

## FULL MOON AND DENVER'S SEVEN

### Chapter One

Danny knew.

That tell-tale smirk was a dead giveaway. Vivian probably knew, too, but she was more mature in her way of handling it. Still, Martin saw how Viv's eyes softened when Samantha was near him. He didn't know about Jack; that man was hard to read at any time.

It was Martin's first Monday back at the office. The elevator ride to the Missing Person's Unit floor seemed longer than normal but when he stepped into the hallway he felt a zing of excitement. He strode down the hall, shoulders back, eyes cast aside to watch the busy agents and staff already at work.

He first saw Samantha behind the glass walls of their office space, sitting at her desk, her head tipped aside as she studied the papers in her hand. The other hand held a large cup of coffee, index finger unconsciously tapping the vessel. Thick blonde hair flowed over her shoulder and under her chin, softly framing her face in gold.

It took his breath away and his step faltered. Finally, he forced his gaze to the office door, cleared his throat and pushed it open. When he raised his head, the first thing he saw was that signature smirk.

Yep, Danny knew.

Circumstance forced Martin and Samantha to take things very slowly since the Full Moon case. Between interviews, Martin's required doctor and psychiatrist appointments and his mother, father, sister, nieces and nephews; he hadn't been alone for over two months. Now that he was cleared for full duty things would finally fall back into the old routine and Martin could finally continue his interrupted life. He hoped that life would include Samantha.

But first he had to deal with smirking Danny. Martin paused inside the door as Danny walked to him, hand extended.

"Hey, glad to see you back, *compadre!*" he greeted.

Martin grinned. "Thanks. Good to be back."

Vivian then swept by, giving him a quick one-armed hug. "You look great, Martin."

"Thanks. I feel great." Then he'd turned to find Samantha right there in front of him. Danny faded back toward his desk with that know-it-all smile. Martin easily dismissed it as his gaze met hers.

"Hey," she breathed, blushing slightly. Samantha reached out and touched his arm, the connection electric.

"Hey yourself," he replied easily.

"All cleared, huh? We've missed you."

"Yeah. I finally have my place back to myself, too. Guess I have to get used to being on my own again."

She brightened. "Really? No more company?"

"Finally," he chuckled, "no!"

They didn't have time for anymore as Jack entered the room with their newest case in hand. Samantha indicated the conference table with a nod of her head and they moved in that direction. Danny and Viv arrived at the same time and they all settled into chairs.

Jack started the meeting with a crooked grin. "Good to have you back, Martin. You doing okay?"

Martin leaned back and returned the smile. "Yep, I'm great. It's good to be back."

"Nothing like hitting the ground running," Jack stated. "Let's do it."

Their latest missing person seemingly disappeared in the middle of the New York Stock Exchange's trading floor just after the closing bell. Martin and Danny were tasked with interviewing the Exchange members present at the time.

One day later the amount of information they had gathered was staggering, most of it proving to be worthless. The pair had been chasing down people all morning. This guy may have well disappeared from the middle of Yankee Stadium in playoff season by the number of names yet to be interviewed.

"Damn," Danny mumbled, flexing his hand. "I'm running out of notebooks and my fingers are cramping." He glanced back at the Stock Exchange entrance. "I do not want to go there again."

"I feel your pain," Martin said.

Their lunch break consisted of sidewalk vendor hot dogs on a crowded sidewalk.

"So," Danny started as he chewed, "hasn't Full Moon filed their last motion? Is the trial finally set?"

Martin angled his hot dog to keep the crowning sauerkraut from sliding down his arm. "The DA thinks their last motion will be denied today. The trial date should be set then." He managed a clean bite.

"When? Any idea?"

"They're guessing about two weeks. Zhan's been tucked away too long and they're afraid he'll bolt if this is put off too much longer. The guy's pretty nervous."

"Yeah, I would imagine that thinking about the Triad coming after you would cause a few sleepless nights. When the trial date's set are they going to assign agents to guard you?"

"Don't know. We'll cross that bridge when we get to it, I suppose. No one's made any threats yet."

Zhan had been Full Moon Shipping's bookkeeper and held the financial information that would put suspected Triad chief Mee Liang away. Martin was the only witness that could physically put Liang in the company of murders and kidnappers, and thus undeniably connecting Liang with the Triad. Whereas Zhan's testimony linked Liang to the financial crimes, Martin's testimony linked the man to capital crimes and guaranteed the man would never see freedom again.

Martin just wanted it to be over. He's already sacrificed nearly three months to the accidental case that he'd become involved with while off-duty.

"Maybe the Triad's just has happy to see Liang out of the picture," Danny thought out loud.

"We can only hope," Martin replied tiredly. His cell phone rang just as they finished their hurried lunch. The conversation was brief and he disconnected with a sigh. "Well, that's that. The trial's set for one week from Monday."

Danny's eyes widened. "That's quick. It'll be good to have it over, huh?"

"Yeah," Martin answered, rubbing his eyes. "It will be nice to move on."

With that, Danny's insufferable smirk appeared and his eyebrow waggled. "Or move in?"

Martin laughed, shaking his head. "At this point I'd be happy with a normal date."

“Which is when?” There was nothing subtle about Danny’s encouragement. Martin shrugged, his eyes twinkling. “Friday. I hope. It depends on this case.” “Where?”

Giving his partner a sidelong look, Martin grinned lopsidedly. “Forget it, Danny. That, I’ll keep to myself.”

Danny shook his head and nudged Martin’s side. “What, you don’t trust me?”

“No,” Martin replied without hesitation. “Now let’s get back to work so we can hopefully wrap this up before Friday and I can embark upon a rewarding personal life again.”

“Is that shrink-speak?”

“Shut up, Danny.”

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The Federal holding facility hummed with activity now that visiting hours were in full swing. The cramped rooms set aside for attorney visits were a far cry from the plush offices Mee Liang was used to and it served to focus his energies in planning his departure from all of this. He’d fought his entire life to get ahead in the Triad family and this was no different.

“The motion was denied,” his attorney said lowly to his client in rapid Chinese. “The trial begins on the 25<sup>th</sup>.”

Liang’s expression was unreadable. Even dressed in the denim uniform of the holding facility the Triad chief carried himself with an aristocratic air. The way he sat at the visiting room table was no different than how he carried himself in one of his many plush executive suites. “Then we shall move on to the next phase immediately, Mr. Wu. Any questions?”

“No, sir. The contract has already been announced and we expect bids immediately. It will not take long to find a suitable candidate.”

The Triad leader forced the younger attorney to meet and hold his gaze to make his message clear. “You will handle negotiations personally. You must find someone outside the family. There cannot be a link between this contract, my family, or you. Do what you must. ”

“I will be careful.”

“I expect an initial report in seven days.”

Wu hesitated, thinking quickly, then stood and bowed shortly. “I will be in touch.”

## Chapter Two

The case of the missing securities trader blessedly came to an end at noon on Friday when he was found in Aruba without any explanation other than he had ‘freaked out’ and fled to save his sanity.

Danny yanked the man’s photo from the white board and began to erase the timeline that had taken nearly five days to compile. Also during the week the team found a lost teenager who had run away to have an abortion. Since the team had been split between the two cases, Martin had only seen Samantha in passing.

Finally together again, the team sat back and enjoyed an unharried few minutes before the end of their work week.

“Quite a first week back, huh?” Danny quipped as he finished with the board. Martin and Samantha gratefully leaned back in their desk chairs, simultaneously spinning around to face Danny.

Martin stretched. “Talk about being thrown back into real life,” he yawned. “I was getting used to a full night’s sleep.”

“Welcome to reality,” Samantha said with little sympathy.

“Gladly,” Martin replied, twisting his chair further around to face her. When he smiled at her, he was pleased to see her cheeks flush a delightful rose color.

“We should celebrate your crashing back to Earth,” Danny suggested. “Quick drink before . . . ?” his eyebrows rose as he tilted his head toward Samantha.

Samantha exhaled loudly and rolled her eyes as Martin laughed. “Sure, I think we have time. Sam?”

“One drink,” Samantha shortly agreed. “I’m starving for real food.” She gathered her purse.

“Sheesh, she’s a pushy broad. Sure you want to take her out?” Danny quipped to Martin.

“Absolutely,” Martin replied with a sure smile. Samantha threw Danny a smug look. The couple rose at the same time and he collected his coat. By the time Martin had slipped it on, Samantha was beside him. His hand rested on her lower back as he guided her toward the exit. “Meet you down there,” he threw over his shoulder to Danny.

Danny watched the two of them as they walked away, their heads bent together intimately as they spoke. Vivian broke his gaze as she stepped up to Danny’s chair with coat on and purse tucked under her elbow.

“Well?” she asked. “Are we joining them for a drink or do they want to be alone?”

Jack walked from his office and joined them, shrugging on his jacket.

Danny immediately grabbed his jacket and grinned mischievously. “Oh, yeah, we’re joining them. I want to see how long we can make ‘em stick around.”

Jack snorted. “I say they’ll be gone before we even get there.”

“I say ten minutes,” Viv said dryly.

“Five bucks says I can keep ‘em there for over twenty,” Danny offered.

“You’re on,” Jack replied.

The three moved quickly in hot pursuit.

Martin and Samantha managed to ditch the others after twenty-two minutes and one drink. As they left, Martin was sure he heard Danny say “pay up!” He didn’t look back to see what happened but mentally figured that Danny owed him something and made a note to press him later his share.

The restaurant was pleasantly alive but the atmosphere was intimate enough to carry a conversation. While waiting for their order to arrive, Martin’s hand sat warmly on top of hers and they talked about whatever came to mind. The food came and left, as did the patrons seated around them, and still they talked. They each had an espresso and shared a dessert, hands touching at every opportunity. Every now and then exploring fingers caressed a chin, a cheek, a knee, the touch light and trembling. The spark of the touches undeniably grew with each encounter.

Their chairs moved inexplicably closer with time until their foreheads nearly touched. Time slipped by, and eventually, Martin raised his head and noticed that the restaurant was practically empty. The maitre de regarded them with polite curiosity and a faint smile.

“I guess they want to close now, if I’m reading my polite dirty looks correctly,” Martin said softly and finding her warm eyes. He stroked the back on her hand with his thumb, each line stoking a fire within. “Shall we?”

Martin rose, reluctant to release her hand, and she smoothly followed. Finally, he released his grip in order to help her with her coat. He guided her out the door with his arm resting lightly around her waist. Outside, they exchanged a smoldering look as their fingers entwined. They shared a cab in silent agreement and huddled close during the ride. When they arrived at Samantha’s apartment, they were still unable separate. She pulled him from the cab leaned in close, her hand over his heart.

“Pay the man,” she said huskily.

Martin threw in more than enough cash and was quickly pulled inside the building by his elbow. Samantha unsuccessfully tried to control a satisfied grin as she pulled him in snugly to her side. They made it to the elevator under the amused and watchful eye of the doorman and by then, Martin was so entranced there was no way in heaven that he could leave. Samantha Spade had him entirely and completely ensnared.

She pulled him through her doorway of her apartment and found his lips with hers as soon as the door closed. He gathered her soft hair at the nape of her neck and pulled her in, allowing her tongue to explore first. Entwined, they stood together as possessive hands pushed away any clothing blocking their way.

Samantha fumbled with his belt as Martin’s hands found their way under her blouse to caress her smooth skin. He groaned in anticipation as his thumbs found the front of her lacy bra, the material tight against her erect nipples. His belt finally undone and waistband released, Martin’s hands felt their way around her body to unfasten the delicate cloth that separated them.

Samantha’s hands slid down his back and under the hem of his boxers, kneading his flesh, forcing his hips to hers. The feel of his hardness against her made him groan again and before he lost complete control right there Martin scooped her up and claimed her mouth with his as he carried her to bed.

Her arms circled his neck and they tumbled down on rich linen, locked in a hungry kiss and scrambling to discard any remaining clothing. With that freedom finally attained, they slowed, each stroke of hand impossibly releasing more desire. Martin traced her neck with his mouth as he firmly cupped her breast with one hand and teased the hard nipple with his thumb. Samantha’s moan caused his other hand to search down under her undulating body until he gripped the roundness of her ass, forcing her tight to him. His mouth dropped to her other breast and he nibbled and tongued the nub until she writhed in want.

Martin's mouth released her and traced a burning trail up her neck. He felt her heart's pulse quicken against his lips. He moaned at his need and pulled her impossibly closer.

When he entered her, her entire body shivered and arced to meet his. Martin struggled for some bit of control but when her smooth legs wrapped around his thighs, he was lost in desire.

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It was early Saturday morning just outside Denver and Ezra Standish was not pleased.

He received the call for this meeting late the previous evening so his plans for sleeping in had yet again been dashed. The only solace he could glean from this was that it would be another step in nailing the Hanna cartel's gun runners. So far, the family had been frustratingly elusive.

The undercover ATF agent brushed a bit of imaginary lint from the lapel of his silk blend jacket. For a fleeting second he was able to enjoy the feel of the expensive weave under his fingertips before he tugged the sleeve to finish his smooth look. It was definitely worth the hour of verbal fencing with the bean counters in finance, and, in reality, he had to admit that his oratory skills were not entirely the reason that he won the purchase; Team Seven's impressive track record did a lot of speaking on its own.

Teams Four and Six constantly griped about the inequality of budgets in this regard and that thought made Standish smirk. Ezra remembered his boss' comment to the respective team leaders on that subject: "It's all about bein' the big dogs, boys," Chris Larabee had said. "And my big dogs can hunt."

It wasn't the most eloquent way of putting things, he mused, but it did get the job done. And that was what Ezra admired about his team - they got the job done time and again.

A stifled curse muttered under hot breath caught the undercover agent's attention and he rolled his eyes heavenward for a moment in search of patience. They'd pulled together the plan for this meeting in the wee hours of the morning and they were all tired.

"Mr. Tanner, must you fidget so?" he sighed. "My good humor is tenuous as it is." Turning his head slightly he narrowed his eyes in the direction of his partner, not surprised in the least to see him tugging on the collar of his custom shirt. His expression could only be described as 'disgusted'.

"Still don' see why I gotta dress up in a monkey suit to set up a buy. Money's money."

"In this case money is a show as well, Mr. Tanner. You know that. Appearance betroths success in this particular circle so cease accosting your collar - silk cannot take the abuse."

"*Would you two can it?*" Chris's voice was tinny as heard through the ear pieces, his snarl clearly signaling that his patience was gone. They all needed sleep and waiting in the early morning hot sun did not help attitudes. At least Ezra and Vin had the luxury of the car's air conditioning up until they had to exit for the microphone check. The others were divided between the boxy, hot surveillance van and the brush that surrounded this open area.

"I am not the one prancing in place like a virgin on her wedding night," Ezra stated firmly, twisting away from his partner to cast his gaze in the direction he expected their contact to arrive. The microphone tested clear and now it was down to the waiting.

"Prance? I don't prance!" Vin snapped, releasing his collar to give Ezra's shoulder a push. "And *virgin*? Do you *want* me ta belt ya?"

"*Tanner, knock it off!*" Chris' limit had definitely been reached. Ezra heard snickering in the background from the other team members through his earpiece. "*Stand still or I'll belt ya myself! You're causin' static.*"

Unfazed, Ezra's mouth twitched to successfully control his urge to laugh - Vin, although usually quiet and at peace, was easily riled when tired. And they were all tired. Ezra lifted his hand

and studied his nails as he acknowledged their boss and smoothed his facial features. “I would appreciate that, Mr. Larabee. I surely do not need to ruin my manicure on one of my own teammates.”

Vin snorted. “Dream on, Ez. You’d never touch me.”

“*Stop it, children. Lannen’s inbound.*” Buck’s voice was all business as he reported the arrival of their current suspect.

“And so the dance begins,” Ezra said lowly, falling into the role of Edward St. James, illegal weapons broker.

“Dance? Shit, Ezra . . .” Vin grumbled as he gave his jacket an irritated tug.

“*Shut up, Tanner!*” Chris ordered.

Standish allowed the exchange to pass with a grin then plucked the earpiece from his ear. Vin followed suite and held out his hand. Ezra dropped his listening device into Vin’s palm and the items were stowed away inside the car. The only piece of equipment now active was the microphone on Ezra. He tugged at the shirt sleeve, insuring the device was clear of the jacket sleeve.

Ezra stood square in front of their dark Mercedes with his hands clasped loosely together in front of him. Vin quietly joined him, adjusting his dark glasses and now all business. They both found and followed the approach of the sedan, their mutual curiosity about the meeting bringing them focus.

Ezra had closed a minor arms deal with Billy Lannen only a week ago. For the team, it was a precursor to a bigger buy they wanted from the Hanna cartel; Ezra and Vin had to gain Lannen’s trust. No one had expected another contact so soon.

As they waited for the arrival of Lannen, Ezra quickly replayed the first deal in his mind – it had been for a crate of assault rifles, a small buy that promised bigger fish later. After Vin had checked the weapons by shooting them in this very field, the deal was quickly closed. The rifles had been top quality and Ezra had stated that he could take as many as Lannen could supply.

Lannen’s vehicle pulled to a stop and before the thin wash of trailing dust curled over the car, the passenger side door flung open. A beefy man stepped out – Lannen’s bodyguard. The man stepped forward and both agents prepared to be patted down just like the first time they had met.

Ezra noticed the annoyed clench of Vin’s jaw at the unwelcome touch, taking it without comment. When he was done, the large man stepped back and nodded toward the sedan. The driver exited the vehicle and opened the back door. Lannen stepped out, slipping on sunglasses in the glare of daylight.

Billy Lannen was a small man with rat-like features. His fingers sparkled with expensive and gaudy jewelry and his clothes, although cut in a radical style, were top quality. The man was too flashy for Standish’s taste, but had been impressed by his negotiation skills; he’d underestimated the man at first and their initial deal was a lesson learned to not judge a book by its cover.

“Mr. St. James, Mr. Nicklin,” Lannen greeted, his hand extended. Ezra firmly shook it, as did Vin. “I’ll get right to the point, gentlemen.”

“Always an outstanding idea,” Ezra quipped. “Our previous encounter was mutually lucrative and I can only believe we can arrange more of the same. What brings us together on this glorious morn?”

“Yeah, we did good on that last deal, but this is something different.” He removed his sunglasses and gave Vin a lingering look with beady, rodent eyes. “I have a proposition for Mr. Nicklin, actually. A little freelance work.”

Caught off guard, Ezra glanced at Vin and quickly disguised surprised at the comment. Ezra regrouped in a few seconds quickly and recalled one of the first rules of undercover work: Never

get separated from your partner. Then Agent Ezra Standish did what he did best – negotiated on the fly.

“I speak for Mr. Nicklin as his agent and partner, Mr. Lannen. We find that arrangement to be mutually beneficial in the long run.”

Lannen’s smile seemed predatory in nature. “And safer, I would think.” He replaced his dark glasses and paused in consideration, his gaze traveling up and down Vin in a way that gave Ezra a chill.

“What is it that you wish to discuss?” Ezra inquired, his voice thickly Southern.

“I must confess, Mr. St. James, that I have investigated your partner’s background since our last meeting.” His eyes drilled into Vin as he spoke, and the agent returned the stare is spades. “An opportunity has come to my attention and I believe Mr. Nicklin’s . . . skills . . . can be used in a, um, mutually satisfying and lucrative way.”

Ezra kept his eyes on Lannen but he saw in his peripheral vision that Vin shifted slightly, uncomfortable with this subject. He, too, was uneasy with the direction this conversation was taking but the fact that Vin did not protest in any way told Ezra volumes about the trust his partner had in him; Vin’s silence signaled Ezra to continue speaking for him.

“Well,” Ezra stalled, thinking furiously, his face bland. “This is certainly an unexpected turn of events.”

The man shifted his attention to Ezra, continuing to speak as if Vin was deaf. “I couldn’t help but notice Mr. Nicklin’s skill with a rifle at our last meeting. Recently I was contacted by someone looking for such talent which is why I checked further into your partner’s background. Army weapons expert, Ranger, hand to hand experience, black ops – I have no doubt that what I found was only a fraction of your actual experience and skill, Mr. Nicklin.” The small man’s attention reverted back to Vin.

Ezra recognized Vin’s planted history, the past of one James Nicklin. A lot of the experiences listed in the fictional background were based on Vin’s true history. Tanner’s real Army Ranger profile was much deeper and heavily shrouded in secrecy. Ezra knew no one in their team – including their boss Chris – would ever know the full extent of Vin’s past missions.

Vin openly glared at Lannen. As Nicklin, he was as protective of his past as Vin was of his reality. “You gotta point somewhere?” Vin growled.

Lannen shook his head and laughed shortly. “My customer is looking for a gun. A specific kind of gun. Your kind, Mr. Nicklin.” He turned back to Ezra. “My buyer has cash and solid backing. I daresay you could name your price but I would require an appropriate broker’s fee, of course.”

“Of course.” Ezra’s mind worked quickly with this unexpected offer. “I do not have to point out the risks in such a venture, I am sure,” he started. “This will cost your client, Mr. Lannen. Such a deal puts our entire business and both of our futures in jeopardy.”

“I understand. I am authorized at this point to guarantee two million if Mr. Nicklin is chosen. He also must follow directions exactly, no questions asked.”

“What? No one picks my shots!” Vin snapped. Ezra placed a restraining hand on his partner’s forearm.

“You do not seem to understand our situation,” Ezra said evenly, his practiced poker face unreadable even though his thoughts raced. “That is not enough to risk our current business. Our livelihood is at stake, Mr. Lannen.” He paused and shifted slightly, never dropping his eyes from Lannen’s. Finally, he took a gamble. “Five million minimum guarantee or we are not interested.”

Lannen cocked his head. *‘He is actually considering it!’* Ezra realized. He’d hoped that amount would break the deal, a deal which made him extremely nervous due to the lack of

information. Right now, all he was trying to accomplish was to get both of them out of this situation and save face with Lannen at the same time.

Lannen's small grin did nothing to appease Ezra's bad feeling. "I will extend the counter offer. Please wait." He retreated to the car, pulling out a cell phone as he walked.

Ezra turned his back to the sedan and pressed his lips tightly together. Vin also turned and moved in closer. "What the fuck is going on, Ez?" he whispered hotly.

"I do not know, Mr. Tanner, but it seems our Mr. Lannen is shopping for a shootist for someone else. This is totally unexpected, I assure you."

Vin's jaw muscles worked furiously under his skin. "I don't like this," he ground out.

"Neither do I, Mr. Nicklin. I do think, however, that we need to keep our options open at this point." He flicked his eyes to Vin's and they locked gazes. Even without details, they both knew that this was something big. After a moment Vin gave a short nod, in essence giving Ezra the rein he needed to keep them both in play. Ezra knew that their team leader must be having apoplexy at this point; Chris Larabee loathed surprises.

When Lannen stepped from the sedan again his face was unreadable. He slipped the phone into his pocket and walked quickly toward them.

"That price is within reason," Lannen said shortly. He held his hand out and quickly shook both agents' hands. "Bring your rifle to the McMillian Gun Club tomorrow, 9:00 sharp." He handed Ezra a business card with the address.

Ezra smiled charmingly. "Until tomorrow, then."

Lannen grinned that infuriating grin and turned on his heel, disappearing into the limo which then left in a dusty cloud. Ezra slipped the card into his inner coat pocket as Vin exhaled sharply. After a moment they retreated to the coolness of idling sedan's interior. Vin retrieved the earpieces from the back seat and held them up in the palm of his hand.

"*WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?*" Chris's tinny voice could be heard as the earpieces sat in Vin's hand.

The two agents looked at each other.

"You first?" Vin offered up his palm cradling the tiny electronic pieces.

Ezra raised an eyebrow. "I propose a coin toss."

Instead, Vin held up his other hand as a fist. "Rock, paper, scissors."

With an unhappy frown, Ezra complied. He lost. Vin smiled crookedly as Standish plucked up his earpiece and inserted it with a wince. "Can we wait until Lannen's vehicle is out of sight, Mr. Larabee?" he calmly suggested. "I am afraid he can hear you at this juncture."

"*Ezra, you and Vin get your asses over here! NOW!*"

"Yes, sir. Our collective asses are en route as we speak."

Vin laughed as he dropped his earpiece in the ashtray and the Mercedes into gear. "D'ya think he'd notice if we took the long way 'round?" he said lowly.

"*I heard that, Vin!*"

"I am afraid so, Mr. Tanner."

### Chapter Three

Sunday morning found Martin still basking in the glow of the previous night. He and Samantha had spent a wonderfully relaxing day together – mostly in bed. He was just now returning to his own place to grab some more clothes. As he entered the apartment, his cell phone trilled. He flipped it open as he reached into a dresser drawer.

“Fitzgerald.”

“Martin, it’s Jack.”

“Hey, boss. What’s up?” He pulled out a pair of jeans and another pair of sox.

“Are you at home?”

“Yeah, why?”

“You need to stay put. There will be two U.S. Marshals arriving there soon.”

This caused Martin to stop what he was doing and stand straight and still. Instinctively, he glanced out his bedroom window and stepped away from it. “What? Why?”

“Since the Full Moon trial date has been checked the chatter in Triad circles has increased substantially. Another unrelated source has hinted that some kind of contract has been put out.”

“Contract? What kind of contract?”

“We don’t know any details but it doesn’t have anything to do with regular merchandise. They’re looking for an outside source and there’s a high possibility that the contract is on you or Zhan. Until we know for certain, you’ll have a couple of marshals with you 24/7.”

“Bodyguards? Jack, that’s ridiculous! I don’t need any bodyguards!”

“The DA does not want to take any chances, Martin. This case is important and you are in integral part of it. The DA’s office insists and I agree with them. Get used to it. It will only be for a week. Once you testify on next Monday there will be no more reason for protection.”

Martin ran his hand through his hair as he paced a small track. “Two guards? This is overkill, don’t you think?”

“Better that than an actual kill. Stay put until the marshals get there, understand? And I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Jack disconnected before Martin could protest any further. So much for a nice, relaxing finish to a near-perfect weekend, he groused. He threw the phone on the bed and glared at it as if the small device was responsible for all this grief.

Eventually he shook his head and exhaled a frustrated breath. He’d waited months to ask Samantha out – first, he had physical wounds that needed healing and a barrage of psychological appointments and evaluations to assure the FBI that he had no residual effects from being kidnapped, drugged and tortured. Then he had to shed himself of his over protective family. Finally, he had to prove to Jack that he was fit for full duty – his life had been back to normal for only a week, and now this. There was no doubt that he would be stuck indoors until he testified.

“When this is over I’m taking a long vacation,” he grumbled. Then a thought struck him and he grinned. “Yeah – a beach somewhere with Samantha.” Now with something pleasant to think about, he continued what he was doing.

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In Denver , Vin Tanner’s Sunday started with a bang.

After bumping heads all day Saturday about this deal, Larabee had finally agreed that this was not an opportunity to pass up. Although they were looking for gun runners, stopping an assassination was just too tempting to pass up. Going along with Lannen's offer could only benefit them - even if Tanner didn’t win the gig it would put Lannen further at ease with the undercover agents, and therefore greatly increasing their odds of success at busting the Hanna cartel.

If Tanner did win the contract . . . well, any plans along that line were sketchy at this point. It was difficult to get any answers from any other agencies in the limited time they had before deciding to go forward, so Vin and Ezra were sent out the gun club while the rest of the team sought information on what to do if Tanner were hired.

At the gun club, Lannen recorded Vin going through his paces on the range in what was clearly a skills test. Lannen made one short phone call but JD – their electronics whiz kid – was unable to trace exactly where it went. All he could tell was that the trace went east. And from Denver , ‘east’ was a lot of area to cover.

Chris hoped someone would come forward with more information on this contract. Better yet, he hoped the whole thing would be handed off when Vin wasn't selected. For now, all they could do was wait, which gave the team the remains of their Sunday to rest and regroup. Chris took advantage of the time off at his ranch with Vin by embarking on a relaxing trail ride and generally fussing with the horses. By late afternoon he was grooming his horse Pony and could hear Vin outside in the barnyard hosing off his moody mount Peso . The background noise of his friend cussing out the surly black made the team leader chuckle.

Chris’ mind, though, couldn’t help but wander back to what he knew about this mysterious contract - or lack of what he knew. There were holes as big as Buck’s ego in the packet so far - no city, no names, no details of any kind and the possible targets were too numerous to count. All they could do was just wait and see what progressed and Chris Larabee hated waiting. He spent the time trying to convince himself that this deal probably wouldn’t go any further, anyway.

But the small voice inside never silenced. Chris had yet to see anyone best Vin’s ability with a rifle and that small voice insisted that Team Seven had better be prepared when the time came.

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Martin jerked awake Monday morning to the smell of coffee. He glanced at his alarm clock – it wouldn’t go off for another fifteen minutes.

‘Damn,’ he thought, his mind taking a few seconds to get in gear. ‘Coffee? Samantha?’ He turned to find the space beside him disappointingly empty. Then he remembered the awkwardness of dating while under U.S. Marshal guard.

Samantha had gone home early.

His mood shifted to the dark side when he realized who had made the coffee. Frazier and Beatty seemed nice enough but the prospect of having a constant shadow – ‘*shadows*,’ he corrected himself – for the next eight days was unnerving. He’d only been free for a week!

Grumbling, Martin turned off the alarm and crawled from bed. He cringed at the heyday Danny would have with this. And as far as getting together with Samantha . . . he shook his head and stalked to the shower. It was going to be a very long week.

Frazier and Beatty were relieved by Astin and Griffith, who picked Martin up in the parking garage of his apartment building. He slouched in the back seat of their vehicle feeling like a he was in a very bad spy movie. The conveyance was the stereotypical black SUV that screamed 'Government Agent!' He expected Jack Bauer to fall through the roof at any instant. Martin could only pray that this didn't add fodder to Danny's verbal arsenal.

By the time they reached his building, Martin had resolved to play the hand dealt to him with some Fitzgerald pride. As he waited for his sizeable escorts to signal that it was clear and open his door, Martin managed to change his attitude and instill the agents in his routine. After all, he knew that if Danny, Samantha or even Vivian smelled even a hint of his annoyance with this whole set up, they'd jump on it like a starving pack of hyenas and he'd never get any peace.

Martin sighed. *'At least there's no paparazzi,'* he concluded with an amused snort as he entered the building.

Striding through the lobby toward the elevators Martin nodded greetings to several people and ignored the numerous puzzled expressions regarding his rather bulky entourage. The marshals made sure it was only the three of them on the ride up, which started a mantra in Martin's mind: *'This is all temporary. It's only for a week.'*

All in all, the day went fairly well. Their latest case involved a lot of financials so Martin was stuck with paperwork for most of the day. Danny tried to get Martin to enlist Astin or Griffith, or even both, to lend a hand but Samantha had to whisper her doubts that they had eyes behind the ever present dark glasses they wore. And shoulder to shoulder, the two marshals made their own mountain. She wondered if they would even fit in the chairs.

"They kinda give me the creeps," she said quietly, refusing to sit with her back to them. "At least the other two guys had a sense of humor."

Danny thought it was hilarious that Samantha had tolerated Martin's escorts at all, let alone know that they had a sense of humor. The rest of the day was filled with Danny's numerous versions of a Martin and Samantha household that included bodyguards, cooks, maids and butlers. By the time day's end rolled around, Martin was already dreading returning to work the next day for another salvo of Dannyisms.

Vivian had eyed the beefy escorts with a frown when she first encountered them and gave them a wide berth for the rest of the day. Only Jack had completely ignored the marshals, which was a feat considering the size of the pair.

*'This is all temporary.'* The mantra started in Martin's brain as soon as he stepped from the office for the day. *'It's less than a week now . . .'*

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The video conferences regarding Liang's contract had kept Jong Wu busier than expected. He had eight applicants by Sunday night, five from the U.S. and three from south of the border. He'd narrowed it down to three by nightfall.

By Monday afternoon, after a little more research, he'd hit upon something completely unexpected. Tuesday required more information to be gathered. Wednesday flew by with assembling facts and creating a timetable. Thursday morning involved an additional and risky meeting with Liang for his approval of a new plan. By Thursday night, the original assassination plan had turned into something completely different. Wu was awed by the fortune of the

coincidence that had fallen at his feet. Liang and the Triad would be indebted to him for life when this plan was set in motion.

When Wu noticed the undeniable resemblance between Martin Fitzgerald and Mark Nicklin, he knew it could be exploited in the Triad's favor in some way. All it took was a little time and a little meditation for the plan to come to him. When it did, he knew that he would rise in Triad ranks like a shooting star.

Wu would be rich beyond his dreams and finally attain the respect he deserved. All he had to do was make sure his plan was followed to the letter. Done properly, not only would Mee Liang be free, but the Triad would be completely invisible because this new arrangement had a built-in fall guy – or guys.

He knew it would take his full and undivided attention for a little while because it was the only way to make sure his plans were followed to the letter. Wu had a reputation for being 'hands-on', anyway, starting back when he was a boy in China . His first kill had been by strangulation with his bare hands. Now he was in a position to direct underlings to get dirty, but his assignment was very special. He'd make an exception.

Wu leaned back in his leather chair and twisted around to overlook Central Park at night. A confident smile grew with the knowledge that after this assignment, he would be able to afford an even better view.

## Chapter Four

Friday started loudly in Denver with the arrival of the normally silent-as-the-wind Vin Tanner. He marched into the office and flung his jacket onto his desk, spectacularly clearing it of his stapler and paperclip holder.

“Whoa there, Junior,” Buck yelped, throwing his hands up in surrender. “Run outta that tar you call coffee this mornin’?”

Vin glared at him momentarily, then looked around the office. “Where’s JD?” he snapped.

“Getting’ the tracking device for your rifle,” Buck answered. “Don’t worry, Vin, he’ll be careful with it.”

Vin reached back with both hands and man-handled his long hair into a ponytail. When he was done, he sighed in resignation and hung his head for a moment. “Sorry, Buck. Didn’t mean ta bark. Lannen’s an idiot and I don’t like fact that he’s tellin’ me what to do. I don’t like not knowing where we’re goin’. I’ve got a bad feelin, s’all.”

Lannen had called Ezra late Thursday afternoon to tell him that Vin had won the contract. They were to meet with Lannen at noon today, rifle in hand, but wouldn’t tell them where they were going after that. Lannen insisted that it was a on a need-to-know basis and he, personally, had no need to know; his job was to simply introduce St. James and Nicklin to the contractor. Lannen would get paid his broker fee and be sent happily on his way.

Chris, drawn to his doorway by the less than subtle arrival of his team sharpshooter and friend, leaned against the frame rolling a steaming coffee cup between his hands. He understood Vin's uneasiness - this whole thing did not set well with him, either. He, Ezra and Vin had discussed it into the late hours of the night trying to decide how to play it. Since they had no idea where the pair would be going, they decided a tracking device or two was essential.

But where to put them? Logically, the only things guaranteed to be at the assassination site were Vin and his rifle. Tagging Vin would be risky so they decided to tag the rifle with a GPS chip and that is what was upsetting the Texan. The rifle in question was his pride and joy and the idea of anyone fiddling with it stuck in his craw. Vin Tanner did not like anyone messing with his things for whatever reason.

A second tracking technique would be through Ezra’s laptop. Since the internet connection used cell phone towers, every time Standish powered up the computer and went online he would leave a trail. The two devices were the best they come up with in the time allotted.

Chris silently watched his friend. Vin let out a sigh and proceeded to pick up his desk items in a ploy to keep his hands busy. Just as he figured Vin was about to give in to his anxiousness and track down the electronics whiz kid, JD walked in with the rifle case. Vin's shoulders visibly relaxed.

“Hey, Vin! It’s all done.” JD handed the sharpshooter his case and Vin immediately set it down and opened it up. The two agents put their heads together as JD pointed out how unobtrusive the device was. “It’s like Lojack. You turn it on and off by sliding this.” He tapped a tiny metal slide incorporated in the seam where the rifle’s body met the stock. “It’s practically invisible. And only

turn it on when necessary because the battery doesn't have much life to it – maybe a couple of hours. We'll be able to track you using cell towers when Ezra logs in on the laptop, too, but when you turn this on we can pinpoint your location almost immediately. Between the two, we'll know where you are."

Vin nodded in understanding, obviously pleased that his rifle looked unscathed.

"I hear we have a new job." Josiah's resonant voice announced his arrival. Chris looked up to see Nathan trailing the big man in the room. "Are we putting the Corklemann case aside, Chris?"

"For now," Chris said from his doorway. "We should be out of this one pretty quick and refocus on Corklemann and the Hanna cartel. Once we've identified Vin's target we're supposed to call in the FBI and local authorities to take over. This really isn't our bailiwick. It was just dumb luck we stumbled across it."

Nathan dropped into his chair and tucked his hands behind his head as he leaned back. "Are we risking losing the Hanna cartel if we hand it over? Won't this jeopardize Ezra and Vin's standing with Lannen when the Feds stop the assassination?"

"According to Lannen, he's out of it after today," Vin drawled lazily, his attention on packaging the rifle. "The contractor wants to work directly with us. Lannen hasn't even seen the guy and doesn't know when or where the hit's takin' place. We can blame our contractor when things go south."

"Where's Standish?" Chris said, looking at his watch. "We need to get moving' if you're meeting' Lannen at 8:30."

Just then the dapper agent strolled in the door with a Grande Starbucks cup in his hand. "I apologize for my tardiness," he said. "I had to speak slowly for the new barista."

Josiah and Nathan laughed at Ezra's look of distain and Buck visibly perked up at the mention of a new female in the area to investigate. Before he could ask Ezra for more details, Chris interrupted.

"Conference room. Now." The team leader strode through the office toward the meeting room and the others immediately followed.

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Lannen waited for the undercover agents at a mall parking lot on the outskirts of Denver . He was edgy and Vin figured it was because this location was too public. The other times they had met with the man it had been in an open field or off road in some desolate place. Lannen acknowledged them with a sharp nod of his head. They exchanged tense greetings as an ordinary blue car pulled into the parking spot next to Lannen's vehicle. A lean Asian man slipped from the driver's side, eyes hidden by dark glasses.

"Mr. Lannen?" the man queried.

Lannen gave the man a nervous rake with his eyes. "You have my money?" he said shortly.

The sunglasses man spared Ezra a glance just before the reflective dark lenses stopped on Vin. "Mr. Nicklin, I presume."

"Yup," Vin replied sharply, not offering his hand.

"My money, please." Lannen asked in an edgy tone.

The stranger returned his attention to Lannen. "Certainly," he replied blandly. The Asian walked to the back of the car and opened the trunk where he pulled out a small duffle bag. "Here you go."

Lannen snatched the duffle from the man's hand and retreated to his car. Once there, he quickly unzipped the bag and rifled through it. From where he was standing Vin could see the numerous

packets of cash through which Lannen pawed. Then, apparently satisfied, the rat-faced man zipped the bag back up and tossed it on the passenger seat as he dropped in behind the steering wheel of his car.

“I’m done here, gentlemen.” Lannen’s car started and he pulled away without a backward glance.

“Edward St. James, Mr. Nicklin’s partner,” Ezra introduced himself to the Asian as Lannen departed.

“Please, get in the car and I will take you to your contact.” Sunglasses man backed up and opened the rear door of his vehicle. Vin reached down and picked up his rifle case.

“I will place that in the trunk for you, Mr. Nicklin,” the Asian said.

“Nope,” Vin said sharply as he folded into the back seat. “It stays with me.”

“As you wish.” The man indicated Ezra sit in the front, leaving the back seat to Vin and his rifle. As soon as Ezra did so they were on their way.

“May I inquire as to the location of this task?” Ezra asked, adjusting the soft laptop case next to him. “And more importantly, are you authorized to issue payment?”

“All your questions will be answered soon,” was all the man said.

They rode in the car for about forty minutes before pulling onto a very remote and private airfield. Vin immediately noticed the small Gulfstream jet standing by on the tarmac and his stomach clenched. As if he felt the reaction, Ezra turned and met Vin’s eyes, giving him an infinitesimal shake of his head. It didn’t help stay Vin’s growing unease. A jet ride was completely unexpected at this point. Both agents only expected a meet and plan.

*‘Chris must be spittin’ nails,’* Vin thought distractedly. As a claustrophobic, Vin wasn’t fond of flying. He could feel his palms becoming clammy with anticipation.

The driver stopped alongside the jet and hopped from the car, opening Vin’s door for him and then circling around to open Ezra’s. Vin exited, but once his feet were on terra firma he found he couldn’t move them.

“Please,” the driver said, indicating with a sweep of his arm that the two of them should enter the jet.

Ezra drew up alongside Vin, who swallowed hard and gripped his rifle case with a slick hand. Ezra touched his elbow, sending him forward toward the jet’s stairwell.

“Perhaps the aircraft is merely acting as an office, Mr. Nicklin,” Ezra offered quietly.

“I don’t think so, Ed,” Vin replied, his mouth dry. “I have a bad feelin’ ‘bout this.” And Vin could tell that Ezra felt the same way. Even though the man’s eyes were unreadable, Vin noticed the tight grip Ezra had on his elbow.

They entered the craft to find one man inside. The fuselage was small, containing four captain’s chairs that swiveled, a small couch and a tiny bar area at one end. One of the chairs held a bald, middle aged Asian man – Vin guessed Chinese.

“Please, sit,” the man indicated two of the chairs facing him with a sweep of his arm.

Ezra slid over to the window seat, leaving the roomy aisle chair for Vin. Ezra settled the computer on his lap while Vin tucked the rifle case between the chairs. Vin kept the open hatch in his peripheral vision as he worked to keep his breathing even – the walls of the small jet felt like they were closing in.

“Edward St. James,” Ezra started, offering his hand. The Asian leaned forward and shook it with a small smile. “And this is Mark Nicklin.”

Vin offered a tense nod only, not wanting the man to feel the dampness in his hand or hear the tightness his throat.

“I am Jong Wu. I have seen your talent with your rifle, Mr., Nicklin, and am sure you will have no trouble with our contract.”

“Yes, I am sure you won't,” Ezra broke in. “I do not know if Mr. Lannen was clear about our partnership, Mr. Wu, but Mr. Nicklin and I are a team. I will handle all of the negotiations. You are already aware of what Mr. Nicklin brings to the contract.”

“Yes,” Wu said, almost distractedly as he studied Vin. “Yes, I am very aware of his talents and capabilities. The agreement was for five million?”

Ezra chuckled. “I believe the agreement was a minimum guarantee of five million. The balance would depend on the nature of the job. We are risking a profitable business for this contract, Mr. Wu. Any compensation would depend on the risk involved. You understand - supply and demand and such.”

“Yes, I do understand, Mr. St. James, and I also understand that you are a hard but fair negotiator. With that said, let us get down to business, shall we?”

Vin half listened to the negations as he kept his eyes on the tiny windows and open hatch of the jet. He felt better seeing the mountains in the distance and he definitely wanted to keep an eye on any outside activity. He saw the blue car depart the air strip at a high speed. Then another car pulled into the sole hanger and shortly thereafter two uniformed men emerged from the building and headed toward the jet on foot. Vin immediately recognized the pilots' uniforms and his heart rate quickened.

The vague dread in his gut intensified when the two uniforms entered the jet. With a slight nod from Mr. Wu, they went directly to the cockpit and began what Vin recognized as a pre-flight checklist.

“Wait a minute,” Vin interrupted. “We goin' somewhere?”

Wu raised his brows. Ezra turned to his partner and gave him a stern look. “It appears you were not paying attention, Mr. Nicklin.” Ezra's voice carried a cautionary tone. “We are going to the location of the job. What Mr. Wu is reluctant to relate is exactly where that location is.”

“Now? We're going now?” Vin had to work hard to keep the rising panic from his voice. Flying in this tiny craft with total – and more than likely dangerous – strangers did not sit well.

Ezra put his hand lightly on Vin's forearm to calm him and turned to Wu. “As you see, I am not alone in my reservations, Mr. Wu. Since you seem insistent on secrecy, I must insist on an open contract. Five million minimum with a two million retainer payable immediately. I would also insist on a caveat that allows additional compensation as the need arises. Our need, that is – Mr. Nicklin's and mine.”

Wu sat with his fingertips steepled under his chin, nodding slightly. “Your needs, Mr. St. James?”

“Well, we have an example before us now. Mr. Nicklin detests flying. If you insist on flying us anywhere, we would have to insist on an additional fee to cover my partner's anxiety.” Ezra paused to smile. “After all, it is much easier to face one's phobia for, say, and additional half – million?”

Vin had to work to keep his jaw from dropping. Ezra was really playing dirty - and he realized that the interplay helped distract him from his growing distress.

“Each and up front,” Ezra added, the smile evaporating as he refused to drop his gaze from Wu's.

*'. . . more than dirty! Damn, Ez, you got some brass cojones,'* Vin thought, smiling sickly.

Vin was more than astonished when Wu agreed with a nod. The shock, however, was short lived when he realized that yet another man had boarded and was closing the hatch. Vin's heart was jarred into racing when the jet engines fired up. He gripped the armrest until his knuckles ached and

stared out one of the tiny windows. Two additional men trotted on tarmac, pulled the chocks from the jet wheels and signaled an all clear.

“Mr. Nicklin.” Ezra’s voice was warm in his ear. Vin just swallowed in reply. “Here. Take this.” Vin finally tore his gaze from the window when his partner shook his shoulder. Ezra held out a pill that Vin recognized as a Valium.

“No,” Vin choked. He didn’t want to be drugged among strangers. He’d taken the pill before when the team had to fly somewhere but then, he had been surrounded by people he trusted. Here . . . this was different.

“Take half. It will help and you will still be alert.” Ezra broke the pill in half. “You can take the other half if the need arises. I will be here to watch your back, I promise.” The words were very quiet and only heard by the two of them. Wu had moved away to speak with the newest arrival so Vin took the opportunity to pop the half pill. Ezra retrieved a water bottle from the bar and Vin gulped down nearly half of it.

When Wu returned, the jet started to move and Ezra pulled out his laptop. “Now, Mr. Wu, I must insist on our three million dollar initiation fee.”

Vin felt a modicum of reassurance knowing that as Ezra fired up the computer, JD would be tracing the wireless signal and know where they were headed. He was able to distract his thoughts momentarily as he imagined Chris watching the jet take off - the rest of the team had been keeping visual surveillance from a distance. Right now, Chris was probably cussing' up a storm and issuing orders as fast as his lips could move. Imagining the scenario made Vin smile tightly for a moment.

Now somewhat distracted with visions of a spleen-venting Larabee, Vin sat back, closed his eyes and tried to ignore the bumps and shimmies of the jet taxiing and then taking off. This job had taken an early, unexpected turn and his only consolation was in knowing that they were being watched by five very competent and determined teammates.

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“At least this pair blends into the background more.” Samantha spoke lowly to Martin as they left the federal building for lunch.

Martin snorted in reply, fighting the urge to hold Samantha’s hand. For some reason, the display seemed a little too personal for the eyes of the two marshals closely following. “I guess. At least the other two had a sense of humor. These guys haven’t said more than a dozen words so far between them.”

The latest guards had started the previous day, suddenly replacing Astin and Griffith.

“Do you know their names?”

Martin shrugged. “Rolls and Royce, Frick and Frack, I don’t know. They’ll be gone on Monday.”

Samantha chuckled and pressed her knuckle to her lips to keep it low. “I get the impression you’re tired of this.”

Martin shook his head with a sigh. “You have no idea. I am so ready for this to be over and done with.”

Frick - or was it Frack? - opened the black SUV door and after quickly checking the inside, allowed Martin and Samantha to slip inside.

“It’ll be nice to walk again instead of being driven everywhere,” Martin grouched. Samantha patted his thigh sympathetically and the warmth he felt from her touch could not be ignored. He

leaned over and whispered in her ear before the marshals entered the vehicle. “Walk, and a few other things.”

“Poor baby,” Samantha sighed. She moved her hand up a bit more and squeezed his leg sympathetically, leaving her hand to rest high on his thigh. He placed his hand on top of hers and gave her fingers a squeeze, trying to ignore repercussions her touch ignited. And by her predatory smile, she knew exactly what she was doing.

