

FIRESTORM

It always happened on Friday, usually sometime just after the doctor's office closed.

It wasn't really a surprise, then, when through the glass window of his office Chris Larabee saw Buck shake his head in resignation as he spoke on the phone. After dropping the receiver in its cradle, his tall roommate rose wearily and made his way to Chris' office door where he slouched against the frame.

Chris leaned back in his chair and tilted his head as he regarded his friend. "What's the matter, Buck? Looks like your horse died or somethin'."

Buck replied with a lopsided grin that wasn't backed up with humor. "That was Mrs. Potter. JD's got a fever and threw up."

Chris looked at his watch and snorted. "Not surprised. It's five-fifteen on a Friday and we have plans."

"Guess the camping trip's off. For me 'n JD at least." Buck came in and plopped down on the small couch. "No reason to disappoint Vin. If you don't do the camp out, what about a day trip?"

The eclectic family had planned a horseback camping trip for a couple of months now. This weekend was the last one where all four of them would be available at the same time before school started. Between the agents' training and work schedules, the boys' summer school and chicken pox, summer vacation time had been scarce.

Summer school was a necessity for Vin as he had been behind in his schoolwork when Chris had adopted him nearly a year ago. JD attended, too, but it was mostly to give him a break in the daily scenery. The sharp-minded little whirlwind loved school, but for Vin it was pure and utter torture. His poor reading skills and dyslexia just made the entire ordeal of school almost like torture chamber. He was in dire need of a break away from things.

Chris understood the feeling because he suffered right along with his boy. Things were getting better, though, that was clear to the adults in Vin's life. Vin,

however, had a tough time seeing it. This camping trip would give the boy a chance to exercise the things he did excel in: Riding, following trail maps, setting up a camp. It was those kinds of survival skills and moxie that had allowed the two young boys to survive, homeless, on the streets before they were found by Team 7 during a warehouse bust.

"I may just do that," Chris said. "I think we'll keep it down to one night instead of two. Leave tomorrow morning and be back Sunday afternoon instead of Monday morning."

"Sorry Pard."

Standing, Chris tapped his keyboard and shut down the computer, and grabbed his briefcase. "It's alright. I'm sure Vin'll like the alone time."

Buck rose and laughed shortly. "Yeah, with JD stayin' home you just may actually see some wildlife!"

"There is that," Chris agreed. "Let's hit the road."

The pair stepped out of the office and Chris turned off the light. They paused in the bullpen area. "Time to go, boys," he announced to the rest of the team. It struck Chris then how hard they had been working these past few weeks as the remaining men practically bolted for the door. He slapped Josiah on the back as he passed.

"Got plans, 'siah?" he asked.

"Thought I'd check out the Habitat for Humanity site north of town. I hear they need someone who's pounded a nail or two."

Ezra wrinkled his nose with distaste as he shrugged on his jacket. "Sounds like an occasion fraught with sweat and dust. Do not call me."

Josiah's toothy grin and the evil glint in his eye made Chris laugh.

Apparently, Ezra read the look, too. "On second thought, I believe I will simply turn my phone off and screen my calls. And lock the door. I wouldn't want anything to disturb my weekend with Opus Two and Coq au Vin."

"Those are funny girls' names," Buck teased.

"I will not discuss the particular lady that will be passing time with me and the previously named delectables," Ezra said firmly. "I must insist on some 'privacy' in my private life on occasion."

"You don't have a private life," Nathan snorted as he closed the main office door behind all of them. "Might as well get that through your head now. Me 'n Raine had to accept that fact long ago."

Everyone but Ezra laughed at that established truth.

"Have fun on your trip, you guys," Nathan said as he waited for the elevator. "It's gonna be hot. Drink lots of water."

"Looks like it's just me and Vin. JD's sick."

Nathan raised a questioning brow as they stepped into the elevator car.

“Fever, throwin’ up,” Buck sighed. “It’s going to be a long night.”

“Lots of fluids. Popsicles. Motrin or Advil. Call me if you need me. Remember the B.R.A.T. diet,” Nathan listed.

“Bananas, rice, applesauce and toast. Got it. I’ll need to stop at the store,” Buck said to Chris. They stepped from the elevator into the lobby. “See ya at the ranch?”

“See you in a bit, Buck.”

“Relate my condolences to my young nephew,” Ezra requested of Buck, and then turned to Chris. “And do not lose Master Tanner in the woods.”

Chris chuffed. “Now that he has a place called home, I get the feeling that Vin could find his way there, blindfolded, from the Arctic Circle.”

“That may be true, but he is only eight years old.” Ezra dropped his annoyed tone, his true attachment to the boys showing in his face. “Be careful?”

“I’m always careful!”

“And still trouble seems to find you,” Ezra said dryly, recovering his poker face. “Enjoy your time together.”

“And watch out for ticks,” Nathan added

“Will do.”



The window was cool against Vin’s forehead as he sat on the window seat and stared at the long driveway. Ringo, his dog, lay at his feet busily working on a rawhide bone. Vin could hear Mrs. Potter fussing in the kitchen. The quiet of the house felt like a heavy weight on his shoulders.

Vin was unsettled. He could feel it in his stomach. The overnight horseback camping trip had been in the works for weeks and now stupid JD and some stupid germs were going to ruin everything. As soon as he had the thought, he felt guilty, then to banish the guilt he reasoned that he deserved the break and then the cycle would start all over again.

Stupid germs. Stupid JD.

He sighed. All he wanted was to escape walls for a while.

A motion at the street caught his eye and he straightened. Chris was home! Vin tripped over Ringo and the dog yelped in fright.

“Sorry, boy! Dad’s home!” The pup had already learned that particular term. He scrambled to his big feet and bounded happily after Vin’s heels.

By the time Vin got to the door and pulled it open, Chris’ black truck was parking in front of the house. Boy and dog raced to the driver’s side and skidded to a stop. Chris would make him feel better. He always did. His adopted dad was the only thing he trusted in his life to always be there when he needed him and that alone lifted a lot of his woes. It was a gift that had taken him a long time to accept.

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“Hey, Vin,” Chris said as he stepped down from the cab. He immediately squatted down and opened his arms. Vin didn’t hesitate jumping into the embrace and wrapped his arms around Chris’ neck. When he stood up, Vin wrapped his skinny legs around Chris’ waist. It was a rare thing for him to accept being carried but the closeness felt good right now. “So JD’s sick, I hear?” Chris leaned into the truck and retrieved his briefcase and then started to the house.

Vin loosened his grip around his dad’s neck and leaned back a little to fiddle with the collar of Chris’ shirt. “Uh, huh,” he answered. “Where’s Buck?”

“He stopped at the drug store to get some stuff for JD.” Chris climbed the four stairs to the front porch.

After a long moment, Vin finally had to ask. “Guess our camping trip’s canceled, huh?” He continued to finger the collar, his eyes fixed on the material rather than the apology he’d see in Chris’ eyes.

“Well,” Chris started as he stepped inside. He put his briefcase down on the entry way table. “I wouldn’t say that.”

Vin’s fingers stilled. Curiosity made his eyes peer upward to meet glittering green. He turned the words over in his mind. “Then . . . what would you say?”

“Pack your saddlebag for one night instead of two?”

Vin’s heart leaped. “Yessssssssss!” he hissed, punching upward into the air with a fist. “Just you and me?”

“Just you and me.”

Vin’s wiggling demanded he be let down. “When? Now? I got my stuff packed already!”

“Whoa, now, wait a minute,” Chris laughed. “We’ll leave in the morning. I’ll hitch up the trailer tonight and we’ll load up what we can so we can make an early break. How’s that sound?”

“Great!” Vin gushed. He turned to race to his room to tell JD, but stopped himself with a second thought. Deciding it was probably better to leave JD alone, he turned back to Chris. “JD’s gonna be bummed.”

“Bummed?” Chris questioned with amusedly raised brows. “Where did you pick that up?”

Vin studied Chris’ eyes deeply looking for any sign of anger. Instead, he only saw humor and relaxed. “A kid at summer school. He jus’ moved here from California.”

Chris rolled his eyes and smacked Vin playfully on the rump. “And here I thought you were learning math and spelling and all that *useful* stuff.”

“Uncle Ez says words is useful.”

“Yeah, well, Uncle Ez would. And it’s ‘words *are* useful’.”

“*Are* useful,” Vin grumbled, but immediately brightened again. “Can I watch TV ‘til dinner? JD’s sleepin’ in our room.”

“Sure.” He ruffled Vin’s hair, and then Chris greeted Mrs. Potter and got the run down on JD. He thanked her for the waiting dinner as she left. When he closed the door Chris stood a moment and looked around the living room. “Sure is quiet. Guess I’ll check on JD.”

Vin plopped on the couch and picked up a remote. “He barfed a couple times.”

“So I heard.”

Vin settled on the Outdoor Life channel and watched a man catching fish in a rushing river, imagining that he would soon be doing the same thing with Chris.



Dawn had just blanketed the sky with pale light when Chris felt a presence near him. Just lifting from the depths of sleep he opened his eyes suddenly to see a shadowy outline he recognized as well as his own.

“Vin,” he said softly, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“You awake?”

“More or less,” he replied knowing this would be it for sleep. Chris sat up and stretched. Vin didn’t move. Chris looked at him and saw that he was shifting his weight from side to side. For Vin, that was the equivalent to jumping for joy. “Guess we best get movin’, huh?”

A huge smile made the boy’s face look his age instead of a serious, miniature adult. It was that smile that always made Chris realize that his son didn’t smile enough. When he stood Vin raced from the room. Chris noticed he was already dressed.

After hitting the bathroom and dressing himself, Chris went to the kitchen and found cereal bowls already set out. He also found a bleary-eyed Buck slouched at the table, one hand propping his head up while the other clenched a cup of coffee. Vin was busy setting out cereal boxes, milk and juice.

“What’re you doin’ up Buck?” Chris said with a bit of pity as he poured himself a hot cup of caffeine. “Or are you actually up?”

“Been up since four,” Buck mumbled. His eyes drooped. “Before that, since two. Before that . . .”

“JD’s no better, huh?” Chris guessed.

“Don’ know yet. What time is it?”

“Six-thirty.”

The sound of retching and a crying boy came down the hall as if on cue.

“Yup, he’s better. He went two and a half hours this time.” Buck oozed upright and with dragging feet, headed down the hall. “Have fun you two.”

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“Thanks, Buck!” Vin said much too cheerily. He caught Chris looking at him and wiped the smile from his face. “I really am sorry about JD bein’ sick, Chris. Really.”

“I know, son. Did he keep you up at all?”

“Nah. After he barfed at midnight Buck came an’ got him.”

Chris couldn’t help but chuckle. He knew he should feel bad, but he also knew he’d get his turn. That’s what having a child was all about.

They ate, loaded the horses and were off in under an hour. The drive took them miles into the mountains. The heat rose with the sun and by the time they reached the base camp parking area, it was pretty hot. Chris wondered how the horses would take it with the extra weight and regretted the decision not to bring one of them as a pack animal.

Chris helped Vin saddle Peso and double checked the supplies. Since Buck and JD weren’t coming, he’d opted to double up on canteens.

“You be sure to drink lots of water, Vin, you hear me? It’s important up here. And don’t forget the sunscreen on your face and arms.”

“Yes, sir,” Vin replied with infinite patience.

They were on the trail by ten o’clock. Vin looked at the sky and surrounding mountains, then regarded the map. Chris was always amazed at the boy’s ability to decipher maps, blue prints and graphic designs. He may not read words well but he sure could read a picture and had a bump of direction that was uncanny.

“How long to get to the camp site?” Vin asked as he mounted up.

“We’ll be there before dark. We have to take it slow because of the altitude and the heat, all right?”

Vin nodded. “Got it. Let’s go!”

Once mounted Vin reined Peso confidently to the trail head. They had plotted their trail and highlighted it on the map days before and Chris had no doubt it was permanently imprinted on Vin’s brain. Chris chuckled, gave Pony a grateful pat and swung up into the saddle. “Lead on! Do you want to be Lewis or Clark?”

