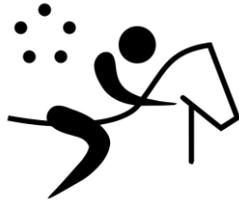


7 X 5 X 15: BOOK TWO  
*Book Two takes place ten years after Book One*



CHAPTER ONE

Marissa Crane squared the pile of papers in her hands and shoved them into a folder, wondering when society would truly become paperless. Stacking the folder to the right of her keyboard, she realized that although this part of the job was mundane, the benefits of this media internship were extremely worthwhile. Where else would a single girl have access to so many physically attractive men?

Her friends were already jealous and this was only the beginning; covering the Olympic trials would take many months and Marissa would see these (mostly) young men regularly for a long time. Oh, the women, too, of course, and she really did admire their accomplishments, but what red-blooded American woman could ignore all these fit men? She hoped the internship with the news station would carry through both the trials and the actual Olympics in Rio de Janeiro.

She chuckled. Her mom's reaction to the internship was funny. All she said after closing her hanging jaw was, "You could meet Mr. Right!" Marissa snorted to herself. Leave it to her mom to come up with that arcane thought. Right now, "Mr. I Can Stomach Your Bad Habits For a Few Months" sounded pretty good. She glanced at her watch. She could see Happy Hour from here.

Marissa noted that there was only one more interview for the day and lifted her eyes when she heard the field office door squeak open. She fought to keep a pleasant smile because, like her mother, Marissa's jaw wanted to drop as soon as she saw the young man that entered.

He slipped in like a cat – no, not a cat, she immediately corrected, more like a mountain lion. A kind mountain lion... Marissa bit her lower lip and ducked her head in confused embarrassment. "*A kind mountain lion? What the heck does that mean?*"

Mentally scolding herself, she checked that her closed mouth formed a nice smile before looking up again. When she did just that, her body froze in stunned bewilderment when she found her gaze locked with the biggest, bluest eyes she'd ever seen.

Seconds ticked by.

"Excuse me?" he said after glancing aside.

Marissa forgot to blink as she sank into the deep lakes that were his eyes. His voice had a raspy quality that ran a shiver up her spine. Marissa finally did blink when she realized she was staring. A warm flush bloomed on her cheeks and she aborted the urge to shuffle papers until the sudden flutter in her tummy settled. She noticed wariness edging his eyes and an adorable furrow developing between his eyebrows. Her mouth dried. "*Get a grip, woman!*"

"Yes. Yes. Um." Was that her voice? "*Come on, Marissa! Speak! Use your words!*" She affixed her smile and grabbed the edge of her desk to keep her hands still. "You're interviewing?" she squeaked. She cleared her throat. "I mean, you're here to talk? I mean, interview?" She sighed, gave up on getting control of her mutinying body and rolled her eyes with a groaned sigh.

Regrouping, she took a breath and pointedly stacked her hands, one on top of the other, on the desk top before meeting those amazing azure pools again. Amusement sparkled there like sunlight on a mountain lake. She forced herself to hold her business-like smile. "Sorry. Long day," she managed. "You are here for an interview, correct? Mister . . ." She glanced at the remaining file to her left. "Tanner?"

"Yes ma'am. You can call me Vin."

Normally, a line like that lacked the "ma'am" and carried an "I bet you'd like to get to know me!" attitude but this young man oozed sincerity from every pore. It was a distraction and, frankly, quite unlike the arrogant pride she'd seen these past weeks.

"Alrighty, then, Vin. Please have a seat. Mr. Duggan will be done in a few minutes." "*Alrighty then? When have I EVER used that phrase?*" She cleared her throat. "Can I get you some water?" "*... and help you out of that shirt?*" Marissa held the smile on her face while the burn of her blush intensified.

"No, but thanks." He smiled.

Ignoring her suddenly heated face, Marissa forced her body to move and pushed to her feet, indicating a chair against the wall by extending one arm. She knocked over a small container of pens on the high counter. "Oh shit," she breathed, then, realizing what she said, felt her burning cheeks elevate to nova

levels. "Oh, damn. I mean . . . oh hell!" Scrabbling for the pens, Marissa couldn't believe her mouth's refusal to stop babbling like a teenager. "I. Am. Sorry." She forced out between her teeth after making a point to unlock her eyes with his and focus on the mess. The young man's chuckling did not help at all, and he continued to help until they corralled the last pen.

Marissa whispered embarrassed thanks and got a short nod of acknowledgement. Vin Tanner then wandered to the lobby chair after turning a small circle, examining every corner of the small waiting area. Marissa took the opportunity to glance in his file and unscramble her brain.

Vincent M. Tanner, just 23 years old, Modern Pentathlon.

"Really?" Marissa's brow arched as she tried to remember what exactly was in a Pentathlon – *"Didn't that Kardashian guy do that? No, that was Decathlon – ten events. This is five events."*

Her thoughts were interrupted when the interview room door opened, allowing some laughter from within to leak into the lobby. Then her boss, Mr. Duggan, escorted a wiry girl through the reception area.

*"Janice Piper – long jumper,"* Marissa recalled, relieved her brain cells worked again.

"Thank you, Janice," Mr. Duggan said in his low, full voice. "I'm sure we will see more of you soon! Good luck."

After only one week of this job, Marissa recognized a wash out when she heard one. Tony Duggan's job was to gather background on potential Olympic stars for the on-air television profiles. Marissa was beginning to appreciate the art of uncovering the handful of gems that would get America cheering and boost broadcast ratings. Duggan could put an award-winning spin on a dead mouse. He really had a knack the job, and she saw the journalistic wheels in his eyes chug into overdrive the moment they focused on Vin Tanner.

Unperturbed, Tanner looked up and returned the evaluating gaze.

The camera would love this pentathlete. The softly worn jeans were relaxed yet snug in all the right places and the button-down western style shirt would be a joke on anyone else. The clean, casual cowboy look, from the dusty boot tips to crown of his untamed hair, worked for him in every way possible. Marissa prayed he wouldn't fall victim to the shaved-head style so popular these days. Every part of him screamed "outdoorsman" and physically, he was made to market sportswear.

Duggan must have seen that from the start, but aside from all that, there was something special about this young athlete that even she could see. She wondered what was in Duggan's private files, which held reports from his many agents in the field. The get to this lobby, there had to be some kind of "buzz" surrounding Tanner.

Marissa vowed to read what she could, and soon.

"Vin Tanner." Duggan extended his arm and Vin accepted the handshake without hesitation. "I'm Tony Duggan with the network. I've heard some interesting things about you."

"That's why I'm here?"

Duggan chuckled. "Yes, that's why you're here. Come with me." He turned and was leading the way into the small, makeshift studio when Marissa spoke.

"Mr. Duggan? Since Mr. Tanner is the final interview for the day, may I listen in?" Marissa ignored the glow in her cheeks; at least her vocal cords, again connected with her brain, managed to come up with a coherent sentence.

"Sure," Duggan said. "Just lock the lobby door and close the studio door after you're inside."

"Thank you, sir." Marissa edged around the desk and walked to the office door, locking it with a quick twist of her wrist. When she turned to follow them, she looked up and saw that Tanner had paused in the studio doorway. "*He looks scared,*" she realized, but the cool, serene blue of before replaced the fear that quickly crossed his eyes. His eyes then flicked up to hers and she swore he blushed. Then, he ducked his head and followed Tony into the studio without a backward glance.

Marissa wondered if she imagined the whole thing. She stopped in the studio doorway and listened as Tony introduced the camera man, and then his personal assistant, Davy, whose job was to document the interview timeline.

"Have a seat." Mr. Duggan indicated a tall stool set against an off white wall with the station logo in the center.

The cameraman checked the lighting and got the camera rolling as Tanner cautiously perched on the stool and glanced around. His face was unreadable but his eyes were bright and alive. Marissa looked at the monitor image – yes, the camera loved this face.

Tony sat in a sling-type chair across from his subject and opened a file in his lap. "So, Vin. Oh, may I call you Vin?"

"Yes, sir."

"Modern Pentathlon. Quite an unusual category. How did you come to choose that discipline?"

Vin flashed a nervous smile before speaking. "It happened to have elements of things I am familiar with, that I grew up with. Except for fencing. I started learning that one about six years ago."

Tony glanced at the file. "Six years ago – that would make you 17 when you started fencing?"

"Sixteen, actually. After I started high school."

"Why fencing? Wasn't swimming, running, shooting and riding horses enough?"

Marissa only now appreciated the skill Tony possessed. The way he asked the question made it sound as if he was speaking to his best friend. She smiled when she realized his voice made her relax but when she looked to his subject, she frowned in puzzlement. Tanner's eyes were, again, tinged in wariness.

"I, um . . . I'm not sure I can tell you."

Tony's brow quirked with interest; the comment hung there like a challenge. "It's okay, think about it for a minute until you find the words."

Vin ducked his head and shook it, his tawny hair an unruly ripple. He nervously massaged the back of his neck. "No, it's not that," he said while studying the floor. Then he raised his head, dropped his hand to his lap and sat up straight. "It's just that I'm not used to talking about my family. They're pretty private guys."

There was a rough quality to Tanner's voice and his words were anything but tentative. His strength of character exploded on the monitor when he spoke. Marissa saw the cameraman focus on Tanner's eyes for a moment. America would eat this kid up.

Tony's chuckle intended to put Tanner at ease, but there was little change in Vin's body language.

"I have to say, that's refreshing," Tony said, "but there are things in this file that fascinate me, Vin. You're an athlete I cannot figure out."

Vin blinked, surprised. "What's to figure out?"

"As a reporter, I'm curious. I can't figure out what drives you. Why you want to do this, why you compete at all. And honestly, from what I've read, you do not look anything like I pictured." Tony closed the file and tipped his head as he regarded Tanner. "I purposely avoid looking at photos prior to these interviews and I have to tell you that after reading about you, you do not look anything like I pictured in my head."

Tanner's features softened and a glint of amusement sparkled in his eyes. "What did you expect?"

"Definitely not someone that looks as innocent as you do."

To her amazement, Vin smiled. She expected embarrassment, anger or even a challenge. Marissa perked up. What was in that file, exactly?

"You've had a hard life," Tony continued.

"Some would say it started out that way, yes," Vin nodded, shifted slightly and looked pensive. "I guess my reluctance comes from wanting to protect my family like they have protected me."

Whoa. Marissa blinked, and then vowed to get her hands on that file. Many athletes at this level had publicity agents and looked for exposure. Tony tracked around the issue but Marissa knew he'd get back to that statement.

"No one seems to know much about your team. Coaches, I should say. It's quite a staff you have at your disposal."

The smile that statement wrought caused Marissa to tingle all over. She heard a low cough from Duggan's assistant as he shifted in his seat. Was he blushing?

"They're my family," Vin replied.

"I do hear that a lot, but it's not unexpected considering –"

"No, you don't understand." Tanner's voice strengthened with conviction. "They *are* my family. They were before I started training. I've known them, well, pretty much all my life. That's probably why you haven't heard of them. They aren't professional sport coaches."

Even Tony seemed taken aback at the statement. "They aren't professionals?"

Vin shook his head, smiling, and his entire frame curved slightly as tension drained away. This was a subject he loved, Marissa realized.

"No. They've saved my life more than once. And my brother's life."

Tony glanced at the thin folder. "You have an adopted brother. You're adopted."

"Yes."

"Do you know anything about your blood relatives?"

"No, my mother died when I was about five. I don't remember much about her except that she told me to remember I would always be a Tanner. That's why I never changed my name."

"To . . . Larabee? As in Christopher Larabee? Your adoptive father?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's unusual for a single man to adopt one child, let alone two."

"Buck Wilmington adopted JD, not Chris. JD's not related to me in any way but we're brothers just the same."

"Larabee and Wilmington are listed as two of your coaches along with Ezra Standish and Patrice Naylor. Your team also includes Nathan Jackson as your personal trainer and Josiah Sanchez as your advisor? Not many athletes have an advisor."

Vin smiled again. "Well, we couldn't really think of a title for Josiah. He does a little of everything. He keeps all of us centered. Kinda like a spiritual advisor, I guess."

"I see. And Patrice Naylor is your fiancée, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

Marissa issued a sigh of regret along with Tony's assistant, Davy. They glanced at each other, embarrassed.

Tony closed the folder and placed it in his lap, resting his hands on top. Leaning back into the sling chair, he looked directly at Vin.

"I am very curious as to why you have such a team. From what I've heard from my agents on the field, you are a tight-knit bunch."

"Like I said, we're family."

"How exactly did that come about?"

The crew remained mesmerized as Vin Tanner told the tale of how Chris Larabee's ATF team rescued two boys and saved them from a life of homelessness. Marissa hugged herself at the end, warmed by the entire story.

"But they are not with the ATF any more, are they?"

"Not anymore, no."

"I heard you were kidnapped not long after being adopted by Chris."

Vin nodded. "That's true. I was missing for 2 years."

Marissa gasped. "*Seriously?*" she thought, horrified.

"Tell me about it."

Tanner chewed the corner of his lower lip for a second before speaking, "I was about 8 years old. Chris was driving us home one night and hit a deer. Someone took me from the truck while Chris was unconscious. I ended up with a drug dealer in a northern Colorado. He kidnapped me to keep his sister company. Chris and the guys found me."

The brief summary had more holes than a truck load of Swiss cheese and Marissa was surprised Tony did not follow up. By the matter-of-fact way Vin spoke, Marissa figured a lot of counseling made it possible for him to live with that part of his life. She thought he was finished and was shocked when he added more.

"Then the dealer's partner tried to kill me to keep me from testifying against him, but Chris protected me. All of them protected me. I would be dead if it wasn't for them."

Tony waited a few seconds to make sure Vin was done. "You were lucky they were in law enforcement."

He shrugged. "I 'spect."

Marissa blinked, mentally rehashing the clipped summary. To have survived that and thrive; she looked at him with newfound awe.

"But most of them quit within a year of your return."

Tanner gave a silent shrug accented with a crooked grin that made Marissa's body tingle. "That's true."

"Why?"

The following span of silence stretched should have been uncomfortable, but Marissa found her entire attention drawn to the ripples of expression that crossed the young athlete's features. She glanced at the camera man and saw the

subtle motions of his focusing on Tanner's face; he saw it too, as the slightly uncomfortable set to the subject's body tensed.

