

TRACKER

A Fox Walker Novel

Indy Quillen

CHAPTER ONE

Elk Meadow, Colorado

Grandfather had taught him to consider his instincts as real entities, to trust in their message. And intuition told Fox Walker to stay close to his cabin today.

Still, on a cloudless late-summer day, he struggled with his restless mood. He stood on the front porch of his log cabin looking out over the sleek waters of the lake, and the snow crowned peaks of the San Juan Mountains beyond. He longed to roam the woods, not stand around waiting...for what?

He stepped off the porch into the cover of the trees behind his cabin, walking amid the fallen leaves, scarlet and gold against the grass. His moccasin boots rustled their scent into the air as he made his way to a worn grassy spot. Pulling his knife from its sheath on his belt, he concentrated on the practice target before him. The woodland sounds and pungent scent of evergreens surrounding him faded into the background. Soon nothing existed for him except the center of the round slab of pine, twenty-five feet away.

For a moment, his compact body tensed—prepared to strike. A second later, muscles relaxed to allow quick action. In one fluid movement, he propelled the knife through the air. It sailed end over end in perfect rhythm, until the tip embedded itself with a solid *thunk* into the center of the target.

Walker strode to the target board and pulled the knife out, looked up to see a small dust cloud rising a half mile away. The long gravel driveway leading to his cabin gave him ample warning if anyone approached. This design had been no accident.

Maybe the approaching vehicle held a clue to his instincts to stay put, maybe not. He returned to the worn spot and took up his practice again.

He had thrown two more bulls-eyes when the sound of tires crunching over gravel made him look up. He stepped behind a tree and watched as a Colorado Sheriff's Department cruiser pulled up alongside his cabin and parked. The back of his neck prickled.

A lone officer stepped out of the vehicle. Walker knew quite a few deputies, but didn't recognize this one. When the man hesitated at the car and scanned the area instead of walking directly to the cabin, Walker stepped into view. This one didn't assume he would be indoors. It gave Walker considerable insight into the deputy's thought process.

The thick-bodied officer walked toward him with a loose, loping gait. Either the man felt at ease in the outdoors, or wanted time to observe his quarry, or both.

The deputy stopped next to the target, glanced at the knife and looked back to Walker.

"Nice throw."

Walker stepped forward, focused on the deputy's eyes and watched the man scrutinize him in the same way, checking out his shoulder length jet black hair, lynx claw necklace and beaded knife sheath. But to the officer's credit, whatever his deduction, he kept it well guarded.

“Name’s Deputy Harris,” he said, sticking out a beefy hand. “Fox Walker?”

Walker nodded, shaking the offered hand. “That’s right.”

Walker turned to pull the knife from the target and ran his fingers over the symbols carved on the deer antler handle. Looked up to see the deputy eyeing it.

“That’s a handsome blade...looks handmade.”

“Grandfather carved the handle from the antlers of the first deer I stalked and killed.” He didn’t add it had been a gift of initiation—a reminder all life is sacred.

“So...you teach people to throw like that?”

“A few.” Walker studied the man. “I might teach someone like you...you being a hunter.” He caught the flick of surprise in the deputy’s eyes. Watched the veil drop again.

“I’ve heard people say good things about your wilderness school,” Harris said. “Sounds intriguing.”

“Is that why you volunteered to come out here?”

The deputy’s eyes grew round. “How’d you—?”

Walker slid the knife into the sheath at his side. “Maybe you guys have a missing person, and this visit is for official business. But curiosity is what brought *you* here.”

Harris stared a moment longer, then gave a short laugh. “Okay, it’s true. Chief Deputy Morgan asked for a volunteer to contact you, and you’re right, my curiosity got the better of me. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you there are some wild-ass stories out there about you.”

Walker gave a wry smile. “So, you came to check out the crazy Indian?”

Harris grinned. “Guess you could say that. Seems only fair that I meet you and decide for myself.”

“I will try not to disappoint you.” Walker motioned Harris to follow him toward the cabin. “You mentioned Morgan sent you.”

“Well, yes...and no. It’s really Sheriff Kimball. He’s insisting Morgan must conduct a search of Gray’s Forest.”

“So, you *do* have a missing person.”

