

PURSUIT

A Fox Walker Novel

By

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CHAPTER ONE

Denver, Colorado

“We the jury, find the defendant, Matthew W. Logan, guilty as charged of Murder in the First Degree.”

The man stood military-straight before the judge. The civilian clothes he wore masked neither his imposing six-foot two stature nor the training and service he had undergone. Cool blue eyes stared ahead, and the proud square of his shoulders stayed true as the judge remanded him to the courts for sentencing.

A rush of reporters began to scramble from the courtroom, eager to get their stories in print. During the disruption, the convicted man turned toward the gallery, met the gaze of his younger brother. The slightest hint of a nod from Sean, and then Matt Logan turned away.

As the bailiff reached out to take the prisoner’s arm, he looked up into Logan’s face, and backed off.

Matt Logan walked out of the courtroom on his own accord, the bailiff trailing behind.

CHAPTER TWO

Pine Valley, Colorado

Fox Walker and Nataya emerged from the dusky shadows of the Colorado wilderness to face the bright lights and bedlam of TV news teams, reporters and law officers. Walker sighed. They were like flies at a picnic, always finding him, no matter how much he tried to avoid them.

Walker dreaded this part of any search and rescue. The sharp contrast of being immersed in the natural world for hours, or days, and then the strain of being thrust back into civilization. *Civilization*—now there was a term he had to laugh at. That meant people were supposed to be civil to each other.

He leaned in to help Nataya as she shifted the weight of the bundle she carried. Deputies rushed forward, shielding the two of them from the flash of cameras and shouting reporters. The officers guided them toward a young man and woman, also straining to see over the crowd, their gaunt faces accented by the harsh floodlights of the news crews. Walker studied their eyes, dark rimmed with stress, but that spark of frantic hope still burning there. He knew that haunted look, parents expecting the worst, but clinging—up to the last moment—to the wild expectation that all would be fine.

Two steps closer and Walker saw the woman break free from her husband's arms. She pushed her way through the throng of officers and stumbled toward Nataya, sobbing, her arms outstretched.

“Cory!”

The bundle in Nataya's arms stirred.

“Mommy.”

Nataya presented the squirming two-year-old boy to the woman, the toddler's chubby arms reaching toward his mother. An explosion of camera flashes bombarded them as the young woman pulled Cory to her, mindless of his filthy face and muddy clothes, hugging him and weeping in relief.

Fox Walker turned away, not to avoid the emotional scene, just the cameras. He knew how reporters held a special affinity for photographing him. Nothing like spicing up their story with a shot of a traditional Native American, with long, jet black hair, buckskin shirt and moccasin boots.

The claustrophobic press of bodies swarmed him, microphones thrust in his face, the clamor of questions. He began to step back. Chief Deputy Harris moved up beside him.

“Sorry about this, Walker.”

“It's to be expected. Resort area with a large city nearby, and reporters desperate for a story.”

“Look, we've got a Rescue Unit waiting over there to check out the boy before we let the jackals loose for a feeding frenzy with the parents, so in the meantime...”

Walker sighed. “Yeah...I know...got it.” Over the shoulders of the crowd he watched the deputies shuffle away the parents and little boy. In his mind he heard Grandfather’s voice gently reprimand him. *Better you than them*. He inhaled deeply and turned to face the crowd.

He felt Nataya lean her body against him, slip her hand into his and squeeze it reassuringly. He looked down into gray-blue eyes, her sun-tinted face framed by flaxen braids. She gave him a smile of encouragement.

A woman reporter Walker didn’t recognize shouted over the others. “Is there a reward?”

“Reward?” Walker felt Nataya’s grip tighten. “No. Returning the boy to his parents is reward enough.”

Someone else yelled, “What’s it feel like to be a hero?”

Walker grimaced. “I’m not a hero. I’m a tracker. It’s what I do. Just like what you do is ask stupi—” He felt Nataya squeeze his hand again, harder. “Like I said. That’s just what I do.”

