

Brimstone & Silver

by Emily Michel

Prologue

He waited in the trees, adrenaline surging through him as he pointed his binoculars toward the house, cringing with each report that came in, months of painstaking work down the toilet.

“First floor, clear,” came one voice over the radio.

“Second floor, clear.”

“Basement, clear.”

How the fuck had this happened? Everything up to this point had gone according to plan.

Deputy US Marshal Raul Valdez allowed nothing in his demeanor to give away how pissed he was, holding himself as still as the trees surrounding him. At the end of the strangest manhunt he'd ever seen, the target had vanished like he'd never existed.

The sun was high in the sky when Rhys Carter had entered the house looking ragged after a night away from home, doing God knew what. Valdez had coldly evaluated the tall, muscular man with dark, shaggy hair. He knew he was looking at a killer and had prepared this raid accordingly. Taking Carter by surprise was the best way to minimize the risk to his team. The task force had surged out from their observation posts and surrounded the building as soon as the kitchen door slammed shut. On his mark, they'd busted down the doors and tossed in flash-bangs, hoping to stun their target. Instead, they'd found dust, and books, and not much else.

His journey to this old ranch house outside of Tyler, Texas, had started five months ago with an errant fingerprint at a burned-out warehouse in Albuquerque. Belonging to neither the suspect in a months-old serial murder case nor any of her known victims, it had no match in the system. It could have been an errant print from a previous occupant, but that explanation somehow felt wrong to Valdez, especially since it had been pulled off the shelves in the hellscape of the walk-in fridge. That nightmare scene would stick with him for years. If the body parts strewn in the fridge hadn't been enough to mark this case as the weirdest serial murder he'd ever seen, the ritualistic symbols

found in the back office and a large storage room with a floor fused into a perfect glass circle — a woman's sneaker stuck in the middle — clenched the deal. Weird was the business of Task Force Phantom, and did he have his work cut out for him.

The weird kept finding its way to his desk, files piling up as various federal agencies learned of his task force. Valdez had to put this odd fingerprint on the back burner until he caught up. First it was women disappearing in Baton Rouge, then tigers spotted in the swamps of Florida. An arsonist ran rampant in Oakland, California, in September, and truckers went missing along I-10 later that month. He finally caught a break in his caseload in mid-October. It was the first time in months he'd even thought about that damn print, but once his desk was clear for a minute, he ran it through the system.

And got a hit. About Goddamned time. A man named Rhys Carter had been arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct and released on bail in Fort Worth, Texas, about two months after Albuquerque. The charges were later dropped. Hallelujah, he had a name.

Valdez took the case to his boss. Given the circumstances of the original fingerprint, it fell within their new task force's mandate, and she gave him the go ahead to run it down. The man had an interesting background. Born and raised in Tyler, Rhys Carter and his younger brother, Owen, had gone into foster care about fifteen years ago, when their father had committed suicide after killing their long-term housekeeper. The autopsy report on both of them had been horrible, and the coroner had written that her wounds looked more like an animal had caused them than a human being. It looked like the Carters could have benefited from Task Force Phantom way back then, if the US government hadn't been so concerned with covering up the inexplicable instead of trying to stop it.

He started tracing both Carters' movements over the last several months, as the brothers seemed nearly inseparable. Every time he could pinpoint a location, he found evidence of weird shit going down. Some California ranchers had reported a pack of wolves harassing their herds until the Carters showed up. A young, homeless man in a small Northern Arizona town disappeared right around the time the Carters passed through. That string of missing and dead women in Baton Rouge ended once Rhys and

Owen Carter stayed a few days. He may have found a solution to his problem, but he had to make sure these two were the good guys.

Valdez had taken a couple of weeks to finalize his team. Just as they were about to head out to Tyler to begin surveillance at the beginning of November, he'd received a call from park rangers north of Houston. Some weird-ass bodies had been found a few miles into the National Forest, and federal agencies now routinely called him when the strange shit turned up. The bodies had been monstrous hybrids, looking like someone had a field day with mad-scientist-style genetics. Part cat, part human, one had even looked like a saber-toothed tiger. Hadn't those fuckers gone extinct thousands of years ago?

They wrapped up in Houston in time to get a call from the Dallas office. A body had been found with post-mortem bullet wounds in a burned-out greenhouse. And, would you look at that, Rhys Carter had reserved three rooms at a hotel in Plano at the same time, not very far from the crime scene. It was high time they kept an eye on him.

The target made surveillance easy. Rhys Carter was back at the ranch, alone, no sign of his brother. He rarely left and had no visitors in the week they'd been watching. His most frequent excursions were to the grocery store and a pool hall in the middle of town. As far as Valdez could tell, the guy spent his time drinking, reading, and watching TV, both boring and sad.

Hoping to get this done before the Thanksgiving holiday, Valdez chose this bright fall morning to bring Carter in for questioning. He'd called local law enforcement to provide support, and they'd set up a command center in an abandoned strip mall not far from the ranch house. They needed to approach him as though he was the most dangerous criminal they'd ever apprehended, because he might be. He'd killed those five shapeshifters in September, he'd wiped out a nest of vampires in Baton Rouge, and he'd escaped the witch in Albuquerque, nearly blowing up the building in the process. Not to mention the probable demon he'd killed just a couple of weeks ago. The guy had nine lives and wicked skills.

And it looked like Rhys Carter had the luck of the devil, too, because he'd disappeared. He'd gone into the house and now Valdez's highly trained Task Force could find no sign of him. *Son of a bitch!*

People didn't just disappear like that. Carter had to have some sort of escape route. Valdez scanned the area with his binoculars, ignoring the requests for further instructions coming over the radio. His first major operation was turning into a shit-show, and he knew he'd only get one more shot at making the higher-ups believe he could do this. He'd have to come up with a stellar plan to course correct. This was going to be fun to explain to his boss.