to work?” Martin asked.

“Soon as we get a building, I guess. Haven’t heard anything yet. I’m thinking Tanner is probably getting antsy not wanting cases to drop by the wayside. Right now, from what I’ve heard, we are in a holding pattern. He gave me two weeks for my honeymoon. Marianne and I were thinking of driving up to Aspen. But we wanted your approval. Don’t want to duck out if you need us here.”

Martin looked at his daughter who just sat there grinning. “You are letting him talk for you?”

Marianne looked at her husband. She had pinched herself until her arm was red to make sure this wonderful man had said yes to her.

“I am, father.”

“I must say, you look very happy. Both of you. And daughter… your cheeks are pink. Your eyes are ablaze with happiness. I have never seen you like this.’

“It’s Buck’s doing. It is, what love is.”

“I wish to invest in a restaurant in Aspen. Could you check it out for me?”

“Certainly,” Mr. and Mrs. Wilmington answered together.
“We’re heading out tomorrow morning.”

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Kneeling on a bench, Aaron’s hard rock cock dripped cum, yet the ring around the head still held tight. His balls were being sucked by something he couldn’t see, and he moaned his master’s name for more.

“More…master. So good. Master…I belong to you. Use me. Oh please, use me.”

Vin slowly eased the long latex sleeve over his leather arm.

Fingers had been working the ass in front of him. Aaron was high. Probably higher than he’d ever been in his life and now…it was time. Time to put his little Indian boy over the edge.

Fingers worked the opening, stretching, pushing. Fingers and then the fist. Pushing, widening… and then the full force of power slamming up the rectum. Fingers dancing, drumming.

Aaron’s head jerked up as the fist slammed in. His guttural scream turned into gurgling as fingers played a tap dance on every nerve in his body.

“MASTER! IT’S WONDERFUL! Green light! Green light! I love thee. Master! I love thee!”

Then Tanner knew. All he had to do was tap three fingers on a table and Aaron’s cock would be hard as a rock.

“Wet your fingers. Rub the cock ring. Again. Again. Until the ring disappears.”

“Now… ease back off the bench, slowly…. Good,” Vin ordered his fist still inside the tight enclosure.

“Feel for the spittoon. Jerk off into it. Squeeze your balls until they are empty. Once you are empty… kneel on your hands and knees.”

“Master, it is so good. Please don’t pull it out yet.”

“Easy. Put your head on the bench and hold the spittoon with your hands.”

Again fingers danced inside Aaron’s rear entrance.

“Master. Master.”

Pulling the fist almost out, Falcon again slammed it in hard. Once. Then twice in quick thrusts.

Aaron’s scream of pleasure echoed around the sound proof room, as Vin pulled the man into his arms, holding him tight.

“Easy, little Indian boy, easy.”

“Awesome. It was awesome. Colors of the rainbow. Stars and flashing lights. My grandmother was grinning at me.”

Vin reached behind him and pulled open a drawer. He pulled out a pillow and a blanket.

“Sleep. I’ll wake you in the morning. Then we have work to do. And little Indian boy, you are moving into this hotel. You understand.”
Six a.m. came around early for everyone.

Houston and Golden. Bruce and Bart. Dunne and two other ATF computer geeks. Agent Sanchez, plus Team Leader Four and Six were all texted at 7 a.m. to be in the parking lot of the Federal Hotel by 8. Come with cameras or androids and notepads. Casual clothes, walking shoes. Nothing else was explained.

Shortly after the text was sent, Vin was on his way to the sound proof room to rouse Aaron. They had a lot to do in an hour.

Quietly stepping into the room, turning lights low, Vin grinned. The blanket covered every part of him. The pillow was pulled in as if he was hugging a baby. Aaron had a peace to him Vin had not seen before.

“Aaron.”

“Mmmmm.”

Tanner clapped his hands as he shouted, “WAKE!”

“Master?”

“Time to get up little Indian boy. It’s morning. Need you and your bird today. Later we will move you into an apartment.”

Stepping away from the door, Vin pointed out the door saying, “Shower around here. I’ll wait outside, and then take you up to breakfast.”

“Okay…” Aaron said stretching. “Master…”

“Outside this room, it is Falcon or Captain. Now get your butt in that shower.”

Walking into the penthouse was a new experience for Aaron. It was the first time he’d ever been treated like an equal. Anna welcomed him with a hug. Carter and Wolf slapped his shoulders and barked ‘welcome to the madhouse.’ Dennis and Justin just said ‘hello’, yet he knew they accepted him.

Joseph arrived late carrying a stack of papers which he slipped into his briefcase before Michael could see them.

Vin snuck into the head of the line for a buffet breakfast. He ended up standing at the end of the table, talking as he ate.

“Justin. Dennis. I put in a call to my White House contact to see just exactly what your jobs are. As of today, Aaron Wright is my personal pilot as well as my front man. Meaning he will clear any place I need to go into before I go in. Wolf… Aaron needs a place in the hotel. Do we have any up here?”

“Carter and I are sharing a two bedroom. We could change out the queen bed for two twins. Also we discovered that Michael likes to get up in the middle of the night and come out here to read. So
we’ve been splitting shifts.”

Tanner turned his eyes to son. “Michael. Are you sleep walking again? Do we need to get another gate for you?”

“Sometimes I wake up and I’m not tired. Everyone’s asleep.”

“Joseph. Are you going with us this morning?”

“Definitely!”

“Anna. Call Miss Nettie. Michael needs to be in preschool. She was a teacher. Let’s get his homeschooling started.”

“Carter. Wolf. In twenty minutes, I have a meeting with several ATF agents. After that we are going to Jasper’s mansion. We will probably be there most of the day.”

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Aaron, Joseph and Vin stepped out of the penthouse elevator and found Colt Hammer waiting for them.

“Maggie said you were looking for an apartment for Aaron. I think I have just the thing,” Colt explained motioning toward the double doors that lead to the helipad. “It could well have been made for a pilot from it’s layout.”

“Let’s have a look,” Vin responded.

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“A propeller?” Vin laughed.

Aaron ran his hand over it. “This … is from a World War II Spitfire. Let’s have a look.”

Colt pulled out a key that was attached to a thick ring. Someone had put the ring through a woven wrist band.

Taking it from Colt’s hand, Aaron slipped in onto his wrist. His grin reached to his eyes as he stepped into the room.

Joseph whistled as he walked in. There were several framed pictures of vintage airplanes on the walls. It was a small place, yet the pictures made it look big. A sectional sofa was in one corner of the room. A small alley kitchenette in another corner, with a square table with two chairs against the wall.

“Over here,” Colt said, motioning to a floor to ceiling divider, “is the sleeping area. And beyond is a closet and small bathroom with a shower.”

Vin walked through the room and into the bathroom. The walk-in closet was actually part of the bathroom, but the closet did have a door. Stepping back into the sleeping alcove, Vin noticed the huge round painting on the wall. Four feet by four feet.

*Indian buffalo. Drum. Warrior’s shield.*

“What?” Aaron barked rushing into the room. His eyes followed his Master’s point. Aaron gasped as the sight before him. Crossing his heart he mumbled some words no one understood.
Aaron looked between Vin and Colt, saying, “This place is mine.”

Aaron picked up several questions about to be asked, which he answered quietly by saying… “Everything I own… is in my bird. It won’t take me long to unload it.”

“I’ll help him,” Colt offered. “And I’ll have Maggie put him into the system. Then I’ll list this as occupied. Do we need a man on this door to direct agents to their conference room?”

“We have ten agents coming. Plus Aaron and I. I want to sneak out before Dennis and Justin are aware. Can we do that?”

“I can waylay them. No problem,” Colt responded.

“Plus two dogs. Houston and Dunne will be walking down from Miss Nettie’s, they do not have vehicles. They can ride in Aaron’s bird with me. Do you need a copilot?”

“No, but you could ride upfront. Then we could take the K9s and their dogs. I heard they were military dogs, so they should be okay in helicopters.”

*Oh little Indian boy. You are catching on fast.*

Aaron bit his cheek to keep from smiling.

“That takes care of four agents. We still have six. I’d really like to have them flown out because I don’t know how long it will take to drive. And Detective Bekkering is coming at nine and I want to go through the place before he arrives.”

“Don’t forget, I’m going,” Joseph put in. “Henry should be here shortly. I can be his copilot. We can take five, and you should be able to fit one more in Aaron’s bird. He had five in it when he arrived.”

“If someone will help me unload my bird. I can actually take six,” Aaron said heading for the door.

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Vin watched Colt and Aaron unpack his bird. Tanner’s head suddenly shot up. “Why isn’t Henry here? He had a pick up at the airport at 0730. They should have been back by now.”

Joseph looked at his son, saying, “Henry called me to say he was meeting his lawyer at eight this morning. He figured it was okay since no one had called him for anything.”

“So he has dumped Red Feather and is working for you? When the hell did this happen?” Vin shot back angrily.

“Vin.. no one called…”

“We don’t call people, Joseph! If the man had read the contract he signed… he would have seen that we TEXT our pilots with very specific information. He was to pick up one of the main backers of this hotel this morning,” Vin grown out through clenched teeth.

Aaron dropped what he was carrying and quickly stepped in front of his Master.

*Master. I think this man Henry is not for us. But don’t take your angry out on your father.*

“Vin.”

Looking up, Vin answered, “Yes, Maggie.”
“You had best check the trash can there. Henry threw away the bag of ear buds you left in his bird.”

“HE THREW AWAY SIX HUNDRED DOLLARS OF ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT!” Agent Tanner screamed. “That man is fired! Fired!”

It was Joseph who retrieved the package from the trash barrel. He slipped the package into his suit coat, as he pulled out his phone to call Henry.

“Hey, Joseph. I’m with a lawyer that is handling my divorce. It looks like it’s going to be a while.”

“Have you checked your text messages, Henry?” Joseph questioned quietly, standing inside the hotel.

“No one ever texts me. Let me check. The thing’s been blinking for a while.”

Henry’s mouth dropped open as he read what and where and how he was to pick up one of the major financial backers of the Federal Hotel.

“I take it you never read the contract you signed,” Joseph ventured as he heard his former pilot gasp. “It specially states how you will be contacted.”

“Well, next time…”

“I’m afraid there is no next time, my friend. You also threw in the trash six hundred dollars worth of electronic equipment.”


“Special ear buds for Federal agents to wear so they can communicate together. Vin has fired you.”

“Hey. Anyone can make mistakes on a new job. Just talk to him. I’m sure he’ll listen to you.”

“Henry. You don’t work for Joseph and Company. Red Feather Corporation is Vin’s corporation.”

“So I’m unemployed again. What about Joseph and Company?”

“Many of the things I was involved in, in Austin and New York, I’ve resigned from. It will be a month or two before I know.”

“Okay. Well, I’ve got to get loose of Gladys. She has spent ninety percent of our savings. My lawyer has already talked to a judge. It should go through fast. This tells me I can go back to Austin for a spell and close up some other things. I’ll wait to hear from you.”

“Maggie. Check with Jimmy. See where he is?”

“Two minutes out. And Vin, that Sheik is really pissed that he and his son had to stow their own bags. I think his teenage son is embarrassed.”

“Patch me through to Jimmy?”

“Who is this Maggie, the hotel staff talks to?” Joseph asked.
“You haven’t met Maggie?” Vin said laughing. “She is a computer.”

“Hey Falcon. This man is pissed because I didn’t get out. His son is totally embarrassed.”

“Jimmy, our new pilot, Henry, just got fired. You’re it now, and I need you this morning. When you land, shut it down and get out. I need you present in a meeting with Federal agents.”

“I flew back near that castle. There are three men with guns in that turret.”

“Thanks for the heads up. That’s where we are going.”

Colt, Aaron, Joseph and Vin watched the new copter that Joseph had purchased with part of Vin’s college fund. Army green and brown, with a large red feather, US Army symbol and ATF all across the sides.

“That’s pretty damn cool, dad,” Vin exclaimed as Jimmy gently settled it down.

The side doors were opened by two hotel security guards and a baggage handler with a trolley.

The Sheik came out pissed and shouting in a language no one seemed to understand.

All were shocked, including the man’s teenage son, when Vin Tanner quietly said, “Raja… you done?”

Behind him, Jimmy spoke quietly, “Falcon.”

Vin watched Raja’s eyes go wide at the sight of the pilot with springs for legs. Vin turned and walked over to his new hotel pilot.

In a bare whisper, Jimmy said, “Need to pee big time. Where is the meeting?”

Vin pointed through the double doors. “Through the lobby. Down that hall. ATF Conference Center. Bathroom down that way too. Go.”

Turning back to Raja, Tanner explained, “Jimmy saw some Afghan kids playing near an IED. Rather than have them killed he stepped behind them and got blown away. Lost both legs just below the knee. He has three different pairs of legs he uses. These are his favorite.”

“And he can fly with those?” The teen asked.

“He can. It is really amazing what he can do. In fact, we run in the morning .. if you are interested, join us.”

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Eight agents sat around the large oblong table waiting for the last two. Aaron had stepped out twice looking for them, when suddenly Dunne and Houston burst into the room.

“Sorry we’re late, Captain,’ Houston muttered, laying something wrapped in tissue paper down on the table.

“Is that why you’re late?” Tanner asked quietly.

“Yes sir.”
“You going to explain it?”

“JD’s going to explain it. It was kind of his idea.” Houston answered.

“Me!? You know him.”

“John Daniel,” Vin growled. “As I recall, we met in Boston.”

The team leaders present and JD’s teammate Josiah Sanchez were surprised when Dunne came to attention. They knew he hadn’t been in the military.

“Tanner Henry!”

TH glared at JD.

“You…ah… told everyone to wear ATF vests,” JD started. “And since you’re new like TH, we, I figured you didn’t have one. So, we …ah…”

“We came up with a tee shirt, sir,” Houston finished.

“You going to show it?” Tanner questioned.

“NOW?” Quipped the two.

Vin stared at the two young agents. They were perfect for each other. He already knew what it was. Miss Nettie had called Anna and Anna had called him.

It was Houston who grabbed the bottom of the tissues and pulled out the shirt. A dark Army green, long sleeved tee shirt. On the front was Army logo saying Army’s best sniper. On the back in bright yellow capital letters was …ATF BOSS!

“We figured with everyone who was going to be there this morning, they needed to know who was the boss,” Houston stated firmly. “And, I figured with that turret… we might get some practice.”

“How’d you know my size?”

JD looked at TH.

Houston sighed. “We asked Miss Nettie, who called Mrs. Tanner who looked in your closet.”

A sprinkle of laughter went around the room.

“How’d you get it done so fast?”

“Someone at the boarding house, works for a tee shirt place,” JD offered. “He drove us over there and made it for us. Didn’t charge us for it either.”

Houston stared back into the face of his former instructor. He realized the man was holding back a grin. “He said, most everyone knows you are the boss but thought it was a nice idea. That’s why he didn’t charge anything.”

“Give it to Aaron,” Vin ordered, gesturing to the man, as Jimmy walked into the room.

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“Okay. What we are going to do today is fly out in two helicopters to a place known as Jasper’s
Mansion. Has anyone heard of it. Anyone been there?” Vin asked.

“There have been stories about that place for years, Vin,” Agent Sanchez responded. “Could you explain why we’re going there?”

“We’re going there to investigate the place. And to clear out anyone who is there. It belonged to Reinhold Jasper who disappeared five years ago. His body has been found, but it is not retrievable. He was found with numerous Indian artifacts. Items stolen from sacred burial grounds.”

“He mistakenly built the house on private land. That land is part of the mountain that I purchased last week. I would like to turn it into ATF Headquarters.”

When no one asked a question, Vin continued as he introduced Joseph.

“Joseph and my mother, the late Catherine Tanner, have explored Lookout Mountain over several years. She left me funds to purchase the mountain to preserve its heritage and the eagle habitat that has been there for hundreds of years. According to the County, I now own this place.”

“I want a sweep done of every room, nook and cranny… want the dogs especially to check every floor.”

“Cold Case Detective Todd Bekkering and his crew will be there at nine. I want a good walk through before that. That is why we are flying out, not driving.”

Team Four Leader looked up from his notes. “You think Reinhold killed off whoever helped him steal the artifacts?”

“Yes,” Vin answered looking around. “Jimmy. You snuck in on me.”

“I’d like to introduce Jimmy. His name is just … Jimmy. No one can pronounce his name, including him. He is one of our pilots. He is a former Army Ranger. And, he has his running legs on, so don’t challenge him.”

“Jimmy just picked up a hotel guest at the airport. On his way back, he flew near Jasper’s stone castle. He observed three men with weapons in the turret.

“We will be coming in low. We will unload on the side we feel is the safest. Then Houston will harness up with one of Aaron’s rifles and we will take on the shooters in the turret. I will give the key to the place to Bart and explain how to unlock the door. Unless… those who are there have damaged it. Anyone inside will be arrested. Once you are in the door, if you think you need backup, tell me immediately.”

“When the turret is stable, I want Houston and Golden to check it out. See if there are any weapons up there. Get visuals on what you can see. Could it be used in place of range practice without endangering anyone?”

“I want the dogs to go first into any rooms. Put them on a long lead. We could have drugs, weapons, people or most anything there. Any other questions? “

“Captain. I thought we didn’t have the key?” Aaron asked. He knew they didn’t have it last night.

“The warriors found it in a drawer in the bank. Colt picked it up. You will be surprised how it opens.

“Okay! Joseph is going to read off the names that are flying him and Jimmy. Aaron will be reading off who is flying with us.”
“Lastly, open those baggies and pass the ear buds around. It goes in your right ear. Once it is in place, click on the yellow button. We will go with last names only. The yellow button opens it to everyone. If you find something that I should know about, click the red or forward button and say ‘Falcon.’ My computer will direct that remark to only me.”

“Gather your gear. If you need to call your family, wife, other… do it now. You will be engaged all day. Bathrooms are off the main lobby.”

“Aaron. I need to go next door to pick up my weapon,” Vin said as he took the tee shirt and put it under his arm.

“All those going with me,” Aaron ventured boldly. “Don’t get it the military bird until I get there.”

They all watched as he went out the door and immediately went into the next office. Curious, the agents walked out and looked through the window that said Red Feather Corporation.

In seconds, Aaron was back standing in the doorway. Vin looked up from talking with Joseph.

“It’s clear, Captain.”

“Let’s move it!” Vin barked as Aaron stepped aside.

*Stay here.*

Slipping into the smallest of the three rooms off the main office, Vin pulled off the two shirts he was wearing. Slipping on a tan short sleeve shirt first, he then shook out the tee shirt. *Sniper front, boss back. All I need are Captain bars…*

*No bars. Then I’d have to salute you.*

*Only in uniform, love.*

Unlocking the safe in front of him, Vin pulled out the mare’s leg. His favorite weapon of choice. Quick stop at the john and he was out of there.

“You ready?” Vin barked coming through the door. With unspoken words the two jogged through the hotel to the helipad.

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Over their headsets Aaron and Vin heard Joseph’s words. “Never saw it by air before. It looks like a wedding cake.”

Vin glanced at Aaron. “Turn your heat sensors on. Then do a slow circle around the whole thing. Need a readout to see if anyone is there.. dead or alive.”

Halfway down, the sensor started beeping.

“Can you bring it up? Shit! What is that? Put it on the monitor in the back.”

“Bruce. Bart. Image coming up. Do you know what this is?”

“Yikes! That’s the biggest Mastiff I’ve ever seen!” Bart yelped. “How’d he get inside?”
“We will soon find out. Take us up to the turret.”

Aaron glanced at his monitor to see where Houston was sitting. “I’ve got rubber bullets for the cannon. Houston could arm it and fire back if we are fired upon.”

Falcon silently turned and grinned at his pilot. “Do it.”

“Houston,” Aaron cooed through the ear piece. “Under your bench is a drawer. Pull it out and take out one of the packages. Pull down the gun and load it.”

“Cool! Rubber bullets. These hurt like shit! Captain?”

“Do what the man says, Henry.”

“GRRR… you know I hate that name.”

“Let us know when you’re ready,” Vin answered as he touched his ear piece.

“All agents. Jimmy, I want you to land but stay in the bird. We are going to engage the turret. Then we will unload.”

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In the turret, three young men sat drinking beer.

“Do you think that copter will come back?”

“What if they call the cops?”

“Hey you two. No one has disturbed us for months. We got that dog. He’s scared away everyone who has tried to get in.”

“YOU IN THE TOWER! YOU ARE TREPASSING ON PRIVATE PROPERTY!”

“SHIT! Get the guns!”

The three men grabbed their rifles and jumped up.

“HOLY CRAP! It’s an Army chopper and it’s… shitttt!”

Hard rubber bullets ricocheted around the inside of the turret as Houston sprayed the beer cans that sat on the rim.

“FEDERAL AGENTS. YOU ARE ON PRIVATE PROPERTY. SURRENDER NOW OR FACE FEDERAL JAIL!”

“TH. Hit that pony of beer. Then sit this bird down, Aaron.”

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Weapons ready, the group of ATF agents watched their new ATF Boss insert an odd looking skeleton key upside down into the middle of a maze.

Aaron was just about to suggest it might be unlocked when they heard a click. Agent Sanchez pushed the huge door open and before them was the huge dog.

The two K9 entered first and the huge Mastiff went bananas seeing other dogs. Bart dropped to his
knee to inspect the dogs tags.

Laughing, Bart said, “His name is Big Dog. There is a phone number here. And I would bet those guys picked him up.”

“Jimmy. Take his picture and send it to Maggie. Have her check for lost dogs. And JimBo. Stay with the birds. If we aren’t done by nine, you’ll have to fly down the road and keep the cops out until we’ve gone through the place.”

“Golden. Houston. Find your way to the turret. Secure the place. Joseph. Do you have those floor plans? Hand them out.”

Vin took one and stared at the multiple rooms off the center core. “Shit. I should have looked at this first. Aaron. Do you still have Vander Mullen’s code?”

_I thought he put his number in your phone after that bomb thing. Dial that and say, Falcon needs backup._

“That simple?”

“Yes.”

As soon as Vin turned his phone on, Maggie gave him a report.

_The Mastiff disappeared from a backyard not to far from here. Family is worried sick. They have two special needs kids and the dog was theirs._

Bart stood up. “This guy likes my dog best. I should be able to get him into Aaron’s chopper. She can program the address to him.”

“Maggie, call the family and tell them the dog’s been found. Ask where a helicopter can land to deliver him.”

=_=__

Looking at the floor plan of the mansion, Team Leader Two whistled. “We’re going to need more than ten agents to go through this place.”

Vin coded in the number and put the call on speaker.

_Major Vander Mullen! Whoever you are. You are on a secure line._

“Falcon needs backup.”

_Again. You need to recruit more people, Captain._

“My GPS shows that you are doing maneuvers near here. Who the hell gave you permission to use this mountain?”

_The Army has used this area for years. It’s free land, Texas boy._

“Not any more, Major. I own it!” Vin exclaimed. Before Vander Mullen could respond, Vin continued. “Did you fly near the stone castle?”

“Yes! Two guys shot at us. But I restrained my snipers from firing back. Is that where you are?”
“We are here. We have a good forty rooms to search …we’re looking for bodies, drugs, stolen Indian artifacts. Who can you spare?”

“Excuse me, Captain,” Jimmy ventured, handing Vin a note.

_I've got 40 Rangers at Hanover Place. Call if you need them. They are driving me crazy. Moose_

“Tell Moose to send them over.. by air. We need to get this done,” Tanner ordered.

“Major! Just got an offer from a hometown group. Please inform Fort Carson where you are is now private property. If you want to use it again, I will want your exact plans on how you are using the land. And Major! You damn well better not be cutting down virgin timber!!”

-=-=

“CAPTAIN!” Agent Houston shouted.

The group turned to see Houston and Golden emerge from an archway. Ahead of them walked three disheveled men handcuffed together.

“Well done!” The ATF boss barked. “Give me a report on what you found.”

Golden grinned. “Two rifles. A shotgun. An AK47 … which they had no bullets for. Two ponies of beer. One Houston destroyed. The other is intact. The middle one here, pointed the shotgun at Houston. Which is why this dude has a bruised jaw, but TH might have some bruised ribs. The guy used it as a club.”

“TH.”

“I don’t think anything is broken. It will hurt to laugh tomorrow.” Houston replied.

“No brownies for at week…” Vin replied smiling. He knew what they did with brownies.

TH shot a glance at JD before mumbling an answer. “Yeah. No brownies.”

“See anything on the way down?”

“Notice some rooms on the way up. One has a padlock on it.”

_Aaron! If you have chalk in your bird. Bring it up.

Blue or yellow. Got two boxes of yellow. The family cried when Big Dog stepped out. More Rangers coming in. I brought six, one is a paramedic.

_Good! Houston's been injured. Need him checked out pronto._

Joseph looked up from his phone after reading the info that Maggie sent him.

“Vin. We are in Arapaho County. Maggie is connecting you to the Sheriff.”

Vin saw the red blinking light on his phone and knew he was already connected. Well, the Sheriff was going to get an earful.

“Okay! We have Army Rangers coming in. One ATF agent with each Ranger. Start on the left and the right of the center core. Meet in the middle and then move to the next floor. Report what you find to Joseph. Remember, state his name, then give what you found. If it is empty, say empty. If it is
padlocked, say ‘need dogs.’ Bart and Bruce will come up.”

“Now, I don’t want to take all day here because we have Denver Cold Case Detectives who also want to search this place. And…. Sergeant! What are you doing here? You’re active duty.”

“Major Vander Mullen said you might need a sniper expert, even though I told him I’m sure you already did… He really likes using the mountain for maneuvers … “

“So he sent you as a peace offering.”

“Yes sir.”

Vin turned and looked at Jimmy. What do you think JimBo?

Oh, I like him a lot Captain. I’ll take him.

“You stay with Jimmy,” Vin stated pointing to the pilot.

“Where’s the paramedic?”

“Here!”

“I have a sniper here who needs his ribs checked out. And Houston! Whatever he says, you are going to do.”

Walking away from the groups as they split up, Vin put his phone to his ear.

=== Continues in The ATF Mansion/2
More discoveries found in Jasper Mansion. Cannibals are mentioned, but nothing is graphic. All ATF agents want this place to become theirs.

“Sheriff. This is Special Agent Vin Tanner, Colorado ATF. I’m at the Jasper mansion. Is this in your jurisdiction?”

“That’s private property, Agent Tanner. What are you doing there?” a gruff voice asked.

Vin looked up at Joseph whose eyebrows went way up as he frowned at his son.

“Well, sir. I own the mountain, and according to the County and State laws, that means I now own the house…castle. I have three men here that need to be arrested. Are you able to do that?”

“They are probably the owners sons…”

“The owner is dead! The man never married. The man has no children. These men had weapons and were shooting at anyone who flies overheard. Sorry, I bothered you. I’ll call the state police.”

“Now wait just a minute, young man!”

Tanner cut the man off and called State Police Headquarters. He was halfway through his explanation when the Sergeant he was talking with cut in.

“We’ll have a chopper airborne in minutes. We’ve been looking for those three for months. Strange things happening in that place. If you need help, let us know.”

“VINNNN!” JD screamed, coming on a dead run straight at him. “Vinnn. We found someone. He’s… He’s half stone. He was blinking his eyes. But…but…”

“Tanner. We have a visiting professor from the University of Arizona, Tucson. I’ll bring him. He is into this sort of thing. Might be able to help.”

“Okay!”

“AARON! Man the front door. Only allow the State Police to enter. They are bringing someone. Once they are inside… no one else. That includes Detective Bekkering. Keep some of those Rangers with you.”

Vin touched the red button on his ear bud. “Maggie. I want everything said from this point on recorded.

“We’re ready, Vin.” Trevor answered. “We have identified every agent by voice, so whoever speaks, his name will come up as the speaker.”

“Okay.”
“This is Special Agent Vin Tanner, Colorado ATF. I am standing in a stone castle known as Jasper’s Mansion. I am outside the threshold of a small room with two glass windows. Inside is a man in a standing position that is frozen to the ground and unable to move. The original owner of this house is Reinhold Jasper. He disappeared five years ago. His body has recently been found but is not retrievable.”

You found him? And you are alive?

“Yes. We did not go into the vault where he is. However, Jasper was sitting with him. What is your name?”

George Palmer. Los Angeles.

“Answer: George Palmer. He is from Los Angeles. JD. Get on your laptop.”

“Do you know how long you’ve been here?”

Months. Years maybe.

“Was The Tall Man kept in this room?”

Yes

“Answer – yes.”

“The Tall Man!!” A man behind Vin gasped loudly.

“I am Dr. Felch. The Tall Man was stolen eight years ago. How they even got it here is a mystery.”

