Cold Case

by ELG

Summary

When a heavily pregnant woman whose daughter Jack and Viv had searched for in vain in the past goes missing from a small town hospital, it leads to a lot of trouble for Jack Malone and his team, and especially for Martin and Danny, who have been sent to interview her angry husband in a remote, snowbound house. Injuries to major characters occur in this fic. (Martin and Danny whumping. Also, Elena has the flu.) A cold case involving serial sexual assaults and serial murders is also featured heavily.
Chapter 1

Four Hours Missing

Mary Ryan looked like the Madonna. Jack Malone had thought that the first time he saw her, when she opened the door to them, and he thought it again now as he gazed at her photograph. Not the tranquil version in blue with a baby in her arms, but the one that looked as if she had been signed up to a deal that involved suffering for the sake of other men’s sins. Mary could have been a younger sister Jack never knew he had; one who had endured as he rebelled. The fall of brown hair, the haunted dark eyes; every time he had looked at a photograph of Mary’s missing daughter he had been disconcerted by how similar Margaret was to his own children. He remembered Mary holding a white cotton handkerchief in her fingers that she had washed and ironed so there wasn’t a single crease, and which she slowly mangled into a damp twist of despair as first the hours and then the days crawled by and there was no word of her daughter.

That had been four years previously; before Martin had joined them, before so many things had happened, regrettable and memorable and painful and so beautiful he hoped that he would always carry them to the grave. Impossible to think of memories now without thinking of his father, his mind at the last a Pandora’s box from which more than ills were escaping; recollections taking wing and fluttering away to be scattered, perhaps forever, or perhaps to be there again on the next visit. For himself, when that time came, Jack was sure that the lost children he had never found would be the last memories to leave him. All those days of never knowing; he had seen them erode marriages and sanity, like rainfall on rock. He and his team lived in the fissures left by other people’s disappearances. Margaret was one of the ones who would always haunt him, and now here was her mother’s photograph staring up at him reproachfully, come to join the missing, gone to join the lost. He groaned aloud.

And he had been thinking that with the last case wrapped up in a way that was nothing other than depressing he would at least be able to let everyone knock off early to try to get over it….

“Something wrong?”

He looked up to find Vivian Johnson gazing at him in concern. He beckoned her into the office and pushed the file across to her. “Remember Margaret Ryan?”

Viv grimaced. “Vividly.” Jack knew how she hated unsolved cases. She was as tenacious as she was compassionate, that was what made her such a good agent, but the flip side to that was the way the unsolved ones ate at her. Especially when children were involved. “Seven years old, went missing on her way home from school, appeared – from the one grainy security video that ever showed up – to have been abducted by the stranger who asked her for directions, was never seen again. Have we got a new lead?”

“Possibly – if we can find a link between Margaret’s disappearance and her mother’s.”

Viv’s warm brown eyes widened. “Mary Ryan has gone missing as well?”

“Four hours ago.”

She looked at the pictures and Jack followed her gaze, black and white photographs of that dark-eyed girl, already appearing so wistful – even in a school photograph – as if she had always known she was intended for tragedy.
“Who reported her missing?”

“You remember Mary’s husband, Frank Ryan?”

Viv’s eyes betrayed a flicker of amusement for all her concern. “I remember how well the two of you hit it off.”

Jack had to acknowledge that with the glimmer of a smile. “Yeah, we really got along great. Especially when I pretty much accused of him being involved in his daughter’s disappearance only to have that security camera footage from that gas station turn up showing her with a guy seventy pounds lighter and six inches shorter than him.”

“At a time when Ryan had the alibi of being in the local store – as seen by six other customers and a time-dated security camera.”

Malone narrowed his eyes. “Now you’re just rubbing it in.”

“Just showing that I have perfect recall of the case, Jack.”

Jack picked up the file and led the way out to where Danny Taylor, Samantha Spade, and Martin Fitzgerald were sitting in the bullpen, sharing that wilted body language that always followed a tragic conclusion to a case. They all looked exhausted and rumpled. Danny and Martin had both loosened their ties and were half-heartedly trying to write reports. Sam was still staring at the photograph of the dead woman that she had evidently just taken down from the whiteboard.

As Jack walked in, Danny looked up, brown eyes reading Jack effortlessly and already having decided that this was something out of the ordinary. He and Martin had not exactly had a fun time today, most of which they had spent interrogating a particularly difficult suspect, who, despite having elevated stupidity to a whole new level, had still taken three very long hours giving them all manner of crap before finally admitting to murdering their missing waitress; killing the hope they had been nurturing that he could have just injured her. It was always difficult when they had spent forty-eight hours getting to know every aspect of the life of a missing person, becoming intimately connected with his or her hopes and fears, only to have their search end with a cold corpse in a dumpster.

Sam looked pinched from the snow outside, as if she were waiting for spring so that her blood could thaw. For a woman born in a state with an average snowfall of forty-five inches, she really did detest the cold. Martin was gazing up at Jack as if he were waiting for the day’s lesson to begin. It was difficult not to look at Martin these days and see a walking reminder of the toll this job took on all of them. Martin had found his equilibrium once more but he was never again going to be that shiny-faced self-confident new agent who offered his opinion so eagerly; a lot of his certainties were gone, probably forever, and although Jack had waited a little impatiently for Martin to get some life experience and toughen up, he now wished that life could have gone a little easier on him and broken him in more gently.

When Jack paused to pin up the picture of Mary Ryan, her eyes seeming to gaze at him with renewed sadness; as if his inevitable disappointment of her had never been in doubt yet was still to be regretted. He tossed the file onto the desk and it spilled its contents, fanning photographs of the next life that would be touching theirs.

“Mary Ryan, aged thirty-six, mother of one daughter, Margaret, herself an unsolved missing person’s case from four years ago, went missing four hours ago from the Wayne Memorial Hospital in Honesdale. Mary is eight and a half months pregnant. She called her neighbors and asked them to take her in to the hospital in Honesdale because she started having what seemed to
be labor pains. The neighbor dropped her off at the hospital, but by the time the doctor saw her, the contractions had stopped and they couldn’t find anything wrong. Mary Ryan used the hospital payphone to call her husband to come and pick her up, and said she’d wait for him in the hospital lobby. By the time he got there – and it’s a three-hour drive for him because they live up the ass end of nowhere – she wasn’t there. No one’s seen her since. According to her husband, she didn’t pick up her purse, which means she doesn’t have any cash with her or even a front door key.”

Viv tapped the photographs of the house in which the Ryans lived, which Jack remembered vividly, that stone and wooden homestead buried so deeply in the woods. A house that dwelled in shadows, as he recalled it, a place the sunlight could barely find and which the snow iced annually like birthday frosting. “Mary was definitely seen at the hospital?”

“Yes, seen by several witnesses as well as the doctor who examined her, and Ryan was seen – also by several witnesses – at the market a three hour drive from where she was at the time she went missing. The local PD talked to him. He said his wife was a little tired when he left in the morning for the market but insisted she was okay. She called the neighbor about three quarters of an hour after he left.”

Sam said, “Why didn’t she call her husband? Most expectant fathers need to be surgically detached from their cell phones.”

“She said she felt she was going into labor and she couldn’t afford the time for him to drive back.”

“Who are the neighbors?” Danny put in.

“Doug and Karin Box. They only moved in a few weeks ago. They live about twenty miles from the Ryans’ place. They don’t really know the Ryans that well but they knew Mary was pregnant and had seen her in the local store in Unity, so when they got the call, they got out their car and drove her to the hospital. They’re waiting to be interviewed now.”

“She could still be getting a lift back with someone else,” Viv suggested. “What about car accidents?”

“That’s our first line of enquiry but I don’t want to waste any time on this one, so, let’s assume it’s an abduction but hope for the best.”

“Who’s with the husband?” Danny asked.

“Locals at the moment. We’re having his calls routed through here to save setting up a team on the spot. He’s…well, he’s not the easiest guy in the world to get along with and he really doesn’t like having strangers in his house. The last time he got pretty fed up with having an agent camped out in his living room so this time we’re trying another way.” Jack looked around the expectant agents. “I want all the hospitals in the area called, the morgues, everywhere. Sam, can you handle that?”

Samantha reached for the phone. “I’m on it.”

“Danny, Martin, you two talk to the neighbors who drove her in; find out everything you can about Mary’s state of mind. Did she seem depressed or excited about the baby? Did she seem frightened of anything or anyone? You know the drill. Vivian, you and I get to drive out to Honesdale to interview the hospital staff, see if somebody saw something.”

Martin looked up from the file. “What about the husband? Is he coming in?”

“He wants to stay in the house in case she calls or turns up, so, I’ve told him that you’ll come to him. Given that we completely failed to find his daughter for him when she went missing four
years ago, I think that’s the least we can do.”

Danny was examining the picture of Margaret. “Are we assuming the cases are connected?”

“We’re not assuming anything right now. We’re keeping a completely open mind.” Jack glanced across at Viv. “I heard that.”

She held up her hands. “I didn’t say a word.”

“I heard you thinking it.”

Sam’s voice could be heard clearly as she spoke into the phone: “A Jane Doe, no identification, no purse, thirty-six years old, dark hair and eyes. No one matching that description? Okay, thank you…”

Danny narrowed his eyes. “Am I missing something here? Would you like to fill us in on whatever it is you’re not telling us?”

Jack had a vivid memory of that angry confrontation in the dark kitchen; Mary watching from the doorway while tempers sparked like cinders from a campfire. “The last time around, the FBI agent leading the case screwed up, he thought Ryan had something to do with Margaret’s disappearance. He was wrong, and he wasted a lot of time pursuing that line of enquiry that would have been better spent in other ways, meaning that Ryan probably doesn’t have too good an impression of the FBI right now, so it would be good if you two could treat him with kid gloves.”

“Who was the screw up?” Martin enquired as he tightened the knot on his tie and smoothed down his jacket, trying to look as if the day had not already felt over to him, as if he had not mentally already been on his way home.

“You’re looking at him.”

Danny glanced up with a frown. “Something about the guy set off your radar?”

“We just didn’t hit it off.”

Viv shrugged. “I don’t know – I thought you were getting along fine until you accused him of having played a part in his daughter’s abduction.”

“I never actually said that.”

“Maybe not, but I think he got where you were heading with those enquiries.”

“Did you get him to take a polygraph?” Danny asked.

“T ook it, passed it.”

“Are you sure you did screw up?” Martin pressed. “Because I’d take your gut instinct over…”

Every time Martin did that – started trying to set Jack Malone up as the guy he wanted to be when he grew up, Jack was torn between enjoying it and wondering if he ought to nip it in the bud. He honestly thought he could have done a kinder job of raising Martin than Victor Fitzgerald; and had thought that from the first time he’d watched Martin squirming uncomfortably around his father, torn between irritation and embarrassment, while Victor barked orders and Martin tried to work up to that teenage rebellion he should have had a decade earlier. But nor did he particularly want to replace Victor as Martin’s first stop for Daddy Issues, especially as, if Martin’s affair with
Samantha was anything to go by, then at least some of Martin’s Issues could be Oedipal. But he understood, as a son who had never had enough of his father’s attention in his time, that it wasn’t enough to be told what was expected of you and that you had to unquestioningly accept parental authority, just because. He got that sometimes a man’s father had to earn his respect through his actions, not just expect to have it handed to him on a plate because he’d been there at the conception. And, as a man with no sons of his own, he was perhaps not entirely uncomfortable with the role of playing surrogate father to Martin and Danny.

“Well, don’t. Not over six eye witnesses and a time-stamped security video. Sometimes even I get it wrong.”

“Can we have that in writing?” Vivian asked mildly.

“No,” Jack assured her. He turned back to the two younger agents. “Ryan’s not the kind of guy that takes questioning well. He’s six feet five, two hundred and fifty pounds, and looks as if he bench presses grizzly bears. He inherited this big farm in Wisconsin from his father, which he worked before and after his father’s death until he sold up and moved to the Catskills, so he’s always been his own boss. I think he’s a little out of practice at people not treating him with a certain amount of…deference, and he was in a high stress situation. He’s just got a whole alpha male thing going on, but don’t let it get to you because I don’t think it’s relevant to the case. So, after you two have talked to the neighbors, I want you to drive out and join Viv and me in Unity, and then I want you to drive up to Ryan’s place and talk to him, but you need to tread carefully. Be polite.”

“As opposed to how we usually are?” Martin sounded hurt and Jack wished he would lay off with the reproachful eyes. It wasn’t exactly a secret around here that Martin had become short-tempered with pain after that last fall of his and that it had made him more of a liability than an asset when interviewing witnesses for a while, but that had been out of character for him and wasn’t an issue now. Jack felt he should probably make that clear before Martin started beating himself up about what he imagined to be a criticism.

“I’m saying be extra polite. Otherwise you’re just going to waste time butting heads. Call him ‘sir’ a lot like you mean it – he likes that. But try to find out what you can about how he and his wife were getting along and what her state of mind was in the days leading up to her disappearance.”

Sam put down the phone from another fruitless call and looked across at Jack. “You don’t think she’s suicidal, do you?”

“I don’t know. That’s something I hope we can establish by talking to the people who met with her but we know she took her daughter’s disappearance hard, she’s got another baby due any minute and still no word on Margaret. She’s probably tired and hormonal; she may have felt momentarily overwhelmed.”

“Or that the only way to protect her unborn child from the world that took away her daughter, was to kill it and herself.” Sam was careful not to meet anyone’s eye.

“That’s a different take on the word ‘protect’ from any I would use.” Martin took a sip from a cup of coffee that had been cold an hour before and Jack wondered when, if ever, he was going to trade in that damned FBI mug and get something less geeky.

Sam’s eyes momentarily flashed a look of hurt. “It’s not something a man would understand. She may have thought it was the only way to keep it safe from all the harm out there.”

“Rabbits do it,” Danny put in. As everyone looked at him in surprise, he expanded: “Eat their young to protect them from predators.”
“It’s still murder,” Martin insisted.

Sam gave him a look of exasperation. “Why don’t you wait until you’ve already lost one child to God knows what and lain awake every night for four years wondering if she was raped or tortured before she was killed, and then try being eight and a half months pregnant in a world where every headline tells you there is no safe place to raise a child and see how rational you feel?”

They all watched her move away to another desk and Martin looked not unlike a schoolboy who had just received a scolding he wasn’t entirely sure that he deserved. “Did I say something wrong? Because I didn’t mean…”

“It’s okay.” Danny patted his arm. “Just tell Sam you’re sorry later.”

“But I don’t know what I did.”

“That’s not the point. The point is, she’s upset, so you say you’re sorry. That’s what you do with women when you upset them. You not knowing that – that’s the reason you’re single, right there, buddy.”

Viv glanced across at Jack. “I’ll talk to her.”

“You sure?” Jack looked over in some concern to where the blonde agent was doggedly dialing more numbers. Sam was looking as if the cold had got into her bloodstream today, a bone-deep chill, and he suspected this case was going to get straight under her skin. It was already under his, like an itch. He had failed Mary Ryan once; he was damned sure he wasn’t going to do it twice. “She okay?”

“Jack, you don’t need me to tell you that this job sucks some days. This is one of those days.”

Sighing, he rose to his feet. “Okay, well, it’s you and me for Honesdale. Again. And I was so hoping I’d seen the last of that place.” He glanced at Danny and Martin. “You two know what you’re doing?”

“Don’t we always?” Danny countered.

“I don’t know. The last time I took my eye off you for five minutes, Martin managed to get himself shot and you got yourself concussed. So, can you make it to the interview room and back without need of the paramedics?”

Danny glanced at Martin. “I don’t think we need to dignify that with a reply.”

“Me neither.”

Jack watched them head out of the door towards the interview rooms, turning to find Viv watching him with that expression on her face that told him he was not yet on her shit list but did need to take a behavioral exit turn before he got there. “What?” he said defensively. He thought he had shown some admirable restraint in not also mentioning Martin getting knocked down a staircase or nearly getting shot and having to be saved by a well-placed bullet from Danny, or all the various terrifying things that Danny had done while suffering from PTSD.

“It’s been months, Jack, – it’s probably time to dial down the over-protective thing.”

The moment hung there as Jack thought about how to play this; he had been waiting for someone to call him on his attitude for a while and had been ready to go in hard and defensive, but with Viv holding his gaze with all that understanding in her eyes, he felt he could afford an
acknowledgement; an admission that, yes, he knew it was a problem, and, yes, he was dealing with it.

“Hey, you did your part in making me what I am today when you decided to have open heart surgery on my watch.”

“You know, I didn’t actually do that on purpose, and I don’t think Martin got himself shot just to fray your nerves either.”

“I’m not so sure.” He pulled on his coat, his gaze letting her know he got it and he really was working on it for all the flippancy of his reply: “It’s classic adolescent acting out at a father-figure behavior. It’s right up there with painting your bedroom black, playing your music too loud, and smoking pot. He does it again, he’s grounded.”

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Martin had spent a long time learning the common signs of deception; the gestures people made when they were being evasive or untruthful; all that tugging at their clothing, adjusting their hair, hands uncomfortable in any position, refusing to meet the eye of the person questioning them; white collar crime was good for studying all the many ways in which apparently respectable people would, given the right – or wrong – circumstances, lie through their teeth. Then he had also had the opportunity to study the common signs of evasion from the inside, as he pretended to be something he wasn’t while concealing what he had become. So, he considered himself something of an expert on lying these days, but so far, the Boxes hadn’t said or done anything to trigger his radar. He believed that they were telling at least what they perceived to be the truth.

Karin Box was thirty-two and her husband was thirty-six. She had a likeable face rather than a pretty one, her wiry fair hair barely tamed while his was starting to thin back from his temples. Their clothing looked workmanlike rather than smart, their thick sweaters and heavy boots reminding him just how cold and rough the terrain was out of the city; also the kind of clothing one might expect people to throw on quickly when they needed to go out in a hurry in answer to a phone call. So far he was making them as nothing but concerned and honest.

Martin noticed that Danny, like him, was being extra polite in readiness for talking to Ryan. He was still getting flashes of guilt and self-hatred over various interviews he’d conducted when sweating his way through withdrawal; skin prickling with need and every witness feeling as if they were thwarting him out of spite by not furnishing the information that was necessary to get the job done. Ever since he’d stopped being a slave to the painkillers he had been watching himself carefully to ensure that he asked the right questions, used the right words, checking with Danny probably too many times in each interview, a shared glance to reassure himself that he was doing this right. Danny had never lost patience with him, gaze steady and kind. But today he felt normal again, or as close to normal as he could get, and the rhythm had come back to him, all that hard won knowledge still there when he needed it. Despite what Jack had told them about being wrong, Martin couldn’t help thinking there had to be something that would have set off Jack’s radar, but nevertheless he picked his words with extra care.

“So, have you known the Ryans long?” Danny pressed, politely.

“Not really. We only bought our place a few months ago, but we’d seen them around, you know…? In the local stores, buying groceries. Frank Ryan always made a point of saying ‘Hi’ and even Mary would smile if she saw you wave. We knew Mary was pregnant and we’d heard in the store about what happened to their little girl. I think everyone was really rooting for the baby to be okay and for her to feel better.”
“She wasn’t well?”

Karin Box leaned forward. “She always looked so sad. Sometimes, when they’d come into town, she’d stay in the jeep while her husband did the shopping, and I’d see her watching the kids in the school and I just knew she was thinking about her little girl.”

And Martin could see her then, Mary slightly misted behind windshield glass, watching the children spill through the school gates, so vivid and animated while she was a grief-paled ghost, the thread that connected her to life growing thinner and thinner with each year that passed and there was no word of her missing daughter.

“What about when she called you?” Martin asked.

Doug Box shrugged. “Karin took the call. I was just heading out, but she came out after me and asked me to wait, said Mary Ryan was on the phone and thought she was having contractions. I asked if I should go and look for Frank, but Karin said Mary wanted to be taken straight to the hospital. So, we drove up there, and picked her up, and then drove for Honesdale. We’re still getting used to the winters around here, and I don’t mind telling you, driving down those rough roads, with the puddles all frozen and snow everywhere, and a pregnant woman in the back – well, I was glad when that journey was over.”

Karin smiled and patted her husband’s hand. “Doug says if we have any kids, we have to move into Honesdale for the last three months of every pregnancy, just for the sake of his nerves.”

“How did Mary seem during the journey?” Danny gave Karin his best encouraging smile and Martin ducked his head to hide a smile as he saw the woman visibly responding to the warm light in Danny’s soulful brown eyes.

Karin and Doug exchanged a glance. “She was quiet,” Karin offered. “I asked her if she was in a lot of pain and she said it wasn’t that painful but she was just really worried about the baby and she was probably fussing about nothing and I said it was better to be safe than sorry.”

“She didn’t really say much,” Doug put in. “We asked her how Frank was and she said he was fine and we asked if it was always like this in the winter and she said it was, pretty much, but that it was so beautiful in the woods sometimes, that it made up for it.”

“I asked her what it was like where they’d lived before,” Karin added. “She said it was a thousand acres of nowhere in the middle of nothing.”

“I tried to ask her about family,” Doug added. “But she said she didn’t have any family except her husband, not any more.”

“Did you get the impression that she was depressed?” Martin looked down at his notepad and saw that he had written ‘a thousand acres of nowhere’. He really wanted to know how she had referred to the baby, if she had seemed connected to it. That was the difference sometimes, the pregnant women who were unwilling vessels for a life they’d never wanted, and the ones who were bonding with their unborn through every kick. Had this baby been Mary’s way back to life after the cryogenic suspension of grief from the loss of her first child or just something with which she was unable to connect?

Once again Doug and Karin exchanged a glance, confirming their impressions with one another. “No, a little excited, maybe. Her eyes were kind of bright. I thought she might be getting the beginning of a fever.”
“What about frightened?”

“No. Definitely not.”

“Did she talk about the baby?” Danny put in.

Karin visibly tried to remember. “I asked if she knew if it was a girl or a boy and she shook her head and there was kind of an awkward silence. You know how it is when someone’s lost a child? You want them to know that you know and you’re not going to say anything crass but at the same time you don’t want to bring it up. Anyway, Doug said Frank seemed the kind of guy who would probably like to have a son. She looked kind of… I don’t know… She seemed cold and I told Doug to turn up the heater. And I asked her about names and she said sometimes you couldn’t know what a baby was meant to be called until it was born and you held it and then sometimes you knew.”

Martin and Danny exchanged a look of relief. A woman talking about holding a living baby and choosing a name didn’t sound as if she were contemplating suicide.

Danny tossed the question in as if they just had to ask it and it wasn’t even that important: “Did you get the impression that everything was okay between her and her husband?”

Doug shrugged. “I guess.” He looked at his wife. “Karin…?”

She grimaced. “She’s just so quiet when he’s around, you know? He’s a nice guy. He helped out the Wentworths when that tree went down on their barn. Came straight over with his chainsaw and cut it up for them for kindling. But he’s so sure about everything and I always think when I see them together that if I was living with someone who took up all that space and never had any doubts, I’d find it hard to know who I was, too.”

Her husband looked amused. “You’re just used to having a man like me who’s house-trained and does as he’s told.”

She grinned back at him. “Well, yeah, honey, that’s the way I think men are meant to be. Can’t go around letting them have their own way all the time. It’s not good for them.”

“That’s how Mary Ryan strikes you?” Martin leaned forward, trying to catch hold of that tantalizing thread of information before it was snatched away again. “Someone who doesn’t know who she is?”

“I don’t know. She’s just so… quiet. There could be a lot going on inside, but I don’t think she’d talk about it. I like her fine, she’s just not someone you can call up for a girl chat when you’re having one of those days, you know?”

“You didn’t notice anything strange? When you picked Mary up, during the journey, or when you dropped her off at the hospital?”

Another shared look between the husband and wife and then a helpless shrug from both. “No, I’m sorry,” Karin said.

“No one out of the ordinary?” Danny suggested. “No one hanging around suspiciously?”

“Didn’t see anyone like that – but then we weren’t really looking.”

“What was the last thing she said to you?”

“I wanted to go in to the hospital with her but she said not to wait, that she’d call Frank and ask him
to collect her. She apologized for coming out without her purse and said she would give us gas money next time she saw us. That was pretty much it until we got the call from Frank – he checked the last number she’d called – and he asked us to come straight here.”

Martin gave them a warm smile. “You did absolutely the right thing. Thank you for your help. An agent will be along to take you home.”

Danny followed Martin into the corridor. “Not very observant but I think they’re honest.”

“They may not have seen anyone waiting because the kidnapper either wasn’t there or he was out of sight. But, I agree. I think they’ve told us everything they know. It’s just a pity they know so little. Ryan sounds kind of…controlling.”

“Well, that would explain Jack not liking him. Jack likes strong women who know their own minds and don’t take any crap from anyone. When women aren’t like that he tends to get suspicious.”

“Oh course, Ryan may just be over-protective. Mary’s pregnant and she’s already lost one child. He may not realize he’s stifling her.” Martin darted Danny a slightly defensive glance. “Some woman think you’re smothering them if you ask for a second date. Ryan may just be old-fashioned.” He added curiously: “How come you and Sam didn’t work this case anyway? Weren’t you both on the team back then?”

“We’d been working another case when this one came in. Sam and I were in Miami. We were pretty sure the guy we were looking for was dead as we had an eye witness account of him being shoved into the trunk of a car and most people don’t sleep with their eyes open. But we needed to find the body to be sure. While we were still in Miami finishing up the dumpster search, the Ryan case came in and, as there was no time to waste, Jack and Viv started right on it. They had other people checking records and running forensics but it was basically all those two lived for and dreamed of for a while. By the time Sam and I got back it was pretty much a cold trail and Jack was not in the best of moods, as you can imagine.”

“I’m kind of glad I wasn’t around back then.”

“I think that was the case that made Jack realize he needed someone else on the team.”

“Jack told me he needed an extra agent because he’d fed the last one to alligators for breaking procedure.”

“Well, he was a little pissed with you at the time, Concussion Boy.” Danny gave Martin a sideways look. “So, would you call me up for a guy chat when you’re having one of those days?”

Martin tried to suppress a smile without much success. “No.”

“Okay, now I’m hurt.”

“No, you’re not. You wouldn’t call me either.”

“I’d call you in a heartbeat,” Danny protested.


Danny considered for a moment and then conceded with a shrug. “Okay, but if Viv was out I’d so call you.”

Every now and then they got close to talking about it: the shooting, the terror, the pain, the
survivor guilt, the addiction, but they always ended up veering away from it. Martin was still of the opinion that veering away was the right thing to do. Danny had helped him when he needed his help and he had thanked him for it, but there were some things he didn’t think either of them were ready to discuss, and every time he tried out a conversation for size in his head it came full of words that sounded like excuses, and he knew Danny would never want to hear those. And it was true, of course. It didn’t matter how he’d got from not being an addict to being one, just that he acknowledged he was one now and worked hard not to take another pill.

Besides, he didn’t know if words had yet been invented to describe how it had felt to live with that pain every day, the exhaustion of it wearing on his nerves, until he didn’t even feel like himself any more, just a shredded shadow of the man he had once been. Every day he had forced himself to sound like the man he’d been before, still half-convinced that faking it well enough for long enough could make it be true. He still missed the painkillers, not just because of the hit they had given him, but the security they had provided that the pain couldn’t get to him, couldn’t flare up and overwhelm him, making that gray sweat trickle down his spine as his body became nothing except a transmitter for white waves of misery. Even after the physical symptoms of dependency had receded, he still missed the security they had provided. If he’d flushed them after he stopped needing them for the pain, he wouldn’t have had them to hand after that fall down the stairs that had made the pain flare up so agonizingly again, and that thought had terrified him, that he could have left himself bereft, that the pain could get to him and he would have nothing to hand to combat it.

He risked a glance at Danny and caught the tail end of one of those concerned looks. In the beginning they had all overwhelmed him with those, making him feel weak and redundant, so ineffective he needed to be replaced, because even a ninety pound woman was stronger than he was right now… And then it had just been Danny who looked at him that way; he’d faked out everyone else. In the past he’d turned away those looks with flippancy because he didn’t want Danny to know how right he was to be worried for him; now he wanted him not to have the burden of concern because despite his lingering fear of ever experiencing that kind of relentless grinding pain again, Martin actually was doing okay.

Martin shrugged. “Are you going to do that gazing intently into his eyes and nodding sympathetically thing with Ryan, by the way? Because he may get the wrong idea.”

“It’s called normal human empathy, Martin, you should try it some time.”

“Doesn’t sound like something any man in my family would enjoy.”

Danny squeezed his shoulder briefly, and the touch was still a fraction too gentle, as if Martin was too fragile for any greater pressure. “Okay, time to pack for the great outdoors and make tracks for Unity. I’ll pick the car. Jack said we’re going to need something pretty darned Marlboro Man to tackle the terrain where Ryan lives.”

“Get something with snow tires,” Martin warned. “And a really good heater.”

“Just make sure you pack clean underwear and an extra sweater. If your mother calls I want to be able to tell her that her little boy isn’t going to be catching a chill on my watch.”

Martin groaned. “I knew it was a mistake to ever let you and my mother meet.”

“She’s a wonderful woman,” Danny was saying warmly. “And we had some really good times talking about all those cute little things you did when you were a kid. All of which I’ve committed to memory, by the way.”
“You have enough blackmail material for a lifetime, don’t you?”

Danny patted him on the shoulder cheerfully as he headed off. “Several lifetimes, Martin. Several.”

Danny and his mother had not met inside the hospital. They had met in the car park where Danny had pulled by to pick up Jack – who, unlike Danny had visited Martin in the hospital even when Martin started undergoing painful physiotherapy – and for some reason, Martin’s mother, who had never wanted Martin to join the FBI and still harbored hopes he might come to his senses and get into politics, had liked Danny. Martin still found it blackly comic that, after all those years of trying to get her attention while she wafted out of the door on his father’s arm on a wave of expensive perfume on her way to some important social gathering, all it had taken, in the end, to get her to spend a little time with him was to get himself shot, twice, and bleed a lot. He had felt almost ashamed of his reaction when he had opened his eyes to find his mother with tears in hers, his father so upright and tense with anxiety for him; the shock of revelation that they loved him with the same painful intensity that he loved them, and then the guilt following hot on its heels that it came as such a surprise.

Perhaps her defenses had been left particularly low by Martin’s shooting or perhaps Danny had just charmed her, the way he charmed everyone. Either way, Danny was now one of the few people that Martin liked whom his mother also liked, and he suspected her of calling Danny up to find out how Martin was really doing. He could almost hear her saying the words: ‘All his father ever tells me is that he’s looking well….’

Not that anyone could say that about him any more, not for a while now. His clothes still hung off him awkwardly and the shadows under his eyes were slow to fade. He knew that sometimes just looking at him was enough to give Samantha a bad case of the guilts. She had it fixed in her head that, if she hadn’t allowed her own irrational guilt over their abortive romance to come between them, that she would have noticed what was wrong with Martin earlier and been able to help him before things got so bad. Martin wasn’t so sure. He suspected that he had used all the skills he had developed as an agent in trying to conceal what he had become very well and he had needed to hit bottom before he would admit that he needed help anyway. Up until the point when he had been too out of things to show up at work, and unable to do his job properly when he was there; up until the point when the first thing he had done in the morning was throw a pill down his throat just on reflex, without even thinking about it, he had never used the word ‘addict’ about himself.

With Danny, it was a different kind of fear of what any conversation would bring forth. He never wanted to see that look in Danny’s eyes again, all that anger and disappointment at the way Martin had let him down. Every now and then he would let Danny know that he was still going to meetings, and Danny was receptive to that, and kind, but he knew that the glimmer of anything that sounded like an excuse or a rationalization and there would be that look in Danny’s eyes again, and he didn’t think he could bear it. With Danny’s help he had gotten himself straightened out, and he was still riddled with regret and shame and remorse and self-loathing if he let it overwhelm him, but he was functioning again, without pain and without painkillers. He wasn’t sure how Danny was doing; sometimes when they exchanged a glance Martin thought he saw himself reflected in those too-expressive eyes, not as he was now, but as he had been after he was shot, when he had slipped into darkness even as Danny begged him to stay with him.

Martin had no recall of any events after that point, of course; Danny calling for an ambulance, Danny putting pressure on his wounds with blood-soaked hands, Danny accompanying him to the hospital and waiting while he was wheeled into surgery; he just remembered the visits that had been regular while he was on morphine, and then stopped as soon as there was the possibility of seeing him in pain; waiting and wondering and then realizing why Danny wasn’t coming, and wouldn’t be coming if it meant he was going to have to see Martin hurting; how Martin had to go
and find him first.

It had taken so long for the pain to stop, so many months when it had ground him down to a jagged edge, and it had felt so good when those torn muscles had started to heal and it had finally begun to fade, when he had felt the reins of his life back in his hands again. And yes, bright lights and loud noises still made him flinch, so did sitting behind any van, the thrum of the engine of his own vehicle starting to get into his nervous system very quickly as he waited for the doors to fly open, the bullets to spray…. But all of that was to be expected and wasn’t something he allowed to interfere with his efficiency. Physically he had grown stronger and the pain had lessened. He had been almost giddy with the relief of being able to perform ordinary tasks without constant discomfort…then had come that fall and the unbearable spiking of fresh agony and the knowledge that he simply could not go through this again, day by day and hour by hour, not and do his job. He kept seeing the look in Danny’s eyes as he gazed at him, seeing his own pain searing Danny all over again, feeling weak because he couldn’t hide it, when he should have hidden it better, feeling worse because Danny deserved to be protected from it.

He had imagined Danny telling Jack, telling Viv, people taking him to one side and asking him if he was really up to this, if he could really still cut it in the field. The thought of being shoved behind a desk or having people hovering over him protectively once more, being thought of as weak, a liability, someone to be watched out for when danger threatened, instead of someone who was an asset, that had been unbearable to contemplate. Anything was better than that, and the only problem was the pain. Mentally he considered himself perfectly fit, physically, also, except for the pain which might impede his ability to do his job. The pain had been crippling – like an unwanted acquaintance who had once overstayed their welcome, come for what had promised to be a weekend only to end up staying for a month, turning up on the doorstep again with a suitcase in each hand when he had thought them gone for good.

But the pain could be controlled by painkillers. The pain could be fenced in and ordered and denied the right to screw up his life all over again, as long as he could take the pills to do so, but gaining access to the painkillers was difficult unless he was prepared to explain that he had been injured again, which would mean assessments and more examinations and more time spent as a patient in need of help when he didn’t need any help, he just needed the pain to stop…. The painkillers were like the fairytale trolls who offered help just when he needed it most then demanded their own price. Taking them let him do his job but then it had swiftly become impossible to do his job without them. It became harder and harder to obtain them and more and more difficult to function without taking them…. Which was when everything had begun to spiral away from him, his life becoming as unmanageable as fall leaves spun upon the wind, and the one person he wanted to call for comfort was already dead – after suffering this kind of pain, and feeling herself a failure for allowing it to overwhelm her. A dozen times a day as he felt the weakness and shuddering and sweats and shivering and self-loathing coursing through him, Martin had wanted to call Aunt Bonnie and tell her that he couldn’t do this any more, he couldn’t be this person any more, and yet he couldn’t now remember how to be anyone else.

Failure had never been an option for a Fitzgerald. Other children possibly had the option of getting something less than a 4.0 grade average but he never had. He had to graduate top in his class, and, of course, he had to graduate magna cum laude; anything else would have been unthinkable. All those lectures when he was growing up, the praise and blame had both been couched in the same terms: ‘Your mother and I are very proud of you, son’, ‘Your mother and I are very disappointed in you, Martin’. Any small rebellion had been treated as if it were such a shock to their systems, as if it had left them prostrate on the floor in need of years of therapy because he’d smoked a joint; because he’d sneak ed out one night and gone to a rock concert after it had been forbidden; because he’d lied about Daniel Fisher’s parents knowing about the party at his house; because he’d drunk a beer. His rebellions really had been embarrassingly trivial, the boy he had always been kept on
such a tight rein that ignorance of other possibilities made him complicit in the whole business of his life being so over-ordered, so utterly controlled, realizing that he had let those values seep into him, like pesticide into soil. His stress levels would spike unbearably at the prospect of any failure, even if it had originally been his father who cared so passionately that he should succeed at everything; he had been contaminated by those wishes to the point where they had become his own. He was still proud of himself for kicking over the traces of that paternal control so completely and running off to join the FBI – even if his sprint for freedom had been weighed down by all the baggage he carried with him and probably always would. Running off to join the FBI not being an act, as he’d pointed out to his father at the time, on a par with running off to join the circus or deciding to give up a promising career in White Collar Crime to run a vice ring from his basement.

“I just want to do something that matters.”

“You don’t think politics matters?”

“No, Dad. I don’t. I think you end up trying to get yourself re-elected by keeping in with the people who put you there, and any idealism you may once have had gets squeezed out by the system. Not to mention the fact I think for someone to want to go into politics it might be an idea for him to have some political convictions that are a little more fully-formed than mine. This is what I want to do. I think I could be good at this…”

And for a while, he thought he actually had been. He’d made mistakes, certainly, sometimes he’d made very bad mistakes, like the error of judgment that had led to the death of Anwar Samir. But people had been found who would otherwise have remained lost in part because he was one of the agents looking for them. Everything he did mattered in this job, and for a while that had been the most incredible feeling to wake up to every morning; to know that he could walk into the office and make a difference, a palpable positive difference, to the lives of other human beings at their most vulnerable and most in need of help.

Then he had become one of them. He had lost himself so entirely that he didn’t recognize his own reflection, and it was impossible to ask for help in finding himself again – somewhere within the shaking, vomiting remnants that were left to him – when he wasn’t allowed to have got to this point; because the son of Victor Fitzgerald was absolutely not permitted to fail so completely.

But the nephew of Aunt Bonnie would have been. She had always allowed him to explore the possibilities that there might be other ways to be and think and grow; let him in on the big truth that parents were just people with opinions, and their advice and guidance could never be more than that; that even the wisest of them weren’t handing down absolutes on tablets of stone.

“You father’s a wonderful man, Marty, and he loves you so very much but sometimes…”

“He’s an arrogant blowhard who thinks that saying something is true makes it that way even when it isn’t?”

That smile of hers that told him he was naughty and loved at the same time. “He’s not infallible. None of us are. You can’t expect him to be. And you can’t expect yourself to be either. We all make mistakes. You’re going to make them, too.”

“No, I think I checked my father’s life plan for me pretty thoroughly before I came out, and that’s definitely not on his agenda.”

Her hand on his forehead stroking back his hair so tenderly, sometimes he thought his aunt’s house was the only place where anyone ever touched him. “That’s how we learn. It’s painful and sometimes it’s humiliating, but it’s necessary sometimes to just utterly screw up…..”
He could have picked up the phone and called her and known it would be okay, even if he were a sweating, shivering mess, sobbing incoherently down the line to her, telling her that he had screwed up so badly he didn’t think there was a way back for him because he was now an addict and a thief and a liability to the people who trusted him to keep them safe. She was the only person in his family he could think of who may have had some advice to offer him that would have helped, but by then she had gone beyond all suffering and all possible assistance. He helped people every day, or had before he had turned into a junkie, but when she had needed him the most he hadn’t had any help to give her.

He had never felt so utterly lost or so alone, and even now he was afraid of the pain and what it had done to him; how easily it had defeated him; afraid that it might inhibit him, the fear of taking another bullet making him less of an agent that he had been before. Like giving up the painkillers, he knew he needed to give up the fear as well. He could eat and sleep and walk and even run these days; he had a lot to be thankful for and people relying on him to do his job the same way he’d done before, not to become meek or inhibited by the fear of being hurt.

He just wished he could look back on the last few months and see himself as something more than someone who had failed everyone who had ever believed him the first time that he was truly tested.

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Samantha Spade had never thought she would get used to the constant overhead of artificial light. An open plan office should never have come to feel so much like home, but it did now; bad sign, she suspected, proof she was becoming a workaholic incapable of making a commitment to anyone or anything except the missing who became consuming passions until they or their corpses were found. Damn, five more years of this and she’d be well on her way to becoming Jack Malone.

She made another note and thought again how much work one could do in the office. She sometimes forgot that; like Martin she tended to prefer to be out in the field, but so much of their job was this – making calls, following up old paper trails, watching security tapes, tracing DMV records, cross-referencing names. This was more likely to be where the vital lead came that may save a life. This case was already getting to her and she hadn’t been involved in the search for Margaret; it was just too unlikely, like a puzzle with so many pieces missing one couldn’t see the pattern at all.

So far the white board was showing a lot of time line but very little useful information. Mary had called Karin Box at 8:35am and the Boxes had gotten to her around 9:11am – Jack had explained that where the Ryans lived was so isolated that even the closest neighbor was a half hour drive away. They had arrived at the hospital at around 12:28. A Doctor Hughes had seen her at 12:46. She had called her husband at 13:37, then gone outside around 13:48 – which was the last time she had been seen, by a passing orderly. Then everything for Mary just stopped. Her husband had arrived at the hospital at 16:34pm, having driven straight there to collect her as soon as she called. The timing of the phone call was the only possible oddity about Mary Ryan’s behavior – that twenty minute delay between being shown out of his examining room by Doctor Hughes and her calling her husband, but it could be something as simple as waiting for a pharmacy prescription to be filled or waiting in a line for the payphone. Sam had called all the hospitals and morgues with no success, and was now waiting on the hospital security tape footage, and for the hospital pay phone records to be faxed to her.

She had retrieved the file on the Margaret Ryan disappearance and was starting to familiarize herself with the details. Perhaps it was just a coincidence that a mother and a daughter had both apparently been abducted four years apart but she wasn’t sure she believed in those. She was going
to be cross-referencing every step of the way and while she tried not to pre-judge a case, if there
didn’t end up being a connection she was going to be very surprised.

“Here you go.”

Looking up in surprise, she found that Martin had deposited a cup of coffee in front of her and was
eating a Danish while sitting on her desk. He looked more at home there than he had in a while.
For too long now he had seemed to be concealed by a thin veil of pain; a distance between them
which had little to do with their months of intimacy and was more a conscious act on his part of
cutting himself off from the rest of them. She felt as if she had him in focus for the first time in
months. He was looking less bony than he had and the shadows under his eyes had faded a little,
although the lines were there; she suspected it was going to be a long time before they went away.
Even his suit seemed to fit him a little better than usual and his tie was not actually burning her
retinas. It was red silk, and matched the blue-black suit and thinly striped white shirt he was
wearing a lot better than the oversized tweed suit-check shirt-and-orange tie ensemble atrocity he
had been wearing on the last occasion she had really looked at him.

“How long have you been here? Nice tie.”

“Just arrived. Thank you.”

He looked down at his tie in confusion, as if surprised to find it there, and yet he presumably did
choose those clothes each morning, made a conscious decision to wear suits of coarse tweed or
unsightly checks that would only have fitted him if he had first put on two sweaters. Presumably he
did go into stores and select those ties with the patterns that always made her think of a particularly
drab acid trip. She wondered if someone had once told him that as long as a suit jacket cost more
than a thousand dollars, and had shoulder pads, a gentleman would always look stylish in it; or did
he just buy suits like his father’s because he had no real attachment to his work clothes anyway,
only to his work? Or was it a sensory thing? His clothes had always felt better than they looked,
even the worst of his suits a pleasure against the fingertips. At home he wore jeans and college
sweatshirts, and looked younger and sexier and painfully unguarded. She wondered if people in the
office had expected her to take him shopping while they were dating or if she was the only one
who thought that Martin’s clothes were terrible? One day, she really would have to ask Danny.

She picked up the coffee and sipped it, realizing how much she needed it as the first gulp went
down. “Thanks. You’re not having any?”

Martin gestured vaguely in the direction of the doorway. “Danny’s getting mine.”

She bent her head to hide a smile. Danny had originally been so proud of the way he was getting
the new guy broken in, but it was still Danny who did most of the running around after Martin.
“You have him well trained. Get anything from the Boxes?”

“Nothing much. Did you find out anything?” He craned his neck to read her notes over her
shoulder, his hand automatically going to his stomach as he did it. She couldn’t tell if he was still in
pain these days or if the pain had just been a part of his life for so long that he expected it to be
there even when it wasn’t. There had been so many times every day for the past few months when
she had wanted to ask him if he was okay, but he had been so keen to tell everyone how well he
was, and how ready to come back to work, that she, who had behaved in exactly the same way
after her own shooting, didn’t have to heart to push it. She did feel as if she’d failed him though,
but that had become a reflex for her now; a constant niggle of guilt that sometimes, ironically,
made her snap at him when she had intended to be nothing other than patient.

“Sam?” He looked at her in surprise when she didn’t answer. “Are you going to fill me in on all the
background so I don’t have to read my way through all these old files?”

“You know, I’ve been meaning to ask – did you pay poor people to do your homework for you at school?”

“Of course.”

When he smiled at her it was almost like old times, a relief to see his ridiculously blue eyes crinkling with humor instead of pain. It was difficult not to touch his arm, just to let him know that he was cared about; however busy they all got, however difficult this job became, he did have friends here to whom he truly mattered – even the friends who had slept with him. But it was always difficult – touching people with whom one had once had sex; the touching always lasted too long or not long enough. She envied the way Danny and Viv and even Jack could just pat Martin on the shoulder or the back, or invade his personal space the way Danny was always doing, without having to be self-conscious about it. But then she had known all about the difficulties of office romances before she had ever invited Martin to share that taxi and done it anyway.

“I’m a sucker for a pretty face,” she said aloud and when Martin looked at her in confusion, she opened the file. “I’ll give you the Cliff Notes because you brought me coffee.”

“What do I get?” Danny came in bearing coffee and donuts, slopping the coffee down and distributing pastries; energy so high it felt as if the national grid could just plug into him and power an entire city.

Sam realized that as well as being thirsty and caffeine-deprived she was also starving, “You, I may have to marry.”

“We should totally do that,” he told her cheerfully. “We’d clean up on that book they’re running on us in Admin.”

Danny was wearing a more obviously blue suit, but, unusually, a white shirt, and a tie that was exactly the same shade as Martin’s. She fingered it curiously. “Are you two coordinating your clothing now?”

“Yes, Martin and I call each other every morning to make sure that our ties match,” Danny deadpanned. “Because we really like it when we’re trying to interview suspects and they waste our time making cheap cracks instead of answering our questions. And – by the way – next time you get the hung over three hundred pound ex-con to interrogate and we’ll take the friendly neighborhood call-girl.”

Sam smirked at him. “But I heard ‘Buster’ took such a shine to you two. The word is he offered Jack a whole fifty dollar bill for five minutes alone with you.”

“That was for five minutes with Martin. He offered seventy-five for me.”

“Well, if you ever get tired of all this, there’s a whole new career for you, right there.”

“Don’t forget the only slightly hot electrical goods.” Martin snagged a donut for himself. His Danish had evidently gone down without touching the sides and Samantha moved her own donut away from him before he started eyeing it up. She was all for Martin gaining the weight he’d lost but not with her food. “He was willing to throw those in, too. And we have an open invitation to share his cell in Pelican Bay.”

“The guy sounds like a real prince. I don’t know how you two could say ‘no’.”

Danny gestured with sugary pastry. “The Inter-Team Office Romance book. Right now, I could get us pretty good odds on Sam and I getting married in Vegas or Martin and I getting married in Canada.”

“What kind of odds?” Sam felt stung. She suspected she was probably the reason the bets were being placed; one could not sleep with two co-workers and expect no one to make comments; but she was perfectly willing to tough it out and follow Danny’s lead on this. He had a way of meeting things head on which she had always admired. “Cause I always have the rent to make.”

Danny’s eyes were warm and kind and she liked the light of mischief in them. “Twenty to one on you and me, fifteen to one on me and Martin.”

Martin licked some sugar from his fingers. “You and Sam marrying is considered a longer shot than you and me marrying?”

“Fifteen to one is still pretty good – although I bet those odds would be longer if you stopped wearing matching ties.” Sam took another sip of coffee. “If we all put a thousand bucks on it and then booked you two your tickets to Canada, we could clean up.”

“We’d get more if it were you and me though,” Danny pointed out. “To maximize our profits, you and I should get hitched. Right away the odds on Martin and I marrying are going to lengthen. Then you and I get a quickie divorce and I marry Martin before the smart money catches on. As an extra bonus, Martin would also get to really annoy his father.”

Martin held up his sugar-dusted hand. “Count me in for a thousand.”

Sam was pretty sure that somewhere inside Danny Taylor, the playboy, was a nice Catholic boy just looking to settle down, who would no more use the marriage vows to line his pockets than he would sky dive naked off the Empire State Building, but she liked his way of dealing with what could have been considered a public humiliation. She pointedly shook some of the sugar from Martin’s donut from a file into the wastepaper basket. “What about me and Elena?”

Danny shook his head. “Only four to one – but thank you for the visual.”

“You’re welcome.”

“How’s she doing?” Martin’s gaze was fixed on her donut and she quickly took a bite.

“Last time I called her, she sincerely asked me to kill her. I’m making sure my flu shots are up to date from now on. Now do you want me to fill you in on the background to this case or would you rather read the copies I just made for you?”

Martin gulped down some coffee. “You tell us.”

She told them all she had so far. There were more files coming, so far she only had the bare bones of births and deaths; social security numbers and DMV photographs. Impossible to do this job and not be aware of how thin one’s own life would look if subjected to an investigation. Date of birth, date of first runaway attempt, date of marriage, date of divorce; and agents sitting there making assumptions, making judgments, making guesses. They worked together every day and yet they probably knew more about some of the missing people they had looked for than they did about each other.

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“Mary Ryan was born in a small town in Wisconsin called Indemnity, population about six
thousand. It’s very rural. Frank Ryan’s family owned a big farm on the outskirts of the town. The Ryan family gave employment to a lot of people during harvest time and throughout the year and a lot of the town’s economy was dependent on them. His mother died when he nineteen so he came back from college to help his father out on the farm. No one in the family has ever had so much as a parking ticket. In fact if they were any squeaky cleaner their name would have to be ‘Fitzgerald’.

Martin made a face at her. “I hate them already.”

Danny nodded at the file, also trying to read it over her shoulder. She often wondered how he and Martin managed to avoid clashing heads the way they did that. “What about Mary’s family?”

“Very much from the other side of the tracks. Mary grew up in a trailer park outside town.” She tried to say it without a tremor, as if she was not already feeling a pull of connection to this woman from Wisconsin who had grown up in a place that was too cold and too poor while surely dreaming of better things. “Mary’s father was arrested several times for drunkeness, assault, DUI, and there are a lot of notes on his file about officers being called to the house because of domestic disturbances. Mary’s mother was admitted to the hospital on several occasions with unexplained injuries, and Social Services had both kids down as being ‘at risk’. The mother died when Mary was eleven. Her father finally was DUI one too many times, ran the curb into a bunch of kids waiting at a bus stop, and served a six-year sentence for vehicular manslaughter.

“Mary and her brother were in and out of foster homes and her brother was arrested several times while still a juvenile for various offences. And before you ask, yes his juvie records were sealed but the sheriff knew everything he’d been charged with and told Jack and Viv all about it when they were investigating Margaret’s disappearance. According to the sheriff, Nathan was arrested for taking a vehicle without permission, public drunkeness, breaking and entering, assault, resisting arrest, you name it, he probably did it. He finally got sent to Juvenile Hall when he was sixteen for being high behind the wheel of a stolen car – which didn’t help him as much as you’d hope because it was only six years later that he died behind the wheel of a different car that he drove into a tree. He was burned beyond recognition. His father had been killed driving over a cliff while drunk only a few months before Nathan died in almost the same way.”

Martin grimaced. “Nice family.”

Samantha saw Danny glance at him briefly but he didn’t say anything and it was left to her to say – a little more tartly than she had intended: “Even poor white trash have a right not to be kidnapped, Martin.”

He gave her a hurt look. “I was just thinking that Mary Ryan can’t seem to catch a break, can she? She finally gets away from what sounds like the start in life from hell and marries a decent guy and then she loses her child. And now this.”

Danny touched him gently on the arm. “Which is why we’re going to find her. Cause that’s what we do.”

“And we don’t even need a secret identity or special costume,” Sam murmured as she reached for the next pile of files.

Martin swallowed the last of his coffee and got up from her desk. His gaze was searching. “Are you going to be okay?”

She knew what he was asking; almost wishing she had never told him even as much as she had about what it had been like to come from a tiny town in Wisconsin. She gave him a smile brittle as
shattered glass and wondered if he could see all her yesterdays reflected in it. “Fine. And you should get moving. Jack’s not going to be happy if you two are late arriving in Unity. According to Viv, he hates that town and the feeling is entirely mutual so he’s not going to be in the best of tempers.”

Danny smirked at her triumphantly. “We get to drive a Humvee.”

“It’s still a three and a half hour drive from here, especially as you boys don’t know how to drive in the snow.”

“I’m from Washington,” Martin pointed out. “We have snow there.”

Breaking it to him gently, she said: “Not really relevant, as no way is Danny letting anyone but him drive the big shiny Humvee.” For Danny’s sake she phrased it that way instead of saying ‘No way is Danny going to let you risk your neck behind the wheel in this kind of weather’, and if Danny drove at faster than forty miles an hour the whole way there she would be amazed. She hoped Jack had factored in Danny’s heightened anxiety where Martin was concerned when calculating their journey time or he was going to be extremely ill tempered with worry by the time they arrived.

She watched Martin catch up with Danny and point out in vain that he knew everything there was to know about driving in the snow only to have Danny give him a pitying smile. She remembered all too clearly how annoying it had been to have people hovering over her, giving her covert glances, letting her know they didn’t feel she was ready to be back in the field yet, so she waited until Martin and Danny were out of sight and earshot before she said quietly: “Drive safely.”

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Standing in an exam room in the Wayne Memorial Hospital in Honesdale, Jack Malone assessed Doctor Hughes with the skill of long practice; forty-seven, he would say at a guess, hair starting to recede like a shore before the tide, deep-set eyes, hard-working, possibly over-worked but conscientious and thorough. They had been talking for a few minutes now and he had seen no sign of the man having anything to hide.

“So, the contractions had stopped by the time you saw Mary?” Viv pressed.

“Completely. She didn’t seem to be in any discomfort.”

Viv looked a little incredulous. “At eight and a half months pregnant? Because I remember feeling as if I had accidentally swallowed a fire hydrant for about the last six weeks.”

Doctor Hughes had the grace to smile. “No more than the usual discomfort that anyone feels in the last few weeks of pregnancy when there is eight pounds of infant pressing on one’s bladder.”

“You didn’t keep her in?” Jack asked.

“I wanted to but she seemed embarrassed by the whole incident. She apologized for taking up my time. I suggested that she let me run some tests but her blood pressure was normal, there was no sign of any contractions, she didn’t have a noticeable backache. She felt she’d already caused enough fuss and said she just wanted to get home. She said she’d been so flustered when she left the house that she wasn’t sure if she’d left a note for her husband and she wanted to call him right away.”

That sounded like the Mary Ryan he remembered; that woman had put more effort into going unnoticed than anyone he had ever met, it was as if she craved invisibility the way a neglected child craved affection, as if the world could never quite be quiet enough for her; as if she could
never be too still.

“Do you remember what time you finished your examination?”

“I saw my next patient at seventeen after one.”

“Did you give Mary a prescription?”

“No. I asked her if she needed anything and she said she was fine. She seemed to be in perfect health and she was adamant she didn’t want to stay in so I let her go with a warning about coming straight back if she had any other symptoms.”

“So, you weren’t worried about her?” Viv enquired.

Hughes shook his head. “No. I wasn’t sure there had even been contractions as such, maybe a touch of indigestion or the baby being a little restless. She really did appear to be in perfect health.”

“And you got the impression that she was going to call her husband next?”

“Yes. She asked me where the payphones were and I asked the nurse on duty to direct her to the one just down the hall.”

Jack managed a smile. “Thank you, you’ve been very helpful. Would it be possible to talk to the nurse?”

“I’ll have her paged for you.”

As they walked towards the payphone, Jack said: “One doctor down, only seventeen nurses, five receptionists, and two dozen other possible witnesses to interview. Why didn’t I send Danny and Martin to do this job?”

Viv gave him a glance of mild amusement. “Because you wanted to be on the spot. As for the ‘abduction’ – it could have been a set up if Mary wanted to get away from her husband – wait until he’s out of the house then call neighbors who she knew would bring her to the hospital, go through the motions of a medical examination, while always intending to make a run for it.”

“That would be my assumption, too, except for the disappearance of her daughter. I’m worried someone may have targeted her. In the same way it could have been the only chance for a wife who lives an isolated life to get free of a controlling husband, it was also the only chance for someone to snatch her.”

“I could never figure her out, you know, Mary Ryan,” Viv admitted. “All those times we talked with her and sat with her and told her we were hoping for news, I never knew what she was thinking. In this job we get so good at reading people, and she was still a blank page to me.”

Jack remembered those Madonna eyes, the sadness, the resignation; Mary Ryan pouring them both another cup of tea in that neat kitchen that hadn’t been updated in a decade; gaze going to her daughter’s photograph as if she already knew she was gone forever and her loss was no more than she deserved. “I remember thinking she was too good to be true – the perfect wife, the perfect mother who lived only for her daughter; it was as if she had no ambitions for herself, nothing she wanted, nothing she hoped for. I felt there had to be a secret life somewhere even if it was only in her head.”

“That whole family…” Viv shook her head. “There was something going on there we never got close to.”
That was exactly how Jack thought of it, too. He had spent so many hours in that dark house in the
dark woods, asking questions and listening to the answers and feeling all the time that something
significant was being kept from him. He thought of the place as cobwebbed with secrets, strands
veiling every corner; a double failure, not just their inability to find Margaret but also their failure
to read all that secret history that every family harbored. He had felt as if the Ryans were a puzzle
box and he and Viv had never found the catch; perhaps if they had done they would have found
Margaret.

“I’m telling myself it’s an advantage that we have all the background we gathered last time,” he
offered.

Viv sighed. “Yeah, I’m telling myself that, too, Jack.”

“Maybe we didn’t dig deep enough. Maybe we were one piece of information away from working
out what it was we were missing. I just got so hung up on thinking Ryan was an abusive
husband…”

He was still angry with himself for that mistake. They had wasted so much time when the local PD
had already taken a day too long calling them in. Something about Ryan had rung all his alarm
bells and he’d convinced himself the man was molesting his daughter or beating his wife. It had
turned out he was doing neither or had found a way to beat the polygraph because those questions
had been asked and answered in brief, dismissive negatives. They had wasted time pursuing the
alibi of an innocent man and Margaret had been lost, presumably forever. Later, when he’d
analyzed his own reactions to Ryan he had realized, too late, that it had been an alpha male clash.
He was used to being treated with a certain amount of deference himself; most people tended to
respect men in authority who worked for the government and carried loaded guns; Ryan had seen
Jack Malone as someone paid for by his taxes who wasn’t doing his job. The same attitude that
irked him every time he had dealings with Victor Fitzgerald had irked him with Ryan, too, this
feeling that the world should revolve the way they wanted it to because they had more money and
a longer family tree than most of the people they encountered.

A background check had revealed that the Ryans had owned that farm in Wisconsin for six
generations. In Indemnity they were people of importance; everyone knew them, their custom was
always good, their wishes were respected. Even in these new surroundings, Jack had noticed that
people talked about Ryan with respect, regarded him as a man of importance.

“You were sure Ryan was an abusive husband, I was sure it was his money that made him a
target.” Viv shrugged. “If you were on a wild goose chase for non-existent bruises, I waited and
waited for that ransom note that never came.”

“I know.” Jack grimaced. “I was hoping for it, too. That meant it wasn’t a pedophile, that it was
someone with an interest in keeping her alive. You know those woods are so wild and so empty,
she could have been buried ten miles from the house, or her body dropped into one of those
abandoned mine shafts, and we’d never know.”

“The dogs didn’t find anything,” Viv reminded him. “Maybe she ran away, after all.”

“If she’d been the age she would be now, then I might buy it – possibly. But how many seven year
olds can successfully disappear without anyone finding them? Everyone who knew her described
her as naive and innocent. A quiet, obedient girl with a strict but loving father, who, like her
mother, tended to do as she was told.”

Viv glanced at him. “That always bothered you, didn’t it?”
Jack stood in front of the payphone and gazed at it until Mary came into focus for him. He pictured her in that worn blue coat of hers, hair the exact same shade as her daughter’s dark plaits, placing the handset back in the receiver, stepping back and then fading away before his eyes.

“I have daughters. ‘Quiet and obedient’ is not how I’d describe them. I’m not sure that’s how kids are meant to be. Or wives. Not that I’m claiming to be an expert. Ryan may not have hit them or raised his voice to them but I think he demanded so much from them they never had time to think whether or not he had the right to keep asking it; I think he stifled them with the weight of all his expectations.”

Viv said: “You know – given the way Martin turned out there are people who might argue that Victor Fitzgerald did a pretty good job as a father.”

“I’m not even going to pretend to follow you.”

“You follow me perfectly. There isn’t a right way to raise a child and you can’t judge anyone’s performance until you look at the adult and see how he or she turned out. Margaret was a nice girl, everyone agreed on that. And Mary didn’t exactly have the best start in life. She said it herself – Ryan rescued her from a drunken father who used to hit her and her brother whenever he had too much booze or not enough. To her, she said, Ryan was her knight in shining armor.”

Jack sighed, remembering. “It was the way she said it, Viv. Like it was a mistake. Like it was a delusion. Like the fairytales always lie.”

He turned to find the nurse had arrived to answer their questions, pointing out the phone Mary had used – Viv arranged for the numbers called from it during the time Mary had been in the hospital to be faxed straight to Samantha – telling them how she had seemed when on the phone – her fingers had shaken a little, she had seemed excited – how she had watched her walk out to wait for her husband; how she hadn’t thought of her again until Ryan arrived and started looking for his wife.

Viv was checking the timeline again. “It feels like a set up to me. I don’t think it was chance that Mary came here today.”

Jack had a lot of respect for Viv’s instincts. He trusted his own for the same reason he trusted hers; they were born of experience. No one could really succeed in this job unless they learned how to read people and read the patterns in their behavior. And their instincts were always going to be clouded by their own experiences, he recognized that; men like Ryan were going to set off his alarm bells even when they were innocent, and Sam was always going to think any teenage girl was innocent and any forty-year old man was probably guilty of something; just as Danny thought every child was salvageable, however damaged, and Martin had to be watched closely when the cases took a turn too dark because he bottled up everything inside while being as sensitive as an over-strung piano wire. Out of them all, Viv was the one who carried the least baggage and was the least inclined to view the world through the flawed lens of her own imperfections. That was why he trusted her judgment most of all – sometimes even more than his own.

“She didn’t seem the type to run off to me.” He looked at her sideways. “She was so spiritless, that was why I was convinced he’d broken her somehow.”

“Perhaps life broke her before she even met him.” Viv gazed up at the security cameras. “It’s too much of a coincidence, Jack. She called him and then she walked out here and gave herself a three hour start.”

“To go where? To do what?” He liked the idea of her making a dash for freedom, away from that
dark house in the looming forest, away from a man who was always going to set his teeth on edge. But he suspected that the only sanctuary that Mary Ryan would ever seek from her sorrows would be to the quiet of chill black water or the fiery eye of an oncoming train.

Viv blew on her hands as the snow gusted down on them gently as a benediction. “What wouldn’t you do to get your kids back, Jack? If anyone ever took Reggie, everything I know, everything I’ve ever learned in this job, would go straight out of the window.”

Jack was already ordering the tapes from the security cameras to be sent to the office. There was enough there to keep the tech guys busy for a while, looking through grainy footage of pregnant women while hoping for a match, and all the while he was seeing Mary Ryan sitting in her kitchen in that stone and wood house with no glimmer of hope in her eyes.

His breath caught and he stopped in mid-stride. “That was it.”

“What?” Viv put her hand over the phone and he realized belatedly she was talking to Sam.

“Most people wait moment by moment for good news, but she never expected to see her daughter again. She was already like one of the bereaved. That’s why I thought it was Ryan and that she knew it was him. She acted like someone who didn’t have any hope.”

With her gaze fixed on him, Viv said: “Sam, I need to call you back. Jack…?”

“That was why I thought Ryan beat her, not because of the bruises she didn’t have, and which the school physician and the gym teacher told us Margaret didn’t have either, but because Mary didn’t have any hope.”

He could see Viv remembering, turning over old impressions in the light of new perceptions. “Jack, you’re right – Mary thought her daughter was dead, but you know what – I was waiting for a ransom note because I’m almost certain Ryan believed she was alive. Whatever Mary believed, Ryan thought his daughter was taken for his money. When that ransom note didn’t arrive, he was as baffled as I was.”

And he realized abruptly that Viv was right, too. Ryan had never shown a moment’s evasion, never even seemed aware of his wife’s quiet despair, because he had been angry with hope and frustration, snatching up the phone when it rang, hurrying to look in the mailbox each morning. He hadn’t done it, after all. For all the warning bells he’d rung in the mind of Jack Malone, for all that he might be a man capable of murder; he had believed his daughter was alive as fervently as his wife had believed that she was never going to see her again.

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Samantha Spade picked up the fax that had just come through and scanned it for the Ryans’ number. There it was, at 13:37, just as it said on the Ryans’ phone records, a three minute call placed from the hospital pay phone to the Ryans’ phone. The call before it had been placed to a cell phone and it had lasted seventeen minutes. That could explain the delay in Mary using the phone. She could have been waiting while someone else used it. She called Viv and asked her if she could ask the nurse if there had been anyone using the phone when she had shown Mary to it.

“Already asked her,” Viv explained. “She said no one was using it.”

“So, the call made at 13:20 could have been made by Mary before she called her husband?”

“What’s the number that she called…?” Viv had to raise her voice as she and Jack clearly went out through a door.
Sam could hear the unmistakable sounds of the town replacing those of the hospital, no quiet paging of doctors and nurses, the sound of trolleys being wheeled, someone in the background asking just how long his wife was going to have to wait before anyone could see her, to the sound of traffic noise. She gave her the number, Viv repeating the digits after her, and listened to the sound of Jack dialing. She almost jumped out of her skin when his dialing was greeted by the unmistakable sound of a cell phone ringing. “Viv, is that…?”

“It’s coming from the dumpster,” Viv told her, sounding as shocked as Sam felt.

Sam listened to rustling and some cursing from Jack as he made contact with something he clearly didn’t much care for and then the ringing was much louder. “I’ve got it,” she heard Jack say breathlessly. “Whoever Mary Ryan called before she phoned her husband, I’m holding their cell phone right now.”

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The nearest town to where the Ryans lived was Unity, a place so small that Jack wasn’t sure it even featured on the maps. It certainly lived up to its name; which meant that he was about as welcome here as a plague toxin. As far as this town was concerned he was always going to be the big bad G-Man who had wasted time questioning Ryan instead of finding his lost child. But although people didn’t much like co-operating with him, they really did want Mary found and for that reason were overcoming their dislike of him to help as much as they could. Despite the slanting snow gusting down around him and close-to-freezing temperature, every telegraph pole had a poster with Mary’s picture on it. That was one of the benefits of small town crimes – everyone took it to heart, everyone cared. A pregnant woman who had already lost her child to an unexplained abduction was not exactly a hard sell in the sympathy stakes, and Ryan had made a lot of donations to local charities and churches in the twelve years they’d been living in this area.

This evening the whole town was tinkling with ice and snow, not enough of it salted to prevent the roads ridging with gray-brown slush. Darkness was coming in and carrying more cold with it; up in the mountains where Frank Ryan was waiting for his wife to come home, the local PD quite probably his only company, it would be even colder than here, the air bracing itself for another freeze. It was supposed to be a little warmer tomorrow, not necessarily a good thing as there was more snow forecast to dump itself all over the ice that was going to form tonight. He hoped Danny had taken in what he’d told him about renting a vehicle that could tackle that kind of terrain. Martin at least had his hiking experience and time logged in those all outdoor activities summer camps rich kids got sent to if their grades were high enough for even the most demanding parents to let them off studying calculus during their vacation. Thinking about Victor Fitzgerald, Jack wondered if Martin’s grades had ever been considered truly ‘high enough’. Depressing to think that Martin had probably known the best parenting out of any of the five of them – Jack didn’t know enough about Elena yet to consider her background something he could judge – and yet every day Jack saw him chilled a little by the long shadow his father cast.

He was still slightly uneasy about sending Martin and Danny up to deal with Ryan, and yet couldn’t have said exactly why. Martin had a reasonable knack with difficult people, he could suck it up and keep it polite, and, even if Danny was a hothead sometimes, he was also instinctively empathetic in a way that only Viv could match. He would pick up on things that Martin might miss, but he could also get ignited by them. Jack would remind him before they set off to keep himself in check – however much Ryan treated them like a couple of green kids better suited to simonizing his car than finding his missing wife.

The cell phone in the dumpster had been stolen out of a car in Albany two days before. Nothing else had been taken and they were waiting on the security footage from the apartment block now.
Jack had ordered the local PD to dust the car for prints, just in case, even though it was almost certainly too late now and any prints would have been obliterated. The cell phone itself had been wiped clean. By not taking the car or anything else that was in it, the crime had remained so small as to go unnoticed right up until the moment when it had been used in the commission of a possible kidnapping, by which time it was probably a stone cold lead on a road to nowhere. As if they didn’t already have enough of those.