Marissa realized that Vin Tanner wasn't upset about the question; it was as if he never really thought about it before and doing so now, in front of strangers and in front of a camera, was far enough out of his backyard to trigger a fight-or-flight response. When he finally spoke, his guileless eyes were oddly shuttered.

"I . . . I don't know." He stuttered so miserably Marissa had to fight the urge to gather him up protectively. "I'm sure my dad getting hurt had a lot to do with it. Looking back, anyway."

Tony noticed the subject's uncomfortable shift and rose, offering his hand and a pasted on smile that reminded Marissa of a fighter finding a weak spot in the opponent. "Well, it looks like we're out of time, Mr. Tanner," he said as he shook Vin's hand, who looked both relieved and disturbed. "I'd love to follow your progress. Will you meet with me again?"

"Uh, sure. Josiah – um, Mr. Sanchez – knows my schedule before I do. Arrange it through him?" He stepped back, a bit shaky on his legs.

"I will do that. Thank you for your time, Vin. I really appreciate it and I will be following your competitions." Tony nodded to the door. Vin rose and almost bolted through the studio door like a spooked horse.

He must have realized how he appeared because as he reached the outside door, he paused, then turned with an apologetic smile. "Um, sorry about . . ." He waved his arm toward the studio. "I have issues about closed places without windows. Can we meet in the open next time?"

"Sure, Mr. Tanner. Whatever you need. We'll talk soon."

Marissa stopped at the studio entrance to watch the short exchange before Tony release Vin out the lobby door. She swore she saw relief wash over Vin's face when he stepped out into the open. He took off at a strong jog.

Used to Tony's abrupt style, she was surprised that he watched Vin until he was out of sight before closing the door and engaging the lock. When he turned and headed toward her, she saw that he was thinking, hard.

"Davy," he snapped as he passed Marissa on his way into the studio. "He's on my list. Find out all you can about that team of his. There's something about that young man –"

"*You can say that again,*" Marissa thought just as Tony turned his sharp eyes on her.

"Help Davy with that research." Then Tony turned to the cameraman. "Well? Does he look as good as I think?"

"He's made by Mattel, sir. Couldn't ask for a more photogenic face – he's a big improvement from Phelps!" The assistant laughed and Tony chuckled.

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"From what I hear, he's destined for the first gold for the U. S. in Pentathlon, ever. A real natural. And get this – he's turned most of what little sponsorship money he been given over to charity. This guy's too good to be true. We need to check him out thoroughly, capiche?"

"Yes, sir," Davy agreed.

"I don't want any surprises. If we feature him, we have to know there aren't any skeletons lurking in his closet. Doubtful, with a team of former law enforcement but maybe there's a reason they quit that won't look good." Tony focused on Davy again. "Thoroughly vet him out."

"We're on it." Davy slipped by Tony and snagged Marissa's elbow. "Let's go, girl. Time for work!"

CHAPTER TWO  
*JOSIAH*

"So," Tony Duggan began after eyeing the intimidating size of Josiah Sanchez. "Are you comfortable in that chair?"

"Yes, very." Josiah leaned back, adjusted his hips a moment and then rested his hands, one atop the other on his thigh. "Thank you for asking, Mr. Duggan".

"I know this is rather early in the Olympic profile coverage but I have to admit that Vin Tanner has captured my interest. Not only is he a talented athlete, he is a complex young man."

Josiah's toothy smile and soothing baritone softened the threat his large, muscled frame presented. "He is not that complicated, really. I prefer to think of him as a rock, made solid by the elements that formed him."

"I can accept that. Can you define those elements for me?"

Sanchez thought a moment. "Well, I can describe my part, but I won't speak for the others."

Duggan glanced at his tablet and flicked the screen with a fingertip. "The others being the rest of Vin's coaching staff? Let's see – Nathan and Raine Jackson, Ezra Standish, Patrice Naylor, Buck Wilmington and his father, Christopher Larabee?"

"That's a good start."

"There's more?"

Josiah head tipped aside in thought for a moment. "Well, if you speak of his management team, that is correct, but if you are speaking of the elements that shaped our Vin, there are a few more."

"You are listed as his advisor – are you his manager? Can you line up interviews with these people?"

"'Managing' Vin Tanner would be like trying to manage the wind. I am an advisor only and merely make suggestions. The others have their say in all

decisions regarding his career as an athlete, but Vin makes the ultimate choice, always."

"Interesting he has so much say for young man."

"Vin Tanner is only young in years, Mr. Duggan. His soul belies his physical time on this earth."

"And that is what interests me, Mr. Sanchez, and I'm sure it will interest other Americans as well."

Sanchez nodded slowly, considering the words. His bright blue eyes clouded slightly and he glanced aside for a moment, clearly in thought. "He is very private. We all are. If I agree to set up these meetings there will be parameters, some tighter than others."

Duggan smiled in a practiced way as questions peppered his increasingly curious mind. "Will there be a list of restricted subjects?"

Josiah shook his head. "No, no list. It will be whatever is comfortable at the time. I am asking that you respect the boundaries you encounter."

"So you have already spoken to the rest of the team and Vin?"

"Yes."

Duggan frowned. "You mean you all have already discussed my meeting with them? I just asked Vin to see you."

The smile on Josiah's face turned weary and resigned. "It is in our nature to prepare for all possible scenarios well in advance, Mr. Duggan. We watch each other's backs and do not care for surprises. We are well briefed and always prepared."

Duggan blinked in surprise, obviously unaccustomed to such preparation. He glanced at the tablet again. "That sounds like your federal agent training."

"It is."

"But I see here that you haven't been an agent for – 10 years? That training stays with you, I take it?"

"It does."

"All right, that's good to know." Duggan scribbled something on the tablet with a stylus. "So, may I start with you, then? I've blocked out an hour."

"And I am prepared. Where would you like to begin?"

"Is it okay if I record our conversation?" Duggan asked. "And take some video and stills?"

"Certainly."

Duggan turned to the glass and gave a thumbs up. Within a minute, Marissa, Davy and a cameraman entered and began to set up.

"That is one-way glass," Duggan said, indicating the mirror. "That's usually something that bothers some people."

Josiah shrugged. "I already knew that, son."

"Oh," Duggan's eyebrows rose in surprise, and then he relaxed and shook his head. "Of course. You should, what with your background." He glanced around, confirming his staff was in their proper places before settling in his chair and facing his subject. "So let us begin unraveling the mystery of the American pentathlete Vincent Tanner. I have his advisor, Josiah Sanchez, with me. Tell me how you first met Vin and how you became his team advisor."

"I would love to, Mr. Duggan." The big man sat forward and interlaced his meaty fingers together. The angle of the studio lights made his silver hair shine and his blue eyes sparkle from their depths.

Josiah began with the time their ATF team came across two dirty orphans in an abandoned warehouse, and quickly ran through the trials of the following 4 plus years, stopping after the events of Malibu and Washington D.C. to regroup and gather his thoughts.

"I take it by your expression that those last events were a turning point," Duggan offered.

"Yes, they were. Vin's father retired and the rest of our team moved on. Without Chris Larabee at the helm, the heart of the team stopped beating. It was time to move on. From that point, however, I vowed to help the Larabee family find its way in any way I could.

"Chris needed lots of help. He would never ask for it, but we all knew it was required. Buck did a lot but when he was given his own team at the ATF, his time at home was limited. His fiancée at the time, Louisa Perkins, stepped right into the role of JD's mother and she was a gift of God." Josiah shook his head and smiled crookedly. "She and JD connected the first time they met. Vin, though, was another story and no one could blame him, really. His world changed drastically."

"I left the ATF to help Chris adjust to his life as a handicapped father. Once he learned to accept his physical limitations and get around, I took a step back and continued my schooling in psychology and comparative religions."

"And you are recognized as a top consultant for police in profiling cult behavior."

"True. Being an independent contractor has been good for me because I can control my time. For now, my main focus will be Vin and getting him to Rio."

"How old was Vin when you took that step back?"

"Let's see – he just entered high school. That would make him sixteen? Buck and Louisa married later that year and moved from Chris' place. That was a year of change for Vin – it was good he had Chris and vice versa. Sports gave the both of them purpose."

"Let's see, by then, Vin was showing jumping horses, running track, shooting, swimming . . . he picked up fencing a few years later, right?"

"Yes. I am sure Mr. Standish will fill you in on that."

"So what are your duties now with Vin?"

"I schedule his time, intercept any sponsorship offers, respond to press queries, make sure he has plenty of down time, generally keep his spirits up and make sure he's on task and focused."

"What will you do after Rio?"

Josiah's smile brightened the room. "Whatever the Lord directs me to do, just like I am doing now."

### *EZRA*

Ezra stood in front of the small field office and studied the building. "Media and Media Relations" was printed on the glass door. He tipped his head back, squinting into the sun, and saw the dark outline of satellite towers and dishes with a cell tower thrown off to one side. He refocused on the front door and eventually entered, stepping aside just inside the door to have a solid wall at his back. A woman sat at the reception desk, watching him with open curiosity.

"Mr. Standish?" she guessed. "You're early."

He managed just enough smile to deepen his dimples. "A boorish habit, I am afraid, Miss Crane. I sincerely hope you do not hold it against me."

Marissa eyes fluttered. "Oh, of course not! I'll let Tony, I mean, Mr. Duggan know you're here. Please, have a seat."

"Thank you." Ezra remained standing and slowly circled the lobby while Marissa called her boss.

Less than a minute later, the studio door opened and Tony stepped out. "Mr. Standish, it is nice to meet you." He extended his hand and Ezra strode over and shook it while Tony spoke. "I have the studio set up. Please, come in."

"Mr. Duggan, it is certainly a pleasure to meet you but I have to refuse your kind offer to enter the studio. I prefer to avoid photographs and recordings. I hope it is not an inconvenience because I am here representing my nephew and wish to fulfill my duties regarding his quest for the gold."

"Mr. Sanchez didn't inform my staff of that." Tony looked to Marissa. She was staring at Ezra with wide-eyed wonder. Duggan cleared his throat. "Um, Ms. Crane?"

"What?" Marissa pulled her eyes away and found her boss regarding her. "Oh! No, I have no notes on that, sir. Sirs, I mean."

"I am not surprised. Although Mr. Sanchez' assures me his quest to 'lighten my load', as he quaintly puts it, includes scheduling my appointments, there are some details he leaves to me. With that being said, may we carry on here?" Ezra opened his arms and indicated the lobby.

"Certainly. May I take notes?"

"Most definitely. I apologize again for my peculiarities." Ezra headed for a corner chair, placed so his back was covered and he could see out the lobby windows. He also knew it was just out of the range of a ceiling mounted security camera over Marissa's head.

Tony asked Marissa to lock the door and sit in with a notepad. Ezra settled into his chair and leveled his eyes with the journalist. "Whenever you are ready, Mr. Duggan."

"So," the reporter started, "You were on the original ATF team that found Vin Tanner and his brother, JD, in the warehouse."

"Yes, I was."

"I have notes on that as well as the years that followed, so the space of time I'd like to cover is right after the California incident that injured Chris Larabee?"

Ezra nodded with a sigh. "A most dire event in the scenario of Mr. Tanner's life."

"Yes, and it was a turning point for your entire team. It's what got Vin Tanner where he is today."

"I have no doubt that Mr. Tanner would do great things with or without this team or those events. He is a remarkable, resilient young man."

"So, what motivated you to leave the ATF?"

Ezra's features softened ever so slightly and he allowed a tiny smile. "That is an interesting question, Mr. Duggan, and I do not know if there is one reason for my departure. Eventually, it was love."

"Really?" Marissa breathed, garnering a glance from her boss. "Excuse me," she muttered. She dipped her head and scribbled on her notepad.

Ezra chuckled. "Yes, Ms. Crane, really, but it did not happen as directly as you most certainly wish. You see, my role in the ATF did not allow any freedom for relationships of that kind but do not feel sorry for me. I did not desire one at the time."

"You were the undercover specialist."

"Yes. That is why I cannot allow photographs or recordings. My law enforcement career may be behind me but there are still miscreants out there that could do me harm."

"I understand. So, once you left, you took up fencing? You are listed as Vin's fencing coach."

Ezra shifted slightly and his face softened as he considered his reply. He spoke slowly, choosing his words carefully. "There are many crossroads in a man's lifetime, Mr. Duggan, and each change of direction precipitates from the issues at the time. Mr. Larabee's situation was a major issue for the entire team at the time."

Ezra met Tony's gaze. "We are a family. An unconventional one, that is true, but a family none the less. At least, more of a family than I ever had the pleasure to

experience prior to our coming together. Each of us stepped up in our own way and since I had been tutoring Mr. Tanner and Mr. Dunne on their school work since they first joined the Larabee/Wilmington household, I simply stepped up my game, so to speak. A woman at the boys' middle school planted the idea of my getting teaching credentials. I ended up following that suggestion."

"You and your wife have a tutoring business now."

"Yes."

Tony glanced at the tablet in his lap. "Li Pong is your wife, and Emily and Amelia are your daughters?"

"Yes. I may never have had them in my life if the California event did not occur and alter the road I traveled."

"So tell me about this path you took."

Appearing more relaxed, Ezra settled back in his chair and crossed his ankles. A flash of gold accented the brief smile that rose from his thoughts. "Once Mr. Larabee returned to Colorado, he required help in every aspect of his life. Each of us took our turn, but it soon became very clear our life as a team had changed. Mr. Wilmington was a more than adequate replacement as our team leader, but the cohesion was gone.

"I cannot speak for the others, but I felt adrift and discovered that my time with the boys was the highlight of my day. I resigned from the ATF shortly after Mr. Larabee's return and enrolled in the University's teaching credential program. That is where I met Li Pong Xiang."

"She was working for her teaching credentials, too?"

"No," Ezra chuckled, green eyes sparkling. "Her major was business management. We met in a university fencing class."

"Really?" Marissa said brightly. This time, she didn't apologize.

"Yes, Miss Crane, really. I needed an activity to keep fit and recalled my fondness of my boarding school fencing experience." His grin expanded. "To use a rather vulgar turn of phrase, my wife kicked my ass that first day and I was intrigued. Our courtship began within weeks and we married shortly after our graduation two years later. We started our tutoring business shortly thereafter and Emily added to our bliss about two years after our union. Amelia came into our lives fifty-two days ago."

"Emily is about six years old now?"

"Yes, and I never thought I would enjoy fatherhood as much as I do. To reiterate, if those boys had not stepped into our lives, I would never have walked this path."

"Why did you introduce Vin to fencing?"

