

## SAVING GRACE

### PROLOGUE

The hum of the engine was soothing. Almost eight-year-old Vin, settled happily in his booster seat next to Chris, was enamored by the play of headlights over the wet asphalt in the darkness. With each turn in the road the silver rays probed the darkness and then swept around to reveal their path in trusted brightness. Where the light ventured off road, bright patches of snow caused the beam to explode into a galaxy of sparkles. That sight, coupled with the rare alone time with his adopted dad, were things to be savored with every one of his almost eight-year-old senses and Vin did so with silent appreciation.

It was cold outside. He could feel the aura of it emanating from the side window near his face. When he leaned toward it, the little boy could feel the temperature drop with each inch but the heat blasting on his feet from the truck's vents thoroughly warmed him. The cab had a slight tang of damp leather and enveloped him in comfort. Vin saw Chris glance his way and smile, making him grin in return. They didn't need words to communicate their feelings.

It was dark outside because the side road they had chosen to take home had no artificial illumination to spoil the night. Through the broad windshield Vin caught glimpses of a star-splattered sky beyond the tips of winter-bare trees whose branches reached up like needy children. The nearly full moon played peek-a-boo between their boney fingers.

Like the trees, Vin wished he would stand on his toes and touch the stars. He imagined they would feel cool and sharp, like diamonds. He'd seen a diamonds once in a store window, glittering against black velvet like ice. He didn't get to look at them too long, though, before being shooed away like a stray dog. "*That's what I must have looked like when I lived in the warehouse,*" he realized. "*A hungry dog.*" He hugged Cat closer, the stuffed toy representing how his life had changed.

Vin's thoughts turned inward as he mulled over the past and especially the last two years. So much change and all for the better since he'd found Chris. Or

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Chris had found him. Cat, his adopted dad's first gift to him, was one of his most cherished possessions and a constant reminder of how much he'd grown from his time of living in a warehouse.

"Looks like you're havin' some heavy thoughts," Chris said softly. He released one hand from the steering wheel and stroked Vin's hair, smiling. "You okay?"

Again, Vin warmed. He smiled at his dad. "Yeah, I'm good."

Chris grinned. "I bet Cat was glad to get out for a while."

Vin rolled his eyes. "Dad, he's just a toy!" Still, he laughed shortly and stroked Cat's back.

"Oh, yeah. I keep forgetting." Chris chuckled as he returned his hand to the wheel. It was wonderful to see the boy acting like a boy. At times, Vin seemed to carry the world on his narrow, bony shoulders and for a long time after they had come together Vin was wary, reserved and skittish. "Want some music?" he offered. "You can choose."

"Nah. I like the quiet."

"Yeah, it's nice, huh? There's something about winter, moonlight and the open road."

"n no JD talkin'."

Chris snorted and glanced at Vin again. "I do love the boy, but quiet is nice on occasion."

Vin giggled again. His acquired little brother didn't really have an 'off' switch and tended to wear most everyone in their extended family down. He sighed and let the smooth hum of the Dodge engine soothe him as he dropped his head back onto the seat back, Cat cradled safely and snugly in his arms.

The truck vent blew a gentle heat that made him drowsy. Vin's eyes slipped closed, his body completely and totally relaxed. He was lulled into that floaty phase of pre-sleep by comforting warmth and contentment when the truck suddenly jerked violently to one side. His head knocked against the side window. Vin's eyes snapped open as Chris spat an expletive.

"SHIT!"

Vin felt a hard thud and then a blur of brown flew toward him. He saw the deer's shiny, dark eye ringed white in terror a fraction of a moment before the windshield exploded and his world slammed into darkness.

## CHAPTER ONE

Buck glanced at the wall clock and debated his next move. It was a few minutes before ten P.M. and Chris was now three hours late. If he were a single man Buck would smile at the thought that maybe his friend and roommate was getting lucky – that Allison Watkins sure was a looker and she'd made it abundantly clear at the budget meeting this afternoon that her sights were on Chris. But neither he nor Chris were really single anymore since adopting two homeless boys, and Buck knew that Chris had ducked out of today's meeting early to take Vin to the dentist. Then he'd called Buck to declare it "boys' night out" so he could take Vin to an early dinner and movie.

Buck chuffed softly. Chris sure did "get lucky", but the definition had certainly changed in the past couple of years! His gaze drifted to the clock again as his hand absently stroked the cuddled lump in his lap. JD was deeply asleep yet still squirmed like a pile of worms. Buck adjusted his legs to keep his adopted son from sliding off his lap and tucked the loosened quilt snugly around him.

The movie should have been over by seven o'clock. If they'd had to attend a later showing, Chris would have called. Now Buck was worried. His cell phone was in the other room and the house phone was in the kitchen. Was he worried enough, though, to dislodge the snoozing bundle in his lap?

Yes, he was. Gently, Buck twisted and lowered his long legs from the couch, gathering up JD as he moved. By the time he settled the boy into the lower bunk and returned to the kitchen it was a quarter past ten. He snatched up the kitchen phone and dialed Chris' cell.

"Mercy General," a female voice replied, momentarily stunning Buck.

"What? Who is this?" he demanded as his heart rate increased.

"This is Nurse Simmons at Mercy General Hospital. Are you related to Christopher Larabee? I have his cell phone."

"No. Yes. I mean, I have his medical power of attorney. What happened?"

"It seems, Mr. . . ?"

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“Wilmington. Buck Wilmington.”

“Mr. Wilmington, Mr. Larabee has been in an accident and was air lifted to us.”

Buck fought to keep his voice low and began to pace the kitchen. “Why wasn’t he taken to Four Corners?”

“Mercy General is the designated trauma center for major injuries. Mr. Larabee is alive, but he’s been severely injured. It seems he hit a deer and then swerved into a tree. He’s been unconscious.”

“What about Vin?” Buck breathed.

There was a hesitation. “Vin?”

“Yeah, his son. Vin was with him.”

“Mr. Larabee came in alone. I didn’t hear anything about a passenger. The boy could have been transported to Four Corners if he wasn’t badly hurt.”

That didn’t make sense to the anxious agent. If Vin wasn’t badly hurt, he or a nurse would have called home. If he were badly hurt, he would have been transported with Chris. Suddenly, Buck felt sick.

“What agency responded to the crash?” he asked, now all business. “Where did it happen?”

The next part of the hour was frantic, both cell and house phones utilized in Buck’s search for information. He got the accident location from the responding agency’s dispatch and sent Josiah to the scene since he lived closest to it. While he waited for the officer handling the report to call, Buck checked every hospital in the area. The county morgue number was at his fingertips but he couldn’t get himself to dial it. Just the thought made his palms sweat and his eyes burn.

The cell vibrated and Buck snatched it up from the counter. “Wilmington.”

“Agent Wilmington? This is Officer Beckett. I’m taking the paper on Agent Larabee’s crash.”

“Did you get to the scene before the paramedics?”

“Yeah. It was relayed by On Star from the truck itself at about 7:10 this evening after the airbags deployed. Good thing, because he was hurt pretty bad.”

“Did you see Vin? Chris’ eight-year-old son? They were together.”

The momentary hesitation made Buck’s stomach twist. “No, I didn’t. There was no indication of a passenger at all. Hold on.” Officer Beckett spoke rapidly to someone else. “You sure they were together? My partner checked the area around the truck when we got here, but if the boy was small enough he could have been ejected quite a distance through the windshield. We’re still here taking measurements. We’ll check again and I’ll call you back.”

Buck could hear Officer Beckett yell to someone prior to disconnecting. He took a deep breath to stop his hands from trembling and immediately called Josiah.

“Sanchez,” the team profiler answered.

“Josiah, are you on scene?”

“Just got here.”

“They’re looking for Vin. He may have been ejected. Keep me updated, will you?”

“You don’t have to ask, Buck. It looks like the officer and his partner are the only ones here.” Josiah’s breathing told Buck the agent was walking. “The truck’s been towed already and everyone else is gone. I’m sure they can use the help searching.”

“Josiah . . .” Buck found it difficult push words through his thickening throat.

“We’ll find him, Buck. Call Ezra and Nathan to help. It’s pretty dark out here. And if the damage to the tree is any indication, there’s a good chance Vin’s hurt.”

Buck swallowed, a strangled noise escaping from his mouth.

“I’ll check in regularly,” Josiah said calmly. “Now go call the other guys. We can use ‘em.” Buck was grateful for Josiah’s steadiness.

“Okay,” Buck managed to choke before hanging up. Every instinct told him to bolt, to get to the scene and look for his other son but he knew he had to be here for JD. He called Nathan and Ezra, telling them what had happened and where to meet Josiah. The conversations were very short.

With nothing further to do for the moment Buck called Mercy General to get an update on Chris. It was going to be a long night; he just hoped there would be answers by dawn.

By midnight, Josiah had checked in twice without any news and Buck felt like screaming. He paced a track in the living room rug, even wearing out their two young dogs. Finally, he knew he had to act. Snapping up the phone he started to dial Mrs. Potter, the boys’ regular weekday caretaker, but remembered that she was out of town for the weekend. Nettie? He considered the boys’ old caseworker for a moment but knew she’d recently taken on raising her niece and Buck didn’t want to disrupt the two of them. Raine – no doubt she wasn’t asleep, anyway, after Nathan was called away.

The phone was picked up on the second ring. “Buck? You need me?” she said immediately.

Buck nearly cried in relief. “Yeah, sweetheart, I do. I don’t want to leave JD and I don’t want to wake him up, either. I don’t want to upset him without any news.”

“I’m already dressed. I’ll be there in twenty minutes. Good thing I know all the local cops from the hospital.”

That gave Buck a welcomed laugh. “Be careful, woman. It’s dark and cold out there.” When he thought of Vin, his throat constricted and he fought back a sob.

“I’m on my way.”

When Raine arrived just before 1:00 Buck burst from the house, pulling on his heavy coat. “Chris is at Mercy General. I’ll call when I know anything. If you hear anything. . .”

“I’ll call,” she said softly, quickly giving him a wave. “Go.”

It was just before 2:00 when Buck blew into Mercy’s Emergency Room, demanding to see Chris. Waylaid by a nurse to fill out some paperwork, he hurried through the sheets and then directed to the second floor, Intensive Care. When he arrived in the area he slowed, looking for the nurse’s station. Once there, a middle-aged nurse led him to the center room.

“He had surgery to stop some bleeding in his abdomen and they had to remove his spleen, according to the doctor. He has a major concussion, a small skull fracture and stitches over his left eye. His left arm and leg are broken, but they broke cleanly and should heal without any problems. Considering what happened, he was lucky to have survived.”

“He hit a deer?” Buck choked, unable to tear his eyes from the still, bruised form of his friend and boss.

“Apparently so, then ran into a tree. The deer should have killed him, as far as it was inside the truck, and the truck was wrapped well around the tree. The medics had a time extricating him.”

Buck watched the monitors flicker blue light across Chris’ face. The steady beep of the heart monitor was the only indication that he was alive.

“You can go in for ten minutes. Talk to him.”

Nodding, Buck entered the room and found a spot between wires, tubes and IV racks where he could reach Chris’ right hand. Taking it in his own, Buck was shocked at how cold it felt so he covered Chris’ hand with both of his own as he leaned in. “Hey, Chris. I can’t lie, Pard, but I’ve seen ya look better. You just rest and I’ll take care of everything, you hear? Relax while you have a chance.”

Buck noticed how translucent Chris’ right eyelid was – he could see tiny blue veins running through it like rivers on a roadmap. Heavy bandages, spotted red, covered his left eye and the left side of his forehead. Purpling bruises peeked out from the snowy gauze. “Looks like you’re gonna have a hell of a headache, boss, but hey – you work with Ezra so you’re used to it.” Buck swallowed hard, fighting to keep his cool. “I’ll watch over the boys, Chris, don’t you worry about that one little bit.”

“Time,” the nurse called softly from the doorway.

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“Gotta go, ol’ son, but I’ll be back, okay? You rest easy. Buck’s in charge now.”

He carefully laid the cold, still hand back on the mattress and backed away. “*How the hell can I tell him we lost Vin?*” he thought, his eyes starting to burn again. Once out of the room, he turned and fled.

CHAPTER TWO

Ezra stood at the edge of the trees and pondered. He didn't want to believe what his eyes were telling him, but he certainly couldn't deny it. He wasn't much of a tracker but the little things he'd learned over the years were enough in this case. Agent Standish hoped there was more to it and that they would come across Vin at any moment, but his mind whispered otherwise.

Vin had been taken.

Someone had tried to cover the tracks but had done an appallingly poor job. Now all he had to do was tell someone what he had found and that was proving to be more difficult than he could ever imagine. He'd almost rather find his precious adopted nephew near-frozen in a ditch; the implications of this kind of kidnapping turned his stomach.

They had been searching for hours. Other officers were called in and the circle of searchers slowly grew and expanded, none of them finding any evidence that Vin had ever been here. Most of them gathered now by the nearly frozen pond a hundred yards from the crash scene, waiting for the cold water rescue team.

Ezra, though, knew it would be futile. As he stood with a fluttering heart staring at the faint marks in the patches of old snow and damp earth, the sound of crunching footfall told him someone was approaching.

"Ezra." Nathan sounded as weary as Ezra felt.

"Mr. Jackson," Ezra responded automatically, his voice as whispery like the cloudy puff that came from his mouth.

"You comin' to the pond?"

Ezra considered the idea. He knew, though, that the motion would only serve to harbor false hope for a brief while. He ducked his head and jammed his hands more deeply into the pockets of his custom cut wool overcoat. "No," he finally whispered, accepting the inevitable. "Vin's not there."

From the corner of his eye he saw Jackson's head snap in his direction. "What? How do you know that? Where is he, then?"



“I fear he’s gone, Mr. Jackson; spirited away by a nefarious soul.” He withdrew one hand and waved it over the hastily covered tracks. “He’s gone.”

Nathan turned his attention to the ground. Ezra’s finger indicated the trail he’d visually exhumed from the snow. Seeing Nathan’s confused look, Standish retrieved his flashlight, flicked it on and held it low to the ground, perpendicular to the nearly invisible tracks. The resulting shadows jumped out as black on white and told the tale.

“Damn,” Nathan breathed.

There was a visible line of tracks leading from where they stood into the woods. They both knew that the line lead directly to the crash site and paralleled the tracks of the doomed deer. Nathan’s gaze followed the trail backwards to an area behind them. Ezra shifted his flashlight in that direction, showing that the trail stopped perpendicular to two parallel tracks.

“Tire tracks. Vin was carried to another vehicle and then they tried to cover the tracks,” Nathan realized. “They took the booster seat, too. That’s why there was no indication of a passenger.”

Ezra nodded to one side. “The branch they used to sweep the evidence is over there. The leaves – I mean needles – of the branch do not match the tree under which it lies, although the responsible party tried to conceal that fact.”

Nathan pressed the flat of his hand against his stomach and looked decidedly ill as the realization obviously sunk in. “Oh, Lord,” he whispered. “We have to tell the others and check all the clinics and hospitals in the area. We also gotta check the list of registered sex offenders around here.”

“I know for a fact that Mr. Wilmington has already called the hospitals in the area. Whoever did this does not want to be found. The first thing we need to do is initiate an Amber Alert.” He pulled out his cell phone and began to dial. “Although I think that, too, is a moot point.”

Nathan headed to the pond. After a few steps, he stopped and turned. “I sure don’t want to be the one to tell Chris about this. I’m gonna pray we find Vin before Chris wakes up.”

“I am on board with that train of thought, Mr. Jackson.”



“WHAT?” Buck realized that every head on the floor whipped in his direction. Unfazed, he only turned his back to them and strode to the deepest corner of the waiting room. In route, he glanced at his watch and automatically realized that JD would be waking up in less than two hours. “You’re telling me Vin’s been kidnapped?”

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It was hard to hear with his heart pounding so loudly in his ears. Buck rubbed his dry eyes and took a breath as he tried to focus his thoughts. “That makes the truck a crime scene. Ezra, make sure forensics goes over it with a fine-toothed comb. Josiah and Nathan need to make sure the crash site is sealed off until morning and another forensics team gets there and then someone has to get over here. Chris can’t wake up alone.” Buck ran his hand over his eyes and swallowed the large lump growing in his throat. “I need to get to the ranch. JD will need me when he wakes up.”

Satisfied things were in control as much as they could possibly be under the circumstances, Buck slipped his cell phone away and sank into the closest chair, head in hands. “Where are you, Vin?” he whispered, his voice raw.



Four days passed, four long, agony-ridden days with no further information and no results. No clues. No chances to find his second son.

Buck walked wearily down the crowded hospital corridor feeling absolutely alone. The doctors said Chris would be allowed out of his medically induced coma today since the swelling on his brain had reduced to a safe level. They didn’t predict any brain damage; Buck shook his head with the thought. They didn’t take into account the heart damage that would occur when his friend found out that Vin was gone.

Simply gone.

The F.B.I. worked very hard in the past three days and had nothing. Vin had vanished like a puff of smoke in the wind. Buck’s eyes burned anew, not an unfamiliar feeling in these last days. Unconsciously, he rubbed his biceps where JD’s tiny finger bruises reminded him both physically and visually that he wasn’t the only family member in pain. And soon there’d be another name on that list.

Buck Wilmington was tired – exhausted beyond any imagined belief. Between searching, checking on Chris and trying to soothe JD, he hadn’t had much time to rest. Or eat. Or attend to any of the basics of living day to day. He just wanted this to be over, but it was beginning to look like it would never be over.

Buck scrubbed his weary eyes knowing they were bloodshot. He’d spent the last three nights in the rocking chair with JD until the boy cried himself to sleep, clutched to his Da’s clothing like a frightened kitten. Morning always brought a sore neck, stiff back, sweaty shirts and red-rimmed, puffy eyes.

He sighed, continuing on with the day without really thinking anymore. “Just do it,” was his mantra for each motion he was required to perform. With a miserable sigh, Buck pushed open the hospital room door, pausing with a tentative smile at the woman sitting there holding Chris’ hand as best as she could around

his cast. It had taken Claire Larabee a while to accept Vin as Chris' son, but once done, she was as devoted as a grandmother should be. Her red-rimmed eyes and gaunt cheeks were proof enough of her sense of loss.

"Buck." Chris' father extended his hand as he pushed up from the wobbly chair at his wife's side.

"Matt," Buck said, his voice sounding strangled to his own ears. They shook hands briefly. "Did you get any rest yesterday?"

"Some," Matthew Larabee replied, taking his seat. Husband and wife looked rumpled and worn.

Buck found a place on the other side of Chris' bed and rested his hands on the cold side rail. "Did the docs say when he'd come around?"

"Any time now," Claire answered softly. Buck could see her thumb gently stroke the back of Chris' fingers protruding from the cast as her hand rested on top. "They removed the ventilator around three this morning."

"Good." Buck appraised his friend's face with sad eyes. Tape marks were still visible around his mouth and the general swelling had receded, leaving behind red-streaked bruises and multiple scrapes. The line of stitches that bisected his left eyebrow looked blacker than the fading bruises and, under all that, Chris' skin was a sickly pallor. The unshaven stubble of beard was the only natural color the man had at the moment.

And when he opened his eyes, the natural hazel would be dull and shadowed, lacking the spark that Vin had rekindled.

Buck took a deep breath to keep back the tears. They had decided to let Claire tell him about Vin; she had insisted, actually. Buck would then fill in the facts they knew. Matthew would be there to support his wife when she broke down, as they held no illusion that she wouldn't. They were ready. All that was left was for Chris to do his part and wake up.

The subtle signs of awareness slowly began to show. Matthew stepped aside and called for the doctor. By the time he got there, a nurse trailing behind, wakefulness was apparent. Chris' heart rate sped up slightly and his breathing hitched. Arms and legs twitched and then shifted. The casts on his left side limbs allowed minimal movement.

"Mr. Larabee?" Doctor Mills dropped the rail on Buck's side and leaned over. He peeled back an eyelid, flashing the pupil with a light. "You're in the hospital, Chris. Don't move too quickly. Are you awake now?" Returning the flashlight to his pocket, he rested one hand on Chris' shoulder and the other on his hip to keep him from rolling too much to either side as he woke.

A low moan rumbled from Chris' dry throat and Buck saw his eyes roll under his eyelids.

“Christopher?” Claire said lowly, now on her feet and leaning close. “Honey, do you hear me?”

Finally, slivers of dusty green emerged and he blinked, confused.

“Chris?” Matt peered over his wife’s shoulder. “How’re ya doin’, son?”

Chris’ head rolled slightly in his direction. “Dad?” Buck saw the word form on his lips rather than hear it. Chris coughed a little. “Mom?” The second word was scratchy and soft, but more easily understood.

“Hi, honey. I’m so happy to see your eyes open.” Claire stroked his cheek and smiled.

Chris blinked at her and tried to say something again. It came out as a croak.

“Here.” The nurse moved in and raised the head of the bed as Dr. Mills scribbled on Chris’ chart. “How about some ice chips? Not too much.”

Buck took the cue and grabbed the plastic cup on the bedside table. He angled it, dug out a few shards with the plastic spoon, and bumped it against Chris’ lip.

“Careful now,” he said, causing Chris to frown as he parted his dry lips. Buck let the ice slide into Chris’ mouth and he worked his jaw a moment. Then Chris’ eyes found him and a small furrow creased his forehead in thought.

“Buck?”

“Hey, Pard. You look like a mile ‘o bad road.”

One corner of Chris’ lips twitched, attempting a grin. “Feel . . . shit.” His gaze flicked toward Claire. “Sorry.”

She smiled, her eyes shiny. “It’s okay, son.”

After she said the word, Chris’ expression fell and he looked puzzled for a moment, then his eyes widened and the heart monitor sang. “Vin!” he choked, struggling to sit up. “Where . . . where’s Vin?”

The nurse moved to keep her patent from rising but Buck pushed his way in and took over. He pressed his friend’s shoulders into the mattress with little effort and leaned over, telling him to calm down. Claire kept her hold on Chris’ cast with both hands, tears running down her cheeks. Matt held the leg cast to the bed.

“Chris, stop. Stop movin’ around or you’re gonna hurt yourself more.” Buck heard the doctor behind him say something to the nurse, who then pulled a bottle and syringe from her pocket as the doctor moved closer.

“Mr. Larabee – Chris – calm down or we will have to sedate you,” the doctor gently insisted. “You’ve had surgery. . .”

Chris ignored the doctor and locked his eyes on Buck’s. “Where’s he, Buck? Where’s Vin?”

Buck opened his mouth but nothing came out. He licked his lips and tried again, taking a breath. “Chris . . .” he started.

So much for the plan for Claire to break the news gently.

“WHERE IS HE?” Chris surged upward as the nurse grabbed the IV line. “TELL ME!”

“Honey,” Claire sobbed.

Chris’ hard eyes turned on his mother and instantly softened. When they focused again on Buck, they were etched with a pain that been gone for years.

“Buck!” he begged. “Just tell me . . . please!”

“We don’t know, Chris,” Buck finally admitted in a shaky voice. “We just don’t know. We can’t find him anywhere. We think someone took him.”

Whether from drugs, shock or pain Chris collapsed back into the mattress. “What do you mean? You can’t find him?” He tried to sit up again, but pain made him wince and twist awkwardly. “Then look harder! He was with me!”

“I know, I know, Chris.” Buck relaxed the pressure on his friend's shoulders. Beneath his hands, Chris trembled like a lost leaf in the wind. “It looks like he was taken from the crash site. He’s gone. It’s been four days and we don’t have a clue. I’m sorry, Chris. I’m so sorry.” Buck’s voice cracked at the last and hot tears seared a path down his unshaven face.

Chris looked stunned as the sedation kicked in. He shifted his wide-eyed gaze from Buck to Claire. She could only stroke his arm, sorrow and tears stealing away any platitudes.

“They’re still looking, Chris,” Matthew said in a tentative voice. His son’s eyes drifted, shocked and dazed, in his direction. “We’ll never give up looking.”

Chris’ eyes filled as his body relaxed from the drug but he didn’t drop his gaze. “He’s mine, dad. Vin’s mine. I can’t lose him . . . I can’t take it again – I just can’t. I have to find him. I will find him . . . Vin . . . I was just talkin’ to him . . .” Finally, he couldn’t fight it anymore and Chris’ eyelids flagged shut. Even in his forced sleep, his breath hitched and tears trickled from under his lashes. His lips moved in wordless begging.

The nurse slid in front of Buck and adjusted the nasal cannula as she took his pulse. The doctor stood back, making notes and looking a bit grim.

“I don’t think I can take it again, either, Pard,” Buck muttered, wiping his eyes with the heel of his hand. One glance at the others told him that he didn’t stand alone.

CHAPTER THREE  
*Two Years Later*

Buck entered Team Seven's office without looking up, flipping through an open folder as he walked. He paused by his desk, raising his brows at one particular part of a report.

"Chris here?" he said out loud to no one in particular.

"He is in his den," Ezra answered, never taking his eyes from his computer screen. "Beware."

Buck glanced at Chris' closed office door and took the warning to heart. Chris Larabee wasn't one to approach lightly in his best days, but since Vin's disappearance he'd become beyond unpredictable. "Unhinged" to some and simply "scary" to most, contacting Chris Larabee for any reason was a risky venture, even for his best friend. It had been a while since the man had come to work hung over, but his mood was just as foul once he was in the office.

The last two years had fouled him good.