Turning back to the man in the room, Vin asked, “George. Can you tell me what your involvement was with the theft?”

I raised the capital to move it in an asbestos container. They didn’t explain how dangerous the thing was.

“Answer: George raised the money to move the artifact in an asbestos container. They did not tell him how dangerous it was to be near the Tall Man.”

Doctor Felch, a professor in Archeology, stepped up next to Tanner. His eyes scrutinized what was in front of him.

Captain Tanner’s eyes went from the stone feet to the waist to the shoulders.

Something doesn’t fit here.

Felch touched Vin’s sleeve and motioned him back.

“Close him in,” Felch whispered.

“Aaron. Where can we talk?”

“Down here, sir.”

Vin followed Aaron down the hall to a huge room with a long cherry wood table that had chairs for twelve. Vin chose to lean against the wall. His eyes scanned the room taking in the ATF agents, Rangers, State Police. Then his eyes landed on a man in civilian clothes wearing a badge.
Tanner’s eyes bore into a hurdler from his Texas high school. “Thought you were going to Montana?”

“Thought you were going to make a career of the Army?” the man responded.

“Always ended up in the war zone,” Vin replied with a grin.

“That’s what happens when you’re the best sniper in the world. Montana had too much snow.”

“Colorado has less?”

“Okay,” Vin gaffed. “Terry and I went to high school together. Dr. Felch and I observed something in that room. Did anyone else see something that didn’t quite fit? No?”

“JD. Got your laptop?”

“Always.”


Sergeant Terry Blackman looked at his friend asking, “Vin. You want to tell us why you closed that door?”

“Doc. You want to explain what we both realized…. Wait! Aaron, take two men and find a way to barricade that door. If it is open do NOT go in.”

“Oh God, I should have thought of that,” Felch groaned. “Let’s hope he hasn’t escaped.”

BANG!!

Tanner pushed off the wall and was halfway to the door when Aaron returned.

“It’s okay, Captain. The door was opening and Bear slammed it shut. That big handle turned sideways. Fell into a groove in the wall.”

Vin walked back to the table, pulled out a chair and sat down. Using a hand motion for Felch to continue.

Dr. Felch looked around the table. “Six people were involved in the theft of a sacred Indian artifact known as The Tall Man. His body is encased in a mummy-case made of numerous metals. Legend has it … that if you are in the presence of this, you will be turned to stone in a matter of days or months. No one has lived to say how long it takes. We just know that it happens.”

“Holy shit!” Was the collective response of many.

Vin continued. “This artifact is probably worth billions. But, they would have to test it out before they offered it for sale. However, one of them would have to stay behind to check the progress.”

“And he ended up stone instead,” a Ranger offered.

“No. The man we saw in there, that was doing telepathy with Agent Tanner,” Felch continued,” is very much alive. He was standing behind what was left of the man in the chair.”

“Vinnn,” JD moaned loudly.

“Go ahead, JD.”
“The Tall Man was last seen five years ago. It was being moved from some mountain retreat to another mountain when it was stolen. It says, George Palmer is a billionaire’s billionaire. He funded the heist. Police discovered that he’d paid to have a special asbestos aluminum casket made. They speculate it was for this artifact.”

“He has exploded all over the world, but has done several trips to someplace in the jungles of South America. Then three years ago he disappeared completely. His family didn’t worry until a year ago when he missed his son’s college graduation.”

“Where in South America?” Felch asked. “Does it say?”

“Some tribe Cashibo? Holy crap! They are cannibals!” JD Dunne yelped, all the color draining from his face.

“Terry. Do you have a cadaver dog?” Vin asked.

“I can get one here in twenty minutes.”

“Have your officers check with those three that were arrested. See if they saw others in the house.”

“Gotcha.”

“Bart. Bruce. Did you check the basement?”

“We did not. We couldn’t find any lights, and it looked like a black hole to nowhere.”

“Vin!” Trevor shouted over the voices.

“Go ahead, Trevor.”

“That whole place is computerized and monitored. JD and I would go bananas there. Palmer has watched everything from a room down the hall. There are cameras in most every room. In the halls and the stairs. He knew the minute you all walked in. Looking at the security tapes, there were four guys originally. One left the turret but never left the castle. Palmer shot him with a dart and he is in the basement.”

“There are six cells in the basement. The oxygen level is monitored. The lights come on by fingerprint panels. One cell has a stack of bones in it and a pile of clothes. One has a dead man in it. Might be the missing man of those three. Another room has the grossest thing I’ve ever seen. I think it might have been human. Hopefully it is dead. Something odd and green growing in another cell. We are researching that plant. Spider thinks it is a South American man eater. Even a two inch piece can grow into something that would fill that whole room. It’s deadly.”

“The two padlocked rooms … have furniture stacked up. Tables, chairs, beds. It looks like someone wanted this place to look empty and they took every piece of furniture and stacked it, then locked it up.”

“Thank you, Trevor. Where from our location is the computer security room?”

“Two doors past where Palmer is. Also those windows where Palmer is… aren’t exactly windows. The outside is a square piece of cement with multi-colored glass imbedded in the rock. There are, also, cameras outside. Nothing moves around this place without Palmer knowing about it.”

Aaron. Take your two and check out the computer room. If it is safe, let me know.
Terry Blackman watched the non-verbal communication between Vin and the man.

“I see you’re still doing it,” Terry put in.

“I do it all the time with several people,” Vin answered.

“It’s why I didn’t get to Montana.”

“It’s another reason why I didn’t become a career man. Colonels hate the fact you can talk to someone without being verbal.”

Tanner looked at Houston and Golden. He’d noticed TH was holding his side.

“Houston! Are you in pain?”

TH’s head shot up. “Paramedic didn’t think they were broken, sir.”

“We’re going to get them x-rayed on the way home… or I’ll send Joseph with you.”

Houston nodded. He did not want to admit that they might be broken. He didn’t want to miss anything here.

Aaron came jogging back into the large room. “You have got to see this place! There are monitors checking every room in the place. And sir, the only place we haven’t found here… is a bathroom.”

“Take JD and the other two down there. Trevor, introduce yourself once they are there,” Vin ordered as he watched John Daniel Dunne slap his computer closed and take off.

“Okay, Snipers. What did you find in the turret?”

TH looked at Golden.

“The three had sleeping bags on a landing halfway down from the turret. Two ponies of beer. One shot to hell by Houston. Garbage from eating up there. The space is fairly big. Great wi-fi reception. Not sure you would want to keep it that open. Snow would pile up there in the winter.”

Vin looked at Houston.

“We saw several areas that have been cleared. We could set up a shooting range on one of them. Because of the speed of a bullet, if someone shot from the turret and missed the target… who knows where it would stop.”

“Good point.”

Looking around again, Vin asked, “What about the men who searched the rooms?”

“We called everything we found into Joseph,” someone answered.

“Just check your notes and give me a rough estimate.”

“First floor… tables and chairs in three rooms. Lamps. The rest were empty.”

“Second floor. Several are bedrooms. Some had just dressers. Some had beds. No mattresses or linens that we could find. These could easily be made into offices or the new division rooms Washington now wants.”
“Third floor is just one big room. It appeared to have a rug at one time. Several outlets up there. Also good wi-fi reception. That would be a great room to use for conferences. Haven’t seen any vents for heat, though.”

Pointing to black wrought iron squares just inches above the floor, Vin asked, “Have you seen many of those?”

Several answered in unison, “Oh yeah! Every room has those.”

“Those gentlemen… are your heat ducts. Which means we need to find another basement that has a furnace.”

“Dr. Felch,” Vin started. “Were there other artifacts stolen with the Tall Man?”

“Yes. Some have already surfaced on the Black Market. Did you find some with the Tall Man?”

“Yes. But you can’t get to them without going in front of the Tall Man. So, like Jasper, they are not retrievable.”

Vin pushed his chair back and stood up. “ATF agents. Do you think we can turn this place into Colorado ATF Headquarters?”

“OH YEAH!” Came the collective response.

“Captain,” Houston put in. “There are some storage rooms as you climb to the turret. Might be items that belong up there.”

“How bad are you hurting, Houston!” Tanner asked.

TH looked at the floor.

“Lance Corporal!”

“About a 5, sir.”

“A five on you is about an 8 on someone else. You are Larabee’s new sniper but he’s never met you. And the new ATF guidelines have divisions not teams.”

“Tanner. I’m Team Leader Six. Actually my name is Six with two x’s. I flew in with Jimmy. I’ll be glad to go with him to the ER. Have him x-rayed.”

“Captain, if I need surgery… you know what happens when I go under.”

“Tanner Henry Houston. You need to be checked out. Agent Sixx will keep me posted.”

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Two State Police officers with a cadaver dog along with the two ATF K-9 agents stood at the top of a long dark stairway.

“Ok, JD. We’re here,” Bruce ventured, staring down into the black hole.

“We programmed your fingerprints into the system. On your left side is panel outlined in white. Place your left hand on it.”

“WOW! LIGHTS!”
“Those will stay on until you turn them off on the other side, also with your left hand.”

“Any word on Houston,” Bart asked.

“Two cracked ribs. They think they can repair them as out-patient surgery. I guess he explained what happened last time he was in the hospital. So they are working so he doesn’t have to stay. But he’s off the grid for a week.”

“Bruce, why don’t you start your drug dog down first? I have a feeling that green growth might interest him. Then the cadaver dog can go next,” Bart suggested.

“Are your dogs available for other agencies?” One of the State Police officers asked.

“You’d have to ask Tanner. But I think they are.”

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Joseph, Vin, Dr. Felch and Aaron stood in the back of the security command center of Jasper Mansion.

“Have you found the room where Palmer is?” Felch asked. “That room may still have active residues in it. If so, he should be getting very anxious to get out.”

“The question is … what are we going to do with Mr. Palmer?” Tanner asked the group.

“Vin,” Sgt Terry Blackman said coming into the room. “The cadaver dog is on his way down the basement stairs. Several more ATF agents have arrived. All wearing vests. Though I like your shirt.”

“JD… here,” Vin offered pointing to Dunne, “And his roommate Houston, presented this to me…at our morning briefing.”

“Got it!” Trevor barked. “JD. Scroll down to the one that says STONE.”

As the camera panned around the room, Joseph remarked, “It looks like Palmer has used a lot of his money to secure this place. He is clean shaven so there is obviously a bathroom or two.”

“Why is he leaning into that corner?” JD wanted to know.

“JD. Pull back.”

“Wow!” Aaron exclaimed. “The glow from the mummy-case is still there. It is a hundred times brighter in that vault.”

“That means, wherever that mummy-case has been… still holds the power,” Felch ventured. “Any way we can trace where it’s been?”

“That man,” Vin stated coldly, pointing to Palmer, “is the only one who knows.”

It was Joseph who spoke what everyone was thinking. “Why don’t we let him stew for a while? After all, we have no clue about the room. Vin? Emery?”

Vin looked at this father and then at Dr. Felch, whose head popped up.

“How do you know….? Joseph Bebee! Negotiator for the U.N. You gave up Austin?”

“I did. Got a better offer. Vin. I think with your three computer wizards here, we should look
through every room to see what is really there. You’ll see things. Sgt Blackman will see things no one else sees. Plus Todd Bekkering is here.”

“Vin!” JD yelped. “They are coming up from the basement.”

“Padre!” Tanner called when he saw Agent Sanchez.

“Vin. This is an amazing place. A lot of ghosts too.”

“I’d like you to gather all the Profilers that are here and go to…. Maggie! Are you here?”

“I am. There is another computer room on this floor. There is a brown rose on the door. It is one of the few doors that have a regular doorknob. If they will go there, I will boot up the monitors. I will display the answers to their questions on this man.”

“How many Profilers are here?” Vin asked looking around. “Why have they all appeared.”

Sanchez answered, saying, “Joseph told us to call in every agent that was in town. He said you needed input on this place before you made decisions on it.”

Vin looked up into Josiah’s face. “I found out less than a week ago that Joseph is my real father. We both have telepathy…but his is more advanced. He answers questions while I’m still thinking.”

“What do you need to know about this man?”

“His name is George Palmer. He is a billionaire several times over. Has explored the world. But, in the last several years he has spent numerous months with a tribe in South America… Casibo.”

Sanchez crossed himself before saying. “This might explain some disappearances on this side of the state.”

“Maggie is a super computer. She will clue you in on anything that is on record on this man. I need to know what he is capable of … and how he can be imprisoned.”

“We’ve got four profilers here. I’ll gather them up and we will do a study on the man. You’ll be around?”

“I will.”

“Aaron! Where are the K9’s?

Outside throwing up. Take the exit near the big blue chair.

Tanner spun around looking for the chair. He took off on a run, dodging agents as he leaped over the bench next to the chair. Seconds later he burst out a door marked EXIT.

What Special Agent Vin Tanner saw were four men, two ATF agents, two State Police Troopers, leaning against trees and barfing everything they had eaten.

They only became aware of him when the dogs suddenly rose and began to growl.

One State Trooper looked up saying, “I was in Iraqi Freedom. Saw horrible sights. But nothing like
what is down there. Looks like organ harvesting and more. Three dead, well, four dead. The fourth one is in a separate cell. Looks like he’s going to be a feast for someone.”

Bart pulled a handkerchief out of pocket and wiped his face. “I think boss, the best thing would be to pour cement down there and seal the whole thing off.”

“What about that plant?”

“The thing went after my dog!” Bruce rasped. “It’s carnivorous. Might explain why there are more clothes stacked up than bodies.”

“Anyone who goes down there better be wearing hazmat suits and oxygen. We noticed a gauge on the wall. The oxygen level is kept low. The men in that one cell probably died from lack of air.”

“Say we can get rid of everything down there. What is your assessment of this place for ATF Headquarters?” Tanner asked as he dropped to his knees to allow the dogs to investigate him.

“Bart and I think it is a cool place,” Bruce offered. “The dogs can run. We can practice tracking in the woods. There are several places to set up target practice. It already has state of the art security. We’ve noticed several cameras on the outside of the house as well as in the trees.”

Bart looked at his new boss saying, “We also think agents should spend time guarding the place at night. Obviously, people have ventured in here. But once we occupy, we don’t want trespassers.”

Vin reached up and touched the red button on his ear bud. “Trevor. Have you found anyone for this carnivorous plant?”

“Maggie is talking to someone in Chicago. It appears another one was found in Palmer’s Los Angeles condo. They actually used fire to kill it. But she said hot sun lamps would do the same thing. They survive in the dark.”

“So, if we got some floodlights down there for twenty-four hours or more, that would kill it? How can we be sure it won’t seep out again? Or isn’t somewhere else in the walls?”

“Not all rooms have cameras. There are some locked rooms that don’t.”

“But the upper rooms have light. This plant survives in the darkest jungles where sunlight doesn’t reach. So we need spotlights on that thing until it dies. Then we need to seal the walls and the floor, and fill the whole damn thing with cement.”

“Works for me.”

Standing, Vin offered, “Nathan Jackson is out front. Have him check your dog’s leg. Then I want you both to go floor by floor. See if anything else is hidden.”

---

Falcon! We have some agents taking pictures with their phones.

Out front?

Yes.

On my way.

---
Tanner marched up behind two men wearing ATF vests. “Who is taking pictures?”

One turned saying, “Got some real dozies here?”

Tanner grabbed the phone and tapped in a number. “Maggie, I want you to go through every phone here. Delete every damn unauthorized image.”

“We’re on it boss.”

The agent looked at Vin’s shirt saying, “Who the hell are you?”

“Special Agent Vin Tanner! Head of Colorado ATF. Any agent caught sending images to Instagram, Facebook, Twitter or any other place will be suspended. And probably terminated if he continues to do so. How many of you agents can run four miles or more every morning?”

“A mile maybe,” one answered.

“I would suggest you read the packet you got from Shirley. It specifically states that agents are going to be toughening up into a tight fighting machine. If you play solitaire at your desk, I’ll find work for you to do.”

“And if anyone of you yahoos has texted a news station … you might as well pack up and go home.”

“FALCON!”

Vin looked up into the face of Aaron Wright.

“Agent Sanchez says they have come up with some interesting things. Want your input.”

Looking around, Tanner exclaimed, “Every ATF agent that is out here should be inside! Orders have already been given. You are already one step behind. Sitting around on your asses like you did for Travis…. Doesn’t work for me. You’re going to be working, or you’re not going to be an agent.”

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“Aaron, any other developments?”

“We found three bathrooms. All have separate tub and showers. Toilet and urinals. One on each floor.”

“I want you to call your Grandfather and tell him we found one of the men who stole The Tall Man.”

“He’ll want to come here with half the tribe, Captain.”

“He can bring his bodyguards. No one else.”

“And he is going to believe me?”

“He will Aaron,” Vin answered with a smile.

---

“Josiah, what do you have?”

“Have a seat.”
Vin watched George. He hadn’t appeared to move from his corner.

“Has he moved at all?”

“No. And he appears to be getting worried.”

“JD, pull back so we can see the glow,” Sanchez said into a mike.

“The sun has shifted. Those fake windows are taking up the heat,” Vin exclaimed. “The glow is getting hotter because of the colored glass.”

“Yes. And he cannot get to the door without walking in front of it. Even if we opened the door,” Josiah explained, “we don’t think he would walk in front of it.”

“We have learned that he has always been the boss. He is used to walking into a place, any place, and get royal treatment. He spent six months with the Casibos. How he survived only he knows.”

“K9’s found bodies in the half basement. Apparently sections of them. Plus there is a man eating plant down there.”

Josiah tapped the keyboard in front of him. “Here is what was found in his condo. They did a control burn. Then took the walls down to make sure it wasn’t inside. He would have had to make a very special box to get that through Customs.”

<knock… knock>

“Come.”

“Chief, would you leave your bodyguards outside please,” Tanner said with a stern voice.

The four profilers looked at the man who walked in. Stunned to see the man who was obviously an Indian Chief in full ceremonial dress.

“Gentlemen. This is Chief Richman.” Vin said as he introduced the Chief.

“He is the man?” Chief ground out.

“His name is George Palmer. Billionaire. Built the box to house The Tall Man. He is the last surviving of the six men involved. He has spent numerous months with a South American tribe known as Casibos.”

“Cannibals? How did he even survive approaching them?” The Chief wondered out loud.

“He also has a man eating plant in the basement. At least, the only basement we have found so far,” Vin explained.

“Yes. He would need something to dispose of what he didn’t consume. They are easily killed with spotlights or fire. They thrive in the darkness with little oxygen.”

“Can he see us? Can we talk to him?” The Chief asked.

‘JD! Can you pull it up again?”

“Coming right up, Vin.”
“George.” Vin barked.

“It’s about damn time you found my security. Get me out of here… Who the hell is that?”

“This is Chief Richman. You stole the Tall Man from his sacred mountain. I notice that sun glow. Why is it so bright?”

“You know damn well why it’s bright! The glow from the Tall Man never goes away. Even though we boarded up the window, the sun still heats it up.”

“But the Tall Man isn’t there…”

“Jasper had no clue what the thing is capable of. Lost two good friends of mine who were in on the money. Turned to stone. They suffocated within hours of being near the mummy-case”

“We found Jasper in the vault. Did he willing stay there?”

“That man was insane. He wanted to sit there and take notes on how it felt to turn to stone. To write down what he saw. I left him closed in there at his request. Came back in the morning and he was stone. Eyes and everything. I’ve been living here every since.”

“Are you responsible for the disappearance of people in this area?” Vin continued.

“What makes you think I am?”

Vin laughed. “Oh, bodies in the basement. Bones stacked up. A carnivorous plant to eat your waste.”

“I have found that humans are quite the delicacy. Shit! The sun’s getting brighter. I can’t leave until this thing cools down.”

“You can’t leave,” Tanner stated coldly, “until I can find a prison that can hold you.”

Glaring into Palmer’s eyes, Vin silently said, “You can stand in the glow and become stone, as you will probably get the death penalty.”

“Commit suicide?”

“You would be housed in solitary confinement. Not be getting the food you want. You’d starve death.”

“That is not much of a choice,” Palmer ground out verbally.

Vin looked at the Chief who said aloud, “Sound advice.”

“Mr. Palmer” Vin asked, “Why didn’t you cover the windows with black tarps. That would keep out the sun.”

Tanner’s eyes widened, as he picked up the Chief’s thoughts to Palmer.

“I will put you over a spit and fry you alive. Then give your body to the animals. You have moved a sacred artifact that is two hundred years old. It was inside a cool mountain. It only has power when it hits sunlight.”

George Palmer’s mouth opened and closed.
“Holy crap! Josiah! Is that one of the ghosts you saw?” Vin exclaimed as another image appeared in the room.

“That is not who I saw.”

Vin gasped as the image did a slow turn. “Red Horse.”

“You know this man?” Chief Richman asked, staring at a ghostly image in full warrior dress.

The Chief stepped back, his eyes on Tanner as the young man began talking in Comanche.

AAROONNNN! Vin screamed the name in his head as his voice continued to say the same words over and over again.

Aaron Wright burst through the door nearly knocking over his grandfather.

“GET HIM BACK!” Aaron screamed as he grabbed his Master and pulled him away from the screen.

Vin collapsed into the man’s arm.

“Paramedics. We need a paramedic now!” Aaron shouted. “Grandfather, hurry!”

It was Josiah who jumped to his feet and sprinted through the door shouting for Team Seven’s paramedic, Nathan Jackson.

A whiff of ammonia jerked Vin awake.

“Easy,” Jackson said.

“Palmer!” Tanner choked out.

“Everything went black on the screens. JD is working to get it up.”

Aaron. Love. Help me up.

“Josiah, what happened?”

“When you collapsed all monitors went blank. JD and Trevor are working to get them back.”

“RED HORSE! VISUAL!” Tanner barked. Seconds later, everything blinked on.

There was stunned silence in the room as they stared at a frozen George Palmer standing in the glow of light. His mouth open, one arm, hand up as if he was bracing against an attack. One foot frozen in mid air, the other firmly on the floor.

“Red Horse,” Vin barked.

*It was the only way, my brother. He is absorbing all that is left in the glow. By morning it will just be a room. Put him in the vault with the other man. Let them spend eternity there. We have opened a light to the plant. The sunlight will kill it. Seal that place up, Falcon. Seal it up.*

“Did you hear him, Chief?”

“I did not.”

Aaron held in his smile as he answered, “I did. How do we get him into the vault?”
“That mighty warrior… is your grandfather’s problem.”
The castle ...a three tiered wedding cake. Best security money can buy. Stoned for life. Tanner stands his ground.

“So, Iron Horse….” VIN started.

Aaron looked around. There was no one else there that he could see. “Iron Horse?”

“You missed that, did you? Maybe that is why your Grandfather said he didn’t hear anything. Red Horse has protected me for years. Five years ago, four of us were in a chopper that crashed. Red Horse and one other died. I woke up in the hospital with him at my bedside… except I could see through him. He said he would continue to protect me until the next Ranger stepped up.”

“You are that Ranger. He has named you Iron Horse because you are still faithful to the Ranger code and your heritage, even though the women and your grandfather don’t see it. Plus you have stepped up, without being asked, to protect Falcon.”

“Excuse me, Agent Tanner. The door is open to that room with the stone man.”

“Stone man? Oh hell!”

Jogging down to where several men were gawking, Tanner pushed through. “Back up! Who opened this door? Iron Horse! Close it! Make sure the latch is locked.”

Turning to the group of agents, Vin demanded, “WHO OPENED THIS DOOR?”

“Someone told us to check every room.”

“WHO?” Tanner demanded. No one could come up with a name or a description. Looking around the hallway, Vin stopped Ezra Standish.

“Ezra.”

“Yes, Mr. Tanner.”

“I would like you to supervise the set up of the third floor. It is an open space that will become a conference room. There are tables and chairs stacked up in various closets on the second and third floors.”

“You!” Vin barked, pointing to an agent lazing against the wall. “Walk around this whole place and get every ATF agent that is here up there working. I’ll have some pizza flown in for lunch.”

“Mr. Tanner, are you sure you want to use this building for ATF?” Standish questioned, staring at his friend.

“Sorry, Ezra. More than half the agents I’ve talked to want this place. And I do also.”
“Why do you think he walked through there?” Aaron asked. “He knew the sunlight was strong. It would affect him immediately.”

“When did the screen blank out?” Vin asked, still looking into the room.

“Grandfather pulled you back and then you collapsed. All the screens went black at that time.”

“Red Horse made the decision then because the Chief disrupted what was going on. That’s why I fainted. The words I was chanting were keeping Palmer alive. When that was interrupted … Red Horse used full power of the sun and those colored crystals to urge Palmer out. His transformation was instant.”

“Close it up.”

---

“Excuse me, Agent Tanner. The Sheriff of Arapaho County is downstairs. He wants proof that you own this place.”

“Oh hell! … Aaron, did someone call the Coroner?”

“I don’t think so. Since you know him, everyone figured you would.”

Looking back at the man with the news of the Sheriff, Vin asked, “What agency are you with?”

“I’m one of Sergeant Blackman’s detectives.”

“Terry still here?”

“Yes.”

“Tell him to keep the Sheriff occupied, while I print up some paperwork.”

“He and the Sheriff don’t get along, sir.”

“I joined that club, too.”

---

It took Agent Dunne several minutes with Trevor’s help to find and print out the sales agreement for the mountain. Included in that … was a map of the area, and a statement that all dwellings (houses, barns, sheds) were the property of the new owner, Vincent M Tanner. This also includes any vehicles, horses, livestock found roaming free on the land.

“Thank you JD. Save this here. We will probably have to produce it again. I am sure the Sheriff will take this along and have someone check it out.”

“Falcon,” Aaron suggested, “Maybe we should have the K9’s do a sweep of the immediate property.”

“I agree. Also the locked room here. I need to talk with Joseph before we see the Sheriff, then I’ll call Rockland.”

The two stepped out of Security right into Joseph’s path.

“Joseph! Do you know Palmer’s attorney?” Tanner asked quietly.
“I do. Does he need to know Palmer’s going to jail?”

“Palmer’s dead. Step in here. I’ll have JD pull up that room.”

[IlIl]

“JD. I need you to pull up Palmer’s room. And I need a picture to verify he is dead… What the hell?” Vin exclaimed seeing the man up against the wall.

“Back up the film.”

Aaron, Joseph, Vin and three computers techs stared at the imagery on the screen.

“Who are they?” Joseph gasped.

Aaron looked as his master and knew immediately who they were, saying, “Ghosts of all those he has killed. They are putting him into the full power of the leftover glow of the Tall Man. That colored glass intensifies the cure. If there was any life in him before, it is gone now.”

“Click several images and save them. Print them off.” Vin ordered.

“Captain, they may not print.”

“The ghosts won’t print, but he should. How we are going to explain it, is another matter.”

“Vinnn,” JD moaned as he picked up the papers from the printer. “You better look at these. I’ve printed off five, but am doing more in case they don’t show next time.”

Tanner took the pages and stared at the images of the ghosts around George Palmer.


Vin. You trust him. He trusts you. Best to give him exclusive before that Sheriff blows everything.

[IlIl]

“Jimmy. Where are you?”

“Agent Six and I have just dropped Houston off at Miss Nettie’s. The hospital gave her written instructions. He is not happy at all. Wants in on the action there.”

“Are you in the Red Feather ATF bird?”

“We are.”

“Okay. Put me on speaker.”

“Go.”

“I want you to stop at TV8 and pick up Rocky Allan. No cameras. No reporters. No recording devices. Six. Ask to talk to him in a secure area. That might be in the bird. Tell him it is an exclusive that will go international.”

“If he refuses to come,” Agent Six asked.
“Tell him it will go to his BBC rival.”

“Okay.”

“Jimmy. After you bring him… hang loose here. I’m ordering a couple dozen pizzas for everyone who is here working.”

“Boss. I know an independent, family owned business. Could we order them there?”

“Tell me when you get here. And Jimmy, let me know when you are airborne with Rocky.”

---

“Is there more than one stairway to the first floor?” Vin asked those around him.

“That one,” Joseph remarked. “It has a small landing halfway. Or one way over there that goes straight down. We still have not found the basement that houses the furnace, water, or utilities.”

Vin touched his ear bud. “Bart.”

“Yes sir.”

“Is the cadaver dog still here?”

“He is. Are you thinking about those locked rooms on this floor and the first floor?”

“Yes. I want all three dogs to walk every hall and check every room. Take an image of the locked doors. Agent Standish can open any lock. I don’t want them open until I’m there.”

“Got it.”

“Now,” Vin said sighing, “I need to call Rockland. He may not have jurisdiction here.”

“Rockland.”

“Jeffrey. Do you have Arapaho County? Actually we are on the line half and half?”

“I do things there, depending on what it is. What do you have?”