Ezra's expression turned thoughtful. "Mr. Tanner's middle school years carried more angst than the average boy his age. By the time he entered high

school, I could see that he was restless even with all the sports he played. It started out as a distraction, really. I showed him a few basics one day when he was particularly resistant to an algebra tutoring session. I think the activity cleared his mind and allowed the academic subject to sort itself out. It became part of our tutoring time after that.

“My wife and I both noticed his skill the first time he lifted a foil. Vin Tanner is a natural athlete and I envy his talent. I am humbled to be part of his success.”

Tony glanced at his notes. “So, Mr. Standish, what happens after Rio?”

Ezra Standish tipped his head and chuckled. “The next stepping stone is his college graduation, then Rio. After that, I can postulate that Mr. Tanner will find himself at a crossroad and I will certainly back whatever play he makes at that point, Mr. Duggan. He is family, after all, and family is what matters in this life.”

“So, family is a sure bet?”

Ezra’s eyes sparkled with his amused grin as he chuckled softly and shook his head. “In my personal experience, no, it is not. The nature of the family is what fuels the odds.”

“Thank you, Mr. Standish.” Tony and Marissa rose along with Ezra, and the men shook hands.

“It has been a pleasure, and I look forward to speaking again, Mr. Duggan.” He ducked his head and touched his temple with two fingers to acknowledge Marissa. “Good day, Miss Crane.”

Marissa unlocked the door and Ezra exited. She turned to her boss, who looked pensive. “He is certainly a gentleman,” she commented.

“I’m beginning to realize Tanner’s entire team will be interesting,” Tony muttered.

CHAPTER THREE

*BUCK*

Tony Duggan was not prepared for the personality that was Buck Wilmington. Wilmington's physical presence itself was mighty to behold, but the force behind the mustachioed smile and firm handshake was enough to set the journalist back a step. Buck Wilmington was a large man in all aspects.

"So, Tony Duggan in the flesh," Buck began while pumping Duggan's hand in greeting. "Hate to say it, Pard, but you're smaller than you appear on screen."

"Yes, well, the camera can fool the eye," Duggan volleyed back, standing square. "I know how busy you are with the Senator's schedule since you run his security. I appreciate you taking the time."

"Well, Junior's family and I'll do anything for family. He's my second son."

Their meeting was in a public park teeming with life not far from the Capitol building. Springtime was in full bloom and the grass was dotted with blankets and running children. Tony indicated a secluded bench seat and Buck slid in, dominating one side.

"Thank you for the concessions, Tony. My sweet Louisa's in the playground over there with our little Libby. It's too nice to be inside."

"You are very welcome, Mr. Wilmington." There was no way in hell Tony was calling this man Buck without invitation, which came in the bigger-than-life man's next words.

"Please, call me Buck. You met the rest of the family so you're entitled. And who is this?" Wilmington held out his hand to Marissa, all smiles and openness. "Buck Wilmington, miss."

"Marissa Crane. It's very nice to meet you." Marissa slipped in on Tony's side of the table, claiming the edge of the long bench seat. "I'm just here to take notes."

"Well, all right then. Let's get this train on the tracks. What do you want to know, Tony?"

"Vin's family is like none other I've ever encountered before," Tony admitted with a shake of his head. "It is a vast and varied group. I've spoken with the Jacksons, Ezra Standish and Mr. Sanchez, and Patrice Naylor, but none of them have the – how can I put it? – the closeness to Vin Tanner as you or Chris Larabee. The life you have all led as a family these past years is nothing less than amazing."

"Well, has been an interesting ride, that's for sure, and if I ever got the chance at a do-over, I wouldn't change a thing."

"Let's talk about your son, John Dunne, and his relationship to Vin."

"Those boys were brothers from in every sense of the word when we stumbled across 'em. JD barely came to my knees, dirty as an alley rat and as chatty as a squirrel. Vin was the exact opposite. Junior, like Chris, barely spoke 10 words a day, yet he was clearly the leader of the two, God bless 'em. Vin kept 'em safe on the streets and I'll always be grateful to him for that."

"Did that protectiveness continue as they grew?"

"Yeah, Vin carried more than he needed on his shoulders for a long time. It was well over a year before he started to relax and act like a kid his age, but he's an old soul."

"By that, you mean . . .?"

"Vin has always handled problems as they arose. He never shied away from a challenge. He's the most responsible kid I've ever seen. Trustworthy, through and through."

"So the regime of training should come easy to him."

"It does."

"What about a mother figure in his and JD's lives? You moved into Mr. Larabee's place so the boys could stay together, right?"

"That's right."

"Any special women help you two bachelors?"

"Well, yes," Buck started, the openness of his manner scaling back, "but Chris already had experience being a father."

Tony's brow rose. "Really? I haven't dug into his background yet so I didn't know that."

Buck slowly stroked his mustache as he studied the newsman. "I won't speak for Chris, so you'll have to get any details from him but, yes. He had a son and a wife. They died a few years before we crossed paths with the boys."

"I see." There were a few ticks of silence. Buck's expression remained polite and he offered no more details. Tony sensed that this was a sore subject but his reporter's instincts nudged him onward. "How did they die?"

"In a fire." The short answer seemed out of character.

"Was he a good father?" Tony knew it to be a risky question, and he felt a zing of fear when he saw Wilmington's eyes darken. All signs of the jovial man

before him evaporated and the next thing he realized was that Navy SEAL/Federal Agent Wilmington now sat across the table and the magnitude of his presence froze Tony in his seat. He heard Marissa catch her breath but he didn't dare take his eyes off the man across from him.

"Yes," Buck stretched out the answer in a dangerously low manner, stormy blue eyes pinning Tony in place. "He was an excellent father and husband and I suggest abandoning this line of questioning."

"Um, yes," Duggan replied, clearing his throat. "So, JD is graduating from M.I.T. next week. Congratulations."

Sinister Wilmington evaporated leaving proud – but guarded – Wilmington behind. "Thanks. JD was destined for that school from the very beginning. Smarter than a whip, curious; he questioned everything. Drove us all to distraction, that boy. C'n talk the ears off an elephant. Skipped a grade in middle school so he and Vin were in the same class from then on." Chuckling, he shook his head. "Took Vin a little while to adjust to that- there was a lot going on at the time. Anyway, JD entered college young and powered through in 3 years. Yeah, we're very proud. All of us, and especially Vin."

"And Vin's finishing up at the University of Colorado?"

"Yup, in Ag. Business Management. He and Patrice will do well with the ol' place after Rio."

"He has quite a future ahead and it sounds like you and the others are the reason for that."

"Can't disagree with you there. We've always watched each other's backs."

"That is very evident, especially after the events in Malibu. Can you tell me about that?"

Still guarded, Tony could see Wilmington's thoughts turning behind veiled eyes. "After the car accident, Chris' injuries forced early retirement. Once he was up and about, he started taking Vin to the shooting range. Their usual time together before was spent camping, but it was a few years before Chris could manage that again. Vin is a natural marksman. He's done very well and he couldn't have a better coach than Chris Larabee."

Tony appreciated the information, but noted Wilmington's admirable skill at avoiding answering the question - a skill probably sharpened as the Senator's head of security. Buck's expression now was polite but did not encourage any prying, so Tony shelved any ideas of probing farther. Instead, he asked basic questions about life in Vin's household and the ex-agent happily replied to each query.

Duggan knew he had some homework to do.

After the agreed upon half-hour passed, the journalist thanked Buck and stood, motioning for Marissa to wait at the car. She scurried off, clutching her

tablet to her chest. He watched until she was out of hearing distance, then turned back to Wilmington and made obvious motions to turn off the recorder. "Off the record, Mr. Wilmington?"

Buck stood with his thumbs hooked in the pockets of his jeans. He raised one brow and wiped his face of expression before locking his eyes on Duggan's. "Shoot. Can't promise I'll answer, though."

"Fair enough." Tony tapped the tabletop next to the recorder with a finger. "It's early on for coverage and I just want you to aware that things will get crazier as the opening ceremonies get closer."

Buck nodded once. "Go on."

"If there is anything, and I mean *anything*, unpleasant regarding the incident in Malibu and or Chris Larabee, I'm advising you to get your ducks in a row now, Mr. Wilmington." He raised his hands, palms toward Buck in a pose of submission as Buck's eyes darkened again. "At this point, I'm too busy to do any research and not sure I would anyway, but there are other reporters drooling for camera or print time during the Olympics. I just think you and Vin deserve a head's up. You're familiar with law enforcement. You know how there's always a target on your back regarding your personal life."

"True," Buck said after a moment, eyes softening.

Tony collected his small recorder and reached out a hesitant hand to his subject. Buck took it in a warm shake. "Like I said, Vin's got quite a future ahead of him and neither one of us wants to see that sullied in any way."

Buck nodded and allowed a grin. "You got that right. I tend to be over protective of my family. Caution's been earned."

"You have a beautiful daughter there." Tony nodded to the auburn-hair girl on the swings, laughing with abandon along with the beauty that was her mother swinging next to her.

"That she is. You're a man with a good eye." Buck clapped Tony's shoulder. "Libby takes after her mama in every way, God bless her. JD's eyes are gonna pop when he sees how big she's gotten this past year."

"Nice to meet you Buck, and I'm sure we will cross paths again. Have a good flight to Boston and give my congratulations to your son."



Buck watched the reporting team drive away before turning around. Louisa, walking to him, was a sight to behold. She was a beautiful woman inside and out, and Buck felt he was the luckiest man alive to have her by his side.

"All done?" she asked, taking his arm. Her touch always tingled.

"For now. I'm pretty sure he'll be back."

Louisa tugged his arm, leading Buck toward the swings where Libby laughed. “He just asked about Vin, right?”

“Mostly.” He stopped abruptly and Louisa tucked into his side, her chin tipped up to read his expression. It was one of her better skills. “I just . . .” He started.

“Just what?”

“Do you think Vin needs to know everything that happened?”

Louisa rested her head against his shoulder in consideration, and then replied as they watched Libby reach for the sky with each swing of her skinny legs. “I don’t think it will really matter to him,” she said softly. “At the time, I think the silence was wise. He needed the stability and a feeling of security. Now, not so much.” She rubbed his arm affectionately, warming where she touched. “I think all of you see those events as a personal failure and who wants to drag those up again?”

Buck slipped his long arm around her shoulders with a sigh. Louisa continued.

“What you have to consider now, my love, is controlling the release of information. The accident report is out there. The news reports of the time are out there. The investigation into Ella’s background is also out there. All of it is painful, I know, but it can be found with minimal effort by anyone with a little curiosity.”

Buck chuckled darkly. “Another political lesson learned, I suppose. You’re right. He should hear all of it from us, shouldn’t he?”

“Yes, he should.” She slipped her arm around his waist. “Have I told you how much I love you today?”

Buck Wilmington always had a way with women but when Louisa Perkins entered his life, he was transported to an emotional level never before experienced. She’d changed his life forever, and he was eternally grateful for every second they were together.

“Louisa, honey, I love you more than I ever knew was possible.” Together, they watched their daughter scramble from the swing set with two other girls, the temporary friendship easy and carefree and so unlike his son’s history. “What eats at me is the fact that if it wasn’t for Ella Gaines’ condo in Vail, we wouldn’t have ever met.”

“I beg to differ, dear,” Louisa immediately countered. “I believe we were meant to be. With or without Ella Gaines, our paths were destined to cross and there’s nothing you can say to make me think otherwise.”

For once, Buck Wilmington was at a loss for words and even if he could find them at that moment, emotion clutched at his throat, denying speech. Instead, he gave her a squeeze of appreciation.

“So,” Louisa said. “Let’s blow this joint and make plans for Boston. We have a celebration engineer.”

“Damn right, woman,” Buck finally choked out.  
He was the luckiest man alive.

CHAPTER FOUR  
*NATHAN AND RAINÉ*

Davy sang along with “Love on an Elevator”, and sang badly. Marissa, sitting in the passenger seat of the news van, snapped off the radio and ignored his short protest.

“We’re almost there,” she said after consulting her phone’s GPS app. “Next turn, then it’s on the right.”

Davy followed the directions and pulled into the parking lot of a very busy urgent care clinic on the outskirts of Denver. Marissa saw the crowded lobby through the glass front doors.

“These guys know we’re coming, right?” Davy turned off the ignition and pushed open the van door.

“They set up the appointment,” Marissa said, gathering her things. “We are a little early.”

The pair circled to the back of the van and Davy hauled out his tablet and recorder and checked the battery charges. Marissa did the same with her things and the laptop; she was to take notes and record the video interface with Tony. When they were ready, she locked the van and led the way inside. It was not feasible to try to be low key because Davy’s arms were loaded and the room, packed. Instead, they kept to the perimeter and eventually made their way to the check in counter.

“Nathan and Raine Jackson, please,” Marissa asked the receptionist. For as busy as the place was, the fledgling journalist admired the woman’s calm manner. “We have an appointment?”

The woman glanced at Davy then back at Marissa. “Yes, the interview. Dr. Jackson set aside the conference room for you to set up.”

“That’s great. It won’t take long to get it all ready to go.” She and the cameraman followed the receptionist down a long hallway. “Is it always this busy here?”

"Yes, it is. We're lucky to have people like the Jacksons here – the endless cases don't seem to faze them." The woman pushed open the door to a small room dominated by an oval table and about a half-dozen chairs. "Here you go."

"Thanks." Marissa and Davy set to work as soon as the door closed. Marissa opened the laptop and dialed up the video conference number.

"Marissa?" Tony's face moved into frame. "Ready to go?"

"Yes, sir. They should be here any mo . . ."

Behind her, the door opened and a very tall, solid black man stepped in the room followed by a beautiful dark-skinned woman with large, expressive eyes. They both wore white lab coats.

"Marissa Crane? Nathan Jackson." Dr. Jackson stuck his hand out and it engulfed Marissa's as they shook. "This is my wife, Raine."

Raine shook hands with Marissa but looked toward the face on the open laptop. "And you are Tony Duggan."

"Yes I am and good morning! I hope to meet you in person next time," Tony's talking head said. Nathan nodded his way and he and Raine sat across from the image.

"Mr. Duggan," Raine said, nodding his direction. "I'm sure we'll cross paths. Vin's going all the way with this and we'll be right behind him."

"I believe that. So let's talk about Vin Tanner." Tony rested his chin on steepled fingers. "I'll start by saying that I've never had to speak to so many people about an athlete before. It seems all of you are very invested in this young man."

