

## PROLOGUE

### **FLANNEL SHIRTS AND** *neck tattoos.*

To Clark Rickert, sometimes it felt as though his entire career had just been a bloody, churning cauldron of flannel shirts and neck tattoos.

Throughout the seventeen years he'd held this job, Clark had encountered many other things far more frequently: guns, violence, screaming packs of hounds, bears, bone saws, gut piles, steep mountain passes, the frosted predawn darkness. Even so, there was something about these two specific things—when adorned by the same person in the specific places Clark worked—that dilated his pupils, quickened his heart rate, and set his teeth to grinding.

Clark owned flannel shirts himself. He'd known people with neck tattoos over the years who were pleasant enough, and assumed that they, likewise, owned a flannel shirt or two. He felt absolutely nothing when he saw someone with a neck tattoo in a flannel at a fly shop or a bar. But whenever he was in the kinds of places his job sent him, and he encountered someone with *both* these characteristics, he knew it meant things were probably about to go to shit, and *fast*.

Clark knew this was unfair profiling. He knew this was a flagrant social or implicit bias. He had no doubt about it. All the implicit bias, cultural competency, and scenario-based DEI trainings he'd completed over the years confirmed as much. *He just didn't care*. It was his only organic, unflinching prejudice, and he'd keep space for it with no shame. It set off a red, blinking warning light in the control HUD of whatever part of the brain prepares one for violence.

Clark slowly turned the focus wheel on his Leupold range-finding binoculars. The image clarity of the man across the mountain valley became sharp and distinct, and that warning light began to blink.

Booking photos and social media had confirmed the man Clark hunted had a large neck tattoo, but it was Clark's gut that knew he'd be wearing an old flannel when this day finally came. Yet again, his gut had been right. It felt good seeing this man wear that shirt, the full uniform and livery of his lifelong adversary and foe, here in this wild country where Clark worked. It meant he was officially *one of them*.

Checking the last box in a confirmation bias checklist is undeniably pleasing. This guy's decision to throw on a flannel shirt that morning, before coming to *this place*, justified everything for Clark. All the time and effort he'd put into making this moment happen, all the disgust and disdain for him he'd let fester and grow unchecked. What he saw was also a vow that a confrontation was forthcoming, one that would balance upon a razor's edge of carnage. This bias was one that had been born of blood and screams.

Six different people who fit this profile had tried to kill Clark over the years. One, in '06, broke Clark's nose with a headbutt then slammed a cheap gas station pocketknife into his scapula. In '09, one put a .380 bullet into his other shoulder. In 2012, one killed his friend Roy Payton, a fellow game warden.

Roy bled to death in sandy, frozen dirt on a sage-covered hillside under the prettiest sunset Clark had ever seen. A frigid, screaming wind blew so hard that evening Clark couldn't hear what Roy whispered as he died. The wind did not obscure Roy's pleading, desperate eyes. Eyes that told Clark those last words being whispered, the last words no one would ever hear, were of profound importance to the dying man.

A bark of static hummed through Clark's earpiece before the words came.

"Command for TF Alpha, what's your status? Over."

Clark pressed down on the Push-To-Talk button clipped onto the shoulder strap of his sweat-stained olive-drab plate carrier.

"TF for Command, still at overwatch. Gonna start our creep into staging positions in five. Will report when staged and set to execute the warrant. Out."

He ignored the response as he brought the binoculars back to his eyes. He watched his target take a ravenous drag from his third consecutive cigarette.

He felt all the tension start to ramp up, as it always did. He watched the man flick a cigarette butt onto the steep, rocky two-track he and the

other two men stood on. Clark assumed the other two were just a couple of their leader's junkie, booger-eating yes-men.

Elijah Austin Miles was their leader's name. *Elijah*. Clark repressed a scoff as the name echoed in his mind. As a veteran game warden, Clark had busted countless mountain bumpkin tweaker dickheads. However, the criminal act of poaching big game animals was really the only similarity between all those men, *and this one*.

This guy only kept a single canine tooth from each animal he killed, and he'd cobbled together quite the collection over the last few years. He fell far more comfortably into the psych profile of a serial killer than that of any poacher throughout the Rocky Mountain west. This man was thrill-killing. *Collecting souls*.