Vin gave him a dirty look over his shoulder. “Does this hafta be eddycasenul?”

“Nope, not at all. My mistake,” Chris laughed, shaking his head. “Come on, then, we’re burnin’ daylight!”

The smile returned, again brightening boy’s face, and they were off.

The change in his son was like night to day. Vin rode ahead of him full of confidence – back straight, chin up, bright eyes roving constantly – and there was a relaxed curve to his thin frame that was a rarity to witness. On top of that, Vin was practically chatty. Chris wondered if this was the boy Vin would have been all along with any semblance of a normal child hood; he also hoped that this was the

boy he would become in the near future. Chris vowed to make this kind of outing a regular event in an effort to coax that boy out more often.

As they continued up the mountain the day grew hotter. The trees offered welcome shade and by their lunch stop a dry, hot wind started to make itself known.

“It’s getting pretty hot,” Chris noted as he offered the horses water from a canteen. Vin had found a nifty collapsible plastic bowl on the internet that worked perfectly for this particular chore. Pony drank, and then Vin took the bowl to water Peso.

“It’s okay that it’s hot,” Vin said. “Too hot for hikers so we got the trail all to ourselves.”

“Good point,” Chris conceded. Yes, this was a great idea.

“Hey!” Peso, having enough to drink, had started splashing the water with his nose. Chris laughed as Vin half-heartedly scolded the horse and fought to get the bowl away from him. Peso, though, kept poking his nose into Vin’s hands, looking for his play toy. Finally, the boy got the bowl folded. Then Peso sneezed, spraying his young charge. “Thanks a lot!” Vin tried to sound firm, but ended up giggling.

Chris had to wipe his eyes from laughing. Six months ago Vin would have fallen apart with frustration and embarrassment. There were so many little ways in which he’d grown. Chris was proud.

Their day found them at dizzying heights one minute and deep in shrouded forest in the next. The traces of wildlife were abundant, and Chris knew that as it cooled they could expect to see opossums, raccoons, maybe a fox or two and possibly a bobcat. There were more kinds of birds than he could count.

They kept a steady pace, took numerous breaks, and generally enjoyed the company of nature and each other. Vin was right about one thing – there hadn’t been a hiker anywhere in sight today. It was early afternoon when they finally spied the lake they were to camp next to.

“Wow, we’re almost there!” Vin said. “We made good time, huh?”

“Yup, we’re right on schedule.”

They reached the lake in a couple of hours and easily found the primitive camp site. Since this was one of the few horse camps in the area, there was even a small corral made from pipe.

“How do ya ‘pose they got that up here?” Vin asked as he unsaddled Peso.

“Not sure,” Chris wondered. “Helicopter, maybe?”

Once unsaddled, Peso demanded water by shoving Vin in the back, pushing him toward the narrow river that fed the lake. Chris grabbed Pony’s lead line and headed out, walking next to Vin and Peso.

As the horses drank and nibbled river grass, Chris looked around.

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The lake was in a bowl of low mountains that were covered with trees. Dry grass surrounded the lake, leaving open space to the tree line. They were in an upper valley, but there was another valley to the east that rose up like a narrow trench. This was from where the river flowed, feeding the lake. Chris briefly wondered where the river originated. Above them, the sky was clear and blue but over to the west he saw a clutter of clouds that told him they might have a quick summer shower by dawn. He saw a pair of hawks circling, calling to each other as they hunted.

Vin was paralyzed, his mouth slightly open in awe as he surveyed their home for the night. "This is great!" he whispered. "Can we fish?"

"Sure, as soon as we set up camp. We can build a fire, but only in the fire pit. We have to very careful, Vin. It's fire season right now and this grass is very dry."

"I'll be careful."

They turned the horses loose in the corral and set up camp. Chris showed Vin how to prepare a campfire and insisted that they needed a container of water nearby if they lit it later. "If this wind keeps up, it would be better not to light it," Chris said. "We have stoves we can use to cook." Vin looked a little disappointed about the campfire, but Chris quickly changed the subject and suggested a try at fishing with the last hour of light they had until dusk.



Vin caught one fish and felt a swell of pride when Chris praised him on his skill. It was nearly dark, so they left the lake's edge to get dinner going. Chris showed him how to gut the fish and ready it for cooking, promising him a chance to try it tomorrow if they caught any more fish for breakfast. Chris warned him to not touch the knife unless Chris was with him.

He was in heaven. When they first arrived at the campsite there was a twang on guilt that JD wasn't here, but Vin managed to shrug the feeling aside as they got to work. The pressure of school was long gone and he wished they could stay up here forever, just him and Chris.

While Chris put dinner together, Vin took the horses to the river one at a time to drink and fed them their portion of feed pellets and grain. Along with the grass in the corral, they would be fine for the night.

By the time they sat down and ate, the wind had picked up to a steady, hot rhythm with occasional gusts. The trees swayed around them like graceful dancers, sighing mournfully. Vin found the sound to be strangely comforting.

They ended up eating inside the tent. Vin wanted to sleep outside, under the stars, but Chris pointed out the growing thunderheads to the west and explained that there would probably be a little rain before morning.

When they were finished with dinner, Vin collected the dishes and made sure that all traces of food were in the one backpack. Later, they would hang the pack in a tree to keep it from bears. The idea of bears made Vin's heart race; he hoped to see one. Not too closely, though. Chris sent him off with a flashlight to look for an appropriate branch, warning him not to lose sight of the campsite lantern. Vin wandered off, keeping track of the lantern with constant glances over his shoulder.

He was just far enough to lose Chris in the darkness and stopped. The openness, the velvety dark and the hot wind stirred something inside and he felt a tingle of excitement in his limbs. Vin tilted his head back and gaped at the dusting of stars in the inky sky, awed by the sheer number of twinkling lights above. The two constellations he knew, the Big Dipper and Orion's Belt, were nearly lost in the stardust.

A blast of hot wind knocked him sideways and he laughed. He wished he could live like this forever, just him and Chris and the horses, away from school, tutors and the crowds of Denver. He might miss his bed, though, he admitted, and he was glad he'd managed to stuff Cat in his sleeping bag. The stuffed animal, his first gift from Chris, brought the comfort of home wherever he went.

"Vin?" he heard Chris call. "How are ya doin'? Any luck?"

"Still lookin'!" Vin replied, tearing his eyes from the sky and getting back to his chore. It didn't take long to find a couple of likely branches, and he turned back to report to Chris. When he got a little closer, he saw that Chris was still drying dishes, so Vin decided to look around a little more.

He circled the site, the lantern the hub of his pattern, and came across the set up campfire. Vin paused next to the pile of sticks, slightly disappointed they probably wouldn't get to light it. He crouched down, the wind making him set his feet firmly, and picked up a stick. He poked at the dry pile for a few moments, trying to imagine it aflame. His gaze dropped and he saw a box of matches.

Vin knew he wasn't supposed to touch matches but it was dark and Chris was busy, and what if Chris let him light the fire later? He didn't want to look stupid because he'd never seen a match. Vin picked up the box and opened it, intending to just look at them, but a gust of wind jarred his hand and a few of the wooden sticks fell from the box. Vin quickly gathered them up and put them away, holding the last one under his flashlight beam.

He'd seen people light matches on TV and in person and the mystery of how they worked puzzled him. Curious, he scratched the tip against a rock. Nothing happened. Frowning, he tried it again. A sudden 'pop!' followed by a sharp smell and erupting spark, startled him and he dropped it. To his horror, the dry grass around it immediately fed the flame.

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Panicked, Vin leaped up and looked around. Chris had insisted that a pot full of water be near the fire ring at all times; Vin had retrieved the water and now grabbed the pot and dumped it on the flame, drenching it. His heart pounded furiously in his chest as he glanced from the now blackened spot and Chris. A tiny puff of grey smoke was blown away from the burned area by another gust of wind and Vin, afraid that Chris would smell it, kicked dirt over the area.

He waited in fear, watching the newly kicked dirt. It looked like fire was out so Vin hurriedly closed the match box and put it back. He took a step back, breathing hard, and made sure the site looked like it did before. He dropped the pot and figured he could blame it being tipped over by the wind.

Finally satisfied that everything was alright and that Chris wouldn't notice, he returned to the campsite, forcing himself to take small, unhurried steps.

Chris would be really mad if he found out. Anxiety grew and Vin's thoughts went wild. Although he was starting to feel pretty secure at his new home, Vin's biggest fear still was that Chris would change his mind and take him back to Child Services. Playing with matches was a big no-no and if Chris thought he could burn down the house, even by mistake, that was a very good reason to send him packing.

'He won't find out, he won't find out,' Vin chanted, trying to get himself to believe it. He pictured the area in his mind's eye – yeah, he'd covered it up good. Chris wouldn't find out, especially if Vin kept him away from the campfire.

"Hey, you okay?" Chris's voice jerked him from his panicked thoughts. His adopted dad was standing by the lantern, drying his hands on a towel. "What's wrong?"

"Nothin'." Vin tried to sound calm and come up with a reason for looking upset. "It's just so dark." He worked his 'empty face' into place.

"Yeah, ain't it great? Did you find a branch?"

"Uh," Vin started. "Yeah, I found a couple over there." He pointed in the opposite direction of the campfire.

"Okay, then. Let's get packed up."

Grateful for the physical distraction Vin moved in and they packed up. By the time they'd hung the food pack, cleaned up the campsite and secured the items against the wind, Vin and nearly forgotten about the fire mishap.

The hot wind had become steady with time. Chris put his arm around Vin's shoulders. "I'm sorry, Vin, but I don't think it's safe to have a fire tonight."

"That's okay," Vin sighed in relief. "Can we look at the stars for a while?"

Chris grinned. "Sure," he said. "Let's spread out a blanket."

They opened one of the sleeping bags and spread it on one side of the tent, using it as a wind break. They both slipped on long sleeved shirts to discourage mosquitoes then the two of them lay down. Chris pointed out the Milky Way and

other stars and constellations. It wasn't long before Vin felt a nudge and was told to get in the tent. Vin did so automatically. He remembered Chris helping him get his pants and boots off and crawling in his bag, and then dropped off to sleep to the sound of the whispering trees.



Chris stayed up a while longer. There was a growing feel of unease in his gut that he couldn't ignore. He slowly walked around the site using only the weak moonlight as his light source. He checked on the horses and noticed they, too, were having problems settling down. Chris stayed with them until he was satisfied they wouldn't do anything stupid and wandered back to the site.

Tilting his head back, he looked up and saw puffs of clouds racing across the sky. The dry, hot wind was coming from the west and, remembering the growing thunderheads, Chris realized they would probably have rain sooner than he thought. He made sure the saddles were covered and recognized the growing anxiety he felt as his natural barometer.

Thunderstorms usually rode into Denver in a heavy, well-defined front that seemed to electrify the air preceding it as it rolled over the city. Chris had always been sensitive to the atmospheric change and usually enjoyed the intense feeling. This time, however, he felt out-of-sorts being so far from home and have the responsibility of keeping Vin safe on his mind. The charged air this time was unnerving.

Knowing he wouldn't be able to sleep, Chris faced the wind and waited for the tempest to come. He felt the wind become heavier, thicker perhaps, and soon heard the clap of distant thunder. Looking up, he could see the approaching front as a black mass slowly engulfing the stars. It occasionally flared red and yellow with lightening as it continued its noisy march toward them.

The harsh wind intensified just before the front overtook them. It was then that Chris realized what was wrong – there was no smell of rain. At this point, the wind usually carried a musty smell of wet wood but this time, it only smelled of dust.

“A dry storm,” Chris whispered with worry. That meant lots of lightening and very little rain. In this dry environment, that was a recipe for disaster. He quickly ran scenarios in his head and looked around, the weak moonlight making any detail impossible to see. He pulled out his cell phone and turned it on. The bit of hope he had was dashed with the ‘no service’ message.