Vin looked around, than walked to the far end of the hall. “My friend. I have something here that will make even you sick. A man who has turned to stone who is, was a cannibal by choice. Bodies in a basement with minimal oxygen. And possibly more curing in sun filled rooms.”

“George Palmer.”

Vin Tanner was stunned to silence that his friend knew.

“Vin? Are you there?”

“You knew he was doing this?” Vin choked out.

“I heard him speak at a private conference. There is a State man who needs to be in on this. I’ll call him. Where are you?”

“Jasper Mansion. It is a stone castle built like a three tiered wedding cake with a turret on top. You will need hazmat suits for what we found in one basement.”
“He and I will fly in. He will order up what is needed after we see what we have. Don’t touch anything in the rooms where the bodies are.”

Vin Tanner stared at his phone. This place has such potential but … may just destroy the whole thing.

I would wait, son. You notice how cool it is in here and it is hot outside. No air conditioning. It is built to cool itself.

Vin jogged back to his father and Aaron.

“Okay. Let’s go meet the Sheriff of Arapaho County. Getting any vibes off him Aaron?”

“I am. He is worried that Palmer won’t pay for his re-election next year. And he wants to know about the workmen he sent here.”

“Workmen? Oh hell.”

“Boss! We are airborne. Will be there in five. Just discovered this bird jet propelled. I also asked for Trevor’s help. Call him.”

Vin touched the red button on his ear bud. “Trevor.”

“Agent Sixx planted a bug on Rocky when he went back to talk to his cameraman. Lane told his cameraman to check his phone for where he was being taken and to zero in and be ready to move. I put him on the moon.”

Vin burst out laughing. “Call Jimmy and tell him to return Rocky. That means I will no longer call him. Tell Jimmy to park at the glass house until I call him.”

“You got it.”

“What happened with Rocky?” Joseph asked.

“He asked his cameraman to track him by phone and be ready to roll when he texted him. So, it is the British investigative reporter I meet in Europe who just happens to be in Denver for a month.”

Vin Tanner tapped a few buttons and waited.

“Eh, Captain Tanner what are you up to? You’ve made quite the name and you haven’t even been here a month yet?”

“How would you like an exclusive that could rock the world? I will fly you in. No cameras, recording devices… anything.”

“Can you give me a name? Anything?”

Vin looked at Aaron and Joseph.

The Tall Man … came the reply from both.

“The Tall Man.”

“Are you kidding me? Where? When? How long do I have to sit on it?”

“Are you near downtown Denver?”
“Am looking at the glass mess-of-a-house you saved people from. Nice looking bird parked here. Wouldn’t be yours would it? Red Feather. Army. ATF.

“Knock on the pilot’s window and hand him your phone.”

“Hello.”

“Jimmy. Bring this man here. Then we will order the pizzas.”

“Okay, boss.”

“All right, Joseph, the negotiator and Iron Horse, let us go meet the Sheriff.”

Sgt. Terry Blackman looked up to see Vin Tanner coming down the left stairway. About damn time you got here, Tanner. This man is an asshole.

“Terry is not happy with you, son.”

Walking up next to the Sheriff, Vin startled the man when he spoke. “Sheriff. I’m Special Agent in Charge of Colorado ATF, Vin Tanner. What can I do for you?”

The Sheriff jumped like a rabbit. Turned and faced Tanner. Behind him Blackman’s face broke into a huge grin.

The Arapaho County Sheriff gawked at Vin. His eyes surveying the tee shirt, the boots, the gun.

“So you are the new honcho in charge, are you? What the hell you doing in Palmer’s house?”

“Actually sir, it is not Palmer’s house. It is Reinhold Jasper’s house. Well, it really isn’t their house, though Jasper did build the house.”

“It’s his house. Jasper built it on free land,” the Sheriff retorted.

“It is not free land. It has never been free land. I own this mountain! Several thousand acres. According to the County and the State of Colorado, it belongs to me. Which is why my agents and I are here.”

No one said a word. The Sheriff stared at Tanner stunned. Sgt. Blackman’s eyes went wide. Agents and others’ mouths dropped open.

Into the stunned silence walked Agent Sixx and a smartly dressed man in his thirties with a walking stick.

Joseph! Where is Dr. Felch? Find him!

Joseph looked around and then took off for the stairs.

“Top of the morning to you, Mr. Tanner!” Barked Harry Brothers.

Vin grinned as he gave a two finger salute to the man. Then he turned his full attention to the Sheriff in front of him.

“Sheriff. Why are you here?”
“You called me! Why else would I be here?”

“That was three hours ago. I have since learned you don’t have jurisdiction here. This part of the mountain was never annexed into either county. So, again. Why are you here?”

VIN! HE’S IN THAT ROOM. I NEED AARON UP HERE!

“Go!” Vin growled at Aaron.

Master. You will be unprotected. I cannot leave you.

“Harry!” Vin yelped, giving the man some kind of hand signals just before he turned and raced for the stairs.

Harry quietly moved to the bottom of the stairs.

When those on the first floor heard Vin yell, “SHIT!” the group moved at once.

“HALT!” Harry yelled in a tight British accent, his cane raised up in front of him.

“YOU! Who failed his command. Keep them back.”

Aaron stared at the man. He was to protect Falcon. How did he fail? He would have failed if he had left the man unprotected but now he was unprotected.

Vin jogged halfway down the stairs. “Terry! Need you up here.”

What happened to him?” Blackman asked as he knelt next to the prone man.

“He stepped into this room where the Tall Man was kept. He probably wanted to see what a stone man looked up. Thought being in the shadows would be safe.”

“Hell, I thought he was smarter than that,” Terry rasped, pulling out his phone.

“This is 7192. Please have the paramedic chopper that is on standby to come in. Alert University Hospital we will be coming in with a patient that needs to be isolated… in a secure place. Check.”

Vin’s phone went off as Terry’s call ended. Not recognizing the number, Vin answered by saying, “Special Agent in Charge, Colorado ATF. Vin Tanner.”

“What a mouthful? Why not just say Captain Tanner, Colorado ATF?”

Vin frowned at the voice.

“It’s Butcher. Coming in with Jeffrey Rockland and some smart-ass doctor who thinks he knows everything. What do you got?”

“Bodies in various degrees for a man who loves humans in a way you don’t.”

“Shitsville! Better get all civilians out.”

“State Police. ATF agents. A Brit that I invited. Two others that are cleared. Oh yes, and the Sheriff of Arapaho County who knows the man, but is unaware that he has supplied some of the people food.”
“An older Sheriff with a chip on his shoulder?”

“That’s the one. As soon as the Air Ambulance leaves, you can come in.”

Walking back to Blackman, Vin said, “Better tell them to bring one of those cone things for burns. Don’t want others down there seeing this. Leave two of you troopers here.”

“Two of my troopers are going with him. I’m staying here. Don’t give me that look. One of my guys is related to him. So, he needs to go.”

Downstairs, Aaron silently hovered in a corner calling Jimmy.

“What’s happening there, Aaron?”

“It’s a new hell, Jimmy. Need you to go to the Federal Hotel and pick up Justin and Dennis. There is so much going on here, I can’t protect Falcon like I should. He goes one way while telling me to go another.”

“You don’t want him to know this, right?”

“Right.”

“Remind him to give me the order for the pizzas. It will soon be noon and they’ll have a rush.”

“Okay.”

Aaron jogged over to the stairs he last saw his Master using. Just as he started up he heard his name whispered. Looking around, he didn’t see anyone.

*Little Indian boy. Bad. Bad.*

Turning again, he was surprised to see Vin two steps ahead of him.

“Jimmy called, Captain,” Aaron reported. “Said he needs to call in the pizza order soon before the noon rush. And needed to know how to pay for it all. And did you want drinks too.”

Aaron began to sweat when his Captain didn’t say a word.

“Sir.”

“I’ll call Jimmy. YOU… sit right there and don’t move until I tell you too.”

Vin walked around the man and continued down the stairs. He walked toward the front entrance but stopped abruptly. Turned and walked to where Aaron had stood earlier.

“Yeah, boss,” Jimmy answered cheerfully.

“Do not under any circumstances pick up Dennis and Justin. I have enough to worry about here without them underfoot. Agent Sixx and others here can help with the pizzas. Order 20 large pizzas … any variety they want to make for us. Six packs of assorted drinks. No beer.”

“They don’t sell beer. Nothing like that. This is a family place. I’ll call it in and then just wait there
till they are ready.”

“Good. Hang loose around here. Because I want to take an aerial view of this place.”

“Gotcha.”

“Hey, Darlin’ how you doing?” Vin rasped, as he leaned against the wall watching people.

“Vin, I’m seeing some horrible things there. But ... I do know where the kitchen is.”

Vin burst out laughing, causing several people to turn and stare at him.

“We can’t find it and you can?”

“That first floor has several rooms. The kitchen is the middle room. There is a banquet hall on one side, and a big living room on the other side. That second floor was once all bedrooms.”

“And just how do you know this Mrs. Tanner?”

“Because... all mighty warrior... husband of mine. We looked it up. When it was first built, Jasper had an Open House and lots of pictures were taken. Trevor is downloading everything. If Jimmy would stop by, we can give him a binder we’ve put together of the whole place.”

“You tell Trevor to send it all to Agent Dunne and we will print it off here. We have a closet full of office supplies. This guy has two years worth of stuff. Anna. You be careful. A lot of things happening out here. Don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Carter, Wolf and Spider are keeping a close eye on Michael and me. Can’t even go potty without someone wanting to know where I’m going. The whole place is tight. Dennis and Justin are pissed off at you. You really shouldn’t have left them Vin. I feel you need to have them there.”

“Anna, I .... Okay, I’ll call Jimmy back. A lot of people here have no clue who Captain Tanner is. Love you.”

“Love you too, my darling.”

“Jimmy. I have been overruled by Mrs. Tanner. Pick up Dennis and Justin. Also, they have a binder they have put together on this place. Pick that up.”

“You got it, boss.”

Vin stayed where he was, on the outer edge of what was happening. The entrance was a huge room, with halls and stairs leading off in several directions. He watched the two State Troopers interact with two Sheriff Deputies. From the thoughts he was picking up, the deputies didn’t much like the Sheriff. The Sheriff was worried about something he had buried on the property. He also picked up that the Sheriff had, had dinner here with Palmer.

Vin pushed off the wall and headed for the Sheriff, just as the Med-Vac Ambulance landed.

Harry! Time to start mingling. Things are about to happen. Get your photographic brain geared up.
Tanner held back a grin as he watched Iron Horse jump to his feet as though he’d sat on a tack.

“Sheriff. How many times have you been in here? You seem to know your way around.”

“I’ve been here a few times. Palmer financed my last two campaigns. Was hoping to see him today. Elections are coming up again in a few months.”

“I’m afraid George Palmer won’t be available for that, Sheriff,” Vin ventured cautiously.

“And why is that? I’m surprised he isn’t down here ordering you all to leave.”

Vin watched the ambulance crew walk through the room and up the stairs.

“Sheriff. Is there an elevator in this place?” Tanner questioned, avoiding the Sheriff’s question.

“There are two,” the Sheriff answered. “Over there that door with the yellow square goes up to the second and third floors. And that one over there … with the red triangle goes down to the basement.”

“Red usually means danger. Have you been down there?”

“I have not.”

“And the other one?” Vin asked pointing to the yellow square.

“Yes. I have used that on several occasions.”

Joseph! Elevator on the west side.

“You have not answered my question Tanner! Why isn’t George down here?”

Vin stared at the man. Glancing at Harry …you ready for this old man?

The man’s dead, isn’t he? Stoned in real life.

“The reason George Palmer is not down here, Sheriff… is because George Palmer is dead!”

AARON! GUARD THE DOOR. ONLY THE MED VAC PEOPLE LEAVE. NO ONE LEAVES THIS PLACE!

“DEAD?! That is impossible! I just talked with him a few days ago.”

Overhead a voice barked, “Captain Tanner!”

“Go!”

“It’s Major Butcher. My passengers want in there and there is no place to land other than a field that has targets on it.”

“Don’t land there. It is a possible body dump,” Tanner said loudly as he stared at the Sheriff.

“Can you hover near the entrance? Unload them and their gear then land on the road leading up here?”

“Hell Falcon! There are five cop cars there. Two Sheriff cars and several other cars. You guys having a party there? I’ll drop near the entrance. The Coroner and his accomplice want in there
Tanner walked to the huge front doors and looked out. He saw numerous cars which he assumed belonged to the ATF agents that had arrived.

Turning back he spoke loudly, “AGENT DUNNE! GO ON LOUD SPEAKER TO THOSE ON THE THIRD FLOOR AND TELL THEM TO GET DOWN HERE AND MOVE THEIR DAMN CARS! THEY ARE BLOCKING EMERGENCY VEHICLES.”

“Got it!”

Seconds later it sounded like thunder rolling, as twenty men came running down stone steps.

“Captain?” Aaron questioned, as they all came to a stop in front of Aaron.

“Gentlemen. Park down along the road and walk up. We have two choppers waiting to land.”

“YES SIR!” Came the collective response.

“Let them out Aaron.”

“CHRisss…!”

“Cory, what wrong?” Larabee called, coming fast out of his home office.

“Army!”

Chris walked to his front door and looked out. He recognized the type of van that was parking. Military Police and a transport van.

“You stay here,” Chris ordered as he put the code into the front door security box.

Chris pulled out his badge as he walked up to the man getting out of the driver’s seat.


The man looked at Larabee’s badge, saying, “Romeo. He is AWOL. We’ve been tracking him for two months. Saw him in some wedding pictures, which lead us to Denver. You hiding him in there, sir?”

“Romeo? I told him if he came around here again, I’d shot his ass off.”

“Know where we can find him?” The man asked looking up when the door opened behind Larabee.

Chris turned and immediately went to Corliss. “Easy.”

“all…franklin. .ring him here,” Corliss muttered through braced teeth. He reached into his pocket and handed Chris his phone.

“Corliss! How you doing?”

“Franklin. It’s Larabee. I have two Army MP’s here looking for Romeo. Seems he is AWOL.”
"AWOL! Oh god, Tanner is going to be pissed at this. Okay. The man has been begging to get back to your ranch. He’s been bragging about wanting to take you down."

"Not ever going to happen. I changed the security codes because of him. Can you bring him around the back of the barn. I’ll have them move their vehicle back down the driveway. Tell Romeo to come in the back door. The MP’s can pick him up there."

"Okay. Ten minutes."

Chris handed the phone back to Cory, as he explained the plan.

"When you have him, throw away the key," Larabee growled.

"Chris. Alcon needs to know."

As one MP backed the van down the driveway, the other looked at Corliss. "Do you mean Falcon? Capt. Tanner?"

"Yes."

"Do you have his number?"

Chris pulled his phone and scrolled down to the name he’d discovered was there this morning.

"Tanner! Make it short!"

"Got an MP here looking for Romeo. Seems the man is AWOL."

"A..WOL!" Vin Tanner shouted at the top of his lungs. All conversation in the huge room stopped.

Chris looked at the MP who swallowed, muttering, "Looks like he didn’t know. Let me talk to him."

"Captain…."

"How long Sergeant? Thought you were going to throw away the key. Lock him up and chain him to the floor."

Chris looked at Corliss who was trying to grin but only his eyes were laughing.

"I take it sir, you didn’t know."

"If I had known Sergeant goof-off, I would have locked him up myself. How did you find him?"

"He was in a lot of pictures at your wedding. We’re setting a trap for him. Got to go," he ended the call before the man could answer.

"This way. Corliss back in the house and code it."

-= -=-

Vin looked around the room and then headed toward the main room.

Aaron saw his Master leaving and knew he had to stay where he was. Searching the room, his eyes fell on the British guy.

HARRY! GO WITH TANNER!
Harry’s head shot up. Looking around, he saw the Indian staring at him.

**GO! PROTECT HIM!**

Grinning, Harry Brothers walked briskly away from whom he’d been listening to and headed in Tanner’s direction.

“-=-==

“So my Texas brother, got tired of that crowd out there?” Harry questioned coming to a stop next to Tanner.

“I don’t like zoos. And that is a zoo.”

“We have a fantastic stainless steel kitchen here, my friend. Six burner stove. Two double sinks. Big freezer. Big refrigerator. For a single man… seems overboard.”

“What do you know about George Palmer, Harry?” Vin asked walking toward the freezer.

“Eccentric! Billionaire. Puts his money into weird projects. Travels the world. Goes places no one else does.”

“I’m going to open this freezer. I want you to tell me what you see.” Vin said tightly, his hand already on the handle.

Harry’s eyes went wide. His mouth gaping open as he read what was on the shelves. Reaching over he slammed it shut staring at his friend.

“Human parts?” Vin questioned, already figuring they were.

“Oh yeah! I didn’t know penis’ were a delicacy. Or hearts or lungs or….. Holy Shit that man was a cannibal.”

“Spent several years visiting the Casibo’s in South America. Explains why people have disappeared around here.”

“I wanted to turn this into ATF Headquarters. But… I think I will just tear it down.”

“Hey now, mate. Don’t get hasty. This is an awesome place. You just have to clean out a few nooks and crannies.”

_Falcon._

Vin reached up and touched his ear bud. “Yes Aaron.”

“Rockland is here. The ATF have moved their cars and want back in. Jimmy will be here in twenty minutes with lunch. The man with Rockland is Arthur Felix and he wants everyone out.”

Looking at Harry, Vin stated coldly, “Arthur Felix is here.”

“That asshole.”

Vin pulled his phone and called Ezra up on the third floor.

“Ezra. Have you found any human remains up there?”
“I beg your pardon. To whom do you wish to converse?”

“Knock it off Standish. Have you found anything unusual up there?”

“Tables and chairs. Dressers. All empty. We have turned this floor into a banquet room. Three buffets in a row. All drawers are empty.”

“Okay. That looks like the only floor that isn’t going to be a crime scene. Pizzas and drinks will be on their way shortly. And most every one that isn’t working the bodies will be there.”

“Bodies?”

“Well, Texas boy. Let us go meet Mr. Asshole,” Harry ventured, twirling his walking stick.
Chapter Summary

Vin Tanner wants to destroy the castle; his agents want to save it. A Black Market of body parts is discovered.

Joseph! Don’t you know Dr. Arthur Felix? Isn’t he dead? He is coming in with Rockland.

I’m coming down now. He is definitely dead.

“Who is Joseph?” Harry asked as they left the kitchen.

Vin grinned. “Joseph of Joseph and Company?”

“The diplomat? You know him?” Harry quirked. He was impressed.

“Have you seen him in action?” Vin asked.

“I have. He is very impressive. You do know my friend; I am missing a lot of images here.”

“Harry, my British brother, there are cameras in every room. Every stairway. Outside everywhere. Palmer knew what was going on every second of every day. You may have what you want … within reason.”

“There he is. Joseph is always impeccable. I’ve never seen him in anything but a suit.”

Vin looked up at his father as he walked over to them. “I’ll have to work on that.”

“I take it, Rockland is the younger gray haired man,” Joseph ventured.

“He is. Joseph. This is Harry Brothers a BBC reporter, and an old friend.”

“I believe we have met,” Joseph replied studying the man.

“Not formally sir. But I’ve seen you in action.”

“Well, Vincent. Shall we take down the fake Dr. Felix? You do know, Vin, this man is probably here for what you found in that freezer.”

Vin gawked at his father.

“Blimy! I should have recognized that packaging,” Harry ground out. “Palmer must distribute that on the Black Market.”

“Which is why the Fake Arthur Felix is here. Dad, you want to take him down?”

Harry stumbled as he gasped, “Dad?”
Vin just grinned at his friend.

The three men walked up to the group near the door. Arthur Felix was shouting that everyone must leave the property.

Harry and Vin stopped just behind Jeffrey Rockland. Joseph moved up next to him and then stepped in front of the fake Arthur Felix.

“Dr. Felix?” Joseph said curtly.

“Who are you?” Arthur Felix boomed.

“Joseph… of Joseph and Company,” Joseph responded slowly, his eyes moving over every inch of the man.

_Terry! Get you cuffs ready! This man is a fake._

“You sir, are a fake,” Joseph growled evenly.

“I beg your pardon, sir! I am….”

“Doctor Arthur Felix,” Joseph cut in, “is dead! He died five years ago while on an Egyptian dig. It took two years to retrieve his body. He was buried in Arlington National Cemetery… and he had a huge memorial service just outside Dallas, Texas. I was one of the speakers at that service.”

Jeffrey gave Vin a mean look only to discover his friend had a stunned face at what had just been heard.

Joseph continued, saying, “I have recently seen your image on a wanted poster put out by Interpol. You and an American, probably George Palmer, are involved in selling illegally obtained body parts. Vincent. I believe you know an Interpol inspector.”

“Yes sir, I do.”

“I suggest you call him. In the meantime, I would like one of the State Troopers to arrest this man. He needs to be locked up until international authorities can get him.”

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_Vin’s ear bud buzzed, “Vin. We have found Palmer’s office. It is at the far end of the second floor near that elevator. You, Joseph, Rockland, and Harry might want to check it out. It would make a good command post.”_

“Thank you Trevor,” Vin answered to the air around him.

“Captain!” Aaron shouted. “Pizza has arrived. Where does it go?”

Tanner walked over to one of the curved cement benches that adorned the outer walls of the large entrance.

“ATF AGENTS! TROOPERS! The mini chopper that just arrived has lunch. They need help carrying the pizza and soft drinks up to the third floor. Use the elevator … there,” Vin barked, pointing to a sign on his left.

“Sheriff deputies …. I would like you to hold your Sheriff. It has come to my attention that is mumbling to himself about a body he buried on the grounds. I have asked the State Police and their
cadaver dog to search the perimeter of the castle.”

‘WHAT THE HELL YOU TALKING ABOUT?’ The Sheriff roared as two K9 officers walked in a side door and motioned to Sgt. Blackman.

Vin watched the interchange between the Troopers. Terry stepped outside with his officer.

“Sarge. You need to look at this. We’re pretty sure this is the man that was running opposite the Sheriff. Plus he is wrapped in a blanket that has ‘Property of Arapaho Sheriff’ stamped on every corner.”

“That’s him,” Terry replied sadly. “Looks like he’s been in cold storage and recently buried.

Using his pen, Terry lifted a corner of the blanket. He was surprised to find a small hand gun in the armpit of the victim.”

“George. You have a baggie? Got a weapon here.”

“Well, well,” the K9 officer gasped.

“You know this?” Sgt. Blackman asked.

“Belongs to the Sheriff. He has complained for months that he lost it somewhere. Otherwise he is never without it.”

“Stake out this whole area. I’ll talk to the Coroner. See if he can do this before he starts on the castle.”

Sergeant Terrence “Terry” Blackman walked briskly through the door, back into the huge entry of the castle. Pushing through various people, he pulled out his handcuffs.

“You are under arrest, Sheriff! For the murder of Daniel Duval. Your special blanket that you brag about, has been found. Deputies! Read your Sheriff his rights, and notify your next in Command what is happening.”

“I’LL HAVE YOUR BADGE, SERGEANT!”

“Coroner,” Terry remarked quietly. “I’d like you to look over what has been found outside before you start in here.”

“I need to talk with Tanner. Then I’ll be out there,” Rockland answered.

“I’ll have your badge Blackman. Just wait and see.”

“Oh, Sheriff. Look what we found next to the vic…” Blackman replied as he held up the evidence bag holding a small hand gun with the Sheriff’s name carved in the handle.

“All right Maggie we are here. Where is the door?”

Maggie’s soft voice overhead explained. “In front of you is a white frame on the wall. Place your
right hand flat within this square. … Good. It will give your name … and rank if you have one. ‘Captain Vin Tanner, Colorado ATF.’ Now the next person and the next.

Vin watched Jeffrey Rockland’s information come up… Medical Examiner, Denver, Colorado. Then Aaron’s. Then Joseph’s. Then Dennis. Then Harry.

Harry Brothers. BBC.

“Shouldn’t it say investigative reporter?” Vin asked.

“Well, brother. I am sort of hiding out in the US. Did a report on someone in the government and it kind of backfired on the paper. They told me to get lost until things cooled down. Have never been to Denver so… thought I’d check it out.”

“Well, my Brit. What you are about to see will blow your mind.”

‘Now gentlemen, there is a white X on the wall. Whoever is going into this office must place his hand on that square. There will be a one minute delay in opening after the last hand is programmed in.”

“And if only one is going in?”

“Still, a one minute delay.”

“Okay, Aaron. I would like you to go up to the pizza party. Make sure no one leaves that area and wanders around. Especially outside. But really nowhere. You are the most intimidating, so you are the best candidate. Dennis. You wait out here. If anyone needs one of us, you can come in. Joseph, are you coming in?”

“I believe I will go up with Aaron. If I come in there I may not want to eat ever again.”

Vin looked at Harry, whose eyebrows went up.

“Well, dad….” Harry ventured, “After what your son and I saw in the kitchen freezer, I may not want to eat again either.”

“Okay, people let’s go.”

---

“Holy Crapolla!” Tanner yelped as they slowly entered the large room.

There were video screens in rows on one wall. A large corner desk with a swivel chair in the farther corner from the door. Five computer terminals. A corner toilet with just half a door shielding the commode.

“Maggie. Could you bring up the room where Palmer is?”

Jeffrey gasped. “Is there a bigger screen available?”

‘If you sit at the desk, or gentlemen, if you stand behind the desk, I will instruct you.”

“Okay Mag.”

“There is a handle near the front of the desk. Pull on that and a screen will rise up. On the left side of the desk is a directory. I suggest you start with that.”
Vin flipped open the directory. Using his pointer finger he scrolled down to the words ‘tall man.’ Scanning the top of the directory he discovered it was voice activated.

“Tall man.”

“OHMYGOD!” Jeffrey exclaimed, as he fell backwards into the swivel chair.

“That gentlemen is George Palmer. That is the room the Tall Man was kept in after it was stolen. We don’t know who the man was in the chair. And we cannot get into that room to retrieve either one until that glow is gone. Now the Tall Man was moved to a vault in Denver two years ago. That glow is there every time the sun hits the room. What we have surmised is this… they were offering the artifact to the highest bidder. But, first they had to prove that the thing could really turn a man to stone.”


“Maggie. Were you able to download that picture off Aaron’s phone?”

“We were able to save the image of Jasper with only a little background, Vin,” Trevor explained.

Harry stared at the image. “Now that is really stoned. What is he doing?”

“According to Palmer, Jasper wanted to stay in there and write down how it felt to turn to stone.”

“A real looney tunes.”

“Trevor. Are we taxing Maggie if we both use her?”

“Actually Captain, we have divided her. You have one and we have one. Would you like to change her name?”

“Let’s go with Margaret.”

“Done! Vin. Would you like me to play the video of Palmer and you having a conversation? Or the ghosts pushing him into the position he is in now?”

“The ghosts. Then Margaret we need to know what is on every level.. where the bodies are.”

“Coming right up.”

Harry stared at the images surrounding Palmer. Heard Palmer yelling at them.

It was Jeffrey who understood who they were. Vin looked into Rockland’s wide eyes and nodded.

“They are some of the men he has murdered,” Rockland gasped.

“Yes.”

“Okay, Margaret. Show us the basement where that plant is. What is the code for that?” Vin asked looking down the list. “Got it. It says PLANT. And a code is coming up on the screen.”

Tanner touched the square that said [OXYGEN – UP/DOWN]. He increased the level to maximum. Then he increased the [LIGHT].

“What the hell is that?” Harry quipped.
“That ... is a man eating plant. It cannot survive in light or with high oxygen. It is from the jungles of South America. It has learned to grow and thrive in minimal light and air. Margaret, can you show the other side?”

“Oh shit!” The three men gasped at once.

“Vin,” Jeffrey started. “This is beyond me. You need someone who knows about body retrieval.”

“Margaret. There is another room or two. Could you bring those up please.”

“I believe Vin, they are on your table there ... look at number ten.”

“Curing room?”

No one said a word as the camera slowly span across the room. Naked men handcuff to the ceiling. Ankles cuff to the floor. Black circles around vital organs.

“CLOSE!” Tanner barked.

“Jeffrey, my friend. You need to go to the victim outside. I need to call Washington and get a referral here.”

“Obviously, I wouldn’t say anything, Vin. I do agree... this place needs to be destroyed.”

“No way!” Harry exclaimed. “Once it is cleaned up! Bleached. It is an incredible place. It would make a great Bed and Breakfast. You know how many people would love to come here. Especially if there are ghosts.”

Tanner and Rockland stared at the man.

“Bro, what is your other choice for the ATF?”

“The floor above the vault the Tall Man is in.”

“This has outdoors. You can track. You can shot.”

“Jeffrey.” Vin ventured, “You best get outside. The dogs may have found more. I have a feeling that Sheriff has buried a few more out there.”

