

## The River Wild

“I like traffic lights.”

Ezra gritted his teeth.

“I like traffic lights.”

Staring determinedly out the front window, Ezra clenched the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white.

“I like traffic lights.”

Ezra glared into the rearview mirror, giving the soloist a look that would have sent the devil himself running for cover.

“But only when they’re green.”

Ezra waited, praying to any deity that would listen in the hope that the off-key serenade was finally finished.

“I like traffic lights.”

“Mr. Tanner! If you don’t desist with that racket this instant, I’m going to drive us straight into a tree.” Ezra had barely tolerated the entire rendition of ‘99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall’ that Vin had seen fit to entertain him with, but this was finally the last straw.

“You wouldn’t risk gettin’ your suit bloody,” Vin taunted from the back seat.

Ezra smirked at him. “I have an airbag.”

Vin stuck out his tongue, but remained silent.

“‘Bout damned time,” the man sitting next to him muttered.

“Shut yer hole, Macklin,” Vin said, elbowing the handcuffed man roughly.

Chris, sitting in the front passenger seat, chuckled with amusement as he slipped off his headphones.

“I’m glad you find this amusing, Mr. Larabee,” Ezra said darkly.

“Pull into that rest area up ahead.” Chris pointed to the sign they had just passed. He grinned in response to Ezra’s look of inquiry. “He can’t sing if his mouth is full of food.”

“Good point.” Ezra pulled the sedan into the parking area next to the restaurant, then stepped out of the vehicle and stretched.

“I’ll take over when we leave,” Chris said, joining Ezra in leaning on the car. “You’re looking a little tired.”

Ezra shrugged, but didn't protest. In truth, he was very tired, having just spent six long weeks undercover in northern Montana. Wade Macklin was a small-time arms dealer who had decided to expand and make a name for himself in the trade. He had begun operating a weapons pipeline out of Canada, using his contacts in the neighboring country to smuggle weapons over the border.

Team Seven had been brought in because they were not local to the area, and therefore, unknown to Macklin, who had connections within local law enforcement groups. Ezra had worked his way into the man's growing organization, offering additional contacts and smuggling routes in order to ally himself with Macklin. In a joint operation with the Canadian authorities, Team Seven had taken down both Macklin and his suppliers.

It had been a smooth operation, with no unforeseen problems, but Ezra was still weary from the gunrunner's demands on his time. Macklin was no city slicker and his operation had been based out of a rural location in the middle of nowhere. He also had a fondness for hunting and insisted that Ezra accompany him on several multi-day trips into the wilderness. Ezra knew he would be in for some teasing from his fellow agents once they found out about the days spent traipsing through the woods.

"Hey, I'm hungry!" Macklin called from inside the car.

"You'll eat when we get there," Chris said, ignoring the man's further ranting.

Ezra glared at their prisoner, wishing they had been allowed to fly home instead of being forced to drive back as escort to Macklin.

Vin returned, clutching a large bag of food. He handed Chris a cup of coffee and Ezra a bottle of water.

"Thank you, Vin," Ezra said, sipping the cool water.

"Let's go." Chris slid behind the wheel and drove off once the others were inside.

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"Hey, man I gotta take a leak," Macklin said, squirming in his seat.

"Hold it." Vin slurped the rest of his soda through the straw.

"I can't!" Macklin's voice had a pleading undertone and the squirming had increased.

Vin rolled his eyes. "Chris, we better stop."

"Yeah," Chris muttered unhappily.

There was a bridge ahead of them and the shoulder of the road widened as it approached the structure. Vin pointed it out and Chris nodded, pulling into the spot he indicated.

"Come on." Vin hauled Macklin out of the car.

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Ezra yawned and stretched as he woke from his light doze. "I take it we aren't there yet?"

"Bathroom break." Chris said succinctly.

Ezra looked around, seeing nothing but trees, and frowned. "Charming." He climbed out of the car to stretch his legs.

“Hey, Ez?” Vin called.

“Yes?”

“Can you watch him for a minute? I gotta go, too.”

“I told you you’d regret drinking a super-sized soda,” Ezra said with a smirk as he joined Vin at the edge of the woods.

“Yeah, yeah,” Vin said. “Just watch him.”

The sound of a river flowing nearby made Ezra smirk. Running water did tend to enhance that particular urge. He took Vin’s gun and chuckled aloud as the man darted into the woods.

“Are you finished?” Ezra asked their prisoner after a few minutes.

“Yeah,” Macklin said, giving him a dirty look.