Chris pocketed the phone and again faced the oncoming forces of nature, hating the fact that they were at its mercy for the time being.



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Buck pushed back the recliner to the maximum. That way, the hot, slumbering body that was JD could sprawl across his chest with a minimum of support. A sideways glance to make sure the plastic bucket was within reach helped him to relax a bit. He was sure he wouldn't sleep; JD felt like a heating pad on overdrive and the fear of having to clean up another puddle of puke kept him somewhat alert.

He reached for the remote and clicked on the TV, making sure the 'mute' button was engaged. Being past midnight, Buck was sure there would be something mindlessly appropriate on at least one of the bazillion channels the satellite dish offered. As he flicked through the stations, the Weather Channel caught his eye. The perky weather gal is what made him pause in his button punching, but the line of thunderstorms he saw on the map behind her is what widened his eyes.

"Looks like the boys are in for a noisy night," he mumbled. A flash of worry raced across his heart. When the woman started pointing at the clouds, he unmuted the sound.

"... wild and noisy conditions in the mountains. Not much rain has fallen from this front so we urge residents in these areas to be vigilant for fires. Now in the easternmost part of the state..."

Buck engaged the mute mode again and put the remote down with an uneasy feeling. He rubbed slow circles on JD's back and figured he wasn't going to get any sleep tonight.



Chris stayed outside the tent until the stars above him were swallowed by the cancerous black storm and a crack of lightening loud enough to wake the dead made him jump. The wind was now hot, dry and relentless. He heard the horses moving restlessly in their corral, smelling the oncoming storm

When he entered the tent he wasn't surprised to see Vin sitting straight up, tense and quivering. Chris immediately dropped next to him and draped an arm around his shoulders. He knew he had to remain calm.

"Chris? Are we gonna be okay?" Vin huddled close with an uncharacteristic need to be touched.

Chris encircled him with both arms. "Just a thunderstorm, Vin. The front will pass pretty quick and then things'll calm..."

His reassurance was interrupted by a rapid succession of ear splitting thunder. Brilliant flashes of near blinding light made Vin huddle closer. Chris rubbed his back, feeling the line of his spine under his t-shirt.

“It’s okay, Vin. We’re okay. It’ll pass.” Chris focused on his voice, keeping it soothing and low.

“Peso and Pony? Are they alright?” Vin’s voice sounded tight.

“Yeah, they’re a bit worked up, but they’ll be okay. Horses have lived with this kind of weather for generations. They’ll be fine.”

The cacophony of light, sound and electrified air seemed to last forever but did, finally, roll over them as the front charged eastward. The wind, however, stayed. It wasn’t as strong as that which pushed the storm front, but strong enough to discourage wandering outside. At Vin’s request, he did poke his head out to check on the horses and saw them huddled in the far corner, rumps to the wind.

Once convinced the animals were fine, Chris felt Vin relax and settle down. He released Chris and crawled back into his bag.

“Wait’ll I tell JD about that,” he said sleepily. “Wish he coulda seen it, too.”

Chris combed back Vin’s hair with his fingertips knowing it helped the boy to relax. “It’s gonna be hard to describe, huh?”

Vin yawned. “JD’s not gonna believe there’s somethin’ louder ‘n gunshots,” he mumbled. His eyes had already slipped closed.

“Hmmm,” Chris acknowledged, disturbed in knowing that both JD and Vin had experienced gunfire in the worst place possible – while homeless on the street. He could only imagine how terrifying that must have been to two small boys with no place to feel entirely safe.

Chris could tell by Vin’s breathing that he was asleep. Laying back on his bag with one hand under his head and the other stroking his son’s hair, Chris thought again about how lucky the four of them were to have found each other. As he thought about the strides both boys had made in the past year, he smiled in the dark and closed his eyes. Sleep came quickly.



Awaking with a jerk, Chris froze for a moment as his brain caught up. Camping, he remembered when the tent walls finally registered. But what woke him up?

Chris forced his breathing to slow and his senses to reach out. It was dark and quiet, the wind either in a lull or finished for the night. He cocked his head. Was that what woke him? Sudden silence? He tried to convince himself of that but his gut wasn’t buying it.

He sat in the dark, listening, when his nose caught a faint smell. Smoke.

He had fallen asleep on top of his bag, fully dressed except for shoes. Pulling his boots on, Chris twisted his head around for any other clues and found none. He crawled from the tent and stood, turning a slow circle as he sniffed the air.

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It was eerily still and quiet. He thought the smell was coming from the west, but he couldn't be sure. He scanned the sky above him, but the canopy of trees blocked a lot of the sky to the west. Chris walked toward the lake and the open space beyond the trees, passing the horses along the way. Pony and Peso, standing nose to nose and each with one hind leg cocked in rest, looked curiously in his direction as he went by.

"You two look comfy," Chris commented lowly, trying to ease the growing feeling inside. Once in the open, he scanned the sky. Was it brighter to the west or were his eyes playing tricks on him? The smoky scent seemed less strong out here. Unable to confirm his fear, he returned to camp and quietly began the motions to make a pot of coffee. Chris knew he was fooling himself if he thought he'd sleep now.

The night was pleasantly warm and still. As the coffee perked, Chris listened to the chitter of night insects and the hoot of an owl. One of the horses sneezed and the memory of Vin's unexpected shower made him smile. Finally, he poured a cup and settled down against a rock. Visions of an old-time cowboy keeping night watch over a herd crossed his mind and entertained him for a while. From there, his thoughts drifted from work to home, from Sarah and Adam to Vin, and how he had gotten to this point in his life. The coffee was soon gone, but his eyelids still grew heavy and he dozed.

The horses woke him the next time, the reason for their restlessness frighteningly and instantaneously clear.

It was snowing ashes and the western sky glowed ominously, the trees' black and branching canopy clearly outlined in red.

Chris scrambled to his feet with a hammering heart. The horses murmured nervously as they circled their corral. Forcing himself into motion, he went to them, talking calmly and picking up the saddles along the way. He caught them one at a time and tied them to the inside of the corral and then quickly saddled them. He even slipped their bridles on over the halters and tied the reins to the saddle horns in preparation for a quick escape. Falling ash nearly blinded him and the growing panic was becoming harder to control. Once done, he left them tied to the inside of the corral and ran to the tent.

In the short time it took to prep the horses, the glow in the sky had doubled in height and width. They had to hurry.

"Vin!" he called as he unzipped the tent. Ashes slipped off the material and nearly buried his hand. The first tendrils of smoke were fat and thick. "VIN!" he tore open the flap to find his son already struggling to pull on his jeans. The roof of the tent glowed orange. Vin's eyes were wide and he hadn't uttered a sound, but it was clear he knew to hurry.

Chris ducked inside and yanked up the boy's jeans and then grabbed his boots. "We need to fill the canteens but we leave everything else behind, got it?" He stuffed a flashlight in his rear pocket and gathered the canteens

Vin nodded and dropped down to pull on his boots.

"Do you have the map?"

"Saddlebag," Vin squeaked, his husky voice an octave higher.

Chris handed him two canteens. "Okay, let's go."

They pushed out of the tent to near blinding ash and smoke assaulting them on a growing wind. The horses whinnied in worry. As they moved in their direction, Chris noticed squirrels and rabbits racing across their path in an erratic panic-driven pattern. When they reached the corral, they could hear a distant roar. Chris grabbed Vin's arm, stopping him. He dropped to his knees before the terrified boy and caught his eyes with his own.

"Vin, I know this is scary, but you have to keep calm so the horses keep calm. Peso will be looking to you for support. You are a team. Can you keep calm for him?"

Vin nodded and squeaked, "Yes."

"Okay, then. Let's go slow. You got your canteens?" Vin nodded again and held them up. "Good. Put them on the saddle horn before you untie Peso. You have a bandanna for your face?" Vin pulled out a corner of his blue bandana from a rear pocket. "Good. You follow me out of the gate. I'll hold Peso so you can mount."

"Which way?" Vin asked. "Which way we goin', Chris?"

It was then that Chris turned back and really studied the horizon. Gusts of wind cleared the black smoke enough for him to see that the trail back to the truck was out of the question. He recalled seeing a trail on the map that lead up the river valley and looked that direction. The skyline was clear above the valley. If they could make it up beyond the tree line . . .

"East. Up the valley. Let's go, son."

The urge to flee rose like a beast but Chris managed to keep it at bay as he led Pony from the corral. The horse pushed anxiously against him but a calm word and firm hand kept him from bolting. Peso was right on his tail. Once outside Chris grabbed Peso's lead rope and Vin climbed aboard. Vin's black shifted nervously and tossed his head against the bit. Chris kept hold of the Peso's lead line as he mounted a prancing Pony.

Fighting the urge to run, Chris made both horses walk from the camp. Pony danced sideways, chomping the bit, making his hard for Chris to hold Peso's line. Peso was twitchy, jumping in place occasionally when Pony moved suddenly but Vin was doing a good job controlling him.

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Chris decided to let Vin have Peso and moved in beside him. He tossed the rope over Peso's neck. "Wrap it around the horn so it doesn't fall." Vin did so. "You remember looking at the trail up the valley?"

Vin glanced at the valley then turned back to Chris and nodded.

"I know it's dark, so be careful. Can you trot ahead of me? Find the trail?"

Again Vin nodded. "I'll try," he said.

"Just remember to stay calm for Peso," he reminded, realizing at that moment that he had to shout to be heard. "Go!"

Vin reined Peso around and broke into a steady trot and Chris fell in behind, fighting to keep Pony under control. It was then that he turned to look behind them. He wished he hadn't.

From the slight elevation of Pony's back, he could now see the flames. Smoke whorled up like black tornadoes and it was eerily quiet save for the dull roar and crackle. As he looked, Chris saw two tall trees go up like Roman candles, instantly engulfed in hungry fire. The flames swallowed the forest as he watched, chewing its way toward them and spewing ash and smoke skyward. The wind pushed them, spraying hot ash and embers on their backs, increasing with intensity as the fire created its own wind. Living embers scampered weirdly along the ground – it took Chris a few moments to realize what he was seeing.

Rabbits, on fire, were running through the dry grass and spreading the inferno.

Unable to stomach the sight, Chris faced east, determined to keep the grizzly sight from his son. He already had too many nightmares to deal with.



It was closing in on three o'clock and Buck had already paced a pattern in the carpet as he angrily stabbed the buttons of the phone once more. The television was on but muted, a talking head superimposed on a map.

"This the Forest Service?" he snapped in the receiver. "I need to report campers in the fire area! Yes! By Lake Moreno! Don't put me on HOLD!!! Argh!!!" His pace continued and he stomped his feet. A knock at the door made him jump. He hurried to open it with the receiver pressed to his ear.

Josiah, Nathan and Raine spilled inside, silent questions in their eyes.

"It's okay to talk 'cos I'm on HOLD AGAIN!" Buck bellowed into the phone. His other hand ran through his hair. He pointed at the TV. "See that blue spot there?" The new arrivals peered at the screen. "That's the lake where Chris and Vin are camping."

"Dear Lord," Raine whispered, her hand at her throat. The blue spot was nearly surrounded by animated red flames.

“Where did they start?” Josiah asked, staring at the map.

Buck didn't try to reply verbally. He wasn't sure his closed throat would let him. Instead, he pointed at a spot in the middle of the sea of red, west of the lake.

“Lord have mercy!” Josiah rumbled. “You've notified the Forest Service?”

Buck pointed at the phone. “Tryin' to,” he snarled.

“Where's JD?” Raine asked.

Buck was relieved to finally have an answer. “In his room. I gave him something to make him sleep. He's still feverish, but hasn't thrown up for about three hours now. Could you check him?”

“Of course, Buck.” Raine quickly moved down the hallway.

“I'll notify Orin. Maybe he has some connections or suggestions.” Nathan flipped open his cell phone.

“I'll start packing supplies in your truck,” Josiah offered, turning to the kitchen.