Buck's heart still clenched whenever he thought of Vin; it probably always would. It had been two years to the day, yesterday. Thoughts were all Buck had of his lost son because after those first, horrible six months, both JD and Chris refused to speak of him. That had lasted about six more months, then the two of them began to mention the boy in passing at home only – numerous and lengthy sessions with JD's therapist Dr. Will had helped with that breakthrough. JD was the only thing that kept Chris from withdrawing completely into a black abyss and oddly, they seemed to keep each other afloat. At home, Chris was bearable.

The ragged and ugly scar that carved a home across the left side of Chris' forehead, though, never changed. It always looked red and angry, his eyebrow split apart like a broken heart. Chris refused to get it fixed; any good plastic surgeon could lessen the shock of it but Chris would have no part of that. First he'd refused to get it fixed because he didn't want to take away the time from searching for Vin, and later, because . . . well, there was no reason stated later on. Buck figured it was

the Larabee version of a hair coat, worn as a reminder to Chris of his failure as a protector and father.

Everyone healed one event at a time. Chris broke off his close relationship with Jack Daniels by the end of the first year and JD was finally, and regularly, staying in his own bed. They had to shift around all the rooms in the house to achieve that feat. Chris' den was now in the boy's old room, along with the remnants of Vin. None of them voiced any desire to put the missing boy's things entirely away and Dr Will said there was nothing wrong with that. Dr. Will even admitted that he hadn't put away Vin's case files, either.

JD refused to get rid of the bunk beds, though. Buck finally stopped feeling the upper bunk for the huddled form of their long lost family member when he put JD to bed, and he occasionally found JD in Vin's old bed, wrapped in Vin's blankets. They healed one step at a time, each in their own way.

One step at a time - it became a chant every time Buck was tempted to take JD and leave in that first year - one day at a time, one step at a time, one minute at a time, one second at a time. They all lived by that creed for the past two years but at least they were still together as a family even though it felt a bit lopsided at times.

Buck took a breath, closed the folder and stepped up to the door. After a light rap, he pushed it open and stepped just inside the door frame. "Chris?"

The office was encased in shadow and smelled sour. He saw the form of his friend and boss pulling up to a sit on the small, worn couch. What minimal light there was reflected off Chris' pale face, the scar slanting through his eyebrow a black shadow. "What?" Chris growled, knuckling an eye.

Buck knew by the tone to tread very carefully. They'd all worked long hours lately and were still on edge even though the huge bust in conjunction with the D.E.A. this past week was successfully completed. The ensuing cataloguing and paper work was boring and tiring, wearing them all thin. Especially Chris, who, for the last couple of years, didn't rest much, anyway. Thankfully, the D.E.A. was doing most of the follow-up legwork since the small amount of firearms was only a secondary haul compared to the methamphetamines. Getting the reports to satisfy both agencies was simply tedious

Buck stepped inside and snapped on the desk light. Chris blinked at the sudden intrusion and raised a hand to his face. "Shit!" he snarled. "Get it out of my eyes, damn it! Jesus, Buck, what the hell do you want?"

Narrowing his eyes in the face of Chris' uncalled for rudeness Buck redirected the lamp downward and clenched his teeth to stop an automatic reply. The Larabee temper and drinking were the reasons he'd almost moved out with JD early on. The threat to do so was enough, though - Chris was still smart enough to realize he didn't want to lose what family he still had.

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"Got some hits on the warrants from the bust," Buck said flatly, dropping the file on the desk. "There's one I thought you'd be interested in, but if you'd rather sit in the dark . . ."

Chris, now sitting up with his feet on the floor and his head in his hands, cut a sorrowful picture and Buck regretted his snippy reply. Chris' voice was muffled by his hands covering his face, but the misery in his voice was still clear. "Just tell me what it is. I've got a headache."

Buck accepted the back-handed apology. "Seems one of the addresses the D.E.A. hit had a hidden room that looked like a jail cell. Looks like the same kind of black market child trafficking or something. Hidden, kid-sized bed with a leg chain, dead bolt on the room door, stuff like that. There was a fifteen-year-old boy living there that finally admitted he'd been abducted years before by the occupant, Harold Evans. Joshua, the fifteen-year-old, said other boys have been held in the room for the past five years or so. Evans brought Joshua here from back east somewhere."

Chris continued to rub his eyes, his shoulders a weary slump.

Buck eyed him and continued. "Anyway, they're running Joshua's prints and DNA to find out who he really is, but Chris, here's the part you might find interesting." He waited until Larabee tilted his head aside and focused one bleary, hazel eye on him. "Seems Harold Evans was in the habit of poaching deer off season and outside the legal hunting areas but was never caught on it. And he owned a 2000 GMC truck. The address is up in Longmont."

Now Chris was sitting up and giving Buck his full attention. They'd been fruitlessly down this road many times in the past twenty-four months. The tire tracks Ezra had found near Chris' crash scene, although well-worn, had been deciphered to be a tire normally sold on 1999 through 2002 GMC trucks. And there had been a theory that the deer Chris hit had been chased onto the road by a poacher based on the hastily covered prints at the scene.

Amazingly, there were a lot of known poachers with that vehicle profile and they'd checked out every single one without results. It had been the same result with every registered sex offender in the area, too. Vin and his captor had simply vanished into thin air.

"What do you mean, 'owned'? Evans doesn't have the truck anymore?"

"Well, technically not since Evans was one of the two killed in the raid."

"Great." Chris mumbled, rubbing his face again. "Longmont's pretty far away," Chris mused. "Have they interviewed the kid yet?"

"Briefly. As soon as they heard the gist of his story, they called the Fibbies. They're interviewing him this afternoon."

Chris stood and snatched up his jacket. "Let's go," he snapped.

"We haven't been properly invited, you know," Buck reminded him.



"I'll take care of that."

Buck laughed shortly. "With the famous Larabee charm? I don't think so. I suggest we try the Standish charm first."

Chris glared at him as he slipped on his jacket and then stomped to the door. "EZRA!" he bellowed.

Buck winced. "Yup, the infamous Larabee charm in action," he grumbled as he followed along.

On their way to the interview Ezra threatened Chris to not open his mouth while in the F.B.I. building. The undercover agent said he called in a lot of favors to get them into the interview area. They would be behind the mirrored glass in the observation area and Chris had to control himself or they'd be tossed out on their collective ears.

Buck had to admire Ezra's backbone to stand up to their prickly team leader. Then again, Buck knew Vin's absence wore on each one of them - it was as if the heart of the team had stopped beating - but Buck thanked God every day for Ezra. If he hadn't been around, Buck wasn't sure JD would have gotten back on track in school so quickly. The undercover agent was essential to JD's survival in that arena especially with the likes of Eli Joe Chavez and Freddy Chaney on campus. Nights of homework became additional counseling sessions in survival in the real world without a protector. Agent Standish was well qualified in that area.

Larabee glared at Ezra's demands but grudgingly acquiesced and now the three of them stood and watched as Joshua Doe entered the interview room with a young agent who made the boy comfortable. Soon, the agent was excused by a pretty blonde female and a tall Hispanic male with F.B.I. ID cards dangling from their necks.

"Agents Spade and Taylor, from New York," Ezra said lowly. "It seems that the boy, Joshua Daniels, was taken from Central Park six years ago."

Chris' stomach inadvertently flipped, knowing exactly how the parents must have felt. He felt his teeth squeak as his jaws clenched.

"Hi," the woman said sitting next to Joshua. "My name is Samantha and this is Danny. We're F.B.I. agents from New York. We've been looking for you for a long time, Joshua."

The boy smiled tentatively then dropped his eyes and fidgeted without speaking.

Buck snorted softly. "Samantha Spade. Poor gal." He shrugged when Chris frowned at him. "Easy on the eyes, though." Chris rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to the interview.

"Your mom and dad have been very worried. They can't wait to see you." Danny stood with one hip hitched on the far end of the table, giving the boy space. He smiled when Joshua glanced at him.

## SAVING GRACE

"They . . . they're safe?" Joshua whispered.

"They're safe and on their way here. Did someone want to hurt them?"

Samantha kept her voice light.

"He . . . he said he'd kill them if I left the house."

"Harold Evans told you that?"

"Harry," Joshua corrected. "He said to call him Harry."

"Your parents are fine, Joshua. Everything will be okay. Harry can't hurt you or anyone else anymore."

Joshua nodded and whispered, "Okay."

Chris didn't think the boy was entirely convinced.

"Did Harry threaten other boys?"

Joshua looked around nervously and nodded. "He'd keep them for a while and then they'd just be gone one day. I don't know why he kept me. He called my 'his only son.'"

There was a slight pause. "Do you know where any of the boys went? Or where they came from?"

Joshua shook his head. "I didn't ask. He hit me if I asked questions."

Chris clenched his jaw unimaginably tighter. Buck's hand found a place on his upper back.

"I know this is hard, Joshua, but we want to help those other boys. Do you want to help them, too, now that Harry can't hurt you?"

Joshua hesitated a moment before nodding briefly. "How can I help them?"

Samantha placed her hand on the boy's shoulder. Chris could see him lean slightly into her in a motion reminiscent of Vin - he'd lean into Chris the same way whenever Chris put his arm around his shoulders. Chris' eyes burned and his breath hitched once. Buck squeezed his shoulder, acknowledging the pain.

"You can help by telling us any names you remember. If you spoke to the boys, anything they said that may help us to identify them. What they looked like. Anything can help, Joshua, any little thing. Can you do that?"

Joshua took a deep breath and Samantha took out a notebook and opened it. The boy seemed to relax a little. "When Harry would go out I'd sometimes talk to the boys through the door. I wanted them to stop crying."

"That's nice of you, Joshua," Danny said softly. "I'm sure they were scared."

Joshua nodded. "One boy said his name was Ryan. There was a . . . Matt, a Jeffrey . . . um, Steven. Mark . . ." Joshua was ticking off with his fingers as he said the names. "Um . . . I can't remember any more. One kid asked for his dad. Usually they asked for their mom."

"But there were more? All boys?"

Joshua nodded. "Yeah. There was one time I thought there was a girl but it was a boy with long hair."

Chris stiffened where he stood then fumbled for his wallet. Buck kept his hand on Chris' shoulder, afraid he'd bolt. Ezra moved in closer. Chris' shaky fingers managed to pull out Vin's last school photo from his wallet and he looked to Ezra, who picked up the viewing room phone. In the interview room, Danny picked up the receiver.

"I have a photo to show him," Ezra said much too calmly for Chris' taste. "May I bring it?"

Chris saw Danny say yes and hang up the phone. Ezra took the photo and slipped by his partners and out of the viewing room. Chris sank down in the closest chair, his suddenly watery legs unable to hold him any longer. He watched as Danny opened the door and took the photo from Ezra. When the door was gently closed, Danny turned toward the boy.

"Joshua? Can you look at this picture and tell me if you recognize this boy?"

Joshua nodded and took the picture. He frowned.

"Come on," Chris whispered.

"Maybe. I think so . . ." Joshua said, still frowning. Then he shook his head. "The hair looks like what I saw, and the eyes, but I didn't see his face too much."

Buck dropped his hand from Chris' shoulder and ran it through his own hair as Chris slumped.

"Why's that? He didn't let you see the boys?"

"Sure, I'd help with 'em, but that boy was trouble. That's what Harry said . . . trouble. He kicked 'n bit 'n stuff and Harry didn't want me to get hurt so I didn't go in there much. He wasn't there too long. Was real quiet, too, when Harry was gone."

Samantha and Danny exchanged looks and Danny glanced quickly at the mirrored glass. Chris felt sick.

"Where did the boys go, Joshua?" Danny asked casually. "Do you know?"

That question got Chris and Buck's attention again.

Joshua shook his head and handed the photo back. "I'm not sure about the others, but the long haired one got traded."

"For what?"

Joshua looked decidedly nervous again. "Um . . . pills and things. To keep the boys quiet. A bike an' a PS2 for me. A car – kinda beat up, but Harry said I could drive it when I was old enough."

"Did he give you pills, Joshua?"

"Sometimes, at first. Not for the last year or so."

"Really? Do you know why he stopped giving them to you?"

The boy became nervous and looked down. "Because I told him I wouldn't leave," Joshua said quietly, again fiddling with his fingers. "He said he trusted me. I just . . . didn't think I could leave. That he'd hurt me or kill m'parents."

## SAVING GRACE

He started to cry and Samantha put her arm around him again, murmuring quietly. Danny left the room and soon entered the viewing room. He handed the photo back to Ezra. "It's possible," he said. "We've collected lots of samples from the place to run DNA testing."

"Has Joshua been examined?" Ezra asked.

"Yes, there's been a thorough physical done," Danny said, flipping through the file.

"Was he abused?" Ezra's question drew hard stares from Chris and Buck.

"Yes, he was. Sexually, physically and obviously mentally." Danny Taylor glanced over to Chris when Ezra returned the photo. "It's a good thing Harold Evans is dead because I'd hate to lose my job for beating him to death," he said matter-of-factly.

The comment broke the tense atmosphere a bit as Chris dropped his head, his jaw muscles rippling under his skin. Buck nodded, numb.

When the phone buzzed, all of them jumped. Danny picked up the receiver. "Taylor." He nodded at what he heard and said, "Thanks. He'll be ready," and hung up the phone. "Gotta go. Joshua's parents are in route from the airport."

"Would it be possible for our agency, that is, us," Ezra indicated the three of them, "to look at the evidence taken from the house?"

"Sure. I'll leave word with the tech that you can look at it. You know your way to Evidence?"

"Yes. And thank you Agent Taylor," Ezra said politely, offering his hand. Taylor shook it with a nod.

"It had to be him," Chris insisted on their way to Evidence. "Did you hear? Vin would fight. He'd fight."

Buck exchanged a glance with Ezra as the three of them walked abreast through the hallway. "It's possible, Chris. Vin's DNA is on file and we've alerted them, so we just have to wait."

"It's been so long, Buck. Do you really think any DNA is left in that place, the place where he was kept?" Chris' voice cracked and his voice dropped. "Did you see the photos of the room? No windows. Dark. Vin would have gone crazy." The team leader's voice shook as his throat tightened. He swallowed hard, fury obviously on the rise by the way he clenched his hands.

No one said any more until they reached Evidence. Ezra signed them in and they were directed to a large set of shelves to one side, stuffed with labeled cardboard boxes.

"Those boxes are what we have so far. There's more stuff in the Lab." The clerk pointed to an empty table against the wall. "You can use that table but make sure the items are returned to the boxes they came from."

"Thank you," Ezra said.

Buck had already removed the lid from one box and was rifling through the bagged contents. Ezra lifted down another box but Chris didn't move. Instead, he stood staring at the dozens of various sized containers looking a bit shell shocked. The other two glanced his way a few times before he finally chose a box and brought it to the table.

They'd gone through several boxes in tense silence, none of them commenting on any of the items they examined, obviously sickened by where the items had come from. Nearly an hour passed when Chris gasped. Buck and Ezra's heads shot up to see their boss holding up a sealed, plastic bag that contained what looked like a very large, squashed dust bunny.

"It's Cat," Chris said, dazed, eyes locked on the filthy stuffed animal inside.

Buck stepped closer, Ezra at his side. "You sure?" Buck, though, knew Chris was right as soon as he got close enough to see more detail. "My God, Chris," he whispered. He reached out and touched the bag.

Chris noticeably paled. His first gift to Vin looked mange-ridden and physically stressed, the tail hanging on by a few threads and one eye missing, but it was definitely Vin's Cat. The bag shook as Chris' grip became white-knuckled.

"We need to get that to the Lab immediately," Ezra said quickly. "We need to confirm . . ."

"I don't need to confirm anything," Chris said dangerously. "It's Cat."

"I know that and you know that, Mr. Larabee, but the F.B.I. still requires physical confirmation. I am sure I can expedite the process." Ezra paused, both his and Buck's attention on their boss. They knew it would be difficult for Chris to let go of the only connection he had to his lost son. Slowly, Ezra reached out and took hold of one side of the bag, waiting for any acknowledgement from Chris.

Buck put a hand on Chris' shoulder. "Come on, Chris. The sooner they get to it, the sooner we get Cat back."

Without another word, Chris released the bag and stormed from the Evidence Room. Ezra and Buck quickly repacked the boxes and filled out the requested forms for testing on the stuffed animal. As Ezra wrote, Buck studied Cat a little closer, saddened by what he saw.

Vin – or some child – had worried most of the fur from the animal's stomach and chest and Cat had lost a lot of stuffing from the tear at the base of his tail. Bits of food were stuck to parts of the remaining fur and the animal's color was definitely off, dark from dirt and what could have been blood. Buck was amazed he could tell it was Cat, but it was.

They hand carried the toy to the Lab, and then went to find Chris. Larabee was waiting for them by the Ezra's car, pacing a tight track in the snow. Wordlessly, they got in the vehicle and headed home with Chris in the back seat. Silence hung heavy. After a while, Buck heard ragged breathing from behind him.

"Chris," Buck said gently, turning around to get his friend's attention. "Chris . . ."

"Stop the car!" Chris suddenly ordered, startling Ezra. "I SAID PULL OVER AND STOP THE CAR!"

Ezra pulled off the road quickly and Chris was out of the back seat before they came to a full stop.

"Shit!" Buck yelped, fumbling with his seatbelt before leaping out to follow his boss into the roadside woods.

Chris simply ran for a while and then came to an abrupt stop, pulling out his duty weapon. By the time Buck reached him, Chris had emptied his clip into a downed tree. With the first click of the empty gun, Chris threw it at the trunk and then began pounding the chipped bark with his fists. Blood was already drawn by the time Buck interfered, and when Chris swung at him the glancing blow left a smear of red on Buck's cheek.

"Oh, God, Buck, I'm sorry," Chris gasped, staggering to keep his feet. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry . . . I can't go home; can't you see that? I can't go home and look JD in the eye. It's too much . . . too . . . much . . . I'll scare the shit outta him." Breathing heavily, he slumped against a mossy trunk, blood dripping from his dangling hands.

Buck took a moment to catch his breath and wipe the blood from his face. "Chris," he said. "You have to keep it together, stud. You have to. JD looks up to ya and takes cues from you. You have to be strong or he'll fall apart."

"That's bullshit, Buck," Chris muttered, also breathing hard. "He looks to you and you know it. He looks to you like Vin . . ." the air seemed vanish from his lungs. ". . . like Vin looked to me."

Buck let his head drop, shaking it slowly. "No, you don't get it. We're a united front. If we don't mesh, he'll feel threatened. I can't stand alone again, Pard. You think you're the only one suffering? You're not. We're in this together. All six of us. When one hurts, we all hurt and I don't think JD needs any more hurt in his life, do you? Huh?"

Chris took a moment. "No. Of course not. I couldn't stand that."

"Good. Neither can I so pull yourself together and stand tall. JD needs you, Vin needs you and the rest of the team needs you. I know patience isn't your thing, but right now all we can do is wait."

Chris raised his head and focused on his closest friend. His eyes narrowed. "Fuck waiting. We can find every contact Harold Evans had in this state and follow up. I won't just sit and wait."

Buck cocked his head, considering. "Then neither will I. None of us will so let's get to work, boss."

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Ezra looked decidedly relieved when the pair returned to the car. He surreptitiously slipped his cell phone back into his coat pocket, glad he didn't have to call the others for a Larabee hunt in the cold, snowy woods.

The last time they'd done that had been a disaster he cared never to repeat.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Chris is home, Da.” JD sat in the window sill watching for the familiar vehicle, forehead pressed against the glass. He didn’t move after the announcement, but continued to absently fondle his dog Elvis’ ear.

“Okay, thanks. I’ll get things goin’ here, then.” Buck moved around the kitchen putting the finishing touches on dinner, wondering again how he got stuck with making a majority of the evening meals. Chris had agreed months ago to try and get home earlier in the evening and he did for a while, but he’d slipped back into his “all work, no play” schedule since finding Cat.

JD missed him and Buck was starting to resent dinner making. He’d have to sit his friend down yet again and inform him of the importance of his day-to-day input with their unconventional family. Chris had stopped taking anti-depressants months ago and Buck expected to see ups and downs in his friend’s moods, but he still had a way to go to get back to himself – where ever that was.

Buck saw his longtime friend as several people: The original Chris, the Sarah and Adam Chris, the post-family Chris and the Vin period Chris. The post-Vin Chris was simply a less volatile version of the post-family man – probably because of JD and Chris’ parents. This time around, there was some semblance of family support to help him adjust to his – their - loss.

Buck tightened his lips at the thought, but that’s exactly what Vin was, lost, and Buck was starting to accept the fact that they may not ever find out what happened to him. Heaven forbid if he ever spoke the thought aloud.

Buck heard the front door open and close. “Hey, JD,” he heard Chris say tiredly. There was a rustle of clothing and short, low conversation and then Chris came to the kitchen with the boy perched on his hip. JD was brightly animated, telling Chris about an upcoming field trip in school. Buck was glad to see that Chris was actually paying attention and asking questions, much to JD’s obvious delight. It was a good thing, Buck decided, that they hadn’t told the boy about



finding Cat. JD was nearly- just nearly - back to the boy he was before Vin's disappearance.

Dinner was as close to normal as it could possibly be considering the circumstances of the past two years and Buck decided to swallow his resentment for now. He just hoped Chris would continue to be as engaged as he seemed to be this night.

After the meal Chris dove into the dishes while Buck got JD ready for bed. The boy must have latched onto Chris' easy mood because he chatted nonstop through his bath, what little homework he had and picking up his room. Buck even had to tell him to "breathe, Lil' Bit!" for the first time in a long time. Chris came in to say good night and even offered to read the bedtime story so Buck could put his feet up in the living room.

When Chris returned to the living room, he settled on the couch with a Coke and a sigh. "JD wants me to be one of the chaperones on his field trip," Chris mentioned after a bit. "I'll see what I can do about that. That okay with you?"

Buck laid down the paper and stretched. "Sure, Pard, go for it. Maybe you'll get lucky and Chrissy's mama'll volunteer, too. Being with her would make the job a lot more enjoyable, if ya know what I mean." Buck waggled a suggestive eyebrow and Chris laughed shortly. It was a good sound.

"Yeah, maybe she will," Chris said softly as he rolled the Coke can between his hands.

Buck turned on the television and started flipping through channels, eventually settling on a women's water skiing event. Chris shook his head, amused and clearly not surprised that his roommate found such a show entertaining. They watched in comfortable silence for a while and at one of the commercial breaks, after Buck hit the "mute" key, Chris started to talk.

"We've checked out just about everyone that has been involved with Harry Evans," he started, studying the television without really seeing it. "And we're no closer to finding out what happened to Vin. All we have is the DNA from Cat. That's all we have left of him, Buck."

"That's not true," Buck corrected softly. "We have wonderful memories and great pictures. He's in our hearts and always will be. I know how corny that sounds but, damn it, it's the truth."

Chris ran his hand through his hair, scratching his scalp thoughtfully. "I just can't let go. I can't say he's gone because I truly feel he's out there, somewhere. Serritella was the last one on our list that had direct contact with Evans. We've nowhere to go now. No more clues."

"Those F.B.I. agents in New York still send us stuff once in a while," Buck reminded him. "Updates on the other missing boys from New York and all the states between here and there that they've tied to Evans. Something will turn up,

especially as the boys get older. They'll talk, eventually. I'm not ready to close the book either, Chris, but I am ready to start living my life again. So is JD and so is the team."

Chris' head snapped up at the last comment. "We've made some damned good busts lately. We're doing our job as good as before."

"I know, I know, and that's not what I meant. We have made some great arrests using the information we've gathered. The more bad guys behind bars, the better, but it's time we started taking our share of assignments from Travis again, Chris. The other teams are spread pretty thin."

Appeased, Chris relaxed again and picked at the pull tab of the Coke can. "I know. In fact, Travis just gave us one. Since Serritella and his cronies are off the street, there's been some skirmishes by smaller groups to fill the void Serritella left in the black market. Travis got word of an outsider from up north somewhere bringing in a load of handguns. I sent Ezra to see what he could set up. New sellers need buyers, right?"

Chris lifted his head, the grin he gave Buck seemingly forced. Buck was happy that he even tried. "Yup, that's what keeps us in business, alright. Good. Sounds like we got some homework tomorrow."



The phone rang just before dawn. Chris' hand flopped across his nightstand in search of the offensive source, knocking over a partial glass of water and a near empty bottle of over-the-counter sleep aid pills before finding his cell. He fumbled it open. "Larabee," he grumbled.

"Mr. Larabee," Ezra replied, sounding as tired a Chris felt. "We need to palaver on our next course. Things, I fear, are moving rapidly and we do not have much time."

"Yeah, yeah." Chris dropped his feet to the floor and scrubbed his eyes. It wasn't even light yet! "Can you come into the office? I'll meet you there in an hour."

"I will be there."

"When's the last time you slept?" Chris heard a dry chuckle.

"I have heard that such activity is over-rated. I will see you in an hour."

Shaking his head and fighting against the remnants of the sleeping pill, Chris hung his head for a moment. "Get your ass in gear, Larabee," he mumbled, gaining his feet and heading to the shower. From there, he quickly dressed and wobbled his way to Buck's bedroom door. Almost there, he paused and took a moment to peek in on JD. The boy's arm hung over the side of the bed and his head was on a well-worn stuffed Scooby-Doo. Chris smiled at the sight and quietly shut the door.

Then he went to Buck's door and rapped on it lightly before pushing it open and sticking his head in. "Buck!" he called. He had to call again, louder, before Wilmington's body twitched awake.

