

THE CAMPING TRIP

CHAPTER ONE

"I'd like to propose a toast."

Josiah's rich voice quelled the good natured ribbing circling the table. All eyes turned to the big man standing to the side of the table holding a cornucopia of Thanksgiving food. There was a scant second of teasing and laughter as the faint ringing of glass and silver ware fell away. A dozen long stemmed wine glasses were raised high, the liquid contained within each crystal bowl sparkling crimson hues in the candle light.

"This is the time of year to give thanks for our blessings. I, for one, have many things to be grateful for, as do each of us, but I think we can agree that discovering a new family member is at the top of the list. With that in mind, I would like to welcome the newest member of our unusual family . . ."

A round of affirmations punctuated the statement.

". . . and give thanks to family, no matter how unconventional." Josiah raised his glass higher. "To family!"

"To family!"

Glasses clinked around and across the table and there was a split second of silence as the Magnificent Seven and guests drank to the toast. Josiah settled again in his chair and exchanged his wine glass for a fork. "Now pass the potatoes!"

The Larabee Ranch dining room was filled to capacity with the seven ATF team members and four others - Raine Jackson, Maude Standish, Casey and Nettie Wells and the latest addition, Martin Fitzgerald.

Sitting across from his recently found twin brother Vin Tanner, Martin looked completely at ease and relaxed. It had been five months since the two of them had found each other in the middle of a murder for hire case. A few injuries later, the reason for their meeting was resolved but the family entanglements were just beginning.

Although Martin and Vin hit it off immediately, their relationship with their biological father Victor Fitzgerald, went careening uncontrollably downhill. As a result, Vin refused to acknowledge Victor as his father and vice-versa. Martin never did feel put in the middle because as soon as he heard the details about how he had been separated from his twin at birth, Martin Fitzgerald was feeling none to friendly toward Victor, either.

Martin's acquired mother Katherine, however, was another thing entirely. Martin could not ignore his attachment to her. In a way, she was as much a victim of Victor's actions as the

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brothers and in the short time Vin had with Katherine, Martin knew a connection had been made. If allowed, Katherine could easily love Vin as much as she did Martin.

Victor, however, was doing all he could to make sure that didn't happen; all he could see Vin bringing to Katherine's heart was pain. That's the way Martin interpreted things, anyway. But, tired from the physical and emotional upheaval that surrounded his sibling discovery Martin had pulled away from the elder Fitzgeralds and allowed himself to heal. He threw himself into his work and connecting with Vin via phone, instant messaging, email and the strange mental connection they'd established from the very beginning. He'd agreed to come to Denver for Thanksgiving before the invitation was completely out of Vin's mouth. The hike and camping was the final event of Martin's trip.

"So what time are you two departing for your excursion into the hills?" Ezra Standish asked as he passed on the green bean casserole with a look of disdain.

"As soon as the sun's up." Vin accepted the beans with a look of delight. He scooped a generous helping of the creamy glop onto his plate and sent the dish on its way. "We're all packed."

"You ever been camping, Martin?" The question came from Buck. "Let me rephrase that: You prepared to go camping with Vin?" He didn't hide his snicker very well.

As he forked a helping of white meat to his plate, Martin grinned across the table at Buck. "Are you trying to scare me? Because if you are, it isn't working."

"Aw Buck, just because stuff happens to you every time Vin takes us camping it's no reason to assume the worst." JD Dunne refilled Casey's wine glass. She smiled with obvious affection and thanks.

"Not just Buck," Nathan Jackson interjected. "Remember your own head-banging excursion?"

JD waved off the comment with a snort. "That wasn't Vin's fault," he said. "I slipped in the mud."

". . . while making a new trail at Vin's suggestion."

"It was only a mild concussion. And Vin got hurt, too!"

"Vin always gets hurt," Chris Larabee interjected, handing off the rolls to Nettie. "That's a given with any outing."

"Hey! That's not true!" Vin protested. "Remember Albuquerque? I didn't get a scratch!"

"But the rest of us did," Josiah reminded him.

"Well, that wasn't the point," Vin grumbled. "I didn't get hurt."

"*Should I be worried?*" All Martin had to do was think the words and he knew his brother heard.

"*Nah.*" Vin's Texas-accented voice was clear in Martin's mind. "*They're exaggeratin'!*"

Martin raised his wine glass to his brother across the table in acknowledgement. Vin nodded and winked.

"It is not polite to exclude the rest of us from your conversation while gathered together at this gastronomical affair." Ezra raised an eyebrow at the pair before delicately cutting into his turkey slice. The others laughed.

To an outsider, Vin and Martin were identical twins. If it weren't for Vin's penchant for longer hair, the two would seem to be interchangeable. In actuality, it didn't take long for the six members of Vin's team to individualize them in the five days they'd had to get better acquainted, Martin found out.

Ezra noticed Martin's better taste in clothing and the minute differences in facial expressions – he believed Martin would be tougher to read in a poker game.

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Josiah saw a difference in posture and calm - Vin seemed more comfortable in his own skin. That realization made Martin think.

Nathan knew the individual nature of their physical scars even as well healed and well hidden as they were.

Buck saw individual senses of humor and that Martin took his teasing about Samantha without becoming uncomfortable or embarrassed as, apparently, Vin did.

JD noticed that Vin had quicker reflexes and therefore managed to dodge most physical pranks. Martin found that one out almost immediately.

And Chris - well, Chris simply felt the differences between the pair.

But most importantly, Martin strongly felt Vin's joy with the discovery of a blood brother.

It was a Thanksgiving meal Martin would fondly remember as warm and welcoming. It was what followed that he preferred to forget.

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CHAPTER TWO

The next morning's air was sharp and cold, stinging Martin's nostrils as he inhaled. It was different from New York air, thick with the smell of pine and earth and . . . wilderness. He tilted his head back, closed his eyes and drew the air deeply into his lungs, enjoying the cool stimulation.

Then a slap on the back nearly keeled him over.

"So, y'all headin' out now?" Martin turned to find Buck grinning back at him. "You got enough cold weather gear?"

"Yup, I think I'm set. Vin and I went shopping to get the things I lacked, like better boots."

"Our sharpshooter does know his hiking gear, I'll give him that." Buck winked at Martin and headed toward his truck. "JD! Let's hit it, Pard! The job of snacks for the game is the most important one of the day!" he bellowed as he walked.

"Jeeze, Buck, I'm comin' already!" JD shook his head in exasperation and gave Martin a crooked grin as he passed. "Have fun in Vin's backyard. See ya when you get back!"

Buck and JD argued as they loaded in the truck, much to Martin's amusement. Buck took off like a shot down the driveway as JD's door slammed shut.

"Hope the women and children are safely out of the way," Martin chuckled, shaking his head.

"Buck'll sniff out the women where ever they hide." Nathan's voice was right at Martin's shoulder. "You two be careful out there, you hear? There's a little snow and it is cold. Vin knows his stuff but he still manages to get in trouble on occasion. You comin' by the office before you take off on Monday?"

"Sure am. I'll see you then and I'm pretty sure I'll be intact." Martin laughed as he picked up his pack and slung it over one shoulder. "I think I've discovered more than one brother, the way you all worry."

"We are brothers in lots of ways, Fitzgerald, and you're in by default." Nathan shook his hand and turned back to Chris' house. "Be careful now."

"Sure thing."

As Nathan mounted the steps to the front door Vin emerged from the house closely followed by Chris and Josiah. The latter pair stopped on the front porch and was joined by Nathan. Vin hopped down the stairs with his pack. The three left behind leaned on the porch railing.

"Where's Ezra?" Martin asked.

Josiah and Nathan laughed outright. Chris cracked a lopsided smile.

"We won't see Ezra before noon," Chris said.

"Oh, right. He's not a morning person," Martin chuckled.

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Vin grinned back at him then turned to the porch and waved. "See y'all on Monday."

"Call me when you get in Sunday night." Chris' tone left no leeway for argument.

"Yes, Dad." Vin rolled his eyes. He then reached over and tugged on Martin's shirt sleeve.

"Let's go before he decides to ground us."

"I mean it, Vin!"

"Yeah, I know," he called over his shoulder. "I'll call. See ya!"

A few minutes later Martin and his brother were on the open road, headed for the hills.



A pair of hours later Vin turned off the Jeep. The hot engine popped a few times in protest to the mountain cold, the only sound that could be heard in the quiet of the dirt parking area. Old patches of snow under the trees had turned shiny with ice.

"Wow," Martin said as he opened the vehicle door and stepped outside. His words carried on frosted puffs of vapor. "This is great. No one else around for miles. Vin walked around to the back and opened the rear hatch. "It's a nice hike. We'll be at the campsite tomorrow afternoon."

"The trail head looks well marked."

"The first part of the trail is pretty well traveled. When we hit the Outlook, that'll change."

"The Outlook?" Martin moved to his brother's side and helped unload the packs.

"It's the marker used to indicate where the wilderness trails start. It's a sheer rock hillside - good climbing, but we'll be hiking around it to get to the top of the hill then follow the trail from there."

"I take it you know the trail well?" Martin checked his pack and then checked the water pack.

"Been there a time or two." Vin moved the clip on holster that held his gun closer to his hip before pulling on his pack.

Martin mirrored his brother's actions. "I'm surprised no one else is here."

"This is a little out of the way and pretty cold. It's busier in the spring. With the first heavy snow fall, this'll probably get closed for the winter." Vin tightened the pack straps and took a sip of water from his hydro pack tube. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

The brothers hiked at a good clip but still took the time to notice their surroundings. Vin pointed out some birds and identified prints that Martin found. Patches of snow in the shadows became more prevalent with increased elevation, as did the icy edge of the air. It was early afternoon when Vin called for a break. "That's the Outlook."

Breathing hard, Martin followed Vin's line of sight and saw the smooth face of the next hillside. Ragged black lines of shadow etched the greyness of the stone like black lightning. The face was framed, top and bottom, by huge, scattered boulders. "Wow," he said. "That looks like some challenging climbing."

They were at the top of a hill that overlooked a valley between them and the Outlook. The rocky face rose about two hundred feet at its highest point, sloping gently down until it disappeared behind a canopy of trees and cluster of boulders.

"Yeah. It's a real workout. Come on," Vin said, hitching his thumbs in his pack straps. "We want the Outlook well behind us before night if we want to make it to the summit tomorrow."

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“Lead on, then.”

They pushed hard, the trail winding around to the side of the Outlook and then leading them up along the top. They took only one long break to admire the view from atop the Outlook. Shadows were long when they finally made camp in an upper valley. Vin settled them in an open area that had a tell-tale circle of scorched rock in the center.

“Here.” Vin handed Martin a large, folded utility saw. “Go trim some dry branches for the fire.”

Martin unfolded the knife and whistled. The serrated-edged blade was at least a foot long. “Can’t be called a pocket knife, can it?”

Vin laughed. “Airport security would have a meltdown if I pulled that out in line, wouldn’t they?”

“If that ever happens, I’ll bake it into a cake for you at Gitmo.” Chuckling, Martin left on his quest.

The night was cold, the sky sharply clear. Beside a crackling fire, the brothers enjoyed a hot meal and decided to sleep without tents under the canopy of stars glittering icily overhead. Later, as the flames burned down to glowing embers, the pair, snuggled deep in their down bags, studied the heavens. Martin, amazed by the sheer number of lights above, fell asleep to the sound of his brother reciting Cherokee lore about the rising moon. They both slept soundly.

Morning was just a pink cast in the sky when Vin shook his brother awake.

“Let’s hit it. We want to make the next camp by early afternoon. Then we can leave the big packs there while we make the summit hike.”

Martin yawned and stretched, causing the cold morning air to leak into his sleeping bag. Goose bumps erupted on his skin. “Okay, then.” Vin turned away as Martin crawled from the pack, shivering as he hit the open air. “Damn, I could use some . . .”

His thought was completed when Vin turned back and shoved a cup of hot coffee in his hands.

“Hope you like it strong,” Vin commented.

“This mind reading thing comes in real handy. Thanks!” Martin hunched his shoulders and wrapped both hands around the hot cup. He brought the brew to his lips and took a careful sip, the heat of the liquid warming him from the inside. “Perfect,” he sighed.

Vin laughed and turned back to the small fire. “The guys say it’s warmed battery acid that could stand on its own outside the cup.”

Martin snorted, pulling the steaming cup closer to his nose. “They say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Finally,” Vin said. “Someone with good taste!”

After quickly eating and packing up, the pair was on their way just as the sun crowned the eastern range. By the time it tipped from its apex, Martin and Vin were making camp again. Martin then pulled together a quick lunch before they left the base camp to make their push to the range summit.

By mid-afternoon the brothers were perched on the top of the summit, overlooking a sea of trees and miles of mountains that seemed to stretch to infinity. They sat in comforting silence for a long time, neither man willing to breach the quiet. It was Martin who spoke first.

“I can’t tell you what it means to me to find you,” he said softly, his eyes studying the distant range. “I didn’t know I was missing something until we crossed paths. Since then, I’ve felt – whole.” He shook his head and rubbed his eyes with a groan. “Damn, that sounds so cliché.”

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Vin smiled, eyes sparking with an inner energy. “It does, don’t it? Couldn’t say it any other way, though. I know what cha mean.” He paused, momentarily fiddling with the small binoculars in his hand before bringing them up to his eyes before speaking again. “I only had family for a short while but I still remember the strength of it – the inner strength – the . . . hell, I can’t tell ya how it feels. I just know. And I’m glad to have it again. There was a spell for awhile where I thought I’d imagined it.” He paused. “I had that feelin’ again when I hooked up with Team 7, but this is . . . deeper. It’s like I’ll go on if anything, well, you know . . . if anything happens to me.”

Martin smiled crookedly. “Family. Now there’s a term I’ve had to re-define. How you look at it changes everything.”

Vin’s eyes slid sideways when he pulled a few inches away from the binoculars. The corner of his mouth quirked upward. “Or not, if your definition don’t change but . . .”

Martin tilted his head and caught his brother’s gaze. “. . . But the people do. I get it.”

The pair settled back to absorb the wilderness from their lofty perch. Vin pointed out various geological landmarks visible from the summit and filled in Martin about the history associated with them. They both wanted to stay longer, but had to leave the summit to make it back to the base camp before dark. When they reached base camp, Martin felt refreshed and renewed – their new beginning well established.

That night the chatter between them was non-existent. Instead, their mental connection sizzled, the conversation fast and furious, all of it laced with emotion easily felt and openly shared. As a result, their connection deepened, rooting each with the other in a way that forever redefined the meaning of family.

By the time they surrendered to sleep, Martin and Vin knew every detail of each of their lives – the high points, the low points and the events in between that made them the men they were at that moment.



The sun had barely warmed them by the time the camp was broken down and Martin and Vin started their outbound hike to the Jeep. They would keep up a steady pace that would easily get them to the Jeep before dark.

Martin felt rejuvenated and strangely at peace. He knew that on his return to New York the pressures of family - the Fitzgerald version - would renew again but from here, the situation seemed less stressful and definitely less real.

“So what are your plans for Christmas?” Martin asked aloud. Vin was several yards ahead setting a near-brutal pace. Before his brother responded verbally, Martin felt a wash of warmth that made him grin; the speed at which he’d grown accustomed to this internal connection amazed him.

“Not sure. Skiin’ somewhere, I suppose.”

“There’s good skiing in New York,” Martin offered.

Vin threw him a backward glance, his eyes reflecting the grin on his lips. “*Not sure I’m ready for that.*”

Without having to voice his specific concerns, Martin knew exactly where his brother’s thoughts dwelled. Victor Fitzgerald would always be a lurking figure in their minds.

“*The mountains are far away from where Victor will be.*”

“*Never far enough. It’s not fair to Katherine, though.*”

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Martin was touched at the sentiment Vin held toward his – acquired mother? Adopted mother? The semantics of that relationship was something Martin still struggled with. The time with his blood brother, however, was doing a lot to define the situation. Their blood mother died when they were five years old, leaving Vin adrift. Martin was grateful for having Katherine in his life.

“I could have my sisters bring her for a visit,” Martin suggested. He frowned, concentrating on the vague path and working to avoid some exposed tree roots that Vin seemed to float over.

“Sounds nice,” Vin replied, his voice barely heard because he’d again managed to put space between them with his measured stride. His sibling was certainly comfortable in this venue, Martin realized yet again.

Martin scanned their surroundings. The trees were thick in presence and smell. Morning dew had enhanced the earthy aroma and dampened their steps on shed leaves, now a carpet-like under their feet. The canopy over them was spotty with a mix of evergreen and deciduous branches, the sporadic sunlight making gold jigsaw pieces on the ground. Clusters of icy snow collected at the base of the larger trees, protected by eternal shadow. A light cloud cover was slowly taking over the blue above and Vin mentioned the possibility of a drizzle by dark – or even light snow, which was all the more incentive to get to the Jeep in good time.

They passed the morning’s part of the hike in quiet talk and comfortable silence. No solid plans were made at this point but they both knew that they would get together soon. The desire to try and reclaim what was long lost strong between them.

Finally, Vin called for a quick break. The spot couldn’t have been more perfect. They had been following the shallow side of a ridge all morning and they were now at the end of the level trail. From here out would generally be downhill, but at this point, the view down the valley ahead was spectacular. The brothers sat on a rocky outcrop clear of trees for several long and silent minutes sharing dried apples.

“I’m guessing the Outlook is just ahead?”

“A little ways. Not far to the Jeep from there. I’m thinkin’ steak for dinner,” Vin said as she scanned the horizon.

“And I’m agreein’,” Martin replied immediately. “I didn’t see a barbeque at your place. You use the oven?”

Vin wrinkled his nose in distaste. “Nah. There’s a small grill on the roof.”

“Ah.” Martin nodded. “Missed that the other night during star gazing.” He hadn’t missed the affection his brother felt for the run-down area called Purgatorio. Meeting Vin’s friendly neighbors made the attachment understandable. Hope shared by the apartment dwellers that Purgatorio would turn around someday ran strong among them. Vin was doing good things both at work and at home, and Martin was proud of his sibling.

Obviously reading Martin’s thoughts, Vin glanced at him in surprise.

Martin laughed. “Yeah, I am proud of you and proud to be your brother.”

Vin dropped his chin. “Thanks,” he uttered softly.

Still smiling Martin wiped his hands and took a final look around. “Guess we’d better . . . hey, what’s that?” He pointed to the left side of the valley below. “An antenna?”

Vin followed Martin’s line of sight and squinted. A light breeze swept the trees causing the autumn canopy to ripple, but one thin, black line didn’t sway like the trees. It stood out from the surrounding leaves and branches as black, metallic and unbending.

“Yeah. That side of the valley has some sections of private property. This ridge we’re on divides the private lots from the federal park land.”

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“There are some houses over there?”

“I wouldn’t call ‘em that. More like small vacation or hunting cabins. There ain’t many because there’s no real road up this far. Someday, maybe. Some of the places have ham radios with generators and I guess that’s what that is – someone’s antenna for their radio.” Vin sighed and stood, adjusting his pack. “I expect this area’ll be another Aspen someday.”

Martin also stood and prepared to leave, clearing picking up Vin’s disappointment with the idea of development. “It’ll never be New York, though,” Martin offered with a grin.

Vin smiled crookedly in return. “Thank God,” he chuffed.

Chuckling, Martin slapped Vin’s shoulder and they set off on their final push. The pair walked steadily downhill until Vin called a halt for lunch which consisted of cheese sticks and granola bars. Martin recognized the area as their first camping spot. He absorbed the season’s offerings – the scattered turn in colors, the nip of frigid air, the scent of trees and earth all interlaced together with birdsong – hoping to imprint it all in his mind; he was going to miss his brother and this comfortable silence between them when he returned to the bustle of New York.

A gentle slap on his shoulder followed by a short, raspy laugh made Martin realize he’d been sitting with his eyes closed. Far from napping, he’d allowed his mind to wander at will and found a peace that made him feel incredibly relaxed when he opened his eyes.

“Gotta hit the trail if we’re gonna be outta here by dark.” Amusement heavily accented Vin’s words. “Don’t blame ya for wantin’ to stay where you were in your thoughts, though. This place does the same thing to me.”

Martin returned the crooked smile and shouldered his pack. “Can’t remember the last time I’ve felt so relaxed,” he admitted. “But I think I’ll have some painful reminders of this trip.” He leaned against a tree for a moment to stretch his calves and thighs. “Haven’t hiked like this in a while.”

“You’ll be fine. Come on, brother.” Vin hitched one shoulder, adjusting his pack, and started off.

Martin felt warmed when Vin said the word “brother”. It seemed so . . . right.

After walking steadily downhill for a while, Martin, distracted momentarily by a cloud of gnats in his face, took a wrong step, twisted his ankle and fell hard. He was sure he’d heard a tell-tale crack in the joint.

“Shit!” he swore as he grabbed his ankle. For a fleeting second there was no pain, and then sharp, electric bolts shot up his leg from the area around the knob of his ankle.

Vin was squatting at Martin’s side in an instant. “How bad?” Vin didn’t have to ask if it hurt; Martin knew his brother felt the pain as it hit.

“Not sure,” Martin said between gritted teeth. “Didn’t see that root.”

“Sorry. Shoulda pointed it out.” Vin dropped his pack and carefully straightened out Martin’s leg, maneuvering his pack under Martin’s calf.

Martin gripped either side of his knee and watched as Vin carefully probed what he could around the top of Martin’s boot. He twitched once as Vin hit a tender spot just above the outer part of his left ankle.

“I don’t dare take the boot off,” Vin mused. “If it swells, we won’t be able to get it back on. For now, the boot’s good support.” Vin’s eyes rose to meet Martin’s pained expression. “Let’s wait a spell before tryin’ to walk. Maybe it’s just bruised.”

“Yeah, sure.”

They both knew otherwise, their connection made lying impossible. Vin rose and, after making Martin as comfortable as he could, left with purpose.

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“Think I can rig up a crutch,” Vin told him mentally. *“There’s some aspirin in the outer, side pocket of my pack. While you’re at it, shift some weight to my pack.”*

“You sure?”

“Yep. Carried heavier before.”

Chewing his lower lip at the blossoming pain Martin fumbled with the pack under his leg and found the small first aid kit that contained the aspirin. Martin shook out two tablets, tucked the small pill container in his hip pocket and downed the aspirin with a mouthful of water. It took a few minutes to remove his own pack and drag it around to where he could reach it, but he finally got it situated just right and began pulling out the heavier items.

As he worked, an odd kind of movie ran in his mind. Martin could “see” what Vin was doing and they worked in concert to create a crutch. During the repacking, Martin held back some cloth items that could be used to pad parts of the crutch he could see being “made” in his mind. By the time Vin returned Martin already knew what the wood part looked like and had his additions ready to go. Neither one made any comments on the speed in which the crutch evolved. There was no need.

Martin’s injury didn’t improve with time. Obvious discoloration and swelling had already crept up his leg from the boot top by the time the crutch was finished. Aspirin and elevation didn’t help much.

“You could hike out and get help,” Martin suggested.

“Not an option,” Vin replied immediately. “I’m not leaving you alone up here. There’s no cell phone service this far up but there are some areas of connectivity farther down, beyond the Outlook.”

“What about that cabin with the antenna?” Martin suggested.

Vin tilted his head. “I thought of that but I’d have to break in. They usually aren’t occupied this time of year.” He pursed his lips in thought. “Guess they’d understand. I could come back and fix it before the heavy snows. Can you go a little ways more?”

“Sure.”

They put the packs back together and Martin’s was significantly lighter than before. He felt better that Vin wouldn’t be hauling it the entire way so he didn’t object to the transfer of load. Vin helped him struggle to his feet and Martin tucked the homemade crutch under his arm. Lightning shots of pain zinged up his leg at the repositioning so Martin had to stand still and take a few deep breaths until the uncomfortable surge leveled out. Vin’s arm was around his waist, patiently steadying him until he was ready to go.

Martin indicated with a shaky nod when he was ready to go. Vin hoisted up his pack and started out, walking backwards and slightly ahead of Martin until he saw that his brother had the hang of using the crutch.

“Just like old times,” Martin puffed, joking about the circumstances under which they’d first met. “Different limbs this time.”

“The team’ll never let me forget this,” Vin mumbled.

“And you said they were exaggerating.”

They both huffed breathy laughs.

They followed the trail for a little while but eventually had to veer off to get to the cabin. The pair carefully made their way over the ridge and down other side. Martin knew he was slowing Vin up, but his brother refused to leave him. Inwardly, Martin was glad and he knew Vin felt the sentiment.

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Vin followed a trail mapped in his mind and Martin felt Vin's confidence in his chosen path. Martin followed without hesitation or suggestion, knowing his brother was in his element. Even twins had their individual strengths, Martin had come to realize over the past few months.

"There." Vin paused and pointed downhill, off to their right. Between the trees Martin could barely make out a boxy structure.

"The antenna place?" Martin said, squinting painfully.

"Yeah. The tower's separate from the cabin. This guy's serious about his radio system; that's an impressive antenna."

"Rather risky having all that equipment up here, unguarded."

Vin shrugged. "No real road up here. You'd need a serious four-wheel drive, dry ground and lots of guts."

"Like the ambulance that has to get me?"

Vin laughed and shook his head. "Sorry, bro, but it's either gonna be a mule or a helicopter, and the mule has a better chance of gettin' in," he joked.

