

ENDURE THE NIGHT

by jann

Webmaster Note: *This is a "rescued" story. It is also a very old story (c. 2001-2002) and was originally typed with no breaks or indentations in the paragraphs so it cannot easily be converted to a webpage, therefor it is hereby presented as a PDF file and appears as the author originally intended. It should still be readable on any browser and it's a great story!*

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~ CHAPTER ONE ~

"Those two still at it?" Chris Larabee asked as he sat at the table next to Buck Wilmington and nodded across the saloon to where Vin Tanner and the Reverend Mordecai Bliss were engaged in conversation. "Haven't let up since you left," Buck reported. "Though what they find to keep jawing about is beyond me. The reverend can't be trying to convert Vin or he'd have up and walked out of here before now. So, what do you think is going on?"

Chris shrugged. "It's none of my business."

The words were uncaring, as was the tone. But Buck knew that disinterest for a lie, for Chris had been eyeing the tracker and the itinerant preacher ever since he'd first walked into the saloon earlier in the evening to find them deep in a conversation that wrapped around them, setting them apart from the others in the darkened room. He'd sat at Buck's table then, and the two of them had watched and wondered. And two hours later, Chris having left and come back, they were still watching and wondering.

"Can't stay at it much longer," Chris pointed out. "It's almost time for Bliss' show to begin."

"Better not let him hear you talk about his preaching like that," Buck warned, his eyes over the glass he raised to his lips dark with a seriousness seldom seen there.

Chris shot a look to the preacher, wondering what Buck had seen to bring such a look to his eyes, for at first glance it was easy enough to believe that Bliss was nothing more than a simple man of God. But then, the same could be said of Josiah Sanchez -- until one paid attention.

And that's exactly what Chris did then, taking inventory, checking the surface against what might lie beneath.

A few years past fifty, Mordecai Bliss carried his years well, despite a slight limp that necessitated the use of an elaborately-styled cane. A tall man, with a full head of dark hair that showed no signs of gray, he was unbowed by the passage of years. Lean and fit, his movements were graceful and his posture relaxed, as if he were confident of his ability to keep himself in one piece -- or as if he were sure of a greater power to be relied on to see to it for him. As sober of expression as he was of dress, his eyes burned with a fire that, when well stoked, had no doubt scared more than a few sinners onto the path of righteousness. No, Chris thought. There was nothing at first glance that would warn that the fire in Bliss' eyes was anything more than that of a religious fervor. And, in truth, maybe that was indeed all it was. But now that he went in search of it, Chris noted a hardness that belied the man's calling, one he'd seen in the faces of too many men -- his own included each time he looked in the mirror. A man of peace, maybe. But Mordecai Bliss had earned whatever peace he might have found the hard way. Of that, Chris was sure.

And suddenly, he was even more curious to know what it was the man found to keep him so long at Vin Tanner's side.

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"You ever count the dead in your dreams?" Bliss asked, his dark eyes on Vin, one hand idly turning his glass of whiskey, the amber liquid it held swirling gently.

Vin studied those eyes that had watched him for hours now, seeing far too much and giving away far too little. Yet for all the man's reticence where his own life was concerned, there was an understanding Vin had found in him that he'd found nowhere else in life. Not an understanding of God or intellectual ideals, but of the darkness that could claim a man's soul, leaving him to stumble blindly through life. Vin wasn't sure just how he knew that, for Bliss had said almost nothing of himself, had not given voice to that understanding in words plainly spoken. But he had seemed always to know just the right questions to ask -- and which ones to leave unsaid.

And so Vin sat there with him, answering his questions in his own way, giving up only those pieces of himself he chose to give up, waiting and watching and wondering.

"I used to hunt in my dreams," he said at last, by way of answer to Bliss' question. Eyeing the other man with a deceptive laziness, his posture echoed that as he slouched in his chair, hat tipped low over his face, blue eyes looking up from under it. "Tracks were always clear then, even if they didn't make sense. Sometimes it was buffalo I was after. Or deer. One time it was a mountain cat up in the far high rocks. But usually it was men I was after in my dreaming. Bounties. Them running,

trying to shake me off their trail. Me always after them, never hurrying, just following the signs."

"And when you caught up to them?"

Vin squarely met the eyes looking deep into his. "Then I collected the price on their heads."

Bliss gave a slight nod, as if that were the answer he'd expected. Then softly, he took the question a step further. "And at other times, when the lives you took were true flesh and blood, were there ever any you regretted having taken?"

Vin looked away that time. "When I took them? No."

Bliss left the next question to lie in silence between them. And after a minute, Vin turned back to him.

"How come you ain't sitting there telling me I'm going to burn in Hell for taking all those lives?"

Bliss sat quietly for a long moment studying the former bounty hunter, his dark eyes alight with a knowledge he was aware Vin possessed as well. Then with a wry smile, he said, "Well, son, to my mind, Hell's a bit overrated. Seems to me there's nothing the Devil can devise that could possibly be worse than the hell we put ourselves through on our own."

Vin cocked his head. "That the kind of preaching you plan on doing tonight?"

Bliss laughed. "Afraid not, son. Hellfire and brimstone are what brings folks out." He shrugged. "Personally, I think most people just like hearing about where their neighbors are going to end up. But in between all the threats and dire warnings I hand out, I usually manage to get a message or two in from the more gentle books of the Bible. And if God is with me when I do, a few of my congregation will even hear those words."

"You don't sound like a man too happy with his work."

"Ah, but the work isn't mine, but God's. My job is simply to gather the sheep in. It's up to the Lord to provide the words that will open their hearts."

That time it was an eyebrow Vin cocked. "He speaks through you, does he?"

Bliss shook his head. "He speaks through the Bible. I merely give voice to the Word." He slipped his watch out of his pocket then and flipped it open. "And I'm afraid that if I am to give voice to that Word tonight, I should be going." He collected his hat and cane, then stood. And looking down at the tracker, he added, "Will I see you at the Revival tonight?"

"I might pop my head in for a spell," Vin conceded with a shrug. Then with a grin, he added, "I got a few neighbors whose hereafters I'd like hearing about."

Bliss grinned in return and tapped his hat onto his head. "I'll see you later then, Mr. Tanner. And thank you for a most enjoyable evening."

He nodded his farewell and limped out of the saloon, Vin's eyes following until he disappeared through the batwing doors. His attention wasn't so fixed though that he was unaware of the black-clad form slipping up to him.

"You got Banner quieted down over at the jail?" he asked, then looked up to find Chris Larabee staring down at him.

A smile touched those hard eyes and Chris sat in the chair the Reverend Bliss had just vacated. "How'd you know?"

Vin shrugged. "Saw J. D. come in a while ago looking frazzled. Figured our star prisoner was wearing him down again and he was in here asking for permission to shoot him."

"Actually," Chris corrected with a grin, "he was hoping to skip the trial and go straight to the hanging. But he was willing to settle for tying and gagging him instead."

"That what you two were doing over there all that time?"

"Nope. Didn't have to resort to drastic measures. Managed to put the fear of God into Banner first." Chris reached out to twirl the nearly full glass Bliss had left sitting on the table. "Speaking of which...." He let the thought trail off, wanting to judge Vin's reaction to his interest in his conversation with the Reverend Bliss before he tried getting anything out of him.

Vin knew what he was up to, but had no desire to look any deeper into that dark part of himself he'd spent a lifetime trying to forget and the past few hours remembering. So he sidestepped the question neatly, knowing his refusal to acknowledge it would be enough to stop it dead in its tracks. "Think I'll go relieve J. D. for a while, let him get out and eat where the company sits a mite easier on a man's stomach."

He stood then and tipped his hat. And no sooner had he left than Buck joined Chris at the table where he sat staring at the glass in his hand with a sour look.

"Vin run out of words, did he?" the ladies' man asked. "Kind of funny, wouldn't you say? He sits for hours shooting the breeze with a complete stranger, then runs out of bullets with those that matter."

Chris kept his gaze fastened on the glass of whiskey Bliss had left behind. "I'll say what I said before -- it ain't none of my business."

"Maybe not," Buck conceded, not fooled for a minute. "But I don't reckon you scooted over here so fast just to talk about the weather."

Chris turned his sour look on his oldest friend, giving a warning as much to himself as to Buck as he said, "Vin's a grown man. And he's been around long enough to be able to pick the company he keeps without having to answer to me."

Buck gave a sigh, then stood. "Well, son, you just keep telling yourself that. And in the meantime, I'm going to go get something to eat. Then I'm going to mosey on over to that Revival, see if the good Lord has any divine messages He's wanting to send me."

Chris watched him go. Then with a sigh of his own, he decided it was just as good a time as any to eat. And afterwards maybe -- for lack of anything better to do -- he'd go check out the Reverend Bliss' prayer meeting and keep an eye out for trouble.

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~ CHAPTER TWO ~

Vin sat at the table on the boardwalk outside the saloon, softly blowing into his harmonica. It was late, most of the town's citizens having long since turned down their lamps and gone to bed. Normally he would be in his wagon at that time of night as well, either asleep or staring out the canvas opening at the stars barely visible above the firelit streets. But he felt too restless to settle, to lie without thought or to allow his mind to wander down paths that would track into territory best left unexplored. So he'd wandered the streets for a time, telling himself he was patrolling, making sure all was as it should be with the town. The truth was though, he'd been searching for something he couldn't name, something his talk with the itinerant preacher earlier that day had made him lose hold of. But whatever it was, he hadn't been able to find it. So now he sought something to set in its place, turning as he often did to that which was as easily understood as beauty and peace and freedom.

He blew into his harmonica again, note following note in no generally accepted musical order, the sound no more than noise to those not attuned to a world beyond words and the rigid patterns by which men ordered their lives. But to those able to look beneath and beyond and around those patterns, to search out the simple and the true in life, the notes he produced were the most elemental form of music: the sighing of the wind as it whispered its secrets to the prairie grasses; the soft murmurings of a mountain stream tumbling its way from the wild to the tamed; the lone call of a coyote singing to a stark winter moon; and all the longings and joys and heartfelt emotions that could stir within a man and set him to searching out ways to express what had to be felt to be understood.

He sat there playing for a long time, the sounds drifting out of the saloon at his back a soft accompaniment to his symphony: the clink of glasses; the tinny jangling of spurs and the sharp tapping of Inez' heels on the wooden floor; the soft laughter and muted conversations of those hardy or desperate enough to sit that late drinking or playing cards. And, after a time, nature joined in with a percussive display as an early spring storm sent lightning flashing across the sky and thunder rumbling in out of the desert.

As he played the familiar notes of his life, something eased within Vin, something that had drawn tight at the thoughts and memories stirred by too many questions and not enough answers. And as the need within gave way, he lowered his harmonica, the hand holding it resting on his lap

as he watched the lightning flash across the sky. Nature's fury, some called it. But when viewed at a safe distance, there was a beauty to be found there, like random splashes of paint upon a dark canvas forming patterns within patterns, lines and colors blending even as they opposed, the heart understanding what the mind couldn't begin to grasp. Despite the chill and the threat of rain to come, Vin was tempted to keep watch on the night there on the boardwalk. But the saloon emptying behind him and a soft goodnight from Inez spoken over the batwing doors broke the spell that had held him. And waiting only until the last of the late-night revelers had stumbled off to their beds, he stood and stared down the street in the direction of his wagon and the cold, hard bed awaiting him there. And suspecting that discomfort would be the least of his worries that night -- what peace he'd found being no doubt far too fragile to keep at bay the nightmares that constantly threatened at the edge of his awareness -- he decided to stave off sleep and its attendant miseries for a while longer, with one more walk around the town, checking again to make sure that all was well. By then perhaps the rain would have arrived to tap out a lullaby on the canvas roof of his wagon, thereby lulling him into a dreamless sleep.

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The rain was still holding off by the time Vin finished his rounds of the town, although the lightning flashed across the sky with increasing frequency and the accompanying thunder was coming hard on the heels of it. The air was whipping hard as well, running fast ahead of the approaching storm, bringing with it the smell of rain and a drop in the already cool temperatures. It wouldn't be long until the storm hit, Vin knew. Yet he couldn't bring himself to seek shelter, to try to settle his uneasy mind to a sleep he felt sure would be uneasier still. So he sought out an excuse to delay the inevitable a bit longer, settling finally on making one last check at the jail where Josiah was keeping watch. Hunching into his buckskin jacket, he lowered his head against the wind blowing cold against him, ducking it lower still when lightning flashed with a sharp crack of thunder, the nearness of it making his hair stand on end and his steps grow longer and faster. He'd barely closed any of the distance towards the jail though when lightning flashed again, its bright light chasing away the dark for a brief moment, the thunder that came with it shaking the windows of the storefronts and thrumming through his body. It wasn't that sound though that brought him to a sudden halt, but one arising from a human throat. His right hand reached instinctively for the sawed-off strapped to his leg, his head raising in a listening posture, his eyes sweeping the street for the source of the scream that had echoed briefly above the crash of the coming storm. High and shrill, it was without doubt a woman's voice. But it was cut off before Vin could trace it, the thunder masking its direction. So he stood a moment, waiting for it to come again,

his eyes darting from shadow to shadow, his mind tracking through the possibilities. And when his gaze fell on the gunsmith's shop, the glazed window reflecting the street fires dancing high and wild in the racing wind, he knew with a certainty that the scream had issued from Amy Callenbeck -- the only witness against the man currently residing in the town jail.

The son of one of the more prominent ranchers in the area, Jameson Banner had been raised to believe the sun rose and set according to his whims. What he wanted, he generally got -- by fair means or foul. And when the town gunsmith, Marcus Callenbeck, refused to sell a prized rifle, Banner had resorted to foul means to get it. As a result, Callenbeck had ended up dead, with his young wife the only one to name the murderer, her testimony that which would put Banner away, despite all attempts by his father, Winston, to convince her to change her mind.

And now, with the trial just two days away, her screams sent Vin racing across the street to the store that doubled as her home, sawed-off in hand and a curse forming on his lips. Going first to the door set in the storefront, he found it securely locked, so he raced instead down the boardwalk to the alley running alongside the store and on to the back door, which gave easily when he turned the knob.

That alone meant nothing, as most of the townspeople left their doors unlocked at night, despite all the warnings their peacekeepers had issued against such a display of trust in their fellow man. Yet Vin found it hard to believe that a woman living alone after her husband's murder would be so trusting. So while there were any number of possible reasons for that scream -- ranging from the close lightning strike to a wayward mouse -- he wasn't taking any chances. And cocking his gun, he eased his silent way through the door, leaving it open to provide some meager amount of light in the darkness within.

Making out the stairs he assumed led to an apartment above the shop, Vin moved as swiftly and as silently as he could towards them and up, straining to hear some sound from above, his eyes searching out trouble ahead and one finger held lightly over the trigger of his gun.

He paused for a moment when he reached the top of the stairs, listening for some sign of life as his gaze went to the soft glow issuing from an open door at the end of the short hall there. Lightning flashed again, and thunder rumbled through the small apartment, rattling the windows. Then floorboards creaked and a shadow formed in the light spilling out of the doorway.

Vin crossed to the far side of the hall then, his back against the wall, the sawed-off held ready before him as he made his cautious way to the lit doorway.

The shadow grew as he approached, its form crawling its way up to the ceiling along the wall opposite the doorway. A man's shadow -- of that Vin was sure. And no sooner did that thought cross his mind than the

shadow grew solid, a form taking dark shape in the doorway, blocking the light, the face in shadows as it turned.

"Hold it right there," Vin barked, giving the shadow-turned-human no chance to take in his presence and react first.

The shadowy form froze, half-turned into the hall.

"Who are you?" Vin demanded to know. "And what the hell are you doing here?"

He gave the man no chance to answer, instead raising his voice to call out to the woman he assumed could be found in the room beyond the dark form. "Mrs. Callenbeck? You okay?"

When no response came, he slowly made his way closer to the man in the doorway, the gun pointed unwaveringly at him as he rasped out, "Move back into the room. Slowly. You do anything stupid and they'll be scraping you off the walls and scrubbing you out of the floorboards."

The dark form did as commanded, stepping backwards into the room, his face staying in the shadows. Vin followed him, his gun held steady and his gaze leaving him only long enough to seek out the woman lying far too still in the bed.

"Get back against the wall there," Vin snapped out to the man, moving so that the bed lay between them.

Again the dark form did as ordered, moving slowly, the shadows slipping away as he turned more fully to the light thrown by the lamp on the bedside table.

"What the hell!" Vin breathed when the face came into shadowy focus.

The man across the room from him smiled. "Come now, Mr. Tanner. I've been called many things, but never one of Lucifer's minions."

Vin shot another look to the woman in the bed, a dark line crossing her throat, darker patches spilling out onto her nightdress and onto the pillow beneath her unmoving head. Vin didn't need to feel at her bloody throat for a pulse to know there wasn't one. And turning his attention back to the Reverend Mordecai Bliss, who stood watching him with a dark and knowing look in his eyes, he rasped out a single word: "Why?"

Bliss raised an eyebrow. "For the same reason you hunted bounties, Mr. Tanner -- money."

Vin raised his chin at the comparison, refusing to acknowledge it.

"Some cover you got for yourself, preaching hellfire and brimstone. Someone turns up dead, ain't nobody going to look twice at a man of the cloth."

"Cover?" Bliss echoed, sounding wounded. "You doubt the sincerity of my calling?"

"Last I heard, the Good Book kind of frowns on murder."

Bliss shrugged. "A technicality, I assure you."

Vin inclined his head at the body on the bed. "And what about her? She a technicality too?"

"No. Simply an inconvenience."

"To who? Winston Banner?"

Another shrug. "Does it matter?"

"It does if you want company on the gallows."

Bliss shook his head, a small smile playing at his lips. "Come now, Mr. Tanner. Need we let things get quite so unpleasant? Perhaps we can reach some kind of accommodation. After all, you've accepted money for far worse than simply turning a blind eye to another man's dealings."

"Dealings?" Vin echoed in disgust. "That what you call murder?"

Bliss' smile widened a fraction. "You have a word you prefer in its place? 'Bounties,' perhaps?"

Vin's grip on the sawed-off tightened. "Hunting bounty ain't nowheres close to this."

"No? You mean you never took down an innocent man? Never brought in a bounty dead that could have been taken alive? Never thought more of the money that would find its way into your pocket than you did of the life it bought?" Bliss eyed the man standing rigid across from him, his hands on his gun white-knuckled. "You can wrap it up in as fine a linen as you wish, Mr. Tanner, but killing is killing. And that makes us no different. So let us not go casting stones."

"Don't need stones," Vin replied, refusing again to acknowledge the charge made. "A rope will do just fine."

"And what about your own neck?" Bliss challenged. "How long do you think it will be before you too are called into account? Remember, Mr. Tanner -- Judge not lest ye be judged."

"Them's right fine words, Bliss. A body might almost think you was a man of God, spouting Bible verses like that."

Up went Bliss' eyebrow again. "Come now, Mr. Tanner. Thousands could attest to my way with God's Word."

"And how many you reckon can attest to your way with a knife? Or are you going to tell me Mrs. Callenbeck's the first?"

Bliss spread his hands in a gesture of resigned appeasement. "Shall we compare numbers, Mr. Tanner? Measure out the blood we've spilled? See whose soul is stained darkest?"

Up went Vin's chin another notch. And ignoring the questions, as well as the answers he had no desire to search out, he gruffly said, "Don't reckon we need to do anything more than mosey on over to the jail, Bliss. But first -- toss out whatever knife you used on Mrs. Callenbeck. And move real easy or you're liable not to have to worry about your neck getting stretched."

Bliss' smile faded, his brows drawing down now in irritation. "Don't be a fool, Tanner. If you're going to kill, you might as well get paid handsomely for it. And there's more money to be had here than you'd ever hope to earn hunting bounty. Certainly more than what you earn slinging your gun in this dusty no-account town. Why, with my contacts and your talent for killing, we could team up and easily make money enough to buy this town in a few years."

"Talent'?" Vin's upper lip curled, the invitation ignored in favor of that which hit more closely than he cared to admit. "Most people would call being good at killing a curse."

The smile was back, snaking across Bliss' face as he noted that near-confession. "Most people don't know what we know, Mr. Tanner. They can't even begin to guess what it feels like to stalk a prey, to plan and wait and watch for that one glorious moment when we are God, fate in our hands, life and death at our command."

Lightning flashed, a flare of light chasing away the shadows in the room, an instant of singular clarity. And in that instant, Vin took a step back, as much from the man across the room as from something stirring deep within himself, something so dark that to acknowledge it would be to see himself in the madman before him. Then, pushing that darkness away, he raised his sawed-off an inch higher and roughly said, "If I have to tell you again to toss out that knife of yours, Bliss, I'll be wasting my talents on a free killing. So hand it over. Now."

Bliss stood defiantly for a moment, daring Vin to deny the truth of what he'd said, the light from the lamp reflecting in the dark depths of his eyes, the planes of his face standing out sharply in the play of shadows. Then with a deliberate slowness, he raised the cane he held in one hand and twisted it in the light, the soft glow of the lamp mixing with the stark flash of the lightning without. And in that mix of light, the cane's elaborately carved head glittered gold, shining with a brightness that captured Vin's gaze, a snarling lion's head seeming to leap out at him, its bared fangs a harbinger of death. Then, with a jerk, Bliss pulled the head free of the cane's wooden length -- to reveal a sharp-edged knife.

It too he twisted in the soft glow of the lamp and flashes of lightning, the metal catching the light and throwing jeweled facets of it dancing around the room.

Vin eyed the knife with a sick fascination. Then licking dry lips -- and in a tone that fell short of its intended disinterest -- he rasped out, "Neat trick, Bliss. Now slide the knife back into the cane and toss it over here."

Bliss continued to twist the weapon, eyeing it with a fascination mirroring Vin's own. "You ever get up close when you kill, Mr. Tanner?" he asked, his eyes never leaving the knife as he spoke. "Ever see the light go out of your victims' eyes? Ever feel their last breath on your face or touch the warmth of their blood? There's nothing like it in all the world. To hold that power in your hands, to sit in judgment on who will live and who will die -- it's more seductive than a lover's touch."

His gaze shot to Vin then. And noting that the tracker was once again staring at the sharp length of metal in his hand, he gave a quick flick of his wrist and sent the knife sailing through the air.

Lightning flared and thunder roared, but the spell holding Vin was

broken by that flash of Bliss' knife. He flinched away from it, twisting to the side even as his finger squeezed the trigger of his gun. But both movements came too late, for the bullet went far wide of its mark -- while the knife found its target, lodging deep in his left shoulder, just under the collarbone.

Unbalanced by his attempt to evade the knife as well as by the pain bursting in his shoulder, Vin crashed into the bedside table, upsetting the lamp burning there, the glass breaking and the flame spilling out to lick at the curtains covering the room's one window. He was unaware of that however, his attention all for the pain in his shoulder and the gun that had slipped from his grasp. Fighting against the one and reaching for the other, he no more than closed a shaking hand on his gun than Bliss limped around the bed to kick it out of his grasp. Then, before he could make another grab for it, Bliss swung his cane at him, hitting him with a sharp crack to his ribs and knocking him on his back to the floor.

Vin tried to roll away from the pain, but Bliss was upon him, his weight pinning him to the floor, his knees trapping his arms at his side. He struggled against the larger man, trying to throw him off, but Bliss merely waited him out, letting him waste his strength in a struggle he couldn't win. And when he at last gave up and lay still, panting and sick with pain, Bliss shook his head at him.

"I had no wish for it to end like this, boy. And it wouldn't have if you could only have admitted the truth of who you are. After all, you know what they say: The truth shall set you free."

"Go to Hell!" Vin snarled, staring defiantly up at the dark face above him.

Bliss smiled. "When I get there, we can resume this little conversation of ours. Until that time, though, I'll need this back." And with that, he took hold of the knife in Vin's shoulder, twisting it as he pulled it out.

Vin bit back a scream, his back arching as far as it was able with Bliss' weight pinning him down, trying once again to twist away from the pain and the one inflicting it.

Again Bliss waited him out. Then, when his captive once more grew still, Bliss leaned forward, bringing his face within inches of Vin's. "You have to get up close," he softly breathed out. "So you can see the light go out of their eyes, feel the last breath as it leaves their body, the warmth of their blood draining away their last hopes." He placed the flat of the knife along Vin's cheek, drawing it down to trail a line of his blood from temple to jaw.

The motion was caressing, a lover stroking his object of desire, and Vin felt a cold knot of fear in his gut spreading tendrils throughout his body. He shut his eyes and turned his head away from the knife, his face pressed into the cold floorboards, trying in the only way he could to

escape the look of madness in Bliss' eyes -- a look that promised far more danger than the freely bleeding wound in his shoulder.

"Can you feel it, Mr. Tanner?" Bliss crooned, the words whisper-soft, the tone one of dark enticement. Again he traced the knife down Vin's cheek. "Can you feel the seductive power of it, boy? Do you want to wrap yourself around it, take it inside you, feed on it? Would you forsake all else in life for it? Have you forsaken all else?"

Unable to move away from the knife or the voice that would force him to admit to some dark truth hidden away, Vin kept his eyes tightly shut and tried to block out all sound, all sensation. But a whoosh of air and a flash of light that was not lightning caught his attention, caught Bliss' attention as well. The knife moved away from Vin then as both men looked behind and above them to find the bedroom curtains fully engulfed with a blaze of fire that had now spread to the bed, unmindful of the body lying there, and to the wall on either side of the window.

Vin recovered first, twisting beneath the mesmerized Bliss, gaining just enough leverage against his loosened hold on him to throw him off. He scabbled for his gun then, dragging across the floor after it. But no sooner did he reach it and start to cock it than Bliss was again on him, his cane raised high and sweeping downwards, catching Vin hard on the side of the head and propelling him into deepest darkness.

Bliss pushed away from him then, scrabbling in his turn for the knife he'd dropped in his tumble from his intended victim. He had to reach close to the flames rapidly consuming the bed to take hold of it, scrambling back when the weapon was once again safely in his possession. He lurched to his feet then, backing towards the door, his gaze sweeping from the man lying unconscious on the floor to the fire rapidly spreading from wall to floor, his desire to complete what he had started competing with the fear for his own safety. Then the curtains tumbled off their rod to the bedside table, the flames igniting the pool of oil from the broken lamp, the resulting flash of fire spilling to the floor near Vin's unmoving legs.

Deciding at last in favor of his own safety, Bliss backed out of the room and fled, leaving hellfire raging behind him.

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~ CHAPTER THREE ~

For the first and only time in his life, Buck Wilmington's taste for married women proved useful in more than the usual manner, for had he not been sneaking through the alley behind the gunsmith's shop ahead of the coming storm and an irate husband, he never would have heard the sound of Amy Callenbeck's bedroom window breaking from the heat of the fire raging there, would never have looked up to see the flames shooting up towards the roof. But he did. And holstering the gun he'd drawn instinctively at the sound of breaking glass, he raced to the back door of the gunsmith shop and through it, then up the stairs to the room glowing

bright behind the smoke pouring out of it.

One glance at the burning bed told Buck it was too late for the body there. But another shape could dimly be seen through the smoke and fire, and he went straight to it, stepping over the flames licking at the form's still legs. He then grabbed an outflung arm to drag the body out of the room into the hall, where he beat at the man's burning pants legs with his hat. And reaching down to grab hold of him again, he slung the man over his shoulder and hauled him out into the alley and around to the boardwalk. Then, gently depositing his burden onto the covered walkway, he stepped out into the street, gun in hand, and let loose six shots in quick succession, sure that the sound would bring the required assistance.

With that, he returned to the form lying on the boardwalk, squatting down beside the man. And with a gasp of indrawn breath, he recognized the slack features of Vin Tanner.

With a curse, he looked around for help, yelling at the first face to peer warily out of a darkened doorway to run and fetch Nathan Jackson and the other peacekeepers. He then reached down to feel at Vin's neck for a pulse, his breath catching when he couldn't find one. Then Josiah was beside him, demanding to know what had happened.

Buck muttered a quick explanation, continuing to feel for a pulse, relief washing over him when he at last found one. "He's alive," he told the preacher kneeling at his side.

Josiah patted his shoulder and stood. "I'll go check on Mrs. Callenbeck. Just to be sure." And with that he was gone.

Then a handful of townspeople appeared with their own questions and Buck sent them scurrying for buckets and volunteers to form a fire brigade. And no sooner was that accomplished than Chris and then Nathan ran down the boardwalk from opposite directions.

"He's alive," Buck told them as the healer knelt down beside the wounded man. "I don't know what's wrong, but his legs -- they might be burned."

Nathan gave a quick nod. And while he ran his hands over Vin's still body checking for injuries, Buck told Chris what had happened.

"I'd better go help Josiah," Chris said when Buck was done. He no sooner started to move away though than Nathan caught hold of one of his legs.

"Let Ezra do that," the healer instructed as the gambler pushed his way through the crowd, a half-dressed J. D. at his back. "I need you and Buck to get Vin over to the clinic."

Chris looked to the gambler as he climbed onto the boardwalk demanding to know what had happened.

"Looks like someone killed Amy Callenbeck," Chris explained as he slid his arms under Vin's, waiting until Buck grabbed his legs before lifting him. "Josiah went after her. Go around back and help him. Then stick

around here 'til the fire's out."

Ezra dashed off as ordered, leaving J. D. to shift about nervously, wanting to know what he could do to help.

"Run ahead to the clinic," Nathan told him, "and get all the lamps lit for me."

J. D. bobbed his head in acknowledgment, then raced off.

"Be careful with him now," Nathan warned as Chris and Buck straightened up with Vin slung between them. "He's bleeding pretty bad from that left shoulder, so don't jostle him any more than you can help. And Buck, you take it easy with those legs. I don't know yet how bad off they are, and I don't want you making them worse."

The rain that had been threatening chose that moment to arrive, moving from a teasing drizzle to a drenching downpour in the time it took the two men to carry Vin to the clinic, which, thanks to J. D., was well lit and had a fire blazing in the stove.

Nathan had Chris and Buck deposit their burden on a chair. He then quickly stripped the injured man of his wet clothes and dried him off before ordering him transferred to the bed. And while Chris held a pad of bandages to Vin's bleeding shoulder, Nathan checked him more thoroughly for injuries, going first to his legs. Then, without looking up, he snapped out, "J. D., get that salve off the shelf there and put some on these burns for me."

He moved up Vin's body then, checking for further injuries. "Looks like he's got a bruise forming on his ribs," he said, gently checking for fractures. "Feels okay. Don't think anything's broke." Then he moved to Vin's head and let out a curse when his fingers encountered an egg-sized knot above and behind one ear.

"What is it?" Buck demanded to know, hovering at Nathan's shoulder.

Nathan ignored him, gently turning Vin's head so that he could check for bleeding from his ears. Relieved to find none, he turned his attention to the wound in Vin's shoulder. "You keep holding that bandage there, Chris," he directed as he collected the supplies he would need.

"He going to be okay?"

Nathan shot the leader of the Seven a look. "I'm not sure. He's got a knot on his head any hen would be proud to lay claim to. Could be nothing. Could be something. I won't know 'til he comes to." He paused, looking worried. "And his breathing ain't too good. Must have eaten a lot of smoke. He ain't coughing it out, though."

"What about his shoulder?" Buck asked. "He take a bullet?"

Nathan shook his head. "Knife. It don't look too bad, but he's lost a lot of blood. And that will leave him weak, make it easier for infection to take hold."

"And his legs?"

Nathan pulled a table to the side of the bed and laid out his supplies.

"The burns will hurt like hell for a few days, but he ain't hardly more

than singed."

Chris nodded. "All right. J. D., I want you to go check with Josiah, see what he has to say about the fire. And tell him to check around, see if anyone saw anything. Buck, you head over to the jail, see what you can get out of Banner. I'm betting he knows something."

"You going to be here?" Buck asked.

Chris looked down at the unconscious man in the bed. "Yeah," he said softly. "I'll be here."

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J. D. left and came back an hour later, with Josiah and Ezra trailing behind him, all three men grimy with sweat and soot, and wet with rain. "How's he doing?" Josiah asked the two men sitting vigil, nodding to the still form lying under a pile of quilts on the bed.

Nathan looked up from his post in a chair beside Vin's bed. "Burns to his legs, bruised ribs, knife wound in one shoulder. A lungful of smoke. And he took a pretty good knock to his head."

"Will he be all right?" Ezra asked in turn.

Nathan gave only a partial response. "He lost a lot of blood, but I think we got to him in time. And if he steers clear of infection, that shoulder should heal up okay. The burns will be fine too in a few days."

"So he'll be all right?" That time it was J. D.'s turn.

Nathan ran a hand over his face, exhaustion lending a grey cast to his dark skin. "I don't know, J. D. He ain't come to. Ain't so much as stirred -- not even when I stitched him up. And he's breathing awful shallow."

"Because of the smoke?"

"Maybe."

"You worried it might have something to do with that knock to his head?" Josiah asked.

Chris shifted in his chair on the other side of the bed. He and Nathan had already had this conversation and it sounded no better the second time around.

Nathan flicked him a glance, then turned back to the others with a sigh. "I don't know what to think. There just ain't no telling with head wounds."

J. D. stared down at the unconscious man. "But it don't look like it bled none. I mean, his head ain't bandaged up or nothing. So how bad can it be?"

"You can't tell how bad a head wound is by how much it bleeds," Nathan said wearily. "It's the damage that's done inside that you got to worry about."

"Inside?"

"You hit a man hard enough, it can rattle his brain. And you don't know how bad 'til he wakes up. If he wakes up." Nathan took in the others' grim faces. "I know it sounds bad and I ain't saying that it's going to

be that way with Vin. It's just that I seen a lot of head wounds in the war, so it's hard not to worry when a man takes a while to wake up."
"Well, with as hard a head as Vin possesses," Ezra firmly declared, "I have every confidence that he will be just fine."

"Yeah," J. D. agreed, trying hard to sound confident. "Come morning he'll be raring to go track down whoever did this to him and Mrs. Callenbeck."

Chris spoke up then, glad for the excuse to turn the conversation in another direction. "Were you able to tell anything from the body? Find anything at all to go on?"

Josiah and Ezra exchanged looks. Then the preacher said, "I'm afraid the fire got to the body before we could. But maybe Nathan can have a look tomorrow, see if he can spot anything."

Nathan nodded.

"No one saw anything?" Chris continued.

"Nope. Everyone says they were tucked in bed."

"What about Banner? Buck get anything out of him?"

"Nothing that can be repeated in polite company," Ezra wryly reported.

Chris clenched his jaw. "All right. Come morning, if Vin isn't able to tell us anything, we'll ask around, see if anyone saw any of Banner's men in town at any time during the day."

"You think Banner would have sent one of his own people?" Josiah asked.

"Now wait a minute," Nathan protested. "We don't even know for a fact that Banner had anything to do with this!"

"You think he didn't?"

"I ain't saying that, Chris. I'm only warning you to be careful about accusing the man of something before you can prove it. I got my hands full taking care of Vin right now and I don't want to have to patch anyone else up. So don't go stirring up trouble you can't put an end to right quick."

"Don't worry," Chris said with a grim look to the man in the bed.

"We'll make fast work of any trouble we find."

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It was late in the morning when Buck and Josiah returned to the clinic, nodding to the two men still flanking the bed before turning their gazes to the man lying semi-upright against a bank of pillows there, eyes closed and face ashen.

"Has there been any change?" Josiah softly asked.

"He hasn't woke up yet," Nathan told them. "Ain't even showed no signs of it or so much as moved a muscle all night."

Buck gestured to the bank of pillows. "He having trouble breathing?"

"No. But his lungs are getting a mite congested. Figured he'd do better if we propped him up."

"That because of the smoke?"

"Probably."

"He going to be okay?"

Josiah referred to more than Vin's breathing, and Nathan knew it. So did Chris -- not surprisingly, since it was the same question that had been torturing him all night. He wasn't ready for the answer yet though, so he spoke up before Nathan had a chance to say anything he'd regret hearing.

"J. D. down at the jail?" he asked. And when Buck nodded, he added, "And I suppose Ezra's still sleeping?"

Buck shrugged and Chris gave a growl. "Go roust him out of bed. Then the two of you start checking around with the townspeople, see if anyone saw any of Banner's men in town yesterday or anyone or anything the least bit suspicious. And it might be a good idea to let people think the worst about whether or not Vin's going to make it. Might discourage whoever did this from having another go at him."

He turned to the preacher next. "Josiah, you stay here, keep an eye on Vin. And don't forget -- he's the only witness we've got to Amy Callenbeck's murder. So be careful."

Nathan climbed to his feet and stretched aching muscles. "I'll go have a look at Mrs. Callenbeck's body, see what I can find out."

"Later," Chris told him. "Right now you'd better go get some sleep."

Nathan wasn't inclined to argue. "Okay. But you'd better get some yourself."

"I intend to." Chris turned to Buck. "Wake me if you find out anything. Or if...." His gaze shifted to the man in the bed. Then he looked away and added, "Just let me know if you need me."

"I'll do that," Buck solemnly assured him. "Now go on and get. The rest of us will take care of things for now."

Chris gave a nod, then stood and left the room without another look at the man in the bed.

Buck waited for the door to close behind him before turning to Nathan, who was sorting through the various herbs and potions he had laid out on the bedside table, and softly said, "It's been a lot of hours now that Vin's been unconscious. That's not good, is it?"

Nathan grew still. Then turning around, he said, "No, it ain't good. But it ain't necessarily that bad, either. Vin's pretty weak from all that blood he lost. And he's going to be hurting when he wakes up. So it's really best now that he sleeps and gives his body a chance to heal."

"But you said he hasn't even moved a muscle in all this time. And if it's like you say, that he's just weak and hurting, wouldn't he be showing some signs of life by now?"

Nathan sighed and nodded. "But that still don't mean nothing."

"The hell it don't! A man is unconscious for ten hours, it's got to mean something!"

Josiah laid a hand on Buck's shoulder. "Take it easy, now. Nathan's only saying that we shouldn't go getting our knickers in a twist just yet.

It ain't really been all that long, and you know these things can take time. So let's not get excited until Nathan says we got to. All right?" Buck forced his tense muscles to relax. "All right." Then staring down at the man in the bed for a moment, he gave a sigh and said, "Guess I'll go see if I can convince Ezra that the sun isn't likely to burn a hole in him this early in the morning." And with a nod, he set off on his task.

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Ezra was the first to report in, sliding in through the clinic door quietly so as not to disturb the injured tracker should he have regained any measure of consciousness. He stopped though at the sound of a pistol cocking.

"You'd best knock next time," Josiah warned as he uncocked the gun aimed squarely at the gambler's chest and slipped it back into its holster.

"Yes, well," Ezra drawled as smoothly as a mouth gone suddenly dry would permit. "I'll be sure and remember that."

Josiah nodded, and both men turned their attention to the man in the bed, lying as still as he had been since Buck had found him. Then holding a cup to the unconscious man's lips, the preacher said, "You find out anything?"

"Not a thing. It seems a lot of people came into town yesterday for the Reverend Bliss' Revival, so no one can say for sure who they did or didn't see, other than that there were any number of strangers roaming about."

"What about Buck? He still hunting around?"

Ezra shook his head. "He rode out to the Wells' ranch to tell Miss Nettie what happened."

Water dribbled out of Vin's slack mouth and Josiah heaved a sigh. Then reaching for the cloth laid ready on the bedside table, he wiped the tracker's chin.

Ezra stepped closer to the bed and looked down on the man lying there.

"I hate to repeat what has no doubt become a standard refrain," he softly apologized, "but has there been any change?"

Josiah shook his head. "He's been so still and quiet, a couple of times I had to check to make sure he was still breathing. Won't take any water, either, nor any of the medicine Nathan left for him."

"Did our esteemed healer perhaps indicate how much longer it will be before he regains his senses?"

Another shake of the preacher's head. "He said he still don't know. But he's plenty worried. Said Vin can't afford to go too long without water, especially not with all that blood he's lost. So I've been trying to get some into him every few minutes. But he just ain't swallowing."

"You might have better luck with that detestable rotgut whiskey he likes so much," Ezra suggested. His tone was light, but his gaze was intently fastened on Vin's chest, trying to discern movement there.

Josiah chuckled. Then looking up at the gambler and noting the direction of his gaze, he softly said, "I know it don't look like it, Brother, but he's still breathing."

Ezra blinked. "Yes, well. He does still owe me for that poker game the other night, so it behooves me to keep an eye on my investment, you understand."

Josiah eyed him for a long moment. Then turning back to the man in the bed, he gently chided him, saying, "It ain't a sin to care about a friend, Ezra."

The gambler was silent for a full minute, trying to come up with a rejoinder. At last, unable to think of one, he changed the subject. "Why don't I sit with him while you go get some lunch?"

Josiah looked up with a knowing gaze, but said only: "All right. Try to get some water into him, if you can. And if he drinks that, see if you can get a spoonful of that stuff in the brown bottle on the table there into him as well."

Josiah started to get up, only to freeze when a soft knock sounded. Both men's guns were instantly out and aimed at the clinic door. Ezra nodded to Josiah and moved swiftly across the room to the door, cracking it open with gun ready, only to lower it at sight of the soberly-clad man on the doorstep.

"Reverend Bliss? If you're looking for Nathan, I'm afraid he's not here at the moment. Perhaps you could come back later this afternoon?" Mordecai Bliss wore a sympathetic expression, one that spoke of an intimate acquaintance with sorrow and despair. And in solemn tones, he said, "I assure you, sir, that it is not help I seek to obtain, but to offer."

Ezra raised an eyebrow. "Indeed?"

Bliss nodded. "I heard about Mr. Tanner's injury. And while I can offer no help of a medical nature, I would be delighted to provide whatever spiritual assistance is required."

The tone was sincere, the words politely correct. And the Lord knew that Vin could use all the prayers he could get. Yet Ezra couldn't help but feel the man's presence there to be ghoulish, like a crow lighting near a dying creature, waiting for the last breath to be gasped out so that it could feed.

"Thank you, Reverend," he said in as polite a tone as he could muster.

"But I'm afraid Mr. Tanner is in no shape to receive visitors."

Bliss' expression of sympathy changed to one of concern. "Is he that bad off, then? I know the word is that he's at death's door, but I'd hoped the rumor mill had ground that meal too fine."

Josiah crossed the room to stand behind Ezra, his questioning gaze on the man at the door. "You make a habit, do you, Reverend, of inquiring so closely into the health of strangers?"

The words were ones of suspicion, but the tone was of no more than

simple curiosity. Suspecting though that the gentle-spoken man with a gun still in his hand was more than simply curious, Bliss quirked one corner of his mouth up and said, "Indeed, I do make such my habit, sir. After all, one never knows when a lost soul might be in need of saving. In this case, however, Mr. Tanner is not entirely a stranger, as we had a most interesting conversation last night in the saloon, and I found him to be an extraordinary young man. It saddens me now to think of such potential being wasted."

"Greater love hath no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends." Josiah cocked his head. "That don't sound like a waste to me."

Bliss inclined his own head in acknowledgment. "Still, perhaps Mr. Tanner will recover?"

"Perhaps," Josiah acknowledged in turn. And remembering Chris' warning, he added, "It don't look too promising though."

"Indeed? I had heard that he was stabbed in the shoulder. That doesn't sound particularly fatal. Perhaps though, he was severely burned in the fire?"

"It ain't that. He took a pretty bad blow to the head and he ain't woke up yet. Nathan don't hold out much hope for it, neither."

"Well, you know what they say -- while there's life, there's hope."

Bliss waved a hand towards the dim interior of the room. "May I?"

Josiah put a hand to Ezra's shoulder and eased him away from the door in silent invitation to the minister, who nodded his head in thanks and stepped inside.

Bliss made his way over to the bed then, to stand looking down at the one lying pale and still there -- so pale and still, in fact, that it was only the faintest movement of his chest that proved to Bliss that he had made a mistake in not finishing Tanner off the night before. But from the looks of him, he would cease to be a problem soon enough. His expression of regret genuine, even if for what should have been rather than for what was, he turned to Josiah. "Your healer can do nothing for him?"

"Not much he can do. It's not like he can open up his head and fix whatever's wrong."

"And he hasn't regained consciousness at all?"

"Not a lick."

Bliss shifted his gaze back to the figure in the bed, his face reflecting a meditative mood while he considered the possibilities. His first instinct was to finish what he had started, to make sure that Tanner didn't somehow manage to slither his way out through Death's door once again. But with two hired guns standing over him and four more to hand, it wouldn't be easy to finish him off. And from the looks of the man, such a tactic might prove riskier than would trusting in nature to take its course. So, playing the odds, he decided to stick with the

hand he'd been dealt. And bowing his head, he closed his eyes and demanded the Lord's intervention on his own behalf with a vaguely worded prayer.

"Dear Lord," he solemnly intoned, "we ask You to watch over Your servant, to guide his steps from the darkness that threatens into the light, to deliver him from the danger that has befallen him. Protect him from those who would seek to do him harm, and enable him to complete the mission for which You have placed him on this earth. We hold You to this promise, Lord: Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning. We have witnessed the night. Now we wait for morning to come. We ask this in Your name and by all that we believe. Amen."

"Amen, Brother," Josiah echoed, slipping his gun back into its holster.

"Now let's just hope that morning isn't too long in coming," Ezra sourly added.

Bliss looked up. "All good things come to those who wait," he softly quoted. And if they don't come soon enough, he added silently to himself, one can always help them along.

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~ CHAPTER FOUR ~

"Before you ask," Nathan said to the three men assembled at the Seven's usual table in the saloon as he pulled out a chair and joined them,

"there's been no change."

"Who's with him now?" Chris asked.

"Buck and Miss Nettie. And J. D. said he'd take the next watch."

"Nettie holding up okay?"

"You ever seen that woman even think about falling apart?" Nathan queried with a raised eyebrow. Then shaking his head in amused awe, he said, "She was fussing up a storm at Vin when I left. I wouldn't be surprised a bit if she don't scare him into waking up."

"What about J. D.? He down at the jail?"

"Yeah. I stopped by there on my way here and he said Winston Banner was in there earlier, wanting to talk to that son of his. J. D. said he was looking mighty smug, too."

"He know what they had to say?"

"No. But Banner was sure in a good mood while I was there."

Ezra flipped a card between his nimble fingers, his gaze centered on it as he sourly said, "No doubt he'll be radiant with joy tomorrow when the judge sets him free."

"Don't hardly seem fair," Josiah said with a sigh. "Banner goes free and Amy Callenbeck goes into the ground."

Chris shoved a glass across the table to the healer. "You have a chance to take a look at the body yet?"

Nathan shook his head as he reached for the bottle of whiskey sitting in the middle of the table and poured himself a drink. "Didn't find no bullets, but that don't mean nothing. One could have gone through. The

body was just too badly burned to tell anything."

"What about Vin? You think he's likely to wake up before the judge gets here tomorrow?"

"You know I can't answer that. He could wake up a minute from now or...."

"Or never?" Ezra finished when the healer trailed off and his gaze dropped to the untouched whiskey in his glass.

A silence fell, no one moving for a moment, as if afraid to disturb some delicate balance. Then Chris shifted his gaze, letting it fall on the batwing doors beyond which he seemed to retreat, leaving the others feeling vaguely abandoned, the ties that loosely bound them seeming to give.

Josiah gave those ties a tug. "It ain't been that long," he softly pointed out. "I've known of men to lie unconscious for days and come out of it just fine."

"But Vin ain't got days," Nathan pointed out in turn. "He needs to replace all that blood he lost. And he ain't going to do that if he don't take in some water."

"So we'll get him to take some."

"How? I been trying. You tried too, so if you know something I don't, you'd best tell me."

Josiah shook his head. But he wasn't ready to admit defeat yet. "This can't be the first time you've come across something like this."

Nathan shifted in his seat, his gaze dropping back to the glass in one hand.

"Nathan?" Ezra prompted.

There was another long moment of silence and Chris' gaze lost its focus, as if he were putting distance between himself and the words to come. And at last, without looking up, Nathan softly said, "I seen men in the war who lay like they was dead. Hardly breathing, not moving. Not taking nothing in no matter how hard anybody tried. And after a while, the doctors would stop trying."

Chris jerked his head, the distance at which he'd set himself closing as his gaze flashed to the healer. "Ain't nobody here going to stop trying," he firmly declared, his words as much a warning as a statement of faith.

Josiah nodded. Ezra went back to flipping his card between his fingers. And Nathan looked up.

"Ain't nobody said nothing about stopping, Chris." He picked his glass up and drained the contents. Then setting it back down on the table, he got up and left the saloon.

"Nathan's doing the best he can," Josiah softly declared when the batwing doors had closed behind the departing healer.

"Everyone's doing the best they can," Chris growled. "Vin's lying at death's door and Amy Callenbeck's already been shoved through it. And

we're no closer to finding out who did it or proving who's responsible than we were last night. So our best ain't even close to being good enough!"

"What would you suggest?" Ezra asked with a raised eyebrow. "Beating the information out of Banner Junior?"

"You have a better idea?"

Ezra sighed. "Your middle name wouldn't start with an 'S,' now would it?"

Josiah couldn't help himself and rose to the bait. "'S'?"

"For 'subtle.'"

Chris glared at the gambler. "Like I said -- you got a better idea?"

"Of course. My middle initial is 'S' as well."

Again Josiah couldn't help himself. "For 'subtle?'"

Ezra gave a gold-toothed grin. "For 'sneaky.'"

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"I must say, Banner," Ezra commented, flicking another card towards the hat sitting in the middle of the jail's office, "Dame Fortune seems to have taken a shine to you." He waved another card at the complacent prisoner and added, "I'd ask you to indulge me in a game, but I suspect I'd regret it." Instead, he flicked the card at his hat -- and missed.

Banner wrinkled his brow. "You saying I'm lucky?"

"That would indeed be what I am attempting to convey."

Banner gave that one some thought. "I reckon that means 'yes.'"

"Indeed." Ezra flicked another card at his hat -- and again missed.

"Hell," Banner said with a snort. "If you're talking about me being a free man come tomorrow, luck's got nothing to do with it."

Ezra raised one eyebrow. "If not luck, dear sir, then what? Have you some influence with the stars about which we mere mortals can only dream?"

"I don't know what the hell the stars have to do with anything, but it ain't that either. The only influence I got is with my pa."

"Your pa? And how exactly does that work?"

Banner sat up in his cot and leaned forward, his mouth opening. Then a wary look crossed his face and he sat back again. "I shouldn't ought to be talking to you. You being the Law and all."

"The Law?" Ezra chortled. "Nonsense. I'm just a hired gun. One step above the dastardly miscreants I am all too regularly called upon to remove from the streets of this fair town." He paused, then added, "No offense."

Banner's brow wrinkled again, but he said only, "Still, you're working for that judge, ain't you?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. But I hardly consider myself the long arm of the law. More like its foot. With said foot being squeezed into a pair of worn boots two sizes too small and planted firmly in a particularly nasty pile of -- shall we say -- stable refuse."

"That a fancy way of saying horse --"

"Exactly," Ezra hastily agreed. He flicked another card, that one landing on the rim of his hat and bouncing off it to the floor. "Now, if I had influence -- such as you appear to have at your disposal -- I, too, would be attaining my freedom tomorrow."

"What the hell are you talking about? You can walk out of here anytime you want."

"And go where? To the next gambling den? To the next dusty little town in need of a gun?" Ezra shook his head. "No, my friend. I'm destined for bigger things than that. Like yourself."

Banner sat forward again. "You think I'm destined? For what?"

"Why, for whatever your pa decrees, I should imagine."

"My pa? What's he got to do with it?"

"Well, it is he who is responsible for your coming emancipation, is it not?"

"If you mean me getting out of here, so what?"

"So, any man who can cripple the long arm of Judge Travis' law is a force to be reckoned with. And anyone riding in such a man's wake will reap whatever rewards he cares to bestow."

Banner frowned. "I don't need no handouts from my pa. I can find my own rewards."

"I'm sure you can," Ezra soothed, flicking another card that went wide of its mark. "Still, it never hurts to have an ace up one's sleeve. Especially if you've overplayed your hand."

"And what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Ezra shrugged. "Again no offense, but that business with Marcus Callenbeck was shabbily done. After all, if you're going to dispose of someone, you should take care that the killing not be traced back to you. It's rather a tenet of the profession." Ezra paused a moment, then added, "Or so I hear."

"Yeah?" Banner's frown was now a scowl. "Well, can't nobody prove nothing."

"No. Not now. But you did leave a witness. And you have to admit that was a tad sloppy."

"I didn't exactly plan on killing Callenbeck," Banner indignantly protested. "It just sort of happened. And it ain't like his wife was standing right there watching, you know. She was upstairs. And for damn sure if I'd known she seen me leaving, I'd have done her the same as that husband of hers."

"How fortunate then that your father was able to correct that small oversight."

Banner's indignation rose. "Oh yeah? Well, who said it was him who done it?"

The card Ezra flicked at his hat sailed halfway across the room.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't you say...?"

"I never said Pa done it. I only thought maybe he did. But the more I think on it, the more I figure it probably wasn't him."

"And why is that?"

"He ain't God Almighty, you know. Not everything that goes on in this territory is his doing."

"But who else would have reason to kill Amy Callenbeck?"

Banner shrugged. "How should I know? Heard tell that tracker was up in her room. Maybe they had a lover's spat that turned ugly. Or some beau of hers found them together and went crazy."

"Yet your father came rushing here to impart the good news of Mrs. Callenbeck's death. Surely he must have said something to you that would indicate he was responsible?"

"No. He just said the problem was taken care of. And I admit I figured he'd done it. But it's like you said about not letting a killing get traced back to you -- ain't no way Pa would risk it."

"Well, certainly he wouldn't pull the trigger himself. But he does have a number of men in his employ...."

Banner shook his head. "Pa ain't got no hired guns. And it ain't likely he'd trust any of the men we got working for us to pull off something like that. Ambushing someone on the trail, maybe. But this? They're just a bunch of dumb cowboys."

Ezra drew a new card off the deck on the desk before him and flipped it between his fingers, his gaze locked on it. Then with a cock of his head he looked up. "There are plenty of guns for hire."

Banner was silent a moment, considering. "Maybe. But even if Pa did hire someone, it still don't mean that I couldn't have figured a way out of here on my own."

"No, of course not," Ezra solemnly agreed. Then with a flick of his wrist, he sent the card in his hand sailing straight into his hat.

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Chris was at the Seven's accustomed table in the saloon when Ezra strode through the batwing doors a short while later. And sliding into a chair across from him, Standish quirked an eyebrow and said, "I trust you enjoyed tonight's performance?"

Chris nodded. "So did the rest of the audience. In fact, a couple of the men were so impressed they swore they were never getting into another card game with you. And Nettie actually said something flattering about you. Although I don't think any of our witnesses were too happy with the choice of seating."

"I don't imagine any of them are used to skulking in alleyways," Ezra conceded with a grin. "But they'll get nice comfortable front row seats in the courtroom tomorrow."

"Yeah. And at least we'll get Banner Junior put away."

The words were congratulatory, but the tone was flat.

Ezra's grin faded. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to glean any information

about who killed Amy Callenbeck."

Chris looked at the gambler squarely, no condemnation in tone or expression as he said, "It wasn't your fault. In fact, I was pretty damned impressed too, Ezra S. Standish."

"And here all this time I thought your middle initial was 'P,'" a new voice joined in.

Ezra grinned as Buck pulled out a chair and sat down. "Actually, it's 'A' -- for 'adaptable.'"

Buck shook his head and smiled. Then sobering, he turned to Chris.

"Miss Nettie told me what happened down at the jail. You reckon we'll be able to find out who killed Mrs. Callenbeck?"

Chris made no answer, merely stared off into the distance with a hardness in his expression Buck recognized for a determination that wouldn't let him rest until the killer was brought to justice. And knowing how far down a dark path that determination could lead if things went from bad to worse, he bracingly said, "Well, Vin will be able to tell us about that as soon as he wakes up, so I wouldn't worry about it none. And in the meantime, we'll keep an eye on him just in case the killer's still around."

Ezra dug his cards out of his vest pocket. And fanning them with one hand, he said, "Might I suggest that we have a backup plan in place just in case Vin is unable to identify his attacker?"

Chris shifted his gaze to him, his eyes shining dark with anticipation.

"You got another idea?"

Ezra flashed his gold tooth in a cat-that-ate-the-canary grin and said, "Don't I always?"

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Wary of eavesdroppers, the three moved to the clinic to discuss Ezra's plan, joining J. D., Nathan and Nettie there.

"How's he doing?" Chris asked as he moved to the bed to look down at the pale man lying there.

"He's doing what Tanners do," Nettie announced with a firmly set jaw.

"He's hanging on, refusing to give up."

Chris shifted his gaze to the old woman who had taken up a position in the chair on the far side of Vin's bed, as immovable as a mountain, faith refusing to give way to fear.

She was waiting, as they all were, as he himself had waited the previous night and all through the day. Waiting for Vin to make some crack that would let them know that all was not as bad as it seemed, that nothing in life could be hopeless so long as one could find a way to laugh one's way through it. Waiting for what had been and what should be.

Waiting for that which none of them wanted named. But Vin only lay in the bed, as still and as silent as he had been for nearly twenty-four hours.

And with a sigh, Chris took pity on the old woman who looked prepared to sit there waiting as long as it might prove necessary.

"It's getting late," he softly pointed out. "I'll get one of the boys to take you home."

Nettie looked at first as if she would refuse. Then with a sigh she gave a nod, having learned long since that waiting was done with the heart and not with a body sitting still and a mind on the worry. And knowing that Vin had six good men to watch over him and Mary to watch over them, she decided to wait him out in her own bed that night. But first she had that which needed settling in her mind.

"You boys figure out yet how to track down who did this?" she asked.

Chris nodded. "Ezra has a plan."

Nettie shifted her gaze to the gambler, who gave a grin that reminded her of nothing so much as a cat sitting on a table with cream on its chin and an empty bowl in front of it. Before the gambler could share his plan, however, a soft knock sounded at the door.

J. D. moved to answer it, his right hand hovering over his gun. And opening the door to find the Reverend Bliss standing there with hat in hand and a soft request to visit with Mr. Tanner, he turned to Chris for direction.

Chris' first instinct was to turn the man away, to warn him off whatever fascination Vin held for him. But somehow, before he could say a word, Bliss was in the room, his eyes going first to the man on the bed before shifting to Nathan.

"Is there any change?" he softly inquired, his tone properly concerned and sincere. Yet Chris moved a step closer to the unconscious tracker and Nettie stiffened her back, sitting taller in her chair at Vin's side.

"He ain't gotten any worse," Nathan replied, his eyes curious to know what Vin was to this man.

Chris shot a look to the healer, not caring for what wasn't said in his reply. He wanted to ask, but was afraid to know. So he used Bliss' presence there as an excuse to let the question go. Then, as if to mock his fear, Vin gave an answer of his own, his breath coming in a harsh gasp, the sound drawing all eyes to him, his audience waiting for what was to come next.

But nothing came, neither movement nor breath following, the silence that had fallen stretching until it echoed with an ending for which none of the Seven were ready.

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~ Endure the Night ~

by jann

~ CHAPTER FIVE ~

"Nathan! Do something!" J. D. cried, his eyes never leaving Vin as he willed him to start breathing again.

But Nathan was already moving towards the bed, reaching for the quilts

piled on the tracker, pulling them off so that he could press his ear to Vin's chest.

"What is it, Nate?" Buck demanded to know.

Nathan shifted his gaze to Chris without lifting his head. "Get them out of here," he ordered. "I don't need no distractions right now."

Chris had only to turn a glare on the others for them to back out of the room, taking Bliss with them and closing the door behind them, leaving Chris to stand ineffectual guard at the foot of Vin's bed and Nettie at his side.

He waited then. Waited for Nathan's grim look to ease, for Vin to draw breath, for his eyes to open and focus on him with that twinkle that was seldom absent for any length of time. He waited for his own heart to stop pounding, for the weight to lift from his chest, for the world to return to normal. He stood and he waited and he wished he could pray as he knew Nettie was doing, her chin set so firm that Chris felt sure even God Himself couldn't prevail against her.

Then Nathan lifted his head and pulled the tracker up off the bank of pillows. "His heart's still beating," he said. "But he ain't breathing." He leaned Vin forward against his left arm and drew his right back, bringing his open hand down hard on the tracker's back. "Come on, Vin," he demanded. "Don't you be giving up that easy. You hear me?"

He drew his arm back for another blow, only to stop when Vin gave another gasp, the sound not unlike the first. But this time the intake of air was followed by an exhaled breath. And five seconds later, that was followed by another intake of air.

When the process repeated, Nathan looked up at Chris and then Nettie, afraid to move for fear of upsetting the delicate balance of breaths drawn in and let out, not sure what had happened nor what he could do to prevent its happening again. So he sat on the bed with Vin's weight straining against his arm, waiting, Chris standing with narrowed eyes intent on the one whose every breath he counted, Nettie in her chair willing those breaths to continue. And when a minute passed and then another, with no change in the even rhythm of Vin's breathing, Chris lowered his gaze to Nathan and waited again.

Nathan met that gaze without flinching away from the question in the other man's eyes, aware that it shone in Nettie's as well. Then a slow smile curled the corners of his mouth upwards, giving both his answer. The fear eased within Chris at that and he managed a shaky, "What the hell just happened?"

Nathan shook his head, his expression turning serious again, but without that pinched look he'd worn for the past day. "Might have been some kind of fit. But whatever it was, he seems to be okay now."

He eased the tracker back onto the mattress then, his ear going to his chest again. "Sounds okay. At least, no worse than he was."

"Then he's okay?" Nettie asked, voice steady but with years of a

hard-won strength keeping it so.

Nathan pulled the quilts back over Vin and gathered the pillows again, tucking them behind his head. "He ain't okay. But he ain't any worse than he was, at least."

"What about this fit?" Chris prompted. "Is it going to happen again?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"So what do we do?"

"Ain't nothing we can do but what we been doing." Nathan gave a sigh.

"I wish I could tell y'all different, but ain't nothing changed. It still don't look good. It just don't look worse no more."

Chris nodded, willing in that moment to accept the status quo.

"I'd best go tell the others," Nathan said and turned to leave.

Chris, however, stopped him with a harsh, "No!"

Nathan turned back in surprise. "What do you mean 'no?' The others are probably thinking the worst right now."

"Let them. At least as long as Bliss or anyone but us is out there."

Nettie raised an eyebrow. "You want folks to think Vin is dead? Why?"

"You heard what Banner said in that jail. His pa had to have hired someone to kill Amy Callenbeck. And if he did, if a professional is involved, then chances are he knows Vin is still alive -- and he can't afford to leave him that way."

"Which is why we're guarding him," Nathan pointed out. "You thinking that ain't going to be enough?"

"Might not be against a professional. And there's no sense in taking chances, especially if we aren't able to get the killer's name out of Banner tomorrow."