"Not just Vin," Nathan corrected. "We support each other in all things. We're family. It happens to be Vin's turn, that's all."

"Is that how you see it, too, Mrs. Jackson?"

"Most definitely," she agreed. Raine reached over and rested her hand on top of Nathan's. "The team supported Nate all the way through medical school. And Ezra, when he was in graduate school, Josiah in his charity work - "

"Yeah," Nathan laughed. "We watch each other's backs. Wouldn't have it any other way."

Tony nodded. "You were on the ATF team at the time Vin and his brother were found." Nathan nodded. "You were an EMT at the time? Were you and your wife already a couple?"

"I was an ATF agent and an EMT. I met Raine at a local Denver emergency room we seemed to frequent. She was a nurse at the time, so, yes; we'd been together a short time."

"And now Raine is a nurse practitioner, I see. You married right after the Malibu incident?"

"Yes." Nate squeezed Raine's hand and they exchanged glances.

"Tell me about your life after that incident."

“Well,” Nathan sighed, collecting his thoughts. “Josiah Sanchez and I flew to L.A. right after Chris got hurt.”

“I understand he was in a car accident.”

“Yes. The injuries ended his ATF career. Chris will tell you the details on the injuries, but it was clear that our team wouldn’t be the same. I chose to leave the ATF about a year later and enter medical school, once Chris was able to get around on his own.”

“You were part of his recovery?”

“We all were. We also realized how things could change at the drop of a hat, so Raine and I married right before I entered med school. Our son arrived soon after.”

“And two more followed, correct?”

“Yes,” Raine affirmed. “Twin girls. They’re six now. Our son Niko is eight.”

“I guess it’s a natural step to be Vin’s physical trainer, isn’t it?”

Nathan nodded. “It was never a question. I’ve known those boys since they were five and seven. I have his trust and know exactly how to keep Vin from injuring himself; and right now he seems to be listening.”

“There was a time when he didn’t?”

Raine chuffed and looked down, working to control her laughter as Nathan rolled his eyes. “Most of the time he didn’t listen. I can’t blame him, really. Vin had a lot to deal with after Chris came home. Everything changed and he never did do well with change. I’m sure there were times when he thought we were smothering him. He acted out. It was to be expected. Unfortunately, his acting out usually ended up with bumps and bruises.”

“Did sports help him?”

“I think sports saved him,” Raine offered. “Vin tends to keep things inside. The physical release of track and swimming and horses - well, I noticed that he opened up after working out.”

“True,” Nathan agreed. “Trying to get him to talk before was like prying open a bear trap. Chris is the same way, actually. Vin may be adopted, but those two are father and son in every sense.”

“Will you be accompanying Vin to the Olympic trials?”

“I will be,” Nathan said. “Raine will stay here, what with the kids’ being in school and all. She’ll have backup. It won’t be a problem. Everyone here at the clinic is backing Vin all the way.”

“They will miss their dad, but we can video conference and Nettie will be around.” Raine added.

Tony glanced at his notes. “Nettie Wells? Vin’s adopted grandmother?”

“That would be her,” Nathan grinned. “Now that Casey’s moved in with JD at M.I.T., Nettie is available to lend a hand. She helped Vin from the day he was found. She’s not backing off now.”

“Casey is JD’s fiancé and Mrs. Wells niece, correct?”

“Correct. Both of them are family.”

“It sounds like Vin has everything he needs to succeed. He’s had a lot of adversity in his life.”

“True, but he has us, too. All of us, all the way to graduation and Rio.” Nathan sat up straight, a picture of confidence.

Tony leaned forward onto his forearms and interlaced his fingers. “What are your plans after that, then?”

“We’re going to Hawaii,” Raine said immediately, laughing at Nathan’s frown. She nudged him with her elbow. “Nate has a hard time with relaxing. Once we’re there, though, the kids will keep him busy. It will be forced relaxation.”

“Ain’t that the truth. How can I relax when there’s coral and loose surfboards and barracudas . . .”

“Niko and the girls aren’t nearly as accident prone as Vin or JD, honey.”

“Give ‘em time, dear. Give ‘em time.”

### *PATRICE NAYLOR*

Tony Duggan exited the sweeping curve in the roadway and his face exploded with a grin; this place was T.V. gold – white fences, green grass and a long dirt lane cuddled in the leafy arms of ancient trees that interlaced overhead creating a natural tunnel. Adding to the charm were the shiny horses grazing on his left side and the brightly painted jumps in the arena on his right complete with posting riders on the rail. The backdrop to the facility was rugged mountains.

The Montfort Training Academy of Horsemanship looked like it was dead-center of Kentucky bluegrass country instead of a suburb of Denver. The journalist swept into the parking area on the edge of a dust cloud and waited for it to settle before exiting. In the meantime, he noted his first impressions for dubbing any future video as he soaked in the visual atmosphere.

By the time he pushed open the car door, a young woman walked toward him from one of the barns. Leggy and trim, she walked with a confident, sure stride, her long, auburn ponytail swinging with her movement. She wore a dark grey polo shirt with the school’s name embroidered in pink over her heart and riding pants with scuffed black English boots. Large sunglasses and a pink baseball cap hid most of her face, which did not much matter because her bright, open smile dominated her expression. She extended her hand as she approached.

“You must be Mr. Duggan. Patrice Naylor.”

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Naylor." Tony Duggan's practiced eye automatically saw her as the camera would, and he liked what he saw. "Quite a place here."

As overused as the term was, he labeled her laugh as musical.

"I'm an assistant trainer for the time being. After school and Rio, Vin and I have plans."

They walked side by side into the long barn, which had a cheery air about it from horses' heads hanging over several stall doors, faint music coming from a far stall and the scent of hay on a cool breeze. A bay horse in the barn returned a distant whinny. Patrice removed her sunglasses and Tony noticed her eyes were a chocolate brown similar to the color of the bay.

"Friend calling?" Tony noted.

"Actually, the one outside is this one's baby." Patrice stopped and rubbed the mare's forehead. "They've been apart for a few years now but they still talk. Let's go to my office, right there."

She motioned to a small room across the aisle. Inside, there was a small, neat desk with a laptop, a pair of worn chairs and a high shelf, loaded with trophies, which circled the entire room. Ribbons and framed photos adorned the walls and Tony's eye immediately went to one of a horse jumping over a convertible with the top down. "Wow!" He blurted.

"That's Vin," Patrice said with a tone that sounded a bit exasperated. "He should have been wearing a helmet. That's probably not the best example for my students to see!" She shook her head and chuckled.

Tony leaned in closer and saw that it was, indeed, Vin Tanner – the smile was unmistakable, along with the longer hair mussed by the wind and action. The horse cleared the vehicle with ease and the look of pure joy on Tanner's face made Tony smile, too. "I take it he has a wild spirit?"

"Well, not so much wild as curious, and when you mix curious with confidence," she nodded at the photo, "you get Vin Tanner."

"You taught him to ride?"

"No, I taught him to jump. We met showing horses on the local circuit as kids. Gee, I was nine or ten when we first met. He showed western and I showed English. He's really a cowboy at heart. The only thing he likes about English is the jumping – the higher the better."

"So he's a thrill seeker."

Patrice put her sunglasses on the desk and took the chair behind it with a thoughtful frown. "No, he's not that irresponsible. He doesn't do things for the thrill, really, he just likes to push the envelope and test his skill. He knows his limits as well as his horse's limits and, actually, is pretty careful."

Tony took the seat across from her and patted the breast pocket of his shirt. "I'm recording. Is that alright?"

"Sure," she said.

"You met at a horse show, then?"

"Yeah." Patrice's face took on a distant look of fond remembrance. "He had this black horse named Peso. I remember him telling me that Peso was grumpy and to be careful, but Peso took an immediate shine to me and vice versa. Vin used to get so mad when I braided Peso's mane and tail. I would put flowers in the braid and Vin would pull them out," she smiled. "It was funny. I'm not sure which annoyed him more, me doing it or Peso allowing it."

"So of course you did it as often as you could."

"Of course! Vin would grumble like an old man, but he never yelled. Peso and I had that bond 'til the day he died." She paused a few seconds, remembering. "I braided a yellow flower into his forelock near the end and Vin left it there until they took him away." She pointed at a small photo on the wall behind her. "That's Peso."

Tony looked at the picture and saw a skinny boy, awash in a slightly-too-big shirt and broad-brimmed cowboy hat, sitting on a black horse with a wide, white blaze. The horse's ears were turned backward and Tony easily saw a curmudgeon's expression in the horse's face. Vin stared into the camera, gangly, thin and unsmiling. "How old is he in that photo?"

"Eleven. He didn't smile very much around that time."

Tony turned his attention to her. "Patrice, childhood sweethearts have plenty of stories to tell and there is an audience out there that will eat them up. I know Rio seems far away now, but when it's here, you will be busy. It's best to think about the ones you want to share."

Patrice nodded. "Yeah, we've talked about it and we are together on this. Although I have to admit, we are both a bit stumped as to why you're giving Vin so much attention so early."

"Well, I guess the biggest reason is his sport of choice. There has never been a credible American pentathlete candidate in any previous Olympics, and his sport is *him*. He didn't just decide to become a pentathlete; he's been one for a very long time. It's natural for him, which is rare – and I wouldn't be lying if I told you that his looks and attitude are simply frosting on the cake. All that, combined with his training team –" Tony shook his head and chuffed. "That's all new territory, too. Vin Tanner is a story waiting to be told. It's about a real person with real skills. It's also about family."

"Well, that is all true and I see your point, but you need to be warned that he and his family are very private people. You may find some resistance at some point. Just sayin'."

"I realized that right from the start, and again, that's what makes him interesting. He isn't one to boast, and that is rare in an athlete of his caliber. I don't want that to change. I also know that as Rio gets closer, I will be busier because there are many more potential Olympians out there that I have to research. So, for now, all I'm doing is getting background I probably won't have time to obtain later. That's all."

"I understand."

"So, what are your wedding plans?" The shift of subject caused Patrice to blink just before tiny roses of color bloomed on her cheeks.

"Oh! Well, *that's* something to face after Rio and other things."

"What other things, may I ask?"

"Oh, sure. I plan on staying on here until Rio then Vin and I are opening our own training barn at Vin's and Chris' place. The wedding will be wedged somewhere in there!"

"So you and Vin, working together?"

"That's the plan. Chris is more than happy to help out as much as he can, but the place will essentially be Vin's. He loves that place and so do I."

Tony cocked his head. "How do you get along with Chris Larabee? I hear he's difficult to get to know."

Patrice ducked her head and regarded her clasped hands in her lap for a moment. "He's had a tough life. He's not really difficult, he's just . . ." she shrugged, at a loss for words, and looked up. "I've never had a problem with talking to him and neither have my parents. We've been friends for a long time." She offered a crooked grin. "He's like my second dad. I love him to pieces. I just don't like to see him alone. I keep hoping he'll find someone, some day."

"So he hasn't had someone special in his life since Malibu?"

Patrice blinked in surprise. "You know about that?"

"All I know is that he was hurt and the woman he was with, died, in a car accident."

"Yeah," she said slowly. "That's right."

Tony Duggan may have been an entertainment journalist, but he began his career covering hard news and what he saw in Patrice's face and heard – or didn't hear – in her words put every newsman antenna he had on full alert. His mind kicked into another mode of endless questions and he had to work hard to keep a neutral expression.

There was more to the Malibu story and Chris Larabee than he'd been told. He needed to do more research.

Tony managed a few more safe questions for Patrice about her life with Vin and then took a tour of the grounds, snapping photos and making notes for future filming. At this time, he didn't want to push and risk losing any iota of trust he

might have already earned. In making that decision, Tony Duggan put on his entertainment reporting face and left the ranch with more questions than when he arrived.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Vin ran across the University grounds at a steady, ground-eating pace and waved at the police officer posted next to the parking lot. He looked around and spotted Chris leaning against his black truck, legs crossed at the ankles, his worn cane propped against his thigh. When their eyes met, Chris straightened and utilized the cane to limp forward with a smile. He glanced at his watch.

Vin stopped a few feet away and caught his breath, then shook out his legs and squinted at the sun. "Don't look like I'm late."

Chris chuckled. "No, you're not late. Are you gonna need a watch when we go to Rio?" He tossed Vin the hand towel from his shoulder.

Vin caught the towel. "What, they don't have the sun down there?" he teased. "And why wear a watch when I have you guys?"

"Point taken." Chris limped to the driver side and unlocked the doors with his key fob. He climbed in behind the wheel with a grimace, stowing the cane on the floor behind the seat. Vin jumped in the other side and toed off his shoes. Chris started the truck and glanced over at Vin. "You need to pick a sponsor shoe soon, you know."

"Yeah, but these are broken in just right." Vin looked at his feet. "Maybe the duct tape's a bit much."

Chris laughed. "Ya think?"

Chris drove the truck from the lot and waved at the officer. They didn't talk as he moved through traffic to find the freeway and Vin allowed his mind to wander, settling on the schedule of interviews Josiah had set up with Mr. Duggan's crew. Today was Patrice's turn and he wondered how it went and what they talked about. It had taken a few sessions with Dr. Will and Josiah for Vin to get a grip on these interviews, but he was comfortable with it now. He canted his head and studied the profile of the man driving the truck and wondered about his dad's real opinion about all this fuss; he hadn't said much but seemed agreeable.

Chris Larabee was starting to show age. The lines from the corner of his eyes etched deeper and similar lines scored his forehead. Slightly bent reading glasses stuck out from his shirt pocket and his blond hair, still combed straight back, was peppered with gray. Except for Chris' right leg, he was still fit and steady handed enough to shoot with remarkable accuracy.

Vin often thought about his dad's life and career and the reporter's questions from his interview brought those thoughts to the forefront. He knew women vied for Chris' attention, but for as long as Vin could remember, he showed no interest in that kind of commitment. Vin wondered if that would change once he and Patrice took on the ranch. Buck and Louisa had moved to their own place over eight years ago and since then, the place seemed too quiet. He looked forward to Patrice's moving in. It would be very different from when JD and Buck resided there.

The thought of JD reminded him of their current plans and brought forth a surge of excitement,

"What time's JD's graduation tomorrow?" Vin asked.

"JD's group walks at 3:00. There's a shuttle from our hotel." Chris turned and smiled at Vin. "Maybe my handicap placard can get us a seat up front."

"Ya gotta find it first," Vin snickered. "A lot of good it does in a drawer somewhere."