A TV news reporter pushed forward. “But how did *you* succeed in a few hours when the Sheriff’s department and a search party spent all day searching and came up with nothing?”

Walker looked out over the heads of the reporters to the forest behind them, letting his gaze lose focus. “I listened to the trees...they told me where to look.”

He stole a glance at a dozen slack-jawed faces.

A local reporter snickered. “Hey Walker, better fill in the *uninitiated*...tell ‘em how Grandfather taught you to track when you were only eight years old.”

“Is that true?” shouted the TV reporter.

Walker nodded, automatically slipped into the speech he gave to each new class attending his wilderness survival school. “Starting as a young boy, and until a little over a year ago when

Grandfather passed, he taught me how to read signs in nature. Details most people wouldn't notice."

"What kind of details are you talking about?"

"How did they help you find Cory?"

Walker glanced back at the Rescue Unit and the cluster of people still around it. "Once we made it past the jumble of footprints left by the search party, we began searching in wider and wider circles until we found a partial print, the heel of a toddler's shoe. And nearby were broken stems and loose petals where a child had tried to pick wildflowers. From there we watched for disturbances in the soil, over-turned pebbles, broken twigs on the ground. We followed that trail into the trees, finding impressions on moss-covered stones where Cory had stepped, and flattened patches of grass where he sat to play or rest."

Nataya spoke up. "Fortunately for us, Cory did what most boys do—headed straight for mud."

A ripple of laughter ran through the group.

"Having some clear tracks sped up our search," she went on. "Which was important because we needed to find Cory before dark, especially with the smell of rain in the air."

Everyone automatically looked up at the sky, and the mass of purple-black clouds clustering around the mountain peaks.

"Nataya," the local reporter called out. "Six months ago Walker discovered *you*, surviving in the woods...with no memory. Now you're working together. So, what's transpired during these last months?"

Walker slid a protective arm around Nataya's shoulders, but she spoke before he could intervene.

“Now isn’t the time to discuss the past. Today is about Cody being reunited with his parents.”

The reporter tried again. “But what about Walker rescuing you from that killer? Do you feel indebted to him for saving your life?”

Walker opened his mouth to speak—felt Nataya reach up and touch his arm. He held his words and let her reply.

“Yes, I *am* thankful. Thankful that it was Walker who found me. And yes, I’m also grateful to have him as a mentor. For teaching me his tracking skills.”

“Is that all he is to—”

Chief Deputy Harris pushed his way through the crowd to Walker and turned to the group of reporters.

“Mr. and Mrs. Taylor are ready to give a *brief* statement now,” he said, nodding toward where the couple waited. “I ask that you have consideration for their young son. Listen to what they have to say, but no questions at the moment, please.”

The crowd moved away in a cluster of lights, leaving Walker, Nataya and Harris standing on the dark fringes.

“Thanks, Harris,” Walker said holding out his hand.

“No, thank you.” They shook. “Appreciate it that you could keep them occupied until the parents got composed.”

“And Cory?” Nataya asked.

“He’s fine. Nothing a bath and hot meal won’t cure. Good job finding him so quickly.”

“Thanks to you calling us right away,” Walker responded. “Which reminds me. We’ve not had an opportunity to congratulate you on your new position. I know the circumstances were tough, but you’ll do a great job.”

“Thanks. It’s been difficult. There’s been a lot of resistance to changing the attitude already fostered in the department when Morgan was here, especially about using outside assistance. I’m just glad the Sheriff supports my ideas. He asked me to pass along his personal ‘thank you’ for accepting our request for help.”

“No problem.”

“Still, we were lucky in *this* case that the boy’s so young, and we have a storm front moving through. That got everyone to listen to reason about calling you in.” As if on cue, a rumble of thunder reverberated through the mountains and a few large drops of water splattered down on them. “And there’s our sign. That should break this party up. At least the news teams here in Colorado are smart enough to know you don’t mess around with lightning. Are you heading back to your cabin now?”

Walker nodded.