"It makes sense," Nettie agreed. "It's easier to keep the fox out of the henhouse if he doesn't know there are chickens in it."

Nathan thought for a moment, weighing the possibilities. Then he gave a nod and said, "Okay. The judge will be here on the morning stage, so it should be easy enough to keep folks fooled 'til then. But how are we going to keep this up if you don't get the killer's name out of Banner?"

Chris, however, wasn't ready to concede that possibility, so he shrugged it off. "We'll think of something. In the meantime, we'll take turns sitting with Vin's 'body' here in the clinic. Won't nobody think anything is strange about that."

Nathan nodded. "Okay. I'll go give the others the bad news then. But you just remember -- if anyone wants to break a jaw when they find out I lied to them, you'd best be volunteering yours."

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The others were on the clinic porch, waiting in tense silence, Bliss still with them, all eyes going straight to Nathan's face when he opened the door and stepped out to join them, each of them as afraid as they were eager to read Vin's fate there.

Knowing that, Nathan lowered his eyes and shook his head, leaving the

lie unspoken.

J. D. sagged against the railing at his back in response, needing that support for legs gone suddenly weak. The others allowed no more than a slump of their shoulders, their gazes drifting off in different directions, no one saying a word, accepting as they'd always had to accept that death came when and how it chose, no matter sometimes how hard they fought against it. Still, none of the Seven were ready to acknowledge the loss, to make their good-byes and go on with their lives minus another friend. So they stood on that porch in silence, each man at a distance from the others, feeling the loosening of the bonds that had once bound seven and that would now have to be adjusted to fit six.

Finally, it was Bliss who broke the silence, addressing Nathan in a solemn tone. "I'd like to pay my respects, if you don't mind."

Nathan's head came up at that. And stilling the alarm that rose within, he steadily said, "That's kind of you, Reverend. But Chris ain't in no mood right now to be around no one but friends. And I promised we'd keep Vin here the night, keep everyone away but the six of us and Miss Nettie, give us a chance to make our good-byes in private."

Bliss shot a look at the others, noting the closed expressions of all but the youngest, only his grief visible and real. And with a nod, he accepted that, and the evidence of his own eyes, as proof. "I understand, Mr. Jackson. And since I'll be leaving on the stage in the morning, please give Mr. Larabee my condolences." And with that he tipped his hat and left.

No one but Nathan acknowledged his leaving, the others standing still and silent until he was gone. Then with a clearing of his throat, Buck softly said, "Reckon I better go see how Chris is doing."

He moved towards the door, but Nathan stopped him with a hand on his chest. And to the gambler, who stood turned away at the railing, he softly said, "Ezra, let me know when Bliss is gone."

The others shot him a sharp look -- all but Ezra, who kept his back to them. And lowering his gaze to the street, the gambler waited until Bliss appeared before softly reporting, "He's halfway back to the hotel." He turned then and Buck asked the question on everyone's mind. "You want to tell us what that was all about?"

"Yeah. But first let's go inside."

Nathan opened the door behind him then and stepped aside to let the others enter the clinic. And when they had done so, stopping just inside the door with their eyes on Chris at the foot of Vin's bed and Nettie at the side, he joined them, closing the door behind him again.

"He ain't dead," he softly announced without preamble. And when the others turned to him with shocked expressions, he held up his hands to forestall the questions forming on their lips. "He started breathing again -- I don't know how or why. But he's okay now. As okay as he was, leastways. But Chris figured it might be a good idea to let folks think he's

dead, just in case whoever done this is still out there not wanting to leave any witnesses behind."

He waited for the explosions then, hoping they'd heard the part about the lie being Chris' idea. But instead of the expected anger, he got only grins and a clap on the back from Buck, who laughingly said, "Nate, you ever think about going on the stage?"

"Yes," Ezra drawled, feigning a sour expression at being so easily fooled. "I hear there's one leaving in the morning."

J. D. shot a puzzled look from man to woman before him, settling at last on Chris, who stood staring down at the one in the bed, his stance tense, his expression intent, seemingly unaware of the others' presence.

"If Vin's okay," J. D. said at last, "then why's Chris looking at him like that?"

Nathan followed the younger man's gaze, then shot across the room to the bed, his ear going immediately to the chest he hurriedly exposed. And hearing as strong a sound of life as he'd heard in the past day, he straightened up and said, "He's fine."

He tucked the covers back around Vin, then looked up at Chris, who continued to stare at the injured tracker. "Chris? What's wrong? I told you -- he's fine."

A moment passed, Chris seemingly unaware that Nathan had spoken to him. And when Buck crossed the room to lay a hand on one shoulder with a soft bid for his attention, Chris ignored him as well. The others exchanged confused looks, not sure what to make of his strange behavior. Then, with a blink, Chris shifted his gaze from Vin to Nathan.

"He swallowed," Chris softly reported. "He did it before, after you left. At least I thought he did. But he just did it again. I know he did."

Nathan turned back to Vin, studying him carefully. Then he grabbed the glass of water sitting on the table beside the bed and put it to Vin's mouth, tipping the glass slightly so that a trickle of water went past the slack lips.

The others moved in closer, gathering around the bed so that they could see for themselves if this attempt at getting the tracker to drink would prove more successful than all the others in the past day. And to their relief, Vin did indeed swallow, his throat bobbing as he took in the sip Nathan had given him, then again as he offered more, not stopping until the glass was drained.

Nettie gave a nod, as if it were no more than she'd expected, and the men exchanged grins again, Buck slapping Chris on the back as he said, "I told you he was going to make it!"

Nathan set the empty glass down on the table and picked up the bottle of medicine left waiting there. And pouring out a spoonful, he gave it to Vin, waiting only until he swallowed before warning against too much hope. "He ain't out of the woods yet. And I ain't going to say different 'til he wakes up." Then with the faintest of smiles, he added, "But

at least now he has a better chance."

The mood in the room sobered, but only for a moment. Then Buck resumed his grin, saying, "Hell, Vin's just storing up his cussedness 'til he can do something with it. You'll see. By this time tomorrow he'll be hollering for that sawed-off of his, ready to use it on whoever done this to him."

Reminded then that they had a killer to catch, Chris turned to Ezra.

"Now, about this plan of yours...."

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~ CHAPTER SIX ~

"Congratulations, Mr. Banner," Ezra said by way of greeting as John Banner entered the jail the next morning. "Jameson, here, has been regaling me with tales of your paternal devotion."

Winston Banner stopped his determined march past the gambler and turned a hard look on him before transferring his gaze to his son.

Jameson squirmed under that look. "I didn't tell him nothing, Pa! I don't even know what the hell he's talking about!"

"Come now," Ezra chided before the elder Banner could speak a word. "I know you wish to downplay your father's contributions to your success in life, but one should give credit where credit is due. And considering the debt you owe your father -- who has put himself considerably at risk in order to come to your aid, I might add -- it would behoove you to start paying off some of that interest."

The puzzled prisoner turned a look of annoyance on his jailer. "What the hell are you talking about, Standish?"

"I'd like to know that myself," Winston Banner declared, switching his glare back to the loquacious gambler.

Ezra leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on the desk behind which he sat. "I'm merely pointing out, sir, that your son has known more of paternal devotion than most of us will ever know. And despite his apparent lack of gratitude, he is very lucky indeed that he could count on you to help him out of this little contretemps in which he has so unfortunately become involved."

"And just how do you reckon it was me who helped him out of it?"

Ezra cocked his head. "If not you, then who?" He raised a hand to forestall Banner's denial. "Let us not quibble over something so trivial as proof. We all know what happened to the unfortunate Widow Callenbeck. And however tragic her demise, it will nonetheless prove to be to our ultimate benefit."

"Our?" Banner echoed with a growl. "And just how do you figure you fit into this?"

"Quite simply: I am looking for a more lucrative position. One that will enable me to live the life to which I most fervently wish to become accustomed. And as you have proven yourself to be a man of considerable power and influence, I naturally look to you to provide me with said



position."

"And why would I do that?"

"Because it pays to have someone to whom you can entrust those delicate tasks requiring subtlety and finesse."

"And you figure that someone is you?"

"I know it's me, sir." Ezra met Banner's glare squarely, his green eyes reflecting an inner confidence that was all sometimes that had enabled him to stay alive long enough to move on to the next con. "The fact that I could convince a man like Judge Travis to hire me to protect the law I've spent a lifetime flaunting should be more than sufficient recommendation for you. If you desire further testimonial, however, you need look no further than your own son."

Banner cast a suspicious eye on his heir, who stared back at him in bewilderment. Then returning his gaze to Ezra, Banner said, "I don't know what kind of game it is you're playing here, Standish, but I can tell you I'm not interested. I had nothing to do with the Callenbeck woman's death. And if you want to suggest otherwise, you'll find I'm not the kind of man to suffer fools gladly."

"Nor would I suppose you to be the kind of man who would leave a job half done," Ezra dryly pointed out. "A man in your position is used to getting what he pays for, after all. And as a man, myself, who is used to getting paid considerably more than a dollar a day plus room and board for his talents, I had thought I might prove to be of some use to you. Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps you are content to risk a noose around your neck. If that is so, my apologies to you."

Banner narrowed his eyes. "You got something to say, Standish, I suggest you spit it out. I got no patience for this kind of fancy footwork." Ezra grew still, the lazy air that had marked him giving way to a cold hardness that settled in his eyes. "Very well, Mr. Banner. Then consider this: despite rumors to the contrary, Vin Tanner is alive. And it's only a matter of time before he identifies his attacker and Amy Callenbeck's murderer. Now, if you wish to leave it at that, if you have nothing to fear from his testimony, then I apologize for casting aspersions on your sterling character and will trouble you no further. But if you wish to rectify any small oversight that might have occurred, I am at your service."

Banner gave nothing away, his own eyes as cold and hard as Ezra's. And as he demanded an explanation, his voice was controlled, his tone one of skepticism warning that he would not be easily fooled. "What the hell are you talking about? How can Tanner still be alive? The whole town is talking about him dying."

"Just as Chris Larabee planned."

Banner was silent for a moment, his mind turning over the possibilities. And in acknowledgment that the men he'd dismissed as common gunslingers might be of a most uncommon nature, he warily guessed, "It was a

trap?"

Ezra shook his head. "Larabee felt it might be safer for Mr. Tanner to be thought beyond the reach of vengeance until such time as the one responsible for his condition could safely be incarcerated."

Banner took another moment to consider the possibilities before saying, "And how do I know you're telling the truth? How do I know this isn't a trap?"

Ezra studied his well-manicured fingernails, his manner suggesting that the question was of no real concern to him. And as if to appease a petulant child demanding an unnecessary concession, he assumed an air of long-suffering patience and said, "Ask your son whether or not I can be trusted. He admitted his guilt to me in the murder of Marcus Callenbeck yesterday and yet there he sits, a mere hour or two away from freedom." Banner turned a murderous glare on his son, not liking at all that the situation had gotten so beyond his control. "What the hell have you been telling this peacock, boy?"

Jameson blanched under that look and rushed to declare an innocence he hadn't known since before he was out of short pants. "I ain't told him nothing, Pa. I swear!"

Ezra looked up then, one eyebrow raising in genteel dismay at the falsehood offered. "I'm afraid it was a little more than nothing," he corrected with an apologetic air. And turning a sympathetic eye to Banner Senior, he added, "You know, he really shouldn't be let out of the house without a keeper."

Banner drew himself up to his full height, the sense of power radiating from him making up for a lack in inches. Then drawing his breath in deliberately, he fixed his gaze on Ezra and softly warned, "If you're angling for money, Standish, you can forget it. It's your word against my son's. And, as you pointed out, you and the law haven't exactly been on the best of terms. So won't no one around here take your word against my boy's."

Ezra widened his eyes at that and schooled his expression into one of wounded affront. "Sir, you insult me!" he indignantly declared. "Were it my desire to convince anyone of my sincerity, I assure you I could bring your son's jury to tears with my testimony. And at the end of it, I have no doubt but that Judge Travis would be pinning a medal on my chest in heartfelt gratitude. But it is not medals nor tears, nor even a fistful of filthy lucre I desire."

"Then what do you want?"

"I told you -- employment. At an embarrassingly high salary, of course. And in a position that befits my talents."

Another pause for the consideration of further possibilities, the gambler's reputation catalogued and weighed against the caliber of men Banner had currently in his employ. Then: "I might could use a man like you, at that. But would you be willing to go up against your friends if need

be?"

Ezra raised one eyebrow. "If you're referring to my fellow representatives of the law in this town, I assure you that I care more for my horse -- and I'd sell it in a heartbeat if the price were right."

Banner nodded, the sentiment one he well understood. But sentiment wasn't enough. And fixing Ezra with a hard look that warned of what it would cost to cross him he said, "First, I want proof that Tanner's still breathing."

Ezra pulled a key out of his vest pocket and held it up. "I thought you might say that." He laid the key down on his desk, at the edge nearest his prospective employer. "Mr. Tanner is in Nathan Jackson's clinic and only Jackson is there with him now. All you have to do is to get one of your men to lure away our would-be doctor with some dire emergency or other. Then you can slip into his room with the aid of the key you see there and correct that particular little oversight."

Banner, however, was a man long past doing his own dirty work. "I thought I was hiring you to rectify those annoying oversights."

Ezra grinned, his expression that of a fox just let into the hen house. "It will cost you. Five hundred now. And five hundred when Tanner is dead."

Banner said nothing, only stepped to the desk and palmed the key. Then, with a clenching of his jaw, he marched out of the jail.

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Twenty minutes later, he was back. And slapping a small cloth bag down onto the desk, he growled, "I want it done today."

Ezra leaned forward to pick up the bag. And opening it to find a stack of twenty dollar bills nestled inside, he looked up and said, "Any preference as to the method of disposal?"

"What do I care?" Banner dismissed the question with a snort. "Dead is dead. Don't much matter how a body gets that way, now does it?"

Ezra pulled the money out of the bag and fanned it, his gaze on it that of a man delighting in his beloved. Then looking back up, his eyes grew cold and hard again. "I beg to differ, Mr. Banner. It matters a great deal. For instance, if a man dies at ninety in his nice soft feather bed, with his young wife in attendance and his bankers shedding tears at his feet, one can only be envious. But should death come at a young age to an innocent, through the unadulterated greed of a cold-hearted blackguard, it is to be hoped that the hand of God will reach down and smite the dastardly sinner with a suitably painful vengeance."

Banner's eyes narrowed, tracking Ezra warily as he transferred the money to his left hand and held out his right, twisting it in front of his face, his gaze intent on it as he said, "As you can plainly see, I am no heavenly avenger. My hand is but flesh and blood, wielding no lightning bolts on the Lord's behalf." His hand stilled and his gaze shifted to the sinner before him. "No, whatever penance the good Lord wishes to

exact is His concern, not mine. After all, as a particularly wise friend would say, vengeance is the Lord's...." He flicked his wrist then and his derringer slid into his hand. And with a cold-eyed grin, he pointed it at Banner and added, " but sometimes He needs a little help."

"What the hell is this?" Banner snapped, his eyes flashing with anger, his bearing that of a man unused to such outrage.

"Like I said," Ezra continued, "whatever penance the Lord wishes to exact from your miserable hide is His concern. But however He chooses to make you suffer, He'll have to wait His turn in line."

"Pa, what's going on?" Jameson called from his cell, his gaze shifting between the gambler and his outraged parent.

Ezra curled his lip. "Why, I should think that what has just transpired would be obvious even to you, you puerile little weasel. Your father rather foolishly hired me to commit a murder. And in case you weren't already aware of the fact -- and I'm guessing from your present incarceration that you aren't -- that's slightly illegal."

Banner forced out a laugh and relaxed his position, trying to give the appearance of a man unconcerned with his immediate future. "This is never going to work, Standish, no matter what it is you're trying to pull. You won't get another dime out of me --"

"I don't want another dime out of you, you arrogant maggot!" Ezra contemptuously declared. "I want justice -- for Amy Callenbeck and for Vin Tanner. I want to see you sweating away what little remains of your life behind bars, like the animal you are. And then I want to stand at the foot of your scaffold and watch as you swing at the end of a rope."

Banner assumed a smug air. "It'll never happen. You can't prove a thing."

Ezra waved his fistful of money. "Here's all the proof I need."

"A gambling debt," Banner declared, still outwardly unruffled. "Or maybe you stole it from me. Either way, you can't prove otherwise."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," a voice warned as the door to the jail swung open and Judge Travis entered with Chris Larabee at his back.

"Judge! Larabee!" Banner spluttered, scrambling to save what he could of the situation. "I'm glad you're here. I want this man arrested! He --"

"He what?" Travis cut in, his words curious but his tone flat and uncaring of any claims the man before him might attempt to make. "He took the money you handed him in good faith and then reneged on the bargain you'd made?"

"There was no bargain! He's lying!"

"Then my ears must have deceived me, as I could have sworn I distinctly heard you hire Mr. Standish to kill Vin Tanner." Travis turned to Chris. "What do you say, Mr. Larabee? Did these old ears deceive me?" Chris shook his head and gave a small smile of unholy delight. "I heard the same thing, Judge. And I reckon that if you ask Nettie Wells and

Mary Travis and the other six people who stood out in that alley behind the jail with us, they'll say the same thing."

Travis turned back to Banner. "That testimony sounds pretty conclusive to me, sir. And I don't suppose a jury will have any trouble with it at all."

"Now wait just a minute!" Banner pointed a finger at Ezra, who sat idly running a hand through the money he held. "This man tried to blackmail me by threatening to get up in court and swear my boy confessed to a crime he didn't commit. I was simply trying to set a trap so that I could show you what kind of man you have keeping the law in this town."

Travis raised an eyebrow and spoke to Chris without taking his eyes off the blustering rancher. "Tell me, Mr. Larabee, are the fine upstanding citizens who overheard Mr. Banner's solicitation of murder the same ones who overheard his son's confession?"

"That they are, Judge."

Banner was back to spluttering. "It's a trick, I tell you! Jameson didn't know what he was saying! And I had no way of knowing this man wasn't a common blackmailer."

"Common?" Ezra echoed indignantly.

The judge ignored the interruption, folding his hands across his middle and nodding thoughtfully as he said, "I advise you to bring that up at your trial then, sir. Not that stupidity is an acceptable defense. But you are certainly welcome to try it."

Banner was reduced then to threats. "You'll never get away with this! By the time I'm through with you, Travis, you won't be able to get a job mucking out stables. And as for these hired guns of yours, I'll see them run out of town with a posse at their heels."

"You can try," Chris lazily suggested, his eyes glittering with a dangerous light that warned he would welcome the contest threatened.

"I'll wire the governor," Banner warned next, his gaze carefully skirting the uncowed gunslinger to rest on the judge instead. "He'll put a stop to this."

"You can have your lawyer contact him for you," Travis amiably suggested. "In the meantime, feel free to make yourself at home here. And to show you that I'm a fair man, I won't even demand that you share a cell with that boy of yours."

"You can't lock me up!"

The judge raised an eyebrow in gentle reproof. "Not only can I, sir, but I intend to do just that. I wouldn't be too concerned though. After all, you won't be spending much time here. Not with a cut and dried case like this."

Banner's posturing gave way to fear. "I want to see my lawyer!"

"Certainly, sir. Provide Mr. Standish here with his name and direction, and he'll contact him for you."

Travis turned to Chris then. "Lock him up."

Larabee stepped forward with a grin and Banner scuttled back away from him, trying hard to make it seem as if his move to the cell beside his son's was his own idea.

No sooner had the cell door clanged shut behind him than the judge turned to leave. Ezra stopped him, however, with a drawled, "You know, it occurs to me that there is one member missing from our little troupe here."

The judge eyed the gambler thoughtfully. "And that would be ?"

"Whoever Banner hired to kill Amy Callenbeck," Chris supplied. "If he wouldn't take care of a completely helpless man by himself, you can bet he made sure to keep his hands clean of Mrs. Callenbeck's murder."

Travis turned to study the man standing arrogantly in the middle of his cell, as if he didn't have time to get comfortable before his imminent departure. "Is that right, Mr. Banner? Did you hire someone to kill Mrs. Callenbeck?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Banner declared with a disdainful sweep of his eyes between the three peacekeepers. "I had nothing whatsoever to do with that woman's death."

"Good luck convincing a jury on that one, sir. After all, you hired someone to dispose of Mr. Tanner. And what reason could you have had for that but a desire to rid yourself of a potential witness against you and your hired assassin?"

"You can't prove that!"

"I don't have to prove it," the judge pointed out. "All that needs to be done is to convince a jury of a high degree of probability. You willing to risk that?" When Banner failed to resume his blustering, Travis continued. "Now, if you were to cooperate, give us the name of whoever it is you hired, I can assure you of leniency for both you and your son. You try my patience though and I guarantee they'll be digging father and son graves in the town cemetery before long. It's up to you."

Jameson turned frightened eyes on his father. "Come on, Pa! You can't let them hang me!"

Banner shot his heir a look of disgust, then turned back to the judge. And after a moment's pause, he said, "What if I don't know the man's name? What if I hired him through an intermediary?"

"Then tell us what you do know."

"You'll guarantee that my boy and I won't hang?"

"You have my word."

Banner gave a nod of resignation. "All right. I'll tell you everything I know."

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When both Banners' confessions had been signed, sealed and safely stowed in Travis' pocket, Chris moved to escort the judge to the hotel. He stopped, however, on his way to the door to speak to the self-satisfied gambler still sitting with his feet propped up on the desk.. And

leaning down to put his mouth to Ezra's ear, he drawled, "You care more for your horse, do you?"

Ezra smiled. "An exaggeration, I assure you, Mr. Larabee. After all, I really couldn't get that much for the beast."

Chris grinned in return. "I'll be remembering that the next time it's my turn to buy a round of beer over at the saloon." He reached down then and snatched up the money Ezra had been lovingly fondling. And straightening up, his grin widened as he added, "Best be taking this over to the bank for safekeeping."

Ezra looked up in alarm, his feet swinging off the desk to thud onto the floor. "Uh, Mr. Larabee? Chris? Is that really necessary? I mean, perhaps the money would be safer here in the jail. After all, we wouldn't want any despicably greedy bank robbers making off with the evidence, now would we?"

Chris merely widened his grin another notch and made for the door, where the judge stood waiting with a small smile of his own.

Ezra pushed up out of his chair and grabbed his hat, scrambling for the door behind his grinning leader. Chris, however, ignored him. And ushering the judge out of the jail before him, he closed the door behind them -- right in Ezra's face.

Undaunted, Ezra pulled it open again and darted through it, calling, "Now, Mr. Larabee, I really do think we need to discuss this. Chris??"

The only reply to be heard though was a bark of laughter echoing through the dusty morning air.

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## ~ CHAPTER SEVEN ~

In the end, Banner's confession did the Seven little good, as he'd had no actual contact with anyone involved in the hiring of Amy Callenbeck's killer. And by the time the trail was sniffed out in the days and weeks that followed his arrest, it was cold and led nowhere of any real use.

In the meantime, Banners Senior and Junior pled guilty and were sentenced by Judge Travis to the territorial prison where they were bound to spend their lives pending the appeal Winston Banner demanded his lawyer make. And once the doors of the prison wagon clanged shut behind them, none of the Seven gave either of the men any further thought. Instead, their attentions were divided between finding out what they could of the hired killer and tending to Vin, who continued in his unconscious state, taking in what liquid nourishment was offered but otherwise remaining totally unresponsive. Yet, while he moved not a muscle, except to swallow, nor made a sound of any kind, he healed so that the bandages came off his legs and the stitches out of his shoulder, and he no longer needed to be propped up by pillows to ease his breathing.

As the days passed with no sign that he would soon be awakening, the others stopped asking Nathan how he was doing, aware of the healer's

growing frustration with his own limitations, whether real or perceived. And because they could do nothing for Vin, they took to ministering to Nathan instead, taking care not to leave too much of the burden of Vin's care on his shoulders, allowing him to talk out his frustrations and distracting him from his worries when worrying would do no good. But even that focusing of their attention could not allay their own frustrations. They were men used to solving a problem by some action, whether by gun or sheer strength of might or will. When faced with an obstacle, they had learned to go through it or around it or to simply turn and walk away. But there was no getting around what had happened to Vin. And it wasn't in any of them to turn from him. So they plowed their way through the situation, moving blindly ahead, not knowing what would come of it in the end. And when days followed days with no change in Vin's condition, they began to wonder if an end was even in sight, if perhaps they were keeping a body alive long past the point where the spirit had left it.

All of them considered the possibility, but none of them spoke those thoughts aloud. Instead, as if in defiance of them, they began gathering in the clinic each evening, with bottles and cards and raucous conversation, their eyes going frequently to the man in the bed, each of them hoping that their presence there would somehow be noted and appreciated. And when days turned into a week and then on into a second, another thought went unspoken -- that perhaps it was time to move Vin out of the clinic and to a room in the hotel or out to Nettie Wells' ranch. Or perhaps to a hospital in some big city back east that could maybe do more for him than they had so far been able to do themselves. But again no one wanted to give power to that thought by speaking it, to give up hope by suggesting that Vin wasn't going to get any better.

So the middle of the second week following Vin's injury found them all once again gathered at the clinic -- all but Ezra and Josiah, who were off pursuing a lead on Amy Callenbeck's killer.

It was J. D. who first noted the change, looking up from his poker hand to check on the tracker and going still with surprise and hope and the fear to hope when he saw that Vin's eyes were open. All else forgotten, he continued to stare at the no longer unconscious man, waiting for him to speak or move or do something. But he only lay with his eyes half-opened, the blue orbs unfocused and unaware.

It was Buck who next noticed the change in Vin, following J. D.'s gaze to him, his eyes going wide and a grin starting to his lips as he softly breathed out, "Sweet Mother! Would you look at that?"

The others followed his gaze in turn, Nathan exploding out of his chair to rush to the newly awakened man's side, leaning over to peer into his face. "Vin, you hear me?" But he only continued to stare out of half-opened eyes, no flicker of recognition lighting them. "Vin, now I want you to look at me," Nathan commanded, tilting the tracker's head back



against the pillow so that he couldn't miss seeing him. But his eyes remained dull and unfocused.

"He awake?" Chris asked as he moved to the other side of the bed, the others taking up their own positions around it, all eager to welcome their injured comrade back to the fold.

Nathan shook his head. "He ain't out of it yet, but he's getting there. Reckon he just needs some time to get his brain working again."

"Then he's going to be all right?" J. D. asked.

Nathan carefully refrained from looking at him, or at any of the others, as he evasively said, "He might be drifting in and out of consciousness for a while yet. Could be days before he's really back with us."

It was as much of an answer as he could give and the others were reluctant to press him on it. In that moment, it was enough that Vin had opened his eyes, for it was more than he'd done in the past ten days. One step at a time was all they asked and were grateful for it. So they sat watching as Nathan tended to Vin, none of them willing yet to find their beds, wanting to savor the hope that had sprung to life in them. And once Nathan was done with his ministrations, they started a low-voiced conversation, the words unimportant, wanting only to wrap Vin in their nearness and concern, all eyes going again and again to him, waiting and watching for some sign that he knew they were there.

At last though, his eyes drifted shut again and all but Nathan took their leave, with quick grins of relief and hope fighting against the fears left unspoken.

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The town hadn't been long fooled by the Seven's announcement of Vin's supposed death, so they needed only to see the lightening of the grim looks that had settled on their peacekeepers' faces to know that he was at last on the road to recovery. And when the men ceased moving about town as if they were on their way to a funeral, the worries the townspeople had harbored about the fate of the Seven and hence the town they protected eased. Only Chris continued to hold on to the fear that had gripped the Seven, his expression remaining closed, as if he'd been surprised too many times by life to be willing to trust that he wasn't being set up for another fall.

And because that fear still haunted him the next morning, he was the first one at the clinic, riding in from his shack out of town to make sure Vin's awakening hadn't been a dream or an alcohol-inspired vision. Easing his way into Nathan's rented room, his eyes went immediately to the man in the bed, his stomach clenching at the sight of Vin lying once again pale and still, his eyes closed as if to give lie to the hope that had stirred in Chris despite his fears.

Reading that fear in his face, Nathan answered Chris' question before he could decide whether or not to risk asking it. "He woke up again a couple of times during the night, kept his eyes open for a while, then

went back to sleep. Just like before. Acted like his brain hadn't woke up yet even if his body had."

"He sleeping now?"

Nathan nodded. "He ain't been moving around though."

Chris didn't much care for the sound of that and decided to risk the next question rather than have it catch him by surprise. "He going to come out of this?"

Nathan wanted to dance around the question, not wanting to admit even to himself the possibilities. But he'd never been one to shy away from what was hard in life, having learned early the futility of such a maneuver. So he gave as much of the truth as he had in him to give. "I ain't going to lie to you, Chris. I'd be a whole lot happier if he'd woke up and been his own ornery self. And maybe next time he will. I ain't saying it ain't possible. But I got to warn you that there may be something broke that I can't fix, that no amount of time can make right. We just got to wait and see."

"How long?" Chris asked, working to set himself apart from the fear that clawed in his gut like a wild thing fighting to be loosed.

"I don't know. Could be days, could be longer. But I reckon if he don't show some kind of improvement soon, he ain't going to."

Chris stared down at the man in the bed, a seeming stranger in his odd stillness. Not that Vin was ever in constant motion, but his normal stillness was born of a quiet strength, an acceptance of whatever life had to offer. And in that acceptance was an appreciation for life that was seldom found on the hard frontier, where survival was a constant battle. Now it seemed as if he had lost that battle but just didn't know it. Still, he wasn't in the ground yet and had six men to fight for him, six men who'd fought against long odds before and survived. Six men stubborn enough to keep fighting long past the point where success seemed even remotely possible. So if there was a way through this, they'd find it. And at the end of it, six would become seven again.

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Chris clung to that determination in the days that followed, refusing to consider any other possibility when Vin was slow to improve, the changes in his condition coming in small doses, never big enough to give hope that all would soon be well, but large enough to keep hope alive that he one day would be his old self. So when he progressed in the weeks following his awakening from a stupor to a wakefulness that extended more to his body than to his mind -- which remained unaware and unresponsive -- the rest of the Seven looked upon that hope as a challenge. And taking to heart Nathan's suggestion that his mind might benefit from the same attention as a limb recovering from an injury, they set to working and worrying at him, pushing him to the limits of what he could give, including him in their lives as much as they were able, determined to win through the dullness and the confusion clouding his mind by sheer

will alone.

One of them was always with him, and sometimes Nettie, tending to him, talking to him, expecting him to get better. They refused to let him lie abed, forcing him out of it, keeping him steady on his feet until he found his balance once again, taking him by the arm and leading him where they would when neither a request nor a demand would move him. They put food in his mouth when he couldn't be persuaded to eat on his own. They dressed and shaved and bathed him, his hat and coat forgotten and the lack of them leaving him looking so unlike himself that Chris was tempted to cloak him in the familiar just to ease his own discomfort. And through it all, they talked with him as if he understood, even though the vacant expression in his eyes and on his face gave lie to that hope.

But hope was all they had -- and for them it was enough. So whenever the six gathered together, the seventh was there with them, in the clinic at first and then in the hotel room to which they moved him after a time, Chris taking up residence in the second bed there, Nettie's offer of a room at her ranch having been rejected as being too far from Nathan's watchful eye and too unprotected from bounty hunters or hired killers. And when they'd managed to get him on his feet and moving, under his own power if not by his own will, he could most often be found at either the saloon or the jail, a quiet presence among the six, unaware and unheeding, but there nonetheless.

Yet despite their hopeful and determined efforts on his behalf, the fear that Vin would progress only so far and no further, that he would remain lost in his own world to which none of them could gain entrance, weighed heavy on his friends. As before though, that fear went unspoken, Nettie refusing to give way to it and each of the men dealing with it in their own way: Josiah with a philosophical acceptance; Nathan with a scientific detachment; Buck with a natural optimism; Ezra with a con man's regard for all possible angles; J. D. with an innocent's hope; and Chris with a cool determination.

And beneath that fear among the six was a fear for themselves, one long held that they would one day meet with a violence that would not kill but only maim, that would leave them alive but better off dead in a world where it was truly the fittest who survived. It was a strong man's fear of weakness, of being left vulnerable, of being forced to the sidelines and pitied by those stronger or more fortunate, of needing to depend on others for their continued existence. They'd lived their lives and survived by the strength of body and mind. And to have either taken from them would be, they felt sure, a curse beyond their will to survive. To consider therefore that Vin might spend the rest of his days trapped in a healthy body with a mind that allowed no awareness of self, much less of others, was to consider that the same fate might one day befall them as well. So they pushed such uncomfortable thoughts from their

minds and spoke of the day when Vin would once again ride with them, taking every small step forward he made as proof that he would indeed overcome his present difficulties.

It was only when Vin was hit by the pain that had plagued him since his awakening that the fear in them rose to the surface, for then they were once again reduced to standing idly by, unable to affect the outcome of the situation by anything they could do or devise. So when the pain left the tracker curled in a ball, arms wrapped around his head, face pale and his breath coming in shallow pants, they waited in grim silence for it to ease or for him to succumb to the laudanum with which Nathan dosed him when the pain was at its worst.

But even those times when Nathan was actually able to do something for Vin weren't enough, for in all other ways the healer was as helpless as the rest of the Seven. There was no medication, no trick, no Indian remedy he could discover that would heal what damage had been done. There were no broken bones to knit. No disease to eradicate. No wound to suture or foreign body to remove. Only the slow improvement they all witnessed gave him hope that time alone would serve to cure whatever damage Vin had suffered. And when those improvements came in proportion to the easing of his headaches, Nathan took that as proof that he was not yet done mending and held out hope that he would one day regain all that he had lost.

How much he'd lost, they were never able to figure in those early days. And even in the months to come they could only guess. But in those first days and weeks, they convinced themselves that Vin was still Vin, that all the memories and quirks of personality that had set him apart as an individual were there still, that they had only to dig them out and dust them off to bring him back to himself.

And so it was that they sat together in the saloon one spring night telling tales of their time together, hoping to stir some memory in their injured companion, the laughter flowing more freely than the whiskey and beer, Vin sitting silent and drifting but nonetheless one of the Seven.

"Then old man Greer swore he was never going to touch another drop and went and bought his missus a hat -- the ugliest one I ever did see, mind you -- to make it up to her," Buck said in closing to a story that had all but one at the table grinning. And turning to their silent companion, Buck laughed and said, "You remember that, Vin?" When Vin only continued to stare vacantly off into space, Buck slapped a hand to his back and grinningly added, "Now you see why I ain't never been married."

The laughter and ribald comments that followed were abruptly cut off as a chair crashed to the floor on the other side of the saloon, propelled there by a cowboy's furious lunge across the table to his companion, one hand snatching at the man's shirt and the other swinging at his chin.

And before the peacekeepers' heads had more than swiveled in that direction, the other two men sitting at the table took exception to the insult offered and weighed in on the sides of whomever was farthest to hand.

Buck and Josiah were up instantly and across the room to break up the fight. But their help and interference went unappreciated and were roundly refused with a right cross and an uppercut that left their own tempers flaring. All the rest of the Seven but Vin then joined in, chairs and glasses flying as fast as fists and curses.

And while the fight raged around him, Vin sat where he'd been left, uninvolved and unaware. But when a body flew through the air to land on the table at which he sat, oversetting it so that table, drunken cowboy and Vin all crashed to the floor in a heap of tangled limbs, broken glass and scattered cards, something stirred within him at the shock of it. Eyes blinking as he struggled to make sense of jumbled sensations, he lay wet with spilled whiskey and wrapped in confusion, making no move to set himself to rights.

It was Buck who came to his rescue, hauling the cowboy off him and into J. D.'s arms with a grin. He then pulled Vin to his feet and laughingly said, "And here I thought you were going to miss a good fight, Tanner. Should have known you'd find a way to get in on it."

He brushed the glass off his shirt then and Vin let him, standing still and silent, his mind a whirl of sounds and sensations that seemed to echo in a dense fog of confusion. Dizzy, he closed his eyes against it and gave his head a small shake. But that served only to set off an explosion of pain in his head. All else forgotten then, he lowered his head and wrapped his arms around it.

Buck called to Nathan then and the healer moved to take over, leading Vin out of the saloon and to his room at the hotel, Chris following. But when they'd gotten him cleaned up and into his bed, he refused the laudanum Nathan offered, holding tight to his pain, arms wrapped around his head as he rocked in a rhythmic quest for relief. A second attempt to get him onto his back so that the healer could slip the spoonful of pain reliever into him proved no more successful than the first, as he only curled tight into himself in response, rigidly refusing to bend to the healer's will.

Nathan grunted as he continued to struggle with the resisting tracker, but a grin nonetheless spread across his face. "The stubborn fool's fighting me," he said over his shoulder to Chris. "I ain't sure he even knows what's going on, but for sure he don't want to be messed with right now."

"That's good, isn't it?" Chris asked. "I mean, he hasn't acted like this before. Up 'til now, he's just been letting us do whatever we want without even seeming to know we were doing it."

"Well, he knows now," Nathan declared. And letting go of his

uncooperative patient, he straightened up and turned to Chris. "It ain't enough to get excited about, mind you. But as long as he keeps getting even a little better, I reckon we got reason to hope."

Chris nodded, keeping a tight rein on that hope. Satisfied, Nathan continued. "Now, I can fight with him, try to get that laudanum down him. But it might just make things worse if I get him all riled up. So I'm going to see if we can wait it out." He lowered himself into the room's only chair. And looking at Chris, he added, "You want to go on back to the saloon, go on. I'll let you know if I need you."

But Chris had no desire to return to the noise and close company. Instead, he sat down on his own bed and waited, watching as Vin rocked without complaint against the pain in his head. And as always since the tracker's awakening, he wondered how he could be so silent, could ride out the pain without so much as a whispered moan escaping his lips, how he could get through the day without making any sound of any kind. They'd asked Nathan about that, but he'd had no more idea what could be keeping him without sound than did they. So at times they had found themselves sitting still and quiet, just listening for some small noise that would indicate that Vin was still with them somewhere in that stillness and silence.

Chris did the same in that moment, lying in his bed, watching as Vin's rocking gradually slowed then ceased, waiting for some sign that he was more now than the shell of the man he had ridden with and fought beside, whose eyes had met his in silent understanding across a dusty street on that day they had saved Nathan's life. And so intent was he on that quest for some small reason to continue to hope, he was only vaguely aware of the healer's departure.

How long he lay watching and waiting, Chris couldn't have said. But after a time, he could almost convince himself that there seemed to be a light in Vin's eyes that hadn't been there in the past weeks, that his eyes moved with more purpose than they had before. There was even a lessening of the strangeness he'd been feeling in Vin's presence, of that awareness of someone unknown and uncategorized masquerading as a friend. And giving into those hopes, he called Vin's name, softly at first, then more insistently when he showed no reaction.

When Vin continued to make no response, Chris felt a surge of anger, wanting to get up and smash something, to break into pieces some object fragile as his hopes. But to give vent to his frustration would be somehow to acknowledge that his hopes might be in vain. So instead, he only got up and moved about the room, seeking to distract his thoughts. In desperation, he sought out every detail of the room: the gingham curtains at the window; Vin's hat and ragged hide coat hanging from a hook in one corner; the lamp sitting on the table between beds, its light playing on the scarred dresser and glinting off a bit of metal left lying on its surface.

His eyes caught by that flash, Chris moved to the dresser, only to stop when he realized it was Vin's harmonica that shone in the soft lamplight. And growing still, he stared down at it.

It was no more than a cheap piece of tin and wood, battered and scarred with age and hard use. He'd seen it dozens of times, cradled in Vin's hands in still moments around town or on the trail, giving voice to those things the tracker couldn't or wouldn't say. And hearing those notes in memory that he might never again hear in life, Chris keenly felt the loss of the man lying not ten feet away from him. He wanted to turn then, to go to Vin and shake him, to somehow break through whatever held him captive and set apart, to will him back to himself. But he knew this fight was not his to win, that he could only stand by and wait and watch and hope.

With a sigh then of regret and loss and of hope teetering on the edge, he reached out to touch that small bit of his friend bound in tin and wood, hoping in some way to find whatever peace he had always seemed to find there. And as he felt the coolness of the spring night reflected in that battered metal, Chris found not peace, but a moment's calm in remembering not what he had lost, but what he had gained in knowing Vin Tanner.

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~ CHAPTER EIGHT ~

With a small sad smile, Chris picked the harmonica up and fingered it, remembering all the times Vin had blown on it, never producing any real music, just a few notes that sounded like noise -- until one listened carefully. And then they took on the sounds of the wind, of sorrow and joy, of freedom and the loss of it. It was Vin. It was who he was. What he felt and saw and experienced. All the things he once was and might never be again.

Chris brought the harmonica to his lips, searching out those notes that were Vin, wanting to find him in them as he couldn't find him in that room. But even as he blew a soft sad note, he knew he wouldn't find what he was looking for in a sound.

The calm that had enveloped him slipped then and he winced at the discordant note he produced, closing his eyes against it, angry with himself for wanting what might never be again. Then lowering the harmonica with a sigh, he opened his eyes -- to find Vin watching him. No, watching not him, but the harmonica, his gaze fastened on it with an intensity Chris hadn't seen in him since he'd regained consciousness. His eyes were bright and clear, his body still and tense, everything in him focused on that battered piece of tin and wood.

It was as if whatever spell his injury had cast over him had been broken, allowing what had been trapped inside to shine through the fog and the pain and the confusion that were all there seemed to be to him anymore. One note. That was all it had taken. And afraid that it wouldn't

hold him long, afraid that his eyes would soon lose their focus, that he would drift back into the confusion and the pain and the fog, Chris slowly lifted the harmonica again, his eyes never leaving Vin, willing him to hold on to whatever had brought him back, in whatever small measure he was there.

He blew another note and Vin seemed to vibrate, his body poised as if for some action, the look in his eyes one of expectancy. He was there -- Chris knew he was -- the old Vin, fighting to return to a world to which he no longer seemed to belong. And when Chris blew another note, one hand reached slowly out, palm up, all that was within Vin centered on a need or a hope Chris couldn't understand. But he didn't need to understand. All he needed was to draw Vin out a little more into the world. He considered handing him the harmonica then. But he feared he would only grab hold of it and slip back into his inner world with it. So he leaned against the dresser, his posture as relaxed as he could make it, his stance warning that he had no intention of handing the harmonica over. And when he saw by the flicker of hurt in Vin's eyes and the slight lowering of his outstretched hand that he had gotten that message, he blew another note, waiting to see what the tracker would do next.

Vin sat for a long moment, staring at the harmonica. Then he slid out of the bed and moved towards Chris, moving on his own, needing no one to set him in a direction, to keep him moving forward. But when he stepped close to Chris and would have grabbed the harmonica out of his hand, Chris twisted away and stepped back.

Chuffing out his breath in frustration, Vin moved forward to make another grab. But again Chris dodged his reaching hand. Vin raised his eyes to the other man's face then, that look of confusion that had become so familiar back, dulling the brightness that had flared there so briefly. And desperate to get that light back, Chris blew another note.

Vin's gaze lowered to the harmonica again, the sound all that held him, all that had cut through the swirling confusion in his mind. One note. Simple and pure and calling to something deep inside that lay beyond thought and reason. It was the focus of all he had in him to give, one unnamed need all that mattered in the world to him. Yet the fulfillment of it was beyond his grasp. And such was his need that he desperately sought out a means by which to take hold of it, scattered thoughts drawing together to shut out all else. But the confusion was more than his need, so he only stood amid the inner chaos, wanting but unable even to move. Then another note sounded and he raised his blue eyes to green again, somehow knowing that whatever answer was to be found would be found there.

His face was without expression, but Chris had only to look into his eyes to know that he was waiting for him to solve his problem for him. He had no doubt that Vin saw him as no more than a solution, a convenient tool, instead of as a valued friend. But at least he saw him. And at



that he smiled. Then he blew another note on the harmonica and held it out, saying, "You want it?"

Vin frowned with the effort to understand, the fog and the pain that were always there making it hard to grab hold of the thoughts and needs tumbling within. But he kept at it, holding onto the notes in memory as he fought to arrange his discordant thoughts into a recognizable pattern. And at last the fog thinned and he was able to make out enough of a pattern to know what was being asked. Then, knowing no other way to get what he wanted, he once again held out his hand. But this time his gaze was on Chris rather than on the harmonica.

It should have been enough. After all, it was more than they'd gotten out of the tracker in all the weeks since his awakening. But Chris was sure there was more to be had, that with a little effort Vin could step further into the world. So he blew another note and softly said, "Say it, cowboy. Tell me what you want."

Vin's frown deepened and he spread the fingers of his outstretched hand, letting the movement speak for him. Then his gaze dropped back to the harmonica.

Chris closed his hand over it. "No, Vin. Say it. Tell me what you want. You can do it. I know you can."

Vin looked at him again, hurt mixing with the confusion now obvious on his face as well as in his eyes. Then he let his outstretched arm fall to his side.

Chris was afraid then that he'd asked for too much. And again he considered handing over the harmonica. But he didn't want Vin getting the idea that he could give up so easily. So he sighed and said, "Okay then. Maybe not today. But when you want this back, you let me know."

He slipped the harmonica into his shirt pocket and Vin gave a wordless cry of despair, all that was within him springing to desperate life.

Flinging himself on Chris, he clawed at his shirt, trying to reclaim what was his. And when Chris pushed him easily away, he went after him again, panic now in his movements, in the expression on his face, in the darkness of his eyes, and in the wordless sounds that spoke of his need.

Chris grabbed hold of him then and spun him so that his back was to him, wrapping his arms around his chest, trapping his arms, glad of the sounds he made, however painful they were to hear, but determined to make Vin put words to them. "No, Vin! Calm down! I told you what you need to do to get your harmonica back. And I mean it! You want it, then you tell me."

Vin continued to struggle, his efforts weak after so many weeks without any real activity. And all the while he fought, Chris kept up his litany of encouragement. "You want it, Vin? Then tell me! Say it in words. In words! I know you got them inside you. You just got to want to say them bad enough."

And at last, when Vin's struggles ceased and he stood drawing in ragged

breaths of exhaustion and despair, Chris turned him around again, holding him with hands on his shoulders, afraid to look into his eyes for fear of what he would find there. But as he finally gathered his courage and looked straight into those blue orbs -- it was to find Vin looking straight back.

He closed his eyes for a moment in relief and thanksgiving. Then opening them again, he softly said, "Do you want your harmonica back?" Vin's gaze lowered to the pocket hiding the harmonica, and Chris gave him a shake. "No, Vin! Look at me!" And when he did, Chris repeated the question. "Do you want it? Answer me! Just one word. That's all I'm asking for -- just one little word. You can say it, I know you can. So come on, Vin. Say it!"

Tears of frustration gathered in Vin's eyes and his body tensed, thought and need and all that he was drawing together to bend mind to will, to bring some small measure of order to the chaos within.

Chris tensed as well, ready for another fight. But when it came, the struggle was an inner one, Vin shaking with the effort to bring forth one little word, his mouth moving soundlessly, his face screwing up as he struggled to make his mind and his lungs and his tongue all work in tandem. And at last, sweat beading on his forehead, eyes closing tight with a fierce concentration, he forced out a breath. Then, whisper soft, Chris heard it. One little word. "Yes."

Chris laughed then and drew Vin against him, weak with relief and with a hope stirring in him that was painful to acknowledge. Then moving Vin away again, he reached into his pocket and drew out the harmonica. Vin eyed it warily when he held it out, confusion still plain on his face.

"It's okay, pard. Go ahead and take it."

Vin flicked a glance up at Chris, then slowly reached out to take hold of the harmonica. And when it was safely in his possession, he moved away, returning to the bed to sit with legs crossed, staring down at the instrument he cradled in both hands. Then slowly, he brought it up to his mouth and started playing.

What followed was the strangest concert Chris had ever witnessed. Vin blew one note, then another, his lips moving up and down the battered harmonica, his brows drawing down in concentration as if he were searching for a particular note. Chris had no idea how long he kept at it. But finally he seemed to find the note he'd been searching for, and he played it over and over again, his expression lightening as he did so, his eyes half closing in what Chris took to be contentment.

It was only one note. And one word. But they were a start -- the first steps in a long road back. And in that moment, it was enough.

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Chris had no idea how long Vin played that one note before a knock sounded on the door. And getting up from the chair where he had long since

settled, he moved to the door and pulled it open to admit Buck into the room.

Buck's eyes went immediately to Vin sitting in the bed blowing on his harmonica. Then shifting his astonished gaze to Chris, he softly said, "Jesper Johnson came into the saloon a while ago, hunting up someone to come over here and take care of whoever it was killing a cat so's he could get some sleep." He shook his head, his gaze going back to Vin. "Thought I'd never hear that caterwauling again."

He moved slowly to the bed and sat gingerly down on the edge of it, his gaze softening as he studied the man there, seeking out some sign that a miracle had taken place and that Vin was fully restored to them. It didn't take long, however, for him to realize that any miracle that had occurred was a small one, for the tracker seemed totally unaware of his presence there. But no matter the size of the miracle, it was cause for celebration. And wanting to share the good news, he softly said, "Hey, Vin. That's right fine music you're playing there. Sounds real nice. And you know, I'll bet Nathan and Josiah would like to hear it too. So why don't we go on over to the saloon and you can play for them. What do you say? Do you want to?"

He didn't expect a response, so he wasn't surprised when Vin continued to ignore him, his attention all for his harmonica. And when he blew his one note again, Chris moved to stand beside him, one hand reaching out to take hold of the harmonica, pushing it down as he said, "Buck asked you a question, Vin."

Vin tried to pull the harmonica back, but Chris kept a tight hold on it. And when the tracker continued to fight for possession of the instrument, Chris jerked it away.

"Now, hey," Buck objected with a frown. "It's okay. He can keep playing if he wants to. I can get Nathan and Josiah to come here and listen. And as for Jesper, I'll have a talk with him, get him a room over at the saloon if I have to."

"No," Chris firmly decreed, fending off Vin's attempts to reclaim his harmonica. "We ain't mollycoddling him. It won't help none and he wouldn't thank us for it. He understands when it's important enough for him to work at figuring things out. So we got to get him to work at it from now on. It's the only way he's going to get better."

Buck gave a reluctant nod, his heart and his mind at odds, but he was nonetheless willing in that moment to let his mind rule him.

Satisfied that he wouldn't have to fight both men, Chris continued, his attention once more on Vin, saying, "You ain't going to be disturbing the peace, cowboy. You hear me? You want to play this thing, you're going to have to go where it don't bother people. Now, do you want to go to the saloon with Buck and play it there? Or do you want me to put it up for you?"

He held the harmonica an inch away from his pocket, and Vin froze.

"Chris ," Buck began, his tender heart once again gaining the upper hand.

Chris shot him a look of warning, then turned his attention back to Vin, who sat watching him with the same intensity he'd shown earlier.

"Now, I'm going to ask you again. Do you want to go to the saloon and play this thing some more?"

Again Vin quivered with the effort born of an inner struggle, his lips moving long before he managed to once again force out a breathy, "Yes." Chris wasn't sure he was really answering the question and not simply saying what had worked to get the harmonica back for him earlier. But in that moment, it didn't matter. Just getting any kind of response out of him was enough. So he handed the harmonica back, only to have to push it down when Vin would have put it up to his mouth. "Not yet, Vin. When we get to the saloon. Okay?"

He didn't think the tracker understood, so he kept his hand on his wrist, holding it down as he turned to Buck. "Keep a hold on him, will you, while I get my gun."

But Buck sat unmoving, his stunned gaze on the one trying to wrest his arm from the gunslinger's grasp. "Damn, Chris! Did he just say something?"

Chris grinned. "Yeah. It's the second word I've gotten out of him tonight." Then with a pause, he corrected himself. "Well, it was only the one word. But that was two times he's said it."

Buck stood stunned for a long moment. Then with a wide grin, he said, "This definitely calls for a celebration! Drinks are on Ezra!"

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~ Endure the Night ~

by jann

~ CHAPTER NINE ~

They had a tough time getting Vin out of the hotel, as he fought against their attempts to keep the hand holding his harmonica down. Finally they each grabbed an arm and all but dragged him to the saloon and over to the table where Nathan and Josiah sat playing cards.

Nathan gave a grin when Chris kicked out a chair and tried to sit the struggling tracker down in it. "He still not wanting to be messed with?" he asked.

"You wanted ornery ," Chris growled when Vin knocked his chair over. " you got it."

Josiah stared at Vin in surprise. "Nathan said he was starting to show some of his old orneriness, but I had no idea he was acting this ornery."

"He wasn't," Nathan replied, watching Vin with a considering gaze.

"Leastways, not while I was there. Guess Chris must have gotten him riled up about something."

"The man does tend to have that effect on people," Buck offered with a grin. He then picked the fallen chair up and helped Chris get Vin into it before sliding into a chair of his own.

"I think I liked him better when he was unconscious," Chris irritably declared as he let go of his charge and sat down.

Vin's struggles ceased as soon as he was released. And raising the harmonica to his mouth, he blew out his one note.

"That the cat Jesper was sure was getting killed?" Josiah asked with a lift of an eyebrow, his expression still one of surprise at the change in the man who only mere hours before was totally unaware and unresponsive, and -- for all any of them knew -- would always be so.

"That was indeed the cat," Buck acknowledged with another grin. "And that ain't the half of it."

When the others sat waiting expectantly, Buck turned to Chris. "Well, go on. Tell them."

Vin blew his one note again, oblivious to all else, and Chris glanced at him before letting his gaze shift to Nathan. "He talked. I was messing with his harmonica, blowing on it, and it caught his attention. He looked right at it, even put his hand out asking for it. And when I wouldn't let him have it, he came after me and tried to get it. When that didn't work, when I told him he couldn't have it unless he told me what he wanted, I could see him trying to understand, to figure things out. And when I asked him again if he wanted his harmonica, he said, 'Yes.'" "He said it?" Nathan was leaning forward, his brow wrinkled in concentration, his gaze shifting from Vin to Chris and back again, surprise and a glad hope shining in his eyes.

Chris nodded. "He didn't say it very loud and he had to work pretty hard to get it out. But he said it. And he knew what he was saying. I know he did. Then when Buck showed up and suggested coming here, I got him to say it again. I don't know that he really understood that time what I was asking. I think maybe it was just that when I took his harmonica to get his attention, he knew he had to say something to get it back."

"He say anything else? Show any kind of interest in anything besides that mouth organ?"

"No. He's just been sitting and blowing one note over and over again, like he's doing now."

All eyes turned to Vin, who remained oblivious to everything but his harmonica.

"That's good though, isn't it?" Buck asked, his gaze turning to the healer. "He's getting better, right?"

Nathan gave a smile of satisfaction. "Ain't no doubt he's getting better. Now it's just a question of how much better he's going to get."

The others were silent for a moment while they wrapped their minds around that prognosis, trying not to let their hopes get too far ahead of them. Then Josiah broke the silence, saying, "How'd it happen that he

walked out of here this evening the same as he's been, then back he comes a couple hours later talking and understanding?"

It was what they all wanted to know, Nathan included, their hopes like a horse in the spring standing quivering at the gate after a winter of being penned. Having lived weeks in dread, they were now ready to let their hopes run wild. But Nathan felt obliged to rein those hopes in.

"One word ain't exactly talking," he pointed out. "And we don't know yet how much he understands. Don't look like much, right now. But he does seem like he's on his way to it."

"Just like that?"

Nathan shrugged. "I don't know how or why, but it happens that way sometimes. Kind of like a baby learning to walk. One minute they're crawling. Then the next, something turns over in their minds and they get up and start walking. Maybe only a step or two, mind you. But once they got their minds set on it, crawling ain't going to do for them again."

"So then you think something finally turned over in Vin's mind?" Buck asked. And when Nathan nodded, he continued. "You reckon it's going to keep turning?"

"Now, that I don't know," the healer admitted. "But it could be like that baby again. Maybe Vin's got the how of things figured out and now he just needs to work on it so's it comes natural and steady."

Another silence descended on the group as they took that warning in and turned it around in their minds, working at it until they thought they had no fear of their hopes stampeding them. That settled then, they all sat watching Vin play his harmonica, each searching out the man they'd known and trusted with their lives. And truth be told, there wasn't much to be pinning their hopes on, for it was only a bit of tin and wood that had given them back some small part of their friend, the battered instrument far too fragile a thing to trust in or to bear the weight of so much faith and expectation. This they knew. Knew that it would take only one boot heel badly aimed to crush that lifeline to which Vin now clung. But it was all they had. So they sat watching and listening, trying to decipher whatever it was Vin was saying with that one note played over and over.

At last, unable to make sense of it, Nathan sought out other means to solve the puzzle. And getting out of his chair, he moved to squat down beside the oblivious musician so that he could more closely observe him.

Vin, however, continued to blow on his harmonica, ignoring him. Then softly the healer said, "Vin? Can you look at me for a minute?"

Vin continued to ignore him. And when a second request for attention seemed to go unheard, Chris reached out a hand to the harmonica, pushing down on it and saying, "You can play some more in a minute, pard. Right now, Nathan wants to talk to you."

The hand in his tried to jerk free, but Chris held on tight. "Quit it, Vin! Am I going to have to take this away from you again to make you

pay attention?"

Vin grew still, the tone of the warning more than the words striking a familiar chord.

Chris gave a nod of approval. "That's better. Now, Nathan wants you to look at him. Can you do that?"

Another familiar chord, warning that something was expected of him. And struggling for the memory of what had served before, Vin frowned in concentration.

"Just say it," Chris prompted. "Listen to me and tell me if you can do what Nathan is asking you."

Vin struggled to understand, but it was like tracking on a moonless night, signs there but not seen, hiding in the dark from him. Still, he kept at it, aiming for landmarks large enough to stand out against the dim light of faraway suns. And recognizing one at last in the expectant look of the one withholding his treasure from him, he took in a breath and let it out. Then, more easily than he'd yet managed, he gave a whispered, "Yes."

He pulled at the harmonica then, clearly expecting to get it back. But Chris held on tight. "Not yet, cowboy. Not 'til you do like Nathan asks."

Taking his cue, Nathan reached out to softly touch Vin's shoulder.

"Look at me, now, Vin. Come on. Turn your head so's I can see them baby-blues of yours."

A full minute passed, a minute in which Vin sought out the pattern of what was being asked of him, his gaze shifting reluctantly from the harmonica as he worked through the confusion and past the pain his efforts stirred up. Then slowly words and action came together and he turned to look at the man beside him.

Nathan nodded and gave a soft smile. "That's good, Vin. Now I want you to do one more thing. Then you can go back to playing your music. Okay?"

Vin's frown deepened, but he kept his gaze focused on the healer.

"Good. Now, I want you to pick up a card -- any card you see here on this table. Then I want you to give it to me. Can you do that?"

Another minute passed while Vin tracked the words to an understanding and then shifted thought into action. And lowering his gaze to the table, he slowly slipped one hand out from under Chris' hold on him, reaching out to tentatively pick up a card. But once he had it in his hand, he seemed unable to figure out what to do with it, for the words that had taken him that far slipped out of his hold, like mist fading under the morning sun.

Nathan waited. And when Vin continued to sit staring at the card in bewilderment, clearly unable to move beyond that point, he touched his shoulder again and said, "Now give it to me. Give me the card."

Vin shifted his gaze to the healer, then back to the card. And slowly

he held it out to him.

Nathan took it with a grin. "Thanks, Vin. Now go on back and play your music."

Chris let go of the hand holding the harmonica and Vin immediately raised the instrument back to his mouth, the others there at the table forgotten again.

"So?" Buck impatiently asked, not even waiting for the healer to regain his seat before demanding a prognosis. "He going to be okay?"

Nathan lowered himself into his chair. "I still don't know. It's too early to tell yet. I mean, this talking and figuring out what folks are saying to him and wanting from him is definitely a good sign. But like I told you before, there ain't no way of telling how far he's going to go with it. I think though that if we can keep getting his attention like Chris just done, we might be able to bring him along some more, get his mind to working instead of just drifting like it's been doing."

"We can do that," Buck enthusiastically declared.

"Now, don't go getting too excited. This is going to be slow going. Could take a long time to see any real results."

"But he's talking! And he wasn't doing that a couple of hours ago."

"Yeah, but he ain't said but the one word. And he ain't understanding much."

Even Buck sobered at that, hopes once again reined in.

"So where do we go from here?" Josiah asked. "Is there anything we can do for him, any way we can get things moving along faster?"

Nathan thought for a moment. Then slowly he said, "We're going to have to keep things simple for him, make sure we don't throw too many words at him at once. And we have to give him time to make sense of them before throwing any more at him. But most of all, we have to keep at him, keep him from giving up too easy."

"Maybe you'd better have a go at it first," Chris suggested. "Then you can figure out how we need to go about this."

Nathan readily agreed. "Bring him to the clinic first thing in the morning and I'll see how much he's understanding." He shifted his gaze to the preacher. "Josiah? I might need your help."

"You got it, Brother."

Nathan turned his attention back to Chris. "You'd better get him to bed then. I want him rested and able to concentrate tomorrow."

"You think you're going to be able to pry that harmonica away from him long enough to get him to sleep?" Buck asked. "Seems to me he ain't planning on setting it down any time soon." Then, studying the oblivious tracker, he added, "Why's he keep playing that same note over and over again, anyway?"

"I don't know," Chris replied. "It took him a while to find it. But now that he has, it's the only one he'll play."

"Must mean something to him," Josiah guessed.



"Like what?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's a key and the lock it fits is a little rusty.

So he has to keep working at it 'til it turns."

"Maybe," Chris slowly agreed. "But, like Buck said, he ain't going to want to give it up."

"Well, it ain't good for him to latch onto that or anything else so tight," Nathan warned. "We don't want his mind drifting like it's been doing, but we don't want it sitting in one place neither."

"He'll pitch a fit if I try to take it away."

"Then see if you can just get him to stop playing."

Chris did as Nathan had done to get Vin's attention, touching him on his shoulder. Then in a firm voice he said, "It's time to go to bed now, pard. So put your harmonica away and let's go back to the hotel."

Vin eyed him over the top of the instrument and blew another note.

Chris didn't know if he understood what he'd said, but he had a feeling he did. So more firmly he warned, "That harmonica is going up now, Vin. So you decide. You want it in your pocket or mine?"

Vin slid out from under the hand on his shoulder and blew into his harmonica again.

"Then I guess that means it's going in my pocket."

Chris reached out for the instrument, but Vin twisted away from him and pulled the instrument against his chest, both hands gripping it tight.

Before Chris could attempt to wrest it from him, Buck leaned over and put one hand over Vin's. "If you put it in your pocket," he whispered loud enough for the others to hear, "Chris won't be able to take it away from you. It'll be safe there."

Vin eyed his advisor with a frown and Buck had no idea if he understood what he was saying. But when he moved Vin's hand down to one of the front pockets of his pants and urged him to slip his treasured instrument inside, he slowly did so.