Martin grinned through his pain and then winced. "I am entrusting you with the task of insuring that there are no photographs of this incident. Danny would never let me live it down."

Vin quirked an eyebrow. "Do camera phones work without a cell tower?" He felt his pockets teasingly.

Martin groaned "Me and my big mouth. Let's get a-move-on, brother, before I completely lose my sense of humor."

Going slower as the terrain steepened, it seemed forever until they were close enough to the tiny wooden structure to confirm that it was probably unoccupied. It was so basic it was ugly, yet the area around it was meticulously clean of brush or any kind of shrub. A generous pile of chopped wood was neatly stacked to one side. Parallel tracks sunk in the dirt where a vehicle's path had been established were filled with dead leaves.

"Someone's been up here fairly recently," Vin noted, handing Martin the small binoculars. "That wood in the pile's not that old." Vin turned to Martin and the expression on his face told Martin that they shared the same pained weariness. "Sit. Take a rest while I get inside. Technically, it's not burglary, right?"

Martin dropped to the ground with a grunt. "Don't know about Colorado, but it's not in New York. Vandalism at best. Why? You worried about adding a felony to your rap sheet?"

"Nah," Vin snorted. "I'm more wonderin' about what the boys can harass me about. But what they don't know . . ."

"My lips are sealed. Brothers in crime and all." Martin forced a grin. "No photos, right?"

Vin laughed as he started down the hill to the lonely structure.

Martin settled down against a tree trunk and pulled the two packs together, using them to elevate his injured foot. He didn't want to let on how much the injury hurt but he knew that Vin knew. He leaned back with a pained sigh and pulled the tube from his hydro pack to his mouth. The water was far from cool but it was wet and still refreshing. Martin found the aspirin and downed two more, the bitter taste lingering on his tongue.

Watching Vin's progress to the cabin gave him a needed distraction. His brother moved like a wild thing amongst the trees, so natural and at ease. Martin chuckled when Vin approached the structure with ingrained caution. Years of police work were hard to put aside. First, he circled the building from just outside the tree line then started to the front door, slightly off center and away from the single window on that side of the building. Vin's voice carried faintly up to where Martin sat.

"Hello in the cabin!"

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With no reaction from the inside, Vin stepped up the two front steps and knocked on the door, standing to one side.

“Hello?” Vin's voice was faint.

Confirming there was no one inside Vin began a slow circle of the cabin, checking the windows. Martin hefted the small binoculars. Now with a round, magnified, albeit narrowed, view of structure, Martin realized that “cabin” was a gross over statement - it was more like a shack. Unpainted and raw-looking, the structure still struck him as being fairly solid. Two additional antennae stuck up from the roof. As Vin disappeared from view around the corner, Martin noticed the windows were covered from the inside with what looked like newspapers.

That made him chuckle out loud. “At least it isn't aluminum foil,” he muttered, recalling the “alien abduction” case he'd handled in New York. Samantha and Jack had been more than entertained by his knowledge of the UFO culture.

Martin's mind wandered in the direction of Samantha as he surveyed the shack. He put the binoculars down, a small smile forming on his lips. Gazing in the direction of the cabin, his mind went elsewhere for a time before the faint sound of breaking glass refocused his attention in his brother's direction. Vin must have decided to get in on the other side, Martin reasoned.

He leaned back and shut his eyes in an attempt to truly rest. Melodious birdsong and the chattering of squirrels drifted on the cool, light breeze, relaxing Martin. After a few moments, he realized that his ankle felt a little better. Well, maybe less painful was a better description, but still, it was an improvement. With a satisfied sigh, he shut his eyes and simply listened. The call of some kind of hunting bird came from far above and soon after, something fell nearby, softly striking the leaf-padded ground with a muted thump.

Suddenly, Martin felt a stab of alarm. His eyes flew open and he instinctively reached for the weapon on his hip. The second he realized it was Vin's emotions he'd read, a muted and sudden explosion shook his world.

“Shit!” Martin spat as he struggled to his feet, eyes locked on the cabin. The sound echoed distantly down the valley, silencing the birds. A puff of smoke trailed upward from the far side and quickly dispersed in the light breeze. As Martin tried to slow his heart, a tiny drift of white smoke crawled from under the door and across the porch. The cabin was still standing, but Martin's mind held a vast, empty space.

He couldn't feel his brother anymore.

“VIN!”

CHAPTER FOUR

“VIN!”

Martin took an anxious step forward and lurched sideways against the tree, his injured ankle cruelly reminding him of its presence. Awkwardly frantic, he leaned down and retrieved the crutch, hurriedly fitting it under his now bruised arm. Ignoring the pain, Martin hobbled as fast as he could down the slope, forced to watch where he put his feet instead of the cabin. Frustrated eyes snapped from ground to cabin as he covered the yards, anxiety making him yell again.

“VIN!”

Finally, he reached the edge of the clearing where he forced himself to pause to both catch his breath and study an approach. Martin's heart pounded frantically as he studied the seemingly benign structure.

The front door and window was still intact. Along the side, he could see that the newspaper linings were yellowed with sun damage, but still firmly attached. One window in the back was broken, the paper wafting in the slight breeze. A hose faucet protruded from the wall under the damaged window - Vin's step to the crude entrance. Other than the broken frame, there was no indication of fire or, alarmingly, life. Martin finished his circle of the structure and then approached the front door with his gun raised.

Martin struggled up the two porch steps, wobbling dangerously. “Vin?” He called, the silence now becoming frightening. He studied the door, which was locked shut with a hasp and padlock as well as a dead bolt. For a moment, he debated shooting his way in, but then a memory was nudged awake by the lingering odor of smoke; he'd smelled it before, and the realization of what it was made him take a surprised step back.

“A *flash-bang grenade?*” Alarms went off in his mind. With added caution, he moved toward through the window and zeroed in on one upper corner where the newspaper covering had sagged down. Martin holstered his gun and put his crutch aside, needing both hands to support his body and cup around his eyes as he stretched up to look through the triangle of glass.

The darkness inside slowly rolled back and revealed shapes and forms as Martin's eyes adjusted low light, and soon a horrible scene emerged from the shadows.

Martin's pulse quickened when he saw Vin's sprawled face down on the floor. A ray of light cut a path into the single room from the broken window. The beam slashed across Vin's still face. Martin also saw a dark finger of . . . something . . . staining the floorboards outwards from under Vin's head. Blood? Martin forced himself to be still and evaluate the scene.

He pressed closer, the stressed glass crackling ominously. Backing off slightly to assess the glass, something clicked in the agent's mind when he noticed wire leading away from the

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inside of the window frame. Frowning, Martin looked back into the room, his attention focused on the other windows.

"Damn it," he whispered, frustrated at the lack of detail in the poor light. Martin felt his pockets with one hand finally locating the small flashlight tucked in an inner pocket. He twisted it on and pointed it inside, first pausing at Vin to confirm any signs of life. Martin was relieved to see his chest rising and falling, but he also noticed the many dark spots scattered over his body. More blood? Martin's jaw clenched. He had to force himself to check the rest of the interior and reluctantly moved the light away from his brother and to the cabin walls.

The bright beam skimmed around the window across from him, the wire he sought visible against the chipped white paint of the frame. From there, the light followed the wire to the floor where it ended at a duct taped cylinder tucked against the wall.

"*Booby trapped!*" Martin gasped and his heart raced again. Now knowing what to look for, other wires and wrapped devices sorted themselves out of the darkness in the probing beam. A surge of fear forced him back where he was stopped by the railing edging the small porch.

"Oh my God," he whispered, rubbing his eyes. Images of "Unibomber" Ted Kaczynski's cabin popped instantly into Martin's mind. This was the same, booby-trapped - laced situation and the last thing they needed was for the owner to arrive. The agent recognized the cylinders as gas grenades, but there were box-shaped devices in there, too. Were they stuffed with shrapnel? What other weapons would the obviously disturbed owner have if he returned? And how did Vin survive this deadly set-up? "Jesus, Vin, what did you fall into this time?"

Collecting his thoughts and reining in his panic, Martin gathered his crutch and began a slow circle of the wooden structure. He checked every window and looked in every opening, no matter how small. Eventually, he was able to put together a mental picture of what was inside. From what he could discern from his limited visual investigation, it appeared that each opening had two traps - an initial trap and a backup trap. There was only one door. Martin theorized that there had to be a way to disarm the door traps - otherwise, how would the owner get inside?

The only other item of interest he found on his inspection was a generator locked in a small shed attached to the house. The fuse box must be in there, too, Martin thought. He returned to the shed and tried to remember the details of what he'd read about Kaczynski's cabin - how had they initially entered?

The shed door was locked with a simple hasp and lock. Making a decision, Martin shot the hasp and the lock fell to the ground with a soft thud. Standing to one side and turning his face away, he carefully nudged the door open. The hinges' dry creaking scraped at his raw nerves, but Martin pushed again. The door fought movement but he finally got it open enough to look inside. The generator, a cracked garden hose and a breaker box on the wall were the only occupants, save for a few scrambling spiders.

The generator needed a key and Martin figured that the key was inside the cabin or with the owner. The breaker box was locked with a small padlock which the agent grabbed and twisted viciously, breaking the hasp from the slightly corroded metal box.

The two pairs of breaker switches were in the "Off" position.

Martin resisted the urge to throw the switches when he saw a lone wire trailing out of the box. A conduit ran from the top of the box and disappeared into the cabin wall, typical of all breaker boxes, but the sole wire taped to the outside of the conduit was not normal. He could see that the wire mingled in with the rest of the wires that spilled from the conduit to the breakers. That sole wire was obviously added after the breaker box had been installed. Could it be the way to disarm the door traps? It was a simple and clever design and an easy way to allow

initial entrance to the cabin if all he had to do was throw the switches. Usually, though, nothing was that easy. Instead, Martin decided to follow the wire first. And with the shape his foot was in, it was going to be painful.

First, though, he needed a saw to take out part of the wall. He remembered the folding saw he'd teased Vin about and hobbled his way back to the packs. The folding blade was easy to find, as it was stored in an outer pocket of Vin's pack. He also found a sturdy hand axe, and tucked it into his waistband with the saw. Before returning to the structure he downed a few more aspirin and stuffed whatever first aid supplies would fit into his pockets.

Entering the shed Martin climbed on top of the generator, his leg and ankle screaming in protest, and paused to catch his breath, waiting for the pain to ebb. Then, when the agony was at least tolerable, Martin pulled out the folding saw and began working on the dry, aged wood around the conduit's juncture with the cabin wall.

Martin prayed as he worked.



“Come ON! Another flag? That was a good play!” JD’s loud commentary was backed by the groans and grumbled curses of the rest of the team. It startled Chris back into reality, his twitch noticed by one other teammate.

“Mr. Larabee?” Chris snapped his head sideways to find Ezra staring at him curiously. “Are you all right?”

Chris scowled at him, slightly embarrassed, and turned back to the game. “Yeah, yeah. I was just . . .” He paused, thinking back to the disquieting feeling that had suddenly washed over him a few moments ago.

“Just what?” This came from Buck whose attention was now drawn away from the television screen.

Chris glanced at Buck, opening his mouth for a sharp reply, but found no words. The feeling was back again, stronger this time, and he frowned, searching for a verbal definition. Unable to do so, Chris rose and turned to stare out towards the mountains framed by the large great room window.

Sudden silence, save for the electronic mutterings of the football game, brought his attention back to the here and now. He glanced back to find five sets of eyes staring at him. He returned the looks for a moment before asking, “When does it get dark? About six?”

“Earlier,” Nathan responded. “Closer to five-fifteen. Why?”

Chris glanced at his watch. It was a little past three o’clock. “Vin should be home by then or at least out of the hills.” He looked around and spied his cell phone on the bar and stalked to it, snatching it up and dialing in one swift motion.

“Don’t think you’ll get him right now,” Josiah said. “There’s lousy to no reception up there. Once they’re on the road, maybe.”

The profiler’s assessment proved to be correct as Vin’s cell went immediately to voice mail. Chris snapped the phone closed with a soft curse.

“You think they’re in trouble, don’t you?” JD rolled to his knees from his prone position on the floor. His expression told Chris that the youngest team member already knew the answer.

Clipping the phone to his belt, Chris ran his hand through his hair and turned to look out the window again. Expectation weighed the air around him, settling an imaginary weight on his shoulders. This odd connection he had with Vin had become a fact of life for him and his

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team, proven true too many times to ignore. He turned back and did what he did best: took control.

“I’m not sure but I sure as hell can’t sit here and ignore what my gut’s telling me.” Chris grabbed his keys from the same place he’d found the phone. “I’m getting my hiking boots and some supplies.”

Before he could move away the rest of the team was on their feet, verbally dividing up tasks without question.

With a grim smile, Chris headed down the hall to begin preparations. He still couldn’t pinpoint exactly what he was feeling but he did know that it felt better to move, and move he would until Vin and Martin were back in the fold or the worrisome feeling dissipated – whichever came first.

Chris was determined to make it the former as opposed to the latter.



Martin had managed to remove a sizeable chunk of the wall due to the dry nature of the wood. He was sweaty and his hands splinter-ridden but kept on with an unexplainable sense of urgency that wasn’t tied to his injured brother. Finally, he was able to see inside after peeling away a thin layer of insulation and cutting through inadequate wallboard.

Now able to get his head and one shoulder in the cabin, Martin fished the small, powerful flashlight from a pocket and clicked it on to examine the inside. First, he checked on Vin.

Vin position on the floor hadn’t changed. Satisfied his brother was still breathing, Martin probed further with the flashlight. Radio equipment was stacked against one wall across from the frighteningly still body. A table sat in what must have been the kitchen area was piled with boxes, some labeled “Explosives” or “Explosive Material”. Notebooks, folders and books were haphazardly stacked on every surface, including the floor. Photos and newspaper articles were pinned to the walls. The single room smelled musty and vaguely chemical. Fine wires flashed silver when the light’s beam crossed over them, and they seemed to be everywhere.

Martin took a shaky breath and refocused on his mission. Looking up, he found the single wire he sought and followed its path from where it separated from the conduit and climbed the wall to the juncture with the ceiling. The wire ran along the ceiling line, around the corner and to the front door frame. From there, it ran down the hinged side of the door frame to a box. From the box, another wire ran under a throw rug to a tripod. Martin could see the wire that ran from the tripod, about a foot off the floor, to another tripod on the other side of the door way. The door, when pushed open, would trip the trap. A grenade was taped to the floor under each set of tripod legs.

Martin swallowed hard. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck and he worked to control his breathing. Visually, he swept the small cabin once again and counted no less than eight other traps. He had to get Vin out of there.

Quantico had trained him to recognize a bomb but not how to disable one. Martin frantically tried to recall anything he’d seen or heard about this kind of trap, and how other agents had dealt with them. The trap wired to the door was different from the others. The breaker box had to be the way to disarm it, Martin thought with as much conviction as he could muster. Vin’s life was at stake, and he knew he probably wouldn’t be 100% sure about any plan he’d come up with.

He decided to go with his gut. Martin clambered down from the top of the generator, careful to not antagonize his injury more than he already had. He balanced on his good leg, panting heavily, and yanked open the breaker box again. His trembling fingers hesitated momentarily over the switches; then he swallowed hard and threw them to the "On" position.

The only thing he heard was a faint hum.

Releasing a deeply held breath, Martin snagged his crutch and limped his way to the front door where he was now confronted by the padlock and deadbolt. The padlock hasp was easily dispatched with a gunshot. The deadbolt would be trickier because even if he had two good legs and could kick the door in, there was a possibility of setting off another trap.

He could go in through the same window Vin had, but from what Martin saw there, again, was the possibility of setting off another trap. Each opening into the cabin had a primary and secondary trap. For some reason, Vin hadn't set off the primary window trap - he'd been injured by the secondary one once he was inside. Martin wasn't quite prepared to say the primary was a dud. Besides, with his injured ankle he wasn't sure he could make it in the window, anyway. It had to be the door and he didn't have a key but he did have . . .

Martin took off in an awkward stride to the shed. He retrieved the saw and returned to work on the door. Once he got safely inside and checked on Vin, he could use the radio to get help. It would be over soon and they would be back at Chris' ranch in no time.

He hoped.



The apartment was dark even as the full light of day struck the west facing windows. A smoke stained, heavy drape covered the glass to keep outside eyes from prying into his life. Any fresh air from the open window was rebuffed by the heavy material which also refused any of the stale air inside from escaping. As a result, the room's air was heavy and warm

He liked it that way. It was like an invisible blanket. It was comforting. It was his.

A radio murmured constantly from one corner, always tuned to a news station and continually infused the air with biased political commentary, debates and rude radio hosts. At the top of every hour there was laughingly called a news brief.

He knew the briefs lied because government lied and the government owned the radio waves. By keeping track of the government issued lies, though, he could hear what wasn't being said and those were the things that kept him ever vigilant.

Secrets - understanding them was the only way a common, working man could understand the government's real intentions. Those secrets were what constantly threatened his life and lifestyle. He wanted government completely out of his life and he wasn't above fighting to keep it that way. A short stint in the Army had taught him how to defend himself; demolitions proved to be an area he excelled in and he could have been the best if he hadn't have been dishonorably discharged because of lies. Government lies.

The phone rang and he jerked his head up from the mass of wires on his kitchen table. The clipper handles became slick in his palm from instant sweat. The phone rarely rang and when it did, it never brought good news.

He carefully set down the clippers and turned off the radio with a remote control. He reached for the telephone with a shaky hand. Slowly, he lifted the receiver from the cradle. In the sudden silence he could hear his own heartbeat as he drew the device closer. The hard plastic was cold on against his skin but it was the telltale coded message playing in his ear that turned his gut to ice.

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His secret, private retreat had been breached.

Without a word he replaced the receiver and instantly fell into his well-rehearsed plan of action. He knew this would happen eventually, it always did. A deadly calm enveloped him. The alarm had been triggered and he rose to meet the challenge.

Grabbing the black duffel which was already packed and always ready, he strode from the room, leaving everything behind. Such were the wages of war and right now, his personal, private enclave was the front line and it had been violated.

He'd be there in about an hour, ready to fight to the death for his own secrets and what was rightly his.

First, though, he had to isolate the enemy. Leery of most electronic surveillance because they were too easily turned against you, there were still some basic electronic backups that were simple, untraceable and very, very useful. At this moment, he was glad he'd incorporated one such device into his security system.

Without power, the interloper would be cut off. It just took one call from the disposable cell phone he kept for just this scenario. Once he was away and on the road, he called the number.



Chris had an unshakable feeling that he was racing against time. Corded muscles stood out in clear definition along the tops of both hands and forearms as he gripped the steering wheel and pushed his truck to the edge.

"Whoa there, stud, we want to get there in one piece, right?" Buck slapped one hand onto the dashboard in front of him and threw his boss a tentative glance.

Chris pressed his lips tightly together and settled deeper into the seat without altering speed or course.

"I know Ez can really drive that fancy car 'o his, but I think even he's havin' a problem keepin' up. Slow down, will ya, Pard? Don't think trucks this size are designed to take turns on two wheels."

With a disgusted snort, Chris glowered at his longtime friend with the intent of shutting him up but the open-eyed fear he saw there shocked him into reality. He glanced down at the speedometer – 90 MPH. Surprised, he let up on the gas pedal.

"Thanks," Buck sighed, retracting his hand from the dash. "Wasn't sure these jeans'd be clean much longer."

That made Chris chuff a strangled laugh and his hands relaxed a bit on the wheel. "Just worried," he finally grumbled.

"Yeah, I can tell, old dog. We're all here with ya so just take it easy. We'll get Thing 1 and Thing 2 outta whatever fix you think they're in."

"I know. Thanks, Buck."

Buck glanced at his watch. "I figure twenty minutes 'till we're there. Not much time 'til dark."

"Did the Park Service call back yet?"

"Chris, JD only just called. What with it being Sunday afternoon and a holiday weekend I don't think they're gonna call back too quick. JD'll let us know when he hears from 'em."

Chris' grip on the wheel tightened again and he pushed a little harder on the accelerator pedal as Buck muttered a curse and grabbed the door handle for support.

CHAPTER FIVE

Visions of “The Shining” flashed in Martin’s mind as he swung the hand axe at the cabin door. He started just above the dead bolt and managed to inflict some major damage because the door was constructed with the same planks that made up the cabin walls. Although the planks weren’t really that thick, they were well seasoned and very sturdy. His plan was to make some holes around the lock then use the utility saw to simply cut out the lock - time consuming, but the safest way he could think of to gain entry.

Finally, after what seemed like hours according to his screaming shoulders and throbbing ankle, the door was free of the bolt. Martin carefully pushed it open and made sure his crutch was firmly set under his arm before stepping inside. As he paused to allow his eyes adjust to the inner darkness, his brother's still form separated itself from the shadows. Martin's shaky hand pulled out the small flashlight, its beam easily picking out the web-like trip wires between him and his goal.

Before anything else, Martin had to defuse a few bombs. The grenade canisters would be simple enough – all he had to do was detach the wires from the pull pins. What he assumed to be shrapnel packets was another story; they needed a closer look.

Martin stepped over the first wire now lying flat and impotent on the floor. It had automatically defused when the main circuit breaker was turned on, but the door’s secondary wire was still intact and strung taut about a foot off the floor. Martin cautiously stepped over it and awkwardly dropped to his knees to investigate. His assumption about the shrapnel packets was correct but on the positive side, the device was easily rendered inactive by disconnecting the trigger wire. He did so quickly and returned to his path.

The cabin crowded with clutter that did not block the effectiveness of the devices. Martin carefully worked his way toward Vin, checking each step along the way for trip wires. He disconnected two more before reaching his brother and immediately felt for a pulse, letting out a grateful breath when he found one. Holding the flashlight in his teeth his hands roamed over Vin’s head and found the reason for his brother's state – there was a good-sized, bloody dent in the back of his head and another sizeable lump over one ear. Vin had hit something very hard on his way to the floor. Looking up, Martin figured it was the corner of the solid crate being used as a table he lay near. Martin continued his investigation.

Vin sprawled on one side. Bloody rents peppered his back and shoulders; what felt like a nail protruded just below one shoulder blade. Martin's fingers felt sharp bits in many of the other wounds. He glanced around and looked closely at the window Vin had come through – the initial grenade was still intact and had obviously failed but the second device had done its job. The alarm Martin felt from Vin prior to the explosion must have been when he realized what he’d done.

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Martin quickly realized there wasn't much he could do for Vin at the moment. His first priority, then, was to get help on the way and get themselves out of this mess. But where the hell were they? Even if he got someone on the radio, how could he direct them?

He quickly felt his pockets and cursed. His phone had GPS capabilities, but it was currently switched off and in his pack . . . outside. As was Vin's. Martin chewed his lower lip and quickly organized his thoughts – radio someone, get Vin out then turn on the phones.

With a plan in place Martin turned to the radio and picked his way to the console. He played the flashlight beam over the equipment to locate the power switch. Finally, he located one and reached out. Before he touched it, however, something he recalled from his explosives training stopped him cold: Radio waves detonated some kinds of explosive devices.

An odd tug-of-war took place in his mind as he quickly weighed pros and cons, the biggest con being that he wasn't an explosives expert. The debate ended.

"Crap," he sighed dejectedly, turning his back on the tempting display of electronics. Instead, he studied the inside of the cabin for any clues of what his next step should be. His ankle screamed in pain as he shifted his weight and he paused to catch his breath at the assault. His gaze fell on one of the many newspapers covering the windows and pinned to the wall. The word "Explosion" jumped out at him from one sheet and he shuffled a little closer.

The bold headline was easy to read, even in the dim room – "Explosion Rocks IRS Offices."

The overlapping sheet's headline announced. "Bombing Closes Federal Building".

Martin's eyes skipped along the next half-dozen headlines – "Explosion", "Bomb" and "Terrorist Attack", all in bold text, were prominent in the titles. As his gaze swept the entire cabin Martin's pulse quickened – hundreds of clippings dangled from the bare, wooden walls. Exterior photos of the crime scenes that showed fire and police personnel cleaning up after the bombings were everywhere. There was a bloody shirt pinned below one photo of a dead politician. A partially burned American flag drooped from a nail in one high corner. Alarms rang in Martin's brain.

They had to leave. Now.

Swallowing hard, Martin carefully retraced his steps to Vin and stopped to study their escape route. Two more traps to defuse and there would be an absolutely clear path to the front door. After an extended glance at the prone figure, he hobbled past Vin and went to work. While disconnecting the second device a sorrowful moan refocused his attention.

"Vin!" he called. Quickly finishing the job he crawled to Vin's side and gently cradled his face. "Hey, you awake?"

Vin blinked, hissing painfully. One arm dragged its way to his forehead as his body twisted aside.

"Lie still. You're hurt." Martin's hands slipped down to Vin's chest, where careful pressure stopped any more motion. "Hey, hey . . . it's me, Martin. You with me now?"

Vin gasped and twitched. One hand flailed the air then settled on top of Martin's. His eyelids fluttered. "Shit," he groaned. "M'head."

"You're going to have a hell of a headache, I'm sure. Lie there a minute and don't move. Remember where you are?"

Vin stilled with concentration. His eyes opened a crack. "Martin?" he breathed.

"Yeah, it's me. What hurts, brother?"

Vin groaned again and slipped a hand up to his temple. "Head. Dark."

"Yeah, it's dark in here. Look, I need to get you outside but we're in kind of a mess . . ."

That made Vin stiffen and blink rapidly. "Huh?"