"Hunh?" he croaked, raising his head.

"I'm going to the office to meet Ezra. I'll feed the horses on the way out."

"Sure, sure."

Buck's head dropped back on the pillow and Chris doubted he'd remember the conversation. On his way out he hastily jotted a note and left the house.

An hour later he was in the elevator of the Federal building, stopping at his office floor. Really missing his usual morning jolt of coffee, he walked to Team Seven's briefing room where he was greeted by the sensual smell of fresh Starbucks. He dropped into his chair and gratefully accepted the cup shoved his way by the undercover agent.

"I am on familiar terms with a barista that serves early," Ezra informed him.

After a fortifying sip, Chris faced his agent and was surprised at how tired he looked. Ezra usually managed to conceal his physical weaknesses.

"Let's have it," Chris started.

Ezra briefed him on his meeting with the representative of one Jesse Faraday, who claimed to have the ability to cover what Ezra considered an over-the-top order; the undercover agent had gone fishing and apparently hooked a big one.

"It seems that Mr. Faraday has references from here to Atlantic City. I checked into many of the deals, and everyone was successful and legitimate. Well, 'legitimate' being a relative term . . ."

"I get it. Go on."

"When I asked why I had not dealt with him before, he told me that his 'area' was usually more north and east. He wants to expand and was not only willing, but very able to supply what Serritella had promised. The man has a business head on his shoulders."

Chris rubbed the back of his neck, thinking. "If that's so, he's a big fish. Why haven't we heard of him before?"

"I inquired along those lines. Apparently, Jesse Faraday is a very careful man – and as I eluded before, smart – who keeps everything close to the vest. He has a small crew that is very loyal, my contact being one of them. Faraday thoroughly investigates everyone before working with them and does not tolerate anyone speaking of him out-of-turn. He's one of the few drug dealers that doesn't use, and an artillery dealer that does not know much about guns. He specializes in getting things – any things." Ezra paused to sip his coffee. "I feel he should be called 'fence' rather than a dealer, which is more than likely why we have never heard of him. He's a high roller, so to speak, and the gentleman is thoroughly and smartly

diversified, never focusing on one particular commodity. Faraday is what you'd call a 'wheeler-dealer'. And the most irksome part of his empire is that no one can, or will, describe him. I have no idea what he looks like and apparently I am not alone in this dilemma."

The information slowly sunk into Chris' brain, kick starting his mind into action. "So, what are we up against?"

Ezra took a thoughtful sip of his latte as if reluctant to speak. "There are a few . . . disturbing . . . facts that I have uncovered. And mind you, finding anything on this man has been difficult and I believe I know why."

Chris waited patiently as Ezra annoyingly took the time to frame his thoughts.

"Word is that Mr. Faraday started out with two partners. Both have disappeared. His 'turf' has been challenged no less than three times in the past five years. Each one of the challengers has also 'disappeared'. The man is considered paranoid beyond the realm of what is considered normal."

That rolled around in Chris' head. "Do you think he or one of his toadies set up Serritella? Because if he did, he may know you. Or us."

Ezra tilted his head a moment, his hazel eyes dimming slightly as he considered the idea. "No. I don't believe so. Faraday is a businessman that has seized upon an opportunity and if we get him, I do believe we will cut off a stream of trafficking that covers most of the north east. He is big, Mr. Larabee. Quite a catch."

"You be careful, Ezra, I'm not kidding. One hint of trouble and you're out, you hear me?"

The unflappable agent smoothed a sleeve. "I never go in to anything with the intent to commit suicide, Mr. Larabee."

Chris snorted. "Sometimes I wonder. Check in every three hours. Can you wear a GPS?"

"No. He is very careful. No GPS, no wires. Our first planning meeting is at 1:00 this afternoon via video conference. It stops there if I do not show cash." Ezra rose, coffee in hand. "I do not know the location at the moment but I will keep you informed. If you don't mind, I would like to get some sleep. Here are some names I managed to overhear in connection with Mr. Faraday and Mr. Serritella." He slid a neatly printed list to Chris. "I do not know in what capacity that they are involved with Faraday. They could be mere paperboys or pool boys, for all I have uncovered."

"Gotcha. Go get some sleep." After Ezra left, Chris perused the list, divvied up the work, and started to call in the others to prepare for the 1:00 meeting.

Buck picked up the phone on the second ring, tucking it between his ear and shoulder as he flipped a pancake. "Start talkin'," he answered.

"Buck, it's me. I'm calling in the boys to run some names Ezra gave me. This looks like it's movin' fast."

The sound of Spongebob Squarepants in the living room forced Buck to walk to the far side of the kitchen. "Do ya need me to come in?" He shuffled the latest addition of the hotcake tower to the top and switched off the stove. "Mrs. Potter said she'd be home today."

"Nah, spend the time with JD. We have it covered for now. I'll be pullin' you in soon enough so you two have a good day. Ez has a video conference meeting at 1:00 with someone trying to take Serritella's place. We'll know the face-to-face time after that. I'll call you."

Buck put the platter of cakes on the table and dropped into a chair. A photo on the first page of the Denver Post caught his eye. "Hey, boss-man, you got your mug in the paper."

"What?"

Buck opened the paper all the way. There was a picture on the bottom quarter of a man getting escorted from a court room. "Picture of Serritella leaving court. You're in the background. You're lookin' at your feet or something. You could have at least smiled, stud."

Chris snorted on the other end of the line.

"You know what that means, don't cha?" Buck teased.

"Hell, Buck, that's a stupid game." Chris started to protest.

"It's a longstanding ATF tradition, and you know it. Who are we to deny tradition?" Buck said, grinning. "Get your picture in the paper and you have to bring in breakfast for a week for the team! I suggest Inez's huevos rancheros for Monday, boss!" He quickly slammed down the phone as Chris started to curse and laughed out loud. "JD! Breakfast!"

CHAPTER FIVE

The rest of the team spent the morning researching the names on Ezra's list and brainstorming to figure out a way to monitor Ezra's video conference. Chris was both disappointed and heartened that most of the names on Ezra's list were already known to them from their investigation into Harold "Harry" Evans, and were either in prison, standing trial or dead. It confirmed the accuracy and thoroughness of his team but each one down was one less hope of finding what happened to Vin.

Faraday, though, was a whole new direction and if he was as connected as Ezra thought, there were more trails out there to follow.

Ezra was contacted just after noon on his cell and told to go to a local cyber café with the money. He was given a tight time frame to arrive, the name of a public chat room and a moniker to call himself.

The techs couldn't trace the cell call as it was a disposable phone. Following a trail from a cyber café wouldn't be impossible, but would definitely take some time and Faraday – or whoever showed on the connection – would be long gone by the time they did so. Still, they scrambled to follow on the leads.

"Careful" and "paranoid" didn't seem to quite cover the nature of Faraday and Chris didn't like it. Things were moving too quickly and Ezra was already worn thin. If Faraday kept them on the run like this, they would have no advantage. Chris argued with Ezra about backing off, but Standish insisted that if they did, Faraday would be lost for good. The undercover agent would have no part of stopping the deal because of him.

And, of course, things went the way they shouldn't. At the video conference, once the talking head on the other side saw the case of money a time was set for the buy. It wasn't negotiable. The buy would be in four hours.

Chris was pressured to move quickly and that rankled him. He also wasn't happy with the time Faraday chose – the buy would take place in the twilight time between dusk and dark, which was an awkward, dicey time for any kind of

surveillance. They would need both day and night vision equipment, and with no time to prepare the scene, they would need more manpower to monitor. And more manpower meant more chances of detection.

Every instinct told Chris to turn this one down – it was his gut versus his good sense and an internal battle raged right up to the moment they staged.

“I gotta buy some stock in antacid companies,” Josiah joked as Chris threw back another pair of chewable tablets. Josiah earned a steely glare from their leader and threw up his hands. “I surrender!” he said, eyes sparkling as he stepped away and headed to Ezra’s car. The big profiler was posing as Ezra’s bodyguard. He folded into the car and pair departed. It was almost show time.

Nathan sidled up to his boss. “Ezra looks tired,” he commented lowly.

“He can rest all he wants in a couple of hours.” Chris continued to adjust his vest.

“Chris, I’m not sure . . .”

“Look,” Chris snapped. “Standish knows his limits. He’s not stupid. This won’t take long and I’ll make sure he takes some time off.” Nathan nodded, but didn’t drop his eyes. After a few moments, Chris glanced back at him. “What?”

“You too, Chris. You take some time off, too. Don’t make me go over your head to Travis.” Nathan stood his ground in the face of a deadly glare.

Without another word on the subject, he checked his weapons and loaded up. “Get to your post, Nathan. It’s time.”

Team seven, along with team two, dissolved into the night when they arrived at the meeting area. Faraday had chosen an unlighted, outdoor parking facility in an industrial district that was practically empty on a weekend. There wasn’t any place for a cover sniper, or any cover nearby that would do any good in a firefight. Instead, they had to rely on numbers and absolute concealment.

It also crossed Chris’ mind that Faraday could just be testing Ezra, and this was all a dry run to see if Standish was legitimate. And if Faraday was a paranoid as Ezra suspected, this was a possibility Larabee couldn’t dismiss.

As he settled into his place, Chris couldn’t ignore the tingle that raised the hairs on the back of his neck. Were they being watched? Only time would tell. Chris had taken all the precautions he could think of and a few suggested others so he shoved the nagging notions into one of the many dark corners of his mind.

Most of the team seven was sequestered out of sight, close to where Ezra and Josiah waited. Because of their proximity, they sacrificed a direct visual picture and used team two spotters positioned farther away. Microphones were hidden around the parking area instead of on the Standish and Sanchez. It was a precarious set-up. Chris hoped that if either of his men spoke the code word to move the rest of them would hear it.

Chris didn't like having to trust another team's eyes, but it was the best they could do under the circumstances – as long as they weren't already being observed. Chris sighed at his own paranoia and mumbled, “Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't out to get ya.” He settled in and touched his ear bud. For now, all he could do was listen.

As shadows of dusk began its descent into the darkness of night, rumbling and grinding gears announced the arrival of a box truck. It was time.

Ezra slipped from the sleek BMW while Josiah unfolded from the passenger side. As the bodyguard, Josiah moved between Ezra and the arriving van, his hand resting on the butt of the automatic on his hip. The truck leisurely circled around the pair, finally stopping nose to nose with the BMW. Another vehicle, a smaller SUV, pulled up behind Ezra's car, effectively blocking it.

Two men exited from each vehicle. One man from the box truck walked to the back and the agents heard the sound of the back rolling door being opened. Ezra focused on the smaller, well-dressed man approaching from the SUV and faced him as Josiah eyed the remaining musclemen. They didn't like the feeling of being surrounded but stood quietly with arms held out as they both were checked for wires.

“Mr. Faraday?” Ezra greeted the lead man, whom he recognized from the video conference.

“Nope,” was all the man said.

“I was under the impression that Mr. Faraday would be joining us,” Ezra said casually as he shrugged his coat back in place.

“Not this time,” the man informed him. “Money?”

“I have the requested compensation for the goods.” Ezra nodded to Josiah, who reached inside the sedan and pulled out a metal case. He held it as Ezra dialed in the code and opened it. Ezra then stood between it and the speaker. “You understand my reluctance to render payment without inspecting the order,” he said.

“I do. And when you've seen the guns, we get the cash and you get the truck and contents, as agreed.” The man dangled the keys from his fingertips.

“Fair enough.” Ezra accepted the keys and stepped aside to allow the man to inspect the cash. He took a moment to scan the area for any movement or threat from any direction. “I am disappointed for not having the pleasure of meeting Mr. Faraday,” Ezra said casually.

His mind, however, raced. They wanted Faraday. Should he trust that this person's declaration that he wasn't Faraday? With a lifetime of reading people in him, Ezra's instinct was telling him that the man spoke truthfully. He wasn't Faraday. In this scenario, they were to let the buy go through and Ezra or Josiah would say the code word “sunny day,” allowing the deal to conclude without



interference. Ezra was prepared to utter the phrase when something in his peripheral vision, in the well of growing darkness at the rear of the suspect's van, made the agent's senses tingle.

Faraday's spokesman began a verbal rundown on the contents in the truck as he rifled the money, but Ezra's attention focused instead on something just out of his visual range in the shadows at the rear of the truck. He cast a casual glance beyond Josiah and the goons, looking, perhaps for a suspect hiding in the dark. As he did so, a pale face pushed itself from the blackness into the light at the rear corner of the boxy vehicle.

The body below the face was shrouded in shadow, accenting the illusion of a ghostly face floating in the inky black. Ezra managed to keep any hint of surprise from his unreadable poker face as his mind quickly took in the fact that the shadowy newcomer was not only short but small featured and definitely young. When his gaze finally fixed on the bottomless blue eyes staring back at him, recognition flared like a blinding nova.

"*Good Lord. Vin!*" Ezra realized, managing to drown the utterance of the boy's name with a hard swallow. It took every morsel of self-control to keep from leaping toward the boy; instead, his body twitched as if slapped. Vin, seeing his look of recognition, took a small step forward. Ezra sharply shook his head once, and then tore his stare away hoping Vin would understand the message to not move. Ezra looked to Josiah. The well-dressed man noticed the exchange.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Thick suspicion tinged the goon's question, which caused Ezra's heart to jump another gear.

The look that reflected back to Ezra from Josiah was one of instant, yet well-contained, alarm. Ezra knew the instant evaporation of his well-known outward cool had put Josiah on immediate alert. The big man slammed the case shut and the contact spun on Ezra.

"You got a problem?" The sound of guns clearing leather came from the other three goons that surrounded them.

And for the first time in as long as he could remember, Ezra didn't know what to do or say and the hesitation was instantly interpreted as something sinister by the delivery man.

Ezra instantly held up his hands, empty and unthreatening, and froze. Josiah held his arms out from his sides, still gripping the case.

Ezra felt his mouth open and the unfamiliar sound of stuttering came from his lips as he attempted to address the hostiles and his team at the same time. "I . . . ah . . . I mean . . ." Behind the contact, he could see that Josiah's astonished face was shiny with nervous sweat. "Well, it seems that . . . I . . . um . . ."

Usually, this would be the moment the bad guy would take the undercover agents to examine the goods but Ezra didn't want to go anywhere near Vin. He

didn't want Faraday's man to go there without him, either, and he certainly did not want to walk away. No code word covered this situation and, apparently, none of the spotters saw the boy because no one was moving in.

He had to find a way to get out of this and he simply . . . couldn't. Mentally, Standish willed Vin to not move and pulled on every reserve he had deep inside to refrain from looking in the boy's direction.

"This is bullshit," Faraday's representative snapped, clearly nervous and getting too jumpy for Ezra's taste. "I'm taking this now." The big man snatched the case from Josiah and shoved him into Ezra. The other tightened their grip on handguns that suddenly looked the size of cannons.

Ezra and Josiah untangled and the big man moved to stand next to his teammate. There were several tense seconds of silence before Josiah's eyes flicked in the direction Ezra was trying desperately to ignore, causing their contacts to turn and look toward the truck.

Then Ezra knew he had to move.

"GET DOWN!" Ezra yelled as he ducked low and drove his shoulder into the contact, running over him to get to Vin. The gunfire was instant and deafening as Ezra plowed into the boy, knocking him flat. All he could think to do was to cover Vin with as much of his body as he could until this was over.

"MOVE IN! MOVE IN!" Chris surged forward quickly, already alerted by Ezra's uncharacteristic attitude. One target dropped and another turned and ran toward the cover of darkness, wounded and leaving his weapon behind. Another man sprang from the SUV.

Bullets sizzled over his head in both directions. Chris leaped to his secondary position and got a bead on a suspect taking aim on Josiah. Larabee dropped him, and then spared a glance in the direction of the van. Josiah was down but still firing. The spokesman dove under the van, seeking escape on the other side. Buck appeared out of the dark, his long legs covering the distance quickly, and jammed his heel in the man's shoulders as they appeared from under the truck. Buck's weapon trained unflinchingly at the man's head.

The pounding of running feet and barked orders prevailed as the gunfire finally ceased. Chris scanned the area and took a mental count of his men as they appeared out of thin air sharply tinged with gunpowder.

"Check in!" he ordered hotly as an automatic reflex. He helped Buck drag the spokesman to his feet as Nathan sprinted to Josiah.

The rest checked in verbally as the stealth-clad men of team two swarmed the scene, taking custody of the suspects. Medics appeared and headed Josiah's way. The big man was sitting up, grimacing as he talked to Nathan.

Chris then realized he hadn't heard from Ezra and his blood pressure shot up. He holstered his weapon and stormed around the truck and toward the agent, still in a huddled lump on the ground by the back wheels.

"Ezra!" he snapped, reaching his side in a pair of strides. Chris reached down and grabbed the undercover agent's shoulder and forced him to roll aside. "What the fuck . . ." The team leader was shocked into silence when he saw that his undercover agent tightly held a thin child. "Who the hell . . ." he started, and then froze when he was taken completely aback.

Ezra struggled to sit up, ignoring Chris and murmuring quietly as if calming a fractious colt. The child's back was to Chris as Ezra adjusted the squirming figure in his arms. After a moment, the small, pale head twisted sideways to rest on Ezra's shoulder, eyes squeezed tightly shut.

It was the hair that stopped Chris in his tracks – wavy, wild and a familiar tawny color that instantly ignited the pain of loss to the point of making his knees grow weak. Chris had to force himself to breathe. Then the small chin lifted and those eyes – those unforgettable, enigmatic eyes – opened wide, connected with his and jump-started his heart.

"Oh, God!" Chris choked, his vision immediately swimming with tears. Without conscious effort he reached down and scooped the body from Ezra's grip. "My God!" he whispered hoarsely, holding the boy tightly to his chest. Vin stilled but trembled silently in his arms as he worked his legs around Chris' waist.

Chris could hear others calling to him but the voices sounded faint and far away. All he noticed was the feel of his son, the smell of him and the salty taste of tears on his tongue. Vin's heart pounded against his chest, confirming he wasn't just a vision – his long, lost son was here in his arms. He turned from the noise and confusion, falling to his knees when his legs simply could not carry him any farther.

Outside words vaguely buzzed in his ears. Chris' focus was entirely on the bundle he couldn't hold close enough. He spoke softly but didn't know what he was saying – his only purpose at this point in time was to hold his boy, his son, his Vin.

It could have been hours, or minutes, or even a scant second before Chris finally heard one voice clearly in his ear.

"Chris, you have to loosen up on him. Chris! Nathan needs to check him out!" It was Buck's voice slicing through the numbness, the tremble there more alarming than the words. "Come on, Pard. He don't look so good. Please, Chris."

Finally allowing his arms to release a little, Chris became aware of the press of people around him. He automatically shifted into protective parental mode.

"Back off," he pleaded, not relinquishing his hold. "Please. It's too crowded." In his peripheral sight, the pressure around him lessened and he was able to relax

his grip until the thin body shifted lower. “Vin,” he said lowly. “Nathan needs to see you.”

The small form in his arms seemed boneless. Chris, his mind snapping back into itself and working again, realized that Vin had not yet responded to him.

“Chris, he’s in shock. Lay him down.” The medic’s hand rested sympathetically on Chris’ shoulder, his grip firm. His other hand was flat against Vin’s back. “Let me look at him.”

Chris couldn’t let him go completely. Instead, he sank to the cold cement alongside his son, Vin’s head rested on his upper arm so they were face to face. Chris gently stroked Vin’s hair back. Now able to see him closely, Chris saw the waxy quality to his skin. Under his fingers where he traced Vin’s cheek, the flesh felt cool and clammy. Those defining blue eyes were glassy and unfocused, blinking slowly. Chris’ hand shook.

“He’s not hurt, is he? He’ll be okay, right?” Larabee didn’t try to control the emotion that tinged his voice.

“Chris, let ‘em work,” Buck said softly near his ear. As he spoke, Chris saw Buck’s large hand gently stroke Vin’s hair. “God, Chris,” he choked. “It’s a miracle. . .”

*"A miracle,"* Chris thought. *"That’s exactly what this is."* He felt his eyes burn with tears again. So much time gone, wasted – never to get back again. And what had Vin been through during that time?

Pushing back a bit, Chris critically scanned his boy for any hint of what the past two years had wrought. Vin was thin – painfully so – and really hadn’t grown much from what Chris remembered. His hair was longer, rougher, his skin pale and unhealthy. Chris ran a trembling hand up and down an arm that was lean and wiry with no extra girth to it. When Nathan opened Vin’s threadbare shirt, the spread of healed scars and bruises on bone-shaped flesh made his blood boil.

“Heavens,” he heard Ezra say somewhere behind him. “What has been done to this boy is an atrocity.”

Chris glanced up to see his undercover agent supported wholly by Josiah’s strong arm. Blood stained one silk sleeve - Ezra had been hit and Josiah’s thigh was stained black-red under the bandages. Neither one seemed to notice their wounds at the moment.

They were seven again and that was all that mattered.

CHAPTER SIX

Vin never uttered a word during the trip to the hospital. Chris was at his side the entire time and kept a constant physical connection - touching his shoulder, holding his hand, kissing his hair. He was unwilling to take the chance that his son would disappear again right before his eyes. Chris didn't mind that Vin didn't speak. It was the look in his son's glazed eyes worried him more.

The medics immediately inserted an IV to counteract dehydration and shock. When they arrived at the emergency room Vin shut down, closed his eyes and turned his head away, refusing to acknowledge anyone. Chris felt the pressure of too much action around him and fought the urge to order everyone away. He understood Vin's reaction completely - the boy was overwhelmed. Only when they were installed in a room and the bustle of taking the boy's vitals and preparing for an examination was over did Chris finally feel the rigidity leave Vin's frame.

Chris held his tongue and simply stroked Vin's hair with one hand while firmly holding a tiny hand with the other. Eventually, his silent calm was rewarded when tired, blue eyes crept opened again.

"Hey, Cowboy," Chris said lowly as Vin blinked in the brightness. There was no way to stop the hot tears he felt warming his cheek.

Vin's troubled gaze settled on his face. The dull haziness abated somewhat, replaced with obvious wariness. Chris remembered how still his boy could be when he didn't want to be noticed; was this Vin's wish? To be left alone?

The thought fled with Vin's quiet words. "It's really you?" Desperate hope cloaked the question, making his words sound tight. "Chris?"

Chris could only nod, his voice stolen away by boundless joy and a new flow of tears. He squeezed Vin's hand tighter with one hand as he cradled the hollow cheek with the other.

"Dad?" Vin choked as the wariness fled and his eyes filled. Tears released with a sharp gasp, followed by near silent sobbing. He reached out and clutched

Chris' sleeve in a trembling grip. Chris folded, and drew his son into the comfort of his arms, rocking him as they both wept.

Unwilling to disturb the reunion, Buck and Nathan stood just outside the curtained area, unable to speak. Nathan finally excused himself to check on the others, swiping a hand across his eyes as he left. Buck glanced at his watch, finding the numbers tough to read, and tried to think if JD would still be awake. He wanted nothing more than to tell the boy that his brother had been found but Buck tempered the urge, deciding it would probably be better to let Vin and Chris get settled first.

Buck heard Nathan's low voice as he spoke to Josiah and Ezra as well as the quiet murmur of Chris' voice as he calmed Vin. The boy's hitched breaths didn't abate. After several minutes, Buck realized that Vin wasn't settling as he should and hadn't said a word since acknowledging Chris. Knowing only too well that there were going to be problems reintegrating Vin back into their lives anyway, he knew he should back off, but Buck had to see him just once more before going home.

Clearing his throat, he stepped inside the curtained area and looked to Vin to see how he should proceed. Chris was sitting on the edge of the gurney holding onto both of the boy's hands and spoke lowly and continuously, occasionally reaching up to wipe away a stray tear. But when he reached to do the same to Vin's cheek, the boy startled.

Vin's glassy gaze flicked nervously from the ceiling to Chris, apprehension clear in his eyes. He seemed to relax a little as Buck watched, but he was still a far cry from the boy he remembered. Buck's throat went suddenly dry, realizing how hard this must be on Chris.

"Chris?" he said softly, moving slowly forward. "How's he doin'?"

"He's a little scared but he's fine, Buck," Chris replied without breaking the cadence of his voice. "Vin's a little dehydrated and probably pretty tired, right?" There was no reaction from the boy.

"I'm gonna call Dr. Lowery, okay? Before I tell JD?"

The mention of JD made Vin blink rapidly a few times and tentatively turn his head in search of the voice.

"Hey, Junior," Buck smiled. "I'm so happy you're back. We've missed you."

Thoughts swirled in the watery blue eyes as the tiny forehead crinkled.

"JD?" The name was barely a whisper.

"He's fine. He's probably in bed right now, Vin."

Things seemed to register in the boy's brain and his eyes cleared a little. Then, in an instant, panic erupted.

“Miss Grace! You’ve gotta help Miss Grace! You need to save her!” Vin struggled to sit up, fighting against his father’s hands. Chris tried to calm him but Vin was having no part of it. “Save her, Dad! You c’n save her!”

Vin’s voice rose enough to bring a nurse to the room. Vin twisted and fought, insisting they help the unknown woman and begged to be let go. Both the nurse and Chris worked to calm him without success; Vin freed one arm and swung, his elbow catching the nurse hard on the cheek.