Clark had spent so many hours burning every word of Elijah's criminal file into his mind he had permanent familiarity with it, like initials carved into an old desk. Several nights over the last month Clark had actually started dreaming about this guy, seeing him scream commands at his pack of abused, mangy hounds from an old forest road. A road just like those Elijah had cut his pack of hounds loose from so many times before—a road just like the one he stood on now. He'd never seen this man in person until now, let alone look him in the eye, but harbored a boiling hatred for him nonetheless, sight unseen.

Clark had been after Elijah for two years, ever since he'd gotten out of the state penitentiary, where he'd done a stint for kidnapping his ex-girlfriend and beating her younger brother half to death. Clark had found fourteen bears, twelve wolves, and six mountain lions he knew this man had illegally killed in that time. Each had been missing a single canine tooth. Until now, he'd been one step behind Elijah, never catching him in the act, hounds uncaged and gun in hand.

He thought back on the repulsive scene he'd come upon in May, where Elijah had thrown burning Duraflame logs into a wolf den. The desperate, terrified young female wolf and all five of her pups had been riddled with .223 bullets, one by one, as they scrambled out to escape the flames and noxious chemical smoke. Elijah hung all six dead wolves from the lower branches of the ponderosa tree above their den with nooses made of 550 paracord. A piece of folded card stock had been stuffed into the mother wolf's mouth, upon which *too late again, Warden* was written with a Sharpie. One canine tooth from each wolf had been sloppily torn from their gums with pliers.

The bays, barks, and howls of Elijah's pack of bear dogs punched out across the valley from the timbered slope that rose above the road where Elijah stood, chain-smoking Pall Mall cigarettes next to his 1997 Toyota T100. He'd kitted the truck out with a three-inch lift, a roof-mounted light bar, and a big dog kennel in the bed. Painfully cliché poacher rig.

*"Flannel and fuckin' neck tats."*

Clark made the comment to himself, only slightly more than a wheeze.

"What's that, Cap?"

The men standing behind him began to think Clark had not heard the question when he finally responded, not turning to look at them as he did.

"Nothin'."

After another long moment, Clark pulled the binoculars from his eyes, turned, and came down the small rock outcropping to face the five men crouching behind him. One, like Clark, was another game warden for the Law Enforcement Division of the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks. The others were two Teton County sheriff's deputies, a trooper from the Montana Highway Patrol, and a special agent with the United States Forest Service. Yet another ragtag task force, staring at him and awaiting orders. Clark let out a long exhale through his nose, then spoke.

"It all comes down to staging positions now, fellas. We can't afford *any fuckups*. This is a high-risk warrant service in a high-risk environment. We can shuck and jive with whatever happens after we make the callout, but only if we nail staging and timing. Screwed-up staging positions means screwed-up containment, and screwed-up containment blows this arrest. Containment is *everything* in country like this. We blow that, and I promise one or all these dickheads'll get away. We're steppin' off *now*, fellas. No such thing as a dumb question at this point, so ask 'em if you got 'em. I need to know you're all crystal fuckin' clear on where your staging position is, and how to get there from here."

All five other men just nodded as Clark looked each of them in the eye.

"Victor, you're with me. JD and Theo, you're staged to move on the back a' the truck while Mark and Lance, playin' blocker, will be set another fifty yards downslope from the county boys. If these guys try to split, they'll either head straight down the road into you guys, or they'll boogie around the truck and up into the timber, toward their dogs, and they can only go up from there till they get cliffed out. I want a comms check when staged. We good?"

All nodded, tightening grips on rifles or shotguns each held across the

olive-green or black plate carriers of their respective agencies. He scanned each of their features for signs that fear or anxiety had reached the level that gets people killed in situations like this. He was pleased to only find what he considered to be a normal, healthy amount of both.

Anyone who'd worked with Clark, and even those who simply knew his history and reputation, were entitled to such nervousness. Clark had never witnessed it himself, but on dozens of occasions over the last seventeen years, a county, state, or federal law enforcement office had buzzed into a state of excitement whenever they received his request for assistance on a high-risk arrest warrant or raid. They all knew him for the ruthless hunter of men that he was, and how often his operations ended in violence or gunfights. They all knew he only ever asked for assistance to form a task force when he was going after a *real* monster, and they all knew he only ever made a play when these monsters were at their most dangerous, as they, themselves, were *also* hunting.

The USFS special agent in the group, Lance, who Clark had worked with quite a bit over the years, chuckled as he asked the question the other four men had been wondering since they'd first gotten eyes on their target a half hour earlier.