WITHOUT A TRACE FANFIC BY AJB

“We’re surrounded by trip wires and booby traps. I’ve disarmed most of them . . .”

“Shit!” Vin hissed, struggling to sit up. Martin grabbed his shoulders so he wouldn’t topple over. “Traps . . .”

“Hold still, will you? I’ve taken care of most of them. I’ll have you out of here soon. I think someone . . .”

“I can’t see.”

Martin tightened his grip on Vin’s shoulders. “What?”

“I . . . it’s dark. I can’t see anything . . . just blurry shadows . . . spots . . .”

“It’s dark in here and you hit your head. We’ll be outside in a few minutes . . . can you stay still? I want to check the area again.”

“Sure, sure.” Martin helped Vin sit up. He pulled at his legs until they were crossed and then Vin propped his elbows on his knees and supported his head with his palms. He swayed where he sat.

Martin made a quick exam of their exit path and was satisfied it was clear. Speaking quietly, he then helped Vin to his feet and waited until he was able to maintain balance. Stabbing pain shot up from Martin’s ankle.

“This isn’t going to be easy,” Martin puffed. “You have to help me walk and I’ll tell you where to go. That work for you? Can you do that?”

“Yeah, I c’n do that. Just quit shoutin’.”

“I’m not shouting,” Martin said in a quieter voice. “I need to . . .” He draped his arm over Vin’s shoulders and awkwardly snuggled up to Vin’s side. Vin twitched and hissed at the touch. “Sorry. There. You ready?” Vin nodded slightly. “All right then, let’s move out. Small steps. I’ll direct you with my arm. I’m using you as my crutch.”

The sorry pair crossed the littered floor to the open door and, with a little careful maneuvering by Martin, made it onto the small porch. Martin talked Vin down the stairs and across the short clearing to the trees’ edge, their progress agonizingly slow. Once they reached the safety of the trees Martin directed Vin to sit and settled his brother against sturdy trunk.

“I have to get my crutch. Stay put.”

“I’m stayin’,” Vin whispered, holding his head between his hands. He gulped a few times and Martin realized his brother was trying not to vomit; sometimes the ability to sense his brother had its drawbacks.

Martin swallowed hard himself. “I’ll be right back.”

By the time Martin got to the cabin, breath-stealing pain zinged up from his ankle with every step. When he retrieved his crutch, he took a few moments to regroup both mentally and physically before returning. Every instinct told him to put distance between them and this structure, but Martin had to make sure Vin could move without injuring himself further.

Curled over onto himself, Vin didn’t acknowledge Martin’s return and Martin couldn’t feel the usually reassuring presence in his own mind. Once at his brother’s side again, he was a dismayed to really see Vin’s injuries in the light of day.

Bloody holes peppered his clothing and, recalling the nail protruding from Vin’s back, Martin was sure he had shrapnel embedded everywhere. Dried blood flaked off the back of his brother’s head causing the hair to mat in a gory clump. Vin’s face was buried in his hands, elbows propped on crossed legs. Ragged breathing shook his shoulders. The city boy wondered if wild animals would react to the smell of his brother’s blood. Martin patted his gun in his waistband.

A visual examination of Vin’s lower back told him his brother’s weapon was still intact, too. Satisfied, Martin gently shook Vin’s shoulder.

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“Hey,” he said softly. “Time to get moving. Is there a good place for us to hunker down and wait for Chris and the boys? Maybe pick out some shrapnel? Vin?”

It took several moments of gentle prodding before Vin responded with a faint hiss. His surge into consciousness triggered waves of pain in Martin’s own mind and he staggered back a step with a gasp. Gathering himself, Martin swallowed hard and worked through the waves of agony, repeating the questions until Vin finally replied.

“Uh, yeah,” he said breathily. “Th’ . . . the Outlook?”

Martin nodded, trying to catch his own equilibrium. “Yeah, yeah. I can find that.”

“Y’can see ‘em comin’ up the trail from there.” Vin whispered. “Good shelter in th’ rocks.”

“Then the Outlook it is.” He urged Vin to his feet and they made it to the backpacks in a stumbling pace. Martin emptied the packs and combined anything useful into his alone and discarding anything that would lighten the load. There was no way Vin could carry a pack with so much shrapnel.

He hauled Vin to his feet again. It struck him then that something still wasn’t right – the way Vin groped for balance and then for his shoulder told him his brother still couldn’t see. Martin waved his hand in front of Vin’s eyes and got no reaction.

A zing of fear raced down his spine and he felt Vin tense up. “We’re okay. We’ll be all right. Can I use you as a crutch?” With his arm over Vin’s shoulders he could direct their path. Vin nodded, clearly dazed. “Come on, then.” Working keep his voice calm, he lifted Vin’s arm over his shoulder again and directed him toward the trail. “Let’s get out of here. Daylight’s burnin’.”

It was another hour before the sun dropped behind the surrounding mountains and after that, the light faded quickly. Martin ignored his pressing desire to simply collapse and, instead, pushed on a little longer stopping only when the narrow path disappeared between several scattered boulders. He recognized that the Outlook wasn’t far away.

“I think we’re close,” Martin puffed. “We have to stop. I can’t see the trail anymore.”

Vin grunted, clearly spent. How he’d managed to stay on his feet so long amazed Martin. He maneuvered his brother to one side and settled him sideways against a larger rock, then dropped down beside him. Rubbing his leg above his injured ankle, Martin tried to judge Vin’s condition without looking obvious but soon realized that it didn’t matter – he could tell that Vin’s eyesight was still severely compromised. The usually bright, expressive eyes were dull and unfocused and Vin groped to find the tube to his water pack.

Fear tingled Martin’s gut – it was up to him to get them out of this.

“Jerky, granola bars and Gatorade for dinner,” Martin stated brightly, pushing aside his worry.

Vin slumped against the rock.

“*Don’t think I c’n keep anythin’ down.*” Even Vin’s thoughts sounded weary.

“*At least drink some liquids for now. Small sips.*”

Martin mixed Gatorade powder in one of the hydropacks. “Good thing I filled up with water. Don’t think I could take another step right now to find any.” He handed Vin the drink. “Here. Work on that.” Vin took a few half-hearted sips with trembling hands. “I’ll look for something to make a small fire.”

“kay,” was all Vin mustered up.

Nearly overwhelming exhaustion washed over Martin’s mind. Vin was suffering badly. “Rest,” Martin said lowly. “I’ll take care of things.”

Vin sagged against the boulder, breathing raggedly. Martin studied the bloody pattern on Vin’s body in the fading light and surmised that Vin had managed to turn aside before the

explosion, protecting most of his chest and stomach from the flying missiles. It was a crude trap designed to wound but could be deadly in the right circumstances. He dug out one of the sleeping bags and unzipped it to use as a blanket.

As he tucked the bag around Vin, Martin frowned as a thought suddenly occurring to him. Why wound? Why leave the victim alive enough to report the incident? The only reason would be to . . .

"Damn!" Martin growled. Vin flinched at the voice and turned in Martin's direction, his eyes blank shadows.

"He's comin' after us, ain't he?" Vin had picked up on Martin's train of thought.

"It's possible." Martin made sure the bag was snug around Vin's shoulders. *"It would make sense, then, that he's not too far away."*

Martin looked at the westward sky and then his watch. "It'll be completely dark soon. If we don't make a fire and lay low, he can't find us."

"An' neither will the guys."

Martin stood, drawing from a reserve of energy deep within. "We'll just have to find the guys first, then, won't we?"



Dust thickened the surface of his vehicle when he finally stopped. He was sure the intruders were still in the area of the cabin, probably on foot because this was the closest anyone could get in a vehicle and he hadn't seen any signs of a car on his way to this spot. They had to have reached the cabin on foot from another direction.

Insuring that his vehicle was parked out of sight, he shouldered his survival pack and quickly checked his equipment. The two handguns were locked and loaded, but would only be used as a last resort. Noise could draw unwanted company. He tucked them in his waistband and shrugged on the water backpack. Before donning the specially designed daypack he loaded up the incorporated quiver pockets with a dozen arrows – all metal rods with razor sharp heads. The last item he grabbed was the small crossbow. It wasn't much in size, he knew, but it was the most powerful bow on the market. He had brought down all manner of game with it in the past, quietly avoiding any complaints about out of season hunting.

All that practice had readied him for this moment. Protecting what was his energized his body in a thrilling way. He grinned wolfishly. He knew he'd have to move to a new enclave, but first he had to wipe away any sign of his existence at this one, starting with those that knew his secret.

Satisfied, he turned and started his trek. He would be another person and on his way to a new life by dawn.



Salty curses bit the air as Chris stumble once again.

"It's gettin' dark, pard, what did you expect? I think it may be a good idea to stop . . ."

"Can't stop," Chris interrupted Buck sharply.

"Getting lost out here isn't going to help Vin 'n Martin." Buck's voice was breathy with exertion. He batted a low branch from his face and spat. "Damn spider webs."

Chris pushed on, the path still clear to him in the glowing white of his flashlight beam. That would change soon, he knew, as the well-worn day hike trail shriveled down to the

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narrower, less used path that lead to the wilderness camping areas. Chris remembered the rocky precipice that marked the start of the upper trails; only serious and experienced hikers and campers continued around and beyond the impressionable landmark. He remembered Vin telling him that “this is where the fun starts.” He snorted and shook his head at the memory. Vin always did like his fun tinged with challenge.

“Chris,” Buck continued. “We’ll need to stop soon.”

“Not yet.”

Exasperated, Buck rolled his eyes skyward and then turned to train his light beam on the others, who were puffing and grumbling behind him. “Hang in there, boys.” The other four nodded shortly, unwilling to break their concentration on the darkened trail.

Chris weaved around a few more trees and then paused to look around. The path ahead dropped rapidly at this point but he knew it would slope sharply upward again. Between the trees he could see a lighter patch of the neighboring hillside where the trail would take them. The moon’s light wasn’t quite yet at its full luminescence, but the contrasting paleness of the Outlook’s rocky face made it easy to pick out. Seeing it gave Chris an unexplained feeling of dread.

Setting his jaw, he pushed onward.



Night crept slowly over the exhausted brothers, its shadows silently and inevitably embracing their world. Martin noticed how the rustling of small wildlife around them eventually disappeared along with the light. Birds fell quiet. With the night came a gentle wind that rustled the trees and carried the voice of a distant owl. Martin listened hard for any noise that wasn’t natural and after a while, he was convinced that they were, for the meantime, safe from pursuit. Coldness, however, had found them and grabbed a foothold - Martin felt Vin shiver.

Dragging himself out of his exhaustion, Martin fumbled through the packs and pulled out clothing - knit hats, jackets and gloves. He also pulled out a small camping stove and cups to heat water and tried to measure Vin’s condition by asking questions. Vin replied, but slowly and with a faltering voice which caused Martin’s concern to grow. He was starting to realize how long the night was going to be as he heated water to warm their icy hands.

The breeze eventually calmed. Martin put down his hand-warming cup and pushed to his feet, found the worn crutch leaning against the boulder and awkwardly moved off.

“Where ya goin’?” Vin said, turning his head in Martin’s direction.

“Nature calls,” Martin replied, trying to lighten his voice. “And I want to see if there’s a better place close by to sleep.”

When Vin didn’t comment, Martin continued on after fishing the tiny flash light from his pocket. The rest had allowed all his muscles to tighten up and he was incredibly stiff and sore. His ankle throbbed. Martin tried to wiggle his toes but the swelling in his boot didn’t allow much movement. Plus, it hurt like hell. His jerky motions made the flash light beam bounce wildly along the ground as he moved along. Martin complained softly to himself about their predicament as he squinted into the darkness and relieved himself.

When he was finished, he turned back to the boulders. He carefully wound his way through the stretch of smaller rocks that surrounded their rest site until he found Vin still slumped against the boulder. When he paused to catch his breath Vin turned his head in Martin’s direction. He approached slowly, clearing his throat to let Vin know he was here.

"How're you doing?" he asked.

"Tired."

Martin relaxed against a tree at Vin's hip and thought about what to do next. After several seconds, he pushed away from the tree. "Well then, let's . . ."

His words were cut short by a hissing noise and resounding thump. Both men twitched in surprise and Martin automatically dropped to a defensive crouch.

"What . . ." he started.

Then Martin was yanked unceremoniously to the ground where he hit the dirt with a painful grunt. A strange hiss sounded just behind him and something plucked at his shoulder, followed immediately by another solid thump.

"Crossbow!" Vin barked.

Martin rolled to his knees behind the boulder. He glanced at where he'd stood a moment before and saw an arrow sticking out of the tree where his chest had been. A second arrow must be in the tree behind him. He was momentarily stunned.

Vin, though, was in motion and instantly alert. He grabbed Martin's coat sleeve and pulled him close. "We gotta move," he said next to Martin's ear.

"Yeah, yeah. Looks like he's behind us." Martin threw his arm over Vin's shoulder and they moved deeper into the boulder field hunched over make use of their protection. "How the hell did he see us? It's completely dark!"

Vin didn't answer. He maintained a firm grip on Martin's arm as he practically dragged them along a zig-zag path thorough the boulders. There was one more ominous hiss, this time followed by a sharp ringing as the metal arrow struck rock close to them.

"Shit!" Martin breathed. "That was close!"

"Must . . . have . . . night . . . vision . . . goggles," Vin gasped as they pushed on.

"Great. Now what?"

"Gotta find the guys. I know they're comin'." Vin's statement came of a wave of sharp pain.

"The Outlook?"

"Only chance. Scale down the face and keep under the lip. He'll have to circle around to the bottom to get a bead on us."

"That's where the guys'll be." Martin bit his lip. There would be no way to warn Vin's team of the danger – if they were, in fact, on the way. He heard Vin chuckle darkly.

"They're on their way, brother." There was absolutely no doubt in Vin's tone. "All we gotta do is meet 'em halfway."

"Sounds easy." Martin wondered if his sarcasm carried through mentally.

"Hard part's not getting more holes before we get there."

It was Martin's turn to bark a grisly laugh. He pulled Vin's arm tightly around his waist and the sorry pair stumbled onward.

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CHAPTER SIX

Vin knew his attention was wandering again. He also realized it was getting harder to focus on what needed to be done. Without visual cues it was easy to get lost in the shadows.

A particularly rough tumble painfully sharpened his awareness and he hissed in pain when his head knocked against Martin's shoulder. Red and white stars flared behind his eyelids for a long moment, overriding everything else. His legs wobbled.

"Hey, you okay? Vin? Come on, bro, you gotta help me out here."

The garbled noise shook out to understandable words a beat behind the utterance, each syllable a sharp stab into his tender brain.

"Yeah, yeah," he whispered, trying to recall for the moment where his feet were and how to use them. "I'm with ya." He felt his hand get readjusted on Martin's hip and he grabbed a handful of denim. Was the ground rolling underfoot?

Martin pushed and pulled Vin along a weaving path, which didn't help Vin one bit to regain his feet.

"We're in a boulder field," Martin panted. "If we keep moving I think we're okay - I doubt he can get a bead on us with all this. We're out of the trees now."

That information meant something, Vin woozily realized. It was so hard to think through the nauseating headache, though. Mental images flashed in his head with Martin's description but interpreting them was near impossible. There was something important there, though...

"Vin - are we goin' the right way?" Martin huffed. "Where's the - shit!"

One of Vin's feet slipped forward as Martin's weight suddenly shifted back and down. Vin was pulled to the ground, the impact raising the chorus of painful pounding in his head. He didn't think he could hurt any more - obviously he was wrong. Consciousness wavered, his stomach rolled. Moving wasn't an option.

"Don't let go, Vin. Hang on, you hear me? Vin? Don't let go of me!"

Martin's frantic breath warmed Vin's ear, the moist heat being the first sensation he could name. The edge of panic in Martin's tone was Vin's second realization and he fought to concentrate as the waves of pain ebbed slightly. He tightened his fingers in response.

"Good, that's good. Hang on. You with me? Whatever you do, don't move."

"Not likely," Vin mumbled. The buzzing in his brain that was Martin talking was slowly coming clear as pain and the awful vertigo eased. A memory flashed in his mind - the boulder field. "The Outlook..." he started.

"We're here," Martin whispered. "I about walked us over the edge." The short laugh was nervous. "Don't try to sit up because I think you'll go over."

Vin realized then that there was nothing under his feet. He was lying mostly on one side with his head resting on Martin and one arm trapped under his brother's body. Vin could feel his brother's arm locked around his shoulder. He slowly and carefully used his free hand to explore

the pressure on his chest and found that Martin's other hand was fisted in the cloth of his shirt, holding tight. Martin was the only reason Vin hadn't slipped over the edge of the Outlook.

"I . . . the boulders . . . mark the edge . . ."

"Yeah, I know that now."

They lay there a bit longer to catch their breath. Vin could feel the nervous tremor of Martin's hands but his grip never lessened.

"I haven't heard any sign of pursuit," Martin whispered eventually. Vin felt him raise his head. "I think we're well protected for the moment. Let me pull you up some."

All the shrapnel injuries cried out as one as Martin pulled. Vin bit his lip to keep from screaming and clawed the ground with his free hand to help. He finally found a surface he could push against with one of his own feet and as soon as safe. With a groan, he detached himself from Martin and rolled onto his stomach. Each wound throbbled with its own irritation. Vin swallowed the rising bile in his throat.

"Maybe we should just stay here. I don't think he'll be able to find us in these rocks." Martin paused. "It's really dark out there. I can see the outline of the trees below us against the sky. I should be able to see flashlights from here, right? If the others are down there?"

"Yeah," Vin said. "They should be moving from right to left." He was more than happy to whisper. Anything louder would only hurt his head. Levering himself more on his side, the two of them rested in comfortable silence for a few minutes until their breathing leveled out. "Lie on your stomach near the edge," Vin finally mumbled. "Feel the rock face with your hands. Remember the fissures? The black lines in the cliff face?"

"Yeah."

"Most of 'em are fist sized. You done some rock climbing; slip an open hand in the fissure and then make a fist. You can hang against the cliff face that way."

"You've done that here, then? Free climbed?"

"Yep. Works great here." A short grunt and subsequent rustling marked Martin's exploration of the cliff edge. "About six feet down the cliff face cuts in. There's no way he can shoot us from above. He'll have to circle around to the bottom."

Vin was starting to feel almost human again. As long as he didn't move, the pains were tolerable. He listened to Martin examine the rock and then return to his side.

"Many people carry crossbows up here?"

Vin laughed shortly, instantly stopping when it roused his headache. "No, not really. This guy's kinda special, I guess."

Martin snorted. "'Special'. Yeah, I'll say. He's obviously good at what he does. Did you see the newspapers on the walls?"

"Saw 'em. Didn't read 'em. Was a little distracted at the time."

Martin chuckled shortly. "Right. Sorry. I think our man's possibly responsible for quite a few bombings. I think he may be the Fed Bomber. If it's not him, then this guy's a huge fan."

A chill zinged down Vin's spine as the horror of that possibility came to him. "He's suspected as being the one that hit the Federal courthouse in Denver last year. Killed three people."

"Yeah. Along with eight other bombings around the country. All Federal buildings."

There was another long, thoughtful pause.

"Shit," Vin finally commented.

"I concur," Martin grumbled. There were a few long seconds, and then he said in a questioning tone, "What the hell?"

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Vin frowned at the unexpected comment. Any further discussion, though, was nipped in the bud when Martin suddenly yelped and Vin felt a body slam against him. In the ensuing morass of pain, shooting stars and sudden movement Vin felt his body being pushed along the ground. Martin's abject fear rose like a demon in his mind and was nearly palatable.

"The fucker's got a laser site and the red dot was between your eyes!" Martin whispered frantically as he pushed Vin. "We gotta go over!"



"Mr. Larabee, I do not know about the rest of my team mates but I must insist on a break."

"What he said," JD puffed.

"Chris," Buck laid a hand on his friend's forearm. "We gotta stop a minute."

Chris' step faltered as he regarded Buck's hand. Then his eyes flicked up to lock with Buck's. "In a minute," he growled. "Over there."

The beam of Chris' flashlight danced on the ground in front of him. With a tilt of his head, he indicated a point beyond the tree line. The others followed. As the trail entered a clear patch at the top of a rolling hill, Chris stopped, switched off his light and fastened his eyes on the silver glow of the Outlook. The other four gathered around, huffing, and raised their eyes to the vision spread before them.

"Vin took me rock climbing there," JD said as he scanned the cliff face. "It's a fun climb."

Buck shook his head. "An' I bet you didn't use any ropes, right?"

"Er, right," JD confessed. "Wore helmets, though."

"Fat lotta good that'll do ya when you fall from that height," Nathan grumbled.

"Vin does it all the time."

"What? Fall?" Josiah ribbed.

"No, not fall!" JD protested. "He climbs all the time without ropes."

"Like that's a reason to do it, too," Buck pointed out, rolling his eyes.

They formed a broken line to study the Outlook. The moon was beginning to break over the dark line that marked the trees' canopy behind them and it's weak, silver light reflected off the highest point of the cliff. They drank some water and tried to see where their current path would take them.

"Does the path get better from here?" Nathan asked. "Because it hasn't been too easy to follow so far. It's a good thing you've been here before."

"Yeah, it is, because the trail gets worse from here," Chris informed them. The longer he stood here the more his apprehension grew. He tucked away the hydro pack tubing and turned to the Outlook once again. For some reason, he felt drawn to it. The rustling of the others around him drifted away from his attention as he focused on the rocky cliff, carefully scanning each part as it became exposed by the moon's light. Time was forgotten, put aside, as Chris examined the formation. As a sudden wash of fear crashed over him, he saw movement. He blinked, thinking he imagined it, and then stared hard at a spot at the top edge. "No!" he whispered as his heart hammered wildly.

"What? Are we startin' off again?" Buck asked.

Chris frantically patted down his pockets. "Binoculars!" he barked.

Josiah immediately handed over a small pair, recovered from one of the deep pockets of his coat. Chris brought them up to his eyes. It took a moment to orient the landmarks in the

darkness, but when he raised the glasses higher, details of the moon-lit part of the granite were easy to discern.

As were the inky outlines of two bodies dropping from the edge.

"Holy crap! Is that Vin and Martin?" JD had followed Chris' example with his own binoculars.

"What do they think they're doin'?" Buck said incredulously. Now that he knew what to look for, he could easily make out the two forms.

"Looks like they're doing in on purpose," JD said. "What are they looking at?"

After his initial surprise, Chris found he couldn't speak because his jaw was clenched in fear. At JD's statement he refocused his attention the higher up of the two forms and saw that he was, in fact, looking up at the boulders above. Chris scanned the cliff's edge which was dotted with huge boulders, following the climber's line of sight.

"Is there some kind of animal chasin' 'em?" Nathan wondered.

"I don't see . . ." JD's statement balked when he saw motion against the boulders. "There is something up there but I can't tell . . ."

"It's a man!" Chris snarled. He shoved the glasses in a pocket and pulled out his gun.

"If you please, Mr. Larabee, I do not think we have enough probable cause to warrant a shooting," Ezra said quickly.

"Would you do that if you didn't have to?" Chris replied, raising the weapon and taking aim.

"Well, this is Vin Tanner we're talkin' about but I don't think even Vin's that reckless," Buck added, pulling his own weapon. "Little chance of hittin' anything at this distance, Chris," he said, still taking aim.

"He only needs to be scared off. Give the boys a chance," Chris growled. "Everyone, turn on your flash lights again. Let that asshole know we're here."

Twin shots shattered the quiet as Chris and Buck fired. Then they immediately holstered their guns and took off down the trail as fast as they could in the dark.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

“They’ll be here any time now, Vin, you hear? You need to hang on a just a little bit longer.”

Martin’s voice drifted in and out of his mind, reminding him of a drunken bee flitting from flower to flower. Vin rolled that visual around in his head as Martin’s voice faded off once again until it was just a buzz. Buzz . . . buzzing . . . buzzing blotto bee . . .

“. . . a buzzed bee!” He marveled, chuckling. Vin’s head lolled to one side.

“What?” Martin queried. “What did you say? Vin?”

Vin’s chuckled turned into a groan as his head bumped the cliff, the ensuing strike of pain making his body twitch.

“Hold on, Vin, don’t let go. Don’t let go! Just a little longer, I promise.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Even whispering made his head burn. He felt a drop of – something – trickle down his forehead and between his eyes. It felt like a bug walking on his face. Maybe bees. Tiny bees marching down his nose. That thought made him chuckle again. “Tap dancin’ on m’face,” he muttered. Absently, he tried to pull one hand free to swipec them away. His hand, though, was stuck in something.

“Don’t do that, Vin. Hold still.”

“M stuck.” He tugged his arm again.

“That’s a good thing, Vin. Stay stuck. You trust me?”

That word – the “T” word – scuttled every other thought from his aching head. Trust? He felt his forehead furrow and his eyes blink as he pondered the very idea of trust. As mental images of the people he connected with that word flipped through his mind he felt all other things start to drift away.

The throbbing in his head was being replaced by the throbbing of his shoulders. He groaned and allowed the blackness to intrude.



“Vin?”

They’d been hanging for a long time and his brother’s growing confusion was beginning to scare Martin. That, and the realization that he couldn’t “hear” Vin in his head anymore. Something was very, very wrong.