“Vin! Stop it!” Chris ordered, finally getting a grip on the boy’s arms and holding them firmly to the mattress. Buck jumped forward and pressed down on the boy’s legs, immobilizing him. Vin writhed under their hands, screaming hysterically, which brought in another nurse as well as a doctor.

The doctor barked out an order and one of the nurses retrieved a bottle from a drawer and drew some of the liquid into a syringe. Vin fought, crying and pleading, until the dose was injected into the saline line. Finally, his hysteria reduced to sobbing. “No, no, no,” he mumbled before falling to the influence of the sedative.

Chris was shaken, his skin pale and eyes bright. Feeling the attention of others on him, Buck released Vin’s legs and glanced back to see the rest of the team standing at the open curtain, stunned.

The doctor noticed them, too. “He doesn’t need a crowd.” Buck had to give him credit for standing up to the collection of glares he received in response. The doctor then turned to Chris and spoke lowly. “Your son needs to be admitted for evaluation. He’s shocky, dehydrated, anemic and obviously traumatized. He needs a full examination.”

By the stricken look in Chris’ eyes, the implications regarding a “full exam” were clear.

“Vin . . . he . . . he has a therapist. Dr. Lowery. I’d like his input. And I’d like his pediatrician, Dr. Two Eagles, to do the exam.”

“I’ll arrange it,” the doctor said, retreating to write on Vin’s chart. “Both of those doctors have practicing privilege here. Meanwhile, Vin will be moved to a single room.”

“What about visitors?” Buck asked, knowing that would be the first thing JD would ask about.

“First things first. Let’s get Vin settled. He’s going to be asleep for a while. Maybe he’ll be up to family visiting tomorrow afternoon.”



## SAVING GRACE

The miles rolled by under the wheels of Buck's truck but the man was oblivious to the trip. His mind whirled around the day's events – although things had settled into a holding pattern, he knew there was one more step: Telling JD.

Vin was established in a room with Chris at his bedside when he finally escaped the hospital. Buck doubted the man could be pried from his boy's side, and he couldn't blame his friend. When JD was in his arms next, Buck would be hard pressed to let him go, too.

The off ramp for the winding road to the ranch suddenly popped up and Buck blinked in surprise. He didn't recall any of drive. Shaken, he took the ramp and pulled over at the first dirt shoulder he could find.

It was well after nine, closer to ten, at night. The housekeeper, Mrs. Potter, had picked up JD from school as usual and was prepared to stay late – Buck had pre-warned her and she had made arrangements. He hadn't called her back with the news of finding Vin because he wanted to tell JD face to face.

With that realization, Buck dug out his cell phone and stared at it a few moments before flipping it open and scrolling down to the number he needed.

"Dr. Lowery's answering service," the perky female voice stated.

"I need to speak to Dr. Lowery. It's an emergency."

The woman took Buck's information and the agent snapped his phone shut, gripping it in his hand with expectation. In the meanwhile, he stared out the windshield and tried to focus his thoughts. The problem was, he didn't know where to start. The problems he anticipated with Vin's return – and those imagined problems multiplied by the minute – were so varied and complex Buck felt overwhelmed and therefore frozen, unable to make any plan of action. He hoped Dr. Will could get him pushed into the right direction.

And as if reading his troubled mind, Buck's phone rang a lot sooner than he expected.

"Hello?" he said, sounding a little breathless.

"Mr. Wilmington? Dr. Lowery. I just received some exciting news from the hospital – Vin's been found?"

"Yes," Buck nearly stammered, dragging his hand through his hair. "Yes, he has, and I have no clue what to do next. This is . . . huge . . ." To Buck, the words seemed inadequate.

Dr. Will, though, seemed to grasp the situation immediately. "Are you with him now?"

"No." Suddenly, a waterfall of words flowed forth summarizing Vin's recovery all the way up to his current situation. The psychologist let the agent talk, uninterrupted, until he stalled at where he was. "How do I tell JD? Should I let him see Vin tomorrow?"



“Mr. Wilmington, Buck,” the doctor started calmly. “Of course you should tell JD as soon as possible and I think you telling him in person is a good decision. You’ll need to be there for the fallout, and there will be that – nightmares, clinginess, loss of focus in school. Don’t lie. Tell him honestly ‘I don’t know’ if you don’t know something and just keep him close. Let JD direct the follow up. Don’t give any promises you can’t keep. Be honest that you don’t know how Vin will react. JD will want everything to instantly be just like it was. Tell him that Vin will be scared to invest himself emotionally until he’s sure he won’t be taken away again, that he needs a solid home base, security and proof that none of you will leave him. Basically, that he will be scared. JD should be able to understand that emotion.”

Buck let out an explosive breath and a short laugh. “Slow and steady wins the race.”

“Exactly. I plan on seeing Vin in the morning along with Dr. Two Eagles. I understand he’s sedated at the moment and Mr. Larabee is with him?”

“Yeah. I don’t think Chris’ll be anywhere else for a while.”

“I think a short visit by JD tomorrow will be fine. Let Vin set the tone. I’ll call you if I think there’s anything specific you should know. Otherwise, just let JD be JD.”

Buck smiled, feeling a lot better. “Thanks, doc. I think I need a dose of JD myself right now.”

Dr. Will laughed. “Go home. Hug your boy and tell him the good news and stay close. I’m sure he’ll understand that things are going to change and you’ll need to be his home base.”

“I can do that. Thanks for getting me focused, doc.”

“I’ll see you soon.”

“No doubt about that. Thanks.”

With his wild thoughts finally corralled, Buck took a deep breath and dropped the truck into gear. The drive along the quiet, winding road was relaxing and when he pulled into the driveway, he paused for a moment to look behind the barn.

Barely visible was the crushed front end of Chris’ truck from that fateful night. Chris had the truck towed behind the barn and then refused to get it fixed – it just sat there like some sort of gruesome memorial, rusting, with blood-stained cloth seats that were disintegrating from the elements. Chris had thrown a tarp over it to spare JD but they all knew what was under there. The Ram’s replacement had been a used Jeep that was as cantankerous and moody as its owner. Chris seemed to need the distractions the vehicle supplied. It had been a rocky relationship for the past two years.

Buck sighed and continued up the drive, parking in his usual spot next to the house. He exited the vehicle, recalling the days when two boys would happily barrel out of the door on his or Chris' arrival home. Since Vin's disappearance the best he could hope for was to have his boy greet him with a smile when he came in the door. Whenever JD ran from the house to meet him now, it was because of fear.

When Buck topped the porch steps and pushed open the door he was greeted by two happy dogs. Elvis and Ringo seemed to smile up at him with wagging tails, as usual, but then Buck noticed how they slowly became still and sniffed him with dogged concentration.

"You smell right, boys," he grinned, giving each of them a pat before dropping his keys and moving to the kitchen. The dogs trailed behind, noses glued to his legs, tails wagging. While the dogs followed the scent of their lost master, Buck followed the scent of fresh baked cookies.

When he stepped into the kitchen, JD, still somewhat awake and sitting at the table, was ready for bed with a mug of hot chocolate between his hands. He looked up and greeted him. "Hi Da! I got a 100% on my math test! We saved ya some dinner 'n Mrs. Potter's makin' cookies. Where's Chris?"

Buck chuckled at the verbose greeting. He walked over and dragged a chair next to JD, dropped down and threw an arm around his boy's shoulders.

Mrs. Potter turned from the sink and wiped her hands on a dish towel. "Like JD said, your dinner's in the oven. He wouldn't go to bed until you were home." JD accented the comment with a yawn. "Will Chris be back tonight?"

"Well, no, and I need to tell you why." When he turned to look at JD he saw that the boy had stilled and tensed under his arm. Those shining brown eyes went instantly flat. "It's good news, JD. We've found Vin."

"Oh, good God!" Mrs. Potter breathed, bringing her hands to her face.

JD straightened and his mouth dropped open. He stared at Buck, eyes wide, trying to find any indication of a lie. "Vin's home?" he finally whispered. "Really?"

"Really. He's getting a checkup at the hospital right now. Chris is with him."

Buck was nearly bowled off his chair when JD launched into his arms.

"Vin's home! Vin's home!" the boy shrieked, a semblance of the exuberant boy Buck remembered.

Buck wrapped his arms snugly around his son, stood, and twirled around, holding JD tight. "Yup, Little Bit, he's back!"

Mrs. Potter openly cried and dabbed her eyes with a dish towel as JD jabbered with excitement. The dogs raced around the kitchen, feeling the energy. When they started barking a bit too robustly, Buck sat down with his boy in his lap and made an attempt to calm things, but he couldn't stop chuckling. JD hugged his neck then dropped to the floor and hugged Elvis and Ringo. Then he launched himself back at Buck.

“Can we go see him? Can we go now? Can we bring him balloons and a card and . . .”

“Whoa, there, Little Bit, slow down. We can do all that but we have to wait until tomorrow. There’s more I need to tell you before we go visit.”

“Is he okay?” JD asked seriously. The boy had also learned in the past two years how to read both his fathers’ moods – something Vin had always been better at doing. Right now, he picked up that there something wasn’t quite right.

Mrs. Potter got her tears under control and now looked concerned. Buck could tell she was hesitant to ask any questions and knew there was more than Buck was saying.

“Vin’s sleeping right now because he’s really tired. We’ll see him tomorrow after school, after he’s had a night’s rest and the doctors get a look at him.”

“Did the bad man hurt him? How did he get away? Where has he been?”

Buck gave a very brief description of the bust and how Vin had somehow sneaked into the truck. “That’s really all we know right now. Like I said, Vin’s pretty tired and didn’t talk much.”

“This is such good news, Buck. I’m so happy for you.” Mrs. Potter gave Buck a hug and then leaned over and hugged JD. “I guess I’ll work on getting the boys’ room together tomorrow?” She asked.

JD just yelled, “YAAAAAY! Vin’s back, Vin’s back!” and ran from the kitchen with two dogs at heel. Apparently, Buck’s explanation was good enough to satisfy him for now.

“Walk, JD!” Both Buck and Mrs. Potter yelled together.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The night was long and the chair uncomfortable. Chris, though, could not let any complaints enter his mind when everything he'd wanted for the past two years was right here in his grasp. He couldn't take his eyes from the face he loved, a face that was etched deeply into his heart and memories and had been at the center of his dreams for the past two years.

Vin's face looked older. There was a length and hollowness to his cheeks that wasn't there before. He had never been a boy of rounded features – that was more like JD and Adam – and the angles of the boy's frame he saw now were even more defined, any hint of boyishness gone. At ten years old, Chris could see what Vin would look like as an adult. And he'd definitely seen more than any boy should; Chris felt like something had been stolen from the both of them.

Chris, aware that he was grinding his teeth again, forced his jaws to relax. He stood and dropped the bed rail, hitching his hip onto the mattress. While one hand held Vin's, the other stroked his boy's cheek and hair. Vin's pale lashes fluttered, fighting the sedative's effects; he hadn't rested peacefully for one minute since being here.

"Oh, Vin," he breathed, his throat still raw. "You're safe, son. No one's gonna hurt you, I promise. I'm here."

A soft query followed a muted tap on the door. "Still sleeping?" Nathan slipped into the room trailed closely by his wife, Raine.

"If you can call it that," Chris said hoarsely.

"I'm so happy for you," Raine said gently from across the bed. Her eyes were shining with gathering tears as she lightly rubbed Vin's boney arm. "I've prayed for this day, every day since he disappeared."

"Prayer didn't get him home," Chris said flatly. "Vin did that on his own. He did what I couldn't."

"Chris." Nathan said firmly. "Don't do that to yourself. Vin doesn't need it now or ever."

Chris pressed his lips tightly together, not daring to speak again. He knew he was on the edge of losing it, of screaming about the unjustness of it all, of grieving over the loss of two years, of crying in relief that his son was finally in his arms again. He only gained control again as he imagined what he planned do to the one responsible for his son's extended absence.

"We'll stay here while you take a break," Raine offered.

"I'm not going anywhere," Chris managed to say.

Nathan snorted. "We thought you'd say that, so we brought you some dinner." He placed a bag on the bedside table along with a tall cup of coffee.

Chris tore his gaze from Vin's face to the bag – it was from the deli down the street and the scent of coffee was just hitting his nose. He shifted his gaze to the calm eyes of Nathan. Suddenly, the anger and self-doubt drained away in the light of what he had all along - devoted friends. Chris managed a flicker of a smile.

"Thanks, Nathan," he said. "I'm sorry . . ."

"No need to apologize, Chris. We understand. Now if you don't mind, we'll stick around until you eat that."

Chris nodded absently and finally released Vin's hand and retrieved the food, setting back down in the hard, plastic nemesis. He shifted as sore muscles and tender spine painfully reacquainted themselves with the chair.

"Josiah's spellin' us," Nathan said. "I'll dig up a better chair before he settles in."

"They released him?"

"Yup. He's home, showering and changing. The bullet gouged him pretty good. He's got a bunch of stitches and'll be okay. He'll need to elevate his leg."

"What about Ezra?"

"They pulled a bullet from his arm but it missed bones and nerves. He'll be okay, too. He's home, passed out hard. 'Bout time."

Chris nodded, again grateful about how his team watched each other's back.

"Travis said to take as much time as you needed, Chris," Nathan continued. "He'll drop by tomorrow. We can cover most of the paper work and bring it to you for your approval." He rested his hand on Chris' shoulder for a moment. "You're needed here for now. Buck's bringing JD by tomorrow along with some more clothes for you and Vin."

Chris continued to eat, his eyes always on Vin. "I guessin' there's a ton of messages on my cell," he said. "Suppose I should turn it on sometime."

"Sometime tomorrow. Get some sleep while you can. I don't think you'll be getting much this week." Raine sounded sympathetic as she stroked Vin's hair. "There's bound to be immediate repercussions."

"Yeah," Chris uttered softly as his appetite dwindled. He wrapped the rest of the sandwich up and picked up the coffee. "Vin had nightmares for months

when he was first with me.” In fact, it had been close to a year before the middle of the night disruptions disappeared completely. “I hope he’ll be able to put this behind him, Nathan. I . . . don’t want . . .” He sighed heavily and rubbed his eyes. “I only see the worst in my mind.”

“He’s strong and so are you. It may take a while, but with you and Buck and JD there for him, I’m sure he’ll work it out. We’re all here to help, Chris, you know that.”

Chris nodded and sipped his coffee. “Has anyone called Nettie yet?”

Nathan gave Raine a questioning glance and she shrugged her shoulder. Chris reached for the room phone, unwilling to turn on his cell. A few queries later the number was connected. He watched Vin’s face as he spoke.

“Hello?”

“Nettie? Chris.”

“Chris Larabee, it’s about time you called me. I was beginning to think you’d dropped off the face of the Earth.”

How was it that this woman could make him squirm in guilt like a five-year-old? Still, he warmed at the sound of her voice. She’d been in his corner ever since he and Vin found each other. He swallowed hard to clear his suddenly clenched throat. “Nettie,” he managed to choke, his eyes starting to burn again. “Nettie, Vin’s home. He’s here with me, now.”

“What? You found him? Oh, Chris, that wonderful! How is he?”

“Actually, he found us. He’s sleeping at the moment. We’re at Four Corners Hospital for the night.”

“Is he hurt?”

“No, not on the outside, Nettie.”

“Oh, Chris, I’m so happy for you. That boy will only get better now that he’s back with you.” Chris heard a sniff and pictured her wiping misty eyes. “How did he find you?”

Chris gave her a short version of the bust, every second still clear in his mind. After arranging a visiting time for the next afternoon, he hung up and finished his coffee.

Vin stirred and Chris moved back to his side, whispering comforting words. Vin sighed and relaxed a little deeper into the mattress.

“Well, we’ll be camped in the waiting area until Josiah gets here.” Nathan said softly.

“It’s really not necessary,” Chris started.

“Yes, it is.” Nathan insisted. “You need a break sometime and we don’t intend for our boy to ever be alone again. We have to be here for him and you.”

Chris nodded, again grateful.



The tiny hand in his finally felt softer, rounder and generated a little of its own warmth. Chris lightly rubbed across the knuckles with his thumb, relieved to see any improvement even if it was as simple as hydration.

Dawn was less than an hour away – at home, this would be a peaceful time where the last of the moon might dip behind the distant mountain range as the first light of sun washed the opposite horizon. Rabbits and deer may wander into the yard. Birds would start to stir.

Here in the hospital, however, there was the staff's constant motion all night. The atmosphere rarely varied, the only difference between day and night in the little room being the amount of light coming in the window and the amount of foot traffic in the hallway.

Chris couldn't wait to get Vin where he belonged - home. The boy he knew thrived on the out of doors and the nature surrounding the ranch. His eyes traced a path up Vin's limp arm to his troubled face. Even in sleep, he looked as if the weight of the world rested on his fragile shoulders.

Dr. Will called early in the previous evening and listed the things Chris might see. As Vin's blood chemistry was brought back to normal levels, the signs of shock would lessen bringing with it fallout that could express itself in many different ways. Being familiar with Vin's history, the psychologist felt that Vin's first instincts would probably be that of fight or flight. Trust, again, would be a huge issue; Chris' history with the boy would make or break the speed of his recovery. It depended entirely on what Vin remembered, and two years in a ten-year-old's life was a long time. Dr. Will closed the conversation by setting the time for his morning visit.

Chris was more than willing to start at square one again if they had to. The bond they felt from the very start was something too visceral to ignore. Chris truly felt it was in both his and Vin's nature to be together and that's what would bring his son back to them.

In a physical effort to stay awake, Chris stood and stretched, and then walked a small circle in the spare space of the room. The closet door was ajar, so he peeked inside and saw the small pile of Vin's clothes on the top shelf. Curious, he pulled down the dirty, well-worn jeans and checked the pockets, hoping to find some hint as to where his son had been. All he found was a squashed and crumbled energy bar and a wadded up piece of newspaper. Chris carefully unfolded the paper, disappointed to see it was from the Denver Post, which had a huge circulation.

Then he noticed the picture - it was the one of Serritella being taken from the court house with Chris clearly in the background.

Is that what triggered Vin's escape?

Chris sighed and tucked the clipping in his pocket, then folded the garment and put it back in the closet. Then, he returned to sit by the bedside once again and gently clasped both hands over Vin's. A lull of noise in the building made Chris' weariness creep to the forefront and he was unable to keep his eyelids from falling closed.

Suspended for an immeasurable span of time, Chris drifted until an inner urge nudged him back into awareness. When his eyes peeled open and he raised his head, the first thing he saw was his hand cradling Vin's. Inexplicitly, his gaze flicked farther upward to find a hazy set of blues staring at him.

Chris' heart lurched. "Vin," he said softly as he gripped the hand more tightly. "Mornin', son" The last word cracked as his throat tightened. He slowly reached to stroke Vin's cheek, hesitating a second as his son flinched slightly from the motion. There was no fear in Vin's eyes, but the haziness seeped away leaving behind a bright wariness that stung Chris' heart.

After a short pause, Chris continued his motion, cradled Vin's cheek and gently stroked it with his rough thumb. The tenseness around Vin's eyes softened as the boy pressed ever so slightly into the caress. His eyelids partially closed and Chris felt him relax as their bond patched and strengthened.

The spell was broken with the sound of voices passing the doorway. Vin jerked into awareness, eyes wide, and pulled his hand free of Chris', pressing his palms to the mattress in preparation to move. His eyes darted wildly, seeking an escape route.

"You're okay, Cowboy. You're in the hospital and I'm here. I'm not leaving . . ."

The soft cadence helped dispel panic and Vin's breathing evened out. Although Chris kept his tone low and level, his own pulse raced with sorrow, anger and fear. Chris Larabee swore to himself that he would personally eviscerate whoever was responsible for stoking that wary fear back to life.

Chris' eyes must have been mirrors to his thoughts because Vin tensed again and blinked in uncertainty. Wrapping his arms around his chest in the only protection he could muster, the boy locked gazes with his father and his eyes became flat and unreadable. Chris averted his eyes until he felt in control again. Then he looked up and smiled, feeling tears begin to pool yet again.

"You're safe, Vin. I promise."

Slowly, ever so slowly, the tiny body unwound. Vin's arms loosened, then sagged and his intent stare, focused on Chris' eyes, finally softened and broke free, traveling around the tired face of his father. The inspection stopped at a point above Chris left eye where Vin raised a trembling hand. Chris felt those long missed fingertips lightly trace the scar from that horrible night.



“Dad,” The boy’s voice was as brittle as a dried leaf. “Dad?”

The nearly inaudible plea pushed Chris into motion. He dropped the bed's side rail and maneuvered onto the mattress where he pulled the boy tight against his heart. After a few stifled sobs, Vin finally let loose and silently cried, what little sound there was muffled by Chris’ dark shirt.

Chris felt his heart break again and slowly reassemble with each hitch of Vin’s boney shoulders. He held his son close, murmured reassurances and slowly rocked, feeling as if a missing part of him had finally returned.

When dawn finally painted the sky, Vin’s sobs lessened. Vin’s fingers twisted in Chris’ shirt, grasping and releasing, as if confirming this reality. Chris continued to hold him close, waiting for Vin to signal that he’d had enough, as he’d done in the past. He felt the tempo of Vin’s fingers increase.

“I love you, Vin,” he whispered, kissing the boy’s head.

This caused an unexpected reaction.

Vin immediately pushed back out of Chris’ embrace but kept a loose grip on his dad’s shirt. He stared at Chris with wide, hurt eyes. “Why didn’t you find me? I tried to get away . . . I tried . . .” Tears began anew but this time Vin refused to be cuddled as he swiped his cheeks dry. Gulping great gasps and unable to speak, Vin reestablished his hold on Chris’ shirt and tried to shake his father in frustration.

Every twinge of guilt and self-doubt crashed down on Chris like a lead weight, stealing his voice away. He reached out again but Vin released his hold and shifted away, instead snaring the thin blanket and drawing it to his chest in a white-knuckled grip.

“He . . . he kept sayin’ you weren’t . . . lookin’ for me . . . anymore,” he gasped between hitched breaths. “She . . . she took care ‘a me . . . but I can’t . . . I didn’t . . .”

Chris blinked, not quite sure he followed the accusation. “You didn’t what, Vin?”

“You’ve got to save her,” Vin sobbed. “I . . . I tried, but you can do it! Why didn’t you find me?”

Vin’s huge eyes glittered with tears, which rushed down his flushed cheeks. The wary sadness was quickly being replaced with defiance and Chris was stunned at the change. He forced himself to think before speaking, knowing that the wrong thing would escalate the behavior.

“Vin, son,” Chris said lowly, biding his time to think. He reached out again and Vin allowed the hand to rest on his shoulder. Chris could feel tension under his palm and knew he had to tread carefully. He knew Vin would see a lie so Chris spoke from the heart. “I’m grateful someone was there to protect you and I will help anyone that helped you.”

*“I sure couldn’t protect you,”* the little voice in Chris’ head whispered.

“Whatever you want, Cowboy,” he managed to say. “Okay?”

Vin didn't look convinced. One small fist dropped from the blanket to his stomach, where it ground into his gut as he regarded Chris. "You . . . you will?" he said in a tiny voice laced with distrust. Disturbingly, his hand moved in an absent manner as it pushed and rotated against his abdomen.

"Of course I will, but I have to find her first."

*"... and stretch her guts into bootlaces..."*

Vin grew still as he studied Chris' eyes intently. Chris could tell that his perceptive son could read the simmering anger he was trying to contain. Exhaustion made it difficult to hide the emotion.

Vin's eyes narrowed and Chris as the signs of "flight" clicked into place. Both small hands moved to press into the mattress. It was a monumental task to shove the guilt, anger and helplessness aside but Chris managed to do so as he pulled one of Vin's hand into his own. Chris ducked his head, closed his eyes and took a deep breath, sure his thoughts were under control before opening them again.

"Yes, son, I will. Really." He met Vin's intense gaze and held it for nearly a minute before wariness dampened. "I need to know some more so I can find her, though."

"Her name's Miss Grace. Her son . . . died . . . 'n I reminded her of him. She called me Austin sometimes 'cos that was his name. She misses him." Vin's eyes grew wide with distress. "Mr. Jesse hits her 'n I'm too small 'n she takes . . . medicine . . . 'n goes asleep 'n cries 'n I can't wake her up a lot a times before Mr. Jesse'd come back."

Chris was momentarily stunned. That was a lengthy verbal tirade for Vin, but what he was saying was typical of the big-hearted soul. Chris wasn't surprised at his protecting yet another underdog, or at least what he perceived as an underdog. Knowing the circumstances in which Vin had come back to them, Chris pieced together that Grace must be an abused wife or girlfriend and possibly an addict of some sort. He found it difficult to feel sorry for her but if this was the way to earn Vin's trust again, he'd have to try and find her. Whether he could save her or not was up to Miss Grace.

Finding her, though, would mean he'd have to face the person that accepted Vin as a trade payment, treating his little boy like chattel as Evans had done. Chris' jaw tightened with that thought, causing a flicker of unease in Vin's eyes. Chris ducked his head again to get himself under control.

Between the two of them alone, Dr. Will was going to be a very busy man.

"Mr. Jesse," Chris mentally repeated as he ran Vin's words through his head once more. "*Vin said Jesse – Jesse Faraday? He knows what Faraday looks like?*"

The agent in Larabee was nudged awake and challenged Chris' fathering instincts. The terms "Stockholm Syndrome" and "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder"

both tumbled through his head doing him absolutely no good because there wasn't anything in his memory telling him how to deal either of those disorders. If there was ever a perfect moment for Josiah Sanchez or Dr. Will to walk in, this was it.