“Enjoy being warm and dry for me, okay?” Harris grinned and waved as he turned toward the lingering officers and the reporters hurrying toward their vehicles.

Walker wrapped an arm around Nataya’s waist as they strode along the edge of the dispersing reporters and headed toward their truck. When she looked up at him, he leaned over and gave her a quick kiss, then raised his head—and came to an abrupt halt. A man had stepped out of the crowd and stood in their path. Cory’s father.

“I argued with the law about calling you in for this.” The man looked at Walker’s lynx claw necklace, then the knife sheathed at his side, down to his moccasin boots, then back up again.

“I thought it was a mistake to send the two of you in there...alone. I wanted the Sheriff to keep all those officers and volunteers out there until they found Cory. I have to say that I’ve never been so happy to be wrong about something.” The man’s smile broke free of the stress etched into his face. “Thank you both. I wish there was something more I could say or do.”

“No need.” Walker said, shaking the man’s offered hand.

CHAPTER THREE

Elk Meadow, Colorado

Nataya rested her head against Walker's shoulder as he drove the rumbling pick-up toward home. Through the windshield she watched the gathering gloom of the storm, big splashes of rain occasionally hitting the glass. The clouds hadn't completely let loose of the moisture yet. The warmth of the truck's heater radiated into her tired muscles and relaxed her body.

She let the emotions of the day wash over her...the intensity of tracking the toddler...the high anticipation as they got closer to finding him...rejoicing in the reunion of mother and son. Walker spoke the truth. That finding the boy was reward enough.

Then she remembered the local reporter, and his questions for her and Walker. Recalling the last six months made the memories all too vivid, as if only yesterday Walker had saved her from that ritualistic killer...a man obsessed with ending her life.

And yet, it feels a lifetime ago.

The pick-up turned onto the long gravel drive leading to the cabin and she straightened up in her seat. She never tired of watching the scene before her unfold as they passed through the stand of imposing old-growth fir trees, the valley spreading out in front of her. A few drops of rain fell every so often, making little spikes of water sprout from the surface of the lake that lay

beyond the cabin. Even with the setting sun hidden by somber clouds, she could make out the mountains in the background, shrouded in mist.

Walker parked next to the cabin and they each climbed from the cab and stepped up onto the porch. Without a word between them, they stopped for a moment, leaning on the railing and looking out over the valley. Nataya watched the murky clouds roil and tumble over the mountains in slow motion, but steadily advancing closer.

“Won’t be long now,” Walker said. He turned and unlocked the door.

They entered the cabin and stripped off the heavy buckskin shirts they both wore for tracking. Nataya hung them on wooden pegs by the door, to air, and slipped down the hall to get fresh clothes for them as Walker strode beneath the high-beamed ceiling of the large open room that comprised the living and eating space.

When Nataya returned to the main room she hung back, quiet, observing Walker as he knelt before the wood stove, digging in the ashes with a poker, until he found a few glowing hot coals. She watched him place pieces of tinder on the embers and blow on them until the flames flared back to life—thought about how he had done the same thing to her, in a way. Brought her back to life.

As she had for him.

Fox Walker sat on the rug in front of the open door of the stove, the warmth of the orange blaze radiating over him. Wearing only blue jeans, his compact, muscled torso bare, he leaned back against the sofa and stretched his legs out before him. He sensed Nataya’s presence before he heard her, and turned. Her hair, now loosened from the braids, tousled about her shoulders as she walked over to where he sat.

He saw the warmth in her eyes before it spread to the smile on her lips. She had pulled on a sweater and handed him a flannel shirt. He shrugged it on, leaving it unbuttoned, and indicated the spot next to him on the rug. She nimbly lowered her body and curled up against him.

They watched the flames in contented silence, listening to the wood crack and pop as the flames consumed it. Their times together were often spent this way. They shared a bond of silent communion with nature and therefore with one another, and were connected in so many ways other than language.