“Yes,” he groaned softly, squirming slightly with his growing physical discomfort. “It’s going to be a loooooong weekend.”

Samantha laughed shortly and ducked her head, taking his hand completely in hers. When Frick and Frack slid into the front seat, she leaned closely to his ear, her warm breath tickling his neck. “Not just for you, you know.”

“Baseball,” he said quietly, turning to look out the side window. “Must think about baseball . . .”

She straightened up, laughed a low, husky laugh and gripped his hand more tightly.

## Chapter Five

As the powerful jet ascended into the blue Denver sky Ezra took his time arranging payment with a very tight-lipped Mr. Wu. Their contact's reluctance to give too much information was fine with the agent at this point – the longer he was online the clearer their path was for JD to follow.

Wu was a skilled negotiator but Ezra knew he had the key element – Vin. As they bandied about options, Standish kept a careful eye on his partner. The drug showed its effects mostly in Vin's hands as they relaxed their white-knuckled grip on the seat arms. He was also able to finally release his locked gaze out the window and the momentary twitch at the corner of his mouth signaled an attempt at a smile. Ezra interrupted his dealings so Mr. Wu's silent sentinel could dig up a portable DVD player and a few action movies. With that, Vin appeared to settle at least until the Valium wore off.

"Mr. Wu," Ezra started again. "My partner and I have already earned two fifths of our guarantee plus the one million bonus. I must demand remittance immediately."

"And I have no guarantee that this job will be finished," Wu countered as he sat back, relaxed, in his seat. "I propose this: I will place your three million in a holding account, accessible to both of us. When the job is finished you may transfer the funds to your account. Agreed?"

"We are guaranteed five million. When the holding account collects that much I must insist that we can transfer that amount to our account immediately."

Wu pursed his lips for a moment before finally acquiescing with a nod.

"Then we have an amicable arrangement, Mr. Wu." It took a little longer to settle on the holding location, but it was eventually arranged. Ezra entered the information slowly, allowing JD a trace, and turned the laptop over for Wu to initiate the first deposit. By the time it was done, they had been in the air for nearly an hour.

*'Mr. Dunne should have a very clear trail at this juncture,'* Standish thought as he powered down the computer. At that point, Wu twisted his seat around to face forward and did not speak again for the rest of the flight.

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"I got 'em," JD yelled triumphantly from the surveillance van.

"It's about time," Chris grumbled. The edgy feeling in his gut had refused to abate since Vin and Ezra had left them, and experience had carved in his mind to never ignore his gut feelings. It had been too long since the undercover pair had been whisked away in the jet. Chris had expected some sort of communication much sooner. "Where are they?"

"They're east."

"This was supposed to be a negotiations meeting," Chris growled. "There was no indication of travel. They weren't told to bring anything!"

"Except Vin's rifle," Buck said.

“Okay,” Chris started, his brain running scenarios. “Get Nathan and Josiah drop the vehicle surveillance at the mall parking lot and get them to work on lining up a jet for us. Do we have anything back on the vehicle plate of the contact they left with?”

“It was a rental,” Buck said as he started to work the radio. “Josiah should have that information.”

Chris heard Buck contacting their teammates as started the surveillance van. “Okay, guys, let’s park this hunk a junk and get ready to fly.”

Buck gave Chris a pat on the shoulder that meant to be reassuring. “We’ll get ‘em, Pard. Not to worry.”

Chris could only nod. His gut was telling him a different story.

They assembled in their office an hour later. JD flattened a map on the table and traced a path with his finger. “Here’s the path that they were on before the laptop was turned off,” he explained. The five team members looked at the map. “Northeast.”

“Lots of likely landing spots,” Josiah said. “We’ll have to be patient, I guess.”

Chris didn’t miss the pointed glance in his direction and made an effort to relax. “What did you find out about the rental, Nathan?”

“The renter gave a driver’s license number that doesn’t exist,” he replied. “I just checked with the Department of Motor Vehicles. Name on the contract was Alex Wang. Bogus address, too. The man said that Mr. Wang has rented before and has a good record with them.”

Josiah snorted. “Yeah, those companies don’t look too close until one of their cars goes missing. Then they expect immediate service from the police.”

The office phone rang and Buck snatched it up, speaking lowly as the others talked.

“They said they’d call us when the vehicle is turned in,” Nathan finished. “As for the jet, I have the basics started. The flight plan filed isn’t being followed. The jet is a rental. We’ll need a warrant to get the information.”

“I’ll call Travis and get it started.” Chris scrubbed his face. “I don’t like any of this,” he said. He heard Buck hang up the phone and looked his way. The dark expression on his friend’s face made the hairs on the back of Chris’ neck spring to attention.

“That was Sheriff’s dispatch, Chris,” he said grimly as he approached the table. Four heads turned his direction. “They called because of the flag we put on Lannen’s vehicle plate. They just found Lannen dead inside his car.”

“Where?” Chris asked flatly as his stomach flipped.

“About thirty miles from here. Looks like he ran off the road - went off a cliff, actually. Died on impact with a bunch a boulders.”

Dreaded silence dropped over the gathering for long seconds.

“What did they find in the car?” Chris croaked.

“Nothing,” Buck replied. “Not a damn thing.”

JD looked up and frowned. “Didn’t he get paid? Was the cash with him?”

“Yup,” Buck confirmed. “And nope.”

“Any signs of foul play?” Nathan asked.

“Don’t know yet. The coroner hasn’t arrived yet so they can’t touch anything.”

Chris didn’t need the coroner or the traffic investigators. His gut instincts had never failed him before and right now they were screaming.

Lannen had been silenced and it would only be a matter of time until it was Vin and Ezra’s turn. He stormed to the phone under the wide eyes of his remaining team. “I’m calling Travis,” he snapped. “We leave in ten minutes.”

“Uh – where to?” JD stammered.

“East!” Chris barked.

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Vin was still visibly tense when they touched down hours later. He'd spent the last minutes looking out the window and trying to engage his brain by figuring out where they were. He wished he'd taken the whole Valium - what he'd taken had worn off much too soon.

“We're in the New York area,” Ezra's low voice informed him.

“Great. Should be easy to narrow down a target here, huh?” Vin replied through gritted teeth. “What time is it?” he managed to croak as the jet finally touched down and taxied to an area at the end of a line of hangers.

Ezra flicked his wrist and consulted his Tag Heuer. “It is currently 3:15 , East coast time,” he said. “We will be disembarking in a matter of minutes, I am sure.”

Vin nodded shortly and forced his fingers to uncurl from the armrest.

The small jet finally came to a stop and Vin was instantly on his feet, waiting at the hatch with his case as the stairway connected with the fuselage. Ezra came up behind him in a more relaxed manner. Vin ignored his irritation at his partner's cool and tapped his foot impatiently. “Come on, damn it,” he whispered.

“Easy, Mr. Nicklin,” Ezra murmured close to his ear. “Take a deep breath.”

Biting back a sharp retort, Vin instead clenched his teeth and followed Ezra's suggestion. It helped him to hang on long just enough for the pilot to open the hatch all the way before he bolted down the steps, stopping at the bottom to wait for the other three passengers. By the time the last person reached the tarmac a white sedan with dark windows pulled up and a uniformed driver exited. He approached them and reached for Ezra's computer case. “I'll keep this one, my good man,” he said, holding the case firmly against his side.

Vin also refused to hand over the gun case. “I got it,” he snapped.

The driver bowed shortly then greeted Mr. Wu, taking his small case and stowing it the trunk of the car. Wu then moved to the car and Ezra followed. Vin paused a few seconds to examine the surrounding city before taking a deep breath and joining the pair.

Inside, the vehicle was configured as a small limo with facing bench seats. Vin settled in the rearmost seat, facing forward, his rifle case taking up the rest of the seat. Wu settled behind the driver with Ezra beside him. The car jumped away from the jet.

“You will accept my need to get things done quickly,” Mr. Wu started.

“Yes, we understand, Mr. Wu,” Ezra started. “But you must also understand that Mr. Nicklin must have a composed frame of mind to complete his contract. With that said, we must object to our ignorance of the finer details of this . . . job. We must insist on more information before we will proceed.”

Wu's smile was hard. “You are being paid very well,” he said to Vin, ignoring Ezra altogether. “I have every detail set. All you need do is what you are told, when you are told.”

Vin immediately stiffened and glared at their contractor. “Don't mean I have to like it.” Vin's tone was flat as he leaned forward with his index finger extended to poke the irritating man in the chest. Unexpectedly, Ezra's hand shot out and grabbed Vin's wrist, stopping the motion. Vin jerked his arm away and turned to growl at his partner but the sight of a large blade against Ezra's neck stopped him cold. The front passenger had moved with astonishing speed and silence.

Sitting stiffly upright and perfectly still, Ezra said, “I fear, Mr. Nicklin, that it may be prudent to acquiesce to the gentleman's request.”

Vin didn't have to know the words to get the intent. With a dark look, he dropped his hands to the top of the rifle case and faced Wu with narrowed eyes. "Then what's next, old man?" he growled.

Wu checked his watch. "In a few minutes we will be arriving at the location of your first event."

"First event?" Vin repeated.

"Mr. Wu, I simply must object once again," Ezra calmly interrupted. Vin glanced aside to see that the knife had been withdrawn, leaving a fine, red line on Ezra's skin in its place. Ezra's fingers lightly touched the spot as he spoke; Vin admired the fact that his voice reflected no fear. "The contract was for one job. We must insist on further negotiations for multiple jobs."

"This is one job, that is, one target. The job does, however, have many steps. This is the first. If you insist on fighting me at every step, Mr. St. James, I will remove you from the entire deal."

Vin saw Ezra's brow rise with the threat. His partner quickly glanced over his shoulder where the knife disappeared and then turned his eyes to Vin. Pressing his lips into a hard line, Vin shrugged. Ezra nodded. "Very well, Mr. Wu, I see your point. Rather than a full renegotiation, may I respectfully request partial reimbursement at each step? Consider it incentive to continue to the next step."

Wu was motionless for a handful of seconds, his eyes unreadable behind shaded glasses. Then a small smile revealed impossibly white teeth where Vin has expected to see fangs.

"I do like that idea, Mr. St. James. Incentive. It is always good to have incentive." Wu nodded in apparent agreement. "With that in mind, when Mr. Nicklin successfully completes this first step, your incentive will be that I will not kill you immediately afterward. How will that be?" The smile did not falter and when Vin didn't see fangs immediately, he looked closer to see if they would emerge from his gums like a snake.

"Ah, well," Ezra said brightly. "Yes. I can certainly see that as an incentive, but do you not agree that there must be a modicum of trust between us for this to work? You are a reasonable man and can fully understand that as businessmen, we have no reason to remain in this situation if so threatened. We are professionals, sir, and demand to be treated as such."

Vin was impressed by the way Standish kept standing up to this man. Vin had no problem with ripping the man's throat out at the moment but they were supposed to be professionals. And Ezra's accessing their account via his computer at each step would be an excellent way for JD to keep track of where they were.

After a heavy silence, Wu laughed outright. "You will not be cowed, gentlemen. I admire that trait. I think we may be able to work out an amicable solution. Would moving one million to the holding account after each step suffice?"

Ezra looked thoughtful, and then respectfully bowed his head. "Only if there are at least three more steps, Mr. Wu. Five million minimum?"

"Of course."

"Then I believe we have a contract, sir."

"I am pleased that we have finally come to an amicable agreement. We will be at the first point in approximately forty-five minutes. May I offer you refreshment?"

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Martin leaned back in his chair and reached skyward to stretch out the kink in his shoulders. Unbidden, a long, mournful groan escaped his lips.

“Hey, think either Tom or Jerry there do backrubs?” Danny’s lilting voice was almost too cheery to bear.

Martin looked backward over his shoulder and tried to glare at him, but Danny’s quirky smile and barely under control hair were too much. Martin broke into a grin, which was followed by a short laugh. Tiredly, he spun his chair around and glanced at Jack’s empty office. Interlocking his fingers behind his head, Fitzgerald straightened his legs into the bullpen.

“How many times do I have to tell you that it’s Frick and Frack? Not Tom and Jerry or Martin and Lewis, or Lewis and Clark, Frank and Stein, or . . .” he held out a hand, prepared to count off on his fingers the collection of names his current marshal guards had garnered.

Danny waved off the correction and hitched a hip on the conference table. “Whatever their names, they’re rather impersonal, don’t you think? At least the other pair . . .”

“Had a sense of humor’, yeah, yeah. I’ve already heard it. God, I can’t wait for this trial to get going.” Martin rubbed his eyes. “Have we gotten anywhere on these financials? What’s Viv got on the cell phone records?”

“Nada, my brother. Nada.” Danny looked at his watch. “Good news? We can go home in just under an hour. Bad news? You got Butch and Sundance as houseguests for the weekend.”

“Do not. They go home at night. I have Frasier and Beatty at night. And they get take out for me.”

“Ah! Valet service from the U.S. Marshal’s Office! I love where my taxpayer money goes.”

Just then Samantha walked in with a handful of files. “I say party at Marty’s tonight. He has built in bouncers!”

Danny nodded excitedly. “Yeah! We can watch Knicks, blast the stereo, Jello shooters . . .”

“Whoa, back up!” Martin laughed. “Knicks, fine, food fine, nix on the stereo blasting – Mrs. Arbuckle two doors down in a pain in the neck.”

“Jello shooters?” Danny said hopefully.

“I can’t cook.”

They turned to Samantha. “Hey!” she protested, straightening as she planted her free hand on her hip. “Just because I’m a woman doesn’t mean I cook!”

Danny leaned in closely to Martin’s ear but spoke loud enough for her to hear. “Yeah, that’s true. She can’t cook.”

Samantha smacked him on the shoulder. “I didn’t say that either!”

“Okay, gang, let’s dig in, here.” Vivian appeared and dropped a box of files on the conference table to a chorus of groans. She glanced at the wall clock. “Look, it’s 4:00 . Let’s just get these separated into logical piles and call it a day.”

“Okay. You in for the party at Marty’s?” Danny asked brightly as they divvied up the paperwork.

Viv snorted. “Nope, sorry. Family plans tonight. Let’s focus, kids, so we can get out of here.”

-----

Wu’s car swung into a garage entrance and immediately spiraled downward. The ceiling of the parking structure was low and Vin couldn’t help but duck his head and they plunged into darkness. He caught Ezra looking at him with concern so he sent his partner a weak smile. The closeness of the city was stifling enough, but this garage was downright claustrophobic. Vin swallowed and forced himself sit up straighter.

The car pulled into a spot next to a bank of elevators. Vin stepped out of the car and immediately noticed the unclean mustiness of the air. He felt his shoulders roll forward and his grip on the rifle case became clammy.

“Mr. Nicklin,” Ezra’s voice said softly near his ear. “Are you all right?”

“M’fine,” Vin mumbled, straightening at the sight of the bulky bodyguard taking a stance next to Wu. The agent wasn’t about to show any weakness in front of the goon. Vin glowered at the guard with flinty eyes as he grumbled, “Let’s get this over with.”

The goon called the elevator. As they waited, Vin noticed that Wu and his guard slipped on gloves. When the car arrived the goon stepped in, using a hand motion to keep the others outside. Holding the door open with one hand, he reached up with the other.

“To shield us from prying eyes,” Wu explained quietly. “And refrain from conversation until my associate indicates that it is clear.”

Vin realized the goon was disabling the camera. After a moment, the mammoth man silently motioned them inside and inserted a key to send the car upward and directly to the desired floor.

‘Great,’ Vin thought sourly. ‘One cage to another.’ Ezra’s firm hand on his back was a welcome reassurance.

The ride up seemed exceptionally long. Vin kept his mind busy wondering why he didn’t think to bring his gloves and focusing on the flashing floor numbers – anything to keep from thinking about how deep underground the car was parked. Did Wu or his associates own the building? How could he and Ezra find out the address?

Vin’s musings kept him busy until the doors were locked open. The goon exited, indicating the others to stay until he signaled. Vin exhaled, and the trapped feeling slowly ebbed as he waited. Finally, the guard waved then forward and Vin fell in behind Wu. Ezra and the driver brought up the rear. They followed the large man down a long hall and made a right turn before stopping in front of the very last door. The end of the hallway held a large window that would have had a long view if it wasn’t blocked by several other building. As the guard unlocked the door, Vin wondered what the point of the window was, unless looking at another building was plus to New Yorkers.

They entered an office that was clearly unoccupied and completely empty. The guard paused for a moment with his head cocked to one side and then indicated with a nod that they could speak. The mute giant then moved to a large window that overlooked a busy street and waited. Vin frowned at the telescope set up at the window and then noticed the scratches in the window itself that formed a large rectangle.

Vin then looked to Ezra, who raised a brow as he examined the stark office space. “I have the name of an excellent interior decorator,” he said dryly.

Amazingly, Wu chuckled. “The view is all that is needed,” he said. “Mr. Nicklin, please prepare your weapon.”

Surprised, Vin glanced at Ezra. His partner’s face was, as usual, unreadable, so Vin moved forward and set the rifle case on the floor. The close- to- the- vest way Wu handled things was worrisome; Vin was thinking that the man had bottomless violence in his soul that had yet to show itself and hoped that neither of them would be on the receiving end of it. He was beginning to wonder at the wisdom of taking on this assignment – and also wondered if it was a little too late to think along those lines.

“Appreciating a view is not why we are here, is it?” Ezra asked warily. “If this is the crux of the job must insist on . . .”

“No, Mr. St. James, this is not the intended job. This is merely a prelude. I want Mr. Nicklin to convince me of his talent.”

Vin didn't comment as he was already well into the routine of assembling his weapon. His fingers flew over the motions, knowing what to do by feel alone. The actions also allowed his mind to fall into the collected state he needed for the shot. The room was quiet except for the metallic clicks of the rifle parts slipping together, an elixir to Vin's scattered mind.

Vin finished with the rifle and rose, unobtrusively thumbing on the GPS. Ezra's use of the computer at the airfield put them near the city but the GPS reading would – hopefully - pinpoint their current location. He knew it would be quite awhile before the team reached them and their electronic breadcrumb trail should eventually bring them all together again. That was the way it worked on paper, anyway. The actual execution still needed to prove itself.

Wu walked Vin to the telescope and indicated that the sharpshooter should set up on the floor next to it. Vin snapped opened his tripod and set it on the floor, steadying it with two small sandbags. He carefully set the rifle atop the tripod and lay next to it.

"I need to know what I'm aimin' at," he said, his words tight with focused tension. This whole thing felt so wrong. "And you don't expect me to shoot through the glass, do you?"

A nod from Wu brought the goon close to the window. It was then that the etching on the window made sense; with a pair of hand suction cups retrieved from a corner the guard carefully worked to lift a large piece of the window free. The glass had been previously cut. The new opening infused the noise and smell of the city into the cool room.

Wu pulled out a cell phone and dialed a number. He spoke one short, quiet word and then stepped forward and looked through the telescope as the guard set the glass piece aside. Focusing the telescope, Wu said, "Your spotting scope, Mr. Nicklin. Set it up next to you." Vin retrieved the small spotting scope and tripod from the rifle case and set it up. Finally, Wu seemed to settle on what he wanted and snapped the phone shut after a short, sharp word. Then, he stepped aside and motioned for the guard to look through the telescope. "My associate will adjust your spotting scope on your target."

After studying something through the telescope the guard dropped down to his belly and focused the spotting scope, taking less than a minute to find what he wanted. Then he locked the scope in place and rolled aside. "Mr. Nicklin." It was the first time he'd heard the guard's voice.

With a glance at Ezra's unreadable eyes Vin rolled aside and set his eye on the scope. It was aimed through an office window one floor below and across the street, several windows to Vin's right. The window had vertical blinds that were conveniently open and framed a conference table where four people sat, two with their backs to them and two across the table and facing Vin. There were desks scattered around the periphery, mostly unoccupied; it was late on a Friday afternoon, after all. It wasn't a place Vin felt comfortable shooting into.

"You want me to shoot into an office? That's a little risky, don't ya think?"

"Not if you shoot as well as I think you do. I do not want you to kill anyone. I want a near miss."

Vin scowled.

"So Mr. Nicklin is here to scare someone," Ezra concluded.

"Today, yes. A warning only. The man I want you to scare has his back to the window and is sitting to the left of the blonde woman."

Angle and wind compensation calculations were already spinning in Vin's head. "Though the glass? How thick is it?"

"Double panes of one-half inch glazed glass with argon gas center," the goon said instantly.

Vin moved over to his weapon and brought the rifle stock to his shoulder, his mind becoming focused and centered. Knowing it wasn't a kill shot took away any adverse pressure – still, he had to keep in mind the track of a bullet which could easily penetrate an interior wall. He focused on the

table and assumed it was solid wood – one good target. The noise and sourness of the city faded away with his concentration as he studied the back of the man and his position in the scope. It would be easy to put the bullet in the table, but there was a Hispanic man and a black woman on the other side and too close to the bullet's trajectory for Vin's comfort. If they would just shift one way or the other . . .

As if hearing Vin's thoughts, the two people rose and walked in opposite directions, out of his sight line. With that worry out of the picture, Vin's entire self was now centered though his scope. His finger rested tenderly on the cold trigger, ready to respond in a fraction of a second. He shut out all external noise until all he heard was his own breathing and all he saw was the small circle of the office his scope showed him. Suddenly, the target figure rose, walked around the end of the table and settled in a desk chair, his back still toward Vin. The blonde woman remained at the conference table stacking files and well aside from the bullet path.

The computer monitor on the man's desk caught Vin's eye and he adjusted his rifle. The desk was backed by a half wall and empty space behind. Glass walls separated the office space from the hall so Vin could see that the area behind the desk was clear. Perfect – and the monitor would create quite a show when he blew it to bits. Vin waited for the moment he had in mind and it came with his third breath as the targeted man in Vin's round-framed world turned his chair sideways and reached for something on the floor.

Vin smoothly squeezed the trigger.

## Chapter Six

"I hear a beer calling my name," Martin said as he triumphantly topped the stack of files before him.

"Will Siegfried and Roy let you off leash?" Danny teased. "Aren't they off duty in an hour or so?"

Martin chuffed and shook his head. "They'll switch out where ever I am. They do have phones, Danny and remarkably, do know how to use them."

"I see that," Danny nodded, impressed, just as Frick put his cell phone away after a brief and quiet conversation.

Viv rolled her eyes and flipped through the last file in her hand. She slapped the file shut and shoved it to the center of the table.

"Well, I'm glad we don't have to wait for their tag team because I'm ready to blow this pop stand." Danny followed Viv's lead and shoved his files aside, too. "They have no qualms about trading out at the bar, then?"

Samantha laughed lightly. "I hope not because an apple martini is sounding awfully good right now and I do not want to drink alone."

"What am I, chopped liver?" Danny complained from his desk.

"I'd say closely related," Viv deadpanned. "Well, you all have fun. I got plans at home. I'll see you all in the morning." She walked to her desk and rolled her stiff neck.

Danny mirrored Viv's movement in the opposite direction.

Martin rose from the conference table and circled around it to his desk where he began to log out for the night.

"Still don't see why people don't have the decency to be found by the weekend," Samantha mumbled as she started stacking the numerous files on the table before her.

Martin turned and reached for his briefcase on the floor. Suddenly, his computer monitor exploded with a shattering bang and dazzling flash. Someone screamed as glass rained down; electronic smoke assaulted his nose and something popped near his head. Martin realized he'd fallen to the floor, his hands automatically covering his head. A male voice barked orders and he heard the rhythmic sound of running feet as he started to rise. Almost immediately a black form shoved him back to the floor with a grunt.

"Stay down!" A deep voice demanded.

Martin fought to rise and felt for his gun. "Samantha!" he yelled, pushing off the restraining hands. He managed to get to his knees and pull his gun free when he was bodily hoisted to his feet and propelled out of the room into Jack's office by what felt like a tidal wave of human flesh. Frick and Frack tried to shove him under Jack's desk but Martin resisted, taking a crouched stance with his gun raised.

"Where's Danny? Sam!" he rasped, shrugging off the meaty hands trying to force him to the floor.

Vivian charged in the small room, gun drawn, followed quickly by Danny and Samantha. The office door slammed shut with a solid thud and all Martin heard for a few seconds was heavy breathing.

“Martin, are you okay? Someone shot at you!” Samantha spun around and put her hands on his shoulders, dropping down and forcing Martin to follow her to the floor and below window level. She knelt in front of him while Frick and Frack covered the door.

“Shot?” he questioned, eyes locked on the door.

“There’s a hole in the window, Martin. High powered rifle from across the street,” Danny panted from the far side of Frick. “The only casualty is your computer.” Danny holstered his weapon and loosened his tie. “No great loss, really.”

Shocked, “Oh,” was all Martin could think to say as he sat back on his heels and put his gun away.

Vivian and Samantha crawled to Jack’s couch and leaned back against it, staying below window level. Vivian holstered her gun and was immediately on the phone.

“Building’s locked down. We’re here for awhile.” Danny scooted over beside Martin and leaned back against Jack’s desk. Frick and Frack made an impenetrable obstacle between them and the office door. One of them was speaking rapidly into a cell phone. “Hope you had no plans for the weekend, buddy,” Danny sighed. “‘cause I think you’re gonna get grounded.”

“Shit!” Martin spat. “Jack’s going to be pissed.”

Viv shook her head and rolled her eyes as she spoke lowly on the phone. Samantha scowled, obviously thinking hard. Danny reached over and flicked a piece of glass from Martin’s shoulder, grinning sickly.

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Vin’s finger had barely left the trigger when Wu’s eye was back on the telescope. Silently, Vin sat up and began to disassemble this rifle, thumbing the GPS off as he did so.

“Excellent shot, Mr. Nicklin,” Wu complimented, smiling broadly. “Exactly what was needed.” He stepped back and the guard began to expertly pack the telescope. “You are all I expected you would be.”

“We aim to please,” Ezra said coldly. “I assume we are booking a hasty retreat?”

“You have a way with words, Mr. St. James. Shall we?”

The rifle and telescope were ready to go within moments of each other. Ezra moved to Vin’s side, allowing the guard and Wu to take the lead. Vin knew Ezra well enough to read through the deceptively cool expression he wore. Ezra’s mind was working furiously as he gave the room a final glance. Hurrying to the elevator Vin’s partner leaned in and whispered, “Did you leave any prints behind?”

Vin shook his head, but had no doubt that Wu could easily set them up to take the fall for the hit if the man wanted. Obviously, Ezra had the same thought.

Right now, Denver seemed as far away as the moon. At least Vin’s whirling thoughts kept him occupied during the trip to the car. By the time the sedan hit the street, emergency vehicle sirens bounced off the buildings in a deafening chorus.

Ezra immediately pulled the computer into his lap and fired it up. He tapped on a few keys and patiently waited, then turned the device toward their host. “Mr. Wu,” Ezra said with an eerie calm. Wu, wearing an expression of satisfaction quickly entered an account number, sending another million to the holding account. Ezra waited for acknowledgement of the transfer and then logged

into the holding account. He gave a short nod of approval. "I understand your personal need to keep our schedule under wraps but may I inquire, sir, on how long we are to be in your fair city?"

"Until I am finished with you."

"Of course. We will require accommodations. I know of an acceptable five-star hotel uptown where you may drop us . . ."

"Your housing is already arranged, Mr. St. James. You will not be disappointed."

"May I inquire . . ."

"No." Wu turned to look out the window, making his wishes clear.

Ezra gave Vin a glance. Vin shrugged and also turned his attention to the outside, listening as Ezra went through the motions of stowing the computer. Vin rested his hand on the rifle case and wondered how this was going to end, whatever 'this' was.

"This" was beginning to feel less like an assassination and more like a set up.

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Ever since their abrupt departure, JD's eyes were glued to his laptop waiting for any signal from Vin or Ezra. In that time the team had dispersed and regrouped at the airport with enough travel supplies for at least a day.

The wait for a signal was long and nerve-wracking, and JD's stomach was beginning to feel sour from nerves when the GPS ping grabbed his attention. The device was only active for a few minutes, but it was enough to get a longitude and latitude and thus an exact location.

"New York City !" JD announced in the security offices of the airport. Josiah began making traveling arrangements immediately while the rest of the team got online to try and figure out what the target was . . . or would be. None of them could imagine Vin actually carrying out an assassination, but they kept an ear tuned to the news anyway.

Within a few minutes Ezra logged in and the cell tower trail confirmed that they were on the move again. The team absorbed a lot of news between the waiting area and boarding gate, none of it about a recent, news-worthy killing.

When they finally arrived in New York it was past midnight . They checked in to a hotel near the GPS coordinates and took turns monitoring JD's phone and computer for the night. Another ping by the GPS placed their wayward team members just outside the city, near enough to their hotel to keep Chris from heading to the location immediately. Instead, JD managed to get an address on the hit that they would check out after getting some rest and a car.

After an early breakfast, they headed to the nearest Federal building to secure a conference room for research and arrange for an unmarked car. During the taxi ride to the offices JD and Nathan gawked at the sights with Josiah jammed in between the two in the cab's rear seat. Chris rolled his eyes at Josiah's occasional commentary that just encouraged the two enthralled team members. Buck, sitting up front with Chris grinned at his friend's annoyance both with the tight taxi accommodations and the verbal observations.

"Ya gotta admit, Chris, there's a lot to see," he commented as his eyes watched sidewalks. Even on a Saturday morning there was enough feminine eye candy to keep even Buck occupied.

Chris snorted. "Too much, I'd say. Let's not lose focus, kids!" he said a little louder, glaring in the rear view mirror.

"Aw, Chris, we can't do much until we hear from Ezra again, anyway. Just some more research . . ."

“A lot more research,” Nathan had to admit, finally getting a grip on the work ahead. “Do you realize how many conventions alone there are? We could be searching for days and still not find anything.”

“I know, but we have to be ready and that means research.”

“Spoilsport,” JD said almost too quietly to hear.

Buck obviously heard as a smile brightened his face. He chuckled and turned to the annoyed team leader. “Kid’s soundin’ more ‘n more like Junior every day, don’t ya think?” he chortled.

Chris crossed his arms over his chest and tried to see the humor but there was an underlying feeling of dread that would not be quieted. “I wish it were Vin talkin’, Buck. I just have a bad feeling about all this.”

“We’ll keep ‘em both safe, stud. Don’t you worry.”

Chris could only nod.

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Mr. Wu was correct. The accommodations were more than acceptable.

Immediately after Vin’s impressive demonstration the two agents had been taken directly to a plush apartment building on the outskirts of Central Park . There were at least four bedrooms along with a lavish living room, den and media room. Ezra had settled in quickly and spent the first few hours pestering their bulky guard for additional luxuries like top shelf scotch and wine. Vin had to give him some points for his tactics – by the amount of refreshments they were allowed they could estimate how long they were to be in this location.

On their arrival, Vin had prowled around the extravagantly decorated room feeling terribly out of place. He’d picked this room on their arrival because it had the largest window. The floor to ceiling glass made the room feel less confining due to the startlingly beautiful view of Central Park . Still, he still felt closed in. In an effort to keep his mind occupied, Vin immediately fell to cleaning his rifle, taking the opportunity to thumb on the GPS for a few minutes. It had been well into the early hours of morning before he’d finally fallen asleep.

This morning, the smell of the cleaning oil still hung faintly in the air. It comforted Vin. The wrinkling of Ezra’s nose when he’d entered the room told Vin that his partner immediately knew what he’d been doing instead of sleeping.

“It looks to me that we will more than likely be spending the weekend,” Ezra mused as he settled comfortably into the club chair at the end of Vin’s bed. “Our requested items will be arriving poste - haste, I am told.” Vin was surprised Ezra was up so early. Then again, by the subtle shadows hanging under normally sharp hazel eyes, Vin surmised that his partner had slept about as much as he had.

“I’m good with what’s here,” Vin said quietly. He tugged briefly at the long sleeved t-shirt he wore. They had found neatly folded stacks of clothing waiting for them on the dining room table when they’d arrived the prior evening. There were two changes of clothes and basic grooming necessities. Vin had to admit, Wu was well prepared.

Vin dropped down on a small couch across from his partner. “So, have you found out what we’re waitin’ for?”

“Mr. Wu is arranging some sort of meeting. We are to gather in the den in a half hour. He has provided a more than suitable cook. I recommend the crepes.”

“Crepes?”

Ezra expelled a long suffering breath. “Very thin pancakes.”

“Yeah? Syrup, too?”

Ezra's eyes sparkled with humor. "You are most entertaining, if not anything else, Mr. Nicklin," he sighed as he stood. "Come and enjoy the repast. I get the feeling that we will be ensconced here for the duration, so we may as well enjoy the benefits."

Vin moved to his side as they headed to the door. "If ya mean we ain't goin' anywhere for awhile, food ain't gonna help much."

"But it won't hurt, either. We can't have you pining away to nothing, now can we?"

The breakfast was good and Vin ate his fill. The coffee, however, was not as strong as he liked, but he decided he could live with it. Wu's guard had stayed in the apartment with them but Wu had not. Vin had just finished eating when their contractor arrived with another man.

The newest addition was a small Asian man introduced as Mr. Ping. Ping carried tattered valise and put it in the fourth bedroom at the guard's direction. '*Another roommate?*' Vin wondered. It wasn't long before he learned the small man's job.

The four of them – Wu, Ping, Vin and Ezra – gathered in the den at the appointed time. Ping immediately sat at the desk and addressed the computer as Wu let them in on the next step of the job.

"Mr. Ping is a linguist. His job is to teach you how to speak, Mr. Nicklin."

The agents traded surprised looks.

"I speak jus' fine," Vin growled as he turned back to their host.

Ezra was immediately on his feet. "This is totally unexpected and not part of our agreement," he smoothly protested. "This kind of training takes time and I must insist on some type of compensation. Time is money, after all. Perhaps if you enlighten us as to the expected duration of this training we can calculate an appropriate imbursement into the holding account."

Wu hooked his gaze on Ezra. The agent stood fast, holding the pointed look for several long second. Vin noticed that Mr. Ping had hunched over and seemed to be trying to hide behind the computer screen. Wu's eyes were unreadable and Vin had the distinct feeling that Ezra had met his match in that department.

"Fifty thousand a day," Wu finally offered.

"One hundred thousand. Each. Every day that we are here we lose business at home."

Vin dropped his head to hide his smile. '*Go get 'em Ez!*' he thought, wisely keeping his mouth shut.

"Think of it as expenses," Ezra added. "In advance."

"As earned," Wu countered, "and deposited at day's end. And if Mr. Nicklin fails this task it returns to me."

"Accepted," Ezra agreed.

With an agreement made, Mr. Ping seemed to relax and then stood to address Vin. He spoke in perfect, unaccented English and indicated his student should sit beside the desk. As Vin moved, Wu left the room. Ezra settled into a nearby wing chair.

"This is the voice you will be learning," Mr. Ping said. He clicked a button on the keyboard and a man's voice filled the air.

The recording was a collection of one - sided conversations. Vin suspected the subject did not know he was being recorded as the content jumped from subject to subject, pieced together in random sections. The voices of whomever this unknown man was talking to at the time were cut from numerous sessions. There was nothing to indicate anything about who the voice belonged to.

"So I'm supposed to sound like this guy?" Vin clarified.

There was a raspy element to the voice that was remarkably similar to his and the agent figured that was one reason why he was selected for this job. He glanced at Ezra and was acknowledged with a shrug and slight frown. His partner was just as confused by this latest turn of events.

*'Sounds like this guy's phone's tapped,'* Vin thought. *'Maybe his house, too. Wonder who he is ...'*

"Now, pay attention to the inflection of his words and do exactly what I tell you to do with your tongue," Mr. Ping started without preamble.

Vin was forced to turn his attention to the small man.

"I am partnered with Eliza Doolittle," Ezra mumbled in the background.

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Saturday morning found Martin awakening in a strange bed. As he opened his eyes, he immediately recalled where he was and registered the fact that he was still tired.

After Frick and Frack had been replaced by his regular after-hours guards, Frazier and Beatty, he'd been hustled to this federal safe house sometime around midnight without being able to retrieve anything from his apartment

"Can't go anywhere near there," Frazier told him. "It's probably being watched. Anyone going there might pick up a tail. You'll be supplied with what you need for the weekend."

After getting to the safe house, he was unable to fall asleep. Since he had none of his own things, Martin ended up sleeping in his boxers with his gun under the pillow. Between the poor mattress and the previous evening's confinement in Jack's office his muscles were stiff and sore resulting in a poor night's rest.

He sighed. *'Well, I'll have plenty of time to rest up since I'm stuck here until Monday,'* he reasoned.

Martin tucked one hand under his head and absently rubbed his bare chest with the other as he stared at the ceiling. His thoughts wandered back to the time trapped in Jack's office. Viv had retrieved Chinese takeout before leaving for home, Danny left some time after nine o'clock and Samantha had stayed until his transfer to the safe house was put into motion.

He and Samantha had talked and gone as far as holding hands, the imposing figures of the marshals making any intimate conversation impossible. Still, it had been comforting and went a long way to sooth his anxiousness. An obviously miffed and ruffled Jack was finally admitted to his own office around eight and kept track of the ongoing arrangements and investigation since Martin wasn't permitted to set one foot outside the small office.

"The shot came from across the street," Jack had told them, pointing in the general direction. "NYPD found some evidence in an empty office. The sniper cut a hole in the window glass. Forensics recovered the bullet – it was embedded in the floor behind your desk. No surprise it's from a high-powered rifle; that's about it, though. Whoever it was didn't leave much behind. We've taken over the investigation."

Martin turned the information over in his mind as he lay on the lumpy safe house bed and replayed his actions just before the shot. If he hadn't bent down to get his briefcase . . . he shuddered at the thought and wondered how his parents had taken the news.

Moving on to better thoughts, Martin smiled, again recalling his time with Samantha in Jack's office and felt a stirring below his hips. He groaned and threw an arm across his eyes, but it was too late. Memories of her smell and soft skin and light touch aroused his groin to full, unbidden attention. Unfortunately, the soft crackle of a police radio behind the closed bedroom door reminded him of his lack of privacy. Unable to stop the images of Samantha now running through his head, Martin finally gave up fighting his obvious urge and threw back the sheets. The shower was a sorry replacement for the object of his lust but it was all he had at the moment. And it was all he would have until this was over.

Martin Fitzgerald's mood turned sour as he stalked to the small bathroom. It was going to be a long weekend. Again.

After a stress-relieving but none too relaxing shower, Martin pulled on his suit pants from the day before and shrugged on the wrinkled shirt, leaving it unbuttoned, then left the small bedroom for the living room. The safe house was tucked away in a quiet neighborhood far away from the city itself. The yard area around the small building was free of any shrubs and securely fenced. It reminded him of a prison yard, but looked like any other house in the neighborhood with a small front porch and a fireplace. The agents, however, stood out like sore thumbs with their nearly identical polo shirts and tell-tale radio wires trailing from their ears; it was a good thing they were inside the house, at least. He counted three agents watching all sides of the house.

One agent acknowledged him with a nod as he entered the living room. "Do I get any clothes?" Martin asked the agent.

"Your regular day time guard dogs left a little while ago to do just that. They can't go to your apartment so they're buying a few things, including a suit for court on Monday."

Martin moaned and rubbed his eyes. He could only imagine the kind of suit those two would choose – black jacket, white shirt and boring tie. "Can I call them? They need my size, don't they?"

"Sorry, no calls. I can page them, though, and they'll return the call on a land line. How's that?"

"Fine," Martin mumbled.

"And they already know your sizes. They took it from the suit you had on yesterday." The agent paused what he was doing and gave Martin's suit pants an extended examination. "I can bet they probably won't match your normal . . . um . . . style . . ."

Martin looked down at the rumpled vestige of what had been one of his favorite shirts, trying to smooth it with his hands. "I can tell them a place where I have an account that knows my style." Fitzgerald noticed the skeptical raised brow of the agent as he paged Frick and/or Frack and felt a slight rage at his current position. Damn Liang. "There'd better be some coffee left," Martin snarled, grudgingly accepting his fate.

Fortunately, the house had lots of books. It only made sense since the reason for a safe house was to stay inside. Martin skimmed the titles of the worn paperbacks and chose a few he hadn't read yet and settled in to read. It wasn't long before he became restless; he'd had enough inactivity while on light duty. He assembled lunch, taking the time to make enough for his bodyguards, too. There wasn't anything else to do except flop in the couch in the dark living room and scan the television channels. He settled on a basketball game between two teams he really didn't care about.

It was late afternoon before Frick and Frack returned. Martin clicked off the television toyed with the thought of actually learning their names. Honestly, he was a little embarrassed to ask their names straight out since they'd been assigned to him for days now so Martin decided to just pay attention to see if he could pick out their names through conversation. At least it was something to do.

The two marshals hauled in a garment bag, a bag of clothing and two bags of groceries. Martin took the garment bag and unzipped it, nodding his head in approval. The marshals obviously went to the store he'd suggested. "You spoke to Anton, I see," he commented, fingering the tie.

"Yeah, we did as you said," Frack replied noncommittally. "The guy seemed real happy to do it, too."

Martin laughed shortly as he zipped up the bag. "Yeah, he definitely isn't shy about his suggestions."

Frick started to unpack the food and staples. “I didn’t think those patterns went together,” he said with a frown. Then, a little more quietly, “That tie can stop traffic.”

“The price of style is being noticed, right?” Martin joked, his mood lightened with the new suit.

Frack snorted a laugh. Martin took the suit and other clothing and headed to the back room, anxious to change. Once dressed in clean jeans and a comfortable shirt, he felt much better. The prospect of two full nights and another day in ‘lock up’ immediately squashed any spark of enthusiasm so he found the book he’d started and dropped unceremoniously onto the worn living room couch to pass time.

## Chapter Seven

The New York ATF had given them a small resource office packed with maps, phone books and other reference material along with two additional computer terminals. Nathan found the reverse directory and flipped through the pages until he found the address of the location on the last GPS ping.

“Condominiums, it looks like. Private residences. There’s about . . .” he ran his finger down the page. “Sixty units in that building. Want me and Josiah to check it out?”

Chris studied the city map, Buck at his shoulder. He found the location of the previous day’s reading and compared it to the latest one which only confirmed their suspicion that the target would probably be somewhere in New York City . He scrubbed his face in frustration – it was an impossible area to cover.

“Josiah can do that. Anyone have anything new to add? Anything interesting in today’s paper, Buck?”

“Regular big city stuff. Couple of bodies found in the river, here,” he pointed to the map on JD’s computer. “Some industrial big-wigs getting together for an international conference starting Monday here,” he moved his finger. “Lots of shootings, mostly in the clubs. And, oh, someone took a pot shot at one of the federal buildings . . . ummm . . .” he referred to the paper for the address. “Here. Hey, isn’t that near Vin’s position last night?”

Chris perked up and Josiah paused in his preparations to leave. The four of them formed a half circle behind JD.

“How many federal buildings are there in New York , anyway?” JD groused as his fingers typed. Soon there were yellow boxes labeling Vin’s positions, along with times and dates, and the address of the victim building.

“Right across the street,” Buck pointed out. “The paper doesn’t say where, exactly, the building was hit or what kind of gun it was. Can’t be a coincidence, though, can it?”

Chris thought a second. “JD, what federal building is that?”

A few key clicks brought up the answer. “FBI.”

Buck snorted. “Now, gee, there’s a few cases we can start with,” he said sarcastically. “That’s gonna take awhile.”

“At least we can put the convention scenes aside,” Nathan added. “We should also look into any FBI affiliated conferences this weekend. That would make sense if the hit is on a weekend.”

“Or an upcoming trial,” Josiah offered.

“Or any number of ongoing cases,” Chris sighed, dragging his hand over his burning eyes. “And with Ezra’s less than stellar background with the FBI we can’t really reveal too much to them. Buck, head over to the building and see who’s there. Find out who was on that floor – since no one was killed, it sounds like Vin was supposed to scare someone or the FBI in general. I’m sure Travis could narrow this down with a phone call but I don’t want to tip our hand yet for Ezra’s sake and I sure as hell don’t want them to know an undercover ATF agent’s shootin’ at ‘em.”

“Josiah, I’d feel better if we staked out that building Vin and Ezra are in. I want us to be close if anything happens. Take the portable tracker with you so you can follow if he leaves the building with the GPS on. One of us will relieve you around six. Keep an eye on who comes and goes. I’ll have JD bring up a list of tenants and send it to your cell. I’ll also see if I can get any court numbers that have recorded trial information and you can call those from the car.”

Buck nodded, gathered his jacket and headed out with Josiah right behind. Chris instructed JD to try and find any hot open cases in the FBI files, stopping short of asking him to hack into their system. Nathan was given the duty of finding a non-secure FBI schedule of events for the weekend. As the agents went to work, Chris read the all too short article in the paper about the incident.

Chris spared a glance at the conference table provided. They’d been working in the city for mere hours and there was already an impressive stack of information collected. He sighed; there was still so much to do and he was unwilling at this point to ask for additional help. He wanted their presence in this town kept quiet – it as something his gut felt was the way to go.

In essence, they were on their own for now and with each passing hour Chris’s uneasiness about their reason for being here grew, making the morning pass much too slowly. Buck arrived back at their temporary office shortly before noon and he sat with Chris to review what he had found.

“I dug up the name of the agent investigating the shooting and he’s been elusive.” Buck sagged back in his chair and drew a hand over his eyes. “Something’s not right about this.”

“Were you able to talk to the lead investigator at all?” JD asked.

“I spoke to one of his team members. I got the feeling he was fishing for information about me so I had to keep it short. The only thing I was able to get was the floor number.”

JD took note of the information and his fingers flew over the laptop keys. “That floor has offices for the Missing Persons Unit, General Investigations and their Homeland Security Liaison.”

“JD, start pulling files from those divisions. I don’t care how you get them. They want to play hide and seek with us, let’s give ‘em a real game. That narrows the cases down quite a bit for us, doesn’t it?” Chris inquired of his remaining team members.

“Every little bit helps, I guess,” Nathan sighed.

“Buck, start with the General Investigations items. Nathan, look at the Homeland Security concerns. The missing persons can wait since we only have two computers to work with right now.” Chris rose wearily. “I’ll get some food for us and Josiah. We’ll break at five for dinner then Josiah and you,” he pointed at Buck, “will get some sleep. I’ll take over the surveillance. Nathan, you and JD will break for sleep after them at around eleven.”

“What about you?” Buck replied. “When are you sleeping, Pard?”

“After Nathan and JD are back and you’ve relieved me on surveillance around 1:00 .” Inside, Chris knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep wondering what he’d allowed Vin and Ezra to get into. “There’s a lot to go through. Let’s get going.”

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Vin awoke with a start and feeling just as tired as when he’d gone to bed. Memory filled in his weary mind as he looked around, tense, and recalled where he was. He also recalled that he was in for another tedious day of learning to sound like the voice in Ping’s computer files.

Ezra’s subtle inquires about this entire exercise were met with stone walls, concluding that even if the cook, Ping and/or the guard assigned to them did know what this was all about, they wouldn’t reveal anything. Vin knew his day had been frustrating and boring, but Ezra’s must have

been worse; the television and radio had been disconnected leaving his sole occupation being his well worn deck of cards and a few books in the den.

“I am positive that our strapping custodian would have been quite a challenge at poker,” Standish had lamented before going to bed. “I’ve only seen the man show two expressions – blank and blanker.”

Vin smiled at the memory. The only thing Ezra had to look forward to was checking to see if Wu had deposited their daily ‘wage’. As soon as he’d logged on Vin felt reassured that Chris was out there, somewhere, monitoring their location. Their brawny guard stood by to ensure that Ezra did not do anything else online and Vin wondered about that. It was obvious that Wu did not want them to know of any repercussions from his shot at the office window.

Stretching first, Vin rolled from the comfortable bed and peeked out the large window. It was just after dawn and the skyline promised a cloudless day. He hoped he wasn’t trapped in this apartment again – his natural restlessness craved the out-of-doors and if he didn’t get out soon things might get unpleasant.

He pulled on the new clothes, ran his fingers through his hair and cracked open the door. Their evening guard had been replaced by the blank-faced guard who was currently holding a garment bag. Motion from Vin’s doorway caused the man to glance Vin’s way, then walk over and hold out the bag.