Looking at his watch for the fifth time, Jack Malone thought that it would probably be a lot better for his blood pressure if he were allowed to act out unreasonably about Danny and Martin being nearly an hour later than he estimated it should have taken them to join him and Viv in Unity – especially when there was all that ice and snow on the roads. Viv was refusing to get with that particular program, much to his annoyance, and being maddeningly calm.

“They were picking up another car for the trip up to the Ryans’ place, Jack, it may have taken longer than they thought. Or they could have got lost…”

“No, Danny called me as they were leaving.” Jack looked at his watch for what was now the sixth time. “That was more than four hours ago. And I told them to merge onto 1-84 West and then take Exit 30 to Porter’s Lake. It’s not exactly brain surgery.”

“Well, it’s snowing. The traffic is going to be slow.”

“I’m just saying it’s three and a half hour drive, that’s all, and they should be here by now. And they can’t drive up to Ryan’s tonight, not now, not on that track, they’ll have to go tomorrow, when it’s light and they can see what they’re doing.”

“You know the local sheriff’s office would take them and then they wouldn’t have to drive on that road and your blood pressure could return to normal.”

“It could undermine their authority with Ryan and I want them to interview him alone, not with the friendly neighborhood sheriff – who, as you may remember, likes Ryan and doesn’t like us – drinking coffee in the kitchen. And there’s nothing wrong with my blood pressure.”

“Well, there’s going to be if you don’t learn to relax a little. They’re only forty minutes later than they should be. Maybe they stopped off for something to eat. You do want them to eat, don’t you?”

“In a gesture of astonishing generosity I was planning to buy us all take out.”

“And did you tell them that?”

He glared at her. “That patient, reasonable thing you’ve got going isn’t fooling anyone, you know. I know you only do it annoy me.” After a pause he added conversationally: “I couldn’t help noticing that your name doesn’t appear anywhere in that book Admin is running any more.”

“Well, fancy that.” Vivian’s face was an unperturbed blank.

“You didn’t threaten those good people, did you?”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because I know for a fact that there were pretty good odds to be had on you and I having an affair before Thanksgiving.”

Still looking seraphic as an angel, Viv shrugged. “I may possibly have mentioned that it would be
better for their long term health prospects if they made some minor alterations to some of their bets.”

“You didn’t think the rest of us might like not to be the subject of tawdry gossip and speculation, too?”

Viv glanced up at him with her best ‘don’t try it on with me’ expression. “Jack, I know for a fact that you have twenty bucks on ‘Danny and Martin having sex while undercover’.”

“Oh, come on. It was ten to one odds, and Martin’s an easy drunk.”

“Did Sam tell you that?”

“It’s in his personnel file, right next to ‘relentless over-achiever’ and ‘questionable dress sense’.”

Viv nodded up the street from their motel. “I think that’s them now.”

The two younger men were obliviously chatting as they pulled in neatly next to Jack’s car. They were driving a rented Dodge Humvee that looked more appropriate to tackling the prairie or possibly an African safari and Jack wondered if he’d overdone it a little in stressing the roughness of the road that led up to the Ryans’ place. Still, with so much more snow forecast, it was better to be safe than sorry. He noticed that Danny was driving and wondered if that was just the way it had fallen out or if Danny was still a little PTSDy about Martin driving a car they were in just in case someone ambushed it and riddled it with machine gun fire. Jack at least liked to think they were deep in discussion about the case, but as Danny switched off the engine and opened the door he could hear Martin saying: “…I just don’t think I’d want to live for three hundred years if I had to live on the first floor of a five story walk up.”

“Well, I don’t think you’re accurately factoring in the plus value of the drinking the blood of virgins…”

“Glad you boys could join us,” Jack told them. “Where the hell have you been?”

Martin looked as if he were probably guilty of something even if he wasn’t sure exactly what. “We missed our turn off.”

“Where?”

“We forgot to merge, ended up driving too far on the Jersey City Turnpike.”

“We may have been a little distracted,” Danny admitted.

Martin turned to Viv – whom he evidently considered the more likely to be sympathetic – and said: “A bunch of co-eds flashed us from a convertible.”

She looked only mildly surprised. “In this weather? Brave girls.”

Jack felt his amusement in danger of overturning his irritation. “Did they perchance also make lewd remarks?”

“They did.” Danny jumped down from the jeep with a flourish, pressing the button for the central locking in a way that suggested he was going to have to be surgically separated from those keys. “I told them I hoped they didn’t kiss their mothers with those mouths, so they slowed down, cut us on the inside, and flashed Martin, too. You don’t even want to know what they said to him – but there are pimps out there right now still blushing.”
Jack glanced at Martin in what was definitely amusement now. “Are you recovered from that encounter or are you going to need counseling before you can eat dinner?”

“They didn’t just flash us with their…” Martin explained. “They weren’t wearing any kind of underwear…anywhere.”

Danny nodded solemnly. “We’re talking a full on Sharon Stone moment here, Jack.”

Viv glanced across at Jack. “I have to admire their pioneer spirit. Even at that age I’d have been wanting something thermal for this weather.”

Jack shook his head. “You boys had better have at least some positive information for me if you want dessert.”

“Just let Martin geek up in the motel room and we can pool what we have,” Danny said.

Jack watched Martin roll his eyes as he unpacked his laptop and he and Danny headed off to their twin room, bantering at one another good-naturedly in a way he had thought gone for good along with Martin ever getting to take another pain-free breath.

“They look well, don’t they?” Viv offered at his side.

“They look an hour late to me,” Jack retorted. “And in Martin’s case in need of a shave.”

“You know you love them really.”

Jack could hardly hide his smile of relief as he realized that Viv was right and they really did look fine; they were acting like Danny and Martin again. “I know no such thing.”

As he watched Danny waving Martin in ahead of him after he’d unlocked the door with exaggerated courtesy and Martin rolling his eyes, he tried to see them through Ryan’s eyes. Viewed that way they suddenly seemed a lot more physically insubstantial than he usually thought of them.

“Do those two look kind of young to you? You know – if you were seeing them for the first time?”

Viv gazed after them in some confusion. “They look like Danny and Martin to me, Jack. And, no, they don’t look particularly young. Why?”

“Do you remember Ryan saying something about young men these days needing more discipline and how he was all for them introducing the draft again as he thought five years in the army was what every boy needed?”

“I don’t think he meant it for people like Martin and Danny, Jack. I think he probably meant unemployed young black men that he didn’t like wandering around unchecked because they didn’t have them where he came from…”

That caught him off his guard, her words and the bitterness, and he turned to her in surprise. “That’s what you thought?”

He felt wrong-footed by his own lack of observation. He thought he was pretty good at picking up things like that but, of course, he was never going to be as aware of the small signs of prejudice that Viv was. After the hundred and fiftieth time of seeing them, Viv would be pretty much an expert.

“It wasn’t what you thought?”

“I thought he just had a bug up his ass about every guy under the age of forty not treating him as if
he were Ryan of Ryan’s Farm, proud descendent of six generations of manly men from Montana.”

“Wisconsin,” Viv corrected absently. “And, trust me, you can’t do that accent.”

“Maybe you and I should go. We have the history with him.”

“It’s because we have the history with him that we’re not the right people to go, Jack, and you
know that. Last time around we missed whatever clues we should have picked up on to find
Margaret. It’s time for some fresh eyes.”

“Okay, but remind me to give Danny the lecture about being very polite.”

“You’ve already given him the lecture, and Martin, too.”

“Well, in Danny’s case I’m going to give it to him twice.”

As he followed them into the motel room, he could feel the air bracing itself around him, that
indrawn breath of a world about to get colder, and tried to tell himself that was what had just made
him shiver.

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Viv watched in a way she hoped – without much optimism – was more disapproving than
indulgent as Danny pointedly pushed the greasy carton from Martin’s cheeseburger further from
his side of the coffee table on which all their papers were spread out. “I think I liked you better
when you had an eating disorder.”

“You try a few months where the only thing you can digest that doesn’t hurt is apple sauce and see
how much junk food you have a craving for.”

“Boys…” Jack warned them. “Not that I don’t appreciate the cabaret after dinner but I need to
know where we are.”

Danny reached over the pizza carton Jack and Viv were sharing. “One of the questions we’ve all
been asking is – did Mary Ryan leave her cell phone behind because she was in a genuine hurry
and forgot it or because it was part of a pre-arranged flight and she didn’t want to be carrying
anything traceable?”

“And the answer is…” Martin swallowed another mouthful of cheeseburger and pressed the Enter
button on his laptop. The printer began to disgorge paper. “She doesn’t own one. She never has.
She doesn’t have a driver’s license, or a bank account in her own name, or an ATM card, or a
credit card, and she isn’t a co-signatory on her husband’s account either. She is entirely dependent
upon him financially for everything and has been the whole time she’s been married to him.”

“Still?” Jack demanded. “She told me that they just hadn’t got around to adding her to the account.
I thought it was odd then. The cell phone is news to me, though. I got the impression she’d lost her
old one and was in between them last time. But you can see why I was suspicious of the guy – there
were so many red flags about that relationship.”

“He certainly seems to like his wife cut off from everyone but him.” Martin handed over the pages
of print out.

Jack glanced over it and gritted his teeth, all the old suspicions coming back again. “So, she has no
way of driving anywhere, no money to pay for a bus ticket, no way of obtaining funds from a bank
account, and they used to live on a very isolated farm.”
‘A thousand acres of nothing in the middle of nowhere’.

“And now they live in a very isolated house at the end of a very bad road.” Viv pulled the photograph out of the file.

“Exactly.” Jack nodded. “There are a lot of remote properties and no near neighbors. It’s not unusual for people to own eighty or a hundred acres of rock outcroppings and mature woods and make a partial living renting out a cabin for hunters or hikers in the season. It’s very, very private. A man could pretty much do what he wanted.”

“Isn’t this what happened last time?” Danny put in. “Didn’t you spend so much time chasing after Ryan that you didn’t find who really took the girl?”

Jack grimaced and Viv thought Danny could have phrased that a little more tactfully. Nevertheless: “He’s right, Jack.”

“But it’s creepy all the same.” Martin was still typing as he talked. “In this day and age, most women aren’t dependent on cash handouts from their husbands to buy groceries.”

“You’ve checked his account?”

“His income comes from interest on investments he made when he sold the farm. There was no mortgage on the property, it was prime farmland and he got top market price for it. With the money from the sale he could have afforded a place that was in Lew Beach but he bought a hundred and sixty acre parcel, mostly made up of what the realtors call ‘billy goat land’ – very rocky, hilly and wooded, only accessible by one bad road, in Sullivan County. It’s generally used for hunting, not living in all the year round, and most of it only cost him around two thousand dollars an acre, which, for the Catskills, is a steal. Most of the investments he made have doubled in value. Anyone who read about him selling the farm, or even who read the press clippings when Margaret went missing would know he was a very wealthy man. Here.” He hit ‘Print’ again and the printer spewed out Ryan’s financial records in black and white columns of figures. “But there’s no evidence of any unusual payments going out or coming in either in the past few months or back when Margaret was taken.”

Jack sighed. “So, we have evidence of a controlling husband from whom a wife could possibly want to escape, and equal evidence that kidnapping aforementioned wife could be a very lucrative venture but no evidence of a ransom being paid? Great.”

Vivian set the pictures of Mary and Margaret side by side, thinking how alike they were. Margaret would have been taller than her mother, that was the only contribution Ryan’s genes seemed to have added to the mix; in every other way Margaret looked like her mother, and seemed to have inherited all her temperament from her as well. The teachers had described her as shy and studious, a girl who never missed a lesson and always handed in her homework on time.

“At the hospital, a nurse saw Mary hang up the phone after talking to her husband and go and sit down in the waiting room, but she didn’t pick up a magazine, she just sat there. And an orderly thought he saw Mary look at her watch and then go outside about fifteen minutes later.”

Jack checked his notebook even though Viv was sure he had it all memorized. His father might have succumbed to Alzheimer’s, but there was certainly nothing wrong with Jack’s mind. It could make steel traps look rusty. “Which was two hours and forty-five minutes before her husband could arrive to pick her up, but it was assumed she was going shopping and would come back later.”
Danny looked up. “Mary mentioned her husband was coming for her? Because, I’m thinking right now we only have Ryan’s word for what passed between them.”

Viv shook her head. “The same nurse – Ellen O’Hara – overheard a little of the conversation and it confirmed Ryan’s version, and when Mary put the phone down she told Ellen that she hated to be a nuisance and it was a long way for her husband to have to drive just because she’d overreacted. Ellen asked her if her husband minded and Mary said that he’d told her he’d rather she was safe than sorry and Ellen said he was quite right, and then she went off to see a patient and the last she saw of Mary she was sitting down in the waiting room.”

“I think we have what happened after she went outside.” Martin clicked on the screen and turned it so Viv and Jack can see. “Sam sent through the footage from the security camera outside the hospital. We think this is Mary.”

“‘Think’…?” Viv was hoping for something a little more concrete than that but as the grainy image started to play she saw Martin’s problem. The woman had kept her back to the security camera and her head lowered as she walked outside. But she had dark hair and was certainly pregnant and Viv thought she recognized her, not just build and coloring, but something in the defeated set of her shoulders. As they watched, a man so bundled up in a hat, scarf, and greatcoat that he was visible only as two eyes and a nose, came up to Mary and touched her arm. She jumped nervously and turned, there was a pause as the two stared at one another, almost as if the tape had frozen, and then the two of them moved off together.

Even playing it four times over, Viv couldn’t see if there was a gun or decide whether or not Mary had gone willingly. “But whoever he is I think she knew him.”

Jack was still watching the replay fixedly. “That’s the best shot we have of this guy? Because he could be anyone. We need more footage. We have to see what happened next. Did she get into a car with him? Someone must have seen something. I want the locals interviewing everyone within a mile of that hospital.”

Danny nodded. “They’re already on it, Jack. They’ve been on it since she went missing.”

Viv watched the abduction or meeting again. Build for build – as much as one could tell when comparing two tiny snatches of grainy footage and on both occasions the suspect was wearing several layers of bulky clothing – Mary’s abductor could have been the same man who had last been seen with Margaret. “I still like the third option.”

Jack was watching it too, looking for details he had missed. “The ‘lured away with the promise of information about Margaret’ option?”

“We know how vulnerable the parents of missing children are. Chet Collins could have gotten himself into a whole heap of trouble plenty of times if you hadn’t been there to look out for him. What if someone told Mary they had information about Margaret but that she wasn’t to tell her husband? Ryan’s not the kind of guy to sit at home and do what a kidnapper or a possible kidnapper tells him; he’d want to be out there breaking the guy’s neck. Mary may have agreed to this meeting by herself.”

“What would persuade her to do something so dangerous?” Even as Jack asked the question she knew he knew the answer. “Okay, dumb question.”

“Maybe she had some hope after all, Jack,” Viv offered.

Jack’s dark eyes were angry and intent. “And maybe it’s going to get her killed.” He turned to
Danny, “We need all incoming and outgoing phone calls to the Ryans’ house in the past few months and get me the name of the mailman or woman who delivers to that address. I need to see him or her as soon as possible.”

Martin looked at his watch. “It’s ten after ten.”

“And…?”

Martin exchanged a brief look with Danny that reminded Viv a little of the looks Reggie and Marcus would exchange when she came home bad tempered after a long hard day, before saying obediently: “I’m on it.”

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Samantha still felt as if she were engaged in a jigsaw puzzle in which only half the pieces were present but, if this were a landscape, she now had a reasonable amount of sky and clouds, and even a smattering of treetops. She felt wired with too much caffeine and was missing having another agent to bounce ideas off. She had almost called Elena before she remembered how selfish that would be. The last thing anyone wanted when they were home with the flu and a temperature of a hundred and three and had a sick kid to look after was a work colleague ringing up at midnight to talk about a case.

But this one was getting to her, this white rabbit of a case, fleeting and fantastical, and likely to lead one astray. Usually when one started digging a few things were revealed, tantalizing fragments, some of it significant, some of it fools’ gold panned from the rich silt of irrelevant information, a glittering distraction that wasted hours or sometimes even days. But this one led on and on. Just not to Margaret. She was still a dead end.

One chilly February evening when the nights were dark even as the children were heading home from school, a car had pulled up by the bus stop and a man had asked for directions. Margaret, who was shy but obedient, had gone over when he asked her directly to help him read his map. Wiser, more cynical children had hung back. Margaret had pointed out something on the map to him, he had thanked her and possibly murmured something in a voice too low for anyone else to hear. Margaret had come back to the bus stop. The bus had pulled up and she had been the last in the line. No one had looked back to see if she had gotten on but the bus driver swore that every child waiting at the bus stop when he opened his doors had climbed on. Margaret had been behind Heather and Phoebe when they had seen the bus approaching; Phoebe remembered turning to say that here it was at last, and Margaret had been behind her then. In the jostling to climb aboard no one had looked back and certainly when the bus had reached her stop, Margaret had not been on it. None of the children had gotten a good look at the man in the car that had spoken to Margaret and all confirmed that he had driven off before the bus had arrived. He had never come forward despite repeated requests for him to do so. No one had seen his license plate. The girls hadn’t even agreed on the color of his car, or the make, although two of them thought it was a dark-colored sedan, one thought it was blue, and the other black. An hour later, fifty miles west of Honesdale, a gas station security camera had shown a man in an overcoat stopping to buy a cheeseburger which he had heated in the microwave and then carried out to the car. He had paid cash. Just visible, sitting in the passenger seat of the car was a girl who looked very like Margaret. Ryan had said that Margaret’s favorite food was a cheeseburger but she was only allowed one on special occasions at home. Neither she, the man in the overcoat, or the car had been spotted on any other security tapes or ever definitely sighted again.

A couple of the girls at Margaret’s school had said that on the day she went missing she had been excited and distracted, as if she had known something was going to happen, the teachers had said
she had seemed exactly the same as usual. In the end no one had been able to draw any firm conclusions.

Sam had been over everything Jack and Viv had done in the case and as far as she could see they had left nothing undone. But if Margaret was a case so cold it gave the potential investigator frostbite, Mary was less than twenty-four hours missing and still someone they may be able to save. And Mary’s past was not the same as Margaret’s. She hadn’t been born in the Catskills and grown up in a beautiful if isolated house in the woods – she had been born in Wisconsin. She had grown up in a trailer with a mother who had struggled with an unhappy marriage, grinding poverty, and ill health, and then died, and a father who was an abusive, unemployable drunk, whose children only had a break from his cruelty when he was in prison doing time for vehicular manslaughter, and Mary hadn’t moved to the city or run away from that house, she had been Saved, not by Jesus, but by Marriage.

Five minutes of reading about Mary Ryan née Gallagher’s early life and Sam had felt the need to go and find a window that opened and drag into her lungs some gulps of wintry air. On some level, she suspected, Jack thought all fathers were inadequate bastards who would fail their children somehow, and on some level, she suspected she agreed with him. It was strange that Danny, whose father had been the worst bastard of all of them, didn’t think like that, even now. It was hard to know with Viv. Sam suspected her childhood hadn’t been easy but Viv had made sure that Reggie’s was. She had married a good man and brought up a good son, but she never made it look effortless, she let her friends know that it took work; let Jack know that it was the little decisions he made every day that would decide how his children turned out.

She knew they all carried their own baggage; on a bad day, Martin judged the poor as if they were exotic zoo animals he had never glimpsed in their natural habitat. There had been times in the past when he was so unconsciously complacent about the benefits life had handed him that she wanted to shake him until his perfectly capped teeth rattled in his too-handsome head; times when she had wanted to shout at him for being a walking WASP experiment in selective breeding; the product of a few generations of good old fashioned elitism practiced by Fitzgeralads past of only marrying attractive people with money and making sure their descendents did too. And then when life had got too close to him, and reality started swooping in on him like a bird of prey, she had found herself wanting to protect him from it, after all.

It flared up every time there was a case like this. Every time she found herself sitting in a clapperboard house looking around at the dusty décor that made teenage girls yearn to be anywhere but here; every time they knocked on the door of another trailer or tenement or found themselves sifting through the wreckage of some destitute life. Then she found herself almost resenting Martin just because it was all so alien to him and yet so painfully familiar to her. She looked at the apartments of missing girls sometimes and could all too easily envisage her own belongings nesting here, her photograph slipped inside the mirror frame, her make up on the dresser. She knew Martin was always going to see these lives as Other, and, when he looked around in such fascination, he probably didn’t even judge them the way she assumed he was doing, she was probably imposing an expression of distaste. On some level she suspected she had let a few thoughtless remarks overshadow what she knew in her gut, that he was a good man and a compassionate one, and a friend whom she would always love, and it was no more his fault that he’d been raised with a silver spoon in his mouth than it was hers that she had been raised without one.

But she couldn’t help wondering if Martin was sitting out in Unity right now thinking how lucky Mary Ryan had been to be rescued from her inevitable birthright of poverty and misery, and offered marriage by a handsome, wealthy, well-bred man.
As she read through the file again, she found the name of the town niggling at her. Indemnity, Wisconsin. She had heard that name before, read it in a newspaper when growing up, more than once, and yet, statistically, the town was tiny and utterly insignificant. She turned back to the computer and began another search, this time leaving out Mary Ryan and looking instead for ‘Indemnity, Wisconsin’. The hits piled up at once and for a moment she felt a spark of excitement: murder after unsolved murder in the area around Mary Ryan’s home town, the bodies turning up in shallow graves and ditches, and then the images began to come into focus and her excitement turned to revulsion and pity. She hated the way death robbed the missing of their dignity; people with all those hopes and aspirations being reduced to something that had to be identified through dental records; threads of stringy flesh barely adhering to bleached bone, or the ones whose clothing was permeated with earth or mud or water, pale as dead fish, dried blood crusted on them, victims remembered forever only by a single grainy photograph on a newspaper that would the next day be blowing in a gutter or wrapped around a down and out to keep out the winter chill.

She looked at the dates and realized that some of the murders had taken place years before Mary was born. It did explain why the town name was familiar to her; she would have read about the killings in her own local paper while growing up, but there seemed little likelihood of these old unsolved murders of young male drifters being connected to the kidnap of a thirty-six year old woman now.

Samantha turned back to Mary’s file. She had requested the file on Mary’s father, Jake Gallagher, but the bare details were here. He had been a handsome man, going by his photograph, although he looked sullen and ill-tempered in the photographs, but the dark hair and slate blue eyes were striking. He had died in an automobile accident – appropriate given that he had killed a girl while drunk driving. Samantha stilled and turned back through his file. Killed a ‘girl’, not a woman, not a man. She turned the pages and there it was. Haley Stapleton, seven years old. Killed by Jack Gallagher who, after an all night bender, had plowed into the bus stop where the children were waiting for the school bus. It had been a miracle that only one girl had been killed, a miracle for the other children, a tragedy for the parents of Haley Stapleton. Gallagher had done six years for vehicular manslaughter.

Mary Ryan’s father had killed a girl the exact same age that Margaret Ryan had been at the time of her abduction.

Samantha snatched up the phone with fingers that trembled a little, waiting impatiently for it to ring once, twice, three times. Jack said: “Sam, it’s three in the morning.”

“What if it wasn’t a sex crime or a kidnapping for a ransom, Jack? What if it was revenge?”

“What if you tell me what you’ve got?”

She couldn’t help noticing that he didn’t sound remotely bleary or confused. “You weren’t asleep either, were you?”

“I may have been following up a few leads.”

“What leads?”

“There was a partial print on the car the cell phone was stolen from, and it matches with a girl called Clare Hope, a native of Indemnity. She has a record. Not extortion or kidnapping, but soliciting and possession, so she could have moved up into the big league by now. And she has a connection to Mary Ryan.”

“Are you going to tell me about it or just sit there playing hard to get?”
She could hear the laughter in his voice. “Clare Hope used to date Mary’s younger brother, Nathan Gallagher.”

“The one who died in the car accident?”

“The car accident in which the body inside it was burned beyond recognition. Apparently, although the kid was a bit of a waste of space, he and Mary were close, and she was devastated. She had a near-breakdown after his death and was put on every kind of anti-depressant. Ryan thought she’d do better in different surroundings. The whole new life in the Catskills was supposed to be a way of helping her get over it. I don’t like the guy but I never doubted that he loved his wife.”

“But now you’re wondering if it was really Nathan Gallagher’s body in that car?”

“It was assumed the body they found in the wreckage belonged to him because it was his car, but it wasn’t proven. And if it wasn’t him, not only is he alive and out there somewhere, he found a body to burn in his place, which means he’s probably capable of murder.” She could imagine him shrugging. “Or maybe I’m tired and I read too many cheap thrillers when I was growing up but either way I’ve ordered an exhumation and DNA analysis on his remains, just to check that it’s really his remains in that coffin. We have Mary’s on file from when Margaret went missing, and Margaret’s as well, from her toothbrush, so we should be able to get a positive ID.”

She saw the digger in the graveyard, men wrapped up against the cold as snow fell and the earth came away in frozen chunks, roots like bones in falls of soil between metal teeth. “And he had a connection with Clare Hope, who now has a proven connection with Mary’s disappearance.”

“Exactly. If Nathan Gallagher wasn’t dead, I’d be wondering if he had a part to play in this, so, bearing that in mind, I’d like to make sure he’s really out of the picture. What’s your theory?”

“I want to interview the deputy whose daughter was killed by Mary’s father.”

“Harry Stapleton?”

“His daughter was the same age when she was hit by that car as Margaret was when she was taken.”

“And you’re thinking he may have come looking for revenge?”

“It might explain why there was never a ransom asked, and it’s too much of a coincidence for me that Margaret Ryan and Haley Stapleton were the same age. But, Jack, are we absolutely certain a ransom was never paid?”

“Ryan was a suspect, remember? I had him watched around the clock and he never went near the bank, never went near an ATM, didn’t wire any money or withdraw any more than you would need to buy groceries.”

“Then I think I need to talk to Harry Stapleton.”

“Okay, I’ll put it in motion and contact the Indemnity PD to let them know you’re coming.”

She hesitated. “Did you know there was a serial killer who was based around Indemnity?”

“Yeah, I remember the sheriff telling me that it doesn’t do a lot for the real estate prices when the only thing people know about your town is that there’s a psycho living there. It didn’t help that they never caught the guy. The first killings were back in the 1950s, so he’d be a senior citizen by now if he hasn’t died of old age. My money is on him having died a few years back because there
hasn’t been a killing there in a long time. He was probably some pillar of the community that got a memorial service in the local church and a really nice headstone.”

“But they were all young men? Definitely not young girls or women of Mary’s age?”

“No, all young men. Mostly drifters that no one reported missing for years. The sheriff told me they didn’t even know what the final body count was; there could have been a lot more murdered than the ones they found. It’s a big state with a lot of wild country – lots of places to hide bodies. My guess is that it was another Spaulding, someone who seemed respectable and reasonable on the surface and didn’t ring any alarm bells, only instead of being into kids, he was into young men, and young men are a lot stupider than young women about accepting lifts from strangers.”

Sam looked at the newsprint on the screen. “Well, they never think they’re going to get abducted, beaten, raped, and murdered, do they? That’s just something that happens to women.”

“Personally, I’m all for it not happening to anyone. Earliest flight?”

Sam grimaced. “Earliest flight Viv can make too?”

“You want Viv as well?” There was a tense pause in which she hoped he wasn’t going to make her spell out exactly why she didn’t want to go back to small town Wisconsin by herself before Jack sighed. “Fine, you can have Viv. I’ll just hang out in Unity, by myself, getting snowed on.”

“You have Danny and Martin,” she pointed out.

“They’re going to be holding Ryan’s hand for me while practicing their best company manners.”

“One of those ‘don’t do what I do, do what I say’ lessons?”

“Very funny, and I hope it’s cold in Wisconsin.”

Samantha put down the phone before she said softly: “It always is.”

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He was dreaming about pills. He’d been doing so well, too, not needing them, moving further away from them, as if they were a shore and he was on a sailing ship with a good wind behind him, blowing him further and further away from the temptation they represented…and then they were, somehow, just sitting there in his bathroom cabinet in a white plastic bottle with his name typed onto it neatly. He didn’t even think about whether or not he needed them or wanted them; he just opened the bottle and threw them into his mouth, the bitterness of them on his tongue as familiar as a lover’s kiss…

“Martin…?”

At the sound of his name being barked, Martin blinked into consciousness, heart hammering as he thought that he had to get to the bathroom now to throw up the pills he’d just swallowed before they got into his system, only to realize that there were no pills and that Jack Malone was sitting on the side of his bed, already fully dressed and gazing at him intently. “Wake up.”

Martin rubbed his eyes, still tasting the bitterness of the dream-Vicodin and desperate to rinse out his mouth. “What time is it?”

“It’s five a.m. We got lucky with another piece of security camera footage. Mac is trying to do what he can to clean it up but on a first glance the guy in the video could well be the same guy
who took Margaret; that means the cases are connected and before you head up to see Ryan I want you and Danny to go and interview the girls again who were with Margaret the last day she was at school. Think you can handle that?"

Martin sat up, feeling grimy, stiff from too many hours sitting down the day before, and unshaven. “What…”?


“I’m getting there.” He privately thought it was no wonder that Jack was divorced, quite apart from his infidelity, as he was in no way a soothing person to wake up to in the morning. He ran a hand blearily through his hair and looked over at the other bed in the room. It was empty. “Where’s Danny?”

“In the shower. He said to tell you that if you’re good he’ll get you some junk food for breakfast. Just please don’t tell me the ways in which he expects you to be good in a motel bedroom at this time in the morning, okay?”

Danny strolled out of the bathroom, one towel carelessly tied low around his narrow hips, beads of water trickling down his torso, and with another towel in his hand with which he was rubbing his hair into a strangely stylish spiking on top of his head. The scar across the right side of Danny’s abdomen was displayed quite unselfconsciously even as the last droplets of water coursed down it at a slightly slower pace than they ran down his breastbone to his navel. There was a spring in his step that Martin considered completely inappropriate for this hour of the morning, especially given how late it had been when Jack had finally allowed everyone to go to bed. Danny smirked at Jack. “Doesn’t Martin look cute in the mornings?”

Jack smirked back. “Perfectly adorable.”

“I hate you both.” Martin unwillingly climbed out of the warm cocoon of his bed.

“A cup of coffee and you’ll be as good as new, trust me.” Jack nodded to Danny. “I want all the girls re-interviewed in case there’s anything they remember. I’ve finally tracked down that mailman and I’m going to interview him now. The locals are driving Vivian to the airport to meet up with Samantha, who is going to be flying to Wisconsin on the first available flight. Let me know what you find out at the school and tell me when you head up to see Ryan.”

Martin stumbled blearily into the bathroom, pulling his t-shirt over his head as he did so and stepping out of his boxers. Danny stuck his head around the door. “So, do you want another burger or cereal? Oh wait, you only eat breakfast cereal at lunchtime, right?”

“Do you mind?” Martin demanded, automatically putting a hand over the gunshot scar on his abdomen, and realizing as he did so that it had become the part of him he least wanted exposed to another’s gaze.

Danny refused to look even remotely abashed. “Well, from the point of view of your cholesterol I’d rather you had the cereal but whatever you want.”

“Get out,” Martin suggested, stepping firmly into the shower and closing the frosted door.

Danny called through to him: “Burger it is then.”

When the first blast of water ran horrifyingly cold, Martin felt that was probably Danny’s fault too. He twisted the dial savagely and the water ran far too hot, tiny needles of scalding shock on his skin, before achieving the perfect temperature. He had to fight the urge to stay in the shower for
half an hour and just bask in the hot water flowing over him, each jet unknotting the tension in muscles still aching from all those hours of sitting in the car, but he reluctantly made do with a meager five minutes and some cheap lemon-scented shower gel that made him smell like a store-bought pie. As he shaved, his reflection gazed back at him, still a little blearily, and he wondered how Sam and Viv avoided the bloodshot look when they generally got as little sleep as the rest of them. It was clearly some secret female ability that they inherited with their mitochondria or else were unwilling to share.

He would have liked a run to blow away the last of the cobwebs and reconnect to his muscles but had to make do with toweling his hair dry and pulling on his clothes. He was buttoning his shirt as he was assailed by the scents of breakfast that a fully-dressed Danny waved tantalizingly under his nose. “Here you go, Martin, grease, fat, more grease and more fat. All your favorite food groups.”

“You know there’s nothing natural about being this cheerful at five in the morning.”

Danny produced a mug with a flourish. “Coffee, too. Don’t ever say I don’t take care of you on these little field trips.”

Martin sipped the coffee and felt some clarity return to his brain, the last of the cobwebs not cleared by the shower dissipating as the hot strong liquid hit home. “Did Jack sleep at all last night?”

“No, but this one was bound to get to him, under the circumstances. I don’t think Sam went to bed either. She’s got Viv flying out with her to Wisconsin to interview a suspect with a possible grudge. In other news they turned up a print on the car the cell phone was stolen from and it belongs to an ex-girlfriend of Mary’s dead brother. Jack’s getting his corpse exhumed for DNA testing. Oh, and there’s a bad storm on its way, so we’ll probably be driving through a blizzard to visit Ryan.”

Martin took another much-needed gulp of coffee. “And just when I thought the day couldn’t get any better. Still no ransom demand?”

“Nothing.” Danny slapped him lightly on the shoulder. “Come on, or we’ll miss the line for the school bus. Jack wants us to start with the stop where Margaret was waiting.” As Martin pulled on his coat, Danny solemnly handed him a muffler. “Viv said I was to make sure we both wrapped up warm, and – think about it – would you want to be flying to Wisconsin or liaising with the locals?”

“Not really – and you don’t actually expect me to wear that, do you?”

“I’ll tell Viv if you don’t.”

Sighing, Martin wrapped the absurd scarf around his neck. “So, you’re saying we got the long straw on this assignment?”

“Hey, any day when I’m not sifting through garbage, having to stake out a crack den in some freezing downtown alley, or going undercover in a maximum security prison where I have to pretend to be the bitch of a guy called ‘Bubba’ is all good to me.”

“You might want to start setting that bar a little higher.” Martin gulped down the last of his coffee, and bit into his cheeseburger as he followed Danny out of the door, almost annoyed to find that despite the inadequate amount of sleep he’d gotten, Jack was absolutely right, he did feel as good as new.

“I’m driving,” Danny told him firmly.

Martin shrugged and climbed into the passenger seat. He didn’t quite get the fascination Danny
had with this big cumbersome vehicle anyway. “Fine, I’ll catch up on my sleep.”

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Danny dumped a pile of paper in his lap. “We got the Ryans’ phone records through for the last three months and the three months before Margaret’s abduction. Enjoy.”

Resisting the urge to groan and taking another ravenous bite of his now somewhat tepid burger, Martin plucked a pencil from his pocket and began to analyze who the Ryans had called, who had called them, what time of the day, and how often, while the snow blew in light powdery flakes and the windshield wipers rhythmically brushed them aside.

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Jack wished he felt a little more like the spider in the center of the web of information and a little less like the fly tangled in too many sticky threads. He knew he should go back to the office and liaise from there but it was in Honesdale that Mary had last been seen and where the locals were still checking every security camera from every business that might conceivably have footage of her abduction; and for some reason he felt the need to stay in Unity for this one. At least until Danny and Martin came back from interviewing Ryan.

He drove to the mail depot through gusting flakes and ridges of darkening slush to talk to his next possible lead, aware of unfriendly glances fixed on him by everyone he passed. He and the Ryans’ mailman talked outside as the snow fell around them in spiteful gusts because the mailman, Dean Tulliver, wanted a cigarette. “I tried the patches,” he explained. “But they didn’t work for me.”

Tulliver had badly pockmarked skin from adolescent acne or childhood illness, vivid brown eyes, and long black hair tied back in a ponytail. He looked as if someone in his ancestry had probably been Native American but it was diluted in him. There was a silver cross around his neck, which glinted as the sun came up and turned it to red-gold. He sucked the nicotine into his lungs like it was the difference between life and death and then, seeing Jack’s expression, offered him the carton. “Want one?”

Jack wondered how long it was before one stopped being tempted, and was unexpectedly touched to find someone in this town who was prepared to give him a civil word. Everyone else in the mail office had treated him as if he were something they had just scraped off the bottom of their shoe. “No, but thanks.”

Tulliver politely waved the smoke away from him, inhaled deeply and then slowly let out a mouthful of smoke. “Okay, I’m good now. Fire away.”

“You know the Ryans?”

“As much as you know anyone when the only contact you have with them is handing them their mail and nodding to them in church on Sundays. He’s friendly enough, she’s not as chatty – kind of shy.”

“Before or after Margaret went missing?”

“Both. Except she used to cry more after she went missing.”

“She cried before?”

“Once. I came up and she was sitting outside the house crying. I asked her if she was okay and she said it was one of the bad anniversaries.”

“You don’t remember the date?”
“I do. It was my birthday. September 23rd.”

The date her father had died in that car accident – suggesting she had loved the man despite everything he had done to her, her mother, and her brother over the years.

“And you’ve seen her crying since?”

“A few times. She used to sit outside and look at the woods and cry. I guess it was about her daughter. I felt sorry for her. Who wouldn’t?”

“Did you try to talk to her?”

“Yeah, once, I said I thought God had a plan for everyone, you know? And we couldn’t know what it was; we just had to trust it was for the best. I thought it might make her feel better.”

“But it didn’t?” People had been less inclined to tell Jack that God had a plan for everyone after his mother’s death, that road tended to be closed to a son as a source of comfort when one’s parent had committed suicide. It was viewed by too many outsiders as a deliberate abandonment; not to mention that the Catholic observers believed her to be in purgatory; no one tended to have too many comforting platitudes to offer then. It had been left to Jack to remind himself that his mother had loved him, and it had been the inescapable misery of her bipolar mood swings that she had been escaping, not him.

Tulliver shook his head. “I don’t think so. She just said that didn’t help the mothers who were left behind. She said there must be so many people out there who were going to die never knowing what had happened to their children.

“I sat with her for a while and then I asked her if she wanted me to talk to the pastor – ask him to call? But she said that some of them would be dead by now, the mothers whose children had never come home and I realized she wasn’t just talking about her little girl. And I said I couldn’t imagine what that was like but that everyone in Unity was praying she’d get her daughter back safely.”

Jack thought of the sun shining through that thick covering of trees, glistening on the snow, icicles forming on the roof like frozen teardrops, and Mary crying alone where no one else would be troubled by her grief. “Did she say anything else?”

“She said, why did she deserve to get her child back when so many other women never had? I felt so sorry for her but I didn’t know what else to do. Then she apologized for taking up my time and thanked me for my kindness but said she was fine now.”

“What about Margaret Ryan? What was your impression of her?”

“She was a nice little girl. Kind of shy but always very polite, always used to say ‘thank you’ if I gave her the mail.”

“What about Ryan?”

“Nice guy. Not friendly but polite, you know. Good baritone voice – always sings out really well in church. He used to drive the little girl to the school bus stop each morning. Not like some houses where you go and they’re all rushing around, shouting at each other. He was always calm, always organized. Always used to kiss his wife goodbye and open the door for the little girl, make sure her seatbelt was done up right.”

Jack had a sudden uncomfortable memory of that piece of paper being thrust under his nose in that nightmare of a deposition, pointing out that he had only signed in his daughters on nine mornings
in a year.

“Do they have a lot of mail?”

“Less than most. Bank statements for Ryan, a few catalogues, junk mail, the usual.”

“What about Mary?” he pressed. “Did she get any letters?”

“Not usually, but this last week she had two. One was about five days ago – Saturday, I think, and then, on the morning she went missing, there was a letter with a handwritten address. I noticed it because it looked like it was maybe written by someone who was young or didn’t know his letters too well. The ‘s’ was the wrong way round in the house-name.”

“Did you notice where it was posted from?”

“Sorry, no.”

“What about the first letter?”

“It wasn’t handwritten, it was from the doctor’s office here in Unity. Their stamp was on it.”

Jack was on his cell phone before he had reached the car. The snow blew around him, those deceptively light flakes that looked as if a breeze could blow them away to the next state, a ray of sunshine melt them harmlessly, and yet which quietly amassed drifts across every ditch and blanketed the land in white. “Viv. You did a lot of looking through Margaret’s schoolwork, right?”

“Yes, and talking to her teachers.”

“She wasn’t dyslexic, was she?”

“Definitely not.”

“No abnormalities in her writing style? ‘S’s the wrong way around, anything like that?”

“No, Jack.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive.” He could hear the sound of the airport behind her; murmurs of conversation from people about to part, information being given out through the incomprehensible vibrato of a PA system, a child wailing about some perceived injustice; and Sam in the background asking: “Has he got something?”

“You’ve got a lead?” Viv asked.

“I don’t know. But while you’re in Indemnity – see if you can get a look at Clare Hope’s schoolwork.”

“We’re looking for wrong way round ‘s’s?”

“Or a learning disability. Anyone associated with Mary who may have sent her a letter on the day she disappeared. You two wearing your thermal underwear? The forecast for Wisconsin right now is snow, snow, and more snow. Although if it’s any consolation, it’s the same forecast for here.”

“No, Jack…” Sam evidently leaned across to tell him clearly: “That’s no consolation. Did I mention that I hate the cold?”
“I’ll try to ensure that the next missing person we investigate has family in Florida, just for you.”

“Would you? I’d appreciate that.”

For all the sarcasm, she sounded better than she had at three a.m. when he suspected she had been over-identifying with Mary. Vivian had a habit of making the people with her feel better, which was probably why her heart had almost given up the ghost so early, worn out from all the work it did helping others.

“Viv, Mary mentioned to the mailman something about other mothers not knowing what had happened to their children. As if she deserved to lose her daughter because other woman had lost their children. Do you remember her saying anything like that to us?”

“No.” They were calling for their flight in the background; he could hear it echoing through the clamor of the airport. “But I don’t remember her saying very much at all. Ryan did most of the talking.”

“It could be guilt about Haley Stapleton,” Sam put in. “She may have felt responsible for what her father did.”

“But Haley’s parents knew what happened to her. She was killed outright and they had a body to bury. This sounded more like other mothers of missing children. Can you just check while you’re there that there haven’t been any cases of girls going missing in Indemnity?”

Sam’s voice was gentle: “Jack, a lot of women lost their sons to that town, remember?”

“But why should she feel any sense of connection to that? It’s not as if she could have had anything to do with those killings. She wasn’t even born when some of them took place.”

“It’s got to get to you, though, growing up in a place where four times a year another body turns up in a ditch, and you never know if the guy who delivers your mail or who gives you change in the store is a serial killer. If I’d grown up there, I’d have serious trust issues where men are concerned.”

Jack snorted. “As opposed to the way you are now, you mean?”

He could imagine her glittering smile, still loving how sharp her edges were. “Exactly.”

Viv said: “Jack, we have to go.”

“Wish me luck at the Unity Clinic. They’re my next port of call.”

She laughed but he knew that her eyes were probably sympathetic all the same, remembering how many friends he had made last time. “Good luck.”

As he drove towards the clinic, he wondered again if anything they had learned so far was useful. That was the trouble with any investigation. One received so much information and some of it was irrelevant and some of it was vital; and it all came carrying the same weight until the pattern started to emerge that showed which piece of information was going to be the one that made the difference between finding a living person or burying a corpse.

If only Margaret had been a girl who reversed the letter ‘s’ in her schoolwork they would have just been handed a huge break. It could have meant the girl was alive, had managed to contact or been forced to contact her mother, and that Mary had probably been lured away by the promise of seeing her. Now, for all he knew, the letter was from Mary’s long lost Cousin Flo asking for the recipe to
Grandma’s seed cake. Except he refused to believe that it carried no significance at all. Mary had known the number for that cell phone, so a message had reached her at some point between the phone being stolen and her calling it from the hospital pay phone. It was looking more and more likely that Viv’s gut instinct had been right on this and Mary had faked the early labor to get a lift into Honesdale while her husband was temporarily out of the picture. Jack suspected they had a lot of the pieces they needed already, they just didn’t have the ones that would connect them to the truth. At least, not yet.

Jack recognized the receptionist as he walked through the door of the clinic and realized he was in trouble already. The look she gave him showed that she remembered very well that he was the officious federal agent who had wasted his time hassling Frank Ryan; time which would have been better spent recovering his missing child.

Her icy: “I’ll tell Doctor Roberts that you’re here” was a study in chilly politeness.

Grimacing, Jack picked up a magazine and looked at it. Some girl paused between the cusp of childhood and womanhood with too much hair and too much make up and whom he absolutely didn’t recognize beamed back at him toothily. He wondered if this strange half-child-half-woman was someone his daughters liked, if she was an actress or a singer, and what it said about his disconnection from their lives that he didn’t know. He wondered if Hanna was ever going to forgive him for all the days when he hadn’t been there, and he wondered if she would ever get to a place where she understood how much harder it looked from a child’s eye view to be a parent. He doubted it somehow; even after he’d become a father himself, he’d never really forgiven his own father for his failures as a parent.

He was sternly beckoned. “Agent Malone, I’m sure you won’t take this the wrong way when I say how little pleasure it gives me to see you again.”

Jack resignedly followed the tall, silver-haired doctor into his examination room. He remembered from before that Roberts walked with a slight stoop, reminding him of a question mark slightly bowed by its own weight, but something had aged him out of all proportion and his face looked seamed with suffering. “I have a few routine questions…” he began.

Roberts glanced at him dismissively from over half-moon spectacles. “Really? Shouldn’t you be up at the homestead by now, asking Frank Ryan when he stopped beating his wife?”

“I think Mr. Ryan, like most anxious parents, came to understand that our main concern was for his daughter’s welfare and any questions we asked him which he may at the time have found distressing were necessary so that we could eliminate him as a suspect in our enquiries and move on.”

“Move on to what, Agent Malone?” Roberts demanded. “Four years later and Margaret Ryan is still missing.”

“And now Mary Ryan is also missing and I would appreciate any help you can give me in finding her. I understand she received a letter from this surgery a few days before her disappearance. Could you shed some light on that?”

“Why? Do you have some evidence to suggest that she left willingly?”

“I really need to know the contents of that letter.”

“Well, I’m really not happy about revealing confidential medical information without my patient’s permission, especially when it can have no possible bearing upon your investigation.”
Jack thought that he could hardly tell Danny and Martin to be polite despite all possible provocation and then not practice what he preached, but it was an effort. “I’m afraid you really are going to have to let me be the judge of that. We’re not the enemy here. We want to find Mary Ryan and we both know that the sooner we find her, the greater likelihood there is of finding her alive, now, we’re talking about a woman who left the house with no purse, no credit cards, no cell phone, no means of obtaining any money. She’s also heavily pregnant and extremely vulnerable. I’m sure that you want to do everything you can to help us find her.”

Roberts looked slightly abashed. “Of course.”

“You’ve seen her recently?”

“I haven’t as I’ve been away on extended medical leave but she was attended regularly by my locum. I’ve been looking at her records and she was in her about ten days ago for a routine check up.”

“And everything was fine? There was nothing to give him any cause for concern?”

“Nothing at all. She was in very good health and apart from feeling a little tired seemed to be coping with pregnancy very well.”

The snowflakes pattered softly on the window as if asking to be let in, the sound of the traffic muted by the double-glazing but still just audible whenever a car drove through the slush.

“Yet your surgery sent her a letter?”

“I’ve told you, it isn’t relevant to your case.”

Jack sensed there was more going on here than Roberts’ pre-existing dislike of him. “Is there an abnormality in the child?”

“Of course not, that could be relevant and I would have mentioned it.”

Jack picked up on the acerbic defensive note in the doctor’s tone and thought he understood. “There was some kind of mistake made…?”

The glare was icy but Roberts was yielding a little; defensive was better than offensive at least. “Both Frank and Mary had made it clear that the sex of the baby wasn’t important to them in itself, they just wanted to know so that they could prepare themselves either way. When a couple has already lost a child it’s a different experience for them having a child of the same gender or the opposite. As I have told you I was away on medical leave when the ultrasound was taken…”

Jack thought that if Viv had been with him she would surely have appreciated his – in his opinion – heroic self-restraint in not saying ‘Physician, heal thyself’.

“…person reading the ultrasound wasn’t as experienced as some of our other practitioners with the result that he…”

“Got it wrong?” Jack pressed.

Roberts glared at him. “Even at thirty-four weeks it isn’t as easy as is widely supposed to tell a labia from a penis.”

“I understand that difficulty can sometimes continue into adulthood, especially on Santa Monica Boulevard.”
“When I came back I looked at the ultrasound photograph in her file and saw at once that a mistake had been made. The letter informed Frank and Mary that we had now confirmed the sex of their baby to be male and stressed that reading an ultrasound was not an exact science and that we had told them that at the time of the reading.”

“You didn’t want to be sued for emotional distress by the Ryans when their baby was born and wasn’t the same sex as the child they’d already lost.”

“As you can see, there was nothing in that letter to precipitate an abduction.”

Jack couldn’t entirely stop that steely note creeping into his voice. “A woman who has lost her daughter thinks she’s going to have a little girl and is then told by letter that it’s a boy instead? And you don’t think this is relevant to our enquiry?”

“The news reports all said that she’d been abducted! What possible difference could the gender of her baby make – something that would be unknown to anyone except Frank and Mary Ryan and the staff at this medical facility – as to whether or not Mary was targeted for kidnap?”

“It goes to show state of mind, which may well have been seriously disturbed by such information delivered in such a fashion.”

Roberts put a hand up to his head. “I would not myself have suggested sending such information by letter but Doctor Keeley was not familiar with all aspects of the Ryans’ personal history and didn’t fully comprehend the significance…”

“Your surgery screwed up,” Jack told him shortly. “And you should have called in this information as soon as you knew Mary Ryan was missing.”

On his return to the motel room, he found the Honesdale PD had sent over the information from another three security tapes they had managed to scare up: a car with its license plates blacked out caught on the very edge of a security camera – an indeterminate dark-colored sedan; a shadowy glimpse of what could have been Mary in the passenger seat of the same car as it headed out of town; and a security camera from across the street from the hospital that had another view of what looked like Mary’s abduction, showing a partial face on her abductor and revealing him to be definitely male and around five feet nine or ten inches tall. Mary’s expression in the grainy security footage was a frozen blank. Even gazing at it for ten minutes straight, Jack couldn’t tell what she was feeling – fear, elation, it could have been either. Mary was someone whom he had never known to be anyone but a woman living without hope. For all he knew it hadn’t even been Margaret’s kidnapping that had made her that way; perhaps her abusive childhood had already done it; but he could never see a picture of her without thinking that he was looking at a spirit that had somehow been utterly crushed.

He started as the phone rang and looked at the caller ID. “Hey, Dannyboy. What do you have for me and why didn’t I get it three hours ago?”

“Jack, don’t start, I know we were supposed to be at Ryan’s by now but Phoebe Hinton, Margaret’s closest friend, was off sick and we had to drive all the way to her house, and another girl, Heather, was on a field trip and you don’t want to know how much driving I’ve done today especially as there are no road signs around here, I mean, none... But Phoebe’s a good witness. She didn’t really notice the guy but she was adamant that Margaret was excited on the day of her abduction and she said Margaret asked her what was a good present for a baby. Phoebe assumed at the time that her mom was pregnant again and Margaret was going to have a baby brother or sister
but when she went missing she was so upset she forgot what Margaret had said. Another girl, Cathy Adcock, also said she thought Margaret was excited that day but thought maybe she’d been excited about meeting that guy who asked her for directions. The older girls at the bus stop are claiming to have seen a little more but they weren’t close with Margaret so I don’t know how much attention they were paying at the time and how influenced they were by wanting some attention now. One of them is ‘almost sure’ the car was a dark blue sedan, but she didn’t notice the license plate.”

“Any more on the guy? Did any of them get a good look at him?”

He could almost hear Danny smirking. “According to a girl called Celia Thorpe, who was nearly thirteen then and is sixteen now, he apparently looked a lot like Martin, but she’s not exactly what I’d call a reliable witness.”

“Why not?”

“Because she was way more interested in Martin than she was in remembering what that guy looked like and I think she only said she saw the guy so that she’d get Martin’s attention while she answered his questions.”

“Any chance this Celia girl could work with a sketch artist?”

“I’d say none at all. Her memory was hazy at best.”

“Did you show all the girls the photograph taken from the security video?”

“Yes, but the guy in that is so muffled up you can’t see much more than his eyes and frankly I wouldn’t have been able to recognize him even if he was Martin. Celia did say she couldn’t say it definitely wasn’t him, but that was much of a commitment as she was willing to give. So, I can bring Martin in for questioning, if you like, but I’ve got to tell you that Buster and I can both give him an alibi for the time of Mary’s abduction, so if you don’t advise that, I’m thinking this is a dead end. Celia didn’t remember the color of the car or the make of the car or what the driver was wearing, or if he was clean shaven or not, but she thinks he had blue eyes, so, it’s good to know she was concentrating on essentials.”

“Looked like Martin how exactly? Same coloring? Same height?”

“I don’t think she knows herself. I don’t know if she thought he looked like Martin before she saw Martin, or if seeing Martin when she was being asked about that guy made her think he looked like him. But if I had to make a guess I’d say he could possibly be about Martin’s height and build and age and coloring. I tried to nail her down a little but she just got vaguer. I don’t even know if she saw the guy, to be honest, and I think she was ready to say she saw Margaret abducted, an alien spaceship landing, and Elvis singing live at the Coco cabaña if it would get her Martin’s cell phone number.”

“What does Martin think?”

“He didn’t even notice the girl was hitting on him. He wrote everything down and gave her a nice smile while she twisted her finger in her hair and asked for his number in case she remembered anything else, like at night, when she was all alooone.”

Jack’s mouth twitched despite himself as Danny drew out those vowels seductively.

“Supposing she did see the guy and supposing that – adolescent hormones aside – her recollection is accurate, what she’s saying is she saw is a guy in his early thirties, of medium height, medium
build, and medium coloring whose only distinguishing feature is being possibly good looking enough to attract a second glance from a cold, bored, thirteen year old girl?”

“That’s pretty much it.”

“Well, it was a long shot at best.” If the description from the girl at the bus stop was hazy it did at least not contradict the evidence of the security camera footage either from four years before or the ones just sent over by the local PD.

He heard the clunk of the car door and the sound of Martin saying breathlessly: “Man, it’s cold out there. Next time, you can get the coffee and I’ll call Jack.”

“You don’t have time for coffee,” Jack told them. “Get up that damned mountain before it’s dark.”

A stifled yelp suggested that the volume of his suggestion had made at least one of them spill hot coffee on himself. “We can drink while we’re driving…” Martin called across and Jack heard the sound of a hastily turned ignition, the jeep roaring into confident life.

He filled them in on the other developments as well as he could as Martin drove and Danny seemed to be sucking his thumb mournfully, presumably where he’d scalded it.

“And the local police have come back down to Unity so you’re going to have Ryan to yourselves. Apparently there’s a bad storm brewing and they don’t want to be caught in it so I gave them permission to leave. Which is why I’m ever so nicely suggesting you get up there as soon as possible before I have to send out Search and Rescue to find you huddled in a snowdrift somewhere.”

“You think that might be enough to push Mary over the edge?” Danny pressed. “Finding out what she thought was a baby girl was a baby boy?”

“If she was hoping for a replacement for Margaret, it may have been a crushing disappointment. It’s another of those pieces of the puzzle that doesn’t seem to fit with anything else but could be important.”

Glancing out of the window, he didn’t like the look of the snow building up. “I’ll let you know what Vivian and Samantha find out as soon as I hear from them. Anything from Ryan, pass it on right away.”

“Will do.” He could heard the sound of the engine and the swish of the wipers in the background and imagined Danny and Martin on the track to what felt like nowhere, the snow a white smear on their windshields, whoever was driving – he presumed that was Martin – peering through a fog of white.

“Don’t even think about driving back down that road at nighttime.” Jack heard that note in his voice that made Viv look at him with narrowed eyes and tried to correct: “Please. If Ryan won’t let you crash in his place, sleep in the car, but don’t try driving. That track wasn’t designed to be negotiated in darkness.”

“Yes, Dad,” Danny told him solemnly.

Jack heard a slight muffling from inside their car as Danny evidently put his hand over the phone and Martin said in the background: “Ask Jack if we get a helicopter to pick us up if we get snowed in.”

“You ask. I got us the last helicopter ride.”
“Just ask him.”

Danny came back to the phone. “Jack, if we get snowed in…”

“No,” Jack assured him. “You don’t get a helicopter ride even if you get snowed in. You just get to be cold and hungry, so make sure that you don’t get snowed in, okay? Keep in touch.” He switched off the phone and found his smile fading from his face. All this information and none of it leading towards anything. They had worked for a day and a night now, relentlessly focused on nothing but this case, and yet Mary Ryan was still missing and they seemed no closer to finding her.

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Viv had been watching Samantha covertly as they disembarked from the plane and had noticed how the closer they got to this town the tenser she became. It was cold here, of course, even colder than New York, and at the first spit of snow-laden wind, Samantha seemed to turn a whole shade paler. Viv thought she looked brittle as a white birch frosted to its heartwood, as if she had no defense here against the elements or anything else. When a strand of her damp blond hair lashed against her cheek, Samantha shivered as if a corpse had just caressed her.

It was left to Viv to present their credentials to the local deputy who had been sent to pick them up and make small talk with him as he escorted them to his patrol car, while Sam gripped her luggage handle as if it were a lifeline and almost snapped at the guy when he offered to take it from her.

“Nervous flyer?” the young deputy murmured to Viv.

She smiled at him. “Something like that.”

In the back of a patrol car that smelt of sweat and vomit she rested a hand on Samantha’s arm and felt her jump before Samantha’s hand came up a little hesitantly to cover hers in return. Viv patted it gently but could feel her practically reverberating with tension. It was a relief when the call came through from Jack.

“So, how about an update?” he asked.

Viv smiled at his predictability, recognizing that he had ideas he wanted to bounce off them and was probably also bored and lonely in Unity by himself. “We just arrived and don’t know anything yet. We’re being driven to the local police station to talk to the sheriff. Samantha spoke to him on the phone before we flew out here and he says he remembers Ryan and Gallagher and is happy to give us any information we want. He’s also going to put us in touch with a schoolteacher who taught Clare and Mary and her brother. Did Danny and Martin arrive at Ryan’s okay?”

“They’re still on their way, they were a little sidetracked by snowstorms and schoolgirls. Let me tell you what I’ve got so far. Can Sam hear this?”

Viv held the phone between them. “She can now.”

They both listened as Jack related all he had so far. Samantha nodded intently. “So, you’re definitely thinking the second letter Mary received must have told her the number of the stolen cell phone that she needed to call?”

“Well, it’s the best theory I have at the moment. The timeline we’re looking at now is that Mary received a letter from the doctor’s surgery informing her that, contrary to what she had previously been told, her unborn child was a boy. According to the records at the surgery, that was sent out five days ago. No idea if it has any bearing on her disappearance or not, but it’s part of the timeline. Two days later the cell phone is stolen that Mary later calls from the hospital. On the day of her
disappearance she receives a letter, written by someone who was either a child – but not Margaret, who could write well – or someone who is either dyslexic or educationally subnormal. Clare Hope’s background information has come through and she grew up in the same trailer park as the Gallaghers. She’s thirty-three and she has a record, all the usual convictions that go with being a crack addict – petty theft, soliciting, as well as the eighteen months she did for possession, but nothing for the past ten years so she may have cleaned herself up or just flown under the radar. I’m sending through her arrest photo and what we have from DMV so you can take a look when you get to the sheriff’s office.”

“From petty theft to kidnapping is quite a step up,” Viv put in.

“I know. But a successful kidnapping would pay for a lot of crack.”

“Jack, that theory doesn’t explain why there was never a ransom asked for Margaret.”

“I know. It’s bothering me too.”

Samantha leaned across to say: “We’re seeing a teacher who taught all three of them later, she should be able to tell us if Clare was dyslexic.”

“Well, Clare never finished high school.” Jack seemed to be checking the girl’s record as he relayed it to them. “So, she could have some kind of reading disorder or she could just have had an alcoholic mother, an abusive father, a bad start, and the odds stacked against her.”

“I can buy this girl maybe trying to extort money from Mary by sending her a letter in which she claims to have information about Margaret,” Viv said thoughtfully. “If she’s back on the drugs, she’s probably looking for easy money, and as someone who grew up in Indemnity she would be more likely to know about the kidnapping of Margaret even if she had no part in it. What I don’t get is why Mary would contact her.”

“That’s what you’re thinking?” Jack pressed.

Viv shrugged. “Well, it doesn’t seem like a coincidence, does it? Mary receives a letter from the doctor’s. Then two days later Clare steals a cell phone and sends Mary a letter with the number of the cell phone and presumably some kind of plan of action and Mary fakes false labor to get a lift to the hospital as soon as her husband is out of the way. I’m scenting a missing contact there between Mary and Clare. Who’s looking into the phone records?”

“Danny and Martin have them. Martin has already got the office working on some number that either Ryan or Mary called a few days before Mary disappeared.”

“But the person who met Mary at the hospital wasn’t Clare Hope,” Samantha put in. “It was presumably Clare’s accomplice, which – as he matches the description of the guy who took Margaret – suggests that Clare was involved in that crime as well. I think the letter from the doctor is irrelevant.”

“Maybe this is the same scam tried twice.” Viv could almost hear the wheels in Jack’s head going around. “Maybe they tried this with Margaret and something went wrong. They keep their heads down for a few years but then they decide to go back to the well.”

“Mary doesn’t have any way to access Ryan’s money,” Viv pointed out. “She would probably be the easiest touch but her wanting to pay up doesn’t help them much when she can’t get at the cash.”

“But Ryan would pay a ransom if it was asked, I’m sure of that.”
“Are we absolutely certain that Ryan never paid up last time?” Samantha was making rapid notes as she talked. “You said you thought he was certain his daughter was alive and it sounds as if he never had much patience with federal authority.”

“I had Martin go through his bank records again last night and he couldn’t find any big withdrawals. Not to mention the fact he was under twenty-four hour surveillance.”

“But it fits the guy you described psychologically.” Already Samantha looked less brittle and more animated. “He didn’t believe anyone could know better than him the right way to handle this. He could have borrowed it for all we know. Anyone who knew him would know he was good for it.”

“But there’s no evidence of that having happened. Only of Mary possibly having been contacted by Clare.”

Viv sighed. “And we still have no explanation for why Mary would contact Clare after she received that letter from the surgery – if that’s what she did.”

“I think that’s a jump we can’t make yet until Martin finishes going through those phone records. We know Mary was told her child was a boy but we don’t have any witness to tell us how she received that news. We’re assuming it would have upset her but for all we know she really didn’t mind. But I think it’s a fair assumption that Clare Hope stole the cell phone and then wrote to Mary giving her the number because Mary knew that number somehow, and as soon as she received that letter she put her plan into action.”

Viv shook her head. “The letter arrived on a day when Ryan wouldn’t see it because he had left early for market, Jack. That’s too much of a coincidence for me. Either whoever wrote to Mary knew the Ryans’ routine or Mary told Clare what day to write to her.”

“We’re missing something.” She could hear Jack tapping his pen against the table, a nervous rat-a-tat-tat of mental energy needing an outlet. “But your instincts were good on this, Sam. I think you’re where you need to be to get the answers. Dig into Clare Hope’s background and anyone else Mary was friends with in that town. Find out what kind of people they were. I’ll get Danny and Martin to ask Ryan about Clare as well, see what he remembers about her.”

“They didn’t get anything new from the school kids?”

Viv listened as Jack related to her what Danny and Martin had found out. She smirked a little and saw Sam do the same but Viv shook her head over his last conclusion. “No, Jack, a teenage girl saying that a guy ‘looks like Martin’ doesn’t mean she thinks he’s of average height and build, trust me on this.”

“Yeah, I get that he would also be good looking.” Jack sounded a little put out that they would think him too stolidly inhibited by his y-chromosomes to grasp that. “I’ve noticed people checking Martin out. I’ve noticed them checking Danny out, too, and how they don’t do that for me so much – except for the really weird ones – but I’m trying to bear up.”

Sam leaned across and said clearly: “They mean the guy was seriously cute, Jack.”

Viv nodded. “Exactly, although I’d probably go for ‘boyishly handsome’ myself.”

“I can’t put out an APB on a guy on the grounds that he’s ‘cute’. I need some kind of physical description apart from his rating as a hottie. But if you want to look through a few school year books in Indemnity and see if any of those high school boys Clare Hope may have dated look like likely prospects then be my guest. Keep me in the loop and remember I’m stuck here, eating take
out and being looked at by everyone in town like I skin kittens for fun, so, be kind and call often.”

“Any luck on that DNA test?” Samantha asked.

“The lab is fast-tracking it but no answer as yet.”

“Tell Danny and Martin to drive safely,” she added.

Viv looked at her sideways as she hung up the phone. “You really want to be encouraging Jack in his paranoia?”

“I think it would have made more sense to send me to talk to Ryan, that’s all. I can be polite and charming and I can drive in bad weather a lot better than they can.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. Martin grew up in Washington.”

“And what do you think the odds are that Martin – when he was growing up in Washington – used to regularly race his rusty pick-up against the cars of various no-good ex-boyfriends through blizzards in sub-zero temperatures?”

Viv considered the point for a very brief pause. “I’m thinking pretty slim.”

Samantha accepted her capitulation graciously. “I rest my case.”

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As they drove past another aggressively timbered cabin in the middle of what looked suspiciously like nowhere, Martin looked around uneasily. “Did we just slip back in time a hundred years?”

“I tell you, I see a kid playing a banjo, we’re out of here,” Danny warned him.

The snow had fallen everywhere, glittering on fallen trees. The properties they passed were few and far between, and the woods were breathtakingly beautiful but also eerily silent. A cobweb glittered on a frosted fern and Martin could almost feel the earth hardening, turning to iron as the long winter chill set in. “Long way to the nearest store if you run out of milk.”

Danny shrugged. “I imagine they bulk buy.”

“I hope so, because if we get snowed in up there I don’t want things to go Donner Party. Can you try the office again? See if they’ve made any progress with that number?”

“What number?”

“When I checked all incoming and outgoing calls to Ryan’s house around the time of Margaret’s disappearance and this last month, there’s one Appleton number that shows up both times. I’m waiting for a call back on whose number it is but it wouldn’t do any harm to give them a little push.”

Danny obligingly did so, listened intently, and then straightened up. Martin could see at once that his partner had heard something more than unusually interesting, nodding as he encouraged whomever it was on the end of the phone to go on. Martin tried to concentrate on the road. For all the excellent grip of the tires and the four wheel drive, it was still hard work driving on this track; the snow was starting to freeze beneath the wheels, the snow slanting across the windshield and proving a constant battle for the overworked wipers. His shoulders were starting to feel locked in position and he forced himself to try to relax, wondering if he were up to this, as the wheels slid
and then gripped again, kicking off from another jut of rock that made the whole vehicle jolt and dip.

Even a month before, it would have hurt like hell to attempt this rough a road; his guts would have turned to fire as each rut spiked through him like a sword; now it was just a faint twinge of reproach from muscles that were still learning to trust each other again, all the same he wished he’d been slightly less adamant that it was his turn to drive.

Danny’s brown eyes were shining as he ended the call. “Fitzie, my boy, you’ve got something. They were just about to call Jack with it, finally – something that connects Mary’s disappearance with Margaret’s kidnapping that isn’t a half-assed description or a grainy bit of videotape. Like you said, a week before Margaret went missing, Mary Ryan made a call to a number in Appleton, Wisconsin. The day she received the letter from the doctor’s surgery telling her about the sex of her baby, Mary called the same number. The place in question is run by a guy called Garret Davidson who runs a kind of semi-legitimate halfway house for ex-junkies, battered wives, and runaway kids. According to the records, Jack and Viv went up there and interviewed him last time. I’ll call Jack and get some background.”

Martin tried to concentrate on his driving while the snow blew onto the windshield. The snow was changing from spits of dry white powder to a barrage of thick wet flakes falling aslant across his line of sight. He looked to his left and saw the valley falling away from the track more and more steeply. If a deer jumped out of in front of them now, he didn’t think he was going to be able to keep the Humvee on the road. He darted a glance at Danny to check that he was wearing his seatbelt, saw that he was, and then, unable to help that spark of anxiety that spiraled up from his guts – from either the gunshot wound or the place where the pills had used to live – leaned across and tugged at the belt just to check that it was secure.

Danny slapped the back of his hand. “Do you mind? No, not you, Jack. It’s Martin, copping a feel. I don’t know. I guess he’s been out of the dating game too long.” He turned to Martin to say clearly: “Yes, my seatbelt is secure. Now, will you keep your eyes on the road?” He turned back to the phone. “I knew I shouldn’t have let him drive. What’s that about Davidson…?”