Ignoring the glare, Ezra gestured with the gun. “Back to the car.”

Macklin muttered under his breath, but complied. They were almost back to the car when Macklin made a break for it.

Ezra had been anticipating the attempt and ducked neatly under Macklin’s handcuffed wrists as the man swung at him. He hadn’t, however, anticipated the stone that moved under his ankle. Off balance, he stumbled and fell to one knee. Fumbling for the gun, he pushed himself to his feet and took off after Macklin, who had bolted and was now running into the woods.

“Stop!” Ezra fired once, but Macklin kept running.

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“Aw hell!” At the sound of a gunshot, Chris hastily unclipped his seat belt and raced to join his men.

At first, he saw nothing but trees, but then he spotted Vin in the distance. Beyond him, he saw a flash of movement, but then nothing. Chris kept running, then stopped short when Macklin burst into view, heading toward the river. Ezra followed immediately after, launching himself off of a boulder and tackling Macklin to the ground. The two men wrestled for control and Chris winced in sympathy when Macklin landed a hard blow to Ezra’s face. He started running again, keeping his eyes focused on the fight.

Ezra kicked out at Macklin, catching him in the groin and provoking a howl that made Chris grin. Bastard deserved that and more. The gun dealer was not so easily subdued, however, and landed a solid punch in Ezra’s stomach. The undercover agent fell to the dirt and Macklin took that opportunity to attempt another escape. Pulling himself up, Ezra tackled Macklin again, sending both of them into the fast-moving river.

“No!” Chris shouted, watching in horror as Ezra’s head disappeared under the water.

Vin emerged from the trees, drawing himself up short at the river’s edge. Macklin’s head was visible, bobbing in the current and Chris knew with sickening certainty what the sharpshooter was going to do.

Knowing it was futile, Chris yelled, “Vin, no!”

Without looking back, Vin jumped into the river.

“Goddammit!” Chris ran to the river’s edge, looking for any sign of his men. But there was none.

Running a hand through his hair, Chris debated for only a minute before turning around and heading for the car. There was nothing to gain by following them and he didn't have the equipment to track them through the woods. His blistered feet reminded him that he wasn't dressed for the task, either. They were all wearing suits, since they had attended a final meeting with the Canadian authorities shortly before leaving that afternoon. Vin had ditched his suit jacket and tie the minute they left the building, but none of them had bothered to change before heading back. He glared down at his loafers, wishing he had his hiking boots and wondering how a simple drive home could go so wrong.

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Numb. That was the best word his muddled brain could find to describe how he currently felt. His skin felt tingly, both hot and cold at the same time. His head hurt, but that was fading as the numbness spread. Ezra smiled, enjoying the odd, floaty feeling until something grabbed him. Panicking, he struggled against the grip, choking as icy water filled his mouth.

"Ezra!" a familiar voice shouted in his ear. "Relax, it's just me."

Ezra opened his eyes. "Vin?"

Vin tugged on his arm. "Come on, we have to get out of here."

The fog in his head cleared somewhat and Ezra finally took notice of his surroundings, groaning when he realized he was in the water. "Damn," he gasped. "There goes... another suit."

Vin snorted. "That's the least of our problems."

The sound of rushing water reached Ezra's ears and he looked down the river to locate the source. "Aw, hell," he muttered when he saw the flat line beyond which the river seemed to disappear.

"Yeah." Vin huffed through chattering teeth. "Gotta try to m-make it to shore."

Ezra attempted to swim, but his muscles didn't seem to want to cooperate. His arms and legs were leaden and he could barely keep his head above water as he fought against the strong current.

"Let me go." Ezra made a feeble attempt to dislodge Vin's grip. "C-can't make it. Go." There was no way he was going to make it to shore before they reached the waterfall and he didn't want to drag Vin down with him.

"L-like hell." Vin grabbed him with both hands.

The two men struggled to reach the shore, but the current was too strong for them and they headed inexorably toward the waterfall.

"Hang on," Vin said as they approached the fall.

Ezra met Vin's eyes and smiled. Vin grinned at him, then started to laugh. Recognizing the absurdity of their situation, Ezra started laughing as well. They were still laughing uncontrollably when they went over the waterfall.

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"Shit!" Chris threw his cell phone down angrily. He couldn't get a signal this far up in the mountains and he cursed once again at the budgetary restraints that had prevented them from being equipped with the satellite phones he requested. Pressing his foot down, he sped down the road, looking for any place that might have a telephone.