“A present?” Vin said with faked joy. “And I didn’t get ya nothin’!”

The guard’s expression didn’t flinch. After a moment, Vin took the offering with a cocky wink. “It ain’t even our anniversary.” Again, no reaction as the guard retreated to the kitchen. Vin took the bag in his room and peeked inside. It was a suit paired with the most hideous tie he’d ever seen. He cringed and quickly zipped the bag closed again. “Damn thing c’n blind a man,” he muttered. Then he wondered what this new addition meant to the big picture – the big, unknown picture – and he felt his mood sour once again.

A promise of coffee lured him to the kitchen, the scent making his stomach growl. The cook was already at work and Vin got through a cup of caffeine just as his meal was placed in front of him. Vin set the cup aside and was joined by Mr. Ping within moments.

“Good morning, Mr. Nicklin,” the proper man greeted, shaking out his napkin. “We shall get back to work right after our meal. Mr. Wu will be pleased with your progress.”

With the sound of Ping’s voice Vin felt his mood immediately shift to irritation, any positive feelings evaporating. He’d managed to keep his temper in check the day before mainly due to Ezra’s cool presence. Now, however, he was alone which increased his feeling of being cornered.

“This gonna be over soon?” the agent growled, pleased to see Ping sit back and blink his eyes in surprise. It took a moment for the man to speak.

“Ye . . . yes. I think. I mean, you will have to speak to Mr. Wu, but I know that I am here for at least another day.” Then the little man seemed to recover and he leaned forward to establish his determination. Vin could see the fine sheen of nervous perspiration along the man’s forehead in response to Vin’s glare. “I intend to finish my job, Mr. Nicklin. I do not know, nor want to know, the reason why you are here. That is between you and Mr. Wu. I am simply doing my job.”

Vin considered that response for a moment and revisited the notion he’d had about Wu’s abilities toward violence. Ping was afraid, very afraid – the agent could see it in his eyes and he felt a tingle of coldness down his spine as result. Again, the feeling that he was already and unknowingly in over his head with something very dangerous gnawed at his gut and Vin knew at once he had to start thinking of a way out if - or most likely, when - things went south. And if things did head that direction, he knew it would be a rapid and painful ride.

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Martin didn't bother to rise when he woke up on Sunday. Knowing he was trapped in this dreary house for another day, cut off from the rest of the world made it difficult to whip up any desire to greet the morning. Instead, he sprawled across the unyielding mattress with a dejected sigh and thought about what was happening in the outside world. Specifically, what Samantha was doing and how he'd planned to awaken with her this morning.

He immediately realized the hazards of thinking along those lines as his body awakened. A cold shower wasn't the most enjoyable way to start the day, so Martin shifted his thoughts to another track. He turned his head to the barred, curtained window and noticed how the edges glowed with the morning light. *'Great morning for a run,'* he lamented mentally. *'I wonder how many laps around the living room add up to a mile?'*

It was going to be another long, long day but at least an end was in sight –far, far away, but within a reasonable time frame. Now if he could only get his body to accept the confinement . . .

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By mid-morning Sunday Team Seven's leader was missing Denver .

Even though Ezra's signal the previous night indicated that things had not changed much, Chris was uneasy. The phrase 'the calm before the storm' would not stop running through his mind. He also felt like he was sweeping a beach – the more they looked, the more they found. Their conference table was packed with files and the task seemed impossible with the limited information they had.

One call from Judge Travis to the FBI director could possibly narrow things down, but Chris' little inside voice kept telling him to keep this all under wraps. Something would break soon, he was sure. He felt it. In the meanwhile, it was best that the other agencies didn't know of their investigation.

They had rotated surveillance on Vin and Ezra's location, sleep and research duties successfully so far but Chris wondered how much longer they would have to keep this up. New York City was a far cry from the open feeling of Denver and he was beginning to feel crowded. There was no doubt the others felt the same, and Chris was sure that Vin was probably taking it the worst of all of them. He was glad Ezra was with his best friend, as the agent's collected cool was the only thing that could keep Vin on an even keel.

Chris regarded the stacks of files. The room's printer had been running practically non-stop since their arrival and the computers had been accessed continuously. Narrowing the search to the units on the assaulted floor of the federal building had been a great help and he hoped that tactic would yield results soon. What he really wished for was direct word from his missing agents.

The day crawled by and the night threatened to do the same.

Two o'clock Monday morning had come and gone. Nathan had just replaced Buck on the apartment building surveillance and was grabbing some sleep, so it was Chris, Buck, JD and Josiah circling the collection of files that covered the entire conference table. The room smelled stale from their constant presence. Fast food containers overflowed the trash cans. A coffee maker had been moved into the room and precariously balanced on a fax machine, the glass urn etched by burned coffee and currently being refilled with yet another batch of caffeinated brownness.

"These are the most likely cases from Central Investigations and the Homeland Security Liaison's working cases," JD explained wearily. Of the five of them, the young computer genius had logged the most time in this room, only breaking for sleep. Sooty bags smudged his pale cheeks

topped with bloodshot eyes told of his determination. “I pulled all there was from the Missing Person’s Unit, too. It wasn’t much.” He flicked a wrist at the printer. “That should be the last of it now.”

“Okay, each of you take a bunch and break it down. I want a list of the top three possible assassination targets from each division.” Chris glanced at the wall clock. It was just before three in the morning. “My gut tells me we’re running out of time.”

The four team members shuffled the piles into four fairly even groups and began to read. The next couple of hours were silent except for the sound of rustling paper and gulped coffee.

Chris’ eyes burned and he knew he wasn’t alone. Everyone’s features had taken on that familiar weary look. He wondered what Vin and Ezra were doing, forced to accept the fact that if he didn’t feel anything in his gut then they had to be alright. Chris recognized it as a flimsy grip on sanity. Elbows on the table, he rested his chin in his hands as he rubbed his burning eyes with a sigh. It should never have gotten this far.

A short gasp caught everyone’s attention and three heads snapped up.

“Sweet Jesus,” Josiah breathed. “I’ve figured out the target, Chris.”

Frowning, Larabee pushed to his feet and moved around to Josiah’s side. There, looking at him from a photograph gripped in Josiah’s hand was the face of Vin Tanner – a very cleaned up Vin Tanner. The name label affixed below the chiseled features, however, listed the familiar face as Martin Fitzgerald.

“What the hell,” Chris started, taking the picture from Josiah’s hand. Martin Fitzgerald’s hair was neatly trimmed and he wore a suit and tie with obvious comfort, but the face was clearly Tanner’s. He turned the photo over and read the notes on the back. “He’s an FBI agent? Here in New York?”

“Yup,” Josiah replied. “And he’s due to testify against a Mee Liang Monday – today - at 9:00 . Liang is a suspected Triad chief being tried on murder, extortion and drug trafficking charges. Apparently, they have the accountant of Full Moon Shipping – the cover company for most of the drug smuggling – testifying, but they need Fitzgerald to put Liang physically in the middle of things. Without Fitzgerald, Liang could walk. The accountant sets up the Company but Fitzgerald links Liang with the Company and possibly the Triad.”

The photo was passed around amid the stunned agents.

“They have to be related,” JD surmised. “They don’t just look similar, they look exactly alike.”

Buck blew out a short breath. “That’s . . . spooky. Two of ‘em.”

Chris’s forehead was a roadmap of tension lines. Staring at the photo as he tapped it against his palm in thought, he spoke. “So, Vin is there to kill Fitzgerald? Or Liang? This isn’t a coincidence, Josiah.” He turned and paced a short length, his mind working furiously. “What if Vin was to take Fitzgerald’s place and testify? Is that possible?”

“And say nothing to incriminate Liang,” Josiah concluded, nodding. “An assassination would be messy and defiantly throw suspicion on Liang. If Fitzgerald – Vin – testified as directed by the Triad, either they hang Liang without tying him to the Triad or he exonerates Liang. Either way, the Triad is cleared. We need to know which way is more likely. It may dictate their next move.”

“But then what happens to Vin and Fitzgerald after the trial?” Buck asked. “They couldn’t afford the switch to be discovered. Ever.”

Chris collected the file and held it to his chest. “JD, find out everything you can about that Missing Persons Unit. I want the team leader’s contact information ASAP. I also want the background of the rest of the team.” Chris returned to his seat. “We need dig deeper, find out if there’s anyone we can trust. We have to know if any of Fitzgerald’s team members are involved.

We need to have an idea which way the testimony will go so we can try to predict the fallout before I contact their team leader. And we need to think up some possible scenarios.”

Chris felt his stomach churn and popped a handful of antacids. There wasn't much time to get prepared. Every few minutes he found his eyes wandering to the photo of Fitzgerald. He noticed that he wasn't the only one doing it.

This case was getting more convoluted with each passing day.

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Jack Malone rubbed his temple as he walked from the elevator to his office. It was too early in the day for a tension headache, he told himself. In reality, he knew that when Martin's day in court was over and he was released from protective custody, things would settle down. Right now they were really missing their fellow agent – they'd worked through the weekend without any luck on their current case. Jack was close to closing it as unsolved.

Entering his office he glanced through the glass walls into the bullpen. Danny's back was to Jack, the junior agent gesturing with his hands as he made a point to Samantha who sat directly across the conference table. The window behind her was still boarded up from Friday's action. She was focused on Danny's face and wore a serious expression. From his seat Jack could see the faint shadows under her eyes that told of their long working hours. As if feeling his stare, Samantha's eyes drifted aside and locked with Jack's. She frowned slightly at her boss' examination and then turned back to Danny as she unconsciously shoved a lock of hair behind her ear. Vivian drifted into Jack's range of vision, coffee cup in hand, and stopped next to Danny.

Just as Jack settled behind his desk and finally turned his attention to his desktop, his phone rang. He snatched up the receiver to stop the additional irritation to his headache. “Malone,” he snapped. The words he was heard were completely unexpected. “What?” As the message was repeated, his eyes couldn't help but drift back to the bullpen beyond his office walls. Suddenly, he had a feeling that his day was going to get much more complicated. “Send them up,” Jack finished. He set the phone down with a little more care, holding his gaze on his team as he did so.

Jack developed a sour feeling in his gut. Needing to move, he cleared away the open files and awaited the arrival of an ATF team from Denver . He couldn't imagine why they were here and what this had to do with Fitzgerald's case, but his gut was telling him he wasn't going to like what he was going to hear.

He just had time to pop a couple of Advil and take breath to when an FBI escort lead a group of four men from the elevator. Their arrival caught the attention of everyone in the bullpen and they turned to stare, the usually bustling office growing significantly quieter when the strangers passed. The jean-clad group clearly stood out against the suit and ties of the FBI office. A lean, weather-worn blond separated himself from the group and offered his hand to Malone as Jack stepped from his office.

“Chris Larabee, Denver AFT.” The handshake was firm. “I need some information from you about one of your agents and we don't have a lot of time.”

“Jack Malone. We can use my office.” He stepped back and motioned Larabee to enter. The team leader told the others to stand by in the bullpen. With a final glance at his own team, Jack closed the door behind them.

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Silence befell the bullpen as the teams visually appraised each other. Samantha stood with her arms crossed. Danny cocked his head and grinned as his eyes traveled from Buck's worn boots up to his bushy mustache.

"Well," Danny breathed. "Did you bring your horse?"

JD laughed and Buck grinned widely. "Nah. Didn't pass the security check at the airport, what with his horseshoe nails 'n all."

Samantha ducked her head and poorly stifled a laugh.

"Danny Taylor." Danny stuck out his hand, his smile lopsided and open.

"Buck Wilmington." Buck accepted the peace offering. "This here's JD and Josiah. We have another brother in the field right now - Nathan."

"Samantha and Vivian," Danny offered.

"Damn, Danny, how'd you get saddled with ladies like these while I get the boys, here?" Buck quipped with a big smile. "Think I may have to switch over to the Bureau."

Samantha rolled her eyes as Viv smirked.

"Ah. It looks like these agents have brains enough to see through your animal magnetism, Buck," Josiah said. He then turned to the FBI team. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

They didn't get the chance to talk very much before Jack strode from his office with Chris at his side. They stopped at the conference table. "You are not going to believe this one," Jack said lowly. "This is 'eyes only' for our team, got that?" Danny, Samantha and Vivian nodded and stepped up the table where Chris dropped a folder. He flipped it open as Jack spoke. "This ATF team needs our help identifying someone."

Chris drew out the picture of Martin and tossed it on the table. After looking at it the three agents looked up in confusion.

"That's Martin," Samantha said. "So?"

Chris threw down another photo next to it.

"Oh my God," Vivian uttered, drawing the photo closer with a finger.

"That's . . . not Martin . . ." Samantha stammered, frowning. "It looks . . . wow, look at that hair!"

"My thoughts exactly," Jack said. "His name's Vin Tanner. He's an ATF agent in the Denver office."

"How can that be?" Danny said, finally finding his voice. "They look exactly alike!"

"That's something we need to figure out later," Chris said. "Right now, I need to find Fitzgerald. We think he may be in danger along with Agent Tanner. Vin was undercover with another agent on our team. We thought he was being hired as an assassin but now we think it's possible he's going to take Fitzgerald's place in court in order to exonerate Mee Liang."

"Where's Agent Tanner now?" Vivian asked.

"We're pretty sure he's holed up in an apartment just outside Central Park," Chris growled. "Vin's got a GPS device in his rifle that he turns on when he has a chance. Our last reading was Friday night. We can also get general locations when his partner uses their laptop." He opened a well-worn map. "They've been in this building since Friday night." He pointed to the location of the condominiums. "A few hours before they got there the GPS put Vin's rifle here." He indicated another point on the map. "He was there a little before five PM on Friday."

The FBI agents looked at the map and then up to Jack with alarm.

"The shot," Danny said out loud.

Jack nodded and Chris' eyes turned hard as he spoke. "Agent Malone tells me someone took a shot at Fitzgerald about that time."

“The assassination your agent was hired for?” Samantha snapped, straightening quickly and obviously angry. “He tried to kill Martin?”

“Vin wouldn’t follow through with that, and the fact that a payment was accepted by his partner shortly after tells us it was supposed to be a miss.” Chris absently rubbed his temple.

“So your agent was paid to intentionally miss Martin?” Vivian looked skeptical. Her eyes showed that she was thinking hard. “That’s rather dangerous, isn’t it? Especially if they want Martin alive?”

“No one’s better with a rifle than Vin Tanner,” Josiah said. “If they wanted a miss, Vin could deliver. Easily.”

“But why?” Vivian asked. “What’s the point?”

“To get Martin isolated. To control his contacts,” Danny mused.

“Exactly,” Chris said shortly as he stood straight.

Samantha frowned and Josiah picked up the discussion. “Fitzgerald was moved to a safe house as a result, right?” Vivian nodded. “Now, the only way he’ll get to court is by U.S. Marshal escort, correct?”

“. . . and if the escort is handpicked by whoever hired Tanner . . .” Vivian added.

“. . . then that person, or persons, could initiate a switch, Tanner for Fitzgerald, on the way to court.” Josiah threw down the newspaper article that summarized the Full Moon case. “According to this, the prosecution falls apart without Fitzgerald. If he doesn’t testify, then the bookkeeper clams up.”

Jack nodded, his index finger rubbing his jaw line as he stood listening. “We’ve known all along that Zhan – the bookkeeper – will refuse to testify if Martin doesn’t set him up first. He’s scared for his life with good reason; his father was already murdered while Liang tried to find Zhan. Zhan can bring down Full Moon Shipping and Liang with his testimony, but only Martin can physically link Liang with the Chinese Triad and guarantee the man goes away permanently. Without Martin, the Triad is definitely off the hook. Without both Martin and Zhan, both the Triad and Liang walk.”

Chris spoke again, bringing the picture together. “Right now Triad involvement with Full Moon Shipping’s illegal gun and drug trade isn’t proven. Zhan connects Liang with Full Moon. Fitzgerald can connect Liang to the Triad with his testimony about who he saw with Liang during his kidnapping. If Fitzgerald were to be assassinated – which I believe was the original plan – Liang would walk but it would be very messy for him and the Triad. There would always be suspicion and every agency around would be breakin’ their balls to hang ‘em.” Chris paused. “But if Fitzgerald appeared to turn instead . . .”

“. . . all suspicion would fall on Martin. All leads to the Triad would be tainted, gone. Liang and Full Moon could still get nailed but we already know that Zhan would fold without Martin’s testimony.” Danny nodded thoughtfully. “Genius. And it could only be done because of this Martin look-alike.”

Samantha then spoke up. “But that also means that Martin and Vin would have to disappear afterward. The switch can never be discovered.”

“And we have to assume that both the FBI and the U.S. Marshal’s office here are compromised,” Chris said lowly. “We can’t trust anyone outside this room.”

A dark and heavy silence settled around them.

“Frick and Frack,” Samantha said. “It’s them. They suddenly took over as the daytime protection on Thursday. They’re scheduled to take Martin to court Monday morning.”

“And somewhere en route to court, Martin gets switched for their paid witness. Vin pleads the 5<sup>th</sup> amendment and takes all the heat, then Frick and Frack take him away to . . . where? What then?” Buck queried.

“Why can’t we just stop the switch?” Vivian asked. “Follow them from the apartment building?”

“We could, but we won’t know the location of the switch soon enough. It’s too risky for Vin and Ezra.” Chris said. “Overall, the best scenario is for Ezra, Martin and Vin to prevent the switch. Get Martin to the courthouse and pick up Vin and Ezra before anyone realizes it’s Fitzgerald on the witness stand. They have to go somewhere after the switch. I think they’ll all meet somewhere after the trial and the chance that a Triad connection being there is good. With that connection, we can link Liang to the Triad and get the big boys.”

“But we have no idea where that meeting will be and it will just be us,” Vivian pointed out. “What if the area is larger than we can handle? What if there are more suspects than we can handle?”

Jack spoke up. “Agent Larabee’s boss is assembling an ATF mobile strike team that will stand by and shadow us at a discreet distance. It’s not a normal assignment for them, but we can’t trust our sources right now.”

As the FBI team leader spoke, Chris sank into a chair and leaned forward. He began to lay out a plan as soon as Jack settled next to him. “Okay, here’s what we’re gonna do . . .”

## Chapter Eight

Their guard knocked on Vin's door precisely at 6:00 A.M. Already awake and annoyed with this whole set up, his response was less than amicable. "What?" he snapped, not bothering to rise from the padded chair he'd dragged next to the large window. The goon, who still didn't have a name to Vin, pushed open the door and stepped half way in.

"It's time to get ready. Mr. Wu is on his way."

Vin scowled, the feeling of working blindfolded keeping him continuously on edge. "Ya can tell Mr. Wu to . . ." his comment was cut off when Ezra pushed his way into the room. After taking in the unusual sight of a rumped, practically undressed Standish, Vin's mood lightened. The grin that shaped Vin's mouth felt like a long, lost friend. "Hey, Ed, ya look like you been rode hard and put up wet!"

Ezra's narrowed eyes framed an impressive glare, which only made Vin's smile grow larger.

"I will handle this, my good man," Standish growled at the guard. He then slammed the door in the big man's face.

Vin's words were edged with laughter. "You'll never be a morning person, will ya?" Ezra paused just inside the door and took a moment to straighten both his posture and his shirt. Vin pointed a finger and wagged it at his partner's chest. "Yer buttons are crooked," he smirked.

Ezra looked down blearily and started undoing the row of buttons with a growl. "Good God. What an uncivilized hour in which to arise," he grumbled. "It tops off jet lag like a crown of barbed wire."

After watching to make sure Ezra started with the right button, Vin stretched. "Guess things are movin' now, huh? Any ideas what's up yet?"

"None. I do know, however, that you are to suit up, so to speak." Ez flicked his wrist in the area of the garment bag hanging on the knob of the closet door before returning to his mulish buttons. "I shall retrieve caffeinated sustenance from the kitchen while you shower and shave," he said with a yawn. Then he turned to go. "Dawn should be banned from the day."

Vin headed to the bathroom. "Hell no, Ed, it's the freshest part of the day. Nothin's had time to wreck it yet."

As he reached for the doorknob, Standish paused and tilted his head toward Vin, one eye squinted in displeasure. "And I cannot help but feel that this particular day is going to be 'wrecked' in spectacular fashion, Mr. Nicklin." Then he slipped from the room, taking Tanner's tiny store of humor with him.

A half-hour later, Vin stepped from his room feeling uncomfortably like a different person. The provided suit was mostly assembled; the colorful tie undone and draped around his neck and the jacket left behind on the bed. He dropped into the first chair he came to at the table and immediately went to work on the cup of coffee that appeared before him. Pointedly ignoring Wu, the guard and Mr. Ping gathered at the table, Vin, instead, spoke directly to Ezra.

“What now?” he asked.

“Eat,” Ezra suggested as he lovingly nursed a steaming mug. “The repast has done much to enlighten my mood as it will yours, I am sure.”

Vin accepted the breakfast plate with a grunt.

Wu's voice could not be ignored. “Mr. Nicklin, Mr. Ping tells me you have done well. I would like to hear what I am paying a premium for.”

Vin bridled at the tone of the demand. He swallowed his first forkful of food, biting back a nasty retort when he heard his partner coughed softly. Vin reined in his temper.

“Mr. Nicklin?” Ezra prompted with a bit more subtlety.

Vin thought of the words he decided to say. He cleared his throat but the vaguely hoarse quality of both voices was still present when he spoke carefully. “I hear a beer calling my name,” he said, reciting one of the recorded phrases he'd heard.

Wu's face remained unchanged and Mr. Ping shifted his eyes toward his boss expectantly. Ezra looked at Vin and arched his eyebrows in an unspoken request to continue.

Vin spoke again. “That's enough of a demonstration. When am I going to work?”

The flash of surprise in Ezra's eyes told Vin that his self constructed sentence passed scrutiny. Mr. Ping looked pleased. Wu's grin, though, gave Vin a feeling of dread.

“I am confident my Plan A will succeed after all, Mr. Nicklin,” Wu said with obvious satisfaction.

“And what, pray tell, was Plan B?” Ezra asked tightly.

A sharp knock on the apartment door stifled any reply Wu may have offered. The guard moved to the door to open it as Wu and Ping rose from the table. Ping collected his briefcase from the floor and Wu verbally released the linguist from service. By the time the pair reached the door, the guard had allowed a young woman to enter.

“I recommend that Mr. Nicklin speak in his new voice from now on,” Ping advised with a short bow. He acknowledged the woman with an additional bow and then left the apartment.

The woman turned to Wu and bowed respectfully. Vin noted the Chinese features of her face and wondered what was in the boxy case she carried. When she stood up, she kept her eyes on the floor as Wu spoke rapidly to her in Chinese. When he was done, she scurried into the living room and set the case on the table. With a few sharp snaps, the lid popped open and she began setting up with a concentrated fervor.

The agents exchanged looks and Vin frowned. Wu joined them with a satisfied expression and the beefy guard at heel. He consulted his watch for a moment. “We are right on schedule,” he said. “It is time to inform you of your duties.” Wu stood at the head of the table, his gaze locked firmly on Vin. “You were selected for a role that only you can fulfill, Mr. Nicklin. Your partner, I feel, has deduced that much and I must applaud his negotiation skills. We are paying you a lot of money for something you will do in the next few hours. Only you are qualified.”

Vin gave Ezra a sidelong glance as they waited for the other shoe to drop. They didn't have to wait long.

“Mr. Nicklin, from this point forward, your name is Martin Fitzgerald. In a few minutes you will be taken to another location where you will exchange places with Mr. Fitzgerald and assume his identity.”

“What?” Vin yelped as he shot to his feet. “Is that who I've been listenin' to for the past two days?”

“Yes. And you will speak as you were taught.” The demand was given with a tone that broached no argument. It was a deadly look that confirmed in an instant to Vin that his suspicions about the violence this man could wield were valid.

“Mr. Wu,” Ezra said calmly, his voice a balm and his body language relaxed. “Surely you realize that Mr. Nicklin has not had nearly enough preparation time to assume another man’s life. What you propose is not only impossible, it is . . . unacceptable.”

Wu’s eyes danced with evil joy as he finally turned to Ezra. “Mr. St. James, as of yet, you do not know the details. You will soon. This task is not negotiable. Mr. Nicklin will only be required to play this role for a very short while – hours, at the most. All he needs to say are the words ‘I refuse to answer on the grounds that I may incriminate myself.’” Wu chuckled frighteningly and shook his head. “Your American laws amuse me to no end and provide a perfect resolution to a problem I have been tasked to solve. We will leave within the hour.” Wu produced a feral grin. “You and your partner are getting paid very well for this façade, Mr. Nicklin. I expect positive results. Just do as you are told, when you are told, and we will all be . . . happy.”

“So I ain’t . . .” Vin started when the guard instantly pulled out a small handgun and pointed it at Ezra. “Hey!” Vin protested.

“You will speak as instructed.” The flatness of Wu's tone was chilling.

Vin pressed his lips tightly together, his fists clenched at his side. Ezra’s only reaction was to freeze in place with an unreadable expression on his face. Vin tried to draw on Ezra's apparent cool.

“So,” Vin said, slowly, “I’m not shooting anyone today?”

“Perhaps not,” Wu replied. “The beauty of all of this is that if this switch doesn’t work, we still can proceed with the assassination.” He turned his dark eyes to Ezra. “Plan B. I cannot fail this task. It is perfect save for one last detail.” Wu raised a hand in the woman’s direction. Both Vin and Ezra's heads turned in her direction. “She will now cut your hair.”

“What? No way!” Vin took a step back and raised his chin in defiance. Within a heartbeat’s time, a shot exploded and Ezra tipped backward to the floor with a yelp. Vin automatically crouched and reached for his non-existent gun, freezing in a defensive stance when the guard took a step forward and leveled the gun between Ezra’s eyes.

Gasping, Ezra sat up with his hand pressed over the side of his face. Blood trickled from between his fingers. “It’s all right, Mr. Nicklin. He has merely nicked my ear but I daresay he cannot miss from his current position.”

“He didn’t miss from his former position, Mr. St. James.” Wu stated evenly. “You may want to keep that in mind as you decide what your next move will be, Mr. Nicklin.” He held Vin's eyes in a challenging stare.

Fury built inside Vin as he realized his helplessness in his situation. He could feel the anger burning through his veins.

“Mr. Nicklin!”

Ezra’s voice registered in Vin’s mind and he backed off a step, reluctantly breaking Wu's gaze and turning to his partner. The bodyguard’s stance didn’t waver. Although he must have been extremely pissed off, Ezra managed to show a calm demeanor even though blood ran down one side of his face.

Meanwhile, Vin and Wu's hard eyes were locked in a silent battle of wills, neither one willing to release. Vin stood rock firm in a stance that suggested attack. Wu's posture was solid and straight, his guard's gun speaking for him. Seconds dragged by, and eternity seeming to pass before Vin spared his partner a questioning look before returning his cutting glare to Wu..

Slowly, Ezra rose from the floor, one bloody hand pressuring his injured ear, and moved smoothly to Vin's side with a reassuring nod. His voice was pitched low and even, as if to calm a wild animal. “I realize the significance of your tresses, Mr. Nicklin,” Ezra said in calm sympathy, even with the guard's gun barrel floating in front of his face. “I want to assure you that you are still

the same man without them. You are not diminished.” Vin finally turned and faced his partner, knowing Wu’s man wouldn’t hesitate put Ez down. “Mr. Nicklin,” Ezra said again. “Please.”

Vin’s fists finally began to relax as he considered Ezra’s words. Finally, Vin inhaled deeply through his flared nose and visibly relaxed. The cold steel dropped its bead on Ezra. The gun quickly slipped away and the guard stepped forward, arm extended to take Vin’s elbow.

“I’ll do it,” Vin snapped, yanking his arm from the goon’s grip. “No one touches it until I say.”

After a moment, Wu ducked his head, conceding the point. Ezra snatched a napkin from the breakfast table and pressed it to his ear. The woman, eyes wide with obvious terror, came forward with a pair of scissors at Wu’s demand. Her hand visibly trembled.

“No,” Vin growled. “My way.”

He strode to the kitchen and pulled a knife from a butcher block. The guard immediately laid his hand on the butt of his gun in response. Quickly moving to his partner’s side Ezra spoke lowly for Vin’s ears only as, again, Vin defiantly held Wu’s stare.

“I am so very sorry,” Ezra said in a near whisper. “I know what your hair means to you.”

“It’s all right,” Vin clearly said in his new voice. “It’s only hair.” Only then Vin dropped his eyes and retreated to his bedroom with Ezra close behind. Once inside, he closed the door and turned to his partner. “Let me see,” he said.

“Just a scratch, I am sure,” Ezra said, brushing Vin’s hand away as he removed the napkin.

Vin looked closer. “Just nicked the top. Once it stops bleeding, it shouldn’t be noticeable. Sorry, Ez.”

“You have nothing what so ever to be sorry about,” Ezra sighed, dropping on the bed. He dabbed at his wound and looked up at Vin. “I am regretful about your hair.”

Vin mutely nodded his thanks. “What’s he up to? How can I possibly pass as someone else? On the phone, sure, maybe even in video, but in person?”

Ezra only shrugged and sighed. Vin shook his head in resignation and went to the large picture window, slowly drawing the silky drapes aside. He looked out at the sun and the sky and lowered himself to his knees, sitting back on his heels with this back to his partner. His hands rested on his thighs, the knife’s handle held in one hand while the blade rested flat across the other palm. As Vin stared out the window, he softly recited something too low for Ezra to hear. Then, Vin held the knife out in front of him and he said a few more words. As he continued to softly chant rhythmic words, he gathered handfuls of hair, slowly sawing across it until the locks were released from the rest. Before each handful was dropped to the floor, he held it up to the sun and spoke few words in another language. The ritual repeated until there was nothing left touching his collar. He’d angled the blade so that what remained was feathered against his head.

Then Vin stood and faced his partner.

Ezra studied him for a moment, his green eyes evaluating what was before him. “You look younger, less threatening,” he said in summation. “You don’t look like Vin Tanner anymore.” He sighed and reached up, lightly brushing some loose hair from Vin’s shoulder. “I am sorry, my friend,” Ezra said softly as he did so. Vin gave him a short nod, and, without another word, stepped around him and exited the room hoping there were no more surprises. He heard Ezra following close behind.

When they entered the living room the woman motioned Vin to sit on the coffee table. She threw a towel over his shoulders and began to expertly shape what remained on Vin’s head. As she worked, Vin heard Ezra catch his breath and shifted his eyes to one side where he saw his partner staring wide-eyed at a photograph. After a moment, the picture was shoved in front of his face.

Vin was staring back at himself from the photo. And he had short hair. And a suit. And he was smiling!

Vin's felt his eyes grow huge. His mouth worked a moment, trying to find adequate words. "This is Martin Fitzgerald?" he croaked.

Wu chuckled somewhere behind him. "I see you have finally seen the whole plan. It is remarkable, is it not?"

Ezra stepped in front of Vin, holding the photo next to Vin's face. His eyes darted back and forth from one to the other. "This is astonishing," he said. Vin glared at him. "Now that I know that Mr. Nicklin, and Mr. Nicklin alone, is the only person able to fulfill this role I am distressed to realize that the rules of supply and demand point out that we sold out too low." He faced Wu. "I understand now why you did not tell us everything. Bravo, Mr. Wu. You brokered an excellent deal for yourself. We, however, have missed a lucrative opportunity." He handed the photo to Vin. "What we are getting is not enough for this . . . unique . . . opportunity."

"What has Fitzgerald done to you?" Vin demanded.

Wu's reply was void of its previous humor. "That is none of your concern."

"What's gonna happen to him after this? Where will he be while I'm him?"

"Again, none of your concern." Wu's voice had taken a frightening edge. "All you need do is your job."

It didn't take Vin long to figure that Fitzgerald was not long for this world.

The woman was skilled and quick. Her eyes continually darted from the picture of Fitzgerald to her live model as she worked the shears, then, finally satisfied, applied a gel that made Vin's nose wrinkle in displeasure. She removed the plastic shoulder apron and finished by brushing Vin's shoulders and neck with a soft, full brush. Standing a step back she gave him a tiny smile and bowed.

Vin stood, his hand immediately going to the back of his bare neck. He felt chilled. Then he tilted his head sideways toward Wu and glared at him.

The man grinned wolfishly. "Perfect," he said with shining eyes. "Now we must go. Get your things."

Dismissed and feeling irritatingly helpless, Vin and Ezra retreated to Vin's room to get the suit jacket and Vin's rifle case. Before donning the jacket Vin ran a trembling hand through his newly shorn hair and ground his teeth together. He began to working the tie with shaking hands, swearing softly as the material refused to do his bidding.

Ezra had been watching silently but after a second round of increasingly foul language, he stepped forward and gently slapped down Vin's fumbling fingers and quickly working the tie into acceptable form. The guard handed him an empty shoulder holster, which the agent put on. Then Vin slipped on the jacket and shrugged back his clothes all around. Finally, he tugged nervously at the collar, feeling decidedly uncomfortable.

"Armani suits you, Mr. Nicklin," Ezra said evenly. "You could be wearing much worse, I assure you." Then, quietly and in deep thought, said, "This is a most creative ensemble. The tie is remarkable." He raised his eyes and met Vin's troubled gaze. "You can relax and walk in confidence, my friend. You look like a true gentleman."

Vin scowled and dropped his hands. "I just don't like feelin' outta control. Makes me fidgety."

Ezra frowned and stepped forward. His hands reached out and flattened the jacket lapels. "I do not believe you need a reason to fidget. It still amazes me how you can remain completely immobile when you are awaiting a shot when, otherwise, you have the outer calm of a Tasmanian devil."

Vin's scowl transformed into a delighted smile. "Hey, you actually got something out of those Looney Tunes I forced ya to watch!"

Ezra let out a long suffering sigh as he put finishing touches on the jacket. He slapped Vin's hands down as they rose to again fiddle with the lapels, and then stepped back. "That experience has been blessedly exorcised from my memory, I assure you. My comment is derived from my actual observation of the animal."

A look of awe crossed Vin's features. "You sayin' there really is a Tasmanian devil?"

A soft knock on the bedroom door set them in motion. "You had best start enunciating your words as Martin Fitzgerald. You can use the practice."

"Yeah, yeah," Vin replied, distracted. He'd retrieved his rifle case and opened it up on the bed. "Guess it's show time, huh?" He flipped on the GPS switch, wanting to say more but fully expected that the room was wired for sound. He closed the lid and took the case in hand. Before stepping to the door, the agents paused and their eyes met.

This was it. And they could only hope that the rest of the team would be there to help pick up the pieces. Ezra put his inscrutable game face in place and motioned Vin to take the lead with a gallantly raised arm.

Four of them gathered in the living room. – Vin, Ezra, the stalwart guard and Mr. Wu, who wore a smugly satisfied look. Vin thought he looked like the proverbial cat that had eaten the canary... or would soon eat it. And he couldn't help but think that he was the feathered target.

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Jack raced through the streets of the city as fast as he was able. It had taken much longer than they had anticipated obtaining the address where Martin was sequestered. Part of him was happy to know how close-to-the-vest that information was held but the other part was furious at the wasted time it had taken to get the location. They didn't know who they could trust, so the Vin/Martin situation had been kept within the two teams. A phone call from Larabee's Federal was what finally freed the address.

All the while Jack could see the growing heat behind Larabee's eyes. Jack fully understood the festering anger – this man beside him was a leader and between the pressure of the situation and lack of sleep, he had to be ready to explode. Instead, he sat in the passenger seat working his jaw to the point where Jack expected to hear the snap of broken teeth. Jack knew exactly how he felt. Martin was to be on the stand in just over an hour and they were still scrambling to initiate the ATF's leader's plan.

A glance in the rearview mirror showed Agents Wilmington and Taylor staring out of their respective windows. Things were moving too slow for any of them; the tension in the vehicle was stifling and thick.

Once they reached the correct neighborhood, Jack slowed down to look at the address. It was a quiet street with signs of young families scattered about the various yards. When they found the safe house Jack felt that the car load of men looked rather conspicuous, but it was too late to worry about it now. He threw the vehicle into park a few doors down from the actual address and told everyone to pull out their identification – the marshals had not been notified of their visit and they would have to be appeased before anyone set foot in the house. Jack knew he'd have to keep Taylor close to control his mouth, and deduced that Wilmington was the calming influence for Larabee.

Jack once again wondered if he would be able to control himself as well as Chris seemed if their situation was reversed.

Buck erupted out of the car first, instantly placing himself next to Larabee who looked like he was ready to take on any comers. There wasn't a word spoken – the glare Jack could see on Larabee's face was enough and then some. Jack joined Danny, who was standing outside the car.

“Damn, Jack,” Danny said lowly as he watched the pair. “I'm glad they're on our side.”

“Me, too.” Jack gently backhanded Taylor's elbow. “Come on. Let's go see Martin.”

Danny nodded and they joined the others. Buck strategically placed himself to keep his boss from charging ahead, thus allowing Jack and Danny to lead. The four of them were met at the porch by two very able-bodied, casually dressed men. They all showed their identification.

“I'm Agent Fitzgerald's boss. I need to speak with him. Call your supervisor and he'll clear us.” The big marshal that stood before them hadn't said a word but kept his palm on the gun under his arm. His other hand touched the device lodged in his ear. He cocked his head and then looked closely at Jack's ID card.

“We were notified when you drove up, Agent Malone. You're clear to enter but marshals will be in sight all times. And you will check your weapons just inside the door.” The big man waited in their path waiting for a verbal indication of understanding.

Larabee started to protest but Buck said something too low for Jack to hear and Chris snapped his mouth shut. They started forward, passing between the two marshals, following Jack and Danny up the front steps. As they reached the porch, the front door opened and revealed two more marshals inside, flanking the doorway. The four agents entered and handed over their weapons in the entry way. After a quick pat down, the marshals checked their identifications against their faces and were finally satisfied. One marshal nodded to the other and the second man crossed the small living room and disappeared down a shadowed hallway. The group heard a short knock on a door.

Jack, Chris, Buck and Danny trickled into the living room, the depressing darkness jaundiced yellow by a pair of lamps. The remaining marshal made sure there were no openings in the drapes covering the large, barred front window. The agents heard a short exchange of words followed by muted footfall and then Martin Fitzgerald stepped into the room with a marshal lingering behind.

He wore a dark brown suit with fine pin stripes, a pale gold shirt with its own fine lines in box pattern and a tie that mixed light green, orange, and the same gold and brown of the suit and shirt. Somehow it all worked, Jack decided, but that tie took definitely took center stage and was typical Fitzgerald style. Martin smiled at the sight of his teammates. Jack was about to greet his agent when he heard the two ATF men catch their breath.

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“Good lord,” Buck breathed. “It's even creepier in person!”

Martin's eyes shifted from Jack to the staring strangers and his smile faltered. He paused just inside the living room and looked to Danny with a slight frown. “What's going on?” he asked.

“Jeeze, he even sounds like Vin!” Buck whispered, clearly shocked.

Chris, however, silently studied the man before him, more unnerved by the sight of him than he cared to admit. As he watched Martin Fitzgerald watch him, Chris tried to discern exactly why it was so disturbing to face Vin's doppelganger.

“He surely don't dress like Junior, though,” Buck added. “Damn. That's some tie.”

“What?” Martin asked, clearly confused and more than a little wary as he took a small step back and absently fingered the silky tie. His frown deepened as he studied the strangers, his eyes flicking between the two and them before settling on Chris. “Who?” After a long moment he looked back to Jack. “You mind filling me in, here? I have to leave for court in about twenty minutes.”

Danny smiled lopsidedly and spared Chris and Buck a sideways glance. “You ain’t gonna believe this one, *ese*,” he laughed. Martin’s suspicious expression changed back to one of confusion. Danny stepped up and pulled him to a couch where they dropped down, side by side.

Jack motioned for the rest of them to sit. Chris and Buck - unable to tear their eyes from Martin - ended up together on a small couch across from him. The ATF team leader finally broke into a grin, which loosened the tense grip on his frame. “I can’t wait for these two to meet,” Buck said.

“What? Meet who?” Martin’s tone was turning angry. He glared at the two men then turned the frustrated look aside to Danny. “You mind filling me in?”

“He’s about as patient as Vin, too,” Buck said lowly to Chris.

This caused Danny to chuckle. Martin’s eyes narrowed and his lips pressed into an angry thin line as he speared Buck with a glare. Again, he couldn’t hold the gaze as it drifted back yet again to Chris.

It was then that Chris figured it out. He couldn’t read this man like he did Vin; the unspoken understanding between them was simply not there and the emptiness left him stunned.

Jack sat in a chair between and at the end of the facing couches. He leaned forward, forearms on knees, the action drawing Martin’s attention back to him. “Martin, we seem to have a situation brewing. First, look at this.” He pulled a folded packet of papers from his inner coat pocket and tossed it down on the table separating the couches. The packet flipped open as it hit the table and Vin Tanner’s face looked out from the first page.

Martin blinked. “What the hell . . .” he said softly, lifting the packet slowly.

“That is Agent Vin Tanner of ATF,” Jack said, his voice pitched low so the marshals could not overhear.

“And he’s part of my team,” Chris added in the same quiet manner. He managed to shelf his unease and get down to the business of protecting these men and getting his friend back. “He’s been working undercover with another agent and we believe he’s here to take your place in court today.”

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As soon as he saw his twin’s face staring at him from the packet, all the other voices seemed to recede in Martin’s ears in the wake of a powerful vision. He picked up the photo, the face nudging a memory.

It was a reoccurring dream he’d had as a child – he saw his face in a mirror looking back at him as the mirror shattered. There were screams and crying, and a woman’s voice; it was never very clear, but the dream had plagued him for years. It finally faded about the time he remembered starting school, so he would have been around five years old. It seemed impossible that he should recall that memory, but there it was, again, clear in his mind’s eye.

He traced the cheek of the picture before him with his fingertip. It was his own visage, but . . . tougher. Longer hair, obviously, with an illusion of roughness that his own reflection lacked. As he stared at the photo, the dream voices whispered again – begging. The female voice in his dream was begging.

“Martin?”

Jack’s voice snapped him back to the now. “Um . . . yeah?” he said.

Chris and Jack exchanged glances. “Did you hear me?”

“. . . No . . .” Martin looked down to see that his fingertips were still on the face in the photo. He immediately curled his hand into a loose fist and sat up, shaking his head. He faced Jack. “What?”

“Do you know him?” Chris asked suspiciously when he noticed the agent’s distracted stare. When Martin didn’t reply, Chris continued. “My name is Chris Larabee and this is Buck Wilmington.” Martin turned his attention to them, still shaken inside. “We’re from the Denver office and Vin is part of my team and a good friend. He was working undercover when he was contacted to take another job outside his current assignment. It was an assassination.”

Martin gaped, his attention now sharp. “An assassination? Mine?”

“We think that’s how it started,” Buck continued, “but someone must have noticed the resemblance and now we think the plan has changed.”

Martin’s brow furrowed and he turned his gaze back to the photo. Suddenly, he felt very claustrophobic and his throat tightened, making breathing difficult. He loosened his tie and noticed how his hands shook. The paper rattled in his other hand and suddenly he felt uncomfortably hot.

“Martin?” Danny said softly. “You okay?”

Martin shot to his feet, his knees suddenly watery. “I need some air,” he croaked, dropping the photo on the table. As he backed away, the others stood and Danny moved between them and Martin.

“Martin,” Danny said lowly, grabbing his forearm. “You need to get a grip. We don’t have a lot of time. Come on.” He propelled Martin into the kitchen, motioning the others to stay back. Once in the small kitchen space Danny pushed him into a corner and retrieved a glass from a cabinet. “You gotta pull yourself together, bro. I know it’s a shock, but there’s no time to freak out.” He filled the glass and shoved it into Martin’s hand. “Drink.”

Martin took a sip, the coolness in his throat just distracting enough to derail his frantic thoughts. “I . . . I think I know him, Danny,” he whispered harshly. “I think I’ve seen him before . . .”

Danny’s brow arched. “I’d really like to know more, Marty, but there’s no time. Your life is at stake here. Can you focus for me?”

Martin’s eyes found his partner and he made an effort to calm his thoughts. “Yeah . . . yeah. Sure.” He ran his fingers through his hair and gulped. “What’s all this about?”

“We believe that Tanner was contracted to take your place at the Full Moon trial. The only thing we can figure is that he is supposed to lie or plead the 5<sup>th</sup> or something, as you, to stop the trial.”

It took a few seconds for that idea to sink in and then Martin realized his brain was engaged once again. “So . . . if I was to plead the 5<sup>th</sup>, Zhan would refuse to testify and Liang would get off.”

“Yeah. But what’s important here is what happens after the trial. You’d have to disappear. That way, they could never tie the Triad into the mistrial. You would never be able to tell anyone that it wasn’t you. You’d have to disappear, Martin, to maintain the charade after the trial.”

Martin’s thoughts began to fall along rational lines again as he considered Danny’s words. “If it looked like I committed suicide, there would be no suspicious death to investigate. It would never be tied to the Triad or Full Moon. I would look dirty . . . guilty, even.”

“Exactly. Or to be even safer, you’d simply disappear and never be found.”

After a few long seconds of heavy silence, Martin asked, “How did you find out about this? Have you spoken to . . . Tanner?”

Danny leaned against the counter and ran his hand through his hair with a sigh. “No, we haven’t. He’s in deep and can’t get directly in touch with his team. This is all a guess, but it’s the only thing that makes sense. Somewhere between here and the courthouse we think they will make a switch, Tanner for you. That means that the team that picks you up from here is compromised –

they are Triad bought and placed. It would be the only way to pull it off. It's the only thing that makes sense. Larabee and his team figured it out early this morning."

"Wow," Martin breathed. He opened his mouth to speak again but was unable to frame a sentence. "Wow," he breathed again.

"You ain't kiddin', partner. When we saw those photos, we about had a collective heart attack. Samantha nearly fainted."

That caused Martin to chuckle nervously, dispelling some of his queasiness. "How'd she like the hair?" he asked, his stomach still giddy with butterflies.

Danny looked thoughtful. "Actually, I think she kinda dug it," he said with a cocky smile. "So did Viv. They whispered something to each other and they both giggled."

Martin's eyes widened. "Giggled? They actually giggled?"

"Yup." Danny smacked Martin's shoulder and nodded his head toward the living room. "Come on, man. There's not a lot of time. You got a grip now?"

Martin nodded and downed another swallow of water before following Danny from the kitchen. When he settled once again in the living room, he was able to think clearly. The lingering stares from Larabee and Wilmington were easier to accept. He was able to push the meeting of his twin aside and focus on surviving the day, or at least this morning.

Larabee dropped a worn map on the table and found a point at the edge of Central Park. "We think they've been holed up there for the last two days teaching Tanner to sound like you. He's gonna have to control his accent to pass as you."

"Accent?" Martin asked.

"Texas ." Buck replied. "You can take the boy from Texas , but not Texas from the boy."

Larabee's smile was brittle and short lived. "One of our team has been sitting outside the apartment complex since we found it. We can't pinpoint which apartment it is, so we just have to wait and see if Vin or Ez can signal somehow when they're on the move." He leaned in. The others copied his action. "The switch has to be made near the courthouse.

"We have to assume that Vin and Ez will make sure the switch isn't made so you get to court. We'll have a team following Vin, a team following you that will take the dirty marshal escort into custody, a team in the courthouse to make sure there are no warnings about your testifying getting out and an assault team standing by to take the perpetrator of this whole fandango into custody – we hope that person will be with Vin and Ez and he'll be a direct tie to the Triad."

What Larabee didn't say struck Martin hard. He forced the team leader to meet his gaze. "What you're saying is that Tanner will make sure I get to the trial, but after that, his life is forfeit if you can't find him or they lose you after the switch."

Buck's lips tightened and Larabee's eyes grew hard. "We do not take Vin's life lightly. We will find him, and if we're delayed for some unforeseeable reason, he and his partner will stay alive until we do. I know them."