-=-=-=-=-

Vin stared at his phone. Larabee might know.

“Larabee.”

“It’s Tanner. You’ve lived in Denver for a long time. Can you give me a name for body removal? Not Rockland. This is different.”

“Did you find bodies in Jasper’s castle?”

“Jasper is dead in a vault in Denver... with an Indian artifact he stole five years ago. This is something George Palmer was doing. Trapping men. Curing them like a side of beef. Then selling their parts on the Black Market.”

“Damn! There is a company that comes in and removes bodies and then cleans the area. Such as suicides. But, hell, this... I don’t think they would. Military maybe.”
“Shit. That means I have to call Colonel Baptista again,” Vin gasped as he turned to stare out a window. “You and Corliss doing all right? When is his next appointment?”

“We’re going in tomorrow morning for another x-ray. He is tired of slurpies. Hates smoothies. Wants real food.”

“Hang in there, Larabee. That man loves you … a lot.”

Larabee stared at his phone. Tanner knew Corliss loved him and wasn’t upset about it. Travis had told him to watch his urges. Internal Affairs could cut his career. Tanner wasn’t even bothered with the fact and he and Cory were lovers.

Margaret, get me the State Forensic Lab.”

The conversation was short and sweet. It only took an image of the curing room to explain what was found. And to explain that the Denver ME was overloaded with bodies found in the woods around the castle.

Vin explained about another room that was found as well as what was in the freezer.

Harry and Vin looked at each other.

“Well, Bro… they will be here in an hour with refrigerator trucks. Could we go up and get pizza now? Hopefully there is some left.”

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Tanner was surprised at the amount of pizza that was left. Maybe the talk of bodies had slowed people down. After downing his third piece of Meat Mania (sausage, bacon, pepperoni, ground beef, ham) Vin, tapped on the table and stood up.

“I would like to hear your opinion of this place. I have two options, three actually. But I’d like to hear your input first,” Vin started glancing at Harry.

“It’s got natural cooling. The security is tight.”

“JD showed us the computer room. He’ll probably never want to leave.”

“There is space to put up our own firing range. An enclosed firing range.”

“The shoulder on the county roads are wide enough we could run out here rather than on city streets.”

“The second floors’ rooms are pied shaped. With the new divisions, each could have a room and there is still space for a team to meet when working on a mission.”

“There is a commercial kitchen. My wife does catering. She’d love a use of something like that. And she could cook for us too.”

Laughter shot through the room. Harry gave Vin a look.

*Not if they knew what was in the freezer.*

“Better than a floor in the Jasper Building next to the Federal Hotel?”
“OH YEAH!” Came a unison shout.

“Okay gentlemen. Let me tell you what we found here.”

Introduce me, would you bro?

“You’re looking at this Brit here. This is Harry Brothers. He is a BBC investigative reporter that has been exiled to America because of an expose’ he did on a British politician.”

“Vin! What’s with that fake Dr. Felix?”

“Have you guys found a monitor here?” Vin asked.

“Oh yeah. A big one, over here.” An EMT responded walking over to a large buffet and turning around a large picture.

Vin walked over to the monitor and put his hand on the screen. The same coded directory came up on a corner of the screen. Vin stroked a finger across ‘tall man.’

After the initial shock, questions and disbelief, Vin explained who he was and how it happened. And that he would probably always be there.

Tanner than explained the Tall Man’s legend.

“All six men involved in the theft are dead. The Tall Man is in a safe somewhere in Denver. Reinhold Jasper, who built this house, chose to die with the Tall Man. Actually, he wanted to write about how it felt to turn to stone. But he turned to stone before he could do that.”

“Where is the bathroom on this floor?” Tanner suddenly asked.

“It is exactly in the middle of this floor… halfway down either side.”

“Vin,” Harry started. “I think you should show them the image of Palmer and the ghosts first.”

Seconds later the picture appeared on the large monitor. George Palmer’s screams were heard as he was herded by the ghostly images to the center of the glow.

Two agents were immediately on their feet and at the screen.

“We know this man!! He’s been missing for …. He’s dead, isn’t he?”

“Yes, a ghost means they’re dead.” Tanner answered tightly. “Thank you, Margaret.”

“Excuse me, Rockland,” Sgt. Blackman said quietly. “My dogs have found two more bodies.”

“Have you flagged them?”

“We have. “

“Good. Could you send a car down to the turn off? I’ve called in the ME from Greeley to come and assist.”

“Be glad to, sir. And Vin… talked to the State Forensics Lab. They will be here in about a hour or less.”
“Good. What is in that castle is well beyond me. I would venture that all the missing people in this state passed through this place. It is a tragedy for their families … never knowing what happened to them.”

-=-=-=-=-=

“We do not know the fake Arthur Felix’s real name as yet. But we do know he came to pick up items from George Palmer that they sell on the black market.”

Vin looked around the room. There were older agents and several young ones.

“What they sell, gentlemen … are body parts … for edible consumption.”

Tanner leaned against the buffet and waited for those words to sink in.

Two agents took off down the hall in record speed. They rest just stared.

“Do you understand what I said?”

Harry walked up next to Vin saying, “That stone man, George Palmer, was a cannibal… by choice. He spent months in the jungle of South America. He discovered there were others like him in the world.”

“You’re saying… these men lured men here for the sole purpose of cutting them up and….”

“Yes.”

“Why hasn’t anyone known about this?”

“For one … Jasper built this place on what he thought was free land but wasn’t. The person who owned the land before, never came out here. A week ago, I discovered my mother had left me a trust fund … to be used to buy a mountain and protect the eagle habitat on it. As well as a Native American sacred burial ground. When the State sent me a map of the area I now owned, it came with a letter about this castle. Which is why I asked you agents to come out and help investigate it.”

“Vin.”

“Yes, Josiah.”

“I think you should show the rest. They need to know what you found. I do have to say … that even with what you have found here, this would be a good place for us. It already has state-of-the-art computer security. It cools itself. Bleach can remove countless stains and odors. Plus …someone here may be able to identify the bodies.”

“What our K9 agents found, I will not show. However, this one I will show,” Vin said turning to the monitor. He coded in the ‘curing room’ then stepped back.

“If you know anyone here, write their name down. The State Forensics Lab will be here shortly.”

“They are making money off people like this? Just men?”

Tanner watched the faces of the agents that sat around the tables. Disgust. Horror. And then he saw it. One was still alive.

“MARGARET! Pan to the face of the third from the right! That man is still alive. Where is this?” Tanner all but shouted.
“It is down the stairwell with the red triangle on the door. Lights automatically go on but Vin… It is controlled with some kind of liquid. It is not safe for you to enter.”

Aaron burst into the room. “CAPTAIN! THE STATE FORENSIC LAB IS HERE!”
Vin Tanner had hit the [Code 1 – All] line on the directory on the desk to see what would happen. Before him every screen on the wall lit up. He had instant knowledge of what was going on in every room as well as outside.

The kitchen had two techs in protective gear emptying the huge freezer full of human body parts.

The turret had three ATF agents cataloging the weapons found there and in a closet just below. Thankfully, someone had already cleaned up the beer that had been sprayed around from Houston’s target practice. *Too bad he didn’t go for the other one that was empty.*

Several rooms were empty. He stared once again at Palmer, wondering if the man really was dead. Then it occurred to him that the specially built mummy case had to be stored somewhere.

Moving around behind the desk Vin looked at the directory list. *VAULT. STORAGE.*

Vin was so intent on the view of the vault on the desk top screen that he did not hear Dennis open the door and step in.

“Excuse me, Captain!” Dennis ventured loudly.

Vin’s head snapped up to see a man in a suit behind Dennis. “Dennis.”

“Sir. The head of the State Forensics Lab would like a word with you.”

“Have him come in, and Dennis … have Aaron come up here.”

“Yes sir.”

“Quite an operation you have here, Captain Tanner,” a man in a gray suit said.

“This was all put in by George Palmer. He knew what was going on inside and outside this place every minute of every day. What can I do for you, sir?”

“I wanted you to know that the man you thought was still alive in that curing room is being flown to a hospital in San Diego. From the tridents on his left arm, we faxed his image to SEAL Command. He’s been missing for six months. His SEAL training probably saved his life.”

“Hopefully, he will be able to tell us some things about this operation,” Vin answered. “Make sure they keep him protected. We will need statements from him.”

Vin looked at the door as Aaron stepped in.
“Iron Horse. I need your grandfather’s private number.”

“Private number?” Aaron rasped his eyebrows rising.

“Chief Richman has a private number… you don’t know it?”

“I think, Captain, only the Elders have that number.”

“Margaret! I need that number,” Vin barked into space.

“I’m on it.”

His eyes still on Aaron, Vin spoke directly to him. “When you looked into the vault at Jasper, was what he sat on stone? Could he be moved from there without damaging him?”

“Captain! There is no way to get him out. I mean….” Aaron stopped, looked at the man in the suit and then back at Vin.

Vin was also observing the man in the suit. Vin was picking up several of the man’s thoughts. The man knew about the castle but not about the Tall Man.

Tanner abruptly cut off his conversation with Aaron and turned his attention to the man. “Who are you? And what do you need?”

“Dr. David Graham, Head of Forensic Medicine. I was here years ago for an Open House. It is an amazing place. Very self-sufficient. The only utility used is electricity.”

“It appears to be cool but how do they heat it in the winter?” Vin asked as he studied the man. Was he friend or foe?

“This elevator,” the man explained, pointing beyond the office, “goes to the basement where there is a huge wood burning furnace. Jasper would spend many days collecting dead wood from the forest. It was cut to size outside, then the pieces rolled down to a bin in the basement. One of the things all the guests at the Open House had to do was to collect wood. Use the machine to cut the pieces, then deposit them into the chute.”

Vin stared at the man. Bolting to a standing position, Tanner barked, “Have you looked at this machine today?”

Dr. Graham’s mouth opened and closed as the realization hit him.

“I have not! And yes… it would be perfect for cutting through bones.”

“Margaret! When you get that number put it in my red phone. Let’s go!”

-=+=-=

Vin Tanner, Terry Blackman and a forensic lab tech followed Dr. Graham around the west side of the house to the back.

“Here we are. This holds the cutting machine. Then that green lid lifts up and the cut wood would be rolled down. Don’t know how it is stacked up, but I have seen the furnace.”

They watched the lab tech put on rubber gloves. Then he slowly lifted the lid and fastened it to a hook above.
“I don’t think I will eat meat for the next month,” Terry Blackman groaned.

“Obviously, they weren’t worried about bugs or cleanliness,” Graham put in.

Vin questioned, “Can you get any DNA off what is there?”

“Could we take the whole machine?” Dr. Graham wanted to know.

“YES! Definitely. If I keep the castle, we will get an updated cutter.”

“If you? You aren’t going to destroy it, are you?” Graham rasped. “It was one of those Houses of the Future. Minimal furniture. Self heating. Self cooling. That computer system would be perfect for the ATF.”

“Would you show us the furnace?” Tanner asked looking at the man.

“I’d like to see that too,” Sgt Blackman stated moving away from the cutting machine.

As Aaron trailed the three men, he checked his phone for the Vote to keep the castle or destroy it. Plus, ATF here, yes or no. So far, Vin was the only one who wanted it destroyed. Plus the only one who wanted the ATF in town.

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Vin whistled. “Wow! This is a larger scale than Grandma Tanner had on the first Tanner Ranch in Texas. This bin looks like it would hold several cords of wood.”

“Oh, oh,” Dennis yelped. “Got a body here. Though he is fully clothed.”

Blackman walked around to look. “From his hands … I think he thought it was a place to hide. Maybe from Palmer. Looks like his knuckles were broken.”

“Probably when that lid slammed shut?” Dr. Graham suggested. “Can we get him out?”

Vin stepped into the elevator when they discovered their cell phones didn’t work there. Rather than use his phone, he stabbed [1] and rode up to see if Spider had shown up.

Special Agent in Charge Vin Tanner stood quietly in the open elevator listening to conversations close to him.

“........

“This is the coolest place. A castle! Just imagine working here.”

“The second floor is a pie. Half could be our specialties … demolition, sniper, profiler, EMTs… the other half for planning missions.

“I wonder if we could ask Tanner to just have five teams… three, four, five, six, seven. That would make people think we have 7 teams.”

“Why not start with one?”

“Be like SEAL Team Six. The first US SEAL Team was labeled Team Six so the Russians would think we had six teams instead of one or two.

“........
Vin grinned. Now there was a concept. Teams three to seven.

Looking around he could see that whoever wasn’t here might be cut if they didn’t have a good excuse. Then he saw Larabee and Corliss come through the front door. Stepping out, he jogged between several agents he heard mumble, “its about damn time Larabee showed up.”

Tanner’s shout, “Chris!” stopped all conversation.

“How is he? What did the doctor say?” Tanner wanted to know.

“The jaw’s healed well. But he still has some orders,” Larabee explained pulling out a paper and unfolding it.

“Absolutely no steak or pork chops… or meats that take a lot of chewing. Hamburgers, stews that sort of thing. Green leafy salads. He’s been put on some vitamins… which we already picked up. Two of Miss Nettie’s church ladies were in the Doctor’s office… they heard the nurses strict instructions. Have a feeling when we get back to the ranch there will be boxes of food again. Haven’t had to cook much since you put him into protective custody.”

“And Vin…” Cory said loudly, “We got a cooler of smoothies in the truck. I’m sick of smoothies and slurpies.”

“You! And you!” Tanner barked pointing to three agents. “Help Larabee hand those out to the people working the crime scenes. Dennis… wait for them here. When they get back give them a tour.”

Dennis ground his jaw tight but he answered, “Yes sir.”

Turning to the three agents who had complained about Larabee, Vin growled, “You.. and you … and you. Get an extension ladder. You are going to retrieve a body out of the furnace bin.”

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Chris Larabee stood tall in the turret. “What a view from up here! This is amazing.”

“Is Vin going to use for the ATF?” Chris asked Dennis.

“Not sure. But we do have a poll going?”

“A poll?” Larabee asked turning to look at the young man.

Dennis pulled out his phone. “Vin originally wanted it torn down.”

“What! No way!” Cory and Chris yelped in unison.

“Right now…of the 20 agents that are here… it is 20 No and 1 yes.”

“Tanner being the yes to having it torn down.”

“Correct.”

“And the ATF?” Chris asked.

“Vin originally came out here this morning with that in mind. But, with the bodies and…”

“Bodies?”
Dennis pointed to the bench and they all sat down as Dennis explained what had been found here.

Larabee stood up not saying a word. Corliss had tamed him. More than he’d ever thought possible. This was a fantastic place. A place agents could feel like they owned the world. See forever. Most lived in apartments or condos… to hike in the woods.

“Hike in the woods?” A voice asked.

Chris turned. Dennis was gone. Tanner stood in his place.

“Most of your agents live in the city. Condos or apartments. Most can’t afford to even go into a park and be safe for a picnic,” Larabee started.

“You’re going to have to make a parking lot. Could also make a small picnic area. When we’re working a case, sometimes we don’t have time for lunch. Summertime …wife, kids… could come out and have a picnic lunch with their dad or husband. Might be the only time they get to see him. Might be the only time they get outside.”

“Good ideas,” Tanner answered.

Looking at Corliss, Vin rasped, “What did you do to this man, Cory? He’s turned into a civilized man instead of a roaring lion.”

Cory grinned for the first time in weeks. “I tamed him, tamed him good.”

“As the loser on the poll using this castle for the ATF, I have just conceded downstairs. This is the new Headquarters of ATF Colorado. I will, however, keep the ATF Conference Room in the Federal Hotel, which is where several of us met this morning.”

“The State Forensic Director has called two cleaning services to go through the whole building. Especially the areas where the bodies were found. Did Dennis explain what we found?”

“He did,” Cory replied. “Said penises were a popular item on the menu. They’re better when they are attached though.”

Tanner held in his grin as Larabee turned red.

“Explain your craving for bananas? You never used to like them,” Vin rasped, looking from one man to the other.

“Bananas?” Both men gasped.

Vin couldn’t hold it in any longer. He burst out laughing, then turned and headed down the stairs.

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“I would like to know Tanner, how you got my private number!” Chief Richman roared through the phone.

“I am a Federal Agent. I have my ways. I found where the mummy-case is stored that Palmer and Jasper used to steal the Tall Man. Are you interested in having him moved back to the mountain? Can he be moved safely?”

“You know where it is?”

“There are three other offices in that bank. It is locked inside one of those offices. I am in Palmer’s
private office at the castle. I will see if I can find the key or … where it is hidden there. Are you interested or not?”

“It will take some planning. Yes, I am interested. We would like it moved back to the mountain. Armed guards will be needed to make that happen.”

“I can get Army Rangers here. Under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Warrior. He is a Native American from Oklahoma. Good man. Career Army.”

“They need to know the dangers.”

“They will only be involved once it is out of the vault and sealed in the case. They will be informed of the danger of the Tall Man and of the men who want it.”

“I’ll get back to you.”

---

Joseph!

Vin…

Have you walked through this whole place?

I have. Would you like a tour?

Please.

Walking over to the desk, Vin turned off the monitor and pushed it back into the desk. He touched the OFF button and all the screens went out.

Vin looked at Dennis saying, “Where’s the nearest bathroom?”

“Two doors down, just before the elevator. The door swings on a pivot. It’s really cool.”

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Vin walked to one of the urinals and relieved himself. After washing his hands he looked at the tee shirt he worn. Pulling out his phone he took two pictures of the front. Then he pulled it over his head and shook it out. Using his trusty Army knife he cut off the label. Grinning, he put the shirt on backwards so ATF BOSS was on the front. He then took two more images of the shirt. One image each was texted to Hannah’s phone.

“So, backwards is how we’re going. Let them see who I really am.”

Stepping back out into the hall he met Joseph and Dennis. Both men said at once, “That shirt is backwards.”

“No label,” Vin answered.

Instantly Dennis replied, “You cut it off.”

Tanner’s glared at his bodyguard, who blushed and looked at the floor.

Looking at this father, Vin said, “Shall we start at the turret and work down?”
“We’re starting at the bottom and working up. The turret is a relaxing place. A good place for discussion.”

“I’ve already been to the furnace basement. And the other two need to be cleaned.”

“Well, smarty …there is another one, quite large in fact. It has two antique pool tables in it.”

“Pool tables?”

“Let me show you how this place is heated. Then you can show me the pool tables.”

Joseph and Vin walked into the open area that housed the pool tables. They found two men they didn’t recognize.

“Excuse me! Who are you and what are you doing here?” Vin Tanner barked.

“Playin’ pool! What’s it look like? What’s ATF? That some kind of logo?”

_Easy Vin. They might know that dead man._

“ATF stands for ... Alcohol Tobacco Firearms Bombs Drugs .. I’m a Federal Agent. Who are you?”

The two men swallowed hard and quietly put their cues down.

“Ah, Palmer lets us come and play if the house is open. Figured with all the people here he was having another open house.”

“How many open houses does he have?” Joseph asked walking into the room.

“Quite a lot since Jasper disappeared.”

“How many men that came to the open houses are still around?” Vin asked leaning against the doorway.

The two men exchanged looks before one ventured. “We know of three that left the party early yet we never saw them again.”

“They were reported missing?” Tanner pushed.

“Yeah.”

Joseph studied the two. “Vin, perhaps they can identify the bodies that were found.”

“Bodies!?”

“Let’s go!” Vin ordered sharply. “And I would pass the word ... there will be no more open houses here. Palmer and Jasper are dead. This property belongs to someone else.”

The pool players identified the man found in the wood bin as the missing man whose wife moved away. They promised to get Dr. Graham her parents name in Ohio.

The Coroner had the two look at five other bodies, but they were unknown to the two.
“Vin.” Dr. Graham said from behind Tanner as he and Joseph headed back to the house.

“David. How’s the body count? Find any more?”

“Our man in the wood chute is the only one identified so far. We are faxing images and prints of the five found with the SEAL to the FBI. We have bagged the clothes that were in the cell across from the plant and boxed up the bones that were in that cell also.”

“The other three bodies opposite that plant are a mess. It looks like they were given to the plant and then pulled out. They are the grossest things I’ve ever seen and that is saying a lot.”

“Jeffrey and I have made the decision to pay for a common grave for the three of them because you cannot really tell who or what they are. Neither one of us want to work on them for fear the plant might be living in one.”

“What about the plant?” Joseph asked.

“I’ve talked to a cement man we have used now and then. He is coming out to look that cell over. I told him the danger that might be behind the walls and in the cracks. Surprisingly, he knew about the plant from a cousin who was in Special Forces.”

“I’d like to have that whole cell … that whole basement section filled with cement,” Tanner growled.

“That would be costly,” David answered.

Joseph looked at Vin. He knew how his son felt. That place really needed to be sealed off.

“I’ll pay for it,” Joseph said evenly. “We don’t want any kids exploring down there. Finding something we missed. That plant has to be killed. We also have to check the outside of the castle. Pour a little cement down some trenches so it doesn’t find a way out.”

“David, what about the wood chopper?” Vin wanted to know.

“Ah yes. That is cemented in, I’m afraid. However, we have power washed it with a disinfectant solution. What was there is gone. I’m hearing about a stone man. Is that Palmer? Could I see him?”

Joseph and Vin exchanged looks.

“I can show him on a security screen, but to personally see him, no. To personally see him … you would be stoned for life.”

“Iron Horse! What is the latest on Dr. Felch?”

Aaron pulled his phone and checked messages. “His legs are fine. His pants kept the dust from penetrating. But his arms and hands are still covered.”

Looking up, Aaron continued, “Doctors aren’t sure how to proceed. They tried wetting it to peel it off but skin came to. They are going to put him in some kind of a bath to see if it can be softened up. The Trauma Center has never seen anything like this before.”

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Vin invited JD into his office to operate the many things there. Vin grinned inwardly as John Daniel
Dunne’s eyes grew wide.

“WOW, Vin! This place is awesome.”

“The control’s are on your left. Need Palmer pulled up,” Vin ordered as he opened the handle of the monitor to pull it up.

“Zero in.”

David Graham dropped to a squat so he was eye-to-eye with Palmer. “Could he be alive in that? His brain, perhaps, still working.”

Palmer! George Palmer.

“His eyes are blinking, Vin!” JD gushed.

“Is there sound in there?” Graham questioned.

“It’s on, but nothing is coming through.” JD answered.

“JD, zoom in on his hand.”

Palmer. Can you move your fingers?

“Pull up how we originally found him … in that corner. Then go to the ghosts.”

“Ghosts!” Graham squawked standing. “Are you communicating telepathically?”

Vin looked at Joseph who nodded.

“Yes. It is how we first talked.”

Dr. David Graham watched in awe as ghosts of men Palmer had killed herded him into the light.

Graham shook his head, saying, “I have heard stories for years about the Indian icon that could turn men into stone. It is unbelievable.”

“From what we have learned,” Joseph began, “It can only be done when there is light. Why they stored him in this room is beyond me? They must have known the sunlight would intensify the effect.”

Innocently, JD put in, “Doesn’t that mean an Indian would have had to clue them in? I mean, otherwise, how would any of us know that?”

Joseph, Vin and Graham gawked at the computer whiz.

“You are absolutely right, Agent Dunne!” Joseph responded.

Looking at Vin, Joseph continued, “When Catherine and I explored the mountain we met several of Chief Richman’s men. We heard several legends about the Tall Man. Not one mentioned anyone turning to stone.”

“David. How’d you hear about it?” Vin wanted to know.

“Powwows. Several tribes around here used to have Powwows in the summer. Someone always dressed up like the Tall Man. In multi-colored robes and headdresses. Though I don’t recall anything
“It was stolen when being moved from one mountain cave to another. So, JD is absolutely right. There was an inside man.”

David looked around the room. “I’ve been in the forensic business for a long time. Seen a lot of things. But here today…is the first time I’ve seen men being chopped up for edible consumption.”

“IS THAT WHAT THEY….” JD gulped back, his hand going to his mouth.

Vin raced around the desk and grabbed JD off the chair propelling him toward the toilet. Joseph sprinted to open the half Dutch door. They just made it as John Daniel heaved his lunch of pizza into the toilet bowl.

“Stay there, JD.”

Joseph and Vin stared at each other.

Who is going to call the Chief?

Someone on his staff had to know about the heist.

“Had to be an inside man,” Vin said quietly.

“I’ll call him,” Joseph replied as he walked to the door.

“Dad. It would be better the object stayed where it is.”

“Most definitely.”

Graham’s phone went off and he looked at the text. “Cement man is here. I’ll go after Joseph.”

Well, George Palmer. There is no way I can help you. You are lucky you are where you are. In prison, you would be chopped up and fed to the pigs.

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**HARRY! GET UP HERE!**

“Easy, JD. Just sit here. I need you to pull up some pictures for two newsmen.”

“All…all those things in the freezer were ….?”

“Body parts.”

“Maybe I’ll become a vegetarian.”

“Well, little man. There also was a man eating plant here.”

“Oh yeah! I remember that. But it disappeared with the lights on.”

Dunne jumped when the door opened and two men walked in.

“Vincent! You rang?” Harry Brothers exclaimed. “I called my boss in London. Told him about the story I had… he laughed. Told me I was out of my mind. Suggested I look for a job here. Met this guy outside, said he works for CNN.”
Tanner looked at the other man. “Could I see your ID please?”

The man pulled out his wallet showing Vin his driver’s license.

“CNN ID! That includes a Press Pass. Special ID with their logo. Margaret. Send up Terry Blackman.”

“Sorry Boss. I just took his word,” Harry mumbled.

Dennis let Sgt. Blackman and two officers into the office. They immediately recognized the fake newsman. Terry called up a warrant number and the man was arrested.

“Terry. I need a recommendation for news media to work with Harry who with the BBC.”

“I know a woman at FOX News that is good. We have used her several times. Emily Stanford. Hold on, I have one of her cards.”

Harry pulled out his phone and scrolled through his images. “This her?” Harry growled.

“Yes. You’ve met her then?”

“She told me she knew all the BBC reporters and that I wasn’t one of them. I asked her how she could since they are stationed around the world. She said she knew the important ones in the London office. All the rest were just part time dudes. Her word … dudes. I don’t think a woman could handle what has happened here.”

“Vin. Pick up the phone.”

“Who is it Margaret?”

“Someone from CNN who has gotten wind of what is happening here. Evidently they had someone in London and heard about Harry’s call.”

“Special Agent Vin Tanner, Colorado ATF.”

“Doug Stern. CNN New York. I just received a call from one of my investigative reporters who is vacationing in London with his family. I was raised in the West. Have heard legends of Native American icons. I have investigated Harry Brothers. He is an exceptional newsman. He works for the newspaper that laughed at him but also for BBC News. He needs to call his boss in London.”

“He has tried his BBC boss several times. The man is not available. We have just arrested a man who was claiming to work for CNN but had no ID on him that said he was. There is more happening here than a stolen Indian icon.”

“Selling body parts are nothing new, Agent Tanner. People donate bodies…”

“This is nothing like that!” Tanner barked sharply. “Do you have a rep out in this area? Or a station in Denver you could recommend? Or can you give me a number for Harry’s boss that will actually get to him?”

“Give me Harry’s number and I will have the man call Harry.”

“Harry! There is a charger over there. Put your phone in it. He is calling your BBC boss and giving him your number.”
“Terry. Ask Larabee to come up here.”

Vin went out onto the wraparound walkway that circled the second floor. Harry had just gotten a call from London and was explaining some of what happening here.

“Vin.”

“Chris. I need a reliable local newsman to help break this story. My friend, Harry, is with the BBC. He’s on the phone with his boss. But we need a local station to break it.”

“You have been calling Rocky Alan.”

“Earlier today I had planned to have him come out. But he ordered his staff to bug my chopper and roll as soon as we arrived to where we were going. I had him returned and the bird was scanned. So I am not interested to use him again.”

“The local FOX News is good. They’ve done ATF news without naming agents. In fact, hold on. I have a card from the News Desk,” Larabee explained.
How?

Chapter Summary

Snakes hidden in pool tables. A freezing mist that makes a man immobile. Just as Travis got labeled a Judge, Vin's agents soon label him 'Captain.'

“JD. Mark. I want you to go through all the backup tapes. See if you can find how they immobilize the men. Then set a copy aside,” Vin explained. “We need to know how they can completely take these men down without a fight.”

Mark looked at his new boss. This man was so different from Travis. Travis never got to a one on one with anyone but the team leaders.

“You need the whole process, right? We’re probably gonna be sick watching what they do to the bodies.”

“Mark, everyone’s been sick,” Vin quietly explained. “Even the Coroner was throwing up at something that the cadaver dogs found. Don’t be embarrassed by it. JD has already used the toilet in the corner. If you need relief, let me know. We can get the State guys in here. But, I really prefer ATF agents doing this.”