*"How in the shit did you know this bastard would be parked right there, at this exact moment, ten days ago?"*

Clark looked back at Lance with no discernible emotion in his features, the expression of someone watching a dull movie in a dark theater. He glanced at the others briefly with his ice-gray eyes, one by one, then spoke.

*"Let's move."*

He took the short-barreled carbine into his hands from where it hung on its sling across his chest, and started moving through the forest toward the echoing, hollow cadence of Elijah's baying hounds.

Clark knew just from the dogs' hunting song that they had not yet actually gotten eyes on or treed a bear or mountain lion, but were still just working a scent. The sounds made by a pack of bear and lion hounds were *very different* once they actually had one cornered. It was febrile, frantic wailing for their houndsman to come and collect their quarry, to shoot it from the tree and give them the satisfaction of sinking teeth into it.

It took fifteen minutes for the team to creep down the steep, forested slope to the bottom of the valley, cross the trickling creek at the bottom, then stalk up into their staging positions on the slope below the road.

Double-clicks in his radio's earpiece told Clark everyone was in position and ready. He was close enough to hear Elijah and his goons laughing. He looked to his fellow game warden, Victor, who stared back at him with wide eyes, rifle shouldered at the low-ready, muzzle angled down.

Clark nodded at the younger man, and when the gesture was returned, he pressed his radio's PTT button. He hissed the command with his sharp, gravelly voice, sending the message to the other five men on the mountain with him, as well as the command and standby element of Forest Service Rangers and state troopers staged a few miles away.

*"Making arrest."*

Clark crossed through the few trees between his position and the steep road. He stepped onto the steep road about twenty yards uphill from where the three men loitered around Elijah's truck. They stood in a row, staring down the road to their left, away from Clark, toward the area where the two sheriff's deputies were crashing noisily through the rocks and trees toward the road. Right as he saw the three men's muscles start to react—fists clenching, hips and shoulders beginning to turn—he barked out his words in a sharp volume, just below a scream.

*"Montana FWP enforcement, hands in the air. Put your hands in the fucking air."*

All three flinched and whipped their heads in his direction. He moved toward the driver's-side headlight of the truck at jogging speed. Clark's eye never left his rifle's holographic sight as he moved, keeping its illuminated circle-dot reticle steady and centered on Elijah's chest. Muscle memory took over now.

*Hips and hands, Clark knew, they always give themselves away with their hips and their goddamned hands.*

They remained in a line along driver's side of the truck, stunned as they watched Clark move toward them like a storm. Elijah's 30-30 lever-action rifle was on the hood of his truck, a few feet from his right elbow. The next in line, the guy in the middle, had a .44 magnum revolver holstered on his belt next to a ridiculously large bowie knife. The third man, the farthest from Clark, stood next to the bed of the truck, holding an old bolt-action rifle in one loose hand. They flinched again and looked toward the sheriff's deputies as they came into view and began moving toward the back corner of the truck bed.

The deputies were now screaming their own commands, demanding weapons be dropped and hands be raised. USFS Ranger Lance and the

state trooper Mark were now charging up the middle of the steep road to the deputies' right with weapons raised. *Containment achieved*; Clark noted with relief.

It was a supremely rare thing for someone to try escaping a surprise arrest by sprinting *into* a formation of armed, screaming cops. With his team in position, the only real option of escape remaining was scrambling over the truck, then up the steep, craggy mountainside that rose on the other side of the road. Lance and Mark's loud voices, and then Victor's off Clark's right shoulder, joined those of the two sheriff's deputies to echo around the valley.

The frantic chorus of law enforcement demands began to compete with the sounds coming down the mountainside where Elijah's bay hounds frothed, yowled, and raged along the scent trail of some bear or cougar.

The man farthest from Clark tossed the rifle forward as though it had grown red-hot, then launched his hands into the air. His gaunt, needle-scarred arms shook like river willows. He started crying immediately, shouting at the other two to surrender. The guy in the middle also shook like a twig, but he was locked in place, knees quivering as he stared feverishly at Elijah like one of his half-starved hunting dogs.

Elijah ripped his belligerent gaze between the state trooper and USFS agent coming up the road behind the truck, the sheriff's deputies in front of him to his left, and the two game wardens at his three o'clock. He began bouncing on the balls of his feet, lips pulling back into a snarl to expose a slipshod array of yellow, rotten teeth.