Martin could see Wilmington's eyes shifting between the two of them. Oddly, as frightening as Larabee's eyes and demeanor were, Martin did not feel cowed. He held the man's eyes more easily than he held Jack's. The connection felt – solid. "I won't trade one life for another," he said.

"You won't," Larabee immediately assured him. Martin believed it.

"What's his partner's name? Ez?" Martin asked. He saw Larabee's eyes soften as their agreement was settled.

"His cover name is Edward St. James. His real name is Ezra Standish."

"He'll be the one talkin' with the \$10 words," Buck added. "And Vin's cover name is Mark Nicklin but I think you'll figure out pretty quick which one he is."

Jack laughed shortly and nodded. “Yeah, I think so. Well, Martin? You ready for this?” He glanced at his watch. “Your ride should be here soon. We need to be out of the way.”

“So why don’t we stop this now?” Martin had to ask. “Blow the whistle on this now and you take me to court.”

“Because that would tip them immediately and not only would they kill you, we’d have to assume they’d kill my men, too. And with this plan, we have a good chance of getting the man that arranged all this as well as get solid evidence of Triad involvement.”

Martin nodded, understanding that it was a gamble that could result in a huge payoff. The chance couldn’t be passed up.

Jack and Chris stood, moving next to Martin, who sat with his head between his hands studying the photo of Vin. “This is crazy,” he whispered.

“Look,” Chris said firmly, eyes turning hard. “I have two agents at risk. I need to know that you can do this, and I need to know now.”

The hard edge of Larabee’s demand seared the air, causing an immediate reaction from Martin. The agent’s head snapped up, eyes instantly blazing.

“No need to worry about me,” he replied sharply. “I’ll do what needs to be done.”

His quick reply coupled with the fact that Fitzgerald didn’t back down from Chris’ intimidating glare only made the ATF team leader smile crookedly – Martin got the feeling that the man wasn’t surprised by the reaction.

“Yeah,” he said. “I think you will.” Larabee rested his hand on Martin’s shoulder for a moment before moving away to join Buck near the front door.

“You gonna be okay?” Jack queried softly.

Martin tipped his head in Jack’s direction and nodded. “Yeah. I’m good.”

Jack patted him firmly on the back. “Couldn’t imagine being in your shoes at the moment. I wouldn’t put you through this if I weren’t sure you could handle it.”

“Thanks, Jack.” Martin was encouraged by his team leader’s faith in him. There were times when he wondered; he’d pulled some pretty bonehead moves since being on Jack’s team.

“You’ll do fine, Martin. We’d wire you, but we don’t know if they have surveillance detection devices.”

“I just hope we all get out of this alive.”

Jack firmly gripped his shoulder. “We’ll do our best to see that happen.”

With that, Jack and the other three left him to his thoughts.

## Chapter Nine

The teams rapidly dispersed to their assigned locations when the electronic ping of the GPS caused Chris to scramble for the receiver. “Atta boy, Vin,” he muttered as he opened the viewing screen. He was in Jack’s car outside Vin’s apartment building. Buck and Samantha were in a car near Martin’s safe house to follow the transporting vehicle.

Nathan was with the ATF mobile backup unit ready to deploy at Chris’ word. Vivian and JD were in the courthouse keeping an eye on the court audience. Josiah and Danny were also at the court house, keeping an eye outside the courtroom to keep an eye on Martin when he arrived.

Chris got on the radio to Buck. “Vin’s activated the GPS. We’ll have no problem following them.”

“Good for Junior. That’ll make this part a lot easier. Let me know where you end up.”

“Sure thing.” Chris turned his attention to the building. “The parking garage has two exits.”

“The other exit goes to a one way street in the wrong direction,” Jack reasoned. “I’m sure they’ll come out on this side.”

Chris could only nod and impatiently wait. He tried to visualize what was going on inside the building to ease his anxiety, but it didn’t help. Adrenalin began to build in his system. After what seemed like an eternity, the GPS signal appeared to be directly in front of them. “There,” he barked, looking up. “That white sedan.”

Jack dropped the car into gear and pulled into traffic behind the vehicle. “Looks like a custom limo.” He read off the plate and Chris got on the phone with JD, relaying the info. In less than a minute, there was a reply.

“Uh, huh,” Chris said, jotting the information down. “Thanks.” He hung up. “JD says the vehicle comes back to Argon Enterprises. Sound familiar? I think that was the same group that rented the jet.”

Jack shook his head; it was probably another angle to the already complicated Full Moon Shipping case. “It must fit in somewhere. I’ll contact the DA’s investigator –“

“Not yet.”

At first, the sharp reply chafed and Jack nearly snapped a challenging rebuttal. Instead, he realized that he and Chris Larabee were two men used to being in charge and to work together, both of them had to consider the big picture. Jack also grudgingly admitted to himself that Larabee had the most undercover field experience between them. Now that this plan was in play, Larabee was the better one to take the lead. Jack reined himself in and let Chris’ instincts lead them for now.

The white sedan weaved smoothly through traffic, expertly avoiding the major trouble spots and arriving at its apparent destination without any delays. As the vehicle pulled into a private parking garage and disappeared, Jack passed the entrance and took a spin around the block. They ascertained that there was only one exit and one entrance so Jack parked as far away as they could while keeping the exit in sight. Chris relayed their position to the others with the wrist radios Jack had dug up.

“This garage is six blocks from the court house and stands between it and the safe house. I’m sure this is where the switch will take place,” Jack observed.

“Guess we’ll see.” Chris’ words sounded tight with worry.

It wasn’t long before Buck reported that Martin was on his way.

It was a quarter to nine when Jack and Chris observed a heavily tinted, black Suburban entered the parking structure. One call to Buck confirmed the plate to be the U.S. Marshal vehicle that carried Martin. “That’s it,” Jack confirmed out loud. “Martin’s in play now. Wilmington and Samantha are set up on the other side of the entrance.”

Chris growled. “I don’t like being this far away.”

“I know, but we don’t want to tip our hand.”

“I still don’t have to like it.”

“I just hope your men can pull this off.”

Larabee’s brief glance burned. “They can and will. I have no doubts.”

It was a long stretch of minutes watching and waiting, ears tuned for telling sounds of gunshots or shouting, but the atmosphere remained as innocuous as a New York City street could be. Finally, the large SUV exited the garage and turned Buck and Samantha’s way. Jack expelled a breath that had been caught in his chest.

“There he goes,” Chris whispered. “All nice and quiet. Looks like it worked.”

Jack immediately got on the radio. “Sam, stay on the Suburban and make sure everything’s okay. Call me when they deliver Martin. You and Wilmington take down the marshals away from the courthouse but let me know before you act.” He released the transmit button. After getting Spade’s verbal confirmation, he started the car and waited for their quarry. Chris’ eyes were glued to the GPS tracker.

“It’s moving,” Chris said. The white sedan exited the garage shortly thereafter. “There we go.”

Jack fell in behind the vehicle. “I’d feel much better if I had an idea where we were going.”

“You ‘n me both,” Chris muttered darkly. “I just hope we can nail a major player in this game and make someone pay for us having to make this trip.” He glanced at Jack. “From what I’ve read, Liang and his ilk manage to cover their tracks very well and we may have nothing with just a couple of musclemen in that limo.”

“And your agents,” Jack reminded him, probably more sharply than he intended. For a moment, he thought Larabee would explode. The heat he felt sizzling his direction was practically palatable.

“My team feels the same way,” ATF agent growled. “We intend to take someone down. If you have a problem with that, I need to know now.”

Jack felt his ire rise several notches before reminding himself of the experience under Larabee’s belt. To be as successful as this team was, their leader couldn’t be as cavalier as he sounded about their welfare. And this was not the time to bicker the point; Jack had to trust the man’s instincts. It wasn’t easy, though – Martin was at risk.

He gave a sharp nod and readjusting his grip on the steering wheel allowed him to release tension. When he next spoke, he managed to soften his tone. “Worst case scenario gives us until Martin testifies,” Jack calculated, defusing most of the tension. “That’s a half hour at the most. Best case scenario is that the no one knows Fitzgerald testified until the noon news. How about we simply follow for now; maybe in that time we can get a solid Triad connection for the kidnapping.”

“Agreed.” Jack’s olive branch was accepted with Larabee’s short response.

Jack sped up to make a light. “Then our deadline’s thirty minutes.”

“I’ll only be happy if I can nail the asshole that put my agents through this,” Chris immediately responded. “Noon .”

Jack’s glare rivaled Chris’. Not wanting this man to show him up in the self control department, Jack swallowed his initial response and, instead, compromised. “How about we see how far we can push this and take it from there.”

Larabee’s anger was thinly disguised. “Fine.”

Compromise was obviously something either leader was used to accepting.

After a few thick moments, Chris let out a snort and his lips cranked into a tight smile.

“What now?” Jack growled, his grip again tight on the steering wheel.

“I’ve gone from the Magnificent Seven to the Dirty Dozen.”

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The courtroom was packed.

JD, seated on the aisle in the third row, hoped his anxiety didn’t show and again wished he had Josiah’s calm spirit. He stole a glance Vivian seated to his right, envious of her outward coolness. She must have felt his gaze because she turned and gave him a comforting smile. JD exhaled and felt a little tension drain away.

He mentally ran through the sketchy plan again – Travis, as a retired federal judge, had managed to bend the ear of the trial judge here and brought him up to date on the possible scenarios that could transpire in the courtroom. The trial judge allowed Josiah and Danny access to the inner courthouse areas and was well aware of JD and Vivian’s presence in the audience, and was alone in that knowledge.

If Fitzgerald showed up, Josiah and Danny would keep an eye on him to and from the courtroom. Meanwhile, JD and Viv would try to pick out any Triad affiliates in the audience who would try to raise an alarm at the testimony and stop them.

If Vin showed up, things would be a bit trickier. They would allow Liang’s plan to play out, and then follow Vin after he testified to try and locate Fitzgerald. The judge would declare a mistrial when it was proven that is was not Martin testifying. That was the tricky part because when he made that declaration was rather vague. It depended on what happened. Luckily, this particular judge relished a challenge.

JD was pulled from his thoughts with a clank of chains. Mee Liang was escorted to the Defense table from the prisoner’s entrance near the bench. Although he’d been allowed to wear one of his own expensive suits, there was no compromise about the leg shackles. The fact that he was escorted in by no less than three uniforms spoke volumes; the court expected trouble.

The jury was already seated when the District Attorney and his team filed in. They walked in line down the aisle to the front of the room. A marshal opened the gate for them, and the team wordlessly settled at the Prosecution table. No one outside the twelve agents and the judge knew what was supposed to happen – well, themselves and Liang’s bunch. JD knew that anyone in this room was suspect at this point.

JD shifted in his seat. He found his eyes constantly drifting between the judge’s entrance and the wall clock above it. He checked his own watch for the umpteenth time just as the minute hand swept to one slash past nine.

“All rise.”

The bailiff’s deep voice made him jump.

The courtroom, which had been humming with whispers, grew completely silent. Then there was a rustling wave when everyone stood as one with the entrance of the Judge.

“The courtroom is now in session, Judge Scott McKinley presiding. Please remember to keep cell phones and pagers turned off inside the courtroom.”

A tall, grey haired man swept through the Judge’s door behind the raised dais and claimed the bench. Black robes settled royally around him as he immediately sat and gathered the papers before him in a no-nonsense style. Only then he raised penetrating brown eyes and scanned the room. Opening statements had been the previous Friday so he started right in to the meat of the case and fixed his gaze on the District Attorney’s table.

“The prosecution will call its first witness,” he announced, leaning back in expectation.

An attorney stood at the Prosecution table and spoke clearly. “The people call Martin Fitzgerald to the stand.”

JD felt his heart surge and turned to face the back of the courtroom where Martin Fitzgerald was to make his entrance, studying the faces in the audience as he did so. Would he be able to discern Fitzgerald from Tanner? Would anyone that mattered in this audience be able to prior to his testimony?

A moment of silence stretched into long seconds. The audience shifted nervously. Faint voices were heard outside the double doors at the back of the court. A uniformed bailiff stationed by the doors glanced through the small viewing window and pushed a door open. The muted voices became clearer and Martin Fitzgerald strode confidently into the room, his eyes locked straight ahead and closely followed by two uniformed bailiffs. JD studied the agent when he entered and was dismayed that he was unable to discern if it was Vin or Martin.

Danny was the last to enter the court room, shoving the door open again when it was inches from the frame. JD noticed that his temporary team member was winded as he parked himself to one side of the doorway. Danny found JD’s eyes and shook his head with a slight shrug. He didn’t know who was taking the stand, either and that fact made JD feel a little better in one way but worse in another.

JD turned his attention back to the witness and worked to school his face into neutrality. When the man had passed, JD noticed that he looked a little pale and there were sooty smudges hanging under his eyes, but his jaw was firmly set. If this was Fitzgerald, the similarity to Vin in determination alone was astounding.

The witness pushed open the gate at the head of the aisle and walked to the dais without pause. He stepped up into the witness box and raised his right hand as instructed. As he was sworn in, JD studied him intently, trying to get a clue on what to expect. JD had only seen the two together in photographs; seeing one of the two in the flesh and not being able to tell who it was, was disturbing. JD glanced at Vivian and read the woman’s hooded eyes instantly – she wasn’t sure who this was, either.

The swearing in was over and the witness sat. JD tried to read the witness’s sharp, blue eyes, but they were deceptively veiled.

“Please tell the court your name and occupation.”

“My name is Martin Fitzgerald and I am an FBI agent with the missing person’s unit in Manhattan.”

JD blinked, surprised at the Vin-sounding voice. What had he expected to hear?

“In your own words, tell us what happened on the night of September 2, 2006.”

The witness dropped his head momentarily to regard his hands clasped loosely together in his lap. JD could see him take a deep breath to get focus. Would Vin plead the 5<sup>th</sup> Amendment or would Martin tell his story? Had their hastily pulled-together plan worked?

JD turned his attention to Liang, seated about fifteen feet in front of him. The crime boss looked calm and completely relaxed. JD's eyes narrowed angrily when he noted the hint of a smile grow with each silent second that passed.

The quiet was swollen with anxiety. "Agent Fitzgerald?" the attorney urged.

Finally, the witness lifted his head and straightened, his arms crossed low across his abdomen. Was it in a self protective manner or one of defiance? For JD, the heavy anticipation thickening in the air made it hard to breathe.

And then the witness pinned Liang with a piercing stare and spoke directly to him.

"I worked late that night and didn't leave the office until after 8:30 . . . "

Vivian's smile relaxed her whole face – their Martin was safe. In contrast, Liang's face changed from confidence to bewilderment, and then became tight with rage. JD immediately looked to the back of the courtroom as two men slipped out to the hall with Danny right behind. He tapped Vivian's arm and she acknowledged his leaving.

From here, Vivian would keep an eye on Fitzgerald.

Josiah had been standing by in the hallway and the trio of agents quickly overtook the two retreating men in the courthouse hallway. One had opened his cell phone and was poised to dial when Danny snatched it away. "Don't you know that reception in here stinks?" Then he shoved the man to the wall.

Josiah relieved the other man of his cell before the shock of their appearance wore off and positioned the surprised man against the wall next to his partner. As the two men began to protest, Danny shushed them and pulled out a set of cuffs. Josiah already had his man cuffed and was patting him down.

JD called Chris as the protesting pair was hustled to a holding room, hoping that stopping this pair from checking in gave Vin and Ezra the time they needed to extricate themselves from whatever position they were currently in. And knowing those two, they were probably hip deep in all sorts of crap at the moment.

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Ezra still couldn't believe they'd pulled it off. It had been like a classic shell game.

He'd had to choke out Vin to make it believable and the fact that Martin obviously knew what was going on was what turned the tide. Even though both Martin and Vin knew what they would be facing, Ezra still saw the dual looks of shock when the FBI agent was dragged to them and locked eyes with Vin. Wu spies had done their homework well - Vin and Martin were dressed exactly alike all the way down to that most unique silk tie and shoulder holsters.

Since they first entered the parking garage Ezra was on the lookout for a place to fake the switch. He was pleased when Wu's driver tucked the sedan into a dark, deep corner among a cluster of vans and SUVs. The vehicular obstacles provided enough concealment for their illusion of a trade.

Vin and Ezra exited the sedan and placed themselves in what they thought would be the best area to use. As soon as Martin had been pulled from the Suburban by Wu's man, Ezra wedged himself between the struggling agent and the goon in the guise of helping subdue the captive. Since quarters were tight, the guard had no course but to back off which gave Ezra and Vin the few precious seconds they needed to initiate their unspoken plan.

The shocked stare between the look-alikes froze action for a scant few seconds. Then Martin launched himself as if on cue, landing squarely on Vin. Tangled, they dropped to the ground

between parked vehicles, disappearing temporarily from the guard's sight. Ezra then pulled Vin to his feet and initiated a paralyzing choke hold on his partner to seal the con.

It was Martin, however, that put the crown on the illusion. He'd stood, breathing hard and glaring, and snarled a perfect, Texas-accented curse as he straightened his tie. For a fleeting second Ezra wondered if he'd choked out the right man; Martin's sly wink chased the doubt away.

Martin nodded to the goon and smoothed his slightly ruffled suit. Ezra looked down at his unconscious partner, then back up to the FBI agent. Their gazes momentarily met and it took all of the Ezra's well-schooled willpower to keep the wonder from his face. This man was undeniably and unnervingly Vin's twin.

Before another thought could form Ezra left Vin sprawled on the garage floor, took Martin's elbow and steered him to the Suburban. Wu's goon retrieved Martin's gun from the escorting marshals and then stuffed the unconscious Vin into the sedan. Ezra opened the door of the SUV for Martin, carefully eyeing the two dirty marshals inside in case he had to identify them later. One of the marshals handed Martin another gun; by the way Martin hefted it and looked at Ezra, it was obvious the gun was empty; Wu wasn't that trusting. Martin gave Ezra a sick smile before storing the useless weapon in his holster.

Ezra slammed the door shut. The Suburban tires squeaked as the vehicle leaped away. He noticed the goon carefully wipe Martin's gun clean of prints before slipping it into a soft gun case.

Ezra gave a passing thought to Fitzgerald's safety as the Suburban sped away, but immediately turned his attention to saving his and Vin's hides. Entering the sedan he surreptitiously glanced at his partner, relieved to see that Vin was still breathing. He also noticed that his partner was showing signs of waking up and Ezra wondered about Vin's ability to pull off Martin's way of speaking in his current dazed state.

That concern was unexpectedly squelched when Ezra saw the guard pull out a tiny bottle and pour the contents onto a small cloth.

"Roll down the window," the guard ordered. "Fumes."

Concealing his alarm Ezra hit the button to open his window as the guard pressed the cloth to Vin's nose and mouth. Vin bucked once, twice and his eyes flew open only to slowly sag shut again as he melted against the car door, unconscious. Ezra felt his teeth squeak as he ground them together in fury. It took every reserve he had to put on a bored face and turn to his open window.

"My, aren't we prepared," he said smoothly even though his stomach churned sickeningly. "Poor sot. I do hope we get to our staging area before the gentleman expels any of his breakfast. Chloroform has that effect on most people."

Wu chuckled darkly, motioning for the windows to be shut again as the odor faded away. "If it gets too unpleasant, we can store him in the trunk."

"Ah," was all Standish could say, internally appalled at the thought. "There is that option, yes."

The vehicle accelerated smoothly from the parking structure. Once they were on the road Ezra lifted his computer case onto his lap. Before opening it, he regarded Vin's rifle case and maneuvered it next to him, hoping the GPS disc was still functioning. Returning his attention to the computer, he flipped open the case. "You may transfer the balance due now, Mr. Wu," he said as he powered up the computer. At least the cell signal would let the others know they were alright for now.

"The balance will be paid when Mr. Nicklin joins us," Wu answered flatly. "Once I know the plan has worked."

"Then I insist on our agreed upon installment."

Wu's dark look chilled Ezra but eventually the man gave a short nod of agreement. The agent spoke as he typed. "May I inquire as to the time and place of our rendezvous with Mr. Nicklin after the job is finished?"

"No." Wu turned enough for Ezra to see his eyes as he spoke. The previously unseen coldness there caused the fine hairs on the agent's neck to snap to attention; only then Ezra knew for certain that this man could – and would – kill. "Your final payment is ample compensation, Mr. St. James. You are not being paid for the privilege of information. You are being paid to simply do as you are told."

Ezra's fingers moved deftly over the keys of his laptop. He arched a brow and then lifted his eyes, trying to keep the tickle of fear he felt from the man's hard gaze. "Your input, please," he said smoothly, putting the computer in Wu's lap. Wu's fingers typed deftly, sending another million to the holding account. Ezra checked the account, nodded in satisfaction and closed the computer.

Although was the picture of calm on the outside as he stowed the laptop, Ezra glanced at his partner and took a firm grip on his internal fear when he surmised that he, Vin and Martin would be dead by nightfall.

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Traffic had been building since Chris and Jack had arrived at the parking garage. As the sedan merged onto the roadway Jack still found it fairly easy to keep the white vehicle in sight. They crawled through the central part of Manhattan, heading steadily south. He was surprised that they were being lead out of the downtown area.

"Huh," he uttered softly, dropping back a little further.

"What?" Chris replied sharply, turning to query with his diamond sharp green eyes.

"I'm not sure where we're headed, is all. From what your JD has said, the Argon office and holdings are behind us on the north end of the city." He followed their quarry around a turn. "Looks like we're headed into a warehouse district." As they rounded a second turn, the sedan was nowhere in sight. "Damn! Which way?"

Chris focused on the GPS. "Um. . . right. Turn right." His shoulder bumped the door with the sudden sharp turn. "SHIT! The signal's gone!" He whacked the side of the device, cursing, and then switched on the wrist radio. "Buck, check in!"

His friend's voice answered up. "Here, Chris."

"Don't stop the Suburban, you hear me? Abort the stop!"

There was a nerve wracking handful of seconds before Buck replied. "Your timing is really something' Pard. We were about two seconds from calling' in and flippin' on the lights."

"Drop back and follow. We've lost the GPS signal and our car. All we have now are those guys Josiah and Taylor have at the courthouse. Call Josiah and see if the crooked marshals are supposed to take Fitzgerald home after the trial."

"Hang on."

Jack pulled over as Chris alternately cursed and jabbed the hand held GPS without results. The radio crackled to life after what seemed like several lifetimes had passed.

"Chris? That's affirmative – Agent Fitzgerald is supposed to be driven home by the same guys that delivered him to the courthouse and then released from marshal custody. You want to give him back to the bad guys?"

"Hold on," Chris snapped, releasing the transmit button. Chris rubbed forehead, eyes squeezed shut as his mind worked.

Jack watched as the ATF team leader gathered his thoughts and scrambled to pull together a plan. He hadn't known the agent for long, but Jack already knew that this man could think on his feet. Finally, Chris spoke.

"I think that whoever's in charge will want all of them – Vin, Ez and Fitzgerald - together before he ties this up," Larabee reasoned out loud. "If he's as careful as Liang, he's going to wait for confirmation that things went his way in court. When he finds out his plan's failed, Vin and Ez are toast. We'll follow Martin and those marshals back to Vin and Ezra and hope he hasn't heard anything yet."

"Putting Martin back in play is not my favorite plan," Jack interjected. "Especially since I think he's going to 'tie all this up' by killing all three agents. That's Liang's style and I have no reason to believe this guy's any different." He gripped the steering wheel tightly in frustration.

Agent Larabee's icy eyes locked with Jack's. He spoke in a flat, deadly tone. "If you have a better plan – hell, any plan – I'm all ears."

Grimly, Jack shook his head and begrudgingly accepted that he didn't. "I'll speak to Fitzgerald when he's clear. Have someone get him on the phone as soon as he's off the stand."

Chris relayed the information over the radio and waited for all teams to acknowledge the new plan. Silence settled in the vehicle, stifling in its weight. Jack drove slowly through the area while both of them looked for any hints as to where the sedan could have gone. He was struck by the seediness of the area as well as the lack of traffic, both vehicular and pedestrian.

As if he'd read Jack's mind, Chris said, "I'm putting JD on task to find the owners of these building." He immediately issued the order over the radio.

Intuition told Jack not to question how Agent Dunne would do that. He just knew it would get done.

Larabee wasn't finished. "And we need more bodies out here. Josiah, get out here with Taylor and Spade. JD, you and Johnson follow Martin when he's done testifying. Call when you leave the courthouse. And JD, get that warehouse information to me ASAP. We have a big area to search."

## Chapter Ten

Ever since their vehicle had taken that quick and unexpected turn, Ezra's sense of this whole affair had turned irreparably sour. He was glad that Vin was still unconscious, as the pressing narrowness of the tunnel they were now in would surely push the buttons of his partner's claustrophobia.

Ezra realized instantly that they had entered a passage intended for smuggling. The sedan had turned sharply into a rather scruffy-looking warehouse then turned abruptly again to travel down what initially looked like a loading ramp. Then, a wall had opened and the sedan plunged into sudden darkness. His internal bump of direction told him they were headed to the waterfront and probably somewhere underneath an above-ground docking facility. It was a perfect set up for moving illegal imports.

They eventually stopped in a poorly lit area he estimated to be just big enough for three vehicles to maneuver. After sitting in the veiled darkness for many minutes, Ezra dared to speak.

He cleared his throat then said, "Pardon my boldness, but how long are we going to wait in your personal bat cave?"

"Not much longer," Wu surprisingly answered from the front seat. "Mr. Nicklin should be arriving very soon."

"And what follows our reunion?" Ezra pushed.

"We leave this place."

Still not entirely satisfied, Ezra opted not to push. For now, they were trapped. As Ezra tried to figure out their next step he heard noises that signaled Vin's waking and knew that things were going to go downhill rapidly from this point forward. As he leaned over the reviving agent, Ezra heard Wu speaking to the guard in their native tongue. Even though they spoke Chinese, Standish could tell that Wu was not happy about something.

Wu stepped from the car, his fists clenched. With Vin's growing restlessness, the guard reached under his coat and pulled out his handgun, leveling it in front of Vin's eyes. It would be the first thing the waking man saw even in cavern's darkness.

Ezra ordered himself to sit quietly, hoping that Vin roused with the ability to maintain the façade that he was Fitzgerald. If not, Ezra knew he'd have to go for the guard's gun. He kept any outer indication of his thoughts from showing on his face but the tickle of sweat around his collar was not so easily suppressed.

"Shouldn't you subdue him?" Ez asked, genuinely curious as to why they would leave the person they saw a Martin Fitzgerald unbound and physically unrestrained.

"He needs to remain unmarked," the guard replied sharply from the facing seat. "No bruises."

The mysterious reasoning did not make Ezra feel any better.

Vin moaned. His head rolled to one side and he worked his mouth a moment before his eyes cracked open. Ezra could see him frown in the poor light, shadowed lines of concentration forming on his forehead, which, for Vin, heralded only one inevitability where chloroform was concerned.

Then the telltale signs began – Vin began swallowing, first cautiously, then rapidly as his eyes peeled open and grew wide.

“There is a good possibility that the gentleman is about to gastronomically relieve himself,” Ezra announced, noting Vin Tanner’s notoriously squeamish stomach regarding the inhaled chemical.

Ezra yanked the door handle next to him and found it to be locked. The guard looked puzzled for a moment but Vin’s first short gag put the large man in motion as he yelled something in Chinese. He scrambled for the doors’ locking mechanism.

Vin gagged dryly one more time before the locks clicked and the guard bailed out. Ezra managed to shove his partner out behind the guard as he jumped through the opposite doorway. Stumbling momentarily in the darkness Ezra finally found his feet and warily started around the sedan and toward the sound of Vin’s distress. The nauseating noise echoed in the enclosed space.

As Ezra circled around the vehicle he took some time to study the cavern. He could just make out two wide alcoves at one end, each with a large, shiny, silvery pole in the center that disappeared into the ceiling. *‘Elevators,’* he realized. *‘The floor above must lower down to this level.’* This was a deceptively sophisticated set up.

But currently, his impression of the cavern was marred by the sound of Vin’s retching. Ezra peeked around the back of the vehicle and saw his partner on his hands and knees being piteously sick for the second time. The guard was to his side a safe distance away and looking ill himself. Finally Vin, over the effects, sank back on his heels, groaning.

“Clean him up,” the guard ordered Ezra.

“Me?” Ezra protested. “That is most definitely NOT scribed within our agreement!”

“Do it,” the guard said again, bringing his weapon up to Ezra’s chest. “There are things in the trunk.”

Ezra unconsciously touched his still nicked and tender ear, and pulled off an annoyed expression. Anxious as he was to get to Vin’s side, he managed to appear most put out at the unfolding events. He pawed through the trunk and found several towels along with a small stash of tools. Keeping up appearances and grumbling complaints all the while, he slipped a small screwdriver in his pocket and then slammed the trunk shut before cautiously making his way to Vin’s side.

As he leaned in to wipe his partner’s face, he heard the guard and Wu talking again but still couldn’t understand the conversation. Turning his attention back to Vin, he noticed glazed, blue eyes darting in confusion.

“Leave me ‘lone,” Vin growled, pushing Ezra’s hand away as the towel touched his chin. He tipped sideways onto his hip.

Ezra pulled him upright against the car and spoke quietly in Vin’s ear. “You’re sick from chloroform. Remember that you are Mr. Fitzgerald. Understand?” Vin blinked rapidly a few times and then nodded slightly. Ezra saw that his partner’s eyes clearing up. “Now, now Mr. Fitzgerald,” Ezra said a little more loudly. “Luckily, you managed to miss your person but you have blessed all of us with this enchanting aroma.”

“Fuck you,” Vin grumbled loudly, pulling away again.

“A true gentleman, just as I surmised,” Ezra replied sarcastically, keeping up the charade.

“Stand him up over there.” The guard indicated an area near the lifts. Ezra threw him a dirty look and proceeded to drag Vin to his wobbly feet and maneuver him to the wall section between the two lift alcoves.

"Where am I and who the hell are you?" Vin croaked loudly, leaning heavily into Ezra for balance. The Fitzgerald accent wasn't as good as it could have been and Ezra was thankful for the raw hoarseness resulting from Vin's sickness.

"Please direct your inquires toward our host, Mr. Fitzgerald. I am unable to satisfy your requests."

"We in a cave?"

"That is about as much as I know, sir."

When they reached the indicated area Vin slumped to the floor, alternating his glare between Ezra and the guard. Not quite yet fully aware, Ezra hoped his partner could rein in any claustrophobic feelings when he came around fully. Ezra thought it best to stay close just in case and positioned himself next to Vin.

Motion near the sedan caught Ezra's attention. The guard skirted the clumpy puddle steaming in the coolness of the cavern and stopped silently in front of them. Mr. Wu bent down by the driver's window and spoke briefly to the man behind the wheel before coming their direction. He'd circled around the front of the car to avoid Vin's deposit and as he got closer, Ezra could see that their host's face was pinched in displeasure. The agent figured Vin wasn't the sole reason for the mood.

"We will be joined shortly," Wu stated sharply and obviously angry. He held something up to the guard. "Hold this." Ezra recognized the soft, zippered gun case.

"What the hell do you want?" Vin rasped, pulling his coat back together into some semblance of order as he addressed Wu. The elder Asian approached and studied them from a few feet away. His eyes burned.

"You will soon see," Wu hissed. Agitated, he turned away. The guard stepped between his departing boss and the agents.

It seemed like hours before the sound of an approaching vehicle echoed down the dark tunnel.

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Testifying against Liang and Full Moon lifted a shadow that had been lurking much too long in Martin Fitzgerald's mind. When he finally stepped down from the witness box, a great weight was gone from his shoulders. Logically, he knew that his part of this whole charade was over when he left the courthouse so he began to gear up mentally in preparation to justify to Jack why he needed to take this to the end.

Fitzgerald was taken aback when Vivian pulled him aside in the courtroom hallway.

"Listen up, Martin, there's been a change in plans." Then she brought him up to date on the latest events. "Since they lost Tanner and Standish, things need to proceed the way the Triad planned so you can lead us to them."

"Give me some ammo," he asked. "They my gun's empty." She handed him her extra magazine and he reloaded, giving her the empty magazine Wu had supplied. Then an ATF agent that looked more like a college student joined them and explained that there wouldn't be a microphone because the Triad most likely had devices to find unwanted electronics and that he'd be going to a warehouse district.

Viv didn't have to remind Martin that his escorting marshals were turncoats, but she did anyway. She briefed that Jack and Chris were still in the area where they'd lost the sedan. Viv and the kid . . . Dunne? . . . had some intell requested by Jack and that she and Dunne were heading out to join the others in the field. Danny, Sanchez, Samantha and Wilmington were set up to follow Martin's SUV.

They couldn't chance losing him, Vivian reiterated – the Suburban was their only hope to find the undercover ATF men and, hopefully, the person that would connect this to the Triad once and for all.

And now here he was, hoping the vehicles shadowing him hadn't lost them on those last two sharp turns. Well disguised, the sophistication of the hidden tunnel would have been impressive if the agent wasn't concerned about losing his back up. He was glad the gun he had was loaded but Martin had a feeling that it wouldn't be enough if he was on his own down here.

Fitzgerald didn't suffer from claustrophobia but the narrow darkness of this tunnel was extremely unnerving. Just as his hands were beginning to feel sticky from anxiety, the tunnel opened up to a dully lit cavern. Recognizing the white car from the switch point, Martin felt his nervousness disappear in the wake of angry determination.

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“In there!” Chris pointed at a faded green warehouse, one among many on the street but the only one with a door standing open. “They had to go in there!”

Jack jerked to the curb a half-block away as Larabee radioed their position. As they exited the vehicle, Jack listened as the ATF team leader directed the others in so that the large building was as surrounded. Nathan was ordered to bring the backup squad to the area, but to wait for dispersal orders.

“I don't see anything.” Buck's voice, pitched low over the radio, caused Jack and Chris's steps to falter. “Nothing's inside, Chris. I'm up on a ledge looking' in - it's empty!”

“What?” Jack barked, flattening against the wall on one side of the open door.

“Hold on,” Chris snarled in the wrist radio. “Buck, get the others and clear the inside. Do it now.” He took up a position on the other side of the open door from Jack.

Silence ruled the air for agonizing minutes before Samantha voice reported in. “It's clear, Jack. No car, no anything.”

Chris immediately addressed the computer whiz kid. “JD,” he snapped, “What's in this area . . .

“

Jack didn't linger to hear the rest of the conversation. Instead, he stepped inside the warehouse, gun hanging limply at his side. A feeling of dread fought to rise and strangle him, but he swallowed it back and jogged to join the others heading his way from various entrances. Samantha had on her mostly unreadable game face, but her eyes gave her away – Jack could read the fear there.

“They couldn't have gotten around us,” she said firmly.

“Not with one of us seeing them, anyway,” Buck confirmed, standing shoulder to shoulder with Spade.

Danny and Josiah, eyes still searching as they stood, both looked grim.

“Hey,” Chris called as he trotted in. He swung his arm toward the west as he approached. “JD says that Full Moon shares a warehouse two blocks from here, near the waterfront, that way.”

He and Jack met eyes. “Tunnel,” Jack concluded as Chris nodded. Jack had heard of some pretty impressive tunnels running under the border to Mexico – it was possible. “Has to be. Look closer, everyone!”

The combined team spread out and concentrated on the west end of the building. Chris got on the phone and ordered Nathan to start setting up a nine block perimeter and detailed a team from Nathan's group to set up inside the warehouse where they stood.

“Here!” Josiah's rumbling voice commanded attention. He knelt at the bottom of a deep loading ramp. “I feel a breeze. It's hollow behind this wall.”

A tight smile curved Larabee's mouth but didn't reach his eyes - they burned with dark anger. "Josiah, stay here and direct the backup where to set up then join us two blocks west."

"I just hope we're not too late," Jack growled as he ran to the western exit. The others separated into pairs and followed. "Nine blocks is a lot of area for the backup squad to cover."

"Once they're in place I'll have Nathan bring 'em in tighter."

"Like a noose," Jack imagined.

"Exactly," Larabee growled.

"How appropriate," Danny added.

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When the black Suburban glided into the cavern Wu was still unable to bask in his success. One detail had yet to be explained - why hadn't his courtroom spies checked in? Even with the fruit of his success right here in front of him, that little bit of minutiae tasked him.

"Mr. Nicklin. I would think that you will be pleased to finally fulfill your contract," he addressed the figure exiting from the large SUV.

The figure paused at the rear of the vehicle as he visually took in the cavern with wary eyes. His gaze finally stopped on the two forms against the wall.

"Nice set up," Nicklin replied. Before he could say anymore, St. James was allowed to join his partner and they stood shoulder to shoulder, facing their contractor. The two marshals from the Suburban moved in and stood behind the pair.

St. James' usual poker face finally showed some emotion - anger. Wu squelched a smug smile and stood his ground as St. James spoke those expected words. "This is unacceptable. This part of your charade is complete and we expect payment. Now."

Wu then let a short chuckle escape and shook his head in amusement. "You are so predictable, Mr. St. James. I assure you that you will have payment in full in the next few minutes."

"Now." St. James stood fast, his partner silent beside him.

"I do not have time for this." Wu turned away from the pair and waved an arm. "Bring them."

The rogue marshals stepped closer to the hired pair, guns drawn.

"salright," Wu heard Nicklin drawl. "The sooner we're outta here the better, wouldn't you say?"

There was a pause before St. James replied, his voice more calm. "I do share your sentiment on that account, Mr. Nicklin."

When Wu was in the area of the lift alcoves, he turned around to face them again. "Then come here and stand by Mr. Fitzgerald."

After a quick glance at each other, St. James and his partner walked in the direction indicated. Once the three captives were grouped together Wu approached the marshals and had them verbally relate their actions of the past few hours.

It did little to settle Wu's mind on the infuriating pair that had yet to check in from the courthouse. They had become a loose end. He wasn't used to loose ends. He was used to working alone and leaving nothing behind.

And yet his plan was nearing its conclusion. It was time to move, and move quickly. With the ultimate deed done in the next few minutes the missing court house team would be a moot point. Wu would deal with them later. Loose ends infuriated him; the two missing men wouldn't live long enough to regret their negligence.

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Martin could feel his heart racing beneath his outer calm as he and Standish approached Tanner. Standing next to him, it was impossible to not look at him with wonder. As he did so, that unnerving feeling of familiarity washed over him again. The blue eyes returning his gaze were easily read and reflected the same feeling – they had met before.

A loud click followed by a humming noise caught Martin's attention and he turned to see one of the alcove poles moving. *'An elevator,'* he realized. It wasn't long before weak daylight streamed in from above and a cement platform dropped to their level. The alcove now contained a large dumpster. As the silent marshals watched over them, Wu's beefy bodyguard rolled the dumpster out and to one side with relative ease.

Looking at him in action, it was obvious that Wu's guard could probably break a neck with his fingers alone, Martin thought. Fitzgerald reacted to the thought by swallowing and touching his neck lightly. *'Definitely keep that one at a distance,'* he surmised.

Once the elevator alcove was clear the marshals and the guard herded the three of them onto the platform. A rectangular section of rusty roof was high above them. Wu and his body guard were the last to step aboard. With a short nod from Wu, the marshals were excused and the lift jerked upward. Martin heard the Suburban's doors slam and the engine start up. In his narrowing view of the dark cavern, red tail lights disappeared.

*'Heading right for Jack,'* Martin hoped.

They were boosted upward into the muted light of a warehouse. The platform stopped within a three walled area designed to corral the large dumpster that was left below. The location was brilliant, Martin realized. Anyone searching this warehouse would never consider examining the pavement under a dumpster.

There was another surprise waiting for him when he looked around.

*'My truck!'*

Martin glanced at his twin, his shock evident. Tanner frowned slightly at the reaction and then regarded the silver vehicle. Martin saw that he'd figured it out when the concentration lines on Vin's forehead smoothed and he nodded slightly. Now they both knew how this was supposed to end.

The warehouse facility in which they now stood was pier side. One of the building's rolling doors stood open, exposing the dock and the harbor beyond. Sitting mostly inside the cavernous opening, Martin's personal truck was easily identified by the ding in the rear quarter panel. The vehicle faced the water. Martin felt a tingle of dreaded anticipation course through his veins; this stage had been set just for his swan song, which he knew was to be bloody.

Automatically, he glanced at Tanner with wide eyes. His twin unflinchingly met his gaze. The strong measure of fiery determination Martin saw there immediately calmed him and a vision of fighting side by side with this man appeared in his mind's eye.

"All this ends," Wu stated matter-of-factly, "with Mr. Fitzgerald's unfortunate demise. After failing the FBI with his self-incriminating testimony, Martin Fitzgerald's body will be found here in his own vehicle. The implication will be that guilt drove him to suicide."

"What?" Tanner protested as Fitzgerald. "If you think I'm getting in that truck and shooting myself, you're crazy."

Martin noticed that Vin wasn't too steady on his feet. When the guard stepped up, Tanner took a step and swung his fist but the big man easily deflected it and engulfed the smaller man in a bear hug as the agent's wobbly legs betrayed him. He easily carried Vin the short distance to the truck, shoved him through the open driver's side door and slammed the door shut. Wu joined him

immediately and held a gun firmly against the agent's temple. The guard then wiped his prints from the vehicle door. Breathing angrily through clenched teeth, all Tanner could do was grip the steering wheel and wait.

The guard approached Martin and pulled out the soft gun case from the back of his waistband. He unzipped the case and held it up to Martin. "Take it," he ordered. The heft of it in Martin's hand indicated it was loaded. His fingers encircled the grip and he looked up at the guard. In those few seconds, the guard had drawn his own gun and stepped behind Ezra, the muzzle pressed against the base of his partner's neck.

"That's in case you object to a close-in kill, Mr. Nicklin," Wu stated darkly. "Sniper shots are normally too far out for the shooter to get dirty, so I daresay that this is outside the parameters of the contract you have in mind. My colleague's presence also nips in the bud any tiresome claims for additional compensation from Mr. St. James."

Ezra's throat convulsed as he swallowed. Martin found the man's green eyes filled with confidence that he, himself, didn't feel at the moment. His gun felt impossibly heavy in his hands. Standish shifted his eyes toward the truck and then met Martin's gaze again. Martin interpreted that as a go ahead. He ducked his head as he took a steadying breath and mentally ran through his limited options.

Here he was with two loaded guns that were impossible to use at the moment. Martin also had this feeling that Standish had something in mind by the look in his eye; whatever it was, it had to happen very soon.

Martin slowly walked around to the passenger side of the truck where the door stood open, waiting for him. When he reached the seat, Tanner started to move but was immediately stunned when rapped on the temple with Wu's gun. Martin froze.

"That will certainly leave a mark," Ezra loudly and bitingly observed.

"It will be obliterated by the gunshot," Wu replied with confidence. "A Coroner will not find any sign of struggle on Mr. Fitzgerald's body."

Martin set his jaw. Things weren't going well for the good guys.

Wu continued. "You will shoot Mr. Fitzgerald with his own gun in the right temple. Close range. This is suicide, after all." Wu's voice had taken on an excited edge. "Then you will wipe your prints from the weapon and wrap Mr. Fitzgerald's hand around the grips and trigger to leave prints. The gun will be left with the body. Do not touch anything else in the vehicle. When you are in position I will step back and you will shoot."

Martin nodded once and tried to swallow with a suddenly dry mouth. He dropped one hip on the passenger seat and lifted one leg into the truck. Then he turned, surprised to meet Tanner's foggy gaze. When their eyes connected that feeling of familiarity returned in force as if he'd known this man his whole life. Then, unexpectedly, a voice entered his mind.

*'They're here.'* Tanner's words were remarkably clear.

*'I know,'* Fitzgerald replied, the inexplicable knowledge ringing true. He threw a glance toward Standish.

*'Ez can take care of himself,'* Tanner assured. A twitch of a smile moved his lips.

*'Then I'll go for the Chinaman,'* Fitzgerald decided.

*'I'll be sure to duck,'* the Texan drawled lazily in Martin's head.

Before either one could move, the abrupt sound of shouting voices and nearby gunfire electrified the air.

## Chapter Eleven

“Samantha!”

As she moved in closer to Full Moon's pier side warehouse, Agent Spade's tight concentration wandered to thoughts of Martin.

“Agent Spade!”

The voice finally registered and she snapped her head around. “What?” she replied sharply and somewhat flustered at being caught with wandering thoughts.

Buck Wilmington was regarding her with a questioning look. “Did you hear Malone?”

“What?” she had to repeat, blinking as she scrambled to recall orders she obviously didn't hear. Pulling herself together mentally Samantha pressed a shoulder against the nearest wall and adjusted her two-handed grip on her weapon. Finally, she shook her head, accepting futility with a sharp sigh. “No,” she admitted softly. “No, I didn't. What did he say?”

Raising her eyes to meet the tall agent's was easier than she expected. Until now, working as Wilmington's partner had been both annoying and frustrating. The man was a player, that was obvious, and his every attempt to get her to warm up to him had fallen flat. She'd made a point to flatten him; guys like him did not sit well with her, what with their antiquated idea that the 'weaker sex' needed to be taken care of.

She had to admit, she'd been downright nasty to the man. Wilmington, however, seemed oblivious to her hostility - he never backed down. She had to give a nod to his persistence. Samantha also thought she'd done a pretty good job hiding her feelings for Martin throughout this whole ordeal but she could now clearly see that he'd figured it out; again, she was irritated that he'd read her so easily.

As soon as they were called to task, Buck had become Agent Wilmington and became a working partner. She decided that she could trust him – for now, at least. Trust wasn't something she tossed about with abandon. Samantha accepted then that what she'd seen as a condescending attitude was, in reality, respect.

Buck Wilmington respected women.

But he was still a player.

The resemblance to Danny – but in an annoyingly different way – was undeniable. She shook her head and dropped her eyes with breathy snort. *‘Concentrate, Spade, for God's sake. He's got your back and he deserves the same respect.’*

“We're to cover the southwest corner, on the pier,” Buck relayed with what she knew was infinite patience. “The others are circling around until our back up is in place.”

She nodded, now all business and focused. “Okay, then. Let's take a peek.”

Before she could move, Wilmington's steady hand gently took her forearm, stopping her in her tracks. Irritation at the delay flamed and she snapped her head to glare at the tall agent. Samantha opened her mouth to demand an explanation but the warm look in his eyes stopped her.

“We'll get him,” Buck said in a concerned tone. “He'll be all right.”

She shed her anger like a winter coat and instantly felt confident. Samantha dipped her head and managed a tiny smile. "I know. Thank you."

He nodded and released her arm after a reassuring squeeze. They both checked their grip on their weapons, and Buck nodded that he was ready.

Samantha took the lead as they closed in on the warehouse, moving with quick stealth. The windows on the building were set high above them and tilted open for ventilation. Hearing the murmur of voices but unable to discern the words, the pair made their way to the corner and Samantha carefully looked around to the back of the building.

"That looks like Martin's truck," she whispered, puzzled. "The front end, anyway. It's sticking out from inside the building. Wait . . . it's moving – rocking - like someone's inside. I can't see any more without breaking cover." The sound of the truck's door slamming silenced them. Samantha expected the engine to start but it remained quiet.

Buck raised his radio to his mouth to report their find when nearby gunshots, followed by shouts somewhere behind them, made both of them instinctively crouch down. Buck quickly moved close behind Sam, their backs angled together for optimum cover. The questioning frown she gave him over her shoulder was answered with an unknowing shrug. A tinny voice, raised in excitement, erupted from her ear piece and added fuel to her racing heart.

*"Black Suburban just left the tunnel! We've taken out the tires!"* An unfamiliar voice. The backup unit? Agent Jackson's cool acknowledgement confirmed her thought

The two's eyes met again.

*"Tighten the perimeter!"* Chris ordered. *"No one gets out!"*

The scuffling of feet, a shout and the sound of close gun fire snapped their attention back to the warehouse. The truck's engine roared and raced as a car door slammed, pushing both agents in motion. Buck crossed in front of Samantha and quickly glanced around the corner. He whispered rapidly into his wrist radio.

"Chris! We have a truck starting up and motion in the back of the Full Moon warehouse, on the pier," Buck relayed. "Shots fired . . ."