They both laughed a moment and then there was a thoughtful lull of quiet. "M.I.T.," Chris mused, adjusting his hand on the steering wheel. "JD's done well."

"M.I.T. in three years, yeah, he's done real well. He takin' that job with FBI?"

"Guess we'll find out when we get there," Chris replied. "He had a lot of offers to choose from." He pulled into a parking lot with a soft curse, squinting at the crowded parking lot. "Buck said he was still considering the CIA, too. Look for a spot, will ya?"

"Plenty of handicapped spots," Vin pointed out as they drove slowly by the front of a busy Four Corners Café, set in the back corner of a strip mall.

"Too bad I ain't handicapped," Chris replied.

Vin shook his head with a smile and pointed to a spot. "There. And there's Patrice's truck." Chris parked the vehicle as Vin stuck his feet in a pair of sandals and jumped out before the engine quieted. "I'll meet ya inside."

Chris watched Vin trot to the restaurant's front doors and enter. Through the large front windows, he saw Vin greet the staff and many of the customers before finding Patrice to one side. She rose as he approached and Vin didn't hesitate gracing her with a lingering hug and a quick kiss. He'd come so far from the days of near-paralyzing shyness. The events he'd experienced would have turned any other boy into a hermit.

Chris shook his head to banish the thoughts. It was all behind them now – a decade in the past. They'd survived and that's all that mattered. Vin wasn't any other boy, that was for damn sure. Chris felt the warmth of satisfaction and happiness wash over him and he felt lighter.

"Hey!"

A man's voice brought him to the here and now. Chris glanced at a car stopped behind him.

"You leaving?"

"No, no. Just got here. Sorry."

The man drove off after a short nod. Chris shoved the truck door open, eased out and grabbed his cane. Once he locked the truck, he took his time getting inside to give Vin and Patrice a few minutes of well-deserved privacy even if it was in the middle of a crowded restaurant.

Chris worked his way to the table, nodding greetings to the familiar faces, and pulled out a chair to sit to sit with Vin and Patrice. A cup of coffee already waited for him.

"She said her interview with Mr. Duggan was good. Shorter than she expected, though." Vin held Patrice's hand under the table.

"He's probably coming back at some time, right?"

"Yeah," Patrice said, sounding as puzzled as she looked. "He asked about Malibu. It kind of surprised me."

"He did?" Chris's hands circled the cup.

"I didn't say much." She shrugged and snorted. "But then, I really don't know much, either."

"Nothin' to know," Chris assured her. "Accidents happen."

Vin took a thoughtful sip of iced tea. "I just remember when you finally came home."

Chris took a sip of coffee and studied the mug rim. A ripple of guilt went through him every time he thought about those events. He'd never told Vin the particulars of everything that transpired to bring the calamity to its head. The roofies wiped all Vin's memories of how he left the hotel and everyone in the family agreed to leave out some parts to avoid any guilt Vin might assume. Vin thought he'd been sent home early because of Chris' accident and that remained the gist of the whole affair all this time.

It wasn't a lie, really. Or was it?

While Chris healed in L.A., he and Buck agreed to keep any reference about kidnapping out of Vin and JD's heads, not wanting to disrupt their already fragile feelings of safety. Now, Chris could admit that he and Buck really didn't want their boys to discover that their father figures, in essence, stood aside and allowed Vin to be taken away from right under their noses.

Chris didn't even entertain the idea of sharing Ella's betrayal. The woman destroyed his family once and was nearly successful a second time. That burden was his alone to carry.

"Dad?"

Chris jerked his head up, caught. "Yes?"

Vin frowned at him. "You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine." He rubbed his eyes. "Just thinking about what to pack." He turned and grinned at Patrice. "Appreciate you stayin' at the place. I wasn't too keen on the idea of boarding the dogs. They're gettin' kinda old and cranky."

"They'll be fine. It's the least I can do." She reached over and patted Chris' forearm. "I appreciate your letting me use your place for horse rehab."

"I'm happy to oblige," Chris said, smiling and nodding to Vin. "It was his decision, really." Chris finished his coffee and pushed to his feet with a wince of pain.

"You aren't staying to eat?" Vin asked.

"Nah, I need to pack. I'm an old man now, you know." The comment made Vin and Patrice laugh. "Haven't flown a redeye in a while. I'll have to remember to take preemptive Tylenol before boarding."

"We'll be home a little later. I left your suitcase on your bed," Vin said.

"Bye, Chris!"

Patrice's sweet voice raised Chris' spirits, banishing any dark thoughts trying to worm their way into his mind.

Vin ordered their meals and then turned to Patrice, lifting her hand to kiss her knuckles. "I know that face," he said, catching her eyes with his. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head and frowned as if trying to shake a hold on her thoughts. "I don't know. There's just something about all this that makes me wonder."

"All what? The interviews?"

Patrice nodded. She took his hand with both of hers and regarded them. "I sorta remember when Chris came back from California. I remember how upset you were. I also remember my parents talking." She made eye contact again. "Some of it I didn't quite understand."

"Like?"

"I don't think he was in the car during the accident. I remember my dad talking about the bumper doing damage. I think he was outside the car. And the woman -"

"Mrs. Gaines?"

"Yeah, I remember hearing that she was found in an alley somewhere. Not in a car at all."

Vin shook his head. "You must have heard wrong."

She squeezed his hands. "Maybe. I don't know. Did you ever see the accident report?"

"No. There was no reason to look. It doesn't matter now, anyway."

"Yeah, that's true." She leaned over and they kissed, then they leaned forehead to forehead for a moment. "I'll miss you. I've got a card for JD." Patrice turned away and pulled a bright pink envelope from her purse, then tucked it back inside.

"He'll love that color." Vin chuckled, and then their server interrupted them as he refilled their iced tea glasses. "I'm gonna miss you, too, but I'm kinda excited about everyone being together again, even if it's just for one day."

"The Magnificent Seven reunites," she joked.

Vin scooted closer so their thighs touched, needing the connection. "It has been a while. Wish you could come."

"Me too, but I still have finals to study for. You have fun, okay? Give JD a hug for me."

"Not gonna happen. I will tell him you said 'congratulations', though. Good enough?"

"Good enough. Just think, in a little over a year, it will be our turn to walk."

"And then on to Rio." Vin lifted his glass and clinked Patrice's.

"On to Rio," she echoed.

## CHAPTER SIX

Patrice dropped Vin and Chris at the airport just past 7:00 PM to catch the red-eye to Massachusetts, expecting the journey through Security to take longer than usual because the plates and screws in Chris' leg wreaked havoc with the detectors. After that, they needed a little extra time to accommodate his slower pace.

Accustomed to Chris' gait, Vin usually did not give it a second thought anymore but after enduring a TSA pat down and verbal grilling, Chris was darkly silent. Together with the long walk to their gate, his pace seemed rougher than usual.

It took Dr. Will many years to help Vin dump all the guilt, even with no reason he could verbalize that he should have any guilt. Vin always viewed the effort everyone took to keep him active in sports was an inconvenience to all, including Chris. Years ago, he finally figured that the best way to show his appreciation and honor their work was to do his best in school and in this medal quest.

"Looks like they beat us."

Chris' voice pulled Vin from his thoughts and he looked ahead to the gate area. Josiah was hard to miss and Vin smiled when he raised a huge paw in acknowledgment. When they got closer, they saw that Nathan, Raine, Ezra and Li Pong acquired a section of seats for all of them. The women sat together, both of their heads bowed over the pink bundle in Li Pong's arms.

Vin dropped his and Chris' bags and immediately approached the women, craning his neck to peer into the infant's round face. "Is she sleeping?" he asked brightly.

"Yes," Li Pong replied, nodding at Vin's hand. "Go ahead."

Vin gently stroked the baby's cheek with the back of his finger. "Her skin's so soft," he whispered.

Still smiling, Vin turned from Li Pong and offered his hand to Ezra, who took it with a pleased nod. "You look tired. Emily keeping you up? I heard she had a cold."

"I am getting by, Mr. Tanner, thank you. We will resume your training next week as planned, even if I am in a somnambulistic state. You have my word."

Nathan snorted. "Sleepwalking?" He nudged Vin. "Sounds like he's lining up excuses already."

Ezra threw Nathan a pained look. "Really, Mr. Jackson. I would think that you would be in my corner, so to speak, since you and your lovely wife have been blessed three times."

"I don't let Nate touch the kids during the night," Raine said. "I found all sorts of creative diapering jobs the following mornings that did little to contain the messes. I had to strip the linens every time."

"I can't help it if I have big fingers," Nate pouted.

"For a man with such skill at stitching up wounds, it's hard to believe a diaper confounds you." Raine stood and moved to his side, smiling.

Nathan shrugged and wrapped his arm around Raine's shoulders. "Just one of those things, my love." He gave her temple a quick kiss and although she swatted his chest, she cuddled closer.

They selected seats and settled in, except for Vin, who moved to the large windows and looked out over the parked aircraft and the lights of the tarmac. He watched the planes take off at regular intervals, glad that the anxiety he had about flying faded years ago.

He was excited about seeing JD and so proud of his brother's accomplishments. It wasn't a surprise – JD always excelled in school. Although there were bumps in their road, all of them managed to pull together as a team and not only survive, but thrive. Vin refocused his eyes until he could see the reflection of the others in the big window. Raine and Nathan stood nestled in each other's arm, Ezra took a seat next to his wife and gently cupped Amelia's tiny head, and Josiah sat next to Chris, legs stretched out across the narrow aisle.

Chris rubbed his knee absently with a hard set to his jaw and Vin could see Josiah's sidelong observation. As he watched his dad and thought of JD, Vin recalled what he could about Chris' life-changing injury. Details faded with time, but the attached emotion was still strong. Now, as an adult, he reached back through his memories and sorted them in an effort to recall what he'd been told and what he assumed. Patrice's questions would not leave his mind, but it did not seem like the right time to ask.

He chewed the corner of his lower lip and looked back out to the bright lights and idle planes. Would there ever be a good time?

"Come on, Vin."

Josiah's rumbling voice pulled him from his thoughts and Vin turned, automatically reaching down to pick up his carry on pack, which he hitched over his shoulder.

"Want me to get that?" he asked Chris, who paused a moment after rising to adjust the cane and flex his knee. Vin pointed to his small bag and Chris nodded once.

"Sure," he said. "Plane aisles are too narrow for all this." He motioned to the cane and the bag.

Vin picked it up and trailed behind his dad as their group headed to the boarding gate, smirking at the fact that Chris refused, as usual, early boarding for "those that needed more time" to get to their seats.

The flight was full. Vin found enough to look at through the small window to ignore the press of people around them. Something about the black night and jewel lights below comforted him, and when they flew over storm clouds that pulsed with lightening, Vin was entranced.

Across the aisle, Josiah stretched his legs into the aisle and relaxed. Beside him, the Jacksons dozed, with Raine resting her cheek on Nathan's shoulder. With the cabin lights dimmed and the passengers settled, Vin looked to his side and noted that Chris also dozed, but the lines of pain radiating across his face never really faded.

It made him think again about what he knew, or at least what he thought he knew.

From his seat, Josiah noticed the shift in Vin's expression when he looked at Chris, and he did something he normally avoided: he thought about past missteps and wondered how he missed every clue regarding Charlotte and Ella. With the 20:20 aspect of hindsight, Josiah had to admit that he had allowed his wishes for Chris and Vin to lead a semblance of a normal life to override everything. They all had been complacent.

Unbidden, the visual memories of when he first saw Chris in that Malibu hospital rose in his mind and he remembered wondering if the man would live through the night. As the hours passed, the depth of Ella's betrayal became clearer.

Were they wrong in not divulging the sordid details? It was still debatable, but essentially a moot at this point in their lives, wasn't it? Would Vin be the man he was today if none of the events in their first five years ever happened?

Josiah refocused his studious stare to the fuselage ceiling and settled back in the narrow cabin seat, sighing at the folly of being human. The omnipotent being that watched all of them probably shook his head in wonderment constantly.

Yet, after everything, here they were. A sense of pride rose in his heart. They were in a good place now and that is what mattered. He closed eyes and focused on the now. Vin's success was a direct reflection of the deep bond of a family

defined by events. Yes, JD's graduation and Vin's Olympic potential shined because of - or, perhaps, in spite of - their family connection.



Ezra did not sleep for the entire flight. The red-eye nature of the schedule was in his favor with him being the night creature he was. He cast his eyes downward, taking in the relaxed features of the baby slumbering in his arms.

“Such a miracle,” he thought. He'd always thought that miracles didn't just “happen”, but that they were made from skill and timing. Then he became a father and that belief crumbled.

Statistically, this baby was an anomaly when you considered the genetic odds. The genetics class he'd taken in Colorado stunned him; so many things to go wrong! So many small, uncontrollable events! A betting man would never consider those odds . . .

Then he'd met Li Pong Xiang.

Ezra traced the soft, round cheek swaddled in his embrace. Things about family connection made sense now where, in the past, they had been beyond comprehension. He shifted his attention to his wife, her head tipped against the small airplane window in sleep. Luck and destiny weren't things he ever believed in before, but they were the only explanation for all he had right now. He could have gone numerous other directions and never crossed paths with the love of his life.

The idea was unnerving.

Those two boys were the common factors in Ezra's decision making process for the past fifteen years. It was astonishing that their turbulent history resulted in all this happiness.

Amelia frowned and gurgled as she approached wakefulness. “Shh, my sweet child, do not fuss. Everything is fine and I am here,” he whispered as he cuddled her close. His lips brushed the softness of her cheek and the dark, downy silk of her hair smelled like innocence. He adjusted his arms, allowing his daughter to settle and quiet.

Ezra softly kissed her velvety brow and when he looked up, saw Vin smiling back over his seat at him. Chris slept beside him with his injured leg stretched in the aisle. Ezra winked and Vin turned his attention back to the black beyond through the window.

“He has come so far,” Ezra thought as the now familiar feeling of pride welled in his heart. “If such a remarkable young man can emerge from such a heinous history, there is hope for us all.”

“Shall I take her for a while?”

Ezra turned to his sleepy-eyed wife and whispered, “I daresay that she is quite comfortable where she is and that we shouldn’t tempt fate.” Li Pong blinked lazily, her face lighting up when her gaze fell to Amelia. Ezra kissed the raven crown of his love’s head. “Get some sleep while you can, my sweet. We are fine.”