The overloaded pickup truck lumbered down the road at a snail's pace. Chris drew up behind it, growling when he was forced to use his brakes. After a quick check for traffic, he swerved into the opposite lane and sped past the slow vehicle. There was no time for delays when his men's lives were in danger. He was focused so intently on the road ahead that he never saw the police car sitting behind a bridge abutment. The sirens behind him finally registered and he pulled the car over with a relieved smile.

The sheriff's car stopped behind him, the man reporting in on his radio before climbing out of the car to approach Chris's vehicle. Impatient, Chris got out of the car and strode determinedly toward him.

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Sheriff Bob Weston frowned when his radar gun registered the speed of the big sedan. At one hundred and eight miles per hour, the guy was either drunk or crazy. The road had far too many sharp curves for anyone to last long at such a speed, so with sirens blaring, he floored his accelerator to catch up to the reckless driver before he got himself or anyone else killed. He anticipated a long chase, but the sedan slowed shortly after he caught up to him. Grabbing his microphone, the sheriff radioed in the license plate number. The response was quick, since there were apparently no warrants or notices out on the vehicle. The sheriff picked up his pad of traffic tickets and stepped onto the roadway.

Weston slowed his pace and watched warily as the blond man climbed out of the car and started toward him. The man was tall, dressed in a suit with no tie, and had a look in his eyes that made the hair on the back of the sheriff's neck prickle in warning. The man's suit jacket flapped open as he walked and Weston caught sight of the shoulder holster under his arm. Drawing his gun, he pointed it at the man.

"Hold it right there, mister," he ordered. "Hands where I can see 'em."

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Chris froze, lifting his hands up in a non-threatening manner. "Officer..."

"That's Sheriff Weston, to you," the sheriff said, his gun aimed steadily at Chris's middle.

"Sheriff Weston," Chris began. "I'm ATF. I'm going to get my badge." He opened his suit jacket slowly, revealing the gun under his arm.

"Hold it." The sheriff approached him, quickly removing the gun from its holster.

Chris reached into the inside pocket of his suit jacket and drew out his badge wallet, handing it to the sheriff.

Weston checked the badge and frowned. "Denver? Aren't you a little bit far from home?"

Chris sighed. "I was doing a prisoner transport with two of my men, but the guy took a runner when we made a pit stop. My guys chased him into a river a ways back and I need to get some help out here to find them." He shook his head. "Can't get a signal on my cell phone, so I was trying to get someplace where I could call someone."

"I have to call this in." Sheriff Weston gestured with his gun. "Get in the back seat."

Chris was nearly twitching with impatience, but he needed this man's help, so he quickly complied, sliding into the back seat of the patrol car. It didn't take long to verify Chris's identity and he soon found himself headed back to the river with Weston. The dispatcher was calling in Search and Rescue and notifying the rest of Team Seven about the situation.

“Macklin ran off into the woods and ended up in the river down that way when one of my guys jumped him. The other one went in after them.” Weston stood next to him on the bridge and grimaced when he looked in the direction Chris had indicated.

“This is the worst time for them to be goin’ swimmin’, ‘specially in there.” Weston shook his head. “River’s at a high point with the spring snow melt, and it’s damn cold to boot. Got some ferocious rapids further in and a coupl’a good-sized waterfalls. They could go for miles before bein’ able to get out.”

“Shit,” Chris cursed. “It figures.”

“We get some rafters and kayakers tryin’ it out occasionally, but it’s mostly too rough for that,” Weston said. “Usually end up pullin’ out bodies.”

Swallowing hard at that thought, Chris said, “They’ll make it.” He hoped he sounded more confident than he felt.

“The chopper’ll be here in about twenty minutes,” Weston said helpfully. “Those guys are pretty good. Can your boys handle themselves out there?”

“Vin knows his way around the woods,” Chris stated confidently. “Ezra...” He sighed and shook his head. “Ezra’s learning, but he’s a city boy.”

Weston grimaced, and Chris knew exactly what he was thinking. He, too, was praying that Ezra didn’t end up alone out there. The undercover agent was smart, but it was no substitute for wilderness experience in a situation like this. If either of them was injured... Chris shook his head, refusing to complete that thought.

“We’ll find them.” Chris wouldn’t allow himself to think otherwise.

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Ezra’s head popped out of the water and he desperately sucked air into his lungs, coughing as the water bubbled around his mouth.