When Martin had heard the gunshots and saw the flashlights below, he’d been greatly relieved. There was no way their pursuer would stick around now. Although he wanted nothing more than to bring the guy down, Vin’s safety was his first concern at the moment. And with the signs he was seeing, Martin’s fear was that the others wouldn’t get here in time.

Vin's idea had saved them. Once they felt out some of the numerous cracks in the face of the Outlook, shimmying down to safety had been easy. All they had to do was slip a flat hand in a crack and then make a fist and they could safely hang, anchored to the rock. Martin jammed the toe of his good foot in another crevice and was able to maneuver without using his injured foot at all.

Vin seemed to be doing just fine, too, at first but now things were becoming scary. Martin figured he could climb up all right when the others arrived but it looked now like Vin would need help. The pitiful moonlight made it hard to find any cracks that would bring him closer to his sibling. Martin was fooled by the many shadows on the rock as he carefully moved in Vin's direction, talking all the while. He was almost within arm's reach when Vin first tugged one arm as if trying to free his hand.

Martin's heart crawled up his throat. "Don't do that, Vin. Hold still." He edged closer, driven by growing fear.

"M stuck."

If Martin hadn't moved closer, he wouldn't have heard the soft words. "That's a good thing, Vin. Stay stuck." Martin tried to think of a distraction. "You trust me?"

There was no reply except the sound of Vin's breathing, which seemed to sound rather ragged and getting worse. Martin took a second to glance at his brother's face, the lines of pain he saw rivaling the shadows of the Outlook and pushed him make some risky moves to reach his side.

Just in time to see him sag bonelessly.

"Shit!" Without a flash of second thought Martin threw an arm around Vin and hooked his armpit just as his sibling passed out. In a quick maneuver, he wedged his good leg between Vin's suddenly limp ones and kept him in place. Martin's injured foot, now jammed against a granite protrusion to hold them both, caused white-hot bolts of pain to shoot up his leg and was the sole thing keeping the pair from a very long fall.

"Vin? Martin!"

Josiah's voice was that of an angel from above.

"Here!" Martin gasped, pressing Vin's still body into the granite. "I need help here! Vin's unconscious!"

"I hear ya. Hang on one sec. JD!"

Martin heard some scrambling and low voices. Between keeping his brother from slipping away and the pain in his ankle his plate was full; the only thing keeping him from being hopeless was the arrival of the rest of the seven. Now he knew the both of them would be safe.

Safe – he had to keep the team safe.

"Josiah!" he yelled.

"Yes, Martin?"

"There's a guy with a crossbow . . ."

"A crossbow? Are you joshin' me?"

"Laser sights, night vision goggles . . . be careful." Martin gasped, his limbs beginning to feel stressed. "Hurry up, will ya?"

A fall of pebbles and dirt washed down from above off to Martin's right causing him to cough with the dust that followed. He buried his nose and eyes into the bend of his elbow and willed himself to just hang on. The sound of slipping rock stopped.

"Hey, Martin."

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Martin lifted his head enough to see Nathan next to him and relief washed over him. “He hit his head. He can’t see too well and he’s got shrapnel imbedded everywhere.” The last word was accented with a cough.

Nathan had moved in close. Martin could feel the man’s body heat as he tried to examine Vin.

“Can you scoot down enough for me to get this on him? Under his arms?”

Nodding in reply Martin slipped down, allowing Nathan to partially take his place. The medic worked quickly and silently and it wasn’t long before he called up to raise Vin. As Vin was lifted away Martin’s relief let his aches finally surface. His arm trembled, weak with exertion and the pain from his ankle made him feel light headed.

“Can you climb up?” Nathan asked softly. “I’ll have ‘em drop the rig to help you along.”

“Yeah,” Martin breathed. He pressed his head to the cool granite and allowed Nathan to wrap a strap around his chest.

“Up ya go.” Nathan urged. He stayed close as Martin edged his way upward.

Six feet never seemed so far. The smell of freshly disturbed earth told him he was at the top about the same time he felt hand snaring his clothes and hauling him over the final crest. One again on horizontal earth Martin lay flat and still, gasping for breath. Voices floated around him and he silently counted.

Josiah’s rumbling bass, one; JD’s quick questions, two; Nathan’s low orders, three; Ezra’s southern accented complaints, four . . . that wasn’t enough. Martin forced his eyes open and struggled to sit up.

“Didja find ‘im?” He said, his voice sounding odd even to himself. “Where are Buck ‘n Chris? He had arrows . . .”

“Well, actually he had bolts. Crossbow arrows are called bolts.” JD dropped on the ground next to him.

“Yeah. Bolts. Great.” He rubbed his neck and looked around. “What the hell is all this?” Martin picked up the strap that had been used to haul him up.

“Well, we didn’t have rope so we cut off the straps on our backpacks. Good thing you were only a few feet down.” JD pointed his flashlight beam at the pile of strapless packs. “And Chris and Buck are trying to follow Mr. Crossbow.” The narrow beam turned toward Martin. “There was only one guy, right?”

“Yeah. I think he’s the loner type.” Martin went on to briefly describe the small cabin and his suspicions on who it belonged to. “We have to go back there,” he finished.

“Not until we get Vin out of here,” Nathan stated flatly. “He’s got a lot of shrapnel in him. A lot are embedded in bone and there’s a possibility this nail in his back has nicked a lung. I’m not sure I should remove it.”

“His head,” Martin said. “He was saying some crazy stuff before he passed out.”

“A very deep gash and a substantial bump. There’s definitely a concussion, but I don’t know what grade. He was alert for a while?”

“He was awake. Not too sure how alert. He’s been groggy and complaining about his vision. He can’t see.” Martin’s voice cracked with the last statement. Josiah wrapped a light blanket around him. “So,” he said after clearing his throat. “How are we getting him out of here?”



When they’d reached the top of the Outlook, Chris and Buck dropped their packs and immediately scouted a perimeter. Convinced it was clear, they returned to find Nathan, Josiah

WITHOUT A TRACE FANFIC BY AJB

and JD rigging a rescue rope as Ezra guarded at the perimeter's edge. Confident things were in hand, the pair turned outward again to try and find the shooter.

"This guy's good, Chris. He's not leaving much of a trail." Buck was on one knee, keeping his flashlight beam low so the foot prints he found would cast a shadow. "Looks like he's movin' fast."

Chris shifted the weapon in his hand and tightened his grip. He could see the faint line where the path wound through the trees, rising slowly where it would eventually run along a ridgeline. He remembered this part of the path from his hiking here with Vin. "He's heading this way," Chris mused. "They must have crossed paths with this nut job while they were camping."

"Martin mentioned shrapnel. Where the hell did that come from?"

"An ambush?" Chris suggested. "Booby traps?"

"What's he protecting?" Buck asked. "Pot fields, maybe?"

"Not sure how'd he'd get it out. Possible, I guess."

The pair carefully advanced, trying their best to follow a sparse trail in the dark. Suddenly, Chris stopped and pulled Buck to a standstill.

"Smell that?" he whispered.

Buck sniffed the air. "Smoke."

Ignoring the impossible trail, they carefully moved to the edge of the ridge. From there, they could see a red glow behind a stand of dark tree trunks. Using the fire's light, they were able to quickly weave between the trees until they could see the source. Below them, at the bottom of the slope, a cabin was aflame.

And if the wind kicked up at all, the fire would spread and become an inferno.

THE CAMPING TRIP

CHAPTER EIGHT

Nathan glanced nervously over his shoulder. Even in the poor light, Martin could see that he was conflicted about something as he muttered and moved between his patients. Vin hadn't stirred since being pulled up from the Outlook.

"My foot is really hurting," Martin said softly with a hiss. "You sure about leaving the boot on?"

The medic moved to his side. "Well, no, I'm not. What I'm concerned about is that fire. If we have to move fast. I'd rather your ankle was supported. Keep it elevated for now until we know what's what."

A few minutes later Chris re-appeared and squatted next to Martin. He looked worriedly over to Vin before speaking. "I don't think we'll be forced to move," he said lowly. "There's no wind, and the recent snow has made everything wet enough to be okay."

"Is there one of those fire watch stations around here?"

Chris chuckled. "No. It's not wilderness anymore to man year-round. Rangers cruise the area and I'm hoping they see the smoke because being in this valley, I don't think they can see the flame. Most of the flame is gone, though. It's smoldering now." He shifted again and groaned. "I think we'll be alright until dawn."

"Vin seems to be holding his own," Martin said, looking past Chris to the unmoving dark form. "I can't feel him."

Chris threw him a look. "Me neither," he quietly replied. He turned and gently ran his hand over Vin's head. "It's like losing a part of yourself."

Martin could only nod.

Buck's outline moved toward them and settled next to Chris. "I think any fire danger is past," he said. "There's no phone reception anywhere. One of us should hike out and get help on the way."

"You volunteering?" Chris asked. "Cause I'm not moving." His hand rested protectively on Vin's shoulder while his eyes met Buck's.

"Sure. Me 'n JD can start any time. We've been tryin' to conserve the flashlight batteries, so I think we'll make it."

"Where's Ezra and Josiah?"

"Josiah's watchin' the cabin and Ez is prowlin' around the perimeter."

"Okay, then, the sooner you go, the better for us. I don't think any kind of airlift can be done before dawn."

"I agree. Can y'all hold out 'til then?"

Chris studied Vin, pressing the back of his fingers against the lax cheek. "We'll have to because I sure as hell don't want to move him. Take off, Buck."

The mustached agent nodded once and rose, hesitating momentarily before moving off.

“You okay with that?” Chris asked of Martin after Buck left.

“It’s the best we can do.”

“So tell me about this Federal Bomber,” Chris said quietly, his eyes still on Vin. “I only know what I’ve heard in the news and from any training bulletins.”

Martin shrugged. “You know about as much as I do. From what I saw in that shack, I think there may be a few targets he wasn’t credited with. We’ll have to check county records to see who owns that land. That in itself would be more than anything else they have.”

He paused as he adjusted his injured leg, grunting in pain with the motion. Chris dragged over another backpack and settled it under Martin’s leg.

“Better?” Chris asked.

Martin chuckled painfully. “It’s as good as it’s gonna get, I think.”

The night passed slowly. Martin dozed fitfully while the other’s shared shifts. There was talk about moving closer to the smoldering shack for warmth, but Martin didn’t want any part of that and the others respected his wishes.

As dawn grayed the sky the guttural pounding of a helicopter came from the east. Chris rose groggily, rubbing his eyes and allowing the sleeping bag to slip from his shoulders. “I’ll get the others.”

In order to keep warm, one team member stayed with the brothers while the two took advantage of the heat of the burned cabin. Vin and Martin shared an open sleeping bag while their guard at the moment used the second bag.

The night seemed longer than normal but now that a rescue was in motion, time sped up. Josiah and Ezra appeared, shadowy bags under their eyes. Chris and Ezra hauled Martin to his feet as Josiah simply lifted the still unconscious Vin in his arms.

“Get to the edge of the cliff,” Chris instructed. “They’ll probably do a one-skid hover. There’s no place to land.”

The got as close to the edge as they dared, what was left of the team watched as the helicopter approached. The pilot carefully and skillfully rested one skid on the edge of the cliff, allowing the medics within to exit and pack up Vin’s still form. Once he was loaded, Martin was strapped to a Stokes basket and also loaded up.

Leaving the others behind, Martin watched the silver face of the Outlook fall away as he and his brother were air lifted to Denver.



The remaining three watched the helicopter fly away. Once it was out of sight, Chris turned to Josiah and Ezra.

“We need to check what’s left of that cabin and seal off the area. There’s got to be something in there that will tell us who the bomber is.”

“I dare say it is folly to think along those lines,” Ezra started, obviously in poor humor. “There is nothing remaining but soot and ash. It would be better to leave it for the evidentiary experts. We may inadvertently destroy something of value.”

Chris could tell by Josiah’s long look and shrug of shoulder that the profiler agreed with Ezra, which made Chris’ gut burn. Frustrated, he ran his hands through his hair and let out an explosive breath. “I feel like I’m wasting time,” he growled.

Josiah gripped his shoulder and gave him an affectionate shake. “I’d be grateful to catch some sleep,” he said. “So you can work off some of that energy standin’ guard.”

“Hear, hear,” Ezra agreed.

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The two of them turned in the direction of the burnt cabin and shuffled away. Larabee's glare wasn't very effective on the retreating agents' backs.



Martin was jerked awake as the helicopter door was pushed open. He was amazed he was able to sleep at all, considering the noise of the aircraft. Blinking at the sudden brightness, he tried to find Vin but the number of bodies barking orders and quickly moving around him blocked any chance of that. Instead, he relaxed into the pillows and used his ears.

By the time he was in an exam room he knew that Vin was on his way to radiology. The gurney had barely stopped when JD stuck his head in the room.

"Hey, Martin. How're ya doin'?"

Martin grinned. "I'm good. Could use a shower, though." He scratched his head and felt grit embed under his nails.

"I know what you mean." The young agent stepped in and settled next to the gurney. "We had time to hit the shower and get a short nap before coming here. Is it broken?" JD indicated Martin's ankle.

"Don't know yet. Vin's getting x-rayed first. Is Buck with him?"

"Yeah. We figured its better safe than sorry. Don't know if that nutjob'll come after you two or not."

Martin snorted. "I have a feeling that guy's in the wind. He hasn't made it this long without getting caught by being stupid. And walking into a busy hospital like this would be stupid." He flinched as he moved. "I do have to call in, though. I need to extend my leave time and give my statement to the investigators."

He toyed with the idea of letting his parents know what was going on. Although Martin was having a hard time thinking of Victor Fitzgerald as being his father, he considered Katherine his mother and she deserved an update directly from her son. Martin didn't trust Victor to tell her the whole story, if he told her anything at all.

Vin was a sore subject between Martin and Victor ever since Martin had found his twin brother. The discovery had greatly increased the emotional chasm between them and Katherine was unintentionally suspended in the middle. After the twin's reunion, she had spent a short time under a doctor's care to deal with the stress, but firmly stood her ground. Against Victor's wishes, she'd made it clear that she was willing to have two sons if Vin would have her.

Victor, however, had made it very clear that Vin was not what he wanted in a son even though they were biologically his. He had been painfully tolerant of Vin just to appease the wife he adored. Martin could only see this latest event as more fuel to the fire; Victor did not want his wife worrying about anything let alone a trailer-trash, shaggy-haired Texan with dyslexia.

"You probably won't be admitted," JD said as he dropped onto the wheeled stool in the examining room. Unable to sit still, he slowly twirled around on the spinning seat as he spoke. "So you'll be able to clean up and call from the house. Or are you going back to Vin's apartment? It's closer."

"The apartment, I guess."

That was as far as their conversation went before the doctor arrived and booted JD from his stool.



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Hours later a weary and sore Martin, fresh from Vin's sporadically hot shower, dropped onto his brother's well-worn couch and pulled the telephone closer. Checking the time and being surprised that it was only early in the afternoon, he called his boss, Jack Malone.

"Malone." Jack's voice bordered on a growl.

"Hey, Jack, it's Martin."

"How's the wild west? Have a nice family reunion?"

"It's been great but there's been a little setback." Martin went on to explain the situation. "The good news is that my ankle is only sprained. The bad news is that Vin hasn't come around yet. I'll need more time." He could imagine Jack rubbing his eyes and shaking his head. He'd predicted from the start that the united twins could only be doubled trouble.

"Take what time you need. What about the bomber investigation? Have you given your statement to the investigator yet?"

"Not yet. I drew a diagram of the house interior for the forensic team and they're at the cabin now. The media hasn't gotten wind of it yet."

Jack laughed. "Oh, that's not gonna last long. I hope you plan on informing daddy Deputy Director before he sees it on the five o'clock news."

"Damn," Martin sighed. "I hadn't thought of that. You're right."

"Now there's a call I don't envy you making. Take care, Martin, and keep your head down. Keep me updated."

"Will do. I'll be at the hospital so my phone will be off."

"Just check voice mail regularly. I'll let you know if I hear anything on this end."

"Okay. Bye, Jack." Martin hung up and sagged on the couch. He had an hour until JD was going to pick him up to check on Vin. He could call both Victor and Samantha in that time and considered for about a half-second which to call first. With a smile, he dialed.



Chris sat hunched over in the comfort-challenged plastic hospital chair, forearms resting on his thighs and a lukewarm cardboard cup of coffee between his hands. After the crime scene had been taken over by the FBI investigators, he'd been able to quickly shower and change at Buck and JD's place before claiming his spot next to Vin here at the hospital. His friend had been moved from the ICU to a monitored room.

The shrapnel had been picked from his friend's body and the head wound stitched and thickly bandaged without Vin waking up. The doctors found a worrisome subdural hematoma causing the unconsciousness and were keeping a close eye on it. Their only prognosis was "wait and see".

It was the waiting part that had Chris irritated. He was admittedly not good at it.

Vin had been lucky, actually, that the shrapnel didn't do as much damage as it could have. There was a chip in his scapula and a bruised lung from the nail, but the other bits had been picked out with little effort. If Vin had not turned away from the blast, his abdomen would have been shredded.

Chris sighed. The doctors were unable to pinpoint the effects of the head injury until Vin woke. All that ran through his head now was Martin's comment that Vin couldn't see very well and the doctors couldn't say if it was permanent or not. It all came down to this waiting game that Chris was too familiar with. His team played that game much too often.

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The motion of Vin's head rolling a little to one side caught Chris' attention and he looked up. The muscles of his friend's face twitched, a slight frown shadowing his forehead and mouth for a moment.

"Vin?"

Chris stood, quickly setting the coffee cut aside and leaned over the bedrail. Vin's heart monitor showed an irregular beat and his fingers flexed jerkily.

"Hey, partner, you wakin' up?" he asked, lying the flat of his hand on Vin's chest. Chris could feel a tremor under his hand. "Vin?"

A few long, uncomfortable seconds passed tinged with the uneven sound of Vin's breathing. Chris leaned in a little closer, concerned, and was relieved to hear the door swish open. He straightened and turned, a sharp comment on his tongue, when all the monitors suddenly shrieked and the body of his friend launched into a violent seizure.

CHAPTER NINE

Chris was visibly shaken when Buck sauntered into the critical care waiting area. He stopped just within the threshold and watched his friend and boss pace a path between two rows of chairs and knew something bad had happened.

"What's up?" he finally asked. Chris' rhythm stuttered for a pace when he glanced Buck's way.

"It's bad, Buck. What the hell else do you want to know?" Chris snarled, resuming his pace.

Buck refused to be cowed knowing Chris was simply scared. "How bad?"

Finally pausing his frantic movement Chris stopped in front of Buck, his posture tight, tense and ready to explode. Buck stood firm and expectantly held the icy green stare.

The stand-off didn't last long. Chris finally let out a sharp breath and roughly carded his hair with a trembling hand. "Where's Martin?"

"He's on his way. JD's bringing him up. Now what's goin' on, Chris?"

Chris shifted his gaze aside, unable to look at Buck as he spoke. "Vin . . . he . . . he's having seizures. The doc walked in right as they started and said it was probably due to pressure on his brain the bleeding. God, Buck, they drilled a hole in his skull!" The statement pushed him back into motion.

Buck simply stood, feeling sick. "Oh," was all he could say. He was still wrapping his head around the implications when he heard the elevator ding. Glancing over, he saw JD hold the doors open while Martin clumsily exited the car on crutches. They both looked much cleaner and more rested than the last time he'd seen them. They looked grim - one glance at Chris was all it took to set the tone.

Martin's eyes were clearly worried. He didn't have to say anything out loud to ask the question.

"Not good," Buck said. "They had to open his skull to let some blood drain and release pressure."

Without ever saying anything, Martin turned and clumped off to join his brother. When he arrived at the nurse's station they didn't have to ask who he was there to see. Nurse Annie, as her tag said, simply pointed to a room and said "Ten minutes only."

Martin carefully maneuvered into the room, the crutches problematic. Finally at Vin's side, he looked down on the pale, slack face and tried to control his voice as he spoke. "Hey, brother," he said softly. "I'm here now and don't plan on leaving any time soon. Don't stay away too long; it's kinda boring without you around."

Leaning on one crutch he freed one hand and gripped Vin's lax fingers and spoke quietly until the nurse informed him that his time was up. Reluctantly, he stepped back and left the

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room, accepting the fact that this was going to be his routine until . . . well, until it didn't have to be anymore.

The days that followed were a strange mix of waiting, consoling and following up. As much as Martin was driven to find out the identity of Crossbow Man his drive was tempered by the need to be by Vin's side. He and Chris spent the lion's share of time in the sterile room, listening to the monitors and wishing the windows were bigger and let in more natural light. Vin hadn't shown any sign of consciousness in four days.

And now that he was three days beyond his original date to be back in New York , Martin knew it was time to check in with his mother.

Chris came in during his lunch time to spell Martin. It had become part of the routine since the rest of the team had returned to work. There was still some concern that Crossbow Man might still come after the brothers but that likelihood dwindled with time. Still, there was always someone with each brother at all times, whether it was hospital security, another agent or one of the team.

Martin told Chris that he'd be in the hospital garden, visible from Vin's window and hobbled from the room with his newly acquired cane. A heavily muscled security guard followed at a discreet distance and managed to blend into the garden greenery as Martin pulled out his cell.

It took a few long moments to mentally prepare himself before dialing Katherine's number.

"Fitzgerald residence." Martin recognized the voice of Alice, the maid.

"Hi, Alice, it's Martin. Is mom there?"

"Martin, it's good to hear you. Yes, she's here. Hold on."

Dead air hung in his ear as he was put on hold, and, sooner than he expected, he heard Katherine's voice.

"Marty, honey, how was your trip?"

He smiled at her voice, knowing he would never be able to tell her true state of mind by the way she sounded. Katherine Fitzgerald had nothing on Ezra when it came to poker faces.

"It was good up to a point, mom. I'm still in Denver."

A beat of silence was all she gave away to show instant concern. "Still in Denver? Is everything all right, dear?"

Martin took a fortifying breath and explained - mostly - what had happened. He didn't mention anything about Crossbow Man and implied that Vin's condition was from a hiking accident. Not exactly lying, he knew that omitting the truth was not quite right, either. But for now, she didn't need any extra worry. Martin wasn't sure she bought it all, anyway. If there was one thing Katherine was very good at, it was reading between the lines of her children and biding her time. She usually got the entire truth in the end.

"Oh, Marty, I am so sorry. What are your plans?"

"It's day-by-day at the moment. I'm on sick leave for a while longer. We're hoping to see improvement soon."

They chatted until Martin's internal clock told him it was time to go. He started to wrap up the conversation when Katherine surprised him.

"Martin, I want to help. I want to be there. I know this situation has been difficult . . ."

"Ha," Martin thought. "*You mean Victor has been difficult.*"

". . . but Vincent is part of you and therefore part of me. I can't help it."

He believed her. Looking back, he realized the toll it had taken on her because Victor refused to acknowledge Martin's twin. Although he often questioned the methods of his blood

father, he never questioned the love his adopted mother had for him - and could have had for Vin, if allowed.

"Wait and see how things go, okay, Mom? I'll keep you updated. We're okay for now."

"Please do, Martin. I want to help." She sounded disappointed.

"I know. I'll keep in touch. Love you."

"I love you too, son."

Martin closed the phone and sighed, embracing the silence of the garden for a moment longer. Then he pushed to his feet and headed inside to the bank of elevators. When he pushed the button for Vin's floor, a vague feeling of unease began tickling his gut and grew exponentially with each passing second. By the time he arrived, anxiety reigned.

Slipping between the doors before they were fully open, Martin immediately noticed the activity around Vin's open doorway and the fact that Chris was in the hall, obviously pissed. Martin hurried over -

And was hit by a wave of pain that made his stagger.

Chris was there in an instant, speaking lowly and helping him the waiting area. Martin couldn't understand the words, but the fact that he was there, holding him up, seeped deeply into his consciousness. Martin worked to control his breathing, and therefore his revolting stomach, and squeezed his eyes shut against the suddenly intrusive lights around him.

"It's Vin your feeling, Martin. He woke up."

Martin realized he was lying down on a narrow, lumpy couch. The tidal wave that initially hit him receded, leaving vague but persistent pain somewhere behind his eyes. A few deep breaths settled the nausea and he carefully opened his watery eyes. The worried face of Larabee hung over him.

"You okay now?"

Nodding carefully, Martin struggled to sit up. Chris helped. After sitting for a few moments to make sure the pain was under control, he pushed to his feet and wordlessly headed to Vin's room.

The two of them hung outside, listening as three nurses settled their patient. Two finally left, telling Chris that the doctor was on his way. She frowned at Martin, worried.

"I'm okay," Martin whispered, his voice gritty.

When she left they carefully entered the room. The head of Vin's bed had been raised so he was sitting up and the window curtains had been pulled shut. The only light was the soft glow of the incandescent light on the wall behind him. His breathing consisted of a series of tight gasps between clenched teeth; one hand pressed against his eyes and the other tightly gripped the metal side rail.

The nurse, who had been murmuring softly as she worked, gave the pair a brief smile when then appeared. With a final smoothing to the light blanket covering her patient she stepped over to them, talking lowly.

"Keep it low," she suggested. "The doctor will probably give him something for the headache when he gets here."

Chris whispered his thanks but Martin could only nod. The pain behind his own eyes was nearly intolerable.

"Sorry." Vin croaked. Martin knew his brother was apologizing for the transmitted discomfort.