Walker pulled her closer. Such a remarkable woman. A woman brutally tortured and left for dead. But instead, she had survived by retreating to a secret place in her mind, and managed to stay alive in the wilderness long enough for him to find her and save her from that madman. She was a woman with memories of two separate pasts, and yet had managed to weave them into one lifetime. And she had chosen to stay as Nataya...and stay with him.

He leaned over and kissed the top of her head. She looked up at him.

“You still miss him, don’t you?”

Walker smiled and nodded. “Yes, as much as you miss *your* grandfather.”

He pulled her closer. “I’ve been thinking. We have a month before the next group will be here for the spring survival class. Maybe we take the canoe down to the river, spend some time out in the woods?”

“Yes, I would love that.”

She smiled at him and they kissed, featherlike touches of lips to lips. He pressed his body against hers, feeling the warmth of her, the kisses harder now.

They both jumped when the phone rang. It rarely rang, especially in the late evening.

Walker tried to ignore the intrusive sound of the ancient rotary dial phone, but knew full well no answering machine would kick in to take a message. Nataya eased from his embrace, freeing him to answer. He reluctantly stood, strode over to the phone and picked it up.

“Walker here.”

“Fox Walker?”

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“This is Special Agent Susan Mueller, with the FBI, Denver field office. You don’t know me, but I know all about *you*. Dean McClure, our consultant on that serial murder case last fall—the one you were involved in—sang your praises. He says you were a key player in the apprehension of the murderer.”

“Guess you could say that. But I couldn’t have done it without McClure’s help.” Walker answered carefully.

“Well, McClure wasn’t the only one impressed with your tracking skills. The Bureau has chosen you as the best candidate for a new search we’ve got going.”

“Sounds like an order.”

“Look, I don’t have time for niceties here. There’s been an escape. A convict being transported yesterday morning to the Denver County Jail got loose and made it into the woods.”

“Why is the FBI involved in a county matter?”

“Because the fugitive entered a national forest, which puts him in federal jurisdiction.”

“I see.” Walker hesitated. Superficially the story could make sense. But since when did the FBI care about someone being in a national forest? There had to be more to it. “So, what was the guy’s crime?”

“*Crimes*—in the plural. First Degree Murder, rape and assault with deadly force.”

A flash of memory ripped through Walker's mind. Beloved Haiwi, beaten to death on her bedroom floor. And just when he thought he was over that part of my life.

Then his mind made the connection to what the agent had said. He vaguely remembered a high-profile trial in Denver about a rape and murder. But murders were not FBI matters unless state lines were crossed, or the local law called in advisers. There could only be one answer.

"I take it the victim was associated with the Bureau?" Walker asked.

A pause. "She used to be an agent. Quit to get married and start a family. But, she was a damn good agent when she was here."

Walker nodded to himself. So, when the fugitive entered federal lands it gave the Bureau the old "jurisdiction excuse" to insert themselves into the case. Which brought up his next question.

"I'm usually the last person to get called in, when everyone else gives up. What made you call me first?"

"Because our convict is in *your* backyard, Walker. A local rancher found the abandoned vehicle just hours ago, at the edge of the San Juan National Forest. I need someone in there fast, to find his trail. You're the closest, and you know those woods better than any trained agent I can send in there."

Walker heard Grandfather's voice in his thoughts. *Beware of strangers singing praises.*

"So, I'll be working this alone?"

"Yes. I know that's what you prefer. And in this instance, it works for us too. We need someone tracking the convict in stealth mode. We need an edge."

"An edge? How hard can it be to find an orange jumpsuit in a green forest?" There was a long silence on the other end of the phone. Walker shifted his weight, waiting.

“The fugitive has a history that complicates the situation.”

“In what way?”

“He’s a former Navy SEAL. Top of the class in weapons, demolition, stealth, hand-to-hand combat. But none of those were his specialty.”

“Which was?” Walker asked, already sensing the answer.

“Wilderness survival.”

“I see...”

“Not entirely. He’s also armed. And every moment that he’s out there alone, the bigger our risk of losing him.”