His wife smile softened and she shifted to lean against the window again after adjusting the small airline pillow. She uttered one quiet sigh that warmed Ezra’s soul and just before dropping off, breathed, “I love you.”

Ezra whispered, “I love you, too, my darling,” and marveled at how easily the words flowed from his mouth – and heart. “*I, too, have come far,*” he realized.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The plane touched down at Logan Airfield ahead of schedule as a sun-brightened sky haloed the horizon. Since they were not in any rush, the group of friends waited for the plane to empty before rising from their cramped positions.

“Hey, Ezra,” Nate stated as he stood in the aisle and stretched. “What did ya think of the flying coach class?”

Ezra rose carefully as he juggled the awakening babe in his arms wiggled and stepped back to allow Li Pong into the aisle.

“The asinine rule regarding infants in First Class . . .” he started, his statement interrupted by a glare from Li Pong as she shushed him and reached for the now wiggling infant. Ezra seamlessly shifted his focus to the transfer as his tirade continued, but in a hushed tone. “. . . should be applied on a case-by-case basis. I do realize that the elite atmosphere of First Class should be maintained, but there must be a way to separate heathen children with despicable manners from those with finer intent. By the way my knees are protesting at this point in time, I am seriously considering renewing my pilot’s license so we may travel in a more acceptable manner.”

Nathan and Josiah snickered as did Raine, who offered to help Li Pong with the baby’s traveling accessories. The five were soon heading down the aisle, men in front, ladies behind, with Josiah and Nathan amusedly ribbing Ezra all the way about slumming in coach class.

Chris, standing a row back in the aisle so Vin could retrieve their packs from the overhead, rubbed his knee as he carefully flexed his leg back to life. “I’d pitch in to get Ezra a license,” he growled. “I don’t recall these seats being so crowded.”

Vin laughed and offered Chris his backpack. “Here. Want me to get your cane?”

“Nah, they’ll give it to me at the door.”

The two of them moved forward in a now empty aisle to the exit and a smiling attendant handed Chris his metal topped cane. He uttered gruff thanks in response to her cheery farewell and followed the rest up the jet way, many yards behind. Vin paused and gave the attendant a warmer thanks, which allowed Chris space to work out his body kinks with more privacy. Vin, too, appreciated the idea of extra space. Air travel wasn't something he dealt with very well, either.

Chris and Vin caught up with the others at the luggage carousel, instantly noticing the uniformed young man stacking bags on a cart. A cardboard sign with "Dunne Family" written on it stuck out between two bags. Vin raised a brow at Nate while Chris narrowed his eyes at the growing pile of suitcases.

"Looks like Buck's arranged our ride in style," Nathan chuckled. "Yonder." Tipping his head aside, Vin followed the indicated line and saw a black stretch limo at the curb with a perky woman wearing a suit that matched the bag boy's standing at the open door. "Even got the color right!"

Vin laughed. "Nice! I take it Ez's already out there?"

"Yup. Said to leave the bags to the help, but I just wanna be sure he gets everything. Go ahead – I know your bags."

"Thanks, Nate." Vin turned to Chris, noting the pinched corners of his eyes that indicated pain. "Come on, Chris, let's wait outside."

Leaving Josiah and Nathan to collect the bags, the others weaved through the crowd and trailed outside. Chris, bringing up the rear, allowed the others to load up first. He cracked a lopsided grin when the ladies let out appreciative squeals about free champagne; the sound of a cork popping wasn't far behind. He paused at the open door at Vin's chuckle and met his son's amused eyes.

"Hope you aren't getting any ideas when your time comes," Chris joked.

Vin shook his head as he laughed. "I'm planning on horses of a different kind. It's gonna be awhile, anyway."

"You'll get there. That finish line is in sight, son, and I know you'll get it done. You always have."

Vin's features softened with the praise. "It's going to be a stressful couple years."

"True, but we always have your back. You know that."

Vin nodded. "Yeah, I do." He tipped his head. "Better claim your seat by the door while it's still free."

The following minutes consisted of jostling bags, quieting Amelia and shifting bodies until everyone's legs met in a tangle between the spacious limo seats. The smooth ride ended at the lobby doors of a hotel that raised Ezra's eyebrows.

"I see that Mr. Wilmington heeded my advice," he said with a pleased expression.

“I can’t believe you didn’t check up on the plans before we left,” Nathan quipped as he assisted the others in exiting the stretch vehicle.

An annoyed expression crossed Ezra’s face when his wife snorted and said, “He planned to. The girls kept him too busy.”

“I never realized how much of one’s day is focused on two tiny individuals,” he admitted as he reached out and stroked Amelia’s smooth cheek with his finger. “I do not know how you manage, Mr. Jackson, with three precious little ones.”

“See these?” Nathan pointed to the dark sashes under each eye. “Well earned.”

Checking in at the front desk didn’t take long and each of them obtained a written timetable from Buck along with their room key. Ezra and Li Pong brightened at the opportunity of a nap before the afternoon ceremony. Nathan and Raine exchanged playful glances regarding the same free time and Josiah smiled and muttered something about relaxing by the pool with a book. Chris offered to join him and handed Vin his room key card and tipped his head toward the lobby with a lopsided grin.

Vin’s thoughts of free time vanished when he spotted Nettie smiling at him from a lobby chair. Pleased, his face brightened immediately and warmed the hearts of his surrounding family. He handed his small suitcase to Josiah, who took it without complaint.

“Thanks, Josiah. I’ll see you later, okay?”

### *NETTIE*

Nettie Wells watched the group with amused pleasure as they swept into the hotel lobby with ignorant abandon of the effect they had on the public. Outsiders automatically gave her lively family a wide berth without thought; as individuals, they were impressive enough. As a group, their commanding presence was indisputable and it was rather entertaining to see how they garnered long looks and cleared the lobby at the same time.

Although the magnificent group numbered many, Nettie’s eyes only focused on one. Vin Tanner, connected to her heart with an invisible thread that warmed proverbial cockles like no other, managed to be the sum of her working life. Long retired from the Social Services after working with a seemingly infinite number of troubled children and families, Nettie still marveled that this one man confirmed the positive influence of her years of work. Both he and JD started with so little and with so much against them, as did many of her cases. She always thought that the boys’ ingrained personalities saved them and she’d been privileged to act as a mere guide on their early road of life.

Vin Tanner and JD Dunne represented the best of her work. When Vin's eyes met her across the lobby, pride burned brightly and she rose to meet him.

"Nettie," Vin said, embracing her in an affectionate hug.

She closed her eyes and glowed in the essence of the action, returning the hug and remembering how far they'd come. "Vin," she whispered.

He released her, keeping one arm around her shoulders. "Casey with JD?"

"Of course. She felt a little guilty leaving me but I assured her that you would pick up the slack."

"Whatever you need, you know that. According to our schedule, we have a few hours. What's the plan?"

She picked up her bag from the lobby chair and tucked her hand in the crook of Vin's muscled arm. "I just need to pick up a few things. It won't take long." As they left the hotel, she noticed the lingering looks Vin got from a majority of passers-by as they walked to a nearby department store. "Sure you want to spend your time with an old woman?"

"Aw, Nettie, you ain't old and you've got more life 'n most people I know. So, what first?"

Knowing Vin's apprehension about crowds and busy public places, Nettie made a point to be direct with her chores. Casey's party list was thankfully short and wouldn't take long to fill, leaving Nettie to have a nice lunch with Vin, a rare gift these days.

As they walked, she recalled her time with him and how unique their experiences together were. So many obstacles cluttered the boys' path to adulthood; she'd often wondered if they could overcome it all. How two small boys dramatically changed the lives of five grown men was astonishing. After several bumps in the road, Nettie thought they finally had a clear path - then that Gaines woman came along.

The shopping didn't take long, resulting in two bags of items that Vin carried into the restaurant. They opted for outside seating, the sidewalk passers-by providing their entertainment. It was clear that many of them were here for the same reason as her acquired family - graduation ceremonies.

Nettie thanked their server for her iced tea and regarded the menu left behind. She and Vin made their choices and settled in to wait.

"So," Nettie started, patting Vin's wrist across the small table. "You finish up classes next year. What do you think of all this change?"

The young man shifted, flashing a lopsided grin. "I haven't really thought it through," he replied softly. "It's better to think one day at a time, I guess. And Patrice still has to finish up, too."

"Are you two still graduating at the same time?"

"Yeah. After that's Rio - hopefully - then after that, I guess we'll see."

Nettie beamed, inwardly pleased at how, well, normal, her boy sounded. Still, there was something there she couldn't pin down. There was a cloud deep inside those wide, blue eyes and she took a shot to identify it. "What's bothering you, honey?"

Obviously caught, Nettie saw a flash of guilt before Vin ducked his head and concentrated on spinning his iced tea glass and making rings of icy moisture on the tablecloth.

"I can't . . . it's just . . ." Vin puffed a frustrated breath working to form his thoughts. "I had an interview with a news crew a couple of days ago. They interviewed all the guys. Except Chris."

Nettie understood that the seemingly abrupt subject change made sense in Vin's head. The young man just needed time to lay it straight in his mind before he spoke again and she was more than willing to give him that time.

Vin sat back and raked his fingers through his hair, chewing his lower lip before meeting her eyes again with a shrug. "I look at Buck 'n Louisa and how happy they are, and Ezra and Li Pong - Nathan, Raine, Josiah and his flock," he paused at Nettie's chuff of laughter and flashed a smile. "I mean they all are so happy."

Nettie knew what Vin headed toward, but let him spell it out.

"All this feels like such a change. JD will go off with Casey and stand on his own and move on. When I graduate and move on to training full time . . . what's going to happen to my dad, Nettie? He's always been there for me and I want to do the same, but I'm gonna be all over the place showing with Patrice, running triathlons, training. He's going to be home alone a lot. I don't want that for him. It's like he gave up his life for me."

"Vin," Nettie said firmly, her heart aching for her boy. She gripped his hand, stilling the nervous motion. "I understand how you feel. I've often thought the same thing, and Chris and I have talked about it over the years. He's his own man, Vin, you know that. He will find his way, and he'll do it his way."

Nodding twice, Vin worked his lips and considered the damp ring art again. "I don't remember much about the accident, you know? He had the ATF then. It changed everything for him - for us - and I feel like I should remember more. Maybe that's what's buggin' me, Nettie. Maybe I'm not comfortable with the fact that I know so little about such a huge event in my - our lives."

Nettie, squeezed his hand once then sat back to take a sip of tea and form a reply. Vin was right. Put in the same circumstances, she would feel - stupid. "I imagine it makes you feel a little ignorant."

"Yeah, it does."

"You were only 10 years old, Vin. You had no power and no control. Do you have questions now? Or, I guess I should say, do you need answers now?"

Vin frowned in thought for a few moments, speaking only when the lines in his forehead smoothed. “Yeah, I guess so. Not sure what the questions are, though. That’s what’s bugging me.”

Nettie patted his hand. “Talk to Chris. I think it would make you feel better.”

“I guess I will.”

By the time their server brought their meals, Vin looked much more relaxed in Nettie’s sharp eyes.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Vin pushed open his hotel room door and looked around. “Chris?”

“Back here. You got an hour before the limo picks us up.” Chris stepped into Vin’s range of vision, a towel around his waist as he scrubbed his hair with a second towel. “Bathroom’s all yours.”

“kay.” Vin let the door close behind him and grinned at his dad’s sparse get up. “You goin’ in that?”

Chris paused and gave his son a sidelong look, his head tipped slightly aside and his eyes etched with amusement. “What if I was?” he countered.

“I’d say wear lots of sunscreen on those pasty sticks you call legs.” Vin waggled a finger in the direction of Chris’ lower half. “OUCH!”

The towel snap was typical of Larabee’s shooting - quick and on target. “Smartass,” he chuckled as he resumed drying his hair.

Vin rubbed his shoulder and grinned as he flipped open his suitcase and shook out his change of clothes, and then headed to the shower. Once behind the bathroom’s closed door, he noticed the hovering humidity and immediately stripped, leaving his clothes in a pile. Adjusting the water several degrees hotter than Chris left it, Vin stepped under the spray and sighed.

As he washed his hair, he let his mind wander. The scars on Chris’ leg still stood out and Vin tried to decide if there was any more atrophy from the last time he saw the damaged limb. Chris rarely exposed his legs these past years, the only exception of his wardrobe of black and blue jeans being the occasional swim trunks in the Jacuzzi. He couldn’t decipher if his dad was self-conscious about the appearance of his wounded leg - he didn’t think so.

Vin remembered the hospitalization and bandages, and he realized that his dad had been handicapped for over ten years – just about half of his own life. Did Chris resent his altered lifestyle? If so, he was damned good at hiding it. Except for the recovery period, Chris was always there for him and Vin never felt abandoned. Chris was a devoted father, first and foremost.

Vin ducked his head under the hot flow of water and suds ran down his face as he scrubbed his scalp. His actions were without thought because his mind was busy trying to recall what he remembered about the accident. Patrice's words rolled through his mind. He'd picked up facts over the years, but never asked Chris directly about any details; all he personally remembered was sitting in the school lunch room one day, watching Mrs. Gaines walk by and wondering what it was going to be like having his school director for a mother. He remembering being afraid of the thought.

The fear was why he kept his silence. Now having a bigger world view, Vin figured that it was probably fear of Chris leaving him, emotionally.

Dr. Will had talked to him and Chris a lot about how they would always be connected because they were family, but it was also healthy and normal to have time away from each other because it was how people grew. Vin grinned at that memory and turned off the shower.

Grabbing a towel from the rack, he dried off and rubbed his hair, remembering that the growing-by-being-apart concept hadn't make sense at the time. With age and hindsight, Vin realized the sense of it, but at 10, it wasn't so easy to understand.

Mrs. Raymond, however, had made it easier. From the moment he entered the new school on that first day, she guided him and took the time to listen to him. He vaguely remembered the Washington D.C. trip in 6th grade, but he did remember that she was the reason he agreed to go.

Then everything went wrong when Chris was injured and Mrs. Raymond simply wasn't there; if it wasn't for the team and sports, Vin knew he'd be a different person now. He straightened and tossed the damp towel aside, and shook out another one and wrapped it around his waist.

Things changed dramatically after that trip. Chris medically retired and had a regimen of physical therapy almost as busy as Vin's sports, and a year later, Josiah, Ezra and Nathan quit the ATF and embarked on new careers. Dad's team was still around, but everything else was different.

Vin wandered from the steamy bathroom and looked over to his dad, just now pulling on his boots.