"The doc will help with it soon." Martin rested his hand on Vin's forearm. Vin shifted his grip on the rail to his brother's arm, resulting in a forearm to forearm bond of brotherhood. "Meanwhile, you can hang on to me." He didn't miss Chris' approving nod.

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Nothing more needed to be said between the three of them. They shared a strength beyond physical bonds and Vin relaxed with their support. By the time the doctor arrived, his breathing was smooth and regular and his body greatly relaxed.

"Well, it's good to see you awake." The doctor spoke softly as he glanced at Vin's chart. He efficiently checked the various wounds on Vin's body before focusing his attention on the head injuries. Martin got the feeling that the man was working his way up to give his brother time to prepare, and was grateful. He didn't release his grip. Chris stepped back to give the doctor room.

"Let me check this bandage here," he warned Vin before touching the thick wrapping. "The drainage looks good - no sign of infection. Pretty sore though, huh?"

Rhetorical question, Martin knew.

The doctor checked the other side of Vin's head before removing his penlight. "Now let's check those eyes."

Vin grew tense again, his grip on Martin's arm becoming painful. Vin hadn't opened his eyes at all. The doctor peeled back one lid and flicked the light across the hazy, blue eye.

Vin gasped and held his breath in shock.

"It hurts!" Martin snapped, slamming his own eyes shut stealing his own breath away.

The doctor immediately backed off and, instead, gently checked the area around Vin's eye sockets as his patient tried to regain his senses.

"Better now?" he said softly. Vin nodded shortly once, unable to speak. "Can you tell me if you saw anything? Did you see the light?"

It took a few breaths to control his voice. "A little. Around the edges," he said weakly. "It burned."

"I need to check the other eye."

"Is that really necessary so soon?" Chris growled.

"Sokay," Vin gasped.

"I'll be quick." The doctor leaned over and thumbed the other lid open, flicking the light across the iris with practiced speed. Vin didn't react.

"Go ahead, I'm ready," Vin mumbled.

Martin gave Chris a wide-eyed look. Chris met his glance, looking grim. They both kept their silence.

"It's okay for now," the doctor commented, his voice giving away nothing. "I'll give you something to take the edge off the pain for now."

The fact that Vin didn't argue spoke volumes. The doctor stepped away and called a nurse as he scribbled on the chart. Chris moved in and reclaimed his spot next to Vin. The nurse retrieved something from her pocket and began to fiddle with the IV line. Chris tore his gaze from Vin and looked to Martin.

"Go," Martin said softly, still holding Vin's grip.

Chris followed the doctor out into the hallway. "Well?" he demanded without preamble.

"Mr. Larabee, it's way too early to make predictions."

"Best guess."

"I don't . . ."

"Look, you're the expert here, but I saw a man that was, in essence, blind. Am I right?"

The doctor frowned in thought, obviously choosing his words carefully. Then he looked Chris right in the eye before speaking. "I've seen worse, but yes, he's essentially blind for now."

"How long will it last?"

"I can't predict."

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"Days? Weeks?"

The doctor sighed in frustration and massaged the back of his neck in thought. "Could be months. There's significant damage to the brain and skull. I'm sure we released the pressure quickly enough, but the brain is a tricky thing. There could be scarring. We won't know for a while, Mr. Larabee. That's all I can offer. I wouldn't plan on him returning to work for the near future."

The doctor turned to go but Chris grabbed his arm and stopped him. "He's my sharpshooter, doc. He needs his eyes."

The medical man regarded Chris for a long moment, seeing beneath the anger. "I suggest finding another spot for him," he said gently. "I'm not sure if he's ever going to be 100% again." Stunned, Chris let his arm drop away. "I'm sorry." The doctor paused for a few moments before moving away.

Chris stood, frozen in the busy hallway, unaware of anyone else around him. How the hell was he going to tell Vin?

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CHAPTER TEN

In the three subsequent weeks Vin could only clearly recall about five full days. The persistent, debilitating headaches finally ebbed in the passing of time but his vision did not improve. Light didn't hurt as much now, but he still found the most physical comfort in a curtained room.

His condition belied his usual nature. Although Vin was content to rest the first few weeks to keep the headaches to a dull roar, after that, his usual wanderlust made him restless.

Vin was going stir crazy. Today started his third day in a row waking up somewhat painless; his sleep was still disturbed, wracked with vague and riotous images, but a slice of bright warmth on his face told him the sun was up. He was in the habit now of keeping his eyes shut to avoid any light, and as he stood by the window in his bedroom he could hear the stirrings of a new day's routine outside – cars leaving for work, children's voices as they walked to school and the various doors slamming in his building as people left for the day. And for once, the noises did not spark a headache.

His apartment was quiet. Martin finally had to return to New York nearly a week ago with plans to return very soon. Plans for Christmas were still in the air for the brothers – skiing was definitely out of the question.

Vin snorted at the thought. A lot of things would be out of the question if things didn't improve. Before he could depress himself any more, he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. The ringer had been turned off for days now as it always made his head pound.

"Yeah?" he answered with a growl.

"Sounds like someone got out of the wrong side of the bed this mornin'," Buck teased.

While Martin was staying with Vin, the team had checked in morning and evening. Now that Vin was alone, they stopped by at least three times a day and now that he was somewhat mobile, he was becoming irritated with the attention.

"The occupational therapist is coming by at one. It's ten thirty now," Buck reminded him. "Nathan said he'd come by a little before."

"I don't need no fuckin' babysitter," Vin snapped, rubbing his temple.

"Now let's not start up with that, Junior, we want you back as soon as you're able. Give the therapist a chance."

Vin didn't bother to reply. Instead, he worked to quell the growing anger and hopefully, the stabbing pain.

"Vin? You there, buddy?"

"Ummm," he mumbled noncommittally. He massaged his head and wandered around the room.

"One o'clock. Nathan'll be by before. Okay? You hearin' me?"

"Yeah, yeah. One o'clock."

“I’ll see ya after word, pard.”

Vin just hung up and then dropped the phone on the bed with an aggravated sigh. Shuffling his way back to the window, he could tell he was close by the cold that emanated through the glass. Once there, he gently pressed the flat of his palm on the frigid surface. He clenched his other fist in disgust. Vin Tanner was not used to feeling useless, and that’s exactly how he’d felt for the last two days.

Responding to a drive from deep within, Vin pushed off the window and carefully made his way through his apartment, collecting his boots and winter coat along the way. He unlocked the door and pulled it open, pausing in the doorway and suddenly feeling very – naked.

Vin shifted, leaning heavily on the door knob and cursing his hesitance. Finally, with a muttered expletive, stepped into the hallway.



Chris Larabee rolled his pen between his fingers and tried to concentrate on the papers in front of him. He’d overheard Buck’s conversation – if you could call it that – with Vin, and since then, was feeling unsettled. As the minutes ticked by the more the feeling grew that something was wrong. Eventually, the unsettling feeling made him push to his feet.

“Nathan!” he called as he slowly paced a short track behind his desk.

Jackson poked his head in a few seconds later. “You hollered?”

Chris stopped, rapping the pen against his thigh, his forehead furrowed in thought.

Nathan stepped inside the office and crossed his arms. “Chris?”

Chris tilted his head, not really looking at his team member. “Get on over to Vin’s now, okay?” Only then did he raise his eyes to Nathan’s. “Just you, as planned. I don’t want to crowd him. Call if you need us.”

“Okay, then. Guess I’m outta here to face the wrath of Vin.”

“He won’t be that mad, will he?” JD said. “I mean, he’s gotta learn to get around until his eyes get better.”

“I’m sure he knows that, too, but you know Vin. He’s probably feeling a little trapped by now.”

Buck snorted. “A little? If it weren’t for the sensitivity to light, I have no doubt he’d be out an’ about by now. He’s been on his feet for what, two days now?”

Nathan shrugged on his coat. “Barely that. I’ll grab some lunch for the two of us on the way over.”

The cold of the parking garage stung Nathan’s nose as he hurried to his car. He called a deli a few blocks away so he wouldn’t have to wait for the meal. After stopping and getting the food, he continued on to Purgatorio and maneuvered into the first spot he saw near Vin’s apartment building. When he stepped to the sidewalk, he had to do a little dance to keep his feet on the ice.

“Whoa!” he breathed, windmilling his arms for a moment. Once balanced, he grabbed the deli bag and locked up the car.

Nathan carefully made his way down the sidewalk, up the few stairs and entered the building. The first thing he noticed once he closed the door behind him was that the lobby wasn’t much warmer than the outside. The second thing he noticed was Vin sitting on the inside stairs, his head dipped low. There were new holes in his jeans and his knees were scraped and bloody and when Nathan got closer, he saw raw marks on the palms of his hands, too.

Nathan approached carefully. Vin didn’t move.

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“Vin?” Nathan said, stopping within a foot of the man. “You okay?”

“M fine,” he replied softly.

Nathan was itching to inspect the damage but knew better than to start poking at his teammate without warning.

“Let me look at – “

The sharpshooter’s body stiffened immediately, and then he started to rise. “I said I’m fine.” Vin winced visibly when his jeans slid over damaged knees and he groped for the stair well rail.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Nathan said when he saw the rail wiggle loosely when Vin grabbed it. “That rail’s not safe.” He snared Vin’s forearm as he turned and lurched sideways. “I take it the elevator’s still busted?” The medic made sure Vin was tucked snugly at his side before they ascended the steps and noticed that he didn’t put up any resistance.

“I guess.”

“You haven’t checked?”

“I haven’t heard it in two days.”

Nathan was about to stop and check the elevator himself, but realized that Vin had probably been listening to all the building noises for the past few days; there was little else for him to do since the radio or television antagonized his headaches.

“Oh.” They advanced a few steps. “Slipped on the ice?” As Nathan held his arm the dampness of his sleeves was obvious. Vin didn’t reply. “The therapist’ll teach you how to get around safely so it won’t happen again.”

“Why?” Vin growled.

Nathan frowned. “Why what?”

“Why do I need to learn to get around? I can’t do nothin’ and I can get around in my place just fine.”

They made it to the first landing. Nathan turned him to the next flight.

“This is temporary, Vin. In the meanwhile, you don’t need to get hurt worse and you need to learn how to take care of yourself.” Again, silence answered his comment. “Unless you like us comin’ by every day . . .”

“Fine. I’ll play nice.”

That was too easy, Nathan thought. He tilted his head asked and looked Vin over more closely. The tense lines of pain around his eyes were a little deeper and the sooty bags under his eyes were more prevalent. The colorful bruising had mostly faded leaving behind unusually pale skin.

“Are you sleeping?”

Vin’s lips pressed harder together.

“Restful sleep will help you heal faster. I can get something for you . . .”

“No.”

When they reached the next landing, Vin’s breathing was stressed. They didn’t talk until the next landing.

“What’s in the bag?” Vin asked out of the blue.

Nathan glanced at the deli bag in his other hand, realizing Vin heard the paper rustling. “Lunch.”

“Roast beef?”

Nathan sniffed the air. “You can smell that?”

Vin snorted, his breathing still labored. “Smellin’ and hearin’s about all I do lately.”

“Oh.”

Once they were in his apartment and Vin started to warm up, his palms and knees began to bleed. It took some nagging and a little arguing for Vin to allow Nathan to clean him up and wrap his wounds. They weren't serious, but Nathan had no doubt the areas stung. Vin never admitted to it.

In fact, he didn't say much of anything. Nathan began to wish he had a little of the odd connection Chris had with the man. Then again, he wasn't sure he wanted to know the thoughts that simmered in Tanner's head right now.

He wished Martin hadn't left.

Vin ate enough of the sandwich to satisfy his guest and then retired to the sofa when he couldn't hide the headache pain anymore. Nathan'd just finished picking up the kitchen when there was a knock on the door. He saw Vin cringe.

"I'll get it."

Dropping the dish towel he moved to the door and looked through the peep hole and then unlocked the door. When he opened it, a petite Latina woman with a large gym bag slung over one shoulder smiled at him. "Vincent Tanner?" she asked.

"Over there." Nathan waved at the sofa and stood aside. The small woman thanked him and stepped inside.

She walked around and stood in front of Vin. "Hi. I'm Florencia. Before we start, I need to know your level of pain." She dropped the bag on the floor. Vin twitched. "Hm. A little sensitive to sudden noises, I see."

By the tilt of Vin's head and the tightness he could see in his profile, Nathan knew this wasn't starting out well. He couldn't tell if it was anger or fear he was seeing.

"I'll be showing you how to get around safely and then how to take care of yourself and this place. Do you want to start here or in your bedroom?"

Nathan saw Vin flush red.

"Um . . ." Florencia's steady gaze moved to Nathan as the medic gathered his coat. "Ah . . . I have some things to do . . . somewhere else. Buck'll be checkin' on you later, okay Vin?"

Nathan felt like a coward as he slipped from the apartment. The panicked look on Vin's face stuck with him all the way back to the office.



Martin hobbled piteously across the icy New York sidewalk after paying for the cab, praying he'd make it to the Federal building lobby without embarrassing himself. He wasn't sure if the cane was a help or a hindrance, but it was sure better than crutches. Once inside, he let out a short sigh of relief and limped through security on his way to the bank of elevators.

Nearly four weeks had passed since he'd sprained his ankle and Martin was annoyed at how painful it still was. His doctor said bad sprains like his took longer than a break to heal – Martin didn't believe him at first, but now he wondered.

"Hey, gimpy." Danny's cocky voice made him grin. "Here, let me get that for you."

"I think I can manage pushing a button," Martin grumbled as Danny leaned over and punched the elevator button.

Martin leaned on the cane to relieve pressure on his throbbing ankle.

"So how's your first week back going? You riding the desk for a while?"

"I'm keeping busy. Not sure how much longer I'm grounded. It still hurts a bit."

The silver doors rang open and the pair stepped inside with a few others.

"How's Vin?"

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Martin shrugged, the mention of his brother causing his worry to rise. “Last time I talked to him he was pretty miserable.”

“Too bad,” Danny sympathized. “You really going back again?”

Martin nodded, waiting for a few people to exit the car before speaking again. “It’s hard to explain. I miss him – it’s like I’m disconnected or something. It’s weird.”

“What you two have is definitely weird,” Danny laughed, causing Martin to grin. “Why don’t you get him to come back here for a while? Think your mom’d like that? I mean, it sounded like she’d like to get to know him. Am I wrong?”

The door swooshed open again for the next floor but Martin didn’t really notice the exiting passengers as he considered Danny’s suggestion. He thought of Vin in that apartment of his, alone, and toyed with the idea. “*Oh, yeah. There’s that Victor factor,*” he reminded himself. “*But he’s in DC until Christmas and mom’s at the house here for the holidays... alone... hmmm.*”

“You know, that’s not a bad idea.” Martin bobbed his head. “Won’t be easy sell it to Vin, though. He’s pretty independent.”

“You mean stubborn? Well, there’s a surprise.” Danny rolled his eyes.

Martin ignored him. The doors opened again and Danny nudged him forward. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Because I’m the brains of the bunch, Marty old boy.”

It took a few seconds for that to sink in. “You’re the brains? Where does that leave me?”

“Well, it’s obvious to anyone that I’m the brains, Samantha’s the beauty, Viv’s the soul and Jack’s the boss so that would make you the comic relief.”

Martin lifted his cane to whack Danny’s leg but the agent skittered out of range. “Or the sidekick. You can pick!” He chuckled and ducked into the bullpen.

“Sidekick my ass,” Martin muttered, limping in Danny’s wake. “More like ass-kicker. Yeah, that’s it. I’m the ass-kicker of the team. The Enforcer – that’s it.” Satisfied, he shoved into the office.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Josiah stomped uncharacteristically into the office and slammed down his thermos. He was normally an even-tempered soul, but when roused, the big profiler had a temper that was frightening.

“May I assume that our own Mr. Tanner has finally wormed his way into your heart?” Ezra commented dryly from the other side of the office after a tense beat of silence.

That earned him a Larabee worthy glare from Josiah. The big man opened his mouth to issue an instant reply, but managed to get a measure of control and snapped his jaw shut. Instead, he heaved a huge sigh and reached back cradled the back of his neck with both hand as he stretched and gazed ceiling-ward. The others in the office visibly relaxed from their frozen states

“That boy can test an angel,” Josiah finally muttered as he dropped his hands.

“Vin’s feeling pretty trapped these days,” JD commented. “I feel sorry for that therapist lady.”

“The third occupational therapist in four weeks,” Nathan growled. “He is getting around better, though.”

Buck snorted. “Great. More mobility means he can spread the Tanner charm throughout Purgatorio. I shudder at the thought.”

Just then Chris stepped into the room from his office and glanced up, noticing Josiah’s return. “Vin eat lunch?”

Josiah dropped onto his desk chair. “More or less.”

Chris studied him for a moment. “What’s that mean, exactly?”

It was obvious the big man was picking his words carefully as he leaned back before speaking. “Well, let’s just say that the potato soup from Millard’s Bistro blends remarkably well with Vin’s kitchen walls.”

Chris’ lips pressed into a tense, hard line and his fingers wrinkled the papers in his hand as his grip tightened. Buck let out a short laugh whereas JD, Ezra and Nathan chose to be quiet and focus on their leader. They also looked ready to duck.

“He’s acting like a two-year-old,” Chris finally growled, slamming the papers he held onto Buck’s desk a little harder than necessary.

Buck raised an eyebrow and chose not to comment any further.

“When’s Martin arriving again? Friday afternoon?” JD asked.

“Late afternoon,” Nathan confirmed. “Chris, if Vin’s feeling so trapped it may be time for a change of scenery.”

Chris nodded and ran a hand through his hair in thought. “Martin’s trying to get Vin to go back to New York and it’s beginning to sound like a good idea. That’s one of his reasons for coming out.”

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“But he hates the city,” JD protested.

“Martin’s mom – Katherine – lives outside the city,” Chris explained. “He told me that Katherine wants Vin to stay with her for a while. It’s quiet, lots of room, Martin would be close . . .”

“And so would Victor,” Buck noted.

“We could wager on who murders who,” Ezra said a little too brightly.

“Martin told me that Victor’s in DC for the next few months, at least until spring.”

Heads nodded all around.

“Sounds like a good set up,” Nathan said. “I know none of us wants to admit it, but we can use the break. Getting Vin to comply might be a problem, though.”

JD rolled his eyes as Buck laughed. “Now there’s an understatement. We can’t even get him out to the ranch.”

Chris nodded in agreement. “I think letting Martin take the lead on that job is probably best.”

The atmosphere of the room lightened considerably.



Chris pulled up to the curb near baggage claim and thought again how odd it was to see Vin with short hair. Martin was still using a cane, but had no problem tossing his carry-on bag in the back of the truck.

“Good to see you again, Chris,” Martin said when he pulled open the door and settled into the front seat. “Thanks for picking me up but I could have rented a car.”

“Not a problem. Vin’s Jeep needs some use.”

They sat in comfortable silence with the local country station softly playing in the background. When they hit the freeway, Martin broke the quiet.

“So I understand he’s been a bit . . . difficult?”

Chris chuckled. He hadn’t told Martin any details, but obviously the man could read between the lines. “He’s scared and frustrated.”

“He told you that?”

Laughing again, Chris shook his head. “Not on your life. I just know him. You know what I mean.” The connection Chris and Vin had only a fraction of the strength that was between the twins, but it was enough for Larabee to know what Vin was going through. And Chris had to deal with his own frustration at not being able to help his friend; it wasn’t a good mix and he wondered if it was fair for Martin to shoulder that grief.

As if sensing his thoughts, Martin turned and gave Chris an appraising look. “It’s been hard.” Not a question.

Chris nodded shortly after a slight pause. “I . . . we keep trying. Something needs to change, because what we’re doing now isn’t working.” He gave Martin a glance. “He’s miserable.”

Martin took a deep breath and clicked his tongue. “I’ll see what I can do. So the rest of the team supports the idea of him coming home with me for a while?”

“Wholeheartedly,” Chris said. “And we’re all feeling pretty guilty about that.”

They both chuckled and during the remainder of the ride Martin brought Chris up to date on the Fed Bomber investigation. It had become more complicated, but any kind of identification was still impossible.

“It looks like he’s an expert at changing identity,” Martin said. “The only way he can disappear like he does is if he takes over someone else’s life. They expect to find a body buried somewhere on the land where the cabin was.”

Chris gave him a sharp look. “Murder?”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense. The property there has had the same owner for decades, taxes are paid on time and the social security number is still on file and active – well, was active until the cabin burned down.”

“So this guy takes over someone’s life – that is, social security number and property, at least – by killing the person and getting rid of the body until he has to move on. Then he finds another victim. How does he choose the victims?”

“They’d have to be older, isolated and with no real family ties so no one misses them. That’s the what happened with the cabin owner. He must have had a prior identity or identities before but they haven’t found any. The F.B.I. no idea about his true identity.”

“Creeps like that eventually trip up somehow.”

“We can only hope. Based on the stuff I saw in that cabin, this guy’s been connected to at least a dozen bombings across the country in the past 11 years. This guy’s smart.”

When they crossed the arbitrary line that defined the outskirts of Purgatorio Chris’ thoughts returned to his friend. Being with Martin for just this little while convinced him that a trip east would do nothing but good for Vin. Still, there was a touch of residual guilt that wouldn’t be quenched.



When Martin hobbled into his brother’s building on Chris’ heels the meager attempt of holiday decoration did little to cheer him. He could already feel the press of anxiety that emanated from Chris growing stronger. It was hard to believe Christmas was less than a week away; celebrating the holiday was definitely not on his agenda this year. Right now, all he wanted was to ease the load his brother carried.

They mounted the stairs, not at all surprised that the elevator didn’t work. By the time they reached Vin’s door Martin’s ankle was tender. The uncomfortable feeling was overshadowed by the wave of emotion that washed over him just standing in the hall. Martin paused before knocking on the door. Chris tilted his head and raised an eyebrow.

“You ready for this?” the ATF team leader asked softly.

“Yeah. Thanks.” Martin took his bag from Chris, making it clear he would face his brother alone. Chris looked worried. “It’s okay. You’re right – he’s . . . unsettled.”

Chris chuffed at the understatement.

“It’s better this way,” Martin reassured him. “He knows I’m here. I’ll be in close touch.”

With a reluctant nod, Chris left. Martin tapped on the door and tried the knob, not surprised it wasn’t locked. Pushing the door open he stuck his head into the shadows of Vin’s apartment.

It smelled heavy and tangy with sweat. Music played lowly from the living room. The light of the radio glowed on the bookshelf as some instrumental Christmas tune played. Martin stepped in and closed the door behind him after dragging in his suitcase.

“Vin?” he called, squinting as he pulled off his gloves. It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the low light. When he thought he could see well enough, he moved into the living room and opened one of the drapes enough to light the room. The place didn’t look too bad and Martin attributed it to the rest of Vin’s team. They dropped in three times a day to make sure

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their teammate was eating and taking care of the place. The also took him out to make sure his brother wasn't isolating himself.

"Vin?" Martin called again. He limped his way to the back rooms and tapped on Vin's bedroom door. "Hey, I'm here."

"Martin." Vin's voice carried softly from the direction of the bed.

The room was pitch black. Martin slipped in and carefully moved toward the voice. As he got closer, the stabs of pain he felt in his head made him gasp; Chris told him Vin still suffered from an occasional headache, but he had no idea they were this bad. "Can I get you anything?" he asked softly as he settled on the edge of the bed.

"It'll pass," Vin whispered. Martin took his hand. "I'm glad you're here."

Martin felt the pain that uttering the words caused and squeezed Vin's hand. "Me too." He rubbed his own temple and felt sorry for his brother. Martin was sure he was only feeling a part of what Vin was.

"You take something for it?" Vin's silence answered his question. "I'll get something."

"No," Vin snapped, his grip holding Martin back. "No. Don't want it."

"Vin . . ."

"No. It'll pass."

And it did. The brothers sat there in the dark for nearly an hour before the pain began to ebb. As it did so, their strange connection became stronger and although he tried to hide it, Martin figured out Vin's reluctance at taking the pain killers. He was afraid – afraid of dependence, of accidentally overdosing, of becoming disconnected – and Martin understood every fear.

He also became overwhelmed at the barrage of input assaulting Vin's senses, even in this dark, quiet room. The moderate traffic outside, the soft music in the living room, the breeze brushing the window, the patter of footfall in an upstairs apartment – it all seemed absurdly amplified.

"My God," Martin thought as he sharply inhaled. *"How can you stand it?"*

"It's getting' worse. It's like the other senses are on overload. It's why I get the headaches. And no, I haven't told anyone. What's the point?"

"I think Chris knows something is off. You can't hide this forever."

"It won't be forever. It can't be."

It was then that Martin first picked up on the depth of Vin's terror. Although he was doing a good job hiding it Martin wonder to what extent the effort was costing his brother.

"I want to take you away for a while." With that one thought Martin knew Vin understood all the reasons why. Not only was Katherine's house in the country and away from the constant city noise, but her quiet grace could keep him centered and balanced. Although Vin considered the rest of the team family, he was definitely feeling the pressure of too much attention. They all needed a break, a change, and with this brother's help, Vin realized it.

Even the specter of Victor Fitzgerald on the outskirts was tolerable. In fact, the thought made Vin smile. With Martin taking some of his pain, face relaxed and he chuckled.

"Guess I'll have the opportunity to get to know daddy dearest."

"Not sure he's worth the effort, brother. At least mom'll be there to protect you."

Martin felt a surge of surprise from Vin. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why would your mother protect me?"