“Vin!” he yelled hoarsely, searching frantically for his teammate. But there was no sign of him. “Vin!” Ezra called out again, distressed at the lack of response.

The current was starting to pull at him, drawing him away from this small area of calm near the base of the waterfall. He struggled against it, but his body failed him and he succumbed to the rapids once again.

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“Gonna be dark soon,” Weston said quietly, handing the somber blond a cup of coffee. “They’re coming in for the night.”

Chris nodded, sipping the hot beverage gratefully. The air was already much cooler than it had been during the day and promised to drop close to freezing overnight.

“Gets cold in these hills at night,” Weston said, echoing Chris’s thoughts.

“Yeah,” Chris agreed. “Is there someplace nearby I can stay tonight?”

Weston nodded. “Got a motel just outside of town, ‘bout thirty miles down.”

Heaving a sigh, Chris walked slowly toward his car. There was nothing he could do until morning. By then, the rest of the team would be here and they could all join in the search for the missing men. He started the car and followed Weston down the road. It was going to be a very long night.

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Pain exploded in Ezra's arm as he bounced off of another rock. He yelped in pain, his mouth filling with water when the current sucked him under again. He struggled to the surface in time to realize that he was being dragged over another waterfall. His curses were drowned out by the sound of water crashing onto the rocks below. Certain he was about to die, Ezra closed his eyes and sent a silent goodbye to his friends.

No one was more stunned than Ezra himself when he found himself floating in another pool of calm water at the bottom of the falls. His eyes widening in disbelief, he gazed upward, estimating the height of the waterfall to be at least forty feet. Ezra paddled feebly with his right arm, his left dragging uselessly in the water. He nearly cried in relief when his feet touched the bottom of the river. Resting a moment, he looked around, hoping to find some signs of civilization. A spot of color on the other side of the river drew his attention.

"Vin?" Ezra squinted, hoping his eyes hadn't deceived him. Caught up in some branches, the dark red shirt – and the body that wore it – bobbed gently in the current.

"No, no, no, no, no," Ezra muttered fearfully as he pushed himself back into the icy water. Heedless of his own safety, he swam awkwardly to the other side, praying that the current wouldn't take him before he reached Vin.

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"What happened?" Buck stood at the door, his frame radiating the same tension as the rest of the group.

Chris sighed, and gestured for Buck and the rest of his men to come inside the motel room. Without pleasantries, he gave them the bare facts, unsurprised at the worried looks that took up residence on their faces.

"Dammit, can't them boys go anywhere without gettin' in trouble?" Buck cursed.

"Our brothers do seem to have a knack for getting into difficulty," Josiah agreed unhappily.

"I brought the full pack." Nathan indicated the oversized duffel he used to pack medical supplies. "Known' those two, I figured we'd need it."

"What about Macklin?" JD asked absently, his worry evident in the unconscious wringing of his hands.

"No sign of him, either." Chris sat on the edge of his bed. "Ain't much we can do 'til morning, so you'd best get some sleep."

"Brought your stuff." Buck handed him a bag with a change of clothes and his hiking boots.

"Thanks."

No more was said, but the worry was plain to see as the men filed out and went to their respective rooms. Chris doubted any of them would get much sleep this night.

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The normally-animated face was slack and pale in the fading daylight. There was a tightness in his chest that Ezra couldn't ignore as his hand hovered over the man he called 'friend.' Swallowing hard, he pressed his fingers against Vin's neck, hoping the numbed digits would be able to detect the signs of life. His hope faded quickly when he felt nothing.

“Don’t do this to me, Vin,” Ezra pleaded, slapping the man’s face hard. “I can’t go back there without you.” Grabbing the front of Vin’s shirt, he lifted him off the sandy ground and shook him hard. “Please.”

There was no response. Ezra turned away, curling himself into a tight ball. A tear slipped silently down his face as exhaustion and cold finally overtook him.

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Wade Macklin grinned, his smile a tobacco-stained flash in the darkness. Tanner was dead, and from the look of things, Standish wasn’t far behind him. Still, he hadn’t gotten this far without being thorough. He picked up a heavy branch and stepped out of the trees.

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Still on the edge of sleep, Ezra rolled over, inhaling sharply as pain flared in his arm. He opened his eyes, blinking to clear the blurry images in front of him. One shape resolved itself into a familiar, menacing form.

“Shit,” Ezra breathed, forcing his uncooperative body to move. The branch descended, but instead of connecting with his head, as Macklin intended, the blow landed across his back. Ezra saw stars, falling sideways at the impact. He could only watch helplessly as Macklin lifted the branch again.