The track twisted around another blind bend, frosted trees looming close, and Martin tried not to think about what he was going to do if they met another vehicle. There had been no passing place for more than a mile and trying to back up along this track was going to be a nightmare. The jeep jolted violently over another axle-shaking rut and he flinched in anticipation of the pain spiking through his guts. It was difficult not to imagine the pills in his hand, their surface slightly tacky from the sweat on his palm, then the crunch of them on his tongue, bitter and necessary, that hit to his system that made everything feel so much better. He could have driven more efficiently with them in his system, the tension in his shoulders would have relaxed, his guts would not have been coiled in readiness for the next jolt of discomfort, he would have been more confident, accelerating into the bends to keep the traction instead of braking the way he was doing now, inhibited by the fear of how much it was going to hurt if the jeep went over, the horror of more hospitalization, more pain, being pushed back down to the base of the greasy pole of physiotherapy and pain-relief all over again. The spark of resentment rose up that Danny had stopped him self-medicating, only to be immediately followed by a cringe of self-loathing at that delusional voice of justification still whispering in his ear. He had hoped it was gone forever, but no doubt it never truly went away, just waiting for the next opportunity to demonstrate how weak he truly was.

His fingers were white on the steering wheel, tension making every stone under the wheels jolt up through his wrists to his elbows to his shoulders, each vibration shuddering through his muscles and tendons to stab down his spine.
“Martin…?” He risked a look at Danny and the man was gazing at him with those all-seeing brown eyes of his. Danny lowered his hand pointedly. “Relax,” he ordered.

Martin took a deep breath and rotated his shoulders as well as he could, slackening his death-grip on the wheel until his skeleton no longer felt locked into the vehicle’s suspension.

“No, Jack, it’s nothing. This track is just a joke. If I’d known it was this bad… No, he’s fine. No, we’re not going to end up in a ditch. I promise you you’re not going to have to get Search and Rescue out to look for us, okay? We’re good. Go on with what you were saying.”

Another bend and this time he made himself accelerate into it, feeling the tires bite hard, the engine push them around confidently, the wipers rhythmically battling the fall of soft white flakes. He reminded himself that this was the kind of terrain this vehicle was built for; that Ryan had been driving up and down this track three times a week for the past twelve years without a single accident. The mailman made this journey every other day and no one had died yet. He rotated his shoulders again, breathing deeply, in through the nose, out through the mouth, blinking hard to concentrate. The pills wouldn’t have made him drive better, they would have just taken him to a place where he would have felt immortal and untouchable, where he could almost have got Danny killed, again.

“You okay?”

He risked a look at Danny to find the man gazing at him without judgment, eyes kind. The phone was closed so he must have finished his conversation with Jack.

“Fine. Get anything from Jack about Davidson?”

“A whole bunch of stuff. You sure you don’t want me to drive the rest of the way?”

Martin shook his head. “I’m good. Tell me what Jack said?”

“Okay. Jack says Davidson sees a lot of the kids who get into trouble as having been let down by the state.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Martin observed.

“He runs his own de-tox programs and employs some pretty tough methods.” Danny shot Martin a brief worried glance that Martin guessed he probably wasn’t supposed to see. “Sedates them while they go cold turkey and then keeps them more or less a prisoner until they’re clean again. Apparently he really lets them have it if they start using again.”

Martin thought about being cuffed to a bed in a doss-house somewhere, whimpering for a fix while a guy with the attitude of a marine sergeant major told him he was weak and pathetic for having succumbed to addiction and he could only get out when he was clean. He was glad he hadn’t had to go through that and grateful to Sam and Danny for intervening when they had.

Danny was still talking: “They have to give their consent first, but a few of them have described it as hell on earth. Others think the guy is a living saint. But he’s got no time for the police or for social services. He’s taken in kids who’ve run away from foster care and hidden them when social services come looking and he’s let mothers whose kids were about to be forcibly taken into care hide out in one of his safe houses until they’re clean so they can keep their kids. Women who have broken orders not to take their kids over state lines have hidden out there, and so have women in unproven spousal abuse cases. He’s not that well loved by the local law enforcement but he’s very popular with the people he’s helped.”
“Sounds like the kind of place Clare Hope might know all about.” Martin gazed out at the wintry woods, feeling a sudden unwelcome stab of identification with someone who had let her life spiral out of control. At least Clare had the excuse of an abusive childhood and an alcoholic mother. What was his excuse? ‘My father never hugged me?’

“She does. Davidson’s is the address she gives on her DMV registration.”

Martin absorbed that, feeling the familiar flicker of excitement when unconnected strands finally began to weave themselves into a pattern. “In the case of Margaret’s disappearance, did Mary Ryan give Jack and Viv an explanation for why she was calling a place like that?”

“Yeah, there’s a whole lot of follow up. I don’t think Jack and Viv missed anything, you know. They did everything right – they just couldn’t find the girl.”

“I know.” Martin had thought that, too, as he went through the old files. The only mistake he could see that Jack had made had been in concentrating so many of his resources on checking up on Ryan but it wasn’t as if he’d left other stones unturned or not explored other possibilities. As always, Jack had been thorough to the point of obsessive. What he and Viv had done should have been enough to pick up Margaret’s trail, and yet the girl was still out there, or – more likely – dead and her murderer never found. It was no wonder that Jack was still haunted by this case.

“Okay. Mary was questioned about the call and she said that she’d been left two messages by an old school friend who had been trying to get in touch with her. The messages had supposedly been left by a Grace Lynch – although Mary said she hadn’t spoken to the woman and she’d deleted the messages after writing down the number they said to call. A check of the phone records revealed that someone using the payphone at Davidson’s place had called twice and on both occasions must have left a message, as the calls were only a couple of minutes long. Mary missed the call both times but had listened to the messages and, after the second one, had tried to call back. She said that the messages had been in reference to this Grace Lynch trying to arrange a school reunion and calling around everyone who had graduated in her year.”

“Cause that’s what you do when you’re in rehab – arrange school reunions.” Martin braked as they hit another blind bend and the jeep slid a few inches before the tires bit into the rutted surface and he could correct. “Sounds more like the woman was trying to touch Mary for money.”

“Yes, except there was a Grace Lynch who’d been at school with Mary, but when Jack and Viv contacted Grace she said she hadn’t been in touch with Mary in years and certainly hadn’t called her from rehab. She was pretty prickly about it because apparently she’s a devout Christian and pillar of the local church, who does a lot of charity work; definitely not the sort to be trying to get money out of anyone unless it was by knocking on the door and asking for a donation for the church roof. And when the second call came through, it was a Sunday morning. Mary had stayed home from church because she didn’t feel well, but Grace was singing in the choir in her church and had a hundred witnesses that could place her there. At the time, of course, there was nothing to connect Mary to Clare Hope, and Jack and Viv believed what Mary told them. They also believed Grace Lynch, but figured someone had been taking her name in vain while trying to scam money out of Mary.”

“Man, this case is giving me a headache.” Martin had started reaching for the Tylenol before he realized what he was doing and grimaced.

“It’s okay to take an aspirin, Martin.” He wondered how Danny always knew him so well. “Aspirin isn’t an opiate and it isn’t addictive. It’s also good for your heart although, given the beating your small intestine has taken this year, I wouldn’t take more than two.”
“It’s okay.” Martin managed a wan smile and pinched the bridge of his nose, wondering how much reading Danny had done so he could be there to sponsor him with information and support during moments like this. “It’s just been a long couple of days. Get back to the phone call.”

“The call that Mary placed, supposedly trying to follow up on the messages left by the fake Grace Lynch, was twenty minutes long, but Mary explained that by saying that a child had answered the phone and then wandered off, supposedly to look for Grace, but then hadn’t come back, so she had waited and waited for someone to answer her and then given up. Which was plausible, given that Mary was kind of shy and the type to just sit there and wait, according to Viv, and Davidson’s place is totally chaotic and full of little kids running around who could just pick up the phone.”

Martin could feel the cogs in his brain going around while the headache from the snow stabbed between them, like light through the creaking sails of a windmill. “But now she’s called there on two occasions, both of which have coincided with an abduction.”

“Yes. Jack and Viv took a look at it because it was the only connection Mary and Ryan had to anyone who would remotely qualify as a low-life, but nothing about Mary suggested she was culpable in Margaret’s kidnapping.”

“Especially as Mary made no attempt to join Margaret after her disappearance and stayed with Ryan – apparently happily, as she is now carrying his child.”

“According to Jack, when he and Viv questioned Davidson four years ago he wasn’t exactly helpful. He said that he had people passing through all the time and whoever was nearest to the phone would answer it. He had no idea if Mary had called or who she was calling for and he wouldn’t have told them if he did.”

“Did someone mention impeding a federal investigation and what the penalties were?”

Danny shrugged. “He basically told them to sit on it and swivel. As far as he’s concerned we’re all part of the problem that turns girls and boys from low income homes into drug mules and crack whores, and in a perfect world we’d be the ones shooting up in an alley and serve us all right.”

“Nice guy.” Martin felt more than a little aggrieved. “The idea that we help people for a living hasn’t ever occurred to him?”

“Apparently the only people we ever get off our lazy fat federal asses to look for are rich white girls whose fathers have a seat in the senate.”

“Well, I wish someone had given me that memo because I seem to have spent an awful lot of time looking for people outside our official remit.”

“You and me both. But I think we’re getting somewhere. We need Viv and Sam to check out Davidson’s place as soon as they finish in Indemnity….”

Martin concentrated on driving while Danny called Vivian, his mind automatically wrestling with the case even as he fought against a cutting east wind and blinding flurries of snow. The timeline was getting filled in. Five days before her disappearance, Mary had been informed that her baby was not a girl but a boy. The same day she had placed a call to the halfway house run by Davidson to talk to person or persons unknown but whom he was assuming was probably Clare Hope. Two days later, Clare had stolen a cell phone and the day after that someone had posted a letter to Mary that she had received on the following morning, which Martin was going to assume contained the number for the cell phone that Mary had dialed from the hospital. Mary had opened the letter and then called a neighbor, asking her to take her to the hospital in Honesdale, a three-hour drive from
where she knew her husband was going to be. She had then dialed the number of the cell phone and conversed with them for seventeen minutes, and despite the fact her husband could not be reaching her for hours, seemed to have gone outside of her own volition, presumably to meet with the person holding that cell phone. Seventeen minutes...

Martin touched Danny on the arm. “Danny, if she was talking to them for seventeen minutes, doesn’t that suggest that whoever she called – Clare Hope’s accomplice or whoever he was – was only seventeen minute’s journey from the hospital? Either sitting in a car or staying in a motel? We may not have a picture of the guy good enough to flash around but what about Clare Hope? We have her DMV picture and her mug shot. And maybe there was another person in the car? Maybe Mary was talking to her or him while the driver drove to the hospital to pick her up.”

Danny gave him one of those slightly pitying looks that always made Martin bristle like a cat near static – he always perceived those as the ‘poor little rich boy’ looks. Danny said: “Because kidnappers really care about violating the laws on talking on a cell phone while a vehicle is in motion?”

“Could you take five minutes off from being a smartass and admit it’s a possibility?”

Danny turned back to the phone. “Vivalina, I gotta go. I need to call Jack. Yeah, tell Sam very funny and I’ll tell him.” Danny ended one call and speed-dialed the next, adding conversationally: “Sam says she hopes you’re wearing your long johns.”

“Silk boxers.” Martin braked fifteen feet before the bend and then accelerated hard, pleased when he felt in control all the way around the snake-like turn.

“Me too.” Danny apparently became aware that Jack was listening in. “It’s not what it seems. No, Martin and I aren’t in the habit of… Look, it was Sam who brought up the underwear question…. Never mind. I’m calling because Martin thinks it’s worth showing Clare Hope’s picture around, see if she was in the area, too. And it would make sense that Mary would be more willing to get into a car if she thought there was another woman in it, whether she’s trying to get information about her daughter or up to something else entirely.”

As Danny switched on the speaker setting, Martin could hear Jack’s voice coming through: “I’ve already got the locals showing her picture to every motel and gas station in the area. If someone saw her we might get a better description of the guy she’s with. I’d lay odds he’s on record somewhere. I’d like to know if the guy is capable of murder.”

“No dirt on Clare Hope from Indemnity?” Martin asked.

“No yet. But Sam and Viv are going to pay a visit to the schoolteacher who taught Clare after they speak to Stapleton. Let me know when you get to Ryan’s and drive safely, okay?”

Danny smirked in tolerant amusement and then switched off the phone, turning to Martin with a shrug. “Jack really needs to get some help for that paranoia.”

Another flurry of snow dashed itself across the windshield as the jeep lurched bouncily over a boulder, landing with a jolt that practically unseated their back teeth. Martin flinched more in anticipation of pain than actual discomfort but felt Danny’s searching gaze upon him in an instant. “You okay?”

“Yeah, it’s fine, it’s just this road is…not a road. I’m not sure it even qualifies as a track. Ryan has all that money and he’s happy to rip out his axle every few months?”
“It would put off most casual visitors, wouldn’t it?”

“Well, I’d think twice before I dropped round to borrow a cup of sugar.” The day was darkening around them, and Martin had to wrestle with another boulder jutting out of the ridges in the track. The slender end branches of a fallen tree had fanned across the track and the jeep jolted over them, the fir fingers rattling the underside of the vehicle beneath their feet, while to his left the woods fell away in a steep slope, a world misted with snow flurries through which the trees could be glimpsed as dark silhouettes. “Do you think Mary Ryan felt like a prisoner up here?”

Danny hung onto the side of the jeep as they bounced over more stones, wheels slipping on the slush and then biting hard on the frozen earth beneath. “Maybe she liked the quiet.”

“I like the quiet,” Martin pointed out. “I like hiking. I like solitude. I like the great outdoors, and this place is already creeping me out.”

As the snow dashed itself against the windshield again, Martin tightened his grip on the steering wheel, reminded himself that even this track eventually had to end, and that even still flinching in anticipation of pain every time a vehicle jolted on a rough road was a lot better than actually being in pain – and that almost anything was better than still being an addict spiraling into a pit of inevitable self-destruction….

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In the organized clutter of the tiny sheriff’s office, Bradley Bennett, the sheriff of Indemnity himself, was helpful and articulate, and although his deputy, Gary, was slightly less articulate he was no less eager to be helpful. Bennett was wearing very well for a man of forty-four and could easily have passed for five years younger. He had fair hair only just starting to turn gray, and hazel eyes. He was wearing jeans, boots, and a thick sweater and looked comfortable in his body and in his job. He reminded Samantha a little painfully of various long-legged handsome no-goods she’d more than crushed on as a teenager. “You girls going to solve our unsolved murders for us?” he asked, as if he would have been grateful if they would.

“Not why we’re here,” Viv told him kindly. “That’s what Malone said last time.” Bennett poured them both hot black coffee as if there could be no question that this was what was needed in this kind of weather. There was a hot air fan standing on a table that ruffled the clippings and leaflets on the notice board as it turned in a slow circle, favoring them equally with a blast of welcome warmth.

“Sorry.” Samantha took the coffee gratefully. “We’re looking for Mary Ryan.”

“Nice girl,” Bennett supplied at once. “So was her mother by all accounts. Walter Coredon – the sheriff before me – always said he never knew what Mary’s mother was thinking of – marrying a no-good waste of a human life like Jake Gallagher.”

“He looked like a handsome man,” Viv shrugged. “Sometimes that’s enough.”

“Well, you girls ought to start looking past the surface packaging to what’s underneath before it gets you all in trouble.”

Sam was getting ready to bristle about being called a ‘girl’ by a man younger than Jack, but Viv just gave him a tolerant smile and said: “I think a ‘girl’ can ask for both.”

“She can ask all she likes but she ain’t necessarily going to find both around here,” Gary the helpful deputy observed. His ears were a little on the wingy side and it took Sam a few looks at him before
she realized that Danny’s were probably even wingier and she thought his were nothing other than attractive; they were just part of what made Danny…Danny.

Samantha gave him her best brittle smile. “You boys are selling yourselves too short.”

“You from around here?” Bennett asked at once. “I’m not picking up an accent but you’ve got the attitude.”

“Kenosha, and I worked hard to ditch that accent so…thank you.”

“You liking it better in New York then?”

“I’m liking that I can wear lingerie that isn’t tube socks and flannel pajamas all the year round.”

Viv snorted and Sam turned to her. “You think I’m kidding? Where I come from we define ‘summer’ as three months of bad sledding.”

Bennett beamed at her affectionately. “You are a local girl.”

“We’d be grateful for anything you can give us on the Ryans and the Gallaghers, and also a girl called Clare Hope.” Viv sat down in the chair the deputy pulled out for her chivalrously, giving him a smile of gratitude while he hurried to get her another cup of coffee.

“The Ryans are simple enough. No scandals there. Always been farmers, and always worked that area around their thousand acres since Jarvis Ryan started building it up back in eighteen something or other. All tall men, regular church goers, nothing much to say about them. But Jake Gallagher was born bad, if you ask me. Beat his wife, beat his kids, always drunk as a skunk, worked his wife into the ground – because those kids would have starved if she hadn’t worked every hour God gave her. The times the neighbors called old Walt out because Jake was smacking her around again.” He shook his head. “She would never press charges – deeply Christian woman, reckoned she had to stick with him whatever he did, because they were joined together in the eyes of God. She was a good woman and she deserved a better life than the one she had. Just hoping she got her reward in the next life cause she sure didn’t get it in this one.”

“Couldn’t Social Services do anything?” Samantha pressed.

Bennett shrugged. “The kids were trained to say they’d slipped or walked into a door or whatever. Reckon kids are like dogs sometimes, you kick them all you like, you show them one moment of kindness a week and they’re so grateful they still think they love you. He was the only pa they had, I guess they didn’t know they deserved better. Least when they were younger, when he got out of prison, I’m thinking things were different after that. They didn’t want much to do with him then.”

Viv checked her notes. “When Jake Gallagher killed Haley Stapleton, Mary would have been eleven?”

“And Nate was nine. Their poor mother died three years later when Mary was fourteen and Nate was twelve. They were put into foster homes, and, although Mary was a good girl, Nate was always getting in trouble. Some of the foster parents who had them showed the patience of saints but Nate was just too disruptive, and although they all said they would have kept Mary no problem at all, she wouldn’t be where her brother wasn’t, and he was already using and dealing drugs and stealing cars and generally being a punk. He got sent to juvenile hall for a year for stealing a car from his last foster father and driving it when high as a kite. He was sixteen then and I think the whole town had washed their hands of him. By that time everyone was just waiting for Nate to graduate to career criminal.”
Samantha frowned. “But, according to the records we have, Nathan Gallagher was clean after he came out of Juvenile Hall. What happened?”

“Frank Ryan happened.” Bennett topped up Samantha’s coffee for her. “Mary married him the day after her eighteenth birthday and they’d been married a year when Nate was due to come out. A lot of people thought Ryan wouldn’t want Mary having anything to do with her brother but he was waiting for Nate when he got out of Juvie, took him back to that farm, told him he wasn’t going to have him going the same way as his old man and to shape up, and, boy, did that kid shape up.”

“No more trouble with the law after that?”

“None. And his school grades turned right around. No one ever saw him in town any more either, Ryan told him he went to school, he came back home again, and the rest of the time he was needed to work on the farm. No arguments. You’ve met Ryan?”

“I have,” Viv put in. “He’s an impressive man.”

Bennett nodded. “Very. And he must have impressed the heck out of Nate Gallagher because that kid went from being a monumental pain in the ass to being no trouble to anyone.”

“Any idea how he did that?”

Gary leaned forward, eager to be included. “I figure the kid must have wanted someone to say ‘enough’s enough’. You’d be surprised how often boys just need someone to draw a line in the snow for them and tell them they don’t step over it. All his father ever did was smack him around when he had too much to drink. He’d never made him do his schoolwork or do his chores or think about what came out of his mouth, never mind going to church on Sunday.”

“Mary must have been grateful to her husband for taking so much trouble with her brother.” Samantha still felt a slight sense of unease at Nathan Gallagher’s miraculous turn around from troubled teen to model citizen. Either Ryan was a genius who should market his ten step program to parents of teenage boys everywhere or…something else.

“I would have been if I’d been her.” Bennett reached for a file groaning at the hinges with yellowed newspaper clippings. “Sure I can’t interest you in solving our old murder cases for us?”

Viv kindly opened the file and Samantha craned her head to look at the pictures under the headlines ‘Another body found’; ‘Remains of Drifter, 27, found in ditch’, ‘Damian Harrison, aged 24, who had been seeking work in the Indemnity area was found murdered today on farmland…” Samantha winced as she looked at their faces again. She had seen them before when researching this town, but they looked so lost in these clippings.

“I can see why you’d like it solved.” Viv winced at the description of the last hours of one of the victims. “When was the first killing?”

“Nineteen forty-six. Farmhand, found dead in a ditch. Of course, no one knew it was a serial killer back then. The law thought he must have been having a secret life of some kind, even though he
had a wife and kids, because young men don’t tend to turn up dead and naked without cause –”

Seeing their expressions, Bennett hastily amended: “That’s how they thought back then. Of course, when there was three or four a year, they soon realized there was something else happening. But the forensics back then weren’t like they are now and most of the men killed were drifters passing through in search of work; most of them didn’t have families to report them missing, and they were never found with much on them to help identify them, and a lot of the time they were so rotted when they were found it was hard to even work out who they were.”

“And you’re sure it was one man?”

Bennett snorted. “We’re not sure of anything. Some of the autopsies said they’d been killed by one man, some said two. They’d all been beaten half to death before they were killed and not just one beating, different sessions. Lot of them had been kept chained up somewhere and tortured, most of them had been raped.”

“But they weren’t usually local men?” Viv pressed.

“No. Mostly people passing through. Farmhands in the fifties, then in the sixties there used to be these hippies thumbing lifts across the country – well, they were easy meat. Half the time their parents didn’t know where they were anyway so there was plenty of time to get rid of them before anyone started looking. They were all love and peace and trusting everyone who offered them a lift. Same thing in the seventies. The previous sheriff – Walt – he did a lot of work on it and he reckoned the killer used to drive along the main road and check out anyone who was hitchhiking then hit some of the truck stops – some of those drivers were young guys, not too bright, grateful to have someone offer them a place to stay overnight that wasn’t the front seat of their cabs.”

Samantha turned another page and saw another half a dozen faces. Some of the newspapers hadn’t shown much restraint when it came to recounting the more graphic details of how the victims had died. Other than that they were all white and all relatively attractive, they didn’t seem to have that much in common with one another. Some were single, some married, some well educated, some barely literate, and their ages ranged from nineteen to thirty-six. “When did the killings stop?”

Bennett looked across at the deputy. “When was it? Seventeen years ago?”

“Eighteen years,” Gary confirmed. “The last victim was a truck driver called James Simpson, died July eighty eight. He was the last of them.”

“Did you check out people who’d died in that year or been sent to prison?” Viv asked.

Bennett snorted. “About a hundred times. There was an old guy called Craig Vincent that no one in town ever liked much. He got sick around that time and died a few years later. He was a loner and he used to kick his dog, but you can’t convict a man of being a serial killer for that. He was the one the late Sheriff thought was the most likely prospect. But there was also a guy in the next town along who his wife said was always out late at night and coming home at all hours. He had a nasty temper, used to hit her and his kids. He was another possibility.”

“No one ever escaped? No one ever reported seeing someone from around here giving a lift to a young man who later disappeared? Or no young man ever reported a man giving him a lift and then becoming violent?”

“Only Jake Gallagher. When he was about twenty-four, and already a no-good skunk who was making his wife’s life a misery. Said he was drunk one night, crashed his car, got out of it, with blood running down his face, didn’t know where he was or what he was doing. A truck pulled up, he got into it, the driver started talking to him, asking him where he was from, he realized he
recognized the voice and said who he was and how they was neighbors of a kind, the guy stops the truck, kicks him out, says he doesn’t give lifts to men who hit women.”

“Who was it who gave him the lift?” Viv asked.

“Frank Ryan’s father, Frank Senior. Jake was insisting that Frank Senior was planning on abducting him but everyone knew that was just him getting back at Ryan ‘cause he wouldn’t give him a job.”

“No one thought Frank Ryan Senior was a serious suspect?”

Bennett emphatically shook his head. “He was a good man. Gave a lot of money to the church and to help women and children in need. Always said a man should cut off his own hand before he laid it on a woman. And even if he had been a suspect, he died in ninety eighty five, and the killings just kept right on happening.”

Viv sighed. “I’m sorry, Sheriff, I don’t think we’re going to be solving your serial killer case for you.”

“Figured as much.”

“What can you tell us about Deputy Stapleton?” Samantha pressed.

Bennett grimaced. “Oh, that was a tragedy. Before my time as sheriff, of course, but I remember it. Haley was in the same class as my little sister. Gallagher had no business ever being behind the wheel of a car; he had no head for liquor and he couldn’t drive worth a damn even when he was sober.”

“Did Harry Stapleton go on working as Deputy after his daughter’s death?”

“He was broken up, as you’d expect. And things were never the same between his wife and him. He did his best but it was just eating away at him all the time. And then Gallagher got himself killed in that car accident – and that was justice if ever I saw it – and I think we all hoped that Harry might be able to put it behind him and move on at last, now that the guy who’d killed his little girl was dead, but it was as if that was the last straw. He was never the same after that. He took early retirement and now he’s just holed up in that house all the time, not much better than a shut-in.”

Samantha made some more notes. “Can we have his address? We need to interview him.”

“Sure. Gary…” Bennett turned in his chair. “Can you get Agent Spade Harry’s address and Eileen Walker’s, too?” He turned back to Sam. “That’s the teacher I fixed up for you to see. She taught Mary and Nate Gallagher, she taught Clare Hope. She probably knows them a lot better than I did. All I can tell you about Clare Hope is that her ma took to drink in a big way, which was no surprise as her pa and Jake Gallagher went to the same school of parenting, another no-good drunken bastard who smacked her and her mother around; did worse than that to her as well I’ve always suspected. She ran away from a lot of foster homes, did drugs and probably dealt them too. She got eighteen months for possession. I think she was Nate’s supplier for a while which was why Frank Ryan stopped him seeing her in case she dragged him back down again. She and Nate grew up together then were put in some group home where they were both regarded as unplaceables and thought themselves the Romeo and Juliet of Indemnity for a while.”

“Until Nate got a brother-in-law who made him stay home in the evenings and do chores?” Samantha barely suppressed a smile. “That’s a little anti-climactic compared with secret marriages
Bennett grinned. “I always thought so. Clare ran off when Nate was killed in that car accident and we didn’t hear anything about her for several years. And then it turns out she’s been getting herself through rehab and is cleaned up and married with a kid or something. As far as I know Clare’s still up at that halfway house place that Davidson and his boyfriend runs. That place is a Waco waiting to happen if you ask me. One day some angry husband whose wife is hanging out there is going to turn up with a shotgun, and all hell’s going to break loose.”

Viv sighed. “It was pretty chaotic when Jack and I were up there but the kids all seemed happy enough and so did the women hiding out there. They had a school set up and they were growing their own crops. Had some animals that the children looked after.”

“Yeah, on the surface it looks okay, but you don’t want to know how many low-lifes pass through that place. And a lot of those kids aren’t supposed to be taken out of the state where their fathers are, others are runaways that you guys are probably busting your balls trying to find, and Davidson doesn’t give a crap about little things like the process of law. He’s all for helping the oppressed and if you’re not with him you’re against him and probably a fascist redneck. I’ve had a couple of run-ins with him and as far as he’s concerned I’ve got it in for him because he’s gay; the fact that I don’t give a shit that he’s gay but I do give a shit about him always helping people to break the law – that’s never going to compute.”

“Do you think he’d do something criminal? Like helping with a kidnapping?”

Bennett considered the point. “Only if he thought the kid was being abused and Social Services had dropped the ball.”

“But he wouldn’t be part of a conspiracy to extort a ransom?”

Bennett emphatically shook his head. “Not in a million years. I don’t like the guy but he’s got no interest in money or personal gain. He’s on a crusade to help the oppressed, not trying to line his own pockets.”

“So, he wouldn’t shelter Clare Hope if she turned up there with Margaret or with Mary?”

“Like I said, only if he thought they were being abused but the first conversation he had with either of them where they said they were there against their will, the game would be up. If Clare has got Mary with her that’s the last place she’d take her.”

“Any ideas where she might take her? Does she have any relatives in the area she could call on?”

“Her mother’s still alive, although her liver’s shot, but I don’t think they really talk. I always got the impression Clare was pretty pissed with her mother for not doing something about her father.”

“Leaving him, you mean?” Samantha nodded.

Bennett grimaced. “I think more like killing him. I asked her once if Nate was hitting her – knowing what his pa was like it seemed a pretty good bet – and she said that Nate would never lay a finger on her but any guy that did we’d have to identify from dental records because there would be nothing else left of his face. She wasn’t kidding either. If she’s kept in touch with anyone around here it would be Eileen Walker, but I can give you her mother’s address.”

Samantha nodded her thanks, took the addresses from Gary the helpful deputy and headed for the door as Viv made the thanks. Samantha hesitated. “Grace Lynch? Anything on her?”
Bennett shook his handsome head, grinning broadly. “That woman is as close as one can get to a living saint. If someone was using her name for something shady it was because they’ve got a warped sense of humor.”

As she walked back to the car left ready for them outside, it occurred to Samantha that another reason for naming Grace Lynch as the person who had made that phone call at 10am on a Sunday morning, might be because anyone who knew her would know that she, unlike another name snatched for at random, would have an unbreakable alibi.

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The light was fading as they jolted up the track to the cleared area in the woods where Ryan and Mary lived. The sun was going down somewhere beyond the snow and had turned the white sky pink. The house loomed up, unwelcomingly. It stood on an area of flat land that looked as if it had been physically blasted out of the surrounding rocky woodland, no room for much of a yard, just the farm and then a few outbuildings, including a rustic-looking barn and a garage. The house itself was fronted with dark timber, although the stone carcass was visible underneath in the chimneys and basement.


Danny suspected that driving up that track had taken more out of Martin than his partner was ever going to admit, but a sure way to get his head bitten off when Martin was in pain was to ask him if he was in pain, so he pretended not to notice the wincing as Martin eased himself out from under the steering wheel.

“Extra polite, right?” Danny observed.

Martin shrugged. “What is the polite way of asking a man if he thinks his wife could have been tricked into running off with a crack dealing ex-prostitute and her probably criminal boyfriend anyway?”

Acknowledging just how difficult this was going to be with a shrug, Danny was just reaching for the doorknocker when it was opened abruptly and a man with the broad shoulders of a Mr. Universe contestant loomed over him. Danny was usually the tallest man in any room, so it was a strange experience to have to look up to make eye contact. Ryan was certainly very handsome, with piercing blue eyes, and once-sandy hair turning iron gray and neatly cropped. He looked younger than his forty-seven years but his expression was not exactly welcoming.

“It’s about time.” His gaze passed over Danny dismissively and moved onto Martin before he rolled his eyes. “Malone didn’t have a grown up free to send?”

Danny gave Martin a warning look about snapping and realized he was getting one in return. Well, at least they were on the same page. “We’re sorry we’re so late getting here, sir.” He held out his ID. “I’m Agent Taylor and this is Agent Fitzgerald. Can we come in?”

Ryan shrugged and turned away. “Sure, knock yourselves out.”

The first thing Danny noticed as they walked into the long low kitchen was the whiskey bottle sitting on the table. It was half empty but Ryan hadn’t been slurring his words or appeared to be drunk, so perhaps he had only one had one glass. Even now, Danny could remember the miraculous kick of it that got him to the place where that ‘click’ in his head told him everything was now okay, he was who he really wanted to be, and all it needed to get there was the constant consumption of spirits. He saw Martin dart a concerned glance in his direction and then look at
Ryan in irritation because clearly the main priority of a man whose wife and daughter had both been abducted should be to not put temptation in the path of any possible alcoholics who might walk through his front door. Sometimes Danny thought Martin was never more loveable than when he was completely unreasonable. He patted him gently on the shoulder to let him know he was really okay with the whiskey bottle being there and gave him a reassuring smile.

Ryan pulled out a kitchen chair for each of them, catching the tail end of the pat Danny had given Martin, and shook his head in disapproval before sitting down himself. “What news have you got for me about my wife’s disappearance?”

“Mr. Ryan, would you mind just confirming that your wife hasn’t called here since the local PD left?” Martin asked very politely.

“You don’t think I would have mentioned it if she had?” Ryan demanded.

Danny forced a smile. “So, she hasn’t called here?”

“No. I haven’t heard from my wife since I spoke to her on the phone when she called me from the hospital in Honesdale. So, how about you people tell me exactly how you’ve been earning the wages I pay for out of my taxes since my wife went missing?”

Danny kept smiling brightly. “We’d be happy to do that, sir. But, first can I ask you to just confirm that you haven’t been asked for a ransom?”

“No, I haven’t been asked for a ransom.”

Martin cleared his throat. “Thank you, sir. And can you confirm that you were never asked for a ransom after your daughter’s kidnapping either?”

Ryan’s gaze was steely. “No, I was never asked for a ransom for my daughter either. If I had been I would have paid it. If I’m asked for a ransom for my wife, I will pay that too. A good woman is above rubies.”

“One of the theories we’re currently exploring is that your wife may have been lured away by people who have or claimed to have knowledge of Margaret,” Martin explained. “Although we’re not excluding any possibilities at this time.”

“That a fancy way of telling me you don’t have a clue where my wife is or who took her?”

Danny forced out another smile although his face was starting to ache from the effort. He could see why Jack and this guy had clashed head on: talk about an irresistible force meeting an immoveable object. “Mr. Ryan, would you mind taking a look at this man and tell us if you recognize him?” He pushed across the picture from the second security video. Although still blurry and indistinct, there was a little more visible of the man with Mary than the muffled up purchaser of the cheeseburger of four years before or from the first grainy glimpse outside the hospital.

Ryan gazed intently at the photograph and Danny watched as the color drained from his face.

“Do you recognize him?” Martin asked.

Ryan glared at Martin as if he were personally responsible for all the ills he had ever suffered, his color had gone from white to red now, a slow tide of rage coming in. He looked…betrayed. “No.”

Martin said – still politely: “Excuse me, sir, but it looked as if you did.”
Ryan tossed the picture back. “I don’t know him.” He turned to Martin, holding his gaze before saying with blood-freezing clarity: “And if you even think about calling me a liar in my own home again, boy, I’ll break every bone in your body.”

There was a breathless pause in which Danny had to stifle his instinctive reaction to go all Federal on Ryan’s ass and explain to him exactly how dumb it was to think he could threaten an FBI agent with physical injury, not to mention calling one ‘boy’. But this was exactly what Jack had warned them about and time wasted butting heads with Ryan was time Mary may not have. Martin seemed to go through the same process as him, although, Danny suspected, he had also needed to mentally count to ten. With heroic self-restraint Martin said: “I apologize, sir. It would just be a huge break for us if this man were someone known to you. As yet we’ve been unable to identify him.”

“Well, what have you people been able to find out?”

Danny quietly began to explain what they knew so far. It was clear from Ryan’s second flush of angry color that his wife had not told him about the letter from the doctor’s surgery. Martin asked – still politely – if Ryan had any reason to think that his wife would have been upset to receive such news.

Ryan glowered at him. “What kind of a question is that? You’re talking about our son!”

“I appreciate that, sir,” Martin said carefully. “But given that you have already lost a daughter and had been told that the new baby was also a girl, we thought your wife might have had some difficulty adjusting.”

When Ryan continued to glower, Danny intervened: “Mr. Ryan, can you think of any reason why your wife wouldn’t have shared this information with you?”

“She knew I’d love any child of ours. What difference did it make?”

Danny made a show of referring to his notes. “Can you tell me what you know about Clare Hope?”

“Is she mixed up in my wife’s disappearance?” Ryan demanded.

“We’re not sure yet.” Martin put the phone records in front of Ryan. “But someone called the last known address of Clare Hope on this date. That wasn’t you?”

“Of course it wasn’t me.”

“Was there anyone else in the house at that time except you and your wife who could have had access to the phone?”

Ryan glanced impatiently at the date. “I wasn’t home that morning. I was at the market. I always go to the market on Mondays and Wednesdays. But, no, we’re not in the habit of letting people drop in and use our phone.”

“Well then, can you think of any reason why your wife would want to contact Clare Hope or any of her associates?”

Ryan said ominously: “Clare Hope was a drug-peddling whore, Agent Fitzgerald. Are you really asking me if that’s the kind of person my wife associates with?”

There was another awkward pause as Martin and Danny exchanged a look. Martin cleared his throat. “Mr. Ryan, sometimes we have to ask difficult questions but all we want to do is help you find Mary before any harm comes to her.”
“Then stop wasting my time insulting my wife and do some detecting.”

Danny picked up the baton quickly. “Can you go over what Mary said to you when she called you from the hospital?”

“She told me she’d panicked and asked the Boxes to take her to the hospital but there was nothing wrong with her and she’d be grateful if I could come and pick her up. I told her I’d be there as soon as I could but that I thought it was better if she stayed over at the hospital until they ran some more tests. I was going to talk to the doctor when I got there and tell him what I thought of him sending her home without a proper check up.”

“Did she sound normal to you, sir?” Martin asked.

“Yes.”

“Not stressed or frightened or excited?”

“Do you have a hearing problem? I just told you she sounded normal.”

Danny put a hand on Martin’s arm to let him know he was going to handle this next part. “We believe that before she called you, your wife called the number of a cell phone that was stolen by Clare Hope from a parked car in Albany.”

Ryan looked as if he were ready to pull both of their heads off just for mentioning the words ‘stolen’ and ‘your wife’ in the same sentence, and Danny added quickly: “Do you think it’s possible that Clare Hope could have persuaded your wife that she had some information about Margaret and lured her into town that way?”

“My wife and I have no secrets.”

“She may have wanted to protect you,” Martin added. “If it was a false lead, she may not have wanted you to get your hopes up about Margaret, only to have them dashed again.”

Ryan looked slightly mollified and Danny let out a ragged breath. “We have agents in Indemnity checking out all possible leads there. Can we ask you about a man called Harry Stapleton?”

For a moment, Ryan looked genuinely shocked. His gaze narrowed and there was a flicker of something in his eyes that came and went too fast for Danny to read it. “What about him?”

“We understand that your wife’s father killed his daughter in a drunk driving incident?”

“Yes, he did. The no good son-of-a-bitch killed that little girl and never even said he was sorry.”

“Do you think it’s possible that Harry Stapleton would have wanted to revenge himself on the daughter of Jake Gallagher by taking her daughter from her?” Danny suggested.

Ryan seemed genuinely astonished by the suggestion. “No. Never.”

“Mr. Ryan, the word from Indemnity is that Harry Stapleton has been in a decline for some years and never really recovered from the death of his daughter.”

“You ever lost a child?” Ryan looked between the two of them.

“No, sir, we haven’t,” Martin answered a little wearily.

“Well, when you have maybe then you can think about judging him. Harry Stapleton’s a good
man. He’d never touch one hair on a child’s head. If that’s why you’re sniffing around in Indemnity, you’re wasting your time – and mine – again.”

As they tried to get a picture of how Mary had spent the last few days before her disappearance, asking if he could remember anything specific that she had said or done that might give some insight into her state of mind, Ryan become more and more irritated with them until he snapped out angrily: “Why are you asking me these questions when my wife is out there and you haven’t found her yet? Just like you haven’t found my daughter yet. What are you people doing to find her?”

Other people had said the same words to them, but usually in understandable frustration, with Ryan it felt like something else, a slow burn of rage that was making Danny uneasy. He decided that a time out was definitely in order and rose to his feet. “Could you excuse us a moment, Mr. Ryan?” he said politely. “We left something in the car.”

“Figures.” Ryan shook his head.

Nodding to Martin to follow him, Danny led the way outside to the car. Wet white flakes gusted around them as the sun sank to a narrow band of red far to the west, the sky stained behind its low cloudbank of snow, the trees black against the slow bleed. Smiling brightly for the benefit of any observers, he said: “Is it just me or do you really want to deck this guy too?”

Also smiling, Martin said: “Oh, man, a thousand times yes. No wonder he and Jack didn’t get along. I don’t even think this is the right way to handle this guy. He’s got us on the defensive. We’re apologizing to him for breathing. We’ve completely lost control of the exchange of information. It feels like we should be letting him know there’s only so much we’ll put up with and start nailing him down and getting him to tell us what he knows.”

Danny kept smiling as if their lives depended on it. “And I’d agree with you, except Jack tried jumping all over him and ended up having to arrest the guy and take him in for questioning, which, you may remember, wasted about eight hours.”

Martin made a show of checking the contents of the back seat, in case Ryan was looking out of the window, while murmuring rapidly: “So, how do you want to play it?”

“Well, Jack said he wanted us to suck it up, so I guess that’s what we do.”

“I bet Jack didn’t suck it up.”

“I bet he didn’t either, but he sent us and he told us how he wanted us to play it, so, I say we play it the way we’re told until we’re told differently.”

Martin sighed. “Okay. Your call, but I’m not crashing in that house all night. That guy creeps me out. I’m sleeping in the car.”

“You can’t. This snow isn’t stopping and it’s going to freeze tonight.”

Martin groaned and looked at his watch, visibly estimating the amount of hours before it would be light again and they could leave. “I never thought that invitation from Buster to share his cell would look so good.”

“Yeah, that promise not to punk us out unless he ran out of smokes – looking downright romantic to me right now.” Danny dialed Jack’s number and at his ‘Malone’ said: “Jack, tell me you have something I can give Ryan to get him off our backs?”
“You boys making more friends?” Danny could hear the smirk in Jack’s voice and decided that one day soon he needed to pay him back for enjoying this quite so much.

Danny turned into the car, opening the door as if looking for something and hissed rapidly: “Ryan is a nightmare, Jack.”

“I know and normally I’d tell you not to take any crap from the guy, but, under the circumstances, I think we need everything he can give us. He knows the people in Indemnity and he knows his wife. He’s probably our best source of information and we can’t afford to alienate him, especially if Mary Ryan has willingly put herself into the hands of dangerous kidnappers and her life is in danger, which is the theory I’m going with at the moment.”

“Maybe we need to spell that out to him? That the only way he gets his wife back is through cooperating with us”

“I tried that last time and it didn’t work. I think it would take more than any of us to intimidate him. I’ve broken mass murderers, and with Ryan I didn’t even make a dent so, no offence intended, but I don’t think you and Martin have a shot at strong-arming him. What’s Ryan done so far to get your hackles up?”

“Apart from treating us as if we’re twelve? He physically threatened Martin. That’s normally the point where we say ‘Game over, thanks for playing, now meet Mr. Handcuffs’. Martin let it go but I’m not sure how much slack we should cut him.”

Jack cursed under his breath. “Did Ryan touch Martin?”

“No, just threatened to like he meant it.”

“Did Martin provoke him?”

“Absolutely not.”

“That’s something. What have you got out of Ryan so far?”

“Ryan didn’t know about the baby being a boy. He looked as if he recognized the guy in the photo but he denied it when we asked him. He can’t think of any reason why his wife would be in contact with Clare Hope. He’s pretty adamant that the revenge theory is wrong. He’s insisting that Stapleton would never take or harm a child. So, if he’s right, Sam and Viv could be wasting their time in Indemnity.”

“Could be. I’ve got a positive ID for Clare Hope from a motel owner. Apparently she checked in the night before the day Mary disappeared. The motel receptionist thought there was someone else in the car with her and thought it was a guy but didn’t get a good look at him and didn’t notice the make of the car let alone the license plates. The locals are going through all the security cameras en route from the motel to the hospital. You try to work on Ryan on that photograph. Come at it from a different direction, though, don’t challenge him. Ask him about any boyfriends he remembers Clare Hope having and then ask if it could possibly be them in the photograph, okay?”

“Got it. What about the DNA results?”

“Not in yet. The lab told me to call back in twenty minutes. Just tell him we’re doing everything we can to get his wife back.”

“We already have but he’s not exactly convinced.”
There was a moment’s silence before Jack said quietly: “Well, we told him we were doing everything we could to get his daughter back, too. I know he’s a pain in the ass, Danny, but the guy has reason to be upset, so bear that in mind, okay?”

“Okay, but if he threatens either one of us again I think I’m going to have to come down hard on him.”

“Just do the best you can to stop it getting to that point. I’ll call Ryan as soon as I hear back from the lab and give him an update, see if I can get him to grasp that cooperating with you two is his best chance of seeing his wife again. I’ll lay it on as thick as I can without getting into a pissing contest but try to keep things as non-confrontational as you can. If Ryan hits either one of you, you’re going to have to arrest him and we’re going to waste more time than Mary Ryan may have.”

“Is Van Doren leaning on you?”

“Well, let’s just say she wasn’t exactly happy about me going after a pillar of the community last time and I doubt she’ll be any happier this time either. So, if you and Martin could avoid getting yourselves punched, I’d be grateful.”

“Okay. Bye, Jack.” Danny switched off the phone and held Martin’s gaze. “He wants us to suck it up.” As Martin sighed and closed his eyes, Danny added: “I don’t like this any more than you do but there’s a woman out there who’s eight and a half months pregnant and may be in danger and a guy in there who loves her who is our best source of information. Let’s keep our focus and not let him get to us.”

Martin blew on his hands then shoved them into his pockets to keep them warm. “Not to mention that – if we screw up – Jack’s got an offer on the table of a hundred and twenty-five bucks for the pair of us and Buster was willing to throw in a car stereo.”

They both took a moment to do some deep breathing and then exchanged a look of mutual understanding. Danny reached past Martin to pick up the laptop. They didn’t particularly need it but it made it look as if they had done more than come out here for a while to cool off. “Ready?”

Martin nodded. “It’s not like he’s the first obnoxious prick we’ve ever had to interview. And he’s a concerned husband not a rapist or a child molester. How bad can it be?”

Danny plastered a smile back onto his face as they went back into the house and said as brightly as he could: “Mr. Ryan, I was wondering if you remember any associates of Clare Hope that might fit that photograph we showed you earlier? Obviously, they would be ten years older than when you last saw them, but if you give us the names of anyone you remember her knowing in her days in Indemnity who might fit that general description it would save us a lot of time…”

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The house looked as if no one had loved it for a long time, weeds had cracked the driveway and paint peeled from wood that looked as if it had seen too many winters. Hanging from the solitary tree, its leafless limbs stark against the misty whiteness of the falling snow, there were still the knotted age-grayed ropes that had presumably once belonged to a swing, but the seat had long since rotted. Samantha saw Haley Stapleton in her mind’s eye, laughing as she swung there, asking her father to push her higher and higher. They spent so much of their time trying to get the relatives of the missing some closure, even if they couldn’t return their loved ones to them, alive and well, at least letting them have a body to bury; but there was nothing they could do about the grief that inevitably followed. A quarter of a century after Haley’s death, this house was still drenched in it.
She knocked gently on the screen door, covertly watching Viv continuing to assess this town without judgment, just noticing the ways in which it was different from New York. Jack, with his psychology degree, would have made the connections so effortlessly, Samantha wouldn’t have been forced to watch him joining the dots, would have just found herself known a little better by the end of the journey. Danny would have done something nice for her with no explanation, a Danish she hadn’t asked for, just because. With Martin, she was afraid she would have seen the lines being drawn. No, with Martin, she was afraid that she would have been so sure that he was judging her that she would have rushed to judgment on him and then had to watch him recoiling like a friendly puppy that had just been kicked by someone it trusted.

Viv reached past her and knocked again, a little more loudly. “I’m getting frostbite out here,” she explained.

But when the door was finally opened and the bleary bloodshot eyes turned upon them, Viv was the one who managed the genuinely warm smile. “Mr. Stapleton?” She held up her ID. “I’m Agent Johnson of the FBI, this is Agent Spade. We were wondering if we could come in and ask you a few questions?”

He gazed at them, not as if they were unexpected, but as if he wondered what had taken them so long, and, looking over at the rotting rope still swinging as the snow swirled around it, Samantha felt the fear chill her. She had seen that look in men’s eyes before, an old case with Jack where they had gone looking for a missing girl and in questioning a possible witness had found an old man waiting to confess to killing his wife of thirty years before. This man had a murder weighing on his soul and perhaps she had been right the first time, and she really hated it when she was.

But she followed Viv into the chilly house, avoiding the piles of newspaper and clanking bottles that were everywhere.

Stapleton cleared off the couch for them, and Viv didn’t bat an eyelash about the dust or the stickiness, or the half-empty bottle of whiskey, just sitting down and giving Stapleton another encouraging smile. A little less gracefully, Samantha followed her example.

“Would you like some…tea?” Stapleton asked awkwardly. “I have tea.”

“Thank you, Mr. Stapleton, but we’re fine. We wanted to ask you if you remembered anything about some people who used to live in this town? Mary Ryan has gone missing and we’re trying to find her.”

Stapleton averted his eyes. “I remember her. Haven’t seen her in…must be eleven…twelve years. She moved away.”

“That’s right. She and her husband moved to the Catskills. Did you know they had a little girl?”

“Not until I saw on the six o’clock news how she’d gone missing a few years back.” Stapleton shook his head. “Terrible thing to lose a child. Terrible.”

Viv nodded. “I can only imagine.”

“You don’t have any children?”

“I have a son.”

Stapleton gazed at her intently. “You be grateful for him every day, Agent Johnson. Every day.”

“I am, Mr. Stapleton. Truly.”
He nodded. “Doing the job you do, I guess you know better than most how lucky you are. Most people – they don’t know. The man who killed my little girl, he treated those kids of his worse than you’d treat a dog.”

“You mean Jake Gallagher?”

“That’s him.”

“He seems to have been a bad father and a worse husband.”

“He was. The times we were called out to poor Katie and her crying and bleeding and saying it was an accident and him drunk and not even sorry. Man like that – gets to keep his kids, but I don’t? You show me the meaning in that? I’ve asked the pastor so many times. Where’s the meaning in that because I don’t see it. The bruises on that boy’s body. You ain’t never seen anything like it. And welts… Just beat all the spirit out of him. A man like that – what use is he to anyone?”

Viv said gently: “Not much by the sound of things.”

Samantha leaned forward. “We think someone called Clare Hope may be mixed up in Mary Ryan’s disappearance. Do you remember her?”

“Sure I remember her. She was running wild from kindergarten, that girl. Found her in the bus shelter a few times, out of her head on something or other. Couldn’t even send her home knowing what was waiting for her there. We used to put her in the cells just so she’d get a bed for the night in the warm. Her father was a waste of space – vicious too. Drove her mother to drink and Clare into all kinds of trouble. She knew about sex before she should have done. Used to dress with her skirts up to here in all weathers. The nurse at the clinic said she’d had three abortions by the time she was fifteen and I don’t think more than one of those times was down to Nate Gallagher. My wife used to say there was more wrong in that house than anyone wanted to think about. She was always riding me to do something about it, but what can you do? You call in Social Services and the wife says she walked into a door, and the girl says there’s nothing going on. That’s how those men stay out of jail even if they’re the earth’s mortal scum.”

“Do you know a man called Davidson? He runs a halfway house up in...”

“Up near Appleton. I’ve heard of it. Wish he’d been around when Clare was a little girl and the Gallaghers were growing up. I’d have given their mothers his number.”

Samantha sat back in surprise. “That’s not how the sheriff feels.”

“The sheriff’s good man but he hasn’t seen all the things I’ve seen.”

Viv put her head on one side. “I would have thought you’d be the last man to want to see children taken away from their fathers when for all anyone knows the fathers haven’t done anything wrong.”

“I’d rather see a few innocent men lose their children than a few innocent children lose their lives or their innocence…. There are a lot of good people in this town, real good people, but there’s been evil done here, and done for years. The bones of all those boys that were killed – they’re still in the ground, we never found them all, and we never will. This is a place where men get away with murder. Maybe they don’t deserve to get to keep their children as well....”

Samantha could see that the whiskey was starting to kick in hard now as he rambled and she doubted they’d get much more out of Stapleton. She looked at her watch and checked the time. They were barely going to be able to make it see Eileen Walker before it was dark as things were.
Viv leaned forward and said very gently: “Jake Gallagher didn’t die in a car crash, did he, Mr. Stapleton?”

Samantha looked at her in shock only to turn and see the relief break over Stapleton’s face like sunshine after rain. “You know…?”

Viv said, still gently, and with nothing but encouragement in her voice: “Why don’t you tell us everything, Mr. Stapleton? I think you’d feel so much better if you did…”

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Jack Malone checked his watch again. He remembered his own interaction with Ryan all too vividly, and while the man was apparently friendly and easy-going with equals and inferiors he would absolutely not accept any man’s authority over him. Storeowners, feed merchants, farm hands, all said what a great guy he was – strict on punctuality and efficiency but ready to give praise where it was due. As Chuck Harris, his feed supplier in Indemnity, had told Jack – how many men bothered to call you up to tell you how impressed they were with that last delivery of cow cake? Not that Ryan hadn’t been the first one to complain if an order wasn’t up to scratch, but he’d always been reasonable about it. He’d made it clear from the first day he placed his order that there was a quality he expected for his money.

“He said he wanted the quality of grain he was paying for – which was the best, he wanted it delivered when he’d asked for it to be delivered, and he wanted full measure. He said, if I gave him that, he’d sing my praises all over town. And he did. He brought me more business than I could handle. I never met a fairer man than Frank Ryan.”

Jack had discerned the bones of those ‘rules’ of Ryan’s through even that interaction. That seemed to be how Ryan ran everything. He was kind and loving to his daughter but he expected her to be respectful and obedient and do her homework when she was told to do it and go to bed when she was told to go and work hard at school. In return she was loved and fed and kept warm and clothed. Perhaps that was the covenant that all fathers had with their children, but with Ryan Jack had always felt that nothing was unconditional. He knew there was absolutely nothing that Hanna or Katie could do that would make him stop loving them. With Ryan he had never had quite the same sense. The man’s sense of his own significance in the world, the importance of his private rulebook, had seemed unshakeable, but everything else…Jack had always felt that with everything else it would depend upon the circumstances.

This was what had been troubling him all along about sending Danny and Martin up there. He and Ryan had just clashed head on. Viv had observed mildly on her way out after their first encounter: “Well, I’ve had my share of wildlife programs for the week. I certainly won’t need to watch any stags clashing antlers in the rutting season after that little display….”

In vain, Jack had pointed out that in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred going in hard and brooking no nonsense was the right way to handle someone who was starting to get belligerent. But with Ryan it had been a disaster, and Viv had made it clear that she thought he could have handled it better. Privately, Jack had agreed with her. He knew himself well enough to know that whatever resolutions he made before he walked through that door about not getting irritated whatever the man said or did, his temper was going to reach critical mass within ten minutes and he and Ryan would be eyeballing one another in no time. He counted to ten, checked his watch again, and then called Ryan’s number.

“Ryan…” The brusqueness of the man’s tone suggested things were not going much better up there.
“It’s Jack Malone here, Mr. Ryan. I have some fresh information I thought you might like to know.”

“Have you found my wife?”

“Not as yet, no. But we think we’re getting closer.”

“Why am I not filled with excitement?”

Jack mentally counted to ten. “There have been a few developments. We have evidence that Clare Hope was definitely in the area just before your wife’s disappearance and we believe she was one of at least two people who persuaded your wife to leave with them. There was an as-yet unidentified male in the car as well. We have agents near at hand who are going to be visiting Clare Hope’s last known address to bring her in for questioning.”

“Do you have a theory what that junkie whore wanted with my wife?”

“We don’t know, although we’re guessing that she may have told your wife that she had some information related to Margaret and lured her into the car that way. We’re still hoping that there may be a ransom demand. What we don’t know is why your wife contacted Clare in the first place but we’re working on it. We also ordered a DNA test on the remains found in the car that Nathan Gallagher was driving at the time of his believed death and we can confirm that they are not his.”

“Not Nate’s remains?”

“No. We’re not sure who they belong to at the moment but we’re running a search for possible matches. But they’re certainly not those of your brother-in-law, which means that he may still be alive and still an associate of Clare Hope’s. Now, if that is the case, he could have contacted your wife. Can you tell me what their relationship was like?”

“What do you mean?”

“Were they on good terms? Were they close?”

“Yes, they were very close. Mary loved her brother. She would do anything for him.”

“So, you don’t think it’s beyond the realm of possibility that if he contacted her, looking for help, perhaps, that she would do as he asked?”

“Mary and I have an understanding. We tell each other everything. A marriage has to be based on trust.”

“But if he told her he was desperate, say? Or if she was so surprised to learn that he was alive that she wasn’t thinking straight?”

Ryan sounded unwilling to concede even that much but he did so, albeit reluctantly. “Then I suppose she might go behind my back. It’s possible.”

“Mr. Ryan, at the time of his supposed ‘death’, Nathan Gallagher was living with you and your wife in Indemnity, is that correct?”

“It is. He worked with me on the farm. He’d turned his life around and we were both proud of what he’d accomplished.”

“Can you think of any reason why Nathan Gallagher would fake his own death?”
“No.”

“What about if he wanted to run off with Clare Hope?”

“He was forbidden to see her and he knew why. She was nothing but trouble to him and if he’d continued with that way of life he would have ended up whoring himself around every prison in the state and I told him that straight.”

“But by the time Nathan supposedly ‘died’, he was twenty-two years old, and Clare was twenty-one and starting to get herself cleaned up. Is it possible that he’d continued to have feelings for her for all that time?”

There was a long moment in which Jack could hear the sound of Ryan’s quick, angry breaths. He wondered why it was that a man with no criminal record of any kind, admired by all, and widely acknowledged to be a pillar of the community, always felt to him as if he were one wrong word away from doing something violent. Yet Ryan had never had an angry altercation with anyone in his life. And, according to his polygraph results, never laid a finger on his wife or daughter. All the same, he always made the hair on the back of Jack’s neck prickle in warning, as if he was in the presence of someone dangerous.

“Mr. Ryan…?” Jack pressed politely. “Is it possible…?”

“Anything’s possible. They were two dumb kids together the first time around doing things they had no business doing at that age. They did each other nothing but harm and they were better separated, but it’s possible that Nathan was stupid enough to forget everything his sister and I had done for him and to go running off with that girl once she got out of prison. Lord knows, young men can usually be relied on to be stupid and ungrateful and need more discipline than most men can supply. Perhaps I was too soft on him.”

“He was legally an adult and had been for four years. It would have been his decision and it’s not one I think you should blame yourself for. Everyone knows you worked quite the transformation with him. Do you think he could be any danger to Mary?”

“No.” An awkward pause. “I don’t know.”

“It’s important.”

“You think I don’t know that? The boy I knew loved his sister but he’s got his father’s genes in there somewhere. We are what our fathers make us. Maybe it was just going against nature trying to stop him turning out like Jake Gallagher but I tried. God help me, I tried.”

Jack had the file up on Jake Gallagher on the laptop in front of him. A flick of his fingers and he was looking at pictures of both father and son. Jake’s from when he had been arrested after killing Haley Stapleton, dark blue eyes bloodshot and bleary, his good looks ruined by drink and bad temper, but still just visible beneath the stubble and broken blood vessels. The only picture they had of Nathan Gallagher was from when he had been arrested at sixteen, a scrawny, sullen pretty boy with slate blue eyes, and dark hair that fell in a tangle across a face marred by bad skin and bruises. He didn’t exactly look like a model citizen or like someone who would have a problem with scamming even his own sister. Clare Hope looked equally sullen in her arrest photograph, hollow cheeked and with shadowed eyes, her hair showing dark roots and pale scurf in equal measures. They both looked in need of a bath and a hot meal and he wouldn’t have trusted a pregnant woman to either one of them. He felt a spasm of unwilling sympathy for Ryan and softened his tone accordingly:
“Our pictures of Nathan Gallagher are eighteen years out of date, Mr. Ryan, so I’d be grateful if you could take another look at the photographs that Agent Taylor and Agent Fitzgerald have with them and see if you think that the man with your wife could possibly be her brother?”

“Are those two allowed to stay up this late on a school night?”

Jack gritted his teeth, sympathy promptly evaporating, but said as cheerfully as he could: “Well, I would appreciate it if they were in bed by eleven, Mr. Ryan.”

“These are the best you could send me, Malone? My wife goes missing and a couple of college kids asking me joke questions is supposed to help find her?”

“They’re trained federal agents not ‘college kids’. They’re very good at what they do, and the more you cooperate with them the better the chances are of finding your wife alive.”

“Earn your pay and find my wife, Malone.” Ryan hung up and Jack cursed under his breath. He had done his best but he suspected that all he had done was give Ryan more evidence that his wife had left him willingly, which was going to do nothing for his temper. He decided to leave it an hour in which he would check in with Vivian and Samantha and bring them up to speed and then call Danny back and see how things were going.

“Just keep your cool, boys,” he murmured. “This guy may be an obnoxious blow-hard but he could still have information that can help us to find his wife....”

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The ticking of the clock sounded loud in the kitchen. Outside, the world was growing darker but in here the lights were all too bright and Martin could feel the headache that had been pressing its attentions on him earlier becoming more insistent. Each time the clock ticked, it added a tiny jolt of tension to the pain between his eyes. He massaged his forehead and tried not to think about how hungry he was. Ryan was making him uneasy. The man had been difficult before the call from Jack, but he had at least been focused on them; now he just seemed distracted and increasingly irritated, each question they asked seeming to have the accumulative annoyance for him of a buzzing bluebottle. It was as if something in that call had rendered them irrelevant, although no less irritating. Now Ryan was no longer sitting at the table with them but had started to pace around the room. With another man, Martin would have already asked him to sit down and concentrate but even questioning Ryan about his wife was already too much like juggling lighted matches over an open barrel of gunpowder.

Ryan was barely listening to their questions as he paced up and down the long low kitchen. Martin exchanged a glance with Danny, trying to agree through eye contact alone what their response should be if things deteriorated further. He had been in law enforcement for too long for it not to be a shock to the system to be completely dismissed as if he were still some college kid looking for extra credits. And, although he had certainly never consciously used it to his own advantage, there had always been a certain amount of significance conferred upon him through being Victor Fitzgerald’s son that had left him unused to being treated like this. In the past, the relatives of the missing or the dead had railed at him or even hit him, or sobbed in front of him, but they had never just dismissed him as irrelevant until now.

As Ryan continued to wear a groove in the floor, Martin glanced around the room, taking in the note on the refrigerator where someone had started a shopping list, the calendar on the wall, showing a winter scene of what was presumably Wisconsin. The kitchen was Shaker style and looked as if it had been installed when the Ryans first bought this place, and had not been touched since, and yet money was certainly no problem and Ryan seemed the type to give his wife anything she asked for. Perhaps she had simply never asked. There were still faded pictures pinned
to the wall that had clearly been painted by a child, brittle with age now and the paper yellowing under the streaks of red and yellow paint. It was as if time had stopped here when Margaret vanished and neither Ryan nor Mary had been able to move on since. The clocks kept ticking and someone dutifully turned each page of the calendar as a new month began, but the humans trapped in this life could not keep pace with the passing of the days.

He wondered if there was a way to get through to the human being Ryan must be in there somewhere and abruptly rose to his feet. Danny darted him a concerned look and Ryan stopped in his tracks and looked at him as if he thought Martin should have asked permission before doing even that. Martin tried a smile and nodded to the photograph on the dresser. “Is that your daughter?”

Sometimes that was enough to soften even someone living second by second for the phone to ring – enough to get through and make a connection. But Ryan only frowned at him. “You’re supposed to be helping to find my wife and you don’t even know what my daughter looks like?”

Martin cleared his throat. “I wasn’t involved in that case.”

“No, I imagine you were still in school.”

Martin tried for another smile; the most disarming one he could summon under the circumstances. “Sir, we’ve found over and over again that what happened to a missing person in the days leading up to their disappearance and how quickly we learn about it can make all the difference between them being found alive or dead. Now, if there’s anything you can tell us that might help shed some light on why your wife would choose to do what she did it would really be a good idea for you to share it with us.” He tried to keep it light and friendly but Ryan was still looking at him as if he were a skunk he had just found going through his garbage. Sighing, Martin sat back down.

Danny persisted quietly: “I know this must be very difficult for you, sir, but we don’t know your wife the way you do, and any information at all that you can give us about her could help us to find her and bring her home safely.”

Ryan flicked a dismissive glance in Danny’s direction. “I’m not comfortable discussing my wife with people she doesn’t know. A marriage is a private thing.”

“I understand that, sir, but, as Agent Fitzgerald just said, we’ve found in the past that the best way to find someone who’s lost is to comprehend their state of mind at the time when they go missing. The people who are closest to them are the ones who are the most able to help us with that.”

“That’s why it’s important that you answer our questions as accurately as you can.” Martin snatched a breath before trying again: “Would you say your marriage was happy, sir?”

The gaze Ryan turned on Martin was one of chilling dislike and Martin felt a flicker of unease. He had dealt with distraught and furious relatives before, but there had always been a sense of recognition of his status even behind their emotions. If they blamed him for their current distress, they blamed him because he was part of the process that had failed to find their loved one in time. There was the sense of him being part of a larger organization that while conferring responsibility upon him for its shortcomings did at least also confer some authority.

Danny said quickly: “Mr. Ryan, it’s important that we know these things. We wouldn’t ask if we didn’t think it was relevant to helping us to find your wife.”

“Did your wife seem normal to you on the morning when she went into Honesdale…?” Martin realized that they were entirely failing to hold Ryan’s attention. He was gazing fixedly out of the
window at the falling snow, the light from the kitchen spilling out in checkered rectangles onto the new layer of glittering whiteness. “Mr. Ryan…?” Martin cleared his throat. “Mr. Ryan, did your wife seem different to you in any way in the days leading up to her disappearance…?”

Ryan abruptly turned on his heel and walked out of the room, heading into the back of the house. Martin flashed Danny a look of confusion. “What did I say this time?”

Danny was frowning after the man. “I don’t think it’s you, I think it’s something Jack said. He’s been weird since that call.” He rose to his feet and touched Martin gently on the shoulder. “Wait here. I’ll go and see if he’s okay, see if he has any pictures of his brother-in-law we could use.”

“I’ll take a look around in here.” Martin crossed to the dresser to look at the framed photograph of Margaret. She looked so much like Jack’s kids, long dark hair, big dark eyes, but the life shone out of Jack’s kids, they were vivid and animated; even when Hanna was giving her father one of her patented ‘you are lower than the dirt beneath my feet’ looks there was some passion in it. Margaret just looked so spiritless by comparison, every hair in place in those long plaits, her socks both pulled up neatly, her coat arranged without a crease. He picked up another photograph and there was Mary with her daughter sitting next to her on the bench Martin had noticed out at the front of the house. Mary had her arm around her daughter and Margaret was leaning against her; they were both smiling at the camera but even their smiles looked sad, as if someone had told them to look happy so they were attempting the action but only attaining a fleeting facsimile of happiness while their eyes were still full of sorrow.

He was aware of the quiet murmur of Danny and Ryan’s voices from the back room. Ryan was at least answering Danny, so perhaps his partner was making some headway on getting hold of a slightly more up-to-date photograph of Nathan Gallagher. Martin tried to imagine what it was like to grow up like that; to live in fear of the parent who was supposed to protect you from all the bad things out there; what it would have to do to you for your home to be the place you needed to escape from, instead of to, when you wanted to feel safe. But then he thought about Danny, whose father had also been abusive and unreasonable, and how Danny had an unshakeable set of moral values. But then Danny had a stronger character and a stronger sense of self than almost anyone Martin had ever met. He doubted that Nathan Gallagher had turned out to be a protector of the damaged and innocent the way Danny had – more likely someone who thought the world owed him a lot and even his own sister was fair game if it would help him to get his next fix.

A dull ‘thump’ from the back room made Martin look up in surprise. He put the photograph back where it had been standing and stepped back from the dresser. “Danny? Is everything okay?”

Ryan appeared in the doorway, breathing hard and wiping his hands as if they were soiled, although as far as Martin could see they were perfectly clean. The gaze he turned upon Martin was openly hostile. “He had to use the bathroom.”

He had become used to Danny invading his personal space, although it had disconcerted him at first, he had quickly grown to accept and even like it. Given his upbringing, raised in a family where they pressed their elbows in against their sides to avoid making accidental contact, it was probably good for him to have his space invaded on a fairly regular basis; to be touched when he wasn’t necessarily ready for it, small gifts of warmth passed to him from casually affectionate fingers. But as Ryan got much too close and loomed over him, too tall and way too wide, Martin took an instinctive step backwards, feeling his threat assessment instincts kick in automatically, like a car alarm going off in his head. “Did Agent Taylor ask you about the photograph?”

“What photograph?” Ryan loomed even more ominously and when Martin took another step back, the edge of the kitchen cabinet jabbed his kidneys painfully.
“He was going to ask you if you had a photograph of your brother-in-law. If Nathan Gallagher is still alive he’s presumably living under a false name, which means we don’t have a current DMV photograph to show to people who may have seen him.” Ryan was close enough for him to smell his sweat and Martin took a step to the side only to have the man cut him off, glaring at him out of unfriendly blue eyes. Martin craned his neck to see past him, hoping to see Danny appearing in that doorway before Martin had to do something Jack was going to yell at both of them about later. “I just need to consult with my partner….”

Ryan took another step to cut him off. “What are you two – eight? You can’t even go to the bathroom alone?”