“Yes? Hello? Yes, my friend and his son are camping at Lake Moreno. They're on horseback . . .” Buck listened for several seconds. “Yes sir. His name is Chris Larabee. His son's name is Vin. Vin's eight years old. Two horses . . . yeah, the primitive site on the south west side of the lake. Yes, they had a map. I'm an agent with ATF and can help you on site. Where's the command post?” Buck grabbed a pen and started scribbling. “Uh huh, got it. Thank you Chief. My team will be there as soon as we can, travel time from Denver. I'll contact you when we get there. Thanks, Chief.”

Buck threw the phone on the couch. “We're headin' out. Where's . . .” he was interrupted when the front door swung open and Ezra stepped inside.

“It was fortunate I was screening my calls,” he said.

Buck kept it short. He pointed at the television. “There's where Chris and Vin are.”

Ezra paled. “Oh, dear. No word yet?”

“Nope, and we're heading up there.” He dropped on the couch and pulled on his boots. “Can you help Josiah with supplies while I gather up some things and see to JD?”

“Of course.”

Nathan snapped the phone closed. “Orin said he could arrange an ATF helicopter to get us there. They were anticipating a mutual aid call from the Forest Service anyway, so they're getting ready to take off.”

Raine rejoined them. “JD's sleeping, but you're right. He's still hot. Do you need for me to stay?”

Buck cradled her cheeks in her hands. “You have no idea how much I love you at this moment.”

“Hey,” Nathan said teasingly.

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“I mean, yes, Raine, and thank you. We’ll be leaving in a few minutes.” Buck released her and hurried to his bedroom.



Chris had read in the paper many times about how fires seemed to calm down near dawn. For some reason he couldn’t recall, winds seemed to die at that time and slow the progression. He was praying that phenomenon was true.

He followed Vin around the edge of the lake and started up the valley. True to his word, Vin was able to find the trail head. With a waning moon, the light was very poor and they were forced to go very slowly. Chris was thankful for the grassy space between them and the flames, but that wouldn’t last long with the wind encouraging the spread.

The valley was rockier than their previous trail, and the vegetation a little sparser, but it would still burn in a heartbeat. Chris made sure to keep the river in sight. It wasn’t that deep, but if push came to shove, they could lie down in it.

Part way up the valley, they stopped to fill the canteens and rest the horses. Drifts of smoke made it hard to breathe and Pony had developed a cough. The air was unbelievably hot, the ash thick and heavy. Occasional embers, heavier pieces of burning material, would drop down from the cloud of smoke blowing over them. Chris and Vin both had tiny holes in their clothes from them and the horses had burnt spots of hair. Bandanas tied over their faces helped filter a lot of the ash.

Letting Vin take charge of the canteens, Chris looked back again. The forest below them was a blanket of undulating red, the circle of the lake a dark spot in the middle. He tried to figure the fire line and which way the beast would run, but it seemed to be going everywhere at once, spreading like a cancer. The wind direction was not in their favor and he hadn’t bothered to study where the tree line went. Now, it was too dark but Chris did know that the few trees that surrounded them now had no better chance than those below that were currently aflame. This river and distance were all they had.

“Let’s get movin’,” he said quietly when Vin returned. They secured the canteens and pulled the map from Vin’s saddlebag. Sadly, the map ended with the top of the valley. He had no idea what was beyond. He could only hope they would find out on their own. He smiled down at Vin. “Got it in your brain now?”

“Yeah,” the boy replied. Then he turned his big blue eyes up to meet Chris’. “I’m sorry this happened,” he said, tears pooling and marking a light trail down his sooty cheek.

Chris dropped down and held him close, his heart pierced. “Me too. Let’s worry about it later, huh?” Just before releasing the embrace, Chris noticed

something under Vin's shirt. He realized in an instant what it was and smiled. "Cat all safe?"

Vin sniffed and nodded, clutching his hand to his stomach. "You said to leave everythin' but I couldn't leave Cat." He wiped his sleeve under his nose, both adding to and smearing the ashes already there.

"It's alright. I'm glad he's okay. We need to move." He fixed Vin's bandana over his nose and mouth and then did the same with his.

They mounted and moved on. The wind's force growing steadily as the inferno grew. Both horses were coughing now, along with Chris and Vin. Chris' chest hurt every time he inhaled and his head swam. He wondered how bad they would be if they didn't have the bandanas.

As they wound their way up the valley Chris tried to recall everything he'd ever heard about wild fires. He'd talked to a lot of firefighters about their experiences and also tried to remember what he'd read about those firemen that died fighting these kinds of incidents. What did they do wrong? What should they have done? What did survivors of wild fires do to survive? He was pretty disgusted that he didn't know nearly as much as he wished he did. The only thing he did recall were the many stories about firestorms – fierce gusts of flame that traveled at unbelievable speeds with frightful temperatures. They were best described by people that had seen them as fire tornadoes.

That though made him uncomfortable. With this wind, these conditions and this heat, a firestorm incident wasn't out of the question.

"Vin!" he hollered. "We need to stay closer to the river!" Vin reined in and Chris stopped next to him, studying the water. "Where's the map?" Vin pulled it from his saddle bag again and opened it. Chris took his flashlight and studied it. "That's what I was afraid of. Look," he pointed at the map. "The trail goes along this ridge but the river stays at the bottom of the valley. I think it's safer to stay by the water. We can get in it if we need to."

"But what about the horses?" Vin said worriedly, eyes pooling again. "We can't let 'em burn! There's no way out from the valley."

Vin was right. If he was reading the elevations on the map correctly, the valley was a box canyon. If he only knew how much time they had and what was on the other side of the valley the decision would be easier. At that moment, Ezra's words about always betting on a sure thing crossed his mind.

"We turn 'em loose here. They'll do better without us. We need to stay by the river."

Vin started to cry silently, the last of his bravado gone. Chris would have loved to take the time and explain better, but one glance over his shoulder told him they had to move. The entrance to the valley was glowing red and the searing wind was growing to disturbing levels. They slipped off the saddles and began to

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strip the horses of their gear. Chris could see Vin's hands shaking as he cried soundlessly, a trait that always broke Chris' heart.

"Take off the bags and grab both saddle blankets," Chris directed. Vin did so without question as Chris pulled off the bridles and unhooked the lead ropes. He shoved Pony away. "Git!" he ordered waving his arms. Both animals hopped sideways a few steps and looked at him curiously. "Go on!" he hollered hoarsely, swinging the rope.

Then a small rock smacked Peso on the rump. "Go away! Run!" Vin added. Another rock to the horse's side encouraged them to move away.

"Come on, we don't have time. They'll move when instinct kicks in." Chris tried to ban the vision of the burning rabbits as he spoke. Instead, he grabbed the saddle bags and one blanket. "Grab the other. Let's go."

Vin's sniffling and crying-induced hiccups were hard to ignore but Chris felt the urgent need to move.

A last glance at the horses before going over the valley lip showed the horses starting to move upward at a trot. Apparently, their gut instincts were screaming at them like Chris' was at him.

Getting to the valley bottom was painful endeavor. Riding boots didn't have much grip and they got most of the way to the river on their butts, coughing dust and ash all the way. Finally at the bottom, Chris urged Vin onward. He hoped the valley walls were bouncing sound, because the roaring noise of fire seemed to be getting louder.

"A waterfall!" Vin rasped, the saddle blanket hooked over his shoulder. "Look!"

Chris had to stare a moment to make out a moving, glowing wall in front of him. It was water rushing down rock face, he realized. He also realized that the reflection in the falling water was growing redder by the second.

Chris glanced back over his shoulder, the heated wind blasting his eyes dry. "Oh shit!" he swore to himself before turning back. "Run, Vin! In the water! Quick!"

A wall of flame was closing on them at an unbelievable speed.



Vin thought he was going to choke from the ash. His nose and throat burned, as did his eyes. Crying made things blurrier so he tried to force himself to stop. When Chris shouted to run, though, the tears instantly dried.

He leaped forward without hesitation and clawed his way toward the water fall. He could see by the reflected red that there was a pool under the fall and figured that was a good place to be. When he got to the edge, he jumped in, saddle blanket and all. He felt the water surge as Chris jumped in behind him.

Vin had to let go of the blanket because his feet didn't touch bottom and he had to swim. He sputtered out a mouthful of water when he bobbed to the surface only to find himself swept up in one of Chris' arms. Still coughing, Chris dragged him toward the falls. Vin held on with both hands and blinked. A wave of flame was arched over the canyon. Too shocked to scream, he was surprised to find both he and Chris instantly underwater.

He felt Chris bump into a rock and come to a stop. Just when Vin thought his lungs would burst, they broke the surface right into a nightmare.

Vin felt his body still, the air hot and moist in his nose. Everything was fuzzy and he realized that they were behind the waterfall, tucked under a lip of rock, standing in water up to his chin. Well, not actually standing – Chris was standing and holding him tight.

"It's okay, Vin. Breath slow. We're okay." His dad's lips were right next to his ear, their two heads taking up all the room under the lip of rock. The curtain of water was about two feet in front of them and several feet wide. Beyond that was nothing but red, rolling, flickering red, pierced with yellow and belching incredible heat. The falls in front of them wavered, parted and rejoined. Hot wind made it bend inward,

Chris' breath was in his ear again. "When I count to three, take a deep breath. We'll go underwater. Ready?"

Unable to speak, Vin nodded and tried to prepare his lungs by taking deep breaths. It was hard not to cough.

"One . . ."

The waterfall bent inward a little more, wavering tentatively. The red blur behind it grew bigger and what sounded like a train thundered their way.

"Two . . ."

Pressure and wind cleaved the water wall. It sputtered and spat. Vin felt like an oven door had opened in his face.

"Three!"

Just before going under the waterfall turned to hot spray as it evaporated and then it was instantly quiet. They were underwater. Vin's fingers rolled tightly into the sleeve of Chris' shirt. He looked up and saw only red above them and black behind. He heard nothing but a dull roar and his heartbeat in his ears. He felt Chris' heart pounding against his back – and that's what he decided to focus on. He closed his eyes tight and hunkered down.

Vin found an inner peace and hovered there, content, until he felt his body twitch, prodding him to breathe. He wiggled, the peace skittering away as his lungs convulsed. Finally, without a second to spare, he was dragged upward, his face forced into Chris' chest by a hand on his cheek. He gulped in air and soot and smoke frantically, trying again and again to fill his lungs. Coughing was painful

and he saw stars. The hot air burned his mouth and nose. Tears stung as ash washed from his face and eyes as he sobbed and tried to loosen his constricted throat.

“Shhhh, shhhh, it’s all right, Cowboy. We’re okay. Relax and breathe, son. Shhhh . . .”

Chris’ voice was rough, gravelly and interspaced with gagging coughs. Still, the calm tone enabled him to loosen his airway and gasp air. He felt a cloth run over his face and then press over his nose and mouth.

“Let the cloth filter the air. Come on, take it easy. Breathe easy.”

Vin breathed to the rhythm of the words and his tears reduced to mere snuffles. He released Chris’ shirt and rubbed his eyes with the palm of one hand.

“Careful, there. You with me now?”

Vin nodded, not trusting his voice.

“Can you tie on the bandana over your nose and mouth again?”

He nodded again and did what he was told with shaking hands. Chris’ wide palm stroked back his hair from his face as they bobbed in the water. Vin realized he could hear the falls again and looked aside.

The wall of water was back, the colors dark behind it.

“Where’d . . . where’d the fire go?” he choked.

“It went over us. It’s ahead of us now. We’re okay.” He felt Chris’ fingers comb through his hair again. A kiss pressed against his temple. “Shall we take a look?”

Vin nodded hesitantly, not entirely convinced that was a good idea but he trusted Chris.

“I’m not going under. We’ll just walk through the waterfall, okay?”