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“Because she didn’t when you were five,” Martin said quietly out loud. “And she desperately wants to make up for that. She’s really stood up for you this past month. It’s part of the reason, I think, that dad – Victor – escaped to DC.”

“I don’t want to cause no trouble between ‘em.” Vin’s soft voice carried in the velvety darkness of the small room. “She don’t deserve that.”

“*You didn’t cause anything,*” Martin clarified. “*Victor brought that on all by himself. He made his bed, and now he’s got to sleep in it.*” Martin chuckled. “*Chris and the boys were really expecting you to put up a fight over this idea.*”

A wave of mind-numbing weariness cloaked Martin’s thoughts.

“*I’m too tired to fight anymore.*”

Taken aback, Martin felt a spark of alarm and squelched it immediately by taking the admission at face value. Vin’s senses were currently so overloaded and overwhelmed that Martin was sure his brother didn’t pick up on the quickly quashed feeling. He let go of Vin’s hand, and with it, some of their empathetic connection.

“Rest. I’ll start making arrangements.”

“Sounds good.”

Martin left Vin in the darkened room and gently closed the door. Retreating to the living room, he found the phone and started in on the nearly impossible task of booking a flight for the two of them during Christmas week.

He eventually hung after a long, exasperating experience with a harried ticket agent, generally pleased with the results. His ear hurt. Rubbing it tenderly, Martin stood and spied his still unopened suitcase near the door. Stepping over to it, he picked it up and headed toward the guest room, thinking about calling Chris with their plans when he was suddenly hit with a parade of visuals that were more vivid than any dream.

He stumbled, dropping the suitcase and lurched against the hallway wall as he pressed his hands to his temples in an attempt to keep the visions from exploding out of his head. The pictures flicked by at a mind-numbing pace, making him nauseous. He slipped down the wall as if it were physical assault and moaned.

Then, as quickly as they came on, they stopped.

It took Martin several minutes to catch his breath and settle his stomach, and as soon as he knew his knees would hold him he was on his feet and headed to Vin’s side. In the darkened room he could hear Vin’s heavy breathing. Martin reclaimed his place on the edge of the bed and laid his shaky hand on his brother’s thigh. Vin was sitting straight up, trembling and gasping.

When they were both breathing evenly, Martin asked, “What the hell was that?”

“*Don’t know,*” Vin thought. “*But it’s been gettin’ worse.*”

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Martin was amazed that his brother could even function. One day and two nights of dreams – no, they were more like visions – and headaches was wearing him down. Martin knew he only shared a portion of the events. He was also realized that since his arrival in Denver, the events became worse.

So here he was, trying to balance his need to be with Vin against the fact that it obviously caused pain to his sibling. Katherine’s house in upper New York was looking better and better. But first they had to get there.

Martin hobbled around the small bedroom gathering Vin’s things as an obviously frustrated Vin fumed quietly, sitting cross-legged on the bed. Martin could feel the conflicting emotions pouring from his brother; anger, fear, barely restrained panic.

“You’ll feel better with some space and less people,” Martin offered softly. “I know it’s probably pretty scary . . .”

Vin snorted and began to rock slightly, back and forth. The physical motion seemed to help.

“I have some pills from the doctor for the flight,” Martin offered. “Ezra said you did pretty well with it the last time you flew.”

Vin’s jaws rippled as he ground his teeth, but he made no verbal comments. “*I don’t want any of this.*”

“I know. I’ll help you, you know that.”

“Yeah.”

Vin sighed and the rocking subsided. Martin closed and secured the suitcase and dragged it to the living room. When he got there, he heard a knock on the door.

“It’s Chris,” a voice called. Martin wobbled over and unlocked the door, stepping back as Larabee carefully pushed open the door and stepped in with Buck on his heels. Chris raised a brow at Martin. “Where’s your cane?”

Martin grinned and picked up his cane from beside the couch. “Right here, mom,” he teased.

Larabee shook his head as Buck chuckled. “You’ve been around Vin too long.” He glanced around the room then looked down the hall. “He ready to go?”

“He’s packed and dressed. Whether he’s ready or not is another thing altogether.”

Chris tilted his head in Martin’s direction and met his gaze. Buck cleared his throat. “How ‘bout I load up the car?” he offered. “Where’s your bag?” Martin indicated the spare room and Buck headed down the hall, returning shortly with a black suitcase. He stopped by Vin’s bag. “This is all he’s takin’?”

“He doesn’t need much. I have a lot of winter clothes he can use. Mom’s stocked up on a few things, too.”

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Buck gathered the bags. "I'll wait in the car for y'all. Unless you need help down?" He looked to Chris.

"I think we got it," Chris said lowly, still staring down the hall. "You sure Kathrine's ready for this?"

"Yeah. I still think it's the best thing at the moment."

Chris nodded, and then indicated that Buck should go. After the bags were hustled out to the hall Martin shut the door. When he turned back, he saw Larabee disappear into Vin's room.



He could feel the storm of emotion before he stepped into the room. Chris quickly wondered how Martin could stand it – how Vin could stand it. He paused inside the room for a few moments to let his eyes adjust to the dim light. As Vin's outline on the bed, rocking slightly back and forth, became clearer Chris couldn't help but find the sight disturbing. Tanner was the quiet, still type. To see him like this brought a zing of fear to Chris' heart.

"Hey," Chris said softly. "Ready to go?"

The rocking slowed. "*I don't know where I belong anymore.*"

The statement was out of the blue and threw Chris for a moment. A pair of long strides brought him to the bed where he settled carefully on the side. "*With us. You'll always belong with us.*" The response was automatic and clear but he still felt webs of doubt in his closest friend. Vin raised his chin and faced Chris. The rocking stilled. Chris hoped it was because Vin felt the sureness of the statement. Larabee spoke out loud. "This will work itself out, Vin. One way or the other, you still belong here."

The rage of emotions quieted. Vin's sigh was long and deep. "One step at a time, right boss?" He finally said.

"One step at a time, pard." Chris rose and reached over, grabbing Vin's shoulder in a firm grip. "Now let's get you two to the airport. Think you can avoid getting shot at between here and there?"

Vin allowed himself to be directed to his feet next to Chris. "Ain't my fault I'm so popular," he grumbled. "Let's go before I change my mind."

Vin took a step but Chris stopped him with a hand on his forearm.

"How about puttin' on some shoes first?"



The flight went easier than Martin expected. The press of bodies at the airport was all the encouragement Vin needed to take the mild sedative from the doctor. Even Vin admitted – albeit reluctantly – that taking it had been a good idea. It not only relaxed him physically, the drug also managed to quiet the invading dreams as Vin dozed on the jet.

The pill must have been on its last hurrah as Vin started to fidget on touchdown. Martin waited patiently for the plane to empty before helping Vin to his feet and leading the way from the plane. Martin felt a spike in Vin's anxiety as they entered the bustle of the baggage claim area. Wondering for a moment how to juggle his brother and the luggage, Martin was relieved to hear a familiar voice.

"Well, what do we have here?" Danny said brightly as he appeared at Martin's side. "Two lost mountain men?"

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“Danny!” Martin shook his hand and was pleased to see Samantha push her way to a spot beside him.

“Hey you two,” she greeted sweetly, giving Martin a peck on the cheek. She then rubbed Vin’s back. “It’s good to see you again, Vin.”

Vin’s smile looked tentative. “Samantha,” he said answered, sounding a bit breathless. “Danny.”

“There’s a car at the curb,” Samantha said. “Your mom arranged it. How about I take Vin to the car while you two deal with the bags?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Danny said as he slapped Martin’s back. “Looks like Hop-a-long here needs a hand.”

“*You okay?*”

“*I’ll be fine as soon as I can breathe.*”

Martin watched until Vin and Samantha were out of sight.

“So how’s he really doing?” Danny asked as they pushed their way to the baggage carousel.

“He’s having a pretty rough time,” Martin answered. “He’s impatient.”

Danny laughed shortly and Martin gave him a half-hearted glare. Although he would never admit it out loud, Martin was glad to see the familiar spark in Danny’s eye.

“It’s funny if you think about it,” Danny said as he snagged a bag. “Leaving Colorado to get away from the crowd in New York.”

Martin had to admit, it was ironic. He, too, laughed shortly. When Danny had both bags, Martin lead the way from the building then fell in behind his friend as they approached a long, sleek black sedan. The driver jumped from the vehicle and opened the trunk as Martin shook his head in amazement. “My mom sure knows how to arrange things,” he muttered as Danny joined him.

“Damn straight, cowboy.” Martin shot him another glare which made Danny’s grin bigger. “Hey, can I say ‘Home, Jeeves!’ Please?”

Martin groaned and rolled his eyes as Danny opened the back door and pushed him inside.



The ride was long but Danny and Samantha managed to make it an enjoyable trip. Martin was careful about dwelling his thoughts on Samantha. Going that direction would only make Vin more uncomfortable.

His two team mates brought the both of them up to date on the F.B.I.’s FedBomber investigation, which really hadn’t gone very far. None of them were surprised at the discovery of a buried skeleton at the cabin site. They were still trying to get a positive identification, but it was believed to be the body of the long time property owner, Jonathan Parker. Finding any relatives for a DNA match or even any dental records was proving to be tricky. Mr. Parker, it seems, was somewhat of a recluse.

“His social security number popped up again in the work force about six years ago. That’s when they think the Bomber moved in,” Samantha summed up. “This guy is really good at disappearing.”

A scene of some sort flashed in Martin’s mind at the same time he saw Vin raise an arm to rub his temple. He reached over and rested a hand on Vin’s arm. “You okay?” he asked lowly.

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In response, the vision came again, this time remaining long enough for Martin to identify it.

“The cabin,” he blurted out loud.

“What about it?” Danny asked, confused.

Martin glanced his way for a second before returning his attention to Vin. “*Yeah, what about it?*”

“*Don’t know. I keep seein’ it mixed in with other stuff.*”

“Other stuff?”

Martin saw Danny give Samantha a questioning look. She shrugged in reply and turned to Vin. “We’re almost there. You look tired.”

“Reckon I am a might,” Vin said in a whisper, still rubbing his temple.

“*Has it been better since we left the city?*”

“*Yeah,*” Vin thought. “*It has. What I see is clearer and . . . quieter.*”

Martin knew immediately what his brother meant. With less external disturbances there was less “noise” in the background of Vin’s thoughts. When he touched Vin, Martin noticed that the other senses were stronger and more sensitive. Through Vin’s mind he could “feel” what it looked like outside the car – the trees, the fireplace smoke, the flutter of falling snow. Each impression had a smell, a feel, a taste. Martin had to shut his eyes because it was all too distracting to see it with his eyes and his senses at the same time. It made him feel like he was carsick.

“Wow,” he breathed, his eyes shut.

“Can anybody else join this conversation?” Danny asked jovially, a tinge of worry at the edge of the question.

“It’s okay,” Martin reassured Danny. He removed his hand from Vin’s arm and settled back in the leather seat. “We both could use a rest.”

“You have four days,” Samantha said. “Jack expects you back at the office on Monday, you know.”

“Yeah, I know. You two coming to dinner tomorrow? It’s Christmas Eve.”

“Does your mom know she’s hosting a dinner party?”

“My mother lives for dinner parties,” Martin chuckled. “But to answer your question, yes, she knows. It was her idea.”

“Is Daddy coming?”

Leave it to Danny to cut straight to the chase. Martin felt Vin stiffen beside him. “No, he’s still in DC. This isn’t their first Christmas apart, you know.” Vin relaxed. Both brothers knew the plans, but any mention of Victor Fitzgerald brought its own tension to the air.

“I’ll be there,” Samantha said. “I think Jack’s going to Chicago, though.”

“I know, he told me,” Martin acknowledged. “It would be just us.”

“Count me in.” Danny looked out the window. “I think we’re here.”

Martin looked out the frost tinged sedan window to the gaily lit house perched on a low rise. As they passed between two brick pillars bedecked with holly and white lights and started up the long, circular drive, a myriad of memories and feelings washed over him. In past several months, Martin realized his entire world had been turned upside down and inside out, but, instead of feeling confused and adrift, he felt like his feet were firmly on the ground and traveling a solid path.

He felt complete. He had direction. And it was because he’d found his other half.

Vin must have felt the same thing because the nervous tension he’d felt hovering around his brother disappeared with Martin’s thoughts.

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“Merry Christmas, brother,” Martin said quietly.

“Thanks,” Vin replied. “*Never got a gift like this before.*”

They both chuckled.

“Hey,” Samantha objected with a smile. “It’s not polite to . . . to . . . well, to do whatever that is you two do in the presence of company.”

“Company, hell,” Martin said, taking her hand. He felt his pulse quicken when he touched her. “When you’re here, you are family.”

“Can I tell Victor that we’re related, then?” Danny asked brightly.

They all had a laugh at that idea as the car stopped at the massive front doors. Danny stepped from the car and helped the others exit the vehicle. He and Samantha followed Martin and Vin up the three stairs to the front porch. When they reached the top, one of the front doors swung open.

“Hi, mom,” Martin said warmly before she uttered a word. The look of joy on her face made him smile.

“Martin! Vincent! I’m so happy you’re here. Samantha, Daniel, please. Come in.”

Martin and Vin stopped before her and Martin wrapped his arms around her in a tight hug. He kissed her on the cheek when they separated and he saw her look longingly at his brother. Wisely, she simply placed a gentle hand on Vin’s elbow and patted his forearm with her other hand. She directed him through the wide doorway. Martin couldn’t feel any reluctance or wariness coming from his twin so he relaxed. Maybe this was a good idea after all.

“Please, come in from the cold. I have a fire going in the fireplace. Alice will take your coats.” An older woman, obviously the maid, stepped up and shut the door behind them. “I have hot water on. Who would like some tea? Or a drink?”

Katherine carefully lead Vin to the comfortable living room and settled him into an overstuffed chair after taking his coat and handing it off to Alice.

“Well, Danny and I should be heading back soon but some tea might be nice.” Samantha looked around the large room, obviously impressed, and sat near Vin.

Martin had his mother sit on the couch next to Vin, and he sat next to her. “Now if you’re like my Marty, you prefer hot chocolate with a little mint. How’s that sound?” Katherine reached over and patted Vin’s hand as she spoke. Martin was a little amazed at how relaxed Vin looked.

“Sounds nice, ma’am,” Vin drawled quietly. “Thanks for havin’ me.”

“Oh, honey, it’s my privilege,” she said with sincerity, a tiny hitch making her voice tremble momentarily. “And way overdue. But, we’ll talk later. Right now, let’s enjoy each other’s company. How are your friends in Denver spending the holidays?”

Martin marveled, again, at his mother’s knack at putting people at ease and getting more words out of Vin than he’d seen with anyone else, even himself. She was one of the reasons why Victor was so successful; no one knew how to mingle better than Katherine Fitzgerald. Her gentle nature was so opposite Victor’s that Martin wondered how they managed to stay together so long without him killing her spirit.

Then he remembered the bad times – the hospitalizations, the separations – and knew she did pay a price. But now, watching her interact with Vin, he wondered if it would have been different if he and Vin were brought up together. Then a thought struck him like a bolt from the blue.

If he’d never come here, if Victor had simply left him with his birth mother, would that have saved Katherine from any suffering? Would that have saved Vin from suffering? What if . . .

His thoughts stopped there with an intruding thought. Martin looked up to see Vin facing his way as Katherine spoke with Samantha.

WITHOUT A TRACE FANFIC BY AJB

“Don’t.” Vin’s voice was clear in his mind. *“Don’t even go there. Don’t you ever think like that. Ever. If you want to blame someone, blame Victor.”*

“But what he did...”

“Was years ago. We’ve survived. Please, brother, I don’t need any more drama in my head.”

Martin grinned and saw Vin’s shoulders relax. Drama. He chuckled and shook his head, realizing that their situation could rival any soap opera.

“What’s so funny, Marty?” Danny said, accepting a cup of steaming tea from Alice and balancing it precariously on his knee. He looked kind of like a fish out of water.

“Watching you watch your manners,” Martin jibed back. “Didn’t know you had any good ones.”

“Martin!” his mother scolded lightly. “That’s no way to speak to your guests.”

“Yeah, Marty,” Danny chirped. “How rude!” He smiled hugely as he lifted the delicate tea cup to his lips.

Knowing he was beaten, all he could do was throw in the towel and give Katherine a sheepish look. “Sorry, mom,” he muttered.

Samantha gave him a sly wink and a smile that made everything better. With that, Martin sat back and enjoyed the warm feelings of family and friendship that put both he and Vin at ease for now.

THE CAMPING TRIP

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The evening went well. After Danny and Samantha departed, the remaining three made it through unpacking and a light dinner. After that came drinks by the fireplace. They talked late into the evening with Katherine finally throwing in the towel at 11:00.

“You two are still on west coast time but this old woman needs to get to bed.”

The boys stood, with Martin walking with her to the stairs to kiss her good night. He returned to find his brother facing the fire, orange and yellow light painting his face to look like some outdoor cowboy by a campfire. Martin’s thoughts instantly flashed back to the fateful camping trip that had eventually brought them here.

Vin turned slightly as if feeling Martin’s return, turning back to the fire when Martin was settled.

“I think this might help,” Vin said softly. “Thanks, bro.”

“You’re welcome and I think you’re right. You seem – quiet. You know, up here.” Martin tapped his own head, oblivious to the fact that Vin was blind. He knew his brother “saw” what he meant.

“Yeah.”

They sat in quiet a little longer.

“There’s something that’s been botherin’ me,” Vin finally said in a near whisper. “A feelin’ that I’m missing something.”

“About what?”

Vin scowled. Martin could feel his brother’s frustration as he tried to pull his thoughts together. Vin rubbed his furrowed forehead.

“I don’t . . . that’s just it. I’m not sure. It’s like something big is sittin’ there waitin’ for me to notice it, and . . . an’ . . .” Vin rubbed his forehead harder then let out a sharp breath.

Martin felt the tickle of a new-born headache. “Just relax, Vin. You just got here. Things will fall into place as soon as you get some rest.” He scooted to the edge of his chair. “You look like Hell, you know.”

Vin’s face relaxed a fraction before he snorted and flopped back, deep into the overstuffed chair with a lopsided grin Martin would label “shit-eating.”

“You do remember we’re identical twins,” Vin smirked.

“Not exactly,” Martin said smugly as he stood. “I’m the better lookin’ one.”

Vin pushed himself to his feet with a short laugh. “You mean the delusional one.”

Martin took Vin’s elbow and steered him toward the stairs. “No, no. Just the older, smarter one. It would be best if you keep that in mind, squirt.”

“Squirt? Oh, you’re gonna pay for that one.”

As they started up the gracefully curved steps, Alice appeared from out of nowhere and began turning off the downstairs lights.

“Good night, Alice,” the boys said as one. Martin smiled at Alice’s startled expression.

“Good night, sirs,” she quickly answered.

“*She looked a little surprised,*” Martin thought.

“*She’s allowed to have emotions?*”

Martin frowned. “*What’s that supposed to mean?*”

Vin stopped instantly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it that way.” Martin could feel new turmoil starting in his brother’s mind. “It’s just that . . . I never . . . shit.” Vin rubbed his forehead again.

Martin relaxed when he realized what Vin meant. “*You’ve never had a maid or any kind of serve staff.*”

Vin sighed. “Yeah. Sorry. That must a sounded harsh.”

Tugging him onward, Martin said, “That’s okay. I get it.”

Things seemed back to normal by the time Martin left Vin’s room, which was right next to his own room. He put away the last of his travel items and readied himself for bed, sighing contentedly as he flopped onto the big four-poster. Rolling to one side, he turned off the light and wiggled under the down comforter. He was asleep in minutes.

Martin jerked awake with a gasp and shot up to a sit. His heart still raced as visions of the frightening dream faded away - there was blood and blackness and something he couldn’t quite form solidly in his mind. It took a moment for his heart to still and he frowned in concentration. Something in the dreams pictures struck him as familiar, but Martin couldn’t remember what he’d seen.

He continued to sit until his heart slowed to a normal rhythm before lying back again. Martin stared at the ceiling, waiting for sleep again, when he heard Vin cry out.

Martin rolled from the bed and grabbed his robe, trotting from his room to Vin’s. He rapped twice and then pushed the door open. “Vin?” he whispered.

All he could hear was a rustling sound. All he could feel was a tingling on the edge of his brain. When he heard a moan, Martin rushed to Vin’s bedside and sat on the edge. Vin’s head rolled restlessly from side to side as his hands clutched at blankets that were slewed to one side.

When Martin reached pressed his hand against Vin’s shoulder, the tickling of his mind exploded into a calliope of scenes. At first, all he perceived was the color green, and when he realized he was looking at different views of a forest, a few details started to reveal themselves. And every one of those details was the color blue.

Then there was the flash of a face and Vin surged to a sit as he sharply exhaled the word, “Oh!”

Martin backed off a step, shaking his head from the onslaught. Still, the last image, that of the face, lingered.

Vin’s breathing was harsh and ragged. He pressed the heel of his hand against his forehead until his breathing was again under control. Then he slumped back against the headrest and rubbed his eyes. “Did you see ‘em?” he croaked.

“Yeah,” Martin answered. He glanced at the glowing bedside clock: 3:35 and reached out to rest his hand on Vin’s shoulder.

“I keep seein’ him in the woods and then everything hurts.”

“Who is he?”

Vin let out an explosive breath and laughed once. “I have no idea. I can’t remember. I can’t even see him clearly. He’s carrying something . . .”

“Slow down. We’ll figure this out.”

They sat in silence for a few moments before Martin yawned.

“Go to bed,” Vin grumbled. “Ain’t gonna solve this now.”

THE CAMPING TRIP

He started pulling at the blankets and Martin helped to straightened out the mess. Once the bed was back in shape, Vin slid down under the sheets and curled up on his side. Martin watched him for a moment and was struck with an idea. Without any word of warning he crawled into the large bed and snuggled under the blankets alongside Vin.

“What the hell are you doin’?” Although Vin tried to sound annoyed, the last of his words turned up in pitch as he held back a laugh.

“Sleepin’,” Martin replied, drawing the comforter up to his chin. “Maybe sharing the scenery. Just go to sleep, Vin. I’m not gonna touch you or anything.”

“Damn straight,” Vin snorted before letting out a chuckle. The bed jiggled as Vin settled down. They were quiet for a few minutes, the only sounds were of the wind outside and the tick of the clock. “Thanks,” Vin said eventually, his quiet voice barely carrying over the wind – rattled window.

“You’re welcome,” Martin responded. “It’s what big brothers do, take care of little brothers.”

They both fell asleep and almost made it to dawn. Martin awoke when he bolted to a sit after a dazzling display visions; and visions are what he called them. They were much too sharp and detailed to be dreams. And the mystery man had come in very clear.

Vin yelped as he popped up to a sit, breathing hard. “Did you . . . ?”

“Yeah, I saw. Do you remember anything about him now?”

Vin nodded. “I remember now where I saw him. He was hiking near the cabin, Martin. And the stuff he’s carrying? One is a quiver of arrows.”

“For the crossbow,” Martin finished. “What are they called for crossbows? Bolts?”

“Yeah,” Vin mumbled with a frown. “With blue fletches.”

“Fletches?”

Vin wiped his face with his hand. “The feathers. Fletches.” He frowned again.

“This is what you’ve been seeing?”

“I guess. It wasn’t really clear before.” Vin tilted his head in Martin’s direction. “Guess your idea worked. Thanks.”

“At least you didn’t snore,” Martin teased as he flopped back down. “It’s still dark outside and I, for one, am going back to sleep.”

After a few minutes, he felt Vin lie back down, too. “D’ya think you can get a composite of him with a sketch artist?” he asked just as Martin was about to drop off.

“I think so. Unless it fades away when you’re awake for a while like a dream does.”

Vin was quiet again and Martin was close to sleep again when Vin quickly sat up again. “That’s it! The fletches!”

Martin rolled his head toward his brother and peeled his eyes open once again. “What?”

“The fletches! They were a custom design! I remember now . . .”

Vin then recounted the time he’d seen the man. It was at least three years ago in the mountains near where they’d camped. He’d seen the man among the trees while setting up camp and had waved to him, but the man just disappeared into the scenery. Vin hadn’t seen the crossbow itself, but the quiver of bolts was quite clear since a ray of sun broke through the tree canopy and landed directly on it. That’s what Vin remembered clearly – the pattern in the fletches. The blue was nearly iridescent and accented with bright yellow. It had to be a custom design.

“ . . . and there aren’t a lot of custom fletchers out there. Either he did it himself, or he had it done. Either way, the materials should be traceable. There’s only a few manufacturers.”

Now Martin was unable to sleep. They lay there in the dark quiet, thinking.

WITHOUT A TRACE FANFIC BY AJB

"If we do find the guy, there's some hearsay problems with all this." Martin heard Vin chuckle.

"I can hear it now: 'Agent Tanner, is this the man?' 'Well, I don't know 'cos I can't see, but my brother here shared my visions and he can pick him out for ya.'"

Martin agreed. "Yeah. I can't say I've ever heard of shared visions being acceptable in court. Well, at least we have a face."

"And at least one name."

"And feathers."

By now the sky outside the windows was starting to lighten.

"I can work with a sketch artist and get a list of crossbow dealers in the Denver area. Let's take it from there for now."

"I'm startin' to feel kinda useless," Vin grumbled

"It's only temporary," Martin assured him.