Martin decided that Jack’s express orders or no express orders there was no way in hell he was staying in this guy’s house tonight, not sleeping in a chair, or crashed on a couch, not anywhere. He would rather sleep in a ditch than here. In fact he’d rather sleep, pinned in place by his seatbelt, upside-down in a crashed Humvee, in a snow-filled ditch than here. “Mr. Ryan, please step aside.”

“Don’t tell me what to do in my own home, boy.”

Martin wondered if he was allowed to put the guy down now – except that was the final resort and they weren’t quite there yet. Once he did that with a guy like Ryan, they were in a place of absolute confrontation and the next logical step was arresting him. But if Jack asked him if he had precipitated matters by strong arming Ryan before it was absolutely necessary, Martin really wanted to be able to answer ‘No’ and it be true. He had lied to Jack in the matter of the Reyes shooting and it had made him feel sick every minute that Jack was looking at him as if he knew damned well that Martin wasn’t telling him the truth; and he had lied to Danny about being an addict and felt lower than a worm as he did so. He was done with lying. He decided to give being very polite one more chance before he got Ryan in an arm lock and slammed him down on that counter the way he really wanted to do right now.

“Mr. Ryan, please take a step back. Then why don’t we both sit down and talk about…?”

Which was when Ryan’s fist connected with his jaw so hard that all he saw was a supernova of white stars exploding, while the floor came up to greet him very hard.

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Vivian let Stapleton ramble for a little while, like an old sweater unraveling, and then leaned forward and plucked the whiskey bottle from his fingers, placing it on the coffee table in between the piles of old newspapers. “Mr. Stapleton, if you killed Jake Gallagher, I really think you would feel happier if you told me all about it.”

That was one of her gifts, and she knew it. Jack could intimate and empathize with the best of them; scare the truth from people or coax it out so gently it felt like nothing but a relief to let it go; she could invite confession without blame. People lied, of course, all the time, but at heart most of them wanted to tell the truth, or to find a way that the truth didn’t make them the bad guy after all, to justify, to excuse, to have someone understand, and she was good at understanding. She could sit there and let them spill all the darkness they had been concealing from everyone but themselves, and at the end they would feel better. Jack had once told her that she would have made a good priest, and she’d been amused to tell him that she had often thought the same thing about him. Given his dislike of the priesthood, that had made him recoil indignantly. But it was true of both of them.

Stapleton gazed up at her out of bleary bloodshot eyes. “I wanted to kill him. I thought about it… every day. My wife said we had to let it go, that revenge just eats up the one wanting it, but I kept
thinking about how he wasn’t even sorry. He was so drunk he didn’t even remember what he’d done. They had to tell him when he sobered up and even then he just shrugged, like it was nothing, like my daughter’s life was nothing at all.”

“That must have been very difficult for you,” Viv said gently.

“I used to follow him. Everywhere he went, I’d be there watching him. I was determined he was never going to do that to any more children. I pulled him over every time he got behind the wheel of a car, but he was too smart for me. Didn’t drink when I was watching. Kept complaining about harassment.”

“What about on the day he died?” Viv gave him another encouraging smile. Stapleton wanted to confess like a chick wanted to free itself from an egg, everything in him propelling him towards the light and warmth, wanting to be unburdened once again.

“I lost him for a few hours. Had to go and see about some domestic disturbance on the other end of town. When I found him again, he was over at the trailer park, not at his own place, at the Hopes’. I kept out of sight but got in close enough to listen. Nate was there arguing with Clare. Her mother was inside, playing that music too loud, the way she always did. Clare was trying to get him to do something – I couldn’t hear what – but he was saying he couldn’t do that to Mary.”

They crystallized in her mind, turning from vague images to concrete certainties, Clare, pupils pinpricks from the drugs, amorous and argumentative at once, Nate, with the new clarity of being clean, trying to reason with her. Clare sitting on the steps of the trailer while inside her mother’s music blared out, something country, a scream for help that wasn’t coming and never had as the liquor brought its own temporary oblivion.

“Nate had a black eye. Real nasty bruise and looked fresh. Clare kept telling him he had to come with her, that they needed to go far away from this stinking town. He kept saying he couldn’t leave Mary; that Clare ought to know what it meant to be part of a family. Clare said that no, she didn’t know that, she’d never known that; that he was the only family she’d ever known and she never saw him any more. Then Jake Gallagher walks in and Nate asks him what the hell he wants. Jake goes to hit him for talking back and Clare picks up a knife and says he can back the fuck away right now. Then Jake gets all whiny and says he just wants to know why Nate’s got a black eye, that he’s his father, that he’s got a right to know, and when Clare told him that he was the one who gave it to him, he kept saying that he didn’t do it. Then he started in on Nate demanding that he told him who hit him. Nate said ‘Like you ever gave a shit’ and said he needed to get back to the farm. He asked Clare to try again to get herself cleaned up, and then he went off. But Jake kept asking Clare who hit Nate until Clare told him that Nate told her it was him, and maybe he was just too drunk to remember like the thousand other times when he said it wasn’t him. But Jake kept saying that this time it wasn’t. Clare asked what difference did it make if he didn’t hit him the hundredth time when he hit him the ninety-nine before? She went into the trailer and I heard her start screaming at her mother to switch the damned music off. Jake went off to the liquor store and I would have had him for driving with that whiskey in his lap but then I got another call and I had to drive halfway across town….”

Samantha leaned forward, wrapped up in her coat as if it could keep out not just the cold but the past as well. “So, on the day that Jake Gallagher died, Nathan had a black eye and had told Clare his father was the one who hit him?”

Stapleton nodded a little blearily. “But Jake kept saying it wasn’t him this time. Swearing black was white that he hadn’t done it.”

“But you didn’t believe him?” Vivian asked.
Stapleton shook his head. “Like Clare said, it had been him every other time. I was angry because I knew Jake was going to get himself oiled again and then get straight back behind the wheel of that damned pickup of his. So, as soon as I finished taking witness statements from a crash on that corner on Piedmont and Freemantle, I started driving around, trying to spot Jake’s pick-up, and I finally saw it taking the turn-off for Ryan’s farm. That track only led up to the farm and back so I decided to wait him out and then pick him up when he came back down. I knew Frank was home and would never let Jake hurt Mary or Nate. So, I sat in the car and listened to the radio for a while. And, maybe it was because I had the heater on, but I nodded off. When I woke up, it was dark and I didn’t know if he’d come out while I was sleeping….”

Vivian could picture him, starting awake, blurry with sleep, enfolded by the warmth of a dream in which his daughter had been alive, enjoying that twilight moment before the ever-present grief came back to remind him that he had no child any more. It was too easy to imagine that, in this job; all the possessions people scattered around their homes that became unbearable reminders of absence once they were gone. She could imagine the catch of the engine as Stapleton started the car, headlights dazzling as they revealed the track that led up to the farm, jolting around blind bends at a snail’s pace, no purpose left except trailing the man who had murdered his daughter, as if that could somehow make him comprehend the enormity of his crime.

“If he’d said ‘Sorry’ even once.” Stapleton gazed across at her as if willing her to grant him absolution. “But he never did. He never was. Nothing he ever did was his fault.”

“We understand,” Sam said gently.

Stapleton had driven along the long twist of rutted track that led to the farmhouse and outbuildings nestling in the center of all those fields, the sun sunk into darkness, and a fine rain spitting on the windshield; the only illumination the blare of his headlights and the farmhouse dark except for the deep red flicker of the kitchen fire, visible through the unshuttered windows. Then he had seen the black doors of the barn edged with the soft glow of yellow, a pale light spilling from the cracks and hinges. Splashing through puddles, he had walked to the barn, as disconnected from life as any ghost, walked past Gallagher’s pick up, touched the hood and felt that it still had some residual warmth. Pushed open the barn doors, still in that oddly dream-like state, and walked into a crime scene.

Frank Ryan with the piece of bloodstained piping in his hand, crouched in the hay with the hurricane lantern in his hand, and Jake Gallagher dead with a crushed skull, wet crimson trickling into the long stalks of the harvest. Stapleton had made some sound, the shock lodged halfway down his throat, and Ryan had looked up like a man in a dream, raising the lantern so that Stapleton saw the second body – Nathan Gallagher naked, bloody, and unconscious, his back welted, face bruised.

Stapleton reached for the whiskey glass and Vivian let him take another sip before she said quietly: “What did you think had happened?”

“It was clear enough. Gallagher had gone off at Nate, like he was always doing, only this time he’d done worse.” He glanced up at her briefly. “Much worse.”

Samantha cleared her throat. “It was your impression that Jake Gallagher had sexually as well as physically abused his son?”

“That boy wasn’t wearing a stitch and those bruises…” Stapleton shook his head. “His own son? It felt like the whole town was sick with something. Clare’s father and now Nate and Mary’s. Frank got up and put that piece of pipe down and said he couldn’t help himself – walking in on that. He’d just seen red. Hell, I would have done the same. And then he’s telling me he knows I have to put
the cuffs on, that he’s ready to take his medicine, and I’m thinking all the time, why should Gallagher get the last laugh? Why should he be allowed to ruin Mary’s life and Nate’s even after he’s dead? Why should Frank go to prison for doing what any one would have done?"

Vivian glanced across at Sam. “So you decided to cover it up? Make it look like a car accident?”

Stapleton nodded. “I had to talk Frank into it. He was all for confessing right away. I said to him, what did he think Mary would rather think, that her husband had killed her father for doing that to his own son, or that he’d died in an accident?”

“What did you do?”

“Frank and I untied Nate, wrapped him in a blanket, and carried him into the house. He was still unconscious. We put him in his room and Frank said as soon as we’d finished with what we were doing he’d make sure Nate was taken care of, call him a doctor if he had to but try not to if he could avoid it for the sake of the boy’s self-respect. Then we put Gallagher into the passenger seat of his pickup and Frank drove it down while I followed him in my car. My hands were shaking so badly I could hardly hold the wheel and I didn’t know how Frank could be so calm, but I followed him until we got to that bend that goes around Jefferson. We put Gallagher into the driving seat and pushed the pickup over the edge. Then I drove Frank home so he could take care of Nate and I went to see Walt.”

“Walter Coredon, the old sheriff?”

Gallagher nodded. “I told him that I was following Jake Gallagher, the way I’d been doing recently, and I saw him lose control of his pickup and drive it over a cliff, but that I was worried people were going to think it was me that drove him off the road, as everyone knew there was bad blood between us. He asked me on my honor if I had anything to do with his death – and I could swear I didn’t because, on my life, he was dead before I got to that barn – and then he said that my word was good enough for him and he’d take care of it. At the inquest, the store clerk who sold him the liquor gave evidence that he was opening that whiskey before he was even out of the store. Everyone knew he was a no-good drunk who couldn’t drive worth a damn, and no one said anything about it.” He met Viv’s eye. “But I knew. All this time, I knew.”

“That must have been very difficult for you, Mr. Stapleton,” Viv said gently.

“I’ve been wanting to say something for a long time, but it doesn’t just involve me. There’s Frank as well. I didn’t want to get Frank into trouble. He only did what any man would have done. Nate Gallagher was a troublemaker but he wasn’t bad at heart. He loved his sister – always put himself between her and his father when Jake started turning mean. A boy would have had to be a lot worse than him to deserve what that son-of-a-bitch had done to him. He couldn’t even come to the funeral – still sick in bed.” He took another gulp of the whiskey. “I never thought Jake Gallagher would trouble my conscience. But I still see him lying there. I see him all the time.”

Viv nodded to Sam to take over. She rose to her feet, said a polite ‘Excuse me’ to Stapleton, and then went outside, dialing Danny’s number as she did so. A car swept past at the kind of speed more appropriate to a freeway on a sunny day, but she had noticed that everyone drove like that around here – even with their headlight beams thick with snowflakes, they never took their feet off the gas pedal. When there was no answer from Danny she tried Martin, and then when he didn’t pick up either, dialed Jack’s number.

“Malone.”

“Jack, you need to hear this.” She related the whole story to him rapidly. “I’m not saying I blame
Frank Ryan for snapping – he was presumably fond of his brother-in-law, and that was a pretty desppicable crime – but he still committed murder and I don’t like the thought of Danny and Martin being alone in a house with a man who may have a guilty conscience with them not knowing….

“I’ll call them now.”

“Can you call me back when you get through?”

“Sure.”

She expected the call back within a few minutes, and blew on her hands to keep warm as she glanced back in through the window. Stapleton was crying and Sam had moved next to him, looking awkward as she tentatively offered words of sympathy. Leaving this one to the local sheriff to sort out was looking like the best option to her. Bennett had seemed intelligent and humane and perfectly capable of making a judgment call on the best way to proceed. As to Frank Ryan, she thought Jack would probably want to hold off on arresting him for the murder of Jake Gallagher, or perhaps Jack would see this as the way to have some leverage over Ryan that would get him to cooperate. Through the grimy windowpane she could see Sam still quietly questioning Stapleton. Viv checked her watch. Ten minutes. She was starting to feel a little anxious, when she saw Jack’s caller ID show up on her phone.

Smiling in relief, she said: “Did you get through?”

“I’m not getting any answer as yet on their cell phones or the landline but there is a blizzard up there at the moment. I’ll try again in a few minutes. Just didn’t want you hanging around waiting for my call. Do you think Stapleton is telling the truth?”

“Yes. It’s been eating away at him for all these years. He’s a lawman and he covered up a murder.”

“Was there anything in the social services reports to suggest that Gallagher was sexually abusing his kids?”

“No. Nothing. Nathan had behavioral problems but they were accounted for by the physical abuse.”

She could almost hear Jack’s brain ticking all the way down the line. “Well, exactly. His father used to stub out his cigarettes on him if he was closer than the ashtray, and belt him just because he couldn’t find the remote for the TV – that doesn’t tend to produce the most well adjusted teenagers in the world. I’m just not liking this sexual abuse out of nowhere.”

“As far as I know Nathan was never seen by a doctor, Stapleton could have leaped to that conclusion because the boy was naked.”

“But that scene would have been pretty much burned onto Stapleton’s retinas. I’m thinking anything he thought he saw was probably accurate.”

Another flurry of snow melted on her coat and she wondered why the flakes in New York always seemed so much less bleak than this small town variety. “You know, Jack, Jake Gallagher fits the general description of the other victims of the Indemnity serial killer. Is it possible that he got away but not before he’d been physically and sexually abused by the killer? If that were the case, if Gallagher was a victim who got away from the serial killer in this town when he was Nathan’s age is it possible that he could have…?”

“Stored up the trauma and taken it out on his son? It’s a little pop psychology for me but it may be the best explanation we’re ever going to get. It might explain his nasty temper and alcoholism –
although the fact that his own father was a mean drunk also covers that. But if he never dealt with what was done to him, he may have spent his life taking it out on everyone else.”

“Nathan probably witnessed the murder.” Viv was still turning over everything Stapleton had told them in her mind. “He could have been scared of his brother-in-law after that, or he could have just wanted to avoid having to give evidence against him if Stapleton ever admitted what he saw. His father was killed three months before he faked his own death.”

“He may not have been able to cope with Ryan and Stapleton knowing about it either. He was only twenty-two – not the most resilient age for young men trying to deal with a trauma.” Neither one of them mentioned that twenty-six had not been the most resilient age for one of them either, but Viv thought about that telegraph pole and the car wrapped around it in the middle of the afternoon.

Sighing, Viv said: “I’m not finding a connection to Mary’s disappearance or Margaret’s. And I think the last thing on Stapleton’s mind was vengeance.”

“I agree. He had his closure and then some. It’s one thing to think you want a man dead, whole different ball game to have to dispose of his corpse after someone else has beaten his head in. From the sound of things, he’s spent the last twelve years trying to live with the guilt, not looking to get even.”

“What do you want me to do about Stapleton? I think he’s possibly a danger to himself. He’s been storing this up for a long time and now it’s out, he may not be able to live with it.”

“Hand this off to the locals – the sheriff’s a smart guy as I recall – let him handle it. He knows Stapleton. He’s probably the best placed to keep an eye on him.”

“Okay, I’ll call him now. Let me know as soon as you get hold of Danny and Martin?”

“Will do. And call me as soon as you finish up with the teacher. We still need to know where Clare Hope could be hiding Mary if she’s got her.”

“Jack, that’s another thing. Stapleton was adamant that Nathan always protected Mary even though he was younger than her. He doesn’t think he would ever harm his sister.”

“If he’s clean then Stapleton is probably right. But if he’s back on the crack…”

It didn’t need to be said aloud. They had both seen it too many times now, and addiction had a way of eroding anyone’s moral fiber faster than acid rain on sandstone.

“Maybe Mary is security?” Viv offered. “Nathan’s a witness to a crime that Ryan committed. Maybe he took Mary so that Ryan wouldn’t think about coming after him.”

“Ryan didn’t know Nathan was alive, I’d bet anything you like on that. Not until he saw the photograph that Danny and Martin showed him, and even then I don’t think he believed it until I confirmed it wasn’t Nate’s body in the car. I’ll call you as soon as I get hold of them, okay?”

She switched off the phone while more flakes melted on her coat. She thought of Stapleton carrying the burden of having covered up a killing for all these years, of Nathan Gallagher, who had probably thought himself safe from his father at last, only to suffer at his hands, and who had possibly ended up committing murder to cover his tracks, and of Mary, whose loyalties must have been so torn between her father, her husband, and her brother that something inside her had snapped with the strain. Perhaps that what had broken her spirit and turned her into the sad-eyed ghost who believed that she would never see her daughter again long before any of the rest of them had given up hope.
Danny Taylor woke, not for the first time, to the sound of an angry man shouting. For a moment reality wavered and he wondered if he was a child again, cowering out of sight while his brother took another beating on his behalf, then he blinked into full consciousness and realized he was lying in the back room of a house he didn’t recognize. There was a dresser with a picture of a child on it, a little girl with long dark hair, she was wearing a school uniform and smiling as if she wasn’t quite sure that it was permitted. There was crockery on the dresser, too, the best kind that was never used, even when there were visitors. A mirror was too dusty to reflect much more than light, and through thin drapes he could make out trees and the white covering of snowfall, but there was only the thinnest streak of red in a dark sky. His arms hurt, a lot, as did his head, which was pounding in the sickening way that suggested some blunt force trauma recently applied. When he tried to pull his arms out of their painful position, metal bit into his wrists and he realized they were cuffed behind his back.

“Mr. Ryan, you need to calm down so we can talk about this, sensibly. You’re in a great deal of trouble right now and if you want to get out of this without a very long jail sentence I advise you to…”

Martin. That was Martin talking. He sounded as if he was clinging to his patience by a thread.

“You come into my house and try to tell me how things are going to be? You need to learn some manners.”

A stranger. No, Ryan. Danny blinked hard and realized that some of the moisture running into his eyes was blood. Damn. Ryan, whose wife had gone missing. He blinked again and got the man slotted back into his memory. Frank Ryan. Six feet five and two hundred and thirty pounds of alpha male with attitude. The man had been talking about the way young men needed discipline, just before he knocked Danny out. Danny had been trying in vain to get some sense of out of him about a picture of Nathan Gallagher, and Ryan had been off on a rant of his own about rules and how they needed to be followed; how arrangements once made should be stuck to, and how he was the master of his own house. Danny knew all about those kinds of speeches and exactly what they meant – and the sickening pain in his head had really confirmed it for him.

“No, you need to understand what’s going to happen if you don’t…..”

No. No. No. That was not the way to handle this guy, Martin. Getting mad was absolutely the worst thing to do.

“You raise your voice to me again and I’ll make you wish you’d never been born.”

Ryan had that note in his voice that told Danny everything he needed to know about the kind of guy he was. The kind who made his own rules and brooked no opposition to them, even if they were unjust; the kind who was always angry and always looking for some kind of act of defiance to his rule that he could react against. Danny knew all about those kind of men. With his hands free, he knew about how to intimidate them right back these days, but if you weren’t in a position to get out of belting range or to take them down hard, you had to play by their rules, and that meant agreeing with every stupid thing they said and telling them you were sorry and you’d never do it again. That was the only thing that ever worked.

“For the last time, Ryan, you need to unlock these cuffs and you need to tell me where my partner is…”

“And you need to learn some respect.”
Danny flinched at the sound of a punch being landed. He managed to scramble to his knees; the room tilted sickeningly, like a ship on high seas, but he fought the urge to hurl.

“Listen, you crazy son-of-a-bitch, if you’ve laid a finger on Agent Taylor I’m going to make sure you go to jail for so long that flares will be back in fashion by the time you come out....”

Every hair on the back of his neck stood up in horror as he heard Martin utter those words. He didn’t even want to think about what Papi would have done to any boy who gave him that kind of lip. Even with him and Rafi doing their best to never make him angry, there had been so many flashpoints of temper; if any son of his had ever displayed the kind of attitude Martin was showing right now, Papi would have put him in the hospital for certain.

Despite the lurching of the room and the pounding in his head, the almost overwhelming need to vomit, he was on his feet and running; knowing if he didn’t get in there and get between Martin and Ryan’s fists, his partner was going to get himself beaten into a coma.

There was light spilling into the corridor in a hallway, he tried to find a weapon but there was nothing in sight, even as he circled desperately, and the blows were landing, he could hear them, punch after punch.

“Mr. Ryan?” he called desperately, stumbling down the corridor. “Please, sir, can we just talk about this?”

He lurched into the kitchen, catching his hip on the doorway as he did so and rebounding off it, to find Martin with his hands cuffed behind his back, on the floor with his back to the kitchen cabinets, blood running from his mouth, but his blue eyes blazing defiance as he told Ryan just how much shit he was in right now. At the sight of Danny, Martin’s expression was one of overwhelming relief. “Danny! Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Martin, just be quiet. Let me handle this.” Danny flashed him a warning look which was met with total incomprehension. Ryan loomed up and Danny didn’t even attempt not to flinch. He ducked his head a little and talked fast: “Sir, if we could just talk about this. If we did something to offend you, we’re sorry. We know how stressful this must be for you with your wife missing, especially after the loss of your daughter.”

Martin looked up at him in disbelief. “Danny, will you tell him he’s under arrest?” He was trying to get up but his legs weren’t strong enough to get him upright and it was clear that Ryan had landed a flurry of punches to put him on his ass in the first place. Danny wondered how Martin could not know that this was a time to just stay down and if possible pretend to be out for the count.

“Martin, shut up.” Danny flashed him a warning glance, but Martin kept looking up at him as if he’d never seen him before in his life, and couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Even now, with his coat ripped and blood spattered on his nice white shirt, Martin had absolutely no idea how this worked. He thought this was a temporary setback in the middle of them arresting a suspect; he hadn’t yet adjusted the lens far enough to perceive that, right now, they were prisoners, and if they didn’t play this carefully, they could end up being murder victims.

Danny forced a conciliatory expression onto his face, trying to hold Ryan’s gaze. “Sir, this is my fault. My partner hasn’t been doing this very long. I apologize and I...take full responsibility for anything he may have said or done. He’s under my guidance right now and anything I haven’t taught him that’s my fault, not his.”

“I think he’s the one who needs to learn some manners and you’re the one who needs to do exactly
what I tell you unless you want to be crying at your boyfriend’s funeral real soon.” Ryan grabbed Martin by the collar and yanked him to his feet in one fluid movement. Danny didn’t particularly want to think about how strong an ordinary non-military untrained guy had to be to do that so easily. Martin tried to charge him, but he was too dazed from the punches that had landed not to telegraph the move before he made it and Ryan had fast reflexes; he slammed him face first into the nearest kitchen cabinets.

Danny darted forward. “Mr. Ryan, please…! Anything Martin has said or done, it’s completely my fault.”

“Danny, what the hell’s the matter with you?” Martin demanded breathlessly. There was an ugly looking bruise coming out on his forehead now to go with the one on his jaw. “The son of a bitch is batshit frickin’ crazy.”

“That’s it.” Ryan tightened his grip on Martin’s collar and began to drag him towards the door. As Danny started forward, Ryan turned and glared at him. “You stay here. Right here. And, if you want to see him again, you don’t move.”

Danny felt as if someone had punched him in the stomach; bad memories circling him; he had hoped never to be this guy again, the one who was helpless to stop a brother taking a beating; that was why he did the job he did, to prevent at least some of the million injustices in the world.

“Please, sir, can we just talk about this?” he said in his most soothing voice. “Martin’s sorry for what he said. I’m sorry for what he said. Like I said, he’s under my command, it’s my fault if he’s done anything to offend you. I’m the one to blame.”

“Well, that’s a shame.” Ryan elbowed Danny out of the way. “Because he’s the one who’s going to pay.” His eyes flashed a warning. “Move one muscle before I come back and I’ll break his neck.”

As Ryan dragged Martin out of the kitchen door into the flurry of snow, Danny could hear Martin still arguing and struggling every step of the way. He felt dizzy and didn’t know if it was the bleeding cut on his head making him feel that way, or just the sickening familiarity of being in this situation again. The room circled him and he tried not to hurl. There was a stabbing pain in his head whenever he tried to concentrate but the thoughts kept coming; this situation wasn’t just familiar to him; it was familiar to Ryan. He’d done this before.

Danny reached into each pocket in turn awkwardly to see if his knife or lock pick were there, but his pockets had been emptied. He looked around for a knife block but there was nothing in sight. He tried to open the silverware drawer with his hands cuffed behind his back; everything felt clumsy – upside down and back to front – but he delved into the drawer and his fingers closed on one blunt knife after another, not one of them with a blade worth anything, until he felt something with a handle and prongs. He would have preferred something finer and more flexible, like a paperclip, but a fork was better than nothing as a lock pick. Perhaps he had time to pick the cuffs and...

The crunch of boots on snow outside made his heart jump in his chest. Ryan back already? Had he killed Martin? He hadn’t heard a gunshot and he would have put up a month’s salary Ryan was the type who liked to administer punishment for a good long time. Danny stuffed the fork into his pocket hastily. He barely had time to shove the drawer closed with his hip before Ryan was coming in through the open doorway, letting in a blast of freezing air and very human rage.

“Mr. Ryan, can we just talk about this?” Danny pleaded. “I want to negotiate with you. I want us to come to an agreement.”
“Your partner needs to learn some manners.” Ryan had blood on his hand from Martin’s face; it was shining wetly on the knuckles. He reached up to where a leather belt was hanging and began to wrap it around his fist. “We agreed on that?” The door swung shut behind him but the chill in Danny’s veins remained.

Danny tried to keep his voice even: “Martin doesn’t understand the rules, but I do. It’s not his fault, his father never taught them to him.”

Ryan loomed over him. “But yours did?”

Jack’s voice felt as if it had just spoken to him, he could hear it so distinctly: *Call him ‘sir’ a lot, he likes that.*

“Yes, sir. And I’ll do whatever you say, just, please don’t hurt Martin. He had major surgery this year, and I don’t think he can take… He nearly died…. But I’m fine, there’s nothing wrong with me and…” He couldn’t seem to get the words out the way he wanted; he kept seeing Rafael with his face all bloody from a beating dished out for milk Danny had spilled, and Martin lying on the ground with blood pouring from his chest and stomach.

He snatched a breath. “Sir, if you’d just let me explain? He didn’t mean to make you angry. He didn’t understand he was being rude. Please…” Danny thought this had to be about sex as well as power – so many things were – and when he darted a quick look at Ryan’s crotch for confirmation the guy certainly looked at least half-hard to him. With his heart hammering in his chest, Danny risked holding his gaze and said breathlessly: “I’ll do anything you want if you’ll leave Martin alone.”

The moment hung there between them. Danny was afraid to blink in case the connection was lost, and he had never tried so hard to achieve something that he wanted to do so little. And perhaps later – when he was on his eighteenth straight week of therapy – he would wonder why he had thought he had to do this, but right now, with Martin’s blood shining wetly on Ryan’s knuckles, with the memory too fresh of Martin’s blood soaking his hands, even this felt better than the thought of Martin getting hurt again.

Then Ryan looked away and went back to wrapping that belt around his fist in that dead-eyed purposeful way; ignoring Danny as if he were no more coherent than a yapping dog as he strode towards the door.

“No, please….” Danny darted between him and the door and planted his back against it. “He was shot twice. He was in surgery for five hours. Please…”

Ryan took him by the shoulders and slammed him back against the kitchen cabinets hard enough to knock the breath out of his body, holding his gaze intently. “You’ll get your chance to negotiate later.”

Then Ryan’s hand was on the door handle, yanking it open and letting in a blast of freezing air that made the fire in the hearth flicker and dance. Which was when Danny was gifted one of the memories that had been simmering under the surface for all these years, which he had chosen not to remember, of blows barely averted by the frantic pleading or bodily intervention of people who had taken his father’s fists in his place. His brother desperately shoving Danny behind him when Danny had shouted at their father for hitting their mother: He’s just a stupid kid. He doesn’t even know what he’s saying. *You want to hit someone? Hit me!*

“You want to hit someone?” Danny threw out quickly.
Ryan turned to him with a frown and Danny realized that he briefly had his attention. “You’re angry that your wife is gone and we haven’t found her? So, you want to take it out on someone? Take it out on me. Martin’s an Ivy League boy scout. He’s not going to be able to take what you want to dish out. One more punch and he’s going to be unconscious, and I know you have a lot of rage you want to use up right now and that’s just not going to cut it for you, so, you want a punching bag – I’m right here.”

Ryan hesitated and for the second time Danny thought he might have gotten through; swallowing hard as the guy loomed over him, looking like six feet five of pain that was just about to happen, and then Ryan grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around. He patted Danny down invasively and found the fork, holding it up in front of Danny’s eyes. “I told you not to move.”

“I’m sorry,” Danny said hastily.

The backhand was a white burst of pain across the right side of his face, his lip splitting and spilling hot salty blood down his chin; Ryan’s eyes a cold blue blaze in his set face. Danny wondered just how long this explosion had been building – since Mary’s disappearance, or for the whole of the four years since his daughter had been lost and the FBI had failed to find her.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take it out of your friend’s hide.”

“No, Ryan…..” His head was singing, the room a smear of bleeding color and melting furniture, light a jagged pain behind his eyes. “I’m sorry. Please don’t hurt Martin.”

“Shut up.” The snarl was savage. Ryan hauled him over to the table. It was an enormous piece of furniture that looked as old as the woods themselves. Ryan shoved him down on to his ass, pushed his hands back with his foot – sending a white-fire lick of pain through Danny’s shoulders – and then lifted the massive oak table before letting the leg drop down, Danny’s cuffed wrists secured by it. “Stay still and be quiet,” he told him. “Or I’ll break every bone in his body.” He tossed the fork negligently onto the floor, not seeming to notice or care as it bounced under the dresser, turned on his heel and went out the front door, slamming it purposefully behind him.

“No, please, Ryan, don’t!” As the crunch of boots in snow got fainter, Danny raised his voice to shout: “Martin! Do what he says – do you hear me? Just do what he tells you! Martin!” He twisted at the cuffs desperately, trying to slide his hands free, feeling the metal catch on skin and bone, bruising and scraping, but they were unmoving and the tick of the clock sounded deafening even over the thunder of his heartbeat. Whatever was happening in the barn was happening just too far away to hear. He kicked out at a chair he couldn’t quite reach, feeling a pulse in his neck throb with frustration, having to snatch in lungfuls of air over his anger at being helpless, at having let himself get captured like some stupid rookie.

He slid off his shoe and tried to reach the fork under the dresser with his foot; he could see it, but he couldn’t quite get the traction; he scraped off his sock as well, and that was better, he could just reach the end of it with one long toe.

Time crawled past as he strained his ears and tried to wheedle the fork closer, trying to hear past the whistling of wind in the chimney and snow spattering against the panes. He could practically feel the trees inching closer, bleak and menacing, the great bowl of the forest valley darkening as the day got even colder and the gray metal sky paled with unshed snow. He hated the ticking of the clock, and hated even more the wind that snatched away tiny fragments of sound, all of which sounded more than a little like pain.

He moved the fork to the left a little, but couldn’t hook it out. He wriggled down lower, trying to gain another precious inch of traction while all the time straining to hear any scrap of noise that
would tell him what was happening in the barn. When he braced his back against the table it didn’t shift even a fraction of an inch. Cursing under his breath, Danny shoved hard against it and felt as if he had tried to move a wall. Thinking of how Ryan had picked it up as if it weighed so little, the careless way he had moved Danny out his way as if he were entirely inconsequential, his fear for Martin cranked up another notch. They spent so long training to learn how to deal with people stronger and heavier than they were; were so adept at the methods whereby an agent could use the perp’s own weight against them, that he had forgotten in the intervening time just how it felt to be really scared, but he was scared right now. If Martin had ever been in a mental place where backing down had seemed sensible to him, being shot and living with pain and what pain could make him do had eroded that. Martin was all about proving to himself that he wasn’t scared at the moment even though, right now, being scared was absolutely the right way to be.

“Martin, please, just do what the crazy son of a bitch tells you to do,” Danny breathed as he struggled even lower, wrists screaming a protest at him but determined to get that fork if he had to dislocate both his shoulders to do it.

The minute hand juddered from one roman numeral to the next while the second hand swept around and around and still Ryan didn’t come back, and Martin could be dead by now. Ryan could be digging a grave out there in the woods or even in the floor of the barn itself, before coming back to put a bullet in Danny’s head, except he seemed to be about the discipline; people bending to his will, doing as he said. That was why he needed humoring. That was the trouble with Martin. He was so damned by-the-book ninety-five percent of the time that the five percent of him that wasn’t wired that way was totally un governable. He just internalized his unhappiness without saying anything until it built up to the point where it broke out in a flood. Martin had put up with a lot of crap from his father over the years, no doubt about it. Lectures and sighs and head shakes and that over-protective interference in his decision-making. And yes, no doubt it was frustrating sometimes to have your father always looking over your shoulder trying to smooth out every wrinkle in the road in case you weren’t man enough to weather the bumps, but this was not the time for Martin to indulge his Daddy Issues.

He wondered if – even now – Martin knew how to ask for help. Danny felt he had to carry some of the blame for Martin getting in so deep with the painkillers; if he hadn’t been so caught up in his own issues about Martin getting shot, he would have kept an eye on him and seen the signs earlier, but all the same, Martin was a smart guy, and he had been given plenty of red flags, and they still hadn’t been enough to tell him that he couldn’t do this alone. Apparently, asking for help was something Fitzeralds just didn’t do. They just dug themselves deeper and deeper, until their lives were completely out of control and they had so far to walk to get back to normality that their feet would be bleeding by the time they reached it.

He was so proud of Martin for getting himself straight but he still wished that he had come to him earlier when he could have stopped him from walking himself over that cliff. Danny could suck it up when he had to; blame, even unjust blame, he could take it and say ‘sorry’ and move on; he didn’t have anyone he needed to prove anything to, maybe not even himself any more. Every day he didn’t take a drink he knew he was stronger now than he had been then; every day he wasn’t shooting up an in alley, or sitting on death row, he was bucking the odds, given his upbringing. He knew how close he was to being his brother, how lucky he was not to be in prison or a junkie, or both. He, who had been given no advantages at all, had nothing to prove, and Martin, who had been given every advantage, had to prove to himself he could have earned it even if it hadn’t been handed to him; even though he spent his life trying to prove it hadn’t been handed to him, even when it had, when what he should have been concentrating on realizing was that he was good enough that he would have got it anyway. That was the big lesson Danny liked to think that Martin had learned since being on Jack Malone’s team, but apparently he was still in the remedial class some days and those were the occasions when, against all reason, he would be the one mouthing
off to the enormous angry guy while Danny showed sense enough to call the bastard ‘sir’ for both their sakes.

He had never been so pissed with Martin or so scared for him. Seeing him get gunshot had been bad enough, but Martin had just made an unpredictable sadist angry with him when he was completely at the guy’s mercy, and if Martin hadn’t actually been beaten to death, Danny was going to give him a very loud lecture about not mouthing off to madmen some time soon.

It was half an hour before he heard the crunch of boots on snow. He hastily shoved his foot back into his shoe, concealing his sock under his calf a moment before Ryan came back in again, bringing in with him a spiteful flurry of snow, one flake of which slapped Danny’s cheek like a rebuke then slid down it, melting. Ryan had blood on his hands, Danny saw that right away, and on his shirt, red spatters.

“Oh God. Ryan, what have you done to Martin?” He could hear the fear in his voice and tried to banish it; trying to sound the way he knew a psychologist would be advising if he was linked up to one right now: conciliatory, reasonable. He lowered his voice, tried to keep his body language slightly submissive. “Sir, please tell me what you’ve done to Agent Fitzgerald?”

“He needed a lesson in manners.” Ryan poured himself a glass of whiskey as if this were a regular occurrence for him, as if, after the regulation beating of the captive FBI agent, a real man of the mountains always had to have a shot of Jim Beam.

Danny’s heart did a tap dance in his chest. “Is he still alive?”

Ryan glanced across at him as if the subject was boring him. “Can’t learn much if he’s dead, can he? I told you, he needed a lesson. He got one. And he’ll be getting another one real soon if he doesn’t mend his ways. Now, hold your tongue, I’m sick of all your noise.”

“Sir – Mr. Ryan, it’s very cold out there. If you leave Martin out there in this weather, he’s not going to make it….”

Ryan loomed over him. “I told you to be quiet. He’s in the barn. He’ll make it well enough.”

“Please, just bring him back in here. I promise you, he won’t be any more trouble….”

“Hold your noise or I’ll hose him down and leave him outside to turn into an ice sculpture.”

Danny swallowed the next three things he had been about to say. He wanted to impress upon Ryan that holding them was dangerous and futile, that people would look for them, that he would never get away with it and it would be much better for all parties if he would just let them go now, but he didn’t doubt the man meant what he said. He had crossed that line that said that the law applied to him as well as other people; as far as he was concerned the only law was his, and anyone who attempted to upset that world view was going to be beaten until they agreed with him or possibly killed to stop them arguing. Either the loss of his daughter or his abandonment by his wife, or the two events together, had conspired to cause a meltdown in Ryan’s head, and Danny and Martin had reaped the consequences of all that build up of rage. There were a million things Danny wanted to say, and he even thought some of them might have gotten through, but how could he risk it when Ryan had already made it clear that any disobedience of Danny’s was going to be paid for by Martin?

Ryan downed his whiskey in one gulp while gazing at Danny with unfriendly eyes. “Did you hear
what I said, boy? One more word out of you I didn’t ask for and your partner’s an icicle come morning. Tell me you understand?”

Seething inwardly with frustration, Danny gritted his teeth and managed a taut: “Yes, sir.”

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They left Bennett talking to Stapleton, his deputy wandering around outside awkwardly, shoulders hunched against the flakes that found their way between his coat and his neck, looking like a child left out in the rain, and, inside, Bennett with his head bent close to Stapleton, not judging, just listening; another wrecked life washed up on the shore of their investigation.

As Viv drove them through the snow to the house of the woman who had taught Clare Hope, Samantha was still seeing that scene in her mind’s eye: the barn and the beaten naked boy, and every time she saw him like that she was getting newspaper headlines flashing through her mind, a kaleidoscope of corpses, police photographs of bodies coaxed from the mud of ditches, hands bound behind their backs, faces bruised into unrecognizable shapes. She was so cold she could never imagine being warm again. She glanced sideways at Vivian. “Do you think it was him?”

Viv’s voice was as steady as a lifeline. “Who?”

“Jake Gallagher. Do you think he was the serial killer?”

“He was too young.”

“Maybe he was a victim who got away from the first killer but it turned him into a killer himself.”

Viv grimaced. “I suggested that to Jack but I don’t think he really liked it as an explanation. I don’t think I do either.”

“It would make sense of the killings happening over such an extended time period.”

Viv said gently: “Only if the killings stopped for the six years while Jake Gallagher was in prison. Which they didn’t.”

From the beginning of her training, Sam had known what a crime it was to make a theory try to fit the facts instead of letting the facts lead one to the solution. In this instance she felt positively indignant towards the facts – slippery deceptive things that seemed to have no interest in forming themselves into a coherent pattern. “But it fits – it even explains why Mary felt so guilty about the murder victims. If her father was the one killing them and she didn’t turn him in, she was partly responsible for those mothers never knowing what happened to their sons.”

“Except the killings didn’t stop while Gallagher was in prison.”

And there they were, dusty men looking up from broken down cars, relieved to see lights on the road, or weary hitchhikers holding up a thumb despondently only to be trapped in the headlights of a braking vehicle, men who were cold or hungry or exhausted sliding into the warm comfort of a car only to wake up with their hands tied behind their backs and blood trickling from a head wound, their clothes already burned, their lives already over, except for the screaming.

She wanted to believe it was Gallagher and that justice had finally caught up with him. She wanted to believe it was definitely over. “Bennett said there could have been two killers. Perhaps Gallagher had an accomplice who kept on picking up drifters while his partner was in prison.”

“The young men killed by two murderers instead of one were mostly in the early eighties. In the
fifties, sixties, and seventies, and then again in the late eighties there was only one killer.”

Sam banged her head back against the seat rest. “This case doesn’t make any sense.” The scenes kept running through her head, a permanent loop of weary drifters silhouetted against the blaze of headlights, their shadows not showing sense enough to flee, car doors opening, and then a barn somewhere and the blows raining on them. The scene switched to a trailer and a drunken brute stumbling into the room of a teenage girl whose mother was passed out on the couch so that she wouldn’t have to deal with what happened next. She closed her eyes as if that would somehow block out images in her mind. “I keep thinking about her.”

“Mary?”

“Clare.” She opened her eyes and gazed at Viv as if she could provide an answer. “How can it happen like that? Everyone knows her father’s beating her mother and molesting her and no one does anything? A teenage girl having to abort her father’s baby and the whole town just…rolls on around it. How would you even know there was another way to live? All she’s seen since the day she was born was ugliness and cruelty; no wonder she ended up turning tricks in the local bus stop to buy crack. Anything that blotted out reality for an hour was probably worth any price she had to pay for it.”

She clicked open her phone and dialed Danny’s number again. Still nothing. She tried Martin’s number with fingers that shook slightly, only to have to listen to a blandly unhelpful voice informing her that the cell phone she was calling was not switched on at this time. “What is up with those two? Why aren’t they answering?” The anxiety had used to operate at more controllable levels, but ever since Martin’s shooting it was as ungovernable as her temper, a shooting star spike of fear that if she took her eye off a teammate they would be developing life-threatening heart problems or getting themselves riddled with bullets.

“Jack’s following it up, Sam.” Viv checked the address they had been given as she drove slowly down a snow-covered road. “I think this is it.”

“I just need to…” Sam dialed Martin’s number again, holding it to her ear while she tried not to pray. “Come on, Martin, switch on your damned…” She broke off as the same voice repeated the same message, and held the phone against her forehead for a moment, feeling the soft indentations of the numbers against her skin; willing him to just be there so she could tell him the relative of the missing person whose house he was in had once killed a man. Danny had already been knocked unconscious when camped out in someone’s house; the anxious husband revealed to be a bomber wanted for blowing up an abortion clinic. It wasn’t as if her fears were groundless.

Viv’s hand on her back rubbed gently between her shoulder blades. “They’ll be fine.”

The hot salt tears came out of nowhere and she wondered if it was just being back here in this damned snow that was making her feel so fissured with weakness. Perhaps this was about Clare, and her frustrated empathy with someone who had probably gone beyond any help now; was probably someone she was going to have to end up arresting for a crime against another woman who was also owed a childhood she had never known. Or perhaps she should have talked to someone a long time ago about how it had felt to walk across that neon-lit street and see those crimson-stained cloths lying in puddles of Martin’s blood; to sit with him for all those hours in recovery, breathing in time with his breaths as if she could keep his heart beating and his lungs inflating and deflating by will alone.

“I should have known. I knew what his aunt was like. She was in so much pain and so scared and she didn’t tell anyone; she just…kept it all inside until…. I should have known he wasn’t okay. I should have…”
Viv’s arms enfolded her in a hug and Sam remembered Martin breaking down in her arms; that protective warmth she’d felt as she held him and he cried and cried…. Vivian said gently: “I think you’ve been beating yourself up about the Martin business for long enough.”

Sam hastily wiped her eyes. “Viv, I can’t… I still feel so…”

“You know it’s not a crime to find a guy physically attractive without wanting to date him forever.” Viv lowered her head to catch Sam’s eyes. “Martin’s a good looking guy. You were tempted. You gave way to temptation. You’re both single, and it’s not as if you slipped him a roofie. He was willing, wasn’t he?”

“But I knew the kind of guy he was. I should have known that it wasn’t going to be okay for him if it was just about having sex. I knew he’d want to make it a relationship thing. I thought I was okay with that. I thought I could… Sometimes I think there must be something wrong with me. If they’re unavailable I want them, but when they’re not….”

“Sam, Martin had known you for two years and he should have gone into it with his eyes open. If he kidded himself that things were going to be different between the two of you just because he wanted them to be, that was up to him. You weren’t responsible for his assumptions. Unless you made him sleep on the damp patch every time I think your conscience is clear.”

Sam laughed despite herself. “I just feel so… crappy. Sometimes I look at him and I remember him being so… happy and sweet and relaxed and funny because he thought he and I were….”

“Sam, Martin’s at that age when he’s starting to think that when his father was his age, he was already married and Martin was already born, okay? Guys hit thirty and they start thinking they should be taking a girl home to meet their mothers. He set himself up for disappointment. All you did was what you always do.”

“Sometimes I don’t like me very much,” Sam admitted.

“Sometimes none of us like ourselves very much. But it’s not like you broke his heart – you just hurt his feelings a little. He’s over it. You need to be too.”

“Because there’s always some new mistake to make that I can beat myself up about instead, right?”

“Exactly.” Viv glanced at her sideways. “Is Sheriff Bennett the kind of mistake you had in mind…?”

Sam rolled her eyes. “He’s a mistake I’ve already made about twenty times over. Maybe not him, but a half a dozen guys just like him.”

“So, you’re not tempted…?”

“Oh, I’m always tempted – hence the number of my mistakes. But I’m learning to Just Say No.”

“Even to the really cutes ones?”

“Especially to the really cute ones.”

“You know, that’s not much fun for those of us who are happily married and have to get our thrills vicariously these days – especially as Danny will never kiss and tell.”

“My heart bleeds for you.” Sam smiled at her. “Thanks, by the way. I didn’t realize how much sackcloth and ashes chafes.”
The security light had come on outside Eileen Walker’s house; the door opened and the woman stood there, a dark silhouette against light, gazing out at them through the swirl of white flakes. Sam tried to get her into focus, pull the case back to the front of her mind. They weren’t here to make sure Danny and Martin were safe; there was a woman out there somewhere who could be a prisoner and was undoubtedly pregnant enough to go into labor any time soon. They needed to find her before any more harm came to her, because there was no doubt in Sam’s mind that Mary Ryan was well overdue a break.

“You okay?” Viv opened the car door, looking calm and focused and exactly the way an FBI agent ought to look when time was of the essence and everyone they spoke to could hold the information to help them find their missing person.

Sam nodded. “Fine.”

They walked up the drive with their footsteps in perfect rhythm, their shoes leaving matching prints in the new fall of snow.

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Danny Taylor’s world had narrowed to the darkness of this room, the ticking of another clock – he had never known a house so caught up in marking each slow-crawl of time – and this thin spindle of chill metal with which he was trying to spring the lock. Twenty-seven minutes since Ryan had taken the keys to the Humvee from Danny’s coat and walked out of the house. Ten minutes since he had finally managed to hook that damned fork. He had cut his wrist on the cuffs in the process and almost wrenched his shoulder out of his socket, but he had managed to get a decent toehold on it and now, after a lot of squirming and twisting, he had it in his fingers.

There were so many stories of this happening, the biter bit, the law enforcement agent bound with his own cuffs, shot with his own gun. But there hadn’t been a gunshot, and even with the swirl of snow and wind outside, he would have heard it; even muffled through a sack, he would have heard something, that cough of gunpowder and death. He’d heard gunfire too often not to recognize it, however distorted or distant it might be; it never sounded like a car backfire to him. There were always the echoes of the angel of death in its trumpet.

The house was getting colder; he could feel the pipes contracting like hardening arteries as the hot water stopped its flow. If it were already this cold in here what was it like in the barn? What if he only hadn’t heard a gunshot because Ryan had snapped Martin’s neck or beaten his head in with something that crushed his skull with a wet muffled thud…?

Danny swore as the fork slipped out of the cuff and dug into his thumb again. He could feel the blood trickling down between his fingers from the previous fork stabs; but although the operation was delicate, one had to use a certain amount of force. His anxiety levels were telling him to hurry, hurry, hurry, seeing the car speeding down the hill road, that snow-filled valley of firs a steep-sided bowl of darkness to the west; the sky white metal with the coming blizzard and Ryan with his foot to the floor, staging the accident that would make everyone who might be searching for them start looking in the wrong place. And all the while Martin was bleeding in the barn, or else already dead. Danny stabbed himself with the fork again and cursed, then snatched a breath, deep breathing, steadying himself, no point in thinking about Martin; what was done to him was done and he couldn’t go back in time and avert it, all he could do was very carefully insert the prong of the fork into the locking mechanism and try to spring the catch so that he could get loose and do what needed to be done.

The deep breathing helped, and for a moment it was just him, the prong of the fork, the catch of the lock, his fingers slippery but dexterous, and there at last was the right grip and the right pressure and it was going, he could feel it….

The click sounded deafening. He dropped the fork in shock and went to scrubble for it, fingers reaching desperately, shocked when the cuffs abruptly gave way and he realized he was free.

He was on his feet so fast that the kitchen pirouetted like a girl at her first dance, a spin of faded blue and yellow cabinets. Someone had stenciled flowers and butterflies on them in the past but they had faded with time, insects missing half their wings, flowers whose petals had long since flaked away. He had to lean hard on the table to get his bearings, heart slamming, cold sweat running down his spine as his head hammered a warning about how hard it had been hit. The keys to the cuffs were on the dresser in a blue and white willow pattern fruit bowl, kept company by a slightly shriveled orange. Ryan had tossed them there as if they were of so little consequence, Danny and Martin these dumb pups he’d had to leather that had now dutifully learned to cower. Anger spiked in him, but he banished it at once. Getting angry about being powerless led to that
need for some chemical forgetfulness; vodka or crack or a bar fight with a stranger who ended up
taking the brunt of a decade of frustration. A man sucked it up and moved on and didn’t let this be
all that he was: the victim of an injustice on a slow burn to oblivion. He grabbed the keys and
pocketed them, snatching up the phone only to find it dead, no dial tone; when he followed the
wire in case it was just unplugged he found it in order. The fault was in the line to the house then;
probably a cut wire on a telegraph pole. Something Ryan had calmly driven out there and done
while Danny was cuffed to a damned table trying to move a fork with his toe. He pulled on his
coat and started searching drawers for their guns and their badges, their cell phones, anything to
make him feel like an FBI agent again, and not like a kid who had to listen to another taking a
beating he would much rather have had directed at him.

There was nothing. No guns, no holsters, no ID. He tried the drawers in the back room where Ryan
had laid him out and then looked in the bedrooms, but he couldn’t find so much as a box of
ammunition; not even a hunting knife. He could almost imagine Ryan pointing out to him
reasonably that of course he didn’t keep his guns where anyone could find them, he was used to
having a child to think of.

Danny grabbed a blanket and a sweater and the first aid kit from the bathroom instead, stuffing it
all into a backpack. He added matches and a knife and fork into the rucksack as well, keeping the
bottled water on top, despite all the snow out there. It was a three-hour drive to the hospital and it
was going to take longer in this weather. He needed to be able to keep Martin hydrated and warm.
He found their cell phones in the kitchen garbage, smashed to a hundred pieces of plastic and metal
and mixed in with the greasy remnants of a microwave dinner. It would have taken an expert to put
them back together and there wasn’t any time; for all he knew he was already too late. The keys to
Ryan’s Cherokee were also in the fruit bowl, orange scent warring with the leather smell of the key
chain from the dealership where Ryan had bought it.

As he turned, he saw the whiskey bottle again, the light glinting through its amber contents. It
called to him like the One Ring to a Nazgul, and he found himself walking towards it, imagining
the taste of it in his mouth, knowing it would help dull the pain of what had been done to Martin
like nothing else. He picked it up and unscrewed the bottle, inhaling the scent of it and then, even
as he was waiting for that delicious burn on his tongue, his hand was upending the bottle over the
sink and pouring out every irresistible drop. A part of him was relieved, another part wanted to lean
in and start licking the drain just to get the taste of it.

He stumbled out into the night, the cold slamming into him, the warning whine of the wind in the
trees and a flurry of snow melting against his skin, letting him know there was more to come, and
from here on it was only getting colder. If was thirty degrees at the most and being out in this was
like being held under a freezing sea of wet air. He just wanted the car engine running so he could
get Martin into it with no delay, just ease him into the back seat, cover him with a blanket and then
drive hell for leather to the nearest hospital. But when he turned the key in the ignition nothing
happened, not a sound. He staggered out and lifted the hood, hoping for a loose connection,
something obvious, fixable, and instead found the starter missing. It occurred to him that he, with
his years at law school and his experience in the FBI, was currently less use to Martin than Rafael
would have been; his brother could have found a way to make this damned thing work, even with
that starter missing; Danny didn’t even know where to begin. He slammed down the hood and
backed up, hating this situation: no car, no guns, no phones, and time running out rapidly. He
couldn’t put it off any longer – time to find out if he still had a partner or if Martin was already a
corpse.

Danny left behind the crunch of snow for the muffled straw scent of the barn. A battery lantern
was hanging from a hook, unlit, left in readiness for Ryan’s return. Danny twisted the dial and the
light spread out from it, a soft golden glow, color of mangers and nativity plays. The first thing it
showed him was the torn remnants of Martin’s coat and jacket and his heart turned straight over in his chest. He picked up the coat and it looked as if it had been shredded, it had been yanked off with such ferocity. The jacket was almost in two pieces where it seemed to have been ripped from Martin’s body. “No, no, no…” Danny breathed. This was exactly what he had been afraid of when Ryan came back in smelling of all that testosterone.

He rounded a stall and held up the lantern, looking for someone who was probably going to be naked but might not yet be dead…. Another jolt as he saw a battered figure slumped on the ground with his hands cuffed to an upright.

All those bruises and his overwhelming feeling was relief, because he could see the rise and fall of Martin’s chest, which meant he was still breathing, and, apart from the loss of his jacket, he was still wearing the same amount of clothes he had been when Danny last saw him, which could mean that all Ryan had done was hit him. Danny allowed himself to snatch a much-needed breath, although his chest still felt so tight it was as if fear had it snared. He crouched down next to Martin, holding up the lantern, and saw again the rise and fall of his chest. Martin shivered with the cold and began that vague stirring of someone semi-conscious in response to another bending over him. As Danny’s fingers gently cradled his face, Martin’s head came up blearily and he blinked in confusion. Danny gazed into bloodshot blue eyes, mauve bruising under both of them from pain, cold, and too many collisions with unyielding fists.

“Martin…?” Danny hung the lantern on a nail and tilted up his head so that he could examine it. Martin’s face was a mess of bruises, the left side had taken the worst of the blows from the right-handed Ryan, but a backhand had bruised the left side of his jaw as well. Dried blood had congealed down the left side of his face from a cut over his eye, and more had run in a now-crusted trail from his nose, the left cheekbone was lumpy, possibly cracked, and there was a dull red bruise along the right side of his jaw. His mouth was swollen and cut, his white shirt ripped and blood spattered. He looked as if he’d gone ten rounds with Hasim Rahman and never once got off the ropes.

In a voice that shook a little, he said: “Do you have a death wish?”

Martin blinked at him dazedly, the soft light clearly eye-wateringly bright to him. His teeth already chattering. “What kind of a question…? No, of course not.”

“Then what the hell were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that crazy son-of-a-bitch had no right to take us prisoner. What were you thinking?” He sounded a lot more like Martin than he had been expecting. He had been afraid that Martin was going to sound like someone else: a rape victim for one.

“That it would have been nice to get a partner with more brain cells than his shoe-size. What happened in there?”

“I don’t know. He came back into the kitchen and I asked where you were and he said you were in the bathroom. He started crowding me and I asked him to step back – which was stupid, because I should have put him down hard then – but then he must have punched me, because the next thing I know I’m sliding down the wall with the room spinning and he’s got my gun in his hand. He cuffed me before I had a chance to get my bearings. You?”

Watching him carefully, Danny could see no signs of evasion or concealment. Battered half to death he might be, but he still seemed to be…Martin. “He hit me with something right in the middle of a conversation about his brother-in-law. Next thing I knew I was waking up with a headache.”
Martin squinted up at him in concern. “You okay? You don’t look so good.”

“Trust me, I look a lot better than you.”

“What happened to Ryan? Where is he?”

“He’s taken the Humvee – probably to dump it somewhere and make it look like we ran off the road. When he comes back I think he’s going to kill us and bury us in the woods. So, rather than waiting around for that, I thought we might try breaking out of here and running away.”

Martin swallowed painfully, tongue straying over the blood on his swollen lip. “We need to arrest him. He’s dangerous.”

“And I’m good with arresting him when I have a gun in my hand, not when I’m unarmed and have a half-dead partner bleeding all over me. I think you have a concussion.”

“I’m fine,” Martin insisted unconvincingly.

“Like hell you are.” Danny crouched behind him, wincing as he saw the blood running down Martin’s wrists. “Hold still.”

“This isn’t my fault,” Martin insisted. “I didn’t do anything to provoke him.”

“You were provoking him the whole time I was trying to get him to calm down!”

“That was after he’d hit us both. I think the whole being reasonable strategy was kind of a dead duck by that point. Something in that call from Jack set him off and it wasn’t me. We need to work out what’s up with him.”

Danny took a moment to snatch a few calming breaths, remembering Jack slamming him against that car, eyes fiery with anger and fear. Now he knew exactly how he must have felt. He turned the key in the lock, easing the cuffs away from his injured wrists. Martin hissed with pain and put his head back against the upright. Martin’s wrists looked like his, bruised, swollen, and cut. Danny very gently cupped his face with his hand, not sure if he was trying to conceal anger and project compassion or conceal his compassion and project anger. It was taking all the self-control he had not to pull Martin into a hug and start either crying all over him or shaking him until his teeth rattled. “You look like crap.”

“Man, you really know how to sweet talk a guy.” Gritting his teeth against the pain in his shoulders, Martin easied his arms forward.

Danny pulled up his bloodstained shirt, realizing his hands were shaking harder than ever as he did so, expecting to find those healed wounds ripped open again, and Martin spilling blood. For an instant in the battery light he thought his hands were red again, soaked to the wrists as he kept pressure on the wound and saw Martin slipping into unconsciousness. He ran gentle fingers over Martin’s skin, needing to be sure about this, but the healed wounds had held, no tearing, although he winced at the mottled area of bruising all over his ribs. When he tentatively touched it, Martin hissed and twisted away from his touch. “Damnit, Fitzie,” Danny hissed.

“You should try breathing around it.”

“I’m serious, Martin. I think he’s cracked your ribs.”

He fingered the discolored area again gently and it was fever-hot against his hands. There were dull red contusions all over Martin’s stomach as well, under and around the scar tissue from the
gunshot wounds. That must have hurt, must have hurt like white molten lead all over again, and yet Martin hadn’t backed down. What the hell were you trying to prove, Martin? But he knew, of course he knew. All those months of being in pain, shuffling around, every staircase a nightmare, every meal an ordeal, Martin had needed to prove to himself that he was normal again, not weak, not in need of anyone’s protection. It was so hard not to yell but he still remembered Jack yelling at him, and even if it had made Jack feel better to vent all that protective frustrated fear, it certainly hadn’t helped Danny Taylor, and he doubted taking a leaf out of Jack’s book would help Martin either.

“Okay, Martin, we need to get you up and find out how badly you’re hurt and whether or not you can walk.”

Martin glanced up at him with difficulty through a black eye and a drying blood trail from his cut head. “I told you I’m fine.”

“You know saying something – doesn’t make it true. Hang on to me, okay? One, two, three –” Danny hauled him to his feet as gently as he could, but Martin still gasped at the pain of moving. Danny shook his head. “I need to wrap those ribs.” Danny quickly unrolled the bandages in the first aid kit and began to strap up Martin’s ribs as tight as the man could bear it and then a half pull tighter. Current medical thinking might advise rest and painkillers but without access to either of those things, he was going traditional here with the supportive bandaging.

Martin hissed and Danny winced. “I’m sorry, but it has to be tight.” Martin just nodded, still trying to breathe around the pain, a hand pressed to the upright as he tried to ride it out.

Danny unscrewed the bottle of water and held it to his lips. Martin gulped it down gratefully and tried to smile, although his face looked drawn with pain. “Any chance I can have those aspirin now?”

Grimacing, Danny poured some of the water onto a towel he’d snatched from the bathroom and tried to wipe the worst of the blood from Martin’s face. “You could have internal bleeding. I don’t think we can risk anything that could thin your blood.” His nose had stopped bleeding but the cut above his eye was still trickling. “I think you may need stitches.”

Martin took the towel from him and pressed it much more firmly to his head, wincing at the pain but dabbing the cut dry. “Just put a Band Aid on it, if you’ve got one in your little First Aid kit there. Where did you get all this stuff from anyway?”

Danny stuck a Band Aid over the cut as well as he could, tilting Martin’s head up to examine it in the light and trying to remember what that guy in the hospital had done to him when checking him for a concussion, but all he could remember from that time was Martin lying on the gurney covered in blood. “I stole it from Ryan’s bathroom cabinet. Also, matches, and a sweater and a blanket.” He really did not like the look of that cheekbone or the livid bruise on his jaw – which had evidently been the one to lay him out. “Are you sure you’re not concussed? Because that guy was not pulling his punches.”

“I’m fine. You stole things from the relative of a missing person?”

“Yes, I was a bad boy. When we get back, Jack can spank me, right now I’m more worried about stopping Ryan from spanking you again. No double vision?”

“What are you – my mother?”

“Just humor me – follow my finger with your eyes.”
Sighing, Martin dutifully followed Danny’s finger, correctly named the President of the United States, and the day of the week while Danny chewed his lip nervously as he looked Martin over. It took him a moment to get the words out: “Martin, did Ryan…do anything else to you…?”

Martin blinked at him in slightly dazed confusion. “Like what?”

“Like anything…else?”

Martin looked down at himself in confusion. “Danny, you can see everything he did to me. You’ve been poking your nose into every bruise for the last ten minutes.”

Perhaps he was wrong but he really didn’t think Martin was a good enough actor to be lying right now. He would have expected him to wake up flinching and traumatized if anything…like that had been done to him, and there had been no signs of evasion since Martin had opened his eyes. Yet he was sure he had been right about Ryan’s motivation, too. Perhaps the guy had a disciplinary alpha male bug up his ass about making young men obey him, but he also got off on it, Danny would have laid money on that. He would have said Martin had been saved through not being Ryan’s type – except Ryan had zeroed in on Martin from the start even though they had both been equally polite until after the guy had started hitting them, suggesting Martin was exactly his type and Ryan had always intended to make him pay for it. Or perhaps Ryan had managed to hold onto some self-restraint, after all. Martin was badly bruised but he didn’t seem to be coughing up blood. Perhaps a part of Ryan had not wanted to become a rapist or a murderer – under normal circumstances that would be a reasonable assumption – so why did Danny feel in his bones now, with the same conviction Jack must have felt in the past that Ryan abused his wife, that Ryan had no problem with becoming either of those things?

Martin was the living, breathing, apparently unmolested, proof that Danny was doing Ryan an injustice and yet all he found himself thinking was that Ryan must have been saving the really bad stuff for later.

“How are you doing?”

“Fine.”

“I mean without falling over, throwing up or passing out?”

“For the last time – I’m fine.”

Danny had a vivid memory of Martin telling everyone how fine he was and how ready to come back to work and then paling with pain as he had to get to his feet even with a cane to help him.

“Okay. Well, while you’re being so fine and dandy, just hang onto me, we’ll take it one step at a time.” He put his arm around Martin, trying not to flinch when Martin winced at the pressure on his ribs. Every minute he expected to hear the sound of Ryan coming back before he had got Martin to safety. Not that there was any ‘safety’ around here. No shelter either. The second to last thing he wanted to do right now was drag his beaten partner out into a blizzard and force him to scramble down a rocky slope through a snowdrift; unfortunately that still scored over leaving Martin anywhere that Ryan could find him.

Martin glanced out at the flurry of snow and white-laden trees and drew in a painful breath. Everything was glittering as it froze, more snow piling onto the white blanket that already covered the yard. “What about the phone?”

“Dead.”
“Cell phones?”

“Smashed.”

“Guns?”

“None in the house and, trust me, I looked. He must have taken ours with him as well as any he has. There are a couple of blunt knives in the kitchen drawer.” Danny held one up to show just how pathetic the blade was.

“Okay, he has our car, we take his.”

“Already tried it. He took the starter. Unless you fitted in a car maintenance course you’ve never told me about in between all that accountancy and investigating alien abductions, it’s a big hunk of useless metal right now.”

Martin winced at the pain of breathing in and out, already locked rigid with trying to avoid using any of the muscles touching his ribs. When he glanced up at him, bruises seeming to darken on his skin even as they talked, he looked so ill that Danny felt sick inside. “I’m sorry, Martin, but we need to get out of here now.”

As he pushed the door open wider, the cold was a fist to his chest, a freezing chill with every breath. Martin snatched a lungful of cold air then began to cough, trying to conceal how much it hurt as that action tore through his ribs. The barn had seemed so cold after the house, but compared with the great outdoors, it was positively sheltered.

Danny tried to sound positive: “There’s a stream that runs through the valley. We’ll follow that – stop us getting lost.”

Martin wiped some more blood from his mouth. “We should wait for him to come back. Take him out as he gets out of the car. It’s two to one in our favor and – speaking for myself – I’d really like a chance to hit him with a blunt instrument.”

Danny looked down the long rough road that led nowhere but here. It was the only level piece of land around, for all its ruts and rocks, and it was the one path they could not afford to take in case they met Ryan coming back the other way.

Martin was quietly persistent: “There has to be a weapon around here somewhere. An ax, a wrench…something.”

“No, Martin. It’s not an option.”

“Why not?”

“Because if I don’t do the job right, that leaves you…like this…with him, and he was enjoying himself – in case you didn’t notice – beating the crap out of you was giving him a hard-on, that’s how much fun he was having cracking your ribs. Christ, Martin, I thought he’d…” He broke off because he was so angry with his partner right now for scaring him like that; leaving him handcuffed in a kitchen, not knowing if Martin was being raped out there in that freezing cold barn or relentlessly beaten to death.

Martin’s blue eyes widened at the tremor in Danny’s voice. “He just took me by surprise. But we have a responsibility to stop this guy from doing this to anyone else. If we plan it right, we can take him…”
“No we can’t,” Danny insisted ruthlessly. “An hour ago we could have taken him, but now he’s armed, you’re a hundred and seventy pounds of dead weight, my head feels like there’s a truck parked in it with its engine running, and I don’t think I can take him out alone, especially when he has at least two guns and I don’t have any. So, we get down that slope, hide in the woods, and follow the stream until we find a house or a phone and we call Jack. And what we absolutely don’t do is leave you alone with him again. Okay?” He resolved not to say anything else and then found himself spitting out angrily: “Do you have any idea what I thought he was doing to you in here?”

Martin still looked infuriatingly clueless, and slightly bemused by Danny’s stress level, which was a relief in some ways, but also all kinds of annoying given the horror show that had been running in glorious Technicolor in Danny’s mind while he was struggling to get free. “He was just punching me out for the exercise.”

Danny hauled him through the snow, trying to hold him without hurting him, while still supporting his weight. “You have no idea, you know that? No. Frickin’. Clue.”

“It’s only a few bruises,” Martin limped along next to him, aching muscles stiffening up in the cold, an arm wrapped around his sore ribs. Danny couldn’t help holding him gently, even though a part of him wanted to shake him, another part wanted to hug him close for not being dead, and then probably shake him some more for doing this to him again. Oddly, Martin still smelt a little of that lemon shower gel, despite the blood and sweat scents clinging to him, there was the underlying crispness of cheap citrus.

They paused on the brink of the slope. It looked treacherously steep and the faint ribbon of the water a long way below them. If they fell down they were going to slide or roll until they hit a tree and scrape themselves raw in the process. “Hold on to me,” he ordered, and helped Martin down the first couple of feet, looking for footholds anywhere he could find them, eyes already aching with trying to permeate the darkness.

“You didn’t pick up a flashlight?” Martin said plaintively. When Danny turned to glare at him he found Martin flashing him a grin that had no business being on a face that battered. “Don’t suppose you found a granola bar, did you? I’m hungry.”

“Concussed people aren’t supposed to eat and, yes, I packed a flashlight, I’m just afraid to use it in case Ryan sees it.”

“He’s got to walk back as far as he drives. He can’t be here that quickly.”

His partner sounded maddeningly calm and Danny reached for the flashlight with his temper spiking. He put it in Martin’s hands and said firmly: “You hold it. I’ll hold you. Okay?”

Martin shone the flashlight ahead of them and kept the beam playing on a mossy length of wood, coated with snow. “We could hit him with that. Several times. I could really get behind that plan.”