"There," Buck crowed. "Now Chris can't get it."

Vin eyed Buck a moment longer. Then he shot a glance to Chris that had just a hint of triumph in it.

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~ CHAPTER TEN ~

To Chris' surprise, Vin went to sleep that night without once taking the harmonica out of his pocket and trying to blow on it. He understood why that was though in the morning, when he awoke to what had become his usual state of blank confusion, apparently having forgotten all about his treasure.

It seemed that out of sight was now to be out of mind for the injured tracker.

But while Chris was relieved not to have to deal with his one-note repertoire that early in the morning, he felt a cold knot of fear in his gut at the dull gaze he'd thought gone for good. And when no word he

offered or touch or exertion of will alerted him to his presence there, when he allowed himself to be cleaned and dressed without protest, when he sat or stood as uncaring and unaware as he had been for the past weeks, Chris turned at last to what had worked to break through the fog of confusion the previous night. Praying that state of awareness had not been a fluke never to be repeated, he dug the harmonica out of the pocket in which Buck had helped Vin stow it and blew one note sharp and clear. To his relief, Vin's eyes lit up at the sound and he turned his head to it, one hand reaching for his treasure without thought, his need like a beacon in the fog.

Chris handed the harmonica over gladly. But after a few minutes of an endless repetition of the one note that was still all that he would play despite all suggestions to the contrary, he ordered an end to the concert. Not to his surprise, Vin ignored him. So he merely snatched the harmonica out of his hands and took off for the dining room and breakfast. As he'd hoped, Vin followed after him. But by the time he'd caught up in the hallway outside their room, Chris had his treasure safely stowed in his pocket, hoping that would put an end to any fight he might be willing to make. And when he stood before him in confusion, unable to move beyond his need but not able to let go of it either, Chris firmly said, "It's time to go eat now, pard. And you can't be playing your music in the dining room. Folks might not care for it this early in the morning. So come along and eat your breakfast and you'll get your harmonica back when you're done."

He knew it was too many words for the tracker to grasp at one time. So he simplified things, saying, "Eat, then play." And with that he moved on, not looking back as he marched down the hall, but slowing his steps so as to give the other man time to work his mind around his words and the meaning behind them. Then, when footsteps at last sounded at his back, he picked up his pace, not stopping nor looking back until he reached his accustomed table in the dining room. There he waited by Vin's chair, pulling it out as he joined him.

"Sit," he commanded. And when Vin stood unsure, he rattled the chair for emphasis.

Vin did as he was told.

"That's better," Chris softly commended. But when Vin held out his hand for his harmonica, he shook his head. "You get it back after you eat."

Having no desire to keep the tracker happily occupied until that time, Chris snagged the hotel's waitress as she passed with a couple of loaded plates. And with a quick apology, he relieved her of her burden, setting the plates on his own table. Then, settling back into his chair, he looked up at the startled woman and said, "And we'll have a couple of coffees to go with that."

The waitress started to utter a protest, then simply shook her head and moved off.

Chris turned back to Vin then, saying, "You get your plate cleaned off and I'll give this back."

He laid the harmonica on the table where it was visible, but not in reach. And leaning over to pick up his companion's fork, he held it out to him. Again Vin seemed confused, so Chris picked his hand up and placed the fork in it. "Now eat."

The tracker lowered his hand to the table, his gaze going blank again. So Chris picked up the harmonica and blew another note. And when Vin's attention snapped back to him, he firmly said, "Eat some of your eggs now, pard."

With a look from his eggs to his harmonica and back, Vin slowly lifted his fork and speared some of the eggs, lifting them to his mouth. And with a nod, Chris tackled his own breakfast.

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It took a lot of direction and more than a few notes played on the harmonica to keep his attention focused, but at last Vin managed to clean his plate of food. Chris then handed him the harmonica, letting him play his favorite note only a few times before pulling him out of his chair and out of the hotel and onto the boardwalk. And when Vin would have sat in one of the chairs there to play, Chris took hold of one arm again, pulling him forward.

He followed unresisting, his free hand holding the harmonica to his mouth, his one note playing all the way to the clinic. And when Chris led him inside Nathan's rented room and closed the door behind them, he didn't so much as flick a glance at the two men waiting there. Instead, he sank down onto the nearest chair and continued playing.

"How's he doing?" Nathan asked, studying the tracker, looking for some sign that he had made further progress during the night. "Still playing that one note, I see."

Chris knew what was being asked and could only shrug his own disappointment. "Things are the same as they were. I even offered him everything

I own if he'd play a new tune, but he's got his mind set on just that one damned note."

Nathan and Josiah grinned, but couldn't help but wonder how long it would be before they were driven to offering the same bargain. Then, giving voice to a more pressing consideration, Josiah said, "You have any trouble keeping his harmonica away from him last night?"

Chris shook his head. "I think he forgot all about it once it was out of his sight. He kept it in his pocket all the way back to the hotel and went to bed without a fuss. And he was drifting again this morning. Couldn't even get him to look at me 'til I pulled his harmonica out and blew on it."

"And how did he react to that?" Nathan asked.

"Same as last night. Except this time he didn't fight me for it when I

told him he'd have to feed himself first."

Nathan's eyebrows rose. "You got him to eat all by himself?"

"Yeah. But I had to keep at him, telling him what to do. And he spilled a lot of his food. Kept drifting off on me too. I had to keep playing that damned harmonica to keep his attention going. Kept waiting for someone to throw us out of the hotel. But if anyone made any complaints about the noise, I didn't hear about it."

Nathan looked over at Vin, sitting on one of the chairs, playing his one note over and over as he'd done in the saloon the night before, oblivious to everything -- and everyone -- else.

"Okay. Let's let him have it for a while. I reckon he deserves that much. Then we'll get started."

Not anxious to play audience to Vin's one-note concert any longer than necessary, Chris quickly said, "You need me anymore, Nathan?"

"Nah. You go on and go. I'll set Buck or JD to watching him when we're done here."

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When Chris returned to the clinic some time later, having been unable to resist finding out how Vin's session had gone, it was to find Nathan sitting alone at the small table in one corner of the room sipping coffee and Vin curled up on the bed asleep, the harmonica on the pillow beside his head, one hand wrapped tightly around it.

"What happened?" Chris asked. "He give you a rough time of it?"

"More like we gave him one," Nathan confessed with a sigh. "Think we wore him out. Then his head started to hurting him something fierce after a while, so I gave him something to make him sleep."

Chris moved to the bed and stood for a moment, looking down on the sleeping tracker, hope stirring in him at the sight of the hand holding tight to the harmonica as if to a lifeline. "Why's he holding onto that thing so tight?" he asked.

"I don't know," Nathan admitted. "But I reckon Josiah's right and it means something to him. Something like hope, maybe. And a man's got to cling to whatever can give him hope, to whatever might keep him alive long enough for it to do him any good."

Chris stared down as the man in the bed holding fast to his battered hope. "Sometimes though," he said softly, his voice full of regret, "hope's a dangerous thing. Sometimes it keeps a man alive past the point where there's any real reason to keep on breathing. Then you get to die twice. And letting go of hope's a worse death than any I've ever seen."

"So you figure it's better not to trust in it?" Nathan asked. "Better to be thankful for what you got than to pine for something you ain't never going to get?"

"Something like that," Chris softly admitted. Then turning away from wanting and hoping and all the misery that could come from either, he joined Nathan at the table, determinedly setting his mind to only that

which could be seen and measured.

"So, how did it go?" he asked, sitting down across from the healer.

Nathan rubbed a hand over his face, the gesture one of both weariness and frustration. "It went pretty much like what you went through this morning getting him to eat. The only way we could get his attention was with that harmonica. And he didn't care for having it taken away, neither."

"He fight you?"

"No. But he got riled a couple of times. Which is good, really, as it shows his mind is working instead of just letting the world go by without a complaint. But, Lord, that boy can sure be a handful if he's a mind to be!"

Chris grinned, that evidence of the fight in Vin worth more than hope to him. And settling back in his chair, he eyed the healer, wanting to pin him down to more than he'd yet been willing to give. "So, what do you think?"

Nathan gave another sigh. "Well, it was pretty hard to get him to pay mind to us. And I ain't at all sure he understood most of what we was doing or saying to him even when he did pay mind. But he was able to follow a few simple commands -- so long as we didn't ask him to do more than one thing at a time."

"Did he say anything?"

"Got a couple of 'no's' out of him. That's all. And it took a lot of work to get them."

Chris thought on that a while, trying to fit the pieces of the puzzle that was now Vin Tanner together. In the end though, he was unable to figure out the pattern. So he turned once more to the healer and said, "You have any idea what's going on with him? Why's he only paying mind to that harmonica of his? It's like there's nothing else in the world for him but that."

Nathan, however, had had no better luck in solving that particular puzzle. "I don't know, Chris. The mind can do strange things sometimes. No telling why it works the way it does. But just because things don't make sense to us don't mean they don't make sense to him. So, as long as his mind is finally working again, I thank the Lord for whatever gets it going. And even though it ain't working very well yet, I think if we keep working with him, we'll see some improvement."

It sounded like he was holding out hope, but Chris knew there was as much of a warning in his words as there was encouragement. So he said only, "How much improvement are you talking about?"

But once again he'd asked for too much.

"Ain't no way of telling," Nathan replied. "You know that."

When the Seven's leader sat too still and controlled, the healer chuffed out his own disappointment and said, "Look, Chris. It ain't been that long. I know it seems like it has, but this kind of hurt can take a

long while to heal. And he's already lots better than he was. Hell, he's better today than he was this time yesterday! And any more improvements we see will probably be slow in coming. It ain't like he's just going to wake up one morning back to the way he was."

Chris shot the healer a wry look. "I guess maybe that's what I was hoping for. Or at least that it would go faster than it has."

"This ain't like no broken bone," Nathan softly pointed out. "This is a man's mind we're talking about. His brain. And ain't no doctor I ever heard tell of that's got that figured out. It ain't like a muscle you can track from place to place and see the working of it. Or like a heart that's got only the one job that's easy enough to figure. What goes on inside a man's head just ain't something that can be seen or tracked or figured. And each hurt is different. So one man can get poleaxed and get up and walk away with nothing more than a sore head, while another don't hardly get more than a tap and gets measured for a pine box the next day. Just ain't no sense to it."

And that was what was so hard for the Seven to take a hold of. Sure, Vin had been hurt. But all of them had been hurt worse and been just fine after a few days of mending. They'd suffered through stitches and splints and days in bed. They'd seen the evidence of hurt in the blood that had seeped out of them and had waited out the pain of their wounds. They'd seen and understood and had known there would be an end to whatever harm had come to them. But what had happened to Vin was neither seen nor understood. And they had no way of knowing what would be the end of it, whether they had only to wait out the mending and get through it as best they could, or if Vin was never again to be any more than he now was.

It made no sense that a man could be reduced to such a state by what couldn't be seen or tracked. And they were men long used to eyeing the unknown with suspicion, needing to know the how's and why's of a thing so they could name it friend or foe. It was how they'd managed to keep themselves alive for so long. What couldn't be known was to be avoided for fear of the harm it could bring. Yet now the unknown wore a friend's face and they could neither give a name to it nor avoid it. And that had the hairs on the back of their necks standing continually on end, as if something unseen was stalking them.

Rubbing that spot on his own neck, Chris Larabee tried facing down the shadows at his back, saying, "We know he ain't getting up and walking away from this, Nathan. I reckon he'd have done that by now if he was going to. So where does that leave him? Where does it leave us? And not just months down the road, but now. And tomorrow and the day after that."

"I been worrying about that too," Nathan admitted, his eyes shifting to the man sleeping in his bed then back to the man who'd led the Seven into and out of more trouble than he cared to think on. "The way things

are, it'll be kind of hard for us to take proper care of him for very long. We got our duties to the town. And if we all go riding out, who are we going to get to look after him? Nettie and that Spencer carbine of hers?"

It wasn't what Chris had meant. He'd never even allowed his thoughts to travel that far down that particular road. He had never gone beyond the fact that Vin was one of them. He'd watched all their backs time and again and risked his own life in doing it. And now it was their turn to watch his. It was that simple. And if Chris Larabee had anything to say about it, it would remain just that simple.

"We've done all right so far," he declared, his tone putting an end to the discussion.

Nathan, however, was too bent on the practical to notice the warning implied. "Yeah. But how much longer are we going to be able to keep on the way we been? Sooner or later someone's going to come after him, whether bounty hunters or Amy Callenbeck's killer. And we need to know that we can keep him safe no matter what."

Chris raised his chin. "So what are you saying?"

Still Nathan missed the warning. "I'm saying it's going to be a good long while before Vin is able to look after himself -- if he ever even gets to that point. And in the meantime, we need someone we can depend on to look after him."

"Things are fine the way they are." The words were clipped, a decree rather than an opinion offered.

Nathan shook his head, bound and determined to make Chris see what had been worrying at him for weeks. "Things ain't even close to fine," he warned. "Vin needs more than we can give him. And we ain't being fair to him trying to pretend different."

"Sounds like you're saying we should send him away somewhere," Chris accused. "Some place where we don't have to be bothered with him."

"I ain't saying that! And I think you know me well enough to know better than that! I'm just saying that sooner or later we're all going to have to take off or we'll get too caught up in what's going on in the town to be able to watch Vin. And then what's going to happen to him? We just leave him to fend for himself?"

Nathan was right, but it wasn't a point Chris was willing to concede until he knew the path down which he was being led. "So what do you suggest we do?"

"I don't know. But we got to figure something out."

Determined to have the matter end there for the moment, Chris nodded and said, "Okay. I'll work on it."

Nathan didn't miss that assumption of responsibility. And leaning forward, he firmly said, "This ain't all on your head, you know. We all care about what happens to Vin, Nettie and Mary included. And we'll all do our part to take care of him. You know you don't even got to ask that of

us."

Chris was silent for a long moment, years of doing for himself set against the offer of help from those who had gone beyond proving themselves. But while he could trust his own life to them, it would be hard to trust Vin's to their safekeeping. Still, he owed it to them and to Vin to allow them that chance.

"I know I can count on you," he said at last. "And I ain't aiming to shut none of you out. So whatever needs doing, we'll do it together." Then, turning his gaze to the man in the bed, he more softly said, "This is like nothing I've ever been through before, Nathan. I mean, people have died on me and walked out of my life. And people have turned against me or me against them. People have come and gone in my life, but never both at the same time." He shook his head, aware that he was making no sense because he could make no sense of it himself. "I thought for sure Vin was going to die, had myself all set for it. Then back he comes. Only it ain't him. So he's here, but he's gone too." He shook his head and turned back to his companion. "Does that make any kind of sense at all?"

Nathan nodded. "It sure do, Chris. You can change the way a man looks and it's still him inside. But if you change what's inside, all you got is a stranger with a familiar face."

"Is that what's happened here?" Chris felt the knot of fear in his gut tighten at having the thought that had been haunting him spoken aloud. "Is the Vin we knew gone? Are we going to get a stranger back in his place if he don't get better? Or even if he does?"

But again Nathan had no answers. "I don't know. Could be. Or could be we're getting all worked up over nothing. Maybe Vin will be slipping around town in no time, grinning at a world that don't know how funny it is, same as always. Or maybe the Vin we see now is even more of him than we ever seen when he had mind enough to hide who he is -- just like we all do, putting on masks and giving away only pieces of ourselves instead of everything we got in us."

Another silence descended. Then, Chris softly admitted, "I just never thought anything like this would happen. Always thought we'd be burying one another."

"Things don't always work out the way you think they will."

"Do they ever?"

Nathan gave a sad shake of his head. "It sure don't seem like it sometimes."

Chris fastened his gaze on the healer, asking for answers that couldn't be known and knowing it. Yet still he had to ask, had to admit to that fear and the need in him. "Is it going to work out this time, Nathan?"

The healer shifted his gaze to the man in the bed again. "I don't know, Chris. But if it don't, it won't be from want of trying."

It wasn't much of an answer, but it was enough, the hope that was all



Chris would allow himself to cling to found not in the doing but in the trying. And pushing out of his chair, he said, "How much longer do you think he'll be asleep?"

"A few hours yet."

"Okay. I'll be back later then." And with a nod, Chris strode out of the clinic, closing the door softly but firmly behind him.

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~ CHAPTER ELEVEN ~

"Such a fine thing it is you're doing," Cecilia Ware, wife of the town's undertaker, informed Buck as she stopped beside the chairs in which he and Vin sat with the Clarion office at their backs. "There aren't many folks would do for a friend like you boys are doing."

Buck sat up straighter in his chair and shot a quick look at Vin, who played his one note on his harmonica, totally oblivious to all else. And trying to head off yet another well-meant but annoyingly patronizing commendation the townsfolk had taken to handing out in the past weeks, Buck gave a smile that was only slightly strained and said, "It's nothing, ma'am. After all, we haven't done a thing for Vin that he wouldn't do for us."

Mrs. Ware gave a smile of her own, then looked down on the young man playing the one note that was all anyone had gotten out of him in the past week. "Such a tragedy," she continued with a sad shake of her head, "to see one so young and wild so sorely afflicted. It breaks my heart. It truly does. But the good Lord has His reasons. And maybe this is His way of setting Mr. Tanner onto a more righteous path."

Buck's smile faded. "Now, I don't know about that," he protested, his tone still polite, but with a warning edge to it now. "Seems to me that Vin has done more than his share of righteous works. Matter of fact, it would take a right spell to count up what he's done for just this town alone. So I don't reckon the Lord had anything to do with what happened to him."

"Perhaps not. But He surely had something to do with setting six angels to watch over him. The Lord knows he needs it, too, seeing as how he's no more than a child in a man's body, the way he is now. And who knows if he'll ever be any more than that? So it does my heart good to see you boys taking such care of him. Why, I dare say most folks would have sent him away somewhere. Maybe to one of those places I've heard tell of where they keep people like him."

Buck ground his teeth but managed to sound just barely polite as he said, "Now, ma'am, there's no call to be thinking like that. It's not as if he isn't going to get better. Why, he's already lots better than he was a week ago! And in the meantime, we'll go on watching his back for him, same as we've always done. Nothing special in that."

Mrs. Ware shook her head. "Don't you go getting modest on me, Mr. Wilmington. We're not talking about a gunfight here. And I reckon it's a

mite easier to risk your life that way than it is to tend to a friend that needs constant care and attention. After all, anyone can shoot a gun. But not everyone would be willing to work and worry over someone in Mr. Tanner's sorry state for weeks on end the way you and the rest of the Seven have been doing. It's truly a noble thing."

She stood for a moment, smiling down on Vin, who ignored her as he did everything else but his harmonica and his one unchanging note, which he blew again and again. And after a minute or two of what began to sound like nothing so much as an insect buzzing about her head, Mrs. Ware gave a shudder and faintly added, "A truly noble thing, indeed."

She quickly took her leave of the men then and continued on her way down the boardwalk. And when she was safely out of earshot, Buck leaned over to Vin and grinned, saying, "I knew that damned harmonica of yours had to be good for something."

Vin shifted his gaze to him for a moment. Then with a blink, he blew another note and turned to stare again at some unseen thing in the far distance.

Buck slapped his leg in a friendly gesture and let him be, turning his attention back to the departing woman, letting his thoughts drift to other such encounters with the townspeople over the past weeks, the consensus seeming to be that Vin was now to be regarded as an object of pity, a strong man reduced to a childlike existence. Or more cruelly put: to a state of idiocy. Not that anyone had yet had the temerity to make such a claim in the presence of the Seven. But they had only to watch folks watching Vin to know whether their thoughts ran to sympathy, pity or scorn.

Fortunately, there were those willing to follow the Seven's example in their treatment of him, like Mary and Mrs. Potter, speaking to him as if he could understand instead of around him to the others, and worrying at him to take part in life. And then there was Nettie Wells, who treated him as she always had -- with a firm hand and a loving heart. As for the rest of the townspeople, they'd done their best to shield him from their hurtful comments, not knowing how much he might be taking in of what went on around him.

And that something was going on in the tracker's mind, they had no doubt. It had to be forced out of him most times though, the loss of his harmonica or the threat of it still the only thing in the past week that would get his attention or cooperation. But once they got him to focus, he would try his best to understand and do as they asked, the struggle to comply sometimes painful to watch, those blue eyes going wide with concentration or dark with frustration and sometimes pain. They'd yet, though, to get more than one word out of him at a time and that only after a considerable struggle.

Still, every word uttered and every action taken served as evidence that the tracker was on his way back to them. A hard trail it might be and

a long journey ahead of them, but they were determined to see it through. And so they'd taken care of him and worked with him without complaint and learned to tune out the endless repetitions of his one-note symphony.

Life had gone on, in ways different than before, but still they were seven. They'd suffered a blow that hadn't destroyed them and had kept moving ahead, that being the only direction worth taking.

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"So I told her I wouldn't, and that's that," J. D. declared, his knife thunking into the boardwalk outside the Clarion office for emphasis. He gave a self-satisfied nod, a man's decision having been made. And turning to his companion for confirmation, he said, "That's right, ain't it, Vin? You'd have said the same thing, wouldn't you? I mean, a woman ought to know her place and Casey needed to be told. Right?"

His companion blew another note in his sole repertoire and J. D. gave the response his own interpretation, grinning as he said, "That's what I thought." He then scooped up his knife and settled back in his chair, content to sit and watch his little piece of the world go by, sure of his manly place in it.

His own place in the world not so well assured, Vin continued his concert, ignoring the townspeople as they walked by, giving no heed to their words of greeting. All his attention was centered on the single note he blew over and over again, the sound of it centering him with its simplicity. It was order amid chaos, a light in the darkness, a connection to a world once known and now beyond his ken. It was all that made sense in the confusion, speaking to a need he couldn't name. It was the one thing in his life that was unchanging and his to control, and all he sought out in the world.

The world, however, was more generous, seeking him out on a constant basis, bombarding him with bids for attention coming from myriad directions at once, only the sharpest and most insistent of them breaking through the chaos and confusion and sparking him to an awareness of the world around him.

It was the soft bids, though, that brought him to an awareness of self, sounds pure and simple that called him out of a still, quiet place deep within, a place not subject to chaos or confusion, for it had never known words or given heed to logic and reason. There was no awareness there of anything beyond the stillness of being. There the past had no place, nor the future. There were no fears or needs or wants. Those belonged to the chaos. In the stillness was only a contentment of self at its most basic, formed not of deeds or thought, but of an inner strength of will and being. It was no more than who he was, and no less.

It was in that place his one note resonated, the world and self inextricably bound up in the sound. Through it, chaos echoed in the silence, need and want not content with the stillness, the thirst for a world

beyond self and the awareness of it built in and struggling to emerge. It was Eve in the Garden, tempted beyond self into knowledge, the cost uncounted and the payment of it dear.

And so Vin sat beside J. D., searching out knowledge of the world and awareness of self in one note of a symphony not yet fully orchestrated.

But try as he might, he could not find the whole with only a part.

Then, drifting on the soft spring breeze, came the lilt of children's laughter, the sound of it high and pure and amazingly simple. It called to that quiet place within and Vin stopped to listen, recognizing another part of the whole.

His breath stilling, his eyes searched out the source of those notes, his gaze settling on two small girls chasing each other about on the boardwalk a dozen yards away. Joy lit their faces, a simple delight in the day and the living of it. And that he understood in the deepest part of him, words not needed and reason an impediment to that understanding. Without thought then, he searched out those notes of joy, breath and tin and wood giving them a new voice.

J. D. sat up straight at the sound of those notes, turning to his companion in surprise. Then following the tracker's rapt gaze to the girls laughing still in delight, he understood. "That's it, Vin," he softly congratulated. "Now you can hear them laugh any time you want." He sat then, watching Vin watching the girls until they were called away by their mother. And when Vin continued to play the notes of the children's pleasure, J. D. looked around for someone with whom to share his own delight. Buck and Chris, however, had taken off not long since, and Ezra had been deeply involved in a poker game the last he'd seen of him. That left Nathan and Josiah. And deciding that then was as good a time as any for Vin's daily session with them, he pulled the tracker out of his chair and over to the church, where he knew the two would be gathering.

To his relief, they were already there, at work on one of Josiah's endless repairs, when he arrived with Vin in tow.

"Hey, Nathan! Josiah!" he called as he propelled his companion forward and down onto a pew at the front of the church.

The two men looked up from their work on the altar, hammers stilling and nails coming out of their mouths as they returned the greeting.

"I thought Buck was watching Vin this morning," Nathan said with a puzzled look.

"He was. But him and Chris had to go talk to Jeremiah Collinger about some missing stock."

"He been 'finding' someone else's cattle roaming his land again?" Josiah asked with a shake of his head.

"I guess," J. D. impatiently agreed. Then as Vin drew in a breath in preparation for another note played on his harmonica, he quietly said, "Listen to this, fellas, and tell me what it sounds like."

Vin blew his new notes then, the sound trilling up and down the register.

"That sounds like music to my ears," Josiah quipped, his face lit by a grin, glad for the end to Vin's endless one-note obsession and taking the change in notes as a sign that he was mending still and with more miracles to come.

"It ain't music," J. D. corrected. "It's Amy and Lori Brenneman laughing."

"What?" Nathan's eyes narrowed as he tried to make sense of such a claim.

"It's true!" the youngest of the Seven declared. "The two of them were chasing each other around and laughing. And Vin was watching them like they were the answer to some question he'd been worrying at in his mind. Then he started blowing them notes. And I swear it was the same sound as them girls laughing!"

Nathan looked skeptical, but Josiah simply listened to the trilling notes, letting them have their say, sure he could hear in them the echo of delight on a warm spring day. Then he gave a nod. "Could be J. D.'s right. If ever a child's pure joy could be put to music, I reckon that would be the sound of it."

J. D. shifted his gaze from the preacher to the healer. "That's good, ain't it?" he anxiously queried. "It's proof Vin's getting better, right?"

"Anything that shows his mind is working is proof he's getting better," Nathan agreed. Then with a frustrated shake of his head, he added, "I just wish I knew why it is he latches onto a sound that don't rightly mean that much instead of them that do -- like folks who care about him talking to him, trying to help him get better."

"Yes, Brother," Josiah thoughtfully interjected. "But folks can ask too much of a man with only a word or two, or toss out a whole mess of them that don't mean what they say. That could rattle any man's brain. But there's no mistaking the sound of joy nor any reason to argue with it."

"So you're saying it's like the difference between seeing a man riding and knowing who it is and where he's headed, and having to figure all that out from just the tracks he leaves behind?" J. D. queried.

"Exactly." Josiah cocked his head at the youngest of the Seven. "Vin's been teaching you to track, right? And how did he start out? By setting you in the middle of town and asking you to sort out one track in the dirt from another? Or by taking you out to where there's nothing but one clear sign to follow?"

J. D. thought on that for a moment, then slowly said, "So that's what we have to do with Vin? Give him just one clear sign to follow?"

Josiah grinned. "You hit the nail on the head, brother." And to emphasize his point, he placed a nail on the board he'd been anchoring to the altar and brought his hammer down hard on it. Unfortunately, though, he

brought the tool down on his thumb as well, the shock of it tearing a wordless cry of pain from him.

Vin jerked his head towards the sound, searching out another part of the whole. The others were unaware of that scrutiny, however, all their attention being focused on the injured man.

"Let me see that," Nathan commanded, hand held out in expectation. Josiah merely danced out of his reach, shaking his injured hand in an attempt to rid himself of the pain, a string of curses sounding from his lips.

Nathan let his hand fall and shook his head at his friend's stubbornness, while J. D. stood listening in awe to the heated litany, storing up new words and phrases for his own use. Then another hand was extended, reaching out towards Josiah, who grew still in response, eyes widening as Vin moved to stand in front of him.

Nathan and J. D. stood still and silent as well, afraid of breaking whatever spell had Vin seeking them out, concentration and something akin to concern drawing his brows down into a frown, his blue eyes wide and fixed unwaveringly on Josiah's hand, his own reaching out to lightly touch it.

Something eased in Josiah as the calloused fingers settled gently on his hand, the pain of his injury forgotten when Vin's gaze traveled upwards, blue eyes turning to blue, a question in them, one needing no words to be understood.

"I'm okay," Josiah softly replied. "Thank you."

Vin stood a moment longer, then turned back to his pew, sitting down on it to play his harmonica, new notes blending with the old in a comforting harmony.

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~ CHAPTER TWELVE ~

"Now you stay right here," Chris forcefully commanded as Vin leaned back against the counter in Gloria Potter's store, ever-present harmonica in hand. "You go wandering off like you did yesterday and I'll be putting hobbles on those feet of yours."

Vin ignored him, his attention all for the latest in his growing collection of notes.

"I heard about Buck losing him yesterday," Mrs. Potter said with a smile as she moved to the counter behind Vin. "Millie Braugher said that when Buck poked his head in her store looking for Vin, she'd never seen anyone so white that wasn't a ghost. And I swear poor Mrs. Ware was blushing still when she told me about that tongue-lashing he gave Vin when he finally found him and dragged him out of that alley. Not that I blame him for getting so riled. But I dare say if he'd been awake when that fight started, he'd have gone traipsing off to watch too." She shook her head indulgently at the mysterious ways of men.

Chris returned her smile with a grim one of his own, his anger at the

ladies' man not forgotten and taking a certain satisfaction in the scare he'd given himself. "I reckon that will be the last time Buck falls asleep on the job."

"And isn't it nice that Vin needs such careful watching now," Mrs. Potter continued with a fond look to the oblivious tracker. "Why, a few weeks ago he'd have stayed wherever he was set, not paying mind to anything. So it gives a body hope that he's noticing at least some of what goes on around him and has mind enough to be curious."

"Yeah, but you know what curiosity did to the cat," Chris put in with a warning look to the tracker, who continued to ignore him.

Mrs. Potter nodded, then said, "What can I help you with today, Mr. Larabee?"

"Just got to pick up a few things."

"Then you go right ahead. I'll keep an eye on Vin, see he doesn't get into mischief."

Chris gave a quick smile of gratitude, then disappeared into the back of the store.

"Now, as for you, Mr. Tanner," Mrs. Potter said with hands on her hips as she eyed him critically. "That bandanna has got to go." She shook her head at whichever of the Seven had deemed the ragged and faded square of cloth suitable for anything beyond a stable rag. And with a sigh, she moved to a shelf behind the counter and picked out a softly-colored bandanna, which she laid on the counter. Then reaching across it to the knot tied at Vin's neck, her elbow came in contact with a jar of jelly she hadn't yet gotten around to putting away. And with a crash it fell to the floor.

Vin turned at the sound, searching out the cause of it and settling with a puzzled look on Mrs. Potter's dismayed expression as she stared at the mess on her floor.

"Now look what I've gone and done," she lamented with a shake of her head. And when Chris appeared at Vin's back wanting to know what had happened, she added, "It's nothing, Mr. Larabee. I just got a bit clumsy and knocked over one of Mrs. Listerman's jars of cactus jelly."

Chris snorted. "I've tasted Mrs. Listerman's cactus jelly and believe me -- you did the town a favor."

Mrs. Potter laughed. And when Chris went back to his shopping, she stepped from behind the counter and went out onto the boardwalk to collect the broom she'd left sitting there after her morning's sweeping. Then stepping back into the store, her gaze went straight to the counter where Vin had been leaning, only to discover that he was no longer there.

She blinked in confused alarm, her gaze shifting about the room in search of him. And when he was nowhere to be found, she felt a trembling of fear that he'd darted out the back door, Buck Wilmington's excuse not to be her own, for she was wide awake and still she'd lost him.

She moved forward, all set to raise an alarm, only to let the sound die

stillborn as she drew up to the counter and spotted movement behind it. And leaning over it, she discovered the missing man on his knees carefully picking up the broken pieces of glass.

Heaving a sigh of relief, she slipped behind the counter and touched him on the shoulder, saying, "Thank you, Vin. But you be mindful of those sharp edges. I wouldn't want you cutting yourself."

He gave no sign that he'd heard her or was even aware of her presence there at his shoulder. But when he'd gotten a handful of the glass picked up, he turned with a puzzled look, not knowing what to do with them. And seeing her, he held them out to her.

She took them in her apron, then tossed them into the waste bin at the back of the counter. And collecting the rag kept handy for just such emergencies, she stooped to clean up the sticky jelly and the rest of the glass.

Vin continued to kneel at her side, watching as she worked, the harmonica clutched in one hand forgotten for the moment. And when the mess had

been cleaned and she stood again, he remained in place, his head turning to look up at her as she moved behind him to untie the bandanna at his neck and replace it with the new one.

"There," she said approvingly when she was done. "That's much better."

He lowered his head to it, the hand not clutching the harmonica coming up to finger the stiff blue cloth.

"The color matches your eyes," Mrs. Potter continued. "Or near enough."

Then holding her hand down to him, she urged him to get up. And when he'd done so, she moved back to the counter and collected a couple of the jars there, handing one to him and saying, "Now, it's not that I don't agree with Mr. Larabee's judgment on Mrs. Listerman's jelly, but lots of folks here 'round like it. So let's get these up on a shelf before I go knocking any more of them to the floor."

She moved to a shelf at the back of the counter then, setting the jars just so and arranging and rearranging them in order to give Vin time to work his way around her flow of words to the action expected of him. And at last he moved to her side and placed his one jar of jelly carefully on the shelf.

"Thank you," Mrs. Potter said with a smile. "Now, can you fetch me another one?"

After a brief hesitation, Vin moved back to the counter to collect another jar, only to stand looking at it once it was in his hand.

"That's it, dear. Now bring it here." Mrs. Potter patted the shelf of stacked jars for emphasis and smiled encouragingly.

As Vin did as requested, Chris returned to the counter, laying several items down on it. And with a smile, he asked, "You thinking of going back to clerking, pard?"

Vin ignored him, his attention all for his task. Mrs. Potter, however,



smiled in return, saying, "You can put an apron on a wolf but that don't chase the wild out of him. So I don't think you have to worry about him taking this up for a living again. But it sure is handy to have a strong man about the place now and again."

Taking the hint, Chris asked, "You need help lifting anything?"

"Well, there are a few things in the storeroom that have been sitting for a while now, waiting on a back stronger than mine to set them in place." Mrs. Potter eyed her helper, who continued to move jars from counter to shelf. "Maybe you could spare Vin for a bit? He seems in the mood to be helpful. And I'd surely enjoy the company."

Chris cocked his head at her. "Are you sure, ma'am? He's liable to start drifting again. And if he don't, there's no telling what he might get into his head to do next. Buck ain't the only one he's taken off on in this past week, you know."

Mrs. Potter laughed. "Yes, I saw J. D. chasing after him the other day when he took it into his head to follow Jason Carruthers' old yellow dog from one end of town to the other. But I plan on keeping him occupied enough that his feet don't go wandering off after his mind. So you come back in a couple of hours. And don't worry -- Vin will be just fine."

Chris gave a slow nod, reluctant as always to trust Vin to another's care. Nonetheless, he slapped his money down onto the counter and, with a last word of warning to Vin to stay put, he collected his purchases and was gone.

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"He give you any trouble?" Chris asked when he returned to the general store two hours later. And not seeing Vin or hearing his harmonica, he couldn't help asking, "You didn't lose him, did you?"

Mrs. Potter smiled. "He's in my parlor asleep on the sofa. I must have worked him a bit harder than I realized."

"He do what you needed done?"

"He did, indeed. And he only drifted off on me a few times. Then we had some lunch and he never once took his harmonica out. Just sat there listening to me rattle on. Not that I suppose he understood much of what I said. And he did start to nod off in the middle of it. But still, it was nice seeing him pay so much mind. Why, it wouldn't surprise me a bit to see him back to his old self before too much longer at all."

Chris nodded, but made no other comment, not wanting to stir up any such hopes of his own. Instead, he said, "I'd best collect him now. Nathan and Josiah are waiting on him over at the church."

"You think all that work they're doing with him is what's responsible for his getting better?" Mrs. Potter asked as she led Chris to the living quarters at the back of her store.

"I don't know," Chris replied. "Nathan and Josiah don't know either. But they reckon it ain't hurting him none, so they intend to keep at it."

"Well, you tell them I'm praying for them as well as Vin."

"I'll do that, ma'am," Chris promised as he stepped into the parlor and over to the sofa where Vin lay asleep. And leaning over him, he gently shook his shoulder, urging him to wake up.

Vin stirred, his wakening slow. Chris winced as he always did at seeing it, so used had he been to the wanted man's instant awakenings. "Come on, now, cowboy," he murmured. "We got to get over to the church. Can't keep Nathan and Josiah waiting."

A minute later, Vin was up, if not fully awake, and Chris led him away by the arm.

And when he'd pulled him into the church and over to a front pew, sitting him down there, Nathan eyed him critically and said, "He awake?"

"He was over at the general store helping Mrs. Potter," Chris explained. "Think she wore him out with all her chattering."

"A fine woman," Josiah declared with a grin. "But she could talk the devil into the ground without stopping to take a breath and him begging for the Lord's mercy while she does it."

Nathan eyed the tracker who looked ready to lie down and finish his nap. "Reckon we'll give him a minute to wake up all the way, then we'll get started."

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"No. Now come on, Vin," Nathan chided. "You know that ain't green." He put the yellow square of cloth the tracker had handed him back onto the table, alongside the others lying there. "Now try again."

The day's session had not gone well at all, Vin being in a recalcitrant mood and nothing Nathan and Josiah did able to keep his attention going for long. And even when he'd tried to follow whatever directions were put to him, he seemed unable to make sense of them, his actions sometimes far wrong and his frustration growing.

"Maybe we should just call it a day," Josiah suggested when Vin frowned mutinously at the squares of cloth arrayed on the table before him. "If we keep this up, I expect all we'll accomplish is to get him riled."

"Reckon you're right," Nathan agreed with a sigh. And laying a hand on Vin's shoulder, he said, "It's okay, Vin. You don't got to do no more today."

When Vin continued to sit staring at the cloths, Nathan started to gather them up. But no sooner had he swept them into a pile than Vin shot out a hand to shove his arm away. He then sorted through the cloths, laying them out again.

"Now ain't it just like that ornery cuss to decide he wants to do like we ask once we tell him he don't have to," Nathan muttered. "Contrary. The man's just plain contrary."

"I reckon," Josiah agreed, his attention on the one who sat scowling at the colored cloths with a look that was more desperate than determined.

"But sometimes contrary's all that keeps a man going."

"It's just a colored bit of cloth," Nathan pointed out in exasperation.

"It don't rightly matter if he can't pick out the right one. If he don't get it today, he'll get it tomorrow. And he ain't going to do himself no good by setting more store by it than he ought."

"Yes. But this is the first time it's really mattered to him that he make sense of things or been willing to push himself into doing instead of letting others do the pushing."

The two men sat watching the third then, neither saying a word, but each of them trying to will the tracker into choosing the right cloth. But when he at last reached out, it was a brightly-hued red one that he picked up and held hesitantly out to Nathan, his expression tense and his gaze anxious.

The healer hesitated only a moment before sadly shaking his head and saying, "That's a good guess, Vin. But that's red, not green." And picking up the correct square, he added, "This is the green one."

Vin tossed the red cloth down and pushed out of his chair with force enough to knock it over. Then retreating with a scowl to the closest pew, he curled up at the end of it and reached into a pocket for his harmonica. When his hand came up empty, he tried the other pocket. And not finding it there, he sat for a moment in confusion. Then, with a deepening of his scowl, he held his hand out to the two men seated at the table watching him.

"We ain't got your mouth organ," Nathan told him, spreading his hands to show they were empty. "You ain't had it out since you been here. Remember?"

Vin blinked and turned his gaze to Josiah, hand still out.

"Nate's right," the preacher said. "Check your other pockets."

When Vin only blinked again, Josiah moved to the pew, sitting down beside him and reaching out to check his pockets for him. Coming up empty, he said, "Did Chris take it from you?"

Vin looked around the room, as if in search of the Seven's leader.

"It ain't likely Chris would have taken it and not given it back,"

Nathan pointed out. "So he probably left it somewhere."

Josiah put a hand under Vin's chin, bringing his wandering gaze back to him. "Do you remember setting your harmonica down somewhere and not picking it up again?"

Vin gave another blink. Then he started a gentle rocking, his arms clasping the legs he drew up to his chest and his gaze losing its focus.

"Now, there ain't no call for that," Nathan gently chided, moving to kneel at Vin's side. "We're going to find your mouth organ. But it would help if you could tell us where you might have left it."

Vin continued his rocking, seemingly unaware of the question or the man asking it.

Josiah shot a look to the healer. "Chris said he was over at Mrs. Potter's store, so I'll head over there, see if I can find it. You going to be okay alone here with him?"

"We'll be fine. Just you hurry and find that damned torture device of his."

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Josiah was back twenty minutes later, empty-handed and having to take just one look at the tracker, who was now curled up on his side on the pew and staring into space, to know that he hadn't forgotten about his missing harmonica. And motioning Nathan to join him, he softly said, "Mrs. Potter ain't seen it and can't remember if he had it when he left. He had it when he got there though, so the two of us looked all over for it. And when we couldn't find it, I went looking for Chris, hoping he'd know what happened to it or could at least tell us where else Vin might have left it. But Buck said he rode out to that shack of his. So Buck, J. D. and Ezra are on the hunt for it. And I came back here hoping we might could get Vin to tell us where to look."

Nathan shook his head. "I ain't been able to get a word out of him. And I don't think he's heard any I've said either. He's just been sitting there staring at nothing, acting like there ain't nobody home."

"Oh, I reckon somebody's home," Josiah softly corrected. "He just ain't answering the door."

Nathan sighed and shook his head. "I been afraid something like this was going to happen. He sets too much store by that mouth organ and it ain't good for him. He's like one of them babies that takes hold of a blanket and don't want to let it go."

"Well, I ain't never seen a grown man dragging a blanket around behind him," Josiah pointed out. "So I reckon Vin will let go of that harmonica of his when it stops serving its purpose. And until then, I'd say we better find it."

"And what if we can't? Mrs. Potter got any more in her store?"

Josiah grinned. "I'm betting she does." And with a tip of his hat, he hurried out of the church.

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He was only gone five minutes that time and was brandishing a shiny new harmonica on his return. And moving to kneel beside the pew on which Vin lay curled up, he blew a soft note.

Vin's eyes instantly focused, his gaze going to the harmonica Josiah held aloft, his hand going out automatically for it as he hurriedly sat up. He no more than closed it in his grip though than he frowned in puzzlement. Then uncurling his fingers, he stared down at the instrument, his frown deepening into a scowl as he discovered the substitution. He let it fall from his hand then and turned a look of hurt on the preacher before laying down again, his face to the back of the pew that time.

Josiah sighed and said, "I'm sorry, Vin. I should have known you'd want your own harmonica back." And climbing to his feet, he added, "We'll keep looking for it. And I promise we'll find it, even if we have to turn the whole town upside down and inside out."

When he'd left to make good on his promise, Nathan bent down to retrieve the rejected harmonica. And fingering it, he stared at Vin's rigid back and said, "Josiah didn't mean no harm, you know. We just figured one mouth organ's the same as another. I mean, they all play the same notes, don't they? So why are you so set on that old battered one of yours? A man would think you'd be glad to get a nice shiny new one."

When Vin made no reply, Nathan fell silent for a time. Then he tried again. "That mouth organ got some kind of special meaning to you? That why you hang onto it like you do?"

Again no reply was forthcoming, so Nathan tried another tack. "Josiah thinks them notes you keep playing ain't rightly music. He say they're the way you hear the world around you. And he reckons you finding them notes and playing them is your way of finding the world again, of making sense of it and putting it into some kind of order you can understand. That right?"

Nathan blew a soft note on the harmonica, seeking not Vin's attention but an understanding of him. After several notes, though, he lowered the instrument and shook his head. "I don't hear nothing 'cepting noise. And I don't know how to hear nothing else." He paused for a moment, then thoughtfully added, "You think maybe you could teach me?"

Vin slowly turned his head, the look he gave the healer wary.

Nathan held the harmonica out to him. "I know this ain't yours and I ain't asking you to let it take the place of it. But you reckon that if I kept this one, you could teach me how to play it like you do?"

Vin shifted his gaze to the harmonica.

"Maybe you could use this to play me one of your notes," Nathan continued. "Just until you get yours back. I'd really appreciate it if you did."

The tracker considered the request, not understanding it fully, but understanding what lay behind the words. Then sitting up slowly, he reached out to take the harmonica held out to him. And bringing it to his lips, he blew out one note, sad and low.

Recognizing it as the first one he'd played upon his return to some level of awareness, the same as he'd played for weeks on end, Nathan curiously asked, "What's that one mean to you?"

Vin blew it again. Then lowering the harmonica, he softly said, "Home." He went back to playing again and Nathan listened carefully. But it was only one note he played, one no different than any other except in pitch. And length.

Nathan cocked his head at that last thought, realizing for the first time how Vin always drew that one note out, making it sound mournful, like a keening after something lost and never to be found again.

"That's home to you?" he asked as understanding dawned. "Some place you lost that you're afraid you ain't never going to find again?"

Vin blew the note one last time, then held the harmonica out to the

healer.

Nathan took it, but made no effort to find his own note. Instead, he said, "You got a home here, Vin. Maybe it ain't like what most folk got, but you got a place with them that care about you and for you, some place you'll always be able to come back to no matter what. And if that ain't home, what is?"

He raised the harmonica to his lips then, blowing note after note without thought, wanting only to give Vin a chance to think on what he'd said, hoping that he'd understood at least some of his words. And when the tracker remained upright instead of curling up again, he took it as a sign that he'd found some measure of meaning in them. Still, when Josiah returned some time later with the missing harmonica in hand, having dug it out from under the cushions of Mrs. Potter's sofa, Vin took hold of it like a man having found salvation. And curling up again so that he faced away from the back of the pew, he tucked the harmonica beneath him and went to sleep.

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~ Endure the Night ~  
by jann

~ CHAPTER THIRTEEN ~

"A three-legged dog goes into a saloon," J. D. recited to Inez, ignoring the moans emanating from his companions at the table in the saloon. "And he says...."

"...I'm looking for the man who shot my paw," Vin finished for him.

All heads turned to him in surprise, but he merely went back to playing his harmonica, seemingly unaware of the gazes directed his way.

J. D. was the first to recover. "That's right, Vin!" He shot a look of pride around the table that it was he who'd been responsible for getting more words out of the tracker than any of them had heard him utter at one time in the past three months. Then turning back to him, he said, "Now, ain't that a funny joke?"

Vin lowered his harmonica just enough to say, "No." He then went back to playing, giving no mind to the laughter that erupted around him.

"Now will you give that stupid joke a rest?" Buck asked once he was able to gather breath enough to string words together. "Everyone in the territory has heard it by now and we all agree it's not funny."

"It is too funny!" J. D. declared with a scowl. "You fellas just ain't got no sense of humor." And turning a hopeful look on Inez, he said, "You think it's funny, don't you?"

She shrugged. "I think it's funnier in Spanish."

J. D. wrinkled his brow. "But it don't translate the same, does it?"

Inez grinned in reply, then turned and walked back to the bar amid renewed gales of laughter.

"Oh, ha ha!" J. D. snapped out to the saloon keeper's retreating back.

"You're so funny, you should think about going on the stage!"

"I hear there's one leaving in the morning!" five voices sang out in chorus.

J. D. scowled. And standing up, he collected his hat, set it on his head with a firm tug, and in disgust said, "I got better things to do than to sit around listening to a bunch of mules bray. If anyone needs me, I'll be out at the Wells' ranch, where folks appreciate my jokes!"

"Now, I know Nettie's got better taste than that," Buck challenged with another laugh. "And if Casey likes that dog joke, then it must be true love for sure!"

J. D. gave his hat another tug, then stalked out of the saloon.

The others watched him go, grins on their faces. Then Chris turned to Buck and said, "You ever find that joke book he got that out of?"

Buck shook his head. "He's got it too well hid. But I tell you what -- if I ever do find it, I'll be using it to get me a nice little fire going."

He got up then. "And speaking of going, I'd best get. Miss Alice invited me to lunch. And if I'm lucky, she'll be serving something really fine for dessert."

The others hooted him out of the saloon and then it was Ezra's turn to depart.

"If you gentlemen will excuse me," he said as he slid out of his chair.

"I have an appointment with my tailor."

"Your tailor?" Nathan jeeringly echoed. "You mean Mrs. Swenson?"

"Ain't she the dressmaker?" Josiah put in.

Chris tilted his head, eyeing the gambler thoughtfully. "If you're aiming to get you another dress made, Ezra, I'd go with a nice soft blue instead of that purple you had before."

"And leave off the feathers this time around," Nathan added with a grin.

Ezra merely rolled his eyes and departed, his remaining companions' laughter following him out the batwing doors.

No sooner had the doors stopped swinging than Nathan turned an appreciative eye on Vin. "You sure have come up with some wicked ideas in your day, but getting Ezra into a dress has got to be the wickedest."

Vin merely eyed him over his harmonica and blew a soft note out in response.

"You think he remembers?" Josiah asked.

Nathan shrugged. "We already been through this. And I don't know anymore now than I did before just what, if anything, he remembers."

"He remembered J. D.'s dog joke," Chris pointed out.

"And there have been other times when he's seemed to know who was who and what was what," Josiah added.

"Yeah. But there's been even more times when he ain't had a clue."

"So we test him," Chris declared. "See if we can find out just what he

does and doesn't remember."

"And how are we going to do that? He still don't hardly talk. And when he does, it ain't always easy to figure out what he's trying to say."

Nathan shook his head. "What difference does it make, anyways, what he remembers from before? We got our hands full right now just trying to get him to keep a thing in mind from one minute to the next."

"It could make a lot of difference," Chris softly stated, "if Amy Callenbeck's murderer is still around and gets to worrying about whether or not Vin remembers what happened."

Josiah nodded. "Maybe it's time we asked him about that night again. It might could be that he'll remember something now."

Chris readily agreed. And taking a long look around the nearly empty saloon, he shrugged and said, "Now's as good a time as any."

He reached out to lay a hand on Vin's near arm then, saying, "We want to ask you some questions now, pard. So put your harmonica down for a minute."

When Vin reluctantly did so, Josiah leaned forward. "You remember Amy Callenbeck, son?" Vin blinked at him. "You remember her getting killed?" Laughter erupted at the only other occupied table and Vin swung his head towards the sound, his harmonica going back to his lips as he did so.

"Come on, now," Nathan chided as he reached out to turn the tracker back around in his seat. "Pay mind to what we're saying here."

Vin blew out a set of notes, the ones J. D. had dubbed his "happy" song.

"Apparently someone over there knows how to tell a joke," Josiah dryly quipped with a look to the table of laughing trail hands.

Nathan pushed down on the arm holding the harmonica to Vin's lips.

"Forget about them, now. Just think about what Chris asked you and tell us if you remember Amy Callenbeck."

Vin frowned.

"Someone killed her," Chris prompted. "One night a few months back, when it was fixing to storm. They set fire to her place. You remember? And whoever it was, took a knife to you. Tried to break that head of yours, too."

"That's how you came to be hurt so bad," added Josiah.

"Don't you remember none of that?" Nathan asked. "Think, now."

The tracker merely stared blankly.

Chris sighed. "I don't think he has any idea what we're talking about."

"Don't seem like it," Josiah agreed as he leaned back in his chair.

Nathan released Vin's arm. "Go on and play your music," he told him.

"We're through with you for now."

Vin did as he was told, his attention wandering back to the table of raucous trail hands.

The others watched him for a minute. Then it was Chris' turn to take his leave. "Guess I'd better get going, too. I told Billy Travis I'd take



him fishing."

"You go ahead and go then," Nathan said. "Me and Josiah will take Vin over to the church and work with him on some stuff soon as we get us some lunch."

Chris pushed out of his chair with a nod. And no sooner had he stood than Vin jerked his head around and scrambled to join him.

"Not this time, pard," Chris told him. "You stay here with Nathan and Josiah, and I'll catch up with you later."

Vin frowned, his chin rising.

Josiah laughed. "I reckon he'd rather go fishing than have me and Nathan messing with him anymore."

"Yeah, well, I ain't watching him and Billy both."

"Besides," Nathan pointed out, "he ain't been on a horse in months and we don't even know if he could handle one anymore."

Chris laid a hand on Vin's shoulder and pressed him back into his chair. "Nathan's right, cowboy. You get to where you can ride again, we'll go fishing. Just the two of us."

He gave a nod of farewell then and started for the batwing doors.

Vin started to push out of his chair to go after him, but Josiah reached out to keep him in place with a hand on his shoulder. Vin, however, brushed the hand off and, getting up again, would have taken off after the departing Larabee had Josiah not grabbed hold of his arm.

"Now what's your rush?" the preacher amiably asked. "You'll get your fishing trip. Just not today. Now sit back down and we'll see if we can get Inez to rustle us up some lunch before we head on over to the church."

Never taking his eyes off Chris as he made his way across the saloon, Vin tried to pull out of Josiah's grasp. Then Nathan got up out of his chair to snatch the harmonica out of his hand. And when Vin stopped struggling and snapped his gaze to him, he pointed to the vacated chair.

"You sit down and you'll get this back," he declared.

Vin shifted his gaze from the healer to his harmonica and then to the bat-wing doors now swinging after Chris' passage through them.

"Come on, now, Vin," Nathan urged. "You ain't going with Chris this time. So sit back down and let's get something to eat."

Vin stood for another moment, gazing at the saloon doors as they stilled. Then with a sigh, he sat down. And when Nathan returned his harmonica to him, he put it to his lips and blew a long sad note.

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"Are you getting the idea he's a mite bored with us?" Josiah asked an hour later when Vin stood staring moodily out one of the windows of the church instead of closing it as he'd been asked to do.

"Either that or he's mad at not getting to go fishing," Nathan suggested.

"Maybe we should just call it a day."

"We been calling it a day without getting a thing done for a week now," Nathan pointed out. "We keep letting him get away with being ornery like this and he ain't never going to get better."

"But ain't it a good sign that he's fighting us on doing this? Shows he's getting some of his grit back."

"Yeah, but he needs more than grit if he's going to get back to the way he was. We know he can pay mind to us if he wants to. Now we got to get him to do it even when he don't."

Nathan got up from the table at which he'd been sitting with Josiah and moved across the room to stand behind the stubborn tracker. "Come on, Vin. We still got work to do." Vin, however, made no move to obey, so he gently took hold of his shoulders and moved him to the table.

"Now pay mind to what we tell you," Nathan said as he placed a book and a candle on the table. And when Vin eyed the items listlessly, he more firmly added, "Go on and pick them up. Then put the book on the floor by the door and the candle on the windowsill."

Vin sighed and shifted his gaze to Josiah.

"Best do like he says," the preacher advised. "The sooner you do, the sooner we can all get out of here."

Vin gave another sigh, but picked up the book and candle, and moved to the open door with them. But rather than setting the book down as instructed, he stood in the doorway, gazing at the world beyond the dark and stuffy church longingly. Then with a look over his shoulder, he started to edge his way outside.

"Vin Tanner!" Nathan snapped warningly. "You try sneaking off on me and I'll be dosing you with that snake oil Chris took off that slippery salesman last week. You know, that stuff that had Ira Jenkins looking greener than spring grass for a week."

Vin stopped. And blinking, he once again turned his gaze to the preacher.

"I reckon he means it, son," Josiah said. "So go on and do like he tells you."

After a moment's consideration, Vin looked down at the book he held. Then letting it drop to the floor with a thud, he turned a defiant gaze on the healer.

Nathan ignored the look. "Now the candle," he prompted when the tracker continued to stand holding it.

Vin stood a moment longer, unmoving. Then raising his hand, he stared down at the candle, his brows drawing down in a frown of confusion.

"The window," Nathan prompted again. And when Vin merely turned to stare out it again, the healer chuffed out his frustration.

"You sure you don't want to call it a day?" Josiah asked.

Nathan shook his head. "He ain't going to keep doing this. He's got to learn to keep his mind on whatever's going on around him instead of just what catches his eye."

With that he pushed out of his chair and crossed the church to the drifting tracker, one hand going to the shirt pocket in which Vin usually kept his harmonica. And when the pocket proved empty, he groaned and said, "Oh Lord, Tanner. Tell me you ain't lost that mouth organ of yours again!"

Vin shot him a furtive look, then went back to staring out the window. Eyeing him suspiciously, Nathan tried again. "Where's your mouth organ, Vin? You got it on you?"

The tracker moved away from the window and took a seat at the table, sinking down into it with a smug look on his face.

Josiah laughed. "I don't think he's lost his harmonica, Brother Jackson. I think he's got it hidden so we can't hold it hostage."

Vin shot Nathan another quick look, a glint of triumph in his eyes.

The healer stared at him for a moment. Then shaking his head, he threw his hands up in the air, saying, "You win, Tanner. You don't want to get better so's you can go fishing any time you've a mind to, that's fine. But don't be coming to me and complaining when you get left behind again."

The glint faded from the tracker's eyes and he turned back to Josiah with an uncertain look.

The preacher eyed him thoughtfully. Then to his two companions -- one as stubborn as the other -- he said, "What do you say we work out a compromise?"

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"You know how to do this, son," Josiah told the tracker as they stood in the livery stable, Vin's horse in its stall and waiting to be saddled. "You've done this a thousand times and more. Now think. What do you need to do first?"

Vin stood eyeing his horse and the paraphernalia that Nathan and Josiah had spread out on the stable floor for him. Then slowly he moved forward and hesitantly picked up the bridle. And with a backwards look to Josiah, who smiled his encouragement to him, he moved into his horse's stall.

After a few false starts and a bit of frustration, he finally got the bridle on. Then, after only a brief hesitation, he collected the saddle blanket and set it on his horse's back. Next came the saddle. And once he had it cinched and ready to go, he proudly led his mount out of the stall.

"Now, see?" Josiah crowed to the healer at his side. "You give that boy something he's interested in or hand him a way to get something he wants, and he can keep his mind on what he's doing just fine."

"Yeah, but now he's expecting to go for a ride," Nathan dryly pointed out. "So we'd best be saddling some horses before he takes off on his own. And just so you know -- if he falls off his horse, you'll be the one putting him back together again."

With a grin and a nod, Josiah grabbed his own tack. And a few minutes later, the three were leading their horses out of the livery and into the street beyond.

Josiah nodded to the west. "Might as well head that way so we can check in on the Widow Corry."

Vin, however, had his own ideas. And swinging up into his saddle with only a little less than his usual grace, he set off in the opposite direction.

"Or," Josiah said with a shrug, "we can go that way."

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~ CHAPTER FOURTEEN ~

"Where to now?" Josiah asked when the tracker reined his horse in and sat looking around in confusion. "There some place in particular you're wanting to go?"

Vin ignored him, his attention all for the scrubland stretching out flat and empty around them, his eyes darting over it for some sign of the familiar.

"You know where you are, son?" Josiah gently probed. "You figure that out and you can work your way from there to get to where you want to go."

Vin twisted around in his saddle, looking back at the way they had come. But behind stretched only more scrubland, looking no different from what lay before them. And turning back around in his saddle, he raised a hand to rub at his head.

"You know where he's headed," Nathan irritably pointed out. "He's going after Chris. That's why he come out this way. And that's why he ain't been paying mind to nothing we've said to him the whole way -- 'cause he ain't got room for nothing else in that thick head of his. Only it's too much for him to think on. And if he don't stop now, he's going to make himself sick. So we'd best be getting him back to town."

Josiah urged his horse closer to Vin's. "Is that what you want, son? You want to go on home now?"

Vin continued to sit, one hand rubbing the side of his head, the other holding fast to his reins.

Eyeing the hand clenched tight, Josiah thoughtfully said, "There's another way to get to where you want to go, you know. If someone's gone there before you, all you have to do is follow behind them."

Vin blinked. Then with a frown, he slowly lowered the hand that had been rubbing his head. And shifting his gaze to the preacher, he waited.

"How would you go about following after a man?" Josiah prompted. "What would you look for?"

More blinks, then Vin turned his attention back to the land around them. And all else forgotten, he slowly lowered his gaze to the ground at his horse's feet.

"Now wait just a minute!" Nathan protested. "You ain't setting him to

tracking! His head's already hurting him. You push him into using it any more and it's going to hurt a whole lot worse!"

"There are worse hurts than an aching head," Josiah softly pointed out, edging his horse away from Vin's to speak to the healer. "You saw him in that saloon. He wanted to go with Chris. For the first time in months, he made up his mind to do something. And you saw how easy it was for us to keep him from doing it. Is that the Vin Tanner you know? You ever remember anyone keeping him from doing something he wanted before he got hurt?"

Nathan shifted in his saddle. "Didn't nobody mean any harm by that. We was just looking out for him."

"I know, Brother. And I know that's what you're wanting to do now. You see him hurting and you want to make it stop. And there ain't nothing to be sorry for in that. But there's other hurts that need tending now, hurts that ain't so easy to see. And if we don't tend to them, if we stop him again from doing something he wants, even if it's for his own good, we're going to end up hurting him more by stripping him of his spirit and that hope in him that's been all that's kept him going at times."

"But he ain't up to this, Josiah. So how are we helping him by setting him up to fail?"

"Who says he'll fail?"

"We're a mile outside of town and already he's lost and hurting! Now you're expecting him to track?" Nathan shook his head, then offered a compromise of his own. "If you're so all fired up to let him have his way on this, why don't we just take him to the creek where Chris and Billy went fishing?"

"Because then it will be us doing for him instead of him doing for himself. And he needs to know that he can count on himself as well as on us. He needs to know that he can do what's hard and that we trust him to do it. It's the only way we'll ever get the old Vin back."

Nathan wanted to argue further, wanted to ease the tracker's suffering on the spot and keep him from any more. But he knew Josiah was right, that at times worry over the physical had to give way to other concerns. And with a sigh of resignation, he said, "Okay. I don't like it, but we'll do it your way. If he gets to hurting too bad, though, I'll be putting a stop to this. You hear?"

"I hear, Brother," Josiah acknowledged. Then turning his attention back to Vin, he sat waiting while the tracker continued to study the ground. And when he kicked his horse into a slow walk, his gaze on the ground ahead, the preacher and the healer both fell in behind him.

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"He ain't going to be able to take much more of this," Nathan declared some time later, his gaze on the tracker ahead of them sitting slumped in his saddle, his eyes heavy with pain, but doggedly following the

clear set of tracks left in the sandy soil.

"The creek ain't much farther," Josiah replied, his gaze as well on their fatigued companion. "He can rest once we get there."

"Chris ain't going to like this," the healer continued. "He'll take one look at him barely able to sit in that saddle, then he'll rain down more hellfire on us than that traveling preacher a while back could ever do in a month of Sundays."

"Maybe. But then again, he might take one look at him sitting in that saddle past the point most men would have given up, and praise the Lord and those who helped Him."

"Or maybe he'll just shoot us."

Josiah laughed. "In that case, we'd best be sure to keep Vin between him and us when we get there."