But the blow never came. A body erupted from the trees, hitting Macklin in a flying tackle. The branch flew from the gun merchant’s hand and he tumbled down the bank toward the river, landing in the water with a resounding splash. Macklin floundered for a minute until the current pulled him away.

Ezra grinned. “Impeccable timing, Mr. Tanner.”

Vin smiled at him, then closed his eyes and toppled to the ground.

“Vin!” Ezra pushed himself up, crawling after him when he couldn’t get to his feet.

Vin rolled perilously close to the water, but thankfully came to rest at the river’s edge.

Ezra collapsed beside him, closing his eyes against the waves of pain assaulting him. “Vin, wake up.”

The only response was a moan.

“I don’t think I can haul you back up the hill,” Ezra said. “Come to think of it, I don’t think I can get myself up the hill, either.”

A muffled chuckle came from the prone form beside him. “I’ve fallen and I can’t get up.”

Ezra laughed, despite the pain it caused. He could feel a bubble of hysteria building, and struggled to quash it.

Vin slowly pushed himself onto all fours. “C’mon, Ez. Gotta get back up there.”

Ezra sighed, gazing forlornly up the hill. He finally managed to maneuver himself onto his hands and knees. “After you, Vin.”

Side by side, the two exhausted men crawled up the slope, collapsing into a pile of leaves once they reached the top.

“Gotta start a fire,” Vin said, shivering. “Damn cold out here.” He reached for a few nearby sticks and branches.

“Please tell me you aren’t planning to rub two sticks together,” Ezra moaned.

“Nope.” Vin reached into his pocket and retrieved a small plastic tube. “Matches.”

Ezra arched an eyebrow. “Waterproof?”

“Of course.”

Ezra gave him a broad grin. “Thank goodness for modern-day mountain men.”

Giving him a half-hearted glare, Vin poked him in the shoulder. “Still need somethin’ to burn.”

Groaning, Ezra complied, collecting as many branches and sticks as he could find. It didn’t take long for Vin to start a fire and soon, the two men were huddled together near the roaring blaze, relishing the warmth after their long exposure to the cold.

“How you doin’?” Vin asked.

“I don’t know,” Ezra said. “If I look half as bad as you, then I’d have to say I’m doing poorly.”

Vin snorted. “Hell, I feel like a damn pinball, banging off ‘a them rocks and such.”

“I encountered a few of those,” Ezra said, gesturing to his injured arm.

“It broken?”

Ezra nodded. “How’s your leg?” He gestured to the long gash on Vin’s thigh.

“Hurts like a sum’bitch.”

“We’re quite the pair.” Ezra sighed. “They’re not going to be happy.”

Vin grimaced.

There was no need to explain who ‘they’ were. Ezra blew out a breath. He could already picture the disapproving faces of their teammates. He and Vin shared a look and Ezra had to smile. At least they were alive. And he wasn’t alone. That was more than enough for him.

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“We got a body,” Weston said without preamble when Josiah joined him at the bridge. “They’re bringing it to the clinic in town.”

Josiah closed his eyes, offering up a silent prayer. He had stayed behind while the others joined the search teams, knowing that someone needed to be here in case of just such an occurrence.

“I can drive you there,” Weston offered.

“Thank you, Sheriff. I’d appreciate that. Josiah followed him to his car, his shoulders slumped and dread sitting heavily in his heart.

Sensing his distress, Weston drove them to town as quickly as possible. Josiah nodded his appreciation when they reached the clinic much faster than he’d anticipated.

“You want company?” Weston offered

“I’d appreciate it.”

“Morgue is in the basement.” Weston led him to the elevator.

Once inside, Josiah’s heart began to hammer in his chest. He truly dreaded seeing what lay under the sheet, but it had to be done. He took a breath and nodded at the morgue attendant. The sheet was pulled back and Josiah steeled himself one last time before looking down at the body. Relief flooded through him when he didn’t recognize the person who lay there. His shoulders slumped as the tension drained out of him.

“Which one is it?” Weston asked, mistaking his posture for despair.

“It’s not,” Josiah replied, straightening with a grin. “I don’t recognize him.”

“Not Macklin, either?”

Josiah shook his head. “Nope.”

Weston scratched his head and smiled. “Guess Larabee was right.”

Josiah tilted his head curiously.

“Told him about the body over the radio, but he insisted it wasn’t either of his boys.”

Josiah chuckled. “Chris doesn’t know how to give up.”