“No. For the last time, we’re not lying in wait for him or trying to take the guy down. Do you get it yet? That guy can kill you with his bare hands, and he will if he catches up with us again.” He was still feeling the cuffs biting into his wrists as he fought to get free, all the while knowing Ryan had a handcuffed Martin at his mercy.

Martin’s expression was genuinely curious. “Why are you so scared of this prick?”

“Because I have to be scared enough for both of us because you’re too dumb to be scared for yourself.” Danny thought it was just as well for Martin’s sake that there was probably nothing Martin Fitzgerald could do that would ever make Danny Taylor hit him, not since he had been
shot; not since he had gone all out to pretend he wasn’t hurting with every breath and every step so that Danny wouldn’t guilt-trip himself to the morgue. He knew Martin hated it, being turned into something so fragile, something they were all desperate to keep safe; a nerve-jangle to them, watching Viv to be sure her heart was beating, watching Martin to be sure he wasn’t silently bleeding; needing to be seen as strong again so he could believe that was what he was. He snatched a breath out of the freezing air, feeling it chill him all the way down. “If Ryan catches us…”

“I thought we caught guys like him?” Martin countered, sliding gracelessly down a few feet of slope while Danny fought to keep him on his feet. “He’s done this before. He had a whole ritual thing going while he was punching me. He’s definitely not right in the head.”

“Oh, really? What was your first clue? And was there some point when that realization was going to start impacting on your behavior?”

“You’re angry with me…” Martin said it as if it were a revelation to him and Danny wondered what conversation he had been a part of for the last ten minutes that this was only just dawning on him.

“Of course, I’m angry with you!” His grip tightened as Martin slipped in the snow-slush beneath their feet and he barely held him up. The sides of the valley felt sheer as glass. “What the hell were you playing at in there, mouthing off at that guy?”

“Well, what were you playing at with all that ‘yes, sir’ ‘no, sir’ bullshit?”

“I was trying to stop you from getting creamed. And I would have appreciated a little help with that, too. You don’t go off at guys like that.”

“I was telling him that there would be consequences if he kidnapped a pair of federal agents. Why were you such a…?”

“Because it works.” Danny hoped Martin wasn’t too concussed to read the warning in his eyes. “Sometimes, it works, and it’s the only thing that does. You say ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to, and I’ll never ever do it again, please, Papi, I’m so sorry’ and sometimes, just sometimes, it’s enough to stop him putting your brother in the hospital, okay?”

Martin’s eyes widened in understanding. “I’m sorry.” Danny knew Martin wasn’t apologizing for going off at Ryan but for his blighted childhood.

“Don’t be, because I’m figuring if only your father had been an abusive drunk, too, we’d both be in better shape right now.” Danny glanced at him. “Just remember next time – I’m the hot-headed Latino, you’re the uptight WASP – we stick to those stereotypes we’ll both stay alive longer.” He saw the look in Martin’s blue eyes and touched his arm briefly to let him know it was okay, then snatched in a breath of lung-freezing air. The trees looked like dark sentinels against the snow; everything glittering with frost, the air still chilled by lazy white flakes; the sides were getting steeper; they were probably going to have to slide a little, move from tree to tree and hope not to hit anything too hard. “Damn, it’s cold up here. These people need to invent skyscrapers.”

“I’d settle for more than one road,” Martin admitted.

He could feel Martin shivering and it was difficult to find a place to hold him that wouldn’t be hurting one bruise or another. The sides of the slope were just about to get steeper and he needed to catch his breath. “Wait.” He pulled him under a tree, propping him against it while he delved in the backpack and pulled out a sweater. “Put this on. You could be in shock.”
“I’m not in shock.” The chattering of Martin’s teeth did little to reassure him. “I’m a little embarrassed by our incompetence, and not looking forward to having to explain to Jack how we let one unarmed guy overpower both of us. Apart from that I’m fine, now – can we drop it?”

Sometimes he felt sorry for Martin’s father. Not often, of course, as a rule he was a lot more likely to feel sorry for Jack or for Martin when Victor Fitzgerald was around, but occasionally he felt sorry for the Deputy Director himself; such as when Martin had been undergoing surgery and everyone had realized that, while Martin might be an adult and a federal agent to everyone else, that, to Victor, the man who had been shot by Dornvald was still, on some level, his little boy.

Right now, he could see the kid Martin had used to be as well, and it was clear that in between all the need-to-please starved-of-attention moments, and the hard working boy who was no trouble, and the sports-crazy boy who was happy as long as he could play football in a friend’s back yard, and the alienated geeky teen who liked reading up on Roswell conspiracy theories and even with that face had probably had more trouble than he should have done getting laid because of the overwhelming nerd factor, there had been moments when Martin had become the most stubbornly aloof adolescent from hell. Danny narrowed his eyes and spat out through clenched teeth:

“Put on. The damned. Sweater.”

Martin jumped at his tone and then took it from him, looking at Danny a little warily as he did so. Then, as Martin attempted to obey him, he understood the real reason why he was being so stubborn. Martin had his teeth gritted so hard as he tried to pull on the sweater that Danny swore he could hear the enamel chipping, and Danny had to reach up to pull handfuls of blue chunky cable-knit down over his head while Martin tried not to whimper in pain. But then at last the thing was on, the weight of it pulling it down. Martin gave a gasp of relief, as the cold no longer blew straight through his ripped shirt to his bruised skin. The sweater, being Ryan’s, was far too big for him and hung protectively low, keeping his kidneys insulated from the snow. As he rolled up the sleeves to find his hands, Martin looked not unlike a kid in his big brother’s clothes, but he also looked five times warmer than he had even a moment before.

“You see? Sometimes Danny knows best.”

Danny tilted his head back to examine his pupils while Martin unwillingly shone the flashlight where directed, his face looking strange with its disfiguring of bruises and blood trail remnant even before he played little kid on Halloween flashing the blue light over their faces. “Do you even know how to check for concussion, Florence Nightingtaylor?” Danny made an appropriate gesture and Martin said brightly: “One.”

“What?”

“That’s how many fingers you’re holding up.”

Danny said conversationally: “You know the only thing sustaining me right now is the thought of what Jack is going to say to you when I tell him about you mouthing off to Ryan. If I don’t hear the words ‘stupid son of a bitch’ coming out of his mouth at full volume I may never get over my disappointment.”

“I bent over backwards to put up with Ryan’s crap in there and you know it.” Martin caught sight of Danny’s right wrist and caught Danny’s sleeve. He pulled it back, gingerly, wincing at the bruised mess the cuffs had made of it. “Danny, we need to bandage this.”

Danny pushed one sleeve of the over-sized sweater back another few inches to point out to Martin what kind of condition his own wrists were in. “What do you know – we have a matched set.”
Martin was still more interested in the bruises spreading up halfway to Danny’s elbows, examining them with gentle fingers before searching Danny’s face anxiously. “Did he do anything else to you?”

He felt so close to crying he wondered how he was stopping himself. “No, Martin. Beating you unconscious kept him so well entertained he didn’t need to start on me.”

“If this is my fault then I’m sorry.” Martin was still looking guiltily at Danny’s wrists and Danny yanked his coat cuffs down to conceal them. “I wasn’t trying to make him angry. I really did try to…”

“I know.” Danny would have liked to stay angry, it was at least insulating, and in this kind of weather it helped to have a good glow of righteous indignation in the pit of his stomach to help with the sick fear that he might be killing Martin with every step. But he had never been very good at sustaining his anger with Martin. “I know you did. Just – let me do the talking next time. Now, hang onto me – getting down this stretch isn’t going to be fun.” He looped Martin’s arm around his neck and put his other arm around his back to steady him, pulling him in against him so they were at the right angle to tackle the slope. Martin slid and he barely held him up, getting a mouthful of shiny hair that even with the lemon-scented shower this morning carried faint traces of his conditioner.

They slid down another few feet of slope, snow covering their shoes in a wet cold intrusion, and Danny realized he had never put his sock back on; which would explain why his right foot was so much colder than his left one at the moment. They should have left a note somewhere, something to prove they had ever been there and that Jack should come and find them quickly. All those people who went missing every day and right now he and Martin were two of them; lost and scared and really wanting to be found. A screech owl in the darkness made them both jump.

“I don’t think Ryan’s wife was kidnapped.” Martin stumbled over a rock and Danny barely held him up. “I think she escaped from him.”

“Well, I’d run off with a crack addict to get away from him and I’ve only known him for a few hours.”

They slid down another few feet of slope, snow drifting over their shoes. Danny grabbed a branch to hold them upright while the flashlight beam illuminated the relentless fall of flakes.

Snow flurried around them and Danny could feel them melting in his hair, trickling down the back of his neck, felt Martin shiver as the breeze blew through him. They slid down a few more feet of slope in silence, but Danny noticed that Martin was letting him help him more now, his body feeling clumsier and more pliant, leaning in against Danny and not objecting to that tightening grip on his arm.

“Jack was right all the time. He thought there was something off about Ryan and he was right.”

Danny was amused by the satisfaction with which Martin asserted Jack’s infallibility. “Let’s try and stay alive so we can tell him that.” They skidded down another few feet, Danny taking the impact on his shoulder as they hit another tree, and just catching the tail end of a flinch from Martin.

“Did Ryan punch you in the kidneys?”

The expression in Martin’s blue eyes was half-exasperated, half amused. “How would I know?”
“Well, you were there, weren’t you?”

“I didn’t notice exactly where he hit me. I was mostly focused on telling him to stop and that if he didn’t he’d go to jail for a very long time. Also, the floor kept coming up to meet me.”

Danny could imagine the scene in the barn, Ryan telling Martin how he expected him to behave, what he needed to say and do, and Martin refusing to concede an inch; getting angrier every time the man knocked him down and told him to stay down, more determined to get back to his feet and tell the guy to go screw himself instead of finding a compromise. And yet if there had been a third party in that barn, someone Ryan was threatening, Martin would have said and done anything to keep them safe. “You know, there’s a word ‘sorry’ that you could try out sometime. Might even work for you.”

“Why was I supposed to apologize to him when he was the one hitting me?”

“Because it might stop him hitting you, Martin.” Danny propped him against another tree as they dragged some more icy air into their lungs. Martin was shivering and sweating at once and Danny wondered again if every step he was making him take was killing him. He reached up and felt his forehead, grimacing as he felt how clammy it was. “This is so not what you should be doing after that beating you took. And don’t tell me you’ve had worse because I know you haven’t.”

There was a long pause before Martin said quietly: “It didn’t hurt like getting shot.”

Danny tightened his grip on him instinctively. “You don’t have anything to prove.”

“I think maybe I did. To me. I had things I needed to prove to me.”

“Did getting the crap kicked out of you by a psychopath help you with that at all?”

In the blue-white beam of a flashlight, Martin’s eyes were ridiculously expressive; or maybe he and Martin had just got way too good at reading each other over the years. “I don’t want to make every decision based on a fear of getting hurt again.”

“But there’s a reason we’re afraid of getting hurt, Martin. Fear of pain is a good thing, it’s what stops you walking into traffic or sticking a fork in the light-socket; it’s what stops you mouthing off to guys who can pull off your head with their bare hands and use it for a football. Not wanting to get beaten to death doesn’t make you a coward, it’s makes you smart. I’d appreciate it if you could bear that in mind because if you keep doing these things to yourself, you, my friend, are going to drive me to drink.”

Danny saw that hit home as nothing else had done, that brief shocked look from Martin and then realization following as he understood it wasn’t a joke, but a genuine warning of how close the last few months had brought him. Ironically, it was only now that Martin might understand how much Danny had wanted to buy a bottle on the way home from the office on that endless day when Martin had been shot. Every day since he had told himself that he wouldn’t have a drink today, even though he really wanted one; if he still wanted one tomorrow maybe he’d have one then; and then when tomorrow had come around he’d told himself that he wasn’t saying he could never have a drink to get through this but just not now, maybe tomorrow…. It really had been one day at a time and he had come so close so many times, even walking into one liquor store before he’d made himself turn around and walk out. And he would never have breathed a word of it to Martin if he hadn’t known that Martin now knew what that meant; when you’d been through withdrawal and self-loathing and your self-esteem had dropped to way below your ankles and you were still thinking about putting yourself back there, turning yourself into something you despised because the need for that drink – or that handful of pills – was so strong.
“I’m sorry.”

That was truly heartfelt and Danny felt a little relief break through the fear. At least Martin now seemed to be getting that there were other better ways to handle dangerous madmen than making them angry. He tightened his grip on him a fraction, helping him over a slippery moss-covered log that might have turned under his feet. “It’s okay. Just don’t do anything reckless or stupid or get yourself shot or smacked around again for a decade or so and we’ll be fine.”

They slid down another nasty patch of ground and Danny thought how loud their breathing sounded in the darkness, how cold the air was that he needed to fuel his lungs with oxygen; despite the chill, he was sweating with the effort of holding Martin up, and he could still feel the tremors going through Martin’s body; what this little hike through the night was costing him. He had barely noticed the snow until now; it was light and powdery and barely brushed against them; he had even seen Martin turn his face into it because the cold was soothing against his aching cheekbone, but now he realized that the sweater in which he had his fingers twisted was already getting heavier and wetter.

“Damnit. Wait, Martin.” He propped him against another tree and saw Martin grit his teeth as he tried to drag some air into his lungs that didn’t torture his aching ribs.

Shrugging off the backpack, Danny wriggled out of his coat. “You need to put this on.”

“No.” Martin shook his head. “I have the sweater, you have the coat, that’s fair.”

Danny gave him his best ‘don’t fuck with me’ glare. “I don’t have a concussion and unless you want another one, put it on.”

“Danny, you have a bleeding head wound and you were knocked unconscious less than an hour ago. You can’t go without a coat in this weather.”

He could already feel the cold biting into him but held Martin’s gaze unflinchingly. “Will you stop being such a pain in the ass and do as you’re told? If Jack were here I don’t think you’d be giving him all this crap. Just pretend I’m him – only, you know, taller and prettier and with way better hair.”

He helped Martin into the coat while Martin tried to pretend that it didn’t hurt as much as it did every time he had to move or breathe. He snatched a breath as the tears glinted in his eyes from the stabbing pain in his ribs and Danny leaned in close and pressed his forehead briefly against Martin’s. “And another thing – don’t ever scare me like that again? Okay?” He breathed out slowly, trying to release some of the wound up tension still thrumming through him, briefly clasping the back of Martin’s neck as he straightened up. He pulled the backpack on again, the weight of it already hurting his aching shoulders. “Come on. We need to keep moving. If your muscles seize up we’re going to be screwed.” Possibly literally if Ryan catches up with us, he added mentally.

As they scrambled and slid on down the sides of the valley, shoes never made to be worn in this weather going deep into drifts while their socks soaked up the wet and cold and began to chill their feet through to the bone, Martin seemed to get it at last, that Danny had been stuck in the house with no way of knowing what was being done to him, and how long every crawling moment had seemed while that was happening. He put his head on one side, a frown creasing his brow. “What was it you were telling me to do, anyway?”

“When?”
“When Ryan was coming back. You told me to do what he said. What were you expecting him to tell me to do?”

“I was expecting him to tell you to…you know…”

Martin’s blue eyes were the innocent blank of a guy who had never spent a minute in Juvenile Hall. “No, I don’t know.”

Danny wondered how a guy this slow had ever survived in a world this big and bad before he had the rest of Jack’s team to look out for him. “You know.” He jerked his head. “An action that generally involves being on your knees.”

Martin still looked as if a turtle would have outstripped him in the fast lane but he did finally get it. “You expected me to what?”

“You’d rather be dead?”

“Hell, yes.”

Danny felt another spike of irritation. “You really think that would be it – you’d never have another good day ever again if you had to spend five minutes with your mouth full thinking about something else?”

“Are you this sensitive with rape victims, because, if so, I think they should have you teaching seminars.”

“No one is saying it would have been fun for you, Martin. I’m just saying it’s better than some of the alternatives…like being dead, which is what you would have ended up being if you kept smart-mouthing Mr. Insane Control Freak. Didn’t they teach you anything at Quantico?”

“Well, they didn’t teach me how to do that. I guess your training was a little more extra-curricular than mine was.”

They ducked under a branch bent low with a white glitter of frozen snow and only with a great effort did Danny resist the urge to shove a handful of it down the back of Martin’s neck.

“Damn, and I thought we got everything but the splinters too.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about that stick up your ass that I thought Jack, Viv, Sam and I had got out years ago.”

“You know if you were even half as funny as you think you are you’d still be less amusing than road kill. And what was that ‘Ivy League boy scout’ crap anyway?”

Danny hauled Martin up as he slipped again, feeling his bone deep exhaustion as he held him and that shivering still running through him. The snow was going right through his shirt, which was now icy wet cotton clinging to his chilled skin. He was already so cold that he was starting to hate his extremities; especially his damned bare right foot that kept slipping around in his sodden shoe; soon stopping his teeth from chattering was going to be a full time job. “I was trying to stop him messing up that pretty face of yours.”

“Save your own pretty face. I don’t need your protection. I don’t need you taking bullets for me or taking punches for me, okay? I’m not the new guy Jack asked you to look out for any more. I can take care of myself.”
Sometimes, Danny thought that it really was a miracle that Martin had lived as long as he had without someone—an exasperated teammate perhaps—doing something to him that was really regrettable. “Are you trying to tell me you didn’t need my help? That you had the situation under control?”

“Yes.”

“The situation where you were handcuffed to an upright while Ryan punched you senseless?”

“I was just lulling him into a false sense of security.”

“By letting him concuss you?”

Martin’s mouth was twitching with humor, as was Danny’s, but both fought hard to keep a straight face; these battles were a matter of honor, after all. “It worked, didn’t it?”

“I had to rescue you!”

“Yes, but you were only able to get free because of my lulling him. Without that we were toast.”

Danny was smirking at him now and Martin couldn’t help smirking back. “You are so full of crap,” Danny told him, not without affection.

“I’ve been hanging around you for all this time, what did you expect?”

The whine of the motorcycle engine coiled up through the valley. It was distant still, perhaps following the horseshoe bend of the rocky track, or coming from the other side of the valley, beyond that impossible-looking ascent through perpendicular snow-covered trees. They exchanged a look of hope which turned to disappointed resignation as they both identified the motorcycle engine become a wasp whine following the track that led to nowhere else but Ryan’s house.

Danny reached for the flashlight even as Martin was fumbling it and between the two of them they managed to stab the button off; both exhaling misty breath as they gazed at one another in the sudden darkness.

“So much for him having to walk back.”

“He can’t possibly see us,” Martin murmured, as the whine of the engine got louder and louder. The track had seemed so high above them a moment before, but now Danny found himself wondering how long it would take for a fit man with a flashlight and good hiking boots to follow them, and realized they had to get a lot further away then this.

“We have to go.” He pulled Martin in close and slid purposefully down the next ten feet of snow-covered rock and tree roots. Martin felt heavier than he had before and Danny realized that his coat was soaking up the snow like a sponge; the bruises were really kicking in hard now, too; he could feel it with his own shoulders and back where Ryan had slammed him against the kitchen cabinets, the cold biting into them, everything stiffening up. Martin felt unwieldy, trying to coordinate his movements, but his feet dragging and catching on every rock and fallen branch, drooping lower in Danny’s grip. Through gritted teeth, Danny hauled him up higher. “Martin? Are you awake?”

“Yes.” Martin jolted back into full consciousness in shock, tripped over a rock and pulled them both down.

The world briefly became a blur of tumbling trees, sharp things that scraped, snow that soaked into him, as he rolled and slid, and then rolled again and found himself sliding much too fast over
bruising, soaking, freezing terrain, until something crashed into him and sent him somersaulting. His shoulders slammed into the trunk of a tree and for a moment he thought his back had to be broken, the white-out of impact screaming through every nerve. And then something snow-dusted and sodden hit him and he grabbed it instinctively, holding on tight as the world spun and he tried to remember how to breathe.

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Eileen Watkins was like a training video of evasion. She paced the room restlessly, and when invited to sit, did so without making eye contact, hands fluttering. The room was like too many of those Vivian knew from looking for those who disappeared, filled with the familiar memorabilia of life lived so quietly it passed almost unseen even by those few who witnessed it. There were a few abstract prints in bold reds and burnt oranges, some photographs of Africa that carried a quiet yearning; the dying sunsets of a world still unvisited; only those few snatches of color and the books asserted themselves with any personality. The books at least were plentiful. So far Eileen had been unhelpful while pretending to be otherwise, but Vivian didn’t make her for the difficult type usually, which meant she had a reason for her behavior, and Vivian had a hunch she knew what it was.

“Ms Watkins, let’s go through this again…?” Vivian invited. “You’re saying you don’t remember the Gallaghers or Clare Hope but that you do remember that Clare wasn’t dyslexic? Because according to our records, you were one of their teachers and according to Sheriff Bennett you’re the only person in this area that Clare has definitely kept in touch with.” It was a shot in the dark, but they took a lot of those, and sometimes they hit their target. Seeing the flicker of shock in Eileen’s eyes, Vivian was pretty sure that this one had.

Samantha backed her up with the skill of long practice, leaning forward to say: “We’re not the enemy here. We’re trying to find a pregnant woman who we think may have been abducted against her will. That’s all we’re trying to do.”

Eileen seemed to reach a decision. “Clare isn’t what you think.”

“Right now we think she may be a kidnapper,” Sam told her. “If you know she isn’t then we’d love to hear anything you have to say.”

There was another awkward pause while the snow spat against windows that rattled in the wind as the fire flickered in the grate with each swoop of draught that gusted down the chimney. “She’s clean now.” Eileen turned to Vivian, the brown eyes behind her spectacles suddenly vulnerable. “She’s married. She has a child of her own.”

“Do you have a current address for her?” Vivian took out her notebook.

“She lives in Appleton. With a man called Garrett Davidson.”

“He’s her husband?” Vivian carefully smoothed out any cynicism from her voice.

“No. It’s his house but they’re not involved. She lives there with her husband.”

“What’s her husband’s name?”

That look of evasion flickered across Eileen’s face again, and she averted her eyes. “I don’t know.”

Vivian mentally filed that last statement under ‘lie’ and moved on, intending to come back to it later. “You said she had a child? Would that be a little girl?”
“Yes. But she’s not… She’s not Margaret, if that’s what you’re thinking. She’s four. Her name’s Charlotte.”

“Do you have a photograph?” Samantha pressed.

There was an awkward pause before Eileen went to her mantelpiece and began to go through some envelopes that were concealed behind a cookie jar; several had envelopes the color of a winter sky, each one made vivid by a local stamp. Viv reached across and took the bundle from her hand. “Let me.”

“No…” Eileen tried to snatch them back but Viv held them out of reach.

“Ms. Watkins. It honestly would be better for everyone – Clare included – if you helped us. We’re not here to make trouble for people who are just trying to live their lives.” Viv sorted through the envelopes quickly and then paused as she saw the address of the second one. It had been hand printed carefully: Ms. Eileen Watkins, 44 River Drive. Viv glanced across at Sam and then opened the letter, only to have a photograph slip into her hand. A photograph of a toddler beaming up at the camera, dark blue eyes huge in a pretty if slightly grimy face, a jam sandwich a little out of focus as it was evidently waved for emphasis. She turned over the photograph and written on the back were the words: ‘Charlotte – June 2005’. Vivian gazed up at Eileen Watkins with narrowed eyes. “You said that Clare Hope wasn’t dyslexic.”

“She’s not.”

“Impeding a federal investigation carries a five year sentence, Ms. Watkins.”

The woman crumpled into her chair like tissue paper left out in the rain and put a hand up to her face. “Clare didn’t send me that.”

“Then who did?”

As Eileen made no answer, Sam crouched down next to her. “It’s from Nathan Gallagher, isn’t it? That’s who Clare married?”

The wind whistled down the chimney again, damp air meeting damp wood in a flurry of sparks. Eileen straightened up, tears in her eyes. “He’s not called that now.”

Vivian pushed the advantage fast. “Ms. Watkins. If you know what’s going on, you need to tell us and quickly. Mary Ryan is eight and a half months pregnant. She could go into labor at any time.”

“I don’t know anything about Mary!” Eileen protested, tearfully. “And I’ve only been up to see them a few times. They write to me every few months. They send me pictures of Charlotte. That’s it. It’s a way of Clare letting her mother know she’s okay without actually contacting her.”

“But you knew that Nathan Gallagher wasn’t the body in that car?” Viv demanded.

“Not at first. I just heard from Clare from time to time. She told me she’s got herself cleaned up. She thanked me for what I’d done for her.”

“What did you do for her?” Sam pressed.

“I used to give her a place to stay and I gave Nate extra lessons. When he got out of Juvenile Hall, he was barely literate. He’d slipped through all the cracks, he had mild but undiagnosed dyslexia and he’d only attended school from time to time anyway. He needed to catch up so that he could graduate. His brother in law was adamant that he had to graduate, and Nate said that Mary had
asked him to do what her husband asked, so I gave him extra lessons to help him with his reading. Clare used to sit in on the lessons to help him.”

Vivian looked around the room and saw them both sitting there, Clare in her short skirts and bleached hair, the diligent student when there was no one there to mock her studying, and Nate struggling to comprehend elusive vowels, Eileen patiently helping them both. She wondered why, in her mind, the boy was still carrying all those bruises, even though, by that time, his father would have been in jail.

“They weren’t what people thought. They were just trying to make sense of a world that had done nothing but harm to them from the day they were born. There was good in both of them. Nathan was rude and disrespectful, and he drank and cursed too much, and he tried every kind of drug he could get his hands on, but he was just trying to work through some things. He wasn’t cruel, he was just so…wounded. He used to see other men with their sons and be so hurt because his father didn’t like him whereas the fathers of those other boys did. He thought there was something wrong with him. Clare was the same. She’d been abused from the age of eleven. She was just trying to find a way to deal with all the things that had been done to her and she tried sex and drugs…and I don’t think anyone who hasn’t lived her life has the right to judge her.”

Viv sighed at the flash of defiance in Eileen’s eyes and reached across to touch her knee gently. “We’re not judging anyone. We just need to find Mary.”

“I swear I don’t know where she is. I only found out about Nate still being alive when Clare sent me this.” She plucked a letter from Vivian and extricated a photograph from it, holding it out.

A wedding photograph. No white dress or veil blowing in the summer breeze, but undoubtedly a happy union all the same; there were even flowers, a yellow and white spray gilded with spring sunlight. Clare almost unrecognizable from her arrest photograph, hair allowed to return to its natural light brown shade, face no longer pockmarked with acne, body no longer so emaciated with the hunger for a different past, and with a smile on her face as she gazed at the handsome young man leaning across to kiss her. Vivian recognized him at once. “Nathan Gallagher.”

Sam gazed at the photograph over Vivian’s shoulder. “Who knew he’d clean up so well? Remind you of anyone?”

And then she saw it, not just the sullen teenager grown up to be a handsome young man, but something in the boyish face, now that it was unmarked by bruises, that was indeed reminiscent of how Martin might have looked if he had grown up in a trailer park somewhere, with a body left wiry by underfeeding and ill usage, instead of nurtured by comfort, good feeding, and all those healthy outdoor sports.

“That was the first time I knew he was still alive, I swear.” Eileen’s fingers were clearly itching to snatch back the photograph but the damage was done now.

Vivian held up the photograph. “Ms. Watkins. There was a body in that car and if it wasn’t Nathan’s you knew it had to belong to someone. But you didn’t feel the need to report this to anyone?”

“I wrote Clare straight back. I asked her whose body it was and she invited me up to visit with them. I sat up there and I looked into her eyes and Nathan’s eyes and I’ve been a teacher for twenty-five years, I know when someone is lying to me, and those two were telling the truth. She said they found it buried under an old ruin on the farm. She said it seemed to have been there for a long time. She didn’t think anyone would still be waiting for him to come home, whoever he was, and that maybe he’d rather no one ever knew he’d died that way. I believed her.”
“That wasn’t your decision to make.” Samantha reached for her phone.

“They deserved a second chance if anyone did. They weren’t hurting anyone. They were happy. What harm did it do when he was already dead anyway?”

Samantha gazed at her in disbelief. “How about disturbing a crime scene? Destroying the evidence that may have helped to put away a serial killer? And that’s just for starters. How about showing a little respect for the dead?”

“Clare said they told him they were sorry – about how he’d died and using him in Nate’s place. She told me they said prayers for him.”

The fire flattened itself like a nervous dog as another gust of wind spiraled down the chimney.

Viv motioned to Sam to hold off on calling this in just yet, holding Eileen’s gaze. “Why did Nathan fake his own death?”

“To get away.”

“His father was dead by then. He couldn’t hurt him any more.”

“He wanted to be with Clare. Ryan wouldn’t allow it.”

Samantha rolled her eyes. “So, he leaves his sister thinking he’s dead just because he doesn’t have the courage to tell his brother-in-law he wants to date an old flame?”

Eileen glanced at her in surprise. “No, Nate would never have done that. He loved his sister and she loved him. They would have done anything for each other. He would never have left her if she hadn’t insisted.”

Vivian felt her heart begin to beat faster, the way it did when they were getting close to something truly significant at last. “You mean Mary knew? About the car accident? The burned body? She knew her brother was still alive?”

“Of course she did.” Eileen seemed confused that they had not realized this already. “It was Mary’s idea.”

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Danny had possibly passed out for a few seconds because it took a moment before he could hear the sound of another human being stifling sounds of pain into ragged breaths. He ducked his head blearily and realized he had an armful of a wet, dirty Martin; or at least an armful of wet dirty coat and wet dirty sweater with a wet, dirty, Martin bundled up in it somewhere. He finally remembered how to expel air, snatching freezing oxygen into his aching lungs, afraid to move in case he found parts of him were no longer still attached.

“Are you okay?” he managed after a moment.

Martin raised his head and Danny could just make him out in the snow-glitter. He saw the moment when Martin thought about opening his mouth to lie. Martin never had been a very good liar. Most addicts quickly became experts, but, when Martin was lying, it practically lit up in neon on his forehead. At least Martin seemed to be learning that this was one skill in which he was never going to be a straight ‘A’ student because he gave up on speaking as something he could do right now and just nodded his head. There was a long pause while he choked down a few more whimpers and then managed an almost normal-sounding: “You?”
“Never better,” Danny assured him. Unlike Martin, he was a good liar, and despite the pain that was pretty much everywhere it came out airy and assured. There was another long silence as they both fought not to whimper, Danny gripping Martin so tightly he was probably adding to his pain.

“We’re a lot closer to that stream now,” Martin offered after a moment. And then in a voice from which the fear had not been removed despite his best efforts: “Can you move your legs?”

Danny had been hoping to put off for a little longer the moment where he discovered he was irreversibly paralyzed, but he supposed it was probably something he needed to address at some point. He tried wiggling his toes and to his surprise could certainly move them even though they were so cold he would have quite liked to disassociate himself from them in other ways. “Probably not with you lying on them. Can you get up?”

“Sure.” Martin tried to roll off him and Danny automatically tightened his grip on him. Martin cleared his throat. “Danny – you have to let me go.”

“Okay.” Danny kept hold of him, needing a few more breaths.

“Danny…?”

Reluctantly, he let Martin go and then listened to all the pain his partner was in going into his breathing as he practically chewed through his lip to stop Danny hearing him whimpering as he struggled onto his hands and knees. The glance he shot in Danny’s direction was fearful.

“Can you move?”

Danny risked a look at his legs and was surprised to see that they weren’t twisted into any hideously distorted positions. Reaching above his head for a snow-laden bough, he gripped it hard and hauled himself up, realizing as he did so that it was the stolen backpack that had taken most of the impact of him hitting the tree. His back hurt, his shoulders hurt, every muscle between his neck and his knees hurt like hell, but the thighbone still seemed to be connected to the knee-bone. “Damn. And I was hoping I was dead and could stop playing this game now.”

Martin gave him the glimmer of a smile, an arm wrapped around his ribs and more blood trickling from his mouth. “You and me both.”

“It was when we were reversing, wasn’t it?” Danny asked him abruptly. “I told you to back the car up and that was when you were shot.”

“I don’t remember.” Perhaps Martin was a better liar than he thought because there was nothing he could read on his face right now. Jolting through the darkness and being hit by a tree seemed to have improved his eyesight because he could make out Martin’s face a lot better than he had been able to just after the flashlight had been extinguished. He just couldn’t read what Martin was really thinking.

“It must have been then.”

“I remember you pushing me down. You reacted faster than I did. I remember that. I don’t remember anything else.”

He knew that was a lie. In the instant when he had looked in and seen Martin dazedly plucking at the blood-soaked cloth of his shirt, trying to make sense of the pain in his body and the blood pouring out of it, he had known that was a moment they were both going to remember until the day they died. “Nothing else?”
“Nothing until I woke up in the hospital on that morphine high.”

He really wished it had been like that. He wished that Martin would never remember how it had felt to be so utterly powerless, strength and warmth flowing out and the fear flowing in that this was really it; nothing left that he could do now but die afraid and in pain. But he knew he remembered.

“It was definitely when we were reversing.”

“Why does it matter?” Martin asked him.

“Because I told you to back the car up.”

“And you think if we hadn’t backed the car up either one of us would be alive today? Given how well those guys shot into a moving vehicle, how much better do you think their aim would have been into a stationary one?” Martin moved closer to gaze into Danny’s eyes, searching for something in them. “Is that what you’ve been thinking all this time? That if you hadn’t told me to back up the car that I wouldn’t have been shot? Because that’s crazier than…”

“Mouthing off to a madman when your hands are cuffed behind your back?”

Martin didn’t so much as blink. “Way crazier than that. Danny, you can look for a reason why I got shot and you didn’t, but it was chance, and you should let it go now – because one of us really needs to have his act together if we’re going to make it out of this alive, and, given that I can’t breathe in right now without wanting to toss my cookies, I think it probably needs to be you.”

There was a long moment when Danny let the words seep in and he realized that this was the conversation they should probably have had all those months ago, before it ever got to this, no, before it ever got to Martin throwing those pills down like candy. He looked up the slope and he could no longer see the road, or the house, and could only just make out the faint glow of what would be the kitchen light spilling out into the snow. There was no longer any sound of the motorcycle. “He’s back. We need to go.”

“You forgot to tell me I’m right.”

Danny hooked his arm back around Martin, grabbing hold of a branch with his free hand to help them down the next slippery descent. “Tell me I’m right about you mouthing off to Ryan and I’ll tell you you’re right about the survivor guilt thing.”

“I was unbelievably patient with Ryan. Jack would have jumped all over him five minutes through that door.”

“Which is why Jack sent us, remember?”

“Well, Sam would have shot him.”

Danny considered the point and then had to concede it. “Okay, you win on the Sam thing.”

“And Elena would have shot him twice.”

“Okay! You’re slightly more patient than Jack, Sam, or Elena. Big deal.”

The moment he let go of the branch, they slipped down another six feet of tree roots and rocks, every muscle in Danny’s body tensed in readiness for pain before he awkwardly righted them both, fingers twisted into the rough material of his coat as he yanked Martin upright. Looking back up
the slope, he could see that despite the falling snow they had left a clear trail of footsteps and slide marks.

“Who buys a place in terrain like this anyway?” he demanded.

“A hunter.” Martin tried to give him a reassuring smile but still looked mostly bruised, cold, concussed, and in pain.

“I couldn’t find any guns.”

“They were probably locked in the trunk of his car along with all the knives and axes and chainsaws.” Martin looked a little wistful over the word ‘chainsaws’.

Cursing under his breath, Danny helped him over a fallen tree. “I should have looked in the trunk. Why the hell didn’t I look in the trunk?”

“He still had our guns, and you’re probably right that we’re not in the best shape for tackling him…”

That concession from Martin was a little worrying; that meant he had to be hurting pretty badly. Danny could feel how his body was starting to seize up. The adrenaline had probably helped for a while but his teeth were chattering continuously now and the cold was creeping in deeper and deeper into all those pulled muscles. The snow fell so gently, then melted softly as a kiss but his shirt was soaked and chilly against his spine; the only warmth coming from the sweat he was pouring with the exertion of trying to hold Martin up as they slid and stumbled over this terrain, and that dried colder than the snow on their skin. They slid down another few feet of snowy needles and undergrowth and then with another awkward lurch and him tightening his grip on Martin again they were more or less upright on more or less level ground.

The stream tinkled tunefully at them as it ran through the rocks, reminding Danny that the water bottles he had packed were probably all cracked by now. He wearily undid the strapping of the backpack and delved into it. The blanket was sodden and when he felt around past it, he realized that so was everything else.

Martin said. “He may wait until first light to track us.”

“Where was the nearest house to his? Do you remember?”

“About twenty-five miles by the road. But there was a campsite that was only about ten miles away.” Martin closed his eyes, trying to concentrate and then pointed. “That way. Upstream and to the north-east.”

Danny looked upstream and then downstream and both looked equally uninviting. Going in either direction meant dragging Martin through the snow for hours with his ribs cracked. But although ten miles seemed impossible it was less impossible than twenty-five miles.

“Danny, I think we need to…” Martin broke off to squint into the darkness. “Is that…?”

“Please don’t tell me it’s a bear. I’m really not in the mood right now.”

“Bears hibernate in winter, remember?” Martin kept peering through the trees. “Does that look like a cave to you?”

“Wait.” Danny propped him against a convenient tree. “I’ll check it out. Because if it has a bear hibernating in it I figure there’s no point in us both being eaten. Have you got the flashlight?” As
he asked it, he realized even before Martin’s grimace of apology that it was probably smashed into twenty different pieces a hundred yards higher up the slope. “This night just keeps getting better and better, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, I’m already planning the return trip,” Martin assured him. “Next time I’m bringing a packed lunch – oh yes and a SWAT team.”

“Hey, when Viv and Sam see what that son-of-a-bitch did to your face he’s going to wish he were facing a SWAT team instead of them.”

He had never thought that he would get to hate trees and snow quite as much as this. Maybe this was what had turned Sam against the cold; too many nights in Wisconsin where the stars were blinded by clouds and the snow touched the skin like kisses from the dead. He blundered over a few more fallen branches that broke beneath his shoes like brittle bones, grateful that the snow was at least muffling his footfalls. Spiteful twigs kept lashing his face and trying to shove mouthfuls of snow and needles down his throat… He swallowed quickly as he thought about what he had almost ended up doing for Ryan in that kitchen. That was something he was definitely never telling Martin. Much better to let him think that if they were kidnapped by any more deranged psychopaths with alpha male control issues that Martin was going to be the one getting his knees dirty. Perhaps that would at least make him think twice about mouthing off to any more maniacs.

Ducking under another frosted branch, he could make out that square patch of darkness in the glittering whiteness. Too symmetrical to be a cave. He edged closer, a hand out to steady himself. He felt mossy rock beneath his fingers and then the straight edge of a wooden upright. The blackness was absolute here. When he looked back the way he had come, he could just make out Martin in the trees, huddled in Danny’s ill-fitting overcoat that wasn’t broad enough in the shoulders for him, the sleeves of Ryan’s sweater dangling over his hands as he tried to warm them. The light filtering through from the stars above the snow bank was a dim bluish-gray; the trees black lines against silvery snow, like living in perpetual twilight, some undead world they were trapped in with no real color, no real warmth. But this… He turned back to the square of blackness in front of him and smelt dampness, a different granite chill from the earthy exposure of the woods. He ventured into it and heard the sound of water dripping. A few more paces and he hit his shoulder on something hard. Feeling it awkwardly, he felt rough hewn wood under his fingers and realized it was an upright of some kind. No, a pit prop.

He backed out, wondering if this was the shelter they had been looking for or if it would only be a trap. Without a flashlight he did not like the idea of venturing into a place which could have gaping holes into a mine shaft. And there was also the matter of the mine giving him a serious case of the heebie-jeebies.

It was a relief to see Martin still standing where he had left him, looking cold and miserable, but still on his feet. He hurried back to him, the muscles in his calves clenching as he went deep into a drift of snow and had to haul himself out, shoes slippery on mossy branches and rocks as he clambered back to where Martin was standing.

“It’s a mine. We could maybe shelter in it – but it’s blacker than the inside of a black cat on a really black night.”

Martin’s teeth were chattering but he shook his head. “It’s the first place Ryan will look. But if there’s one there are probably others. I think we need to go upstream. If we walk in the stream we won’t leave any tracks and he won’t know which way we’ve gone.”

“And we’ll both get frostbite.” Danny crouched down next to the running water and dipped a hand into it, as he suspected it was like liquid ice. He splashed some on his face and gasped at the cold,
before forcing himself to swallow a few mouthfuls. “No way am I walking through this. We’ll have to rely on the snow to cover our tracks. At least we’ll be on level ground now.” He glanced along the stream. “Okay – a slight incline.” Martin gingerly crouched down next to him, keeping his back straight as he did so, he cast a longing look at the water but leaning forward to get a drink was clearly out of the question. Danny scooped some water up in his hands and offered it.

Martin shook his head. “I’m fine.”

The annoyance sparked again as he thought of those weeks when Martin has been worn out with pain, and the only thing that helped dug him deeper and deeper into a pit of despair and self-loathing. “Yeah, you’re always fine, aren’t you?” He scooped his hands back into the water and held them out to Martin, who steadied his wrist and then sipped a little gingerly.

Not meeting his gaze, Martin said: “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Look, I know I could have handled things differently. I should have followed up after… It was just difficult for me to deal with going through that again but you closed me out, too.”

Martin said: “Do we have to do this? You know I’m sorry. We both know I screwed up. I can’t undo what I did.”

“I know. I’m not…” Danny wiped his hands on his wet pants, vainly wishing for his right sock.

“No, we don’t have to do this.” He didn’t know how to tell him that he wasn’t angry with him about that any more. He was proud of him for getting help. He was angry with himself for not having worked it out earlier, for not having picked up on the signs until it was too late. As far as he was concerned it was all in the past; he just found his temper getting frayed when Martin put himself in danger or didn’t admit that he needed help. He put his arm around Martin again, getting them both into a position where they could do this, step by step, him taking some of Martin’s weight and keeping him on his feet.

“Your teeth are chattering,” Martin said.

“So are yours.”

They stumbled wearily along beside the stream. At least the terrain was relatively level here, and when they wandered dazedly off track the shock of the freezing water splashing over their feet reminded them to lurch back in the right direction. Danny wondered how long the human body could take being this cold. He could barely feel his feet or his hands and his forehead was aching with the chill of snow that had numbed it. Martin was stumbling along with his eyes closed, Danny having to take more and more of his weight.

“Stay awake,” Danny told him and felt Martin jolt against him.

“I’m awake.”

“Right. You’re awake, and you’re fine. You’re always fine. All the shit we see every day and nearly dying and being in pain for all that time, you’d think that would take a toll, but, hey, Martin, it’s lucky you’re Superman and don’t need help like the rest of us.”

“I didn’t shut you out. I shut me in,” Martin said softly. “I couldn’t do my job without the pills and I knew none of you would let me keep taking the pills if you knew about them; so I either had to stop doing my job or stop taking the pills, and I couldn’t imagine a life without this job. And then I couldn’t function without them and the only way to feel even slightly like myself was if I took a
handful of Vicodin first.”

The silence was a fall of snow between them, as Martin realized he had spoken those words aloud, after all, and Danny felt it hit him with renewed force, the pit Martin had gotten himself into. He knew Martin would never have said any of that out loud if he hadn’t been concussed and exhausted and light-headed with pain.

“You have a best friend who’s an alcoholic and you can’t come to him and tell him you’re drowning and you need a hand?”

Martin glanced up at him in surprise. “That’s nice.”

“What?”

“The whole ‘best friend’ thing, because I thought one had to stop doing that after Fourth Grade.”

“Now the alien conspiracy geek is telling me what’s cool? I don’t think so.” But Danny pulled him in a little closer all the same. It scared him sometimes how much he cared about the rest of the team, and he was used to caring passionately about the people he loved; used to treasuring them because a twist of a car wheel and they could be gone like that; but it must scare Martin so much more.

“No, seriously, does this mean we have to make each other friendship bracelets and always sit together at lunch?”

“You’re cute when you’re concussed, you know that?”

They stumbled on a little further, still veering drunkenly into the stream and then splashing out from time to time. Danny was afraid that Martin was going to drift off again but the man surprised him by saying: “It had to be something in the call from Jack that set Ryan off. And he definitely recognized the guy in the photograph.”

Danny was equally grateful for a chance to act like an FBI agent. “Jack told him his brother-in-law had faked his own death so chances are the guy in the photograph is Nathan Gallagher. And I was asking Ryan about him when he knocked me out.”

“So, why does a guy go off the deep end because his wife’s criminal brother is scamming her into seeing him?”

“He doesn’t.” Danny thought about who Ryan was, the way he was. His eyes widened. “Martin, if he did what he did to you for giving him some lip, what the hell did he do to a rude, morose teenager who had been running wild for years and was fresh out of Juvie?”

Martin shivered in his grip. “Nothing good, I would think. Except – why would Mary stay with him if he was treating her brother like that?”

“Maybe she was frightened? Maybe she didn’t know that it wasn’t something she had to put up with. Her father beat her mother, he beat her and her brother. Sometimes it can take a while before you realize you deserve something better, when something shitty is all you’ve known.”

Danny kept turning over in his head the conversations they had with Ryan. “Maybe he doesn’t hit women, or girls, or children. He said ‘young men’ needed to learn discipline, nothing about women. Maybe he wasn’t pissed with Mary for going to see her brother. Maybe he was pissed with Nathan for outsmarting him and escaping. Maybe it was Nathan who broke Ryan’s ‘rules’ when he got away.”
Martin pressed a hand to his head and Danny saw that the blood had seeped through the Band Aid. Martin wiped off his hand absently, stumbled in the snow and then struggled on. “Nathan Gallagher was only seventeen when he came out of Juvenile Hall. He was technically a minor.”

“I think Ryan would still think he was old enough to have the crap kicked out of him. Nothing else explains that miraculous character transformation. That kid was into drink and drugs and had a whole load of attitude inherited from his abusive father. One day the kid is a hopeless case, the next he’s the best-behaved boy in the class. And now we’ve met Ryan, I don’t think he made that happen with a good talking to and a reward system.”

“Would you stay with a man who did that to your brother?”

Danny found there was abruptly no air in his lungs. *Papi was a bastard. And he was a mean drunk. And I spent ten years between his fist and your pretty face.* He remembered it all now – those few words from Rafael enough to bring it all back – and yet, even remembering it, he still loved his father, still missed him, still felt guilty for his part in the crash that had caused his death.

He had to take a moment to catch his breath before he managed quietly: “What if you loved them both? What if she loved Ryan and he kept telling her that if her brother just did what he was told then he wouldn’t need to hit him any more? Maybe she just used to beg her brother to obey Ryan so he wouldn’t get mad. Maybe anyone living in the house started to think that Ryan had a right to set the rules the way he did and knew if the rules got broken then there was going to be a punishment. Maybe it just became the only reality they knew.”

He turned to find Martin gazing at him with way too much sympathy in those expressive blue eyes of his, although he quietly persisted: “I still don’t know why she’d stay.”

“She had no money of her own and she can’t drive.”

“She could pick up the phone.”

“And tell the cops what? That she – the daughter of the guy who did six years for killing the deputy sheriff’s daughter – wanted to report that Ryan – the pillar of the community and sixth generation all round good guy – was hitting her drunken, drug-addicted, juvenile delinquent brother? They’d probably think it was tough love and just give Ryan a warning, and then they’d be left alone in the house with him.”

Martin looked as if he was finally getting it. He shivered. “But – you couldn’t just stay, could you…? How could you just stay…?”

“You said it yourself, Martin, he’s done this before. There must have been someone he practiced on because what Ryan did to you – that was just to soften you up. He hadn’t even gotten started on you. That’s what torturers do. You beat the crap out of someone and then you leave them tied up in the cold until their muscles are screaming and every bruise is throbbing, and then you beat them again, and then you leave them for even longer so they can think about you coming back and starting all over again. And then you do something even worse to them that they weren’t expecting. So by the fourth time you walk in there, they’re hurting so badly and they’re so scared of what you’re going to do next that they’ll agree to anything.”

Martin looked as if a lot of things were finally clicking into place for him. “He told me he still kept a cattle prod for special occasions.”

Danny sighed. “You told him where he could shove it, didn’t you?”
Martin acknowledged his insight with an apologetic grimace.

“Yeah, don’t do that next time. But Ryan was used to negotiating, too. With me, I mean. He was going to bring you back in sometime during the night so I could see exactly what he’d done to you and then he was going to make me watch him do something even worse. He wanted me really scared of what he was going to do to you next before we actually came to terms. I was trying to make a deal with him when he came back in the first time but from Ryan’s point of view, it was too soon. He wanted to be the one who set when and where and what I had to give him to make him stop hurting you.”

Martin darted him a searching look. “What were you offering him?”

“The point is that he’s done this before. Maybe he negotiated with Mary. Maybe he never needed to lay a finger on her because her brother was the one who took the beatings if she didn’t do exactly what Ryan said.”

“Danny, if that’s really what happened…Nathan Gallagher was living in Ryan’s house for five years.” Martin looked as sick as Danny felt.

Danny whistled through his teeth. “That poor kid. Left alone with that guy in the middle of nowhere? I would have faked my own death after five days.”

***

Standing in the office of the local sheriff, while the wind rattled the windows like an insane asylum inmate after the Haloperidol had run out, Jack Malone could feel his patience fraying like torn silk. He had two lawmen, both very unhappy about being bothered at this time of night, smirking at him as if he were an anxious parent whose kids were two minutes late home from Little League practice, and at the same time his gut was telling him that he had every reason to be worried. As the snow battered the windows and the wind whined down the chimney, Sheriff Cooper glanced across at his deputy with an eye roll that suggested he thought that the FBI were once again indulging their paranoia all over his town.

“You said yourself that you heard from your agents after they reached Ryan’s place. There’s a blizzard, in case you haven’t noticed. A few of the phones are out. Why would you think any harm’s come to them?”

“There could have been an accident.”

“In Ryan’s kitchen? Your agents don’t know not to run with scissors?”

“They weren’t getting along too well with Mr. Ryan when last I spoke to him.”

Cooper snorted. “Well, I think we both know who’s to thank for that. You didn’t give him too many reasons to like you guys last time, did you?” Seeing Jack’s expression, he rolled his eyes. “Just relax, Malone. Even if they were getting under Ryan’s skin like ticks, he’d still let them sleep in his barn. Are you worried Bigfoot’s got them – cause I’m thinking we’re a little too far east for that?”

“I haven’t been able to contact my agents for nearly three hours. When I last spoke to them, Ryan had physically threatened one of them. And I now hear from my agents in Indemnity that Ryan has already murdered one man. Now tell me again why I have nothing to worry about?”

He saw Cooper’s certainties waver a little, like drapes flicked by a sudden chill breeze. “Murder?”
He killed his father-in-law, Sheriff Cooper. There was a witness who helped him cover up the crime – a reliable witness who was, at the time, deputy sheriff of Indemnity. I’m not denying Ryan had cause, and for all I know he rid the world of a serial killer, but he’s still a murderer, and my agents don’t switch off their cell phones when they’re working a case.”

The clock on the wall ticked its way around circle of numbers as Cooper thought the matter over. He rose to his feet. “Are you expecting me to arrest Ryan for this murder he supposedly committed?”

“I think he needs to be taken in for questioning. Last time I checked, someone being a drunken scumbag didn’t mean it was okay to cave his head in with a crowbar even if he did beat and possibly rape his own children. I think it could get plea bargained down from murder one by a first year law student and there’s not going to be a lot of sympathy for the victim, but it’s still a crime, and according to a reliable eye witness Ryan still committed it. So, for the last time, how are you going to get me up that mountain?”

“I can’t.” Cooper gazed up at him with concern in his eyes as well as the exasperation. “Ryan could be the Hillside Strangler, it still doesn’t make that road safe in this weather. You can’t send a chopper up until the wind drops and I wouldn’t risk a car either.”

Jack had already been told that about the chopper, of course, after he’d called it in and been told that on this occasion his best bet was the local law enforcement who would know the terrain and understand the safest approach in the current conditions. But being told it again didn’t mean that he enjoyed hearing it any better.

The deputy said: “The snow’s supposed to let up in a few hours. Come morning, they say it’ll be clear. I could take you up then.”

Cooper added: “Agent Malone, I want to help you, but I can’t make it stop snowing and you know yourself that track isn’t safe in these kind of conditions. Why don’t you sit down and I’ll get Jarvis to brew up some coffee….”

Unwillingly, Jack sat. He did not want to concede that he had to wait this out but he knew they had a point. If he were honest, his fear was that Danny or Martin’s questioning had led Ryan to think they knew more than they did, and he had taken them prisoner. He doubted Ryan would hurt them, but he might have grabbed one of their guns and be holding them hostage while he decided what to do. The last thing he needed was another Barry Mashburn dilemma developing. But that might explain why they had been forced to switch off their cell phones. He just hoped that if they were in that situation they were showing sense enough to sit tight and not try to wrest the gun from his hand; the last thing he needed right now was another agent getting shot. Sam had more than used up her right to scare the hell out of him, almost bleeding to death in that bookstore and then getting grabbed and beaten after her cover was blown; Martin had used up a five year allowance of acceptable stress in ten seconds of gun battle; Viv was lucky he even let her out of the office after that scare over her heart; and Danny had ridden his last nerve for weeks after Martin’s shooting, doing his damnedest to get himself killed through a series of reckless stunts that had taken years off Jack’s life.

Cooper put the hot coffee down in front of him. “Here you go.”

“You know, Ryan’s a good man.” Cooper sat down next to him. “He may not like you G-men coming in and asking him a bunch of questions he doesn’t want to answer, but he’s a good husband and a loving father. Your boys should be safe enough.”
That was the second time Cooper had called Danny and Martin ‘boys’. Jack called them that himself sometimes but it was an odd thing for someone to call them who had never met them. Jack narrowed his eyes. “Have you spoken to Ryan this evening?”

There was an uncomfortable pause before Cooper shrugged. “He called me a few hours ago. Said you’d sent him a couple of college boys to question him.”

“When exactly?”

Cooper glanced at his watch. “Two hours ago, maybe.”

“Called you from his landline or his cell?”

“His cell phone. Said the line must be down again.”

“And you were going to tell me this when exactly?” Jack rose to his feet again. “Stop screwing me around, Cooper, and tell me what he told you – and I mean word for word.”

“It was nothing. He was kidding around – saying those agents you sent seemed to think they were all grown up just because some idiot had given them a gun and a badge. He said the line was down and that if you started fussing to let you know they were okay. Then he said they were talking about driving down in the dark – but he promised me he would talk them out of it.”

Jack felt anger stirring in his guts; the coffee really hadn’t helped, turning the rage tar black and bitter. “Ryan calls you up for no reason other than to talk about my agents and here was me worrying about them. Don’t I feel silly?”

“He was just a little exasperated – wanted to talk. He mostly asked me about Mary – if I’d heard anything about her, if I could put out my own feelers because he didn’t trust the FBI. Said he was worried about her, being out in this weather and that he hoped she was somewhere warm. All he said about your agents was that they were annoying and too dumb to know how dangerous it was driving in the snow.”

Jack stabbed a finger at the phone. “Call the phone company, now. I want confirmation the line is down.” As the deputy scurried to do as he asked, Jack held Cooper’s gaze. “Don’t withhold information from me ever again.”

“I told you, it was nothing.”

“And I’m telling you he had a reason for calling you. When he called you was it from inside the house or outside?”

“Outside.”

“Did you ask him why he was out there?”

“He said he was getting more wood for the stove.”

“What time was it exactly?”

“Nine-thirty-one. I checked it at the time.”

The silence hung there for a moment, heavy as wet washing on a line, and then Cooper said abruptly: “Agent Malone, this is a nice town. We’ve got people who rely on each other, they live a long way from the nearest doctor, the nearest hospital, the nearest grocery store; you live in a place
like this you get to know who your neighbors are, and I know Frank Ryan, and I don’t know what your beef with him is, but he’s a good man. He loves his wife and he loved that little girl of his. Whatever he did back in Indemnity, I reckon he had a good reason.” He held Jack’s gaze. “Did he have a good reason?”

“Yes,” Jack conceded. “He did.”

“You come in here, throwing accusations around, and I have to tell you, I don’t know you. I don’t know anything about you except that you’re the FBI agent who never found Margaret even though he said he would.”

“I haven’t finished looking yet,” Jack said quietly. “But I take your point. But that doesn’t alter the fact that Frank Ryan once killed a man and I’ve lost touch with my agents, who were last heard from in his company, so I’m a little concerned, especially as when I spoke to Ryan, he didn’t sound any too good tempered.”

“We’ll take you up at first light.” Cooper reached across and refilled Jack’s coffee mug, his gaze still guarded under light lashes, the lamp light picking up the lines beneath his eyes, like bird tracks in the sand, and glinting on the silver in his hair. “We don’t want to get in the way of your search for Mary or Margaret or your agents. We’ll help you in any way we can, but I know Frank.”

Jack took a sip of the coffee, letting the bitterness wash over his tongue this time. “Maybe you don’t know him as well as you think, Sheriff. But I’m hoping you’re right and I’m wrong. I really am. But I want you to know that…”

His phone cut through their conversation and he flicked it open. “Malone.”

“Jack, it’s Vivian. I think we can fill in a few blanks for you…”

As the new information poured into his ear, he could see the picture in his head adjusting, like a jigsaw puzzle with new pieces filled in, suddenly the sky was the sea and the cloud formation the white spume of a wave. Everything was clearer; everything was subtly different.

“And this teacher – she’s adamant that it was Mary’s idea for Nathan to fake his own death and disappear?”

“Absolutely adamant.”

“I’m not getting that. If Jake Gallagher was the problem and Jake Gallagher was dead then why did Nathan need to run away? Stapleton was sure he was dead?”

“No question, Jack. He checked for a pulse several times and the body wasn’t disfigured by the crash. They had an open casket. Gallagher senior definitely died that night.”

“Did the killings stop after Gallagher’s death?”

“According to Sheriff Bennett they’d already stopped by then. The last one happened six years before Gallagher died.”

“Okay, let’s forget the serial killings for a minute. Let’s go through what we know about Clare Hope again.”

As Viv reiterated it quietly, how Sam had tracked down the midwife who had delivered the baby and spoken to her over the phone, how she had described Clare and her husband – whom she had identified from a photograph as ‘Ethan Hope’ – as ‘ecstatic’ about the birth of their daughter; how
they had been a ‘normal, happy, healthy couple’ who showed no signs of being on drugs, Jack was still fitting things together in his head. “Okay – back up. When exactly was Clare and Nathan’s daughter born?”

“I’ve got a copy of the birth certificate here – it’s just been faxed through to me. She was born on –” Viv broke off.

“What?” Jack demanded.

“Jack, baby Charlotte was born three weeks before Margaret went missing.”

Jack remembered that conversation with Danny. “Margaret’s best friend at school said that just before Margaret went missing she was talking about buying presents for a baby.”

“This could be a lot less sinister than we thought, Jack,” Viv put in. “Supposing Nathan is doing that new father thing…”

“Where you accost complete strangers and people you haven’t seen in a decade and force them to admire pictures of your baby?” Jack smiled. “I remember it well.”

“No one was safe from Marcus when Reggie was born. I swear he used to ride elevators just to find new victims. Maybe Nathan’s the same and wants to share this experience with his sister. So he makes contact, she calls him back. They arrange a secret meeting so that Margaret can meet her uncle and see the baby, but something goes wrong. And Mary didn’t tell Ryan that their daughter had been with her brother because she didn’t want to let him know that Nathan was still alive.”

“Yeah, everything else I get, it’s Nathan playing dead that I don’t understand. Ryan’s an asshole but there’s no reason to suppose he would still have a problem with Nathan seeing Clare. She’s not an addict any more, they’re married, they have a child. Even the AFA should be okay with their lifestyle these days.”

“I don’t get that either. Or why Nathan didn’t bring Margaret back. I’d assume he found some evidence that she was being abused, except that Ryan passed that polygraph. Unless Mary…”

Jack thought of Mary, trying in his mind to imagine her striking out, erupting into a sudden fit of temper, but he couldn’t envisage it with any conviction. “The teacher didn’t know why Nathan left? She didn’t know what the problem was?”

“No. She told Nathan he should let his sister know that he was alive and well and he told her that Mary knew, that Mary had always known, that it was her idea for him to leave. But when she asked him why he’d done that, he just said he wanted to be with Clare, and Ryan wouldn’t like it. He did say he hadn’t done anything wrong.”

“And that was when he and Clare told her that they’d given that poor bastard whose corpse they’d used the last rites?”

“Yes. Eileen Walker said that when they told her about that, they both cried.”

He could see the scene of them with the corpse in his mind’s eye, the two skinny ex-addicts, barely into adulthood themselves, sobbing as they disinterred the shriveled remnants of a life ended so cruelly, gagging as they carried it to the car, speaking words of half-remembered rituals, a confused solemnity, vocabulary inadequate for the occasion. He wondered if they woke up in the dark sometimes with their hearts pounding in their chests, still remembering the feel of his dead skin against theirs, the stink of him, the tragedy of him; the one they had doomed to be forever nameless.
“Jack…?”

Vivian’s voice recalling him to the present and reminding him how very tired he was at the same time. “Have you run Ethan Hope through the system?”

“We’ve got his social security number. It was issued three months after Nathan Gallagher supposedly died. He gives Garrett Davidson’s address and on his DMV records he owns a dark blue sedan, like the one the girls thought they saw him driving when Margaret gave him directions. I’m sending you through his DMV photograph.”

It flashed through on his cell phone and he gazed at it, so unexpectedly clear, no longer a blurry black and white, but with color and texture and detail. He could see the connection to Margaret, although Nathan’s dark eyes were blue instead of brown, but more than that he could see another unexpected similarity. “Well, what do you know, a poor white trash Martin. I think Danny owes that schoolgirl an apology.”

“If Mary ran away willingly – even if Ryan gave her no cause – then I think Davidson would hide her, and Margaret.”

“I think you’re right. But we still need to find them, even if they’re missing by choice. We need to know that Margaret hasn’t been abused by anyone. Do you want me to get a team assembled?”

“No, Jack, we don’t want a hostage situation. I think it makes more sense if Sam and I go and knock on the door and ask a few questions, get a sense of how the land lies. We don’t want to spook Davidson or to push Gallagher into doing anything stupid. And two women may seem less threatening.”

“Okay, but if you need any back up – you’ve got it, and don’t take any risks. None.”

“We promise.”

He could hear the amusement in Viv’s voice and couldn’t help smiling. “Hey, I’ve got two agents not answering their phones right now. You need to cut me a little slack.”

“Call us as soon as you get in touch with those two,” Viv warned.

“Will do.” He ended the call and looked at the expectant Cooper. “It seems likely that Mary wasn’t kidnapped. We think she arranged for her brother to pick her up from the hospital in Honesdale. We think she may have arranged for him to collect her daughter four years ago as well. That’s the brother who faked his own death to get away because Ryan wouldn’t let him date.” As Cooper looked astonished, Jack held his gaze: “Still think you know Frank Ryan?”

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Martin jolted awake to find that he was shivering with cold in thick undergrowth beneath an overhanging fir. Every muscle was aching, the air smelt of bracken and earth, and the snow was still falling – although the flakes had thinned a little, riding gusts of wind in spits instead of the purposeful downfall of before. His head was still pounding but the urge to vomit had worn off, and, while breathing hurt, the pain in his kidneys had faded from a sharp stab to a dull ache. Turning his head stiffly he found that he was curled up against Danny, who had drifted asleep, that warmth against his cheek from Danny’s body heat, that warmth across his back, Danny’s arm around him. Even in his sleep, Danny was shivering and, when Martin reached across, his skin felt icy and his shirt was chilled and wet.

Wriggling out of the coat he was wearing was painful and made a more difficult process because
he was trying not to disturb the sleeping man, but finally he was out of its folds and could drape it over Danny. It was warm from his body and Danny nestled into it gratefully without waking up. Martin blew on his hands to warm them, his breath misting the air, and then let the sleeves of Ryan’s sweater cover his fingers again, wrapping his arms around himself to try to keep some of the cold out. At present it was difficult to imagine ever being warm or not in pain again.

He was still trying to make sense of what had happened and what it meant for this case. Ryan’s anger had been not only so violent but so practiced. He had beaten Martin with controlled rage, giving an impression of being entirely in the grip of fury and yet…and yet people had been beaten to death by men a lot less powerful than Ryan in a fraction of the time that Ryan had taken to batter him. Since starting to work for the FBI he had seen far too many rape victims who had sustained broken bones and horrendous contusions from scuffles lasting for only for a few minutes, and Ryan had been punching him out for at least twenty minutes, possibly half an hour. He should have been pissing and coughing blood by now and yet Martin was almost certain that apart from his cracked ribs that he really was just bruised. How did a man get so much practice at knowing how to judge his punches so perfectly?

Jack had been justified in assuming that Ryan was a wife beater; Martin would have thought it too, except Ryan had passed the polygraph, so perhaps he really didn’t hit women, but the effort involved in not doing so was so colossal that he had to find an outlet for his frustrations elsewhere. Martin certainly felt as if he had walked into the middle of something that had been building for a while. Something he intended to point out to Jack when the man was snatching a breath in between yelling at him. Ryan was all about the rules, so presumably he had to stick to them, too, and if not hitting women was one of them then Mary and her daughter had been safe from actual physical abuse, although Martin suspected they had been subjected to all manner of regulation by other means. Presumably Mary and any number of daughters would be safe from actual physical harm but perhaps that safety would not be extended to a son. And Mary’s next child was going to be a son.

Martin shivered and rubbed his arms as vigorously as he could bear with the bruises marking them. Difficult to escape while eight and a half months pregnant but almost impossible to escape with a newborn baby; and the stress of living out of motels as she fled could increase her infant son’s chances of succumbing to SID. So, he understood why she had taken this chance to get away from her husband, and, with his ribs aching in time to every breath, he understood why Nathan Gallagher had faked his own death – and, ironically, Indemnity was one of the few places in the States where one might easily stumble upon the convenient corpse of a dead twenty-something male without the need for murder – and he understood why Mary had contacted the only people she could think who might understand her need to flee, and had chosen the company of a crack addicted ex-prostitute over that of her respectable loving husband. What he still didn’t understand was why Mary had stayed when her brother had left all those years ago. Even if she had been in love with her husband, he didn’t think he could forgive her for staying and allowing her daughter to grow up under the shadow of Ryan’s instability.

Thinking of Nathan Gallagher, he wondered realistically how long it was possible to maintain one’s defiance when in this much pain; when there was no chance of rescue, no end in sight, just the immovable authority of Ryan’s will. He was a trained FBI agent, and he had plenty of practice at dealing with living with pain; he could take a lot and suck it up and keep going – it came with the territory; but he hurt in so many places right now, the hiss and sting of cuts and the dull numbing ache of bruise after bruise, and he wasn’t a scared teenage boy who had been down this road too many times before. In the middle of nowhere, with no help coming, how long could even someone with a childhood of abuse and who had spent a year in Juvenile Hall keep telling a guy twice his size to go screw himself before everything except giving in an accepting Ryan’s authority just hurt too much to bear? Martin thought he could probably stick it out for a few days at the
most. And that was if there was no one else around for Ryan to threaten. If the guy held a gun to
the head of someone he loved, he would probably do any damned thing he wanted in thirty
seconds. He could see Nathan now, getting up off the floor, holding his ribs, with the blood
running down his face, saying he was sorry, saying he wouldn’t do it again, eyes averted the way
Ryan wanted, shoulders slumped, defeated and full of self-loathing, but even this better than
another beating. Maybe Ryan had told himself he was doing this for Nathan’s own good; a short
sharp shock to make him accept Ryan’s authority so absolutely that there was no question of any
rebellion taking him back to drugs and drink and stealing cars. He could believe the man who had
been so righteously indignant in between smacking him around, clearly of the opinion that Martin
had brought this on himself, had convinced himself that he really had no choice other than to beat
his brother in law into submission.

The person he couldn’t get in focus was Mary. What was she doing while her husband was beating
her brother? Was she watching? Was she crying somewhere in another room? Why wasn’t she
waiting with an axe in her hand the way Samantha or Viv would have been if anyone had done that
to him or Danny, never mind, a blood relative? Except Mary was a churchgoer, he remembered
that; considered reasonably devout. Perhaps she believed in ‘thou shalt not kill’ but why did she
believe in ‘thou shalt not report your abusive spouse to the police for beating on your brother’ too,
because last time he’d checked that hadn’t featured as one of the Ten Commandments. **Because no
one would believe her.** Danny had spelled that out for him and Danny probably knew better than
him what the police did or did not believe in those circumstances.

Martin squinted at his watch and saw that they had been asleep for nearly three hours. Three hours
closer to Ryan being able to follow their tracks, but perhaps also three hours closer to Jack coming
looking for them. Jack had never been the over-protective type, no doubt he would have argued
that he had hand-picked a team he trusted to get on with the job without him looking over their
shoulders, and certainly on the occasions when they had proven unworthy of that trust he had been
happy to hand them their heads with their ears still ringing, but just because he was the hands-off
sort of boss didn’t mean that their health and safety wasn’t important to him. He had told them he
would call back in an hour, and Martin doubted he had given a casual shrug and headed off to bed
when he had done so and found their cell phones were switched off. Of course, if it was possible to
check the location of cell phones as shattered as theirs now were, then that was going to tell Jack
they were in Ryan’s kitchen, but he doubted that would allay Jack’s fears for long.