Nathan grumbled in reply, then kicked his horse forward, reining in beside Vin. "You okay?" he asked, carefully taking note of the pale face and the lines of pain etched there. "We can stop any time now. You just say the word."

For an answer, Vin kicked his own horse into a faster pace. And letting him go, Nathan fell back into company with Josiah again.

"The only way to get him to quit now is to hog-tie him and drag him back to town kicking and screaming," the healer conceded with a disgusted shake of his head. "Either that or we just wait 'til he drops. Which, from the looks of him, ought to be any time now."

"He needs to do this," Josiah softly declared. "And it ain't about fishing or even being with Chris. It's about him not giving up and settling for what's safe in life. It's about pushing ahead when all he wants to do is lie down and beg for mercy, about not letting himself get beat down into the ground. And more than anything, it's about him taking back what was taken from him."

"That's a tall order for a short ride to a creek for fishing," Nathan pointed out. Then with a sigh, he added, "But I reckon if it's what he needs to do, he'll do it."

"In fact, " Josiah said with a nod to the horse tied under a tree at a short distance ahead, "I'd say he's already done it."

Vin, too, had spotted the animal and was jogging ahead to it, so Nathan and Josiah kicked their horses into a lope to catch up with him. And together the three made their way to the creek where Chris stood with his hand on the gun holstered at his side and his gaze on the approaching riders.

Noting that he didn't let his hand drop once they'd reined their horses in a few feet in front of him, Nathan sat back and waited for the fireworks, taking care to keep Vin between him and the man staring up at them with steely eyes.

"You three better have a good explanation for this," Chris growled.

"Just thought we'd go out for a little ride," Josiah replied in an

amiable tone.

"Little?" Chris gave a pointed look to the tracker's pale face and pain-dark eyes. "Looks to me like Tanner's been rode hard and put away half dead."

"Nope." Josiah's tone remained unperturbed. "He just decided to do a little tracking and it wore him out a bit is all."

"A bit?"

"He just needs to rest."

"What he needs is a keeper with more sense than he has!"

Vin sat up straight in his saddle at that, a new and deeper pain shadowing his eyes.

"Now, there ain't no call to be talking like that," Josiah chided, his tone hardening. "Vin knew what he wanted and that was to be here with you. And there's nothing hurting him that a little rest won't cure. So why don't you invite us to step down and share some shade with you? It's mighty hot sitting here having you breathe hellfire on us."

Glaring at the one swaying in his saddle, Chris snapped out an invitation. "Fine. Get on down. But this ain't over." And without so much as a glance at Vin, he turned and walked back to the creekbed where Billy sat fishing.

Nathan shifted his gaze from the angry gunslinger to the tracker sitting slumped in his saddle again. "Don't pay him no mind," he advised.

"You know what Larabee's like when he plays Moses Come Down from the Mountain and don't nobody bother to keep them commandments he hands out. But

he'll get over it soon enough. And if he don't, I reckon I got a bush or two I can burn to get his attention. So come on and get down."

And so saying, he swung down from his own horse and stood waiting for Vin to dismount. Vin, however, ignored him, his gaze still fastened on the one squatting down now at Billy's side, his back to his uninvited guests, not wanting them there. Not wanting him.

Something inside then seemed to tear, something deep and vital, the pain of it lancing through him, seeming to fill him completely before it exploded in his head. And glad of the darkness it brought, he gave himself over to it and slid from his saddle, unaware of the healer's cry of alarm or the strong arms catching him and lowering him to the ground.

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It was hours later when he awoke, his rise from the dark depths slow and uncertain, sounds and shapes slow to come into focus, his mind working its way hesitantly through the fog. And when at last he came to an awareness, it was to find himself lying on the ground with Chris Larabee at his side watching over him.

"You awake?" his companion asked, the earlier anger gone and only concern shadowing his eyes and voice now.

Vin ignored him, instead turning his head to study his surroundings,

memory returning as his gaze lit on the creek shining in the late afternoon sun. He sat up then, his movements slow and weary. And still ignoring Chris, he reached down into a boot and pulled out his harmonica. Chris gave a half-smile. "Nathan was wondering what you'd done with that. But don't worry -- I won't say anything to him."

Vin blew out a sharp note that softened into a low mournful sound. For once feeling a need for words to offer the silent tracker, Chris searched out something to say -- anything but what needed saying. "Nathan and Josiah went back to town, took Billy with them," he said at last, studying the man beside him for some reaction, trying to read what he couldn't or wouldn't say. And when Vin only sat with shuttered eyes and a closed expression, letting his music speak for him, Chris searched out more words, offering them to one who had never before needed them and who now had little understanding of them. "Nathan was plenty mad at me after you collapsed. Called me a cold-hearted bastard. Said it was beyond him why you'd go to all the trouble and hurt you went through to come out here just so I could hurt you some more."

Too few words or the wrong ones, for the tracker continued to play his music, seemingly unaware of words said or left unsaid.

"I don't know which of us is more stubborn," Chris continued, trying again, getting closer now to the words that needed saying. "You for coming out here when you had no business even trying or me for turning my back to you over it instead of being glad you done it."

It wasn't much of an apology, and Chris knew it. But there was a time when it would have been enough, when even that would not have been necessary. That it was necessary now left him feeling lost and unsure. And that was not a feeling the gunslinger would normally allow. In order to survive this life, a man had to know where he stood at all times, had to be sure of the ground at his feet. That was why he and Vin had always gotten on so well, even from that first moment across a dusty street when a mob was fixing to hang Nathan. They had looked into each other's eyes and known where the other stood, had each felt sure of the other. Now he was faced with a stranger and could be sure of nothing.

Still, this man, whoever he was and might never be again, meant something to him, even if he'd never allowed himself to consider the depth of those feelings or the power they held over him. So he tried again.

"You remember when I got shot a while back, out at Ella's ranch? You remember how I wanted to go after her but couldn't? I wanted it more than anything I'd wanted in a very long time. But I was hurt too bad to even stir out of bed much less ride across half the territory. So I had to let the rest of you go after her without me. I had to depend on you to do what I couldn't do for myself. And it didn't sit well with me. It didn't sit well at all. Do you remember that?"

A pause, then a short low note.

"You and the boys did for me then, Vin. You took care of what needed



doing until I could do for myself again. And that's all we're doing for you now. You understand?"

Two notes then, one long and one short.

Chris didn't know what that meant, didn't think Vin understood much, if any, of what he was saying, knew he was throwing too many words at him. But he hoped he would recognize what lay behind those words, even if Chris himself didn't know quite what that was.

"Me and the boys doing for you don't mean we think any the less of you," he continued, working his way closer still to what needed saying. "No more than you thought bad of me when I was hurt and needing help. And if I've said or done anything to make you feel that way, if I've made you feel any less of a man, then you feel free to take a swing at me any time. I reckon maybe I even got it coming."

It was as close to an apology as he ever got and he waited to see how Vin would take it. And to his surprise, that time he reacted not with music, but with silence, his harmonica pressed to his lips but seemingly forgotten as he turned his gaze on the gunslinger, a frown drawing his brows down.

Taking that as a good sign, Chris pressed ahead. "You done good coming out here, cowboy. Nathan told me how you tracked me all on your own. And what I said about you not having any sense -- I only meant you ain't never had any when it comes to taking care of yourself. There ain't nobody better when it comes to taking care of other folk. But when it comes to taking care of yourself... well, even Billy Travis could do better than you do."

Vin lowered his gaze at that, the hand holding the harmonica dropping into his lap.

"I ain't saying that you can't take care of yourself," Chris hurriedly added. "It's just that sometimes I think you just ain't willing to do it. And if you won't do it for yourself, then I got no problem doing it for you. So when you pull some fool stunt like making yourself sick just to come fishing, I reckon I get a mite riled."

Vin raised his head at that, one eyebrow raised in challenge.

"Okay," Chris conceded with a laugh. "Maybe I get more than a mite riled. But you do seem to have a talent for getting a man's hackles up, Tanner."

He cocked his head then, studying his companion. And when Vin kept his gaze steadily on him, he gave a hopeful smile and said, "So what do you say? You want to do some fishing?"

Vin continued to eye Chris for a long moment. Then with a slow nod of his head, he softly said, "Yes."

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"We should have done this sooner," Chris said as he watched Vin watching the day.

The tracker was more relaxed than he'd seen him in months, had maybe

ever seen him. And he was more aware as well, his gaze drifting frequently to the land around them, his attention caught by the smallest of sounds. But while his attention was constantly shifting, it was an easy interest rather than the distracted wanderings that had marked him in recent days.

Chris thought maybe that was due to the lack of the constant stimulation found in town. Here there was only the natural ebb and flow of life moving slow and easy: the wind rustling the tall grass at the creek's edge, the water tumbling over stones in the creek, birds calling, the horses stamping, and the sunlight dancing among the trees and shadows. Here Vin could hear himself think, could track his thoughts without sights and sounds and the demands of others tripping him up and leading him down false trails. And most telling of all, perhaps, was the fact that not once had he resorted to his harmonica since they'd settled down to fish.

"Maybe we can go out to my shack after I get back from that trip I'll be taking to Julestown tomorrow," Chris suggested, wanting to get Vin away from the distractions of town and give them a chance to get to know each other again. "We can maybe get some work done. Lord knows there's plenty that needs doing." He pulled his line in and reset the bait.

"What do you think, cowboy? You want to ride out with me in a few days and start earning your keep again?"

Vin turned to look at him, his eyes clear and bright. And while he didn't make a reply, Chris had no doubt what his answer was.

He gave a nod of satisfaction. "We'll make a day of it. Just the two of us. Or maybe we'll let Buck come along to do the grunt work. Think he'd go for it?"

Vin seemed to give the question some thought. Then with a shrug, he slowly said, "No women."

Chris nearly choked on a laugh that sounded rustier than he wanted to think on. "We'll have to find some other means of persuasion then. But don't you worry -- we'll think of something."

Vin gave a nod and started to turn his attention back to his fishing.

Then he jerked his head up to stare downstream.

Chris' hand went immediately to his gun. "What is it?" he softly asked.

"You hear something?"

The tracker cocked his head, then climbed to his feet. And when he started to walk off, Chris scrambled to grab hold of one leg.

"Now hold on there, cowboy. You ain't going nowhere 'til you tell me what's got your attention. We got company or what?"

Vin frowned down at him and chuffed out a breath in frustration.

"All right then," Chris conceded. "We'll go take a look. But you let me go first."

He drew his gun then and stood, moving off down the creek in the direction Vin had been heading, the tracker impatient at his back when he

moved slow and cautious.

He'd gone less than a dozen yards when he heard what had caught Vin's attention -- the bawling of what sounded like a calf. And holstering his pistol, he more quickly led the way along the creek edge, the ground gradually dropping away to form a high bank. Then rounding a bend, they came upon a shallow spot used as a cattle ford. And there they found a young calf struggling alone in the mud churned up there.

Chris stopped at the sight of it, his gaze shifting in search of other company, whether four-legged or two. And when Vin tried to move past him, his eyes on the trapped animal, Chris barred him with a raised arm and a hissed, "I don't see its mama. But she's bound to be around here somewhere."

Unimpressed with that bit of information, Vin tried again to go to the animal's rescue, but again Chris stopped him. "You forgetting where we are, cowboy? This is Ira Jenkins land here. And he's got the meanest bunch of cattle this side of hell. You remember that time one of his longhorns chased Nathan up a tree? And he wouldn't even have been out this way if another of them devils hadn't gored one of Jenkins' ranch hands near to death."

Again Vin pushed at the arm blocking his way.

"All right, cowboy," Chris growled, shoving his gun back into its holster. "We're going. But you keep a lookout for an angry mama. And if she shows up, you find your own tree. You hear?"

With another chuff of breath, Vin pushed past the cautious gunslinger and slid down the bank and into the mud in which the animal was trapped. And when he had trouble getting a sure hold on the slippery beast, he glared up the bank at Chris, who stood high and dry keeping an eye out for trouble.

Larabee grinned down at him in return. "Sorry, pard. But one of us has to stand guard."

Vin shot him a dirty look, then went back to his struggles with the calf.

Chris started to laugh, but a movement in the brush caught his eye. And before he could get out the curse forming on his lips, an angry longhorn trampled through the scrub, heading straight for her bawling baby with horns lowered and the earth shaking beneath her thundering hooves.

Pulling his gun, Chris yelled at Vin over his shoulder to run. But the tracker only stared up at him in confusion. And with a curse, Chris aimed his weapon at the charging cow. Before he could pull the trigger, however, the ground gave beneath his feet and he went sliding down the bank and into the mud where the calf and Vin continued to struggle.

"Forget the damned calf and run!" Chris yelled, scrambling in the mud for his gun. And unable to find it, he lunged at Vin and pulled him away from the calf, then pushed him into the water and in the direction of the far bank.

The tracker stumbled and went down to his knees in the mud and water. And no sooner had Chris pulled him back to his feet than the angry cow was charging down the creek bank towards them.

"Run for the other side!" he directed the tracker as he shoved him in that direction. Then turning to face the charging cow, he waved his arms and ran right at her, yelling at the top of his lungs. He then swerved at the last minute, barely dodging the sweeping horns and scrabbling up the loose earth of the creek bank, hoping to lead the cow away from Vin. To his relief, the angry animal obliged, twisting into a turn after him.

No sooner though had he gained the top of the creek bank than it once again gave way beneath him, sending him sliding back into the mud and water, the rampaging cow nearly trampling him as it went charging past. Then it too started sliding, loose soil and clods of earth cascading ahead of it and behind.

Climbing awkwardly to his feet, Chris scrabbled to get out of its way, slipping and sliding in the mud, trying desperately to keep his feet under him. And just as he stumbled and started to fall, a hand closed around his outflung arm, holding him up as it jerked him forward. Then, the cow hit the water and Chris both, the gunslinger receiving only a glancing blow. It was enough, however, to knock him off his feet and into the mud and water. He was then jerked up and forward again, out of the mud and into the water that rose to his thighs as he was pulled farther into it, coughing and spluttering and wiping mud from his eyes as he went. And when he soon felt dry land beneath him, he collapsed gratefully down onto it, the hand on his arm letting go.

A minute later when he'd cleared his eyes and nose and mouth of mud, his gaze focused on the far side of the creek where the mollified mama was leading her muddy baby up the bank. He then turned to his rescuer, as wet and muddy as himself, and grinned, saying, "You never could follow orders worth a damn, Tanner."

Vin cocked his head at him, long hair streaming mud and water, his breath coming hard and fast, soaked and muddied to the skin, but his eyes bright and full of an exhilaration that only comes from cheating the devil of his due. Then looking his companion up and down assessingly, he shook his head and sighed, saying, "Get Billy?"

Chris stared at him in confusion for a moment. Then he realized that his earlier words to the tracker about his ability to take care of himself had come back to haunt him. And feeling suddenly as if he'd just found his way after being lost for too long a time, Chris grinned. "You think that's funny, do you?"

He tried for a glare then, but he had only to see the answering grin that lit Vin's face to know he was somewhat less than successful. "It ain't funny, Tanner," he growled nonetheless. "I got mud in places I didn't even know I had."

Vin gave a giggle then, the sound of it high and clear and pure. It started out small, like a practice note on an instrument left lying too long forgotten. Then when Chris worked harder on his glare, mud dripping from his hair down his nose and plopping onto his lap, the laughter grew, notes building upon notes until they cascaded into a symphony of joy, pure and simple and needing no words to be shared. The sound took on a life of its own, Vin rocking with the intensity of it, his arms coming up to wrap around his ribs as he rolled onto his side, giving himself over to the joy of simply being alive.

Chris gave up on his glare and reclaimed his grin, wishing he had Vin's way of setting life to music, wanting to hold onto that moment by some means other than memory. Then Vin tried to sit up, only to collapse in another round of laughter. And rolling too close to the edge of the creek bank, he slid down it, the laughter cut off with a yelp of surprise. Chris scrambled to the edge after him, looking over it with a worried eye -- only to find Vin sitting unharmed below, in mud and water up to his waist, his eyes blinking in confusion the only thing on him not covered in mud.

It was Chris' turn then to laugh. "Now that's funny!" he crowed. And sliding down the bank to its bottom, he extended a hand to the muddy tracker. "Come on, let's get you up out of there and cleaned off before you harden."

Blue eyes blinked up at him for a moment. Then a muddy hand reached to take hold of his... and pulled, sending him tumbling face first into the mud at Vin's side.

When he spluttered his way up out of it, he was once again met with the sound of joyful laughter. And blinking the mud away from his eyes, he gave a guttural growl.

Vin was up and running at that, into the water and back down the creek, laughter floating behind him as he raced not away but forward.

Chris let him go, delighting in his delight and content in that moment to share in it, hope not needed nor looked for, all that he had enough. And sure that if Vin Tanner had not yet found his way home, he was at least on the path to it, he stood and followed after him.

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~ CHAPTER FIFTEEN ~

Ezra Standish looked over Vin Tanner's shoulder as he stood between the batwing doors of the saloon, and peevishly said, "As lovely a view as this particular position affords me, Mr. Tanner, I must confess that I prefer the view from our accustomed table inside. So if you don't mind...?"

When his companion only turned a puzzled look on him, he sighed and wearily ordered, "Inside, Mr. Tanner."

Vin turned his gaze to the table in the back of the room at which three of the Seven sat. Then turning on his heel, he would have slipped back

out onto the boardwalk had Ezra not blocked his way.

"Inside," the gambler repeated more firmly, taking hold of Vin's arm and propelling him into the saloon and over to the table.

"He giving you trouble?" Josiah asked when the gambler pulled a chair out for his charge and sat him down. "Buck says he wasn't feeling too cooperative earlier."

"What I said was that he was acting ornerier than a bee-stung bear," Buck corrected. "He woke up frowning and things went downhill from there."

"He wasn't too happy yesterday night either when I had him over to the jail," J. D. added. "Thought I was going to have to lock him up to keep him from wandering off. And he got so riled when I wouldn't let him that I swear he was cussing up a storm on that harmonica of his." Josiah eyed the tracker sitting unhappy across from him, eyes on the batwing doors. "I'd have thought maybe he was feeling a mite cooped up in town," he mused. "But when Nathan and I took him out for a ride yesterday, he didn't seem any happier. And he sure wasn't paying mind to much of anything."

Ezra settled himself into a chair and gratefully accepted a cup of coffee Inez produced for him. "It is entirely too early in the morning to be chasing hither and yon after a recalcitrant tracker," he declared with a sigh. "This is the longest he's stayed still all morning. And by my calculations, he should be popping up out of that chair any second now."

And so saying, Vin did exactly that.

"Now hold on there, pard," Josiah said as he reached out to take hold of one arm. "Let's let Ezra sit and rest a spell. He's not used to so much exercise. You've like to wore him out."

"Indeed," Ezra agreed. And leaning forward to pull Vin's chair out, he firmly ordered him to sit.

Vin, however, only scowled at him, standing his ground.

"Might be best to let him walk around and work off whatever's riding him," Buck suggested.

"Well, be my guest," Ezra offered with a wave of his hand. "Just be careful of that groove he's already worn in the boardwalk all around town."

Buck shook his head and with a grin said, "I have to take over with him this afternoon. And I'm hoping you'll have him all wore out by then."

"I've got to go relieve Nathan at the jail in a minute," Josiah put in before Ezra could turn to him. "And truth be told, I'd rather deal with a back-stabbing horse-thieving cur like Sandoval than Vin in this kind of mood."

Ezra turned a considering gaze on the youngest of the Seven.

"Don't look at me," J. D. hurriedly warned. "I took your shift last night and you ain't weaseling out of taking mine now."

"I'll pay you."

Before J. D. could consider the offer, Vin pulled out of Josiah's grasp and made for the saloon doors. And with a moan, Ezra was up and after him.

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"Mr. Tanner," Ezra said with a weary protest as he followed the tracker out of yet another shop, "this has got to stop. We've been inside every store in this town at least once this morning. And to what purpose? You've spoken to no one, acknowledged no one's existence -- including mine. You've purchased nothing. Admired nothing. And you've yet to remain above thirty seconds at any one establishment. So what is it you're looking for? Anything in particular?"

Vin ignored him, as he'd ignored him all that morning. Instead, he moved to the next store along the boardwalk and went inside, Ezra following wearily behind him.

"You know, if you would only tell me what it is you're in search of," the gambler continued when Vin led him out again, "I might be able to help you find it." A thought occurred to him then. "You haven't misplaced that hell-born device I laughingly refer to as a musical instrument, have you?" And when Vin only continued down the boardwalk to the next door in line, he stopped his hand as it reached for the knob and turned him around, more simply saying, "Vin, where's your harmonica?"

A look of suspicion flashed in the tracker's eyes.

Seeing that, Ezra said, "Don't worry. I'm not going to take it away from you. I just want to make sure you still retain possession of it."

Vin blinked at him, and Ezra tried again. "Do you have your harmonica, Mr. Tanner?"

That time Vin gave a nod. He then turned back to the door behind him and opened it.

Ezra followed him, irritably muttering, "I could be in Denver right now, sleeping the sleep of the rich after a night's work at the poker table. Or maybe in St. Louis, dancing attendance on some rich man's widow. Or better yet, in New Orleans, presiding over my own gambling establishment."

"And give all this up?" a voice asked with amusement.

Ezra looked up to discover that Vin had led him into the Clarion office. And seeing Mary Travis watching him with an amused eye, he dryly said, "As charming a dusty little burg as this is, and with such amusing denizens...." At that he fixed a jaundiced eye on the tracker already turning to depart. "...on days like this, I'd give it all up in a second if someone offered me the right price." He turned back to Mary and hopefully added, "You wouldn't happen to have a nickel on you, would you?" Mary laughed, then turned her attention to their impatient companion, laying a hand on his shoulder to hold him in place. "Aren't you going to stay and visit for a bit, Vin?" she asked. "I've hardly seen you since

Chris has been gone."

The tracker turned back to her, his eyes brightening. He then shifted his gaze about the room hopefully.

Noting that, Ezra frowned and said, "Is that what your perambulations about town have been about? You're looking for Chris?"

Vin jerked his gaze to the gambler, his expression expectant, eyes still hopeful.

His irritation at the morning's exercise forgotten, Standish softened his tone, saying, "Don't you remember? Chris went to Julestown a couple of days ago. He won't be back for another three days yet."

Vin blinked, the hope fading from his eyes.

"Three days isn't that long," Mary hurried to add. "He'll be back before you know it."

Vin blinked again.

"I'm not sure he quite grasps what we're telling him," Ezra said with a frown. Then holding three fingers up, he said slowly and deliberately.

"Chris will be back in three days. Three."

Vin eyed the fingers for a long moment. Then reaching out slowly to touch them one by one, he softly repeated, "Three days."

"That's right. Three days. Then Chris will be home."

Vin sighed. Then taking the harmonica out of his pocket, he leaned against Mary's desk and blew out a mournful note.

"Good Lord!" Ezra groaned, eyes rolling. "If we're going to be subjected to a dirge for the next three days, it might behoove us to wire Mr. Larabee and demand his immediate return!"

"I think it's sweet that he misses him," Mary chided. "After all, it wasn't that long ago that he wouldn't have noticed Chris was even around much less that he was gone."

Ezra squinted at the scruffy tracker, trying the word 'sweet' on for size. And finding it a decidedly loose fit, he cleared his throat and said, "Yes, well. Be that as it may, in the interest of everyone's sanity, perhaps a distraction of some kind is in order, something to keep Vin occupied for the next few days."

Mary looked thoughtful. "I've been thinking about working with him on his reading." Then remembering that Vin's reading lessons were supposed to be their little secret, she hurried to cover her slip, saying, "I mean, he seems to have forgotten so much, it wouldn't be surprising if he'll need help with that as well."

"Indeed," Ezra slowly agreed, Vin's secret not quite as secret as the shy tracker would like to believe. "In fact, it wouldn't surprise me in the least if he needed to return to the basics. Learn them all over again." He paused for a moment, then added, "I once passed myself off... er... passed some time as a professor in one of our more learned academies. If I do say so myself, I was quite the exemplary teacher."

Mary cocked her head at him. "Are you volunteering to help?" she asked



in surprise.

Ezra shrugged. "There's little enough to do around this cultural wasteland, so a man has to find amusement when and where it offers." Taking that as a 'yes,' Mary smothered a smile and said, "All right, Professor Standish. I'll get some paper and pencils, then class can commence."

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The morning's lesson wasn't a total disaster, but it came near enough one that Ezra was more than happy to escort the tracker at last back to the saloon. And finding only Buck still in residence there, he led Vin to the table where the ladies' man sat and all but collapsed into a chair, signaling Inez for a drink as he did so.

Buck switched his gaze from gambler to tracker and, grinning, said, "I don't know which of you looks more wore out."

Vin rubbed his eyes tiredly, then slumped into a chair between the two men. And folding his arms on the table, he laid his head down on top of them.

"Mrs. Travis decided to refresh his reading skills," Ezra said, accepting the shot glass Inez handed him with a grateful smile. And after downing its contents, he added, "Suffice it to say, I didn't shoot him, however tempting a prospect it may have been. Although at one point I was afraid that Mary might do so."

"He still feeling a mite bee-stung?" Buck asked with a grin.

"He's missing Chris," Ezra said simply. "Dragged me all over town looking for him."

"Now why's that?" Buck asked in surprise. "I know Chris told him he was going to be gone for a bit."

"Well, either he forgot or he never really understood to begin with."

"And now?"

"I explained to him that Mr. Larabee would be returning soon."

"And you reckon he understood that?"

Ezra shrugged. "Ask him yourself."

Buck looked down on the weary tracker who sat watching him with dull eyes. "Hey, there, Vin," he softly said. "You know where Chris is?"

Vin sighed and said in a near whisper, "Gone."

Buck smiled gently. "That's right, pard. But he's going to be coming back real soon." He cocked his head. "You know when that will be?"

"Three days." The words were soft and spoken with a dullness that matched that in the tracker's sad eyes.

Tender heart aching, Buck tried to cheer his unhappy companion up.

"Well, don't you be worrying on that now, pard. We'll have us some fun without ole Glarabee around to spoil it for us. Come tonight, the six of us will have a game and drink all the whiskey we want. And if you're really good, afterward I'll see if Blossom has a friend for you."

The blue eyes remained dull, so Buck tried again. "And in the morning,

we'll go ride out to see Miss Nettie. How about it?"

Vin's eyes lit up at that. And, his fatigue forgotten, he pushed out of his chair and made for the batwing doors.

"Now hold on just a second there, pard," Buck called, getting up to chase the departing tracker down. "In the morning, I said."

Vin turned puzzled eyes on him. Then switching his gaze to the late morning sun shining through the swinging doors, he frowned and firmly said, "Morning!"

"Well, yes," Buck conceded. "It for sure is still morning. But I didn't mean we'd go now. I swear though, first thing tomorrow morning we'll ride on out to the Wells' place. Okay?"

When Vin only blinked at him, Buck turned to the gambler sitting grinning at him. "Come on, now, Ezra. Help me out on this!"

Ezra only grinned more widely. "Sorry, my friend. But I do believe Mr. Tanner is correct. You said morning -- it's morning."

"But Miss Alice is expecting me to take her on a little ride this afternoon!"

"Now, which is more important? Yet another in a long line of dalliances or succoring a friend in need?"

"Sucker is right!" Buck growled. And with a scowl, he added, "You ever notice how it is ol' Vin here can understand just fine when someone tells him to have a drink or another piece of pie? But when it comes to understanding what he don't want to hear, all you get is a blank look and a stone wall."

"Really?" Ezra innocently replied. "I hadn't noticed."

Buck shot the gambler a dirty look. "The boy's been hanging around you too much. Next thing you know he'll be cheating me at cards."

Ezra laughed. "I've seen you play, Buck. Billy Travis could beat you without having to resort to deception."

Buck gave another growl. Then turning back to the tracker, he irritably said, "Well, don't just stand there! Let's go get our horses!"

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"Good Lord, son," Nettie Wells declared as Vin Tanner rode into her front yard in company with Buck Wilmington, eyes bright and a smile on his face. "If you aren't a sight for sore eyes!"

"Hey, Vin!" Casey called as she joined her aunt, a puppy in her arms. And holding the squirming animal up for inspection, she added, "Missy had pups! You want to go see them?"

Vin slid down from his horse and reached out a gentle hand to the puppy. And grinning when it licked him, he eagerly followed as Casey skipped away to the barn.

"He's looking good," Nettie said to Buck as he too dismounted. "Up and riding and a light in his eyes!"

Buck led the horses into the corral, Nettie trailing behind him. "Yeah, he's doing a heap better. But he hasn't come all the way back yet. He's

getting enough like his ornery old self though that Chris was ready to shoot him the other day and Ezra this morning."

Nettie laughed. "I'm glad to hear that. But what brings you boys out here? Just out riding? Or you hiding him out 'til tempers cool down in town?"

"Neither," Buck replied with an answering grin. "Chris took off for a few days and Vin's got to missing him. Figured he could use some cheering up. And some apple pie."

His grin widened at that and Nettie gave him a soft slap on his arm.

"Don't think I don't know who it is ate half of the last pie I baked. And it's lucky for you I just happened to make another this morning."

"I knew I could count on you!" Buck said with a laugh. And giving the old woman a buss, he added, "If someone don't come along soon and swoop you up, I just might do it myself!"

"You do and like as not I'll be adding another notch to my Spencer carbine before the honeymoon's even over."

"Now, that you probably will," Buck admitted with a laugh. "In the meantime though, Vin and I will take a hammer and nails to a few things around here. Work us up an appetite for that pie of yours."

"You can start in the barn then. Dang old cow of mine near kicked in her stall the other day."

Nettie led the way into the barn then, only to stop with Buck at her back at sight of Vin Tanner tumbling on the hay-strewn floor with a litter of puppies clambering over him and Casey laughing at his side. The old woman put a hand to her heart, a pain starting in her at the sound of his laughter, so free and easy, unbound by that wariness that always reminded her of an animal wild in its need to search out danger, never stepping out of concealment lest it be set upon.

"That's him," she softly breathed.

"What?" Buck asked in confusion. "That's who?"

"Vin," Nettie replied, her eyes never leaving the one standing in the open, eyes unshadowed and no wide-brimmed hat or hide-tough coat to hide behind. "It's who he was meant to be before too much grief too soon and years of drifting from trouble to hell and back again weighed him down, taught him to mistrust what's good for fear it would disappear and leave him with a heartful of hurt."

Buck too eyed the man who had hunted buffalo and men with equal skill, who was deadlier with a rifle than any man he'd ever known, and who had lived with Indians as wild as he. And shaking his head as the killer of men both red and white buried his face in the warm fur of a puppy's belly, laughing with a joy pure and simple, he sighed and said, "It's not going to last, Nettie. It can't. He might have forgotten how hard the world can be, but the world hasn't forgot him. And sooner or later it's going to come knocking at his door to remind him of all that's cruel and hurtful. It's just the way life is. Can't no man get through it

untouched."

"I know." The old woman nodded her agreement, tears starting to her eyes at the thought of the lessons needing to be learned again. "I know. But I don't approve."

"No, ma'am," Buck softly agreed. "But you don't have to go worrying about Vin. He's survived everything life's thrown at him so far and I reckon he'll go on surviving. And he'll do it without ever losing what you see of him now. Not completely. It'll always be in him. Hid maybe someplace safe, but there just the same. And as long as he's got that, he'll do fine."

Nettie stood watching Vin for long minutes, drinking in the joy shining out of him, storing it up for some dark day to come. And at last, with a sigh she said, "The good Lord giveth and I reckon He has a right to take away again if He wants to. But me and Him are going to have words when my time comes. And you can tell that fancy gambler to take care he don't bet against me winning that particular argument."

She gave a nod then and strode away, out of the barn with back straight and a warning eye to the heavens above.

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~ CHAPTER SIXTEEN ~

The noonday stage rolled into town only two hours late and pulled to a stop in front of the hotel. And jumping down to open the door, the stagecoach driver peered into the dim interior at the sole passenger, saying, "We'll be pulling out in an hour, mister. So you'd best go eat now if you've a mind to."

Taking the driver's advice, the soberly-clad passenger stiffly descended the steps, having no thought in mind but his overdue luncheon. And limping his way onto the boardwalk in front of the hotel, he headed for its doors. No sooner had he reached them though than they swung open. He paused then to allow the two men stepping through them to pass -- and came face to face with a dead man.

"Tanner!" he uttered in shocked tones.

The man beside the very much alive tracker cocked his head at the newly arrived traveler. "Reverend Bliss?" Josiah Sanchez greeted in surprise. And reaching to take hold of Vin's arm when he would have kept walking, he added, "I didn't know you were heading back this way. You holding another Revival?"

"What?" Bliss asked in confusion, his eyes never leaving the man he'd seen breathe his last three months earlier and who now stood hale and hearty and watching him with only a faint interest.

"Oh, that's right," Josiah said in sudden understanding at the other man's pale face. "You were there that day Vin supposedly died."

"He stopped breathing!" the dumbfounded preacher declared.

"Seems he started up again," Josiah explained with a shrug. "And Chris thought it best to let folks believe he'd died, just in case Amy

Callenbeck's murderer decided to pay him a little visit."

His gaze shifting to Sanchez with an alarm quickly covered, Bliss studied him for any sign of possible danger. And seeing none, he adopted a tone of sympathetic curiosity and probed for things hidden. "You ever find out who killed the poor woman?"

Josiah shook his head, his gaze clear and unshadowed. "We found out who paid to have it done, but we've never been able to learn any more than that."

Bliss shot a look back to Tanner, who stood impatient and bored -- and seemingly uncaring of his presence there. "But surely Mr. Tanner can identify the killer?"

Again Josiah shook his head, his eyes now shadowing with pained regret. "Vin hasn't been quite himself since he was hurt. And near as we can tell, he doesn't remember a thing that happened that night."

"As near as you can tell?"

Josiah sighed. And flicking a look to the man beside him, he slowly said, "That knock he took to his head has left Vin... a mite confused."

Bliss eyed the tracker more closely, taking in his disinterested gaze and the lack of any weapon strapped to his side. And as his initial alarm eased, he turned back to Josiah and said, "I am most distressed to hear that. Perhaps we can go somewhere and you can explain to me what has happened?"

After a moment's hesitation, Josiah nodded. "We're meeting Nathan Jackson over at the church in a few minutes. You can come along with us if you'd like. Might be easier showing you what you want to know than trying to explain it."

His lunch forgotten, as well as the soon-to-be-departing stagecoach, Bliss nodded his agreement and accompanied the two men on their trek to the church. And as they walked, he took note of the hand Josiah frequently placed on Tanner's shoulder to guide him when he would have stayed or strayed in response to some heedless shifting of his attention -- a far cry from the constant awareness normally displayed by a man used to the hunt and being hunted.

Bliss wasn't sure what to make of it -- until he sat through an hour of watching the former bounty hunter struggle his way through a series of exercises so simple a small child could easily have accomplished them. And all with only the barest of syllables uttered.

When Nathan at last declared the session at an end and took his leave, Bliss studied the wearied tracker curled up on a pew blowing into his harmonica, a seeming stranger to the man who had sat a few short months ago in the saloon with a darkness in his eyes born of too much seen and done and lived. Now his eyes were clear. But it was a blankness rather than an absence of darkness, a slate waiting bare and ready.

"It's been said that the eyes are a mirror to a man's soul," Bliss mused aloud, his gaze still on Tanner but the words directed to Josiah

Sanchez. Then turning to his companion, he said, "You believe that?"  
"I do."

Bliss nodded at the words simply spoken but with years of complicated living behind them. Then shifting his gaze back to the one sitting unaware on the pew, he added, "Those are no longer the eyes of a man used to killing."

Josiah shrugged. "I never did figure Vin for a natural born killer."

"A killer made, not born?" Bliss raised an eyebrow, his attention still on the tracker. "Perhaps you're right. But still, there had to be that in him that made killing an easy option."

"I don't know that killing ever came easy to Vin Tanner," Josiah disputed, his gaze curious on the preacher whose words condemned but whose eyes held understanding.

"You believe he never killed when he could have walked away?" Bliss challenged, turning once more to Josiah. "That he never aimed for the heart when a shot to someplace not quite so fatal would have sufficed?"

"I reckon he might have regrets," Josiah allowed. "Same as we all do."

"Regrets are easy, Mr. Sanchez. They can save a man from having to make the right choice to begin with. And they can enable him to walk into a room filled with polite company without being asked to leave."

"And you think that's Vin?"

Bliss was silent for a moment. Then, his gaze returning to the one blowing soft notes on his harmonica, he slowly said, "I knew a man once who had a wolf. He raised it from a pup and treated it better than most men treat their wives. Even bragged on how he'd tamed it. But one day, for reasons no man could probably ever tell, the wildness in that wolf took hold and it turned on his master. Ripped the throat right out of him."

A silence grew then as Josiah considered the words and the meaning behind them. Before he could track them down whatever path Bliss was set upon though, J. D. burst into the church.

"We got trouble coming!" the youth breathlessly announced. Then noting the traveling preacher, he gave a tip of his hat before turning his attention back to his fellow peacemaker. "Sorry to interrupt, but Buck wants us all down at the jail. He thinks maybe we got trouble coming."

"What kind of trouble?" Josiah asked as moved to the door leading to the back room and slid an arm inside it to collect the rifle kept ready there.

"A bunch of men have been drifting into town the past couple of hours. Buck thinks they might be part of Sandoval's gang come to break him out of jail."

"Chris back yet?"

J. D. shook his head. "Where's Nathan?"

"Gone back to his clinic." Josiah grabbed his hat. And with his rifle under one arm, he moved to the pew upon which Vin sat playing his music unheeding of the trouble brewing. "I'll get Vin over to Mrs. Potter."

You go fetch Nathan and we'll meet up at the jail."

With a nod, J. D. was gone. And as Josiah urged a reluctant Vin to his feet, Bliss spoke, saying, "Might I be of assistance, Mr. Sanchez?"

"Only if you're handy with a gun."

Bliss shrugged. "It's not my weapon of choice in the fight against evil these days, but I can handle one well enough."

"Then stay here with Vin, keep an eye out for trouble." And with that, Josiah tossed the rifle to Bliss and hurried out of the church.

Rifle in hand, Bliss watched him go, then turned his gaze to the tracker, who stood watching him in confusion. And with a smile slow and dangerous he said, "Don't worry, Mr. Tanner. You and I will find some way to amuse ourselves while your friends are busy defending this dusty town of yours."

Vin shot a look to the door through which Josiah had disappeared, a frown drawing down his brows.

Bliss eyed him thoughtfully, the darkness stirring in him as he considered his options, the game beginning but as yet unnamed. "You want to join them, Mr. Tanner? You wish to return to your chosen way of life, guns blazing and heart racing, life and death in the balance, your wits and skill bet against luck and fate?"

Turning back to him, Vin stood uncertain, faint stirrings within hinting at things long remembered and briefly forgotten. Then his gaze slid down to the rifle.

Bliss' heart beat fast at the look that came into the tracker's eyes, a weighing behind the confusion there, a recognition of something just beyond reach. And wanting to draw out that dark in him so similar to his own, to force him to admit its hold and thereby give false claim to the righteousness the law and a judge had bestowed upon him, he raised the rifle and ran one hand caressingly over it. Then turning a lover's gaze on it, he lowered his voice to a seductive tone and said, "Death stalks the streets of this fair town, Mr. Tanner. And here you sit on hallowed ground, no player in the game about to unfold. Shouldn't you be out there, stalking the stalker, a hunter on the prowl for dangerous prey, following the smell of blood in the air and fear? Your heart should be racing with the thrill of it, your senses heightened by its seductive power, your body suffused with a joy known only in that fleeting moment before the kill."

He looked over the rifle to find the tracker's eyes locked on the weapon gleaming with a cold light. "You were born for this, Mr. Tanner," he softly continued, the hunt on and the thrill of it beginning. "It's who you are and will always be. I knew that the moment I first saw you, your hair as wild as your nature, a trophy skin cloaking you, and a darkness in your eyes no light, however bright, could banish. You were never meant to live tame in a town, surrounded by sheep and the mongrels guarding them. You're a wolf, born and bred to run free beyond reach of

fences and the farmers who build them." He paused, shaking his head. "I admired that in you, Mr. Tanner, however much I pitied the struggle to deny it and your doomed attempt to live a life safe among the sheep, refusing with a fool's pride to admit that the wild in you will never let go, that it is more vital to you than the air you breathe."

Vin raised his eyes then, the blue orbs shadowing with something not yet understood.

Bliss, however, comprehended fully. And needing as much as wanting the tracker to understand as well -- the shadows sometimes a lonely place and the chase more enjoyable with two playing at the game -- he went on.

"You know what happened to that wolf I told you about when it finally gave in to its wild nature?" He paused, watching the shadows at play in Tanner's eyes. "It was shot by a farmer, its pelt sold for some rich woman's jacket."

Vin blinked, once only, the stirrings within growing stronger.

Though the shadows were still faint, Bliss knew some part of the tracker took heed of the warning given. And scornfully he continued. "Look at yourself, boy. Those so-called friends of yours have turned you into their lap dog. They've got you heeling and sitting and staying like any trained mutt, when you should be out running the ridges beneath the baying moon, the creatures of the forest trembling at your passing." He held the rifle out to him then. "Take it, boy. Feel the cold weight of it in your hand. Taste the power of it, life and death yours to command, fate at your bidding."

Vin lowered his gaze once more to the rifle, but made no move to take hold of it. Then reaching down to grab one hand, Bliss brought it up and shoved the weapon into it. And when Vin brought his other hand up to help support the weight of it, Bliss waited for the shadows to gather. "You remember, don't you?" he prompted, his voice little more than a whisper, Vin having to strain to hear it, his gaze never leaving the weapon in his hands. "You remember the look of fear and the smell of it, that moment when your prey realizes the game is lost. You remember the rush of power and the thrill as you pull the trigger, the game over and another waiting to begin. Whatever else you might have forgotten, you remember that. Don't you?"

The words only half understood, Vin nonetheless recognized what lay behind them, the knowledge buried deep and the shadows in which it lay best left undisturbed. And backing away from a truth that would bind him to a darkness from which he might never again escape, he would have loosed his hold on the weapon, would have let it fall to the floor and run from it. But shots sounded from outside before the thought could become action. And instinct rising in him along with a fear for those who were now all he knew of the world, he tightened his grip on the rifle and swung his gaze to the open window overlooking the street, searching out whatever danger lay beyond.



Bliss grinned, not needing to see the tracker's eyes to know that shadows gathered there. "The hunt is on," he hissed. "Huntsmen and prey are in motion, the ending of it to decide which is which. And in your hands is the only ante you need in order to join the game." He moved to stand at Vin's back, whispering in the tracker's ear as he warned, "Deny who and what you are, boy, and you'll end your days at the end of some farmer's chain, set to guard that which has no true value."

The words still only half understood, Vin nonetheless moved forward, instinct taking over at the continuing sound of gunfire, the rifle swinging up, his finger searching out the trigger. Then a hand on his arm stopped him, the voice in his ear stronger now as it commanded, "Keep to the shadows, boy. And stake out the high ground."

Vin turned a confused look to the Devil at his shoulder.

"You go haring out there, boy," Bliss continued, "you're liable to be splattered from here to next Sunday. And while there are certain advantages to that, I have to admit I'm not eager to see this game come to a close just yet. So follow me."

Leaving nothing to chance, he took hold of Vin's arm and led him to the back room of the church, seeking out and finding the stairs leading to the bell tower above. And pulling the tracker up to the sniper's nest, he said, "Keep your head down, boy. And move to the side over there."

Vin hesitated only a moment before doing as he was told, one hand still clutching the rifle as he scooted along the tower floor to the low wall Bliss indicated. And when shots rang out below in quick succession, he raised a cautious head to search out the shooters, both friendly and not.

Bliss moved to his side, letting him do what he would, watching the play of light and shadow on his face as he studied the town spread out before him. And when the rifle failed to rise, when Vin only let his gaze drift confused, no target chosen, Bliss too raised his head above safety, the game not to be so quickly abandoned.

Below, J. D. Dunne broke from cover and raced across the street, guns blazing and dust kicking up at his feet from bullets poorly aimed. Buck yelled something at the boy from the shelter of a wagon, a shot punctuating his words, Nathan echoing both from his position behind a rain barrel. And from the window of the jail barked a rifle, the gambler wielding it, Bliss knew, for Sanchez could be seen at the corner of the livery, a rifle answering the fire emanating from an alley across the way. Other shots were fired from cover as well, Bliss counting seven guns in opposition to the five peacekeepers, another two men lying still and out of the game. And when a movement caught his eye, a brightly-hued serape begging to be chosen as a target, he obliged.

"There, Tanner," he commanded, nudging the tracker and pointing to the garishly dressed desperado. "Take him out."

The words that time were fully understood. And though it was a

necessity long known and the doing of it become more habit than thought, Vin hesitated, the need of it now unclear, the doing no longer a given.

Seeing that hesitation, knowing the game was at risk, Bliss fought to keep it in motion. "This is your chance, Tanner, to reclaim the wild in you. To prove yourself more than a mangy mongrel set to guard the sheep. So stop thinking like a farmer and shoot!"

Still Vin hesitated, his finger lightly held on the trigger, no clear path laid out before him, tracks laid upon tracks and paths crossing in a tangle of confusion.

Shots continued to sound below, the game moving forward with or without the players above. And laying the movements out in his mind, Bliss made his play, the stakes high, yet the winning hand his no matter what the ending. "Will you sit," he softly asked, "and watch your friends die without lifting a finger to help them?"

The tracker jerked his gaze to him. And confident of his next move, Bliss pressed ahead. "It's up to you to save them. And there's only one way to do that. So listen to the wild in you, boy, and do what you were born to do. If you don't, if you hide among the sheep instead, you'll be all alone in this world and with no one to blame but yourself."

Vin studied the man before him, dark-clad and -visaged, and somehow bringing to mind the crows of which Josiah often spoke, carrion eaters feeding off another's misery, sustained by death and decay. His eyes were dark as well, shadowed by some canny madness Vin recognized without any real awareness of that knowledge or how he came by it, only a vague uneasiness warning him of danger. But there was a greater danger, one known and recognized, and that to men meaning more to him than all else in life. So he ignored one to concentrate on the other, need and instinct coming together, all that was in him focusing on it as he brought the rifle up to rest on the low wall of the bell tower. And heeding the voice whispering in his ear, he slowly squeezed the trigger.

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~ Endure the Night ~

by jann

~ CHAPTER SEVENTEEN ~

Vin was asleep on a pew, with Bliss sitting across from him watching with thoughtful eyes, when Josiah and Nathan strode into the church some time later.

"Gentlemen," Bliss said by way of greeting, his gaze shifting to the men, dusty and tired, but with hope in their eyes as they looked down on the sleeping tracker. "I trust the situation is now in hand?"

He knew that it was, had counted two men dead at Tanner's hand and a third courtesy of Buck Wilmington, the gunfire ceasing before he led the sharpshooter down from the bell tower. The question was only a role played, the answer of no interest to him, his mind too filled with the

consideration of a game yet to be fully set in motion or perhaps merely ended, the choice not yet made.

"Everything's fine," Nathan reported, his gaze shifting from the tracker to the minister. And eyes still hopeful, he added, "I don't suppose that was Vin up in that tower shooting before?"

Bliss bristled at the question, at the want in the man's eyes for that which he could never fully appreciate. A gun Nathan Jackson might carry and even use with little or no hesitation should the need arise, but he was far more farmer than wolf, would bed gladly down with the sheep and set the dogs to guard against the wolf prowling in the dark. So hope he might for that day's killings to be laid at Vin Tanner's door, but not for gladness at the return of the wild in him but in welcome to the guardian of sheep. And Josiah Sanchez was even worse, a wild in him forsaken and left pressed between the pages of a dusty Bible, the dark abandoned in favor of the light.

Two men with no understanding of the game being played or its coveted prize. And Bliss could no more yield that game to them than he could deny the darkness within to become a lamb of the Light. The game thus decided, he made his first move, his pawn to be kept in the game at all costs.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Jackson," he said with a regretful air, his mask firmly in place. "But I'm afraid I took a page out of the Old Testament to help you gentlemen in your time of trouble. I hope you don't mind?" "Mind?" Josiah echoed. "Next time I need any smiting done, I'm coming to you!"

"Where'd you learn to shoot like that?" Nathan asked, his disappointment forgotten in curiosity.

Bliss shrugged. "I was not always a man of the cloth. And bad habits can be hard to break."

He stood then and collected his hat and cane. "Now that you men have returned to keep watch over Mr. Tanner, I'd best head over to the hotel and see whether or not my bag took off with the stage."

"You wasn't planning on staying?" Nathan asked.

"I had not intended such," Bliss admitted. Then with a look to the man sleeping on the pew, he added, "But perhaps the Good Lord in His wisdom has other plans."

He tipped his hat then and bade the peacekeepers a good day.

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Vin awoke slowly, half-remembered dreams more real to him still than the high-backed pew on which he lay or the man sitting reading at the end of it. And searching out visions and meanings, he stared unseeing, his brows drawn down into a frown as he tracked through the confusion in his mind.

He made no move, yet Josiah's gaze was drawn to him, his head cocking at the frown marking some deep thought in the tracker. And when a minute

passed and then two, he grew impatient and softly prompted, "Something on your mind, son?"

His gaze still unfocused on something unseen and his companion's presence barely realized, Vin's voice rang hollow as he slowly said, "I saw a crow."

When no more was forthcoming, Josiah gave another prompt. "When was this?"

Brows drawing down further, Vin tried to track a path through the dark, death at the end of the trail and a single crow keeping watch over him, knowledge in its eyes and blood on its shiny black feathers. It waited, knowing. Waited for him, aware as he was not of what lay ahead on the dark path he followed. And suddenly afraid to know, to discover what waited for him, Vin jerked up and scrambled into the corner of the pew, needing the solid feel of it at his back.

Breath coming in ragged gasps, eyes wide and unseeing still, face pale and tightly drawn, he fled the dark, seeking refuge in that still place deep within, visions and meanings having no place there.

The signs of terror and retreat recognized, if not their cause, Josiah wrapped Vin in soothing words, a refuge offered in which he wouldn't have to be alone. And reaching out to that comfort as to a lifeline, Vin held on tight, the rhythm of the other man's voice easing his fear, his racing heart slowing to beat in time to it, the darkness slowly receding until the fear had retreated to a safe distance. Eyes closing then, he wrapped the warmth of Josiah's presence about him and drifted into a dreamless sleep.

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"How many desperadoes would you say we took out this morning, Ezra?"

Buck Wilmington called to the gambler seated at a table in the raised gaming area of the saloon. "Twenty, maybe?"

A gasp of awed delight issued from the lips of the buxom beauty on Buck's lap. And with a roll of his eyes, Ezra solemnly declared, "Oh, at least twenty, Mr. Wilmington. Quite possibly more."

"And all of them uglier than a one-eyed scraggle-toothed hound with fleas," Buck declared with a slow smile for his appreciative audience.

"And I do hate ugly."

"Tell me again how you killed three of them with just one bullet," his admirer pled with a slow smile of her own.

A sharp note issuing from Vin's harmonica sounded to Wilmington's left, reminding him that he wasn't nearly as alone with that evening's entertainment as he would have liked. And nuzzling into his companion's neck, he softly said, "Why don't we go someplace more private, Miss Belle, and I'll tell you anything you want to know."

Taking the giggle that came in response as a 'yes,' Buck gave a distracted warning to the gambler above to take over care of the tracker. And with a whisper that brought forth another giggle, he set Belle on her

feet, then stood and led her away.

Vin watched them go over the harmonica held to his lips, his gaze drifting without interest around the saloon once they'd disappeared up the stairs. His slow perusal of the room came to an abrupt halt though when his eyes fell on the Reverend Mordecai Bliss in a corner, darkness seeming to gather about him as a living thing, like a snake coiling in preparation for a strike. His harmonica forgotten, Vin watched the watcher, as sure of that shadowed gaze as if Bliss had given voice to his interest in him. Visions stirred then, dreams and memories a dark confusion he couldn't escape. Then a cheer rose from the poker table over which Ezra Standish presided, the noise breaking the spell which seemed to bind him.

Bliss forgotten, Vin turned to watch with faint interest as Ezra raked in a pile of winnings. Boredom quickly set in, however, and he got up to move to the batwing doors. And standing there, harmonica in hand, he breathed in the night air, eyes turning above in search of stars lost in the faint light from lamp-lit windows, street fires and the newly risen moon. Behind him was noise and confusion and too many people in too little space. Without was only the soft night sounds: the occasional stamp of a tethered horse, the creaking of shop signs as they swayed in the breeze blowing in fresh and cool from the desert, the crackle of the street fire outside the saloon, and the tapping of a woman's heels upon the boardwalk.

Vin turned to that last sound, but could see nothing from his position inside the saloon. Idly curious, he pushed through the doors and stepped out onto the boardwalk. He was then able to see the approaching pedestrian and, recognizing Mary Travis, he stood watching as she stepped off the covered walkway into the dirt of the alley that ran beside the saloon. Then a laugh sounded and two cowboys stumbled out of the shadows there, hands going to arm and long blonde hair as they issued coarse invitations.

Vin took an instinctual step towards the beleaguered woman, his hand tightening into a fist around his harmonica. Then an arm went around Mary's waist, pulling her into the alley, and she gave a sharp cry, struggling for release.

As she disappeared into the shadows, Vin moved forward, jumping off the boardwalk and into the alley without thought. Then, quickly covering the dozen feet that separated him from the nearer of the two cowboys, he launched himself at him, taking him down to the ground.

"What the hell?" the other cowboy hissed, turning to kick out at Vin as he rolled off the man beneath him, a toe to the ribs that sent the tracker crashing into the side of the saloon to lie dazed. Then Mary drew in breath for a scream and one hand clamped to her mouth, the other keeping tight hold of her, pulling her deeper into the alley. And turning to his companion struggling slowly to his feet, her captor growled, "Get

the hell up, Lem!"

Lem did as he was bid and staggered to Vin, pulling him up before he was even aware of the hand fisting into the front of his shirt. He then threw a hard punch to the tracker's gut, following it up with a left hook as his victim doubled over with a pained grunt of expelled air. And when he slid down the wall to sit sprawled in the dirt, Lem gave a satisfied laugh, nearly falling over his own feet as he turned to stumble after his friend.

Vin gave a low moan, arms wrapped around his torso, trying to remember the pattern of breaths in and out. Then a harsh laugh and a muffled scream had him struggling to his feet and pushing away from the wall, all that was in him focused on stopping some unnamed horror. And stumbling down the alley, he grabbed hold of one of the cowboys and jerked him away from Mary, spinning him around even as he lashed out with a hard fist.

Lem let go of Mary with a curse and drew the pistol holstered at his side, aiming it squarely at Vin, who froze at the sight of it.

"What the hell do you think you're doing trying to spoil a man's fun?"

Lem growled as his companion, knocked to the ground by Tanner's fist, climbed unsteadily to his feet.

Vin raised his eyes from the gun to the man holding it, then to Mary, who stood trembling against the side of the building against which she'd been held, afraid to move for fear of what she might set off.

Lem followed his gaze, then reached out to snag Mary by the arm, pulling her close again. And with a grin, he turned his attention back to Vin. "You want a piece of this, boy?" Then with a look to his companion, he added, "What do you say, Ike? Should we share?"

"Nah," Ike refused, moving to stand behind Vin, one hand going to his long curls, taking them up to rub between dirty fingers. "Looks to me like he ain't the type, him near as purty as any gal I've ever seen. Bet it ain't the woman he's so interested in at all."

Vin jerked his head away, a cold stealing through him, dark and terrible, visions and fears and a wild need to escape tangling within. Then back went the hand to his hair, laughter ringing out as a voice spoke crude words that echoed in the darkness within, stirring it to life. And with a wordless cry, he spun on the one at his back, his hands going instinctively for the man's gun, pulling it free of its holster before he could even begin to react.

Vin fell back then, gun pointed waveringly at the disarmed cowboy, who put his arms up in fear, insisting in a voice high and shaky, "I was just funning you, Mister! Didn't mean no harm!"

Lem dragged Mary more tightly against him, pulling her to stand in front of him, his gun moving to point at her head as he warned, "You drop that gun, boy, or I swear I'll blow her head clean off!"

Vin blinked at him, the gun held at arm's length and no way he could

let loose of it, knowing with a certainty that it was all that kept the dark at bay. He could feel it rising within, could see it gathering in the shadows before him and moving slowly forward, a dark shape forming at Lem's back. Then with a blur of motion it struck, an arm rising and falling, bringing down a half-seen weapon, long and dark, down on Lem's head.

The cowboy fell then, Mary set free to stumble back with a harsh sob. "Are you all right, Mrs. Travis?" the dark shape asked as a hand reached out to steady her.

"I think so," she unsteadily replied, her gaze on the face of the man who had rescued her. And in relief as she recognized him, she shakily added, "Thank you, Reverend Bliss."

She turned then to the one who still stood with a gun on the wide-eyed Ike. "Are you all right, Vin?" she asked. And when he only stared at the man at her side, eyes dark and body trembling, she moved forward. "It's okay," she softly said. "It's over. You can put the gun down now." Vin stumbled back at her approach, a wildness in his eyes shining in the faint light of the moon, the gun still held high.

"Vin?" Mary questioned in surprise, not needing the hand that tightened about her arm to bring her to a stop.

"Don't make any sudden moves, Mrs. Travis," Bliss warned at her back. Then he let go of her and moved to stand a few feet away.

Vin watched his every move, the dark moving with him, swirling with a threat he couldn't name, the cold within setting him to trembling, certain that the gun heavy in his hand was all that kept him safe.

"Come now, Mr. Tanner," Bliss gently spoke, his hands held up at waist height, one empty and the other holding a dark cane glittering gold at one end. "You know me. I stayed with you this afternoon, remember? When the others left you to go protect the town. You and I had a nice talk, all about farmers and wolves. Do you remember that?"

The cold within turned to ice, the darkness before swirling with a growing threat. Vin wanted then only to escape, to turn and flee, to outrace the dark and all that ever was. But he was afraid to turn his back on what stood before. So he kept the gun raised, both hands holding it now, and swinging it to a threat greater than a drunken cowboy. And taking a step back, then another, he stopped only when his back hit up against the wall of the saloon.

Bliss stayed where he was. But Mary moved slowly back, saying in a voice low enough for only the preacher to hear, "I'll go get help."

Bliss let her go, his attention all for the pawn he had every intention of capturing for his own. "You did well, son, your prey brought down and ready for the kill. But the dogs will be among us soon, even sheep such as these to be defended. And now is not the time to face them. So leave the sheep to their protection. Let the mongrels rob you of the kill that is yours by right. There will be other sheep. I promise you that."

Vin closed his eyes against the dark that rose up within, dreams and visions and fears tearing at him, the flapping of a crow's wings more real to him than the sound of steps fast approaching down the alley, the gun in his hand a soothing weight.

"Vin?" a soft voice called.

The accent was familiar, the tone one of concern. But it wasn't enough to drown out the sound of dark wings in flight.

"Vin?" Ezra tried again and moved forward, past the trembling Ike standing with hands held high. "Let me have the gun. Then we can get these vile creatures down to the jail where they belong."

Still Vin stood with eyes closed and gun aimed squarely at the Reverend Bliss.

Ezra took another slow step forward. "Vin? I need you to open your eyes and look at me. Can you do that?"

Still no response. So Ezra sharpened his tone and snapped out a commanding, "Vin! Look at me!"

Vin's eyes flew open at that and focused on the gambler standing six feet in front of him.

"That's good," Ezra said in a more soothing tone. "Now, do you know who I am?" Vin nodded. "And do you know who Reverend Bliss is?"

The tracker switched his gaze to the dark shape before him, brows drawing down in recognition. "He's the crow," he softly declared, visions and dreams melding into one reality.

Ezra quirked an eyebrow upwards. "No, Vin. This is Reverend Bliss. He helped us this afternoon in that gunfight. And he helped you and Mary just now. So let's not be so rude as to point a gun at him. All right?"

The tone now was reasonable, but Vin only blinked in response.

"Give me the gun, Vin!"

The tone that time was demanding and the tracker wavered, trust warring with instinct, light against the dark. Then Bliss lowered his arms, his hands moving to rest on the cane head shining gold in the moonlight. His eyes following the movement, Vin was drawn to that bright shape, visions stirring, half-formed and dimly seen, the beat of a crow's wings warning of a dangerous knowledge unclaimed.

He tightened his grip on the gun, tracking through the confusion and the dark to one thing known, if not understood. "Someone died," he declared, brows drawn down as he tried to bring order to the visions.

"What?" Ezra asked. Then with a look to the unconscious Lem, whose chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm, he said, "He's not dead, Vin. We'll get Nathan to take a look at him and I'm sure he'll be just fine."

Vin shifted his gaze to the man in question, his frown deepening in confusion, sight not vision, yet the stronger of the two.

"What happened to him?" Ezra asked with another look to the unconscious man.

"He had a gun to Mrs. Travis' head," Bliss explained. "I knocked him



out."

Ezra nodded. And turning back to Vin, he said, "See there? Nothing a night in jail won't cure. And nothing he didn't deserve. So there's no need to hold a gun on the Reverend. He was merely doing his civic duty."

Vin continued to look confused, so Ezra tried again. "Reverend Bliss is one of the good guys. He saved Mary. He saved you. He didn't do anything wrong. So put the gun down and we'll go buy him a drink to thank him for his help. What do you say?"

"He's right, Mr. Tanner," Bliss added softly in low tones. "I did only what I had to do. You understand that, don't you? I did only what was necessary -- as did you. As you have always done." His eyes took on a fervent light and the darkness swirling about him seemed to deepen. "I'm not your enemy, son, but your salvation."

The tracker shifted his gaze from Bliss to Ezra, from the dark to the light, dizzy at the contrast, words at odds with sight, nothing making sense. He knew that what Ezra had said was true, knew that Bliss had come to his aid and was grateful for it. Yet still the darkness clung to the man and still a crow's wings sounded in that darkness, warning of some danger unheeded. So he clung to all that kept him safe, refusing to give it up, the gun gripped tightly in unsteady hands.

Then more footsteps rang in the alley, spurs jingling with a familiar rhythm. And looking past the men before him, Vin saw Chris Larabee marching towards him, Nathan and Mary at his back.

"What the hell is going on here?" the Seven's leader demanded to know as he moved past Ike, still waiting with hands raised, to stand between the gambler and Bliss, his eyes narrowing as he recognized the Reverend and took in the gun held unsteady on him.

"Mary was attacked by these two lowlifes," Ezra explained. "And Reverend Bliss went to her aid. But not without some confusion on Mr. Tanner's part, it seems."

Chris nodded to the cowboy lying unconscious on the ground. "You take him out?" he asked the Reverend.