“JD. You doing okay?” Vin asked the techie.

“Do you think we could show the ghosts?” JD asked turning to look at Vin.

“No… because someone, somewhere, may recognize a missing family member.”

“What else, JD?” Vin knew something was bothering the younger agent.

“Houston is going bananas. Miss Nettie won’t even let him put on his own shirt because he might stretch too far. Won’t let him do anything. Has him lyin’ down when he feels fine.”

“We could use his eyes here,” Tanner quipped. “He will probably see things that you two would miss. I’ll talk to Miss Nettie and have Jimmy go pick him up.”

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“Attention you ATF yahoos!” Tanner blasted over the castle’s PA system as he stood on the walkway that surrounded the second tier. “Tanner Henry Houston, Larabee’s new sniper is coming in shortly. He is replacing me, who was originally going to be that sniper. He’s been called TH most of his life. You call him Tanner, he won’t know who you’re talking to. I called my contact at The White House to get him out of Afghanistan. He’d been there 18 months with no injury. This morning he took on a shooter in the turret and ended up with two cracked ribs. He is taped together. So please, no nudging him in the ribs or back slapping. He is also a computer geek. If your smart phone has a problem, he’s your man to see. I’m bringing him in because I need his eyes to help scan the security tapes.”
“Those of you, who need to leave… have things to do with your families, go. If this place is ever up and running … we will be involved with numerous things. Our two K9 agents will be available not only to us but for other Federal and State agencies. Our snipers will also be available to the State Police when theirs has a conflict. For those of you who haven’t read your packets yet … the whole concept of teams has changed. I’ve already gone toe to toe with the new Washington Director about that.”

“I know Larabee will be in my face as Team Seven may not be his team mates as it was in the past. Find a quiet place away from your kids and really go through every page of that package before you come roaring into my face. Save your questions for later. Now! I’d like to know if anyone here knows how to take those pool tables apart and bring them up here into the lobby. Various things are going to be happening down there. We need to preserve them or they will be ruined.”

“Couldn’t we put them up on the third floor?” Someone near the front door asked.

“No …too easy for you all to sneak up there. Who are pool players here?” Vin asked of those who were downstairs looking up at him.

“Look through the rooms down here. See where the best place is for them,” Vin declared.

Spotting Houston coming in the front door with Jimmy, Vin spoke loudly, “Houston! How are you feeling?”

“Captain! Sir! Thank you for rescuing me. I was going bananas at Miss Nettie’s. She wouldn’t let me do anything.” TH lamented.

“Iron Horse?”

Vin saw a hand go up. “The man in the red shirt over there,” Tanner remarked pointing to Aaron, “Is Aaron Wright. If you are planning to leave, please give him your name and number. Let me remind all of you… You cannot talk about anything that’s been found here this morning. Nothing! Absolutely nothing can be mentioned until we break the news. IF I find out you have leaked the tragedy happening here … you will be terminated immediately. I don’t care if you are the Governor’s son. You will be fired.”

“Now… I would like the pool players to walk through the first floor rooms and then come to me with your decision on where to put the tables. We need to get that done before the cleaning services get here and the cement trucks.”

“Houston. Need you up here. Stairs or elevator at the end there,” Tanner soothed pointing to his right.

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Vin Tanner leaned across a wide kitchen work counter studying the third sheet of floor plans of the Jasper castle.

“Where did you find these?” Vin asked, not looking up.

“In the living room. At least we think it is the living room. We started opening bookcases and cupboards. Found them there.”

“So, the dining room …there… would be a good conference center or meeting room. Kitchen needs to be cleaned and inspected. Cupboards completely emptied,” Vin pondered.
“You all are still voting to work here?” Vin ventured.

“Definitely!” Came a resounding answer.

“Okay. Show me the living room.”

-=-=

Agent Houston sat at Palmer’s desk staring at the split screen. He was running through tapes of the living room on one screen and watching what was happening on the other screen.

“GOD NO!” TH screamed as he bolted for the door. When it didn’t open fast enough, he forced it open shouting as he careened down the stairs.

“CAPTAINNN! BACK OFF! BACK OFF! PULL HIM OUT! PULL HIM OUT!”

Joseph had just entered the doorway of the living room when Vin noticed the blinking light and heard a sizzling noise. His instincts kicked in as Houston’s shouts were heard. Grabbing his father’s arm he yanked the man backwards propelling him into the agents behind them.

Stunned, his father stared at him. Before Joseph could speak Houston was there.

“I just… I just…” TH stammered trying to catch his breathe.


Oh god sir. I thought I was going to lose you.

You’re never going to lose me, TH. Drop to your knees and breath in at seven, out at seven.

Vin moved with his former Ranger as TH dropped to his knees.

Joseph stared at the two men. He had heard their silent conversation and was beginning to understand what his son really meant to the Rangers that responded to his call.

Silently the two on the floor stared at each other, quietly Tanner spoke. “Tell me what you found.”

TH offered a hand to his Captain as he started to stand. Turning to Joseph, TH asked, “Are you okay, sir?”

“I am, yes.”

TH scanned the area to see who was there before saying, “Captain. Remember that village in northern Iraq we came upon? That house where the men were frozen inside yet their eyes watched us.”

Tanner stared at TH scanning his memory for that incident.

TH continued, “We took off the roof. You called in an Air Force water tanker.”

Vin picked up the memory and continued the explanation. “The tanker dumped the whole load inside the house. Only three men were alive by then. The rest died of heart attacks or fear. The water washed away the chemical that had frozen them. “

Looking at the agents around him, Vin stated, “It will be a long time before this place is occupied. We need to find out where those chemicals are stored. What is the process you’ve found, TH?”
“When the agents first entered and looked around inside, opening and closing things, the door monitored how many went in, how many left. When the next group entered, it counted those going in. The door closes when that many re-enter. Seconds later the overhead spray starts. The room is saturated for several minutes. Then two automatic sweepers come out and suck up what is on the floor.”

Momentarily looking at Joseph, TH continued. “Palmer and some guy named Arthur walk in and size the men up. Arthur produces scissors and they cut the men’s clothes off. Sort through the pockets. Take out cash. The wallets and such go into boxes. Palmer walks around looking at each man. Puts an X on the right shoulder if they are going to go further. Those are carried into the elevator and taken to where the SEAL was found. The others … are aroused. Their cocks measured. Then they are taken to a room under the kitchen.”

Vin watched his Ranger turn green. Vin continued the tale. “They cut off the penis, and bury the man as he bleeds to death out in that field.”

“How can I be sick now, sir?” Houston rasps as his knees give out again.

“BUCKET!!” Tanner shouts as Joseph catches the young man.

Joseph sat with TH slowly rubbing the young agent’s back as Tanner Henry wiped his face and mouth. The bucket he’d thrown up in was gone but he still sat bent over with his head in his hands.

“You two are related, aren’t you?” TH asked quietly.

“We are, yes,” Joseph softly replied, taking in TH’s thoughts on Vin. “I didn’t have the privilege of raising him, but I did hold him minutes after he was born.”

“My dad walked away when I was ten. I still don’t understand why.”

Joseph glanced around for Vin before asking, “Have you ever looked for him?”

“Once. I found out he was a career Army man. Evidently my mother got tired of moving around. She wasn’t happy when I told her I’d enlisted.”

“Why don’t you ask JD to look for him?” Joseph ventured.

TH’s head shot up. “Oh hell! I hope it isn’t that Colonel Houston that was at the wedding. He’s an asshole.”

“You saw the wedding?” Joseph asked in a surprised voice.

Blushing, Houston muttered, “Trevor live streamed it to several guys in Afghanistan. Oh Shit. You better not tell Falcon that.”

“Why don’t you ask Margaret to find your father? Tell her everything you remember. Are you named after him?”

“His name was Henry …something.. Houston. Tanner was my grandfather’s name. His father’s father. I was the first boy on my dad’s side.”

“For him to have to walk away from his first born son… probably cut him to the core. I would definitely try to find him, Tanner,” Joseph suggested.

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Vin Tanner stared down at his father and TH. Several things were flying through his brain. *Tanner’s father was a career Army man. Henry Houston. Where had he heard that name… Master Sergeant…retired…Fort Sam Houston.*

Once again, pulling out his phone Vin walked into the bathroom to make a private call.

[]

Jogging down the stairs to the first floor, Vin was trying to decide where would be a good place for a meeting with Terry Blackman and Dr. Graham. They also needed to bring the fake Dr Felix back and interrogate him on site.

**“SNAKES! SNAKES IN THE POOL TABLES!”**

“Oh Shit. What now?” Tanner growled as he faced four ATF agents running toward him.

“CAPTAIN!” The four shouted in unison.

*Great! This is how Travis became Judge Travis. I’m now Captain Tanner.*

“I’m pretty sure they are Coral snakes. Red with yellow stripes. They are all over the tables and the floor.” One said in a rush.

“They are dropping out of the things. We found some towels and stuffed them under the doors, though they hadn’t gotten out. Still we…” Another agent rasped.

Special Agent Tanner held up his hands. “You and you. Find four other agents and bring them to the dining room. You two… go into the kitchen and find any kind of empty jars with tight screw on lids. I also saw some latex gloves .. bring that box into the dining room.”

The four stared at him. “Because gentlemen, you will be looking for eggs in those drawers that are on the dining room table. We need some boxes also to put those wallets in. We can’t keep them here. GO!”

“We’re not going to be able to use this place, are you?” One asked sorrowfully.

“No, we’re not.” Vin answered tightly.

Vin turned as someone touched his shoulder.

“Dad,” Vin responded softly.

“I’ll check with Dr. Graham. I saw a huge stack of boxes in his van. I’ll bring him and Terry and Rockland in here for that meeting you are thinking about.”

“Thanks. I talked to Moose. He is sending over two Special Ops men who know about our man eating plant.”

“Good. We need to know how to deal with that before it gets dark.”

“Find Larabee. I’m putting him in charge until further notice.”

“You sure that is wise?” Joseph questioned.

“Corliss is safe now. His brother’s arrested and under tight security.”
“Vin. There are two team leaders here that have been here all day. Larabee has no clue what is going on here.”

“Larabee has seniority over the team leaders that are here. I need to fly out and pick up that SEAL that Graham sent away without any protection. The Navy may well hide him.”

“Call the ATF in San Diego. You have that authority and … they have the authority over anyone else. That includes the Navy, State Police … anyone. Because Duke is your only witness.”

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Vin Tanner sat inside his five passenger Hermes Jet helicopter.

“Are we leaving or staying, boss?” Jimmy asked looking into the mirror at Vin.

“Just looking for some quiet time … and need to make some calls. We’ll be flying to San Diego in the morning.”

“To pick up Duke?”

“Yes,” Vin answered with a smile.

“Yeah, I wondered about Dr. Graham’s decision. He didn’t say anything about the guy being protected.”

Vin tapped a speed dial number. “Maggie. I need a direct line to the head of the San Diego ATF.”

“Special Agent Marcos.”

“Special Agent Vin Tanner, Colorado ATF. I am in need of your assistance, sir.”

Twenty minutes later, Marcos responded, “I know Dr. Mark Crawford. I will call him immediately. He can make Duke disappear until we get there. You coming this way?”

“First thing in the morning. My pilot is a former Army Ranger. He’ll be flying me in along with two bodyguards. We will be bringing Duke back to Denver. He is in protective custody, but the man who sent him to the decompression seemed to have forgotten that.”

“Look forward to meeting you, Tanner.”

“Boss.”

“Yes, Jimmy.”

“You’re going to have to wear something besides those jeans and that tee shirt.”

“You think so,” Vin asked holding in a grin.

“A suit, maybe?”

“No suits, Jimmy. Jeans, shirt, shoulder holster … sport jacket. What are you sketching there?”

“Justin said they need something that set them apart from hotel security. But they aren’t in the Army, right?”

“Correct.”
“So … I came up with this…” Jimmy responded, handing his boss a sketch pad.

Vin flipped through the four pages of drawings.

Short sleeved tee shirts. Gray and black. A large red feather diagonal across the back with the word SECURITY under the feather. On the front .. a name plus a smaller red feather under the name.

“These are fantastic, Jimmy! Last name on the front… we could have them done up at that tee shirt place. A special order. In fact, we need these for the hotel. Light blue and white for the hotel.”

Vin pulled out his phone and snapped several pictures, sending them to Colt and Wolf.

Vin looked up as someone knocked on the window. “Jimmy, go ahead and prepare a flight plan for San Diego. Maggie, let him know what the coordinates are for the hospital.”

“Use this card again… for filling up?”

“That card is especially for gas and maintenance of this bird. Do you have your walking legs with you?”

“Yeah.”

“Put them on and step out. Show Justin and Dennis the design. Have them check with Houston. See how long the tee shirt place is open.”

Sliding open his side door, Vin invited Terry Blackman, Jeffrey Rockland, David Graham and Joseph into his private hiding place.

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“My apologies, Vin,” Graham said sheepishly. “It never occurred to me that Duke might need protection.”

“He’s covered now. I just got off the phone with San Diego ATF. The man in charge there knows the doctor who is handling the case. He will be safe until I arrive in the morning. Right now my concern is … how do we break this to the media and the world?”

Jeffrey Rockland scoped out the group. “Joseph is the diplomat, though you are the boss in charge. I’m the body man. I don’t usually do news conferences.”

Joseph smiled. “My diplomacy doesn’t usually involve dead bodies. Vin really is the man in charge here, though I know how he hates the media. He called in the State Police, so really … he and Terry need to do it. But who do you recommend?”

“Fox News!” Graham and Blackman offered in unison.

Vin looked around at his new and old friends. “We know how they did what they did. Lure men in with free booze and food. What I need to know if how do we present to the public that the missing men have been quartered and sold off as food.”

Terry stared at his friend.

“Personally, if I was watching TV and this news came on … my first thought would be horror. My loved one.. father, brother, husband .. was diced up and eaten by someone else. And it will take months to go through those wallets to find where they are from. To notify police in that state, let alone families.”
“We have a killing field west of here. Jeffrey hasn’t even gotten to all the bodies. And now we know the Sheriff has been burying people there too,” Vin retorted quietly.

Joseph sighed. “I think we need to invite more than one media out here and tell them what we discovered. Get their input. Let them make the decision on what to say. How to say it.”

“What about the Tall Man?” Vin asked.

Immediately Joseph responded. “I think we should ignore that for now. It is secondary for what is happening here.”

“Terry,” Vin ventured.

“I will call my contact at Fox News. You call Rocky Allan. Both of these stations cover most major news in the area. I will see to it that one van of each is allowed in with one investigative reporter and a camera man.”

“When is the cement being poured?” Tanner questioned.

Joseph smiled. “It is happening now. The basement first. Trenches are being dug around the western perimeter. More trucks will be brought in to fill those.”

“Anything else?” Tanner asked looking around.

Joseph sighed. “Larabee has called up all agents that weren’t involved today. Those that are here and are leaving have been told they can’t talk about anything. They know what it would be like if they were a family that heard something that wasn’t official. From what I’ve learned throughout the day, Travis only did one on one with team leaders. You’ve been interacting with every agent all day. You are the man in charge. The captain of the team. It’s why they are calling you Captain, Vin.”

Music filled the copter. Three men reached for phones. Vin answered his.

“JD and I have put together a timeline of how they lure men in and the process that takes them down. No faces are shown though some men have tattoos. We can give this to each TV station on a USB stick.”

“Good job, Houston. Do it.”

=TERRY= Vin stood together at the base of the steps of the castle.

“One news van. One cameraman. One investigative reporter. One tech in the van,” Terry stated firmly.

“Agreed. One of your officers will drive the van in. No one gets out until you or me gives the word”

“Let’s make our calls,” Terry replied reaching for his phone.
Snatch a Navy SEAL

Chapter Summary

Local arrests made in Denver. The Navy SEAL who is the only living witness is 'snatched' from Navy interrogation and brought back to Denver.

Special Agent Vin Tanner burst through the door of the castle’s security room.

“TH! I need a list of distributors. People who are buying this stuff. Especially local people. There has to be a reason this place was decided upon.”

TH Houston cleared what he was looking at and typed in ‘online orders.’

“SHIT! Palmer has an online ordering system. There is a whole list of names, addresses … four people locally. Mark! Turn that printer on!”

Tanner walked over to the printer, grabbing the papers as they came out. Glancing over the names, his eyes went wide. Immediately pulling out his phone, he called Terry Blackman. Four warrants needed to be served before the news conference started.

“What have you found, Vin?” Sgt. Terry Blackman asked coming into the room.

“Captain! “ TH blurt out. “Those four names… also come up as hosts for some of the parties here. That makes them accessories to murder, doesn’t it?”

Vin looked at Terry as he handed the trooper the list.

“Are you kidding me?” Blackman gasped hoarsely. “One of these men works in the District Attorney’s office. This one… has four kids in college. He has a standing order for penises … Can Jimmy fly me to the Federal Building? Need to get to a certain judge before he leaves. Can I have these? I’ll call up Troopers in flight to meet me there.”

“Margaret! Call our reporters back and tell them they will be delayed entrance until some local arrests are made.”

“Terry. Bring back that fake Dr. Arthur Felix too.”

“TH. Keep searching for more distributors world wide. How it is shipped. JD. How are you doing on the timeline?”

“Mark and I are just putting it all together. From the time they walk in the door to … until death and … we found a chart on how the bodies are sectioned for … ah, cut up. We… we didn’t include that part.”

Vin stared at the three men. Quietly, he said, “There is one part of the body we haven’t found at all.”

Three pairs of eyes stared back at Vin.

“The head!” Mark quipped. “There’s no incinerator so where…?”
“The plant,” Houston interrupted. “They would have to feed it something or it would eventually die.”

“As much as I hate to ask this, we need a visual, gentlemen,” Tanner muttered loudly.

“I’ll do it, Captain. I’ve seen headless in the Middle East. These two would never make it to the toilet,” Houston replied with confidence.

_Okay TH. You’ll get my personal reward for that._

Tanner Henry Houston’s head shot up, his face and ears turning pink.

Vin grinned at the young man. A blow job or a long French kiss, a tongue fucking his throat for this young sniper, would be a pleasure. TH had been pulled out of his Unit, pushed into a Navy jet, and flown around the world. With Anna being pregnant, the Master’s sound proof room will get some use.

A sly grin spread across Vin’s face as Houston stared at him.

“By the way, JD … TH, I have moved you out of Miss Nettie’s. You are now on the Security floor of the Federal Hotel. It is a unique suite with a shared bath. I will explain to Miss Nettie why that happened.”

“She’s not going to like that,” JD quipped.

Vin looked at one and then the other saying, “She needs to understand that Houston is not ten years old anymore.”

Houston practically came off his chair as he jumped at the news. “That explains a lot! She’s always bringing up my grandmother… and me doing this and that. Shoot! No wonder she wouldn’t let me dress myself when I got home from the hospital.”

“And gentlemen … no more hiding brownies under the bed. They attract ants.”

John Daniel Dunne and Tanner Henry Houston gawked at each other.

“Everything’s been m-moved out?” JD stammered.

“Hotel security has moved everything that belongs to the two of you, yes. This is the day of Miss Nettie’s church women’s group meets. She won’t be home until after lunch. I will talk to her later and explain why. You will need to check in with the first floor Security Office to get key cards to get in.

“Sir,” TH started, “Could you ah…explain why?”

TH swallowed as his Master’s eyes narrowed and glared back. _Oh shit! That glare is making me hard._

Suddenly a smile spread across Vin’s face as he realized the problem Tanner had.

“One, you will always be a ten year old in Nettie’s eyes. A leap to a deadly sniper is not something she can handle. Two, JD is interested to train with Trevor on some things. Three, Nettie is giving both of you a break on the rent. Everyone else is paying more than three hundred dollars a month. Security will explain about living there when you sign in tonight.”

---
Terry Blackman called up several State Troopers to accompany him to the Federal Building. As they boarded the helio, Terry called one of the oldest Judges on the Denver bench explaining he needed four arrest warrants for pre-mediated murder.

Three other Troopers already in the city were asked to go to the Federal Building and wait.

Inside the helio, Terry looked at his four Troopers. “How are you guys holding up?”

One answered, “I don’t think I will ever eat another wiener or brat as long as I live.”

“They are still finding bodies in that field, Sarge. Rockland says they were probably buried alive while they bled to death.”

“How are you going to arrest? Where are we going to put them?”

“Federal jail, but… Terry started. “Federal jail… Hell why not?”

Pulling his phone Terry called Vin.

“Special Agent Tanner.”

“Vin. It’s Terry. Your hotel is the original Federal Building and a historical site, right? What about the jail cells in the lower levels? Are they useable?”

“There are three lower levels. One level has six cells. But… are you seriously thinking…”

“Yes! Could we use them to house these four? No bail will be set, I’m sure. Once news hits they need to be isolated.”

“What judge you going to?”

“I going to the oldest judge on the bench. Also his grandson has been missing for over a year.”

“Okay, ask him about using that. If he agrees, call the 800 number and ask for Colt Hammer. Tell him you have already passed this through me. He will get on with our Chief of Security. You will need to provide your own guards.”

“What about meals?”

“Check with Colt. And Terry. We may find other distributors in other states. Ask the Judge how to handle that. If possible, we want them arrested before this news hits.”

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Vin Tanner stood next to Chris Larabee in the dining room of the castle.

“Tell me why you turned down this job,” Vin asked Larabee.


“I am so going to kill Jack Maloney,” Tanner growled fiercely. “They never asked you, did they?”

“No.”

“Vinnn!”

“Yes, Maggie.”
“If we could get two or three more smart phones or tablets with scanners, this could go much faster.”

“We going anywhere, sir?” Dennis asked as he pulled out his phone.

“No, Dennis, we’ll be here for a while.”

Looking around, Tanner observed the activity. “Okay! One phone at each end of the table and the other on the left side of the buffet.”

“Maggie! How many so far?”

“One hundred from the U.S. Twenty from Canada. Thirty from Europe.”

“Captain!”

“Is this how Travis got to be called Judge?”

Larabee grinned. “Probably. But your Rangers are calling you Captain, which you are.”

“You were never called Lieutenant.”

“I was a homicide detective after the Navy,” Larabee replied as two ATF agents approached the two men.

“Captain. We found where the chemicals were stored. The fire department has called in a Hazmat Unit. We also found more boxes of wallets in three closets in that room…”

Tanner quietly groaned. “Bring them in.”

“So, originally, I was to be your sniper. Your second in command,” Tanner said with a smile. “I would have out-ranked you. Interesting.”

“Plus, you haven’t made a pass at me yet. Which tells me, Corliss has really brought you to your knees. “

Larabee was stunned at Tanner’s statement, but recovered quickly. “Cory has tamed me in ways … brought angry out that I’ve been holding for years. Made me face the truth in a lot of things.”

“Now that his brother is incarcerated in Illinois, I can transfer him to the mountain.”

“Nooo!” Larabee growled fiercely.

Vin turned to look at Larabee. His mind read numerous thoughts flying through Chris’ mind relating to him and Cory.

Tanner stepped back against the wall of the dining room as more boxes were brought in. Larabee followed suit.

“You two really want to commit to each other … for life?” Vin asked quietly.

“Yes.”

“Cory resigned a job in Texas to be part of what is going to happen on the mountain. Plus you have a job. I suggest you both talk about those commitments before you follow through with Sanchez. If you follow through with Sanchez, I will restructure Cory’s job.”
“Who are you?” Chris asked.

“Ask Sebastian, he knows,” Vin responded quietly.

Chris Larabee gawked at the man next to him. “You’re …. Sebastian told me about ….”

“Yes. I am him. And if you ever do anything to hurt Corliss … you will be a gigolo in my hotel.”

“Captain.”

Vin looked up at the three men holding boxes.

“Larabee’s in charge of this operation,” Tanner barked, moving off the wall.

---

Terry Blackman stared into the enraged faces of two men. The Assistant D.A. was the last man they were arresting. The other three were already cooling their heels in the lower level of the Federal Hotel.

Pulling his phone, he sped dialed Vin Tanner. As Vin answered, Terry put the call on speaker.

“Special Agent Vin Tanner, Colorado ATF.”

“District Attorney wants proof as to why his ADA is being arrested.”

“Tell the DA to go into his office and turn on his cell phone. Maggie will gear up and call him for his fax number. Do you have me on speaker?”

“Yes.”

“Who is present?”

“The DA, ADA, two assistants both male.”

“Oh, Maggie. Boot up that office fax. Send the three less gory images involving this man.”

Blackman and his two Troopers grinned at each other. They were well aware of who Maggie was and what she could do.

The District Attorney grabbed each of the three sheets that were printed out. One had his ADA pointing to a naked man in a frozen upright position. The second image, again showed the ADA with the same man, only this one the ADA’s mouth on the man’s cock. The third… the man’s arms and legs strapped down to a large table. The man was gagged but his eyes were wide open.

It was the third image that the District Attorney responded to, “GET THIS FUCKING BASTARD OUT OF HERE!”

The DA’s personal assistant took the last image from his boss’ shaking hand. One of the troopers caught the young man as he fainted.

Terry Blackman picked up the floating image and presented it to the arrestee. “Obviously, you were unaware that every room in that castle had security cameras. At least three in every room. How many penises did you hack off with that machete?”

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In the lower level of the Federal Hotel, the eldest of the men arrested was shouting at State Troopers when Sergeant Terry Blackman walked in with the Assistant District Attorney.

The three detainees watched as the ADA was stripped to his underwear and forced to put on an orange jumpsuit. His clothes and the contents of his pockets were put into evidence bags.

“Gentlemen. I am Sergeant Terry Blackman, Colorado State Police. You have been arrested at the request of the Colorado ATF who are now occupying Jasper’s Castle. George Palmer, whom you all know, is dead. Reinhold Jasper is dead. You will be held here until your trial. The judge has set NO bail.”

Colt Hammer watched the four men come to grips with what was said.

Blackman continued, “In an hour or so, the news of the atrocities that have been happening at Jasper’s Castle will be going live around the world. This is the reason you are in an older Federal jail. If you were in the jail in the basement of the present Federal Building, I doubt we’d find enough pieces of you to hold in one’s hand.”

“Let’s go Troopers!”

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“Chris! We just found a box of wallets in the pantry. Maybe they belong to the bodies in the field.”

“Take them out to Rockland. See if he or his team recognize any of them.”

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FALCON! HOUSTON! FALCON! HOUSTON! IT’S DUKE. ANSWER. PLEASE ANSWER.

Duke, it’s Houston. Where are you?

Vin burst into the computer-security room. “TH! Out here.”

Houston left what he was working on and followed his boss out the door and into the bathroom.

“Indian style on the floor,” Vin ordered as he took a sign off the wall and taped it to the front of the bathroom door.

The telepaths sat with legs crossed. Hands open, each clasping the others hand for a stronger bond.

It’s Falcon. Houston is here. Where are you? What is happening?

The Navy was interrogating me as if I was a deserter. Macros walked in with my doctor and escorted me out. We are in a van travelling somewhere west. I’m worried.

It’s Falcon. Are you still wearing the woven bracelet?

Yes.

On one side of the silver ring is a very, very small button. Calmly push that three times. It will be activated and come up on a board in my hotel. We will track you. See if you can get them to tell you where you are going.

“TH, have you heard everything?”
“Yes.”

“Who was present when he was found. That he looked at.”

“Aaron and Agent Sanchez helped to get him down. I was there. A paramedic. Someone who knows Aaron.”

“So Sanchez, Aaron and the paramedic will fly down to pick him up. You’re too vital on the computer for me to send you.”

_Falcon. Golden Acre Casino! Agent Marcos has family in that area. He will be calling you in the morning._

_It’s Falcon. I’m going to have Rangers spring you. Bring you back tonight. Do not tell Marcos. Repeat. Do not tell Marcos._

_10-4, Captain._

_If things change. Contact Houston._

_Check. Houston is my connection._

TH stared at the clasped hands. Suddenly, his boss yanked him to his feet and ushered him into the handicapped stall.

“Drop your pants to the floor. Using you left hand push your penis into the water and flush, two times.”

Tanner Henry swallowed. A long time ago, he remembered doing this.

As the second flush started, Vin lifted the chin in front of him and began a deep throated French kiss.

TH jerked as his tongue was sucked. Stars burst all around as his Master’s tongue explored his mouth and throat. TH came hard, cum gushing out into the swirling water. Then he was being held, too spent to even talk.


“Mmm…”

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Vin Tanner walked out onto the second tier walkway. Looking down at who was there, he let out a whistle.

“I need Iron Horse, Jimmy, Sanchez and the paramedic who found the SEAL out by the white helio in five minutes!” Tanner shouted.