Vin nodded again and they moved forward and passed through the watery curtain, parting the debris that blanketed the pool. Once on the other side, he was shocked by the darkness. Smoke hung heavy in the air, obliterating the sky, but it was moving and thinning all the while. It was incredibly hot. Red embers spotted the ground, crowned with little shots of flame. As his eyes adjusted to the dark, more embers appeared before him.

“I think we may have to stay here until things cool a bit. We’re sorta in the middle of a fireplace right now. See the embers?” Vin stared at the gleaming chunks of wood. “I don’t think it’s long until dawn. Let’s go back in the grotto and find a cool, wet rock. It’s just down to the waitin’ now, Vin. We’ll be okay.”

With those words, Vin nodded tiredly. Chris walked through the falls again with a shiver and they explored the grotto. It wasn’t very big and didn’t have a lot to offer, but they did find that the ledge they’d crowded under had room enough for Chris to sit and stretch out his legs. Vin settled in his lap, suddenly weary and amazingly, a little chilled even though his face felt hot. As his eyes crept closed, he

wondered where the saddle blankets were but then figured they'd be too wet to sleep under. Conscious thought shut down.

He was running after two horses, screaming for them to stop, but they were afraid of him. Whenever Peso's eyes rolled in his direction, they edged white with fear and he took off again. Then his tail burst into flames and he ran away. The same thing happened with Pony and Vin started to cry. Chris came into sight, his arm stretched out to him but when Vin reached for it, he saw he had a burning stick in his fist. It caught Chris' shirt on fire and he melted like the witch in the Wizard of Oz. Vin screamed and the stick turned into Cat, who was also on fire.

He ran again, crying, gasping 'I'm sorry! I'm sorry!' No one was around and he was lost in a forest of charred trees.

"Vin, wake up!"

He felt arms wrapped around his body, trapping him, and he flailed against them.

"Come on, son, you're safe. I'm here."

Chris' voice finally sank in and Vin collapsed into himself, trying to curl into a ball. He found he was crying, just like in his dream. Did he cause the fire when he played with the matches? Was it his fault? There was no way he could confess that major sin to Chris and get to stay his house or his life. He cried harder.

"We're all right, Vin, we're okay."

"Pony and Peso! They're dead!"

He felt Chris rubbing small circles on his back as he rocked him. "I'm sure they got away. They weren't in the valley. I saw them running on the ridge. I'm sure they got out of the way."

Afraid to say anymore, Vin just latched on to Chris' shirt and cried. He knew that as soon as someone found out how the fire started his life at the ranch would be over.



"My God."

That's all Buck could say as they flew over the fire ravaged area to the command center. A vast area of black was circled by a ring of orange fire, the largest flames moving east with the wind. And somewhere in the center of it all were his best friend and son. He felt sick.

"Reports say lightening started several spot fires that joined up." Josiah was tuned into the fire dispatch center.

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It was noisy in the chopper, but they were wired to talk with their helmets. Buck looked out the side window and saw other helicopters crisscrossing the blackened area, organizing fire jumpers and equipment and dumping water.

How on Earth could he tell JD that Chris and Vin wouldn't be coming home? He couldn't, it was that simple. Knowing Chris, he'd find a way. He always found a way, and especially now with Vin depending on him, he'd force the elements to his will. A firm hand on his forearm caught his attention.

"We'll find them," Josiah said with confidence. "We'll get them home."

All Buck could do was nod.

When they touched down at the makeshift landing pad, the four men piled out. Nathan spotted the medical tent and headed there while the other three sought out the Chief. Heading for the generator run emergency lights they found their man wearing a Chief's hat, hunched over a map spread out on a portable table. A half dozen men dressed in turnouts listened as he ran his fingers over the map. He looked up on their arrival.

"Perfect timing! Can your chopper drop these men here?" he pointed to the map.

"Whatever you need," Buck said, nodding for Josiah to get the pilot. "I'm here to find my friends, too."

"You must be Agent Wilmington," the Chief said, sticking out his hand. Buck shook it briefly. "Now show me where they were supposed to be."

Buck saw that there was a small Post-it stuck right on top of the camp site. "There. Looks like you knew where I was talking about."

"I thought that was close, at least. As you can see, that area's already been compromised." Buck saw that the map was laminated and white board markers were used to crosshatch in black the burnt areas.

Buck's stomach lurched. Not only was the campground burned, but it looked like it was burned for miles around. "They had horses," he added. "And a map. The fire went this way?" He drew his hand over the area, west to east.

"Yes," the Chief said. "If they tried to get away, they had to go this way." The eastern area he indicated was large. And cross hatched in black. "Not many places to hide. After I got your call, I dropped some men here." He indicated a spot a distance west of the campsite. "They found a charred truck and trailer. I think they had to go east. My men are working east from the truck and are about here."

Buck had to swallow bile at the news of the vehicles. "How many established trails run east from that campground?"

"Looks like at least four, and they split to nine. No telling which one they took."

Ezra had been quietly studying the map. “Excuse me, but is this a river?” He pointed to the blue line extending from Lake Monroe. The Chief confirmed the question. “I would think that Mr. Larabee would stay close to the water.”

“But that river ends in a box canyon. If he followed it, he would be trapped.”

Sickly silence settled over the group. The ATF helo fired up and took off to drop the jump team. Meanwhile, Buck tugged nervously on his moustache and tried to convince himself that everything would be all right and he wouldn't have to tell JD any bad news. He stared at the map, hoping it would whisper good news to him.

But all he actually heard was Josiah mumbling proverbs at his side.



Every time Vin tried to doze he was wrenched awake by horrible dreams. Guilt dug deep in his gut. By dawn he was shivering, coughing and dry heaving. Breathing was a painful thing, stinging his chest and burning his throat. His face hurt.

He could tell that Chris felt just as bad.

When the skies began to lighten Chris said it was time to move, that the cold, wet rocks of the grotto would make them sicker. The only way out was through the falls so they repeated their action from a few hours ago. This time, in the light of day, the embers seemed less threatening but they still threw off lots of heat.

The smoke was mostly gone but the essence was still thick in the air. Chris set Vin down on the bank of the pool and pulled himself out of the water. He took Vin's hand and they looked around. Blackened skeletons were all that was left of the trees. The rocks and ground were scorched, other shrubs burned away. The valley looked desolate.

“Look,” he said. Vin turned his attention to where Chris pointed and saw their saddlebags and saddle blankets bobbing in the water among the debris left by the fire. Chris fished them out and dropped them with a solid splat. “Let's see what survived.”

Vin didn't move. With his arms tightly wrapped around him he felt like he wouldn't fall apart, but wasn't so sure what would happen if he moved his feet. He was paralyzed by fear, guilt and shame, weak from crying and lack of sleep and pain and generally as sore and miserable as he ever felt. When he hugged himself tighter, he felt water squish from Cat's body. The toy was still between his stomach and his t-shirt.

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He watched Chris open the bags and dump everything out and start to separate the food items from the clothes. Vin could tell the coughing hurt Chris' throat, too, just like his. He realized he was staring, but didn't care. The both of them coughed endlessly.

Vin saw the worried look Chris cast his way and felt another load of guilt on his shoulders.

"Come here, Vin," Chris said in a rough voice. "Eat something. Then we'll find help." He finished with a pair of coughs.

Vin dropped his eyes and shivered. He looked up through his lashes and tried to think of something to say. He shook his head once and again dropped his chin.

"Vin, come here."

He shuffled a step and stopped without looking up. He heard Chris stand, and Vin took another hesitant step. He couldn't stand it anymore. He had to tell Chris. He deserved what he got for playing with the match and causing all this destruction. Finally pooling his courage, he looked up and opened his mouth, but, instead, burst into tears.

Hearing a rush of motion, he soon found he was again hugged tight to his beloved father. Vin wrapped his arms around him, sure it would be his last chance.

"It . . . it . . . it's my fault!" he sobbed between coughs, burying his face into Chris' neck. "I did it! I did it."

Chris drew him close. Vin could feel his cheek press against the top of his head. "Did what, Vin? You didn't do anything. You've been so brave . . ." between the interrupting coughs, Chris' voice sounded like sandpaper on wood.

"I started the fire. I played with a match and started the fire. I killed all those trees. I killed Peso! It's my fault!" It was hard to talk because his throat burned and he coughed a lot so he wasn't sure Chris understood.

Vin waited for the moment that Chris would push him away in shock and anger but it didn't happen. Instead, Chris continued to hold him and stroke him and issue soft reassurances that lightning was the cause until the tears stopped.

Finally, Chris did hold him out at arm's length but instead of anger, Vin saw the calm, loving eyes he always saw. Chris didn't say anything, but quietly cupped Vin's cheek with the palm of his hand. That's when Vin noticed that Chris' face looked funny. It was really red.

Chris kept a hand on Vin's shoulder, but used his other one to stroke his own throat. He coughed deeply, and went into a fit, bending over and turning even redder. When Chris looked up, Vin saw a frightened look in his eyes and he started to gasp. Turning away, he took stumbling step.

"Chris?" Vin called hoarsely. "Dad? Are you okay?"

To Vin's horror, Chris dropped to his knees and clutched at his throat before tumbling forward.

"Dad!" Vin cried. He made his way to Chris' side on wobbly legs and dropped down next to him. A small puddle of blood pooled under his father's temple and Vin saw that he'd struck a rock when he fell. "Dad!" Vin gasped, his burning throat constricting. Vin patted his father's cheek and the memory of doing the same thing to his mother flashed in his mind. She never woke up.

"Oh, no!" he gasped. "It's all my fault! Chris, I'm sorry! Chris!" Finally, his raw throat gave out and all the only noise he could make was a raspy, pain-filled croak. He sat next to his father, crying silently, stroking Chris' cheek and terrified that he'd never see those familiar green eyes again.

Suddenly, Vin realized that Chris wasn't cold like his mother had been. He felt warm. Vin leaned closer and stared, finally noticing the gentle rise and fall of Chris' chest. He wasn't dead! Vin scrambled to the saddlebags and grabbed a wet t-shirt. Unable to rip the stubborn material, he gently wrapped Chris' head as best as he could. After that he stood, trying to figure his next step. A noise made him look up. A plane?

Seeing that they were sheltered by charred trees, big rocks and sloping sides, Vin knew he had to get to open space to get the attention of a plane. Too scared to move him, Vin dragged over the heavy, water-saturated saddle pad and tucked it under Chris' head to provide a pillow. He checked Chris' raspy breathing one more time and as a last thought, peeled back an eyelid. He didn't know what to look for, but they always did that on television. He was shocked when the black part of the green eye immediately shrank down in size. He jerked his hand back. Was that normal?

Coughing pitifully again, Vin struggled to his feet and looked for the easiest path up the valley wall. There wasn't one. Instead, he picked the closest one and started upward, ignoring the burning pain in his throat that came with each breath and the pounding headache that grew with each step.



They were to start a search pattern at first light. As the pilot ran through his pre-flight check list, Buck hauled himself from the too-short cot in the first aid tent and woke the others. Things had calmed down a lot in the early hours of the morning and they were able to catch some sleep. Somewhat awake, Buck found the Chief to see the status was on the fire itself.

"The wind stopped just before dawn and that's huge break. We'll have it 80% contained by noon, I'm sure. Forecast call for some sprinkles later and we can only hope they are right for once. If the winds stay calm, it should be contained by

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tomorrow afternoon. Your bird was a great help. We got the teams out much faster. Thanks for the help.” He was going to talk some more but he touched his ear as he listened to some radio traffic. He keyed the mike. “Brush unit 33, repeat?”

The Chief listened again then looked at Buck. “Your party had two horses?”

Buck gasped. “Both black,” he said instantly. “One with a blaze and one with a star.”

The Chief repeated the description into the mike, and nodded with the reply. “I think they got ‘em south of here. They wandered into someone’s yard. No saddles, but they had on halters.”

“That’s gotta be them. Can you get a phone number?”

After a few minutes, the Chief recited a number of the reporting party. Buck wrote it on the back of his hand with a pen. “Thanks. Show me on the map about where that is?”