Bliss nodded. "He was holding a gun to Mrs. Travis' head. I thought it prudent to persuade him to release her with all due haste."

His gaze shifting back to the tracker standing watching with wide eyes and pale face, Chris gently said, "You done good, pard. But the reverend ain't a part of this. So you don't got to hold that gun on him. Put it down."

Vin eyed him with confusion still, the darkness no less, but the light more. So when Chris moved forward to take hold of the gun, he let him have it without protest or resistance, trusting in him, as he would no other, to hold the dark at bay.

"Take these two yahoos down to the jail," Chris directed Ezra, holding the gun out to him. "Mary will be by in the morning to press charges."

Then to Nathan: "Take Mary home, make sure she's all right. Then stop

by the hotel to check Vin out."

He took hold of the tracker's arm then, pulling him gently forward, a hard glance all he spared to the Reverend Mordecai Bliss, his presence there a prickling on the back of his neck, however grateful he might have cause to be for it.

Vin too turned to look at him, watching over his shoulder until the darkness swallowed him, the soft sound of a crow's wings following as Chris led him away.

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~ CHAPTER EIGHTEEN ~

When Chris led Vin into their room at the hotel, the tracker went straight to the coat and hat left hanging on a peg in the corner. And grabbing them up, he slipped into both, tipping the hat down so that it hid his face and pulling the coat tightly about him.

"You cold?" Chris asked, his brows rising in surprise. "I was just thinking about opening the windows to let some of this heat out!"

Vin made no response, merely went to his bed, climbing up to sit with his back pressed against the headboard, legs crossed, and one hand reaching into his pocket. Then with a frown, he pulled it out again empty and tried another pocket and then his boots. And when all those searches proved futile, he curled up in misery, arms tight across his midsection, eyes turned unseeingly to the wall.

"You lose your harmonica again?" Chris guessed. And too tired to worry about that after a long day on the trail pushing to get back to town, he dumped his saddlebags onto his bed and said, "It's probably back in that alley somewhere. I'll have one of the boys look for it tomorrow."

He moved to sit at the foot of Vin's bed then, something in him wanting answers to questions not yet fully formed. "In the meantime, I want you to tell me what happened with Bliss and those cowboys. How'd you get a gun? And why were you holding it on Bliss?"

At first he didn't think the tracker was going to answer, didn't even really expect him to. But after a long moment, gaze still unseeing on the wall, Vin hoarsely whispered, "It was dark."

Chris waited for more. And when it didn't come, he said, "What's that mean? It was too dark for you to recognize Bliss? You didn't know it was him?"

"The crow was there," Vin softly declared, his voice still whisper soft, the tone distant, as if he were lost in some place far beyond reach. "He knows."

"Knows what? What crow? What are you talking about?"

Vin curled up more tightly in response, slipping down further into the bed, too wrapped in the darkness to be able to make sense of the visions swirling there, too afraid of what he might discover to even try.

"All right," Chris conceded with a sigh when no more was forthcoming.

"We can talk about this later."

He got up from the bed then and moved to open the windows, letting in the cooler night air to dispel the heat that had built up in the room during the day. Then turning to frown at the heavy hide coat in which Vin huddled, he said, "Why don't you take that off, pard? You're making me hot just looking at you." And when he made no move to do so, Chris returned to the bed. "Come on, Tanner. Let's get that off you. It's hot in here and this is only going to make you hotter. Besides, Nathan will be here in a few minutes and you'll have to take it off then anyway so he can get a look at you."

He took hold of one edge of the coat and tried to tug it off Vin's shoulder. But the tracker batted his hand away and pulled the coat more tightly about him, turning his back to his companion as he did so. "Fine," Chris growled, too tired to argue with him. "I'll let Nathan peel you down."

He moved back to a window then, looking down into the street and the shadows beyond dancing in the dim illumination of street fires. And in those shadows of the covered boardwalk, a darker shadow moved -- Bliss, head tilted up to the lit window.

Chris knew he saw him standing there, couldn't help but see him. But the preacher gave no acknowledgment, merely stood in the shadows for a moment. Then, with a thump of his cane on the boardwalk, he stepped down from it and slowly crossed the street to the hotel.

Chris watched him until he disappeared from view, not liking in some way he couldn't name that they would apparently be sharing the same roof that night, not liking the man's interest in the tracker from that very first night in the saloon, when they had spent so much time together talking of things unknown and somehow worrisome, the two of them seeming to know some secret not to be shared. He wanted to ask Vin about that, wanted to know what drew Bliss to the quiet tracker, what the preacher knew that Chris did not, not liking that lack in him. But he had only to flick a glance to the man curled still on the bed, drawn tight into himself, to know he'd get no answers out of him that night, if ever. So he went back to staring out the window.

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When a knock came at the door a few minutes later, Chris opened it to admit Nathan. "How's Mary?" he asked as the healer stepped into the room past him. "She hurt any?"

"She's fine," Nathan declared, moving to the bed on which Vin lay curled. Then digging into a pocket, he brought out the missing harmonica. And proffering it to the tracker, he softly said, "You left this in that alley. Thought you might be wanting it."

Vin seemed not to hear, so Nathan blew a soft note to get his attention. And when he jerked his head up at the sound, Nathan held the instrument out again.

The tracker snatched it up. But instead of blowing into it as expected,

he tucked it under an arm and once again curled up tight.

Nathan shot a questioning look to Chris, who only shrugged. Then turning back to the tracker, he said, "You all right, Vin?" When still no response was forthcoming, he moved around to the other side of the bed, trying to get a look at the face hidden. And when he could see nothing in the shadows beneath his hat, he reached out to remove it. No sooner though did he begin to lift it than Vin snaked out a hand to knock his arm aside.

"Come on, now," Nathan chided. "I got to take a look at you, make sure you're all right. So let's get that hat and coat off you."

Again he reached for the hat and again Vin knocked his arm away.

"Now, we ain't going to be playing these games!" Nathan commanded in firm tones. "That hat and coat are coming off. It's just a question of who gets them gone -- you or me."

Vin was still for a long moment. Then he tilted his head up to the healer, blue eyes wide and dark with shadows deeper than those beneath his hat. And there was that in them that warned of hurts beyond Nathan's ability to heal, of too much taken and not enough given back. So with a sigh, he gave in.

"All right, Vin. You can leave your hat and coat on. But you got to tell me if you hurt anywhere." And settling onto the bed, he asked, "Do you?"

Again Vin was still for a long moment. Then he gave a slow nod and moved one hand to his side.

"Your ribs hurt?" And when Vin gave another nod, the healer softly said, "I need to get under that coat to take a look-see. But you can leave it on. Just let me pull it back some and unbutton your shirt. All right?"

Another moment of silence, followed by another nod. Then wide eyes watched as the healer did only as much as he'd said he would, large hand gentle on bare skin and the dark bruise forming across his ribs.

"You'll be all right," the healer softly declared when his examination was complete. "Ain't nothing broke. But you'll be sore for a few days."

He cocked his head. "You hurting anywhere else?"

Vin shook his head, so Nathan buttoned his shirt back up for him and pushed up from the bed, saying, "You go on now and get some sleep. I'll check on you again come morning."

Vin ducked his head at that and pulled his coat back around him, curling up with one hand fisted tight around his harmonica, his hat tipped to hide his face completely from view.

When he was settled, Chris jerked his head, motioning Nathan to the far side of the room. "Mary say what happened?" he asked when the healer drew close.

Nathan nodded. "Said she was on her way home from visiting with Mrs. Potter when them two cowboys come out of the alley and grabbed her. Said

Vin was out on the boardwalk in front of the saloon and saw what happened."

"He was alone?" The question was as much accusation as a request for information. And when Nathan nodded, Chris' expression tightened. "Who was supposed to be watching him?"

"Buck."

Brows drawing down into a scowl, Chris said only: "Why am I not surprised?" Then making a mental note to have a little talk with Buck Wilmington in the morning, he prompted the healer to continue. "Go on. What happened next?"

"Vin went after them, took one of the men down. But the other pulled a gun on him. Then the first one started messing with his hair, telling him how pretty he is and what a good time they was going to have soon as they got finished with Mary. So Vin turned on him, got his gun. Then the other cowboy put his pistol to Mary's head. That's when Rev. Bliss showed up."

"He just happened by, did he?"

Chris' tone was one of suspicion, his eyes narrowed and his lips set in grim lines, and Nathan eyed him curiously. But he only shrugged in reply, saying, "I reckon."

"What's he doing back in town?"

Another shrug. "He come in on the stage this afternoon, just passing through, from what I can tell. Then he ran into Vin and Josiah, and somehow he ended up missing the stage out. It's a good thing, too, as he came in handy when Sandoval's men tried to bust him out of jail."

Quickly counting heads of those seen since his arrival back in town and finding too many missing, Chris snapped out, "Everybody all right?"

"Everybody but five of Sandoval's men."

Chris gave a nod, satisfied for the moment. "So how did Bliss figure into that?"

"Josiah left him to watch over Vin and he climbed up into the bell tower, took out two of Sandoval's men."

"Bliss did?"

"Yeah. Did some real fine shooting too. Thought at first it was Vin."

Chris' eyes narrowed again. "Where did Bliss learn to shoot that good?"

"Don't know. He just said he wasn't always a man of the cloth."

"Now that I can believe," Chris conceded with a snort. Then, his gaze drifting to the man curled in the bed, he added, "And where was Vin while all this shooting was going on?"

Yet another shrug. "Down in the church sleeping, maybe. That's where he was when me and Josiah got there a bit later, anyways."

Chris was silent a moment, considering. Then, worrying at Bliss' interest in the tracker, as a dog at a bone he couldn't crack, he continued.

"You said Bliss missed the stage 'cause of Vin?"

"Yeah. Josiah invited him down to the church to watch us working with

Vin so's he could see for himself how he was, and I reckon he lost track of time."

"Why?" Chris asked, not expecting the healer to provide an answer, but wanting one nonetheless. "Why's Bliss interested enough in Vin to miss the stage to wherever he was headed?"

"Maybe he was just so surprised to see Vin alive that it knocked everything else out of his head." And when Chris seemed unimpressed with his reasoning, Nathan searched out answers to questions of his own. "Why are you on the worry over this? You got something against the man? Or you just jumping at shadows?"

Chris eyed the healer. "Bliss don't make your skin crawl?"

"No." Nathan sounded surprised. "I reckon he must have stuff in his past he ain't proud of, but he strikes me as a good enough man. Sure came in handy today -- and more than once."

"Yeah," Chris conceded, not liking that he disliked the man without knowing why. "But one thing I learned a long time ago -- a rattlesnake might kill the rat nesting in your barn, but that don't mean you should be so grateful as to invite it in to supper."

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The moon had set when Chris woke to soft cries, his hand going unerringly to the gun hanging from his bedpost, his eyes adjusting quickly to the dim light filtering in from the street. And scanning the room for danger and seeing none, he turned his attention to Vin, from whom the distressed sounds were issuing.

Reholstering his gun, he slipped out of his bed and crossed the few feet to Vin's, hands going to his near shoulder, gently shaking him as he said, "You okay, cowboy?"

Vin twisted away from his touch with a sharp cry, burrowing deeper into the ball he'd made of himself. And suspecting he was caught up in some nightmare inspired by that night's events, Chris eased down onto the bed, talking softly as he moved the hat that had long since fallen to reveal tousled curls damp with sweat. Then putting one hand gently on Vin's shoulder again, he gave it the barest of shakes, softly saying, "It's all right, pard. It's just a bad dream. You wake up and it will be gone."

Vin fell silent then, stilling with an intensity known to the hunted when the hunter is near, and Chris knew that he was awake and listening.

"Everything's all right," he continued, his tone gentle and comforting.

"You were having a bad dream. But you're awake now and you're safe.

See?" At that he moved to the lamp on the table between the beds, striking a match to light it and adjusting the wick to softly illuminate the room.

He returned to the bed then, lowering himself down onto it again, one hand going to a leg drawn up protectively, resting there as he said,

"You with me?"

Vin moved his head just far enough out of the cocoon he had made for himself with arms and pillows to fasten a wary gaze on his companion. "You're hot," Chris told him, knowing that wasn't the cause of his distress nor of all of the sweat beading on his forehead and soaking his hair, but wanting some problem he could easily remedy. "Why don't you let me help you take that coat off. Then you can go back to sleep." He reached out then. But Vin's head came up, and he abandoned his cocoon to push up and against the bed's headboard, arms tight across his middle, coat held firmly in place.

"Come on, now, pard," Chris coaxed. "You'll feel a whole lot better if you peel down some."

Blue eyes wide and dark with fears long known gave the lie to that claim. And feeling suddenly inadequate to ease those fears, afraid to look too closely at them lest he recognize his own, Chris sought escape from both their fears in anger. "Fine," he snapped out. "You want to sweat your way through the night, go ahead. But don't expect me to rescue you from Nathan when you make yourself sick."

He pushed up from the bed then and reached for the lamp. But before he could put a hand to it, a fluttering sounded outside the window, the soft whisper of a bird taking flight. And with a wordless cry, Vin scrambled off the far side of the bed, to sit huddled in the small space between bedstand and wall, arms wrapped tightly around his middle again, head up, eyes wide and breath panicked.

Chris froze, staring at him with a surprise that quickly turned to concern. "It was just a bird," he told him. "Probably an owl gone off hunting. Nothing to worry about."

Vin shook his head, eyes dark and his gaze darting to the open windows as if expecting something or someone to come sailing through them. Unable to help himself, Chris looked over his shoulder. Then, hoping to lay the tracker's fears to rest, he moved to a window, standing there for long seconds searching out danger. And finding none, he turned back to the man huddled in the corner, saying, "It's all right, pard.

There's nothing out there. Nothing at all."

Again Vin shook his head. "He's out there," he hoarsely insisted. "In the dark."

"Who?" Chris queried. "Who's out there?"

"The crow."

The words were no more than a whisper, Vin's gaze losing its focus, eyes dark with shadows no amount of lamplight could dispel, dreams and visions once again all there was of reality to him.

Not understanding this sudden fear of crows and putting it down to whatever nightmare had stirred, Chris moved around the bed to squat a foot away from the frightened tracker. "There ain't no crows out there," he softly declared, his tone firm and holding out a promise of safety.

"There ain't nothing and nobody out there. You had a bad dream is all. But

it's over. And ain't no one and nothing going to hurt you. I'll see to that. I promise." And when Vin only sat staring at things unseen with shadow-dark eyes, he softened his tone and said, "You don't got to be scared, pard. Ain't nothing going to happen that the seven of us can't handle. Whatever comes along, whether it's crows or drunken cowboys, we'll take care of it together. You just got to trust us." Then, thinking that they had done a far from adequate job of keeping him safe that night, he amended his promise, saying, "But you can't keep wandering off like you keep doing. We can't keep you safe if we don't know where you are. But you don't got to worry right now. I know where you are. And I'll keep you safe. You can count on that."

Vin blinked, bringing his eyes back into focus. Then shifting his gaze to Chris, he eyed him for a long moment before turning back to the open windows, the tension in him easing not at all.

Chris sighed. "I told you -- there ain't nothing out there. And even if there were, there ain't nothing coming in those windows. We're two stories up." Still Vin kept his gaze centered on the windows, so Chris tried again. "And if you're worried about some crow flying in here, you can forget it. It ain't going to happen. They're all in their nests sleeping, just like we should be doing. So come on and get back into bed." He reached out to take a hold of the tracker then, but he only jerked away, pressing himself more tightly into the corner.

Chris tried for logic. "Vin, you know crows ain't nothing to be scared of, no matter what Josiah says. They ain't got a thing to do with death and dying. They're just birds. They ain't even all that big, so they couldn't hurt you even if they tried."

When Vin seemed unimpressed with his argument, he tried a different tack. "I promise, cowboy, if a crow so much as looks at you cross-eyed, I'll fill it so full of holes won't no one be able to string enough of it together to make so much as a pen out of it."

Still Vin's fearful gaze remained fastened on the open windows. With another sigh, Chris conceded defeat, but not without a silent curse directed at the superstitious preacher and another at Buck Wilmington. "All right, Vin. Would you feel better if I closed the windows? No crow can get in here then for sure."

Vin shifted his gaze back to him, the shadows in his eyes retreating a fraction, and gave a slow nod.

"Fine," Chris growled. "I'll close the damned windows. We'll both probably be dead of the heat by morning, but at least no crow is going to get in here and peck us to death."

He got up then and closed the windows. And turning back to Vin, he held out a hand. "Let's get you back to bed then. Might as well sweat to death in comfort."

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~ CHAPTER NINETEEN ~



Chris was back at the window the next morning, staring out at the awakening town, when Nathan arrived to check on Vin, who still slept, curled now beneath the quilt, head all but covered.

Nathan shook his head at him, hands on hips. But it was to Chris he said, "Tell me he ain't got that coat of his on underneath all that."

Chris shrugged. "He wouldn't take it off. And if that wasn't bad enough, he had a nightmare and was scared stiff a crow was going to get in here. The only way I could get him calmed down was to agree to sleep with the windows closed. I'm surprised we didn't both melt."

"He was scared of a crow? Why?"

"Hell if I know. But he was convinced there was one out there in the dark. What he thought it was going to do to him though, I don't know."

Unable to make sense of that, Nathan said only, "Josiah must have been talking about them to him. And with the way his mind is working and after what happened last night, I reckon things must have gotten a bit turned around in that head of his. But with any luck, he'll do like he's been doing and forget all about whatever it was got him riled."

"Yeah. But I ain't forgetting. So once you get through checking him out, I want you to round up the rest of the boys. Except for J. D. -- he can watch the jail. Everyone else meets at the saloon in thirty minutes. We got things we need to talk about."

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"How's Vin?" Buck asked when Chris entered the saloon minus the tracker thirty minutes later.

"Where's Vin?" Nathan added at not seeing Chris' usual shadow following behind.

"Mrs. Potter is watching him," Chris said with a glance to the healer.

Then centering his attention on Buck, he moved to stand at the table across from him, saying, "You mind telling me how it is you managed to lose Vin? Again?"

Buck met hard eyes squarely. "I'm sorry about that, Chris. I truly am.

But it's not like I just up and left him, or fell asleep or something

-- I asked Ezra to keep an eye on him."

"Ezra!" Chris snorted, noting the look of surprise that flitted across the gambler's face. "Let me guess -- he was in the middle of a poker game at the time." And when Buck hung his head in acknowledgment, he added, "Did you even bother to make sure he heard you? Or were you so worried about getting into some woman's bed that everything else went out the window?" He gave Buck no time to reply, his tone hardening as he continued. "I sure hope it was worth it."

Buck's head came up at that. "No, pard. I don't reckon it was. There's nothing worth Vin or Mary getting hurt. And you know that. But if you want to hang on to this, if you want to make me feel lower than I already do, you go right ahead. I won't try to stop you. No more than I ever have."

Nathan raised a hand before Chris could make a reply both he and Buck would regret, saying, "This ain't getting us nowhere. Besides, did you never stop to think, Chris, that if Vin hadn't gone out onto that boardwalk when he did, Mary would most likely have got bad hurt, maybe even killed? What Buck done wasn't right and you ain't going to get no argument out of me on that. But it all worked out for the best -- Mary's all right and so is Vin. Besides, ain't a one of us here that Vin ain't slipped away on -- you included. So let's not be casting stones. Not unless you're aiming to collect a few bruises of your own."

"Well said, Brother," Josiah agreed. Then settling his gaze on the Seven's leader, he added, "Buck made a mistake and he's sorry for it. And I reckon he'll be more careful next time. We all will. So let's move on."

Chris continued to glare at Buck, not yet ready to let go of his anger.

"Was there something else?" Ezra prompted with a yawn. "Or did you convene this meeting merely to take exception to Buck's wandering eye?"

Chris turned his glare on the gambler. But he allowed the distraction, saying, "The trial in Julestown went faster than expected, so the judge will be here tomorrow for Sandoval's trial. And I'm sure he'll be happy to add the rest of his gang in. Then he can take care of those two cowboys from last night. So we need to discuss a few things."

He pulled out a chair and sat, his gaze once more on Buck, his tone hardening again as he said, "I don't want any slip-ups. So let's see if you can manage to keep your eyes -- and all the other parts of your anatomy -- where they belong."

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"Does he have to keep up that infernal racket?" grouched the one and only customer in Gloria Potter's store, glaring at the tracker who sat slouched in a chair there, blowing random notes on his harmonica. "What's he doing here, anyway? You taken to babysitting village idiots now?" Vin's music stopped mid-note.

"Mr. Conklin!" Mrs. Potter exclaimed in shocked tones, knowing by the hurt look in Vin's eyes that he'd heard and understood the unkind remark. And lowering her voice, she added, "I'll thank you not to speak of Mr. Tanner that way. And if you insist on such unchristian behavior, you could at least do it out of his hearing. He's not deaf, you know."

"No," Conklin muttered. "Just stupid."

"Mr. Conklin!" Mrs. Potter began again. But before she could remonstrate further, another voice broke in.

"Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me," the Reverend Mordecai Bliss quoted as he moved into the store, his gaze moving from the tracker sitting still and uncertain to the man at the counter puffing himself up with righteous indignation. And fastening the latter with a steady gaze, he said, "Surely, sir, you have better things to do with your time than to persecute those less fortunate than yourself?"

"Me persecute him?" Conklin sputtered. "He's been squawking on that harmonica ever since I walked in here! A man can't hardly even think!"

"Ah," Bliss said with a thoughtful nod. "That would explain it."

Mrs. Potter let out a laugh. Then sobering quickly at the look Conklin shot her, she said, "Vin's not hurting a fly. And if you don't care for his music, you're free to do your shopping elsewhere."

"But there's no other store in town that sells what I need!"

"Then perhaps you should stop complaining and do your shopping with all due haste," Bliss pointed out in a reasonable tone. Then shaking his head, he added, "I declare. With all the squawking you're doing, a man can't hardly even think."

Conklin sputtered again, then turned and stalked off, only to stop in the doorway and turn back. And glaring at the tracker who sat watching him with wide, troubled, eyes, he said, "I'm not the one who should be run off. It was him waving a gun around last night threatening to shoot people! In my day, they locked up idiots and crazy people instead of setting the town's law keepers to babysitting them. And so I'll tell the judge when he gets here! It's about time someone put a stop to this nonsense and locked that lunatic up before someone gets hurt!" And with that, he spun on his heel and stomped out of the store.

"That man could give lessons in mean to the Devil himself!" Mrs. Potter declared with a sniff. Then turning to Vin, she added, "Don't you pay him any mind now, Vin. You know he's nothing but a cantankerous old coot. Full of hot air and mean and nothing else."

Vin let the hand holding his harmonica to his mouth fall, his head dropping as well.

"Mrs. Potter is right," Bliss agreed, moving to stand beside the dejected tracker. "Bags of wind like that might make a lot of noise, but all it takes is a single pinprick to deflate them. And obviously his is not the majority opinion in town. From what I've seen, most people are like the good Mrs. Potter here, willing to do their Christian duty by you, no matter the cost. Even your fellow regulators have sacrificed considerable time and attention -- and no doubt a fair share of their meager savings -- to secure your place in this town. Indeed, their care of you has been most remarkable, considering the circumstances. And I must admit to no little surprise that men such as they -- hard-bitten and used to surviving at all costs -- should devote so much of themselves to one unable to aid in that survival. Most men in their place would have turned their backs and walked away from what most people would consider a burden. You are very fortunate that they have not yet done so."

There was the slightest emphasis on the word "yet," and Vin raised his head at it, an unease growing in him that his presence among the Seven might indeed be a burden, his foundation of trust in those who had set themselves guardian over him shifting at the thought that such might lie unspoken between them. And needing in that moment to know that he was

indeed welcome among them, that his place was secured by something more than duty or pity, he pushed out of his chair and all but ran out of the store.

"Vin, wait!" Mrs. Potter called after him, hurrying around the counter to go in pursuit. But Bliss held up a hand to stop her.

"I'll go after him, ma'am. You stay and tend to your store." And with that he took off in pursuit of his quarry, a contented smile hovering at the corners of his mouth.

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Vin went straight to the saloon, pausing at the doorway as the sound of his name issued from within, Buck's voice tight as he said it, with an edge to it that spoke of an anger reined in and fighting at the bit.

"And what about Vin?" he asked in low tones. "With everything that's going to be going on, we won't have enough manpower to watch him and the town both."

Vin pulled back from the doors at that, standing at the edge of them where he could hear without being seen.

"I'll take care of it," Chris snapped out. "It ain't your worry."

"Oh, that's where you're wrong, pard," Buck corrected, his voice soft but still with that edge to it, like a sharp drop-off to a hard and rocky ground far below. "It's all our worry, same as it's always been."

"Buck's right," Nathan declared. "Now, we been through this before, Chris, and last night proves I was right about us not being able to look after Vin proper."

"All it proves is that Buck thinks with some part of his anatomy other than his brain!"

"I agree with Nathan," Ezra softly put in. "Vin is getting better, it's true. But that only means that he's harder to keep up with now. And as difficult a time of it as we have in keeping track of him, how can we continue to rely on the townspeople to watch him on those occasions when we are unable to do so ourselves? They all have jobs of their own requiring their time and attention. So is it even fair to ask them to take on an added burden?"

Vin pressed hard against the wall at his back, one hand going to his pocket where his harmonica lay, his fist closing tight around it.

"He's done plenty enough for them in the past," Chris pointed out, his tone one of irritation. "I reckon it's only fair they return the favor now."

"But is it fair to Vin?" Nathan challenged. "He could have gotten hurt last night! It's only by the grace of God that he didn't. And what about next time?"

"There ain't going to be a next time," Buck firmly declared.

"You don't know that! You know how ornery he's gotten. If we get even a little distracted by the town and its problems, there's no telling what he might get himself into. He needs more attention than we can give

him. And I'm telling you...."

What more he said was lost to Vin as another voice spoke in his ear, saying, "Looks like I might have been wrong about the majority opinion in town."

The Reverend Mordecai Bliss shook his head sorrowfully as Vin turned to him. "But I wouldn't worry," he continued. "I'm sure all those horror tales you hear about asylums for the mentally deranged are exaggerations. Surely they couldn't be as bad as people say. Chains. Beatings. Painful 'treatments.' Crowded conditions, with men living right on top of one another in filth and degradation. Inmates locked away in tiny rooms without windows or fresh air, forgotten and left to rot in lonely solitude. And despite reports to the contrary, I'm sure they allow visitors. Assuming, of course, that anyone even bothers to visit."

Vin backed away, eyes wide, face pale, mind filling with terrible visions.

"I wouldn't worry though," Bliss advised, his voice soft, his tone concerned, but looking Vin up and down consideringly, with a light in his eyes that had the tracker backing away another step. "A man as handsome as you should make lots of new friends in a place like that. Intimate friends. Men who will appreciate your many charms as perhaps no one here ever has. Well, beyond your friend from last night, that is."

Not fully understanding the words, but easily comprehending the suggested horrors, Vin took another step back, then another, a lifetime of fears stirring within -- a cold terror of pain and confusion, half-remembered and best forgotten. He would have turned and run then, would have

tried to outrace what couldn't be escaped, but a voice stopped him, coming hard and angry.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Chris demanded as he pushed through the batwing doors, the others at his back, his glare fixed with its full intensity on the pale tracker, the signs of fear lost in his own anger, worries and frustration. Then flicking a look to Bliss, who watched with a knowledge in his eyes that seemed to challenge him, he turned back to Vin and growled, "Didn't I tell you to stay with Mrs. Potter?"

And when Vin only looked at him with eyes wide and dark, Chris' gut twisted, something in him reacting to the need reflected in those eyes, months of care and worrying, after long years of having no one to worry over or care about, tangling with the fear that came with such caring. And reacting to difficult emotions as he always did with anger, only that emotion strong enough to hold back the fear, he set his face hard against the man responsible for that fear and coldly said, "What do I have to do to keep you out of trouble, Tanner? Lock you up?" He shook his head, his brows drawing down in a scowl. "Hell, you keep this up and that's exactly what I'll do. And the chances are damned good that I'll throw away the key while I'm at it."

He turned away from the tracker then, his tone one of disgust as he snapped out a command to the men at his back, saying, "Somebody do something with him."

He stalked off then, without another look to the one staring after him with fear and coming loss in his eyes.

"Hey, now," Buck softly said as he moved to lay a hand on Vin's shoulder. "You don't have to look like that. You know Chris don't mean what he says when he gets like this. The man can be ornerier than a coyote with his tail between his own teeth, but there ain't no one better to have at your back, come good times or bad. And you know that too. So don't worry. He won't stay mad for more than six or seven months. Eight at the most."

He grinned then, the expression soft and sad. And with a nod to the others standing at the doors to the saloon, he said, "You boys go on. Me and Vin are going over to the jail to check things out."

Nathan and Josiah tipped their hats, then moved off down the boardwalk. And with a squinted look up to the early morning sun, Ezra shuddered and turned back into the saloon, only the Reverend Bliss remaining. "Reverend," Buck greeted without warmth, his hand on Vin's shoulder tightening. "I heard you were back in town. You heading out on today's stage?"

Bliss shook his head. "It seems that my intended destination is not on any of the more popular stage routes, so I'll be staying in your fair town for the next couple of weeks."

"I hope that don't put you out none," Buck said, his voice polite but his eyes unwelcoming.

Bliss smiled. "Not at all, Mr. Wilmington. My work is the Lord's work. And if He has placed me here, I trust it is for a reason. Perhaps there are souls here in need of saving and I will be fortunate enough to be the instrument of His will." He shifted his gaze to Vin then. "Perhaps there is one soul in particular He has in mind. And if there is anything at all that I can do to assist in that salvation, you can trust that I will do so."

Then to Vin he said, "About our earlier conversation, Mr. Tanner -- let me see what I can do to turn the tide of troublesome opinions."

He gave a tip of his hat then and moved off, his smile of satisfaction full-fledged now.

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~ CHAPTER TWENTY ~

"Hey, Buck, Vin," J. D. greeted when the two walked into the jail.

"How'd the meeting go?"

"Oh, it went," Buck said with a rueful shake of his head. Then taking a seat at the desk across from the one on which J. D. was perched, he filled him in. "The judge is coming in tomorrow, so Chris went over a few things. Some more pleasant than others."

He shot a look to Vin at that and J. D. lowered his voice, saying, "Chris mad about last night?"

Buck shrugged. "No more than you'd expect. The good news, though, is that I still got most of my hide left."

J. D. gave the older man a look of commiseration. "Mary came by a while ago, told me what happened and swore out a complaint. I'm just glad she's okay and that Vin didn't get hurt." He shifted his gaze to the man in question, who stood gazing out a window, shoulders slumped, expression bleak. Then turning back to Buck, he added, "He is okay, isn't he?" Buck sighed. "He was. But then he took off on Mrs. Potter, came by the saloon right as the meeting ended. So now we're both on Chris' To Be Shot Just As Soon As I Get Around To It list."

"Good. He can save me the trouble!" Sandoval called out from his cell in the back of the jail, his men hooting in appreciation.

"Well, if you're going to do it," Buck called back, "you'd best get it done quick, 'cause come tomorrow, you and what's left of your mangy gang are going to be on your way to the Territorial Prison."

Yellow teeth flashed in a grin. "Maybe," Sandoval conceded. "But it's a long way to Yuma. And you never know what might happen between here and there."

His cohorts laughed in agreement, and the two cowboys sharing a cell with one of Sandoval's men raised their own voices in complaint.

"What about us?" Ike shouted. "How long you going to keep us here?"

"Yeah," Lem joined in. "We ain't done nothing!"

"Well, why don't you just tell that to the judge," Buck advised. "I'm sure he'll let you go. And I wouldn't worry none that the woman you attacked last night was his daughter-in-law. After all, it's not like the two of you done nothing wrong."

He rolled his eyes and J. D. snickered, saying, "I don't know which of that bunch in there is dumber. But my money is on those two."

"Hey!" Ike snapped out. "We ain't half as dumb as that pet dummy of yours! It was him waving that gun around last night. So how come you ain't arresting him, huh? He keeping the right beds warm at night or something?"

Vin stiffened at the words, his gaze still on the street but his attention all for what lay behind. And seeing that, Buck turned on the foul-mouthed prisoner, harshly warning: "You shut that filthy mouth of yours or there won't be enough of you left to make soup out of by the time I get finished with you."

Ike muttered something under his breath, but wisely subsided.

Buck shifted his gaze then to the stiff-backed tracker, his tone softening as he said, "Hey, Vin? You want to give me a hand checking the rifles and such?"

He stood and moved to the case on the wall where the rifles were stored, pulling a couple down and taking them to the desk at which he'd been

sitting. And when Vin turned to look at him from beneath his hat, his gaze blank and his face pale, he added, "I thought we could give them all a good cleaning, make sure they're loaded and ready for tomorrow. Okay?"

Vin eyed the rifles laying on the desk for a moment, then turned to study the men in the cells, men against whom the guns might be needed, against whom they'd already been used, memories of that vague, but there. And turning back to Buck, he nodded.

A few minutes and one rifle cleaned and loaded later, he got up to collect another from the rack. And to his surprise, his own weapon was there, the sawed-off nearly lost among the longer rifle barrels. Reaching out to it, he let the fingers of one hand trail over it, tracing lines once more familiar than his own face and now nearly forgotten. He realized in surprise then that he hadn't missed the gun, had never even thought about it until that moment. Years of living by it behind him, his life owed to it on more than one occasion, yet he'd never noticed the weight of it on his leg missing, hadn't reached for its comfort to find it gone, hadn't thought it odd to trust his safety to others.

All that he was focused in that moment on the length of metal and wood, all that was in him of light and dark coming together: visions and dreams, should have's and could have been's, regrets and those things done by necessity and accepted as such -- they were all a part of who he was and would be, the future building on the past, the two inseparable and unavoidable. What was, would be again.

This known as nothing else, he closed his hand about the cool metal of the barrel, lifting the gun up and out of the rack, his other hand moving to help support the familiar weight of it. And moving back to the desk, he sat down with it cradled in his hands, his gaze intent on it, as a man reclaiming the sight of one loved and now returned after long years missing.

Buck looked up from the rifle he'd been cleaning then, and had only to see that look to know what a mistake he'd made.

"Oh, hey, now," he said, reaching out to pluck the sawed-off from the enraptured tracker's grasp. "We'd best be locking that up some place safe. Wouldn't want it to go missing on you, now would we?"

Vin turned startled eyes on him, his empty hands still held up, his brows drawing down in an indignant frown.

Buck shot a look to the youngest of the Seven. "I thought I told you to lock this thing up months ago," he hissed.

J. D. looked up from the stack of Wanted posters he'd been idly flipping through. And seeing the gun held low in Buck's lap, as if he had only to get it out of Vin's sight to remove it from his thoughts, he said, "Sorry. I was going to. But Ezra walked off with the key to the drawer before I could do it. And by the time I got it back from him, I'd forgotten all about it."



"Well, you think you can lock it up now?" Buck asked, aware of Vin staring at him in confusion, sure he had only moments before he was able to track his way through what was happening and launch a protest. Noting then the look on Vin's face, J. D. slipped off his perch and crossed to Buck, scooping the sawed-off up and returning to his desk to deposit it in the bottom drawer there, sitting down to paw through the clutter in an upper drawer in search of the key.

Vin gave a growl then and pushed out of his chair. But before he could round the desk and go after his confiscated weapon, Buck was up and blocking his way, saying, "Now hold on there, pard. There's no call to go getting riled. No one's taking your gun from you. We're just keeping it safe 'til you're ready to start wearing it again. That's all. So what do you say we go over to the saloon, get us a couple of nice cool beers?" He took hold of an arm then and grabbed his hat off the desk. "You know, I bet if we ask Inez real nice, she'll even make us some of them fried biscuits you like so much."

He moved forward then, pulling the tracker with him. Vin, however, refused to be distracted. And jerking out of Buck's grip, he made a beeline for J. D.'s desk and the drawer in which his sawed-off lay.

Buck made another grab for him, stopping him with a hand on his upper arm. "Now, don't you be worrying about that gun of yours," he advised lightly. "J. D. will take real good care of it. Won't you, J. D.?"

The younger man nodded. And holding up the key found at last, he leaned down to insert it in the drawer's lock. That done, he sat up again, saying, "All safe and sound now." He then slipped the key into a waistcoat pocket and leaned back in his chair, his posture one of ease, but his gaze on the tracker wary.

Buck tugged on Vin's arm. "Come on and let's go then, pard. The sooner we get to the saloon, the sooner we can get some of them biscuits."

Vin planted his feet firmly, refusing to be budged. Then twisting once more out of Buck's grasp, he took a step back to stand with breath coming fast and his face dark with an anger that warned against any more attempts at moving him from that spot. And satisfied that Buck had gotten that message, he shifted his gaze to J. D. and beyond him to the men in the twin cells at the back of the jail. Then with a shake of his head and a lift of his chin, he turned back to Buck and forced out a furious: "Ain't no dummy!"

Buck nodded without hesitation. "I know that, Vin. And no one who matters thinks different. But this isn't about that."

Up went Vin's chin another notch in challenge.

"Now, I ain't never lied to you before," Buck softly pointed out. "And I ain't about to start now. So believe me when I tell you that the only reason we're keeping that gun from you is because you've been hurt and hurting still, and you're just not ready for it yet. But when you are, when you're all healed up and Nathan says you can handle it, you'll get

it back. And that you can count on."

Vin shook his head, his jaw tightening to hold back words tangling up inside, all that he was teetering on some edge crumbling beneath his feet.

"I'm telling you, son," Buck continued, his tone soft and sincere, "there's nobody I'd rather have backing me in a fight. But you just aren't up to that now, however much we both wish different. But you'll get better, I promise you that. You just got to give it time. Same as if you'd broke an arm. You wouldn't be toting that gun around then and you know it. You'd rest up, wouldn't you? Give your arm time to heal. And maybe you haven't broke no bone, but there's something broke in you just the same. So you got to give yourself time to heal, to get back to the way you were. And in the meantime, you got me and J. D. and the other boys to watch your back." He paused, cocking his head at the tracker standing fast against him. "You trust us to do that, now don't you?"

Vin grew still at that, held back from the dangerous edge on which he stood by those words and the trust he had in the man who spoke them, safety to be found in more than metal and wood. And whatever else he knew or had forgotten, that he was sure of with a certainty unwavering. Knew too that he could have that taken from him more easily than he'd had his gun taken, only a word said wrong or trust held back seeing to that. So slowly, his gaze shifting to the desk where his gun was locked away from him, reluctant to give it up but determined to hang onto something more important still, he nodded.

"Okay, then," Buck said with a smile of relief. "Now let's go see about those biscuits, shall we?"

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No sooner were the biscuits fried, and eaten with relish, than Vin started drifting, awake but unaware, his mind wandering to some place beyond reach. Not even shouting in the street outside, nor Buck's hurried command to Inez to keep watch over him as he dashed outside distracted him from that place. Nor was he aware when the Reverend Mordecai Bliss sat down at the table with him, his words with Inez washing over him unheard. Then a sharp pain in one booted foot focused his wandering attention on matters physical and he let out a sharp cry, jerking his foot away from the source of pain and turning to the man beside him with an accusing frown.

Bliss nodded in satisfaction and laid the cane he'd used to command the drifting tracker's attention on the table. He then shot a look to Inez, unheeding behind the bar, before glibly saying, lies coming to him more easily than the truth, "As promised, I had that little talk with Mr. Larabee. And while it wasn't easy to persuade him to reconsider his threats, I was able to prevail upon him to maintain your place among the law keepers of this town. Although I would encourage you to resume your duties as quickly as possible if you wish to keep Mr. Larabee in such an

accommodating mood."

Vin blinked, and Bliss tried again. "Mr. Larabee has agreed to keep you among the sheep. He does, however, require that you at some point in the not too distant future resume your duties. Apparently a guard dog without teeth is of no use to him."

That won him a frown. Then Vin's gaze shifted to the batwing doors and beyond, his thoughts going to the weapon kept from him.

"I can help you reclaim your place in life," Bliss continued, his voice low and his own attention intent on positioning his pawn just so. "You were meant for greater things than guarding sheep, boy. You've a wild in you that none of these sheep dogs guarding you can appreciate. They'll tie you up in chains, deny you your chance to achieve greatness. Mark my words -- the day will come when you have to choose between those chains and your freedom."

Vin turned to Bliss at that, aware of a choice already made, uneasy at it now. And licking lips gone suddenly dry, he shifted his gaze back to the saloon doors.

Aware of that uncertainty, Bliss pressed that advantage somehow gained.

"I'm sure they mean you no harm, boy. In fact, I believe they think only to protect you. And you shouldn't fault them for that. But they don't understand you, don't know who you are or have been or who you might one day become. And, I suspect, they wouldn't want to know."

When Vin turned back to him again, he lowered his voice still further, saying, "You walk a fine line between wolf and guardian of the sheep, boy. And how do you think your fellow law keepers would react should you take one step out of line, if the wild in you comes out?" He sighed.

"Not that you need worry now, seeing as how it is you've been placed among the sheep, with the dogs to stand guard over you, keeping you in line, nipping at your heels if you try moving by your own will instead of following along with the rest of the sheep at their direction."

He heaved another sigh. "No, it won't be easy to break free of them. But the day will come when it becomes necessary. And when that day arrives, you can turn to me for assistance. I won't fail you, boy. Trust me on that."

He reached out to lay a hand on Vin's near shoulder, the gesture one of support. But Vin shivered at the touch and would have moved away from it had not his attention been distracted by the sound of the batwing doors swinging open behind him.

He turned then as Buck Wilmington advanced into the saloon, his eyes narrowed and a questioning look aimed at that hand on one shoulder.

"Reverend," the ladies' man said with a nod as he moved to the table.

"You back again?"

Bliss inclined his head. "I noticed Mr. Tanner sitting here alone and thought I'd keep him company until one of you men could be spared for that duty." He stood. "But now that you're here, I shall bid you both

good day." And looking down at Vin, his hand still on his shoulder, he added, "You remember what I said, son. Any help I can give, you've only to ask."

He gave Vin's shoulder a firm squeeze then and released him. Then with a tip of his hat and a swing of his cane, he made his way out of the saloon.

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~ Endure the Night ~  
by jann

~ CHAPTER TWENTY- ONE ~

"Vin?" Nathan Jackson asked with a look to the tracker riding quiet on his horse, his unseeing gaze on the desert ahead shimmering in the afternoon heat, a frown drawing down his brows. "You still with us?"

"He drift off?" Josiah asked from the other side of the healer.

Nathan shook his head. "I think he's just got something working in that head of his." Then moving his horse so that it blocked Vin's, he waited until the tracker focused on him before saying, "You don't look none too happy. You got something worrying at you?"

"Something we can help you with, maybe?" Josiah added, reining his own horse in beside Vin's.

Before Vin could even think to reply though, a sound of whirring wings rose behind them, startling horses and men alike, both Josiah and Nathan's guns drawn before the sound had fully registered. And no sooner had they spied the bird taking flight than they exchanged sheepish glances and started to reholster their guns. Vin, however, reached out to stop Josiah's hand from completing the maneuver, his hand closing about the gun and tugging on it, his eyes lifting to the preacher's.

Josiah tightened his grip on the gun instinctively. Then, curious, he released it, letting Vin take it from him.

"Now, hold on a minute!" Nathan protested when the tracker slid off his horse, Josiah's gun in hand. "Where do you think you're going with that?"

He started to dismount as well, but Josiah reached out to stop him, saying, "Let him be for now, Nate. If he's got something working on his mind, he's going to have to show us what it is. Lord knows, we ain't going to get him to tell us."

Nathan subsided with a grumble and sat watching with worried eyes as Vin moved away from them, eyes on the ground and gun in hand. And when he stooped to pick up a rock and moved on to collect another, the healer turned to the preacher, saying, "What's he doing?"

Josiah shook his head. "I have no idea. But I reckon we'll find out in a minute or two."

They waited, watching as Vin collected half a dozen rocks and set them on a patch of clear ground a dozen yards from the horses. Then moving

back to join his companions, he looked up at them before shifting his gaze to the rocks. And lifting Josiah's gun, he fired it six times in rapid succession, six rocks shooting into the air in response. That done, he turned back to the men with chin raised and a satisfied air.

"Mighty fine shooting, son," Josiah praised. "Good as you ever were."

"Yeah," Nathan agreed in confusion, not understanding what point had just been made. "You sure showed them rocks." Then, hoping to distract the tracker from whatever had gotten into him, he said, "But now, why don't you give Josiah his gun back and we can get back to work."

Vin looked down at the gun, then up to Josiah. And with a sigh, he handed the weapon over and climbed back onto his horse. But when Nathan would have continued on into the desert, Vin turned his horse around and headed back towards town.

Nathan shook his head, saying, "I reckon whatever he got on his mind, he ain't let loose of it yet."

And with that, he kicked his horse after the departing tracker, Josiah following behind.

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Vin led the way back to town, keeping without wandering to the road, his attention focused with a single-minded purpose neither of his companions understood. It became clear, however, as soon as they rode into town and Vin reined in his horse in front of the jail, where Chris and Buck sat keeping an eye on the town.

"You boys sure weren't gone very long," Buck commented, watching curiously as Vin dismounted and stepped onto the boardwalk, his face working at something, his mouth opening as if to speak. And when no words were forthcoming, Buck tried prompting him, saying, "You run into some kind of trouble out there?"

Vin shook his head, then blew out his breath in frustration before turning to Nathan, watching him expectantly.

The healer exchanged a look with the preacher. Then sighing, he said, "He did some target shooting while we was out riding. Reckon he wants to tell you about it."

"You gave him a gun?" Chris asked, his tone more accusation than question.

"I let him borrow mine," Josiah confessed. And when Chris fixed him with a hard look, he shrugged and said, "He asked."

When Chris looked set to add more names to his To Shoot list, Buck turned the conversation back to Vin. "And how'd you do, pard? You shoot any targets dead?"

"He nailed six rocks with six bullets," Josiah reported. "One right after the other."

"That's great!" Buck commended, grinning more widely than necessary to offset their leader's scowl. "Ain't that right, Chris?"

Chris aimed his scowl at Buck, but kept his tone level as he said, "I

reckon."

Vin gave a satisfied nod at that, then marched past the two men to the door of the jail. And with a curse, Buck was up out of his chair and after him, catching up with him as he moved to the front of the desk in which his sawed-off resided.

"Now, I thought we already had it settled that you aren't getting your gun back yet," he said when Vin leaned down to tug at the locked drawer.

Vin only chuffed out his breath and straightened up to fix an impatient eye on the older man, clearly expecting him to unlock the drawer for him.

"What's going on?" Chris asked from the doorway, Nathan and Josiah at his back, eyes curious.

Buck shrugged. "Ol' Vin here has gotten a mite itchy to get his gun back. And I reckon he figures he's proved he can handle it now."

"No," Chris decreed, his tone flat, his word final and the gaze fixed on the expectant tracker unyielding. "I don't care how many rocks you shoot, you ain't getting that gun of yours back."

"Hallelujah," Ike muttered from his cell.

Buck shot the prisoner a warning look, then turned back to Vin, saying, "I thought you'd agreed to trust the rest of us to look out for you 'til you're better able to do it yourself. You haven't changed your mind about that, have you?"

Vin blinked, aware that he stood once more on some dangerous edge, needs and fears and whispered words of warning tangling within, threatening to trip him up, an abyss behind as well as before and his balance on unstable ground precarious.

He turned pleading eyes to Nathan, who threw his hands up in refusal, saying, "Don't you be looking at me. I ain't giving you no gun neither. There's more to carrying one than just putting a bullet where you aim. And you ain't ready for no more than that."

Vin's gaze went to Josiah next.

"I'm sorry, son," the preacher said, his eyes offering an apology but his tone firm. "I'm with the rest of them on this."

His eyes closing, Vin swayed on the edge, and Buck moved to him, laying a gentle hand on one shoulder, saying, "You'll get your gun back, Vin. Just not today."

He shook off the hand, not wanting comfort in that moment, not wanting to feel the bonds of friendship tightening around him, afraid that bonds would become chains and his freedom forfeit. And jerking back from the edge on which he teetered, he ran from what couldn't be lost nor gained, pushing his way past the man at his side, hitting out at the hands reaching to stop his flight from the jail, larger men shoved aside as he ducked through the door onto the boardwalk and into the street beyond, aware of nothing but his need to escape. Then a heavy weight at his

back hurtled him to the ground, the breath knocked out of him and the sound of hooves and wheels loud in his ears as he rolled to a stop, a body on his back pressing him into the dust.

"Now you see why you ain't getting your gun back?" Chris growled when the stage that had narrowly missed running over the unheeding tracker had safely passed.

Vin twisted so that the weight holding him down eased off, Chris sliding to lie in the dust facing him, breath coming hard and his face set with an anger Vin returned in full measure, the two of them lying in the dust glaring at one another.

Then a hand reached down to Vin, the Reverend Bliss' voice breaking through the stalemate, saying, "Are you all right, Mr. Tanner?"

When Vin looked up at him, Bliss smiled. "You don't exactly look comfortable lying there in the dirt. Why don't you let me help you up?"

Vin shot a look to Chris and beyond him to the men standing on the boardwalk waiting to see if their help would prove necessary, the willingness to provide it a certainty but unwanted. And turning instead to the one standing with hand held out, he reached up to take it, letting Bliss pull him to his feet and lead him to the boardwalk to join the others there.

"You all right?" Nathan asked, his gaze shifting from head to toe looking for signs of injury. And when Vin only glared at him, he shrugged and said, "Fine. You know where to find me if you decide you need fixing."

Bliss shifted his gaze from man to man on the boardwalk, then to Chris Larabee as he joined them, brushing the dust from his clothes with more force than necessary. "Is something amiss?" he asked at last.

"Nothing you need worry about," Chris snapped out. Then to Josiah, he said, "Take Vin back to the hotel, get him cleaned up."

Josiah nodded and moved to Vin's side, a hand going out to his shoulder as he said, "Come on and let's go, son. You got dirt enough on you to grow beans."

Vin knocked his hand away and furiously proclaimed, "Ain't no kid!"

"Then stop acting like one!" Chris shot back. He let out his breath in disgust. "I swear, Tanner, you're worse than a two year old throwing a fit 'cause he don't get his way. Well, I wouldn't give a two year old a gun and I ain't about to give you one neither. And if you want to throw a fit, you go right ahead. I ain't spanked nobody in years, but I reckon I still know how to do it!"

The tracker bristled at that and would have surged forward had Josiah not taken quick hold of him. Then, before more words could be spoken in anger or fists thrown, Bliss stepped between the combatants, hands held up in appeasement.

"Gentlemen, please," he gently chided. "You're both acting like children. And truly, I see no need for such behavior." He shifted his gaze

between the men then, saying, "Mr. Tanner, if you wish Mr. Larabee to judge you ready to carry a firearm, I suggest you prove that he can trust you to act like a responsible adult. And Mr. Larabee, you would do well to heed an old Chinese proverb that advises giving your sheep a spacious meadow in order to best control it."

Nathan gave the two no time to make reply, merely plowed ahead as if the matter were settled. "If y'all will excuse us, I promised Mary I'd leave Vin with her after we got back from our ride. So we'd best get going."

He took off then, leaving it to the tracker to join him or not. And with a look to Bliss and then Chris, Vin hurried after him, brushing the dirt off his clothes as he went.

Then it was Bliss' turn to take his leave, his hat tipping as he bade the remaining peacekeepers a good day, Josiah electing to accompany him. And when the two preachers had strolled out of earshot, Chris turned to Buck, saying, "I'd sure like to know how it is Vin don't go nowhere anymore without Bliss shadowing behind him. What's a man like him want with a man like Vin, especially now?"

"Damned if I know," Buck admitted. He then gave an exaggerated shiver. "Is it just me, or does the man always leave you feeling like a snake just slithered over your grave?"

"It ain't just you," Chris declared, turning to eye the two preachers walking down the street side by side. "And I'm thinking it might be a good idea if you were to have a talk with Josiah, see what he knows about the Reverend Mordecai Bliss. I'll talk to Mary, see if she knows anything about what he did for a living before he took to preaching."

"You thinking he was a lawman or a bounty hunter, maybe?"

"I don't know. That could explain his interest in Vin. But something tells me that ain't it. Whatever he's after, I don't think it's that bounty on his head."

"You think Vin knows what it is?"

"Maybe. Couldn't hurt to ask him."

"All right, but we'd best be careful. You know what happens when you step on a snake's tail -- you're liable to get bitten."

"Only if I don't blow its head off first."

Buck laughed. "Well, you keep a lookout here then. I'm going to mosey on over to the church, do me some snake hunting."

"Watch your backside," Chris advised as Wilmington took off.

Buck threw a grin over his shoulder. "Oh, now, I prefer to leave that to the ladies." And with a laugh, he continued on his way, leaving Chris shaking his head after him.

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When neither snake hunt proved successful, Chris decided to tackle the tracker for information, waiting until they'd retired to their hotel room for the night, Vin curled up on the bed playing his harmonica



softly, running through his full repertoire of notes, with special attention given to the more mournful ones. And sitting on the edge of his mattress, Chris wasted no time in getting to the point, not wanting the tracker tangling up in too many words.

"What do you know about Reverend Bliss?" he asked.

Vin paused in mid-note, one eyebrow raising, then both drawing down as he considered the question, all that he knew of the man beyond words or a full understanding, vague visions and confusing dreams leaving him with a sense of something not right and a reluctance to look too closely at shadows in the dark, only one thing standing out clear in his mind and easy. And focusing on that, his frown eased and he firmly stated:

"He don't like sheep."

"What?" It was Chris' turn to frown. And when Vin went back to playing his harmonica, he continued. "He tell you anything about himself? About what he did before he became a preacher, maybe?"

A trilling note was his only answer.

"Come on, Vin. Think! He must have said something about something. You and him have spent a lot of time together. So what do you talk about?"

A series of short notes followed. Then Vin looked over his harmonica and said only, "Sheep."

"Sheep?" Chris echoed. "You talk about sheep?" He shook his head in confusion. "So, what are you telling me? That Bliss used to be a shepherd? And he learned to handle a gun by, what, shooting coyotes?"

"Wolves," Vin supplied, that vision tangling in his mind.

Chris threw up his hands, darkly muttering, "Oh great. First crows.

Then sheep. Now wolves. Next he'll be building an ark, expecting me to start rounding up a zoo for him."

He buried his face in his hands for a minute, then looked up and tried again. "Why's he keep hanging around you, Vin? He after something?"

An indrawn breath, sharp and uneven, was his reply that time, the note it pulled from the harmonica discordant. And aware that he'd touched a nerve, Chris straightened in the bed. "What's he want from you, Vin?

Tell me."

But Vin could no more tell him than he could see in the dark, shadows hiding what he couldn't bear to gaze upon. And turning from them, he turned as well from the one who would have him search out those things beyond bearing, sliding down into his bed, his harmonica clenched tightly in one hand, his coat wrapped securely around him and his hat shielding his face from view, his back giving all the answer he intended to give.

Chris sighed, knowing he'd lost him. And reaching out to lay a gentle hand on one leg drawn up tight, he softly said, "I don't know what's going on with you, Vin. Not inside your head and not with Bliss. But whatever else you know in life, I hope you know that you can count on me for whatever you need -- don't matter what, don't matter why. You don't even have to ask."

He stood then. And looking down on the man huddled into himself like a child afraid of the dark hiding behind closed eyes and the darkness there, he added, "I ain't always been there for the people I cared about. But I'm here now. And I ain't going nowhere. So you hold onto that and remember it."

He moved to the bedside table then and blew out the light. And sliding into his own bed, he softly called, "Good night, Vin."

He waited then for a response, hoping the tracker would give some sign that he'd heard and understood his promise. And straining to hear words that didn't come, he at last gave up and rolled onto his side, away from the man in the bed across from him.

Then into the silence of the night came a single note of music, whisper soft and as hopeful as it was mournful.

Words no longer needed then, Chris closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

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~ CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO ~

"Are you in need of assistance, Mr. Dunne?" the Reverend Bliss asked J. D. when the younger man walked out of the Clarion office wearing a harried expression and with a disgruntled tracker in his wake.

"You seen Mrs. Travis?" J. D. asked, his eyes scanning the street for her.

Bliss shook his head. And eyeing the glum-faced Vin, he said, "Something wrong, Mr. Tanner?"

Vin chuffed out his breath, his arms crossing on his chest, his jaw set in stubborn lines.

Bliss raised an eyebrow. "You're not still out of sorts over that little run-in with Mr. Larabee yesterday, are you?" And when he received only a scowl in reply, he turned to J. D. for enlightenment.

The young peacekeeper shrugged. "He didn't take too well to Chris telling him this morning that he'd have to stay with Mrs. Potter during the trial today. Only, he can't, 'cause her little boy's sick. And now I can't find Mrs. Travis to leave him with her instead." He looked up and down the street again for the newspaper editor. "You sure you haven't seen her?"

"I'm afraid not," Bliss replied. "But if you need someone to keep an eye on Mr. Tanner, I'd be happy to oblige."

"But aren't you going to testify at the trial of them cowboys who attacked Mary?"

Bliss shook his head. "I spoke with the judge just a few minutes ago and it seems the cowards agreed to plead guilty in exchange for doing their time here rather than in the Territorial Prison. So I am at your disposal."

J. D.'s face lit up. "Thanks, Reverend. I appreciate it. And if you'd like, you can go over to the church. I'm sure Josiah wouldn't mind. Just

make sure Vin don't wander off on you. He's kind of sneaky that way." The tracker let out another chuff of breath and settled his angry gaze on the distance.

"Don't worry," Bliss said. "I'm sure we'll find some way to keep ourselves occupied. You just be careful. Having seen Sandoval's men in action, I have no doubt that they are a dangerous lot. I wouldn't want a repeat of that shoot-out the other day."

"You and me, both, Reverend," J. D. admitted. Then turning to the angry tracker, he said, "I'm sorry, Vin. This ain't the way none of us wants it. But it won't be long 'til you're back to your old self and helping out again. You'll see." He gave him a pat on the shoulder then and hurried away in the direction of the jail.

Vin watched him go, the anger fading from his eyes to be replaced by a look of longing.

Bliss moved to stand at his side, his voice low as he said, "Chains are chains, boy, no matter how kindly meant." He waited until Vin turned to him, his scowl deepening, then added, "If you wish them removed, come with me." And with that, he moved off.

Shifting his gaze from the preacher to J. D.'s retreating form, Vin stood a moment, caught between want and need, the granting of one withheld, the other freely offered. And turning away from want, he reluctantly followed need.

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He no sooner stepped into the church and past Bliss than the preacher reached out a hand to shove hard at his back, causing him to stumble forward a few paces, only his grip on the back of a pew keeping him upright. Then, balance regained, he spun around to scowl at Bliss, who only smiled and stepped forward, circling him. Vin turned warily after him. And when his back was towards the door, Bliss stepped forward again, one hand reaching to shove him once more, back a step, then another, hand to his chest again and again until he stumbled against the wall beside the door, the other man's hand on his chest holding him there.

"Your back is now to the wall," Bliss pointed out in low tones. "You've been pushed until you can be pushed no further." He cocked his head. "What will you do, Mr. Tanner? Will you allow me to hold you here, captive to my will? Or will you push back?"

Vin blinked at him, the hand on his chest starting a cold that seeped through coat and shirt, through skin and bones, to someplace deep within. And twisting to escape that hand and that cold, he tried to move away. But Bliss only reached out to shove him back into the wall, hard this time, holding him there with a painful pressure on his chest.

Next Vin tried shoving the hand away, but no sooner had he knocked it aside than the other one came up to hold him in place, the pressure on his chest increasing, the cold within growing. And desperate to escape, he growled and pushed away from the wall, both hands going out to shove

Bliss back and away.

The preacher stepped back obligingly, nodding his approval. "Very good, Mr. Tanner. You have teeth after all. Now you must learn to use them." He moved away then, down the short aisle between pews, his movements sure despite the limp, his cane thumping down at each step, not stopping until he took up a station behind the pulpit. Then turning back to Vin, who remained in place at the back of the church, he said, "Will you reclaim what is yours, Mr. Tanner? Will you break the ties and chains holding you captive, a sheep now in wolf's clothing, at the mercy of other men's whims, submitting to their will instead of exerting your own? Will you be content to live out your days at the end of a leash, the wild in you forsaken?"

Vague memories of darkness stirred within, and Vin turned his head to eye the door a foot away, only a step and a turn of the knob from escape.

And knowing that, Bliss raised his voice in warning. "You can go through that door, Mr. Tanner. You can run from the truth, but still it will remain. And no lie, whether your own or one offered to you in friendship, can ever change that, can ever tame the wild in you or ease the weight of chains binding you. You are what you are. No more and no less. Accept it. Embrace it. Then use it to your advantage."

Still Vin eyed the door.

"What lies beyond this place?" Bliss continued, his tone lowering again. "Do you go running out there, you will only incur Mr. Larabee's wrath. He's already set you in place, a sheep among the fold. So if you go to him now, he'll simply return you to your place. Or worse -- lock you up to keep you out of his way. Is that what you want? Are you willing to risk further humiliation at best and the complete loss of your freedom at worst?"

Vin turned to him at that, eyes wide and uncertain.

"If you walk out of here, boy, you lose everything. But if you stay, you'll get it all back and more." Bliss waited then, aware that the entire game hinged on his pawn's next move.

And placing a hand to his chest, trying to warm the spot from which the cold within spread, Vin considered the choices given: the cold within sure and deadly, but a greater danger to be had in its place; his reliance on the men he'd come to trust still too new and fragile to stand against years of depending only on himself, to overcome lessons taught by trusts broken and betrayed. Want those men in his life he might, but that want warred against need, want of the heart and that too easily broken. It was need upon which survival depended. So, as always, want gave way to need. And with one last look to the door beyond which want lay, Vin took a step forward, his gaze turning to the one who understood the need in him.

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The choice made, Vin sat uneasy on the pew to which Bliss directed him before stepping into the back of the church to collect the rifle kept there, returning a moment later with it in his hands. And sitting down beside the tracker, he held it up, twisting it so that the early morning light filtering through the dusty stained glass window glinted off it.

"If you are to be a wolf, boy," Bliss said in low tones, "then you need teeth sharper than your own." He handed the rifle over then. And when the tracker gingerly took hold of it, he continued, saying, "It's no more than a shepherd's tool, fit only for the guarding of sheep. But its teeth are sharp enough for our purposes today."

Vin looked up from the rifle, a question in his eyes, and Bliss smiled. "Larabee might disdain a wolf's help, boy, but that doesn't mean the wolf need listen. And with wild dogs such as sit in the jail, and more of them no doubt circling the town waiting their chance to let blood, tame ones need all the help they can get. So you have only to stake your ground and wait for the scavengers to show themselves. And when they fall at your feet, Larabee and his tame dogs will thank you."