Loud shouts peppered with several gunshots spilled from the area of the truck. In unspoken unity Buck dashed across the pier and dove behind a stack of boxes as Samantha snapped off cover fire. The truck shot from the open warehouse and lurched into a tight turn directly toward them. Two forms fought to hang on and climb into the bed of the small pickup as it roughly surged away, weaving wildly from side to side before finally setting on a true course straight for her and Buck. Samantha saw the twin scrambling bodies finally roll into the truck bed.

Buck stood up, took a wide stance and put several shots into the radiator. Samantha yelled, "FBI!" as she took a shot at the tires, not wanting to risk hitting the men in the bed of the truck.

The vehicle accelerated as the agents pumped off several more rounds in rapid succession. When the truck raced by Samantha could see that one of the figures in the bed was working on the sliding window at the rear of the cab. The second figure was hunkered down, gripping the side of the bed, trying to gain balance.

By his profile, she could tell that the body hanging looked was Martin – she didn't clearly see the other but assumed it must be the other twin. Buck relayed vehicle information as soon as the vehicle sped past. The scent of radiator fluid and a wet path told of the damage done. When Chris confirmed that the inside of the warehouse was contained, the two agents ran in hot pursuit of the truck.

The truck took an unsteady track down the wide pier, passing several warehouses before it careened around a corner and out of Samantha's sight. Hoping to at least back up the pair in the bed of the fleeing vehicle, Sam and Buck continued to follow the liquid trail. They hadn't quite reached

the corner when the scream of the racing engine was abruptly upstaged by the sickening sound of screeching metal and shattering glass. A nauseating thump immediately followed and then it was abruptly silent. To Samantha, the silence was more frightening than gun fire.

The sprint to the final corner seemed to take place in slow motion with their feet encased in mud. When Buck and Samantha finally rounded the corner with weapons up, they immediately pulled up to sort out the bedlam spread before them.

The underbelly of the truck was visible among scattered, broken pallets and boxes. An acrid smell burned the air as stressed metal groaned and settled. A gouge in the concrete traced the path of destruction. Steam belched from the heart of chaos.

Samantha's gut clenched. "Oh, no!" she whispered in horror as she once again dashed forward. A small corner of her awareness heard following footfall and yelled orders for paramedics.

She found the first body crumpled at the base of a warehouse wall among splintered wood, obviously thrown from the back of the truck. The pull to go to him was relentlessly strong, but she was steadfast in her job to back up Wilmington and keep the injured agent safe.

They approached the truck with heightened caution. Reaching the back of the truck first, Buck quickly glanced into the area between the vehicle and the building.

"One down," he reported. He then backed off and stole along the length of the vehicle and glanced around the hood. "Can't see a driver. Airbag was deployed. Cover me."

Samantha first glanced around to make sure no one was hiding nearby and then moved in tight to Buck's back as he tried to force his way to the windshield. Unable to fit, he moved back along the truck's belly and climbed up to the driver's window. "No driver. He got away. Our boy here is stuck half way in the sliding window."

"Alive?" Samantha asked, her throat tight.

There was a long pause. "Yeah, there's a pulse. Let's check the area so we can clear the medics to come in."

Before Buck's feet hit the ground again, black-clad reinforcements appeared from the street side of the buildings. Wilmington found her gaze and nodded toward the first body. "They'll secure the area. Go and check on him." He nodded back to the body by the wall. "I'll stay here."

Samantha didn't argue. She retraced their path with her heart in her throat.

"Martin!" she cried as she dropped by his side and holstered her weapon. Her fingers searched under his slack jaw for a pulse as she gently laid her other hand on his bloody cheek. His shoulder was at an odd angle and his arms and chest were covered with raw scrapes under shredded cloth. A knot was already forming high on his temple. "Martin!" she called again as she stroked his cheek with her thumb. Her throat threatened to close; there was still no response but Samantha was encouraged by the regular beat of life under her fingertips.

"Is he . . .?"

Samantha glanced up into the wide, green eyes of a breathless Larabee and her heart skipped a beat. He stood over them in a protective stance, looking down with frightened trepidation – the first sign of uncertainty she'd seen in his face. Fear emanated from the imposing figure; fear and something she couldn't exactly place.

"There's a pulse," she said simply, the short statement a balm to her quaking nerves. All Larabee gave her was a silent nod as one hand tightly gripped a lowered gun. The other hand squeezed into a tense fist at his side. Suddenly, it occurred to her what she saw in reflected back to her from his eyes – deep concern edged with bewilderment.

Larabee knew this wasn't Tanner in the same way she knew it was Martin, and the why unnerved him.

The ATF leader's gaze shifted to the truck and he was moving before either could say another word. He ran to the truck and she heard rapid exchange between him and Buck as the area around them slowly filled with agents. She turned back to her charge and replaced a shaky hand on Martin's cheek, willing him to open his eyes. Samantha was torn from the moment with the arrival of her team leader and friend.

"How is he?" Jack dropped down next to her, breathing hard. Danny joined them moments later, also winded.

"I'm not sure." She heard the quiver in her own voice. "He's out. His shoulder's messed up . . ."

"Agent Jackson's a medic," a soft southern voice offered. Samantha looked up to see a well-dressed albeit very rumpled man with a pained expression cradling his left arm tightly against his body. His torso was stained with blood. The towering Agent Sanchez appeared to be holding the man up with one strong hand. "I cannot tell you if that is our Mr. Tanner or your Mr. Fitzgerald," the injured man said softly. He grimaced in pain before continuing. "The resemblance is more than astonishing, I can assure you. Side by side, I cannot ascertain one from the other."

They all looked down on the unconscious man at their feet and then glanced briefly over to the truck where the other half of the agents gathered. Samantha looked around to make sure the scene as secured. With that responsibility handed over, she was able to turn her full attention to the unconscious agent.

"It doesn't matter at this point," Samantha whispered. "They both need our help."

Her heart, though, told her she had her Martin.

"There was one more driving," Samantha reported to her boss as she gently stroked Martin's slack cheek. "Older man. Asian, I think. Wilmington said he wasn't in the truck, Jack. He has to be around here somewhere."

Jack reacted almost immediately to the information. "Search the docks and surrounding buildings. He must be on foot and is possibly injured."

It wasn't over.

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With the scene finally secure Chris Larabee and the rest of Team Seven wearily retreated in the direction of their vehicles, leaving the scene processing to ATF's forensics team. The underground facility would never have been found if not for this case. The local office suspected its use in numerous gun smuggling operations and everyone now assumed there were more tunnels in the area – it was the only way the missing Asian man could have given them the slip.

The disappearance of the driver was galling. The man that Ezra had killed in the warehouse and the two marshals were only the hired help. Chris had gambled three agents' lives to find the Triad lead and lost. Ezra had told them the driver's name was Jong Wu, but so far, there was no information to be found on the man. They hoped the truck would give up some prints or DNA on the missing suspect.

The remaining team members paused at the tow truck dragging Fitzgerald's battered truck onto the flatbed. Viv and Danny were standing shoulder to shoulder watching the process as the vehicle groaned its way up the ramp. The others fanned out behind, tiredly staring at the smashed truck's progress with blank expressions.

Buck winced at a particularly loud and long squeal of resistance. "Ouch," he muttered.

"Maybe Fitz'll finally get a real car," Danny said brightly, drawing a hand over tired eyes.

"A real car?" JD asked.

“Yeah,” Taylor said with a weary sigh. “I mean, who drives a truck in the city anyway?”

“What’s wrong with a truck?” Larabee’s tone resembled a growl and he turned his piercing green eyes on Taylor .

Danny hesitated and took a cautionary step back from the frightening glare.

Buck backhanded his boss’ shoulder. “Easy, stud. Good guy, remember?”

Chris’ shoulders slumped and he shrugged as he rubbed his temple. “Sorry,” he mumbled. “Any word from the hospital?” Ezra had accompanied one of the unconscious twins while Samantha stayed by the side of the twin she insisted was Martin.

“Samantha said they still haven't come around. Ezra's shoulder was dislocated and he got a bullet graze on his arm. The one Sam says is Martin has a broken collarbone and a concussion. The other one has facial lacerations and possibly some other broken bones. He's been to x-ray already, but the doc hasn't looked at them yet.” Jack blew out a frustrated breath after the recitation.

Vivian nodded at the list and frowned. “How does she know which one was Martin?”

“I’m not sure,” Jack started.

“She just knows,” Chris said with quiet conviction. “Like I know which one is Vin.”

The ATF men nodded in understanding. The New Yorkers looked skeptical.

Josiah expelled a short laugh at the unconvinced faces and playfully slapped Danny’s back, causing the lanky agent to stumble forward a step. “Well, I’m sure in the case of Miss Spade that it’s her heart recognizing the lucky Mr. Fitzgerald.”

Vivian’s brows arched in interest and she looked to Danny. “Uh,” Danny breathed, obviously searching for a way to voice a thought he couldn't quite put into words. His head was cocked in Chris' direction. “Well, if that’s so . . . does that mean you and . . . I mean, you know Tanner because . . .” He wagged a finger in Chris’ direction and audaciously raised a questioning brow.

Buck quickly figured out the innuendo and burst out laughing. Josiah and Nathan joined in immediately after making the connection. Chris’ frown dropped to dangerous depths with uncertainty while JD simply looked confused. Jack and Vivian turned expectantly to Chris for a response.

“No, no, no!” It’s not like that at all!” Buck managed to wheeze.

“Like what?” JD innocently asked.

Chris’ jade eyes ignited as he finally followed the implication. He turned his glare on Danny once again and the FBI agent’s dark eyes grew wide, but he didn’t retreat. Instead, a tentative smile quirked his mouth. “Well?” he prodded.

“No, no,” Nathan started as he caught his breath. “It’s just that Chris and Vin have this weird ‘talking without words’ thing that they do. It’s kinda spooky, but that’s all. There’s no . . .” Nathan’s words sputtered to a near whisper when Chris turned his eyes on him. “. . . er . . . relationship. Like that, anyway.”

Chris snorted and stomped away in the direction of Jack’s car as understanding finally dawned on the often naive JD.

“OH!” the young man blurted, blushing. “Oh! Yeah, I mean . . . no. I mean, what he said . . .” He pointed at Nathan.

Jack shook his head and pulled car keys from his pocket. “Things are as secure here as they’re gonna get. Let’s head to the hospital while we wait to see what forensics comes up with.” They slowly trailed along Larabee’s path and then separated out for the trip to their absent partners' sides.

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The clock told her she'd been here for nearly three hours. This was the first lull in treatment there had been in the busy emergency room and Spade finally felt that she could move about without getting in the way of any medical personnel.

Samantha stood over the unconscious man in the bed and gazed down at his slack face. Bloody scratches etched a riotous pattern across his forehead and cheeks. Two of the deepest lines were accented with tiny, dark stitches. The bump on his forehead, just at the hairline, had already turned a painful-looking purple. The cervical collar seemed to swallow the defined jaw line and a temporarily splinted left arm was placed across his abdomen on a pillow.

She let her eyes travel over his face again and then down to his chest where the gentle rise and fall of the thin blanket told her he would be fine. Without realizing how it got there, she found her hand resting on his chest to feel his heartbeat, not trusting the rhythmic beep of the monitor.

Samantha couldn't see anything different about him – the two of them, physically, were identical yet she knew this wasn't Martin. That perplexed her because her analytical mind couldn't express how she knew. It was simply . . . weird.

She studied Tanner a little longer before returning to her chair between the two beds. The curtain between the two emergency room bays had been shoved aside for now so she could watch both of them. Samantha gently slipped her arm under the rail of the second bed, resting her hand on the still arm underneath the sheet.

"How fare our friends?" The tired voice caused her to turn to the speaker and smile. Ezra Standish had introduced himself shortly after their arrival, somewhere between radiology and the nurses' station. His arm was in a sling and white bandages topped one ear. She could just see more bandages encircling the slinged arm's bicep, peeking out from the bloody rent of his shirt. More blood – not his, she was relieved to hear – stained the shoulder of the once cream-colored material.

She gave him an assessing look. "Not much worse than you, I'd say. Agent Tanner's still unconscious but Martin's getting restless. I think he's coming around. The others are on their way here."

Ezra wandered in and dropped down onto a second chair closer to Tanner's bed. He looked from one to the other. "Remarkable," he muttered.

"Did they get to talk at all?" She asked, turning her eyes back to Martin. "I imagine they'd have a lot to say."

"The gentlemen have not yet had the chance. I daresay the opportunity may even result in our Mr. Tanner uttering more than a dozen words in a row." He must have noticed Samantha's puzzled expression. "Mr. Tanner is known as a quiet man," he explained.

Sam leaned back in her chair. "Not Martin. He has no problem speaking his mind. Does . . . um, Vin . . . eat junk food?"

"By the crate load," Standish sighed rolling his eyes. "Why he's not the size of Rhode Island, we'll never understand."

She smiled at a memory. "Martin's got a stash of Ding Dongs in his desk."

"The very name sounds perfectly Tannesque."

"Cheeseburgers?"

"For breakfast. We have yet to figure out where he gets them at that ungodly hour in the morning."

Samantha laughed shortly and squeezed Martin's hand, then turned to Ezra. "How are you doing?"

"I am in the process of being sprung," he said, stretching his legs. "And will recover to sleuth again."

"They're finished securing the scene," she informed him. "They didn't find Wu."

Ezra shifted uncomfortably. "That is most regrettable. I do believe that may be problematic as I got the distinct feeling that Mr. Wu is no stranger to retaliation."

Samantha found her hand drifting to her gun. Thoughtful silence was marred by the sudden increase in the tempo of the beeping monitors.

Fitzgerald shifted on the gurney and a breathy moan escaped his lips. Samantha put her hand on top of his and he settled. "Martin's parents are on their way from California," she said, her eyes on Martin's face. "I can't wait to see the expression on Victor Fitzgerald's face when he gets here."

Ezra's eyes slid her way. "Victor Fitzgerald? As in Deputy Director Victor Fitzgerald?"  
"Yeah. You know him?"

Standish pinched the bridge of his nose as if in pain. "Unfortunately, yes, I am acquainted with the formidable Deputy Director. We served time together in the Atlanta office." He must have seen her frown. "I was in the FBI before transferring my allegiance to the ATF," he explained. "I did not leave the Atlanta office on the best of terms with the brass."

Samantha head tilted sideways so she could give him a sympathetic smile. "Then you're in good company," she said. "I don't know anyone on the best of terms with Victor Fitzgerald, including his son." With a second thought, she glanced at the second bed, wondering if it contained a second son.

The agents had another few minutes of relative peace, the bustle of the ER poorly dampened behind thin curtains. The nurse peeked in once and assured them that they were just waiting for a room to open up and the two men would be moved upstairs. Samantha told her that Martin seemed to be waking up, and she said she'd find a doctor and disappeared. Soon, loud voices drifted their way from the direction of the emergency room reception area followed by foot fall coming their way.

"I believe our backup has arrived," Ezra stated just as the curtain was roughly pushed aside.

"Ez? How're ya doin'?" Chris asked as he stepped in, casually tossing Ezra's jacket to him. "Paramedics left that." His boss was followed closely by the thin-lipped man with untamed dark hair Ezra recalled seeing at the scene, who moved to stand by Samantha.

Ezra smoothed the blood stained jacket across his lap. "An unfitting end for Brioni," he sighed wistfully.

"I'm sure a replacement will show up on your next reimbursement request," Chris said with a slight grin. "That's what you get for severing an artery with a screwdriver."

"I was aiming for the cretin's heart." Ezra's growled lowly. "But his demise was the goal I apparently achieved."

"Yeah, you achieved it, alright." Chris's featured softened as he turned to study Tanner's quiet form. "Damn it, Ezra, what the hell happened?" he finally asked.

"Direct and to the point as usual, Mr. Larabee." He shifted in the chair. "I assure you, I did not intend our pilgrimage to cast us so far from the home front. I applaud young Mr. Dunne's ability to maintain a connection."

The yet unnamed man snorted. "His reports must be a joy to read."

"His expense account is much worse, trust me." Chris' expression softened a little. "Ezra, this is Jack Malone, Martin Fitzgerald's boss. Jack, Ezra Standish."

"At your service." Ezra winced and didn't bother to stand.

"The rest of the gang's in the waiting room. They'd only let two in at a time," Chris said as he wandered to stand next to Vin. Once there, he rested his hand on his friend's shoulder and spoke softly. "He's got a compression fracture in one of his cervical vertebrae. He'll be wearing that collar for awhile. He hasn't come around at all?"

"Not yet," Samantha said.

Martin groaned, getting Malone's attention. "Sounds like he's waking up."

Samantha stood next to Jack and they both watched Martin's face as he came back to them. Ezra turned his attention to Chris and noted the lines of worry mapping his boss' face. *'I wish encouraging thoughts would rouse our teammate, too, Mr. Larabee,'* he wearily thought.

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Swimming up through the roar in his ears brought him closer to a goal he couldn't quite understand. Then the roar receded until all he heard was mumbled words, beeping and his own breathing. Then he felt cold for a moment before pain rolled over his entire torso, overriding everything else.

He groaned and fumbled to drag his hand across eyes that didn't seem to want to open.

"Hey, watch the IV lines."

A soft hand restrained his motion. Martin was grateful the soft voice didn't antagonize his headache. He let out a sharp breath and dragged his eyelids open, squinting into the painful light. A fuzzy, golden framed face filled his sight.

"Martin? You want some ice chips?"

The suggestion made him realize that his mouth was bone dry. He tried to say yes, but it sounded more like a croak. The form retreated and he heard a rustling noise just before the icy goodness slipped past his lips. Martin sighed with delight.

"How are ya doing, champ?" a vaguely familiar voice asked.

"Jack?" he mumbled around the second spoonful of ice chips which seemed to help his thoughts come together. "What . . .?"

Then it came to him in bits and pieces and Martin tried to sit up. His broken collarbone chose that moment to make itself known and he yelped at the sharp pain.

"Don't move so fast, Martin. Your shoulder and arm are bound up and you have a concussion." Samantha arranged some pillows and found the button to raise him to a sitting position.

"God, I feel like shit," he mumbled, carefully maneuvering his IV laden hand to his pounding head. He dared to roll his head sideways and attempted a smile for Samantha. The sight of her caused the heart monitor to flutter.

"Hey there," she said with a smile.

"You look great," he replied. Then he looked beyond to another face he recognized. "Hey. You're okay?" he said to Ezra. "What happened?" When Ezra stood, the blood on his shirt became clearly visible. "Shit! Where's . . ." he strained to see the adjacent bed sparking a galaxy of stars to explode in his head. Moaning, he sank back and slammed his eyes shut until he could ride out the agony. A southern-tinged voice soothed his head and gave him something on which to concentrate outside his discomfort.

"Mr. Tanner will be fine. He has not yet chosen to join us at this juncture." Martin forced one eye open and peered at the bloody agent. Ezra shifted and attempted to straighten the ruined shirt. "I assure you that the stains you see are not from me. They are courtesy of Mr. Wu's trained behemoth."

Martin frowned. "You always talk like that?"

The rugged blond man next to Ezra – Larabee, was it? - let out a short, hard laugh. "'Fraid so."

"What about Tanner?"

"Vin's going to be okay." Larabee glanced down and Martin realized that his twin must be right in the next bed. He forced his other eye open and, slowly this time, turned his head aside. Samantha took a step back so he could see the profile of his look-alike. There wasn't much to see

above the wide cervical collar and Martin felt strangely disappointed that he couldn't sense the man. He wondered if the odd mental conversation he'd had with Tanner just before things went to hell was a figment of his imagination; a little voice inside told him otherwise. Martin involuntarily shuddered as flashes of memory raced through his mind intertwined with a woman screaming. What did it mean?

"Ezra, you said the guy that hired you was Jong Wu?" Chris asked.

"Yes. Did you find him?"

"We can't find anything on him," Jack said. "We found his name tied to some Full Moon holdings, but we can't find anything on him. No identification of any kind. He doesn't exist on paper as far as we can tell."

"Forensics got some partial prints and they're running them now. It may take awhile." Larabee turned to the still form on the other bed.

Martin felt his gaze fall on what little bit he could see of Vin Tanner's lax face, the distinct feeling of familiarity settling over him once again.

"I think I know him," Martin said softly. "From where, I can't quite figure out."

Samantha raised an eyebrow and glanced over at Tanner. "You said that before, to Danny."

"JD's looking into that as we speak," Larabee said. "And he's very good and finding things."

"Victor's on his way from California," Samantha said. "The nurse told me."

Martin's heart skipped. "My dad? From California?"

"I left a message at his office." Jack scrubbed his eyes. "I didn't think he'd respond that fast. Sorry."

"Actually, I'm looking forward to his arrival," Martin said flatly, turning his aching head to face the other bed. "I have questions."

## Chapter Twelve

When Chris Larabee left the emergency room he suddenly felt the stress of the last few days clamp down on his shoulders. There must have been some physical sign of his bone-deep weariness because Malone nudged him with an elbow as soon as they'd given Buck and Danny the go-ahead to check on their teammates.

"I'll buy you a coffee. The good stuff's in the nurses' break room."

Chris willingly followed, telling the others that he'd be right back.

Once they were alone in the break room Jack waited until Chris took a sip of the bracing brew.

"I think they need to be under guard," the FBI team leader said. "Until we find this Wu character or find out the Triad's intentions, I think they're still at risk."

Chris leaned against the counter and grimaced at the reminders his achy body gave him. "I agree. We need to debrief this afternoon," he glanced at his watch. "Jesus, is it only two-thirty? It seems like midnight."

Jack chuckled. "Once Tanner and Martin get into a room, we'll set up a guard schedule between us and meet up at my office. There are more resources for us to work with there and there's a couch to catch a nap."

Nodding, Larabee massaged his neck. "JD's working on that already. He's hooked into the internet on the hospital network." He noticed Jack's mouth open, a question clearly on his tongue, but it never came out. Chris chuckled. "I've learned not to ask how he gets a lot of his information. He's never wrong and what shows up in court always sticks."

"Enough said, then. Let's fill in the others."

On their return to the waiting room, Chris dropped down next to JD who barely acknowledged his boss' arrival. By his lack of reaction, Chris knew his young agent was hot on an electronic trail. He could hear Jack, who stood behind him, talking with Vivian.

"Whatcha got?" Chris asked tiredly.

"You aren't gonna believe this, Chris. Lookit." Dunne's fingers flew over the keys of the laptop. A document popped onto the screen. "Here's Martin's birth certificate. See the doctor's name? And the time of birth?"

It suddenly grew silent behind him and Larabee felt Malone's physical presence at his back.

The electronic version of the document was crisp and clear, easily read except for the scribble of the doctor's signature. 'Dr. Brian C. Beauchamp' was typed below the unreadable writing. The date of birth was May 24, 1978, the time 4:36 AM. The certificate bore an electronic seal of certification from the County of Alexandria, Virginia. The father was listed as Victor Edward Fitzgerald.

JD continued. "Now here's Vin's."

Another certificate popped up, this one obviously a scanned copy of a paper original. Fold lines and worn edges were clearly visible on this document. The birth date and time was May 24, 1978, time 4:45 AM. The doctor's signature looked very similar, but the name was exactly the same: Dr. Brian C. Beauchamp. The gold Dallas County, Texas, certification seal was easily readable.

Dunne placed the documents side by side on his screen. "Now how do you suppose the same doctor was in Virginia and Texas on the same day at the same time?" JD asked brightly, the joy of discovery clear in his eyes as he regarded Chris.

"Jesus," Chris whispered. "Vin's mom is listed as Kelly Ann Tanner, father Victor E. Fitzgerald. Martin's mother, though, is listed as Katherine Elizabeth Fitzgerald."

"Well I'll be damned," Jack mumbled from Chris' shoulder.

"I have Dr. Beauchamp's home phone number, too," JD added. "He's retired now, in Texas . I've traced his life all the way back to his birthplace – also in Texas . Other than med school, he's never left the Lone Star State ."

"Before we call Dr. Beauchamp, why don't you see what you can find on his financial situation in, say, 1978?" Chris requested with a raised brow in Jack's direction.

"Like around . . . May?" Jack added.

JD smiled broadly. "You got it."

"But you need to start on Wu, too," Chris admonished half-heartedly.

Dunne's smile never faltered. "Already in progress, Chris. Just waiting' for some . . . um . . . info." The smile faltered, replaced with an expression that stated 'You Don't Want To Know'. "I found the birth certificates while I was waiting'."

Chris shook his head and snorted, knowing better than to inquire any further. He then rose to talk to the others and arrange a guarding schedule. Jack stopped him with a light hand.

"Is that boy looking for a job change?" Malone asked.

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Samantha and Buck offered to take the first shift of watching over the hospitalized agents allowing the others to debrief, clean up and figure out the next step. With Martin more or less awake she felt compelled to stay until Vin came around, too. Buck offered to drop Ezra at their hotel promising to return as soon as his team mate was fed and settled somewhere.

She glanced at her watch and calculated that she'd been at this hospital for nearly eight hours. Stretching, Samantha knew she didn't need the timepiece to tell her that – she ached everywhere. Finally in a regular room that better dampened outside noise and had a window to the outside world, she was able to relax a bit more and started taking notes on the staff to familiarize herself with them and their schedule.

Martin was lucid each time he woke up and was told he would be released the next morning. Vin, however, needed to stay until he came around fully, which should be fairly soon as he was gradually growing more restless.

Whenever Martin was awake, she noticed him studying his roommate. He was more than just curious. Samantha could tell that something was bothering him deeply. Other than the comment about knowing him, she was unable to draw out much more. She didn't think he was being secretive; she got the impression that Martin didn't know the basis of this unnerving feeling and that was what bothered him.

A sigh made her look up from her notes. Martin's eyes fluttered open and he automatically turned his head toward her and smiled.

"Hi again," he said.

"Hey," she responded, putting the notes aside and rising. "Want to sit up?"

"Yeah."

She adjusted the bed but could tell that he still wasn't comfortable.

"Need another pillow?"

Martin frowned. "No, actually, I think I need to use the bathroom."

"Want me to get a nurse?" The only thing left attached to him was a sole IV keeping him hydrated. The doctor had instructed that he could get up and move around and this was the first time he was so inclined.

"Nah, I'm good." He dropped his legs over the edge of the bed. His head swam. "Just let me sit here a second and get my bearings first."

Samantha maneuvered the wheeled IV stand to within his reach. "I'll help you when you're ready."

He smiled and his eyes showed that long-missed twinkle of mischief. "I don't think we've been dating long enough to share normal bathroom behavior."

She laughed, thrilled to see his humor again. "Good point. How about I just help you to the door?"

Martin agreed. Taking it slow and easy he finally managed to drag the IV into the small bathroom and turn around. Samantha had held the gown closed for him since his one arm was useless and simply stayed close for moral support during the short walk.

"Thanks for protecting my dignity," he said with a tired grin.

Samantha leaned in close. "Forget dignity," she whispered. "I was avoiding the temptation to grab your ass."

His eyes widened and the grin grew. "Oooh, that's so not fair," he groaned, closing the door. "I may be in here longer than I thought." The door opened just a crack, the blue twinkle back. "Or maybe you can join me in a few minutes?"

"Ew, Martin!" she exclaimed, working to keep her laugh quiet. "I mean . . . ew!"

Laughing at getting in the last word, he shut the door. Samantha shook her head, chuckling, and moved to the side of Vin's bed. She was pleased to see eye movement against closed lids and other signs that he was waking up. He groaned. She laid her hand lightly on his forehead, hoping it would keep him from moving his neck too much.

Finally, the man's eyelids peeled apart revealing unfocussed blue. He blinked rapidly a few times before locking his eyes on her, squinting. She brushed back his short hair and smiled down. "Hey there."

Vin stared and she saw his forehead furrow. His mouth worked dryly.

"Oh, wait a sec." She turned and retrieved the mostly melted ice chips and fished out a few clumps with a fresh spoon. "Here."

His cracked lips parted with the touch of the cool spoon and he sighed contentedly, closing his eyes for a moment. She adjusted the head of the bed so he sat up a little more and spooned in another chip. When it was gone his eyes opened and found her again.

"Are ya an angel?" he croaked.

"An angel?" Samantha laughed. "I have to admit, I've never been called that before!"

Just then the room's door swept open and the imposing figure of Victor Fitzgerald stepped inside, his wife right behind. Katherine gasped and slipped around him as her husband stopped and surveyed the room with disapproving eyes. From behind the bathroom door the sound of the toilet flushing seemed unusually loud as did the running water in the sink.

"Why doesn't he have a private room?" The Deputy Director snapped, giving the closed bathroom door a glare. "Where's the doctor?" Samantha took a step back and started to speak but Victor did not give her the chance. "What the hell happened, Agent Spade? Where's Jack?"

Katherine had slipped between Samantha and the bed. Samantha heard her breath catch and glanced over to see Martin's mother reach out and stroke Vin's hair.

“Wait a minute,” Samantha started. Then the bathroom door opened, drawing everyone's attention.

Everything froze as a sharp chill stabbed the room. Martin stood in the bathroom doorway with a white knuckled grip on the IV stand and his eyes defiantly fastened on his father.

Victor's gaze snapped from Martin to Vin and back to Martin, speechless. He took a sideways step and let the door swing shut behind him.

It was Katherine that put everything into motion again with her sharp gasp. “Oh!” she breathed as she snatched her hand back from Vin's head. The spell broken, Samantha turned to see Vin's wide and completely confused eyes following Katherine's abrupt withdrawal. Samantha's heart clenched.

No one had discussed the birth certificate discovery with Martin yet, not sure his head was clear enough up at this point to allow information sink in. Samantha had come to her own conclusions with the information, and Victor Fitzgerald was at the heart of her scenario. She turned to glower at Victor.

“Dad.” Martin's voice was cold, hard, flat, his glare unflinching. Samantha had never heard that tone from him before.

“Martin,” Victor gaped, the shock and surprise slowly draining from his face. “I . . .”

“Martin?”

Katherine Fitzgerald's voice was a choked whisper. Samantha glanced over and saw her suddenly pale. Samantha automatically reached out and supported the woman's closest elbow. She could feel Katherine trembling under her hand. Unlike Victor's glances between the two men that were in a nearly panicked motion, Katherine's stares had become deep and caring, caressing each injured man with a mother's concern.

And then the tears began.

-----

Vin wasn't at all sure he was really awake – if he was, he didn't want to be anymore. The sight of the golden-framed face hovering over him had been pleasant at first but suddenly, things had changed.

The previous quiet of the room had been replaced in a heartbeat by hysterical crying and demanding voices. He clamped his eyes closed in an effort to lessen the input to his overtaxed and weary system, but it wasn't working. Vin's chest squeezed tighter and tighter and he was sure the soft collar was choking him. He gasped for breath and tried to focus his scattered concentration on the simple act of drawing air.

His entire torso throbbed mercilessly and the collar engulfing his neck was suffocating. The air in the room felt cave-like in its heaviness. Any motion brought stabbing pain and his desire to simply flee grew exponentially with each passing second. His hands fumbled at his neck; they felt heavy and clumsy.

And it was getting hard to breathe.

Then an easy calm fell over his mind like bright warmth and suddenly, the loudness, the emotion and the suffocating room were nudged into the background.

*'It's okay,'* a familiar voice assured him. *'Nothing here can hurt you.'*

*'No air . . .'*

He felt a hand on his own and latched on, holding tightly as if it were a lifeline. The touch was warm and tingled slightly on contact.

*'You're safe, Vin. Just breathe. There's plenty of air, trust me.'*

And Vin did. Finally, the pictures and the thoughts in his mind began to lay down in some semblance of order and he could feel his body relax. He turned his mind to the hysterical crying and felt the question arise.

*'That's my mother. The screaming woman is my mother.'*

And although a vision of another woman filled Vin's mind with the word 'mother', he knew that some puzzle piece had been clicked in place in the mind of his twin.

And that's what they were, he realized instantly. Twins. Vin then dared to open his eyes again and found that he was looking into a mirror.

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All Samantha found she could do was put her body physically between Martin and his parents. Martin's mother was fighting a losing battle with demons long held back and it appeared that Victor had seen this scenario before because although the woman was raging in his face, the 'I told you so!' frequent and blasting, Victor simply stood there and absorbed it stoically. The expression on his face was battle-worn and weary.

One glance at Martin told Samantha that this was new for him, though. Everything he'd mentioned to her about his proper and lady-like mother did not apply to the tempest before them.

Martin, after the initial shock of his mother's tantrum wore off, seemed to take it in stride and shrug it off and instead, focused his attention on Vin.

It wasn't long before a pair of nurses burst into the room with the tall form of Buck Wilmington following in their wake.

"What's going on in here?" the older of the two nurses snapped as she and her cohort flanked Vin's bed. "This is unacceptable. You need to leave, now."

"Don't be ridiculous, I'm his father!" As he chastised the nurses, Victor made an effort to corral his raging wife in his arms. Katherine seemed to be winding down and accepted the embrace. "You can't throw me out!"

"Guess again," Buck said, taking a firm stance between the elder Fitzgeralds and the others. The way he stood, with arms crossed, booted feet slightly apart and a face set in stone, was impressive. There wasn't anything left of the jovial man Samantha had been working with all day. This Agent Wilmington was an immovable force that wasn't to be messed with. Samantha moved forward and stood next to him to make a united front. "This isn't helping anyone," Buck said lowly. "Take it somewhere else until you're in control."

"Who are you? I'll have you removed!" Victor barked as he tried to quiet his wife.

"I don't think so." Two uniformed hospital security guards arrived, the pair comprising their own zip code. "They stay. You need to go."

"What?" Victor roared.

"You heard them, dad, mom." Martin, still holding tight to Vin's hand as the nurses checked vital signs, tilted his head to face his parents. Buck and Samantha parted enough to give their team mate a clear sight path. "Not the time or place. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"But you can't . . ."

"I can and I am. I'm a full-fledged adult and can make my own decisions. Tomorrow. Good night."

The door swept open again and a doctor entered, stopping just inside to avoid hitting the wall of security. He looked around in irritation.

"I need this room cleared," the doctor ordered.

The uniforms flanked the Fitzgeralds and, without touching them, encouraged their departure. By then, Katherine had been reduced to nothing but tears. Victor put a protective arm around her shoulders and with amazing gentleness, guided her out to the hall without another word.

The tension in the room dissipated with their departure.

“You, too,” the doctor snapped at Buck and Samantha.

One of the nurses spoke over her shoulder as she adjusted Vin’s bedding. “It’s okay, Dr. Albright. They’re the guards.”

Acknowledging them with a short nod the doctor stepped by them and approached Vin. Martin stood at the head of the bed, his back near the wall, and released Vin’s hand when the doctor approached.

“Good to see you awake, Mr. Tanner,” Dr. Albright said pleasantly. “Quite a drama to wake up to. I’m sure that little fracas didn’t help your headache.” He checked Vin’s eyes.

Vin croaked an agreement about the headache.

Samantha turned her attention to Martin, realizing he was against the wall to keep his rump from being exposed. At the moment, she could see him eyeing his bed, the IV pole and the nurses as he tried to figure out how he’d get across the small space with dignity intact. She worked her way to his side, reached behind him and drew the gown shut. “I got it,” she said softly. “Grab your IV and let’s get you out of the way.”

For the first time since Victor’s arrival she looked deeply into his eyes and saw the pain there. She knew it wasn’t simply physical pain and she felt her eyes sting. He was reluctant to move away at first, but Vin seemed more at ease and managed a pitiful smile. Apparently satisfied for the moment, Martin stiffly shuffled to his bed.

“Is he all right?” Buck asked from the doorway.

“Yeah, thanks Buck.” Samantha answered as she helped Martin to lie down and then adjusted his blankets.

“Thanks, man,” Martin sighed. “Really.”

“Anytime.” After checking the hallway, Wilmington moved a chair by the door and settled in, his eyes appreciating the attributes of the younger blonde nurse as she worked with Vin. That irritating grin Samantha had grown used to reappeared, this time directed at the rear end of another target. She chuckled and shook her head.

“What?” Martin asked.

The confrontation and other events had clearly taken its toll. Martin looked exhausted.

“I was just thinking about how Agent Wilmington there reminds me of Danny.”

“Say it ain’t so. Two of him?” Martin sank into the pillow and rubbed his eyes.

“Hey,” Samantha countered, capturing his hand between hers. “They’re saying the same thing about you, buster.”

### Chapter Thirteen

Vivian Johnson and Nathan Jackson arrived to take their turn at guard duty a couple of hours later. Buck and Samantha brought them up to date on the unfolding drama involving Martin's parents. Vin finally had received pain medication and was asleep and Martin fell asleep shortly thereafter. They expressed their impatience that the two men hadn't yet had a chance to talk.

Reluctantly, Samantha and Buck agreed to get some sleep themselves. Viv and Nate had printed copies of the birth certificates JD had found and were prepared to fill in Martin and Vin if the opportunity arose. It didn't. Even with the frequent visits by the nurses to check their vitals, the brothers slept soundly.

Brothers. Nathan shook his head with the unfamiliar idea. That part of this case was so out of left field it made him chuckle.

"What's so funny?" Vivian asked, just returning from a stroll around the hallway.

"This whole thing is funny. Or maybe bizarre is a better word."

"I have to agree with you on that," she said with a sigh. "I just hope we get to go over this birth certificate thing with them before Victor returns. It may answer some questions for them."

"I hope so. It did for me, but it also created new questions. Lots of them."

The agents spoke quietly of their relationships with the two sleeping agents, their own families and other things until the early hours. It was past three in the morning when Chris and Josiah arrived to relieve them. The file folders they carried did not go unnoticed.

"Our missing Chinaman is becoming quite interesting," Chris told them in a hushed tone. "There was hit on a partial print taken from the truck."

"So who is he?" Vivian asked.

Chris rubbed his eyes and Nathan wondered when his boss last slept.

"Still don't have a name," Larabee said, "but the prints match those found in an Interpol interface. It seems our mystery man is none other than Dragon's Claw."

There were several moments of silence as the information was absorbed.

"The political assassin?" Vivian finally said. "I thought they had nothing on him. No prints, photos, nothing."

"They don't, really," Chris confirmed. "One time, and only one time in over a decade's worth of killings, did Dragon's Claw get sloppy. A partial print was found on a shell casing at an assassination in Luxembourg. Until now, there was no name or face."

"How many assassinations is the Dragon's Claw credited with?" Nathan asked.

"Eleven for sure. Three more are possibly his. It's been a dozen years since the last attributed case." Josiah lowered himself in to the inadequate plastic hospital chair. He extended his long legs into the center of the room. "The man was a complete mystery until now. Apparently he has retired from the assassination game and works for the Triad."

"You gonna tell the boys?" Nathan asked, tipping his head toward the beds.

Chris' lips twitched into a crooked grin. "It's only fair. Vin's gonna be itchy about being under guard as it is. Did you talk to them yet?"

"Haven't had the chance." Nathan moved to the door. "Guess you two get the honors. Did you get any sleep at all, Chris?"

Josiah's rumbling laugh answered the question for him. Nathan scowled at his boss.

Chris flicked an irritated wave at Nathan with one hand as he rubbed his eyes with the other. "I'll get a chance after breakfast. Now the two of you get out of here. I do know that Agent Johnson has a family that needs attention."

Vivian gathered her purse. "Thanks and I'll see you tomorrow." She glanced at her watch with a yawn. "I mean later today. Good night."

Nathan held the door open for her and then followed her out of the room.

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The arrival of breakfast woke Vin abruptly and jarred the ache in his head to life once again. Blinking rapidly, he raised his hand and felt the tug of an IV on his forearm. He hissed at the sharp jab caused by the jolted needle and tried to raise his other hand instead. Something felt wrong about that, too, and as he tried to make sense of the bulky wrapping on that arm Chris' voice again split his attention.

"It's broken, Pard. You finally awake?" Chris' head and shoulders leaned into his view. The brief attempt to turn toward his boss resulted in even more pain.

"Damn, you really are a pain in the neck," Vin mumbled.

Chris chuffed. "Shit, Vin, your gratitude is astounding."

Vin felt the head of the bed slowly rise. "But I really do have neck pain. What is this damn thing?" He fingered the cervical collar with the fingers that projected from the soft cast.

"You've got a cracked vertebra in your neck. You'll need to wear this for awhile, but you'll be okay."

Vin pursed his lips in thought and frowned a few seconds. Then his eyes widened and he started to turn his head to look past Chris, but stopped short as he hissed in pain.

"That'll teach ya to move quick for awhile," Chris chastised. At the same time stepped back to clear Vin's line of sight to the next bed.

"You all right?"

The oddly familiar voice encouraged Vin to turn again, this time with caution, until his gaze locked with that of his mirror image. Several seconds passed before Vin replied, "Yeah, I'm fine." He couldn't help but break into what he knew was a goofy grin. "How about you?"

"I'm getting out this morning. I'm good."

A few more seconds of curious silence reigned before they both spoke at once. "What the hell . . ."

Chris and Josiah burst out laughing. It took another collection of seconds for Chris to intercede. "Here. This may help you a bit." He dropped copies of the birth certificates on each of the twins' laps.

After they looked over the papers, Martin was the first to comment. "I see my dad's hand all over this," he growled. "I'm sorry, Vin."

"You ain't your father. No need to apologize." His voice brightened. "Or should I say, you ain't our father? Looks like I'm the little brother!"

"You should probably get DNA testing done, too," Josiah threw in. "Although it's obvious you're closely related. Maybe it'll help you get a grip on this?"

"The only grip I want is on my father's neck," Martin muttered.

Vin grinned. "And I thought big brothers were supposed to be a good influence."

"And little brothers are supposed to be annoying. You seem born to the part."

The mood shifted when they both laughed.

"Now really, how are you feeling?" Martin asked seriously.

"Fine," Vin automatically replied. The dual eye rolls from both Chris and Josiah were impossible to miss.

"Well," Martin started, "Although your teammates' reactions throw considerable doubt on that answer, I think you realize that I already know better."

The two regarded each other for a long stretch. Vin, feeling the presence of his sibling, knew what Martin said was true. The feeling was one of closeness and was something he was familiar with; he'd felt it before with one other. He glanced to Chris, not sure he should voice the experience.

Instead, he turned back to Martin. "You have some pain, too," Vin stated.

"You seem – comfortable – with this – thing," Martin's fumbled words indicated the experience was new for him as he waved his uninjured hand between the two of them.

"You'll get used to it."

Josiah shifted his gaze to Chris. "Maybe they'd like to talk, boss?"

Chris started as if jarred from a deep thought. "Oh. Yeah. Sure. There's one other thing you two need to know about, though." He proceeded to fill them in about the findings connected with Wu's fingerprint.

"Dragon's Claw? You sure?" Vin arched his eyebrows in interest.

"Does that mean we're still under guard?" Martin asked.

"For now, yes. Josiah'll be just outside. I have to get on the horn with Jack and figure out the logistics." Chris followed Josiah to the door where he paused, settling his intense gaze on Vin. "This is serious, Vin. You both are most likely in this man's sights."

"I know." Vin turned his attention to his boss and friend to convince him that he knew very well where he – they – stood. "I also know that splitting the target would make trapping him harder."

They locked gazes for a long moment and then Chris nodded understanding and slipped from the room.

"Splitting the target?" Martin asked. "You mean separating us, don't you?"

"Yeah." Vin lay back and studied the ceiling for a moment before speaking. "There's some things you got to know about me," he said as he pushed the constant, throbbing pain of his injuries aside in his mind. "Looks like we'll be in this together for a spell so we need to know each other's strengths and weaknesses. It may make a difference." He rolled his head aside with a twitch of pain to meet Martin's eyes.

The sound of his spiked heartbeat at the discomfort must have struck a chord with Fitzgerald because the agent immediately sat up, slid from his bed and shuffled over to Vin's. After a moment's fumbling at the bedside rail with his one working hand Vin reached out and provided the second hand needed to drop the rail. Martin hitched a hip on the mattress so Vin wouldn't have to turn to see him.

"Start talkin'," Martin said.

For the first time in Vin's own memory he verbally laid out a description of his life, putting together more sentences in a row than he could ever recall. He quickly skimmed the parts of his life from when his mother died when he was five to when he joined the Army at seventeen and all the foster homes in between, choosing, instead, to touch on his struggles with dyslexia and how that contributed to make him a deadly sharpshooter and Army Ranger. He saw this as an explanation as

to why he knew what they faced; why he, between the two of them, would probably know better what Wu – Dragon’s Claw – could do, and how.

Martin sat quietly through the whole story not once dropping his eyes or looking away. An occasional frowning along his forehead showed he was absorbing it all and forming opinions. Vin couldn’t feel any negativity coming from him with their indescribable connection, but could see – and feel – the uneasiness the connection itself caused to Martin.

“Don’t take long to get used to it,” Vin offered at the end of his story, his voice rough from talking. “I’m used to it, I guess. Ma ‘n I had the same sort of thing and for some reason, Chris ‘n me. Not as strong with Chris as it is with you, though.”

Martin shifted, his eyes shining as he gave a small smile. “I’ve felt it with Samantha, too,” he admitted. “Not nearly as strong as it is with you, either.” Then his expression turned dark. “Wonder why I don’t feel it with my dad . . . our dad . . .” he corrected. “That is, if he is our father. I guess that’s another issue, isn’t it?”

Vin returned the smile. “One thing at a time. Not sure I’m up for that angle yet.”

“I agree,” Martin said softly. “Now about this Wu character. . .” Fitzgerald then told Vin what he saw as his strengths, also skipping over a childhood that Vin knew was a polar opposite of his own. Martin’s grades in college and the Academy were also vastly unlike his own struggle to simply graduate from high school, but his brother’s ability to reason, read a crime scene as well as people and connect events with leaps in logic were very similar.

Together, it would be possible to bring down the infamous Dragon’s Claw. It was their physical state that concerned him. Together, they barely made up one fully functioning person. The lacking parts were where the rest of their teams had to fill in.

And there was still the Victor Fitzgerald issue to consider.

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Martin felt his headache growing. It hadn’t started when he and Vin traded history, nor had it started when Chris and Josiah began feeding them more and more information on both Dragon’s Claw and the logistics about an around the clock guard schedule. He thought the twinge would lessen as he filled out discharge papers and made arrangements for Vin to stay with him in their plan to stand side by side.

But that wasn’t the case. In fact, the headache blossomed more whenever he thought of the confrontation he knew was coming with his father. Their father? Martin knew it was inevitable and soon in coming. He also knew it wouldn’t be fair to face Victor alone; Vin had the right to be there. With that, he began his campaign to get his long lost brother released with him while Larabee and Sanchez helped Vin get mobile.

Chris and Josiah were joined late in the morning by a bleary-looking Samantha and a smirking Danny. Martin couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow and rest his eyes on his paramour. To his total surprise, a wash of pink cloaked her cheeks. His surprise and pleasure must have showed on his face because as soon as Danny and Samantha stepped in Martin’s hospital room, Danny glanced between the two of them and chuckled. And so did Vin. Martin felt like he had no secrets from these people.

“When’s Vin getting out?” Martin snapped, covering the emotion obviously on his sleeve.

Samantha, obviously feeling the silent examination, regained her composure after a dirty look was thrown Danny’s way. She tucked loose hair behind an ear. “The paperwork is in motion. Jack’s not thrilled about you two going to your apartment, Martin, and I have to say, neither am I.”

Martin winced as he bent down to tie his running shoe. "It's the best way. We can't let on that we know who he is."

Vin, after struggling to sit on the edge of his bed to allow his legs to dangle, agreed. "It's the only way. Chris? Did you get the schematics I need?"

Larabee and Josiah had taken flanking positions to Vin as he fought to keep from swaying.

"Yeah, we got 'em. JD's bringing 'em over. You sure you're up to this?"

"Got to be," Vin mumbled. "I sure don't plan on bein' ambushed by his schedule. And we all know he'll probably strike when we're at our weakest."

Vin's doctor came in for a final once over as the room's phone rang. Martin's constant headache flared at the irritation and he fumbled a moment with the receiver before pressing it to his ear.

"Fitzgerald," he automatically replied.

"Martin?" Victor's voice sounded tired. "I understand you're going home today."