Until then, the fathering part of Chris took control. He captured Vin's hand and held it tightly in between his as he scooted closer. Gathering his thoughts, he tilted his head and found Vin's troubled gaze.

"Vin, I know you want to help Miss Grace, but you're pretty sick right now and you need to get better first." He stopped Vin's upcoming protest with a word. "Please, son." He waited until Vin looked like he was ready to listen. "Miss Grace is an adult and can take care of herself for now. You need to trust me and the doctors for now." He felt his eyes burn as he spoke. He adjusted his grip on Vin's small hand and when he spoke, his voice shook. "I've missed you so much. A part of me was missing right along with you and all I want is to make sure you are all right. I have to be sure before I can do anything else. Please understand." Chris didn't bother to wipe the tickle he felt on his cheek. He bowed his head.

After many moments of silence, Chris felt Vin pull his hand free and then he felt a light touch on his cheek as his son brushed away the tears. The touch trailed upward to the ugly scar that marred his eyebrow. Chris tried to hold back, but as soon as he looked up again and saw those soulful, aged blue eyes, he lost it.

The first sob was barely loose from his heart when he felt Vin's arms around his neck. Chris pulled him in tight and, together, they mourned lost years.

CHAPTER EIGHT

This was how Dr. Will found them. He stepped just inside the door and stopped, clearing his throat and shuffling the papers in his hands to make them aware of his presence. When the pair seemed to be under control, Chris stood. Dr. Will stepped forward and offered his hand to Chris, noting that his other hand remained connected to Vin's shoulder.

“Good morning, Mr. Larabee,” the psychologist greeted, meeting Chris’ eyes. Then he turned to the bed and moved a little closer but respected the boy’s personal space. Then he looked squarely at his patient’s face and smiled. “Hi, Vin. It sure is good to see you again. I’ve missed you.”

Vin unconsciously gathered the edge of the blanket into his fists and dropped his gaze, but the doctor could see that Vin's eyes were in motion, taking in every nuance. He looked to Chris, whose nodding acceptance of the doctor quieted most of the tense movement. Vin then opened one little fist and rubbed his stomach. Finally, he glanced up tentatively and whispered, “Hi, sir.”

“You called me Dr. Will when I was seeing you before. You can call me that again when you’re comfortable with it, okay?” Vin nodded mutely in response, dropping his gaze again to his lap. He frequently confirmed Chris’ presence with furtive sideways glances. “I won’t stay long, Vin. I just wanted to see you and say hi, and leave this with you.”

Curiosity dampened the unease his eyes widened at the three ring binder Dr. Will placed on the bedside table. Clearly, he recognized it.

Dr. Will smiled. “You wrote in that, Vin,” he said gently. “I suggested that you write down your ‘feel bad’ thoughts and what you did to turn them into ‘feel good’ thoughts. You were pretty good at that, I remember.”

Vin graced the doctor a long, evaluating look before nodding and saying, “Thanks.” One hand tentatively reached over and touched the notebook. His finger traced the handwritten “Vin Tanner” on the cover.

"I put some blank sheets in the back and I also have this for you." Dr. Will put a rectangular plastic box next to the folder. "There are pens, pencils and some new Crayons and markers in there in case you want to add anything to the book. Is that all right?"

Vin nodded. "Yeah," he replied shortly, some of the wariness gone.

"I'll be going now, Vin, but I'll be seeing you and your Dad again soon. Dr. Two Eagles will be here in a few minutes to look you over before you go home. Have you seen JD yet?"

The question chased any residual uneasiness away and his eyebrows quirked upward as he looked to Chris. "Is he comin'?"

"If you want him to, Vin," Chris answered lightly. "Is it okay?"

"Yeah," Vin nodded. "I'd like to see him."

Even without the small boy's physical presence, JD again managed to affect them all and chase away the awkwardness of the situation. Dr. Will grinned. "Okay, then, I'll leave you to your reunion plans. I'll see you soon, Vin." He turned and shook Chris' hand and headed to the door.

"Dr. Will?" Vin called unexpectedly.

The man paused at the door and turned. "Yes, Vin?"

Vin had captured the blanket again and fingered it nervously. "Thanks."

Dr. Will smiled and nodded. "You're welcome. Bye, now."

"Bye."

Chris sat on the edge of the bed then reached out and stroked Vin's hair away from his face. "You anxious to get home?"

Vin nodded, "Yeah . . . no . . . I don't . . ." he began to rub his stomach again with one hand.

"You okay?"

"Hurts a little," Vin admitted. "I'll be all right. It's just . . ."

"You're a little scared?"

Vin dropped his gaze and nodded as he whispered, "What if JD don't like me no more?"

Chris covered the hand that clutched the blanket with his own. "It'll be okay, Vin. Trust me. JD still loves you. We're all glad you're finally home."

The little hand rubbing Vin's tummy ground a little harder. He frowned.

"Vin?" Chris stroked Vin's cheek with one hand as he held Vin's clenched fist with the other. "What's wrong?"

Without a word, Vin pushed away and doubled over in pain. He retched dryly, bile and blood spotting the hospital blanket.



Buck entered the hospital with some trepidation. JD, perched on his hip, happily tugged on a shiny Mylar balloon festooned with stars and exploding fireworks. The agent had to finally resort to carrying the excited boy when he'd tried to run ahead twice in the parking lot.

"I wish we'da had time to get somethin' else like a car or a toy or a stuffed animal like Cat. Hey, Da, do ya think Vin needs 'nother Cat? Did Cat come home with him? Da?"

"Huh? What? No, no Cat's, um, not here, Lil' Bit, but we know where he is." Buck stopped at the elevator bank and reached to punch the button.

"Me, me!"

Buck tottered forward a step when JD leaned out and hit the silver button. "Hey, hey. Warn me next time, okay, Pard?"

JD laughed, excitement exuding from every pore, and Buck was thrilled he was back to being a regular ball of energy once again. Buck shook his head, chuckling, as the doors dinged open and they stepped inside.

"What?" JD asked. "What's so funny?"

"You," he replied tweaking his boy's nose. "I think you're just what the doctor ordered."

"Huh?" JD said, confused.

"I mean," Buck replied patiently, "Remember that Vin might be shy and even a little scared. You can help him get over that."

"Vin's not scared 'a me, Da," he answered with a roll of his eyes. The ding that announced their arrival at Vin's floor and cut the discussion short. "Look, look, we're here!"

Again, Buck tried to instill some measure of decorum into JD's bouncing body but he threw in the towel and set the boy down, keeping a firm grip on one tiny hand. JD tugged, surging out of the elevator and dragging Buck in his wake. Checking the door numbers as he moved, he finally froze when he reached Vin's door.

The world must have shifted on its axis because for the first time in their time together, JD was both speechless and motionless. Frozen.

Momentarily stunned, Buck hesitated, but as soon as he saw the first lines of doubt cross his son's forehead, Buck scooped him up and pushed open the door.

"Vin!"

The world shifted instantly back on track.

Amazingly, the boy in the bed didn't twitch – but Chris did. Instead, Vin stared for a moment, open-mouthed, and then he broke into a big smile. Buck had to trot forward to counteract JD's forward lunge, and when they reached the bed he simply released his little whirlwind.

Somehow, the boys wrapped around each other without getting tangled in the balloon string or toppling from the bed. Vin's IV line even managed to behave and stay clear. Chris leaned back in the unforgiving chair and in spite of it, Buck saw the shadow of a relaxed smile on his friend's face for the first time in years.

Finding his throat suddenly constricted, Buck took Chris' shoulder and squeezed getting a goofy grin in return – well, as goofy as a grin that Larabee could offer. “You okay?”

“More than okay,” Chris said hoarsely, turning his attention back to the boys.

JD kneeled next to his beloved brother, heads bowed with foreheads touching, jabbering on about something they couldn't quite catch.

With the boys deep in conversation – well, actually, it was JD deep in chatter – Chris slowly stood and indicated with a nod for Buck to join him on the other side of the room.

“What did the docs say?” Buck asked quietly.

Chris ran a hand over his face. “There are some new scars – cigarette burns, belt marks, a few needle tracks.” The last words were strangled. He had to stop for a moment and clear his throat. “He's got an ulcer, Buck. Ten years old and an ulcer.”

Buck kept himself from groaning and, instead, gripped his friend's shoulder in support. Again in control, Chris continued.

“There are traces of THC and other drugs in his system. There are some healed breaks in his arm and ribs that weren't there before. He's anemic and too thin and his blood chemistry's out of whack but good nutrition should fix that. It's possible he was . . . violated . . . but there's no definite physical indication. Two Eagles doesn't want to rule it out.”

Buck's stomach churned, not sure he could hear any more.

“I called Dr. Will during the examination. He mentioned post-traumatic stress, Vin didn't say much. The trust has to be rebuilt but it was a good start. I think there's some Stockholm Syndrome . . .”

“With who?” Buck snapped.

Chris sighed and rubbed his eyes. “Some woman named Grace. Vin says she took care of him. From what he says, she sounds like an addict. I promised Vin I'd find her.”

“Chris, you realize that she's an accomplice and you'll have to arrest her, right?”

“Of course I know that!”

Chris' tone caused Vin's head to swivel their direction. JD, oblivious, kept talking. Buck forced a smile and a wave. Chris did the same. Eventually, Vin turned back to JD but seemed to be a little on edge.

Chris took a deep breath. “The only things we have are the vehicles and the men we arrested. What do we know about them?”

“Travis assigned Wheeler from team two as lead. Ezra and Josiah are on light duty and can help with research. Nathan’s working with Wheeler now. I’ll check in and see what they have. You ‘n me have the rest of the week off.”

Chris jerked his head up.

“Travis insisted,” Buck explained. “He wants updates on Vin’s recovery, too. The man was positively giddy.”

“Travis? Giddy?” Chris snorted. “I don’t know what is more disturbing – visualizing Travis ‘giddy’ or you actually using that word.”

Buck playfully backhanded Chris’ chest. “Hey, I’ll gladly use the words ‘frolic’ and ‘gaily’ if it’ll help our boy get back to where he was.” With that, the two of them turned toward the boys. Vin’s posture had relaxed again and there was a hint of a smile around his mouth as he gazed with clear adoration at his acquired brother. “Looks like JD’s worked his magic.”

Chris nodded and one corner of his mouth twitched into a grin that didn’t do much to banish the tired hollowness of his face or the charcoal smudges under his eyes. Even with that, the man finally looked connected with life again. Buck’s heart lifted.

“So when are we taking our boy home?”

“As soon as his blood chemistry’s acceptable. Two Eagles would prefer he gained a pound or two but I don’t think that’s required. Possibly tomorrow.”

“I brought you some fresh clothes.” Buck pointed to the bag on the floor. “Razor, that kinda stuff. I’ll go get some food now, too. Anything in particular?”

“Something that won’t antagonize an ulcer?” Chris said tentatively.

Buck nodded. “I’ll think of something. Chicken noodle soup from that deli Vin liked?”

“Perfect. See you in a while.”

Buck approached the bed and told the boys he’d be back. JD was fine with it and said good bye, but Vin said nothing. The tall agent did note that Vin kept his eyes on him and finally graced him with a weak smile. Unable to stop himself, Buck reached out and stroked Vin’s head, ignoring the twitch he felt at his touch.

*“We’ll get you back, Vin, I know it.”*



When Vin looked weary, Buck suggested that it was time to go home. Not surprisingly, JD protested and, surprisingly, Vin looked a looked hopefully at Buck, wanting his sibling to stay. Chris felt like the bad guy when he insisted that Vin needed rest. JD was crestfallen but acquiesced when Vin’s eyelids flagged. The



younger boy made sure the balloon was within Vin's sight and the card stuck to the wall nearby.

When Buck lifted JD from the hospital bed the boy yawned hugely and rested his chin on the tall man's shoulder as they left the room. He waved to Vin on his way out and Vin waved back.

Chris moved to the bed and adjusted the blankets, then helped Vin snuggle down to rest.

"I don't need no nap," Vin complained through a yawn.

"Just humor me, then. Your body needs to store up some energy before we go home." Chris tucked in the blanket. "There are some critters waitin' to see you, you know."

"Ringo? 'n Peso?"

"And a certain turtle, too. He's just coming out of hibernation." Vin's smile as his eyelids closed was the first true one Chris had seen. He hoped the good thoughts would influence his dreams. Chris stroked Vin's hair until sleep overtook the fragile form.

He was still sitting on the bed drinking in every angle of the sleeping boy when he felt, more than heard, someone come in the room. Chris glanced back and couldn't help but smile at the visage of a teary-eyed Nettie Wells just inside the door. One gnarled hand was over her mouth and the other clutched a brightly wrapped box to her chest.

"Oh, Chris," she whispered roughly. "I am so happy for you. All my prayers have been answered."

"Nettie," Chris replied quietly, returning his gaze to the sleeping boy. "I can't . . . it's still . . ." He took a deep breath. "He's been hurt so much. It's been a busy day. Dr. Two Eagles and Dr. Will were here this morning, JD this afternoon . . . he's pretty worn out."

He felt the warmth of the small woman's hand on his arm when she moved to his side. They were both silent, content to watch Vin sleep. Vin scowled at a dream and his head rolled to one side with a quiet moan.

"Shhh, Vin, you're safe. You're home," Chris softly soothed, stroking a thin arm. Vin quieted and his forehead smoothed as he let out a small sigh.

"I have absolutely no doubt that Vin is where he needs to be to recover from all this. No doubt at all." Nettie put the gift on the over-bed table pushed to one side. "Do you want a few minutes to clean up and change your clothes? I'll stay here."

"No, I don't . . ."

"Let me rephrase that. Get cleaned up and change your clothes." Nettie wrinkled her nose and scowled. "Please."

Chris laughed shortly, knowing she was the only person that could convince him so easily. "I'll be in the bathroom here." He indicated the one in Vin's room.

Nettie shook her head and gently shoved the man aside, replacing Chris' hand with her own on Vin's arm. "Keep it down in there," she ordered, trying to sound firm.

"Yes, ma'm," Chris replied as he backed away, ducking his head. Afterward, he had to admit that a bath – even a hand-bath with a washcloth – clean clothes and a shave did wonders. Nettie stayed a bit longer and left before Vin awoke.

The boy, still full from the noodle soup Buck provided, didn't eat much of his dinner which didn't surprise Chris. It didn't look very appetizing. All Vin managed to get down was a little rice, milk and the chocolate pudding. The gift from Nettie was a small model horse that looked very familiar.

After dinner, Vin's fingers traveled all over the plastic horse, hesitating at the white blaze. He glanced at Chris, then back at the gift.

"It looks like Peso, doesn't it?" he said softly.

"It sure does. I wonder where she found it."

Vin carefully set the model on the small bedside table. "D'ya . . ." he started.

"What?" Chris urged.

"Ya think he'll remember me?"

"I'm sure of it. That horse has a long memory. Remember that horse shoer he didn't like?"

Vin blinked, obviously thinking. "He had a red truck."

Chris chuckled. "Yeah. And that devil horse could hear him comin' a mile away."

That made Vin grin briefly before returning his attention to the model. Chris sat and rested his hand on Vin's, thrilled when the small hand turned and initiated a grip. They sat in comfortable silence for a little while, then it was time for evening rounds. After the nurses took more blood, things quieted down again and Vin slept, his hand still in Chris'. Through the evening, the other members of Team Seven dropped by in pairs, Josiah with Ezra, and Nathan with Raine, as well as Mr. and Mrs. Travis. Vin slept through all of it.

It was just before midnight when the night headed down a rough path. Vin slept deeply until then, but from that point on, Chris was jarred from his dozing just about hourly to calm him. The nightmares invaded relentlessly the rest of the night. Sometime around four A.M. a doctor took pity and introduced a sedative into Vin's IV which allowed a couple hours of uninterrupted sleep.

The increase of traffic in the hallway spooked Chris from his uncomfortable doze in the backbreaking chair. He stretched carefully, every joint complaining. As he did so, he tried to recall what day of the week it was - Tuesday, he thought.

The nursing staff had obviously taken him under their protective wing because there was a tall cup of steaming coffee and a Danish on the table near his hand when he wiped enough sleep from his eyes to notice. Chris inhaled deeply and savored the coffee scent.

Thankfully, his son continued to sleep soundly. Chris guiltily remembered the sedative and sighed. He couldn't wait to get Vin home. Any semblance of normalcy would do the boy nothing but good. He hoped, anyway. Dr. Will had suggested as much and Chris was more than willing to start down that path anytime now.

A light tap on the door caught his attention and Chris looked up to see Josiah leaning in. "Morning Chris," he said quietly. He held up a Starbucks Grande. "I see you're already set up."

Chris waved him in. "Can never have too much coffee, especially after a night like last night." Josiah limped in and set the cup down. "How's the leg?" Chris asked. He hadn't spoken much to the team the evening before.

"Just a scratch."

"Twenty-five stitches isn't a scratch," Chris growled. The profiler gave him a toothy grin in reply, causing Chris to snort. "So, you find anything on the vehicles?"

"I'll find out today. The state Department of Motor Vehicles was doing a hand search for me. Should hear something soon. The arrestees aren't talkin'. It seems that Faraday has instilled quite a feeling of loyalty in his employees."

"What about Faraday himself? Find any background on him yet?"

"Found a birth record in Columbus, Ohio. Expired driver's licenses in Indiana and Illinois. Some Social Security working records in Ohio, Iowa and Indiana. Nothing this far west, though, and nothing within the past ten years. The man hides well."

"What about this Grace woman Vin mentioned?"

"Sister. Birth records match up to a Grace Ellen Faraday from Columbus. She fell off the map about eight years ago. Found a marriage license in Nebraska from then to a fella named Giltner."

"Relatives? Parents? Grace's husband's family?"

"In the works, Chris. We'll find him. We did find a link between Faraday and Serritella."

Chris narrowed his eyes, too tired to ask. Josiah took the hint.

"Faraday fenced some electronics that Serritella took from a competing arms dealer. The initial meeting took place at Harold Evan's house."

Chris shot to his feet, all his pains forgotten. "When?" he asked. "When was that meeting?"

## SAVING GRACE

Josiah met his piercing gaze and held it. “Twenty-one months ago. Evans must have had Vin for three months at that point.”

Three months; that monster had Vin for three months. The F.B.I. told him that Evans was a registered sex offender in New York and that Joshua Daniels, the boy found at Evans’ home, finally admitted that Evans had raped him numerous times while in his company. Chris’ stomach churned and he quickly put down the coffee, settling his stormy gaze on Vin’s sleeping form along with a punishing grip on the metal side rails of his bed.

“Chris,” Josiah said quietly. “This will do Vin no good. I suggest you have a meeting with Dr. Lowery sooner than later to resolve this in your head. Your anger won’t help Vin at all, and I know you know that.”

It took Larabee several long minutes to rein in the burning emotion. It was difficult – anger was what pulled him through both Sarah and Adam’s deaths and Vin’s disappearance. It was familiar and automatic; not a comforting place to dwell, but it had allowed him to survive. It wouldn’t be easy to ignore.

But his reason for living now was asleep right in front of him in this hospital bed. Anger had no place here with this boy.

“I know,” Chris growled from between clenched teeth. “I know. I’ll try.”

Satisfied, Josiah gripped his shoulder and gave him a shake. “Your word’s good as gold, brother.” He turned his eyes to the sleeping boy. “That is a beautiful sight,” he breathed. With a final shake to Chris’ shoulder he headed for the door. “I’ll check in with you later, boss.”

## CHAPTER NINE

Vin's breakfast tray came with a rattle, nudging the boy from sleep. Chris sipped his coffee with his eyes locked on the small form in the bed, and knew precisely when Vin woke up; his relaxed form in sleep tensed just enough for Chris to notice. He also knew that his son was processing his surroundings before letting anyone know he was awake.

Chris felt the stirrings of contentment as caffeine began to flow through his body and cleared his head. With that, he was able to wait patiently for Vin to come face to face with the rest of the world. It took a little longer than Chris liked, but it did happen.

Vin slowly scanned the room, his gaze lingering on the model horse, the food tray and then on Chris. Their unique bond felt strong today and Vin looked more rested. The boy still needed weight but Chris could overlook that for now and simply be happy that his son was here with him. Vin refocused on the breakfast tray as most of his wariness slipped away.

"Mornin', son," Chris said as he put the coffee down and wrangled the rolling table away from the bed. "Do you need to use the restroom first?"

After a moment, Vin nodded.

Chris rolled the IV pole into place and reached for Vin, who managed to slide from the bed and avoid Chris' touch at the same time. Chris pulled back, disappointed, but respectful of his son's personal space as he slipped into the small bathroom. After the sounds quieted down and the door opened, the boy hesitated and nervously found Chris' eyes with his own.

Chris stood quietly, his heart fluttering from a confused mix of happiness, anxiety, anger and fear. Again, knowing how well Vin could read him, he tried to focus on one emotion, and he settled on relief. As soon as he did that Vin's entire frame seemed to soften and he physically relaxed. Vin even managed a weak smile, causing Chris' hopes to soar. He felt his face crack a smile in return.

Vin returned to the bed and allowed Chris to help him settle, the earlier wariness gone. Chris adjusted the tray in front of his son. Vin blinked at the plate

of bland food and Chris recognized the remnants of the sedative in the boy's movements.

Just after Vin finished what he could, Dr. Two Eagles entered the room accompanied by a nurse. Vin stiffened. Chris kept his hand on Vin's as the nurse moved to his side and started removing the IV set up while the pediatrician talked.

"Good news," Two Eagles started. "The labs look good so we'll be releasing you today. I'm still concerned about your weight, Vin, so I'd like weekly visits to see how you're doing." He handed Chris some papers. "Here are some foods that won't antagonize the ulcer, and here's a prescription for something to help with the stomach aches. Also, vitamins, every day. You've set up appointments with Dr. Lowery?"

Chris nodded. Vin squeezed his hand.

"Good. Then we'll finish up the paper work and you can go home," Two Eagles said to Vin, smiling. "I'm glad you're home, young man. We've missed you."

Vin blushed slightly and ducked his head. Chris squeezed his hand in support. The pair breezed from the room and Chris pulled some clothes from the bag Buck brought in. "Let's get you changed, then."

Vin donned the clothes in the bathroom. When he stepped out, Chris' heart clenched again at the sight of his son looking like any other kid. A little pale, but Vin otherwise looked – normal. They didn't talk much. They didn't have to. Chris called Buck to let him know they would be home soon and while he was on the phone, the room door swished open and Ezra stepped in.

Vin automatically flinched at the sound of the door, and in response, Chris put his hand on the boney shoulder.

Obviously reading the boy's discomfort, Ezra kept his distance. He still wore a sling on one arm, and held a colorful gift bag tucked under the other. The smile that graced his face was genuine and warm.

"Mr. Tanner, I am glad to see you up and about," he said gently. "I am sorry if I hurt you at our first meeting. Forgive me?"

Chris closed his cell phone and dropped his gaze down to Vin, who had stepped back and behind his legs. "Vin?" he prodded softly. "You okay?"

Still staring at Ezra, Vin nodded once and took a hesitant step to stand alongside Chris. He found Chris' hand and gripped it tightly before looking to Ezra.

Ezra continued in the same gentle voice. "I have something here that I do believe belongs to you." He crouched down, coming eye-to-eye with his adopted nephew, and held out the gift bag.

Vin hesitated a few moments before releasing Chris' hand and taking the three small steps that closed the space between them. Vin's eyes shifted to the gift,

then back up to Ezra's face. Only then did he reach out and take the bag. Ezra drew his hand back but held his low position.

Vin opened the bag and cautiously looked inside. After a moment, he gasped and then reached in. Curious, Chris looked over his son's shoulder just in time to see a familiar stuffed animal pulled free.

Vin's mouth hung open with astonishment as he stared, wide-eyed, at the cleaned and repaired Cat. Ezra somehow managed to match the remaining eye and re-attach the tail, but the fur on Cat's belly and chest remained smooth.

"I am pleased that we were able to recover him," Ezra started. "And I only hope he can bring you the same comfort that he has in the past."

Still speechless, Vin drew Cat slowly to his chest and stepped back until he pressed against Chris' legs. When he looked up to his adopted father, his blue eyes shimmered and his lips trembled. Chris could feel that Vin's entire body shook so he immediately dropped down, pulling the boy in close.

Vin accepted the action and, once safe in Chris' arms, looked back to Ezra. The undercover agent didn't even try to mask the emotion that shaped his face; his eyes glistened, and then he bowed his head and reached in a pocket for a handkerchief. "My," he said in a breathy voice. "It seems that I am unable to maintain my cool façade at the moment."

Vin twisted from Chris' arms and closed in on Ezra, stopping just short of hugging him. "Are you okay?" he asked in a wavering tone.

Ezra dabbed his eyes and looked up, smiling. "I am more than okay, nephew," he replied in a hoarse voice. "But I would be better if allowed a hug?" He held out his good arm and Vin moved into the embrace without hesitation.

"Thank you . . . Uncle Ezra," Vin said softly.

Vin stepped back toward Chris and Ezra's arm fell away. The undercover agent rose slowly.

"Yeah," Chris added, lifting Vin as he, too, stood. "Thanks, Ezra."

"It is my pleasure. Now when are you escaping the premises, young man?"