Vin pulled out his phone and called Trevor, informing him about Duke and the bracelet. Then he had Margaret pull up all the Rangers in Southern Arizona and the San Diego area. Then a plan was hatched to steal a Navy SEAL.

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“You follow what I’m saying Morgan?” Tanner questioned.
“You want us to ‘kidnap’ a Navy SEAL in the custody of California ATF, for Jimmy and Aaron to pick up. Wait! The man in charge is Marcos? We are right near his family’s big place.”

“Someone here who didn’t have authority, sent him to the decompression chamber in Diego. Without bodyguards. The Navy treated him as a deserter not a captive who had been tortured. I need him back here. He is a material witness. Can you do this?”

“Damn straight we can do it! Aaron’s Army bird and … if Jimmy can cover the red feather and ATF logo people will just think it is more coming in to two bachelor parties.”

“I’ll let you know when they are airborne.”

---

Vin talked with Aaron and Jimmy and they left to gas up their birds. The paramedic received permission to leave the state on a mercy mission. Vin roamed the first floor looking for Agent Sanchez who had helped Aaron get the SEAL off the ceiling. The news conference would go as soon as Tanner received word the SEAL was on Aaron’s bird.

Vin stared at the Lincoln Town Car that was being escorted in by State Police. Who the hell is this?

“Vin, were you looking for me?” Josiah Sanchez asked coming up to stand next to Vin.

Vin explained what was happening, adding, “The Yuma Base had a recent clothing drive. Have a ton of kids clothes. Figured your shelter could use those. Coming back, Jimmy will be flying with ATF visible on the helio. If you are forced to land, Jimmy will explain that he needed flying time and agreed to fly you down to pick up those donations.”

“Sounds great. We always need children’s clothes.”

“Do you know who this is?” Tanner asked as an elderly looking gentleman stepped out of the town car with Terry Blackman.

“Judge Henry Cook. The oldest Federal judge on the Colorado bench.”

---

“Vin.”

“Joseph! Where have you been hiding?” Vin asked as his father stepped out of a door under the computer-security room.

“Thought you might like to see this,” Joseph said motioning toward the open door. “Your headquarters.”

Tanner whistled. “Wow!” As he scanned the room, his eyes took in four dark brown leather chairs in a semi-circle around a low table. Two leather sofas at right angles, and a magnificent desk of Mahogany with leather inserts.

“Palmer’s or Jasper’s. I wonder.”

“It has the same pull up computer monitor as the one upside,” Joseph explained. “I pulled up the new ATF Guidelines. You are allowed to have one or two agents under you to take charge of things. A second in command to if you want.”

“A second in command….? I know just the unwilling blond who would be good for that.”
“Larabee? You sure you want him?”

“Dad. I was suppose to be on his team. Now he can be on my team.”

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Vin stood between the two parked choppers. “You understand Morgan is the one who is rescuing the SEAL and getting him to a place you can pick him up. Margaret has put his cell into Aaron and Jimmy’s phones. Sanchez is riding both ways with Jimmy. Paramedic is riding with Aaron. Duke will be coming back with Aaron. Sanchez and Jimmy have a cover story if they are asked to land. Once you are airborne with Duke, I will start the news conference.”

“Josiah. I was just informed that I can hire or promote an agent to be … sort of second in command of Denver ATF. You think Larabee would accept that?”

Agent Sanchez chuckled. “He is qualified. He can do it. But he will probably say no.”

“We’ll see,” Tanner answered as the men boarded.

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At the Golden Acre Casino a young man in a wheelchair and leg braces was rolled into a bathroom.

“Are you sure you are willing to do this, Carl?” Morgan asked for the third time.

“Morgan! Will you stop already. I’m alive because of Falcon. Damn, we all are. A few minutes of discomfort to get this SEAL to safety isn’t going to be a problem. You just get him in here alone. We will switch him out and you pick him up in the hall that goes into the kitchen. Just don’t damage this wheelchair. It cost a hunk of money. You have pictures of him?”

“I’ve got pictures and he’s telepathic. A sniper named Houston will tell him what is going down here and that a fat guy named Morgan will be contacting him.”

“Okay,” Morgan whispered. “He comes into the bathroom alone. Probably an ATF agent will scope out the place first. You two switch. Your guy takes him out instead of you. They will be several Army birds in the parking lot. He gets on one and is delivered to Yuma, Arizona army base. Aaron Whitehorse takes it from there.”

“Back here, we all disappear into the crowd of the casino.”

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“Aaron!” Jimmy barked into his mike, “I’ve got permission to land on that south runway near that big Red Cross truck. They should be contacting you soon. They said Duke is already on the ground. See you there.”

“Jimmy,” Agent Sanchez started. “I met Vin in Germany. Who is he … that the Army will make things like this happen?”

“Hell! I don’t even know where to start on that. He knew three languages before he got to high school. Ran track. Rifle team. He got to know some retired Army officers in Texas. They clued him in on a lot of things, I think. He joined the Army right out of high school. Took college courses online. Got a Bachelors in Criminal Justice… in three years.”

“In Basic Training, they discovered he was an expert shot. Pulled him into Ranger training. Then Sniper school. Hell, he even retrained the sniper instructors. Seems his grandfather on his Mother’s side was an Indian chief. Taught Vin to block out everything around him when he went into ‘his shooting zone.’ There could be an earthquake going on around him, he wouldn’t even know it, until his mission … his shot was done.”

“Aaron has watched him lay in one position for over an hour. Bugs crawling over him. A snake once. Vin never batted an eye. Course once the shot was done and he began aware…” Jimmy explained through a burst of laughter. “When it was over, he was jumping all around to get the bugs out of his pants.”

Tapping on the pilot’s window got Jimmy and Josiah’s attention. Josiah unlatched the door and slid it open.

“SANCHEZ!” Duke yelped. “Boy, am I glad to see a friendly face.”

Jimmy opened the pilot’s door but didn’t get out. “Did your ride take off already?”

“They dropped me here about forty minutes ago. Been sitting with the Red Cross guys waiting for you to land.”

“Aaron should be along anytime,” Jimmy offered. “You are flying home with him and the paramedic that helped you. We are picking up a load of boxes for a homeless shelter that Josiah helps with.”

Looking inside the copter, Duke mused, “He’s going to be in the copilot seat going home. They have a lot of boxes in that truck.”

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If anyone was watching, they viewed three Army helicopters landing simultaneously. The paramedic in Aaron’s copter slipped out and walked up to the Red Cross truck. Slipping his arm around a startled Navy SEAL the medic whispered, “Duke, this way.”

Two Army helios rose as one and headed toward Phoenix. West of the city, Aaron headed north to Denver as the other circled south and headed home.

On the ground in Yuma, Jimmy looked around. Calling to a Lieutenant for help, he gave instructions
for covering the Army logo on the helio and exposing the ATF, Red Feather logo.

“If we are forced to land,” Jimmy growled, “they are the ones that are repacking.”

“---=

“So far, so good,” Jimmy mumbled as a helicopter with guns suddenly came along side. “Shit.”

“Please land at the Flagstaff Airport. South runway.”

Jimmy hit several buttons in front of him, as they lit up he barked, “This is JimBo! I’m being forced to land in Flagstaff, Arizona by an unknown gun ship. Who has the authority for that? We are on a humanitarian mission from Denver to Yuma and are going home. Any Ranger in the area please notify Falcon we are being forced down.”

Sanchez stared at Jimmy.

Jimmy grinned. “You are about to learn more about how far Vin Tanner can reach.”

Circling over the small airport, Jimmy waited until he saw the media truck approaching. Then he asked the tower just where he was to land and who had the authority to order him down.

“California ATF. Please land immediately.”

“This is Colorado ATF, Sanchez, do you have authority in Arizona, sir? We are packed to the brim with children’s clothes for three Denver shelters.”

“You will land the helio now!!” The voice roared.

Jimmy once again opened several mikes on his keyboard. “California ATF wants to shoot down a million dollar helio … for clothing. Special Agent Tanner ‘s lawyers are going to have a field day with this one.”

It wasn’t until Josiah’s cell burped the message … Lunch is on us. Aaron. That Jimmy landed in Flagstaff.

Out of the two media trucks jumped several Arizona ATF agents. They immediately surrounded Tanner’s helicopter. The last man out was an officer in green camo fatigues wearing an ATF vest.

“Holy hell! The Colonel is here,” Jimmy groaned.

“Who is he?” Sanchez questioned.

“Falcon’s sniper expertise saved his son.”

“MARCOS! YOU HAVE NO JURDISTION HERE!” Roared the officer. “NO WARRANT! NO CAUSE!”

“There is a Navy SEAL in there. I want him.”

Nodding to an agent next to the helio the Colonel said, “Knock on the door. Have a look inside.”

The agent pulled open the door and grinned. He lost the grin as he turned. “Colonel, this thing is packed so tight you couldn’t get a piece of paper between these boxes.”

The Colonel walked over and looked in. “I see why Sanchez is riding up front.”
Looking at Jimmy, the Colonel said, “JimBo! Take off. Give my regards to Falcon.”

“Yes sir Colonel!”

At the same time Jimmy was landing, John Daniel Dunne was receiving a call from the Federal Hotel. JD had asked Trevor to check the security tapes of the hotel. JD said something he knew was loaded on one of the helicopters had never been unloaded.

“Trev. I think you better call Vin, Joseph and Corey and tell them what you found.”

“Hell JD. Corliss is going to be raving mad. Henry still has all his stuff on that bird. All the plans for what is happening on the mountain. Pray for me… one conference call coming up.”

Three cell phones rang at once as two ATF agents approached Special Agent Tanner.


“Trevor here. JD asked me to check the security tapes when we were all unloading from Texas. None of Corliss’ things were unloaded. Five different people asked Henry if the architect’s equipment was unloaded and he said yes each time.”

‘WHAT!! That asshole left with all my stuff! All the plans for the mountain are in there!” Archer screamed.

“Trevor. Has Jimmy arrived yet?” Vin asked calmly as Corey spit fire.

“He was forced to land in Flagstaff, Arizona.”

“When he arrives and unloads, tell him to take a pee break, then gas up. Inform him of this and tell him he will be flying Joseph and Corliss back to Austin. “

“Joseph. Call your FBI contact. Make sure they hold that helio.”

“I’ll call his wife, she is visiting in Greeley. See where he parks his bird when he is home.”

Vin closed his phone and stared into the faces of two ATF agents.

“We found something in the pantry as we were taking things off the shelves. Looks like some kind of keyboard. It includes temperature controls.”


Pointing to one agent, Vin stated calmly, “Get Dr. Graham in here. You and you … go back and guard the area. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

The agents watched their new boss turn and walk toward an open door.

“How many times did Travis ever talk to us one on one?” One asked as he turned back toward the kitchen.

“We were invisible to him,” the other agent answered.

=-=-=
Vin Tanner walked back into the plush office of George Palmer. He glanced at the Judge sitting at a round table. In front of the man was an open binder.

Vin stepped up next to TH Houston, who had moved from the upstairs computer room to this office. Touching the young agent’s shoulder, Vin whispered, ‘Need you to look for a trophy room. Climate controlled. If you find it, do not let the judge see it.”

“Climate controlled?” TH rasped in a surprised voice.

“*Heads. Palmer is saving the heads.*”

Wide-eyed the young sniper stared at his Captain. Then he turned and typed in several odd words that Vin didn’t understand. Both men bolted back as an image came up. Then the image expanded as rows of well preserved heads began to appear. Ten shelves high on three long walls.

“Close it up,” Vin ordered quietly. “Don’t tell a soul. Definitely not JD.”

“Yes sir.”

Looking up at the Judge, Vin saw the man looking directly at him. “How we doing, sir?”

“I have talked to a Federal Judge in New Jersey. Two in Chicago. One in San Francisco.”

Standing, the Judge picked up several papers as Dr. Graham entered the office. “This is a list of the names of the Judges and those being served. The time difference will be coordinated so they are all served at the same time. Your 800 number will be called when the men are in custody.”

“Judge…,” Graham rasped quietly.

“Dr. Graham.”

“Sir,” David replied with a sigh. “We need you to identify a man we just found in the field.”

“It is Royal?”

“I believe it is, sir.”

“Agent Tanner…”

“Yes, Judge.”

“You are doing a fine job for someone who has just been thrust into the unknown here. I suspect your Army training has prepared you in many ways.”

“For what I’ve seen in Iraq, sir; this is child’s play.”

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Vin looked around at the agents in the kitchen. He noticed immediately that they all now wore name tags. The ‘hello’ part had been cut off with first initial and last name printed in the white square. As he stared at one name tag, someone said, ‘Larabee thought you’d like to know who the hell we are.”

Vin laughed. “Well, old Larabee is right. Show me what you found.”

“We began moving all the unopened products off the shelves when this opened up,” Agent Lathrop explained as he moved what looked like three boxes of Corn Flakes.
“Climate control. Should be all orange, I bet,” Vin replied as he pushed back the hair around his ear phone.

“TH. Bring that room up you just had. Is there a climate control box with lights?”

“*Three are blinking yellow. There is an alert on the image. All should be orange.*”

“Right. All should be orange… but does it give instructions for opening or for changing them to orange?”

“*Put your left hand flat inside the image. It should give you directions once you are verified.*”

“Excuse me, Agent Tanner,” a fireman in a hazmat suit asked behind the group. “The two tanks we were called to empty, only one was accessible. All those lights should be orange, sir.”

“Do you know how to make them all orange?” Tanner asked.

Before the man could answer a voice on the panel said, “You are cleared for opening. The oxygen level is below standard. Please enter wearing a mask. Step on the right edge of the walkway and press the three blinking yellow buttons. This will equalize the pressure and bring it back to normal.”

The fireman pushed forward saying, “Looks like I’m the one with the mask.”

“I’m not sure you want to go in there,” Vin said seriously.

“Do you know what is in there, Agent Tanner?”

“It is a trophy room. It houses the missing parts of the bodies that haven’t yet been found,” Vin explained as he removed his hand from the panel.

As his hand was raised from the panel, a sliding door opened to reveal the perfectly preserved heads of numerous men. Each one was enclosed in its own glass case.

There was a collective gasp. The fireman handed his gloves off to Tanner before he carefully stepped onto the narrow walkway. Following the instructions given, he pushed in the three blinking yellow lights. Walking backwards the man asked for the melon. Carefully leaning forward he placed it on the pressure pad.

Tanner touched the hazmat suit and guided the man back into the pantry. Only when he was back inside did the enclosure of the melon start.

Five ATF agents, Special Agent Vin Tanner and a fireman watched four squares of glass push up and surround the melon. One of the side pieces pushed up across the top as a second piece replaced the side. The pressure pad lifted, found a place in the rotating shelves and locked it into place.

Vin placed his left hand on the panel and the door closed. Looking at the group, Tanner quietly spoke.

“You all are aware that you cannot say one word about what is in there.”

“Yes sir,” came the collective agreement.

The fireman looked at Tanner. “I recognized three men in there. There is no way I’d want their families to see them like that.”

Overhead Margaret’s voice softly spoke. “Vin. JD and Mark have found some lists of names. “
“Put them into my ear phone…”

“Vin. Mark and I found a list of everyone who was killed. There is a list for those in the field. A list for who was fed to the plant. And a long list of who was …was… ah, cut up.”

“Do you have some USB sticks up there? …okay, save those to one and I will give it to the Coroner. That will assist him in identifying the bodies.”

“SHIT!” Vin growled fiercely. “I should have said no to this job.”

“NO SIR!” Five agents responded.

“Captain. You have interacted with almost every agent here today. Travis never dealt with agents. Only team leaders.”

Vin grinned, saying, “A team leader is only as good as his team.”

Looking around, Vin told them to empty the shelves and close up this area. “Put an X on the door to indicate it has been checked.”

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Vin pulled his phone as JD jogged down the stairs.

“Joseph and Corliss have arrived in Austin. They will be spending the night at the Senator’s mansion with his daughter Gladys. Everything was intact. Corliss is ecstatic that nothing is missing. Henry has been arrested by the FBI. It appears he was trafficking drugs for a Mexican war lord when not working for Joseph. Gladys said if you ever need a safe house for anyone to let her know. The mansion is like Fort Knox, plus it has its own airstrip.”

“Thanks Margaret.”

“Vin. Here it is,” JD said in a hushed voice looking around. “USA is by State. Europe is by country. The list for the field also tells why they didn’t make the cut… “

“Harry called,” JD continued. “The media is getting anxious. He reminded us that London is six hours ahead.”

“Thanks JD. I will take this out to Jeffrey. He and I and Graham need to get together for this news conference.”

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Special Agent Vin Tanner, Sergeant Terry Blackman, Medical Examiner Jeffrey Rockland and Dr David Graham sat around the small table in George Palmer’s plush first floor office. Discussion of the upcoming news conference had taken an hour and still they could not decide how to break the news to the world.

Judge Riden walked in with Aaron Iron Horse. “Excuse me, Captain. The Judge has a solution to what you are discussing.”

“Thank you Aaron.”

The Senior Judge placed his hands on the back of a chair as he started to speak.

“I’ve just prayed over my grandson. He had so much to live for. A new job. A new wife. A lot of
potential. I have written out what you may want to use Agent Tanner.”

“We are stymied Judge, so please continue,” Vin offered.

“One, I believe that Jeffrey, David, Terry and all the team leaders should stand behind you. You definitely should not be there alone.”

“We agree,” Jeffrey Rockland answered. “No way will he stand there alone.”

Judge Riden unfolded a piece of writing paper. “Tanner speaking … I came here this morning at the request of the State of Colorado. It is part of property I now own. We had no idea what to expect. As we opened the doors, we were greeted by a huge Mastiff dog. Someone knew it had been stolen… and it was returned to the family that was missing it.

“As we began to investigate, we were fired upon by two men in the turret. They were quickly neutralized by a newly appointed ATF sniper.

“We all know what cannibals are. They are found in the jungles of South America and Africa. But they are also found in Colorado … New Jersey … Chicago and San Francisco. As well as Canada and Europe. They could be your next door neighbor. Or your boss … or anyone.

“We discovered six men in a curing room. One was still alive when we found them. He is only alive because of his Navy SEAL training. He was flown to San Diego and put through a decompression chamber. Unfortunately, Navy brass there treated him like a deserter rather than a kidnapped tortured prisoner. “

“I understand, Vin,” Judge Riden said, “that you personally called the Head of Navy Intelligence regarding this. You might want to tell the world that. I have learned that you have some incredible contacts. Again I have to tell you, you will be excellent at this job.”

“Again … Tanner speaking … ‘Our only live witness was rescued from the Navy and is in a safe house somewhere in the West. Only three people know where he is.

“George Palmer is behind what has happened here. He has sealed himself in a room that we cannot enter. In all probability he is dead. Palmer has an elaborate security system here. There are cameras in every room. Every hallway. And outside. He knew what was happening every minute of the day.”

“Judge…,” Vin said breaking into the speech. “Were you a criminal lawyer? This sounds like opening or closing remarks of a top notch trial.”

A chuckle erupted from the elderly Judge. ‘You are right on. It is what I miss most about being a Judge. The closing remarks that seal a guilty verdict. Perhaps you’d prefer to read the rest.”

“No!” Yelped Rockland, Blackman and Graham.

“No,” Jeffrey repeated. “We’d like to hear the rest. We need a bit of preparation too as I am sure we will be questioned also.”

Smiling, Riden continued, “How did Palmer lure the men here? Free beer … food … pool. What made him chose some men and not others? We have no clue. The field to the west contains bodies that cadaver dogs have found. It will take days … weeks to ID them. We have hundreds of wallets and passports. Again it will take months to sort through those and get them to State Police in their home state or country.

“Why we came here in the first place … agents told me it would be a great place for ATF
Headquarters since the building we were to use collapsed. However, we all know that this place is a dead zone. It will never be of use to anyone again.”

Harry Brothers burst through the door. “VIN! Guys! It’s getting dark. You need to do this.”

“We’re ready,” Vin answered standing, as his red phone began to ring.

“Don’t answer it!” Harry yelped.

Vin looked at the ID and calmly said, “Mr. President.”

Vin motioned everyone out as he explained he was about to do a news conference that would shock the world. The President told him the ATF building was going to be rebuilt using funds the Senator had hidden in off shore accounts.

“Apparently Vin, Cayman bankers don’t like people who think they can blow up people just for the hell of it. The building will not be made of glass this time. Good luck on your news conference. You are where you were meant to be.’

Special Agent Vin Tanner stepped through the double doors of Jasper’s castle. Three microphones were set up … Fox News, Local TV8 and the BBC. Vin wondered who had the BBC’s since Harry didn’t have one. He had read through the Judge’s words three times.

You can do it Vin. Then go home and wrap your arms around Anna and Michael. Tell Michael, Opa will be home tomorrow. Love you son.
The news conference was over. Images of men in graves with no penises, heads covered with a cloth were being shown on European television. Images of the contents of the walk-in freezer slammed home what really had been going on in this castle.

Chris Larabee was in Vin Tanner’s face. Growling fiercely, arguing, why was it necessary for him and other team leaders to have been on camera.

“I thought Corliss tamed you,” Vin responded quietly.

“There are certain things that still tick me off!” Roared the blond. “And… I am not interested in this job!” Growled Chris, flapping a sheet of paper in Tanner’s face.

“Chris,” Vin said evenly. “I have talked to a number of your former supervisors. The Admiral. He told me some interesting things about you. Very interesting things…. Said you were more than qualified to be a recruiter or a trainer. The former Chief of Police … detectives you worked with … detectives who worked under you … all said you were perfect for this job. Your promotion from ATF agent to Agent in Charge of Training and Recruitment has been approved by Washington.”

“And if I refuse?” Larabee questioned.

“Then … you would have to call Jack Maloney, the new head of the ATF. Make an appointment to see him in Washington. It would be up to him what your future in the ATF would be.”

“This is why Judge Travis was replaced?” Larabee groaned. “Because he didn’t do these changes?”

“Probably.”

“What did the Admiral tell you about me?” Chris asked, suddenly realizing why Tanner was grinning at him.

“He told me how you got the name ‘Stud.’ What a damn good SEAL you were. He also suggested I use that sexual prowess in my hotel …IF, I had men who liked doing threesomes.”

Chris Larabee closed his eyes and groaned.

“And, I might just use you for that whether or not you take this job,” Tanner said with confidence.

“What?!” Larabee yelped, his groin growing hot at the thought.

“HEY CHRIS!” Buck Wilmington yelped walking up to his old friend. “You looked damn good on television tonight.”

“Tanner,” Buck offered. “I’m back in service. Marianne has things to do in her office and has shooed me off to work. I read that package Shirley handed me. Glad to see we can work and train with other demolition experts.”

Tanner gently grabbed the paper Larabee was holding and handed it to Wilmington.

“Washington thinks Larabee would be good for this position. I’d like your opinion since you know him so well.”
Quickly scanning the job description, Buck had an instant answer.

“Hey Stud! This is right up your alley! You helped put some SEAL teams together. You took extra care to train those foreign nationals. Hell! This job is perfect for you,” Buck responded. “Absolutely perfect for you. And you won’t get shot at anymore.”

“Vin,” Buck continued as he handed the paper back to Chris. “My wife said Chris’…ah um…that Corliss is an architect. Any chance we could hire him?”

“Architect?” Larabee gasped frowning. “I thought he was a Ranger.”

“He was a Ranger, stud. Just like you were a SEAL. Anyway, is he for hire?”

Tanner watched several emotions roll across Larabee. Then looking at Buck, Vin answered, “He is presently working on a big project for me on the mountain. But yes, he is for hire. He is in Austin, Texas right now. Should be home sometime tomorrow. He is setting up his office in the Jasper Building next to the Federal Hotel.”

“Great! Someone out there,” Buck began pointing to a group of men on the steps, “said the ATF was meeting in the Jasper Building too.”

“We are meeting there while the ATF building is being rebuilt. The President released that news earlier today,” Tanner replied looking around.

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“Are we set for tonight?” Vin asked the group around him.

Sgt. Terry Blackman was the first to answer. “Two ATF. Two State Troopers, and one K9 unit will patrol the grounds and inside. Shift will change every four hours around the clock.”

“Why only four hours?” Jeffrey Rockland asked. “There is a lot to cover inside and out. The ME’s that are working here tonight won’t have time to be aware of that plant.”

“One ATF and Trooper will be paired together. One team inside, one team outside. The K9 will patrol the outside perimeter as well as a walk through the inside,” Vin explained.

Continuing Tanner said, “We have also had five computer forensic agents volunteer to man the security system. They are working seven hour shifts. TH Houston insisted that someone manned the security just in case someone was hiding in the forest. Someone who could slip past a patrol but not a camera programmed for movement.”

“Didn’t you bring him here to be a sniper?” David Graham asked.

“I did,” Vin groused. “Pulled some strings in Washington to get him here. Have since found out they used him both as a sniper and on a security Intel system. He has more savvy than any other geek here. He could end up being in charge of our computer forensics lab.”

“I totally agree!” Graham and Rockland barked as one.

“Did Larabee take the job?” Terry Blackman asked.

“Not yet.”

“Perhaps when this is over, he will. He’s in charge of the patrols. Making sure they are here. Getting a report texted to him if anything is found.”
“How the hell did that happen?” All asked at once.

“Team leaders drew straws … State cops and ATF. Then the two shorts for each are in charge of their teams.”

Looking around, Vin asked, “Are we set then? Can the rest of us go home now?”

It was almost midnight. All Vin Tanner wanted to do was get home and fall into bed.

“How’s that bird of that Aaron?” Vin asked as they landed at the Federal Hotel.

“Grandfather’s. He called me earlier. Wants to talk about moving the Tall Man.”

“Not going to happen,” Tanner groaned sliding out of the green camo helicopter. “Slip into your cool apartment. Take a shower and hit the bed. I’ll deal with the man.”

Looking over his shoulder, Vin asked if Aaron needed help covering the helio.

“Just going to tack it down. Anyone tries to steal this baby, alarms will go off.”

Vin ushered Chief Richman into his Red Feather Corporate office. The Chief stared at the name and the red feather that was scrolled across the glass.

“How the hell are you related to the Red Feather’s of Texas?” The Chief growled walking into the office.

“My mother. Her grandfather was a Red Feather. Guess that makes me one too. The Tall Man is not going to be moved.”

“I am setting it up,” The Chief answered, ignoring Vin.

“I, sir, have had a hell of a long day! The Tall Man is not being moved. It has been safe since it was stolen. Did it ever occur to you that someone in your group was involved?”

Chief Richman stared at the man.

“The six men who were involved in stealing this icon … none of them are Native American. None even knew of the thing. Yet they were carefully found and instructed what kind a container had to be built to keep the thing in. What you couldn’t do with it. Plus George Palmer flew to South America to harvest a carnivorous plant. How he got it into this country no one knows. Then they had to test the icon to see if it could really turn a man to stone. The latest bid for the thing is sixty billion dollars. All six men are dead. So, which of your Elders has suddenly decided he’s moving out because he is going to be a wealthy man?”

“I am not going to endanger this city or any Ranger to move that thing! I have already made plans to completely seal the visual part of that safe. What is inside will stay inside. “

“None of my Elders would do such a thing. The Tall Man is centuries old.”

“Then explain to me … how six men came together to steal something they knew nothing about.”

“And another thing … go to the Trauma Center and check on Dr. Felch. He is half stone and half
human. Why? Because he stepped inside that room at the castle where the Tall Man was held. That, Chief, is just from the afterglow. It is suicide to go in and try to move it. Even in a hazmat suit.”

Vin looked up to see hotel security motioning him toward the lobby.

“You try to move him, you will need to evacuate the whole area. Plus you will be responsible for anything that happens. Can you afford that?”

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“What’s up, Colt? Shouldn’t your night manager be on duty? Or don’t we have one yet?”

“We had one, I fired him. Houston wants to talk to you. And Larabee is here. He needs a bed. Didn’t want to drive out to his ranch since he is in charge of covering the castle guards.”

“Don’t we have a couple of odd apartment that no one wants?”

Pulling up his tablet, Colt Hammer brought up several floor plans, narrowing them down to two.

“We have this one. Third floor where most single security guards live. Near the elevator. I think it was put together as an afterthought. King-size bed in the corner here. Mini kitchen. Two burner stove. No oven. Microwave.”

“Definitely not by the elevator,” Vin responded. “He’s been offered the job of Agent in Charge of Recruitment and Training. Maloney and I have talked to his former SEAL Admiral. Police detectives. Former Chief of Police. All say it is the job for him. Yet he doesn’t want it. The one thing I learned from all of them … he likes to fuck and be fucked.”

“So, we need an out of the way apartment that is easy to get to,” Colt mumbled, as he scrolled through the floor plans.