“I’m starting to see that.”

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“You all right?” Vin’s worried, blood-smearred face looked down at him.

Ezra frowned. “Huh?”

“Shit,” Vin cursed.

Looking around, Ezra suddenly remembered what had happened. They had been shuffling along, leaning on each other, when his foot had tangled in a thorn bush and he had tripped, landing on his broken arm and dragging Vin down with him.

“I’m fine,” Ezra said, the harsh cough that escaped him belying that statement.

Vin rolled his eyes. “Sure, you are.”

Struggling to his feet, Ezra swayed a minute before Vin’s grip steadied him. “How much further?”

Vin shrugged, then winced. “Don’t know. We prob’ly got washed a few miles from the road, at least.”

Ezra sighed, forcing himself to put one foot in front of the other. “Have I told you how much I hate the wilderness?”

Vin laughed, then started to cough.

“You sound terrible,” Ezra remarked.

“Pot ‘n kettle, Ez,” Vin muttered.

Ezra smirked. Pot and kettle, indeed.

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Leaning his head back, Chris took a drink from his water bottle, squinting up at the late afternoon sun. It would be dark in a few hours and if they hadn't found Vin and Ezra by then... He pushed the thought out of his head. He knew how unlikely it was that they would survive another night in the cold, with no food, no shelter, and inadequate clothing. His men were tough, but even tough men had their limits.

"Coming, Chris?"

Chris nodded to Buck and continued on, pushing through the tangled brush in hopes that maybe behind that next tree, he'd find his men. He didn't want to contemplate finding them in the river.

"I wonder who that guy is that they found?" JD pondered.

"Don't know, kid," Buck replied. "Could be a hiker or somethin'."

"It's wrong of me, since I know that man has a family, too," Nathan said, softly, "but I'm glad it was him instead of Ez or Vin."

"Me, too, Nathan," Chris said, patting him on the arm as they continued their slow progress.

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"This sucks."

Vin chuckled at the uncharacteristic crudeness of Ezra's remark. "Yep."

Night had fallen, but the moon was bright and they had decided to continue walking as long as they were able. Both of them were limping, now, and though they were moving slowly, they were at least making some progress. Neither man was looking forward to another cold night.

"Vin," Ezra said suddenly, squinting into the darkness. "I think I see something."

Vin stared into the woods, eventually spotting a faint glow amidst the trees. "I see it."

"You think..."

"Light means people, Ez," Vin said. "Usually."

"Lead on."

Together, they started forward again, making halting progress toward the light.

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Chris sat next to the fire, sipping coffee from a tin cup. He was starting to lose hope of ever finding his missing men. It hadn't been said aloud, but Chris knew the search would end tomorrow, one way or another. He and the others would keep looking, but the rescue teams would be heading back in the morning. He glanced at the small tents, wondering if his men were able to sleep tonight. He certainly couldn't.

Stretching the kinks out of his back, Chris stood, draining the last of his coffee. He needed to get some rest, if he hoped to do any good in the morning. Starting for his tent, he stopped, frowning at the sound of crackling he heard coming from the surrounding woods. He cocked his head, listening carefully.

When he heard the sound again, he quietly reached into his pack and pulled out his gun, then crept behind a tree at the edge of the small clearing. Weston had said there were bears and wolves out here and it wouldn't do to be caught unaware if one should attack. He slipped off the safety as the noise drew closer.

"Don't think ya need that, cowboy," a familiar voice called from the shadows.

"Vin." Relief flooded through Chris as he stuck the gun in his waistband and headed toward his friend.

Vin and Ezra shuffled into the dimly lit clearing, dropping ungracefully to the ground near the fire.

Chris shook his head. "You guys look like shit."

"Nice to see you, too," Ezra said hoarsely.

"Sound like shit too." Chris grinned. It was the best thing he had heard all night.

Vin gave him a one-finger salute.

"Mr. Larabee," Ezra complained. "I expect reimbursement for my ruined wardrobe."

"Hey guys!" Chris yelled, ignoring Ezra's grumbling.

A grunt came from one of the tents and Nathan poked his head out, blearily looking around. His eyes widened when they lit on the two bedraggled men by the fire. "Holy...."

"Aw hell," Ezra groaned when Nathan emerged from the tent with his duffel bag.

Chris sat back and grinned as first Nathan, then JD and Buck descended upon their two wayward teammates. His men were somewhat worse for wear, but they were alive and in one piece. That was good enough for him.

*fin*