He stood then, moving to the window in the front of the church to look out on the town. "Those so-called friends of yours think themselves objects of fear and respect. But they have no true knowledge of fear, of a terror that rips away all that a man names holy. And the only respect they earn comes from the sheep they guard. They know nothing of the hunt, of the joy to be had in tracking down prey, in bringing it to its knees, groveling for mercy. They know nothing of what it is to stand god over life and death. They bare their teeth on a whim, hackles raised to scare off the weak. They haunt back alleys and saloons, staying close to the fold, the stink of sheep dulling their senses to the smell of blood. They know nothing. Yet they set themselves your master, obedience demanded, chains brought out to ensure it, and the occasional pat on the head your only reward."

He turned back to Vin then. "You're a hunter, boy. The chase is in your blood, all that you are born to run wild. You've hunted men, wild as yourself and dangerous, your cunning against theirs, and brought them down. You've set yourself as their god, yours to choose between their lives and death. You're everything those lawmen of yours pretend to be and more. And now is your chance to prove it, to break free of their chains."

Vin shivered, the cold within spreading to the hands holding Josiah's rifle close, a familiar darkness stirring, needs confused and tangling with words only half understood, the want in him shrinking away from need, safety in neither and both. He wanted to let loose the weapon in his hands, yet held more tightly to it. Wanted to stand and run, yet was bound to that spot. It was too much, yet not enough. There was everything to gain and everything to lose, and both of them one and the same. He closed his eyes then, the cold and the dark in him banishing all

else.

Bliss turned back to the window then, waiting and watching and finding at last a suitable pawn. And turning again to Vin, he said, "It's time, boy." Then pulling him out of the pew, he led him into the back room and up the ladder there to the bell tower above, warning him to keep his head down as they moved to the shelter of the low wall.

"One of Sandoval's gang is down at the livery," Bliss reported. And when Vin peered over the tower wall to search out the man standing idle at the livery doors, gun on one hip, cigarette dangling from his lips, he added, "I expect he's been sent ahead as a scout, to report back to the rest of the gang when it's time to ride in and effect the release of their comrades."

Vin nodded, lies accepted as easily as truth, searching up and down the street for other likely targets.

"If you take him out now," Bliss continued, "that will put an end to any rescue efforts. One man down, no others put at risk, the hunt ended as soon as it's begun."

Again Vin nodded, but he made no effort to bring his rifle to bear.

"Take him out," Bliss prompted. "Now."

Vin frowned, the rifle heavy in his hands as he studied his target, who continued to stand at the doors of the stable as if waiting on something or someone. Then the liveryman led a horse out to him, saddled and ready to ride.

"He's going to get away!" Bliss hissed. "Your prey is in sight and yet he's about to escape!" And when that had no effect, he tried again.

"He'll ride out of here and bring back the rest of his gang to shoot the town up. And what do you think Larabee will do when he finds out you could have stopped it and didn't? How will you live with yourself if someone dies because you hesitated?"

Still Vin did just that, the rifle held low.

"What good is a sharpshooter who won't shoot?" Bliss snarled, the game in danger of ending too soon. Then with a chuff of breath let out in disgust, he scathingly said, "I was wrong and Larabee was right. You're nothing but a sheep, too dumb to be allowed out of the fold!"

Vin jerked his head to him at that, eyes dark with anger. "Ain't dumb!" he shot back.

"Then prove it! Prove you're worthy to carry a gun, to take your place among the dogs of this town if nothing else!"

Back went Vin's gaze to the man below, mounting his horse now. And when still he made no move to make use of his weapon, Bliss reached out and snatched it out of his hands, Vin turning to him in alarm. Bliss, however, allowed him no chance at protest, merely pushed up and limped to the trap door, flinging it open and starting down the ladder. Vin was up and after him though before he placed a foot on the second rung, the rifle snatched back and held tightly to his chest.

Bliss only shook his head at him in disgust. "You're a sheep, boy. A mindless stupid sheep. And like all sheep, you'll live your life out in some farmer's pen, too dumb to know there's an entire world lying beyond. You'll have Larabee and the others riding herd on you, nipping at your heels -- until they get tired of it. And then you'll be alone. Locked away from the world, too dumb to know how pitiful a life you lead." He continued his descent down the ladder, then paused to add, "Should any of your sheepdogs survive the coming gunfight, I'll be sure to explain to them that you're not to blame for failing them. After all, you can't expect a sheep to guard the guardians, now can you? So, when they send you away, when they lock you up as unfit to remain among them, you'll have the satisfaction of knowing it was through no fault of your own."

Vin threw a look over his shoulder to the horseman riding away, the cold and the dark in him allied now with fear, survival demanded at any cost, all else giving way before that. And moving to the low wall, he knelt down there, his rifle coming up to rest on top of it. Then, breath drawn in, he aimed and pulled the trigger -- which clicked harmlessly back.

Breath let out in a rush, he pulled the trigger again, with the same result, and again. Then, sliding down to the floor, he checked the rifle for bullets, to find it empty of rounds. And eyes filling with panic, he looked to Bliss, who stood poised on the ladder watching him with darkly satisfied eyes, and held the useless weapon out to him.

Bliss only shrugged. "It would seem Brother Sanchez is a bit remiss when it comes to keeping his weapons loaded." He climbed back up the ladder then and moved to stand at Vin's side, reaching down to take the weapon held out, his gaze going to the rider disappearing down the road, a pawn no longer needed. "No matter. The fault is not yours, but mine. I should have checked the weapon first."

Vin scrambled for the ladder then, and Bliss called sharply out to him. "Let it go, boy! It's too late to gather ammunition now. Sandoval's man is beyond your reach and your chance to prove yourself gone with him. But you'll get another one. I promise you that."

He hefted the rifle and moved to the ladder upon which the tracker stood frozen, watching him in confusion. "We'll move below, boy. Keep a lookout there. And no one will ever know of your failure. It will be our little secret, yours and mine."

He gestured Vin to continue down the ladder. And after a moment, his gaze lingering on the empty rifle, he did so, Bliss following -- with a smile of satisfaction and a pat to his coat pocket full of rifle shells.

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· Convinced that the town and the rest of the Seven stood in peril, his own fate at risk as well, Vin alternated through the morning between standing watch at the window, pacing about the increasingly small

confines of the church, and attempting to slip out the door.

Bliss sat watching him, speaking only to stop him when he would have gone off in search of Chris Larabee, the game playing out in his head, moves and countermoves planned and plotted, and the ending of it all clear. Then, as the morning gave way to afternoon, he tried to distract the tracker from his preoccupation, taking him to the hotel dining room for lunch, only the reminder of Larabee's threat to lock him up should he again ditch his keeper holding him there. And when they were done, Vin's lunch untouched, Bliss led the way back out onto the boardwalk, intending to return to the church. But no sooner had they stepped in that direction than Chris and Buck strode out of the jail, their gazes sweeping the street by habit and coming to rest on the two men across the way. Vin saw them as well and scurried out of Bliss' reach, into the street and across it.

"What the hell's he doing with Bliss again?" Chris growled, glaring at the preacher moving to follow Vin. "I told J. D. to leave him with Mrs. Potter!"

"Hey, Vin," Buck greeted the tracker as he joined them. And taking in his pale face and anxious eyes, he said, "You okay?"

Vin only stood uneasy before them. And when Bliss joined them as well, Buck cocked his head and asked, "He slip away from Mrs. Potter again?"

"No," Bliss replied with a tip of his hat to both men. "It appears her young son has fallen ill. And when Mr. Dunne attempted to recruit Mrs. Travis as a substitute, he was unable to locate her. So I volunteered to take charge of Mr. Tanner in her stead."

"Right nice of you," Buck curtly replied. "But we'll take it from here."

"Of course," Bliss amiably returned. Then with another tip of his hat, he returned to the hotel.

All three men watched him go. Then Buck turned to Chris, muttering, "Check to see if he left snake tracks in the road."

"I'd rather check for a forked tongue," Chris said in reply. Then, attempting to do just that, he turned to Vin and asked, "What did you and Bliss do to pass the time this morning?"

Vin's already pale face paled even further at that and Chris narrowed his eyes at him. "What? Did something happen?"

Blue eyes widened in response.

"Damn it, Vin!" Chris snapped out. "If something is going on, you'd best tell me what it is!"

His tongue darting out to lick dry lips, Vin shot a look to Buck, and the big man gentled his voice, saying, "Chris is right, pard. If something's wrong, if you've got something worrying at you, you need to tell us."

Need warning against that, Vin turned away, his hand digging into his pocket for his harmonica, pulling it out as he sank into one of the



chairs there on the boardwalk. And putting it to his lips, he sought escape in his collection of notes.

Chris let out another curse and would have snatched the harmonica away, but Buck stopped him with a hand to his chest. Then, before he could warn the larger man out of his way, Nathan approached with his horse and Chris', their saddle bags and gear all packed for a long ride, J. D. behind him with a string of riderless horses, and Josiah and Ezra further behind leading their own mounts.

"You all set, Chris?" Nathan asked.

Chris looked from Buck to Vin and back to Nathan. "I got something I got to take care of first. You men go ahead and get the prisoners out and on their horses."

And with that, he moved to Vin's side, squatting down and saying, "You don't want to tell me what's going on, I don't reckon I can make you. But if you decide to talk, you go to Buck, you hear?"

Vin wrinkled his brow, blowing out a rising note on his harmonica.

"Me and some of the other boys are going to take Sandoval and his men to Julestown, where the prison wagon will pick them up and take them on to the Territorial Prison," Chris explained. "But Buck and Nathan are staying here to keep an eye on things. So if you need anything, they'll take care of it."

Vin lowered his harmonica at that, shaking his head.

"It'll be all right," Buck told him. "Chris and the boys will be back before you know it. And meantime, you, me and Nathan will do just fine." Chris laid a hand on a near arm, then stood. But when he would have walked off, Vin grabbed at his sleeve, holding him in place. And looking up at him with wide, frantic eyes, he rasped out, "No. They're out there!"

"Who?" Chris asked.

Vin frowned, pausing to gather confused images before saying, "The wild dogs."

Chris lowered his head to his free hand and groaned. "Not this again, Vin. There's no more room in the ark." Then raising his head again, he patiently said, "There ain't no wild dogs out there. And even if there are, we've got guns enough to take care of them. So don't you go worrying on that. You just do like Buck and Nathan tell you. And I don't want to hear when I get back that you disappeared on them or caused any kind of a ruckus."

He pried his sleeve loose then and moved off, Buck remaining at Vin's side, holding him back when he pushed out of his chair and would have chased after Chris.

"Just take it easy, pard," he advised. "Ain't nothing to worry about. Ain't no dogs or nothing else mean enough to tackle Chris Larabee and come out the winner. He'll be fine. They all will."

"You remember what I told you," Chris warned as he mounted his horse,

the prisoners on theirs and ready to go. "You keep out of trouble while I'm gone, or you and me will have words when I get back."

He turned his horse then and led the procession off, Vin and Buck on the boardwalk watching them go, Nathan climbing up to join them.

"Reckon I'll take first watch with them other two in the jail," the healer offered.

"Yeah, you do that," Buck accepted with a nod. And pulling at Vin, he said, "Come on. Why don't we go hunt us up some pretty ladies and see how fast we can get them to blush."

Vin reluctantly allowed himself to be led away. Then a shadow chasing across the street and a rush of wings above caught his attention. And looking up to see a crow landing on the roof of a building across from them, he jerked free of Buck's grip and was off and running down the street after the departing horsemen, Buck and Nathan calling after him. Hearing that, Chris reined his horse to a stop, the others doing likewise behind him. He waited then while Vin ran up to him, an arm raised to point at the crow sitting watching them.

Chris gave a sigh and a curse. He then turned to glare at the one he held responsible for the tracker's fixation, his voice a low growl as he ordered, "Do something!"

Josiah moved his horse up the line, stopping at Vin's back, his own voice deep and gentle as he said, "I wouldn't worry none on that, son. Sometimes a crow is just a crow. Ain't always a sign that something bad is coming. So you go on back to Buck and Nathan. And we'll see you in a few days."

Chris headed out at that, the others moving after him, Josiah waiting until they'd all drawn ahead. Then, leaning down to the tracker, who stood watching the men go with a troubled expression, he said, "Just in case, I'll keep both eyes open for trouble and my gun hand free." And with that, he kicked his horse after the others, leaving Vin to stand alone in the street.

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~ CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE ~

"Good morning, gentlemen," the Reverend Mordecai Bliss said in greeting as he thumped his way down the boardwalk to join the three lawmen lounging on chairs outside the jail.

Vin gave no sign he even knew he was there, simply continued playing his harmonica without pause. Buck and Nathan, however, tipped their hats in reply.

"I understand the trial went well yesterday," Bliss continued. "Guilty verdicts all around?"

Nathan nodded. "Took the jury all of ten minutes to decide."

"And Sandoval and his men are now on their way to prison?"

"Yep. Chris and the others rode out with them to meet the prison wagon that will take them on to Yuma."

"Leaving only the two of you to stand watch over the town and your remaining guests in the jail?"

Another nod. "Won't be for more than a few days though."

Bliss turned a thoughtful look to the one sitting oblivious to all but his music. Then shifting his gaze back to the other men, he said, "Then you will have your hands full, no doubt. And since I find myself at loose ends for some time to come, I would be more than happy to offer my services in looking after Mr. Tanner should you find yourselves in a bind."

"Thanks," Buck said with a tight smile. "But I think we've got it covered."

"With only the two of you to watch both the town and the prisoners, and Mrs. Potter unable to provide backup?"

"There's other folks we can count on if we need to, so there won't be no call to bother you, Reverend." Buck kept his smile in place, but his eyes gave lie to any such amiable sentiment.

Bliss was silent for a moment, considering the warning unspoken, the game in danger, but the playing of it now become that much more interesting. And with a tip of his hat, he said, "Let me know if you change your mind. I'll be around."

A pleasantry exchanged and a challenge offered, he moved down the boardwalk, Buck watching him go with a hard look. And noting that, Nathan demanded answers. "You want to tell me what you and Chris got against that man? Both of you raise your hackles and start to scratching every time he comes around, like dogs marking their territory."

His gaze still on the departing preacher, Buck said, "You ever notice his eyes, Nate? He's seen too much. Done too much."

"Reckon we all have. But I ain't never known you to hold that against a one of us."

"That's different."

"How?"

Buck was silent a moment. Then he turned back to the healer. "I've seen men beat down by life come up swinging. Others, a hard life only seems to gentle them. But there's others still who turn against life when they figure it's turned against them. They set themselves against all that's good and right in the world, and the light just goes right out of their eyes. I've seen that look before. It's like there's nothing but dark inside a man and him lost in it. And I see that look every time I look at Bliss."

"You can tell that about a man just by looking at his eyes?" Nathan scoffed. "Come on, Buck! The man's a preacher!"

"Yeah. But all that tells me is that he knows how to read the Bible. And I reckon the Devil knows how to read it just as well. Only it ain't the reading that saves a man."

"No. But you can't fault him in the doing neither. He ain't done

nothing but good since he come to town. He saved our hides with Sandoval's men. Saved Vin and Mary. And yeah, maybe he wasn't always preacher material, but that don't mean he ain't changed, become something more than he was."

Buck stared at the healer in surprise. "You like him, don't you?"

Nathan shrugged. "I don't know him well enough to say one way or the other, to know what kind of man he is. All's I'm saying is: neither do you. So why don't you let up on him, give him a chance to prove himself?"

"Because Vin can't afford for me to, that's why! That man has latched onto him for reasons no one can explain. And until I know what it is he wants out of him, I got to figure it's nothing good."

"Lord be, Buck! Why's he got to want something? Can't it just be that he likes Vin? Maybe even wants to help him out some? Why do you got to see shadows where there ain't none?"

"Cause there's always shadows, Nate. Sometimes you just got to step around things a bit to see them."

Nathan shook his head in defeat. "All right, Buck. You and Chris want to go boxing at shadows, you go on ahead and do it. I ain't going to try to stop you. Just so you know though -- you're the one who's going to go begging around town if we need someone to look after Vin."

Buck smiled. "Oh, I reckon there's a few ladies I could talk into doing it without too much persuading."

"Yeah, well, just make sure you don't go persuading yourself into no trouble. I got enough to keep me busy without having to rescue you from no riled-up husband."

A grin was all the healer got in reply. Then Buck was up and pulling Vin with him, saying, "Come on, pard. We got us a job to do. Now, I got to warn you -- it ain't going to be pleasant. But sometimes a man's just got to do what a man's got to do."

He laughed then, Vin echoing him on his harmonica. And together they drifted off down the boardwalk, leaving Nathan shaking his head at them, but smiling.

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Their mission accomplished without too much pain, the two then adjourned to the saloon for an early lunch. Buck's lingering good mood was ruined, however, when a thumping that was becoming all too familiar sounded. And looking up, he watched in annoyance as the Reverend Bliss made his way through the saloon to stand at Vin's back.

"We meet again, gentlemen," the preacher said with a slight smile.

"Mind if I join you?"

Vin went still for a moment, then twisted to look up at the one standing behind him. And when Bliss laid a hand on his shoulder in greeting, Buck all but growled.

"You sure the hotel dining room wouldn't be more to your liking, Reverend?" he asked in as even a tone as he could manage. Then, flicking a

glance to Vin, he added, "Or maybe you aren't here for some of Inez's good cooking?"

"On the contrary," Bliss corrected, taking the challenge as an invitation. And stepping away from Vin, he lowered himself into the chair next to him, saying, "I've already sampled Miss Recillos' cooking and found it a delightful change from the hotel's more mundane fare."

Buck narrowed his eyes. "Like things a little spicy, do you?"

"Indeed." Bliss smiled as the saloon keeper approached. "The hotter and spicier, the better."

"Then you've come to the right place, Senor," Inez said with a smile of her own. "I'm trying out a new recipe today and I've had almost twice the usual number of drinks ordered to wash it down."

"In that case, you'd best make my drink water."

Inez gave a laugh, then departed with a swish of her skirts.

Buck watched her walk off appreciatively. Then turning back to Bliss, he said, "What else do you like hot and spicy, Reverend?"

His tone was curious, but his eyes warned that his curiosity was anything but idle.

Duly warned, Bliss smiled and said, "These days I confine such tastes to the occasional Mexican dish. In all other ways, I find my work for the Lord to be adequately stimulating."

"And before you took up with the Lord? I'm betting you must have had a few wild times."

Another smile. "I admit -- my youth was badly spent. But then I saw the light and am now dedicated to helping others see it as well."

Buck cocked his head. "That why you spend so much time with Vin? You hoping to get him to see the light too, leave off those wild ways of his?"

Vin shot a look to Buck at that and Bliss eyed him thoughtfully, saying, "I find Mr. Tanner's particular brand of wild fascinating. From what I can tell, he led a rather interesting life before joining with you and the others to protect this town. Interesting enough, I must say, that I can't help but wonder what could possibly have persuaded a lone wolf such as he into accepting the chains of civilization."

Buck watched Bliss watching Vin and slowly said, "You're forgetting one thing, Reverend -- a wolf is a pack animal. So if it loses its pack, or maybe never really had one, it only makes sense that it would seek out others of its kind to form a new pack."

Bliss shifted his gaze back to Buck, one eyebrow raising. "Still, is not this guarding of a town -- when he could roam free and unbound -- not a bit tame for the likes of Mr. Tanner?"

Buck gave a tight smile, unmindful of blue eyes anxious on him. "Oh, I don't know. It can get a bit wild here at times. And three squares a day and a soft bed at night sure do beat cold beans and hard ground."

Vin grew still at that. And holding back a smile of satisfaction, Bliss

said, "A dollar a day, plus room and board. You sell yourself rather cheaply, Mr. Wilmington."

Buck bristled at that, but before he could make reply, Inez erupted out of the back room, crying, "Senor Buck! There's a fire in the alley!" Buck was up and running instantly, Inez chasing after him as he disappeared into the back, the few other patrons in the saloon not far behind. And when Vin sat staring in confusion, Bliss leaned over to him and said, "Now is your chance to prove your worth, boy. So go on and help." Vin blinked, then got up slowly. And at another prompting from Bliss, he headed for the doorway through which the others had just passed. No sooner had he disappeared through it, than Bliss slipped a hand into a pocket of his coat. And taking out a small packet, he leaned across the table and shook some of its contents into Buck's half-full glass of beer. He then used a knife to stir the mixture. And leaning back in his chair with a smile, he murmured, "No offense, Miss Recillos, but I prefer to add my own brand of spice to things." Then with a laugh and a thump of his cane as he climbed to his feet, he went to check on his handiwork in the alley.

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"Now I'm thinking," Buck said with a smile to Inez fifteen minutes later when he led the impromptu volunteer fire brigade triumphantly back into the saloon. "A man risks his life to save a damsel in distress, he deserves a little reward."

Inez returned his smile with one of her own. "You're right, Senor Buck. A big brave hero like you deserves a very special reward." She leaned in close and lowered her voice to a seductive tone, saying, "So why don't you close your eyes and open your mouth...." She leaned closer still as Buck obeyed her instructions, dreamy eyes closing and his mouth opening in anticipation of a kiss. "That's right," she whispered, her lips inches now from his, one hand caressing its way to his jaw. And bringing one hand up, she slipped an object she'd pulled out of her pocket into his mouth, then shoved hard with her other hand on his jaw. His eyes flew immediately open as he bit down hard, the dreamy look drowned in a flood of tears when a burning sensation filled his mouth. And spitting out the pepper into which Inez had just forced him to bite, he grabbed for his beer and drained it without pause, Bliss watching in satisfaction and Vin in confusion.

"Damn, woman!" Buck complained as he slammed his glass down onto the table. "You can ruin a man's mouth that way! And there will be a whole lot of ladies hereabouts that won't thank you for it, neither!"

Inez merely grinned and flounced away.

Buck sighed, his anger forgotten in appreciation of the womanly curves bouncing in just the right places. And ever the optimist, he called out, "I don't suppose you'd care to kiss it and make it better, would you?"

Inez looked over her shoulder at him with a grin. But it wasn't to him she spoke, saying, "Tell him, Vin."

Without hesitation, the tracker said, "Nunca."

The object of Buck's desire then laughed and disappeared into the back.

Buck turned to glare at the traitor. "Some friend you are!" he grumbled. And with that, he picked up Vin's glass and drained what remained of his beer. Then with a sigh, he lowered himself into his chair and went back to his interrupted lunch.

Vin did likewise, his accusing gaze on his empty beer mug, and Bliss sat as well, his tone genial as he said, "The next round is on me, gentlemen."

Vin shot him a grateful look, then went back to his meal, while Buck grudgingly offered his thanks. But no sooner did Inez return with the reverend's meal than he held up his hand at Bliss' request for more beer, his face paling as he tightly said, "Not for me, thanks." And pushing his plate away, he added, "I reckon maybe I'm the one should have played it safe today by eating at the hotel."

"And what is that supposed to mean?" Inez indignantly demanded to know, hands on her hips.

"Just that all them spices of yours seem to be doing the Mexican Hat Dance in my gut," Buck replied, his hand going to his stomach and his face paling further. And standing abruptly, he croaked out, "Will you watch Vin for a minute? I think I --" Then with a gasp, he bent at the waist and all but fell back into his chair.

"Buck!" Inez cried. "Are you all right?"

He shook his head. "My gut feels like it's all twisted up."

"Do you want me to go get Nathan?"

That time he nodded. "That might not be a bad idea."

"Mr. Jackson is at the jail, I believe," Bliss put in as Inez raced for the saloon doors. "Why don't you go get him and tell him to meet us at the clinic." Then pushing out of his chair, he moved to Buck's side, slipping a hand under his arm to urge him up as well. "Come, Mr. Wilmington. I'll escort you."

Vin watched with an expression of alarm mixed with confusion as the ill man climbed to his feet, doubling over again with a groan. "Buck?" he worriedly asked.

"He'll be all right," Bliss assured him. "We'll take him over to Mr.

Jackson's clinic and he'll be as good as new in no time at all."

Buck gave another groan, but reached out with one hand to take hold of Vin's shoulder. "Don't you go worrying, now. The Reverend is right. Nathan will dose me up with something that tastes awfuller than Mrs. Listerman's cactus jelly gone three weeks bad and I'll be as right as rain. Just lend me a shoulder to get over to his place, okay?"

Vin was out of his chair then, one arm going around the larger man's waist, holding him up against the pain in his gut. And when Bliss pulled

Buck's near arm around his shoulders, Buck slipped it free, saying, "No need to trouble yourself, Reverend. Vin can get me over to Nathan's. You go on and eat your lunch before it gets cold."

"Nonsense," Bliss declared as he took hold of Buck's arm again and resettled it around his shoulders. "It's no trouble at all. In fact, I won't be able to rest until I know you're taken care of."

He took a step forward then and Buck moved reluctantly with him, Vin at his side moving as well, the next move in the game safely set in motion.

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~ CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR ~

"What have you gone and done now?" Nathan accused with a stern look to Buck as he hustled into the clinic, Inez at his back. "I can't leave you people for five minutes without one of you getting into some kind of trouble or the other."

His words were harsh, but the look in his eyes gave lie to them as he moved to the bed where Buck was curled up, arms wrapped around the pain in his middle.

Vin was there as well, seated on the edge of the mattress, one hand patting the sick man's shoulder. And looking up at Nathan as he bent down around him to get a good look at his patient, he sadly said, "He hurts."

"I know," the healer replied. "And I'm sure he appreciates you sitting with him, trying to make him feel better. But right now I need some room to work. So why don't you go stand over there with the Reverend and Inez for now."

Vin nodded, then reluctantly did as requested, moving to the far side of the room where Inez and Bliss stood waiting. And when minutes passed with only the occasional murmured question from Nathan and a groaned response from Buck, he started inching his way back to the bed, Bliss finally stopping him with a hand on his arm and a warning to stay out of the way.

Then at last Nathan stood and crossed the room to Inez, softly asking, "What was it you made for lunch? Buck said it was something new."

"It was," Inez agreed with a worried look to the man lying pale and ill on the bed. "But the ingredients were all fresh. I'm sure of it! And nobody else has gotten sick."

"Vin eat the same thing?"

"Yes. I had some as well. And we're both fine."

Nathan nodded, considering the possibilities. "Might not have nothing to do with what he ate. Or maybe it was something he had this morning or yesterday even. Bad food can take a while to take a bite out of a man sometimes. Or could be he's picked something up. He ain't running no fever though and I ain't heard tell of nobody else being sick, so I don't know what to make of it yet."



"Will he be all right?"

"I ain't sure. We'll just have to wait and see. I got some stuff though that might make the waiting a mite easier. Just got to fix it up." The healer eyed Inez. "I could use some help here. You got to get back to the saloon?"

She shook her head. "Just tell me what to do."

"And how may I be of assistance?" Bliss asked, his expression one of solemn concern.

"You can best help by taking Vin over to the newspaper office," Nathan replied as he began sorting through his bottles of medicines and packets of herbs.

"Mary isn't there," Inez reported. "I saw her riding out in her buggy about an hour ago."

Nathan ran a hand over his close-cropped hair, running through the list of possibilities.

"I would be happy to watch over Mr. Tanner," Bliss offered. "I assure you, it would be no bother."

Nathan ran his hand over his hair again. Then with a sigh, he nodded and turned back to his apothecary.

Bliss took hold of Vin's arm then and started to lead him out. But the tracker resisted, his gaze intent on the man in the bed. "You heard Mr. Jackson," Bliss murmured. "He wishes you gone. You can be of no help here and will most certainly only be in the way if you remain. So come with me and we'll find some way to amuse ourselves until there is some word on Mr. Wilmington."

At that, Vin turned, a shadow of doubt in his eyes.

"You have yet to prove your worth," Bliss reminded him, his voice barely above a whisper. "Come with me now and I'll help you to regain all that you've lost."

A long moment of hesitation passed. Then with a last look to the man in the bed, Vin gave a slow nod and allowed himself to be led away.

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Bliss went straight to the livery, where a rented horse was waiting, along with Vin's own mount and Josiah's borrowed rifle. And heading out into the desert, heedless of the summer sun sending shimmering waves of heat rolling across the scrub-laden landscape ahead of them, he maneuvered his pawn into position.

"You mustn't blame Mr. Jackson for wishing you gone earlier," he advised with a sympathetic look to his companion. "Your place among the guardians of sheep is uncertain at the moment, a wolf among them sporting sheep's clothing, neither one nor the other: too wild yet to safely be let loose among the sheep, and too unmindful of that wild which proved your worth to them to set you free of the chains with which they have bound you. And so you will remain -- unless you either give up all that is in you of freedom or reclaim it."

He returned his attention to the road ahead then, allowing Vin time in which to process his words. And a short while later, he guided his horse off the road to follow a dry creek bed, the tracker following close behind.

"Do you understand the choice you must make?" Bliss then continued. "Wilmington and the others don't think that you do. They've set themselves already to make that decision for you, choosing chains over freedom, thinking they do you a favor by binding you to three square meals a day and a soft bed at night. They take away your gun and offer theirs in its place, then send you into hiding with the women and children when there's trouble to be found. And in all ways they treat you as a child whose hand must be held while crossing the road. They set you in place and move you as they will, with no thought to your wants or wishes or what would best suit you. And that they mean you no harm by it does not lessen the damage done."

Vin shifted uneasily in his saddle. And satisfied that the game was progressing as planned, Bliss pressed ahead, saying, "You are a hunter denied his prey. A man of the wild and open places confined to a dusty little town. You are a man used to making his own way in life deprived of choice. But a choice is now laid before you -- to continue as you have been, languishing in chains while the wild in you dies, or to reclaim all that you have lost."

Once again silence descended, Vin frowning as he tracked his way through the preacher's words, twisting and turning along the path laid down, false trails edged with enough of the truth to lead him on and away from a greater truth. And by the time Bliss called a halt, he was thoroughly lost.

"You are a hunter, Mr. Tanner," the preacher declared as he took hold of the borrowed rifle and tossed it to him. "And now is your chance to prove it."

Vin looked down at the weapon he'd caught, his frown now one of confusion, the way unclear still.

"I overheard some ranchers talking yesterday," Bliss continued, his move ending and his pawn maneuvered into position. "It seems there is a coyote making free with the livestock in this area. But no one has been able to track it well enough to get near it, despite the fact that it has but three toes on its left hind foot. The consensus is, though, that it hides out somewhere along this creekbed. So, if you wish to reclaim what is yours by right, you have only to find the animal and dispose of it."

Vin shifted his gaze from the rifle to Bliss and back again, the weight of the weapon familiar and right, instinct setting him upon the path laid out before him. And needing no more of a prompt to follow that instinct, he dismounted and started searching the ground for prints, walking slowly along the creekbed, Bliss dismounting as well to trail behind

him, the reins of both horses in one hand.

He found the first paw print within a few minutes, an hour passing as he followed the trail, staying with it even when his head began to pound, Bliss having to return his attention to his task only twice. Backtracking and casting about when the coyote's tracks disappeared among the rocks, and putting himself in his prey's position to think ahead to its next move, he stayed with the trail barely discernible and was at last rewarded with a flash of golden fur in the brush ahead. His rifle came up instinctively then, his target sighted and his weapon aimed without thought, his finger tightening on the trigger before his mind could catch up. And a split second later, it was over -- the coyote lying dead on the ground ahead.

Bliss clapped a hand to his shoulder in congratulations, then dropped the reins of the horses he'd been leading to limp over to the dead coyote, bending down to inspect its left hind foot. And looking up to the one who remained in place, rifle held loosely in one hand now, he said, "Three toes, Mr. Tanner."

He straightened then, the coyote at his feet as he continued. "You brought him down when no other man could, boy. And not because your eye is more keen than any other man's, nor your knowledge so much greater. No, your success was due to your uncanny ability to live your prey, to become one with it, to feel what it feels and think what it thinks -- its life yours and its death your victory. You live for this -- for the hunt. For the kill. I could see it in your eyes as you tracked, as you pulled the trigger and brought it down. And I can see it still."

His voice took on a challenging tone. "Will you give this up, boy? Can you? The hunt is in your blood, your instinct sure as any wild creature's. In town you are no more than a man broken and led, allowed no place but one among the weak. But here in your element, you are without equal, strong and sure and whole. This is where you belong, boy. And you'll be lost to yourself forever if you stay in that town with those men and their chains. But if you come with me when I leave, if you ally yourself with one who appreciates the wild in you, who knows what it is to walk free of restraints, you can return to the hunt, to the tracking and taking of that most dangerous of all prey -- Man. You did it once, before the hunter became the hunted. And you can do it again -- this time under my protection and for a much greater reward than that to be found in the taking of paltry bounties."

He paused then, taking in Vin's frowning gaze as it lowered to the coyote downed with one unerring shot. And when he turned to look back the way they had come, towards town and the men there, Bliss hurriedly warned, "You haven't proven yourself by this to those who have set themselves over you, boy. It's the guardian of sheep they want returned to them, not the hunter of those wilder than he. And mark my words -- if you tell them what you've accomplished here today, they'll shorten the chains

binding you and never allow you beyond their reach again."

Vin turned back to him then, his frown deepening.

"They took your gun from you," Bliss reminded him. "Despite your having proven yourself with it. And if you go to them with this evidence of the wild in you still, you'll lose that too. They'll make sure you're never allowed near another gun again and this then will be your final hunt. You'll be dragged back into the fold among the sheep, there to live out your days among the stupid and the weak, never to run free again. Is that what you want?"

Vin shook his head at the vision playing out in his head and softly said, "No."

"Then you'll leave that dusty town of theirs behind, come with me and resume your rightful place in the world?"

Another look behind, then back to the coyote and to the man at whose feet it lay. Two paths open to him and neither of them well marked, both promising salvation and each leading both to it and away from it. And unable to choose between them, he chose neither, bringing his free hand to press hard against his forehead, tightly saying, "My head hurts."

Bliss nodded, the move anticipated, his pawn now set up for capture.

"We'll go back to town then, boy. But remember -- not a word of this day's adventure to anyone if you wish to keep hold of your freedom."

He stepped over the dead coyote then and moved to reclaim his mount.

And swinging up onto its back, he led the way back to town.

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"He ain't doing no better," Nathan pronounced of his patient sleeping restlessly in the clinic's bed when Vin and the Reverend Bliss returned to check on him.

"Have you any idea what is causing his condition?" Bliss asked.

The healer sighed. "I ain't for certain sure, but I reckon it must be food poisoning. He's got the symptoms of it, anyhow. And nothing else makes sense."

"And will he be all right?"

"He ain't gotten no worse since shortly after y'all left, when he started in to losing his lunch. So I reckon if his stomach settles before too long he'll be fine."

The healer gave another sigh. Then with a weary smile, he said, "I sure do thank you for looking after Vin the way you done, Reverend. I reckon Mary's back though if you'd like to leave him with her now."

But Bliss had no intention of giving up his pawn. "That won't be necessary, Mr. Jackson. After all, Mrs. Travis has a paper to put out and a son needing tending. While I am grateful for any means of keeping myself occupied."

"You sure? I don't want to be putting you out none."

Bliss merely smiled. "It is never a burden to assist those in need. I assure you. So if there is any other way in which I might be of some

service, you have only to ask."

Nathan hesitated only a moment before saying, "Well, I'd appreciate it if you could keep Vin with you tonight. I was going to let him bunk down in here, seeing as I'll likely be staying the night with Buck. But I don't reckon it would be too comfortable for him. There's two beds in the room him and Chris have been sharing at the hotel, so if you wouldn't mind?"

Bliss smiled, the game playing out better than he'd hoped. "Not at all, Mr. Jackson. I'm only too happy to oblige."

Nathan smiled in turn, relieved to have one less worry to have to deal with. And turning to the tracker, who stood watching the sleeping Buck with a worry of his own obvious, he said, "He's going to be okay, Vin. So you stop fretting over him and tell me what you and the Reverend done today."

Vin jerked his gaze from the man in the bed and fixed it on the one standing at his elbow, Bliss' expression bland but a warning shadow in his eyes. And moving away without another look to the healer, the tracker sat at the table and pulled out his harmonica.

Nathan sighed as the first note sounded and turned to Bliss instead.

"He didn't give you no trouble, did he?"

"Not a bit," Bliss reported. "In fact, we rubbed along together quite nicely. And I'm sure we'll continue to do so."

"That's good. At least I got that worry off my mind."

"And your prisoners? How are they faring?"

Nathan rolled his shoulders, trying to ease some of the tension that had built up in the past hours. "I got some of the men from town to take turns watching over them, so they ought to keep 'til either Buck gets better or the rest of the boys get back."

Bliss hefted his cane and turned to the one sitting oblivious of all but his music. "Then we'll leave you to your work here. And again -- if you should need anything, don't hesitate to call on me for assistance."

He thumped his cane then for Vin's attention, inclining his head to the door when he looked up. "Mr. Jackson has work to do, son. So let's get out of his way."

Vin shot a look to the man in the bed.

"Buck's going to be okay," Nathan assured him. "He just needs to rest right now. So you go on and go with the Reverend. And stay out of trouble, you hear? I got trouble enough right now -- I don't need you bringing no more to my door. So don't go sneaking off or turning ornery. Just do like the Reverend says. And don't let me hear none different!"

Vin looked from healer to preacher, his gaze uncertain on both.

"Go on now and go," Nathan urged. "You can come back and see Buck in the morning."

Vin sat still for another moment. Then with a last sad note on his harmonica, he got up and followed Bliss out of the clinic.

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Bliss made no further plays in the game for the rest of that day, content to let his pawn consider his own move, certain that instinct would win out easily over sentiment.

Vin, however, was anything but content, a restlessness riding him that wouldn't ease up, a need in him to be in motion, to stay ahead of some shadow at his back that was felt more than seen, a forerunner to a gathering darkness. And when his restless movements about town led him -- in company with Bliss -- to the saloon, he sought a table in the far corner of the room and took eager hold of the whiskey his companion poured from the bottle Inez provided. Whiskey then followed whiskey, need and shadows giving way to a comfortable haze that remained undisturbed even when Bliss pulled him to his feet and led him to the hotel and bed. And giving in to that haze, sleep came easily, if disturbingly -- dreams of a crow perched on a coyote carcass as six men rode away jerking him awake in the far reaches of the night and up, breath coming hard and fast, fear holding him in place.

He waited then in the darkness for the shadowed dreams to recede, for one of the six to give lie to them. And when the only proof offered that he was not alone was the soft breathing of one lying in shadows as deep as those from which he sought escape, he slid out of the bed and away.

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~ Endure the Night ~  
by jann

~ CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE ~

The sun was well over the horizon the next morning when the Reverend Mordecai Bliss awakened to discover that the bed across from his borrowed one was empty. And jumping out of his own bed with a curse, he went in search of his errant pawn.

He went first to the livery stable and gave a sigh of relief when he discovered his quarry's mount there, contentedly munching its breakfast of oats. He then made the rounds of the town, which was just beginning to come to life. And finding Tanner nowhere, nor finding anyone who had seen him, he tried the clinic, cracking the door open to peer within.

"He's over yonder," a sleepy voice proclaimed.

Opening the door further, Bliss discovered Nathan Jackson slouched in a chair at the table and nodding to the floor at the near side of Buck's bed, where Vin lay sleeping.

"Don't know when he got here," Nathan continued, stretching aching muscles. "But he was there when I woke up a few hours ago to check on Buck. And he ain't stirred since."

Bliss pushed the door open still further and stepped into the clinic, moving to stand beside the table, his gaze on the man curled up on the floor, a pillow tucked beneath his head and a thin blanket spread over

him. "Is he all right?"

"Seems to be." Nathan yawned. "He give you any trouble last night? Other than taking off on you, I mean."

Bliss shook his head. "He went right to sleep. And I'm afraid I assumed he would remain that way until morning." He shifted his gaze to the weary healer. "I apologize for not being more diligent in my duty."

"Don't you worry yourself about it. Ain't a one of us he ain't slipped away on. And ain't no harm come of it, so it don't rightly matter none."

"Still, I should have been more careful."

Bliss returned his gaze to the man on the floor, considering the move made in the wrong direction and working out a countermove that would bring his pawn back in line. Then shifting his gaze to the man in the bed whose return to the game too soon might throw it into question, he said, "And Mr. Wilmington? How is he?"

"He had some broth last night and kept it down," Nathan reported.

"Slept fine through the night, too. So I reckon he'll be all right. Might even get back on his feet again later today, if he rests and does like I tell him to this morning."

Bliss forced a smile at the unwelcome news. "Then shall I continue to keep watch over Mr. Tanner for a bit longer? Assuming, of course, that you still trust me to do so?"

Nathan hesitated only a moment before saying, "I don't like to ask you again. You already done plenty. I can always get Mary to watch him. Or Mrs. Potter, if her boy is feeling better today."

Bliss raised an eyebrow. "No offense, Mr. Jackson. But do you really suppose either of those two fine women is up to the task? After all, you've admitted Mr. Tanner is a bit of a handful even for you men."

"That's true. But ain't you got nothing better to do?"

"No, I assure you. And indeed, you do me a favor in giving me some means of keeping myself occupied."

"Well, if you're sure?"

Bliss smiled. "Quite sure. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'm afraid I exited the hotel rather hurriedly in search of our missing friend there and would like to return to my room to do a more thorough job of my ablutions. Shall I bring you and Mr. Wilmington some breakfast on my return?"

The matter of Vin's care settled, Nathan nodded in glad acceptance of the offer. "That would be right fine, Reverend. I appreciate it. Just go down to the hotel dining room and let the cook know you're ordering for us. She knows what to send over."

"I shall see you in a bit then," Bliss stated. And with a last look to the man on the floor, he thumped his way out of the clinic.

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"Now, you're going to have to give up sneaking off on folks like that,"

Nathan instructed for the third time in as many minutes to the tracker staring mutinously up at him from the edge of Buck's bed. "You can't go wandering around the streets alone at night. You remember what happened the last time you tried that?"

Vin chuffed out a breath and turned his attention to the man in the bed still sleeping.

"You listening to me?" Nathan irritably demanded to know.

"No," Vin defiantly declared, his shoulders set in stubborn lines, his brows drawn down in a scowl.

Nathan chose to ignore the comment. "Why'd you sneak off like you done, anyways? Did something happen?"

His dream stirring to life, Vin's scowl deepened. And aiming it at the healer, he accusingly said, "You left me."

"What?" Nathan asked in confusion. "Oh, you mean I left you with Reverend Bliss?" And when Vin only continued to scowl at him, Nathan patiently added, "Now, you know why I had to do that. I told you I had to sit up with Buck last night in case he needed me."

Vin shifted his gaze back to the man in question, his scowl easing.

Then with a sigh as the previous night's dream played out again in his confused mind, he mournfully said, "Everybody left me."

Again Nathan misunderstood. "But Chris and the boys will all be back in a few more days. You know they will. So you don't got to worry none. And in the meantime, I don't want you running off on the Reverend again. He's doing us a big favor by stepping in to help and I don't want you making him sorry for it. You do and you're like to end up cooped up in this clinic with me and Buck all day long. And I don't reckon you'd care too much for that, now would you?"

"No," Vin admitted on another sigh. Then as dreams and visions tangled in his mind, he turned back to the healer and firmly pronounced: "I don't like crows."

Not even trying to follow that leap in logic, Nathan simply said, "I know you don't, Vin." And with a cock of his head, he added, "Would you mind telling me why?"

"They like the dark."

Nathan waited for further information. And when Vin only sat looking up at him as if he thought his explanation should be self-evident, he asked for clarification. "What are you talking about? Crows ain't night birds. They keep to the daylight. You know that."

Vin shook his head. "I saw them. They make people dead."

Throwing up his hands, Nathan gave up trying to make sense of Vin's confused pronouncements and attempted instead to set him straight. "Boy, where you getting this stuff from? Ain't no crow ever killed nobody.

They ain't made that way. And you'd best stop listening to Josiah go on about them birds. They're just birds and nothing more. Ain't no death goes following them around. So you just stop worrying on that."



Another sigh. Then Vin shifted his gaze back to the man in the bed, his mind making another seeming leap in logic. "Is Buck going to die?" he asked.

Regretting that he'd ever started that particular line of questioning, Nathan forcefully declared, "No, he ain't going to die! I told you that last night and again this morning. Ain't you been listening?"

"You won't let a crow get him?"

"No." Nathan hung his head, his fingers digging into his close-cropped hair. "I won't let a crow get him, Vin. I promise. He's going to be fine. He just needs to rest up some more is all."

After a moment's consideration, Vin went back to his original point, saying, "I don't like crows."

That time it was Nathan's turn to sigh. "I know," he wearily said. "You told me." Then lowering his hands and lifting his head, he firmly added, "And I promise -- ain't no crow coming near Buck. Now get on up from there and let me check him."

With one last sigh, Vin did as instructed. Then moving to sit at the table, he pulled his harmonica out and played a mournful set of notes as Nathan tended to his patient, Buck stirring awake enough during the exam to offer a sleepy protest.

"You might as well wake all the way up," Nathan told him. "Your breakfast will be here soon."

Buck opened one eye. "Please tell me it's something needing teeth."

Nathan shook his head. "Now, you know better than that."

With a groan, Buck let his eye fall closed again.

A knock came at the door then and it slowly swung open to admit the Reverend Bliss with a napkin-covered tray in hand.

"I do hope Mr. Wilmington is awake," he said as he set the tray down on the table and removed the napkin to reveal a full plate and two steaming mugs, only one of which held coffee. "Cold broth leaves much to be desired."

"If I go back to sleep," Buck moaned, pulling the covers up over his head, "does that mean I don't got to drink that stuff?"

When Nathan snorted his response, Buck gave another groan.

Vin was up and across the room at the sound, his harmonica forgotten in one hand, his eyes dark with worry. And seeing that, Nathan shook his head at his recalcitrant patient, saying, "Now you got Vin on the worry again. And here I just spent ten minutes convincing him you was all right."

Buck peeked out from beneath his sheet, looking suitably chastised. And turning to the worried tracker, he said, "Don't you go fretting yourself, pard. There's nothing wrong with me that a nice fat steak wouldn't cure."

Vin looked expectantly to Nathan, who in turn shot a dirty look to the man now looking back at him with an innocent expression. "You do like I

tell you this morning and maybe I'll let you have some chicken in your broth for lunch."

"And what do I get for dinner?"

"We'll see."

Buck nodded his acceptance of the terms of surrender. "All right then.

I reckon I can live with that."

He settled his sheet back onto his chest and struggled to sit up, Nathan going to his aid, piling pillows at his back to help prop him up. And with another of his confusing leaps of logic, Vin solemnly declared, "Ain't no crow getting in here."

Buck shot a look to Nathan, who only shrugged. Then turning back to the earnest tracker, he just as solemnly replied, "Well, that's good to know, Vin."

"And it's good as well to know that you are feeling much improved,"

Bliss declared as he picked up the mug of broth from the tray and carried it across to the bed.

Buck made a face at it, then shifted his gaze to the preacher. "You taken up waitressing down at the hotel now, Reverend?"

Bliss gave a faint smile and shook his head. "Just helping out in any way I can, Mr. Wilmington."

His eyes narrowing at that, Buck shot a look to Vin, then back. "I appreciate it, Reverend. And aren't we lucky you always seem to be around whenever there's helping needing to be done."

His words were ones of gratitude, but Bliss was aware of the move about to be made in the game being played. And moving to block it before it could be set in motion, he held out the mug of broth, then smiled and piously said, "I live to serve both God and Man."

Buck narrowed his eyes further still, then reached out to take the proffered mug. And with a sigh and a grimace of distaste, he took a sip of it.

Bliss' smile turned to one of satisfaction. And stepping back and away from the bed, he busied himself with laying out the breakfast provided for the healer, carefully not watching as Buck continued to sip at the broth. Vin and Nathan, however, played audience to Wilmington's exaggerated shudders after each swallow, Vin frowning in sympathy and Nathan rolling his eyes. Then halfway through it, Buck's eyes widened and he gave a groaned curse.

"What is it?" Nathan hurriedly asked. "It ain't going to stay down?"

Buck held the mug out, wanting what it held gone. And with another groan he said, "Feels like my gut's trying to tie itself into knots again."

Nathan took the mug and set it on the bedside table. And reaching for a bottle and spoon kept handy there, he poured a dose and offered it to the pale-faced man, saying, "Come on and take this, now. It'll settle your stomach down."

Vin's face paled to nearly the same shade as Buck's, and he looked

worriedly around the room, dreams and visions returning to life, warning of some danger lurking in the shadows, its form barely seen, but vaguely recognized. And reaching to take hold of Nathan's shirt as he bent over the groaning Buck, he urgently declared, "The crow!"

Nathan gave a groan of his own. "Lord have mercy, Vin! Ain't no crow done this! His gut just ain't as ready for food as I figured. That's all."

But Vin wasn't to be so easily appeased. And when another tug on the healer's shirt produced no more than an irritated demand for Bliss to take him outside, he stepped back and over to the nearest window, slamming it down.

"Vin Tanner, you quit that!" Nathan snapped out, turning to glare at him over his shoulder. "You ain't keeping nothing out of here with that but fresh air. Now, I told you -- ain't no crow getting in here. So open them windows back up and go on with the Reverend, let me tend to Buck in peace."

Vin turned from the window, his gaze shifting between the man curling up now on his side groaning, arms pressed tight to his middle, and to the remaining window in the room, frowning his indecision.

Bliss crossed the room to him then, cane thumping lightly, and took gentle but firm hold of one arm. "This isn't helping, son. Mr. Wilmington is in good hands and will soon be up and around again, I assure you. So let's get this window back open and go get some breakfast."

Vin looked up to Bliss, the shadows stirring again, the dark form there taking shape but too dim yet for him to be able to put a face to it.

"Go on, son, and open the window," Bliss urged, his tone one of soft command. "You don't want Mr. Wilmington suffocating, now do you?"

His gaze flicking once more to the man in the bed, the tracker hesitated a long moment more. Then Nathan, in a gentle tone of reassurance, said, "Buck's going to be just fine, Vin. This here is just a little setback. It happens all the time and it don't mean nothing but that his body needs more time to get rid of whatever's got a hold of it. So you go on and get that window open and leave him to me. I'll take good care of him. I promise."

Bliss allowed no further chance for protest, merely let go of his charge and opened the window himself. And when he then took hold of his arm again, Vin reluctantly allowed himself to be led away.

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~ CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX ~

After breakfast, Bliss led Vin along the boardwalk to the mercantile, where they staked out a couple of chairs and sat, Vin with his harmonica, Bliss with a book, both lost in their respective amusements, the townspeople coming and going into Mrs. Potter's store with nods to them but few words spoken.

Vin paid little mind to the coming's and going's, his attention all for

the notes he played, slow and lonesome, the sound like the distant wailing of a train moving fast away. Bliss, however, looked up at each interruption, nodding politely or exchanging brief pleasantries. And when a clattering of spurs announced a new pair of interruptions, he closed his book and laid it on his lap. He then raised his gaze to the two cowboys standing half a dozen feet away on the boardwalk staring at Vin with avid curiosity.

Seeing the preacher's eyes on him, one of the men inclined his head to the musician and said, "Hey, Mister? That the dummy we been hearing tell about?"

Vin jerked his head up at that, the harmonica falling away from his lips. And with a look to him, one corner of Bliss' lips raised in the barest of smiles. Then turning back to the cowboys he said, "Is there something I can do for you... gentlemen?"

"We just want to know if that there is the dummy we heard the townspeople going on about," the cowboy repeated. "They claim he's one of the lawmen hereabouts and a mite dangerous, but he sure don't look like neither to me."

"I don't know, Cy," his companion jeered. "I bet he's sent more than one man screaming for the hills with that screeching he's doing on that mouth organ."

"Yeah," Cy agreed with a laugh. "Guess that explains why he don't need no gun. Ain't no outlaws going to hang around this town long enough to cause no trouble so long as they got to listen to that noise."

"Perhaps you should heed their example," Bliss suggested, his voice easy, but with a warning note to it.

Cy only laughed and stepped around the preacher to snatch the harmonica out of Vin's hand. And with another laugh as the infuriated musician pushed out of his chair to grab for it, he tossed the harmonica to his companion.

"That's enough!" Bliss warned, also rising from his chair.

The cowboys, however, only laughed harder, playing keep-away now with the harmonica as Vin raced between them trying to grab hold of it. Then with a growl and a leap, he tackled Cy, knocking him into a display of handcrafts fashioned by the local Seminole tribespeople, more displays of merchandise crashing to the ground as the two men continued to grapple over the harmonica, the second cowboy shouting encouragement to his companion. And as Mrs. Potter came out of her store with a cry of dismay, several townsfolk at her back and more gathering on the street, Bliss forcefully demanded an end to the fight.

Then Nathan was there, wading through the remains of the displays and broken bits of pottery, grabbing hold of Cy and throwing him away from Vin before reaching out to pull the embattled tracker to his feet.

"You cut that out!" he warned when Vin struck blindly out at him.

"You're in trouble enough already. You don't need no more!"

Vin subsided at the sound of the familiar voice. Then his gaze shot to Cy, still holding his harmonica, and he started forward.

"Now, I told you to stop that!" Nathan warned again. And grabbing hold of an arm to keep the tracker in place, he turned to Cy and said, "You hand that over to him. Then you and your friend get on out of here. And don't let me see either of you in town again."

"You ain't got no call to talk to us like that!" Cy furiously protested. "We ain't the ones what started this! All's I wanted to do was see the dummy's mouth organ and he liked to tear my head off. He's crazy, I tell you!"

"Yeah," his companion added. "We heard he almost shot a man the other night. Now he attacks my friend. So why ain't you people got him locked up or something?"

A low murmuring issued from several of the gathered townspeople and Nathan turned to those at his back and growled: "You folks get on and get now. There ain't nothing going on here you need to be worrying on."

The townspeople scattered at that, only Mrs. Potter remaining, hands on her hips as she surveyed the damage done to her display.

Nathan's gaze shot from her to the cowboys standing defiant, Vin's harmonica still in the one man's hand. "I done told you already to hand that mouth organ over. And I ain't going to tell you again!"

Cy's face flushed with anger. "Ain't no darkie going to tell me what to do!"

"And will you then let him escort you to jail?" Bliss asked calmly, dark eyes warning against such a foolish choice.

Cy let out a scoffing laugh. "He ain't no lawman. Ain't no town going to hire a darkie to protect them."

Nathan's chin went up at that and Bliss stepped forward, setting himself between lawman and rowdies. "I suggest you do as Mr. Jackson says and

return Mr. Tanner's harmonica to him. Then get on your horses and ride away -- or you'll have reason to learn that not only does this esteemed gentleman serve as lawman here in town, but healer as well."

After trading uncertain glances with his companion, Cy flipped the harmonica at Vin. "Ain't nothing but a piece of junk, no how," he mumbled as it bounced off the tracker's chest and onto the boardwalk. "Only a dummy like him would have any use for it."

He stomped off then, his companion trailing at his heels. Then when they'd gotten a safe distance away, Cy turned and yelled, "I'll be glad to shake the dust of this town off my boots! Ain't fit for decent folk, what with crazy men wandering loose trying to kill people!"

The four on the boardwalk watched the two cowboys collect their horses and ride out. Then Nathan shifted his gaze from Mrs. Potter to the mess made of her display and on to the one who stood in the midst of it.

"You go on and get this cleaned up, Vin Tanner," he snapped out. "And just

so you know -- you'll be working off any damages been done."

When Vin shot him a mutinous look, he warningly added, "Don't you even think on getting into no more trouble today. I already got more of that than I got places to put it. Ain't bad enough I got those two fools over at the jail to watch, and Buck sick in the clinic. Ain't even bad enough I got to get other folks to watch them all so's I can ride out to the Cooper ranch to tend to a hand what got horse-kicked. No, that wasn't enough trouble. Now I got you stirring up more!"

Taking note of the hurt look flashing across Vin's face, Bliss suppressed a smile of satisfaction and went to his defense. "He didn't start this, Mr. Jackson."

"No. But he didn't turn and head out the other way when he seen it coming, neither." Nathan ran one hand over his tightly curled hair and let his breath out in a chuff of frustration. Then fixing Vin with a hard look, he said, "I ain't got time for this now. I got a man bad hurt I need to get to. So you get this mess cleaned up and we'll have us a talk when I get back."

He turned then and stalked off. And as he continued on his interrupted way to the livery, Gloria Potter softly said, "He didn't mean that, Vin. He's just got a lot on his plate right now and it's got him some frazzled. So don't you mind a word he said."

Vin raised his chin at that, not ready yet to let go of the hurt, holding it close in stubborn defiance. And scooping up his harmonica, he shoved it into a pocket, then began righting the tumbled displays. Bliss shooed Mrs. Potter back into her store then. And when she'd disappeared back inside, he stooped to pick up one of the barrels serving as a display stand, softly saying as he set it in place, "She's right, boy. You mustn't hold it against Mr. Jackson for growing weary of the burdens placed upon him. He is, after all, alone to defend the town and to take care of both you and Mr. Wilmington. Not to mention the task he has of dealing with those in town who wish you gone. It's a wonder, really, that he hasn't given into his frustrations before now." He shook his head. "Indeed, you should truly be thankful that your fellow peacekeepers have continued to take care of you for as long as they have." "I can take care of myself," Vin muttered, placing pottery back on a board set between barrels with more force than necessary. "Don't need nobody."

Again Bliss shook his head. "I'm afraid you'll have trouble finding anyone in this town to agree with you, Mr. Tanner. The general consensus concerning your abilities seems to have changed only for the worse in the past few days. And certainly patience seems to be wearing thin. Indeed, your welcome here may fast be running out."

He said no more then, only continued to help with the cleanup. But he was well aware of his charge's frown and troubled eyes. And when he was satisfied that his latest move had proven successful, he excused

himself, saying, "Continue with your task here, Mr. Tanner. I have a small errand I must run and will return shortly." He stepped inside the mercantile then to alert Mrs. Potter to his brief absence. And with a smile to his unhappy pawn, he crossed the street to the hotel.

There he went inside and out the back door, taking care that his movements went unobserved. And stepping into the alleyway behind the hotel, his gaze went immediately to the two cowboys leaning against the back of the building, their horses standing patiently at their sides.

"Well done, gentlemen," he said approvingly as he pulled an envelope out of an inner coat pocket. And handing it over to the one who reached out for it, he added, "Your fee, as agreed."

The cowboy snatched the envelope and peeled it open to count the bills inside. Then with a scowl, he looked up and snapped, "I should charge you more. You never said a word about me having to take nothing off of some darkie!"

"And neither did I say anything about you getting thrown into jail," Bliss pointed out in a hard tone. "Which you most certainly would have done had I not stepped in to save your worthless neck. So be grateful that I didn't deduct any of your fee. Or worse."

"Let's just go, Cy," the second cowboy urged, plucking at his friend's sleeve. "We don't need no trouble."

"Indeed," Bliss agreed. He then simply stood waiting. And after a moment, Cy gave in with a growl.

He stuffed the envelope inside his shirt then and swung onto his horse, his companion hurriedly following his example. And as they rode off, Bliss slipped back inside the hotel, the game far advanced now and the ending of it in sight.

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To his surprise, his next move was made for him as soon as he returned to the mercantile, where Vin was setting the last of the overturned goods back into place in company with one of the townspeople, who looked relieved at Bliss' return.

"Maybe you can help me, Reverend," the man said. "I'm looking for Mr. Jackson."

"He's been called out of town on an emergency," Bliss reported, pleased to note no lessening in his pawn's unhappy expression during his brief absence.

"He say when he'd be back?"

Bliss shook his head, turning back to the man who stood before him looking nearly as unhappy as the tracker. "Is there some problem you need help with?"

"It's just that I've been watching the jail," the townsman explained.

"And Stan Remsen was supposed to take over for me. Only his wife just told me he can't 'cause he hurt his back. I've asked around, but I can't find anyone to take his place." The man wrung the hat held in his

hands. "It's not that I mind staying longer, you understand. But I've got a store to run and my wife won't be too happy if I leave her to take care of it by herself all day."

The possibilities instantly considered, Bliss clapped the man on the back. "Go on and relieve your wife of her duties then, Brother. I'll be happy to take over for you at the jail."

The man looked surprised. "Are you sure, Reverend? I wouldn't want to put you out."

"And you shan't," Bliss assured him. "Mr. Tanner and I can keep ourselves amused there as easily as here. Perhaps more so, as he will not be subject there to any unwanted attentions. So return to your store in all good conscience."

The man nodded in relief. "Thank you, Reverend. I sure do appreciate it. And don't worry -- Kiley Folger will take over in a few hours. And Millie Braugher will be by before then with some lunch for you and the prisoners -- I'll stop by her place on the way to mine to let her know there will be two of you standing guard so she'll know to bring extra food."

The townsman held out his hand in gratitude, then took off. And turning to his pawn, Bliss smiled and said, "It seems we've been handed a wild card, Mr. Tanner. Shall we move ahead with the game and see how best to play it?"

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The rest of the morning passed uneventfully, Bliss sitting in thoughtful silence, his gaze shifting between tracker and prisoners, and Vin content, after a tug on the drawer in which his sawed-off still lay, to sit at J. D.'s desk playing his harmonica, the notes now short and sharp and more discordant than usual. And when his captive audience protested such cruel and unusual punishment, he merely scowled at them and raised the volume of his concert. So it was with considerable relief to three of the men in the jail when Millie Braugher arrived an hour later with lunch as promised.

Bliss stood to relieve her of the tray, setting it on the desk in front of Vin as he thanked the woman and then escorted her from the jail. And once he'd closed the door behind her, he returned to the desk.

"The prisoners need to be fed, Mr. Tanner," he pointed out, removing the cloth from the tray to reveal four plates and four sets of cutlery wrapped in napkins, only two of which contained knives as well as forks. And removing one of those sets, along with a knifeless one, he set them on the desk and said, "Why don't you take our guests their lunch while I pour some coffee?"

Stuffing his harmonica into a pocket, Vin picked up two of the plates, along with the remaining sets of cutlery, and carried them to the cell at the back, sliding them under the cell door, the tin cups of coffee soon following. He then returned to the desk and his own meal.



Twenty minutes later, lunch complete, Bliss collected the tray and began clearing up. And to Vin, he said, "Please collect the prisoners' plates, Mr. Tanner."

He watched out of the corner of his eye then as Vin moved to the cell to stand waiting impatiently for the plates. And with a grunt, Ike pushed off his cot, the plates and cups jumbled together in one hand, the other hanging limply at his side.

"I see them friends of yours decided to let you play at lawman," he taunted as he set the plates and cups on the floor at his feet and pushed them towards the opening at the bottom of the cell door. "Too bad they wouldn't give you your gun back, though. Kind of spoils the illusion."

"Maybe they can get him one of them toy guns from the mercantile," Lem suggested with a laugh. "And one of them stick ponies to go with it."