Just as they were going to enter the Lobby Colt stopped. “This one is weird.”

“Isn’t this the back of the soundproof room?” Vin asked.

“No. That was a narrow hallway completely around it. Let’s have a look here. This is the only one that doesn’t have an electronic key.”

Stepping in the two men gasped.

“It’s got everything,” Vin said in surprise.

On their left was a miniscule kitchen. A two burner stove. Four cupboards above the stove. A microwave hanging under two of the cupboards. Four more cupboards under the stove and mini counter. Ahead of them, a four poster bed that took up most of the space. An open closet with hangers. A shower big enough for two. The shower was visible to anyone in the room. The bathroom sink and toilet however, had a security screen attached to the ceiling and the floor which blocked their use.

Vin walked over to the bathroom area as Colt opened the cupboards.


“I’m calling security. Make sure no one is using this space.”
Vin walked over to the bed and pulled back the comforter and sheets. “No bugs. Everything is clean here.”

Flipping the blankets back up, he turned down the bed. “All we need is some chocolate on the pillow.”

“Looks like this is his place,” Colt remarked looking up. “Security thought this was a closet. Left a text for Brittany. Maintenance is on their way to rekey the lock. I’ll bring Larabee.”

Chris Larabee watched a man rekey the lock. Looking at Colt Hammer who was leaning against the open door, Chris asked, “Any chance of getting a chair in here. Looks like there was one from the marks on the carpet.”

The maintenance man walked over and looked at the marks in the rug. Smiling he said, “It’s in the lobby. Doesn’t match anything out there. I’ll bring it in.”

“Who needs a key, Colt? Maintenance. You. Does the boss need one?”

“Who is the boss?” Larabee asked looking around.

“You and I need one,” Colt replied, ignoring Larabee’s question.

“If the boss needs one, I can make an extra one. I’ll go get the chair.”

“We have no clue who this was made for,” Colt began. “There is beer in the fridge here, and chocolate something in the small freezer. You might have someone trying a key that no longer fits. The Security camera is just above here, so this door doesn’t show up.”

“Who owns this place? Who is the boss?” Larabee asked again as the chair was brought in.

The maintenance man chuckled. Then snapped his fingers saying, “Housekeeping won’t have a key to this gem. We have three other residents who don’t want housekeeping in their space. I will see that you get special bags to put your sheets, towels in … clothes, whatever. They can be left at your door for pickup. When washed your packages will be left in the security office off the lobby. Too much traffic down this hall to leave it outside the door.”

“Oh yeah, Colt! That architect. Archer. Is he going to be in the Jasper Building or down here where that daycare center was? He left some instructions but didn’t say which place.”

“Corliss. He’ll be back from Austin tomorrow. Probably be at the mountain most of the day taking pictures.”

“Pictures?” The maintenance man and Larabee asked.

Colt looked at the two. Morrison knew about the mountain, Larabee didn’t.

“Corliss has designed a five bedroom mountain house for the Tanners. Plus a huge horse barn, two story bunk house. Kennel. And … two tree houses. He needs to go on the mountain. View the terrain. See how it’s going to fit.”

“He’s gotten some awards for his designs, hasn’t he?”

Walking toward the door, Colt said, “He has. The Austin community center wasn’t happy to learn that he’s moving his office to Denver.”

Colt Hammer pulled out his phone and sent at text to Morrison… sign for the door = CAL – R&T ..
under that ‘Private.’

Morrison pulled out his beeping phone and smiled at the text. “It will be up in the morning.”

“Chris,” Colt said softly. “Morrison can put a folding door on that closet. If you take that job or just want a place to hang out in town … this place is now yours. Might want a change of clothes in there.”

Morrison looked up from putting his tools away. “If you need a lockbox in the closet for your weapons, let me know.”

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Chris Larabee looked around the room. It was bigger than his Navy quarters. Walking over to the small night stand next to the bed, he opened the drawer and put in his wallet, keys and weapon. Setting his phone on the indent of the top, he stripped down and walked to the shower.

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JD Dunne was leaning against the door of the security computer room on the second floor of the Federal Hotel. He’s spent the last hour with Trevor, who was now giving instructions to the next crew coming on.

JD watched a computer blink on in a vacant cubicle and rushed over to see what was happening. He was shocked to see a naked Chris Larabee stepping into a shower.

“Trevor!”

“What’s up?” Trevor asked following JD’s pointed finger. “Holy hell! Where is this coming from? Go around. See if any other cube is getting this.”

Pulling out his phone, he called his boss. He hated waking the man who probably was just getting into bed.

Three minutes later, Vin Tanner and Colt Hammer walked into the Security lab.

Larabee! You are on camera. We don’t know how or where it is going. Grab a towel.

WHAT?

Whoever used that room before the hotel was here … has cameras up. Check the ceiling. We are getting an overhead view.

There is a rotating light.. it goes where I go. Shit.

Get your pants on. Morrison is coming down with an electrician.

‘Margaret! Are you asleep? Where is this going?’ Vin barked.

‘It is going to a special subscription channel on YouTube. This is tame compared to what has been there in the past. I am cutting their connection.’

“Need the name of whoever was using this place before I bought it.

“Hey look!” JD yelped. “There is a guy on a ladder.”
Trevor looked around. “We’ve only had two or three people use this cube. Why don’t we have the place fingerprinted. Maybe we’ll come up with something.”

Grinning, Colt said, “I have some police tape in my drawer. I will close this off and call our favorite detective in the morning.”

“Wow! Chris is going to be mad when he finds out he was on You Tube,” JD gulped.

Vin, Colt and Trevor glared at the agent.

“No one is telling Larabee anything!” Tanner growled into JD’s face. “Nor are you telling anyone. That includes TH Houston. You tell anyone, John Daniel…. You will be jobless and homeless.”

JD gulped. Fear spread through his gut as each man gave him a death glare.

Quietly, Vin said, “Go take a shower and get some sleep. You have to be back at the castle by eight in the morning.”

The door was barely closed when Trevor and Vin heard a slow whistle. They peered over a cubic wall.

“Who is this guy?” The techie whispered. “No one is supposed to be there until Saturday.”

Colt lifted the man out of his chair as Trevor sat in it.

“Hey man!”

_Houston! Help me! Colt’s office._

TH Houston flew into the security computer room. Opening Hammer’s office door as Colt walked the surprised man in.

The tech’s hand was forced onto a tablet. Fingerprints were scanned into their super computer. The name that came up was completely different than the application that Colt pulled up on his computer.

“Margaret! What Rangers are available?”

“Wolf and Spider are up.”

“Get them down here. Tell them we have someone for the dungeon.”

“Ahh, Vin. We have those cannibals that were arrested down there.”

Colt responded to a knock on his door.

Vin explained the situation to Wolf and discovered that those in the dungeon had been moved to Federal jail until their booking and trial. Since the news conference their names were passed around as being arrested.

“This man is being detained for lying on his application. For videotaping naked people without their permission and … luckily we caught him before he sent it to an online web page.”

“Morrison and Ranger are changing how the cameras are in that hallway. Anyone who tries to get into that room other than Larabee will be instantly taken down.”

“HOLY CRAP! THAT WAS LARABEE?” The cuffed man barked. “I’m dead meat.”
Vin spoke to Wolf in German, asking him to interrogate the man.

“Vinnn. Vinnn.”

“Mom… it’s too early.”

“Vin!” Anna said louder, closer to her husband’s ear.

Tanner rolled over and stared at his wife.

“You haven’t gotten much sleep, my love. You phone is ringing. I cut it off twice but…”

“How about we sell this place and hibernate on the mountain?”

“My husband would get upset about that. He told me commitment was important.”

“The job is not what I thought it would be,” Vin answered stretching.

“I think when our house is built we will live there, not here.”

“I totally agree, Mrs. Tanner.”

“I talked to Joseph this morning. They are going to stop here on the way to the mountain to pick up Michael and me. Carter will go with us.”

More than anything Vin wanted to pull his wife under the blanket and forget about the day. But, he kissed her lightly and headed for the shower.

Showered, dressed, yawning, Special Agent Vin Tanner walked quickly through the staff breakfast brunch line. Then taking his plate he walked through the lobby to the ATF Conference room. He hoped they had coffee there.


Setting his coffee and breakfast down at the only empty chair, which was at the head of the table, Vin said, “Report!”

Larabee glanced through his notes, saying, “The first four hours no activity other than the medical examiners in the field. The second shift had someone come out of the woods between five and six. He started for the turret side but backtracked when he saw the lights and the people.”

Chris nodded to someone opposite him.

“Camera picked him up. Alerted us. Canine tracked him to the west side and we discovered a hidden side door. Steps go down into the furnace room. We went in the front door. K9 went down the steps. Bart and his dog brought the guy up in the elevator. The next shift coming in was boarding up that door.”

“The man said he lives in the woods. I’d say he’s about fifty, maybe older. Usually raids the kitchen after they have a party. Had no clue what they did there. Just helped himself to beer and leftovers, then went out through the furnace room or the front door if it was open. But he said, lots of times it
was locked.”

“I wonder if Palmer knew about that side door,” Vin wondered out loud.

“We’d better find out where he lives in those woods. Check with your State Trooper partners. Have them check around the neighborhood. See if anyone is losing food from gardens or freezers in their garage,” Tanner instructed.

Vin looked around the table. “Any sign of the plant?”

“I was on the team that just left there. I’d like to say first, that the four hour shift was just right. Any longer… well, it is just spooky out there at night. Even though you have a partner, you’re still jumpy. Not exactly why I joined the ATF.”

“Makes two of us,” Vin answered.

“On our second walk through around the second floor tier, we heard scratching noises. We brought Bart and his dog up. But the dog didn’t sense anything human or animal. We checked with the computer guys, but they couldn’t bring up that room. So have no clue what it was.”

“JD,” Vin said, staring at the young man whose head was studying something on his laptop. “John Daniel.”

JD’s head shot up and looked around. Everyone was staring at him. “Huh?”

“What are you looking at?”

“I was watching last night’s news conference. There is a weird guy on the other side of the field from the bodies.”

The agent who had just explained about the strange man got up and walked around the table to JD.

“That’s him! That is the man we found. State Police took his name and fingerprints and then we let him go. We really didn’t have any reason to hold him.”

“No problem there,” Vin answered.

“JD. Is it possible for you … on your trusty laptop … to pull up something from yesterday? Specifically, those ghosts that pulled Palmer into the light.”

“The ghosts?”

“The ghosts.”

Looking at Aaron, Vin asked quietly, “Do you think we could call Red Horse up … out there?”

“I don’t know, Captain. He called you brother.”

“He’s a Red Feather. We’re blood brothers … since we were five,” Tanner said quietly.

Looking around at the agents, Vin continued. “Red Horse said they, the ghosts, would try to make a light to the plant. If they could, it would die. Did any of you notice moonlight going into the castle last night?”

Larabee leafed through his notes. “I got a call around 1 a.m. about moonlight that seemed to be disappearing into the castle near the turret. But when they went to the turret, they couldn’t see where
it was going."

Tanner looked at the notes Larabee had. Very meticulous.

“Chris has been offered a promotion… to Agent in Charge of Recruitment and Training. He can’t make up his mind on it. What do you all think?”

“Chris talked me into being an agent,” Sniper Todd Burton put in. “I didn’t end up on his team, but I followed his advice. Been here five years.”

“He handpicked Team Seven,” Agent Sanchez continued with a big grin. “Took in some men who others didn’t think would be good. Chris can read a man, just by talking to him. Congratulations, Chris. You are a perfect match for that job.”

Larabee glared at Vin Tanner. He’d been set up. There was no way he could refuse now.

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“You set me up big time,” Larabee groused as he walked with Tanner back to his mini apartment.

“I size up men also. I know you can do it. After talking with the Admiral .. I know you can do a lot of things. Looks like you have company.”

“They have overnight bags,” Chris began. “Maybe they are part of the camera crew.”

Aaron! Need security back up here.

How many people do you talk to like this?


“Gentlemen. What can we do for you?” Tanner asked sharply, startling the two men.

“Just waiting for our friend to answer the door.”

“Well, it will be a long time for anyone to answer. This is the guy that uses it now. He is a Federal agent. I don’t think you want to do to him what you’ve been doing to other people. Oh, by the way. John Smith has been arrested. Though his name isn’t really John Smith, is it?”

“Captain Tanner,” Morrison called walking up to the group. “Besides that camera in the ceiling, we followed wires down to one in the kitchen and … one above the shower. Maggie is tracing the source. Everything that is being found is being turned over to the FBI. We’ll take these two and hold them in the dungeon with John Smith.”

Larabee watched three hotel security guard take possession of the two men and their cases. He didn’t like how Morrison was looking at him.

Morrison looked around to make sure no one else was around. “I had Margaret save the images of Larabee in the shower. He showed his whole body off. There will be a line forming out the door if he is ever available.”

Tanner pulled his phone and dialed Margaret. Speaking in French, he told her to bury those images for later use.

“Who else saw those besides you?” Vin asked.
“Just me.”

“Just make sure you don’t tell anyone about them. I’ve have already threatened to fire an ATF agent who happened to see them on Smith’s computer. If I hear about those images and they came from you … you will no longer be employed. Check your contract. Everything that happens in this hotel is under strict control and confidential.”

“Yes sir,” Morrison replied through a tight jaw.

“Let’s check it out,” Tanner said, pulling out his key.

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The two agents stood with their backs against the door. Chris locked the dead bolt but didn’t move.

*Someone is watching us.*

*Yeah. Straight on. Must be near the bed.*

“Looks like Morrison got you a folding closet door,” Vin said softly.

“Interesting covering on the shower,” Larabee said walking toward what looked like a rolling door.

*Keep walking. I see it.*

Moving silently along the cupboards, Vin watched the lens as it protruded out from the wall. *He has to be in the alley way near the soundproof room.*

*AARON. Backup near the soundproof room. Tiny door before the room.*

*The door is open. I see someone down there.*

*Grab him. He is taking pictures of Larabee. Of anyone in this room.*

“Got you!” Tanner shouted as he pulled the long lens through the opening.

Larabee spun around staring at the long lens that was tossed onto the bed.

“Got him Captain!” Came the voice from the other side of the wall. “Looks like they drilled through the wood and cement. I’ll put him in the dungeon with the others. Colt is getting maintenance. They will plaster this back up. Need to get in there too.”

“What did you find over there?” Vin asked pointing to the object in front of the shower.

“A rolling door,” Chris replied showing his new boss how it worked.

“Cool. Did you sleep well last night? “

“It’s a good bed. Slept like a log. Hopefully these guys only arrived this morning.”

“Once their faces are on the news about their arrests, I don’t think we’ll be bothered again. But Trevor is personally going to make sure no one puts in any more cameras here or anywhere else in the hotel.”

“I’m not sure I want to be commit to Corey.” The words were spoken quietly. Only Tanner heard them.
“That is one thing the Admiral said about you. You don’t like educated men. I’m not sure Corliss wants to be committed to someone for life either. But he does like chocolate bananas. And I would ask that you not refuse him on that issue.”

“And if I do?”

“Remember what happened in your ranch shower. You were taken down by an invisible force. I can do that anywhere. Any time.”

Larabee stared at the man. He remembered the touch. The entry. His need.

Vin watched the man’s cock stiffened.

*Strip down. Get back in the shower. NOW!*

Larabee screamed ‘master,’ as he came hard on the floor of the shower. And still the cock pumped into him. Still he met every thrust. Then everything stopped. Water hit him. Shocking him back to reality.

Looking up, Larabee stared into the ice blue eyes of Vin Tanner. Smiling, Vin said, “I’ll see you at the castle.”

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“Chris! Open up!” Wilmington barked as he knocked on the door.

Larabee fumbled with the two locks that had been added to the door.

“What do you want Buck? I just got out of the shower.”

“Hey, nice little place. Saw Tanner out there. He said you were a bit on the grouchy side. Figured you needed an ass to work off that angry.”

“You’re married Buck.”

“Marianne and I are very happy. She likes being fucked like a man, but isn’t interested to do that to me. You! You know how to take me hard and fast. My ass is the best way for you to work off your anger. We’ve had this love affair for years Chris. Come on. You don’t have to be back at the castle for at least an hour.”

“Like we did it in the Navy?” Larabee asked as he draped the damp towel over the rolling door of the shower.

“Exactly! Me kneeling on the bed… you thrusting that bulging hard cock in hard. Every thrust a pleasure…want to hear you growl, Chris. You know how I like to hear you growl.”

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Trevor’s phone pinged. He stood up from his desk and walked into a small office, closing the curtains as he locked the door behind him. Slowly he eased into the comfortable desk chair and clicked on the sleeping computer.

“Well, well, well. Buck Wilmington has come for some action. How did Vin know about these two? The Admiral, I bet. Nothing gets by an Admiral,” Trevor murmured as he put on head phones.

Morrison hadn’t found this camera. Tanner had when he walked through the apartment last night. The camera was part of a picture of the old Federal Building. It was quite ingenious how it was placed. Trevor reprogrammed it. Obviously his boss thought it was necessary to keep an eye on Larabee. Trevor called his boss and told him Wilmington and Larabee would be late … if they got there at all.

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Buck groaned.

“Chris! Yes. Yes. Oh god you know how I like it. Faster, Stud faster. Shit man, I’m so dry. Fill me. Fill me.”

Larabee was sweating. He would need another shower. His mind was in overdrive as he pumped his cock into Buck’s ass.


Trevor made a note to soundproof that room. They could probably hear Buck halfway down the hall.
Vin stared at the text from Trevor. ""’'The blond is fucking the mustache hard. HARD! Mustache needs fucking. Wife can’t do it. Mustache is the blond’s ‘baby.’’’"

So, happily married Buck still needs his long time lover. I’m pretty sure Marianne could find a sex toy to do the same thing. Of course, Buck and Chris would laugh themselves into hysteria at that toy… strapped on a woman.

Morrison wants Larabee, but I don’t trust that man. Wolf wants Larabee. Two Executives from D.C. want Larabee. They have enjoyed his ass in Washington. Guess we will have to set up a calendar.

“You are in deep thought there, Vin,” Sanchez remarked coming up to Tanner.

“I’m thinking that maybe Chris should just be the Recruiter for Colorado ATF. We are covering the whole state now.”

“Training could be done by the Agents in Charge of the divisions,” Josiah suggested. “Be more specialized. Chris certainly knows his men. No one thought the seven of us would fit together or work together.”

“You party together. Have cookouts together. Do things together. That is the key, ‘Siah. That is how my Rangers got to be a close knit team.’”

“Any changes in the castle this morning. I’d really like to be rid of this place,” Vin said.

“JD and Mark are working the computer security systems. They are reprogramming some of it so they can pick up the alerts at your hotel or wherever the ATF is going to be.”

“Have you talked to Duke?” Vin questioned. “How is he doing at Mrs. Hathaway’s?”

Josiah looked around before saying, “Did you know her husband was a Navy spy?”


“She and Duke have been having some interesting discussions. I was there this morning as was Ezra. He’s been present every time the FBI has interviewed Duke.”

“Standish isn’t priming him to be an undercover agent, is he?”

“Not sure on that,” Sanchez replied. “Have you heard from Special Agent Marcos?”

“I have. I told him this morning, we got a call from someone in the boonies of Utah to pick Duke up no questions asked. Told Marcos the FBI has him in a safe house.”

“Captain! We finally found a way into that room,” Mark VanClef said, coming up to the two agents. “Dr. Graham gave us a scope that goes into your intestines. A flat thing. Anyway, here is the image.”

Tanner and Sanchez gawked at the plant climbing up the side of the room and sliding down again.

“It is trying to get away from the light. Get a helio up. Check for an opening. Let’s get the most powerful lamp the fire department has. Shine it down there. We have to kill this thing,” Vin ordered.

“Shine it down for an hour. Then check with the scope. Then we will send down a flare or two just to make sure. We need that dead before we can leave here.”
Chris Larabee collapsed on the bed. He and Buck had first gotten together in high school. Larabee still couldn’t get enough of the man.

Buck Wilmington eased off the bed and walked over to the refrigerator. Opening the door he discovered beer, eggs, milk, some labeled boxes of fruit and salads. Looking into the small freezer his eyes widened.

“Hey Chris! Look what I found in the freezer!”

Chris felt his cock roar to life as he stared at the chocolate covered banana. But it wasn’t Buck he heard, it was Corliss.


“Chris! You okay? What’s going on?” Buck groused coming over to the bed.

Larabee closed his eyes but he couldn’t block out Corliss Archer’s plea to be sucked off. His plea to eat a chocolate covered banana.

“Cory … Corliss … loves those. We had them especially made so he could eat them with that jaw brace.”

“You love him, don’t you?” Buck asked as he sat on the bed and ate the banana on a stick.

“Hell, Buck. I’ve had so many men I don’t even know what love is,” Chris lamented. “But, Cory is special. Was special. Helpless and depended on me. But now…”

“Now you found out he has a career. Has friends. So what if he does? The same goes for me, and I’m here. Were you willing to give up everything for him?”

“We talked about commitment … when he was helpless.”

“You took me in when I was helpless. Dropped at an Aunt’s house in Indiana. A person I didn’t even know existed until my mother died. I’d have gone bananas …” Buck laughed looking at the stick that had held the banana.

“Your mom and dad … you … took me into your family and loved me. You still love me. Give it time, Chris. You and Cory still might work it out.”

“Buck! I love fucking men! Love to be fucked. The threesomes in the Navy really turned me on!”

“Threesomes?” Trevor whispered making notes in a small spiral notebook. “Wowzer. The boss was right. The Admiral definitely knows this blond. Maybe even performed for the man. Naked. Hooded. Makes me hungry just thinking about how he could be enjoyed.”
Aaron Iron Horse watched Houston and Tanner slid into the open door of his chopper. He didn’t think either one noticed the shimmering image of Red Horse that followed them in.

Vin stretched his legs out between the two seats in front of him. Glancing at Tanner Henry he noticed the young man was staring at his hands.

“TH.”

Vin smiled. Like many Rangers before him, Vin saw the smile of a man who wanted to be loved. Loved by him. “Just spit it out, Tanner.”

“I’d like to move to my own space. And… I really don’t want to be the head of Computer Forensics. I’m a sniper. A damn good sniper. Trained by you and Major Wentworth. Got two years of college, so far. Want to finish my degree.”

“He’s good at both, Falcon.”

The voice of Red Horse brought Vin to an upright position.

“Shit!” Vin and TH yelped.

“Sorry brother. Thought you saw me here. This man is a sniper. But anyone can learn to shot a gun. I watched him at the computer. He was tapping in anything and it was coming up. Computer science … that is where you need to be, Houston.”

“And Falcon, my brother, he and Cory would be good lovers. Both educated men, yet behave like kids. Both like chocolate. One likes chocolate brownies. One likes chocolate covered bananas.”

“Houston knows a female Ranger. A sniper. She is damn good. She’s being discharged next month. Interview her. You’re going to need another one anyway.”

“What about that plant, Red Horse? What about the heads? Can this place ever be used for anything?”

“Ask Dr. Graham about the heads. You have to stay on that walkway or you will be boxed up and on the wall. The plant will be gone once you put down the flares. Not much is left of it now.”

“If the heads can be taken out and that oxygen removed… the place will be clean. Well except for Palmer, that is.”

“Palmer will be there forever. That door is sealed. He is frozen in time, just as Jasper is. He killed a lot of men here. More than what is buried out there. More than those heads show.”

“Red Horse. Why is there a glow inside that bank vault? Does that endanger the building above it? The stores on that ground floor?”

Red Horse stared at this brother. There is a glow inside the vault?

Aaron! Need you here.

“What’s up…?” Aaron started, blinking at the hovering image.

“Tell Red Horse about the glow in the safe,” Vin ordered.
“I’m not sure it was coming from the Tall Man. There appeared to be lights over the shelves to illuminate the artifacts on the shelves. There was a glow, but I couldn’t see him. He was around the corner inside another vault. A vault inside the vault.”

“The Safety Deposit vault?” Houston asked. “Those are usually on the right when you go into a bank vault. Was there an iron like gate?”

“There was! I wondered what it was for,” Aaron responded.

“The vault is encased in several feet of thick cement. The artifacts can’t ever be retrieved,” Vin began. “Could we wall in the visual part of the vault with cement?”

“Red Horse … the building above it will be used for apartments and the ATF. How can we be sure the Tall Man is not a threat?”

“Let me check with others here, my brother. We have a contractor who built a skyscraper. You are worried about the heads. There is a solution for them. The ones you found … are ones killed this year. All others were burned in the big furnace.”

“You turn off the oxygen?” Houston asked blushing as Vin turned hard blue eyes on him.

“I… ah, heard your thoughts and did some research … sir.”

“He is correct, Falcon. Turn off the oxygen. If it does not get turned on in 24 hours it will automatically go into a self-destruct mode. They drop down onto a trough that leads to the furnace. The furnace starts automatically. In a matter of hours they are ash.”

“Aaron. Please get Rockland and Graham here. This is a decision I don’t want to make alone.”

Aaron took off and a grinning Red Horse left.

Vin slid a hand down Houston’s thigh to his crouch. “Yes, I will find you another residence. Tonight… your bare ass will meet my black belt. And yes, my favorite sniper, you are now a computer man. Get me the name of the female sniper.”

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Vin Tanner sat with his back against the pilot’s seat. His eyes watched the conversation between Jeffrey Rockland and David Graham.

“So… decision time,” Tanner said softly.

Jeffrey Rockland looked up at his high school friend. “There is no way we can retrieve them without endangering more lives. We definitely cannot take photos of them. I would not want to show a picture of one to a grieving wife or parent.”

“Agents Dunne and VanClef found lists of all who have been killed here. Whether sold for food or buried in the field. With those lists, and the wallets and passports .. that should help us to identify the bodies. The sold parts are gone,” Graham replied.

“I, for one,” David Graham continued, “Would not want to be notified that my son was killed, cut up and sold for dinner.”

Looking at both men, Vin responded, “Yet there is no way we can stop that.”

“Are we unanimous in burning the heads?” Vin asked quietly.
Rockland and Graham extended their hands to Tanner. In a tight clasp, the trio said, “We are.”

Special Agent Vin Tanner was sitting on a stone bench in a front alcove of the main lobby. His feet were propped up on the bench, he back to the wall. Red Horse was sitting just beyond his boots, invisible to everyone except Tanner.

“Captain!”

Vin looked up into the face of the fireman who had volunteered to step into the head room.

“I heard a noise and went into the pantry. The oxygen level is way done.”

“It is. Sit.”

Vin held in a smile. The man was looking where Red Horse was sitting. He wasn’t sure he saw something there or not. Finally he sat.

“Dr. Graham, Jeffrey Rockland and myself made the decision when we discovered the heads that are there … are only for this year. All previous ones have been destroyed. Palmer has built in a self-destruct system. When the oxygen is turned off and isn’t turned on again after 24 hours, it automatically begins the process. The furnace automatically ignites. The heads roll down a trough and slowly feed into the flames.”

The fireman’s head dropped to his chest. Quietly he spoke. “I know it is the best way. I know there is no way to take something like that to a family. It just seems wrong … yet I know it isn’t. He’s already dead. It’s another nightmare that is going to haunt me. One I can’t share with anyone.”

“You can share it with me. You can share with Dr. Graham. David Graham has seen what people do to other people. Things we never read about. I’ve seen things in the Middle East that would terrify the parents of my Rangers.”

“Once this is done. Once the plant is dead. Maybe, just maybe, this castle can be used for something beautiful.”

“I already heard a couple of agents say they’d like to use it for a wedding. Ceremony in the lobby here. Reception on the top floor … top layer of the cake.”

“I would think it would be opposite. Ceremony on the top… reception down here. Interesting input. Thank you.”

“Your sniper is rebelling, Falcon,” Red Horse purred. “Can I watch you take him down?”

Can you leave this place? It will be done in the Federal Hotel. I have a sound proof, padded playroom there.

“A black belt on his bare ass. Does he like that?”

At times he does. Tonight, probably not.

“You threatened him. He is worried. But you really aren’t going to do it. I can tell that you like him. He and Iron Horse are your toys now. The blond agent will keep your other Rangers happy. Even Larabee and Wilmington’s love will strengthen … and still Wilmington and his wife will stay strong.
Aaron and TH are special. They will protect you at all costs, even if it means their death.”

Vin Tanner looked up into the concerned face of Agent Houston. Slowly a smile spread across Vin’s face. He watched Houston’s eyes go wide and his head drop.

I will use him as a sniper trainer but also in computers. He has a natural knack for research.

“What about Archer, Houston and Dunne paired as lovers?”

Vin stared at his blood brother.