He was working himself up, Clark could see, so he seized the man's complete attention in a way that always seemed to work. He snarled his full name.

*"Elijah Austin Miles, you are under arrest for the unlawful killing of big game. Put your hands in the fucking air."*

All six officers had formed a wide crescent around the trio of men, taking care to close all options of escape and to stay outside one another's shooting lanes. The man who'd tossed away the rifle was on his knees now, pleading for the one with the revolver to do the same. That man remained locked in place, trembling, staring at Elijah with a pure, pants-shitting terror in his eyes. The other five officers were looking between Clark and the three poachers they were screaming at, awaiting his order or move.

The screaming of the five officers and the poacher on his knees

blended into a frenzied roar that Clark turned down, intentionally washing the noise away with an exhale.

Clark and Elijah both knew their own, personal business was all that remained relevant here. They both knew this was a proper standoff now, eyes locked like their pupils were connected by a steel fishing line. Neither paid any attention to the tempest of screams, howls, or weeping from the men and dogs raging in the valley around them. Clark's eyes were dark slits under the brim of his old black Stetson hat. Elijah's eyes were widening, exposing the bright red vessels that latticed his jaundiced eyeballs like parasitic worms snaking from his brain to feed on his pupils.

The shaking throughout Elijah's body was showcased by the glistening strand of saliva that jittered as it ran from his meth-wrecked teeth, over his chapped bottom lip, to a darkened slick on the T-shirt under his flannel. The large vein beneath the faded mess of a tattoo on his neck pulsed visibly.

A reflection quickly passed through Elijah's mind that he was just like one of the dozens of bears or mountain lions he'd killed: stuck up a tree with starving, furious dogs seething around its trunk.

That thought slipped away as he realized he recognized this game warden. The calm one who'd just shouted his name.

He'd never been able to actually see the face of the dark man from the dreams that had been plaguing him these last months, but this felt like him. All the dreams were a bit different, but in all of them he was paralyzed, unable to move, talk, beg, or scream while he knew this dark man *was coming*. In some of these dreams he'd been stuck in his childhood bedroom, looking out the dirty window to see the dark man pass between trees. In others he'd been frozen in his bunk in his old cell at the Montana state penitentiary in Deer Lodge, listening to the echo of this man's boots grow as he strolled down the row toward him.

*This was him.*

Elijah had never been more certain of anything. The urge to rip out one of this man's canine teeth coursed through his body with more urgency than any craving for opiates or meth he'd ever felt. It was the only thing in the world that mattered anymore. It was the only thing that had *ever mattered*. A grotesque smile spread across his face as he let his white-knuckled fists open slowly.

No muscles in Clark's body or face moved. This was yet another moment in Clark's life where it seemed as though everything and every

person in the world around him could only move in slow motion, bogged down by some invisible force.

Everything, and every person, *except for him*.

He knew *exactly* what Elijah was about to do with his head, hands, shoulders, and hips as he turned to reach for the rifle on the hood of his truck. He'd known for some time now.

*Flannel and fuckin' neck tats.*

Clark also knew he had to let Elijah get far enough into the effort so the other officers, in their keyed-up states of adrenaline surge, would also be able to clearly perceive what Elijah was attempting to do. He'd learned long ago that all the after-action investigation and fuss was considerably easier if he waited just long enough for a few other witnesses to see, *in real time*, that which he somehow managed to see *ahead of time*.

So Clark waited, very patiently, for that precise moment.

And when Elijah did make the long-anticipated move for his gun—just as his hips rotated and his hands extended upward, away from his body and toward the rifle—Clark shot him in the face.

The 62-grain 5.56 hollow-point bullet struck Elijah Miles in the tear duct.

The bullet blossomed like a rose as it passed through Elijah's brain—a considerable portion of which followed it through the baseball-sized hole it punched out the back of his skull—then cracked into the windshield of that man's beloved truck, splintering the glass into a white spiderweb.

The crack of the rifle shot stunned everyone else into silence as it echoed in a static roar across the mountain valley.

Elijah's body toppled over, lifeless as though every tendon in his body had just ceased to be. His face slammed into the hood of his truck above the wheel well on his way down. It connected with enough force to splash a pint of blood onto the hood and redirect the course of his body's fall, which crumpled back-first into the dirt, kicking up a halo of dust from the rocky road.