“Hey…”

Turning his head, Martin saw that Danny was awake. He looked as rough as Martin felt, half-
frozen and shivering, unshaven, and with shadows under his eyes from the cold, stubble all over his
jaw, and cuts and bruises marking his face from his collision with the slope and then the tree, but
his expression was concerned. “You okay?”

Martin half-smiled, acknowledging that his answer was annoying even before he made it. “Fine.”

Danny pointed a finger at him. “That’s going on your tombstone. ‘Here Lies Martin Fitzgerald.
Still Fine.’”

“Hey, works for me.”

Danny looked down at the coat draped over him and Martin gave him his most determined ‘want

Martin held his gaze. “I’m not wearing that coat, so don’t even think about it.”

Either Danny was too cold to fight or could see that Martin was immovable on this because he
pulled the coat on and Martin thought he saw him shiver with the relief as it covered his chilled back.

They climbed to their feet stiffly, Martin trying to conceal how much that hurt, although not with much success, going by the way Danny steadied him as if he were made of porcelain. “Can you make this?” Danny asked gently.

“Sure.” Martin nevertheless kept hold of him as he snatched another necessary breath. “We must have covered five miles last night, mustn’t we?”

“Easily.” Danny nodded upstream, still holding him up. “Even limping, it can’t take long before we find the campsite, and even if no one except you and me was dumb enough to get themselves caught in a blizzard, there’s a good chance a ranger will be along to check, although I imagine he’ll want to have some fun at our expense about us getting lost in the snow like Hansel and Gretel.”

“If he’s got a thermos of hot coffee with him he can call us anything he likes. Well, maybe not ‘Gretel’.”

“Coffee, nothing. He’s bound to have food with him, too.” Danny gently looped an arm around Martin’s back. “Hot unhealthy food with melted cheese on it.”

“You had me with ‘food’,” Martin assured him. “I’d arm wrestle a grizzly for some apple sauce right now.”

They scrambled out from under the shelter of the fir and the wind was a lash that shivered through them both. Danny tightened his grip on him. “Sure you’re okay?”

“Peachy.” Martin half-smiled at Danny’s eye roll. “Well, stop asking me stupid questions and I’ll stop giving you wise ass answers.” Walking hurt, every muscle had stiffened up and was chilled with cold, his legs seemed to have seized up and Danny seemed to be little better off, the pair of them lurching along like wannabe Igors. “They don’t put this on the recruitment posters, do they?”

“What?” Danny caught him as he wavered, steering him back from the stream.

“That sometimes being an FBI agent really sucks.”

“And the best part is that this isn’t even as bad as it gets.”

Martin darted him a sideways look, really hoping that Danny was joking. “It gets worse than this?”

“We still have the whole ‘explaining what happened to Jack’ part to get through, remember?”

The wind chill factor seemed to increase and Martin shivered in a way that wasn’t all theatrics. “It’s not completely our fault. He could have warned us that Ryan was a total nutbar.”

Danny looked amused. “That’s the line you’re going to take?”

“What line were you thinking of?”

“Unconditional apology. Possibly some groveling.”

“I don’t think we did anything wrong.” Martin felt stung by the injustice of it. Ever since they had stepped across the threshold Ryan had been looking for a fight. Whatever they did, whatever they said, he had a feeling that the first people Ryan could legitimately perceive as enemies who in any way added to his stress over his wife’s disappearance – were going to get it in the neck. He and
Danny had just been there at the wrong time and in the wrong place to suffer for Mary’s deception.

The sigh from Danny still seemed slightly amused and slightly weary. “You don’t get it, do you? The second Jack sees the state of your face he’s going to explode like a nail bomb.”

“Well, do you think he might direct some of that anger at the guy who took us prisoner rather than me?”

“Oh, he won’t be happy with Ryan either, but he is going to be so pissed with you he’ll probably perforate your eardrums. Do you remember what he was like when you got your head cracked by that baseball bat?”

Vividly, Martin thought. Sometimes he thought his ears were still burning from the tongue-lashing he had received, being publicly berated by a man he had hoped to impress while feeling sick from a concussion had that effect. “I still think he overreacted.”

“Jack nearly has to call the Deputy Director of the FBI to tell him that he’s let his son get killed the first day on the job. How would you feel if you had to take care of your boss’s kid and he immediately started playing in traffic?”

“But I didn’t break protocol this time.” On some level he knew Danny wasn’t goading him for fun, as in the good old days of their first meetings, but to keep his mind off the cold and the wind and the pain of his stiff muscles and aching bruises. And it was working. But nevertheless he still felt indignant. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

Danny shrugged. “See, if it had just been you there you could maybe have gotten away with that argument, but I was there, too, and I don’t have a scratch on me.”

It would have been funny on another day, possibly, but given that Danny looked as if he had been not just dragged through a hedge backwards but as if someone had made determined efforts to shred him like an incriminating document, it really wasn’t. “Danny, Ryan knocked you unconscious then punched you in the face before you slid thirty feet down a rocky slope and slammed into a tree. Most people look better than you after they’re dead.”

Realization evidently hit even as Danny had his mouth open to protest. He reached up and felt the needles in his hair and then seemed to become aware of the scrape on his face, the bruise on his forehead. “Damnit to hell!”

“If I get yelled at, so do you,” Martin told him smugly. Childishly, that made him feel better than almost anything that had happened so far.

They trudged on through glittering snow and past trees that groaned and rustled ominously with each gust of the bitter wind. Martin thought he should be used to the pain by now, that it should have numbed down into something he could accept, but each breath was a stab, sharp and new and always surprising. He could feel himself reaching for energy he didn’t have, expecting his body to produce strength from somewhere, and could feel it laboring, wavering, shaking with the effort demanded. It annoyed him intensely to discover that his body was letting him down again. All those years of keeping fit, of training and running, of sit ups and visits to the gym and it had still taken agonizing effort to get back to full fitness after those bullets had so nearly claimed his life. Such a long, slow, painful crawl back to feeling like himself again, with every moment of weakness having to be lived out in the gaze of anxious observers. He had spent so many weeks shaking off offered assistance, telling people crossly that, no, he didn’t need the door held open for him, that, yes, he could manage the stairs, that their help was unnecessary and unwelcome, until they had all taken a step back and learned to let him do it himself. What he wanted now was what he had
wanted then – to feel like an FBI agent and not a victim.

“Let’s go through it again. We should be able to solve this thing by now. Mary wasn’t kidnapped, I’m sure of that now. She got away from Ryan, and her brother and her brother’s girlfriend helped her. For all we know they got Margaret away as well.”

Danny was quick to join in. “Mary hears her baby is a boy. Did we decide if that was relevant or not?”

“Well, Ryan didn’t hit women or children, according to his polygraph, but he had no trouble hitting us, so I’m guessing…yes. Although, she could have jumped the gun a little if he wouldn’t start hitting a boy until he was out of being a child and classified as an adult.”

“No, wait, that’s not it…Ryan said something to Jack – when he was on the phone, do you remember? Something about boys taking after their fathers…?”

Martin remembered not only hearing it but wincing from it, images of his own father and his occasional replication of his faults stinging him uncomfortably, not to mention all those meetings with other men in expensive suits with high-powered jobs, eyeing Martin as an extension of Victor Fitzgerald and congratulating his father on how closely he resembled him. “He said: ‘We are what our fathers make us.’”

“That’s it. That’s why Mary had to go once she knew she was having a son. Not because Ryan would have hurt him, but because Ryan would have raised him to be a chip off the old block. She didn’t want her son turning out like his father.”

“So she contacts her brother and he comes to get her. Are we thinking Mary had her own daughter kidnapped?”

Danny shook his head. “Viv and Jack both said that Mary was desolate over the loss of Margaret. I think she just arranged for Margaret to meet her uncle or something.”

“Risky move, given the way Ryan reacted when he found out that Nathan was still alive. A lot to expect a seven year old to keep secret.”

“I expect Margaret and Mary had a lot of secrets from Ryan.” Danny shrugged. “That’s what happens in that kind of a household. You have to have the things you don’t share with the guy who controls you, even if you love him, he’s also the enemy, he’s the one you form alliances against, have all these maneuvers for keeping in a good mood. Margaret was probably an old hand by the time she was seven.”

Martin thought I don’t want to know how you know that, Danny, but I trust that you know it all the same. “Okay then, so Margaret was just supposed to meet Nathan. But we don’t know what was different, what made him contact Mary or made Mary agree for him to meet Margaret.”

“But something did. So they arrange the meeting and that’s all it’s meant to be – a meeting, but then Nathan doesn’t bring her back.”

The breath caught in his aching ribs again, like a tissue snagged on a twig, he remembered fists hitting him over and over, Ryan yanking his head back by the hair while the blood poured into his eye and the man snarled at him about obedience and respect. “Would you? If Nathan knew what Ryan was like – would you take a little girl back to him? Even if he never hurt her, even if he loved her, would you want her raised by him?”

“No. I’d keep her and I’d hope that it would give my sister the impetus to run away, too. And I’d
tell her that if she ever changed her mind all she needed to do was call…and I’d rescue her somehow.”

And for the first time it felt as if they had them all in focus, those shadow puppets overwhelmed by Ryan’s vivid color. Nathan no longer a flake looking for a fix but a guy trying to save his sister from marriage to a monster; Clare solidifying in his mind’s eye from a girl with a needle in her arm to someone with determination enough to make happen the rescue of another woman in need, to save Margaret before she had to endure a childhood every bit as twisted as her own. “I think Margaret’s alive. And Mary’s in no danger.”

“But from Ryan,” Danny pointed out. “We may have put her in danger the minute we showed Ryan that photograph of her brother meeting her outside the hospital. Maybe he isn’t following us, at all. Maybe he’s already on his way to Wisconsin to look for his wife.”

Martin had another kaleidoscope of Ryan’s fury in a closed space, winded from a punch to the guts and with his ears singing, the man raging at him as he landed blow after blow, all the anger he was feeling about his wife’s betrayal, her brother’s deception; and he suspected that all he’d felt was the tip of the iceberg. “We have to get to a phone. We have to warn Sam and Viv that Ryan could be coming their way. They need to get to Mary before he does, because I’m thinking that if Ryan works out that Mary has known where his daughter is for all this time and didn’t tell him, that he may change his mind about hitting women….”

It was what he needed. The pain and stiffness in his body, chilled nerve-deep by too much cold and too many bruises, all of it receded as he thought of a woman eight and a half months pregnant whose only defenders were a guy who Ryan had probably beaten into submission so many times before he would never believe himself capable of defeating him, and a woman who had been abused throughout her childhood. Then he thought of what Ryan had done to him, with such swift and merciless efficiency. The adrenaline spiked and for the first time since he had awoken, shivering, in the snow, he felt like an FBI agent again.

He found a smile for Danny, who was still watching him anxiously. “We can do this, Danny. It’s already getting light.”

Danny smiled back. “Which means Jack will be looking for us and – given what he does for a living – that’s a comforting thought.”

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There was nothing about this picture that wasn’t wrong. Jack stood in the snow with his hands in his pockets and gazed through the starred window of the crashed Humvee. Ever since he had first seen the black metallic shine of the car in the midst of the white show and yelled at the Sheriff to stop the car, he had been trying to fit Danny and Martin into this scene. He had tried to imagine them jolting down that track in a darkness lit only by their headlights while the snow fell in a curtain of gray flakes and the wind buffeted them maliciously. Every time he tried it, they faded like ghosts, because they had never been here in the first place; of that he was almost certain.

Snow had fallen over where the skid marks should have been on the road thirty feet higher up this rocky slope, but the tree was still there and still down, and here was the jeep smashed into a tree and the smears of blood on the steering wheel. Textbook, except it wasn’t an accident scene, Jack had seen too many not to recognize one when he saw one, and this was set dressing.

“It seems to be pretty clear what happened,” the deputy offered. “The tree came down in the storm and your boys swerved to avoid it, the jeep went off the road, hit here and then…”
“And then what…?” Jack turned dark eyes upon him. “Why would they leave the jeep? It’s the best shelter around.”

“Maybe they thought it was going to blow up?”

“Why would it? The fuel line wasn’t damaged. It didn’t even hit the tree that hard. When it came down here it wasn’t going very fast, less than ten miles an hour – probably as fast as any vehicle would go with the impetus of its own weight down a slope that steep. And let’s not start on the tree that’s down across the road – which was cut with a chainsaw, not blown over by the wind.”

“Maybe someone was logging and the storm caught him unawares, so he took off and left the tree like that and then the wind finished off what he started?”

Jack didn’t bother trying to hide his disbelief. “Only an idiot would fell a tree where that one was standing.”

“Maybe it was a safety measure. Cutting it down before it fell? But the storm came and…”

“And this is all bullshit.” Jack gazed at the starred deception of the windshield, the blood. He had already ordered the helicopters and the team of FBI agents. Ironically, he had ended up calling Search and Rescue as well, but he didn’t believe that Danny and Martin had left Ryan’s house in the middle of a blizzard and driven down a track like this in the dark after he had expressly told them not to, not because of any provocation.

“There’s blood on the steering wheel.” Cooper looked grim, but he also looked as if this crime scene was bothering him too.

“I know. It’s not right either.” Jack had examined it carefully and the blood had dried in a clotted sticky lump; it looked more like someone had wiped it off on there to him.

“You don’t think you’re being a little paranoid?” Cooper asked.

Jack glanced at him. “I know what blood looks like on a steering wheel when you run into a stationary object and hit your head.” He could still recall it vividly from when he had done exactly the same thing and it hadn’t looked like that. He called into the office again, wanting an ETA for the helicopter he’d ordered.

“Delgado.”

He frowned in disbelief. “Elena?”

“Have you found them yet?”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Sam talked to your neighbor yesterday. She said you had a temperature of a hundred and three. What the hell are you doing in the office at five in the morning?”

“I called Sam for an update. She said you’d lost contact with Danny and Martin. Just thought you may need someone here to coordinate things.”

“Go back to bed.”

“Jack….”

Sighing, he thought about how good he would be at resting in bed and sipping soup while two colleagues were lost in the snow. “Who’s looking after your daughter?”
“My neighbor. She’s sleeping most of the day at the moment anyway. I’m more useful here. They said you’d found their car?”

“Yeah, wrapped around a tree, but I don’t think they were ever in the car. We’re just waiting for a logging crew to get up here and cut up the damned tree that supposedly ‘fell’ across the track so we can get past it and head up to Ryan’s. There’s a helicopter on the way but it’s not easy to find a place for it to land around here. Flat cleared areas are a little in short supply. As you’re there, can you chase up the ETA on…”

“Forty five minutes. Do you want anything else?”

“A Saint Bernard might be an idea. Does the Search & Rescue team include a paramedic?”

“Of course. Two paramedics coming by helicopter.” She seemed surprised that he would need to ask. “I was very specific about what was needed and how I would personally be hunting them all down if they didn’t find Danny and Martin and bring them home safely. They are very motivated.”

Despite the knot of anxiety in his stomach, Jack couldn’t help a smirk breaking out at that. He could imagine that Elena had a good line in threats. “Good for you. What else did Samantha and Vivian say?”

“They’re still driving up to see Garrett Davidson.”

“Yeah, well, good luck to them with that guy. I’ve had more profitable conversations with vending machines.”

“What else can I do?”

“Wrap up warm, drink plenty of liquids, try not to infect anything I might touch with flu germs. I’ll be in touch.” He snapped off the phone and held Cooper’s gaze. “This is a set up and we’re supposed to waste a lot of time looking for my agents in the snow – time that we need to spend finding out where they really are.”

“They could be around here somewhere, concussed and disorientated,” the deputy protested, clearly thinking that Jack was a heartless bastard. A lot of people thought that about him and at times he almost wondered if they were right, but on this occasion the anxiety for his two agents was a rat gnaw in his intestine, and while his commonsense told him they were probably already dead, he had a siren going off in his instincts telling him they were still in danger and even a minute wasted here could be the difference between getting them back alive and being hollowed out with grief at their funerals.

“They’re not.” Jack began to clamber back up the slope, feeling the cold bite into his aching knees as he did so. “They’re where Ryan is or they’re already dead. But they’re not here.”

Cooper climbed up next to him with a lot more grace. “You’re putting a lot of faith in their obedience, Agent Malone.”

“They’re not particularly obedient.” Jack grabbed a branch and hauled himself up through a knee-deep drift. “They’re just not stupid. And no way would Danny either drive Martin down this track in the dark or let Martin drive down it.”

“What about Fitzgerald?”

Jack snorted. “Yeah, he’d drive down here in a blizzard with no headlamps if he was on the trail of something but, like I said, Danny would never have let him. When a guy has bled all over you
before needing five hours in surgery, you tend to be a little twitchy about letting him put himself in a danger. Danny would risk his own life if Ryan got him really pissed but he’d never risk Martin’s.”

That seemed to get through to Cooper as nothing else had, or perhaps the man had already been having doubts. Either way he nodded. “Okay, how do you want to play this?”

“I need to get to Ryan’s. I think he may have taken them prisoner sometime last night and that’s why their cell phones were switched off. Now, either he’s stalling because he hasn’t made up his mind what he wants to do with them, or he’s already killed them and this was stage one of him covering his tracks.” Jack tried to keep his tone brisk but there was a waver in there he couldn’t entirely suppress.

“Even if he is this kidnapping crazy guy you’re describing – maybe they got away?” Cooper suggested. “Ryan’s not a professional criminal. He’s a farmer and they’re trained federal agents, right?”

“They would have called in the second they were able.” And although his instincts were still screaming at him not to waste a second, Jack could see it in his mind’s eye all too clearly – Danny and Martin lying in the snow with bright crimson stains around their heads, Ryan with a shovel in his hands, the edge of it dripping red.

The roar of an engine made them both turn around and he had never been so grateful to see a truck driven by a guy wearing a lumber jacket before. The man pulled up, nodded to Cooper, and then hauled out of the back seat a wicked looking chainsaw. When he pulled the cord and the blade began to whir, Jack thought he had never heard anything so much like music in his life.

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Snowflakes had danced in their headlight beams all the way here; through darkness and the graying pre-dawn to the first rosy streaks of morning, Sam had driven through snow and slush and wind-whipped flurries while Vivian map read and wondered how anyone could drive in this weather at this speed. She was grateful to Elena for camping out in the office and taking their calls, letting them know everything that was being done to find Danny and Martin without them clogging up Jack’s cell phone. Even with her throat a hot croak of infection, Elena managed to sound efficient and positive.

“I’m sure they’ll be fine,” Elena had said on the last call. “They’re big boys. They can take care of themselves, the weather’s clearing now and Jack is hoping to be at Ryan’s in a few minutes. You find Mary. We’ll find them.”

As Vivian closed her cell phone, she realized that she and Sam really were Mary’s best chance of being found now. Danny and Martin were missing people themselves and Jack was going to use every resource available to him to find them; she also doubted he had thoughts to spare for anything else right now, even Mary. The last thing Jack needed after the year that he’d had was two of his agents going astray. She really did hope for Danny and Martin’s sake that they hadn’t done anything reckless or stupid, or she suspected they were going to be flying desks for a very long time. Personally, she wouldn’t much care what they had done as long as they hadn’t gotten themselves killed, but Jack’s nerves were a lot more frayed than hers.

They jolted down a snow-softened track lined by a high hedge of firs, a screen between the road and the sprawling isolated farm buildings. This was the place which Garrett Davidson had inherited from his grandparents and immediately turned into a shelter for the dispossessed; he had planted those firs too, a living wall between the people he was protecting and the world that had done them harm. Vivian had liked Davidson a lot more than Jack had, but then Davidson had a lot
more time for women than he did for forty-something men. As he had told Jack at the time, he spent most of his time trying to fix the damage done by men of Jack’s age. It occurred to her that Davidson and Sam should have a lot in common.

Sam switched off the engine before they reached the gap in the hedge and they rolled silently along the last few feet of track. As Vivian climbed stiffly out of the car, she could hear a rooster crowing. She glanced across at Sam. “You know there’s nothing natural about being able to drive at sixty miles per hour in this weather.”

As Sam began to dial the number for the office, Viv added gently: “They’ll call us if they hear anything.”

Sam stopped dialing, fingers poised. She was always pale but the shadows under her eyes had a delicate tinge of blue today. Vivian suspected she was hanging on by her fingernails, and, not for the first time, was glad that she had been in recovery herself when Martin had been undergoing those endless hours in surgery. That was a crisis she was in no way sorry to have missed. By the time she had been fully conscious and able to take in her surroundings, Dornvald had been dead and Martin sleeping under sedation, not feeling any pain and already out of danger. There was a tremor in Sam’s voice: “It was thirty degrees in the Catskills last night. If they were out in that blizzard….”

“Jack is going to find them, Sam. We need to focus on Mary now.”

“Ryan’s a murderer.”

“He killed a wife-beating child-battering rapist. Danny and Martin don’t exactly fit those categories. How are we going to play this?”

She saw Sam determinedly ignore the white noise of anxiety in her mind and focus. “Davidson knows you so we can either go in as federal agents, or I can go in undercover and see if I can get inside and take a look around.”

Viv grimaced. “I think we’re better playing it straight with Davidson. Tell him we’re not interested in making Mary go back to her husband if she doesn’t want to, we just need to know that she’s okay and we need to find out what happened to Margaret.”

“Okay.” Sam inclined her head, snatched another breath as she forced herself not to call Elena or Jack, and then followed Vivian into the farmyard.

The place, ironically, was very similar to the pictures of the farm where Ryan had once lived outside Indemnity. The house was large and square and would – before the planting of the firs – have been badly situated, too exposed to the east wind that would sweep in across the fields. There was a barn, a child’s drawing of a building, red corrugated iron, softened by the yellow straw within it, the edge of a green tractor. As she watched, red-brown chickens began to appear out of the shadows, clucking peevishly, a few of them venturing out of the open doors, their tracks narrow cuts in the snow, before scuttling back for the comfort of the barn.

There were several vehicles parked outside the house, most of them old, but all of them looking able to deal with the local terrain. Viv crossed over to examine the old blue sedan, feeling that familiar spark of excitement at some tangible connection to a missing person. The car was grubby inside, looking as if dogs had traveled in it and children spilled all manner of sticky things upon the seat covers, snagged hairs and dropped candy, remnants of journeys taken in comfortable chaos. On top of a slightly stained comforter on the back seat, there was a bent-looking copy of ‘Little House in the Big Woods’, and a grubby soft toy of indeterminate species that had once been pink
but had been washed so many times that it was now more off-white.

Vivian knocked on the door, expecting to have a long wait before anyone answered. It was barely six in the morning, there was probably no one stirring. But then Sam said softly: “Viv…” and she turned to follow his gaze. Davidson was just coming from the barn to the house; he looked a little grayer at the temples but apart from that he was just the same, a solid bulk of conviction in an old overcoat. He was holding the hand of a girl of ten or eleven. She was carrying a basket of eggs, hands hidden by mittens, a scarf wrapped around her neck, and her long blonde hair spilling out from a woolen hat. But as she raised her eyes, Viv recognized her at once. Taller and older but unmistakably Margaret. Blonde or not, still definitely Margaret. Alive. Not raped or tortured or murdered and buried somewhere she would never be found, alive and smiling and holding Davidson’s hand and chattering to him nineteen to the dozen about the eggs they’d collected and how even Daisy never pecked her now.

It never stopped feeling miraculous. Finding the ones alive one had believed were already dead would never quite outweigh the misery of finding the one’s dead you had hoped were still alive, but there was almost no high like it – this spike of relief, this moment of seeing a person from a photograph on a whiteboard walk towards her, alive and well; that was why Vivian was still coming into work every morning.

Sam was still holding her arm. “Is it…?”

“Yes.” Vivian had to wrestle the smile of relief from her face. “It’s Margaret.”

Davidson looked up and saw them, and the shock washed over his face before the annoyance took its place. Not with them, with himself, Viv realized; no doubt Margaret had been cooped up in the house ever since her mother had gone missing and he had thought it would do no harm to let her come with him to collect the eggs. “Agent Johnson, long time, no see.”

“You lied to me, Mr. Davidson,” Viv said in quiet reproach.

Davidson raised his chin. “This is Megan, my cousin’s daughter.”

“She’s Margaret Ryan and we both know it.” Vivian held up a hand to stop his protests. “Mr. Davidson, we’re not interested in forcing Mary or Margaret to do anything they don’t want to do. We just need to know if they’re safe.”

Davidson held her gaze with his steady brown eyes. “She’s my cousin’s daughter, Megan, and I have all the paperwork you’ll ever need to prove it.”

Vivian said: “You don’t think her father has the right to know his daughter is still alive?”

The basket fell into the snow, spilling eggs, the whole ones rolling, softly speckled, amidst the crack of shells and gush of bright yellow yolks. Dismay was written all over Margaret’s face, her eyes huge and dark and terrified. Then her face went blank, as if a shutter had come down and when it lifted all the fear was concealed, and she smiled as brightly as if she were posing for a photograph.

“Why don’t you inside and have some tea?” she said. “I can make tea.”

She ran for the farm house door, moving past them swiftly on legs long and spindly as a filly, keeping just out of reach, throwing back the screen door with a clatter, twisting the handle of the door and flinging it wide, saying loudly: “I’ve never met anyone from the FBI before. It was just the local policemen who came before. Do you like being Federal Agents? If you told me all about
Margaret had always been softly-spoken, all of her teachers had said that – just like her mother, never one to speak out in class although she invariably knew the answers to the questions asked. She just never liked to call attention to herself. Now she let the door slam hard enough to make the windows rattle, and she was talking rapidly, a chatter of sound, inconsiderately loud in a house so full of children, the noise she was making enough to make a dog start barking and summon the inevitable wailing of a baby disturbed from slumber.

Sam hurried after her, darting between screen door and front door with some of Margaret’s own despairing energy, Margaret still a potential whisk of tragedy if she could not be secured. Viv increased her own pace, feeling her heart begin to beat a little too fast, the rhythm a reminder of how much she had invested in this child, in the need to see her safe. The stairs curled upwards, their white paint glazed and peeling, but the flagged corridor led straight past them to the kitchen, French windows letting in a silvery haze of snow-softened light from the scrubby tangle of the kitchen garden.

Vivian increased her own pace, wanting to sit down with the girl and talk to her, get some confirmation that she was happy, some understanding of why she was here; what had happened to her four years ago. She glanced at Davidson in exasperation. “You could have told us she was safe. Do you know what we’ve been imagining all these years? What her father’s been imagining?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Davidson walked past her with rapid strides, and she sped up to keep pace with him, determined that come what may they were not going to lose Margaret again.

Margaret had pulled back the French doors that led out into the kitchen garden and Sam said: “Margaret, please, we just want to talk to you.”

The girl paused in the doorway. “I’m Megan. Why don’t you tell me your names?” But she was coming back into the kitchen, albeit moving straight towards the kettle. There was coffee, ready brewed, but she ignored it, putting the kettle onto the hot hob of the stove. It was the whistling kind, Vivian noticed, and Davidson must have already got the stove going as the kettle began to sing softly, a low note still, but getting ready to build.

“I’m Samantha.” Sam held out a hand. “And this is Vivian. She’s been looking for you for a long time.”

Margaret politely removed her mitten before shaking her hand. “There was no need. I wasn’t lost.” She glanced up at Vivian and her face was a polite blank. “It was nice of you to look for me though.”

The singing of the kettle was growing louder but Margaret made no move to lift it from the heat, gazing up at Vivian without giving anything away. Vivian held her gaze. “Is your mother here?”

“Oh do you want to know?” Margaret countered.

“We need to know that she’s safe.”

“If I tell you that she is, will you go away again?”

“We need to know that she wanted to come here. That she isn’t being held her against her will. We need to know that about you too. Do you understand? And we definitely have to see her and speak to her for ourselves.”
The kettle whistled shrilly and, just behind it, Vivian could make out the sound of a car engine starting. She and Samantha exchanged a shocked look of realization at how they had been suckered and then Sam was running. As Viv made to go after her, Margaret caught her wrist and held it desperately.

“No, please. Let them go. I’ll go back if I have to. I’ll be good, I promise. I’ll be good every day. I’ll stay with him and I won’t be any trouble. Just, please let them go. Don’t make them go back. Please, don’t make them go back. It’s only me he wants. He’ll let them go if he has me….”

There were tears running down the girl’s face and although she could hear the sound of Samantha’s shoes on the flagstones as she ran, her shout of ‘FBI! Stop!’, Vivian was held by the fear on Margaret’s face, the same determination to sacrifice herself for others. In that instant, Vivian felt as if something had been shown to her so quickly that she had no time to process it but had recognized it just the same.

“We’re not going to hurt them, sweetheart,” she said gently. “We just need to know that your mother is okay.”

“But you’ll tell him…” Another well of tears. “You’ll tell him where we are.” Behind Margaret the snow had begun to swirl again, swift flakes falling aslant, a wet white wall of silence.

Vivian felt a chill pass through her. “Did your father hurt you or your mother?”

Margaret shook her head, dyed plaits swinging with the motion. “He doesn’t hurt women and children.” She said it dully, as if it was a phrase she had heard many times before.

Samantha ran up breathlessly. “I couldn’t see if she went willingly or not, but Mary was definitely in the car. I think the driver was Nathan Gallagher. Clare Hope was in the back with Mary. We need to get after them.”

Davidson moved in front of them. “Why can’t you let them go?”

“We just need to talk to Mary,” Sam told him shortly. “And if you don’t step aside I’ll arrest you for impeding a federal investigation.”

The sound of a child crying made them both turn and Vivian recognized Davidson’s partner, Bryce, who had a little girl of four or five in his arms who looked like Charlotte Hope. He was talking to her in soothing tones. “Mommy and Daddy will be back soon.”

“They’re not criminals,” Davidson said angrily. “They haven’t done anything wrong. Why do you have to keep hounding them?”

“One conversation with Mary and we’re out of here.” Vivian held Davidson’s gaze. “And Margaret had better be here when we get back or else I’m going to have every adult in this place arrested for kidnapping and every child put in foster care.”

Then she strode after Sam, already speed-dialing Jack to let him know that Margaret was alive and so was Mary, although how long she was going to remain that way being driven into a blizzard remained to be seen….

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The base of the valley had leveled out to leave them walking upstream through a wider scoop of snow. Danny was very conscious of how visible they must be, he in his black coat and Martin in that petrel blue sweater, dark shapes against the whiteness struggling on as the snow dropped the
occasional flake into their hair, but the going was so much easier here, on the level, than it would be if they climbed back up to the tree line.

Martin’s bruises were shocking by daylight, darkness had blurred them into vague shadows, but now every discoloration was painfully visible. Danny could see every different color of mottling, even the imprints left by Ryan’s fists, the edge of the belt buckle, the red and purple contusions across his cheekbone, and the livid redness around his left eye deepening swiftly into a blue black bruise. There were still flakes of dried blood on his face and Danny kept wanting to clean them off with snow but realized in time that Martin had probably reached his limit on being fussed over about six hours since. Martin had certainly told him to back off as he if he meant it when Danny had tried to monitor what color his urine was.

“I’m not taking a piss with you watching me.”

“I don’t trust you to tell me if there’s blood in it.”

“Tough. Go and work on your trust issues over there.”

Danny had unwillingly complied but darted back in time to see Martin kicking snow onto a steaming stain that certainly looked more yellow than red, and earning himself an eye roll of disbelief.

Every now and then Martin’s tongue would dart over the fragile scab holding his split lip together, tasting the unfamiliar metallic taste of his wounds, and there would be that look of slight surprise as he was reminded of the pounding he had taken. Even after his long slow recovery from the shooting, it was obvious that Martin still found it difficult to think of himself as a victim. Danny tried not to think of Martin that way either, but as the day grew lighter and his bruises came more and more into focus it was difficult not to gawp in horrified fascination.

“Can you stop doing that?” Martin flashed him a look of amused irritation.

“I’m sorry, but you’re just such a hideous offence to the eyes.”

“You’re no oil painting yourself right now.”

Danny snorted dismissively. “Nonsense. This face doesn’t know how not to be handsome.”

“Yeah right.” They grinned at each other stupidly and then Martin winced as his split lip began to bleed again and he had to lick the blood from his lip. He hid the wince quickly though.

Stumbling on through the snow, Danny took a moment to appreciate the way Martin wasn’t complaining. Annoying though it was the way he kept claiming to be ‘fine’ when he wasn’t, it would probably have been more annoying if he had whined constantly about how much everything was hurting.

He knew he was guilty of placing the people he loved on pedestals. Maybe that had been the problem with Rafael, too. Throughout his childhood, Rafi had been the one who was always kind, always reasonable, who headed off the pain that would otherwise have found him, and then just when he had needed Rafi most of all, the guy had run out on him; not physically abandoned him, but mentally and emotionally left Danny without any guidance or assistance while Rafi chased dragons along every aching vein. That had seemed like the greatest betrayal of all, far worse than Papi’s outbursts or beatings. His parents’ deaths had been no fault of theirs – although a part of Danny still thought that he was to blame – but Rafi had been his only ally for so long, and had chosen to leave him, could have stayed, could not have got high, could not have stolen and lied and
cheated and despoiled himself, yet had chosen to do all of those things.

When Martin had made the same choice he had been so angry, so betrayed, and feeling doubly betrayed because Martin had been one of the friends who had been there for him when Rafi had gone missing and who had helped him look, seeing every step of the way what this was doing to Danny to have to go through this again. Martin should have known what it would do to Danny for him to become an addict too. It should have been enough to stop him.

Stated like that, really spelled out in the privacy of his head, Danny could see that it sounded a little crazy. Martin hadn’t done anything to Danny; he had done things to himself that had impacted on Danny, just like Rafael had done. Rafi had never breathed a word of reproach to Danny about the crash that had killed their parents, never blamed Danny, and dealt with his own grief and guilt in his own way. Just like Martin had dealt with pain and feelings of inadequacy and then the panic of his life getting away from him, in his own way. And it had been the wrong way and he wished Martin had never done it, but it hadn’t been done to hurt him. All the same…

“It’s one of the things about being in a team, you know.”

Martin looked at him in surprise. “What is?”

“That everything you do impacts on other people.”

There was a flicker of raw anxiety in Martin’s eyes in an instant. “What have I done now?”

It was a shock to discover that, under the surface layer of normal Martin, there was a sharp exposure of guilt-ridden confidence-eroded Martin, like a battle-scarred landscape barely covered by new growth.

“Nothing.” Danny rubbed his back in brief apology. “Just…I’m glad it’s you and me, that’s all. If we couldn’t get hold of Viv and Sam, I’d be imagining…”

“Don’t even go there.” Martin shuddered. “It’s bad enough worrying about Ryan being on his way to Wisconsin and knowing we’re the brain’s trusts who sent him there.”

They were moving better now. They seemed to have gone through the period of stiffening up and aching with cold and managed to come out the other side of it. Martin was still limping and breathing shallowly around the pain in his ribs, but he was no longer weaving from side to side like a drunk and Danny’s arm around his shoulders was more of a guide than a necessity.

“I’m good with blaming Jack for telling Ryan his brother-in-law is still alive,” Danny offered conversationally.

Martin thought that over for a minute and then nodded. “Me too.”

The snow spat a few flakes at them half-heartedly and Danny tried to think warm thoughts while the weather persisted in reminding him how cold and stiff and aching he was. He was remembering that moment in the kitchen where he had responded to Ryan, not as if the man was a husband and father who had cracked under the strain, but as someone crazy, someone dangerous.

“Martin, when you were in the barn with Ryan…?”

“Nothing happened,” Martin repeated wearily. “Nothing like you’re thinking. You’re right that I wouldn’t tell you if it had, but I’m not that good an actor, so, trust me, you’d know, and it didn’t.”

“I don’t mean that. I mean…who did you think you were with? A guy who’d just flipped out because of his wife or someone who’d done it before?”
“Someone who’d done it before.” There was no hesitation. “He hardly mentioned his wife. It was all about me not being…disciplined enough. Needing to learn respect, needing to learn the rules. That’s why I’m sure you’re right about Nathan. I think Ryan would have beaten the crap out of him for sure.”

“All those guys in Indemnity who were abducted, and tied up, and beaten, and raped, and murdered, and we’re scoring a three out of five on a guy from Indemnity who still ‘keeps a cattle prod for special occasions’ – and he had a hard-on, Martin. I keep thinking about it and I think the only reason he didn’t rape you in the barn was because he wanted to make me watch him do it.”

Martin looked as disgusted as Danny felt, and Danny realized how much worse an experience that would have been, not just for him, but for Martin, too.

“I keep thinking that, too – about Ryan’s similarities to the mindset of that serial killer.” Martin stumbled and then found his footing again. “It’s too much of a coincidence for me, but the timing’s wrong. Ryan isn’t old enough to have done the earlier killings and he’s been around for the past eighteen years when there haven’t been any more. No one’s died around here and no one died for the six years in Indemnity before he and Mary moved here.”

“Maybe he got bored. Jack said that happens with serial killers.”

“He said they get bored and they get sloppy and sometimes they want to get caught. They don’t usually just stop, do they?”

They exchanged a glance and Danny shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe he’s the one that did. Just…stopped. But I think you were going to be his next victim, so if he was a serial killer in Indemnity, something set him off again.”

Martin snatched a breath that clearly hurt him all the way in and Danny thought again how much he would give to get him to a hospital and get his ribs x-rayed. Martin was clearly still thinking about the case: “Eighteen years is having some significance for me but I don’t know what it is. Can you think of something in this case that happened Eighteen years ago? When did Nathan get out of Juvenile Hall?”

“When he was seventeen. He’s thirty-four now, so that was seventeen years ago, not eighteen.”

“Okay. When did Ryan’s father die?”

“Sometime in the eighties. Twenty years ago, I think, maybe more.”

“And Margaret was born eleven years ago. Jake Gallagher died twelve years ago.”

“And Nathan was believed killed in that car crash twelve years ago.”

Martin shook his head. “So, if Ryan is a serial killer. What happened eighteen years ago to make him stop killing people? There has to be something.”

Danny went through the cases he had known where people had suffered an epiphany. “Maybe he saw the light? Was born again or something? Maybe he met one of the relatives of the victims?”

“He was always a churchgoer. I think someone who could walk into church and sing in the choir and go out and kill a guy the next day, as Ryan must have done if he was the killer, is going to take more than a really good sermon to understand that what he’s doing is wrong. And I didn’t get the impression when he was hitting me that he thought it was wrong, he didn’t ask God to forgive him before he took each swing at me, he was okay about doing it. He thought I had it coming.”
Danny tightened his grip on Martin as he felt him stumble again. “Okay, what did he say to you exactly? When he was hitting you, what was he saying?”

“It was all about how I needed to learn discipline and obedience and to realize that he was the one in charge and how all young men needed to learn that and their fathers should teach it to them and if he didn’t then it was his job to make them realize the error of their ways – that kind of thing. Nothing about it hurting him more than it hurt me.”

“So, if he was ever a serial killer, he’s an unrepentant one.”

“I’d say.”

“An unrepentant serial killer who nevertheless hasn’t murdered anyone for eighteen years but decided to fall off the wagon because…?”

Martin went through the possibilities without much enthusiasm: “Because he found out Nathan was still alive. Because he found out Mary left him willingly. Because there’s an ‘r’ in the month. Because…we’re the right type to start him back on the serial killing again.”

“You’re his type, I’m not,” Danny pointed out. “None of the Indemnity victims had Spanish as a first language.”

Martin’s gaze was level. “And he’s really going to know your ethnicity from your name, Agent Taylor. Maybe he was going to kill me first, but he would have killed you next.”

“He would have killed you slower.” Danny shuddered as he thought about that case file Sam had been looking through, all those young men, dead so very painfully, and Ryan had been in total control of both of them; he could have done anything to Martin and there was nothing Danny could have done to stop it except sit there and listen to the screams. Not that there would have been any of those, of course. Martin was too stubborn to scream, so, if Ryan really was the Indemnity serial killer, then what Ryan would have done trying to make him cry out would have been truly unspeakable.

Martin’s voice was gentle: “It didn’t happen, Danny. Remember?”

It was way too close for comfort. He didn’t say it aloud. Martin had probably passed the point where he could take any more nagging about four hours before. They had walked into the middle of something that had nothing to do with them and it was even possible – although he certainly would not be acknowledging that out loud – that whatever Martin had said or done, Ryan would still have beaten the crap out of him.

“Hey…” Martin tugged at his coat to get his attention and pointed up into the trees. “Does that look like a cabin to you?”

He had to blink to get it in focus through the low winter sun glinting through the trees, but then he saw the square darkness of the building nestled amongst firs.

They scrambled up there awkwardly. He was still hauling Martin up after him while Martin insisted he could manage, but thinking of Martin telling him he was ‘fine’ and just needed to walk off being knocked down a flight of metal stairs, when in fact he was in so much pain he was clinging on by his fingernails and was about to dive into the Vicodin so hard he was going to become an addict, Danny just tightened his grip and kept hauling.

He was hoping for a phone, blankets, a change of clothes, a gun would also be nice, but as he pushed open the door, Danny felt not much surprise when the interior of the cabin turned out to be
musty, mossy, and almost empty except for an old table and a rickety-looking chair. There were shelves on the wall, but there were only a couple of cans on them. The roof looked relatively solid, so they could shelter in here if they had to, although it didn’t look much snugger than the forest outside, but on the whole it was disappointing. Martin limped to the window and wiped at the grimy pane. “I think there’s another mine entrance over there.” Danny peered over his shoulder and saw that blacker square in the green-dark shadows of the trees a few hundred yards away. Another possible hiding place if hiding places became necessary, although he was becoming more and more convinced that all Ryan had wanted to do, after all, was delay Jack realizing what had become of Danny and Martin so that Ryan could get after his wife. Except, no…

That would have been the logical response for a man thinking himself betrayed, but Ryan had taken the time out to beat the crap out of Martin for no very good reason, and that wasn’t logical or sane, and any way Danny looked at it, Ryan still felt like a serial killer to him. Although a guy presumably dropped a lot of points at Serial Killer School for not bothering to murder anyone for eighteen years. It worried him a lot more than he liked to think that Ryan could have been a recovering serial killer, someone who had kept himself away from murder until they had walked in and triggered something in him that had made him revert.

“Do you think we’re really that annoying?”

Martin glanced across at him from the window. “What?”

“That a guy who’s sworn off serial killing falls off the wagon after five minutes talking to you and me?”

Martin grimaced. “In fairness to us, it was more like half an hour.” He looked back out of the window, apparently making calculations of some kind as he glanced at the mine and then up at the far side of the valley.

“Have you got something?”

“If I’m remembering the map right we must be close to the campsite. It should be up there.”

Danny opened the door of the cabin and looked the way Martin was pointing. Very close to the campsite indeed, as the crow flew, but not having wings, they were looking at a scramble up more steep, rocky, wooded terrain. Groaning inwardly, Danny looked across at Martin who sighed and said: “I don’t think we have much choice.”

“Maybe you should stay here and I’ll go.”

“I think we need to stick together.”

Danny was glad Martin had at least a surface layer of his self-confidence back. It had taken a hell of a beating over his addiction; not easy for a guy who had known from birth what he had to achieve and by which time he had to achieve it, to suddenly find out he had gotten into something he couldn’t control; was way over his head and drowning fast. But it hadn’t been all bad when Martin had first started going to meetings, when he had been looking to Danny for affirmation and reassurance. On this particular trip, for instance, he could have definitely lived with it if Martin just did what Danny said all the time.

Martin was already leading the way back down the slope that led up to the cabin, each slip sending up small spits of snow. The cabin was tucked away in the trees, almost invisible from the ground, a good hide for a hunter, but was possibly visible from the air. Not that there was enough space around here to land a helicopter, but half a mile downstream there had been an area where it was
definitely wide and flat enough. Martin was still shambling a little but looked slightly less as if he should be eating bugs and opening the creaking doors of a castle to let in the unwary travelers so they could be consumed by the guy sleeping in the coffin.

As Danny caught up with him, Martin gave him a smile that looked out of place on his bruised face. “Man, I am going to be so glad to see that campsite.”

“You do know we’re probably just going to find a few picnic tables.”

Martin held up a warning finger. “No raining on my parade. I want a cell phone. I want to tell Jack that Ryan is unbalanced so he can get the word out to the airports and, if Ryan has already boarded, get some of the locals up to Davidson’s place to help out Viv and Samantha in case he shows up. As soon as Jack knows what we know, I’ll be fine.”

Danny smirked. “Yeah, cause that’ll magically heal your broken ribs.”

The shot sounded loud in the silence, a clear zing of sound that had Danny reaching for his gun instinctively; even as his ears were ringing and the spit of bark from the clipped tree furrowing a cut across his cheek, he was still blindly grasping for a sidearm that was no longer there.

The next shot came with its own sear of pain along his left side, the impact spinning him round; even as he felt the flare of agony throbbing into his nervous system, he was slammed down into the snow by Martin, his painful impact with the ground coinciding with the whiplash crack of another bullet passing through where his head had just been. Moaning with pain as white fire spread up from his side, he teetered on the brink of consciousness like a bus over a cliff, while Martin whispered his name in shocked horror.

He forced himself to look up at Martin’s bruised face blurring in and out of focus, his eyes absurdly blue even in the midst of all those red and mauve marks. Martin wriggled back awkwardly, pulling back the coat to look at Danny’s side while continuing to shield him with his body. When Danny risked a look down he saw a red stain spreading out from where the pain had its epicenter. He put his head back and said a lot of very bad words. The first spike of pain had reduced from blackout-causing to simply unbearable. Through gritted teeth, he managed to say: “Looks like Ryan isn’t on his way to Wisconsin.”

“We have to get to some better cover. Sorry, Danny.” Martin rolled off him completely and the pain of that weight being lifted off him was almost as bad as it landing on him, more bolts of white fire lancing through him as Martin ducked low to grab him under the arms and haul him back into the cloaking darkness of the trees. He couldn’t stifle a cry as the wound in his side tore deeper, Martin still repeating how sorry he was and Danny wanting to hit him really hard right now for causing him all this pain and for apologizing when he had just saved his life.

Another bullet sang past their heads before Martin dragged Danny behind a tree, gasping with what Danny realized was as much pain as exhaustion. Being sat up against the tree was indescribably painful and they were both whimpering in stereo now. Martin pulled off his sweater, cursing savagely as he did so, as if snapping back at his ribs would stop them hurting quite as much, then pulled his shirt over his head. It was the first time that Danny had seen Martin’s torso in daylight, and it was such a shocking mess it pulled him out of his own pain for a couple of seconds. The strapping he had put on had loosened and bruises spread out from around it, a spilled sea of contusions covering his skin. Through the sagging white bandages he could glimpse deep red and black bruising radiating from the left side of his ribs up around his back. He could see how Martin must have rolled to try to protect the ribs Ryan had just kicked and taken the next few blows on his back, before Ryan had pulled him up and punched him repeatedly down his left side.
“God, Martin…” Danny breathed, then hissed in pain as Martin wrapped his shirt around his wound, pulling it so tight that Danny thought passing out must surely be the only option. For some sick reason, his body decided that it wanted him to stay conscious, and he came back to full awareness to find the world graying in and out of focus and Martin still pressing on the wound while the pain spiked to unbearable levels. Martin bound the sweater around the shirt and pulled it so tight that it was all Danny could do not to scream. He made an inarticulate sound that in no way covered all the killing of Martin he was going to do if he didn’t stop doing that.

Martin grimaced at him apologetically. “Sorry, man. I know it hurts, but it needs to be tight. It’s a through and through but I don’t know if it nicked your intestine or your kidney and you’re losing a lot of blood. I have to slow the bleeding and I need to get you to that cabin.”

He could see it through the trees; even with everything turned granular with agony; it was a symmetrical darkness between the snow-glistening boughs, up an impossible slope an impossible distance away. “No….”

Martin already had his left arm around his back and was pulling Danny’s right arm around his neck, as he tried to haul Danny up onto his feet. “Danny – please, you have to get to cover.”

Danny had his mouth open to say how much better an option dying looked to him than moving right now, when the words were silenced by the look in Martin’s eyes; the tears in them of fear that Danny was already dying and that nothing he did would be good enough to save him. He looked at the blood all over Martin’s hands and remembered that feeling all too well, trying to stem wounds that just kept pouring more and more of that irreplaceable warmth.

Snarling in defeat, he nevertheless pushed off, trying to help Martin get him up onto his feet, even though the pain was terrible, then clung to him for a moment, trying not to sob as the white waves of it passed over him. He let Martin take his weight and took one agonizing step and then another; each movement sending a white flame licking outward from his perforated side, torn muscles screaming at him to stop fucking moving while his sense of self-preservation told him to pick up the pace. As he clung onto Martin, trying not to sob, curse, or snarl too loudly in his ear, he was waiting for the next bullet to blow out the back of his head. Martin was trying to haul them both from the shelter of tree to tree, and the woods were dark, but if Ryan had a telescopic sight he should still be able to pick them out and…

He flinched from the sound of the shot before he realized that neither he nor Martin had been hit and the trees weren’t spitting any sheared bark at them, nevertheless, Martin hauled them both behind another tree.

“I’m going to get you out of here.” Martin’s expression was a mixture of edge-of-panic and focused determination that Danny recognized all too well. He had probably looked just like this while he had applied pressure to Martin’s bleeding wounds and gabbled at the paramedics, determined to give them all the information there was so they could fix Martin, fix him now.

He would have liked to say something reassuring but everything was hurting too much for him to be able to focus on any word more complicated than ‘Fuck!’ – but he tried to take some of his own weight and to stifle his moans of pain into cursing as Martin hauled him up the slope. The blaze of pain in his side was making him want to bite now, as well as curse, but he forced his legs to keep moving, trying to focus as the cabin went from sharp to blurred and back again.

His legs went out from under him and he pulled Martin down too, both of them crying out as their knees hit snow-covered rock and the impact juddered through their wounded bodies. The flare in his side was a supernova now; he could feel it bursting out through the rest of his body, white waves of escalating pain, as he clung to Martin helplessly, fingers digging into his arms as he tried...
to get through the pain. He could barely hear Martin’s sobs of agony above his own. He could not get up; there was just no way he could…

“Please, Danny… Please…”

Damn. The full force of the Fitzgerald blue eyes coming right at him, pleading with him not to die. With a Herculean effort, Martin staggered to his feet and Danny found himself reaching for a tree branch and hauling himself up after him. The pain was indescribable, but Martin was pulling Danny’s arm back around his shoulders and stumbling upwards, grabbing at tree branches, thin fingers of wood that seemed to be offering them a helping hand, groaning as he clawed his way up another foot of slope. With his right wrist held onto by Martin as if he were a lifeline, and his left hand clasped to the sodden knot of the sweater, trying to keep it tight against his bleeding wound, Danny was trying to take some of his own weight, but his legs felt like rubber, and it was all he could do to stay upright. They lurched up another few feet, both of them shaking with the effort and pouring sweat. He felt impaled – it was almost impossible to believe there wasn’t a red hot poker jammed through his body – every breath hurt, every movement hurt; there was nothing, in fact, that did not hurt. He could feel Martin teetering with exhaustion, the effort of trying to hold them both up almost too much for him; Danny cringed as he imagined them both hanging by the creaking thread of Martin’s broken ribcage.

Danny let go of his wound for a moment to grab a branch, and pulled, trying to throw his weight forward to help them both out, and Martin snatched another breath, grabbed a branch of his own and hauled them up another foot, and another, and another… And there was the cabin, a last agony of effort and they were level with it, stumbling towards it… Martin kicked open the door, and the mossy darkness had never seemed so welcoming, as Martin helped him limp across to that rickety table and finally, thank God, he could lay down.

Even that hurt like hell, ripped muscles screaming at him, but Martin seemed to know all about that and lowered him carefully, inch by inch. Danny could feel the shivers tearing through them both, his shudders mirrored by Martin’s bare torso, cold and shock coursing through them both in place of blood. Martin was fumbling in the backpack he had evidently tugged from him, looking for the medical kit, Danny presumed, but Danny grabbed his wrist, trying to breathe around the pain and get the words out in between each gasp. “No, you’ve got it tied up tight. I don’t think it’s a good idea to take the pressure off.” He didn’t think either of them could deal with seeing that wound again right now and he was afraid that if they undid the makeshift bandages his insides would fall straight out.

“I have to get help.” Martin’s eyes were blue pools of shock. He pulled out the blanket from the backpack, cursing as he realized how wet it was, turning around to try to find something in this cold, moldy, neglected place that would magically make Danny warmer and safer and better. His teeth were chattering with either cold or shock as he said: “You’re losing a lot of blood and in this weather that’s really not a good idea…”

It was like listening to himself the night before, that terror spike for a wounded comrade. Martin’s hands were shaking as he pulled Danny’s coat more warmly around him, and felt Danny’s brow, chafing Danny’s hands between his own freezing ones as if that would somehow keep him warmer. Danny could feel himself getting number and colder with every passing moment, the life going out of him as death began to trickle in. Martin seemed to know about that too. “I have to find a phone from somewhere. We need to get you to a hospital.”

Danny tried to catch hold of his wrist, keep him anchored. “It’s not safe out there. He’s got a gun, remember?”
But Martin just folded Danny’s hands over the knot of those sweater sleeves tied so tightly and said gently: “Keep the pressure on.” Then, as Danny reached for him, he moved out of range.

“Martin…” Danny tried to put a whiplash crack of warning into his voice to let Martin know that he had better not even think about going out there where the killer with the gun was; but it was muffled by the pain, the effort it took to just breathe in and out right now with his whole body a transmitter signal for a wound trying to demand all of his attention.

Martin eased open the door and gazed out, then flinched violently at the crack of another gunshot. It sounded further away and had certainly not been aimed in their direction.

“Who the hell is he shooting at now?” Danny demanded. He wanted to sit up and see what was going on, but moving had become an impossibility.

“Not us.” Martin looked over his shoulder at him. “If he’s busy dealing with someone else, I may not get a better chance.”

“You’re half dead and he has a gun,” Danny retorted angrily.

Martin held his gaze. “He’s going to come and find us if I don’t get some help. And you’re going to bleed to death. If he’s shooting at someone there must be someone over there to shoot at – and they may have a phone.”

“Martin, don’t…” He opened his mouth to play dirty. He knew if he said ‘Don’t leave me to die alone in this hut’ that Martin would stay, and he would bleed to death, and then… And then – if Ryan was the Indemnity serial killer – he would probably kill Martin – slowly. Danny closed his mouth again and found that Martin was still gazing at him, eyes full of agonized anxiety, while all his commonsense told him to get over to where the people with cell phones may be, and all the rest of him was finding it impossible to move away from his wounded teammate.

That was when they both heard the sound of a car engine turning over and faltering. Not Ryan’s car, a different vehicle. Someone on the other side of the river, down, across, and up that agonizing scramble of rocky woodland, was trying to start his or her car. They exchanged one look of shocked recognition and then Martin said, “Don’t you dare die on me, Danny” and ran for that proof of other people, every breath no doubt torturing his cracked ribs, sweat slicking his chilled bare skin, running towards the man with the rifle, because this was the only chance they had.

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The car flew on wings of snow, sending up fans of wet whiteness to spatter on the windshield of the vehicle following it. As the driver of the vehicle following it, Sam peered through a windshield the wipers were barely clearing, fought the ridges of slush trying to send the car into a skid, and concentrated on keeping Nathan Gallagher and his passengers in sight.

“Slow down,” Vivian said quietly.

Sam glanced at her. “Viv, I can drive in this weather.”

“I know, and perhaps he can, too, but there’s a pregnant woman in that car and we don’t want to push them off the road. Pull back. Give them a chance to slow down.”

As Sam lifted her foot from the gas pedal she said conversationally: “You know being right all the time – not a very attractive characteristic.”

Vivian’s smile was as enigmatic as the Sphinx as she went back to speaking very clearly into her
radio, letting the locals know what was going on. “No, we don’t want any assistance with the chase….”

Even as she concentrated on keeping the car going straight, when buffeting winds and unstable drifts wanted to push her into a ditch, Sam was aware of Vivian asking the locals to secure Davidson’s place but not, repeat not, to take anyone into custody; that there should be someone from Social Services to check up on the girl Davidson was calling Megan but whom she was sure was Margaret Ryan, but to take no further action.

“You think Ryan’s the bad guy here?” Sam had to fight the impulse to floor it as Gallagher’s car flew further away from them, sending back those snow spumes to mist in front of her, yet still visible through the whiteness.

Vivian didn’t answer but when Sam darted a glance at her she noticed that her calm was a disguise, she was gripping the cell phone a lot harder than necessary. “Jack, this is Vivian. We’ve found Margaret. She’s alive and well and living under a false identity at Davidson’s place. We’re in pursuit of Nathan Gallagher who has Mary and Clare in the car with him. No idea if he’s armed or not.”

“She’s alive…? You’re sure it’s her?”

“Positive. Where are you?”

“At Ryan’s place.” There was a pause before Jack added quietly yet clearly enough for Sam to hear: “It’s not looking good, Viv.”

Sam felt her heart catch, panic trying to roar up like a fire fuelled by too much gasoline; she fought to breathe evenly, to stop her heart rate from racing.

“Ryan’s car is gone. His kitchen garbage can has been emptied but we can’t find the bag it was in so it looks as if he took it with him. There’s some blood and fragments of cloth in the barn which are on their way to forensics. Ryan’s guns are gone even though the hunting season is over. The good news is that there’s no evidence of the kitchen having been wiped down; there’s still dust around and footprints. No signs of any major blood loss being cleaned up there or in the barn and no spatters in the snow around the area where his car was standing. Danny and Martin may be handcuffed in the back of Ryan’s car while he drives around and decides what to do with them. There’s no evidence of him having killed them here anyway.”

“But you think he’s kidnapped them?” Viv rasped and her voice sounded as painful as Sam’s felt.

“It’s my best guess, right now. The locals have brought in some tracker dogs to see if there’s a trail to pick up but I’m not expecting…” The loud baying of dogs made Samantha start and Viv almost drop the phone. They exchanged a glance.

“Sounds as if they’ve found something?” Viv said.

“Hold on, Viv.” They could hear Jack walking outside and the rapid gabble of information being exchanged and then he came back on line. “There’s a trail – two sets of footprints, neither of them big enough to be left by Ryan. It looks like Danny and Martin’s footprints. One of them seems to be helping the other, no blood trail, so if one of them is wounded it’s not enough to splatter. I’m going to follow the trail with the trackers. But we need to know what Ryan’s really like, what he’s capable of, and his wife could be the best person to tell us that, so…”

“We’re not going to lose her, Jack,” Samantha called across. “You find Danny and Martin. We’ll
find Mary.”

As Vivian closed her phone they exchanged another glance. “Could be worse,” Vivian was clearly trying to sound calm and Sam appreciated her making the effort.

“Yeah, he could have found them dead. They could be in the trunk of Ryan’s car running out of air. Whereas it sounds as if they left there on their own two feet.” She was pleased with how calm she sounded right up to the moment when she found herself adding: “If he’s hurt either one of them I’m going to kill him.”

Vivian glanced across at her, the glimmer of a smile on her face. “If he has – do you really think Jack is going to leave you anything to kill?”

Nathan’s car was scudding ahead of them now, its speed reduced as Samantha pulled back and let him regain control after that first panicked flight. Her headlamps reflected off sheets of spray, the air thick with the flurries of snow, the road ridged with slush their wheels were turning gray. The land was level here, thickly misted with fallen snow and coming snow and the snow still falling, the metal-gray sky so low it seemed to be brushing the roof of the car. Vivian was on the phone to Elena, asking her to map their route for them, to tell them of any landmarks that might be coming up. A part of Sam’s mind was entirely focused on the car whose lights were a dull yellow amidst the swirl of snow, thinking of the pregnant woman whose safety they were all focused on – pursued and pursuers – but another part was thinking of Danny and Martin stumbling through the snow in the wild white shadows of the freezing forest.

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Martin’s chest was a furnace. Every pace stabbed him straight into the ribs, a double-pain as the impact of his feet hitting the ground jolted through him, and the inevitable inhalation made his ribcage expand agonizingly. Nothing other than Danny bleeding to death could have made him do this. His teeth had been gritted against the pain for so long that they were in danger of fusing. He grabbed at a branch and hauled himself up the slope, cursing as that action sent another stab into his ribs. Being shot in the gut had taught him how many muscles connected up in the human body, how difficult it was to do anything without it hurting when a bullet had lodged itself, however temporarily, in one’s small intestine. He could feel the imprint of every impact from Ryan right now, the pile-driver fist to his guts, the rabbit punches to the kidneys, and most of all, the stabbing pain in his side from his cracked ribs. But more powerful than any of those points of pain was the memory of Danny’s terrifying pallor, the gush of blood from that bullet wound, the feel of his legs going out from under him as there was not enough strength in his body to hold him up.

He flinched as he felt the blood gush over his hands again, Danny’s blood intermingling in his memory with his own blood as he plucked at his crimson shirt, trying to make sense of the agony he was in, the cold chilling him along every vein. Danny’s horrified whisper of his name. He knew how that felt now, and it felt equally terrifying from either side of that bullet, victim and spectator. When he had been bleeding to death in that car, Danny had kept him alive until the paramedics came; somehow or another, he was going to return the favor.

Snatching a breath, he realized his skin was wet with sweat despite the wind cutting into him like a flail; he ducked under a snow-laden branch, shivering as it deposited a freezing fall onto his bare back. He could see the way ahead of him, rocks half concealed by snow, bracken and fallen branches, darkness dappled with the occasional intrusion of daylight, the twigs thin whips that lashed at him as he ran, but in his mind’s eye he could just see the terrifying speed with which the blood had come through his makeshift bandage and the look in Danny’s so-expressive brown eyes that told him how much pain he was in.
The car engine sounded again. He could hear it had started at last – was moving – faster – and now faster still – a vehicle coming this way at speed, tires spitting road metal, gears grating. He had to get to the top of the ridge before it passed; had to flag down whoever was fleeing this scene at such a frenzied pace and enlist their help. Even though he had thought it was impossible for him to run even this fast, he found that at the thought of that car passing by he could move with the speed of a sprinter when the victory tape was in sight, ignore the pain in his ribs completely, drag lungful of air in and gasp them out in a white mist of panic at this one chance getting away. He hauled himself up the last few sheer feet of bank, fingers digging into earth and roots and rocks, clutching at any handhold he could reach with panicked determination as the car sped closer, sped past in a flurry of debris its tires spat down on top of him –

He flung himself over the ridge and onto the track, yelling and waving his arms in the air, the car still visible as it took the next bend on two wheels. “Stop! FBI! Stop!”

It disappeared around the twisting forest road and he ran after it, still shouting for it to stop. He rounded the next bend in time to see it disappearing around another one, getting only the last whisk of bumper, a last gleam of tail light as the car sped away from him. He ran after it still, unable to believe that he had screwed up Danny’s only chance of rescue, yet feeling that same terrible sense of physics being against him that he had experienced when chasing Brian Stone’s car through the New York traffic and realized that he was not going to catch it. When he rounded the next bend there was no sight of the car, and its engine was already sounding fainter. He peered down through the trees desperately, waving his arms and shouting, but the car roared on down the zigzag path, leaving him with his lungs heaving and wanting to weep with frustration.

He turned and tried to run back the way the car had come, but his lungs were laboring, each deep, deep inhalation agonizing. He could feel the coughs building up, volcanic tremors that could not be controlled, and then they were tearing through him, a white heat in his ribs as he wheezed and heaved, making inarticulate sounds of pain as his chest callously insisted it was full of fluid that he needed to cough up now. Spitting out the last of what felt like at least one of his lungs, he stumbled with exhaustion, finding he could only manage a painful jog, each impact of his feet on the snow-covered track jolting straight up into his ribs. The people in the car had clearly left in a hurry. Perhaps they had left their cell phones. Perhaps they had left a world class first aid kit and a cellular blanket, not to mention a field-ready injection of morphine.

The tire tracks were easy to follow. Two sets of tracks. The car that had fled the scene, and another vehicle, possibly Ryan’s, although, as he tried to remember the map, Martin recalled a horseshoe loop that went up from Ryan’s track to the east and made its way around here to join up with the park trail from the opposite direction. Ryan had the road closed with a gate but he presumably had a key to it. If he had worked out where Danny and Martin were heading, he would have had no need to follow their trail through the snow, he could just drive around here and set up in readiness for them to step into view.

“Stupid…” Martin breathed aloud, hating himself for not having thought of it before. He was the one who had studied the map so carefully before they set out on the journey because he was the one who had insisted on driving, and then told Danny he didn’t need anyone to map read for him, he knew the way. He was the one who should have realized what Ryan was most likely to do. The man was a hunter, after all. Hunters didn’t follow their prey; they set up at a likely spot and waited for their prey to come to them.

He followed the tire tracks to the point where they tore onto the track, deep gouges cutting through the snow into the earth beneath, a scattering of stones sprayed everywhere from the traction. Other tracks led off to the right as these curled sharply to the left. Holding his ribs but still panting too hard not to breath deeply, he stumbled after the first set of tracks, heart-rate lifting when he saw the
tent still standing. The campsite fire was smoking from being doused in a hurry, clothing scattered as people had run to their car, dropping what they were carrying. He approached the tent cautiously, wondering if Ryan had set up inside it, risking a quick glance before yanking his head back. It was empty. He cautiously ducked his head to take a better look, and then scrambled inside. The warm air had already escaped, but the sleeping bags still had some residual warmth when he touched them. No bloodstains, so whoever Ryan had been shooting at had not been in this tent.

He found a man’s gray t-shirt and pulled it on without thinking, even though, twelve hours before he would have shuddered from the thought of wearing a stranger’s unwashed clothing. As he hunted in the folds of sleeping bags, he found a woman’s discarded panties, which he dropped as if they burned his fingers, and a man’s zip neck pullover, which he gratefully pulled on over the t-shirt, relieved that the guy who had fled this scene had been a large rather than a small, all the while searching desperately for a cell phone. It took him a few minutes to admit that despite the things they had left scattered, the half-empty back pack, the hairbrush, the tube of toothpaste, these people had taken their phones with them.

All the time the invisible elastic between him and Danny was getting stretched tighter and tighter. The minutes would be crawling by for Danny and with no one to keep him conscious, to try to keep him focused and aware, he could slip into a coma. Martin hastily emptied out the backpack, bundled up the sleeping bag and stuffed it into the pack, slipping it over one shoulder as he realized in time how painful it would be to pull it on properly.

As he stepped back out into the morning cold, it felt as if hours had passed since he had last seen Danny, the minutes bloating in his mind like maggots, fat with too many seconds. He hurried towards the other set of tracks, looking around for a weapon as he followed them, ready to beat Ryan’s head in with a branch if there was no other way to get help for Danny. The third branch he found seemed the most suitable and he hefted it with some difficulty, reminded again that every muscle in his torso seemed to be connected to his broken ribs.

He stumbled after the tracks, knowing he should be more cautious than this, keeping to better cover, but there was so little time… He had to force himself to remember his training, using the trees for cover, advancing carefully. Then he saw the vehicle – a park ranger’s jeep, parked neatly – no sign of panic here. The doors were locked, but he saw that the window on the passenger side had been smashed, broken glass glittering on the seat. Approaching cautiously, he saw an empty rifle case, the weapon taken; and the radio in the jeep had been ripped out. He was starting to be able to put this together, too. The ranger had driven up to see how the campers had fared through the blizzard, he had parked, got out of the jeep and then…

For the first time, Martin had cause to be grateful for the snow that had done its best to freeze him and Danny to death all night; the footprints were still clear and easy to follow. He followed the ranger’s trail: the man had jumped down from the jeep and then, instead of turning towards the campsite, his eye had been caught by something else. Martin kept off the footsteps, aware that this was part of a crime scene. He wanted Ryan to go to jail for shooting Danny and hoped he’d left his shell casings lying on the ground where there could be no confusion.

Looking up from the trail to see where it ended, his heart lurched as he saw the ranger lying in the snow. Running awkwardly, with still laboring lungs, holding his side to ease the pain of each footfall, he hurried over to him and then slowed as he gazed down at a man lying prone, a bloody hole in the back of his jacket. He dropped the branch. He still crouched down and felt for a pulse, but knew the man was dead and had been dead the instant the bullet hit him. A breeze fluttered the man’s hair while Martin wondered if he had a wife, if he had a family; if he had kissed them goodbye before he left this morning, how many regrets he had left behind. Whatever Ryan had been before – a good man pushed over the brink by the abandonment of his wife or a serial killer
who had escaped undetected for decades – he was now undoubtedly a murderer. And Martin was all that was left to prevent Danny from becoming his next victim.

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Vivian watched the car they were pursuing turn onto a farm track. It was hardly a high speed chase any more; both of them slowing their pace as the snow danced around them. Gallagher’s car bumped over the tracks so carefully that she wondered if she should start calling the paramedics now, and, exchanging a look with Sam, saw the same thought cross her mind.

“How are you on delivering babies?” Sam asked.