"Dad?" he asked, deciding to follow his train of thought.

"What?" Chris answered, as he tugged his pant legs over his boot tops.

"What happened in Malibu?"

Chris paused a second before finishing with his pant legs and slowly sat up. He rose from the bed, pushing on his cane and stood staring at his toes for a few moments longer. Then he turned sideways and faced his son. "May I ask why you're thinking of that now?"

Vin dropped on the second bed as he spoke. "Just thinkin' of how things change with time, and what causes the changes. Reminded me of when you got hurt and how life was after that. I remember being scared all the time and wonder if there was anything I could have done differently."

Chris nodded and ducked his head. "Tell you what. We'll talk about it after this ceremony. It's going to take a little while, because it took me a long while to figure it all out myself. In fact, it might be better if the others were here, too, to fill in some blanks." He looked up and found Vin's eyes. "It's about time we all talked about it. Is that okay? Can you wait a little longer?"

"Sure." Vin dug through his small suitcase and found socks, boxers and his deodorant. "We sure don't have the time now. I better get movin', huh?"

The smile Chris offered was lopsided. "Guess so. I'll meet you in the lobby since I take a little longer to get from point A to point B. I guess Buck's limo is our ride again."

Vin beamed. "Sweet!"



The bustle of the crowd required Chris to concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other as he followed Vin down the grassy aisle. A sea of white folding chairs filled with brightly dressed families, bobbing balloons and hand held signs of congratulations surrounded them giving the entire place a party atmosphere. He nearly bumped into Vin at his son's abrupt stop.

Chris looked up to see that they'd reached a cordoned off area with Vin showing a uniformed security guard their clearance paperwork. The guard unhooked the rope and the ten of them filed through, heading to a block of empty seats set to one side.

"Looks like Buck's takin' care of business," Nate commented with a grin. "Reserved seating!"

They settled in, leaving five empty seats in the front for Buck, Louisa, Libby, Casey and Nettie. Chris and the others spent the next few minutes enjoying the lively crowd. Just as the ceremonial music began, amid cheers and clapping, the rest of their group arrived. Buck, sporting both a huge grin on his face and his giggling daughter on his hip, was easy to spot since he towered over the seated crowd with Louisa close in behind, her striking, upswept hair shining copper in the sun.

Chris watched his longtime friend with both admiration and amusement. Buck was the picture of contentment and pride which made him seem bigger than life. Chris, too, smiled, infected by his energy.

"Buck looks pretty darn happy." Josiah must have felt the same aura.

"He has every reason to be," Ezra added.

Chris glanced at his team, struck by their connection. At that moment, he realized to the very depth of his often blackened soul how fortunate he was to have the acquaintance of these men. Through the hell of these past twenty years, they were his touchstone to life but none of them shined like Buck Wilmington.

"Heya, guys!" Buck greeted when he swept up to their seats, standing aside, allowing the ladies to choose their seats first. He handed off laughing Libby to Louisa as she passed. "Ain't this somethin'? Did ya ever think we'd be here fifteen years ago when we first saw our boys?"

"There he is!" Casey squealed, pointing at the long line of graduates filing into their seats.

Everyone turned to look, and Chris blinked at the press of black robes, at first stymied at how Casey found her fiancée in the impossible crowd. Then he saw the large, gold "Team 7+" on the top of a mortar board. Vin laughed and pointed just as JD turned their way. His dark hair, long enough to tuck behind his ears, framed his face as the decorated cap flattened it. JD grinned maniacally, waving and swaying from standing on his toes. A colorful drape around his neck dangled nearly to his knees.

"Magna cum laude," Buck said, puffed with pride.

"It looks good on him, Buck," Chris noted, still grinning.

Chris fell into a static state of mind in the time it took for the black snake of graduates filled the seats. He sat somewhere in the middle of the row and his knee protested despite the pain pills he had taken before leaving the hotel. The familiar fuzz of the medication usually did little to slow him down, but now, sitting in the spring sun in an ocean of buzzing people, Chris found his mind wandering over the years as the speeches began.

He recalled the circumstances that began with his first look at JD - how small the boy looked through the sights of his gun; how swimming through a pile of boxes and crates with single-minded purpose resulted in his first sight of Vin; the feeling of anguished relief that overwhelmed everything when he realized the skinny, dirty child was still alive; JD's incessant chatter; Nathan's barked orders; the ambulance siren and the smell of garbage - it was all still there, deeply tucked away in his mind.

The series of visions rolled by, as unstoppable as an avalanche: JD riding Milagro and Vin on Peso; fishing while dodging swinging fishing poles and hooks; seeing his crushed black Ram for the first time. Then things skipped forward to when he swept Vin in his arms after a dark void of two years. Chris' eyes stung at that picture.

Their lives continued to roll along, frame by frame: Vin swimming. JD maneuvering his robotic team creation into a wall. Vin crossing a finish line. Buck

swinging JD in a circle on their pitiful front lawn, dogs yipping at their heels; JD skipping a grade to Vin's level, and Vin's amazingly level-headed acceptance of the event; Vin's first prom; JD's first prom; The boys' heads poked under the hood of the ragged Jeep they shared; College acceptance letters; the boys' alphabetical high school graduation ceremony resulting in JD's graduating "first"; watching JD's flight disappear in the distance, heading east to M.I.T. and Buck's lost expression. Vin and JD announcing their engagements. Vin running, shooting, riding, swimming, standing with flexed bow and complete concentration on his target . . .

And now, proud and excited faces surrounded him as they crossed another milestone as a team – the Magnificent Seven plus some. JD got that right.

Not once in the entire collage, Chris realized, did Ella's face enter the picture. Her power over him was gone. She'd severely changed the course of his life twice, but now she simply did not matter because not only did he survive, he thrived. Even now, life changed right before his eyes and Chris Larabee embraced it all on his own terms.

Well, maybe he did have a little help. Team 7+, indeed.

"Here he comes!" Casey's excited squeal caused all of them to stand. At the stage, the gold flecks on a mortar board indicated their family member. "He's next!"

"John Daniel Wilmington-Dunne!"

Their group of ten roared. Heads turned their direction at their exceptional noise. Chris – and by the look on his friend's face, Buck, too – was stunned for a second at JD's expanded name, but they still issued a hearty "Woohoo!" as the familiar figure bounded across the stage and accepted his diploma.

With the document in hand JD paused, and with a wide grin clearly visible to the family, raised the document, pointed directly to his family, and pressed the sheepskin to his heart with a very clear message: He didn't manage this accolade alone.

The motion brought Buck Wilmington to tears and Chris' eyes burned with fierce pride and thankfulness that they all celebrated this milestone together.

## CHAPTER NINE

The Wilmingtons spared no expense on the graduation party. They'd managed to get a large chunk of the top floor of the hotel that included the Presidential Suite and surrounding mini-suites, so the party stayed in one place and within walking distance of comfortable beds.

JD and Casey had many friends and every one of them made an appearance at some point after the ceremony. At one time, Chris figured there to be at least 60 people milling about the suite and the adjoining halls. He was amazed that they never got a call from the front desk. Then again, with the youthful age of the visiting crowd, the noisier ones were gone by 10:00 PM to continue celebrating at their favorite haunts.

"Ahhh, youth," Josiah sighed, sinking into the luxurious and gigantic curved couch in the big suite as the time closed in on 11 PM. He stretched out his legs with a groan. "I envy their energy."

"I don't envy their hangovers," Nate added, dropping next to Josiah. Raine sat on his other side with a tired sigh and sweet smile. Nathan patted her thigh. "We're up late."

"And we can sleep past 6:00 AM," she said with glee. Li Pong crossed in front of her, handing off a flute of champagne which Raine accepted without hesitation.

"Now that it is just us, I would like to offer a toast," Ezra stated, standing before them and reaching out a hand to his wife.

"As long as it ain't too long," Buck joked. "I know Louisa and Li Pong have to relieve the sitter in Nettie's room."

Chris and Vin made their way in from the balcony, the twinkling lights of the city behind them, and joined the growing circle starting by the curve of the couch. Buck joined the arc, Louisa on one side and JD on the other and next to Vin. Casey pushed her way between the boys, giggling, and JD slipped his arm

around her waist. Vin shuffled aside so Nettie could fit between him and her niece. The three on the couch rose to their feet.

Everyone retrieved a full flute from the low, circular coffee table and Ezra took a step back to stand next to Li Pong, closing their circle. He cleared his throat and held his glass close to his vest. Everyone fell silent.

"To family and friends," Ezra started, "and what makes both, one. As we have found with time and trials, each singular triumph is our own as a family. Well done!" He raised his glass and everyone followed suit.

"Well done!" They chorused. Then, they all took a sip and exploded into chatter.

"Well, some of us worked harder than others."

"What qualifies as a triumph?"

"I have enough scars to prove my part in these triumphs."

"Good Lord, help me through the next one."

Grinning, Chris turned to Vin and they touched rims with a crystal ring. Vin smiled back and they both took a sip. Vin slipped his arm around Nettie and pulled her in. The chatter slowed, and then Louisa, Raine, Li Pong and Nettie excused themselves to retrieve the children from Nettie's room.

"Can you give us a few minutes?" Vin whispered to Nettie when he escorted her to the door.

Nettie gave him a knowing smile and patted his hand. "Sure, honey. You may not get a chance to have them all together like this again anytime soon. Casey!" she called. "Help me a minute?"

"Sure, Nettie." Casey gave JD a quick kiss before trotting toward her aunt.

"Thanks." Vin gave Nettie an affectionate kiss on the cheek, and then turned around to study his family until he heard Nettie's suite door close with a soft snick. With that, he moved to take his place beside Chris, who lowered himself to the impressive couch with a barely muffled groan. Nathan, Josiah and Ezra sat beside him and Buck settled on the arm of the couch. Vin pulled JD down to sit on the coffee table with him.

Vin looked at each face, one at a time, each man falling silent after meeting his eyes.

"What's on your mind, son?" Josiah inquired.

"Well, I didn't want to take away from JD's party, but he said it was okay."

"It's not just okay," JD added. "It's overdue, I think."

Vin shifted. "I have some questions and I thought about asking each one of you alone, but this way is faster," he started with a wince. He'd hoped to sound a little more elegant.

"Sure, son," Buck said. "Shoot, while we're still coherent."

"With the upcoming media presence, I think I – we - need to know what happened in Malibu. I mean, I've heard some things, and the press might pick up on them . . ."

"Like?" Chris' expression when he spoke wasn't hostile. In fact, Vin thought he looked a relieved.

"Well, I haven't read the accident report, but did a doctor say you were hit by a car's bumper, Dad?"

"That's true."

"Then, you weren't in a car?"

"Not that I remember, no."

"I heard the whole thing." Buck's words came out flat and his eyes took on a far-away expression that had nothing to do with alcohol. The others turned to him and he ducked his head, studying the bubbles in his glass. "Ella was parked up the street and Chris saw her. I heard him yellin' at her, then I heard gunshots, and then . . . nothing but crazy noises – rattles, scraping, a loud thud, horns honking, yelling - until a witness picked up the phone and told me Chris had been hit by a car. I was on a plane to California within an hour."

"I went with him," Nathan added quietly. "When we got there, they hadn't found Ella yet. They found the car, shot up and abandoned a few miles away, but they didn't find her until hours later."

"She wasn't killed in an accident?" Vin asked, eyes wide.

Chris shifted before speaking. "No, she died from gunshot wounds. Mine. I've read the report, but don't really remember much before or after being hit. I do know, from subsequent investigation, that not only did she try to run me down and kill me, Ella Gaines was responsible for the death of Sarah and Adam, and for your kidnapping."

"What?" JD breathed, straightening. "When Vin was gone those two years?"

"No, not that time," Josiah answered in his calming voice and looking directly at Vin. "The second time."

Vin held Josiah's look as shock rolled through his body, making his stomach churn and his limbs tingle. "I was kidnapped again?" His hoarse whisper was loud in the dead-silent room. The five men in front of him shared a ripple of guilt in their eyes.

"We never told you that part because we did not want to shake your foundation at home," Josiah explained. "With your history, a solid base at home was essential, especially then, with all that upheaval."

"There was no point in telling you," Buck continued. "The threat was taken care of and you had no memory of it, Vin. It would have been unnecessary stress during a very bad time in our lives."

"Who? Who tried to take me?"

"Well, she actually did take you, son, but she gave you Rohypnol – roofies – so you didn't remember any of it."

Buck then spelled out Ella's plan and Charlotte Richmond's part in the scheme. He also told Vin about the subsequent investigation into Ella's background and how she connected to Cletus Fowler, who more than likely put out the contract on Sarah and Adam for Ella. Charlotte was a pawn to a brilliant schemer.

After all of it, JD and Vin blinked, frowning as they worked to process all of the new information.

"So, you never confirmed the contract? The one on Chris' wife and son?" JD asked.

"No. Fowler died when the house he holed up in burned down in a resulting SWAT action," Buck explained tiredly.

"So Mrs. Richmond was one of Ella's victims, too," Vin said softly. "Wasn't she?"

Chris tipped his head in thought. "You could look at it like that, yeah," he admitted. His expression said otherwise.

"What happened to her?"

"After she served five years in the Dominican Republic for drug possession, she was extradited to the U.S. and is serving time for kidnapping and conspiracy. She was also found to be insane as is serving her sentence in a facility in Maryland."

"Insane?" Vin whispered, eyes wide.

"Vin," Chris began in a low, soothing voice. "She was, and still is, delusional. She lives in her own world with her deceased daughter and appears to be happy, now at least." He held Vin's gaze so his son could read truth in his eyes.

"You've checked on her?"

"Yes, I have. She has no other family. Her case worker keeps me briefed when she's evaluated annually. At the time, it probably upset you that she just disappeared. I am sorry about that part."

"I . . . I thought she moved away. I was angry with her for just going like that, without telling me."

"We discussed that with Dr. Will, Vin." Josiah explained. "We figured –" he indicated the other men beside him – "that it was better you were angry at her than feeling like you weren't safe. You had a lot to deal with already and we did not want your hard-earned feelings of security shattered once again." He smiled. "We knew she was always good to you, Vin. We didn't want to take that away."

"It was my call," Chris claimed. "I take the responsibility for the decision."

"And as time passed," Ezra added, "A 'need to know' scenario never materialized."

"Until now. Chris and I figured out just recently that we had to tell you everything." Buck closed.