"Right," Vin responded tiredly as he drew the back of his hand over his eyes.

"So," Martin started as he rolled over and closed his eyes with a yawn. "You think that you'll sleep better with that off your mind?"

"Not sure," Vin said after a long moment. "Still feels like there's somethin' else. . ."

Martin snuggled deeper into his pillow. "*It'll come.*"

"*Hope so.*"



Click. Click.

It was a soft noise but enough to lure Martin from sleep. "*What the hell!*" he thought as fog cleared slowly from his head.

Then there was an aborted giggle followed by whispered words. "Ain't they cute?"

Danny.

Martin forced his eyes open to see Vin pulling the comforter over his head. "Tell 'em I'm lookin' for my gun and I'm gonna shoot 'em," Vin snarled tiredly.

"I'll help you." Martin rolled to the side and dragged his feet from under the sheets, letting them drop to the floor as he sat up. Danny was just tucking away his camera phone with a self-satisfied grin.

"Good morning sleepyheads." It took a moment for Samantha's voice to register.

Martin stood up and quickly grabbed his robe.

"Like the P.J.s," Danny remarked. "Guess that answers the 'boxers or briefs?' question."

Martin pulled the robe closed over his boxers and glared at his partners. It wasn't very effective.

"Whoa. Serious case of bed head." Samantha extended out an arm and offered a steaming mug of what gloriously smelled of coffee. "Peace offering. Alice serves a mean java."

He shuffled forward and took the mug. "Thanks." Danny retrieved another mug from a nearby table and started toward Vin. Martin threw out an arm to block his path. "I'd better . . ." he said in way of an explanation and took the mug, walking over to put it on the bedside table. "What are you two doing here at the crack of dawn?"

"Martin, it's nine o'clock," Samantha corrected. "And I know you two need to get some things for tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Christmas Eve? Do you have anything for your mother?"

THE CAMPING TRIP

Martin had the grace to look sheepish.

“Didn’t think so. We’re going shopping.”

“Now I know I’m gonna shoot ‘em.” Vin’s voice was muffled under the comforter. “I’m stayin’ here.”

“Okay, then. Martin?”

Martin ran his hand through his hair. Some time alone with Katherine would be good for Vin, especially since he knew how his mother could keep him busy getting ready for the dinner gathering. “I’ll get dressed.”

After Danny and Samantha departed the room, Martin turned back to his brother. “I’ll get you something for mom.”

“preciate it. ‘n Alice, too. ‘n maybe Samantha, if ya don’t mind.”

“What about Danny?” Martin said teasingly.

“Something painful?”

Martin patted Vin’s shoulder. “I’ll look around. You okay with this?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Martin could feel that he was telling the truth – there was no anxiety connected to the words.

“Great. You coming down for breakfast? Alice serves up a killer omelet, too.”

“I’ll be right behind ya.”

After Martin left, Vin pulled down the blankets and took a few moments to listen to the silence. No car horns or alarms, no slamming doors, no music – it was bliss to his weary senses. A tree ticked the window and Vin imagined a light snow falling in the breeze. He felt completely relaxed for the first time in weeks.

Except for that nagging thought that he was still missing something in his night-time visions.

Vin ran over what he remembered again, clearly recalling the fletch pattern and the suspects face. There was more, he knew it, but blew out a breath and sat up. His head pounded a little and figured a shower would take care of that.

Generally feeling much better, Vin realized that he was actually looking forward to the day.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The light tap on the bedroom door was perfectly timed. Vin ran a brush quickly through his hair and figured he was ready for the day. As he showered and dressed, Vin realized that he could see more light and even some moving shadows on the periphery of his vision. Things were getting better.

“Come in,” he called out in response to the knock as he quickly checked all his buttons one last time.

“Good morning, Vin. I thought you might need some help getting downstairs.” Katherine’s voice was light and cheery.

“Mornin’. Yeah, that son of yours left me high and dry.” He smiled and felt a light touch on his elbow.

“Breakfast is ready. Hope you like waffles.”

Vin didn’t know how she did it, but Katherine had a way of helping him get around that made Vin feel like he was leading the way. He made a note to remember her style for future reference.

“We have a lot to do today. Dinner will be around 7:00 and there’s a lot to do in the kitchen. I hope you don’t mind lending a hand.”

“Whatever I can do,” Vin offered.

Descending the stairs Vin could discern the size of the room below by the slight echo. He could hear Alice in the kitchen as well as isolate the mouthwatering smells being created there. Katherine was describing what it looked like outside and he was perfectly able to picture the dusting of snow in his mind.

Breakfast was wonderful. Fortified with a sturdy mug of robust coffee, Vin settled back down at the table after the dishes were cleared. Katherine brought several items to him.

“Can you fold these napkins for the table?” she asked. “Here’s how . . .”

Luckily, it was a simple fold. She promised she’d be back with a more entertaining task when he was done. Vin found the somewhat mundane task to be soothing and his mind wandered. He explored what each sense felt. He knew when Katherine was returning by the sound of her footfall followed shortly by shadowy movement in the corner of his eye.

“Well, that didn’t take long,” she said cheerily. “Now here’s something a little more challenging.”

He smelled chocolate. A spoon was put in his hand. Something metallic clanked. Before Katherine said anything, Vin followed his nose and dipped a finger in the bowl placed before him and snuck a taste.

“Chocolate chip cookies?”

“Stop that!” Katherine laughed, playfully whacking his arm.

THE CAMPING TRIP

Vin chuckled as Katherine showed him how much to scoop out a spoonful and feel for the proper amount of dough with his fingertips before placing it on the tray.

“Just think of the tray as a parking lot and you’re parking each cookie,” she said with a laugh.

“Parking lot,” Vin mused as he placed a couple of dollops. He felt more cooking sheets stacked under the one he was filling.

Apparently satisfied, Katherine patted his shoulder. “There should be four trays’ worth,” she said. “You all right for now?”

“Yeah.” Vin replied, feeling a little distracted. Something she said stuck in his head and he tried to figure out why he couldn’t distract himself from the thought.

Slowly the tray filled. The vision of a parking lot was very clear in his mind as Vin worked. It was when the last “space” was filled that it hit him.

The spoon clanked on the table where he dropped it. Parking lot! Vin stood and patted his waistband, looking for his cell phone. Damn – he’d left it in his room. Vin shoved the chair back and felt his way to the edge of the table, wiping doughy fingers on his shirt. He was orienting himself toward the stairs when he heard footsteps.

“Vin?” Katherine questioned. “Are you all right?” She was at his side in a moment.

“Phone,” Vin said quickly. “I need to call Chris.”

Katherine led him to an upholstered chair and sat him down. “I have a cordless phone here. I’ll dial for you.”

Vin told her the number as she handed him a hand towel. By the time his hands were clean of dough she passed the phone to him. He was vaguely aware of her leaving him with some privacy.

The phone rang three times. “Larabee,” the familiar voice snapped.

“Chris?”

“Hey, cowboy! How’s it going?”

“Chris, I just remembered something. The bolts. Did you find any? Were any recovered?”

“Bolts?” There was a slight pause. “The arrows?”

“Yeah. The guy shot two of them at us. One went into a tree, which I’m sure he recovered, but the other . . . where did it go?”

Vin heard Chris call for a copy of the report, glad that his friend wasn’t questioning him any farther on this line of thought. He heard a soft thump over the phone and then the sound of rustling paper. “I’m putting you on speaker so I can look at this.” There were a few seconds of rustling paper. “Nothing listed in evidence. Let me check the narrative. You didn’t ask Martin?”

“Not yet. He’s not here at the moment. I . . . I think we were shot at twice, right? I don’t really remember.” Vin rubbed his forehead.

“Here it is. Let’s see . . . yeah, here’s a note. Investigators found the hole in the tree, but no bolt. Looks like there was some scarring on a boulder near where we found you – they assume it was from the second bolt . . . no, neither one was recovered.”

“The scratched boulder - was it near the cliff face?”

“Yeah, it was.”

“Could it have gone over the edge?”

“The way it sounds here, yeah. I’m sure it did.”

“Chris, listen. Get in contact with Mary Travis. Have her pull all the news feeds she can get her hands on. Look for the ones where they’re either reporting from the trail head parking area or took extra footage in the parking area. Since that’s the parking area closest to the cabin, that’s where a lot of the news crews staged, right?”

“Right . . .” Chris spoke slowly as he tried to follow Vin’s train of thought.

“Look closest at the footage of the following morning, after we were air lifted.”

“What are we looking for?”

“Hikers and car license plates.”

There was a beat of silence. “He came back to recover the bolt.”

“Yeah, I’m sure of it. Chris, the fletch pattern of the bolts was custom and I can identify it. I don’t know if the suspect remembers but I saw him before, about three years ago, with his bolts. If the fletch pattern matches, I can I.D. him. He had to recover the bolt before he left town. The trail head parking area . . .”

“ . . . is the only place to park and hike in. I’m on it.”

Vin heard his boss and friend bark some orders and the vague replies before Chris came back on the line. “We should have it soon.”

“Martin needs to look at the footage.”

“Okay. We can stream it online from here. Did he see this guy?” Paper rustling noises again. “It doesn’t say that anywhere . . .”

“Well, not exactly. But he knows what he looks like.”

Significant pause. “Care to explain that one, Pard?”

Vin sighed and briefly explained the shared visions. If it had been anyone else but Chris, Vin would never have broached the subject. He could mentally visualize Chris pinching the bridge of his nose as he tried to figure how to explain this to Director Travis. Vin grinned guiltily.

“Hey, Chris, don’t worry none. My sights gettin’ better every day. Won’t have to explain nothin’ when I can see again.”

“Yeah, heck, let’s not worry too much about that pesky, old ‘Probable Cause’ thing.”

“Exactly.”

“Vin, I was being sarcastic.”

“Really? It sounded like you always sound.”

“Smartass. So, how goes the visit?”

“I’m makin’ cookies.”

“Cookies?”

“Hey, Vin!” JD must have stepped in Chris’ office. “Sugar cookies? I had an aunt that made the best Christmas sugar cookies! I helped her lots of times.”

“Chocolate chip, with those big chunks of chocolate!”

“Jesus, I’ve been transferred to Hell’s Kitchen,” Chris interrupted. “Whaddya got, JD?”

“Mary’s on it, Chris. Should get the first feeds within the hour.”

“You hear that, Vin?”

“Yup. Tell him thanks and you all have a good Christmas Eve if I don’t talk to you again.”

“Sure will. Have Martin check email this afternoon. I’ll link any videos we get.”

After they said their goodbyes, Vin heard the familiar voices of his team in the background just before Chris hung up and a wave of homesickness washed over him. He found that he was listening to dead air for a few moments before he dropped the phone from his ear. Vin fumbled with the buttons, trying to find the disconnect button, with growing agitation.

“Here.” Katherine’s soft voice was a balm to Vin’s nerves and he let the receiver slip from his hand.

“Thanks,” he said softly. So far, he’d avoided the frustration and melancholy from his condition, but after hearing voices from home and realizing how far away he was from them, the anxiety he’d ignored flared. “*What if I don’t get better?*” he thought.

THE CAMPING TRIP

Katherine must have heard the catch in his breath because he felt her hand on his arm as she settled into the chair beside him.

“Vin, we haven’t known each other for very long but I know a good man when I see one,” she said. “It’s remarkable how similar you and Martin are. Because of that, I feel closer to you than I have a right to.”

Vin ducked his head. “I’m sorry,” he replied softly.

“Sorry?”

Vin tilted his head in her direction but kept his eyes cast low. “I . . . just don’t . . . trust . . . that easily,” he explained haltingly.

She patted his hand. “And I can understand why. Don’t worry, I’m not hurt. I do understand.” She curled her fingers around his hand. “I just want you to know that I feel like I let you down and I don’t blame you for being cautious. When I saw you by that grave site . . .” Katherine’s voice hitched and she momentarily squeezed Vin’s hand. “I wanted to . . . well, I was surprised, that’s for certain, but after, I wanted to do well by you. I couldn’t find a way, though. I was . . . overwhelmed.”

Vin pushed up from the chair with the first nervous stirrings in his gut. He wasn’t ready for this conversation. “I know and it’s okay. I turned out fine. Please don’t feel guilty because of me.”

Katherine’s hand dropped away and Vin heard her sniff once. “You are a gracious one,” she whispered. “I just want you to know that I’m glad we’ve finally met.”

“Me too,” Vin sincerely replied. He lifted his chin and smiled at the shadow in her direction. “I’m almost done with the trays. What’s next?”

Vin found that he couldn’t fully concentrate anymore on any of the chores Katherine gave him. He finished them as best as he could and after lunch, found his way out of the back door and into the elements.

Cold nipped his nose and cheeks and the outside brightness made the shadows he could see, darker. Vin pulled his coat tighter and carefully felt his way down the back steps to the snowy ground. He took a few steps and stopped, allowing his senses to reach out to their fullest and build a scene in his mind of where he stood. Reflected noise told him where the trees and shrubs were. Smells told him which direction the closest neighbor dwelled. The stinging breeze and the faint heat of the sun told him which direction he faced. Soon, he had a mental picture of where he stood.

And that realization made him miss home even more.



Martin kicked the car door shut after Samantha exited. The motion caused the tower of bags in his arms to list threateningly and he had to do a dance to regain balance.

“You drop those bags and you’ll be gluing for the rest of the night,” Samantha warned.

“I don’t think glued crystal makes a good gift,” Martin answered.

“But it could be art.” Danny’s stab at helpfulness earned him a sharp glare from Samantha.

“Just be careful,” she warned.

“Yes ma’m.”

“Ma’am?’ Since when am I a ‘Ma’am?’”

Danny sighed while Martin chuckled. “It’s best just nod,” Martin whispered to his friend.

"I heard that." Samantha swept up the front stairs and managed to look graceful and beautiful as opposed to annoyed.

Martin watched her retreat with a crooked smile. Danny snorted and elbowed his partner into motion. "And mind the crystal," he snipped.

The trio wiped their feet and were about to drop their load when a clucking Alice headed them off. "The living area is ready to receive guests." Her expression made it clear they didn't fall into that category.

Danny looked perplexed as Samantha and Martin mumbled apologies and headed for the stairs. He trotted to catch up, asking, "Was that a polite way of kicking us out of the room?"

"Yes," the other two said together.

"Damn. I'm not sure I can function with all this politeness." Danny went on verbalizing the possible scenarios "poor little Martin" must have had to live through as a boy that wasn't allowed to get dirty.

"Shut up, Danny," Martin finally grumbled as they dumped the bags on Martin's bed. He looked around. "Hm. Wonder where Vin is?"

"Can't you feel him, you know, up here?" Danny tapped his temple.

Martin rolled his eyes. "It's not LoJack, Danny. I know he's around but can't pinpoint exactly where." Martin frowned. "I do know that he's cold."

Martin spun on his heel and headed downstairs after grabbing an extra cashmere scarf from the coat closet. He was making a bee-line to the back door when his mother called him aside.

"Hi, mom. I'm taking this to Vin." He held up the scarf.

"He's been out there most of the afternoon," she told him. "He's got something on his mind. I really hope he can get it sorted out so he can enjoy himself tonight." She glanced at the door. "I didn't want to intrude."

Martin smiled. "He's okay. Really." He pecked her forehead and continued outside. Once on the small back porch, Martin paused to button the top button of his coat and look around. He found his brother sitting on a garden bench under a bare tree and knew Vin was aware he was there. Feeling a mental "warmth", Martin knew he was welcome to approach.

"Here," he said as he dropped next to Vin and thrust the scarf into his hands. "Wrap that around your neck." Vin chuffed and offered a crooked smile as he accepted the scarf. "You should have gloves on. Your hands are like ice cubes."

Vin wound the cashmere around his neck and tucked the ends down the front of his coat, and then jammed his hands into the pockets. "I'm fine. Hey, I remembered something while you were out."

Martin had hunkered down and pulled up his collar to the growing chill, burying the lower half of his face in layers of wool. "Yeah?" he thought, not wanting to let air into his cocoon of warmth. "What?"

Vin unknowingly copied his brother's position. "*The bomber couldn't leave the bolt behind – the one he shot and skipped off the boulder? – because the fletches are unique. He can't take the chance.*"

"Yeah, so?"

"So, he had to go back in the daylight to look for it. And there's only one parking lot in the area, so there were news crews there."

"You think he's on film?"

"Possibly. Chris is checkin'. You need to look at your email. He was going to send what he got from a reporter friend of ours."

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“Then let’s check. It’s been a couple of hours, right?”

“Yep.”

“And you do need to come in a wrap some gifts.”

Vin straightened. “Me?”

“Don’t worry. I’m bad enough at it that yours will probably look better than mine.”

Vin snorted at that idea and slowly stood. Martin rose and lightly took Vin’s elbow, directing him to the back stairs. Once inside, Alice huffed and grumbled and took their coats. When Vin muttered his thanks the maid patted his cheek and said she’d be up with something hot to drink.

The brothers entered Martin’s room and found Samantha grumbling and wrapping gifts. Danny sat on the bed, flipping through what looked like Martin’s high school yearbook. Samantha glanced up on their arrival.

“Just because I’m a female it doesn’t mean I know how to wrap presents! Get your ass over here, Martin.” She flipped her hand in Danny’s direction. “Good thing I got most of this stuff wrapped at the stores. He’s useless.”

“I’m providing entertainment,” Danny protested, holding up the book to display a page of adolescent basketball players. He grinned hugely. “Your legs are still skinny, Marty!”

Martin ignored him and shook his head as he walked to his desk and computer. “I’ll help ya in a minute, Sam. I just have to check my email.”

Vin started to explain about the news feeds which caused Danny to abandon the yearbook and stand next to Martin, leaning closely over his shoulder.

“Hey, I have some things here. Quit breathing in my ear.” Martin elbowed Danny aside.

Samantha cleared a spot for Vin on the bed and continued to wrap boxes. She handed him a couple of things, explaining what they were and who they were for. Vin nodded, pleased, as he listened to both her and the other two at the same time. Apparently, there were several videos linked to Martin’s email and it seemed to take forever to go through them. Finally, Vin’s heart raced when he heard the words he was waiting for.

“It’s him,” Martin announced. “We got him and we got a vehicle plate.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“We were able to get the vehicle identification number from the Colorado license plate,” Chris reported a few minutes later over Martin’s speaker phone. “It’s a good thing Vin thought of the video when he did. We ran the I.D. number and the records show that the vehicle is in the process of being registered in Virginia. When the process is complete, the Colorado plate information will be dumped from the system and the files from this end would have been untraceable.”

“Virginia?” Danny said. “You have an address and a name?”

“Christopher Wheeler with a PO box. He listed a street address, too, but it isn’t good. Josiah already had the locals check. It’s an empty lot.”

“What about fletch suppliers in that area?” Vin asked.

“Already have a list and have the flyer all set to send out. All we need is a description of the pattern you saw.” Chris paused. “And to keep the source of that information vague for now.”

Martin laughed shortly. “You don’t think the ‘shared visions’ source will sit well with the District Attorney?”

“Definitely not.”

Martin described the pattern he saw in Vin’s mind.

“Good. We’ll send out those flyers now. Meanwhile, I have a B.O.L.O. out on the vehicle for Virginia in the Reston area. That’s where the registration application was submitted. I’m also arranging for surveillance on the PO Box, but I’m not holding my breath on that happening anytime soon. The request has to clear both ATF and FBI protocol.”

“So between any custom fletchers, the PO Box and the vehicle registration, there’s a chance to grab this guy.” Samantha sounded optimistic.

“And if we miss these opportunities, he’s gonna disappear again.”

“Do you think that Christopher Wheeler is his latest victim? You think he’s taking over this guy’s life like he did the others or is it a temporary name?”

“Can’t say. Could go either way.”

“Wouldn’t hurt to search for all the Christopher Wheelers in Virginia.” Vin rubbed his eyes as he spoke. “With it being Christmas Eve and all, we aren’t gonna get any responses from fletchers or the Department of Motor Vehicles for at least a day.”

“We’re on it,” Chris assured them. “In the meantime, relax and enjoy yourselves.”

“Will do,” Martin said as he prepared to disconnect. “Tell the others Merry Christmas.”

“Same to you. I’ll get all this off to Jack and keep you posted. Bye.”

“Bye,” Martin replied. A clattering noise indicated that Chris had hung up. Martin punched the disconnect button. “He sure didn’t sound too merry to me.”

Vin snorted. “‘Merry’ isn’t a word usually connected with Chris.” He stood and stretched. “What time is it?”

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“Time to get ready for dinner,” Danny said. “Who else is coming to this affair, anyway?”

Martin rattled off a couple of names as they started to break up. “Neighbors, mostly. It won’t be too bad.”

“It sure smells good down there.” Samantha stood in the hall outside Martin’s room and sniffed the air. Danny joined her, smiling at the wonderful scents. “See you downstairs.” She shut the door.

“I don’t have to dress up for this wing-ding, do I?” Vin sounded uneasy.

Martin chuckled. “You can borrow a tie and dress pants. Is that dressing up?”

“Anything involving a tie is dressing up,” Vin replied miserably. “You aren’t gonna give me something stupid like a Christmas tree tie, are you? ‘Cause if you do . . .”

“It’ll be boring, don’t worry.” Martin gathered his brother’s elbow in his hand and directed him to the bedroom door. “I’ll bring something to your room. I need to hit the shower.”



The dinner was a cheery affair and Vin found he actually enjoyed himself. At first, the idea of mingling with strangers made his palms sweat, but Martin, Samantha or Danny stayed by his side the whole time and he eventually relaxed. Katherine had invited only the nearest neighbors so it was a small group. The twins were the hit of the night.

The mental “discussions” with Martin were the most entertaining; dirty and often scandalous details were passed on about each couple as they arrived, which put Vin much more at ease when he realized that rich people were still just people. It also explained why Martin fit so well with the team in Denver – it was clear that he was more down-to-earth than the rest of the neighborhood.

Vin also noticed that his senses seemed to have calmed down since he was seeing more. His vision had gotten to the point to where he could discern objects in a room almost well enough to get around on his own and, therefore, didn’t rely on the other senses as much. The chatter of the other couples was tolerable and didn’t cause a headache.

By 10:00, all the neighbors had departed, tottering happily off into the night toward their houses. Worn out, they all wandered to the living room and the giant fireplace. Katherine sat with the rest of them by the flickering flames as Martin poured everyone a brandy.

“That was nice,” Katherine breathed. “You seemed to have a good time, Vin. I was worried . . .”

“It was nice,” he agreed. “You have some interestin’ neighbors.”

“Well, they certainly aren’t boring. Thank you, Martin.” She said as she accepted the crystal snifter. Then she looked around and noted the somewhat guilty expression on Martin and Vin’s faces. “What? You don’t think I know I live smack in the center of Peyton Place?”

Samantha exchanged perplexed looks with Danny. “Are we missing something, here?”

Before either of the twins could explain, Katherine spoke. “I’m sure Martin told Vin all the dirty secrets of our neighbors as they arrived. That’s why Vin was so relaxed. Right, honey?”

Martin’s face reddened slightly, obviously guilty. “Uh . . .”

Vin also blushed. “Yeah . . . well . . .”

Katherine laughed lightly. “We all have our crosses to bear, don’t you think? Don’t worry about it.”

“What kind of secrets?” Danny asked as one eyebrow quirked with curiosity. “Come on, Marty. Spill.”

Samantha rolled her eyes and settled back in a corner of the sofa with a resigned sigh. “We can’t take you anywhere, Danny.”



Christmas day turned out to be more enjoyable than Vin imagined it would be. Although there were many phone calls, there were no physical visitors and that made for a peaceful day. Vin and Martin enjoyed spending quiet time together, walking and talking, in the quiet, snow-insulated environment.

Martin, now that he wasn’t feeling the chaotic sensual input from his brother, physically relaxed which made his role as middle-man between Vin and Katherine not only enjoyable but somewhat educational; Katherine, separate from Victor, was a breath of fresh air in the staleness of Martin’s family memories. So ingrained was the interaction with Victor in Martin’s mind, the quiet presence of Katherine in the background was easily forgotten. He was glad to rediscover her through Vin’s experience.

Vin and Katherine seemed to reach their own understanding through the long weekend. They were both quiet and soft spoken and accepting of Martin just the way he was. It was a good mix. So, when Martin was forced to return to the workplace on Monday, he was relaxed and refreshed. His life was definitely fuller with this family shift.

“Martin,” Jack called out as soon as the agent neared his office door. “Come in. We need to talk.”

With his coffee cup firmly in his grip, Martin nodded an acknowledgement to the others in the bullpen as he changed course and entered the office.

“Close the door,” Jack asked.

Martin did so and dropped into the nearest chair. “What’s up?”

Jack, leaning on his forearms on the desktop and fiddling with a pen, cocked his head as he met Martin’s gaze. “The Fed Bomber team got a hit on the arrow maker. A custom fletching job was mailed out Saturday for pick up at a PO Box in the Reston area of Virginia. They’re staking it out now.”

Martin quickly sat up, grinning. “Really?” he chirped. Then, his brows knitted in concern as he noted the tentative attitude that his boss emitted. “They aren’t planning to pick him up, are they? There’s no proper probable cause for arrest!”

The pen twirled in Jack’s fingers and he leaned back. “Apparently, they don’t care. They’re using Patriot Act guidelines.”