“Not exactly. I guess you could say this search is more about proving there *isn't* a person out there.”

Walker stopped mid-stride and stared at Harris. “The Sheriff wants to search the woods...to prove no one is there?”

“Yeah. He figures if they do a search and don't find anyone, the local paper will stop harassing him.”

“So this has to do with those newspaper stories they've run all summer?”

“You heard about 'em?”

Walker's mouth twitched. “I even heard we landed a man on the moon.”

“Sorry. Anyways, yeah, the media won't give Sheriff Kimball any rest over the unsolved murder last spring. *The Elk Meadow Bugle* may be a small rag, but it has half the town convinced that a killer...or worse...is hiding out there in Gray's Forest.”

“Or worse?”

“Hell, I'm sure you know the reputation of that part of the wilderness as well as anybody...and now the people who own the land are saying they've seen a spirit out there wandering around. Sheriff Kimball wants Morgan to make this go away, once and for all. I got the impression from Morgan you've worked for the Sheriff before.”

“I have. Never personally met Morgan, though.”

“Yeah, well I suppose the fact Morgan's not thrilled about your search and rescue success rate compared to ours, has something to do with that. But he's not calling the shots on this one.”

Walker didn't reply. Instead, he gazed up through the treetops. Inhaling deeply, he savored the smell of crisp air scented with smoke from his wood-burning stove.

What an odd request, trying to prove there was no one hiding in Gray's Forest. The wooded area was considered *mukua sogope* by his people—sacred ground. He searched his feelings, realized his earlier mood had lifted. He turned to the deputy.

“Tell the Sheriff and Morgan I will help.”

Harris gave him a thumbs up. “Good. I’m sure Sheriff Kimball will be happy to hear it.”

Walker noticed Harris didn’t say the same for Morgan. They walked to the patrol car while Harris gave him instructions for meeting the search party in the morning. Harris opened the car door, but didn’t get in yet. Walker saw the man gaze out over the meadows and lake in front of the cabin, the dark mountains rising up beyond.

“Quite a view you have here, Walker.”

“Thanks. You are welcome to come check out my classes, anytime you want.”

“I just might do that.”

Walker watched the patrol car pull away, picked up an armload of wood and headed inside. The temperature would soon drop with the setting sun, but his cabin of thick logs would keep out the cold.

Crossing over the boards of the porch, he stepped through the door into a large open-beamed common room, which comprised the kitchen and living area. Warmth radiated from the centrally located cast iron wood burning stove.

Walker carried the wood to the stove and opened the door. Heat rolled over him as he laid a few logs onto the glowing coals. Setting aside the rest for later, he moved to a wire cage sitting next to the window. Inside the cage a Red-shafted Flicker watched him, her wings quivering. He smiled at the woodpeckers’ now familiar *wik-wik-wik* call.

“You know it is time, don’t you?” Walker picked up the cage and carried it outside.

He sat the cage on the porch railing and unlatched the door. Reaching inside, he gently wrapped his hand around the bird and lifted her out through the opening, placing her on the wood railing.

She cocked her head, looking at him for a long moment.

“Time to test your mended wing, *kwinaa*, so it can be made strong again—go on.”

The bird burst into the air, wings fluttering unsteadily, then slowing into sure beats. She made her way to a nearby stand of trees, where she clung to the side of an evergreen.

She let out a single, loud *klee-yer* and seconds later disappeared into the woods.

Walker stepped off the porch, reached down and plucked a single feather from the grass. He held the Flicker feather in his fingers, silently thanking the bird for the sacred gift.

He remained standing in the grass, looking out over the waters of the lake. In moments like this, the absent companionship of Grandfather felt especially poignant. It had been a year now, but still he expected to see the old man out there, walking along the shore.

He sighed.

The last rays of sunlight streamed upward from behind the mountains in a performance of brilliant color, as if the sun, reluctant to depart for the night, could keep center stage a moment longer. He could feel the warmth of the sunbeams as they splashed across his face.

In his mind, he could see Grandfather nodding in agreement with his decision to help the Sheriff and Morgan. But as always, there would be something more to contemplate, for Walker also heard the old man’s patient voice. *Expect the unexpected*