"Yeah I am, as soon as Vin gets released."

"Oh, yes, of course." There was a pause. Martin heard Vin's doctor quietly asking questions in the background along with Vin's mumbled replies. He also felt his grip tighten on the phone as he wrestled with his mixed feelings regarding his father. "Martin, you know we need to talk. Can we do that soon?"

"Sure." Martin glanced at Vin and worked to keep his voice neutral. "I'll call you when we get settled at my place. I take it you're staying in the city?"

"Yes. Your mother and I are at the Palace."

Martin realized that for the first time ever in his memory, his father sounded unsure. Scared and unsure. That realization did little to ease his sense of betrayal, but it went a long way to make him feel unbalanced. Victor Fitzgerald never showed fear. "I'll let you know when we're settled. Probably tonight."

As he hung up, he found Vin's blue gaze fixed on his from over the doctor's shoulder. Leaving the relative safety of the hospital made Martin feel like he was walking into a myriad of traps but he knew he wouldn't be alone.

## Chapter Fourteen

The rifle hadn't been touched in years. It hung as a shrine – oiled, shined and encased in a sealed glass display case – amongst the numerous trophies frozen in time. A tribute to one man's skill and daring, the display filled the room with well cared for animal heads, framed newspaper articles and other preserved mementos. Without the rifle, nothing else would be hanging here. The rifle was the central focus of the entire display, lovingly encased in velvet, glass and mahogany

Jong Wu – Dragon's Claw – plucked a ring of items from an elaborate hook near the door and began rolling the items on the ring between his fingers like a macabre rosary. From the ring dangled a dozen mummified human fingers worn smooth by the loving manipulation. Wu walked slowly around the den as he worked the trophy ring, gazing at his collection without really seeing it as he gently rubbed each jerked digits' pliable and surprisingly soft skin.

Wu was disturbed by his fractured thoughts.

*'I've been too distant from the game,' he reasoned. 'I've become addled. Stagnant. Lost.'*

The memory of his hectic escape was unnerving in its sloppiness. He wasn't used to sloppy. Dragon's Claw was used to clean efficiency and he now realized how far he'd been drawn off track from his true self. He had been lucky in his knowledge about the old, rarely used passage under the warehouse district and even luckier that it was unblocked. Many of the first tunnels had collapsed. Wu did not like relying on luck – it usually ran out.

As his eyes flowed over each success that hung on the wall he was comforted by the feeling of power the remains in his grasp gave him. Wu knew that he had become what he swore he never would – a general. In doing so, his power and skills were now diluted as orders were passed down to underlings. In relying on others for so long he'd lost his true power and therefore had become a slave to luck. He didn't like it. Wu knew he had to recapture his self respect before he could remind his peers that he was still someone to reckon with, someone with true power that deserved respect.

Dragon's Claw knew that true power came from one's hand absorbing the essence of life – for the farmer, it was soil. For the blacksmith, iron. For the hunter, it was blood. Some called it getting dirty. He recognized it for what it was – being reborn.

It had been too long since he'd gotten his hands dirty. Gripping the ring of fingers in one hand, he fingered the display case lock with the other until the face of the case sprung opened. Wu reached inside, holding his breath. The metal was cold under his hand at first, but as he caressed the rifle it grew warm and seemed to come alive. His breath returned. Dragon's Claw would be reborn.

Wu smiled as he lifted his old friend from its velvet coffin and his mind calmed. With the calm came his plan that would resurrect Dragon's Claw from his soul.

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Ezra peered from the hotel window, deep in conflicted thought. The introduction of Martin Fitzgerald into the mix of things confused things. He was genuinely happy that Vin had discovered family, but why did it have to include Victor Fitzgerald?

When he had first joined the FBI Ezra had realized from the first day Quantico that he didn't fit the typical mold. Looking back, he was surprised he'd lasted as long as he did. To him, integrity took many forms and crossed many blurred lines. To the FBI agents he'd worked with, integrity was black or white but clearly defined by the FBI.

Ezra snorted and shook his head. If there was ever a man that defined FBI integrity, it was Victor Fitzgerald. If anyone didn't fit the man's mold of how an agent should act, that agent shouldn't be trusted. Unorthodox was unacceptable. Atlanta had proven that. If it weren't for Chris Larabee's impeccable timing Ezra was pretty sure he would have eventually wound up fired or in jail.

Victor Fitzgerald and Vin Tanner were about as opposite as two men could be and Ezra couldn't help but wonder where Martin fell in that mix. He wanted to bask in Vin's happiness but the shadow of the Deputy Director made that impossible. Until they returned to Denver, he was going to have to keep his distance and keep his eyes open. Until he knew where Martin Fitzgerald stood, Ezra would be careful.

And on top of all this, there was Dragon's Claw. Ezra remembered reading a profiler's summation of the assassin at Quantico as well as list of kills attributed to him. He was pleased that his instincts about the man had been spot on – the bottomless violence he saw in Wu's eyes was real. Ezra shuddered with the knowledge that the man was still out there.

"Hey, Ez?" Josiah's resonant voice rolled from the main area of the suite. "How're you doin', son?"

Ezra collected his thoughts and put them on a mental shelf, chuckling at his teammate's words.

"I do not believe you have ever claimed to be my father, Josiah." Ezra smiled as he turned from the window and walked stiffly into the living room. Josiah's eyes sparkled with amusement. "But in answer to your inquiry, I do think that I will eventually be able to move with comfort. Right now, however, it is merely a goal I hope to achieve sooner rather than later." He hissed as he lowered into a nicely padded wing chair.

Josiah provided a toothy grin. "Chris doesn't want you to be alone until they find this Dragon's Claw individual so for now you got me. And stay away from windows."

"And I am most comforted by your presence," Ezra sighed as he tried to find a comfortable position for his arm and shoulder. "So how goes the hunt? And how goes the reunion between Mr. Tanner and his long lost sibling?"

"I believe they are both getting released this afternoon and headed for Martin's apartment. They'll have company, too."

Ezra wrinkled his nose in distaste. "The illustrious Deputy Director Fitzgerald?"

Josiah grinned again. "Among others. From the sounds of him, I think that Chris will be challenged to keep his cool. I'd love to be a fly on the wall at that meeting."

"I have a feeling that Victor Fitzgerald had some explaining to do, and I, for one, would love to hear that tale. I believe he is the only man in the world that could come up with a logical and sensible reason for separating twins. And I predict that Mr. Tanner's situation will have something to do with the Deputy Director's integrity."

Josiah frowned. "I don't follow you."

Ezra sighed. "Mr. Tanner's grievous childhood happened because Victor Fitzgerald did not want to look bad."

The big agent looked thoughtful. "Vin would be an embarrassment to him?"

"That's my interpretation of things, yes, knowing what I know of the Deputy Director."

Josiah slowly shook his head. "Pride can be a terrible burden," he said lowly.

"Yes, it can be, Mr. Sanchez. It can be."

A knock on the door silenced both men. Josiah drew his weapon from his holster and he motioned Ezra to stay put. Standing to one side of the main door, he asked. "Who is it?"

"Vivian Johnson."

Josiah moved a step forward and used the peep hole. Satisfied, he holstered his weapon, unlatched the door and pulled it open. Agent Johnson stepped in with two large albums under her arm.

"Good day, gentleman. I brought some mug shots for Agent Standish to pass the time."

"Wonderful," Ezra practically groaned. "And for whom am I looking?"

"Anyone, actually. We have some names from the two dirty marshals and those two gentlemen we detained at the courthouse, but they're lower level types. We were hoping you may recognize someone in here."

"I cannot think of a better way to spend my recuperative hours." Ezra's sarcasm was softened with a sigh.

"And we have an artist on the way so we can get a drawing of Jong Wu." Vivian plunked the albums down on the coffee table. "Finally, a picture of Dragon's Claw. Quite a coup, Agent Standish."

"This whole affair has had some surprising turns, Agent Johnson."

"That it has," she agreed. "That it has."

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It was late afternoon before Vin received clearance to leave the hospital. He had dozed off and on, his rest interrupted constantly by nurses checking for alertness. All Martin wanted to do was get home to some peace and quiet and get to know his twin a little more before facing his father. In the meantime, his own pain had become manageable and he was learning to function, again, without the use of his right arm.

Chris Larabee stayed right at Vin's side the entire time. From speaking with him, Martin knew that things were moving at a rapid pace at the office. Jack was directing the action and Martin understood that if circumstances were a bit different Chris and Jack would be constantly bumping heads. For now, though, the ATF team leader was content where he was. The man checked in often and was definitely still in the loop which, in turn, made Martin still feel involved with the investigation.

Martin had shooed Samantha home for a few hours of sleep. She promised to return to escort him home. Danny had returned to the office to work with JD on Wu's financials and would brief them when they got home.

And it seemed the more he tried to push the upcoming confrontation with his father to the back of his mind, the more it crept to the front. When the nurse finally arrived with two wheelchairs in the late afternoon, he had to hold back a whoop of joy.

Samantha appeared at the same time with clothes for both of them. A few minutes and lots of frustrated grumbling later Vin and Martin were dressed and ready to go. They both flushed with embarrassment when Chris needed help them both button the loose jeans. Sam commandeered one chair while Chris helped a very grumpy Vin into the other. The two men received more than their share of curious looks as they passed down the hallway side by side. Martin got the distinct

impression that if Vin's chin wasn't forced up by the cervical collar it would be buried in his chest. The impression deepened as they waited for the elevator.

A feeling of dread became very clear. Dread and something else . . . panic? Martin didn't have time to mull it over because when the elevator doors finally opened and revealed a packed car, the wave of panic washed over him in a cold douse. Samantha immediately turned the chair around and pulled Martin aboard, the crowd parting to make room.

Chris, though, didn't move. Instead he pulled Vin's chair back a bit and said, "We'll wait for the next one."

Relief quickly followed the stifling fear in Martin's mind.

"Hold the door," Martin barked as he rolled forward. The doors bumped the wheels of his chair before opening again. Samantha then jumped over and pushed him out the rest of the way. The doors whooshed closed behind them.

Without a word, Samantha pushed the button again and turned the chair around, stopping next to Vin.

Martin could see that his eyes were downcast.

*'Too closed in?'* Martin asked mentally, again marveling at how he'd adapted to this weird way of communication.

Vin turned stiffly and gave him a weak grin. *'Yeah.'*

"Vin doesn't like tight quarters," Chris said lowly to Samantha.

"Oh, okay," Samantha replied.

When the next car came, most of the people disembarked, allowing the two chairs to be pushed in with a little room to spare. Still, Martin saw Vin's knuckles whiten as he gripped the wheelchair handle with his one good hand and felt the wash of panic.

"I hate these things," Vin muttered.

"The elevator or the wheelchair?" Samantha asked.

"Both," Vin grumbled.

Martin reached over and sympathetically patted Vin's forearm. "Almost there," he said. The feeling of panic retreated.

They were met in the elevator bays by Nathan and Buck wielding body armor and accompanied by two huge security guards. They helped the two injured agents to don it as best they could right there in the hallway, receiving curious looks from hospital staff and visitors.

"Jack's waiting just outside the staff exit," Buck explained. "Not a lot of sniping opportunities that way."

Vin snorted. "You'd be surprised."

They started their journey down a long hallway. Agents flanked the two chairs and the guards lead the way.

"I didn't say there were no sniping opportunities," Buck told Vin. "After watching you these past years I've come to believe there's no such thing as a safe place."

"Aren't you supposed to be making them feel better?" Samantha chastised. "Remind me to not call you when I'm feeling low. Not that calling you would ever cross my mind anyway."

"Ouch!" Buck said, clutching at his heart.

"Well, Bucklin, it sounds like you've finally met someone immune to your animal magnetism," Vin croaked dryly.

Martin was enjoying the light hearted teasing but he also noticed that no one escaped the scrutiny of their escorts. Even Vin's eyes darted around, studying everything. The feeling of security, though, was foremost in his mind. There was a level of trust among them that was

comforting. As if reading his thoughts, Samantha's hand rested on his shoulder for a moment before she gave a reassuring squeeze.

Jack had the big SUV's doors open and waiting when their small group exited the building. With a little help, Martin and Vin were in the vehicle within seconds along with Samantha and Chris, and they were on their way. Nathan offered to collect all the medications and would join them at Martin's later.

*'Home,'* Martin thought. He felt Vin's gaze on him and turned to face his sibling.

Vin smiled slightly. *'Feels good to just be outta there,'* he remarked.

During the drive Samantha leaned forward and whispered in Martin's ear. The effect of her warm breath on his neck and the faint scent of her perfume coaxed a slow burn of desire deep inside. Instinctively, he reached up with his good hand and gently stroked her cheek. With that touch, he felt his blood grow hot and his groin stir.

"You okay, Junior?" Buck leaned forward from the back seat and eyed Vin. "You're squirming like a worm on a sidewalk."

"M fine," Vin mumbled, shifting in his seat.

"Do you need this other pillow . . . hey, are you alright? You're red." When Buck reached up to feel his forehead, Vin slapped his hand away.

"I'm fine, Buck!"

Martin froze and gave Vin a wide eyed stare. Then he felt his cheeks grow hot when he realized that Vin had felt his reaction to Samantha.

Something in the odd silence made Buck glance at Martin. Then he looked back to Vin, who looked like he was trying his best to curl up on himself and disappear. Buck put two and two together when he saw Martin snatch his hand back from Samantha's cheek like it was on fire, and the tall ATF agent's more than bemused expression reminded Martin as to why that man was compared to Danny.

Chris turned around and glared when Buck eventually broke out into laughter. "What's going on back there? Vin? You okay?"

"I said I'm fine!" he snapped, clearly embarrassed.

Martin couldn't help but feel guilty about Vin's predicament and knew the guilt was clear on his face because it made Buck laugh louder.

Fortunately, Samantha just sat back and looked at Buck like he was insane and hadn't figured out the situation.

Chris, though, must have either figured it out or 'read' Vin's thoughts because his famous glare- and- frown combination turned slowly into an eye-included grin before he turned to face forward again.

It took a minute or so for things to calm down. When they did, Martin apologized.

"Sorry," Martin said lowly.

*'No need,'* Vin replied. *'Guess there's more to this than I thought.'*

*'Welcome to my world,'* Martin grumbled.

They arrived at Martin's apartment building without incident - life threatening incident, anyway - and entered the secured parking area. Chris and Samantha visually swept the area and called the elevator. When it arrived, he held it open while the Buck, Vin and Martin exited the vehicle.

Vin and Martin walked slowly, injured arms side by side. Buck, Chris and Samantha walked behind.

"They look like a set a bookends, don't they?" Buck jibed.

“What would you know about bookends?” Samantha shot back. “I get the feeling that reading isn’t one of your favorite pastimes.”

Martin and Vin stepped to the back of the elevator and turned around.

“She’s gotcha there, Buck,” Vin snickered.

Martin didn’t feel the same wave of controlled panic from Vin this time as the elevator rose. There was a little bit of tense unease, but nothing like before. He figured it was because of the company with him.

When they reached Martin’s door they found JD and Danny waiting for them.

“I have those schematics,” JD said as he handed a very fat folder to Vin.

Martin opened the door. Buck and Danny entered first and cleared the rooms, dropping window curtains as they moved through. Then they let in the rest of the bunch.

“Where’s Ezra?” Vin asked.

“He’s tucked away with Josiah and Vivian,” Danny said, holstering his weapon.

“The best bait to bring out Wu would be me ‘n Ez, ya know,” Vin said softly to Chris. “We’d be able to ID him.”

“Yeah, we know, but you need to rest up a bit, Vin. You look like shit.”

“I ain’t tired.”

Chris pointed at the folder in Vin’s hands. “Tell ya what - you relax a bit and do your homework, then we’ll talk.”

“But . . .”

“Hey, I got an idea,” Martin said. “I’ll hunt down Dr. Beauchamp while you’re looking at that,” he pointed at the schematics. “When he’s ready to talk, we’ll sit down with the speaker phone and hear what he has to say.”

Vin narrowed his eyes, obviously suspicious.

*‘And you do look like shit.’*

*‘Looked in a mirror lately?’*

Martin and Vin chuckled at the same time. An annoyed look crossed Chris’ face as he grabbed Vin’s good arm. “Enough of that. Relax. Now.” He steered his friend down the only hallway. “There’s a guest room back here?”

“Den,” Martin corrected.

“I’ll show ‘em,” Danny offered, following the pair.

As the three of them disappeared, Samantha, arms crossed in front of her and looking resolute, nodded to the couch. “You too, Martin. The couch or your bed. They both have phones nearby.”

“I’m fine,” he told her. Even to his own ears he sounded unconvincing.

Her frown deepened, her expression clearly saying, ‘I know better and you know it.’

Sighing in defeat, he nodded. “My room, I guess. Y’all need the space out here.”

“‘Y’all’? Buck laughed. “Have you ever used that word before?”

Martin smiled, taking the jibe with grace. He took Samantha’s elbow and nudged her with his shoulder. “Hey, you gonna let him provoke an injured man?”

She started down the hall with her charge and snorted. “The best way to deal with his kind is to ignore them.”

“His kind’?” Buck protested to their retreating backs. “Whaddya mean by that?”

## Chapter Fifteen

Six thirty Sunday night in New York meant it was five thirty in Texas , Martin calculated. He'd eased into his own bed about an hour ago and hadn't managed one wink of sleep. The shoulder throbbed, as did his head, but Martin resolved to save the pain pill for when he'd called it a day. Samantha had other ideas and, surprised at the mother hen that came out in her, Martin agreed to 'quiet time' instead and was left alone after one chaste kiss.

Now, he grumbled to himself and fiddled with the edges of brace that aligned his collar bone. His body ached. Martin pushed up from the mattress and dropped his feet over the edge of the bed, waiting a moment for the floor to cease its undulations. The dim light that forced its way around the drawn curtains was good enough to see by and Martin was sure that any direct light from the outside would probably antagonize his headache. For now the near darkness was soothing.

Martin maneuvered to his feet with the goal of tracking down some Tylenol to take the edge off. As he stood gathering his balance, he saw the thin file folder about Dr. Beauchamp and decided to go with his thought to call the man. First, Tylenol.

As he shuffled to the bathroom and pawed through the cabinets, Martin tried to think of what he'd say.

*"Hi, I'm sure you don't remember me . . ."* Too demeaning.

*"Dr. Beauchamp? Do you remember delivering me and perhaps my brother, too, twenty-eight years ago?"* Too cheesy.

*"Hi, Doctor. Do you remember delivering twins in two different time zones twenty-eight years ago?"* Too confrontational.

Martin downed the pills dry, making the mistake of throwing his head back to position the pills at the back of his throat. He hissed at the resulting pain and gripped the edge of the sink with his free hand until the feeling dissipated. Glaring at the unhealthy looking reflection in the mirror, the agent eventually shoved off and shuffled his way back to the bed.

He lowered himself carefully down on the edge and regarded the phone. Finally, the pain somewhat receded and he flipped open the folder. The phone number teased him from the top page, the digits thoughtfully bolded by JD.

Martin took a fortifying breath and reached for the phone. All he had to say was, "Hi. My name is Martin Fitzgerald and I have some questions about my birth."

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Vin forced an eye open and started to roll his head to see read the clock on the low table next to him. The warning blitz of pain made him rethink the strategy. Instead, he shoved sideways, bracing his body against the back of the couch and rolled his entire body as one unit onto his uninjured – well, less injured – right side. The collar did a good job of keeping his neck in line with his spine but it still hurt. His mind felt fuzzy.

*'Hate those damn pills,'* he thought with rancor. Then he recalled the reason for the maneuver when he saw the glowing digital clock face. *'Six forty-five,'* he read. He'd been asleep for about an hour. Figuring it was enough for now, Vin slowly pushed himself upright and waited for his stomach to settle.

There was a soft tap on the door but Vin knew who it was before the door cracked open. "Come on," Martin said quietly. "I've got Dr. Beauchamp on the phone."

Vin arched his brows.

"You ready for this?" Martin asked, knowing the answer.

"Sure as shit am," Vin mumbled. He rose cautiously and approached the door, avoiding any jarring motions that would aggravate his neck and head. Vin had to smirk at the woeful sight the pair made in his mind's eye.

Martin chuckled as the thought/idea formed. "Ain't that the truth?" he agreed as they started across the hallway.

"Hey!" a voice called from the living room. They paused, Vin twisting aside to see the speaker. Jack Malone stood at the end of the short hall. "What are you two doing?" Samantha and Chris appeared at his shoulder as he finished the query.

Vin bristled. Martin placed a restraining hand on Vin's arm, calming him, as the three came down the hall.

"I called the doctor on the birth certificates. He's waiting on the phone."

"Oh," Jack said, surprised. "Um, do you want us to . . ." He pointed his thumb over his shoulder toward the living room.

Vin saw Samantha's questioning eyes on Martin and then glanced to Chris' unreadable expression. The fact that it was unreadable told Vin volumes; Chris was letting Vin decide without outside influence.

"Nah, it's fine," Vin said, "I may need help recallin' everything, my head's so frazzled from those meds."

"Meds that you need," Chris said, his expression softening. "Come on, let's get you seated before you fall down."

Samantha and Jack followed Martin into the bedroom and settled him on the bed. Martin spoke briefly on the phone and as Chris helped Vin into the only chair, Martin pushed a button on the phone base.

"You're on speaker phone now, Doctor. Vin's here."

"Howdy, doc," Vin said.

"Oh, oh. Yes. Well, I've retrieved my files from the safe, but I won't need them. I'll remember that day until I die." The Texas accent was soft and breathy, easily imagined as coming from an aged man. Papers rustled in the background. He cleared his throat and began.

"I knew your mother, Kelly, since the day she was born. I delivered her. I knew her family situation was tough – her mother was an alcoholic and died when Kelly was just a teenager. Her father – your grandfather – adored her but they were very poor. I followed Kelly's growth at the free clinic in town. Her dad made sure she was looked after and examined regularly. His name was Royce Vincent Tanner, Roy to everyone. His wife's name was Ann.

"After Roy's wife died Kelly became a little wild, which was probably her way of coping with Ann's death, I suppose. I lost track of her when she was about sixteen. Roy said she'd left town. He was heartbroken. Then, about three years later, she shows up, out of the blue, at the clinic. She was pregnant. I clearly remember how scared she was, worried about what her father would think since Kelly wasn't married. She wouldn't tell me who the father was, either, at least not then.

"I convinced her to make amends with Roy, especially since she was going to have twins."

At this point, Vin looked at Martin and their eyes met. Martin smiled ruefully with the confirmed suspicion – it really wasn't much of a surprise.

“She finally did see him,” the doctor continued. “And like I thought, Roy stepped up to the plate. It took a little time but Kelly finally did lose her fear and start to look at her future positively. By the time her due date came around, she was excited. So was Roy. I knew these babies would be raised in a loving home.

“The pregnancy was rough, especially at the end. I put Kelly on bed rest at home three weeks before the due date when she started showing signs of an early delivery. I wanted to be sure the babies' lungs had a chance to develop. Ultra sound showed two good sized fetus', one only slightly smaller than the other, and I was sure they would be all right even with an early delivery but I didn't want to take any chances.

“A week later, it was clear the babies weren't going to wait. They were coming no matter what I did.”

Samantha chuckled softly at that description as if it answered a question for her. Vin grinned at her reaction as he listened.

“Kelly was in a lot of pain. Roy was very worried and so was I. By the time she got to the delivery room the umbilical cord had wrapped around one of the fetus' necks and was clearly in distress. I wanted to perform an emergency C-section but before I could get set up, the first baby was born, healthy and unencumbered. I had to go after the distressed child surgically to save it.”

Vin was uncomfortable with the agony-ridden stares that turned his way. His stomach flipped with the realization that he could easily have been still born if circumstances had been slightly different.

“The second child did not respond well after I removed the cord. Reactions were non-existent at first and it took awhile to initiate breathing. That child went to intensive care immediately. Kelly sent Roy to be with the boy.”

Vin saw Samantha cover her mouth with her hand and Chris duck his head. This was hard for them to hear as well. Vin took a breath to settle his stomach.

“Kelly was barely out of the anesthesia when I heard an argument in the hall. Then a man came into the room. A nurse was insisting that he couldn't enter but he ignored her. He said he was the babies' father.”

Martin shifted uncomfortably and kept his eyes on the phone. Vin received the feeling that he was embarrassed and wracked with guilt. Vin didn't know what he could say to ease his brother's mind so he kept silent and hoped his calmness and acceptance would be picked up.

“I could tell by Kelly's face that this was true. I was busy with the babies so I didn't hear a lot that was said at first. I just know that Kelly cried a lot and when I tried to get the man to leave, he refused. I finally got Roy from intensive care and when we returned to the room, that man was holding the healthy baby. The three of them argued. I started to call the police but Kelly stopped me. The man ordered me to leave but I refused. I could tell he was a man that was used to getting his way.”

Martin snorted, shook his head and wearily rubbed his eyes. Apparently, that wasn't a surprise.

“I found out later the man's name was Victor Fitzgerald because an attorney brought papers for me to sign, one being the new birth certificate, but I'll get to that later. Roy was impressive. I always thought of him being a mild-mannered man, but the man had backbone, that's for sure. He fought hard for that first-born child. It was Kelly that finally told him to back down and Fitzgerald left with the child after a day. It was years before I saw them again.”

Heavy silence weighted the air for several seconds until Jack spoke up. “Did Kelly ever explain herself to you? Tell you why she let Victor take the baby?”

A sigh came from the phone speaker. “I finally got the story over the next year, piece by piece. She was ashamed to talk about it but I finally put the pieces together. Fitzgerald threatened her and Roy with financial ruin and also threatened to take the second child, too. Fitzgerald’s wife was unable to have any more children after having two girls. I’m not sure why, medically. He’d had a week-long affair with Kelly while on a business trip to Dallas . He was some up and coming big-wig with the FBI and not about to leave his wife for an unsophisticated small-town girl – Kelly’s words, not mine,” he added. “I always thought the girl had grit and a sharp mind. It was a shame she didn’t have the opportunity to nurture her smarts.”

Vin smiled at the description. He’d heard the same thing about himself through the years.

“Kelly told me that it was for the best that the baby went with Fitzgerald because the boy would grow up wanting for nothing. He’d get a lot more that she and Roy could offer. She asked me to sign the birth certificate so I complied with her wishes. She and Roy doted on the boy left with her but I could tell she missed her baby. It ate at her soul. I also understand that Fitzgerald sent money every month for the boy’s welfare, but the Tanners were a proud bunch. They never accepted it. They asked my advice on where to donate the money.”

Vin perked up at that comment and looked to Martin, curiosity also clear in his expression.

“The Tascosa Children’s Home and Learning Center in her hometown has used the anonymously donated money wisely. She was so happy to be able to help. Maybe it helped alleviate the guilt of not fighting for her first born, I can’t really say. The money came in for eighteen years.”

Vin grinned. He remembered the Center. It was how he managed to make it through high school and become involved with one Nettie Wells, a volunteer there that patiently tutored him and was the only stability throughout his years of schooling and a time when he’d been bounced between foster homes after both Roy’s death.

“While Kelly was battling her cancer, she told me she had only two regrets – that she never saw her first born again and that she was leaving her boy without a mother. When she knew she was going to die, she considered sending him to Fitzgerald. But she couldn’t do that to Roy.”

“He was a good man,” Vin said softly.

“Yes, he was,” Dr. Beauchamp agreed. “It was a shame that he died a mere two years later. A stroke. It was fast and unexpected. The child was seven years old.”

Vin nodded, remembering his feelings of the time. He felt Martin’s gaze more than he saw it; it was laced with guilt.

“I expected Fitzgerald to come and get the second boy, but he never did. He did show up at Kelly’s funeral, though. I do remember that.”

Martin jerked to stiff attention, clear realization on his face. “My mother was hysterical,” he said softly.

“That’s one reason why I remember, other than again seeing the child I’d delivered five years before. It was Vincent, only with shorter hair and better clothes.”

Chris laughed shortly and shook his head. The grin he threw Vin said, “Nothing’s changed there.” Vin had to grin back.

“After the ceremony, Mrs. Fitzgerald broke down. I’ll never forget it. There weren’t many in attendance and I decided to stick around for Roy and Vincent’s sakes in case there was trouble. I expected Fitzgerald to march right up and take Vincent away. Instead, his wife had an emotional breakdown right there near the grave site. I got the distinct impression that Mrs. Fitzgerald didn’t know anything about Vincent. I could never figure out why they came to the funeral at all.”

“I intend to find out,” Martin ground out, his face flushed with fury that Vin clearly felt. The dream he recalled was based in truth after all, Vin realized. *‘The screaming woman was my mother.’*

“Well, that’s all I have to offer you, boys. I’m glad you finally found each other. Kelly and Roy would be very pleased.”

“Thank you for your time, Dr. Beauchamp,” Martin said.

“Yeah,” Vin added. “I’m grateful. It sounded like my mother had people that cared for her.”

“Yes, she did,” the doctor said softly. “She’d be proud of both of you.”

After hanging up, Vin felt very weary.

“He’s on the up and up, that’s for sure,” Chris said. “JD didn’t find any financial glitches in the man’s history. He was very tied to his community.”

The small group didn’t speak as they filed from the room.

“I need a drink,” Chris muttered.

“I’ll join you,” Jack said.

“Me, too,” Martin added, heading toward the kitchen.

“Oh no, you don’t,” Samantha said firmly. “Not while you’re on those meds.” She snagged his elbow and steered the complaining Martin to the couch.

Vin snickered, but stopped abruptly at the glare Chris’ aimed at him. “Ditto, cowboy,” he warned darkly.

“Aw, hell!”

The five of them eventually settled in the living room. JD, Buck and Danny were gone, their duties being to stock the kitchen, get some rest and let Danny show the out-of-towners a little of the City before one of them relieved Josiah from Ezra guard duty. They weren’t due back anytime soon.

Vin and Martin both fizzled out around nine o’clock and slept soundly.

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Martin woke at eight. When he shuffled to the kitchen he was surprised that he was the last one up. When he realized Samantha was gone he vaguely recalled a soft kiss when he was in that barely conscious part of waking. She’d gone to get a change of clothing.

“Food should be here sometime this morning,” Jack said from the kitchen. He shoved a cup of coffee into Martin’s hand. “Meanwhile I’ve outdone myself and made scrambled eggs and toast. Have a seat. I’ll get your plate from the oven.”

“Oven?” Martin said, accepting the steamy mug. “I have an oven?”

Jack laughed. “I’ve forgotten how a true bachelor lives,” he said as he set Martin up at small breakfast bar. “Here. Eat.”

“Needs salsa,” Vin informed Martin from the couch.

“And habaneras, if you were to get your wish,” Chris added, disapprovingly speaking to Vin.

“Everybody’s a critic,” Jack complained. “See if I ever cook again for you ungrateful people.”

“That’s why they invented take-out,” Martin said between mouthfuls.

After cleaning the kitchen, changing clothes and generally picking the place up, the five settled down to make a plan for finding Dragon’s Claw. It was close to nine-thirty. They had just opened the assassin’s file when there was a knock on the door. Jack jumped up.

“Must be Danny. He’s due,” he said as he peeked through the peep hole. “Well I’ll be damned,” he muttered giving Martin an apologetic glance before unlocking the deadbolt.

## FULL MOON & DENVER'S SEVEN

As he unlocked the door, Martin knew exactly who would be on the other side, and it wasn't Danny.

## Chapter Sixteen

An odd wash of feelings coursed through Vin as his biological father stepped into the room. Awe, curiosity, disappointment, anger and profound sadness whirled together, none taking the lead. While still in the hospital Vin recalled having similar feelings along with confusion – drugs and injury hadn't helped much. This time, however, he easily picked out Martin's anger and saw the same anger reflected in Victor's eyes.

In the hospital there had been something else, something that softened the emotion in the older man's expression. Whatever it had been was now gone, leaving nothing but hardness. The man currently standing in the doorway was pure anger and Vin couldn't figure out why.

"Martin," Victor said flatly after nodding an acknowledgement to everyone but Vin.

Vin felt invisible – not a new sensation for him. In fact, he often preferred it.

"I would like to speak with you in private." Victor spoke directly to Martin.

Martin remained seated at the breakfast bar, one arm still bound to his body. The other hand rested on his thigh, one finger tapping a regular rhythm. "What about?"

Victor bridled at the tone and pursed his lips. Obviously, he wasn't used to being questioned. "Family matters that do not concern anyone else here."

Martin's head tipped thoughtfully aside. "Define 'family'."

Victor's jaws visibly clenched as he glared at Jack, who leaned idly against a bookcase next to the couch. Then Victor's gaze skittered over Chris and fell directly onto Vin with distain. Vin managed to remain expressionless – the pain from his injuries offered a convenient distraction but he knew better than to show pain in front of this particular person. Vin refused to let the Director provoke him. In his peripheral vision he could see a ghost of a smile on Martin's lips.

Instead of answering Martin, Victor spoke directly to Vin. "What is it you want? Why are you here?" he demanded.

"Hmm, well, let's see," Vin drawled, rolling his eyes in exaggerated thought as he tapped a finger on his chin. "If I remember correctly, I believe it was to stop an assassination. Ain't that right, Chris?"

"Damn straight," Chris replied, settling back in the couch. He began to count on his fingers. "And in the process broke up an illegal shipping operation, found a known and wanted murderer, broke up a Triad cell and, oh, yeah," Chris snapped his fingers, "stopped the assassination. That about sum it up Agent Malone?"

"Yeah, pretty much, Agent Larabee," Jack agreed, nodding his head in approval.

"Don't play games with me," Victor snapped at Vin.

"Don't seem like I'm the one playin' 'em," Vin replied softly before brightly finishing with, "Dad."

Victor took a step toward the couch. Chris was instantly on his feet, a dark barrier between the two. That stopped Victor's forward motion but not his attack.

"You have no right to be here," he yelled, jabbing his finger in Vin's direction. "You are not part of this and never will be. I paid my dues and owe you nothing. You deserve nothing!"

A dark wave of fury rose deep within Vin. In a well practiced response he rose slowly and felt his body relax into a defensive stance, ready for battle. All his pains melted away as adrenaline surged. His expression went deliberately neutral and unreadable. Now, he realized, one other shared his current state of being. He glanced aside and saw Martin mirror his stance. Together, they were a force to reckon with. Victor Fitzgerald was in for a big surprise.

"There's nothin' I *ever* want from you, old man." Vin's words came out flatly dangerous. "I'm already cursed with your blood and that's enough to sicken me. I may be your biological son but I agree with you, you are not my family."

"Then what the hell are you still doing here?"

"Because he's part of my family," Martin stated. Victor tore his stare from Vin to regard Martin. If Victor was surprised by the rebuff, he didn't show it. Martin continued. "We spoke to Dr. Beauchamp in Texas. How could you? What reason could there possibly be to do what you did? Explain it to me, Dad, because I'd like to know what it takes to be so cold blooded." The sarcastic emphasis on the paternal endearment caused Victor to blink.

"I will not discuss this in front of these people," Victor replied sharply. Then, surprisingly, the hard lines of his face softened slightly. "Martin, please. You owe me at least that."

Martin frowned.

"Sure are a lotta debts out there only you seem ta know about," Vin said. He tipped his head to Chris, who took the hint and moved aside. Vin watched Victor carefully, looking for any clue as to what made the man tick. In his mind, Vin re-examined what he'd seen of Victor Fitzgerald in the hospital. This man before him was not standing down, but he'd done just that during their first meeting. Then it hit him - at the hospital, Victor had been protecting Martin's mother. Victor's anger had something to do with Katherine. Could it be as simple as fear of losing her?

The arrogance returned to Victor's tone. "Stay out of it. You don't know anything."

Apparently, something about Vin's thoughts must have rung true to Martin. When Vin turned his head, he saw Martin staring back with an expression of surprised realization.

"Mom," Martin whispered.

A vision of Kelly Ann Tanner flashed through Vin's mind. '*Katherine*,' Vin clarified.

Martin nodded, understanding, now, what he was up against. '*He's never going to talk about her in front of any of you. Hell, he doesn't talk about her in front of me!*'

'*'bout time that changed, don't cha think?'*

Martin huffed impatiently and rolled his eyes while Vin chuckled and heard, '*Yeah, it'll be as easy as a stroll in the park!*' in his head.

Vin saw Victor look at his son, then at Chris, who had also chuckled. "What the hell is going on?" Victor spat.

Martin moved from the breakfast bar to Vin's side and cleared his throat. "Dad. This does concern Vin. He's my blood brother. You speak to me, you speak to him, period. Take it or leave it."

Both Vin and Martin took Victor's silence as grudging acceptance. Martin then compromised.

"Good. Then I'll leave it to you as to where we talk."

"How about here?" Jack said, grabbing his coat. "Agent Larabee and I were just leaving."

Chris scowled at Jack, obviously not pleased with that idea. Vin clearly felt the distrust Chris had toward Victor along with the reluctance to leave Vin. Jack shoved Chris' jacket into his hands.

"It's okay," Vin said to his boss and friend.

Chris clearly was not okay with it, but he yielded to Vin's wishes. "You will not leave this apartment without an escort, do not go near the windows and you will call me when you are through here. We'll be down in the lobby."

"Yes, sir," both Vin and Martin grumbled together. An annoyed look crossed Victor's face.

As the two agents slipped out the door Vin heard Jack boast, "I taught him all he knows about negotiations."

"Now I know this isn't a good idea," Chris shot back as the door swung closed.

Just before the door latched, it opened again and Jack stuck his head in. "Lock the door, kids."

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Victor uttered a disgusted snort and strode to the door, pushing it shut. He threw the dead bolt and turned to find two pairs of arctic eyes focused directly on him. A zing of fear raced through him as he wondered if this was a good idea.

Victor forced his feet to move and walked around to face the couch. The injured men sank down onto the cushions with barely squelched groans. Seeing the two of them together like this was disconcerting. It brought back long suppressed memories along with the strong feelings associated with them.

Damn those Tanners. They'd made his life difficult right from the time Kelly told him she was pregnant. He glanced up to see twin faces waiting for an explanation. Victor didn't know where the start. He let his eyes drift from one son to the other, noting that Vin's neck collar gave him the visual ability to tell them apart. He decided to speak directly to Martin, but Martin spoke first.

"Did you love her?"

Martin's question gave him a start. "Who?" he snapped.

"Kelly Tanner. Did you love her?"

"I love your mother."

Martin frowned. "You'll need to clarify that."

"You only have one mother, Martin," he said angrily.

"No. I don't," Martin insisted. "And until you can accept that thought, there's not much to discuss."

"Your mother is Katherine Fitzgerald. I will not let you speak ill of her to my face."

"I'm not speaking ill of her, I am trying to get you to see my point of view," Martin sputtered. He leaned back and took a calming breath. "Let's start with something simpler. Why were you in Texas and where did you meet Kelly Tanner?"

"I was attending a conference. I was there ten days." Victor paused, deciding how much to tell. "I met Kelly at the hotel restaurant. She was the hostess and made a point to get to know me."

Vin's eyes narrowed. Victor clearly read disapproval. He didn't care – it was the truth.

"And you didn't discourage her." Martin kept his voice even.

"No, I didn't. Your mother . . ." Victor caught himself. "No, I didn't discourage her," he finished.

"How many times did you cheat throughout the years?" Vin's question caught him off guard.

"Never! I have always loved my wife."

Martin and Vin exchanged glances. Vin laughed shortly while Martin spoke. "You're kidding, right? You're saying you never had sex with any other woman after you married?"

"I didn't say that." Victor forced himself to stay calm. "I said I never cheated. I never loved another woman. Sex is . . . another thing."

Martin looked astonished. Vin just turned aside and mumbled, "'Another thing' . . ."

Victor took a breath in preparation to make things clear to his obvious clueless son. "Martin. You don't understand how things work with men in power. When I graduated from Quantico, it was made clear that I was destined for big things. I made ties with the most important men in the

Company and in the Capitol. I was being groomed for a position of power, and sex is a common commodity of powerful men. Think of Kennedy and Clinton - it's just the way it is. I only love Katherine. She represents who I am to the world." Victor studied his son and saw that he still didn't understand. "Martin, you can't be naive enough to not understand. I've made sure you've been surrounded by men of position your entire life! Didn't you ever notice how those men carry themselves in public? That who was on their arm influenced their success?"

"Of course I noticed that! But you're telling me that all those men cheated on their wives?"

"It's not cheating. It's necessary and accepted. Powerful, vigorous men need release." Victor took Martin's silence as thoughtful repose. "A few weeks before I went to Dallas, Katherine was told she couldn't have any more children. She loved your sisters, but felt guilty that we did not have a son. I . . . I have to admit, I was disappointed myself that there was no one to carry on the Fitzgerald name. We were looking into surrogates. By the time I left for the conference, she was very depressed and we hadn't . . . we didn't . . . well, we hadn't been intimate for quite awhile. Kelly was . . ."

"Convenient and available," Martin offered dryly.

"Well, yes. It wasn't an uncommon occurrence for any of my contemporaries. It was accepted."

Martin slowly shook his head, laughing darkly. "So it was – is – socially acceptable to have children out of wedlock?"

"No! That's not what I said!" Victor spat. "Her getting pregnant was not part my plans! In fact, it ruined me. Any chance at a political office was gone. When Kelly told me she was pregnant, I told her to abort. I gave her the money to do so. I explained why. She just did not understand. Instead, she disappeared. I had to hire an investigator to find her."

"Couldn't use FBI sources 'cause they'd find out," Vin said lowly. "You had to keep it quiet."

"Yes." Victor turned his attention to Vin with a critical eye. "By the time I found her it was too late to terminate. When my sources told me they were twin boys, the solution was obvious. Kelly couldn't raise two children with her financial situation. I was helped her solve a problem."

-----

Martin was both shocked and appalled at his father's reasoning. He'd known Victor was not a sentimental man but the depth of his coldness was staggering. His father could actually be considered a sociopath!

"So, when the babies were born I altered one of the certificates and brought you home. End of story."

Uncomfortable silence thickened the air. Martin could feel the waves of rage threatening to overtake his sibling and settled his gaze on Vin. Outwardly, his brother appeared calm.

*'I don't know what to say,'* Martin thought. *'I have no idea how to make this less painful for you. For us.'*

*'None a this is your fault,'* Vin responded. *'It just is. Cain't change the past.'*

*'But we can direct our future'*

*'True.'*

Although his thoughts sounded calm, Martin could still feel simmering rage. *'Your mother didn't deserve this.'*

*'And our father doesn't deserve us.'*

With that statement, Martin saw Vin straighten and slowly rise to his feet. He looked Victor straight in the eye. "There's still one thing I don't get," he said in a deceptively soft voice. "Why did you go to mama's funeral?"

By the look on Victor's face, that was obviously a point he did not want to discuss. His reply made it clear. "That is none of your business," he growled.

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Something was not connecting to Vin's satisfaction. There was more, he could feel it. Victor Fitzgerald had secrets – what man in his position didn't – but there was one secret here that would tie all this together. Victor was clearly a power-hungry man. To have his political ambition plucked from him so suddenly must have been devastating. Instead, he seemed to accept it more quickly than Vin would have expected, seamlessly shifting that ambition to Martin.

But Martin, it seemed, had inherited Tanner pride. He'd decided to make himself his own man. For Victor to see his ambition tossed back in his face would explain the anger Vin saw in him, but there was still that other, unnamed aspect that dogged Vin. His gut read fear, but "fearful" was not a word that suited Victor.

When Vin voiced his question, though, it was very clearly fear that he felt radiated from Victor.

"You still don't seem to understand that it is my business. We are bound by blood, Martin 'n me, and you as well. We deserve . . ."

"You've received all you deserve already. You have your life and Martin has his. You do not belong here. Everything was just fine . . ."

"It was mom's idea, wasn't it?" Martin's statement was met with shocked surprise by Victor. "She made you go to the funeral."

Although he hid it well Vin could see panic brewing in Victor's eyes. It was Katherine. Katherine was the source of the fear Victor harbored and that fear festered into anger.

"Why?" Martin demanded when Victor didn't reply. "Why did you go?"

"She wanted to," Victor finally admitted. "Katherine's the one that insisted."

"But you didn't."

"No."

"Why?"

Vin carefully watched Victor during Martin's pushing. He could feel the missing piece right there . . .

"Why did she want to go? She said it was for you. If you were to ever find out you were adopted, she wanted to make sure that you knew we honored your mother. That we were grateful. That it would be clear to you that we respected your blood parents."

"Parents?" Vin repeated instantly, his instincts singing loudly.

"I meant parent. Blood parent."

"She didn't know." It was suddenly very clear to Vin. The last piece fell into place. Martin's mouth opened to speak but he froze. Vin continued. "She didn't know you were the father. She didn't know you'd cheated on her. She didn't know there were twins."

Victor's jaw rippled as he clenched his teeth. He'd nailed it. Vin could feel the waves of fear and anger radiating from the elder Fitzgerald and all of it was directed him.

"If it wasn't for you, she would have never known," Victor growled. "You and that damned doctor. Katherine took one look at you standing by the gravesite and the looks the doctor was giving me and figured out everything. Thanks to you, she had another breakdown!"

Martin's whispered so softly Vin barely heard him. "*Another* breakdown?"

Victor clenched his fists and began to pace a short path in front of the couch. Back and forth, back and forth he paced, breathing raggedly. He started to speak several times but choked to silence after the first words. "We could have had it all," he whispered fiercely. "We were on track to real power and station. After our second child, Katherine experienced – what bullshit do they call it – postpartum depression? Then she found out she couldn't have any more children. Between that and her social responsibilities she fell apart."

For the first time since coming face to face with his blood father Vin saw true sorrow in Victor Fitzgerald's eyes. The man stopped pacing and stood with his back to the brothers as he quietly continued.

"I made sure she didn't find out about Kelly. Who knows what she would have done. It took lots of therapy and you, Martin, to bring her back. With you, she felt worthwhile. She believed she saved you. It was actually the other way around."

Martin was speechless. Vin realized he never would have guessed any of this about his mother. She had always been a picture of strength to him – Vin could feel that. Like Martin, Vin had just figured that Victor Fitzgerald's wife would have to be strong and assumed she was.

"When she realized I was the father, Katherine begged me to get custody of the second child - to save him. But when I found out the problems he had and the difficulties involved with raising a child like that, I refused. She couldn't have handled it. The social pressure would . . ." He paused. "She didn't speak to me for months. I had to sign her into a private hospital in Connecticut so no one would know." He turned enough to glare at Vin. "You should have died, you know that? That doctor should have let you die. If you were healthy, I would have taken both of you. But with the way it turned out, you would have been nothing but a reminder of everything that went wrong."

Vin felt alternate pangs of embarrassment for himself and pity for Katherine. First and foremost, though, he wanted to strangle the man before him. A light touch on his forearm distracted him and he looked down. Martin's hand rested on him.

*'Difficulties?'* his sibling inquired. *'The dyslexia?'*

Vin nodded and shrugged, slightly sickened by the fact that Dr. Beauchamp had grossly understated the details about his birth. Martin squeezed his arm in understanding and then dropped his hand. Vin could feel the anger growing inside his brother with every word uttered by their father. Vin didn't trust himself to speak at the moment and neither did Martin.

"The doctor and I convinced Katherine that it was best to leave you with Kelly's family and she finally believed me. For years following she worried that you would show up and steal Martin away by turning him against us. That lessened with time. Now, all those old fears have come alive again."

"Is mom okay?" Martin managed to ask, the revealed history sprouting concern that Vin could feel.

"She will be once he's gone." Victor glared at Vin.

"So all of this is my fault, then," Vin snapped. "You are completely clear of any wrong doing."

"Don't be so dramatic!" Victor bellowed. "That woman is worth a dozen of you!"

With that declaration, Vin finally figured out Victor's fear. It was that he would lose Katherine. To Vin, it was momentarily unbelievable that Victor Fitzgerald could love anyone. Martin, though, believed, and that was enough to convince Vin. Now he just couldn't figure out why Katherine loved Victor.

"That assassin targeted the wrong twin," Victor grumbled.

"That's enough, dad!" Martin yelled.