They returned to the big map and found the approximate location of the small ranch. With the camping site and the ranch location, it narrowed down the starting point for a search pattern. He memorized the coordinates.

Before he left, the Chief held Buck back with a light touch to his arm. “They also found your friend’s campsite. Nothing left. No bodies, either, so there’s still a chance.”

Buck swallowed hard and croaked a thanks before jogging to the helo. Ezra, Nathan and Josiah were already waiting on board.

“They found Pony and Peso raiding someone’s vegetable patch,” Buck reported. Josiah shook his head and Ezra rolled his eyes. Nathan snorted. “They also found the campsite. No sign of ‘em. Between the lake and the horses, I have a starting point to start searching. Let’s go!”

After reporting the location to the pilot, the helicopter lifted off.

In the wash of day, the amount of destruction was painfully clear. Once forests of green were now laid to waste, charred tree trunks as far as the eye could see like an alien landscape. The once blue waters of Lake Moreno were black, choked with floating debris and ash. They circled the lake once and estimated the location of the camp then headed east in a zig-zag pattern.

Four sets of eyes combed the land below. Any detail was hard to decipher as everything was in shades of black and grey. After an hour, Buck felt the stirrings of a headache. He begged some Tylenol from Nathan’s fat first aid pack and continued to scan the landscape. It was the fourth time they’d crossed over the river when Buck thought he saw something.



Scaling the valley wall was proving to be much more difficult than Vin ever imagined. Without any bushes to grab or stabilize his steps, his feet slipped a lot. The ashy dust choked him. And with the pain that came from breathing, he found he had to rest a lot. He'd collapsed in a frustrated heap many times to cry and catch his breath. Each time became harder to stand up again and, each time, what got him on his feet was the sound of a helicopter somewhere in the down the valley. The hope of an overhead pass kept him moving.

Finally, he reached the trail that he prayed had taken Peso and Pony to safety. The trail wasn't easy to see, but Vin noticed the smoother line in the blackened debris matched the location he'd memorized from the map the night before. Vin stood, each intake of air pain filled and ash-laden, and scanned the area around him. There was nothing recognizable about this dead landscape – it was like he was on another planet. A zing of fear made his gut churn. Eventually, the painful breathing became tolerable, just as his feet had become tolerant to not having shoes when he'd lived on the street.

A huge, scorched boulder caught his attention and instantly, Vin knew it was the place to make his stand. Getting to the top wasn't easy, but he made it eventually, ignoring the black dots that swirled at the edges of his vision. His throat and chest burned mercilessly. Vin squatted, studying his raw fingertips until his breath evened out.

Finally, he raised his eyes and surveyed the area around him. Everything was black. He looked down at himself and realized he was as black as his surroundings. That wouldn't work – he needed to stand out. *'Why didn't I think of that before?'* he chastised himself. His throat tightened as tears threatened again at his stupidity, but when he swiped his sleeve across his eyes, he remembered something. Vin pulled open the button-down long-sleeved denim shirt he'd slipped on before star-gazing in camp and looked underneath. The bright red t-shirt was mostly untouched by the black ash!

Suddenly, his weary brain registered the sound of a helicopter. Vin quickly shed the outer shirt, his raw fingers spotting blood on everything he touched. Next, he pulled off the red shirt. Cat fell out and bounced to the ground. Ignoring his stuffed pal, Vin stood on the rock and scanned the sky. It was hard to see at first because it was below the stark, black trees, but the small dot grew quickly. Vin frantically began waving the shirt like a flag, all his pains momentarily forgotten.

The tiny voice within his head, though, wouldn't stop telling him that he was probably too late for Chris.



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“There!” Buck yelled. “Someone’s waving!” The pilot banked right and headed toward the motion. “It’s Vin!”

Voices broke into excited chatter as the helicopter circled the lone figure, blowing ash in a tempest of wind. After hopping up and down on the rock, Vin suddenly stopped and bent over, holding his chest. After a few seconds, his legs gave out and dropped to an ungainly sit, obviously in pain.

“Something’s wrong with him! Where can we set down?” Nathan said sharply.

“There’s a level spot about a quarter mile up,” the pilot reported. “Above the tree line.”

“That’s too far. I’ll repel down.” Nathan removed his seatbelts. “Move away to reduce the dust. He’s probably inhaled a lot of it already.”

Ezra and Josiah immediately pulled out the harnesses from the back area. They handed one to Nathan and the other to Buck. Ezra and Josiah opened the side door, adjusted the winch, and prepared the litter for patients. In no time, Nathan and his massive first aid kit were deployed.

Buck watched anxiously from above as Nathan approached Vin. He had to shed his first aid pack and negotiate several smaller boulders to get into a position where he could reach the boy. Finally, he was able to and lift the boy from his perch. Buck could see that Vin was limp in the medic’s arms and the urge to get down there became unbearable. Finally, the hook reached the platform and Buck connected up. The drop to Earth seemed too slow. When he finally hit dirt and released the cable, Buck sprinted to the pair.

Vin was coughing horribly and was covered in black and gray ash. His bony chest was cleaner where the red t-shirt had been and his face red under the thick layer of soot. He was holding back Nathan’s arm and trying to talk but between crying, coughing and gasping for breath, his words were unintelligible. When Buck came into his line of sight, Vin pushed away from Nathan and half crawled, half jumped into Buck’s arms, wrapping his thin limbs around him, clinging tight.

Buck hadn’t had this kind of reception from Vin before and he was speechless at first. His eyes stung and he automatically began crooning gentle words to the hysterical boy. Nathan waited patiently to examine him more closely, but Buck could see him running a critical eye over his little patient’s body. Finally, the tears lessened to hiccupped breaths and Vin started to talk. His voice was gone, reduced to harsh breath and scratchy mews, and the attempt was obviously painful, but he still tried to talk. Buck continued to rub his back.

“Whoa, now. Slow down, little man. I know you want ta tell me somethin’ and I’m sure it’s about Chris, right?” Vin nodded, his chin bumping against Buck’s shoulder. “Do you know where he is?” Vin nodded again. “Is he alright?” This time a shake. “Is he . . .” Buck paused, unable to say the rest. Vin, though, knew what he

meant and shook his head again. “Good, good. So he’s hurt?” Vin nodded. “Can you point where he is?”

Slowly, Vin untangled himself from Buck and looked around, squinting. It took a moment for him to get his bearings, but he finally took a few shaky steps to one side and very close to the edge of the valley rim.

“Whoa, there, son.” Buck said suddenly, gripping Vin’s shoulder. “Stop.” Vin obeyed and turned his sad, blue eyes to Buck, holding his gaze as he pointed down into the valley. “He’s down there?” Vin nodded. “At the bottom?” Vin nodded again and silent tears began to roll, smearing the chalky ash on his face. Buck squatted down so he was at eye level with the boy. “It’s okay, Vin. We’ll get him out. You can leave it to old Buck, okay? Right now, you need to go with Nathan.”

Buck knew that Vin took very seriously his commitment to make sure Chris was safe. If it were up to Vin, he’d stay here to the bitter end. Buck knew that because it was the same determination that had kept JD safe, even to this day.

Buck also knew that Vin wouldn’t leave without a fight. He held tight to the exhausted boy’s shoulders and glanced over to Nathan, who had signaled Ezra to lower the litter. Vin must have figured out the plan because he immediately broke into action, kicking out at Buck’s shins and taking a swing at his chin.

Buck was prepared for all of it and managed to dodge the moves. He quickly pulled the boy into a tight hug and Nathan approached with a hypodermic. No amount of calm words from either man calmed him, but Nathan managed to inject the sedative. Vin grunted and squirmed, outraged, and managed to head butt Buck firmly in the eye before the drug took effect.

“OW!” the tall agent yelped, but he didn’t release his grip until he felt Vin slump in his arms.

“I’ll take him,” Nathan said as he lifted the boy away.

“Oh, right, now you step in once the fight’s over,” Buck griped. He rubbed his cheek. “Damn, that kid’s gettin’ more like Chris every day.”

Nathan chuckled as he secured Vin in the litter and checked his vital signs. An oxygen tank and mask were in the litter and the medic got Vin all set up before he signaled the litter to be raised. He also requested that Josiah come down with the second litter to help retrieve Chris. By the time the helicopter returned from delivering Vin and Ezra at the hospital, they hoped to have Chris ready for transport.

While things got sorted out in the helicopter, Buck and Nathan started down the valley wall.



“Chris?”

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The voice didn't fit the circumstance. Not that he was clear on the circumstance, but he knew Buck wasn't supposed to be here. No, not Buck –

“Vin!” That hurt. It awakened the burn in his throat and the pain in his chest, but he had to find . . . “Vin!”

“We got him, Pard, he's just fine. It's your turn now. Damn, Chris, I gotta hear this story.”

Buck was the only person he'd accept those words from, those words about Vin being safe. He tried to open his eyes but his head felt like a squashed melon. He coughed deeply and then groaned from the pain it stirred up.

“You've hit your head, Chris.” Nathan. “And you have second degree burns on your face like Vin. Does it hurt to talk?”

Chris nodded once, which was one too many times. He coughed again. His chest felt like he inhaled a porcupine.

“Probably burned your throat, too. Smoke inhalation, respiratory distress. Actually, for surviving a wildfire, you ain't bad off.” Nathan's hands finished with a bandage on his head.

Chris tried to laugh, but it initiated another coughing fit. He gasped for breath.

“Here,” he felt Nathan put something on his chest. “Hold this while we load ya up. It's an oxygen bottle.” Next, Chris felt a mask snuggle over his mouth and nose. “I've done as much as I can now. Can't help ya with your eyebrows, though. That would be Raine's department.”

That didn't sound right. Chris forced his puffy eyes open and found a blurry, grinning Buck looking down on him. The question in his eyes must have been clear.

“Burned your eyebrows completely off, stud! Gonna haf ta draw 'em on for a while.”

Chris tried to glare but between his swollen face, the oxygen mask and, God forbid, no eyebrows, he was sure the effect was lost. Buck's stupid grin confirmed it.

The following events were fuzzy and decorated with a bevy of swirling black dots that pulsed in time with his headache. There was Josiah, a cold, hard litter, a trip up a mountain side and a very noisy helicopter. He saw it all between violent, painful coughing fits that stole his breath away and bouts of unconsciousness. At one point he turned his head aside and saw a familiar lump of fuzz.

Cat? He tried to reach for it, but he was strapped in the litter. He tried to tell someone to pick up Vin's stuffed friend but he wasn't sure he was understood. The next second he saw the helicopter above, and in the following second he was

inside it. Josiah's soothing voice weaved in and out. Then he was jostled a bit and when he was next aware, he was in a hospital.

God, his chest hurt. A realization hit him and he tried to sit up.

"Hold on, Chris. Lie still. What's wrong?" Josiah.

"Vin?" he managed to croak.

"Vin's here. He's doing fine. They're getting you two a room together."

Chris' hand fumbled for Josiah's arm. With the other hand, he pulled the mask down to talk. "He hurtin' like this?" His voice was unrecognizable and the effort pushed him into another coughing attack.

"Yeah. You two took in a lot of hot smoke, Chris. You'll both be okay, though." Josiah took his hand and squeezed it. "You scared us, boss."

"Scared m'self." More coughing. He inhaled some of the cool oxygen before speaking again. "Vin thinks he did it. Caused the fire." His throat burned and he paused to cough again. "Pony 'n Peso? Thinks he killed 'em. Help him?"

Josiah nodded his understanding. He placed Chris' hand on the gurney and replaced the mask. "I understand. They found those two varmints chompin' away at someone's garden. I'll get some pictures to prove it."

That mental picture made Chris smile. Right now all he wanted was to see his son and to breathe without pain. Outside of that, didn't care what happened next.



Ezra had been shunned before but this time it hurt deeply.

The ride in the helicopter with his young nephew had been difficult. Vin slept the whole time but Ezra spoke constantly with low, soothing words to him, held his hand and stroked his temple the entire way to the hospital. He was afraid the boy would wake up in hysterics and Ezra wanted him to know he was safe. Always safe.