It wasn't soon enough for Chris, but they finally made their break just before noon. Ezra insisted early on that Chris take Vin home in the Jag, insisting the "death trap on wheels" that Chris currently drove was unacceptable. Ezra said he'd bring the motorized monstrosity to the ranch later in the day. Chris relented because the grin on Vin's face kept him from arguing. Apparently, Vin found Ezra's soliloquy quite entertaining.

Chris had to admit the Jag was not only fun to drive, but much more solid and safe than the Jeep. He mentally thanked Ezra as they pulled onto the highway.

Vin stared out of the window with Cat clutched tightly to his chest and Nettie's horse tucked beside him for most of the trip home. The two of them never needed conversation, but Chris was finding it difficult not to ask questions.

Evidence of their eerie bond came to light when Vin started to talk while continuing to stare out the window. His voice was soft, making Chris thankful for the well-engineered quietness of the Jag.

“It looks like what I dreamed.”

“What does? Outside?”

“Yeah.” There was another stretch of silence. “I didn’t . . . I wasn’t supposed to go outside. Mr. Jesse said so. He’d . . . he’d put me in my room and lock the door or, sometimes, make me sleep.”

Vin choked and swallowed in an effort to control the press of tears and continued to stare outside. “There was bars on the windows,” he ended in a harsh whisper

As Vin’s story trailed off Chris tried to ignore the augmented version that played in his head. The “making him sleep” and “putting in his room” parts were no doubt heavy-handed in nature, based on the newer bruises that adorned the boy’s body and the drugs in his system. Chris’ grip on the steering wheel tightened to the edge of painful – so many questions he wanted to ask, so many clarifications needed.

Instead, he took a breath and willed his shoulders to release the angry tension. “*Keep it simple,*” he thought. “So,” he finally said out loud and amazingly calm. “How did you get outside to the truck, then?”

Vin continued to watch the passing scenery, his fingers absently worrying Cat’s ear. “Out my window. I . . . I fixed it so’s I could go in ‘n out. Took a while to do it ‘n I nearly got caught a couple ‘a times but Mr. Jesse didn’t know about it. Neither did Miss Grace.”

Chris’ heart swelled at Vin’s resourcefulness in a horrible situation. Still, there was the question as to why he didn’t just run away sooner; even as the question parted his lips, he knew that was probably a question better asked in front of Dr. Will. “Why didn’t you leave sooner, Vin?”

“Sooner?” The boy finally turned from the window to look at Chris. His forehead was furrowed in question. He started to rub his stomach.

“Yeah. If you could leave the house when you wanted, why didn’t you go get help before?”

Vin looked more puzzled than anything else. “Weren’t nowhere t’go,” he replied.

“No neighbors?”

Vin shook his head and his palm twisted against his stomach.

Backing off, Chris reached for the pharmacy bag on the console between them. “Stomach hurt?” Vin nodded. Chris pulled out the antacid prescribed by Two Eagles and managed to work the lid off. “Here. This should make it feel better. Looks like it’s grape flavored.”



Vin eyed the chewable tablet suspiciously before slowly taking it from Chris' palm. He brought it to his nose and sniffed it before taking a cautious nibble. Apparently satisfied, he put it in his mouth and chewed. Chris was saddened by Vin's cautious actions; trust was still not entirely there. He took another tack. "Vin, if you can describe what it looked like outside the house it would help us find Miss Grace." "... *and maybe locate a stockpile of evidence.*"

Chris ignored the agent-style thinking. "Right now we don't know where Jesse is. We don't even know what he looks like. All we have are ten-year-old photos." Vin appeared to be thinking as he chewed the antacid. "What did it look like outside? Were there trees? A barn, maybe?"

"Fields," Vin finally replied. "Big fields all around of some . . . crop. That's what . . . Miss Grace called it. Th -there was a cement fence all around th' place. No one could drive to the house without Mr. Jesse knowin'. Didn't see any houses. Mountains all around but far away. There were big metal buildings behind the house, outside my window. Trucks loaded 'n unload all the time an' I couldn't go out to see what was in 'em . . ." Vin's voice trembled again so Chris reached over and held his hand.

"That must have been hard," Chris said lowly, knowing how Vin liked the outdoors. "I'm glad you fixed your window to get outside." The idea of his boy locked in the confines of a house all day, every day, made him clench his jaw. He pointedly worked the muscles loose again before asking, "You didn't go to school at all?"

"No. Miss Grace taught me stuff. She was a teacher . . . before . . ."

"Before her son died?"

Vin only nodded.

"I'm glad she was nice to you." Chris said, returning his hand to the steering wheel. "*But I don't understand why the skanky bitch didn't try to help you escape.*"

That little guilt-born voice in his head was going to be a problem, Chris realized. He changed the subject before he gave himself away. "We have an appointment to see Dr. Will tomorrow to help you with any 'feel bad' thoughts. Then maybe we can talk about Miss Grace a little more."

Vin didn't reply. Chris glanced over at this son and saw that he had twisted in the seat so his forehead pressed against the side window. Both arms were in front of him and his shoulders were set in a tense hunch. Chris guiltily thought that he wasn't able to hide his true feelings regarding Miss Grace and that Vin had picked up on it. He cleared his throat. "Vin?" he called gently. "What's wrong, Cowboy?"

The small form didn't move, didn't make a noise

"Vin?"

When the dam finally burst Chris flinched in surprise.

## SAVING GRACE

“All I have are ‘feel bad’ thoughts!” Vin wailed from the other seat, sagging in defeat with Cat smothered against his tiny body. “I don’t want ‘em anymore! Just make ‘em go away!” The sobbing that followed stole away any chance of talking.

Chris immediately pulled off the road and parked, releasing his seatbelt and then Vin’s. Between the confines of the small interior and the bucket seats, embracing Vin wasn’t an easy task. He ended up pulling Vin into his lap, against his chest and just let the boy cry into Cat’s newly cleaned coat. He felt his eyes burn but knew that this little soul needed his strength right now and he was more than willing to give it, and give it, and give it. The doctor warned Chris that there may be some mood swings as Vin’s system detoxified, but he hadn’t expected such a sudden onset.

Chris rocked and petted and uttered reassurance for many minutes in the tight quarters as cars whooshed by on the highway. The turnoff to the ranch wasn’t far and he wanted to be sure Vin was in a good frame of mind when they got home. They had plenty of time for Vin to regroup. He pushed all the clues about Faraday’s location to the back of his mind, forcing the agent in him into submission. The realization finally hit him that not only was Vin going to have a difficult time re-adjusting, so was he.

Agent Larabee and Dad Larabee would have to exist very separately in one body and Chris wasn’t sure he could pull it off.



Ringo and Elvis both knew something was up. The waves of excitement rolling off JD were impossible for the dogs to ignore. Buck smiled as he wiped his hands on a dish towel and leaned against the kitchen entry. JD had posted himself at the front window awaiting a first glimpse of the Jag. The dogs milled around his feet unable to sit still and fed by the boy’s emotions.

Chris called when they left the hospital and told Buck about driving Ezra’s vehicle because he knew where JD would be. As Buck watched, JD checked the balloons and hand printed banner for the zillionth time. Torkus the turtle was even present, corralled in his aquarium on the living room table looking a bit stunned. Buck could relate some to the amphibian’s state; he felt like the entire household had been jarred awake after a two year hibernation.

Just when Buck was sure JD was going to explode from nervous energy, he heard the scream. “They’re here! Vin’s home!”

The dogs yipped and chased the boy as he raced to the door. Buck threw the towel over his shoulder and managed to snag his son’s shirt just before he tore the door open.

“Slow up, there, Little Bit!” Buck laughed. “Wait until the car stops!”

Buck ushered him to the porch and managed to keep the spun-up dogs inside. He stood behind JD with his hands resting firmly on the boy's shoulders at the top of the stairs as a rolling cloud of dust chased the Jag up the long driveway. When the vehicle finally came to a rest near the bottom of the stairs, a slight wind blew the dusty tail away from them and Buck released his bundle of energy.

JD flew down the stairs and across the drive, yanked open door for his acquired sibling and yelled. "Vin! You're home!"

After a few seconds, when Buck saw that Vin seemed to be doing okay, he opened the house door and released the dogs.

Buck had to admire Vin's cool as he allowed his brother to hug him while being circled by a pair of cavorting dogs. Vin even managed to get one arm loose and return the embrace. As soon as they physically parted, Elvis and Ringo attacked with their tongues until Vin sputtered half-hearted pleas to stop. JD was non-stop chatter during the entire reunion.

Chris sauntered up to Buck's side with a relaxed demeanor that made Buck grin like a fool. "*Welcome back, Pard,*" he thought. "How's he doing?" he asked lowly as the two of them watched the chaotic welcome.

"Can we go the barn, Chris? Th' horses have missed him, too!" JD loudly interrupted. Vin looked up for an answer, his face bright with anticipation.

Chris caught his breath at the sight; it was the face of the boy from two years ago. "Sure," he managed to choke out. "If that's what Vin wants. Vin?"

Chris didn't get a reply. Instead, JD grabbed Vin's hand and they ran to the barn with the dogs leading the way in a zigzag pattern.

"Don't go in the corral until we're there!" Chris hollered at their backs.

"Is that Cat he's holding?" Buck and Chris fell in behind the small herd at a more leisurely pace. "Last time I saw it I was sure it was a goner."

"Thank Ezra. He knows people with interesting talents."

"That he does," Buck agreed. Then he tilted his head in Vin's direction. "So, how was he on the way home?"

Chris ran his hand over his face and spoke lowly. "As well as you can expect, I guess. Emotionally, he's all over the map. He's still concerned about that Grace woman but he's happy to be home. He wasn't allowed out of the house, Buck." Chris rubbed his eyes as he gritted his teeth. Then he got a grip and dropped his hand with a sigh. "Vin managed to figure out how to get out his window, though."

Buck shook his head and chuckled. "That boy is the definition of a survivor."

The sight that greeted them just inside the barn cut off their conversation. The horses were loose in the back pasture. JD and Vin had climbed up on the fence so they could lean over the top rail to see them clearly. JD continued to chatter and point. Finally, JD quieted, probably to take a breath and Vin whistled a short, two-note tune and called Peso's name.

The horses stood together under a tree at the far end of the field. Chris and Buck could see that JD's boisterous arrival caused a few ears to twitch in their direction, but as soon as Vin whistled and called, one black head snapped to attention and turned to stare at them.

Vin called again and that was all it took for Peso to break away from his stable mates. With both ears sharply forward and his eyes fixed on Vin, the horse walked rapidly toward them. About half way, he broke into a trot.

"Well, will ya look at that," Buck said, amazed, as Peso trotted right up to Vin and stuck his nose in the boy's hair. Vin wrapped both arms around the black's neck as he greeted his friend. "And I thought the damn mule was deaf," Buck muttered. "He ignores me when I call 'im."

"Just ain't got the right voice," Chris teased, his voice thick.

Soon the other horses grew curious and wandered to the fence, too. The boys spent several minutes greeting them all before they backed down off the fence. Vin was smiling a real smile and seemed very relaxed, both good signs that gladdened Chris' heart.

"Come on, guys, let's see what's in the house to eat." Buck took JD's shoulders and turned him toward the barn door.

Vin stood at Chris' feet and twisted Cat's front paw between his fingers as he tilted his head sideways to look up into in father's face. "C'n I ride him?"

Chris gently ran his hand over Vin's hair. "Sure. But you need to eat something and get your boots on first, okay?"

"Boots?" Vin worried the furry paw. "I don't got boots, do I?" His voice was tentative.

Chris squatted down and firmly took both of Vin's hips in his hands. "You sure do, Cowboy. Buck and JD got some this morning. We knew you'd want to ride." Chris smiled and stood up.

"Come on, Vin! I'll race ya!" JD bolted through the barn.

Vin hesitated for a moment before he took off in pursuit. Buck saw a flash of panic cross Chris' face as Vin left his line of sight, but he then relaxed once they passed through the barn and could see both the boys with the romping, barking dogs.

Buck slowed Chris with a hand on his forearm. "How are you doing, Chris?" he asked suspiciously.

Chris threw him a dark glare and looked like he was actually going to deny anything was wrong, but, instead, he blew out a sigh and let his shoulders slump. "Let's just say that our appointment with Dr. Will tomorrow isn't soon enough."

Buck nodded and then released Chris' arm. "We'll, y' know, stud, that admitting there's a problem is half the battle."

Chris shot him an unbelieving look and then rolled his eyes and choked out a short laugh. "Jesus, Buck, you've been watching way too much Dr. Phil! Get away from me!" He broke into a jog after the boy and dog gang.

Buck laughed and brought up the rear. The rest of the afternoon went quickly, what with touring the grounds, going on a short ride and making dinner endlessly accented by JD's narrations.

Vin never was a boy of many words, he and Chris accused in the past of speaking six words a day between them, but this day Buck knew there was a good excuse for the reputation. Vin made it to bedtime with an expression he could only label as "shell-shocked". Chris, on the other hand, hovered too close for too long and by the time the boy collapsed in the shared bedroom, Buck was sure his best friend would simply fold up from exhaustion in the hall just outside the door.

"Listen, stud, you gotta relax," Buck offered as he shoved a beer in his boss and friend's hand. The two of them made it as far as the living room after putting the boys to bed. From there, Buck could tell by the way Chris kept glancing down the hall that he wasn't comfortable with Vin out of his sight.

Chris took a pull on the beer and ran his hand over his hair. He was the picture of exhaustion. "I know. It's just that . . . I don't . . . shit." He sank deeper into the cushions of the recliner. "I am so tired, but I don't think I can sleep. It's like . . . if I sleep . . ."

"You'll wake up to find it's all just a dream." Buck chuckled. "It does feel good. The house is full again, huh?"

Chris nodded and the pair dwelled in comfortable quiet until the beers were gone. Chris stretched and stood, moving slower than usual. "I'm going to check on him and go to bed. If it's anything like last night, it's going to be a long night."

CHAPTER TEN

*“I am always with you, my sweet boy. Don’t you know that?”*

*And then her hand would reach for him, her fingers soft and warm as they traced a line from temple to cheek. She smiled when she did this – a small, loving smile seemed sad.*

*“Ma?” The endearment was a mere wisp of air, light as a sigh.*

*“’bout time ya woke up.” There was no gentleness in the hard words. “Ya ain’t hurt bad, boy, just a lump on your noggin. You’ll be fine with time.” This voice was sharp and painful and wholly unfamiliar. The dream of his ma floated away out of reach but the love she’d had for him was still inside and tightly bonded with the love of his dad. With that lingering warmth he felt safe and only slightly curious about who was talking. Chris would be here soon, so the person here didn’t really matter.*

*But then the pain started.*

Vin jerked awake with a gasp. His heart raced as he blinked in the darkness and tried to orient himself. Cat was snug to his chest. The moon traced a silver rectangle around the window curtain and he heard soft snoring . . . below him.

Slowly, he leaned over with a runaway heart and looked into the darkness of the bunk underneath. He saw a small figure sprawled cross-wise and instantly recognized JD. Vin’s heart, though, didn’t slow. This was a familiar dream, too. He’d had it often after the crash, but not with such clarity. The dream itself was wonderful; it was the waking up that was horrible.

Vin pinched himself and gasped in pain. “I’m awake?” he wondered. Still not trusting his senses, Vin crawled down the ladder and stood next to JD’s bed for a few minutes, clinging to Cat until his shoulders ached. The pull of sleep was strong but Vin refused it until he has some kind of proof that this wasn’t a dream. He crawled in next to JD and, after feeling the reassuring warmth of the small

boy's breath against his skin, curled into a tight ball with Cat in the very center. Only then did he finally allow sleep to carry him away again.

*It took some time to gather the strength to open his eyes. In the meanwhile, as his other senses came online he absorbed his surroundings and tried to recall what brought him here. Dream? Reality?*

*It smelled musty and felt a little too warm. His head pounded. Loosening one arm from a rough blanket he shakily rubbed his cheek, clinging onto the covering with the other hand. His face felt gritty and tender to the touch.*

*The blanket felt stiff and dirty.*

*Something wasn't right.*

*When his eyes fluttered open he saw a sickly yellow ceiling with many dark cracks and peeling paint. Carefully angling his head to one side he saw a small, rickety three-legged table leaning against a wall and littered with red-spotted washcloths and an open bottle of medicine – the kind Chris got from a doctor in a plastic bottle with a plain label. The wallpaper behind the table was of scattered Army men and tanks scarred with little tears, scratch marks and crayon scribbling.*

*It wasn't home and it wasn't a hospital.*

*It was totally unfamiliar and foul smelling.*

*Alarmed, Vin tried to rise but the room rolled and bucked. The unfocused shape of a man came into view and reached for him, pressing him back down. Vin's stomach lurched and he rolled to one side to vomit.*

*"That's all right, son, I'm used to it. It'll get better."*

*Now void and completely spent Vin barely twitched when a needle pricked his arm. Before he could make sense of anything, he spiraled away.*

This time Vin awoke screaming "NO!" JD jerked awake and Vin, feeling the motion, pushed JD away from him with his legs before pushing himself into the corner where he curled into a tight, impenetrable ball. He cried silently.

The next thing he knew a calm, even voice soothed him. Each sense slowly awoke as he shivered in the corner – Chris' scent, a soothing mix of tobacco and hay, was a balm, his voice a security blanket. The light, familiar stroke of Chris' hand on his shoulder and arm warmed his frozen heart.

Vin gasped, finally able to breathe again without tears, and cautiously lifted his head. He'd dreamed of this very scenario and was suspicious. Was it real?

"Hey, Cowboy, you with me now? Vin? You awake?"

"Chris?" Vin's thin voice trembled as much as his body.

"I'm here, son. I'm right here. You okay?"

Vin, still shaking, nodded slightly, unable to speak.

“You want to come to my room?”

Vin nodded again and allowed Chris to embrace him with his strong arms. Vin squeezed his eyes shut and melted into the motion, not entirely believing this was real and unwilling to unwind his protective posture. When he felt his body lowered onto a soft mattress, the familiarity of it made his breath hitch.

“Vin? Can you sleep now?”

Vin felt Chris stretch out next to him, his father’s hand rubbing comforting circles on his back as he tucked a blanket around him. He nodded in response, unwilling to speak and break the dream if that’s what this was. Soon, he drifted away again.

*Each time Vin woke he felt wrapped up in cotton.*

*He always woke up in the room with the Army men and tanks wallpaper and unable to move. He found himself staring at each camouflaged man, naming each one of them after an uncle and knowing where each man’s twin was as the pattern repeated around the room. He vaguely remembered days of riding a horse, camping, laughing, JD and Chris and Buck . . .*

*His family. Every time he thought of them his throat constricted but when he tried to think of specific things, specific days, specific times with his family in detail, his mind would wander and he’d soon be simply floating away.*

*It certainly didn’t hurt where he floated away, which wasn’t the case whenever he woke up.*

*And wake he would as surely as the winter stole the leaves away. Vin knew something happened when he was “away” because when he came back again he was sore in places he was too embarrassed to ever mention aloud. He really didn’t know what went on when he was away, or even the why and when of it all, but he did know something was gravely wrong.*

*There was a man, too, that he saw a lot. He always brought food and spoke to him kindly and told Vin to call him Mr. Harry but rather than admit the reality of Mr. Harry by speaking his name, Vin chose to stay silent and fight him off as a vision whenever he could.*

*Finally, one day when the ever-present fog finally parted he looked around and realized he was in a small room. Other than the wounded three-legged table and narrow bed, there was a small television attached to the wall. There were no windows and one door. When he tried to get up and check the door, he found his leg chained to the bed and that he all he wore was diaper like, pull-up underwear. Vin’s cheeks instantly felt hot with shame, especially when he realized that the diaper was wet. Now assailed with claustrophobic panic and raging embarrassment he surged for the door, falling flat when the chain pulled him up short.*



*When the screaming started he couldn't stop as he fought blindly against the metal tether. He knew that he would soon be pressed to the floor and feel a cold pinch that brought a rush of warmth and stole his voice.*

*And as it happened the wide-eyed figure of an older boy would stare at him from the rectangular frame of light that was his only physical escape route.*

“Vin!”

He snapped his eyes open and looked wildly around, his frightened gaze locking instantly with the cool, dusty green he remembered so well. Completely undone, Vin burst into tears. Here it was barely dawn and he was completely exhausted. The comforting blanket of Chris enveloped him with calm reassurance, rocking him until his heart calmed and his breathing gentled. Chris murmured words that were unclear to Vin, but what his dad said wasn't as important as the fact that he was there.

Slowly, Vin became aware of his surroundings. He blinked, finding his chin resting on Chris' shoulder as his father held him close. Vin rolled his eyes to take in the surroundings and found Buck leaning against Chris' bedroom doorframe.

“Mornin', son.” Buck winked, as if waking up to a screaming child was a normal morning event. He held JD close to his chest. The boy's shaggy head twisted in Vin's direction.

“Buck's gonna make waffles,” JD announced, his arms wrapped around Buck's neck and his eyes looking worried. “You want some, Vin?” he asked gently. “We got snow.”

Vin blinked, the word sinking slowly sinking in. “Snow” was that soft, fluffy sugar, he remembered. Vin also remembered that snow and syrup make a wonderfully sticky, sweet paste. “n syrup?” His voice sounded shaky even to himself. Then he heard Chris chuckle near his ear and everything was okay.

“Plenty of that, too,” Buck said brightly. “We'll get to workin' on it, won't we Lil' Bit?”

“Yeah!” JD cheered as they disappeared down the hall.

“Good mornin',” Chris said lowly as he released his boy. He smiled, but Vin thought he looked tired. He also knew why his dad was tired and sighed. “Ready to get up?”

Vin slowly unwound and looked around the room. “Sorry,” he whispered, ducking his head and concentrating on Cat's mended tail.

“Vin.” Chris' serious tone made Vin freeze. He felt his dad's finger lift his chin until he was looking right into those warm eyes he'd missed for so long. “Any change is scary. We've missed you and you belong here. It's a change for you and it's going to take a little time for you – and us – to adjust. We love you. I love you. I've always loved you and that will always be true. Just remember that when you're

scared and that it's okay to be scared. Change is scary for everyone. There are a lot of scary things in this world, but it doesn't mean you have to fear them."

He made it sound so simple. Vin swallowed hard and nodded, hoping he could convince himself of that during his dreams.



"Chris, this Grace Faraday Giltner is going to be our way in to locate Faraday," Director Travis said over the phone as Chris stood in the kitchen preparing lunch. "I doubt we would have ever made the connection if it wasn't for Vin. Jesse Faraday is a master at covering his tracks."

Chris stepped to the kitchen door way and leaned against it. From there, he could both see and hear Buck and the boys playing in the front of the house. The adults kept JD from school for the next few days to strengthen the family's bond. JD would return to school the following week and Vin tested for placement. It seemed too fast to Chris, but Dr. Will said that getting back into a routine was what Vin needed. So right now, talking about this Grace woman was the last thing Chris wanted to do.

Travis continued. "It seems Jesse is using his sister as a shield. Everything is in a trust under her married name. He's the executor."

As Chris scrubbed his face, his fingers brushed over the puckered scar. "So the fact that Grace is more than likely an addict is a good thing for Jesse."

"Absolutely," Travis replied. Chris could hear the squeak of Orin's leather chair as he moved. "The question remains if he got her in that situation or she was already there when he started using her. Jesse still maintains control over everything yet his name isn't on anything. We have no eyewitnesses, so unless one of his crew turns on him, the best thing we can nail him for right now is probably tax fraud. If we find him."

Chris snorted at the injustice of it all. "Well, that's what they got Capone on. Sure doesn't seem like enough, though, but as long as it puts him away, I don't give a shit."

"I know what you mean." Travis agreed. After a slight hesitation, he went on. "Now that we have a name, we've come up with some hits on probable property locations. I've sent Nathan out on fly-overs of three likely spots." He let that information sink in for a moment before adding, "I'd like Vin to look at the shots they bring back."

Chris' head snapped up on that request. "No," he spat. "He's out of this. It's too soon . . ."

The Director didn't seem surprised at the reaction. His tone was low and even when he spoke. "He's our only eyewitness, Chris. We'll go slow . . ."

“I said no!” Chris barked. He’d moved rapidly to the great room window and watched as Buck scooped up a smiling Vin and tried to dodge JD. “You have those two we arrested to be eye witnesses. Vin hasn’t settled in yet. He’s still too fragile. He needs some normalcy . . .” *“I need to keep him safe.”*

“Chris,” Travis started after Larabee fell silent. “One of the arrestees was killed last night in lock up.”

“What?” Chris bellowed.

“On preliminary questioning we determined that only one of the two arrested has actually seen Faraday and now he’s dead. He was stabbed. There are no witnesses.” Travis’ disgusted sigh carried clearly over the phone. “On Faraday’s order, no doubt, but we can’t prove it. The other man can’t describe Faraday for us so all we have are ten-year-old driver’s license photos. Faraday’s obviously spooked, so we have to move fast. If this guy’s is as paranoid as we believe, when he does bolt, he’ll leave no living clues behind. The man’s a killer and does not take any chances.”

“If he’s so paranoid then he’s already gone,” Chris heatedly argued. “Making Vin relive that experience is a moot point if Faraday’s already gone.”

“Perhaps you don’t understand, Chris.” Travis’ tone took on an authoritative edge. “You do not have choice. I’ve already arranged a court order. Vin will look at what Nathan brings back.”

“WHAT?”