Ike laughed as well, one hand still hanging limply at his side, the other gripping the bars of the cell door to help keep his balance as he pushed the pile of plates as far as they would go before catching at the cell door.

Vin scowled, his gaze going from prisoner to prisoner, and then to the pile of plates. And when Ike made no move to disassemble the pile and shove the items beneath the door, he let out his breath in an angry explosion of air and stooped to reach through the bars for the cups. No sooner though did he take them up and start to straighten than Ike snaked an arm through the bars to grab hold of one sleeve of his coat, spinning him around so that his back slammed into the cell door. And letting the cup fall to the ground, Vin raised both hands to claw at the arm wrapped now around his chest, only to give up the attempt when Ike's other arm slipped through the bars with one of the dinner knives in hand, the sharp blade of it coming to rest against his throat with a painful warning against any further struggles.

"Unlock this door!" Ike then called to Bliss. "Or I swear I'll slit this dummy's damned throat!"

Vin's gaze shot to the preacher standing at the desk watching them with an unreadable expression and started to shake his head in warning to him, only to stop with a yelp when the knife blade bit harder into his throat.

Bliss moved then, limping to the wall peg on which the keys were hung, his voice steady as he said, "You boys aren't in so much trouble that it would be worth your while to add murder to your list of crimes."

"We don't aim to hurt no one," Ike declared, pressing the knife harder against Vin's throat so that he pushed back as far as he could against the cell door to escape it, a trail of blood attesting to his lack of complete success. "You just unlock this door and we'll ride out of here, leave you two locked up for his friends to find."

Hesitating only a moment longer, Bliss moved to the cell door and inserted the key. And when the door creaked open, Ike moving Vin with it,

Lem slipped through and shoved Bliss inside the cell. He then went to the gun rack on the wall and snatched up a couple of rifles. And taking them back to the cell with him, he stood guard while his companion released Vin then reached around the iron door to jerk him into the cell, the door clanging shut behind him.

"You boys have fun now," Ike crowed with a grin, locking the cell door and pulling the key free. And stuffing it into the waistband of his pants, he gratefully accepted the rifle Lem tossed to him, then led the way out the back door.

Vin went immediately to the cell door, jerking on it with a growl and kicking it when it wouldn't open. He then paced the length of the cell, his breath coming fast, his expression furious, his hands balled into fists.

"Calm down, Mr. Tanner," Bliss advised as he lowered himself onto one of the cots. "The fault is not yours, but mine. I should have distributed the prisoners' lunch myself. And so I shall tell Mr. Jackson when he returns."

Vin stopped his pacing and turned to the preacher with a look of wary uncertainty.

"I'm sure he'll understand," Bliss went on. "The others as well. And more than likely they'll be able to recapture the prisoners." He paused, then with a regretful shake of his head, he added, "Oh dear. I'd forgotten Mr. Jackson is alone in his duties to the town at the moment. So I don't suppose he'll be able to take off in pursuit." He shrugged.

"Never fear though. I'm sure the miserable curs will turn up sooner or later in some town or other -- hopefully before they are able to inflict themselves upon some helpless woman again."

Vin closed his eyes and slumped against the bars at his back.

"It's not your fault," Bliss repeated, his tone one of sympathy but a look of satisfaction in his eyes. "As I keep reminding you, you were never meant to serve as a sheep dog, guarding the flock. Your place is in the wild, free of restraint and on the hunt. There you are without equal. Here you are as one lost, with chains to hold you in place." He sighed. "I only hope those chains will not be unduly shortened after today."

Vin squeezed his eyes more tightly shut, then slid down the bars to sit on the floor, his face pale and his head lowering in defeat.

Bliss smiled at that. And offering scant comfort, he said, "Never fear, Mr. Tanner. I'm sure it will all work out for the best in the end."

And tipping his hat low over his face and adjusting his coat so that the pistol hidden there was not digging into his hip, he settled himself comfortably on the cot, to await the next move in the game.

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~ CHAPTER TWENTY- SEVEN ~

When Nathan walked into the jail to discover his prisoners gone and Vin

Tanner and the Reverend Mordecai Bliss locked into the cell in their stead, he stood for a long moment, neither moving nor speaking. Then letting out a sigh that spoke of weariness too great to be borne, he said only, "How long ago did they escape?"

"An hour maybe," Bliss reported, his gaze focusing on the man sitting on the floor in front of the cell door, turned now to eye the weary healer, his shoulders tensed, his posture rigid.

Nathan stood a moment longer. Then with a slumping of his shoulders, he moved to the far desk and pawed through its bottom drawer, coming up with the spare set of keys. And crossing the office to the cell, he unlocked the door and swung it open. "Y'all come on out of there now," he commanded wearily. And when Vin continued to stand, eyeing him warily, he hardened his voice, saying, "I ain't got all day for this, now. I got me some prisoners to go fetch on top of everything else today, and I ain't in a mood to be waiting on y'all. So tell me what happened so's I can get a move on."

Vin sidled out of the cell then, moving with head down and shoulders hunched, Bliss limping at his back.

"The fault is mine," Bliss explained as he took a seat on one of the desks in the office, Vin moving to stand behind him, the desk between him and the one he'd failed.. "I'm afraid I neglected to take care in the distribution of silverware at the noon meal. And one of the prisoners took advantage of that fact."

Noting the dark stains above Vin's bandanna, Nathan frowned and said, "You mean Vin gave one of them fellers a knife and then let him get a hold of him."

It wasn't a question but a bald statement of fact known without the words needing to be spoken, the tone one of weary resignation.

"The fault was mine," Bliss repeated. "I should have taken care of the prisoners' lunch myself."

Nathan closed his eyes, and Vin eyed him anxiously from behind the desk on which Bliss was perched. Then, with another sigh, the healer opened his eyes and moved around the desk. "Let me have a look at your throat," he commanded the tracker in neutral tones. "I want to see if you need stitches."

Vin stood with head bowed and let him lower the bandanna, offering no resistance when Nathan then pushed his head up so that he could see the cuts on his throat. "They've already stopped bleeding," he said. Then letting both bandanna and head fall, he turned and started for the door.

Vin's head came up at that. "Nathan?" he called, his tone one of desperation. And when the healer turned to him, waiting with a closed and unwelcoming expression, he scrambled for words, his tongue tripping over them as he said, "I can find them."

Nathan shook his head and started again for the door, only to stop once more when Vin called after him, "I can!"

The words were more plea than assurance, a need in him not so much to make amends as to know he still had a place among the Seven, however precarious it might be. And reacting instinctively to that need, Nathan opened the door and stood waiting for him to join him.

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It took them nearly an hour to sort out the tracks left by the escaping prisoners, two for Vin to lose them and half of one for Nathan to realize that the tracker's silence wasn't a sign of a concentrated hunt, but that of a confused drifting, his horse having long since chosen its own path. And when he drew close enough to the tracker to catch sight of vacant eyes, he reached out a hand to take hold of the reins, drawing the horse to a stop.

"Vin, you with me?" he asked when the tracker gave no sign of awareness. "Vin!"

The tracker blinked his eyes at that, the blue orbs coming slowly into focus, his gaze drifting until it at last came to rest on his companion.

"You know where you are?" the healer asked.

Vin blinked again, his eyes showing more awareness now as he shifted his gaze to the desert landscape about them, his brows drawing down into a frown as he remembered where they were and why. Then, jerking his reins free of Nathan's grasp, he kicked his horse into motion, his frowning gaze now on the ground, searching for tracks. And ten minutes later, having found none ahead, he was forced to backtrack until he came upon the spot where the trail had been lost.

Twice more in the next hour his attention wandered, Nathan catching it early enough each time that the trail was not lost. But the healer had no doubt that Vin was nearing the end of his endurance, for his face was growing increasingly pale and his brow was drawing deeper and deeper into a frown of pain. He no sooner suggested, however, an end to their pursuit than the tracker sat up straight in his saddle with eyes flashing and lips compressed into an angry line.

"I can do it!" he furiously declared.

Nathan, however, shook his head. "Them cowboys is hours ahead of us by now. And you'll be dropping out of that saddle long before we catch up to them. So we'd best be getting back to town. We know which way them two are heading, so all's we have to do is wire ahead and let the sheriffs of any towns in that direction know to keep an eye peeled for them."

"No." One word, but years of stubborn behind it. And kicking his horse, Vin surged ahead.

"Vin Tanner!" Nathan called after him, kicking his own horse in his wake. "This ain't helping none. Now, I already got Buck sick back in town. I don't need you falling off your horse and busting your head open, taking up space I ain't got in my clinic. So stop this foolishness and come on back to town."

Pulling hard on his reins, Vin whirled his horse around to face his companion, his expression drawn in furious lines. "Ain't no dummy!" he snapped out. "I can do it!"

Nathan eased his own mount, reining it in a few feet in front of his companion's. "I ain't never said nothing about you being no dummy, Vin," he softly declared. "Not now. Not ever. And I ain't saying I don't think you can do this. But we're both dog-tired and we ain't got a lick of provisions between us, with night coming on before we got any hope of catching up to them two we're trailing. And what about Buck and the town? I don't like leaving either of them without someone to watch them. So we got to choose between going on and going back."

He waited then, leaving it to Vin to choose, and the tracker shifted his gaze back in the direction from which they had just come, then ahead, his bottom lip caught between his teeth, one hand rising to rub at his aching head. Then, need against need and want giving way to the greater of them, he gave in, seeming to shrink in his saddle, his voice whisper-soft as he said, "I didn't mean to." He rubbed his head again. "I try -- I just can't...."

Nathan urged his horse forward, stopping that time beside the tracker. "I know, Vin. I know you try. Ain't nobody tries harder than you do. But sometimes all the trying in the world just ain't enough. And not all the stubborn in the world can change that. So you got to maybe stop trying so hard sometimes. You got to leave go of some things and accept that they've got to be that way. Maybe not forever, but for now."

Vin was silent for a long moment, one hand still pressed to his head, his face hidden in the shadows beneath his hat. Then in a voice soft and plaintive, he said, "I don't like this."

Shifting his gaze to the brown scrubland around them, the only spot of color the summer sky above them fading into the long shadows of late afternoon, Nathan sighed and said, "Don't nobody like this, Vin. But we'll get through it. Same as we've gotten through anything else life ever threw at us. So you just hang on. And someday this all will be nothing more than a bad memory."

He kicked his horse into motion then, turning it back in the direction of town with a soft, "Come on, Vin. Let's get on home."

Vin gave a nod. But it was a long moment before he turned away from the trail ahead to return to what lay behind.

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It was dark by the time they made it back to town, Bliss stepping out of the shadows beneath the boardwalk to enquire as to their success -- or apparent lack thereof.

"They were too far ahead," Nathan wearily declared as he reined his horse in, Vin's stopping of its own accord beside him. "Had to turn back." Bliss shifted his gaze to the one riding silent and nearly asleep at the healer's side. "And Mr. Tanner?" he asked. "Is he all right?"

"Just plumb wore out," Nathan diagnosed. "I'll go check on Buck, then get him to bed."

"You look worn out yourself," Bliss pointed out in tones of concern.

"Why don't you let me tend to Mr. Tanner while you go ahead to the clinic. And if you'd like, I can stay the night with him again."

Nathan nodded, the movement almost more than he could manage. "I ain't going to argue with you none on that."

Bliss moved to Vin's side then, raising one hand to jostle his leg when he seemed unaware of his presence there. "Come, Mr. Tanner," he firmly urged. "Let's get you down from there and into the hotel and bed."

Rousing enough to half tumble from his horse, Nathan taking up its reins and moving away with it, Vin then allowed himself to be led into the hotel and up to bed. And sitting half asleep while Bliss tugged his boots off for him, he mournfully declared, "I didn't do it."

"No, Mr. Tanner, you did not," Bliss acknowledged. "But there will be other hunts."

A long sigh, and then: "I tried."

"I'm sure you did, son. As much as Mr. Jackson would allow, that is."

Vin eyed his companion with bleary confusion. "Buck's sick," he offered in explanation.

"Indeed," Bliss agreed, pushing to his feet with boots in hand. "And to a guardian of sheep, that would, I am sure, take precedence over the hunt. Understandable, but nonetheless regrettable. Still, as I said, there will be other hunts. Should, of course, you ever be allowed to slip your chains again."

Coming further awake, Vin looked up at the preacher, who set his boots down on the floor by his bed, then moved to douse the lamp on the table between beds before continuing. "Go to sleep now, Mr. Tanner, and dream of a more successful hunt. Your dreams, after all, are all that is allowed you here."

A faint light filtered in from the street, shadows playing along the wall, Bliss lost among them as he moved to the far side of the room. And straining to pick him out from the patches of darkness there, Vin frowned and uncertainly protested, "Nathan said...."

Bliss gave his jumbled thoughts and memories no chance to form. "Mr. Jackson said what?" he challenged. "That you will soon be back among them? That the chains with which they have bound you will soon be removed?"

He made a scoffing sound. "Do you know how long it has been since you have been relegated to a place among the sheep, Mr. Tanner?" Again he gave Vin no chance to reply. "Months, boy. And still you are as you have been and as you will always be."

Vin shook his head, the motion dimly visible in the faint light.

"Nathan said --" he tried again.

"Don't be a fool, boy!" Bliss hissed. "The guardians of sheep will say anything you want to hear, anything that will keep you from trying to

break free of their chains. Oh, they mean well by it, believe they do you a favor by holding out false hope, by keeping you safe in the fold. But you can't live on hope, any more than you can live forever on their charity. Sooner or later they will grow weary of your care. Or the town will relieve them of their duties and they shall scatter to the winds. And do you think the town will then abide your presence? Your days here are numbered, Mr. Tanner, your place in the fold a precarious one. When will you come to accept that? When they cast you out? When they lock you away? When?"

Pushing back in the bed until he hit up against the headboard, Vin shook his head repeatedly and tried again. "Nathan --"

"Nathan was ready to wash his hands of you this morning over a minor scuffle!" Bliss pointed out, his voice harsh and unyielding. "How do you think he will react now that you have allowed vicious criminals to escape the jail? How do you think Chris Larabee will react? He'll never give you your gun back. Never."

That time Vin made no attempt at protest, simply sat staring into the darkness surrounding Bliss, his mind growing numb as a chill crept through him.

"You'll be trapped among the sheep, Mr. Tanner," Bliss continued.

"Forever. Unless you break free of their guardians now."

Vin slid down in the bed at that, curling into himself, his hat tipping down to hide his face, his back now to the shadows in which Bliss hid. But there was no escaping the darkness stirring within, fears long held set free, trapping him between shadows and the dark. And when he at last fell into troubled sleep, dreams and visions haunting him, there was no escaping them.

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#### ~ CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT ~

Pleased the next morning upon awakening to find Tanner still there and burrowed beneath the covers of his bed, curled tightly into a protective ball, Bliss felt sure the ending of the game was near, his pawn very nearly his, little needed now to tip the balance in his favor. His next move, however, was forestalled when a knock came some time later at the hotel room door and he opened it to Buck Wilmington, looking a little pale still but the hard look in his eyes warning he was back in the game.

"Good morning, Mr. Wilmington," Bliss said with every appearance of welcome. "I'm relieved to see you are on the mend." He stepped back to allow the other man entrance. "Won't you come in?"

Buck stepped into the room with a nod, his gaze going immediately to Vin, who stood shaving now before a mirror propped on the dresser, his reflected eyes on the new arrival anxious.

"We were just about to go to breakfast," Bliss said from his place at the door. "Would you care to join us?"

Buck, however, had another move in mind. "Thanks, Reverend. But me and Vin got some talking we need to do. So why don't you go on ahead."

"Certainly," Bliss agreed with ease, undaunted by the change in plans, sure of his hold on his pawn. "I'll be nearby should you have further need of me." He collected his hat then and tipped it to both men. And with that, he limped away.

Closing the door behind him, Buck gave an exaggerated shudder. Then turning to Vin, who continued to watch him in the mirror, razor held still and eyes wide, he moved to sit on the bed, stretching his long legs out on it as he said, "You don't need to look like you just been caught kissing the mayor's wife there, pard. I didn't come here to get on you about what happened yesterday. What's done is done and them two yahoos will turn up again sooner or later. So don't you worry about it."

And when Vin continued to wait, his eyes on him still anxious, Buck smiled and tried again. "Relax. I don't really have anything I need to talk to you about. I just used that as an excuse to get rid of the Reverend." And when Vin blinked his confusion, he shrugged and added, "The man

just don't set right with me. No offense if you've taken a liking to him, but he kind of reminds me of a vulture, circling up in the sky looking for something to feed on."

"A crow," Vin softly corrected, his gaze losing some of its focus.

Buck cocked his head at him. "You see it too?" He moved a hand behind his back to settle a pillow more comfortably beneath him. Then setting off on a snake hunt, he said, "Tell me why it is he's always hanging around you, Vin. He wants something -- I can feel it, and have since that first night in the saloon when the two of you sat jawing for hours. I just can't figure out what it is though. And I have to admit, it's got me worried."

But Vin only stared blankly into the mirror, his vision clouding still more as his mind tracked through the dark to visions stirring there, too deep yet in the shadows for him to be able to pick out more than the faintest of outlines.

"What's he up to?" Buck continued to press. "What do the two of you even begin to have in common?"

"The hunt," Vin said without thought, still lost in the shadows. Then as he realized what he'd said, his eyes flashed to Buck's in the mirror in alarm.

Buck, however, assumed the obvious. And wrinkling his brow, he said, "He likes to hunt? He don't strike me as the kind that would take too well to stalking through the woods after deer." He shook his head, then tried again. "What else do you two talk about?"

The previous night's conversation with Bliss running through his mind, Vin turned to the man on the bed and sought to ease the fears stirred and refusing to give up their hold on him. "When, Buck?"



"When what?"

Vin waved his razor around as he searched out the words needed. "When will I...? When....?" Then letting out his breath in frustration, he said, "It's too long!"

Buck didn't need to hear the words he couldn't speak, needed only to see the need in the blue eyes turned pleadingly on him to know what was being asked. And softly he said, "It hasn't been all that long, Vin. I know it seems like it, but it hasn't. And you're getting better all the time. Why, before you know it, you'll be back riding with the rest of us same as always. You just have to give it some time."

Vin shook his head and firmly declared, "Now."

"Not now," Buck just as firmly refused. "But soon. You'll see. And in the meantime, we'll all help you get back what you've lost, same as we've been doing."

Again Vin shook his head, and again Buck insisted that all would be well. "It's going to happen," he insisted, believing it as much as he believed in the man before him. "You just got to be patient and trust us to take care of you in the meantime."

It was the wrong thing to say, Vin's eyes flashing as he heatedly declared, "I can take care of myself!"

Buck took in the vision of independence before him, feet bare, face half-shaven, shirt looking as if it had been buttoned by a four year old new to the art of dressing himself, and hair tangled and unruly beneath his hat. And biting back a laugh, he said, "Why don't you finish getting dressed, pard. Then we'll go take care of some breakfast. What do you say?" And when Vin only glared at him, he tried a cajoling smile. "You wouldn't make a sick man go hungry, now would you?"

Refusing to be charmed out of his irritation so easily, Vin chuffed out a breath, sending a spray of shaving cream flying. He then turned back to the mirror, bringing the razor up and down on one cheek, only to let out a yelp when it nicked the skin. And sending another glare to Buck via the mirror, daring him to say a word, he tried again -- with the same result.

"Now, hey!" Buck protested, unable to resist that time. "You might want to leave some skin on that face of yours. Got to have something for that scraggle you call a beard to hang onto." He got up from the bed and crossed the room to the bleeding man of independence. And taking hold of the razor, he said, "Why don't you let me have a go at it?"

Vin snatched the razor back, growling, "I can do it!"

"I know you can, pard. But in the state you're in, it just ain't safe."

Buck made another grab for the razor, only to jump back with a yelp of his own, Vin having jabbed an elbow into his ribs. "Okay, fine," he then conceded, raising the arm not wrapped around his ribs in surrender.

"You want to do it, then do it. I'll leave you alone. I'll just go sit over yonder and count my broken ribs." He moved back to the bed, sitting

down on it to gingerly press a hand to his side, wincing with careful exaggeration.

Satisfied that he would be allowed to shave in peace, Vin turned back to his mirror. And three yelps and ten minutes later, he was not only shaved, but fully dressed as well.

Not daring to point out the mismatched buttons on his shirt, Buck then followed him to the saloon, where Nathan was already ensconced at a table, his breakfast half finished. And taking one look at Vin's nicked face and disordered shirt as he sat down in the chair next to him, he grinned and said, "You get into an argument with a wildcat or something? And don't tell me it lost, 'cause the only way I'll believe that is if you tell me it run off with its coat on inside out."

When Vin merely stared at him in confusion, he reached over to unbutton his shirt, only to snatch his hands back in surprise when they got slapped.

"Careful, Nate," Buck warned with a shrug. "Mr. Sunshine here got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning, and he's been taking wrong turns ever since."

"Were some of them wrong turns into his razor?" Nathan asked with a pointed look to the annoyed tracker's face.

"Yeah. And into my ribs too."

Nathan raised an eyebrow. "He upset about yesterday?"

"I reckon. And he's getting a mite impatient, wanting things to get back to the way they were."

"You tell him it's going to take some time?"

Buck nodded. But before he could say more, Vin slammed one hand down on the table. "I'm here!" he heatedly pointed out.

Both men turned to him, Buck first with his apology. "Sorry about that, pard. We didn't mean to talk around you. And you got my word that it won't happen again."

"I'm sorry, too," Nathan added. "Guess I'm so used to relying on other people to speak for patients that sometimes I forget they can speak for themselves."

Up went Vin's chin at that. "Ain't no patient! Don't need no doctor. Don't need nobody!"

"Yeah, Vin," Buck agreed in a mollifying tone. "You can take care of yourself. We know that. And no one's suggesting otherwise. Nathan's just being Nathan, now, worrying about everyone and everything, figuring there's not a man born who don't need him worrying after him."

"That's right," Nathan agreed. "I didn't mean nothing by that." Then seeing Inez approaching with two plates, he added, "So settle on down and eat you some breakfast."

Inez slipped the plates onto the table in front of the two newcomers with a smile for each. But Vin only frowned at his eggs. And pushing the plate away, he mutinously declared, "Don't want eggs."

"What are you talking about?" Nathan challenged in surprise. "You always eat eggs for breakfast. Ain't never seen you eat nothing else."  
"Don't want them!" Vin repeated with a growl, his frown shifting to the healer.

Nathan sighed. "Fine. You don't want eggs, you don't got to eat them. Just tell Inez what you do want and she'll go fix it for you."

Inez gave him another smile. "What would you like, Senor Vin? Some frijoles perhaps?"

He shook his head, not knowing what he wanted beyond the right to pick and choose, even if just the food on his plate, to once again have some measure of control over his life. And at last, unable to make up his mind, to track his way from need to want and on to thought and beyond, he pushed away from the table with a hard shove, dishes rattling and coffee sloshing in Nathan's cup from the force of it. Then standing with another growl, he stalked off.

"Where you going?" the healer called after him. "You ain't had nothing to eat!"

Buck, too, pushed out of his chair. "Don't worry, Nate. I got him." And with that he hurried after the rapidly departing tracker, catching up to him on the boardwalk outside, Vin not so much as sending a glare his way to acknowledge his presence.

"You mind telling me where we're going?" Buck asked in an amiable tone, sounding for all the world as if they were out for a companionable stroll.

"Not we," Vin snapped out, gaze still straight ahead. "Me."

"Okay," Buck conceded without argument. "Then do you mind telling me where you're going?"

Vin, however, had no idea, had left the saloon with no thought beyond escaping from, with none for escaping to. So he made no reply, simply kept walking.

Buck tried again. "Look, I understand how you feel." That brought Vin's head around, his eyes fixing his companion with an accusing glare. And with a sigh, Buck conceded the point. "Okay, so maybe I don't understand how you feel. And I reckon I haven't been doing too good a job at guessing either. But you going on the prickle like this isn't helping me or anyone else to understand what you're going through. So why don't you hold on here and tell me what's going on in that head of yours. You never know -- I might be able to help. And if I can't help, then maybe I can at least understand some better."

His eyes once again focused resolutely ahead, Vin nonetheless slowed down in his headlong rush to nowhere but away, trying to make sense of the chaos in his head, sure of nothing but that things were not as they were supposed to be, nor as they had always been, and hating the maelstrom of thoughts and emotions and memories fighting all to be heard. Words wouldn't come to him, kept getting lost or twisted, even within his

own mind. And while he'd never been one to depend on words, had never before had anyone in need of them from him, they had always at least been there, however dusty and ill-used. Now he was a prisoner to chaos, unable to reach out to others and a stranger to himself. He would have told Buck that, would have admitted to the fear that seemed to be the largest part of him: that he would never again be himself. But he didn't have the words, couldn't bring order to the fear or the grief or the anger, couldn't think. So he continued moving ahead in search of more than what he had or had lost. And Buck stayed with him, refusing to let him make that journey alone.

"You're going to run out of town here soon," he pointed out with a slow smile as he continued to pace his companion. "So you're either going to have to turn around and head back the way we come or we're going to end up kicking sand in our boots."

Vin stopped at that, realizing the futility of his flight, able to escape the town and the men who had always made it worth calling home, but having nowhere to hide from himself. And dropping to the steps at the end of that section of boardwalk, he sat still and dejected.

"Now, come on," Buck gently chided, joining him on the steps. "I know it seems like you're never going to see the end of this. But you're already lots better than you were. And you're getting better all the time. You just got to be patient and wait things out, same as you've always done."

He slipped an arm around Vin's shoulders then and gave him a brief shake of encouragement. "Now, what do you say we wait things out over at the saloon? You can order whatever you like for breakfast and we'll put in on Ezra's tab. That sound good?"

Vin thought it sounded no better nor worse than remaining in place, so he started to nod his uncaring acceptance of the invitation. But as he turned his head to Buck, he looked beyond him to the alley and froze. Then slowly he turned to study the street and buildings around them, making sure of his place, his eyes growing wide and his face paling as he turned back to the alley where his wagon had once stood.

Only a few barrels took up space there now and those not even his. His wagon was gone and all that it held of his life. Gone and he'd never noticed until that moment, hadn't thought of it once. His gun taken from him and locked away. His home disappeared. All those pieces of himself missing and him without a thought for their loss until long after. How could he not have known? How could he have been so utterly lost to himself that he had never even noticed? And what else remained lost to him still?

Unable to move or to think or to feel beyond the loss of all that was his of home in the world, of all that he was and had lived, he sat, Buck's arm around him unnoticed, his presence there forgotten until his arm again tightened, this time in concern, and he worriedly said, "Hey,

Vin? You okay? You're looking a mite peaked there."

Vin turned to him then, eyes wide with his loss and saying all that words couldn't. And with a softening of his features and a look into the empty alley, Buck again tightened his grip on him and said, "It's okay, Vin. Your wagon is out at Chris' shack. We figured it would be safer out there."

Vin blinked, needing time for the words to sink in. Then shifting his gaze from the alley to Buck and to the road leading to Chris' small homestead in the hills above town, he pushed up from the boardwalk, climbing back up to it and marching off.

Buck scrambled to catch up to him, sure he knew what was on his mind.

"Now, you don't have to go out there, pard. All your stuff is safe, all right and tight. And if there's anything you need, you just let Chris know and he'll bring it to town for you just as soon as he gets back."

That wasn't enough, wasn't nearly enough. Vin didn't want his things back, he wanted his life back. So he continued his determined march ahead, stepping off the boardwalk to cross to the livery stable.

A hand on one arm stopped him though, and pulled him back onto the boardwalk. "Now, don't not go rushing off half-cocked," Buck warned. "Let's go over to the saloon and talk this out."

Vin, however, only knocked his hand away and turned once more to go after what was his.

"Damn it, Tanner!" Buck hissed as he caught hold of the determined tracker again. "You aren't going after that wagon and that's all there is to it! So forget any ideas you got rattling around in that head of yours about camping out in that damned alley again, with nothing between you and some mangy bounty hunter but a ratty piece of canvas and a prayer. It just ain't going to happen!"

Vin turned again, this time his free arm coming up in a swing, fear and anger and loss behind it, his fist connecting with Buck's jaw with enough force to knock him to the boardwalk in a daze. And with one last glare, he stalked off, crossing the road to the livery. He'd no more than reached it though than a soft voice called out of the shadows there stopping him.

"Have you slipped your chains then, Mr. Tanner?" the Reverend Bliss asked as he moved into the light, stepping down from the boardwalk beside the livery. "Is the wolf ready to run free again?"

Vin stood in the dust of the street, ten feet from the stable doors, his gaze shifting from the preacher to Buck, who struggled to his feet on the boardwalk with the aid of one of the townspeople. And no longer sure of his direction, he turned back to the one who waited for a choice to be made.

"Choose," Bliss softly continued, the game now to be won or lost. "Make the choice or it will be made for you. Choose between the sheep and the wild, between chains and freedom. Between all that others would have

you be and all that is in you. Choose, Mr. Tanner. Choose!"

A demand. An escape offered. A loss prevented and a loss guaranteed. To go back or move ahead. To reclaim his life or lose it. The decision his and only one voice in his ear to make an argument for or against. And looking neither behind nor ahead, Vin remained in place, listening.

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~ Endure the Night ~

by jann

~ CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE ~

"Now is your chance, Mr. Tanner," Bliss continued when Vin remained in place. "You can ride out of here and reclaim all that is yours, all that has been taken from you. You can escape your chains and all that binds you to this place. You can be free. So ride out and don't look back." Vin started to turn, to look over his shoulder to Buck. But Bliss stopped him with a hissed warning. "He'll stop you, Mr. Tanner. He's tried already. And if you give him another chance, he'll succeed. Then where will you be but back in their chains? And if that happens, they'll never let you escape them again. Never. So take your chance now or lose it forever."

That time it was to the stable Vin's gaze turned.

"Do it now, Mr. Tanner," Bliss urged as Buck took an unsteady step in their direction. "Do it now or submit once again to their chains."

Unable to turn back, to accept that what was would always be, Vin moved in the only direction he could, determined to reclaim some small piece of what he had lost, giving no thought to how much he would have to leave behind in order to do so. And taking one step forward, then another, he moved ahead. But no sooner had he reached the open door to the stable than a soft voice stopped him, speaking one word only, but with all that he would lose in the saying of it.

"Vin?"

He turned to find Chris Larabee a dozen feet away in the street, looking down at him from the back of his dusty horse. Josiah was there as well, with Buck coming up behind them and Bliss still to the side. But it was only Chris that Vin saw, only the question in his eyes, an unspoken demand to know if he was going to run out on him.

All else forgotten then, Vin moved back towards all that had kept him in that town, all that had made it worth the risk of remaining in one place so long, Bliss behind him now and moving back into the shadows to stand and watch and consider the game so nearly won. And moving to Chris' side, Vin raised one hand to his horse's neck, laying it there gently.

Chris gave a nod in response, all that needed to be said known, his gaze flicking then to the man in the shadows, his eyes narrowing in a warning he could not have put into words. Bliss, however, only returned the

gaze with an unblinking one of his own, having no intention of conceding the game. And challenge offered and accepted, Chris dismissed the man

for the moment. He then swung down from his horse and would have fallen had Vin not reached out to steady him.

"Chris?" the tracker asked in alarm, noting then the left arm tucked into Larabee's shirt, a dark stain on the sleeve attesting to some injury.

"I'm fine," Chris quickly declared. "Just ran into a little trouble on the trail."

"Sandoval?" Buck guessed, moving to take a look at the injured arm.

"Yep," Josiah acknowledged as he too dismounted and took hold of the reins Chris had loosed. "He got stupid. Then he got dead."

"J. D.?" Buck asked, looking up again. "And Ezra?"

"They're taking the rest of the gang on to meet the prison wagon. They should be here in another day or two."

Buck nodded, satisfied. Then reaching for Chris' right arm, he said, "We'd best be getting you up to the clinic. Got to warn you though, Nathan ain't going to be happy."

Vin, however, refused to relinquish his hold on the injured man, shooting a glare to Buck when he would have taken his place at Chris' side. He then gently pulled him forward.

"It's okay," Chris protested, trying to pull his arm free of Vin's firm hold. "I can walk by myself."

A growl was the only warning he got that Vin had no intention of letting go of him until Nathan declared it safe to do so. So with a glare of his own to Buck, who stood grinning in wicked delight, he allowed himself to be led to the clinic like an old man on his last legs. He refused though to lie down on the bed as commanded, sitting on the edge of it instead while Vin hovered over him like a maiden aunt over a blushing bride. And when Nathan appeared a few minutes later, Buck at his back still grinning, Chris growled out a cease and desist order to the anxious tracker. Vin, however, only moved far enough away to allow Nathan access to the wounded man.

"You got a bullet in there?" the healer asked as he cut the bloodied sleeve open to reveal a bandage beneath.

"No. Just took a nick out of it is all."

"You lose a lot of blood?"

"Not much."

Nathan started on the bandage next. "Your arm hurting?"

"Some."

Chris considered another choice of words then as Nathan tugged on the bandage, which had dried to the wound. And when he tried on a number of curses for size, Vin grabbed hold of Nathan's wrist with a growl.

"Take it easy," the healer soothed, letting go of the bandage. "I ain't

going to pull on it no more." Then turning to look over his shoulder to Buck, he said, "Pour some water into that basin on the table over there and bring it here, along with one of them rags."

Vin let go of him then, watching suspiciously when Buck handed over the requested items.

"I'm going to have to soak that bandage off him," Nathan explained as he placed the rag in the basin of water. "That's the only way to get it off without hurting him." Then with a pause and a look to Vin, he said, "That okay with you?"

Vin shot a look to Chris, who sat biting back any further colorful descriptive phrases with an obvious effort. Then turning back to Nathan, he uncertainly asked, "It won't hurt?"

The healer shook his head. "I'll be careful as I can be. And if it even starts to hurt, I'll stop. Okay?"

Vin hesitated only briefly before nodding his permission. And while Nathan worked on soaking the bandage off Chris' arm, he watched the injured man for the least sign of pain, his right hand hovering, ready to stop the ministrations should it prove necessary.

Fortunately for all concerned, the bandage came off with ease that time.

"I'm going to have to clean it now," Nathan warned the hovering tracker once he'd inspected the wound and declared it in no need of stitching.

"And there ain't no way that ain't going to hurt. So maybe you'd best go over to the saloon with Buck and wait 'til I'm done."

"No," Vin firmly declared.

"It's okay," Chris told him. "You go get a bottle of whiskey set up for me and I'll be along in a few minutes."

"No!" Vin repeated, that time in a tone of warning.

"All right," Nathan conceded. "But if you stay, you ain't going to throw a fit when Chris gets to hurting. You understand? This has got to be done and there ain't no way around it. So you sit down on that bed and hold Chris' arm steady as you can. And don't you go giving me none of them glares of his you been practicing on neither."

Vin did as commanded, sitting down at Chris' right side, both hands taking gentle hold of his arm, both above and below the wound. And when Nathan picked up a bottle and started pouring the contents over the wound, he closed his eyes and held on tight, his face paling more than Chris' when the injured man let out a string of curses that never once repeated themselves.

"I'm thinking it's not just Chris that's in need of some reviving over at the saloon," Buck pointed out in amusement when Nathan had to pry the tracker's hands loose of their hold so that he could bandage Chris' arm.

"And while we're reviving," Chris managed to hiss between gritted teeth, "maybe you can explain how you came by that swollen jaw of yours."



Nathan simply shook his head. "Can't turn my back on none of you for five minutes what you don't go walking into a bullet or a fist or some kind of trouble or other. I ought to start charging you is what I ought to do. I could retire then. Wouldn't have to go fixing up fools no more. Could sleep through the night instead of sitting up with people who ain't got sense enough to stay in one piece. Could sit and rock the day away instead of digging out bullets or fixing up broken bones or stitching y'all back together. Wouldn't have so many gray hairs then neither." "Hell, Nathan," Buck protested with a wink to the two on the bed. "You'd die of boredom if you didn't have us around to make life interesting."

"Interesting? That what you call patching up a passel of fools every week? It ain't what I call it. Can't rightly say just what I'd call it neither, since my momma didn't raise me to say them kind of words. But then I reckon if she'd ever met you six she'd be saying them herself."

Nathan shook his head. "Interesting, the man calls it. Lord, I don't know which of the lot of them's the bigger fool!"

"Well," Buck huffed. "Guess that means you're not interested in a fool buying you a drink then."

"A drink?" Nathan echoed with scorn. "All of y'all owe me a lot more than that. And I aim to start collecting, too. Starting with that drink." He got up and thumped the basin down on the table. Then collecting a sling, he tossed it at Chris. "Drinking at this time of the morning," he grouched. "See what y'all have done to me? Ain't hardly finished breakfast and already I'm needing a drink. Next thing you know I'll be chasing after every woman in town or cheating at cards. Or maybe I'll start to wearing a funny hat. And Lord help me if I start to glaring at folks for no more reason than that they're taking up too much of my space." He moved to the door and opened it. Then turning to the men watching him with varying levels of wariness, he said, "What are y'all waiting on? Am I going to get that drink or not?"

"Sure you are, Nate," Buck assured the irate healer as he hustled to the door. "Why, I'll even buy you two drinks. And knowing Ezra like I do, I'd be willing to bet he'd like nothing more than to buy the next couple of rounds after that himself. J. D., too. So you just come along with ol' Buck and have you some fun for a change."

"Ha!" Nathan scoffed as he allowed himself to be led out of the clinic.

"Knowing you, I'll probably end up ducking chairs after you start a fight with whatever fool's handiest. Well, you'd best make sure I get my drink before you do or you can patch up your own self. And you for damn sure better be buying me the good stuff and not that rotgut you're always drinking."

"It just so happens that I know where Inez keeps the good stuff stashed," Buck soothed. "That stuff she buys special for Ezra. And I don't reckon he'd mind at all if we were to have us a little taste of it."

Chris would have followed then, slipping his arm into the sling and getting unsteadily to his feet. But when he stood waiting for Vin to join him, the tracker only bowed his head and unhappily said, "It's my fault."

"What's your fault?" Chris asked in confusion.

"Nathan's mad."

"He ain't mad at you, Vin. Hell, he ain't even really mad at all. He just don't like seeing us get hurt, is all. And I reckon he figures he can scare us into staying out of trouble for at least the next couple of days if he acts ornery enough."

Vin shook his head. "They got away and I did it. And then I couldn't find them. I tried, but I couldn't."

"Who got away? And what did you do?"

Vin raised his head again, his eyes filled with a fear and a sorrow that spoke far more than his next words. "It's true, ain't it, Chris? I am a dummy."

To no one else would he have voiced that fear, for to no one else would he entrust that piece of himself, from no one else could he expect a truth that would change nothing of what lay between them.

Aware of what was being asked, Chris sat back down on the bed and gave as much of the truth as he had in him to give. "You ain't a dummy, Vin," he firmly stated. "And don't let me ever hear you say that again."

"But I can't do it!"

"Do what?" And when Vin only shook his head and lowered it again, Chris softly said, "Look at my arm, cowboy, and tell me if you think I could do any arm wrestling now."

Vin shot a look to the arm in the sling and frowned, saying, "It's hurt."

"That's right. And until it heals, there's going to be certain things I can't do, no matter how much I might want to do them or how hard I try. But that don't mean I'll never do them again. It just means I have to wait and let what's hurt get well again. And it's the same for you. You got hurt and now you have to wait and let what's hurt get well again."

Vin considered his words for a long moment. Then, his eyes moving up to Chris', he said, "How long?"

It wasn't a question Chris could answer, wasn't one he wanted to answer. But he knew it was a question needing to be asked. So he did the best he could. "I don't know how long. It might be a while yet."

Vin sighed. Then, accepting that answer for the moment, he returned to his original thought, woefully saying, "I don't like Nathan being mad."

Glad for the change in subject, Chris hurried once again to reassure the unhappy tracker. "Nathan ain't mad. I told you that already."

But Vin had more worries stored up and needing to be dealt with.

"Buck's mad too."

"Buck? Why should he be mad?"

Vin ducked his head again, his hat brim hiding his face from view. "I hit him."

"You hit Buck? Why?"

"It was gone and I wanted it back and now I'll never get it back."

Chris tried to work his way through that one and couldn't. "Vin, you ain't making a whole lot of sense here. What was gone?"

"My wagon. It's gone. Everything's gone and I'll never get it back."

Glad of something that could be so easily dealt with, Chris attempted to ease the tracker's fears. "Vin, your wagon ain't gone. It's out at my place. And you can have it back any time you want."

Vin looked up then, his jaw set in firm lines. "It's mine."

It was his and all he had -- and Chris knew it wasn't the wagon and its contents to which the tracker was staking claim but all that it represented of his life. Too much had been taken from him by too many people.

So while what he had wasn't much, it was his and all that he was. And Chris would be damned if he'd let anyone take one thing more from him.

"I know it's yours," he said. "And I won't let anyone take it from you. I promise."

Again Vin considered the words offered, knowing all that lay behind them. But still there was a piece of his life withheld from him. "And my gun?"

Chris shook his head. "You'll get it back, Vin. Just not now."

"It's mine!"

The words were as much a demand as a claim. His gun. His life. And neither yet his to control.

"I know it's yours," Chris acknowledged, aware of the shaky ground on which he now stood. "But you ain't any more ready for it than I am to do any arm wrestling. And those are the facts, Vin, whether we like it or not. So until Nathan says different, we both have to wait." He tilted his head. "You reckon you can do that?"

Never before had Vin Tanner given another man control of his life. He'd had it taken maybe, but had never freely handed it over. He'd stayed alive as long as he had by his own doing, by making his own mistakes but never twice, by failing and falling and getting up to risk being knocked down again. All that he had, he'd fought for. All that he was, he'd only himself to thank for it or blame. And now he was being asked to trust himself to another, to go against all that had so far kept him alive.

It was too much to ask. It was more than he had to give. And almost he got up and walked away.

But, as always, freedom had its price. And the need in him refused to pay it that time, refused to give in to the fear that had nearly sent him running earlier. He had feared losing himself by staying, by allowing one more thing to be taken from him. He had fought against that which held him in place, forgetting in his fear that the bonds that held him

were of his own choosing. And to break free of those bonds, he would first have to let go his hold of the six men who held on to him just as tightly.

He would be free, but he would be alone.

It was too much to ask. It was more than he could allow himself to lose. So he tightened his hold on the bonds that kept him in place. And raising his chin, he gave himself over to the man who sat waiting, his brows drawing down into a scowl that warned that while the battle might have been won, the rest of the war would be hard fought.

"Don't like it," he growled.

Chris smiled, the terms of surrender noted and approved. "I'll take that as a 'yes,'" he said. And standing up again he added, "Now, you reckon you can stand to go on down to the saloon and drink some of the good stuff Ezra's going to buy us?"

Vin gave another scowl, the next skirmish already commenced. "Want a beer."

Chris laughed that time, the sound one of relief and of a delight in the battles to come. "A beer it is then," he conceded. "Now come on and let's go before Nathan drinks all the good stuff."

Vin looked up, his face fully revealed beneath his hat. "I would have come back," he softly said of his earlier attempted flight.

"I know you would," Chris just as softly replied. "And just so you know -- I'd have come after you."

He moved to the door then and stood waiting. And getting up from the bed, Vin crossed the room to him, one hand going to his uninjured arm in an offer of support. The gesture was unnecessary, but Chris leaned into Vin's hold nonetheless, giving himself over to his keeping as surely as Vin had given himself over to his. And together, they headed to the saloon and the companionship waiting there for them.

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~ CHAPTER THIRTY ~

Vin continued to hover all the rest of that day, nearly coming to blows with Nathan when he tried to send Chris off alone to get some rest after a few drinks at the saloon that morning. It was only Chris' assertion that the two of them could look after one another that averted disaster. So off they'd gone to their room at the hotel, Vin supporting Chris and Chris letting him, neither of them aware of the dark form across the road watching them from beneath the boardwalk, nor the dark look sent their way.

Evening found them sitting outside the saloon, a bottle and two glasses on the table between them but neither drinking much, simply sitting there in silence taking in the slow setting of the sun and the distant rumble of an approaching storm. It was so much like many a night spent in each other's company that Chris almost forgot that anything had changed, that anything had been lost and might never be found again.

And so they sat as the dark descended and the town grew quiet around them, only the noise from the saloon at their backs offering proof that they weren't alone in all the world. Then the storm drew closer, lightning flashing in the sky with increasing frequency and the air blowing in cool before it, and a tension seemed to build. Chris thought at first it was the storm and that change in the weather that could sometimes be felt coming. But after a time he realized that what was building up was not the storm but something in Vin, something that held him still but on edge, straining to hold something back, like a dam just before giving way to a superior force. And watching him watching the night sky, he asked what was wrong.

"You got something working in that head of yours, cowboy?" he asked, his tone light but with concern behind it.

Vin paid him no mind, seemed not even to have heard the question, his mind flashing in beat to the lightning and thunder, his body chilling to the lowering temperatures that were no more than barely cool. For every flash in the night sky, there was a corresponding one in his mind, visions and dreams coming to life but without form, a summer night melding into a spring one, past and present confused and confusing, nothing existing but the chaos.

Chris tried again, leaning forward over the table to lay a hand on Vin's shoulder, shaking it to get his attention. "Hey, cowboy. Where'd you go?"

After another shake of his shoulder, Vin slowly dragged his gaze from the night sky to his companion, neither eyes nor mind focused. And letting both drift away again, he shifted his gaze beyond the spill of light from the saloon and into the darkness beyond, a movement there catching his eye, his mind struggling to make sense of it. Then the dark was torn by a blinding flash of light, a sharp crack of thunder accompanying it. Both men jumped and a scream sounded from the saloon, one of the working girls having apparently taken exception to the near strike. Laughter followed, the men inside finding amusement in the girl's fright. But Vin was unaware of it, was unaware of anything but the scream that continued to echo inside his head, one scream becoming two and then one again. Lightning flashed, lighting the dark street but also a dark room, the vision of it half-remembered and unrecognized, an even darker shape taking form in both. Then came more flashes, these inside his mind only: the glint of a gold lion's head, the beat of a crow's wings, fire and pain and a darkness that had a terror of the known in it -- bits and pieces of a whole he had yet to grasp. But whatever else was lost to him, the fear remained. And pushing out of his chair with enough force to send it crashing to the boardwalk behind him, he stood, his eyes on the dark shape approaching.

"Vin?" Chris asked in alarm, the figure at a distance behind him unnoticed. "What's wrong?"

His question, however, went unheard, Vin moving a step back and another, his gaze never wavering from the one who was a part of the darkness and confusion and pain. A crow's wings beat, a scream shrilled, thunder crashed. And the dark form drew closer.

He turned then and ran, into the street and away from what lay behind and within.

Chris called out his name, even as he stood and started after him. But it was Buck Wilmington who grabbed hold of him, stepping out of an alleyway after an early night of pleasure, his arms going fast around the fleeing man. He no sooner stopped his heedless flight, though, than Vin struck out, arms and legs in motion, fighting against he knew not what, knowing only the need to escape. Then Chris was there as well, helping Buck to hold him, shouting out his fear and concern, wanting to know what was wrong. But the words went unheard. And at last, knowing nothing else to do, the two men took the struggling tracker down to the ground, pinning him there face down as he continued to fight them, growls turning to sharp cries of distress when his efforts availed him nothing. Then he grew silent and still but for a trembling that was not of the coolness of the night nor the effort just expended.

After a minute, Chris pulled him up, kneeling in the dirt of the street before him, hands on his shoulders to support and hold him, and face pale as he said, "What's going on, cowboy? What are you running from?" A dark shape stood in the shadows beneath the boardwalk, listening. But Vin was no longer aware of anything but the darkness closing in.

With a sharp crack of thunder then, the rain came, pelting the men in the street with hard stinging drops. And with one accord, Chris and Buck pulled Vin to his feet and hurried him to the hotel, unaware of the dark shape watching.

Vin made no protest, offered no resistance, merely went where he was led, sitting on a chair in the room when gently pushed into it, his eyes and mind both now blank. Off went his coat and hat, his boots, shirt and soaked pants following, and he was unaware of it, was unaware when he was led to the bed, and the quilt there drawn over him.

"Should I go fetch Nathan?" Buck then asked, looking with worried eyes at the man in the bed staring at nothing even he could see.

"Might be a good idea," Chris agreed. Then when Buck was gone, he sat on the edge of Vin's bed and softly said, "Talk to me, cowboy. Tell me what got you so spooked."

When Vin made no move, when no flicker of recognition lit his eyes, he felt a stab of fear that all the ground gained had been lost, that Vin was as he had been months previously, alone in some place far beyond their reach. In desperation then, he got up from the bed and bent over the pile of wet clothes that had been tossed into one corner, searching through them until he found Vin's harmonica. And returning to once again sit on the edge of the bed, he blew softly into it, his eyes on the man

lying still and pale and unaware.

He expected the familiar sound to work as it always had, to break through whatever fog held Vin captive. But note followed note and the tracker's eyes remained blank. And finally he gave it up, the harmonica lowering to his lap, his gaze fastened on the one lost to him.

Needing then to hold on to him, as if he could thereby keep him from drifting away beyond his reach, Chris laid a hand on a quilt-covered leg, pressing hard, fingers massaging tensed muscle. He spoke then, telling the tracker of some long ago day when his world had been whole and complete, the words unimportant, all that lay behind them both promise and plea.

The rain pounded on the thin roof of the hotel and streamed down the windows, the drops shimmering in the flashes of lightning. Beyond that room was darkness and storm. But within was warmth and safety. And by the time Nathan arrived, Buck with him still, the darkness within had begun to recede. Gentle hands and murmured voices of concern then became Vin's world. And giving himself over to it, he closed his eyes and turned into the warmth of the quilt, drawing it close about him. Then a touch and a familiar voice called to him, kept him from drifting away into sleep.

He opened his eyes, turning them up to the man sitting on the edge of his bed, one hand on his shoulder, green eyes worried on him.

"You back with us now?" Chris asked.

Vin blinked at him, trying to remember where he had gone.

"Talk to me, cowboy," the soft voice continued. "Let us know you're here."

Another blink and then a sleepy, "You're wet."

Chris smiled at that, relieved. And behind him, a grinning Buck said, "Ol' Larabee still hasn't figured out that he can't glare the raindrops away from him. Reckon maybe next time he'll try shooting them full of holes to keep them off."

Vin blinked again. Then it was Nathan's turn.

"You feeling all right?" he asked.

"Sleepy," Vin murmured, eyes closing again and turning once more to the warmth of the quilt.

Nathan, however, pulled him back, saying, "You can go to sleep in a minute. Right now though I need to know what happened down in the street."

Vin frowned in confusion, unwilling to give up the warmth. Then thunder crashed and images once again flashed in his mind. He froze, eyes opening but unseeing, his face paling again.

"Oh no you don't," Nathan warned, taking hold of Vin's chin and turning his head so that he was facing him, shaking him in gentle admonishment.

"You ain't taking off on us again, now. You ain't going to get away from whatever it is you got going on in that brain of yours. So you look at me and tell me what's happening."

Vin turned unfocused eyes to the healer, a hand reaching up to take hold of one arm, needing the feel of something solid and real. And tracking his way from image to vision, he tried to make sense of it. "He was there," he said at last, his voice soft and low.

"Who was?" Nathan asked.

"The crow."

Chris gave a sigh. "There wasn't a crow," he assured the confused man in the bed. "It was dark. The crows all went to bed hours ago. You know that."

His voice rising with a firm certainty, Vin insisted, "He was there! It was dark and he was there."

"Okay," Chris soothingly conceded. "But why are you so scared of a crow? What do you think it's going to do?"

Another blink and a frown. "I don't...." Vin trailed off, uncertain.

Then lightning flashed and he turned his gaze to the window, remembering.

"She screamed."

"Who? One of the girls in the saloon?"

But Vin went on, images and visions taking form. "I heard her. He was there, all dark and a light in his hands, gold and silver. He knew. And I couldn't...."

"Couldn't what?" Chris prompted when Vin trailed off again. "What couldn't you do?"

Vin looked up at Chris then, his breath coming as fast as the flashes in his head. "She was dead. She was dead and I couldn't...."

He trailed off again, his eyes losing their focus, the darkness swirling and fear clouding the vision.

The others in the room exchanged quick glances. Then Chris gave another prompt. "Who was dead, Vin? And who was there with her?"

But the trail had been lost, driven back by fear into the darkness from which it had come, another rising from the shadows to take its place.

"He'd share his God with him, but not his daughter," he said, voice hollow, the remembered words coming easily, his breathing slowing as the fear dimmed.

"What?"

"I think he's talking about Reverend Mosley," Nathan offered.

"Remember? That's what Josiah said about him when we found out he was the one

who killed Claire."

"But he never heard her scream. She was long dead when he found her and it wasn't dark. So it can't be her he was remembering."

"It was dark the night Amy Callenbeck was killed though," Buck pointed out. "And I'm betting hearing her scream is what got him up into her room."

Chris nodded, then turned back to the man in the bed. "Tell us what happened the night Amy Callenbeck was killed," he softly ordered. "It was



storming and you went up to her room. What did you see? Did you see who killed her?"

More flashes, too many to grab hold of any one, faces and sorrows running one into another. "There's too many," Vin softly complained.

"Too many what?"

"Too many dead people inside my head."

Chris closed his eyes briefly, then opened them again. "I know, cowboy. And I wish I could make them go away. But I can't. And right now I need you to remember just one: Amy Callenbeck. Someone killed her husband and then her. And whoever it was hurt you too. So if you saw who it was, you need to tell us."

But the trail remained lost. And letting go of Nathan's arm, Vin put that hand to his head, his brows drawing down into a frown of pain.

"Don't want to do this no more," he tightly declared.

"You got to try to remember, Vin."

"Can't." The word was as much plea as declaration. Then the tracker buried himself deeper into the covers, pulling them tight around him, his head burrowing beneath the pillow, trying in the only way he could to escape what couldn't be borne.

Chris started to reach out to pull the quilt free of him, but Nathan leaned down to take hold of his arm, stopping him.

"He ain't going to tell you nothing," he softly insisted. "Don't reckon he can. And if you keep pushing him, he'll only end up sick."

"But he remembered!"

"Yeah. But then he lost hold of whatever it was and there ain't no pushing him into finding it again. So leave him be and chances are he'll remember on his own when he's good and ready."

"Nate's right," Buck agreed. "You know when he gets like this, it's 'cause he's gone as far as he can and he just can't go no farther."

Chris nodded, conceding defeat, and Nathan let loose his hold on his arm. Then frowning down at him, he said, "You go on and get out of them wet clothes. Then get you some sleep too. Don't need you back in my clinic again, sick from not having sense enough to come in out of the rain."

Another nod. Then Chris looked up, tired and his hold on hope slipping.

"Is he going to be all right, Nathan?"

The healer looked from man to man on the bed, both of them fierce in their loyalties and true. "Oh, yeah," he said softly. "He's going to be just fine."

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~ CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE ~

Vin continued to shadow Chris all the next day, refusing to leave his side for longer than it took the injured man to tend to his needs, none of the other three able to pry him away. Chris was at first tolerant of the attention, keeping the sling on at Vin's glaring insistence,

trotting dutifully to Nathan's clinic when it seemed likely the hovering tracker would drag him there if he didn't go to have his wound checked and cleaned on his own. He even went back to the hotel after lunch to rest at his overly protective attendant's insistence. But by late afternoon, he was ready to try sneaking off to his shack in the hills. Then the Reverend Bliss put in an appearance, inquiring with polite concern into Chris' health but his eyes on Vin, studying him with an intensity that had Chris' hackles rising. And when Vin grew still and quiet, like a rabbit under a fox's gaze, nothing could have removed Chris from the tracker's side.

Bliss, however, made no attempt to do so. Instead, he remained in the background, seemingly always there, his eyes on the tracker, whose own unsettled gaze turned frequently to him, something stirring in him, a warning only vaguely felt.

The next day was much the same, Vin refusing to leave Chris' side, not even when Josiah and Nathan invited him for a ride. Then J. D. and Ezra returned, dusty and tired, but glad to be back. And something in Vin seemed to relax when they tramped into the saloon to join their comrades at their accustomed table, the dust of the trail still on them. The Seven were seven again. And if all was not as it should be, there was at least that hope for it then.

Vin therefore hesitated only briefly when Ezra later offered to escort him to Mary's for his reading lesson. And as they made their way to the newspaper office, there again was Bliss, across the road watching him from a chair outside Mrs. Potter's store.

Vin felt uneasy at his gaze on him, shadows stirring within, a crow's wings flapping out a warning to some danger unvoiced. And struggling to pierce those shadows, he would have walked past the Clarion office had Ezra not reached out a hand to stop him and lead him inside.

Mary smiled in greeting to them and led the way into her living quarters in the back, setting the paper on which she'd long since printed the alphabet onto the kitchen table, along with several sheets of blank paper and some pencils.

They got right to work, Vin reading off the letters as Mary pointed to them, sounding them out as well. But he remained distracted and missed several of the letters and only frowned when prompted for most of the sounds.

"What's wrong?" Mary at last asked. "I know you know this, Vin."

"Maybe he's grown bored with it," Ezra suggested. "Perhaps we should move on to the reading portion of today's lesson."

Mary got up at that and collected the book they'd been struggling their way through, one that Billy had outgrown. And sitting down again at Vin's side, she opened the book to the beginning, wanting to go over familiar ground. But while Vin got through the first page without too much trouble, he grew silent once it was turned, staring down at the book

with a frown.

"Sound it out," Ezra suggested. And when Vin continued to stare at the page, the gambler-turned-teacher tried again. "What letter does the word start with?"

But still Vin was silent.

Then Mary followed his intent gaze, realizing that it was not the words that held his attention, but the illustrations accompanying them. "What is it, Vin?" she asked, her gaze shifting from the picture of children playing in a field with a cat and a dog to the frowning tracker. "What do you see?"

She laid a gentle hand on one arm and his frown deepened. Then, a dim shape taking form in the shadows within, he said, "It was there, in the dark, all gold and shining."

"What was?"

Vin's frown deepened still further and he opened his mouth as if to make reply. But he had no words to offer, could give no name to the dimly seen shape. But one thing he was sure of. "There was a crow."

"A crow?" Ezra echoed. And shifting his gaze to the illustration, he said, "There's no crow, Vin. Just some children and their pets. A dog, see?" He pointed to the floppy-eared animal running at a boy's heels, then moved his finger to the black cat held by a golden-haired little girl. "And that, my friend is a cat."

"No," Vin insisted. "It was...." But he didn't know what it was, couldn't fully see it, couldn't give name to it, only knew it shone gold in a half-remembered light.

When he continued to stare down at the page, his frown growing as he tried to track his way through the confusion, Ezra reached out to close the book. "Well, perhaps we should move on to something else now." He shoved the book to the side, Vin not even realizing it was gone.

"Why don't you practice your writing?" Mary suggested, laying one of the sheets of blank paper in front of him, along with a pencil. "I'll call out a letter, and you write it down."

Still Vin continued to stare, at the blank paper now.

"Come now, Mr. Tanner," Ezra chided. "Mrs. Travis has been most generous with her time, so let's not waste it, shall we?" He reached across him then to the pencil, picking it up and placing it in the tracker's slack hand. And when Vin took hold of it without thought, Ezra continued.

"Now try a 'V' as in 'Vin.'"

Vin shifted his gaze to the pencil in his hand, his frown still in place. And after a moment's hesitation, he formed a shaky 'V.'

"Very good," Ezra praised. "Now how about an 'M' for 'Mary'?"

And on they continued, Vin slow to respond and the frown remaining, but forming each letter as requested, backwards sometimes and even upside down, but recognizable nonetheless. But when Mary called out a 'C' as in 'cat,' he hesitated a long moment. And then, instead of the requested

letter, he began to draw, a lion's head soon taking shape, its mouth bared in a snarl.

Mary and Ezra both stared at the drawing for a moment, neither knowing what to make of it. Then at last Mary said, "That's very nice, Vin. I didn't know you knew how to draw."

"It would seem our Mr. Tanner is a man of many hidden talents," Ezra put in.

Vin ignored them, staring at the lion's head for a long moment, waiting for something known but hidden. And when it didn't come to him, he started drawing again, hoping to prompt whatever lay in the shadows. But still it didn't come. And when he started on his third drawing of the same lion's head, Ezra laid a hand on his to stop him.

"What is that you're drawing?" he asked, his tone curious, his eyes vaguely perturbed.

Vin tried to pull his hand free, but Ezra gripped it fast.

"Look at me," he softly commanded. And when Vin looked to him with a frown, he said, "Tell me what it is you're drawing."

Vin shifted his gaze back to the shape he'd drawn, his mouth twitching in readiness to form words that didn't come.

"I don't think he knows what it is," Mary said with a frown of her own, hers one of puzzlement. "So why is he drawing it? And each pose the same?"

"He's likely seen it somewhere. And seeing the cat in the book must have reminded him of it."

"Is that it, Vin?" Mary asked. "Have you seen something like that before?"

Vin nodded, his gaze still intent on his drawing. "It was dark. And the crow was there. And...."

"And what?" Ezra prompted when the words trailed off into silence.

But anything more was lost in the shadows. And shaking loose of the gambler's hold, Vin returned to his drawing.

Mary and Ezra watched as he continued to draw lion's head after lion's head, not knowing whether it was best to leave him to his obsessive rendering of something which clearly held some meaning for him or to distract him from it. But when his free hand moved to rub at his head and his frown of concentration became one of pain, Ezra once again laid his hand on Vin's.

"I think that's it for today's lesson," he firmly declared. "So let's put this up now and thank Mrs. Travis for her help." And when Vin kept tight hold of the pencil, Ezra changed tactics, saying, "We should probably go check on Chris, make sure he's not overexerting himself."

Vin shifted his gaze to the gambler then, his hold on the pencil loosening, Ezra slipping it free of his grasp with ease, the tracker seemingly having forgotten it.

"Where shall we seek out Chris first?" Ezra continued, drawing Vin up

and out of his chair. And with a nod of good-bye to Mary, he led the tracker out of the kitchen into the office and beyond it to the boardwalk.

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Vin led Ezra straight to the saloon, where Chris and Buck sat at the Seven's usual table, Buck smiling over a piece of paper in his hand and Chris shaking his head at him.

"I'm telling you," Buck told his doubting friend as Vin and Ezra joined them, "women love this stuff."

"What 'stuff'?" Ezra asked, his tone plainly conveying his expectation that he would regret having asked.

"Buck's written another love poem," Chris explained with a grin.

"Want to hear it?" Buck asked, eyes bright and throat clearing in preparation for his recital.

Ezra immediately popped back out of his chair. "No offense, Buck," he said. "But it's nearly time for dinner and I wouldn't want to spoil my appetite."

He took off then, to the accompaniment of Chris' laughter.