“But Vin’s the true eye-witness. He’s the only one that can nail this guy. All they have now is what I’ve seen in Vin’s mind. How the hell are they going to justify any warrants with that? It’s going to make using psychics in police work look like hard science!”

“That’s true in the cases we prosecute. Patriot Act guidelines allow for detention without probable cause. This guy is so good at disappearing that they don’t want to take any chances. They want to detain first, ask questions later.”

Martin sagged in the chair, spinning the forgotten cardboard coffee cup between his hands. “This is going to get messy for Vin.” he concluded. “Any pressure from publicity’s going to be a setback in his recovery.” The two regarded each other for a long moment. “They’re going to be hovering over him, waiting for his eyesight to return and the press will be . . . well, the press.” He paused. “There’s no chance of keeping this quiet, is there?”

Jack sighed and tossed the pen on the table. “Neither one of us are that naive. This is going to get ugly, Martin. I just wanted you to be prepared.”

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Martin ducked his head. “Thanks,” he muttered. “I’ll let Vin know when I see him. Are you in the loop? Will you know if they pick up this guy?”

Nodding, Jack gave Martin a sympathetic look. “Eventually. It will filter down, but I think I’ll hear pretty quickly. And keep this to yourself for now.”

Letting out a frustrated sigh, Martin rose to his feet. “Well, that’s a nice holiday gift,” he said with resigned sarcasm.

“Sorry.”

“Not your fault. Thanks for letting me know.”

The rest of the day was spent with busy work and as quitting time neared, Martin found it increasingly difficult to concentrate. He knew that the rest of the team realized something was wrong and, amazingly, didn’t pry. Martin saw the questions in their eyes when they spoke to him but there was no room in his mind to let it bother him. He was still trying to figure out how to break it to Vin when he returned to the house. When the case of the missing wife came to the office just at quitting time, Martin was guiltily relieved at the reprieve.



“Martin called.”

Vin cocked his head in a few directions, trying to find an angle that would give him the best idea of what the fuzzy forms were in front of him. Setting the table had never been such a challenge before. “He workin’ late?” Finally deducing the darker rectangle on the lighter background was a folded napkin, he placed a knife and spoon on top of it.

Katherine chuckled. “I suppose that wasn’t much of a guess now, was it?”

Vin continued his hesitant exploration of the dining room table, hoping there was no glassware set out to get in his way. “Nah. Not really.”

“How about you?” She asked. “You gettin’ itchy to get back to work?”

“Honestly? I haven’t had time to think about it. I miss work, sure, but gettin’ around on a daily basis has kept me more th’n occupied.”

“That will change as your eyesight improves, I’m sure.”

“Prob’ly so.” Vin placed a fork, moved along the table and stumbled over a chair leg. “Shit!” he spat, keeping his balance and ignoring the sting of his shin. Then he remembered Katherine and ducked his head. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

She laughed. “I’ve heard worse, believe me.” She patted his shoulder just as the doorbell rang. “Alice went home early,” she said. “I’ll get that.”

Katherine’s footsteps receded in the direction of the front door. Vin shook his head and mentally chastised himself before finishing his chore by placing a final set of utensils. Completing the task without permanent damage to person or property was an achievement that made him feel a little better. He grinned stupidly to himself.

“Vincent?”

Any good feelings Vin felt fled instantly with Katherine’s tentative tone and his instant realization that she wasn’t alone.



Martin gasped.

“What?” Danny spared his partner a glance from behind the wheel of the company car. “Martin? You okay? You’re lookin’ a little green there, partner.”

Martin rolled the window down a little, hoping the cold air would stop the sudden twitch of his stomach. He gulped in a lungful as a series of pictures raced through his mind, too fast to distinguish any details. It all was a fuzzy blur. He clutched at the door handle and his head at the same time.

“Whoa, there, wait a second!” Danny expertly dodged two lanes of traffic and pulled into the emergency lane amidst a cacophony of car horns. “Martin? What’s wrong?”

Martin unlatched the seatbelt and surged from the car, stumbling a pair of steps before stopping to stand, bent over, with his hands on his knees. Carefully, he drank in deep drafts of air to clear his head.

“Marty, talk to me.” Danny had made it to his side by his second breath.

“Something’s wrong,” he whispered. “Something’s . . . off.”

“Can you be a little more specific? Something as in the train station?” They were headed toward an Amtrak station outside the city on the case. When Martin shook his head, unable to reply, it sunk in. “Or something as in that freaky connection with Vin? What’re you feeling?”

Not gracing him with a response, Martin stood up and shoved Danny toward the car. “We gotta get to my mom’s . . .”

Danny took a stumbling step. “Now? We can’t walk out on this case . . .”

“DO IT!” Martin snapped as he fell back in the car. He had to concentrate on buckling up with trembling hands.

“Martin,” Danny started as he slid back behind the wheel.

“Then drop me where I can get a cab!” He slammed the door. “Do one or the other, Danny, but do it fast!”

“All right, all right,” Danny mumbled as he abruptly pulled back on the highway. Martin rubbed his temple, vaguely aware that they were headed toward Katherine’s house. “Hell, the house is in the same general direction as the train depot, right?”

“Right,” Martin snorted. “The same state, at least.” He regretted snapping at his partner, but only for a second. Regret was quickly replaced with a pressing surety that his family was in grave danger. “Thanks, Danny.”

“Who am I to question . . . uh, what do you call that thing, anyway?”

“Gut instinct?”

It was Danny’s turn to snort. “Like a hurricane is a ‘bit of wind,’” he mumbled.

Martin managed a grim smile as the feeling of dread pressed heavier on his heart. He turned his eyes to the side window and watched the scenery race by, blind to what he saw because what he imagined in his mind overrode anything else.

“Call them.”

Danny’s suggestion made him feel like an idiot – why didn’t he think of that? He flipped open his cell phone and hit speed dial. The Fitzgerald answering machine picked up each of the three times he called and Martin had to restrain from heaving the device out of the small crack of the window as he swore.

Danny didn’t question. He simply pressed harder on the accelerator pedal.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“The lady will get your coats and we will leave.”

The voice was flat and sharp. Vin knew there was no negotiation, but he tried anyway.

“Leave her out of this,” he said. “She’s not part of it.”

“She’s everything to it,” the man countered. A shifting of shadows warned of his approach, but Vin was unable to defend himself. He felt the cold metal of gun barrel against his neck. “Once you have your coat, we will leave.” Then the voice was quiet and close to his ear. “I will shoot her if I have to.”

Vin had no choice but to believe him. Anything he did would put Katherine at risk, and he wouldn’t do that. He cursed his limitations and at the same time wondered if it would make a difference. This unknown entity had all the power at the moment. Vin felt the weight of a winter coat on his arm at the same time a shadow he knew was Katherine drew alongside.

“Let me help you,” she started. Vin admired her cool.

“I can do it,” he said lowly, slipping the garment on with minimal guidance. He could feel the fear that made her hand tremble.

“Let’s go.” The man’s voice was soft but brooked no defiance.

Katherine took Vin’s elbow and directed him to through the kitchen and out the back door. Vin cursed his inability to read the threat – it was clear to him that their adversary had a plan; he only had to figure out what it was to be able to counter it.

Vin was ushered into the passenger seat of the sedan while Katherine got behind the wheel. Their kidnapper sat in the back of the car.

“Drive south,” he directed.

Vin had no idea where the roads in this area went, no idea of the topography of this part of New York. At this point in time, he had the inkling that it was important, part of the plan. What was this man thinking? There was no doubt as to who he was; there was no one else with the motive to dare such a move unless there was something in Victor’s life he’d missed or overlooked. Otherwise, Vin knew that the Fed Bomber was the man now sitting in the back seat of Katherine’s sedan and getting rid of the only eye witness of his existence was his reason for being here. Killing Katherine Fitzgerald would only be collateral damage – a means to an end.

How he planned to accomplish Vin’s disposal was the question.

“Where are we going?” Vin asked once they were buckled in and moving, trying to get a feel of the plan. He had never felt as helpless as he did at this moment. The tingling of his connection with Martin was strong, but he wondered what kind of images Martin would be getting and if he’d be able to make any sense of it all let alone get her in time.

“Drive,” the man directed Katherine, completely ignoring Vin.

WITHOUT A TRACE FANFIC BY AJB

She drove, sniffing on occasion, letting Vin know that she was scared and powerless to do anything about it. He didn't have the luxury to dwell on her fear. Vin's mind was working hard on figuring a counter attack.

They drove in complete silence. Vin desperately tried to get a feel of where they were headed, but there were absolutely no clues. He sat in leather seat, safely tucked in by the seat belt, and again ran scenarios through his head.

It all came down to an accident; a staged accident. It was the only way to get rid of him without suspicion. It was the only way the Fed Bomber – whoever he was – could evade suspicion.

But when? What was his plan? It had to be soon because if the stench of kidnapping was attached to this car ride, it was all over. The “accident” had to happen soon to be believable and without his eyes, Vin couldn't even hazard a guess as to when the event would occur.

It was up to Katherine to give him a clue.

And then she gasped; it was a tiny sound, maybe even inaudible to the normal ear, but Vin's hearing at the moment was beyond normal.

Vin reacted without thought and grabbed the steering wheel, wrenching it aside with all he had. The car careened sideways in an eerily quiet way due to the icy asphalt and lurched off road. Katherine screamed and the car shimmied sharply before a deafening bang slammed them to a jolting stop.

Burning smoke assailed his nostrils and his head swam, but even stunned, Vin's body seemed to work on automatic. “*Protect Katherine,*” was the mantra that echoed in his mind as he pushed back the deflating airbag. His fingers then found his seat belt, followed by hers, and he dragged her to his side of the car without conscious thought. He felt a separate body wedged between the front seats, partially blocking Katherine's path but Vin simply dragged her over the top. The body twitched to life, and Vin could hear a groan and sounds of motion by the time he'd kicked his door open and pulled Katherine free.

Vin could also feel that Katherine was merely knocked senseless as she wasn't limp in his arms anymore; she helped push the two of them clear of the vehicle. The engine popped and the hot odor of radiator fluid stung his nose.

“Come on,” he croaked, lurching on his feet and dragging her along. Katherine responded more quickly than he'd even hoped and gripped his arm with both of her hands. “Keep movin'!”

They had taken a couple dozen steps before the pain of injury hit him. It really wasn't much - his head throbbed and one arm stung – but his legs worked just fine. He heard Katherine catch her breath. “We gotta keep movin'. Are we in any cover? Can he see us?” Everything was a sea of fuzzy, wavering forms that could possibly be trees.

“Uh . . . yes, yes. Trees, we're in some trees.” Katherine's voice was breathy, but she gained her feet and dragged less on Vin's arm.

“You hurt?”

“I'm okay. Some cuts, nothing serious.” They stumbled through some low brush. “I don't see him.”

“He's there,” Vin said with conviction. “We need to keep low. He'll have no trouble trackin' us once he's on his feet.”

Although Vin propelled them forward, Katherine moved into the job of picking their path. “Is that the man from the cabin?”

She tripped and Vin kept her from falling. “Think so.”

“He had a wetsuit on,” she said between breaths. “I didn't figure it out until I saw the lake.”

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“Lake?” Vin felt her tug him aside as they brushed by a tree trunk.

“He was going to crash the car in the lake, wasn’t he?”

Vin’s thought furiously for several moments. “Makes sense.”

“He was wearing a mask over his face. I couldn’t see his face.”

“I’m not surprised,” Vin snorted. “I’m the only one who has. Where are we? How far to help?”

“Oh,” Katherine breathed. “I . . . I’m not sure. A mile at least. The area around the lake is protected open space.”

“Figures,” Vin gasped as his head was whacked by a low branch. He spit out leaves.

“Sorry.” Katherine was beginning to sound winded.

Now that Vin had a minute to get his wits about him he began to feel edgy about running blindly and depending on someone else’s eyes to pick a path. That caused his heart to quicken even more, and another hope struck him – was Martin on his way? Could he feel that they were in trouble? If so, was there a way to lead him to where they were?

“Katherine,” Vin whispered desperately. “Tell me where we are. Exactly where we are, and let me know when you can see any landmarks Martin might recognize.”

She only hesitated for a moment before turning him with his arm. “I know a place.”



“Can’t you go any faster?”

Danny flexed his ankle at Martin’s snarled request. The closer they got to his mother’s house, the tenser his partner became. “There’s some ice. It won’t help to get us killed right now.”

Martin’s jaw just worked silently. Suddenly, he jerked in his seat. “Shit!”

The car wiggled when Danny twitched in surprise. “What? What is it?” Martin’s hand rose to his forehead, and with a glance, Danny saw that he looked a bit stunned. “Martin?”

“I think . . . they crashed . . .” Martin’s voice was dazed, as if in a dream.

“Almost there,” Danny barked in reply. “Hang on.”

After a pair of winding turns at a dangerous speed, the turnoff to the Fitzgerald estate came into sight. Danny slowed, anticipating the turn.

“No,” Martin snapped sharply. “Keep going. Turn south at the next intersection.”

Danny frowned, but followed the directions. After they made the turn, he glanced at Martin again. His partner sat with the fingertips of his left hand pressed to his forehead while his right hand tightly gripped the door handle. Martin’s eyes looked unfocused, like he wasn’t seeing what was out of the window – what he was seeing was in his head. His eyebrows slanted in concentration.

“What do you see?” Danny asked.

“It’s . . . foggy, fuzzy. Tall shadows are moving by. Vin’s on foot somewhere. Trees . . . the shadows are trees and there’s something else . . .”

Danny chuffed, glancing upward through the windshield at the natural arch of tree branches over the roadway. “Not much help, Marty.”

“Hang on . . .” Martin’s eyes squeezed shut for a long moment, and then his lids popped open. “I know where they are! Hurry – it’s about a mile or so down the road.”

Except to direct Danny to a wide area off to the side of the road to park, Martin’s face was tight with concentration. Danny got the impression that if he relaxed for a moment, Martin was afraid that the freaky connection with Vin would be lost.

“This way.” Martin’s voice was quiet, but confident. When he pulled out his weapon, Danny followed suit and fell in behind his partner. They both switched off their phones and slipped into the trees.

A narrow path was trodden in the dusting of new snow between the trees but Martin moved as if he knew the trail intimately, with speed and surety. It was quiet; all Danny could hear was their breathing and the slight crunch caused by their footfall on the crusty, white powder. The deeper they ventured, the brush became heavier but the path wound between it all keeping their presence secret. After several minutes, Martin came to an abrupt halt and pulled Danny down to a crouch beside him. Martin stared between the stand of trunks, motionless.

“There,” he said softly, pointing down the slight slope below them. “The rock formation.”

Danny leaned a little more to one side and a jut of shiny ebony stone, stark and bold against the frosty background of the woods, came into view. He started to speak but Martin silenced him with a raised finger, frowning deeply as he studied the rocky formation.

“It’s different,” Martin mumbled to himself.

Danny’s gaze flicked between the trees and his partner, waiting for clarification.

“I see . . . Vin’s on the other side, that way.” Martin hesitantly pointed to their left, but then swung his finger to the right. “Over there.” The surge of skepticism Danny felt must have shown on his face. “I’m seeing what Vin sees,” Martin said simply. “It’s pretty foggy, but I’m seeing those rocks from a different angle and . . .”

“And?” Danny repeated after a moment as he continued to scan the area.

“They’re hiding from someone. My mom’s with him.”

The edge that honed Martin’s words alerted Danny and he guessed where Martin’s mind had leaped. “We don’t know for sure if it’s the Bomber, Martin. Could be a kidnapper or a robber of some sort – like a home invasion.”

The glance Martin gave him was one of astonished disbelief.

Danny kept his voice just over a whisper. “Look, all I’m saying is let’s not jump to conclusions. They’re in danger, I’ll give you that, but let’s keep focus here, okay? Make a plan?”

Martin’s face relaxed in agreement and he turned back to study the terrain. “The trees thin out from here. It’s too open to cross to get to them. We’ll have to circle . . .” He stopped suddenly, his head snapping back to face the rock formation as he hunkered down more and raised his gun. “No time. He’s almost on them.”

“Let’s go, then!” Danny urged, starting to rise.

“No.” Martin’s iron grip pushed Danny back down. “Vin’s going to bring him to us. Get ready to move – we need to get closer.”

Now it was Danny’s turn to look astonished, but when he saw the determined confidence in Fitzgerald’s face as he raised his weapon and moved out, Danny swallowed any dissenting comments and adjusted his position to stand by his partner.



Vin’s lungs burned from breathing the cold, sharp air and he knew Katherine was suffering more. She not only kept up with him, though, she led him with determination to the one spot that was their edge. The black rocks were clear even to his fuzzy vision.

“Martin used to climb that when he was little,” Katherine gasped between breaths. “Scared me to death.”

She crouched low beside him as he stared at the formation, imprinting it on his mind. It was asymmetrical and distinct – by its shape, Martin could figure out where they were in

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relation to it. When he was finally satisfied the “message” was received, they had caught their breath.

“Martin’s on his way,” Vin said with certainty. “We need to buy some time until he gets here.”

“Why is he chasing us? Killing us now won’t look like an accident.”

“We’ve forced him into plan B,” Vin whispered. “He just needs me to be dead. Since you still haven’t seen his face, you’re only collateral damage. He’ll kill you only if he has to.” Vin used his chin to indicate the direction their pursuer would come from. “Do you see him?” He looked around for any kind of cover but all he could see were shadowy trees, fuzzy bushes and the black monolith of rock which was too far away to be of use as cover.

“No.”

“Don’t try to look for a person,” Vin said quietly. “Look for any movement against the wind. And listen – he won’t sound like a squirrel. He’ll be . . . heavier.” Trying to explain what he meant was difficult, but Katherine seemed to get it. She didn’t ask for clarification. Vin took a moment to appreciate this woman and he realized why Victor was so protective of her. His biological father only saw her weaknesses, though, and chose to ignore the strength within.

Now that their breathing was light and under control, a stark silence established itself around them. Vin’s damaged eyes were of no use right now, so he closed them and reached out with his other senses. One by one he separated the natural sounds of nature, setting them aside as he reached farther. It was the cold starting to take hold of his bones that was the most difficult to ignore, especially since he could feel Katherine shivering next to him.

Finally, there was something unnatural. Silently, he placed his hand on Katherine’s shoulder and turned her in the direction the sound came from. Vin opened his eyes and only saw unfocused landscape. He concentrated on the shadowy forms, looking for any motion.

“I hear . . .” Katherine started.

He silenced her with a raised finger, and then turned back to the rocks, imprinting every bulky nuance in his mind. It took few long moments until he felt a solid connection.

Help had arrived. Martin knew where they were. Now if he could only get his message across . . .

“I see him.” Katherine’s tone was a notch higher from fear. “I saw something move between the trees, that way.” She turned Vin’s chin with a trembling, icy finger.

Vin mapped their location in his head – the rocks, the trees he could see, the darker, and therefore thicker, stands of brush between them and the black hole of stone. He hoped it was enough because it wasn’t only his life on the line at the moment. Vin felt the adrenalin gathering in his limbs as he prepared to run.

“Stay here and stay low. It’s me he wants.”

“No,” Katherine snapped. The word was shocking in its conviction. “You need me.”

“There’s no time,” he started.

“You need me and I won’t let you go again.” Time was running out. Vin knew Martin was in place and ready, but he wasn’t willing to gamble with Katherine’s. She didn’t allow any more thought, though, when she took his hand in a powerful grip. “Which way?”

He hesitated, but had to accept her defiance as she rose because the motion instantly gave away their position. With absolutely no choice, he turned in the direction he had in mind and they ran directly into the open space surrounding the ebony monolith.

Vin let Katherine pull him toward the outcrop, the only solid cover available to them. Vin trailed a little, placing his body between her and the threat, allowing her to pick the path. It was tricky just keeping his feet. Except for their pounding feet it was eerily quiet. Then Vin tripped,

WITHOUT A TRACE FANFIC BY AJB

slowing their forward motion, and in that brief span of relative quiet, he heard a familiar pop and his shoulder flashed in pain.

Unsilenced return fire told him where Martin took a stand. Heartened, Vin lurched to his feet with Katherine's help and they stumbled to the safety of the rocks.

After a brief pause, there was a flurry of gunfire. Vin slouched against the solid mass as his legs gave out. With Katherine's help, he settled gently to the ground, finally releasing her hand to fumble at his injury.

"I have it," she said, winded, as she applied pressure to the burning spot in his shoulder.

"Got him," Martin's voice echoed in his head.

Satisfied of their safety, Vin's hazy vision grew dark and he passed out with a relieved sigh.

THE CAMPING TRIP

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Two Weeks Later

“Chris.” Vin grinned at his boss and stepped forward confidently, extending his right arm.

“Well,” Chris replied with his own lopsided grin as they gripped forearms in their traditional greeting. “I see that you c’n see.”

“Enough to pick the darkest shadow in the crowd,” Vin jibed.

“Oh, he can see much better than that,” Katherine stated at Chris’ acknowledging nod. “Don’t let him fool you. How are you, Mr. Larabee?”

“Please, call me Chris. I’ve been relishing the quiet,” he answered as he pointedly scanned Vin from head to toe. “With the resident troublemaker out of town, things have been slow.” He reached out and flicked the sling embracing Vin’s left arm. “See? Trouble follows him everywhere.”

“But with big results,” Vin protested. “When was the last time you helped bag the F.B.I.’s number one most wanted?”

“Oh, I’d say about two weeks. You didn’t do it alone, you know.” Vin snorted. The three of them turned to the baggage carousel and Chris made it clear that he would handle the luggage. With Katherine as the lookout, the trio picked a spot and settled in to wait. “So, how many stitches this time?”

Vin hugged the slinged arm to his body in a protective manner. “Fifty-two. Twenty-seven on the inside and the rest out the outside. The sling’s only to keep the arm quiet.”

“Pretty much ploughed a furrow across your shoulder blade, huh?”

“Yup.”

“Nathan’s been frettin’. Just a warning.”

“Thanks for the heads up, cowboy.”

“Don’t call me cowboy,” Larabee growled disgustedly. Vin chuckled. Katherine pointed out a bag and Chris pulled it from the track as he spoke. “Still no I.D. on the guy, huh?”

“Nope. They got him tucked away tighter than JD’s belt at a buffet an’ he ain’t said a word. He’s a complete unknown.”

Chris shook his head in wonder. “Amazing. Guess he’s not seeing the light of day anytime soon.”

“If ever,” Katherine added with a lady-like sniff of disdain. “And I’m happy for that.”

With the bags gathered Chris tilted his head to let Vin and Katherine lead the way. Following them, he watched the interplay between the two with deep satisfaction. Katherine’s hand was tucked in the crook of Vin’s arm and Vin guided her with protective care, chatting

quietly. They had obviously bonded in the past weeks because they both looked rested, content and familiar. He knew Vin was overdue for some peace in his life and figured the same was true for Katherine. Chris also wondered what the future would bring for his best friend now that his family had extended so dramatically.

When they stepped outside Vin paused and tilted his head back as he took a deep breath and shut his eyes with obvious pleasure. “Good ta be home,” he sighed. Then he focused on Larabee. “Y’all kept your cr. . . er, stuff off my desk? I’m comin’ in Monday and don’t wanna spend half the day clearin’ the junk off.”

“Whoa back there, partner. Who said you’re coming back so soon? What about your company, here?”

“Kate? I figger she c’n entertain herself for a few hours a day.”

“Kate?” Chris thought as he glanced at the impeccably dressed woman on Vin’s arm. He shook his head and chuckled as they crossed the street and entered the parking structure. He doubted Mrs. Victor Fitzgerald had been called “Kate” since the third grade. Chris also realized that Vin had lead the entire way from Baggage Claim to the truck, only asking for the lot number where the vehicle was parked. “Hey, your vision is better,” he commented.

“Yup. Which is why I’m goin’ back to work on Monday.”

Chris tried to reason with the stubborn sharpshooter as they loaded the truck and exited the lot. As soon as the tires hit the highway a cell phone rang, interrupted their banter.

“Hey, Marty,” Vin greeted from the back seat. “Yup, headin’ home right now.”

“Marty?” Chris shook his head again. Katherine laughed softly as Chris glanced aside and caught her bright gaze. He had to grin at her smile.

“Not many people call him ‘Marty,’” she said, amused.

“What, are you two connected mentally or somethin’?” Vin demanded behind them. “Chris just gave me the third degree about that, too.” From what Chris could hear of the one-sided conversation, “Marty” wasn’t too keen on Vin’s returning to work, either. “You got enough to do cleanin’ up the fish I caught so there’s no need to stick your nose . . .” Pause. “He’s my collar, brother. Unwritten rule: The bait gets the bag.” Pause – with chuckling. “Hey, A.T.F. rules and F.B.I. rules are the same. Both are Federal . . . hey, quit interruptin’ me when I’m makin’ a point!”

The two front-seaters shared another amused glance before returning their attention to the road before them.

“It’s been a joy being with those two.” Katherine said. “I never thought I’d be so lucky. If only . . .” Her smile faded as she paused mid-sentence.

“Victor’s cutting his own throat,” Chris said lowly. “And he’s the only one that can make himself realize that. His loss.”

Chris wasn’t sure if it was due to the brotherly, backseat bickering or the words he just spoken, but Katherine’s smile returned. “True. And I won’t let anyone keep me away from my boys again, not this time around. You can bet on that.”

And that was a wager that Chris knew Ezra Standish wouldn’t even go against.

THE END