Right after he spoke, Casey, Louisa and Raine returned. Louisa gave Buck a warm, lingering kiss on the cheek over the top of their sleeping child cradled in her arms on her way to one of the bedrooms. Raine wiggled in next to Nathan and Casey sat in JD's lap, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Ezra stood and stretched. "I believe I will follow my lovely wife to our room," he said before facing the younger men. "Mr. Dunne, congratulations on your great achievement. Mr. Tanner, I do hope you look upon our actions as being in your best interest at the time, but I, for one, am glad you have the entire picture now. I hope you do not judge us harshly." He touched high on his forehead with two fingers, taking a short bow to the group. "Good night, everyone."

"What was that all about?" Casey asked, confused, as Ezra left the suite.

"Family business," Vin answered with an understanding smile. "Closed family business."

"Huh?"

"I'll tell ya later," JD said, standing so she slid from his lap. "Last round at my favorite bar? The night's still early!" he asked cheerily, nudging Vin. "It's within walking distance!"

Vin stood. "Sure!"

The remaining 7 leaned back into the pillowy arms of the lush couch, shaking their heads and chuckling.

"I think I speak for the over 40 crowd when I say 'pass'," Buck laughed. "Got your room cards?"

"Yup!" JD said brightly. "We'll try to be quiet!"

Josiah rubbed his eyes, saying, "Don't think the Hounds of Hell could wake me, son."

The three youngsters hustled out the door, chattering like squirrels. It was profoundly silent when the door closed.

After a long moment, Josiah said softly, "Well, I'm very satisfied with the conclusion of things, gentlemen."

"Hear, hear," Nathan said as Rained nodded in agreement

"We all are," Buck added. "And don't call us gentlemen."

The others chuckled, prying themselves from the cushions and groaning, before shuffling to their bedrooms.



The next day, later in the morning, Chris and Buck elected to stay behind with JD and sift through the kid's numerous job offers from a dizzying number of

alphabet government agencies while the rest of the group toured Boston. Casey acted as tour guide.

The group trickled back to the hotel starting with Ezra and Li Pong's return mid-afternoon for Amelia's nap time. Nathan and Raine were the last to return, opting to stay out for a romantic dinner alone. After everyone packed, the large family swarmed the lounge area of the hotel, taking over the entire back section. The night, filled with talk, laughing and story-telling, ended with the lounge's closure at midnight.

JD and Casey thought ahead for departure day breakfast and everyone gathered around a huge reserved table at a nearby restaurant. When everyone was finished, JD announced his acceptance of the NSA's job offer.

"Look out terrorists," Josiah, said, engulfing JD's hand in a congratulatory shake.

"The agency certainly has obtained a skilled employee. Congratulations, nephew." Ezra tipped his head in JD's direction.

"They want me in 2 weeks. I'll be doing Admin stuff until I get my security clearance. We've gotta pack and find a place," JD said excitedly. "They're payin' for the move, too!"

"You're gonna be busy," Nathan said, smiling. Raine, sitting next to Casey, gave her a quick hug.

"Nettie and Casey are gonna start packing while I look for a place with Buck and get my credentials." JD's eyes were bright with excitement. "Thanks, Dad and Chris, for helping me decide."

"Any time, son," Chris offered, grinning. "Here's to your success."

They all raised their juice glasses and coffee mugs in a toast.

"I guess you'll all be contacted during my background check. I'm glad we talked last night." JD nudged Vin.

There was a blur of action after breakfast that ended with the rest of the group arriving at the airport. Together, they waited to board their flight to Denver. Restless, Vin couldn't sit and stood at the large windows, watching the airplanes. It was crowded, and the flight was full. He was not looking forward to the trip.

Chris sensed his son's unease and kept a watchful eye on him. He unconsciously rubbed his knee and thought back over the past days with fondness and pride. "Vin will have his turn soon," he thought with satisfaction. A flutter of excitement awoke in his belly; he always knew his son could achieve greatness. Vin was a champion already – Olympic gold would simply be icing on everything else he'd survived.

Vin must have felt his thoughts because he turned and looked at Chris with an easy smile, and all traces of nervousness vanished. The young man left the

window and settled next to his beloved father, sitting with knees wide, resting his forearms on his thighs as he studied the floor over his clasped hands.

After a bit, he spoke. "I remember visiting you in the hospital, in L.A."

Chris' mouth slanted, neutral. "I don't."

"I know. You were . . . it scared me."

"The doctors didn't want you there. Buck insisted. He said that your imagination was worse than the reality."

Vin nodded. "Yeah. I was sure you were dead and nobody wanted to tell me. I remember laying my hand on your chest and feeling your heart."

"And you left Cat for me."

Vin chuckled. "Yeah, I did. He was pretty ratty looking at that point."

It was Chris' turn to laugh. "Yeah, he was. Can't believe it's still in one piece."

"Well, Cat's got about as many scars as you do and still in one piece, like you."

Chris tipped his head in Vin's direction and his smile softened. "I don't remember much until just before getting transferred to Denver." Chris sat back, hands still. "There were some hard months that followed. I remember that you were my sole reason to keep on, Vin. You saved my life." He met his son's eyes, holding the connection with direct sincerity. "I never really thanked you for that. For you just being you."

"No need for thanks," Vin responded. "It's more like paying it forward, right?"

Chris cracked a grin. "And now for a new adventure," he said before turning serious again. "I'll tell you, I never anticipated any of this in my life. I am so grateful for all of this." He indicated the others with a sweep of his hand. "Everything is still an adventure, Vin. It's just great to be alive."

"Yeah, I know what you mean." Vin looked to the ceiling at the sound of their flight being called and the noise level shifted as people in the waiting room rose to gather their things. "Well, that's us." Vin smirked as Chris rose with a groan. "You could have pre-boarded you know," Vin chuckled.

"That would mean I'm handicapped," Chris breathed.

Chris stood a moment, allowing his joints to adjust and the rest of the crowd to move beyond them. Then it was just the two of them, standing side by side. Vin started to turn but stopped when Chris' hand rested on his forearm. He looked up and into his father's eyes, seeing nothing but love and deep pride.

"Vin, I know you are going to be extremely busy the next few years with school, Patrice and training. You are going to have a lot on your plate. I just want you to know that I am always here for you, always ready, willing and able, despite this." He raised the cane. "I wouldn't change anything in the past because the past

is what made you what you are today. I can't be any prouder of you than I already am, son." Chris let his hand fall, but he held Vin's gaze. "And that's precisely why I can't think of myself as handicapped. I'm a very lucky man.'

Vin stood a bit straighter and his eyes glistened. He showed no inclination to move as his beloved father's words washed over him and filled him with warmth. Then his face softened with a fond smile. "I love you, too, Dad."

After a moment, Chris chuckled and leaned on his cane to move out. "And they say I only speak ten words a day."

Vin laughed as he shadowed his dad to the jet way and home.

CHAPTER TEN  
*CHRIS*

"There," Marissa said, indicating the dirt driveway by pointing her finger. "The mailbox says LT7 Ranch. That's the place, right"

Tony slowed the van and carefully pulled off the winding highway with a bump.

"Ouch!" someone in the back yelled.

"Sorry," Tony apologized. "You two okay?"

"Fine!" Davy said. "That was Jim. He's okay."

"Just banged my head on the window," Jim confirmed. "I'm good."

The driveway was a long arc and the first building that came into sight was a barn with corrals and several horses that twitched ears acknowledging their arrival. Once around the barn, the drive straightened and revealed a long, low ranch house at the top of a rise and several vehicles parked off to one side. In front of the house there were huge trees shading a grassy area.

"I thought this was a one-on-one interview," Davy wondered aloud when they noticed several children running on the lawn and a number of adults standing around a huge grill or sitting in lounge chairs at the edge of the lawn or on the deck that extended from the house.

"Actually, that point wasn't addressed," Tony noted, circling around to park off to the side with the rest of the cars and trucks. "I just assumed and I should know better."

"There's Vin, I mean Mr. Tanner!" Marissa nearly squealed, pointing at the now familiar figure chasing a giggling child. When the van got closer, Vin stopped, looked up, and waved.

"Why, yes, there he is," Davy said somewhat dreamily. He snapped his mouth shut when Jim gave him a narrow-eyed glance.

Tony chuckled. "We've been set up, folks. Looks like a party."

In the time it took Tony to park the van, a trim, older man, standing by the grill, passed over a spatula and retrieved a cane leaning against the brick side of the barbeque and headed their way at a steady, limping pace. Vin trotted up to him and they met the group together.

"Mr. Duggan," Vin greeted, shaking the reporter's hand. "This is my dad, Chris Larabee."

"Mr. Duggan." Chris took his hand in a firm shake.

"Mr. Larabee. This is my crew, Marissa Crane, Davy Trice and Jim Kenner." He waited until everyone shook hands. "Looks like a relaxing day. Celebrating something? Can Jim take some pictures?"

"Just one of our frequent get-togethers," Chris explained. "As for pictures, generally, yes, but you may want to ask permission from the guys. Vin can show him around."

"Yes, I remember Mr. Standish's request." Tony turned and briefed the photographer, then sent him off with Vin to document the scene. That left Davy and Marissa eyeing each other. "One of you go with Jim."

"I'll go!" they said simultaneously before eyeing each other again.

"Davy, you go," Tony said, the words barely out of his mouth before his assistant sprinted to Vin's side. Tony though he heard a disappointed noise from Marissa, but she looked innocently back at him when he glanced her way.

"Please, it's quieter inside." Chris indicated the front door of the house on the other side of the vehicles.

Once inside, they enjoyed a sweeping view of the deck, barbeque area and the barn. Tony recognized the men he had already interviewed and smiled a little at the comfortable way they interacted with each other. If it was all an act, the journalist in Tony Duggan would feel it, but all he observed here was a close-knit family dynamic. He did note the surreptitious glances toward the house, confirming what he knew about how they watched each other's backs.

Photos graced the walls without cluttering them and smaller frames sat on the wooden mantle over the fireplace. A wrought-iron screen with a mounted cowboy silhouette blocked the open firebox. A large couch sat directly across from a big screen television and a carved, wooden rocking chair sat to one side with a quilt thrown over the back. The room was definitely masculine, but still felt warm and friendly. While Marissa studied each picture on the wall and took notes, Duggan approached Chris.

"Very nice home, Mr. Larabee."

"Thanks." Chris said, lowering himself into a recliner. "Help yourself to some iced tea."

A glass pitcher wet with condensation sat on the coffee table along with a pair of tall glasses and Tony saw a matching glass, half full, next to the recliner.

"Thanks." Tony helped himself, offered to pour a Marissa a glass, and then turned in a small circle to take in the rest of the room when she declined the offer. She seemed captivated by the photographs and her hand flew across the notebook pages.

"So this is where Vin grew up," Tony commented, taking a seat across from Chris. Marissa settled next to him.

"Yes, it is, from when he was 7 years old. It hasn't changed much over the years."

"Was it hard, raising two boys out here in the country?"

Chris chuckled and Tony noticed how the ridges of his face softened. "Well, there were times when we wished the emergency room was closer. It was a good thing Nate was around."

"So Vin and JD were pretty active, I take it?"

"Yes. They got into a lot, even with us standing right next to them."

"Boys will be boys, then?"

"Yeah, you could say that."

"Mr. Larabee," Tony scooted to the edge of his seat and then leaned his forearms on his knees to get closer to Chris. "When I spoke with Mr. Wilmington, I got the impression that there were some areas you might be reluctant to talk to me about. I told him at the time to prepare for the press, wanted or unwanted, if Vin wins a spot on the Olympic team. Did he tell you that?"

Chris nodded, "Yes, he did, and I appreciate the heads up, Mr. Duggan. We are familiar with how the press operates. With that in mind, we are prepared to respond regarding Vin's past and have a press agent lined up – Mary Travis."

"The news anchor?" Tony said, surprised. "You do have some connections, Mr. Larabee." Tony shook his head, grinning.

"Yeah, we do," Chris agreed calmly. "Her father-in-law was my boss when I was an agent."

"I read about his passing, what, two years ago?"

Chris nodded. "He was a fair and generous man. We were lucky to have him. I doubt our team would have been assembled if he wasn't there."

Tony glanced over to Marissa, and she nodded, confirming that she'd made a note of that.

Chris cleared his throat and got Tony's full attention. "The reason we asked you here today is right out there." He waved toward the big picture window that framed his extended family outside. "I think there's enough there to keep any media outlet busy when Vin's time comes and that's how we intend to play this out. It's Vin's show, not mine, not Buck's, not Josiah, Nathan's, JD's or Ezra's. We intend to keep the focus on Vin and his accomplishments, and on that." He nodded to the group outside.

"You mean family."

"The strength of family, yes. I know you told Vin that you couldn't figure out his motivation for competing; I'm here to tell you that what you see out there is the motivation. Any and all 'stories' from our past in the last 15 years come down to family: Nurturing it, protecting it, and basking in it. That's Vin's story, as well as mine, in a nutshell, Mr. Duggan."

Tony sat back, holding Chris' serene gaze and turned his subject's words over in his mind. Then, he tipped his head in realization before saying, "You aren't going to answer any questions regarding Ella Gaines, Cletus Fowler or Malibu, are you?"

Larabee's return expression looked like that of a smiling wolf. "I see that we understand each other then, Mr. Duggan. None of that is Vin's story."

Conceding defeat, Tony considered for a few moments before changing tactics and asking about how Vin got involved with each of the five Pentathlon events. As Chris spoke, the journalist noted the cadence of his subject's words and Chris' fluid expressions. When he first met Chris Larabee, Tony took him to be a stern, no-nonsense man with a tortured soul; but as he spoke, Tony marveled at the depth of feeling that shadowed every word and brightened his eyes.

Maybe Chris Larabee was a tortured man at one time in his life, but here and now, all he saw was deep pride, solid familial connections and a certain wonder and excitement about the future.

Tony Duggan found himself openly wishing to be the same way someday.

Chris finally wound down and from the finality of his last sentence, Tony knew they were done here for now. He smiled, and the two men held gazes for a moment. "I'm sure we have plenty to work with, Mr. Larabee." He stood, feeling strangely enlivened, as Chris levered out of the recliner, leaning on his cane. They shook hands with the journalist. "It will be an interesting next couple of years."

"It's been an interesting past fifteen years, I assure you," Chris agreed. "Please, have some food before you go. There's always plenty."

The trio moved outside and joined the rest, basking in glow that was the Magnificent Seven Family.

THE END