“If you can’t handle it I can arrange to have Buck bring him in, but I’d rather it was you. There is no choice here, Agent Larabee.” Travis’ use of Chris’ title made it abundantly clear where Chris stood. “Dr. Lowery agrees that a place away from home would be best for Vin to look at the photos. He’s volunteered his conference room and will stand by.”

Chris slapped his hand on the window frame. “Orin, this isn’t right! It’s too soon!”

“I don’t like it either but I do believe Vin’s stronger than you think,” Orin said in a softened tone. “So get your head wrapped around this because it is going to happen and that boy needs you.”

Realizing the discussion was over, Chris stalked to the kitchen counter and angrily slammed the phone back on the cradle. It took several minutes to loosen his tense muscles, the boisterous sound of play outside helping considerably. His hands still trembled as he finished assembling lunch and when finished, took a deep breath before going out to call the others in to eat.

Once outside, Chris paused on the porch and watched his friend of many years do what came naturally to him – bringing others out of their shells.

Vin was laughing – not as boisterously as JD, but laughing none the less and looking much more relaxed. He also looked weary and although Chris knew

partially why from the doctors' reports, he also knew of his boy's current lack of sleep and physical activity in his absence.

The idea of Vin Tanner being trapped in a house and drugged into submission for two years made Chris sick all over again. The bond that came naturally to them played against Chris this time as Vin looked his way and immediately froze, the happiness gone in a flash and replaced with apprehension. Chris, now very aware of what his body language said, forced himself to relax and smile.

*"How the hell am I going to make it through tomorrow?"* he thought. Vin frowned at the same time. "Lunch is ready," he announced with false cheeriness. "Anyone hungry?"

"Yeah!" JD yelled. He bolted toward Chris but Buck managed to latch onto him before he hit the stairs.

"Hand washing first, boys!" Buck glanced behind him. "Come on, Vin! Let's put on the old feedbags!" He scooped JD up and dropped him at the top of the steps.

"We aren't gonna eat outta bags, are we, Da?" JD asked, his feet moving before they hit the porch. "Like at school?"

Chris ruffled the mop of dark hair as it passed by. "Only if we can strap it on so you don't make a mess," he teased.

"Yuck, no!"

By now, Vin slowly made his way up the stairs. Buck gave Chris a questioning look.

"Later," Chris said quietly. Then he turned to Vin. "Hey, kiddo, I bet you're hungry, huh? Doctor's orders say you get a chocolate shake with lunch."

Vin's face brightened a little. "Really?"

Chris reached for his hand. "Yup. He wants to see some weight on you and so would I."

After lunch, Chris suggested a nap for the weary looking boy but Vin refused with uncharacteristic venom, at one point he even jerked his arm from Chris and looked as if he was ready to take a swing at him. Buck took the cue to let Chris handle the situation and shuffled JD to the bathroom to wash up. Vin, breathing heavily, glared at his dad but Chris could only see fear in the intense blue eyes.

Shifting gears, Chris smoothly swooped in and picked Vin up. Vin struggled for a moment, but grew still when Chris opened the back door and stepped onto the wide porch. Chris settled in the porch swing with Vin sideways on his lap.

"I'm too big for laps," Vin grumbled, but he didn't make any attempt to break free.

“Probably,” Chris agreed as he wrapped his arms around his son and kissed the top of his head. “But I need you here for now. Is that okay with you?” He started the swing into a gentle rhythm and mentally ordered his muscles to relax.

“I guess,” Vin replied softly after a moment, not quite ready to admit how tired he was but clearly ready to stay put.

They swung for a while, the sun wrapping them in warmth and the slight breeze wafting a spring chill over their faces. As always, the silence between them was natural and comforting, fulfilling them in a way nothing else could. “*A matched pair*,” Chris thought, citing the term often used to describe his and Vin’s relationship. “*Bookends*.”

Ever so slowly, Vin’s body released tension and his head settled against Chris’ chest with his ear pressed directly over his father’s heart. It wasn’t long before soft, regular breathing told Chris that his boy was asleep.

Leaning his head back, Chris, too, closed his eyes but instead of resting, he thought of what the next day would bring. Chris felt his parental side anxiety rise as all the possible bad outcomes paraded through his mind. Vin’s emotions still swung so unpredictably.

Vin murmured in his sleep and pressed against Chris’ chest. The motion made Chris aware that his body had grown tense and the gentle swinging had become jerky, both of which fueled Vin’s reactions. Chris took a deep breath and mentally forced physical relaxation once again.

“Over thinkin’ things again?” Buck’s low voice asked. Chris wasn’t surprised by his appearance. Buck had been looking out for his friend for a long time now and before settling on a nearby chair, he dropped a light blanket over the sleeping boy.

“Guess so,” Chris sighed, shoulders slumping.

“Everything’s gonna be okay, Chris,” Buck whispered, smiling. “Look at him, here, with us. How could it not?”

With that, Chris felt his fears drain away as he looked down on the other part of himself. His eyes stung briefly and he bowed his head, smelling the fresh sweetness of his son’s hair as his eyes closed. “Yeah,” he breathed again, relishing the moment of quiet peace.

When Vin was deeply asleep, Buck stole away. Everything would be alright. Like Buck said, with them together again, how could it not?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The whinny of hungry horses woke them hours later. The sun had wandered behind the house and the two of them were now in shadow. Chris chuckled at the second light blanket that covered his shoulders. Buck had obviously taken care of them as they both caught some badly needed sleep; how his roommate managed to keep JD quiet was a wonder in itself.

Vin rubbed his eyes and looked quickly around before slipping from Chris' lap. Blinking rapidly, he managed a small smile as he finally focused on his stretching dad.

"Well," Chris said with a yawn. "That was nice." A loud whinny again demanded attention and Chris looked at the corner of the pasture visible from the porch. "Alright, alright already!" he hollered, and then muttered, "Dang varmints nag worse 'n Ezra."

Vin's short laugh and tiny smile instantly lifted Chris' mood.

"We gonna sling chow now?" Vin asked brightly and a lot happier than when they first sat.

Chris was thrilled he'd remembered the phrase used to feed the animals. Without a second thought, he grinned and ruffled Vin's hair. "You bet," he said. "Let's go before they stampede the kitchen."

As Vin took off Chris realized his boy hadn't flinched with the affectionate touch. He headed to the barn with a light heart.

Vin was happily enthusiastic when caring for the horses. Ringo and Elvis kept him company as he went through the barn related chores and spoke often and cheerfully to dogs and horses. Chris had to remind him of what to do, but once reminded, Vin carried out the job completely. Soon, the stalls were cleaned, waters checked and mangers filled in good time. Then, they led each horse in one by one.

Father and son enjoyed the contented, relative quiet of barn's atmosphere side by side, leaning on Peso's stall door. After a few minutes, Chris' peripheral

vision caught Vin studying his face. Chris tilted his head just enough to catch his gaze and raised an eyebrow.

Without a word, Vin's reached up and traced the scar that marred his forehead.

"Does it hurt?" Vin asked quietly.

"Not anymore," Chris instantly replied with a lopsided grin, knowing his response went deeper than Vin probably realized. Then again, maybe not, he thought as Vin smiled back at him. "I haven't gotten around to getting it fixed."

"It c'n get fixed?"

"Fixed enough to be less noticeable," he explained. "*Only time can fix the inner ones, though.*"

The serenity broke with the sound of a truck coming up the drive and Chris' vague wondering about the whereabouts of Buck and JD answered.

"Hey!" JD shouted as he leaped from the truck. "We got Kentucky chickens 'n smashed potatoes!"

At dinner, JD verbal tirade about his day entertained everyone. With the table cleared and the leftovers taken care of, Buck dragged his boy to the bathroom to clean up.

"You comin', Vin?"

Vin, obviously uncomfortable with the idea, absently rubbed the spot where Chris knew the doctor found the cigarette burns. Buck read the body language well.

"Hey, Little Bit, let's let Vin have the tub to himself for a while." He didn't give the boy a chance to argue before scooping him up and making him giggle all the way to the bathroom.

Chris smiled and winked at him as he dropped on the couch and lifted the remote. As he flipped through the channels, Vin wandered around the room eyeing everything. Chris was glad he hadn't changed anything during his son's absence. In the face of the familiar, Vin's tension drained away.

Vin hesitated, though, when he rested his hand on the front doorknob. He looked to Chris with wide, unsure eyes. Chris paused his surfing and nodded. "It's okay, Vin," With a reverence that stoked Chris' anger, Vin carefully and slowly opened the door and stepped outside. Chris nearly crushed the remote as he worked out his anger at Faraday on the device. With his peripheral vision Chris saw that Vin stood unmoving just outside the open door. "It will take time," he reminded himself. Again.

After several minutes Vin stepped back inside and closed the door. Just then, Buck called from the back of the house. "Vin! Time to get ready for bed!" JD squealed in the background.

Chris forced a tired smile and nodded in Buck's direction. "Go on. I'll be along."

Vin trotted down the hall and Chris perked up at the sound of Buck trying to keep control of the two boys as they maneuvered around in the bathroom. As Chris walked down the hall his anger evaporated entirely with the happy noise. Leave it to Buck to get Vin out of himself.

Vin chose to shower while JD brushed his teeth in Buck's bathroom and chose a bedtime book. After brushing their teeth, both boys gratefully sank into their beds. Vin looked exhausted. As Chris pulled the blankets up over the boy, Vin, hugging Cat tightly to his chest and gave a longing look at the window as Buck settled JD. and opened the book.

"Want me to open it a crack?" Chris asked softly. Vin's relieved smile answered the question so Chris worked the window open and returned to his son's bedside, Buck's voice regaling the very shortened tale of Treasure Island.

Only when he gently stroked Vin's soft hair back from his face did Chris allow himself to truly believe that things could get back to normal after all. With his head resting on his pillow, Vin's blink was slow and heavy but his smile was bright. It wasn't long before the weight of his lids couldn't be countered.

Buck closed the book when JD, too, fell asleep, and left it on the small desk. Chris and Buck watched them sleep from the doorway.

"Wasn't sure it would be like this again," Buck said softly as he rested a hand on Chris' shoulder. "Sure feels good."

"Yeah," Chris breathed. "Yeah, it does."



*She was crying again.*

*His view was from a dark corner of the room and his fingers worried the stretched out edge of his t-shirt. He never knew quite what to do to stop her from crying, and had found it best to just wait and be near. When she got like this, his stomach felt twitchy and upset as if a flutter of birds were working to escape his belly.*

*She'd stop, eventually, and then she'd sleep for a long time. All he could do was throw a blanket over her when her eyes finally closed and wait. He was on his own until she woke up.*

*Or, until Mr. Jesse came back. He shuddered at that possibility.*

*"Austin," the woman moaned. Slumped on the sofa she turned her red-rimmed, puffy eyes toward him and raised an arm, beckoning him to come close. "Oh, my little Austin, come here. I've missed you so much!"*



Wordlessly, Vin shuffled closer knowing any correction to his name would be futile. When he was close enough, she hooked him with her arm and drew him into a shaky hug. She never noticed how he stiffed at her embraces. He didn't like it, but he'd also learned that fighting it was useless, too; she'd simply cry harder, which was worse.

He felt sorry for her. Miss Grace had been nothing but nice to him since Mr. Jesse brought him here. Once Mr. Jesse made it painfully clear what the boy's role was in this house and he cooperated, the beatings became less frequent. But they didn't cease.

And Miss Grace was always there to comfort him afterward.

Vin felt growing apprehension as she hugged him. The sound of wheels on gravel grew louder. Vin's heart pounded faster when he suddenly realized that the house was a mess.

"He's home!" Vin whispered as he tried to break free. Mr. Jesse would be very angry. "Lemme go!" Vin pleaded. Miss Grace's embrace turned into a choke hold. Her chatter grew louder until her words were an intelligible shriek and still Vin could hear Mr. Jesse's footsteps as he approached the house. "Lemme go!" he pleaded. "We have to clean up!"

The arms around him turned into octopus tentacles, squeezing so tight that he couldn't breathe. Vin heard the key in the lock.

"LET GO! LET GO!" he screamed in the stifling grip. The door opened and a rotten smell hit his nose, turning his stomach. Terror ripped his gut and took his voice, Vin's mouth opened wide and he couldn't breathe.

The big man stepped through the doorway and for a fleeting moment, his face was clear. Then, after seeing the state of the room, Mr. Jesse's face flushed red and he turned toward them.

His face shifted into that of a monster and Vin screamed.

"Vin! Wake up! Vin!"

The waves of terror parted and the voice became clearer. Vin snapped open his eyes and looked wildly around.

"Easy, Cowboy, you're all right. Easy, now."

His heart pounded in his chest as he gasped for air. He felt warm, strong hands on his hips, holding him still. Something soft was tight to his chest in a death clutch. Vin's eyes finally settled on the window.

It was open and the room was different.

"You awake now, son? Vin?"

Vin dazedly scanned the room before meeting Chris' worried gaze.

"You okay now?"

Vin nodded mutely and gulped. The hallway light was on and a warm light angled into the room. His and JD's room. Vin remembered now where he was and without having to look, knew it was Cat he hugged to his chest.

"Nightmare, huh?"

Vin blinked and nodded once, his heart slowing. "JD?"

"He's with Buck. I had a little trouble waking you." Chris' hold on his hips relaxed and Vin felt Chris' wide, warm palm stroked across his cheek, pushing his hair back.

"Sorry," Vin muttered, relaxing his hold on Cat.

"It's all right. I expect it's going to take a little bit to settle in again, Vin." Chris' voice soothed him. "I told you that change is hard. Talking to Dr. Will can help."

Vin shrugged and Chris started to pull back. "No," Vin begged. "Don't go."

Chris smiled and rested his hands on Vin's thighs. "You want to come in with me?"

Vin nodded again as he unwound. Chris pulled him into his arms and off the upper bunk. Vin threw one arm around his father's shoulders and snuggled close, closing his eyes as he took in the soothing scent. The images from the nightmare receded as Vin absorbed Chris' every detail – the way his arms felt, his smell, his voice, his gait, the feel of his muscles under his t-shirt.

Chris flipped off the hall light and turned to his bedroom, talking softly all the while. By the time Chris sat on his bed, Vin's grip on him had relaxed enough that his dad could settle him under the covers and turn off the light. Normally, the darkness would scare him but in this house the windows remained open and unbarred and Vin could see the bright moon between the space in the curtains.

The bed bounced a little as Chris situated himself next to Vin. He felt a protective arm slip under his head and another drape over his waist. "You're safe now, Vin," Chris whispered softly as he drifted to sleep. "I love you, son."

Sleep dragged Vin's eyelids closed.

"I love you, Austin."

*He and Miss Grace spent a lot of time together in this house. Miss Grace tried to keep it neat because she, too, was under the rules of Mr. Jesse. There was usually food to be found but Miss Grace didn't really feed him regularly because she didn't eat much herself. Vin managed to find enough to quiet his stomach.*

*Miss Grace dressed nice but under the colorful clothes was a thin body patterned with lots of scars. Vin couldn't help but notice how they lined her arms and ankles as purplish bumps or bloody bruises. Sometimes they oozed and stained the long sleeves of her shirts.*

*She never left the house, either. Sometimes they both sat on the front porch, but that was a rare and relished treat for Vin. They both knew if Mr. Jesse found out, there'd be trouble.*

*Miss Grace spent part of the day teaching Vin and cleaning. The other part spent on the couch after "taking something to relax." She insisted that she would quit "the stuff" because now that her Austin was back she had all she wanted, but she kept putting it off.*

*"Tomorrow, maybe," she said, petting Vin's hair as the medicine took hold. "I just need a little more time, that's all."*

*When she rested Vin spent a lot of time with books because the television made Miss Grace act scary. She'd laugh too hard or cry uncontrollably or yell at the screen. When she finally fell asleep, Vin would turn it on and keep the volume low. That way, he could hear when Mr. Jesse got home.*

*When he was there, Vin noticed that Mr. Jesse looked at Miss Grace with hard eyes. Mr. Jesse kept saying he didn't want to hit her but she just didn't listen and it was for her own good. It was her fault she'd lost her Austin and it could just as well happen again if he eased up on her. Everything Mr. Jesse did was for Miss Grace's own good and she just had to realize that.*

*That reasoning awoke memories of another life, long faded in his memory. He'd lived with people that said the same thing to him after his mama had died. The boy hadn't had anyone on his side back then, but he could at least be on Miss Grace's side now. It was the only thing he had any control over.*

*So, Vin let her call him Austin and tried to protect her from Mr. Jesse. Maybe if he'd have been older at the time, he could have done the same for his real mama. And maybe when Miss Grace was all better they could run away and find his dad, whose face, he realized, was becoming more difficult to visualize with each passing day.*

*Vin found himself through the iron bars and outside the dark window. His stomach churned painfully with fear, igniting a burn that didn't allow for sleep. He focused on the land before him, painted bright by the full moon. He couldn't see any other houses nearby. The only signs of other people were tiny dots of light in the distance moving along a road. Mr. Jesse didn't even get any mail here. Vin had no idea where he was. When he asked Miss Grace, she'd say, "Oh, it doesn't matter as long as we're together, Austin." He didn't think she knew or cared.*

*He'd asked Mr. Jesse once and got painful reminder about asking questions.*

*Vin scanned the scene closer to the house and saw a pair of trucks parked next to the half-dozen metal containers on the property. Sometimes he saw men*

loading and unloading the trucks whose license plates were all different colors. Outsiders never entered the house.

The sound of tires on gravel announced Mr. Jesse's return. This spurred Vin to take a final lap of the house, making sure everything looked neat. When Vin circled through the kitchen he saw a newspaper on the counter.

He'd seen Mr. Jesse carrying it around earlier that day, something he'd read in it exciting him to the point of being on the phone most of the morning. Vin peeked at the front page. He recognized the words "Denver Post", and his heart jumped a beat. Now curious, he scanned the front page. His eyes stopped on a photo of a group of people. A uniformed policeman walked next to a handcuffed man. He was about to turn away when a face in the background, behind the cuffed man, caught his attention.

Chris. His Chris. His dad.

Vin froze and instantly felt sick. His vision swam, and he hastily brushed his eyes. The one person he thought he'd never see again and who could save him and Miss Grace.

The sound of a car door slamming announced jerked Vin from his discovery. He ripped off the page and stuffed it in his pocket, then stuffed the rest of the paper in the trash. He ran to the living room and threw a fearful glance toward Miss Grace – she was lying on the sofa, one arm draped to the floor and the light blanket askew. In sleep, her eyebrows frowned and she muttered. Mr. Jesse would not be happy.

Vin's stomach burned. He moved to stand between her and the door, his heart pounding. He heard heavy, booted feet approach the house and keys clatter at the lock. Vin's tummy rolled and his palms turned damp. He made little fists to stop the sweat. The door swung open and Mr. Jesse stepped in, his gaze falling on Vin after a quick sweep of the room. The big man's coal colored eyes narrowed in anger.

"Get out of my way, boy. You're as worthless as she is."

Vin didn't move. They'd played this game before and Vin always lost, but he simply couldn't find it in his heart to stop because it was one of the few things he could do for Miss Grace.

As the big man came closer his arms reached out and turned into monster tentacles, snaring Vin by the neck as he turned to run. The hairy force squeezed him tight and he couldn't breathe . . .

He sat up with a gasp, clutching at his throat and gulping great mouthfuls of air. His heart raced wildly.

"Hey, it's okay," a voice soothed. "Vin? You're okay."

Vin's vision cleared and his gaze dropped to the feel of a hand on his thigh. He blinked at it -Chris' hand. He blinked again and looked up to a worried face. "Chris?" he choked. "Dad?"

"I'm here."

His father drew him in and Vin trembled, feeling guilty for waking Chris again. Vin noticed the room was veiled in the gray light of pre-dawn. Safely embraced, he was now able to calm his heart and think.

"They'll fade, Vin." Chris had again read his mind. "The dreams will fade. Dr. Will said that as you start to feel safe again, the dreams will go away. It's like your mind taking out the trash so good thoughts can take their place."

Vin smiled slightly. He liked that comparison but he wasn't sure he believed it. He didn't think he'd ever forget, and not because of what had happened, but because of what hadn't happened.

"I don't . . ." Vin started, trying to pick out the right words to express his conflicted emotions. "I need . . ."

Chris separated enough to look down at his son. "What do you need, Vin?"

He held his father's gaze for a long moment. "I need to know she's okay," he finally said softly. His fingertips nervously twisted a piece of Cat's fur and he dropped his eyes downward. "I'm sorry."

"Vin." Chris lifted the boy's chin with a finger until their gaze met again. "Don't feel guilty. You don't have to apologize. I understand and it's all right. We'll find her."

"Really?"

"Really."

Satisfied after a few moments of intense scrutiny, Vin nodded and turned away. Chris watched him slide from the bed and head to the bathroom. Chris sank his face into his hands as soon as he heard the bathroom door closed and swore softly.

"Everything okay in here?"

Buck's soft question made Chris twitch in surprise before he looked to his best friend. He should have expected the big man to appear.

"It will be," Chris muttered, finally accepting what he'd been fighting all along. "I think Vin needs to see those surveillance photos after all. He's not going to have any closure until he knows about this Grace woman."

Buck chuckled. "Don't cha just hate it when Travis is right?"

"Shut up, Buck."

That only made the man chuckle again. He disappeared from the doorway, footsteps retreating toward his room.

When Vin was finished in the bathroom he stopped at the side of Chris' bed and plucked at Cat's fur, eyes cast downward. Chris recognized the reluctance.

“What’s on your mind?”

“I saw ya in the newspaper,” Vin said quietly.

“I know. I found it in your pocket.”

Vin continued to pluck Cat. “I heard Mr. Jesse talkin’. I knew the trucks were goin’ to Denver.”

Chris kept silent so Vin would say what he obviously needed to say.

“He . . . I heard him hit Miss Grace again. I wanted to help her . . .” Vin stopped picking Cat long enough to rub his cheek. Chris wondered if he was rubbing away an old, remembered injury and he had to fight himself to keep still. “But I knew I couldn’t so . . . so I sneaked out the window ‘n hid in the truck. I knew you’d help her.”

Vin’s fingers returned to Cat as Chris struggled to keep his initial reactions to himself. “*He escaped to save that woman, not himself,*” Chris realized, angry at the thought. He knew he had to be in control before speaking, and swallowed hard. Instead, he shoved the blankets down and patted the bed. “Come here,” he whispered.

Vin crawled in next to him and Chris pulled him close, relishing the solidness of his son’s presence. Chris lay on his back with Vin snuggled close to his side, his boy’s warm breath tickling the hollow of his throat.

“It’s been too long, hasn’t it?” Vin whispered. Chris immediately detected the slight tremor in his son’s voice that warned of imminent tears.

“Too long?” Chris repeated, thinking fast. “You think it’s too late to get her out?” Vin nodded and snuffled. Chris stroked his son’s soft hair and kissed the crown of tousled waves. His feeling just confirmed. “How about starting today?”

Vin stilled. “Today?”

“Yeah. Nathan’s got some photographs for you to look at. Gotta start somewhere, right?”

“Yeah.” With that one word Chris felt Vin’s body relax. It wasn’t long until his breathing evened out in sleep and Chris closed his eyes and contentedly followed.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Chris?”

Buck’s voice was soft but insistent, so Larabee finally peeled his eyelids apart and groggily turned toward the persistent disturbance. “Huh?” was all he could muster at the moment as he made out the lanky form leaning in his bedroom door.

Buck chuckled shortly. “Hey there Sleeping Beauty,” he whispered teasingly. “I’m taking JD to Mrs. Potter’s for a while so you two can get some sleep and headin’ into work. The critters are taken care of so go back to sleep. Y’all need it.”

As his friend spoke, Chris became aware of the small body tucked into his side, deeply asleep. Instead of answering, he nodded once and waved Buck away before letting his eyes close again. He heard the door snick closed which muffled Buck’s and JD’s whispered voices, and then heard the front door close and lock. Chris fell asleep to the sound of Buck’s truck departing the ranch.

The next time he woke, Chris felt the weight of Vin’s stare on him and looked down to find two sleepy eyes blinking at him. “Hey,” he said. “Good mornin’.” He yawned and stretched, and both of them sat up. “Hungry?”

Vin nodded, and after hitting the bathroom, they perused the kitchen.

“It’s quiet,” Vin noted, sitting at the table swinging his legs with Cat in his hands.

“JD’s at Mrs. Potter’s for a while and Buck went to work.”

Vin didn’t say much more while they ate. Chris noticed that he absently rubbed his stomach and wondered if it was the ulcer or simple worry over the photographs, or even the visit with Dr. Will.

“How soon will I go back to school?” The question was quiet.

“We’ll see how you do. I think Mr. Rockman wants to see you next week to see where you are, so your first day will only be to take some tests. I’d say a couple weeks from now.”

“Will I be with JD?”

Chris smiled at the worried face. "I don't know. But we'll only take this as fast as you can handle, Vin, so don't be afraid to speak up, okay?" That seemed to ease the boy's mind some as he cleared the table. "Now go get dressed. We slept late like a couple of lazy bones. We need to be at Dr. Will's in an hour."

Their departure was delayed when Vin requested to see the horses before they left. Chris couldn't refuse him. He doubted he could refuse Vin anything at this point. He felt a rush of satisfied warmth as the black gelding nuzzled the small boy's cheek. Peso had been waiting at the gate and Chris had to wonder if Vin and the curmudgeonly horse had the same non-verbal connection that he had with his son.