Vin had a tenuous hold on his own fury and sensed the same in Martin. Distance. He needed distance to regain balance and control. Vin pushed his way past Victor and headed for the door. Behind him, he heard Martin start to follow. Quickly throwing the bolt open Vin glanced back and saw Martin nose to nose with his father, both of them yelling accusations. Victor had a grip on Martin's good arm, preventing him from moving.

Vin slammed the door behind him and stormed down the hall, his spiked defenses blocking any pain. He furiously poked the elevator call repeatedly and just started looking around for the stairs when the car arrived. Making a quick decision, he stepped into the elevator, relieved that it was empty.

-----

The lobby carpet was holding up well. It was built for New York winters so Chris' restless pacing barely made a crease. He finally paused when Nathan and Buck entered.

"Ezra did pretty well with the artist. He says it's a near perfect likeness." Nathan handed Chris and Jack copies of the black and white sketch.

Chris took a copy of Jong Wu's image and studied it a few seconds before his heart kicked into sudden overdrive. "Shit! I saw this guy across the street ten minutes ago! He was carrying a long bag, like a document tube! That's why I noticed him! He wore sunglasses, but I'm sure it was the same guy."

"A gun case," Jack summed up. "Agent Jackson, you and I will check the street while I alert the locals and call the rest of my team."

Chris was already sprinting for the elevator with Buck on his heels.

"DAMMIT!" Chris snapped. Both cars were in use. They headed directly to the stairs.

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Vin was relieved when the elevator finally arrived in the lobby without any stops. His thoughts were in such turmoil he only realized he'd made it to his destination when the doors opened. He burst from the car into the lobby, his eyes locked on the glass front doors and the openness beyond. He pushed his way outside, arbitrarily turning right at the sidewalk. He ignored the growing protests of his various injuries and took a deep breath of air. His pace and heart rate slowed. The sun felt warm on his cheeks. He paused.

"VIN! GET DOWN!"

Vin dropped before Jack's warning ending. He heard thundering feet just before a powerful force hammered him sideways.

After that, Vin slammed into darkness.

## Chapter Seventeen

Calculations sped through Jack's brain as he pulled his weapon and directed it to the fourth floor of the building across the street. He could barely see the end of the rifle as it snapped to attention, the sudden move catching his eye. Jack glanced over his shoulder at the intended target *'No time!'* he realized when he saw Vin's path. Jack was just able to yell a warning before taking a bead on the window.

Jack saw a whisper of smoke hang at the end of the rifle muzzle before he heard the shot and he responded with two from his own gun, shattering the window and chipping the concrete sill. Vaguely, he heard screams, the scuffle of running feet and chaotic voices around him but he did not allow himself to be distracted. He got off two additional shots, seeing the puff of concrete dust as one bullet again hit the sill. The second bullet struck somewhere inside the window but didn't stop the rifle's second shot.

Sirens sounded in the distance, too far away to help, Jack concluded. He quickly considered charging across the street and heading to the fourth floor, but when he glanced back again to see if there was any possibility of a cover body, the idea of pursuit left him.

Nathan was crouched on the sidewalk, his body squarely between Vin and his assassin. Nathan's weapon was also pointed at the fourth floor but Jack could see his lips moving as he constantly checked the still body behind him.

There was a splash of crimson hanging on the pale grey of the wall above Vin's crumpled form.

Jack glanced back to the window. The rifle was gone. He danced backward until he was next to Nathan without taking his eyes from the suspect window. "How is he?" Jack demanded, nerves still on edge.

"Don't know yet. I was a little busy." Nathan must have noticed the rifle's withdrawal because he turned his full attention to Vin. "See anything up there?"

"Nah." Jack's eyes were in constant motion and his weapon still trained on the building. The sirens were closer. "My guess he's retreating, maybe even repositioning. We need to get out of here."

Nathan was talking softly to Vin and as far as Jack could hear, getting no response. He heard the medic call for an ambulance.

"He's been hit, but I don't think it's too bad. He's got a good sized gouge along one temple and a knot on the other side of his head where he hit the wall. I don't know where the second shot went."

"Less than a foot above your head," Jack informed him.

Nathan glanced up and Jack saw the man's throat ripple as he swallowed hard.

The first black and white screeched to the curb and two officers poured out, guns drawn and pointed at Jack.

"FBI!" Jack announced. "I'm getting out my ID! The shot came from the fourth floor!" He kept his gun pointed at the building, hopefully keeping the uniforms at ease long enough for him to

produce his badge. Finally successful, one officer got on the car radio while the other quickly made his way over, also scanning the suspect building.

“Did you see where he went?” the young officer asked.

“No, but here’s who we’re looking for.” Jack pulled out the sketch and general description written on the back of Jong Wu and handed it over. “See if you can seal a two block area. I’m not sure he’s still in that building. He may be carrying his rifle in a long document tube.”

The cop nodded and motioned for his partner to pull the car alongside Jack. The agent appreciated the cover but still felt like the center of a bull’s eye. With the two uniforms taking up guard positions, Jack felt comfortable enough to turn his attention to Vin.

“I’ve managed to stop the bleeding,” Nathan said lowly. “His vitals are good. Did you call Martin?”

Jack pulled out his phone and dialed, getting the answering machine. “Martin!” Jack said sharply. “Pick up!”

He was about to utter a stream of expletives into the machine when he heard sharp voices coming from the direction of the building entrance. Jack snapped the phone shut when he recognized them.

“Damn it, leave me alone! I’ve got to see him!”

Jack turned and saw Martin push away Buck’s arm. Larabee was between them and the street, gun drawn and eyes roving.

“It’s okay!” Jack told the officers before they shot Chris. “They’re with me.”

“Vin?” Martin’s voice softened considerably as he knelt next to his brother.

Jack glanced at the new arrivals. “Where’s Victor?” he asked.

“Damn kid took him out with one punch. Southpaw style, too,” Buck said with admiration as he made himself part of the human barrier protecting Vin and now, Martin.

“So he’s still up there?” Jack questioned.

“Lying’ on the living room floor, resting’ soundly last I saw,” Buck reported.

“I’d like to have seen that,” Jack said with an amused snort.

“Where was he?” Chris deadly tone rerouted the conversation. His hard gaze tirelessly scanning the area.

“Fourth floor. Broken window,” Jack summed up.

The group stayed tight and vigilant until the ambulance pulled up behind the squad car and Jack decided it was time to get out of the way. “I’ll see what the uniforms have set up as a perimeter,” he said holstering his gun as he moved away. After receiving the information he needed from N.Y.P.D. Jack called Danny and Samantha to reroute them to the hospital. It would be much easier to keep Vin and Martin together, and Jack had a feeling that Martin wasn’t going to be easily separated from his newfound brother anyway.

Jack was tired of playing defense. It was time to make an offense move to snare the Dragon’s Claw.

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Chris was tense, worried and extremely pissed off. He wanted to get out of this God-forsaken city and get home, but he wasn’t about to leave this case unfinished.

He glanced down at Vin as the paramedics worked. His friend was still unconscious and bound to have one hell of a headache when he woke up. Chris shook his head and sighed. Denver seemed very far away at the moment.

“Martin, ride in back with Vin. Buck, ride in the front with the driver. I’ll follow in the car. Nathan, I want to drop you at Ezra’s. They’re due for some relief and I’m getting the feeling that we can’t have too much coverage.”

“You think Wu will try something in the hospital?” Buck asked.

“Depends on how desperate he is.”

“He must be pretty desperate to try something like this in the middle of the city in broad daylight,” Nathan said.

He was right, Chris thought. Was Wu desperate? Or was it something else? The latter thought set his instincts tingling and he didn’t like it. It was an unknown. Desperate he could deal with.

The paramedics rolled Vin onto a backboard and lifted him to a gurney as Chris stood like a guardian, trying to watch everything around him at once. He started to relax his vigil when Vin was pushed into the back of the ambulance and even considered holstering his weapon when Director Fitzgerald stormed from the building lobby. Instinctively, Chris placed himself solidly between the Martin and the ambulance crew at the back of the vehicle and the obviously angry Deputy Director. He kept his weapon in hand, dropped to his side.

“Martin, come here. Where’s Jack?” Victor demanded before he came to a full stop by the intimidating wall called Chris Larabee.

“Checking the perimeter,” Chris said lowly. In the corner of his eye he saw Buck step forward as physical reinforcement.

“I wasn’t talking to you, Agent Larabee,” Victor snapped. Chris could see a darkening area along the right side of Victor’s face and twitched with the desire to add to the growing bruise. “Martin! I’m talking to you!”

Chris could see the anger in Victor’s eyes when he was ignored. Chris didn’t take his eyes off the Director until he heard the ambulance doors shut behind him and knew Martin was sequestered away. Only then he holstered his gun. He felt a presence approach from behind and Nathan spoke.

“We’re set, Chris,” Nathan reported. “I’ll call Ezra so he knows we’re comin’ in and let ‘em know what’s goin’ on.”

“Ezra Standish?”

When Victor Fitzgerald said the name it made the hairs on the back of Chris’ neck snap to attention. He was about to turn away and leave Martin’s father standing there but something in the man’s tone gave him pause. Chris narrowed his eyes and met the Director’s gaze. “Yes,” he said without further explanation.

Within seconds, the Director’s face became as unreadable as rock. His eyes, though, looked very familiar. Deep within was the same flame he’d seen many times in Vin’s eyes – a flame that burned brightly before being hidden, along with whatever secret his friend wanted to keep. Chris hadn’t seen it in Vin for a time now, and he sure didn’t like seeing it from this particular source.

Chris wasn’t surprised that Victor took a step back and seemed to calm. The action should have reduced tension but instead, the atmosphere thickened.

Chris was relieved when Jack returned from the NYPD command post. He could now leave Victor with Jack. The adage about keeping your enemies close ran through his mind, and he made a note to himself to keep tabs on the elder Fitzgerald. Chris hoped he was simply overreacting to the circumstances. His gut told him otherwise.

“There’s a forensic team in route to process the floor, but there’s not much there,” Jack reported, oblivious to the tension that Chris decided only he felt. “We’ll keep looking but I don’t think we’ll find him.”

“I’m heading to the hospital,” Chris said. “Nathan’s going back to Ezra’s.”

"I need to speak with Agent Malone." Victor did not offer any more and Chris felt as if he'd been dismissed.

Jack looked momentarily perplexed. "Okay, I'll find my way to the hospital in a little while. Don't let Martin do anything stupid."

The comment made Chris laugh shortly. "I'm sure Martin's about as controllable as Vin."

"Then you know what I mean." Jack smiled. "I'll be by later."

Chris headed to the sedan with Nathan falling in next to him. Not one word was spoken between them until they neared the hotel where Ezra and the others were. When he stopped at the front entrance to let Nathan out, he stopped his teammate from exiting with a firm hand on his forearm.

"Nathan, keep an eye out. I've got a bad feelin'. This is far from over."

Nathan's head drooped. "Great. We all know better than to ignore your gut feelings. I'll try to make sure everybody's at least rested up."

Chris released him with a nod. "Thanks. Keep your eyes open."

"And Chris? See if you can get someone to look at Martin's left hand – I think he's favorin' it a mite."

"Can't think of a better reason for why that is," Chris commented with a tight grin. "He's Vin's brother, all right."

Nathan chuckled and let himself out of the car. Chris watched the medic enter the hotel and then turned the car toward the hospital.

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Martin couldn't believe he was back here. The antiseptic smell, the squeak of nurse shoes on linoleum – he'd been here as often as he'd been in his apartment this past year. This time, at least, he wasn't the one in the bed.

But the bed sure as hell would be a lot more comfortable than the damn plastic monstrosity he currently occupied.

"Martin?"

Samantha's voice parted some of the cloud of doom that hovered above his head. He stiffly stood and extended his hand. She took it between hers and he was unable to stop the flinch of pain.

"Hey?" she said, looking down at what she held. "What's wrong here?" She pressed his knuckles with her thumb and he couldn't stop the small gasp.

"It seems that Martin's knuckles had a close encounter with the Deputy Director's jaw," Buck explained with a grin as he stepped from a curtained cubicle.

"Really?" she said brightly.

"Way to go, partner!" Danny exclaimed.

"Yeah, well," Martin mumbled, a little embarrassed. "He wouldn't get out of my way." He looked to Buck. "How's he doin'?"

"Still out. The doctor's not surprised, what with his other injuries. The x-ray didn't show any new damage to his neck so that's good."

"So Wu's still out there?" Danny glanced around them and moved into a more defensible position against a wall.

"Yeah," Martin said.

"Then what are you doin' out in the open?" Danny nodded to the cubicle Buck had just left. "Why don't you stay with Vin while we stay out here?"

Martin didn't need to be asked again. He tucked his throbbing hand against his stomach and moved toward the curtains. He heard the others talking quietly as he left them.

"Now that you are here," Buck said, "I can check in with security."

"Did the doc look at Martin's hand?" Samantha asked.

"Not yet."

When he parted the curtain and stepped to his brother's side, the first thing he noticed was the emptiness in his mind. In the short time they'd been united, Martin had grown comfortable with Vin's presence there. Now, it seemed empty – like a piece of him was missing.

Martin stood near Vin's bed and studied his sibling. The cervical collar still looked too snug; he could see where Vin's skin was rubbed red along his jaw line where it met the material. Dried blood from the new wound had dried to flakiness on the collar's material. The bullet left a sizeable gouge, deep enough for a line of stitches along the hairline. The scar shouldn't be visible, especially if Vin grew his hair long again.

His hair. Martin unconsciously touched his own temple, fingering the hair. In his photo, Vin looked like he belonged on a horse chasing buffalo or living in a cabin in the hills. Martin wondered how Samantha would like it; he knew his father would hate it and, therefore, the idea became even more tempting.

"God, what am I? Sixteen again?" he said softly, chuckling. "Growing my hair to piss off my dad?"

He let his eyes travel over Vin's forehead to the sizeable lump on the other side. The dark purple color was already extending to the soft tissue at the corner of his eye. It would be very ugly, very soon.

Martin found his mind going over his father's story, trying to imagine Kelly Tanner's face. He'd seen a flash of it in Vin's mind, the similarities clear in Vin's features – his features. It had been a noble thing his mother, Katherine, had done, taking him to the funeral. When he thought about it, she was the one with the strength in the family. She's the only one that could make Victor do what she wished. She simply didn't wish for a whole lot. He smiled at the vision of the three of them on the plane. Victor must have been furious.

His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of the doctor. He gave Martin a classic double take.

"I guess I don't have to ask if you're family," he said as he consulted Vin's chart.

"So what's the story?" Martin asked, stepping back and out of the way.

"He's gonna have a headache," the doctor started, giving Martin a small smile. "But I think you probably figured that out on your own."

"Pretty much. Any idea when he'll wake up?"

"Hard to say with the double whammy to his skull. There's a slight bruise to his brain on the right side we'll keep an eye on, but the other side looks good. He could wake up within the hour or within the week. Time will tell." He replaced the chart and checked Vin's eyes and heart rate. "Everything looks good for now. We'll be moving him to ICU until we can get him stable. His vitals are within the norm, but not exactly steady. It's just a precaution."

Martin nodded. "He'll have some guards, too. Have you been briefed on the circumstances?"

"Yes, Agent Wilmington filled me in. We've circulated the sketch he gave us and we're re-arranging the rooms so Agent Tanner will be away from the others."

"Okay." Martin winced when he brushed his hand along the bedrail.

The doctor dropped his eyes to Martin's hand. "I'm also supposed to look at your hand. It's a little sore?"

"Not too bad."

The doctor carefully felt around the knuckles. “I don’t think it’s broken. I’ll get you some ice for it.”

He had an ice pack a few minutes later when they started moving Vin. Chris joined up with them as they entered the elevator and made a short comment about it being a good thing that Vin was unconscious with the bunch of them packed in like they were.

Vin was settled in the ICU with Martin settled in a chair next to him, balancing his ice pack on his hand. He listened as Chris, Buck, Samantha and Danny threw together a schedule and meal plans. Just as Samantha was taking dinner orders, Danny’s phone rang.

Martin was relaxed in the chair, casually watching his teammates when the look on Danny’s face sent every nerve in Martin’s body into immediate alert.

“He what?” Danny snapped. The others paused and fell silent. All eyes were on Danny. “Now? Just now?” He listened again. “Okay, okay. I’ll tell ‘em.”

Martin could see that Chris had fallen instinctively into a defensive mode, expecting trouble. He stared hard at Danny, as if daring him to speak.

“That was Viv,” Danny said. He looked directly at Chris when he spoke but Martin could tell that he wanted to be anywhere but in the position he was in right at this moment. “The F.B.I. has detained Ezra Standish for questioning in relation to Martin’s attempted murder.”

## Chapter Eighteen

Rage.

Barely controllable embers of rage burned deep inside Chris. His fingers flexed into fists, longing to feel the yield of Victor Fitzgerald's neck in his hand because he knew, instantly, that he was the person responsible for Ezra's detention.

Chris could feel his teeth squeak under the pressure of his jaws. Wordlessly, he pushed by Danny and headed toward the hospital exit. Both Vin and Ezra needed him, but Ezra had just been unwillingly shoved up on the priority list.

"Chris, hold on!"

The team leader allowed Buck's plea to ease his stride but not his fury. Buck caught up as Chris punched the elevator "down" button with his fist. His knuckles protested, the brief pain eclipsed by anger.

"You can't go in there like this, Chris. You gotta cool down."

Chris turned on him. "You of all people, Buck, should know that no one fucks with my team," he snarled, teeth grinding.

"I know, I know and you're right. I'm all for backin' up Ezra but you're treading on thin ice, here. It's another government agency, not a gun-running gang. You need appropriate ammo."

Samantha cautiously approached and stood behind Buck, her eyes shifting from one man to the other.

"I need to strangle a certain Deputy Director," Chris snapped. The silver elevator doors opened with a pneumatic whoosh and Chris had to step back to allow an occupied gurney with attendants to disembark.

"Ya can't go in there guns blazing', although there's not one of us that wouldn't like to do that," Buck said, his voice firm. "You need information. You need to know what they have first. There's no way they're gonna let you in to see Ez if he's being questioned. They might if you already know the answers." Chris stepped into the empty car and turned around. Buck hesitated, leaning on the frame to prevent the doors from closing. Chris glared at Buck but his old friend refused to give way. "Chris, let JD do some research. Get down there and find out what you can but don't press until we know more."

"You need to contact the F.B.I.'s Atlanta office, then," Samantha offered. Chris directed his glare to the blonde. She blinked, but stood firm. Buck glanced at her and then nodded at Chris. "Agent Standish told me that he knows Victor from that office."

Chris paused, his wrath dampened as his mind worked. He knew all about the Atlanta business – when he had background checked Standish while putting Team Seven together Chris followed every accusation to its end. Now he had to go back and figure out if any of it pertained to Director Fitzgerald. Buck was right, he had to admit; he probably wouldn't get access to the interview but he sure as hell could rattle some cages.

"How long will it take me to drive to the F.B.I. building?" Chris growled at Samantha.

She shoved a lock of hair behind her ear as the Larabee glare pinned her. "Um, from here, I'd say . . . twenty minutes, with traffic and parking."

Chris turned his smoldering gaze back to Buck. "Tell JD he's got nineteen minutes to get any information I can use." The statement brooked no room for interpretation.

"Sure . . . sure." Buck pulled out his phone. "I'm on it. Don't do anything stupid, Chris."

Chris let out a short, bitter laugh. "I'm the boss here. I decide what's stupid." He crossed his arms across his chest and glared at Buck again. "Can I go now, Agent Wilmington?"

Buck looked startled for the moment before he realized that he was still blocking the elevator doors. "Oh, yeah, right." He started punching buttons on his phone as he took a step back and allowed the doors to close.

Chris shook his head in amusement, frustration and fury as Buck and Samantha disappeared from his sight.

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Frustration.

Complicated, irritating frustration was all Jack felt boiling inside his gut as he stood next to Victor in the viewing room. On the other side of the one way glass sat Agent Ezra Standish, who looked - how did he look? Jack thought. The man should be tense, frazzled, nervous. Instead, he looked cool. Tired and possibly in pain, but cool.

Jack had to admire that. He glanced at his watch. Victor hadn't let Jack leave his sight and had kept him busy every second since they left Martin's building. Jack suspected it was to keep him from calling Larabee.

"He's too calm," Victor grumbled.

"Probably because he's the victim and not the suspect?" Jack didn't miss the venomous glance thrown his way.

Victor regarded his Rolex. "It's time. Send in Harrington."

Jack picked up the intercom receiver and informed Agent Phil Harrington to begin his interrogation. The very words felt bitter on Jack's tongue as he hung up.

Within the minute a thick-muscled, thirtyish man with receding blond hair entered the room. Standish watched him with apparent indifference. Harrington didn't look at Standish at all. Jack frowned, still uncomfortable with any of this. He knew Harrington – the man came from the Violent Crimes unit and was very good at interrogation. Looking again at the nonplussed Standish, Jack couldn't help but wonder if Harrington may have met his match.

As the interview began with short, false pleasantries Jack glanced at Victor. "Why are you so sure about this?" he finally asked.

Victor's gaze didn't break from the room behind the glass. "This whole affair stinks of treason. Wu had moles in the Marshal's office, the courthouse and most likely in the F.B.I. itself. He's getting personal information, like Martin's home address, from somewhere. I know Standish from Atlanta . He was dirty then and he's dirty now. Standish is behind all the leaks, I'm sure of it. He's the only one that's been in it from the start."

"What about Agent Tanner?"

"Standish is a loner. He wouldn't share any payoff."

"Are you suggesting Standish probably arranged for Tanner to be killed, too?"

"I'm not suggesting anything of the sort. Yet. But Standish is capable of that, yes."

Jack grunted an acknowledgement and rolled that information over in his mind. After hearing, and seeing, the depths to which Victor could sink, Jack felt Victor was hardly the person to point

fingers. “Chris Larabee does not seem like the type to be easily fooled and he vouches for this man.”

“Agent Larabee has obviously been misled. Standish is very good at that.”

Still not convinced, Jack turned his attention back to the interview. Standish was examining the fingernails of his uninjured hand and not even breaking a sweat. Jack smiled. “*That man may be too cool for his own good,*” he thought.

They were fifteen minutes into the interview when the observation room phone chirped. Jack picked it up. “Malone,” he said softly. He listened for a moment. “Uh, huh,” he replied to the caller, glancing at Victor. “Send him up to Missing Persons.” Jack hung up the phone and addressed Victor. “Larabee’s in the lobby demanding to see Standish.”

“No. There will be no contact until we know who’s involved.”

“Then you better work fast because Standish has an attorney on his way here. And from the looks of it,” Jack tilted his head toward the interview room where Standish was now yawning and looking altogether bored with the whole situation. “This is all a pointless exercise anyway. He’s not offering up anything anytime soon.” He shrugged on his jacket. “I’ll meet Larabee in my office. They want him out of the lobby. I guess he’s raising quite a stink.”

Victor didn’t seem to hear him. Jack waited a moment for a response and after getting none, slipped from the unit to meet Chris two floors down in the Missing Persons unit.

Jack was in his office a mere few minutes when Larabee exited the elevator on the heels of a nervous F.B. I. escort. When Chris saw Jack, he pushed the escort aside and stormed into the office. The young escort hurriedly retreated.

Chris hit the door with enough force to shake the office walls. He started speaking as he stormed to Jack’s desk and pounded one hand on the mahogany desktop. “What the hell’s going on, Malone? Where’s my agent?”

“Not my idea, Chris.”

“I don’t care whose idea it is! I want Standish released!”

Jack narrowed his eyes in the light of Larabee’s intimidating glare and stood firm. He kept his voice even. “I don’t have the ability to do that. But after watching Standish, I don’t think he needs any backup. The man’s as cool as they come.”

Chris Larabee held Jack’s stare, daring him to lie. And Jack knew that if he did lie, the ATF man would know it before it even passed Jack’s lips. Seemingly satisfied after several long seconds, Chris nodded sharply.

“So what’s the Deputy Director looking for?”

“A mole.”

“I figured as much.” Larabee ran his hand through his hair. “It’s Atlanta all over again.”

“That’s what Victor said,” Jack confirmed. “You know all about that?”

“Yep.” Chris hooked his hands on his hips and seemed to consider something for a moment before continuing. “Ezra Standish is the best undercover agent I’ve ever seen and the reason why is because he isn’t acting. He’s himself. It’s like that saying about lies – the most believable ones are those that contain some truth.”

Jack dropped into his chair and motioned for Chris to sit. “So tell me about Atlanta .”

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The urge to shift weight in the hard, unforgiving chair was nearly impossible to ignore, but ignore it he did. Ezra Standish knew he couldn’t show one iota of discomfort to his audience. And he knew full well that there was an audience beyond Agent Harrington.

Ezra had to admit that the man was good – his hard-but-approachable manner probably brought more than a few deals to this very table, but Standish was not going to be one of them. As soon as he heard the Deputy Director’s name in the hospital he knew this moment was coming. He’d had plenty of time to prepare, more time than he’d had in Atlanta , at least.

Ezra thought back to that time in his life.

When Chris Larabee had approached him three years ago the mess in Atlanta was just coming to a close. Ezra was very good at reading the writing on the wall; his F.B.I. career was as good as over. Knowing this, he wondered at Larabee’s interest. Was this a man wanting to squeeze a few more assignments out of a doomed man to make himself look good or was he on the level about this team he was assembling?

Maude Standish hadn’t raised a fool. Ezra did his homework on Larabee and although there was nothing he found that warranted concern, Standish knew very well that a man could easily hide his past and if Larabee had anything to hide, he hid it well. But the timing couldn’t have been better so Ezra had jumped ship and joined the ATF team fully expecting Larabee, like every other Government agency boss he’d ever had, to show his true, self-centered colors quickly by sacrificing Standish in some fashion.

Standish needed only to get out of Atlanta and hold tight for a few months until some personal financial issues came to a close. Then he could bail on Larabee, the ATF and all other forms of conventional employment. He would be set for life.

But, three years later, Standish was still waiting for Larabee’s expected betrayal. In actuality, it was Standish that had done the betraying by walking out of an assignment when his finances finally attained the level he’d worked so hard to achieve six months after his transfer. When he’d walked, though, he ran into an obstacle he’d never anticipated: Guilt. It seemed that Larabee and his team of misfits had unexpectedly given Standish not only a conscious, but a place he could call home as well. He found he couldn’t walk away after all.

Knowing this made it easy to sit here and listen to Harrington’s accusations without rancor. Ezra knew his team, his family, was working on getting him out. He simply had to wait and show no weakness. His body, however, wasn’t cooperating and he decided to make his own move.

“Excuse me, Agent Harrington,” Ezra suddenly said, breaking the interrogator’s verbal dissertation of Ezra’s Atlanta indiscretions. “I do not mean to interrupt your wonderful recount of my questionable past, but I simply have to know something.”

Harrington paused and slowly laid down the sheaf of papers in his hands. “What’s that, Agent Standish?” The tone was painfully polite.

“Have you and your glorious agency looked inward for the source of this betrayal you are so skillfully investigating?”

“Inward?”

“Yes. I am sure you have heard of the endearing acronym ‘K.I.S.S.’?”

Harrington blinked. “Keep it simple, stupid?”

“Precisely; I see that the F.B.I.’s well of knowledge is deep and you have certainly drunk from its depths.”

The investigator frowned. “Yes, I’m sure you would know all about our resources. You are the clearest and most direct connection.”

Ezra sighed plaintively, rolling his eyes as he leaned back and rubbed his tender shoulder. “Yes, I am sure I am the most obvious to you and your highly esteemed agency, but I have to wonder . . .” He put on a thoughtful look and turned widely curious eyes to Harrington.

Harrington bit. “Wonder what?” he warily asked.

Standish tilted his head as if mentally debating a point. “Oh, never mind me. I do not want to interfere with your little party here. Forget I asked.” Ezra dismissed his idea with a wave and leaned on the table as if intrigued by the litany of dates, times and actions Harrington had been verbally listing. “Now, what were you saying about my activities five years ago? I seem to have lost track of where you were going with that.” He frowned. “Or were you going anywhere at all?”

Harrington showed his irritation for the first time by pressing his lips into a hard, pale line. Ezra gave him points for lasting this long. As his team frequently pointed out, he had a knack for getting under another’s skin in the shortest possible time.

“Look, Standish, this isn’t a game. This is serious.” Harrington’s tone proved that he was tired of this game.

“Well, I am certainly ecstatic that we have finally found a point on which we can agree upon, sir.”

“We know you gave Wu information. We know you’re dirty.”

Ezra’s eyes widened in obviously mock surprise. “And what information would that be, pray tell, Agent Harrington?”

Harrington’s mouth opened and shut without issuing a word. His fingers rapped the table and Ezra could see that he was working to regain his outward calm. The man leaned back a little, away from Standish, and dropped his hands to his lap. He looked down and took a breath and then leaned back in, his cool demeanor restored.

“What was it you were wondering, Agent Standish?” The agent even managed a tight smile. Ezra thought he was going for “sincere”, but had sorely missed the mark.

“Oh, it wasn’t much. But I can’t help but wonder how Wu found Agent Fitzgerald so quickly after he was discharged from the hospital.”

In the pause that followed, Ezra could see Harrington’s mind working furiously. “You told him.”

“I did?” Ezra looked surprised. “When?”

“You were released before he was and you kept in contact with the hospital, along with your team. You had at least sixteen hours to pass the information!”

“Hm.” Thoughtfully, Standish tapped his chin with his forefinger. “How?”

“How?”

“Yes. It’s a simple question. How did I contact him?”

“I don’t know.” Harrington tried to pull off another smile. “Why don’t you tell me?”

“Well,” Ezra said. “You have my cell phone and I’m sure you’ve checked my outgoing calls,” he started. “And I’m also sure you’ve checked the hotel records on the telephone in the room . . . but, honestly?” he leaned in and dropped his voice, Harrington automatically responding in kind. “Hotel telephones are notorious for harboring all sorts of germs and other nasties, as are hotel bedspreads, and I, for one, avoid touching either of them.” He wrinkled his nose in distaste and sat up again.

Harrington pushed angrily to his feet. “Quit playing games, Standish!”

Ezra also stood all pretense of play now gone. He pierced the agent with a glare and then turned to face the mirror behind his adversary. “I am certainly not playing games in the face of the danger that lurks out there for my friends and teammates as well as myself. If you had done your job instead of jumping on years old conclusions, you would find that I did not call anyone. Two agents were with me at all times and one is from your own esteemed agency. Wu knew exactly when Martin had been released and where he was going. I must ask you the obvious again: Who would have had immediate knowledge of that information?”

“Your team!” Harrington bellowed.

Ezra returned his gaze to the agent and added in a low voice, “And yours, Agent Harrington. Specifically, Deputy Director Fitzgerald’s staff.”

## Chapter Nineteen

Jack and Chris both reached the same conclusion concerning Atlanta.

"Victor's going to be sure Ezra's the informant again this time," Jack said, leaning back in his chair as he thought. "Just like you said. It's Atlanta all over again. Did you run down any of those suspicions in the report? Obviously, Ezra's old team didn't bother."

"I followed a few as best as I could but nothing was conclusive. Knowing Standish now and looking back, those 'clues' were way more obvious that Ezra would leave behind. If Ez wants something hidden, it's hidden. I was sure then and I'm sure now that he was set up to look like a traitor. I haven't had the time to go any further than that and honestly, it hasn't mattered until now."

"Hm. You've never asked him about it? Get his thoughts on it?"

"Not directly, no. I have picked up things here and there that he's sure someone profited from the betrayal."

"Profited, as in cash money?"

Chris snorted. "That's the only profit Ezra truly understands. I get the feeling he's more ticked off that someone made money on him than being labeled as a traitor."

Their discussion was interrupted by the phone's ring. Jack snatched up the receiver. "Malone," he grumbled. After a few moments of listening, he glanced at Chris. "Uh, huh," he said. "Thanks for the information. Want me to look into it?" He grinned. "I understand completely. I didn't hear it from you. Thanks again."

Chris straightened at the cat-that-ate-the-canary expression Jack had. "What?"

"Seems we're on the right track, Agent Larabee. My caller prefers to remain anonymous, but I'm sure you'll figure out the source. He also said that he was ordered to tell no one what he just told me. It seems Agent Standish suspects the mole to be on Victor's personal staff."

There was an electrified silence as the men jockeyed the information in their minds. "Well," Chris finally offered, "there is a way to check that theory . . ."

". . . and finally be one step ahead of Wu for a change," Jack finished.

Chris shot to his feet. "Come on. We have work to do and we need to be away from this building to do it."

In complete and total silence the two men exited the building and climbed into Jack's car.

"Where to?" Jack asked.

"The hotel. I had everyone regroup over there before coming to the hospital. I think we need JD's expertise to narrow down the rat in your house."

"Did I tell you I offered that boy a job?" Jack commented as they left the parking garage.

Chris laughed shortly as he pulled out his cell and dialed.

-----

Buck startled when his phone vibrated at his hip, garnering an amused look from Danny. Buck checked the incoming call's source and flipped open the device. "He's not awake but holding' his own, Chris," he said without preamble.

"Okay smartass mind reader, what was I gonna say next?"

"That you have an idea but you can't talk over the phone."

Silence.

"You're too smart for your own good, Wilmington. I'll be there in a little while."

"Okay, and yes, I'll call you when Vin comes around."

"Damn, Buck, cut that out! The idea of you crawlin' around in my head is too scary to contemplate."

Buck chuckled and snapped the phone shut. Danny grinned before he spoke. "What's up?"

"We'll find out when Chris gets here." Buck stretched where he stood. "It's my turn in the cage," he said, heading to the small ICU room.

As the doctor had promised, Vin's room was isolated at the end of the row of glass-faced rooms. As he approached, he could see Samantha and Martin in adjoining chairs, huddled close in the tight space. Martin looked more relaxed than he did an hour ago and credited the pretty blonde agent. *'That boy's got a lot on his plate right now,'* Buck thought of the F.B.I. agent.

"Hey," he said softly at the open doorway. "Time for a break."

Samantha looked up at him and then rose to her feet. "Can I get you anything?" she asked Martin. He shook his head and Samantha smiled. "Okay. I'll be just outside." She ran her fingers gently through Martin's hair before turning to go. Martin's hand slid down her arm and his fingers brushed hers as she moved away.

Martin sighed and turned his attention to Vin. "Hasn't moved at all," he reported. "You know what's the weirdest of all this?"

"What?" Buck asked as he looked down at Vin's slack features for a moment.

"It's like there's a hole in my mind now. I never knew there was a hole there until Vin came along; he's just there, you know?" He tapped his temple. "And now that he's out like that," he nodded toward the still figure in the bed. "I can feel the hole. It's kinda hard to explain."

"I do get it," Buck said softly. He glanced at the monitors before turning to face Martin. "Chris 'n' I have been friends for a long time. He told me the same thing when he and Vin first met. It's the only way he could explain that 'talking without words' thing they have. It was hard to believe, and I admit I did razz him about it, but after awhile . . ."

"There were too many instances to back up what he - they - claimed."

"Yeah. That little parlor trick they do has saved our asses, both individually and collectively, too many times to count. So I believe ya."

Martin scrubbed his weary face with his hand. "This has been the weirdest week of my life."

Buck chuckled and decided to change the subject. "So, you and Samantha been together long?"

A slow grin erased some of the tired lines of Martin's face. "Yes. No. Well, we were starting to connect when the Full Moon case came up. We had to back off for awhile, but it looks like things are coming together."

"She's been a real trooper with all this, that's for sure. Don't meet many women that are so resistant to the Wilmington charm."

"She's worked with Danny, remember. Must have built up her immunity."

Both men chuckled softly and then turned their attention to Vin.

"Never thought I'd ever see the back of his neck," Buck mused. "He sure looks different without that hair." He glanced back to Martin. "But the style suits you. Why does it look so weird on him?"

Martin shook his head. "One of those mysteries that comes with twins, I guess." He looked thoughtful.

"Been quite a shock for y'all."

"Yeah, ain't that the truth." Martin sank back in the less than soothing chair. "It's given me a new appreciation for my mom - Katherine," he clarified. "In an odd sort of way she's got dad wrapped around her finger. I've never seen him bow to someone's needs like he does to hers. Guess everyone's got someone . . ."

"But it doesn't help the hurt much, does it?"

"Nah. Not really. I can forgive her. Not sure I can do the same for old Victor." Martin sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. "I just want this all over so we can move on."

"I hear ya, son. New York's fun to visit, but I'll be very happy to head home."

-----

Wu was deep into his meditation. He was upset that it had taken so long to achieve a calm, peaceful center.

Never had a hit gone so badly for him. Pride, he figured. Pride is what made him lose his focus. He wasn't a young man anymore and he had to realize that, along with the fact that he'd been out of the field for at least a decade. Dragon's Claw had to adjust his technique. After all, success was the only measure that mattered. He had to finish this because Dragon's Claw never failed.

He may have to try something different. He had to start from the basic idea again. He had to taste blood again. Literally

The Ancients believed that drinking the blood of their enemies brought them strength and power. It was time to embrace the lessons of his ancestors once again. It was time to start over again.

Wu felt his mind calm and his thoughts become focused. Yes, that was it. He'd ignored the Ancients and had paid for it with failure.

He wouldn't fail again.

-----

"I got it!" JD yipped.

The six of them had spent the last hours making connections and running down threads and finally, JD was sure he'd found the common factor; the mole. The same mole here that had been responsible for Ezra's disgrace in Atlanta five years ago.

"Ted Cheever," JD announced.

Jack's face showed disbelief. "You sure? Cheever's had his mitts in just about every aspect of the F.B.I. A real climber - he's considered a golden boy."

"If he's such a climber than what's he doin' on Fitzgerald's staff? Aren't there better positions?" Chris took the sheets JD offered and began scanning them with Josiah looking over his shoulder.

The hotel room was getting hot and rather stifling. It wasn't meant to hold this number of people for any length of time.

"Being on anyone's staff in D.C. is the way to make influential contacts," Vivian said. "And I bet he's got more than a few secrets in his pocket, too. That's better than gold."

"I don't know what he plans for himself politically," JD explained. "But his bank account shows he's got a great shot at being a lobbyist or a congressman. With the timing of some of these deposits, it sure looks like he's bein' paid off. By lots of people. And the way he transfers funds is usually untraceable."

"Hm." Jack studied the figures with Vivian at his side. "He makes a lot more than I do, looking' at this."

"He makes more than the F.B.I. Director, according to that." JD flexed his sore fingers. "And look back five years. I cross matched with the records of Ezra's investigation and I see a pattern of deposits around each of the events that were in the record - the events that tried to show Ez as a snitch. They couldn't find a money trail on Ez. That was the only thing that saved him from being prosecuted."

"So he was used for convenience. It was never the intention to pin the events on Ez to hang him," Chris mused. Nathan also read over his shoulder.

"Nope. He was the decoy only. The money was the only thing Cheever wanted. He hides it very well, too. He did a lot of stuff behind Victor's back in Atlanta and no doubt in D.C., either. He got lots of money then, and he's still getting it from even more sources."

"Now?"

"Yep. Look. There's a deposit and transfer to an offshore account just before Wu started shootin' at Vin. Cheever must have told him where Martin and Vin were."

"And I bet he was real pleased to hear Ez was involved."

"I bet he was. Ezra was an instant stooge. Like I said, Atlanta all over again and that was very profitable for him. So, what's next?"

"Time for a set up," Jack said. "Damn, an F.B.I. employee in cahoots with an assassin." He shook his head, speechless.

Chris could only nod in agreement that it was a horrifying precedent.

## Chapter Twenty

The humming was low and throaty and the only thing that didn't seem to throb in time with his head. It was deep hum that massaged his bones and wasn't particularly unpleasant until there was a sharp click and it was over.

"Vin?"

He realized the word was repeated several times, but this time he finally understood it. He responded automatically – "Hunh?" the effort burning the back of his throat. The muscles of his forehead twitched into a frown. Sparks ignited in his head.

"Here." The word was followed by a sharp poke to his lower lip. "Drink something."

It was easier to simply follow orders because the pain in his head was taking all his attention. The water was blessedly cool as it spilled from the straw. Vin sighed.

"Come on, Vin, quit moaning' and open your eyes."

Moaning?

"I ain't moanin'." The words didn't sound like he thought they should.

"I know you're a little mixed up but it's time to wake up, Pard."

Pard? "C'rs?" He worked to get his eyelids to obey.

"Yeah, it's me. Keep tryin', Vin. Come on."

Finally, both lids cracked at the same time and he saw fuzzy figures.

*'You with us now?'* Not Chris but still familiar in his mind.

"Yeah, yeah." Vin reached up and touched the wrapping on his head.

"Mr. Tanner? Can you answer some questions for me?" Fingers held open his eyelid as a painful probe of light pierced his eye. Vin reached for the fingers with the intention of breaking them for the intrusion. A strong hand prevented the motion.

"Stand down, Vin. It's only the doc." Chris said softly. His grip, though, was firm.

Vin forced his body to relax and tolerate the inspection. He realized he was sitting up and the humming sensation from earlier made sense – hospital bed. The light left his eyes and he tried to blink away the fuzziness.

"Do you remember what happened?" Strange voice. The doctor?

"Uh . . ." Visions rolled through his head like tumbleweeds on a desert. The headache dug furrows to in his forehead between his brows as he squeezed his eyes shut.

"Do you know your name?"

"Tanner. Vin."

"Do you know where you are?"

"Hospital?"

Chuckling from a source in the background.

"Do you remember where? What city?"

Vin narrowly opened his eyes. His vision cleared and he saw three faces. Doctor dressed in white, Chris dressed in black and . . .

"Martin?" That's whose voice was in his head before.

His own face minus hair grinned back. “Yeah. Glad you remember me, brother.”

Brother. The word organized his thoughts. He was far from home and he’d found family. “New York.”

Apparently satisfied, the doctor’s face disappeared but Vin could still hear his voice.

“Something for pain will be brought in soon. The CAT and MRI look good. I’ll start on your release papers.” Vin frowned and started to nod but the slight motion hurt too much. Chris moved aside and began speaking with the doctor near the door. Martin moved in closer and Vin noticed that his right arm was trussed up.

“Guess you’re going to live.” Martin hitched a hip on the bed and winced.

“You okay?” The reason for his brother’s injury came to Vin in spurts.

“I’ll survive. As soon as you’re able, we need to bring you up to date.”

*‘Wu shot me?’* Speaking without words was easier on Vin’s headache.

*‘Yeah. He’s still out there . . .’* “. . . and that’s why we need to talk.”

“There’s a plan, then.” The feeling had come to him bundled with Martin’s mental message.

“Chris and Jack are working on it.”

“We’re gonna lure the bastard into the open, right?” Vin shifted and at that moment realized his left arm was in a cast. He regarded it blearily as Martin spoke.

“Neither one’s too happy about it, but it’s really the only way. We found a leak in dad’s staff. That’s how Wu’s been getting information.”

Vin pondered on that between the throbs of his headache. The word ‘dad’ brought the revelations of the past few days together in his mind. “Dad,” he mumbled. “Don’t sound right.”

Martin’s smile didn’t include his eyes. “I know what you mean.”

Chris returned to the bed as the doctor left the room. “Hey, partner,” he started. “I hate to do this to ya, but we have to move fast if we want to control where we meet Wu again. Travis gave us the warrants we need and we’re ready to go.”

Vin forced himself to ignore the headache. “So start talkin’.”

-----

Deputy Director Fitzgerald hung up the phone with a decisive slam and let out a sharp breath. Ted Cheever, his personal assistant, twitched at the noise and saw his boss throw a furtive glance toward the bedroom.

“Is my wife still asleep?”

“Yes, sir. She took one of those pills, as you requested. She should sleep for another couple of hours.”

“Good, good.” Victor turned, his mind obviously distracted. The man had been gone for hours trying to keep tabs on his ungrateful son and had only just returned to the hotel suite. Things hadn’t gone well, gauging by Victor’s mood since then. “I’ll be going out later . . .”

“Should I change your dinner plans, sir?”

“No,” Victor said first. Then he ran his hand through his hair. “Yes, yes. Maybe you should. I don’t know if I’ll make it back in time.”

“Back?”

His boss was uncharacteristically disjointed, his mind obviously elsewhere. Then Victor sucked in a sharp breath and regrouped right before Ted’s eyes. “Yes. Martin’s leaving for a safe house late this afternoon – before six, I think.”

“Again? The same one? If it is, you can still make the dinner . . .”

“No, no.” The Deputy Director shook his head and grabbed the back of his neck in a massage-like pinch. He turned his back to Ted. “It’s out of town, off Dreyden Road, near the dead end. The ATF team will be returning to Denver soon but Martin and their two agents will be recovering at the same location for a few days before they leave.” He let out a breath and dropped his hand. “And it’s not soon enough for me.”

“Good riddance, huh?” Victor shot his assistant a piercing glance over his shoulder that told Ted he’d overstepped again by sounding too familiar. Ted cleared his throat and dropped his eyes, busying himself with Victor’s Blackberry. “So,” he said as he poised the stylus. “When are they arriving at the safe house? Are you going to meet them there or go by later?”

Always efficient, Ted Cheever updated the Deputy Director’s schedule for the day before excusing himself. He had just enough time to make a few phone calls from his room before having to arrange for the Deputy Director’s car.

-----

It was obviously taking every ounce of Larabee’s self control to keep from strangling his team’s sharpshooter. Vin dropped into the wheelchair with an ill-concealed grunt. His forehead was shiny with pain-induced sweat because he’d refused any help.

“You comfy?” Chris asked from between gritted teeth.

“Just fine, thanks,” Vin growled back.

Martin found the whole exchange amusing. He could feel the frustration pulsing from both of them, the mental conversation fast and furious between them. Martin could only follow one side of it, but the emotion from both sides was very clear.

*‘At least now I know that stubbornness is hereditary.’*

In response, Vin glared at his brother which made Martin’s smile grow bigger.

“Amusin’, huh?” Vin asked.

“Oh, yeah.” He fell in beside the chair as Chris pushed. Martin felt the unease growing as they trio approached the elevator. “It’s only three stories,” he said. “Quick trip.”

Vin nodded mutely.

“So JD’s in the car already?” Martin figured they could keep Vin’s mind off the trip by going over the plan again.

“Yep. Looked pretty good in Ez’s suit, too.” The elevator doors slid open. Chris let Martin push the chair in and turn it around as Chris pulled out his cell phone. He hit a few buttons to pull up a picture and handed it to Vin.

Martin nodded in approval at the well-timed action. Vin’s nervousness waned as he took the small device in his hand. After a moment he chuckled and handed the phone back to Chris.

“Good thing the parkin’ garage was dark. Looks like the shoulders need some paddin’. JD ain’t quite as buff as Ez.”

Larabee glanced at the picture with a smirk before closing the phone and putting it away. “Did the trick. Looked like Ez to Buck when they hustled him onto the car.”

“Those windows better be pretty dark ‘cause Wu’ll be able to see faces with his scope.”

“That’s why JD’s sitting’ behind the driver and in the back. The side and back windows are pretty dark. The windshield’s the only clear glass.”

The elevator bumped to a stop and Chris pushed the wheelchair out. Martin saw Vin’s shoulders visibly relax. They were met in the alcove of the elevator bank by security. Vests were draped over the three of them and they were surrounded as they moved to the exit.

“Quite a show we’re puttin’ on,” Vin mumbled, clearly uncomfortable with the attention.

“As much as we trust your sniper knowledge, we aren’t takin’ any chances,” Chris said and he quickly pushed Vin along. Once outside, Chris leaned closer to Vin’s ear. “And it has to look good. We don’t know who is watching.”

The black Suburban was as close to the exit as it physically could get and a dark sedan was close behind. Vin and Martin were quickly ushered into the back seats and the door barely closed before the vehicle was in motion. Martin glanced back and saw Chris jump in the sedan.

“So far so good.” JD’s voice was breathy with excitement. He was in the third row seat.

The kid’s mood was catching and Martin couldn’t help but grin. He glanced at his brother and saw a small smile soften Vin’s features. Apparently, the mild pain medication he’d taken helped.