“You know Falcon, Cory won’t let JD act like a kid. He is one serious dude. Maybe not as lovers but definitely let Archer tell him how he should act now that the kid is an adult.”

Were you always so damn bossy?

“It’s ‘cause I love you bro. Who else is going to tell you like it is? No one.”

-=:==-

Vin collected the agents that were in the pantry earlier. He explained what was happening and why.

“I need at least one of you on each shift throughout the night. We have to make sure no one tries to enter here. It is only four hours in the twenty-four. We don’t know when the furnace will kick in. Or when it will start to happen. The plant is dead. This is the only thing left that must be destroyed.”

“Captain. We think it will happen sooner. When we found the lights blinking before, we had no idea how long that had been happening. Now it is in the stop mode again, it might just kick in to where it was before.”

“Captain!” Houston called, bursting into the pantry. “I was just in the elevator and heard this roar. Another agent and I took the stairs down to the furnace room. Wood from that rack is rolling into an open door. You can see into the thing. It is huge. It is gearing up for something.”

Nodding to the agents, Tanner ordered. “Two of you stay here until the lights go off. Two others man the stairs and the elevator. No one goes down into the furnace room.”

“Yes sir!!”

“Follow me Houston.”

-=:==-

“Hell, Chris. If we don’t get up and get to that castle, we might be fired. What are you staring at?”

Larabee got up from the bed and walked over the picture. “There is a camera there. Tanner and his staff found four cameras in this room. It was being used by some people and putting the videos over a private internet channel.”

“What? Someone has been taking pictures of us!”

Chris spun around as his phone rang. Jogging to where he tossed it, he didn’t recognize the name but it answered it anyway.

“Larabee!”
“This is Trevor Titan. We met in the lobby. I am head of computer security here. Tanner ordered the camera. Some of your numerous lovers … especially from Washington… want to make sure you are still active. The camera only comes on when more than one person comes onto the bed or in the shower. I am the only one who sees the live action. And don’t worry, Wilmington will still have access to you. Tanner wants to make sure your lover continues to get relief from the man he’s loved since high school. Why do you think Wilmington followed you into the Navy? Endured the hardships of SEAL training. Followed you to the police department. You are blind as a bat, Larabee. That man staring at you has loved you since day one.”

Larabee closed his eyes and sunk down into the chair he’d insisted be put in the room. All these years wasted. All these years the love of my life was standing next to me and now … now it’s too late. Too damn late.

-=-=-=-=

Vin Tanner, TH Houston, Terry Blackman and Josiah Sanchez were standing at the top of the tier. They had just done a walk through of every level.

“Gorgeous view from up here, Vin,” Sanchez remarked as he looked through the windows. “You can see in every direction.”

“I think, Captain,” TH started, “we need to put shutters or something on the turret. Might end up with a lot of birds or animals nesting in there.”

“He’s got a point there, Vin,” Blackman concurred. “One of my snipers suggested that too.”

TH was looking at something out in the woods. Vin had his back to the window, his right hand was stroking the hard ridge in Houston’s black jeans.

Captain!

Unzip it. Just enough for the head to come out.

Captain. There are people here.

Pull out your phone and call Larabee. Tell him we are closing up and he and Wilmington don’t need to come in.

TH Houston shivered as he felt a thumb stroke the head of his penis. He pulled out his phone almost dropping it.

“Larabee! TH Houston. Captain Tanner asked me to alert you. We’re closing up here. No need for you and Wilmington to come in.”

“What about tomorrow and the next day? Where?”

Tell him, he’ll be called.

“Captain says you will be called for any meetings, training….

TH closed his eyes as he started to leak. Shit, Captain.

Tell him I will stop in to see him when I get there.

“Captain says he will stop in to see you when he gets back to the hotel. Sorry sir, I don’t know when that will be.” Houston closed his phone and dropped it back into his pockets.
Captain! That man is out there again.

“Terry, Josiah. Would you please collect everyone that is left. Those that are still going to be guarding the place for the next few days. Let’s meet in the dining room.”

Once they were alone, Vin turned the sniper away from the window. Out of nowhere a small baggie was produced. Vin continued to stroke the bulging penis.

“This is in place of the black belt tonight,” Vin stated calmly into shocked eyes.

“Tightened this bag around the head. It will hold what ejects. If it comes off … you will be cleaning up the spray with your tongue.”

TH swallowed. He’d never heard of this kind of punishment. Maybe it wasn’t punishment. Maybe the black belt wouldn’t have been punishment either.

Are you ready?

I hope so….

The kiss was unexpected. His Master sucking his tongue. His knees giving out and yet the kiss continued. His hands held the baggie tight as it filled to capacity. He collapsed onto his Master’s shoulder. What a ride!

“From this point on, Tanner Henry, you will call me Falcon not Master. Though I am still your Master. Before you had no choice in what you were forced to participate in. You were a slave for me to use. Now you can say no or yes when I request your presence. You are now a ‘toy’ to be enjoyed by your Master, not a slave to be used to work my frustrations off on.”

---

“Who called Chris?” Buck asked for the third time.

“What!” Chris barked, jolted back to reality by an invisible slap on his bare butt.

“It was that new sniper, Houston. He said they are closing up the castle. We don’t need to go in. Tanner will call us for any meetings.”

“Okay! Well, I’ve got to get going. Marianne and I are driving up somewhere to look at some property. She wants us to build a house of our own. Though that mansion of her father’s is pretty damn nice.”

Walking over to his clothes Buck, said, “Sure am glad to know we still have it. Love having you fuck me Chris. I’ll call you when I’m dry again.”

---

“Corliss, are you sure you want to pick up all the things at the ranch? Don’t you want to talk it over with Larabee first?”

Joseph had been surprised when Cory insisted they stop at Larabee’s ranch on the way to the mountain. While Michael and Anna got out and walked around the place, he had helped Cory grab his clothes. Now everyone was standing at the fence watching the horses in the pasture, as Archer handed out chocolate covered bananas.

“Uncle Cory! These are really good. Mom! Can we make some of these?” Michael wanted to know
as he devoured his second one.


“I’m set, Jimmy.”

It was Michael who broke the silence as they flew over the mountain lake.

“WOW! It’s beautiful.”

“Jimmy, fly lower,” Corliss ordered. “Need to check out those yellow tubes. Looks like there is gas here. So gas stoves and gas heat is a plus. Swing around by the tents, but land away from them.”

“What do you think, Anna?” Joseph wondered out loud.

“It is beautiful, Joseph. I’ve been all over Europe … but this is incredible. I almost don’t want to build here. Yet I can’t wait until the house is up and I can sit on the wraparound porch.”

Anna watched Joseph. “You miss her, don’t you?”

“Yes. Being here… brings back a lot of memories Catherine and I shared. She was an incredible woman. Forced to live two lives. One was a loveless marriage. The other … our love knew no bounds yet we couldn’t acknowledge it to anyone. I helped birth a son I couldn’t raise. Which is why I look forward to grandchildren I can help rise.”

“You two going to sit there and talk all day?” Jimmy asked. “The rest of us are out here.”

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Falcon.

“Red Horse.”

*It appears I can travel beyond this place. I have just been in Larabee’s room. He is sprawled on the bed naked. Sound as asleep. Unfortunately I couldn’t feel him. Nor did he feel me … but … he is quite the specimen. You know a good place to use him is that office like thing with the little waiting room. You could enlarge that window. Men could watch while he is being enjoyed.*

“You have been watching him? I’m not sure I want you popping up here and there.”

*I have already popped up in the middle of Chief Richman’s meeting with his Elders. Several saw me. I pointed a finger at one until he started to sweat. He ended up confessing he had helped to steal the Tall Man.*

“You got a confession out of one of his Elders?”

“Excuse me, Captain …ah, Falcon,” Houston stammered. “Dr Graham, Mr. Rockland and Sgt Blackman are on the front porch. They’d like to see you.”

Vin smiled at the sniper. “What else?”

“That fireman and I. We, ah, opened up the head room. More than half are gone already. It appears it was close to countdown when you started it again. Now it is in full swing. Less than fifty left to go. He’d like to stay until the place is empty and the furnace turns off.”
“We told Larabee not to come. What is the guard schedule for this place? It needs to be looked after.”

“That’s what the men on the front porch want to discuss with you sir.”

Vin stared back at the sniper. He blocked his mind as he thought about Trevor Titan.

“Do you and Trevor get along? Did you know him before coming here?”

“Sure, I’ve known Trevor for a couple of years.”

“He has a two bedroom apartment. It is fairly big for just one guy.”

“He’s a computer person, Captain. I don’t want to be a computer person.”

Red Horse started laughing. Several agents, still in the lobby, looked around.

“TH. I have already notified Washington … that you will be the Sniper Trainer for all incoming snipers. But … because of your expertise in this other area… you are also our Internet Researcher.”

Vin watched the frown form on his sniper’s face.

“The salary is being split. You will get a weekly salary, paid once a month, as the Sniper Trainer. You will get an hourly wage for the Internet Researcher. You will be informed by email how to set up your electronic online time card. I suggest you open a bank account. Both these salaries will be by electronic transfer.”

Red Horse moved around and stood next to his blood brother.

Quietly TH heard Red Horse say, “You could end up making more with these two than you would ever make on one of them. And, if you are ever wounded or disabled, you could continue to freelance as an internet researcher.”

“How can a ghost know so much?” Houston wanted to know.

Vin looked at TH and back to Red Horse. “I’m late for the meeting on the porch. You tell him, brother.”

---

Special Agent Tanner watched the Fire Department carefully retract the cylinder of oxygen from the hidden compartment under the turret.

Agent Dunne had reprogrammed the room so no one would end up in the furnace if they stepped off the walkway.

The Fire Department dropped a camera down the air vent of the room the plant was in. There was no trace of any green leaves.

Sgt. Terry Blackman took control of security for the castle and the grounds. It would still be many days before the field was clear of bodies.

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Someone had gone through the bathrooms and filled up the paper towel dispensers and the toilet paper. Everything in the pantry was put into the furnace.
The boxes of wallets and passports had been picked up by the FBI. They were now in charge of notifying families and loved ones.

The coral snakes … most had been retrieved by wildlife experts. The pool tables were carefully taken apart and a hundred more snake eggs were found.

The room where the Navy SEAL and others were found was labeled = DANGER! DO NOT ENTER!

All in all, Vin Tanner felt things turned out much better than he first expected. He wondered if he’d ever get a full night’s sleep again.

He had talked to Joseph and discovered that Anna loves the mountain. She wants to get the house up fast and enjoy the land.

“Captain!”

Tanner looked up, surprised to see Agent Wilmington here.

“Every room is cleared and deemed safe … to our knowledge. JD has the security computers set to be seen from the hotel. Anything happens, the ATF guys will know it. The security that Larabee set up will still go until the end of the week.”

“Thanks, Buck. Enjoy your weekend.”

---

Houston and Dunne sat in Aaron’s helicopter. Aaron was in the pilot’s seat watching Agent Tanner talk to Dr. Graham. Only Houston noticed Red Horse ease into the seat next to JD.

Vin opened the co-pilot’s door as he glanced into the back of the helio.

“You guys ready to …” Vin began gawking at Red Horse sitting them grinning at him.

“We’re heading to the hotel. JD, you will be spending the weekend up at Mrs. Hathaway’s on the corner. She is having some problems connecting to a Navy site she works with… and Duke wants an operation set up so he can connect to his siblings.”

“TH. I’ve arranged for you to spend the weekend with Trevor. He needs to show you how the Internet timecard works. It took him a bit to understand it. Wants to make sure you don’t get shortchanged in your salary.”

“Yes sir,” Houston replied curtly.

“Okay, Aaron, take us home!”

As they circled the castle, Aaron asked, “What about the Tall Man, Captain?”

“That Aaron Iron Horse … is a question for another day.”

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Vin leaned against the kitchen counter of the penthouse, coffee in one hand and a doughnut in the other. His eyes followed his son Michael’s antics with Wolf. Wolfman, who was raised in a dysfunctional family, was one of Michael’s best bodyguards.

Hearing a sharp knock on the front door, Vin put his coffee down. Before he could move, Anna was there.

“Agent Houston! Come in. Vin’s in the kitchen. Help yourself to coffee and doughnuts.”

TH moved slowly toward the kitchen. He wasn’t sure how he was going to explain his dilemma to his Captain.

Vin smiled at the sniper. “Grab some coffee and a doughnut… or two, and follow me.”

TH did as he was told. Grabbing a big mug of hot black coffee and three doughnuts, he followed his boss into a room off the kitchen.

Setting the food down, TH surveyed the room. The big round table with a lazy susan took up most of the room. Plus six… eight chairs around it.

“You ended up with Corliss last night,” Vin stated, cutting directly to why his sniper was here.

Tanner Henry choked on his coffee. _Hell, nothing gets by this man._

“Trevor and I aren’t compatible. He is a brain. Has his own company. He and Larabee would be good bed mates. Both would fight each other for domination. JD would love him. They talk the same language. Don’t know if they would work in bed. Though … JD did tell me he learned to suck cocks from an English dude in college. It’s how he got his spending money… scholarships paid tuition but for cash things…. From what he told me that first night we were together … some Fraternities paid him big bucks for his expertise at their parties.”

“John Daniel Dunne!?” Vin gasped in astonishment staring at his sniper. _How did he not pick that up from JD when he met the kid in Boston._

“TH. How did you end up with Corliss?”

“I was pacing the halls last night and found Cory sitting outside the Red Feather office. He wanted in that room Colt said might be a daycare center. Except they would need two exits, so that probably won’t work for that. Anyway. Cory wanted into that space. So I picked the lock. He said it was perfect for his office. He’s not sure he wants to be in the same building as the Tall Man, even though it would be at the opposite end.”
“We found a couple of mattresses stacked in there and sat and talked. It has a bathroom with a mini shower, commode and a sink. He lived in his office in Austin. The outer place would have a couple of chairs, coffee and a mini fridge. He doesn’t allow food where he works.”

“Did you two come together?” Vin asked as he sipped his coffee. From the thoughts he was picking up, Tanner Henry Houston and Corliss Archer had a real connection last night.

“Best connection I’ve ever had from a partner … other than you. You send me to the moon just by touching me. But last night … hell, Captain, until last night I didn’t know what stars and fantasy were. Maybe he and Larabee had that connection but he has backed away from Chris. He had Jimmy stop at Larabee’s yesterday and he picked up all his stuff.”

“Larabee has a problem with ‘educated men,’ ” Tanner agreed. “I noticed that yesterday at the castle. Chris’ whole demeanor changed when he heard Corliss was an architect.”

“There is a huge storage room for that place. Corliss has already got his easel set up in the main room. Now that he’s been to the mountain, he saw some changes he wanted to make to the treehouses.”

“I told him I’d ask you about the storage since it already has some kind of bunks built into it. Could it be made into a mini apartment?”

“It has bunks in the storage area?” Tanner rasped. *How did they miss that on the walk through.*

“They are pretty cool. Wider than a normal bunk bed. Each one has a reading light. And … they have curtains you can pull to close you off. Kind of like a Navy bunk on a sub.”

“Okay. Go see Colt Hammer in his office. Explain this to him and he will set it in motion.”

“Can I live with Cory, sir?” TH asked hopefully.

“TH… you can live with anyone you want… except me,” Vin Tanner responded standing.

Walking over to his sniper, Vin tilted his chin up with two fingers and lightly kissed the man.

“You are your own man. You can live with and love anyone who is agreeable with you. You can refuse sex from anyone who wants you. Including me.”

“I would never refuse you, Captain,” TH gushed, his tongue licking his lips his Captain had just kissed. “Maybe when I’m dead … I could refuse. Probably not even then.”

“That night after that battle. When I couldn’t wake up from that nightmare … you held me … kissed me. Brought me back into the world of the living. Told me I could be loved like an equal. Not used like an animal. Corliss has been hurt too. We shared a lot last night. He told me things he’d never shared with anyone before. That’s why he is afraid to stay with Chris. He thinks Larabee will get more aggressive. Cory’s already been used as a sex object. He doesn’t want to go that route again. He wants an equal.”

Staring into his coffee, TH rasped, “I understand now … why you put me into Internet Research. I spent an hour searching the web last night for something Cory needed. Found what he needed and a whole lot more.”

Looking up into the sparkling blue eyes of his Captain, TH continued. “We found this cool floor plan. He’d like you to stop in and have a look.”
“Tell me about it? Can you?” Vin asked with a grin. He’d never seen Tanner Henry Houston so excited about another person before. He and Cory were definitely meant for each other.

“Just a sec…” TH mumbled, pulling out his phone and calling Cory to see if it was okay.

“Yeah. He said it would be good if you knew ahead of time,” TH answered.

Vin watched TH move the plate the doughnuts had been on, and the coffee mugs into a formation.

“The living room … great room is across the front of the house here.” TH explained moving his finger in front of the plate.

“The kitchen is behind the living room which opens into a big dining area, but also has a breakfast bar. Now the neat thing is … the bedrooms are separated. On one side is the Master suite… bedroom, bath, walk in closet plus a study for you. And a smaller room that could be used as a nursery. On the other side of the kitchen-dining area are four bedrooms down and two guest suites up.”

“Plus! I found a really cool idea for the bunk house we’d both like you to look at.”

Vin stretched out, his hands folded on his belt, he grinned at his sniper.

“Captain?” TH muttered looking at the grin on Tanner’s face.

TH threw up his hands. “Okay! I understand now. I… I just didn’t understand you could actually have a real job researching the internet.”

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As Special Agent Vin Tanner stepped into the penthouse elevator, his phone rang.

“What’s up Colt?”

“Chief Richman is here with some City people. You aren’t going to believe this, but he wants to move the whole safe.”

“Are you kidding me? That safe was built first and the building around it. I’m on my way now.”

TH held in his grin as he heard his Captain growl.

“You smirking there, soldier?” Vin groused turning toward the man.

“Me sir?! No sirrr….” Houston responded, biting his cheek.

“Good thing we are almost there, I’d take that smile off your face.”

“It’s always good to have a smile taken off the face by you sir,” TH responded as the door opened.

Vin turned, lightly punching Houston in the gut. As the sniper doubled over faking a groan, Vin tapped the Penthouse button and stepped out.

“WAIT! CAPTAIN!” TH shouted as the door closed in front of him and sped back up to the penthouse level.

“SHIT! You cannot outsmart that man!” Tanner Henry Houston roared.
“Maggie,” Vin said quietly into his phone. “Send a message to agents that live in the city. Captain needs backup at Jasper Building. Wear ATF vests. Park in hotel garage... Bring mega flashlights.”

Got it. I shall alert Parking Security to the incoming agents.

Walking out into the main lobby, Vin first noticed the huge marble mosaic on the floor in the middle of the room. It never failed to amaze him. Most walked over it without even noticing.

Vin observed Colt in conversation with the City of Denver employees. His manager was shaking his head apparently agreeing with their decision. Aaron was leaning against the wall with a frown watching Chief Richman and a man in an expensive three-piece suit argue. And Vin was about to get into the middle of it all.

Aaron! That’s not the Chief, is it?

Aaron Iron Horse jerked, looking around. Spotting his Captain he took off on a run toward the man. The security alarm went off as he passed through an arch from the office section into the main lobby.

Security guards appeared out of nowhere. A whistle from Tanner stopped them.

“Georgie! Have security turn off the alarm for that gate. Just the red lights. A lot of agents will be going back and forth through there today.”

“On it, Sir!”

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“Aaron. Stand back here and look, really look at the man you think is Chief Richman.”

“I’m looking. What am I … he’s too short! Captain. He is way too short. Larabee just walked out. Grandfather was taller at the castle… but how? How is this possible?”

“Why would the light be on inside the vault? Everyone is dead, aren’t they?”

“The Legend! No, no, they wouldn’t.” Aaron moaned as he turned to face the wall “Every hundred years the case is emptied and a new tall man is put in. If he is not found and rescued, he dies there.”

“Then we’d better rescue him,” Vin stated calmly as he pulled his phone and called the Denver Hazmat Unit.

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Tanner noticed right away that the pole was no longer locked in place on the huge safe.

“Vin!” JD chirped. “Where are those warriors that were guarding the door?”

“Buck. Take three agents and check the offices down the front. Though I have a feeling I know where they are.”

Josiah Sanchez looked at his friend. “A sacrifice inside? Or perhaps they tried to stop the transfer. Vin. I researched the history of this legend. The original tall man was seven feet tall. All the minerals, stones on the esophagus relate to him and him only. The composition changes only if they replace him with another.”
Tanner stared at the former priest, now ATF agent. A man he totally trusted.

“Are you saying whenever they replaced the body years back… that changed the composition of the gems?” Vin rasped in disbelief.

“Yes. The legend that it caused people turning to stone only started sixty years ago. Sunlight isn’t the catalyst. It is the breaking down of the body inside that changes the stones.”

“Which means, the warriors are inside as they were picked by Chief Richman to guard this place.”

“Vin,” Buck Wilmington barked. “Everything down here is clear. Electricity is off for the whole block. Hazmat is just now arriving.”

Vin pulled his beeper out of his pocket as the Fire Chief walked in.

“Tanner.”

“It’s Joseph. I’m on my way over. Don’t do anything until I get there.”

“Dad. When you and Catherine explored the mountain, did Chief Richman show you the Tall Man?”

A voice behind the group barked, “NO!”

They turned to see an extremely good looking, older man in a three piece suit approach.

“Vin. The Tall Man was in a cave away from sunlight. Away from the atmospheric changes. The body inside was never to be replaced.”

“Dad…,” Vin started. Only to be cut off by his father.

“I’m here, because Chief Richman’s house keeper called me. His house is a shambles. Front door bashed in. Police are there now. If he is inside this safe,” Joseph said motioning to the safe. “He is on oxygen. Several canisters were stolen from a clinic just outside the reservation.”

“Joseph Bebee,” a deep baritone voice said.

Joseph turned to stare at the man wearing a helmet. Glancing at the name on his black jacket, Joseph grinned. “You always wanted to be a fireman.”

“I did. What do we have here, Joseph?”

Joseph looked at Vin, who looked at the Chief.

“We have a possible life threatening situation. Both for those inside this safe and all of us. Catherine…. Vin’s mother and I have explored Lookout Mountain a number of times. With Chief Richman, we learned the history of this esophagus. The original occupant was over seven feet all. He was Russian, Danish and Comanche. His coloring was both dark and light. The gems and stones on the coffin.. esophagus are native to Russia and the U.S. However, they interact with the composition of the body as it decomposes inside. Whoever it was that decided to open this thing and remove that body, changed history. It does not feed off light as Palmer thought. It feeds off the body inside. But… as it does, it also projects what it is doing inside outside.”

Agent Sanchez sighed. He picked up the story. “As it mummifies the corpse, it projects that process to anyone or anything within its parameter.”
“Yes,” Joseph responded. “Turning off the electricity will do nothing. However, it will slow the process down considerably. “

Aaron moved up to stand next to his Captain. “I don’t think my grandfather, Chief Richman, would want people to die trying to save him.”

Joseph looked at his fireman friend. “Your decision, Hank.”

“I think we need to try. If the warriors are in there, their families would want closure. If the Chief is on oxygen, then he has a chance. Our hazmat suits have withstood every hazard so far. My men are ready to try. Plus, I would say to turn the electricity on. We will need more than our helmet lights in that small place.”

Vin pulled out his phone and instructed his computer to turn the electricity for the quadrant back on.

As two firemen moved in, Vin and Aaron, suddenly stared at each other.

*Captain! They built a special case for it. Where would it be?*

*The castle. You walked through the place. Where? Aaron. Where?*

*Wilmington was on patrol one night…*

“Bucklin!” Vin barked, moving out into the covered walkway that ran the length of the lower level.

“When you were patrolling, did you see any kind of a large aluminum container. Have to be taller than Larabee.”

It was Houston who responded. “Yes! Near where I saw the strange man standing. I thought he came out of it. Looks like a canoe case only taller.”

Vin grinned at his sniper. *You’re going to get to ride on a fire truck.*

The fire chief turned and shouted orders, then smiled at Houston. “Son. How’d you like to ride in a fire truck and show these men where that case is?”

“BACK UP! BACK UP! COMING OUT WITH TWO! Paramedics! Need chilling blankets, hurry.”

Wilmington shouted, “MOVE OUT OF THE WAY YOU, TURDS! MAKE SPACE! MAKE SPACE!”

One of the hazmat crew looked toward his men saying, Need a bolt cutters. Hurry.”

“Bolt cutters?” Tanner questioned.

“The Chief is chained in a standing position. Looks like the original guy was that way too. The coffin is open. The top is facing the wall. My guess is someone opened it before the Chief was brought in. Getting the thing into a case… is a whole ‘other matter.”

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“IT’S HERE!” Houston shouted as firemen and State Police came around the back of the castle.

“Sounds like something is inside,” Terry Blackman ventured. “Anyone have ideas?”
“What’s left of the original corpse?” Houston asked.

The group looked at him.

“Well, it’s sacred. They would have to keep it.”

“Okay people!” The fireman in charge yelped. “Let’s get it strapped on the ladder truck. Houston! Jameson! You two are riding … standing up next to this thing. It will be strapped down. Still… it needs an escort.”

Aaron knelt next to his rescued grandfather who was strapped on a stretcher.

“Grandfather. Grandfather.”

Chief Richman’s eyes blinked open. The eyes scanned the people around him and landed on Joseph.

“Joseph.”

Joseph Bebee moved through the men and stood next to the Chief he’d gotten to know.

“Joseph. The original must be replaced. Chained in the same position. Only then will the stoning be stopped.”

“They found it at the castle. It is being brought in.”

“Your son. I need to see your son.”

Joseph stood up and looked around. “Vincent!”

Tanner spun around almost knocking over Dunne and Wilmington. He hadn’t been called Vincent in years.

Son. Chief Richman needs you now.

“Excuse me. Excuse me,” Tanner said pushing through a variety of people.

Joseph nodded to the Chief, as Vin dropped to one knee. “Chief.”

“Do you know Four Hands?” Richman rasped, pulling his oxygen mask off.

Startled at the question, Tanner mumbled. “Yes.”

“Do you know his private number?”

Vin pulled his phone out and pulled up a list that required a password. Whispering the first four digits, he waited.

“Good. Call him. Tell him the coffin has been found. Contents replaced. He will pick it up and take it back to where it belongs.”

“Can he come here? I can get it to the mountain.”

“His choice, Joseph’s son,” the Chief rasped as oxygen was replaced.

Still looking at Joseph’s son, the Chief smiled. You will have three sons. Let Joseph enjoy them.
Spoil them. He grieved not being able to help raise you.

Vin Tanner sat back on his heels and stared after the man. He shivered when someone touched his shoulder. Looking up, his blue eyes met the blue eyes of his father.

“What?” Joseph asked. “What did he say that disturbed you?”

Vin realized then, that only he heard the words of the Chief in his head.

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Nathan Jackson stood with three other ATF EMTs around a tall unusual coffin.

“This damn well better be the first and last time I chain a bag of bones back into a coffin,” Jackson groused.

A man in a wheelchair wearing odd shaped gloves instructed the group how to replace the ‘man’ back in the coffin. The aluminum cover was in place over the precious stones on the esophagus.

Four hands continued to give strict instructions on how the esophagus was to be closed. What order the latches needed to be locked down. When it was done, the wheelchair bound man motioned everyone but Joseph and Vin out.

“Four hands,” Vin started. “There is no way you can get this back into the cave.”

“One of your Rangers, my friend. The one you call Blackfoot because he was always walking through the mud. He has answered the call. He has spelunkers who will replace it. Once inside the first cave, the covering can be taken off. By then, the gems will have reunited with the original bones. Don’t ask me how I know, I just do.”

Joseph watched the man. He had socks on his feet yet they weren’t shaped like feet. His eyes went wide as he realized what he saw.

“Dad,” Vin said softly. “It is why he is called Four Hands.”

“About the man in there. And the artifacts,” Tanner began only to be cut off by Joseph and Four Hands.

Joseph nodded to the other.

“Everything that is now in there will be sealed. Welded shut. Never to be opened again. I suggest you cut the electricity to that whole office. Make it impossible to be used. I have no idea, my friend, if opening it again will do harm. But I wouldn’t want to chance it.”

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Three days later, Joseph Bebee held a news conference in front of the Jasper Building as ATF agents moved files and equipment into upper floors. An ATF helicopter earlier had stopped traffic as it lifted off the parking garage’s top tier with an odd shaped aluminum tube hanging under it.

Chief Richman and his two Warriors sat in a parked car watching the helicopter leave.

“Chief. Do you think it will be safe back in the mountain?”

“Four Hands has found deep cave spelunkers. They will find a spot no amateur will find. He explained everything to them. He and Tanner trust these four. The Tall Man will be safe again.”
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