Vin's ragged breathing and violent coughing spells were hard to watch. His face, puffy and red with burns and bereft of eyebrows, was ugly and nearly unrecognizable. Ezra had to work hard to keep his expression a neutral calm. It wouldn't do for the young man to wake up and see the horror Ezra felt.

He had awakened in the emergency room and nothing Ezra did or said calmed him. It was as if the trust they'd establish in this past year was completely gone. After speaking with Nathan, he knew why. Vin won't easily forgive the sedative incident and Ezra realized that was why he was getting the cold shoulder. Buck and Nathan were saddened by Ezra's conclusion and saw it firsthand themselves; even when they returned Vin's beloved Cat, all they got in return was a cold stare.

After they left, Vin had turned his back to Ezra and the agent was sure he was crying those unnerving silent tears. The motion of his shoulders gave the boy away.

Right now it was Chris, and only Chris, Vin would give the time of day; his rock, his unshakeable foundation. Chris Larabee. And the sooner they were together the sooner the boy could start to reclaim his balance.

After a litany of tests and questions, none of which Vin answered, a cheery nurse finally swept into the emergency room bay and prepared the small patient to move. The panic that flared in those impossibly wide blue eyes was very clear to Ezra. Vin hugged Cat close, coughing into the soft fur. There couldn't possibly be another torture for the boy, could there?

Ezra stopped the woman's preparations with a hand on her forearm. "Please. What now?"

"He's moving to a room now. It should be quieter there."

"Oh, good. You hear that, Vin? You're moving up in the world." Vin gave him a steely stare. At least the panic was gone.

He followed the gurney to the small room, grateful the other bed was empty. "Well," he said with a smile, "It's not the Ritz, but it certainly is bright, wouldn't you say?" Ezra dared not turn around. He could feel the glare on his back. "You have a nice view." He got a cough as a reply.

Ezra was happy to see Josiah. He had some papers in his hands and gave Ezra a wink before he approached Vin's bed.

"Hello, Vin. I hope you're feeling better." Ezra labeled the look Josiah received as 'suspicious'. "I have something here that I think will make you feel better." He held out the sheets. Vin's eyes dropped to look at what was on the papers and what he saw there perked him right up.

A thin arm reached out and snatched the sheets away and he studied the papers for long seconds before turning large, hope filled eyes to Josiah. His lips moved, but there was no voice.

"Yup, Pony and Peso are just fine. Well, save for some singed mane and tail hair."

Ezra felt some of the tension leave him at Vin's obvious relief. The boy tried to talk again, again resulting in a pain-filled wince.

"How about trying to write it down, son?" Josiah said softly. He pulled a notebook from his back pocket and handed it to Vin, along with a pen. The boy glared at him, ignoring the offering.

Josiah smoothly changed tactics and pulled the bedside table to the bed. He put the pen and paper on the table and maneuvered it in front of Vin. Vin suspiciously eyed both Josiah and the paper for a few seconds before relaxing his grip on Cat and picking up the pen. His eyes narrowed in concentration and he

gripped the pen hard enough to make his knuckles white. As he slowly and painfully wrote, he shoulders hunched with tension. He was interrupted by several coughing fits, but finally finished with a sigh. Vin's expression was defiant as he put the pen down and pushed the table toward Josiah.

Josiah retrieved the notepad. Ezra read it over the big man's arm. The letters were mostly reversed and very messy, but the message was still very clear: 'Cris sed so.'

"He did, huh? Then I guess we shouldn't have worried. I just thought you'd like the pictures. We can put them on the wall for a little decoration." Josiah said cheerfully, ignoring the attitude.

Vin's attention, however, had returned to the photos.

"It seems we've been dismissed," Ezra said quietly. "May I speak with you in the hall, Mr. Sanchez?"

"Sure. We'll be right outside, Vin. I'll leave the door open." Vin ignored them.

Once outside Ezra voiced his worry. "Young Master Tanner is right back where he was when we found him. He does not trust any of us. Have you spoken with Mr. Larabee? Is he aware of this turn of events?"

"No, we haven't said anything about what happened. We'll tell him once he's up here. Chris doesn't need the worry right now and I think once the two of them are together again, things will get better."

"I certainly hope you are correct." Ezra ran his hand over his chin. "I will find out when that may occur."

"I'll hold down the fort," Josiah said.

Ezra waited until his teammate settled in a chair next to their young charge. He saw Vin wiggle down in the sheets and then turn his back to Josiah, the IV lines in his arm draped over his hip and Cat hugged tightly against his chest. Josiah adjusted the blanket and then returned to the book in his hand, leaving Vin alone.

Shaking his head sadly, Ezra headed to the emergency room in search of some good news.



Sleep was the lesser of two evils. Sleep brought dreams but wakefulness brought that gut-tingling fear that distrust and worry wrought. No one had mentioned Chris. But if they did, would he believe what they said?

Vin's little world was shattered.

He curled up facing the wall, the thin blanket pulled up to his chin. Chris must be dead, too, he figured. That's why no one mentioned him. The thought made his eyes sting and his throat constrict. Vin knew someone was in the room

with him, but it wasn't Chris. Never would be Chris again because of his stupidity. He was goin' back to Child Services for sure.

He vaguely remembered Chris telling him it wasn't his fault; he thought, anyway. Things were a little vague after jumping in the pool and he couldn't seem to think straight with all the coughing. And now, it was just easier to ignore everyone. They'd hate him with time, anyway.

Vin wondered if he'd see JD again.

But mostly, he missed Chris. The thought of him made Vin gasp and fight tears again. He felt a hand on his shoulder and murmured condolences – Josiah. His shoulders hitched again with a sob and he buried his face in the pillow, trying to shut out the voice.

There was a quiet clamor of motion at the door. Several voices spoke quietly for a minute. Finally, though, one voice did stand out.

“Come on little man, sit up.” Buck - the one that had betrayed him. Vin shrugged off his hand but his voice wouldn't stop. “Come on now, Vin, Chris is here. Wanna see him, doncha?”

Chris?

Vin threw off the blanket as he twisted, sat up and frantically searched the room with his eyes. There, on other side of the room, barely visible between standing bodies, was Chris, sitting up and smiling. His face was red and swollen, but it was clearly Chris.

Vin scrambled to get up, oblivious of the hands trying to hold him down; it was just like before when they'd kept him from Chris and stuck him with that needle . . .

“Shit!” he heard Buck hiss. “Watch the IV, Nathan! Vin, calm down! Josiah, grab his legs!”

But they wouldn't hold him, not this time. He wouldn't be kept from Chris this time. Without a thought of the pain Vin yanked the needle from his skin and flailed his arms, throwing one leg over the raised side of the bed. More hands on his body only made him fight harder, the scream that grew from the deepest part of his lungs burning his throat and chest. His vision blurred with tears but he managed to slip over the rail and hit the floor running.

He made it to Chris' bed before being again engulfed by arms. He wriggled and wailed and tried to get loose. In the next instant, he was on a bed.

“Vin! Stop! You're okay, cowboy!”

Chris' voice wasn't quite right but the smell of him, the feel of him, was exactly right. He felt Chris' arm pull him close and Vin threw his arms around his father's chest, burying his face into the thin hospital blanket. He eventually felt the reassuring thump, thump of Chris' heart against his cheek and stopped wiggling. Vin gasped for breath, his throat tight and burning, his eyes and face stinging.

There were murmurs of voices in the room, one demanding an explanation, but he didn't listen. He didn't care.

He was home and desperate to stay.



"Damn," Buck whispered, rubbing his stomach. "It's like I was wrestlin' a tornado."

Nathan squeezed his hand in his armpit and held his lower lip in his teeth.

Josiah grunted as he held his palm against his chest. "Remind me not to do that again."

Chris, however, kept silent. The desperate display he'd just witnessed had taken his voice clean away and all he could do was hold his boy close, stroke his hair and hope the tremors that wracked his son's body would subside.

The doctor that had entered the room during the altercation frowned deeply. "This child should be in the pediatric ward," he said lowly as he untangled the hanging IV line.

Buck caught the glare heading the clueless doctor's way from Chris' bed and figured he'd best take control.

"Listen Dr.," he glanced at the name tag. "Gleason. This is the best for both of them, I'm tellin' ya right now. I'll get Vin's doctor on the phone so you'll understand. These are not normal circumstances." The doctor eyed Buck and the agent got the feeling that hospital security would be arriving at any moment. "You try to move that boy and you'll have to go through us." Buck pulled out his cell as he felt more that saw the rest of the team form behind him. He dialed the number for Dr. Will, Vin's psychologist, and left a message to call Dr. Gleason, relaying the phone number to the answering service.

When he hung up, Buck looked to Chris and saw his grateful expression. Buck hoped all the ground they had gained with Vin in the last year wouldn't be lost in one day because of a clueless doctor. Gleason obviously wasn't convinced of anything yet, but was at least willing to listen to Dr. Will.

The doctors' cell rang within a few minutes, just as he finished examining both patients – not a task easily done. Dr. Gleason gave a brief update to Dr. Will and then moved to the hall to talk. As the door swung shut Buck noticed Cat dangling by his neck, stuck between the bed rail and the mattress of Vin's empty bed. He dislodged the toy and tucked it between Chris' arm and Vin.

Twenty minutes later, the nurse came in and reestablished Vin's IV, leaving the boy where he was. Dr. Will must have worked his magic.

Buck sighed deeply and his shoulders slouched in weariness. "I need to get home and see to JD," he said softly. He took one more look at his best friend and

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the vision that would forever be stamped in his memory, but he still felt a twinge of guilt at his role in the drama.

Chris' eyes were closed, but he was still awake, his hand tirelessly stroking Vin's hair. The tremors that wracked the boy's body had stopped, but the embrace the boy had on his rock never slaked even though he was asleep - finally. They were one, body and soul.

Buck gave them one long look and left for home and the small boy waiting for him.



When Buck arrived at the ranch it was very late Sunday afternoon and nearing dusk. He was met at the door by both JD and Raine. JD was abnormally quiet and when he reached out to his Da, Buck scooped him up without hesitation. The agent could feel the heat that radiated from the boy's body.

"Still feelin' poorly, huh Little Bit?"

"Uh, huh." JD snuggled up to Buck's chest.

"He hasn't thrown up since noon," Raine said softly, stroking the small boy's hair. "He's getting better, aren't you JD?"

The brown haired head nodded. Buck entered the house and headed directly for the couch where he sank down and held his boy close. The thought of JD in Vin's place made his stomach lurch.

"Where's Vin?" JD's voice was muffled against Buck's shirt.

Buck glanced at Raine and saw that she held her lower lip between her teeth and quickly shook her head.

"Well, Little Bit, I had to go help out Chris and Vin. Seems they got a little off track on their camping trip but they're back on course now. They probably won't be back until tomorrow. Remember that was our original plan? Two nights away?"

"Ya," JD sighed. "You took a day off work. You're playin' hooky 'em."

Buck laughed. "No, it's call hooky. I'm playin' hooky from work tomorrow." JD yawned. "Did you eat something, JD?"

"He had some soup and crackers. I gave him some Motrin about twenty minutes ago. He's been up since two so he could be getting tired." Raine started to gather her things.

Buck stood and ruffled JD's hair. "You want ta go to bed or stay out here a while longer?"

"Couch." JD chose. "An' Spirit."

Buck chuckled and set the boy back on the couch. While Raine tucked him in, Buck found the requested video and slipped it in the machine. By the time the

opening sequence started, Raine had a fresh glass of water for JD. Buck kissed JD on the head.

“I’m walkin’ Raine to the car, okay? I’ll be right back.”

JD mumbled an incoherent reply.

Outside, Raine gave Buck a weak smile. “Something about a quiet JD is disturbing,” she joked. Buck nodded and ran his hand through his hair. Raine placed her hand on his forearm. “Nathan’s been calling. I think I’m pretty caught up. It sounds like it was close.”