"Some folks just don't appreciate fine literature," Buck huffed. He turned then to Vin. "How about you, pard? You want some pointers?" But Vin sat unheeding, his gaze on the papers spread across the table, each one filled with Buck's rejected efforts. The poet gave it up then, folding the paper and slipping it into a shirt pocket. And getting up, he said, "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go bring tears to a few ladies' eyes with my poetic genius."

He strutted out of the saloon then and Chris shook his head at him, smiling. He then turned to Vin. "How'd your lesson go at Mary's?" he asked. "Learn anything new?"

Vin reached out a hand at that to Buck's rejected scribblings and pulled one of the sheets of paper towards him, his other hand collecting the pencil. He then began to draw.

Chris sat waiting in silence, assuming he was going to show what he'd learned rather than verbalize it. But when he continued without stopping, Chris grew curious and leaned across the table to see what he was doing.

"A lion?" he asked, one eyebrow raising. "You read about Africa today?"

Vin ignored him, merely continued drawing, filling the blank spaces on the page with the same snarling lion's head.

Chris watched him, idly at first, then with increasing attention when he filled the one piece of paper and reached for another. He studied him then, noted his frown and the lines of pain about his eyes, saw the way his fingers gripped tight to the pencil. And reaching across the table to lay a hand on Vin's, he said, "What's going on in that head of yours? Is this about your lesson -- or something else?"

Vin looked up at him, his mouth opening to speak. Then a dark shape loomed at his elbow and he looked up into the face of the Reverend Bliss.

"Gentlemen," the newcomer said in greeting, one hand going to Vin's near shoulder, resting there lightly, a cold starting in Vin at the touch.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

Bliss' gaze drifted then to the paper lying on the table in front of Vin -- and the hand on the tracker's shoulder tightened into a painful hold. Then he let loose of him, his hand moving to rest on top of his cane, along with his other hand already there. "Drawing lessons, Mr. Larabee?" he asked, his gaze going across the table to the one eyeing him with disfavor.

His tone was one of curiosity, but there was that in his eyes that caught and held Vin's attention, and he continued to stare up at him, the shadows once more stirring, images there but unconnected.

"Something like that," Chris said brusquely. And pushing out of his chair, he stood. "And now if you'll excuse us, we've got something we need to take care of."

He moved to Vin's side then, taking a hold of one arm to get his attention, keeping it there as he led the way out of the saloon, Vin's attention remaining on the Reverend Bliss until he was lost from view. And once the bat-wing doors closed behind them, Bliss reached out to pick up the paper left lying on the table and crumpled it in his fist.

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The Seven came together that night in the saloon, drawn there of one accord, even Ezra at the table with the rest of them, having no interest in starting a game among the other patrons, content to play with no money on the table, only Vin not taking part. Instead, he sat among them but distant, his attention all for his harmonica, sorting through his collection of notes as if in search of a particular pattern.

It was a quiet time for them, the game an excuse to keep them at the table in company together, laughter sometimes breaking out and gazes going frequently to the one among them who was as yet set apart. Still, he was there and one of them. And they would all do their best to see to it that he one day reclaimed his place among them.

Then the peace of the night was shattered, the bat-wing doors bursting open to admit one of the townspeople crying, "Fire!"

Six of the Seven were on their feet instantly, Chris turning to Inez, asking her to watch Vin. Then they were gone, as were the rest of the patrons in the saloon, leaving only Inez and Vin, who sat staring at the swinging doors in confusion, his gaze growing wide when they opened again to admit the Reverend Bliss.

"Miss Recillos," Bliss said as he limped into the room, heading for the table at which Vin sat. "I see you have been left as guardian over Mr. Tanner. Should you wish, however, to join the rest of the town in its firefighting efforts, I would be happy to stand in your stead here."

Inez hesitated. "Is it very bad, senior?"

"Bad enough that I suspect the main efforts will go towards making sure

that no other buildings become involved."

Inez moved from behind the bar then. "I have some buckets in the back. And some bandages too. They could probably use them." She disappeared into the back room, returning a minute later with her arms full. "I'll be back as soon as I can," she said. And with that she slipped out of the saloon.

Vin would have gotten up and followed her, but Bliss took hold of one arm, holding him in place. "Leave this town to its guardians," he said. "It is up to them to tend to the sheep. Your destiny lies elsewhere. So if you wish to escape the chains that bind you to this place, if you wish to reclaim all that is yours and that has been taken from you, the time is now. You must make your escape to the wild or give yourself fully to the tame. The choice is yours. So tell me now -- will you save yourself? Or will you allow others to destroy you?"

Vin stared at the man seated next to him, the light of the saloon's lanterns shining on him. Yet still Bliss was lost in darkness, one in which images flashed to the beat of a crow's wings. "You were there," he said with a frown, knowing only that. "It was dark and you were there." Bliss didn't need to ask where "there" was, knew with a certainty that the game was now to be lost or won, the ending of it to be decided in that moment.

"Yes," he acknowledged, his grip on Vin's arm tightening, his voice low and dangerous. "I was there. And I offered you a choice, just as I offer you one now. I only hope that this time you choose more wisely."

Vin was still for a long moment, trying to lay hold of the images darting among the shadows. But they lay just beyond reach, teasing him with their nearness. At last, unable to make sense of them, unable to fathom the fear that stirred in him at this man's touch but wanting to escape it, he tried to jerk loose of the hold on him.

Bliss, however, only held on more tightly. "You disappoint me, boy," he said, his eyes hard and unforgiving. "Only a fool would do as you have done, would choose sheep and their pens over the wild and freedom. But if that is your choice, then so be it."

He loosed his hold then and stood, his weight going to his cane, the head of which gleamed gold in the dim light of the saloon. And when Vin continued to sit, looking up warily, Bliss added, "If you are to remain in this place, I suggest you prove your worth. So let us join the rest of the sheep."

Vin rose slowly from his chair, eyes still on Bliss. Then shifting his gaze to the bat-wing doors, he moved towards them, Bliss at his back.

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No sooner had they stepped outside the saloon than Vin saw the fire rising against the night sky at one end of town. All else forgotten then, he started immediately towards it.

Bliss, however, had forgotten nothing. So he hurried after Vin, keeping

at his back as they moved down the boardwalk, his eyes searching the shadows and dimly lit street, one hand tightening its grip on his cane at finding them empty. And raising the cane, he placed his free hand on its golden lion's head and pulled.

Before he could slip free the knife hidden there though, footsteps sounded behind them. So with a snarled curse, he pushed the knife back into the cane. And thumping it onto the boardwalk, he turned.

"Mrs. Travis," he said with a tight smile as a panting Mary hurried up to him, her arms filled nearly to overflowing with a collection of loose items. "I would have thought you to be in the thick of things, penning a report for tomorrow's paper."

"I went to collect some supplies from Nathan's clinic," she said as she drew abreast of him. "Just in case."

She hurried off then, only to stop a few feet later when a roll of bandages tumbled out of her hold and to the boardwalk. And when she stopped and bent to retrieve it, more items fell.

Bliss shifted his gaze from her to the tracker pulling away, a dozen or more feet ahead already. And with another thump of his cane, he went to Mary's aid.

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~ CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO ~

Vin slept poorly that night, his dreams filled with fire and crows and golden lions' heads. The light of day, however, gave no respite, for those images stayed with him on awakening, filling his mind as he got up to face the day, his mood foul and Chris wisely not pushing him when he refused to shave or get cleaned up. The gunslinger merely sought out the rest of the Seven, figuring there was safety in numbers. And leading Vin to the saloon for breakfast, where all but Ezra sat eating, he took refuge between Buck and Josiah, leaving the disgruntled tracker to take a seat across the table from him.

"Mr. Sunshine get up on the wrong side of the bed again?" Buck asked, eyeing the scowl with which Vin graced his companions.

"He didn't sleep well," Chris explained, pretending not to notice when the scowl was aimed in his direction. "He was tossing and turning most of the night."

"Well, I don't reckon that's too surprising," Josiah put in. "That fire last night was enough to give anyone nightmares. I'm just glad we were able to keep it from spreading."

J. D. looked up from his eggs with a frown. "I still don't get it. That building's been abandoned for months. So how'd a fire start there?"

"Might have been kids playing with matches," Buck suggested. "Or maybe some drifter looking for a free roof over his head for the night."

"Well, however it began," Nathan said, "I'm just glad no one was hurt."

Vin's scowl turned into a frown then, the previous night's dreams coming to life. And taking hold of another piece of the puzzle that was his



mind, he softly said, "She got burned."

Six gazes turned to him, waiting for what would come next. And when he merely sat staring with unfocused eyes, Chris tried prompting him. "Who got burned, Vin? Someone last night?"

He shook his head, the frown still in place. "She was there in the dark, with the crow. And then she started burning."

The six shared glances, sitting still and tense, knowing with a certainty that it was Amy Callenbeck of whom he spoke.

"Why was she burning, cowboy? What happened?"

Vin's frown deepened as he tried to see beyond the flames burning in his dim memory. Then a new vision flashed, painfully bright, and he raised his right hand, placing it on his left shoulder, his tone one of surprise as he said, "It hurt."

It was Nathan's turn that time to prompt him. "That's right, Vin. Your shoulder got hurt. Do you remember how?"

Vin rubbed at the remembered pain, tracking his way from image to vision and back again. But still the trail was unreadable, signs there but unconnected. And at last, giving words to the vision prompted, he said, "It was gold. And it was shining in the dark."

"What was?"

But Vin could only shake his head, words failing him. So Chris tried again.

"Someone hurt you, cowboy. You and Amy Callenbeck both. Do you remember who it was?"

Vin blinked, the pieces of the puzzle within his grasp, but the edges too dimly seen yet for him to be able to fit them together.

Then, at last recognizing a piece of that puzzle, Chris continued. "Was it the crow who hurt you?"

Buck let out a soft "Damn!" as realization hit, the others merely nodding their heads in understanding.

Vin, however, paid them no heed, rubbing still at his shoulder as he struggled to hold on to a vision long enough to make sense of it. Then, with a frown as he caught hold of one, he said, "There was blood."

"Where?"

One hand raised to the tracker's throat in reply.

"The killer must have used a knife on Mrs. Callenbeck, same as Vin," Nathan theorized.

Chris nodded in agreement. Then, turning his attention back to the one sitting with blue eyes staring blankly at some dimly remembered horror, he said, "Tell us about this crow, cowboy. What did it look like?"

Vin spoke without thought that time, this much always known. "It was dark."

"The crow was dark?"

Vin nodded.

"And was it bigger than you or smaller?"

That time the tracker had to think. Then, as the vision took vague form, he at last said, "Bigger."

"Had you ever seen it before?"

Vin rubbed at his head, the phantom pain in his shoulder forgotten as an all too familiar one grew. Visions fading then, he said only, "I don't like crows."

"Yeah, we know," Chris replied. "And we'll put that crow of yours in a nice safe cage so it never hurts anyone ever again. But we need you to help us do that. We need you to tell us everything you know about it." But the visions were lost now, slipping back into the shadows, obscured by a sudden blaze of pain that had Vin pale and his breathing turning ragged.

"That's enough, now," Nathan declared, pushing out of his chair and pulling Vin out of his. "You ain't going to get no more out of him." Then softly to the tracker, he said, "Let's get you back to the hotel so's I can give you something to make you feel better."

He led him then without protest out of the saloon, Chris at Vin's other side, his hand at his elbow supporting him. And once in their room, he eased the tracker down on the bed while Nathan collected the bottle of laudanum kept handy, along with a spoon.

Fifteen minutes later, Vin dosed and sleeping, Chris turned to Nathan, his tone one of self recrimination as he said, "I should have listened to him. All those times he talked about that damned crow and I just thought he was mixed up, didn't pay him any mind at all."

"He was mixed up," Nathan pointed out. "And he still is. He's almost got a hold of what happened that night, but it still don't make sense to him. I think he's seeing just bits and pieces of it and he can't get it put together."

Chris frowned. "So what have we got? A killer who's dark and bigger than Vin. And something gold and shiny. What else? Can you remember anything he might have said some other time?"

Nathan shook his head. "I wasn't no better than you -- I thought that crow of his was all Josiah's doing. So I didn't figure it meant nothing."

Chris turned to look down on the man sleeping in the bed, hat pulled low over his face and the covers drawn up to his chin. "Someone did this to him, Nathan. And I'm not resting 'til whoever it is swings for it -- if I don't put a bullet in him first."

Nathan sighed. "You don't feel no different than the rest of us do. But you'd best keep in mind that Vin needs you standing by him more than he needs you going after whoever did this. So don't you do something we'll all regret."

"Won't nobody regret what I do to that man when I catch up to him,"

Chris warned in a deadly tone of promise. Then turning away from the sleeping tracker, he looked to the healer and said, "If you'll stay with

him, I'll go talk to the other boys, see if any of them remember anything he might have said about that damned crow that makes any kind of sense."

And waiting only for Nathan's nod of agreement, he went in search of answers.

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Vin woke to a better mood in time for lunch, his eyes wide enough on awakening that Nathan suspected he had forgotten how he came to be asleep in his room in the middle of the day. He asked no questions though and Nathan volunteered no answers.

Chris had long since come and gone, having reported his failure to discover anything helpful from the rest of the Seven. And while Nathan was tempted to press Vin to remember, he knew he would have to do so on his own. He therefore did no more than get him up and back to the saloon for lunch, after which J. D. invited him to go for a swim in a local rancher's pond.

It was a short ride there, but such was the heat of the day that the still waters of the pond hidden among a tumble of rocks had J. D. stripped to his longjohns and ready to plunge into the beckoning coolness almost as soon as he'd dismounted. Vin, however, proved more reluctant, getting off his horse to move slowly to the edge of the pond, watching uncertainly as J. D. whooped and splashed about.

"Come on in!" the younger man called, slapping out a stream of water that fell far short of its intended target. And when Vin made no move to disrobe, J. D. splashed around for a bit more on his own before deciding his companion needed persuading. He waded over to him then, smiling with an innocence that had Vin taking a step back. He didn't move back far enough though, for J. D. lunged towards him, reaching out to grab hold of one arm.

He never made it. Instead, a rifle shot sounded with a sharp crack that echoed among the rocks ranged about the pond. And with a cry of pain, J. D. fell back, his left hand clamped around his upper right arm. He floundered in the shallow water, trying to get his feet under him, while Vin stood staring down at him in confused surprise. Then another shot sounded, hitting a rock at the tracker's back, and he moved instinctively away from it and towards J. D. And stepping into the water, he pulled him up and forward, all but dragging him into the cover of some rocks, stooping to snatch up his gunbelt as he did so, shots ringing off the rocks around them. Then, settling the wounded man against a boulder, he slipped one of the guns from its holster, the heft of it lighter than his own sawed-off, but the feel of it as natural to him as the ground beneath his feet.

"Did you see the shooter?" J. D. asked, his teeth chattering as his body shook with shock and pain, his hand still clamped around his arm. Vin shook his head, words beyond him in that moment. It was not words

he needed, though. And slipping his hat off, he laid down on the ground to peer cautiously around the boulder in the direction from which the shots had come. He saw nothing more, however, than another tumble of rocks. He lay for a minute, watching and listening, but there was no movement, no sounds but a soft jingling as one of the horses shook its head. He pulled back then, sliding to J. D.'s side. And slipping the remaining gun from its holster, he held it out, J. D. reaching with a bloodied hand to take it from him.

"You going after him?" he asked. And when Vin nodded, J. D. took a firmer grip on his pistol and started to get up. Vin, however, pushed him back down with a frown.

"I can do this," J. D. declared stoutly, chin up and pistol gripped tightly.

Vin only nodded, then took hold of the youth's uninjured arm, tugging on it as he slid back to the end of the boulder behind which they sheltered. And when J. D. scooted after him, he tugged on him again, wanting him to lie down.

"You want me to cover you?" J. D. guessed. And when Vin nodded, he lowered himself to the ground as requested, peering around the edge of the boulder. "The shooter's in them rocks straight ahead?" he asked. And after another nod he added, "Okay, then. You go ahead and I'll keep his attention."

Vin gave him a pat on his shoulder then and slid to the other side of the boulder. And as soon as J. D. started shooting, he slipped around it, running low to the east and swinging north to come up on the shooter's location from behind. But when he did so, there was no sign of their attacker. Still he moved cautiously, eyes and ears alert for trouble as he searched the area. And finding the spot at which the shooter's horse had been tethered, boot prints coming and going from it, he gave one last look around before returning to J. D.

"He gone already?" the younger man asked, pushing himself upright again, leaning back against the boulder wearily.

Vin nodded, then squatted down to inspect his bleeding arm.

"I think it's broke," J. D. told him.

Vin gave him another pat, then got up again and went to collect the clothes left lying at the edge of the pond. And returning to J. D.'s side, he used the shirt to bandage his wound. He then slid the vest over his good arm, pulling him forward to slip it behind him and over his injured arm, gently folding the limb against his chest before wrapping the vest around him, buttoning it up above and below his arm so that it was supported and held relatively immobile. His coat was next, placed around him so that it draped over his shoulders, his pants and boots following, and even his hat placed comfortably on his head.

That done, Vin pulled the tightlipped youth to his feet. And while J. D. swayed for a moment, looking more than a little ill, he kept his feet

under him and moved of his own accord to his horse, Vin supporting him with a hold on his uninjured arm.

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The ride back to town took longer than it normally would have, Vin taking a circuitous route back to avoid any potential ambush. And so it was that J. D. was leaning far forward in his saddle by the time they arrived at Nathan's clinic, some of the rest of the Seven alerted to trouble by various townspeople, Chris and Buck there to help J. D. down from his horse before he could make the attempt on his own.

"What happened?" Chris asked, his gaze shifting to make sure the tracker sliding off his horse was not injured as well.

"Someone was there at the pond, shooting at us," J. D. shakily reported, getting his feet under him with difficulty and grateful for the hold Buck kept on his uninjured arm.

"Did you see who it was?"

J. D. shook his head. "Vin went after him, but he was already gone."

Chris turned then to the silent tracker. "You find any tracks?" And when he got a nod in reply, he turned to Ezra as he hurried up and said, "Go get Josiah. Then both of you meet me in the livery."

He and Buck then escorted J. D. up the stairs to the clinic, Vin trailing behind. And when the injured youth was safely ensconced in the bed with Buck and Nathan in attendance, Chris took hold of Vin's arm and led him back down to the street, collecting the tracker's horse before heading for the livery. There Ezra and Josiah joined them, both men demanding to know what had happened.

"J. D. got shot -- took a bullet in the arm," Chris grimly reported as he saddled his horse. "Didn't get a look at whoever it was though."

"Bounty hunters?" Josiah suggested.

"Maybe."

"How many?"

"Just the one." Chris shifted his gaze to the still silent tracker for confirmation. And when he nodded, his gaze lowered and shoulders hunched, Chris gentled his tone and said, "This ain't on you, cowboy. You got nothing to feel guilty over. In fact, from what I can see, you did a damned fine job taking care of J. D."

Vin looked up at that and finally spoke, forlornly saying, "He got away."

"Yeah," Chris acknowledged. "But that wasn't your fault either. You had to take care of J. D., get him back to Nathan. And now that you have, we'll go out there and see if you can track him down."

Vin made no reply to that, only stood still and silent while the horses were saddled, his own standing ready at his back. And at last, the horses were led out into the street, the four men mounting them, Vin growing still when his right leg settled into the stirrup and he bumped the holster and guns looped around his saddle horn. He shot a look to Chris

then, waiting.

Reading the question in those blue eyes fastened on him, aware of all that was being asked, Chris said only, "Let's ride."

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~ Endure the Night ~

by jann

~ CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE ~

The summer sun was low on the horizon when the four weary men returned to town, going first to the livery to stable their horses, then tramping up the stairs to the clinic to find Buck and Nathan playing a desultory hand of cards at the table in one corner of the room. And as Vin crossed to the bed and the one sleeping there, J. D.'s holster looped over one shoulder, Chris softly asked, "How's he doing?"

"His arm's broke," Nathan reported. "Got the bullet out okay though. He'll be hurting for a while, but he should be up and around in a day or two."

"You get whoever did this to him?" Buck asked, his voice tight and his expression grim.

Chris shook his head. "Tracks led back to town. Found the horse in the livery, but Tiny said it came in hours ago on its own and that he'd never seen it before."

"It wouldn't happen to be a bay with a blaze and one white sock, would it?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"Some drifter reported it missing not long after you boys left."

Chris let out a curse. "Okay, then. After we get something to eat, we'll ask around, see if anyone knows or saw anything, find out who's new in town, ask if anyone's been asking after Vin or paying him special attention."

"You thinking someone's after that bounty on his head?" Nathan asked.

"I don't know. But we play it safe, assume the worst."

"Might be a good idea to let Vin stay here while we check around town," Josiah suggested. "We can get Inez to send some food over to him."

Chris started to make reply, but stopped when a soft voice sounded from across the room.

"It was the crow," Vin declared, a buried truth trying to work its way through the confusion and shadows, harm done and the dark form haunting his visions somehow responsible, this known and this only.

All eyes turned to him, waiting for more. And when it didn't come, when the tracker stood still and silent staring down at the youth in the bed, Chris prompted him. "What was the crow, cowboy?"

Vin, however, continued to stand silent. So Chris moved across the room to him, laying a hand on his shoulder to get his attention. And when his gaze remained focused on J. D., his brow wrinkled as if trying hard

to remember something, Chris' brows drew down in a frown of his own. "What are you thinking on?" he asked.

But Vin only continued to stare down at J. D., trying to see past the shadows in his mind, searching out the crow he could hear slipping through the concealing darkness, the sound of its wings in flight seeming to beckon him, taunting him with the knowledge of things hidden.

Chris tried again, this time taking hold of the tracker's chin and turning his head so that they were face to face. Then, in a commanding tone, he said, "Talk to me, Vin. Tell me what's going on in that head of yours."

The tracker blinked, unable to give words to the confusion.

"You ain't going to do this," Chris insisted, his tone sharpening. "If you know something about that damned crow, if you're working on something in your head, you'd best spit it out."

Nathan was out of his chair then and across the room to break Chris' hold on the confused tracker. "He ain't going to remember nothing just 'cause you tell him to. And if you get him riled up, he'll just get more confused."

The healer took gentle hold of Vin's shoulders then and guided him to a seat at the table beside Buck, slipping into the chair on the other side of him. And doing as Chris had done, he took hold of the tracker's chin and turned his head, waiting until the blue eyes focused on him before saying, "What made you think of the crow just now? Can you tell us?"

Vin tried to turn his gaze back to the one lying pale in the bed, but Nathan kept firm hold of him. "Now, you look at me," the healer gently but firmly commanded. "And you tell me what's got you to thinking on that crow. Did you remember something? Can you maybe tell us what it looks like?"

Vin shook his head, the shadows still thick and unyielding. "Can't," he softly declared. "It's too dark."

"Too dark?" Nathan echoed. "You mean it was too dark that night Amy Callenbeck was killed to see who did it?"

Vin frowned at that, his confusion plain. And then it was Josiah's turn.

"You remember the fire, don't you?" he asked.

He was rewarded after a moment with a slow nod and a soft, "She got burned."

"That's right. And the crow was there, remember?" Again that hesitation and slow nod, and the preacher continued. "Now, I want you to take a good look at that crow with the light from the fire shining on its face and tell me what you see."

But it wasn't the killer's face that shone in Vin's memory, gold and silver instead glinting in the darkness, warning of danger. Then a half-remembered pain flared, his hurt becoming J. D.'s, and again he tried to turn towards him, only to again be thwarted by Nathan's hold on him.

"Now, don't you be worrying on him," the healer scolded. "Ain't no crow coming after him. You just pay mind to what we're saying."

"He got hurt!" Vin protested.

"Yeah, he did. But he's going to be just fine. And that don't have nothing to do with no crow. It's long gone now. So you just think on telling us what it looks like so we can make sure it don't hurt no one ever again."

Vin blinked. "I saw it!"

"Yeah, we know. But now we need you to tell us what happened that night."

Vin's eyes narrowed as he worked at that memory of a summer night when lightning had flashed. "It was dark. And she screamed."

"But why did she scream?" Nathan asked, his thoughts on a spring night.

"What happened? Did the crow do something to her?"

More blinks as the vision slipped away in confusion, another taking its place. And trying again to turn back to the one in the bed, Vin frowned and said, "It was there."

"Who was there?" Chris asked, working hard to keep the frustration from sounding in his voice.

"The crow," came the reply, Vin making no effort to conceal his own frustration. And at last batting free of Nathan's hold on him, he got up and moved back to the bed. Then, staring down at the youth sleeping there, sure in some way he couldn't name that it was the crow responsible for his hurt and determined to keep him from further harm, he firmly declared, "Ain't no crow getting in here."

Battle lines drawn, he then moved to one of the windows and slammed it shut. But before he could move to the other one, Chris had crossed the room to open the window just closed, his voice a growl as he warned, "You ain't starting this again, cowboy. Ain't no crow getting in here. J. D.'s fine and he's going to stay that way. So you come on back to the table and tell us what we need to know so we can catch that damned bird."

Vin, however, only pushed past him, reaching for the window again. And when Chris grabbed hold of his arms, stopping him, he gave a growl of his own, insisting on a truth he was sure of without knowing why or even understanding it. "It was there!"

"We know it was there," Chris replied, too intent on resisting the urge to shake the tracker to look beyond the words offered, his own confusion unrecognized, assumptions made and held as truth. "You already told us that. But what you haven't told us is who the damned crow is!"

Vin, however, ignored the question, continuing to struggle against Chris' hold. Then Ezra moved to the combatants, one hand going to Chris' near arm as he said, "Let him go, Mr. Larabee. I trust we can all endure the lack of fresh air for a time if it satisfies Vin's desire to protect our fallen comrade."



Chris glared at the gambler for a long moment. Then with a hissed curse, he loosed his hold on the determined tracker, who wasted no time in slamming shut both windows in the room. And with that, he moved back to the bed to stand guard at J. D.'s side, a hand going to the holster still looped around one shoulder.

"Ain't no crows getting in here," he again announced, this time his tone one of satisfaction.

With a look of warning to Chris, Ezra crossed the room to join him, his own tone curious as he said, "Might I inquire, Mr. Tanner, why it is you feel such an unbridled dislike for crows?"

His gaze still on the one sleeping in the bed, Vin unhesitatingly replied, "They kill people."

"Indeed? And have you ever witnessed such an act?" His only reply that time a frown, Ezra tried again. "Have you ever known a crow to simply hurt someone?"

Vin's frown deepened, the unconnected images inside his head no help, yet the knowledge was there, buried deep within the shadows.

"Perhaps," Ezra continued, doggedly persevering, "an example might be in order, to better help me understand your feelings in the matter. For instance, what was it the crow did the night of the fire that caused you to so dislike it? Did he hurt you or someone else? Was it he who started the fire?"

Vin blinked, the shadows stirring, visions and images flitting in and out among them. But still he could make no sense of them.

"Certainly he must have done something to arouse such intense feelings in you," Ezra prompted. "Do you remember what that was?"

A darkness stirred then, deep within the shadows, a fear of knowledge known but denied starting in him. And gripping tightly to J. D.'s holster with one hand, he raised the other to rub at his head, the pain starting there again as he roughly said, "He knows."

"Knows what?"

"About the dark."

Ezra tried again, dismissing words that held no discernible meaning.

"Vin, I want you to forget about the dark for a minute and concentrate on the light. Can you do that?"

The tracker's brow's drew down in a frown of both pain and concentration. "The crow don't like the light."

"That's because he can be too plainly seen," Ezra pointed out. "So I need you now to shine some light on this crow, so that we might all better see him."

Vin pressed his hand hard against his head, the pain there driving out the shadows and all they concealed. And when he continued to stand silent, Ezra heaved a sigh and turned towards Chris, hands spread in surrender and supplication.

Moving then across the room to take the gambler's place at the

tracker's side, Chris gently said, "I know this is hard for you, cowboy, and I'm sorry. But we wouldn't keep pushing you like this if it wasn't important. So I need you to do your best to remember what happened the night of the fire. And I need you to tell me who this crow is you keep talking about. Can you do that?"

Vin closed his eyes and plaintively said, "It hurts."

Nathan made a warning noise from across the room, but Chris wasn't yet ready to give up. Before he could push for an answer though a knock sounded at the door, startling Vin into a spin, his right hand reaching for one of J. D.'s guns. As fast as he was though, Chris was faster, one hand flashing out to stop him before he could clear the gun of its holster. And even as he did so, the sound of four hammers clicking back echoed through the room.

Then a soft voice called out questioningly, the hammers of the guns clicking back in recognition, Vin's struggles against the hold on him ceasing.

The door opened then and Mary Travis poked her head into the room, one eyebrow barely rising at sight of the guns still out if no longer pointed in her direction. "I heard you were back," she said, her eyebrow rising a notch higher as her gaze shifted to Chris then Vin and to the gun he still gripped. "Any luck finding whoever shot J. D.?"

Chris released the tracker, who in turn released his grip on the gun, that hand going to rub at his head instead, the pain there exploding, the room spinning and the edges of his vision turning black. He would have fallen then had Chris not grabbed hold of him and eased him down to the floor.

A cry of "Nathan!" was unnecessary, the healer already across the room. And kneeling down to examine the tracker who clung to the arms around him with face pale and eyes closed, he softly said, "He's okay -- just done more than he ought today." Then to Vin he added, "Let's get you up and over to the hotel so's I can give you something to make you feel better."

Vin, however, refused, his brows drawing down in a scowl as he firmly insisted, "The crow will get in!"

"Ain't no crow getting in here," Chris assured him. "It's long gone, just like Nathan said. So come on and let's get you to bed."

He would have pulled the tracker up then, but Vin shoved his hands away and shoved backwards until he hit up against the bedside table, his scowl deepening into a determined warning, his eyes tightening in pain. Nathan looked to Chris then, saying, "Might be best to let him stay. It will only rile him up to try to get him to leave. Besides, he'll be safer here if there's a bounty hunter prowling around town."

Chris nodded his agreement. And once the determined tracker had been dosed with laudanum and settled on a blanket on the floor beside J. D.'s bed, the others gathered around the table.

"Are you sure it was a bounty hunter?" Mary asked once they were all settled, her gaze centered on Chris.

He shook his head. "Could be anyone. We don't even know that Vin was the target. It's just what makes the most sense."

"But only if you discount the fact that the shooter was mounted on a stolen steed," Ezra pointed out, picking up the discarded cards from the table and shuffling them.

"Yeah," Nathan agreed. "It don't hardly make sense that a bounty hunter wouldn't have his own horse."

"Could be it pulled up lame," Buck suggested. "Or maybe he saw Vin and J. D. taking off out of town and didn't have time to collect his horse, so he grabbed the nearest one to hand."

"He sure seems to have given up easy though," Josiah put in, his head cocked to one side consideringly. "Most men would have put in a mite more effort with \$500 at stake."

"Maybe he figured he was no match for Vin once he got hold of a gun," Buck suggested in turn, still playing Devil's Advocate.

"Still," Mary mused, "it does seem a bit slipshod for a professional job."

Josiah nodded. Then with another cock of his head, he said, "Maybe it wasn't a professional. Maybe it was just someone out to make a fast and easy pile of money. And when it turned out to be not so fast and not at all easy, they hightailed it back to town."

"You're thinking it could be a local that did it?" Buck asked, his eyes narrowing at the thought.

"Makes sense."

When no one had anything further to add, Chris pressed ahead, his gaze shifting from Buck to Nathan as he said, "You two stay here. The rest of us are going to get something to eat and then start asking questions around town."

"And if our inquiries avail us nothing?" Ezra asked, slipping the ace of spades out of the deck he held and deftly flipping it between the fingers of one hand.

Chris eyed him for a moment. Then with a slow smile he said, "What did you say your middle initial was?"

"D," Ezra decided, the ace disappearing up his sleeve with a flick of his wrist. "For 'devious.'"

Buck grinned. "That mean you got a plan?"

"Don't I always?" And with that, the gambler gave another flick of his wrist and opened his hand to reveal the ace of spades.

More grins followed, then all but the two on watch got up from the table, Mary offering to help with the inquiries about town as she stood. And with a nod, Chris gratefully accepted. Then, as she followed the others out of the clinic, he moved to the one lying asleep on the floor, his right hand holding tight to the holster still looped around one

shoulder, determined even in sleep to stand guard over his injured comrade. Chris stood there for a full minute, studying the steady rise and fall of the tracker's chest, what once had been more real to him in that moment than what was. Then, that vision fading, he stooped down to remove the holster from Vin's grasp, straightening up and turning. And without a look back, he strode out of the clinic determined to insure what would be.

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~ CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR ~

"I'm telling you, something's got to be done," Buck Wilmington declared, unflinchingly facing Chris Larabee's glare across the Seven's usual table in the saloon. "Now, you know we've all tried to help Vin and keep him corralled, but it's just not working. So far he's let loose a couple of prisoners, held a gun on an innocent bystander, gotten J. D. shot, and damn near shot Mary himself last night."

"J. D. getting shot wasn't his fault," Chris ground out. "And in case you've forgotten, he saved the kid's life."

"But he wouldn't have needed his life saved if Vin hadn't had someone gunning for him!"

"You don't know that it was anyone after Vin!"

"No. Maybe not. But sooner or later someone from his past is going to try to take advantage of the fact that he can't defend himself, and somebody is going to get hurt or killed, either trying to save him or by getting caught in the crossfire. Now, who in this town are you willing to sacrifice?"

"Besides Vin, you mean?"

Buck heaved a loud sigh, shooting a look to those scattered about the saloon eating their breakfasts, their eyes curious as they waited to see if the raised voices heralded danger or simply entertainment. And satisfied with their attention, he turned back to Chris, saying, "Nathan's been telling you all along Vin needs special care, more than we can give him. But you wouldn't listen. So now I'm telling you that we can't keep doing this, not and hold our heads up if someone gets hurt because of it. And it's for Vin's sake as well. Maybe he'd do better if he was in a hospital or something, some place where they know how to care for people like him."

"People like him?" Chris echoed, his voice harsh, all eyes in the room now on him. "And what kind of people would that be? The kind that goes stabbing their friends in the back?"

Buck drew himself up in his chair, chin high and chest out. "I'm not stabbing anybody, Chris. I'm just trying to do what's best."

"And you really think what's best is to lock Vin up someplace?"

"Just 'til he gets better."

"And you figure you got the right to make that decision?"

"It's not just my decision. Me and the rest of the boys have talked it

over and we're all agreed. Ezra says he knows of a real fine place we can send him to. He says --"

"I don't give a damn what Ezra says!" Chris snapped out, his face dark with anger. "Vin ain't going nowhere."

Buck grew still. And though his voice was low, it easily carried to those sitting watching with interest as he said, "That's where you're wrong, Chris. You're not the one who has the final say on this -- Judge Travis does."

"Like hell!"

The words were a warning, a calm and deadly intent behind them. And visibly reining in his anger, Buck gave a warning of his own, tightly saying, "Don't make this any harder than it already is, Larabee. And don't go acting like you're the only one who gives a damn about Vin. We've all done our best by him. And it's nobody's fault if our best just isn't good enough. So, we can keep going like we've been, 'cause we're too proud or stubborn to admit the truth. But if we do, someone -- most likely Vin himself -- is going to get hurt. And are you going to be able to live with it if that happens?" He shook his head. "Well, maybe you can. Lord knows you grab hold of all the guilt you can lay your hands on and wear it close, like some kind of holy garment that sets you apart from us mere mortals. But this isn't about you. And you've got no right to act like it is. We got a duty to this town --"

"And what about your duty to Vin?" Chris cut in with a growl. "How many times has he saved your life? And this is the way you repay him?"

"Damn it, Chris!" Buck shot back. "This isn't about you not wanting to let go of someone you care about. It's not even about friends doing for friends. This is about someone needing more help than we can give and other folks maybe having to suffer for it. And you know Vin wouldn't like that. What do you think it would do to him if someone were to get hurt because of him or if he hurt someone himself?"

Chris fixed his companion with a glare cold and deadly, saying, "Vin ain't going anywhere. Not now. Not ever. And if you lift one finger against him, I swear to you I'll shoot it off."

Up went Buck's chin another notch. "You going to shoot the judge too?"

"Won't need to. He's got no say in this."

"The hell he don't! We work for him -- or have you forgotten that?"

The glare remained, unwavering. "I ain't forgotten nothing, Buck. And if you have, if you and all the rest of the boys have forgotten what it means to watch a friend's back, then there ain't nothing more to say."

He stood. And in a voice that rang clear and sharp, he added, "Vin and I will be out at my shack. If you and the boys come to your senses, you know where to find us. If not, we'll be heading out come morning."

With that he turned and strode out of the saloon, all eyes on him until the bat-wing doors swung shut behind him. Still though, no one spoke, the morning's entertainment not yet over, the remaining player sitting

still and grim. Then, turning to glare at those eyeing him, Buck's gaze fell on one of the working girls. And with a tight smile, he got up and crossed the room to her, bending to whisper in her ear, her giggle answer enough for him. He then led her up the stairs, his morning's entertainment about to commence.

Forks clinked against plates, the other saloon patrons returning to their interrupted breakfasts, voices raising once again in conversation, only a dark form in a far corner sitting still and quiet. Then, with a thump of his cane against the saloon floor, the Reverend Mordecai Bliss slid out of his chair and limped his way out of the saloon.

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Three hours later, Chris was ready to strangle Ezra "D for Devious" Standish. Or better yet -- he'd drag the gambler out of whatever no doubt comfortable hiding place he'd found in which to keep watch and make him take his place there in the tiny shack. He'd let him try to keep Vin happy and occupied. He'd let him keep him from sneaking out the door. He'd let him try to explain why it was he had to stay indoors on a nice summer's day. And best of all, he'd let him listen to the same mournful notes played on that damned harmonica over and over again until he started fantasizing about ways to spend the \$500 bounty on the annoying tracker's head.

In the end though, he simply endured, moving constantly about the one room of his shack, going from window to window searching out trouble, hoping that he hadn't made a mistake in bringing Vin there, the home that had once seemed comfortably remote from prying eyes now seeming dangerously isolated. And with each look out the window, he tried to pick out the four men hidden around the cabin, not sure whether to be alarmed or reassured when he could see no sign of them.

Vin watched his movements in confusion, aware that something was going on, but having no idea what, the others having decided it would be safer to keep him in the dark about the gambler's plan lest he inadvertently ruin it, either by word or by action. And at last, not wanting to arouse his suspicions, Chris sat down at the table with a book and pretended to read.

Soon, however, the sound of a horse's hooves approaching had him up and across the room to one of the front windows, his gun in hand. Vin's confusion turned then to surprise, an alarm starting in his eyes which eased only slightly into curiosity when Chris gave a curse and, after a moment's pause, holstered his gun. He kept his hand resting on it though, opening the door to stand waiting as his unwelcome guest reined his rented horse to a stop at the foot of the porch and dismounted.

"Mr. Larabee," the Reverend Bliss said in greeting as he climbed the steps. "I had hoped that by now tempers might have cooled. But when you and Mr. Tanner didn't return to town, I thought it prudent to see if I could be of some assistance to you."

"That's mighty thoughtful of you," Chris replied in a tone notably lacking in gratitude. "But this is between me and the boys."

"And Mr. Tanner," Bliss added pointedly as Vin appeared at Chris' shoulder.

He started to say more, his eyes on Vin, but Chris cut him off, saying, "There really wasn't any need for you to ride out here, Reverend. Everything's fine. Now, if you'll excuse us, we were just about to sit down to lunch."

He made as if to close the door then, but Vin stood unyielding at his back, the hint not taken, his eyes on their company dark and wide as shadows stirred faintly. And that gave Bliss time enough to say, "I just wanted you to know, son, that you have my full support in this. And so I will tell Judge Travis when he arrives."

Chris jostled Vin then in an attempt to move him back far enough so that he could shut the door on anything further Bliss might have to say. But Vin had other ideas, shadows forgotten in favor of more immediate concerns. And holding his ground, he wrinkled his brow and said, "Judge Travis?"

"It's nothing," Chris hurriedly assured him. "Just some business we need to discuss."

Bliss raised an eyebrow, his tone one of accusatory surprise as he said, "You haven't told him?"

"There's nothing to tell. So if you'll excuse us...."

Again Chris tried to close the door, and again Vin refused to budge, his narrowed gaze shifting from man to man before him. "Tell me," he growled.

"Vin," Chris started, turning to him with one hand still resting on his gun and the other holding tight to the latch on the door. "There ain't nothing going on that you need to worry about. Trust me."

Bliss could see the wavering in Tanner's eyes, could see trust warring against instinct. And rushing to forestall an easy retreat into trust, he said, "I beg to differ with you, Mr. Larabee. Getting run out of town seems a very big deal to me."

Vin paled at that yet stood his ground. And fastening his gaze on the one now half-turned to him, he said, "Chris?"

It was one word, but it spoke of all he had of trust in him, and that given to one he'd never had cause to doubt. And with that one word, Chris knew he asked for the same in return, anything less a betrayal of that trust. So with a sigh, he said, "Go sit at the table, cowboy. I'll tell you in a minute."

Not waiting then for Vin to move away, he turned to get rid of their unwelcome guest. But before he could say a word, Bliss spoke again, saying, "Mr. Tanner is indeed fortunate to have one friend true and steadfast in his loyalty. And so I told Mr. Wilmington after that unfortunate incident in the saloon." He shook his head, eyeing the one who continued

to stand inadvertent guard over the closing of the door. And hurrying to finish his move before Larabee could elbow the tracker aside, he added, "I never would have expected him to turn on a friend like that, to wish to dispose of him as one would a stray whose presence has become annoying. That gambler, maybe. But not Mr. Wilmington, nor any of the others."

Vin took a step back then, but it was too late to close the door against the hurt and fear that sprang to life in his eyes. And seeing that, Chris hurried to reassure the stricken tracker, Bliss forgotten as he said, "It ain't the way it sounds, cowboy."

Vin, however, took another step back and another, his face paling, his head shaking in a repeated refusal to believe that the ones he had trusted to keep him safe were now the very ones from whom he needed protecting.

Chris followed him, his gaze locked on blue eyes dark and wide. "There ain't no one wants you gone," he firmly declared. "You got my word on that."

"Indeed," Bliss agreed, stepping into the room behind Larabee, his hands coming to rest lightly upon the golden head of his cane, his gaze intent on a pawn once lost and now again within his grasp, one last move in a deadly game remaining to him, the ending of it delayed as he weighed the possibilities. "I assure you, Mr. Tanner, Mr. Wilmington seemed quite sincere in his regrets at the decision made. In fact, the very idea of sending you away seemed to cause him considerable anguish."

"Shut the hell up!" Chris commanded, his words to the one behind him, but his gaze on the one before, who took yet another step back, his eyes growing wider, his head still shaking, but the movement less certain now.

"And you needn't worry about the judge," Bliss continued. "Even should he find in favor of Mr. Wilmington and company, and order you to be sent away to the asylum Mr. Standish was so kind as to recommend, Mr. Larabee made it plain that he would never allow it, that he would ride out with you first, with guns blazing if need be." Bliss gave a sorrowful shake of his head. "Ah, what a sad day it is when matters between friends come to such a pass, when such a camaraderie as you men have shown should be so easily betrayed."

Chris turned then, eyes blazing with fury as he growled, "I ain't telling you again to shut up, Bliss. Anything else that needs saying, I'll be saying it. So you can just slither on back to town."

Bliss raised an eyebrow in shocked dismay. "I apologize most profusely, Mr. Larabee, if I have overstepped my bounds. I wished merely to assure Mr. Tanner that, despite earlier threats to the contrary, you were determined to maintain his freedom, regardless of the cost, and that you in no way blame him for what happened to poor Mr. Dunne, despite your fellow peacekeepers' assertions that he merely got in the way of a bullet



meant for Mr. Tanner."

Shadows stirred at that, a crow's wings sounding faint in the dark recesses of Vin's mind.

Bliss turned his gaze to his pawn then, the game playing out once again, careful plotting needed to ensure a victory rather than an unsatisfying, if secure, ending. "Lest there be any doubt in your mind, Mr. Tanner, I assure you that Mr. Larabee remains devoted to your care, and I expect him to continue to give the same exacting attention as he has so far shown you. And I have every confidence that he will do so despite the odds against one man succeeding where six have failed."

Chris gave a final warning then, his tone one of deadly menace as he said, "I ain't never shot a preacher before, Bliss. But I got no problem in making you the first if you say one more word."

Bliss took a step back, one hand sliding free of his cane, the other moving to grip it beneath its golden head, raising it slightly in an instinctive gesture of defense.

Vin's gaze was drawn to that movement, a flash of gold in the midday sun illuminating the shadows stirred now to life, dark forms taking shape there, lightning flashing as thunder rumbled, a scream echoing from out of the darkness, a crow's wings sounding loud in warning. Rain poured. Pain shot through him. Visions of fire and blood and gold glinting on a dark night came to life. A crow smiled at him, taunting him, knowledge in its eyes and death in its grasp, glinting silver and gold in the dark.

His breathing quickened as a shadow took solid form, the crow giving way to a dark shape known and recognized. The truth shall make you free, the crow-turned-man declared. Another shape lay still in a bed, a line of blood at her throat, pillows stained dark with it. You have to get up close, so you can see the light go out of their eyes. Lightning glinted on gold and silver, the cold touch of metal against his face. Would you forsake all else in life for it? Have you forsaken all else?

Killing is killing. And that makes us no different.

"No," he said, soft but insistent, knowledge denied, his gaze centered still on the glint of sunlight on gold, silver flashing a warning amid the shadows.

Two pairs of eyes shifted to him at the sound of his voice, Chris turning with a questioning look, his back now to the dark shape of vision, a hand moving to that glint of gold.

Lightning flashed. Gold became silver. And the still form in the bed was draped now in black, green eyes watching him.

You have to get up close.

Too close. A hand's reach. Gold and silver. Life and death. And the power to choose between them.

Silver glinted beneath gold then -- and the choice was made.

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~ CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE ~

With a wordless cry of anger and warning, Vin was across the room, his slight weight crashing hard into Bliss' larger frame, knocking him off his feet. Both of them then fell to the floor, the cane flying out of Bliss' hand to go sailing through the air, landing six feet away, the knife slipping free of its sheath as it hit. And even as it did, Vin was up and straddling the other man, his fists striking out in anger and fear -- and in denial of a crow's taunting knowledge.

Bliss lay unprotesting beneath him, too stunned by the unexpected attack to defend himself against the blows that rained down on him, his head snapping back and forth as Vin gave in to a maelstrom of emotions fueled by visions felt more than understood -- images and dreams flashing amid the shadows in his mind, light warring there with the dark as the prey became the hunter, nothing known so much as that he had once failed to stop this man from causing harm and would not do so again.

Then Chris was on him, hands grabbing at him and pulling him away, shouts unheard demanding that he stop. But he could no more stop than he could have spoken, could have given voice to all that screamed in him for release. So he fought against the hold on him, a foot kicking out at the one on the floor even as his hands clawed at the arms dragging him back and away.

"Cut it out, Vin!" Chris yelled, giving vent to a string of curses when a booted heel connected hard with his right shin. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"He's crazy!" Bliss wheezed as he sat up, his left hand going to a cut above one eye, his right hand slipping into a coat pocket.

Vin's struggles ceased at that movement, danger noted and catalogued, his response to it instinctual. And sliding his right hand from the arm holding him captive, he reached for Chris' gun, slipping it out of its holster even as Bliss' hand snaked out of the pocket into which it had slid, a dark shape known and instantly recognized held there. But it was Vin's hand that raised first, his gun firing as Bliss drew his own level, another report sounding from one window of the small room in the same instant. Then Bliss fell back with a scream of pain and crashed once more onto the floor, the derringer he held spinning out of his hand and two bright spots of blood springing to life on his right coat sleeve.

Seconds later, both the front and back doors of the cabin crashed open, Ezra peering through one, gun extended and ready for further trouble, and Josiah through the other, with Nathan at his back, gun held high. And seeing the man lying on the floor with one hand pressed to his bleeding arm, the healer demanded to know what had happened.

"Damned if I know," Chris blankly admitted as he snatched the gun out of Vin's hand and released him.

It was Buck who gave reply, sticking his head in the open window

through which he had just fired, saying, "The Reverend there just proved that you've got to watch out for more than just a snake's bite."

"This gun his?" Nathan asked as he stepped over the fallen derringer to go to the injured man's aid.

"That it is," Buck replied as he left the window to move into the room, crossing to the fallen weapon and stooping to pick it up. And scooping up the knife with its golden head, he added, "So's this."

He held the knife up for the others to see, the lion's head snarling in the dusty light, and five pairs of eyes grew hard and cold.

Shifting his gaze from the knife to its owner, Ezra holstered his gun and stepped further into the room, lazily drawling, "My, but that does look annoyingly familiar. I do believe I might have seen its likeness drawn a time or thirty."

Chris, too, holstered his gun. But his voice was tight with anger as he turned to Vin and said, "You want to tell me what's going on?"

It was Bliss though who answered, his own gaze fixed unwaveringly on his pawn turned hunter as he struggled to sit up. "It would seem that I sadly underestimated the perspicacity of the townspeople," he said, his voice tight with pain as Nathan took gentle hold of his arm, his tone aggrieved and sorrowful, his head shaking with regret over having to confess that his hopes in one sorely afflicted had been so sadly misplaced. "As reluctant as I am to admit it, Mr. Tanner is apparently as dangerous as the townspeople claim, as Mr. Wilmington himself admitted this morning in the saloon."

Buck's gaze went to Vin, who turned to him with his eyes wide with hurt. And hurrying to proclaim his innocence, he said, "Now, don't go looking at me like that! It was all Ezra's idea!"

Blue eyes shifted to green, accusation now shadowing the hurt there. Ezra shifted uneasily under that regard. "Yes. Well. I may have gotten a bit carried away with the scripting of that particular drama, but I assure you that it was merely a ruse to lure whoever may have been after you into thinking you'd become an easy target."

Vin blinked his uncertainty, his eyes going to Chris for confirmation and getting it with a barely perceptible nod.

Noting that, and unwilling to give the game up so easily, Bliss shook his head and admonishingly said, "Thou shalt not bear false witness, Mr. Standish. Not if you expect to enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

"Out of the mouth of snakes?" Buck charged, the glare he shot the suspect preacher one to rival Chris' best efforts.

"Methinks I spy a forked tongue flicking between the not-so-reverend's lips," Ezra murmured.

Again Bliss shook his head, this time in sorrow. "Mr. Standish, please. Contrary to the belief popular among those in this room, Mr. Tanner is not stupid. I'm sure even he realizes that such a charade was unnecessary if all you desired was to lure some unsuspecting criminal out of

hiding. He and Mr. Larabee had merely to ride out of town, and I'm sure they would have been followed."

Vin bit his lower lip, the uncertainty flaring to life again in his eyes.

"We had to make sure their departure was known and observed," Ezra explained, his tone calm but the look he shot Bliss warning of deadly currents lying beneath a deceptive surface. "And what better way than by making sure the whole town was speaking of it?"

Another blink followed, the uncertainty in the tracker's eyes easing again.

Conceding defeat, Bliss tried a different tack then, saying, "Perhaps I have misjudged your intentions, Mr. Standish. And if so, I apologize. Still, I have heard it said that a con goes down easiest when wrapped in some measure of the truth."

He hissed then, Nathan having pulled a bit too hard as he tugged his coat off his injured arm.

"Sorry," the healer apologized, but with no light of contrition in his eyes.

Bliss momentarily silenced, Ezra shot a look to the one who stood uncertain still and shifted the conversation to safer ground, saying, "The question now is: Did our little ruse work?" And with that, he turned his gaze to the man being tended by the healer.

Bliss raised an eyebrow, his breath ragged as he said, "You think that I...?" Again he shook his head, this time the gesture one of sorrowful surprise. "Surely you jest, Mr. Standish, to even suggest such an unlikely scenario."

Buck hefted the knife. "This don't seem like a joke to me, Reverend. And I don't see anyone laughing about that gun you pulled either."

"I was merely attempting to defend myself," Bliss patiently explained.

"I'd already been attacked and had every reason to fear it would happen again."

"The only thing is," Buck pointed out, "most preachers I ever heard tell of -- save one or two --" and with that he looked to Josiah, "depend on the Lord to protect them. So why would you carry an arsenal around with you?"

"Perhaps," Ezra suggested, "he subscribes to that old adage about the Lord helping those who help themselves."

"And speaking of help," Nathan cut in, "I could use some myself."

Josiah holstered his weapon at that and moved to hold the injured man's arm as Nathan slit his shirt sleeve and inspected the wounds. And when Bliss would have spoken up again, his gaze going to Vin, he silenced him with a jerk of his arm that had him hissing once more in pain.

Chris nodded his approval, then held his hand out to Buck for the knife, holding it up to Vin, saying, "Tell me about this, cowboy. Have you ever seen it before?"

Vin shifted his gaze from Chris to the snarling lion's head, his mind a chaos of visions and images flashing in and out among the shadows, the picture they formed still uncertain even if recognized. And sorting through those shadows, tracking from light to dark and back again, from vision before to vision within, he found words even as he found the trail of memories. "She was dead," he softly said. "There was blood and a fire. And the crow was there in the dark." Lightning flashed in memory, glinting gold in the darkened room. And squinting against the light, Vin continued, his words coming slowly as the memories fell into place. "He was there, and he killed her."

"Who was there, Vin? Can you tell us who the crow is?"

Vin was still for a moment, then his gaze shifted to the dark shape of memory come to life, the crow's wings falling silent in the shadows. "He was there," he repeated. Then: "He was there in the dark, and he killed her."

Bliss started to object, but again Josiah silenced him with a jerk of his arm, and Chris continued, his voice low and warning of violence barely suppressed. "You saw him kill her? You saw Bliss kill Amy Callenbeck?"

Vin returned his gaze to the man in black, the violence within recognized and a darkness building there. But no crow's wings beat in that dark place within this man known as he'd never known another, so he turned easily away from it and said, "She screamed. And he was there." He reached out then to lightly touch the knife Chris still held before him, the movement hesitant, as one would reach to test metal pulled from a fire. "It was shining in the dark. It was shining and...."

He trailed off, silver glinting and pain exploding, the memory of it beyond words.

Chris, however, had no need of those words. And slamming the knife down into the kitchen table, he turned and crossed the few feet to where Bliss sat, Nathan wrapping a strip of linen around his upper right arm. Bliss looked up, meeting the glare aimed at him with an unblinking gaze of his own, giving nothing away by word or look. And for a moment the two searched out in silence what each recognized in the other, the dark in each known and given name. Then, his gaze never wavering from the one who shunned the light, Chris asked of the healer, "He going to live?" Nathan looked up, his eyes blank of their normal compassion as he said, "He took a couple of bullets in his arm. One broke his bone and it's still lodged there."

"Leave it in."

The words were spare and simple, the tone not of violence but of a cold anger all the more deadly for the constraint that edged it. Still, Nathan could no more heed them than he could get up and walk away from any need he could ease. And with a shake of his head, he said only, "You know I can't do that."

Chris had known, had known before the words were spoken, for he knew his men as perhaps he would never know himself. Yet there was that in him that needed those words spoken.

He would have turned then from the killer at his feet, would have turned from the darkness that stared up at him and from his own darkness stirring within. But before he could move, Bliss barreled into Nathan with his left shoulder, knocking him to the floor and pulling his gun out of its holster as he did so. He then held it up so that it was aimed directly at the healer. And unmindful of the four guns instantly out and cocked, he coldly said, "You would listen to the ravings of a man you treat as a child? You would take the word of one who can barely speak it over that of a man of God?" He shook his head. "I'll not stay here and swing at the end of a lynch mob's rope. So, if you gentlemen will do me the courtesy of removing your guns...."

Neither gazes nor weapons upon him wavered.

"Come now," Bliss continued, his tone one of patience unreasonably tried. "I'm sure you men have no desire to lose the services of your good healer over the demented ramblings of one who will never again be one of you. Better six than five, wouldn't you say?"

Chris gave a curse at that, hard eyes warning against the assumption of defeat. Still, he dropped his gun, the others following his example, their guns clattering to the floor after his. "This ain't over," he declared, the words more an unshakable promise than a threat given. "It will never be over 'til you've suffered as much as Vin and J. D. have, 'til you're as dead as Amy Callenbeck is. So no matter what rock you crawl under, I'll find you. And won't nothing save you then."

Bliss climbed unsteadily to his feet, his right arm tucked tight against his side, blood staining the bandage there, and his left holding the weapon on the healer still. "That may be, Larabee. But any rock you turn will be one long familiar to you. So hide in plain sight if you will behind a lawman's title. But it doesn't change who and what you are. No more than it will ever change who and what Tanner is." He waved the gun then towards a sack draped over a chair. "And now, if you men want to continue your little charade, I suggest you toss those weapons of yours in there and hand them to me."

He waited then while Josiah collected first the sack and then the guns. And when he held the filled sack out, he shook his head, saying, "You carry it out to my horse, tie it on the saddle for me."

He moved to the front door, his back to it and his gun shifting to cover Josiah, who moved slowly after him. And reaching the door, he inclined his head in farewell to the others, saying, "Good day, gentlemen." "Not for snakes, it ain't," a new and unexpected voice announced, J. D. appearing at Bliss' back, a gun pressing into his spine. Then with a growl, he said, "Drop the gun, Preacher, or you'll be crawling to the gallows on your belly."

Bliss froze, his left arm still extended, the gun in his hand unerringly pointed at Josiah. And, unwilling yet to concede defeat, he coolly said, "You're making a mistake, boy."

"Only if I miss," J. D. corrected. "And ain't no way I can do that with my gun working a hole in your back. So drop your weapon now."

Seconds passed, Bliss' gaze going to Chris, then Vin, move considered against move, his eyes darkening in challenge, refusing still to concede the game even as his arm lowered and Nathan's gun dropped to the floor. Josiah instantly snatched it up, holding it on Bliss even as he handed the sack over to the healer, who quickly distributed the guns within. Chris no sooner holstered the gun returned to him than he moved to stand before Bliss, saying, "If you know any prayers, preacher, you'd best start saying them now."

Moves yet to be made and the game far from over, Bliss met and held the other man's gaze, saying, "What was that you said about this not being over?"

Challenge understood and accepted, Chris said only, "J. D., get this piece of trash out of my house."

Holstering his gun, J. D. moved to take hold of Bliss' right arm, only to release it when the injured man let out a hiss of pain and a scathing: "Apparently the Judge has more than one idiot on the payroll."

It was to the healer a stoney-eyed Chris spoke next, saying, "Nathan? You got any laudanum on you?"

"No," the healer replied. "It's all back in town."

Chris cocked his head. "We can't rightly transport a prisoner in pain without doing what we can to relieve his suffering, now can we?"

"Why, it wouldn't hardly be proper at all," Buck agreed, his tone as serious as the eyes fastened on the pale-faced Bliss.

"Guess we'll have to ease his pain the old-fashioned way then." And with that, Chris balled his right hand into a fist and slammed it forwards and up into Bliss' jaw. He then watched with a small smile of satisfaction as the man fell heavily to the ground, to lie there unmoving.

"Don't reckon he's feeling any pain at all now," Buck approved with a slap on Larabee's back.

"And I don't imagine he'll be feeling much of anything at all for some time to come," Josiah added as he nudged the still form with a booted toe.

"Well, all right then, J. D.," Buck said with a look to the youngest of the Seven. "You heard Chris. There's garbage needs taking out. So don't just stand there -- get to work!"

J. D. grinned and shook his head, saying, "Heroes don't haul trash. That's work fit only for them that need rescuing."

"Rescuing!" Buck echoed in indignant protest. "Wasn't no one needing rescuing here. We had the situation completely under control. In fact, we had that ol' reptile of a reverend so full of himself he was about to

bust with it. And it's a good thing you didn't pop up a few seconds later or he'd have busted all over you." He shuddered at the thought. "Now that would have been ugly. And you know how much I hate ugly." Nathan scowled at the youth cocky despite the right arm bound to his chest. "Well, Buck," he warned, "you'd best watch out, 'cause things is going to get mighty ugly if J. D. don't get himself back to town and into bed right quick." Then advancing upon the young hero, who scrambled back with a look of alarm, he growled, "What did you think you were doing following us? Did I say you could get out of that bed? Did I say you could go riding? No, I ain't said neither. And if you'd have listened to a thing I said, you'd know that. Now what do I got to do -- get Chris to administer some old-fashioned pain relief? 'Cause I can do that if I have to."

J. D. turned tail and ran at that. And as the irate healer disappeared through the door after him, Buck shook his head and said, "Reckon I'd best go after them before Nathan does some pain relieving of his own." When he'd slipped through the door to go to the youngest's aid, Ezra gazed in distaste at the unconscious man on the floor. "I suppose," he said with a sigh of long-suffering bravely borne, "that I have been relegated to the role of garbage collector now." He wrinkled his nose. "Oh, the things I do for filthy lucre." And rolling up his sleeves, he looked to the Seven's leader, a hopeful note to his voice as he said, "I don't suppose I can expect a small bonus in my next pay packet? Just a little something, you understand, to cover the costs of the laundering this onerous task will incur?"

"Ezra?" Josiah said as he bent down to grasp Bliss' legs. "Shut up." The gambler did as directed, heaving another sigh and screwing his face into lines of distaste as he bent to gather Bliss' upper body. But as he lifted his burden and backed out of the front door with it, he set up a litany of complaints that had Josiah rolling his eyes and heaving a sigh of his own.

When they too had disappeared and Ezra's complaints had faded away, Chris turned to Vin, who stood in the middle of the one room of the shack, staring at the open door with a familiar confusion shadowing his eyes. It was then Chris knew how true his words to Bliss had been. This ain't over.

Amy Callenbeck's killer was on his way to jail and would swing for her murder. J. D. was barely slowed down by his broken arm. But Vin Tanner had yet to reclaim his place among the Seven. No, it wasn't over and it would never be over until the Seven rode out again as seven, with Vin riding ahead in search of a trail or danger, as he had always ridden in life. It wasn't over. But seven men good and true were determined that it would one day be so, and nothing of Heaven nor Hell would stand against them. This Chris knew as he'd known nothing else in life: It wasn't over -- but it would be. And until that day, Vin would ride among the



Seven, their ranks closed about him in shelter.

It wasn't over, but it would be. And with that thought firmly in mind, Chris cocked his head at his companion and softly said, "The boys are probably waiting on us. We'd best get going."

Vin eyed him for a long moment, tracking his way from words spoken to promises unvoiced. And with a nod, he turned and led the way to the front door of the shack, stepping out of its shadowed interior into the light, his horse there at the foot of the steps, saddled and ready, five men seated on their own mounts and waiting. The sixth moved around him to the horse standing next to his. And swinging up onto its back, he too sat waiting for Vin to join them. Then, as the seventh gained his saddle, Chris turned his gaze to the road stretching away before them and said, "Let's ride."

THE END