“Calm down, JD. You’re supposed to be in pain, remember?” Nathan said from the driver’s seat.

“Was Ezra all right with this switch?” Vin asked. He found the handguns he’d requested in the seat pouch in front of him and handed one to Martin. They both automatically inspected the weapons as JD replied.

“He was the one that requested it,” JD said. “It did make sense to have one armed, uninjured passenger back here, just in case. You know Chris, he . . .”

“ . . . he didn’t want to take any chances. I got that.” Vin’s irritation at Chris’ protectiveness made Nathan chuckle.

“Wu is a seasoned professional. The element of surprise is all we have working’ for us right now,” Nathan reminded them. “We have Dreyden Road covered from all angles based on your instructions, Vin. If you’re right and that’s where Wu hits ya, he ain’t getting’ away.”

“And that’s another reason why Ez suggested the switch,” JD said. “He left Wu for Vin while he settled an old score somewhere else.”

Vin grunted and glanced at Martin. “You better be right about that part, brother, or we’re puttin’ on a show without an audience.”

“Victor Fitzgerald is driven to gain status and power. Cheever threatens both. Dad will do what needs to be done to save his own hide.” Martin awkwardly thumbed the safety of his weapon with his uninjured left hand and tucked the gun in his waistband with a sigh. “He’s very good at taking care of himself.”

Nathan snorted. “I’ll say.”

-----

Sharp raps on the door drew Ted’s attention from his laptop. He glanced at his watch. “Damn, fastest dry cleaning delivery I’ve ever seen,” he mumbled as he closed the computer lid. A second assault started on the door. “Okay! I’m coming!” he said loudly as he approached the door. “Fast, but rude,” he grumbled to himself. He pulled the door open and was shocked to see a familiar black woman standing there. Her eyes locked on his and he immediately felt fearful. “Agent Johnson, right?” was all he could think to say.

“Good day, Mr. Cheever. I believe this is for you.” She slapped his chest with a folded paper and pulled him from the room.

Ted stumbled into the hall, juggling the paper in surprise. “Hey!” he yelped, finally getting the paper under control. All he saw was the word “Warrant” before another presence made him look up.

Victor Fitzgerald’s eyes pinned him with an arctic glare. “Cuff him,” he said shortly. A man came forward with handcuffs.

“What?” Ted sputtered as cold metal clicked over his wrists.

## FULL MOON & DENVER'S SEVEN

His boss stepped into the hotel room behind Agent Johnson, clearing the way for another's piercing glare to freeze him in his tracks.

"My dear Mr. Cheever," Ezra Standish stated dryly while still managing to appear elegant even with one shoulder heavily wrapped in bandages. "It has been a while since we last met. About five years?" The smile that shaped his mouth somehow made Standish's eyes grow impossibly harder. "I see you have finally earned your true reward. You have no idea how happy I am for you."

As more agents moved past Standish and spilled into his hotel room, Ted Cheever knew he was in trouble. Big trouble.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Dreyden Road began where the city of New York ended and led travelers along a path that slowly became rustically rural with each passing mile. It began at the edge of the city as a four lane, divided highway and eventually ended as a two lane country road. As it narrowed, the roadway became as curvaceous as a 50's pin-up gal.

Vin found the gentle turns relaxing. Between the crooked roadway and increasing number of trees overhanging the pavement he knew there was no chance of being the target of a distance sniper. That feeling would evaporate when the road eventually straightened out near its termination. There was a very small window of opportunity on this particular roadway which was why the team chose it to make a stand. There was only one area of opportunity for sniper ability of Dragon's Claw.

Dreyden Road dead-ended in a collection of scattered estates and open land. Wu would be trapped inside an unbreakable perimeter of ATF, State Police and Federal Park Rangers that knew this area well. The hastily collected law enforcement personnel were mounted on everything from horses to small all-terrain vehicles and 4-wheel drive trucks, all of which blended in to the area to look like residents.

With only a half a day to pull the plan together, Chris has been impressed at the response. Victor Fitzgerald and Jack Malone had a lot of contacts and they had all acted quickly. The hard part had been convincing Victor of Cheever's double dealings. Once Judge Travis had approved the search warrants for Cheever's phones and financial and personal records, the limited information they'd had time to retrieve was damning. And when the Deputy Director intentionally let the location of the safe house off Dreyden Road slip, Cheever's following phone call to Wu quickly hung him.

Victor Fitzgerald had been uncharacteristically quiet since then.

Vin cast his eyes in the direction of his brother, trying to read his expression. Martin, too, had been subdued since they'd started their trip. He must have felt Vin's gaze on him because after a moment, Martin met his brother's concerned look.

"I'm fine," Martin assured him with a half grin. "When this is over, we need to get away and talk."

Vin nodded. "I think we've earned some time off, wouldn't ya say, JD?" The only response was a grunt from the back seat. Vin turned as much as his aching head would allow. "You okay back there?"

A mumbled "yeah" was all he uttered. Martin turned to the back seat, having a better angle to see the agent. Vin saw his brother frown at first and then break into a smile.

"Are you carsick?" Martin prodded.

"Carsick?" Vin laughed. "JD, are you really carsick?"

"Who's carsick?" Nathan demanded from the driver's seat. "I can't pull over! If you're gonna heave, JD, use this!"

An empty paper coffee cut flew backward through the air and bounced off Vin's shoulder. HE cringed as he automatically tried to grab the cup before it hit the floor. "Ooh, shouldn't move that fast," he winced, his head a constant reminder of his injuries. Much more slowly, he retrieved the cup and handed it over his shoulder to JD. "You ain't gonna ruin Ezra's jacket, are ya?" he commented.

"Shut up," JD growled, grabbing the cup. "I'll be fine when the road straightens out."

Martin tried to look sympathetic but Vin saw the amused shine in his brother's eyes. Martin's mouth opened to issue what Vin knew would be a smart-aleck remark when a loud bang was suddenly followed by a jerking movement of the Suburban.

"SHIT!" Nathan yelped. Vin saw him glance to the rearview mirror. "CHRIS!"

A louder bang made the big SUV cut sharply to the left, and then to the right, giving Vin just enough time to press his body against the side before his world turned sideways and the sound of screeching metal drove him painfully into darkness.

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Wu relaxed, allowing the rifle stock to drop from his shoulder. The two vehicles had come to a crashing stop exactly where he'd planned. He had not instituted a medium range attack in decades and was pleased that his accuracy and speed was still intact. Wu whispered thanks to the Highest Powers for giving him the chance to prove himself.

Wu strode to his nearby Jeep and slipped inside, driving a few dozen yards to reach the wrecked vehicles. The smell of hot antifreeze and burned rubber ignited excitement in his veins but his tight and practiced control kept him to an efficient pace. Wu carefully and respectfully stored his rifle and retrieved his handgun, tucking it in his waistband. As he exited the Jeep he felt for the knife pouch on his waist and patted it to make sure his knife was where it should be. It would soon be time for close work and again feel the essence of his victims' blood on his fingers.

The sedan was nose down in the muddy rut of a small stream. Steam rose from the grille and the shredded tire he'd shot out still twitched from the front wheel hub. There was no motion inside from the body draped over the steering wheel. After a quick visual inspection, he moved to his main target.

The Suburban was on its left side in the same ravine, the shot out tire hidden under the vehicle. Wu was momentarily annoyed that he had to climb up to the side door, but then chastised himself for being ungrateful. The Powers that gave him his ability to shoot would not be pleased with that attitude. Wu immediately banished the thoughts with a mental apology and focused on finishing his task.

Wu climbed onto the side of the vehicle and reached inside through the broken window to unlock the door. It took some effort, but the door finally groaned open. The sight of the bloodied, tumbled bodies inside caused his heart to race with anticipation. He grabbed the closest arm and tugged – it didn't move. Wu slipped into the metallic hulk and used his knife to cut the seatbelts that kept his prey from him.

The familiar Fitzgerald/Nicklin face, lax in unconsciousness, showed no reaction at being pulled free. The way the arm was wrapped against the body made it easy to push the first figure out and over the edge of the SUV. There was a dull thud as it hit the ground.

Wu reached in again, ignoring the tug of long unused muscles in his back and freed the second twin. Blood marred on side of the injured man's face, the sweet and heady copper scent exciting Wu to the point of losing concentration. Wu paused, mentally berated himself and asked the Powers to forgive his momentary weakness. Then the second body joined the first as the assassin focused

on his task. Wu heard the hard cast on his second victim's arm banging loudly against the vehicle as it fell to the ground.

The driver moaned and stirred. Wu struck black man's skull with the butt of his knife to send him back into unconsciousness. Wu turned to the third passenger and was momentarily taken aback when he realized it wasn't St. James. The figure moaned and an arm jerked just before the eyes snapped open. Wu found that he was looking at the face of a boy.

Wu pursed his lips in disgust. Who did these people think they were, sending out a mere boy to protect Dragon's Claw's victims? The blatant disrespect was insulting. Wu thought about cutting the boy's heart out in anger but then remembered why he was here. The Powers were testing his humility! Wu took a deep, relaxing breath, ignored the tantalizing blood perfume and knocked the unknown boy into the same darkness as the driver. Wu congratulated himself on his restraint.

"This is a clever, convoluted test," Dragon's Claw complimented the Powers in a reverent whisper, bowing his head with respect. "I can only hope I have proved my worthiness so far."

Wu crawled out from the wreck and laboriously dragged his two sacrificial entities to the Jeep where he threw them in with little finesse. Wu was reminded that this was the kind of physical labor that started his climb to becoming Dragon's Claw and thus confirmed to him that he was on the right path. He quickly bound the arms and feet of his victims with duct tape.

Now he had to get his victims to the sacrificial site for the Blood Offering ritual and Dragon's Claw would be redeemed.

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Chris came around abruptly with the sound of a vehicle starting. His body jerked into motion and he sat up, looking around wildly as his hand felt for this weapon. His stomach lurched when he saw the Suburban on its side and it took a moment for the sound of wheels on dirt to register. He twisted his head over his shoulder and saw a sage-colored Jeep executing a careful Y turn.

"Hey!" Chris yelled as he tried to undue his seatbelt. "STOP!"

Realizing he wouldn't get loose in time Chris fumbled with the car's radio.

"All units, the suspect hit early and is on an off-road westbound trail. I repeat, the suspect hit early! Suspect vehicle is a light green Jeep. I need back up now! Outside the perimeter to the east!" Radio chatter immediately cluttered the airwaves and Chris returned to fighting his seatbelt. Finally, it released and he erupted from the smashed vehicle, stumbling as his feet hit the uneven ground of the ravine. Finding his balance he dragged his weapon from his shoulder holster and shot off three rounds at the retreating Jeep. There was at least one solid strike that he could hear but the Jeep didn't hesitate in its departure.

"SHIT!" Chris screamed as the vehicle moved off in a cloud of dust that obscured the license plate. "GOD DAMN IT!"

Chris clawed his way out of the ravine and wobbled toward the SUV. "Nathan!" he called. "NATHAN!" He ran around to the front, barely able to make out the still form behind the wheel. Chris yelled again and Nathan jerked, coming to life much too slowly for Chris.

Squealing tires from the road caused Chris to duck down and bring up his weapon toward the noise. Buck leaped from a car before Samantha came to a complete stop.

"He's getting away!" Chris yelled.

"Which way?" Buck responded, sliding to a stop and pulling out his weapon.

Chris pointed to the brush-hidden off-road trail beyond the ravine. The only evidence of the departed Jeep was the remnants of a dust cloud settling on the path.

“Damn! We can’t follow in this car,” Buck said with a nod toward Samantha’s sedan. “I’ll see if there’s air support and if anyone else is . . .”

Before Buck finished his sentence a park ranger emerged from the trees on a leggy bay horse, his radio alive with chatter. “Everyone alright?” he asked as he pulled up.

Without a word, Chris stalked to the man and yanked him from the saddle. The ranger, taken totally by surprise, fell without a sound. Chris stuck his foot in the stirrup; the horse danced in place, its ears flicking nervously.

“Chris, are you nuts?” Buck called. “Wait for a helo! You’ll never catch him on a horse!”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” the ranger demanded as he gained his feet.

The angry team leader barely heard the last words as he pulled himself into the saddle, reined toward the off-road path and urged the horse into a ground pounding gallop.

Orders and directions were quick and furious, spilling from Chris’ earpiece nonstop and he quickly built a mental picture of he back up; he realized he was on his own for now. After a dozen more strides of the running horse, Chris blocked all the chatter and became completely focused on pursuit.

The narrow roadside ravine where he left his car was a tributary to a larger creek that ran, more or less, parallel to the trail the Jeep followed. There was very little water in the creek this time of year and the sandy-loam bed proved to be a good surface for the galloping horse. The Jeep had to follow a trail that had more curves than the riverbed - one thing in Chris’ favor.

Chris figured his luck wouldn’t last – it never did. The creek bed would run out soon or the Jeep would take another trail up one of the numerous valleys; trying to plan ahead was impossible since he didn’t know the area. He had to come up with a plan, and fast. Chris noticed the roof rack on the Jeep and worked it into an idea.

The Jeep bounced along the trail with impressive speed. Chris figured the passengers were getting a very rough ride and that he probably couldn’t count on Vin or Martin at the moment – if they were still alive. He moved his hands down the length of rein and urged the bay to a faster speed by leaning over the horse’s extended crest. The animal complied. Chris knew it would tire quickly at this rate.

He saw an out and immediately took it. A narrow path that led to the creek’s edge came into view and he directed his mount toward it. The pair thundered up the slight slope and through a primitive dirt parking area. A low log fence bordered the area and the bay jumped the obstacle without hesitation. Chris grabbed a handful of mane and managed to stay aboard. Upon landing, he glanced up and saw the Jeep’s rear bumper disappear behind a low rise.

Chris spat a curse and headed for the rise. Suddenly, the ground in front of them dropped away where another creek had cut a path. The horse’s ears shot forward and Chris barely had time to adjust his seat as the horse took a gallant and powerful leap.

They cleared the void – barely. The horse stumbled on landing but quickly found his feet and resumed his furious pace. His mount was starting to lather and Chris knew it would soon be spent. He could only pray that his vague idea panned out before the horse tired completely.

Man and horse attacked the small rise. When they reached the slope’s crest Chris instinctively guided the spirited bay to follow the slope’s crest. The timing was perfect. As the Jeep straightened out parallel to their course and below them, Chris asked the horse for more and it complied, probably for the last time, he realized. He had to act now.

Chris leaned to the side and pushed off the thundering horse, landing on the roof rack with an ungainly thump. He grabbed the leading edge of the roof rack with both hands and braced his feet against the back section. The Jeep swerved violently from side to side, but he held on even though

the ride was violently rough. When he felt somewhat secure Chris released one hand and reached for his handgun.

He pulled out his weapon and frantically tried to figure his next move. He looked ahead and saw that the off-road trail emptied on to a narrow roadway so he waited. The bumpy, wild ride immediately became smoother as the Jeep transitioned from dirt to pavement with a wild jump that lifted Chris' belly from the roof.

He'd just slammed back onto the metal when a loud bang produced a sting in his thigh. Gunfire! Another bang quickly followed. Chris looked over his shoulder and saw a bullet hole next to his hip. A second later another shot burned a trail along his side.

He had to move.

Chris scooted to the right edge and dropped his arm. It was an awkward angle – too awkward to shoot through the window – so he needed a secondary target, one that would allow the vehicle to come to a controlled stop rather than spinning out. Chris swung his arm to the front and started shooting at the hood, hoping to hit the distributor cap or the radiator; damage to either one would eventually kill the engine and hopefully that would happen before he got gut shot.

Firing off a trio of shots, Chris rolled aside as quickly as his predicament allowed. A pair of shots zinged through the roof where his abdomen had just been. He fired another trio of shots through the hood and rolled to his side to make the smallest target he could. Another pair of holes burst through the roof next to his chest.

Chris concentrated on staying aboard and listened to the radio chatter in his ear, trying to estimate when he's have backup. The Jeep was far outside the established perimeter but a helicopter unit answered up and was heading his way. For now, Chris was on his own. He twisted and snapped off another trio of shots and was finally rewarded with a violent spray of steam and antifreeze. The hot concoction came down in a fiery rain and he gasped. The Jeep jerked suddenly, the engine screaming.

Another shot pounded the roof and Chris' left bicep erupted blood, tearing his grip on the rack. He yelped in pain and frantically grabbed for the rail with his right hand. His gun disappeared over the edge of the roof. Adrenalin dampened the hurt but didn't dampen the dizziness that attacked him. Mentally, all he thought to do was hang on and survive.

Chris tightened his grip on the rack rail and braced himself with his feet. His left arm refused to obey him. The Jeep's motor whined as it seized and died. The vehicle slowed rapidly and then jerked to a near stop, the engine grinding sickly.

Chris heard the driver door open. Rolling to the right side and felt brief weightlessness before painfully hitting the asphalt with a loud grunt and a spray of bright lights.

Shocked, Chris froze for a moment. Blinking rapidly, he worked to ignore the pain of his arm and slowly turned his head aside. He saw feet on the other side of the Jeep and was reminded of Ezra – the shoes were the expensive kind. Automatically feeling for his gun, he remembered that it was somewhere on the road behind them. A renewed adrenalin rush forced focus.

The feet weren't moving. A door open.

*'Vin!'* his mind screamed.

The roar in Chris' ears grew louder very quickly. He tried to push to his feet but his left arm collapsed when he tried to use it. Liquid fire immediately shot up his arm and directly to his head and he reeled, gasping. Chris rolled to the other side, trying to ignore the blinding pain, and again attempted to stand. His body wouldn't respond.

Chris collapsed to the ground, breathing heavily and fighting darkness as he commanded his limbs to work. He growled in frustration at his body's betrayal. Chris fell back again and tried to

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yell a warning but the roaring in his ears was too loud. He suddenly felt bits of dirt bite his skin on a hard wind and then realized that the roaring he heard was a helicopter. Backup had arrived.

Although he tried to hang on, Chris dropped into a black abyss.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Buck swallowed hard in a supreme effort to keep his stomach in place. The noise of the helicopter bundled with the abrupt landing maneuver and what he saw below him suddenly brought back many suppressed visions from his SEAL days. None of them were pleasant. He glanced at Jack, sitting next to him, to see if the man had noticed his discomfort. He hadn't - Jack's eyes were fixed out the small window of the craft.

The radio chatter was incessant, bursting with directions of travel and sightings of Wu and his captive – one captive, Buck knew, and both on foot. From what he could see from the sky it wasn't Chris because the sprawled figure on the street next to the green Jeep was dressed in Chris' signature black. The body was and very still.

The helo's runner barely touched the ground when Buck leaped from the cabin feeling, more than seeing, Jack on his heels. Admittedly afraid as to what he would find, Buck skidded to a stop a few feet from his oldest friend before taking a breath and crossing the final void. He dropped next to Chris and his hand stalled for a moment over the motionless form. Blood stained the asphalt under one of Chris' arms and one side of his shirt was shiny. Buck finally reached out and touched the glossy cloth, knowing what he'd find. His hand came away red.

"Medic!" he yelled over his shoulder, shocked into motion. "I need a medic, here!"

After receiving a faint acknowledgement from the helo Buck turned his attention back to Chris.

"Hey, stud," he called through a tight throat. "Chris?"

Buck felt for a pulse and found one that was stronger than he'd expected. It pushed him into motion and he rolled Chris to his back. Chris responded with a sickening groan. Buck gave him a quick going over, thrilled when an EMT dropped down next to him with a loaded medical kit.

"Buck?"

"Yeah, Chris, it's me. Or should I call you Indiana Jones?" Buck said with relief.

"Where's Vin?" Chris tried to move, but gave up with a pain-filled hiss.

"That'll teach ya." Buck looked apprehensively toward the Jeep. Jack was talking lowly and helping someone from the back seat. "One of 'em's here, Chris, but Wu has the other and is using 'em as a hostage."

"Who? Who's here?" Chris chewed his lower lip and squirmed in obvious pain.

"Looks like Wu has Martin," Jack said, puffing a bit as he assisted Vin to Buck's side. Vin appeared to be barely aware of his surroundings. A piece of silver duct tape dangled from the cast on his arm.

"Take a seat, Junior, you're next." Buck pointed to a spot next to the medic as he stepped back toward the helo.

"I'm comin' with ya," Vin said, his voice breathy and slurred as he braced his wobbly legs.

"Don't be stupid, Vin!" Buck yelled, his nerves finally snapping. With the cervical collar on and his disheveled clothes Vin looked like a refugee from a war zone field hospital. "You stay here!"

“He’s my brother, Buck,” Vin said hoarsely. He raised his eyes from Chris and met Buck’s stern gaze without flinching. “I’m goin’.”

Buck looked at Jack. The FBI leader was holding up the injured agent with one arm around his waist. Vin’s good arm was draped over Jack’s shoulders. Jack adjusted his grip and pulled Vin in tighter. “If tea time’s over then let’s get my agent,” Jack growled.

Malone turned Vin toward the helo and they stumbled away. Buck hesitated a moment, his eyes on Chris.

“Go, Buck. Cover his sorry ass.” Chris mumbled, ending the order with a breathy expletive as the medic tightened a field dressing. His body went limp as he sank again into unconsciousness.

Buck sprinted to the chopper, passing the stumbling pair. Once at the craft he stepped up and turned to help drag Vin inside.

“You’re heavier than you look,” Jack panted when they finally settled Vin enough to lift off.

“Must be all those bandages,” Buck yelled over the growing engine noise. He threw Vin an exasperated look.

Vin didn’t see it. His eyes were closed because he’d passed out again.

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Wu pushed onward with purpose, driven to complete the task set to him. Purposely keeping a fast pace to keep his captive off balance, Wu already knew that he was not destined to reach his prepared arena. Instead, he would have to use what the Powers allowed. Again, he’d have to prove himself.

He held his captive tight, their bodies pressed into one silhouette. The blade Wu held was long, obscenely sharp and very special. Wu had only used it twice before in two other rituals to the Powers. Both times he’d been rewarded with power and skill beyond expectation; he’d been humble then, not expecting much. This time was different – Wu knew he’d taken the Powers for granted the last few years, his expectations of greatness higher than, perhaps, they should have been.

It was time to beg forgiveness, and Wu wasn’t used to begging. A blood offering was the only way to prove his respect.

Wu dragged his weakly struggling victim with a physical strength that came from somewhere deep inside. His eyes locked on a circle of rocks in an open field beyond the trees and he felt giddy with pleasure. The Powers had purposely led him to this exact point to offer him a perfect altar.

To get there, thought, he would be in the open and dangerously vulnerable.

Wu barked a short laugh. The Powers’ test was exquisitely difficult – to get to their selected altar Wu had to cross the treeless meadow and rely on the Powers to protect him. They were testing his trust!

The assassin hesitated for just a moment, tightening his grip on the weakly squirming sacrificial lamb and the shiny blade. Wu was well aware of the powerful handgun tucked in his waistband, teasing him and testing his restraint. Using the firearm, though, would indicate a lack of trust to the Powers. It had to be the blade.

Wu started forward, the circle of rocks lying in wait for the blood offering. All else around him faded away as he pressed the blessed blade against his victim’s throat and again set his course for immortality.

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As the helo cleared the tree line, Jack scanned the area ahead as he settled a microphone fitted helmet on his head. The radio chatter was nonstop.

“He’s in the field, crossing eastbound,” Josiah’s unmistakable voice reported. “There’s no shot from here without endangering the hostage.”

“I’m almost there, south side,” Samantha said, panting.

Other officers also reported in and Jack imagined a tight circle closing in on the field.

“This is Malone. I have an aerial visual from the east side. Sanchez, can you see how the suspect’s armed?”

“Checking.” There was a long pause as Jack imagined the big agent adjusting binoculars. Jack could see the open field now with a dark speck moving unsteadily across the green. “I see a knife on the hostage’s throat. At least ten inches. Looks like a gun in Wu’s waistband, in the back.”

“How does Martin look?” Jack asked.

“Looks like brother Martin’s slowing’ Wu down. He’s upright and moving but Wu’s having to work.”

“Does anyone have a shot?”

“Not that I can see.” Josiah’s voice was breathy. He was obviously on the move as he spoke. “He’s got Martin too close. Looks like we have a good perimeter around the meadow, though. He can’t get out.”

“Everyone hold positions. Do not expose yourselves. Wu is an accurate shot and we don’t have a clear target.” Samantha acknowledged Jack as did several other voices. Jack recognized Danny and JD among them.

The dark figure crossing the meadow grew in size and clarity as the helicopter drew closer. Jack could differentiate between Wu and Martin now, but the visualization did nothing to lighten his dread. The pair was melded close, and once they got to the rocks there wouldn’t be any chance for a shot.

As the aircraft approached the edge of the meadow, Wu twisted around and raised his chin. The pair paused, and Jack saw Wu press the enormous blade tighter to Martin’s throat as the Chinaman defiantly glared at them. The message was clear.

“Back off!” Jack yelled at the pilot. “Back off and hold position!”

As soon as the craft pulled back and hovered, Wu continued his trek to a rough circle of boulders in the center of the field.

“Looks like Stonehenge,” Jack muttered, the significance of that suddenly hitting him. “He’s heading for the rocks,” he said softly, his thoughts turning. Jack dug out a pair of binoculars and focused on Wu’s hands and the knife against Martin’s throat.

“He’ll be trapped, then,” Danny offered excitedly. “He’ll have to negotiate.”

Jack studied the lay out and Wu’s direct and this determined expression as he trekked to the natural theater. From somewhere deep in his mind, the memory of a training class about sacrificial rituals sprang forth.

Theatre. Or was it an altar?

Something clicked in Jack’s mind and he was spurred into action. Turning, he began a frantic search.

Buck startled from his position over Vin. “What’s up?” he snapped.

“Rifle. I need a rifle. When he gets to those rocks, Martin’s as good as dead.” He found what he was looking against the fuselage behind Buck. A rifle, locked to the frame. “Key! Who has the rifle lock key?”

“I’ll get it . . .” Buck lurched to the pilot and after a moment, returned with a key. Jack snatched it away and worked the lock as Buck looked out of the small window. “You gotta be kiddin’ me!” Buck yelled. “Can you make that shot? From HERE?”

Jack determinedly pressed on, checking the weapon thoroughly as he ordered Buck to slide open the side door. The pilot and co-pilot worriedly glanced back over their shoulders. “What the hell’s going on back there?” the pilot demanded.

“Keep it steady!” Jack barked. “Put me in line with the suspect!”

Jack pulled off the helmet and held the rifle to his shoulder, peering through the sites. It was difficult – no, nearly impossible – to keep a bead on Wu. Through one eye he tracked the assassin as he approached the rocks. First, Jack stood. Then he kneeled. Finally, he lay flat on the floor.

“He’s going to sacrifice Martin,” Jack said steadily as he tried to find a shot. “That’s no ordinary knife. That’s the Chinese version of a hari-kari knife, made for sacrificial purposes only.”

“Can you do it?” Buck asked sharply. “You have one chance, Malone. If you miss . . .”

The following silent seconds were heavy and tense. Wu and Martin disappeared momentarily behind a large boulder that thrust solidly upward from the earth. When the pair appeared on the other side they were mere steps from the center of the circle.

The gun site bounced. “Shit!” Jack spat – he could feel the sweat percolation along his hairline. His hands felt damp. “I don’t know . . . I just . . . can you . . . ?” Even he heard the desperation in his voice.

“Hell, no,” Buck choked. “I know only one person that could make that shot.” He dropped by Vin’s side and shook Team 7’s sharpshooter into awareness.

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Vin awoke to a cacophony of sound, the force of it making him cringe. A constant roar in the background made the layering of words impossible to understand. It was a hand on his shoulder that helped him to finally focus.

“Vin!” a man’s voice called. “Junior! Wake up!”

‘Buck?’ Vin frowned at the voice and struggled to concentrate. “Wha . . . ?” he managed to croak.

“Come on, hotshot, you have a job to do.”

“Job?” Vin’s thoughts felt like scrambled eggs and his head felt like the cracked eggshell. He hurt. Everywhere. Corralling the various agonies took some effort and he wasn’t helped in the least by the jarring motion of whatever he was sitting on.

Then a memory hit him. “Martin?” Vin struggled to sit up. Rising alarm temporarily drowned out the pain of motion.

“He’s outside with Wu. We need you to . . .”

“Chris? Where’s Chris?”

“If you’d just shut up a second, I’ll tell ya! Damn, Junior, I never thought I’d hear myself say those words to you . . .”

Vin gritted his teeth and silently accepted help to sit up. His stomach rolled dangerously. Then he realized what the loud background noise tormenting his head was a helicopter. And he was in it. Sharp, exquisite pain enveloped in his head and neck making focus difficult before moving like lightning down his torso and extremities. Vin pressed his abdomen with his free hand to still the awful nausea the pain caused.

“Chris is fine. He’s back at the car.” Buck licked his lips nervously as he shifted to get into Vin’s line of sight. “I’ll just tell ya strait, Junior: You gotta make a shot. Neither one of us trust our

eyes or our accuracy at this distance. Martin's only got one chance, Vin, and it's you." As he spoke, Buck turned away and Vin heard the jingling of keys. Buck reappeared with a zipper pouch in his hand that had a large, red cross on the outside. He practically ripped it open.

A very familiar clicking noise on Vin's other side shifted his attention from Buck. He tried to breathe through the pain and quell his rapidly growing nausea. Jack held a rifle and was positioning a sandbag next to the open side door of the aircraft. An electrified zing of fear jolted Vin into awareness.

"You need to take the shot, Vin," Buck said sternly. "It's Martin's only chance. We only have one shot."

Vin tried to move but sharp and sudden pain took away his breath again. The battle to push back the fiery tendrils that laced up and down his body was paralyzing. He gasped; the jolt of adrenalin that followed still wasn't enough to mask the agony.

"I can help ya." Vin felt Buck's warm breath brush his ear, his closeness overriding all background noise. "This'll take away the pain long enough for you to do what you do best. You're all Martin has, Vin. You have let me give it to you."

Vin's hazy gaze fixed on the small item in Buck's fingers and he shuddered. Vin was all too familiar with the Army's field morphine ampoules; he'd seen way too many of them. He was well aware of what they could do for him as well as to him.

Vin flicked his eyes from the obscene device to the view outside. Two fuzzy figures – Wu and Martin – were surrounded by a natural circle of rocks in the middle of an open field. The one obviously in control forced his captive to his knees as Vin watched. Wu was behind Martin, holding the agent tight to his chest. Vin frowned at the position – pain narrowed his field of vision, but he could see that not one of the surrounding agents could approach the pair and remain unseen.

"Someone's trying to negotiate," Jack said above the noise of the craft. Wu made no indication that he heard.

"He's got a knife to Martin's throat, Vin. Right over his jugular." Buck's words cut through the fog clouding Vin's thoughts. "Wu's gonna sacrifice him. Martin will bleed out in seconds. One shot is all we have or Martin's dead. You have to do this, Vin!"

Vin swallowed rising bile and nodded, knowing if he unclenched his jaws to speak he'd probably throw up, scream or do both. The needle stick was quick and hardly noticed over his tumultuous thoughts and overwhelming physical distress. As the familiar, calming warmth spread all through him, Vin blinked rapidly at the dark figures on the ground, embraced by the circle of rocks. His vision cleared to an unnatural sharpness. His hand rose to his throat and his fingers danced on the cervical collar.

"Off," he rasped.

He heard more than felt the cervical collar as it was peeled from his neck. Firm hands pulled him forward to his stomach and placed him behind the sand bag. The rifle was pressed into his good arm and he heard someone's voice telling him what the load of the ammunition was. Vin automatically adjusted his body and the casted arm into position, calculations of speed, distance, angle and wind already racing through his brain now that the outside distraction of pain was shoved to the background, behind a terrible opiate dam.

Vin kept his eyes on the pair below him in the distance knowing if he thought about the cloying warmth that washed away his pain he would never get focus back in time. All that mattered now was what he saw through the sight on the rifle and how to best use the weapon. He couldn't allow his thoughts to wander. Not now, not this second. He had to go for a body shot, he knew, because he couldn't chance anything else – Vin didn't know this rifle and the largest mass of target was the best target at this point.

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The majority of Wu, though, was covered by a lot of Martin. Vin found his eye focusing on a small triangle of opportunity in Wu's upper chest. Vin centered his site and prepared to fire, the jerk of the helicopter his only nemesis. He'd have to feel out some kind of rhythm to the motion and use it accordingly.

His thoughts centered and his sight focused. All that existed was the tiny, circular world in the scope, centered in the triangle of Wu's upper chest and the movement of the chopper. All else faded away . . . then he felt it. A rhythm. Vin waited . . . then counted . . . then held his breath and squeezed the trigger as Wu's blade flashed in the sun.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

*'Breathe. Think about breathing.'* Martin found it getting more difficult to concentrate. All he recalled was pain and confusion for the past minutes? Hours? At this point, he couldn't remember.

His shoulder burned like molten lead. His head felt like spikes were being driven in his temples. The brightness of the sun caused needle-like stabs in his eyes and this physical force kept driving him forward. Martin knew on some level that it was Wu – but he found that it was taking all he had to simply stay on his feet as he was forced to move.

Memory was sporadic - a flash of a hospital room, another of sitting in a car looking at his twin and then a loud noise and a spray of dazzling light behind his eyes. Now he smelled dirt and grass and sweat. Pressure on his throat made breathing nearly impossible.

*'Breathe. Relax and breathe.'* Simple steps in order to survive. If he couldn't intake air then the other pains didn't matter a whole lot. *'Breathe.'*

It took many moments to realize he wasn't moving anymore. Martin felt pressure on his shoulder and he dropped to his knees, grateful for the respite. *'Breathe.'* He closed his eyes, forced his muscles to relax and focus simply on expanding his chest and lungs, forcing inhalation.

After a few pain-filled breaths, Martin realized the buzzing in his ear was words. Soft words that he didn't think were directed at him, but to comprehend them took too much effort - effort he needed to simply breathe.

Martin was physically weary. He tried to sit back on his heels but a mass at his back kept him upright, that and the unrelenting, upward pressure on his throat. Martin raised a shaky hand to dislodge the sharpness on his neck. Weakly working his fingers, the pressure refused to yield. All Martin could do was hang on, his trembling grip ineffectual and weak.

He heard spoken words crooned hotly in his ear. Martin ceased all motion and tried to listen and breathe at the same time, fighting to understand and live at the same time.

Martin's mind clicked for a handful of seconds. The words he heard weren't English. He felt his forehead crinkle into a frown but it was only for a moment. The pressure increased on his neck and the speech level raised a notch.

*'Breathe!'*

His fingers clawed at the pressure, making no difference.

The cadence of the words quickened as the pressure against his skin began to burn. There was a roaring in his ears as his air was sharply cut off.

Martin's eyes flew open, shocked that his body was unable to intake air anymore. The brightness of the day created instant tears and he felt cold trails down his cheeks. There was a horrible gurgling sound and it registered somewhere in the back of his fading mind that it he was making the noise. He felt his body lurch to one side . . .

. . . and then he was falling heavily to earth, the musty smell of dirt invaded his nose as soon as he hit the ground with a painful thud. Cool air rushed down his throat when he gaped widely and expanded his chest in desperation.

Energy drained away and Martin simply and gloriously breathed, each intake of air more cool and refreshing than the last. He felt his body slowly revive, and, as it did so, the various pains made themselves known. It was best to just lie still he figured out quickly. After all, he could breathe now and that was all that mattered.

Awareness of what surrounded him came slowly. Voices, footfall and then gentle hands on his body, face and neck.

“Martin?”

*‘Sweet Samantha. When did she get here?’*

Blinking, Martin brought her golden-haloed face into focus and grinned weakly. “Hey, beautiful,” he thought he said, the words unclear to his own ears. He was rewarded with her bright smile. After a moment, his own smile drained away and he frowned as he studied her. “Tears?” he asked.

“Happy ones,” she explained softly, still smiling. “We’re gonna get you out of here, okay?”

“Fine,” Martin sighed, closing his eyes. It really was tiring to hold them open. He felt pressure on his throat again but this time it was gentle. His body was jostled and he jerked in a painful response. It was getting difficult to ignore. “I’ll just rest a bit,” he said shakily.

Martin felt Samantha’s hand gently stroke his cheek. “Yeah,” she whispered. “You do that. I’ll take care of everything.”

A tiny smile twitched one corner of his mouth as Martin dropped off. He finally felt safe.

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“Jesus,” Danny mumbled as his eyes fell on Dragon’s Claw. The Chinaman was flat on his back, his hands stained with what he realized was Martin’s blood. One dead hand still clutched a shiny silver knife, the blade also stained red. Wu’s eyes were open and blindly gazing skyward, his mouth agape.

There was a dark red hole at the base of his throat, only slightly off-center. Danny knew that the back of his neck was flayed open in typical exit wound style. Wu had died almost instantly. Danny hoped those last seconds were pain-filled.

Quiet murmurs became plain as the helicopter moved off, taking the rotor noise with it. He glanced skyward, sending mental thanks in its direction. “Hell of a shot,” he said to no one in particular as he turned his attention to his partner.

Martin was unconscious. Samantha held his head as it rested on her thigh while paramedics worked on his body. Danny heard the constant stream of numbers and medical terms between them knowing only that it meant Martin would be alright. One of Martin’s arms was still bound snugly to his body and as far as he could see, there were no new bruises to his face. The only new addition was a thick layer of four-by-four pads on his neck and some blood visible on the collar of his shirt.

An unexpected vision of that memorable tie Martin wore to court being used to bind the injury caused Danny to bark a laugh; there was a good use for it after all! He’d have to remember to hide it in the first aid kit in Martin’s agency car.

Agents Dunne and Sanchez helped roll Martin onto a back board and then onto a stretcher.

“Is he being air lifted?” JD asked as they raised the stretcher. He glanced skyward.

“No, there’s an ambulance waiting right over there,” one medic grunted as he shouldered his pack. He indicated the closest road with a nod of his head.

“They’re going to meet us at the hospital,” Sanchez said, adjusting his grip on one corner of the stretcher.

“Is Vin okay?” JD asked as they began the short trek to the road. He had another corner of the stretcher in hand.

Danny laughed shortly at the question as he followed Samantha behind the odd caravan. “I’d say he’s more than okay if he’s the one that made that shot.”

“Yes, I’d say that shot had Brother Tanner’s signature all over it.” Josiah’s tone was one of admiration. “No one’s better.”

“Which is what got us here in the first place,” JD added. He sounded amused at such a logical ending to a case.

Danny backed off as the stretcher was loaded, shifting his feet with impatience. When the doors were ready to be shut, he raised a foot to climb in but was pulled off balance by a sharp tug. He turned and came face to face with Samantha’s big, brown eyes.

She didn’t have to say a thing. Danny just quirked a grin and stepped back, helping his partner into the back of the ambulance with a steady grip on her forearm. She gave him a grateful smile just as the doors were slammed shut.

Danny heard a rumbling chuckle just before he was knocked off-balance by a friendly slap on the back. “Come on, son,” Josiah said. “We’ll give ya a ride to where Agent Spade left her car.”

“Looks like we’ll be meeting up at the hospital,” Danny replied, falling in behind the large agent and the computer whiz-kid.

“So what else is new?” JD mumbled.

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Two days.

It had only been two days since Martin had been snatched from Dragon’s Claw. It only felt like an eternity.

“Hey, JD, did ya bring th’ coat hanger?”

Chris pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut in an effort to ward off the growing headache that his pain meds didn’t seem to touch.

“Sure did, Vin, and I even unwound it for you. I started bending it to shape, but I need to see your . . .”

“Tanner, your gonna scratch your skin under that cast and get an infection and then you’ll be sorry!” Nathan tried to snatch the wire from JD but Vin managed to be quicker, even with one arm in a cast and cervical collar around his neck.

“Don’t worry, Nate, I’ll be careful. Lookie here, JD’s even made it so there ain’t no sharp edges.” Before Nathan could grab at it again Vin stuck the twisted wired under his cast and began scrubbing in earnest. “Ahhhhh!” he sighed blissfully.

“I brought your stuff,” Josiah said, dropping a duffle on the foot of Vin’s hospital bed. “Getting’ sprung, huh? Guess the swelling around those vertebrae finally went down.”

“Not soon enough,” Chris grouched, any hope of control over his injured teammate long lost. The hospital, now more than a little leery about this odd collection of agents, had managed to find a room just large enough for three beds and after the first half day, Chris, fresh from the minor surgery required to sew up his various wounds, was handed over the duty of keeping an eye on Tanner and Fitzgerald.

He’d requested handcuffs but the staff kept insisting they didn’t have any. The uninjured part of his group just laughed off the request. Apparently, pain meds reduced the potency of Larabee’s infamous glare.

Samantha trailed in with a small backpack. “Looks like a mass exodus,” she said, dropping the pack on Martin’s lap. “Your release papers are on their way.”

“That’s great!” Martin sighed, slowly reaching for the pack. Chris saw him winch, his newly re-set collarbone making itself known.

“Need help dressing?” Samantha asked innocently.

Chris laughed at the flustered expression as Martin glanced nervously around the room. Since Josiah’s, JD’s, Nathan’s and Samantha’s appearance, Danny, Vivian, Ezra and Jack had strolled in – or mostly in. The room was packed.

“Uh . . .” Martin stuttered.

“Aw, leave him alone, Sam. Can’t you see he’s in pain?” Danny quipped with a huge smile as he stepped up to Martin’s bed.

“Pain in the ass, you mean,” Chris muttered, settling back on his pillow.

“I see Agent Fitzgerald has finally shown his true colors,” Jack said brightly.

“Fitzgerald, Tanner – I’ve come to the conclusion that they’re interchangeable.” Chris said.

“Hey,” Vin interjected, frowning. “Be nice to my brother, cowboy.”

“Don’t call me cowboy,” Chris growled, again pinching the bridge of his nose.

“He doesn’t like to be called cowboy?” Martin asked, thrusting his clothes in Danny’s direction in an obvious plea for help. “You said he did.”

“He loves it, actually,” Vin replied.

“I do not.”

“Ah, we know that’s just the drugs talkin’,” Vin said sweetly. “Right, cowboy?”

Chris merely glared at his friend knowing he wasn’t going to win in any way, shape or form it was 2-to-1 now. It was best to concede the point for the moment.

“Hey!” Buck’s voice carried easily from the hall. He extended his long arm in the full room, waiving papers over everyone’s heads. “I got Chris’ release papers here. Gimme some room, will ya?”

“Thank God,” Chris sighed.

Those not tasked with assisting the wounded to dress wandered into the hall, effectively clogging the passageway. Vin and Martin’s cheerful demeanor wavered then dropped to Chris’ level by the time they were dressed and settled in their wheelchairs. All of them were obviously feeling their wounds and Chris tried to keep his snarling to a minimal level. It wasn’t easy.

Buck claimed Chris’ seniority and pushed his boss into the first elevator ahead of the others. A majority of the crowd joined them, leaving Martin and Samantha to accompany Vin and JD in the next empty car.

“So,” Chris said to Ezra, trying for some level of professionalism during the short ride. “I hear things went well with Cheever?”

The instant grin that revealed a shiny gold incisor told Chris everything he wanted to know.

“Ah, yes. There’s a special kind of delight when one is redeemed by clean, cold numbers.”

Buck snorted and grinned. “Old’ Victor looked out-and-out constipated by the facts,” he chuckled. “That was the most unenthusiastic apology I’ve ever heard.”

“Victor Fitzgerald apologized? To your face?” Danny asked, awed.

“He sure did,” Jack chuckled. “And I know he choked on every syllable.”

Ezra’s grin widened. “Ah, yes. And it was most sweet. I shall relish that particular vision to the end of my days.” He smoothed the sling that was color coordinated to his jacket, the smile unflinching.

Chris felt as if a great weight were lifted from his shoulders at the sight. It felt like this crowd hadn’t had much to smile about recently. It was well deserved.

The elevator doors opened and the crowd spilled out into the lobby. Danny and Buck departed to get the vehicles.

“So how long until you blow this town?” Jack asked.

Chris shifted in the annoying wheel chair. He knew better than to try and stand; the nursing staff had their eyes on him from every part of the lobby. “Well, Vin and I will stick around a while longer. I want to make sure there aren’t any loose ends in our part of this mission.”

“I appreciate it. It’ll also give Martin a little time to connect with Vin.”

“Yeah, by the sound of it Denver’s doomed to a double dose of Tanners come winter.”

“Martin is an outdoor kinda guy,” Jack affirmed.

As if on cue, two more wheelchairs joined him at the lobby door.

“Where’s the car?” Vin immediately asked, craning as much as he could to look through the glass exit doors.

Chris, watching him, pursed his lips and counted silently to three. Vin yelped right on cue as he over extended his neck right on cue. Chris rolled his eyes, dreading the next few days cooped up with his best friend.

“You okay?” Martin asked, looking a little worried. Vin must have replied in their silent language as Martin frowned slightly. “How many languages do you know?” he asked with an approving nod. “Danny’s teaching me Spanish but so far what I’ve learned I’m not sure is useable in the general public.”

“Ah, but you’ll reek of authenticity once you get the hang of it,” Danny crowed, grinning unabashedly.

“If I still have my teeth from being slapped,” Martin muttered.

“Agent Tanner,” Jack said, stepping forward in an obvious attempt to change the subject. “I didn’t get the chance to thank you for getting Martin out of that spot. That was an amazing shot.”

“You’re welcome,” Vin said distractedly, tugging at the padded collar with his good hand. “I’m jist glad this is all over. Is the jackass responsible for all this doin’ time yet?”

“Not yet, but that’s only temporary.” Samantha said brightly as she gently squeezed Martin’s good shoulder. “Mee Liang’s trial will probably go for another week, at least, but the outcome looks pretty bleak for him. Martin’s testimony was devastating. Word on the street says the Triad has a contract out on him already.”

“Didn’t waste much time,” Nathan said. “Guess the Triad don’t take to folks making’ ‘em look bad.”

“Yeah, they’d rather keep everyone guessing’ instead,” JD mused.

“We just have to prevail,” Josiah said quietly.

“Amen,” Chris agreed.

“But we’ll do it from Denver , thank you,” Vin grouched.

“My town getting a little too close for you, brother?”

“I reckon.” Vin frowned. “Hey Chris. Is my rifle okay? Is it safe somewhere?”

“Safely tucked away in evidence. I’ve arranged to have it released to you when you’re ready,” Jack said.

“And no one has found anything more on Wu?”

“Nope. The man’s a ghost. He had to live somewhere. The apartment you were holed up in was rented and the money trail, dead. Something will come up, and you sure as hell can bet that we’ll keep digging.” Jack glanced at the exit doors. “Looks like your rides are here.”

Bickering and complaining, the three discharged agents were finally loaded up and they headed out. Jack and his team, minus Martin, were going back to the office to check any loose ends. The

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first stop for the remaining agents was Martin's apartment where Vin, Martin, Nathan and JD were going to stay for a few days. The others would rest up at their hotel room.

Five of the Denver Seven were flying out the next afternoon. Chris was looking forward to getting home, too, but he had promised Travis that he'd clean up any loose ends first and Vin had offered to stay with him; his friend's real reason for staying was blatantly obvious but Chris didn't mind. Martin offered his place and Vin had accepted for the both of them. Chris wondered if it would be better – or safer - to stay elsewhere.

But for now, he had his crew around him and Chris had to admit, it gave him a level of comfort he'd missed. Even though this had been a tough assignment, the unexpected bonus of Vin finding family made it worthwhile. Chris was thrilled for his best friend. He settled back in the SUV's leather seats and let out a satisfied sigh. Buck's gave him an amused sideways grin.

"Feelin' pretty good, Pard?"

"Yeah," Chris had to admit. "Yeah, I really am."

*'Me too, cowboy.'*

Chris grinned and closed his eyes at the comment. *'Don't call me cowboy,'* he mentally ordered, knowing the anger he tried to infuse in the comment was woefully lacking.

*'Whatever you say, cowboy.'*

Nope. He wouldn't give up this job or this unorthodox family for the world.

**THE END**