Buck chuffed and felt his eyes burn. He was so very tired. “It was too close, Raine. Too close.” His voice was raspy with emotion. He cleared his throat before speaking again. “I think we may have screwed up.”

“With Vin?” Buck nodded. “Nathan told me. It sounds like there was no choice, Buck. He had to get in that litter eventually and they would have had to strap him down. You know how he is about being restrained. Nathan would have had to sedate him anyway.”

Buck absently rubbed his chest. “Yeah, but we could have handled it better.”

“Well, I’m sure Vin will forgive you. He loves you. He loves all of you guys.”

“Yeah,” he replied wearily. “He did. In his eyes, we betrayed him I think. That’s a lot to forgive. Plus, he feels guilty about Chris getting hurt and the horses. . . he thinks he started the fire.”

Raine frowned. “But lightning started the fire.”

“I know that. We all know that. We just have to convince Vin.” He scrubbed his face. “He’s going to be a different kid when he gets back. Thought you should know. JD doesn’t need to know any details until tomorrow.”

“Thanks for the heads up. Now go take a load off, Buck. I’m pretty sure JD will sleep much better tonight. There’s some spinach lasagna in the fridge for you.”

“Will you marry me?”

Raine laughed. “I think Mr. Jackson may take offense to that idea.” She turned to go. “Oh, by the way, Nettie called. I’ve kept her updated.”

Buck winced. As a Social Services caseworker, Nettie Wells had been the one responsible for making Vin and JD’s adoption possible. These two particular boys had found a way into the woman’s heart and she still kept in contact. “I’ll be sure to call her. Thanks.”

Raine got in her car and left. It was then that Buck’s weariness hit him full force and he could only think of joining his son on the couch in comforting closeness.



“I know you aren’t asleep.”

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Chris' voice was raspy and raw, a bare whisper of a breeze across Vin's cheek. Vin had fooled the nurses that constantly bothered him, but he really didn't think he could fool Chris; he knew Vin was awake. It just hurt too much to talk. The last time he'd tried Vin's throat felt like he'd swallowed glass so he wasn't too inclined to try right now, even for Chris. Besides, he didn't know what to say anyway

"It wasn't your fault, Vin." Chris' hand on his head felt solid, warm. Vin knew that talking must be painful for Chris, too, but he wanted to hear his dad's voice.

It must have been the middle of the night. The hallway was much quieter and the room was dark. One of the others must be around, Vin thought, they were always around. What brought him comfort at one time now made his stomach flutter – they could take him from Chris at any time just like Buck did in the canyon.

"If it's anyone's fault, it's mine. I was outside the tent. I felt something coming and I fell asleep." Chris swallowed and Vin could tell it hurt. He turned his face to look up into his father's face. "I was sitting outside for quite a while. The fire came from the west, where we parked the truck, Vin, not anywhere near our campsite. It was lightening."

The tightness in Vin's chest loosened some. His grip on the blanket over them slaked. Was it true? Chris wouldn't lie to him, wouldn't send him away . . . would he? Chris's hand rubbed circles on his back as Vin struggled to manage the tumble of emotions.

"You're my son, Vin. I love you. I will never send you away. You know that, don't you?"

Vin let the question lie there as he sorted his thoughts. He accepted the fact that he didn't start the fire because Chris wouldn't lie to him. Would he? Vin thought about that and, finally, his heart told him it was true. He could trust Chris to always tell him the truth.

But someone else could *take* him away. That's the thought that suddenly hit very hard, and a thought that made his stomach churn. Sure, Chris may not send him away but someone else could separate them.

"B . . . Buck took me away," Vin rasped painfully.

"Buck took you away? When?"

"In tha helicopter. I wanted to be with you 'n he took me away."

"Oh," Chris replied, his hand firm on Vin's back. "Well, I'll tell ya, Vin, those helicopters can't take a lot of passengers, did you know that?"

Vin had to admit to himself that he'd never thought of that.

"There's only room for one sick person at a time. Even if you would have waited for me at the top of the valley, we would have had to travel separately."

Vin mulled that one over. "Buck know that?"

"Yup, Buck knows that."

"'n Nathan?"

"Yup, Nathan too." Chris paused and Vin felt him swallow and shudder. When his father spoke again, his voice was much softer and still rough. "In fact, the way Buck and Nathan handled it was the fastest way to make sure we were together again. They did the right thing, Vin. Don't be angry at them. They love you, too."

Peaceful quiet reigned for many minutes as Vin tried to keep his fractured thoughts together. Finally, there was only one bit of information left that made his eyes burn with impending tears. "I thought you was dead." The final word was a choked squeak and he gasped for wind as he tried not to cry.

"It's okay, Vin," Chris' rough voice crooned. "I'm still here and we still have each other. Soon we'll be back at the ranch havin' a barbeque with the guys to celebrate. Pony and Peso will be there, too. I hear their tails got a bit singed so they look a little funny. I can't wait to see them with my own eyes."

Vin drifted on the calm sea of Chris' words. It didn't matter what he said, Vin relished in the voice and found his frantic thoughts settle. He relaxed into sleep.



The steady rhythm of Vin's breathing told Chris that the boy was finally asleep. He stopped talking and rubbed his burning throat. It felt raw and probably was, he realized. A pair of coughs bounced Vin's head on his chest, but his son didn't stir.

Chris closed his eyes and willed his body to relax. He ached everywhere and only wanted to sleep, but he was afraid someone would remove Vin if he did so and undo all he had hopefully fixed. Listening to the sounds in the hallway Chris fought to keep his eyes open but was finally beginning to admit that war may be lost when he heard the swoosh of the door opening. The faint scent of sandalwood identified the new arrival as Ezra.

"Ez." Chris croaked, forcing one eye to finally obey and open.

"Mr. Larabee," Ezra greeted lowly. "I apologize for my lateness."

"Don . . . 'em . . . take Vin . . ." Chris wasn't sure the words were clear because it certainly hurt to utter them. He felt a light touch on his shoulder.

"I will not allow anyone to remove Master Tanner from his current position, Mr. Larabee. You may rest assured."

Chris felt satisfying relief. He heard a chair scrape the floor just before he gave up his fight and fell asleep to the tickle of Vin's hair against his chin.



The next day Vin woke up to the rattle of breakfast dishes and the feel of Chris under his cheek. He raised his head, blinked at the bright light of day and silently watched the aide place food trays on two bedside tables. She paused, a little frown wrinkling her forehead as she looked from the two tables to the only occupied bed.

“I will take care of dispensing their meals, miss.” Ezra sounded tired.

“Thank you,” the young nurse’s aide said, leaving the room with a smile.

Vin cautiously twisted his head until he could see Ezra rising from a chair. He stretched carefully with a twitch of pain, adjusted his jacket, and then inspected the trays.

“Well,” Ezra sighed. “It looks like the usual hospital fare. A delightful study in beige.” The agent turned to Vin and smiled. “Good morning, Master Tanner. May I fix your oatmeal for you?” He picked up a small bowl that contained brown sugar and raised a brow in question. Vin nodded. “I am sure we can abscond with some of Mr. Larabee’s portion to sweeten the pot, so to speak. Would you like to try some apple juice while you wait? Please let me know if it bothers your throat.” He removed the twist top to a small, plastic bottle and handed it to Vin.

After a second, he accepted it and wiggled to a sit. Chris’ arm remained draped around his waist. Vin felt it twitch. He took a sip of the cool liquid.

“Can you swallow without pain?” Ezra asked softly. Vin nodded. “Good. Let us give this repast a moment to cool before you taste it.” Ezra was stirring the oatmeal.

Vin watched his uncle and remembered the bad thoughts he’d had the day before. Feeling guilty about it now, he dropped his head and picked at Cat’s ear as he sipped the juice. He just wanted to feel like he’d felt before the fire. Like family. He wasn’t sure he deserved it now.

“Mornin’ cowboy.” Chris’ voice, although dry and feathery, sounded wonderful. Vin released Cat’s ear and rested his hand on Chris’. “You feelin’ all right?”

Vin nodded, nervously rolling the small bottle of juice in his hand. He could feel the tears building and his throat burning as he tried to swallow the growing constriction away. It was no use – Vin turned to Chris’ chest again to hide his eyes.

”Careful, there,” Chris whispered, taking control of the slipping bottle. Vin then twisted his free hand in Chris’ blanket and squeezed Cat with the other hand. Vin heard a muffled tap as the bottle was placed on back on the table just before he started to cry silently again, feeling like so stupid for doing so.

“Shh, shh, you’re okay.” Chris crooned quietly, holding him close. “Everything will be okay, Vin, I promise.” Vin felt the comfort of Chris’s hand rubbing his back. “Can you tell me what’s bothering you? Are you hurting?” Vin nodded first, then after a moment, sniffled and then shook his head. “Are ya feelin’ bad?” Vin nodded, the tears mostly gone.

He started to sit up when he felt the head of the bed begin to raise up. He adjusted a little until he was sitting up next to Chris, eyes downcast as he started in on Cat’s ear again, this time with both hands. Vin just couldn’t seem to be able to look at Ezra – he was too ashamed.

“I, ah, need to refill by coffee,” Ezra said softly. “The oatmeal is nearly cool enough to eat. Mr. Larabee? Is there anything I can get for you or Vin?”

“I think we’re good. Vin?” Chris’ hand gently brushed through Vin’s hair.

Vin shook his head without looking up. He heard the door swish open and muted conversation in the hallway when it closed.

“What’s on your mind, son?” Chris asked, fingering the soft waves of Vin’s hair.

Vin felt Chris shift and glanced sideways. He was rubbing his throat.

“Hurts?” Vin whispered.

“Some,” Chris replied. “Not bad. Yours hurt, too?”

“Yeah.”

Chris kept quiet while Vin organized in his mind what he was feeling. “I . . . I was mean to Uncle Ezra. And Buck. And Uncle Josiah,” he finally blurted, tears threatening again.

“Oh, I see.” He paused. “Maybe you’d feel better if you apologized?”

“Yeah.” Vin rubbed his nose and he felt Chris move. Then he felt a tissue in his hand.

“Be careful. Your face looks as sore as mine feels.”

Vin mumbled a thanks and dabbed his eyes, and then blew his nose. “I wanna go home.”

“Me too.”

There was some more silence.

“C’n we call JD?”

“I don’t see why not. Can you reach the phone?”

Vin turned and looked at the small table between the beds. He dragged the telephone closer by the curly cord, then picked it up and put it on his lap.

“You hold the receiver and I’ll dial.” After reading the instructions on how to get an outside line, Chris dialed.

The phone rang three times before Vin heard Buck’s voice. “H’llo?”

“Buck?” Vin said nervously.

“Vin? How are ya, buddy? I was going to come by later.”

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Vin worked his mouth a second. “I’m sorry,” he finally blurted. “I treated ya bad. I’m sorry!”

Vin felt Chris hug him closer in support. On the phone, Buck was saying it was all right, that he understood and he accepted the apology. “All we want is you and Chris home again. Want to talk to JD?”

Vin nodded, forgetting Buck couldn’t see him, but it didn’t matter because in the next second, JD was on the phone.

“Vin! I heard ya got no eyebrows and burnded! I’m all okay now and really miss ya and Peso and Pony got here last night and their hair’s all melted . . .”

“They’re home?”

“Yup! Buck let me feed ‘em this morning. Theys really hungry.”

“Peso’s always hungry.”

“Yeah, both he ‘n Milagro are both piggies.”

That made Vin laugh for the first time since the fire.



As Vin laughed – although it started a coughing fit – Chris felt his own body relax. He started to pick at the breakfast, mostly so Vin wouldn’t feel self-conscious. All Chris really wanted to do was watch his every expression, every breath and every change of nuance in his amazingly blue eyes.

Chris knew he was a lucky man. And when the door to the room opened to reveal that Josiah and Nathan had joined Ezra, he knew that, eventually, their odd family would be just fine.

THE END