Clark had busted hundreds of poachers and other violent criminals throughout his career. He'd killed three other men before today, and maimed or hurt many times that number. None of those men, or his efforts to stop them, had mattered at all. They were all nameless now. *Meaningless*. Because he'd never felt *this*. He'd never felt as fulfilled as he did the moment that bullet tore through the brain of Elijah Austin Miles.

The sensation became physical as a heavy weight lifted from Clark's

hips and shoulders. A pulsing ring of furious dark red around his vision and a piercing tinnitus screaming in his ears all vanished in an instant. He hadn't even noticed any of it until the moment it washed away. He'd never felt anything like it before. Nothing even close. But he did not reflect on its uniqueness, or his having just experienced a psychosomatic shock wave caused by another's death. He just shivered, blinked hard, chalked it up to adrenaline, and forgot about it.

Before anyone had taken their eyes from the Elijah's body—before it had even come fully to rest—Clark's rifle was aimed at the man with the revolver. The one who remained standing with the holstered pistol, shaking and stunned as he stared down at his dead friend. Eyes like a loyal dog's that whined and paced around the old man who'd just collapsed on their morning walk, anxious for him to stir and rise while knowing he never would; capable of feeling death, yet unable to grasp its permanence.

Again, Clark saw clearly how this guy was about to draw down on him. He saw how his shoulders would tense and hips would turn as he dropped his trembling hand to his revolver. He saw how his eyes would narrow in agitation as he yanked on the pistol's battered grip, then open wide in dread as he realized the gun was still button-strapped into the holster on his belt. He saw how that dread would curdle into a tragic humiliation that can only be found in the face of a man—one who's spent a lifetime idolizing fabled cowboys of the old west—realizing his final act in life was giving himself a wedgie instead of drawing his gun.

Clark's gift of violence-induced foresight was not necessary now, however. Plain old experience rendered everything about a guy and situation like this down into a cashable certainty. The outcome was already set.

This was a twitchy, pinned-out Narcan mascot who'd just been caught dead to rights in the commission of a felony now refusing to move his hand away from his gun: a situational recipe justifying lethal use of force in virtually any jurisdiction in America. On top of that, Clark sensed the other five officers' adrenaline was about to start blistering their skin. He knew this dude was a sudden fart away from getting himself a toe tag and a body bag.

Clark also knew, however, that this guy wasn't an inherently evil man. He hadn't forfeited his right to life long before today—as the dead monster at his feet most certainly fucking had. This was the walking, talking sociological afterbirth of bad luck, worse decisions, and not enough hugs. The type who'd blamed every slight in life on a bad hand, yet still went all in on every busted flush they'd ever seen. The type whose judgment calculus

defaulted toward throwing most things into the old *fuck-it bucket*. This was a stupid man who'd only ever had stupid, shitty friends.

And Clark Rickert had a soft spot for such men. These were his people. Those of his tribe.

So when the dumbass finally went for his gun, Clark didn't shoot him. Instead, he flipped the safety on his weapon and exploded forward in such a sudden eruption of speed it made his deputy flinch.

By the time the terror-stricken simpleton even registered the shadowy mass blitzing toward him, it was too late. Clark had already closed the distance and speared the flash hider on the muzzle of his rifle into the man's chest like a snakebite.

The strike connected with brutal, rough-hewn precision, fracturing the man's sternum under the blunt steel. Both local deputies and the younger game warden winced as a sickening, wet crack punched into the still mountain air.

The man's body bent around the rifle as air and spit blasted from his mouth. Before his lungs had emptied, Clark had already dropped his rifle to hang on its sling, clamped one viselike grip onto the guy's shoulder, and another onto the wrist of his gun hand. As he collapsed forward, Clark spun around him like a wraith. In what looked like a single, fluid movement, Clark arrested the guy's collapse, set him down almost gently, then pinned him with a knee to his upper arm and an oaken forearm to the back of his head.

The others cast quick glances at one another, then moved toward the other poacher. He was still on his knees, but silent now, all his screeching panic replaced by a look of dumb wonder. He didn't resist the officers as they cuffed him. He barely registered it. He just stared at the man who'd just hit his buddy like a truck. The man who then rolled his buddy onto his side and began patting his back as his friend gagged and hacked bile into the dirt. The man he'd just seen move faster than he'd thought men could.

Two and a half hours later, assistant chief of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Law Enforcement Division, Leonard Price, arrived at the scene.