Murmured goodbyes ended their greeting and as Vin turned away from the corral, something caught his eye and he stared, unmoving.

Chris knew exactly what caught Vin's attention and his gut clenched. Sucking in a bracing breath, he nonchalantly moved to his son's side and squatted down. One corner of the battered Ram's rear bumper jutted out from the corner of the barn, uncovered where the wind had blown back part of the plastic tarp. Lightly, Chris settled a hand on Vin's tense shoulder.

"I couldn't get it fixed," Chris stated gently. "Now that you're back, I'll get a new truck."

Vin thought that over. "You couldn't get it fixed or wouldn't get it fixed?"

Chris was astounded at his son's astuteness and his mind fumbled as it tried to catch up. "I . . . ah, I'm not sure. Both, probably," he finally sputtered.

"Like your scar?"

This time Chris was speechless. He felt his mouth open and close, but no noise came out. Vin's head tilted aside as his soul-searching eyes focused first on Chris', then flicked to Chris' eyebrow.

"Uh . . . I . . . well . . . yeah. I guess so."

Vin's eyes sparkled mischievously. "You goin' to see Dr. Will, too?"

Chris snorted and stood, his knees popping as he straightened, and chuffed a short laugh as he stroked Vin's hair. Inwardly, he was thrilled to see a flash of the Vin humor and knew that his eyes reflected the feeling. "When did you get so smart? So maybe we'll go truck shopping next week."

With one more lingering look at the covered truck, Vin found Chris' hand and they walked to the sorry Jeep. Ezra and the others would be nagging him 'til kingdom come until he got rid of it, he realized as he secured belt buckles. "They're right," he mused. "*These belts don't seem like enough.*" At ten, Vin was tall enough and heavy enough to use adult seat belts but to Chris, he looked small and fragile in the seat. Vin, though, was thrilled with the vehicle and happily tipped his head back and enjoyed the wind from the open top and sides.



By the time they reached the medical building, Vin was as relaxed as Chris had seen him. Once in the parking garage, though, a little of the stiff wariness returned. He gave him a reassuring grin, which seemed to help.

Vin held Chris' hand tightly as they walked to the elevator and Chris noticed how he squeezed his eyes shut during the ride to the second floor. Vin let out a relieved breath as the door slid open again and Chris had to wonder how he was really coping.

The pair didn't wait long in the reception area. Anita, the receptionist, hadn't said much but Chris could tell by her smile that she was happy to see Vin again. Vin kept his head bowed and squeezed next to Chris when they sat on the small couch. Tension was building in the small body.

When the office door opened, Vin startled.

"Mr. Larabee, Vin, it's so good to see you. Please come in." Dr. Will opened the door wide and followed them to the play area. Vin stuck close enough to his father to impede his walking stride and the doctor must have noticed. "How about if your dad stays with us for a little while today, Vin?"

Vin nodded, his fingers twisting in the hem of his shirt. Dr. Will pointed him toward the toy box while he and Chris settled in chairs. "So, how has it been going at home?"

"Pretty good, I guess. We haven't made it through a night yet."

"Is that right, Vin? Are you having trouble sleeping?"

Vin nodded and then sat next to Chris with a Matchbox car. He held it upside down and spun the wheel with a finger.

"Have you looked at the notebook I gave you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did it help?"

Vin shrugged.

"Did you show it to your dad?"

Vin shook his head. To Chris, Vin was shutting down a little more with each passing second. He glanced at Dr. Will, trying to keep his worry from showing on his face.

Dr. Will, though, appeared unflustered by the limited responses. After getting some answers from Chris, Dr. Will asked Chris to wait outside. Vin reacted by snapping his head up and staring wide-eyed as the door closed on his father's heels. Dr. Will sat across from Vin, knowing Chris was watching them from behind the one-way glass of the observation room.

Vin's fidgeting was nearly unwatchable, but Chris had to give him credit for not bolting. He was sure the room was closing in on his son and he could tell by the way Dr. Will spoke to Vin that he realized it, too. The last few minutes of the appointment focused on Vin's looking at the photos Nathan was going to show

him. As the doctor explained the airplane view, he had Vin imagine being a bird and looking down. Chris saw his son relax with the exercise and sighed in relief.

The observation room door opened behind him and Chris turned. Nathan greeted him with a smile. "Hey, Chris," he said.

"Nathan. Those the pictures?" He nodded to the manila folder in his teammate's hand.

"Yeah. And there's something else," he said, causing Chris to stiffen at his tone. Nathan held out another paper.

Chris' head jerked up. "That's a photo lineup," he snapped. "Travis didn't say anything about that."

"Vin is the only eyewitness that can identify Faraday, Chris. We have to cover all bases before we go in." Nathan was calm, refusing to react to Chris' anger. "We can't afford to skip any steps."

"Travis arranged this?"

"Yes."

Their connection must have flared again because on the other side of the glass, Vin stiffened. He glanced up at the mirror in his room. Dr. Will rose and directed him to the door.

Chris had no time to argue and Nathan wilted slightly under Larabee's glare. Without another word, he left the room and met Vin in the hall. Nathan stayed behind. Dr. Will directed them to the conference room and then departed.

Vin's eyes were huge as he looked at Chris. Chris put his anger aside and smiled. "You know I'm not entirely happy about you looking at these photos. I'm afraid you'll get scared again."

Vin visibly relaxed and he reached over and patted Chris' hand. "They're only pictures," he said quietly. "They can't hurt me."

Chris smiled, amazed. "You're right. They can't. So, you ready, then?"

Vin nodded. They sat down and Nathan and Dr. Will entered.

"Hey, Vin. How are you feeling?" Nathan was a big man, always a good one to have at your back, but when he smiled, as he was now, his eyes engaged and softened his features.

Vin automatically smiled back and uttered a quiet, "Hi, Unca Nathan," as the man sat across from him. He set a manila folder on the table between them. Dr. Will stood to one side.

"You ready to look at some pictures?" Nathan asked brightly.

Vin nodded and gave his dad a nervous smile. Chris rested his arm across the back of Vin's chair.

"Okay, then. Remember, these were taken from an airplane." Nathan flipped the folder open and laid out six photos in front of Vin. "Let's group these together. There are two photos of each location."

Dr. Will had suggested letting Vin pair the photos to engage his mind and distract from the immediate purpose of the viewing. The plan worked. As Vin studied each photo and paired up matching landscapes the tension in his stiff posture drained away as the simple act of doing something gave him a feeling of control.

“Recognize anything, Cowboy?” Chris asked softly. Each of the three locations matched Vin's description, including a block wall, surrounding fields and shipping containers. All were owned by Grace Faraday Giltner. With one finger, Vin drew one of the photos closer.

“This one,” he said quietly.

“Are you sure?” Nathan asked.

“Yeah. There was a porch,” he tapped an edge of the house. “In my window faced this part of the wall. I could see that tree from my bed.” He tapped the one property that had a large tree near the fence. “There was a bird nest in it and sometimes an owl sat on the top branches.” Vin sat back in his chair as his fingers intertwined nervously. When he spoke and his eyes darted around to the other photos on the table as if unable to look at the place of his imprisonment.

“Very good, Vin. That’s just what we needed.” Nathan started to gather the pictures.

“Now we can find Miss Grace,” Chris said softly.

“One more thing, Vin,” Nathan said, “Do you recognize anyone here?” He slid a paper with six headshots on it to Vin.

Surprised, Vin glanced at Chris. “Remember, they can't hurt you.”

Vin turned back to the lineup and studied each face. “No,” he finally said.

That got both Chris and Nathan’s attention. “What?” Chris asked, surprised. He knew that one of them was from Jesse Faraday’s old driver’s licenses. “None of them are Mr. Jesse?”

Vin shook his head. “No.”

“His picture is ten years old. He may look older.” The investigator in Chris came forth and gentled his tone and body language.

Vin looked at him again and shook his head. “None of ‘em are Mr. Jesse.” Then he looked at Nathan and bit his lip nervously. “I’m sorry . . .” he started, beginning to fidget.

Nathan reached over and quieted Vin’s hands by resting his palm on them. “You did great, Vin. Don’t worry.”

“Vin,” Dr. Will interjected, stepping forward. “How about you come and choose a sticker to take home for your folder?” He pulled Vin’s chair back as the others stood. “I want you to pick out a sticker that shows how you felt when you came home.”

## SAVING GRACE

Vin stood and automatically grabbed Chris' hand. Dr. Will left first with Chris and Vin next. Nathan followed. While Vin looked through a collection of stickers, Chris spoke quietly to Nathan.

"I don't like this, Nathan. I know how Travis thinks. Vin's gonna have to I.D. Faraday, and he's going to have to do it in person before we act."

"When we get to the place we'll detain everyone there and send photos electronically. Vin doesn't have to be there."

Chris ran his fingers through his hair and muttered a curse. "No, Travis won't let us detain anyone until we're sure Faraday is there and we can't take the time to set up surveillance. In that open area, a surveillance team will be spotted. Vin's gonna have to be nearby and I don't like it."

"I understand, Chris, but don't you think closure to all this would be the best thing for Vin?"

"Don't tell me what's best for my son!" Chris snarled harshly, turning on his teammate. "Don't you dare tell me what's best for Vin! That's my job and my job alone!"

Nathan dropped his eyes for a moment but physically held his ground. When he spoke next, his voice was almost a whisper and his eyes were soft when they met Chris'. "There's where you're wrong, Chris. You two do not stand alone. You don't think any of us know how hard this is for you and for Vin? Yes, the final say is yours and always will be yours but don't shut us out. We deserve more than that, and you know it. That boy is as much a part of our lives as he is yours."

Chris deflated before Nathan's eyes and ducked his head and there was a few long seconds of silence. "You don't understand, Nathan." The medic was taken aback at the resignation he heard in his boss' voice. "Vin isn't part of my life, he is my life."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Speed was a necessity and the team knew it, so the operation was slated for that very night. Faraday was certainly a flight risk anyway, and, along with the realization that no one other than Vin knew what the subject looked like added a new and different edge to the planning.

While Chris and Buck went home to let JD and Vin play a while, the rest of the team collaborated with Team Two.

“Maybe Jesse Faraday is more like a corporation,” Nathan suggested to his teammates as they processed information in their office. “There’s more than one person using the name.”

“Another Dread Pirate Roberts?” Ezra said with one raised eyebrow. Technically on light duty, he was rarely out of the office and unusually cooperative. Nathan gave him a blank look and Ezra smirked as he returned to his computer. “Give Mrs. Jackson a treat and rent *The Princess Bride* someday, my dear man.”

“It’s a classic,” Josiah added from his corner. When the other two looked his way, he continued the original discussion. “As interesting as that idea is, I tend to think our Mr. Faraday is one, single, very intelligent, very paranoid sociopath. He rules via dictatorship, using fear to feed his power.”

“So it’s all about control,” Nathan summed up.

Ezra snorted. “When is it not?”

Nathan looked thoughtful, then walked to the profiler’s desk and hitched a hip on one corner. “The way you talk, Josiah, it sounds like it’s a miracle that Vin survived him.”

“It is, actually. And knowing Vin, it would have been a simple matter of time before Faraday killed him. Vin connected emotionally with Grace Giltner. Given time and a little more physical bulk, he would attempt to stand up for her and, sadly, pay the price.”

The three of them mulled that over in silence. It was true, and they knew it. Vin stood up for JD as a mere child and took his lumps then; imagining him doing the same as a young adult wasn't any stretch of the imagination.

"I hate to say it, but I'm glad Wheeler has lead on this," Josiah added. "Chris needs to be with Vin and vice-versa. They're both conflicted right now. Chris needs to be father first and agent second, and Vin hasn't resolved which way he wants it to be. His need for Chris to 'save' Grace Giltner battles with his need for Chris."

"And there's not a selfish bone in that boy's body. No wonder he has nightmares," Nathan muttered, moving away. "That's a lot for an adult to deal with. Are you two ready for Wheeler's briefing?"

Ezra nodded and slowly rose, concealing his injury with practiced grace. Josiah moved stiffly, but also refused to be side-lined. When they entered Team Two's briefing room, Buck joined them. Travis and Wheeler stood at the blow-up surveillance photo which now had multicolored arrows, boxes and lines drawn all over it.

The clatter of the rest of Team Two entering caused everyone to grab a seat. It was show time.



The plan built on a "shock and awe" approach. Because the property was so open, they had to wait until nightfall, but nightfall had its own complications.

Travis insisted on confirmation of Faraday's presence. The initial team in would focus on intelligence – pinpointing the location of every warm body within the walls and get raw footage. Vin would be in a nearby vehicle, viewing the feeds as they came in. There would be no assault on the property until Faraday was located.

Sunset fell on the fourth day of Vin's return with Chris' emotions spinning at the speed of events coming at them. He longed for time away with his son, but he also knew that Vin would never move forward until the Grace situation was handled. Hopefully, this night would be the end of this chapter in Vin's short, rough life.

The less-than-pristine undercover SUV encountered its planned flat tire a quarter mile from Faraday's property just as the last of dusk was overrun by night. Team Two, dressed for stealth, slipped from the vehicle and melted into the dark. While one agent very slowly went through the motions of appearing to change the tire, Chris, Vin and Ezra, acting as the electronics specialist, huddled together around a tiny video monitor. A majority of the little screen showed nothing but

indistinct, bouncy shadows, but the even smaller screen-in-screen showed a diagram of moving dots.

“Each team member is tagged,” Chris said lowly, pointing to the miniscule green dots. “We can tell where they are so when they send us footage to the bigger screen, they don’t have to tell us where they are since their job is to be quiet. Green dots are our guys, red dots are everyone else.”

As they watched the initial team’s progress, there was a whispered greeting at their window.

“B team is assembled and ready,” Wheeler told Chris.

Vin craned his neck and peered out the vehicle windows. He knew there were about a dozen agents out there in the night but he couldn’t see or hear any of them. It warmed him to know that men trained like his father surrounded him and he felt perfectly safe in the car snuggled between Chris and his Uncle Ezra.

Vin knew Chris wasn’t happy with him being here. And he had to admit just to himself that he didn’t really want to be here, either. He was glad they arrived at dark so he wouldn’t have to see the place where he was trapped for so long; the idea of being so close made his stomach burn, and he’d seen the hard line of Chris’ mouth when he took one of the grape-flavored tablets that lessened the pain.

“They are inside the fence line,” Ezra noted. “Two in the house, none around outside.” One red dot joined the green ones on the picture-in-picture overlay.

“There’s an outgoing call,” Josiah quietly reported at the window, one finger pressed against an ear bud. His face was blacked out with greasepaint and he was dressed in black. Vin had watched them prepare and even had his own smear of black high on each cheekbone. Josiah’s teeth looked bright white when he grinned and winked in Vin’s direction. Vin managed a tiny smile in return. “Someone’s calling in an order, it sounds like.”

“Tell surveillance to hold,” Wheeler ordered from nearby. “Let’s hear the order first.”

Before the order was given, the screen in the SUV flickered to life. The wavy, black shadows were replaced by a jerky shot of the interior of the house. A couch, cold fireplace and coffee table came into focus, the view behind and slightly to one side of the couch. Vin let out a tiny gasp.

“You’re safe, Vin. I’m here.” Chris took his hand and squeezed it reassuringly. Vin held on tightly.

“It’s her,” Vin breathed. “Her hair . . .” He pointed at a dark line that trailed over the top edge of one arm of the couch and dangled loose. “There’s her hand.” It was flung out and rested, palm up on the coffee table in front of the couch.

“I see her, son. She’s still there.” Vin wondered why Chris sounded unsure and glanced at him. “We’re almost done.”

The picture vanished as the team received Wheeler's order. Vin shifted in his seat. Suddenly, the close confines of the SUV seemed suffocating. Chris must have felt or heard the change in his breathing, because the vehicle door opened and Chris pulled him outside. Chris dropped to one knee and gathered him close. Vin immediately felt better, and after a few moments, his heart slowed.

Chris spoke lowly to him and Buck materialized out of the night and rubbed his back. Comforted, Vin told them he was okay. Before stepping away, Buck whispered in his ear. "You're doin' great, Junior. Not much longer." Vin felt him kiss the top of his head before he moved off.

Chris murmured, "I'm proud of you," in his ear, but didn't loosen his embrace as he turned his head and spoke to Wheeler. Vin stilled in his father's arms and looked over Chris' shoulder into the darkness as he waited, a bit calmer now. As his eyes adjusted to the night he was able to pick out a few of the camouflaged men. Buck approached one man and they knelt down to talk, their inclined heads nearly touching as they spoke. Vin slipped from Chris' arms, insisting he was all right, and pressed close to his father's side, watching Buck.

It took him a moment to notice that another man stood close to Buck's back, facing Vin. He was also the only man, Vin realized, that was squarely standing tall on both feet, not attempting to hide. He held a short rifle across his hips, the muzzle pointing directly at the back of Buck's head.

Vin frowned, old warnings about pointing guns at people dredged up from somewhere, and let his eyes trail upward to the man's face. The eyes that bore back at him turned Vin's heart to ice.

Jesse Faraday was standing there, staring at him with a stomach churning smile.

Mr. Jesse was dressed just like one of the agents, bullet proof vest, grease paint and all. Vin's gut lurched and burning bile rose in his throat. They were all set up. He knew if he made any wrong move, Buck would be dead so he froze. Buck stood and Faraday backed off a step, but the gun stayed trained on target. After a few more words, Buck eased off into the darkness. Vin inhaled to yell, but Jesse just smiled and shifted the gun so it pointed directly at Chris.

Vin held his breath as Mr. Jesse's smile was replaced by a stern expression well known to Vin – someone was going to be hurt if orders weren't followed. Vin vaguely heard Wheeler walk off as Chris stood, and twitched when his father's hand rested on his shoulder.

"Vin?"

Instantly, Chris was on guard and his hand went for his gun, but he didn't turn around as his instincts screamed to do that very thing when he heard Vin's frightened voice.



“Don’t,” Vin gasped as the man of his nightmares stepped closer, the rifle still pointed at his father. Vin’s trembling started at his knees and traveled upward, his fisted hand latched onto Chris’ pant leg keeping him upright and trying to prevent Chris from moving. *“Please don’t move,”* he mentally pleaded Chris.

Faraday stepped in behind Chris and leaned in. “You drive,” he growled in his fathers’ ear, the rifle less than an inch from Vin’s face. Jesse plucked Chris’ gun from his hand and pointed it at Vin’s face, dropping the rifle so it hung nonchalantly from his shoulder. “Get rid of the passenger or your own gun will kill the kid.”

“*Uncle Ezra,*” Vin realized – and it all came to focus. His whole family was threatened again as those ugly words Mr. Harry used exploded in his head, *“I’ll kill your entire family and it will be your fault.”*

Last time Vin had frozen and obeyed.

Chris’ words swooped through his mind: *“There are a lot of scary things in this world but it doesn’t mean you have to fear them.”*

This time, Vin acted.

He grabbed the gun with both hands and twisted aside. A deafening bang rang his ears and his hands burned, but he held on, his entire focus bearing down on that one thing. Faraday growled and Vin felt his huge hand snare a fist full of hair. Vin hunched over the object and his hands, and went completely limp, the sudden weight pulling Faraday aside just enough.

The gun went off again and Vin felt the burn against his stomach, but there were no more shots. For a moment, he was lifted from the ground by his hair, the pain sharp and blinding. Still, Vin hung on and screamed one scream that drowned out everything else. The next second found him on the ground, stunned and unable to breathe with a hard lump beneath him. As the world turned gray, he heard scuffling feet and fading shouts through ringing fog.

At the first shot and sense of motion, Chris saw red, spun and lunged with a feral roar. Faraday suddenly lurched aside and the gun went off again. Chris hit the bigger man full body, the strike knocking Vin aside where he bounced on the hard ground like a rag doll. The two men managed to stay on their feet.

Enraged, Chris hit hard and fast with a furious flurry of strikes. Faraday tried to fend off his foe but, for the moment, could only defend against the relentless attack. Chris drew first blood, but Faraday managed to land a few pile-drivers to the agent’s face before Chris’ backup finally shifted gears from frozen shock to action.

Buck was first in, latching onto Faraday’s back like a tick in an effort to engage a successful choke-hold. Wheeler appeared at Buck’s side, grabbing the front edge of Faraday’s assault helmet and yanking backward, the chin strap

pulling his jaw up to expose his throat. Buck finally got a hold and hauled back, nearly breaking the man's neck before he gagged and sputtered, into oblivion.

Chris, however, would not be stopped and continued to pummel his opponent, one bloody fist ensnared in Faraday's collar to hold him while the other struck over and over like a possessed, venomous snake. Buck and Wheeler tried to pull him off, but couldn't, and each landing punch sounded wetter and wetter as Faraday's face was slowly pulverized.

"Chris, stop! Let him go!"

He only stopped when Josiah's trunk-like arms physically trapped him. The combined weight of three of them drove Chris to the ground, his hoarse screaming fading to gasping breaths.

"Jesus, Chris," Buck panted. "You gotta stop. You gotta see to Vin, you hear me? We got Faraday. You go see Vin, okay Pard? Chris? See to Vin."

Buck's words finally sank in and Chris' struggles slowed enough for Josiah to release him.

"Vin," Chris croaked from his hands and knees. "Where's Vin?"

"Nathan's with him," Buck said as he hauled his friend to his feet. "Come on." He dragged him to where Nathan squatted near the truck, the darkness shrouding the form before him.

"God, Buck, what if he's . . ." Chris' voice strangled to a halt as his throat closed.

"Shut up, Chris. Don't you fuckin' say it." Buck's words were thick as they pushed through gritted teeth.

They stumbled to a stop just behind Nathan, leaning on each other to keep their feet. Chris' stomach twisted sickeningly and he thought he would lose it, but then he heard that all-healing voice.

"Dad? Where's dad?"

Chris fell to his knees next to Nathan as the medic helped the boy to sit up. Once their eyes locked, Vin's wild and Chris' desperate, Chris swept him into his arms.

The rest of a night was a blur. Chris felt completely drained and was grateful that he and Vin were left alone in the SUV, both of them silent and unable to release each other.

Chris was vaguely aware that the raid on the Faraday property continued without him, but he didn't care. One by one, each of his team made contact throughout the night, checking their welfare and updating Chris on the situation as it unfolded, but they immediately backed off and gave them space.

It was hours before Chris allowed Nathan to look at his hands and face and only because Vin insisted. The boy also insisted on being there during the exam, refusing to leave Chris' lap. After Chris hands were cleaned, bandaged and

wrapped, and his “head examined” (according to Nathan), Vin was cajoled into taking something for his headache, then the pair started to engage with their surroundings.

“How about we get you home?” Chris finally asked as he gently probed his tender cheek. “I think they can spare someone to take us. I don’t think I can hold a steering wheel right now.”

“No.” Vin’s protest surprised Chris, but as soon as he met his son’s gaze, he knew what had to be done. “*I have to see her.*”

Any protest Chris had died on his tongue. They had to finish this, for Vin’s sake and for his own. With Grace behind them, they both could move on. He sent Ezra to find Grace’s status and a ride to the house. Ezra’s face was unreadable when he returned, but Chris knew the story with the one glance Ezra gave Vin.

“It’s all right, Ez. Tell us.”

“I am sorry to report that Grace Faraday has passed. She apparently died of an overdose ten to twelve hours ago. The live persons in the house were Faraday’s miscreants.” He squatted down in front of Vin, who met his eyes. “I am sorry Master Tanner. I know that she is the real reason why you are here today.”

Vin nodded in understanding and thanks. “Can I see her, please?” he whispered.

“Follow me. Your carriage awaits.” Ezra stood and led the way to the SUV.

Ezra drove them through the iron gate and up to the house, now bright with lights and the photographer’s flashes. He opened the car door for his boss, who managed to slip out while carrying Vin. They stood still and looked at the house, Chris waiting for a clue from Vin.

“The Coroner is just now departing the structure.” Ezra indicated the man overseeing the path of a gurney just exiting the house. A black body bag was strapped to the mattress.

Oddly, Chris felt relief from his son and knew it stemmed from the fact that Vin wouldn’t have to enter the house again. “*Are you ready for this?*”

Vin tipped his head back and squinted up at him. “Yeah,” he said softly. “I haf to do it.”

Chris ignored the odd look from Ezra, which was followed by an eye roll when the gambler realized why he hadn’t heard the question. “I see that things are returning to the status quo,” he muttered.

Chris smiled tiredly at his boy and they started toward the Coroner’s van. The Coroner must have been expecting him because Chris thought there would be a fight to view the body but, instead, encountered no resistance as if a beaten up man and a young boy wanting to say goodbye to an unrelated dead woman was the norm at a crime scene like this.

## SAVING GRACE

The Coroner unzipped the bag just enough to expose Grace Faraday Giltner's face. On one hand Chris saw just another O.D.'d junkie but on the other, he saw an attractive young woman with a pretty face framed by long, dark hair that simply couldn't live anymore without her son. Chris found that he related with her and even understood to a small degree. He also doubted that he could ever have saved her, even if they had gotten here in time.

Vin held on tightly to Chris. When he spoke, his voice was soft and gentle. "Bye, Miss Grace and thank you for bein' nice. I'm glad you're with Austin now."

After a few moments, Vin rested his cheek on his dad's shoulder. Chris nodded to the Coroner, and as they turned to go home the sound of the body bag being zipped closed confirmed that this part of their lives was finally over.

THE END