“I don’t do that,” Viv assured her.

“But when you had Reggie…?”

“I was at the other end. Marcus could probably deliver a baby. Me – not so much.”

There was a flicker of panic in Sam’s eyes. “Well, I’m not doing it.”

“You’re a local,” Viv told her as comfortingly as she could. “Mary would be more inclined to relate to you.”

“You think we have babies differently in Wisconsin?” Sam’s voice was starting to rise to panic levels.

“Maybe he just wants to talk to us.” Vivian used her most soothing voice but Sam was still looking as if she thought she might be about to be suckered into playing midwife. “She’s not due for two weeks,” Viv added.

Sam just looked at her. “Yes, because babies never decide to come early, especially when their mothers are really stressed.”

“He could just want to shoot us?”

“You’re such a comfort.” Sam looked even more on edge as she pulled the car up next to Gallagher’s, Vivian covering her in case he decided that killing his pursuers was going to be his next trick.

There was a long pause as their two vehicles shuddered in the chill whisk of flakes, engines turning, exhausts pumping, the cars like racehorses after the final furlong, and then Gallagher slowly wound down his window, holding up his hands as Vivian pointed the gun at him. When he turned to look at them, his dark blue eyes with their fringing of long black lashes were unexpectedly beautiful.

“Are you police?” he asked.

“FBI,” Vivian told him clearly. “Your sister should remember me. I’m Vivian Johnson. I came with Agent Malone to talk to her after Margaret went missing. This is Agent Spade. Is your sister okay?”

Gallagher turned his head, still moving carefully. “Mary…?”

Vivian heard her voice, a thin gasp of sound between painful breaths: “I remember her. She’s nice, Nate.”
The relief at hearing Mary Ryan was still alive was overwhelming, and she and Sam exchanged a brief smile. Vivian raised her voice: “Mary, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” the woman called back.

“She’s having contractions,” Gallagher explained. He held out his hands so Vivian could see how badly they were shaking. “I don’t think I can drive any more, not in this snow.”

Sam said: “And you a boy from Wisconsin?”

His smile was fleeting but very pretty. “I’m usually okay to drive in any weather but I’m so tired right now I keep thinking I’m going to go off the road.”

“You drove Mary from Honesdale?” Vivian asked.

He nodded. “We had to stay off the main roads in case anyone was looking for us. It took a long time. I haven’t slept much the past few days, and Clare’s holding Mary’s hand. Can you take us to the hospital? Even if you’re going to arrest us I’m hoping you don’t mind taking us to the hospital first.”

Vivian nodded to Sam. “Over to you.”

Sam rolled her eyes but did switch off the engine. “Do you have any weapons?” she asked him.

He looked at her in confusion and then looked over the back seat. “Clare?”

“I got a nail file,” the girl said in obvious perplexity. “Is this like getting on a plane?”

“Nathan, get out of the car and let me search you,” Vivian said wearily.

The young man complied, although clearly still a little confused. Vivian patted him down carefully and found that underneath the layers of clothing he had the physique of a stray cat. She couldn’t help wondering if Martin would also have been this skinny if he didn’t have his junk food craving and need to pass FBI fitness tests. A look in the back seat won her a brief pained smile from Mary, who had her legs braced against the back of the passenger seat and sweat trickling down her face. Clare had her arms full of her sister-in-law and was keeping her hair off her face while breathing on her cheek and murmuring encouragement. Only by contorting oneself like a gymnast would it be possible to search either Clare or Mary for concealed weapons.

“How trusting are you feeling today?” Vivian murmured to Sam.

“There’s nothing in their records to say that they’d shoot two federal agents in the back of the head,” Sam pointed out. “And if Mary is faking labor, she’s doing it very well.”

“It’s not procedure.” Vivian had never felt less like caring about procedure but it wasn’t just her life she would be risking.

“Martin did it,” Sam pointed out. “And Jack didn’t even yell at him.”

“Well, Jack didn’t see him do it and Danny gave him the censored version of events before Martin had to face him.”

Sam shrugged. “Jack can’t see us either.”

Vivian held her gaze. “You sure?”
Sam glanced at them. “A woman in labor, a girl with her arms full of a woman in labor and a guy that I could take with one arm tied behind my back…? I think we can risk it.”

Vivian turned back to Nathan Gallagher who seemed to be waiting for her to handcuff him. “Get in the back with your sister. We’ll take you to the hospital. But in return you have to answer all our questions and you have to do it right now.”

“Anything.” He politely held the door open for her. “Just please hurry because the baby could be breech or it could have the cord wrapped around its neck or…”

“Shut up and get in the back,” Sam told him, sliding behind the wheel. Glancing in the rearview mirror she saw Clare Hope rolling her eyes at her husband for his paranoia.

“You know, Nate, nature’s on the side of babies being born just fine.” Clare smiled down at her sister-in-law reassuringly: “He was like this before Charlotte was born, too. Next time I’m putting him on Prozac the first day I get the test results.”

As they sped off into the snow, Nathan wriggled into the back seat to take his sister’s hand and gave Sam rapid directions on the quickest route to get to the hospital while Vivian called in where they were, who they were with, and where they were headed to the local PD. Nathan didn’t seem to get the significance of that either, much too focused on his sister.

As Sam drove, Vivian glanced in the rearview mirror, holding Mary’s gaze. “Mary, I need you to tell me what happened, to you and to your daughter. But before you do that I need you to tell me if your husband is dangerous?”

Mary’s dark eyes were lowered at once, a flicker of evasion across her face. “He’s never hurt me or Margaret. He doesn’t hurt women or children.” She glanced up at her brother and her eyes were full of apology. He leaned across to kiss her brow, stroking a wet strand of hair out of her face.

“As they sped off into the snow, Nathan wriggled into the back seat to take his sister’s hand and gave Sam rapid directions on the quickest route to get to the hospital while Vivian called in where they were, who they were with, and where they were headed to the local PD. Nathan didn’t seem to get the significance of that either, much too focused on his sister.”

“Two FBI agents drove up to interview him last night and we haven’t heard from them since,” Sam said shortly.

Nathan looked up, startled. “Men or women?”


“How old?”

Vivian turned around in her seat to look at him. “Your age. Why?”

Nathan paled and Mary was looking stricken with guilt. “I knew it…” she breathed. “I should have stayed. I should never have left him…”

“You think he’s going to be angry that you left him?” Sam pressed.

“He doesn’t know you left him,” Clare assured her. “As far as he’s concerned you were taken. Not your fault and not your decision.”

“He was shown a photograph of the man who appeared to ‘kidnap’ his wife. Who we have now identified as you, Mr. Gallagher,” Viv pointed out.

Nathan stared at her. “But Ryan didn’t know that, right? He didn’t know it was me?”

“Not until we showed him the photograph of you abducting your sister, no. But he would have
known it afterwards.” She found her voice was getting a steely edge she couldn’t quite seem to soften. “Mary, do you have any reason to believe that he would be a danger to the agents who went to interview him?”

There was a long silence before Clare said abruptly: “You have to tell them. Think if it was Nate.”

“I can’t…” Mary shook her head. “If I say it out loud…”

“You think you’ll make it truer than it already is?” Clare demanded.

Mary gazed up at Viv like someone pleading for forgiveness she felt she did not deserve. “We had an arrangement. I was the one who broke my word.”

“What arrangement?” Sam sounded as if she had slivers of glass in her mouth.

“If he’s hurt them, it’s my fault for leaving him. He never would have done if I’d stayed.”

“What arrangement?” Sam almost shouted.

“It was crazy!” Clare insisted. “The whole damned thing was crazy. You should have run out of on him when Nate did.”

“But he would have gone on…” Mary broke off while Vivian felt all the blood in her veins get colder and colder.

When she spoke her voice sounded like a stranger’s: “He would have gone on…killing?”

Mary nodded once, briefly, as tears rolled down her face. “The arrangement was that I would stay with him and be a good wife to him, and not tell anyone what he’d done in the past and he wouldn’t…hurt anyone else. I didn’t know when I married him, I swear. I didn’t know until Nate…I was afraid of him by then but I didn’t know everything. I couldn’t prove it – neither of us could, and when he talked to me about it he explained how he’d stopped the day we married and never done…that since. Not to a stranger. He didn’t break his word, but when I found out the baby was going to be a boy, I knew he’d do what his father did and want to raise it up to be just like him.”

Viv could make more sense out of Mary’s words that her confused tangle of sentences probably merited. The realization that she was married to a serial killer after years of being subjected to the brain-washing of a controlling husband had led her to make a deal where other women would be making a statement. The dead were already dead and she didn’t think anyone would believe her. The police in the form of Deputy Stapleton had already been shown the irrefutable evidence that Ryan was a murderer, and had done nothing but help him to conceal his crime. She had agreed to pawn her own liberty in exchange for the lives of the young men he would not kill if she stayed with him. Something that could have been considered noble if it had not also been so incredibly stupid.

“So you said nothing to anyone about the crimes your husband had committed in the past in exchange for his guarantee that he wouldn’t kill anyone else? And that arrangement stayed in place until you heard from your brother…”

“He wanted to meet Margaret. He wanted her to see Charlotte. I agreed to it. But then…” Mary darted a look at Clare who held Vivian’s gaze unflinchingly.

“I knew what Ryan was. I thought about reporting him but then I thought what would happen…? He’d maybe think it was Mary who’d told on him and kill her. Or they’d send some young deputy up there and he’d kill him. But a little girl…? Sending her back to that…? When there was a chance
to get her away…? I was the one who wouldn’t let Nate take her home. I was the one who said she couldn’t go on living with Ryan, not knowing what he was, what he’d done, what he was capable of. I thought Mary would come too. I thought we could save her too.”

Mary gasped as another contraction tore through her, her fingers tightening around those of her sister-in-law. “I missed her every hour of every day, but a part of me always hoped they wouldn’t send her back.”

“So you knew where she was the whole time?” Vivian pressed.

Mary shook her head. “I didn’t know for sure. I knew Nate was bringing Clare and the baby to show to her but I didn’t know if there had been an accident. But there were no reports of an accident so I hoped…and in the end I got a postcard that was supposed to be from my cousin Lucy. Except it wasn’t her handwriting. It was Clare’s. There was nothing there to make Frank suspicious – not that he was thinking I knew anything anyway – just things about the family, and recipes, but in the rest of it there was a sentence about how Charlotte was so happy to have her cousin staying for a visit, and I knew that was the message I’d been waiting for, letting me know that Margaret was okay.”

“But you thought you’d never see her again?” Vivian could remember how spiritless Mary had been; so devoid of hope.

“I had to stay with him or more people would die and I knew Clare wouldn’t let Margaret come home. So, I knew I’d never see her again. Not unless Frank died.”

“You didn’t think about helping that situation along?” Sam enquired.

“I never let myself think that. I never wanted to be like him.”

There was a pause while Vivian and Sam exchanged a glance; Vivian thinking that she probably ought to admire Mary’s restraint; her principled refusal to fight violence with violence, and yet at the same time, how much misery could have been averted if instead of sending Nathan away she had found a way to make sure that Frank Ryan never woke up.

“You didn’t feel you could contact your brother again to ask about your daughter?”

“I would never have done that. You were monitoring our calls. And Frank paid the bills. He could see all the numbers I called. I would never have put Nate and Clare and Charlotte in danger if I hadn’t been desperate.”

“Because of the sex of your baby? That was why you called your brother?” Viv prompted. “And you told him you wanted out of your marriage but that Ryan mustn’t know you’d left him willingly?”

She nodded, jerkily. “I was hoping he’d never find out. I knew if he did…”

Sam and Vivian exchanged a look of horror as Vivian hit the button for Jack’s number. As Mary went on apologetically, her voice hushed as if even now she could hardly bring herself to say the words out loud: “…if he did he might kill the next young man who walked through his door…”

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Backing away to try to keep the scene as uncontaminated as possible, Martin took in the signs that he could see. More tire tracks, coming and going to this point. The place where it had been parked. Ryan’s vehicle, he was certain. He could see it in his mind’s eye now. Ryan driving here calmly,
setting up, waiting for Danny and Martin to appear and then intending to pick them off. No doubt he would have retrieved the bodies afterwards, perhaps dumped then in one of the mines around here. He had not expected an audience. But he had been interrupted…

Martin imagined the ranger driving up, catching sight of the other vehicle, then hearing the gunshots, hurrying over to tell the man with the rifle that this was out of season, only to realize that what he was shooting at wasn’t deer. He had turned to run, perhaps shouting a warning to the campers, and Ryan had shot him in the back. No wonder the campers had left in such a hurry; that must have been the other shots he and Danny had heard – Ryan firing at the campers as they ran for their car. They were lucky he hadn’t taken out the tires. Martin checked the tracks again and it was clear that Ryan had got into his own vehicle and headed back the way he had come. Perhaps he was hoping to cut the fleeing campers off by some other route, but Martin couldn’t see any way that he could make it. He hated leaving the ranger lying there in the snow but preserving the crime scene was the best way to bring his killer to justice. Except…

All of Martin’s instincts as a federal agent rebelled at disturbing a body but he needed the phone the ranger was probably carrying. Wishing vainly for a pair of gloves, he delved under the corpse, trying to feel into the pockets of his jacket. His footprints were already confusing things, making it less easy for another crime scene investigator to work out what had happened. If Danny hadn’t been in such dire need, he would have taken a moment to find a pen and some paper and leave a note, but there was that pulse beating in his brain, that piece of elastic tightening with every second. He lifted the body up a little – gasping with the pain that exerted on his injured ribs – and searched for a weapon, but without success. He searched pockets too small to take a revolver, and felt the square edge of something in the man’s pocket. A second later he had it hooked out and in his hand. He opened his fingers cautiously, afraid of disappointment, but there it was, the outline of a cell phone, and when he flicked it open it was showing a signal. He was dialing so fast his fingers barely had time to shake.

Jack Malone’s phone hadn’t stopped ringing since daybreak. Elena giving him more information about the rescue personnel on their way; the helicopter pilot giving his ETA; Victor Fitzgerald wanting to know where his son was right now and why Jack couldn’t give him that information every twenty minutes or so, and a dozen other calls relating to the case. It was a relief to see Vivian’s caller ID. She might have something concrete to tell him instead of more questions he couldn’t answer.

“Hey, Viv. Tell me you have something…?”

“We’re on our way to the hospital with Mary Ryan, Clare Hope, and Nathan Gallagher, but, Jack, we have some bad news…”

He listened as the information rolled over him with all the finesse of a Sherman tank. Frank Ryan was a second generation serial killer. A chip off the old block, trained up by his father to inherit the family farm and the family nasty habit of picking up male drifters and beating, torturing and raping them before he murdered them and dumped them in a shallow grave. There had been no more killings in Indemnity for the past eighteen years because the marriage vow Ryan had made in private but forgotten to share with his wife was that he was giving up killing people on condition that she was a good wife to him. He had, apparently, truly loved her, but that hadn’t stopped him taking out some of his repressed psychosis and sexual frustration on making her brother his own special project. Which was when Mary had realized that her husband wasn’t quite the man she thought he was, because the warning bells his controlling behavior had set off before that point had been as nothing beside the clanking klaxon of realization after the first time he had beaten her.
brother unconscious and locked him in the basement to think about his options.

Nathan Gallagher had chosen obedience, which had helped some of the time, but hadn’t always averted the beatings that followed, as Ryan found excuses to smack him around for increasingly contrived reasons. Mary had become more and more terrified of doing anything that might make her husband angry, as he would then take it out on her brother, the two of them more brainwashed by Ryan every day into playing by his rules so completely that they never had time to stop and ask if the rules made any sense.

They had played by his rules for four years, not much better than prisoners on that farm, while Ryan stuck to his marriage vows and didn’t murder anyone, but the effort of doing so seeped out against his brother-in-law, who, by this point, could never be quite obedient, respectful or submissive enough. Nathan had left after Ryan – finding out that Nathan had seen his ex-girlfriend against his express orders – had beaten and raped and had probably intended to murder him, but had been interrupted by Jake Gallagher, who, for the first time in his life had tried to do something for his son. Jake was the only person, apart from Nathan and Mary, who had realized that someone other than him was now blacking his son’s eyes and had driven up to the farm to confront Ryan. Coming in on Ryan – who had overstepped his previous boundaries, as the old serial killing urges got away from him – he had confronted the man and had his head beaten in for his troubles. Realizing that, in Ryan’s perception of him, her brother had crossed the line he had been so precariously balanced on before as a family member rather than Ryan’s next victim, Mary had ordered Nathan to fake his death before it became a reality.

Had she been doing penance ever since? Jack thought about what that night must have been like for her. In what order had she found out? Had Ryan told her lovingly or brutally? ‘Sorry, I killed your father and raped your brother while I was beating him into unconsciousness, but as a tribute to my great love for you I haven’t killed anyone since I married you, which is really something, because up until then I used to do it all the time….’

Mary hadn’t been grieving for her not-dead brother or even her truly-dead father when she had been given all those anti-depressants, she had been having a complete nervous breakdown over the realization that she was married to a serial killer, and that she had the choice of either staying with him to protect his future victims or trying to make someone believe her story. Mary wasn’t a fighter. Jack had thought that on their first meeting. She was someone who endured; who suffered; who did penance for what she perceived to be her guilt. That was why she had let her sister-in-law take her daughter away and thought it was the right decision, rather than telling the FBI agents in her house that her husband was a murderer.

“Jack…?”

Jack blinked as he realized he was still standing in the snow, surrounded by trees and scurrying agents, whining dogs, the distant sound of something that could, please God be a helicopter finally on its way. He found Sheriff Cooper looking at him anxiously. “What is it?” the man demanded. “What’s wrong?”

He swallowed hard and while holding Cooper’s gaze said rapidly to Vivian: “So, you’re telling me that Ryan’s a serial killer who specializes in the murder of good-looking young men, and I not only entirely failed to realize it, I sent Danny and Martin up there, alone, to interview him…?”

Cooper turned away, pulling off his hat to run a hand through his hair. “Hell,” he said. And then more forcefully: “Hell and damnation!”

Jack personally thought ‘Fuck!’ was a more appropriate response, but he got that Cooper was probably using the two worst words in his vocabulary and ones he would never normally use in
“Jack, you couldn’t have known,” Vivian breathed.

“But I should have done.” He took a moment to try to get his heart rate back to normal but he could practically feel his blood pressure spiking. “How close are you to the hospital?”

“We should get there in time but – ”

He saw another number flashing at him and grimaced. “Viv, I have another call. Call me from the hospital or if you find out anything else. I’ll be in touch.” He didn’t recognize the number but took the call anyway, hoping it wasn’t Martin’s mother as he did so. It had been bad enough having to field Victor Fitzgerald all morning. “Malone.”

“Jack…?”

His heart did a double back flip. He tightened his grip on the phone. “Martin…? Where the hell are you? Are you okay?”

Cooper spun around at once, eyes full of hope, while Jack gestured at him to be quiet before he even opened his mouth.

Martin was breathing hard. “Danny’s been shot in the side. I’ve slowed the bleeding but I couldn’t stop it. He’s in a cabin – it’s about ten miles from Ryan’s place heading east, level with a campsite. It’s hard to spot from the air. You need to look for our footprints. There’s a mine to the north – about three hundred yards from the cabin. That should be on the map. I’m going back there now. I didn’t want to leave him but I had to find a phone…”

The Sheriff was already spreading out the map so Jack could find the location, while relaying the information overheard from Martin to another agent. For the first time, Jack felt a tiny spark of liking for Sheriff Cooper.

“How bad is it – the wound?”

“I don’t know. But they’re never good, are they?”

Martin’s teeth where chattering – he could hear down the line, and realized that the part of Martin that was a federal agent was giving him the information to find them while another part was spiking with panic for Danny.

“Who shot him? Was it Ryan?”

“We didn’t see, but we’re assuming it was him.” Martin sounded breathless, clearly moving over what seemed to be uneven terrain, little gasps and grunts of exertion accompanying each movement. “There’s a dead ranger up here. He was shot a few minutes after Danny. His name is Cliff Haynes. I’m using his cell. I didn’t see him shot either, but I heard it.”

Cooper grimaced. “Oh, hell. Not Cliff….”

“…And there’s a couple, I think, driving west fast. Whoever killed the ranger shot at them. I didn’t see any blood spatters in the snow so I don’t think they’re hurt but it might be a good idea to try to find them.”

Jack motioned to Cooper about the helicopter and the man told him rapidly that it was on its way and he’d asked for a trace on the call Jack was taking right now.
“What happened between you and Ryan?” Jack asked. Martin still sounded in pain to him. He was clearly moving fast and he didn’t like the way his breath was hitching over each inhalation. “Are you hurt?”

“He went ape. Started going on about discipline and obedience. Danny tried to talk him down. I probably didn’t handle it right. He knocked Danny out – I was worried. I know you told us to suck it up but I mouthed off more than I…”

“Martin…” Jack had intended to sound soothing, but anxiety had sharpened his voice and he practically snapped his name. “Ryan’s a serial killer. The second he found out that Mary had left him willingly the next young guy to walk through that door was already toast. It was probably nothing you did. Did he hurt you…?”

There was a fractional hesitation before Martin said: “I’m fine, Jack, but Danny’s bleeding heavily. He needs the paramedics.”

Cooper said rapidly: “The chopper will be here in five minutes. Fitzgerald’s about seven miles from here. Your guys have got his location. Do you want the helicopter to come here or go straight there?”

“Tell them to come here first,” Jack ordered. “There’s a guy with a gun out there who’s already shot two people, one of them fatally. I need to give them some back up.” He turned back to Martin and said gently: “Martin, the chopper’s on its way and I’m going to come and find you. Just keep talking to me.”

“Did I say it was a through and through? In his left side. I tied it up with my shirt and a sweater but I had to move him right after he was shot and there was a lot of blood loss. He was losing heat fast.”

He could hear still Martin’s teeth chattering with what sounded like shock and cold, and his chest had a wet sound he didn’t much care for. He heard a twig crack loudly, the sound of someone sliding, then even through the cell phone connection, Jack could feel the jolt as Martin hit the ground, and that cry of pain tore straight through him. “Martin? Are you okay?”

He heard Martin snatching more ragged breaths as he evidently struggled to his feet. “I just slipped. How long until the paramedics get here…?”

“They’re going to pick me up in a couple of minutes, then we’re going to come and find you and Danny. We’re pinpointing your location now.”

Cooper was circling a place on the map and whispering to him rapidly: “Hal Shire’s cabin. I’ll give the coordinates to the helicopter pilot, but they’re not going to be able to land there, closest place is about half a mile away.”

The gasp of horror from Martin made Jack break out in goose bumps, a chill shivering straight down his spine. “What is it?”

“Footprints. I can see footprints in the snow and they’re not mine.” Then Martin was moving at such speed that Jack could hear the tear and lash of tree branches, grunts as Martin stumbled and slid, presumably on his ass, in a mad scramble down what seemed to be very rough terrain. Jack could see the place on the map that Cooper had circled, the campsite marked and the contour lines so close together, proving how steep the incline was.

“Martin, don’t panic;” he told him sharply, afraid that his agent was going to fall and break his
neck while he listened impotently.

“He’s going after Danny. I shouldn’t have left him….”

“Martin…?” Jack said his name several times but Martin had evidently stuffed the phone inside his clothing to leave his hands free because he could hear the sound of bumps and thuds and gasps of pain and the rapid beat of his heart; he was as close as an amulet and about as useful.

“How bad is it?” Cooper asked.

Shrugging helplessly, Jack said: “I don’t know. He said Danny’s been shot. It may look worse than it is but it’s pretty clear that if the bleeding isn’t stopped soon, Danny’s not going to make it, especially in that weather after the night those two must have had trekking through the snow. Martin sounds like crap to me, but he says he okay. You know the guy Martin mentioned – the ranger?”,

Cooper nodded. “He’s a good man. Wife and two kids. Ryan must have lost it completely.”

“This is my fault.” Jack could feel the guilt coiling in his guts. “I should never have told Ryan that Mary had left him willingly until we’d found her and knew the reason why. It’s a miracle Danny and Martin are still alive.”

Rapid breathing and what sounded like little hitches of pain told Jack that Martin had hold of the phone again. “Martin, are you okay?”

“Jack, the footsteps lead toward the cabin. Danny can’t move, which means he’s a sitting duck up there. I’m going to try to get Ryan away from him but the paramedics need to get here fast.”

With the map in front of him, Jack could imagine the terrain, its ridges and rocks smoothed out by the blizzard, a white drift over everything, and those footprints, deeper and larger than Martin’s would ever be, like yetis prints in the snow, leading up to that cabin half-hidden on the opposite slope – the slope just as steep and rough as the one Martin had just stumbled down. With a wounded friend at the mercy of a serial killer, he doubted Martin was thinking any too clearly right now. He could feel his own tension ratcheting tight at the thought of Danny bleeding and helpless and that madman advancing on him, but the fact remained that he still had one agent who was definitely alive and in one piece and he wanted to keep it that way.

“Wait, Martin. Do you have your gun?”

“No. Ryan took them. That’s what I mean – Danny’s unarmed and I don’t even know if he’s still conscious. I should never have left him….”

“Martin, if you don’t have a weapon and Ryan does there isn’t a lot you can do right now. Danny may have a better chance as a hostage. If he’s a bargaining chip then Ryan won’t kill him.”

“Yes, he will.” Martin sounded absolutely certain about that. “But he’d rather kill me. I can get him away from Danny, and he won’t kill me quickly. He’s got a whole ritual he has to go through. There’s time for you to get here.”

He could hear the sound of Martin’s feet, a crisp intrusion into thick snow, then the sound of ground that was less densely covered, the crunch of twigs and leaves. That meant Martin was climbing again, and he could hear his breath hitch, the painful inhalations as he stumbled upwards
doggedly. He hoped it was just a stitch, or cramp from muscles chilled by the cold night of escaping from Ryan, hurting as they were forced to move at speed. The frustration of having Martin on the phone and yet not being able to arrest his movement towards what could be his death was overwhelming.

Through gritted teeth, Jack said: “Martin, if Ryan has a weapon and you don’t, I am ordering you not to approach him. Do you hear me?” He felt like the father in *Poltergeist*, having to play stern to keep his child from going into the light, but the anxiety spiking in his voice needed no playacting at all. “Martin…!”

Martin’s voice was an entirely sane whisper on the other end of the connection. “Danny’s wounded and alone with a serial killer, Jack. Don’t tell me you’d just leave him there and wait for reinforcements because we both know you wouldn’t. I’m putting the phone down now. I’ll leave it open so you can hear what happens but don’t say anything or Ryan will know….”

He almost screamed his name again, but stifled it, despite his frustrated anxiety, imagining how close Martin could be to the hut by now, unarmed, and about to go up against a murderer.

That was when he heard a cry of pain that made chill sweat break out on his skin. He recognized who it came from and the sound was worse because it had so clearly been dragged out of Danny against his will; a snarl of anger coiled around the pain because he could not quite suppress the agony he was in.

“Ryan, don’t!”

Martin was giving the guy everything he wanted right there; the anguish that told him hurting Danny was absolutely going to get him what he wanted. Groaning, Jack pressed a hand to his forehead, hardly daring to breathe as he strained to hear what happened next.

“Martin, don’t come in here…!” That was Danny, who sounded ragged and desperate and angry as hell. Jack could picture him lying there, bleeding, in so much pain and furious at the pain, at the helplessness, at the way he was being used to walk Martin straight into a trap.

There was noise beating all around him now, louder and louder, but Jack just blocked it all out, straining every sinew to hear those ghost whispers on the other end of his cell.

“Mr. Ryan, can I come in?”

Martin was hanging onto his negotiator voice by the skin of his teeth there. Jack wanted to bodily reach down the phone line, grab him by the scruff of the neck and haul him the hell away from the maniac with the loaded gun, shove him behind a tree somewhere, then get Ryan away from Danny, with a bullet or with reason, he hardly cared which. He pressed a hand over his other ear, trying to just concentrate on what was happening where Martin was, all other sounds just extraneous noise to him right now.

“Martin – don’t…” he hissed under his breath at the same time that Danny said the words so much more forcefully as a tinny echo in his ear.

“I’m sorry…” Jack heard Martin say so quietly that he wasn’t sure if it was meant for him or a near-silent apology to Danny, and then there was the sound of the cabin door closing and everything was too muffled for him to hear.

Holding his phone against his ear to listen for what he feared was the inevitable gunshot, Jack motioned to Cooper who had done a good job – he now realized – of keeping everyone quiet. “I
need that helicopter now,” he breathed.

Cooper pointed up and Jack realized that one of the noises he had been blocking out was the whirl of those blades as the helicopter swooped above them, sending beats of air down rhythmically to make the snow swirl and flurry and the dead fall leaves beneath rise up and dance.

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Danny had thought that nothing and no one could blot out the pain; that had become so all consuming it was even making his hair pulse with it, as if there were not enough living cells in his body to absorb it all and it had leached out into the dead ones. His side was a throb-throb-throb of blood pumping and leaking, each pump an outgoing tide that took some more warmth with it; each inward tide broken glass ground deeper into the burn that was the bullet hole in his side. Then Ryan had stepped through the doorway with that look on his face, as if they were the ones in the wrong; the ones who deserved to be punished. Not even a man looking for a justification, but one who believed he carried one in his pocket, like a starched handkerchief, always ready in an emergency.

Shivering with cold and pain, Danny had tried to sit up, knowing he was a pasty, sweating, bleeding victim here and that was all Ryan was seeing. The satisfaction in Ryan’s steely eyes confirmed it, and he would have given almost anything to have a gun in his sock, in his sleeve, somewhere he could produce it and level it, and wipe that damned expression off the man’s face. But his gun was in Ryan’s hand right now, the rifle slung over his shoulder and the barrel of Danny’s revolver staring back at him, like the eye of the Cyclops.

“Where’s Fitzgerald?” Ryan asked.

“He’s gone for help.” Danny’s voice rasped with pain when all he wanted Ryan to be hearing was anger.

Ryan came closer and Danny looked around for anything he could use as a weapon, but there was nothing. He was lying on top of the only piece of furniture in the cabin. He tried to sit up but the pain in his side was too bad and he fell back, teeth gritted to try to choke down his exclamation. Ryan touched the wound with the barrel of Danny’s gun. “I didn’t give you permission to borrow my sweater.”

“You ruined Martin’s coat,” Danny managed between gritted teeth. “Fair exchange is no robbery.”

“He hasn’t gone far.” Ryan pushed the barrel a little harder against the wound. “He wouldn’t leave you for long.”

The pain was building again, radiating in red waves as that metal pushed a little harder and then a little more. Danny suspected his crowns were starting to chip but he managed to gasp out: “I’m the best chance you have of getting out of this alive.”

It felt like a long time since Ryan had blinked. “Call him.”

Danny met his gaze and felt some fear mix in with his anger. Torture was not something he had ever had entered on his mental ‘must try sports’ list. Hang-gliding, maybe, excruciating pain – no. He realized at least half of the fear was for Martin. “I’m not your type…?” he tried to sound witty and careless but suspected he just came off like someone bleeding to death. “You’re hurting my feelings.”

Ryan dug the barrel of the gun in harder. “Call him.”
Danny swung the punch with everything he had, only to find that dizzying blood loss had evidently slowed his reflexes, or Ryan had always been quicker than a rattlesnake, because he found his right wrist held in a painful grip and being twisted until the bone felt as if it was beginning to bow. Danny cursed, tears springing into his eyes from the intensity of the pain, but managed to stifle his urge to scream. Which was when Ryan dug the gun so hard into his wound that he saw stars and heard himself crying out before he could smother it in a snarl of rage.

And, dammit to hell, Martin was there right on cue, pleading with Ryan to stop. He shouted at him to stay away while the world swam in and out of focus, the dark cabin graying several shades darker as he tried to decide whether it was better to be conscious to help Martin get out of this or unconscious so Ryan couldn’t use him as bait.

He could hear Martin using the exact tone Danny had used earlier, and realized with horror that not only did he know why Martin had been so angry at Danny giving in to Ryan but that Martin was going to give Ryan any damned thing he asked for, just the way Danny had earlier, because neither of them were apparently capable of watching a friend get hurt if there was anything they could do to avert it. Desperation gave him the strength to shout: “Martin – don’t!”

Ryan jabbed him harder with the gun and for a moment he might have passed out. The pain spiked into unrelieved agony and when everything stopped going in and out of focus, he could hear the low rumble of Ryan’s voice countermanding him. The darkness lifted as the door was pushed open, letting in a blinding wedge of snow-reflected daylight. Martin came in slowly and Danny was just praying he would have a weapon in his hand, but, blinking the sweat out of his eyes, he saw that Martin had his hands held up as he advanced slowly into the room.

“Ryan, you need to give up now,” Martin said quietly. “You could claim temporary insanity. Your wife just left you – you already lost your daughter. People will understand. Any good lawyer could make a case for you.”

“You talk when I tell you to talk.” Ryan didn’t even sound particularly angry – just as if he was laying down the rules now, and everyone needed to understand them.

Danny watched Martin swallow, their gaze met, and he saw how sick and pale Martin looked, realizing with an inward cringe that it was his fault Martin looked like this, his fellow agent all twisted up inside with anxiety for him.

“Are you okay?” Martin mouthed at him.

He nodded emphatically, trying to communicate with his eyes how much he wanted Martin to get the hell away from this situation right now. When that didn’t work, he jerked his head savagely at the door, eyes urging Martin to run. Martin’s headshake was very slight and so regretful. Danny groaned and tried to shift into a better situation.

“I have this for Danny.” Martin carefully lifted a rucksack from his shoulder and held it out so that Ryan could see it. “Can I give it to him?”

Ryan took the rucksack from him and tossed it casually into the corner, too far for Danny to reach it. “No. Now, be quiet. Turn around and face the wall.”

Danny met Martin’s gaze in a last desperate ‘Run like hell!’ silent urging before Martin gave him a look that could possibly be the last one they ever shared, and turned. Still hoping that Martin might have a plan, Danny felt even the pain throbbing through his body recede as he focused on Ryan lifting that gun.
“Don’t…” Danny swallowed painfully over the razor blades that seemed to be lodged in his throat. “Ryan, please. Please…”

Ryan jammed the gun barrel into the back of Martin’s head. “Tell me why I shouldn’t blow your head off right now and your friend’s right afterwards?”

“He hasn’t done anything to you!” Danny protested.

Ryan grabbed Martin’s hair in his left hand and pulled his head back so he could see his face, still digging the gun barrel into his scalp. “Tell me.”

“I’m not your enemy,” Martin said quietly.

“Wrong answer.” Ryan cocked the gun.

Danny saw Martin go even paler, noticing the lines around his eyes, the shadows underneath them, the bruises looking crimson and black against the pallor of his skin. He saw Martin’s jaw clench and then he said quietly: “Because I’ll do whatever you say.”

Ryan’s smile was sharp as a shark fin cutting through the waves. “Good answer.” He took a step back. “Put your hands behind your back.”

If Danny had been able to get up he would have been rocking with rage and tension. He was afraid to say anything in case Ryan killed Martin just to make a point, but the anger and fear bubbling up in him was almost impossible to keep choking into silence. He so badly wanted Martin to slam an elbow into Ryan’s ribs, and yet he knew that Martin wasn’t going to, not with Danny immobilized through blood loss and likely to pay the price if Martin’s strategy failed. He knew that Martin was going to do exactly what Ryan wanted to keep Ryan in a good enough mood that he wouldn’t stick a gun back into Danny’s wound or blow a hole in his head, and that thought was killing him. Last time he had wondered why Martin had kept mouthing off to a maniac, and now he knew why. It was all he could do to keep biting down his hatred and scorn for Ryan as the man snapped on the handcuffs over Martin’s bruised wrists.

“I need to know you’ve really learned your lesson,” Ryan told him.

Danny could feel the fine hair on his skin bristling like an angry cat. Ryan’s unshakeable self-confidence in his own right to order them around was making him want to spit and hiss.

“I’ve told you,” Martin said quietly, still facing the wall as ordered. “I’ll do anything you want if you’ll leave Danny alone.”

Danny shuddered as he heard his own words echoed by Martin. But it had been easier to say them than to hear them said by another. “Martin, don’t…” he began tautly.

Ryan’s retribution was swift and completely unjust, his fist slamming hard into Martin’s kidneys. As Danny cried out a protest he quickly stifled at a warning look from Ryan, Martin’s knees buckled and he went down hard, gasping for breath as the pain radiated out from that blow, and then coughing and retching as the breath came wheezing back.

“I’m sorry…” Danny said at once. “Please don’t hurt him.”

“Too late for that.” Ryan’s eyes were cold as a lizard when the sun had gone down.

Danny knew that if Jack were here he would find the words somehow, the ones Martin was too breathless to utter even if they had occurred to him and that he had lost somewhere back in the sea
of pain in which he was currently drowning. Jack would have known what to say to stop this; stop Ryan from whatever he had planned next, the whole ritual that was going to lead to them both being dead.

Ryan grabbed Martin by the collar and yanked him around – still on his knees – to face him. Danny saw the movement of Martin’s Adam’s apple as he swallowed. Ryan ran a thumb across the bruises marring Martin’s face and Martin turned his head away in disgust. “College boys like you – always think you’re too smart to end up dead. Always think a good education is going to help you, but it doesn’t.”

Martin held Ryan’s gaze, letting that flicker of ‘fuck you’ show briefly before he submissively lowered his gaze and pretended to be a good obediently cowed agent who accepted Ryan’s authority over him. “Do we have to do this here?” Martin asked.

“I want your friend to learn a lesson too. And wouldn’t you two rather die together than apart?”

“Do I get a last request?”

Ryan seemed amused by that. Danny thought that perhaps the only thing they had going for them right now was that something about Martin made Ryan want to kill him slowly instead of fast. “Maybe. Try me.”

He seemed more genial now that no one was opposing him. Danny understood how that could have given his past victims some power of their own. Mary and Nathan could feed his sense of being in control by instant acquiescence and absolute obedience, but in some ways it had still been them manipulating him even in the middle of him being the guy who made up the rules. He got that in a way that he knew Martin never would; the games you played when you lived with a guy who could hurt you; how every step of your wider defeat could feel like a small victory because the beating hadn’t been as bad as it could have been, or had even been averted. Concentrating on ways to avoid the next blow stopped you thinking about how none of this should be happening to you anyway. In the end you became complicit in your own abuse; too busy trying to bend the rules a fraction to remember the rules were unjust and had never made sense in the first place. He wondered if Ryan missed that even more than the groin-hardening fun of someone scared and pretty and unused to being powerless begging him to stop; people who affirmed his view of the world by playing by his rules. As long as Mary had been with him, there had been a connection to that power; that was something she had severed when she left him by choice. No wonder he needed this as much as he had ever done.

Martin said quietly: “Take me somewhere else before you do whatever you’re going to do. Don’t do it in front of Danny.”

Frowning, Danny tried to work out what Martin was up to. The last thing he wanted was for them to be separated. As long as they were together there was a chance they could come up with a way to overpower Ryan or outthink him. Separated, all they were was a guy with his hands cuffed behind his back, and another guy bleeding to death. He shook his head at Martin, who, still kneeling in front of Ryan, looked up for long enough to catch Danny’s eye. Martin gave an almost imperceptible head shake back, telling Danny that he wasn’t budging on this. Danny glared, eye-rolled, and gave him his best begging look to no avail. Martin looked up at Ryan and said: “Please…?”

Danny had to admit he would have caved in an instant but Ryan was made of more sadistic stuff and said: “Sorry, Agent Fitzgerald. No can do.” He grabbed Martin’s hair and pulled his head back and Danny had no idea if the next thing he had planned would have involved his gun or his fists or something more organic, because that was when he heard it, the distant sound of helicopter blades.
Martin shot him a quick, loaded ‘You see?’ look – and he did see. He got why Martin had wanted to get Ryan away from Danny, because a madman – thinking himself trapped – might shoot one of them and keep the other for a hostage, whereas if Martin and Ryan had been elsewhere when that helicopter was first heard then Danny would have been out of harm’s way. Martin, of course, would not; meaning it still seemed like a seriously flawed plan to Danny.

Ryan transferred his grip to Martin’s borrowed pullover and yanked him roughly to his feet, almost throwing him against the wall. “Who the hell is that?”

“I don’t know.” For a very well trained, very fit FBI agent, Martin was doing a good job of looking scared and small, hunching his shoulders and ducking his head, feeding into Ryan’s view of himself as big and powerful as well as any pro; but Danny was pretty sure he was lying and – for once – lying really well. “I guess Jack got worried when he couldn’t get hold of us and sent out Search and Rescue.”

Ryan snarled something that was oddly mild, not profane or even vulgar. Danny wondered what kind of mindset thought it was okay to kill complete strangers for no reason at all but still wouldn’t take the Lord’s name in vain. Ryan’s gaze as it rested on Martin was coldly assessing. “Looks like you get your wish, Agent Fitzgerald.” He pointed a gun at Danny. “Now, what are you going to do to pay me back for not killing him?”

Danny wondered if that was a question Mary had heard before or if Ryan had been subtler about the way he blackmailed her, masking it behind professions of love.

Martin darted an anxious look in Danny’s direction. “Anything you want.”

“I want you to die screaming.”

Danny shivered and saw Martin swallow again before he looked up at Ryan with no hint of that ‘fuck you’ showing through: “I can do that.”

“Good.” Still holding Martin by the pullover he began to haul him towards the door, his stolen revolver pointed unerringly at Danny the whole time. Danny realized how well Martin must have played this when Ryan didn’t pull the trigger – because it was clear how much he wanted to; he craved the power kick of ending Danny’s life with the squeeze of a trigger; wanted to see the bullet crack his skill and split his brain. He wanted the anguish from Martin, wanted to feed off that pain spike like a vampire feeds off blood. But he wanted Martin to die Ryan’s way even more – only just more – Danny could feel by what a fine thread his life was hanging – but slightly more, and that was enough to keep his finger from squeezing the trigger. After eighteen years of going cold turkey, he guessed Ryan really wanted this particular murder to go exactly to plan.

The door swung wider, letting in more of that dazzling white light, and Danny could see Martin’s face clearly, half-turned towards him. Martin gave him a brief smile, a not-scared, you’re-not-going-to-die smile so sweet and fond that it hurt like broken glass; and then Ryan had yanked Martin out of sight, the door banging closed behind them, and although he strained his ears Danny couldn’t even hear the crunch-crunch of their feet in the snow.

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Even dangling dizzily from that ladder way too many feet above the snow-covered ground, Jack still felt he had made the right decision. The helicopter could only put down half a mile away from the cabin; the trees grew too closely together for any other landing to be possible – the pilot had been adamant about that. Although the paramedics had been willing to climb down the ladder to get to the wounded victim they knew was out there, Jack had insisted they dropped him first, as
close to the cabin as they could get flying this low, so he could make sure he wasn’t going to get them killed. Now he clung to the ladder as it snaked and twisted like a tapeworm, while the edges of the helicopter blades sliced off twigs from the looming trees and sprinkled him with needles while a swirling vortex of snow was blown up to engulf him. He could see the footprints Martin had spoken of; two sets of them leading to the cabin from different directions and then setting off together in the direction of the mine.

Four feet from the ground, he jumped, landing awkwardly, and feeling pain jab hotly through his knee, but thankfully cushioned by the snow. He could see the cabin, and limped up towards it, massaging his knee and trying to stifle all the curses he wanted to say, as he kept to the cover of the trees.

He risked the quickest glance through the window and saw Danny sitting up on a table, still moving, so – against all odds – still alive. The relief was so incredible he almost passed out. He darted another look and saw no sign of Ryan or Martin, and then realized that Danny wasn’t just sitting up, but in the process of moving, gripping the edge of the table as he tried to swing his legs over the edge. His agonized cry had Jack kicking the door open in a second. The cabin seemed to be mostly full of someone cursing loudly in Spanish.

“FBI!” he shouted.

“Clear…” Danny gritted out. Despite being whiter than a cotton sheet, and clearly in too much pain to describe, Danny still seemed to be trying to get his feet on the ground.

Jack holstered his gun and gazed at him in disbelief. “What the hell are you doing?” He was across the cabin in two strides and caught him by the arms, holding him in place. It was dim in here after the white brightness of outside, but he could see bruises on his face, and, most ominously of all, that wet red stain that had spread out from makeshift bandaging to soak into his shirt all up his left side and halfway across his stomach. “Danny, stop moving. You’re going to bleed out if you don’t keep still.”

“I was going after Martin!” Danny snapped back, eyes dark with anxiety and pain.

“You wouldn’t make three paces. Now, cut it out.” Jack helped him to lie down again, Danny protesting as he did so. Jack pulled off his jacket and balled it under his feet. He checked the binding over the wound, which was completely blood-soaked but still seemed to be tight enough to be working as a kind of pressure bandage, apologized in advance and then pulled the knot tighter. Danny called him what he was sure was a very bad name and he acknowledged it with a regretful shrug. He caught sight of the backpack on the floor, snatching it up, he found a sleeping bag in it which he hastily unrolled and laid over Danny – who had not stopped talking the whole time Jack was seeing to him.

“…couldn’t see where they went but there could be a mine. There should be footprints in the snow…. Why are you still here…?”

Jack gave Danny a look which he hoped spoke volumes and went outside to look for the phone Martin had stashed; when he spoke into his own cell, he heard his voice sounding from a patch of snow a few feet away; he dusted off a light surface layer and retrieved it, breaking the connection, before using it to dial the paramedics as he headed back inside. “Malone. Danny’s alive but he’s lost a lot of blood. He’s in the cabin. I’m going to leave this line open and with him.” He put the phone into Danny’s hand and held his gaze. “Wait here for the paramedics. Don’t move an inch or I swear to God I’ll shoot you myself.”

“Jack…” Danny grabbed his wrist, leaving blood all over his sleeve. “You have to hurry.”
“How long since they left?”

He almost added ‘approximately’ but Danny was already checking his watch. “Six minutes and thirty-seven seconds. Ryan heard the helicopter. He knows he doesn’t have long before someone gets here.”

Jack touched his cheek briefly, feeling how cold he was and held his gaze. “I’m going to get Martin back, I promise.”

“If Ryan’s…done anything to him, promise me you’ll shoot that son-of-a-bitch…” Danny ground out. His voice sounded as if he’d been gargling with sandpaper.

“Keep that line open,” Jack warned him. He ducked back out into the brightness of the snow, following the footprints in the snow as fast as his bad knee would carry him. The tracks were clear enough and were leading straight for the mine. Ryan had obviously been pulling Martin along, Ryan’s long strides made even longer by the speed at which he had been walking. Jack dialed Vivian’s number as he hurried after them, saying as soon as she picked up: “Let me talk to Nathan.”

It was strange to hear his voice, that tentative: “Hello…?” from someone who had been a face in a file, a dead face in a file at that.

“Tell me how to stop Ryan killing Martin?”

There was a brief pause before he said: “I don’t know.”

“How did you stop him killing you?”

“I was his brother-in-law.” A brief pause as Jack grimaced at the probable truth of that, before Nathan added: “And I did what he said.”

“But he still beat you, didn’t he?”

“All the time, but I learned the rules. Most of the time if I followed them it didn’t get too bad. And he couldn’t make Mary stay with him without me to threaten.” Or the nameless young men out there who he would kill if she left him, Jack added mentally.

“Tell me the rules?” Jack pressed.

“You have to do what he tells you to do, always, and you have to apologize if he says you’re wrong, even if you’re not. You just say you’re sorry and that you’ll never do it again, and you don’t ever question him on anything. Does your agent understand that?”

“Martin? I sincerely doubt it.” Jack gripped the phone tighter. “Come on, you lived with the guy for four years and Mary lived with him for eighteen years, between the two of you there must be something…?”

“Clare, don’t…”

Jack realized Clare Hope must have snatched the phone out of Nathan’s hand when he heard the rasp of her breathing before she said clearly: “Just do the world a favor and kill the bastard already.”

Nathan came back on to say quietly: “We never found a way to stop him, Agent Malone. We just ran away. Remember?”
“Thanks. You’ve been a great help.” Jack switched off the phone, less angry than he sounded, because, ultimately, perhaps there was no magic word to use with Ryan. He was ready to say or do anything to get the guy away from Martin right now, but asking the people who had been victimized by him so completely probably wasn’t the best strategy.

It was automatic to speed up as the mine entrance came into focus, even though his knee was throbbing a protest with every pace; the dark square was half-hidden behind the fir trees that had grown up to reclaim it. Behind him, he could hear the helicopter must have landed, its blades whirling rhythmically while paramedics spilled from it, running, he sincerely hoped; Danny was tough and resilient, and took a lot of killing, but there had been far too much blood loss not to have him scared. One agent bleeding out in a freezing cabin and one in the custody of a serial killer was making the score pretty much Ryan 2, Malone 0 right now. Time to level the score.

Drawing his gun, Jack advanced carefully into the darkness of the mine, knowing he had probably presented a silhouette to any waiting murderer for a moment there, but also not caring that much about his own safety when one of his agents was in danger.

At first he could hear nothing except his own slightly ragged breathing, his eyes adjusting to the darkness as he debated whether or not to use his flashlight. Not particularly wanting to light himself up for a killer like a Macy’s window on Christmas Eve, he continued to inch forward cautiously. Then he could see a dim light in the distance, which, as his eyes became more accustomed to the gloom, revealed to him a long tunnel which led to an intersection, the light glowing from the left. And there were voices. He recognized the timbre of Martin’s, slightly croakier than usual, and that harsher deeper sound was Ryan.

“…don’t even know what I’m hoping for – I think your friend’s going to die. I think he’s lost so much blood that there’s no way back for him. On the other hand, I really like to picture his face when he reads your autopsy and realizes all the things I did to you.”

“Shouldn’t we go in deeper then? I mean my agonized screams are presumably going to travel quite a way on a still day like today. You probably wouldn’t want to tip off those search and rescue guys that you’re torturing someone to death in here.”

Martin should probably have pitched his tone a lot more respectful and scared than that. Jack suspected that if Nathan had been with him right now he would have been grimacing and shaking his head in horror at that ‘fuck you’ tone in Martin’s voice.

Ryan sounded more amused than angry: “You’re don’t think you’re going to scream? You think you outsmarted me and now your little friend is safe there’s nothing I can do that’s going to hurt you? You think because what I did to you last time didn’t make you beg for mercy, it’s going to be the same now? I went easy on you before. That’s not going to happen here.”

Jack edged further down the corridor, avoiding bowing pit props and wondering just how stable this place was. It felt dangerous; mossy and damp and ready to fall; as if its stones had been shifting for decades now and were just about at the point of collapse.

“You want to know what I think, Mr. Ryan? I think you’re really brave when the guy you’re up against has his hands cuffed behind his back or when he doesn’t even know you’re there and you shoot him anyway.”

“Are you going back on your word, Agent Fitzgerald. You told me you’d do anything I said.”

“Yeah, and if we’d stayed in that cabin, I would have done. But, like you said, Danny isn’t here now, and you can’t get to him.”
Jack decided that however angry Martin was about Danny getting shot he really did need to take lessons in How Not To Mouth Off To the Crazy Guy.

Luckily for Martin, Ryan still sounded more amused than anything: “I liked you so much better when you were all submissive and obedient, but, you know, Nate was just like you. The first few times he thought he could take it and keep coming back for more. He was sure nothing was ever going to make him give in even though it meant making his sister cry all those tears. So selfish. But he learned. So will you.”

Edging a little closer, Jack tried to steady his breathing, not wanting Ryan to hear his approach. He could have done with a covering of the kind of suspenseful music they always gave heroes in the movies – silly of him not to have remembered to bring his own string section. An earth wall was bulging like rancid fruit in a can and he moved past it warily, he wasn’t sure a gunshot was even possible down here, not without bringing down the roof. As he passed another pit prop he could almost hear it groaning.

“Weren’t you the guy making his sister cry? You know, by beating her brother half to death?”

“All he ever had to do was what I told him. Three days in the cellar with his hands cuffed behind his back and a broken arm and a few broken ribs soon taught him the error of his ways. Like I told Mary at the time, everything was going to be so much easier for all of us once Nathan had learned to obey me.”

“You did that to a seventeen year old boy – half your size? Man, that takes real courage. As much courage as it took to kill all those guys who’d never done you any harm and never had a chance. Your Daddy must have been a real piece of work. Tell me, all those drifters he raped and left to die in ditches – did he ever get in any practice on you…?”

Grimacing at the sharp report of what sounded very like a backhand, Jack wished he could shake off the feeling that Martin was probably channeling him right now. He liked to think that if he was at the mercy of a serial killer, even with no one else’s life in danger but his own, that he would still be rational and calm and not try to provoke the guy, but when he caught a glimpse of the wetness on his fingers from Danny’s blood-soaked clothing, he suspected that Martin might not be as far off base as he was thinking.

“You don’t talk about my father – ever. He was a good man; he had a calling; and he left the world a better place than when he found it. And I think it’s time you had a reminder about who’s in charge here.”

Jack was at the corner of the turn now; he risked a glance around the edge of the intersection and saw that Ryan had Martin in a small scooped-out chamber, presumably somewhere for the miners to kit up before they headed in deeper. There was an old pickax lying almost within reach, blade rusty with neglect, and a lantern that Ryan had lit and stood on an old packing case. Martin’s hands seemed to be cuffed behind his back, but by good fortune or bad judgment on Ryan’s part, Ryan had his back to the entrance and Martin was the one looking Jack’s way. Not that Martin had a chance to see him because all his attention was focused on the guy looming over him.

Ryan slammed Martin back against the wall and, as he winced from his skull being cracked against rock, Ryan reached under his pullover and squeezed his left side hard. That agonized cry from Martin went right through Jack like an electric current; even as his brain was processing that Martin’s ribs must be broken to make him hurt like that and that if Ryan knew about it then Ryan was the guy who had done it, his hand was reaching for the pickax.

“You getting the picture now, Agent Fitzgerald?”
Ryan’s vicious punch into Martin’s ribs would probably have broken them if they hadn’t already been broken, and that second cry of agony from Martin scraped all the sheaths from Jack’s nerve endings and left him vibrating with rage. He was across the chamber in two strides and slamming the flat side of the pickax hard against Ryan’s head. Possibly too hard as the man went down like a felled oak and didn’t move. He found himself gazing at Martin across Ryan’s unconscious body as Martin painfully straightened back up, the dim light of the lantern revealing all kinds of cuts and bruises, blood running from his mouth, and blue eyes dazed with pain. But at the sight of him, Martin did manage a glimmer of a smile.

“You didn’t say ‘Freeze, FBI’.”

Jack smirked back at him. “And I was hoping for a ‘I knew you’d come’.” He quickly knelt down, cuffed Ryan’s hands behind his back, and then checked for a pulse. It was almost a disappointment to find there was still one there. He checked Ryan for weapons and found another revolver, a second set of cuffs, and a set of keys, both of which he pocketed. As he straightened back up, he was only just in time to catch Martin before he toppled over. Holding him up, he said: “The things you boys will do for a helicopter ride.”

Martin spat out a mouthful of blood that Jack really hoped wasn’t from a broken rib impaling his lung; he was wheezing and still clearly in a lot of pain but he didn’t seem to be drowning in his own blood as yet. Jack gently turned him around and undid his cuffs. It was too dark to see very well but the little whimper of pain Martin uttered when he undid them suggested he had more bruises than this dim light was revealing. Martin rubbed his wrists. “Is Danny going to be okay?”

“The paramedics should be with him by now.”

Martin gave him a shocked look. “You left him alone?”

“You’d been hauled off by a serial killer, Martin. Excuse me for thinking that rescuing you was an urgent priority. Not to mention the fact Danny was trying to get up and come after you when I arrived there. I damned near had to handcuff him to the table as things were.” He dialed Cooper’s number rapidly, trying to get an ETA for his arrival.

“We’ve found Ryan’s vehicle,” Cooper’s voice sounded so clear he could have been standing a few feet away. “We can see the mine entrance from where we are now – and Ryan’s footprints in the snow.”

“He’s in the mine, about a hundred yards in, first chamber on your left. He’s all yours. Just be very careful not to let off a shot in there. That place is completely unstable. I haven’t read him his rights so I suggest you do – right after you charge him. I don’t think you can get him for murder, but you should be okay with kidnapping, attempted murder, and assault.”

“You told me he was a serial killer.”

“He is a serial killer. But everyone who witnessed him committing a murder is dead. He told Mary what he did, but I don’t think he left any physical evidence hanging around for us to use as proof, which makes her testimony no better than hearsay. My boys can’t swear to who shot Danny, and Martin didn’t see the ranger get shot either. But you’re safe enough arresting him for kidnapping a federal agent. He had Martin in cuffs when I caught up with them and Martin’s going to be around to give evidence at a trial.”

Jack ended the call to find Martin looking at him in confusion. “Is that really all we have on Ryan?”
“Pretty much.”

“But he may have given Mary specific details about the killings. He may have kept trophies. There may be a much better case than you’re implying. We can recover the bullet that he shot Danny with and compare it to the gun he used. His fingerprints could still be on the weapon. And what about the campers – they could have seen him kill the ranger?”

“Maybe,” Jack acknowledged.

“Aren’t you worried that you’ve given Cooper the impression that Ryan is going to walk away from killing that ranger, nearly killing Danny, and all those other murders?”

“Did I?” Jack held his gaze, knowing he could beat Martin at poker any day of the week.

As expected, Martin looked away first. “We should stay with Ryan. We shouldn’t leave him unattended. We need to wait for Sheriff Cooper.”

“No, I need to get you to the helicopter so the paramedics can take a look at you.” Jack dialed their number rapidly, asking if they had taken off with Danny yet, and if not if they could afford to wait for Martin as well. He began to propel Martin away from Ryan and towards the long dark tunnel that led to the outside.

“No, they can’t afford to wait.” Martin gave him a look of disbelief. “Danny’s bleeding to death right now.”

The paramedic had been in the middle of some technical explanation which had sounded a lot like ‘No’ to Jack when Danny came on the phone shouting over the sound of whirling blades: “Jack? Did you get Martin? Is he okay?” Off to what was apparently the paramedic, Danny said clearly: “You try to take off without Martin and I’m jumping.”

He could hear polite paramedics patiently saying: “Sir, we need you to lie down…”

“I don’t know how he is,” Jack shouted back. “It’s very dark in here. He can walk and talk though.” Putting an arm around Martin to steady him he proved the truth of his words as he helped him to stumble towards the light. He much preferred this journey, the darkness behind him and the pale beckoning of the day lit snow ahead of him, Martin dimly visible in the blue-white light, his bruised skin a palette of different shades of gray.

“Is he still wearing all his clothes or did Ryan…do something to him…?” Danny demanded anxiously.

Martin leaned across to shout: “No.” Wincing as raising his voice evidently expanded his ribcage to painful levels, he clasped his side and tried again: “No, he didn’t ‘do’ anything to me. Will you stop obsessing about that? You’re the one he shot.”

“Well, you’re the one he beat half to death!” Danny added something long and complicated in Spanish that sounded rude to Jack.

Martin retorted swiftly: “You didn’t teach me that phrase yet. Would you like me to ask one of the nuns at St. Augustine’s for a translation?”

They were getting closer to the light now, Jack could see the opening of the mine and the snow and trees beyond.

Over the phone, Danny seemed to be telling the paramedics that they needed to take a stretcher and
go and pick up Martin – who was arguing with him about how he could walk perfectly well, and could in any case wait for a lift back to town in a car.

“Oh, right, because your broken ribs are just going to love that track – all three hours of it!”

As the light bathed them, Jack got his first good look at Martin’s face and exclaimed in anger. Martin darted a look at him, and said hastily: “Gotta go” to Danny. Holding the cell phone away as if he hoped that would render their conversation impossible to overhear, Martin began to say: “It looks worse than it is…”

“Like hell it does!” Jack gazed at him in disbelief. “What happened at Ryan’s place anyway?” He practically hauled Martin out from under the shadow of a tree to get a better look at him, tilting his head up to examine it. “Are you concussed?”

“Not any more…”

“What do you mean – ‘not any more’?”

“Well, I had a headache, but it’s gone now. And I was only out for a few minutes.”

“He beat you unconscious?”

“It wasn’t my fault,” Martin protested.

“So, you weren’t mouthing off at him the way you just were in that mine?”

“No. Well…yes. But, he knocked Danny out. Jack – you’re the one who said the guy’s a serial killer. I’m not responsible for his actions.”

“No, but you’re responsible for your own and it sounds as if they were completely contrary to the very specific orders I gave you!”

All of Jack’s instincts as an FBI agent – not to mention a parent – were telling him that Martin needed to be bawled out like no agent had ever been bawled out before, but unfortunately, the reason why he needed yelling at was also the reason why Jack didn’t have the heart. In the light, he looked dreadful; his left eye blackened, the paper-thin skin beneath both eyes bruised from lack of sleep, cold, hunger, and fists, his jaw and cheekbone were both badly bruised, his lip was bleeding, there was dried blood from a cut above his eye and a nose that evidently bled copiously, and it was clear that every pace was jabbing into his broken ribs like a spear. All that and a friend shot right in front of him too. Somehow, despite knowing he would regret it later, he couldn’t quite get his anger to overtake his concern.

“We’ll talk about this later.” He put an arm around Martin to steady him, helping him follow his footprints back downstream. “Are you sure you can walk as far as the helicopter?”

“You’re not going to yell at me?” Martin asked cautiously.

“Of course I’m going to yell at you.” Jack rolled his eyes at him even asking such a ridiculous question. “I’m just not going to do it now. Once you’re in the hospital and they give you the all clear I’ll yell at you then.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be the first time. Viv and Sam will be back by then – right?” Martin sounded so hopeful and Jack just knew he was hoping for a human shield.

“I doubt it.”
“Did they find Mary?”

“Yes. And Margaret. They’re both fine, although Mary was apparently several centimeters dilated and quite possibly about to give birth in the back of a car. So maybe Sam really will get a kid named after her this time.”

Martin shivered. “How do you that? Raise the son of a serial killer and try not to act as if you’re watching him all the time?”

“I don’t know.” Jack knew he was already watching Hanna and Kate to see if there were any signs of depression or strange mood swings, afraid of his mother’s legacy being passed onto them; but perhaps even fearing that one’s child may have inherited a tendency for suicide was not as bad as fearing they had inherited a compulsion to commit murder. “Which is why I wouldn’t have had even one of that guy’s kids if I was her, never mind two.”

“You said Margaret was a nice little girl despite everything?” Martin was limping badly now; Jack could feel how much holding up he needed but tried to be tactful about it, and not point out how badly the guy was struggling.

“By all accounts she was – presumably still is. But she’s a girl. Boys are different.”

“How would you know?”

“Look there’s a reason my wife and I just had girls, okay?”

“You ate lots of yogurt?”

“All the babies went in the water butt. If only your parents and Danny’s had been that sensible, I wouldn’t have had to drag myself out into all this snow to save your skinny asses.”

Danny’s voice crackled through the phone, killing any hopes Martin may have had that he had not been overhearing their conversation: “Some people find us both decorative and useful.”

“Well, today you’re neither,” Jack assured him. “Especially Martin – although you weren’t exactly looking your best either the last time I saw you. And aren’t you supposed to be unconscious by now? When Martin was shot at least he had the good taste to lapse into a coma.”

He hoped the spark of indignation that gave Danny – that Jack could even think about joking about Martin nearly dying – would give him the requisite jolt to keep him awake and aware. If there was a method to keep him like that all the way to the hospital, all the better. He was afraid that as soon as Danny saw that Martin was safe his reason for fighting was going to be over and he was going to sink into that never-never place the injured went to when they had lost a lot of blood and were exhausted and in pain and darkness was beckoning to them like a favorite dream.

“He wants to see Agent Fitzgerald,” a paramedic said wearily. The guy sounded extremely long-suffering to Jack and he guessed that Danny was in no way being a model patient.

“We need to hurry.” Martin increased his pace, breathing obviously like gargling ground glass for him right now, but doing it anyway. The faster pace made him breathe deeper and cough agonizingly, trying to hold his ribs in place as the coughs tore through them. Jack supported him as well as he could and then stopped worrying about his feelings and pretty much hauled him as fast as he could.

By the time they reached the helicopter they were both pouring sweat and Martin was hurting badly. It occurred to Jack that he had been in this state when he had been telling him he was ‘fine’.
“You lied to me.”

Martin darted him a quick look. “No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did. You told me you were ‘fine’.”

“Compared with Danny I was.”

Jack had his mouth open to tell Martin exactly what he thought of that argument when Martin was saved by paramedics reaching down to haul him up into the helicopter. Jack climbed up behind him in time to see Martin stumble over to where Danny was trying to sit up while an – in Jack’s opinion – overly-patient black paramedic was trying to get him to stay down. They dusted off so fast, Jack didn’t have time to get to a seat, swaying sickeningly for a moment before the second paramedic caught his arm and pulled him down into a seat. He had a good view of Danny from here and could see that in his eagerness to check up on Martin he was trying to struggle upright again.

“Danny, lie down!” Jack snapped; relieved to see that he still had it, as Danny obediently flattened as if someone had dropped an anvil on his chest. The paramedics – who introduced themselves as Jorge and Omar – had clearly been working hard on him, having cut off his shirt and removed the sodden mess of blood-soaked pullover and whatever had been underneath it, sterile dressings now in place. Omar, the black paramedic, was keeping pressure on the wound and politely asking Danny to stay still. Danny was hooked up to an IV but still looked deathly.

Jack watched as Danny reached out and Martin clasped his hand, the two of them gazing at each other in a way that revealed that they had never expected to see each other again. Looking at their expressions, Jack could imagine exactly how painful their parting had been; Martin having to leave Danny bleeding in a cabin; Danny watching Martin hauled off to what could well be his death.

“Hey…” Martin said gently.

“Hey, yourself.” Danny gave him a smile of relief that showed just how exhausted he was from blood loss and pain. As Jack had feared, only waiting to see for himself that Martin was really alive seemed to have kept him fully conscious, and he was visibly drooping already. Now that he could see Danny in the light, he was better able to assess his condition, and, although it certainly didn’t make him want to get out his tap shoes and start twirling a cane, if he had been forced to choose a spot for a male agent to get shot in the torso he would definitely have opted for the left lower quadrant. But if the large intestine been nicked they would be looking at peritonitis, and he noticed that the paramedic who was putting pressure on Danny’s wound was also keeping an eagle eye on his blood pressure.

Martin looked anxiously at the paramedics. “Is he going to be okay?”

“We don’t think there’s any major organ damage, but it’s a borderline placement. We’ve radioed ahead, and there’s going to be an ER ready for him.”

As Danny once again tried to sit up, Omar said – far too politely for Jack: “Sir, you really need to stay flat.”

“Why didn’t you strap him down to a trauma board?” Jack demanded.

Jorge, the Latino paramedic, who was now trying to get a look at Martin, said: “He didn’t have a neck injury or a back injury.”

“Who cares? It would keep him still.”
Jorge was younger and taller, with short-cropped hair. His smile was unexpectedly teasing: “We try to avoid torturing our patients unnecessarily.”

“That’s good to hear.” Martin gasped as his clothing was lifted up and what was evidently a very cold stethoscope was applied to his back.

“Of course, it’s more of a guideline,” the man added mischievously.

“You need to check Martin’s ribs,” Danny said.

Jorge listened carefully to Martin’s breathing and nodded. “Not too bad. You’ve obviously been remembering to breathe deeply. Well done.”

“Actually he ran up and down a slope a few times then probably coughed his guts out.” Jack had no problem with ratting Martin out on this.

The paramedic winced in sympathy. “Well, we probably wouldn’t advise that from a pain management point of view but as a method for avoiding a collapsed lung you could do worse.”

When he undid the strapping around Martin’s ribs, he revealed a Kandinsky palette of bruises, all over his side, his back – flaring down and across his kidneys – and an ugly lumping around his ribcage. Jack looked at them in shock before fixing a glare on Martin that made him sink a little lower in his seat.

“Are they broken?” Danny demanded. “Is he breathing okay? Are you checking to see if his lung got punctured? Is there bruising around his kidneys? And don’t forget to check him for concussion. He was unconscious when I found him.”

“Thank you, Doogie Howser. Now be quiet and let them do their jobs.” Jack reached across and put a hand on Danny’s shin just wanting to feel for himself that he was still alive.

Jorge was now asking Martin to gaze into the light and count backwards from ten, before telling him to breathe deeply, no, deeper than that, and to cough if possible. Martin good-naturedly objected to apparently what sounded like torture to him before – inevitably – giving in and breathing deeply, coughing, and then gasping at the pain.

“I know it’s painful, but this is the best way to avoid lung collapse and pneumonia, and, trust me, you don’t want either of those. Breathe again… Okay, that’s good. Now, I need you to keep breathing that deeply and I’m going to give you some painkillers….”

Martin’s deer-in-headlights expression made Danny – who was watching everything closely – wince. “It’s okay, Martin.”

“No, it’s not.” Martin gazed at Jorge as if he were an oncoming train. “I can’t take painkillers.”

The paramedic handed out a couple of tablets and a bottle of water which he unscrewed for Martin as if he were six. “These are Tylenol with codeine. They’re not going to get you high, if that’s what you’re worried about. They’re just going to make it less painful for you to breathe as deeply as you need to breathe to avoid atelectasis. Take them now.”