Elijah's body and the two living poachers had been taken to the little town of Choteau an hour earlier, once the state and county detectives finished their primary investigation. Those detectives plus around twenty other personnel from USFS, Montana State Police, Teton County Sheriff's Office, and FWP were still at the scene wrapping up their respective after-action duties.

Price looked around until he spotted Clark, alone, leaning his elbows on the hood of one of the trucks now choking the steep forest road. The county and state detectives approached him, both mentioning their confidence in the lawfulness of his warden's use of lethal force, as well as how downright impressed they were by it. Price shook hands and thanked both, then made his way up to Clark. Neither man spoke as Price leaned his elbows on the hood next to Clark's and took in the same view of the ridge across the valley.

Not much needed to be said.

They'd worked together at FWP since Clark graduated from the police academy seventeen years earlier and started his career as a game warden. While twelve years Clark's senior, Price had treated him as an equal since the start. Today, each man privately figured he was the other's best friend. Of the 108 commissioned FWP law enforcement officers throughout the state of Montana, there were only two who had been on the job longer than Clark: the division chief, behind a desk in Helena, and Leonard Price himself, the chief's second in command. After a full minute of silence, Price shifted his weight onto one elbow to face Clark.

"Gettin' soft, *eh?*"

Clark didn't look his old friend in the eye, but turned his head a few degrees toward Price and lifted his eyebrows. Price spoke through a grin.

"The county and state detectives said that after you smoked the ringleader, another one a' them sons a' bitches made a move for his gun. But, instead a' just shootin' him, too, they said you went 'n beat the brakes off that poor little tweaker so bad *he'll wake up on Christmas achin' from it.*"

Clark couldn't help but snort in amusement at Price's prose. Both men spoke in the old western *Montana patois*.

It wasn't a distinct accent like those found in the south, Midwest, or northeast. It was just *western*, still heard throughout rural stretches of Montana, Wyoming, and the Dakotas. a laconic rhythm with flat, clipped vowels, hard *Rs*, and an occasional, almost bashful twang. It's a deliberate parlance, one annealed in terse exchanges about hunting, ranching, weather, and Indians. It's a speech pattern that was left rough and unfinished by a need for it to be easily shouted outdoors in country where wasting time can be deadly. Extra consonants or words easily replaced by a single letter were discarded. Words like *or* and *than* were replaced by slapping an *R* or *N* onto the front of any word requiring the services of a

conjunction. Gs were amputated from the *-ing* at the end of a word, leaving an unsanded *N* for a stump.

Clark took off his Stetson hat, ran his arm across his eyes and forehead, then put the hat back on. He glanced at Price with an unamused, bored expression, then back at the ridgeline across the valley. It was illuminated in the deep yellow light of an afternoon starting to turn toward evening.

“Been here all goddamn day, Price. You better be tellin’ me we’re rigged to flip and that you’re my ride. Finished all my AAR stuff two hours ago. So, can we jet, *please?*”

Price nodded.

“*Yeah . . . yeah*, I ’spose we’re all squared away here. Same as before, though, gonna have to put you on administrative leave for a bit, shootin’ protocol ’n all. C’mon, I’ll bring you back to your rig.”

Clark put on his pack, slipped his rifle sling over his shoulder, and the two men walked down the forest road through the mess of trucks. Elijah’s pack of hounds had been rounded up throughout the day and put into a kennel in the back of an FWP truck. They’d been barking and yowling nonstop, increasing in anger and volume whenever one of the officials on the scene got within a few yards of the truck bed.

Clark whistled the tune softly as they went, the only one he ever whistled. The only one he knew how to whistle, Price suspected, if such a thing were possible. It was the sad, lonely theme song to his favorite western, *High Plains Drifter*. Over the years, Price had challenged Clark on many occasions to whistle something else, literally any other song, just to prove he possessed the ability. Clark had responded to each with a mumbled suggestion that Price *kiss his ass* or some other such thing, but never had.

Clark walked by the kennel, close enough to touch the dogs’ noses, and glanced into the eyes of the closest one.

All six dogs’ tails dropped as their ears went back. They backpedaled—a few letting out quick whines as unkempt toenails clicked on the bed of the truck—until they were huddled together along the far side of the kennel, shivering visibly in their lean, muscular shoulders.

For the first time that day, all six dogs went completely silent.