Jack had always assumed that tall, blue-eyed men of privileged backgrounds would be the kind most likely to get Martin to do what he was told, but it turned out that tall, Latino paramedics with liquid brown eyes were able to hypnotize him like a snake with a rabbit. Martin obediently took the painkillers, obediently coughed some more, and obediently kept breathing deeply even though it obviously hurt. His reward was a nice warm smile of approval from the paramedic, who got a very
sweet smile back in return. Jack wondered if Martin would ever realize that his unconscious response to men being nice to him came perilously close to flirting, and if he would realize it before he found himself on what the other guy thought was a date and he thought was a drink between friends.

As Martin inhaled and exhaled to the full extent of his lung capacity and Danny fought to keep his eyes open, Jack was pressing the number for Viv.

He could hear the tension in her voice as she answered: “Agent Johnson.”

“They’re alive, Viv.”

He heard her gasp of relief: “Are they hurt?”

“Danny’s been shot and may need surgery although I’m still hoping they can fix him up with some lidocaine and a needle and thread. Martin’s pretty banged up and looks like crap, but the general consensus seems to be that they’re probably going to make it as long as they don’t annoy me too much on the journey to the hospital.”

“Ryan?”

“In custody. I admit I wish the case against him was a little more watertight but the DA should have enough to get a conviction.”

“How could he get off? Danny and Martin are both witnesses and so are Mary and Nathan.”

“Mary and Nathan never saw him commit a murder, he just told him that he had. Ryan could claim to have told them he committed them to scare those two into doing what he said. Nathan didn’t even see him kill his father. He was unconscious at the time. Neither did Stapleton. He just came in and found Jake Gallagher already dead and Ryan standing over him. Danny and Martin didn’t see who shot Danny, and Martin didn’t see who shot the ranger. But even if they can’t get a conviction for the murder charges, any DA should be able to get one for him kidnapping two federal agents and for the assault on Martin.”

There was a long pause before Viv said quietly: “There was no justification for shooting him? He didn’t resist arrest?”

“I didn’t give him the chance. He had a loaded gun trained on Martin and that place was too unstable to withstand a gunshot. I knocked him out before he had a chance to fire.”

There was another semi-silence in which he could hear the car she was in scudding through the snow, the labored sound of Mary’s breathing in the background, Clare murmuring soothing words and Nathan apparently praying. He thought of Davidson’s shelter; the brightly colored chaos of that place, where lost souls went to find themselves, a place in which they could find the inner strength to turn away from alcohol and drugs and abusive partners or fathers. It suddenly seemed a lot like their office. “How are things going at your end?”

“We’re fifteen minutes from the hospital and now driving through a blizzard. I can’t see anything but apparently people born in Wisconsin have the ability to smell blacktop even through two feet of snow.”

Jack grinned and would have dared a ‘That’s my girl’ on the sound basis that Sam was much too far away to shoot him, but decided not to take advantage. “Mother to be?”

“Mary’s calm although she’s in a lot of pain and I think she’s pretty much sitting on the baby’s
head. Clare is a great Lamaze coach. Nathan’s a gibbering wreck, but Clare says that normal for him when someone goes into labor.”

“Tell him to snap out of it and stop being such a wuss.”

“Sam already has. Twice. Apparently he can’t help it.”

“Is Mary asking about Ryan?”

“She’s worried about the baby growing up like him.”

_Aren’t we all?_ Jack thought, but allowed he said only: “Tell Mary that all scientific evidence points to nurture being more important than nature, and that there’s no reason why any son should end up like his father unless the father’s around to make him turn out that way.”

“Are we sure he’s _not_ going to be around?” Viv retorted cynically. “From what you’re saying he’s only going to be charged with kidnapping a federal agent and assault.”

“He didn’t deny shooting Danny and there could be more physical evidence than I think. There’s probably enough to hold him for a few years. Tell Mary not to worry, anyway, and to concentrate on having that baby. Do you need to me to get Davidson off the hook for impeding a federal investigation and whatever other crimes he’s currently committing?”

“I’ve already put in a few calls to make sure no one gets arrested, and to let Margaret and Charlotte know that their parents are okay, but Social Services have already spotted a few runaways so I think I’m going to sorting this one out for a while.”

“Especially as the only people in that car right now who _haven’t_ committed a criminal offence or impeded an investigation are you and Samantha.”

“Don’t worry, we probably will have done by the time this is over,” Viv told him cheerfully. “Tell Danny to hang in there.”

“Will do.” He hung up the phone and looked over at Martin and Danny; Danny looked half asleep, wiped out with too much pain, and far too pale. Martin was still holding his hand, gazing down at him anxiously while Danny tried to give him a reassuring smile in between his heavy eyelids trying to lead him into sleep. “Viv sends hugs.” Jack remembered belatedly that Elena would still be waiting for information. “Hell…” he dialed quickly.

She sounded exhausted when she answered the phone for all the forced crispness of her tone.

“Delgado.”

“Elena, we’ve got them. They’re okay.”

“I know. Sam just called me while you were talking to Viv.”

“Well, what are you still doing in the office? Go home. Drink soup. Take Tylenol. Try to get your temperature down below and a hundred and three. You can’t visit them in the hospital while you’re Typhoid Mary anyway.”

“You have such a way with words,” Elena told him. “And I’m not going anywhere until those two have been treated and Sam and Viv are out of that blizzard and Mary has had her baby okay. Let me talk to Danny.”

Jack obediently leaned over and held the phone to Danny’s ear while Elena said something in
Spanish that made Danny and Martin smile. Danny said something back also in Spanish, of which Jack understood not a word.

“She said that if he was really badly hurt she may even be a little bit nice to him,” Martin explained. “He told her not to strain anything for his sake.” He leaned forward to hear what else Elena had to say and then smiled and managed what seemed to Jack to be some fairly wonky Spanish. “Was that right?” Martin asked.

“If we’d ever had sex, yes – although it would be a little formal. But, Martin, I didn’t think you were that kind of boy.”

“I was just thanking you!” Martin protested. “For what you did to help bring things to a happy… conclusion.”

“Climax,” Danny told him, not unkindly. “You said you were grateful to Elena for her part in bringing you to a happy climax.”

“And here was me thinking you were just stumbling around lost and bruised in the snow.” Jack shook his head. Seeing Danny looking as if he was going to start drifting off, he said quickly: “As Elena’s got nothing to do except spread her germs around the office, why don’t you two start relaying your statement to her and she can type it up. I’d particularly like to know how – after I expressly gave orders that you were not to antagonize Ryan in any way – Martin ended up looking like Mike Tyson’s sparring partner.”

That seemed to do the trick; at once Danny looked animated and focused, talking rapidly to Elena in Spanish while Martin tried to follow what he was saying and made belated interruptions. “No, I didn’t say that... I didn’t do that either… What was that phrase? I didn’t say that!” He turned to Jorge, who was applying an icepack to his ribs. “Jorge, help me out here.”

The paramedic smiled but shook his head. “I’m staying out of this one.”

Undercover of Danny and Elena toying with Martin, Jack gave Omar a glance of enquiry. The paramedic gave him a reassuring smile, letting him know that Danny’s blood pressure was holding steady, while Jorge glanced at his watch. “We should be there in seven minutes.”

Jack sat back with a nod of thanks, keeping one hand on Danny’s shoulder, grateful to the paramedics for probably saving Danny’s life, and grateful to Elena, who was managing to keep Danny conscious and entertained – albeit by tormenting Martin – as Danny gave what Martin insisted was a deeply inaccurate account of events. He knew Sam was probably worried sick, imagining another friend undergoing hours of surgery, and wished she wasn’t currently behind the wheel of a car driving a pregnant woman to hospital through a blizzard. Vivian would be hiding her stress better but she would still be feeling it, and for himself, he felt stretched a little thin, worried about Viv and Sam in that snowstorm, worried about Mary Ryan giving birth safely, worried, also, about what she might be giving birth to, worried about Danny, who was still bleeding and couldn’t be in the ER a second too soon for him, and for Martin, whose ribs seemed to be grating as painfully as a stab wound every time he breathed; and worried that Sheriff Cooper might, after all, not do what he was hoping, and blow Ryan’s head off the first chance he got.

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The room was quiet. Outside, the sounds of the hospital washed up to the door like a cacophonous tide and then receded again, but in here it was quiet and still and…safe. Jack blotted out the extraneous noises with the skill borne of long practice and took a moment to try to soothe himself with the sound of his agents’ breathing in the hope of getting his nerves to unwind. Not easy, as he
realized they were tighter than copper wire and still fizzing slightly, as if they had been struck by lightning.

It had taken surprisingly little begging on his part to get Danny and Martin a shared room; the administrator had been kind – or perhaps Victor Fitzgerald had insisted when he arranged their transfer to St. Vincent’s. He probably knew the governor of every board of every hospital in New York.

Jack had called Martin’s father as soon as they reached the hospital in Honesdale. As they wheeled Danny in to the ER to assess the gravity of his gunshot wound, and wheeled Martin off to take a look at him in an exam room, Jack let the man know that his son was alive and relatively well. It felt good to be the bearer of good news for a change; he had been dreading having to tell Victor Fitzgerald that this time Martin wasn’t just wounded and undergoing surgery but gone beyond anyone’s help.

“You’re sure this Ryan is the Indemnity serial killer?”

“Pretty sure. He’s one of them anyway. His father seems to have been the first one, and Ryan carried on the family business.”

There was an awkward silence before Victor said: “I’m familiar with that case – those young men were sexually assaulted before they were killed.”

“Yes, they were.”

“Was Martin…?”

“I’m pretty sure we got to him in time.”

“And his friend – Agent Taylor…?”

“As far as we know, he was shot, nothing else.”

“Is he going to be okay?”

Jack remembered that last time Victor hadn’t even asked about Danny, despite him being in the car next to his son at the time Martin was shot. Perhaps his own subjectivity had frightened him a little on that last occasion, and he was certainly making the effort to be more reasonable now.

“At the moment it’s looking good. They think the bullet missed his kidney and his large intestine, but they’re going to take a look to be sure. Martin did a good job taking care of him.” He wished he felt less like a teacher filling in a report card whenever he discussed Martin with Victor, but he suspected that feeling was never entirely going to go away.

“Could you please tell Martin that his mother and I will be along to see him soon?”

Jack noticed that ‘please’ but didn’t comment on it, although he appreciated the effort the man was making.

“I’ll tell him. They want to keep him in just for a day or so. He’s got a possible concussion and is suffering from exposure, multiple contusions, rib fractures, and they want to keep an eye on his kidneys, make sure they’re both working okay and he’s not bleeding internally from getting smacked around, but they don’t seem to think there’s anything to worry about. They just want to keep him under observation. He’d only be hanging around here waiting for Danny to come round from surgery anyway; at least this way he gets a bed instead of having to sit on those
uncomfortable chairs the rest of us have to put up with. And they’ll keep him occupied sticking
him with needles so he shouldn’t get bored.”

He had hoped that might get at least a small laugh out of Victor but the man still sounded choked
up. “I’m very grateful, Jack – for all you did to find him so quickly. If you hadn’t gone in there
alone…”

“Victor, I’m the one that sent them up there to interview the serial killer. I knew there was
something off about Ryan the first day I met him. I should have followed my gut on this and never
let those two within five miles of the guy. We were lucky today, and they were smart and stubborn
and they took care of each other.”

“Would it be a better idea for them to be moved to New York – maybe to St. Vincent’s? They did a
good job with Martin. We should make sure Agent Taylor gets the best treatment.”

“They’re just cleaning him out and sewing him up. The wound was a through and through, no
organ damage. They’re not anticipating any complications.”

“All the same… I’ll see if I can arrange to get you all flown into St. Vincent’s. That way you can
oversee their care and keep in touch with the office more easily….”

When Jack closed the phone he was a little taken aback by how low key and pleasant Victor had
been. The concern for Danny had surprised him as well. “Perhaps he’s growing as a person,” he
murmured.

He also realized just how much influence Victor had when a doctor came in to tell him that a
helicopter was on its way to fly them into New York so that they could be taken care of there.

“Just so you know – I’ve no complaints with the way you were taking care of them here,” Jack told
him. “But Martin’s father is a little…over-protective.”

The doctor shrugged. “He’s also best friends with someone on our board of directors so apparently
when he says ‘jump’ we ask ‘how high?’”

Jack shook his head. “Don’t hold it against Martin. We’re really very grateful for all your did for
Danny.” He guessed that Martin really had scared the crap out of his father with this latest exploit
and the only way Victor had to burn off some of his protective energy was to throw his weight
around somewhere. As, for once, he wasn’t throwing it around at him, he didn’t mind.

Now, as he sat in the room in St. Vincent’s – where Danny and Martin had been admitted and
assessed and found to be exactly as the hospital in Honesdale had said they were – and listened to
Danny’s monitors bleeping and the even rhythm of his two agents breathing in stereo, Jack realized
that they had scared the crap out of him too. He let out a long breath and looked down at his hand,
shocked to discover that it was shaking. Reaction; relief; whatever it was, it had left him one wrong
word away from breaking down and crying. The ‘what if’s were still flashing at him in leering
Technicolor. They had skated the edge of a tragedy, and two men had died; it could so easily have
been the two men in these hospital beds instead and he would have been the ones who sent them to
their deaths.

He had been a receiver for information today, news pouring into him through satellite phones and
cells, while helicopter blades whirled above his head or sirens wailed as they were moved
impressively from place to place until he had felt as if he had been run through too many x-rays, a
skeleton burned down to a negative. Elena had done the coordinating through a fever, drinking
honey and lemon juice to try to hold onto her voice as she received reports from forensics about the
bullet casings, from the coroner about the murdered ranger, from the local PD about the couple who had fled from the scene and who had witnessed the ranger’s murder, from Bennett in Indemnity about all those abruptly re-opened cases, a fax of the statement from Stapleton, who had perhaps had doubts all along. Thinking about it now, Jack remembered that he had said the hood of the truck Gallagher had been driving had still been warm to the touch, as if the man had only recently arrived, not enough time to beat and sexually assault his son as Ryan had claimed. Bennett had sounded excited, Elena had said, so relieved that their serial killers finally had faces and names; a puzzle solved in his lifetime after all. His one disappointment had been that he wouldn’t get to interview Ryan and ask him where the other bodies were buried.

Everything in Wisconsin was a mess, Vivian had told him, wearily, from her own uncomfortable chair in another uncomfortable hospital. At Davidson’s place Social Services had found runaways and the police had found women whose husbands still had visitation rights to children who were not meant to be taken over state lines, and Davidson was not being cooperative, and all Viv’s sympathy was with him anyway, Jack could tell that. She was being reasonable yet subtly steely to a lot of officials to try to swing it that Davidson got his own way. She was probably right. Jack wasn’t feeling too sure of his opinions today. He hadn’t liked Ryan much or Davidson much either; neither of them had liked him and they had both rubbed him the wrong way; and Ryan had been a serial killer and Davidson a savior of the oppressed. Davidson had certainly impeded a federal investigation and then some, by helping to hide the child they were looking for; he had probably also been right. Mary had lost the spirit to stand up to Ryan a long time before; perhaps the only way to ever get that child away from that situation was to kidnap her and then keep her safe and hope her mother would find the courage to join her somehow.

Mother and child were doing well, Sam had sent him pictures through her cell phone; Mary with her hair unbound and the new baby gazing up at her unblinking, that intent slightly disapproving stare that all babies displayed in their first few hours out of the womb. She looked full of love and sorrow and more like a Madonna than ever. Vivian had managed it so that Margaret and Charlotte had been allowed in to gaze at the baby too and in one of the pictures had all been crowded around the bed – Margaret holding out a tentative finger for the baby to grasp, Charlotte wide-eyed with wonder and sucking her thumb. They all looked eerily related, even with Margaret’s hair dyed that unlikely blonde shade, the face and eyes were the same.

Nathan had not been arrested, Sam and Vivian had managed that also, ensuring that he and Clare had been allowed to stay while Mary had her baby. Vivian was trying to find someone who could help him to avoid doing any jail time for any of the things he had done, but in the absence of a lawyer seemed to be doing a pretty good job herself. She had told him she was hoping that escaping from a serial killer gave one a get out of jail free card for the minor matters of grave robbing and obtaining a social security number under false pretenses. Sam had told Jack that she owed her a very stiff drink on her return to New York, for making her go to Wisconsin and having to drive a pregnant woman through a blizzard to a hospital. Mary had indeed named the baby after her. Samuel Hope being the latest addition to their own little Addams Family.

“How many people get to have the son of a serial killer named after them?” Jack had murmured to her mockingly.

“Don’t even joke about it,” Sam told him in a whisper. “As the kid came out I was looking for the 666 on his forehead.”

“Well, at least she didn’t call him ‘Damien’. Does he look…normal?”

“Yeah. Wrinkled, cross, unnecessarily cute, little tiny fingernails and little tiny toes – all of those things.” Sam had tried and failed to sound as if she wasn’t exhausted to the bone and the narrow
within. “Are the boys really okay?”

“They’re fine. They look like crap, but they’re going to be okay. They’re both asleep now, which is
good, because while they were awake they wouldn’t shut up. Two helicopter rides with Danny and
Martin is two more than anyone needs in a lifetime. Does Nathan really look like Martin?”

“Yes. He’s a pretty boy. His scar tissue isn’t though – the amount of broken bones he’s had you’d
think he’d been pulled out of a twenty car pile up. The things Ryan did to him, Jack… I keep
thinking about Danny and Martin being alone with that guy.”

“You and me both.”

There was a moment’s silence as they both went through a few of those possibilities and then
shuddered. Her voice was tentative, cracked with exhaustion and fear: “Are you sure Ryan didn’t
do anything to them…? Something they’re not telling you…?”

“Pretty sure.”

“But not positive?”

“I wasn’t there. Martin looks like a photo-fit of every rape victim on file but he’s sure as hell not
acting like one. All he did while Danny was in surgery was pester everyone for information and as
soon as Danny was confirmed to be out of danger, he ate everything that was put in front of him
and then fell asleep. They had to wake him up to shove him into the helicopter for his ride here –
where he pestered everyone for information about Danny again, then ate even more food and then
fell asleep again. If he’s traumatized by anything other than Danny getting shot, he’s hiding it
dammed well. Danny’s got a few less bruises, but he admitted he was alone in that kitchen with
Ryan for a while. And Martin was alone in the barn with Ryan then alone in the mine. Both of
them had their hands cuffed behind their backs and even if they hadn’t I think Ryan could probably
have taken them. He did have plenty of practice.”

“Don’t do that guy thing and don’t ask because you don’t want to know….?”

He sighed. “I know it’s hard for you girls to believe – but having ‘y’ chromosomes doesn’t
automatically make one a complete idiot.”

There was a long pause before she said: “I’ve seen no evidence to support your theory.”

“You’re going to have to be nicer, now you have a godson.”

He could imagine the bright brittle flash of her smile. “Yes, but only to him.”

The call from Cooper had been full of the things unsaid. Cooper had told him that the suspect had
got free from his cuffs as they were escorting him out of the mine, and he had tried to wrest a gun
from his deputy. There had been no choice but to shoot him. Jack had said that he must have
missed a set of keys when he searched him, and apologized. Cooper had said he would have done
the same thing. Why bring both sets of keys, after all? Jack had asked no difficult questions and
Cooper had offered no extraneous information. Jack reasoned that what had happened was between
Cooper, his deputy, and his conscience. His own conscience had never been clearer. Perhaps it
would have been much better closure for all involved for Ryan to stand trial for his various crimes,
and no doubt Martin would have agonized about it, if he had been the one who wound Cooper up
and sent him off, but Jack was just relieved the guy was dead.

Jack was starting to be able to make the trip to the vending machine on automatic pilot. This time
when he got back to the hospital room with the cup of coffee blistering his fingers, he found Martin
out of bed and peering anxiously at a still-sleeping Danny. As Jack stepped into the room, Martin was feeling Danny’s forehead.

“He’s fine, Martin,” Jack told him wearily. “The doctors in Honesdale told you he was fine. The nurses in Honesdale told you he was fine. Then the doctors and nurses here in New York told you the same thing. Not to mention that Danny himself has told you that he’s fine in two different hospitals and two different helicopter rides. He’s asleep, that’s all.”

“He doesn’t look fine.” Martin pulled the blanket up a little higher and then smoothed it down.

“Trust me, he looks a lot better than you did after you got shot.”

The hospital gown was more revealing than a backless cocktail dress and Jack could see the full palette of bruises – they ran from Martin’s shoulders all the way down to what he had earlier heard a nurse describing approvingly as a ‘really pert little ass’. Right at this minute, Jack was a lot more interested in the blue-black contusions disfiguring it than the allegedly perfect curve of his agent’s buttocks.

“Martin, we need to talk.”

Martin looked up at him in surprise. “Is there something wrong with Danny that you’re not telling me?”

“For the hundredth time – he’s fine.” Jack held his gaze. “I told your father I got to you in time.”

Martin gave him a look of bemusement. “Well, didn’t you…? I don’t feel dead…”

He was aware of Danny just starting to stir into consciousness but ignored him for now; needing to finish this conversation with Martin before they were interrupted. “There’s no nice way to put this – you have bruises all over your ass.”

Martin continued to gaze at him as if Jack was speaking a different language, clearly waiting for Jack to get to some point that he had not yet reached. “And…”?

“Why?” Jack prompted.

“Because I fell on it. About six times. And before you judge me – have you ever tried climbing down a rocky wooded slope in the snow when you’re concussed? Because if you haven’t I don’t think you have the right to diss my coordination.” Martin held up an arm for inspection. “I have bruises all over my elbows too. No one had sex with them either.”

Looking Martin over, Jack could see his point. His bruises did seem to be evenly distributed everywhere in every shade of the rainbow, so did his cuts and scrapes at various depths and stages of scabbing. And he had heard Martin fall and slide while talking to him on the phone.

“Okay, just – give me your word that nothing like that happened and I won’t ask them to get out the rape kit.”

Martin rolled his eyes and then drew a cross over his heart. “Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye. Are you going to give Danny the third degree as well?”

“Danny wasn’t left alone with Ryan for as long as you were.”

“No, but he offered him a…you know…sexual act usually performed on the knees.”
“He what…?” Jack demanded in disbelief.

“That’s what Ryan told me in the mine.”

“Danny offered…that…in exchange for what?”

“My virtue – and my virtue is still unscathed so I think you should be annoying Danny with these questions when he wakes up. I mean you do the math.”

Jack actually understood some of the Spanish that came out of Danny’s mouth at that point. It was very rude and definitely involved a donkey and possibly a wrench of some kind. Martin turned around slowly to find Danny sitting up – very cautiously – looking pale and exhausted and cat-having-sighted-an-ugly-dog-with-fleas spitting mad.

Martin did look slightly embarrassed at having ratted him out. “Sorry, man, but I couldn’t resist the payback.”

“You told him you’d do anything he wanted if he wouldn’t kill me,” Danny said, in English this time. “I had a reason to be concerned. I still do.”

“You told him what?” Jack demanded. “What happens to you two when I’m not around? Do you drop fifty IQ points as you walk out the door? Danny, did you…?”

“No, I didn’t,” Danny interrupted shortly. “If anyone did it was Martin.”

“Martin, once and for all – did Ryan molest you or not?”

“Not. And will you two get real?” Martin countered in exasperation. “I was in that mine with Ryan for less than five minutes. I was still fully clothed when Jack turned up, so Ryan must have worked pretty fast to do all the nasty sticky things to me you think he did and then get me back in all my clothes – including my underwear – in less time than it takes most people to solve a crossword clue. That would be quite a neat trick even with my full cooperation. The guy was forty-seven and I’m a trained federal agent. I think you’re over-estimating his powers just a little, not to mention seriously under-estimating my ability to bite and kick.”

Martin looked mildly amused and more than somewhat exasperated, but in no way even remotely traumatized. Jack had to concede that either Martin had been a world class actor all this time, despite hitherto only demonstrating the deceptive abilities of a two-year old, or Ryan had not in any way sexually assaulted him.

Jack shrugged. “Fine, but that hospital gown lends a whole new meaning to you suffering from exposure. And the nurses are grading your ass.”

“On a curve?” Danny smirked.

“Don’t get smug, Dannyboy, they’re grading yours too.”

Danny looked unfazed. “If I don’t get a ten then they’re just not looking properly.”

Jack ran a hand through his hair, grateful once again to have never had sons. These two were walking advertisements for vasectomies. “If I get an ulcer I’m charging all medical expenses to the two of you.”

“What do we have to give you to get a couple of cheeseburgers?”
Martin gave him his best begging look but Jack just shook his head. “See, that whole big blue eyes thing would work on Sam just fine. Put on your little Santa hat and it would probably work on Viv too, but she and Sam are still in Wisconsin sorting out fifteen different legal technicalities, and me and Elena, we’re made of sterner stuff.”

Martin and Danny exchanged a glance and then said in unison: “Call Mac.”

Before the nurse arrived to check Danny’s dressings and ask for another urine sample from Martin, they had already remembered Mac’s extension number between them, bummed change from Jack, Martin had escaped to the payphone to place the call and managed to get back into his bed – where he was looking the picture of innocence as the nurse arrived. She turned out to be one of the nurses who had taken care of Martin after he was shot, giving them a huge advantage. Danny charmed her flirtatiously while Martin asked after her husband and remembered the names of her children – to her conspicuous pleasure – and they both feigned surprise when Mac arrived breathlessly with their greasy bundles of food.

Jack watched in growing amusement as they did indeed work their big blue and big brown eyes to their full extent on the nurse, who revealed herself to be a walkover who thought it would ‘probably be okay’ for Martin to have his cheeseburger and said she would go and check if Danny was allowed his. The second she was out of the room, they were both on the food like starving leopards on an injured antelope. Jack shook his head at Mac: “You’re such a pushover.”

Mac did have the grace to look a little embarrassed. “Martin said he was hungry.”

“He’s barely stopped eating since we reached the hospital in Honesdale.”

“Soup and Jell-O, Jack.” Martin wolfed down another few bites. “Not real food.”

“You lived on apple sauce and Pepto Bismol for six months but you can’t go twenty-four hours without a cheeseburger?”

Martin closed his eyes in an orgasmic fashion as he swallowed. “This tastes so good….”

Jack felt a headache begin to dig in between his eyes. “Tell me you didn’t do that in front of Ryan…?”

As Martin looked at him in confusion Danny made gestures to Jack suggesting either that he wanted his throat slit or that Jack should probably give up that conversation now. Jack cocked a glance at him. “You going to explain it to him later?”

“I’ll cover it in Spanish class.”

“Really?” Jack felt his eyebrows move skywards. “Because I always suspected that was a metaphor for something else, and given how bad Martin’s Spanish still is….”

Danny shook his head in lofty disapproval before tearing into his own cheeseburger. “Some people need to get their minds out of the gutter,” he offered through a mouthful of food.

“I just want to collect on my bet.”

Mac seemed to be enjoying watching Martin eat almost too much but he did reluctantly rise to his feet. “I need to get back to analyzing fingerprints.”

Martin held up a fist to bump against Mac’s in what seemed to be their own speshul sekrit handshake. “I owe you, man.”
Jack waited until Mac was out of earshot before observing to Martin: “If all those guys you keep giving the ‘my hero’ eyes to ever decide to collect on what they may think you’re offering you’re going to get very, very tired.”

“What?” Martin looked at him blankly in between wolfing down another bite of cheeseburger.

“Never mind,” Danny told him. “Jack’s just yanking your chain.” The glare he sent in Jack’s direction suggested that Martin should just be allowed to continue in blissful ignorance so Jack shrugged and let it go. Thinking about it, Martin had presumably gone through high school, college, Quantico, two years in White Collar Crime, and now four years in the FBI looking at a lot of guys like that without suffering any ill effects, so he may as well just continue as he was.

For all their claims to be so perfectly recovered that they could go home now if the doctors would only discharge them, Jack noticed that Martin was asleep five seconds after swallowing the last piece of cheeseburger while Danny had flaked out even earlier, after a few bites. Telling himself that he was definitely not covering for them, he nevertheless collected up the cartons and leftovers and took them some distance from their room to deposit in a trash can. By the time he got back to their room, he found three nurses gazing through the glass at them with expressions on their faces more appropriate to looking at a basket full of kittens. He was almost certain that amongst their murmurings he caught the words ‘so sweet’. Deciding that his agents were not only in safe hands but were also probably going to be spoiled absolutely rotten, Jack was forced to reluctantly acknowledge that he had no excuse not to go back to the office and start on the mountain of paperwork those two had landed him with.

As he was walking out of the front door, he passed the Fitzgeralds on their way in. They looked elegant and perfectly coiffured and he did wonder in passing what it would take to make these two have a hair out of place.

“They’re both fine,” he forestalled them. “They look bad but they’re already well enough to scam cheeseburgers out of technicians and get the nurses running around after them like they’re six year olds.”

Martin’s mother smiled in relief, thanking him for everything that he had done, while Victor took him by the elbow and moved him slightly out of earshot: “Are you absolutely sure that Ryan didn’t…”

“Absolutely,” Jack assured him. “And I wouldn’t suggest asking Martin about it, because he was apparently bored with that conversation the first time he and Danny had it, which was about…” He looked at his watch, “…nineteen hours ago. Just – bear in mind that those bruises may look nasty but they’re going to fade pretty fast, and it could have been a lot worse.”

As he walked back to his own car, he found he was telling himself the same thing, and this time he could even think it without that sickening jolt of panic at what could have happened making him feel quite so much like the guy on the high wire without a safety net who had just lost his footing. It had almost had been so much worse, but fate and luck and stubborn determination had intervened to save their necks. Danny was going to be in the hospital for at least a week and sore for a few weeks more, and Martin was going to feel it every time he coughed for a month at least, but, they were not only still breathing but miraculously untraumatized; everyone in his team was still in one piece, and so was, not only the missing woman whose photograph was on their whiteboard, but the little girl he had despaired of ever finding alive.

Sliding behind the wheel, Jack wondered what it said about the usual stress levels associated with his job that today would count as a good day for him. Abruptly, the fear of getting Alzheimer’s lessened considerably. There seemed like no point in worrying about mental deterioration in his
old age when, on the showing of the last twenty-four hours, he was undoubtedly going to be dead of a heart attack before he was sixty….

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Danny woke to the familiar quiet of the hospital room. The air tasted dry and antiseptic here, and it was never entirely silent, everything muted like a TV with the sound turned down low, but something always happening somewhere. Sometimes he dreamed he heard Martin screaming and woke to the sound of another patient lost in their own agony, digging his fingernails into his palms to still the panic as he willed a nurse to get there quickly and stop it hurting. Today, his own pain woke up right along with him. Coming off the morphine had been all kinds of a bitch, and starting physiotherapy had just added to the fun-time.

Up until today, Martin had been in to see him as many times a day as possible. He sneak ed him in breakfast, he sneak ed him in lunch – he sat with him and watched daytime soap operas and pretended not to be as hooked as Danny now was despite knowing way too much about who all the characters were – and he came in the evening for as long as he could until the nurses were forced to kick him out. Even though he had clearly been itching to get out of the hospital himself and had started packing his bag five minutes after the doctor admitted he didn’t have pneumonia, had recovered from his mild case of exposure, and could probably take care of his own broken ribs at home, he had still been Danny’s most regular visitor.

But today had been the beginning of Danny’s physiotherapy, which hurt like stink, and had, in the past, been the day when Danny’s visits to Martin had started to dwindle and then stop. He had come in on Martin’s second day of physio and watched him trying to struggle to take six paces while holding onto bars while it obviously felt as if someone was slicing up his guts with an acid-soaked blade, and had bolted. As he all but sprinted for the stairs he had been thinking about Martin smiling across at him a few seconds before the gunfire started, so happy because Vivian was okay; Martin the guy who could outrun any suspect and climbed cliffs for fun; whose idea of a good weekend was to stuff some water and sandwiches into a backpack and head off for the nearest forest for some hiking. And now he couldn’t even walk without holding on, and it hurt so much the sweat had been pouring down his face with every agonizing step. After that, Danny had barely visited at all, knowing that Martin was going to be in pain the whole time he was there while pretending not to be, and that the pain and the pretending were something he simply couldn’t bear to see.

He had come in from his own physio today, limping back to bed with every nerve screaming at him, and waited to see if Martin would turn up anyway. He had known that he wouldn’t — how could he not know? — but he had hoped that the afternoon visit would happen anyway. It hadn’t. He didn’t blame Martin at all. He knew that it was only possible to deal with the memories of that first agony a friend had suffered as the bullet ripped into him if he was on morphine and safe in a hospital bed with nothing hurting him; after that the guilt became unbearable. Not blaming wasn’t the same as not missing though, and he had missed him all through the daily installment of what he thought of as ‘their’ soap opera, which had seemed badly-acted and pointless without Martin there next to him to insist that they couldn’t be going down the evil twin route even though Danny knew perfectly well that they were.

One of the nurses had stuck her head around the door to see if Danny wanted anything and said in surprise: “Martin not in today?”

Danny had forced a smile. “Not today.”

“I expect he’ll be in this evening.”
“Maybe.”

When Vivian had arrived at the beginning of visiting hours, bringing chocolates and a John Grisham for him to read, there had been a moment when he just knew that his face had fallen as his door opened and it wasn’t Martin coming through it, but he had managed a smile a second later, genuinely pleased to see Viv, after all, and she had tactfully pretended she hadn’t noticed the moment when he had let his disappointment show. She had stayed with him for an hour even though she worked too long as it was and barely saw enough of a husband and son she adored, and he reminded himself that he had very good friends, and that it was enough that Martin had risked his neck for him and managed to save his life, there was no reason to pine because he couldn’t cope with a friend being in pain any better than Danny had done.

After Viv had gone, he had slept and dreamed of the mine he had never seen, and of Ryan twisting a screwdriver into Martin’s side while he tried not to scream and Jack didn’t arrive in time.

Now, as he tried to move, his side ached with a slow pulse like a migraine in his skin. He winced, trying to moisten a mouth that seemed to have been superglued shut while he was sleeping. A cup with a straw appeared as if by magic and as he went to reach for it, a hand gently held his arm still.

“Trust me, you don’t want to move yet. Just open your mouth.”

He turned his head cautiously – the reminder had been a timely one as any kind of movement still sent licks of flame from his side to the rest of his body – and found Martin masking his concern with a smile as he proffered the water.

Danny gazed at him, dumbfounded, then obediently opened his mouth and sucked in a welcome mouthful of cool water. Swallowing was still a little painful, but the water was delicious going down. He drank his fill and then cautiously leaned back against his pillows. The grin couldn’t be suppressed, even though he knew it was giving away how much he had missed him, how empty the prospect of those days of recovery had seemed unleavened by Martin’s visits. “Don’t you have a home to go to?”

“Hey…” Martin flipped open his overcoat to reveal his suit. “I went to work today.”

“There’s no way Jack let you work a case.”

“He let me answer the phone. A couple of days and he may even let me look at files.”

Danny looked him over carefully. Martin was still carrying a lot of bruises and looked exhausted, pain shadows under his eyes. “Are you taking your Tylenol?”

“Yes.” Evidently seeing Danny’s lack of conviction, Martin held out a notebook. “I’m taking them.”

Danny looked at the neat listing of every single pill Martin had been given or had taken since breaking his ribs, the quantity, the time, the four hour intervals before another two could be taken. His heart caught because it looked so orderly and yet came from a place of such terror of losing control. Aloud he said only: “That’s a really good idea, to write it down so you don’t forget.” He tapped the last entry and checked his watch on the stand by the bed. “You’re due to take two more.” As Martin hesitated, Danny pushed the beaker and straw at him. “Here you go.”

He watched as Martin spilled the pills onto his palm, gazing at them for a long moment. When he swallowed them down with the water he still looked as if he were doing something wrong.

“Martin, they’re not addictive and being in pain all the time isn’t a good idea.” Danny reached out
cautiously – movement still hurt but it could be done if he concentrated – and patted him gently on the shoulder. “You’re doing fine, and, let’s be honest about it, in this job we’re going to get hurt from time to time and you have to have a way of dealing with it.”

“Sam already gave me that lecture today – I have a note that says I’m excused nagging for the evening.” Martin glanced at him sideways. “Are you feeling okay? I know when you start physio it’s…”

“It’s a bitch, yeah.” Danny tried to get comfortable and immediately Martin was there, helping him to sit up higher, adjusting his pillows for him. “Martin – stop fussing before you hurt yourself.”

Martin sat down obediently but still looked poised to spring up again if Danny so much as winced. “I’m sorry I didn’t get in at lunchtime today, there were so many phone calls I didn’t like to leave the office….”

The relief was overwhelming that it was only it being Martin’s first day back at work that had stopped him visiting. Trying not to let those feelings show, Danny gazed at him in fond exasperation. “Martin, you came to see me before breakfast and you’re here now. If you spend any more time at this hospital people are going to talk – well, more than they already do. Now, tell me you brought me something to read and something to eat.”

Delving into a backpack, Martin checked that no one was watching and then slipped out a brown paper bag. “If anyone asks, promise me you’ll tell them Elena got you this and I brought you Playboy.”

The shiny glamour of a new issue of ‘Fama’ slid onto his coverlet and Danny smiled in relief. “Just say it’s for your Spanish classes. In fact – read the first article to me.”

“How is knowing what’s happening in the latest soap operas on Telemundo going to help me interview suspects?”

“Well, if you’re interviewing a suspect who’s a big Eduardo Capetillo fan, think of the head start you’re going to have. Now, read, I want to know if Evita is Abigail’s daughter. Did you bring me any food?”

Martin wordlessly handed over a bag of popcorn. “The sooner you get out of here the sooner you can watch SNY again.”

“The physio keeps telling me that if the hospital got cable the patients would have no incentive to get well.”

“Makes sense.” Martin opened the magazine, checked again that no one was eavesdropping, and then began to read in halting Spanish about what the viewers of Peregrina could look forward to in future episodes.

The next time Danny woke up it was so late the muted television was showing infomercials and he found himself half-hypnotized by the sales pitch for a gadget that could chop and peel any known vegetable, wondering how much they paid the people who had to demonstrate those things to look excited by zircon jewelry and learn the knack of every utensil that was not available in stores. He groped for the remote and turned the screen dark before he started wanting the TV on all the time for company, and then realized he could still hear someone else’s breathing.

Turning was still difficult and worked better if he could pivot from the hips, doing a full torso
adjustment rather than just blithely swiveling from the waist. He lurched around a little awkwardly and found that Martin was still cramped uncomfortably into the visitor’s chair, head lolling back as he slept in a position that was going to cramp every muscle from his neck to his coccyx.

“Martin…” He whispered his name, trying not to alert any nurses who might be prowling. He was amazed they had missed him on an earlier patrol. But perhaps Martin had given them his ‘just a few more minutes’ plea and they had relented. Martin had clearly been a Good Patient, as they all seemed fond of him and he was never treated with the same briskness as other visitors. “Martin, wake up.”

Martin jolted uncomfortably into wakefulness, bleary-eyed and confused. “What?”

“You’re in the hospital.”

Martin looked up at him in shock. “What happened?”

“Nothing happened. You just fell asleep here, visiting me. Remember?”

Clasping a hand to his neck, Martin shifted painfully in his seat. “What time is it?”

“Way past visiting hours. If Nurse Rosa catches you she’s going to give you a sponge bath.”

Martin straightened up carefully, a hand going to his ribs. “Are you okay?”

Danny gazed at him for a long moment, seeing him plucking at his crimson-stained shirt in confusion, lying in that pool of blood, so painfully getting up from a chair with the use of his stick while pretending that nothing hurt. He picked his words with care: “I’m better than when I was lying in that cabin knowing you were running towards a serial killer for my sake. I’m not as good as I’m going to be in a month’s time when I can touch my toes again.”

Martin grimaced. “A month could be a little optimistic.”

“Want to bet on it?” Danny held out a hand. “Some of us didn’t get our intestines perforated, remember?”

Martin shook his head. “I’m not taking the bet. I know how stubborn you are.”

“Yeah, good you don’t have that fault, isn’t it?” Danny gazed at him until Martin looked away.

“Are you still angry with me?” The question was asked so quietly that he wasn’t sure he’d heard it right the first time.

“Am I…? No, of course not. About what anyway? The painkillers? Mouthing off to Ryan?”

“Yes.”

“Which?”

“Either.”

“No,” Danny realized that sometimes ‘no’ was too small a word. “I’m not angry with you about anything. You saved my life, Martin. Has Jack been yelling at you…” He felt his own anger rise at the thought, remembering how unreasonable Jack had been with him, projecting all his paranoia onto him because yelling at Martin for getting shot was beyond even Jack and that left only Danny to blame. “Because you can tell him from me there isn’t a damned thing you did that he wouldn’t have done. Has he yelled at you?”
Martin grimaced. “Sam, Viv and Elena. It was more of a shriek.”

“What did you do?”

“Picked up a box of files for Sam.”

“Well, that was dumb.”

“And my ears are still ringing from them telling me that.” Martin gave him a concerned look. “How are you really doing?”

“I’m bored and I hurt and I’m fed up with being in pain. And, Martin, I’m sorry I bailed on you when you were in the hospital. I just couldn’t deal with seeing you…”

“I know.” Martin’s eyes bore not a trace of resentment. “You felt bad that I got shot and you didn’t, and you couldn’t deal with seeing me in pain. Of course, I get that. It’s okay. It always was.”

Danny sighed and leaned back against the pillows. “So, you didn’t spend days and days being in pain and bored and wishing I would come visit you then?”

“I was actually hoping for Angelina Jolie. She didn’t show up either.”

“Just as well. That is way more woman than you can handle, my friend. But it’s not okay that I didn’t come to see you and I’m sorry.”

Martin inclined his head in unwilling acknowledgement. “Okay. Apology accepted. I’m sorry for coming into work high on Vicodin or spacey with withdrawal and risking your life because I was too stupid to get myself some help.”

“Hey, that’s over and done with. You got the help. You were in a lot of pain and you were sick of everyone treating you like an invalid. I get how it happened. You’ve got yourself straight. That’s all that matters.” He might have said more about how he had been tough because he had to be, because that was the only way to help Martin climb back from being an addict whose life was inevitably going to end up in the toilet to being the guy he really was, but how he had never stopped caring, however angry he had seemed; but any chance of a chick flick moment was banished when Nurse Helen appeared in the doorway and said in disbelief:

“Agent Fitzgerald…?”

“I fell asleep.” Martin gave her a look both penitent and pleading. “I was just leaving.”

She looked at her watch pointedly. “I would hope so.”

He rose to his feet stiffly, wincing from the pain in his ribs and she crossed over the room to help him, automatically feeling his forehead for a fever. “You really need to take better care of yourself.”

“He’ll be good,” Danny promised.

“I’m sorry about falling asleep.” Martin looked genuinely remorseful. “I can still come back tomorrow, can’t I?”

Martin gave the nurse his best begging eyes and she folded like a paper plane. “Just stick to visiting hours.” She gave Danny her best attempt at a stern look. “And you should be asleep by now.” As she walked Martin to the door she was asking if he was remembering to take his meds
and hoping that he wasn’t even thinking about driving yet because if he was she would have to take it up with Agent Malone when he called in next.

Martin paused in the doorway and gave Danny a smile that was unexpectedly sweet. “See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah.” Danny smiled back at him, absurdly relieved that Martin was going to be coming back on the next day and the day after; that this shooting wasn’t going to sit between them and fester guiltily. “See you then.”

As Nurse Helen escorted Martin to the nurse’s station, from which she was apparently going to personally supervise calling him a cab to take him straight home, Danny lay back down on his pillows, holding his side as he did so, but already finding that it burned a little less.

The physio was going to hurt and it was going to wear him down, and eventually it was also going to make him strong enough to get out of this hospital room and back to work. He realized that, against all commonsense, that thought pleased him immensely. Even though he had empirical evidence that their job stood a good chance of getting them shot, smacked around, cursed at, and occasionally spat on, he still loved the challenge of finding the people who, without them, were never going to make it. Having temporarily been one of those victims who was cold and scared and hurting and desperately hoping for a rescue, he found that he now loved it even more. That kind of job satisfaction, he felt, was worth a lot, even the pain he was in right now, even the scars on Martin’s chest and abdomen; it was worth all of it to know that every day he went into work he was helping some of the lost find their way home.

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The fax spewed out another endless loop of paper and Jack groaned inwardly. He knew it would be from Bennett; every other fax he received these days was from Bennett containing more meticulous deductions about the Indemnity killings. Bennett had deduced that the timeline of the killings could be worked out as precisely as a sudoku puzzle. He had filled in a decades long calendar of known disappearances with big red squares for where he was deducing another killing must have taken place, and wanted the FBI to go through the disappearances from that time and find ones that matched the general appearance of Ryan Senior and Ryan Junior’s victims. He thought the final tally could be much higher than anyone had ever imagined.

Jack tore the latest loop of fax paper out of the machine and walked into the bullpen to deposit it in front of Sam. “You deal with Bennett and find his missing victims for him.”

Sam grimaced. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?” Jack looked across at Viv. “I thought you said Bennett was a good guy?”

Viv shrugged. “He is.”

Danny perched on Sam’s desk a little gingerly. His hand still automatically went to his side when he moved too fast and Jack had forbidden him to leave the office for another two weeks.

“What not?” Danny had enquired.

“I could make it a month.”

Danny had been much better behaved after that, although still inclined to sigh heavily and insist that there was nothing wrong with him, even though there obviously was. Now, he leaned forward – carefully – and read the fax over Sam’s shoulder. “Ah hah. From the shape of his handwriting I
deduce that Sheriff Bennett is what women technically refer to as a ‘hottie’.”

Sam looked accusingly at Viv who sighed. “Sam, they asked, I answered.”

“Is there something wrong with him?” Martin peered over Danny’s shoulder to peer over Sam’s, handing Danny a cup of coffee as he did so before taking a sip of his own. He still had to hold his ribs if he moved quickly but his bruises had faded to faint blue and yellow mottling.

“Yes, he’s not married. He’s therefore single and available and clearly not busy enough or he wouldn’t be sending us sixteen faxes a day with his latest deductions.”

“I think you should liaise with him.” Elena handed Sam one cup of coffee and Viv another before sipping her own, and Jack realized that now everyone had coffee except him. “And then I think you should tell us all about it – in detail.”

Jack noticed that Martin looked slightly glum about that suggestion and had to admit that, although he had no business feeling that way, he felt a little glum himself. Viv, Danny and Elena all seemed to think it was an excellent idea though. “Why don’t you people get love lives of your own instead of having to enjoy them vicariously through the rest of us?” he enquired.

Sam gave him a slightly pitying look. “Jack, if Danny had any more of a love life he’d be too tired to work.”

“I have a child, which is kind of like being forced to live in a convent. And Viv is married,” Elena explained. “She’s not allowed a love life.”

Martin took another swig of coffee. “I heard that, in some states, married people are allowed to have sex. If they get a note from their church.”

“I don’t think so,” Jack assured him. “I think that’s just something they tell you unmarried types so you’ll go through with the ceremony when your time comes.”

Danny smirked at Jack. “You have a sex life now?”

“None of your business.”

Sam glanced up at Martin. “If I couldn’t make a relationship work in New York, how likely is it that I can make it work in Wisconsin – a state, by the way, in which I do not live.”

Martin shrugged. “On the plus side, it’s very unlikely that anyone from the office would see you out with the guy. And Sheriff Bennett could tell people that you were his sister and they may actually believe him.”

Jack snorted. “Yeah, and as it’s Wisconsin, they would believe you even after they knew you were sleeping together.” At the look Sam gave him, he grimaced. “We could all pretend I didn’t say that out loud.”

Raising her voice, Sam said: “For the last time, I wasn’t the one who got shot – ”

“This time.”

“I wasn’t the one who got lost in the snow.”

“We weren’t lost,” Danny protested. “We were following the stream.”

“I wasn’t the one who had to be airlifted to a hospital or who scared the crap out of you by getting
himself taken prisoner by a serial killer.” She pointedly didn’t look at Martin or Danny. “So, take it out on the guilty parties, not me.” Sam swept up the fax with dignity and headed for the file room.

Viv gave Jack a level look. “And speaking as someone else who didn’t get shot or kidnapped by a serial killer, I’d appreciate you dialing down the paranoia and the attitude a little too.”

Elena nodded. “It’s true, Jack. Maybe Danny and Martin aren’t safe to be let out without a keeper, but the rest of us shouldn’t have to pay the price for their…” She turned to Danny: “How do you say ‘tontería’?”

“We weren’t stupid,” Danny protested.

“My mistake – necedad.”

“Our deeds weren’t foolish either,” Martin put in.

Danny held up a hand to Jack. “You see? He’s learning.”

“All you need to do is to get a little transmitter and put it in their pockets so you always know where they are.” Elena smiled brightly at Jack.

Jack knew he had hired Elena for reasons other than just her efficiency – she was also truly evil at times, and he liked that in a woman. “I was thinking more along the lines of one of those cranial bugs. How do those little alien implants work again, Martin?”

Martin sipped his coffee, unperturbed. “You do realize that signal can be blocked by any good brand of tinfoil?”

Elena looked regretful. “It had better be one of those retractable dog leashes then.”

“We didn’t do anything wrong!” Danny insisted.

Jack tapped the table. “I seem to recall giving you very clear instructions about the things you were and were not allowed to do. You weren’t allowed to get yourselves concussed, get yourselves shot, or make me call out Search and Rescue to look for you. Shall we have a recap on how that turned out?”

“Circumstances conspired against us.” Martin looked across at Viv for help but she shook her head.

“You scared everyone half to death, Martin. No one is forgiving you two any time soon. But, don’t worry – this came today.” She pushed an opened envelope across the table to them. “Buster still loves you.”

Jack watched as Danny and Martin both had to tilt their heads to one side to look at the contents. Martin peered at the verse. “That doesn’t rhyme or scan. And that word definitely isn’t spelled right.”

“What word?” Elena enquired.

“Any of them.”

Danny tilted his head the other way. “Yes, I’m touched by the sentiment but his poetry sucks.”

Elena also glanced at the contents of the card curiously. “So do you, apparently, at least in his fantasies.”
Without looking up from her report, Viv said conversationally: “I had no idea you two were so flexible. The mail room was most impressed.”

Martin was practically standing on his head to look at what Jack guessed was an illustration of some kind. “I don’t think that’s physically possible.”

Danny glanced at it briefly. “Yeah, it is.”

Elena nodded. “Oh yes. Definitely.”

Martin looked at the picture and then back at them with a whole new respect in his eyes. “Really?” Sam came back in with another box of files, pausing to look over Danny’s shoulder. “That’s what yoga classes are for.”

Martin glanced up at her in mild reproach. “But we never…” He broke off to cough instead, while Jack tried not to smirk.

Sam gave Martin a dazzling smile. “I’m sure Danny could show you.”

“I bet Mac could too.” Jack gave up trying not to smirk and just went for it. The reproachful look that Viv and Sam both shot at him told him too late that no one was apparently meant to be commenting on Mac’s little crush. Luckily, it went right over Martin’s head anyway. He and Danny were too busy feeling picked on and unloved to notice.

“How long are we going to be punished for things that weren’t our fault anyway?” Martin asked resignedly.

Jack checked his watch. “About two more weeks.”

“I can’t believe I’m in the doghouse for getting shot!” Danny protested.

“It’s for willfully and negligently getting shot.” Sam dumped the box on the table. “There’s this new thing called ‘ducking’ – you and Martin should try it some time.”

Elena shook her head. “Eighteen years without killing anyone and – how long were you two alone with him before the guy couldn’t control himself any longer…?”

Martin looked longingly at the empty white board. “I’m actually hoping someone is being abducted right now, just to get the rest of you out of the office.”

“You can help me with these.” Sam put a second box of files on the table. “We’re looking for Ryan’s type who went missing within the specified time period.”

“And for those who need a reminder of Ryan’s type…” Danny pointed at Martin. “Behold Exhibit A.”

“Yeah, I’ll be sure to put that on my bio if I join one of those internet dating agencies.” Martin opened the first file he came to and began to study it.

“What’s the age range again?” Elena took a handful and pushed them along the table to Danny, before grabbing another pile of files for herself.

“Between nineteen and thirty-five.” Vivian took a stack of files for herself and handed Jack a pile of his own.
He looked at the files without enthusiasm. “This is Bennett’s obsession, not mine.”

“It’s not like we have anything else to do,” she pointed out, reasonably.

The phone ringing half an hour later made them all look at it in surprise. Jack felt almost aggrieved. He was just starting to get caught up in going through the old files, and so was everyone else, the pile of possible victims already containing four likely missing men. At the thought of having to gear up to search for someone now, he felt a surge of weariness. He picked up the phone.

“Malone.”

The message was unexpected but more welcome than a report of a missing person. Sam was coming back in with another box of files as he put down the phone. He nodded to her. “Your godson is on his way up along with the rest of the family.”

Glancing around at his team, he noticed the way Martin immediately adjusted his tie and smoothed down his hair, trying to look less rumpled, becoming abruptly aware of his still-lingering bruises when they had been completely forgotten a moment before. Danny was also fiddling with his tie and picking fluff from his jacket. Jack watched them not meeting each other’s eyes for a moment and then said quietly: “You didn’t get Ryan killed. You weren’t even there. He got himself killed when he decided to resist arrest. And even if you had – which you didn’t – you would still have done Mary Ryan a favor. Okay?”

Danny shrugged as if the thought of feeling guilty had never crossed his mind. “Sure.”

It was left to Martin to say: “What about Margaret? Whatever else Ryan was, he was her father and he loved her.”

“She’s still better off without him.” Jack held his gaze. “Believe it, Martin. It’s the truth.” Which was when he realized that, on balance, he did like Martin doing the whole ‘I want to be Jack when I grow up’ thing because on occasions like now it meant that his word carried a lot of conviction and therefore a lot of comfort.

Ironically, when Mary and her extended family arrived, with their visitor IDs pinned or clutched a little stickily, Danny and Martin were the least stressed, immediately being distracted by the fact there was a baby to coo over. Jack had taken a cursory glance at Samuel Hope, too, and had to admit that the baby was not unattractive, and did seem to be one of the contented gurgling kind that were sometimes difficult to resist – although he intended to give it his best shot. Sam was busy throwing missing person’s files back into their folders and boxes so that Mary wouldn’t see them and Vivian was immediately annexed by Charlotte, who seemed to have at least a hundred pictures she had drawn to show her, and who was not exactly slow about ordering Danny and Martin around once she realized that they were as much of a pushover as her father.

Jack had been hoping that Elena might have turned out to be made of sterner stuff, but she let herself get suckered into helping Margaret with her homework within five minutes, and Jack shook his head, retreating to his own office on the pretext of having to make a phone call.

“I’m sorry.”

Mary Ryan was standing in his doorway. It was a shock to see here there, in the place where he had once looked at her photograph and thought how much like a Madonna she was. Today there was even a crack of light finding her brow like a benediction. Her hair was still neatly plaited, but he saw a few signs of rebellion from her previous restrictions in the fact that she was wearing jeans. He remembered, from looking through their closets after Charlotte had gone missing, that Mary had not owned a pair of jeans, only a long row of dresses in demure blues and blacks. Ryan had
liked his wife to dress like a member of the Exclusive Brethren as Jack recalled. It was too much to
hope that she would have cut her hair and henna’d it orange before getting a nose stud, he
supposed, but the jeans were something.

She came into the room without being invited, which surprised and quite impressed him, although
the way she sat down in the chair opposite him was still too neat and quiet, elbows pressed into her
sides to avoid taking up more than her allotted space.

He could hear Charlotte laughing outside. Viv and Sam had said she was a very happy child, a little
spoiled by her father – who as well as being the world’s biggest wimp when a woman went into
labor was doting to the point of idiocy with kids – but undoubtedly happy and well adjusted and
articulate. Social Services had insisted on taking a few of Davidson’s foster kids away and but Jack
suspected they would be back as soon as they could get away from wherever they were put next.
Most people who went to Davidson’s seemed to end up staying. Vivian and Davidson were now
bosom pals, somewhat to Jack’s annoyance. Viv had even called in a few favors to find someone to

“What are you sorry for?”

Mary gave a pained little laugh. “For so many things. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you where Margaret
was when you tried so hard to find her. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you the truth when you arrested
Frank. I’m sorry for what happened to your agents. I’m sorry for all the things that were done to
my brother because I didn’t find a way to stop Frank from…”

Her voice cracked and Jack winced. “Your brother doesn’t seem to hold it against you. And he
could have called the police too. It wasn’t as if he never had a chance to leave the farm. He put up
with the guy as well.”

“He was protecting me.”

“And you were protecting him. And Ryan played you both so you ended up not being protected
from anything. Do I think you were an idiot not to go to the police? Yes. Do I think you were an
idiot not to tell me what the hell was going on when I was there in your house, ready and willing to
listen, yes. But do I understand why you didn’t? Yes, I sort of do.”

He watched as she twisted a handkerchief between her fingers, then caught herself doing it and
stopped, smoothing out the creases carefully. “If I betrayed him, he would kill again, and if I told
you about the murders but you couldn’t convict him – that would have been the worst betrayal of
all. I used to look out at those woods and think about all the places where Frank could hide a body,
all the campers and hikers who would just disappear…. He used to watch them. He thought about
it. I used to see him thinking about it. They came by for directions sometimes. I was always so
scared he wasn’t going to be able to hold onto his self-control, but he did. He said he was man of
his word, and he was.”

“Yeah, real big of him not to kill anyone as long as you kept having sex with him.” Jack couldn’t
hide his exasperation and so didn’t try. “When you went missing, didn’t you think he’d be
suspicous?”

“I thought you and Agent Johnson would talk to him again. I hoped that you wouldn’t find me and
he’d just assume I’d been murdered – and he’d have to keep his word even though I’d broken
mine.” She looked guilty about that, the burden of not keeping her promise. “I didn’t know what
else to do.”

He lowered his voice. “He raped your brother. He murdered your father. How could you live with
“How could I not when if I wasn’t with him he’d keep doing that to other people?” She closed her eyes. “Neither of us thought that he would ever do that to Nathan until it was too late. He was always hitting him but I didn’t know why. I didn’t know he was a murderer. I thought he just wanted Nate to stay out of trouble. We never really saw anyone. It was just us. Frank kept saying that Nate and I had never known what it was like to have a proper family, to live proper lives, and he wanted that for us. And he was going to make sure we had it.” Her smile was very sad. “We thought being a proper family was probably a little different from what we had with him, but we didn’t know for sure. Clare was stronger than us. Even though she never had a family either, she knew what she was missing. She knew it was meant to be better than it was.”

Jack glanced out through the glass at Clare who was holding the gurgling baby while effortlessly monitoring her daughter. “She seems to be a girl of strong character.”

“She saved all of us.” Mary straightened another crease in her handkerchief. “I couldn’t save Nate, but she did.”

“You sent him away before Ryan killed him. He wouldn’t have done that if you hadn’t told him to.” Jack gritted his teeth. “Why didn’t you call us from the hospital? Tell us you didn’t want your husband to know you’d left him?”

“I was afraid. He said that he would find us if we ever tried to leave – that he’d never rest until he did.”

“My agents could have been killed.”

“I know.” The remorse in her eyes was so heartfelt that he felt his anger sputter a little. “I’m so sorry. I thought you’d be the one to go. I thought you could deal with him. You seemed to know what he was like.”

Jack almost laughed. “Well, I didn’t get a lot of back up from you when I was asking if he hit you or Margaret, did I?”

“He didn’t.” Her sincerity was unmistakable as well. “I kept hoping you’d ask a different question.”

“Well, silly of me, I know, but it didn’t occur to me to ask ‘Oh, and by the way, is your husband a serial killer?’”

“I am sorry.” She darted an anxious look out at the bullpen. “Are they okay?”

“They’re fine. But I don’t appreciate my agents getting shot because of people not telling me things. I’ve got three agents out there now with bullet hole scars. Can you imagine how inefficient that makes me look?” He gazed at her for a moment before his curiosity got the better of him. “Did you love him?”

The sounds of Charlotte suggesting a game they could all play filtered in from outside. Danny was counter-suggesting that they should eat lunch while Elena was asking for quiet so Margaret could finish her project.

“I can’t remember,” Mary admitted. “If I did, it was a long time ago, and the man I loved never existed. The man I loved didn’t kill people.”

Jack sighed, conceding the point. “You know, we’re not all drunken wife-beaters or serial
murderers. There must be some normal guys out there somewhere you could meet.”

Mary smiled as if he had said something very funny. “You think I want to meet someone? You think I want to share my life with another man?”

“Don’t you?”

“I want to be a widow for the rest of my life, Agent Malone.”

He had never heard a woman say the word ‘widow’ like that before; like it was a key that opened all doors and the quiet room in the house that always got the afternoon sun. She rose to her feet. “Sheriff Bennett keeps coming to see us. He wants us to help him identify everyone Frank killed. We don’t really know anything, but he comes anyway. I’m not sure he’ll ever forgive me for keeping quiet for so long.”

“Would you do it again?” Jack asked curiously. “Play it the way you did?”

“No. I’d find the courage to send Nate away the first time Frank hit him.”

“What about you? You’ve spent half your lifetime tiptoeing around drunken or insane men and doing what you’re told. Wouldn’t you change that or would you stay with him?”

Mary leaned across and opened the file on Jack’s desk, one of the old ones they had looked at when Bennett had started faxing them information. The dead man’s face gazed up at them. “I know all their names now. All the ones so far.” Mary turned the photograph around so she could see it more clearly. “This one was called Silas Perry. Frank’s father killed him sometime in the April of nineteen sixty-three. I’ll never know the names of the ones he didn’t kill because I stayed with him. But I know they’re out there. I know they have lives that would have been lost. Eighteen years, Agent Malone, and Sheriff Bennett thinks Frank and his father used to kill at least three or four a year. That’s more than fifty people who aren’t dead because I kept my promise. Yes, I’d stay with him. I just couldn’t be a part of bringing another murderer into the world, of watching my son turned into something he didn’t want to be.”

She gazed into Jack’s eyes and although the logical part of him knew he disagreed with her on every level, there was something about her conviction that was almost contagious. Her voice was still quiet and gentle and she seemed to need an answer. “There must have been a time when Frank could have become someone else instead, mustn’t there? You hunt down killers all the time. Wasn’t there always something that made them that way? Someone could have done?”

“We don’t know.” Jack closed the file, hiding the dead man’s eyes. Mary had identified him correctly, even upside down. He wondered how much obsessing she was doing over her late husband’s victims. If she was going to hug her guilt to her like a comforter for the rest of her life. At least this was one of the ones whose body had been found, forty-three years ago now; any surviving relatives were probably going to take very little comfort from knowing that his murderer had finally been stopped. “We don’t tend to meet up with them until after the damage has been done and someone else has paid the price for it.”

“My son is going to grow up to be a good man.” Mary straightened up.

“Are you going to tell him the truth?”

“Yes.”

He was surprised when she didn’t even hesitate. “Do you think that’s wise?”
“I think it’s something he has a right to know.”

“Does Margaret know?”

“She knows enough. She’s always been someone who watched and understood things. She knew I was afraid of him, she just didn’t know why. Now she does.”

“Her and me both.” Jack glanced up at her, words still burning the tip of his tongue like a chili pepper every time he thought of his time in her kitchen, knowing something was wrong and not able to get at it, an elusive thread he could never quite catch hold of; and then walking into her kitchen on that last occasion, afraid of finding the bloodstains that meant Danny and Martin had died here. He realized he was still angry about that and probably always would be but he only shrugged. “You know, we could go over this a thousand times and it wouldn’t make any difference. You did what you did and it’s done now.”

“I nearly told you.” She hesitated in the doorway. “I thought about it. I was just so used to being the one who took responsibility for stopping Frank… I felt that was the least I could do after what he’d done to Nathan – what I let him do to Nathan by marrying him and not realizing in time what it was I’d married. Even when you were right in front of me, looking as if you could carry some of that burden, I couldn’t seem to let go.”

Jack thought about her kitchen in the Catskills, with the clock ticking and the faded paint on the units, and the faucet in the sink dripping that slow beat into the metal sink; their lives had seemed so quiet and so calm, and all the time Mary had been driving a crazy ghost coach along a causeway with the sea getting higher and higher as the wind whipped at them like a flail. “You know, you’re probably due a breakdown.”

She nodded. “Later. I’ll have one later.”

“You should. You’re owed one.”

He held open the door for her and they looked out at the baby Clare was rocking, and Margaret – her roots starting to grow out now to reveal the dark hair beneath the blonde colorant – still working on her homework while Charlotte made Danny read her a story and Nathan ineffectually tried to stop her bullying him.

“I really am grateful for everything you did, Agent Malone,” Mary said softly.

“I’m grateful to you for not being dead.” He glanced at her. “Too many dead missing people lowers my average. Means I miss out on my Christmas bonus.”

“As Margaret and I were both alive does that mean you get a toaster this month?”

Surprised to find she had a sense of humor, it took him a moment to respond. “It works on an accumulator. Twenty more and they let us have an espresso machine.” Jack watched Charlotte ordering her father, Danny and Martin around for a moment, and shook his head. “You do know your brother has just exchanged one tyranny for another?”

Before they stepped out into what had once been a working office and was now a child-induced chaos, Mary touched his arm. “I’m sorry you weren’t the one who got to find Margaret. I know how hard you looked for her.”

“Not hard enough, obviously, or I would have found her.” He looked across at Danny, who was wincing after most unwisely picking up Charlotte at her command. Martin hastily took the girl from him, then winced himself as even her light build pulled on his cracked ribs.
“Oh, for goodness sake…” Jack strode across and took Charlotte from Martin. “You, young lady, are way too good at getting your own way. And you two are idiots. Sit down, both of you. Help Margaret with her homework.”

“Her homework’s difficult,” Danny explained. “That’s why we’re letting Sam and Elena do it.”

Nathan looked across at his niece sadly. “I’m never much help to her. Her spelling’s much better than mine.”

Margaret beamed up at Elena confidently, talking excitedly about the animals at Davidson’s and how much fun school was, except for the boys, who were kind of stupid. She said this in more surprise than condemnation, as if there was no logical reason for them to be like that and yet they persisted in being so.

Jack thought of those photographs of Margaret in Ryan’s house and the reports from her teachers about how painfully shy she was, never offering an opinion, never able to speak out in front of others; how very different she was now. “I think you’ve helped her just fine, Nathan.”

“Yes, they stay stupid until one gets to be about thirteen,” Elena explained. “And then overnight they suddenly seem much less stupid and much more interesting.”

“But it’s an illusion,” Sam assured her. “They are, in fact, still stupid. Don’t let your hormones fool you into thinking otherwise.”

“Hey!” Danny protested. “Do you know how tough it is when you’re in High School to get a teenage girl to do more than look at you and giggle? We deal with rejection every day, and it’s conditioning like that, Samantha, that’s the cause.”

“Hear, hear.” Martin obediently passed Charlotte the pen she was asking for while still reading Margaret’s homework over her shoulder. “High School is much tougher for us guys and that’s mostly because girls have it fixed in their heads that we’re idiots and they would be too if they even contemplated going out with us – and that’s because their friends are always telling them that.”

Sam shook her head. “Danny, let’s pretend for a minute that Margaret is your daughter, now, given what you remember about being a teenage boy and with the knowledge gained since while doing this job of the usual behavior patterns of the average teenage boy, how would you like her to be treating the average High School Boy when she’s thirteen?”

“As if he carries every plague toxin known to mankind.” Danny nodded emphatically. “Margaret, listen to Samantha. Teenage boys are indeed very, very stupid – have nothing to do with them.”

“Traitor,” Martin told him.

Elena glanced at him. “If you had a daughter, would you let a High School boy drive her to a movie?”

“Hell, no. I wouldn’t let him walk her to school.”

Mary took the baby from Clare and he gurgled up at her happily, waving fists and feet around in the unnecessarily cute manner of all infants everywhere. A coil of Mary’s hair came loose from her plait, and the low winter sun arced through the window and gilded it. He noticed her ID for the first time, and realized they all had the same surname, every one of them a Hope. He watched Mary look from Clare and Nathan – who were gazing at one another in a goopy manner he thought quite inappropriate to people with an exhausting four year old – and then at Margaret, who was
patiently explaining her homework to Martin, who, despite an accountancy degree, was feigning ignorance of any knowledge of fractions, and Charlotte who was drawing a picture of what looked like Danny on the back of a piece of paper that Jack hoped wasn’t needed for anything else. When Mary smiled, he understood it completely, and found himself looking around the table as well.

Perhaps his wife and daughters were in Chicago, and perhaps his father was dead, but he still felt as if he had a family here; a family that occasionally disagreed with him or scared the hell out of him by nearly getting themselves killed, but a family all the same. Vivian, Danny, Samantha, Martin, and now Elena. Unlike Mary, he'd had the opportunity to hand pick his particular extended family, and he thought he had done a pretty good job.

Viv caught his eye. “Why are you smiling, Jack?”

He looked around at them again, all of them alive and well, and not dead in the snow. “No reason at all.”

The End

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